Deadly Beats

By Lisa M. Lucero

Chapter 1

It was a cool, damp night in the streets of New York City. A loud pulsating beat filled the air outside the new trendy music club, the Groove. There was an extensive line of anxious ticket holders waiting to hear the ringing euphonic vocals of twenty-nine-year-old Maia Morrison, the mezzo-soprano sensation from the Midwest. Her stylistic vocals had drawn thousands of people to the music club on a nightly basis.

She came to the bustling city of New York as a nobody from Topeka, Kansas, a month ago. Morrison grew up dreaming that someday she would get up on stage in a long, shimmery dress that would display her slender, curvy body with her long, straight brunette hair flowing while singing pop rock tunes. It was not an easy road to get to the tremendous success she is today. It took decades of training in choirs, singing during her spare time, and voice lessons since she was ten years old. Morrison felt she owed the owner of the Groove, Maximilian Rangel, or just simply Max, a great deal of gratitude for giving her this opportunity.

It was one hour to showtime and people were already eager to get inside the venue to see Maia Morrison. News of her talent had traveled everywhere within the city. They were expecting to see a good show, so Morrison knew she had to be on her A-game. The audience members did not pay good money to see her sing mediocre. She warmed up her voice by singing scales, drinking warm herbal tea, and practicing her breathing and stance. Morrison wanted her fans to get their money’s worth.

Shortly after warming up, a club employee knocked on her door to deliver a bouquet of pink roses to her. Morrison quickly opened the tiny envelope on the bouquet to see who sent her the stunning array of pink roses. Her eyes were mesmerized by the beauty of the flowers. She could not believe that someone was thoughtful enough to send her them. She suspected they were either from a fan or a secret admirer because she was not seeing anyone romantically and she did not know any friends or family members who would do this for her. Morrison gasped after reading the message on the card. Her first reaction was to drop the card and envelope; she then broke out into tears, standing there in disbelief. Morrison could not believe someone would send her such a nasty note. Her heart beat fast as she ran to Max’s office to inform him of what she had just read.

“Okay, okay,” Max said while trying to comfort Morrison. “Now, take a deep breath and tell me exactly what the note said without freaking out.”

“I-It said . . . it said . . .” she sobbed. “It said, ‘*If you go up on that stage tonight, I will kill you!*’”

“Oh, no,” he said regretfully. “I was hoping this would not ever happen again. I swear, when will this nightmare ever end!”

“What will happen again?” Morrison demanded. “Max, what are you hiding from me? Come on, speak up!”

“In the past, we have lost a few singers,” Max said. “They were all murdered brutally somewhere in the Groove or just outside of it by what police believe is a serial killer. It was always on the night of a performance. The police had arrested a man named Connor Lynch, who they believed was responsible for the deaths of three of our singers: Nadia Waters, Darcie Chase, and Lillian Durham. The killer sent a bouquet and the same message as they sent to you to each of them.

“Since this is happening again, I believe the police have arrested the wrong person. I will alert the authorities right away. They will send a few police officers over to keep an eye out on the place. Maia, please watch your back from here on out. There may be someone lurking about the building waiting for their opportunity to kill you next.”

“Why didn’t someone tell me this before I accepted this singing position?” she shouted out. “I cannot believe no one told me about this. Max, this is so wrong of you to keep this all to yourself. You should feel ashamed of yourself.”

“We thought the whole situation had been resolved,” he answered. “I am sorry this is happening to you. I swear, we will do whatever we can to keep you safe. I promise to pay you for tonight’s show to make it up to you.”

“You better,” she replied. “I did not come all this way from Kansas to be killed! This is the shadiest thing that any employer has ever done to me. From here on out, no more secrets being kept from me.”

“Alright, I promise,” Max told her. “I think it is best that someone goes home with you after you leave the club from now on. Me or any of the other employees will be happy to take you home. Also, I will keep a close eye on you from here on out. Now, go out there and be the star that you always had meant to be. You have thousands of eager fans out there that have come to see you sing.”

“I must not let my fans down,” Morrison said. “I will be sure to give them a good show. Max, please make sure there’s extra security out there tonight! I cannot allow anyone’s life to be in danger.”

“I will do what I can,” he said. “It will be short notice, but I am sure law enforcement will send at least two officers down to keep an eye out for anyone acting suspicious.”

“Thank you,” she replied.

“Now, go get them, tiger!” he shouted enthusiastically out at Morrison as she stepped out of his office.

She quickly walked back to her dressing room. Morrison did not even bother to pick up the threatening note. She did not want to ever see it again and would leave it there for the cleaning crew to come in and pick it up. Morrison fixed her makeup and hair quickly before it was time for her to take the stage. She could hear the deejay playing pulsating music to get the crowd revved up for her show. One of the stage crew members stepped into her dressing room to let her know she was up in five minutes. She quickly rose from her chair, fixed her dress, and took one last look at herself in the mirror before heading off to the back of the stage.

She could hear the deejay shouting out, “Are you ready for Maia Morrison?”

The crowd screamed and clapped as loud as they could. Morrison could tell the crowd was getting the crowd pumped up for her show. She could not help but smile.

“I said are you ready for Maia Morrison?” the deejay repeated. “Is that as loud as you can get? I think we can do better than that.”

The crowd screamed and clapped even louder. Morrison was now anxious to get up on stage. Hearing her fans cheering for her uplifted her spirits and got her all excited about tonight’s show.

The deejay then knew he had succeeded at getting the crowd fully hyped up for the big show. Morrison smiled at the deejay from the side of the stage to let him know she was ready to come on. He nodded at her to show that he understood.

“Ladies and gentlemen, give it up for the one and only Maia Morrison!” the deejay screamed out.

Hearing her name made her heart leap out in joy. She stepped out on the stage with an air of confidence. She smiled and waved at the crowd as she stepped up onto the stage. The crowd screamed and clapped wildly.

“How are you doing New York City?” Morrison shouted out. “Are you ready to get this party started? Well, all right then, I am going to kick things off with one of my newest songs called ‘Hypnotic.’ I just know you all are going to love it!”

The band then began to play the music to her new song, “Hypnotic.” About five hundred crowd members began to dance to the upbeat music. She then began singing excitedly while dancing along with her backup dancers. The crowd cheered her on.

*The way you look at me is so hypnotic.*

*. Your eyes, your lips, and your touch is so irresistible. You are not like all the rest.*

*How enticing, so fresh. I know we were meant to last.*

*I must confess that I am such a mess. Look at what you’ve done to me, baby.*

*Hypnotic, hypnotic*

*Your love is so hypnotic.*

*I don’t know what you do to make me feel so entranced by your spell. I can tell that you love me as well.*

*An overwhelming feeling takes over me so. My face is aglow.*

*Your love, your touch is so electrifying. There’s no use in hiding. I feel like I am flying higher and higher as our love takes flight.*

*Hypnotic, hypnotic*

*Your love is so hypnotic.*

Right when the music began to fade, a shot had rung out from the crowd. Everyone became so entranced by her performance that they had no idea where the shot had come from. Morrison screamed and ran off the stage. Luckily, no one in the crowd had gotten hurt. She believed it was just a warning shot from whoever sent her the threatening note. Morrison knew she was no longer safe.

Crowd control did what they could to calm the audience down while security searched the building for the person who was responsible for shooting at the singer. Security had searched bags and purses for weapons but did not find any guns before entering the building. They figured it had to be someone who had either snuck into the building before the show or carefully had a gun hidden inside their clothing where security could not see it. When they could not find anyone with a gun, they knew the shooter had to have run off. Security announced that it was now safe in the building and that the shooter was no longer there.

Afterward, Max stepped up onto the stage and told the audience the show had been canceled and that they would be refunded for the amount they had paid for the tickets. A few grumbles could be heard in the audience. Morrison felt bad that she could not give the show that they had anticipated, but it was for the safety of her fans and herself. She did not want to be held responsible for someone getting killed at her show.

She quickly changed into a pair of blue stonewashed jeans and a thick red knitted sweater. She waited patiently for someone to take her home. Morrison then heard a knock on her dressing room door. It was Max. He told her it was him and asked if it was all right for him to come in.

“Yeah, Max,” Morrison replied. “You can come on in.”

“I can take you home right now if you are ready to go,” he said. “There’s no rush. I understand that you are angry with me and can see why.”

“Yes, that would be fine,” she answered. “I suppose I have no other choice at this point now that my life is at risk and there is no one else here to drive me home. Thank you for taking me home, Max.”

“Hey, no problem,” he said. “I would feel guilty if something happened to you after all that I had put you through. I owe it to you since I never told you what had happened to the previous singers and thinking the murder case had ended. I do not know how you could ever forgive me.”

“Well, through time I will find it in my heart to forgive you,” Morrison replied. “Driving me home is a good start, I suppose. But it is going to take much more than that to get in good standing with me. You will have to prove to me that you are trustworthy enough.”

“I understand,” Max replied.

It was a quiet drive to Morrison’s apartment on Second Street. She was still in shock about what had just happened to her. She wondered, *Why would anyone want to kill me?*

Max walked her up to her apartment to make sure she returned safely. He kept a close eye out for anyone who appeared suspicious. Max carried his gun by his side to protect her from the murderer. Morrison unlocked her door, opened it slightly, then Max kicked the door the rest of the way open. He went inside first to make sure her apartment was clear from all harm and that no one was hiding inside waiting for her. He came back and told her it was safe to go inside.

“Hey, let me know if you need anything,” Max said. “Be sure to call me in the morning when you are ready to come to the club for rehearsals so I can come out and pick you up. We will make sure there is extra security at the show tomorrow night. Each ticket holder will not only have their purses and bags checked, but we will be patting down them, too. Also, security will be carrying guns to shoot back if needed.”

“Thanks, that is comforting to know,” Morrison responded. “Thanks for the drive. I will see you tomorrow. Have a good night!”

“You, too,” he said. “Now, get plenty of rest, my superstar.”

Chapter 2

Morrison woke up exhausted. She barely had a wink of sleep. The gruesome message *If you go up on that stage tonight, I will kill you!* kept spinning around in her head. She was still in disbelief that it ever happened. Morrison was going to have a challenging time getting up in the morning. She was going to need a couple of extra shots of espresso in her coffee to wake her up and give her an additional boost of energy.

The alarm went off two hours later. She groaned as she slowly rose from her bed. She yawned, then stretched out her arms and slowly slid her body toward the side of the bed to get out while not feeling fulling alert yet. Max was going to pick her up at ten o’clock for rehearsal, so she had to wake up and get ready. She forced herself to completely get up from the bed. Morrison hoped that with the little energy she had, it would be enough to get up on the stage and perform tonight. She tried to pretend that everything was going to be all right and that there would be enough security to keep her safe while she was performing. What concerned her the most was the number of people in the audience. How were they going to find the person responsible for the murders of the three singers? She also wondered if the person who shot at her was just someone trying to be a copycat murderer. Morrison had to find a way to forget all about it so she would have enough courage to sing up on stage again. She must not let one incident keep her from fulfilling her dreams. This was the rest of her life about which she was thinking. Without music, what else was she supposed to do?

She laid out a pair of dark blue jeans and a black long-sleeved blouse on her bed before heading to the shower. It was going to be another chilly day in the Big Apple. A hot shower and a coffee were all she needed to get herself motivated. The condensation and the warmth from the shower would be good for her throat. It was a good place to warm up her vocal cords by singing all major and minor musical scales and by singing a song or two.

“Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti, Do,” Morrison sang out. The sound of her clear, crisp, singing voice bounced off the shower walls and there was a slight echo. She was satisfied when hearing how her voice sounded. Morrison’s voice sounded amazing today.

“Hey, will you keep it down in there!” her neighbor next door shouted. “I am trying to sleep here! You know I work the graveyard shift and sleep at odd hours!”

“Sorry, Mr. Crumble, for waking you up!” she shouted back. “I will try to keep it down! I am sorry for being such a nuisance! I promise not to wake you up again!”

Morrison quietly grumbled amongst herself about her grouchy, old neighbor as she stepped out of the shower. She then threw a fist up in the air toward the direction of the neighbor’s apartment. However, she knew that he worked late at night and needed his rest. Morrison knew that it was not easy for him to have to work odd hours. She knew he was not deliberately being an annoyance. Morrison quickly put on her bathrobe and walked down the hallway to her bedroom. She then quickly threw on what she was wearing for the day. It was about fifteen minutes before it was time for her ride to rehearsal. Morrison sat in her living room drinking a cup of coffee while waiting for Max to come pick her up.

Morrison became startled when she heard knocking on her door. She knew it had to be Max because it was exceedingly rare for her to have any visitors. She dashed to the door and peeked through the peephole. Sure enough, Morrison saw Max standing in front of the door, running his fingers through his thick blond hair. He then looked in both directions as if keeping an eye out for someone. Morrison then unlocked the door and allowed him into her apartment.

“Right on time, Max,” Morrison said. “It does not surprise me that you would be the prompt one. You have always been the one that is all about the business.”

“Well, good morning to you, too!” he responded. “Someone must have woken up on the wrong side of the bed. I am sorry for just trying to be nice to you and all!”

“I’m sorry, Max,” she said. “I did not mean it that way. I am a little on the edge here, and I am not much of a morning person. I really do appreciate you being protective of me and all. Trust me, I would much rather ride with you than being out there on my own during this time.”

“I understand why you would feel that way,” Max replied. “In fact, all of us at the club are scared about a cold-blooded murderer being on the loose. We cannot figure out why they would choose the Groove as their target to murder singers and anyone who stands in their way. I really wished that I had answers for you, Maia, for what is happening, but unfortunately, I do not have any.”

“I really hate to ask this, but when did the last murder take place?” she asked.

“The last singer that was killed was Nadia Waters, which was about five months ago,” he answered. “She was leaving the club after her performance. As she was heading out to her car late at night, someone had crept up from behind her, strangled her, then slit her throat. The custodian had discovered the lifeless body of Nadia the day after the murder. The killer somehow got inside the club building and knew where her dressing room was. He put her up in a sitting position on her chair in front of her mirror so that she would look like she was getting ready for the show. The killer then painted her face heavily with makeup. As the custodian stepped into the dressing room, she screamed hysterically when she saw Nadia sitting there lifelessly with blood running down her neck after the killer slit her neck with a knife. She said Nadia’s face had given her the creeps because the killer made her look like a scary clown. There was also a message written with lipstick across the mirror. It said *The Slut Can Now Sing in Hell!”*

“Do you think it is someone who works at the Groove, and that is how they knew how to get into the building and where they were going?” Morrison then asked. “I mean, it is a plausible explanation.”

“The police suspected that themselves, but they couldn’t find enough evidence to prove it,” Max said. “It just so happened that a convicted serial killer named Lewis Huber escaped from prison and had been hiding out in the area during the times of the killings. Since each of the singers killed had similar injuries as Huber’s victims, the police assumed he was the one responsible for their deaths. However, the DNA found near the locations of the murders did not link to his DNA. But because he was in the area at the time of the murders and the similarities of how each of the dead bodies were found was enough evidence to put him on the stand. After the arrest of Huber, the jury found him guilty of all the murders in court. He is now serving a life sentence. I am not saying he did not do it, but I find it fishy that it is happening again. It could be a copycat murderer.”

“And now I am next on their radar,” Morrison said. “That is great! What am I going to do now? All the other victims did not manage to get away from the murderer, so what makes you think that I can?”

“All I can say is watch your back,” Max told her. “There is no telling what plans they have up their sleeves. I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe, but I cannot promise you that you will not be the next victim. Once again, I am so sorry to drag you into this mess.”

“As you should be,” she responded. “Well, I am ready to go now if you are.”

Morrison then grabbed her purse, made sure all the lights in her apartment were off, and locked her apartment door before heading off. Max escorted her out to his jeep parked on the side of the street outside of her apartment. He made sure to always stay in front of her to make sure no one was lurking about before she proceeded to the vehicle. Morrison appreciated his efforts in keeping her safe. Max opened the passenger door for her.

“Thanks,” she told him. “You really are going all out for me, for which I thank you kindly. But this much attention on me is not necessary, though. I know you are trying to do your best to make up for all of this mess and that you cannot help it that someone is lurking about the Groove, wanting to kill me.”

“I want to do whatever I can to keep you safe,” he responded. “As your employer, I feel responsible for whatever happens to you. I feel guilty for not telling you about what happened to my previous singers. I don’t think I will ever be able to make it up to you. It was rotten of me to bring you all this way out here from Kansas without talking about the possible risks involved in singing here. I hope somewhere deep inside you will find a way to forgive me.”

“I really appreciate your concern, but I am a big girl,” Morrison said. “I think I can take care of myself. I have pepper spray and a cell phone in my purse for protection. I am not one of those stupid characters from a horror movie that walks down a dark alley by themselves or seeks out what the strange sound is.”

“I know you are not,” he said. “This is just all precautionary. You are one of the strongest women that I have ever met. I admire you for that immensely.”

Both became quiet while Max drove them to the Groove. He turned on the radio to help lighten the mood since they were both tense from the recent scare. Morrison watched people walking down the busy streets of New York. The number of people in New York was unfathomable. How were they going to find who was responsible for the singers’ murders? The killer would be hard to trace. For all they knew, they could be hiding right underneath their noses without them ever knowing. This was going to be an extremely challenging task.

Once they arrived at the club, Max drove around the block to make sure no suspicious person was sitting inside a car or standing outside the Groove waiting for Maia Morrison to arrive. He then parked right in front of the back door of the building. He got out of the vehicle first, then opened Morrison’s door. Max then walked her up to the door and stepped inside the building first to make sure nobody was inside. He left Morrison inside her dressing room after searching it to make sure no one was hiding in it.

“Now, I want you to stay here and don’t go anywhere else without letting me know first where you are going,” Max told her. “I will come back in a little while to check up on you.”

“Okay, Max,” Morrison said. “I think I can take it from here. I am sure the rest of the girl bandmates will be joining me shortly in the dressing room. Now, if you do not mind. I would like to have a little privacy here.”

“Okay,” he said. “I will leave you to your privacy now.”

Morrison could not believe how the whole situation became quite an ordeal. She sat quietly, waiting for the rest of her bandmates to come in. She then could hear footsteps coming from the hallway. Morrison became nervous. She prayed to God it was one of her bandmates or Max coming and not an unwanted intruder. She heard the creaking of her door. Her heart pounded as it opened. Morrison’s eyes grew wide with fear. She was relieved when she found out it was just Max.

“Oh, my gosh, you nearly gave me a heart attack,” she said. “Don’t sneak up on me like that ever again!”

“I’m sorry about that,” Max replied. “I should have announced that I was here before opening the door. I just wanted to let you know that all the band members have arrived and are waiting on the stage. Do you need me to get you anything while we wait for the rest of the crew to get here?”

“No, I am fine, but thanks for asking,” Morrison said.

She made herself a cup of hot herbal tea to soothe her throat, then warmed up her voice. About twenty minutes later, a sound technician walked in and told her the band was ready for rehearsal. She slowly got out of her chair and took a deep breath.

“Alright, let’s do this!” she muttered. “It is time to get up on that stage and show them what you got.”

When she arrived at the stage, all the band members were either tuning their instruments or practicing playing their parts of a song. Morrison quietly stepped onto the stage, trying not to disturb them as they practiced. She quietly walked across the stage and took her place in front of the microphone.

“Hey, Maia!” one of them shouted out and waved at her as she made her entrance. “I cannot wait to see what you have got in store for tonight’s concert. You always put on quite the show.”

She smiled back at them, waved, and said hi back at them.

“Thanks,” Morrison replied. “So, which song would you all like to work on first?”

“I vote we start with ‘The Stars are in Your Eyes,’” the bass guitarist Josie Porter suggested. “You sound amazing when singing that song. I think it is one of your best songs.”

All the others agreed to start with that song as well.

“That’s a great one to warm up to,” Morrison replied. “We will do that one then. Now, play me a Major 2nd!”

The band played the music interval to help Morrison sing on pitch. She then began to sing while the band played along to the song. Morrison’s hips swayed to the music as she sang on the microphone. Her head rolled, then she broke out into a rooster strut, a dance move inspired by Mick Jagger.

*When I look at your pale blue eyes, I feel like I am endlessly falling into a deep blue sea.* *I can only imagine the wonders I might discover while exploring what lies behind those beautiful eyes.*

*As your eyes catch mine, I feel so elated. I am flying now up to the pale blue sky. Your eyes shine like diamonds. I am so high now that I am flying amongst the stars.*

*The stars are in your eyes.*

*The stars twinkle and dance in them. I am completely entranced by them. I feel like I am in a new atmosphere. I drift and float. If only you knew what I see in your eyes.*

*The stars are in your eyes.*

When the song ended, Morrison looked up and saw a shadowy figure standing creepily far away in front of the stage. She gasped when she saw a pair of menacing-looking eyes staring back at her.

Chapter 3

As the shadowy figure walked closer up to the stage, the appearance of it grew clearer. The facial features were now in focus, and they were now able to identify who it was. It was the janitor who was making his rounds throughout the building. He was carrying a broom to sweep up the aisles. The janitor then paused and took another quick look at Morrison before proceeding with his cleaning duties.

Morrison sighed with relief. However, she kept in mind that the murder suspect could be anyone. She caught the janitor eyeing her as if he were studying her once again. This time the look made her nervous. Her attention shifted as the band began playing another song. She tried to convince herself it was all in her head and that the janitor was completely harmless. Morrison then heard her cue and started singing the lyrics to the next song. She tried to stay focused during the remainder of the rehearsal. Morrison avoided eye contact with the janitor as he finished sweeping the floor.

As she belted out the lyrics to her songs, she became more relaxed, and all her worries just seemed to have gone out the door. Morrison began to feel upbeat and unstoppable as she danced and sang along to the fast-paced beats. The music was now taking over her body. It made her feel alive.

Once the band felt like they were near perfection, they stopped for the day. Max clapped afterward and told everyone to go home and get rest for that night’s performance. He also told them to be incredibly careful because their safety was currently at risk. There was a killer on the loose and could strike at any moment, Max warned them.

“Hey! Maia!” he shouted. “Why don’t you allow me to escort you to your dressing room to make sure no one is lurking about in the building waiting for you?”

“Thanks, I would really appreciate it if you did,” Morrison replied. “After seeing the way that creepy janitor was looking at me, I am completely petrified. You should of saw it. It would have sent shivers down your spine.”

“Oh, him,” Max said. “He wouldn’t harm a fly. I hired him about five years ago and he has not caused any problems since then. He is really quiet and somewhat odd, but I would not hold that against him. I don’t know much about him because he rarely ever talks.”

“That might be what he wants you to think,” she replied. “It could be any day that someone like him strikes, and we won’t know anything about it. I am not taking any chances with that man around. He just rubs me the wrong way, and I cannot even explain why.”

“Hey, don’t you want to make sure either of us are safe too?” one of the band members shouted. “We saw the way you have been giving Maia googly eyes all throughout practice.”

“Yeah, I wonder why Max has all of a sudden been so protective of Maia,” another member said in a teasing way. “Is there something going on between you two?”

“Quiet, you two!” Max responded. “I care just as much about all of you as I do for Maia. I just feel guilty for allowing her to come all this way to sing in the club without telling her about the murders. That is all! If any of you do not feel safe going home alone, I can drive you back too.”

“Yeah, sure!” the band member replied. “We all know you have grown quite smitten with Maia ever since she first started singing here. We see how your eyes light up whenever she is around.”

“Alright!” Max said. “I have had enough of this. If nobody else is going with me, then so be it. Maia, are you ready to go? Let us leave these buffoons.”

As they were walking up to her dressing room, Morrison could not help but ask what the band members had meant when they said to Max about him being smitten with her. She was really hoping that was not the case. It would be strange knowing that her boss had feelings for her.

“Max, I know this is an awkward subject to bring up, but I was just wondering why the band members had thought you were harboring feelings for me?” she asked quietly, so the other band members would not hear to avoid embarrassing him in front of them.

“Oh, that,” he said as his face turned bright red. “Just do not pay attention to them. They say silly things like that all the time to get a rise out of me. Besides, it would be unprofessional for me to have feelings for one of my employees. You should know that.”

Morrison could tell by his response and the way that he had looked that he was indeed having romantic feelings for her. She tried not to let it bother her too much, but it still made her feel slightly awkward.

“Yeah, you are right,” she said. “I am sorry if I embarrassed you just now. I could not help myself, I guess. I want to make sure there are no romantic feelings involved in this relationship. I would not want it to affect my professional relationship with you.”

“It’s all right,” Max replied. “Well, here we are. Let me go inside and check the room quickly to make sure it is safe. I want to make sure no one is lurking around or hiding in your room.”

He opened the door partially at first and took a quick peek before going inside. He then cautiously walked inside the room and looked around to make sure no one was hiding and there was not anything inside that would harm her. He came back about three minutes later to inform her that it was safe to go inside.

“It’s all clear,” he said. “Just call or text me if you need anything. Well, you know where to find me.”

“I will do that,” she said. “And thanks again for everything.”

He smiled coyly at her and then walked to his office, which was two rooms away from her dressing room. Morrison made sure to flash him a smile back. She now could understand why he had been acting so awkwardly around her lately. She shrugged at the idea of her boss having the hots for her. Morrison had much bigger problems to manage right now.

About three minutes later, she nearly jumped out of her seat when she heard someone knocking on her door. Morrison figured it was just Max checking up on her again because he had been so overprotective of her lately. He must have forgotten to tell her something or was coming in to see if she was still all right.

“Who is there?” she asked with a nervous quiver in her voice.

“It’s the janitor,” they answered. “I am here to empty your trash can.”

The sound of the janitor’s voice sent shivers down her spine. She could still picture him creepily staring at her with his dark, menacing eyes. Morrison was too afraid to take the trash can over to him. There was no way she was going to allow him into her room while she was there. Morrison decided to take the trash can over to him while he stood in the hallway.

“Just one second!” Morrison shouted. “I will be right there!”

She grabbed her half-empty trash can and walked slowly toward the door. She looked around quickly to find something to protect herself with in case the janitor attempted to attack her. Morrison spotted a large coffee mug that could knock him out if she hit his head hard enough with it. For backup, she could always grab her hair spray to spray his eyes with. It would allow her enough time to escape.

She opened the door slightly and peeked out first to make sure the janitor did not have any weapons on him. He had that same deranged look from earlier on his face. Morrison handed him the trash can. He quickly took out the bag containing trash, then put in a new trash bag. The sight of him made her tremble. He gave her back the trash can. She gave a slight smile and thanked him.

“You sing beautifully,” the janitor said softly. “I am a huge fan of yours. You have raw talent. You are better than the last few singers. It is such a pity what happened to them.”

“Yes, it truly is,” Morrison said. “They were much too young to die. They had so much promise in the music industry.”

“You are brave to continue performing at the Groove,” he said. “Let me know if there is anything else that I can do for you.”

“Sure, and thanks for everything,” she replied.

Morrison quickly closed the door and locked it afterward. Her heart was beating wildly. She had never been so frightened in her entire life. Morrison could not wait for Max to come back and take her home. She would feel safer with him by her side.

Suddenly, she heard a notification alert on her cell phone. It was a text message from Max. *Right on cue,* Morrison thought. He told her he was on his way to the dressing room and to not be frightened when she heard a knock on the door. Just after Morrison finished reading it, she heard the knock and Max’s voice coming from her door.

“Are you ready to go?” Max asked.

“Yes, I am,” she answered. “Just one second! I need to grab a few things first.”

She grabbed her purse and a bottle of water from the fridge, then headed to the door. When she opened the door, Morrison could see a smile break out on Max’s face. She began to wonder if he was still nervous from earlier when the band members were teasing him about liking her in front of her. Morrison noticed his hands shake a little as he stood outside her dressing room door.

“Shall we?” he said just before escorting her down the hall and out of the building through the back exit door. It was a bit of a nippy afternoon. Max offered his jacket to her, but she said it was not necessary and that her sweater was just enough to keep her warm.

“We shall,” Morrison responded.

Max opened the passenger door of his jeep for Morrison. She climbed up into the front seat. Morrison quickly fastened her seat belt. She watched Max as he walked around to the other side of the vehicle. Morrison was a little nervous about him driving her home because she now knew about his feelings for her. She would do her best not to give him the wrong impression without hurting his feelings.

“Hey, I hope you don’t mind if I run an errand on the way back to your place,” he said as he buckled his seat belt. “I wanted to stop by a toy store that is along the way. I need to get my nephew a birthday present. His birthday is tomorrow. I know it is an odd request. If you need to be somewhere, I can wait until after I drop you off. It is just easier this way.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “I am a little nervous about being back home by myself anyway. At least I know if I am with you, I will be much safer.”

When they arrived at the toy store, Max reached over to his glove department to take out a few bills he had stashed. As the glove department was open, Morrison got a glimpse of a gun that was partially hidden under the cash. She figured it was for safety purposes only and that she had nothing to worry about. Max did not strike her as the violent type, but then again, she did not know him all that well. Morrison had only known him for about three months. There was still so much about Max she had to learn about him. She really should not put her guard down yet, even for Max.

“Hey, why don’t you come in with me and help me pick out a gift for him?” he asked her after he had parked the car in the parking lot of the toy store. “I am terrible with gift shopping, and without your help it is no telling how long I will be in there. It will be much quicker if you came in and helped me decide on what to get. I am sure you are great with picking out gifts for kids.”

“Well, I am the oldest of four,” Morrison said. “I have four nephews and two nieces that I buy gifts for all the time, and I do not disappoint them at all with what I buy them. I always find it easier shopping for gifts for children than it is for adults.”

“You see what I mean?” Max said. “You are perfect for helping me decide what gift to get my nephew. We should be in and out of there in no time.”

Morrison was beginning to feel uncomfortable about getting closer to her boss. However, he was giving her a lift, so it was the least that she could do. They browsed through the boys’ section for toys. She asked Max about what his ten-year-old nephew Alex was like. Morrison was surprised to find out his nephew was studious and loved to read. Since he also had a love for learning, she recommended that Max get him a telescope, a STEM robot building kit, or a 3D drawing pen.

“I think he would really enjoy that STEM robot-building kit,” he said. “He is a bright kid who is technologically savvy. Gee, thanks for all your help!”

“I am always happy to help,” Morrison replied. “I know your nephew is going to love it based on what you have told me about him.”

When they walked up to her apartment together, Morrison felt nervous. She knew it was going to be an awkward moment once they reached her door. She was hoping that one thing did not lead to another, especially now that she knew Max liked her. He was also nine years older than her, which made her feel a little uncomfortable. She might have to remind him that this was not a date by any means.

“Well, thank you for all of your help,” Max said with a dreamy look in his eyes. “That was so much fun. We make a wonderful team. Don’t you think, Maia?”

He then leaned in closer to her and took a step forward. Morrison tried to avoid any contact with him. She turned her head in the opposite direction and took a step back.

“Um, Max,” she said, “we just talked about this not that long ago. Remember?”

“I remember,” he said softly. “It is just that you are so beautiful.”

Right before Morrison could say anything more, Max kissed her softly on the lips. Morrison tried to break loose, but his grip was too tight. His arms wrapped around her waist forcefully. She squealed. He quickly let her go.

“I’m so sorry, Maia,” Max said. “I could not help it. I have had my eyes on you for way too long that I could not resist kissing you. I felt a connection between you and I.”

“Look,” Morrison said. “I do not want to hurt you, but I do not feel the same way about you as you do for me. If you felt like I was leading you on in any way, I am terribly sorry. Nothing could ever happen between us. Please, do understand.”

“Fine!” he blurted out. “I should have known you would be just like all the rest. I am not good enough for you. I get it. You have your beauty, talent, and a bright future ahead of you!”

“I thought we agreed that our relationship is strictly professional,” she said. “Max, I think you should leave right now!”

“One of these days, you will regret this, Maia!” Max shouted out. “You better believe it!”

Morrison watched Max storm off from her apartment. She was worried that this was going to create a hostile work environment. She felt as if she was under fire. Morrison hated the idea of viewing Max as an enemy, but lately there was something off about him.

Chapter 4

The sound of screaming broke out throughout the crowd at the Groove. Smooth music with a rhythmic beat could be heard as the deejay blared techno music and spun a record to create a scratchy sound. The crowd was now hyped up because they knew that Maia Morrison was to go on stage in fifteen minutes.

Morrison took a deep breath. No matter what happened, she was determined to give her fans a show they would never forget. Morrison tried to block the memories of someone shooting at her with a gun and Max’s forced kiss. This was her moment to shine. It was everything that she had worked for, and she was not going to let anything—or anyone—stop her now.

“Okay, Maia,” she whispered to herself as she waited for the deejay to complete his routine. “You know just what to do!"

As she watched the deejay spin his turntable, sparks lit up the stage. The deejay looked up and saw one of the lights dangle loosely before completely snapping off. He then ran off the stage immediately. Morrison screamed and ran away as fast as she could as the stage light crashed on the stage. It had to have been the culprit who left her a threatening message in her dressing room. They were sending another warning to her. Whoever it was, they obviously did not want her on the stage that night and were going to make sure of it.

Security dashed toward the stage to make sure none of the performers were hurt by the accident and to clear the area. A security officer ran up to her and asked if she was okay. Morrison sobbed as she told him she was all right. He then pulled her quickly away from the stage.

“We need to get you out of here right away in case another incident happens,” he told her. “It is not safe to be here.”

The security officer took Morrison to her dressing room, where Max was waiting for her. Just as she thought it was all over, she noticed another dozen red roses were awaiting her. She saw a note was attached to them. Morrison dreaded to read what it said. She just knew it was going to be another threat.

The message written in huge red bold letters was: *YOU ARE NEXT, MAIA MORRISON!*

Morrison shrieked after reading the gruesome message. She handed the message over to the security officer nearby while sobbing.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get up on that stage again until we find out who is responsible for all of this!” Morrison cried out. “Are you making sure the fans are being safely evacuated from the building?”

“Don’t worry,” the security officer said. “They are safe and well cared for. No one in the accident has been injured from the accident. The police are here investigating the situation right now.”

“I would really like to believe you, but with additional security, this should not have happened,” she said. “We also would not have a killer on the loose, so you could see why I do not completely trust you or anyone at this point. This should have been taken care of a long time ago. I do not understand how this person escaped without being noticed by anyone.”

“I am truly sorry we let you down, miss, but we are trying to do whatever we can to protect you and everyone else at the Groove,” he replied. “We got our best men out there taking proper measures to help ensure your safety.”

“Thank you for everything that you have done,” Morrison said. “I know I should not be taking it out on you, but this is getting out of hand. I hope you understand my frustration and the reason why I am being overly emotional.”

“It’s okay,” the security officer replied. “We are used to these kinds of reactions from people.”

“Maia, I can take you home now if you want,” Max said. “I would not want you to go home by yourself. It would be much safer if I took you.”

“No, Max,” she said. “I do not ever want you to drive me anywhere again after that stunt you pulled on me the last time. Officer, can you take me home instead?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “I’ll make sure you get home safely.”

“Thank you,” Morrison replied. “I really appreciate it. I would like to go home now. I need to get out of here immediately. I don’t know how much more that I can take!”

She looked up at Max and could tell right away that he was disappointed about not being able to take her home. Morrison could tell he was trying hard to keep a straight face, but he could be clearly seen frowning, and there was a slight sadness in his eyes. She hated hurting him, but in a way, she was protecting him from getting his heart broken.

She picked up her purse, then slowly walked away with the officer without looking back at Max. Morrison could feel Max’s eyes on her as she walked past him. She just knew he was upset with her. Morrison was beginning to worry that she may lose her job over this. There was no telling what Max was thinking about right now.

On the way home, she could not stop thinking about the look Max had been giving her after she refused to let him take her home that night. She also could not block out the memory of him kissing and holding her forcefully. There was something dangerous about Max. Morrison knew she would have to keep a close eye on him. She could not afford to take any more chances with him.

Later that night, just as she was getting ready for bed, there was a phone call. *Who could be calling me at ten o’clock?* she wondered. She reluctantly picked up the phone to see who it was, just in case it was an emergency.

“Hello?” she answered.

“I know where you sleep at night,” a breathy voice said. “You can’t escape me, Maia Morrison. I will get you.”

“Who are you?” she shouted.

“I am the one who murdered all the singers at the Groove,” he said while trying to disguise his voice. “You will be next!”

“Why me? I haven’t done anything wrong!” she pleaded.

“Because women like you hurt men like me!” he replied. “You do not care for anyone but yourself. You are a greedy, boastful, and insensitive soul who wants nothing more than to become rich and famous. You do not deserve to live!”

“You don’t know me!” she screamed. “I want you to just leave me alone! You are nothing more than a cold-blooded murderer! That is what you are! You belong behind bars, you psychopath!”

Morrison slammed her phone down on her bed. She was so frustrated and filled with anger. She then wiped the few tears off her face before contacting the police immediately. Morrison was not about to let him get her. She had too much to live for.

About twenty minutes later, the police arrived at her front door. Police Chief Joe Harvey and Officer Chris Holcaster began asking her questions about the threats she had been receiving. Harvey said law enforcement had already begun asking people who were present during the recent events that had transpired at the Groove.

“Do you think I will be able to sing during tonight’s show, or do you think I am taking a huge risk?” Morrison asked.

“We don’t you think you should go up on stage and perform again until this case has been solved, Miss Morrison,” Holcaster said. “I would advise you to no longer allow exposure of yourself to crowds of people. You are now a walking target.”

“That’s just perfect!” Morrison said. “I do not think it is fair to allow this man to disappoint my fans. Do you at least have any suspects yet?”

“No, but we have recovered one of the bullets that shot out during your performance two nights ago,” Harvey said. “We were able to identify the type of gun that was used and obtain a small amount of DNA from it.”

“Have you questioned the janitor or Maximilian Rangel, the owner of the Groove?” she asked. “Those two have been acting rather fishy these days.”

“Yes, we have,” he answered. “The janitor was away during the night of the shooting. He was visiting family members in Vermont. Maximilian was honest with us about the situation. But that does not mean either one is in the clear yet. There might be multiple individuals involved. They may not have been the ones to pull the trigger, but they may have collaborated with the person who is responsible for it. I advise you to always watch yourself.”

“I noticed the janitor has been acting rather peculiar lately,” Morrison said. “He also said the strangest thing to me.”

“And what was that?” Harvey asked.

“He said that he was a big fan of mine,” she said. “He also told me in a creepy voice, ‘You are better than the last few singers. It is such a pity what happened to them.’ Now, if that doesn’t make him sound suspicious, I don’t know what does.”

The police chief listened carefully as he quickly jotted down everything Morrison was saying in his notepad. He nodded every time she would say something interesting to show that he understood what she was talking about.

“Is there anything else you would like to tell me?” he asked.

“I did have a slight confrontation with Maximilian,” Morrison replied. “You see, he had been driving me to and from the club to protect me. After taking me to a toy store to shop for his nephew, he chose to make a move on me in front of my door while dropping me off. He forcefully kissed and held me against my will. Max seemed agitated when I broke free from him. He then screamed out that I would regret it. This afternoon, he was extremely disappointed with me when I chose to have an officer drive me home instead of him.”

“Would you like us to issue a restraining order on him?” Harvey asked. “I would highly recommend it, but it is okay if you didn’t because you don’t feel like he is a danger to you. It is your call in the matter.”

“No, I don’t believe that would be necessary,” Morrison said. “I would, however, like a patrol car to drive by my apartment frequently throughout the day to help scare any perpetrator that comes near my apartment. I am sure if they see a police car in the area that it would make them rethink their decision to come after me.”

“We can arrange to have someone check up on you throughout the day to make sure you are safe and that no one is lurking about your apartment,” Harvey said. “However, it will not guarantee that you are one hundred percent safe. Anyone could sneak past the cop cars and get inside your apartment without anyone even knowing.”

“I would be happy to check up on you a few times each day,” Holcaster said.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “I would appreciate that very much. It is very comforting to know that someone will be keeping an eye out on me. I know I am not completely safe, but it would be good having someone every once in a while check on me to make me feel like I am not alone.”

“Well, just give us a call if anything else comes up,” Harvey said. “We will do whatever we can to keep you safe. Hopefully, we will get new leads on who the killer is soon. For now, just stay put. Make sure you always keep your doors and windows locked. Also, let someone know when you are leaving. To be safe, you should never leave your apartment alone. Do you have anyone that you can trust to take you places?”

“Nearly all of my family lives in Kansas,” she said. “I do have a close bandmate named Stacy Sullivan that I can have come over and drive me to places if I need anything. I know I can trust her.”

“Then I suggest you do that,” he said. “I will call Max and tell him that you will not be going back to the club for a while. For the time being, do you have enough food and supplies to stay in for at least a week?”

“Yes, I have plenty,” Morrison said. “I should not have to go anywhere for a while.”

“Good,” Harvey replied. “Just give us a call if you need anything. I will occasionally call you up to see how things are going.”

“I will,” she said. “Thanks again for everything. I am sorry to be on the edge and seem to be taking it all out on you. I know you have a job to do and that you are doing all that you can. It is not fair of me to criticize you for it.”

“It is all right,” Harvey said. “We know this is a very difficult time for you and we feel truly sorry for you. We will do whatever we can to make your life a little easier.”

After the police chief and officer walked away from the door, Morrison stood looking out the window. The blue and red lights were still flashing on the police car. She could see the officer and police chief chatting with each other. Morrison then set her sights on the bright, shiny lights of New York City. It was a wondrous city full of mystery and intrigue, but it was also a very scary and dangerous place. The city had a good deal of both good and bad people. It was going to be an arduous task for law enforcement to find who was responsible for the heinous crimes that took place at the Groove.

*Could someone be watching me at this very moment?* she wondered. Morrison hated missing work. She did not want to disappoint her fans, but there was not anything else that she could do. Morrison had to keep all of them and her bandmates safe. There was no other way. She felt trapped.

Chapter 5

Maximilian Rangel did not know what he was going to do without his star singer. There would not be enough cash flow coming into his business now. He had already refunded all the fans from the past two shows. He had to find a new singer for the Groove to stay afloat. Max owed too much money to the gang that loaned him some to open the business. He had swindled enough money from them; he knew the gang members were after him, and they were going to do whatever it took to get it back. If they killed him, how would they ever get their money back? The killer had to be a member of the gang or someone the gang had hired to go after his singers as part of their revenge. He knew the Groove was part of their turf, and they wanted it back so they could use it as another hideout spot. But first, they wanted their money. During the shows, he was selling the drugs the gang had given him to the fans to pay off his debt. Max got greedy and took more than his share. He blamed poor ticket sales and taxes for not making his quota.

Max had to schedule auditions for a new singer to replace Maia Morrison soon. He was aware of putting another singer at risk of getting murdered, but he had no other choice. He needed the business to save his hide, or else he, too, would get murdered by the ruthless gang that he had been making shady deals with. Max felt bad for everything he put Morrison through. He was also angry at her for rejecting him. For now, the killer was fixated on her, so maybe they would not have it in their mind to kill the new singing sensation at his music club. It was not him that the killer was after. By now, he would have already been murdered if he had been the killer’s target, so he had nothing to be worried about.

He printed off flyers that advertised the singing position with his contact information. Max also posted the singing position help wanted ad on the Groove’s social media. It would not be long till he got his first call from an interested individual. The Groove was known to be a popular venue for singers to get their start.

Max placed the pile of freshly printed flyers on his desk. He would put them up all over New York City first thing tomorrow morning. It was getting late in the evening, and he felt exhausted. Max decided to call it a night. He locked up his office, turned off the lights, and made sure both the front and back doors of the building were locked before heading off. Max could not wait to get home to unwind and fix himself something to eat. It had been a long day at the office.

He walked briskly toward his jeep. There was a blanket of stars and a full moon. The air was cool, and the ground was damp from all the rain earlier in the day. Max grew agitated after stepping into a puddle of water, making it splash. Both his shoes and lower pant legs were now drenched. He heard some chatter and laughter from a distance. It was a young couple crossing the street. He was about halfway to his jeep. Then suddenly, he heard footsteps.

He quickly turned around to see if anyone was there. Max was puzzled when he did not see anyone. He took five more steps, then the sound of footsteps proceeded. Max knew he was not the only one present. The mystery person had to be hiding somewhere, either behind a car, a building, or a dumpster. He became frightened, then dashed to his vehicle ten feet away. Within seconds, Max was inside his jeep. He felt relieved as he revved up the engine. His tires squealed as he accelerated quickly on the pavement. As he drove down the alleyway toward the street, a hooded individual awaited his arrival. Max could not get a clear view of who the person was because it was much too dark. They were purposely wearing all-black clothing to camouflage themselves. The mysterious person also wore a black ski mask, so he could not make out a face.

“Try and get me, you son of a bitch!” he shouted. “I dare you! I have a gun and I am not afraid to use it!”

Max pulled open the glove department, grabbed his gun, and rolled down the window. He shot five bullets in the direction of where the mysterious person was walking. Three bullets shot back at him from the masked person but just missed his vehicle. Max could not believe they were after him. He was sure they would have killed Maia Morrison first to allow him enough time to pay the gang back what he owed them. Max figured they wanted much more from him. He thought they wanted the property of The Groove as well. Whatever it was, just the money itself was not going to satisfy them.

Max spun the jeep away with great urgency as the hooded figure pulled out a gun and pointed it directly at him. While he was driving in the opposite direction, his back windshield shattered after the first shot had rung out. Just as he turned onto the street, there was a second gunshot. Max felt an excruciating pain in his neck. He blacked out and went unconscious. His fingers slowly slid away from the steering wheel. Max had lost complete control of his jeep. It crashed into a building across the street from the Groove. While engulfed in flames, the jeep exploded. The explosion rattled the streets of New York, and the fire rose high enough for people to see miles away.

About forty minutes later, fire trucks and police cars flooded the scene. Spectators drove by and gasped at the crash site with wide eyes. Residents in nearby condominium apartments stood outside on their front lawns and balconies in their pajamas, watching the blaze with curious minds. This was highly unusual activity in this section of the neighborhood. At this time of night, it was normally quiet, with all the businesses closed.

News reporters arrived at the scene shortly after. News helicopters flew above, trying to get the best aerial footage for breaking news reports. There was around-the-clock live coverage from the crash site. Everyone in New York wanted to know what exactly was happening that caused such a commotion. It was complete chaos, the sort of situation you would normally see in an action movie.

Morrison was awoken by the whirring sounds of helicopters fluttering and juddering across the night sky. She could hear ambulance sirens nearby. Morrison wondered what the commotion was all about, but this was something not unusual in the city that never sleeps. She figured she would hear all about it on the morning news. Morrison put earplugs in her ears to block out the sound, then swiftly went back to sleep.

As she slept, her intuition was telling her that the chaos during the night had involved a loved one or maybe even another murder. The sounds were coming from the direction of the Groove. She tried hard to shake off the feeling. Morrison could not allow more stress in her life. She was already on the edge and probably should seek some guidance from a psychiatrist since she had no one close to talk to in the area.

In her mind, she told herself, *That is ridiculous. Car crashes and fires happen all the time in New York. Nothing could have happened at the Groove.*

Less than an hour later, the thoughts stopped invading her mind while she slept. Morrison once again felt at peace with the world. She felt relieved that she was getting some time off from work. She desperately needed to have time for herself to reflect on what had just happened to her and what she needed to do next to achieve her goal of being a singer since her future with the Groove was now in limbo. Morrison could not see how she could possibly continue singing there after all that had happened. She would have to consider finding work somewhere else. For now, Morrison would feel much safer inside her apartment than getting back up on that stage.

She woke up after sleeping in for much of the morning, feeling well-rested. Morrison paced across the kitchen floor to fix herself a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee. The steam and aroma coming from her coffee rejuvenated her senses. She pulled up a seat from her kitchen table. She sat gazing out the window. Morrison felt warm and cozy in her fuzzy lavender pajamas. She reached for the remote control to turn on her television in the living room. She could watch the news from the kitchen while she enjoyed her breakfast.

Morrison had a feeling whatever happened last night would be the top coverage that morning. She quickly put on the local news. Just as expected, an anchorwoman was standing in front of a blaze. Morrison looked closer and recognized the location. She could not believe it had happened right next to the Groove. Hundreds of people surrounded the area to get a closer look at what was happening. Morrison was in complete disbelief over it. She turned up the volume to hear the anchorwoman speaking better so she could get more details.

“Witnesses in the area claimed they had heard gunshots shortly before the jeep had crashed into the building,” she said. “One witness who lived in a nearby apartment saw a man step out of the music club the Groove and began running away from gunfire before trying to escape the unknown shooter. He called 911 right about the time the jeep had exploded and caught on fire.”

Morrison began to have a sinking feeling in her chest. Her heart began to ache because she knew exactly who was in that jeep. The incident had happened right around the time Max normally left the Groove. She was hoping that it just happened to be another jeep that had been in the area during the time.

“Oh please, do not let it be Max,” she pleaded. “Oh, please, please, not Max!”

Then, just like that, a breaking news bulletin broke out in the middle of the news coverage.

“We just received video footage of the incident from a security camera located just outside of the Groove,” the anchorwoman announced. “It shows the man just minutes before being shot by a gun from an unknown person and killed in a crash as a result of his gunshot wound. The police have identified the victim as Maximilian Rangel, who is the owner of the Groove. The police believe the person who shot at Rangel is connected to the recent murders of singers who were performing at the Groove during the times of their deaths. If anyone has any information regarding this case, please contact the police immediately.”

“This cannot be happening!” Morrison shouted. “I cannot believe this. It is like I have just woken up in the Twilight Zone.”

Morrison broke down in tears. A massive wave of guilt had flooded over her. She could not believe that she had suspected Max to be a murder suspect. Morrison admitted he was not completely an angel either. Whoever did this was clearly after her and would kill anyone in their way. Nobody was safe. Morrison could not allow anyone else to help her. She did not want anyone else to be killed by trying to save her. It was best to only have law enforcement involved.

The phone began to ring, which startled her at first. She knew she had to answer it. It may be the police calling her about the incident.

“Hello?” Morrison said softly.

“Hello, sweetheart!” a familiar voice said. “I just got done watching a news report involving that owner and several singers who were murdered at that club you have been singing at. Darling, you need to come home now. That place is no longer safe. It is much too big of a city that is completely riddled with crime. There are plenty of opportunities for you in Kansas.”

Morrison was so relieved to hear her mother’s voice on the phone.

“Oh, hi, Mom,” she responded. “I know about everything, and I just want to assure you that I will be all right. I have already contacted the police about the situation, and they will be checking up on me and driving by my apartment frequently to make sure that I am safe. I do not plan on performing up on a stage anytime soon. The police told me that I should stay home for a while until they can find out who is responsible for all of this.”

“I hope this killer hasn’t come after you, too,” her mother said. “I cannot believe I allowed you to go out to the big city alone. What was I thinking?”

“Yes, I have been threatened by them,” Morrison responded. “But everything is under control. There is no need for you to worry about me. I need to stay here. I am a singer, and New York City is the perfect place for me to be discovered. There is no way that I am going back to Kansas. How am I ever going to be discovered there?”

“Sweetheart, you know that I am very proud of you,” her mother said. “But now is not the time for you to be there. You need to be someplace safe right now. Please, consider coming back home!”

“I am perfectly fine here,” Morrison said. “I do not want the killer to follow me home and put your lives at stake as well. It is best that I keep you all out of harm’s way. Trust me on this one. I know what I am doing.”

“Well, obviously I am not going to get you to change your mind,” she replied. “You have always had your father’s stubborn streak. Please, do not go anywhere alone, especially at night. Also, make sure you have something with you or nearby to protect yourself with. Just do not do anything dumb.”

“Mom, you should know that I would never do anything that will put myself at risk,” Morrison said. “I repeat, you must trust me on this. Okay. You and Dad have raised me right, so you should not have anything to worry about.”

“Just call me if you need anything,” her mother said. “Since you are not singing anywhere, I suppose you will need money to pay off your expenses. I will mail you off money later this week when I get paid. I cannot have you go around New York without any money. Let me know how much you will need.

“I will, Mom,” Morrison said. “I love you. I will keep you updated on any new developments.”

“I know you will,” she said. “I love you, too. Please take care of yourself. Bye!”

“I will, Mom, oh my gosh!” Morrison said. “Bye!”

She hated worrying her mother this way, but she was already in New York and her singing career had already started taking off. It would not make sense for her to leave now. Morrison felt like she had to stay put. If the police were patrolling her area often, she should be fine. She had everything that she needed for the time being, which was good because she really did not feel like going anywhere. Morrison had not known Max for long, but his death was still hard for her to take. She was still in disbelief that she would never see him again. Morrison was just going to remember all the good times she had with him and forget about the time he had made a move on her.

She could tell that he had feelings for her after seeing the hurt in his eyes after she had chosen not to take a ride from him yesterday. It made her feel bad since that was one of the last memories he would have of her. Morrison was sure that he had understood her reasoning why she did not want him to.

She pulled out her guitar and began to strum a song she had recently written and began to sing her heart out. Morrison decided to dedicate her new song called *Broken* to Maximilian Rangel during her next show. Her heart ached as she remembered the former owner of the Groove.

Chapter 6

After being cooped up inside her apartment for a few days, Morrison was beginning to feel a bit of cabin fever. She found it much harder to resist being out and about in the city that never sleeps than originally anticipated. There was so much to do and see. Morrison felt like breaking free and having a few drinks with her bandmates. She needed to loosen up and have a good time.

She called up her lead guitarist, Stacy Sullivan, to ask her if she would like to go to the popular dive bar Milady’s for cocktails and wine. Morrison knew she would not have to worry about her being the murderer. Stacy was harmless. Morrison just wanted to go out, enjoy her youth while she still could, and have an enjoyable time with someone that she could trust. There are millions of people in New York. How could one person find her? It was like finding a needle in a haystack. Morrison decided to throw caution to the wind. She could not take another night alone in her apartment.

Morrison excitedly went into her bedroom to pick out a snazzy outfit for her outing. She chose a tight pair of black leather pants and a one-shoulder sequin sparkly glitter top in the color of champagne. Morrison topped it all off with a pair of black high-heeled shoes. It was time to live it up!

Stacy said she would be picking her up at six o’clock in the evening. Morrison still had another hour to get ready. She carefully applied her makeup. Once she finished with that, she dabbed perfume on her wrist and neck. Morrison was single, so she would not mind mingling with a dashing young man who was also looking for a little romance. However, it was unsafe for her to hook up with anyone now. Morrison could not trust anyone, but she knew it would not stop Stacy from trying to set her up with someone. Morrison decided she just wanted to have a night out on the town so that she could have a little fun. She was tired of feeling scared and alone. This was the perfect opportunity for her to meet men and find someone to go out with.

Morrison quickly checked her cell phone. She had received a text message from Stacy, which said she was on her way and that she should be there in fifteen minutes. Morrison checked what the time was. Stacy would be there in about five minutes. Morrison grabbed her purse from the kitchen counter, then sat down on the couch in her living room. Three minutes later, the doorbell rang. Morrison sprung from her chair and dashed over to the door. She then checked the peephole on the door to make sure it was Stacy ringing the doorbell. Sure enough, it was her curly, redheaded musician friend with freckles, pale skin, and brown eyes standing in front of her door. Morrison straightened out her hair quickly before she opened the door.

“Well, hey there, stranger!” Stacy said jokingly. “I have not seen you for a while. Where have you been lately?”

“You know, stuck in this apartment for like forever,” Morrison replied. “I am so glad you are here. I really need to get out of here and be with people. I was beginning to feel lonely. Don’t get me wrong. It has been nice to have a break and chill at home. But I was getting really bored doing the same thing every day and needed a night to go out and have some fun.”

“I am glad that I am the one you called to take you out tonight,” Stacy said. “I was beginning to feel lonely myself. Especially now that we do not have any gigs. I sure hope they find the creep that has been murdering singers, and now Max. This isn’t fair. I also know how much your singing career means to you. I mean, you have a gift. You should not have to hide it from the world.”

“Thanks, your support means so much to me,” Morrison said. “I am not the only one with raw talent here. You can sure play the hell out of that guitar. I do not know any other woman that can play like you can. I mean, it is not fair for you either.”

“Oh, you,” Stacy said. “That is so nice of you to say, Maia. You are such a sweetheart! That is why I have chosen you as my best friend. So, are you ready for a night out on the town? Because I most certainly am!”

“Of course,” Morrison said. “What are we standing around here talking for? Let’s get the heck out of here while the night is still young!”

It was a beautiful night out. The night sky was clear and there was a light breeze in the air. Morrison and Stacy took a taxicab to Milady’s instead of Stacy driving her car. They figured it would be safer that way. Morrison sat looking out the window. She felt mesmerized by the bright lights and the countless amount of people strutting by. There was always so much to look at in the city. She still could not believe her being from a small town was now a part of the New York City scene. It was like a dream come true. Morrison was hoping someday to see her face up in big lights on one of the major venues or up on one of the many large billboards displayed downtown.

The cab pulled up to the front of the dive bar. After the cab driver had parked the car, Morrison quickly pulled out her credit card to pay for the ride. Both women excitedly got out of the taxi. Morrison had not felt this alive in a long time. The place was packed with people and the music was pumping. Everyone was so energized and ready to party.

They walked up to the bar to order their drinks. Morrison ordered a martini on the rocks, while Stacy ordered a cosmopolitan. They scoped the room to see if they could find any cute guys that appeared to be single. Stacy then started to giggle. Morrison gave her a quizzical look.

“What is so funny?” Morrison asked while laughing at her. “I mean it. What are you laughing at this time?”

“You see that cute guy sitting in the corner across the room?” Stacy said. “He has had his eyes on you the entire time we have been here. You should go up and talk to him.”

“Stacy, I couldn’t possibly,” Morrison said. “I cannot be walking up to random strangers in a bar, and you know perfectly well why. Although I must say, he is quite the looker.”

“Oh, come on,” Stacy said while nudging Morrison. “Take a chance. I will be right here to keep a close eye on you. You cannot continue living in a box. You are young and hot. Now is the time to go out and flaunt it.”

“I don’t know why I ever trust you, but I think you are right,” Morrison said. “Besides, there are people all around us, and two security men are standing over there. What could go wrong?”

“That is the spirit!” Stacy said. “Now, go get yourself a man.”

Morrison calmly and collectively rose from her chair. She smiled at the handsome man with thick blond hair and blue eyes. Morrison walked confidently toward him while running her fingers through her long hair. She could tell he was pleased by what he saw when his eyes lit up and by the way he was stroking his chin with a smile.

“Hi there,” she told him with a flirtatious smile. “I noticed you were looking at me from afar, so I decided to come over here to introduce myself. My name is Maia Morrison. I am a singer at the Groove, which is a music club.”

“Yeah, I know who you are,” the man said. “I saw you perform there about a month ago. You have an amazing voice and are a genuine entertainer. You absolutely blew my mind away when I first heard you. I swear you are going to make it big someday with that kind of talent.”

“Thanks,” Morrison replied. “To hear you say that means so much to me. And you are?”

“Oh, pardon my manners,” he said. “My name is Hugo Long. I have not seen you here before. I don’t see how I could possibly miss a beautiful face like yours. Do you come here often?”

“Not really,” Morrison said. “I just moved to New York four months ago. I am here with my friend Stacy, who is a guitar player in my band. She is standing right over there.”

“Can I buy you a drink?” Long asked. “What do you have there?”

“It’s a martini on the rocks,” she said.

He got up out of his seat, walked over to the bar, and called out to the bartender.

“Hey, I need two martinis on the rocks!” Long yelled so that the bartender could hear him over the loud music playing. The bartender then returned with the drinks.

“Hey, thanks,” Long told the bartender. “Keep the change!”

Morrison watched as he made his way back over to the table. *He is one smooth operator,* she thought. Morrison tried to act casual and not overly excited to see him. Morrison wanted to make a good impression on him.

“Here you are, my lady,” he said as he handed one of the martinis to her. “Enjoy!”

“Thank you,” she said. “You know, they make the best drinks in town. That is why my friend over there and I love coming to this place.”

“I agree with you,” Long said. “I have been coming here for years. So, where are you from originally?”

“Believe it or not, I am from Topeka, Kansas,” she chuckled. “I am just a midwestern girl who came here in hopes of becoming a big star. I have always envisioned that someday I would become one of the biggest singers in the world and sell millions of albums.”

“Well, by what I have seen, you are not far from that,” he said. “There are very few people with your kind of talent. You shine like a star when you are up on that stage. All the fans cannot get enough of you!”

“I hope you are right,” Morrison said. “I give it all that I got. Singing is a passion of mine, and there is nothing else that I would rather do.”

“I know so,” Long said. “How would you like to get out of here after we finish our drinks? I know another bar where they have a karaoke night. I would really like to hear you sing again. I was also hoping that we could do a duet together. You can invite your friend if you would like. It will be a whole lot of fun!”

“That sounds rather tempting, but I really don’t know you that well,” she answered. “But let me talk to my friend for a minute and hear what she has to say about it.”

“I’ll be right here waiting ever so patiently for you,” he said. “If you want, you can invite her too!”

Morrison briskly made her way over to her friend, who was having a flirty conversation with a man sitting at the bar. Stacy was too busy looking at the man that she did not even notice Morrison standing right behind her. Morrison then gently nudged her friend with her elbow to get her attention.

“Oh hey,” Stacy blurted out. “So, how did it go? Is he everything that you ever dreamed of?”

“He seems nice,” Morrison answered. “He invited us to go with him to another bar that is having a karaoke night. He wants to hear me sing. Under the circumstances, I do not think it would be a wise thing to do right now. Also, I feel like I should not completely trust him just yet because he is a stranger whom I have just met. Do not get me wrong. He is cute and all but is it worth it?”

“Hey, it is all right if you choose not to go,” Stacy answered. “If you really want to go, I will go with you. I will completely support your decision, but I do not think it would be wise for you to go alone with him. I wouldn’t want to see my best friend go alone and possibly get butchered up by a man she had just met at a bar. However, it would be fun if I tagged along. I have not done karaoke in a while.”

“So, do you think we should go?” Morrison said. “I mean, it does sound like fun, and he is really a handsome, charming fellow. I want to make sure you are comfortable about going with him.”

“It’s totally up to you,” Stacy responded. “But if it were up to me, I would take a chance. You really do deserve a night of fun with a handsome stranger. He doesn’t look like the serial killer type. He looks and acts completely harmless.”

After hearing Stacy’s take on the situation, she knew exactly what she was going to do. She headed back to Hugo Long’s table. Morrison saw him with a smile wide enough that she could clearly see his pearly white teeth, and his eyes sparkled while he looked at her. She could tell he was studying her to figure out what kind of person she was. Morrison, too, was curious about him.

“So, my friend and I decided it would be fun to go do some karaoke,” she told him. “However, I would feel better if we just met you at the bar in an hour. I do not feel comfortable going anywhere with someone who I have just met at a bar. You seem like a nice guy, and I would like to get to know you better.”

“I can respect that,” he said. “I know that women really need to watch themselves these days because there are many psychopathic men out there. If I was a woman, I wouldn’t feel safe going out with a stranger. You are being smart about it, and I can respect that. I will see the both of you there in a little while then.”

“Thank you for understanding,” Morrison replied.

They exchanged smiles before Morrison could go back to tell her friend Stacy that they would be doing a night of karaoke with Hugo Long. She could not wait to get back up on stage to sing again. Morrison did not know how much longer she could take not singing in front of an audience. It was the perfect time to shine again. Besides, how would the killer know she would be there? Lots of bars have karaoke nights in New York. It would be hard for the killer to know which one she was at. Morrison was not going to let them stop her from doing what she loved the most.

She walked up to Stacy and told her excitedly that they would be meeting Long at the other bar to sing some karaoke. Stacy could tell by the smile on her face that this was something that Morrison truly wanted to do, which didn’t surprise her because singing was in her friend’s blood. Stacy knew this would make her friend happy.

“Okay,” Stacy said. “Let’s do this! Just let me finish this drink and get freshened up in the bathroom before we go. I need to fix my makeup in case there are some cute guys there. I should only take a few minutes.”

“Oh, yay!” Morrison gleefully replied while clapping her hands. “This is going to be so much fun. Thank you so much for doing this! I think you will have a blast as well.”

“Hey, that’s what friends are for,” Stacy said with a wink. “Now, let’s go out there and be reckless together. Maybe I will find myself a man over there at the other bar.”

Chapter 7

It was now ten o’clock in the evening, and Morrison and Stacy had just hailed a cab. The boisterous and slightly drunk duo were laughing and joking all the way to Karaoke City, which is both a karaoke and sports bar. At times, they felt like the taxi driver had been checking them out through the rearview mirror. He gave off creepy vibes when they could see him smile as he was watching them. Stacy and Morrison turned their attention back to each other.

“Girl!” Stacy squealed. “The first night out, since the whole you-know-what, you are already putting yourself out there and meeting cute guys. I would not blame you for wanting to go. If I had your looks and talent, I would be flaunting it, too!”

“I have not been flaunting it,” Morrison said. “I mean, on occasion, I get asked out on a date or find some man checking me out. There is nothing unusual about that. It is not like I ask for it to happen. I cannot help it if men notice me. Men just seem to gravitate towards me because they find me attractive.”

“You would say it that way,” Stacy said with a smile. Afterward, she began to giggle. Morrison rolled her eyes at Stacy. “Not all of us get that kind of attention. Many women, like me, are not nearly as attractive as you are.”

“What are you talking about?” Morrison replied. “You are very attractive, and you are loaded with talent. I have seen men checking you out.”

“I guess so,” Stacy said. “I do go out on more dates than you, but that is only because I have been putting myself out there, unlike you.”

The cab then came to a complete halt. Morrison quickly pulled out her debit card to pay the taxi driver. Stacy and Morrison wasted no time leaving the cab and walking up to Karaoke City. Morrison noticed a familiar face right away. Hugo Long was standing right outside the door, waving at them. Morrison and Stacy waved back.

“Right this way, ladies!” Long told them as he opened the door for them. “I saved us a table. There is a lot of people here tonight. It was a good thing that I found one available for us.”

“Hugo, this is my friend, Stacy Sullivan,” Morrison said. “She is my lead guitarist at the Groove.”

“It is nice to meet you,” Long said.

“Likewise,” Stacy replied.

“Thank you for allowing Maia to come sing karaoke with me,” Long told Stacy. “I know it must be a little creepy being with me when you know nothing about me other than I am a nice guy. I can assure you that I am safe to be around.”

“Well, you better be,” Stacy responded. “I am putting my trust in you that everything is going to be all right. If you mess with my friend, you mess with me.”

“That makes you a really good friend,” Long said. “Maia is very lucky to have you as a friend in her life.”

“That is what makes Stacy my best friend, Hugo,” Morrison said. “She really does stand up for me and keeps an eye out on me. I do the same for her.”

As they entered the building, Morrison’s curious eyes wandered. There were black cushioned couches, a bar area, disco lights, television screens that showed lyrics, and microphones. The place was hopping. Long led them to a table he had reserved for them. While they sat down, a man was singing the lyrics to “Mr. Brightside.” There were several cheers and some laughter from the crowd. At the end of the song, the man received a standing ovation.

“Would you ladies like me to buy you a drink?” Long asked. “You can have whatever you like. The sky is the limit!”

“I will have a chocolate martini, please,” Morrison answered. “Thank you!”

“I’ll have the same,” Stacy said. “Thanks!”

“Well, he seems nice,” Stacy said after Long left the table to buy them drinks at the bar. “He is cute, too! I wish I had the ability to attract men like the way you do.”

“That’s not true,” Morrison said. “Who was that handsome gentleman that was talking to you at the bar earlier this evening. I saw the way you two were smiling and looking at each other. Both of you were clearly flirting with each other.”

“Oh, his name is Daniel Stuart,” Stacy said. “He was a classmate of mine in college. We both were music majors at New York University. He is now a high school music teacher, believe it or not. We were surprised to see each other again. I want to say that the last time we saw each other was six or seven years ago at a college friend’s party.”

“By what I saw, you two have chemistry,” Morrison said. "You both couldn’t keep your eyes off of each other. I also noticed the way the both of you were playfully touching each other. Do you plan on seeing each other again?”

“Yeah, we exchanged phone numbers,” Stacy said while blushing at Morrison. “We are just friends, though. I don’t even know if he has a girlfriend or a wife. We thought it would be nice to catch up some more another time.”

“Well, the next time you talk to him, you should ask him,” Morrison said. “By the way he was looking at you, I could tell right away that he does not. Also, I did not see a ring on his finger, so he is not married.”

Both grew silent when Hugo Long approached the table with both of their chocolate martinis. He handed them their drinks. Morrison was the first to take a sip. She had not had a chocolate martini in so long that she had almost forgotten how good it tasted. Morrison then licked off the tasty concoction from the corners of her lips, which got Long excited. It got him imagining what it would be like to kiss her plump, velvety lips.

In the background, a woman singing “I Touch Myself” could be heard loudly throughout the room. Everyone laughed at her as she tried to use a sultry voice while playfully being sexy. Morrison could not wait for her turn with the microphone. She gestured at the person responsible for handing over the microphone to an eager participant. The young woman came running over to her and asked Morrison for her name and what song she would be singing.

“My name is Maia Morrison, and I will be singing ‘The Boy is Mine’ with my good friend Stacy here,” she answered.

“Maia!” Stacy yelled. “I am not singing. I mean it this time!”

“Oh, yes you are,” Morrison said. “Come on, show them what you got!”

“Alright, fine,” Stacy said. “You owe me one after this. I do not know why I let you talk me into doing these sorts of things. You know that I am not nearly as good of a singer as you are.”

“Hugo, you are not out of the clear,” Morrison teased him. “I expect you to sing a tune as well. It is only fair since we are doing it. So, what song will it be?”

“Trust me, she will not take no for an answer,” Stacy told Long. “You might as well give in and say yes to her.”

“She is right, you know,” Morrison said. “I don’t expect anyone to go to karaoke with me without singing at least one song.”

“Okay, you win,” Long replied. “Hey, put me down for ‘Wonderwall’!”

“This is going to be so much fun!” Morrison said. “I haven’t done karaoke in months.”

“More like embarrassing for me, that is,” Stacy said sarcastically. “I do not know how you got me into this mess. I am not the one with the voice, you know. Hugo, she is relentless. You can now see what you are getting yourself involved with.”

“I don’t mind,” Long said. “I think she is absolutely adorable.”

All of Morrison’s troubles were starting to fade away. She waited anxiously for her turn to sing. When she and Stacy’s names were called, she nearly jumped out of her seat when each of them was handed their own microphone. Morrison could tell Stacy was nervous. She felt more comfortable playing an instrument than hearing herself sing. Stacy was a real trooper for doing it. Morrison took the lead by singing the first lyric. Stacy followed her lead afterward. The experience was exhilarating for both as people clapped wildly at them. Audience members were clearly impressed with the vocal stylings of Maia Morrison.

As Morrison scanned the room as she was singing, a suspicious person then caught her eye. He glared at her from across the room and kept jiggling something around in his left pant pocket. The lights were dim, so she could not make out what the object was. They exchanged looks. When the song was over, the mystery man edged closer to her. Morrison then looked at her friends with a troubling look on her face. They both could see the fear in her eyes and asked her what was wrong.

“There’s a man over there who is giving me a cold stare,” Morrison said frantically. “He seems to be heading this way. I think he might have been threatening me with an object that he has in his pocket. I couldn’t make out what it was.”

“Okay,” Long said. “Just stay calm. Don’t worry, I will make sure that he doesn’t do anything to you. I will keep a close eye on him while you enjoy yourself.”

Morrison looked back at the man and noticed he was only about ten feet away from her now. He gave her another threatening look. She knew she could no longer stay with her friends and had to get away as soon as possible. There was something menacing about the way he looked at her.

“I’m sorry, I have to go,” Morrison said before scrambling toward the nearest exit. “He is coming straight towards me.”

The tall, well-built man with dark brunette hair and icy blue eyes began to chase her. It was then that she realized he really was after her and wanted to harm her. Somehow the person chasing her knew exactly where she was. Could it have been Hugo Long or her friend Stacy Sullivan who reported where her location was? Then she realized that Long had dove toward the man, but the man had broken loose from his grip. Stacy screamed out for help.

Morrison quickly bolted out of the bar and started running for her life amidst the crowded streets of New York without looking back. She zigged and zagged throughout the city to try to lose the man. After running several blocks, she looked back and lost sight of the man. Morrison was relieved to find he was no longer behind her. She then hailed a cab and went straight back to her apartment. She made sure her place was completely secure by locking every door and window. That was the last time she would ever take a chance like that again. Morrison was saddened after she realized that she couldn’t even spend a night out with Stacy without someone being after her. She felt alone and afraid. *What is to become of me?* she wondered.

Morrison knew what she must do. She quickly dialed the number to the police department to report what had happened at the karaoke bar. Police Chief Joe Harvey and Officer Chris Holcaster were not going to be happy with her for not heeding their warning. They were going to scorn her for going out and taking a huge risk by going up to a stranger at a bar, then meeting him up at another bar later, putting both her and Stacy’s lives at risk.

Harvey and Holcaster arrived about twenty minutes later. Just as expected, Morrison heard all about how she should have been more careful and about how stupid and reckless she was. She sat quietly on her living room couch while the police scorned her.

“We’ve got police patrolling this area around the clock, then you decide to sneak out in the middle of the night just get some kicks,” Harvey scolded her. “What good is it for us to try and keep you safe when you are putting yourself in danger like that? I hope this serves as a lesson, Miss Morrison.”

“Okay, I get it,” she replied. “I admit it. I screwed up. Is that what you want to hear?”

“From now on, stay home,” Harvey said. “We will try to locate the man you described that chased you tonight and bring him to the station for questioning. Please do what you can to stay safe in the meantime. Give us a call if anything else comes up.”

“Okay, Officer,” Morrison said. “I promise I will stay home from here on out, alright? I realize now that going out with my friend was a huge mistake. I am tired now, and it is late. Can we just end this now?”

“All right, we will leave you alone now,” Harvey told her with an exasperated look on his face. “Have a good evening!”

Holcaster followed him out the door quietly. Morrison closed and locked the door as soon as they stepped out. She felt like a complete fool.

Plus, her boss was just recently murdered and had suffered a tragic death. It was insensitive of her to have completely dismissed his death and acted like it had been nothing. It made her feel selfish. Morrison was becoming one of those egotistical singers who had a love for the spotlight. This was a reality check for her. Morrison went straight to bed.

The next day, Morrison stayed cooped up in her apartment all day. She spent the day reading, watching television, cleaning up her apartment, and walking on her treadmill. Morrison was eager to go outside to get some fresh air, but she had to follow the police chief’s orders.

At the end of the day, she went up to her bedroom to put on her pajamas so she could feel all warm and cozy for the evening. It was quiet and calm, much unlike the previous night. Morrison pulled out her notebook and started writing lyrics for a new song. Morrison played soothing jazz music in the background, along with a few candles lit and a glass of wine to help her find inspiration for her latest song in progress. She would also play the piano and try to sing along to the lyrics. It wasn’t the same kind of excitement she experienced while singing at the Groove; it was more peaceful and soothing. It was like food for the soul. Since she was so wrapped up in the creative process, she had forgotten the time. Morrison noticed it was already about eight o’clock. She decided to have a pizza delivered to the apartment for dinner.

Morrison took a break from writing to watch a movie instead. She flicked on the television and chose to watch the comedy movie *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion*. About fifteen minutes into the movie, she was indulging in a whole medium pepperoni pizza herself as she sipped Diet Coke. She had not felt so relaxed in a long time. Morrison appreciated a stress-free night after all that she had been through.

When the movie was halfway done, Morrison heard an unusual sound outside her door. She nervously glanced over at the door. The doorknob slowly turned. She immediately freaked out. There was no place she could escape her apartment if, indeed, someone was breaking into it. Morrison quickly got up, ran to the kitchen, and grabbed a meat carving knife from a drawer. She then ran to her bedroom closet to hide. Morrison slid behind her hanging clothes and placed a few boxes in front of her legs and feet so no one could see her when they opened the closet door.

Morrison remained quiet and stood completely still. She shook as she held on to the long, sharp knife in her right hand. Her heart beat wildly. A few minutes later, she heard the door slam open. Morrison knew someone was now inside her apartment when she heard their footsteps inside her living room. They then knocked over one of her lamps while they searched the area. Many thoughts were whirling around in her mind. It had to be the killer trying to find her. It was the only plausible explanation.

She could hear at least one person scampering around inside her apartment. They were clearly looking for something or someone. The bedroom door squeaked. Her heart nearly stopped as they stepped inside the bedroom. The sound of the footsteps grew closer as the intruder slowly approached the closet door. As the door opened, Morrison could see the bedroom light shine inside the closet. Her body quivered. The intruder was close enough now that she could hear them breathe. She positioned herself in a stance that would allow her to lunge and stab the perpetrator with the knife if they found her.

“The light is on, but no one is here!” the intruder called out. “Are you sure this is the apartment that Maximilian Rangel dropped her off at? Maybe they forgot to turn the light off before they headed out of the apartment.”

Morrison then heard someone screaming on the other line of the intruder’s cell phone. She couldn’t make out what was being said because the sound coming from the phone was muffled.

“Look, that’s why Max had to go,” the intruder said. “We had a deal, and he blew it off many years ago. If it wasn’t for us, he wouldn’t be able to keep the Groove open. He had it coming. Unfortunately, the singers had to go too.”

Morrison could tell the person on the other line who was now talking was furious. She tried hard to make out the words the other person was saying but still could not. These had to be the people who killed Max and all the singers. They were after something, but what?

“Once we kill off Maia Morrison, we can take full ownership of the Groove and turn it into something much more profitable, like a swanky restaurant or a casino,” the intruder said. “Plus, there will be no one else who would be suspicious of us killing off Max and the singers. Several people know we were at the Groove during the time of the murders. A few employees and band members know we were handling business matters with Max. They would be idiots to report us as suspects, because they know they would be next on our radar.”

Morrison could not wait for the intruder to leave. She didn’t know how much longer she could stay hidden. However, she couldn’t help but try to peek at who was there. Without moving anything, she tilted her head slightly and looked through a small opening between a pair of pants and a thick sweater. She squinted her eyes to get a better view.

“There’s a police car parked in front of this apartment,” the man said. “I need to scram before they suspect anything. I can’t let them see me here. I just got out of prison!”

The man then sprinted out of the bedroom.

Morrison couldn’t make out the features on his face, but she could tell the man was about six feet tall, had dark brunette hair, and was well-built just before he had left. He looked very similar to the man chasing her at the karaoke bar last week. She knew there was something fishy about that man. Morrison remembered his icy blue eyes staring her down like he was a hawk hunting down his prey. Right when she heard him run out of the apartment and slammed her door closed, she came out of the closet quickly and tried to see if the police car was still parked out front so she could flag down the officer.

Fortunately, he was still there. She waved fiercely at the officer and pointed at the man acting cool and confident while walking past the police car. The officer quickly looked up at her, then looked at the man sneaking out of the apartment. He knew Morrison was trying to tell him that the man had done something wrong.

“Hey, you!” the officer told him. “I need to ask you a few questions. Get back over here!”

The intruder then ran full speed ahead. The police officer quickly called for backup before chasing after the man. A few minutes later, gunshots were flying off. Morrison quickly got away from the window and went somewhere else in the apartment so that she could be safe from flying bullets. She was hoping the intruder had been shot. Within seconds, police sirens approaching the area could be heard.

“Oh, please tell me the man was caught so I can get more answers about why someone is trying to kill me and end this whole nightmare,” she said out loud. “Please, dear God!”

Someone was now running up the stairs and down the hallway to her apartment. There was then a loud knock on her door. Morrison knew it had to be the cops checking in on her. She walked slowly up to the door, then looked through the peephole. Sure enough, it was Police Chief Joe Harvey standing outside her door.

She never felt so relieved.

Chapter 8

“I’m telling you, Officer, I think this is the same person that chased me at Karaoke City,” Morrison said. “I may not have gotten a good look at his face, but he was built the same way and had the same hair. Have you heard anything about the officer who went out chasing him tonight shortly after he broke into my apartment?”

“That officer had exchanged gunfire with the intruder,” Police Chief Joe Harvey informed her. “Sadly, that officer had been shot and is in critical condition. The good news is the man who broke into your apartment had been shot and was limping down an alleyway but was picked up by a vehicle that sped away. We were able to retrieve his DNA at the scene, so we could check and see if it matches the DNA of any repeated offenders in New York. This would allow us to identify who he is and would provide us with sufficient evidence that could lock him up behind bars.”

“That’s horrible about the officer being shot,” she said. “I feel awful about it. If I had been more careful, this would never have happened. Please, send him my best.”

“I’ll be sure to,” Harvey responded. “I am going to set you up at a hotel for a few weeks in case he or somebody else comes back to try and kill you. I will drive you to the hotel myself in the patrol car.”

“Thanks, Officer,” she said. “I’ll go pack up a few things now. It should not take long. Just make yourself at home. Would you like something to drink? I have diet soda and sweet tea.”

“No, that is okay,” Harvey said. “Thanks for offering, though.”

Morrison ran up to her bedroom to pack five pairs of clothes, some hygiene products, pajamas, undergarments, a few technological devices, chargers, and her notebook that she used to write lyrics in. She was happy about leaving her apartment because she no longer felt safe there. Morrison hurried back into the living room with her suitcase. Harvey took the luggage and carried it for her.

Once again, Morrison found herself in the front seat of a police car. She felt embarrassed when people curiously watched her step into the police car. Morrison hoped they were not thinking she had done anything wrong. She smiled and waved at them to let them know that she wasn’t a criminal and that she was just simply getting a ride.

“We booked you into the Homewood Suites,” Harvey said. “There’s a free hot breakfast each morning, and there are plenty of restaurants that will deliver food to the room. You should have everything that you need while you are staying there. If there’s anything else you might need, just give us a call. Do not leave the hotel for anything. I repeat, do *not* leave the hotel.”

“Okay, I got it,” she said. “Trust me, I learned my lesson the last time. You can count on me not to do anything else stupid.”

“Good girl,” he said. “From here on out, no more funny business.”

Harvey slowly pulled up and parked the car at the front entrance to the hotel. Morrison pulled out her suitcase and wheeled it inside the hotel lobby. She patiently waited for Police Chief Harvey to check her in while sitting on a comfy sofa in front of a fireplace. Morrison was so tired that she could not wait to get up to her room and fall fast asleep.

“Here are your keys,” Harvey told her. “Your room number is 326. Breakfast is served from six o’clock to nine o’clock on Monday through Friday and from six o'clock to ten o’clock on Saturday and Sunday. Call me if you need anything, and have a good evening.”

“Alright, Officer,” Morrison said. “You have a good evening, too, and thanks for getting me a room at the hotel! I will feel much safer now.”

She sluggishly took the keys from his hands and practically dragged her feet to the elevator. It had been an incredibly long night. Morrison was too tired to even think. All she wanted to do was throw herself on the bed and wrap herself up in some blankets while falling deeply asleep. She couldn’t imagine what other turn of events would happen during the week. Morrison did not think she could take any more surprises.

Once she was in her room, she quickly got out of her clothes and changed into her pajamas. She checked her cell phone to see if she received any messages and her social media pages before turning off the lights and going to sleep. Since Morrison had no place she needed to be the following morning, she decided she was going to sleep in. She was so exhausted from all the excitement that her mind wouldn’t even allow her to dream that night. It was the first time in a long time that she felt safe enough to sleep without the fear of being murdered in the middle of the night.

Despite waking up feeling fully energized the following day, the gloomy feeling returned. Morrison’s mind was still processing the events that had recently occurred. Everything from the death of Max to the man who broke into her home had caused her a great deal of trauma. She was hoping the police were getting closer to catching the person or people involved in the murders and the recent events that had transpired.

Morrison sat at the breakfast bar quietly and all alone. She pulled out her notebook because she felt inspired to write songs while she sipped her coffee and ate her cereal. Writing provided a creative outlet that allowed her to pour out her feelings and ideas. She desperately needed that right now. Morrison watched an old couple sitting at a table eating their breakfast and quietly conversing amongst themselves. She wished there was someone there for her to talk to. Morrison felt like there was no one that she could turn to and that she would have to face some of her greatest fears on her own.

All she could do now was cry. Morrison was beginning to think that her mother was right about leaving Kansas. Maybe she should have stayed. Then she wouldn’t have found herself in quite the predicament. The big city wasn’t meant for a midwestern girl from a small town in Kansas. Suddenly, she felt someone tapping her shoulder. Morrison jumped up in fright.

“I am so sorry that I startled you, miss!” the breakfast bar attendant told her. “I was just checking to see if you were all right. I was concerned because you looked so sad over here all alone.”

“Umm, yeah, I am fine,” Morrison replied. “I just lost a friend, and I was caught up in my emotions. That is all.”

“I am so sorry to hear that,” the attendant told her. “My name is Alice. If you need anything, just let me know.”

“Thank you so much, Alice,” Morrison said. “The breakfast has been great. The pancakes and cheese omelets were delicious. Keep up the good work.”

“Thank you,” Alice replied. “I am glad you enjoyed it, and if you ever need someone to talk to, don’t be afraid to come up to me. I would be happy to listen.”

“Okay,” Morrison said with a tear rolling down her cheek. “Thank you.”

Morrison handed over a five-dollar tip to Alice afterward to show her gratitude for her service. Alice accepted the money most graciously. It made Morrison happy to see her smile.

Shortly after Morrison returned to her hotel room, she checked her cell phone to see if she missed any calls. Morrison noticed she had one voicemail message. She listened carefully to it.

“Maia, this is Police Chief Joe Harvey,” Harvey said. “We got the DNA results back and were able to successfully identify the perpetrator who broke into your apartment. His name is Zachariah Kelly. Zachariah has been arrested multiple times for gang-related activities. It is possible that he and a few other gang members were responsible for Maximilian Rangel. Max may have been in cahoots with a gang. According to his financial records, Max was in financial trouble, and the Groove was in danger of closing. Call me back so we can discuss it further.”

Morrison immediately called him back to get more information from Harvey. She was excited when he answered right away. Morrison couldn’t help but ask him what this all had to do with the singers.

“So, why are they murdering singers?” Morrison asked him. “They aren’t involved in this mess. The whole thing doesn’t make any sense.”

“He could have owed money, and in response, Zachariah and maybe even a few others were sent to kill the singers at the Groove to serve as a warning to Max before killing him off,” Harvey replied. “Because you were in the middle of it, they may want to kill you off because they fear you may know too much.”

“Well, that is just great,” she said. “I possibly got an entire gang after me, and it is all because of Max’s stupidity. This is going to be far more complicated than trying to track down just one killer.”

“Just hang in there,” Harvey said. “We are doing whatever we can to solve this case. At least you are now someplace safe where I don’t have to worry about you anymore. I will call you again when we have more updates. Stay safe, and I’ll talk to you later. Goodbye, Miss Morrison.”

“Okay, Chief,” Morrison said. “I will do that then. Bye, Chief!”

In a way, she was relieved after talking to the police chief. At least the police were starting to get more information about the case. Unfortunately, Morrison was still not out of the clear. She was going to be spending much more time in a hotel room. Morrison decided to call her parents up to give them updates on the latest developments in the case. Her parents had been scared silly. Then she started to think maybe she should not tell them that a gang was after her. That might scare them even more, and then they would want her to come back home.

The best thing for Morrison to do in the meantime was to wait and hear back from the police for more information. She knew this could mean many more days being stuck inside, but she had no other choice. Whoever it was looking for her was going to keep a close eye out for her. She was no longer safe on the streets of New York City.

Morrison pulled out her notebook once again and started adding more lyrics to her new song to help her take her mind off things. It soothed her nerves and put her mind at ease. At least now, she was keeping herself busy. It was all that she could do for the moment. Morrison wished she could play her guitar, too, but she knew guests would not appreciate her doing it. Instead of playing the guitar to the tune, she hummed instead. She then sang along with the melody.

It was only a matter of time before she would find herself back up on the stage with her name in lights and singing her heart out to the crowd. Morrison could already hear the crowd clap and scream. She could see the stage lights and feel the excitement that comes when she sings and dances. It was an exhilarating experience that she craved immensely.

The idea of getting back up on stage gave her hope. Her fans and her love for music made her who she was: a star.

Chapter 9

Morrison couldn’t shake the thought that her old boss, Maximilian Rangel, was involved in some shady business with possible gang members. She couldn’t believe he was willing to risk his singers’ lives to keep the Groove open. It made her wonder if he even cared about her at all. Her feelings for him were beginning to change. At first, she felt bad for him, but now that sadness for him was turning into anger.

Morrison felt betrayed. All he ever cared about was bringing in more singers so that he raked in enough dough to keep the business afloat and to raise enough money to pay back some ruthless gang members. Her life and career meant nothing to him. The more Morrison thought about it, the more she wished Max had never hired her to sing at the Groove. She felt so gullible. Morrison couldn’t figure out why she didn’t see that there was something wrong with him from the beginning. She was too busy chasing after her dreams of being a star to even notice any of the red flags around her.

Her cell phone suddenly started to ring. Morrison picked up her phone immediately from the bedside table and answered it without even thinking about checking the caller identification. To much relief, she recognized the voice immediately. It was her friend and bandmate Stacy Sullivan.

“Hey, I was just checking up on you,” Stacy said. “You just ran frantically out of the karaoke bar without telling us where you were going. Then, when I saw that creepy man coming after you, I realized that you were in trouble. I tried my best to call the security over or get someone to catch the guy before he could get to you. Hugo tried to stop him, but the man was too quick for him. It just all happened so quickly.”

“Thanks for trying to help me,” Morrison said. “When Hugo grabbed him, it allowed me enough time to escape the club and lose him. I ran all over the streets of New York so that I wouldn’t lead him to my apartment. After I knew I had lost him and he was nowhere in sight, I went straight to my apartment and called the police afterward.”

“I am glad you were able to get away from him unharmed,” Stacy responded. “Hugo did call the police as soon as you made a break from the man that was chasing you. He left the bar abruptly without saying much, which I thought was weird. I am starting to think maybe he went out to look for you, but I am not entirely sure. All I know is that I don’t know what I would have done if I had lost you. You mean the world to me.”

“It happened so suddenly that I didn’t even get a chance to call and explain,” Morrison said. “I was so tired after talking to the cops about it. I am sorry that I worried both you and Hugo Long. I should have called you as soon as I got back to the apartment to let you know that I was okay. I promise I won’t do that again.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Stacy said. “I am just glad to hear that you are doing fine and made it back safely. Just don’t ever scare me like that again!”

“I can’t make any promises given the current situation, but I will try my best,” Morrison replied. “I was really shaken up that night, so I wasn’t thinking clearly. So, how did the rest of the evening go with you and Hugo at Karaoke City?”

“It was fine,” Stacy said. “He bailed out of singing karaoke, which was a bit of a bummer. His personality changed quite a bit after you left. Hugo was quiet and he didn’t appear to be as friendly. In fact, he seemed a little worried. Probably because he was worried about you, and he seemed disappointed that he couldn’t share the night with you. I don’t think he said a single word to me. Hugo just told me that he had to leave because he had to go to work early the next day. He left shortly after you ran away. He was an odd fellow. I think you dodged a bullet on this one.”

“Yeah, I’ve been dodging a lot of bullets lately,” Morrison said sarcastically as she rolled her eyes. “I am really disappointed in myself for thinking that he was dating material. I should have known he was too good to be true. I feel so naïve.”

“Hey, don’t get down on yourself for it,” Stacy said. "There’s no way of us knowing what kind of a person he would be. He seemed all right at first, and I would not blame you for wanting to go out with him. He was so dreamy-looking. So, would you like it if I come over later today?”

“I don’t think that is a good idea,” Morrison said. “You see, someone broke into my apartment yesterday and it turned out to be the same person that had chased me at the karaoke bar. I am now staying in a hotel room because it is not safe right now to be in my apartment.”

“So, what hotel are you staying in?” Stacy asked.

“Look, it’s not that I don’t trust you,” Morrison replied, “especially with you being my friend and all, but I don’t think it is a good idea to let anyone know where I am at right now. The police chief is already breathing down my neck over being careless these past few days.”

“Oh, come on,” Stacy pleaded. “You can trust me. After all that we’ve been through together?”

“Okay,” Morrison said. “You have to promise me that you won’t tell anyone else that I am here.”

“Sure thing,” Stacy replied. “I promise you that I won’t say a word.”

Morrison then reluctantly gave her friend and bandmate the name and location of the hotel. She wasn’t sure if it was the right move, but it would be nice to have someone around to keep her company. They would meet up at the Starbucks that was located inside the Homewood Suites to drink coffee and chat later that afternoon. Stacy told her she hated seeing her cooped up all alone and felt bad about how things went at the karaoke bar. Morrison was hoping to have the opportunity to ask her if she had any idea about Max being involved with gang members. Maybe she would get some more information about it from her. Something was telling her that other people at the Groove knew more about the murders and Max’s shady background than what they were letting on to not scare her off. She had to get to the bottom of it before it was too late.

At two o’clock in the afternoon, Stacy and Morrison met at the Starbucks on the first floor of the hotel. Morrison was so happy to see her friend again. She desperately wanted to talk to someone about everything that had been going on in her life. Morrison knew that Stacy would understand what she was feeling and would show her some sympathy.

“I just can’t believe Max would be capable of doing this,” Stacy said while sounding flabbergasted. “All of this time, he had a hand in all the murders. How dare he do this to you! And to think he had a crush on you is just beyond me. That man deserved what happened to him. No one in their right mind would get mixed up in this mess.”

“Yeah, he even forcefully kissed me when he took me home one day,” Morrison said. “I must admit he was kind of a slimeball, but I still do miss him. Even for him, he didn’t deserve to die the way he did. However, he should have known better than to make deals with gang members. Max set himself up for this.”

“I guess you are right,” Stacy said. “I mean, who knows what is going to happen to the Groove now after Max’s passing? We are going to have to get a new gig here soon. I hope this doesn’t mean the band will break up. I think I overheard two of the band members wanting to leave the band and join another one shortly after the last show we performed in.”

“It will be a pity if the band breaks up, but I don’t see how it is possible for us to stay together,” Morrison said. “Everyone enjoyed listening to us at the Groove. I felt like we were going to make it big. Some of the band members have families they need to support, so they will likely get jobs elsewhere.”

“That’s true,” Stacy said. “It is still possible for us to get a job at a new band together. We just need to keep our ears open for band tryouts. I see flyers all the time downtown about bands looking for musicians.”

“That would be great,” Morrison said. “Surely, we can find another band or club somewhere out there. I mean, this New York City. The opportunities are endless. I will have to leave it up to you to find us a new band to play with or a club that needs musicians because I can’t leave this hotel room. It would be amazing if we both started working for the same new band. At least with you there I would already know someone that I can work with easily.”

Morrison then asked Stacy if she knew Zachariah Kelly, the guy who had chased her and broke into her apartment. Stacy told her she had no recollection of someone who was named that and that if she found out anything, she would for sure let her know.

Morrison felt comforted knowing that her friend was going to help her find out more about Zachariah Kelly. She then told Stacy to be careful because she didn’t want Zachariah to know that she was asking around about him, and she also didn’t want her to ask the wrong group of people about it either. Morrison would hate to put her best friend’s life in danger over this.

“Thank you so much for coming out to talk to me,” Morrison said. “I am sorry that I had to be such a Debbie Downer. I just really needed someone to talk to about my problems right now. I hope we can go out soon and have a good time.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Stacy replied. “That is what friends are for. I am always here to lend an ear. I mean, you would do the same thing for me. It’s only fair.”

“I am so lucky to have a friend like you,” Morrison replied. “If I had not met you in New York, I would most likely be stuck here all alone with no one to talk to. Meeting you has been a real blessing in my life. You are like a sister to me. I can always rely on you to come and help me during difficult times in my life.”

“You are just too sweet,” Stacy said. “You are like a sister to me, as well. The reason why I help you all the time is because I know you would do the same for me. I am always happy to be here for you during difficult times.”

“Well, I really need to go back up to my room now and get some rest,” Morrison told her. “We can meet up later this week to talk.”

“That sounds good,” Stacy said. “I really do enjoy our times together. Just give me a call when you want to meet up next, and I will be sure to be here.”

“Well, talk to you later,” Morrison said. “Bye!”

“Okay, bye!” Stacy replied.

Morrison hated to see her go, but she knew she had a life and had to get on with it. She begrudgingly got on the elevator to go back up to her hotel room. As she was heading up, Stacy hailed a taxi to go meet with Daniel Stuart, her old college classmate, for a drink at Milady’s, the same bar she and Morrison went to where they met Hugo Long before heading up to Karaoke City. She didn’t want to tell Morrison about it because she wanted to be a good friend by listening to her friend closely and allowing her to vent her emotions. Stacy didn’t want the conversation to be about her. Stacy felt sad for her friend and only wanted the best for her. It wouldn’t be fair for Morrison to hear about how well her life was going.

The taxi pulled up to Milady’s parking lot to drop her off. She paid the driver, then followed a crowd of people to the bar entrance. Quickly after entering the building, she spotted Stuart sitting at his usual bar stool. They exchanged smiles as she walked up to him to take the seat he had reserved for her.

“Well, hi there!” he said to her. “I am so glad that you can make it. I really enjoyed conversing with you the last time we were together. I remember you telling me that you loved this place, so I thought it would be the perfect spot to meet. I was hoping that we could get a chance to get to know each other some more.”

“I would really like that, too!” Stacy replied. “I was so surprised to cross paths with you again. It was almost like fate was bringing us together for some cosmic reason.”

“I felt that way, too!” Stuart said. “It is a small world, after all. You never know, we might be soulmates and it is destiny that is bringing us together. We do complement each other quite well and it all seems so coincidental that we are here together once again after several years of being apart from one another.”

“We do seem to have a lot in common,” Stacy said. “I mean, we both share the same passion for music. I think it is quite possible that we are soulmates, which would be amazing! However, it is too soon to tell.”

“It would be,” he said. “Then we don’t have to continue roaming the planet without a love in our lives. I haven’t been in a serious relationship in a long time.”

“I, too, haven’t found someone that I could see myself sharing a life with,” Stacy said. “For a long time, I thought it was completely hopeless. But now that I found you, I have hope.”

“So, what is it that you do for a living?” Stuart asked her.

“I am a lead guitarist for the singer Maia Morrison at the Groove,” Stacy said. “Right now, we are kind of in between gigs. If you haven’t already heard, the Groove’s owner was recently murdered, and no one knows for sure whether it will stay open or not.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “I remember hearing something about it on the news. Hey, I have a few buddies who are members of a rock band called Ladies and a Guitar. Sheryl Heart is the drummer. The band recently broke up. They are looking for a new guitarist and a singer. Maybe you and Maia can audition for the band.”

“Oh my gosh!” Stacy replied. “That would be awesome! Maia and I were just having a conversation about finding a new band to join. How do I contact her?”

Stuart then grabbed a napkin and burrowed a pen from Stacy so he could write down Sheryl Heart’s contact information for Stacy. She took the information excitedly from his hand. Stacy knew it would really lift Morrison’s spirits when she found out about it.

“Thank you so much for this,” Stacy told him. “This is going to be a huge help.”

“You are welcome,” Stuart said. “I know this is going to come off as weird, but are you seeing anyone right now? It is okay if you don’t want to answer. I understand that this is somewhat of an awkward question.”

Stacy chuckled when she noticed he was blushing. She could tell he was nervous. Stacy thought it was adorable.

“Daniel,” she said, “I am not seeing anyone. At first, I thought for sure, with you being a teacher and all that, you would be married with a kid or two by now because you are such a sweet guy.”

“You are not far from being wrong,” he responded. “I am divorced, and I have a five-year-old daughter named Ellie. I was thinking maybe we should go out on a romantic date sometime to see if we really are compatible. Also, I think it would be fun to try it out. Don’t you?”

“Yes, I would love to go out on a date with you,” Stacy answered. “You know, I had a bit of a crush on you in college, but I was too shy to tell you.”

“Oh, did you?” he said. “I, too, had a crush on you. I never thought you would go out with me because you were dating Scott Flores at the time. That was why I never really cared that much for the guy. I was so jealous of him.”

“Well, Scott Flores was a real jerk,” she replied. “I caught him cheating with a violinist backstage shortly after our orchestra concert. They were making out behind the curtain after everyone left—that is, everyone but me.”

“How dare he!” Stuart exclaimed. “And with someone who is as lovely and talented as you are? I would have never dreamed of doing that to you. You have always been so sweet to me, and everyone seems to love you.”

“Stop it!” Stacy said. “Now, you are making me blush.”

After having such a wonderful time, they decided to go on their first date on Friday at nine o’clock in the evening later that week. After Stacy left the bar, she walked back to her apartment. She couldn’t help but smile while thinking about the time she had with Daniel Stuart. He was the sweetest guy that she had ever met. Stacy felt warm and tingly inside. She felt like she was walking on air with every step, and her heart was racing.

As she turned around a corner, she suddenly heard footsteps from behind her. Her heart suddenly sank, and she began to panic. The footsteps sounded like they were coming from the dark alley that she had just passed a minute ago. Stacy was too frightened to turn around and see who was walking behind her. When she reached a crosswalk, she waited for the light to turn green before crossing the street. Just as the light turned green, she felt someone’s hand on her back. She shrieked and nearly jumped out of her skin. Stacy thought she nearly had a heart attack. She looked behind her and was surprised to see Hugo Long standing behind her.

He had a very stern look on his face, and she could tell he meant business.

“Hi, Stacy,” Long said. “I need to talk to you about Maia Morrison. I am a private investigator. I believe your friend is in extreme danger. I would really appreciate it if you fully cooperated and answered all my questions. It could save both of your lives. I have been helping law enforcement with solving the murders of the singers at the Groove.”

Chapter 10

Stacy was stunned at the sudden change of events. She was left speechless and was having a hard time comprehending what had just happened. Hugo Long had her completely off guard when he approached her and revealed to her that he was a private investigator. She wasn’t exactly sure how she was going to respond. This was going to be a complete shock for Morrison when she found out.

“You must not let Maia know that I am a private investigator,” Long said with a stern voice. “I was hired by a family member of Nadia Waters, who was the last singer that was murdered at the Groove. Her family is wanting to punish anyone responsible for her death and prevent any other singers from being murdered as well. They demand that justice be served. They hired me to help find answers and to assist the police with the arrest of those responsible for murdering all the singers.”

“So, what do you want from me?” Stacy asked. “How can I help you with this investigation when I don’t know much about it? Wouldn’t it be more helpful confronting Maia about it, since she is the one they are after?”

“If she knew about it, this whole thing would frighten her, then she may not want to cooperate with me,” Long explained. “She might not even trust me and expect that I am the killer. I want you to keep me updated on her whereabouts, what she knows, and what has happened to her. Also, I would like her to think of me as a friend for the time being. Can you tell her that you saw me again and that I said hi? Also, tell her that I was sorry that things did not go as planned at Karaoke City and that I would still like to meet up with her again soon.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Stacy said. “I promised her that I would not tell anyone where she was right now, but I will tell you it is someplace safe. A man that had chased after her from Karaoke City had broken into her apartment and was wanting to kill her. Luckily, she was hidden, and the person had not found her. The police were able to identify the person through DNA. His name is Zachariah Kelly. He supposedly has ties with some gang.”

“Hmmm… I see,” he responded. “I will have to dig up some research on him. Here is my phone number. Call me and let me know what happens after you tell her about running into me and about meeting up with me again. In fact, why don’t you try setting me up with her sometime? I must admit that I find her very attractive, but it would be unprofessional of me to date someone that I am involved with in one of the cases that I am working on. However, some rules are meant to be broken.”

“Okay, I will,” she said. “I won’t guarantee that she is going to like the idea of meeting up with you, but I will try my best. I didn’t exactly put you in a positive light the last time I had to talk to her. I may have said some things that might turn her off about you since you bailed out of karaoke and didn’t say much to me through the rest of the night. She will find it strange when I start telling her that I changed my mind about you and start trying to convince her to give you another chance.”

“Just try your best to,” he told her. “Maybe you can set us up on a double date. That way she will feel better about being around me and I won’t frighten her off.”

“All right,” Stacy said. “I don’t particularly feel good about lying to her, but if it is for her own safety, I am willing to do so. I do think it would be better if you just told her the truth. In fact, it would probably make her feel much safer around you. That is just my opinion, but I will keep it a secret from her for you.”

“Good,” Long responded. “I will be keeping tabs with you later. Here is my phone number to contact me.”

They then went their separate ways. Stacy was so relieved to get back to her apartment. She didn’t need any more surprises that evening. Stacy was tempted to tell Morrison about what just happened with Hugo Long but knew she had been told by Long that she must not. If he was indeed trying to protect Morrison and help bring peace to the family members of the victims, then she should honor the family’s wishes and help protect her friend by not saying anything at all. To do that, she had to put in a good word for Long and get her friend and him together again. Maybe, with him by her side, it would provide her with someone who could always keep her safe. Stacy wondered if the police department had ever heard of Hugo Long and if they had ever joined forces with him.

She would call Police Chief Joe Harvey to see if he had any background information on Long. If so, she would do what she could to bring her friend and Hugo Long together again. It was the best thing that she could do to help Morrison. For now, Morrison was safe being someplace where the killer didn’t know where she was.

An hour later, Stacy called up the police department and asked the police chief if he knew Hugo Long. Stacy was nervous about calling him up, but it was something she felt like she needed to do for both her and Morrison’s sake.

“Oh, yes, we have worked together on quite a few cases in the past,” Harvey told her. “Trust me, he is completely harmless, and since he is working on Morrison’s case, he will provide her with additional attention. He is good at his job, and he has enough experience with these types of cases.”

“Thank you, Police Chief,” Stacy said. “This is such a comfort for me to know that he is truly trying to help my friend out. I just wanted to make sure the man was trustworthy.”

“I can understand your concern,” Police Chief Harvey told her. “I would have probably done the same if I had not known about him. This is a rather awkward situation for you, but believe me, it is for the best.”

After they were finished talking, Stacy lay on her bed in a state of disbelief. She felt like she was in some spy thriller movie where she was cooperating with the investigator on solving a crime. At least she now knew that Long was only helping with the case and wasn’t trying to kill her best friend. Stacy could now fall asleep peacefully without worrying about it.

The following morning, Stacy called Morrison up to let her know about the auditions. She knew she would be ecstatic about it and would be eager to audition. Stacy knew her friend loved basking in the spotlight. The opportunity couldn’t have happened at a better time. She dialed the number, then waited patiently for Morrison to answer. As soon as she heard Morrison’s voice, her heart leaped with joy.

“Hey, Maia!” Stacy said excitedly. “I know it is early in the morning, but I got news that I couldn’t wait to tell you. I met with my friend Daniel Stuart yesterday, and he told me there was a rock band called Ladies and a Guitar who are looking for both a guitarist and singer. They are currently holding auditions. I’ve got the contact information. I thought it would be awesome to be part of a band again, and I knew you would be excited about it, too.”

“Oh, my gosh!” Morrison squealed out. “That is so awesome. I can hardly wait to perform again. For a while, I didn’t think that I would ever perform again. You should totally call and set up an audition for us. I would, of course, sneak out of the hotel for it. It would be worth it, though.”

Since Stacy had called Police Chief Harvey earlier to ask about Hugo Long and found out that he has helped law enforcement with solving previous cases, she knew it would be safe to set Morrison up with Long again. This was the perfect moment to put in a good word for Long since her friend was so elated right now.

“I just so happened to have run into Hugh Long yesterday,” Stacy mentioned. “Hugh told me he really wished you could have stayed at the karaoke bar longer because he really likes you immensely and would like to get to know you better. In fact, he wanted me to set something up so you and him and me and Daniel could double date.”

“But I thought you said he was kind of odd and that he hardly said a word to you that night after I left Karaoke City?” Morrison said. “You also said he left with a concerned look and hardly an explanation for his departure. I’m really confused right now with this sudden change of heart. This is not like you at all.”

“Well, after talking to him, I realized he wasn’t so bad after all,” Stacy said. “Hugh apologized for his lackluster reaction when you left. Hugh then apologized for leaving so abruptly and said that he felt like he was being rude. He was very concerned after you were chased off by that man and wanted to know that you were now okay. Hugh felt bad because he did not stop him in time.”

“What did you tell him?” Morrison asked.

“I told him that you were fine and that you were now in a safe place,” Stacy replied. “Don’t worry. I didn’t tell him where you were and explained the reasoning behind it. Hugh then said he would really like it if you and him could try going out together again as part of a double date so that you would feel more comfortable around him. I told him that you would love that so that I wouldn’t hurt his feelings.”

“Now, why in the world would you do a thing like that when you know I am supposed to stay away from people?” Morrison said. “I know you said he was a nice guy and that I should trust him, but this is not the right time, Stacy. I would love to, but I just can’t right now. I am having real trust issues, and I am afraid that I won’t be able to allow him to come into my life the way you would envision I would.”

“I really think you should give him another chance,” Stacy said. “He seems like a real sincere guy who really is interested in you. I thought it might be good for the two of you to spend more time together and really get to know each other.”

“Stacy, sometimes I wonder about you,” Morrison said. “Do you really think it would be safe for me to go somewhere with him? So, okay, he did try to rescue me, so that tells me he isn’t the killer who is after me. But you never know.”

“Oh, he is completely harmless,” Stacy said. “In fact, I told him about the audition with the band Ladies and a Guitar. Hugo said he would love to go with us, to offer some support at the audition. He was excited when he found out about it. Hugo is a real fan of ours and he can’t see why we wouldn’t make it. Plus, with him being a big and strong man, it might be good to have him around for some extra protection.”

“Stacy, you had better be right about this,” Morrison said. “It would be nice to have another person with us when we go out. I think you should invite Daniel Stuart to go along with us just in case you are wrong about him.”

“I will do that,” Stacy said. “I was planning to do that all along. Daniel would love to tag along, too! It was his idea, after all.”

“So, when is this audition going to take place?” Morrison asked.

“I thought about setting up an audition at two o’clock in the afternoon on Saturday,” Stacy answered. “That way both Hugo and Daniel will be off from work, and we can sleep in a little on that day as well. Does that work for you?”

“Alright,” Morrison said. “That sounds good. Will you be getting ahold of both Daniel and Hugo to let them know when and where to meet us?”

“Don’t worry,” Stacy said. “I will arrange everything. All you will need to do is start thinking about what songs we are going to perform for the audition. Would you like to meet up at the hotel so that we can practice a song or two to perform during the audition later this week?”

“Yes,” Morrison said. “It would be best to be prepared for it. I want to knock them off their socks! I need to have another paying gig soon. I have bills to pay.”

“Do you want to meet tomorrow at noon?” Stacy asked. “I’ll bring my guitar to play while you are singing because we both need to sound great together. Also, we can discuss which song would be best for the audition.”

“That works for me,” Morrison replied. “I will see you then!”

“Okay, I will see tomorrow!” Stacy said.

They both said their goodbyes before hanging up. Stacy was hoping that her plan to get Long and her friend together would work. Having both a double date and an audition at the same time was going to be a lot of fun. Who knew, maybe Maia and Long would discover some common ground and find out they make a good match. She noticed that Long had no wedding ring on, so he had to be an eligible bachelor. Stacy would have to act like she was only putting them together so that Morrison wouldn’t find out about him being a private investigator, and that way, Long could solve the case without her ever knowing. He also wasn’t going to have a clue about her trying to set them up. A mischievous smile spread across her face.

For now, she needed to focus on practicing playing her guitar for the audition. Stacy needed to be well-prepared and ready to strut her stuff in front of the band. Ladies and a Guitar would be the first all-female band she had ever been a part of. Stacy also wanted to impress Daniel with her guitar-playing skills. She was in desperate need of finding a new boyfriend.

Daniel Stuart had always been nice and treated her with respect. She remembered he was a quiet, shy kind of guy in college. Stacy had suspected Stuart of having a crush on her. He always acted awkwardly around her, and she was lucky whenever he gained enough courage to go up and speak to her. Stacy then recalled her trying to make him feel less nervous around her by taking the lead in their conversations and occasionally complimenting him to help him gain the confidence he needed to talk to her. She thought his bashfulness was cute.

Stacy couldn’t wait for all four of them to come together and spend time with each other. She just knew Morrison was going to like Stuart. Hopefully, they could both find love from this date on Saturday. Both she and Morrison needed to find their bliss.

Stacy then sent out a few texts to both Long and Daniel to set up a time for them all to meet and go to the audition. She would also arrange for them all to go out for drinks and maybe dinner too, afterward. She hoped that she wasn’t putting any of them in danger from doing this. But with a private investigator by their side, she figured it would help keep them safe. However, a little danger made it all exciting.

Stacy felt like everything for her and Morrison was coming together now and that they would soon be in the spotlight once again. After the texts were sent out, she began to practice for her big break.

Chapter 11

It was a beautiful morning. Morrison looked out the window in her hotel room and saw the sun brightly shining in a vibrant blue sky. The trees were a vivid green, and the flowers were in full bloom. The birds outside her window were chirping a cheerful little tune. It was a sign that good things were about to happen.

She stretched out her arms, took a deep breath, and optimistically stepped out of her room to get a bite to eat from the breakfast bar. Morrison was fully energized and ready to take on the world. With the upcoming audition, nothing was going to stop her. All she needed now was a cup of coffee from Starbucks, a waffle, and some fresh fruit to get her into full swing.

Morrison hummed a happy, upbeat tune as she got on the elevator. She smiled at an elderly man as he joined her. Morrison didn’t mind having to stop on the second floor to allow more people on the elevator because she had no place she had to be. She was in quite the cheerful mood.

Morrison could not wait to get back to singing and working with a band again. She and Stacy would be meeting soon to practice for the audition. Making the band would be all that she needed to complete her life. Music was all that she had ever known, and nothing brought her nearly as much pleasure as singing. She desperately needed to get back on that stage. It was all that she could think about.

She ordered a cup of hot white mocha latte from Starbucks. She then walked over to the breakfast bar, where she made a waffle and filled a bowl with fresh fruit. Morrison had to decide which song she was going to sing at the audition. She wondered if it would be best to sing one of the songs she had written to show how versatile she was. Morrison then narrowed it down to her song “Hellraiser” because it was the closest thing to rock music that she had ever sung. Most of her songs had that light pop sound. It was also a song that she could easily turn into a rock song with the help of Stacy. It was the perfect song for Stacy to show off her guitar skills to. They could work on adding a guitar solo in the middle of it to highlight Stacy’s rock-playing ability. Morrison knew they were both going to shine. There weren’t many women who had the kind of talent they did.

Morrison then realized that she had almost forgotten that Hugo Long and Daniel Stuart would be accompanying them to the audition. She thought it was rather odd that Stacy would think so highly of Long. She began to wonder what Long had told her to make her change her mind about him. *He must be one smooth talker,* she thought. The whole thing was a mystery to her, but she tried hard not to let it get to her. She was dealing with enough now. Morrison had to admit he was handsome, and she did feel like there was some connection with him. If her friend thought he was a good guy, then she should really give him a chance.

She quickly finished up her breakfast and then headed upstairs to warm up her voice before Stacy came over to practice with her. She made sure there were bottles of water in the fridge for her to drink during practice to keep her throat moist while singing. Stacy figured she might want one, too. The hotel was about empty as travelers headed off to their next destination or to explore the sites in New York. It was the perfect time to practice her vocals without disturbing anyone.

Morrison sat on the edge of the bed to look out the window while she sang chords. There was something about singing that warmed her heart and lifted her spirits. It made her feel at peace with the world. It also enabled her to express herself fully, allowing others to get a sense of what she was feeling. She loved spreading joy to others by entertaining them through music. She also went through some breathing techniques and loosened up her muscles by stretching and massaging them so that she would feel relaxed. It was very important to feel relaxed while singing. She then started singing a few of the lyrics to “Hellraiser.”

Morrison found herself so lost in the music that she had nearly forgotten about the time. She checked the clock and realized that she only had forty minutes till she had to meet Stacy in the lobby. Morrison immediately jumped up from the bed, then quickly went into the restroom to straighten out her hair and check her makeup. Afterward, she slipped on her shoes before heading downstairs to the lobby, where she would meet her friend.

It wasn’t long before Stacy first stepped foot into the hotel with her Fender electric guitar strapped on her back and carrying her lightweight, compact guitar amp. The two friends excitedly ran up to each other. Morrison helped Stacy by carrying her amp to the room. They were so eager to get back to working on their musical skills. As they went up the elevator, Morrison told Stacy that she had been having problems sleeping at night because she was so excited about the audition. Stacy said she had been a little nervous about it.

“So, are you ready to rock, my friend?” Stacy asked excitedly just before Morrison opened the door to her hotel room.

“Hell yeah!” Morrison nearly shouted. “I am always ready. In fact, I was already practicing the song I thought we should play for the audition before you even got here.”

“And what song is that?” Stacy asked.

“‘Hellraiser,’” Morrison answered.

“That is a good song,” Stacy said. “I can see why you chose it. It does sound like a rock song, and we can easily make it more edgy. It is also a song that I can work in a guitar solo to. Let’s go ahead and start working on it. We can figure out what changes we would like to make to it as we go along.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Morrison said. “So, let’s get started.”

The jam session lasted for two hours. Stacy played her guitar harmoniously and Morrison sang her heart out. It was as if they were completely in sync with each other. They cheered each other on and gave each other high fives when one of them did something amazing. It was the best time they’d had in a long time.

“I am so glad you convinced me to do this audition,” Morrison said. “This was just what I needed to get out of the slump that I am in. I was certain that I was not going to be able to sing for a long time, but this proves me wrong, and I owe it all to you. We are going to totally rock it! There’s no way they are going to find anyone better than us.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” Stacy replied. “We are for sure ready for this audition. I feel comfortable enough with the way we sound that I think we can call it a day.”

“I would say so,” Morrison responded. “I believe we earned ourselves a drink. There’s a bar in the lobby where we can get one there. I have been there a few times since I’ve been here and the drinks are not bad.”

“Alright, well, let’s go!” Stacy said. “I could use one right now since I have been quite tense over this audition. I really need to loosen up some.”

“I know what you mean,” Morrison said. “I have definitely been stressed out over everything that has happened to me.”

They wasted no time in heading to the bar. They were proud of their progress and ready to celebrate. They each ordered lime margaritas on the rocks.

“Cheers!” both said while clinking each other’s glasses. They both took a small sip of the tasty concoction, then licked their lips afterward.

“So, are you nervous about meeting up with Mr. Hugo Long again?” Stacy asked Morrison. “I must say he is quite the dish.”

“I don’t even know why you invited him,” Morrison said. “I really didn’t need the added pressure. Now, I must impress both the band and Hugo during the audition. I haven’t been serious with a guy in a long time. Plus, I’m not sure if I am even ready to start dating again.”

“This is why it is a good thing for you,” Stacy said. “It’s time for you to get out there and find yourself a man. I think the two of you would make a lovely pair. You can’t continue living your life as a recluse. You need to open yourself up to dating.”

“Oh gosh!” Morrison replied. “You would say something like that. I am not a recluse. If I was, I wouldn’t be spending time with you right now. Besides, you haven’t told me anything lately about Daniel. Have you two met up lately?”

“Well, actually, we have,” Stacy said. “We met up for drinks just the other night and had a splendid time. He is the nicest man that I have ever been with. He is divorced and has a daughter named Ellie, who is five years old.”

“Oh, so he is a family man,” Morrison teased her friend. “It would be quite the change for you to be dating a man with a child. If you wind up marrying him, do you think you have what it takes to be a stepmom?”

“Of course I do!” Stacy said. “I am the oldest of five children, so I have plenty of experience with kids. I have always envisioned myself with at least three kids. I know they are a lot of work, but I still love being around them. Kids can be fun to be around, and they are so adorable at times.”

“I could see that,” Morrison said. “You are good around kids. I’ve seen you play with some of your nieces and nephews and all of them absolutely love you. You have always had that youthful side of you that draws in small children.”

“Thank you,” Stacy said. “I want to be the best mother that I can be and to hear you say that means a lot to me. Daniel sounds like the perfect father figure. He talks about how he takes his daughter out to the park, they go out for ice cream, and they sometimes go to the zoo. She takes both ballet and piano lessons, so she must get her musical side from him.”

“Wow!” Morrison said. “He does sound like a catch.”

“You know, I believe that Daniel is the one for me,” Stacy said. “I’ve had a crush on him ever since college. I was dating someone else at the time, so the timing was off. He was so cute in college. Daniel was so shy. He could barely speak to me. Every time I tried to talk to him, he would blush and didn’t even have the courage to look me in the eyes. He would shyly say hi back to me.”

“Oh, that’s adorable,” Morrison replied. “I’m thinking you could be right about him being the one. You both share the love of music and I know how much music means to you. Also, I saw how well you both clicked with each other. I just hope you plan on having me as one of your bridesmaids at your wedding.”

“Of course I will,” Stacy said. “I mean, we have been through an awful lot together. It wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t. Plus, you are one of my best friends. Who knows, maybe things between you and Hugo will work out, then I will be one of your bridesmaids.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Morrison said. “It’s too early to be thinking about Hugo and I being a couple. I just met the man, but it would be nice if he did, in fact, turn out to be the one.”

“Alright, enough talking about men,” Stacy said. “How about another round of margaritas?”

“Yes, that would be amazing,” Morrison said. “Hey, bartender! My friend and I would like to order another lime margarita on the rocks.”

“Two more margaritas coming up,” he replied.

They watched the bartender make their margaritas and salt the rims. He added a lime to both drinks before bringing them over. They took their margaritas, then raised their glasses and made a toast.

“Here’s to a kick-ass audition tomorrow!” Stacy said.

“Here, here!” Morrison replied. “We are going to totally rock their socks off! There’s no way anyone is going to turn us down.”

Chapter 12

Morrison stood anxiously waiting inside her hotel room for the time of the audition to make it as the new lead singer for the rock band Ladies and a Guitar. It was now just three hours to the audition, and she would meet Stacy in about two hours. Morrison made sure she had enough water to drink and practiced her song a few more times. She found herself looking out her window and thinking about how she was going to handle seeing Hugo Long again and whether it was going to affect the way she performed during the audition.

She normally wasn’t this nervous to perform in front of people, but she desperately needed another singing job. Morrison felt like she wasn’t going to have many more opportunities like this one, so she had to give it all she got. Stacy had been acting all cool and collected about it, but Morrison knew deep down that Stacy was feeling just as nervous as she was. Stacy was just better at acting like she wasn’t than she was. They would have to run through some breathing exercises and give each other massages on the way over there to relax just before they auditioned.

Morrison made herself look like a rock star by putting on a denim jacket, a pair of red leather pants, a black sequin-covered top, and gold metallic high heels. She knew she had to dress to impress. Morrison also had to sing with confidence and dazzle the band members with her personality to show she had a great stage presence. She finished up her hair and makeup.

Morrison listened to the Rolling Stones sing “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction.” She could visualize what Mick Jagger would do while singing the lyrics. He was the epitome of cool. Morrison’s goal was to be as cool as Mick Jagger and to sing as well as Axel Rose from the band Guns N’ Roses. If she could achieve both, then Morrison would know at that moment that she had reached legendary status.

It wasn’t long till it was time to meet up with Stacy. She quickly left her room and headed to the lobby. Morrison knew her high heels were going to kill her by the end of the day. She already regretted not bringing her pair of sneakers and a set of comfortable clothing along with her in a duffle bag. Morrison knew it was too late for her to go up and get it now. She saw that Stacy was already seated on one of the couches in the lobby and had her guitar and amp next to her. Stacy got up as soon as she saw Morrison walking up to her.

“So, are you ready to do this?” Morrison asked her. “I am not sure if I am.”

“I’m as ready as I can be,” Stacy answered. “Honestly, I am absolutely petrified right now. It would be a huge disappointment if we didn’t make the band.”

“I know what you mean,” Morrison said. “We are just going to have to work on relaxing on the way over there so our muscles won’t tense up and we won’t freak ourselves out up there.”

“You mean, just like what we normally do right before a big show,” Stacy said.

“Precisely,” Morrison said. “You should know the routine by heart now. I was thinking we should run through a few breathing exercises on the way over to the audition to help relax us.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Stacy said. “I am thinking that would make me feel much more at ease about it. This audition means so much to me that I am nervous that I am going to blow it.”

They walked to the nearest subway station and took the subway along the way to their destination. They took a seat and rode the subway quietly while observing the people all around them. Many people were on their cell phones, and some were chatting. They got off at the next stop where they would meet with Stuart and Long, then walk the rest of the way to drummer Sheryl Heart’s home. Morrison did not think the killer could figure out where she was unless they were tracking her down somehow on her phone.

Once the subway came to a complete stop and the doors opened, Stacy and Morrison immediately got up from their seats. Stacy said Stuart told her to meet them at a small New York Deli just outside of the station. They walked past a coffee and bagel shop, then scanned their tickets to get out of the station. It was about a half of a block walk to the deli.

Morrison began to feel butterflies in her stomach once she saw Long standing outside of the deli shop. They exchanged glances as she slowly walked toward him. Morrison tried to remain calm and act like his presence was no big deal. She had to stay in the game. Her rehearsal was coming up, and she was about to let Long become a distraction. When approaching him, Morrison bashfully said hello to him. He said hi back in a similar fashion.

“Hello, lovely ladies,” Daniel Stuart said. “Shall we escort you through these busy streets and lead you to your destination?”

“Yes, kind sir,” Stacy said. “You may.”

Stuart then took Stacy’s hand and held it while they walked toward a residential area. Morrison and Hugo Long walked side by side awkwardly. Occasionally, he would slide a glance or two at Morrison. She would nervously return the eye contact and smile up at him. Morrison would notice how they would bump into each other while walking every so often. She wondered if it was a sign that they were secretly attracted to each other. When they stopped just before crossing the street, Morrison could feel Long gently place his hand on her back for a few seconds.

“It’s so good to see you again,” he said, breaking the silence between them. “I really am truly sorry that things did not go quite as planned at the karaoke bar. I just wanted us to have fun and for us to get to know each other better.”

“I know,” Morrison said quietly. “I wasn’t accusing you of anything. Besides, it was me that left the bar unexpectedly to get away from that man you tried to stop. If it wasn’t for you, I may not have escaped the bar unscathed. In fact, I should thank you for saving my life.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to stop him,” Long replied. “I keep thinking about what I could have done differently. The rest of the evening I felt bad for it. I was also very disappointed that things didn’t work out the way I had hoped for. That was why I was quiet and seemed distracted the rest of the evening. But for whatever reason, I knew we would get back together again. As soon as Stacy called to make this arrangement, I knew it must be destiny. I am so sorry for leaving you alone and frightened while that man was chasing you out of the club. I feel like I Iet you down. I really do care about you. I think you are an amazing woman, Maia, and I would really like to take you out on a date.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I believe you are trying to sweep me off my feet,” Morrison said. “A little flattery will take you far.”

“Maybe so,” Long responded. “You know, I find you very irresistible. You can’t blame me for trying to win a beautiful woman’s heart. Any man should feel lucky to be embraced by your presence.”

“Here we are!” Stuart said while he directed them toward a small rundown white house.

He walked up to the door and knocked on it. A young woman with jet black hair and blue streaks, a pierced lip, and wearing a rock band shirt with stonewashed tethered jeans answered the door. Morrison felt a little nervous as soon as the young woman came out.

“Hi Daniel!” she asked. “It is so nice seeing you again.”

“Sheryl, this is lead singer Maia Morrison and bass guitarist Stacy Sullivan that I talked about with you on the phone,” Stuart said. “I arranged for them to audition at this time. I think they would be a great addition to your band.”

“Well, what are you all standing out here for?” Sheryl said. “Come on in! We’ve been waiting for you. We are so excited to have the both of you here.”

Sheryl led them through the living room, then down the steps to the basement, where the rhythm guitarist and keyboardist were waiting for them.

“This is our keyboardist, Patricia Wolf, and our rhythm guitarist, Violet Hodges,” Sheryl said. “Patricia and Violet, this is Maia Morrison, who sings lead vocals, and bass guitarist Stacy Sullivan.”

“Hi! It’s so good to finally meet you,” Patricia told them. “We’ve heard a lot of good things about you two from Daniel. As soon as he told us that he knew people who would be perfect for the band, we flipped out. It has been nearly a month since we have had a bass guitarist and lead vocalist. We have been disappointed with the previous auditions, so I hope the both of you are as good as Daniel made you out to be.”

“It is an honor to have this opportunity,” Morrison told Patricia. “We would love to become members of your band. In fact, that is all Stacy and I have been talking about lately.”

“She is not lying,” Stacy said. “There is nothing else that we want to do. Music is what we live for.”

“Well, we are dying to hear what you got,” Violet chimed in. “I have heard from many of my friends who have seen Maia sing at the Groove. They told me you totally rocked the place and that your voice is amazing. They also said Stacy was an amazing guitarist and that we would be fools if we didn’t let you both in the band.”

“So, what will you be playing for us, Maia and Stacy?” Sheryl asked.

“We will be playing ‘Hellraiser,’ which is one of the songs I wrote,” Maia answered. “Stacy will also be playing a guitar solo to prove how amazing she is at playing the guitar.”

Morrison waited for Stacy to get set up. She then nodded to Stacy to let her know she was ready. Stacy struck her first chord afterward. Morrison began to sing her lyrics.

*You think you are all that.*

*You are messing with my brain, leaving me with a strain. Thoughts are spinning around like a hurricane.*

*Yet, I take the blame. I hope you go down into a flame. Down, down you go into hell where I’ll be raising hell. I will be raging with anger and put you into a lather.*

*Because I am a hellraiser. You hear me! I’m a hellraiser.*

Morrison threw her head back, her body bent and moving with the music, then she strutted past the band members while Stacy continued to play her guitar solo. She raised the microphone to her mouth to sing through it again afterward. She eyed the band members down with a fierce look while snarling out her words to give an edge to her song. She then ended the song with a high-pitched shrill. Morrison wasn’t used to the vocal stylings of a rock singer, but it suited her well.

Sheryl, Patricia, and Violet stood up and clapped their hands loudly when the performance ended. Morrison and Stacy knew they were impressed with them by the way they looked enthusiastically at them.

“Wow!” Sheryl said. “That was the best that we have seen yet. We still have a couple of more auditions. We will give you a call to let you know if you are in or not sometime next week. I will say that you two totally rock!”

“Yeah!” Patricia said. “That was some badass playing right there, and Maia, your vocals are out of this world!”

“I’m glad you liked what you heard,” Morrison replied. “It would be like a dream come true if we became members of your band. It is all that we could ever ask for. Thank you for allowing us to play for all of you today. We hope you choose us because it would mean so much to us to be members of Ladies and a Guitar.”

“I, too, would like to thank you for this opportunity,” Stacy said. “We both feel like we would be a huge asset to your band. Between the two of us, you would gain a great deal of originality through our songwriting, talent, and artistic expression. We have so much to offer.”

“Well, I can believe that from what we just saw,” Sheryl responded. “Thank you so much for coming and playing for us.”

As they left Sheryl’s house, Stuart told them they should go out and celebrate. Stacy agreed.

“You both were amazing,” Stuart said. "I think I know just the place for us to celebrate at. It isn’t that far from here.”

“Oh really, and where might that be?” Stacy asked.

“It is a sports bar,” he answered. “I figured we could watch a few games, drink beer, and eat appetizers. I’m sure Hugo wouldn’t mind. There is a very important football game that is about to come on that I would really like to see.”

“Oh, yes,” Long said. "I know exactly which one. I would really hate to miss it.”

“I think I see where this one is going, Stacy,” Morrison said.

“It appears that football is the primary interest here,” Stacy remarked. “Well, I suppose we will let you boys have some fun this time. There had better be booze and wings involved in the occasion or else Maia and I will head off and have our own kind of celebration.”

“Don’t worry, girls, there will be plenty of that,” Stuart assured her.

They walked over to a sports bar and grill that was three blocks away because Stuart and Long wanted to watch the New York Giants play the Baltimore Ravens. Stacy and Morrison rolled their eyes as the two men talked about how good the Giants’ offense was and about how the defense needed to step up their game.

The hostess directed them to a table that was in front of the big screen showing the Ravens and Giants game. They ordered buffalo wings, nachos, and beers. Morrison could hear football fans screaming and cheering for their teams in the background. She couldn’t help but notice Stuart and Long having their eyes glued to the big screen. They gave each other high fives when the Giants scored a touchdown.

“Okay,” Morrison said. “What exactly are we celebrating here? Are we celebrating the Giants or how awesome Stacy and I were during the audition?”

“Yeah, that was exactly what I was thinking,” Stacy said. “You men and your sports!”

“We are truly sorry, girls,” Long said. “This is just one of the biggest games of the year, so we are getting a little carried away. Both of you were great. No question about that.”

“Definitely, the both of you totally killed it out there,” Stuart said. “I am very proud of you both. There’s no question that they are going to choose you. Both of you are born to be up on that stage!”

“Thanks, guys!” Morrison said.

“Well, I am pleased that you enjoyed listening to us,” Stacy said. “Entertaining fans and engaging them has always been a must for me. We are so happy to have the both of you come and support us. It made the experience even better.”

“I agree with Stacy,” Morrison said. “You two really did help us feel more comfortable playing and made it more enjoyable. We really did need the additional support to help us have the confidence that we needed to perform.”

“Order anything you want from the bar,” Long said. “The drinks are on us.”

“Hey, alright!” Stacy said. “I will take you up on your offer. I could use a cold one after being in a nervous wreck over this audition.”

The group delved into a huge platter of wings and a basket of nachos while washing it down with a pint of beer. When the game was over and the food and drinks were finished, they headed back to the subway station, where they would part ways.

“Hey, Maia!” Long shouted out before Morrison headed off. “I just want to tell you that I had an amazing time with you. I hope we can do something together sometime soon. Maybe next week? Just the two of us? That is if you trust me.”

“I would love to, but I just can’t,” Morrison said. “If you haven’t noticed, someone is out to kill me right now. You saw the way that man at the karaoke bar ran after me. I am supposed to be lying low right now. It’s not that I don’t trust you.”

“Well, maybe I can help protect you,” Long said. “Have you ever thought about that? I can be your human shield if you allow me.”

“This is true, but how do I know you aren’t the one trying to kill me?” Morrison said. “I mean, several people know about my singing, and any one of them could be suspects. It’s best for us to be with each other in a group setting. That is, until the person—or people—trying to kill me are arrested.”

“Okay,” Long responded. “Anything for you. I would rather spend time with you in a group than nothing at all. I know you are frightened and are having problems trusting people. I will respect your boundaries and not do anything that you don’t want to do.”

“Thanks for understanding,” Morrison said. “I would prefer being safe than sorry. Personally, I don’t think you are the one involved in the murders. If you were, you would have already killed me by now.”

Stacy grabbed Morrison’s arm and told her the subway they were supposed to get on had arrived. She waved goodbye to Long before heading off. Stacy and Morrison then quickly rushed over to the subway and got on shortly before the doors closed.

“That was nice,” Stacy told her. “I really enjoyed spending time with the guys today. I noticed that you and Hugo were getting awfully close.”

“Yeah,” Morrison responded. “I had a good time with him. I don’t think the timing for us to get serious is right now. I want to wait this one out to see where it takes us.”

“It’s probably for the best,” Stacy said. “I mean, you haven’t known each other for long. I have not seen you this happy with a man before. He seems to be doing a good job charming his way into your heart.”

About fifteen minutes later, they got off the subway. They then started to walk back to the hotel. Along the way, gunshots sprang out. Both women ducked, then ran off as fast as they could past the crowd. Morrison was worried that the person trying to kill her had found the location where she was staying. A million thoughts were whirling around in her mind as she and her friend frantically tried to find a place where they could hide so the shooter wouldn’t find them.

“I cannot believe this is happening!” Morrison screamed. “How did they ever find us?”

“We don’t know if it’s them, Maia!” Stacy shouted back while almost out of breath from running so hard. “They could be trying to shoot at someone else!”

“I sure hope you are right, Stacy,” Morrison replied as she ran beside her. “I’m starting to think this wasn’t a good idea.”

“Just keep running!” Stacy screamed out. “Do not look back!”

Many people around them were also screaming and running. A few feet away from them, a woman was shot in the leg. A man was also shot multiple times nearby.

Just as they approached the hotel, more gunfire went off. Morrison could hear Stacy screaming. She turned and noticed she was lying on the ground with splattered blood on her body. Stacy screamed out to her.

“Just keep going, Maia!” Stacy cried out. “I will be fine. Go save yourself!”

Tears were streaming from Morrison’s eyes. She could tell Stacy was in complete agony. Morrison could hear more gunshots. She suddenly felt a sharp pain in her left leg, then blood began spewing out of it. Without hesitation, she kept running. Morrison finally reached the doors to the hotel she was staying at. She could hear police sirens. Police cars were now surrounding the hotel. There was an exchange of gunfire.

Morrison scurried across the lobby and got on the elevator immediately. She called the police station to inform them what had happened and that she was shot so they could send an ambulance right away. She quickly grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her wounded leg tightly to help stop the blood loss.

She could still hear gunshots outside the hotel. Morrison suddenly felt weak. She had lost a tremendous amount of blood already. Then, suddenly, the gunshots ended. Just as they had ended, Morrison began to blackout. As her body slumped, Morrison’s body dropped down to the bed.

There was continuous knocking on the door, and then, finally, a group of paramedics came rushing into the room. They observed the wound and treated it. Morrison could feel all their pokes and pierces as they worked on removing the bullet, cleaning out the wound, and stitching the open area up. Morrison’s vision became a blur. She could faintly make out a paramedic as they quickly placed her on a gurney and wheeled her toward the elevator, then through the lobby to an ambulance. The ringing sound of an ambulance siren could be heard. Morrison then lost consciousness and blacked out on the way to the hospital, where she would spend the next few weeks.

Chapter 13

Morrison woke up with a slight tinge of pain the following day. She felt like her pain medication was beginning to wear off. The sun was shining brightly through the window inside her patient room at the New York Presbyterian Hospital. Her injured leg was wrapped up in a bandage.

A nurse stepped into her room with a glass of water and some pills. Morrison took the pain medication and took a few sips of the water. She felt dazed and confused. Morrison wasn’t sure what she would find out about her condition and how long she was going to be there. She felt like a frightened little girl.

“I was wondering when you were going to wake up,” the nurse told her. “You slept all through the morning. I imagine you are quite hungry now. I brought you up a lunch menu to fill out.”

“Thank you,” Morrison replied. “Do you happen to know what time it is?”

“It’s a little passed one o’clock in the afternoon,” the nurse said. “My name is Betty. I will be checking up on you throughout the day. Another nurse named will come in later during the evening. Let me know if you need anything.”

Morrison handed her the menu that she had finished filling out. There was only one question that had come to her mind.

“Do you know how long I will be in the hospital?" Morrison asked.

“I really don’t know,” Betty replied. “But through my years of being a nurse, depending on how bad the gunshot wound is, I would say no more than three weeks. Since it is a minor gunshot wound, you will most likely be out of here much sooner and fully recover in less than a month. You will more than likely undergo some physical therapy while you are here to ensure you are able to walk before leaving.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Morrison said. “I was afraid that I would never walk again. I am glad that I will be able to leave soon because I may need to get up on the stage to sing sooner than I had originally anticipated.”

“Oh, so you are a singer?” the nurse replied. “That is cool. I don’t think I have ever had a patient that was a singer before. It takes a lot of courage to go up on stage and sing in front of all those people. I envy those who have a talent for singing. I love to sing, but I can’t hold a tune for the life of me.”

After the nurse left, Morrison grabbed the remote and turned on the television to watch the news. She had to find out what happened last night when she and Stacy were shot at. Morrison prayed her friend was okay and that the shooter had been killed. She just knew she would hear something about it on the local news.

When she flicked through the channels, she found a breaking news story that was being covered at the scene of the crime. Morrison took a closer look at the buildings and the street to see if it was the same location where the shots had been fired. One building caught her eye instantly. It was the building right next to the hotel she had been staying at. It was at that location where she had been shot.

“Eight people were shot last night in this area of the city,” the anchorwoman said. “Two, including the shooter, has died. One is in critical condition, and five others are expected to make a full recovery. We are still waiting to hear from law enforcement on the name of the shooter and the person who died. We will continue to provide coverage as more details come in. We will now return to your normal programming.”

Morrison was relieved that the shooter was dead, but she wanted to know how her friend Stacy was doing. Unfortunately, she did not have her cell phone on her, so she didn’t have her list of phone numbers stored on her phone with her. Morrison hated waiting around to find out the status of her friend. She then figured the best way to find out was to call Police Chief Joe Harvey at the New York Police Department, which she could easily find in the phone book. He would know what was happening.

Morrison then spotted a landline phone next to her bed on a night table. She pulled out the top drawer of the night table and conveniently found an old New York City telephone book. Morrison found the police station phone number and quickly dialed the number. After the third ring, someone answered the phone.

“Hello, New York Police Department,” the woman said. “How can I help you?”

“This is Maia Morrison,” Morrison answered. “I was one of the victims from last night’s mass shooting. I know that the police chief is busy, but I was wondering if he could talk to me just for a moment.”

“I am sorry,” the woman said. “He is not in the office right now. I can take a message for him if you want.”

“Yes, that would be fine,” Morrison said. “Just tell him that I need to know how my friend Stacy Sullivan is doing. She was shot, too.”

“Okay, I will let him know,” the woman replied.

“Thank you!” Morrison said.

She continued watching television until the next update about the mass shooting came on. Her lunch was delivered to her. She dug into a grilled cheese sandwich, tomato bisque soup, and a side salad with ranch dressing. For dessert, she had the cherry cobbler. For hospital food, it really wasn’t all that bad. It was quite satisfying, especially after being on an empty stomach for quite some time. She washed it down with a Diet Coke that she had the nurse go get her from the vending machine just down the hall from the hospital room.

In the middle of finishing up her meal, a breaking news bulletin interrupted *Wheel of Fortune*. Images of a man and a woman popped up on the screen. Morrison just knew they were the two victims who had died during the mass shooting. She felt relieved when Stacy’s picture did not show up. That must mean she was alive and doing well, which made her heart leap with joy.

“On the left is the picture of Zachariah Kelly, who is the shooter that was shot down by the police, and the picture of Hannah Finley, who was one of the victims,” the anchorwoman said. “Finley was just twenty-three years old. Family members described her as the sweetest person that you would ever know and was full of life. Kelley was a repeat offender who was known for gang-related crimes. He recently got out of prison for assault and battery.”

Morrison felt sad for the family and loved ones of Hannah Finley. She hated that someone so young with so much promise for the future would have their life cut so shortly by a brutal act of violence. Morrison thought that Finley didn’t deserve this at all, and she partially felt responsible because Kelly was really after her. Finley was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Because Zachariah Kelly was dead, the police wouldn’t know his motive for shooting her or whether he was working for someone. This was concerning for her.

A few minutes later, the phone in her room rang. Morrison knew it had to be the police chief calling her up because nobody else knew she was there. She quickly answered the phone.

“Hello, is this Maia Morrison?” he asked.

“This is she,” Morrison answered.

“This is Police Chief Joe Harvey, and I was just returning your phone call,” Harvey said. “First of all, how are you doing? One of the officers told me you were shot last night and are now in the hospital. I called up the hospital immediately to find out how you were doing and was so relieved to hear that you are going to be all right.”

“I am hanging in there,” Morrison said. “I am just so grateful that I am still alive and that I will be able to recover from this. Do you know how my friend Stacy Sullivan is doing? She, too, was shot as we were both trying to escape the shooter together.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “She is going to be fine. You both were extremely lucky. You know, she is staying in the same hospital as you are. I can find out which room she is staying in and let you know where to find her. She is probably staying on the same floor as you are, since you both have minor injuries. I’m sure a nurse would be more than happy to take you over there.”

“I would really appreciate that,” she replied. “Hopefully, I will be able to get out of this bed soon so that I can go over there to see her. I am sure she needs company as much as I do right now.”

“I am sure she would appreciate hearing from you after you both experienced a very traumatic event last night together,” he said. “She was probably frightened and alone when she woke up in the hospital this morning. I’m sure you were, too. I feel sorry for both of you after having to go through all of that.”

“Have you found out anything about Zachariah Kelly and whether he was working with anyone on trying to kill me?” Morrison asked.

“We have some connections between him and a gang that had been supplied with cocaine from Maximilian Rangel to distribute to customers at the Groove,” Police Chief Joe Harvey said. “The money received from selling cocaine kept the doors open at the Groove. Rangel was having financial difficulties in paying the property taxes. If he didn’t think of a way to make more money soon, the club would have been shut down and the gang he was working for would not have gotten the money he owed them as well. This is most likely what attributed to his murder.”

“So, what does this all have to do with murdering singers, and why now after Maximilian Rangel has been killed?” Morrison asked.

“We believe the singers that were murdered before you were partially used as a warning to Maximilian,” the police chief said. “Now, we think they are just doing it as an act of revenge. Plus, they want to make sure the Groove stays closed at any cost. We believe they want to purchase the property to use it for something else, such as their hangout, where they can continue engaging in illegal activity. You see, Maximilian left the Groove on his will for his brother, who lives in Arizona right now. That would also put him in a great deal of danger. Without any singers, there would be no more club, which is what they want. Of course, we have no evidence to support this theory at the time. Also, we need to find out who else is involved in this.”

“Zachariah was talking on his cell phone to someone about killing me when he had broken into my apartment,” Morrison said. “Wouldn’t that have all of his contacts on it?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Unfortunately, the phone was destroyed during the shootout between Zachariah and law enforcement. Luckily, we know a few people in prison who were part of Zachariah’s circle of friends who might know something about it or who he had been working with at the time.”

“So, what you are saying is that it could take a considerable amount of time to crack this case and that I will have to stay in hiding much longer than expected,” Morrison said. “This is so unfair. I didn’t do anything to deserve this.”

“Sadly, yes,” he answered. “Is there anything else you want to know?”

“No,” she said. “I think I am good for now. If I have any more questions, I will be sure to call. Keep me posted on any new developments and be sure to give me the room number where Stacy is staying.”

“I most certainly will,” Police Chief Joe Harvey said. “I will leave you now so you can get some rest. Now, take care of yourself, Miss Morrison, and try not to get yourself in any more trouble.”

“I will and you be sure to take care of yourself as well,” Morrison said before hanging up the phone.

Morrison could not believe that she would be living in fear even longer after finding out the case still hadn’t been solved and that other gang members would try to come after her. She thought for sure after Zachariah Kelly had been killed by the police that this whole situation was over and that she could return to her apartment. Despite everything, she felt like law enforcement was getting closer. For sure, Zachariah’s friends would know something about his involvement in the murders. It was only a matter of time now.

Just as the medication started working, she decided it was time to take a nap. Morrison couldn’t wait to hear what room Stacy was staying in so she could call her up to see how she was doing since neither one of them was in good enough shape to get up and see each other. She then slowly drifted off to sleep.

As she was sleeping, Morrison began to have flashbacks. She remembered hearing Zachariah speaking to the unknown person on his phone as he was inside her apartment, the aggressive behavior Max displayed as he forcefully kissed and held her, and the suspicious way the janitor had acted. She wondered if all three individuals were somehow connected. Morrison also thought it was odd that Stacy had a sudden change of heart for her thoughts of Hugo Long. She wanted to know if Stacy knew more about him than what she was letting on. The questions kept whirling around in her mind. Morrison needed answers, and she needed them quickly. Perhaps she should call Hugo Long to get some answers without sounding accusatory. Morrison would slyly ask him a few questions here and there while conversating with him. She would find a way to get him talking. The constant pondering of questions eventually exhausted her and put her into a deep sleep.

Morrison woke up about two hours later to the sound of ringing from the phone next to her bed. She rubbed her eyes and yawned just before answering it, then a familiar voice was heard from the other line. Morrison immediately got excited, and a huge smile broke out on her face. She could hardly believe who it was.

“Hi, Maia!” Stacy said, barely above a whisper. “I found out what room you were staying in from the police chief, so I was able to get the phone number to your room from him. He called about an hour ago. I wanted to let you know that I am doing fine. I have a few aches and pains in my right upper thigh, where the bullet grazed me. I think it hurt me more when I fell hard on the cement and bruised my leg and knees badly. So, how have you been feeling?”

“I’m hanging in there,” Morrison replied. “The pain medication they have been giving me has relieved me some. It’s so hard not being able to get out of bed and move about freely. I feel like a mummy wrapped up in these blankets all day. I am so glad that you called. I really needed someone to talk to. We are both extremely lucky to come out of this alive.”

“You are right about that,” Stacy said. “After I had been shot, I felt like my life was flashing before my very eyes. I remember lying on the sidewalk in a puddle of blood just before I blacked out. I was not ready to die. There was so much more I needed to accomplish. I am so grateful to be alive and that I will recover from all of this.”

“Me, too,” Morrison said. “I feel like we are both in this together. This traumatic experience will make us feel closer. You are like my best friend and there is nobody else that I would want to share this horrible experience with.”

“You are my best friend as well,” Stacy said. “You are the only person that I can depend on right now. You have always been there for me, and I am truly grateful for it.”

“Hopefully, we can get out of this hospital soon, and by the time we get out, the police will have all of the people responsible for this whole mess arrested,” Morrison said. “I absolutely hate that this is happening. I just want my life back.”

“That would be so nice,” Stacy said. “I know exactly what you are feeling. I feel like I have lost a large part of my freedom and I want it back!”

“Stacy, I know this is changing the subject, but is there something about Hugo that you are not telling me?” Morrison asked. “I mean, it was kind of odd how you suddenly changed your mind about him. I figured something was up. I was thinking about asking him, but then I decided I wanted to hear it from you instead.”

“Okay,” Stacy said. “I might as well tell you now, given that we almost lost our lives. Hugo Long is a private investigator who is trying to help police find out who is after you. Someone hired him to protect you, but he won’t say who. You must promise me that you won’t tell him that I told you that. He wanted to keep it a secret.”

“I promise,” Morrison said. “I knew there was something different about him. I just wasn’t sure if he was a good guy and that he was someone I could trust. But now that I know, that will take a huge burden off my shoulders.”

“I will tell you one thing,” Stacy said. “You two have chemistry. I can see it in the way you look at each other and the way you just casually bump into each other while walking. Now that you know the truth, I think you should continue acting like you don’t know anything about it. I mean, just to see what happens next.”

“I sure will try,” Morrison said. “It’s going to be a difficult task for me because I am not much of an actress. I do admit I kind of like him myself, but there is still more I need to know about him for him to gain my trust.”

“That is completely understandable,” Stacy said. “I know you can do it. He has been so worried about you lately. Would it be okay if I gave him your phone number so he could call you to check up on you? That is really what he wants.”

“Yeah,” Morrison said. “After what you just told me, I am completely comfortable with it. I mean, what could possibly go wrong?”

Chapter 14

After a week, Stacy Sullivan and Maia Morrison were able to move about the hospital. They would occasionally meet up at the Starbucks inside the hospital to drink a cup of coffee and have a conversation or eat a meal in the cafeteria. In about a week, after showing steady progress, they would be able to leave the hospital. They could hardly wait.

Morrison sat down on the chair in her room to watch television. Just as she was about to take another sip of her coffee, her phone rang. She quickly answered it. Morrison was hoping for some updates from Police Chief Joe Harvey but was shocked when she found out who it was.

“Hi!” the mysterious baritone voice said. “Is this Maia Morrison?”

“Yes,” she replied while knowing exactly who it was. It instantly brought a smile to her face.

“This is Hugo Long,” he said. “I was calling to check up on you. I wanted to make sure you were okay. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you ever since I heard about what happened to you and Stacy on the news. I hope you don’t mind that I got the phone number to your room from Stacy.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Morrison replied. “It is kind of nice to hear your voice again. It is hard being stuck in a hospital room all alone without anyone to talk to for long periods of time.”

Morrison then remembered what Stacy told her about him being a private investigator. She tried not to sound as if she knew much more than what she did about him as she spoke to Long.

“I am sorry that you and Stacy are going through this. I wish I was over there to give you a great big hug,” Long said. “Anyway, how are you doing health-wise?”

“I am doing good,” she said. “I was lucky to escape with a minor gunshot wound to my left leg. The doctor expects me to get out of the hospital in less than two weeks. The nurse told me I may have to undergo some physical therapy while I am down here. It’s nice of you to call. So, how are things with you?”

“Well, you know I am just busy with work and running errands,” he said. “I don’t have much time for anything else. As soon as I heard about the shooting, I was worried sick about you. I feel partially responsible because I should have walked you back to your place that night. But you didn’t trust me and went with Stacy instead, which I understood why.”

“Trust me, there’s nothing you could have done that night,” she assured him. “The man that was shooting was shooting at everyone and every little thing just to get to me. You would have been shot at and possibly killed. That man has very little respect for the living. He was all out for blood.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Long replied. “I have extensive training in the defensive arts, and I always carry a concealed weapon. I would have taken a bullet for you. I could have saved your and everyone else’s lives. I just might have been your hero that night, and then maybe your feelings for me would have changed. I was deeply upset when I had failed the night at the karaoke bar because I really should have gotten that guy, but because there were so many people at the bar, I couldn’t make my way through the crowd fast enough. And you are not allowed to bring a weapon inside the bar on top of all of that.”

“You sure do think highly of yourself,” Morrison said. “However, it is nice knowing that you would have taken a bullet for me. Not many people would do that for me.”

“You should think of it as a privilege,” he said. “I wouldn’t do that just for anyone. It would be shameful to lose someone as special as you, with all your beauty and talent. It would be a total waste. I have grown quite fond of you over these past few days.”

“I bet you have,” she said with a smile on her face. “Now, don’t get too ahead of yourself, Mr. Long. We just met not that long ago. Plus, you still need to take me out on our first official date. You can make up for it during that. After that, I will make my mind up about you.”

“I love a woman with spunk,” he said. “I will accept that challenge of taking you out on a date. So, how long do you think it will take for you to get out of the hospital?”

“They are telling me if I keep up with all of this steady progress, I will be getting out of here soon,” Morrison said. “You can prove your worthiness then. I am willing to give you a shot if you play your cards right.”

“Just let me know, and we can arrange for this first date of ours,” Long said. “I can prove to you that I am the man of your dreams. Just you wait!”

“Oh, I will, all right,” she replied. “Hopefully, I will find out that you are not as full of yourself as you sound. A little modesty could go a long way for you. Plus, I feel like I owe it to you since you did try to stop that man from chasing me.”

“Good,” he said. “I will call you up again in a couple of days to see how you are doing. In the meantime, take care of yourself and think about me often, beautiful. I am dying to see you again.”

“I’ll talk to you later, goodness gracious,” Morrison said. “Have a good night.”

“You, too,” he said.

Morrison smiled widely and felt her cheeks grow warm. She wasn’t sure how she was going to handle this relationship. Morrison was heading into unknown territory in her love life. It was something she was going to have to discuss with Stacy. She knew more about this kind of stuff. Morrison had been only focused on her career for so long and was not planning to date anyone until she was settled in her singing career. She was afraid if she spent too much time with a man, it would make succeeding in her career more unreachable. Morrison felt like she was taking a huge risk in seeing Hugo Long.

Mr. Long was starting to sound like quite the charmer. She wondered how many women he had to talk to like that before her. He clearly had much more experience in the dating field than she did. Many people suspected she had a big personality and basked in the limelight during her off-stage time. The truth was she was quite the introvert who would much rather stay home on most nights. Morrison enjoyed her privacy and loved having lots of quiet time. On the stage, she was a completely different person. Singing and performing allowed her to express her inner emotions and thoughts. She felt a great release from it.

Morrison didn’t have any friends when she first arrived in New York. Everyone in Kansas thought that she was very shy and did not say much. It was very difficult for her to find friends. She felt lucky to have met Stacy. Without Stacy, she would have been stuck most of her nights in her apartment all alone. Stacy introduced Morrison to her social circle and made her feel comfortable about going out at night and having a good time. Stacy really helped bring her out of her shell. She also gave her the confidence to go up on stage and give it all that she got.

Right now, she was frustrated because she couldn’t go up on stage to sing. With her wounds, it would be hard for her to stand for long periods. It would be entirely boring for the audience to see her sit up on the stage the entire time and not see any dancing. Everything seemed to be going her way up until last month. Morrison felt like she was going nowhere, and all she could do right now was spend much of her time lying in bed. Her career was now up in the air. She couldn’t be more ready to make it in the music business as she was right now. Morrison had come so close to achieving her dream.

Morrison couldn’t help but call up the police station. She needed to hear more about what was happening in the murder case. Morrison hadn’t heard from the police chief within the past few days. She knew the police station was probably tired of her constantly calling over there.

The receptionist then picked up the phone. Morrison quickly asked her if the police chief was there.

“I’m sorry, Police Chief Joe Harvey is out helping a detective investigate a possible crime scene,” the receptionist told her. “I will leave a message that you called, Maia. I can’t promise you that he will get back to you soon. He is just too busy.”

“Thank you,” Morrison said. “I would really appreciate that.”

Morrison hung up the phone while feeling a great deal of disappointment. She turned on the news to see if there were any more updates involving the shootings that nearly killed her and Stacy downtown. She flicked on the television and turned it to the evening news. Unfortunately, there was not. But there were more interesting news reports coming in.

Sure enough, there was more mayhem in downtown New York City. A woman had been shot dead while walking her dog. A search for the killer was now underway. The anchorman then started talking about an old vacant warehouse that contained a massive stock of drugs a few blocks away from the Groove. The building awfully looked familiar to Morrison. She recalled walking past it a few times to get to the Groove. Morrison suddenly remembered a moment when the janitor at the club had walked right out of the old warehouse. Could it be possible that those responsible for killing the singers and Maximilian Rangel were hiding out in the warehouse all this time? She also had a feeling that was where the police chief was when she had called the station during the afternoon.

Morrison continued listening to the news coverage for more details. It turned out there was a police raid that had broken out in the warehouse and several people had been arrested. This was a huge relief, but then there were three photos of the ringleaders who had managed to escape the building. To her astonishment one of the photos was of the janitor whose name was Alex Pratt. The other two men’s names were Jeffrey Humphrey and Oliver Buchanan. Pratt was identified as six foot and two inches, with fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. Humphrey was six foot and eight inches, well-built, with multiple tattoos, and a bald head. Buchanan was five foot and five inches tall, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a very slender figure. The anchorman warned the audience that these men were armed and dangerous and to call the police immediately if they saw them. Morrison jotted down their names and their descriptions in case she saw them lurking about. She had to keep a close eye out for anyone associated with the gang. At least she knew how a few of them looked.

Morrison turned off the television. She knew there was something rather peculiar about the janitor. He would stare at her ever so creepily and always seemed to be lurking about. These men were clearly the ones after her. She just knew it. It all began making sense to her now. The gang members knew the police were hot on their tails, so they needed a new hideout spot. That was why they were adamant about taking over the Groove.

She had to call Stacy immediately and tell her what she had just found out on the news. Morrison knew she would be shocked about it. Stacy also thought the janitor gave off bad vibes and should be a suspect before he was even named one. She just knew Hugo Long was aware of it and that was why he had told her he had been so busy lately. He and the police chief had been investigating the warehouse and gathering clues.

She called Stacy quickly. After she told her everything she had found out, Stacy was surprised to find out the answer was only a few blocks away from the Groove. She, too, was not surprised about the janitor after how he had been acting lately. No one at the Groove knew his name because he had always pretty much kept to himself.

“Could they be hiding out at the Groove now?” Stacy asked. “I mean, the police already ran them out of the warehouse. Where else would they go?”

“That is true,” Morrison responded. “But I am pretty sure the police chief already knows that. In fact, he was the one that told me the gang wanted complete control of the Groove. I bet you they have police patrolling that area day and night in case the remainder of the gang decides to make it their new hideout. I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t be dumb enough to do that. They most likely left the city to hide out elsewhere.”

“You are right,” Stacy said. “I’m hoping they left the city completely and decide not to come back now that law enforcement is hot on their trail. I pray to God that the police will arrest them soon because I am so sick and tired of this. I want my life back.”

“That would be nice, but I bet you the ringleaders will be seeking revenge on law enforcement officers and those involved with the Groove soon,” Morrison said. “At least law enforcement now has some leads in the case. It will all be unraveled here soon, and there’s no way they will be able to get out of it.”

“That is comforting to know,” Stacy said. “All we can do now is sit back and wait. I guarantee you that I sure the hell won’t go back to the Groove under *any* circumstance. I feel much safer staying clear away from that place.”

“When we do leave the hospital, we need Hugo to be with us the majority of the time,” Morrison said. “I believe he will protect us. After talking to him this afternoon, it is clear he would do anything to keep us safe. I will, however, tell you that he is quite the flirt and thinks highly of himself. Hugo had no problems trying to charm his way into my heart. He wants to take me out on our first official date shortly after I leave this hospital. I am telling you he is something else.”

“Oh my gosh!” Stacy said. “You sound so happy every time you talk about Hugo. You clearly have the hots for him. I can tell.”

“Maybe I do, or maybe I don’t,” Morrison said with a coy smile on her face. “That is just something you and I will have to find out later. I am not sure of anything now.”

They both laughed. Stacy just knew that Long and her friend Maia were going to end up with each other at one point or another.

Chapter 15

Maia Morrison was dressed up and ready to leave the hospital. She had spent nearly two weeks there and was ready to break free. Stacy would be leaving the hospital in a few minutes. She stood outside in a Led Zeppelin T-shirt and a pair of light-washed ripped jeans as she waited for the taxi to arrive. It was a warm, sunny day. The sky was a cerulean blue color, and the sun was so bright that Morrison had to put on her dark black oversized sunglasses.

She then saw a taxi pull up in front of her. The taxi driver asked her if she was the Maia Morrison who called them up about a ride two hours ago. She nodded and then instructed him to take her to the hotel where she was staying. It was a little past ten o’clock on a Wednesday morning, so traffic wasn’t as bad during this time of the day. Everyone was already at their intended destinations.

She had to go back to the hotel to get the remainder of her stuff and move to a different hotel to make it harder for the gang to locate her since they obviously knew where to find her at the time of the shooting. Morrison hated staying in a hotel because she didn’t feel like she was at home at all. She felt more like she was being forcibly moved to a place that wasn’t her own with very limited space. She yearned to go back to her cozy little apartment, but she knew it wasn’t safe yet to return to it. Morrison had asked Police Chief Joe Harvey if it was safe for her to retrieve more stuff from her apartment, but he advised her not to. She grew more agitated about it day after day.

She paid the taxi driver as soon as he parked in front of the hotel. Morrison scurried across the lobby. When she got up into her room, she noticed the maid had cleaned it and made her bed. Morrison felt bad that she had left the room a mess. She gathered her belongings and packed up. Morrison felt tired from all the drama and from being relocated once again. She found herself having trouble sleeping once again and her appetite had dropped considerably as well. The flashbacks and endless thoughts were constantly invading her mind. Morrison was having a terrible time blocking them. She was in desperate need of some caffeine, so she decided to pick up a white mocha latte with an extra shot from Starbucks before heading out.

She made plans with Hugo Long to have lunch with him in a few hours. Morrison told him to meet her at the Riu Plaza New York Times Square Hotel, the new hotel she was staying at. She knew he could be trusted because he was helping with her case. Despite not wanting to stay in a hotel, Morrison did think it would be nice to have a different scenic view from her room. Plus, there were a few restaurants in the area that she would like to try. Morrison also noticed there were several shops in the area where she could buy a few new pairs of clothes. She knew that when Stacy got out of the hospital, she would like to go on a shopping date with her as well. Everything was close enough, so they wouldn’t have to walk far. Morrison had a slight limp when walking because of her injury, so she was slower in getting to places.

Police Chief Joe Harvey was going to meet up with her earlier at the hotel as soon as she got settled. He wanted to give her a few updates on how the case was going. She felt optimistic that the police knew what they were doing and were about to solve it. All the missing pieces seem to be falling into place now with the new information they were getting. Morrison hoped it would not take long so that she wouldn’t be late in meeting with Long later during the afternoon.

Morrison took a shower, put on a fresh pair of clothes, styled her hair, and put on some makeup for her lunch date with Long. She wanted to look her best for the occasion. Now that Morrison knew he was helping the police with the investigation and was trying to protect her, she felt safe around him. If she stood by his side, she wouldn’t have to worry as much. Morrison was anxious to see him again since it had been almost two weeks since she had last seen him. He made her heart flutter.

Just as she laid back on the recliner and turned on the television, there was a knock on the door. She knew right away that it was Harvey. Morrison sighed, then slowly rose from the chair to answer the door. She quickly looked through the peephole to make sure it was him before opening the door. Morrison could see him wearing his uniform. She sighed, then slowly opened the door.

“Why, hello there,” Morrison said. “It’s so good to see you again. So, what news do you have to report to me this time?”

“Maia, I am sorry it’s been a while since I last touched base with you,” Harvey said. “I just got all caught up with this investigation that I almost forgot to return your phone call. However, we have gotten close to ending this case. I have both good news and bad news for you. Which would you like first?”

“I would like to get the bad news out of the way first,” she replied. “No matter how troublesome it may be. I’m pretty sure by now that I am strong enough to take almost anything after the recent events in my life. So, fire away!”

“You were right about the janitor, Alex Pratt,” Harvey said. “After Maximilian Rangel had been shot and the police arrived at the scene, Alex snuck back into the Groove and stole all the employees’ records. He now has all their home addresses, social security numbers, contact information, and relationship status. He and the remaining gang members may try to invade employees’ homes and kill them. Plus, they might find close relatives or previous employees, too, and possibly use them to get to you or anyone else. They might even kill them as well. Who knows? They could commit identity fraud as far as I know. There’s no telling what vile acts they will commit. Did you put down any relatives or loved ones as your emergency contact on your application?”

“I put down my mom as my emergency contact who lives in Kansas,” Morrison said. “They wouldn’t dream of going to Kansas . . . or would they?”

“Anything is possible,” he said. “This is a ruthless bunch who are capable of anything. That Alex Pratt is one crafty devil. We will contact your mother immediately and tell her she and your family’s lives are at stake. What is your mother’s name?”

“My mother’s name is June Morrison, and she lives in Topeka, Kansas,” Morrison said. “Please, do what you can to keep my family safe. They don’t deserve to be part of any of this. In fact, they didn’t even want me to come out here in the first place. Oh my gosh! I can’t imagine how worried my parents are right now. I feel so bad about it.”

“We will do whatever we can to ensure your family is safe by contacting their local law enforcement to keep an eye out on their neighborhood and home,” Police Chief Joe Harvey assured her. “I will also call them up and tell them you are safe and they have nothing to worry about.”

“Thank you,” Morrison said. “I really appreciate it. Now, tell me what the good news is. I desperately need it.”

“We managed to capture Jeffrey Humphrey and Oliver Buchanan, the other two instigators,” Harvey said. “We hope by offering them a plea bargain, they will provide us with more information and help us locate Alex Pratt and whoever else is behind these heinous acts. Since you know who Alex is and what he looks like, you will know who to keep an eye out for. However, you don’t know who else is working with him. It could be either of your friends from the Groove.”

“No matter how you put it,” Morrison said, “it all sounds so worrisome. I sure hope the plea bargain will be enough to put the rest of the gang members behind bars. They don’t deserve to roam these streets freely.”

“Maia, be careful out there,” the police chief warned. “Keep both your eyes and ears always open. I mean it. You haven’t exactly been playing it safe. Just don’t go too far away from the hotel, and if you must go someplace at night, make sure there is someone with you. I can’t have you wandering all over New York City on your own. It just increases your chances of getting found.”

“You got it!” she said just before he stepped out of the hotel room. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Good,” Harvey said. “You will be hearing from me sometime soon about more updates, and I will let you know when I contact your parents and let them know you are safe.”

“Okay,” she said. “Talk to you later!”

Morrison scrambled back to the bathroom to put on a pair of large silver rhinestone hoop earrings and a rhinestone necklace to go along with her pink sweater and skinny blue jeans. She sprayed on some perfume just before heading out the door. Morrison flung her black Kate Spade crossbody purse over her right shoulder as she exited her hotel room. She would find Long waiting for her in the lobby downstairs.

She made sure to be always completely aware of her surroundings. Morrison scanned the crowd of people carefully to see if the creepy janitor Alex Pratt was hiding amongst them. She felt relieved when he was nowhere to be seen. She anxiously waited for the elevator to come up to her floor. As soon as the ding to the elevator went off, she quickly got inside. When the elevator arrived on the first floor and opened its doors, she spotted Long right away sitting on a big, fluffy gray couch. He waved and smiled at her.

“Hi there!” she said cheerfully as she approached him.

“Well, hello!” he replied. “Fancy finding you here!”

“Don’t sit there and pretend you didn’t arrange this whole thing coincidentally and are sitting here in the hotel lobby by happenstance,” Morrison teased him.

“Shall we?” he said while escorting her with their elbows intertwined. They smiled at each other as they walked side by side out of the hotel and onto the bustling streets of New York City.

“Are you okay to walk, my dear?” Long asked while being concerned about her slight limping.

“Of course,” Morrison said. “I’ve got this! It isn’t that long of a walk. It will be good exercise, and the weather is lovely. I could use some fresh air because I have been cooped up in the hospital for too long.”

The café she and Long would go to together was just two blocks away. They wove through the crowd until they reached their destination point. It was sunny and warm out, which made the walk a pleasant experience.

The bell on the door to the café rang as Long opened it for her. They were seated at one of the tables with two yellow tulips in a glass jar placed on it. Morrison calmly eased her way to the table with a big, bright smile on her face. Her face was glowing.

“I hope I didn’t leave you waiting for too long at the hotel,” Morrison said. “I was caught up in a conversation with the police chief about the suspects who were behind the shootings. I found out two of the ringleaders have been arrested, but one is still on the loose.”

“I understand,” Long said. “Just like the way I understand why you were reluctant in telling me which hotel you were staying at. I would say you are one smart girl, and I do not blame you for not wanting to tell me. I feel honored that you find me trustworthy enough to allow me to take you out to lunch.”

“Sometimes, I feel otherwise,” Morrison said. “I don’t think it was a smart move for me to go audition for the rock band Ladies and a Guitar, but I desperately needed to find more work. Had I not gone, I would have prevented both me and Stacy from getting shot at.”

“You can’t blame yourself for that,” Long said. “Besides, you can’t expect to live in a cave. You need to have a life, too. Just don’t leave anywhere at night alone. Don’t be afraid to call me. I would be more than happy to help protect you.”

“I suppose you are right,” Morrison said. “Both Stacy and I are out of jobs now, and we needed an audition. What gives them the right to take that opportunity away from us?”

“I know I have said this before, but I wanted to remind you that the members of Ladies and a Guitar were blown away by your performance,” he said. “I could tell. I will not be surprised if you get a call from them any day now.”

“I sure hope we make it,” she said. “Stacy and I need both the money and exposure. I don’t know how much longer I can afford to stay at these hotels. Unfortunately, I may have to return to my apartment where the man who shot me broke into. I just know whoever is after me will go back to the apartment to find me. If I did take the risk, I could not go alone. Someone brave enough will have to go back there with me.”

“I might be able to help you out with that,” Long said. “You are more than welcome to stay at my apartment until things are all cleared out. At least I can keep an eye out for you and protect you that way. I keep a concealed weapon in the house, and I am a real sharpshooter. I also am trained in the martial arts. Not to mention, I have a dog on guard twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. You will be much safer staying with me there.”

“I would like that very much, but I don’t want to impose,” Morrison said. “I really don’t want to feel like I am invading your space. However, it would be nice not being alone anymore.”

“Oh, you won’t at all,” he said. “I wouldn’t mind the company, and I, too, feel very lonely. This also will allow us the opportunity to get to know each other.”

“Well, it sure would beat staying in a hotel,” she said. “I’ll have to think about it, then get back to you about it later.”

“Take your time,” Long replied. “Just remember that my offer still stands. I would much rather have you staying with me than have you stay by yourself in some hotel with a bunch of strangers coming in and out of the building.”

The waitress then came over to take their order. They pulled out their menus to let her know what they wanted. She quickly jotted down their orders, took the menus, then walked back to the kitchen to place their orders.

“It’s been a difficult time for me,” Morrison said. “I’ve got a lot of things on my mind. I don’t want to be a burden to anyone. Also, you saw what happened to Stacy when she was with me, and we were walking to the hotel. I don’t want to put your life in danger, too.”

“I am so sorry that you are facing all of this,” Long said sympathetically. “Trust me, you are no burden. All I want to do is help, and I am willing to do so at any cost. Just seeing you over there hurting kills me. Would it be okay if I went over and gave you a great big hug?”

“I could really use one right now,” Morrison said. “All of this has taken a huge toll on me. I never felt so frightened in all my life.”

He stood up and walked around the table toward her. Long then dipped down to hug Morrison tenderly to show how much he really cared about her. Morrison could feel the warmth and tenderness from his hug. Her heart pounded wildly. She felt like she could melt right into his arms as they embraced. Morrison could tell his intentions were genuine. She wanted to stay in his arms forever. He broke away from the embrace as soon as the waitress returned with their food.

“I am completely famished,” Long said. “I am ready to dig in.”

“Me, too,” she chuckled. “All this talk has made me hungry.”

“So, will you do it?” he asked.

“Do what?” Morrison replied.

“Stay with me, of course,” Long said. “Please, say you will.”

She finished chewing her food, then looked down at her plate, trying to keep herself from smiling so she could hide the way she was feeling. It was no use; Morrison began to blush. She couldn’t believe what she was about to say.

“Yes, I would love to,” she said. “How can I turn you down after giving me a hug like that? You are like a big, warm, cozy teddy bear. I felt so secure in those arms of yours.”

“Good,” he responded. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Chapter 16

It was moving day for Maia Morrison, and she could hardly wait to leave the hotel. She would be moving in with Hugo Long, who was possibly the man of her dreams. It was the best option that she had left. She only had one month’s rent paid for her apartment, so she either had to move out or find a paying job quickly before it was too late. Morrison could not see how she would come up with enough money to pay for it, plus pay for a hotel. One month was enough time to pack up her things from her apartment with Long by her side and haul them over to his place. She would only live with him long enough till it was safe for her to get a place of her own. Morrison hoped to get a singing job soon so she could start saving up for a place. Joining Ladies and a Guitar would save her hide.

Her mom would not have approved of her moving with him normally, but given the current circumstances, her mom would think it was best for her to move in with him—or with anyone, for all that matters. Her parents would not want her to continue living alone. Stacy still had a few days left in the hospital. She would be moving in with her parents after she got out since she, too, was running out of money.

Long would come by the hotel to pick her up in about twenty minutes. Morrison gathered her suitcase, purse, and laptop, then headed out of her room. She rushed over to the elevator door before it closed. A man inside the elevator held the doors open to allow her in. She thanked the man graciously as she got inside. He smiled and said, “You are welcome.”

As she stepped out into the lobby, she found Long sitting on a red sofa, sipping on a cup of coffee from Starbucks and reading the *New York Times*. He looked up, noticing her immediately. Long and Morrison exchanged smiles as she walked up to him. Both were really excited about living together. It was going to be quite the adventure for both, and they had never lived with someone who they had only known for about a month.

He got up and gave her a quick hug before taking her suitcase out to his gray Audi parked out front. He unlocked his car to let Morrison inside as he loaded up his trunk with her luggage. Long then dashed around the car and got into the driver’s seat. He found Morrison flashing him with a smile and sitting like an eager child ready to go to the zoo.

“So, are you ready for this exciting adventure that we are about to embark on?” Long asked.

“I’m ready as I’ll ever be,” she gleefully said. “You know, I think this is going to be a whole lot of fun seeing the real you under that exterior of yours.”

“Alright then, let’s do this,” he said as he turned the engine on. Ratt’s “Round and Round” song blared on the radio as they drove off. Long began singing along to the lyrics while he lightly headbanged and tapped the steering wheel with his fingertips to the music. Morrison rolled her eyes, then couldn’t help joining him in singing along to the song as well. Both were now having a good time as Long sped off from the hotel.

Long then maneuvered his way through the New York City traffic. The sound of horns honking, people talking, and sirens flooded the air. He drove onto the ramp that took them to the expressway for ten miles to the north from the downtown area. He exited off onto a suburban area. Morrison saw a Chinese restaurant, a boutique, and a small supermarket. A few more blocks down, there was a residential area. Long took a left at a stoplight, then drove one more block down. He turned off onto a driveway that went to a two-story white house with a blue door and blue trimming. It had a large front yard. There were trimmed bushes and flowers in the front of the house. Morrison thought it was a charming house, one that she could see herself living in.

“Well, this is it!” he said. “I know it isn’t much, but there is just enough room for two people, and I find it cozy enough. I sure hope you like living here with me.”

“Oh, my!” Morrison said. “This is lovely. It reminds me of the house that I grew up in. It’s small and quaint with a wide front yard.”

“You will have to watch your step when you come into the house,” Long warned. “I have a dog that gets overly excited when someone comes in and he just might jump up on you! I sure hope you like dogs.”

“Are you kidding me? I love dogs!” she said. “Don’t worry about it. I grew up with three dogs and a cat as a child, so I am used to animals jumping up on me. He is such a cutie! What is your dog’s name?”

“His name is Bear,” Long said. “Don’t let the name frighten you. His bark is much stronger than his bite. It’s a relief to find out that you love dogs. I was afraid that I was going to have to choose between Bear and you, but now I know I get to keep you both here. You know, I can already tell we are going to get along great. So, let me take you up to the room that you will be staying in.”

“So, just curious, who would you have picked?” Morrison asked.

“I would have picked Bear, hands down, and I would have sent you packing,” he said jokingly. Morrison nudged him on the shoulder and gave him a playful smirk after that remark.

Just as they stepped foot into the house, Morrison could hear pitter-patter and barks. An English bulldog appeared and ran right toward her. Bear jumped up onto her legs while yelping away. Morrison laughed and patted the playful dog as he licked her continuously. Long brought out a bone from the kitchen and threw it toward the pup. The pup charged at it and began to chew it while lying on the floor.

“That will keep him busy for a while,” Long said. “I am so sorry about that!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Morrison said. “I don’t mind. He is adorable.”

Morrison then followed him up the stairs. Two rooms down the hallway to the right was a small bedroom, and next to it was a bathroom. The bed had a dark blue comforter on top and there were pillows with white pillowcases. The bed looked very inviting.

“This will be your room,” Long said. “My bedroom is down the hallway, so if you need anything, just let me know.”

He put down her suitcase on the floor in the bedroom. He then took her on a grand tour of his home. Morrison was impressed with how clean it was. She could tell that Long was organized and took pride in the appearance of his home. This was a relief to her because not many men possessed this trait. Morrison dated men who would have uneaten food left out, trash piled up high, and a sink filled with dirty dishes.

They sat out on the deck for a while and had a long conversation about what some of their likes and dislikes were. Morrison discovered that Long didn’t like it when people didn’t clean up after themselves. He also wasn’t a huge fan of laundry and could leave his clean clothes in the dryer for days, which didn’t bother Morrison all that much. Long said he loved to barbecue and do yard work. Occasionally, he would have some of his buddies over for barbecue, beer, and to watch football games on the big screen. Morrison told him that she loved jogging early in the morning and that she may get loud at times while warming up her voice before rehearsals. Long said he wouldn’t mind that at all and that he was curious about what singers do to warm up their voices and prepare for performances. Morrison felt like it was a nice chat. Not many men paid that much attention to her while talking. A lot of them didn’t seem to understand her and they couldn’t relate.

“So, what would you like to have for lunch?” Long asked. “I can make us sandwiches if you like, or I can go pick us up something.”

“Sandwiches sounds great,” Morrison said.

“Okay, then,” he said. “Sandwiches it is!”

While he was making the sandwiches, Morrison pulled out her cell phone to check her social media. Just as she was about to do that, the phone began to ring. It was a phone number that she wasn’t familiar with, but her instincts told her to answer it. She worried it might be someone like Alex Pratt calling her up to threaten her.

“Hi!” the caller said. “Is this Maia Morrison?”

“This is she,” Morrison answered.

“This is Sheryl Heart, the drummer of Ladies and a Guitar,” she said. “I just wanted to be the first to tell you that you and Stacy are in the band. I heard both of you were victims of the shooting downtown. I was so happy when I found out that you and Stacy were okay. The others were worried we wouldn’t be able to have you two in the band after that. All the artists who auditioned were not nearly as good as you both. I hope you are still wanting to be a member of Ladies and a Guitar.”

“Of course I am,” Morrison said gleefully. “Music is my life! I cannot tell you how much this truly means to me. I am absolutely flipping out right now. I can already tell you that Stacy will be dying to join as well. Have you told her yet?”

“Not yet,” Sheryl said. “I will be calling her up right after I am done talking with you.”

“She is going to be ecstatic when she hears,” Morrison said. “Thank you so much for this opportunity. I can’t wait to get started!”

“The next practice will be next week on Monday,” Sheryl said. “Do you think the both of you will be able to make it?”

“I know I will be,” Morrison said. “You will have to check with Stacy to see if she is up to it. She will be leaving the hospital this week. But knowing Stacy, she won’t let a little pain get in her way of playing the guitar. She is a real go-getter like me.”

“Okay, we will see you for our band’s next rehearsal!” Sheryl said. “Maia, welcome to Ladies and a Guitar!”

“Thank you so much,” Morrison said. “I will see you then!”

She hung up the phone with tears of excitement. Morrison felt like her music career was just about over before she got the phone call. Now, she would be able to continue doing what she loved best. She jumped out of her seat and squealed with pure joy, along with a huge smile spread across her face. Long walked outside and saw her dancing with excitement. He could not help but laugh at her. Morrison looked like one of his nieces with endless energy monkeying around in his backyard.

“So, what is all the excitement about?” he asked her.

“I just got a phone call from Sheryl Heart,” Morrison said excitedly. “Stacy and I both made the band! I can hardly believe it. I honestly did not think I would find another singing job for a long time.”

“Congratulations!” he said. “I knew you could do it! This calls for a celebration. I say we go out tonight and have a nice dinner, along with some champagne. We can do whatever else you would like to do tonight as well.”

“Yes,” Morrison said. “Let’s do that! I am so happy that I can hardly contain my excitement. I may have a little limp when I walk, but I won’t let that stop me from having a night out on the town. In fact, I am well enough to dance, even. I wouldn’t be opposed to going to a club afterward.”

“I can arrange for that to happen,” Long said. "I would love to go dancing with you. I would recommend that you take it easy out there on the dance floor, though. I would hate for you to get hurt.”

“I’ll stop myself if I start to hurt too badly,” Morrison replied. “I promise I won’t overdo it. The last thing I would ever want is to end up in the hospital again.”

Long dashed up to her and gave her a huge hug. She hugged him back tightly as he told her he was so proud of her. Bear decided to come out and join in on the celebration by barking hysterically and jumping up and down at both Morrison and Long. They burst out laughing.

“Well, the sandwiches are ready,” he said. “I hope you like turkey on honey wheat bread with provolone cheese. The condiments, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, and onions are on the table in the kitchen.”

“I sure do,” she said. “I am so hungry right now that I could eat a whole cow.”

“Well, dig in!” Long said.

Ever since she moved in, their relationship was turning out to be a beautiful one. She tried hard to think rationally about it and to not let her emotions get carried away. There was still so much more she had to learn about him. Morrison didn’t want their relationship to get awry because of her jumping to conclusions. For now, they were just friends and that was the way it should be. They needed to take it slowly before jumping into a romantic relationship.

Long escorted her into the kitchen, where he had her plate made. There were three different bags of chips and a bowl of potato salad. She helped herself. They ate and talked with each other happily. There was an immense amount of chemistry between them that she could not deny.

They couldn’t help but look at each other with a smile and exchanged plenty of eye contact.

*I could get used to this. He is exactly the kind of man that I have been looking for my whole life. He is funny, charming, and shares a lot of common interests. I am not going to let you go, Mr. Hugo Long,* Morrison thought.

Chapter 17

Long and Morrison enjoyed a night out on the town to celebrate Morrison becoming the new lead singer of the rock band Ladies and a Guitar. They started off by eating dinner at the swanky restaurant Da Andrea in Greenwich Village. They followed that up with dancing at the Avant Gardner.

Just as things were heating up at the club, Morrison checked her cell phone and noticed she had missed a text from Stacy. Stacy said she was overjoyed about them both making it in the band and that she had just gotten out of the hospital, so it was a delightful surprise. Stacy then asked Morrison if she would like to go out for drinks tomorrow, and that she could pick her up from the hotel.

Morrison smiled because she had not told her friend yet that she had moved in with Long temporarily. She just knew Stacy was going to freak when she found out they were living together. Morrison replied by saying she would meet Stacy at the bar tomorrow. She could tell her there about it.

“You are all smiles,” Long told her. “Did you hear some more exciting news?”

“It’s Stacy,” Morrison said. “She was released from the hospital today. Stacy told me she was excited to hear about us both being in the band and that she wanted to go out for drinks tomorrow to celebrate. Stacy still has no idea that we are living together. I know it is going to come off as somewhat of a shock for her, but I know she is going to be ecstatic about it. She has been trying to get us to be a couple ever since the audition. It will be interesting hearing her thoughts about us living together.”

“That’s great!” Long said. “I am so happy that the both of you will make a full recovery from being shot and will be able to continue doing what you love. Life can’t get any better than that!”

“You know, this has got to be one of the best nights of my life,” Morrison said. “I feel like everything is finally coming together. This, you and I living together, has been great and I truly appreciate you taking me in. I am excited that I will be making money soon and getting a place of my own, though. I am a strong, independent woman, Mr. Long, and I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he said. “You can stay with me as long as you like. I don’t mind taking care of you. It has been nice having you around, and Bear really likes you.”

“That’s nice of you to say,” she replied. “I like being around you and Bear, too. Your place has been like a second home to me. I am just worried that I may get too used to staying there and that I may never want to leave. Then you would have to put up with me even longer.”

“I want you to consider staying with me longer because I’d really like you to,” Long said. “Not that you have to, but only if you want to, that is. You make me happy, Maia. If you left, the place would not be the same.”

“I just can’t, Hugo,” Morrison said. “It’s too soon. We would be moving things too fast in our relationship. This is just temporary for now. I don’t want it to ruin things for us. Maybe after a while, when we are more serious and know more about each other, I will move back in with you.”

“I understand,” he said sadly. “But I feel like it has brought us closer, Maia. I don’t think it will ruin our relationship at all. I think it is making our relationship even stronger. I will respect your boundaries, though, and allow you to move out if you wish.”

“Thank you, Long,” she responded. “Who knows? I might just change my mind. Just give me time to think it through.”

“Okay,” Long said softly.

They then continued dancing the night away. Morrison was surprised that her leg really wasn’t bothering her much at all. She was just too excited and overjoyed to even pay attention to it. Morrison would occasionally take a break to make sure her leg was still doing all right.

They were having such a good time that they almost forgot about how late it was. They decided to go back home since Long had to go to work early in the morning. They both felt exhausted and a little drunk when they returned to the house. They kicked off their shoes at the entranceway, then looked up and smiled at each other one last time for the evening.

“Thanks for the wonderful night,” Morrison told him. “I am way too tired to do anything else. I guess I will see you in the morning. Have a good night!”

“You, too!” Long said. “Sleep tight and have sweet dreams tonight, my love!”

Morrison sluggishly made her way up the stairs and went straight to the bedroom. She quickly undressed and put on her pajamas. Morrison pulled out her phone one last time to check if she had any other missed messages. She was relieved that she didn’t. She was way too tired to be messaging anyone at this time of the night. Morrison slid under the covers, then immediately drifted off to sleep.

As Morrison was in a deep sleep, she received a mysterious text message. It was another warning from the creepy janitor and ringleader, Alex Pratt. It would remind her that both she and her loved ones were in danger.

The following morning, Morrison woke up with a slight hangover. She yawned, then tried to muster enough strength to get out of bed, along with having a throbbing headache. Morrison groaned as she sat up. She was in desperate need of a cup of coffee and some aspirin, so she put on a robe and headed downstairs. That was the last time she was going to stay out all night and get drunk for a very long time.

There was an aroma of coffee and crisp bacon coming from the kitchen. Long was standing in front of the stove, cooking bacon and scrambled eggs. There were two plates, two mugs, napkins, and silverware set up at the kitchen table. A fresh pot of coffee was made as well. Morrison thought he looked cute wearing an apron while cooking her breakfast in front of the stove.

“Well, good morning, sunshine!” he told her. “I took the liberty of making us some breakfast on this bright and glorious day. There’s plenty of food, so help yourself. I almost cooked enough for an entire army. I don’t know why I let myself get carried away.”

“I don’t know how you managed to wake up in such a chipper mood after drinking as much as we did last night,” Morrison said. “Plus, making breakfast on top of all that. My head is pounding, and I feel like crap right now.”

“Let me go get you some aspirin from the kitchen cabinet,” he said. “There’s creamer and sugar on the table for your coffee. I wasn’t sure how you like your coffee. Here is a spoon to stir your coffee with.”

“Thanks!” she replied. “That would be very helpful. I swear I won’t allow myself to be out all night drinking and dancing the night away like that again. I clearly can’t handle my booze like the way I used to.”

Morrison poured some coffee into her mug and put in some creamer and a few cubes of sugar. Long stepped in and handed her some aspirin. She took the aspirin, then took a sip of the coffee. The warmth of the coffee felt so good as it passed through her throat.

“As you can see, I have made scrambled eggs and bacon,” Long said. “I also can make you some toast if you like. I have Cornflakes and Raisin Bran, oatmeal, and fruit as well.”

“Just some scrambled eggs and bacon will do just fine,” she said. “You know, you don’t have to be this good to me. I can always make myself breakfast, but I do appreciate it very much. Thank you so much for being so thoughtful and going all out of your way to make me feel at home.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all,” he said. “I like doing things for others. You have been through so much and I am trying to make your life a little easier. When you are happy, I am happy.”

“You are most certainly kind,” Morrison replied. “There aren’t many men out there that would do this for a house guest. You are truly one in a million.”

“I will be leaving right after breakfast,” Long said. “I got some work to do at the office. I left a spare key to the house right there on the cabinet for you. Don’t be afraid to help yourself to the food in the kitchen. I hate to leave you, but duty calls.”

“What kind of line of work are you in?” she asked, pretending that she didn’t know what he did for a living.

“Well, if you must know,” he said, “I am a private detective. Since we are living together now, I might as well tell you that I have been hired by a family member of Nadia Waters, who was the last singer murdered at the Groove. As soon as I found out that you were singing at the Groove and that you were the latest target, my intuition told me that I should keep an eye out on you because you could help lead me to the killer. Also, I could get additional information about the case from talking to you. But don’t think for one moment that I didn’t feel attracted to you. In fact, I wanted to date you, and I am glad that we can live together now. This will make my job protecting you and helping solve the crime much easier.”

“I did not want to say anything about it, but Stacy told me about you being a private detective and that you didn’t want me to know about it because you were afraid that you might scare me off,” Morrison said.

“So much for keeping it a secret,” Long said. “I will have to remember that the next time I want to tell Stacy a secret. Perhaps it will be best for me to keep it to myself. So, how does me being a private investigator make you feel?”

“I feel much safer when I am around you because of it,” she admitted. “It was quite the surprise, though. I almost did not believe her. I thought it was all a joke at first, but I could tell by her expression that she was being serious about it.”

“I wouldn’t blame you,” he said while finishing up his breakfast. “Well, I should be heading off now. Call me if you have any problems. Have a good day!”

“I will do that then,” Morrison said. “I will see you when you get back. Have a great day at the office!”

“I hope you have fun today getting a drink with Stacy,” Long said. “Tell her I said hi.”

“Sure thing,” she said. “Trust me, two drinks are my limit this time.”

The first thing Morrison was going to do was take a shower. She finished up her breakfast, cleaned up the mess, then loaded the dishwasher. She rushed upstairs to get ready to take a long, nice hot shower. As she laid out her clothes on the bed, she noticed her phone had lit up. It was a text message. Morrison picked it up to see who it was from; it was a phone number that she did not recognize. She gasped when she saw what the message was about.

*Maia, remember me! I always knew you were a no-good slut like all the rest of them. Me and my gang will kill you off and we will take back what is ours. No singer will ever step foot into The Groove ever again. The property belongs to us. Max had no plans of paying us our share of the profits after we loaned him a considerate amount of money. Now, we want to destroy whatever is left of The Groove and take down everyone who was ever a part of it. Sadly, Max learned the hard way. If you don’t turn yourself in now, you will when we go after your family and your former bandmates!*

Morrison couldn’t believe the audacity of Alex Pratt in threatening her via text message. Someone needed to find him and put him behind bars for life. She knew she had to show Long the message immediately. At least she knew if she were with Long, she would be safe.

“I swear somebody has got to take that man down once and for all,” Morrison screamed out. She was about ready to take matters into her own hands if no one else could. She was tired of hiding and running away from him and his gang. This was supposed to be her time to shine, and she was not going to let anyone take that away from her, including some group of thugs. The quicker they were put behind bars, the better.

The message got her so worked up that she just felt like punching a punching bag. Instead, she went to take a hot shower to let off some steam. Morrison knew it would calm her down. She began singing the song “Careless Whisper” by George Michael. She could hear the echoes from her voice in the bathroom. Between the singing and the shower, Morrison began to feel at ease again. It was nice being able to sing in the shower without annoying her neighbor for once.

She noticed a small, quaint café in Long’s neighborhood just a few blocks from his home yesterday. Morrison decided she would walk over there for lunch. Shortly afterward, she would text Stacy about meeting up for drinks later in the afternoon. Morrison knew she was going to have to tell her about the scary message as well since her life was also in jeopardy. This was the sort of thing that would piss her off.

She started wondering if Long could show her and Stacy some self-defense moves and possibly show them how to shoot a gun to protect themselves while they are out on the streets of New York. Long couldn’t always be by her side. She knew that Stacy would be up for it as well. Soon, they would have to go out for rehearsals and shows with the band Ladies and a Guitar.

She quickly put on her clothes and started working on a new song. Morrison wanted to put something together that was hot for her first day as a lead singer. She wanted to make a good impression with the rest of the band members. Morrison took out her pen and notepad, then started writing down lyrics for a new song. It had to be edgy since she was now part of a rock band. Writing a new song was just the ticket to keep her mind off Alex Pratt.

“Alright, Maia, it’s time to show what you can do,” she said softly to herself.

Chapter 18

After spending nearly two hours writing out lyrics in her notebook, Morrison rested a bit before calling Stacy up to see what bar they would be meeting at and what time they were meeting. It was going to be so nice to see her friend again. Morrison had missed her so much.

They planned to meet at four o’clock at the Clover Club for a few drinks to celebrate them making the band. Morrison had so much to say to her that she could hardly wait. Much had changed since the last time they had seen each other. She still couldn’t believe they both managed to survive after being shot and were well enough to meet each other for drinks again. Morrison couldn’t imagine the odds in that.

She decided to go with a more casual look today. Morrison threw on a royal blue T-shirt, a pair of ripped jeans, and some sneakers. She wanted to feel comfortable today while going out and not have to put up with a fussy outfit. Morrison put on some makeup and brushed her hair back before leaving the house. She walked with a limp toward the small quaint café that she saw yesterday. Morrison had received physical therapy on her leg while in the hospital to help her get back on her feet again. The hospital released her when they noticed she had no problems walking on her own. Luckily, both she and Stacy were only grazed by a bullet, so they didn’t have to spend much time in the hospital. Their doctors expected they would make a full recovery in less than a month.

It was about a ten-minute walk to the café. When Morrison arrived, it was nearly a full house inside. She patiently waited to be seated. The hostess came and then led her to her seat. Morrison noticed she was the only one who was sitting alone at a table. She could hear endless chatter in the background. She skimmed through the menu while the waitress went to get her Diet Coke. Morrison decided to order a bowl of lemon chicken orzo soup and a baguette. She knew that Long said it was all right for her to eat the food in his kitchen, but she didn’t feel comfortable making herself completely at home at his place yet. Morrison didn’t want it to seem she was taking advantage of his hospitality.

Morrison scanned the room to see if there were any familiar faces there. She figured there was no way that Alex Pratt would ever find her there. He had never met Hugo Long and didn’t know that she was with him, so how would he know the location where Long lived? Morrison had no idea where Pratt lived. She barely even spoke to him, so she knew very little about him. In fact, no one at the Groove really spoke to him. Pratt always kept to himself. Maybe that was why he had such a hatred for everyone at the Groove. He was a lonely man who got mixed up with the wrong group of people, perhaps. Maybe it was his way to seek out revenge on anyone who ignored him and made him feel like a nobody. Being one of the ringleaders of a gang made him feel powerful and in control.

Morrison wanted to feel sympathy for him but could not because he was a cold-blooded murderer. There was no good motive for him to be behind all the murders. It was just for selfish reasons. He needed to take full accountability for them and should be given a harsh punishment for it. Pratt deserved a life sentence in prison or, worse, the death penalty. *He does not deserve to walk on the streets of New York City ever again,* she thought.

When the waitress arrived with her bowl of soup and baguette, her mouth began to water. It all looked good and smelled good. It was the perfect healthy and light meal. The taste of the soup was divine. She felt relaxed as she listened carefully to the smooth jazz music that was playing in the restaurant. Morrison then took the bill up to the cashier to pay for her meal and leave a tip.

She went back to Long’s house to rest up for about an hour before heading off to meet Stacy at the Clover Club. She would have to call a taxi to take her there since she found it more difficult to walk long distances with her leg injury. Morrison tried hard to block out thoughts about Alex Pratt so she could savor the moment with her friend. She wasn’t going to allow herself to be frightened of him anymore because that was exactly what he wanted. She went straight up to her bedroom to take a short nap, making sure to set the alarm to avoid oversleeping. Morrison would hate missing the taxi after she had set up a time for it to arrive.

Time flew by just before the alarm awakened her. She quickly got up to fix her hair once more before rushing down the stairs to wait for the taxi to arrive. It was about three minutes when she saw the taxi driver pull up into the driveway. She grabbed her purse and sunshades, petted Bear while he was sitting next to the door barking, then locked the front door while holding off Bear so he wouldn’t get out of the house before heading off.

The drive to the Clover Club took about twenty minutes. Since it was the afternoon, there weren’t a lot of people at the bar because people were still working. It didn’t take long for her to spot Stacy inside the bar. She had already reserved a table for them. Stacy smiled and waved at Morrison. Morrison smiled back at her.

“Hi there!” Stacy told her. “It has been a long time since we last seen each other. I was beginning to wonder when we were ever going to see each other again. So, how are things in your neck of the woods?”

“Oh, you know, the usual,” Morrison joked. “Actually, you have missed out on quite a bit lately. First things first, I know you are going to totally freak out when I tell you this, but I recently moved in with Hugo Long.”

“What?” Stacy said. “When did this happen?”

“I moved into his home yesterday,” Morrison said. “I was telling Hugo that I was having financial problems since we haven’t been able to work for quite some time and that I couldn’t afford to continue staying in hotels. That was when he offered me a place to stay.”

“When did he ask you?” Stacy asked her. “Please, do not leave out any juicy details. I must know everything.”

“He asked me last week,” Morrison said. “At first, I didn’t think it would be a good idea, but then I began to start thinking this was for the best. I figured he could protect me, and it would be nice to not be alone anymore. Plus, there was no way that I was going to end up moving back to Kansas and have to live with my parents again. For one, there aren’t many opportunities for a singer there. Two, my mom would drive me up the wall, and three, I might put my family’s lives in danger if Alex and his gang decided to follow me there. This was the best solution that I could possibly have right now.”

“So, tell me, what is it like living with Mr. Hugo Long?” Stacy said.

“It has been a wonderful experience so far,” Morrison said. “He is so kind and considerate. Surprisingly, he is very organized and keeps a clean house as well. Not to mention, he even cooked me breakfast this morning. Hugo is not like other men. Plus, he owns this cute little English bulldog named Bear. We both agreed not to take things too fast in our relationship.”

“But what about him being this private detective?” Stacy asked. “Doesn’t it bother you that he was hired by someone to help solve this case?”

“Not at all,” Morrison said. “I asked him about his line of work yesterday. That was when he admitted he was a private detective and that a family member of Nadia Waters, who was the last singer murdered at the Groove, had hired him to find out who killed their daughter and to put them behind bars. Hugo said that me living with him would help make his job much easier because I could help lead him to the killer, and he could protect me in the process.”

“That’s interesting,” Stacy said. "He told me that he didn’t want you to know about it. I guess he felt like he could trust you and thought that you would not freak out about it. Hugo is just full of surprises.”

“Maybe he figured he couldn’t keep it a secret much longer,” Morrison said. "I mean, we are living together now, so it was only a matter of time till I would have found out about it. It would be hard for him to keep it to himself for so long. He knew he would eventually have to tell me what he does for a living, or else things would get weird.”

“That’s true,” Stacy said. “So, have you slept with him yet?”

“Of course not! What kind of a person do you take me for?” Morrison said. “You know I like to take things slowly in my relationships. I’ve been hurt way too many times to be reckless.”

“Well, I am very happy that it is working out for the two of you,” Stacy said. “I want nothing but happiness for you, Maia. You most certainly deserve it.”

“Thank you for saying that, Stacy,” Morrison said. “I want nothing but the best for you, too. You also have been going through so much with this whole ordeal that you deserve it as well. So, how are things with you and Daniel Stuart?”

“It’s been really amazing,” Stacy said. “We are planning on going out on another date tomorrow night. I can’t wait to see him again. I haven’t felt this happy with someone in a long time. We are constantly texting and calling each other. He seems to really get me. We have a real connection.”

“That’s fantastic!” Morrison replied. “Who knows? We might end up being the maid of honor at each other’s weddings in no time at this rate.”

“Yeah, you never know,” Stacy said. “We can keep dreaming. There is nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“I hate to bring this up, but I received a threatening text message from Alex Pratt,” Morrison said, then pulled out her phone and showed Stacy the text message he sent her. “He just won’t let up.”

“Oh, that bastard!” Stacy practically screamed. “How dare he? Can’t he just get over it already? I always knew there was something strange and twisted about him. You could just tell by the way he was always gawking at us as if we were his prey."

“Apparently not,” Morrison responded. “I was thinking since we are about to be going to rehearsals and perform in shows again that maybe we should learn how to defend ourselves. I mean, just in case. I figured Hugo could show us some self-defense moves and how to use a gun. We both should consider becoming gun owners so that we can carry around a concealed weapon in case we are attacked again. At least we would no longer be easy targets.”

“I can’t imagine us with guns,” Stacy said. “Guns scare me. But you are right; we need to be able to protect ourselves. We can’t be sitting ducks. Have you talked to Hugo about this yet?”

“No,” Morrison said. “I know he will be one hundred percent for it because he knows that he can’t always be there for us. I can’t see why he wouldn’t do it. He has always been so supportive of us.”

“You know, every day I spend with you is like an adventure,” Stacy said. “There’s rarely a dull moment. Especially right now. I’m sure one of these days we will look back on all of this and somehow find some humor in it.”

“You know it!” Morrison said. “Just leave it up to me to get us mixed up in this kind of crap. I will ask Hugo first thing tonight during dinner. I’ll text you to let you know what he thinks.”

“Soon, we’ll be a couple of crime fighters,” Stacy said. “Maybe someday we can open our own private investigation office.”

“Oh, gee!” Morrison replied. “That will be the day! After all of this is done, I will not ever want to get into that kind of business.”

Later that evening, as Morrison was setting up the table for dinner, she found the perfect opportunity to talk to Long about him teaching her and Stacy how to protect themselves. Just as he stuck the beef roast into the oven, Morrison cleared her throat. When she got his full attention, she began to speak.

“I’ve been thinking about mine and Stacy’s safety quite a bit lately,” Morrison told him. “You see, you won’t always be around when we are out and about. I figured maybe you could teach us some self-defense moves and how to use a gun so that we could protect ourselves when you are not around. It would be better for us not to be easy targets, especially after we both just got out of the hospital from being shot. We need to be able to fight back. Don’t you agree?”

“I think it is an excellent idea,” Long said. “I won’t mind teaching you both how to protect yourselves at all. I am not sure why I hadn’t thought about this myself. I want to do whatever it takes to keep you both safe. I think more women should learn how to protect themselves through martial arts and handling a gun. It is a dangerous world out there and it is important to be prepared for any dangerous scenario.”

“Thank you, Hugo,” Morrison said. “Both Stacy and I really appreciate it. She, too, agreed that it would be a good idea.”

“So, how is Stacy doing?” he asked. “I have not seen her in a long time.”

“She is doing great,” Morrison replied. “She and Daniel are going out on another date. They seem to be getting along well. Stacy told me she feels like there is a real connection between them. She also was excited when I told her that we were now living together, which didn’t surprise me one bit. Stacy has been trying to set me up with someone for quite some time and now she is hoping that things work out between the two of us.”

“That’s good,” Long said. “I can tell that Daniel really likes her. So, do you want me to set a time for you, Stacy, and I to meet so that I can show you a few defensive moves and how to use a gun? I could start teaching you both this week before you start rehearsals with the band next week. We can start off with meeting each other twice a week if you like.”

“That would be great,” Morrison said. “I’ll check with her on her availability, then we can take it from there.”

“That sounds good,” he said. “I am always happy to help. I don’t know how I would live if something were to happen to you again. Now, the part about her bringing us together is not necessary. I believe we will end up together naturally. Since you have moved in here with me, you have brought so much happiness into my life.”

“You are just too sweet,” Morrison said. “I would have to say you have brought happiness into my life as well. I am so lucky to have found you. And thank you so much for doing this for me. I can’t tell you how much it means to me.”

They both smiled at each other. Long stepped away from the kitchen to take Bear outside so he could run around the yard for a bit. Morrison stayed inside to help finish cooking dinner.

With her and Stacy getting trained on how to protect themselves, Morrison finally felt like she was doing something about it. She was tired of running and hiding. Morrison was ready to take a stand against the gang. She knew she couldn’t continue relying on the police and Long to protect them from Alex Pratt and his gang. Something had to be done, and now she was taking matters into her own hands.

If Pratt knew what was good for him, he would stay away from her and her loved ones. Sooner or later, he was going to lose, and it might as well be to her.

“Alex Pratt, be prepared to meet your match,” Morrison softly said to herself with a vengeful look on her face. “You don’t know who you are dealing with. I am going to get you one way or another.”

Chapter 19

Two days later, Morrison, Stacy, and Long all met at his house during the afternoon to go over self-defense moves. Long told them that he understood they were recovering from gunshot wounds, and he would discourage them from continuing during the day if they began to feel pain. He wanted them to take it easy until they were fully recovered. Stacy and Morrison were both resilient people, so they were completely up for the challenge.

Long started teaching them the technique of palm strikes and tiger claws, which were both basic moves in the martial arts. He knew under their condition, they would need to start with something simple. Striking your enemy with your palm would lower your risk of breaking your hand. Also, scratching your enemy across their face would be another safe and effective way to hurt them and allow yourself enough time to escape. Unfortunately, since they both were grazed by a bullet on one of their legs, they were not able to learn any kicks or run from their opponent. The next best thing for them to do was to use their elbows to hit their opponents. Long promised them that in a few weeks, after they recovered from their wounds, he would show them how to do front kicks, side kicks, and round kicks.

“This is so cool!” Stacy said. “I feel like I am in the movie *The Karate Kid* and I am about to get a lesson from Mr. Miyagi. Let me guess, we will be painting fences and washing cars as an introduction to the martial arts.”

“Not quite,” Long answered. “I follow a very much different method than Mr. Miyagi, but I can arrange for that to happen if you feel so inclined to.”

“That is okay,” Stacy said. “I think I will pass on that one. I am kind of relieved because I don’t want to feel like you are putting us to work. I want to get down to the good stuff as soon as possible.”

“I really appreciate your eagerness to learn,” Long said happily. “I think the both of you will be fast learners and will give it all that you got. If you are both available tomorrow evening, I can take you out to the shooting range to show you how to handle, load, and shoot a gun. Plus, I will show you how to aim at your target. For your safety, I will start you off with blank bullets.”

“This is really exciting,” Morrison said. “I have never shot a gun before. I feel like I am getting an adrenaline rush from all of this.”

“Neither have I,” Stacy added. “This is all very new to me. I have never learned any defense moves or shooting a gun.”

“Well, you got to start somewhere,” Long said. “I think it is almost essential for any woman to learn how to fend for themselves, especially during this day and age. I think it is great that you both are willing to learn and put in all the work.”

“I am very grateful to have this opportunity,” Morrison said. “I would love to have a new skill that will be useful for me in the future. However, I don’t think I will be carrying around a gun everywhere I go after all the bad guys are locked up behind bars. This is just a one-time thing for me.”

“Since we are all together, I figured we could have ourselves a little barbecue,” Long said. “I have enough meat in the freezer. I can make us a side or two. Maia and Stacy, if you want to make us some sides you are more than welcome. If there are any ingredients that you need, let me know and I will go out and buy them at the grocery store. It is only three blocks away. I planned on going to the grocery store later today anyway to pick up a few things.”

“That’s a lovely idea,” Stacy said. “I can make my grandma’s potato salad. That is always a real crowd-pleaser.”

“I will make a homemade apple pie,” Morrison said. “I can also make my Southwestern pasta salad. Stacy and I can go into the kitchen and see if we have everything that we need, then we will write you a list of ingredients that we don’t have. I can give you some money, Hugo, to help pay for everything.”

“That won’t be necessary,” he said. “This will be my treat! Stacy, you are more than welcome to invite Daniel over as well. Let’s consider it being a double date.”

“That is so sweet of you,” Stacy said. “I will give him a call right now. I know that he will want to come.”

As Stacy was in the middle of her call, Morrison headed over to the kitchen to figure out how many ingredients she might need to make her dessert and side. She browsed through Long’s food cabinets and refrigerator, then started writing out a list of food items needed. Just as she was about to finish, Stacy stepped into the kitchen. She, too, began writing out a list. They handed their lists to Long before he left the house to go to the grocery store.

Just as Long left the house, Stacy looked up at Morrison and smiled with a gleam in her eye. Morrison was well familiar with that look. It only meant one thing. Stacy wanted to get all the juicy details about her and Long. Morrison knew Stacy would try to pry more information from her.

“Oh, my gosh,” Stacy said. “You weren’t kidding when you said he was a sweet and generous guy. If I were you, I would really put myself out there. You mustn’t let this one go, Maia. He is a real keeper.”

“I have a really good feeling about this relationship,” Morrison admitted. "But I am going to refrain from throwing myself at him until I am one hundred percent sure that he is truly the one I have been looking for. There may be something hiding behind his smooth façade. Trust me, I have been fooled in the past before. So far, he seems to be a genuine guy. This all came as a huge surprise to me since he appeared to be so full of himself when I first met him.”

“Well, I am not going to tell you what to do in your relationships,” Stacy said. "But I know what I see. You are falling for him, Maia. I can tell just by your behavior, the way you talk about him, and the way you look at him. It’s pretty darn cute if you ask me.”

“That may be true,” Morrison said. “I figured it would be best to play it safe this time. I mean, there are a lot of other men in New York. If this one doesn’t work out, there are plenty of other men that I could date. The opportunities are unlimited in a city as big as New York.”

“Now *that* I can agree on,” Stacy replied. “But I have a good feeling about this one. He seems so perfect for you. Even though there are tons of men out there, there is only like a handful of them that are worth dating, and Hugo is one of them.”

They hushed up about it as soon as Long stepped into the house. Morrison walked up to him to see if he needed help carrying any of the groceries inside. He told her he had it all under control. They waited for him to put everything away before getting started on their side dishes and dessert. Long went outside to get the grill going.

While both Morrison and Long prepared the food in the kitchen, they would exchange quite a few glances and occasionally make prolonged eye contact. Stacy smiled at Morrison and gave her a wink as if she knew what was going on between them. Stacy gave Morrison a nudge and whispered, “Go up and talk to him” in her ear.

“Okay,” Morrison whispered back. “I sure hope I don’t say anything dumb.”

Morrison gradually walked up to Long while he was putting the rub on the brisket. She could tell he was really focused on what he was doing. She wasn’t sure how to approach him. Morrison then found herself nervously standing right beside him. She gently poked him on the back to get his attention before speaking.

“Wow, that looks and smells amazing,” she said. “You must grill often.”

“You know it,” he answered. “I am a master behind the grill. I take great pride in my barbecue. It’s so good it will make your mouth water. That is what I hear anyway from people.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” she said with a big smile on her face. “Now, I will have high expectations when tasting it. But judging by the smell and the way it looks, I know I won’t be disappointed.”

“I can’t wait to try your Southwestern pasta salad,” Long said. “I watched you stir in the ingredients earlier and it looked mighty delicious. Just thinking about how good this food is going to taste has been making me hungry.”

“I wanted to tell you that it is great what you are doing for me and Stacy,” Morrison said. “I know we are taking a great deal of your time away when you are teaching us how to defend ourselves. We really do appreciate it. You have been doing a great job instructing us.”

“You are welcome,” he replied. “I really don’t mind teaching you girls at all. It allows me the opportunity to spend more time with you, which I love. I am a much happier person whenever you are around.”

“That has to be one of the sweetest things that anyone has ever said to me,” she said. “Well, I am going to let you finish preparing to put the meat out on the grill. I got a pie to make.”

“Okay,” Long said. “It was good talking to you.”

“Yes,” Morrison said. “It was good talking to you, too!”

Morrison walked back to the pie pan that she had just put crust in. She could feel her cheeks burning. Morrison knew she was blushing. She began putting the apple filling onto the crust. She had hoped she didn’t make a big fool of herself in front of Long. Stacy walked over to her.

“You and Hugo are too cute together,” Stacy said. “You both have tons of chemistry and there’s definitely a spark between the two of you.”

“Stacy, you are just bound and determined to get us together,” Morrison said. “I know you all too well.”

“I just want to see you happy and settled with someone,” Stacy said. “What is so wrong with that?”

“Don’t you think I just want to figure that out on my own?” Morrison replied.

“You are right,” Stacy said. “I’ll just stand back and watch it all come together without interfering. I promise.”

“Thank you,” Morrison said.

Morrison then put the rest of the pastry on top of the pie before sticking it into the oven. The house was going to smell heavenly while the pie was baking. She wasn’t used to cooking for other people. Morrison hoped they would enjoy her food. They then could hear the doorbell go off. Stacy left the kitchen to answer it. She knew it was Daniel.

Daniel had indeed arrived for the barbecue. Morrison could hear Stacy and Daniel talking to each other. She watched as they teased one another. Long stepped up to them and told Daniel about him teaching them how to defend themselves. Daniel said he thought it was an excellent idea. Long then bragged about how well they were doing in his lessons. Daniel was stunned that Stacy was turning out to be quite the fighter.

About two hours later, they were indulging themselves with delicious homecooked food. Everything was cooked, grilled, and baked to perfection. It was a delectable feast. They also enjoyed plenty of friendly conversation. They couldn’t have picked a better day to eat outside on the patio. The sun was shining bright and there was a light breeze. Stacy noticed that Long and Morrison could not keep their eyes off the other as they sat next to each other. She also noticed how they would share a subtle touch here and there.

Morrison and Long thanked Stacy and Daniel for coming over and told her they would be seeing her again soon. Stacy thanked Long for having the idea to barbecue, and that everything was delicious.

“Well, that was a success,” he told Morrison. “Everything tasted so great, and everyone enjoyed themselves. I think we should do this again.”

“I would say so,” Morrison said. “It was such a good idea. I would love to have more gatherings with those two. Thank you for the wonderful suggestion.”

“Now that is all over, what are your plans now?” Long asked.

“I think I am going to take a nap,” she answered. “After eating all of that food, I am really tired from being so stuffed.”

“Yeah, me too!” he said. “I feel like taking one myself. If you want, we can have a pizza delivered to the house and watch movies tonight since we spent quite a bit of time cooking this afternoon. It would be nice just to unwind and take it easy.”

“That sounds good!” Morrison replied. “Well, I’ll see you a little after I finish taking my nap. We can then discuss what movies we are going to be watching.”

“Okay,” Long said. “Have a nice nap, Miss Maia Morrison.”

“You, too,” Morrison replied.

Both went upstairs and into their own bedrooms to take a nap. Morrison shut the door to her bedroom, then slipped under the covers. Her eyes slowly closed shut, and she drifted off to sleep. Morrison began to have a sweet dream of what it would be like if she and Long became a married couple. The idea made her smile. She imagined being held by him and kissing him tenderly on the lips. Morrison couldn’t hardly believe that he was just down the hallway from her room. She wondered why she wasn’t with him right now, especially after all that he had done for both her and her friend. Morrison knew she couldn’t think about him that way right now. It was way too soon.

She stopped thinking about it and went into a deep sleep. While she was sleeping, Long was having romantic thoughts about her, too. He was waiting for the right time to make his move.

*Sooner or later, I am going to have to make my move before it is too late,* he thought before getting a little shut-eye himself.

Chapter 20

Three days later, Hugo Long took Maia Morrison and Stacy Sullivan out to the shooting range. Long handed each one a shotgun, earmuffs, and shooting glasses. He thought it would be best for them to start with some dry firing practice, meaning shooting a firearm without any ammunition. He could tell the girls were nervous and had never handled a gun before. Their small, fragile hands were slightly shaking as they held their weapons.

Long taught them a shooting stance and how to grip a handgun. They followed his instructions carefully and were eager to please. He then taught them how to pull the trigger. Both women were really scared to pull the trigger because they didn’t know what to expect. Long told them to breathe naturally while shooting a gun and not be afraid. Long demonstrated what they must do before shooting the gun at their target. When he shot his firearm at the target, the two women looked at him in awe. Long told them to also study what all the other shooters at the range were doing and practice their stances and holding a gun at home.

“I want to make sure you are ready before letting you lose at the range for your safety,” he said. “Handling a gun is a big deal and is nothing to take lightly. We’ll go to the range a few more times for practice and to observe what the other shooters are doing before I will allow you to start shooting at the range yourselves. Your aim will get better over time once you get the hang of it.”

“Thank you, once again,” Stacy said. “I find this all to be very educational and useful. I will feel much safer now while walking the streets of the city because of your expertise and excellent instruction. I can hardly wait for the next lesson.”

“I’m glad to be of service,” Long replied. “Since tomorrow is your first rehearsal with the band, I will give you both a ride there and back to your homes to ensure your safety. Also, you both just started to learn how to protect yourselves and don’t have the techniques down just yet. With how well you are doing, it won’t take long for you to be able to defend yourselves well.”

“That makes me feel better,” Morrison said. "I have been feeling really nervous about going out on my own. Plus, after the last few times that I sang, bad things have happened.”

“Okay, I believe we are done here,” Long said. “Let’s get out of here and go home!”

“I second that motion,” Morrison said.

Long drove Stacy back home, then he and Morrison went straight back to his place. Things were still going wonderfully for them. There were sparks between them that they couldn’t deny. Long was supportive of Morrison and was her biggest cheerleader.

The night went on as usual. They would fix dinner together, watch a movie or a few shows, sometimes take a walk or run together, then go straight to bed. Morrison was okay with that arrangement. She had a big day tomorrow and needed to take it easy that night. Morrison needed her rest so she could be fully energized for the rehearsal. She had to be able to perform her best and show the band what she could do. It was important to her to make a good impression on her first day with her new band. She was sure Stacy felt the same way.

Before falling asleep, Morrison listened to all her favorite musical artists to get some inspiration for tomorrow. She then pulled out her notebook to jot down a few more lyrics for the song she was working on. It was just enough to wear her out. It helped her fall asleep after being overly excited about her debut with Ladies and a Guitar. She knew that Stacy was having her own trouble falling asleep from all the excitement.

The following morning, Morrison woke up in great spirits. She could hardly contain her excitement about being a lead singer again. Morrison always felt like she was born to be in the spotlight. She was hoping that one day, she would have her big break and she could be an inspiration for other singers trying to make it in the music business.

As usual, Long was the first person up and already fully energized. He was busy in the kitchen making breakfast and had just made a fresh pot of coffee. Morrison placed a pancake and some scrambled eggs onto her plate and poured some coffee into a mug. Long was an excellent cook and knew his way around the kitchen well. Everything he had made her so far was delicious. Morrison smiled after taking her first bite of pancake because she knew it was going to be a good day.

After breakfast, he drove both her and Stacy over to their first rehearsal. Stacy and Morrison were in good spirits and talked nonstop all the way over there. Long listened to them carefully and at times laughed at some of their jokes while focusing on the traffic.

As he pulled up the front of Sheryl Heart’s house and came to a complete stop, they got out of the car in good spirits. He smiled, shouted out their names to get their attention, then waved at them when they turned toward his direction to see what he had to say to them.

“Have a wonderful day, girls,” he told them before driving off.

“You, too,” they both told him as they waved back at him.

They giggled some more at a joke that Stacy had said earlier as they walked over to the door, then rang the doorbell to Heart’s house. They stopped giggling as soon as Sheryl answered the door and welcomed them in. Morrison and Stacy gleefully went inside.

“Hey, look who is here!” Sheryl shouted out to the rest of the band members who were in the living room. “It’s our two new shining stars that are going to take us straight up to the top.”

“We hope so, anyway,” Morrison said. “We’ll do what we can to help the band reach superstardom.”

Sheryl led all the band members down to the basement for rehearsal. Morrison could see the instruments set up the way they were when Stacy and she had been there to audition for the band. Morrison stood near the microphone while the band members got into position.

“We made sheet music for you and Stacy to follow,” Sheryl said. “You will have to learn all our songs. Once you memorize the songs and can perform them, we can start scheduling shows again. Maia, I know you are a songwriter. Don’t be afraid to share your songs with us. We are always wanting fresh new songs. We want to stay hip and be always ahead of the game.”

“So, have you been working on anything lately?” keyboardist Patricia Wolf asked.

“I have just started writing a new song,” Morrison said. "It’s nowhere near to being done yet.”

“What is it called?” rhythm guitarist Violet Hodges chimed in.

“I have not settled on a name yet, but if I had a guess, it would be ‘Just You and Your Old Ways,’” Morrison replied. “I’m trying to go for a slow rock song, but I haven’t quite figured out the sound of it. It really is a work in progress, but once I have it finished, I will let you know.”

“Well, when you are ready, we would love to hear it,” Sheryl said. “We really do appreciate songwriters and what they can contribute to the band. Keep it up! In fact, we all loved your song ‘Hellraiser’ that you performed during the audition. We want to add it to the show if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not; I would love to sing it with your band,” Morrison replied. “Stacy and I can teach you it with no problem. I think we can turn it into something awesome with your collaboration.”

“Well, now that we are all here and ready to go, I think we should start rehearsal by playing the song ‘Red Hot Loving,’” Sheryl said. “It’s the first song on top of your sheet music. Just listen carefully and sing along with it the best that you can the first few times. We will follow the songs in your sheet music in the order that it is.”

“You ready to rock out, the amazing Maia Morrison and Stacy Sullivan!” Violet screamed out.

“I am always ready to perform!” Morrison said enthusiastically. “Just play me a note and I light up like a firecracker.”

“Hell yeah!” Stacy screamed. “Let’s do this!”

The rich, versatile sound from Stacy’s electric guitar filled the air while Morrison did her best to sing along to the lyrics on the sheet music. It was a bit of a rough start, but it was their first time having to go through the music. Everyone was having a good time jamming out. Morrison was feeling that high she got from singing again. She danced along to the beat of the drums. The moment was truly magical.

After they had gone through all the songs, Morrison and Stacy were feeling good with their performance for the first day. All the band members complimented them on their skills, which made them very happy. The band did everything they could to make them feel welcome. All their worries about joining the new band had gone away. Right away, they felt like they were at home with the band and that they were officially members.

“You all did an amazing job today,” Sheryl told the band members. “Maia and Stacy, welcome to Ladies and a Guitar!”

The band members clapped for Maia and Stacy, who bowed to the band to show appreciation for their support.

“Okay, I have us booked in a few weeks to play at the Edge,” Sheryl announced. “I trust that you all will be ready by then. Continue practicing and getting familiar with our songs, Maia and Stacy. Plus, get plenty of rest. I know you are rockers and like to stay out and party late at night, but I need you to be focused and fully energized for the upcoming show. I’ll see you all again this coming Friday for our next rehearsal.”

Many members walked over to them to chitchat afterward. Morrison could tell they were eager to get to know them and make them part of the group. Morrison and Stacy both agreed that the first day was a complete success and that they were already fitting in with the group well.

Everyone left the rehearsal pumped up for the upcoming show. The band hadn’t performed for almost three months, so the band members were in need of making more money and couldn’t wait to introduce Morrison and Stacy to their fans. They knew they were going to love them.

Morrison and Stacy spotted Long parked along the side of the street, waiting for them. Long smiled at them as they walked over to his car. He was blaring a Def Leppard song in his car. It was obvious that he was an ’80s hairband lover.

“So, how was your first day?” he asked them as they got inside the car.

“It was awesome!” Stacy said. “Everyone was so friendly and supportive. I really like the songs we played as well.”

“Yeah, it was pretty great,” Morrison said. “I think we will make a good fit for the band. Our next rehearsal is on Friday at the same time. I can hardly wait for it. Today’s rehearsal was so much fun, and I really enjoyed getting to know our new bandmates. I think they are just as excited as we are about us being part of the band.”

“I got that impression, too,” Stacy said. “At the end of rehearsal, they gave us a standing ovation. It was amazing.”

“Here’s the best part,” Morrison said. "We will get to put on a show in a couple of weeks at the Edge. Stacy and I are going to be busy learning all their songs for the show.”

“I am glad to hear that,” Long responded. “I cannot wait to see the band in action. You will have to let me know what time and day so I can be sure to have it down on my calendar.”

“Sure thing,” Morrison said. “I know this is changing the subject, but are we going to the shooting range tomorrow? I have been practicing handling that shotgun that you gave me, and I can hardly wait for the next lesson.”

“We can meet tomorrow evening after I get off from work if you like,” he said. “That is if you both are available. We’ll see then if you both are ready to shoot off real bullets.”

They both sporadically told him they were, so Long stated that he would take them. Morrison wanted to make sure they had at least one more day of practice at the shooting range before the big show so they could be prepared.

“You know it wouldn’t be a bad idea to get some more self-defense practice in either since we are going to be performing in front of a large audience here soon,” Morrison said. “I mean, who knows who might show up? Alex Pratt could be there waiting for us. I swear there is nothing more that I want to do than kick his ass.”

“Yeah, me too,” Stacy said. “That man gives me the creeps. He’s been creeping me out since day one. I always knew there was something wrong with him. He was always standing there in the front of the stage staring at us like a hawk. Alex had that menacing look to him. You could tell right off the bat that he was thinking awful things about what he wanted to do to us.”

“Of course, I will make more time for you to prepare to defend yourselves before your show,” Long said. “You must remember that I, too, will be in the audience keeping an eye out for anyone who appears suspicious. Also, I will contact law enforcement so there will be more security at the venue.”

“That is good to know,” Morrison said. “I feel a little bit better about performing in front of an audience now. Won’t Alex Pratt be surprised after he finds out we have learned a few tricks of our own?”

“Me, too,” Stacy said. “Although, I am still a little paranoid about going out on the stage and being up in front of a bunch of people. I feel like we are still taking a huge risk.”

“You will be in good hands,” Long replied. “Trust me. I will see to it that you are both well protected.”

Chapter 21

After three weeks of working on their defense moves and practicing shooting a gun, Stacy and Morrison were starting to feel like they were getting the hang of it. It was good timing because their first show with Ladies and a Guitar was tomorrow night. They had no idea what to expect. Morrison had not received any new threats during the past few days, so they had a hunch that Alex Pratt might have a surprise attack in mind.

The band was starting to sound impressive. Morrison knew they were going to wow the crowd. She and Stacy had been practicing together, playing and singing the band’s songs every other day in Long’s attic while he was away at work. Both felt like they had memorized most of the band’s songs. Morrison was too busy practicing the band’s songs that she could not find the time to finish writing her new song. She and Stacy decided to take the night off from practicing so they could be fully energized for the show tomorrow evening.

Morrison did not know how she could get any sleep with all the excitement going on. Not only was she excited for her first show as the lead singer for Ladies and a Guitar, but she was also incredibly nervous about any attempts to murder her by Alex Pratt and his gang. With the tight security at the Edge, she did not see how it would be possible for him to get inside the venue. But anything is possible, so she had to be always extra alert. There was still a chance he might successfully shoot his way into the venue or be waiting for her outside of the building to sneak up on her. Long told her she must not let it get to her too much or else she might scare herself out of performing.

Later in the day, she noticed there was an unread message on her phone. Morrison reluctantly checked her text messages. She knew it might have been another threatening message from Alex Pratt the day before the show. Morrison should have known she was not out of the woods yet. He already knew about it because of all the flyers that were hung up all over the city. There was no way he could have not recognized her face, since she was front and center and her name on the poster was in big and bold letters.

When she read it, it was just as she had expected. It was Pratt sending her a message in a timely manner as usual. He typed it all in red capital letters this time!

It said: *PREPARE TO DIE, MAIA MORRISON! YOU WILL NOT GET AWAY THIS TIME!!!*

Morrison quickly took the phone over to Long so he could see it. He was not surprised by it at all. Pratt was still following the same pattern as the previous murders, so Long expected something like this from him.

“You need to call the police chief and tell him about this,” Long told her. “He will send fifty officers to the Edge immediately. Of course, we all expected this would happen by now. There has been a clear pattern of the timing of the messages and attacks since a gunshot at the Groove killed the first singer.”

Morrison contacted Police Chief Joe Harvey immediately to let him know about the threatening message. This was the moment that they all had been waiting for. It was time to take a stand and end this finally. Harvey stopped by Long’s house to see the message and to leave bulletproof vests for the entire band as a safety precaution. They knew if Pratt snuck into the venue, he would be aiming toward the stage at Morrison. The band members behind her would be at an elevated risk of being a target by the shooter, too.

“Thanks for stopping by, Police Chief Joe Harvey,” Long told him. “We really do appreciate all your help in this matter.”

“And thanks for keeping Maia safe,” Harvey told Long. “You are an important asset to the police station. You have helped us solve dozens of cases in the past.”

“I just want to do my part in keeping New York City safe and to see that justice is served,” Long said. “I have a deep admiration for law enforcement. So many have laid their lives down to make sure citizens can resume their lives without living in fear. Someone must make sure everyone is obeying the laws around here or else it would be complete chaos.”

“Stick around this guy, Maia,” Harvey told her. “Hugo is quite the investigator, and he is a very trustworthy man with a big heart. He will see to it that you will be safe throughout all of this. I promise you that. Hugo has never let us down.”

“I know he does,” Morrison replied. “Hugo has been a huge help for both Stacy and I in more ways than you will ever know. He really is a truly great guy and has been kind enough to allow me to stay at his place until I can afford to get a place of my own.”

“Well, duty calls,” the police chief said as he headed out. “I will see you folks later. Good luck tomorrow, Maia. I am sure everything will turn out all right!”

“Thanks,” she said. “See you later, and be careful out there!”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about me, Miss Morrison,” Harvey told her. “I would be more concerned about yours and Stacy’s safety. But it is kind of you to be concerned about me.”

Morrison and Long waved and smiled goodbye to the police chief as he headed outside. Morrison noticed that she had captured Hugo Long’s eye. He smiled, and his whole face glowed. She smiled back at him because he made her feel safe and secure. Somehow, she knew it was going to be all right. They had spent so much time preparing for a situation like the one they were about to face during the concert that they felt like they had it all under control.

Morrison called Stacy to let her know about what just happened so that she would know what they were going to be up against tomorrow night. After they chatted for a while, Morrison decided it was an appropriate time to rest up by relaxing in front of the television and sipping on some warm herbal tea while curled up with a delightful book. Bear curled right up beside her. She stroked his little head as it rested on her upper thigh.

“There is nothing to be worried about,” Long told Morrison during the evening while they ate dinner. “You are going to be safe, and you and the band are going to kick ass tomorrow during the show. Like the police chief said, I will not let you down. Your safety matters to me so much because I love you too much to let anything happen to you.”

Morrison felt baffled but, at the same time, relieved. She, too, was harboring romantic feelings for Long. Morrison was not prepared to hear those three words from Long. She sat speechless while Long was waiting for a reply from her. Morrison knew she must say something. She couldn’t continue keeping her feelings to herself. Since Long had poured his heart out to her, he had the right to know.

“Hugo, these past few weeks with you have been amazing,” Morrison said. “I admit I have tender feelings for you, and I admire you immensely, but I cannot tell you that I love you just yet. I need more time to determine whether I do. Like I said before, I do not want to rush things.”

“I understand,” he told her. “I will wait as long as it takes for you. I know what I want, but I will respect your decision and allow you more time to think about it.”

And just like that, Long had pulled at her heartstrings and left her feeling completely enamored with him.

“Thank you,” she said. “I knew you would understand. You are a truly kind and caring person. That is why I trust you wholeheartedly.”

“I am happy to hear that,” Long replied. “I just hope this doesn’t make things too awkward between us. I don’t want it to ruin our friendship. But deep down, Maia, I want so much more.”

“I don’t think it will,” she said. “In fact, I think it might bring us a little closer to each other. You must admit we have been through a whole lot together. It is possible that we can remain friends, but if that becomes a problem, just let me know. I would hate to see one of us get our heart broken.”

“That is true,” he said. “I hope being friends will not become problematic if one of us has strong feelings for the other. If it ever gets to the point that I cannot manage it, I will let you know.”

“Okay, I am glad that we had this conversation,” Morrison replied. “I hope that we can continue being open with each other about our feelings. The more open we are about our feelings, the more we can trust each other.”

“I would really like that, too,” Long said. “I cannot continue hiding my true feelings for you. Sometimes, I get the urge to want to express those feelings to you and make sure you know. I also want to know exactly what you are thinking and feeling as well. I don’t want you to ever be scared to confront me and talk about sensitive topics such as this one.”

“And I want you to know that it is okay for you to come up to me and talk about your feelings and what you are thinking as well,” Morrison said.

“Good,” he said. “I am glad we are on the same page.”

“Well, I am pretty tired right now,” Morrison said. "I think I will clean up the kitchen some and load up the dishwasher before heading upstairs to get myself a good night’s rest. I guess I will see you in the morning then.”

“I can help you out if you would like,” Long said. “I mean, it is no trouble at all. You are my guest, after all. I should be taking care of you.”

“That won’t be necessary,” she said. “You have helped enough. You just sit here and relax while I do the rest.”

“Okay,” he said. “If you say so.”

Morrison quickly got up from her seat, took all the dishes from the table to rinse off in the sink, and put them in the dishwasher. She also partially cleaned off the pans and placed them in there as well before turning it on. Morrison wiped down the counters and the table.

She went upstairs and quickly put on her pajamas before sliding under the covers. Morrison was both excited and scared about the show tomorrow. To ease her mind, she turned on some soothing music to listen to through her earbuds. Morrison was interrupted by the sound of knocking on the door. She rose from the bed to see what Long wanted.

As she opened the door, he surprised her when he wrapped his arms around her and began passionately kissing her. She could not resist his warm, moist lips. Morrison began to kiss him hungrily back. She knew she needed him desperately. Morrison pulled him into the bedroom. Long lifted her up and carried her to the bed where they would make love to one another.

Morrison felt warm and safe in his arms as they lay entangled in each other’s bodies. He ran his hand through her hair while she caressed his chest. He then kissed her forehead, which made Morrison’s heart flutter. He made her feel things that she had never felt before.

“That was amazing,” Long whispered in her ear. “That was the best lovemaking that I have ever had. I really felt like we connected.”

“It was wonderful,” she said softly. “I never thought that I would feel that way again. I just thought this kind of romance was in the movies, but this has felt so real that I can honestly say that I believe in true love again.”

“I’ve been waiting to touch you for so long, Maia,” he said. “You could not understand how desperately I have wanted you. You are so beautiful, talented, and kindhearted with an incredible personality. I yearn for you.”

“You say the most beautiful things,” Morrison said. “You are just too irresistible. I really should get tons of sleep now. I have a big day tomorrow.”

“Alright,” Long said. “Goodnight, beautiful.”

“Goodnight, my love,” she said.

They kissed, then fell asleep in each other’s arms. Morrison smiled. She felt exceedingly happy, and all her troubles just magically disappeared at that moment.

Chapter 22

With showtime being less than four hours away, Morrison was feeling jittery now. She planned to wear something flashy and glamorous for her debut. Morrison picked out a pair of black sequin bell-bottoms, a one-shoulder crop top with a snakeskin pattern on it, and red high heels. Long told her she was going to look “hot as hell” up on that stage tonight.

Long was disappointed in the band for refusing to wear bulletproof vests when he was doing everything in his power to keep them safe. Band members complained that they would look tacky and that fans were expecting them to look sizzling hot up on the stage. They did not want to disappoint their fans or possibly frighten them when they noticed the vests. He knew there was no way of convincing them otherwise, so he just shrugged and let them have their way. Long also realized that even with a bulletproof vest, it would not stop someone from shooting them in the head, so there was no true way to keep them a hundred percent safe if the killer started shooting bullets at them anyway.

Sheryl Heart told all the band members to meet at the Edge two hours before the show started during the last rehearsal so they could warm up, dress in their performance clothing, put on makeup, and fix up their hair. Heart said the stage would already be set up, and lighting and sound should be ready for the show.

“Maia, are you about ready to go pick up Stacy?” Long asked. “We can wait a little longer. There’s no rush. I just was not sure if you needed to be at the venue a little earlier to do hair and makeup.”

“Yeah, I am ready to go get her,” Morrison answered. “I am sure she is eager to go. I can see her pacing back and forth in the living room and checking the window every few minutes to see if we have pulled up in her driveway yet. She is such an excitable person.”

She quickly grabbed her duffle bag that contained the outfit that she would wear during the show. Morrison then followed him out the door. It was only a fifteen-minute drive from Long’s house to Stacy’s house, so there was no need for them to hurry. They had about forty minutes left to get to the Edge. That would give them plenty of time to warm up.

As soon as Long pulled up into her driveway, Stacy excitedly came out of the house, already wearing what she was going to be wearing during the show. Stacy had on a pair of leopard skin printed tights and a sexy silver glitter strappy tank top with black high heels. Morrison could not see how she would be comfortable wearing the high heels for an extended period.

“Damn, girl!” Morrison said. “You look good! I love those leopard skin printed tights you are wearing.”

“Why aren’t you wearing your outfit yet?” Stacy asked her.

“I thought I would wait until we got into the dressing room to put it on at the Edge,” Morrison answered. “I didn’t want to mess it up or wrinkle it. I also wanted to be comfortable for a little longer before slipping on my high heels. I will tell you that my outfit will be a real crowd-pleaser.”

“Are you nervous about tonight?” Stacy asked Morrison.

“You know, I don’t think I am,” Morrison answered. “I actually feel ready to go up on stage and give it all that I got. I feel like I know all the songs by heart now, and we have played with the band long enough that I know we will sound great together.”

“I have both of your handguns, plus ammunition in case you need them,” Long said. “I will hide them behind the drum set. Do not worry, I have already told Sheryl about this. If someone were to shoot at you tonight, you can dive on the floor next to the drum set and pull out your guns to shoot back if you need to. I also brought the bulletproof vest if you change your minds. They will be placed next to the stage. I am not saying you will need them. This is just a safety precaution.”

“Thanks for doing all of that,” Morrison said. “You really do go above and beyond! It’s nice to know that we have someone looking out for us.”

“Just promise me that you won’t do anything dumb,” Long said. “And I mean it. I don’t want either of you going up there and trying to be a hero. I know you have been trained to protect yourselves, but don’t purposely put yourself in the middle of gunfire. If you shoot a gun, please be sure you are taking cover while doing it or if someone is coming up to you with a gun. Also, don’t use defensive moves unless you absolutely need to.”

“I will try my best,” Morrison replied. “I will be so petrified that I might not be able to think clearly. But I understand what you are saying. I will only shoot if it is necessary.”

“Me, too,” Stacy said. “Although, I cannot make any promises. I will only fight if it is necessary or if they come after my friend over here. If they do so, I will give them hell!”

They pulled up into the Edge parking lot in the back of the building. Long pulled out his gun and told them to wait in the vehicle while he searched the area to ensure no one was lurking about the premises. He came back to the vehicle and told them it was safe for them to come out but to have their handguns on them just in case.

“Three people with a gun is better than just one person with a gun,” Long remarked. “If you know what I mean. Like they say, it is better to be safe than sorry. Also, be sure to keep a close eye out for anyone who appears to be suspicious. There is no telling what Alex Pratt has in store for us tonight.”

Right when they got up to the door, Long told them to stay behind him as he went inside first. They held their guns as Long took the lead. Morrison and Stacy looked at one another as they waited patiently for Long to tell them to come in. Long came back and gave them a signal that indicated it was safe to come inside. Morrison thought it was ridiculous to go through this much trouble just to go inside a building, but she knew it was for the better. They walked slowly toward the dressing room, where the rest of the band members were waiting for the rehearsal before the show.

“Hey, Stacy and Maia!” Patricia shouted. “You made it. Are you psyched for your very first show with the band? I just know you two are going to do great!”

“Of course we are!” Stacy said while giving her a high five. “Both of us live and breathe for the music.”

“Alright, rock on!” Violet said as she eased herself onto the soft, comfortable chair. “This show is going to be epic!”

“Alright, gather around, people!” Sheryl said. “Everyone is here and accounted for. They have finished sound-checking the instruments now, so that means we can head up towards the stage to start practicing before the big show.”

Long took the guns away from Maia and Stacy to carry up to the stage and place behind the drum set. He told them he would be sitting in his seat in front of the stage, watching them practice. The band members then followed Heart as she led them to the stage.

“There will be a warmup band for this show,” Heart told them. “I will give you the cue when it is time for us to go up on stage. I want to start the show with Maia’s song ‘Hellraiser’ as an introduction to the new lead singer. Plus, it is a great song to start off with because it is upbeat and edgy, and Maia sounds great when she sings it. It will really pull the audience in. Here is the order of the songs that we are playing.”

Heart handed out a sheet of paper that had the list of songs in order so that they could arrange their sheet music in the correct order. They then walked over to their instruments while Maia grabbed the microphone. Maia looked out at the seats in front of the stage and noticed Long sitting front and center, smiling at her. The band then began to play, and Morrison sang to her heart’s content. She strutted across the stage as she sang, danced to the beat, and headbanged. Stacy put on quite the show herself by dancing beside Morrison as she played the guitar. At the end of the song, Long stood up, clapping and cheering them on.

“Thank you!” Morrison said on the microphone. “Now, we will be playing one of my personal favorites, ‘Red Hot Loving.’”

“Woohoo!” Long shouted out. “That’s my girl!”

Morrison smiled and pointed at him while giving him a wink.

They continued to play through their twelve songs before heading back to the dressing room to dress in the clothes they would be performing in and put on makeup for the show. Long could not wait for the actual show to start.

After everyone finished putting on their attire, fixing up their hair, and putting on makeup, they looked like a glam rock band. Everyone was either wearing leather, animal prints, glitter, rhinestones, sequins, or a combination of them. They could hear the warmup band Smoking Gun playing. Sheryl came in to inform them that they would be on in fifteen minutes. Stacy, Maia, and Violet were dancing along with the music to help them get into performance mode.

When the band stopped playing, Sheryl told them it was time to head to the stage. The warmup band members passed them by and wished them good luck.

“Are you ready for Ladies and a Guitar?” the radio deejay asked the crowd. The crowd then went wild. A minute later, the deejay shouted, “It is now time for the one and only Ladies and a Guitar!” before stepping off the stage.

“Okay, we’re up,” Sheryl said. “Let’s do this!”

The lights went dim as they got up on the stage. When all the band members were in place, the stage lit up again. The spotlight was now shining on Morrison. She smiled and pointed to the crowd before taking the microphone.

“Hello, New York City!” Morrison shouted out. “Are you ready to rock?”

The crowd cheered hysterically as they got up out of their seats. They could hardly contain their excitement.

“Well, alright then,” Morrison replied. “You know, I really like your enthusiasm. The louder and more dancing we see out in the crowd, the more you wind us up and get us to want to go! So how many of you are out there from New York City?”

The crowd cheered even louder. Morrison smiled, nodded her head, and rubbed her chin to show the crowd she understood that many of them were from New York City. She smiled, then walked over toward the crowd to give a few fans a high five.

“We are going to kick it all off with the song ‘Hellraiser,' which I wrote,” Morrison said. “I hope you all like this one as much as I do. All right, here we go!”

The band then began to play. The crowd continued to roar. Morrison began singing while she pumped up the crowd with her headbanging, dancing, strutting around the stage, and interacting with the crowd. She gave the performance all that she had.

*You think you are all that.*

*You are messing with my brain, leaving me with a strain. Thoughts are spinning around like a hurricane.*

*Yet, I take the blame. I hope you go down into a flame. Down, down you go into hell where I’ll be raising hell. I will be raging with anger and put you into a lather.*

*Because I am a hellraiser. You hear me! I’m a hellraiser.*

*I am not your mother, so why don’t you go find another.*

*Your lies are pathetic. I’m tired of your antics.*

*I’m going to shoot you down. Down to the depths of hell.*

*Just you wait.*

*Because I am a hellraiser. You hear me! I’m a hellraiser.*

Just as she was feeling the vibe, Morrison became distracted when she heard an unusual banging sound from outside; it sounded like gunshots. She suddenly had a sinking feeling. Morrison knew something bad was about to happen. She gave Stacy a worrisome look. Stacy understood what she was trying to tell her. They immediately got closer to the drum set. They both looked down at the two handguns to make sure they were still there.

And just like that, gunshots rang out from the crowd. All the band members dropped their instruments and scampered off the stage to take cover. Audience members screamed in fright and got down to hide behind the seats. Stacy and Morrison dived down to the floor and grabbed the guns behind the drums. They then shot back at the intruder standing in the middle aisle. They ran off to the side of the stage. Long jumped up from behind a seat and shot at the intruder’s shoulder and leg. The shooter groaned in agony and wobbled closer to the stage. Morrison jumped out onto the stage and shot the intruder right in the head. The shooter then fell to the floor, leaving a puddle of blood. Long ran up to the shooter. To his surprise, it was not Alex Pratt. It had to have been a member of Pratt’s gang.

Morrison was extremely agitated when she found out it was not Pratt. That meant he was still out lurking about. Law enforcement came running into the venue to check on the audience members to see if everyone was okay. Paramedics arrived shortly afterward.

“Did the person shoot anyone on the outside of the venue to get inside?” Morrison shouted.

“He shot a couple of security officers and the ticket taker!” Long shouted back. “Two are in critical condition and one received non-life-threatening injuries!”

“That son of a bitch!” Morrison screamed. “I am so ready to get this shit over with! I dare Alex Pratt to show his face to me. I am going to get that bastard!”

She stormed off to the dressing room to check on the other band members. Morrison was relieved to find that they were all left unharmed. She then told them she was sorry for having put them through all of this. They were clearly frightened and sobbed while trying to comfort each other.

“I think I am going to need some fresh air,” Morrison told them. “I will be back in about five minutes. If I am not back by then, have a police officer come out and check on me. Hopefully, it will not come to that. Well, wish me good luck as I attempt to go outside on my own.”

Morrison made sure she had her gun with her as she headed out the back door of the venue. She took deep breaths as she stood out under the moonlight and gazed at the stars. Not even the beautiful night sky could calm her. Morrison felt full of anger. She had hoped someone would get Alex Pratt that night.

“I know you are out there, Alex Pratt!” she yelled. “Why don’t you just come out and get me already, you coward!”

Morrison then heard footsteps from a distance, to her astonishment. She could see a dark figure standing still next to the dumpster. She became frightened as the dark figure stepped out into the light shining from the streetlight. Just as she saw who it was, it came as no surprise to her, and in a sense, she was relieved because she was ready to get it all over with. It was time for her to end this once and for all.

“So, you are not scared of me?” the creepy voice said. “If I was you, I would be trying to run for your life right now.”

“No, I am not, you bastard,” Morrison replied. “I have been waiting for you to show your face, Alex Pratt, this whole night. You coward! You must have other people do all the dirty work for you. Now, come out here and finish what you started. I am ready to get this over with!”

“Maia, you have always been a scared little slut,” Pratt said. “It ends here, tonight! You will go down just like all the rest of the singers I killed.”

“I am not afraid to stand up to you,” she told him. “I have come here prepared. It is you that should be very afraid.”

“Nonsense!” he shouted. “You could never defeat me. I am much too strong.”

“Just watch me!” Morrison shouted back. “And by the way, I have a little surprise for you.”

Morrison then pointed her handgun at him. Pratt stood back in shock.

“You don’t have the courage to pull the trigger,” he taunted her. “I bet you don’t even know how to operate a gun. I dare you to shoot me. Come on, Maia, shoot!”

Just as she was about to pull the trigger, he jumped out at her and attempted to grab the gun from her. She quickly shot out a front kick at him, then struck him with a tiger claw, which is a martial arts technique in which you strike at your opponent’s neck with your hands.

Pratt suddenly felt overwhelmed and out of his league. Just as Morrison caught him off guard, she shot him in the leg and foot so it would make it impossible for him to escape from the police. The police heard the gunshots, then ran out of the building to see what the commotion was about.

“There’s your suspect, right there!” Morrison called out to them. “I got him right where I want him! Arrest him, boys!”

Alex Pratt began limping away from the police but knew it would be pointless. The police had no trouble surrounding him and capturing him. They handcuffed him and took him to a police car immediately so he would not get away. Pratt tried to put up a struggle but was too weak for the police.

“You will not get away with this, you little bitch!” Pratt screamed out to Morrison just before he got inside the police car.

“Oh, sure!” she yelled back. “Tell it to the judge! Enjoy spending the rest of your life in prison, you creep!”

Police Chief Joe Harvey asked her how she was able to take on Pratt and where she learned her shooting skills.

“Oh, Hugo taught both me and Stacy a few tricks,” she responded. “I was not about to make myself an easy target for that bastard and his cronies. At last, justice can be served.”

“I think you just may have a future in law enforcement,” Harvey teased her. “You seem to have a real knack for fighting criminals.”

“I think I am done fighting criminals,” Morrison replied. “I just want to be a singer, and that is all.”

Long came out minutes later and hugged Morrison. He then kissed her on the lips. Long, himself, was amazed by Morrison’s ability to fend for herself. Long could not have been prouder of her. He could tell she still had a lot of fight left in her.

“I knew you had it in you,” he told her. “You have some serious fighting skills. However, let me say you did have an excellent mentor to show you all the ropes. No one could have taught you any better.”

“That is true,” she said. “He was an amazing teacher.”

“Boy am I ready to call it a night,” Stacy said as she approached them. “I have taken as much excitement as I can take for one evening.”

“Me, too,” Morrison said. “Let’s get out of here!”

Chapter 23

Morrison was about to start a new chapter in her life. There was nobody else she would want to share it with more than Mr. Hugo Long. Morrison knew that Long was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with shortly after she moved in with him. Soon, she would be Mrs. Hugo Long. Now, she had to pick out the perfect wedding dress for the occasion.

Morrison stepped out of the dressing room in a wedding dress fit for a princess. It was a regal A-line gown with sequined lace appliques and a cathedral train. The dress was of a champagne color and had puffed sleeves. It would for sure put a gleam in someone’s eye.

“That’s the dress,” Stacy said. “You look so beautiful in it, and it is enchanting. It is like something you read about in a fairy tale book. Hugo will not be able to take his eyes off you!”

“Oh, my gosh!” Morrison said. “I absolutely love it. I look and even feel like a princess in it. This is the wedding dress that I’ve always imagined myself wearing on the day that I married my prince charming!”

Morrison could not help but look in the mirror at herself in the beautiful wedding dress. She admired every little detail of it. She could not believe this was the dress that she would be wearing when she would start her new life as Mrs. Long. Morrison could not wait to see Long’s expression when he would see her in it. She was going to look stunning in it, and she just knew she was going to take his breath away.

She went back into the dressing room and changed into her regular clothes. This would be her last major purchase for the wedding. Morrison took the dress to the counter and paid for it. Stacy was incredibly happy for Morrison, and she knew marrying Long was the right decision for her. Stacy knew it was time for her friend to settle down, and no one else would be more perfect than Long for Morrison to spend the rest of her life with. Stacy and Daniel Stuart had been married for a little over a year now, and she could not be happier.

The wedding was now less than a month away and would take place in May. Morrison and Long wanted a simple wedding in a church and the wedding reception to be in Central Park to allow plenty of space for kids to run around in and to have a spectacular view of the city skyline in the background. Morrison could not wait for the moment to come. They already felt like a complete unit when together. Every ounce of her told her that Long was her soulmate and that she must not let this opportunity pass her by. A gazillion women would die to have someone like Long in their lives. Morrison absolutely could not let him be with anybody else. That was not going to happen. Not on her watch.

“So, you got the dress,” Stacy said. “Now what?”

“That is it for wedding stuff,” Morrison said. “Everything from the flower arrangements to the location has already been set and paid for. All we have to do now is sit back and wait for the big day. If you want, we can go out to Katz’s Delicatessen for lunch. I could go for a light and healthy lunch. I need to watch my figure for the wedding day, especially if I am going to be wearing a bikini during the honeymoon.”

“That sounds good,” Stacy replied. “Besides, I got to watch my figure as well. The band has that photo shoot on Monday, so I want to look good for the cover of our new album.”

“Who knew Ladies and a Guitar would become quite the sensation?” Morrison said. “Can you believe we were just on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine? It really is like a dream come true. I guess we really did get what we always wanted: fame and success, plus a man of our dreams to top it all off.”

“Yeah, we have come a long way since our days at the Groove,” Stacy replied. “We just shot up like a bullet on the music charts, and our fan base has grown phenomenally.”

“There is not a day that I can go out on the city streets of New York without hearing someone yell out that they want my autograph,” Morrison said. “Oh, the life of being a rock star! However, it is nice to finally be up on top of the music charts.”

“You make it sound like it is a bad thing,” Stacy said. “I thought this was what you always wanted.”

“It is,” Morrison said with a smile. “It is just ever so exhausting, and there is so much pressure that comes along with all the money and success. I feel like we always have to stay relevant in the world by constantly changing up our routine and the way we look.”

“Well, you will get a nice long break during your honeymoon in a few weeks,” Stacy said. “You can relax then and take in as much sun as you can while lying out on the beach. I know you too well, though. You will bounce back into the busy routine in no time.”

“You are right about that,” Morrison said. “It is just who I am, I guess. I like to keep myself busy, so I feel like I am getting much accomplished. You know, life cannot get better than this.”

“I can agree with you on that,” Stacy said. “We just seem to have gotten everything that we ever wanted, plus more.”

“We are so lucky,” Morrison said. “We have the type of lives that most people can only dream of. I really should not complain about it at all.”

“Yes, we are extremely lucky,” Stacy replied. “We have so much to be thankful for. There are people in this world struggling to make enough money to get by, but we have everything that we could ever want and need. We must not be ungrateful for that privilege.”

“You are right,” Morrison replied. “I don’t know what the hell I was thinking. I remember what it was like starting from the bottom. We are in a business that is extremely hard to make it in. So many people try yet fail to get where we are.”

Morrison was so relieved to get home later that day and find her future husband mowing the front lawn. Bear was running around chasing a butterfly. She finally felt like she was at home and that she was where she belonged. Long was perfect for her in every way. They really did complement each other.

Morrison headed toward her studio on the second floor of their New York mansion. She had to finish working on the perfect love song to perform at their wedding reception. Morrison would have Ladies and a Guitar playing the music as she sang to her soon-to-be beloved husband up on the stage. It would be a wonderful touch to the celebration. Long had no idea that she was doing it and thought it would be a lovely surprise.

She nearly jumped out of her seat when Long came into the room and said something to her because she was in deep concentration. Morrison was afraid Long had discovered her little surprise for him.

“Hey, sweetie!” he said. “It is such a lovely day out. Would you like to go out for a walk with me?”

“Sure,” she said. “Just let me finish up a few things, then I will be more than happy to go on a stroll with you. I have been a little tense with the wedding preparations, so I could use a bit of fresh air.”

“Sounds good, darling,” he replied. “I will be waiting outside on the front porch for you.”

“Okay, sweetheart,” she said.

Just as expected, the walk was the perfect ticket to relieve her from the stress she had been feeling from becoming a superstar to planning a wedding. Long always seemed to know just what she needed to relax. It was one of the many things that she loved about him.

Everything was going so well that the next few weeks seemed to have just flown by. They were so busy with planning the wedding and working. Both were ready to take a couple of weeks off for the honeymoon. Morrison asked Long if he was nervous about the big day. He told her he was not and could not wait to be married to her.

Their family members and friends started arriving for the wedding a couple of days before the big day. Everyone who had a role in the wedding was instructed on what they would be doing during the ceremony. The rehearsal dinner was a blast. The company was great, and the food was delicious. It was so exciting seeing how both Morrison’s and Long’s family members were getting along and how they naturally seemed to blend.

Morrison’s parents really took a liking to Long and his family. Her mother told her that he was a genuinely nice young man and that she was happy for them. Long and her father were very much alike in so many ways, so Morrison could not see how they would not get along. They were endlessly chattering away at the wedding rehearsal. After seeing how well her parents and Long got along, Morrison was completely convinced that she had found a keeper.

On the day of the wedding, the attendees had dressed in their finest clothing as they patiently waited for the wedding to start. The bridesmaids walked down the aisle in blushing pink-colored sheath/column V-neck sweep train chiffon dresses with leg slits down the aisle.

When it was Morrison’s turn to walk down the aisle with her father, she could hear about a dozen of the guests in awe at her dress and the way she looked. Morrison carried a lovely array of white- and blush-colored roses that were accented with gold foliage. She looked onward happily with a proud look on her face. Not far away, she could see the dashing-looking Hugo Long dressed in a Calvin Klein charcoal gray performance wool tuxedo. He looked taken away by her beauty as she walked toward him. It was the perfect fairy tale wedding that she had always dreamed of.

This was by far the happiest day of her life. She tried her best to keep her composure as she stood in front of the priest. Morrison tried to focus on saying her wedding vows. She was so nervous that she was afraid she would recite the lines wrong or would not be able to speak right. Morrison looked up into Long’s eyes, and everything seemed to be all right again. It was the way he looked at her that put her at ease.

Her heart leaped with joy as soon as the priest said, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride!”

They smiled and didn’t shy away from giving each other a deep, passionate kiss that lingered in front of the audience. Everyone clapped joyously as they stepped away from the podium and walked down the aisle for the first time as husband and wife.

Everyone was ready to get the party started after the ceremony. The newly wedded couple was greeted by an exuberant crowd who was throwing rice at them as they cheered wildly for them. Mr. and Mrs. Hugo Long laughed as they tried to brush off all the rice before entering the limousine.

“Well, we did it!” Morrison said. “We are now a married couple. How does it feel to be a married man?”

“It feels great,” Long said enthusiastically. “And I would do it all over again to show you just how much I love you. There is not a single woman that can make me happy as you do, Mrs. Long!”

“Where are you all going for the honeymoon?” the limousine driver asked.

“We are heading to Bora Bora first thing after the reception,” Long answered.

“I’ve heard good things about that place,” the driver said. “I’m sure you will have a wonderful time there, and the sights will be beautiful.”

“Well, sweetheart, I guess we have to go to this reception now when all I really want to do is get you alone so I can have you all to myself,” Long said. “I guess that would be awfully selfish of me, though, since everyone is counting on us to be there.”

“Don’t you worry,” Morrison said. “We will have plenty of time for that in Bora Bora. We must not let everyone down. Our family members and friends are eagerly waiting for our arrival so they can help ring in the celebration. We must make them happy and give them the satisfaction that they so deserve.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s just that I love you so much and that I have waited for so long for this moment.”

“Me, too!” she said. “It won’t hurt to wait a little longer.”

They kissed all the way to the reception. They found pure bliss in Bora Bora where they spent most of the time cuddling and going on lots of adventures deep into the tropical rainforest and scuba diving in the crystal blue sea.

They forgot all about the troubles of the past and lived the rest of their lives in harmony. A few years later, they became parents of three kids: one boy and two girls. Maia Long had tremendous success as a singer, so Morrison could go into early retirement without having any worry about a shortage of finances. She loved being a stay-at-home parent. Long, too, retired. They spent several years of their lives traveling, having family over for cookouts, and attending their kids’ events—and they lived happily ever after!