

T R I N A M . L E E



WICKED
IN THE
SHADOWS



H A L E S Y N D I C A T E
B O O K T W O

WICKED IN THE SHADOWS

HALE SYNDICATE BOOK TWO



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CHAPTER ONE

MAVEN



“Don’t do this, Wolfe. You need more time to calm down and think it through. You barely slept last night. There’s no way you’re in the right headspace to talk to Maddox.” My pleas lacked the power to change his mind. He was a Hale. Stubbornness was in his blood.

Jaw fixed into a hard line, Wolfe shook his head and hit the gas pedal, making the Mustang’s engine growl. “I can’t rest until I look him in the eye and hear what he has to say about everything. I need to know if he’s responsible.”

I turned around in my seat to meet Ace’s thoughtful blue gaze. He offered me a sympathetic smile and shrugged. His eyes were red rimmed. We were all tired, having had little sleep since last night. The incident at the nightclub Wolfe and Ace owned had left us all shaken. Unfortunately, Wolfe was convinced that Maddox had something to do with it.

After the authorities arrived on the scene, we’d spent several hours answering questions. Of course everyone there had some link to the crime world and nobody was saying more than necessary. It wasn’t as if the police were able to do a damn thing about any of it.

By the time we got back to the hotel where Wolfe had been staying while his house was repaired, he'd been a wreck. Despite my efforts to calm him, he'd paced the suite until the wee hours of the morning, finally falling into a fitful sleep that didn't last nearly long enough. The moment his eyes had opened, he'd been on the warpath, ready to confront Maddox.

"He's not responsible," I insisted, adjusting the messy bun atop my head. "I know he's not. Mads would never do that to you. I refuse to believe otherwise."

"I wish I could be so certain. It's just too strange that you saw a man with Hale ink moments before the first explosion. I don't like it." Wolfe's hands tightened on the steering wheel.

I didn't like it either. Still, it didn't prove anything. I'd mulled the events of the previous night over and come to the same conclusion every time. Donovan Archer was behind this, pulling strings to turn the Hales on each other. We'd hit him hard by intercepting and stealing a large shipment of narcotics. Of course he was hitting back.

"We all have Hale ink too," Ace said. When Wolfe shot him a glare through the rearview mirror, he raised both hands in surrender. "Don't take my head off. Just making a point. The ink doesn't prove anything. We need more evidence than that."

Ace's hands up gesture flashed the Hale ink he bore. The gothic letter H with a cobra wrapped around it in the shape of an S was nestled among the numerous images that made up his full arm sleeve. He made a fair point. A tattoo proved nothing.

“Maddox knew about the party,” Wolfe continued, unwilling to be swayed. “He sent a man in to plant those explosives. Not only has he shaken people’s faith in us, he’s put Shifty’s out of business for several weeks at least. I’m already living in a goddamn hotel. What else could possibly go wrong?”

I flinched as a pang of guilt slammed through my chest. “I’m sorry, Wolfe. This is all because of me. Maybe I shouldn’t have come back. Your lives would be a lot simpler.”

There was no denying the truth. Coming home had upset the new balance the guys had formed in my absence. Not only had I brought trouble home with me, it had set off a domino effect with our long time rivals. We’d managed to chase the Crimson Thorns back to their own city, for now, but our biggest battle with the Archer Syndicate had just begun.

“No, Maven, don’t say that,” Wolfe admonished, reaching for my hand. “None of this is on you. I’m happy you’re back. Fucking ecstatic really. Don’t blame yourself for anything Maddox or Archer does. They’re both grown ass men acting like jackasses.”

“Hell no, Bright Eyes,” Ace jumped in, his hand warm on my shoulder. “We need you here. Never think otherwise. We’re a fucking mess without you.”

Their enthusiastic responses brought me a shred of comfort, although I couldn’t help but wonder if returning to River City meant starting a war between the men I most loved. As we drew closer to the Hale house, my stomach began to twist. The coffee I’d chugged upon waking wasn’t sitting so well.

“You guys are cute. I appreciate your attempts to make me feel better, but you can’t deny that it’s been one thing after another since I got back.”

“It had to happen eventually.” Ace gently rubbed my shoulder. “Your return got the ball rolling on things that should have happened long ago. The reality of it all is that we’ve been in limbo since you left. Stuck in an endless loop, never getting ahead in this city. With you home, we have a real chance at bringing Archer down.”

“Only if Maddox gets his head out of his ass and learns to be a team player again,” Wolfe muttered, slowing the car as we turned down a street lined with large houses hidden behind high walls and gated driveways.

I gave his hand a squeeze. “I know he didn’t issue the attack on your nightclub. Try to keep a level head in there, okay? I can’t force the two of you to be civil but it kills me to see the animosity between you guys. It’s not supposed to be that way.”

“That I agree with,” Ace said, eyeing Wolfe. “No weapons. Leave anything you’re carrying in the car.”

We pulled up to the gated driveway of the Hale house and rolled to a stop. Wolfe’s hazel gaze traveled over each of us. “You know as well as I do, Butterfly, that putting seven years of bad blood to rest doesn’t happen overnight. Maddox has to put in the work too. I’m not sure I can ever trust him again. Not after what happened to you.”

Wolfe’s feelings were valid. I didn’t trust Maddox yet either. I struggled constantly, torn between forgiveness and forgetting. They weren’t one and the same. As hard as I tried

to forgive Maddox for the night Archer's men almost killed me, I would never forget.

It took a minute for the gate to swing open. I glanced at the camera mounted above the gate, wondering who had let us in. My mind wandered to the message I'd received this morning. One of my apartment applications had been approved. It was available immediately. I dreaded the thought of telling Maddox that I was officially packing up my meager things and leaving.

He'd begged me to stay, but I'd named my terms. I wanted all four of them to be the Kings to my Queen. This city was ours, but we had to claim it, and we had to do it together. Maddox thought it was too late for that. He was wrong.

Two of Maddox's security people stood at the top of the driveway, eyeing us with thinly veiled suspicion as we parked and got out of the car. They each had a visible gun on their hip. We'd come unarmed. I'd made sure of it myself, although I did have a small blade tucked into my sock beneath the pant leg of my jeans. If the Hales wanted a piece of each other, they could throw fists. They wouldn't be killing each other on my watch.

Wary of letting Wolfe go first, I quickened my pace, leading the way up the front walk to the door. With Maddox's men standing watch, I knocked and let myself in. The heavy aroma of bacon greeted me. If I hadn't been so damn nervous, it would have made me hungry.

Maddox appeared in the front entry, a spatula in one hand. His black hair stood up in bedhead tufts, and his eyes were wide. "Holy shit, Vixen. I just heard about what

happened last night. I tried calling your phone. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. We all are. My phone must still be on silent. There were casualties though.”

He checked me over for injuries before turning his attention to Wolfe and Ace who stood behind me in the doorway. “Thanks for bringing her back safely. Sorry to hear about your nightclub. That’s rough.”

“Speaking of our nightclub, we’d like to come in and talk to you about it, if that’s okay.” Wolfe wasn’t asking. He shoved into the front entry, making it loud and clear that he wasn’t leaving until he’d said his piece.

Maddox’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah, sure. We can talk in the kitchen. I have to get back to my bacon.”

I followed Maddox down the hall into the large open concept living room and kitchen. I turned back to flash Wolfe a pleading look, silently begging him not to turn this into a confrontation. He responded with a brittle smile that did nothing to reassure me.

A frying pan filled with bacon sat on one burner, sizzling away. A pancake cooked in a pan on another burner. Maddox busied himself with flipping the pancake. Ruthless was nowhere to be seen. Probably downstairs in his cave.

“Help yourselves to coffee or whatever,” Maddox said, sipping from a mug of steaming brew. “Then hurry up and accuse me of attacking your club. That’s what you came here for, isn’t it, Wolfe?”

My heart dropped. The brothers knew each other so well. Tension fell over the atmosphere, making it hard to breathe. Maybe that was just me. I gripped the kitchen island counter hard enough to make my fingertips numb as I braced for all hell to break loose.

Wolfe didn't beat around the bush. He took a seat on a stool at the island, regarding Maddox with a pensive expression. "Yes. Can you really blame me for thinking it though?"

Maddox prodded a strip of bacon with the spatula before slowly turning to face his brother. "Fucking rights I can. I'm your goddamn blood. As much as I'd like to knock your cocky ass out on a regular basis, I'd never put you in real danger. And with Maven there too? What kind of a monster do you think I am?"

I glanced at Ace. He lingered near the counter next to Wolfe, ready to jump in if needed despite the arm sling he still wore to keep his injured shoulder steady. If the two of them went at it, he'd never be able to split them up. My fingers twitched at the thought of pulling my knife on them. I'd do whatever it took to keep them apart.

"I don't think you're a monster," Wolfe replied, his voice calm but icy cool. "But you haven't been making the best decisions for some time now, Mads. Since Maven came back, you've been worse than usual. Add in the fact that one of your men was seen right before the first explosion and it looks pretty suspicious, don't you think?"

"Why in the fuck would I waste time and energy on your nightclub? If I attacked anyone like that, it would be Archer."

Maddox angrily dumped the pancake onto a plate stacked with several and turned off the burner. “Which one of my men was there? I need names and faces because I did not issue a hit on your club. Believe me or don’t. I really don’t give a shit.”

Wolfe looked to me for an answer. I awkwardly cleared my throat and said, “I didn’t recognize him. He had your ink though. He was in a rush, and he bumped into me. Dark hair and eyes. I’d recognize him if I saw a photo.”

Maddox’s dark blue gaze landed on me. He absently plucked a strip of bacon from the pan, taking a bite. “You saw the guy?”

“Only for a few seconds. He had Hale ink on his arm. I know that doesn’t mean he did it, but he seemed so frantic. It was suspicious.” I held his searching stare as he studied me. I’d never crumpled beneath Maddox’s piercing gaze. I wasn’t about to start now.

“Do you think I’m behind it?” he asked, seeming to care more about my opinion than anything else.

Trusting my gut, I shook my head. “No, I don’t. Unfortunately, it looks that way. We need to track down that man and find out what he knows.”

Relief flitted across Maddox’s face. “Thanks, Vixen. At least someone doesn’t think I’m a total piece of shit.”

Wolfe scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Are you kidding me? My business got hit and you find a way to make it about you? You’re so fucking self-centered. You are not the victim here, Maddox.”

My pulse quickened as my gaze darted between them. The animosity between them racked me with worry and guilt. This would never have happened if I hadn't left. There was no changing the past. That didn't mean I couldn't change the future. Although if these two didn't stop with the sibling rivalry bullshit, I may have to lock them in a room together until they got it all out of their systems.

"I guess I'm supposed to stand here and listen to you go on about what a garbage human I am after accusing me of hitting your club. It's nice to know what you really think of me. I knew you had a grudge because of what happened with Maven but I didn't think you completely hated me." Turning his back on Wolfe, Maddox placed the bacon on a plate next to the pancakes. His shoulders were rigid, his motions jerky from barely suppressed anger.

"I don't hate you," Wolfe snarled, his temper rising. "I also don't trust you. I know what you're capable of."

In a snap of rage, Maddox whirled around and slammed the spatula against the countertop. "Obviously you don't if you think I'd come at you like that. I'm your goddamn brother, Wolfe. I would never turn on you that way, but I'm starting to think that you'd turn on me in a heartbeat since you're so willing to believe it."

Maddox's voice had risen to a shout which brought Ruthless out of the basement. He rounded the corner from the hallway and paused, taking in the scene. Then he sauntered over, moving to having Maddox's back if the shit really hit the fan. He glanced at me, his expression hard and unreadable.

“Turn on you?” Wolfe scoffed, struggling to get the words out in his fury. “I’ve been watching your back this entire time, bailing you out more times than you know, little brother. Spare me the temper tantrum.”

The two of them glared daggers into one another. A vein in Maddox’s temple throbbed, his fingers tightly wrapped around the handle of the spatula. I half expected him to take a swing at Wolfe. Although he portrayed a calm and composed front, Wolfe was seconds from grabbing his brother by the throat and shaking him. I saw it in the way his jaw twitched and his eyes narrowed dangerously.

Ace turned off the burner Maddox had left on and raised a hand. “Let’s take a moment to calm down. We can discuss this like rational adults.”

“What are we discussing?” Ruthless piped up, fetching a mug from the cupboard. He stuck it under the spout of the one cup coffee maker and popped a coffee cartridge into the machine.

“Wolfe thinks we orchestrated the attack on his nightclub last night.” Disgust dripped from Maddox’s tone. Shoving away from the island, he put the spatula in the dishwasher. At least it was no longer a potential weapon.

Ruthless let out a bark of grim laughter. “Why the hell would we want to do that? Kind of like kicking over a kid’s sandcastle, isn’t it? That would be bullying someone who can’t fight back. It’s not our style.”

His assessment brought a scowl to Wolfe’s face. The older Hale stiffened, his back ramrod straight as he popped his knuckles. “You think we can’t fight back?”

The smirk that spread across Ruthless's rugged face was downright deadly. In a black t-shirt that showed off his heavily inked arms, the simple motion of stirring cream and sugar into his mug was far hotter than something so mundane ever should have been.

"I think you know better than that," Ruthless said, raising the anger levels in the room to the breaking point with that statement.

Wolfe's temper got the best of him. He rose from the stool and turned around to viciously kick it across the room. It crashed into a bookshelf near the piano in the living room, knocking several books and decorative pieces to the floor.

"We're done here," he hissed. "Come on, Ace. Let's go before I do something I'll regret. I'll call you, Butterfly. Let me know if you need help moving into your new place."

Wolfe paused to kiss me on the forehead before he stormed out of the house. I cringed as he spilled the news I had yet to share with Maddox. Shit.

Ace shot me an apologetic wince. He pulled me into a brief hug and whispered, "I'll calm him down. Are you okay here?"

When I nodded, he followed Wolfe out. Ruthless poured gasoline on the fire by calling after him. "Keep an eye on him, Ace. Wouldn't want him doing something reckless and stupid."

Unable to let that one slide, Ace lingered long enough to say, "I'm not too worried. I'm not the one backing the Hale most likely to do that shit."

Then he was gone. The silence that followed felt heavy and morose. Watching the conflict grow among the four of them cut deep. If they continued on this path, it would lead to an all-out war. It both worried and angered me. How could they keep this shit up after everything we'd been through?

Being back was still difficult for me. At least once a day I flirted with the idea of taking off again. But I'd promised not to leave again, and I meant that. I'd endure the hard days and the trauma that remained because this was my home and my city. I wanted to fight for it, and they wanted to fight each other.

I opened my mouth to ask Maddox what his problem was but he cut me off.

“New place?” he asked, a brow arched. “Care to explain?”

I sighed, wishing I had more time to figure out how to tell him. “Yeah, I guess we should talk about that.”

CHAPTER TWO

MAVEN



“Honestly, I can’t believe Maddox let you leave. I thought he’d handcuff you to his bed for sure. Mind if I open this? It’s getting hot in here.” Rumer unlocked the sliding patio door to the balcony, waiting for my nod before opening it to let the breeze inside.

I stared around the small apartment, feeling a bittersweet sense of victory. “He took it better than I thought he would. But not really though. He pretty much shut down, which is never a good sign with Mads.”

When Maddox failed to react to a situation that would normally have him pitching a fit, it meant he was in an unpredictable state. Not that he was known for his predictability but his calm acceptance when I’d announced my intent to move out hadn’t been a good thing. I’d braced for a fight and instead been met with a stone wall.

He was so stone cold that I’d stayed with Rumer for the past few days until my place was ready. The delivery guys from the store had just dropped off the bed and couch that I’d bought. The two of us were putting things away and getting organized. Not that I had much to organize. Enough dishes for one person plus a small mountain of canned cat food for

Akasha. The little black and white cutie peered out the screen door to the balcony, watching a butterfly flit about on the other side.

“Do you think he’s going to do something crazy?” Rumer asked, plopping down on the new couch. She ran a hand over the blue microfiber fabric. “Should I be prepared to babysit your cat again when Maddox whisks you away to his giant house in the hills?”

“That won’t be happening,” I insisted. Flipping my ponytail off my shoulder, I went to the kitchen and fetched a cold beer for each of us. We’d crossed from balmy spring temperatures into the hot days of summer as we neared the end of June.

Rumer accepted the beer I handed her with a grateful smile. She took a long swig from the bottle and sighed. “That hits the spot. You seriously need to get air conditioning in here. So what’s really the problem anyway? You want them to work things out so the five of you can resume your previous group shenanigans and they don’t want that? I’m surprised.”

“I ordered an air conditioner. It will be here tomorrow.” I plopped down on the couch next to her, swiping a hand over my sweaty forehead. “For the record, we never had any group shenanigans. Not like what you’re thinking. I’ve only been with Maddox and Wolfe.”

“At the same time?” She wiggled her brows mischievously.

“Yes but not for a very long time now. The five of us were a group though. We were a team, and we were amazing together. We should be running this city now.” I stared out the

balcony window at the neighboring apartment building across the parking lot. Not the greatest view but it would do.

I couldn't help but miss the days when the Hales loved me together without issue. Now they couldn't make it through a conversation without the threat of violence. How would we take back our city if those two wouldn't get their heads out of their asses?

Rumer gave me a playful shove. "Stop being so bleak with the mafia queen drama. Tell me about your kinky threesomes. Dish the dirty details, girl."

I rolled my eyes and chugged my beer until the bubbles burned my chest. "What do you want me to say? That being the middle of a Hale brother sandwich is fucking amazing? Because it was. Best nights of my life... so far."

"Not enough details." Rumer shook her head, making her blonde ponytail swing. "Did they take turns, or was there some double penetration action going on? Hey, that's what you need to do. Get the two of them in bed with you again. That will force them to get on common ground fast."

She may have a point there. Although I couldn't simply seduce the two of them into bed and hope for the best. They needed to trust one another again.

"I wish it was that easy. The answer to your question is all of the above. Now stop talking about them. It stresses me out." I waved a hand at Rumer. "What about you? Who's your latest boy toy? Have you seen Rush since the night at Shifty's?"

Turning the conversation around on her took the focus off me and my past sexual exploits. Her cheeks turned red, and she scraped the edge of the label on her beer bottle with a long pink fingernail.

“I have his number, but I haven’t contacted him yet. He’s a really nice guy and so good looking. I’m just not sure he’s my type.” She shrugged it off, making it out to be no big deal.

I frowned, confused. “You mean because he’s not an immature douchebag? I don’t understand your aversion to nice guys, Rumer. Do you have daddy issues or something?”

A grin quirked my lips, and I braced for the punch she threw at my shoulder. “Ew, Mave, that’s fucked up. Don’t say shit like that. Who are you to talk anyway? Since when do you go for nice guys?”

I pretended to think about it. “Well, Ace is a pretty nice guy. Wolfe can be nice, although he is a little broody.”

“Yeah, just a little.” Rumer finished her beer and rose, returning to the kitchen. She opened the near empty fridge and groaned. “You desperately need groceries. Should we order in? What are you in the mood for?”

A knock at the door stopped me from answering. That was strange. I wasn’t expecting anyone. Maybe it was a neighbor coming to welcome me into the building.

Because I trusted no one, I slid the knife from the leather garter belt holding it strapped to my thigh over my leggings as I approached the door. I peered through the peephole, releasing the breath I’d held. Sliding the knife back into the sheath, I

unlocked and opened the door. Maddox stood in the hallway holding a bottle of wine in one hand and a bag of Chinese food in the other.

“I brought a little housewarming gift,” he said with an awkward shrug. “I hope that’s okay.”

The steely resolve this man always incited within me melted away. I stepped back to let him inside. “How did you get past the doorman?”

Even though it had cost more than I’d like to pay, I’d chosen a building with a doorman for a little extra security. Couldn’t be too careful in a city where Donovan Archer held power.

Maddox flashed me a smug smile as he placed the things he carried on the small kitchen counter. “You’re kidding, right? That guy wasn’t going to take the risk of telling me no.” His gaze traveled around the apartment, his nose wrinkling at the small one bedroom unit. “Nice place. The whole thing could fit in my bedroom. Hey, Rumer. How’s it going?”

“Very funny,” I muttered.

“Can’t complain. I was just on my way out.” Rumer rose and gathered her purse, ensuring her phone was inside. She carefully ignored the pointed look I shot her. “Be careful, big brother. She’s got a knife.”

“Duly noted,” Maddox said with a nod. He dug through the nearly bare cupboards, finding the few drinking glasses that I’d acquired. Black flames climbed out of the t-shirt he wore, licking up the side of his neck. I was struck with the sudden urge to sink my teeth into his inked flesh.

Her silly childhood nickname for him hit me like a fist to the sternum. It momentarily stole my breath to hear Rumer call him that so easily, leading me to believe she'd never stopped in my absence. A lump formed in my throat. I knew it would be hard for Maddox and me to work through our history, but I wanted to try. For all of us.

After giving Akasha a few affectionate pats, Rumer headed for the door, calling back that she'd talk to me later. She didn't give me a chance to stop her as she left me alone with Maddox. Jerkass.

"Here." Maddox handed me a glass half filled with white wine. "No wine glasses but I guess this will do. Let's toast your new apartment. Care to make a wager on how long it takes before you're back under my roof? We both know you're only doing this to make a point."

Cocky as ever, Maddox clinked his glass against mine and took a drink. My face morphed into a mask of disapproval. I shoved past him and set my glass on the counter before digging into the bags of food.

"Check your ego, Mads. I'm doing this because I need a place of my own to get my head on straight. You need to do the same without me around all the time." I dished a small mountain of chicken fried rice onto a plate and pointed at him with the spoon. "You know my terms. They haven't changed. All or nothing, babe."

His gaze was heavy upon me as I opened the container of ginger beef. He'd gotten far too used to bossing people around in the time I'd been away. That shit didn't fly with me.

I could feel him assessing me, deciding how far he wanted to push me this time.

“Are you still on that?” With a dramatic sigh, Maddox ambled over, joining me at the counter. “We’ve been over this. It’s not going to happen. In case you didn’t notice, Wolfe and Ace think I hit their nightclub. They don’t want to play nice with me, and frankly, I’m not interested either.”

His flippant tone made me stiffen as my lips pressed into a tight thin line. “Maybe you all need to grow up a little. Seems like there’s been some regression over the years. I think it’s bullshit. Someone has to make the first move towards peace. The four of you can’t keep this up forever. I won’t wait that long.”

Maddox pried the lid off a container of chicken balls, side eyeing me as he dumped a few onto a plate. “Seven years of bad blood doesn’t just go away, Vixen. It’s not that simple.”

Somehow I refrained from grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking the shit out of him. Why did he have to be so damn stubborn? I sucked in a slow breath, willing myself to stay calm.

“Seven doesn’t have to become eight,” I said, my voice strained with tightly reined emotion. “I know we can’t go back to the way things were, and I don’t even want that. But bonds like the five of us shared don’t break, even when they hurt like hell. We either work through our issues and find our strength together or we watch Archer rule this city after he successfully takes down you and Wolfe. There are no other options. It’s already begun.”

I took my plate laden with Chinese food and sat on the couch in the living room. I didn't have a table yet. Maddox's pensive gaze followed. He finished piling food on his plate before joining me. Instead of responding right away, he silently ate while staring out the patio window.

Nothing about the division between the Hale brothers was natural or right. They'd been so tight, trusting one another implicitly. They'd shared everything, even me. Only now instead of being a link between them, I was driving them apart.

Maddox's actions had led us to this place, but we couldn't stay here. It was time for Wolfe and me to stop punishing him for a mistake I knew he deeply regretted. I wouldn't pretend the trauma of that night didn't still haunt me. Every now and then I woke up drenched in sweat after reliving it in my nightmares. It was time for healing, for all of us.

"You really think that Archer is trying to turn Wolfe and me against each other?" Maddox asked, quiet and thoughtful.

"Of course he is. We hit him hard, and he's pissed." I took a crunchy bite of a spring roll, mulling it over as I chewed. "I think me being back in town is making him desperate to keep you guys apart. If you and Ruthless were to combine forces with Wolfe and Ace, you'd have no problem taking Archer down, and he knows it. It only makes sense that he'd find a way to make sure that never happens."

Maddox clicked the tips of his chopsticks together as he considered this before absently stuffing a bite of noodles into his mouth. "Makes sense. I'd do the same if I were him. Although I'd have done a lot more than a basic nightclub attack."

“Maybe he’s just getting started,” I suggested, dipping a chicken ball into plum sauce. “Or maybe he’s counting on Wolfe being pissed off enough to hit back at you. That’s all it would take to start an ongoing war.”

Maddox’s brows rose, and he paused with another bite of noodles halfway to his mouth. “Do you think Wolfe is going to retaliate? I didn’t hit his club, Maven. I fucking swear it. I would never lie to you.”

I nodded, rushing to reassure him. “I know that. I believe you. Really. I’d like to think that Wolfe wouldn’t do anything crazy but it’s been a long time. I don’t really know anymore.”

“That makes two of us.” Maddox set his plate on the small TV table beside the couch. He scrubbed both hands over his face and sighed. “I really hope he doesn’t pull a stupid move because I’ll be forced to come after him. I can’t sit back and let anyone take shots at my business. Not even Wolfe.”

A tremor rippled down my spine. My appetite immediately died. I passed Maddox my plate, and he set it down on the table next to his. He was right. He’d have to defend his syndicate. Unfortunately, Wolfe was likely feeling the exact same way. I needed to see him, to make sure he wouldn’t make any decisions out of anger.

“Then we can’t let it get to that point,” I said, mind racing as I searched for a way to avoid a war between the only men I’d ever loved. “We have to find the man I saw that night at Shifty’s. The guy with the Hale tattoo. He knows something.”

Maddox tossed back the rest of his wine and went to the kitchen to fetch the bottle, drinking straight from that instead. Tugging his phone from his jeans pocket, he thumbed around on the screen for a minute.

“Here. Look through these photos and tell me if you recognize him.” He handed me the phone as he sat back down on the couch, much closer this time.

Our thighs touched as I accepted the device. I’d missed out on these little things for so long that I couldn’t help but focus on the warmth of him next to me. His spicy cologne tempted me to bury my face in his neck and breathe him in. I resisted, preferring to savor this small, simple touch.

I scrolled through the images on Maddox’s phone, scanning faces quickly as I searched for the man I’d seen. It didn’t surprise me that he had his people documented in an easy to access file. The head of a syndicate couldn’t be too careful.

Maddox leaned in close, propping his chin on my shoulder as he watched me scroll. It was far too easy to fall into old habits. Before I realized what I was doing I reached up to touch his face, cupping his cheek as I stared at the phone. It just came so naturally. Funny to think that just over a week ago I’d held a knife to his throat while we fucked. Our relationship never had been conventional.

Suddenly a familiar face scrolled by. I stopped and scrolled back up, studying the man on the screen. “This is him. I’m sure of it.”

Mads plucked the phone from my hand, staring at the image of a man with short dark hair and a goatee. “His name is

Murray. He's been with the syndicate a few years now. Never had any problems with him."

"I could be wrong but I think Archer got to him." I reached to pet Akasha as she rubbed against my leg. She peered at Maddox with open suspicion.

"Let's go find out." He stood up quickly, sending Akasha skittering away. "I'll call Ruthless and tell him to meet us."

"You want me to come?" I rose and ran a hand over my messy ponytail.

"Yeah, I need you to confirm that it's him." Maddox's sly blue gaze slid over me. "You want to be queen of the city, right? Let's go grill one of your subjects. Bring your blades."

He had a point. I wanted to get to the bottom of this before it spiraled out of control.

"Fine. Give me five minutes to change and brush my hair."

CHAPTER THREE

MADDOX



“You’re sure he’s on the clock tonight? All right. Meet me there in twenty.” I ended the call with Ruthless and tucked my phone into the console. Then I started the engine of my BMW and peeled away from Maven’s building.

I glanced over at her in the passenger seat. Her long black locks tumbled over her shoulders, falling to hide her face as she bent over to adjust the knife strapped to her ankle. A second blade was in a sheath on her hip. Her third was strapped to her forearm. Maven didn’t bother to hide them since we weren’t trying to go unseen tonight.

“Murray is working security at the nightclub Ruthless and I own. Ruthless will meet us there. Ready for some blood and torture?” I smirked, a trickle of excitement spilling through my veins. No part of me enjoyed finding out that one of my people was a traitor. I would, however, enjoy making him sorry for it.

Maven caught me staring at her and pointed a finger straight ahead. “Eyes on the road, bud. No gawking. I want to get there in one piece. Don’t be too torture happy. We need to get answers from him.”

“Oh, we’ll definitely get answers from him,” I chuckled. “I have ways of making him talk.”

My fingers tightened on the wheel as I rounded a corner and accelerated. I couldn’t help the thrill that shot through me at the thought of forcing Murray to spill his guts. Maybe literally depending on how things went. The closer I drew to our nightclub, The Hole, the more adrenaline flooded me in preparation.

“We need to get his confession for Wolfe,” Maven said, staring out the passenger window at the water below as we entered the bridge that crossed the river. “I want it on video.”

I noticed the way she touched the knife sheath hanging from her hip, running a finger over the leather as if it brought her comfort. It probably did. It meant a lot to Maven that we clear up this misunderstanding with Wolfe and Ace. More than it meant to me.

Her desperation for us to work out our shit hit like a kick to the nuts. All I wanted was to make her happy, but I didn’t see my brother and I ever being as close as we once were. Wolfe wasn’t a bad guy but when he’d formed a grudge, it stuck.

The one thing that meant the most to him was Maven, and I’d put her in danger. Something I’d never forgive myself for. She said that she’d try to forgive me. That kind of thing didn’t happen overnight, and I didn’t deserve it. I didn’t deserve her. Although I’d do anything to have her again. Anything.

The problem was all that she wanted was for the four of us to find peace with each other and rule this city with her as

our queen. That's how it should have been, but I'd fucked it up. Shit happened and lines were drawn. I didn't know how to give Maven what she wanted, and I wouldn't make a promise that I couldn't keep.

“Sure. You can record while Ruthless and I do the dirty work. Unless you'd like to do some of the dirty work. I always did love watching you make them beg.” A cheeky grin spread over my face as memories surfaced. Watching Maven work a guy for info made my blood rush and my dick hard. I missed it.

She settled back in her seat, holding the knife handle. “If that's what it takes to make him talk and clear this shit up, I'll do it.”

“That's my girl.” I put my hand on her thigh, gripping a firm handful.

Maven put a hand over mine, briefly squeezing my fingers before letting go. Her touch was there and then gone, leaving me wanting more. She wanted more too. I felt the reluctance when she pulled away.

Patience wasn't one of my better traits. All I wanted was for her to be my queen as she was always meant to be. If I had to play nice with my asshole brother to make it happen, I would. As long as he didn't make a move against me. Otherwise, I couldn't be held responsible for what happened next.

Maven's expression changed when we pulled into the parking lot of The Hole. I knew the steely glint in her blue green eyes. When the promise of violence was near, Maven

became a whole other person. A dark goddess that thrived on danger. I was instantly enamored.

We met Ruthless in the parking lot where he stood near the front entrance smoking a joint. His jeans and t-shirt were black, as usual. Blood friendly color for a man that spilled a lot of it. He glanced up from his phone as we approached, a frown creasing his brow at the sight of Maven.

“Don’t look so happy to see me,” she quipped, punching him in the arm. “It’s going to go to my head.”

Ruthless’s frown turned into a scowl. “Yeah, we wouldn’t want that. I’m definitely not happy to see you.”

The grumpy fucker may have had Maven fooled but he didn’t fool me. Her arrival back in River City had shaken him up, getting inside his head. For some reason known only to Ruthless, he harbored a lot of anger over her previous departure. Since she’d come home he’d been more moody than usual, and that was really saying something.

Despite his hostile attitude toward Maven, Ruthless had jumped right in with her when the two of them plotted with Ace to lure the Crimson Thorns into a face off. He’d given himself to the Thorns, not once leaving Maven alone with them. He clearly had his issues with our Vixen but he still loved her. I wouldn’t believe otherwise.

“Aww, Ruthless, you’re cute when you lie,” Maven teased, beaming a smile that would make even the strongest of men weak.

He regarded her with icy resolve, refusing to let her penetrate his guard. Tucking the joint between his lips,

Ruthless shoved the floppy front piece of his mohawk off his forehead. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

His question was directed at Maven. A silent understanding passed between them as she nodded. The two of them had experienced torture at the hands of our greatest enemy. Archer’s crew had done a number on each of them, leaving invisible wounds that had yet to fully heal.

Inflicting that same torture on others came easy to Ruthless. It was twisted therapy for him. Regardless of her eagerness to hold a knife to my throat while I fucked her, Maven was nothing like him. He’d gone deeper into hell than she had, and it showed.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to prove to Wolfe that you guys had nothing to do with the attack on Shifty’s.” Maven plucked the joint from Ruthless’s lips and took a long drag. “So where is this guy anyway?”

“Murray? He’s inside.” Ruthless’s dark gaze lingered on Maven as she dragged from his joint. “Let’s go get him.”

I wasn’t the only one who wanted to watch Maven get her hands dirty. I could almost feel Ruthless’s anticipation. And he thought I was messed up since her return? Dude must be in mad denial.

Maven didn’t wait around. She stubbed out the joint with the toe of her boot and headed for the door. I was hot on her heels, leaving Ruthless to saunter along behind us.

Despite its name, The Hole wasn’t a dive bar, although it wasn’t nearly as nice as Wolfe’s nightclub. The Hole served one purpose. To be a legal business making legal money while

also providing us with a safe space to conduct business of the not so legal kind. This was where we met with clients, conducted syndicate meetings, and strung people up in the back when we needed answers. This wouldn't be the first time I'd strung up one of my own. Thankfully, it didn't happen often. Most of my people would never dare to cross me.

We stepped from the early evening sunlight into the dark interior of The Hole. Red walls and black furniture gave it a gothic vibe that made me feel right at home. Due to the early hour, there were only a handful of people drinking and talking over the rock music that boomed from the speakers. In a few hours it would be packed with party goers innocently enjoying drinks and dancing while my people entertained clients and struck business deals.

“Hey, boss,” Willa greeted me as we entered. She sat at a round table near the door with the six men and one woman who made up her crew. “You're here early.”

Willa's gaze landed on Maven, and her brows rose. She smartly didn't say a word. Whatever rumors were running around the syndicate about Maven's return were of no interest to me. I didn't care what anyone thought.

Maven glanced at Willa, eyeing her partially shaved head of red hair and the dragonfly tattooed on the side of her face. Before I could introduce them, Maven stuck out her hand and introduced herself. The two of them beamed at each other while they exchanged greetings. Willa had joined the syndicate after Maven left. It came as no surprise to me that they were immediately friendly. Maven could win over anyone.

“We’ve got a traitor in our presence,” I said, nodding toward the bar where Murray sat shooting the shit with the bartender. “Make sure nobody comes into the back.”

I trusted Willa to keep an eye on things while we took Murray in the back room. She was one of my best people. A born leader in a world of crime dominated by men. She could go toe to toe with any of them. She was almost as deadly as Maven.

“No problem. Let me know if you need any help.” Raising her beer to her lips, Willa turned back to the conversation at her table.

“That’s definitely him,” Maven said, eyes locked on Murray.

Even though he couldn’t hear her over the music, he must have felt her cold, dagger-like stare. Murray glanced in our direction and did a double take. His eyes widened at the sight of Ruthless and me with Maven. I didn’t expect him to bolt, so when he ran for the back exit, I stared after him in shock.

Ruthless didn’t hesitate. He sprang into action, darting around tables as he gave chase. Two of the men from Willa’s table got up and joined him. Murray didn’t make it far before Ruthless tackled him to the floor. A fist in Murray’s face stilled him. Together with the other two men, Ruthless dragged him down the hall behind the bar to the back room.

Maven quickly followed with a sexy sashay to her step. I helped myself to a healthy ogle of her ass. God how I wanted to bury my face between those gorgeous cheeks and taste her.

Shouts poured from the near empty room as we entered. Murray begged and pleaded as the others hung him from the chains descending from the ceiling. Once each wrist was shackled, the two who'd helped left the room and closed the door. The room was soundproofed. Combined with the music beyond the door, nobody would hear him scream.

"I don't know what you heard but it's a mistake. Maddox, I swear it." Murray's voice came out high pitched and desperate. He pulled uselessly on the shackles locked tight around his wrists as sweat broke out on his brow.

"Then why did you run?" I asked, walking a slow circle around him before coming to a stop when we were face to face.

Arms crossed, Maven regarded him with utter loathing. "I saw you at Shifty's right before the explosions. You seemed to be in a rush to leave. What were you doing there?"

Murray's gaze darted between Maven and me, like he wasn't sure who to address first. I nodded for him to answer my lady.

"I was invited by the cousin of the bride. She's an acquaintance who needed a date." Murray's words spilled out in a rush. "That's all. I was looking for her when I bumped into you. I'm sorry about that, by the way."

Maven tapped a finger on her bottom lip as she considered his response. "So you remember me. If we contact the cousin, will she back up your story?"

The blood drained from Murray's face. He couldn't lie his way out of a paper bag. "Maybe. I don't know. Look, I

know what you're thinking, but I didn't have anything to do with it."

"Let me circle back to my original question," I broke in, popping my knuckles. "Why did you run just now if you're as innocent as you claim?"

"Because I know how it looks, and I knew you wouldn't believe me." Murray grunted, wincing from the pain shooting through his shoulders. He had no idea what pain was yet.

I exchanged a look with Ruthless who gave a simple shake of his head. Maven studied the small table in the corner laden with fun-filled torture devices. She opted for using her own weapons.

Pulling the knife from her arm sheath, Maven stepped in close and pressed the sharp blade against Murray's throat. "You're a terrible liar. How else would you have known why we were here if you didn't do it? I'm willing to bet that there is no cousin. You're already fucked, so you might as well talk. Did Donovan Archer send you to hit Wolfe Hale's nightclub?"

Murray stupidly shook his head, causing the blade to cut into his skin. He yelped and froze, eyes wide and panicked. "No, I didn't do it. I swear. I have no idea who was behind it."

"You were already long gone by the time the rest of us evacuated the building. If it wasn't you, then you knew it was coming. Who set it up?" Maven's tone dropped to a deadly pitch. She pressed hard enough on the blade to make blood spill down Murray's neck.

"I don't know anything," he insisted, looking to me for help. "Maddox, I promise you, I know nothing about it. I

would never do that to you, man.”

I’d been doing this long enough to know a liar when confronted with one. Jerking a thumb toward the table of torture tools, I said, “I’m not buying it. The best way to avoid losing your fingernails or a few teeth is to talk. Holding out will hurt like hell. Who sent you to Wolfe’s club?”

“Nobody,” Murray shouted, panicking now. He writhed and jerked about, succeeding only in digging Maven’s blade deeper into his throat. “I had nothing to do with it. I’m not going to admit to something I didn’t do.”

Ruthless had heard enough. He crossed the room to the table and picked up a set of brass knuckles. Sliding them onto his hand, he motioned Maven aside.

Reluctantly she stepped back, giving him room to work. She gripped the bloodstained knife tight, watching as Ruthless threw a jaw breaking punch at Murray’s face. A large gash opened on his cheek, causing blood to spray. Ruthless hit him a second time, and Murray shrieked.

“Gonna talk yet?” Ruthless snarled, giving Murray a shove so he swung on the chains. His toes just barely touched the floor. “Tell us the truth. We might even let you leave here alive. Keep holding out and this will be your last day on earth. Choose wisely.”

Murray spat blood, making the mistake of spitting in Maven’s direction. It landed on the floor inches from her feet. Ruthless didn’t like that. He hit Murray again, almost knocking him unconscious.

“I swear to God I don’t know anything,” he wailed. “I didn’t do it. I don’t know who did.”

The continuous lying was starting to piss me off. It confirmed that Maven was probably right. Donovan Archer had issued the hit on Shifty’s. If he’d managed to infiltrate my people and force one of them to work for him, there had to be threats and blackmail involved.

Trying another angle, I asked, “What did Archer do to get you to cooperate? Did he threaten someone you love? Find some juicy blackmail material? Or did he pay you off? I can help you if you’re honest with me, but I won’t stand for a liar in my camp.”

Murray made a noise of frustration and pain. When Ruthless exchanged the brass knuckles for a pair of pliers, Murray almost shit himself. He fought hard to escape, succeeding only in dislocating his shoulder. The shackles dug into his wrists, rubbing them raw and bloody.

He hung his head and mumbled, “I can’t. I just can’t.”

It was as good as an admittance of guilt. Archer had definitely gotten to him. Whatever Donovan had done, it was enough to keep Murray from talking. Even when Ruthless used the pliers to tear out several of his fingernails.

Maven grew visibly restless. She shifted from foot to foot, twirling the knife she held in one hand. When Murray stopped responding at all, nearly unconscious from the pain, she lost what remained of her control.

Shouldering Ruthless out of the way, Maven let out an angry shout as she buried the knife in Murray’s chest. His

mouth dropped open as a hiss of air escaped. The light faded from his eyes, and he hung there, limp and lifeless.

“Motherfucking son of a bitch,” Maven cursed, hands shaking with rage as she jerked the blade free. Her frustration hung heavy in the atmosphere. She’d wanted so badly to clear this up.

Ruthless caught her elbow and spun her around to face him. He used a thumb to wipe a stray smear of blood from her cheek. She peered up at him, a storm of emotion in her eyes. His gaze dropped to her lips as he thought about kissing her.

“He wasn’t going to give us anything,” Ruthless said, cupping her cheek. “We’ll find another way to prove it was Archer. Even if we have to go after his family. We won’t let him win.”

Maven looked at him with both adoration and wariness. She nodded, a shaky sigh racking her body. Ruthless disappointed both of us when he pulled away. I wished he’d stop fighting his feelings and admit that he wanted her. It would make life a lot easier if he’d stop being so stubborn and bitter when it came to Maven.

I studied Murray’s limp body as I pondered my next move. This stupid asshole may have started a war with my brother. He hadn’t suffered nearly enough for that.

“Well,” I said, stuffing down the rise of fury that threatened to consume me. “I don’t know about you two but I need a drink.”

CHAPTER FOUR

MAVEN



An hour after Maddox dropped me off at home, I was on my way to the swanky hotel where Wolfe was staying while his house underwent repairs. I needed to talk to the older Hale brother. The confrontation with Murray hadn't gone well. To say that I was disappointed would be a gross understatement.

I was mad as hell and more than a little afraid of where things would go from here. Murray lied right to our faces. I felt it in my bones. Archer had something on him, something big enough to make him betray Maddox and Ruthless. How many other Hale Syndicate members had Archer manipulated?

Maddox hadn't wanted to part ways when I got out of his car. Truth be told, I hadn't wanted to either. Even though the crazy fucker had snatched me off the street and locked me in his house, I still loved him madly. I guess that made me crazy too. But I knew how much was on the line right now. I needed to do everything possible to keep a war from breaking out between the men I loved.

I'd showered off the blood spatters from Murray and texted Wolfe that I was on my way over. He was expecting me. I changed into black pants that perfectly hugged my ass and a tank top with a four leaf clover on the front. I needed all the

luck I could get. I left my freshly blow-dried hair hanging loose down my back and secured my blades back into place.

When I reached the hotel, I nervously paced around the inside of the elevator. Even though I'd looked into Murray's lying eyes for myself, I didn't expect Wolfe to believe any differently than he already did. He believed that Maddox was capable of coming after him. It broke my fucking heart.

"Hey there, gorgeous." Wolfe greeted me with a dazzling smile when he opened the door. "Come on in. Are you hungry? We can order room service."

In suit pants and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, Wolfe exuded classy casual mob boss vibes. I helped myself to a glimpse of the howling wolf inked on his chest. His black hair had a slightly disheveled, devil may care quality to it that made me want to grab a handful.

He stepped back to let me in to what was a pretty nice room. The king size bed was draped in thick blankets. A sitting area complete with couch and matching chairs was situated near the window, providing a great view of the city. I followed Wolfe to the couch and sat down.

"No, thanks. I'm good. I was hoping that we could talk. I was just with Maddox at The Hole. We grabbed the guy with the Hale ink that I saw at Shifty's the night of the attack." I watched his face closely for a reaction.

Wolfe sat on the couch next to me, angling to face me. His brows drew together, and he nodded. "And? Did you get anything out of him?"

I sighed. “Unfortunately, no. He wouldn’t break, and then I kind of lost my temper and killed him. I probably should have held off, but he just made me so damn mad. He said he didn’t know anything, but he was lying, Wolfe. I know it.”

“Or maybe he was telling the truth,” Wolfe suggested. “And you just can’t accept that. I know that’s not what you want to hear, Maven. I’m sorry, but you have to consider that maybe Maddox is behind the whole thing.”

Frustration shook me. Why did they both have to be so goddamn stubborn?

“Why would Maddox torture one of his own people if he knew they were innocent?” I challenged, refusing to let this go. “He can be a real asshole, but he’s not a piece of shit. He would never do that.”

Wolfe held my gaze, his enchanting hazel eyes searching me. “Unless he wanted to convince you that he was innocent of any wrongdoing. Maddox has changed a lot since you left town. He’s not the same man he was before.”

“Neither are you,” I said, desperation creeping into my tone. “We’ve all changed. That doesn’t make him the monster you’re claiming him to be. Please, Wolfe, promise me that you won’t do anything to retaliate. Give me a chance to get the truth from Archer.”

“From Archer?” Wolfe repeated, vigorously shaking his head. “No way. You have to stay away from him. There’s no telling what he’ll do if he catches you sniffing around. Don’t draw his attention, Butterfly. It’s not worth the risk.”

I stared out the window at the city street below, watching the flow of traffic outside the hotel. “It is though. If it means peace between you and Maddox, then I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Wolfe slid closer, taking my hand. “Look at me, Maven. Promise me that you’ll stay away from Archer. He’s already waiting for an opportunity to make another grab for you. Don’t give him one.”

His closeness flooded me with the woodsy scent of his cologne. It had a way of getting inside my head, making me want to obey his every command or request. But not this one.

“Only if you promise not to make any moves against Ruthless and Maddox,” I countered, gripping his fingers tight.

Wolfe stared at our joined hands and groaned. “You know I can’t do that. If Maddox brings more trouble to my doorstep, I’m going to react. I’m not going to let my reputation take a hit too.”

My shoulders slumped. I felt powerless to fix this before it was too late. “Look, I know you don’t trust Maddox, but can you at least trust me? I looked into Murray’s eyes tonight, and I knew he was lying. Archer got to him somehow. Cut Maddox a break on this one. Please.”

A moment of quiet fell over us as I waited for Wolfe to refuse. It felt inevitable. Maybe there was no bringing peace to the Hale brothers. Maybe Maddox was right, and it was too late for that.

No part of me could accept that though. We hadn’t come this far to only come this far, had we? We’d survived so much

together and apart. We were far from done. This was my city, and these were my men. I would not give up on them.

Wolfe caught my chin with a hand, tipping my face up to his. He kissed me with a sensual tenderness that stole my breath. My mind went blank as he dominated my focus. I returned his kiss, parting my lips for him to dip his tongue into my mouth. It didn't take much for Wolfe to make my head spin.

"It's not on you to fix us, Butterfly." Wolfe's hand was warm against my face as he brushed a lock of hair behind my ear. "I know you feel like this wouldn't have happened between the four of us if you hadn't left, but that's simply not true. Maddox and I were fucked the moment he left the funeral looking for trouble that day."

I nodded, unable to argue. That was true. That day had changed the path for all of us.

"As long as you both allow that day to still have power here and now, you're choosing to live in the past and let it dictate the future. I'm not going to lie and say it doesn't still haunt me. It does. But I refuse to give that day any more of my power and energy. I'd advise the rest of you to join me in moving forward before it's too late and Archer wipes the city streets with us." My tone grew harder as I spoke, firm in my declaration. I was done catering to their rivalry.

"Is that so?" A devilish smile played about Wolfe's lips. Hunger shone in his eyes as he looked me over. "You may be able to convince me to do things your way... for now. Are you up for it, Princess?"

Excitement pinged in my brain, and I sat up straighter. Wolfe only called me Princess when he was dominating me in some way. After the week I'd had, I was most certainly up for some fun. I could use the stress release.

“You know I am,” I said, teasingly biting my lower lip. “What did you have in mind, my King?”

Desire blazed in Wolfe's eyes. The moment I was on board, he morphed into a different version of himself. One that gave commands, enjoyed sexual discipline, and controlled my body in every way. Our dynamic was different than what I shared with Maddox. With Wolfe I was able to surrender control and become a different version of myself too. One able to submit.

There was no submission with Maddox, only a sheer war of wills that erupted like a fiery volcano. I enjoyed both brothers equally and loved how different it was with each of them.

“Get naked and get on the bed.” Wolfe nodded toward the bed. “Don't rush.”

Heat spread through my limbs, pooling in my groin. Torn between being obedient or testing him a little, I rose from the couch and went around the small coffee table to stand next to the bed. Facing Wolfe, I slowly peeled off my top.

He leaned back on the couch, watching my every move like a predator waiting for the right moment to pounce. I left the blades strapped to my forearm and ankle as I disrobed. The one hanging from my hip joined my pants on the floor. Instead of testing Wolfe by rushing any of it, I moved painfully slow. When he showed signs of impatience, I stifled a grin.

“All right, Princess. Stop fucking around. Get those panties off.” Wolfe’s gruff command sent a shiver down my spine. “On the bed. Now.”

I was quick to obey, knowing how much he loved it. Driving Wolfe crazy for me made me feel powerful in a situation where he had control. Once I was naked, I crawled onto the bed as instructed.

“Happy?” I asked, noting the bulge in his pants. “Looks like you are.”

He rubbed a hand over his erection and twirled a finger in the air. “On your back. Spread those legs and show me everything. You’re going to play, and I’m going to watch.”

Grabbing a pillow from the head of the bed, I placed it in the middle of the mattress and laid back. I held his gaze as I spread my legs and gave him a hell of a view. Wolfe sucked in a breath, releasing it slowly as I trailed a hand down my body.

I started off by giving him what he wanted. I lightly ran a finger over my slit before opening myself up for him. He leaned forward on the couch, hands clasped as he watched intently. I dipped the tip of a finger inside before using it to gently flick my clit. The arousal on his face made me eager to please him. My motions grew more intense as I rubbed myself.

“Don’t come,” he commanded. “I’ll decide when you’re ready.”

Try as he might to be patient, Wolfe grew fidgety as he watched until finally he couldn’t take it anymore. He stood up and came toward me, a prowl in his step. My stomach tightened in anticipation.

Wolfe stood beside the bed, looming over me. In one swift motion, he grabbed my ankles and dragged me to the edge of the bed. Running a hand down the middle of my body, he dropped to his knees before me and buried his face between my thighs.

My mouth dropped open in a silent gasp, and I clutched two handfuls of his dark hair. His mouth was ravenous on me, his tongue delving into my wetness. As much as Wolfe liked to play with me, he couldn't deny his want.

Instead of teasing me or taking his time, Wolfe licked me with aggressive determination. He thrust his tongue inside me before gliding it up to my clit. He persistently drove me toward orgasm, like he needed to make it happen. As soon as I felt the pleasure climb toward climax, his goddamn phone rang.

An annoying alert rang through the room, interrupting the moment. Wolfe pulled away, his expression apologetic. "Sorry, Princess. That's an emergency call. I have to take it."

I waved him away and nodded. I knew how this syndicate business worked. Certain calls could not be ignored. Not even if a head spinning orgasm was on the line.

Wolfe grabbed his phone off the desk near the bed. The dominant sex god immediately became a serious organized crime boss. I tensed, hoping and praying silently that this call had nothing to do with Maddox and Ruthless in any way.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Wolfe barked into the phone. "The cash drop for Lionel? How long ago?" He listened with growing fury before adding, "Stay put. I'm on my way. Call Ace."

“Sounds like trouble,” I remarked when he ended the call. “What’s going on?”

He let out an angry huff. “One of my crews was ambushed by a bunch of masked assholes on their way to a cash drop for a loan client. There was a fight. They lost the money.”

“Oh shit. Do they have any idea who it was?” I sat up on the bed, reaching for my panties where they lay on the floor.

Wolfe plucked the underwear from my hand. “No. The guys were masked, no visible tattoos or facial features. However, there’s a tracker hidden in the cash they just swiped, so we’ll be hot on their heels in no time.”

Because I needed to make sure these masked thieves weren’t linked to Maddox, I said, “I’ll come with you. I could use some action.”

“Sounds good. I miss having you with me on things like this.” Wolfe dropped my underwear and pushed me back down on the bed. “But first, I’m going to finish what I started here.”

CHAPTER FIVE

WOLFE



Having my time with Maven cut short pissed me off. Even more so because I knew this was no coincidence. Having a second hit on my business within a week wasn't random. It was purposefully planned. If I found out that Maddox was behind this, he would rue the day he'd decided to fuck with me.

Since I didn't like to tease and run, I finished licking Maven's sweet pussy. The problems that had arisen would still be there after making her come with a cry that made my cock throb. Now I drove through the city with the taste of her on my lips. She sat next to me, tense despite the climax.

I knew we weren't thinking the same thing. I wondered if Maddox had made another move. While I desperately wanted to believe her claim that he was innocent of wrongdoing, I just didn't buy it. He'd wanted to crush Ace and me since we left to start our own organization. Maven's return had made him desperate to find a way to keep her all to himself.

Although I wasn't entirely one minded. I knew that Archer was more than capable of pulling such stunts. There was no doubt that he had motive. Until I knew for certain who

was behind these incidents, I had to remain open to any possibility.

“Don’t assume it’s Maddox and Ruthless, okay? I know your mind has already gone there. We need to find out for sure, and we will.” Maven placed a hand on my arm, willing me to hear her out.

“I’m not assuming anything yet,” I assured her. “I’m also not ruling him out. You know what he’s capable of.”

She nodded, her tresses moving about her shoulders. “I do, and I know he’s not capable of coming after family. He knows that he fucked up, Wolfe. How long to do you plan to punish him for that?”

I slid a glance her way as I pulled to a stop at a red light. “I’m not sure yet. Why are you so quick to overlook his mistakes? He almost got you killed, Maven. He drove you away. I know that you suffered more than any of us will ever know, but we suffered too. We all lost you that day, and we had no choice in the matter.”

The last thing I wanted was to upset her. I believed in being honest. These were my feelings. She shoved both hands into her hair and leaned back against the seat’s headrest. A long, slow sigh spilled from her, like pressure releasing from something that would otherwise explode. Maven was tightly wound, and I didn’t like it. She was Maddox’s victim. She shouldn’t be protecting him.

“I spent the last seven years haunted by what happened,” Maven said, her voice husky with emotion. “Every day I wondered if I made a mistake by running. I hated Maddox with every piece of me. That’s not who I want to be, Wolfe. A

person filled with hatred and regret. I'm not overlooking Maddox's mistakes, but I can't hold them against him forever either. It isn't right."

The light turned green. The person behind me honked when I didn't notice because I was staring at Maven. I muttered a curse beneath my breath and stepped on the gas. "You're a better person than me, Butterfly. Honestly, I don't know how to break out of the dynamic that's formed between Maddox and me. I'm not sure it's even possible."

"Of course it is," she insisted. "You can either take the time and make the effort to repair your relationship or spend the rest of your lives at odds while I'm caught in the middle. The choice is yours."

There was a slight flippancy to her words, a slip of the attitude that made Maven a badass who got shit done. She was frustrated with my brother and me. I didn't blame her. I was frustrated with us too.

We pulled into a gas station, finding my crew gathered at the far end of the parking lot. Ace had already arrived. His gray Mercedes was parked next to a black sedan with tinted windows. He and four other people stood in a small group talking. They all looked up as we rolled to a stop.

Maven got out of the car and threw herself into Ace's arms. He gathered her close, hugging her tight as he murmured something in her ear. A smile broke over her face, and she kissed his cheek.

"All right," I said, joining the rest of them. "Tell us what happened. Don't leave out any details no matter how insignificant they seem."

While I listened to my crew explain how they'd been tailed by two vehicles that blocked them in and forced them off the road, I used my phone to check the tracker hidden in the stolen cash. It appeared to be at a standstill at a warehouse in the industrial sector of the city. It was common for anyone in organized crime to have such locations for the storage of various goods. If they started going through the cash, they would find the tracker. We had to get moving.

"Is anyone seriously hurt?" Ace asked, pointing at one of the men whose forehead dripped blood. "That looks like it needs stitches."

"They held us at gunpoint while they roughed us up before fleeing with the cash," Jameson explained. "But I think we're mostly all right. We called Lionel to tell him not to come to the pickup. We told him there was trouble and that you'd be in touch."

Lionel was a client that we loaned cash to on a regular basis. What he did with it I didn't know, and I didn't care. He'd always paid us back on time plus thirty percent. If the people behind this theft lost us a steady client, there would be hell to pay.

I nodded, swallowing my growing ire. "Yeah, no worries. I'll handle it. You guys go home and take care of yourselves. Chill out for the rest of the week."

"There were six of them, Wolfe," Jameson warned, rubbing a bruise that formed on his cheek. "Be careful."

I glanced at Ace. "Let's go. We'll call Rex and Tony on the way. They can bring a crew and meet us there."

We took Ace's car since it had four doors and the backseat was roomier. As we drove, I made the necessary calls to arrange backup. Ace and Maven made small talk in the front while I stretched out in the back. Someone was going to get hurt tonight.

Stuffing my phone in a pocket, I half listened to the lighthearted chatter coming from the front. Ace wasn't the type to brood. Even as we drove to a potentially bad situation, he was able to crack jokes and make Maven laugh. He was exactly the kind of guy a woman like her needed to ease the strain of dealing with the rest of us.

Try as I might, I couldn't shake the worry that Maddox and Ruthless had swooped in and swiped a hundred grand from us. It was exactly the kind of thing they would do. They'd stolen a delivery from Archer not all that long ago.

We parked around the corner from the warehouse. Adrenaline began to pump through my veins. I had a knife on my hip and a handgun tucked into the back of my pants. Not my ideal place to carry but I'd been in a hurry.

A navy blue SUV pulled up behind us. Six of our people got out. I preferred to handle things in a peaceful manner, finding the solution that benefited us without excessive force or violence. Unfortunately, that kind of thing only went so far. When I could no longer play nice or use business to get what I wanted, I played dirty.

"I don't think they found the tracker yet," I said when we were all gathered next to the vehicles. "We should have the element of surprise on our side but be prepared for anything."

The goal is to retrieve the money and find out who these guys are.”

We had no choice but to go in with weapons drawn, ready to use them. I didn't love the idea of bringing Maven into a dangerous situation, but I knew she could handle herself. I'd seen it. She'd never have let me keep her out of it anyway. Her headstrong personality had captivated me from the start. Despite my personal fears from the past, I wouldn't do anything to stifle her.

I wouldn't stifle her but I also wouldn't let her walk into the warehouse first. I put myself in front with Maven and Ace right behind me. The rest of the guys joined us except for two who rounded the building to the back delivery entrance in case anyone ran.

Drawing my gun, I chambered a round and flung the door open. I entered with my weapon raised to find six men gathered around a table, a duffel bag filled with cash in the center. They were counting it while talking loudly amongst themselves. It took several moments for them to notice us, allowing us to all file inside.

“Hey, what the fuck?” One man started to rise, reaching for a gun on the table next to him.

I fired off a shot that zinged past his head to embed in the wall. “Don't even fucking think about it. Sit your ass back down, hands flat on the table. All of you, hands flat on the table. Try anything stupid and the next shot lands.”

The man who'd risen slowly sat back down, placing his hands flat as instructed. The others followed suit, exchanging

glances with each other. There were a few black ski masks on the table, backing up the story my people had told.

Our other two guys entered through the back to join us. I nodded for them to relieve the thieves of their weapons. I didn't trust anyone to willingly give up their weapon without trying something reckless.

"Who the fuck are you?" A burly man with a shaved head sneered in my direction.

Another guy barked, "You're making a big mistake here, pal."

"Shut the fuck up," I snapped, stepping close enough for a point blank shot. "You stole our cash drop tonight, and I want to know who sent you to do it."

A third man with curly hair and glasses laughed. "I know who you are. Wolfe Hale, right? You're going to love this. We were hired by your brother to hijack the drop. Maddox Hale. He told us that if we pulled it off, we could keep the entire thing. Couldn't turn down a payday like that."

Inside I went cold. It was exactly what I'd expected to hear, even though I'd hoped otherwise. My younger sibling was putting me in a tough position here.

Maven snapped. She lunged for Curly, fisting a handful of his hair from behind. The *shing* of her blade being drawn was loud as she pulled it free and jammed it against his throat. She pulled his head back at a neck breaking angle to peer into his eyes.

"You lie," she snarled between clenched teeth. "Tell us who really hired you before I bathe your buddies in your

blood.”

Curly grunted, eyes wide as he gaped at her. “I told you. Maddox Hale hired us. I have no reason to lie about that.”

My body stiffened as I watched Maven become the coldest, deadliest version of herself. She was on a mission, and I didn’t want to stop her, although I wondered if she was chasing a ghost here. She so badly wanted it to be anyone but Maddox. I’d already accepted the truth.

“Who do you work for?” she asked, jerking Curly’s head back until he cried out in pain.

“Nobody,” he shouted, voice straining. “We’re not loyal to any gang or syndicate. We’ll do a job for anyone if the money is right.”

Maven nodded to Ace. “Check him for ink.”

Ace sprang into action. While Maven held Curly in a precarious position, Ace checked him over for any tattoos that may give us some information. Nothing. No Hale ink, which came as a relief. No Archer ink either.

“Can you prove it was Maddox Hale who hired you?” Maven continued, refusing to give up. “Did you meet him in person?”

Curly’s fingertips dug into the table’s edge, his knuckles white. “Of course I can’t prove it. We didn’t meet. The whole thing was arranged over the phone.”

The atmosphere thickened as emotions ran high. Maven didn’t like what she heard. I never saw it coming when she suddenly slashed her blade across Curly’s throat, opening up a fount of crimson.

“I’ll get the answers I want if I have to kill my way right to Archer’s front door.” Clutching the knife handle in her fist, she jabbed the blade into the neck of the man sitting next to Curly.

It all happened so fast, as these things did. The burly dude with the shaved head took a chance and flung himself at Ace, knocking him to the floor. Having no weapon handy, he plowed his big fists into Ace’s face. One of my men reacted and took the shot, putting a bullet in the guy’s brain. He slumped over, and Ace scrambled to his feet.

Another man bravely tackled Maven who went down beneath him, slashing wildly with her knife. She caught him across the cheek and arm, ready to kill anyone who stood between her and what she believed to be the truth.

The two men remaining at the table raised their hands in surrender, choosing life. I stepped forward to put a bullet in the man trying to strangle Maven but she didn’t need the help. She brought her blade up and plunged it into his chest, forcing a scream from her attacker. A knee between his legs finished the job. He sprawled on the floor bleeding and wailing while she rolled over and got to her feet.

Maven swiped a hand through the blood that had splattered her face, her fierce gaze traveling over the remaining two men.

“Leave them, Maven,” I said, ready to grab her if she went for them. I didn’t believe in killing unless necessary. In our world it often was but not when people were surrendering.

She pointed her bloody knife at them. “I know it was Archer who hired you. Tell him that he’s not fooling anyone.

Tell him that I'm coming for him."

"Jesus, Mave." I grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the door. "You can't just start a war with Archer."

She let me drag her away as a twisted grin stole over her face. "Watch me."

CHAPTER SIX

MAVEN



“Honestly, Maven, the syndicate has people to do those things. There’s no reason for you to be in a dangerous situation. Let the enforcers handle it.” Mom shook her head and clucked her tongue as she studied the bruise on my face.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. She’d always been the type to sit back and let the men do all the dirty work while she lived her cushy mafia princess life. That was her choice. I wasn’t content to reap the rewards of other people’s hard work. I preferred to be on the front line, getting shit done.

“I like it,” I said with a shrug. “I don’t want to sit around and wait for everyone else. I want to be out there with them.”

My mom frowned. “I wish those boys wouldn’t let you do these things.”

Those boys, meaning Wolfe, Maddox, Ruthless, and Ace. Grown ass men but still boys to her. My mom meant well. I knew that she genuinely cared but she and I were two very different people.

“They don’t let me do anything, Mom. I’m a grown woman who can make that call for myself. They know better than to tell me what I can and cannot do.” I took an extra-large drink from the martini I’d mixed upon arriving.

When she'd called this morning to ask me and my sister to come for dinner, I'd known there would be remarks about my face. I'd taken a couple of hits. No big deal. The guy that hit me fared much worse.

Thinking about last night made my jaw clench. Hearing the thieving bastards blame Maddox for the theft had ignited a carnal rage within me. I'd lost it. But I wasn't sorry. Archer had arranged the theft. Someone had posed as Maddox. Wolfe didn't believe that. While I understood why, it frustrated me to no end. To me it was obvious who was behind everything. I hated that the Hales were playing right into Donovan Archer's hands.

"I know you haven't been back home long but that doesn't mean you should take such risks. I don't want you to get in over your head." Mom leaned across the kitchen island to pat my hand. "Those boys should want to keep you safe after everything you've gone through."

I almost choked on my drink as my temper flared. She knew how touchy a subject that was for me. Why couldn't she let anything go?

My father glanced up from the charcuterie board he was hoovering down. "It's fine, Dorian. Maven knows what she's doing. Would you rather her live in fear for the rest of her life?"

My mother's eyes narrowed. "Would you prefer that she end up like you? Injured and unable to do a damn thing without pain?"

Oh shit. Was an argument about to break out?

Rumer piped up from where she leaned against the counter next to the stove. “Dinner smells great, Mom. What did you make this time?”

My parents stared at one another until my mom broke eye contact. She turned to face my sister, her smile fake and brittle. “Chicken parmesan with garlic mashed potatoes. I hope you like it. I’ve missed cooking for you girls. We’ll have to make this a regular occasion.”

Not if I could help it. I loved my parents but these visits had become a form of torture. Rumer did a good job keeping my mom busy chatting about an upcoming event she was working on for her party planning business. It seemed to defuse the tension between our folks for now.

For the most part my parents had a healthy marriage, as far as I knew, with typical disagreements. Except when it came to the syndicate. Mom never wanted Rumer or me getting involved. She’d been opposed to my father teaching me how to fight. She’d been more than happy to see the Hales and me form a bond, but she thought they should protect and pamper me when I wanted to be in the thick of things right beside them. I’d given up expecting her to understand long ago.

When dinner was ready, we moved to the dining room where Rumer did her best to keep the focus off me. I flashed her a grateful smile when she got my mom prattling on about the neighbor’s ugly rose bushes.

Eventually the conversation made its way back to me. Mom eyed me as she stuck a bite of mashed potatoes into her mouth. I braced myself.

“How is everything going with Maddox?” she asked, reaching for her wine glass. “Or is it Wolfe? I never could be sure which one of them you were involved with. You were always bouncing between the two of them.”

“I was fucking them both, Mother,” I opted for a blunt but truthful response. “I’m not with either of them currently. Not officially. Maddox is being a possessive, hardheaded jerk and Wolfe won’t listen to reason. They’re still at odds and I’m caught in the middle.”

My sister let out a tiny bark of laughter before clapping a hand over her mouth. My dad frowned but said nothing as he continued to shovel chicken into his face.

Mom almost spit out the sip of wine she’d taken. Her mouth dropped open. She coughed before clearing her throat, nervously running a hand over her tight blonde bun. “I see. I suppose I shouldn’t ask about Ace and Ruthless. I don’t really want to know. I just thought maybe you’d reconnected since you came back. Never mind.”

“We have reconnected,” I said, tone softening. “It’s complicated. Things are different now. I don’t want to be with any of them as long as they’re at odds with each other. I think it’s pretty obvious why I don’t discuss my personal life in detail.”

My mom drained the rest of her wine, peering at me over the rim of the glass. “Both of them? Really? And they were okay with that?”

Maybe it was me but the expression my mother wore suggested that she had never considered such a possibility. It wasn’t the norm, and it wouldn’t work for everyone, but it had

worked for us. Only time would tell if we were able to get that back.

Dad cleared his throat and slid my mom a pointed look. “I’m not sure this is appropriate dinner conversation. Rumer, honey, tell us more about that big party you’re planning.”

After dinner as Rumer and I helped clear the table, she leaned in close and whispered, “I think you’ve got Mom wondering what she missed out on by hitching her wagon to only one man.”

I snickered, scraping a few food chunks off a plate and into the garbage. “What about you? Think you can handle more than one man?”

“I don’t know.” Rumer’s blonde ponytail swung as she shook her head. “I can’t even find one man that I can stand for more than a few dates. I guess we can’t all have our cake and eat it too.”

“Maven,” Dad said as he entered the room carrying the empty chicken platter. “Would you join me in the den, please?”

Rumer and I exchanged one of those looks siblings share when one of them is in shit. Dammit. Why me?

“Sure, Dad.” I put the plate I held in the dishwasher and followed him from the room.

James Hart with a cane was a little slower than he’d been before his injury but it made him no less intimidating. Casual lounge pants and a turtleneck sweater didn’t take away from his self-assured stature and poise. He entered the den off

the living room, waiting for me to join him before closing the door.

The den was dark and woodsy with a bookshelf on one wall and a fireplace on the other. A gray couch sat across from two matching easy chairs, a coffee table between them. My father flicked on the light, bathing the room in a golden glow. He went to the couch, motioning for me to sit across from him in one of the chairs. Then he poured us both a glass of scotch from the bottle on the table.

He took a long sip, placed his glass on the coffee table, and clasped his hands together. “The Hales will succumb to Archer if they don’t end their feud and work together against him. What are you willing to do to make sure that doesn’t happen?”

I stared at him uncertainly, caught off guard by his question. He’d always been the blunt type, which is probably where I got it from. Still, I hadn’t expected him to come at me with that one.

“I know that, Dad. I’ve tried talking to them about it, but they’re so fucking stubborn.” I drank back a burning shot of scotch and leaned back in my seat. “They refuse to work together. Archer is going out of his way to start a war between Maddox and Wolfe. They’re so focused on each other that they can’t see what I see. Personally, I’m ready to go after Archer myself.”

Dad nodded, pressing his lips together as he mulled it over. “Those two fell apart after you left town. You were the glue that held them together, and then you were gone. You’re probably the only one that can get through to them, Maven.”

“Oh yeah, I’ll get right on that. No pressure or anything.” I laughed bitterly, then paused. “There’s only so much I can do. The rest is on them.”

Leaning forward, Dad flipped open a small box on the table and withdrew a cigar. He pulled a lighter from his pocket and lit the cigar, puffing on it several times. “That’s true. There is only so much you can do. Don’t forget how much influence you have over them. They’ll follow your lead, even if they do it kicking and screaming.”

I thoughtfully stroked the arm of the chair, enjoying the softness of the fabric. “I want to make another move against Archer. I need to send him a message.”

“You do.” Dad nodded, puffing away on his cigar. “Carefully. You need to rally up your men and get them all on board. I know it won’t be easy, but you have to get them to pull their heads out of their asses before it’s too late.”

My mind raced, furiously concocting ways to hit Archer where it would hurt. “Ruthless and Ace are more receptive. It’s those damn stubborn Hales. I’ve never seen them like this before.”

Dad finished his scotch and reached for a refill. “While your mother may have been in denial about your relationship with those two, I was not so ignorant. Without sharing anything personal or private, can you tell me how things are now? Have you resumed a romantic relationship with either Wolfe or Maddox?”

I groaned and put a hand over my eyes, thoroughly embarrassed. “Kind of. I wouldn’t call any of it a relationship

though. We're back in each other's lives, and there are still feelings between us, but like I said, it's complicated."

"Mhmm. Well, judging by how smitten they always were with you, I can't see them doing anything to lose you again. If you lead, they will follow." Dad raised his glass to me and nodded. "This city will belong to you one day. All of you."

His vote of confidence meant more than he knew. Settling back into syndicate life had been jarring, made harder by the division of my men. I knew that my dad was right. I had to take the first steps to bring everyone back together, and that meant going after Archer.

"That's the plan," I murmured into my scotch glass.

"Look, Maven, I want to apologize. I shouldn't have forced you to see Maddox before you were ready. I was eager to see you all reconnect, and that wasn't my decision to make. I'm sorry." Dad held my gaze as he owned his mistake. He'd always treated me with respect, never talking down to me because I was younger, female, or less experienced. It went a long way to boost my self-confidence, especially when my mother had been the opposite, always pushing me to do and be less.

"Thanks, Dad. I appreciate that."

We sat in comfortable silence, my dad smoking his cigar and me sipping the remainder of my drink while I pondered the dark thoughts rolling through my head. Archer's empire would crumble. All I had to do was find the weak point and bring the whole thing down. Or go straight to the top with Archer himself.

“Come on,” Dad said when he’d finished his cigar.
“Let’s go have some of the cherry cheesecake your mother made. She won’t be happy if you don’t have some.”

He rose to leave the room, clutching his cane in one hand. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I nodded and waved at him to go ahead without me. “I’ll be right there. I just have to make a couple of calls first.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

MAVEN



“You really need to relax.” Ruthless’s dark gaze drifted over me as he tossed back a shot of tequila like it was nothing. “What happened to you? You used to be so smooth. In the zone.”

I frowned, stirring a cherry around my vodka lime cocktail with a straw. I tried to stop my leg from nervously bouncing as I also fidgeted with a lock of my hair. He was right. I was off my game.

“Cut me some slack. I’ve been gone a while. Maybe I’m a little rusty but I’m bouncing back.” I sure hadn’t had any trouble slashing the throat of that lying fuck who stole Wolfe’s cash.

Ace laughed and waved a hand in my direction. “No, man, you didn’t see her the other night. Maven took the lead, and she didn’t hesitate to use those knives. It was fucking beautiful.”

My cheeks warmed as a slight blush stole over my face. The three of us sat around a table in the lounge of a four star hotel. I’d asked the two of them to join me on a little endeavor. Archer needed to know that we were ready to play dirty.

Although it came with risks, we needed to send a message, and I wanted to use his son to do it.

After the talk with my dad, I'd reached out to Ace and Ruthless, explaining my plan. The Hales would have been opposed. Since the two of them were already a mess, I'd turned to the two men who could help me get to the bottom of this. I'd expected some resistance from Ruthless, but to my surprise he'd been on board right away.

He regarded me now with a wary curiosity. Like he didn't quite believe Ace's claim. "We'll see how tonight goes. Don't let me down, Baby Girl. I'm risking a beating by being here."

I sincerely doubted Maddox would beat him if he found out that he'd helped me, but he'd probably throw a punch or two. The Hales never would have been up for what we'd planned tonight. Hiring an escort to seduce Donovan Archer's son and bring him back to this hotel wasn't something I could see either of them thinking was a good idea.

That was only one of many reasons I hadn't told them. I didn't need Maddox's possessive shit right now, and I didn't want to listen to the two of them bitching at each other. I also didn't want either of them to try and stop me.

"Don't worry about Maddox," I said, nervously checking the burner phone in my back pocket. Nothing yet. "Tell him it was all my idea, and you just couldn't resist me. He'll understand."

I flashed Ruthless a saucy grin, trying to smile through the nerves. The escort, Lainey, was supposed to text when she was on her way back to the hotel with Evan Archer. One of

three Archer children, he was the only one who'd joined his dad in the syndicate. His sister and brother had opted for a normal, legal life.

My plan was to work Evan for some information and send him back to his father in rough shape. Hitting Archer hard by going after one of his kids was dangerous. Archer may hit back the same way, by targeting family. Ace had already promised to have one of his people watch my sister's back. My parents were as safe as they could get with an advanced security system and my father's gun collection.

I was counting on Archer not to make such a move though. That would be too obvious.

"Yeah right," Ruthless scoffed, reaching for another shot. There were two more lined up on the table before him. "I'm not here because you're irresistible. I'm here because I'm sick of being held down by Archer, and I want to take this city away from him."

"You're so full of shit," Ace snickered into his vodka. "I'd never say no to this woman and neither would you."

Ruthless nailed Ace with a glare but it lacked venom. "Go fuck yourself, pretty boy."

In response, Ace ran a hand over his perfectly coiffed blond hair and smiled cheekily. "I've missed you too, dude. We should really do this more often."

The two of them couldn't have been more different in personality and style. Ace with his golden retriever energy was in suit pants and a white shirt, the sleeves rolled up. He was a direct contrast to Ruthless's much darker vibes. His brown hair

was cut into a short mohawk. The black t-shirt and jeans he wore were faded and casual. Both men boasted a buttload of ink, but Ruthless had significantly more.

Despite their loyalty to Maddox and Wolfe, Ace and Ruthless got along as well as they ever had. This was part of the repertoire they'd shared before everything changed. It gave me warm, squishy feelings to see them work together.

“Hey, guys. In case I haven't mentioned it yet, I'm really thankful that you came. It means a lot to me.” I looked at each of them in turn, hoping they saw my sincerity.

“Of course we came,” Ace said, serious now. “We all want the same thing. Even Wolfe and Maddox. They just need to set their egos aside and leave the past where it belongs.”

Ruthless grunted a nonverbal agreement. “Any news yet? If we have to grab Evan from the club instead, it will be a lot harder but not impossible.”

Evan Archer was a regular at this high-class piano bar downtown. He liked to hang out there with his inner circle throwing money around and acting like a big bossman. It was common for him to leave with a different woman every night. I hoped Lainey was able to be that woman tonight.

If she failed to snag his interest, we'd be forced to use more obvious, violent methods to grab him. Having her bring him right to us was preferred. None of his people would know we had him. He would be entirely at our mercy. The thought sent a rush of excitement through me. I resisted the urge to fondle the knife strapped to my arm beneath the sleeve of my stylish long black cardigan.

I opened my mouth to tell him that I hadn't heard anything yet when the burner phone buzzed. My stomach flipped as I reached for it. If Lainey failed, my perfect plan would be ruined.

We're upstairs. He's getting naked while I "freshen up" in the bathroom.

"Fuck yes," I swore, holding the phone out for both men to see. "Let's get moving."

"Keep an eye out for any security detail that may have followed him," Ruthless advised, shoving his chair back. "They'll probably wait outside but stay alert."

Adrenaline spurred me to my feet, imbuing me with readiness. My nerves faded now that the waiting was over. I slammed back the rest of my drink and exited the lounge. Ruthless and Ace were right behind me.

We scanned every person we passed for any sign that they were with Evan Archer. We made it up to the room Lainey had prebooked without incident. I pulled out a keycard to the room and sucked in a deep breath. I was almost giddy with excitement.

"Ready?" I asked in a hushed whisper, pausing to listen at the door. It was quiet.

Both men nodded. Ruthless waved a hand for me to hurry up and open the door. I slapped his hand aside and slid the keycard into the slot. The lock clicked, and I shoved the door open.

I burst into the room with a knife in hand. Evan Archer was on his back in the middle of the bed, hands folded behind

his head. His semi-erect dick was on full display. The man still wore his white sport socks. What a jackass.

He sprang upright at the sight of us, his face morphing from cool and confident to shock and terror. Evan scrambled for the edge of the bed in an effort to fetch the gun laying on top of his abandoned pants. He never had a chance.

Ruthless lunged forward and caught him around the neck with an arm, choking him unconscious. “That was too fucking easy. He really should have brought his security detail. Let’s tie this asshole to the chair.”

I pulled the chair out from the desk near the bed, placing it in the middle of the room. The guys dragged Evan’s limp form onto the chair, using bed sheets to tie his arms and legs down. Lainey emerged from the bathroom, pleased to see him incapacitated.

“Thank you so much for your service,” I said, pulling a wad of cash from my pocket. “You did great.”

“Happy to help. Call me anytime.” Lainey accepted the money without counting it and tucked it into her cleavage. She was a knockout with long ginger curls and dazzling green eyes. No wonder he’d fallen for her seduction.

Moments later the door closed behind her. I hurried over to flip the lock into place. Then I dug through Evan’s clothes until I found his phone. Using his face to unlock it, I turned the device off so it couldn’t be tracked.

Setting the phone on the desk, I approached him with a knife in hand. I slapped his cheek until he started to come

around. When Evan opened his eyes to see the three of us standing over him, he panicked.

Tugging on his bonds, he shouted, “My father will fucking kill you. I hope you all know that you’re as good as dead. Your families too.”

I slapped him across the face, startling him silent. “Shut your damn mouth. You will only speak when answering my questions, understood? Otherwise I’ll stuff your nasty underwear down your throat. We’re the ones in control here. Better get used to it.”

Evan swallowed hard, his dark eyes darting between the three of us. “You’re all dead.”

He looked like a younger version of Donovan Archer. They had the same chiseled jaw and haughty demeanor. Evan’s brown hair set him apart. He was no silver fox like his father. He also wasn’t a crime boss like him either. There was nothing special about him. He’d been born into crime, like the rest of us, but that didn’t make him the tough guy he pretended to be. We’d find out just how tough he was.

“Tell me everything you know about your father’s attempts to start a war between the Hales,” I demanded, twirling my knife in one hand. “If you give me nothing, you’ll die in this room. And in case you think I’m bluffing, remember what your father’s goons did to me several years ago. I owe your family pain.”

To prove my point, I used the tip of my knife to slash a small cut across the large A tattooed on his shoulder. He sucked in a sharp breath, glaring daggers at me.

“My father doesn’t share every move he makes with me,” Evan hissed, straining against the tightly tied sheets. “If you want answers bad enough to pull shit like this, why not just go straight to the source?”

“Trust me, I’m working my way up to it, but I need Donovan to know I’m serious. You seem like the easiest way to achieve that.” Another flick of my wrist and I slashed a letter H into his chest.

Evan gaped at the H, his eyes huge and angry. “Are you kidding me, bitch? Why the fuck did you do that?”

Ruthless’s fist seemed to come out of nowhere. He stepped forward and punched Evan hard enough to cause a spray of blood from his split lip. “Talk to her like that again and we skip right to removing your fingers and toes. I won’t tell you a second time.”

A warm and fuzzy feeling came over me. Ruthless claimed that he didn’t miss me while I was gone yet he still snapped when someone disrespected me. Whatever his problem with me was, it didn’t stop him from having my back. Eventually I would get it out of him, even if I had to tie his ass to a chair to do it.

“Jesus, you people are fucked,” Evan muttered. “Couldn’t at least let me get dressed first?”

I tugged my burner phone out and snapped a picture. “Nope. Otherwise this photo I’m sending to your dad wouldn’t be quite as powerful.”

Evan’s face reddened as he sputtered something nonsensical about killing everything we loved. I sent the photo

to the number my father had given me for Archer the previous evening. Then I turned my attention back to the quivering man in the chair.

“Let’s try this again,” I said, playfully taking a swing with the knife that didn’t land. Evan jerked back as much as the chair would let him. “Tell me what you know about Donovan’s plans for the Hales. You have to know something.”

Glaring up at me, Evan shook with rage and fear. “The only thing I know is that my father was upset when he learned you were back in town. When he heard the Crimson Thorns were after you, he hoped they’d take you out and save him the trouble. I don’t know anything about a war.”

Not satisfied with that answer, I cut into his chest again, adding a letter S to the H. Evan yelped with pain. “Try again. You have to know something. Is he trying to keep them apart because I’m back and he’s afraid we’ll take him down?”

Evan’s breaths came faster. Perspiration broke out on his brow. “He’s not afraid of you. He’s going to finish what his guys started with you and make these stupid fucks watch.”

It was Ace who lost his temper this time. The usually calm, cool charmer pulled his gun, smashing Evan in the skull with the weapon. Blood ran from a cut on his temple. His eyes rolled back in his head, but he didn’t pass out. Ace raised his hand to deliver a second blow.

“Cool it, Ace.” Ruthless moved to stop him. “We don’t want to kill him. Yet.”

My phone pinged with an alert. I pulled it out to find a speedy reply from Donovan. *Is that how you want to play? You*

know what happens if we go down this road.

Yes, I did. I wasn't reckless enough to kill his son and start a domino effect of bloodshed and death. But I wanted Archer to know that I was ready to fight him for this city and the safety of my loved ones.

I took a moment to steel myself. I was getting awfully sick of fighting for answers and receiving nothing. Someone was going to spill the truth. Be patient. That's what I told myself as I turned my attention back to Evan.

"Give me something." Twirling the knife inches from his face, I pretended to drop it in his lap, catching it before it impaled his flaccid dick. "I can't let you go unless you give me something. You know that."

Evan flinched, and I could have sworn that his penis shriveled up like it was trying to escape into his body. A groan erupted from him as he hung his head in defeat. "If I give you something, my father will kill me. I'd rather face you than him."

I nodded in understanding, painfully aware of the way Ace and Ruthless watched me. The former with a playful spark in his eyes and the latter with an impenetrable poker face. Chemistry crackled between us, reminding me of old times.

"All right. How about this?" I changed tactics, hoping that appealing to Evan's masculinity would help. "We're not going to kill you. I will, however, remove body parts. Starting with that ugly little thing between your legs. I'll give you a minute to think about it. I'm sure you can come up with something that will appease me."

Evan gaped at me in disbelief, his gaze swinging to Ace, the only one of us he thought may be sane enough to appeal to for help. “Is this a joke? Are you seriously going to let her do this?”

The bark of laughter from Ace crashed his hopes. “Let her? Clearly you don’t know a damn thing about this woman. Do yourself a favor and spit out something good.”

“Okay, okay,” Evan pleaded. “Just give me a minute to think.”

“You have thirty seconds,” Ruthless snapped. Tension filled him, making the veins in his tattooed forearms bulge. Holding back seemed to test him, like all he wanted to do was tear Evan apart.

Part of me wanted to watch him do it. I slid Ruthless a sidelong glance, stealing a glimpse of his taut arms and hard jaw. My gaze lingered on the knife scar that slashed through the ink on one side of his neck. I had the sudden urge to press my lips to that scar, to run my tongue over the ridges.

Ruthless caught me looking before I could tear my gaze away. Our eyes locked, and I saw a flicker of desire in his deep brown orbs. It was quickly replaced with disdain. He really needed to get over his issue with me. I wasn’t going anywhere.

“All right. I remember my father being on the phone, saying something about doing whatever it took to maintain control of the city,” Evan gushed, panic making his words spew out in a rush. “He said something about crushing the Hales and using you to do it. Both of them. But I swear I don’t know any details. That’s all I heard.”

“Me?” I asked, waiting for his nod. “And that’s all you know? I find that hard to believe.”

“Why would I risk my dick over something like this?” Evan’s shout rang through the room, hurting my ears. “Trust me, you’re not worth it.” Another punch from Ruthless dazed him. He spat blood onto the carpet and laughed. “You guys are so fucked. In about three minutes the place will be swarmed with Archer people.”

I tensed, not liking the satisfaction in his bloody smile. I’d turned off his phone to avoid tracking. Unless... I jabbed the tip of my knife into Evan’s throat. “Do you have a tracking chip? Seriously? Like a damn dog, huh? Well, thanks for the heads up. I guess you get to keep your pitiful excuse for a penis. For now.”

“He could be lying,” Ace pointed out, glancing nervously toward the door.

There were only three of us. If Archer knew where his spawn was, he’d send a small army. It wasn’t a risk worth taking.

“Maybe,” I agreed. “But I’d rather not find out. Not today. Let’s go.”

Because I had to leave Evan with a parting gesture, I slashed my blade across his throat, careful to avoid the jugular and carotid. He’d live, but he’d bleed first.

Evan’s mouth gaped open in an agonized shout as blood spilled down his chest. Although he could have been lying to get rid of us, something told me it would be dangerous to

linger. Sheathing my knife, I went for the door. As soon as I opened it, the sound of voices in the hall spurred me on.

With Ruthless and Ace right behind me, I darted into the hall and headed for the back stairwell. From the opposite direction the voices grew louder, now accompanied by heavy footfall. We rounded the corner at the end of the hall, sliding out of sight as the oncoming group emerged from the other end where the elevators were located.

I risked a tiny peek around the corner, my breath crushed from me at the sight of a dozen Archer men marching toward Evan's room. Motherfucker hadn't been lying after all. Archer put a tracker in his kid? That seemed a little overkill.

Adrenaline drove my steps as I hurried down the stairs. Ruthless hung back a little, gun in hand, keeping an eye on the stairs above us. It wouldn't be long until they were in pursuit.

"You were sexy as hell in there," Ace said as we ran. "Have I told you how much I've missed you, Bright Eyes?"

Gripping the stair railing, I rounded the last corner to the bottom. "Glad someone did."

I shot a pointed look back at Ruthless who snarled and all but shoved me out the door into the night. We didn't stop moving until we reached the cars where we'd left them in a neighboring parking lot.

I was already breathless when we stopped running, so it took me by surprise when Ruthless grabbed me by both shoulders and kissed me. One hand snaked up to roughly grasp my jaw, holding me in place while he plundered my mouth

with his tongue. Once the initial shock passed, I became an active participant, kissing him back with a heady fervor.

“Goddamn, that’s hot,” Ace murmured.

Ruthless nipped my bottom lip before pulling away. Then he shoved me into Ace’s arms and opened the door to his black SUV. “Get her home safe. Keep an eye out for any tails. For the record, Maven, I never said that I didn’t miss you.”

With that, he got into the vehicle, started the engine, and drove away. My body was flushed and my mind flustered. Ace’s strong arms felt good. I wanted to enjoy it, but we were about to have a dozen Archer men looking for us.

We reluctantly broke apart and got into Ace’s gray Mercedes. As we left the parking lot, Ace nudged me with an elbow. “I don’t know about you but I could go for ice cream. Or maybe burgers. Want to stop and grab a bite to eat?”

“Sure. I could go for a burger.” Once I came off the adrenaline high of a night like this, I was always ravenous.

I glanced back at the hotel to make sure we weren’t being pursued, but all I could think about was Ruthless’s words after that kiss.

He’d missed me?

CHAPTER EIGHT

RUTHLESS



“Are you sure you don’t want to tell me where you disappeared to last night?” Maddox eyed me suspiciously, tapping a finger on his whiskey glass. “Your phone was off.”

I pulled a fat joint from the tin in my pocket and lit up. Taking a long drag, I cocked my head to one side, studying my best friend. He’d been all over me with questions when I returned to the house last night after leaving Maven with Ace. I did my best to brush him off, but Maddox and I didn’t keep secrets. He knew I was holding back.

“I told you. Just had some stuff to take care of. Nothing worth your attention. Trust me.” I puffed on the joint and let my gaze travel around the dim interior of The Hole.

We were seated at our usual table near the back where we could speak privately while keeping an eye on the whole building. After his questions last night, I knew he wasn’t going to let this go. Maddox didn’t need to know that I’d been with Maven and Ace working to keep him and Wolfe from killing each other. I’d seen them come close enough several times.

It would destroy Maven if Archer succeeded in his plan. That shouldn’t have mattered to me. I didn’t want to care about her. My demons didn’t give a shit what I wanted. Being

with Maven messed with my head. I could barely hear myself think with all the noise her presence caused. Why did she have to come back?

“Right,” Maddox sneered, unconvinced. “And you just happened to take off around the same time that Maven gave Jake the slip? I had him watching her building.”

Yeah, he had me there. Where the hell was the client we were waiting on? His immediate arrival would buy me some time.

“What are you insinuating, Maddox?” I asked, holding his steely gaze. “That Maven and I snuck off together? Don’t worry, M. I’m not fucking her behind your back.”

I wouldn’t be fucking her at all if I could help it. Although my cock seemed to have other ideas. Watching Maven carve the Hale Syndicate letters into Evan Archer’s chest had been hot as hell. I hated how much I’d loved it. She still did something to me after all this time. Something that I was ready to fight tooth and nail.

Maddox scoffed. “Oh, I know you’re not fucking her. You wouldn’t be so tightly wound if you were. I’d prefer it if that’s what you were actually up to. Maybe then you’d stop being such an asshole about her. Seriously though, if you’re sneaking around with Maven stirring up shit, I want to know about it.”

I released a plume of smoke that drifted above my head in a thick cloud. “Shouldn’t that guy be here by now? Does he expect us to wait all night?”

“Goddammit, Ruthless.” The table jumped as Maddox slammed his fist onto the wooden surface. “Don’t make me kick your ass. Tell me where you were last night.”

I leaned back in my chair and chuckled. “Settle down. You know you can’t take me.”

I probably shouldn’t have antagonized him, but I wasn’t one for manic demands. I had no interest in engaging with him now, although I wasn’t afraid of him. I hadn’t felt fear in a long time. Not since it was bled out of me during three long days and nights of hell. After the torment I’d survived, nothing scared me.

“Is that what you fucking think?” Maddox snapped, starting to rise. “Stand up. Let’s go.”

“Sorry I’m late, gentlemen. Things ran a bit late at the office.” Our client hurried over to our table, a briefcase clutched in one hand. He slid onto a chair between Maddox and me.

Maddox sat back down, shooting me a violent glare. Suppressing his rage, he turned to our visitor. “No problem. Eric, is it? I’m Maddox Hale. This is my partner, Ruthless. Tell us how we can help you.”

Getting down to business, Maddox became another version of himself. Immediately he was the syndicate head that everyone knew him to be, ready to make things happen, for the right price. I stubbed out my joint and raised a hand for the server to bring us a round. Otherwise, I was content to let Maddox handle the details of this meeting.

“Right. Eric Ellms. I’m here about my business partner. We haven’t been seeing eye to eye for some time now. Pretty much since he slept with my wife. I’d like to take over the company without a battle. I was told by a colleague that you can help.” His expression both wary and hopeful, Eric had no shame in asking us to wipe out his business partner.

Hey, I didn’t judge, but only because I didn’t care. We all had our reasons for doing the shit we did, and it didn’t really matter what anyone else thought. It wouldn’t stop most of us anyway. As I sat there listening to Maddox work out the details with Eric, my mind wandered back to last night.

To the excited glint in Maven’s ocean colored eyes as she threatened to slice off Evan Archer’s dick. To the way she’d looked at both Ace and me with a sinister hunger that made me desperate to be inside her. I couldn’t resist tasting her lips before leaving her side. Somehow I’d wrestled my demons and walked away before I let myself think about taking her up against Ace’s flashy ride.

My fist clenched as I fought back any thought of Maven. Why wouldn’t that woman stop tormenting me? Like she hadn’t done enough damage to my psyche.

“Can you make it look like an accident?” Eric asked, rousing me from my thoughts. “I can’t have anyone linking it back to me.”

“We may be able to arrange that,” Maddox said with a nod. “We’ll need more information about his daily routine, photos, that kind of thing. And of course, we’ll have to discuss our fee.”

I had no problem putting a bullet in a guy's brain for the right price, but it wouldn't be less than thirty grand. The tougher the job, the higher the price. Eric nodded along, happy to agree to anything we asked.

I tuned out through most of the conversation. Lost inside my own head, I absently stared around the building, watching people mingle and dance. My skin started to itch from the inside, slowly driving me crazy. An uncomfortable sensation that plagued me when I needed to purge my mind. Everything was starting to pile up in my head, making it feel cluttered and suffocating. I wanted to claw holes in my skin, but that wouldn't release the pressure. Only one thing would, and it involved shedding someone else's blood.

As Maddox and Eric reached an agreement, they rose and shook hands. A scream rang out seconds before a hail of gunfire rained down upon the front of the building. Glass exploded as the front doors were targeted. People fell over each other in their panicked efforts to get away.

"What the fuck?" Maddox shouted, shoving Eric toward the back of the building. "Go to the back room and stay there."

I didn't wait around for things to get worse. I was on my feet and running toward the gunfire while Maddox called my name. Having no fear meant not flinching as I hurled myself into chaos. Reaching behind me, I pulled the Glock from where it was tucked into the waist of my jeans, dodging fleeing people as I navigated my way to the front door.

Running right into the line of fire may not have been the wisest move. I was past caring about shit like that. If some

lucky fuck managed to take me out, then so be it. Although I was far too cocky to believe it would happen tonight.

As I ran through the lobby, I passed two of our doormen on the floor with bullet wounds. Outside people fled in every direction, leaving a few wounded behind. One of our security guys was flat on his back, eyes wide and vacant, a bullet lodged in his forehead.

A black sedan idled in front of the building. I saw the gun muzzle pointed out the window right at me a heartbeat before a shot was fired. I dropped down low while firing a shot of my own. I didn't stop with one.

Three bullets through the car window and the muzzle disappeared. With adrenaline driving me, I lunged toward the car, reaching in through the open window. I grabbed hold of the man inside, realizing that I'd nailed him in the face. He was dead.

Someone in the front seat shouted at the driver to take off. I wrenched the back door open and shot the driver before he could obey. Then I pressed my gun to the passenger's skull, hand deadly steady.

"Get out of the fucking car," I barked. "Don't try anything. Let me see your hands."

"All right. All right. I'm getting out." The man in the front placed a handgun on the console before opening his door. He got out with hands raised, turning to face me.

His expression lacked remorse. His gaze slid over me like I was trash, like this entire situation disgusted him.

“Get on your fucking knees,” I snapped, smashing my gun into the side of his face. Not content to stop there, I kicked out one of his knees, bringing him down hard with a pained yelp. “Who do you work for?”

“Nobody, man,” the guy answered between anguished wails. “We’re independent. Small time.”

“Who hired you to come here?” I asked, pressing my gun barrel to his forehead as I stood over him. “You can die fast or you can die very slowly. Answer wisely.”

The man’s gaze flicked past me, and I knew Maddox stood behind me. “Wolfe Hale,” the man said, determined to go down without begging.

Something in my brain prickled. Motherfucker was lying. I slammed my gun against the side of his head again, almost knocking him face down on the pavement.

“Try again,” I demanded, ready to curb stomp the asshole. “I know you’re lying.”

Damn rights he was lying. This kind of thing wasn’t Wolfe’s style. It was, however, Donovan Archer’s. He hadn’t waited long to hit back after what we did to his pathetic offspring. Was he also sending a message to Maven and Ace?

The guy looked me right in the eye and said, “I’m not lying. It was Wolfe Hale. No matter what you do to me, my story won’t change.”

“Archer has something good on you, huh? Let me guess. He threatened your family. Wife. Kids.” I waited, receiving nothing but a blank stare. “Fine. Have it your way.”

I put a bullet in his brain, watching dispassionately as he hit the ground. Sirens wailed in the distance. Dammit. I turned to find Maddox glaring holes into me.

“Either tell me what the fuck is going on or I go to Maven and force it out of her,” he snarled, hands clenched into fists.

Glancing at the black sedan and the three dead men, I nodded. Couldn't really explain this away. “Last night Maven, Ace, and I made a move against Archer. I'll explain everything.”

CHAPTER NINE

MAVEN



Having a quiet evening at home felt strange after what I'd done with Ace and Ruthless last night. Being back in River City didn't make my job disappear. I still had a virtual assistant job to do for several clients. Thankfully, the hours were flexible.

While I worked on a few Instagram posts for a client that sold high quality handmade jewelry, I stuffed my face with pepperoni pizza. Akasha had curled up on the couch next to me. An episode of *Family Feud* played on the television. Every now and then one of the crazy responses would coax a chuckle from me. It was a nice quiet night in my new and relatively bare apartment. Too quiet.

I eyed my phone, tempted to call Rumer. Maybe she'd come over and watch a movie. Before I could reach for the device, it rang. It was my old high school friend, Faith.

"Hey, lady," she gushed when I answered. "Since you haven't been back long, I wasn't able to send you a wedding invitation. I'm calling to invite you to the big day."

Faith prattled on about her upcoming nuptials to the guy she'd met at the law office where she worked as a paralegal. I didn't have much interest in attending a wedding, although it

would do me good to get out and do something normal. Until I realized it wasn't normal at all.

“Danny is Mr. Archer's nephew, so if you'd rather not come, I will totally understand. No hard feelings.” Faith continued talking, giving me the address, date, and time.

My mind got hung up on what she'd said. She was marrying Archer's nephew? His lawyer nephew. Big city, small world. This may be my chance to have a face to face talk with Donovan in an environment where violence would be prohibited. I could safely walk right up and ask him why he was so threatened by me.

“I would love to be part of your big day,” I said, absently stroking the sleeping tuxedo cat beside me. “I'm looking forward to it.”

Damn rights I was. Archer would shit his expensive pants when he saw me.

“Feel free to bring a date.” Faith hesitated before adding, “Maybe not one of the Hales though, just to be on the safe side.”

“No problem. I completely understand.” I smiled to myself when the call ended.

Getting close to a man like Donovan Archer wasn't easy. I couldn't believe my good luck. Faith had just gifted me the perfect opportunity.

I crunched a piece of pizza crust and got back to work. Once my eyes began to blur, I shut it down and got ready for bed. While brushing my teeth and washing my face, I ran through various scenarios in my head. Me walking up to

Archer and wiping the smile off his face with my mere presence alone. Him wanting to kill me and being able to do absolutely nothing. He wouldn't take that kind of risk at a wedding filled with innocent people and children.

In shorts and a tank top I crawled into bed in a room I was still getting used to sleeping in. Like the rest of the apartment, it was relatively bare. A night table next to the bed held a small lamp and a glass of water. The bare walls seemed to shine brightly even in the dark.

Once Akasha got settled in next to me, I quickly dozed off. I had no idea how much time had passed when my eyes popped open. Something had awoken me. A low growl came from the cat. A jolt of adrenaline got my heart pounding when I realized that I wasn't alone. The outline of a man standing near the closet infused me with terror.

Snapping into survival mode, I did my best to keep my breathing steady, as if I were still asleep. Then I ever so slowly slid a hand beneath my pillow, grasping the handle of the knife I kept there. One could never be too careful. Not in this city.

Akasha continued to growl, hissing when the man crept closer. I clutched the knife, waiting for him to get close enough. Then I'd bury it in his gut. Archer hadn't waited long to send someone after me.

With the help of the outside city lights shining in, I was able to make out a rag in one of his hands and a stun gun in the other. He wasn't here to kill me. He was here to abduct me. No way in fucking hell.

I wasn't about to let him get close enough to use either of the things he held. Once he was within arm's reach, I sat up

and swung. The blade slashed across his stomach. He let out a surprised yelp and jerked back out of reach. I came off the bed, lashing out with the intended blow to his gut, plunging my blade into his abdomen. At the same time, he jabbed me with the stun gun, sending shocks of electricity racing through me.

My body seized, and I went down. He staggered backwards, dropping the stun gun as he clutched at the wound. I grunted and shoved to my feet, snatching up his Taser. He raised bloody hands to fend me off. I zapped him anyway, following with another slash of the knife. He shrieked and went down on the floor near the door.

“You came for the wrong woman, asshole. Did Archer send you?” I flicked on the light, astonished by how bright all that blood appeared once the shadows vanished.

Two blows to the gut and a third to the throat. His wounds spilled blood far too fast for any hope of survival. Great. I’d only been here a few nights and already there were bloodstains. So much for my damage deposit.

To my surprise, he nodded. “Archer wants you for targeting his kid. Please, call me an ambulance. I’ll do anything. I’ll work for you instead.”

His words came with pauses and gasps for breath. An ambulance wouldn’t get here in time.

“Sorry, pal, but I would never trust anyone who worked for Archer. Besides, if you turned on him that fast, you would turn on me too.”

When he continued to beg as his life spilled all over my carpet, I snatched up my phone from the bedside table and

called Maddox. Leaving the intruder in the bedroom, I picked up the frightened and wary Akasha, carrying her into the living room with me.

The open patio door made it apparent where he'd entered. The flimsy spring lock was broken. Renting on the second floor hadn't been such a great idea.

"Good timing," Maddox barked into the phone upon answering. "I was just thinking about coming over to spank the shit out of you."

Ahhh fuck. If I wasn't mistaken, Maddox knew about what we'd done to Archer's son.

"Excuse me? Watch the tone, Mads. I'm not in the mood. I've got a guy bleeding out in my bedroom." I kept an eye on the bedroom door in case the bastard managed to get up. "Can you help with the cleanup?"

That seemed to temporarily snuff out Maddox's ire. "What happened? I had a man watching your building. Nobody should've been able to get in there."

I rolled my eyes. I'd easily given one of his guys the slip last night, ensuring he hadn't seen me leave or followed. "Archer sent someone in here with a stun gun and chloroform. This wasn't a hit attempt. It was an abduction."

Maddox sounded absolutely venomous when he said, "I'm on my way."

Things were escalating quickly now with Archer. That hadn't been my intent, but if it derailed his efforts to turn the Hales on each other, it would be worth it.

A peek in the bedroom revealed a dead man. I closed his eyes, otherwise careful not to touch him. Then I returned to the living room to wait. Akasha sat on the couch, watching me pace the length of the small apartment. When the time moved too slow, I poured a shot of whiskey and slammed it back. Just a little something to take the edge off.

Twenty minutes later, there was a tap on the door. I peered through the peephole first, flipping the lock when I saw Maddox standing in the hall. He entered with Ruthless and two other men right behind him. Ruthless's gaze met mine. He gave me a look, trying to communicate without words. Yeah, I already knew that we'd been found out.

"Tell me what happened," Maddox said as the others went to the bedroom to check out the scene.

I recounted the brief but terrifying incident. "Archer doesn't want me dead though. Not yet."

"Is that supposed to reassure me?" The question came like the crack of a whip. Maddox strode into the tiny kitchen and helped himself to the whiskey, drinking straight from the bottle. "If he doesn't want you dead, it's because he wants to do far worse things to you."

"He won't though," I insisted, refusing to let him panic me. "That's not going to happen. We're going to stay one step ahead of him."

"And how do you plan to do that? By luring his son into a hotel room and having your way with him?" Leaning on the counter, Maddox raised a brow, a glare stealing over his gorgeous face.

A smile quirked at my lips despite my efforts to suppress it. “Oh, so you heard about that.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. What were you thinking, Maven? Why the hell would you go out of your way to draw Archer’s attention?” Clutching the whiskey bottle, Maddox took a long drink.

“Why do you think?” I countered, bracing for the argument that I sensed brewing. “He’s targeting you and Wolfe. Someone has to stop him before he succeeds in manipulating you two into killing one another.”

Maddox’s jaw clenched. “What do you think it will do to us if we lose you because you’re running around behind our backs pulling strings that will only put us all in danger? That’s reckless as fuck. I knew I shouldn’t have let you move in here. Can’t take my eye off you for a minute. Apparently.”

“Are you kidding me?” I gaped at him. “You don’t let me do anything, Maddox. Don’t talk down to me like I’m a child. I can handle Archer. Someone has to.”

Maddox’s expression morphed into one of absolute outrage. A vein in his temple stood out as his temper flared. “Giving him an open invitation to come for you is not handling him. You’re not staying here alone. You’re coming back to the house.”

“Fuck that. I’m not going anywhere.” As Ruthless emerged from the bedroom, I turned to him for help. “Can you talk some sense into this maniac? I’m sick of being treated like a damsel who can’t take care of herself.”

Ruthless eyed me with grim amusement. “You’re definitely no damsel, but we found two other guys waiting downstairs to help carry your unconscious ass out of here. Probably shouldn’t be letting your guard down by staying in a building without protection.”

I snatched the whiskey from Maddox and took a swig large enough to burn my throat. “Wow, thanks, Ruthless. Teaming up on me, huh? You didn’t even want me to stay with you guys.”

“I still don’t. Just pointing out that you’d be a fool to stay here alone.” Ruthless’s gaze darted about, like he struggled to maintain eye contact with me. He nodded toward the bedroom. “We’ll take care of dumping Archer’s people on the doorstep of one of his properties. I’d brace for another move from him if I were you. Watch your back.”

“I’ll be watching it,” Maddox declared, slightly drunk and completely annoying. “I’m not leaving your side, Vixen. If you won’t come with me, then I’m staying here.”

The two men they’d brought came out of the bedroom with my assailant’s body hanging between them. They dragged his limp form to the patio and heaved him over the railing onto the ground below. Easier than trying to move him through a building with cameras. One of them jumped down after him while the other hurried from the apartment through the main door.

The clock on the microwave informed me that it was shortly past one in the morning. I hadn’t slept as long as I’d thought.

Too tired to fight with Maddox, I said, “You don’t have to stay. I’ll be fine. I’m not afraid.”

“You weren’t afraid the night Archer’s people tortured you either. Not until it happened. I’ll die before I let that happen again.” Shadows stole through Maddox’s blue eyes as he stared at the tile floor. Guilt racked him, reminding me that beneath the hardheaded exterior was a man who couldn’t live with the thought of failing me again.

“Fine,” I relented, unable to kick him out with that look on his face. Trying to meet Ruthless’s eyes, I said, “What about you, Ruthless? Do you want to stay too? We can make popcorn, watch movies, and plot against our enemies. It will be a blast.”

My facetious tone elicited a hint of a smile from Ruthless. It happened so fast I almost thought I’d imagined it.

“I’ll leave the slumber party fun to you two. I need to make sure that Archer gets back what’s left of his guys.” Ruthless nodded to Maddox on his way out.

“No kiss this time?” I teased, unable to keep the taunt from popping out of my mouth.

Ruthless’s response was to flip me the middle finger before closing the door behind him. I snickered to myself. Eventually he wouldn’t be able to keep resisting me. I looked forward to that day.

“I knew it,” Maddox muttered, smirking as he pulled out his phone. “I’m going to have a small army stationed outside this building for the rest of the night. I don’t want any interruptions while I fuck you.”

His bold claim made me do a doubletake. I'm not sure why. This kind of talk wasn't new for Maddox. It was the possessive way he spoke, like there was no question about what he would do to me.

I was torn between wanting to slap the audacity out of him and telling him to get on his knees. With a sly grin, I asked, "With or without a knife held to your throat?"

CHAPTER TEN

MAVEN



The wicked grin Maddox wore set off tingles in my stomach. He raised a brow and tilted his head to one side. “Sure, that’s always fun. Or maybe I can be the one wielding the knife for a change.”

My cheeks warmed along with the rest of me. I bit back a giggle. Pulling a knife on Maddox and making him fuck me never got old. I’d lost count of how many times I’d done it over the course of our relationship. In my defense, sometimes it was the only way to shut him up for a while.

“I don’t think you need any weapons in the bedroom, Mads. You’re crazy enough without them.” Excitement stole through me as the dark sparkle in his eyes deepened.

He plucked the whiskey bottle from my hand and placed it on the counter before grabbing me by the waist and setting me up there beside it. Standing in front of me, Maddox tugged on my pajama shorts. I lifted my ass to accommodate him as he slid them off.

“You haven’t seen crazy yet,” he murmured, kissing me. Soft at first, which wasn’t like him. The bite on my lip that followed was exactly like him.

Tugging my panties aside, Maddox leaned down to breathe me in before tonguing my slit. He delved between my folds, occasionally flicking my clit. I sucked in a sharp breath, grasping a tight handful of his hair.

He gripped my hips, fingers pressing into my flesh with bruising force. An unexpected bite on the inside of my thigh made me yelp. A rush of desire followed, creating a steady throb between my legs. Maddox licked me with an intensity that stole my breath. He worshipped my pussy like a man starved for it.

I flung out a hand to brace myself against the counter, almost knocking over the whiskey bottle. Moans spilled from me, one after the other as the pleasure grew with each flick of his tongue. He teased my clit enough to make me want more before dipping inside me. I squirmed on the counter, pulling his hair hard enough to make him swear.

“Damn, Vixen,” Maddox laughed. “You’re so fucking hungry for me. You like to pretend you don’t need it but you’re dripping wet. Looks like you missed me a lot more than you want to admit.”

My face burned as he used my arousal against me. Refusing to give him the satisfaction he sought, I said, “I never said I didn’t miss you, Mads. Now shut up and make me come.”

Hearing those words pop out of my mouth made my thoughts briefly dart to Ruthless. I’d known when asking him to stay that he wouldn’t. In my gut I felt that it was only a matter of time. Ruthless and I walked a different path with

each other than with anyone else. It would bring us together in its own time.

Maddox chuckled against me as he targeted my clit with deadly precision. As much as he enjoyed antagonizing me, he didn't hold out and torture me the way Wolfe often did. Maddox wanted me to orgasm. It fed his ego. He and his brother were nothing alike in bed. I couldn't help but feel that I got the best of both worlds that way.

I came with a shudder and gasped, "Fuck." Maddox straightened up and lifted me off the counter. Needing to push back against his controlling nature, I stopped him from taking it further.

"Get your clothes off and go sit on the couch," I commanded, leaving him to obey as I left the room. Entering the bedroom, I ignored the bloodstain near the door and fetched blankets, pillows, and condoms. I wouldn't be sleeping in here until the carpet had been replaced.

When I returned, Maddox sat in the middle of the couch, stark naked, hands clasped behind his head. I deposited everything on the floor and knelt in front of him. He was always in such a rush to be inside me. I wanted to make him slow down for a few minutes and savor every touch.

Taking his cock in my hand, I held Maddox's gaze as I flicked my tongue along the head. His pupils dilated as he watched, making his eyes almost black. I stroked my hand up and down his thick shaft, reveling in the power I held in my grasp. So easily I could have him crying out in either pain or pleasure. I loved that feeling.

“Why does it feel like you’re thinking about biting off my cock?” Maddox asked, eyes glazed with lust. “You want to hurt me, Vixen?”

“Pretty much always,” I admitted with a devious grin. “Don’t worry, Mads. I won’t do anything that we’d both regret.”

He reached to cup my cheek before tugging the hair tie from my locks. Then he fisted a handful, using it to guide my head back down to his cock. A daring move. To remind him who was really in control here, I sucked his entire length into my mouth, grazing the shaft with my teeth as I withdrew.

Maddox tensed, making a noise that was both a moan and a curse. He loved it. Pain with pleasure was something we both shared. His hand tightened in my hair as I swallowed his cock again. This time he held me down upon it, only easing off to let me breathe. Another grazing of his shaft with my teeth and he came undone.

Maddox pulled me off his dick, grasping my chin in a hand. “As much as I’d love to fill this beautiful mouth of yours, I haven’t had nearly enough of your pussy.”

He rose from the couch, swiped a condom from the blanket pile on the floor, and quickly sheathed his erection. He surprised me by picking me up in his arms and pressing me against the living room wall next to the couch. I automatically wrapped my legs around his waist as he thrust inside me.

My arms went around Maddox’s neck. I kissed him with a drowning desire as he buried himself deep within me. He felt so good, so right. I questioned why I’d ever thought I could leave him. The way he rolled his hips between my thighs had

me moaning his name. Every deep thrust tied me tighter to the man I'd loved and left behind. I knew that I'd never have the strength to walk away again. Come hell or high water, I was going down with this ship.

Maddox roughly gripped my face, pressing my head against the wall as he leaned in to bite my neck. The sharp sting of his teeth bruising my sensitive flesh got my heart pounding faster. He wasn't happy if he didn't leave marks behind, evidence that he'd been there. The deep grooves that my fingernails cut into his back and shoulders marked him as well. There was no questioning that we belonged to each other.

"You are mine," he murmured in my ear. "I won't let anyone touch you again. I fucking swear it."

His desperation to protect me came through in the frantic way he moved, fast thrusts that quickened with each one. Despite my efforts to forgive him and bring us to a place of peace, Maddox continued to punish himself.

I cupped his cheek, forcing him to meet my eyes. The pain that flickered through him cut deeper than any knife. "I know, babe. It's going to be okay. We're going to take Archer down. Together."

His low groan caused something to stir inside me. "I fucking love you, Maven. Don't leave me again or I'm going to do some very bad things."

A claim like that uttered by most people would cause alarm. Coming from the man who'd claimed me when we were still teenagers, it sent me crashing into a body shuddering orgasm. Maddox gripped my ass tight and pressed his mouth to mine as his cock twitched inside me with his climax.

He carried me over to the blanket pile and eased me down. As he removed the condom and tied it off, he glanced at the cat tree near the window where Akasha soundly slept. “Good thing she’s sleeping, otherwise that could’ve been weird.”

“Shut up,” I laughed, playfully punching his chest. My hand lingered as I outlined the pink V shaped scar inflicted by my knife. “So tell me how you found out about Evan Archer. Did Ruthless tell you?”

Settling in next to me, Maddox tucked a pillow beneath his head. “Yeah, but only because he had no choice. There was an incident at The Hole earlier tonight.”

I propped myself on an elbow, giving him my full attention as he told me about the shooting at his nightclub. My heart lodged in my throat, choking me with horror. We’d gone into that hotel room to mess with Evan Archer knowing damn well we were inviting this kind of response. I hadn’t expected it to come so swiftly.

“Shit, Mads, I’m sorry. I never meant for that to happen.” There were no words for what had happened. Archer had gone all out on us tonight. “I needed to make it clear to Archer that I didn’t come home to hide out and put my head in the sand. I came to take over this city.”

“I’m just relieved that you’re all right. We can’t take reckless chances though, Mave. This is no time to be caught sleeping alone.” Maddox’s expression became wistful as he stroked a finger along my arm. “You were right when you said that the four of us guys need each other to take Archer down.

Unfortunately, I don't think Wolfe will be too keen on cooperating."

"Let me handle Wolfe," I said. "He's stubborn, as Hales tend to be, but he'll come around. I'm sure of it."

I wasn't as sure of it as I'd like to be. Although there was no way he could believe the attack on The Hole tonight was anyone other than Archer. Maddox hadn't believed for a second that his brother was behind it. Surely Wolfe would see what was going on here.

"I received a wedding invite today. To an Archer wedding." I raised a hand when Maddox opened his mouth to protest, willing him to hear me out. Once I explained that the wedding would be filled with people not affiliated with the crime world, he began to lighten up.

"I don't love the idea, but you have a point about getting close enough to Donovan to talk without him getting his hands on you. Take Ruthless as your date." The finger Maddox ran along my arm traced my collarbone before continuing down over my ribs.

I pressed my lips together and shook my head. "No deal. Ruthless isn't the party friendly type. I'll bring Ace. Archer will see him as the least threatening of you all, and he's a natural charmer. People love him."

Ace's chill personality made him seem like the least threatening of my four men, but the truth was that they were all dangerous. In fact, Ace's charmer nature and easy smile possibly made him the deadliest. Nobody saw it coming when he turned the tables and nailed them to the wall.

“Okay, good point,” Maddox agreed. “Ace it is. Ruthless and I will be nearby though, just in case.”

Maddox’s hand continued to travel down my side, a gentle but firm caress. Unable to get enough of me, he dipped between my legs. I lay back on the extra pillow, comfortable despite being on the hard floor. I couldn’t remember the last time Maddox and I had been like this, cuddled together beneath the blankets, enjoying one another.

As fate would have it, we wouldn’t be doing that now. My phone rang, jolting me upright. I scrambled to my feet to fetch it from the kitchen counter where I’d placed it. Rumer’s name was on the screen.

“What’s up?” I answered, praying that Archer hadn’t targeted her. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine,” Rumer shouted over the background noise of whatever club she occupied. “We have a big problem though, Mave. Someone killed one of the Sanguine Dragons MC members. A witness is claiming that it was Maddox.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MAVEN



“Are you fucking kidding me?” I barely got the words out, thanks to the shock of adrenaline that jump started my heart.

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the biker bar that I brought you to, the one the Crypt Keepers run,” Rumer said. “The Rat Cage. The Dragons president is here. He just got the news, and he’s pissed. Just wanted to give you a heads up. Better fill Maddox in.”

No sooner had she said that than Maddox’s phone rang in his abandoned jeans. Bad news sure traveled fast. He snatched the phone up, frowning at the name on the screen.

“I think he’s about to find out. Stay out of trouble. I’ll get back to you soon.” I ended the call and turned to Maddox, too late to warn him before he answered his phone.

As he listened to the person on the other end, his expression darkened, becoming downright vicious. “Have you lost your goddamn mind, Dodge? Why the fuck would I kill one of your men?”

My palms began to sweat when Maddox rose and grabbed for his boxer shorts, slipping them on before reaching for his pants. He was being framed for a murder he didn’t commit. A murder that would threaten the partnership he’d

formed with the Sanguine Dragons MC. Only one man would benefit from ruining this for the Hale Syndicate, and that was Donovan Archer. He was a busy little bee tonight.

I quickly donned my clothes as well, unable to take my eyes off Maddox as he grew angrier by the moment. For the first time since grabbing Evan Archer, I wondered if perhaps I'd gone too far. Maybe I fucked up. Now Archer was raining down hell upon us, and it was all my fault.

"I want to know who your so-called witness is," Maddox hissed into the phone. "I'll be there in twenty minutes. Don't let that fucker leave."

"Fuck, Maddox, I'm sorry," I said when he'd finished the call. "This is all on me. If I hadn't recruited Ace and Ruthless to go after Archer's son, this wouldn't have happened. Archer's coming at us hard because of me."

Maddox's furious expression softened. He came to me, pulling me into his arms. "The only thing to be sorry for is that you didn't kill that little prick when you had the chance. You were right, Mave. It's way past time to take Archer down."

"I'm going with you," I said, wary of letting him out of my sight. Maddox was the type to walk into the place and start beating the hell out of people. I didn't trust him not to make matters worse by losing his shit. It was a delicate time.

He started to protest and immediately stopped. "Fine. You're the rising queen of the city. You shouldn't be hidden away and treated like a helpless damsel. You know I only want to protect you though."

Maddox traced one of the bruises he'd left on my neck with his teeth. His jaw was hard set, like he internally wrestled with himself.

"I know. But you can only do so much, Mads. Archer will always be a threat if we don't get rid of him." I held out a hand. "Car keys. I'll drive."

He'd had far more to drink than I had. Thankfully, he wasn't an ass about it and handed over the keys without protest. We left the apartment and descended the stairs into the lobby where I nodded at the night doorman on our way out. To my surprise there were half a dozen Hale Syndicate members gathered around my building.

A warmth filled my chest, reminding me of the days when I was happy to have Maddox's protection instead of feeling that it was something I needed to resist. We'd taken care of each other once. That's the only way we would win this war against Archer.

We got into Maddox's blacked out BMW. Everything about the car was sleek. I took a moment to marvel at the luxurious interior. Then I put on my seatbelt, started the engine, and took a deep breath. Two thirty in the damn morning and we were about to walk into a biker club where we would be greatly outnumbered if things went south. Considering Maddox had just been accused of murder, things weren't looking so good.

"Call Ruthless," I said, knowing that if Maddox blew his top, I'd never be able to handle him alone. My tone left no room for argument. "I have a feeling that we're going to need him."

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Maddox pulled out his phone, slipping me a sidelong glance. “I fucking love it when you take charge.”

I rolled my eyes and grinned, fingers tightening on the wheel as excitement thrilled through me. As much as I hated the circumstances, I was elated to have Maddox at my side. It was almost like old times.

For a brief moment, a memory threatened to surface, shaking my confidence. A flash of Maddox storming out of the funeral reception, hours before Archer’s goons had grabbed me from a grocery store parking lot. A second flash of the man who’d spent most of my time captive bringing me nothing but pain and sick promises.

I swallowed hard, braking suddenly as the light ahead of me turned red. Lost in the past, I hadn’t been paying attention. Steeling my features so Maddox wouldn’t notice my mental break, I opened the window several inches, letting the evening summer air cascade over me.

Going back to that night and that horrible place reignited the pain and anguish I’d felt towards Maddox. A wave of nausea made my stomach roll. I sucked in a deep lungful of air in an effort to calm my racing thoughts. I knew that traumatic memories never really went away, but I thought I’d learned to live with them. Being with Maddox was putting me to the test.

I wanted to forgive him, but I didn’t think I could ever forget.

When we pulled into the parking lot of The Rat Cage, I glanced over to find Maddox staring at me pensively in the dark. “What?” I asked, forcing a small smile.

“Are you okay?” His voice was gentle, like he sensed how fragile part of me still was.

Because I didn’t know how to reassure him when I couldn’t even reassure myself, I nodded and said, “I will be. Don’t worry about me.”

Maddox put his hand on the door, ready to get out. “All I’ve done for the past seven years is worry about you. I’m not going to stop now. Are you sure that you’re up for this? It could get nasty.”

A knock on my window startled me, and I yelped, frowning when I saw that it was Ruthless. “Hell yeah, I’m up for it. Let’s settle this peacefully though, Maddox. We didn’t come here to make things worse.”

The half-assed nod I got from Maddox was as close to an agreement as he was willing to give me. I knew what that meant. Be ready for anything.

We got out of the car and joined Ruthless who’d brought six men with him. They would wait outside, entering only if given a signal. Walking in with too many people would send the message that we were here for violence. I hoped to avoid any such thing.

“Rumer is in there, guys,” I said as we approached the front entry. “If things get ugly, we have to get her out.”

“This night is never going to fucking end, is it?”
Ruthless snarled, popping his knuckles.

Maddox punched him in the arm. “Maybe you should have thought about that before you went after Archer’s son, dickhole.”

Wanting to locate Rumer right away, I led the way inside with both men right behind me. I felt a lot better with Ruthless there to keep Maddox in line. The man was a hothead with an attitude. Sexy as hell and deep down a good guy, but still a manic asshole ready to go off like a bomb at any time.

It wasn't hard to spot Rumer once we were inside. She was the only one decked out head to toe in bright colors. A tight blue mini dress hugged her body as she danced with a man I recognized. Rush, the biker from the night Wolfe's club was hit. Nice to see her with a decent guy for a change.

Maddox didn't wait around. He strolled right up to the table filled with Sanguine Dragons members. Their president rose to greet him, and he didn't look happy about it. I'd have to speak with Rumer later. I hurried alongside Maddox, wary of his intentions.

Dodge Harrison was a tall, bulky man with a stature that would make most men think twice before messing with him. Maddox Hale was not most men. The heavy beard and piercing stare did nothing to deter him.

"Care to tell me why I have a dead enforcer and a witness claiming that you were the one who shot him?" Dodge grabbed Maddox's shoulder in a hold that appeared friendly but bordered on brutality. "What's going on, Hale? I'm hearing a lot of talk about you and your brother going at it. My club won't be involved in that shit."

Maddox raised both hands and shook his head. "I had nothing to do with your man's death, Dodge. You should know me better than that. I would never do anything to ruin our arrangement, and I don't fuck over people I've made deals

with. There's nothing up with Wolfe and me. Our problem is Archer."

"Archer? What about him?" Dodge's gaze traveled over Ruthless and me. He lingered on me, seemingly surprised at my presence.

The leaders of MCs and syndicates in this city were going to have to get used to having me back. Whether they liked it or not, I would be one of them. Although women didn't play as many major roles in the crime scene as men, we weren't entirely absent. And we should never be underestimated.

"Archer hit Wolfe's club and framed me for it. He's trying to start a war." Maddox nodded at Ruthless and me. "These two went after Archer's spawn. Things have escalated quickly. There was a shooting at my nightclub earlier, and Archer tried to grab Maven a few hours ago."

Dodge's brow furrowed. His leather vest creaked as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Are you trying to tell me that Archer took out my man to frame you?"

"Of course he did. He wants to destroy our alliance. He's doing everything he can to weaken my operation, but he's not going to get away with it." Maddox paused, considering his next words. "Look, Dodge, I need you to trust me on this. What reason would I have to kill one of your men?"

Head cocked to one side, Dodge looked Maddox up and down. Despite the alliances made between organizations, trust only ran so deep. "According to the witness, you did it because he found out that you were fucking us out of money owed to

us. You lied about the earnings of the last few jobs we did for you.”

Maddox scoffed, almost laughing in the biker’s face. “For one, why the hell would I kill your guy in front of witnesses? And for two, who the fuck is this witness? I want a piece of him.”

“He said it happened at the warehouse bar. The neutral zone. Out back. Said he went for a smoke and saw you pull the trigger.” Pulling a cigarette from behind his ear, Dodge tucked it between his lips. “If you didn’t do it, Hale, then you better bring me the one who did. Or our business is done. I can’t take the risk you’re becoming.”

“Who is the witness, Dodge?” Maddox repeated, his voice dropping to a deadly pitch.

Dodge’s gaze drifted past us to someone at the bar, and he nodded in that direction. “Ryker King.”

We turned in unison to find the president of the Dead City Zombies MC seated at the bar, shooting the shit with the bartender while drinking a beer. There was a division between the MCs in this city. The Zombies weren’t generally allowed into this bar.

Maddox’s jaw dropped at the sight of him. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. You don’t know who killed your man, Dodge? He’s sitting at the bar drinking your goddamn booze.”

“Archer recently struck a deal of some kind with Ryker,” Ruthless supplied, a scowl adorning his face. “Can’t trust the Zombies. They’re in Archer’s pocket.”

Before he'd finished speaking, Maddox was already storming across the room. Ruthless and I exchanged a knowing look before rushing after him. We didn't make it in time to stop Maddox from grabbing Ryker King by the neck and roughly jerking him off his stool onto the floor.

He slammed the Zombies president down with bone jarring force. Ryker's beer bottle went flying. Shock became rage when Ryker saw who'd grabbed him. He started to scramble to his feet, but Maddox reached down and seized hold of his shirt, dragging him up while smashing a fist into his face.

Maddox didn't stop there. He never gave Ryker a chance to recover as blow after blow landed. "You fucking piece of shit. You're going to regret the day you became Donovan Archer's bitch."

I kept my distance, wary of taking a stray punch not meant for me. Several people in the vicinity moved out of the way while others drew closer, eager to watch the fight. Ryker managed to get in a few hits of his own as he did his best to stay on his feet. Ruthless watched them both, braced and ready to intervene. He seemed to be waiting for the right moment.

"Fuck you, Hale," Ryker sneered, spitting blood at Maddox while dodging a punch. "You know what you did tonight. This little performance isn't fooling anyone."

"Unlike you, asshole, I own my shit. If I killed Dodge's man, I'd happily admit it. I have nothing to hide." Maddox launched himself at Ryker, tackling him down to the floor. "You're a dead man, King."

Wrapping his hands around Ryker's throat, Maddox squeezed tight. Ryker's face turned several shades of red as he struggled to break Maddox's hold.

That's when Ruthless stepped in. He dragged Maddox off Ryker and shoved him several feet away. When Ryker made as if to follow, I stepped into his path with a blade in hand, the tip pointed at his throat.

"Back the fuck off," I hissed, ready to gut him like a fish. "You do realize we have nothing to lose by killing you. All you've done is dig yourself a very early grave."

"You think I'm afraid of a tiny little thing like you with your big bad knife?" Ryker made a show of looking me over. "You're a nice piece of ass but that mouth of yours needs work."

I took a swing with the knife, slashing his cheek. Before I could take a jab at his throat, Ruthless was there shoving between us. He hit Ryker hard enough to throw him on his ass. A boisterous shout went up from those watching.

"Watch your mouth when you talk to her," Ruthless snarled, placing a worn combat boot on Ryker's chest. His dark gaze swung to me, gleaming with violent intent. "Maven, cut out his tongue."

With nobody to hold him back, Maddox was right there, ready to help with the mutilation. He placed a foot on Ryker's forehead to keep him from moving. Unfortunately, Dodge wasn't into it. He muscled his way into the chaos with a few bikers flanking him.

“Nobody is cutting off anyone’s body parts in my club,” he barked. “Take your bullshit outside.”

His men moved in to separate everyone, using muscle but not violence. I could respect that. It was the right way to run a business in our world.

Maddox wasn’t ready to back down. He let a grizzled biker shove him away from Ryker, holding up his hands in protest. “Give us five minutes with him. Then we’ll all know who really killed your man.”

“Do it on your own property, Hale. It’s not my problem.” Pointing a finger at us, Dodge included Ryker when he said, “I want all of you out. Now.”

Kicking us out wasn’t enough. Dodge and his men escorted us to the parking lot, then waited while Ryker drove away first. While I understood his desire to keep the heat off of his establishment, I didn’t understand why he wouldn’t do anything it took to get the truth. Despite Maddox’s pleas, Dodge’s mind wouldn’t be changed.

“Fucking son of a bitch!” In a fit of temper, Maddox slammed a fist into the side of his BMW.

“Shut up and get in the car.” Ruthless shoved him toward the passenger side. “You know better than to lose your shit in public. I don’t think our enemies need any more weaknesses to exploit.”

Maddox mumbled something snide beneath his breath and got in the car. I joined him, sliding into the driver’s seat. It had been some time since I’d seen him this mad. Nothing pissed Mads off like liars.

I waited for Ruthless to pull out of the parking lot before following the black SUV. Most of the drive back to the Hale house was spent listening to Maddox rant and rave about how Archer wouldn't see it coming when we finally killed him. Although I shared his feelings, I stayed calm, focusing on the road. Of course he was losing it. He'd just been accused of a murder he didn't commit.

When we arrived at his house, Maddox exploded from the vehicle. On his way inside he kicked over a large ceramic planter filled with flowers before punching out the light above the front door. He hadn't calmed during the drive. He'd only succeeded in hyping himself up worse.

"For fuck's sakes," Ruthless muttered as we followed Maddox into the house. "I am not in the mood for one of his fits. If he starts drinking, I'm knocking his ass out."

Maddox always did have a temper, but he'd never been a maniac about it. I hadn't been around for a long time though. Years of running the syndicate were likely catching up with him.

My phone was blowing up with messages from Rumer. I'd have to get back to her when I had five minutes of peace.

As Ruthless and I entered the living room, we found Maddox chugging straight from a whiskey bottle. When he finished, he launched the empty bottle through the open patio door where it smashed on the concrete next to the pool.

"Settle down, Maddox," Ruthless shouted. "Or I'll lay your ass out on the floor."

Before he'd even finished speaking, Maddox had buried his fist in the wall. I'd seen him like this a few times before, usually when he felt helpless and trapped. There would be no getting through to him until he'd calmed down.

Ruthless wasn't playing around. He meant exactly what he'd said. In a few lengthy strides he reached Maddox who stupidly took a swing at him. Ruthless caught the fist coming at him and twisted Maddox's arm behind his back. Then he nailed Maddox with a punch that forced his head painfully to one side, knocking him out cold.

Maddox hit the floor with a thud. I stared at the two of them with my mouth agape. This night needed to end now. I was over it.

Stepping over Maddox's prone form, Ruthless went to the bar and splashed some rum into a glass. He raised it to me and said, "What do you think our next move should be?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

MADDOX



I studied the bruises on my face in the visor mirror of the Escalade, frowning at the purple patch on my chin from Ruthless's fist. Last night had been a doozy. "Is this meeting really necessary? I'm head of the syndicate. I decide when we have a meeting."

Ruthless cast a derogatory glance my way. He was entirely unapologetic. Not that I expected him to be sorry for clocking me. "You're not the only cog in this machine, M. Those men have invested years in the syndicate. Can't blame them for wondering what the hell is going on lately."

I sat back in my seat and grumbled to myself while staring out the window. The men we were going to see were my father's oldest and closest friends. Those who'd helped him run the syndicate when Wolfe and I were still kids. They'd been resentful when my father died. Having to answer to someone half their age didn't sit well with them. I'd always suspected that eventually they would make a move against me.

"They want me out," I muttered. "They always have. They're looking for a reason to take action."

"You're fucking paranoid. None of them want your position. Just go in there and tell them what's going on. They

deserve to know.” Ruthless socked me in the shoulder. “Try laying off the booze for a while, huh? It’s not helping.”

I scoffed. “It helps me.”

Liquor was the only thing that numbed me out. My thoughts and feelings were scrambled, giving me a much needed break from the never ending guilt and anxiety. I’d watched my father drink himself right into the grave. Although I didn’t want that for myself, I didn’t know any other way to cope. I’d been relying on it for too long.

We pulled up to the office building where the syndicate’s accountant worked. I wished I’d stuck a few mini bottles in my pocket. Anything to make this meeting pass by faster.

“Don’t be a jackass in there,” Ruthless warned. “Unless you want a matching bruise on the other side.”

I chuckled, unafraid. “Better make sure you knock me out or we’re going to have one hell of a brawl.”

Ruthless and I had been best friends for most of our lives. He’d always been the enforcer type, ready to step in and use violence to solve a problem, even if that problem was me. I didn’t hold it against him for doing what he had to do in the moment. However, I didn’t always accept his interference either. We’d butted heads more times than I could count over the years. Still, he was family, and I’d throw myself in front of a bullet for him.

We entered the building and waited for the receptionist to take us from the front waiting area down a long back hall to a conference room. I stepped into the room to find five of my

father's closest men seated around a long rectangular table. It was pretty much exactly who I'd expected.

"Hello, gentleman," I greeted them with false enthusiasm. Then I lied through my teeth. "Always nice to see you."

"I'm sure," said Gerald Feldman, my father's close friend and advisor. "Would you like tea or coffee?"

I pulled out a chair and dropped into it with a shake of my head. "No, thanks. I'm good. Let's just get things rolling, shall we? Who wants to tell me why I'm here?"

Gerald seemed to be the appointed spokesperson for the group. In a gray suit, his thinning salt and pepper hair slicked back, he appraised me with a judgmental stare. "What's going on with you, Maddox? We're hearing all kinds of stories about you going after Wolfe and killing one of the Dragons MC members. This isn't a good look for the syndicate."

I leaned back in my chair, pressing my fingertips together. Deep breaths. Stay calm. "Of course I didn't go after Wolfe. I didn't kill the biker either. It's Archer, which should be pretty damn obvious to anyone paying attention."

"Archer?" Gerald repeated. "Does this have something to do with Maven Hart's return?"

Hearing him say her name with that judgmental tone fired up my temper. My fuse was short. Sucking in a breath, I spoke through clenched teeth. "I wouldn't doubt it. Archer is worried that she'll reunite Wolfe and me. If that were to happen, we'd have enough power to bring him down."

“And is that a possibility?” Robert asked, drawing my gaze toward the heavily tattooed older man. He’d once been a top syndicate enforcer. “For you and Wolfe to come to some kind of agreeable terms? If that’s what Archer wants to prevent, it only makes sense that you should partner up. It’s been a long time.”

There was a murmur of agreement and plenty of head nods. I didn’t blame any of them for wanting my brother and me to play nice. It would make these rich bastards a lot richer and give all of us extra security in this city. They thought they knew everything about what happened back then, but they didn’t understand that it wasn’t so easy.

“You’d have to ask Wolfe about that,” I said with a shrug. “He’s the one holding the grudge. He’s the one who left the syndicate.”

The men seated around the table exchanged looks with one another. My temper climbed several more notches. Something didn’t feel right. This felt like an ambush.

“We think that maybe it’s time for you to take the first step in repairing your relationship,” Gerald said, interlacing his fingers. “You need to go to Wolfe and do whatever it takes to get him back into the fold. It will be best for all of us.”

My fingers tightened on the arms of my chair as I fought to keep my ass in it. All I wanted to do was drag Gerald across the table by his tie. “Oh, is that what you all think I should do? News flash, boys. You’re not calling the shots. Wolfe doesn’t even believe that I’m not behind the attacks on his organization. What makes you think he’s going to rush back with open arms?”

The quiet that followed fed my suspicions. Something was going on, and I didn't like it.

Gerald propped his elbows on the table and sighed. "I'm afraid we're not giving you a choice. Things haven't been going well for a while now. Since Maven returned, you've been more volatile than usual. The public fights and accusations aren't good for business. Either you get this syndicate back on track and bring Wolfe back or we'll remove you from power."

My body flamed with angry heat. Ruthless's chair creaked as he braced himself for my reaction. I didn't know yet what that reaction would be. There was only one way to respond to such a threat.

"I fucking dare you to try," I snarled between clenched teeth. "In case you've all forgotten, I'm the one in charge here. I won't be threatened by my own people. I'll kill every last one of you before I allow you to force my hand on anything. And I sure as hell won't be replaced by any of you."

"There's no need to get excited." Gerald waved a hand dismissively. "We all want the same thing. Success for the syndicate and the end of Donovan Archer's reign. All you have to do is convince Wolfe to come back."

I shot to my feet, unable to stay seated. Fury filled me to the point of bursting. Who did these holier than thou fucks think they were?

"If you think I'm volatile now, Gerald, then boy will you be surprised when I burn your goddamn house to the ground while you sleep." I jabbed a finger in the air, including the rest

of them. “You all need to remember who you’re fucking with. I will not be threatened.”

“Sit down, shut up, and listen,” Robert barked, muscles rippling in his arms. “We have a right to share our opinions and have some kind of say in the direction the syndicate takes. We’ve been doing this a hell of a lot longer than you have, kid. Might be a good idea to be quiet and listen to those with far more experience.”

A maniacal laugh spilled from my lips. I held up both hands, inviting Robert to do his worst. “Want a piece of me, Robert? Come on then. Let’s see how you’ve held up in your old age.”

Ruthless placed a hand on my shoulder, squeezing tight. “Maddox, settle down. We won’t be fighting our own people. That’s exactly what Archer would want.”

Slapping his hand away, I remained standing but made no move toward Robert or anyone else. “Then they should have thought about that before making insane threats they can never uphold. I will do whatever it takes to protect my title. I’d advise you all to watch your backs.”

In a fit of rage, I slammed a fist into the wall, finding a twisted satisfaction in the pain that ricocheted through my arm as I hit a stud. A framed certificate of some kind fell off the wall, the glass shattering all over the carpet. Pulling my bloodied hand free, I stormed from the room, tearing the door open hard enough to pull it partway off the hinges.

Never had I claimed to be the best leader. I’d been forced to take the reins far earlier than expected. I was learning as I went while also doing things my own way. I

didn't want to be a replica of my father. Having my own men turn on me made me sick. The betrayal left a bitter taste in my mouth. Not only did I have Archer to worry about, now I had to stop an uprising from the inside.

For the first time since he'd walked out on the syndicate, I missed my brother. But I'd walk through the gates of hell before I would ever tell him that.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ACE



I couldn't take my eyes off Maven. The woman was a total knockout no matter what she wore, even sweats and a messy bun. Tonight a long black cocktail dress hugged her beautiful body. It was a strapless number that showed off her cleavage and the tattoos marking her left arm. The black cat on her wrist was my favorite.

Hair the color of ravens fell down her back in perfect curls. So badly I wanted to feel it slide between my fingers. Watching her dance with Wolfe had me itching to cut in. I did my best to be patient and wait my turn, allowing an older couple to draw me into a boring conversation about art.

Wolfe and I had been invited to this shindig where rich folks gathered to mingle and network while drinking from bottles of wine worth more than my monthly rent. This wasn't really our crowd, but we'd done jobs for several of these people, and we couldn't turn down an opportunity to score more work. These types were happy to fork over cash for protection. Not to mention hits on everyone from the competition to their own spouses. Gotta get that life insurance pay out.

Despite my constant nodding and smiling, laughing at the right times, I had no interest in these people. They were a source of income and little else. Being social came easily to me, and I was a hell of a good actor. My friendly smile was plastered in place as I nodded along to a conversation about stock portfolios. Bored as hell.

The moment the song ended, I excused myself and made a beeline across the room, sweeping Maven out of Wolfe's arms. "Sorry, man, but I can't keep fake smiling anymore. My face hurts. It's your turn to mingle."

Wolfe frowned but relented. "All right, I suppose that's fair. If it looks like I've been roped into a painful encounter, come and save me."

"Finally," I sighed, pulling Maven close as the band started the next song. "I've been waiting to get you all to myself."

A dazzling smile graced her painted red lips. She snuggled in against me, letting me guide the two of us around the dance floor. I half-assed it, more interested in enjoying the feeling of having her in my arms.

"I needed this," she said, resting her head on my chest. "It's been a hell of a week. God, you smell good. I could just eat you up."

"Please do," I chuckled, helping myself to a gentle stroke of her hair. "I'm all yours, baby."

When she playfully nibbled my neck, I almost lost my mind. My cock took notice, rising to attention. *Down, boy. Not a good time.*

“I miss movie nights,” she murmured next to my ear. “When the five of us would order pizza and take over Maddox’s living room. Snuggling under the blankets while watching some stupid action flick. Those were the days.”

She summoned many memories with those words. I did indeed remember movie nights. I always tried to get one of the two couch spots on either side of Maven. I never cared what we watched. I was always watching her.

“They were good days,” I agreed, resting my cheek on the top of her head. “But the good days don’t have to be over. We can make new memories. Want to plan a movie night? Let’s do it. We can do anything you want, Bright Eyes.”

She sank into me, surrendering herself to the moment. “Yeah, I do want to plan a movie night. What do you think the odds are of getting both Wolfe and Maddox to come?”

My gaze strayed across the room to where Wolfe sipped champagne while a woman shamelessly flirted with him. He smiled politely but showed no interest. It would take a lot more than a rich widow decked out in the diamonds she’d bought after having her husband wacked to steal his heart from Maven. She’d taken it with her when she left. Wolfe wouldn’t even try to form a real relationship with anyone else.

Maven’s absence had left a hole behind. She’d taken a piece of us when she left. All four of us had struggled to deal with it in our own way. Maddox had been more obvious about his pain, getting drunk and stupid, starting fights. As he does. Wolfe had retreated inward, stuffing his emotions down while throwing himself hard into the business. All work and no rest meant no time to think about Maven.

Ruthless had never been big on showing his emotions. Once Archer's people tormented him for three days, he'd shut down more than ever. Hard as steel and cold as ice. I'd never made any effort to hide my feelings, but I didn't flaunt them either. It had broken my heart when Maven left. Even though I understood why, I'd just wanted her to come home. Now she was here in my arms and it still felt surreal.

"Honestly, Bright Eyes, I wouldn't hold your breath on that one," I admitted. "I'm not trying to crush your hopes, but it's going to be tough to get those two back on the same page. I've been trying for years. Although if anyone can do it, it would be you."

Maven lifted her head to peer up at me, searching my face. "Do you think Maddox and Ruthless were responsible for the hit on your club and the theft of that cash drop? Be honest."

Her green tinted blue eyes glimmered with hope. At first, I didn't know what to believe. It had appeared to be an authentic Hale attack on our nightclub. However, it wasn't Maddox's style. As much of an asshole as he could be, he'd never do something so shady.

"No. I don't. I think you're right about it being Archer. Try telling that to Wolfe though. He's so insistent on it being Maddox." I loved my best friend like a brother, but he was a stubborn fuck who didn't always listen to reason.

Maven sighed as the tension she'd held upon asking the question left her. "I know. Those two drive me friggin' crazy. I just wish I could—"

Her words cut off sharply and her jaw dropped. My brows knit together as I tried to puzzle out the cause of her reaction. I followed her gaze to another couple on the dance floor. A man and a woman several feet away, moving to the music while laughing at something one of them had said.

“What am I missing?” I asked, glancing between the couple and Maven’s shocked expression.

“That man,” she said, almost tripping over my feet as she lost her concentration. “Isn’t he one of the men from the night your people were robbed?”

Only two men had been left alive that night. I kept Maven moving so she wouldn’t draw attention to us while sneaking covert glances at the man she’d indicated. He looked a lot different all cleaned up in a suit with a pretty lady at his side, but there was no mistaking that he had indeed been there that night.

“Well, this is an interesting turn of events, isn’t it?” I turned toward where Wolfe stood near a dessert table eating tiny brownies and other baked goods. Despite my efforts to make eye contact, he wasn’t paying me any attention.

I gently steered Maven further away from the couple, not wanting the man to recognize us. Not yet. Keeping an arm around her waist, I pulled my phone from my pocket and typed a quick text to Wolfe. I needed him to be ready.

“What’s the plan?” Maven asked, watching me type the message alerting Wolfe to the man’s presence. “Please tell me that we can grab him and use the wife as leverage to finally get some real answers.”

I glanced up to find her almost quivering with excitement. How could I possibly deny this woman anything she wanted?

“That’s what you want to do?” I waited for her enthusiastic nod. “Then that’s what we’ll do. I’ll tell Wolfe to meet us out back.”

It wasn’t much of a plan. Most of these situations tended to be a take it as it comes kind of deal. Shoving my phone back in my pocket, I gradually danced Maven over to the couple. As we drew closer, her excitement grew. I felt her vibrating with it.

When we were close enough to speak to the couple without being overheard, Maven leaned over and tapped the man on the shoulder. “Remember me, asshole?”

He whirled around, brow furrowed into an angry frown. Then he saw her. The goddess who’d savagely killed his friends right in front of him. His eyes widened. He grabbed his partner’s hand, intending to hurriedly drag her away.

I caught his elbow, holding tight. “Don’t even think about running. We’re going outside. All of us.”

His eyes darted around as he sought a way out of this situation. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I’ve got the blade that killed your buddies strapped to my thigh,” Maven hissed. “Get your ass moving or I introduce it to your lady friend. I’ll cut her from ear to ear and be gone before anyone here knows it was me.”

He froze but his partner snapped, “What the hell did you do, Jared?”

Her angry tone seemed to pull him from his frozen state. I nudged him along. He got moving, ushering her with him. We left the dance floor and exited the building through a rear exit that deposited us in the parking lot. We kept moving until we reached a secluded area at the back of the lot.

“We just want to ask you a few questions,” I said, releasing Jared’s arm. “The faster you answer, the faster this will be over.”

Jared raised both hands. “Hold up. We already told you that it was Maddox Hale who hired us. What else can I possibly tell you?”

“Well for starters,” Maven said, twirling a knife in one hand. “You can try telling the truth.”

Moving fast, Maven grabbed Jared’s date and twisted an arm behind her back, driving her to her knees. The woman let out a shriek and Maven clapped the hand holding the knife over her mouth. The blade hovered a mere inch or less from her cheek.

“All right don’t hurt her. Please.” Jared’s face flushed red, and he sucked in a breath like he couldn’t get enough air. “Do whatever you want to me, just leave her out of it.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that. Give me what I want and you both walk away without a scratch. Keep telling lies and you both end up like your friends. Your choice.” Maven held the blade to the woman’s throat, her eyes locked on Jared, daring him to fuck up.

To be sure that he didn’t try anything stupid, I drew the handgun hidden beneath my suit jacket. I was content to let

Maven take the lead. I would follow her pretty much anywhere.

The back door burst open as Wolfe appeared. He glanced around the dark parking lot, trying to find us. With a whistle, I alerted him to our location. He pulled a gun from inside his jacket as he hastily made his way toward us.

“What’s going on here?” he asked, taking in the scene.

Maven grinned, reminding me a little of Maddox with the twisted glint in her eyes. “I’m just about to remind Jared here how lucky he was to survive the night he robbed you.”

Wolfe’s face lit up in recognition. “Ah, I see. Well, by all means then, Butterfly. Don’t let me interrupt.”

Because Maven didn’t fuck around, she dug the blade into the woman’s throat deep enough to break skin. The first drop of blood had Jared blubbering and waving his hands.

“Okay, stop,” he begged. “I’ll tell you the truth. Please, promise me that you won’t kill my wife.”

“Ace, get your phone out,” Maven instructed. “I want this on video.”

She waited for me to pull out the device and start recording. Then she nodded for Jared to start talking.

His gaze darted frantically between his wife’s terrified face and Maven’s demanding glare. “Fine. I guess I’m a dead man either way. Maddox Hale didn’t hire us to rob you. Donovan Archer did. Well, he didn’t hire us so much as he blackmailed us. If we didn’t do the job, he would make sure we never did another job in this city.”

“Care to repeat that?” Maven smirked, satisfied with the victory she’d been fighting for. “One more time. Nice and clear.”

Jared hesitated until her blade bit deeper into his wife’s neck. The woman let out a pained squeak and he fell all over himself to save her. “Donovan Archer recruited us to rob you. Okay? Donovan Archer. Not Maddox Hale. Is that good enough? Just let her go already. You got what you wanted.”

His voice rose, cutting through the otherwise quiet parking lot. Maven released his wife and stepped back, blade held ready in case they tried anything. Jared helped his wife to her feet and together they ran back inside the building.

Turning to Wolfe and me with a satisfied Cheshire cat smile, Maven said, “See, Wolfie? I told you that it wasn’t Maddox. Now let’s go pay him a long overdue visit.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MAVEN



I'd started to believe that I'd never get the truth about Archer. Coming to this banquet for rich tight asses had been the key. Jared had been practically dropped into my lap. I couldn't have asked for a better night.

It wasn't over yet though. Now we had to speak with Maddox and Ruthless. It was long past time for the Hale brothers to talk. Having Wolfe there to hear the truth right from Jared's mouth had been the icing on the cake. Unfortunately, he didn't look happy about it. I didn't understand why he wouldn't be overjoyed to learn that he'd been wrong about Mads.

We never returned to the party. Instead, I'd called Maddox and arranged for us to meet at his house in an hour. I was almost beside myself with giddy satisfaction.

"I knew it," I proclaimed, bouncing in the passenger seat of Wolfe's Mustang. "And we have proof. Donovan Archer can fucking suck on that."

Wolfe slid me a sidelong glance before returning his eyes to the road ahead. "Don't get too carried away, Mave. You had a win tonight, and you're happy. I get that. But it doesn't stop Archer from being a threat, and it doesn't

guarantee that Maddox and I will be able to move past our differences.”

Ace muttered something beneath his breath and shook his head. I tugged on my seatbelt, creating some slack so I could turn to face Wolfe.

“Why can’t you move past them?” I challenged. “He almost got me killed. He drove me out of the city. I understand better than anyone how entitled you feel to the grudge you’re holding. But at what point does it start to cost you more than it’s worth? When do you decide you’ve had enough, Wolfe?”

His jaw clenched, and his hands tightened on the wheel. Several long beats passed before he said, “I don’t know. Maybe never. Maybe I’m afraid the minute I let my guard down and trust Maddox again, he’ll just go off and do something else to fuck shit up.”

Maddox did have a tendency to act on emotion and lash out with little provocation. I couldn’t argue that. However, he’d shown nothing but remorse for his actions. The guilt over what happened to me still plagued him. I trusted him not to make that kind of mistake again. I wished Wolfe could do the same.

“Don’t you think he’s learned anything from all of this?” I laid a hand on Wolfe’s thigh, giving it a gentle squeeze. “He’s still a hotheaded fireball of a man, but he’s grown, Wolfe. I’ve seen it. Maddox has spent the last seven years feeling like a piece of shit, and that won’t change if you keep treating him like one.”

I left it at that, turning to stare out the window. Wolfe shifted uncomfortably in his seat. We peeled around a corner

with a squeal of tires, the only indication that he was upset. The relationship Maddox and I had was far from perfect. We often butted heads. Part of me would always carry the pain of what he'd done the day of his father's funeral. Still, I wouldn't live in the past. I hoped that eventually Wolfe would tire of it as well.

We rolled up to the Hale house right on time. The gate swung open, and my stomach flipped. I was eager to get the four of them together in one room again. Hopefully, they would all be on their best behavior. If not, well I had three blades hidden on my body, and I wasn't afraid to use them.

Maddox met us at the door wearing a suspicious frown as he took in our dressed up attire. "What's going on, Vixen? Why did you bring them here?"

"Let's go sit down and talk, okay? I have something to show you." Pressing my lips together, I offered him a small smile.

His gaze strayed past me to where Ace and Wolfe stood. He didn't say a word. Turning on a heel, he strode down the hall to the living room, expecting that we'd follow.

We entered the living room behind Maddox to find Ruthless standing in the adjoined kitchen, stuffing a Twinkie into his mouth. His brows rose as we locked eyes. I waved a hand for him to come join us.

I waited for all four of them to take a seat, motioning for Ruthless to hurry up. As expected, Ruthless and Maddox took one couch, Wolfe and Ace sat on the other. I stood between them, extending a hand for Ace's phone. He passed it over with the video ready to play. I held it out for everyone to see.

We all watched in silence as Jared's confession played out on the screen. Hearing him say it again was music to my ears. Archer had done a good job of keeping his people from talking. It had taken time and effort to wear one of them down. I'd refused to give up and been rewarded for my persistence. Thanks, Universe.

After the video finished playing, Maddox turned his attention to Wolfe. "And the truth comes out. I think that means you owe me an apology."

I stiffened, not liking his cocky tone. Wolfe didn't like it either. He sat tensely on the edge of the couch, hands clasped together.

"Oh yeah? Is that what you think?" Wolfe countered, holding his brother's gaze. "Fine. I'm sorry that I believed you were a shitty enough human to come after my business. To be fair, you haven't exactly been the most reliable, trustworthy brother."

"That's bullshit," Maddox snapped. Veins popped out along his forearms as he clenched his hands into fists. "I've never done a goddamn thing to fuck you over, and you know it. If you want to keep hating me for what happened to Maven, then go right the fuck ahead. I've never forgiven myself for that night. I never will. I know that I deserve to suffer for the rest of my life, and I will. But I punish myself every damn day. I won't take it from you."

I held up both hands, shooting them each a warning glare. "Stop it. Both of you. We're not doing this anymore. Don't you think seven years is enough? Archer won that night when his guys took me. He succeeded in tearing the syndicate

apart. How much more do we let him get away with before we decide that we've had enough?"

Ace raised a hand. "I know I have. That man has been fucking us all in the ass for years. I'm over it."

I turned a grateful smile his way, thankful that someone had my back on this. Glancing at Ruthless, I tilted my head and raised a brow, inviting him to contribute.

Leaning forward in his seat, he propped both elbows on his knees and sighed. "I'm over it too. If we keep letting personal shit divide us, Archer will finish what he started back then in no time. He's escalating because Maven is back. She's a threat to him. We'd be idiots not to use that to our advantage. You two need to deal with your shit or we're all screwed."

It wasn't like Ruthless to get involved in drama between the brothers, but there never had been this much tension before. Not until the night that divided them.

Maddox shot a glower at his best friend. He shot to his feet, running a hand through his black hair as he stalked over to the bar. I hated that he always turned to the liquor. This wasn't the time to tackle that demon though. One problem at a time.

"I don't have any shit to deal with," Maddox said, pouring a glass of whiskey. "Wolfe needs to decide if he's ready to let go of the past. He seems to get an awful lot of joy out of constantly throwing it in my face."

"Because you're an egotistical maniac who doesn't think about the consequences." Anger forced Wolfe to his feet. "I don't trust you not to fuck up like that again."

The atmosphere warmed with the heat of their fury. I placed myself in Wolfe's path, ready to pull a blade if either of them turned this into a violent confrontation.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, big brother," Maddox muttered into his glass. His shoulders slumped as his anger deflated.

With an imploring look, I willed Wolfe to make this right. It was all in his hands now.

He huffed and shook his head before sitting back down. "I'm sorry, Maddox. This hasn't been easy for any of us. I know that you'd take back that night if you could, but my concerns are valid. You're not exactly known for being the calm, rational type."

"Nope," Maddox agreed, slamming back the whiskey. "I'm not. I'm a fucking maniac ready to fly off the handle at a moment's notice. What do you want me to do? Change my entire personality so you can trust me? You either do or you don't."

"Well, I don't." Although he wasn't as prone to fits of temper, Wolfe seemed to be working incredibly hard to remain calm.

I sucked in a deep breath and counted to five. I couldn't make it to ten. "Since you two won't stop going in circles, I'm going to make this very clear. I can either be with both of you or neither of you. It's your choice."

A strained quiet fell. Unable to endure such discomfort, Ace tried to lighten the mood. "What about me, Bright Eyes? I'll play nice with anyone if you'll just come sit on my lap."

I rolled my eyes at his goofball remark but did slide onto his lap. His arms went around my waist, and he laid his head on my shoulder. Ace was the best hugger. I settled into his embrace, enjoying the warmth emanating from him.

“At least someone here cares enough to try and make this work,” I quipped, suddenly aware of Ruthless’s dark penetrating stare upon me. “I know that Ruthless doesn’t give a damn about being with me.”

Ruthless smirked and plucked a joint from behind his ear. “You’ve got that right, Baby Girl.”

Wolfe cleared his throat and shifted uneasily in his seat. “An ultimatum, huh? Nice touch, Mave.”

I shrugged, trying not to let Ruthless’s comment bother me. “What can I say? I know what I want and that’s for the four of you to get back to doing what you do best. Whether you want to admit it or not, you need each other. And I need all of you, so we have some decisions to make.”

Ace kissed my shoulder and nodded. “We need to team up against Archer, boys. It’s the only way to bring that bastard down. Isn’t that the least of what he deserves after the hell he’s put us all through?”

A plume of marijuana smoke drifted above Ruthless’s head. His gaze traveled around the room, lingering on me. “That man deserves to suffer long and hard. Maven is right about a few things. We’ve let Archer manipulate us for too long. It’s time to move forward. Together.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have been so shocked that he was encouraging peace but I genuinely didn’t know what to expect

from Ruthless these days. He didn't seem to share my vision of the five of us once again united the way we'd once been, with me as the beating heart of the group, the center they all shared. His rejection hurt, but if we were all on the same page regarding Archer, I'd learn to live with it.

We all looked to Wolfe for his response. It was up to him where we went from here. He knew it too.

Rubbing a finger over the stubble on his chin, Wolfe studied his brother. "Fine. I agree that we need to get rid of Archer. I'm willing to set our differences aside and team up against him. I need you to promise me, Maddox, that you won't do anything to endanger Maven again. If you do, I'll have to kill you."

Not quite the happy reunion I'd hoped for. Wolfe's trust had been broken. I understood that. So had mine. He'd never find peace with Maddox if he didn't truly forgive. That couldn't be forced. It had to be authentic.

"Fair enough," Maddox said, pouring another drink. "I wouldn't expect anything less. Does this mean you two are officially returning to the syndicate?"

Ace and Wolfe shared a moment where something unspoken passed between them. "Yeah," Wolfe relented. "I guess it does."

My hopes soared. It was too soon to expect them to find the closeness they'd lost. Now it was possible though. The first step toward peace had been made. I could have cried with relief.

I trailed my fingers through Ace's blond hair, sitting up straighter as something occurred to me. "Let's not make it too official yet. I mean, let's not make anything public. It's better to let Archer think he's winning. Let him believe you're still at odds, and then we'll pull the rug out from under him. He'll never see it coming."

"Good call, Vixen. I think we should hit one of his warehouses, something that will really hurt. He's got that one on the north side. It's his main hub. Taking that out will fuck him good." Maddox perked up as he plotted revenge against the man who'd hurt us all.

"It's guaranteed to start a war," Wolfe said. "As long as we're all okay with what that means."

"The war started a long time ago," I mused, snuggling in tighter against Ace. "We're going to finish it."

"Fucking rights we are." He brushed my hair aside, kissing my neck. It sent a tickle down my back, making me laugh.

Wolfe and Maddox exchanged a look. This time it lacked animosity. There seemed to be a shaky but genuine understanding between them. The two of them needed to spend some quality time together. Maybe I could do something to help that along.

Joint clamped between his lips, Ruthless leaned back against the couch. His dark gaze never left me. "Here's what I think we should do first."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MAVEN



Akasha wound herself around my ankles, mewling up at me as she openly pouted. She knew what it meant when I stared into the mirror and did my makeup. I kept stopping to give her pets and love, reassuring her that I wouldn't be out long.

Tonight the guys and I were going to the neutral zone, the biker bar in the warehouse district where everyone was welcome to party. The plan was for me to arrive with Wolfe and Ace. The three of us would encounter Mads and Ruthless. Conflict would ensue. All faked, of course. A little show we would put on to guarantee that Archer heard all about it. He'd think his efforts to start a war between the Hales was working, which is exactly what we wanted.

Black winged eyeliner and gold shadow decorated my eyes. I left my hair down and straight, keeping it simple. Dressed all in black, I wore stretchy pants and a tank top. I strapped one knife to my ankle where my boot would hide most of it. Another was tucked into my pants pocket and a third hung in a visible sheath on my hip.

After a spritz of lightly scented tropical perfume, I went to the kitchen to fetch some treats for Akasha. She ran ahead of me in eager anticipation. While she munched away, I

checked the pet camera I'd purchased to watch the place in my absence. If Archer tried to send someone in here again, I wanted to know about it immediately.

I didn't think he'd try that again so soon though. After tonight he'd think he had us right where he wanted us. Then we'd hit him hard and take this war to the next level. I owed Archer pain, and I wouldn't rest until he'd gotten what he deserved.

My phone chimed with a text alert from Wolfe. He and Ace were waiting downstairs. I gathered my things, shoving my phone and bank card into my pocket, then I kissed Akasha on her furry head and slipped out.

Both Ace and Wolfe were casually dressed while maintaining the mob boss style they both possessed. Wolfe wore chinos and a black shirt while Ace wore slim fitting pants and a long-sleeved gray shirt. It was about as dressed down as they got.

"Looking good tonight, guys," I said, sliding into the passenger seat of Wolfe's car. "Are you ready for this, Wolfe? I don't want you and Mads to forget that this is supposed to be a fake fight."

Wolfe reached over to slide a hand along the back of my neck, pulling me in for a steamy kiss. "You do know we still have to throw real punches, right? Don't worry so much about us, Princess. That's an order."

He gave my neck a gentle squeeze before letting go. My belly warmed at the tone he'd used. That commanding tone was generally saved for the bedroom. It got me hot and bothered every time.

“Careful there, King,” I said, teasingly nibbling my bottom lip. “You’re not in charge out here. I need to make sure my boys are all on their best behavior.”

“And what about you, brat? Who keeps you in line?” The sexy grin that stole over Wolfe’s face made me wish we were going back to his hotel room instead of to a loud, obnoxious biker bar.

Ace let out a low whistle from the backseat. “Damn, you two are going to make me hard if you keep that up. I always knew you were kinky little freaks.”

I turned in my seat to face him, quirking a brow. “Oh yeah? What about you, Ace? How kinky do you like it?”

His chuckle was both flirtatious and devious. He leaned forward, placing a hand on my seat. “There’s only one way to find out, Bright Eyes. Let’s just say that I wouldn’t be disappointed if you wanted to give me a few orders. Wolfe and I are a little different that way.”

My curiosity was certainly piqued. Although Ace and I had fooled around in the past, we’d never slept together. I had no problem playing different roles with my men. With Wolfe I played the submissive. With Maddox I was always ready to pull a knife and challenge him. My mind ran away with me as I pictured Ace on his knees, ready to do anything I asked.

“I can definitely think of a few orders I’d like to give you,” I teased with a wink.

“Always ready and willing, babe.” Lightly chucking me under the chin, Ace raised a brow in invitation.

Wolfe steered the car through the city streets, bringing us closer to the warehouse bar. “All right let’s get our heads in the game before we end up having a dirty three-way on the side of the road. There definitely isn’t enough room in the car.”

“A dirty three-way on the side of the road,” Ace repeated, stroking his chin as if pondering that idea. “I like it. Are you cool with crossing swords? Because I’m open to trying anything once.”

Wolfe let out a bark of laughter and shot his best friend a middle finger through the rearview mirror. “Keep it in your pants, Ace. We have work to do.”

As we rolled up to the warehouse bar, I sent a text to Maddox to let him know we’d arrived. The first trickle of nerves and excitement slithered through me as we exited the car. We were here to send a message to Archer. I just hoped the Hales were able to keep their heads on straight and follow the plan.

There was a murmur as we passed through the crowd of people loitering outside the front door. Most of them were smoking and drinking, shooting the shit and cracking nasty jokes. Several of them took note of us as we entered.

One biker babe called a hello to Ace, blatantly licking her lips as she motioned for him to join her. The biker at her side didn’t look too impressed. Ace gave her a polite wave and moved closer to me, putting a hand on my waist. A charmer like him must have a colorful history.

Ace leaned in close as we entered the noisy building and whispered in my ear, “She meant nothing. I don’t even

remember her name.”

I turned to him with a laugh and gently patted his cheek. “It’s cool, Ace. I didn’t expect you to be celibate for the last seven years. It’s not as if I have any claim over you.”

“Are you kidding me?” He gaped like I’d said something shocking. “Of course you do. I’m all yours, Bright Eyes.”

Taking my hand in his, Ace led me along as we followed Wolfe to the bar. My gaze roamed around the large room, taking note of those present. Bikers from several MCs were scattered around the building, playing pool and watching the live band that played. Ruthless and Maddox were already here. They occupied a pool table on the other side of the room. I quickly averted my gaze, pretending not to notice them.

No doubt Archer had eyes and ears watching this place. He was affiliated with the Dead City Zombies MC. Several of their men were here. He should hear all about the Hale altercation within moments of it happening.

Wolfe handed me a Jack Daniels on the rocks. I tried to swallow a mouthful around the lump that had formed in my throat. Mads and Wolfe were just barely on speaking terms. Despite their recent agreement to work together again, I wasn’t entirely confident in how our plan would play out.

“Dance floor,” Wolfe said, guiding me with a hand on my shoulder. “Feels like a good place to do something that would piss off Maddox.”

I had to remind myself that this was all a fake set up to initiate conflict. Wolfe seemed to be enjoying it too much, and

we'd barely started. We entered the dance floor and both men sandwiched me between them, grinding on me to the music. My breath caught as they pressed close, their hard bodies tight against mine. I was starting to think we should've stopped for that dirty three-way.

It didn't take long for Maddox to notice us. The anger that flashed across his face was too authentic to be faked. He abandoned his pool cue on the table and strode toward us. Momentarily confused, Ruthless glanced around until he spotted the distraction that had lured Maddox away. I could've sworn I saw Ruthless roll his eyes before following his best friend through the throng.

Heat engulfed me at the thrilling sensation of being between Ace and Wolfe. Something about Maddox's furious stride added to that feeling. Goddamn my guys were hot. Even Ruthless with his sneer of boredom and disdain. He tried hard to make sure I knew how little he cared. Too hard.

"What the hell is this?" Maddox barked, flinging both hands out to indicate the three of us. "Hands off my woman, Wolfe. Unless you want me to rearrange that perfect face of yours. You too, Ace, you fucking manwhore. Hands off."

Maddox stormed right up to us, not caring who saw or overheard. Dozens of people were certainly looking. His delivery was so believable that I suspected he didn't have to fake much of it.

Taking my cue, I raised a hand and stepped forward. "Back off, Maddox. You don't own me. I'll do what and who I like whenever I like. Got it?"

Our eyes locked. In the depths of his deep blues I saw the turmoil he wrestled with. The remorse and regret. His constant companion. Seeing me with his brother did something to him, something it never used to do. It made him green with envy. I hated it. This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

“That’s what you think,” Maddox snapped, reaching to grab my arm, roughly jerking me toward him. My drink spilled as the glass tumbled to the floor. “You are not to leave my side.”

Wolfe handed his drink to Ace and got dangerously close to his brother, seething right into his face. “Take it easy, Maddox. She doesn’t fucking belong to you. If Maven wants to stay with us, then she stays with us.”

Now I was trapped between the Hales, an incredibly different vibe. Having them on either side of me felt deadly. Like being caught between two wild animals about to tear each other apart. It filled me with both fear and desire. I placed a hand on each of their chests, trying uselessly to push them apart.

“Come on, guys,” I said, wary of how many people were now looking our way. “Let’s not do this.”

I may have been the worst actor of our group. Did my delivery sound as fake and unsure as it felt? Maybe that was the nerves climbing around my insides, making them quake.

“Let’s go, Maven. We’re leaving.” Maddox grabbed my arm as if to drag me away.

“She’s not going anywhere with you.” Not holding back, Wolfe roughly shoved Maddox in an effort to dislodge his

hold.

Both men exuded fiery anger, making me wonder if this had been a good idea after all. That question was promptly answered when Maddox swung without warning, smashing his fist into Wolfe's face.

I let out a little shriek of surprise. Even though I'd known this would happen, seeing it play out in front of me was still shocking. Ruthless pulled me out of the way in time for Wolfe to retaliate. He hit Maddox with enough force to snap his neck back. It looked painful.

Playing his role as the peacekeeper of our group, Ace shouted for them to stop while Ruthless dispassionately looked on. I tried to pull free of him, but he held tight.

"Don't you think that's enough?" I hissed, watching in horror as Maddox tackled Wolfe to the sticky floor. There was no doubt that the punches they threw were incredibly real.

Ruthless scanned the vicinity. "Not just yet. Give them a few more hits. They need to get this out of their systems."

"Someone is going to really get hurt," I insisted, trying to pry his fingers off my arm. They clung tight enough to bruise. "It doesn't have to go that far."

"Sure it does. You're the one that wants them to let shit go and work together again. This is part of that, Baby Girl. Live with it." Refusing to release me, Ruthless subtly nodded his head toward a table packed with Ryker King's men. "They need to see this."

Once Maddox landed a punch that brought a flood of blood from Wolfe's nose, Ace ditched the drinks he held and

jumped in. He tried to pull Maddox away, giving Wolfe the opportunity to come at his brother with a headbutt.

“Son of a bitch,” Ruthless muttered before joining Ace in pulling the Hales apart.

Both brothers were bleeding and bruised. It hadn't taken them long to hurt one another. My stomach felt ill. Maybe they did need to get this out of their systems. That didn't make me feel any better about it.

Disappointed shouts rang out when Ace and Ruthless pulled the other two apart. More than one person held up a cell phone, recording the entire thing. All right. Now Archer would have video proof. That had to make this worth it.

A few bouncers muscled their way through the crowd, coming to make sure we all left. They'd sure taken their sweet time. They escorted the five of us to the front entry, shoving us into the parking lot. I grabbed hold of Wolfe's arm, pulling him toward the car. I was afraid they would start going at it again now that they were outside. To my utter relief, Maddox stormed across the lot to his BMW without a glance back.

Nothing about this felt right. A sudden desperate need to make sure everyone was okay struck me. It would have to wait.

“Are you all right?” I asked Wolfe when we were all back inside the Mustang. “Are you okay to drive?”

I dug through the glove box, finding some napkins from a fast food joint. Wolfe pressed them to his bloody nose and winced as he checked out his face in the visor mirror.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he muttered. “That little shit wasn’t holding back. I sure hope he feels good because I’m not doing that again.”

Ace shook his head of slightly disheveled blond hair. “You won’t have to. Archer’s probably already received half a dozen videos of the fight. Let’s go grab a bite to eat while we figure out our next move.”

As we drove through the night back toward a busier part of town, my phone pinged with a message from Maddox. *I need you. Now. And I’m not in the mood to share.*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MAVEN



“Dear God, Mave, why do you let him do that to you? It looks like you were attacked by a friggin’ vampire.” With a shake of her head, Rumer eyed my bruised neck. “I don’t even want to know what the rest of your body looks like.”

Last night after leaving the warehouse bar, Maddox had shown up at my place. Scrapping with Wolfe had him all fired up. The only thing that helped subdue him was fucking me senseless all over my small apartment. The bite marks and bruises adorning my body were Maddox’s calling card. His way of marking me as his. It didn’t bother me. When he was inside me, I loved every second of pain and pleasure.

“Maddox and I have always been rough with each other,” I said with a shrug, tugging my hair over my shoulders to better hide my neck. “We enjoy a little pain. What’s wrong with that? Don’t tell me you’ve never engaged in a little rough play. Don’t be so vanilla.”

She thwacked me in the shoulder hard enough to actually hurt. “Don’t shit on being vanilla. There’s nothing wrong with a nice, passionate encounter that doesn’t include pain and violence. For the record, I like the occasional spanking. You take it to a whole other level.”

She pulled a blue dress off the rack and held it up for me to see. I shook my head and continued on, scanning the store for something that caught my eye. Rumer had come with me to the mall to shop for a dress to wear to Faith's wedding. Since I'd abandoned most of my personal belongings when I came back to River City, I didn't have anything wedding worthy.

"Sounds to me like you just haven't met the right man," I teased with a smirk.

Spying a purple dress that had soft waves of material making up the skirt, I held it up in front of me. Rumer shook her head, and I returned it to the rack. This was taking forever.

"Maybe you're right. Most of the guys I date are less than stellar in bed, but they're not all bad." A blush stole over her face, and she turned away to hide it.

"What does that mean?" I followed her to another rack of dresses, grabbing her elbow to turn her around. "Have you and Rush been bumping naughty bits? Do tell."

"There's nothing to tell. We spent a night together. It went pretty well. That's all." Rumer flashed me an impish grin. Touching the soft material of a low cut dress, she pulled it out for a closer look.

I gaped at her. "That's all? Like hell it is. How was it? Spill the details."

Eyeing my sister, I noted how her blush crawled up her face to encompass the tips of her ears. She must really like this guy. She didn't get so red faced for just any old bozo.

“No details. Just a nice time together.” When I continued to stare at her, Rumer relented with a huff. “All right. I really like him, okay? I’m still not sure where this is going, so I don’t want to talk about it too much. I’m afraid I’ll jinx it.”

Rumer had never been in a steady, serious relationship. She’d always flirted around and played the field. It was nice to see her consider someone as a legitimate partner. I didn’t know much about Rush, but he’d seemed like a nice guy when we met. He was also part of the Sanguine Dragons MC, a good club that would protect Rumer if she were linked to one of their members.

“All right, I’ll back off. Tell me more when you’re ready.” Ready to give up my search for a dress, I checked one last rack of clothing in the back corner.

There I found a black dress with a halter style top and a long skirt with a slit up one side. The material crisscrossed below the bosom, creating a sexy but stylish design on the midriff. Sexy but not too over the top for a wedding. It was perfect.

After a brief trip to the changing room, I made the purchase and left feeling like I’d achieved something. The upcoming wedding regularly darted into my thoughts. After the little display the guys had put on last night, I was more eager than ever for a face to face moment with Donovan Archer.

Once we finished in the store, we went to a restaurant to grab a late lunch. Tomorrow night the guys and I would be making a move on Archer, hitting one of his warehouses

packed with supplies. Hopefully after last night's fight he would never see it coming.

While we munched on appetizers and waited for our food, I told Rumer about the previous evening. "I was stunned when they ended up on the floor throwing punches like rowdy teenagers. I've never seen Maddox and Wolfe go so hard on each other. It scared me. What if they never get past this? I don't think I could bear it."

Rumer's lips pursed thoughtfully as she dipped a fry in gravy. "They will, but it's going to take some time. You have to remember that they've had seven years to feed this animosity between them. Having you home is already bringing them back together. Try not to expect too much too soon. They'll come around. They were always so tight back in the day."

"Hell yeah they were. Tight enough to fuck me at the same time. What I wouldn't give to be the meat in that sandwich again." Knowing that it would creep Rumer out, I wiggled my brows and made a salacious face.

Her expression morphed into one of wide eyed surprise. She clapped a hand over her mouth and shook her head. "Holy shit, you're filthy, Mave. No wonder they're all so obsessed with you. I'm sure it won't be long before the three of you are back to your old sex games."

"If you've never been between two men like that, I highly recommend that you give it a try." Plucking a fry from the plate we shared, I popped it into my mouth with a smile. "You don't know what you're missing."

Rumer's brows knit together into a soft frown. "I'm not sure I could handle two dicks at a time. Sounds a little intimidating to be honest."

"Then you just need to find the right dicks," I cackled, enjoying her reaction. "I've conquered two at a time. Now I have my sights set on four."

"Damn, girl. Let me know how that goes." Rumer perked up when the waiter arrived with our food. Shoving the fries aside, she grabbed a fork, ready to dig into her cheesy risotto and grilled fish.

I accepted my pasta alfredo with a smile of thanks, waiting for the server to leave before saying, "It would go a whole lot easier if Ruthless would stop being such an asshole. He's so hot and cold since I got home."

Rumer nodded, chewing a mouthful of fish. "He's been through a lot. Makes sense that he would shut down emotionally. Easier to avoid getting hurt again."

Something about the way she said that gave me pause. Had my leaving town hurt Ruthless? I knew it would be hard on my men. However, in the moment I'd been running scared, terrified to stay. Trapped in my own fear and trauma, I hadn't let myself thoroughly explore how deeply it would affect those I'd left behind.

"I guess," I agreed, pondering her words.

Was Ruthless's stony attitude toward me a defense mechanism to protect himself from me? I wasn't sure how to feel about that. To be fair, he'd encouraged Maddox to go off and cause shit the day of his father's funeral. Together they'd

initiated the events that led to my kidnapping and torture. Things with Ruthless now felt more confusing than ever.

I stuffed a bite of pasta into my mouth, pausing to savor the creamy deliciousness. My gaze strayed around the restaurant while I thought about Ruthless. At this time in the afternoon the restaurant was mostly empty. Only a few other tables were occupied. I did a double take on one of them, scoffing when I recognized the woman seated there.

Gesturing with my fork, I nodded in her direction. “Don’t look now but Lauren Archer is sitting over there with her daughter. I’m surprised she’s not surrounded by goons. Seems pretty dangerous for Archer’s wife to go out unattended.”

It proved how cocky Donovan was. After what had just happened to his son, he should have an entire team protecting his wife and other kids. Either they were really good at going unnoticed or he didn’t believe they were in danger. They weren’t the people that I really wanted though. He was.

Rumer cast a brief glance in Mrs. Archer’s direction. “I’m sure she’s got people nearby. He wouldn’t be that stupid, would he?”

“Hard to say.” Shrugging it off, I turned back to my dish and immersed myself in pasta goodness, forgetting Mrs. Archer completely. Until she sauntered up to our table.

“Isn’t this place a little rich for your tastes?” A hand on her hip, Lauren Archer scrutinized the food left on my plate. “Last I heard you were peddling stolen wares in Castle Grove before you came crawling back to your boy toys. They must give you a fat allowance.”

A wicked laugh spilled out of me as my fork clattered against my plate. I looked her up and down, frowning at the expensive name brands that covered her from head to toe. “Actually, I make my own money. Unlike some people, I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty. It must be tough having your husband throw money at you to keep you busy while he’s doing the real work. I’m betting the two of you haven’t fucked in a long time.”

I offered her a sarcastically sweet smile, ignoring the gasp that came from her daughter. Rumer snickered and kept eating. Lauren’s face flashed several shades of red.

“My husband runs this city,” she hissed, trying to save face. “You’d better not forget that. He sure hasn’t forgotten about you. It’s only a matter of time until he dismantles what’s left of the Hale organization. It won’t be much longer now until he rips control from that drunk, crazy asshole in charge. Then you’ll all be begging us for mercy.”

“Seriously, though?” I gaped at her, wondering how she could possibly believe such idiocy. “You’re delusional. Do you have an actual point to make?”

Lauren’s dyed blonde hair was pulled into a tight updo. She’d had enough work done on her face to drastically alter her appearance since I’d last seen her years ago. Lips pressed into a tight line, she regarded me with haughty derision.

“Watch your back, bitch,” she snarled, clutching her fancy purse tight, like she thought about hitting me with it. “My husband is a patient man. He will finish what he started with you, and the Hales will be next.”

Normally this type of goading wouldn't have an effect on me. For some reason, her arrogant threat set me off. I was out of my seat throwing a punch in her face before anyone saw it coming.

There was a shriek as Lauren hit the floor. Blood gushed from her nose, and she burst into frantic tears. Rumer was up and moving toward me, making an attempt to keep me at bay.

“What the fuck did you do, you stupid bitch?” The Archer daughter, Sabrina, helped her mother up while simultaneously dragging her away.

That's when both the restaurant staff and two Archer thugs appeared. I sat back down and picked up my fork, continuing to eat my food. I wasn't letting this spoiled mob wife ruin my meal.

Nodding to the goons, I said, “Great job, guys. Might want to watch her a little closer next time. She's a bit of a loose cannon.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MAVEN



“Willa and her crew will go first. We’ll wait a few blocks away until they give us the all clear, then we’ll join them. Take at least two cars and park far enough away to avoid a tail if we have to run. We’ll meet back here if we get split up. Any questions?” Maddox’s gaze drifted over each of us as he awaited a response.

The five of us had gathered at his house to go over the plan. Tonight we were hitting Archer’s biggest warehouse. It was the main hub of his many operations. He dealt in everything from drugs to weapons to counterfeit cash. No doubt we’d find something of value in that warehouse. Something he’d never want us to get our hands on.

“How many of Archer’s people are we expecting on site?” Wolfe asked. “There will be some kind of security.”

Since we’d all arrived, he and Maddox had been getting along as well as could be expected. They’d exchanged greetings and managed to be civil. So far so good.

“We’re expecting at least six. Willa will update us when she gets there. No doubt there will be cameras. We’ll have to move fast. We want Archer to know we hit his warehouse but we don’t want to give him time to send reinforcements.”

Maddox loaded a magazine into the semi-automatic handgun he often carried.

The veins in his forearm rippled through the scorpion tattooed there, drawing my eye. In a black t-shirt and worn blue jeans, Maddox had no idea how simply gorgeous he was. His focus on the gun, he didn't notice me ogling him.

I glanced around at the other three, admiring them each in turn. They were all unique in their own way. Ruthless with his mohawk and heavy ink along with that dark attitude. Ace with his fun loving personality and beautiful blue eyes. And Wolfe who was tall, dark, handsome, and deadly.

We were so far from where we'd started out together. Tonight was the first real step in starting anew. Becoming more than we were before. Tonight the first domino would fall, kicking off a chain of events that would bring us closer to ruling this city. Hopefully it brought us closer to each other as well.

"Everybody ready?" Ace asked, pulling car keys from the pocket of his trendy pants.

There wasn't much discussion as we exited the house. Everyone slipped into their own headspace, mentally preparing for the job ahead. I joined Ruthless and Maddox in the Escalade, blowing Wolfe and Ace a kiss when we parted ways in the driveway.

Nothing felt quite as satisfying as knowing that we were about to turn Archer's world upside down. Well... clocking his old lady had felt pretty damn satisfying.

We were only a few blocks from the warehouse when Ruthless pulled into a darkened alley behind a row of businesses. He parked the SUV next to a dumpster where it wouldn't easily be seen by passersby. My body hummed with anticipation. Was there any better feeling than this?

“Willa and her team are in place,” Maddox said, staring at a message on his phone. “There were ten security people on site but four of them left in a dark blue van. There's six left, but they're half drunk and playing poker in a back room. This is going to be easy.”

I frowned, annoyed at the lax security. “It's like these dumb fucks really believe they're untouchable. I can't wait to prove them wrong.”

“Let's go then, Vixen. Tonight we wage war.” Maddox reached for my hand, kissing the back of it before getting out of the SUV.

The three of us briskly walked the few blocks to the warehouse. My feet barely touched the ground as I skipped along, excitement spurring my steps. I could never be one of those kept syndicate women like Lauren Archer or my mother. I needed to be on the frontline with my men, stirring up shit.

As we approached the building, Ace and Wolfe joined us about half a block away. We could see the warehouse looming up ahead. There was no sign of Willa and her guys. They were stealthy.

“Let's take the front,” Maddox said as we drew closer. “Willa will take the back. Do you still have trucks on the way, Wolfe?”

Wolfe nodded, his eyes fixed on the warehouse. “Yeah, two of them will be here in about three minutes. I have a backup crew waiting on the next street over to run interference if we have to hightail it out of here with Archer goons on our asses.”

“Awesome. Good thinking. I’m hoping that it won’t come to that.” Maddox glanced at his brother. The two of them shared a brief but poignant look. They would never admit as much but they were happy to be doing this together.

Maddox quickly tapped a message out on his phone. The response came swiftly. He nodded, and we quickened our pace. The sound of my heart grew louder in my ears as we entered through the front door with Maddox taking the lead.

There was no avoiding the camera above the door. It definitely saw us. Hopefully nobody moderated the feed in real time.

Inside the warehouse we found rows of wooden pallets stacked with goods. Everything was in tightly packed plastic wrapped boxes, making it impossible to know exactly what was inside until we had the chance to open them and look. It didn’t matter. It wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t worth stealing.

The trucks would be here any minute to start loading up pallets. We continued on through the warehouse, slinking between the rows of pallets toward the back room. Laughter and loud voices told us exactly where they were. We rounded the corner of the last pallet in time to see Willa storm into the back room with several men flanking her.

She took no prisoners, unloading her weapon into those inside the room. Shouts rang out, and chairs scraped against

the floor as Archer's guys tried to run or fight. They didn't stand a chance. Our crew took them all down in a matter of seconds.

The back room was a bloodbath. Archer's men were splayed about. Some were on the floor. Others hadn't made it out of their chairs. They'd been trying to draw weapons, having been taken by surprise. The table was covered with blood spattered playing cards and liquor bottles. A few lines of coke had been neatly cut on a tray placed in the center.

"This was too easy," Ace remarked, echoing my thoughts. "Let's move fast. I've got a weird feeling about this."

There was no hesitation. We'd done this kind of thing enough times to know that not even a second could be wasted. Wolfe hurried to open the large loading doors just as the delivery trucks we'd been expecting pulled up. Four men got out and began loading Archer's goods into the back of both vehicles. Wolfe, Ruthless, and Maddox helped while Ace and I stood watch at the front with Willa watching the back.

I scanned the night for anything amiss while pallet after pallet was loaded into the trucks. We'd never have time to take them all, but there was no doubt that we'd put a painful dent in Archer's supply.

When a dark blue van drove by, my heart leapt painfully in my chest. It didn't turn into the small lot out front. Peeling away with a squeal of tires, it disappeared around a corner.

"They know we're here," I shouted. "We've got to go. Come on, guys. Let's move it before the reinforcements show up."

I wasn't sure how long it would take for Archer to send a team big enough to stop us once the guys in the blue van made contact with him. Our chances of success grew slimmer the longer we stayed.

Maddox emerged from the back of one of the trucks, shoving a hand through his disheveled hair. "Okay, Maven, you go with Ruthless to grab the SUV. Pick us up behind that auto shop on the next block. We'll meet you in five."

I shook my head, not liking the sound of that plan. "We may not have five minutes. It's not worth the risk. Let's just take what we already have and go. Archer could have this place surrounded any moment."

"I know that. Just go. We'll be right behind you." Maddox stole a precious few seconds to kiss me, his strong hands gently holding my face. "Please, Vixen. Go with Ruthless."

Gun in one hand, Ruthless grabbed my arm with the other, pulling me away from Maddox. They weren't giving me a choice. Arguing would only waste time that we didn't have, so I let Ruthless pull me along into the shadows.

We ran between buildings and down alleys as we made our way back to the SUV. As we ducked into the alley where we'd left the Escalade, two white panel vans sped by, headed for the warehouse. Unsure if he'd get the message, I texted Maddox a heads up that Archer's people were coming.

Ruthless and I got into the Escalade, scoping out the alley before driving away. We'd almost reached the end of the alley when a vehicle turned in toward us, blocking our exit. Headlights shone bright in our eyes as it accelerated quickly.

My lungs froze, and I gripped the door handle as Ruthless put the Escalade in reverse and slammed on the gas pedal. So much for picking up Maddox. Hopefully he made it to Wolfe's car with him and Ace.

Because Ruthless was a crazy badass, he stuck one arm out the window, firing bullets at the windshield of the car in front of us. He aimed for the tires as well, succeeding in taking out one of them.

Just as we reached the opposite end of the alley, a second vehicle turned in to prevent us from fleeing. Ruthless didn't slow his speed. He continued to barrel full tilt toward the newcomer car.

"Brace yourself, Mave," Ruthless warned seconds before we slammed into the car behind us.

The impact was jarring but not painful. It didn't slow us down very much. Ruthless kept on the gas, forcing the Escalade to keep moving. It shoved the car behind us back out of the alley, giving us enough room to escape. Ruthless shifted into drive, and we took off with a squeal of tires. The car we'd struck was badly mangled in the front but was still running. The driver didn't hesitate to follow us.

We raced through the streets with an Archer car right behind us. The first car from the alley soon joined the pursuit, trying to dodge down side streets and head us off. Ruthless was a skilled getaway driver who had no problem anticipating their moves and avoiding a trap.

That didn't stop them from shooting at us. I ducked down in my seat, heart pounding as I wondered if the others

had escaped without issue. They could be involved in a bloody shootout for all I knew.

“Fuck,” I swore when a bullet took out the side mirror attached to my door. “We have to lose these assholes.”

“Doing my best here,” Ruthless snapped, never taking his eyes off the road. “Would you like to drive instead?”

I knew that he was under pressure while trying to make split second decisions but his biting tone still cut deep. Clamping my mouth shut, I bit back the nasty tirade that threatened to burst free. This wasn't a good time.

When the people in the car tailing us got off a lucky shot, I knew we were screwed. They took out both of our back tires, sending the Escalade into a rough fishtail. At such a high speed, Ruthless struggled to control the vehicle. We careened sideways, skidding toward a large power pole.

A small scream escaped me upon impact. I felt everything and then nothing at all.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

RUTHLESS



Everything came to a shocking and sudden stop. The Escalade plowed into the power pole, sliding so that Maven's side struck first. In what felt like slow motion, I watched her head bounce off the side window.

The goddamn airbag did nothing to prevent a large gash from opening up on her temple. Blood poured down the side of her face, instilling me with terror. A sick sensation filled me at the sight of her eyes rolling back in her head. She slumped against the crumpled door, her lips moving with no sound coming out.

Both cars pursuing us sped away, choosing safety over stopping to finish us off. I had bullets ready for them if they came back. I watched their taillights disappear before calling 911. It was last resort in a situation like this, but with Maven clearly injured, I couldn't take any chances.

I couldn't lose her again.

Once emergency crews were on the way, I did my best to keep Maven conscious. Lightly tapping her cheek, I said, "Talk to me, Baby Girl."

Again her lips moved as she struggled to speak. Her eyelids fluttered and closed. She groped about for my hand,

clutching it tight in hers. Pulling me closer, she tried again to speak.

I leaned in to hear her whisper, “Why do you hate me so much, Ruthless?”

For a moment I thought I’d misheard. Carefully, I undid her seatbelt and shoved it aside. “What did you just say? Do you need me to do anything? Help is coming. Just try to stay awake, okay?”

This time when her eyes fluttered, they stayed open, locking on me. Those pretty orbs swam with pain. “Why do you hate me? If I’m about to die here, at least tell me first. I deserve to know.”

Every word out of her mouth rang with agony. She was in physical pain, hurt in ways unknown, and all she cared about was why I was such a fucking cunt to her.

I swallowed around the sensation of razor blades in my throat. How the hell was I supposed to answer that? Did I hate Maven? Sometimes I did. Sometimes I wanted to, especially when she turned those dazzling eyes my way and smiled. It was so goddamn hard to resist her.

“You’re not going to die,” I said, uneasy with how pale her skin had grown. “The ambulance will be here any minute.”

“Tell me,” she insisted, her grip on my hand loosening, as if she didn’t have the strength to hold on. “Please, Micah.”

My name on her lips weakened the parts of me I’d worked to harden. Some part of me had known this conversation was coming. Although I hadn’t anticipated that it would be like this.

I didn't know how to answer her loaded question. My mouth opened, and I heard myself say, "Because you left me, and you didn't even say goodbye."

She nodded. The small action made her squeak in pain. That's exactly what she'd expected me to say. Her eyes closed again, and a rush of dread sent a cold chill through me.

"Maybe that's selfish," I continued, panic driving my words. "I know you had your reasons to go, and I know that I was one of them, but losing you hurt more than anything. When it became clear that you weren't coming back, I worked hard to forget you. I shut down completely. Being tortured by Archer's thugs helped me shut out the last of my emotions. I haven't let myself feel anything for a very long time. I don't know if I can anymore."

Maven made another pained sound and put a hand to her bloody head. "That's sad. I never meant to hurt you, but you hurt me too. And then I came back and..."

She trailed off with a tired sigh.

"And then I did my best to make sure you knew that I didn't want you here," I finished for her.

A little annoying voice in the back of my mind encouraged me to say something helpful. Something apologetic. But I couldn't get the words out. I didn't know what I felt. I only knew that if the motherfucking first responders didn't get here right away, I was going to jail for killing someone.

"Stay awake, okay?" I nudged her cheek, a frantic knot choking off my breath when she didn't respond. "Maven, open

your eyes. Tell me to go fuck myself like you would with Maddox. It's the least I deserve. Just say something... please."

No response. I made sure she was still breathing before getting out of the Escalade. My door opened without issue. I stood in the street holding my breath until sirens sounded in the distance. *Hurry up, you bastards.*

Then they were there, taking over as they removed Maven from the vehicle. I stood back and watched in stony silence as they got her on a gurney, securing a brace around her neck. The paramedics asked me a dozen questions that I couldn't answer. I could only stare.

"He's in shock," said a woman in paramedic attire. "Get him in the back with her."

Hands shoved me along to the back of the ambulance. I got in without further urging, sitting off to one side while they worked on Maven, checking her vitals and shining a light in her eyes. I moved robotically as I pulled my phone from my back pocket and sent a message to Maddox, telling him to meet us at the hospital. I only hoped that he was still alive to see it.

Any error could happen on a job like this. There was no foreseeing every possibility. And still I wanted to bash my head against the side of the ambulance for letting it happen.

We sped through traffic, making good time. Upon arriving at the hospital they quickly rolled Maven into the emergency room. I was free of injuries aside from a few bruises so they directed me to the waiting area. My body was fine. My mind was a mess. The noise of my demons grew louder than ever as they all shouted at once.

I sat in a chair as far away from anyone else as I could get, hands clamped over my ears. That didn't drown out the sound though. Not when the noise came from the inside.

"Ruthless, what the fuck is going on? Where's Maven?" Maddox's voice snapped me out of the spell I'd fallen under.

I glanced up to find him striding fast down the hall toward me. Wolfe and Ace were hot on his heels. All three of them wore varying expressions of worry and distress.

I leapt to my feet and went to meet them where we could talk away from everyone else in the waiting area. Rubbing the back of my neck, I said, "There was an accident. Archer's guys chased us. We hit a pole. Maven was bleeding. I'm not sure how bad it is. They haven't told me yet."

"Those fucking cunts are dead," Maddox seethed, clenching his fists. "If she doesn't walk out of this hospital, Archer will never see me coming until it's already too late."

Wolfe's jaw tightened, his shoulders stiff. He cast an unreadable glance my way, like maybe he silently blamed me for all of this. Then he stormed away. "I'm going to see if someone can tell us anything."

Unable to cope and wishing I could trade places with Maven, I walked away down the hall, doing my best not to smash my head into the wall. I sucked in breath after breath, but nothing calmed the rise of anxiety that swelled within me.

A hand on my shoulder had me spinning around with a fist raised. Maddox raised a hand in case I took a swing at him. I lowered my fist and swore.

“It’s not your fault, Ruthless,” Maddox said, his gaze darting back down the hall as he waited for Wolfe to reappear with news. “You know that, right? We all took a risk tonight. Even Maven. She’s going to be fine. She has to be.”

The sterile hospital smell was getting to me. It made my stomach roll. I thought I might actually throw up.

“Her side slid right into the damn power pole. She could barely stay conscious, and then she asked me why I hated her.” Did I sound as haunted as I felt? What if Maven died in there and that was our last conversation?

Maddox steered me over to an empty bench to clear the way as a few nurses walked down the hall toward us. “What did you tell her?”

I shook my head. A lump in my throat made it hard to speak, not that I knew what I would say. Sharing this with Maddox was hard as hell. I kept these feelings to myself, burying them deep where they no longer plagued me. Now that they’d been so violently unearthed, I didn’t know how to cope.

“I told her the truth,” I croaked, my voice failing me. “God, I hate myself right now.”

“Not gonna tell me, huh?” Maddox nodded, as if he’d expected as much. “That’s okay. I get it. You still love her, and it kills you.”

“I don’t—” I started to protest, then stopped, unable to say it. “Things have changed. It’s not that simple.”

Placing a hand on my shoulder, Maddox let out a shaky sigh. He was more afraid than he wanted to admit. “Nope.

Nothing about that woman is simple, and that's part of what we love about her."

I didn't argue. There was nothing to say. We sat there in silence on the uncomfortable metal bench watching Ace pace the hallway until Wolfe returned. Then we both shot to our feet and hurried to meet him. The stern but relaxed expression he wore made my dead and decaying hopes rise.

"Maven is stable," he said, putting us all out of our misery. "She has a mild concussion, some bruised ribs, and a dislocated elbow. Thankfully, it's pretty minor overall. They want to keep her overnight for observation. We can see her in a bit."

I almost collapsed with relief. Slumping against the wall, I rubbed my hands over my face, closing out the bright fluorescent lights that seared into my psyche. The pent up need to hit something made my arms vibrate. Anything to release this inner anguish before it ate me alive.

"Did they ask who we were?" Ace asked. "Don't they usually only allow family in for shit like this?"

"I told them we were family," Wolfe confirmed. "Flashing my syndicate tattoo stopped any further questions."

Maddox fell heavily against the wall next to me. He pressed the palms of his hands against his eyes, releasing a shaky breath that seemed to pour from his soul. "Good. So now we wait."

"Now we wait," Wolfe repeated.

I didn't care how long it took. I wasn't going anywhere. Not without Maven.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MAVEN



A knock on the door preceded Wolfe poking his head inside my room. “Hey, Butterfly. How are you feeling?”

I waved him inside, trying to sit up straighter in the bed. Pain slashed through my ribs, and I winced, biting back a yelp. It had been two days since the accident that put me in this position. Thankfully, the hospital had released me the previous day. Now I was tucked into bed at Maddox’s house, back in his old bedroom. According to the doctor, I needed a few days of rest to let my brain and body heal up a bit.

“I’m a little sore,” I admitted, my face lighting up at the sight of the flower bouquet in Wolfe’s hand. “Headaches on and off. I’m okay though. I’ll bounce back in no time.”

I tried to reassure him, not wanting him to worry. The four of them had been hovering over me since I left the hospital, doing all they could to keep me comfortable while I recovered. As much as I appreciated every second of their loving attention, I hated feeling weak. Like I couldn’t take care of myself.

“I hope you like lilies,” Wolfe said, placing the flowers on the dresser next to a teddy bear from Ace. “I can’t stay long. I’m on my way to check out the repairs on my house, but

I wanted to stop by and see you for a few minutes. How's everything here?"

There had been no arguing with Maddox when he'd insisted on bringing me back to his house to recover. He'd made arrangements for my sister to stay at my place with Akasha. My parents had been horrified to hear about the accident. They'd come by to visit already. Mom brought a container of homemade cookies while Dad strongly encouraged me to give up my apartment and move in with Maddox and Ruthless.

I shrugged and gave a small laugh. "Well, Maddox hasn't locked me in here, so that's a plus. Although I can't do anything without him or Ruthless hovering over me. The headaches are getting better."

"Good. I'm happy to hear that." Sitting on the edge of the bed beside me, Wolfe glanced around the room. "This room hasn't changed much. I noticed that my old bedroom is exactly the same. It's weird."

"Yeah, it's weird for me too. Being in this house brings back a lot of memories. Good memories." I raised a brow suggestively.

A grin spread across Wolfe's handsome face. He took my hand in his, stroking my fingers with his thumb. "Yeah, we definitely had some good times here."

"We could have more good times here," I said, studying him closely. "Think you'd ever move back in? Or is having a house separate from Maddox better for you?"

Wolfe sucked in a sharp breath, releasing it slowly. “I honestly don’t know. There used to be a time when I thought we’d all live here together, the five of us. Things changed. I’m not sure Maddox and I can co-exist under the same roof. I think it’s too soon to say.”

“Yeah, I understand. I’m glad you and Ace are back in the syndicate. That was the right choice. For all of us.” I reached to touch his face, drawing him in for a kiss.

Wolfe kissed me like I may shatter into pieces if he wasn’t careful. Tender and soft, a barely there press of his lips to mine. Sure, I was injured and sore, but I wasn’t that fragile. His concern was adorable. I savored it.

The sound of footsteps in the hallway preceded Ruthless who entered with a tray in hand. Upon realizing he’d interrupted something, he jolted to a halt in the doorway, almost spilling a mug of tea on the tray.

“Sorry,” he said, eyes downcast. “Didn’t mean to interrupt. Just thought you could use something to eat. I can come back.”

Wolfe stopped him with a raised hand. “No, it’s fine. Stay. I have to take off anyway.” He lightly kissed the bruise on my temple and rose. “I’ll see you soon, Mave.”

When it was just Ruthless and me, I held my hands out in a dramatic grabbing motion. “What did you bring me? I’m starving.”

Ruthless brought the tray to the bed, setting it on my lap. He placed the mug of tea on the bedside table so it wouldn’t spill. It smelled like lavender.

“I made BLTs and soup for supper. I hope that’s all right. You need to eat.” He stood stiffly next to the bed, grudgingly sitting down when I patted the space beside me.

Although all four of my guys had helped take care of me, Ruthless had gone over and above. He’d barely left my side, even when his eyes were heavy with fatigue. He had to have been feeling guilty about the conversation we had before the ambulance arrived. We hadn’t discussed it since.

He hadn’t wanted to admit why he was so bitter toward me. I’d coaxed it out of him before drifting into unconsciousness. But I’d already known deep down inside. Hearing him say it had confirmed my suspicions.

Ruthless had taken it hard when I left... because I hadn’t said goodbye. The tough as nails gang banger who curb stomped men without flinching had been hurt. The one thing to cut through his layers of self-protection was me. Who’d have guessed?

“A BLT sounds great,” I said, happily snatching up the perfectly toasted sandwich. “It smells divine. When did you become such a good cook? I recall you living off frozen pizza and hotdogs back in the day.”

The corner of his mouth lifted in a sardonic smile. “Yeah, well that changed. It didn’t take long to realize that I needed to eat real food if I wanted to hold my own out there. Maddox is a slacker in the kitchen, so I didn’t rely on him to feed me. After a while, cooking became therapeutic. I actually enjoy it. The cleanup fucking sucks though.”

I munched away on my sandwich, loving every delicious bite. Listening to Ruthless talk was nice too. Especially when

it didn't include a nasty retort in my direction.

Hoping to keep him chatting, I asked, "What's your favorite thing to make? I'm not much of a cook myself, but I manage to keep from starving."

He watched me pause to sip from the mug of tea. Our eyes locked, and he quickly averted his gaze. "I don't really have a favorite, but I make a mean mac n' cheese."

"Sounds great. I'd love to try it sometime." I chewed a mouthful of sandwich, catching a stray piece of bacon as it tried to escape. "Where's Maddox?"

"He went to run damage control with Ace. One of our storage facilities was hit around three o'clock this morning. Archer's people burnt it to the ground. Joke's on them though. We saw that coming and moved everything out the day before." Ruthless said all this with a shrug, like none of it fazed him.

"Shit, that happened fast." As I finished devouring the sandwich, I turned my attention to the bowl of hearty vegetable soup. "Archer must be mad as hell. He won't stop there. What happened with the shit we stole from him?"

"Long gone already," Ruthless confirmed with a hint of a smile. "We unloaded everything with a syndicate in Stony Brooks. They were more than happy to take Archer's cocaine and fake cash for a fair price. We kept the pallet of guns for ourselves."

I nodded, glad they'd unloaded the stolen goods in a neighboring city right away. Holding onto that kind of thing too long was risky. Archer more than likely had deals in place

for those goods. Deals that would fall through now that we'd screwed him. Every time this happened he lost the trust of his business partners. It was only a matter of time until those people made deals with us instead.

Ruthless and I kept up the chitchat while I finished eating and sipping my tea. I saw the way his gaze darted from the empty food tray to the door.

"I should probably get back downstairs and tidy up. Do you need anything else?" He picked up the tray and empty mug, turning to the door.

Spending all day in bed was boring. I could only sleep for so many hours at a time. I didn't want to be alone. Since he'd asked, I would risk his rejection and answer.

"Actually, it would be really nice if you stayed a while longer," I tentatively broached the subject, expecting him to hightail it out the door. "Maybe you could even lay with me?"

I braced for the cold, stony Ruthless that I'd experienced since my return to River City. He stood awkwardly next to the bed, considering my request. Even though he just stood there, I felt his inner turmoil. I almost told him to forget that I'd asked, then he surprised me by putting the tray on the dresser.

He turned back to face me, his expression steeled into something I couldn't read. "Are you sure? I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't hurt me." I flung the blanket back and scooched over, patting the mattress beside me. "I'm fine. Really. I just don't want to be alone right now, and I thought a little cuddle wouldn't hurt. Unless you don't want to."

Something had changed between us in the Escalade that night. I just didn't know what it had changed into. Not yet.

Ruthless got into the bed next to me on my uninjured side and reluctantly pulled the blanket over himself. He left a few inches between us. The man was so damn stiff next to me I almost cracked a bad joke about a corpse. Biting my tongue, I gave him a few minutes to adjust.

Gradually he began to relax. Feeling brave, I snuggled in against him, tucking my head against his chest. If he didn't at least give me a halfhearted pat on the arm, I was going to feel like an idiot. It felt like forever before he put an arm around me.

Awkward didn't begin to describe the way he held me. Like it was his first time getting close to a woman, and I knew that wasn't true. Did he really not want to do this? I bit my lip as I wrestled with myself. Maybe I should tell him to leave.

I just couldn't bring myself to say the words. I desperately wanted to bridge the gap between Ruthless and me. If he wasn't ready, I wouldn't be able to make that happen. He had to want it too.

Right when I'd decided to give up and tell him he could leave, he stroked a hand through my hair and sighed. The stiffness and tension seemed to seep from him then as he completely relaxed.

A long time passed before Ruthless said, "I'm sorry, Maven. What Archer's thugs did to you was just as much my fault as it was Maddox's. When we got into that wreck the other night, I was afraid I'd never get the chance to tell you that."

My entire body buzzed with the rush his words incited. A swell of emotion rose up hard and fast, threatening to steal my voice. Tears filled my eyes. I blinked them away, taking a deep breath.

“Thank you,” I managed to say, my fingers curling to fist a handful of his t-shirt. “That means a lot to me. I’m sorry that I never said goodbye. I never knew you cared that much.”

Ruthless pressed his face to the top of my head, breathing in my scent. “Neither did I.”

I raised my head to meet his eyes in the lamplight. Still so guarded, Ruthless maintained that poker face he wore so well. His jaw was hard set, his lips pressed together. His eyes gave him away though. In them I saw a softness I hadn’t seen in years.

When he kissed me, my heart swelled. It wasn’t a demanding, angry kiss like those I’d experienced with him recently. Instead, this kiss was filled with regret, confusion, and longing. A world of emotion packed into one kiss. His tongue dipped into my mouth, soft but yearning. Hungry for more. I was hungry for more too.

When we broke apart, I reached for the drawer in the nightstand, plucking a condom from within. Pressing it into Ruthless’s hand, I said, “Be with me, Micah. Please. I want you, and I know you want me too.”

There was no missing the hard on that pressed against me. Ruthless’s deep brown eyes gleamed with desire. He shook his head.

“I can’t. I don’t want to hurt you. You should be resting.” Despite his refusal, he pressed his groin against me and kissed me again.

“I’ve been resting for two days,” I said when his lips left mine. “I won’t break. I promise. If all you want to do is cuddle, then that’s cool with—”

Ruthless’s next kiss silenced me. Now there was a hint of that darkness he carried. He nipped my bottom lip before plunging his tongue into my mouth, delving deep. He dropped the condom between our pillows and gently rolled me onto my back.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MAVEN



Scorching heat followed the path his mouth made as he kissed down the side of my neck. It continued on a fiery trail that ended between my legs. Bracing himself against the mattress, Ruthless hovered over me, wary of putting too much of his weight on me. Little did he know that all I wanted was to feel him atop me.

“Just so you know,” he warned, meeting my gaze. “I’m going to treat you like a breakable object because I don’t want to hurt you and because Maddox will fucking murder me if I do. When you’re back to full strength, I’m going to fuck you the way I’ve always wanted to.”

My thoughts ran away with that idea. What kind of fucking did Ruthless have in mind? Because I’d sure like to know.

“Don’t hold back on my account. I’m not going to break, Ruthless. Trust me.” I ran both hands down his chest, grasping the hem of his t-shirt. I needed to feel his skin.

He sucked in a breath between his teeth when I raised my hips, rubbing against him. “Don’t test me, Baby Girl. You can’t handle what I want to do to you, but that’s okay. I’m still going to make you mine.”

A rush of adrenaline spilled through my veins in response to his claim. That's exactly what he intended to do. Claim me. We were long overdue for this.

I sighed happily and said, "You fucking better."

Ruthless groaned, kissing the side of my neck as he slid a hand beneath my loose fitting tank top. Since I was stuck in bed, I wasn't wearing a bra. Only a tank top, underwear, and pajama shorts covered me. Not for long though.

Moving quickly but carefully, Ruthless lifted my top up over my head. He flung it onto the floor and captured my nipple in his mouth. I whimpered softly and slid a hand into his mohawk. Without product to make it stand up, it was floppy and sleek, slipping between my fingers.

He took care not to hurt me, just like he'd promised. Ruthless's every touch was tender and kind. More gentle than I'd ever have expected from him. It was a direct contrast to the hard, brutal exterior he'd shown me.

As his tongue swirled around my nipple, he tugged my shorts down, taking my underwear with them. Excitement coiled in my belly when he kissed a trail down the center of my body. My pussy throbbed in anticipation. This wasn't the first time Ruthless had gone down on me, but it was the first time in a very long time. It would be our first time seeing this through to the end. We needed this.

He seemed to share that feeling. He paused, taking a long moment to gaze down at my naked body. Not all that long ago he'd walked in on Maddox licking furiously between my legs. Ruthless had glared and stormed away. I knew it was because he'd wanted it to be him in that position. Now it was.

I quirked a brow and nodded at his still clothed body. “Get those clothes off, Ruthless. I want to see all of you.”

Fucking rights I did. I knew from previous encounters that Ruthless was hung like a horse. The biggest of all my men. Not that it mattered. Nobody was coming up short in that department.

With a smirk, he pulled off his shirt, tossing it aside before reaching for his belt. My eyes ate up every piece of him. His tattooed torso was decorated with scars from the torture he’d endured. Burns, cuts, and stabs that told the story of what had happened to him. I bore similar scars though not nearly so many. I wanted to touch them all but feared he wouldn’t like it.

As his clothes came off, I helped myself to a greedy eyeful of hard toned chest and abs that revealed hours regularly spent in the home gym downstairs. Lower still and a thrill ran through me. I’d been waiting a long time for this.

“Better?” Ruthless asked, not waiting for a response before taking a deep dive between my thighs.

Slinging one of my legs over his shoulder, Ruthless dragged his tongue over me. My mouth dropped open in a silent gasp. I’d never experienced a touch so powerfully gentle and intimate. The feather soft flicking of his tongue along my slit did something to me, making me come undone in a way that wasn’t just physical but also emotional. A man that hated me could never love me like this.

“Yes,” I moaned. “So much better.”

I kept a tight hold on his hair, raising my hips to get more of him. Ruthless answered my unspoken request by pushing two fingers inside me. I was ridiculously wet. My body ached for him, and it was ready to take the challenge nestled between his legs.

The press of his tongue against my clit was soft but determined. Ruthless knew what he wanted from me. The pleasure built quickly, overwhelming me in its suddenness. I came with a series of moans, surprised by how fast he'd made me orgasm. The intensity of it left my legs quivering.

He didn't force me to have four more orgasms like Wolfe would have. Like me, Ruthless was eager to take this to the next level. Impatient to be inside me, he snatched up the condom from where he'd dropped it and sheathed his hard cock. I licked my lips, eyeing his erection.

"That thing is gonna split me wide open," I whispered, afraid to ruin the moment by talking too loudly. "I can't fucking wait."

A sexy chuckle shook Ruthless's shoulders. "I'm pretty sure you can take it just fine. Promise to tell me if I hurt you in any way. I mean it, Maven."

His smile faded as he stared stonily at me, awaiting my agreement before continuing. I'd have agreed to just about anything to get him moving. I nodded vigorously.

"It's just a few sore ribs, Ruthless. I'll be fine. You're killing me here. Don't make me wait any longer." I raised my hips to hurry him along. It didn't work.

Taking his sweet time, Ruthless positioned himself between my legs. Supporting his weight with one arm, he used the other to grasp my wrists in his hand, pinning them to the pillow above my head. I knew he had a dark spark that would come out in the bedroom. I suspected I'd only scratch the surface of what he was capable of tonight.

“Don't get bossy. That shit might work on Maddox, but it won't work on me. You're going to take what I give you when I'm ready to give it to you.” Eyes sparkling with a sinister delight, Ruthless grinned down at me.

I wasn't surprised that he knew how my encounters with Maddox often went. We were hardly quiet about it. Ruthless's approach was all his own, like neither Wolfe or Mads. I loved it. I only wished that I was well enough to take the whole experience. I knew that he'd never cross the boundary he'd put in place for himself.

Lucky for me, Ruthless didn't want to wait any longer either. He placed the head of his cock against me, holding my gaze as he slowly thrust inside. He stretched me open inch by inch. A small squeak escaped me when he was buried deep, and he paused.

“I'm okay,” I assured him, not about to tell him that my ribs ached from the tension that suddenly filled me at his entry. I needed a moment to adjust, but no part of me wanted to stop.

“You better be,” Ruthless snarled, slowly withdrawing only to slide deep once again. He took his time, keeping a slow rhythm as we both absorbed the moment of just being together. Finally.

Hips rocking forward again and again, Ruthless gradually increased his pace. Still, he didn't go fast or hard. There was nothing rough or demanding about how he took me, even though I sensed his hunger for those things. He put my needs first, thinking only of taking care of me. I'd never felt so loved, so protected, in the arms of my lover. Which was even more special since he worked so hard to hate me.

Every stroke of his cock inside me made my breath come faster. There was only one thing missing. Usually I'd have no problem with having my hands restricted, and I still didn't. However, being with Ruthless meant something to me, and I desperately needed to touch him.

"Let me touch you, Ruthless," I pleaded, tugging against the hand that held my wrists. "Please. I want to feel you."

For a moment I thought he would refuse. Making a sound that was a mix of a groan and a sigh, he kissed me hard and released my arms. I cupped the side of his face, kissing him back with wild abandon. The sensual way he fucked me bordered so heavily on making love I could have cried.

I ran both hands down his neck. My fingers glided over the gargoyle inked on his chest, tracing its outstretched wing before continuing down to the zombie crawling across his ribs. When I dared to trace a lengthy scar left by a knife blade, he tensed but said nothing.

Ruthless's mouth moved on my neck, his breath warm against my skin. We moved together like we'd been made to do this. My arms went around him, and I held him close, savoring the way he felt on top of me. This man had enough power to crush me with little effort. He could easily have left

me bruised and sore, but he held himself back, loving me soft and slow instead. My heart did a little flip in my chest.

I ran my hands down his lower back to his ass, raising my hips to meet his thrusts. At my silent urging Ruthless moved faster, grinding on my clit. His real name rolled off my tongue on a moan. That seemed to be his undoing.

His thrusts grew in intensity, plunging deep while still not crossing the line into rough. Sensual and erotic, Ruthless had this way of moving his hips that sent a wave of pleasure rippling up to my belly. I climaxed with a small cry that he seemed to love.

Pressing his face into my neck, Ruthless gave a few more deep thrusts. His cock twitched inside me as he came. The feeling of fullness eased as he withdrew. Rolling over beside me, Ruthless carefully wrapped me in his arms, kissing the back of my shoulder as he spooned me.

I closed my eyes to savor everything about being in his arms this way. Unable to resist the urge to be cheeky, I said, “I guess you’ll have to stop being such an asshole to me now. I know you don’t really mean it.”

The laughter that followed rang with wickedness. “That’s what you think. Don’t let a gentle fuck fool you. I am who I am, Baby Girl. Just because I missed you doesn’t mean I’ll start kissing your ass. I’m not Ace.”

“Hey,” I protested, playfully slapping his arm. “Leave Ace out of this. He’s a good guy. You couldn’t say a bad thing about him if you tried.” I paused to chuckle before adding, “So you missed me, huh? I knew it.”

“Yeah, try not to enjoy that too much.”

The sound of the front door opening and closing broke the still quiet. Footfalls thundered up the stairs, announcing the arrival of Maddox. He jerked to a stop outside the open door, taking in the sight of us naked and entangled.

A smirk stole across his face. He pivoted on a heel to leave but not before saying, “It’s about fucking time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MAVEN



It was a nice day for a mafia wedding. The summer sun shone down brightly, bathing the outdoor wedding setup in light. Faith and her fiancé were getting married in the sprawling backyard of her in laws' estate. Not a bad choice. The property looked like something right out of a bridal magazine.

Ace and I pulled up in front of the house, waiting in a row of vehicles lining the large circle drive. Four valets moved among the cars, taking keys and driving to an unseen parking location. I ogled the big house, shocked that anyone wanted to live in a place so huge. It seemed so cold and unfeeling, not to mention impossible to keep clean without an entire team. Although from what I'd heard about these people, they probably did have an entire team.

"How are you feeling about this?" Ace asked, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel as we waited our turn. "You're not in any pain, are you? You look fucking amazing, by the way. Have I mentioned that yet?"

He made an over the top dramatic face, pretending to pant and drool at the sight of me. I gave him a shove and laughed. Ace could always be counted on to lighten the mood.

“Only about eighteen times but thank you. You’re looking damn fine yourself. Good enough to eat.” I teasingly snapped my teeth together. “I’m still a little sore but so much better. Haven’t had a headache in a few days. I’m all good. No worries. How about you?”

It hadn’t been all that long ago that Ace had been shot in the shoulder. He no longer wore the sling on his arm but his motions were still stiff at times.

“Oh this?” Ace nodded to his shoulder. “I’ve had worse. At least it wasn’t my gun arm.”

We rolled up to the valet and got out. One valet accepted the keys from Ace while another hurried to open my door. I accepted the gesture with a smile, thanking him as I smoothed out the skirt of my dress. The slit climbed up my left leg, ending just below my hip. I caught the valet checking out my cleavage before averting his gaze.

Because this was an organized crime shindig, we were all being searched at the door. No weapons allowed. I hated the raw, naked feeling of being stripped of my knives. I’d tucked a small one into the twisted pile of curls pinned atop my head. Because I struggled to always follow the rules, I had another small blade secured to the thigh covered by my skirt. If they found it, I’d plead ignorance.

Ace took my hand as we ascended the wide front steps. I snuck another peek at him, loving the way he moved so easily in the black suit hugging his body. The event was semi-formal. He went without a tie, his short, trendy blond hair neatly combed into place.

“Maybe it’s just me,” I said. “But we look damn good together.”

Ace didn’t miss a beat. “Hell yeah we do. You’re definitely the hotter one though.”

I flashed him a grin as we stepped up for our turn to be admitted to the house. We each received a basic pat down from a couple hulking security guys in suits. They seemed to be looking for guns more than anything else, missing my thigh sheath completely. Although they couldn’t really get handsy that close to my ass without looking like creeps.

We entered the house hand in hand, allowing the flow of traffic inside to sweep us along through the luxurious foyer and living room to the massive yard out back. It had been beautifully decorated with flower displays and marble statues featuring smitten lovers. Rows of chairs were lined up on one side of the yard, facing a beautiful wooden archway that was draped in pale purple chiffon. The other half of the yard had been set up for the reception with a dance area, stage, and loads of food laden tables. The tall four tier wedding cake sat displayed on a table in the middle.

Ace and I took a seat on the bride’s side. Where the hell was Donovan Archer? I barely resisted the urge to look around for him.

“Where is that fucker?” I asked in a hushed whisper. “He better be here.”

Ace glanced up to watch the flow of guests streaming into the yard. “I’m sure he’ll come. He’ll probably walk in last minute to really make an entrance.”

That's exactly what happened. Most of the guests had taken their seats as the ceremony start time drew closer. A few stragglers still made their way through the house to the yard. The minister had taken his place in front of the arch.

When all were seated, Donovan Archer appeared on the back patio. I knew by the way several people turned in their seats to watch him stroll across the thick green grass. I joined them in staring, ready to lay eyes on the man who played the role of my number one enemy.

Because of him I'd suffered countless nightmares and trauma induced anxiety. It had taken years for me to overcome the worst of it. That kind of thing never really did completely go away. I felt certain that Ruthless would agree.

Donovan was decked out in an expensive Italian suit. Dark gray to match his dark eyes. Those eyes traveled over the guests as he made his way to the front row of the groom's side. His gaze passed over me, and he did an obvious doubletake. I smiled in satisfaction.

Schooling his features to hide the surprise I'd seen in his eyes, Archer continued on to his seat without another glance my way. He didn't want me to know it but he didn't love that I was here. I loved that my mere presence antagonized him.

Once everyone was settled, the groom took his place at the altar, and the ceremony began. A woman seated at a harp next to the wooden arch played a lovely piece as the wedding party came down the aisle in pairs. The music then shifted to the wedding song that introduced the bride. We all turned as one to watch Faith descend the back steps and start her dramatic journey down the aisle.

She was undoubtedly beautiful. The white dress she wore had mountains of tulle making up the skirt. It moved around her like a giant cloud. A bridesmaid helped carry the long train that trailed behind her, attached to a sparkly head piece woven into her dark locks. Her bouquet was packed with colorful wild flowers.

There was a murmur among the guests as they softly commented on her beauty. Faith paused to eat it up before continuing along. I watched her face light up as she gazed upon her fiancé. I'd never given much thought to marriage. After I left River City, marriage was the last thing on my mind.

Ace gently nudged me with an elbow and whispered, "Think you'll ever do this? I'd kill to see you in a dress like that."

I turned to find his eyes lit up at the image painted in his mind. I'd known Ace was a charmer but I'd never have pegged him for a complete romantic.

"I don't know." I gave a lazy half-shrug. "I've never been able to picture myself getting married. As you know, I'm not exactly a one man kind of woman. That kind of throws a wrench into things."

"Well, it doesn't have to be legal to be a beautiful ceremony of love and devotion," Ace replied, head tilted as he gauged my reaction. "Fuck the law. Since when do we let the rules stop us from doing whatever the hell we want?"

He had a point. As the minister began to speak, we all fell silent. I pondered Ace's comment about having a ceremony anyway. Did he want to marry me? Did the others?

Not Ruthless, despite the tumultuous feelings he had for me. Maddox would be first in line, no doubt, ready to possess me any way possible.

Did I want that? To forge a lifelong commitment to the men I'd once been so deeply bound to? My mind toyed with the idea as I listened to Faith recite her vows. Her eyes gleamed with unshed tears, and her voice quivered as she declared her undying love. No doubt the whole thing was beautiful.

I didn't know if I could see myself doing the same. I hadn't been back home all that long. There was still so much upheaval among the five of us. It was too soon to say.

Finally the minister got to the part about kissing the bride, and the guests all clapped. A few whistled. The happy couple joined hands and strolled down the aisle back toward the house. They beamed at each other like they were the only two people in the world. A tiny prickle of envy niggled at me.

The reception kicked off when the band perched upon the stage played the couple's chosen song. The groom, Steve, swept Faith into his arms, and they danced to some Taylor Swift song that I wasn't familiar with.

When other couples began to join them in the dance area, Ace grabbed my hand and pulled me over there. He gathered me into his arms, holding me close as we danced among dozens of beautifully dressed couples. Feeling an unexpected swell of emotion, I slid my arms around his neck and rested my head on his shoulder.

"It's probably way too soon to say this since we haven't even slept together yet but I would marry the hell out of you in

a heartbeat, Bright Eyes. I just want you to know that.” Ace dropped a kiss on the top of my head.

There was a cozy squishiness to his embrace that reminded me of days long past. Nights tucked beneath blankets on the couch watching scary movies and munching popcorn. Ace was always down for anything, but those simple nights were often the best.

“You’re an anchor in this storm, Ace,” I said low, next to his ear. “The rest of us would have been set adrift ages ago without you. I love you for always being the peaceful, lighthearted person that you are. We all need you to get through what’s ahead with Archer.”

Ace’s lips on the side of my face drew my gaze up to his. Those enchanting blue eyes cut through me, seeing the good and the bad, loving me anyway. He kissed me with a light claiming of my lips, lingering long enough to make me want more. With so many people and children present, he kept it clean. No tongue.

“I don’t doubt that Wolfe and Maddox would have killed each other years ago without me,” Ace chuckled. “You’re the core though, Mave. It’s you that links the rest of us. I’m so thankful you came back. Deep down I knew you would.”

I squeezed him a little tighter. “Thanks for keeping the faith.”

The song came to an end, and the band promptly launched into another. A voice from behind sent a chill down my spine.

“Mind if I cut in?” Donovan Archer asked, oozing arrogance when he offered me his hand. “May I have the next dance, Miss Hart?”

“Miss Hart?” I scoffed. “Let’s not pretend that’s the name you call me behind my back.”

I scowled at his offered hand, knowing that I would accept but wanting to make him sweat while I pretended to consider. Getting a few minutes alone with him in a setting that provided us both safety was what I’d been waiting for.

Placing my hand in Archer’s, I said, “One dance. Don’t get handsy or I’ll break your fingers.”

It was Donovan’s turn to scoff. “Don’t flatter yourself, sweetheart.”

“Don’t call me sweetheart,” I warned, bristling at the condescension in his tone. We were off to a fabulous start.

Ace took his cue and turned to leave. “I’ll grab us some champagne.”

When Archer and I were alone, we stared at one another like two apex predators wondering if the fight was worth it. Sometimes it was better to walk away. Not this time though. I’d already run once. I wasn’t going anywhere.

Using our joined hands, Donovan pulled me closer, keeping a respectable distance between us. He glanced around to ensure nobody was close enough to eavesdrop. “What are you doing here?”

“Faith is a friend from high school,” I answered truthfully, wondering why he was already so threatened. “She invited me. Got a problem with that?”

“Of course not.” He frowned. I’d offended him. “Can’t blame me for asking. I’m sure that I don’t need to tell you how many of my people are here.”

I erupted in laughter. For a man who’d been doing this crime gig since before I was born, he sure did feel the need to make sure I knew that I was outnumbered. My laughter only served to deepen his frown.

“Don’t worry, Donovan. I didn’t come here to get revenge for the night your people tortured me. Although I definitely haven’t forgotten about it. All in good time.” I beamed a self-satisfied smile at him, loving the hatred that filled his eyes.

I just barely held his hand as we awkwardly danced to a classical song that I didn’t know. What happened to some good reliable top forty music? I couldn’t dance to this shit.

“Is that why you came back to River City?” he asked, voicing a question that had probably been burning a hole in his psyche since hearing of my return. “To get your revenge for that night? Let’s not forget that Maddox killed my son-in-law. My daughter is a widow because of him. A price had to be paid.”

“You goaded him into it with that nasty card you sent,” I hissed, struggling to rein in my temper. “You wanted a reaction, and you got one.”

Archer’s expression morphed into a mask of derision. “Maddox chose to be goaded. He allowed me to get under his skin. It was a test of his ability to be a leader, and he failed.”

Anger scorched me. I bit my bottom lip to keep from telling Archer what a vile piece of shit he was. He wanted to unsettle me. I wouldn't let him do that.

"You simply have no class," I quipped, finding it awkward to move to the music with him. He guided me in a wide arc as we did what had to be the stiffest, most uncomfortable version of dancing to ever be done.

Donovan nodded his head, accepting my claim. "That's fair. I'm sure I'd feel the same way if I were you. Now would you like to keep slinging shit at each other, or should I get to the point of this dance?"

Here we go. I'd suspected that he had an ulterior motive in asking me to dance.

I nodded for him to continue. "Please get to the point and save us from spending any more time in each other's company than necessary."

Touching the man made my skin crawl despite how little we actually did touch. I'd wanted a face to face with him, but I hadn't expected it to be like this.

A strange calculating glint in his eyes put me on guard. His gaze strayed to Ace who stood near the large table that served as the bar. "I want you to work for me."

He let that hang between us. His gaze returned to me, studying my face for a reaction. My immediate response was a bark of laughter.

"Is that some kind of joke?" I gaped at him, wondering why he'd say something so outrageously insane.

“Not at all. I want you to work for me. Join my operation.” Taking advantage of my stunned silence, Archer forged onward. “You’re good at what you do. Sly, smart, and one of few women in this business that I truly respect. I’m sure we can come to some kind of agreement that suits us both.”

I almost tripped over his foot as he suddenly spun us around, turning me away from Ace. When I recovered, I shot him a vicious glare. “Why the hell would I ever want to work for you? This has to be a joke.”

“No joke. I’m completely serious. You may want to consider my offer carefully, especially if you prefer your men alive.” Archer’s expression darkened into something ugly and menacing. “Join me and I’ll let them live. After the stunt you pulled with my son and that heist at my warehouse, death is the least you all deserve. This way you all get to live.”

Giving up any effort to dance, I jerked to a stop and tugged my hand from his. “You’re losing your mind, aren’t you? Trying to figure out how to stop us from taking everything from you. But you can’t stop us. We’re coming for you, Archer, and you know it’s only a matter of time.”

Donovan went to reach for me again. I jerked back before he could touch me. Dropping his arms to his sides, he snarled, “Impossible. Those assholes don’t have what it takes to bring me down. A few warehouse hits is nothing in the grand scheme of things. They’ll never best me. Not as long as they have a weakness, and that’s you, Maven.”

Goddamn this man knew how to push buttons. I’d have loved to pull the blade from my hair and jam it into his

windpipe. Unfortunately, he had enough people present to make sure I never left the property alive.

“You’d never be able to trust me anyway,” I pointed out. “Why would you want me to work for you? Do you think that would give you some kind of power over me? You couldn’t be more wrong.”

Donovan shook his head, a slow grin splitting his face in two. “Not over you, no. Over them. As long as you work for me, they would all be on their best behavior. We may even all learn to coexist in this city. Think about it. Name your price. Not only will I meet it, I’ll beat it.”

This man had been playing dirty for decades. It shouldn’t have surprised me that he’d take such an approach. Still, I hadn’t seen it coming.

“Do you really think you can buy me?” My tone dripped acid. “I’m not for sale, bitch. I will never work for you, Donovan. I’m the enemy. Trust me when I say that your syndicate’s days in this city are numbered. I owe you pain and vengeance, and I will deliver.”

I whirled on a heel to storm away. He stopped me by saying, “My offer is the only way to save them, Maven. As long as you’re with the Hale Syndicate, they’ll always be vulnerable.”

I hated the truth that rang in his words. He’d already proven that I could be used against the Hales. Things were different now though. We were stronger now than we were before, and we could face anything Archer threw at us.

Nailing Archer with a deadly glare, I said, “Go fuck yourself.”

He didn't stop me from striding away across the grass. Upon reaching Ace, I glanced back to see Archer disappearing into the crowd that had gathered to congratulate Faith and Steve. He did not look in my direction.

“What was that all about?” Handing me a glass of champagne, Ace slid an arm around my waist, tucking me in against him.

I chugged back the entire glass of champagne in two swallows. They really didn't top these up as full as they should. “That motherfucker wants me to work for him. Can you believe that shit?”

Ace and I exchanged our empty glasses for full ones and moved to a part of the lawn that was relatively unoccupied. I filled him in on the brief but aggravating conversation I'd just had with Donovan Archer. A series of emotions ran through him as I spoke.

Mouth open in shock, Ace gave a little laugh, like he wasn't sure how to react. “Is he for real? Why would he give you a chance to double cross him? That makes no sense.”

“He's so conceited that he doesn't believe it would happen. He seemed to think that I'd be happy to join his syndicate if it meant keeping the four of you safe.” I frowned, scanning the yard for Archer. I wasn't sure where he'd gone, but I didn't want to let him out of my sight.

A downright sinister energy stole over Ace. Brow furrowed, he shifted from the happy-go-lucky guy I knew to a

different version of himself. One that wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty when there was no other choice.

"I see. He thinks you're going to be a weapon he uses against us. Can't blame the guy for having big dreams, I guess." Nodding toward the bride and groom, Ace added, "I don't know about you but I'm ready to get the hell out of here. Let's congratulate them and take off."

The sun was beginning to set, dropping lower in the sky, painting the horizon in streaks of pink and gold. This was the last place I wanted to be after dark when everyone was drunk and rowdy.

"Sounds good. I'm ready to not be here anymore." Draining my second champagne, I placed the glass on a server's tray of empties and carefully crossed the lawn to where Faith and Steve stood beaming proudly at one another.

We patiently waited our turn to speak with them. I gave Faith a hug and told her how much I loved her dress and wished her nothing but happiness. She thanked us for coming before being whisked away by her new husband to drink and dance with their guests.

Ace and I entered the house through the back patio doors, momentarily delayed by the flow of people inside. Many of them were waiting to use the main floor washroom while others simply mingled in the living room. Still no sign of Archer.

We weaved our way through, taking care not to jostle or push anyone even though all I wanted to do was shove them all out of my way. We crossed through the empty foyer to the

front door. Hopefully the valet wouldn't take long fetching the car.

We never made it to the door. Donovan Archer stepped out from an adjoining hallway, flanked by several men with guns.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way," Archer said, spreading his hands wide in feigned innocence. "But I can't let you leave yet."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MAVEN



There wasn't a damn thing we could do with eight guns trained on us. Of course Archer had been allowed in with his weapons. Piece of shit.

Both Ace and I raised our hands in surrender. My two blades would do nothing in this situation. I left them right where they were. Even when Archer's men manhandled us down the long hall to a large office at the end.

They dragged us inside and closed the door before throwing Ace down onto the floor in front of an expensive wooden desk. I winced as he threw his hands out to catch himself, putting most of his weight on his injured shoulder. Before he could get up, an Archer goon stepped forward and kicked him in the ribs, flinging him back down.

"What the fuck is this?" I shouted, straining to break free of the men holding my arms. "You petty motherfucker. Pretty bold of you to show how vulnerable your ego really is. You never do your own dirty work, do you?"

I'd never been the type to take shit from anyone. People were far too inclined to ignore boundaries and walk all over you if you didn't draw clear and bold lines. Calling out Archer on his crap came second nature. Unfortunately, there were

times when silence was the best choice. Too late I realized that this was one of those times.

Archer reached into his pocket and plucked out a set of brass knuckles. Sliding them on, he crossed the room to where Ace sucked in painful breaths as he tried to rise. He waited for Ace to stand up before smashing him in the face with the brass knuckles. A large gash opened up on Ace's cheek, and he went down on his ass from the strength of the impact.

I choked back another shout, refusing to let Archer see how much this affected me. Of all the men for him to target, Ace deserved it the least. I'd brought him here, right into Archer's grasp.

"How's that, Maven?" Archer asked, smiling as Ace touched a finger to the bloody cut on his cheek. "Is that what you wanted to see?"

Holding his gaze so he could see that there was no fear in my eyes, I spoke between clenched teeth. "Why are you doing this?"

Archer spread his hands wide as if to indicate the situation itself. "How can I pass up such an opportunity? It's not every day that two top tier Hale Syndicate members walk right into my turf unarmed. I'd be a fool not to take advantage."

My gaze quickly traveled around the room, assessing the place for anything that could be used as a weapon. Although it was a decent sized room, it was relatively bare. Other than the desk on one wall and a bookshelf on another, it was empty. It didn't matter anyway. Nothing would give us an advantage in a room filled with gun-toting goons.

“The others know we’re here,” I said, not addressing his remark about Ace and me being top tier. He knew that we were all back in the Hale Syndicate thanks to our little heist on his warehouse. No doubt that had instilled a sense of panic that had him acting out now.

“That’s fine. They’ll never make it past the property line without taking more bullets than any one man can withstand. For the time being, it’s just us. Shall we get started?” Without warning, Donovan threw another brass knuckles punch at Ace who still had yet to get off the floor.

I choked on the scream that rose in my throat. Screaming only encouraged the abuse. No matter how much it killed me to watch them hurt Ace, I had to wear my best poker face.

Archer took off the brass knuckles and tucked them back into his pocket. He nodded and two of his men came forward to grab Ace by each arm, holding him between them. A third man stepped forward, ready to deliver any punishment his boss deemed necessary.

“Is this because I refused to work for you?” Aghast, I stared at Donovan Archer in total disgust.

He rolled his eyes and scoffed. “You think awfully high of yourself, don’t you? Maybe you’re used to having men fall all over themselves for you, but that’s not going to happen here. You’re nothing to me but a tool, Maven. One that I will wield whether you play along or not.”

“You’re a fucking dead man,” Ace seethed, spitting blood onto the burgundy carpet. “We haven’t forgotten what you did to Maven. Not to mention Ruthless. You think you

hold all the cards now but you're blinded by your own ego. We're going to destroy everything you built."

I winced, anticipating the hit from Archer's man before it snapped Ace's head back. Again I fought to break free of those holding me, needing to get to Ace. To just be by his side.

One of the men holding tight to my arm slapped me hard across the face. The daring move did nothing to subdue me. It only fed my boiling rage.

"Ah yes." Donovan stared off as if recalling a pleasant memory. "The work my boys did on Ruthless was beautiful. I'm surprised he hasn't completely lost his mind yet. I only wish we'd had that kind of time with you, Maven. Eventually I will work my way through your entire group, making my way back to the queen. Then I will personally finish what my men started."

I caught Ace's eye, silently willing him to stay calm. It took a lot to make Ace snap, but when he did, there was no going back. Not until the threat was over. I understood his desire to tear Archer a new one. However, our priority needed to be walking out of here alive.

"Sure, Donovan," I quipped, not giving him the satisfaction of getting under my skin. "Whatever you say."

The man who'd hit me smacked me again, this time using a closed fist. Archer held up a hand to stop any further blows. My fingers twitched, desperate to pull a knife and slash open the fucker's artery.

"Tell me about the raid on my warehouse," Archer demanded, looming close enough for me to smell the scotch

on his breath. “What did you do with my stolen goods?”

Finding no reason to lie, I said, “We unloaded them with a syndicate in another city. Your stuff is long gone.”

Archer nodded knowingly, as if he’d expected as much. Pressing his fingertips together, he pondered his next question. “What’s your next move? You must be planning something else. I can’t imagine you’d stop now.”

I made a show of looking him up and down, like I’d assessed him and found him to be nothing but utter shit. “Our next move depends entirely on what you do here. How fast do you want to die, Donovan?”

The next fist to hit my face belonged to Archer himself. Ace lunged forward, restrained by the men keeping him on his knees. I tasted blood as my lip split open.

Instead of giving Archer what he wanted, a scared and helpless female, I grinned with blood staining my teeth. “Give me another one, Daddy. Let’s see what you’re made of.”

Confusion caused Donovan’s brow to furrow. He didn’t seem to know what to make of my reaction. Did he think I was unable to take a hit?

While he gathered his thoughts, Archer took his ire out on Ace. Whirling toward my blond companion, he threw several punches at Ace’s already bloody face. If we didn’t get out of here soon, Archer may decide he was done playing and simply kill us.

“This is your last chance to change your mind.” Archer’s shout echoed through the barren room. He flung a hand in Ace’s direction. “Either you work for me or I kill this asshole.”

“Why would you want me to work for you?” I countered. “You know that you’d never be able to trust me. The first chance I got I would double cross you. Maybe even kill you. Why would you be willing to take that risk?”

Archer didn’t miss a beat. “Not if I had your sweet little sister under constant surveillance. I have eyes and ears all over this city. I know that you’d do anything to keep her safe. Let’s not forget your parents. Your father isn’t really up to a fight these days.”

But of course. Targeting my family was the only play in Archer’s book. As much as it did instill a trickle of fear into my heart, I knew that the Hale Syndicate would protect my loved ones. I would not be coerced.

“Maybe he’s not,” I agreed with a nod. “But I sure as hell am. If you test me, Archer, I’ll give you the fight of your pathetic life. Evan will be calling me Mommy when I get through with you.”

I braced for another smack in the face. It wasn’t me who took the brutality of Archer’s anger though. It was Ace.

Archer waved a hand, issuing a silent command. The goon in front of Ace kicked him hard in the ribs. My own still sore ribs ached in sympathy. I watched Ace’s face as he struggled to keep the pain from showing. It invaded his blue eyes though, filling them with agony.

“Then I guess you leave me no choice.” Walking a slow path between Ace and me, Archer gave me a cold, analytical stare. “I’ll have to slowly torture your Golden Retriever here until you’ve seen enough to change your mind. I can’t imagine it will take long. Unless you’re a coldhearted bitch.”

My eyes darted from Archer to Ace who shook his head. He didn't want me to give in. I couldn't stand there and watch them take him apart piece by piece. I wouldn't.

Pain slashed through my head, reminding me that only days ago I'd been in bed with a concussion. Those few smacks sure hadn't helped. The room momentarily spun. For a second I thought I may puke on the guy next to me. His grip on my sore elbow wasn't helping.

Ace turned everyone's attention back to him when he snarled, "Do what you've got to do, dick. We're not going to beg for mercy."

The malicious chuckle that rippled forth from Donovan made the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. "We'll see about that. All right, boys, start breaking his fingers. One at a time."

"No," I blurted, unable to stay quiet. "Hurting Ace won't get me to join you. It will only fuel my desire to see you and everything you love turned to ash."

Casting a bored stare in my direction, Donovan waved a hand. "Do it."

The sound of Ace's pinky finger snapping made my queasy stomach turn. He grunted with the effort it took not to scream. I was proud of him for keeping himself together. He was both a lover and a fighter.

"This isn't going to achieve anything," I insisted. Desperation clawed its way through me, threatening to spill out in the agreement he wanted to hear. I had to stop them from hurting Ace, and there was only one way to do that.

I hovered on the edge of telling Archer that I would work for him. When Archer looked to me for a response, I froze. I didn't know what to do. We were outnumbered and without guns.

I stared blankly at Archer. When I didn't tell him what he wanted, he snapped his fingers and nodded. They broke Ace's ring finger. This time a pained shout escaped him.

No more. I could do this no longer. I didn't know where things would go from here, but I was out of time and options. I opened my mouth to beg him to stop and promise myself to his syndicate. Before I got the words out a noise in the hall brought everything to a halt.

"River City Police! Everyone stay where you are." A loud voice barked orders as the sound of footsteps poured through the house. Someone had called the cops. The timing couldn't have been more perfect.

"Is this your doing somehow?" Archer hissed.

I shrugged, having no idea how the police got involved. We usually liked to keep them as far from the action as possible.

Ace raised his head, peering at Donovan through a mask of blood and bruises. "You're not the only one with contacts on the inside, asshole."

The office door burst open before Archer could respond. Several police officers filled the doorway, shouting for Archer's goons to drop their weapons. They all did as they were told.

I fell back against the wall, my body sagging in relief as I slid down to the floor. As the cops cuffed Archer and his men, he held my gaze. When they escorted him from the room, I slipped him a middle finger. I wanted Donovan Archer dead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MAVEN



I washed down two painkillers with a glass of ice cold water. My head swam and throbbed, sending shockwaves of nausea rippling through me. I'd never been so happy to be back at Maddox's house.

After the police had rounded up every present Archer Syndicate member, they'd allowed the rest of us to leave. At least one of the cops present was definitely in the pocket of the Hale Syndicate. We'd been asked if we wanted an ambulance called for us, but we'd both declined. Once we got our hands on Ace's Mercedes, we hightailed it back to the Hale house. Since Ace was in far worse shape than me, I drove.

The syndicate's doctor had just left after doing his best to ensure Ace didn't have any internal injuries. Ace had been stitched, bandaged, and given something to help him rest. He now lay sprawled across one of the two couches.

"Motherfucking son of a bitch. I'm going to kill him. I'm going to burn his goddamn house down with his entire family inside. We can't let this go. Not this time." Maddox continued the ranting and raving he'd been doing since we'd arrived. With a drink in one hand, he paced back and forth in front of the fireplace next to the furniture.

Wolfe sat on the arm of the couch next to Ace, occasionally glancing down at his best friend. Right now he watched his brother wear a hole in the carpet. “Don’t let it make you do anything reckless. We need to be strategic right now, which we can’t do if we don’t have clear heads.”

Maddox turned to pin Wolfe with a soul sucking scowl. “Don’t start in on me. I’m not going to run off and start killing Archer family members. Yet. But it’s coming. We need to plan our next move.”

I understood Maddox’s need to take action. There was nothing I wanted more than to make Donovan Archer beg for death as we took our sweet time making him sorry that he’d ever crossed paths with us. All the want in the world wouldn’t make it happen though. Archer would be ready for that now.

“We need to be careful,” I said, refilling my water glass from the purified jug on the kitchen counter. “There’s no telling what Archer will do next. He may wait to see if we make a move or he may not. I have a feeling he’s going to come at us hard now that Wolfe, Ace, and I are back in the syndicate. He’s threatened by us.”

“Are you then?” Pausing mid-pace, Maddox turned to face me. “Back in the syndicate? You never really made that clear.”

I’d been reluctant to make that commitment again so soon after coming home. I hadn’t really been allowed to settle in before chaos ensued. This was where I belonged though. In River City with the four of them.

“Of course I’m back. If you still want me.” I held his drowning blue stare, knowing how bad Maddox needed to

hear me say these words. My gaze dropped to the tattoo on my forearm. A cobra wrapped around a gothic letter H in the shape of an S. I'd never once considered having it removed, like part of me always knew I'd be back.

Maddox looked at my tattoo as well. Some of the steam went out of him, and he appeared to relax. "Of course I still want you. You're the queen of this freak show. Without you the rest of us are just running around waving guns with our dicks in our hands. We need you, Vixen."

Ruthless sat up straighter on the couch he occupied across from Ace. Glancing between Maddox and me, he fake coughed, "Speak for yourself."

Try as he might to inflect his words with venom, his attempt fell short. I didn't buy it anymore. He'd shown me a peek inside of that hard exterior. Ruthless may be a hardass but he also had warm, squishy feelings for me. Despite how hard he tried not to.

"Oh, give me a break." Maddox playfully swatted at him, narrowly missing when Ruthless ducked out of the way. "Don't pretend you're not head over heels for her. I saw you wrapped around her like it would take an army to drag you away."

"Get fucked, M," Ruthless quipped, plucking a joint from behind his ear. Playing it cool, he leaned back on the couch, refusing to acknowledge Maddox's claim.

I hid the smile that tugged at my mouth but winked when I caught Ruthless's sly glance in my direction. He glowered and averted his gaze, staring out the patio window at

the pool instead. *Keep trying to hate me, Ruthless. I'm enjoying this game.*

Wolfe's brows drew together as he realized what Maddox had implied. I hadn't been trying to keep my encounter with Ruthless a secret. There just hadn't been an appropriate time to bring it up.

From the couch, his voice muffled by a pillow, Ace said, "Pretty sure that means it's my turn, Mave. Prepare to have your world rocked."

A groan escaped Ace next as he tried to roll over onto his back. Several pained obscenities followed. Laughter shook my shoulders as I crossed the room to where he lay. His pain didn't amuse me but his ridiculous remark did. The man couldn't rock anyone's world right now if he tried.

Carefully lifting Ace's head, I sat down and placed his head in my lap. He snuggled in against me, eyes closing. Looking at his battered face hurt. I grabbed the towel wrapped ice pack from the coffee table where he'd abandoned it and gently pressed it to his swollen cheek. The brass knuckles damage had been stitched shut. There was plenty of angry bruising.

"How does your head feel?" Ace asked, proving once again how truly good of a man he was. He'd taken far more abuse than I had.

"I have a bit of a headache, but I'm okay. Don't worry about me. You got it way worse than I did." I winced when he flinched away from the ice pack. "Sorry."

Ruthless sucked in a deep lungful of marijuana smoke, releasing it in a plume that floated above our heads. “What’s our next move going to be? Personally, I think we need to hold tight. Sit patiently for a few days and keep an eye on Archer. Maybe even put a tail on him and his top dogs.”

He had a point. Making a move too soon may do more harm than good.

“I don’t want to give Archer enough time to come at us hard. He told Maven that he wants to work his way through all of us before circling back to her. Whether that’s true or not, I don’t want to take any unnecessary risks.” Frowning into his empty glass, Maddox strode over to the bar for a refill.

There never would be a good time to bring up his drinking. However, this was certainly not the right time to attempt that conversation. We hadn’t discussed Maddox’s unfortunate habit since long before I left town. He was a grown man capable of making his own choices, but if he drank himself into an early grave alongside his father, he would be letting us all down.

“I don’t want to keep doing this back and forth bullshit with him,” Wolfe said, watching the way I stroked my fingers through Ace’s blond hair. “We can either play the long game and keep hitting each other in a constant battle of retaliation or we end this. We go after Archer with the intent to kill.”

Ruthless also watched me stroke Ace’s hair, puffing absently on his joint. “Making a move that big too soon will make it harder to ensure success. Archer is probably already manning up, adding security to his house and family. He’ll be expecting us to come for him.”

Archer was most likely doing just that. The police wouldn't have held him long. Not with the money and strings he was able to pull. He'd be regrouping, manning up. Doing all it took to make sure he was ready if and when we came for him.

"I don't want to wait any longer than necessary before we go after Archer," Maddox declared, resuming his rhythmic pacing. "I want him dead."

I nodded, considering our options. "I want him dead too. I can't imagine anything more perfect than slicing open his throat and watching the arrogance fade from his eyes. We're only going to get one chance to pull it off though. Rushing into anything too soon will guarantee failure. We need to think through every move before we make it."

We all agreed that Donovan Archer needed to die. Starting at the top, we would take down his entire empire. There was some division on when it would happen.

"We need Maven and Ace to be at their best," Ruthless pointed out. "They need time to heal, and we need time to plan."

Wolfe nodded in agreement. His gaze flicked to Maddox when he added, "Nobody is to go off and do anything to Archer without the rest of us. This has to be a team effort."

Annoyance flashed across Maddox's face but he didn't argue. Wow, such progress for the two of them. I was impressed. Sharing a goal united them in ways that even I couldn't. There was still a great and obvious divide between the Hales, one I would do my best to bridge. I could only do so much though. I needed them to do some of the work.

Ace's breathing evened out as he dozed off. I continued to lightly run my fingers through his hair, happy he could sleep. He bore more bruises on his face than unmarked skin. It was a miracle he slept at all.

In the quiet, safe confines of the Hale house, I was finally able to relax. Not because the wedding from hell was over but because the five of us were together without conflict. There was no denying the underlying tension that still permeated our links to one another, but for just a few minutes, it felt like old times.

This was where we belonged.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WOLFE



Driving a typical family style SUV was new for me. I preferred my Mustang. Since Archer may be having us watched or tailed, I'd opted for a more low key ride for the time being. It was much easier to blend into traffic in a white SUV than my loud, aggressive car.

I kept a close watch on all of my mirrors as I drove through the city. I didn't think I had a tail, but I took a few extra turns just in case. Nobody knew where I was going tonight. Not even Maven or Ace. This was a private meeting.

I knew that going off alone was one of the things I'd worried Maddox would do. That made me a fucking hypocrite. But I wasn't out for blood or violence. This was business, which was where I excelled.

The small back parking lot behind the beat up MC clubhouse was littered with motorbikes. I parked among them and waited several minutes to be sure that nobody had followed me. The gun in its holster beneath my suit jacket would hopefully never be drawn tonight. I only came to talk. Still, I wasn't stupid enough to walk into Ryker King's domain unarmed.

The Dead City Zombies were not an exceptionally large MC. They were on the smaller side with less than twenty members. I expected their low numbers had something to do with their president being a shady piece of crap.

“Ryker is expecting me,” I said to the large bear of a man blocking the entryway.

He glowered at me for several long seconds, arms crossed over his thick middle. The heavy ink marking most of his face added to his air of intimidation. That kind of thing would have affected me back when I was new. Now I knew better than to believe appearance made the man. It was only a small part.

“Let him in, Butch,” Ryker called from inside.

Butch stepped aside, giving me just enough room to squeeze past. The air was thick and smoky inside. A handful of bikers sat around a table with the club’s zombie logo carved in the center. They all wore similar expressions of curiosity and irritation. Guys like me didn’t belong in places like this, and the bikers liked to make sure I knew it.

“Come on into my office.” Ryker waved me into a room off the bar. He closed the door behind us, muffling the sound of music and voices. “If you were anyone else, I’d have you surrounded. Lucky for you, I know you’re nothing like your brother.”

I accepted the ratty chair across from a rickety desk, ignoring the suspicious red stain on the woven material. “Maddox and I are nothing alike. I’m here to talk. That’s all. I believe there’s no reason for us not to discuss the situation like the rational men that we are.”

I sincerely doubted Ryker King to be rational in any manner. He'd made a deal with Archer. Anyone willing to work with or for that demon couldn't be trusted. I didn't come because I thought Ryker was trustworthy. I came to offer him a deal he couldn't refuse.

"And what situation is that?" Ryker plopped into a tattered office chair that squeaked beneath his weight. Thin but muscular, he was tall and tattooed with a short, close cropped mohawk. His lifestyle had aged him. He looked older than the early forties I knew him to be.

"You taking that hit on the Sanguine Dragons. I know that Donovan Archer paid you to do that job. What I'd like to know is how much?" I didn't waste time, getting right to the point. I hadn't come to play games.

Ryker's brow crinkled as he decided whether or not to deny my claim. "What makes you so sure I killed that guy? I was the witness that night. I saw Maddox do it."

I released a heavy sigh and sat forward, bracing my elbows on the edge of the desk. "I'm not here to argue about Maddox. We both know what really happened that night. I'm here to do business. You like money, right?"

"Don't we all?" Ryker chuckled, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Then tell me how much Archer paid you to do that job."

I waited patiently for him to cave. Ryker was a man driven by money. His MC didn't have much of it, and it showed. That's why it had been so easy for Archer to recruit

him. I was counting on Ryker's need for cash to help me obtain his services for us instead.

"Ten grand," he finally said. "He paid me ten grand."

I nodded, expecting it to be high enough to entice while still being a low ball offer. "I'll triple it if you'll agree to work for the Hale Syndicate instead. We'll pay you per job, and your first job will be tailing Archer and giving us regular updates on his whereabouts. Anything you see, hear, or learn will be reported back to me."

Ryker sat back in his chair, considering my offer. His near black eyes gleamed with intrigue, giving him a beady, rat-like stare. "Thirty grand to turn my back on Archer? It's not enough. He'll kill me. I want a hundred grand."

"He won't do shit," I retorted. It grated on my nerves that this asshole thought he could demand such a substantial amount. "You already did the dirty work he hired you for. Any other deals your MC has with him will be null and void if you agree to work for us. If he has a problem with that, he can take it up with me. Fifty grand. That's my final offer."

If Maddox knew that I was here striking this deal, he'd shit an entire litter of kittens. As far as he was concerned, Ryker King was a dead man walking. I preferred to seek out opportunity. A guy like Ryker may come in handy.

"Can you guarantee my safety from Archer?" he asked, tempted by the amount I'd dangled in front of him. "Because fifty grand doesn't do shit for me if I'm six feet under."

"I can send extra men to watch your back if it makes you feel better. Although Archer won't be a threat for much

longer.” I knew that I had him. Archer didn’t give a shit about offering Ryker protection from Maddox when he’d made that pathetic attempt to frame him for the murder of a Dragon. This was clearly the better deal.

Ryker nodded slowly, like he found my terms to be satisfactory. “And you’ll keep your brother away from me? I don’t want any beef with him. I did a job that I was paid to do. It was nothing personal.”

“Maddox won’t touch you,” I said, making a promise I wasn’t authorized to keep. “Once we’re running the city, your club will have the chance to move up. Maybe even to grow. I think it goes without saying that we expect your complete and undivided loyalty.”

Ryker smirked. “Then why say it?”

“Can’t overlook the details.” I shrugged. “If you run straight to Archer to tell him about this or try to fuck us over in any way, you’re dead. And you’ll never see it coming.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know how this works.” Dismissing my threats with a wave of his hand, Ryker rolled his eyes. “When do I get my money? I’m not doing jack shit for you until I have that fifty grand.”

I shoved my chair back, ready to end this conversation before he could think of more demands. “You’ll get it when you get it. Sit tight. Wait for me to reach out to you.”

Without another word, I strode from the room. Behind me I heard Ryker mutter, “Almost as much of an asshole as his brother.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MAVEN



“I was starting to think I’d never get you to myself. This is nice.” Wolfe raised his wine glass in a silent cheers before taking a sip. “Do you still want to see a movie after?”

He wiggled a brow teasingly, and I erupted in laughter. “You’re not being all that subtle, Wolfe. What would you like to do instead?”

“Well, for starters, I’d like to get you on your knees with your hands tied behind your back while I make you come until you beg me to stop.” As Wolfe spoke, a server with a tray loaded with food passed our table. The server did a doubletake, making me laugh harder.

“You’re terrible.” I stabbed a piece of buttery grilled asparagus with my fork. “Are you sure that you don’t want to sit in the back of a crowded theatre and finger my pussy? Could be kind of fun. I bet I’d even get away with sucking your cock.”

“And you say I’m terrible,” Wolfe scoffed playfully, watching me devour the asparagus. “It’s tempting actually. All right. We’ll go to a movie first, then continue at my place. It’s finished now.”

We continued to eat in comfortable silence. I was happy for Wolfe. It had to be much more comfortable at his own house than a hotel.

Unable to shake the question that nagged me, I asked, “Have you given any thought to moving back into the Hale house?”

Wolfe glanced up from his steak and veggies, genuinely thinking about it. “Have you?”

I had that one coming. Of course I’d thought about it. Then I’d dismissed it entirely, remembering Maddox’s possessive efforts to lock me in his teenage bedroom. Crazy bastard. He would love it too much if I moved myself in, and that was enough to make me resist. The push and pull battle between us would probably never end.

“Yeah, I’ve thought about it,” I admitted, shoving the veggies on my plate around with my fork. I’d already eaten the eggplant parmesan I’d ordered. “On one hand I know it makes sense for us all to be there together. It’s safer. It would make us stronger. On the other hand, I just keep thinking about how smug Maddox would be.”

Wolfe burst into laughter. I offered him a shrug. What could I say? That’s how Mads and I worked.

“You two are all kinds of fucked up. You know that, right?” With a wink and a grin, Wolfe leaned forward, his shirt open just enough to give me a glimpse of hard, tattooed chest.

“Yes, which is what makes my relationship with you so special. You and Maddox couldn’t be more different, and I

love that.” Abandoning the rest of my vegetables, I shoved my plate to the edge of the table for the server to retrieve.

The server came by and took our dishes after asking if we’d like dessert. We ordered a slice of chocolate cheesecake to share. It was creamy and decadent, like heaven in my mouth. I moaned softly with every bite, partly because it was so good but mostly to drive Wolfe crazy.

He watched me slowly lick a smear of chocolate from the spoon, dragging my tongue along the cold metal. “You have no idea how bad I want to punish you right now, Princess. I can’t wait to get you somewhere a little more private.”

A tingle started between my legs. I smiled in satisfaction. I loved toying with Wolfe.

Knowing that his idea of punishment included either the denial or the onslaught of orgasms, I ran my high-heeled foot up the inside of his leg. “Well, then I better make this worth it.”

“God, I love you,” Wolfe said with a shake of his head, like he couldn’t handle the sight of me daintily licking chocolate from a spoon. “Have I told you how much I missed you?”

“Only about twenty-three times,” I quipped. “But who’s counting?”

Wolfe’s throaty chuckle was heaven to my ears. There was nothing quite like that sound in my ear while he took command of my body.

“So... you and Ruthless?” he asked, his tone light and casual. “I didn’t see that coming. He’s so angry all the time. How did it go?”

I knew Wolfe, and I knew that these questions came from a place of true caring. However, he was also the type to enjoy tales of me with another man. He’d enjoyed hearing about the rough way Maddox fucked me in the past. Wolfe’s hazel eyes sparked with intrigue.

“Actually, it went pretty well. It happened a few days after the car accident. He was really sweet and gentle. He was afraid of hurting me.” Letting my mind drift back to being in bed with Ruthless brought me a warm, fuzzy glow. For such a grumpy fuck, he sure had taken care of me.

Wolfe took this in with a nod. “I’m surprised he has it in him. That’s good though. I’m glad he was so good with you. You deserve to be worshipped like a goddess.”

Because I couldn’t help but mess with Wolfe a little, I added, “He did tell me that sweet and gentle wasn’t what he really wanted. That when I was healed he would fuck me the way he wants to. I’m kind of looking forward to that.”

“Fuck you the way he wants to, huh? That actually sounds pretty good right now. Almost done with that dessert?” Impatient to leave, Wolfe finished the wine in his glass.

Glancing around to make sure nobody watched, I reached beneath the table and slid a hand under the knee length skirt of my dress. My fingers traveled past the knife strapped to my thigh up to my underwear. Trying not to appear painfully awkward, I tugged the purple lacy panties down.

When I was sure that nobody would notice, I clutched the fabric in my hand and passed it across the table to Wolfe. He accepted my gift, eyes widening as he realized what I'd handed him. He fisted it tight before slipping it into his pocket.

Before he could speak, I said, "Meet me in the ladies' room in two minutes."

I slung my purse onto my shoulder and sauntered away from the table, leaving him staring after me. In the restroom I paused at the mirror to check my makeup and finger comb a few stray hairs back into place. Then I waited.

Only one other woman occupied the space. She left the restroom mere seconds before Wolfe entered. He glanced at me with brows raised. With a finger, I beckoned him to follow before slipping into a stall.

"Seriously?" he asked with a grin. "Bathroom quickie?"

I propped a foot on the toilet and lifted my skirt. "Yeah, why not? It's nice to change it up sometimes. Consider it an appetizer for later."

Wolfe hungrily ogled my bare pussy. He closed and locked the stall door, squeezing in against me. "Hands above your head, Princess. Hold onto the door."

He cupped the warmth between my legs in his palm, rubbing me until I moaned. I did what he said, reaching up to grab the top of the stall door. Dipping a finger between my folds, Wolfe made a low noise of satisfaction when he found me wet. He teased my clit before undoing his belt. I waited with eager anticipation for his erection to spring free.

Wolfe firmly grabbed my jaw as he leaned in to plunder my mouth with his tongue. “Try not to make any noise, Princess. We don’t want to get caught.”

Pulling a condom from his pocket, Wolfe shoved his pants down and wrapped his cock. I liked a man that came prepared. He grabbed one of my legs, hooking it over his arm. Cupping my ass, he entered me with a forceful thrust. It momentarily stole my breath.

Holding tight to the door as instructed, I watched him fill me over and over, loving the sight of Wolfe’s cock disappearing inside me. When I heard the restroom door open and a set of heels click along the tile floor, I bit back the moans that threatened to expose us. I hoped like hell that she didn’t notice my fingers frantically gripping the top of the door.

Wolfe guided himself into me with a steady rhythm. A fast pace that only quickened. We hadn’t come in here for a leisurely screw. We had a goal here.

Much to my amusement and dismay, the woman chose the stall right next to us. There were at least five others to choose from. She entered the stall and locked the door. That’s when she became aware of the small grunts and gasps that we couldn’t withhold. She hurried out of the stall and right out of the restroom. Oops.

Wolfe’s evil little chuckle made the whole thing worth it. He withdrew long enough to spin me around so I faced the door. Planting my hands against it, Wolfe ran his fingers down my back to my ass. He entered me from behind, gripping my

hip with one hand while the other reached around to seek out my clit.

The rush of screwing in public made the whole situation hotter. With Wolfe's fingers rubbing perfect circles on my clit, I bit my tongue to hold back a cry. So close. So damn close.

Of course that's when my phone had to ring. My purse vibrated as the chime of my ringtone spilled out. Shit.

"Don't answer it," Wolfe panted. "I'm not stopping."

There was never a good time to ignore calls. Right now Archer was likely priming to blow our asses sky high, an especially bad time to ignore a call. It might be important.

Still, I couldn't bring myself to stop. Not with that pleasure peak getting closer with every stroke of Wolfe's cock.

Wolfe wrapped a hand in my loose locks, gently pulling my head back so he could murmur in my ear. "Come for me, Princess. Now."

Unable to keep quiet any longer, I came with a moan and a small squeak as I fought back a cry. Public sex came with a nice rush, but it sure sucked some of the freedom from the experience.

Wolfe's climax was much quieter than mine. More of a gruff gasp. We pulled apart and hurried to get ourselves back together. My phone still had not stopped making noise.

I pulled it from my purse to find my parents' home number on the screen. My stomach suddenly dropped, feeling heavy, and it had nothing to do with the cheesecake.

"Hello?" I answered, tugging my skirt down.

“Pumpkin, it’s Dad. Have you heard from your mother?
She never came home from yoga.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MAVEN



Not only had my mother not returned from her afternoon yoga class, her phone was off. My father had sent a syndicate member to check the parking lot of the yoga studio. Her car had been there along with her purse. No sign of her or the phone.

The fuzzy haze of the afterglow never got the chance to settle. I flew out of the bathroom stall in a total panic.

“I’m on my way over with Wolfe. Call Rumer. Make sure she’s safe. Tell her to get her ass over to your place. I’ll see you soon.” I hung up while trying to fight an unexpected swell of tears. Deep in my core, I knew that Donovan Archer had my mom.

“What’s going on, Maven?” Wolfe pulled me to a stop next to the row of sinks.

“I think Archer has my mom.” In a rush I told him what my father had said. “We have to go.”

Wolfe nodded, immediately snapping into crime lord mode. “It’s going to be okay. I’ll go pay the bill. Meet me by the door. Breathe.”

He exited the restroom as two women entered. They both did a double take. If my mother hadn't just gone missing, I'd have found it funny. Instead I hurried from the washroom, fingers flying over my phone as I called Maddox.

My words flew out fast when he answered. He asked me to repeat myself three times. I stood in the restaurant lobby, waiting for Wolfe, almost climbing out of my skin. When he appeared, he made me wait while he checked the parking lot for anyone waiting to jump us. Once he'd made sure the SUV was clear of any explosives or tracking devices, we sped out of the parking lot with a squeal of tires.

Maddox promised to meet me at my parents' house with Ruthless after picking up Rumer on the way. Relief eased some of my tension. Rumer would be in good hands with those two. I prayed that Archer's men hadn't already grabbed her.

While Wolfe drove, I called Ace and watched for a tail. "Don't feel like you have to come. If you're not up for this yet, I understand."

"Are you kidding?" Ace scoffed. A rustling in the background preceded the jingle of keys. "It's going to take a lot more than a beating to keep me away. I'll see you in twenty minutes."

Nobody followed us. We hadn't been their target tonight. Archer had watched for an opportunity and taken it. My mind raced as I tried to put together a plan. What was the best way to handle this? We couldn't exactly go in guns blazing and take her back. Archer would be ready for that. He'd blow us away before we got close enough to help my mom.

What if Archer hurt her? What if he tortured her? He'd had it done to me. Being a woman didn't spare one from his wrath. It would be my fault. I'd known what kind of danger I'd tempted when I went after Evan Archer. We all knew what kind of trouble we were inviting when we hit that warehouse.

My family wasn't ignorant to the true dangers of our world. We all knew how this worked. So did Archer. He had to know that hurting my mother would put a lot of targets on the backs of his family too. I doubted that he wanted to orphan his grandkids.

"This isn't your fault, Butterfly," Wolfe said softly. His hand was warm on my thigh. "I can feel you blaming yourself. Archer won't hurt your mom. He knows how stupid that would be. He's doing this because he wants something. Relax. We'll figure this out together."

I turned to meet his gaze in the glow of the red traffic light. "I know. I'm just afraid of what he might do to her before we can stop him."

Wolfe passed me the underwear that I'd given him earlier. "Here. You better put these back on. Wouldn't want to accidentally flash your ass in front of your dad."

Most definitely not. I accepted the panties and slipped them on. It amazed me how easily a thrill seeking good time turned into a terrifying hunt for my mother. So easily our lives could be turned upside down. By the time I reached my parents' house, I was worried but ready. Ready for whatever Archer threw at me. I would not be bested by a man like him.

I rushed inside, almost tripping when my heel caught in a crack in the sidewalk. There was a reason I didn't wear these

things often. I threw the front door open, finding Maddox, Ruthless, and Rumer in the living room with my father.

The first thing I did was hug my dad. “I’m sorry. I feel like this is my fault.”

My father patted my back and kissed my forehead. “You can’t blame yourself. We’ve always known this was coming. A war with Archer was inevitable.”

“I’ll get her back,” I promised. “He won’t win this.”

Rumer hugged me tight the first chance she got. “I can’t believe they took Mom. What do we do now, Mave?”

I hated that I didn’t have the answer. I shook my head, unable to lie to her. Telling her that everything would be fine felt like a lie. I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

Turning to Maddox, I slid my arms around his neck and held on for dear life. “Thank you for picking up Rumer. I can’t believe that motherfucker took my mom.”

Maddox studied my face, gently rubbing a smear of lipstick from the corner of my mouth. “We’ll get her back, Vixen. Archer knows better than to take this one too far. He’s trying to get our attention, and it’s working.”

“We can’t play the long game anymore,” Wolfe said, taking a seat on the couch next to my father. “Archer has to die this time. We should’ve ended this when our father died.”

He and Maddox exchanged a look. Instead of silent accusations, they shared a silent understanding. Donovan Archer had to go.

Ace arrived carrying two trays filled with coffee. I gratefully accepted a latte. Kicking off my shoes, I walked a circle around the living room while we discussed what plan of action we should take. I was too tightly wound to sit.

My father was a special kind of angry. Quiet and brooding but vibrating with rage. I knew that he felt helpless. The leg and back injury he lived with didn't really allow him to go rampaging in after Archer. I snuck a glance at him, remembering how heavily involved he'd been in the syndicate before the injury sidelined his activity. It had been a blessing in disguise. He may not be alive right now if he'd continued in the syndicate.

Every encounter with a rival group could end any one of us. We all knew that. Somewhere along the way we'd signed on for the risks. The only way to make it worth the danger was to be the last crew left standing. We would be. We had to be.

When my phone rang, everyone froze. Nobody spoke as they waited for me to check the screen. It was my mom's number calling.

Steeling my voice into something strong but neutral, I answered the call. "Hello?"

There was a pause. I heard my mother whimper in the background before Donovan said, "I have something you may want back. What are you willing to do to see her again?"

"Don't fuck around," I hissed. "Just tell me what you want."

Donovan chuckled. A low, ugly sound that made my skin prickle. "I want you to play the game. It's more fun when

we all play our parts. I expect you'll be delivering some kind of bad guy threat any moment now."

"Whoa, hold up there. You think we're the villains here? Dear God, you're a delusional fuck. What do you want, Donovan? Let's cut to the chase. Name your terms."

The pause that followed was meant to make me sweat, and it did. Finally he said, "Trade yourself for your mother and I'll let her go."

I gripped my phone tight, my palm moist from nerves. "I won't work for you, Donovan. We've been over this."

In my peripheral view, I saw my father grow pale. Maddox swore and muttered something nasty beneath his breath. Archer was clearly desperate to separate me from my men. He saw clearly how much deadlier we were together.

"Just come. Give me another chance to change your mind. No funny business." Archer lied with ease, as if he may even believe it himself. "I would tell you to come alone, but we both know that won't happen. It's up to you if a war starts tonight, Maven. Make the right choice."

My temper shot into the danger zone. The audacity of this man. He really thought he had the upper hand here. Although his actions suggested that he was scared shitless. Desperate to hold onto what power he still possessed as we reduced it day by day.

I ran a hand through my hair, yanking it through in frustration when I encountered a tangle. "You've got to be kidding me. If a war starts tonight, it will be because you

finally fucked up for the last time. Where do you want me to go?”

“Maven, no!” My father’s loud protest rose above the angry murmur that rippled through my guys. “You can’t give him the satisfaction.”

Waving him off, I hurried into the kitchen. I didn’t want Archer to hear the round of protests. He’d love to know how much fear he’d instilled in my once unshakeable father.

My mom’s voice was muffled on Archer’s end as she told him off. He chuckled, thoroughly enjoying this. “Come to the warehouse. You know the one.”

Yep, I sure did. “Fine. Give me an hour.”

I hung up before he could give some kind of rules or instructions. When I returned to the living room, my dad and Wolfe wore similar expressions. They weren’t okay with this. My sister just looked scared, and the others were ready for anything.

“I’m going to meet Archer at the warehouse we robbed,” I said, bracing for their reactions. “He wants me to trade myself for Mom. I don’t really have a choice. I need to get her out of there.”

“He must know that you won’t go alone,” Maddox said, ready to get moving.

At the same time my sister asked, “Isn’t there some other way to get Mom back? We can’t lose you instead.”

“Archer asked me to work for him a few nights ago,” I explained for those that didn’t yet know. “Of course I shot him down. He’s afraid for what’s left of his organization. I’m going

in there to get my mom out, and I'm not leaving until Donovan Archer is dead."

Wolfe rubbed both hands over his face and sighed. "All right. I guess this is it."

"It's long overdue anyway," Ruthless added, rising from the easy chair he'd occupied. "I'm ready to end that fucker. I owe him."

"Don't expect it to be easy," my father warned. "Archer won't be obvious in his plans. He likes to change things up and catch his opponent off guard. Don't go in there expecting to simply gun him down."

I headed for the front door, needing to get this over with. It had been a long time coming. Archer had started this war with those who came before us. My dad, along with Aaron Hale and Ruthless's father. They had failed to best Archer, passing the torch to the next generation. We would finish what they'd started.

"I need to swing by my place first and change." I gestured to the dress I wore. "I'm not wearing this."

"I'm coming with you." Dad rose and grabbed his cane.

Thankfully Rumer saved me from having to tell him to stay. She grabbed hold of his arm, holding him back. "No, Dad. You need to stay here with me where it's safe. Mom is already in danger. We can't risk you too."

"I already have people outside your house," Maddox said, following me to the door. "Stay put for now. You'll be safe here. Better not to take unnecessary risks."

I paused at the door, holding it open while the guys filed out ahead of me. Glancing back at Dad and Rumer, I said, “I’ll bring Mom back. We’ll both be walking through this door sooner than you think.”

Then I exited the house, closing the door behind me. I’d just made a promise that I intended to keep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MAVEN



“I still don’t like the idea of you walking in there alone. At least one of us should go with you.” Wolfe was visibly uncomfortable with the plan, not that we had much of one.

Maddox watched me tuck a small blade into the weave of my braid and arrange the hair to hide the weapon. Arms crossed over his chest, he shook his head, not liking this any more than Wolfe did. “She has to go alone, bro. Archer already knows how to use her against us. If someone goes in with her, it makes all of us look weak.”

This was probably harder for Maddox than anyone else. He’d been the one to start this war the night Archer’s people first took me. Standing back while I walked right into the lion’s den had to be eating him alive.

“He’s right, Wolfe,” Ace joined in, trying to be a voice of reason. This was no time for a Hale brother argument. “Maven won’t be alone for long. Once her mom walks out the door, we all go in.”

That was the plan anyway. Beyond that we didn’t have much of a plan. Get my mom out of there and do our best to kill Donovan Archer before he killed any of us. Not quite the way I’d envisioned finishing off a date night with Wolfe.

I checked the time on my phone. “I should get going. I told him I’d be there in an hour. It’s almost time.”

After a brief stop at my apartment, I now wore comfortable blue jeans and a black t-shirt with a red horned demon skull on the front. A much better attire choice for dodging gunfire and killing enemy mobsters. The five of us stood next to Maddox’s black BMW.

We were just a few blocks from the Archer warehouse. I would drive right up to the door in the BMW. The guys would keep their distance, watching for my mom to leave the building. Once she safely drove away in the car, the guys would follow in Wolfe’s Mustang, enter the warehouse, and join me. We had no idea what to expect. We were bracing for anything.

There was nothing any of us could say as we parted that wouldn’t make this harder than it already was. Accepting the BMW keys from Maddox, I turned to open the door. As I slid into the driver’s seat, Ruthless ambled over.

Placing one hand on the roof, he leaned down and caught my chin in the other. Forcing me to meet his piercing dark gaze, he said, “Give ’em hell, Baby Girl. Tonight you and I make Archer hurt. We’ve waited long enough.”

Ruthless towered over me, the sheer intensity of him both intriguing and intimidating. I peered up at him, excited at the image he’d conjured. A wicked smile curved my lips. When Ruthless dragged his thumb over the corner of my mouth, I knew he was thinking about kissing me. I also knew that he wouldn’t do it. Instead he stepped back so I could close the door and drive away.

I didn't let myself hesitate. Starting the engine, I drove away without a glance back. This was not the last time the five of us would be together. Intrusive thoughts tried to sway me, to convince me there was no way we could win this. We had more than enough people in place, ready to ambush the building at a moment's notice. I knew that we could hold our own, but that didn't mean we'd all get out of this alive.

Deep down I couldn't shake that thought. We may not all make it. I'd refused to say any parting words to them, anything that may sound like goodbye.

"None of us are dying tonight." Clutching the wheel tight, I spoke through clenched teeth. "I've waited seven years to get my life back. It happens tonight."

Hyping myself up helped chase back the shadows of doubt. Fear clamped an icy hand around my throat as I drove up to the warehouse. No problem. Fear had kept me alive in the past. I was ready for this confrontation. Ready to finally get it over with. Readiness calmed my nerves, imbuing me with confidence as I parked and got out of the car. I left the keys in the ignition for my mom.

Five of Archer's people met me at the door. Four of them were gun-toting men aiming their weapons at my head. The fifth was a woman with a super tight brown ponytail and a sneer. Without a word, she motioned for me to place my hands against the wall. I obliged, worried that she'd check my braid. No doubt she would think of that. Fuck me.

"Are you alone?" She ran her hands over my body, checking the most obvious places but also checking the less

obvious places, like underneath my breasts and along the edge of my bra.

I grimaced when she fully cupped me between the legs. I didn't blame her for thinking of the nooks and crannies on a woman's body, but I sure as hell wasn't packing heat in my cooter. "Do you see anyone else? Take it easy. I don't store weapons in my vagina. It's much too difficult to access in a pinch."

To my horror, the woman ran a hand over my braid, fingering the weaves. Dread filled me, choking off my breath. My lungs froze.

"What do we have here?" She sounded surprised to find a knife hidden in my hair. "Good job. My guys would have missed this completely. Too bad for you though. I'll be confiscating your weapon."

To her credit, she gently removed the knife from my braid, taking care not to entangle it or slice any of my hair. I hoped that we wouldn't have to kill her tonight. Once she tucked my knife into her pocket, she shoved me along, none too gentle.

The warehouse was empty this time. Just a wide open space with a few wooden pallets piled near a loading door. Well, it wasn't totally empty. The entire perimeter was lined with Archer goons. More than I could count with a mere onceover. At least thirty. Knowing Archer he would have more people on standby, just like we did. They were probably out back.

Archer himself was nowhere to be seen. Neither was my mom. They had to be in the back room.

The five people escorting me walked me to the middle of the warehouse. They surrounded me on every side. A man at the back ducked into the small office to inform Archer of my arrival.

I held perfectly still, careful not to set off any of these fools. I didn't trust them not to overreact. Keeping myself calm and steady, I stared at the doorway where Archer would soon appear. *Come on, you arrogant swine. Cut the fashionably late bullshit.*

When at last Donovan Archer did emerge from the small office, he strode toward me with a smile, straightening his tie. Several men encircled him, all of them clutching guns. They came to a stop several feet from me. Did Donovan truly feel that uneasy in my presence, or was this some kind of showboating shit?

"You came," he said with a pleased nod. "I admire your dedication to family, Miss Hart."

"Where's my mother?" Refusing to play his game, I got right to the point of my visit. "She walks out the door in exchange for me. That's what you said. If she doesn't leave this building in the next two minutes, a lot of people are going to storm the place. That probably won't end well for any of us, but it's a chance I'm willing to take."

Archer's brows rose. Hands clasped in front of him, he regarded me with the cold stare of a man who'd ordered the deaths of many and the torture of even more. Including me.

"Of course. A deal is a deal." Annoyance flashed across Archer's face. He waved a hand, and two men jumped into

action, disappearing into the small back room. “I assume you didn’t come alone. Where are your companions?”

“They’re nearby,” I said, confirming what he already suspected. “They’ll join us after my mother leaves safely. Although I can’t imagine anything you can say or do that will change my mind about working for you.”

Archer merely grinned. “We’ll see about that.”

His men emerged from the office, holding my mother between them. Her blonde bun was in disarray, and her makeup was smeared beneath her eyes. Other than a bruise on her cheek, she appeared to be unharmed. Maybe Archer knew that I’d gut him like a fish if he hurt her.

Mom took one look at me surrounded by goons and burst into an angry tirade. “Your obsession with my daughter will never end, will it, Donovan? She must really get under your skin. Either that or you’re secretly lusting after a woman half your age. You don’t know what you’re up against. Maven is a warrior. You can’t win a war with her.”

Gee thanks, Mom. I rolled my eyes at her and smiled, hoping to ease her concern. I needed her out of here so I could stop worrying about getting her safely back to my dad.

Archer was unimpressed. He waved his hand dismissively, saying nothing in return. I braced myself as his men dragged her to the door I’d entered through. If anyone tried anything, I’d do whatever it took to protect her.

I guess Archer wanted to start this out by playing fair. His men opened the door and pushed my mom outside. Before they closed the door, Ruthless appeared in the threshold. He

shoved inside with the other three right behind him. They were quickly brought to a halt by a dozen armed Archer people.

One by one they were subjected to a thorough search. Having expected to be searched, none of them were carrying. We were all taking a serious risk here. Now that my backup plan had been removed, I was forced to play it by ear, figuring out each move from moment to moment.

“Get Maven on her knees,” Archer commanded, his voice gruff and harsh.

The goons surrounding me obeyed as several heavy hands grabbed hold of me, forcing me down. There was a shout of protest from Maddox who was still detained at the door.

“Seriously, Donovan?” My brow arched as I gave him an inquisitive appraisal. “On my knees? Maybe my mom was right. You do have a thing for me. I’m flattered but not interested.”

Archer regarded me with utter disdain. “I don’t want to fuck you, Maven. I want to own you. Not at all the same thing.”

Something about the way he said those words made me go cold all over. I held his haughty gaze, refusing to give him the reaction he sought. “Good luck with that, prick.”

“Line them up against that wall.” Pointing to one wall of the warehouse, Archer barked instructions at his people. “If even one of them so much as scratches an itch, put a bullet in his head.”

They pushed Maddox, Ruthless, Wolfe, and Ace up against the wall. It kept them from being close to me, putting more than ten feet between us. My gaze traveled over each of them, finding them all to be hard and unreadable. For the most part.

When my eyes locked with Maddox's intense blue stare, I saw the determination he'd walked in here with. Archer would see it too. He knew that Maddox would be desperate to protect me. What he didn't know was that I didn't expect anyone to protect me. My men weren't here to save me. They were here because we were a team. We were stronger together.

"Are we all ready to talk business?" Archer stared a hole into me as he awaited my nod. "Let's get right to it. Maven, what will it take for you to work for me?"

"A miracle," I quipped, flashing him a dazzling grin.

He frowned hard enough to make his eyebrows almost touch. "I'm willing to make you a hell of an offer. You come work for me, Maven, and in return I'll cease all plans to bring down the Hale Syndicate."

Maddox muttered something that included obscenities. The Archer man next to him jabbed him hard in the ribs with an elbow. Ruthless shot the man a death glare that made him reconsider before throwing a second jab.

I scoffed. "If you really believed that you could bring us down, none of us would be here right now. Unless you want to strike a deal that benefits us somehow, we have nothing to say to each other. I have no interest in working for you now or ever."

Hands clenched into fists, Archer forced himself to relax. I suspected his perfect suit and slick haircut were all part of his attempt to portray himself as the one in control. He seemed to know that wasn't true.

"I'm trying to prevent a war that will kill a lot of people we both love. You should want to protect your family. This doesn't have to end badly." Archer turned to address Maddox specifically, knowing that he was the bomb about to go off. "Partner with me then. Join forces with my organization. As long as we're at odds, there will be no end to the violence and death."

"God, you're fucking pathetic," Maddox sneered. "Transparent as hell too. So damn desperate to find a way to control us. You thought you could use Maven because of what your people did to her, but she's so fucking far out of your league, and you know it."

Archer stalked over to where Maddox stood, leaning in close enough to hiss, "What my people did to Maven was a direct response to you murdering my goddamn son-in-law. You made my daughter a widow. What did you lose, Hale?"

The two syndicate heads glared daggers into one another. I'd never seen two men with so much hatred for each other. The tension in the warehouse grew heavier with each passing second. Soon something would give and the still atmosphere would shatter.

Maddox didn't flinch. He studied Archer with vicious intent. "I lost Maven for seven fucking years. Maybe that's not all on you. I can accept responsibility for the role I played.

That doesn't change the fact that you crossed a line that night, and there's no coming back from that."

Lips pressed into a tight thin line, Archer nodded. "Of course. I completely understand your desire for revenge." Turning back to me, he added, "So that's it then. There's nothing I can say to change your mind?"

Goosebumps broke out along my arms before rippling down my spine. Something told me that he wasn't about to simply let us walk out of here.

"I'm not changing my mind," I confirmed, bracing for whatever came next. The hard floor dug into my knees. It wasn't enough to distract me from the way Archer seemed to be working up to something.

"That's unfortunate," he said, strolling back toward me. "I'm sure you all understand that I have to protect my interests. My business. The only way for me to do that is to bring a timely end to the Hale Syndicate. Since I'm aware that you have a small army stationed outside, I can't simply kill the five of you and be done with it. Too bad. But there are other ways to strike a blow that counts."

I was starting to think that Donovan Archer was losing his mind after several decades in the business. He wore an eerie smile, satisfied with himself.

"Spit it out then, asshole." Wolfe barely held his temper in check. He was seething, ready to take Archer apart with his bare hands. "It doesn't matter what you say or do now. There's only one way this ends."

“That is very true.” The glee that lit up Archer’s face made my uneasy feeling grow. “I imagine you still have plenty of anger toward your brother for splitting up the syndicate and chasing away the woman you stupidly share with him, so I’m expecting this to be good.”

“Expecting what to be good?” Now Wolfe was suspicious too.

Strolling around the warehouse like a ringmaster at the circus, Archer motioned for his men to act. Two of them stepped forward and handed a large hunting knife to both Maddox and Wolfe. There were far too many guns trained on them for either Hale to make a brazen move.

“I’m going to turn the two of you on each other,” Archer announced. “Whichever one of you is left standing can leave with Maven.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

MAVEN



Panic momentarily stole my words. I tried and failed several times to protest. On my knees without a weapon, I was completely helpless to stop this.

My gaze darted frantically between Wolfe and Maddox. The former stared at the large knife he held, his expression angry and confused, while the latter looked at me as if silently pleading for me to tell him what to do. Maddox had never needed my input before. He seemed unsure of the best way forward.

“You’re fucking crazy,” I spat at Archer, finally finding my voice. “That’s your big idea? Hurt the syndicate by turning the Hales on each other? I knew that’s what you were up to all along. It won’t work. We’re not participating in this circus.”

Archer held my gaze for several long, painful moments. Every second made me more furious than the last. I wanted a piece of that man more than I wanted air.

“I assure you, Maven, that this will be happening.” Nodding to one of the men surrounding me, he said, “Do it.”

Suddenly I was thrust face down against the floor. Several people held me down while I struggled. The man Archer had nodded to grabbed my hand, prying my fingers

apart. I barely had time to brace myself before he snapped my pinky finger.

A scream broke free despite my attempts to rein it in. Pain shot through my hand into my wrist. The man grabbed my ring finger next, holding tight until Archer gave the command.

“You’re a dead man walking, Donovan.” Ruthless’s dark promise was loaded with venom.

Ignoring him, Archer gestured to Wolfe and Maddox. “Are you ready to play along yet? Or should we break something else of Maven’s? Maybe an arm or a leg?”

Both brothers stared at me now, wearing similar expressions of horror and rage. I shook my head, willing them to refuse. Watching them hurt each other would be far more painful than anything Archer’s goons could inflict.

When Maddox and Wolfe shared a long silent look, I knew that they were going to cave. They would do anything to protect me. They would even hurt each other. I wasn’t supposed to divide them. I united them. It wasn’t supposed to be this way.

Ruthless and Ace stood quietly by, rigid and braced for anything. There had to be another way to get out of this alive.

“We’ll do it,” Maddox snarled. “But you can bet your ass that whichever one of us is left standing is coming for you next.”

Archer spread his hands wide in invitation. “Then so be it. The only way to guarantee that Maven walks out of here alive is by doing things my way. If you choose to storm the

place with your people, then I can't stop you, but you'll be putting her in the line of fire. If I die here tonight, I'm taking her with me."

"Like fuck you are," I grunted, my face still mashed against the dusty concrete floor.

"Get her up," Archer instructed. "Make her watch."

I was dragged from the center of the room into a corner. Archer ambled over to join me. I didn't spare him so much as a glance. My focus was locked on the two men moving into the open space.

Maddox and Wolfe faced one another with knives in hand. They were large, menacing blades. The type that would easily slice a human body into pieces. My mouth went dry as I watched them silently communicate. Maddox gave a slight nod, and my stomach turned.

"Any time now, gentlemen." Archer waved a hand for them to proceed. "Give us a good show, hmm?"

"Don't do it," I pleaded, hating myself for showing emotion in front of the enemy. "Please, don't do it."

Across the room, Ruthless fixed me with a vicious stare. Feeling the weight of his glare, I glanced over to see him shake his head. Just once. I didn't need telepathy to know that he wanted me to shut my mouth. The emotionless man who used shutting down as a way to survive this world wanted me to do the same.

He was right. Emotional breaks wouldn't help us now. We had to be strategic and ready to make our move.

Sucking in a deep breath of musty air that smelled like Archer's sickly sweet cologne, I embraced the primal part of me that had allowed me to survive this long. I closed the door on my fear and anger, slipping into the calculated mindset of a stone-cold crime queen.

Because I didn't want Archer to realize that I was far from harmless, I cradled my injured hand and whimpered. Playing it up for his benefit was easy enough. Especially when Maddox took the first swing at Wolfe, coaxing a genuine gasp from me.

In my peripheral view, I saw Archer glance at me for a reaction. He was a malicious bastard, no doubt about that. Using the Hales against each other when their brotherhood was still so fragile was smart. The Hale Syndicate had suffered greatly from their division. Archer was weak though, grasping at straws, like he knew that it was only a matter of time until we finished chipping away at his empire. And he was right.

Shouts and jeers from the watching Archer Syndicate members filled the warehouse as Maddox took a second swing at Wolfe. They thought his efforts lacked authenticity. I agreed. It was painfully easy to see that Maddox's heart wasn't in this.

It was endearing as fuck, reminding me why I'd fallen for him. Deep down Mads was a good guy who would lay down his life for any one of us. I already knew that no matter what happened, he would take a dive and let Wolfe come out on top.

"What's the matter, Maddox? Let's not pretend you don't love having the opportunity to finally get rid of me."

Wolfe beckoned with both hands before expertly twirling the knife he held. The man was crazy good with a blade. He'd taught me everything I knew about handling a knife.

While I wanted to believe Wolfe was putting on a show for Archer, I sensed that his words came from a place of true hurt. If either of them gave in to the driving force of emotions they'd been carrying, this would end exactly as Archer hoped.

Maddox didn't seem to know if Wolfe was putting on a show either. He threw a punch with his free hand instead of slashing with the knife. It seemed to take Wolfe by surprise, sending him stumbling back several paces. A goon shoved him back toward Maddox.

"Let it all out, Wolfe," Mads said, calm in the face of adversity. "All that hate you've been carrying since Maven left. Leave it all here, bro."

"You don't get to play the good guy. Not after everything you've done." Lunging toward his brother, Wolfe lashed out with a fist first. He hit Maddox in the jaw, stunning him long enough to slash his arm with the knife.

My gasp was real. Ace wore a pained frown while Ruthless watched with an unshakable poker face. Blood trickled down Maddox's arm, spattering the floor around him. He froze, knife clutched in his bloodstained hand. He slid a sidelong glance my way, careful not to take his attention off Wolfe.

Knowing that Archer wanted us vulnerable, I regarded Maddox with what I hoped passed for a neutral expression. Did he see the depths of what I felt for him in that moment? Never had I loved these men more. Sometimes getting the job

done and keeping everyone alive meant a sacrifice. We were all ready and willing to do whatever it took.

Something moved within Maddox's gaze, an unspoken thought he needed me to read. Then it was gone as he turned back to Wolfe. With an angry snarl, Maddox lunged at his brother, bodychecking him hard. The two of them went down on the floor, landing with a grunt and a curse.

Maddox really took me by surprise when he wildly slashed at Wolfe with the knife. Wolfe brought his hand up in time to catch Maddox's wrist. They strained against one another, each battling for control.

I felt sick to my stomach. This was nothing like the fake bar brawl. Watching them wrestle on the floor felt different. It felt sinister, like it would only end one way. With one of them dead.

The temptation to open my mouth and bring this all to an end gripped me. I could stop this. All I had to do was tell Archer what he wanted to hear. That I would work for him.

Maybe it would buy us some time. At the very least, it would get us out of here alive. If we didn't find a way to turn the tables pretty damn soon, I would have no choice but to give myself to Archer.

When Wolfe managed to flip Maddox and pin his arm with a knee, Archer leaned in close and asked, "Which one of them do you think will win?"

My hands were unbound. Other than being boxed in on every side by goons, I was free to make a move. As bad as I

wanted to throat punch the fucker, I remained patient, knowing the right moment would present itself.

Back on their feet, Wolfe slashed at Maddox again, this time nicking his cheek as Mads jerked back in time to avoid a more deadly blow. My heart thundered in my ears. The close proximity of the man literally breathing down my neck kept me rooted in the mindset I needed to survive this.

“You better hope it’s Wolfe,” I said, smooth as sin. “He’ll probably kill you a lot faster than Maddox will.”

Archer was quiet a moment, watching the sibling battle that he’d forced. “So that’s it? You insist that this must end with one of us dead? I gave you the chance for peace between us. Why wouldn’t you want that?”

“You’re not much of a businessman, Donovan. Your refusal to negotiate is why we can’t have peace.” I flinched as Maddox grazed Wolfe with his knife, slicing him across the abdomen. A shallow wound, thankfully. “You’re also a hateful man who tortures and kills his way through this city. We would never be able to trust you.”

There could never be a partnership between two syndicates such as ours. He knew that as well as I did. My gaze darted to the woman who’d confiscated my knife. The odds of overpowering her for it before getting shot were slim. Nope. Needed a better plan.

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than Maddox shouted my name. In the same split-second a wicked hunting knife flew end over end through the air toward me. My body reacted, driven by an instinct I’d honed long ago.

My hand came up in time to catch the knife by the handle. It was a feat I'd practiced plenty in the past, failing more times than I could count. Memory served me well now. In the same breath, I grabbed Archer by the hair and pressed the blade to his throat.

It all happened so fast. It was surreal. The rush that filled me was exhilarating as hell. The series of shouts that went up from Archer's people was music to my ears.

"Shut the fuck up. Drop your weapons or I open him up," I yelled, my voice coming out strained and more than a little crazed. To ensure they all knew how deadly serious I was, I pressed the knife to Archer's carotid.

"Do what she says, you fools," he barked when his people hesitated. "Do you want to turn this into a bloodbath?"

"Get your hands up where I can see them," I hissed in Archer's ear. "Try anything and I bleed you."

One thing I didn't do was bluff. I was ready to end him in seconds if his people forced me to make a hasty decision. Although I'd rather take my time.

Most of Archer's people did as they were told, placing their weapons on the floor. One man jabbed a gun in Maddox's face.

I needed these people to know that I was dead serious. I dragged the blade over Archer's throat, avoiding the artery. The cut that opened up was significant, spilling blood down the front of his suit. But it wouldn't kill him. Not yet.

"I said drop your fucking weapons." My voice rang through the warehouse.

The hesitant man quickly complied, setting his gun at his feet. Maddox was quick to snatch it up. Once it became clear that we'd seized control of the situation, Wolfe also picked up a gun before handing off the knife he held to Ruthless who happily accepted. When all four of them were armed, they joined me.

Getting my hands on Archer was the one crucial factor that had turned this in our favor. We had to take advantage of the sudden shift. Ruthless grabbed Archer's shoulder and kicked the back of his knee to force him to the floor. I maintained my grip on his hair, knife still pressed to his throat. Archer's people stood uncertainly, staring at their leader for some kind of instruction.

"Get out," Maddox commanded, waving toward the door with the gun he held. "Leave your weapons and go."

Ace opened one of the loading doors, allowing dozens of Hale Syndicate members to flow inside. Some quickly gathered up the dropped weapons while others ushered Archer's goons out.

"Let's be reasonable," Donovan said, keeping himself calm and collected. "There's no need for anyone to die. I'm sure we can come to some kind of agreement. Name your price. Money. Territory. What will it take to make you go away?"

Despite his cool exterior, Archer was a dead man, and he knew it. He was ready to bargain away everything he had to save himself, and that still wouldn't be enough.

Once the warehouse was empty of people leaving only the five of us and Archer, all of the doors were closed, and the

building became a tomb. Archer's tomb.

"We don't want anything from you," I said, coming to stand in front of him. Twirling the hunting knife in one hand, I held up the other, nodding to my swollen finger. "I think I owe you one."

I didn't screw around with breaking his bones. Grabbing his hand, I forced his fingers open and sliced his pinky finger clean off. The resulting scream brought a smile to my lips. Archer clamped his mouth shut against another scream, fighting hard to keep his composure. His chest heaved with pained breaths.

"Killing me won't give you the city," he said, his voice rising with panic. "My son will take over. He'll still have the money and power that you don't have. He'll take you down. You're better off striking a deal before it's too late."

"Your son?" I laughed. "I don't think that's the threat you think it is."

"It doesn't matter. My people are loyal. They won't stop until they wipe every last one of you off the planet." Even with his severed finger on the floor before him, Donovan refused to back down. "Killing me is a death sentence. I said that I'd take you with me if I died here tonight, and I meant it."

Wolfe stepped forward and slammed a fist in his face. "You've been trying to take Maddox and me out since we were kids. This has been a long time coming."

"Get your kicks, boys, but the kill belongs to Maven and me." Ruthless stood back, watching while turning the knife over in his hands.

“That’s fair.” Maddox nodded before joining his brother in dealing Archer an assload of pain.

I joined Ruthless and Ace a safe distance away while the Hale brothers punished Donovan Archer. They got him back on his feet, inviting him to fight back while they took turns throwing punches and bodychecks. Archer did his best to block the hits. He wasn’t much of a fighter.

“See what happens when you pay other people to do your dirty work.” Maddox gave Donovan a violent shove that sent him flailing toward Wolfe. “You’re nothing without others to keep you afloat. Have you ever lifted a finger yourself? Maybe that’s a poor choice of words.”

Archer had always been the type to hand out commands and let others carry out his will. He hadn’t been present when his men grabbed me. Maybe he’d once been on the frontline like the rest of us, earning his dues, but he’d grown complacent. That was his downfall.

Wolfe grabbed him by both shoulders and hit him with a brutal headbutt. The force flung Donovan down on the floor. When he didn’t try to get right back up, it was time for Ruthless and me to take over.

We stood over Archer who tried to shakily get to his feet. I put my foot against his shoulder to keep him down. His face was a mess of blood and bruises. One eye was partially swollen shut.

“Do you know what your men did to us, Donovan?” I crouched down to face him, holding the hunting knife tight in my grasp. “Did they tell you all about it?”

“It’s not too late for a truce. Do the right thing, Maven. You’re better than this, aren’t you? Better than me.” There was no quaking or fear from Archer. He’d accepted his fate, and yet he was arrogant enough to believe we may still be willing to compromise.

I had to give him credit for remaining consistent and not begging like a coward. I ran the flat side of the blade along his jaw, making him shudder. “I am better than you, Donovan. That’s why I’m here to finish what you started.”

Ruthless approached, exuding sinister intentions. He rolled up his pantleg to show Donovan a thick scar above his knee. “Know what this is from? I’ll show you.”

Donovan desperately tried to scramble away as Ruthless swung the knife he held. No such luck. Ruthless was on him with a vengeance, driving the knife point first right into Archer’s leg.

Archer’s shriek hurt my ears but soothed my soul. Mouth wide open, he gaped at the knife protruding from his leg. Before he could react, Ruthless jerked it free, causing a gush of blood to flow from the ugly wound.

There had been a time when I wanted nothing more than to torture Donovan Archer. I’d moved past that to merely wanting him gone. Torture had never been something I’d enjoyed but something I used as a tool when necessary. I was happy to let Ruthless take the lead.

“Have you had enough yet?” Ruthless asked several long, agonizing minutes later. “Not gonna beg, huh? I’m shocked. I didn’t think you had the balls to take it.”

Archer's one eye was swollen entirely shut now. He stared at me as Ruthless jerked his lolling head up. Even though he didn't say a word, I felt Donovan silently pleading with me to end this. To end him.

He was a blood covered mess of cuts, gashes, and broken bones. His breathing was labored, like the pain made it difficult. I didn't enjoy his agony as much as I'd thought I would. That felt unfair. This should be joyful. Liberating. Now I could free myself from the hold Donovan Archer had on me all these years. Why did it feel like something was missing?

Vengeance wasn't enough. It would never undo everything that had been done to me. To all of us. But it was the closest to closure I would ever get.

"He's all yours, Baby Girl," Ruthless said, wiping a splatter of blood off his cheek with the back of his hand. "Whenever you're ready."

I'd been ready for a long time. Now the moment was here. I tried to savor the finality on Donovan's face.

"Do it, Maven." Voice ragged, chest heaving, Donovan dribbled blood when he spoke. "Enjoy this moment. It will be one of your last."

His arrogance in the face of death ignited my last fuse. I prowled toward Archer, standing over him so he had to crane his neck to look at me.

"You should have made better decisions, Donovan. Your obsession with protecting your organization has only guaranteed its downfall. I hope that haunts you all the way to the grave."

A flick of my wrist and the knife slashed through his artery as I opened him up wide. I stepped back to avoid the spill of blood as it painted the floor deep crimson. Ruthless released Archer, letting him fall forward to bleed out face down. I stared at the growing puddle beneath him, unmoved.

Ace's hand was warm on my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

I placed a hand on top of his and nodded. "I'm fucking fantastic."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MAVEN



Three shots of tequila down the hatch made the tension in my muscles finally ease. I made a face as the last shot burned a path down into my stomach. It had been one hell of a night.

“I sent a crew over to watch your parents’ house, Maven. Rumer should probably stay with them until this all blows over.” Maddox joined me at the bar in his living room, drinking straight from a whiskey bottle. He’d been strangely quiet since we left the warehouse.

“Are we expecting this to blow over?” Wolfe plopped down on one of the couches. He held a stiff drink in one hand, using the other to rub his forehead. “There’s a good chance the Archer Syndicate will launch an all-out war. We could be playing defense for a while.”

Setting my shot glass on the bar, I went to the bathroom to fetch the First-Aid Kit and a towel. Then I returned to the living room and started cleaning up my guys. Because Maddox was lurking near the bar with his whiskey wearing a haunted expression, I started with Wolfe.

“They’ll crumble,” Maddox said, staring out the patio window at the pool. Security lights positioned around the property lit up the backyard. “Donovan was their rock.

Without him the rest will collapse. Junior won't be able to do shit to save it."

Junior being Evan Archer. He sure hadn't struck me as the leadership type. I shook my head to myself as I recalled the incident with him in the hotel room. Nope. Definitely wasn't worried about him.

Ace wandered in from the kitchen, an apple in one hand and a bag of chips in the other. "We've already upset their relationship with several clients. I say we go directly to those clients and offer them a better deal. This is the best time to swoop in and steal their business."

A hiss escaped Wolfe as I opened his shirt and pressed a towel with disinfectant to the wound slashing across his abs. It was a surface wound, not serious and could probably do without stitches. However, it was long and in an awkward place for bandaging.

"Agreed," Ruthless said, sparking up a thick joint. He sat on the couch across from Wolfe and me, watching me work. "We have to kick them while they're down. Don't give them any chance to recover or regroup. That's how we take this entire city."

"Let's put a hit out on Evan Archer. Word will travel fast through the MCs. It will probably send him running." Maddox still stared out the window. Somehow I suspected that he wasn't really seeing the backyard.

I frowned as I glanced his way, noting the rigid way he held himself. Like he couldn't relax yet. The job wasn't really done. We'd only just started. I suspected something else bothered him. Something I couldn't put my finger on.

Ruthless picked up his phone and began tapping around on the screen. Holding the joint between his lips, he squinted through the stream of smoke as he sent a message that would topple the first domino. Once the MCs knew this hit was up for grabs, any number of people would be after Evan. He wouldn't be able to take a shit without looking over his shoulder.

While I cleaned Wolfe's wound, he smoothed back a few loose tendrils that had escaped my braid. His thumb lingered on my face, stroking my cheek. I flashed him a smile. Patching him up like the old days felt right. We all belonged in this moment.

We got lucky tonight. Things could have easily ended with us in body bags instead of Archer. If his entire organization came after us in retaliation, we may still end up that way.

"No doubt they'll be divided on how to handle this," I said, carefully applying a bandage to Wolfe's knife wound. "Some will want to come after us. Others will choose to cut their losses and leave the syndicate. We have an opportunity to recruit them to our side."

"We'll have to move fast on this. The less time they have to regroup the faster the whole operation will fall apart." Ruthless held up his phone. "The hit has been issued. Evan Archer has a price tag of half a million on his head. That may even be enough to encourage his own people to turn on him."

"I'd be surprised if he lasts a week," Maddox muttered, swigging from the whiskey. "It doesn't feel like enough though. It feels like Archer got off too easy."

And there it was. The reason behind his strange mood.

I grabbed a clean towel and some bandages before crossing the room to where Maddox stood. Taking hold of his injured arm, I gently turned him toward me. “Let me clean you up.”

The gash on Maddox’s forearm was deep enough to cause the flesh to split open. He watched me clean the wound with little concern. “Just tape it shut. It will be fine.”

I studied his face, noting the frustration creasing his brow and the irritation in his deep blue eyes. “What’s up, Maddox? Why the weird mood? You should be happy. Archer is finally dead.”

“I guess I thought it would feel different, you know? More of a completion.” Maddox held my gaze. Something within him softened. “Or maybe I just hate that I wasn’t able to hand deliver Archer to you like I always wanted.”

My heart filled to damn near bursting at the regret that passed over his face. I would never doubt that Maddox was sorry for what Archer’s people did to me that night.

I paused in cleaning his wound and rose up on my toes to kiss him. “You did though in your own way. You worked with Wolfe and Ace so that we could all be there when the time came. I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.”

Maddox nodded but said nothing. He still carried a guilt that weighed heavy upon him. My forgiveness would only do so much. He also had to forgive himself.

I didn’t push the subject further, leaving it for a better time. After doing my best to tape and bandage his wound, I

did the same to the much smaller cut on his cheek. Watching them hurt each other like that had hurt me. There was obviously still so much unrest between them. I'd thought that working together again would help bridge the gap between Wolfe and Maddox.

I knew of one thing that would help them let go of the past. Me.

As the hour grew ridiculously late and the conversation wound down, Ruthless slipped away to the basement and Ace went to shower before crashing for the rest of the night in Wolfe's old bedroom upstairs. Based on the bed count, someone would be sharing a bed with me. Why only one of them though?

When the three of us were alone, I started to tidy up the First-Aid supplies and Ace's abandoned chip bag. I glanced from Maddox to Wolfe, ready to tackle this head on.

"Are we going to talk about what happened tonight?" I asked. "You two were pretty quick to start swinging knives at each other."

Wolfe gestured to my bandaged finger. "We didn't have a choice."

The tequila helped with the throbbing. I imagined tomorrow it would hurt like hell.

"It's cool, Vixen. We did what we had to do. I was never going to hurt Wolfe. Not really." Maddox grabbed me by the waist and pulled me down with him onto the couch, settling me on his lap.

I waited for Wolfe to say something similar, to assure me that he'd never had any ill intent toward his brother. He didn't. I met his gaze and raised a brow. Wolfe shrugged, like he'd rather say nothing than lie.

Disentangling myself from Maddox, I rose and stood between the couches, looking from one brother to the other. "I'm going upstairs to shower and get into bed. I'd really like for you both to join me."

They looked at each other and then quickly away. I'd expected some awkwardness. It had been a long damn time since the two of them had me together. It felt like the only way to officially close the door on everything that had divided us.

"I sense some reluctance," I continued. "Here's what we're going to do. I'm going to head up and get all wet and soapy. You two are going to stay here and settle your shit. When you're ready, you know where to find me."

I left them without hesitation. They needed this. In the meantime, I'd enjoy a hot shower and hope that they came to their damn senses.

CHAPTER THIRTY

MADDOX



Maven sashayed from the room, leaving the two of us behind without a glance back as she ascended the stairs. We probably had this coming.

I glanced toward the bar, thinking about pouring more liquor in my veins. Although I rocked a decent buzz already, I knew that popping open another bottle would end with me saying something I couldn't filter and Wolfe punching my lights out.

Wolfe and I sat in tense silence, each waiting for the other to break first. Fine. I could make the first move toward peace. Of course, that only worked if that's what he wanted.

"You were going to kill me," I said. "I saw it in your eyes. And I was okay with that. If it meant keeping Maven safe, I'd happily die for her."

Wolfe sat forward on the edge of the couch, hands clasped together. Although we faced one another, he stared at the floor. "I wasn't going to... I didn't want to do it. It's not like we were given much of a choice. He would've kept hurting her."

My brother couldn't tell me that he didn't hate me. I guess I didn't blame him, but I was starting to lose my

patience. I could only apologize so many times, and I sure as fuck wouldn't beg him for forgiveness.

"You swung a knife at my face, Wolfe. I get it. Trust me, I do. You're still pissed. I would be too." I stared at the stairs where Maven had disappeared from sight. "Mave is right though. It's time to let shit go. We can't run the syndicate together if we're holding grudges. We have a real chance to do it right this time."

Wolfe shoved to his feet, the abrupt motion surprising me. He wandered over to the untouched piano in the corner near the patio door. As he trailed a hand over the polished finish, he studied the snow leopard portrait on the wall above it.

"It's like everything has changed and nothing has," Wolfe mused. "Deep down I think it pisses me off that Maven forgave you so easily. She should have made you work for it."

"Is that what you're doing?" I asked, rubbing the stubble on my chin. The cut on my cheek tugged, and I winced. "Making me work for your forgiveness? I'm your brother. We shared everything once. The most important thing we've ever shared is waiting for us to get our heads out of our asses. It's all or nothing. I can't keep saying I'm sorry, and you can't keep holding onto this grudge."

"Remember how hard Mom tried to get us to learn how to play this thing? She was so damn mad when we chose to raise hell with Dad instead." A faint smile crept onto Wolfe's face as he trailed his fingers over the keys, too light to press them down.

I frowned. I didn't like to think about the woman who'd walked out on us, let alone discuss her. Our mother did the bare minimum, calling only on birthdays and sending a card on Christmas. The syndicate life hadn't been for her, so she left. We stayed. She'd made her choice, and we'd made ours.

"Yeah, well, brawling with street thugs and running drugs was a lot more fun." I rolled my eyes, recalling how my mother would always accuse us of exactly that no matter what we'd actually been up to.

Wolfe chuckled, pressing a few piano keys at random. "Not to mention seducing rich old ladies to get close to their money."

I laughed as well at the memory of our mom shouting such accusations at us after a long night. "That one isn't our fault. That one is all on Dad. Should've kept his dick in his pants."

"He definitely made some questionable decisions," Wolfe agreed. Leaning on the piano, he folded his arms over his chest. "He never could understand why we were happy with only one woman."

My dad's surprised face came to mind, and my shoulders shook with laughter. "He was so shocked when he found out that she was with all of us. I couldn't explain it though. It just felt natural to make Maven the heart of our group."

"Yeah, it did. Everything fell apart without her." Wolfe nodded, his gaze straying toward the stairs. "Look, Maddox, I'm sorry. I know you didn't intend for Maven to get hurt. I

know that you hate yourself for what happened. It's not fair for me to keep throwing it in your face.”

The weight of his apology struck hard, like a boulder to the chest. Emotion caused a lump to form in my throat. I nodded vigorously, momentarily speechless. I'd told myself that the divide between Wolfe and me hadn't hurt. It had been just another one of those things I'd stuffed deep down and drowned with alcohol. The opportunity to repair my relationship with my brother meant more than I had the words for.

Wolfe pushed away from the piano. Coming to stand before me, he held out both arms, inviting a hug. I got to my feet and embraced him, feeling seven years of unrest dissolve. Change wouldn't happen in one night, but it was a start.

“Are you up for this?” I nodded toward the stairs. “We probably shouldn't keep her waiting too long. You know how rowdy she gets after a night like this one.”

“How could I forget? There's no doubt that our lady knows what she wants. I'm always more than happy to give it to her.”

Wolfe and I locked eyes. This would be the defining moment of our relationship. The moment that proved whether or not we were able to resume the partnership and friendship we'd once shared. If we could share Maven again without issue, we could do pretty much anything.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

MAVEN



I'd just stepped out of the shower when I heard the bedroom door close. Had both Maddox and Wolfe come to the room? I paused to listen. Nothing at first. Then the murmur of two distinct voices. Miracles happened after all.

I dried off and wrapped the towel tight around me. When I opened the door, I was surprised to find them sharing a joint and laughing about something I'd missed. Maddox was sprawled on the bed while Wolfe stood next to it. They both glanced up at my arrival.

"Perfect," Maddox said when he saw me in the towel. "Damp and naked. Lose the towel, Vixen."

"Seeing as you're both here, I assume you've found some kind of peace with each other." Clutching the towel, I held it in place. I needed to know where they stood with one another.

Wolfe nodded, extending the joint he held to me. "We have. It's going to take time to rebuild trust on both sides, but we're willing to try. Starting here with you. Now do what you're told and ditch the towel, Princess."

He wiggled a brow at me as I accepted the joint. A playful Wolfe was always a fun Wolfe. Excitement took root in

the pit of my stomach. I'd been waiting a very long time for this.

Since I returned to River City, I'd been given multiple reasons to believe it would never happen again. I was proud of them for being able to set their egos aside for the good of us all. They knew as well as I did what coming up here meant. Going forward would mean a commitment from each of us to each other and the syndicate. We were reclaiming what we'd almost lost.

Holding the joint between my fingers, I took a long, slow drag and let the towel fall. The atmosphere immediately changed. Suddenly nothing outside the room mattered. Our personal issues took a backseat as our priorities shifted.

Wolfe stepped forward to pluck the joint from my grasp. Cupping the side of my face, he peered into my eyes for a few enchanting seconds before kissing me. His dominant nature came through in the firm press of his lips against mine. Anticipation made my head spin.

"Get something to tie her hands with," Wolfe said to Maddox, handing him the remains of the joint. Helping himself to a handful of my ass, he pushed me toward the bed. "On the bed, Princess. Spread those legs and let me see you."

Maddox ducked out of the room, returning in record time with two silk ties. He tossed one to Wolfe, keeping the other for himself. I crawled onto the bed, coy and playful as I lay down and spread my legs wide for them.

"Holy fuck you're beautiful, Vixen," Maddox murmured as he rounded the foot of the bed, pausing to savor the view. "I don't think you have any idea what you do to me."

Wolfe moved about the room, turning on a small bedside lamp in place of the bright overhead light. Then he caught one of my wrists and wrapped the tie around it before securing it to the corner bed post.

“Make sure she can’t get free,” Wolfe instructed when Maddox tied my other wrist. “Not too tight. Just tight enough.”

“Don’t be afraid to hurt her a little.” A smirk crossed Maddox’s handsome face as he secured his side a bit tighter than Wolfe’s. “She likes that kind of thing.”

Wolfe stood at the end of the bed, his hazel gaze locked on me as he undressed. I ate up every inch of him. From the faint scar on his neck to the howling wolf inked on his chest and down to the tattooed claw marks slashing across his side. Then lower. Over his taut abs and down to the gorgeous hard on between his legs. Damn, this day just got a whole lot better.

Once he was naked, Wolfe climbed onto the bed next to me. Touching my chin, he kissed me with a fierceness that had me bracing myself. His tongue entangled with mine as I returned his kiss with wild desire.

The sound of clothes hitting the floor was the only warning I got before Maddox joined us on the bed. He stretched out beside me, opposite Wolfe. I took a moment to enjoy the visual of both of them next to me. Wolfe was slightly taller and leaner than his brother though both men were in fine shape. We’d all learned early on that keeping on top of the cardio was a must with our lifestyle.

“Are you ready for us, Princess?” Wolfe murmured against my neck. He kissed a spot that made me giggle.

“You have no idea,” I replied, testing the restraints on my wrists. Maddox’s side was tight enough to bruise. Not really a surprise. “It’s been a long time.”

Clasping a handful of my damp hair, Maddox held my head in place as he claimed my mouth next. I fell into his kiss, tumbling headlong into the spicy scent of him. The added sensation of Wolfe running a hand slowly down my body while kissing my neck had me melting into the sheets.

I ached to touch them, which was exactly what Wolfe had intended. He loved to have me at his mercy, and I loved the way it brought out a side of him I never saw any other time. Slow, seductive caresses over my arm, along my torso, and down my leg made any reservations I’d held about this dissolve.

“We have a lot of time to make up for.” The heat of Maddox’s breath against my skin made me quiver as he nipped my shoulder. “We’re going to make you come. We’re going to fuck you like you belong to us.”

“You better,” I said, gasping softly as Maddox pinched my nipple.

Wolfe’s massaging caresses continued between my thighs. My body tensed when he rubbed me with his palm, grinding against my clit. I found him watching my face as he slowly descended my body, pausing to kiss my ribs and flick his tongue across my nipple along the way. When the hot touch of his mouth against my pussy followed, I almost came undone.

Maddox sucked my nipple into his mouth, teasing the other with a finger. He pressed close, his firm cock against my

leg. I lay there entirely at their mercy as they feasted on me. Chest heaving and heart pounding, I slipped into a mind altering state of bliss.

Little moans came from me as they partnered in worshipping my body. I automatically strained against the restraints, hating that I couldn't get my hands on these two gorgeous men. I gave a frustrated whimper, succumbing to them completely.

"Soon, Princess," Wolfe whispered against me. "Look at me while I lick you. That's right. Direct eye contact. That's a good girl."

Hearing him say those words flooded me with arousal. My pussy grew wetter as I watched him between my legs. I couldn't help but get hot when he talked like that. It was the dark sparkle in his hazel eyes that got to me.

Next to me Maddox sat up and pulled my head onto his lap. He smoothed the hair back from my face, fisting a handful as he offered me his cock. I sucked the head into my mouth, teasing it with a swirl of my tongue. He caressed the side of my face, his hand warm on my cheek.

Between my legs Wolfe grew persistent in his actions, flicking my clit with clear intent. He went hard on it, attacking it with a precise determination. There was no controlling the onslaught of pleasure that sent me soaring on the wings of orgasmic wonder. I came with a moan that was muffled by the cock in my mouth.

"I can't do this anymore, Wolfe. I need her hands free." Maddox picked at the knot he'd tied around my wrist. "Let's get her up. I want that ass."

“You’re an impatient motherfucker,” Wolfe said with a roll of his eyes. “Who said you get her ass?”

It didn’t matter how old people grew. That sibling rivalry aspect never faded. They were far worse than Rumer and I had ever been.

“Are you guys seriously arguing over who gets my ass?” I wiggled my fingers once my hands were free. “Don’t I get a vote in this?”

“Do you have a preference?” A brow arched, Wolfe eyed me dangerously, daring me to choose.

I didn’t really. The daring expression he wore tempted me to say his brother’s name. Before I could answer, Maddox rolled me over and spanked my ass. I let out a little yelp. The impact of his hand against my skin stung in the best way.

“Of course not,” I said with a grin. “I love both your cocks equally.”

“Scratch that, Wolfe. You can have her ass. I want to watch her face while we fuck her.” Maddox reached into the bedside table for a condom. He pulled out a small bottle of lube and tossed it to Wolfe.

A nervous tickle in my stomach gave me a giddy rush. I’d mentally prepared myself for this before issuing the invitation to the two of them. We’d done this before. However, we were taking a huge step here together. Reclaiming the power we’d once shared. This was a big deal, and it left me shaken.

Maddox laid back on the bed and sheathed his cock. A wry smile graced his lips when he patted his lap, beckoning

me to straddle him. I climbed on top with no further coaxing. Bracing myself with my hands against his chest, I slid down Maddox's hard length. Being filled with him felt amazing.

I moved atop him for several strokes before Wolfe moved in close behind me. He grasped my butt cheek with one hand, giving it a squeeze. With slow, careful motions he worked one lubed up finger into my ass. The intrusion made me want to tense against the pressure. Overall it wasn't bad. Riding Maddox helped.

As soon as I got used to the sensation, Wolfe inserted a second finger. The pleasure grew along with the pressure. He worked his fingers in and out, matching the rhythm I set. When my moans increased in frequency and urgency, Wolfe replaced his fingers with his cock.

Maddox and I held still as Wolfe eased inside me one exquisite inch at a time. The breath left my lungs on a moan. It took me a moment to wrap my mind around the many sensations. With both of them inside me, I felt stretched to my limits. I enjoyed the way it tested me, pushing my boundaries.

My fingernails dug into Maddox's chest as I braced myself against him. Whatever he saw on my face made him drive up into me, burying his cock deep. Behind me Wolfe lovingly held my hip, pressing his chest against my back as he thrust inside me. It took them a minute to find a pace that felt right. Once they did, everything was heaven.

Caged between them while they fucked me, I was overcome with a swell of emotion. It caused a heaviness in my chest, like a sob had been lodged inside me. I saw my

emotions mirrored in Maddox's serene blue eyes. The relief and elation of having reached this point after so much unrest.

Maddox's hand slid around my throat, holding tight as he kissed me hard. He bit the edge of my lip before nipping at my chin. A frenzied feeling gripped me, and I grabbed a handful of his black hair with one hand, pulling hard as I clawed deep bloody scratches into his chest with the other. He moaned, thrusting harder and faster.

An arm slipped around me from behind as Wolfe reached for my clit. He pulled my hair aside, pressing his lips to the back of my neck while pumping into me with steady rolls of his hips.

Needing to touch both of them, I grasped the hand Wolfe had between my legs. He entwined our fingers together, using mine as well as his as he rubbed perfect circles on my clit. Having them so fully at the same time was a special kind of pleasure. One that couldn't be accurately put into words. I felt like the bridge of peace between them. They would always share my heart. Having them share my body was almost more than I could take.

My moans turned to cries as the intensity of every touch and stroke grew beyond what I could handle. My body began to shake as I reached the beautiful peak of orgasm. On a frantic whim, I bit Maddox's chest, sinking my teeth into his soft skin. It helped release the overflow of energy making me crazy.

Wolfe couldn't hold himself together any longer. The moment he felt my pussy spasm, he lost it. He pulled out and decorated my ass cheek in hot spurts. Maddox managed to get

in a few more thrusts before he came with a groan that made my pussy clench.

I let my head fall against Maddox's chest. His arms went around me, and he hugged me close while Wolfe slipped away to the bathroom. My breaths came in heaving gasps that made Maddox chuckle.

"Looks like you're a little out of practice," he teased. "We'll have to tag team you more often."

I shook my head and laughed, unable to yet form words. When Wolfe returned with a towel to clean me off, I caught hold of his forearm, pulling him down beside me. Arranging myself so I lay nestled between them, I settled in for the cuddle I'd been longing for.

Both men pressed close, having no interest in leaving my side. Maybe things would change later when the moment had ended, but for the first time since I came home, I believed everything would be okay.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

MAVEN



“You fucking paid off Ryker King? What are you trying to do to me here, Wolfe? That asshole deserved to have both arms broken at the very least.” Maddox slammed a bottle of whiskey down on the kitchen island and pried off the cap. He poured way too much into a glass, shooting a glare into the living room at his sibling.

Unfazed, Wolfe waved a hand dismissively, his attention on his phone. “You’ve got to learn to pick your battles, Mads. A guy like Ryker is far more easy to control with money than violence. If he fucks up again, you can break his arms.”

“I don’t want him working for us,” Maddox continued. “I don’t trust him.”

“Fine then. He doesn’t work for you. He works for me. Happy?” Wolfe looked up long enough to roll his eyes at his brother. “Might want to lay off the booze a little too. Not a good time to be going too hard on the sauce. We have a city to take over.”

Maddox’s jaw dropped. “Are you serious? Do not even start with the nagging brother shit already.”

My gaze darted from one brother to the other. There was a different dynamic to their banter. It felt less volatile than

before. Less likely to explode into violence. I hid a smile behind my sandwich as I took a bite. I was overjoyed as hell, loving every second.

Donovan Archer had been dead for three days now. We'd spent the last few days laying low, avoiding public spaces while surrounded by Hale Syndicate security. The Archer Syndicate had yet to make a move. I imagined Evan was shitting his pants right about now.

Ace ambled into the kitchen and perused the inside of the fridge before helping himself to a bottle of iced green tea. "Things could be a lot worse, Maddox. At least everything worked out with the Sanguine Dragons. They know now that you weren't behind the death of their man."

"And it doesn't hurt to have Ryker and his MC in our pocket," Ruthless added. He sat next to me at the island, eating a piece of leftover pizza.

I enjoyed the way his thigh pressed against mine. A subtle touch, powerful in its simplicity. After almost losing these guys, I was determined to savor the little things that I'd once taken for granted. These tiny moments mattered so much.

"No more second chances for Ryker," Maddox insisted, shooting a pointed look at Wolfe. "If he so much as pisses in my direction, I'll kill him."

Ace erupted in laughter. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that Maddox is looking for any reason to kill the guy," Wolfe supplied. "Just leave it alone, Mads. Let me handle Ryker."

This was exactly why they operated best as a group. They all brought something different to the table. Maddox didn't have the savvy business mind that Wolfe had. Although nobody in the city had quite the brutal reputation that Maddox and Ruthless had. They all balanced each other out. With me at the core to keep the whole thing running smoothly.

I was almost afraid to let myself enjoy it. Being there with the four of them like old times felt damn good. I wanted it to always be this way.

Unfortunately, I couldn't help but feel that it wouldn't be without a fight.

An hour later we were on our way to an Archer Syndicate establishment. A cozy little bar located next to a few restaurants. It reminded me a little of *Cheers* but more modern and filled with mobsters. Being a public facility meant that it was also filled with regular, everyday people. We were going to do business, not to engage in violence.

"Are we sure three days isn't too soon?" I asked when we were piled into the new SUV that had replaced the one Ruthless and I had wrecked. "Maybe we should wait a week. Out of respect."

I had no respect for Donovan Archer nor did I feel any remorse. However, we planned to make a play for his people, offering them a chance to change sides. Maybe waiting longer would secure us higher numbers.

Wolfe shook his head, watching the city fly by as Ruthless drove to our destination. "Every time a syndicate changes leadership it sends people running scared. The best

time to nab them is now, while everything is uncertain. This isn't about respect. Only power."

"All right," I relented with a shrug. "You're the brains of this operation. I'll take your word for it."

"If Wolfe is the brains, what am I?" Ace slung an arm around my shoulders, taking advantage of having me in the back with him.

"You're the pretty boy charmer," Ruthless snickered.

Ace scoffed. "That would make you the violence and Maddox the hotheaded leader."

"Um, excuse me." Maddox held up a finger. "I'm also a brilliant strategist."

"Right," Ace laughed. "How could I forget? That would make Maven the heart. The whole thing only works because of her."

They all nodded or murmured an agreement, even Ruthless. While I wasn't the overtly emotional type, lately it had been harder than ever not to succumb to the rise of fuzzy feelings. I threw an arm around Ace's middle, leaning into his embrace.

While I would have loved to stay there in the back seat between Ace and Wolfe, duty called. We'd started this. Now we had to see it through. Taking over as the city's top crime syndicate wouldn't happen overnight. One step at a time.

We walked into the building without issue. It took several moments before anyone took notice of us. Most of the patrons were regular people who had no reason to recognize

us. Once a man with an Archer tattoo seated at the bar took notice, word quickly spread.

Maddox and I walked hand in hand through the bar with the others close behind. Except for Ace who wandered toward the bar. We'd come to make a statement both in words and actions. We were here to take over everything that had belonged to Archer.

We strolled up to a table filled with Archer people. They wore varying expressions of anger, fear, and uncertainty. I expected mixed reactions once they knew why we were here.

Maddox placed both hands on the table, leaning in to deliver his invitation. "I'll make this short and sweet. For the next seven days we're willing to accept any Archer Syndicate people that decide this might be a good time to switch sides. I'd also like to pass along a message to Evan Archer. Tell him that we'll call off the hit if he leaves town. We won't hesitate to bury him too if he plans any form of retaliation."

A man with thinning brown hair and a thick mustache scoffed. He pointed at Maddox with his beer bottle. "You've got a real big set of balls on you, huh? Think you can just swoop in and stage a takeover without a fight? We're loyal to the Archer Syndicate no matter who is in charge."

"Yeah, I do." Maddox's ego wouldn't let him answer any other way. "Make the wise choice and join the side that will be left standing. Offer closes in one week."

Those seated around the table didn't all seem to agree with the man who'd spoken. There were some confused frowns in the bunch. Wolfe had been right about the unrest

right after the loss of their leader. Some of these guys looked ready to jump ship.

“You don’t speak for all of us, Eddie,” barked an older man with a gray beard. “Keep your trap shut before you start shit you can’t finish.”

The dissension among them was a good thing. One that would work to our advantage. No doubt we would swipe a significant number of their people.

Of course, not everyone was ready to abandon their post. Eddie chose to fight back instead. He leapt to his feet and threw a punch at Maddox who took the unexpected hit with a grin. He struck Eddie hard on the chin, and his eyes rolled back in his head. He went down, falling awkwardly to the floor next to his table.

Two more Archer men approached from another part of the room, coming up behind us. A brawl broke out as fists started flying. Wolfe shielded me with his body as he got us both out of the fray. We left Ruthless and Maddox to do what they did best. Watching them throw punches and take a few shouldn’t have been as hot as it was.

Because the bar was open to the public, it didn’t take long for the bouncers to intervene. Everyone was separated. Maddox and Ruthless were pushed toward the nearest exit. We followed them out onto the sidewalk where I lectured Mads about opening up the knife cut on his cheek that had yet to heal.

Ace joined us a minute later, smiling like the fox that had been in the hen house. “Evan Archer has gone into hiding.

He might've enjoyed pretending he was a gangster because of his daddy but he's not up for filling his shoes."

"Didn't take you long to get someone to spill that info."

Ruthless winced as he touched the bridge of his nose.

"Goddamn. Kind of missed having you around."

This time I didn't try to hide my smile. All the pieces had come together. We were whole again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

MAVEN



It didn't take long to move my meager things into the Hale house. Akasha wasn't thrilled about another move, but she handled it well. She spent the first three days hiding under the bed in my room.

I glanced around the bedroom that had once been Maddox's and was now mine. It felt a little like defeat to see all of my stuff. Maddox had wanted me here all along, living under his roof. I'd resisted because I needed to make these decisions for myself. And I had. Still, the satisfaction Mads exuded while moving my things had been a bitter pill to swallow.

It was safer this way. Ideally, I'd prefer for all of us to be here. Wolfe wasn't ready to make that commitment just yet, and I understood why. Ace had a lease on his apartment that expired in a few months. For now it was Ruthless, Maddox, and me. Although Wolfe and Ace had been spending a lot more time here. We had a lot of planning to do.

We'd acquired almost two hundred of Archer's people from all levels of his organization. There was a lot of work to do in order to screen each person to ensure they were legitimately joining us and not trying to pull some kind of

double agent act. There were also meetings to plan and execute with several of Archer's biggest clients. We were all being kept busy.

I kissed the top of Akasha's head and left her to nap in the middle of the bed. When I descended the stairs to the main floor, I found Maddox on the patio in discussion with one of the many security people manning the property. Despite the news that Evan had gone into hiding, he wasn't being too careful.

After grabbing a muffin from the basket on the counter, I continued on down into the finished basement. I hesitated at the bottom, listening for Ruthless. Music came from the large room that served as the workout area. I popped my head into the room to find him on a weight bench lifting a barbell loaded with weights.

Leaning in the doorway, I took a bite of the blueberry muffin and watched him. Muscles rippled in his heavily tattooed arms. I wondered what he would do if I went over there and licked him. Anywhere. I didn't care. I suddenly wanted the taste of Ruthless in my mouth.

"Enjoying the show?" Ruthless asked, placing the barbell back where it belonged. He sat up, swiping an arm across his forehead.

I nodded, taking another enthusiastic bite of my muffin. "I am, actually. Like you wouldn't believe. Don't stop because of me."

"You know, it wouldn't hurt you to lift some weights. Build up those skinny arms of yours. Can you even throw a

punch with those twigs?" A grin tugged at Ruthless's mouth despite his efforts to wrestle it down.

I raised a brow and put a hand on my hip. "How bad do you want to find out?"

Being good with a knife wasn't the same as being good in a fight. My father had taught me how to throw a punch, but I'd be the first to admit that my time in the gym had decreased considerably over the years. I most likely could stand to spend more time honing those skills.

Ruthless stood up and peeled his t-shirt off, tossing it on the weight bench. The low slung sweat pants he wore drew my gaze right to the sprinkle of dark hair that disappeared into the waistband. I gawked at him as I chewed my muffin.

"No fair," I protested. "You have a clear advantage."

He raised both hands in invitation and moved a few feet away to a clear space. "I'll go easy on you. I'll only defend. Come here and hit me. Lose the muffin."

I cocked my head to one side, giving him a long onceover. "All right. I think we have to even the playing field a little though."

I put the muffin down on the weight bench and took my top off, standing there in a black bra. Ruthless scoffed and rolled his eyes.

"Are you planning to distract me with your tits?" he asked with a dark laugh. "That might actually work here. It won't help you out there unless you plan to flash our enemies."

“Why not? It may really take them by surprise.” Putting both hands up in fight position, I approached him. He beckoned me closer.

I took a playful swing at him, never coming close to connecting. With each swing I took, my fist got a little closer to his face. Ruthless made a few half-assed attempts to block and avoid the blows. When I grew feisty and started to really make an effort, he grabbed my wrist and used it to pull me in close against him.

Spinning me around, Ruthless slid a hand around my throat and pressed his obvious erection against my ass. “Never let them get behind you, Baby Girl. You don’t want that.”

“I kind of want this,” I said, grinding my ass against him.

His breath was hot on my neck. “Trust me. You’re not ready.”

Since the night he’d so carefully and tenderly loved me, I’d been itching to know what it would be like with Ruthless now that I was healed from my injuries. Now the man was trying to drive me wild with want.

“Is that what you really think?” I taunted. “Or is that what you need to tell yourself because you’re not ready to lose yourself with me? It’s okay, Micah. I’m a safe space, and I can take all of you.”

He groaned softly when I said his name. “Don’t test me, Mave. Not if you want to be able to walk for the next few days. Show me how you would get out of this. Fight me off.”

His hand tightened on my throat. The other slid around my waist to hold me against him. Heat engulfed me, and I trembled in his grasp. My immediate reaction was to be turned on rather than afraid in any way. I wanted to push Ruthless to the point of taking me right there on the weight bench.

I reached behind me and helped myself to a handful of his cock through his pants. The soft material allowed me to feel him in great detail. Ruthless sucked in a sharp breath, letting it out on a husky, "Fuck."

When he wasn't expecting it, I gave him an elbow to the ribs. It knocked the breath from him, allowing me to dislodge his hold on my throat. I whirled around to face him, psyching him out with a feint to the left before nailing him with a right hook.

I danced away on the balls of my feet, my hands up as I invited him to come at me. "How's that? Kind of what you were thinking?"

"Something like that," he muttered, prowling toward me.

Ruthless lunged for me, catching my wrist with one hand. He backed me up against the wall, snatching my other wrist and pinning both above my head. His weight against me brought naughty thoughts to mind.

Our gazes locked, and he stared deep into me. We hadn't spoken much one on one since the night we killed Archer. There had been a lot going on and few opportunities to privately check in with him. Now I took my chance.

"Are you okay, Ruthless?" I asked. "I mean since we killed Archer. You got a little torture happy there, and I wanted

to make sure it didn't trigger any past traumas.”

He wore a hint of a smile. “Actually, it was pretty therapeutic. I only wish I could have done it sooner. How are you feeling?”

I nodded. “I feel better than I have in a long time. I'm sleeping better too.”

“Good. You deserve to finally be free of him. Watching you kill that fucking asshole was hot as hell.” Ruthless leaned in close, pinning me with his body. His lips faintly brushed over the corner of my mouth.

I turned my face toward him, forcing our lips together. Slow at first. A tender press of his mouth to mine, deepening moment by moment. The power of the sex charged tension between us left me breathy and wanting more.

That's when a commotion broke out upstairs. All we had to hear was a shouted warning of cops to break our focus. What the fuck was going on?

We took the stairs two at a time. I paused only long enough to slip my shirt back on. Ruthless went first, motioning for me to stay behind him. We emerged from the basement to find a team of police swarming the house. They already had Maddox cuffed face down in the living room. A stream of obscenities flew from his lips.

It didn't take long for us to be spotted. Several officers shouted at us to get down. There was something about a search warrant mixed in there too. Search warrant? What could they be searching for?

We knew the drill. At times like this, it was best to go along with the police and let our people on the inside pull strings for us later. Swallowing hard, I put my hands up where they could be seen and went to my knees. Next to me Ruthless did the same.

One loud cop acted as the spokesperson. “You are all under arrest for the murder of Donovan Archer. I’d advise you not to make this any harder than it needs to be.”

He launched into the reading of our rights which I tuned out completely. How the hell could they have enough evidence to arrest us for murder? Nobody who was there that night would talk to the police. There was no video footage left behind from security cameras or anything else the police could get their hands on. We made sure of it. This felt like a scare tactic from the other side.

“Just me,” Maddox shouted. He was on his knees now, hands cuffed behind him. “You only want me. Nobody else had anything to do with it.”

What the fuck? Panic got my heart pounding. No, he couldn’t do this.

Maddox repeated himself, making sure every cop present heard. I stared hard at him, willing him to look at me. When our eyes locked, I silently begged him not to do this.

I knew what this was all about. Maddox had been unable to atone for his sins against me in the past. He’d wanted to hand deliver Archer to me. Like a gift. When it hadn’t happened that way, he’d been disappointed, feeling like he had to make it up to me somehow. This was how he chose to do that.

I vigorously shook my head. Maddox's expression was one of acceptance. He was doing this, his sacrifice for me after all this time.

There was some confusion as the officers grilled Maddox further about his involvement. He claimed that he knew all about Donovan Archer's death. He'd been there. But we hadn't, and he wouldn't say shit if we were brought in.

After almost an hour of sitting on my knees with my hands cuffed behind my back, I was released and free to watch them drag Maddox out the front door. Despite how hard I fought it, tears rolled down my face. Even in death Donovan got in a final blow.

"They don't have anything to hold him on," Ruthless said when we were alone in the house. "He'll be out by morning. Call Wolfe. He's got the good legal ties."

I nodded, swiping the back of my hand through my tears. Ruthless's brown eyes softened, and his shoulders slumped. He pulled me into his arms, hugging me close. I held tight to him, my mind reeling from what just happened.

Nothing about this felt right. There was no evidence against us. The police had found nothing in the house other than registered legal firearms and my knives. None of those items had been used to kill Archer.

I suspected the Archer Syndicate had an inside contact with the police, as did we. That's the only reason the cops would come right to our door with such accusations. The fact that they'd only taken Maddox was also suspicious as hell. They knew they didn't have shit on any of us.

Over the years I'd seen many syndicate members end up in the slammer, and I'd seen just as many walk free. There was no way of knowing for sure how this would play out. We had to be prepared to fight back and fight hard.

With great reluctance, I disentangled myself from Ruthless and called Wolfe.

EPILOGUE

MAVEN



“Maven, you have to eat something. Come on. You love tacos. Just try one.” Ace wore a hopeful smile as he shoved a plate at me. “Do it for me. Please.”

It had been almost two days since Maddox was arrested and charged. His bail had been set at one million dollars, an amount they knew would be hard for us to get quickly in a legal manner. The stress and anxiety had plagued me since they took him. I’d barely slept. Eating wasn’t on my radar with the roiling ball of nausea in my stomach.

“I’ll take one bite. Just for you. Don’t hold it against me if that’s all you get out of me though.” I accepted the plate and sniffed at the food. I did love tacos. It was unfair that my body would betray me this way.

“Are you staying hydrated? Here. Have some water.” Without waiting, Ace poured me a glass of water. He went the extra step and added a fresh lemon slice.

I put the plate on the counter but accepted the water, drinking most of it to satisfy him. I kept glancing into the living room where Wolfe was on a call with a judge friend of his. Nerves made it impossible to take even a nibble of the taco. I wasn’t doing such a good job of handling Maddox

being taken from us so soon after the five of us had reunited. It was eating me alive.

Ruthless sat at the kitchen island, finishing his own taco. He swiped the one I'd abandoned from my plate and helped himself to a large bite. He didn't seem to have any problem eating. I knew he hadn't been sleeping well either though. He'd been hitting the gym equipment downstairs harder than usual too.

"Thanks for trying to take care of me, Ace. I appreciate you." I leaned in to kiss his cheek, smiling when he turned his head so I'd get his lips instead. I knew he was going to do that.

"I'm here for you, Bright Eyes. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to keep things functioning around here. I'll stay as long as you need me." Sliding an arm around me, Ace tucked me in against his body.

I grabbed his other arm and repositioned us so that his arms were wrapped around me from behind. I let my head fall back against his shoulder, sighing as some of the tension seeped from me. It wouldn't completely leave me though.

When Wolfe ended his call, I almost leapt out of Ace's arms. I crossed the room to where Wolfe sat on the couch scowling at his phone.

"How bad is it?" I asked, fearing his response.

He ran a hand through his hair and tossed his phone onto the side table next to the couch. "It could be worse, so there's that. They don't have enough to hold Maddox on. They'll be forced to drop the charges and release him. Unfortunately, they're still looking for a way to make the charges stick.

They're also using it as an excuse to search our homes and businesses. I'd like to try and put up the money for his bail. I may have to sell some assets to do that."

I plopped down on the couch beside him and took his hand. "Archer must have put this in place before his death. He planned ahead."

Wolfe nodded and rubbed his eyes. He looked exhausted. "Either that or the authorities are using his death as an excuse to come after us. It won't stick, but it definitely forces us to put our plans on hold."

A knock at the front door made all four of us jump. We were a little on edge these days. Ruthless went to answer the door, returning a minute later with a shoebox in hand.

"The security team said that someone left this in the driveway outside the gate," he said, eyeing the box with suspicion. "The cameras only caught it being thrown from a black car."

Ace frowned. "That's sketchy. Do you think it's safe to open?"

Ruthless looked the box over and shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

He used a kitchen knife to cut open the tape holding the box shut. Having no fear, Ruthless flipped open the box lid and peered inside. His brows rose, and he shook his head.

"Someone is trying to send us a message," he said, holding out the box for the rest of us to see. "Maybe the Archer Syndicate. Or maybe someone else."

We all gathered around to look into the box. A dead snake had been stuffed inside. A very clear message.

“None of the MCs would pull a stunt like this,” Wolfe mused, frowning hard at the dead serpent. “Archer may have arranged it ahead of time. He was devious that way.”

Ace gnawed his lower lip, puzzling it over. “Possibly. It could also be from an outside syndicate looking to move in on our turf now that Donovan is dead and Maddox is locked up.”

Feeling overwhelmed, I turned away from the disgusting sight and crossed the room to the bar. Needing something strong, I chose a bottle of tequila and poured myself a shot. The problem was that there were too many possibilities.

Now would be the prime time for anyone who wanted to take us down to make a move. One of our core members was temporarily sidelined, and the Archer Syndicate may be seeking revenge.

I tossed back a shot of tequila, wincing at the harsh burn and taste. “We have to make a move that nobody will see coming. Something that makes people reconsider fucking with us right now.”

Ruthless closed the box, unimpressed with this whole situation. “We have to watch our asses though. The cops will be looking for reasons to come after us.”

“I pull a lot of strings and do a lot of favors to make sure that shit doesn’t happen,” Wolfe grumbled. “Don’t worry, Butterfly. We’ll make a move when the heat dies down. Try to be patient. My priority is getting Maddox back.”

I nodded and poured a second shot. Nothing was more important than having Maddox come home. I felt like I needed to take action. Sitting around doing nothing was killing me. But Wolfe was right. We had to play it safe.

Staring out the window into the backyard conjured many memories from the past. Memories that had tormented me during my time away. After almost losing a future with the men I loved with all my heart, there was nothing I wouldn't do to protect what we shared.

What we had was worth fighting for, and I was ready to go to war with anyone stupid enough to come for us.



Maven's story concludes in Hale Syndicate Book 3, [*Sinister in the Moonlight*](#).



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Trina writes paranormal and contemporary romance that is action packed and gritty about people in dark places discovering who they are and what they're made of. Trina lives in Alberta, Canada with her husband and their kitties. She loves to hear from readers so don't hesitate to drop her a line on social media or at trinamlee.net.