



ENGULFED

book 7 of the **ROGUES** series

TRACIE DELANEY

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ENGULFED

BOOK SEVEN IN THE ROGUES SERIES

ENGULFED

After another successful year for ROGUES, my family and friends gather to spend Christmas together at our brand new boutique hotel.

Yet, the cozy retreat transforms into a chilling nightmare, as a grave error sends shockwaves rippling through our perfect world.

With stakes as high as the lives hanging in the balance, and our once-pristine reputation on the line, I'm forced to confront an agonizing choice.

Is this the end for ROGUES and the bonds we've forged over time? Or can we find a glimmer of hope within the smoldering ruins?

A NOTE FROM TRACIE

Dear Reader,

Well... this book was something of a surprise. After I published *Enticed* more than two and a half years ago, I truly believed I wouldn't revisit the ROGUES again. My muse had already moved on to the *Intrepid Bodyguard* series and, later, the *Kingcaid Billionaires* where one or more ROGUES members makes the odd cameo.

But when I received so many emails and messages from readers begging for more from our six best friends, I sat down and thought about what a seventh book might look like. The issue I had was that I didn't want to just throw another book out there for the sake of it. I have too much respect for you, my readers, and for my own craft to do that. So I let the idea of book seven percolate for a long time while moving on to other things.

Then, one day out of the blue, while lying in bed unable to sleep, an idea began circling. And the more I thought about it, the more excited I became. I had a few other things in the pipeline, so *Engulfed* had to wait, but once they were done, I sat down to write this story. Oh my goodness, it came so easy. Being back with the ROGUES was such a pleasure.

Originally I started out thinking this would be a sweet Christmas story... but this is me! I mean, there's a tree or two, some Christmas lights, snow, an idyllic setting. It has all the hallmarks of a joyous occasion. Until I throw a spanner in the

works! To find out how big of a spanner, you'll need to read on.

I hope you enjoy being back with the ROGUES as much as I did. Do message me with your thoughts after you've finished reading, or join my Facebook reader group [Tracie's Racy Aces](#), and take part in the discussion over there.

In the meantime, turn the page and dive in to this final, *final* installment. The ROGUES are waiting for you.

Happy reading.

Love,

Tracie

RYKER

It didn't take a genius to figure out that my wife was pissed off with me. Her annoyance was right there in her furrowed brow, pursed lips, and the blotch of red on her neck. Not to mention the clenched hands, ready to take a swing at me the second she thought I wasn't paying attention, and the irritated way she checked her watch three times in quick succession, then huffed.

Loudly.

I suppressed a grin and made a face in the rearview mirror at Ethan, our two-year-old son. He giggled. His chubby cheeks and eyes the color of the richest amber tugged at my heartstrings. He looked so much like Athena, it hurt. Mia, our six-month-old daughter, on the other hand, had inherited my wide-set blue eyes and angular jaw. Poor baby. Although when she'd popped out, covered in Jell-O, and the nurse laid her on Athena's chest, my wife had looked up at me with adoration in her eyes and murmured, "A mini you. Just what I prayed for."

She's a little crazy, my wife. Crazy about me. Fortunate, really, considering I worship every single thing about her, every loving touch she grants me, and every breath that she pushes out through lips that have touched every inch of my body. Multiple times.

Right now, she might be a little pissed, but she loved me. Insanely. Just as I loved her.

“Chill, Thea. We have plenty of time.”

Another huff. Another sharp snap of her wrist as she checked her watch once more.

“The roads will only get busier the longer we leave it. Everyone is traveling somewhere for Christmas, and New York traffic sucks at the best of times. We have a one hundred fifty-mile journey ahead of us. With kids,” she added, as if I had somehow forgotten our precious cargo sitting in the back.

I reached over the center console of my sensible, family-sized Mercedes SUV—I’d reluctantly sold my beloved Aston Martin DBS when Ethan came along—and squeezed her hand. “Relax. It doesn’t matter what time we arrive.”

“It does to me. We’re supposed to be there to greet everyone.”

I shook my head. “Wrong. *Garen* is supposed to be there to greet everyone. The hotel business is his baby. I’m just there for the whiskey.” I slid my eyes to the right, a smile tugging at my lips. “And the holiday sex.”

“Ugh.” She huffed for the third time in as many minutes.

Clasping her wrist, I brought her fingers to my mouth. I sucked on one, taking it deep inside, my tongue wrapping around the pink-tipped nail. “Did you just say ‘ugh’ in relation to sex?”

She rolled her eyes in that special way she’d mastered. The one that made me so fucking hard my dick hurt.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“How did you mean it, beautiful?”

She checked over her shoulder at Ethan, who was engrossed in bashing two trucks together and making *vroom vroom* noises, then Mia, who was at the stage where she gurgled constantly as if trying to find words that wouldn’t come for a good few months yet. Once satisfied they weren’t

paying any attention to us, she turned her fiery gaze back on me.

“Being late makes me antsy. It’s Christmas, Ryker. You promised me you’d take a few days off work so we could enjoy a relaxing time with our friends and family without you dashing off every five minutes to fix another ROGUES catastrophe.”

“And I meant it. But this can’t wait until the New Year, Thea.” I hadn’t told her the reason for diverting to Brooklyn before we headed upstate. Unlike me, Thea was a softie. She’d waste pointless energy trying to talk me out of the decision I’d already made. “Don’t worry. I have just the thing to make you relax.”

“You’ll be lucky.” She pointed to the backseat of the car where our children were strapped into their car seats.

I grinned, tapping my temple. “You should know me by now, Thea. I’m... resourceful.”

Despite her annoyance at our unscheduled deviation, she couldn’t prevent the hint of a smile from curving her lips, nor stop the way she squirmed in her seat. Our mutually insatiable desire for one another was one of many reasons Thea and I were a perfect match. Having kids hadn’t changed that—not one bit. We just had to be a little more creative to carve out time for us as lovers rather than only as parents.

The roads were slushy, last night’s snowfall already destroyed by the incessant traffic that filled Manhattan’s streets twenty-four-seven. *New York, the city that never sleeps.*

I pointed the car toward the Brooklyn Bridge, leaving Manhattan behind. Ten minutes later, I stopped outside the Brooklyn branch of my erotic nightclub brand, *Poles Apart*. I had a soft spot for this particular club not only because it was the first one we had opened in a chain that now numbered sixty-nine branches—given my love of sex, I might never open another—but also for its location. The rooftop terrace offered a view of downtown Manhattan, Staten Island, and the Statue of Liberty, and as such, it was hugely popular with regulars and tourists alike.

“Wait here. I’ll be as quick as I can.” I unclipped my seatbelt and leaned over to kiss Athena. “If you get cold, fire up the engine.”

“If you’re in there long enough for us to get cold, I’m switching to the driver’s seat, pointing the car toward the freeway, and leaving you here.”

Grinning, I climbed out and closed the door behind me, striding over to the private entrance used by employees to access the club. I found Martin Atkins, the club’s manager—soon to be ex-manager—in his office. He rose to greet me, his welcoming smile a sign he hadn’t a fucking clue what was coming.

“Ryker. This is unexpected. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

He stuck out his hand. I thought about leaving it hanging there but shook it. “Martin.”

I indicated he should sit, although I remained standing. This wouldn’t take long, and Athena’s threat of leaving me here was still fresh in my mind. She meant it, too. My wife didn’t make threats she wasn’t prepared to carry out.

“Always working, huh, Ryker? Even on Christmas. Guess that’s why you’re the CEO.” Atkins laughed at his own joke. He was that kind of a dick. I might not like the guy, but he was a great manager. The club had grown by ten percent year on year since he took over three years ago. Unfortunately, he also took me for an idiot, fleecing me out of tens of thousands of dollars over the past several months. I wondered how long he thought he’d get away with it before I noticed. It already annoyed the shit out of me that it’d taken me this long, but my attention these past few months had been on my growing family and a large deal that had required my personal oversight. I’d left *Poles Apart* to run itself. My mistake—one I wouldn’t make again.

“Correct. I am the CEO, and as such, there isn’t much that gets past me.” I fastened the button on my jacket and fiddled with my left cufflink, then fixed him with a stare fiery enough to peel the skin off his face. “You’re fired.”

What point was there in drawing out the inevitable? My family was waiting in the car.

Atkins followed up his incredulous stare with a strangled chuckle. “You’re kidding, right?”

My gaze remained steady, cold, ruthless. “I never joke about my business.”

“But... but... why?”

“You’re stealing from me.”

He spluttered, leaping to his feet. “That’s not true. I wouldn’t—”

“Don’t insult my intelligence.” I held out my hand. “Keys.”

His thin face turned a rather unfortunate shade of purple. “Prove it.” He spat the words, spittle forming at the corners of his mouth. “I know my rights.”

I rolled my eyes, yawning. Not this bullshit. I’d kinda hoped he’d go quietly. “I can call the police if you’d rather plead your case to them.” I reached into my inside pocket and pulled out my phone. “According to my sister-in-law, who’s a lieutenant in the NYPD, fraud carries a one to five-year sentence, depending on the judge allocated to your case.” I smiled thinly. “Want to take a chance?” I’d made the decision not to call the police and file charges, but he didn’t know that. I’d rather not focus bad publicity toward ROGUES. I’d never bought in to the idea that all publicity was good publicity, and I was pissed off enough at myself that the processes we had in place hadn’t caught Atkins far sooner.

Atkins’ eyes flitted left to right, up and down, as if they’d worked their way loose from the veins and tendons holding them in place. He blustered, the words unintelligible.

I thrust my hand closer to his face. “Keys.”

Opening the drawer on the right-hand side of his desk, he pulled out a bunch of keys and tossed them as if he was pitching a ball. I caught them easily.

“Out.” I jerked my head toward the door.

He drew alongside me, then pivoted. Atkins was only a couple inches shorter than me, and the furious smolder in his eyes spoke of having murder on his mind. I wasn't remotely concerned. Men like Atkins were weak in mind and body.

"You'd better watch your back, Stone."

I laughed. "I'll bear that terrifying threat in mind."

"You think you're untouchable but you're not."

"I *think* I'm bored." I wrenched open the door. "Now get the fuck out while you still have working limbs."

I followed him through the club and into the parking lot via the employee entrance. He kicked a soda can against a wall, threw a killer glare over his shoulder, then launched himself into his car and floored the gas. The tires squealed, and billows of smoke rose into the air. He fishtailed onto the highway, braked hard at the corner, then disappeared around it.

Asshole.

I locked up the club and returned to my car. I already had a caretaker manager lined up to take over from tonight. After all, Christmas was a busy time for *Poles Apart*. It wouldn't do to lose valuable income at one of the most lucrative times of the year.

"What's going on?" Athena asked as I climbed in.

"Nothing for you to worry about." I tossed the set of keys into the glove box and squeezed her knee. "Now, what do you say we get on the road and begin our vacation?"

She narrowed her eyes, peering at me. She wanted to drill for answers, but she also wanted us to get going without further delay. The internal struggle amused me, and I smirked.

She sighed and shook her head. "Just drive."

I grinned, saluting her. "Yes, ma'am."

Another huff spilled out of her, a tell-tale muscle drumming in her cheek. "I hate how well you know me."

A grin etched across my face. "I love you, too, Thea."

ATHENA

Garen had outdone himself.

Not that I'd ever tell him such a thing from the get-go. The man already had an ego the size of a planet. He needed no further encouragement from me, or anyone else for that matter. Which was why, when Ryker whistled and breathed, "Wow," I gave him a swift dig in the ribs.

"Whatever you do, don't use that word in front of Garen until I've had the chance to bring him down a peg or two."

He chuckled. "I hear you loud and clear. But, good God, it's stunning."

He wasn't wrong. The first boutique hotel in the ROGUES portfolio was a triumph. The building was built on the fringes of a crystal-clear lake, with snow-capped mountains as the backdrop. It was only three stories tall, yet the architecture was, quite possibly, the most stunning I'd ever seen. Whomever Garen had employed to design it, hats off to them. And the location was perfect, too; a tranquil escape from the rigors of modern-day life, and exactly the branding he'd aimed for.

Reaching into my purse, I plucked out my phone and fired off several shots. ROGUES had their own vastly experienced marketing team, but I liked to support my husband and the company he ran with his five best friends as much as I could.

Over the last few months, I'd posted a ton of content detailing my excitement about our Christmas trip and teasing an exciting new venture for ROGUES.

I uploaded a photograph of the hotel with the mountains framing the shot and the lake in the foreground to Instagram. Using the hashtag *nofilterneeded*, I hit post. I sent it to my stories, too, and posted the same content on Facebook.

Unhappy we'd left him strapped into his car seat, Ethan chose to ruin the peace with an indignant cry of "Mommy!" Mia then chimed in with a wail of her own. I put my phone away and opened the car door.

"Shush." I pressed my finger to my lips. "You'll scare the rabbits and the deer."

"Wabbit," Ethan said with a beaming grin.

"Exactly."

I unfastened his belt and lifted him out. The second I put him on the ground, he set off running, flapping his arms, and crying, "Wabbit!" at the top of his voice. A flock of birds resting in a nearby tree took flight simultaneously, crowing in displeasure.

I caught Ryker's eye. "Maybe we should have left them at home with Mom and Dad, rather than inviting my parents to join us here for Christmas."

Ryker chuckled. "That'd win you the 'worst parent of the year' award on socials."

"I'd live with it," I muttered, trekking around the other side of the car to rescue Mia. At least I only had one with the ability to run away from me. I was toast as soon as Mia learned to walk. God only knew how people with three kids managed. They'd have to grow an extra arm, or hire a nanny... something Ryker brought up at least once a month. Each time he did, a discussion followed about the merits of a nanny when money wasn't an issue versus wanting to bring my kids up myself. He'd then mention Oliver, who'd met his wife Harlow when she got a job as nanny to his then nine-year-old daughter Annie. I'd hit back by reminding him that Oliver had been a

single dad back then. Ryker would then huff and park the conversation, only to revisit it a month later.

I could set my watch by it.

Ryker plucked Mia from my arms and swung her in the air, then peppered her face with kisses. Her eyes lit up, the way they only did for him. She was the spitting image of her father, not only in looks but in personality, too. I didn't get a look in when Ryker was around. She only had eyes for him.

"There you are." Garen strode down the steps of the hotel, with his wife Catriona a step behind. "We'd begun to think it was just us."

"Blame Ryker." I hugged Catriona, then grabbed Ethan as he raced by me. "He made an unscheduled detour."

"Which took all of five minutes." Ryker shook Garen's hand and kissed Catriona on the cheek. "It's been too long."

Garen and Catriona lived in Vancouver. We tried to get together more than once a year, but it wasn't easy. ROGUES had the right strategy to spread their board members in several locations, but it made it difficult to see one another in the flesh, and virtual just wasn't the same. At least we had the next five days to catch up on all we'd missed in each other's lives.

"So." Garen swept his hand in the direction of the hotel. "What do you think?"

I side-eyed Ryker, catching the faintest lift of his lips. I liked this plan. Hoisting a wriggling Ethan onto my hip, I wrinkled my nose. "Not what I expected."

Garen's supreme confidence slipped. He narrowed his eyes, switching his gaze from me to Ryker. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know." I pretended to give the hotel a thorough once over. "It's a bit... ugly."

Ryker masked a laugh by pretending to cough. Garen's jaw flexed, and he pressed his lips together. "Ugly?" He forced the word out through clenched teeth. "You think this... is ugly?"

“Yeah, I do. And the setting isn’t quite right, either. I’ve got a lot of damage control to do on social media. I’ve been playing up our trip out here for weeks, alerting everyone on my socials to book for the new year before it’s a sellout. And that’s on you. You’ve built this place up to be the bee’s knees for months, but it’s...” I gestured dismissively. “Like I said. Ugly.”

A vein popped in his forehead and, for the first time I could ever recall, he was lost for words. I traded a glance with Catriona. Yeah, my girl knew I was teasing. She turned away, her shoulders shaking.

“It’s not fucking ugly,” he spat. “It’s perfect. And who the fuck says bee’s knees?”

“Me. I do.” I held out for another few seconds while Garen floundered, muttering a string of curses under his breath. Then I burst out laughing. “Your face.” I almost split my sides. “God, I wish I’d recorded that. TikTok would explode.”

“You... you...”

“*Bitch* is the word I think you’re looking for.”

“He’d better fucking not be,” Ryker ground out, glaring at Garen as if he were an enemy rather than one of his best friends.

I almost swooned. *My hero.*

Garen jabbed a finger in my direction. “You’re lucky Ethan’s a shield, otherwise I’d throw you in the lake.” Barking a single note laugh, he added. “Good one.”

I grinned, but pulled Ethan closer, anyhow. Garen was unpredictable at the best of times. I wouldn’t put it past him to carry out his threat. “It was fun while it lasted. Seriously, it’s amazing, Garen. Beautiful.”

Color flooded back into his cheeks. Relief probably. “I’m surprised the architect didn’t bury me in the footings during the build. I was demanding to say the least. But just look at it.” He swept his arm in an arc. “A fucking masterpiece.”

“You always were the modest one out of the six of us.” Ryker bumped his shoulder. “Do we get a tour before the hoards arrive?”

“Since you’re twisting my arm.” He flashed a set of perfect white teeth and led us into the hotel.

If my jaw had dropped on the outside, it hit the floor when I got a look on the inside. ROGUES hotels were usually large; minimum five hundred rooms and upward. I remember Ryker coming home after Garen first pitched the idea of super-luxurious boutique hotels of somewhere between fifty and one hundred rooms set in beautiful locations around the world. He’d burst through the door of our penthouse, tugged off his tie, and announced that Garen had lost his mind. His assumption might still prove correct, but somehow I doubted it. If this was the blueprint for the ROGUES Boutique brand, Garen had a smash on his hands.

An enormous Christmas tree towered above us in the entranceway, beautifully decorated, smelling of pine and the outdoors. Garen gave us the grand tour, his chest puffed with pride as he pointed out the smallest of details only someone intimately involved with the design would notice. We finished up in the library. Another grand Christmas tree sat in the corner, its lights twinkling. A roaring fire burned in the grate, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves were crammed with the latest novels and the classics, and comfortable chairs and couches, perfect for curling up with a good book, were in plentiful supply.

“I think I’m moving in,” I announced. “That top floor suite overlooking the lake and the mountains at the back has my name written all over it.”

Garen slung an arm around Catriona’s shoulders. “Shame. We’ve already claimed it. If Ryker hadn’t taken that detour, you might’ve stood a chance.”

“It was five fucking minutes,” Ryker blurted. “Jesus Christ.”

I covered Ethan’s ears. “I’m amazed both my children didn’t shoot out of my vagina spluttering curses.”

“No point in covering his ears now, Thea.” Ryker kissed the top of my head. “The horse bolted some time ago.”

“Ugh.” I groaned. “I pity the future teachers of my offspring.”

Ryker handed Mia to me, and he and Garen went outside to bring in our suitcases from the car, as well as the pile of Christmas presents I’d spent an age wrapping last night. I gave Catriona the once over. She looked exhausted. No, more than that. She looked sad. Dark circles framed her normally vibrant green eyes, and her hair lacked that lustrous shine I’d always been jealous of. And if I wasn’t mistaken, she’d lost weight too.

I touched her arm. “Are you okay?”

She smiled, but it failed to reach her eyes. “Of course. Why do you ask?”

“You look... a little tired.” I thought that sounded better than sad.

“It’s been busy at the school. I’ve hardly had a minute to myself in weeks, and the second one is due to open soon. I have my hands full; that’s for sure.”

Catriona ran a ballet school for kids. Garen had forced her to sell the school her grandmother built from scratch so he could raze it to the ground and build a ROGUES hotel on the plot. After they’d gotten together, he’d surprised her by recreating the exact dance school on the first floor of the hotel. When I thought of that story, it astounded me how he ever managed to get her to go out with him, let alone move in and then marry him. I’d have used a nail gun on his balls if he’d forced me into selling something that meant a lot to my family, even if he had made up for it with a swoony romantic gesture. But their love for one another was indisputable. I guess someone had to love him.

“I can’t wait to return to work. Ryker keeps dangling the work carrot as a way to coerce me into hiring a nanny. He won’t get his way, but that doesn’t stop him trying. I didn’t have a nanny for Ethan, and I won’t have one for Mia, either. I

want my kids to come to me when they need a cuddle, not the hired help.”

She managed another half smile, her eyes flickering to Mia who'd fallen asleep in my arms.

“I don't blame you,” she said. “This is precious time you'll never get back.”

“Exactly. Please tell Ryker that.”

“Tell Ryker what?” He dropped our bags on the floor beside the winding staircase leading up to the second floor.

“That you're a jerk.”

“But I'm your jerk, baby.” He planted a hard kiss on my lips, then lifted Mia from my arms. She stirred but didn't awaken. “I'll take her and Ethan upstairs for a nap.”

“Wait.” I rifled through one of the cases until I found the baby monitors. I switched them both on, handing one to Ryker. “Ethan, go with Daddy.”

Ryker held out his hand, and Ethan slipped his inside. I tracked them all the way up the stairs, only tearing my eyes away when they disappeared from view. When I turned back to Catriona, I found her staring wistfully after them, too.

“Are you sure you're okay?”

This time, her smile almost dazzled me. “Yes, Mom.” She nudged me. “Come on. Let's go grab a drink while we wait for everyone else to arrive.”

Parking the conversation, I went with her, a seed of worry taking root in my gut. Something wasn't right, but if Catriona didn't want to talk about it, there wasn't a lot I could do to force her.

ATHENA

Sheer bedlam greeted me as I made my way down the winding staircase to the first floor after putting the kids down for the night. Upton and Belle had arrived while I'd been upstairs, and not only did they have their crazy dog Buddy with them, but another ball of fluff darted in and out of everyone's legs, its bushy tail wagging fast enough to fall off.

"You got another puppy!" I skipped down the last few stairs and scooped the gorgeous little thing into my arms. "Oh, he's adorable." I turned him over, checking out his doggy bits. "Yep, definitely a he."

Belle laughed. "We've called him Tyke, and honestly, it's the best name for him."

"Monster would have been a better name," Upton said, kissing me on the cheek. "Poor Buddy doesn't know what's hit him."

"He'll survive." I put Tyke down. He promptly cocked his leg and peed all over the floor. Garen looked as if he were about to have an embolism. Belle scolded the puppy, picked him up, and jerked her chin at Upton.

"You're on cleanup duty," she said, making her way to the door.

"When am I not," he grumbled.

“Kitchen’s that way,” Garen growled. “And the dog sleeps outside.”

Upton dropped to a crouch, rummaged through his bag, and pulled out a wad of paper towels. “I come prepared, and the dog is *not* sleeping outside. It’s a bit of dog piss. Don’t get your panties in a twist over it.”

I caught Ryker’s eye. We both grinned. I doubted Garen would make it through the weekend without suffering a minor stroke.

“Kids okay?” Ryker murmured, sliding his arm around my waist.

“Asleep before their heads hit the pillow. All the excitement, no doubt.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way.”

“Amen,” Oliver said. “Although Annie and Patsy were wide awake and gossiping when I went up to say goodnight.”

Harlow rubbed her swollen belly. In three months, they’d add a third kid into the mix. At least Annie and Patsy were old enough to help. “Did Oliver tell you I overheard them talking about boys the other day?” When I widened my eyes, she nodded. “Right? I’m not ready for this.”

“You’re not ready?” Oliver made a sound reminiscent of a growl. “I’ve been researching chastity belts and the legality of locking up children until they’re twenty-one.”

“I’m grateful we don’t have to think about that for a while.” I linked arms with Harlow and headed for the dining room.

Garen had suggested we look after ourselves rather than bring in outside caterers or have the hotel staff take care of us, and while I’d liked the idea, looking around at the pandemonium surrounding me, I began to have doubts. Fourteen adults including all the ROGUES board members and their partners, my parents, four kids—my two and Oliver and Harlow’s two—and now two excitable dogs added into the mix sounded like a recipe for disaster.

In the end, we all mucked in and managed to get food on the table before it went completely cold. As endless chatter swirled around me, happiness swelled within me. We'd planned this get together for so long, at times I'd thought it would never come. Every person in this room was family, whether by blood or not. A few of the parents and siblings were missing, but it'd been enough of a miracle to arrange for this many people to be here at once.

Something brushed my feet and then nibbled my toes. I looked underneath the table. "Tyke." I picked him up and held him in the air. He must have weighed little more than six pounds. "If you're hungry, we can get you food. My feet are not dinner."

"Oh, he loves to do that," Belle explained. "If the toes are out, Tyke'll find them."

Garen glowered. He'd taken an instant dislike to Tyke from the moment he peed on his "fucking expensive *and* imported oak floor". God help him if he and Catriona ever had kids. Puke was a hell of a lot harder to clean up than a smidge of puppy pee.

"He's just adorable. I'd love a dog, but what with living on the top floor of a high rise and two kids... I just don't see it working."

"Yeah, that's not ideal. More the high rise than the kids. I mean, imagine having to go up and down in the elevator fifteen times a day with a pup spraying pee everywhere." She laughed.

Garen's face twisted as if he'd sucked on a particularly sour piece of lemon.

"How's Zak and your mom?" I asked Belle as a group of us mucked in to clear away the dinner plates.

"They're great. Did I tell you that Mom is dating?"

"No, you didn't."

Belle grabbed a pile of dessert bowls from Upton before he dropped them. If I was a betting gal, I'd wager that men purposely made themselves a liability in the kitchen so that

women would take over and they could retire to the drawing room to smoke cigars and down expensive brandy. Most of them probably craved a return to the eighteen hundreds.

“Yeah, his name is Gordon, and he’s really nice. It’s good for her to have someone. Especially with me gone and Zak out of the house most of the time on his quest to date half of Los Angeles’ eligible bachelorettes.”

I chuckled. Belle’s brother Zak had been paralyzed in the same terrorist bomb that scarred Upton and killed his sister, yet Zak didn’t let the challenges of his disability stop him from living a full life. He ran ROGUES’ assistive technology division, and he’d made such an impact that other companies had approached him to consult for them.

Dessert consisted of fruit and cream, and Ryker opened a bottle of brandy and several more bottles of wine. As the alcohol flowed, the conversation grew even more raucous. Thank goodness the kids were on the top floor. I had the baby monitor on the table that would light up if either Ethan or Mia stirred.

“What do you say we all go skiing tomorrow?” Ryker proposed.

“Not for me.” Mom raised her hands in the air. “Spending Christmas with a broken leg does not sound like my idea of fun.”

“Nor me.” Dad nodded in agreement with Mom. “I’m happy to stay behind and watch the kids.”

“That’s settled, then. Just us twelve.”

“Um.” I tapped my finger against my lip. “You’re missing an important issue, my beloved.”

“What issue?” He frowned. “We’re all proficient skiers.”

A smirk pulled at my lips. “It’s a well-known fact that women are the smarter sex, and you’ve just proved it.”

Ryker snorted.

I arched a brow. “Don’t believe me? Case in point.” I got up and walked around the table, touching a few people on the

shoulder as I passed. All the women knew where I was going with this, but apart from Oliver, the rest of the guys were clueless. I stopped behind Harlow. “Would anyone like to guess at a slight problem with Ryker’s skiing suggestion?”

It took him less than a second to catch up with me. He closed his eyes and muttered, “Fuck,” under his breath.

Harlow glanced up at me, giggling. “That was fun. Although,” she rubbed her belly, “it sucks that I can’t go skiing.”

“I know.” I laughed. “Pregnancy is the worst.”

Catriona stumbled to her feet, knocking a glass of wine all over the table in her haste to stand. Murmuring apologies, she darted out of the room. I looked over at Ryker. He pulled in his lips and shrugged. By the time I’d shifted my gaze to Garen, he was already up and racing after Catriona.

My stomach dropped. It might be an overreach, but I didn’t think so, and if I was right, then I deserved a kick in the ass for being so goddamn insensitive. Without prying or making her feel uncomfortable, I had to find a way to let Catriona know I was here for her if she needed me, and make my apologies for sticking my foot right in it.

CATRIONA

What have you done, Catriona? Stupid, stupid, stupid.

My heart threatened to explode out of my chest as I raced up the stairs to the top floor and burst through the door of the suite Garen and I had commandeered when we'd arrived earlier today. I sat on the bed before my knees gave out and put my head in my hands.

I'd make a pact with myself that I would not allow my personal problems to ruin the holidays. Months had passed since we'd all gotten together like this, and the last thing anyone needed, including me, was for anyone to destroy this precious time together.

Seconds later, Garen dashed inside, kicking the door closed behind him. I should have known he'd follow me, but the fact that he had would only alert everyone that things weren't okay. I'd tried so hard to stay upbeat, but seeing Harlow, all plump and glowing, as well as Athena with her two gorgeous babies... well, the front I'd promised myself I'd maintain had collapsed like a stilt house built on shaky foundations.

"Baby." Garen knelt in front of me and picked up my hands. "It's okay."

My vision blurred, but I couldn't cry. Not now. I'd cried enough. Besides, what good would tears do? They wouldn't

magically fix me.

“I’m sorry.”

His eyebrows flew up his head, and his lips pinched together in disapproval as only Garen’s could. I’d watched him make grown men’s knees tremble with that look, but it didn’t work on me. It just made him look constipated which, in turn, usually made me laugh.

Not today.

“What the fuck are you sorry for?”

“I promised myself I’d forget about it until after Christmas and then we could decide what to do.”

He got up and sat beside me. The mattress dipped under his weight. Putting his arm around my shoulder, he tucked me into his side. It still surprised me how well we fit together. Him, all hard lines and taut muscle, and me, slightly softer, although still with a dancer’s lithe body.

“Since when did you develop superpowers?” he asked.

I pitched a glance up at him. “Huh?”

“I mean, if you’ve uncovered the secret that allows human beings to just forget stuff, especially important stuff, worrying stuff, well, I want to get a patent on that shit. Like now. You’re gonna make me rich.”

A chuckle worked its way up my throat. “You’re already rich.”

“Yeah,” he said softly, his eyes burning into mine. “In all the ways that matter.”

God, I loved him. It hurt how much I loved him. “I can’t forget how excited you were when we started trying to get pregnant. That wasn’t a front, Garen. You wanted it as much as I did.”

“Yeah, I know. But kids are not the beginning and end of everything, Catriona. If it doesn’t happen for us, I’ll still be the richest man alive.”

I closed my eyes, the tears I'd been determined not to allow to fall ignoring me. They spilled in rivers down my cheeks, dripping off my chin and landing on my jeans in big, wet splotches.

"Please don't cry." He turned me to face him, his big, callused hands cupping my cheeks. "We're going to work this out. I promise you."

"How? I've been through four rounds of IVF, Garen, and still no baby. And what about the twelve months before that where we were trying? I'm not sure I can do this anymore." I hitched a sob, then swallowed it. Dashing the backs of my hands across my cheeks, I gazed at my husband, reading nothing but adoration and love in his eyes.

"We can adopt. Oliver and Harlow did it."

"And now they're having their own baby." Another wave of grief accompanied by an ugly jealousy that shamed me rose up, crushing my chest. I didn't begrudge Harlow and Oliver their happiness, but was it so wrong to want a piece of it for myself? One baby. That was all I yearned for. But it seemed as if my stupid womb wasn't interested in playing host.

He kissed me then, lightly pressing his lips to mine, passing on his strength to me as he had done in spades these last two agonizing years where I'd sobbed every single month when the pregnancy stick showed negative. I sank into the kiss, laying back on the bed and pulling him down on top of me. We might not have a baby, but we still had a powerful connection that most couples would be jealous of.

"I love you." He kissed my eyelids, the tip of my nose, the arc of my cheek, the curve of my jaw. "All I need is you." He rose up on his forearms, his eyes digging into mine, searching for answers to a question he was afraid to ask. He didn't need to ask it, though. I already knew what he wanted to know. I was enough for him, but was he enough for me? Did our inability to have a child put our relationship at risk?

"And I only need you. A baby is the frosting on the cupcake." My voice cracked. It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth, either. If I never had a child of my own, I'd still

be ecstatically happy with Garen—he was my husband, my lover, my soul mate—but there would always be this hollowness I carried around with me. A missing piece that nothing quite filled.

“Do you want to try one last time?”

The thought of putting myself through IVF treatment for a fifth time exhausted me. The thought of what the fertility drugs did to me was bad enough: the headaches, the mood swings, the stabbing abdominal pains. I could just about deal with those. What killed me was the soaring hope as they implanted the fertilized embryos only to crash back down to earth and shatter when my period came. I wasn't sure I had the mental strength to go through that again.

“I'm not sure.” I bit my lip, squeezing my eyes closed. “I just don't know, Garen.”

His lips brushed mine again. “Whatever you decide, I'm right there with you every step of the way. All I care about is you.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and rose up a bit to kiss him properly. His erection dug into my thigh, and he broke away, groaning.

“Here I am, trying to be a supportive husband, and my dick is all ‘let's go, homie’.”

I giggled. “Did you, Garen ‘stick-up-my-ass’ Gauthier just say ‘homie’.”

He looked affronted at my teasing for all of half a second. Breaking out into a grin, he tickled me. I squealed and pushed him off me. The hormone drugs must've made me stronger than I thought, because the next thing I knew, Garen landed on the floor with a bump. I peered over the side of the bed, my cheeks aching from laughing so hard.

“You're in trouble, Mrs. Gauthier.” He flipped to his feet like Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon*, and launched. I rolled away but not fast enough. His thighs pinned my hips to the bed, and he captured both my wrists in one of his large hands, then tickled me unmercifully.

“Get off me!” I kicked out with my legs, laughter making its way up my chest.

“That’s not what you usually say when I pin you down.” He waggled his eyebrows and went for my waist again.

I jerked and cursed. “You’re a dead man,” I gasped.

“And you’re full of shit.” His eyes gleamed, and I knew why. He’d successfully distracted me from the crushing sadness of my ability to fall pregnant and made me laugh at the same time.

I stopped fighting him. “I love you.”

The look in his eyes shifted from teasing to reverence in the time it took me to blink. He brought my hands to his chest, placing them over his heart. “It kills me that I can’t give you what you want. All this money, and what’s the point, really?”

“Without money, we wouldn’t have been able to try IVF even once.”

He breathed in deeply. “Sometimes I think that would have been better.”

I’d thought that, too, although I hadn’t voiced it. “I guess we should go back downstairs.”

“Is that what you want to do?”

I twisted my lips to one side. “Gotta face them sometime.”

“Do we, though?” He smiled without teeth. “I mean, I could keep you captive here for the next five days. I’m sure we could think of a couple of fun activities to occupy ourselves.”

His lips took mine again in a kiss that made my toes curl and my heart weep from how much love I had for this man. Everything he did was with my happiness in mind. Every day, I thanked the higher power that insisted we were perfect for each other for not letting me quit and walk away. My life would have been so much bleaker without Garen.

I fixed my hair, smoothed my clothes, and, hand tucked safely inside his, we made our way downstairs. Voices drifted

from the living area as we reached the first floor. We followed the sounds and slipped inside.

Athena was the first person to notice we'd returned. She mouthed, "You okay?"

I smiled brightly, replied with a silent, "I'm fine", and took the spare seat on one of the squishy couches beside Harlow. Her eyes told me she knew why I'd dashed from the dining room, but she didn't say a word about it. She just squeezed my hand, motioned to Oliver to get me a drink, and then struck up a conversation about the latest blockbuster movie.

Garen took up a position beside the fire, swirling a brandy, deep in conversation with Ryker. ROGUES business undoubtedly. Out of all six guys, those two were the ones who couldn't let business take a backseat, sometimes to the detriment of everything else. Garen had put his heart and soul into this project, staying up long into the night for months on end as he pored over drawings, making miniscule tweaks that must have had the architect pulling his hair out. His ability to absorb himself to the exclusion of everything but me was one of the things I admired most about him. When Garen wanted something badly enough, he was all in. That personality trait of his was the reason he took my inability to fall pregnant so personally. The doctor had made it clear that the problem lay with me, not him, but Garen always approached it as an "us" problem, not a "me" problem.

I couldn't have loved him more.

On several occasions, he caught my eye. Each time, I dipped my chin, letting him know I was okay. He'd stare at me for a few seconds longer, decide I wasn't lying, and then return to his conversation.

When the clock struck midnight, most of us got to our feet and trudged upstairs to bed. Garen had refused to have an elevator put in the hotel, insisting it would ruin the ambiance he was aiming for. There were five suites on the first floor that were ADA compliant for guests with specific needs, and all the public areas were fully accessible.

The guys were planning to head to the slopes at first light, while us girls had a more leisurely start to the day. I had to admit that a few hours getting pampered at a nearby spa sounded a lot more appealing than frostbitten cheeks and chronic knee pain from schlepping down the slopes all day. Even if Harlow hadn't been pregnant, I'd have found a way to wriggle out of it. Garen loved to ski, and while I'd learned so I could support him, it wasn't my favorite activity.

Garen's arms came around me once I closed the door. He nuzzled my neck, peppering my skin with kisses.

"I'm proud of you."

I twisted around in his arms. "What for?"

"For being you. Amazing, beautiful, sassy, sexy you."

A smile tugged at my lips. "Are you drunk?"

He pinched his thumb and forefinger together, then parted them an inch. "Maybe this much."

I pulled his digits wider. "More like this much."

"You may have a point." Flopping backward on the bed, he kicked off his shoes. "Probably shouldn't have had that third brandy. I blame Ryker."

He gestured to me. I lay down beside him and slid my hand through a gap in his shirt. His heart beat steadily beneath my palm.

"Undress me." His throaty voice rang with need.

I stripped down to my underwear and got to work on his shirt buttons. He watched me with hooded eyes drowning in lust.

We might not have a baby, but we had this, an unbreakable bond. One that nothing, not even the absence of a longed-for child, could shatter.

GAREN

A thousand tiny hammers woke me the next morning, the little bastards doing their best to fracture my skull. Groaning, I rolled over and checked my phone. Seven-thirty. We were supposed to leave for the slopes at nine. God fucking damn that third brandy, especially coming on top of several glasses of wine with dinner.

You're not twenty anymore, dickhead.

Rubbing my eyes, I waited for my vision to clear. When it did, I drank in the sight of my beautiful wife, her dark hair splayed over the crisp white pillow, the sheet bunched low at the waist, and her perky rose-tipped breasts that begged for attention.

Attention that I didn't have fucking time to give, thanks to Ryker and his stupid "Let's go skiing" idea, which, viewed through a haze of alcohol, had sounded like a terrific idea. But in the faint morning light, and with Catriona's naked body half on show, might just be the worst idea in the history of mankind.

I picked up my phone and typed out a text. **Hungover. Catch you later.**

Ryker answered so fast, he must've been expecting me to bail.

Ryker: Get your ass downstairs in thirty or I'm sending Ethan in. And trust me when I say that toddlers and hangovers are a combination created by Lucifer himself.

Fucker.

Kicking at the covers tangled around my legs, I freed myself and trudged into the bathroom. I set the shower to cold and stepped under the spray, the needles of icy water breathing life back into my poor, battered body. Once fully awake, I turned the temperature dial to hot and stood with my face in the stream of water. I jumped when Catriona encircled my waist.

Turning, I gripped her hips. "You could give a man a heart attack, sneaking up on him like that."

"Especially one of such advanced years as you." Grinning, she gripped my cock. It hardened in her hand. "How's the hangover?" She ran her hand up and down my length.

I moaned. "Getting better by the second. Ryker's instructed me to be downstairs in thirty minutes, which is probably twenty-five now, or he's sending Ethan in."

There was no reaction from her, but I inwardly cursed, anyway. Every time I mentioned kids, I felt as if I were picking my way through a minefield of explosions, each one having a potentially catastrophic impact on the woman I loved.

"Ooh, a two-year-old and a wine and brandy induced hangover." She shook her head gravely. "Not a good match."

"Exactly." I hissed when she cupped my balls. "Which is why I can't be late. That bastard will carry out his threat, and you know it."

"Well, then." She ran her tongue over her lips. "I'd better hurry."

Sinking to her knees, she took me into her mouth. I braced both hands on opposite walls of the stall, my eyes on her. Watching Catriona suck me off was a sight I'd never tire of. Whether it was the emotional upheaval of the previous night, Ryker's threat of terrorism by toddler, or my wife's skill at

sucking dick, I came in thirty seconds. She licked her lips in a cat-that's-got-the-cream manner, stood up, and pushed my hand between her legs.

“My turn.”

Fuck yes. It was.



The glower on my face as I entered the communal living space would have scattered most people, or at least made them tread very carefully. Ryker, the bastard, just laughed. “I knew threats of Ethan would work. My own personal little terrorist.”

“Fuck off.”

He laughed harder. I flipped him off, spun on my heel, and went in search of coffee and enough Advil to sink a cruise liner. Oliver was in the kitchen looking just as enthusiastic about this skiing trip as I was. He grimaced, jerked his chin at the coffee pot, then hoisted himself up onto one of the vast counters. He kicked his legs, each one thudding against the heavy stainless steel. My glower deepened.

“Dent that and I’ll dent your head.”

“Jesus, and I thought I was in a crappy mood this morning.”

“What have you got to feel crappy about? And where the fuck is everyone else? Ryker made it sound as if I risked being the last one to arrive, and three of us aren’t even here yet.”

He sipped his coffee. “Which question do you want me to answer first?”

I considered throwing the coffee pot I held in my hand all over him, but considering he was my best friend in the whole fucking world, that wasn’t the finest idea I’d ever had.

“Any one will do.” I downed half a cup of java and pinched the bridge of my nose. “You don’t have any headache

pills on you by any chance? My head is splitting.”

“No. One of the girls might. Want me to ask Harlow?”

I shook my head. “Let her sleep. I wish I fucking was.”

“No one forced the alcohol down your throat.”

“Gee, thanks, buddy. You’re all fucking heart.”

“Someone’s crabby.” Sebastian sauntered into the kitchen looking far too bright and breezy for my mood. He helped himself to coffee, grabbing a second cup as Upton appeared, yawning loudly.

“Whose stupid idea was this?” he asked.

I gestured at him. “Thank you!”

“I mean, the slopes will still be there this afternoon, and I’d have a greater chance of not breaking my neck if I was properly awake.”

“You’re speaking my love language.” I grinned as he stuffed two fingers into his mouth and pretended to puke.

“Where’s Elliot?” Sebastian asked.

“He’s probably negotiated some kind of pass, or he’s found an escape pod.”

“Jesus, quit whining, you little bitch.”

I glared at Ryker. “No one wants to go.”

“I want to go,” Seb said.

“And me.” Elliot appeared out of nowhere, almost skipping to the coffee pot. “Haven’t been skiing in ages.”

Ryker lightly punched me on the arm. “If your hangover is that bad, then fresh air is exactly what you need. At your age, they can linger, and what with tomorrow being Christmas Eve and all...” He winked. “I’m sure you of all people wouldn’t want to spoil anyone’s Christmas.”

“I’m the same age as you, dickhead.”

“Exactly. Why do you think I only had one brandy?” He clattered around, setting several pans on the stove. “Okay,

which one of you ladies knows how to scramble eggs?”

I covered my face with my hands. This was going to be a long-assed day.

After we'd cobbled together burned eggs, charred toast, and downed several more cups of coffee, we piled into two cars and set off for the slopes. As we arrived at the resort, my headache had lessened to a dull ache, and a flicker of excitement had taken root in my stomach. It had been too long since the six of us were together without our arguably better halves. I tried to think back to how long ago that was, but I couldn't remember. More than a year. Probably closer to two.

Ryker had called ahead to rent the gear we'd need, and by the time we arrived at the rental lodge, it was laid out ready for us. We got changed, adjusted our skis, and made our way over to the lifts. I made sure to ride with Oliver rather than Ryker. The temptation to push him off the ski lift at the highest point possible was too risky.

Despite my marginally improved mood, I'd still rather have spent the morning in bed with my wife having her nurse me back to health with several rounds of sex and a head massage, and I blamed Ryker for dragging me out here. But by the time I'd completed two runs, I begrudgingly admitted—only to myself, not to him—that I was having a great time.

We stopped for lunch at around one, eating outside at an Italian restaurant at the foot of the slopes. The sun glinted off the brilliant white snow, and despite the chilly air, it warmed my face in this sheltered spot. I tilted my chin up, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. My mind drifted to Catriona. She was handling her inability to fall pregnant like a champ, but on the odd occasion she let her guard down like she had last night, the pain in my chest got so bad, I imagined that was what a heart attack felt like.

It wasn't a heart attack, though. It was the inability to fix something outside of my control for the person I loved most in the world. The powerlessness of it crushed me. My wife was good and kind and thoughtful about other people. She worked

with fucking kids, for Christ's sake. It was like some kind of sick joke without an antagonist I could slowly choke to death.

“You're unusually quiet. Still hungover?”

I focused my attention on Oliver. I told my best friend everything. Except this. If Harlow wasn't pregnant, I might have blurted my troubles to him. But she was, and to tell him Catriona and I were having problems about the very thing he and his wife had so effortlessly managed felt like a shitty thing to do. I refused to take away his joy by drawing attention to my misery.

“It's a bit better. Ryker must've been right about the fresh air.” I cast a glance to the side. Ryker was deep in conversation with Elliot so hadn't heard me. “Let's keep that to ourselves.”

Oliver smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. “If there was something wrong, you'd tell me, right?”

“Of course,” I lied. “I'm fine. Honestly. A bit stressed about the hotel and whether this bunch of yahoos will trash it and put back the opening date, but apart from that, it's all good.”

“I heard that,” Elliot said, grinning. “We're in our thirties now. Trashing of hotel rooms is in the dark and distant past. Besides, remember that my wife is a cop. Although...” He gave a little shudder. “I love it when she puts me in handcuffs.”

“For fuck's sake, Elliot.” Ryker clamped his hands over his ears. “Keep your sex life to yourself.”

“Oh, come on. Mr. Kink himself is bothered by the mention of handcuffs. Do me a favor.”

Upton chimed in with something, then Sebastian followed up, and before long, everyone bar me was talking over one another, throwing fake punches, and laughing hard and free as if they hadn't a care in the world, because they didn't. Not that I knew of, anyway. It was only me carrying a boulder too heavy for my shoulders.

I could cope with anything other than my wife's pain.

But if we didn't fall pregnant soon, I'd have to find a way to support her while hiding the fact that, inside, I was falling apart, too.

ATHENA

The spa I'd booked was a thirty-five-minute drive from the hotel. Ryker had taken our car, and it looked as if Oliver had taken his, so we all clambered into Catriona and Garen's enormous four-wheeled drive rental, complete with snow chains and enough space inside to seat eight.

"Is the size of Garen's choice of car in direct contradiction to the size of his penis?" I mused.

Catriona burst out laughing. My insides warmed at her shimmering green eyes and wide grin. She wasn't right, but God bless her, she was putting on a terrific show.

"I assure you that nothing could be further from the truth." She fired up the engine and threw the stick into reverse.

"Well, if the size of his penis is in direct relation to the size of his ego, I'm amazed you can walk straight," Sage said, firing a wink in my direction.

"Just so I can prepare, are we going to talk about the size of my husband's dick all day?"

"No." Sage wagged her eyebrows. "We're going to talk about the size of all of them." She dissolved into fits of giggles. "It's in the rules."

"What rules?"

“The ones I created especially for this weekend.” Her grin ate up most of her face. “I’ve been looking forward to this for ages. Remember, I work all day with macho men. I need some girl time.”

“Where men’s appendages are the subject?” Trinity asked.

I threw out a laugh. “Appendages? God, Trin, I do love you.” Trinity was our English rose, and she had that crushing British sense of embarrassment when it came to discussing sexual matters. The blush on her right then could heat a whole house for the entire winter.

“You know what I mean.” She ducked her head. “I hate you all.”

“You love us.” Belle threw her arms around Trinity and gave her a big hug. “Honestly, apart from meeting the love of my life, one of the greatest things about being with Upton is I get to spend time with all of you, too. I always wanted a sister, and now I have five of them.”

“Oh, God,” Harlow said, shaking her head. “Don’t do that to me. I’m already teetering on the brink of tears every minute of the live long day. The last thing I need is a great big shove over the edge.”

“Pregnancy hormones.” I nodded sagely. “I remember them well. They disappear after the baby comes.”

“I hope so. I’ve never been the teary sort, but honestly, I can cry on command right now.”

The chatter continued, but I noticed that Catriona had fallen silent. She seemed lost in her thoughts, a million miles away from us and where we were headed. So much so that I had to nudge her as a reminder we had a turn coming up. She flashed me an apologetic half smile, turned left, then immediately disappeared into her private thoughts once more.

If I got a chance today, I’d ask her straight up if she was okay. I didn’t want to pry, but like Belle had said, these women were my sisters. We’d all come from different backgrounds, brought together by our love for men who happened to be best friends and start up a company together

right out of college. If she couldn't talk to one of us about what was bothering her, who could she talk to? I'd put the offer on the table, and if she declined, I wouldn't push. At least then she'd know I was there for her if she needed me.

Although, if my instincts were correct about what was wrong, Harlow and I might be the last people she wanted to talk to. Maybe Belle would be a better choice. Or Trinity. Definitely not Sage. For the foreseeable future, my sister-in-law was married to her career. Elliot didn't seem to mind, as far as I could tell. Besides, there was plenty of time for kids if that was what they wanted. Plenty of couples chose not to have kids, and during the times when Ethan was throwing a toddler tantrum or Mia was screaming the house down, I envied those couples. Not that I'd change my decisions. I loved being a mom, even if it was the toughest job in the world.

We pulled up at the spa, and all six of us exited the car, jabbering excitedly about mani-pedis and deep tissue massages. Carrying a baby around on my hip all day was murdering my back. I'd have to check if they did sports massage here—something that would dig right into the muscles and loosen me up a bit.

I fired off a quick message to Mom to check everything was okay with the kids. Silly, really. Mom had raised two children singlehandedly until my stepdad Karl came along after she kicked my birth father to the curb. Prickles raced down my arms. I rarely thought about *him* these days, but when I did, nausea would wash over me. It still made me physically sick to think that the man who helped create me had kidnapped me and kept me in the filthiest conditions for more than twenty-four hours, leaving me in fear for my life. All so he could blackmail my brother into giving him fifty million dollars. And then, when Elliot had discovered it was him and confronted him, he'd shot my brother at point-blank range. If Sage hadn't arrived on the scene shortly afterward, Elliot might not even be here anymore.

The ding from Mom's reply pushed thoughts of that bastard to the back of my mind. He was rotting in prison,

exactly where he deserved to be, and I was out here in the beautiful countryside with the love of my life, my two beautiful kids, and surrounded by family, both blood and found.

Mom: All good here. Patsy and Annie are helping me bake cookies. Ethan's gone exploring the woods with Karl, and Mia is sleeping like the angel she is xxx

I smiled, shooting off a thank you before putting my phone away. The receptionist checked us in, gave us robes and slippers, and directed us to the changing rooms. Once we'd changed, we headed for the relaxation room. The lighting was muted, and soft music played through hidden speakers. A plate of chocolate-covered strawberries and a tray of mimosas awaited us, one marked non-alcoholic. I handed that one to Harlow, and the rest of us helped ourselves to the others.

I raised my glass in the air. "To the best Christmas ever."

"With the best friends ever," Belle said.

"In the best place ever," Trinity added.

"And the dirtiest talk ever." Sage grinned. "What? Would you have expected anything else from an NYPD cop?"

Trinity reached for a chocolate strawberry. "I've always wondered why you didn't give up work after you married Elliot?"

"Oh, believe me, he wanted me to, but I love my job. I'm doing something important. Not that what Elliot and the rest of the guys do isn't important, but being a cop isn't just a job to me. It's who I am. Without it, I wouldn't be me."

"I can't wait to get back to work," I said. "Once Mia is old enough to go to nursery, I'm going back at least part time."

"Do you think you'll have any more kids?" Trinity asked.

A short laugh made its way up my throat. "Good God, no. Two is more than enough."

"Sebastian and I have talked about it, but we're not in any rush. If it happens, it happens."

Belle dunked a strawberry in her mimosa. “Same here. Two dogs is enough for me right now.”

“Elliot’s enough for me until I’m at least thirty-five.” Sage gave a low laugh. “I mean, the man is basically a child anyway.”

That answered my earlier musings about her position on having kids. I raised my hand. “I fully support this analysis of my brother.”

Several of us laughed, but I couldn’t help noticing that Catriona hadn’t said a word. My certainty about what was wrong with her grew. Before anyone asked her when she and Garen were thinking of having kids, I downed my mimosa in one and got to my feet. “Who wants more drinks?”

Sage finished hers. “Me. A girl can’t ever have too many mimosas. Plus, it is Christmas after all.”

“Catriona, why don’t you come with me?”

She looked slightly bemused but got to her feet anyway. “Sure.” I noticed she hadn’t touched her drink. Fortunately, none of the others had. They were too busy ribbing each other.

I led her out into the hallway, but instead of making a beeline for the reception area, I veered off to the right. I’d spotted a cozy lounge area earlier, and I took her there now. She gave me a strange look when I gestured to a chair, taking the one opposite.

“Thought we were getting more drinks,” she said.

“We are. In a sec.” I reached across the space between us and held her hands. “Talk to me. You’re not right, and I’m worried about you.”

Her hands stiffened beneath mine, but she didn’t pull away. Hiding her eyes from me, she shook her head.

“What makes you think I’m not okay?”

“Catriona.” I kept my voice soft, hoping my love for her came through in the tone. “It’s me.”

When she raised her head, tears swam in her eyes. She blinked them away, then more came. In the end, she couldn't stop them falling. They plopped onto her robe, immediately absorbed by the thick terry cloth.

“Oh, honey.” I got to my feet and perched on the arm of her chair, pulling her into my embrace. I stroked her hair, rubbed her back, and let her cry. A member of staff passed by, hovered, only moving along when I gave a curt nod to indicate we were fine.

Wiping her nose on the sleeve of her robe, Catriona said, “We should get back.”

“There's no rush. We can stay here as long as you need.”

“The others will wonder where we are.”

“Don't worry about them.” I canted my head. “Look, you can tell me to mind my own business, and I will, but if you want to talk, I'm happy to lend an ear.”

She sniffed and wiped her nose again. “Do you think they charge extra to wash dried snot out of these robes?”

“Considering their astronomical prices, they'd better not.”

She managed a brief smile before it slipped off her face. “I don't want any of the others to know. I refuse to make this vacation about me and my problems.”

“Whatever the problem is, if you trust me enough to share, I won't tell a soul. Not even Ryker.”

She pressed her fingertips to her eyelids and blew out a slow breath through pursed lips. “Garen and I started trying for a baby two years ago. When almost a year passed and I still wasn't pregnant, we visited a doctor. At first, he was dismissive, saying that a few months wasn't very long at all, and that we should keep trying. Garen told him that we'd tried several times a day for months, and if that amount of sperm wasn't enough to fertilize a fucking egg then he'd like to know what was.” She huffed a laugh. “Typical Garen.”

“Serves the doctor right for being an asshole. No one knows a woman's body better than herself. I hate it when

medics act all condescending with their metaphorical head pats and their ‘just try a bit harder, dear’. Ugh.”

“Right? Anyway, Garen said that if he wouldn’t arrange the tests, we’d find someone who took our issue seriously. The doctor scrambled after that. Probably saw a big fat check disappearing out the door and backpedaled. He sent us for a barrage of tests, but they didn’t find anything that conclusively explained our inability to conceive, although there wasn’t any problem with Garen’s fertility, so they put the issue down to something not right with me. In the end, we opted for IVF.” She forced a smile. “That’s a barrel of laughs, I can tell you. They make it sound so easy but it’s not. Anyway, we’ve had four attempts. All unsuccessful, obviously.”

“Oh, Catriona. I’m so sorry.” I’d guessed correctly that she was having problems conceiving, but that didn’t stop how badly I felt for her. For them both. I’d fallen so easily with both my pregnancies. No matter how hard I tried to empathize, I couldn’t begin to comprehend what it was like for Catriona. But I could support her. I held her that bit tighter, and she curled into me.

“Will you try IVF again?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I’m not sure I can put myself through all that for a fifth time. It’s so awful, Athena. Not just the drugs they make you take beforehand, or what those drugs do to your body, but more the total sense of despair when it fails to work. I just don’t think I’m strong enough to do it again.”

“What about adoption?” I asked softly.

“Maybe.” She pulled away, and she looked so distraught that my heart broke in two. “Say something funny. I’m fed up with feeling maudlin.”

I tapped my finger against my bottom lip and gave her request some serious thought. “At least you get to practice on Garen’s monster dick.”

She snorted through a bout of laughter. “I love you.”

“Love you, too.” I kissed the top of her head. “And I’m here for you. Tell me what you need, and I’ll do everything in my power to make it happen.”

“I need a drink.”

I stood and held out my hand to her. “Now, *that* I can arrange.”

RYKER

Lingering in the doorway of the bedroom to our suite, I drank in the sight of my wife sitting at the dressing table, carefully applying a light covering of makeup. AirPods hung from her ears, and her body swayed in time to whatever music she was listening to. I'd already checked on the kids, fast asleep in an adjoining room. I wasn't surprised by how tired they were. All this clean mountain air, the excitement of spending time with their grandparents and all these new people that Mia, especially, hadn't met, and Ethan probably didn't remember. It was little wonder they'd crashed as soon as Judy, Thea's mom, put them down for a nap. An hour ago, she told me when I arrived back from skiing. Heads touched the pillows and that was it. Lights out.

The ever-present baby monitor sat on the table beside Athena. It would light up if either of the kids murmured, and knowing my wife, those earbuds would be cast aside mid-dash in her rush to check on her babies.

Something shifted in my chest, a familiar lightness accompanied by the overwhelming emotion that crashed into me whenever I witnessed her in the role she was born to do. Athena was the most incredible mother. She always got the balance just right between discipline and understanding, and as our kids grew, they'd cherish her all the more for it. She'd be the kind of mother they'd turn to, the kind they could share

anything with knowing she'd listen, and whatever advice she imparted would be given with love at its heart.

Fuck, I was a lucky bastard.

I sauntered over, our eyes meeting in the mirror as soon as I came into view. She gave this coy little smile, her gaze dropping to my mouth, her fingers removing the earbuds and setting them on the dressing table. I placed my hands on her shoulders and dug my thumbs into the nape of her neck. She let out this soft, satisfied groan that my dick paid attention to.

“You're better than the masseuse I had today.”

I increased the pressure, kissing the top of her head. “I'm a lot more expensive, though. And I bring added benefits that I hope the masseuse didn't offer.”

She giggled. “You'll never know.”

Sliding my fingertip under the strap of her bra, I eased it down her arm. “You had a good time, though?”

Her eyes shuttered, only for a moment, then she hit me with a dazzling smile. “The best. Don't think badly of me, but it felt amazing to just be with the girls as me rather than Mom.”

I wasn't sure Athena could do anything that would make me think badly of her, and taking much needed time out for herself didn't even make the list, no matter how long it was.

“Catriona okay?” I eased down the other strap, and her breasts spilled out. She flashed me a surprised look in the mirror, and not one related to me getting her naked.

“Of course. Why do you ask?”

Reaching down to cup her breasts, I shrugged. “Call it intuition. And her running out of the dining room last night. Plus, Garen isn't right, either. He was even more bad-tempered and brooding today than usual. You don't think they're having marital problems, do you?”

She stood up and laced her arms around my neck. “No, I don't.”

“But you know something.”

A sigh spilled out of her, and she avoided my eyes. “Don’t ask me to break a confidence.”

So there was something. I’d felt pretty certain there had to be. Garen had always had a dark side to him, his sour mood always bubbling just beneath the surface, but today was different. “I’d never do that.”

“I know. Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“He’s one of my best friends. I’m worried, that’s all.”

“If I tell you that he and Catriona are more solid than ever, will you worry a little less?”

“Yeah.”

She entwined her fingers in my hair. “Then, that’s what I’m telling you.”

Leaning down, I brushed my lips over hers. “Kids are asleep.”

“Yes, I know.”

“We’re not meeting everyone for dinner for forty-five minutes.”

“I know this, too.”

“And you can re-do your hair and fix your makeup in no time, right?”

A twinkle in her eye told me she knew exactly where I was headed. “Five minutes, tops.”

“Good.” I scooped her into my arms, marched over to the bed, and tossed her on top of it. She bounced, her laughter sprinkling the air. I prowled after her, caging her beneath me. Rosy, erect nipples tempted me. I pushed her breasts together and gave both nipples equal attention. Her groan was loud enough to wake the kids and alert anyone nearby to what was going on behind the door. I gave zero shits about the latter, but the former could scupper my plans before I’d undone my fly. I clamped a hand over her mouth. She licked my palm, her laughter muffled.

“You’ll pay for that.”

Gripping my wrist, she pulled my hand away from her mouth. “Oh, yeah. What you gonna do, big boy?” Fluttering her lashes like a fifties movie star, she pushed her boobs in my face.

“I can fashion a gag out of a tie easily enough.”

“Ooh, promises, promises.”

I climbed off the bed and strode to the closet, returning with three ties. When I’d packed them, I hadn’t had this particular purpose in mind. Maybe bringing them along was some sort of foresight, that maybe a part of me had known we’d get kinky at some point during the five days away.

Splayed there with her bare tits, her bra half-off, her rounded stomach and stretch marks from carrying two babies, she’d never looked more beautiful. Before Athena fell pregnant with Ethan, I hadn’t really thought about the miracle of a woman’s body, but having been by her side through it twice now, the wonder of it never ceased to amaze me.

“What’s that look for?” Her soft voice drifted over my skin like expensive silk.

“Have I told you today how much I love you?”

Her eyes misted over, and she grazed her top teeth over her bottom lip, appraising me. “You have. Twice before you left for skiing.”

“Only twice? I’m slacking.” I straddled her hips, kissed her hard once, then gripped her left arm. I got as far as tying it to the headboard when a loud wail interrupted me. Mia. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Being a father was a blessing ninety percent of the time, but that ten percent...

“I’ll go.” I climbed off the bed and saw to Mia. A cuddle, an abundance of kisses on her sweet face, and a quick check that she was dry, and I put her back down, making sure her favorite teddy bear was close by. I checked on Ethan, too. He was fast asleep, his feet entangled in the covers. I fixed them, kissed his forehead, and returned to our bedroom. Athena was in exactly the same place as I left her.

“We don’t have long.” She blinked up at me. “Or we could just be late.” One corner of her mouth inched up.

I grabbed the two ties I’d tossed to one side before I went into the kids’ room. “Punctuality is overrated.”



The fact that Elliot, Upton, and Sage were in charge of dinner should have acted as a warning sign that disaster was on the horizon based on the fact that none of them could cook, and all of them were far too easily distracted. When they presented us with charred *something* and limp vegetables, with their only suggestion to make it edible along the lines of getting absolutely smashed, I called the pizzeria in town. They delivered in forty-five minutes, and we all fell on the pies as if we hadn’t eaten in a week. Skiing always gave me a raging appetite, and devouring Athena on my return had only added to my hunger.

One benefit of takeout was the fast cleanup. I returned from dumping the boxes in the trash bins already in place for when the hotel opened in a week’s time to find Athena talking to her mom. Before I reached them, she came over to me, knitted our fingers together and, standing on tiptoes whispered in my ear, “Come with me.”

As she tugged me through the hotel lobby, she thrust a thick jacket at me and put on her own. Grabbing a hikers-sized backpack that had miraculously appeared beside the main entrance, she shoved that at me, too. I gave her a quizzical look but put on the coat and slipped my arms through the straps of the backpack before following her outside. Fresh snow had fallen in the time since I’d returned with the guys, our tire tracks already covered over, but right this second, it had stopped. The air was crisp and clear, the sky above us cloudless.

“Where are we going?”

“To see the Milky Way.”

I frowned. “Isn’t that a candy bar?”

Her elbow caught me square in the ribs. “You know what I mean. I want to see the stars, and it’s impossible in New York, what with all the light bleed and everything.”

“Athena, it’s freezing out here. And what about the kids?”

“Mom’s going to watch them. We won’t be far away, just enough that the hotel lights don’t spoil the view.”

I gave her the once over. “View’s looking mighty fine to me right here.”

“I brought a sleeping bag, and a thermos of hot chocolate. We can snuggle and think about how small we are compared to the universe.”

“If I’m butted up against you in a tiny sleeping bag, there won’t be anything small about me.”

“That’s what I’m banking on.” She strode ahead, her dark hair swaying with every step. I caught up to her, sliding my arm around her waist, which wasn’t easy considering the bulk of her quilted coat.

“I prefer you with less clothes.”

“We’ll have to see what we can do about that.”

We must have walked for ten or fifteen minutes, the torch on my phone the only light guiding our way. We didn’t even have a full moon to rely on, only a sliver of it visible in the sky. Living in the city could fool you into thinking you knew what dark was, but out here, nighttime took on a whole new meaning. It also occurred to me how easy it would be to get lost, especially if a fresh dumping of snow fell. Although, given how clear it was, I doubted that would happen. And if it did start to snow, I’d insist we headed straight back.

Athena chose a spot not too far from the lake shore and where we were shielded by a row of pine trees. I shrugged off the backpack, and she dove inside, producing a blanket that she shook out to lay on the ground, and the promised sleeping bag, as well as the thermos.

“Hmm.” She tapped her lower lip. “We won’t fit in there with our coats on.”

I removed mine, folding it in a ball to make a pillow. “Good. I can’t get to your boobs through all those layers, anyway.”

“We’re supposed to be looking at the stars.”

I opened the sleeping bag and climbed inside, palming my dick through my jeans. “How about fireworks instead?”

Laughing, she took off her coat, copied my pillow idea, and climbed in beside me. I zipped us up and pulled her close to me. She rested her head on my chest, her ear right over my heart, and we both took in the night sky. Even I was astounded by the sight.

“Who would have thought there were that many stars?”

“And that’s just our little part of the galaxy,” she said. “I told you we were small.”

I placed her hand on my crotch. “I beg to differ.”

“Ryker Stone, you’re a *father*.”

“Don’t play coy with me, Athena Stone. We both know you’re the filthiest one of us.”

“You corrupted me when I was an innocent little virgin.”

“Virgin, I accept. Innocent, I most certainly do not. You crawled into my bed, remember. Took advantage of me while I slept.”

She snorted. “Took advantage, my ass. You were horrible to me the next morning. You’re lucky I forgave you.”

I chuckled, though the tightness in my chest that followed had nothing to do with the iciness in the air. Thea and I had talked about how shitty I was to her the morning after I took her virginity many times. Seven years I’d spent running from her before I discovered that outrunning your soulmate was futile. These days we chose to treat it as a funny anecdote, although there was always a tiny piece of me that would change how I’d behaved if I could. All I needed was for some clever scientist to develop time travel and I’d go back and worship at her feet instead of breaking her heart.

I tried to shift my position, but it was impossible inside what amounted to cling wrap for humans. I made a frustrated noise, then unzipped it, pulling her on top of me to keep her warm. Cupping her cheeks, I eased up and kissed her.

“I can’t see the stars from here,” she whispered.

“Is this view so bad?”

“No. It’s better.”

This time, she kissed me. I burrowed underneath her sweater and—

“Fuck.” I sat bolt upright.

Athena tipped off to the side, landing with a bump in the snow. “What’s the matter?”

“Something licked my face.” I launched to my feet and grabbed my jacket, wiping my face with it. Athena madly tried to stifle her laughter. I glared at her.

“Licked your face?”

“Yes. I swear. I don’t think this outdoor life is for me.”

“We’ve only been here a half hour.”

“Which is precisely twenty-nine minutes too long if you ask me.”

“Be honest. Your real problem is that you can’t fuck me like you want to. The sleeping bag is too restrictive.”

“That’s not it.” That was part of it, but the face licking by an unknown critter was the final straw. “I think we should pack up. You’ve seen the stars. It’s not like they’re going to put on a show.”

“They might. I haven’t seen a shooting star yet.”

“And how likely is that to happen?”

“Very likely. I saw once on the Discovery channel that over a million shooting stars happen every day around the world.” She patted the space beside her. “Come on. Ten more minutes. Fifteen, tops.”

I never could say no to Athena. She could ask me to hack off a finger and I would. Huffing, I lay on the ground and zipped us up. Sex would have to wait until we were back at the hotel. Far comfier in a bed with one thousand thread Egyptian cotton sheets, anyway.

We fell into silence, and although it pained me, I had to admit this was pretty nice. How often did we get to truly unplug from life and tune into nature? Apart from the odd rustle in the undergrowth and an occasional hoot from an owl, it was dead silent. Gorgeous. Almost as gorgeous as the woman curled up in my arms.

“Oh, look,” she suddenly exclaimed as a white light streaked across the sky. “Wow. Did you see that? How incredible.”

My eyes were drawn away from the natural phenomenon to my wife. Her eyes sparkled with excitement, and wonder shaped her mouth into a perfect ‘O’.

“You’re incredible.” I kissed her then, sliding my tongue over her lower lip before gently slipping it inside. She made this noise in her chest, and I hardened again. Pulling away, I groaned.

“Can we please go back to the hotel? I’m in fear for my health if I don’t do something about this hard on soon.”

She laughed, the sound squeezing my heart the way it always did. “You are such an over-exaggerator. Men’s penises get hard and go soft about seventeen thousand times a day. I’m sure you’ll live.”

“Look who’s exaggerating now. Seventeen thousand is impossible. And how would you know what a man’s penis does all day?”

She pecked my lips. “Because, my gorgeous husband, you delight in telling me.”

I grinned. She had a point. “Oh, yeah.” Unzipping us, I helped her to her feet. We put everything away in the backpack, and I hoisted it onto my shoulders.

“What if we can’t find our way back?” I caught the tinge of worry to her tone as she cast a glance at our surroundings.

“You’re raising this *now*?” I hugged her to my side. “I guess they’ll find our bodies in the morning, frozen with our lips locked and my dick buried inside you.”

“I guess there are worse ways to go, although I hope someone other than Mom finds us.”

“Think your mom knows we have sex, Thea.”

“Knowing and seeing are two entirely different things.”

The lack of fresh snowfall made our journey back pretty straightforward, but as we approached the final slope before the hotel came into view, I stopped. Sniffing the air, I turned to Athena.

“Can you smell that?”

She did the same as me, nodding. “It smells like smoke. Do you think they’re toasting smores?”

“Maybe.” Knots formed in my stomach, and not the good kind. “Come on.” I took Athena’s hand and powered up the slope. As we crested the hill, it took me a split second to figure out what I was seeing.

My stomach dropped to the ground.

Oh, God.

ATHENA

Smoke billowed out of two windows on the top floor, and a foul burning smell filled my nostrils. I opened my mouth to scream. A loud crack blasted through the air followed by a massive explosion. A ball of fire shot out of one window, and in seconds, the entire roof was engulfed in flames.

“Oh my God!” My heart leapt into my throat. I took off running. “My babies! My babies!”

Ryker powered past me, shaking off the backpack to give himself an extra spurt of speed. I attempted to follow him, but he was far too fast for me to keep up. He shouted something, but the breeze picked up whatever he was trying to tell me and swallowed it whole. My toe hit an object hidden underneath the snow and I went sprawling. I barely even touched the ground before I bounded to my feet.

If my kids die, I'll die.

Fear punched a hole in my chest, the adrenaline spike fueling the panic roiling through my veins. The hotel was on fire. *The hotel was on fire!* My babies were on the top floor, the farthest away from safety. My breaths came in shallow gasps, my lungs burning, begging for more than I could give them.

Garen staggered out of the front entrance holding Catriona in his arms. They were both coughing violently. Streaky black

soot dappled their faces. Garen collapsed to his knees and laid Catriona on the snow-covered ground. Ryker reached them before I could.

“I’ve called the fire department,” he yelled as I finally caught up with him. “How bad is it?”

Garen shook his head. Desperate, broken. “Bad,” he croaked. “It’s spreading. Fast.”

“Stay here,” Ryker ordered me. “Look after Catriona.”

I fought a rising panic, my fear for him, for my children, spiking. “No!”

He gripped my arms, shaking me hard. “Stay. I’ll get them. I promise you on my life, I’ll get them. I can’t worry about you, too.”

He ran inside. Garen followed. Catriona made a grab for him, but he’d gone. In less than a second, the black smoke swallowed them whole. Tears stung my eyes, blind terror devouring me.

“Are you okay?” I dropped to a crouch beside Catriona. She nodded but couldn’t seem to stop coughing long enough to speak. A nasty gash on her forehead oozed blood. I packed some snow in my hand and put it against her head. “Hold this. Stay here.” I’d taken one step when she wrapped both arms around my thigh.

“No,” she croaked, her voice barely audible. “Bad.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.” I shook off her feeble attempts to stop me. Every maternal instinct screamed at me to do something. Take action. Save my babies. That Ryker was stronger and faster and more capable than me didn’t matter. I could not wait here, in safety, while my babies suffered. “Pack that cut with snow. It’ll stop the bleeding.” I didn’t know whether or not that was true, but it was all I could think of.

I sprinted to where Ryker had dropped the backpack, yanked out the blanket, and threw it over my head. It would provide some protection from the searing heat.

Taking a final breath of clean air, I covered my head with the blanket and ran into the burning building.

CATRIONA

My lungs were on fire, and the ends of my hair that the flames had caught smelled bad. The scent of smoke was in my nose, on my clothes, everywhere. I couldn't get rid of it. My throat was like razor wire, and every time I took a breath, I coughed.

Garen. God, he went back inside. And Athena. I should have stopped her. Should have thrown myself at her. Anything. Now she was inside, too. Would I be the only one who made it out? No. God, please, no. Not that. I'd rather die in the flames with Garen beside me than live without him. What point was there in carrying on if I lost my husband and almost every single person I cared about other than Grams and Aiden in a single night?

I staggered to my feet, dizzy and disoriented. I craned my ears. Was that the faint sound of sirens in the distance? Maybe. Oh, wait. I couldn't hear them anymore. Was it in my head? Was I hallucinating? Maybe this was all a dream and I'd wake up warm and cozy, snuggled next to Garen, feeling his solidity, and his comforting, warm skin pressed against me.

Two shadows appeared in the doorway, stumbling, before they staggered down the steps of the hotel. Athena's parents. Thank God. I lumbered over to them and pulled them farther away from the hotel. Fear of the building exploding twisted my gut. If that happened, everyone inside would die.

“Athena?” Judy rasped. “Elliot? The children?”

I shook my head, unable to bring myself to tell her that Athena had been here, safe, and I’d let her run into a burning building.

“Maybe she’s still out with Ryker,” Karl, her dad said.

No hiding it now. “She isn’t,” I rasped. “They came back and went inside to get the kids.”

Every drop of color drained from Judy’s face. She looked back at the hotel, her knees buckling, and Karl grabbed her around the waist before she fell.

“We should have got them,” she wailed. “If they die, I’ll never forgive myself.”

Karl’s stricken expression ripped my heart in two. “They were on the floor above. We couldn’t get to them.” He looked at me as if he wanted reassurance. Or absolution maybe. “We couldn’t get to them,” he repeated.

I squeezed his hand. “You got Judy out. You can’t save everyone.” My belly cramped. I gazed up at the building. So much of it was on fire now. Surviving the inferno must be a near impossibility. Where were the fire engines? Ryker said he called them. I patted my pockets. No phone. Why, oh, why didn’t Athena stay here with me? I fisted clumps of my hair, tugging on the roots. *Please, God. Please get everyone out safely.*

Seconds later, four more people launched through the door, their faces blackened by smoke, their hair thick with it, too. Sebastian and Trinity, and I recognized Sage’s long blonde locks, streaked with gray, with Elliot holding her tightly around the waist. Judy spotted them at the same time I did. With a sob, she threw herself into Elliot’s arms.

“They’re in there,” she cried. “The babies. I couldn’t get to them. I couldn’t get to anyone.”

“Shh,” Karl soothed, stroking her back.

“The kids. God, we have to save the kids.”

“I’ll go.” Elliot’s voice didn’t sound anything like him. He eased his mother into Karl’s arms.

“Elliot, no.” Sage didn’t shout or demand, and maybe that was why he paused. It didn’t stop him, though. He kissed her before dashing inside.

My bones turned to jelly. I let my legs go, sinking to the ground. Snow came down in thick, relentless flakes. An icy chill spread through my chest. The onset of grief maybe? Hollowed out, everything good and worthwhile taken from me, ripped apart, leaving behind nothing more than a husk. A shell.

A thud sounded just inside the hotel entrance. Sebastian was the first to react. He raced through the gaping black hole into the blaze, ignoring Trinity’s plaintive pleas not to go. Thirty seconds later, he returned with Belle in his arms. Upton wasn’t with her. Sebastian set her on the ground. Her whole body heaved, and she coughed and coughed.

“Did you see anyone else?” I asked Sebastian.

He shook his head. “I’m going back in.”

“No!” Trinity found the strength to stand. She threw herself at him, wrapping her limbs around him like a vine. “No one else goes inside. They’ll be here soon, won’t they? The fire department. They must get here soon.”

I traded glances with Sebastian to see his face etched with worry and devastation.

I hope so, I thought. Dear God, I hope so.

GAREN

Smoke scorched my lungs despite ripping off my shirt and using it to cover my mouth. I could hardly see my hand in front of my face, and the crackles and spits of the fire raging all around me sent a lightning bolt of fear straight to my heart.

This was madness.

Yet, as mad as it was, and even with my wife waiting for me outside, the urge to press on, to save my friends, kept my legs moving forward. I lost sight of Ryker halfway up the first flight of stairs, but as I approached the second floor, he staggered toward me, both his kids tucked under his arms. I almost collapsed with relief.

He shouted something about Oliver, then sprinted downstairs, taking them two at a time. Crawling on my hands and knees where the smoke was marginally thinner, I made it to the top floor. A loud snap came from somewhere above me. I looked up. One of the roof struts arched straight for me. I rolled to the side, and it crashed against the balustrade, hissing, spitting, and breaking in two. My heart rattled my ribcage, adrenaline pumping through my veins, and my throat was dry and raw from inhaling so much toxic smoke. I felt myself getting weaker. How much longer could I survive in here? Where the fuck were the firefighters?

Through the smoke, someone dragged themselves toward me on their hands and knees, fighting for every inch. Harlow. Thank Christ. I made it over to her.

“Oliver,” she rasped, her voice barely audible over the fury of the fire and the screaming in my ears that we were going to die. “The kids. Please. Save them.”

“Go!” I yelled at her, breaking into a coughing fit. “Straight down. Don’t stop.” I guided her to the stairs, pausing long enough to see her make it to the bottom of the first flight. Dropping low, I powered on. Another beam came down, this one too close for comfort. My eyes stung, streaming, and I could barely see. I didn’t have long.

Crawling on my belly, I counted the rooms until I reached Oliver’s. The handle burned when I touched it. Using my shirt, I pushed it open and staggered inside.

“Oliver!” I stumbled over to the bed. He wasn’t there. Racing into the bathroom, I soaked the shirt and drank straight from the tap. The water soothed my throat, and the damp shirt was easier to breathe through. Oliver wasn’t here. There was only one place I could think of where he’d be. The kids’ room. That must have been what Harlow meant. Fuck. I’d wasted time and energy I didn’t have to spare.

I somehow made it to the kids’ room, falling inside, smashing my knees on the carpeted floor. My sapping strength boosted when Annie’s plaintive cries reached me. I couldn’t see her through the smoke, but she was here.

“Annie!” Another coughing fit ensued. “Patsy!”

“Here! Help. Daddy!”

I saw it then, a shape far too large to be one of the kids. Oliver lying on the floor. Oh, Christ. His chest. His chest was... black. Burned. Blistered. He must’ve been hit by falling debris. Most of the ceiling was on the floor.

He wasn’t moving. *He wasn’t fucking moving.*

“Kids, come to me. Come here right this second.” I made my voice harsh, commanding. As they approached, scared, their hair matted, faces streaked with ash, my stomach tilted.

Patsy had a horrible burn on her arm, the skin already bubbled with yellow blisters. I scooped one kid under each arm.

“Cover your faces.”

“But, Daddy!” Annie screamed as I carried her away, her cries for her father ripping out my heart.

I’d never know how I made it to the first floor. I put the kids down and pointed to the gaping hole leading to the outside. To safety. “Go, now. Run.”

They sprinted away from me. The urge to follow them pulsed through me only for a second. Wheeling around, I gathered every ounce of strength I had left and returned for Oliver.

The sight I found when I made it back to his room was something I’d never be able to scrape from my memories. In the short time I’d gotten the kids to safety, one of the ceiling struts had fallen and was now lying across Oliver’s torso. It was on fire.

“Jesus, God, no.” I grabbed it. Agony exploded in my palms as the fire burned through my skin. “God, help me!”

I freed Oliver from beneath the burning piece of wood, throwing it to one side. Another loud crack sounded above me. I reacted too late. Pain shot through the back of my head. I hit the floor. Blackness.

RYKER

The fire spat and crackled, and the smoke made it almost impossible to breathe. Neither of my kids had made a sound since I scooped them into my arms and picked my way through the carnage. A puff of fresh air was the only indication we were close to safety, but the knot in my stomach wouldn't loosen until I heard the sweet cry of my babies.

If they were hurt...

No. Don't go there. Get out. Get them into their mother's arms. Return for Garen and anyone else who was still inside.

"Ryker!"

Elliot took Ethan from me and grabbed my arm, hauling me outside. Fresh air poured into my lungs as I staggered away from the inferno behind me. I coughed and choked, my throat burning with every breath I took. Athena's cry tore through the fog in my brain, and I released Mia into her arms.

"You got them. You got them." She kissed Mia all over, wrestling Ethan from Elliot's hold and doing the same thing with him. "Oh, my babies." Mia let out a wail which might just have been the best sound I'd ever heard in my life, and when it was followed up with Ethan's sorrowful, "Mommy", I nearly lost it.

Mopping away perspiration, I grabbed Elliot's arm. "Who's missing? Apart from Garen. I passed him on the stairs

on the way down.”

“Oliver, Harlow, and the kids. Upton made it out just before you did.”

Blood froze in my veins. My gaze returned to the inferno behind me. No one could survive that furnace.

“Where’s the fucking fire department?”

Elliot shook his head. “We’re a ways out of town.”

I squeezed my eyes closed. They stung like a bitch. Tears streamed down my face as the smoke charred my eyeballs. How long had it been since Athena and I returned to the hotel to find it ablaze? Ten minutes? It couldn’t be longer than that. The drive into town took fifteen minutes. By the time the fire engines made their way through the icy roads, how long would it be? More than that. I pivoted to look at the building once more. My friends didn’t have that long.

“Stay with Athena and the kids.”

“Ryker, no!” Elliot lunged for me, but I was too fast. As I reached the hotel entrance, Annie and Patsy crashed into me. Patsy collapsed before I could catch her. Annie fell to her knees, too.

“Where’s your father?” I barked.

Annie burst into tears. Patsy pointed behind her, her arm horrifically burned. “Uncle Garen went to get him.”

Judy rushed over to comfort the kids, wrapping her arms around both of them.

“You can’t go in alone,” Elliot insisted. “I’m coming with you.”

“No!” Judy cried. “Please, don’t.”

Ignoring her, I nodded to him. There were no extra points for stupidity, and if Oliver or Garen or Harlow were injured, I’d need Elliot’s help getting them out.

“We’re coming, too.” Upton and Sebastian appeared by my side. “With four of us, we stand a chance of getting them out.”

Both Trinity and Belle burst into tears. Belle clutched Buddy, one of the dogs, to her chest. There was no sign of the puppy, Tyke. Catriona was quietly crying, her cheeks streaked with black and gray, and Karl looked stunned, as if he couldn't believe the catastrophe unfolding before his eyes. Sage was the only stoic one, quietly reassuring everyone in softly spoken tones, her police training controlling her reactions.

I didn't dare look at Athena. The desire to stay here with my wife and children was like an invisible thread tugging me toward them, but if I let Oliver and his family die when I could have acted, I'd never forgive myself. The last thing I owed Athena was a shell of the man she once knew.

"Let's go."

Inside, Elliot sprinted toward the kitchen instead of heading to the stairway. He yelled something about a fire extinguisher. The three of us plowed on. By the time we reached the second floor, I could hardly breathe. Even in the couple minutes I'd been outside, things had gotten considerably worse. For the first time, I feared for my life, dread gnawing at my insides.

The smoke almost overwhelmed me, and then I saw her. Harlow. She'd collapsed a few feet from the stairs. I shoved Sebastian toward her. He picked her up in his arms and stumbled down the stairs. A heavy blanket landed on my shoulders. A fire blanket. Elliot wielded an extinguisher, aiming it at the worst of the flames. His clever thinking gave us enough of a break to make it through the flames that had closed in around us.

My mind worked slowly, like an old-fashioned record player on half speed. Every step was like lugging a lump of concrete behind me.

"Go back!" Upton yelled, shoving me in the chest.

I shook my head.

"Fuck's sake, Ryker. Go back. You can hardly stand. We'll get them."

Elliot nodded. "I think you should listen to—"

A deafening crack fractured the air. A gigantic hole opened up in the floor, mere inches from where I was standing. The debris hissed and spat, crashing to the floor below. I wavered, the last dregs of my energy spent. Elliot gripped me by the shoulders.

“Go.” He whipped the fire blanket off my shoulders.

Defeated, I nodded. As I turned to make my way down the stairs, I lost my balance and fell. Behind me, Elliot screamed.

ATHENA

Sirens blared, the deafening sound of help arriving finally getting closer and closer. Three fire engines pulled up to the hotel, followed by two ambulances. Ryker was missing, so was Elliot, Upton, Garen, and Oliver. Sebastian was the only ROGUES member who had made it out, carrying an unconscious Harlow in his arms. I muttered prayers under my breath for her baby, and for the guys missing inside. Mostly, I prayed for Ryker. I couldn't do this without him. I didn't *want* to do this without him. Other than my children, he was my light, my life, my everything.

Boots thudded against the compacted snow as firefighters jumped out of the cab, some already wearing breathing apparatus. Sebastian dashed over to the nearest ambulance, alerting the crew to Harlow. A female and male paramedic rushed over to her.

“Hurry!” I gesticulated, panic rising within me until I thought I might go mad. “God, please!”

Sebastian left Harlow with the paramedics and sprinted to one of the firefighters who appeared to be in charge. I couldn't hear their conversation from here, but I trusted Sebastian. He'd give them the right information on who was still inside the building.

They'd be safe now. Wouldn't they? They had to be. Help had arrived. Finally.

I dropped to my knees and pressed my hands together. *God, please let them live.* I hugged Mia and Ethan close to my chest as Mom knelt beside me, wrapping all three of us in her arms. It took forever before the hoses were attached to the fire hydrant. The crew worked in sync, the four with breathing apparatus making their way over to the front of the hotel. As they approached, the building exploded. Flames shot out of broken windows like a snake's tongue, retracting almost immediately. A scream tore from my throat, and I held my children tighter.

No one could have survived that. No one. *Oh, God, please.* I rocked, back and forth, back and forth, muttering prayers and pleas under my breath. I couldn't watch—couldn't bear to see Ryker's body brought out, limp and lifeless. Burned, maybe, beyond all recognition. If I'd lost him, I wanted to remember him the way he was. Vibrant, full of life, strong and bold.

I didn't know I was crying until Mom wiped the tears from my eyes. "Oh, darling. He'll be okay. They all will. Stay strong."

"But what if they're not?" I whispered.

Her face creased in pain. I might have lost my husband and my brother, but Mom... if Elliot didn't make it, she'd have lost a son. I looked at Ethan, my heart slowly disintegrating. I couldn't imagine losing a child. That wasn't the natural order of things.

"They will be." She sounded so determined, resolute. I clung to her, drawing some of her strength into me.

I heard a shout. My head snapped up, and I scrambled to my feet. One of the firefighters appeared through the smoke carrying a man.

"Garen!" Catriona's heart-wrenching cry blitzed through the air. She stumbled over her feet in her haste to get to him, only just managing to save herself from taking a tumble. A gurney appeared from nowhere, and the firefighter laid him on

top. My eyes fixated on the entrance, desperate for Ryker to be the next one brought out. Catriona bent over Garen's unconscious body, her sobs so painful, so terrible, tears streamed down my face. Would any of us be the same after this?

If Ryker and Elliot didn't make it out, my life, and Mom and Dad's, too, would change forever. Nausea curdled in my stomach at the thought of my kids growing up never having known their amazing father or their wonderful uncle.

As the medical team wheeled Garen past me, I gasped. His hands were black and blistered, and there was a vicious scorch mark across his left shoulder. An oxygen mask covered his nose and mouth. That meant he was alive.

Oh, God, please let him live. Please let them all live.

I covered my face with my hands and let grief and anger and despair pour out of me. By the time I looked up again, the ambulance was halfway down the snow-covered road, its sirens blaring.

Digging deep, I found the courage to look back at the hotel. The second I did, Elliot and Upton came staggering out, hair singed, coughing their lungs up, but alive. A momentary spear of joy raced through me. My brother was alive and, from what I could see, uninjured. Mom flung herself at him, crying harder than I'd ever seen her. He held her, murmuring words I couldn't hear over the noise of the crackling flames, as well as the firefighters barking instructions at one another.

Seconds later, a firefighter appeared in the doorway, the bulk of a man over his shoulder, arms dangling. Hoisting Ethan and Mia on my hips, I stumbled over just as the firefighter lay the prone figure on a gurney.

Oliver.

Oh my God. He... he...

I turned away, sick to my stomach. I'd never seen charred flesh, not to that extent. I wanted to bleach my eyes. Thank Christ Harlow wasn't around to see this. She was already on her way to the hospital. More prayers followed that her baby

wasn't affected by her inhaling all that smoke, and that Oliver lived to see his child born.

Another wave of emotion crashed over me. How had this happened? Why? Why us? *God, Ryker, please. Please live. Please come back to me.*

"Dad, take the kids, please. I can't... I just can't." I thrust them into his arms.

"He'll make it, love," Dad said, cradling Mia and putting a wriggling Ethan on the ground before taking his hand. "He's strong, young, stubborn." He smiled then. I couldn't rally a smile in return. "He loves you. He wouldn't leave you or the kids."

"Athena." Elliot stumbled over to me, flinging his arms around me, and burying his nose in my hair. "I lost sight of him. We sent him back. He was just too weak from the smoke and..." A strangled sound came from his throat. A sob, I thought. My brother never cried. It was bad. It had to be for him to cry in front of me. "He fell, Athena. The stairs collapsed, and he fell. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

No. No, no, no. Not Ryker. Not my Ryker.

My knees hit the ground, the snow soaking straight through my trousers. My entire body trembled. I couldn't stop my hands from shaking. I waited for the grief to hit me, like a tsunami crashing onto the shore and destroying everything in its path. Instead, numbness enveloped me.

More hands touched me, suffocating me, until I couldn't stand it any longer. I shoved my way free. This terrible wailing, like an animal in horrific pain, burst from my chest. I screamed and screamed, my throat hotter than the flames that had stolen the only man I'd ever loved, ripping him from me before I'd had anywhere near my fill of him. Was this what madness felt like? This all-consuming need to blast the unfairness of it all. Why Ryker? He had everything to live for. The kids needed him. *I* needed him.

A shout came from somewhere behind me. Elliot yanked me to my feet, hollering something, but I couldn't hear him. I

was underwater, drowning, the noise of rushing water thundering through my ears. He gripped my arms and shook me, then gesticulated toward the hotel.

“—alive. Athena, he’s alive!”

I whipped my head around. A firefighter had his arm around a man. *My* man. Ryker. He wasn’t dead. He wasn’t even being carried like the others. I tried to move, but my legs refused to budge. Elliot captured me around the waist, and then I was running, running toward him. I slammed into him, almost knocking us both to the ground.

“Ryker, God.” My hands roved over him. Was he even real? Or was this an apparition and I was dreaming because I wanted it to be real more than I’d ever wanted anything in my whole life. “God, is it really you?”

He gave a low chuckle, rough and husky. It didn’t sound like him. “Who else is this handsome?” A hacking cough forced him to double over. He coughed and coughed as a paramedic loitered with an oxygen mask in hand.

“Fuck,” Ryker croaked. “Think I just lost a lung.”

“Here, sir.” The paramedic put the oxygen mask over Ryker’s nose and mouth, then pointed to a gurney.

“As long as I’ve got working legs, I’ll walk.” He slung an arm around my shoulder, and I propped him up on one side, with Elliot on the other. We got him into the ambulance where, in true Elliot style now that he knew his best friend wasn’t seriously injured, my brother began joking.

“Trust you to be the last out. Always did want to make an entrance and have everyone looking at you, marveling at your brilliance.”

Ryker flipped him off.

Elliot barked a laugh. “Now I *know* you’re fine.” He squeezed Ryker’s shoulder and bent to kiss my cheek. “I’ll follow on behind once I’ve been given the all clear.” He rolled his eyes. “Seriously, this paramedic waiting for me is a ball buster.”

“Set Sage on her,” Ryker said, his voice so strange from the amount of toxic smoke he’d inhaled. It astounded me that he was here, breathing, talking. *Alive*.

“Good thinking.” With another flash of his teeth, my brother jumped down from the ambulance. The doors closed, and then it was just us and one of the paramedics. He put a blood pressure cuff around Ryker’s arm and one of those pulsometer things on his finger.

Ryker’s eyes turned serious. “The kids.”

“Are fine. They’re with Mom and Dad. You saved them.” My eyes welled up. I blinked to clear my vision.

“What about everyone else? Did they make it out okay?”

What little bravery I’d clung onto vanished. I burst into tears.

RYKER

It took most of the journey to the hospital for Athena to tell me what she knew about the others. As she updated me, a weight settled over my chest that had nothing to do with the gallons of smoke I'd inhaled, and everything to do with crippling fear. Oliver's injuries sounded particularly worrying, as did Garen's. And Harlow, too. God, I hoped she didn't lose the baby. If that happened, and she lost Oliver, too... Jesus, who could survive that?

I still couldn't figure out how I'd gotten away with so few injuries: a couple of cuts, a badly bruised hip, which must have happened when I fell through the floor, a throat that felt as if someone had taken a cheese grater to it and had a fun fucking time taking most of the skin off my esophagus, plus lungs that struggled to take and then hold a full breath. It could've been a lot fucking worse.

Reaching for Athena's hand, I held it tightly, lay back against the pillow, and closed my eyes. My wife and my kids were safe. I prayed the rest of my family, for that's what they were to me, survived, too.

They had to. I couldn't bear to contemplate the alternative.

The ambulance pulled up outside the Emergency Room of the local hospital. Although I didn't consider myself anything

like an emergency, the paramedic gave me one of those “don’t mess with me” glares and wheeled me inside on the gurney.

“Waste of goddamn time,” I muttered as a nurse triaged me, recognized, as I had, that I wasn’t going to die, ordered me to keep the oxygen mask on, and shuffled me off into a cubicle before announcing that a doctor would be with me shortly.

We all knew what she meant by shortly. I’d still be here, twiddling my fucking thumbs in five hours’ time.

“Can you do something for me?” I grazed my fingertips down the back of Athena’s arm. She hadn’t let go of my hand since the paramedics loaded me into the ambulance. I didn’t want to let myself think about what she’d gone through when I’d returned over and over to that burning building, only to be the last one brought out. I’d make it up to her. Somehow.

“Anything.”

I arched a brow, needing to tease her to show that I truly was okay. A little roughed up but nothing that wouldn’t pass in a few days. “Careful. I have a vivid imagination.”

A small smile touched her lips. “Don’t I know it. What do you need?”

“Go and see what you can find out about Oliver, Harlow, and Garen. Please. I’m going out of my mind sitting here. And you know me. If the answers don’t come to me, I’ll discharge myself and go looking for them.”

She wagged her finger at me. “That’s basically blackmail.”

I blew her a kiss. “You can punish me later.”

“Your idea of punishment and mine are two very different prospects.”

“But both involve sex, yes?”

She rolled her eyes. “What will I do with you?”

Grinning, I said, “The list is long and dirty.”

She laughed then, a low, throaty laugh that perked my dick right up. See, I was fine. Bending to peck my lips, she ran her hand over my soot-covered hair and slipped through the

curtain. I flopped back against the pillow, but I didn't have long to sit by myself. Athena's parents and Elliot arrived about two minutes after Athena left. Finding me alone, Elliot arched a brow.

"My sister sick of you already?"

I'd have flipped him off, or worse, but Judy and Karl looked so upset that I refrained. "Where are the kids?" I craved to hold my babies, to check for myself that they were completely unharmed.

"Trinity is looking after them. She took them up to the hospital canteen. Not even a scratch on them, and Ethan was already asking for ice cream when we left."

I managed a weak smile. "Can you go get them for me, please? I need to see them." After thrusting them into Athena's arms before returning to the hotel, I'd barely had a chance to look them over. That they were unharmed made my knees weak. Good thing I was lying in bed rather than standing.

"Of course we can." Judy kissed my cheek, and she and Karl went to get the kids, leaving me behind with Elliot. I grimaced.

"I asked Athena to go see what she could find out about the others. According to her, both Garen and Oliver were in bad shape. Harlow, too. All of them were unconscious when they were loaded into the ambulances."

"You should have waited for me to get here. You do know that this is probably the last time Athena will let you out of her sight for, oh, I don't know, at least four or five years."

I husked a laugh. Christ, that hurt. How long would it be before I could breathe normally again?

"I can live with that."

"You say that now. I give it a week before you're peeling her off you and threatening divorce if she doesn't give you some breathing room."

"Never. I can't get enough. Never have been able to."

Elliot screwed his face up. “Dude, please. I get the fact you’re banging my sister, but I really don’t need to hear about it.” He tried to smile, but it fell short. “You scared the shit out of me, Ryker. When you fell, I-I—” His head dropped.

I put my hand on his arm. “I thought I was a goner, too.”

He raised his eyes to mine. “Scariest fucking moment of my life.”

Elliot and I always bantered—we’d done it for years, hiding how much we loved each other behind manly jokes—but we both could have died tonight. That we came so close to it made me reach out to him in a way I hadn’t in years.

“I love you, man. You’re the brother I never had.”

He didn’t even hesitate, throwing his arms around me and holding on tightly, just for a few seconds, but it was enough for both of us to show how terrified we’d been.

“Fuck, Ryker. I don’t know what I’d have done if you hadn’t made it out of there.” He reared back and punched me in the shoulder. “Don’t ever fucking do that to me again.”

“Jesus.” I rubbed where he’d hit me. “Last time I’m being nice to you, you fucker.”

A second later, we both were laughing, and despite how much it hurt, I couldn’t seem to stop until Judy and Karl appeared with the kids. I sobered up, my vision blurring as I held out my arms. Judy placed Mia in the crook of my elbow, and Karl hoisted Ethan up onto the bed where I nestled him against my chest. I kissed their hair and their faces, and somehow held myself together. The pent-up terror I’d felt when Athena and I had returned to the hotel to find it on fire would have to stay locked inside for now. My kids, Athena, everyone, really, needed me to be the strong one, as I always had been.

Athena reappeared, her eyes softening at the sight of me sitting up in bed holding our kids in my arms. She picked up Ethan, sat in his place, then settled him on her lap, cuddling him close to her.

“Did you find out anything?” I asked.

“They wouldn’t say much. Oliver and Garen are being assessed. That’s all they’d tell me. I tried to find Catriona, but she’s nowhere around.”

“Probably by Garen’s bedside.”

“Yeah, most likely. Harlow’s been taken to the maternity ward for them to check on the baby. The good news is that she was conscious when they took her up there.”

“Thank God,” Judy breathed.

“What about everyone else?”

“Sage is sitting with Patsy and Annie,” Elliot said. “They’ve both got minor burns to their hands when they tried to lift a piece of the ceiling that had fallen onto Oliver, and Patsy has a burn on her neck, but the nurse we spoke to briefly said that they’re first degree burns and shouldn’t leave any lasting scars.”

“Upton and Belle are trying to find someone to take Buddy, apparently.” Athena’s lips twisted. “There’s no sign of Tyke. I know it’s probably the last thing any of us should be worrying about, but he’s Belle’s baby, just like these are ours. She’s inconsolable at the thought of him...”

She trailed off, then shrugged. No need to finish the sentence. We all knew what she meant.

Ethan gave a big yawn. Athena stroked his hair, then kissed the top of his head.

“Do you think we should try to find a hotel in town?” Judy asked no one in particular. “We could take the children and let them get some rest.”

I read Athena’s mind before she opened her mouth. She hated the idea of letting them out of her sight. I did, too, but they couldn’t stay here all night. Not when we had an alternative. At least Mia was on formula now. If Athena was still breastfeeding, she’d have to go, too, and I couldn’t stand that.

I laced our fingers together. “I think that’s a good idea, Judy.” I squeezed Athena’s hand, silently sharing my thoughts.

“Thank you.”

“She’ll need formula, Mom,” Athena said. “And diapers for her and Ethan.” Scraping a hand through her hair, her lips pinched at the sides. “Where are we going to get supplies from at this time of night?”

“Don’t worry.” Judy stroked her daughter’s hair and kissed the top of her head. “I’ll sort everything out. We’ll manage just fine.”

“Would you call us once you’re settled?” I asked. “And block book a few rooms. I’ve a feeling we’ll be staying a while longer yet.”

“Of course.” Judy lifted Mia from my arms, and Athena reluctantly handed Ethan to Karl. She held his hand until the last moment, her arm stranded midair long after both children had gone, as if it still connected her to them.

“They’ll be better off sleeping in a comfortable space than in here all night with all the noise and the comings and goings. I know it’s hard to let go.”

“Harder now,” she said.

“Yeah.” I caught Elliot’s eye, and he mouthed “You’re doomed”. I swallowed a chuckle, shaking my head at him.

“I’ll leave you guys to it. Go see if Sage needs help in cheering up Patsy and Annie.”

“Give them our love,” Athena said. “I can’t even imagine how this experience will have scarred them.”

“Kids are resilient,” Elliot said, as if he was an expert on the subject.

Only after he’d gone did Athena murmur, “Not if they lose their dad.”

I squeezed my eyes closed. “Was he really that bad?”

“I only caught a brief glimpse but the burns across his chest... they were deep, Ryker. Third degree, for sure. I expect he’ll need skin grafts. He could have internal injuries, too, or worse.”

“Jesus.” I swiped a hand over my face. “How the fuck did this happen?”

She lifted one shoulder. “I don’t know. I can’t believe how fast it went up in flames.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. Neither could I. As soon as the doctor gave me the all clear, the fire chief and I were having a long chat, because if anyone could find out what had caused this disaster, it was him.

RYKER

I was *this* close to saying fuck it and discharging myself without seeing a doctor when one magically appeared at my bedside. It took a firm dig from Athena—she knew me far too well—for me to keep my mouth shut and not tear a strip off him for keeping me sitting here, taking up a much-needed bed for the better part of two fucking hours when there was nothing wrong with me that a good night’s rest wouldn’t solve.

After poring over a clipboard and flicking the pages back and forth several times, the doctor declared me fit for discharge. Or, as he put it, free to go, which made it sound as if he’d have instructed the nurses to handcuff me to the bed if I’d dared to leave without approval. Before the last syllable left his lips, I’d already tossed back the thin, reedy blanket and planted my feet on the floor. He gave me a wry smile and slipped through the curtain.

My clothes stank of smoke, and my hair was full of ash, but speaking to the fire chief and getting his take on what had happened was far more important than a hot shower and a comfortable bed.

The problem was, I hadn’t bargained for my wife objecting, which, thinking about it, was pretty dumb.

“Are you insane?” she asked when I told her my plans. “You nearly died. You almost left me a widow and your kids

fatherless, not to mention two of your best friends are potentially fighting for their lives, and one of their wives might lose her unborn baby. And, what? You're more interested in speaking with the fire department?"

"It's not a case of being more interested, but don't you think it's important that we know what happened? When this gets out, the media will be swarming all over us in minutes. I have to at least sound as if I know what the fuck happened."

She ground her teeth so violently, I winced at the sound of enamel on enamel. Her nostrils flared, and she put her hands on her hips.

"I'm sure when the fire chief has some information, he will contact you. There's no need for you to stand over the man, breathing down his neck while he's trying to do his job. That won't make the answers appear any faster."

Sometimes, having another person who knew you better than you knew yourself was a royal pain in the ass.

"So, let me make it clear what's going to happen," she continued, her expression more irritated with me than I'd seen in a long time. "We're going to check up on Oliver, Harlow, and Garen, and once we've done that, we're going to head to the hotel where Mom will have booked us a room. There, you're going to shower, get some rest, then in the morning you can call the fire chief."

"The morning?" I ran my tongue along the inside of my bottom lip. "It'll be all over Bloomsbury and CNN by then."

"So?"

So? I closed my eyes and took a deep breath through my nose, holding it in my lungs until a coughing fit hit me. I repeated the exercise a couple more times.

"Athena," I began as patiently as I was capable of, considering I had a public relations disaster on my hands. One that rivaled the Deepwater Horizon. "ROGUES is a multi-billion-dollar company with subsidiaries all over the globe. We have responsibilities to our customers, our clients, to the media. I don't like it any more than you do, but if I get caught

by a journalist, and I look as if I haven't a clue what made a brand-new hotel go up in flames in less than fifteen minutes, then I've got an even worse catastrophe on my hands."

"There's such a thing as 'no comment', Ryker, which is what you should say regardless of whether you have any more details."

"And I will. But journalists are like bloodhounds. They can smell weakness or indecisiveness or ignorance in seconds. And once they start to dig, I lose control of the situation. I can't allow that to happen. *Garen* wouldn't want that to happen, nor Oliver, nor Upton, Elliot, or Sebastian. So please, for the love of fucking God, let me do this my way."

"We check up on our friends, you take a shower, nap for one hour, and *then* you can call the fire chief. Deal?"

Marriage was all about compromises, and she presented a reasonable proposition. Didn't mean I liked it any better, but opposing rational logic wouldn't endear me to her, and she already looked as if she wanted to kiss me and lop my head off at the same time.

"Deal." I couldn't have sounded any more reluctant if I'd tried.

She rose up on tiptoes and kissed my cheek. "I'm your wife, Ryker. It's my job to look out for you, and yes, to challenge you when you're being a jerk."

"Gee, thanks, babe."

"You're welcome."

Information on Oliver and Garen was still sketchy. All the nurse at the information desk would say was that they were stable, whatever the fuck that meant. News of Harlow was better, though. The medics had given her a thorough examination, and she and the baby were fine. No lasting damage. Thank God. They were keeping her in overnight, though, for observation.

"Does she know about her husband?" Athena asked.

“We’ve told her he’s stable,” the nurse replied. “That’s probably best for now.”

My grunt sent the message that I disagreed. I received an arched eyebrow and thin lips as a response. All I knew was that if it were Athena and I instead of Harlow and Oliver, I’d want her kept abreast of my status, and she’d want me to know she and the baby were okay. But as we were unlikely to force our way past Nurse Ratched, I might as well save my energy for what was coming down the line.

Sebastian and Trinity were still in the visitors waiting room. I suggested they come back to the hotel with us. There wasn’t a lot we could do here right now. Belle and Upton still hadn’t made it to the hospital, so I assumed they were struggling to find somewhere to take Buddy, and as I was the only one with a cell phone, I couldn’t call them to check up, either. I hated that we were all dispersed, unable to communicate, unable to plan.

“Do you want to go tell Elliot and Sage we’re leaving?” I said to Athena. “If Patsy and Annie are settled, I think they should come back with us, too.”

“Good idea.”

When I was sure she was out of earshot, I turned to Sebastian. “We need to come up with a press release. I’m surprised the media aren’t swarming all over this already. Athena has already made it clear she’ll hack off my balls with a rusty blade if I don’t get some rest. Hate to do this to you, buddy, but can you call Sherry and update her on what’s happened? Get her working on something bland that will keep the vultures at bay?”

Sherry was our head of PR, and one of the best in the business. If she couldn’t put a shiny veneer over this clusterfuck, no one could.

“Sure, but I don’t have my cell.”

I handed him mine. “I’d call myself, but if Athena catches me...” I drew my finger across my throat. Trinity chuckled, but the smile slid off her face faster than an ice cream melting

in the heat of summer. I squeezed her shoulder. “It’s good to laugh. God knows we’ll need humor over the coming weeks.”

Sebastian disappeared to make the call. He still wasn’t back when Athena showed up with Elliot and Sage.

“Where’s Sebastian?”

“Here,” he said, reappearing just in time. He handed me my cell phone. “Thanks for lending it to me to call Mom. Didn’t want her hearing about the fire on the news and not knowing what had happened to me.”

“You’re welcome.” I gave him a grateful smile, but guilt kicked me hard. I hoped he *had* called his mom as well as Sherry and hadn’t only made the work call. “I should call Oliver’s mom. Garen’s parents, too.”

“I’ll do it once we’re settled at the hotel,” Athena said, a firmness in her tone that sent a clear message. I heard it. Deafeningly so.

We arrived at the hotel in town to find that Judy had booked several rooms. We got our key, then headed straight to Judy and Karl’s room to look in on the kids. Judy had managed to secure the only family room in the entire hotel. When we arrived, the kids were fast asleep, their faces smooth and worry free, the ordeal of the evening seeming to have passed them by. I hoped it had. At least they were too young to remember it. Patsy and Annie on the other hand...

Christ, if Oliver didn’t make it, I’d—

“Don’t.” Athena touched my arm. “Everyone’s going to be okay.”

I rested my head against hers as we stood over Mia’s crib. “I’m exhausted, Thea.”

“Let’s leave the kids with Mom tonight.”

“You sure?”

She nodded. “We’re two rooms down the hall, and if you do insist on calling the fire chief in the middle of the night, at least we won’t disturb them.”

As it turned out, I showered, stripped out of my destroyed clothes, and was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

The morning light woke me. My eyes flickered open for less than a second before bone-weary exhaustion made them close again. Everything ached. I felt as if I'd been kicked, punched, and had razor wire shoved down my throat. It hurt to swallow, and my lungs complained with every breath I took.

With a groan, I forced myself to sit up. Planting my feet on the floor, I put my head in my hands, the events of last night rushing back in brilliant technicolor. I glanced over my shoulder. Athena was still fast asleep. I picked up my cell, checked for messages—there were none—and crept into the adjoining bathroom.

“Jesus, you look like hell,” I muttered as I studied my reflection in the wonky mirror over the sink. My eyes were sunken, there was a cut on my forehead that I hadn't noticed last night, and the massive bruise on my hip had blackened overnight. Even the slightest touch to the area made me hiss. It amazed me how I hadn't broken something when I'd fallen last night. I must have elastic bones.

Sitting on the edge of the tub, I googled the local fire department. After plugging the number into my contacts, I hit *Dial*. My call was answered almost immediately. I gave my name and asked to speak to the fire chief. He came on the line within a few minutes.

“Mr. Stone. I'm Matthew Gardner. How are you feeling this morning?”

“I'll live. Can we chat?”

He caught on to my all-business stance and spared me the small talk. “Of course. Would you like to come here, or would you rather I met you at the hotel?”

“The hotel.” I wanted to see it for myself in the cold light of day. “Do you have any clue what started it yet?”

“No. My team is still investigating, and we will be for some time. Why don't I meet you there in an hour and we can talk.”

“I’ll be there.” I hung up and dialed the main switchboard at the hospital. The nurse they put me through to was a lot more forthcoming than the one from last night.

“Mr. Gauthier is doing well. He received second degree burns to his hands and his shoulder, and he has a concussion, but other than that he’s doing well.”

“And Oliver. I mean Mr. Ellis.”

She hesitated, and my stomach vaulted. “His injuries are much more serious, I’m afraid. He has third degree burns to his chest, and he suffered a fractured skull, possibly from a fall or from falling debris. We’ve got him under sedation right now, and we have a burns specialist coming to see him today.”

“Whatever he needs. Has his wife been informed?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, thank you.” I hung up and opened the bathroom door. Athena was awake and sitting up in bed, looking at me expectantly. I updated her on how everyone was doing, as well as my upcoming meeting with the fire chief.

“Shall I drop you at the hospital, or would you rather stay with the kids?”

“The hospital. Harlow and Catriona need the support right now. Let’s have breakfast with Mom, Dad, and the children, then we’ll go.”

“Did you get in touch with Oliver’s mom and Garen’s parents last night?”

She nodded. “They’re on their way.”

Ethan was his usual boisterous self, with no signs that he even remembered what had happened last night. Mia was a little disgruntled, but a hug from Mommy seemed to settle her down. Every time I looked at my family, the relief was so palpable that it stole my breath. I felt sick at the thought of what I could have lost. It would be some time before that tightness across my chest vanished.

We ordered room service, but I barely touched a thing, too anxious to speak with Chief Gardner and start to put together

what the fuck went wrong.

Whatever had happened to cause that fire, I intended to make sure it never fucking happened again.

CATRIONA

“Please tell me you haven’t been sitting there all night.”

My gaze snapped to the bed at the sound of my husband’s rough voice. His eyes were alert, even if the whites were reddened and sore from all the smoke. He’d barely said two words to me last night before the sedatives the doctor had given him for the pain kicked in, so to see him alive and talking caused a swell of emotion to surge within me.

While he slept, I’d promised myself I’d stay strong for him.

I failed.

Tears trickled down my face as I scrambled out of the chair and knelt at the side of his hospital bed. On a reflex, I went for his hand, stopping myself just in time.

“Oh, thank God.”

“Hey, don’t cry.” The tips of his fingers, the only part of his hand that wasn’t bandaged, touched my damp cheek. “I’m okay.”

“I know,” I sobbed. “But for a while there, I thought you weren’t.”

“Think a fire could take me down?” He managed a brief smile before it slid off his face. “The others? The kids?”

I ran my fingers through his hair, still matted from smoke. Washing it hadn't been high on the medic's list of priorities. "Patsy has a burn on her neck, and both her and Annie have minor burns to their hands where they tried to help their dad. They were kept in last night for observation. Elliot and Sage sat with them for a while, and Elliot swung by to let me know they were okay before they went to a local hotel to get some rest. Harlow seems to be okay, too. The baby's fine." I bit my lip. "But Oliver..." I shook my head. "Last I heard, he wasn't good..."

Garen's eyes briefly closed, and he muttered a curse. "I couldn't get to him. I couldn't fucking get to him. I fucking failed him."

His voice broke on the last word. To hear my strong, spirited husband at the edge of despair broke something inside me. Ever since I'd met Garen, he'd projected this power, the kind that lulled me into thinking he was indestructible. Yet last night, I'd almost lost him and, dear God, we might still lose Oliver. I couldn't bear to think of it. Poor Harlow and the kids. Losing Oliver would destroy them.

Losing Oliver would destroy ROGUES.

"You almost lost your life, Garen. You couldn't have done any more."

His expression told me he didn't believe that for a second. "Everyone else is okay, though?"

"Yes. Everyone's fine."

He squeezed his eyes closed once more. "Thank God."

"Belle is devastated, though. They can't find Tyke."

"Can't say I'm sorry about that." His lips twitched, and the knot in my stomach loosened a little. To see him make a joke, even a small one, bolstered my hopes that he'd make a full recovery.

"She was winning you over and you know it."

"Bullshit." He raised both hands in the air, examining the bandages. "What's the prognosis?"

Before I could answer, the door to Garen's hospital room opened, and the doctor I'd spoken to last night walked in. Didn't she ever go home? I returned to my seat and gave her a wan smile.

"Ah, Mr. Gauthier. You're awake. How's the pain?"

"Manageable," Garen said, although the skin around his mouth pinched. He was feeling more discomfort than he was willing to admit, and I already knew why. He wanted out of here, and the more drugs they gave him, the longer he'd have to remain in the hospital. "What's the prognosis, and how fast can I get out of here?"

Bingo!

The doctor smiled. "You have second degree burns to your hands and your chest, and a minor concussion, but you're young and fit, and that will help you to recover. You also inhaled a lot of toxic smoke, so you may find you get out of breath quicker than normal for a few weeks. Let's see how the next couple of days go."

He grimaced. "Two days? Some fucking Christmas this is gonna be."

God, that's right. Tomorrow is Christmas Day.

"I only care that you're alive, Garen. We have plenty of Christmases to look forward to." And we might have had none. Just the thought choked me up.

"Listen to your wife, Mr. Gauthier. She's a smart lady."

"With a smart mouth."

I grinned. "You know it."

The doctor checked his pulse and then his blood pressure. "All looks good. Take your meds, get some rest, and we'll have you home before you know it."

She left us alone, and within a minute or so of her leaving, Garen's eyes drooped.

"Do me a favor," he murmured, eyes still closed.

"Anything."

“Go get some rest and something to eat. I’m alive. I’m fine. I don’t want to have to worry about you, too.”

I was tired, but I also had this deep yearning to stay close to him. The fear that had grown within me while I waited outside that burning building knowing my husband and some of our best friends were inside wouldn’t go away. I couldn’t help worrying that if I left him, I might not see him again. It was an irrational fear. The doctor had said he’d make a full recovery, and while he might bear the scars of last night as a constant reminder, all I cared about was that he was alive and whole and mine. But the fear that had coursed through my veins would remain with me for a long time to come.

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. Go.”

I rose to my feet, rubbing the base of my back where stiffness had set in from sitting in that chair all night. I kissed his cheek. With my hand on the door handle, I glanced back at him, love blooming in my chest. My stomach growled, and I desperately needed a drink and a pee. I left him to rest, visiting the bathroom first, then made my way toward the hospital canteen.

As I passed the visitor’s waiting area, I stopped. “Harlow? I thought you were on the maternity ward.”

She rubbed her eyes. “They let me go.” Lifting her chin, she took one look at me, then burst out crying. “Oh, Catriona.”

I sat beside her, pulling her into my arms and stroking her hair. “Hey now. It’s okay. He’ll be okay.”

“I don’t think he will.” I barely made out what she said through her tears.

“Of course he will.” I hadn’t a clue if I was saying the right thing, giving her false hope without solid information to back it up, but I couldn’t stop worrying about the baby. All this stress had to have a negative effect on her unborn child. Keeping her spirits up and her thoughts positive was my only goal right now.

“Will you look after Annie and Patsy for me? I want to be with them, but I can’t... I can’t...”

I understood her angst. Her maternal instincts pulled her toward the kids, but her soul pulled her toward Oliver. And she probably didn’t want them to pick up on her fear for their father’s recovery.

“Honey, of course I will. We all will. They’re going to be fine.”

“I know. I spoke to the doctor this morning. They were eating ice-cream and chattering away when I looked in on them. He said they can go home today.” Her face twisted. “Home. What if we’re never all together there again? What if...”

She broke off and sobbed in my arms, her whole body shaking. I did what I could to comfort her, murmuring reassuring words I wasn’t sure she even heard. A few minutes later, a guy in his forties or fifties with gray hair and a somber expression approached us. Adrenaline fired through my bloodstream. I did not like the look on his face. Not one little bit. A lump crawled into my throat. *Oh, God. Please, please, please.*

“Mrs. Ellis?”

Harlow lifted her head from my shoulder. “Y-yes.”

“I’m Doctor Sands. I’m taking care of your husband.”

“Is... is he all right?”

The doctor rubbed his lips together. “I’m afraid we need to take your husband into surgery. The drugs we gave him to reduce the swelling on his brain haven’t had the desired effect in reducing the inflammation. We need to remove part of his skull to allow the brain more room to breathe.”

“Surgery?” She paled. I held her hand. It was so cold. “Oh, God.”

“Try not to worry.”

Why did doctors say that? As if she’d just go, “Oh, okay. My husband, my soul mate, the man I love, and the father of

my child is going to have part of his skull sawn off. That's okay. I'll just swing by the local mall and buy myself a new set of maternity clothes."

I glared at him.

"It'll be a lengthy operation. I suggest you go get some rest."

Not a bad suggestion in itself, but it showed the man either lacked understanding or hadn't ever been in love. There wasn't a chance Harlow would leave this hospital until she heard back about Oliver. And I wasn't leaving, either. My friend needed me, and I wouldn't let her down. As long as it took, I'd stay right here, offering what little comfort I could in a rapidly spiraling situation.

Harlow's eyes burned into the back of the doctor's head until he vanished from sight, then she dropped her head into her hands. This time, her crying was unrestrained. There was little I could do for her other than to rub her back and let her know I was here for whatever she needed. We must have been sitting in the same position for about ten minutes when Harlow hissed through her teeth and sat bolt upright. Her hands went to her stomach.

"Catriona. Oh, God." She let out a scream. "Oh, God, it hurts."

The baby. Christ, please, not now.

"Hold on. I'll get someone." I raced down the corridor to the nurses' station at the far end. It was empty. There wasn't even a bell I could ring.

"Help!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. "Woman in labor. Hurry!"

My hollering had the desired effect. Three nurses came dashing toward me from different directions.

"My friend. She's in the waiting area. She's six months' pregnant and is holding her stomach, saying it hurts."

Two nurses took off running, and I sprinted after them. By the time we arrived, Harlow was doubled over, making these

dreadful wailing noises. One of the nurses crouched down and placed her hands on Harlow's knees.

"What's her name," the other nurse asked.

"Harlow. Harlow Ellis."

"Hey, Harlow. I'm Sondra. Can you tell me where it hurts?"

"My tummy and my back." She gasped, and her face twisted in agony. I wrung my hands, feeling utterly useless. Would this nightmare never end? If Harlow lost her baby *and* Oliver...

No. Stop thinking like that. It'll be okay. It had to be. There wasn't a gentler, kinder person than Harlow. If a higher power existed, they wouldn't allow this to happen to someone like her.

Except... bad things happened to good people all the time. There were no guarantees of a happily ever after.

"Okay, honey," Sondra said after examining Harlow. "I think you're in labor."

"It's too soon!" Harlow cried, her voice shrill with fright.

"I know. Just breathe for me. We'll get you up to the maternity ward and give you something to stop the labor. Okay?"

The color drained from her face, and her breaths burst in and out of her at lightning speed. A porter appeared with a gurney, and the nurse helped Harlow onto it. Her face etched with pain, she grasped for my hand.

"Take care of the kids," she repeated. "And pray for Oliver."

As they wheeled Harlow toward the elevators, my knees trembled. I sank into a chair and raked my fingers through my hair. This was a nightmare. God, I wished I had my phone. I couldn't do this on my own. Where was everyone? Why weren't they here?

"Catriona."

Belle came dashing toward me. I rose on shaky legs and flung myself at her.

“Harlow’s in labor. They just took her... they just... and they’re operating on Oliver. His brain won’t stop swelling.”

“Oh no,” she whispered. Helping me back to my seat, she put her arms around me. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here. It took forever to find someone to look after Buddy, but I’m here now. The others will be here soon. I think Ryker is organizing cell phones for us all so we can keep in touch.” She squeezed my fingers. “Garen?”

“He’s okay. Second degree burns on his hands and his chest, but he’ll be fine.”

“Thank God,” she breathed. “How did this happen?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Tyke?”

“No sign.” The skin around her eyes tightened. “But that’s not important right now.”

“Yes, it is,” I argued. “I know there are people out there who say things like ‘it’s just a dog’, but they don’t understand. He isn’t ‘just a dog’ to you. He’s your baby. You’re allowed to be scared, Belle. You’re allowed to be upset that he’s missing.”

Her face softened into a smile. “I love you. We’re going to get through this. Oliver will be fine. Harlow will be fine. I just know it.”

I wished I had her positivity, but I couldn’t shake this feeling that our lives wouldn’t ever be the same again.

RYKER

As I climbed out of the taxi, the acrid smell of smoke lingered in the wintry air, and the charred remains of Garen's pet project still smoldered. Police had set up yellow and black tape around the perimeter of the hotel warning trespassers to stay out. How was a flimsy piece of tape supposed to stop that?

At least the fire was out, but the building was unsalvageable. We'd have to knock it down and start from scratch, if we even bothered. That was a tomorrow problem, though. My main concern right now was Oliver, Garen, and finding out what the fuck happened to our brand-new hotel.

Chief Gardner still hadn't arrived, so I took the opportunity to call Sherry and make a few changes to the press release she'd drafted and emailed to me overnight. She made them while we were on the phone, then sent me an updated copy. I read it through, replied that I approved, and instructed her to release it through the main news channels immediately before they got wind of what had happened through other means. It wouldn't stop them from descending on this town in their hordes, but it would give me the opportunity to reply with "no further comment" while the fire department carried out their investigations.

The crunch of snow chains on the compacted icy roads alerted me to the fire chief's arrival. I waited for him to get out

of his vehicle and join me in front of the hotel, and I shook his proffered hand. “Chief.”

“Mr. Stone. How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve chain-smoked a thousand cigarettes.”

On cue, another bout of coughing hit me. Gardner waited until I’d recovered, then said, “It’ll take a few weeks, but each day will be better than the last.”

“Good to know.” I gestured to the hotel. “So, what happens now?”

“My team are on their way. We carried out an initial investigation last night, but it’ll be easier in daylight. A building this size will take a while to thoroughly search, though, so the answers you’re seeking might take a few days.”

“Takes what it takes, Chief,” I said, refraining from letting my impatience show. It wouldn’t make him move any faster. “Do you have any initial observations?”

“I’d rather not speculate, Mr. Stone. I have some theories, but I find in these cases, it’s better to deal in facts. As soon as I have solid information on the cause of the fire, I guarantee you’ll be the first to know.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.” I returned my gaze to the hotel. “What a fucking mess.”

“Yeah. Fire and water are two of the most destructive elements on earth, but fire... she leaves clues. All we have to do is follow them and she’ll lead us to the answer.”

I arched a brow. “She?”

He grinned. “Fire reminds me of my ex-wife. Beautiful to look at, but get in her way and she’d burn your balls to a crisp.”

A chuckle rumbled through my chest. “Got it.” I jerked my chin. “Mind if I take a walk around the exterior?”

“Yes, I mind.” His lips lifted on one side. “Until our investigations are complete, this is my patch.”

“Fair enough.” I studied the scorched remains once more. “Don’t envy you your job, Chief.”

“I’ve seen far worse and still figured out what started it. Like I said, fire leaves clues, which is why I don’t want you tramping around and possibly destroying evidence.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “I promise I’ll call the second I find anything.”

“Good man.” I shook his hand once more and made my way over to my car. Fortunately, the parking lot was far enough away from the hotel that our cars had survived the flames. Athena should have handed out the cell phones I’d had delivered to the hotel this morning. I got in, started the engine to keep me warm, and called up the number allocated to Sebastian. Until we ported our old numbers, these temporary ones would have to do. He answered on the first ring.

“Where are you?”

“At the hospital,” came his husky reply. We were all suffering from the effects of the smoke. “Are you at our hotel?”

“Yeah. Just met with the fire chief. No answers yet. I’m on my way to the hospital now.”

“Fair warning. The place is swarming with journalists.” He sounded wearier than I’d heard him in a while, not that I blamed him. I was running on rapidly depleting stores of adrenaline myself.

“Great. Didn’t take them long to smell a juicy story. I only just gave Sherry the approval to wire the press release. What did you say?”

“Absolutely nothing. Just elbowed my way through and silently cheered when one of them lost his footing, slipped on a patch of ice, and smashed his camera.”

I smiled. “That’s enough to cheer up the worst of days. How’s Oliver?”

“He went into surgery this morning.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Apparently the drugs they gave him to reduce the swelling on his brain weren’t working, so they’re gonna remove part of his skull to give it room to grow... or something like that.”

“Jesus Christ.” My stomach pulled uncomfortably tight. I’d somehow convinced myself that he’d be fine. That they’d treat his burns and he’d be back to his usual self in no time. But surgery was a whole other level. What if he ended up with brain damage? What if he didn’t make it at all?

“There’s more bad news.”

The weight of the world landed on my shoulders. I bowed under the burden of it. Running a hand over my face, I asked, “What now?”

“Harlow went into early labor.”

“Ah, fuck.”

“Right? Catriona was with her when it happened. She’s on the maternity ward. Trinity’s sitting with her so Catriona can go back to the hotel and get some rest. She was up all night with Garen.”

“And how’s he doing?” I figured that if Catriona had left his side, it was good news.

“Back to his usual self. I called in to his room a few minutes ago, and he’s already griping about getting the hell out of here.”

Relief swamped me. One less person to worry about. “I can’t blame him. I felt the same myself.”

“Oh, and he said to tell you to get your ass here and tell him what’s going on with his hotel.”

I laughed at that. “*His* hotel? Since when did he have a majority share in the company?”

“You know Garen. The hotel business is his baby.”

Yeah, I did know that, and I dreaded telling him that a project he’d personally designed and overseen from beginning to end was unsalvageable. He’d know it was bad, but last night

was such a clusterfuck, there might be a part of him still hoping for the best.

“I’ll be there soon.”

I hung up and began the tricky drive down the mountain, back toward town. Oliver. Fuck. And Harlow, too. What the hell was up with this fucking universe? They were the last people on Earth who deserved a pile of stinking shit dumped on their heads. But Oliver was strong as fuck. If anyone could come through this, it was him. He had to, for Christ’s sake. He had a family who needed him, and, selfish as it may have seemed, I wasn’t only thinking of Harlow, Annie, Patsy, and the unborn baby I prayed to fuck survived. I was talking about us: ROGUES. We worked as a unit. It took all six of us to make this company work. If one wasn’t around... the entire structure would collapse.

He had to make it. Dammit, he would fucking make it.

Parking at the hospital proved impossible, so I left the car on a side street a few minutes’ walk away. As I approached the entrance, the swarm of journalists moved in sync, crowding around me, demanding answers I didn’t have. I kept my head down, my elbows out, and repeated “No further comment” over and over until I broke through the crowd and made my way inside the hospital.

“Fuckers,” I muttered, my comment coaxing a faint smile from a security guard stationed on my right. I dipped my chin in acknowledgement of his solidarity, and marched to the bank of elevators. My mind churned as I rode up to Garen’s room on the fifth floor. Athena was in the waiting room talking to Elliot, but no one else was around. I pulled her into a hug as she stood to greet me. When the adrenaline receded, I’d need her more than I’d ever needed her before. I was running on endorphins, but once they dwindled, I’d crash. I could feel it coming, but I had to hold on a little longer. Just a little longer.

“Where is everyone?” I asked Elliot, still clinging to Athena as if she was a life vest and I’d drown without her in my arms.

“Catriona has gone to the hotel to get some rest, even though she didn’t want to. She was dead on her feet after sitting with Garen all night. Belle and Upton were here earlier, but they’ve gone looking for Tyke. Sage is with Patsy and Annie. They’re being released today, so she’ll take them back to the hotel with her.”

“Okay, good. Any signs of Oliver’s mom?”

“Her cruise is due to dock in St. Maarten today. Sebastian has arranged a plane to fly her to the local airport here. Hopefully, she’ll arrive sometime this afternoon.”

I blew out a breath. “Here’s hoping she arrives to positive news.” Pinching the bridge of my nose, I bowed my head. “It’s all such a mess, Elliot.” Athena clung to me. I kissed her hair.

“We’ll get through it. We’ll *all* get through it.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Leaving Athena with her brother, I headed down the hall to Garen’s room. Tapping once on the door, I entered. He was sitting up in bed, a tray of disgusting, congealed eggs, burnt bacon, and toast that had barely seen the toaster in front of him. Both his hands were heavily bandaged, making holding silverware a challenge. I let out a one-note laugh.

“Is your nurse paying you back for being a shitty patient?”

He pushed the tray away. “As if I’d eat that crap even if I did have working hands.”

“Can’t say I blame you. If you’re hungry, I can send someone out for edible food.”

“Nah. Not sure I could eat, anyway.” Worry drew his brows low, and his gaze flitted about the room, settling on anything other than my face. “I think I fucked up, Ryker.”

I pulled the guest chair closer to his bed and sat down. “What do you mean?”

“The fire. I think it’s my fault.”

“Why the fuck would you think that?” He still wouldn’t look at me.

“I’ve been... distracted lately. There were certain things I didn’t check as thoroughly as I should have done. I delegated more than I’m usually comfortable with because I couldn’t find the fucking energy to deal with every goddamn thing.”

Garen had been a control freak since the day I met him. He had to delegate—the business he ran inside ROGUES was far too large not to—but he hated it, working ridiculously long hours, taking on more than he should and handing off as little as he could to his team.

“Do you want to talk about the cause of this distraction?”

“No.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “That’s cool. If you change your mind, you know where I am. But I’m still not following how this could have been your fault. We have processes in place, Garen. Procedures that are followed to ensure nothing comes down to one man, even if that man is you.” I flashed a quick grin. It worried me that he didn’t respond with one of his own.

“I can’t give you hard facts, but I have this thing in my gut, this ball of anxiety that is telling me I dropped the ball. I don’t know how, but it’s telling me that I failed, and it’s my fault Oliver is in surgery and Harlow might lose her fucking baby. All because I didn’t do my fucking job right.”

I carefully weighed up my words before speaking. The last thing I wanted was to worry him further, or give him more ammunition to flog himself with. “I don’t buy it, Garen. It wasn’t only the fire, but the sprinkler system never kicked in, and the fire alarm didn’t sound. If either of those things had happened, the fire wouldn’t have taken hold, and everyone would have gotten out safely.”

“But what if they’re all connected? What if it’s like... I missed something in the... oh, I don’t know, the electrics that the sprinklers and the alarms rely on, and that one tiny mistake caused this fucking disaster.” He sank farther into the pillows, his eyes on the ceiling. “If Oliver dies, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“Hey!” I punched his arm, and not lightly, either. Maybe I should’ve gone easier on him, considering what he’d been through, but fuck that. Garen was a shoot-‘em-between-the-eyes kind of guy. He wouldn’t respect me if I treated him with kid gloves. “Shut the fuck up, you idiot. This is not on you. If something went wrong that was within our control, then we’ll fix the process failing that led to it. But, Jesus Christ Almighty, dickhead, I’ll say it louder for those at the back. A project this size cannot rest on the shoulders of one man. Even if that man does think he’s a fucking genius.”

My last comment earned me the faintest of smiles. “*Is a fucking genius. Get it right, jerkweed.*”

I grinned and punched him again. “Better. Now, until the fire chief discovers the cause, quit with the self-flagellation. It’s pointless. And despite your many, *many* faults, lack of logic isn’t one of them.”

“You’re bringing the positivity this morning, I see.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“Lucky me.”

“You know it.” I got to my feet, squeezing his shoulder. “As soon as the chief gets back to me with some answers, I promise you’ll be the first to know.”

“I appreciate that.”

As I crossed over to the door, he called out to me. “Hey, Ryker?”

I glanced back. “Yeah?”

“Is it a write-off?”

No point in sugarcoating it. “Yeah.”

He let out a hard sigh and closed his eyes. “Damn.”

“We’ll fix this.”

Saying nothing, he turned to face the wall. I quietly closed the door, resting my head against it. I felt my strength ebbing away, but I couldn’t crumble yet. Too many people were

relying on me to hold it together, but damn if I didn't want to put my head in my hands and weep.

RYKER

The sound of beeping machines monitoring the severely sick patients inside the ICU was audible, even through the thick glass. I stared at Oliver, his head and chest swathed in bandages, as a nurse stood beside him, taking his vitals. She caught sight of me and pointed at him. I nodded. She wrote something on his chart, then beckoned to me. I went inside.

“How is he?”

“Stable.”

Ah, stable. The medical professional’s favorite word.

“He came through the operation just fine,” she continued. “His surgeon was happy with how it went, but we’ll keep him sedated for the next twenty-four hours, just to give his body the time it needs to start the healing process.”

“So... he’ll recover?”

“He has every chance. We’ll know more when he wakes. But talk to him. There’s lots of evidence to show that unconscious patients can still hear.”

“What about the burns to his chest?”

“They’re severe, but we’re treating them. Right now, he seems to be responding well.”

“Okay, great.” Not great. Not at all great. At least his mom was on the flight from St. Maarten. She’d arrive sometime this evening. I felt ridiculous holding his hand, but I did it anyway.

“Hey, bud. It’s me. Ryker. Jesus, the fucking trouble you’re causing. When you wake up, I’m gonna kick your ass. You hear me?”

The nurse smiled, retreating to give me a little privacy. I took a seat in an uncomfortable plastic chair by the side of his bed. Why didn’t they provide some cushioning? It was as if they wanted to actively discourage long visits.

“Harlow misses you. She can’t come right now, but she’s okay. The baby, too.” I hoped that was true. “Annie and Patsy are fine, as well. Everyone is fine. We just want you to get better, so that’s your job, right? Your only job is to get better and get back to fucking work. There’s a lot to do.”

Emotion clogged my throat. I rested my head on the blankets tucked in around his body. “Fuck, Oliver. You’d better make it. Please, just hang on. You cannot leave Harlow or the girls. You cannot leave me with Garen. Everyone knows you’re the only one who can handle him, and right now, I need you, bud. I fucking need you.” I jerked as a hand touched my shoulder, the familiar wedding band and huge diamond ring telling me it was my wife. I got up and wrapped my arms around her, resting my chin on the top of her head.

“I’m worried about you, Ryker.”

“I’m okay. Tough guy, remember?”

“You’re far from okay. I know you think everyone is relying on you to be the leader, to find a way through this, but I want you to know that when you’re ready to fall, I’ll catch you. I’ll always catch you.”

The last time I cried was when the nurse put Mia in my arms, and the time before that when Ethan was born. I wasn’t big on the whole wearing my heart on my sleeve, but as Athena’s quiet support hit home, my eyes stung with unshed tears. I knew, though, that if I let them fall now, they wouldn’t

stop. I couldn't afford to let the others know how close to the edge I was, or how helpless and out of control I felt.

"I know." Kissing the top of her head, I drew back. "I'm going to see Harlow and do what I can to reassure her that he's doing well and is in good hands."

"I think she'll like that. Want me to come?"

"Could you sit with Oliver for a little while?" I hated the idea of him being alone, and there were more than enough of us to make sure that didn't happen.

"Of course."

I crossed the ICU, glancing back at her as I reached the door. She was holding Oliver's hand and talking to him, although I was too far away to hear what she was saying. She must have sensed me looking because she met my eyes. The emotion swimming in her amber irises almost broke me. I blew her a kiss and left.

It took me a while to find the maternity ward, and even longer for a nurse to answer the buzzer and let me in. After asking for directions, I made my way to Harlow's room. The door was closed, but when I peered through the glass panel, Trinity spotted me and motioned me inside.

Harlow spoke before I could get a word out. "How is he? They won't tell me anything here."

It didn't surprise me that she was more worried about him than about herself. Sometimes I wondered what we'd all done to earn the love of these women, each one a fucking angel.

"He came through the operation. He's sedated but doing well. They're hoping to reduce the sedation tomorrow. Once he's awake, they'll know more."

She squeezed her eyes closed, and while her lips moved, no sound came out.

"He's a fighter, Harlow. He'd never leave you and the kids."

"I keep telling her that," Trinity said.

“I had a dream he died.” Harlow’s voice was almost a whisper, as if saying the words out loud might make them come true.

“He isn’t going to die.” I probably shouldn’t have said that. I wasn’t a medic, and Oliver had suffered a major head trauma, as well as severe burns, which even I knew carried an infection risk. But I had a feeling in my gut that he’d make it.

“I need to see him, but these stupid nurses won’t let me get out of bed.”

Trinity cut her gaze to me, the single shake of her head communicating that Harlow was bedbound on doctor’s orders. I crouched beside her bed, bringing myself eye level with her.

“Sweetheart, your job right now is to take care of that baby you’ve got growing inside you. Oliver would want that, too. If the nurses tell you it’s bed rest for the foreseeable, then you’ll just have to deal. Liv is on her way.”

Harlow’s eyes lit up at the news her mother-in-law had cut short her vacation to be by their side. They had a special bond, made more special because Harlow was estranged from her own parents.

“Oh, thank God.”

“Exactly. And we’re all here for him, and for you. There’s more than enough of us to go around to make sure no one is alone unless they want to be.”

The door behind me opened. Patsy and Annie rushed inside, launching themselves at Harlow. Sage dashed in behind them, throwing her hands in the air.

“Girls, easy! Your mom is poorly.”

Harlow burst into tears, throwing her arms around both girls. “Oh, Annie, Patsy.” Her sobbing grew louder, and once the girls joined in, the sound of three people’s wailing almost deafened me, yet I could not wipe the smile off my face. At last, there was a little bit of good news—something to celebrate. I cocked my head at Sage and Trinity, and the three of us left the family alone to get reacquainted.

“I told them to take it easy,” Sage said. “Why do kids never listen?”

I chuckled. “I think it’s in the DNA.”

“I’ll hang around here in case Harlow gets tired and needs me to take Annie and Patsy off her hands,” Trinity said. “You guys go. I’ve got this.”

“Did Athena give you a cell?” I asked.

She nodded. “If I need anything, I’ll call.” Returning inside Harlow’s room, she closed the door.

I slung my arm around Sage’s shoulder. “How are you holding up?”

She squinted up at me. “How are *you* holding up?”

The woman always was too astute for her own good. Bet Elliot couldn’t get a single thing past her. Then again, I couldn’t slide much past Athena, either.

“Teetering on the edge.”

“I thought as much. It isn’t your responsibility to shoulder everyone’s worries, you know? You’re not a robot.” A quick flash of her teeth prepared me for a moment of teasing. “Most of the time.”

I grunted a laugh. “For that, you can buy me lunch.”



Liv arrived a little after five in the evening, and just having her here to take some of the pressure off made me feel lighter. Between Judy and Karl taking care of the kids, and Liv with her quiet strength, I counted myself fortunate that they were in our lives. Even though I was a grown assed adult with children of my own, having my in-laws and Oliver’s mom here bolstered my spirits. My mother had wanted to come, too, but I’d persuaded her not to. Every year, at this time, she went on vacation with her best friend Portia, who was a lovely woman but overly exuberant, and the last thing any of us needed was Portia’s special brand of morale boosting gaiety.

I was about to suggest to Athena that we return to the hotel to see the children and grab some food when my phone rang. I answered it, my stomach hardening when I heard the chief's gravelly voice on the other end.

"You have news?"

"Preliminary findings, yes, although there's a ways to go yet."

"And?" I coaxed, holding my breath.

"The fire seems to have been caused by a short in the electrical system, which might be the reason why the sprinkler system didn't activate and no alarms sounded, although I don't have conclusive evidence yet. We're also still looking into how it spread so fast, but no answers on that, either."

"Do electrical systems just short out like that, in your experience?"

"In properties with aged wiring, yes, it can happen. But this was a new build. It seems unlikely to me."

"Then, what caused it?"

I could have sworn he sighed, and I imagined him rolling his eyes and thinking uncharitable thoughts.

"Like I said, Mr. Stone, we're still investigating. I promised to keep you updated, and that's what I'm doing, but you're going to have to try to be patient while we work through everything. As soon as I know more, I'll call you."

He hung up without waiting for my response. I stared at the phone for a few seconds as if I could magically make it ring again and this time he'd have all the answers for me. It remained stubbornly silent.

"Who was that?" Athena asked.

"The fire chief." Breathing heavily through my nose, I added, "Looks like there was a problem with the electrical circuitry, but that's as much as he could tell me." I stuck my phone in my pocket and clasped Athena's hips, resting my forehead against hers. "I've a feeling I could be stuck in this town a while. I think you should take the kids back to New

York after Christmas. I don't want them living in that hotel for days or even weeks on end."

"I'm not leaving you." She pulled back so she could give me one of her special stubborn looks. "But I agree about the kids. I'll talk to Mom and see if she'll take them home with her."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Is that your way of saying I've been extra clingy?"

A smile lifted the corners of my mouth. "Would I?" Closing my eyes, I soaked up my wife's everlasting strength. "What should we do about the kids' presents?" Everything had burned in the fire. "They'll be so disappointed."

Athena chuckled softly. "They're two and six months old, Ryker. I think it's you that's disappointed."

She wasn't wrong. Last Christmas, Ethan had been too young to appreciate the mountain of gifts he received, but this year was meant to be the first time he could actively participate. Tomorrow should have been a day of celebration surrounded by the people who meant the most to us. Some celebration we'd have now.

"Fair point, but I don't want them to have nothing to open. And what about Annie and Patsy? They're a lot older."

She rubbed her hands up and down my arms. "What about this? You go and tell Garen what the fire chief has found out so far and try to pry his fingertips off the blame ledge, and I'll run into town and pick up a few small gifts. It won't be much, but it'll be something. Although the best gift Annie and Patsy could have would be for Oliver to wake up and be okay."

"I know. But let's see what we can do to at least give them a few hours of happiness."

"Leave it with me. I'll meet you back at the hotel."

She moved away, but I pulled her back into my arms. "I love you, Mrs. Stone." Lowering my head, I kissed her. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

“I’d never leave you.” She walked away, but not before tossing over her shoulder, “You’re too good in bed.”

I laughed, my eyes staying on her until she vanished from sight, and for a few moments afterward. Despite what had happened over the last thirty-six hours, I was a lucky bastard. My wife was my rock, my support structure, my soft place to fall. As soon as this was over, I’d take her somewhere amazing and treat her like the fucking queen she was.

Garen had his eyes closed when I entered his room, but he opened them before I’d shut the door. Using his elbows, he struggled to push himself upright. I left him to it. He wouldn’t thank me if I tried to help. Quite the opposite, and that fork on his dinner tray was a little too close to hand, even with thick bandages hindering him.

Launching straight into my news, I said, “The fire chief called.”

Garen paled a little beneath the light tan he’d caught when we’d gone skiing... yesterday. Christ, it felt more like a month ago.

“And?”

“Looks like a short in the electrical circuits. He doesn’t know the cause yet. Still nothing on why the sprinkler system didn’t kick in, nor the alarms, or why it spread like a California brush fire, but what this does show is that it was nothing to do with you.”

“How do you figure that?” Garen snapped. “From where I’m sitting, a short in the electrics sounds like a botch job, and as CEO of ROGUES Hotels, it’s my fucking job to make sure our contractors deliver quality work.”

“Oh, that’s right.” I clapped a hand to my forehead in exaggerated fashion. “I forgot you were a fully qualified electrician. How stupid of me.”

His lips thinned, and I could have sworn his eyes volleyed to the fork. I shifted back a couple feet just in case my sarcasm made him extra stabby.

“My company. My job. My fucking fault.”

I heaved a sigh. Maybe I'd be the one to use that fork on him. His shitty attitude was making *me* feel extra stabby. "Don't be an asshole. Well, no more than you usually are. You can't fucking check every damn thing, especially where you don't have the knowledge. If this is a botch job by the contracting firm you hired, then we'll deal with that via our lawyers. But we don't know enough yet to make that call."

"When will we know?"

I shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, but while we wait for the investigation to unfold, do me a fucking favor and stop flogging yourself with that invisible whip. You're getting on my tits."

His lips moved upward into the faintest of smiles. "Well, your man boobs are growing in, so that's a possibility."

"Screw you. They are not." I flexed my pecs. "I'm as fucking ripped as I ever was."

"Sure, sure."

"You are a gigantic dick."

A glint shone in his eye. Garen lived to taunt me. To be fair, he lived to taunt just about everyone, including Catriona. Considering how their relationship began, it still surprised me he'd lived this long.

The lady herself chose that moment to appear. I hadn't seen her since the paramedics loaded me into the ambulance. She moved in to hug me. Garen growled. I laughed, holding onto his wife a little longer.

"Your man is showing his green," I said, kissing the top of her head.

"Her man is plotting how to bury your body if you don't let my girl go."

"You guys will be the death of me." She slipped out of my hold and perched on the edge of Garen's bed. "Better?"

"Marginally," he grunted.

I rolled my eyes. "Like I said. Dick."

“You call me the minute that chief finds out what the fuck happened.”

I nodded, offering a silent prayer that when the answers came, they absolved Garen of any wrongdoing, because if he found a reason to blame himself, I wasn't sure he'd ever recover.

ATHENA

Twelve adults, four kids, and several Christmas presents crammed into my parents' two-room family suite was a tight fit, but we made it work. Yet despite the jolly atmosphere, I couldn't shake the empty space in my heart that four of our friends weren't here.

Garen had hoped his doctor would release him today, but Catriona called first thing to say he'd been told it would be another couple of days at least. I pitied the poor doctor who'd given Garen that particular slice of bad news. He wasn't the kind to hold back when something pissed him off, and having to stay in the hospital over the holidays fell squarely into that bracket.

Catriona, rightly, wanted to spend Christmas with Garen, Harlow was still on bed rest after her early labor scare, and Oliver remained under sedation. Poor Liv was spending Christmas Day running between her son's intensive care bed and the maternity ward to cheer up Harlow. At least we could provide a little joy for Annie and Patsy. They deserved it after what they'd been through. My stomach dropped every time I thought about what might have happened to them, and to my own kids.

"Oh, I love it, Aunty Athena," Patsy exclaimed when she opened the metallic nail salon I'd bought for her. "You're the best."

She got up from where she'd been sitting cross-legged on the floor and flung her arms around me. My mind fast-forwarded to when Mia reached this age. I guess I was getting practice in early. While shopping for Patsy and Annie, I'd come to realize it was a heck of a lot easier to buy gifts for kids Ethan and Mia's age. Tweens were a problem, and the shops here didn't have anywhere near the range I'd find in the large department stores in New York.

"I'm glad you love it."

The wireless cat headphones I'd bought for Annie were also a hit, although I'd stored up trouble for Harlow and Oliver. Annie had been asking them for a kitten for months, and so far they'd resisted. I bet she'd double down on her efforts now, and something told me they'd give her whatever she wanted after everything that had happened.

After all the presents had been opened, and Mom had cleared the room of discarded gift wrap, we took the kids out for a walk in the snow, more to kill time than for any other reason. Ryker had managed, somehow, to find a restaurant a few miles away that could accommodate a party of our size for Christmas lunch. When I'd asked him how he'd swung it, he'd winked, tapped the side of his nose, and told me that money talked.

The small town we were camped in was pretty much deserted, the store and café owners likely all enjoying Christmas with their families. Annie and Patsy gathered snowballs and began tossing them in rapid fire succession at the adults, their laughter echoing through the empty streets. It filled my heart with hope rather than the fear that had tormented me since the fire the night before last. I wondered how long it would take before I'd relax. Probably when Oliver was up and about, and Harlow safely delivered her baby.

My *fix everything* husband had arranged transportation to take us to the restaurant so the adults could have a drink. Or three. I honestly did not know what any of us would have done without him these last couple of days, but at the same time, his dogged determination to be all things to all people worried me. Just like everyone else, he was only human, and a crash was

surely coming. I kept watching him like a hawk, reading his body language, looking for signs of the horrible events we'd all gone through taking their toll on him. As soon as the kids left for New York with my mom and dad tomorrow, I'd sit him down and make him talk to me.

Not an easy thing to accomplish, knowing my husband the way I did.

The restaurant owners had decked the place out with tons of Christmas cheer, and watching everyone talk, laugh, and be, well, normal, lifted my mood. Until I caught Ryker staring out the window when he thought no one was watching him. He looked so darned tired and somber, and something else, too. Defeated.

I changed my mind about waiting for the kids to leave with Mom and Dad. This couldn't wait.

"Hey." I touched his arm, and he jumped, almost as if he'd gotten so lost in his thoughts, he'd forgotten where he was. "Get the check. We'll swing by the hospital for an hour or so, then we're having some alone time."

His lips flickered up. "Can't resist me, huh?"

I narrowed my eyes, lowering my voice. "Ryker."

Nodding, he let out a heavy sigh. "I know." He touched his head to mine. "I'm crashing, Thea."

"I'm aware, which is the reason we're leaving. You've done enough. It's time to take care of yourself. To let me take care of you."

He showed just how low he felt by not arguing with me. After we'd paid for lunch, I asked Mom and Dad to take Ethan and Mia back to the hotel while the rest of us went to the hospital to spend a little bit of Christmas Day with our friends.

When we arrived, the news was slightly better. Harlow wasn't showing any more signs of early onset labor, Garen was being an all-round grouch, which meant he was feeling a hell of a lot better, and the doctors had withdrawn Oliver's sedation, meaning he should begin to wake up in the next day or so. Maybe before. It wasn't an exact science, apparently.

I allowed Ryker the time to check up on everyone, then gave Sage word that I was taking him back to the hotel. He drove in silence, his brow furrowed. One of the best and worst things about Ryker was that he always wanted to lead, to be the one everyone turned to in a crisis. He couldn't abide weakness, in himself or in others, so he pushed himself to his limits far too often. But this latest crisis had pushed him *beyond* his limits. I should have stepped in earlier, even if he'd have fought me and we'd have ended up having an argument, which was the last thing either of us needed.

The second we entered our hotel room, Ryker headed straight for the bathroom. He closed the door behind him, a signal that he needed a few moments alone. I sent a message to Mom asking after the kids. I despised the idea of Mom taking them back to New York where I couldn't hold them, kiss them, or get my fill of Mia's special baby smell whenever I wanted. But Ethan was already getting bored living in such confined quarters. At Mom's house, he'd have room to run about and let off steam.

The makeup I'd applied to present myself as something close to half-human for the children's sake clogged my pores. I sat at the cramped dresser and removed it. As I dropped the used cotton balls into the trash can, Ryker came out of the bathroom. Our gazes met in the mirror. I couldn't read his expression, so I waited for him to say something first.

He sidled up behind me, sweeping my hair over one shoulder. Lowering his head, his lips brushed my nape. I closed my eyes, losing myself in the feel of his mouth as he dropped kisses along my shoulder.

"Are you okay?" I whispered.

"I will be." He unzipped my dress, his knuckles tracing each vertebra in my spine.

"What can I do?"

He helped me to my feet, turning me toward him. His eyes were like the ocean on a warm, summer's day, a wonderfully vibrant blue, but the faintly bruised skin beneath them told a different story.

“Let me love you.”

His mouth captured mine with the kind of desperation and raw need from our earliest encounters when we'd hidden our relationship from everyone we knew. Rough hands shoved my dress to the floor, and my bra went pop. I feathered my fingers through his hair, gently massaging his scalp. A low groan rumbled through his chest. Lifting me, he carried me over to the bed and lay me on top of the covers. He braced his knees on either side of my thighs and gazed down at me. His body was still, but his eyes burned with yearning and a hunger I craved to satisfy.

“Forgotten what to do?” I teased. Having two kids had curtailed our sex life somewhat. It was a lot harder to be spontaneous when a toddler might inadvertently wander into your bedroom, or the plaintive cry from a baby interrupted you right on the cusp of orgasm. Having sex twice in three days—with a fun fumble in the snow in between—was a record since I'd given birth to Mia.

“You and the kids... you're my reason for living.” He pulled his gaze away from me. “If I'd lost you...” His voice cracked.

“Ryker, it's okay.” I sat upright, hugging him as tightly as I could, wishing I could squeeze the pain and distress from his body and his mind. Ryker's greatest strength was also his biggest weakness. He never knew when to quit or when to turn to someone else for help. “We're safe. Nothing's going to happen to us.”

“I can't get it out of my mind, Thea.” His voice was muffled from where he'd buried his face in my neck. “Racing into that burning building, knowing the kids were in there.”

“But you got them out.” I kissed his hair. “You saved them.”

“How are you being so strong?”

“I borrowed it from you,” I whispered. “It's your turn to lean on me for a change instead of me and everyone else always leaning on you.”

His shoulders shook, and for a second, I thought he was laughing at me, and any minute, he'd call me out for being a softy. It was only when he made a strangled sound that I realized he was crying.

“Oh, Ryker. Babe, I've got you. I've got you.” I lay down, pulling him with me, and I held him while he finally let go of the crippling fears that had tormented him for the last two days, the toxicity of panic he'd held inside while he took care of everyone but himself. I'd seen him cry when the kids were born but not like this. Never like this. The sobs consumed his entire body as he fisted his hands in my hair as though he'd die if he didn't hang on. I stroked his back, comforting him as much as I did when consoling the children, my heart shattering along with his.

This wouldn't be easy for Ryker, to show such vulnerability, even in front of me. But the fact that he had showed the strength of our bond. More concerning for me, though, was that it exposed how deeply affected he was by what had happened at the hotel. It would take him a while to process this, and there was a high possibility he might need a therapist—something I did *not* look forward to suggesting.

His breathing slowed, as did the violent shaking, and he rolled to the side but kept his face tucked into my neck. I lay there, silent, letting him guide me on whether he wanted to stay quiet or talk it out. He kissed directly below my earlobe, his lips traveling to my shoulder. His hand curved around my right breast, and he brushed his thumb over my nipple. I hissed a breath as it peaked under his touch.

“Let me love you,” he repeated, his voice husky from the remnants of smoke inhalation and the after-effects of crying. “I need you.”

“I'm yours. Always.”

The second the words left my lips, my dominant, assertive husband reappeared, the show of vulnerability scattering as fast as a crisp leaf in a brisk wind. He gripped both my hands in one of his and pushed them over my head, kissing, sucking, and biting my breasts and my nipples until I couldn't think,

couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. I let lust consume me until the nightmare of the last few days faded.

He shrugged out of his clothes, pushing inside me with a single thrust and a throaty grunt. I cried out, digging my fingernails into his shoulders. I braced myself for a pounding. It never came. Buried inside me, Ryker stopped moving. He raised up on his forearms and locked eyes with me.

“Tell me you love me, Thea.”

I cupped his cheeks. “I love you. I love you so much.”

Bringing his face closer to mine, I met him halfway, sealing my lips over his. He made a sound in his throat, half agony, half ecstasy. Pulling out slowly, he eased himself back in. He stopped kissing me, looking deep into my eyes, blue on amber. Each time he bottomed out, he slowly blinked as if the pleasure was too much, exhaling a heavy breath before withdrawing once more. With each push inside, he grazed my clit, driving me crazy until I begged him to go faster. In response, he merely smiled and slowed down.

“I need to come. Goddammit, Ryker.” I grimaced, clasp ing his butt, and angling my pelvis in a poor, and ultimately doomed, attempt to force him to do what I wanted.

“You will, baby. You will. But not yet.”

Running the tip of his nose down the length of mine, he winked. As happy as I was to see the return of my commanding husband, the ache in my belly demanded satisfaction—satisfaction he'd chosen to deny me.

I growled.

He laughed.

I pinched both his butt cheeks. Hard.

He laughed louder.

“There should be a law that says wives can punish their husbands if they deny them orgasms.”

Ryker faked a shiver. “Baby, you can punish me all day, every day. Twenty-four seven.” Lowering his head, he bit my

nipple, entering me lazily, once again.

“Ryker, please.”

“That’s it, Thea. Beg. I fucking love it when you beg.”

I fisted the sheets, clamping around his dick as hard as I could. He hissed, air whistling through his teeth. *Ha. Gotcha.* I pulsed.

He... he... he pulled out.

“What are you doing?”

“You want to play? Let’s play.”

Wriggling down the bed, he pushed my thighs as wide as they’d go and lapped at my soaked pussy. He kissed and tongued and blew warm air on every single part of my vagina, *except* my clit.

“Goddamn you,” I muttered.

I’d been married to Ryker for long enough to know he could happily set up camp right where he was. Most of the time, his desire to pleasure me was a definite plus. Tonight... it was a fricking nightmare, because he had both pleasure and pain on his mind, and he intended to draw this out until I was a sweaty, writhing mess, willing to do anything to reach climax.

I wouldn’t swear it under oath, but I might have passed out when he edged me for the fourth time. Either that, or I traveled to another dimension where I murdered him.

I mumbled something, but even I didn’t know what it was. Ryker chuckled, the sound vibrating against my clit, and the swell in my stomach peaked, but before I could reach for the release I craved, he stopped. Again.

“I hate you,” I muttered.

“And I love you, baby. So fucking much.”

He licked me as delicately as he might if he wasn’t sure he’d like the taste of something when what I needed was him to devour me as if I was his favorite meal. Pushing my pussy in his face only made him stop, but if I didn’t come soon, I might die—and that was *not* the way I wanted to go.

“Hanging in there?”

I ground my teeth and gave him a death glare that, for a normal person, would give them a warning I was reaching the end of my tether. Not Ryker. He grinned so wide his face might split open.

“God, I fucking love it when you’re mad at me. It turns me on.”

“I’m divorcing you,” I snapped.

He snickered. “You’d never divorce me. I’m too good in bed, remember?”

“I take back what I said. I take it all back.”

He blew on my clit, then ran his tongue around it where he knew I was most sensitive. I groaned, lifting my pelvis, seeking any kind of friction.

“Aww, my poor baby. You want to come, Thea?”

“Have I been talking in a foreign language all this time? Yes, I want to come. Fuck’s sake.”

A low chuckle rumbled through his chest. “You are magnificent.” He circled my clit with his tongue one last time, then wrapped pursed lips around it and sucked.

“Holy Christ!” My body detonated, splintering into a million pieces as he granted me the longed-for orgasm. All that denial resulted in a bed-shaking climax—one that went on and on, and through it all, Ryker didn’t stop licking me, petting me. Even when I tried to wriggle away, he held me in place, pleasuring me with his tongue, his teeth, and his fingers.

I came for a second time, my nerves strung tight, and still he wouldn’t release me. I was still coming when he entered me again, only this time there was no going slow. Ryker let go. One hand on the headboard, the other clamped around my throat, he pounded into me with ferocious need, the veins in his neck protruding as he tried not to come. Another swell grew in my stomach, and for the first time in my life, I feared my climax.

“God, not again.” I moaned, my body coiling, erupting, fracturing.

Ryker ground out my name, burying his face in my neck as his cock jerked and pulsed inside me. Gasping, he rolled to the side, his chest heaving, and sweat trickling down his temple. He reached for my hand and placed it over his heart, putting his hand on top of mine.

“You okay?” He sounded as if he’d sprinted up ten flights of stairs without stopping.

“I think I might be broken.” I wasn’t exactly in control of my breathing, either.

“Still want to divorce me?”

“That depends.”

He rolled onto his side. “On what?”

“On whether orgasm denial is going to be an ongoing part of your sexing routine.”

He burst out laughing. “I love you so fucking much, Thea. Come here.” Pulling me into his arms, he kissed me.

I snuggled closer. “Are you okay?”

“As long as you’re by my side, I’ll always be okay.”

RYKER

Two endlessly long days passed before Chief Gardner called me again, and it shamed me to admit that I greeted him with a less than professional attitude.

“About fucking time. I thought you’d left the goddamn state.”

Lucky for me, he was an amiable sort. He merely gave a low, one-note laugh, and replied with, “These things take time. Fire has her own agenda.”

I still thought it was weird that he referred to an element as female, but I wouldn’t put it past him to hang up on me if I called him on it.

“I hope this means you have news.”

“I do, yes.” He hesitated, and I held my breath.

When he didn’t say anything else, I prompted him. “Which is?”

“The electrical system was tampered with. Whoever was responsible knew what they were doing, because what they did also stopped the sprinkler from activating and the alarms sounding.”

Shock hit my chest, and I opened my mouth, then shut it. *The electrical system was tampered with.* Who the fuck would do that? Who’d even have access to tamper with it? Had a

rival company infiltrated the contracting firm Garen had hired? *No, don't be stupid.* We weren't in the mafia, for Christ's sake.

“There was also a significant amount of accelerant used on the top floor, which is why the fire spread so fast. It's a miracle no one died.”

No one died, but Oliver had come fucking close. Thankfully, he'd made it through the operation, and so far, knock on wood, was recovering well. The swelling in his brain had stopped, and plans were in place to replace the piece of skull they removed a few days ago, as soon as the medics were convinced the swelling had subsided.

“I've called the police,” he continued. “They'll want to speak with you, and your colleagues. The detective in charge is Detective Freeman. I've given her this number.”

“Thanks.” I swept a hand over my face. “I appreciate your efforts.”

“It's what we do. We should be finished up here in a day or so. I just want to check we haven't missed anything, then we'll hand the case over to the police.”

“Thanks again.” I hung up and sank onto the bed. Someone tampered with the electrics and almost killed my kids and my friends. If Athena and I hadn't been out looking at the stars and fooling around like a couple of teenagers, this bastard might have killed her, too.

My hands looped into fists, blood pounding in my ears. Whoever had done this would pay. I'd fucking see to it if it was the last thing I did.

I picked up my phone to preempt a call from the detective in charge of the case. After arranging to meet her at the local precinct, I then called Elliot and updated him. The stunned silence that greeted me over the phone line was an accurate representation of how I felt. I struggled to take it all in. Who hated one or more of us enough that they'd risk killing kids? I could not think of a single person I knew who was that evil.

I reached the precinct before Elliot, as he'd been at the hospital relieving Liv for a couple of hours. Athena was keeping Harlow company, and I decided not to tell her or any of the others what the chief had said until I'd spoken with the police and gotten a handle on what this might mean. The last thing I wanted was to scare her into thinking someone out there wished us harm.

My email inbox was crammed with messages from journalists, all asking for an exclusive interview. Patricia, my executive assistant, had marked them all for my attention. I deleted every single one, then sent her a text to instantly delete any others that came in.

Goddamn fucking journalists. The last thing I needed was for one of those bloodhounds to get a sniff of criminality over the fire, especially as the person who'd done this was, in all likelihood, watching and reading every scrap of news on the events of that night. If they'd meant to kill one or more of us, they'd failed, and that meant they'd likely try again.

A shiver rolled through me. How did I protect my family from a threat I couldn't see?

Elliot's car pulled into the parking lot. He climbed out, his expression grim as he made his way over to me.

"Can you fucking believe this?"

"Nope. You haven't told anyone else, have you?"

He shook his head. "Let's gather the facts first, then we can decide what to do. Jesus, Ryker, who would want to hurt us? *Any* of us?"

"I don't know." But if the police didn't find out who was behind the fire, I sure as hell would. One way or another, the bastard responsible would not get away with this. "After you." I motioned to him.

The officer behind the desk invited us to sit while he called Detective Freeman. A few minutes later, a woman in her mid-fifties came through a door on the far side of the waiting area. Elliot and I rose to our feet.

"Detective Freeman?"

“Yes.” She stuck out her hand. I shook it, then Elliot did.

“I’m Ryker Stone, and this is Elliot Bancroft.”

“Thank you for coming down, gentlemen. Please, follow me.” She returned from the way she’d come, leading us to an interview room. “Coffee?”

“No, thanks.” I fiddled with my cufflinks, thoughts of “Can we just get on with this” running through my mind. Knowing me, they showed on my face, too.

“I’ll take a coffee,” Elliot said.

I kicked him under the table.

“On second thought,” he said, “I’ll pass.” He kicked me back.

“I spoke to the chief,” I said, moving things along. “He updated me on what he’d found. What happens now?”

“We’ve opened an investigation, and we’ll work closely with our colleagues in the fire department to gather any pertinent information.” She opened a file and picked up a pen, tapping it against the small leaf of papers inside. “Can you think of anyone who’d want to hurt those who were inside that building? Enemies, business rivals.” She paused. “Mistresses?”

I bristled. Elliot laughed.

“Detective, trust me when I say that our wives would nail our balls to the wall if we even glanced at another woman. Same for our friends. We’re all happily married.”

“We also run a multi-billion-dollar global company, Detective. Making enemies of our business rivals comes with the territory, but I can’t think of a single one who would do something like this. My kids were in that building. My business partner’s kids were in that building. It’d take some fucked up individual to want to hurt innocent children.”

“You’d be surprised,” she murmured. “What about more recent issues? A business deal gone wrong, or a disgruntled employee, perhaps.”

I was about to deny both possibilities when the words *disgruntled employee* made me think again. Atkins. He was mightily pissed that I'd fired him, but was he capable of something this serious? If things had worked out differently, he might have earned the title of mass murderer, and I just couldn't make that add up. Even so, I owed it to my family to have the police follow up on every lead.

"There might be someone worth talking to."

Elliot's head snapped toward me. "Who?"

"Atkins," I replied. "Manager of *Poles Apart* in Brooklyn."

"Why?" Elliot asked. "What's his beef?"

"I fired him right before we came here."

"On what grounds?"

The detective tapped her pen on the desk to get our attention. "Sorry to interject, gentlemen, but it's better if I ask the questions."

Elliot held up his hands. "My apologies."

"Let's backtrack. Tell me about this Mr. Atkins."

"He's... I mean he *was* the manager of one of our exotic dance clubs. I discovered that he was stealing from us. Our company doesn't tolerate theft of any kind, for whatever reason. Instant dismissal is the only outcome. It's right there in the employment contract."

"And how did he take it?"

I gruffed a laugh. "Three days before Christmas? How do you think he took it? Made idle threats, kicked a can across the parking lot. Did a *Fast and Furious* onto the highway." Except now I had to consider, however implausible, that his threats weren't so idle after all.

"Can you recall what he said?"

I rubbed my lips together. "Something about watching my back and that I wasn't untouchable. Usual unimaginative nonsense." Outwardly, I painted a calm picture, but my insides

were all twisted up. If Atkins had put my family in danger, I'd kill that bastard slowly and painfully.

“Does Mr. Atkins live in New York City?”

I nodded. “Brooklyn. I'll have my assistant send you his address.”

“Okay, good. I'll speak to a contact of mine in the NYPD and have them bring him in for questioning. In the meantime, if you think of anything else that may help us, give me a call.” She slid her business card across the desk. “I'm sorry for your trouble. We don't get a lot of arson up here. We're a quiet, close-knit community.”

“Yeah, we know. That's why we chose this location to build the first of our boutique hotels.” I grimaced. “I'm sorry we've brought shit to your doorstep.”

Detective Freeman chuckled. “Keeps life interesting.”

I walked Elliot over to his car, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “I'll go see Garen and put him out of his misery. Can you speak to Sage and see if we can get a front-row seat at the Atkins interview?”

“Will do.” He opened the car door, pausing with his hand on top. “You really think a former employee of ours would do something like this?”

I shrugged. “None of us knows what people are capable of. Once Oliver is through the worst, and Garen is released from the hospital, I'll set up a meeting. We need to make a list of who could possibly hate us enough to want to kill us.”

“I can't think of anyone off the top of my head.”

“Me, either. I'll ask Patricia to start pulling together a list of deals that went sour, or where we've been approached and passed on a particular opportunity. I suggest we start there.”

“Good plan.” He got into the car. “Hey, Ryker?”

“Yeah?”

“Careful how much you tell Athena. I don't want her to worry unnecessarily.”

I tapped my temple. “Already ahead of you, buddy. I’ll have our security stepped up but make sure they’re discreet about it.” I smacked the roof of his car. “Call me when you’ve spoken with Sage.”

I crossed the lot to where I’d parked my car and climbed inside. Following Elliot onto the road, I turned left toward the hospital, and he turned right toward the hotel. Now that we’d found out what had happened, I wasn’t sure whether it was better to keep us all together, which might make us easier targets, or to tell everyone to go home. I doubted Belle would return to LA until Tyke’s body was found. I didn’t get the whole pet thing myself, but I figured her anguish was as real to her as mine was when I’d realized my kids were inside a burning building. I refused to belittle her feelings on the matter.

Garen had a nurse with him when I arrived. There was no sign of Catriona. Knowing Garen, he’d have ordered her to take a break, and when he dug his heels in, there wasn’t much point in arguing. I should imagine Catriona knew that better than most. She had to live with the stubborn bastard.

I waited outside until the nurse came out. I mustn’t have concealed my feelings well enough because the second Garen laid eyes on me, he pushed himself upright, wincing from the burns on his hands, and fixed me with a glare.

“Give it to me straight.”

“When do I ever do anything else?” I got a grunt in acknowledgement. Pulling up a chair, I said, “The fire wasn’t your fault. Someone tampered with the electrics, and according to what the chief said, they knew what they were doing because they took out the sprinkler system and the alarm system, too. Oh, and just to make sure we all perished, the fucker doused the top floor in accelerant. That’s why it went up so fast.”

“Fuck me.”

“You keep offering, buddy, and I keep turning you down.”

His lips twitched. “You should be so fucking lucky.”

“You tell yourself that, dickhead.” I canted my head. “Can we stop with the self-reproach now?”

“I gotta tell you, Ryker, if I’d fucked up, I’d have quit ROGUES immediately. That would have been it for me.”

“It would have been it for ROGUES.”

He exhaled a shaky breath. “Yeah.”

“But you didn’t.”

The landscape of his face changed from relieved to concerned. “The question is, who did?”

Steepling my fingers underneath my chin, I rested my elbows on my knees. “That, my friend, is what I intend to find out.”

ATHENA

After relieving Trinity from keeping Harlow company, I parked my butt on the most uncomfortable chair I'd ever had the misfortune to sit upon. How had Trinity slept here last night? Whenever that woman chose to have kids, she'd make an incredible mother. She was caring and thoughtful. No wonder Sebastian had fallen for her. I often wondered what would have happened if his brother had lived. Would she and Sebastian have fallen in love anyway? The romantic in me said yes, they would. Somehow, they'd have found their way to each other.

I'd only been there about five minutes when Harlow woke up. She rubbed her eyes, stretched, then gave me this beseeching look—the same one she used on every one of us. The one that begged us to take her to Oliver. We would in a heartbeat, but getting her nurse to agree was more difficult than Harlow realized. I couldn't blame the medical staff for their cautious approach. If Harlow went into labor again, she might lose the baby. But I also happened to think that it would do Harlow the power of good to see Oliver, if only for a few minutes. It didn't matter that we told her he was making great strides, that he was out of the woods and his doctors were happy with his progress. She needed to see it for herself.

If the roles were reversed and it was me lying here and Ryker badly injured in another part of the hospital, I'd feel

exactly the same.

“Let me ask,” I said before Harlow opened her mouth. “No promises.”

“I love you.” She held out her hand for me to squeeze.

“Prepare for the answer to be no.”

“If anyone can persuade them, it’s you.”

I grimaced. “No pressure.”

The nurses’ station was empty when I arrived. I hung around for a few minutes, groaning when the nurse we’d nicknamed “The Battleax” appeared from around the corner. Plastering my friendliest smile on, I greeted her with a bright, “Hi!”

“Can I help you?” she clipped, reaching behind the desk for a pen.

Her attitude gave me the same feelings I’d had in junior high when I was pulled up in front of the principal for talking in class. I decided right then that politeness wasn’t the right approach. Authoritative was.

“I’d like to take my friend, Harlow Ellis, to see her husband. He’s in the ICU. And before you say ‘baby’ or ‘premature labor’ to me, I know. I promise I will make sure she does not get out of the wheelchair, and only stays for a few minutes.” She opened her mouth to respond, but I powered on. “I think seeing her husband with her own eyes and knowing he’ll be okay will lower her stress levels, and therefore her blood pressure. I’m sure you agree that’s a good thing. Yes?”

The last word was a trick I’d learned from Ryker. He used it in contract negotiations. He told me that it was harder to disagree when someone laid out a logical argument and ended it similarly to how I had.

Nurse Battleax pursed her lips. She set down the clipboard she’d jotted something on while I pleaded my case, and motioned to me. “If, and I stress *if* her blood pressure is within the normal range, I will allow a short visit. But if I am not happy with her vitals, it’s a no.”

“Seems fair.” I followed her to Harlow’s room, crossing my fingers behind my back that Harlow would pass the test. If she didn’t, it was out of my hands. I could hardly go against medical advice. If anything happened to her or the baby because I hadn’t listened, I’d never forgive myself.

“Your friend makes a compelling case,” Nurse B said to Harlow as she broke out the blood pressure cuff. “But if this is even a little bit high, you’re stuck here. No arguments.”

I made a face behind the nurse’s back. Or so I thought.

“I saw that,” she said.

Harlow giggled. I grimaced.

“One eighteen over seventy-five.” She unfastened the cuff. “You passed.”

Harlow tossed her covers to one side. “Take me to Oliver. Please, Athena.”

“Hold on.” The nurse put her hand on Harlow’s shoulder. “I have to go find a wheelchair first. You stay right where you are. If one foot hits the floor, I’m withdrawing consent. I’ll know. I have eyes in the back of my head.”

Harlow’s face said something along the lines of “Whatever. Try and stop me”, but she stayed where she was, her fingers plucking at the cuff of her nightgown.

“Have you heard anything else from Ryker on the cause of the fire?” she asked when we were alone.

“No. I haven’t seen him since this morning. I’m sure as soon as he knows anything he’ll tell us.”

“I keep running it over and over in my head. It spread so fast, Athena. So fast.”

“I know. Guess that’s kind of its job, though, right?”

“Yeah. I suppose.” She swapped fiddling with her cuff for messing with her hair, twisting it like a rope while she swung her legs. “Are Patsy and Annie okay?”

“They’re fine. Sage took them for burgers at the diner in town.”

“I was thinking of—”

The nurse came back, cutting off the rest of Harlow’s sentence. Harlow squealed at the sight of the wheelchair and jumped off the bed. The nurse made a disapproving sound before hustling her into the wheelchair.

“Thirty minutes,” she said, wagging her finger at me. “I’m timing you. If she isn’t back in this bed by that time, I will send security to find you.”

I saluted her. “Yes, ma’am.”

She looked like she wanted to punch me but fear of losing her job was the only thing stopping her. I pushed Harlow out of the room before Nurse B decided it was worth the risk just to give me a broken nose.

It took us five minutes to reach the ICU, which meant Harlow had twenty minutes with Oliver before I’d have to take her back. Although a part of me wanted to test Nurse Battleax’s boundaries. I doubted she’d go through with her threat of calling security. Probably best not to risk it, though.

Oliver’s eyes lit up like the sky at a Fourth of July firework display, and he held out his arms. A sob broke from Harlow’s throat, and she went to get out of the chair.

“Oh no, you don’t, missy.” I pushed her back down. “Nurse Battleax already wants to do me harm. I’m not letting you give her a free shot.”

Oliver laughed, but I could tell he’d suffered terrible damage from inhaling all that smoke. His laugh was usually smooth, not harsh and rough. His eyes were sunken, too, and he looked like he’d lost at least fourteen pounds. The trauma he’d gone through had taken a dreadful toll on his body.

Wheeling Harlow over to Oliver’s bed, I squeezed his hand and then her shoulder. “I’ll give you some privacy.”

Leaving them alone, I moseyed down the hallway to the visitor’s waiting area and grabbed a soda from the machine. My phone buzzed, and I answered it without looking.

“Hey, babe,” Ryker said. “Where are you?”

He came across like he was trying to sound breezy, which instantly put me on high alert. “Just outside the ICU. I finally got approval to take Harlow to see Oliver. What’s going on?”

My question must have caught him off guard because he hesitated. “Nothing. Why?”

“Don’t lie to me. I know you. What is it that you’re not telling me?”

A heavy sigh came down the line. It might as well have been a confession.

“I can’t keep a thing from you, can I?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, but before I say anything, I want you to promise me two things. One, that you’ll keep this to yourself, and two, that you won’t panic.”

“Done and done.”

“Someone purposely set fire to the hotel. They used an accelerant and messed with the electrics.”

I pressed my hand to my chest, unable to stop my gasp of shock. “That... Oh my God. Who would do that?”

“I don’t know, but I can promise you that we’ll find them. The police are involved. I’ve given them a name of someone they might want to question, although I can’t see him having the smarts or the guts to pull this off. I’ve told Sebastian and Upton. They’re working with Elliot and me to come up with a list of potentials to give to the police. I’ve also stepped up security on all of us, so I do not want you to worry.”

“Thank goodness we sent the children back home with Mom and Dad.”

“Agreed. I think Liv should take Patsy and Annie home, too. Try to persuade Oliver and Harlow it’s for the best without letting on why. I’ve already beefed up security at your parents’ house, and wherever they go, they’ll have protection. I can extend that to Oliver’s place, too.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“I know. I’m still reeling myself. I’m on my way to you now.”

“Whose name did you give them?”

“A guy called Atkins. He used to work for us, and I fired him for stealing. I doubt it’s him, but we’re covering all bases. Sage is in touch with the cops here and back in the city. She’s going to see if she can get Elliot and me approval to watch the Atkins interview. Because I know the guy, I might be able to offer some insight.”

“If you’re going back to New York, even if it’s not for long, I’m coming with you.”

“I was hoping you’d say that. Sit tight until I get to the hospital. I don’t want you leaving by yourself.”

He hung up, and I stared at my phone for the longest time, realizing too late that I’d breached Battleax’s curfew. I dashed back to the ICU ward. Harlow was out of the wheelchair and lying beside Oliver on the bed, her face tucked into his neck. I cursed. Should have known this would have happened. If it was me and Ryker instead of her and Oliver, nothing would have stopped me getting on that bed and lying beside him. The only saving grace was that the ICU nurse must have given them permission. She wouldn’t have done that if it wasn’t safe. Right?

“Hey. Sorry, sweets, but it’s time to go.”

Oliver’s arms flexed around his wife, a silent message that letting her go was the very last thing he wanted. She kissed his cheek, whispered something I couldn’t hear, and lumbered off the bed, sitting back in her wheelchair.

“Ryker heard anything about the fire yet?” Oliver rasped.

I shook my head. I despised lying to him, but what other choice did I have? He and Harlow had enough on their plate without me piling on more worries. “He called earlier, but the investigation is still ongoing. He spoke to my mom, though, and the kids are having the best time. Far better than they would up here cramped in that hotel. Have you thought about

sending Patsy and Annie back with your mom now you're on the mend?"

Terrible segue, Athena.

Luckily for me, they bought it.

"We were just talking about that," Harlow said. "We came to the same conclusion. I'll call Liv when I get back to my room and ask her if she doesn't mind taking them back to our place until we can travel. They'll be far more comfortable in their own beds with their things around them." She reached for Oliver's hand. "Call me later."

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. "Take care of yourself and our baby."

"I will. I love you."

His eyes glistened with tears that he blinked back. Pressing his hand to her belly, he murmured, "I love you. I love you both so much."

Feeling like an intruder at the touching moment, I pulled my gaze away.

"Let's go, quickly," Harlow whispered. "Before I refuse to leave."

With a final smile at Oliver, I wheeled her outside, pausing on the other side of the door so she could give him a final wave. I headed for the elevators to take us back up to the maternity ward, and braced myself for an altercation with Nurse Battleax.

"Okay," I said once we arrived on the fifth floor. "Time to face the music."

RYKER

Athena sat on the floor, her legs tucked beneath her, shaking a rattle over a giggling Mia. Since arriving back in New York last night, ready for Atkins' interview today, we must have spent ninety percent of our time with the kids, hugging them, kissing them, playing with them. Watching over them while they slept. Almost three days was a long time to be separated from an intricate part of you, and no doubt Athena felt that absence greater than I did.

We'd left them at Judy and Karl's place rather than taking them back to our Manhattan penthouse. Until I'd seen how today went and whether it made sense to come back to New York rather than stay upstate, it seemed pointless to uproot them. Besides, I hadn't organized full-blown security at our home yet. I doubted properties were this perp's target. It was one or more of us.

"Dada." Ethan wrapped his chubby arms around my knees, his cute, plump cheeks puffed up with the biggest smile. I picked him up, swinging him in the air.

"Careful," Judy said as she whisked pancake batter. "He's just eaten. You don't want regurgitated oatmeal all over your suit."

"I'll live with it for my boy. Won't I, beautiful little man?" I brought him closer to me, peppering his face with kisses.

Having kids had changed me beyond all recognition. There was a time once where I couldn't abide the slightest mark on my clothes. Now, I didn't care. If Ethan throwing up on me was the penalty for seeing that enormous smile on his face, I'd happily suffer the indignity of a puke-splattered jacket ten times over.

"When are you thinking of coming back permanently to New York?" Judy asked.

"Soon. If the NYPD take over the case from the local force upstate, there's no real reason for us to stay there. Oliver is recovering well, and Garen should be released soon. The hospital has great security, and I've bolstered that with our own resources."

Judy's face twisted, and Athena stiffened. I hated involving them in the dark underbelly of this case, but hiding things from Athena was an exercise in futility, and she'd always been close to her parents—her mom, especially. It was natural that she'd want them to know as much as we did, even if it made them constantly on edge. At least they wouldn't take unnecessary risks, and if they left the house, the security I'd put in place would tail them. Whoever had set fire to the hotel would not get within ten feet of my family, or any of the ROGUES and their families, too.

"Morning." Elliot strode into the family room at the back of Judy's house. He kissed his mom on the cheek. "Where's Dad?"

"On the phone to one of his golf buddies. Knowing them, they're wondering if they can still play, despite the thick snow on the ground."

Elliot chuckled. "If anyone can work it out, it's Dad."

"Are we ready to go?" Sage asked.

I kissed Ethan and put him on the floor next to Athena. "Yep."

"I'm sitting in on the interview," Sage said. "Swung it with one of my colleagues."

“Good.” Sage was a fantastic cop, and she’d remained on the force even after marrying Elliot. She was the one who’d helped Elliot track down the man who’d kidnapped Athena years ago—her birth father, no less. I ground my molars just thinking of that bastard. The only thing that made me feel marginally better was knowing he was locked up in one of New York’s toughest prisons. It pleased me to think that each day was a fucking nightmare for him. Having kids of my own had made it even more impossible for me to reconcile how a man could do to his daughter what he’d done to Athena. And Elliot, too.

Athena hoisted Mia onto her hip and came to the door to see us out. “Good luck. Don’t punch the guy.”

“Me?” I pointed at myself. “Would I?”

“Yes.” She jabbed a finger at her brother. “That goes for you, too, Elliot. I’m relying on you, Sage, to keep these two yahoos in line.”

Sage dusted off her hands. “Piece of cake.”

I drove with one of our bodyguards beside me. Sage sat in the back with Elliot. I chewed over the upcoming interview. What would I do if Atkins confessed? In the unlikely event he did, I wouldn’t manage to keep my promise to Athena, that was for sure. I had a fine-tuned radar for people. If Atkins was even partially involved in the fire, I’d know. At least, I hoped I would.

After signing in, an officer led us to a cramped room with a couple of wooden chairs that had seen better days, and a glass walled screen with a view into the room next door. Atkins would be brought from his holding cell into that room for his interview. We could hear and listen to everything, and while he’d know the mirror was two-way, he wouldn’t know it was us on the other side. He’d know Sage was Elliot’s wife, though. His reaction to seeing her fascinated me, and would, I guessed, give an inkling as to his possible guilt.

We sat down and waited. A few minutes later, a uniformed officer brought Atkins into the room along with a guy I guessed was Atkins’ attorney. Sage and another detective

entered and sat on the opposite side of the table. Sage set the recording machine, and the detective did the intros. The entire time, Atkins just stared, a sullen expression on his face, his arms crossed over his chest, his posture slumped.

“Makes you want to punch him just for being an asshole,” Elliot said to me in hushed tones.

“They can’t hear you,” I said. “But, yeah. He does have one of those faces you’d like to punch. It pisses me off that he was skimming because he was a damned good manager. Idiot. He could’ve had a fantastic career with us.”

“Can’t fix stupid.” Elliot flashed a grin.

“True enough.”

The detective kicked off the interview while Sage made notes and pierced Atkins with a steely glare. After a couple of settling in type questions, the main interviewer cut to the chase.

“Tell me about your recent unemployed status and how that happened.”

Atkins sat up a bit straighter, his lip curling. “So, that’s what this bullshit is about, huh? That bastard Stone. If he’s pressing charges then I want to see proof, because I didn’t steal a dime. Not a fucking dime. Where’s your proof?”

Lying bastard.

“I’ll ask the questions, Mr. Atkins. Why were you fired?”

“Because Stone is a cunt.”

“He’s got you nailed,” Elliot said, laughing.

“He accused me of skimming,” Atkins continued. “Then he fired me three days before Christmas without giving me a chance to explain my side of the story.”

“And what is your side of the story?”

“I didn’t steal a single thing.”

I snorted. “I have a whole dossier on him if he wants to see it.”

As if Sage had heard me, she tapped her pen against her notepad, then set it down. “That’s odd.”

Atkins fixed her with a glare. “What’s odd?”

“Well.” She leaned back, the picture of calm. “I spoke to Mr. Stone, and he showed me a rather large file he’d amassed that clearly showed you had, in fact, embezzled a serious amount of cash from his business. I can go get that if you’d like to see it.”

She was bluffing. The dossier was in my office at ROGUES headquarters. It had the desired effect, though. The realization he was cornered—even if losing his job was only an indirect connection to the real reason the police had brought him in for questioning—bled all over his face. Good cover story, though. If he’d been informed it was in connection to the fire, he’d have time to prepare.

“He told me he wasn’t going to call the police.”

I hadn’t said any such thing, but someone who could steal and potentially do a lot worse wasn’t exactly a reliable narrator.

“He didn’t call us,” Sage deadpanned.

“Then, why...? What...?” He turned to his attorney, then back to the detectives sitting across from him. “Why am I here?”

The detective answered. “After Mr. Stone fired you, where did you go, Mr. Atkins?”

“To my mother’s house.”

“Aww, bless,” Elliot said. “He wanted a cuddle from his mama.”

“How long were you there for?”

“I stayed there until December 26th. Since my dad died, Mom is on her own, and I thought she might like the company.”

“And she can corroborate that?”

“Yes.”

“Course she can,” I muttered. “She wouldn’t exactly grass on her own son.”

The questions and answers batted back and forth until Sage’s coworker asked the killer question outright.

“Did you visit upstate New York on the night of December 23rd? A few miles south of Saratoga Springs?”

Atkins’ eyebrows arched inward. “Why would I do that?”

“Answer the question.”

“No. I don’t even know anyone upstate.”

“You said you went to your mother’s house directly after getting fired, correct?”

Atkins nodded.

“For the tape, please.”

“Yes,” he snapped.

“Did you meet with anyone before arriving at your mother’s house, or afterward?”

“No.”

“Talk to anyone on the phone?”

“No. Look, I’m getting sick of this. Either get to the fucking point or I’m walking out of here. I’m not under arrest, right?” He looked to his attorney for confirmation. The man nodded.

“Fine.” Sage’s coworker knitted his fingers together and rested the edges of his hands on the desk. “Did you travel upstate on the night of December 23rd, or any time before, and tamper with the electrical system at a ROGUES hotel?”

Atkins’ eyes widened, and the realization of what he was being questioned about slammed into him. His gaze volleyed between all three people in the room. “Wait a goddamn minute. Are you trying to say I had something to do with that fire?”

“Did you?”

“No! Good god, no. I saw that on the news. There were kids in there. What the fuck do you take me for?”

“I have no idea. Why don’t you tell us?”

“I’m not a fucking murderer.”

“No one died, fortunately. Does that disappoint you, Mr. Atkins?”

“Jesus Christ! Of course it doesn’t disappoint me. Look, I have no time for Stone. The man is a class A cunt, but I would never, *never* do something like that.”

Sage glanced sideways at the mirror. She gave the smallest shake of her head, and as much as I hated to, I agreed with her.

Atkins was innocent, which meant we were right back to square one, and neither us, nor the police, had a single goddamn lead.

GAREN

“You take care now, Mr. Gauthier. It’s been a pleasure having you stay with us.” The nurse responsible for my discharge gave me the fakest smile I’d ever seen. Catriona stifled a giggle while I merely growled.

“Can’t say the same.”

She rolled her eyes. “Color me shocked. Remember those bandages need to come off in three days’ time. Fortunately, I’m not on shift that day.”

She spun on her heel and disappeared back inside the belly of the hospital, leaving me and my wife breathing in the crisp air, the first I’d tasted in what felt like forever. It was hard to fathom that the hotel had burned down a week ago, and during that time, so much had changed. Ryker had called me last night to share the news that the only lead was a dud, and the police had no new lines of enquiry to follow. Whoever was responsible might just get away with almost killing us and destroying a project I’d put my heart into for fucking months. It infuriated me to even think of the possibility.

“You’re lucky she didn’t jab you in the ass with the thickest needle she could find as a goodbye gift,” Catriona said, resting her head on my shoulder.

“She’d have gotten the needle right into her eyeball if she had,” I muttered.

“You really do make for a terrible patient.” She trotted down the steps ahead of me and opened the passenger door of the rental car, waiting patiently for me to situate myself. My hands were still bandaged, so Catriona had to clip my seat belt in. I hated being this dependent on her, but as she’d reminded me several times over the past couple days, taking care of me in my hour of need was right there in the wedding vows. The sooner these bandages came off, though, the happier I’d be.

“I thought we might meet Belle and Upton for lunch,” Catriona said. “I told them—”

“Take me to the hotel. *Our* hotel. I want to see the damage.”

“Garen.” She sighed heavily. “There’s plenty of time for that.”

“There’s plenty of time to see Upton and Belle, too. Now, take me, or I’m calling an Uber.”

Her lips thinned. “You are an irritating bastard at times.”

“But you still love me.”

“Only on days with a Y in them.”

I broke into a smile. Even on my blackest days, this woman right here brought light to the darkness. She lifted my mood from the lowest of ebbs, and despite our recent difficulties getting pregnant, and the terrible toll it had taken on her body and mind, she was always there for me, just as I was for her.

The closer we got to the hotel, the more I fidgeted, until Catriona put her hand on my thigh to stop my leg from jiggling. I needed to see what was left, but at the same time I dreaded it. For some reason, this project had felt different from the other hotels I’d built over the past several years. It hadn’t been easy persuading the rest of the ROGUES board that shifting focus from large scale hotels to a more exclusive boutique experience where we could charge a premium was a good idea. And what happened with the first one I built? Some fucker decided to burn it to the ground with us inside it.

Who the hell was it? Had they known there were kids inside? If they had, they clearly gave zero shits. Molten anger rolled through me. If I felt like this, fuck only knew how Ryker and Oliver felt.

“Relax.” Catriona rubbed my thigh, nestling her hand between my legs.

“Keep doing that and I’ll have you pull over to the side of the road to take care of the boner you’re giving me. With your mouth.”

She laughed. “That’s better.”

I glanced down at the bulge in my pants. “No, it fucking isn’t. Not yet, anyway.”

She laughed again. There hadn’t been much of that in the last few months, and I’d missed the sound of it. I missed her. Missed us. Missed the life we’d had before we started trying to have a kid and realized that everyone around us seemed to fall pregnant merely by being in the same room as their significant other. For me and Catriona, it was a different story. The rounds of IVF had taken their toll on both of us, but it was far worse for her. She had the physical as well as the emotional difficulties to cope with. Once we returned home to Vancouver, we’d have to have a serious chat about where we went from here because I could not stand by for much longer and watch her tear herself to pieces every time her period came.

As the car rounded the last corner, and the burned-out shell of the hotel came into view, I gasped. I’d imagined it wouldn’t be good, but this... there was nothing left. The walls that still stood would have to be knocked down, the entire site razed to the ground.

Did I have the motivation to start from scratch?

What I wouldn’t give to find out who did this and ruin their fucking lives.

“How did we all get out?” My skin tingled, shock setting in now I’d seen it for myself. “It’s a fucking miracle.”

Catriona applied the brake and turned off the engine. “I know. Ryker told me it was awful, but someone telling you and seeing it for yourself are two different things.” She twisted in her seat and flung her arms around me. “I could have lost you. I almost *did* lose you. It terrifies me to think about it.”

“Hey.” I soothed her as best I could with these ridiculous bandages on my hands. The next three days couldn’t come quickly enough. I wanted to pull her close to me, to hold her tightly, but the burn on my chest stopped me from doing that, too. “We’re fine. We’ll be fine.”

Movement caught my eye. I glanced in the side mirror. A car was parked around the bend, the front left corner sticking out just enough for me to see it. Must have been the security Ryker had mentioned. There had been occasions in the past where we’d employed security, often when traveling to dangerous parts of the world, but we’d never needed it in the United States or in Canada before. We weren’t celebrities. We were business owners. Yet Ryker having someone tail us meant he was far more worried than he’d shared with me, which made me worried, too. I could handle whatever came at me, but the idea of putting Catriona in danger was something quite different. As soon as these bandages came off, I was taking her home to Vancouver. At least there we were on familiar ground, and a long fucking way from here.

“Do you want to get out and look around?” she asked.

Yellow police tape ran around the perimeter of the hotel, but there was nothing to stop us checking it out as long as we didn’t enter what was left of the building. Not that I intended to. Some of those walls looked like they might collapse at any moment.

“Yeah. Let’s.”

I exited the car, taking care not to slip. These shoes weren’t exactly suitable footwear. I gingerly picked my way through the compacted snow and ice. Despite the fire chief’s findings, backed up by the police opening a criminal investigation, I couldn’t shake a sense that I still had a part to play in this disaster. Someone managed to get close enough to tamper with

the electrics, not to mention gain access to the hotel to douse the place in accelerant. That meant the security measures weren't tight enough, and that was on me.

The smell of smoke lingered in the air. I pulled up my sweater, covering my nose. All that smell did was remind me of how close we'd come to dying. I stopped at the tape, shielding my eyes from the weak winter sun as I scanned what was left of the building. Fire sure was a destructive bitch.

"Are you okay?" Catriona placed her hand on my back.

"It's a shitshow."

"I'm so sorry, Garen. I, more than most, know how hard you worked to bring your vision to life. But you can rebuild. I have faith in you."

I rested my head against hers. "All those months of working my ass off, and it fell apart in a single night." I thought about telling her there was a part of me that still blamed myself. In the end, I kept those thoughts to myself. She wouldn't accept I had any culpability, so there was no point in opening a discussion we'd never agree on.

"I think I've seen enough."

"That's fine. Let's go meet Upton and Belle for lunch. I think it will do us all good to talk about something other than this for a while."

She had a point. For the last week, the fire had consumed—no pun intended—every thought and every conversation. As I turned away, a dark flash of something moving fast came toward us in a blur.

"Oh my God!" Catriona crouched, holding out her arms. "It's Tyke." She picked him up, and he licked her face as if it was covered in ice cream.

"Oh, goody." Sarcasm laced my tone. I didn't mean it—not really. Belle would be beside herself when we turned up for lunch with this scrappy little thing. I glared at the dog. "You piss in my rental and I'm tossing you out on the side of the road to fend for yourself."

“Garen!” Catriona narrowed her eyes. “I’ll toss *you* out on the side of the road first.”

“Gee, my wife chooses a dog over me. I’m getting warm and fuzzy feelings over here.”

“He’s a defenseless animal. You are not defenseless.”

“Hardly defenseless. He’s survived on his own for days. But I am an animal.” I growled, nuzzling my face in her neck. She laughed, shoving at me.

“Careful. You’ll squish Tyke.”

“Are you going to call Belle?” I got into the passenger side of the car and held out my arms to take the dog. “Tell her we’ve found him?”

“No. Let’s surprise her.” She rounded the hood and climbed into the driver’s seat. After clipping in my belt, and her own, she fired up the engine and began the icy trek down the mountain. The car with what I guessed was our bodyguards sitting inside had reversed into a cutout in the road. Catriona was so busy chattering to Tyke, who’d curled up on my lap, she didn’t notice them. I did, though. I traded a glance with the driver who lowered his chin about an inch. Yep. Bodyguards.

As we traveled toward the center of town, I cast the odd glance in the side mirror. The car kept a discreet distance, but considering we were the only two vehicles on the road, if Catriona paid attention she’d see them, and she might ask me if they were following us. I wouldn’t lie to her. A white lie by omission to stop her from worrying was one thing. A direct question right to my face was another.

Lucky for me, we reached Main Street without her noticing we had a tail. She pulled into a parking space outside the restaurant and turned off the engine.

“Wait here. I’ll go see if she’s inside and I’ll bring her out. Keep him out of sight so it’s the best surprise.”

I glanced down at the sleeping dog softly snoring on my lap and arched a brow. “Don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

Catriona grinned, then disappeared inside. A few moments later, she returned with Belle and Upton. I raised a bandaged hand as they approached the car. Upton reached me first, opening the door.

“Is this yours?” I asked with a wry smile.

“Oh my God. Belle. Look!”

Upton scooped Tyke from my lap and handed him to Belle. She promptly burst into tears, cradling the pup to her chest, and covering him in kisses, which he returned enthusiastically. I refrained from sharing my thoughts on dog hygiene. Somehow, I didn’t think they’d be all that welcome.

“Where did you find him?” Upton asked.

“At the hotel. I guess he must’ve fled when the fire started and he was too scared, maybe, to come out from his hiding place with the fire service and police swarming around.”

“I can’t believe he survived for a week on his own.” Belle shook her head. “It’s a miracle.”

“After what we’ve all been through, I think we’re due one tiny miracle,” Catriona said, tousling the fur on Tyke’s head.

I prayed for a miracle, but it was for a bundle of our own—and not one who could lick his own balls. I only had to wait three days to have these goddamn bandages removed, then I could get Catriona far away from whoever was responsible for burning down the hotel. With Oliver on the mend, Harlow’s early labor stopped, and now Tyke found, there was no reason for us to stay here a second longer than necessary.

And the way I felt right now, I’d never, ever, come back.

RYKER

A few weeks after Athena and I returned home from one of the most horrifying experiences of my life, a small party welcomed Oliver and Harlow back to New York. Me and Athena, Elliot and Sage, Oliver's mom Liv, plus two exuberant, almost-teens in Annie and Patsy. Judy was babysitting our two terrors. The last thing Oliver needed after spending five weeks in the hospital was Ethan emitting that high pitched squeal—a habit he'd recently developed, and one I hated—or Mia throwing up all over him as she had on me this morning.

He moved stiffly as he exited the car I'd sent to La Guardia to pick him up, but the beaming smile he gave us was testament to how happy he was to be home. His arm cradled Harlow's shoulders, but I wasn't sure who was supporting whom. There hadn't been any more signs of the baby coming, but the hospital had given her strict instructions to take plenty of rest at home and call the doctor at the slightest twinge.

The rest of the ROGUES had returned home, too, all of us still struggling to come to terms with the events of last Christmas. The police were no further along in finding a culprit, despite Elliot and me trawling through our files and compiling a small list of maybes. Every single one of the potential suspects, in the loosest possible terms, had an alibi

for the night of the fire, meaning unless we had an epiphany, the investigation had ground to a halt.

It pissed me the fuck off, but what could I do? For the foreseeable future, we'd all have to live with tight security at our homes and the office, and the bodyguards trailing us whenever we went out in public.

“Good to see you, man.” Oliver clapped me on the back and then shook Elliot's hand. “Any news?”

I shook my head. “Trail's gone cold.” Not that it was ever warm to begin with.

He grimaced. I wasn't sure if that was in pain or, more likely, the lack of progress on the case. I felt responsible for being unable to give the police a name of anyone who might wish us harm. Garen and I were fighting for top spot in the blame game we had going on. If either Athena or Catriona knew how much we beat ourselves up on a daily basis, they'd clip us both around the ear.

“Let's get you inside.” I closed the car door and followed the group into Oliver's building. Annie and Patsy chatted the whole way, catching Oliver and Harlow up on the last few weeks since Liv had brought them home. From what I gathered, they'd spoken on the phone almost every day, but I guessed for them, nothing replaced being able to hug their mom and dad and see them face to face.

We stayed for about an hour before I gave Athena the signal that we should clear out. Harlow had yawned seven times in the last five minutes, and Oliver looked as if he couldn't keep his eyes open. Athena and Sage walked a few steps ahead as we crossed the lobby to where our cars waited for us, their heads close together while they chatted.

“See you at the office tomorrow,” Elliot said. “I want to go over the Farrington deal.”

“Sure.” I waited for Athena to hug Sage goodbye then get into the car before turning back to him. “We've missed something, Elliot. I don't know what it is, but the answer is out

there. After we've talked through Farrington, I want to go over the sour business deals one last time."

He nodded in agreement, even though he knew, like me, we hadn't missed a thing. But to do nothing wasn't in either of our natures. When Athena was kidnapped by her own father before we were married, we'd left no stone unturned to get her back. In the end, he'd simply dropped her off after we paid the ransom. A couple years later, after Ethan was born, Sage and Elliot broke the case and discovered her birth father was the bastard behind it all. I prayed to God it didn't take two years to solve this case.

Athena was quieter than usual on the way to pick the kids up from her mom's house. She did a lot of staring at the buildings as the car inched through Manhattan, chewing her lip, and even occasionally twisting around to peer through the back window. After the third time, I touched her hand.

"We're safe."

Heaving a sigh, she let her head flop against the back of the seat. "Seeing Oliver and Harlow today brought it all back. Who did it, Ryker? Who hates one or more of us so much that they'd wish us harm?"

"I don't know. I wish I did."

"I know that. It was rhetorical really. It's just so frustrating, and I won't lie, a little bit scary."

"That's why we have security. Whoever is behind this won't get within fifty feet of you or the kids. Or me, for that matter."

"Yes, but how long can we live like that? A month? Six months? A year?"

"As long as it takes."

Her nostrils flared. "And what about when Ethan starts kindergarten? Is he expected to have an armed guard sitting next to him in class?"

Despite how serious our situation was, I chuckled. "Thea, Ethan is two. He won't be going to kindergarten for another

three years, and if you decide to return to work, we'll have a fully vetted nanny who will be afforded the same security as us."

"It might go on for that long. You don't know. And stop trying to push me into the nanny thing."

"I'm not."

She huffed, returning her attention to the window. I left her to stew. She'd come around in her own time. The burst of anger wasn't directed at me but at the situation we found ourselves in. If she needed to rail on me to make herself feel better, though, I had broad shoulders, and both of them belonged to her.

Judy and Karl sensed the prickly atmosphere between us and kept the goodbyes short. We strapped the kids into the back of the Escalade, then climbed in ourselves. Ethan filled the silence with his constant jabbering, and Mia made sweet baby noises, as if she was trying to join in. Her cuteness even brought a smile to our bodyguard's usual serious expression.

When we got home, I muttered something about work and disappeared into my office. I'd seen the look on Athena's face when we walked through the door. For whatever reason, she was spoiling for a fight, and my wife was the last person I wanted to argue with. I got it. Boy, did I get it. She needed to bang her fists and yell and scream at the constraints forced on our lives by an invisible person who quite possibly wanted us dead—I felt exactly the same—but taking our frustrations out on one another wasn't the answer. She'd realize that, and when she did, I'd open my arms, stroke her hair, and promise, *promise* her I'd fix this.

I never broke my promises to Athena.

The report Chief Gardner had prepared stared out at me from the screen, mocking my inability to crack the goddamn code. I never closed this file. It was a permanent reminder not to drop my guard. At that moment, the fire was as fresh in my mind as if it had happened yesterday, but I guaranteed that this bastard, whomever he was, knew the importance of patience. He'd struck once and failed. He'd strike again but bide his

time, waiting for us to return to our previous lives and grow complacent.

Right now, we were probably the safest we'd ever be. As time went on, whoever set the hotel alight would grow in confidence. I felt it in my bones. And before that happened, we needed to find the bastard.

The problem was I didn't know how.

Air feathered the back of my neck as the door to my office opened and Athena's cool fingers brushed my nape. I raised my hand and covered hers, leaning back to look up at her.

"I've put the kids down for a nap."

Spinning my chair around, I pulled her onto my lap, encircling her waist. "Talk to me."

She tugged on her bottom lip, a flood of emotions crisscrossing her face. "I'm scared, Ryker. For me, you, but most of all for the kids. I've tried, but I can't shake this feeling that something terrible is about to happen."

"Hey." I squeezed her tighter, easing her head onto my shoulder. "You're safe. I promise. I'd never let anything happen to you."

"But you couldn't stop the fire." I winced, and her face twisted. "That isn't an accusation, Ryker. It's just a fact. You can't protect us from everything."

Maybe not, but I could damned well try.

"I hate the feeling of confinement," she added, playing with my hair in a way that'd always driven me wild. "But I know it's necessary. I just want to forget for a few minutes that there's a potential target on our backs."

Her lips brushed my cheek, my forehead, my eyelids, and then she was kissing me, pouring her fear and desperation into the pressure of her mouth on mine, the thrust of her tongue. I hardened beneath her, groaning into her mouth when she rolled her hips.

Shifting her position, she unzipped my fly and freed me, wrapping her hand around the base of my cock.

“God, that feels good,” I moaned, letting my head hit the back of my leather office chair.

“I can make you feel even better.”

She slid off my lap and lowered to her knees. I opened my mouth to stop her, to tell her that it was up to me to make her feel better, but before a single word came out, she swallowed around my cock, and I was a goner.

I shut my eyes, threading my fingers into her hair as she bobbed up and down. She always knew how to make me forget my own name, to carry me away on an ocean of bliss, and I needed that now. I needed her like never before.

My orgasm approached far too quickly. Before I could explode, I wriggled free. She made a frustrated sound followed by a squeal when I picked her up and tossed her over my shoulder. Holding her with one hand, and my unfastened pants with the other, I strode into our bedroom and lay her down on the bed. Her luminous, amber eyes gazed up at me, swimming with adoration that mirrored mine.

“Make me forget, Ryker,” she whispered. “Take me to that place where it’s just you and me, where nothing else exists but us.”

“I’ve got you, Thea.” I slowly removed her clothes. “Always.”

RYKER

Two months later...

“Ryker! Are you ready?” Athena swept into the living room like a tornado, whirling around picking up God knew what and shoving it into a backpack. “I don’t want to be late.”

I put my phone down. “What are you worried for? The baby isn’t going anywhere. Oliver won’t care if we’re a few minutes late.”

She gave me one of her death stares. “*I* care. Now stop scrolling on your phone and get your shoes on. We’re out of here in five minutes.” Spinning on her heel, she disappeared before I could share that it didn’t take me five minutes to put on a pair of shoes. Probably for the best.

Ever since Harlow gave birth to a healthy baby boy a week ago, Athena hadn’t been able to contain her excitement. After an initial visit to see them in the hospital, I’d persuaded her, with some difficulty, to give them space as a family, to get to know the new addition without us—meaning her—crowding them. When Oliver called me last night to invite us, Elliot, and Sage over for lunch, Athena dug a ton of Ethan’s baby clothes out of storage and put together a package for Harlow. She’d spent all morning pacing from room to room, muttering under her breath. I chose not to ask what about. No point in pulling on that thread.

“Ryker!” she yelled again from somewhere in the apartment, panic in her tone. “Can you come get Ethan, please? He just squirted toothpaste all over my dress.”

Chuckling at his toddler antics, I rescued him from Athena’s wrath, leaving her to get changed. Five minutes later than planned, much to my wife’s irritation, we left the building. As had become habit, I glanced up and down the street while hustling my family into the back of the car. Paul, our bodyguard, waited until we were situated, then sat up front next to the driver. Over the last three months, he’d become an extended part of the family, unobtrusive yet comforting at the same time. Athena no longer seemed as afraid as she had been, and I credited Paul for that. It pleased me that she’d slipped back into her comfortable life. That was what I wanted for her.

But I hadn’t.

I was constantly on alert, unable to switch off that sense of doom, of an approaching threat I couldn’t see or hear or touch.

The police had given up searching for the culprit. Oh, they hadn’t officially closed the case, but from what I gathered, there was little investigative work taking place. Then again, with no clues and no further attempts to harm any of us, I couldn’t blame them for moving on to other cases, given their limited resources. I made a mental note to talk to Sage today and get her advice on their/our next steps.

Harlow was positively blooming when we arrived, and Oliver fussed around her in the same manner I must have when Athena gave birth to Ethan and Mia. There was something about your wife holding your child that brought out instincts you didn’t even know you had. While this wasn’t Oliver’s first rodeo with a newborn, the way he and Harlow were together was in direct contrast to the way he’d been with his first wife, Sara. Then again, Sara had been, and probably still was, a cold bitch, and I couldn’t be happier she was no longer in our lives.

After an appropriate amount of time fussing over the baby, I maneuvered Oliver, Elliot, and Sage to a corner of the room away from Athena and Harlow. Athena was so engrossed with

the new baby, who they'd called Harrison, she didn't even notice I'd split us off from the group.

"How's the head?" I asked Oliver. Since leaving the hospital two months ago, he'd suffered with a lot of headaches, which his doctor had reassured was normal for a head injury like his. He was due to have skin grafts on his chest in the coming weeks, but despite all that, he'd returned to work, albeit from home and not the office.

"Improving. Slowly. I'm still on enough pills to tranquilize an elephant."

"A crying baby probably won't improve things," Elliot said in his usual empathetic manner.

"You're all heart," Oliver grumbled, turning his attention to me. "So, why the huddle?"

"The police have tapped out, which I'm not blaming them for, but I cannot let this lie. I can't sit idly by and wait for whomever set fire to the hotel to make another attempt on our lives. Fuck, we don't even know which one of us they wanted to target."

"Could have been all of us," Elliot said.

I glared at my best friend. "Wow, you're on form today. Gag him, would you, Sage."

He wagged his eyebrows. "Have you been spying on my bedroom antics again, Ryker?"

Rolling my eyes, I focused on his far more sensible wife. "I wondered if you had any ideas where we can go from here."

"If the police have no leads, maybe a private detective might be the answer."

"Maybe." I tapped my lip, looking to Oliver and Elliot for their input. "What do you guys think?"

"Can't hurt, other than in the pocket," Oliver said. "And it's not like that's a problem for us."

"I agree," Elliot said. "Although I'm not sure what a PI could do that the police can't."

“You’d be surprised,” Sage said. “If you want to give it a try, I might know of someone.”

“Who?” I asked.

“A coworker of mine used his company a couple months ago when she was convinced her husband was cheating on her. She had no evidence, but her gut told her something was off. She was right. Bastard didn’t just have one mistress, but two.”

“Christ, how did he keep up?” Elliot grinned. “Must’ve been popping Viagra until he rattled.”

“He’s not cheap,” Sage continued, ignoring her lesser half. “But what she told me after researching investigators in that field was that this guy, Draven, is one of the best. Former NYPD, too, so he’ll have contacts in the force, which might be useful.”

“Do you have his contact details?” I asked.

“I’ll message her now and ask her to send them to me. Once she does, I’ll forward them to you.” She hitched a shoulder, already tapping on her phone. “Gotta be worth a shot.”



The intercom buzzed, and Patricia’s voice came through the speaker. “Ryker, Mr. Draven is here to see you.”

“Send him in.” I got up from behind my desk, fastening my suit jacket as I crossed my office to meet with the private investigator Sage had put me in touch with. I couldn’t say for sure what I expected, but the giant who only just fit through the door frame wasn’t it. At six foot two, I held my own, but this guy must have been six foot six at least, broader than a heavyweight boxer, with hands like shovels. His long, dark hair was tied back, and sunglasses covered his eyes.

“Mr. Draven.” Sticking out my hand, I braced for him to crush every bone in my fingers. “Good to meet you.”

“Just Draven,” he boomed, surprisingly gentle when we shook hands.

I arched a brow. “Like Madonna?”

His rich chuckle rumbled through his chest. “Heard that once or twice. Cher is another favorite. Funny how no one says Drake. I’d even accept Sting at a push.” He grimaced. “Strike that.”

I let out a one-tone laugh. I liked this guy. Motioning to the couch in the corner of my office, I said, “Have a seat. Can I get you anything to drink?”

“I’m good.”

His frame took up half the couch. I left him to sprawl, choosing the chair instead.

“So, how does this work?”

He shoved his sunglasses on top of his head. “You tell me what’s going on and how I can help, and I take it from there. I charge a daily rate, plus expenses, and I don’t take kindly to interference. In other words, I don’t plan to tell you how to do your job, so don’t try to tell me how to do mine. If you don’t hear from me it’s because I have nothing to report, but trust me, I’m not fleecing you. I’m working the case.”

My lips twitched. His bluntness was right out of my own playbook, and I appreciated it. It drove me insane when people pussyfooted around.

“Seems fair.”

I told him what little I knew, the lines of enquiry the police had followed, and I gave him the list of potential suspects Elliot and I had given to the detective in charge of the case.

“All of them came back clean.”

He scanned the list, folded it into quarters, and slid it into the inside pocket of his leather jacket. “I’ll check them out, anyway. In my experience, the police are overworked and under-resourced, and things get missed.” He rose to his feet.

“That’s it?”

He pinned me with a fierce glare. “Unless there’s something you haven’t told me?”

“No.”

“Then, that’s it.” He paced across my office to the door. Pausing on the threshold, he turned back to face me. “I’ll find out who’s responsible. Guaranteed. What I can’t guarantee is how long it will take me.”

I remained seated; a snicker loaded with skepticism making its way up my throat. “That’s a hell of a guarantee, Draven. How can you be sure you’ll find out who set fire to our hotel? Trail’s pretty cold after more than three months, I’d say.”

His full lips moved ever so slightly upward. “Because I’m the fucking best at what I do.” He winked, dropped his sunglasses back in place, and left. I stared at the closed door for a couple seconds, then pulled up the contacts list I shared with the rest of the ROGUES. Adding his name under the list of important contacts, I dropped a text in the group chat.

Met with Draven. He’s on it. Now we wait.

The man had only just left my office, and already, I despised waiting.

CATRIONA

I must have read the letter that arrived two days ago a hundred times, possibly more, and I still didn't know what to do for the best. I wasn't in the habit of keeping secrets from Garen, although this wasn't a secret as such. But it would require a discussion, and until I had an idea of what I felt about it, which side of the fence I stood on, maybe it was better to keep it to myself.

But that didn't sit right with me, either. This was as much about him as it was about me. We hadn't spoken about whether to undertake another round of IVF since returning to Canada in January, and now, two months later, this letter from the doctor was inviting us to do just that. Before long, we'd need to make a decision, and I just did not know what to do.

What made matters worse was the constant threat hanging over all of us—one that would remain until the person who'd set fire to the hotel was apprehended. If they ever were. Security remained tight, the heavy bodyguard presence a reminder that none of us were safe. Add in the terrible toll IVF treatment had taken on me during the last four rounds, and I wasn't sure I had the mental, nor physical ability to cope with a fifth.

“I have a surprise for—”

I quickly rearranged my face, stuffing the letter into the back pocket of my jeans, and pasted a bright smile on my face. “What surprise?”

His eyes narrowed, his gaze lowering to my waist. “What’s that?”

“What?”

Lips thinning, he growled, “Don’t play games, Catriona. What did you put in your pocket?”

I squeezed a swallow down my throat, taking out the letter. I tapped it against my hand. “It’s from the fertility department at the hospital.” Handing it to him, I added, “I didn’t mean to keep it from you. I’ve just been...” I trailed off. We both knew I’d struggled to make a decision, which was the reason we hadn’t contacted the hospital in the last few weeks.

He read it, dropped it on the kitchen counter, and wrapped his arms around me. Resting his chin on the top of my head, he said, “How do you feel?”

“Confused. Scared. Tired.”

Taking my hand, he walked me through to the family room that overlooked the back yard. This was one of my favorite rooms in the house. South facing, light flooded in, even this early in the spring. He sat on the couch, tugging me down beside him. His gray eyes searched mine, looking for answers I didn’t have.

“Do you have any idea what you want to do?”

“What do *you* want to do?”

He shook his head. “This isn’t about me.” Holding up his hand as I opened my mouth to interrupt, he continued. “This is *not* about me, Catriona. I don’t have to take the drugs, nor cope with the crippling headaches, the depression, the hot flashes. I will stand by your side whatever your decision ends up being, but I think this is one you have to make on your own.”

My eyes stung with tears I couldn’t risk allowing to fall. If I started to cry, I’d never stop. I’d fought for so long to have a

baby, but as the choice of whether to put myself through a fifth attempt of IVF treatment or quit trying lay before me, I knew the answer.

“I don’t think I can, Garen,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry.” I put my hands up to my face. He gripped my wrists, tugging them away, forcing me to lay myself bare.

“Don’t you dare apologize. Not to me. *Never* to me. I didn’t marry you so you could pop out a kid or two or seven. I married you because I fell desperately in love with a woman who is so fucking special, I don’t even know where to begin describing just how goddamn wonderful she is. How she makes me happier than I ever thought I could be.” He brushed away a tear that dared to trickle down my cheek. “I love you, and it kills me that I can’t fix this for you, but from the moment you walked into my life, all I ever wanted... was you.”

I peered at him through blurry eyes. “You know what this leaves us with?”

He nodded. “Adoption.”

“Yeah.”

“How do you feel about that?”

I thought carefully before I answered, but as I allowed myself to consider the possibility now that we’d decided not to go through with another round of IVF, it suddenly occurred to me that I felt good about it. No, I felt *great* about it.

“Amazing.” I pressed a hand to my chest. “I keep thinking about Finn.”

Finn was a five-year-old boy who’d recently been taken in by Debbie, a wonderful lady who ran the orphanage for disadvantaged kids in New York. Oliver had been involved with the home for years, providing most, if not all, of the funding. We’d visited there while he’d been in the hospital, just to let Debbie know what had happened. This dark eyed, dark-haired boy had hidden behind the couch the whole time we’d been there, his gaze following me everywhere.

“Think of the home we could provide for a kid like Finn. Is there a greater gift than that?”

“I think you’d be a gift for any child in need. Me, on the other hand...” He raised his eyebrows. “Not exactly mellow, am I?”

I laughed, the weight of having this decision hanging over me for the last couple of days vanishing after one conversation with my husband. I should have spoken to him as soon as I opened the letter.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart.” I ran my hand down the lapel of his suit jacket. “Once you’ve had jammy fingers all over your best Brioni for the tenth time, you’ll mellow out.”

The horrified expression on his face would bring me joy right through until Christmas. Garen might not know it, but he’d make a terrific dad. I’d be the pushover, and he’d be the disciplinarian, and I’d always believed children needed both kinds of parents.

“Is it too late to change my mind?”

“Yes.” I straddled his lap, cupped my hands around his face, and kissed him. “Besides, you can always buy another suit.”

“Hmm. This might take some readjustment on my part.”

“Hate to break it to you, but ruined suits will be the least of your problems once there’s a child in the house.”

“You’re really selling it to me.”

I grinned. “I guess we should start contacting adoption agencies, then.”

“We should. After we get back.”

“Back from where?”

“Antigua.”

“Antigua?”

“Yeah. I figured we could both use a break, and this place is sewn up tighter than Fort Knox.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because it’s ours, and I’ve reviewed the security arrangements personally.”

Frowning, I said, “But we don’t own a property in Antigua.”

“We do now.” He reached into his jacket pocket and waved a stack of papers at me. “That’s the surprise.”

“Oh my God. I *love* Antigua.”

“Which is why I bought a property there. And I thought that, on the way back, we could divert to New York. Go see Oliver, Harlow, and the baby.”

I squealed. Ever since Harlow gave birth to little Harrison, I’d been dying to see him in the flesh, to kiss him and breathe in his special baby smell. Over video conference wasn’t the same. They hadn’t invented smell-o-vision yet.

“When do we leave?”

He checked his watch. “Three hours.”

“Garen!” I leaped off his lap. “Thanks for the warning. Not.”

His rumbling laughter followed me as I dashed up the stairs to start packing for two very different climates. Damn the man.



My stomach dropped when the plane hit an air pocket on the descent into La Guardia. I gripped Garen’s arm, my nails digging through his shirt. He pried my hand off him, then held it, rubbing his thumb along my knuckles as turbulence buffeted the fuselage.

“We’ll be on the ground soon.”

“This baby had better be worth it.” I smiled through my anxiety. “I could’ve stayed in Antigua for another few days.” Switching off from the outside world for a week had been the

panacea I'd needed, and if it wasn't for the pull of seeing Harlow and Harrison, I'd have hunkered down for at least a week more.

Garen let out a throaty laugh. "If I'd suggested that, you'd have withheld sexual favors or slit my throat in my sleep. We both know you can't wait to see the baby."

He wasn't wrong. At first, I'd worried that my yearning to have a baby of my own might take the shine off seeing Harlow with her bundle of joy, but in a way, the decision we'd come to before we came to Antigua had made me even more excited to see him. And once we returned home, we could start the process to adopt.

Garen wasn't aware I knew this, but he'd written to Debbie a few days ago and asked her advice about the adoption process. I'd seen her reply on his laptop. Not that I was snooping. He'd left the lid open while he fetched me a drink, and I'd spotted her name in his inbox. She'd offered to help us in any way she could. I hadn't told him I knew, though. If he wanted to surprise me with his proactivity, I wouldn't take that away from him.

One question I wanted to ask Debbie was whether it would be possible for us to adopt a child from her. A child like Finn. I could not get that little boy's face out of my mind, or my heart. But with us being Canadian I guessed that might cause a few issues.

If anyone could make it happen, Garen could.

The plane touched down with a violent bump, skipped off the runway, and bounced again. Rain lashed the windows, and the windsock stuck out at ninety degrees, but eventually, we slowed and then stopped. A member of TSA boarded to check our passports, his blond hair plastered to his head. We waited for him to disembark, then followed the bodyguard who'd traveled with us down the plane steps, making a dash for the car waiting for us at the bottom. It only took me about ten seconds, and still, I was soaked by the time I threw myself into the back of the car.

Somehow, Garen fared better than me, as if the rain daredn't land on his pristine outfit or drench his perfectly styled hair. Meanwhile, my nipples poked through my T-shirt, and I could probably wring a good half a liter of water from it. Garen's eyes dropped south.

"I approve of the wet T-shirt competition you've got going on."

I rolled my eyes. "Very funny. I need to change before we go to Harlow's place."

"They're at Ryker and Athena's. Oliver just texted me."

"Oh, cool. Hotel first, though, please, before my nipples poke someone's eye out."

The driver glanced in his rearview mirror. Garen activated the privacy screen, but not before the man received one of Garen's killer stares.

"He's just lost his job," he muttered.

"Don't be a grouch. No harm, no foul."

"No fucking harm? He looked at your tits. No one gets to look at your tits other than me."

"It was my fault. I shouldn't have mentioned sticky-out nipples."

"And he should have kept his fucking eyes averted."

I loved Garen's possessiveness, but sometimes, I wanted to clip him upside the head.

"If you have the poor man fired, I *will* withhold sexual favors, and for some time, too, so choose your actions carefully."

He grumbled and said something under his breath that I couldn't hear—probably just as well—then spent the rest of the journey to Manhattan on his phone. I left him to wallow in frustration and opened a book I hadn't had time to finish before we left Antigua. It'd taken me a while to figure out the best way to deal with Garen, resulting in a lot of fights early on in our relationship. Now, I knew to let him sit with his

annoyance while making it clear which behavior was acceptable and which was not. It usually worked a treat.

I quickly changed at the hotel, feeling better once I got out of my clingy, wet clothes. The driver waiting to take us to Athena and Ryker's place was different from the man who'd picked us up at the airport. I side-eyed Garen with a questioning lift of my eyebrow. He studiously ignored me.

"I see you made your decision. Good luck with the blue balls." I climbed into the car.

"I didn't have him fired," he snapped, following me. "I had him swapped out. Not the same thing at all."

I loved my husband, but good God, I could throttle him sometimes. He had a stubborn bone a mile long, and a tongue sharp enough to cut through steel. At least the poor driver who'd picked us up from the airport wouldn't have to suffer Garen's glare burning into the back of his head on the drive to Athena and Ryker's place.

The icy atmosphere lasted until we arrived at our destination, but one look at the baby and it melted, as did my heart. An excessive amount of cooing and cuddling followed, with Harrison passed from person to person. He took it all in his stride, yawning and making the cutest baby noises ever. I caught Athena studying my reactions once or twice, and I gave her a reassuring smile. I hadn't had a chance to tell her about our decision to adopt yet, but every time I thought of Garen contacting Debbie, excitement rooted itself in my stomach.

Finn was already mine. We just had to make it happen.

The three guys gave it what I liked to call "a safe amount of time" to avoid the wrath of their wives before disappearing into Ryker's office, leaving us girls alone to chat. I'd bet the house in Antigua that they were talking about the fire. Probably dialed the other ROGUES into the conversation, too. I kept hoping for good news, but so far, even with the private detective Ryker had hired just over a week ago, we still weren't any closer to finding out who set fire to the hotel.

“Since we’ve been abandoned for something far more interesting, shall we go to lunch?” Athena suggested. “I’ll see if Sage can get off work to meet us.”

“What about the kids?” Harlow asked.

Athena got this twinkle in her eye. Holding up a finger, she said, “Wait here.” She disappeared in the direction of Ryker’s office, returning less than sixty seconds later with all three guys in tow. She picked up her purse and motioned to us.

“Problem solved.”

I stifled a chuckle. “You sure you trust those three to look after two babies and a toddler?” Annie and Patsy were staying with Oliver’s mom for a while until the baby settled in. “I mean, it’s one on one. Surely the kids will win.”

“It’ll do them good. If they can’t manage for an hour, then I will call into question their ability to run a multi-billion-dollar company.” Athena corralled us to the elevator, checking her phone when it buzzed. “Oh, excellent. Sage can make it. What about Juanita’s?”

“I *love* that place,” Harlow said. “Best Mexican food in Manhattan.”

“I haven’t had Mexican in ages,” I said. “Sounds perfect to me.”

Three bodyguards surrounded us as we exited the building onto the street. They hustled us into a waiting Escalade, and five minutes later, Juanita herself showed us to our table in a cozy, colorful restaurant that could’ve been plucked straight out of Mexico. The sight of Sage striding toward our table in full NYPD uniform caused a few diners to do a double take, but as the four of us hugged, they returned to their lunches.

I ordered my favorite beef empanadas and pulled pork tacos, along with homemade guac and lashings of sour cream. But when the server placed the food in front of me and I got a whiff, my stomach roiled. The smell... ugh. It smelled *awful*.

I risked a taste and chewed slowly, then swallowed. The food hit my stomach, and a second later, nausea climbed up my throat. Slamming a hand over my mouth, I raced to the

bathroom. I made it with less than half a second to spare. My knees hit the cold, stone tile, and I brought up the breakfast we'd had on the plane. Retching until I had nothing left in my stomach, I clambered to my feet. As I opened the stall door, my girls were waiting, concern etched on their faces.

“Are you okay?” Sage asked. “I can arrest the owner for poisoning you if you like.” She chuckled, but laughing was beyond me right now. I was doing my best not to recall the smell of those tacos.

“Water,” I croaked.

“Here.” Harlow fished a bottle out of her purse.

I unscrewed the cap and took a long drink. “That’s better. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what came over me. Wonder if I’m coming down with a bug. If I am, you shouldn’t be near me, Harlow. I don’t want to give it to you and then you give it to Harrison.”

“How do you feel now?” Harlow asked.

“Fine.” I wrinkled my nose. “I feel completely fine.”

Harlow and Athena traded glances.

“What?” I asked.

Athena drew her teeth over her lip. “Babe, is there any way... God this is hard for me to ask after our conversation in December... but... you couldn’t... be pregnant could you?”

I shook my head. “I was going to tell you over lunch, but Garen and I have decided not to go through another round of IVF. We’re going to adopt instead. My last round was last November, and that failed.”

“You’ve been having IVF?” Sage and Harlow asked at the same time.

I grimaced. “I should have told you last year, but I didn’t want to ruin Christmas.”

“No, you left that for the bastard who tried to kill us.” Athena nudged me, grinning.

“Glad you can laugh,” Sage said. “I get stabbed every time I think about it. If they ever catch the dude, they’d better not leave me alone with him.”

“Or her,” Harlow said. “Could be a woman.”

“Could be, I suppose.” Athena waved her hand in the air. “Back to Catriona. Are you a hundred percent sure? I mean... unless you and Garen haven’t been sleeping together.”

I laughed. “Oh, we’ve been sleeping together. A lot. A lot, a lot, a lot.”

“All right,” Harlow said. “Don’t rub it in. New mom over here. Sex is off the table for weeks yet, and I’m honestly not sure my vagina will ever go back to normal.”

“It will,” Athena reassured. “Trust me. After I had Ethan, I told Ryker to take a look and make sure it was all still there because, believe me, when the baby’s head came out, I thought that was the end of my poor pussy.”

I hugged her. “God, I love you.”

“Take a test,” Harlow said. “Just to rule it out.”

“I’ll go get one,” Sage said. “There’s a pharmacy on the corner. Wait here.”

Before I could stop her, she’d gone. My hands started to shake. I wasn’t pregnant. I couldn’t be. We’d tried to get pregnant on our own for a year before having IVF, and four rounds in twelve months had produced zero babies. Besides, I didn’t feel pregnant. I just felt nauseous for a few seconds. I bet there was something off with the food.

An elderly lady opened the door to the bathroom. She side-eyed us as if wondering what a group of women were doing hanging around in the bathroom, then disappeared into the stall next to the one I’d puked in. Right behind her was Sage. She handed me a brown paper bag and shoo’d me into the stall.

“Go.”

I traded glances with Athena who smiled reassuringly. Closing the door, I pulled down my panties and sat on the pan.

It took me ages to go. Stage fright, probably. I heard the elderly woman say something to my friends, but I didn't catch their reply. Eventually I managed to pee on the stick. I came out of the stall feeling sicker than I had before I puked. I handed the stick to Athena and washed my hands.

“You'll have to look. I can't.”

“Okay.” She set a timer on her watch without looking at the instructions. I guessed she'd done one or two of those herself. So had I. More than I cared to count, and every single one had returned a negative test result. This wouldn't be any different, but somehow, having my friends here to hold me up when I crumpled made it a little bit better.

Athena's watch chimed. She looked over at me. “Ready?”

“No.”

Harlow felt for my hand, squeezing my fingers. I couldn't look at Athena, choosing to count the cracks in the floor tiles instead.

“Catriona?” Her soft voice forced my head up.

“Yeah?”

She handed me the stick. “Darling, you're pregnant.”

Harlow squealed, Sage fist pumped the air, and Athena flung herself at me. The stick hit the floor. I didn't recall letting it go. *Pregnant*. It wasn't possible.

“Are you sure?” I croaked.

“Sure as eggs is eggs.” She clasped my cheeks. “Catriona, my beautiful, sweet friend. You're going to make the most wonderful mother.”

I burst into tears.

GAREN

The baby puked on my suit. I shouldn't have expected to get off scot free, but goddammit, did it have to be the thick, yellow, bile kind of sick? Ryker and Oliver were no help, either, or Elliot who'd turned up a few minutes after the girls left for lunch muttering something about Sage preferring lunch with her girlfriends rather than him.

Handing a gurgling, and, frankly, pleased with himself Harrison to Oliver, I shrugged out of the jacket and stuffed it into a paper bag I found under the sink, then threw it in the trash. A dry cleaner might have successfully gotten the stain out, but I'd always know it was there.

Maybe Catriona and I could adopt a kid who'd passed through the puking stage. They must've stopped projectile vomiting by four or five, right? *Oh, what did I know?* The number of things I knew about kids could fit on the back of a postage stamp.

Voices sounded in the foyer, and the three women burst through the door giggling and laughing. Catriona split off from the other two and made a beeline for me.

"The baby puked on my jacket," I said, expecting her to make fun of me. Instead, she grabbed me by the arm and tugged.

"I don't care. Come on. We're leaving."

“Leaving? Why? Have you girls fallen out or something?”

“Or something,” Athena said, winking at Catriona. “I’d do as she says, Garen.”

Confused, I said my hurried goodbyes to my friends who, from the expressions on their faces, were as clueless as I was. “What’s the rush?” I asked her once she virtually shoved me into the elevator.

“You’ll see.” She looked as if she had a huge secret that she was only just managing to contain, and she wanted to get somewhere safe before she spontaneously combusted and took out half the block.

She hustled me to the car, climbing in first. Her legs bounced during the entire, albeit short, journey from Ryker’s place to the hotel, but every time I attempted to question her, she shushed me, then made a zipping motion across her mouth.

Since my wife had chosen not to clue me in, I used the time to answer a few emails and read an all-too-brief report from Draven, the investigator Ryker had hired to look into the fire. It struck me as one of those “need to keep the clients happy so they don’t bother me” reports which, based on how Ryker had described his initial meeting with Draven, was probably accurate. The lack of progress was getting to us all. None of our personalities took well to feeling a loss of control, and when our families were involved, the need for answers, for whoever was responsible to face punishment, drove us all crazy.

I had a good few inches on Catriona, yet I almost had to jog to keep up with her as she strode across the lobby to the bank of elevators. Even our bodyguard lengthened his stride to keep us close. The three of us rode the elevator up to our penthouse suite, our bodyguard stationing himself outside the door as me and Catriona went inside.

“Okay, what the fuck is going on?”

She rummaged through her purse and withdrew a long, thin box wrapped in gold paper and tied with a bow. “Here.”

She thrust it at me.

I frowned. It wasn't my birthday or an anniversary. At least, I didn't think so. Ah, fuck, what special event had I forgotten? "What is it?"

Rolling her eyes, she huffed. "Just open it, Garen. It won't bite you."

Giving her a sarcastic smile, I pulled at the ribbon and tore the wrapping paper. The box resembled something a jeweler might put a bracelet in. I removed the lid. It took me longer than it should take a man of my intellect to grasp what my eyes were telling me. In the small, clear pane on one side of the white stick, was a word I thought we'd never see: *Pregnant*.

My jaw slackened. I lifted my head, seeking out my wife. Her glowing joy wrapped around my heart and smothered it.

"Is this... is this for real?"

"No, you jerk. I just like messing with your head for shits and giggles." She flung her arms around my neck. "It's real. It's a hundred percent real."

"But... but... how?"

She drew back, her green eyes twinkling. "Well, let me see. Man puts erect penis into woman and ejaculates. Sperm swim up the fallopian tube and—"

"All right, all right. Stupid question." I touched her stomach. "I still don't understand. All that trying. All those IVF sessions. All those disappointments."

"I know. I said as much to Athena, and she speculated that it's one of those things where you want something so badly and it doesn't happen, and the minute you accept it won't happen for you, bam! It happens."

"I can't believe it."

"Neither could I. I kept looking at it, wondering if I'd read it wrong."

I hated asking the next question, but it needed saying. “How accurate are these tests?”

“I thought the same, so I looked it up. Ninety-nine percent. And yes, I know what you’re thinking. What about that one percent? And you’re right, so...” She let me go and went over to where she’d put her handbag down. She reached inside and pulled out four more white sticks, waving them in the air. “TaDa.”

My chest swelled with love. I took the sticks from her, tossed them aside, and drew her close to me. “I’m sorry for being a grouch this morning. I just get this burst of fury whenever any man even looks at you.”

“You don’t say.” She laced her hands around my neck once more. “Which is why I’m praying for a boy.”

“Oh, yeah? Why?”

“Because you and a daughter.” She widened her eyes. “Can you imagine?”

A chuckle rumbled through my chest. “That is a very good point you make, Mrs. Gauthier.”

Standing on tiptoes, she kissed me. “I’m going to call Grams and Aiden. You should call your parents.”

I stopped her. “Not yet. Let’s get you checked out first.”

She looked glum at my suggestion but nodded. “Okay.” Her gloomy mood didn’t last long. “I’m so happy, Garen. A baby. We’re going to have a baby.”

“Yeah. A baby.” I drew her to me, resting her head on my shoulder. Half of me was elated; the other half was filled with a rabid need, even more fervent than before, to find the person responsible for burning down the hotel.

There was so much more at stake than a mere hour ago. If we didn’t get a breakthrough soon, I feared the only way we’d find the culprit was to put ourselves up as bait and wait for him or her to try again.

Except, without knowing which one of us was the target, how the fuck did we do that?

RYKER

Casting a final glance over the Farrington deal Elliot had spent the last six months working on, I signed my name as the second signatory, right below Elliot's. When we set up ROGUES, we agreed that all deals would require two signatories to form a legally binding agreement. Originally, we'd thought that all six of us should sign, but considering half of us were separated by time differences, even using online signatures would slow things down more than we'd like. Besides, we trusted each other. There wasn't a single one of us who would tie ROGUES into a bad deal. And all potential deals were brought to the board meeting and discussed right down to the finer details. The signature part was just the final tick in the box.

Before the ink had dried on the contract, Elliot entered my office. Without knocking, I might add. Nothing new there. He swanned over, swiped my coffee from under my nose, and took a sip. When he returned it to my desk, I pushed it in his direction.

"Keep it. I'm not drinking it after you've had your lips around the rim. Who knows where the fuck they've been."

Elliot laughed. "I can tell you if you like."

I raised a hand. "Please don't."

He laughed again. Flopping onto my guest chair, he drew the Farrington contract toward him. “All good?”

“Yes.”

“Great. I’ll send it over to the lawyers as soon as I’ve—”

My intercom buzzed. “One sec.” I pressed the button. “Yes, Patricia?”

“Mr. Draven is here to see you.”

My eyes collided with Elliot’s. I’d heard very little from Draven in the two weeks since I’d hired him to investigate the fire. He’d sent the odd, all-too-brief email, and that was about it. No phone calls, no reports on what he’d uncovered, or rather hadn’t uncovered. He’d told me as much when I gave him the job, but that hadn’t stopped me craving a crumb of information here and there.

“Send him in.”

I rose to greet the burly investigator, as did Elliot. Trying to get a read on Draven’s expression was a futile endeavor. He’d make a great poker player.

“Please, have a seat.” I pulled out a chair at the conference table, choosing one opposite. Elliot sat beside me. I knitted my fingers together and laid them on the table, more to stop me fidgeting than any other reason. “What do you have?” No point in beating around the bush.

“I’m just gonna throw a name out there and see the reaction I get, okay?”

I sat up straight. So did Elliot. Whoever Draven was about to name, he expected us to know them.

“Go on.”

“Tony Carruthers.”

Elliot sprang to his feet as if a stick of dynamite had exploded beneath him. His palms landed on the conference table with a dull thud. “The fuck did you just say?”

Draven ran a hand over his thick beard. “He’s the man responsible for the fire.”

Elliot scoffed a laugh, while I sat there unable to utter a single word, let alone a sentence.

“I thought you were supposed to be good at what you do. It can’t be him. That bastard is in prison where he belongs and where, hopefully, he’ll rot until the last pathetic breath leaves his body.”

I braced for Draven to explode. He didn’t strike me as the kind of man who’d take kindly to having his talents called into question. The problem was that a mere mention of Elliot’s birth father always caused Elliot’s famous temper to put in an appearance. His temper usually burned out quick—unless Carruthers was the cause. Then it could mushroom for days.

Draven got to his feet, helped himself to a glass of water from a jug in the middle of the table, then walked around to our side and put it in front of Elliot.

“Drink. Then sit. I’ll let your slight at me pass, but you only get one. Second time, I put you on your ass. Once you’re ready to listen, I’ll talk.”

As casual as you like, he returned to his side of the table, sinking into the chair with more grace than a man of his size should manage. Crossing one leg over the opposite knee, he laced his hands behind his head and leaned back.

I waited for Elliot to look at me. “You okay, man?”

“Fuck, Ryker. It can’t be him. If he’d gotten out, the police would have told us, surely. Or Helen would have called me. Even Thomas, for Christ’s sake.”

Helen was Elliot’s birth father’s second wife, and Thomas his son, making him Elliot and Athena’s half brother.

“Maybe they—”

Draven cleared his throat. “I mean, you guys can continue to bat back and forth what you think happened. Or you could shut the fuck up and let me tell you what I know.”

In any other circumstances, his response would have made me laugh. But right at that moment, my concern lay with Elliot. He’d gone through hell, as we both had, when that

bastard abducted Athena, but Elliot was the one who'd gotten shot and almost died when he put it all together and figured out his own father was the kidnapper. The man's name would always provoke this kind of response.

Elliot downed the drink of water, setting the glass on the table with enough force to shatter it. A muscle flickered in his cheek, and his jaw scissored from side to side. Several deep breaths later, he appeared to have gotten his emotions under control.

“Talk.” He made a gesture with his hand, a kind of “get on with it” flick of the wrist, as though Draven was the one who'd held up the information rather than Elliot and his famous temper. I kicked his ankle under the table, accompanying it with a warning glare.

Draven remained in his relaxed position, his gaze moving from Elliot to me and back again. “Your father had—”

“He's not my fucking father,” Elliot growled.

Draven lowered his arms to his lap. He came across as utterly unfazed, but I sensed a growing irritation with Elliot. I put a hand on Elliot's arm. “Chill. I get that this is hard for you, but we've searched for answers for almost four months and found out zip. Let the man tell us what he knows.”

Closing his eyes, Elliot drew a deep breath in through his nose, letting it out through pursed lips. His lids lifted up, and he gave Draven a look layered with apology.

“I'm sorry. You won't know this, but that man has done the most dreadful things to my family. He was and always will be a trigger for me.”

“Oh, I know what he's done.”

“You do?” Elliot's eyes swiveled to mine. “You told him?”

“No. Not a word.”

“Mr. Bancroft, when I take on an investigation, I make it my business to research everyone attached to that case. The answers lie in the details. So, yes, I know your... Carruthers... I know he kidnapped your sister.” His gaze flicked to me.

“Your wife, for a fifty million-dollar ransom—one you paid.” He returned his attention to Elliot. “I know he beat your mother and did a twelve-year stretch in prison. I know he remarried and had another son, who you then donated a kidney to when his own failed. I know Carruthers beat his second wife. I know he shot and almost killed you.” He pressed his fingertips together and rested his chin on them. “Shall I go on? Or do you need more evidence that I’m fucking great at what I do.”

That brought a flicker of a smile to my lips. Elliot’s, too.

“What makes you think it’s Carruthers?” I asked. “Especially as, far as we know, he’s still behind bars.”

“Oh, he’s still behind bars. There are many ways criminals gain access to the outside world. How do you think the Mexican drug lords continue to run their business while incarcerated? They don’t have to physically be on the outside to get things done.”

“No, I suppose not. But Carruthers isn’t exactly a drug lord. He’s a wife beater, a kidnapper, and an attempted murderer.”

Draven arched a bushy brow. “Yeah. He’s a regular Boy Scout.”

Elliot snickered a laugh under his breath. “Okay, I like you. Go on.”

“Until recently, Carruthers had a cell mate—someone named Barton—who’d received a two year stretch for GBH. Barton’s the type of man who runs his mouth. One day he ran it to the wrong guy who came for him in the showers. Carruthers saved him from getting shanked. Right before his release date, Carruthers called in the favor for saving Barton’s life.”

“The fire,” Elliot breathed.

“Yep.”

“How, though?” I asked. “According to the fire chief, whoever messed with the electrics knew what they were doing.”

“Barton’s a qualified electrician.”

My eyes widened. I volleyed my gaze to Elliot. “Fuck.”

“How do you know all this?” Elliot asked.

“Did you not hear the awesome part?” Draven threw a grin. “As I said, Barton likes to run his mouth. Plus, most convicts are talkers. They enjoy bragging about their exploits.”

I leaned in. “How did you even find this guy?”

“Surely you don’t expect me to reveal my sources?”

“So, what happens now?”

For the second time since Draven arrived, Elliot launched to his feet. “Now? Now I go down to that prison and beat that bastard to death.”

He got halfway across my office before I scrambled to my feet. Draven beat me to it, gripping Elliot by the arms and holding him in place.

“Easy there, tiger.”

“Get the fuck off me!” Elliot wrestled to free himself, but the giant investigator was far too strong.

“Elliot, calm down.” I stood between him and the door, then jerked my chin at Draven for him to let Elliot go. He did, taking a step back, but not far enough away that he couldn’t grab Elliot again if needed.

A vein popped in Elliot’s forehead, his hands coiled into fists at his sides. “He’ll never let go. Don’t you get it, Ryker! I’ll never be free of him. We’ll never be safe as long as he’s alive. Do you want that threat hanging over your head? Over Athena’s head? Over Ethan and Mia’s heads? You want them to live a life where they’re forever looking behind them, on pins, waiting for the next death blow? A life where they can’t take a piss in a public bathroom without three bodyguards minding the door? That’s what you want?”

“No, that’s not what I want. But think it through, Elliot. How would you even get past the guards? There’s no way to

get to him. Use your head. The best approach is to call the police, share what Draven has found, and let them handle it.”

He scoffed. “Yeah, because they’ve done such a fucking good job controlling that bastard so far, haven’t they?”

“That’s not the job of the police,” Draven interjected. “They arrest and charge. That’s it. Guilt is up to the courts, and prison is the responsibility of the governor.”

For a split second, I thought Elliot might punch him, and that would not end well for my best friend. Draven wore a shit-eating grin that dared Elliot to try. I got in between the two of them. If Elliot took a swing at either of us, better for me to be in the firing line.

“I’m calling Sage.” If anyone could calm him down, it was his wife. I risked leaving him long enough to grab my phone off my desk. He didn’t try to stop me, nor did he make a move to throw a punch. Thank Christ. I gave Sage the briefest rundown, and as soon as I mentioned Carruthers’ name, she hung up.

“She’s on her way.”

I had Patricia bring some coffee and pastries, and tried to keep the conversation away from Carruthers while we waited for Sage, asking Draven about his business and why he’d left the NYPD. Elliot’s temper slowly dissipated, and by the time Sage walked through the door thirty minutes later, he’d gotten himself under control. Draven briefly recounted what he’d told us, and when he finished, Sage took charge, as I’d known she would.

“I’m calling it in.” She put her phone to her ear. “Draven, are you okay to stick around?”

“Yeah.”

She spoke rapidly into the handset. When she hung up, she took Elliot by the hand. “They’ll be here shortly. Won’t be long.” They left my office together, leaving me and Draven alone.

“He’s a firecracker.” Draven guffawed a laugh. “Thought he might take a swing me at one point.”

“Oh, he was close.” I gnawed my lip, pacing. “I should call my wife. This affects her as much as it does him.”

That wasn't strictly true. Even though Athena suffered at the hands of her father, he'd never stimulated the same angry response in her that he had in Elliot. Possibly because Elliot was seven years older than Athena, and he'd witnessed the beatings his mother suffered firsthand. Athena was too young to remember much, and even when she found out her father was the one who'd kidnapped her, she'd responded with the kind of levelheadedness Elliot seemed incapable of whenever his birth father was in the picture. She was the measured one while he was the hothead.

Regardless, I put in the call. She listened while I told her what Draven had uncovered.

“How's Elliot?” was the first thing she asked.

“Not great. Sage has taken him for a walk to cool off while we wait for the police to arrive.”

Her breath caught. “Oh, God, Ryker. You don't think all that posting I did over social media before we went away had anything to do with this? What if that's how he found out where we'd be? What if all this is my fault?”

“It isn't your fault. The only person to blame is him. If we all go by that logic, no one would ever post anything online. You're allowed to share your excitement with your friends and followers.”

“Yeah, I know.” Her voice still held a hint of remorse. “Shall I tell Mom?”

“Not yet. Let's see what the police say first. Then we can sit them down and tell them as a family.”

“Okay,” she said quietly. “I love you. Look after Elliot.”

She hung up, and I raked a hand through my hair. Jesus, what a fucking mess.

Sage and Elliot returned with two police officers. The four of us sat around the table while Draven shared what he'd uncovered. He promised to hand over all of his investigative

notes, and the officers left with a promise they'd keep us updated.

I walked Draven to the elevator, and when I returned to my office, Sage was alone.

"Where's Elliot?" A trace of panic raised my tone. I didn't put it past him to carry out his threat, regardless of police involvement, and what a clusterfuck that'd turn out to be.

"Relax. He's in the bathroom." She jerked her chin to the door on the far side of my office.

"Is he okay?"

She flopped into a chair and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Not really. Jesus, Ryker. What a mess."

"I know. You're going to have to keep a close eye on him over the coming weeks, Sage. I wouldn't put it past him to try to take matters into his own hands, and then we're in for a world of hurt."

"Yep." She blew out a stream of air. "I'll handle it."

"If anyone can, it's you."

"Have you told Athena?"

I nodded. "She's shocked, but she took it far better than him."

"You got the sensible one, and I ended up with the volcano."

"Any mention of his birth father has always provoked a response. But this..." I sat beside her, exhaustion swamping me. "He could've killed us, Sage. He could've killed my kids. If I didn't think we'd end up behind bars, I'd go down to that prison with Elliot and hold that fucker down while Elliot beat him to death."

"I get it. Revenge is such a powerful emotion. But we really are better off letting the police handle this."

"Elliot said that as long as his father is alive, we'll always have to be on our guard. He's right, too."

She laid a hand on my arm. “Let’s take one problem at a time, okay? For now, I’m going to take Elliot home. I suggest you go home, too, and reassure Athena. Then get the rest of the ROGUES on a call and update them. But do me a favor and leave Elliot out of that phone call. He needs the time and space to come to grips with this. It’s a lot for anyone, but doubly hard for Elliot.”

“He’s lucky to have you.”

She smiled. “Oh, I know.” Her gaze went to the bathroom as Elliot appeared. She rose from the couch and slipped her hand inside his. “Shall we go?”

“Yeah. Call me later, Ryker.”

As he walked away, I caught the expression on his face, and my stomach dropped. Whatever Sage had said to calm him down, I had a horrible feeling that Elliot wouldn’t let this go, no matter what the consequences of his actions might be.

GAREN

Three months later...

“Someone want to tell me why we had to fly two and a half thousand miles just to have dinner at Elliot’s place? Bearing in mind my wife’s delicate condition.”

Catriona gave me a dig sharp enough to crack a rib. “Delicate? Did that feel delicate?”

I rubbed my side, glaring at Oliver’s shit-eating grin. “You can quit it, too.”

“I see you’re in as sunny a mood as ever.” Oliver flung his arm around my shoulder, walking me toward the car parked a short distance from the plane. “Stop with the bellyaching. We haven’t all managed to align our calendars since before last Christmas. It’ll be nice to spend some time together. And it isn’t just dinner. Unless you’re planning to return to Vancouver tonight.”

“Keeping my options open,” I grumbled.

“Besides,” Oliver continued, ignoring my comment. “I think Elliot has something he wants to tell us. He’s been walking around the office for the last couple days like he’s constipated.”

“First, look what happened last time we were all in the same location. I mean, who the hell carried out that risk

assessment? And second, fuck you very much for the visual of a constipated Elliot.”

“You’re welcome. Now get in the goddamn car before I decide to let you walk to Manhattan.”

He gave me a good-natured shove toward the open door. I made sure Catriona was settled, then climbed in beside her. Oliver got in the driver’s seat, his bodyguard riding up front. All of us were still security conscious, despite the fact that Elliot’s birth father had been charged with conspiracy to murder and was in solitary confinement while awaiting trial, and we now knew that the most likely target was either Elliot, Athena, Judy, or Karl. Maybe all four of them. The man was clearly psychotic, although he’d been declared fit to stand trial.

“How’s Harrison doing?” Catriona asked. “I can’t wait to see him. When I FaceTimed Harlow last week, I couldn’t believe how much he’d changed.”

“He’s terrific.”

Oliver wore the smile of a proud father—one I hoped to see on my face in a few months’ time. Three and a half to be precise. The thought of being responsible for a baby whose life depended on me not fucking up made me both petrified and excited. Catriona was the epitome of calm. I watched her sometimes when she thought she was alone, cradling her stomach and talking to our son or daughter. I couldn’t begin to explain the feelings that consumed me whenever I caught her unawares. She’d make an amazing mother. The jury was out on my standing as a father.

“He smiles all the time now,” Oliver continued. “It’s not just wind anymore.”

I screwed up my face. “Or puke, I hope.”

Oliver laughed. “Think of it as good practice for when your little one comes along. His personality is really coming through now, too, and he’s much more mobile. It’s quite something watching them grow.”

Catriona’s lips tipped up, like she’d thought of a secret only she knew. I reached across the seat and clasped her hand.

She turned her head, her smile growing wider.

“We can’t wait.”

I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed every one of her fingertips. “No, we can’t.”

“Who would have thought the arrogant ass that is Garen Gauthier would have been brought to his knees by thoughts of his kid. I remember in college you vowing never to settle down, never to marry, and never to have kids.”

“I didn’t know that,” Catriona said.

I groaned. “Thanks, bud. Rat me out on a few more secrets why don’t you?”

“Don’t tempt me. Remember, I know where all the bodies are buried.”

Catriona rubbed her hands together. “Ooh, this sounds like fun. Maybe we should play truth or dare over lunch?”

“No,” I said. “Absolutely not.”

She laughed. “That’s okay. You keep your secrets, and I’ll keep mine.”

I sat up a bit straighter. “What secrets?”

“Aha!” She tapped the side of her nose. “If you can have secrets, dear husband, then so can I. You’ll just have to deal.”

Oliver chuckled. “Some threads shouldn’t be pulled on, even loose ones.”

“Amen,” Catriona said.

Deciding it was probably a good idea to let this subject drop, I moved the conversation onto work. Catriona gave a resigned sigh, riffled through her purse, and pulled out a book.

It took us a solid hour to get from La Guardia to Elliot’s place. Oliver parked in the private garage space reserved for the penthouse, and we rode the elevator up to the top floor.

“Are we the last to arrive?”

Oliver nodded. “Sebastian and Trinity got in yesterday afternoon, and Upton and Belle arrived last night.”

“Without the goddamn dog that pees everywhere, I hope.”

Catriona made a frustrated noise. “You’re never going to let that go, are you?”

“Nope.” I grinned, wrapped an arm around her waist, and kissed her temple. “You wouldn’t have me any other way.”

She arched a brow. “Now, *there’s* a thread that shouldn’t get a tug. Ever.”

Amusement swam in Oliver’s eyes. “If it ever unravels, can we all get in on that action?”

“What the fuck is this? Pick on Garen day?”

“Aww, poor baby.” Catriona stroked my hair.

I tried to scowl, but ever since I’d met and married the love of my life, I’d found it harder and harder to be that bad-tempered, miserable son of a bitch I’d been for most of my adulthood. Around her, anyway. My crabby persona worked just fine toward almost everyone else. But from the second Catriona walked into my life, she’d chipped away at the walls I’d built until they laid in rubble around my feet.

The elevator doors opened directly into Elliot’s living room. Nine people rose from the U-shaped seating area, striking up a clearly practiced slow clap. I scanned the room. No kids present.

“You can all fuck off.” I accompanied my curse with a one-fingered salute. “Two and a half thousand miles we’ve traveled for you ungrateful bastards.”

“Got you beat,” Sebastian said. “Three and a half thousand from London to here.”

“Fuck’s sake, it’s not a competition on who traveled the farthest,” Elliot said. “Glad you found a slot in your extremely busy schedule to fit us in.”

“Catriona, you’re positively *glowing*.” Harlow skipped over, placing the flat of her palm on my wife’s growing bump.

“I might be glowing, but I am not loving the swollen ankles.”

“Oh, I remember those,” Harlow said.

“Me, too,” Athena cut in. “Guys don’t know how lucky they are.”

I raised my hands on either side of my head. “Let’s set some ground rules. If this dinner is going to include constant man bashing, I’m out of here.”

“Let’s make a deal.” Athena winked at Catriona. “No man bashing as long as there’s no mansplaining.”

All six of our wives laughed. I rolled my eyes. “Fun times.”

“Oh, Garen, shush.” Athena linked her arm through mine and tugged me toward the kitchen. “We all know it’s a front and you’re a teddy bear really.”

“If you think that, then something has gone horribly wrong.”

She laughed, kissing my cheek. “We all love you. Now, how about a drink?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

The banter free-flowed throughout the first and second courses. It wasn’t often we all got together, and as much as I’d griped about traveling all this way for one dinner, the stress of the last few months slid off my shoulders. We’d all recovered well from our injuries, the culprit had been found and would get what was coming to him, and after all the disappointments and worry, Catriona and I would soon become parents. Life was fucking good.

“I have something to tell you guys,” I said. “I’ve decided to rebuild the hotel.” I’d been back and forth on this for months now. Every time the subject came up at a board meeting, I’d brushed it aside, refusing to discuss the idea. It was Catriona who’d finally persuaded me to give it serious thought. Ever since conception, that project had been close to my heart, and she’d asked me a few nights ago while lying in bed why I’d allow someone like Carruthers to steal my joy. At the time, I’d brushed it off, but it’d percolated in the back of my mind. And the minute the words left my mouth, a ball of

excitement lodged in my stomach. My gut rarely led me astray.

“That’s fantastic,” Oliver said. Elliot, Sebastian, and Upton all nodded in agreement.

“It’s the right decision,” Ryker added.

Catriona squeezed my knee. “I’m proud of you.”

Elliot stood and tapped his dessert spoon on the side of his crystal wine glass. “Before Garen steals everyone’s attention, I have something to say.”

Laughter rose from around the table. I made a face. “Asshole.”

Elliot’s smile grew. “There were two reasons for inviting you all here today. One was because I’ve fucking missed you guys, and we don’t get to spend nearly as much time together as I’d like. The second reason is…” He looked down at Sage, his eyes shimmering with adoration. “This amazing woman here has just been promoted to Captain, and we wanted you all here to help us celebrate.”

The table erupted. I must admit, I thought he was going to say she was pregnant. With Elliot’s money, she could easily have given up that job and done something less dangerous, but Sage loved working for the NYPD, and she was a fucking good cop, too. No doubt she’d nail the more senior role, and maybe a desk job was the first step in planning parenthood. She’d never hidden the fact she wanted a family one day.

The intercom buzzed, interrupting the celebrations. “I’ll get it,” Sage said, standing and doing a little bow to more applause.

“And I’ll get more wine.”

Elliot hadn’t even made it to the kitchen when Sage said, “It’s the police. They want to talk to you.” She gestured at him.

“If you’ve organized a stripper, she’ll kill you,” Ryker teased.

“I swear, I haven’t.” Elliot frowned. “What do they want?”

“I don’t know. I’ve buzzed them up.”

A couple minutes later, the elevator opened, and two uniformed detectives stepped into the room. All of us got up from the table. One of the officers dipped his chin at Sage. “Captain. Sorry to interrupt your dinner.”

Ah, so her coworkers must have already known about her promotion.

“Pearson,” she replied. “What’s this about?”

“We need to speak to Mr. Bancroft.” His eyes shifted to Elliot. “And Mrs. Stone.”

Athena glanced at her brother, then Sage. “Me? Why?”

“Is there somewhere private we could talk?”

Ryker moved closer, settling his arm around Athena’s waist. “Whatever you have to say to my wife, you can do with me present.”

“We don’t need to go anywhere,” Elliot said. “We’re all family here.”

Pearson cleared his throat. “As you wish, sir.” He took out his notebook, but it looked more like a prop than a prompt. “I’m afraid I have some bad news about your father.”

Athena gasped. “Dad? Why? What’s happened to him? Is he hurt? Is Mom okay?”

Pearson went beet red. “I mean... your birth father. Tony Carruthers.”

“He’s not our father,” Elliot growled. “And what about the fucker? What could possibly interest us other than if he’s dead.”

“I’m afraid he is, sir.”

Athena covered her mouth with her hand. I glanced at Elliot, then at Ryker. He tightened his hold on his wife.

“Good,” Elliot spat. “I hope he fucking suffered.”

Sage pressed her palm to Elliot’s back. “Easy, babe.” She shifted her focus to Pearson. “How?”

“The prison guards found him hanging in his cell earlier today.”

She nodded. “I see.”

“He wasn’t on suicide watch. The Governor didn’t think there was a need.”

“Give the Governor my thanks,” Elliot said, his knuckles turning white as he made fists of his hands.

“Elliot.” Warning peppered Sage’s tone. She gestured to Pearson, maneuvering him and his colleague back toward the elevator. “As you can see, tensions run high whenever that individual is mentioned. Thank you for stopping by personally to tell us, but we’d appreciate some privacy to help us come to terms with this.”

“Of course.” Pearson dipped his chin. “Again, I’m sorry to ruin your dinner.”

“Ruin it?” Elliot scoffed. “Best fucking gift ever.”

Ryker jabbed him, a silent message for him to shut up. I studied Ryker’s face. If Elliot had anything to do with his birth father’s sudden suicide, Ryker would be the one person he’d confide in. Or maybe Ryker was the one responsible. Not only was Elliot like a brother to him, but Athena was his wife, the mother of his children. Perhaps both of them were responsible.

Or perhaps neither of them were. Carruthers’ untimely death could be a stroke of luck.

Apart from a muscle flickering in Ryker’s cheek, his expression remained impassive. Whatever he knew, or didn’t, he’d take the secret to the grave.

Best place for it.

ELLIOT

“It’s a day for celebration,” I said after the elevator doors closed on the cops. “My beautiful wife’s promotion, Garen finally waking up to what we’ve all known for months, and now that bastard is dead. This is a fucking great day. I’m sure I have a bottle of Krug around here somewhere.”

“Elliot—”

I headed off to the kitchen before Sage could finish her sentence. I already knew what would come out of her mouth. Celebrating that bastard’s demise was one thing. Talking about it was not on my agenda. Today, tomorrow, fucking never. I dropped to a crouch, examining the wine rack. I waited the appropriate amount of time before exclaiming, “I don’t believe it.”

“What now?” Sage groaned.

“I must’ve drunk it. I have a Cristal here, but I wanted the Krug.”

“Cristal is fine.”

Her voice was sprinkled with that exasperated tone I’d usually give in to. Not today. I needed an excuse to leave the house, and this was as good a reason as any I could make up.

“I won’t be long. I’ll go to Boucher. They usually have a good selection.”

“Elliot,” Sage attempted again.

“Let him go,” Ryker said. “He needs some space.”

I didn’t need space—not for the reason he assumed. It didn’t matter to me what anyone thought. All I needed was a thirty-minute window. I snatched up my wallet, kissing Sage on my way to the elevator. As the doors closed, I expelled a sigh heavy with relief. Slipping my phone from my pocket, I sent a quick text.

Be there in ten.

I didn’t receive a reply, and I hadn’t expected one.

Exiting my building, I turned left and strode down the street. I made another left, then a right, slipping inside the inconspicuous coffee shop. I headed to the back and slid into the last booth. A black coffee awaited me. I picked it up and sipped.

“Anyone suspect anything?” Draven asked.

“Yeah, Ryker does. Garen, too. But neither of them will ask me.”

“What about Sage?”

“She’s more worried I’m blocking out some kind of trauma.” I laughed, able to breathe for the first time in what felt like forever. “Letting him live would’ve been traumatic. But this, knowing he’s gone, knowing he can’t hurt me, my sister, or my mother ever again... that’s freedom.”

“And the police? They give you any concerning vibes?”

“Nope. It went like a dream, just as we planned.” I bumped fists with him. “Thank you. I’ll never be able to repay you for what you did for me and my family.”

“Me?” Draven pointed to himself. “I didn’t do a thing.”

“Right. Not a thing.” He’d never shared with me how he planned to pull off the job I’d paid him a considerable down payment to arrange, and I didn’t care. The end result was the only thing that mattered. Coming after me was one thing, but

Athena? Her kids? Oliver's kids? Nah. He crossed a fucking line—one he paid for with his miserable, useless life.

There wasn't a single fiber of my being that felt any remorse. That wouldn't change.

I took out my phone and tapped on it, pressing send on the transaction I'd set up this morning. Draven had put me in touch with someone he knew who was an expert in hiding a money trail. The last thing either of us needed was a shred of evidence to lead back to us.

Once it went through, I turned the screen to Draven. "Done." I put my phone away. "I have to go before Sage sends out a search party, but I wanted to say thanks in person."

"It could've waited."

"No, it couldn't. I don't expect you to understand, but what you've done for me has given me the kind of peace I never thought I'd have." I stood, looking down at the big, bearded dude I hadn't known for long, but the minute he'd agreed to help me, he'd become family. "Stay in touch, yeah?"

He half smiled. "Any more relatives need offing, I'm your guy."

I laughed. "Just the one for me, but if I hear of anyone in need, I'll make sure to send them your way."

Retracing my steps, I called into Boucher to buy a bottle of Krug and stopped off at a florist to pick up the bouquet I'd ordered, all part of my cover story to explain why I'd walked out on my wife's celebratory dinner. I rode the elevator up to the penthouse, plastering a grin on my face as the doors opened.

"Surprise!" I brandished the flowers and the champagne.

Sage's eyes lit up. She came toward me. "So, *that's* why you wanted to go out." Her arms full of five dozen red roses, she kissed me. "You are such a romantic, Elliot Bancroft."

"There's an extra gift in my pocket."

She narrowed her eyes. "We have guests."

Laughing, I said, “Not that gift. I’m saving that for later.” I tilted my hip toward her. “Go on.”

She reached into the pocket, withdrawing the small velvet box. “What is it?”

“Open it and find out.”

Lifting the lid on the eternity ring I’d had specially made, she gasped. “Oh, Elliot, it’s beautiful.”

“You and me, babe. For eternity.”

Keeping her and my family safe was the only thing I’d ever wanted, and I’d done it. Finally, we could all sleep safely in our beds and live our lives freely without a black cloud hovering over our heads.

The bastard was dead, and I didn’t feel a single shred of guilt.

EPILOGUE

RYKER

Four months later...

“Twenty-two hours.” Athena shook her head in either disbelief or awe. I wasn’t sure which. “Catriona’s a hero. I thought I had it tough with Ethan. Fifteen hours labor, including pushing for two. Fortunately, Mia shot out of me without warning.” She grinned up at me from her seat in the hospital waiting room. “Ryker thought he might have to deliver. You should have seen his face.”

Belle giggled. “Pets are so much easier.”

I slid my eyes over to Upton. He nodded along in agreement with Belle’s comment. No kids in their immediate future, then.

Sebastian paused his pacing and blew out a breath. “Fuck, I’m glad I’m not a woman.” He fired an apologetic look at Trinity, whose baby bump was just starting to show. “Sorry, Trin.”

“You will be when I squeeze your balls with every contraction.”

Elliot snickered. “When we decide to have kids, I’m staying out of arm’s reach in the delivery room. I’ll let Sage crush her mom’s hand instead.”

Sage looked up from the book she was reading, arching a brow at him. “We’ll see.”

I grinned, nudging him with my elbow. “That’s female talk for ‘good fucking luck with that plan’.”

A doctor in green scrubs appeared. Every one of us braced. He walked straight past, tapping on his cell.

“How much longer can she do this for?” I mused. “I thought when they induced labor, it sped things up.”

“Babies make an appearance when they’re ready,” Oliver said.

“But doesn’t a time come when they decide enough is enough and give her a C-section?” Belle asked. “I mean, they wouldn’t put her in any danger, would they?”

“They’ll constantly monitor the baby’s heartbeat,” Athena said. “If there’s a problem, they’ll take her straight into surgery and get the baby out. I read up on this when I was pregnant with Ethan.”

“I wonder how Garen’s coping,” I mused.

“Badly,” Oliver said. “It’s the doctors I feel for. Imagine how many times he’s yelled at them.”

“True story,” Upton said. “I’m surprised they haven’t put him in time out.”

Sebastian’s lips tilted up. “Or pumped him full of a sedative and propped him up in the corner.”

“Garen doesn’t know what’s coming,” Oliver said. “Going from zero kids to two kids in the space of a week is a test for anyone, let alone him.”

I nodded. Before Catriona had fallen pregnant, she and Garen had made the decision to adopt, and that hadn’t changed when she’d discovered she was expecting a baby. They’d fallen in love with a kid called Finn at the orphanage Oliver funded, and the paperwork had been finalized last week. Once Catriona and the baby could travel, they’d fly to New York to pick up Finn and welcome him into their family.

“He’ll work it out.”

Oliver laughed. “This is one of those times I wished I lived closer, so I could revel in his despair. Next time we see him, he’ll probably be bald.”

“You guys are mean.” Sage put down her book and stood, stretching out her back. She yawned, then rubbed her eyes. “It’s gotta be hard. Seeing the person you love in pain and there isn’t a thing you can do to help. Cut Garen some slack.”

Elliot wrapped his arms around her waist from behind and rested his chin on her shoulder. “I should have recorded that for when it’s our turn.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll remind me when the time comes.”

“When will that be?”

She twisted in his arms. “We could start now if you like.”

“God, please.” My hands flew in the air. “I know we’re close, but some things are best kept private. Think I’ll go grab a coffee.” I cocked my head at Athena. “Come with me?”

She didn’t need to be asked twice. Rising to her feet, she slipped her hand into the back pocket of my jeans and rested her head on my shoulder. She was exhausted, we all were, but not a single one of us had suggested returning to the ROGUES Vancouver hotel and getting some sleep. Garen was my brother in all the ways that mattered, and he’d asked us to come and support him and Catriona when the doctors had made an appointment to induce her. However long it took, we’d stay.

The hospital restaurant didn’t serve the best coffee, but it was strong, black, and gave me the caffeine kick I needed to stay awake. I added three sugars and pointed to a table by the window that had comfier seats than the waiting room.

Athena rubbed her face. “The last time we went this long without sleep was when Mia was a baby.”

“Yeah. I don’t miss those days.”

“Don’t you?” A flash of disappointment whipped across her face. “I kinda do. They grow up so fast, and you’re so in

the moment that you forget to stop and take a mental picture of the special times.”

“Projectile vomit at three a.m.?”

“You know what I mean.” She gazed wistfully out of the window, taking the odd sip of coffee.

“Thea?”

She dragged her eyes back to me. “What?”

“Spit it out.”

Sighing, she gave me a small smile. “It’s scary how well you know me.”

“Ditto.” I reached for her hand, encasing it between both of mine. “You want another baby. Is that it?”

I’d spotted the growing signs over the last couple of weeks. Every time she’d spoken to Catriona on the phone as her due date approached, then passed, Athena had come away from the conversation with a dreamy look in her eye. We’d only ever planned to have two kids, but times changed. Feelings changed. And while I’d been happy to stop at two, blessed that they’d both come out healthy, if Athena wanted three, five, hell, ten kids, I’d give them to her.

“I do. I really do. I know what we said after Mia was born but—”

I leaned across the table and cut off her next word with a kiss. “Whatever you want, Thea.”

“But what do *you* want?”

“You. Your happiness. Our family. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. If you want another baby, then I want another baby. Besides, I’m more than happy to ditch the condoms.” I grinned. “And have sex several times a day.”

“So... we’re doing this?”

“I guess we are.”

She got up, came around to my side of the table, and sat on my lap. “I love you.”

“Love you more.” I moved in to kiss her when my phone buzzed. Digging it out of my pocket, the banner across the screen from Elliot read, “It’s a girl!”

“Fuck! We need to go.” I turned the screen toward Athena.

“Oh my God! We missed it.” Leaping from my lap, she sprinted across the restaurant. I caught up to her at the exit.

The waiting room was empty when we arrived, and I cursed. “What fucking room is she in?” I was about to text Elliot when a nurse appeared.

“Are you looking for Mrs. Gauthier?”

“Yes.”

She beckoned to us. “Come with me. I’ll take you to her room.”

Athena went in first. The room was packed, all our friends gathered around Catriona’s bedside. Garen looked ecstatic and exhausted, with a swaddled bundle in his arms. Catriona positively glowed.

“Oh, Catriona,” Athena gushed as she peered at the baby’s face peeking out through the blanket. “She’s beautiful.”

“Isn’t she?”

I squeezed Garen’s shoulder. “Do you have a name for her yet?”

Garen’s eyes met Catriona, and she nodded.

“Cara,” he said. “After Catriona’s mother.”

As if by design, the door opened again, and Catriona’s diminutive grandmother entered along with Catriona’s brother, Aiden. After Catriona had been in labor for ten hours, we’d persuaded Aiden to take his grandmother home so she could get some rest. Eighty-two was far too old to stay awake all night, or to try sleep upright in a plastic chair.

“Oh, Grams.” Catriona burst into tears. We separated to make room for the family reunion. “Meet Cara.”

Garen handed over the baby to her great-grandmother. She cradled the baby like a pro, rocking her, cooing, and giving the baby her pinky to suckle on.

“Your mother would be so proud.” She kissed the baby’s forehead.

Aiden squeezed his sister’s hand. “You’ll have to send a picture to Finn. Tell him he’s a big brother.”

“Oh, yes! I love that idea. He’ll be so excited.”

“Why don’t we give the family some space?” I suggested.

Ten of us filed out of the room, drained, sleep deprived, but happy.

“Breakfast at the hotel?” Elliot asked.

“Then sleep for a week,” Upton said.

“Think it’s straight to bed for us.” Sebastian put his arm around Trinity’s shoulders. “*Someone* should have gone back to the hotel earlier.”

“And *someone* should stop treating me like glass,” Trinity said.

“Careful, Sebastian,” Oliver said. “Pregnant women are not to be trifled with.”

We headed back to the hotel in separate cars. I purposely drove slower than the rest, losing them about a mile from the hotel. When we arrived, their cars were empty. I pulled into a reserved space, but instead of heading for the elevator, I led Athena into the hotel via the staff entrance. The head chef looked a little startled as I strode through his kitchen, towing my bewildered wife behind me.

“What are you doing?” she asked as I hustled her into the service elevator.

“Thought you might want to get started on the baby plan right away.”

“Aren’t you tired?”

“Aren’t you?”

She grinned. “Touché.”

My phone buzzed. I turned it off without looking at the screen. It was probably Elliot wondering where we were. He could wonder. I had far more important things on my mind than bacon and eggs.

“Think we’ll get pregnant on the first try like we did with Mia?” Athena asked as I stripped off her dress, kicking the door closed behind me at the same time.

“I hope not. I’m looking forward to lots of practice.” I unclipped her bra. “Have to say, though, I can’t wait for the big boobs and to taste breast milk again.”

She giggled. “You’ve always been kinky.”

“You wouldn’t want me any other way.”

“I’ll always want you.” She pressed herself close to me, threading her fingers through my hair.

I nestled my face into her neck, breathing in the vanilla scent of her soap. “Let’s go make that baby.”

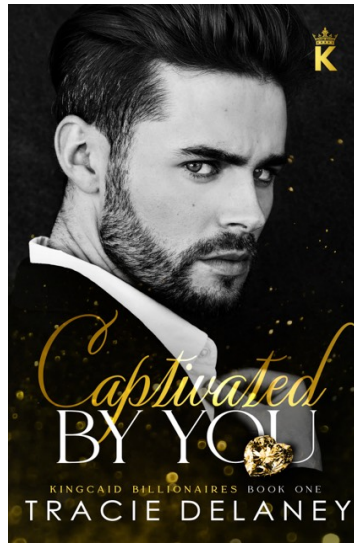
And, you know what? We did.

Thank you for reading ENGULFED. I hope you loved being back with the ROGUES. I wasn’t sure how this book would turn out, having written several novels since we first said goodbye to them, but I’m so happy with the final result. Their voices were loud which helped, especially Ryker and Garen which was the main reason they took center stage.

But sadly, that really is it for the ROGUES. I don’t plan to revisit them again. Having said that, they do make cameos in the Kingcaid Billionaires, and who knows, they might turn up in future series too.

And if you’re wondering who the Kingcaids are... start right here with [Captivated By You](#) where you can meet my

cinnamon roll hero Asher Kingcaid and the feisty Kiana Doherty.



Girl walks into a bar, hooks up with the gorgeous guy in the designer suit, and has the hottest sex of her life.

Sounds like a wet dream, right?

Wrong.

When I wake up the next morning in a stunning penthouse overlooking the Seattle waterfront to a note saying “have a safe flight back to Chicago,” his message is loud and clear:
One and done.

Famous last words.

Guess who’s waiting to greet me on the first day at my new job? Turns out the mega-rich Asher Kingcaid is far from one and done. But surrendering to his charms is a bad idea. When you’ve been burned once, it makes sense to stay away from the fire.

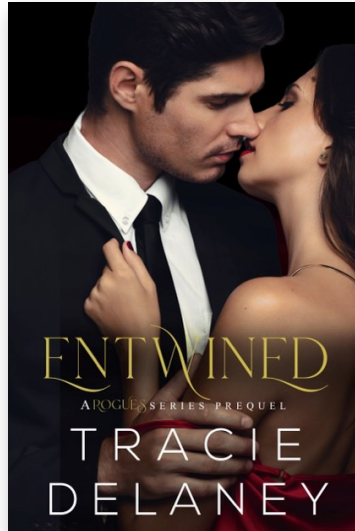
Except Asher is determined to drag me into the flames.

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SPINOFFS/STANDALONES

Mismatch (A Winning Ace Spin Off Novel)

Break Point (A Winning Ace Novella)

Control (A Driven World/Full Velocity Novel)

My Gift To You

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Once again, my wonderful team and amazing friends were all part of bringing this book to fruition. Authors do not birth their book babies alone...

Hubs - thank you for all you do. This journey would not be nearly as much fun without you.

To my amazing PA, Loulou for your unending support. I don't say it often enough, but I love you. Never leave me. I will hunt you down!

The work wives, Lasairiona and Clare. Truly I don't know what I would do without you both. If we don't speak every day, it just feels *wrong!* Love you both to the moon and back.

To my editor, Vicki. Thank you so much. Your comments were LIFE! I haven't laughed so much going through an edit as I did with this one. I'm sorry I caused you so much angst.

Katie - One. In. A. Million. You truly are the bomb. I'm so grateful we met. Thank you for your daily messages. Each one makes me feel so loved.

Jean - I have missed you SO MUCH! Welcome back darling.

Jacqueline - Ugh. Fourteen. FOURTEEN! I was not happy with that lol. If you were writing a report card, it should say "must do better".

To my ARC readers. You guys are amazing! You're my final eyes and ears before my baby is released into the world and I appreciate each and every one of you for giving up your time to read.

And last but most certainly not least, to you, the readers. Thank you for being on this journey with me. It still humbles me to think that my words are being read all over the world.

If you have any time to spare, I'd be ever so grateful if you'd leave a short review on Amazon or Goodreads. Reviews not

only help readers discover new books, but they also help authors reach new readers. You'd be doing a massive favor for this wonderful bookish community we're all a part of.