
Passion
OF
YEARNING

THE HILLS BOOK ONE

J ALMEIDA

PASSION OF YEARNING

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To everyone who found this book and gave it a chance.

Thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS SATURDAY NIGHT, and I was on a mission to have fun.

I wore a green sparkly dress to go clubbing. It was fun and fit me like a glove, showing off my legs and a hint of cleavage. The back was completely bare, ending just over my ass. It boosted my confidence and honestly, it made me feel hot. It also caught the attention of people as I walked, the lights of the club reflecting on the material.

The work week had been stressful and there was nothing like dancing until my feet couldn't take it anymore to help me reset to do it all over again come Monday.

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Jamie elbowed her way through the crowd and handed me a new drink.

“Thanks,” I told her.

I took a hearty sip from my drink. It was delicious. Not at all like the watered-down messes some other clubs around New York City served. The city might have quite an extensive night life, but the quality of the service wasn’t always guaranteed. The bartenders at this club were actually good.

“Big crowd tonight,” Jamie commented. “Looks like all the *deviants* in the city decided to come out and play.”

Deviants were humans—sort of. The biggest difference from *non-deviants* was the way our bodies absorbed and reflected sunlight.

Jamie eye-fucked a particularly attractive dude on the edge of the dance floor. From his smirk, I would say he was interested.

“Are you down to play tonight?” I asked her, lifting a brow.

She smirked. “Maybe. The night is still young. What about you, Ruby? Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“I’ve been busy with work. You know how it is.” I shrugged, shimmying to the beat. “No one

else could come tonight?”

Jamie had been my roommate in college. Paired up freshman year, we hit it right off the bat. We weren't exactly the closest of friends besides sharing the love of going out and having fun. Most importantly, we trusted each other not to leave the other behind and to help them get home safe if one of us drank too much.

The rest of our friend group worked the same way, coming and going depending on their lives.

My sister—who, despite being four years younger than me, was my best friend—didn't like clubbing, and neither of my current roommates were *deviant*. It was important for me to go out with *deviants*, so I could let go of all inhibitions and truly have fun. And though I wasn't above hooking up with a random stranger, that wasn't always the point. I, like many of my kind, had decided to conceal my nature in my normal life. In order to prevent any leaking, excess energy needed to be spent. Physical activity usually did the trick.

Jamie scrunched up her nose. “Everyone else also claimed to be too busy with work. Are we getting old?”

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I laughed and toasted against her glass. “Definitely not. Let’s dance.”

The music took over for me. My body swayed to the rhythmic melodies. Closing my eyes after another sip of my sweet drink, I felt free. The bodies around me disappeared as I became one with the song pumping out of the columns strategically positioned from every direction.

When the song changed, I opened my eyes and shared a smile with Jamie.

The hairs at the back of my head stood on end. I searched my surroundings for the source of my sudden awareness.

Then, I saw him.

A balcony overlooked the dance floor. His eyes were dark and intense and staring right at me. My lungs froze, unable to expand. I couldn’t believe it. I hadn’t seen him at work this week, but even from a distance his identity was unquestionable to me.

His tall frame was clad in dark-grey suit pants and a crisp white shirt. He had ditched the suit jacket and rolled up the sleeves to reveal forearms I wanted to get acquainted with. His dark hair, a little longer at the top, which was

usually perfectly styled, now looked just slightly disheveled as if he'd been running his fingers through it. Like he always did when he was at work, also here he looked like he was in charge.

I wanted to pry my eyes off of him. Off of the intense smolder that had to be directed at someone other than me. But I couldn't.

Rune Hill disappeared from the balcony, giving me the reprieve I needed to breathe again.

I was ready to chalk up the entire encounter to my imagination when he prowled to the edge of the dance floor. His steps were slow and measured, as he moved in between the writhing bodies gracefully and without stopping. His gaze never left mine.

I put more sway into my hips. I couldn't help it. If he wanted a show, I was giving him one he couldn't forget.

"Looks like you're the one playing tonight," Jamie purred, eyeing the man stalking me appreciatively.

I laughed breaking eye contact to finish up my drink. "Not likely. That's Rune Hill, one of my bosses."

At twenty-seven, only one year older than me, he was one of the owners of the law firm I

worked for. And in possession of a career and reputation I envied, despite his age. No doubt I would be in the same position with his family name. And money. And charisma. Rune Hill had a lot going for him and his career.

Jamie whistled. "Girl, if that was my boss, I would be climbing him like a tree. And if any man here tonight was looking at me like I'm about to become his favorite meal, I wouldn't care if he was the one signing my paychecks."

We shared a loaded look. I bit my lip.

Jamie plucked the empty cup out of my hand and pointed behind her with her thumb. "I'm going to go take a break at the bar. Have fun."

I nodded and continued to dance by myself. The song ended and a new one was already building up the intensity as more people joined the dance floor.

As soon as Jamie was gone from my side, Rune took her place.

"Mind if I join you?" He didn't shout in my direction to be heard over the booming music. Instead, he spoke directly in my ear, leaving goosebumps in the wake of his warm breath.

I glanced around us, at the endless number of bodies moving in close proximity.

“Why me?”

He leaned in again. “Because out of everyone in this club, you’re the one who shines the brightest.”

I smiled.

The line bordered on cheesy, considering we were both *deviants*. However, the way he said it, with his smoldering gaze on my body, had the intended effect on me.

“What’s your name?”

The question stung, but I smiled, nonetheless. “Ruby.”

I turned around and resumed dancing. A big, warm hand snaked around my waist. Our bodies didn’t touch anywhere else while he danced with me, but his presence commanded attention.

Unable to help myself, I glanced over my shoulder. His eyes were dark and sinful glued to me and the way I swayed in place. They were so deep I could lose myself in them.

The way we danced was filthy and sexy. I loved it. He touched my arms and my waist, finding the exposed skin of my back. Goosebumps followed his fingers.

I shut off the part of my brain that insisted on thinking this was wrong. I could deal with the

embarrassment in the morning. Right now, I was on fire and wet. In fact, I would gladly take him right here.

Dancing with him, having his hands on me, was almost just as good.

Through the fog of desire, I remembered to text my mom about Sunday lunch. The throbbing lights made it difficult to unlock the phone, but I managed to insert the pin and type up a quick message while grinding on Rune.

That done, and the phone back on my tiny clutch, there was something I needed to clarify. Rune had asked for my name. The answer was obvious, but I wanted to be sure.

Reaching for him on my tiptoes, I spoke in his ear, catching a whiff of his delicious cologne. “Doesn’t your firm have some policy regarding fraternization between coworkers?”

He gazed down at me, and I held my breath. Did he finally recognize me?

“Why does it matter?”

I deflated. “You do realize I work for you, right?”

He narrowed his eyes. “No, you don’t.”

I chuckled. “Hum. Yes, I do.”

“I would remember it if you did,” he insisted.

My chuckle turned into a full-blown cackle. “Clearly, I’m not that memorable.”

Rune frowned, visibly frustrated, while I continued laughing at the situation I found myself in.

I shook my head and extended a hand to him.

He took it without hesitation.

“Forget about it.”

I pulled him closer and then looped my arms around his neck, shamelessly rubbing my body all over his.

Rune Hill didn’t remember me.

We’d never actually worked on the same clients. Never even had a proper conversation. My cases, when requiring multiple lawyers, usually involved his brother—the other owner of the firm—not Rune. Realistically, there was no reason for him to know me, other than maybe seeing me in the corridors of the law firm, which apparently, he never did.

Or better yet, he didn’t remember it. Because I sure saw him. He never noticed me or my existence.

Maybe that should discourage me and lessen my desire, but it actually had the opposite effect.

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I was bolder than ever. This way, there would be no repercussions come Monday morning. No awkwardness. No expectations.

With one hand on my bare back and the other on my waist, Rune plastered me to his front. He lowered his head, his lips resting on my pulse point before he kissed and then bit me there.

Heat pooled at my core. My hips undulated against him to the beat of the bass of the current song.

I'd lost all my shame at some point. I was a ball of need and nothing else mattered but feeling more of his body touching more of me.

I had been wet from the moment I'd crossed eyes with him and didn't know how long I was going to last under these conditions before I did something reckless like drag him to a dark corner of the club so we could have some semblance of privacy. I didn't want to kiss him right there in the middle of dozens of people, even though others didn't have the same reservations.

People hooked up against every even surface of the club, it seemed. With the advanced hour and drinks and other substances in their systems, inhibitions were loose. Most unleashed the

natural glow of their skin. I was doing it as well.

Deviants were powered by light. We absorbed it from the sun and reflected it. It was more noticeable at night. The natural glow was easy to control if we wished to be inconspicuous. However, in this particular club, we didn't need to. It was exclusive to us. The only *non-deviants* inside had been vouched for. We might live harmoniously in society, but only for as long as our differences were at an acceptable level. Meaning, hidden.

"You're driving me insane." He growled into my ear, biting it and then licking it to soothe the sting.

I pulled back to look at his face. At his eyes burning with heat. I licked my lips and suppressed a shiver when his eyes tracked the movement hungrily.

"What are you going to do about that?" I whispered the challenge in his ear.

Rune kissed my neck once more and then pulled me away from the dance floor by the hand.

"Where are we going?" I asked, though I couldn't care less. As long as he was taking me somewhere we could be alone.

I met Jamie's eyes and gave her a little wave. Her answering smirk was devious.

"You'll see."

He released my hand and confidently led me away from the center of the club with a hand on my lower back, keeping me close and protecting me from the shifting bodies. We climbed the stairs to that balcony where I'd first seen him. Rune nodded to the man in a dark suit posted by the roped-off area, but we didn't linger.

I barely had a chance to admire the lush decoration, the circular tables and considerably less crowded bar. I had been to this club many times, but never up here. The corridor was quieter and we could speak at a normal volume if we wished. Rune opened the door to one of the bathrooms. It was surprisingly clean and fresh—not at all disgusting like I'd expected. But that was as much as I could see before he was on me.

My back hit the wall as his mouth, soft and greedy, slammed into mine. When he licked and sucked on my lower lip, I allowed him entry, moaning into his mouth when our tongues tangled together and got the first taste of him.

His hands lit a fire inside me with each touch.

"I knew you would taste like sunshine." He

moaned into my neck, kissing his way to my ear.

My head swam with the assault of sensations. I clung to him greedily.

Rune found the hem of my dress and pulled it up. His hand was warm and enticing as it trailed up my thigh until it reached my underwear.

“So wet.” His voice was hoarse against my lips as he angled my head to devour my mouth in another devastating kiss.

He fondled me through my lacy thong, extracting a gasp from me. My hips moved involuntarily against his hand searching for more friction. In answer, he fiddled my clit in slow lazy circles.

“So eager.” He chuckled.

I cupped his cock—big and hard—over his trousers, meeting his eyes. “Eager? What do you call this?” I challenged him.

His answering growl was rough and strained.

“Pull me out.”

His order made my pussy throb and clench with the need to be filled. I hurried to obey.

He claimed my mouth again before I could get a good look at his cock. I wrapped my hand around it and pulled it all the way out of his

trousers pumping my fist up and down the velvety length.

His sexy sounds were muffled by the kiss, while his fingers continued to play with me, driving me closer to the edge faster than I expected, but never giving me enough of the delicious pressure I craved.

Pulling my thong to the side, he sunk a finger into me slowly. His thumb continued to play with my clit.

I moaned, rolling my hips to meet his hand.

“That’s it. Tell me what you want.”

He inserted another finger, stretching me in preparation for his cock. Spreading them inside me, agonizingly slowly. Everything he was doing—long fingers moving in and out, the maddening circles on my clit—was just a tiny bit too slow to give me what I actually needed. What I was desperate for.

My legs were weak. His strong arm around my waist held me up when my knees threatened to buckle and I lost my train of thought.

“Ruby.” I loved the way my name sounded in his deep voice. “What do you want?” He asked again, curling his fingers.

I gasped into his neck and fisted his suit

jacket.

“Do you want my mouth? Or my cock? Or my fingers?”

The rhythmic pounding of his fingers inside me made it hard to focus on his words. Instinctively, I squeezed his cock tighter, running my hand up and down, from root to tip. He felt so good in my hand. Heavy and wide. I wanted to know what he felt like stretching me.

“Cock,” I finally announced. “Definitely cock.”

Rune produced a condom from somewhere and expertly put it on. Then, he lifted one of my legs, wrapping it around his waist to open me fully to him. After he had me where he wanted me, he rubbed his cock all over my aching center, spreading my wetness on both of us.

When the tip of his cock nudged my entrance, we both stopped to revel in the feeling.

“Look at how greedy this pussy is to be filled.” His voice rasped as his cock slipped a few more inches inside.

He still wasn’t completely in, and I was already so full, so stretched. So good.

We locked eyes for a second before he kissed me again. With one hand holding my thigh

tightly to keep it around his waist, the other one played with my clit while he continued to push inside me in small, shallow thrusts. The triple assault was almost too much for me. I moaned into his mouth and mindlessly moved my hips.

“Patience. You feel so good. So tight.” He closed his eyes as if the pleasure was too much for him. It was almost too much for me. He was bigger than I was used to, stretching me almost to the point of pain. But I reveled in it. And I wanted more.

I ran my hands over his hard chest, wondering about the body under his crisp, white shirt. I felt a flash of disappointment that he wasn’t completely naked. But a quick fuck in the bathroom was exposure enough for someone as high profile as Rune Hill. I was surprised he even came this far. But I wasn’t one to complain.

My fingers threaded through his silky hair and I pulled his mouth down for another kiss. I was addicted to the taste of him, to the way he took over every kiss and stole my breath away.

“You’re doing so good.” His praise went straight to my pussy, which tightened around him.

I smiled when he groaned.

He continued to touch me everywhere finding my tight nipples over the dress and pinching on the sensitive tips.

“I’m so glad you were joking about working for me.”

I almost laughed again, but a moan came out instead.

“Yeah? Why is that?”

“Because if I had someone like you working with me every day, I’d lose my mind. I’d want this tight little ass on my desk so I could take my frustrations out on this sweet pussy whenever someone pissed me off.”

You don’t because I work with your brother, I thought. I didn’t get a chance to say it out loud because his hand squeezed over my ass, pulling me harder on his cock, and I lost my train of thought.

He settled in with a long groan against my neck.

I squirmed against the wall, pulling at his hair. I was full. Almost too much. I’d never felt like this before.

When he started to move, pulling out his cock and then thrusting back in to the hilt, I was dragged up against the wall. My left foot, the one

holding me upright as the other was trapped against Rune's ass, lifted to my tiptoes in my high heels. He was going to lift me from the floor with his cock. I chuckled at the insane thought.

He glanced down, a single brow raised. "Something funny?" His voice made me shiver. Who was I kidding? Everything about this man made me shiver. And wet and hot and wanting more.

I didn't have a chance to answer because he started to actually move, slow and hard at first.

My breath caught in my throat. If I thought I was full before, it was nothing compared to the sensations of Rune actually moving.

I clenched around him, greedy to keep him inside me. My toes curled and I moaned loud enough to be heard over the muffled electronic music.

"There you go. You feel so good, so hot. Perfect."

He punctured his words by increasing the speed of his thrusts, hitting hard and deep.

There was a slight bite of pain every time he pulled almost completely out only to forcefully slam back in, eliciting whimpers from my throat.

"Too much?" He asked, grunting with each

thrust of his tight hips.

“No. Please don’t stop. I might die if you stop.”

I didn’t even know what I was saying.

I was chasing my pleasure, flying high on it, and holding on tight to his shoulders as he rode me into the wall with the abandon of a man on a mission.

Over his shoulder, on the vanity, I could see our reflections in the mirror and almost came from the sight. From the dirty picture we painted.

His body was powerful and sinful—the wide shoulders and tight ass and the erotic movement of his hips. Those hips moving to the rhythm of his cock hitting my insides, eliciting tiny sparks of pleasure and pain with each hard thrust.

The angle changed and I pulled on his hair when his cock hit the perfect spot that made my entire body tingle with the need to come.

“Right there,” I announced. “Right there. Go on. Please. I’m so close.” I mumbled into his neck, biting down when he continued to hit that spot over and over each time.

“Come for me. I want to feel you squeezing me.” He kept up the pace and when his fingers

returned to my clit, I soon was obeying his command and coming with a gasp followed by a moan.

Rune Hill fucked me with abandon, speeding up, his fingers bruising on my thigh and ass. His movement lost all finesse and sophistication. He was no longer focused on my pleasure, he was chasing his own.

His cock finally slammed home one last time and then he stopped, coming with the sexiest groan I'd ever heard.

He trailed soft kisses all over my neck. "Thank you. That was amazing."

We were both breathing hard.

I chuckled, unable to move. "My pleasure."

My voice was breathy and a little hoarse. I must have been screaming louder than I realized. In my defense, the intensity of the sex had caught me by surprise.

Rune pulled out.

I winced, already knowing I was going to be sore tomorrow.

Instead of leaving me against the wall to find my footing on my own, Rune lifted me. I wrapped my legs around his waist with a gasp, meeting his eyes in surprise.

He smirked as he set me on the counter of the vanity to dispose of the condom and pull his pants back in place.

Meanwhile, I waited for my heart and breath to settle. I leaned against the mirror with my eyes closed, enjoying the cold against my bare back. Feeling eyes on me, I opened mine.

Rune was already back to normal. No one would say he had just been phenomenally fucked. Not unless they counted the unruly state of his hair from my fingers and a couple new wrinkles on his button up shirt.

He handed me a few paper towels to clean up with and washed his hands while I put my dress back in place and then twisted around to check my appearance in the mirror.

I, on the other hand, looked like I just had an amazing fuck. Laughing to myself, I ran my fingers through my hair and reapplied my lipstick.

Rune waited for me to be done before extending a hand to help me down and handing over my clutch.

“Thanks for that. I won’t tell HR,” I murmured against his ear before stalking off.

“You do *not* work for me,” he insisted from

behind me, but I didn't turn around to let him see my smile.

Maybe I'd bump into him on Monday, and he'd realize I wasn't lying. But I was deluding myself. Of course, I wouldn't bump into him. And of course, he wouldn't even glance twice at me if I did.

What happened tonight was caused by the dim lights of the club and pure and simple need. That was it. It was a perfectly normal *deviant* thing. I didn't regret it. But I also knew it would never happen again.

Jamie wasn't hard to find, sitting at a high table alone, nursing a drink. I sat down, facing her with a satisfied sigh.

She took one look at me and smirked. "Feel better?"

"Much better."

"Drink?" She gestured with her almost empty glass.

"I could go for another one. Let's go. Night's still young."

CHAPTER TWO

SUNDAY MORNING, SITTING AT THE table with my family, it was almost impossible not to think about last night. Even with my mom and stepdad chatting away, and my sister sending me covert amused glances as if she knew exactly where my mind kept wondering off to.

My body still tingled from being deliciously fucked against the wall. Goosebumps rose in the flesh of my arms after a single thought—a simple memory—of a definitely not simple encounter.

This morning, it had been a struggle to get out of bed and venture out to have lunch with

my family. After my time with Rune, I'd danced and danced and danced. Even though my body had been soft and pliant and ready for bed. But I didn't want to go home too soon. I didn't want to lie down and stare at the ceiling, reliving those too short moments over and over and over again.

It had happened anyway.

I'd gotten home at two in the morning, taken a long, relaxing shower, and then lied awake in bed, waiting for sleep to drag me under. But it had refused to come.

The echoes of Rune's touch had been branded on my skin, refusing to allow the fire in my body to go out.

This morning, I'd taken one step inside my childhood home, when my sister—half-sister, lucky for her—had taken one look at my face and grabbed my hand, dragging me upstairs and demanding to know everything.

I didn't know how she'd known, but she always seemed aware whenever something important happened in my life. The truth had poured out of me, culminating in both of us having a fit of giggles like blushing teenagers.

We didn't have a chance to talk much more before our mom called us to the table.

Now, as we ate, I was struggling to follow the flow of conversation and my sister was having a blast making fun of me with her eyes.

My phone vibrated within the back pocket of my jeans.

We didn't usually use our phones during meals, however I'd missed the context for the funny story Charles was currently telling. I decided to risk being scolded and pulled my phone out into my lap, unlocking it to see the message.

✨🍆✨: I hope I'm not the only one thinking about last night. I swear I can still feel you around my cock.

I had to reread the message several times to make sure I wasn't delusional. To believe that I wasn't the one making it up and it actually said exactly what I was thinking.

My heart thundered as I typed my response.

Me: How did you get my number? Did you hack the company files?

I already knew he hadn't because his contact was

on my phone. He had to have put it there himself, and it didn't take me long to figure out how. He had me my clutch in the bathroom after we had sex, and when we'd danced, he had seen me use the code to unlock the phone. Sneaky.

I couldn't help trying to rile him up a little bit. Especially when I wasn't lying about working for him.

✨🍆✨: Still not funny.

A laugh escaped me. Everyone's heads turned my way and I put my phone away. I didn't want to explain to the entire family that I had sex with my boss. A man who hadn't even believed he was my boss. My mom would certainly kill me for being so stupid.

I didn't regret it, especially when I sat down and felt the delicious soreness his dick had left behind. But I could still admit, if only to myself, it had been a huge risk that could jeopardize my job and career.

Taylor hid her face behind her napkin. I kicked her foot under the table.

"What's wrong with you today? Did you go out last night?" My mom asked.

I didn't cringe at the words or under the scrutiny of her gaze which always saw far more than should be possible. Her eyes narrowed.

"I did. With Jamie. But I didn't get home too late. I'm sorry if I'm distracted." I directed the apology to Charles, who I'd been ignoring. "I have a contract I need to finish reading today for a merger we're working on and my brain keeps turning to that."

The excuse wasn't a complete lie. I'd be working on that this afternoon.

"Meredith, leave the poor girl alone." Charles directed a fond smile at his wife before turning to me. "It's alright, sweetie. Don't work too hard. You also need to rest."

"I won't," I agreed. "It's nothing too complex. I just need to make sure everything is as it should be."

"Is that Marie Moore still only giving you the work she doesn't want to do herself?" Mom asked.

I laughed. "I can deal with her. Don't worry, mom."

I'd once made the mistake of complaining about one of the lawyers at the firm giving me simple yet time-consuming tasks when I wanted

to be doing more. I'd vented about my frustration one time only, but it was more than enough for my mom to ask about it every time the subject of my job came up.

After her own bad experience in the corporate world, she worried I wasn't being treated fairly. But it wasn't as bad as she liked to paint it and I loved my job. I could be patient about climbing the career ladder. I was confident in my skills and work ethic. Boss-fucking aside.

For the rest of the meal, I was able to focus and actually be present in the conversation. I felt bad for being distracted in the first place, instead of enjoying the couple of hours with my family. We tried to always have lunch on Sundays but sometimes it was hard to find the time. My mother had a catering business that often occupied her weekends. My own job required me to work at all times of day to keep up with legal deadlines, and my sister Taylor was in college, pre-med, and always had a lot of studying to do.

I only texted Rune back when dessert was served and my mom was in the kitchen.

Me: Why is your number saved on my phone as sparkling cock? Is this a

Twilight reference?

✨🍆✨: It's not a sparkling cock. It's your favorite cock.

Me: Then shouldn't it have a heart or something?

✨🍆✨: No.

My lips twitched.

I pulled my phone away from Taylor's prying eyes, earning myself a pout.

Me: Seriously. Why did you take my number?

✨🍆✨: In case I wanted to see you again.

I would not admit under torture what those words just did to my insides.

Me: Damn, that good uh?

✨🍆✨: you tell me.

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It was a dare if I ever saw one. But that way laid danger. I couldn't get involved with my boss, even if I didn't work directly under him.

Oh, how I wished I could be under him again. The sex had been amazing and I would love to have a repeat.

But no.

I had to be strong.

I knew men like him. We didn't walk in the same circles at all, and I didn't want to get into his anyway. There was a very clear separation between what *deviants* society found accepting and those they didn't. I was not one of the acceptable. I didn't have the right name, the right pedigree or power. Well—

No. that was definitely not the kind of thought I wanted to pursue at the moment. Or ever.

Me: Probably not a good idea.

✨🍆✨: Why?

Me: Because I work for you, remember?

✨🍆✨: Not this again.

I chuckled, almost tasting his exasperation through the phone but I didn't respond. I needed to cut this at the root and to stop fantasizing about him and his big cock that rearranged my insides so deliciously.

* * *

Monday morning, I woke up feeling all sorts of butterflies.

Stop being stupid. You aren't going to see him.

The mantra played on repeat in my head all the way from the apartment I shared with two roommates in the East Village, to the Financial District.

As I entered the revolving doors and crossed the lobby of the high-rise, a new, tiny speckle of hope burst through my carefully curated thoughts.

But what if I do? What if I bump into him on the way to my office?

I didn't even know how I would react at this point.

One thing was certain, I needed to get my shit together.

Choosing the firm's floor on the touch

screen, I then put my musings back in order while waiting for the assigned elevator to arrive. My eyes stared, unfocused, at the red marbling of the stone wall between two of the six elevators. I still remembered the first time I'd walked through this lobby with Morrigan Hill and had marveled at the pure decadence of it.

The Hills Law Firm's office was located on the thirteenth floor, but the entire building was one of many in the portfolio of the Hill family. The other floors were rented to companies, small and big.

The two brothers, Rune and Morrigan, had founded the firm short months after finishing law school. They'd somehow convinced a couple of older lawyers with decades of experience and established careers to join them. It had given them an incredible amount of credibility. And it was all they needed to jumpstart their success.

Through the extensive research I did on them and the firm before taking this job, I'd learned how they had been interning at the family parent company and several law firms throughout the city since their freshmen year of college.

Yes, they were able to have their own firm

and the connections to actually break through into business quickly because of their name and money, but I had seen the work ethic of both brothers and knew how much they truly loved the job. Especially Rune.

They hadn't built the firm because they didn't know what to do with their money. Neither did they use it as some sort of vanity project where they were the face of the brand while others did all the work. No. Rune and Morrigan put in the hours just like everyone else.

When Morrigan first offered me the job, after having faced off against each other in a litigation case, I'd been hesitant to take the leap. I'd done all the right things. I'd been top of my class and done all the right internships. The Hills firm was fairly new, not even a year old at that point, but it was already building a reputation.

After inviting me for coffee, Morrigan had been fierce and passionate telling me about all his plans and projects for the future of the firm. When he'd asked me to come work for him, I'd realized I was faced with a unique opportunity. Taking the chance on him had been a risky bet, but the reward, a way to climb faster than at a more traditional setting, had been worth it.

I'd been working here for two years now, and I absolutely loved it. It was everything I'd hoped for.

The elevator was big enough to accommodate almost twenty people. After a couple of stops, the doors opened on my floor.

I pressed a hand to my middle on my way to my desk, as if I could trap the sudden wave of unexpected anxiety right at that spot.

Stop it.

Sitting down at my desk, I took a moment to get settled. Again. The recurring theme of the morning. I hated fighting against my own thoughts. So, I told myself this was going to be the last time, and allowed it all to pour in.

The sex had happened. It had been great—amazing even. But what transpired once was never going to repeat itself.

I'd been working for this firm for two years and Rune had never noticed me before. It was delusional to even entertain the idea that anything would change simply because he'd fucked me once in a nightclub.

Even if the sex was as memorable for him as it was for me, there was no chance for a repeat. I might have lost my mind over the man once, but

I couldn't do it again. A one-time slip was excusable, but I wouldn't put my career on the line for a cock. I wasn't suddenly deranged.

I had sex with Rune Hill.

I said it and I could let go of it.

There. Much better.

My fake peppiness was quickly squashed by Marie Moore. After a short meeting to hand over the work I'd finished over the weekend, she assigned me yet another batch of contract reviews for a few small companies.

What I really wanted was to work on the big merger. It was the biggest client the firm had ever taken on. The merger of two medium sized media groups had the city abuzz with speculation, creating the type of exposure that could catapult a career.

I could talk to Morrigan and request to be assigned to the case, but I didn't want to go over Marie when she was responsible for distributing cases to the attorneys. It bugged me not knowing what I ever did to provoke her animosity, but I didn't want to make matters worse.

Truthfully, I didn't even dislike Marie. She wasn't talkative or nice, but I didn't mind it. I was just disappointed. I'd like to see more interesting

cases, but I knew not everything was fun about the job.

I lowered my head and did my job. I would prove myself through my actions and my work.

As expected, I didn't see Rune Hill all day, or any day, for the rest of the week.

It was for the best. And by Friday, I even managed to tell myself I didn't care. Mostly because I was so focused on work, I didn't have time to worry about my libido.

* * *

Morrigan Hill's corner office had a breathtaking view of the Financial District.

I envied him that perspective of New York City, the world at his feet to rule as he wished. His desk was sleek and a bit messy with folders and legal pads. Opposite the desk, the sitting area consisted of leather couches and a glass table. The entire office screamed power and money and comfort.

It was our tradition to meet up on Fridays. On the rare occasions when we weren't overwhelmed with work, we had lunch together. Most times though, we met in his office to go over the week and catch up on the progress of

my projects.

We got comfortable in the sitting area. Morrigan reclined back on the big couch, stretching his long legs in front of him, while I took the armchair opposite him.

Morrigan and Rune were identical twins, but for some reason he didn't have the same effect on me that his brother did. He never had. I didn't know how to explain it.

Now, staring at him, I once more tried to figure it out. There had to be something about their attitude—their bearing and personality—that drew me to Rune but not to Morrigan. Maybe because I worked with Morrigan and saw him as a coworker. A friend even. While I had admired Rune from afar, never once attempting to bridge that gap.

Not wanting Morrigan to notice my scrutiny, I started talking and reported on all the work I'd done this week.

"Once you finish those contracts," Morrigan said, "I want you to start working more on the merger with me. I need one more person and I think it will be good for you to work on something bigger.

"I'd love to. I'll have to talk to Marie about

freeing some of my time. She's been keeping me busy with contract reviews. I don't mind it at all. But all that reading takes time."

Morrigan was nodding. "It's good experience. She's helping you build good foundations. But I also think that working on something more complex like the merger will be more exciting."

We shared a grin. This was why I loved working with him. Morrigan was just as passionate about the job as I was.

"She is," I agreed. "I'll find a way to win her over eventually."

Morrigan laughed. "Marie doesn't like anyone, except perhaps Rune, but she's a damned good lawyer."

That name was like electricity on my body.

And then, as if he'd been summoned, the man himself strode through the door.

If anyone asked me how I knew it was him without even turning my head, I wouldn't know the answer. But that familiar voice was like a caress.

"Hey. Are you going to the fundraiser tonight?" The hairs at the nape of my head rose, my heart thundering. "I already told mom I'm not going by myself, but she's been pestering me

all day.”

I glanced over my shoulder.

Rune stood on the doorway, looking delectable in a grey suit. My insides clenched. He didn't notice me. Didn't even spare me a single glance.

I knew I looked different, but I never expected I'd be invisible to him. At the office, I wore mostly pants and blouses. I looked elegant and professional. Nothing like my clubbing clothes that showed off my boobs and ass, earning me more than a few compliments from pervious partners.

The reality of the situation was, he hadn't even seen that much of me that night. He'd been inside me and he wouldn't even be able to pick me out of a lineup of naked people. Logic didn't erase the disappointment I felt.

Morrigan winced. Apparently, he'd forgotten about this fundraiser. “Yeah. I think I told her I'd go. But I completely forgot. Can't we say we're busy with work?”

I uncrossed my legs, ready to leave “Morrigan, I'll get going. I'll leave you two to talk.”

“I'm sorry,” Morrigan said. “I'll kick my

brother out and we can continue. I still want to tell you about the case.”

But I was barely listening.

Rune Hill was staring at me like he'd seen a ghost.

I bit down on my lip to keep myself from laughing in his face.

The slow recognition was confused at first. He even did a double take, as if he didn't trust his own eyes. But then he stared, examining every inch of my body.

And that stare, the confident perusal, ignited a fire I thought would be forever extinguished.

It really wasn't fair that barely one minute in his presence was enough to get me ready to risk everything. If I didn't know what his power was, I would be worried that he'd trapped me under his enchantment. If such a thing was real.

But I was in control of my reaction to him.

Leaning back on the chair, I recrossed my legs, waiting for him to leave. He was the one interrupting the meeting.

His eyes traveled from me to his brother. “Who is this? What's the meeting about?”

Morrigan lifted a brow at the demanding question. And then shook his head, mortified.

“What do you mean who is this? Ruby has worked with us for two years.” He turned to me. “Damn, two years already? Time flies. We should celebrate.”

I nodded and smiled. “It’s true. We should get lunch next week.”

“Deal.” Morrigan’s attention returned to Rune, who’d been watching the exchange with predatory focus. “What is wrong with you, dude?”

“I don’t know everyone, especially the people I don’t work directly with.” The comment was directed at me.

And because I was enjoying seeing him off his game, I rose to my feet and extended a hand.

“Ruby Byrne. Associate Attorney.”

His hand engulfed mine, reminding me what else was big about him. He seemed to guess the direction of my thoughts if the teasing grin he threw my way was any indication.

“Rune Hill. Pleasure to meet you.” He introduced himself the same way I had, though with considerably less bravado. His voice sounded almost intimate, as if the two of us were alone in the room, instead of being watched by his brother. Who, might I add, was my savior.

He broke the spell Rune had over me.

“The firm isn’t that big. Not to mention the fact that I told you about Ruby when I hired her. She was the reason I almost lost the Smith case.”

I took a deliberate step away from Rune—which he took note of—and grinned at Morrigan. “You should have checked your client’s social media pages.”

Morrigan shook his head and grinned back. “I should have. But that’s why I have you now.”

Rune’s face lost all amusement. I didn’t know what he was thinking. And it didn’t matter.

I returned to my seat facing Morrigan, who hadn’t moved from the couch. Then we both waited expectantly while Rune glowered at us.

I didn’t know if he was annoyed that he was being dismissed and couldn’t talk with Morrigan at the moment, and I honestly didn’t care. I’d been here first. Besides, I was being given a chance to work on a big case with Morrigan, and I wasn’t leaving without all the information and a few tasks to start with. Rune could wait. If I left empty handed, who knew what else Marie would dump on my plate before I had a chance to work on the merger.

“I’ll see you tonight.” With that remark, Rune

left, and I took my first deep breath since he'd walked in.

He had seen me.

And he didn't recognize me at first.

If I hadn't spoken, would he have been in the same room as me and not given me a second glance?

Talk about another blow to my ego.

I shook myself. Work. I had work to do.

After another hour of going over details for the merger with Morrigan, I walked back to my desk on shaky legs.

He had seen me. Now what?

CHAPTER THREE

THIS TIME, I DIDN'T HAVE TO SIT with the questions and the doubts for days. As soon as my ass landed on my office chair, the phone rang, showing an internal number to the firm on the screen.

"Ruby Byrne's office," I said, picking up the call.

"How are you? This is Pierce Lang. Mr. Hill has requested that you stop by his office as soon as possible."

I'd just left Morrigan's office. Did he forget to tell me something important about the case?

But then I glanced down at the number. Morrigan's assistant was called Amanda and this wasn't her extension.

"I'm sorry. Can you clarify which one?"

Pierce chuckled. "Rune Hill. He asked me to call you as soon as you left Morrigan's office."

"Thank you. I'll be right there."

Hanging up the phone, I leaned back on my chair, whirling from one side to another. Then, I rose and straightened by clothes.

Show time.

* * *

"You wanted to see me?"

Rune Hill leaned back on his chair and stared at me, his gaze penetrating. Commandeering.

I broke eye contact and instead of allowing him to see my nerves, I inspected his office. I'd never been in here.

It was roughly the same size as Morrigan's. Instead of see-through walls, Rune was isolated from the rest of the floor by opaque glass. His work often involved sensitive subjects which his clients might feel more comfortable disclosing in complete privacy. But I imagined he preferred it that way anyway. He wasn't much for casual

interactions with other lawyers or workers of the firm.

Rune Hill didn't hang out in the common areas like Morrigan did whenever he had the time. I often saw Rune in passing as a shadow on the corridor. Always on the go from meeting to meeting.

His desk occupied the left side of the room. A conference table was located opposite it. A single, broad window to the front of the building provided him with a gorgeous view and plenty of light.

"Please close the door."

I stifled my reaction to him as much as possible. But this voice. The uncompromising face. They gave me chills.

Unwittingly, the first time I ever saw him burst to the forefront of my mind. I'd been new to the firm, on my first week, and Morrigan had invited me to watch a negotiation of one of Rune's cases. I'd been horny during the entire two hours it lasted. Watching him work was an aphrodisiac to me. Especially considering the types of cases he took. He worked with *deviants* who suffered discrimination from society or their employers. Often times, he defended

people pro bono, when the ones asking for his help didn't have the money to fight for themselves.

Deviants had evolved alongside humans. Perhaps in ancient times, they'd been powerful and impressive and magical, but now all that remained were parlor tricks to entertain guests at dinner parties. However, it was more than enough to set us apart. But not all of us. High society didn't discriminate against suitably deep pockets.

Some *deviant* dynasties were known for their extensive or impressive or unique abilities. The Hills were different. They had the money and the pedigree, but it was the connections to both *deviant* and *non-deviant* alike, and the work they did for the community, of which Rune's was just a small example, that distinguished them from the others. That allowed them to be seen in a more positive light.

I closed the door at Rune's request but didn't approach.

The spell of Saturday night had been broken. Fucking the boss was no longer allowed. For the first time this week, I wondered if I made a terrible mistake in sleeping with Rune Hill. My

career—my future, my life—were in his hands.

I crossed my arms and smirked. “Believe me now?”

“Oh, I believe you,” he practically growled. “I’m just trying to understand how you can look like two completely different people with one change of clothes.”

I snorted. “Please. You don’t have to act so contrite. You noticed me at the club because you needed something and I was there. End of story. You’re not hurting my feelings. It’s actually kind of hilarious.” Minus the boss thing. But I couldn’t show him my uncertainty. How much I worried about the security of my job after the mess up.

“Make no mistake.” Rune climbed to his feet and prowled to me, a feline on the hunt. “There was nothing random or convenient about what happened Saturday night. I don’t usually expose myself like that for fear of ending up in some random tabloid the next morning. But in that sea of people, I saw you and only you. You were dancing across the club, and I knew I had to get closer. I needed to see if you were actually as enchanting as you looked. I couldn’t take my eyes off of you.” He stopped in front of me, almost too close to be professional, but I didn’t

dare take a step back and allow him to see how much he still affected me. “Therefore, don’t delude yourself into thinking I didn’t want to fuck you exactly as much as I did.”

I gasped. The sound was an involuntary reaction to his words. The intensity of his eyes. All for me.

Whatever I had expected of this conversation, this was not it. I thought he wanted to make sure I understood what happened had been a mistake and would never repeat itself. Maybe even issue a couple of threats about keeping it quiet. I didn’t anticipate him to look like he wanted to fuck me again where I stood.

I gulped and licked my lips, trying to moisten my suddenly very dry mouth. Rune followed each of my movements hungrily and I had to finally take a step back.

It was the same look he’d given me before he devoured my mouth. But I couldn’t let that happen. I needed to remind myself where I was. Who I was. What I was.

“Well, that’s very good to know,” I said with all the bravado I could muster. “Too bad it won’t be happening again.”

“No?” He actually sounded indignant. “And

why the hell not?"

My jaw dropped. He couldn't be serious. "Because I work for you."

He dismissed that with a simple shrug, as if it was inconsequential. "You work with my brother, not me. And on that note, you two seemed quite comfortable in his office."

I froze. "Seriously?" I turned my back on him to leave the room. "This conversation is over."

What an asshole.

In a way, I was glad he ended up making it this easy for me to walk away without any delusions. Just because I slept with him, it meant I would sleep with Morrigan as well? Was that what they were used to? For women to be attracted to both of them equally? Well, not me.

He grabbed by chin before I finished turning.

"That's not what I meant. Don't paint me to be that much of an asshole. What I actually mean is that you guys looked friendly, and I know all of my brother's friends. I was commenting on the strangeness of the two of us never having crossed paths before."

I pulled my face out of his grasp. Having that warm hand touching me was messing with my brain and making me want to do impossible

things. "Then you better start explaining yourself better, because you came this close of implying I've slept with your brother."

The side of his mouth lifted. "Apologies."

Since he appeared to be sincere, I decided to drop the subject.

"And we have been around each other before." I smirked. "You simply never looked my way."

He closed the distance I'd created between us, looming over me. "Good thing I never saw you then."

"Why is that?"

"Because I would have felt guilty for wanting to fuck you."

"And how is this any different? I'm still an employee of the firm you own."

"True. But now I know what you taste like. How well we fit together. And I can't find it in myself to feel guilty for wanting you."

My eyes widened. "No. We can't."

But my words were as weak as my resolve, not when our chests were almost touching and he was all I could see and smell and almost taste. I was desperate for another taste.

He lowered his head slowly. And I knew he

was giving me time to pull away. Giving me time to find my brain and put it to work. To tell him again that this was a mistake and it couldn't happen. I worked for him. If someone saw us, my reputation and my career would be over, forever tainted by his touch.

But then his lips found mine, and all the reasons why this shouldn't be happening vanished from my brain, chased away by his kiss. It was just like I remembered and somehow that made it worse. I had been ready to chalk it up to the alcohol and the club setting, the loud music just outside the bathroom door. But this kiss was just as good as I remembered. It was intense and devastating, promising all sorts of nasty things.

I clenched my legs together, trying to stave off the arousal. The control this man had over my body was unreal. My need for him was immediate and impossible to ignore.

Rune plastered his body to mine, one hand holding the back of my head, while the other teased my side, my ribs, close to my boobs and yet not close enough. Then down to my hip and over my ass. He reacquainting himself with my body, reminding me of how his own had felt against mine, pinning me against the wall as he

extracted orgasms out of me.

I pulled back to peer at his face, my hands falling to the lapels of his suit jacket.

“Stop thinking so much,” he ordered, lowering his lips to the side of my neck to kiss and bite and lick his way to the back of my ear.

“Stop? I can’t stop thinking. This is possibly the dumbest thing I’ve ever done in my life.” But my body betrayed me, and my hold on him tightened.

“I can convince you to stop thinking,” he whispered the promise in my ear, just like when we’d been at the club.

I whimpered.

He guided me back step by step until I hit the door. Slowly, deliberately, he turned the lock, making sure I knew exactly what he intended.

That soft, little click was all the permission we needed, unleashing from the last dregs of inhibition. We reached for each other, kissing while removing our clothes, carelessly throwing them as if they were personally responsible for holding us back from this all-consuming need.

Once I was down to my bra and panties, and Rune had been ridden of his jacket, tie and dress-shirt, leaving the expanse of his chest bare, with

only his pants on, he pulled me to the conference table and effortlessly lifted me to sit on top of it.

His hands ran up my thighs, spreading them so he could fit his body between them. While my own traced the dips and valleys of his hard chest. I hadn't realized he was this defined. I knew his suits fit well over his tall frame and wide shoulders, but the pectorals and abs were a surprise I wanted to sink my teeth into. The way his chest tightened under my hands with each of his breaths was delicious.

I leaned back on my hands, stretching my entire body for him to see, the way he looked at me giving me all the confidence I needed.

Rune took in the view, saying, "I've been beating myself up for not getting you naked when I could last Saturday, and now I know I was absolutely right. This body deserves to be worshiped properly. I won't make the same mistake twice."

I preened at the praise but couldn't help but tease. "And yet, you're still looking and not doing much."

His smirk was dangerous. "Oh yeah? My apologies. I'll try not to disappoint again."

He unhooked my bra, peeled it off, and the

focused on my boobs, teasing and squeezing and licking and biting. Basically driving me wild with need, until my arms shook and struggled to hold me up. But I didn't want to lower them and lose the contact.

I moaned.

And he stopped.

"You have to be quiet. We don't want the entire building to hear you, do we?"

I gasped and covered my mouth with my hand, my eyes going to the door. "Fuck."

He chuckled.

"It's not funny! We can't do this here."

I tried sitting up but a hand on my middle kept me in place.

"It's ok. You just have to be quiet."

I smirked. "Oh, I can do that. But can you? I still remember what you sound like when you come. And it wasn't quiet. But that's not my point. Anyone could come looking for any of us. I can't be gone for long."

Rune teased me through my panties before pulling them to the side and slipping his fingers in to spread my wetness over my clit.

"Is that a challenge? It sounded like a challenge."

“It’s not—“

And then all thought evacuated my mind, because his tongue was there, right on my center, giving me a long, luxurious lick.

I moaned against my palm and finally lowered myself so my back rested completely across the table. I felt more than saw his satisfied smirk, but I didn’t care as long as he kept eating me like that.

Rune was relentless, kissing and licking and teasing with abandon. It didn’t take him long to find the right pattern to drive me wild. My fingers threaded through his hair, pulling and pushing, and then I was coming, my back arching off the table, my legs closing over his head and shoulders.

He softened his touch, kissing each of my thighs before rising to his full height to look down at me with a pleased grin.

I took his extended hand, allowing him to pull me up and kiss me. The taste of both of us together made me delirious with need.

As if he was reading my mind, Rune pulled me to my feet and led me to the front of his desk. Breaking off the kiss, he turned me around and pulled down my panties.

“Kneel on the chair for me.”

I was naked at my place of work. If I thought too much about it, shame would keep me rooted in place. Right now, thinking was the last thing I wanted to do.

I did as he asked and climbed on the chair.

Rune kissed up my spine as his hands cupped and squeezed my boobs.

“Do you think you can keep quiet while I fuck you?” His breath tickled my ear. “You say you remember the noises I made when I came, but I also remember something about that night. I remember how much you moaned every time my cock moved inside you.”

He fisted my hair and pulled by head back. I whimpered.

“Answer me.”

“I guess we’ll see.”

He chuckled and then pulled back.

I spread my knees wider, as far as I could on the chair seat. It wasn’t enough, but if he wanted me here, I wasn’t going to complain. Jutting my ass out in offering, I rested my forearms on the back of the chair. I would bite into them to contain the sound if I had to, but I needed him. Now.

I glanced back over my shoulder to see Rune opening his slacks and pulling out his thick, hard cock, pumping it with his fist.

When the broad tip breached my entrance, I arched my hips, pushing back to get more of him. Rune held me in place with one strong hand while the other kept hold of my hair. He wasn't pulling on it but I loved the feeling of it. The possibility. The promise.

"Patience. I know you're dying for this cock, but you have to earn it."

"I've earned it. I just came on your mouth." I pushed back once more and was rewarded with a few more inches of him. He pulled in and out in short teasing strokes, going deeper each time while allowing me to acclimate to his size.

He chuckled. "And what a sight you were."

The stretch was almost too tight, probably because of the position, my legs too close together. A few more short strokes later and he bottomed out.

I squirmed under him, moaning and whimpering and shaking against the agonizingly amazing feelings.

"It's too much," I complained with another moan when he pulled out halfway and pushed in

again.

He tugged my head back and bit my neck. “Shh. Ruby, you’re making too much noise. Someone will come to see what’s going on in here. You don’t want to be caught, do you?”

I didn’t know if I was actually making too much noise, or if Rune was playing into the fantasy of being caught, but the effect was the same. My pussy clenched around his cock and I arched against his chest.

“Help me,” I moaned. I took the hand holding my hair and brought it to my face.

Rune faltered. “Ruby, are you sure that’s what you’re asking me to do?”

I nodded.

“Say it.”

I glanced over my shoulder and met his eyes. He was hesitating, making sure I was on board with everything, but they held an unmistakable heat and desire behind them. He wanted to do this just as much as I did.

“Yes.”

“Fuck.”

Rune covered my mouth, making sure my nose was free and I could breathe properly. The hand on my hip tightened almost painfully

before he pulled almost all the way out and then slammed into me forcefully. I screamed into his hand, holding on to the chair to keep myself in place while he pounded into me.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.”

I didn’t know if he understood the muffled words, but I couldn’t stop saying them as he fucked me fast and hard and deep. My body, still primed with pleasure from the previous orgasm, didn’t take long to reach for another one, surprising me.

In this position, and with Rune’s tight hold on me, I could barely move. As soon as I realized this, I erupted. I came with a spasm and another scream, glad for the hand covering half my face because the entire office would have heard it otherwise.

Rune pulled out and I whimpered at the sudden loss. He released his punishing hold to help me stand and then turn to the desk.

“Hop on. You look lovely when you come. I want to see your face when you do it again.”

My eyes widened at his intensions but I didn’t fight it.

Rune was a sight to behold. Half-naked, with his cock hanging heavy and hard between his

legs, shining with the remnants of my orgasm. I wanted to see him come as well.

I hoisted myself up on his desk, not caring about the things falling on the tile floor. Then, I reached for his cock and lined him up to my entrance, spreading my legs in an obscene offering.

My nails dug into his delectable ass. It was firm and hard. Too bad it was still covered. I wanted to take a bite. Perhaps I could convince Rune to remove the trousers and give me the full sight of his naked body. It was only fair, since he could see all of me.

Rune wasn't slow and careful this time. I was already stretched and ready for him when he plunged in with a forceful, long stroke, and started fucking me in earnest, as if we hadn't stopped to change positions.

I tried my best to keep quiet, only gasping when he hit a particularly good spot inside me.

"It feels exquisite like this. I love watching you come undone for me, how expressive your face is," he murmured against my temple, one hand holding my hip to keep me from sliding on the smooth surface and the other anchoring him to the desk.

The suggestive slap of skin against skin filled the office. I wondered if Pierce could hear us through the closed door. His desk wasn't that far away. And there was no way the sound could be mistaken for anything other than what it was. Fucking. Hard.

Rune played with my clit in soft touches.

"I can't," I complained. It was too much. Too good. Still shaking from the previous orgasms, I couldn't take another one.

"You can. I want to see you. Lean back and let go. Don't think. Just feel."

I did as he ordered, his hand immediately covering my mouth exactly like I needed. Closing my eyes, I allowed myself to bask in the sensation of the deep plunge of his cock inside me, over and over and over again.

Rune's hand muffled my moans and held me in place while the other one continued to circle and press on my clit. I arched my back, and when that changed the angle of his thrusts, I saw stars. Right there.

"Right there." I repeated out loud against his hand.

Rune obliged, increasing the speed, but never changing the angle.

I squirmed under him once again as a third orgasm barreled into me.

His satisfied groan had me opening my eyes just in time to see him lose control and plunge into me with abandon, until he too came before stilling deep inside me.

He uncovered my mouth and cupped my face, pulling me into a sitting position to kiss me softly, while he caressed the length of my leg still around his hip.

“Thank you,” he mumbled against my lips.

I chuckled. “I should be thanking you for the three orgasms.”

His snorted. He picked me up off the desk and carried me to the private bathroom attached to his office.

“Sorry about the mess on your desk,” I said.

“You can pick it up on your knees.”

I bit my lip, my grip tightening on the hair at the back of his head. “Maybe I will.”

And now, all I could think about was his cock in my mouth. I wanted to drive him wild and hear those sexy groans of his again. His grin told me he knew exactly the direction of my thoughts and he approved it.

He lowered me to the vanity.

“We keep finding ourselves in this position,” I joked.

Rune laughed while he disposed of the condom and pulled his pants closed.

“Can you get my clothes?” I asked. I was starting to feel a little underdressed in comparison.

His eyes lingered on my naked body. I didn’t hide, but I did straighten my back to create a prettier figure.

Eyes lighting up in amusement, Rune inclined his head. “Of course. Whatever you need.”

As he walked away, I admired how amazing his ass looked in those pants. I’d never considered myself an ass woman before now, but for some reason, this man did it for me.

Rune was handing me back my clothes when his phone rang, and our heads swiveled towards his desk at the same time.

“Time’s up,” I said.

Reality come crashing in without notice, and the enormity of what I’d just done chilled me to the bones.

His eyes narrowed on my face like he could read these thoughts just as well as he had read the

dirty ones. I was usually terrific at concealing my thoughts and feelings, but something about Rune Hill disarmed me and allowed him to see too much.

I took my clothes and jumped down from the counter, reaching for the knob to close the door, but Rune held it open.

“Whatever you’re thinking. Don’t. And don’t hide from me. I’ll be right back. I’m not done with you.”

Rune picked up the phone and spoke softly into the receiver.

I turned my back on him and got dressed under his watchful gaze. My hair was a mess from his hands, so I combed through it as best as I could with my fingers and then pulled it up in a ponytail. The waterproof mascara was proving to be worth every penny I’d spent on it, as my makeup was smeared, but not unfixable. As for my lips, they were a little bruised from kissing, but I doubted anyone would notice anyway.

“Thank you for letting me know, Pierce.”

I heard the end of the call, just as I was giving myself the finishing touches to cover up the fact that I’d just had the most amazing sex of my life in the middle of the work day. At my place of

work nonetheless.

Rune leaned on the bathroom door with his arms crossed.

I lifted a brow. He didn't look pleased.

"Pierce was just reminding me I have a meeting at three."

The thought of Pierce being aware that Rune needed a reminder of the meeting sent a chill over me. I glanced at my watch. Two forty-five p.m.

"Looks like our time's up."

Rune frowned. "For now. I want to talk about this."

I sighed. "Look, there's really nothing to talk about. Just don't say anything to anyone, and I will do the same."

"It's that simple?" He looked peeved.

"Yes. I'm not risking everything for a quick fuck. Don't you dare jeopardize my job."

His eyes sparkled with humor. "It wasn't that quick." He sobered when I didn't laugh. "I know what's at stake. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you or your position. I'm not stupid."

"Well, you're a man in a position of power and with the money to back it up, it doesn't hurt to remind you to keep your mouth shut when I

have everything to lose, and you don't. And this isn't happening again. No matter how good it is."

He ran a hand over his hair. My hands tingled thinking I had just been pulling on those soft strands mere minutes ago. It didn't escape my notice that we hadn't touched a single time since we finished fucking. All because of a single phone call. We had been in a bubble of our own hormones but the sharp reality had burst it.

"Fine," Rune said. "Fuck. I know. I get it. Do you know how many times I've represented women in your position? I'm perfectly aware of the repercussions for you. It doesn't mean I have to like the fact that we need to consider those things, when we are two consenting adults who aren't harming anyone."

I sighed and cupped his jaw. "I will see you around." I kissed his cheek, taking in his scent one more time before departing.

I gave Pierce a smile as I left, letting him know that Rune was alone and ready for his meeting, and then marched to the bathroom as fast as possible, without calling attention to myself.

Only then did I allow myself to freakout.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FOLLOWING DAY WAS SATURDAY, and I didn't have to go into the office.

After tidying up my bedroom and doing my share of the apartment chores, I went shopping with my sister. She had pestered me all week for details on Rune, and admittedly I needed to unload all of it onto someone else.

I could use some outside perspective, someone to remind me how dumb and stupid I was being, since my brain refused to cooperate. In fact, my own body was against me, constantly heating up over the memories of what had

happened in Rune's office on Friday afternoon.

Taylor wasn't much help either. My sister gushed over every single interaction between Rune and I no matter how few, going as far as to romanticize the whole thing, precisely the opposite of what I asked her to do.

In the end, my sister and I had a lot of fun and ate a bunch of good food. By mid-afternoon, Taylor needed to return home. Being pre-med wasn't easy and I was so proud of her.

Back at my apartment, as I was chatting with my roommate Rose, thinking of putting on a movie and making some snacks to relax before doing some work, my phone rang. I picked it up and stared at the caller ID, butterflies fluttering in my belly.

What could Rune possibly want on a Saturday afternoon?

I excused myself and ran to my room, closing the door behind me. "Hello?"

"Ruby. How are you?"

"I'm good. What's this about?"

I heard movement from his side of the call, as if he was pacing.

"Several things. But it all boils down to one." Rune's voice was low and seductive, like a caress

in my ear. "I can't stop thinking about yesterday. Try as I might, I haven't been able to work all day, and instead I end up reliving those way too short moments we spent in my office. I can't focus. I can't do anything productive. And I have been hard pretty much all day to the memories of you."

I was rendered speechless. Damn. That was some declaration.

And hot.

So hot.

I had to sit down. My knees were too weak to stand.

Before I could come up with a suitable answer, Rune asked, "Are you busy?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"What you want."

"I want you to come over."

I rolled back on the bed, staring at the ceiling, my dark hair fanning out around me, and suppressed a groan.

"Why would I do that?"

I was trying hard to control my frustration. We were going in circles, having the same debate over and over again, as if expecting to come to a

different conclusion, but somehow always ending up at the same maddening place. “I thought we were in agreement that this wouldn’t happen again, Rune. I won’t risk my career for you, no matter how good you are at playing my body.”

“I know we did. But that was before I realized this was going to affect my productivity.” I snorted, which Rune ignored. “I know you are as curious as me about this crazy chemistry we have. We are both completely focused on our careers and married to our jobs, and you were right in calling out the dangers of succumbing to our feelings at the firm, especially during work hours. I think we need to get it out of our systems for real, not just a quick fuck on a bathroom or an office. We should use this weekend to burn through this desire. I have complex cases to deal with and I can’t afford to make mistakes. And you can’t afford it either if you’re working on the merger with Morrigan.”

I didn’t like that his logic made sense. Or maybe some part of my body other than my brain was too eager to agree with him.

“Is this a late-night booty-call?”

“It’s hardly late. It’s barely dinner time,” he

deadpanned.

I chuckled. "Rune—"

"Don't say no just because you think you should. Tell me honestly that you haven't been thinking about yesterday. Tell me that you're having a perfectly normal Saturday, and the thought never even crossed your mind. Say it to me and I will drop it. I won't pressure you. I'm not calling as your boss. I'm just some dude you met last weekend who can't get you out of my mind."

I bit my lip. "I can't."

"Come over and I promise you won't regret it."

I doubt it, I thought. But what came out of my mouth was an agreement.

Rune texted me his address while I rushed to tell Rose and Camilla something had come up and I was heading out. Then I ran back to my room and emptied my closet. I didn't know what to wear.

Staring at the mess I'd made of my clothes, I called Taylor and told her everything, including my contradictory thoughts. "I shouldn't go, right?"

Taylor sighed. "Ruby, if you want to go, you

should do it. Have fun. Let me live vicariously through you.” She laughed.

I chose a matching set of lingerie and a little black dress. Then I sat on the bed, anxiously munching on my lip. “This is wrong.”

“There is nothing wrong with two adults having fun.”

“Mom would kill me.” She would probably do worse than that.

“Then, it’s a good thing you called me and not her,” Taylor countered.

“This is exactly the type of thing she always lectured us about.”

“Mom having a bad experience in the past doesn’t mean it’s going to happen to everyone,” Taylor lectured. “Stop worrying. Go for it. And I want to know all about it tomorrow.”

I sighed. “Love you. Bye.”

I felt lighter after talking to my sister and getting the validation I needed for what I was about to do. If I wanted to be completely honest with myself, not much could stop me from going to see Rune tonight.

Disconnecting the call, I put together a bag with toiletries and a change of clothes. Although Rune hadn’t said anything about spending the

night, I wanted to be prepared for everything.

I would not be doing a walk of shame out of my boss' house.

After checking his address and determining his place wasn't far, I still decided to take a cab. These heels weren't made for walking.

Rune's building was older and full of charm, but definitely upscale and comfortable. The elevator brought me up to his door where he met me, wearing jeans and a white t-shirt.

He looked good.

From the way his eyes lingered on me, I'd say he approved of my outfit choice.

Rune welcomed me with a kiss on the cheek. A hand circled my hip, pulling me in, and his lips lingered, caressing my neck. I was assaulted by the scent of him, the warmth of his body, so close and yet not enough.

He pulled back too soon, taking my coat and bag with a grin. He knew exactly what he did to me.

I followed him to the kitchen, surprised to find two pans on the stove and a cutting board prepped with half-cut veggies and a sharp-looking knife.

"You can cook? I expected you to have a

private chef or something like that.”

Rune pulled a high-backed stool from the kitchen island and gestured for me to sit. Then, he poured me a glass of wine and returned to the cutting board while answering my question.

“I grew up with all of that—the chefs, maids, butlers—all the things that allowed my parents to spend as much of their free time with us, instead of worrying about the house or food, or anything else really.”

I took a sip from the red wine and delighted in the richness of the flavor. Rune had good taste.

“That sounds nice,” I said. “At least your parents weren't the type to throw money at you to keep you out of the way. I imagine a lot of those families in your social circles are like that.”

He glanced up, brow furrowed, presumably because I emphasized the differences in our backgrounds, but he agreed. “Yes, I have seen a lot of that.”

“If you were used to it, why the absence of staff?”

“I do have staff, just never when I'm home. I rarely have time to cook, let alone taking care of the house. Besides, cooking for one isn't very interesting. But growing up with six siblings, I

appreciate, and crave, privacy. I don't like people in my space."

He finished chopping up the vegetables and added them to one of the pans, mixing them into the sauce.

"Six? I wasn't aware there were that many of you." His poor mother.

Rune chuckled at whatever he saw on my horrified face. "Oh yes. And meddling in each other's lives is their favorite hobby. I love them all very much, but they can be too much sometimes. What about you? Do you live by yourself?"

He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms over his wide chest. The shirt pulled at the sleeves, giving me a mouth-watering view that almost distracted me into forgetting what his question had been.

"I have two roommates. The city is very expensive, and I don't mind having people around, for the most part. I left home as soon as I started college. My mom didn't need to know about my hoe phase. She would have judged me too hard."

"Hoe phase? Is that what you're going through?"

I shook my head. “Now? No. I don't go out every weekend anymore. That was a few years ago.”

“Every weekend?”

“Yeah. Work hard, party hard, you know?”

“I see. I've never been much for partying. Morrigan is the wild one.”

I had gathered that about him already. Except the events of the last week might have changed my perception of him. “I think having sex in public spaces is pretty wild.”

Rune's eyes darkened, his voice turning seductive. “There's a first time for everything. Maybe I am discovering my wild side.”

I took a sip from my drink to conceal my stupid grin. “What were you doing at the club then? I thought for sure that's what you were looking for—a hookup.”

“I was out with my friend Irvin, not exactly voluntarily. I don't like picking up girls in clubs. It's always a risk.”

I uncrossed my legs and shifted position on the comfortable stool.

Rune's eyes followed the movement of my foot, but I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

“I'm surprised I didn't have to sign an NDA

to leave that bathroom,” I joked.

Rune lifted a single brow, face serious. “The thought did cross my mind, but only after we’d already left.”

I laughed.

As Rune turned his attention to the food, I took a deep breath and a long gulp of my almost empty glass. Rune was charming, gorgeous, great in bed—or out of it—and could cook. I was in trouble. I could jump his bones right now and forget about dinner. We could eat it later to refuel before going at it again.

I didn’t have enough time to recover from the impact of his proximity, of being in his space and seeing him so relaxed, before he was facing me again. His dark, expressive eyes stared deep into mine. It could have felt disconcerting had it not been for the amusement in the slight curl of his lips softening his expression.

“This needs to simmer for a bit. How about I give you a tour?” Rune suggested.

“Sure.” I jumped out of the stool a little too eagerly, almost twisting my ankle on my deadly high heels.

I was dying to see more of Rune’s personal space that so few other people were allowed to

enter.

The apartment was gorgeous, all dark, mood colors and elegant lines.

I used to live with three roommates all throughout law school to afford to live in the area I did. Now, having downsized to two, and seeing Rune's space, I wondered what it would be like to have my own place. To not have to worry about waking up my roommates when wandering the house at odd hours of the night, having lost track of time working or doing something else.

It turned out I was a fool for thinking the tour would give me enough of a distraction from the tension between Rune and me. That I could possibly stop wanting to jump Rune's bones at every single interaction.

I never stood a chance.

Rune kept touching me, guiding me through the apartment, or simply standing next to me with a hand on my lower back. I did my best to listen to him as he showed me the living room first. Then the two spacious bedrooms and an office.

"For Morrigan." Rune pointed to the spare bedroom.

“I thought you didn’t like people in your space.”

Rune rolled his eyes. “I can’t get rid of him, so I guess he’s the exception.”

I grinned at the unexpected softness of his actions.

I didn’t dare linger too much in his room, not even entering it. No matter how much I would love to stumble into his bed, I was enjoying talking to him. Getting to know these little things about his personality, his life, his family.

Which was why I entered the office instead.

One of the walls was covered by floor to ceiling bookshelves. I stopped to inspect the titles. The law section was the easiest to identify, but the rest, it took me a while to realize, were mostly sci-fi novels.

I gasped in delight at having discovered yet another surprising detail. “Rune, you’re a nerd!”

He laughed, shaking his entire body. I stood frozen for a moment, enjoying the sight. I loved his laugh. And loved it even more because I caused it.

Rune saved me from cringing at my own thoughts. “Come on. Dinner’s probably ready.”

* * *

We ate sitting side by side at the huge island. Rune's torso was turned to me the entire time, his leg touching my crossed ones. My heels dangled off to the side. He tracked my every move, including the way the hem of my dress barely reached mid-thigh when sitting down.

"What are you working on that you're so stressed about?" I asked.

Rune lifted a brow, cleaning his mouth with the napkin. "What makes you think I'm stressed?"

"You sounded pretty desperate on the phone."

I didn't have a good excuse as to why I was teasing him, other than the fact that this tension was starting to get the better of me.

He pulled my chair closer, his legs on each side of mine. I was surrounded by him. The only way to be nearer would be to climb on his lap.

I licked my lips, leaning forward, desperate for a kiss.

Rune followed the path of my tongue.

"You think I'm desperate to fuck you?" He asked, voice like gravel.

I nodded, grinning like a fool.

He leaned forward, and I thought he was finally going to kiss me, but stopped a hair's breadth away from touching me. "Finish your food first."

Rune gestured to the plate with his chin, smirking when I groaned in frustration.

I didn't want to wait any longer. I'd been at his place for what felt like hours, and hadn't even gotten a single kiss.

Rune rested his hand on my thigh, squeezing reassuringly. He kept it there while we finished the meal, eating with the other hand. It was pure torture, especially when he began drawing small circles with his thumb absentmindedly.

"To answer your question," Rune said, "my most recent client is Ginny Lawrence. She was a news anchor for the Dumont Media Group and was fired two months ago after she started glowing while live on the evening news."

I had heard of that story. The news had spread like wildfire, shocking everyone. Up until that point, the public hadn't been aware of her *deviant* status.

Rune waited for me to resume eating again before he continued explaining, "Her employer cited several reasons for letting her go, but she

claims it was all about her being *deviant*. After the incident, she tried moving on and finding another job, unsuccessfully. She appears to have been blacklisted. No one is willing to hire her. And all signs point to her career being over.”

“You’re suing for discrimination?” I asked.

“Yes. But against such a huge media group, it’s going to be tough.”

If I remembered correctly, they owned several television channels, newspapers, magazines.

“It’s no fun when things are too easy,” I commented.

“Is that why you chose law? For the excitement?”

He gave me his full attention, waiting for my response.

It took me a while to put my thoughts together in order to give him a truthful answer without dumping all my issues on him.

“Not exactly.” I rolled up the napkin to give my hands something to do. “I was a difficult kid, and even worse as a teenager. Eventually, my mom helped me see that I was better off channeling all those tumultuous feelings towards something productive for my future. I don’t

remember exactly what drew me to law in specific. Probably something I watched on a show. But as soon as the decision was made, I focused all my energy on it. On being the best I could possibly be.”

“Hence the work hard and party hard mentality?” He asked, face full of understanding.

“We might like *non-deviants* to think we are all the same, but we’re not. We wear our emotions on our sleeves. It’s easy to get distracted and lose control if we don’t channel all that energy elsewhere.”

“I completely agree with that. It’s why I work out every single morning. More often than not, I need to be tactful of client’s emotions, which doesn’t come naturally to me. Especially if I have too much accumulated energy.”

“Well, that explains it,” I teased, eyes roaming his hard body.

His eyes darkened. “Are you done?” He gestured to my empty plate.

Instead of responding, I pushed it away from me, fully facing him.

Rune smirked. And then he was kissing me.

Finally.

This kiss was nothing like the ones we’d

shared before. Like all those other moments when we were in a rush, constantly aware we didn't have time to linger. Afraid of getting caught.

Rune didn't devour me instantly. He didn't delve deep and hard and claimed my mouth until I couldn't breathe.

This time, Rune kissed me like he wanted to seduce me. Slow and soft. His hand never left my thigh, squeezing and caressing. I attempted to spread them to give him better access, but my body was bracketed between his legs and I couldn't move. When his tongue teased the seam of my lips, I opened, allowing him to deepen the kiss.

It was a different type of claiming, careful and torturous, but no less intense.

While Rune seemed to be in no rush, I only wanted more. I squirmed in my seat, thoroughly seduced and teased and enticed. My hands roamed over his hard chest, his neck, the back of his head, pulling at his hair. Asking for more.

"Come here." Rune lifted me off the seat.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and trailed kisses up his neck.

He carried me to his bedroom and deposited

me on the bed, breaking away to kneel at my feet.

“Tonight, there are no excuses. No rush. No interruptions.” His words were both a promise and a threat. And I couldn’t wait to be at his mercy.

He removed one of my heels, kissing the ankle as his eyes locked with mine. He looked good between my legs like that.

“What are you thinking?” He asked, kissing my leg up to the knee.

“How good you look on your knees.”

His sinful mouth stretched in a smirk. After repeating the agonizingly slow process on the other leg, leaving me dripping wet and aching for more of his touch, Rune lowered the zipper on the side of my dress. I rose only for long enough for the dress to pool at my feet and to step out of it, and then laid back on the bed.

When Rune went to follow, I stopped him with a foot on the middle of his chest.

“What is it?”

“Clothes.” I demanded glancing down to his fully clothed body. Somehow, I always found myself in this position, naked while he remained completely covered.

That couldn't go on. I wanted to see him as much as he could see me. To explore his body the way he explored mine. I wanted to learn every minute detail of him.

Rune pulled back and did as I told him. He removed each piece of clothing slowly, enticingly, eyes locked with mine the entire time I admired him. This man was such a fine specimen. Perfect. At least to me.

I'd never given much thought to what my type was. I got involved with people after forming a connection. But now, if I had to describe what men I was most attracted to, it would simply be Rune. His looks. His attitude. That gorgeous smile. He checked all my little boxes without even trying.

Once he was fully naked, Rune prowled on top of me, mapping the length of my body with his lips and teeth and hands. By the time he reached my head and kissed me again, I was ready to spread my legs and pull him closer. Pull him to where I was wet and hot and ready for him.

But Rune had other plans. He kept his distance from my center, kissed me breathless, and then continued his assault on the rest of my

body. He lavished my breasts while I complained from need and desperation for release.

I pulled on the hair at the back of his head so I could look at him.

“Stop teasing me,” I commanded.

Rune smirked. “I never have enough time with these.” He licked the tip of my nipple. “Let me play. We have nothing but time.”

My breath got stuck in lungs. “That sounds wonderful.” I rubbed his shoulders, amazed at the beautiful shape of him. “But I can’t take it anymore. I need to come. Now.”

He finally gave me what I needed. His fingers traveled down, circling my clit before plunging inside. I came after a few deep strokes. And because Rune was nothing short of a perfectionist, not long after, I came on his mouth as well.

By the time his cock entered me, I was a sweaty mess of pleasure.

The thrust of his hips against mine held no urgency. No need to hurry up in case we were caught. No thumping base of electronic music. Just two bodies and an enormous amount of pleasure.

And even without all that adrenaline, the

intensity startled me. I worried Rune was going to ruin sex for me with other people. How could anyone else compare after him? Future me could worry about that.

The fog of pleasure only allowed me to think about it for a fleeting moment before my attention was once again arrested by Rune. His touch, his cock, his kisses. He was like a drug. Like a lighthouse in a storm. A shiny light in the darkness. Nothing I could do would prevent me from being drawn to him. Nor did I want to.

CHAPTER FIVE

AFTER WE WERE BOTH SATIED, we laid in bed under the dim, warm light of the bedside table lamp.

Rune disposed of the condom and returned to the room with a smirk on his lips. He looked pleased. And hot. After pulling on a pair of sweatpants, Rune handed me one of his t-shirts and tugged me to the bed again.

“Are we staying in bed?” I asked, laughing.

He’d said he wanted to go all night, but I’d expected some distance in between rounds of delicious sex.

“Yes. Do you have objections?”

I stretched. “No. None.”

His eyes tracked the length of my body, snagging on the spot where his shirt rode high on my thighs.

Rune’s phone pinged. He glared towards the nightstand where it rested plugged to the charger.

I pursed my lips, trying to hide my amusement. He’d been so happy with the lack of distractions and interruptions.

“You can take that,” I teased, hoping to lighten his mood. “You don’t have to entertain me.”

His palm climbed my thigh and squeezed before he pulled away. “Let me see if it’s work.”

“You did say you had a lot to do.” I pushed his shoulder. “Don’t worry about me.”

I reached for my phone and searched for the name *Ginny Lawrence*. Predictably, the first few results were links to short video clips of the incident, on August 27. I clicked on the first one and watched it with the volume turned down, not wanting to disturb Rune.

Ginny, a gorgeous, blond woman in her twenties, spoke to the camera. Something was off

about her. She looked nervous. Tense. She kept glancing at different points beyond the camera.

After a few short seconds, the exposed skin of her face and arms started glowing. It was subtle at first, however as soon as she glanced down and noticed the shift, the rest of her power burst out as if a dam had ruptured. Her skin turned golden and her eyes like mirrors, reflective and opaque. The true form of the *deviants*.

I squinted.

The camera flared for a moment, making it impossible to see while it adjusted to the change in lighting. When the image returned to normal, Ginny's panicked eyes filled the screen. The video ended on that note.

Returning to the search results, I watched other videos of her work from before the incident. Her posture was completely different—smiling and confident.

I searched for her social media accounts. There was always something to be learned from how people wanted to be perceived online.

In Ginny's case, she loved taking mirror selfies ahead of going live, showing off her outfits and makeup.

Scrolling up her feed, I searched for the date

of the incident. No pictures. The previous day looked normal, as did the previous ones for several days in a row. All of them with identical poses and lighting of what I assumed was her vanity backstage.

I turned on my side, facing Rune, who was frowning at whatever he was reading on his phone. My fingers trailed up his arm until he gave me his attention.

"I was just looking up Ginny Lawrence. Did anything happen in her personal life that day? Something that could explain why it happened?" I asked.

Rune leaned back, staring at the ceiling, thinking. "No. She said everything was normal."

I leaned on his shoulder and showed him my phone. "She didn't post a photo. It was the first day she missed in several weeks."

Rune frowned. "That's important? It's just a photo. Maybe she didn't like her outfit."

"Also a valid explanation." I shrugged. "I was only pointing out the break in the pattern."

"Thank you." Rune smiled. "I need to check my notes to answer an email, and then I'll be done."

"No rush. I'm here all night."

Rune's answering smirk was full of heat.

I fluffed up the pillow on my side of the bed and settled in to continue my investigation. This bed was heaven.

With nothing better to do and a nagging feeling regarding Ginny, I changed to another app and searched for her name. On her page, I found more pictures and videos from work, sprinkled in between ones from her personal life. I read the captions while Rune worked.

At the sound of fast typing, I glanced over and smiled. Apparently, all Rune had needed was a good orgasm to be able to focus. I was more than happy to volunteer for the job.

After several long minutes of watching Ginny's online life and another app switch, I noticed a pattern. All her captions and posts since the incident referred, in one way or another, secrets and being quiet. She was subtle and I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't been reading them all together.

Lover's quarrel? Maybe a cheating partner? I searched for any hints on her pages but found no mention of a relationship.

I went back and forth between the dates and times of all the posts. And she posted a lot.

The night before the incident, on the 26th, she had reported to her followers about working late on the deserted news station.

“Did she ever give any theories at all as to why she was nervous?” I asked Rune, feeling guilty for pulling him away from his computer.

Rune finished typing a sentence and then he shook his head. “She said she was afraid of being fired. Everyone was treating her differently and it didn’t surprise her she had to leave.”

I sat up. “But that was afterwards, right? What caused it in the first place? Check this out.” I showed him the different videos of her working, contrasting that day with others. “She was nervous when she lost control. Something was already wrong by the time she went live.” I showed him the posts from the twenty-sixth. “She sounded perfectly normal telling the news the day before. Something must have happened during that time period. Either in her personal life or at work.”

Rune inspected everything I had uncovered in silence. It wasn’t much, but something in her story didn’t make sense to me.

“I took her words at face value and didn’t dig deeper. I should have pushed her for more

details. Thank you.”

He kissed my cheek, startling me, before getting on his feet, phone to the ear.

“Ginny, this is Rune Hill.”

He paced along the foot of the bed as he briefly spoke with his client.

“You’re meeting with her?” I asked as soon as the call was over.

“Yes. I want to talk face to face about this.” He returned to the bed, facing me. “Will you go with me?”

“What if she is bothered by my presence? I’m not her lawyer.”

Rune shrugged. “You work for the firm. You’re bound by client privilege same as me.”

“What time is it?” I really wanted to see this through and find out if my instincts were correct. “I’m having lunch with my parents tomorrow. I need to let them know if I have to change the time.”

“You are? Is there a special occasion?” His keen eyes focused on me as they did every time I told him something personal. “I can do it without you and let you know how it goes. I would like to know your opinion, but I don’t want to intrude on your weekend plans.”

I waved away his concern and smiled. “No, it’s nothing special. We have a meal together on Sundays ever since I’ve moved out. Just the four of us. My mom has a hard time letting go, especially now that my sister is also moved out at college.”

“I think our mothers would get along perfectly.” Rune rolled his eyes. “Mine complains all the time of not seeing us enough, even though we also pretty much meet up every week.”

I chuckled. His words might have sounded annoyed, but his face softened when talking about his mom.

“What time are you meeting Ginny?”

“At three. Can you make it?”

“I’ll try. Depends where you’re meeting.”

“That’s not a problem. I’ll drive you there and pick you up.”

My eyes widened. I didn’t want him anywhere near my parents’ house. If my mom saw him, she would have a heart attack.

“It’s nice of you to offer, but you don’t need to do that.”

Rune pushed me until I was flat on my back and straddled my thighs with his powerful body. “I’m not being nice.” He set my phone on the

nightstand and then pinned my hands down to the mattress. "I'm keeping you here for as long as possible. All night long. And in the morning, I will drive you, so you don't have to leave earlier to catch other transportation."

My toes curled and all my objections died on my tongue. He had some very compelling arguments.

I licked my lips.

"Alright. As long as you don't let anyone see you."

His eyes flashed with annoyance, but he agreed just before making good on his promises and devouring me.

* * *

By morning, as I was getting ready for lunch with my family, I was boneless with satisfaction.

"I'll be at your parents' house at two thirty," Rune said on the way to the parking garage.

"Where will you go in the meantime?" I asked noticing his bag.

"I owe my friend Irvin a training session for the one I missed this morning. Don't worry. I'll be on time."

I didn't know how he could possibly still

have the energy after the workout he gave me, but I refrained from commenting. I was slowly transitioning back into professional territory. Today was all about business.

No matter the fact that I was deliciously sore and sated from how much we'd fucked last night and this morning. It was out of our systems.

It didn't feel like it yet, only because I hadn't left Rune's orbit. But it was.

It had to be.

The drive uptown was pleasant. Traffic was in a rare cooperative mood, not giving us any major delays. Plus, Rune was simply easy to talk to. I quickly discovered we always had something to talk about. Anything from our likes to dislikes, work, hobbies. We were just as comfortable talking as we were in silence, like last night while we worked in bed.

But as we approached the neighborhood where I'd grown up, I became jittery. The neighbors were nosey, having known me and my family for many years. My mom would skin me alive if she found out where I'd spent the night.

When we turned into the familiar street, I instructed Rune to park several houses down from my mom's, away from the prying eyes of

the people she interacted with the most. Rune narrowed his eyes at me, but followed my instructions perfectly and without complaint.

“See you later!” I all but jumped out of the car and sped down the street.

Only after I slowed down to a reasonable pace, did I realize how ridiculous I was being. I started laughing and was still shaking my head at myself when Taylor opened the door and drew me into a hug.

“I saw the car you arrived in. And it didn’t look like an Uber driver to me,” Taylor teased.

I glared at her and glanced around to make sure no one else had heard her.

“How was your night?” Taylor continued smirking. “Was your boss ok?” she stage-whispered.

I slapped her arm. “Shut up!” I hissed.

Her grin widened. I hadn’t hit her hard enough.

“Girls?”

I widened my eyes at her in warning before turning to the dining room.

Luckily, Taylor might enjoy watching me squirm, but she was also a good confidante. She stopped with all the teasing as soon as we weren’t

alone anymore.

My mom wasn't happy when I told her I had a meeting after lunch, but she knew how hard I worked and how much I loved my job, and she respected that.

I knew Taylor was dying to question me about Rune, but we had no alone time before I raced out the front door for the meeting with Ginny.

* * *

The coffee shop on the Upper East Side was way too overpriced. But I understood the choice as soon as we were showed to our table.

Maybe calling the establishment a coffee shop was a disservice. It deserved something more sophisticated, like tearoom or whatever it was people with money liked calling these places.

The decoration was tasteful and elegant. And more than anything, it provided privacy. The tables weren't crowded against each other, holding a respectable distance between them. I glimpsed more than a few familiar faces from tabloid magazines but did my best not to linger for too long on anyone in particular.

Today, I was stepping foot into a world that

wasn't my own, and I was here to observe.

Rune paid for my coffee, claiming it was a work expense, and then we sat side by side, facing Ginny Lawrence.

Ginny, much like in her social media photos, was glamorous with long blond wavy hair and glowy skin. She wore a cinched waist dress that reached below the knee and accentuated her hour-glass figure.

"Ms. Lawrence, thank you for seeing us on such short notice." Rune opened the button of his suit jacket and extended a hand. "We just have a few questions regarding your case."

Ginny shook his hand, hers pliant under his. Her fingers lingered on his palm when he pulled back.

"Of course." Ginny smiled at Rune from under her perfect long lashes. "Whatever you need."

"This is Ruby Byrne." Rune gestured to me. "She specializes in corporate law."

Ginny greeted me with a perfectly professional smile and handshake.

"Corporate?" she asked Rune.

"Yes. I want her opinion on a few things. Nothing for you to worry about."

As her attention once again focused solely on Rune, her smile turned sweet. "I trust you know what's best."

I couldn't tell if the flirting was second nature to her or if it was Rune in particular who brought out the sweet and docile side of Ginny. Not that I blamed her. Most likely, she was used to people liking her and wanting to help her on account of her appearance, especially men. Rune was a powerful, rich man who could solve all her problems. Despite his gruff disposition, his seriousness and directness had a calming effect. I felt it when I put my trust in him during sex. Or maybe none of that mattered when the man in question was as insanely rich as Rune.

As for the man himself, Rune was either unaware of all of this, or he didn't care and chose to ignore it. I was inclined to bet on the second option. I had to imagine women threw themselves at him all the time thanks to his money and family influence, not to mention his looks and presence.

"We would like for you to go over the days leading up to the broadcast with us," Rune directed the conversation towards what they needed. "*Deviant* powers can be deeply affected

by our emotions or physical exhaustion. Which was it for you? Have you been able to identify one or two things that could have led you to release your power in such an uncontrolled manner?"

His explanation on *deviant* powers was detailed to account for the presence of a *non-deviant* which was what I presented as.

Ginny's smile immediately vanished. She pulled herself together fast, but the split-second hesitation was enough for me. I had been right. There was more to the story than she'd initially told Rune.

Ginny plastered on a practiced fake smile. "I lost control. That is all. It was a stressful work week, with long hours, and you know how it is when we don't get a proper release for the tension."

She threw me an apologetic look. As a *non-deviant*, I couldn't possibly understand those urges.

I made sure my own face didn't reveal anything. It was a good thing Ginny was mostly focused on Rune and I could watch her without having to engage in the conversation.

Rune connected the tips of his fingers on the

table, like a school principal about to lecture a misbehaving student. It was kind of hot.

“Ginny, I can’t help you if you don’t give me all the details.” Rune sounded disappointed, and from the way Ginny was munching on her lip, it was having the right effect on her. “What happened Saturday night?”

Her eyes widened. “How—? Why would you say something happened Saturday?”

Rune didn’t answer her question, continuing to apply pressure on the topic. “When you hosted the news on Saturday, everything was perfectly normal. Afterwards, you stayed at the station and worked late into the evening. What were you working on?”

“I was preparing for a new segment I was going to start on Sunday,” Ginny answered without hesitation.

“What happened before you left?”

Her shoulders curled in, and I knew he had her.

“I can’t tell you,” Ginny said, voice small, defeated.

Rune responded, firm but understanding, “If you don’t, if you don’t give me all the information, I won’t be able to win this for you.

Do you want to give up your career?"

Her eyes widened. "You're the best. That's why I went to you for help. You're the only one who can fight these things."

Not the only one, but definitely the most successful. Rune didn't have to fear the repercussions of going against powerful people, because he had the support to do so.

"And I will fight for you as hard as I am able to." Rune leaned forward, cupping his coffee. "But you have to help me. You have to give me the tools to win. Only you can do that."

He waited her out, allowing the silence to stretch until Ginny shifted in her seat and felt the need to fill it.

"I wasn't the only one at the station that night. Other people were working as well, mostly reporters writing stories for the next day." Ginny gulped. "Harry Dumont was also there."

Harry Dumont was the owner and CEO of the Dumont Media Group, which was comprised of several news stations and newspapers. Ginny's former employer.

I pulled out a notepad and a pen. It would be much easier to write things down on my phone, but I'd learned people were much more at ease

with physical writing than typing.

"I'm just taking notes," I told Ginny. "Don't mind me."

Ginny nodded and focused on Rune.

"I was going to get a coffee when I heard voices from Mr. Dumont's office. I—" She blushed, toying with the ring on her middle finger. "I approached to hear better. He was talking to a woman demanding he attend their kid's sixteenth birthday party. It wasn't his wife, but someone called Valerie."

"And then?" Rune prompted.

Ginny glanced around, but not a single person was within hearing distance. "Valerie was being very insistent, saying how important his presence was. But he kept evading the issue because his wife wouldn't stand for him to be seen with them." Ginny's face contorted in pure disgust. "Anyway, she eventually gave up and left." Ginny pushed back her shoulders. "Now, brace yourselves for the next part."

Brace ourselves? I thought this had been the scandalous part. Rune didn't appear fazed at all. He either heard stuff like this all the time or the mistress and kid weren't new information to him. I supposed it was common in his circles for

people in marriages of convenience to engage in other, extra marital, relationships. I would never understand how anyone could live like that. But I was so far removed from all of it, we could be on different planets.

Ginny took a sip from her drink before continuing, “Mr. Dumont’s secretary walked in right after Valerie left and she—she climbed on the desk, lifted her skirt and they proceeded to have sex. Right there.”

It took me a moment to process what I’d just heard. When I turned my head, I found Rune’s eyes on me and I knew instantly what he was thinking. We hadn’t done it on the desk, but we had used a lot of other surfaces on his office.

Focus, I wanted to tell him, but couldn’t do it in front of his client.

Unaware of our silent exchange, Ginny shook her head, revolted and disgusted and annoyed, all at the same time. “I didn’t want to see any of it, and I’ll spare you the details which are unfortunately burned into my eyes.”

“How did you see?” Rune asked. “How close were you? Did they close the door?”

I wrote down what she’d said, mostly to keep my hands busy, but also to record Ginny’s exact

words as much as possible.

“The office walls are all see-through. He had the blinds closed on most of the them and his secretary did close the door, but from where I was, I could see them perfectly.”

“Then what happened?”

Ginny toyed with the strap of her purse. “I didn’t move an inch until I was sure they were distracted and—noisy.” She gulped down the rest of her drink.” But as soon as I moved, Mr. Dumont looked up. Straight at me. It was too fast to be sure of anything, and I half convinced myself he hadn’t seen me. It was dark in the corridor. But he must have seen well enough to know it was me.”

Rune’s face didn’t change as he asked, “Did he say anything to you?”

I prided myself on my poker face, but Rune’s might be even better.

“Not necessarily,” Ginny answered. “The next day, I was getting ready to go live, when I was informed he would be watching. And I knew it was because of what I’d seen. He stared at me the entire time, always talking with other people and never approaching me, but I could feel it. I could feel his eyes on me.”

Rune was pensive, most likely already rethinking his strategy to fit this crucial information, which completely changed the tone of the case. It no longer fit the narrative of cutting her lose to save the reputation of the station for employing an out-of-control *deviant*. Harry Dumont was retaliating against Ginny Lawrence for what she'd seen.

If Ginny she went public with this story, it would be much harder to prove. She could be counter sued for defamation.

It was up to Rune to decide how to use what Ginny had told them. I wasn't sure he should.

"Thank you for telling me," Rune finally told Ginny. "Is there anything else you haven't told me that could affect the case?"

"No. This is everything that happened." Ginny crossed her arms. "What do you think?"

"I'm going to have to rethink our strategy, and possibly redraft our complaint to get the lawsuit started. But I will have it done soon and then we can prepare to move forward. I'll call you this week to give you an update."

Ginny thanked Rune profusely, shaking his hand for longer than professionally necessary. This time however this time I didn't think she

was attempting to flirt. Ginny was searching for comfort when feeling uncertain and scared regarding her future.

“It’s both worse and better than I expected,” Rune said as soon as we were alone.

He relaxed back in his chair, angling himself so he faced me.

“How so?” I asked. “How is going against Harry Dumont any good?”

“He has an image to uphold. He knows Ginny saw something, or he wouldn’t have jumped on the opportunity to get rid of her.”

I closed my notebook and put it away on my bag. I would transcribe my notes as soon as I got home and then send them to Rune. “The fact that she can’t find another job frames whatever she says against him as a desperate call for attention.”

“Yes, but he has to know cornering her this badly could force her to reveal everything. And even if he has public opinion on his side, since she can’t prove anything, he has a lot to lose. Much more than she does, if this story comes out.”

“I almost wish she had filmed it.” I mused. “It would have been much easier to sway him into a quiet agreement.”

Rune's eyes lit up. "You're a genius."

"I am?"

"She might not have filmed it, but there is a way to show what she saw."

I froze.

"I'm going to ask the Wellingtons for help," Rune continued, unaware of my discomfort.

I gulped some more of my drink to conceal my reaction. "Are you close with them?"

Rune's face twisted in disgust. "We aren't exactly on the best of terms actually. But their ability is unique and they are willing to sell it for the right price. I only have to play nice with them for a while, even if it is unpleasant."

The Wellingtons were an influential *deviant* family—more like a dynasty—with the power to project something akin to a holographic image directly from the mind. But the reason for their popularity was the ability to become vessels and project images from other people's brains, not just their own.

If Rune managed to hire them to show what Ginny saw, even though it wouldn't be admissible in court, it could be enough for them to reach an agreement. Dumont wouldn't want that knowledge out there.

Ruby suddenly wanted to be as far away from this case as possible. She hoped Rune didn't invite her to tag along to that specific conversation.

Finished with our coffees, we left the establishment and stopped on the sidewalk, next to his car.

I didn't know how to say goodbye to him. Tomorrow we would return to the safety of the professional distance. How did I thank him for this amazing weekend?

"Come back to my place." Rune interrupted my thoughts.

"Why?"

I squared my shoulders, watching him. I hated that now I could see the difference between his work mode and Rune at ease. Out here, he wasn't stoic and expressionless anymore. His eyes shone with intensity. All of it focused on me.

"Wasn't last night all about getting this thing between us out of our systems and be done?" I asked.

He lifted a brow. "I never said anything about being done. Are you?"

I didn't have an answer.

“I’m not done.” Rune cupped my cheek. His thumb pulled on my lower lip, releasing it from my teeth. I hadn’t even realized I’d been biting it. “Give me another day.”

I was fucked up for this, but I couldn’t help it. “Fine. But—” I grabbed his coat, stopping him from turning to his car with a victorious smile. “We have work tomorrow and I need to rest. I’m going back home tonight.”

His smile didn’t dim. “That’s fair.”

CHAPTER SIX

I WAS EXTREMELY HAPPY TO determine everything was back to normal the following week.

Rune and I didn't see much of each other and when we did, we were perfectly professional.

He was out of my system. I was sure of it now.

Of course, I was still very much aware of his presence and the loaded stares he stole my way occasionally, but I wasn't tense and anxious about it anymore. We were both aware of what our brief affair had meant, and no hard feelings

remained after it had run its course.

I worked closely with Morrigan, drafting and reviewing the initial merger agreement of the biggest case I had worked on to date, and then polishing specific clauses regarding employees. It was a big endeavor and I had to admit the weekend of sex had helped me focus.

By Wednesday, after I finished revising yet another document, I delivered it and grabbed my bag, ready for lunch. I was starving.

Alana Ramirez, one of the paralegals of the firm, stood at her desk, organizing folders when I approached.

“Ready for lunch?” I asked.

She looked up with a raised brow. “Are you finally ready to leave the cave?”

I chuckled. She was absolutely right. Today was the first day this week I wouldn’t be eating at my desk.

“I know. I know.” She kept lecturing me about proper rest and breaks, but I rarely listened. “This case is more stressful than I anticipated. But I’m ready to stop for an hour today.”

Alana looped her arm through mine. “Let’s go then,” she said, leading me to the elevators.

“How are the kids?” I asked. Alana had a twelve-year-old and a seven-year-old, and they were adorable.

As we descended to the restaurant on the second floor of the building, Alana regaled me with tales of her seven-year-old’s hockey games and the twelve-year-old’s science experiments. After a polite exchange with the hostess, we found Blake sitting at a table, face lighting up when we approached.

“Ruby! There you are!” Blake threw a hand over his heart. “I thought we lost you.”

“Don’t be dramatic.” I patted his arm. “I only missed two lunches.”

Blake worked in HR for the building administration, which meant he technically worked for the parent company of the Hills. His team was responsible for many things, but Blake was most fond of the events they got to plan, coordinating themes with the restaurant and team building moments.

“This week.” Blake lifted a sassy brow. “What about last week?”

He had a point.

“I’ve been busy. But I’m here now. Do you want to enjoy my company or complain about

it?”

The three of us shared a laugh and the subject naturally moved on to catching up and discussing what we wanted to eat. We were done ordering when the last official member of our lunch dates appeared.

“Hi, everyone.” Millie sat down on the empty chair next to me with a huff. “Sorry to barge in. Am I late?”

“Of course not,” Alana said. “Why are you in such a rush? Is something happening at work?”

Millie worked at a tech startup. More specifically, she owned a tech startup with two friends, after creating an app which had revolutionized online shopping. Their offices were on the fourth floor and at the speed their company kept evolving, they would outgrow them soon.

She ordered her lunch from our lovely waitress and then answered, “No. Work is fine. That’s not why I was late. I got distracted reading an article.”

“What type of article?” Blake asked.

“The gossip kind.”

“Do tell.” Alana’s eyes lit up.

Blake and I shared an amused look. We

didn't usually participate in their love of celebrity gossip, though we were keen to hear about the real people who worked in the building. We weren't mean or anything. Just curious.

"One of the Hills kids is getting married to a *deviant* heiress," Millie explained. "Since the parents were the ones to announce it, the experts are saying it's another arranged marriage. No one is sure if a merger is happening, or if the wedding serves another purpose."

Blake perked up. "One of the Hills? The Hills I work for?"

"Yes." Millie nodded enthusiastically. "In fact, not just you. It's one of the lawyer twins."

She and Blake turned expectantly to me and Alana, who gasped. "I didn't know anything. Ruby, did you?"

"No. Which one?"

Millie grabbed her phone and scanned an article too fast for me to catch any of the words. "Rune. Rune Hill."

Ears ringing, I stared blankly, not seeing my surroundings.

I couldn't have heard correctly, because if I did, it sounded a lot like Rune was getting

married. The same Rune I had just spent a weekend with. The same Rune who had slept with me knowing he had another woman waiting on the sidelines to become his wife.

I was a cheater.

A mistress.

Engagements didn't spring up out of nowhere. He knew about this, and he still had an affair with me.

I felt sick. Disgusting.

My thoughts racing, I was distantly aware of going through the motions as the conversation continued around me. Of giving minimal reactions to direct questions so as not to attract more attention to myself. Of laughing and nodding along as if I wasn't currently living through one of my worst nightmares. When our food arrived, I ate it mechanically. It tasted like ash today. It was usually really good. Something must be wrong in the kitchen.

After lunch, I returned to my desk on autopilot and stared at the blank screen. My mind hadn't quieted yet, all sorts of different thoughts crossing it at the same time. The public announcement could be a fluke. It could have been blown out of proportion by the

sensationalist media outlets. Millie could have read wrong.

I needed to see for myself.

The simple search yielded a multitude of results. I picked one at random and there it was.

Gabriel and Amaryllis Hill signed a joint press conference with James Goldberg announcing their children's engagement. The message was simple and tasteful, leaving no room for doubts. Rune Hill was marrying Clara Goldberg sometime in the future. The date wouldn't be announced until the time came, to preserve their privacy.

The food roiled in my stomach, threatening to come up, as I scanned article after article, all confirming the same thing. Some even included pictures of Rune at a restaurant, sitting across from a beautiful woman wearing a soft smile. Pictures from last night. Just the two of them. They looked good together, perfectly matched. The restaurant was romantic, the dim light warm. I couldn't see his face clearly in the photos, but it was undoubtedly him.

That woman didn't deserve to be lied to like this. But what did I know? Maybe she didn't care if hers was a marriage of convenience. Maybe she

had someone else too.

I closed all the tabs and deleted the websites from the browser history for good measure. I couldn't look at any of it anymore. The sadness...

No. My inner turmoil wasn't because I was sad. It wasn't.

Of course, Rune would marry a powerful *deviant* from an old family. Everyone knew they married each other to keep their powers strong and forge bonds unbreakable by *non-deviant* prejudice.

What I felt most of all was used.

And more than a little bitter.

I didn't want to have a relationship with Rune. That wasn't the main problem here. But because I didn't have the right family, the chance wasn't even within my reach. Not when my biological father had never acknowledged me. The piece of trash had done me a favor, but it had taken me years—and a lot of therapy—to accept it.

The *deviant* therapist had understood the nuance of being someone like me living in a world of mostly *non-deviants*. She had known how relationships between the wealthy and the poor invariably ended. And she had helped me

immensely dealing with my father's abandonment.

My mother had belonged to the wrong bloodline, and when she'd fallen pregnant, that sorry excuse of a man had left without a second glance. Her promising career, her future, had been cut off short. She'd seen opportunities she'd earned through her hard work denied, by influence of the family of the man she had loved and who she'd thought loved her back.

She had taught me that hard-learned lesson, which was one of the reasons why I'd never held any illusions of what my relationship with Rune could be. And why I didn't understand his need to lie to me. He didn't owe me any explanations, but I thought he respected me. I deserved at least that much.

More than anything, I was beginning to feel angry at the entire situation. So angry. I focused on that emotion. It was the only one he deserved from me.

Thankfully, Rune was away from the office today, and I wasn't at risk of crossing paths with him. I felt too raw, needed some time and space to settle my emotions before I could face him again.

For the rest of the day, I poured all my energy into work.

Rune called me on my phone at some point in the afternoon. I wasn't even slightly tempted to pick it up.

Nothing he could possibly say to me right now was worth hearing. And if he required work assistance, he could ask someone else. As we didn't share any cases, I wasn't compromising my professionalism.

I was focused on my work, completely curved over my desk, earphones on playing music to keep all my stray thoughts at bay, allowing me to focus on these contracts. I didn't notice Morrigan standing over me.

For a slip second, I thought it was Rune. But no. Those familiar eyes were bright and playful, not serious or scowling. Intense.

I plucked the earphones off.

"Sorry. Didn't see you there. Do you need something?" I was proud of myself for sounding normal, if only a little flat.

The way he regarded me, searching and guarded, I would think he knew something was up. But that could only be true if Rune had mentioned me. I didn't know how I felt about it.

Nothing.

I didn't feel anything.

Morrigan glanced at his watch. It was way past my working hours. "I think you're done for today. Want to grab a drink?"

The friendly commiseration sort of annoyed me. I didn't need to drown my emotions in alcohol.

Who was I kidding? Of course, I did.

And despite his unfortunate share of Rune's DNA, I liked Morrigan. He was my boss, but I could call him a friend as well.

"Yeah, I could use a drink," I finally decided.

Lifting my butt off the chair, I groaned and then stretched. I shouldn't have gone this long without getting up.

Luckily, Morrigan didn't comment on my theatrics while we left the office building and walked to a bar a couple of blocks away. We chose a booth and ordered drinks while chitchatting about work.

I liked Morrigan. Why couldn't I have gotten a crush on him instead of Rune? Maybe that was exactly my problem. I shouldn't have had a crush on either of them, let alone acted on it.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Morrigan

asked after a while, pulling a fresh fry out of the cute basket the waitress had deposited in front of us.

I lifted a brow. "I don't know what you mean," I said before downing my drink in one go. I knew exactly what he meant.

"If it serves as any sort of consolation, he's not exactly happy with the situation."

"I don't care if he's happy." I scoffed. "Or unhappy for that matter. What I don't like is being blindsided." I frowned, turning to Morrigan. "How did you know?"

It was Morrigan's turn to scoff. "You mean how could I possibly have guessed there was something going on between you two? Perhaps you should recall the time in my office last week when you two were eye-fucking right in front of me. It was painfully obvious."

For an entire week after meeting Rune at the club, I had been consumed by thoughts of Saturday night and what might happen if we crossed paths at the office. When I finally did, I was completely focused on Rune. It didn't even occur to me what that exchange would appear like from the outside.

"Of course, I had to ask him what was going

on.” He lifted a brow. “He also told me about last weekend.”

I hid my face in my arms on the tabletop. “You mean meeting up with Ginny Lawrence?” I asked, words muffled by my position. “It was purely work.”

Morrigan chuckled. “That was a good find, actually. Rune was pissed he didn’t catch up to her half-lies earlier.”

I straightened and stole one of his fries. “It’s a common failure of the man species. There’s a reason the damsel in distress act works so well most times.”

My phone rang. I briefly glanced at it before turning it facedown.

“Is that him?”

I stuffed my mouth with more fries. “I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“Is this going to be a problem at work?” Morrigan frowned, looking concerned. “You don’t usually work on the same projects, but the firm is very collaborative—”

I interrupted immediately, “I know that. I’ll be back to normal tomorrow. Give me tonight to feel my feelings,” I lifted my glass, “and by tomorrow I’ll be your favorite employee once

again.”

Morrigan grinned. “My favorite, uh?”

“Of course.” I winked.

After a much-appreciated subject change, we ordered more drinks and more food. We talked mostly about work, which I was always excited to do. It was a great time.

By the end of the night, his driver took both of us home, much to my happiness. I couldn’t even stand properly, let alone navigate public transportation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THURSDAY MORNING, I WOKE UP with possibly the worst hungover of my life. I hadn't even drunk that much. It wasn't fair. And I was determined to blame Rune for it.

When my phone started ringing with the alarm, I wanted to throw the damn thing across the room.

Today was going to be a miserable day. Just what I needed.

The shower helped with waking up but my head still pounded at the temples.

Because I wanted to feel empowered after

last night's pity party, I chose to wear a cute black dress and high heels. The knee length was perfectly respectable to sit at my desk all day. No one needed to see it. It was the effect it had on me and my confidence that I was most interested in.

I was going about my day, relieved with the normalcy, when Rune's assistance called me. Since I'd promised Morrigan I could be professional, I intended to deliver.

This time, when I entered Rune's office, he didn't immediately rise from behind his desk. I was glad for the barrier. It reminded me of the professional distance I needed to maintain from him.

Even though he was sitting back, he looked all but relaxed. Dark circles marred his handsome face and his hair was messy as if he'd been running his hands through it more often than usual.

Pierce had closed the door after letting me in, but it was completely unnecessary. I was determined to be done with this conversation as fast as possible.

"You wanted to see me?" I asked.

"Take a seat."

“I’m fine standing. Is there something you need assistance with, Mr. Hill?”

He sighed, sounding tired.

Seeing him like this tugged at my heartstrings. However, I reminded myself, he hadn’t bothered with the same concern when he’d blindsided me.

“I wanted to explain.” Rune’s gaze never wavered from mine. “She’s a family friend and we practically grew up together, but it doesn’t mean anything. It’s just a contract my family wants to settle. This isn’t about me. If you’d at least spoken with Morrigan—”

“I told Morrigan last night, I don’t care—”

Rune zeroed in on that statement, interrupting me before I could finish. “What do you mean, you were with Morrigan last night?”

His voice, low and with a dangerous undertone, was like a purr. And I loved feeling it against my naked skin. But not in the current situation. No, I wasn’t fond of it at all.

“This again?” I exploded. “I don’t have to inform you of who I spend time with. And I definitely don’t need your approval on who I’m friends with or when I go out for drinks after work.”

It was already more information than he deserved. I didn't owe him any explanations, but my mouth and my brain were apparently directly connected, and I my filter wasn't working.

Visibly relaxing back into his chair, Rune lifted his hands in a peacekeeping plead. "Neither of you said anything. I could have joined you."

My laugh was humorless and bitter. "What makes you think you would have been invited? Besides, you have a fiancée now. Your time is fully booked."

His eyes darkened, sending a shiver down my spine.

When he went to rise from the chair, I said, "Don't."

I didn't need his overwhelming presence to cloud my judgement.

He sat back down, furious. "I just told you, the engagement doesn't mean anything. It certainly doesn't change anything between us. I never thought you would be jealous over something insignificant like this."

"There is no us," I reminded him. "Last weekend was a once-only type thing."

“What if I don’t want it to be?”

This time, I was the one to approach him, losing control and leaning with my palms on his desk, pissed beyond reason.

“Are you going to keep fucking me until you walk down the aisle with your perfect princess?” I hissed. “And then what? After the wedding, are you going to be the perfect son and only fuck her for the rest of your life? I sure as fuck won’t be around to find out.”

I pulled back, needing distance from him.

Rune jumped out of his chair, holding me in place with a hand around my neck. His thumb caressed my pulse while his other hand touched my cheekbone, pushing back a strand of hair. His eyes locked on my lips with a dirty smirk.

“I’m going to keep fucking this dirty mouth for as long as I want to,” he dictated. “You know why? Because I’m obsessed with it, and even the threat of disownment from my family and the collapse of all I have ever worked towards isn’t enough to keep me away from you.”

My eyes widened at the audacity. The entitlement. As if my thoughts on the matter were of no consequence against his wishes.

But I never got a chance to come up with a

suitable answer. His mouth crashed down on mine, hard and angry and dominating. My own responded in kind, pouring into the kiss all the frustration and anger and hurt he'd caused, whiling him to understand.

The desk between our bodies created too much distance.

Of the same mind, Rune ordered, "Get over here."

I gasped for air. "Let me go."

With his hand still holding on to my throat, I couldn't go around the desk.

"No." Rune pulled back to stare at my eyes, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "You'll have to learn the hard way. I won't let you go that easily."

The words, the power plays we enjoyed, might have been empty of meaning outside of sex, but they still affected me. My core warmed, thawing off the icy fury which had settled since learning the happy news yesterday.

Biting my lower lip, Rune tightened his hold on my neck. Not enough to cut circulation or air flow, but the exact amount to make me feel it. To tell me he was in charge of my body. That he owned it. Temporarily.

"Crawl to me. Over the desk."

His hand never wavered even as I climbed on my knees, the skirt of my dress riding up.

“You’re going to pay for this one,” I threatened.

Though some of the effect might have been lost since I was on my hands and knees, doing exactly as he said. My chest heaved, my panties soaked with need.

His devilish smile confirmed my thoughts.

In response, I pushed his things off the desk as I went. He could pick them up later.

As I reached the edge, Rune lifted me off it, helping me lower my legs to sit before him.

His mouth was on me immediately, drinking my moans. Pushing my knees apart, Rune closed the distance between our bodies, crowding me against the smooth wood.

He kissed and bit and sucked on my neck, and I knew he was leaving marks for anyone to see.

“Stop that,” I snapped. “Don’t you dare.”

He chuckled and bit my shoulder. Hard.

I pushed him off me before he could do more damage, leaning back to push the suit jacket off his shoulders. When I moved on to the buttons of his shirt, Rune stopped me.

“Turn around,” he requested.

Wanting to feel more of his skin, but knowing the faster way to get what I wanted was to follow his lead, I allowed Rune to pull me to my feet and lower my zipper.

“Wait,” I said when he reached the middle of my back, eyes widening on the frosted glass wall I faced.

Rune paused, removing his hand from the zipper and trailing kisses down my neck instead.

“What is it”? He asked.

“The door isn’t locked.” I gasped.

His hand traveled up my inner thigh, dangerously close to my underwear.

“Pierce knows not to let anyone interrupt when you’re in here.”

“What do you mean?” I whimpered, moving against Rune’s finger which had found its way to the silky material of my underwear. “No one can see us like this.”

He circled my clit slow and teasing. “No one will see a thing. Trust me.”

My hesitation didn’t hold against his ministrations. I nodded, questioning my sanity while knowing it would be no use. Rune played my body as if he knew it better than I did. As if

he had explored every single inch. There was little I could do to rationalize it when I was completely entranced by the way he touched me.

Rune finished pulling my dress off, leaving me standing in my boss' office in my panties and bra and heels. I shivered. He turned me to face him, raking his eyes over my body from head to toe and back up again. His gaze was like a physical touch on my desire-sensitive skin. He was starving and I was his favorite meal on display for him to feast on.

My bra hit the floor somewhere by the desk as Rune descended on my chest with intention. He fondled and bit and kissed my boobs like a man on a mission. One I wasn't yet aware of. Only once I was squirming and pulling at his hair and pushing my thighs together in desperation did Rune release my sensitive flesh to move down and remove my panties.

Even through my pleasure-fogged brain I was distinctly aware of my nakedness in stark opposition to Rune's fully clothed body.

"Why do you always keep your clothes on?" I whined.

Rune ignored me, lifting me by the hips to once again sit on the desk. "Lean back," he

ordered, returning to his chair and situating himself between my things.

He barely gave me time to brace myself before he descended on my core. Aware of his tricks, and especially of my own reactions to them, I covered my mouth and bit my lips, preventing sound from escaping. It was almost impossible to contain when under the deliciousness of Rune's ministrations. The first orgasm hit me with barely any buildup. Rune slowed down as I shook against his mouth but he never stopped, kissing my thighs before returning to flutter his tongue against my clit.

"No more," I complained.

"One more. You can do it. Let me hear you."

He suckled on my clit and then descended to my opening, spearing his tongue inside as if consuming my arousal.

"We're at work," I reminded him, testily.
"Enough with the noise."

"Fine. Then give me a silent one."

I squirmed in place and attempted to pull away from his talented tongue and lips, but he had a solid hold on my thighs and soon I was coming again with a silent cry, gasping for air as my body spasmed on top of the hard wooden

surface.

Rune pulled away then, dragging his lips up my body to kiss me. The mingling taste of the two of us together was filthy.

I unbuttoned his shirt while devouring his mouth, carving my nails down his hard chest. When I reached for his belt, Rune took hold of my hands, pulling them behind my back to push up my breasts. Then, he continued to lavish them with attention. Even after two orgasms, I was a ball of need, and Rune appeared to be set on ignoring it.

“Enough,” I finally commanded, done with waiting for him to decide. “I need you.”

“Oh no.” Rune chuckled, a dangerous glint in his eyes. “You’re not getting my cock today. This is your reminder that you’re as obsessed with me as I am with you. I’m going to make you come over and over again, until you can’t take a step outside this office without thinking of me. Until you’re so desperate for my cock you will beg for it.”

“Bastard,” I gasped.

He chuckled against my tight nipple and I swore I could feel the vibration all over my entire body.

“I think my parents would object to that one.”

An indistinguishable sound left my lips, quickly forgotten as Rune finally speared two fingers inside me, hitting and rubbing at the correct spot. I came once again.

* * *

After an unquantifiable amount of time, I laid in Rune’s arms. Rune had wrapped me in his shirt while I fought to stay wake.

“What did you mean when you mentioned threats of disownment? You weren’t being literal, right?” I asked.

Rune’s hand which had been soothingly caressing my leg stilled. “You’re lucky, you know? You were born into a normal family and are free to make your own decisions about your life. Being born into this—world, it comes with a leash attached. My life isn’t my own. It belongs to the family first.”

My head rested on his shoulder as I drew shapes on his naked chest. “If you know all that, why do you try to push back then?”

Rune lifted a brow. “Have you met me? You think I roll over and do everything mom and dad

tell me to do?”

“You tried to refuse the engagement?” I hated how a note of hope slipped into my voice.

“I’ve been pushing against it for years. But I’ve run out of excuses and they know it. They pulled out the big guns and threatened me with my inheritance and the rest of my trust fund.” He grimaced. “It got ugly.”

“Why is it so important?” I didn’t know the rest of the Hills, but from talking with Rune over the weekend I gathered they were all very close. He clearly adored them. I wanted to understand why they would put such an important relationship in jeopardy.

“James Goldberg was basically the first person who accepted my dad into the fold of the rich and powerful, so to speak.” Rune sighed, as if he was reliving his father’s arguments. “When he started his company, my dad had money, but not generational wealth. He had worked his ass off for every penny. So you see, he got rich but he didn’t have access to certain circles. He could have all the money and power in the world, but it still didn’t earn him the respect of his mutuals. It took a long time to get to where we are today.”

I couldn’t imagine it. They weren’t

necessarily famous but all *deviants* knew who the Hills were. They were seemingly untouchable.

“James Goldberg was the key my dad needed,” Rune continued, resuming his soft touches on my calf. “His family is very old with generations of wealth and solid *deviant* powers. With a lot of small gestures and invites to events my dad wouldn’t otherwise attend, James showed the others he accepted him as his equal.”

The Hills weren’t known for their abilities like the Wellingtons.

“It sounds like your dad owes him a lot.”

“Yes, and their friendship has lasted for many years. Clara and I have known each other for a long time. We weren’t always close but we hung out a lot when we attended the same parties and events for the adults. We learned how to sneak out and make the most of it together.”

He clearly looked fondly back on those memories. I wondered what that would have been like. To know you had the world at your feet.

A question popped up in my mind, but I didn’t know if I should ask it. It ended up bursting out of me as I was still riding the high of my hormones.

“Does it have to be you?” I felt bad for the implication that I would rather someone else shouldered this responsibility. But this wasn’t the time to mince my words.

Rune kissed my temple. “Yes. It has to be me. Morrigan is already promised to another and the three of us were closest growing up. They think it’s the easiest match.”

I sighed. “You have an older brother though, right? Half-brother? Couldn’t he do it?”

“Yes, from my dad’s first marriage. But they barely know each other. And my parents would never ask that of him. He’s already paid his dues to the family.”

“He also had an arranged marriage?” I glanced up to see his profile as he stared into the distance.

“Kind of. It wasn’t planned. When he was younger, he hooked up with this girl and got her pregnant. She was from an affluent family. When she said she wanted to keep the baby, even though they were young, together the parents decided they would get married. The relationship never took off and they divorced after a couple of years. They’ve shared equal custody of my niece ever since.”

“And the younger one?” I asked, knowing it was stupid to keep insisting.

“I’m sorry.”

“What now?”

Rune glanced down, meeting my eyes with his intense ones. “Now, you will stop running from me and accept that the kind of chemistry we have isn’t just going to disappear. And agree to keep seeing me.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t make sense of the last demand. “You are engaged.”

“It’s a contract. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“You went to dinner with her.”

“I wanted to know her thoughts on the matter. If she would help me push back on this. But she is being very accepting.” A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Like me, she has always known this was her future and she made her peace with it.”

“Exactly.” I pulled back so I could face him fully even though I remained on his lap. I needed this little bit of connection before it was all over. “You are going to be her husband and I don’t share.”

He tightened his hands on me as if afraid I was going to leave at any moment. “Is that what you need? Exclusivity? Done. From now on there

is no one else for either of us.”

I scoffed. “Until when? Until the wedding day?”

Rune shook his head, cupping the side of my face. “Until we decide we’re done. Forget about the wedding. They announced it because they want to solidify the bond between the families, but it could be years before they put any real pressure on the actual ceremony. It doesn’t affect us.”

My thoughts were a mess. I could not believe I was actually considering this.

“What is it about you that always makes me cave? I hate it,” I whined.

“I love it.” His thumb caressed my cheekbone. “Does that mean you agree?”

“Yes. I agree.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

AFTER THE MATTER OF THE engagement was settled, I felt more centered. I didn't have time to question the sanity of my decision to have an exclusive physical relationship with Rune Hill. Instead, I focused on the enormous amount of work currently on my plate.

We spent the next weekend together, and I was yet again surprised by how well we got along and how easy it was to share the same space. With the exception of Sunday lunch with my family and Monday dinner with my roommates, I spent the rest of my time with Rune. The only

thing I didn't keep up with was clubbing with Jamie and the rest of our friends. And I was fine with that. I texted with Jamie and the others occasionally, but they didn't insist much when I told them I wouldn't join them yet another weekend. To be completely honest, staying in naked with Rune was much more appealing to me. And we did. A lot. All weekend.

We also worked and shared our cases with each other, providing feedback and brainstorming. Rune showed me his favorite books from his collection and, since I was curious, I asked him for a recommendation. He was eager to loan me one. Cooking together wasn't as peaceful. For some reason, we always ended up naked and almost messed up our meals more than once.

Despite all this, I was confident in our ability to maintain a certain emotional distance and carry on with the relationship with no expectations.

The following Saturday, this conviction was put to the test. We were currently driving to the Hamptons, to his family home, where his parents were hosting a get together. I was about to meet his family. All of them, by the sound of it. And I

was terrified.

Sitting on the passenger seat of Rune's car, I adjusted the hem of my dark burgundy cocktail dress, questioning my choice.

Rune's hand slid on top of my thigh, rubbing his thumb reassuringly. I hadn't even realized I'd been nervously tapping my foot and allowing my trepidation to show.

"Relax." Rune glanced over with a small smile. "What's the worst that can happen?"

"Let's see." I counted on my fingers. "Your family not liking me. Someone finding out about us. Me ending up without a job. Possibly blacklisted as well. And kicked out. Do you want me to keep going?"

Rune chuckled. I wasn't exactly kidding.

"I didn't know you had a flare for the dramatic. Even if my family found out, no one is firing you."

I held my tongue. He could promise me all he wanted, but I knew how these things worked. I had heard the stories all my life.

The house at the end of the driveway was magnificent. White pillars framed the front door and the siding was fashioned out of stone in different tones of grey. The sun reflected on the

many windows, and I knew it would be wonderfully warm inside.

I felt tiny standing before this behemoth of luxury architecture, and once again my heart pounded with the creeping doubt of the wisdom of my presence here today.

Rune parked in the packed circular driveway, next to a fountain. A freaking fountain. I swallowed a nervous giggle as I climbed out of the car.

“Finally.” Morrigan appeared out of nowhere, making me jump. “I’ve been waiting for you. What took you so long?”

“Why were you waiting for us?” I asked as Rune rounded the car and greeted his brother in one of those manly handshakes with a half-hug.

The brothers shared a look.

“So the two of you don’t arrive by yourselves,” Morrigan explained. “We don’t want to draw too much attention to this.” Morrigan gestured vaguely between Rune and I.

I was glad they had considered it.

“Let’s go in,” Morrigan said. “I’m starving.”

The interior was exactly what I had expected and at the same time there was no preparing me for this. It was as if I had stepped inside a house

photoshoot. All the furniture and decorations were perfectly aligned and color coded in light, sand tones.

“Can I take your coats?” An older man in a dark, impeccable uniform asked us.

After handing over our coats and thanking the nice man —butler? — I followed Rune and Morrigan across a living room to exit to the garden where we found the rest of the guests. They didn’t even pause to allow me to gawk at their house. To them, this was all normal. It didn’t cross their minds how I could be freaking out.

Outside, more people in dark uniforms meandered among the party to serve drinks and appetizers. I had been in their place many times, serving at my mom’s events, but never one of this caliber.

Seeing how everyone was dressed up, I felt more confident in my choice of dress. Most men didn’t wear ties, but they were all in suits. And the women were clad in a mix of dresses and pants, all of them exuding elegance.

“Are you sure it’s ok for me to be here?” I had to ask once again.

It was Morrigan who answered. “I would

have invited you anyway. As a coworker, you were due for one. My assistant Amanda and her husband and kids have come a couple of times. Same with Rune's assistant and other associates. Your friend Marie included." Morrigan chuckled.

I nodded, grateful for the reassurance, and finally taking in the extension of grass which turned into sand and the waves crashing in the distance. "This place is gorgeous."

"Thank you, dear." A woman in her fifties stepped up to them, smiling softly. Amaryllis Hill, their mother.

She was followed by a younger woman. Someone I recognized immediately.

My first instinct was to step away from Rune, but I was being flanked by both brothers, with no space to subtly retreat. It would have brought more attention to myself.

"Thank you for coming, my sweet boys."

They each kissed their mother's cheek, with Rune rumbling, "Like you gave us a chance not to come."

My lips twisted.

She met my eyes and I didn't know what to do.

Thankfully, Morrigan stepped in with the

introductions, not allowing the silence to stretch. "This is Ruby Byrne. Associate attorney at the firm. Ruby, meet our lovely mother."

We shook hands.

"Thank you for having me, Mrs. Hill," I said.

"Please, call me Amaryllis." Her smile was kind and welcoming, putting me at ease. "Welcome to our home. You probably haven't met Clara Goldberg. She is a family friend."

Amaryllis gestured to the side and Clara and I shook hands as well. I held on to my polite smile as if my life depended on it. Which it kind of did.

"Clara, why don't you and Rune go say hi to your father?"

A muscle feathered in Rune's jaw, but he didn't voice a complaint as he followed his mother's instructions. He glanced back, meeting my eyes. "I'll see you later."

"Let's go," Morrigan said. "I'll show you around and introduce you to everyone."

* * *

"I need a break, Ruby." Morrigan sat down on one of the couches facing the ocean. Cocktail in hand, he had commandeered my attention and

taken me to the quieter part of the garden, away from the other attendees. The scenery was mesmerizing, with the sound of the waves as background. All I needed was a cozy blanket and I could sit here for hours.

I chuckled, taking the seat next to him. “I could use a break as well. There’s just so many people. It’s a little overwhelming.”

He scoffed. “You are not overwhelmed. You’re a natural at networking and everyone is absolutely in love with you already.”

True to his word, Morrigan had introduced me to the rest of his family. It was hard to keep up with all the new names and faces, but I did my best. I was relieved to see other partners from the firm with their spouses, confirming my presence wasn’t at all weird.

What had surprised me the most was how nice their family and guests were being, and how whiling they were to share some interesting conversations. Overall, it was an excellent networking opportunity. Before attending today, I’d been vaguely aware these types of things happened but seeing it in person was still a wild experience.

“There you are, lovebirds.” A gorgeous

brunette sat next to Morrigan, stealing a sip from his drink. "Have you been hiding from me?"

Morrigan put an arm around his sister Garnet's neck, ruffling her hair without ruining the styling. "If I was hiding from you, you wouldn't find me. And lovebirds?" He lifted a brow.

Dove, Garnet's friend, chimed in, sitting next to me. "Well, you two look cute together. Are you dating?"

I met Morrigan's gaze. We both erupted in laughter at the same time.

"We're not dating," I clarified once I was able to regain my composure.

Morrigan rolled his eyes at his sister. "Are you bored without the rest of your friends around?"

I was surprised at how many people had made similar remarks this afternoon, considering Morrigan was also engaged. No one appeared to care. It was a bit strange. Maybe there was more to the story than what Rune had mentioned.

Garnet narrowed her eyes on Morrigan and then me. "I'm keeping an eye on you two."

Morrigan shrugged. "Do that. There's nothing to see. We're friends."

I chuckled at their sibling antics, but the laughter died when I found Rune talking to his older brother. Next to Clara.

She hadn't left his side since we arrived. And I wanted to trust Rune meant it when he said we were exclusive, but I was also aware all of it could end at any moment because of one woman.

Rune found me watching and frowned.

I peeled my eyes away, not wanting him to guess what I had been thinking.

When I turned my back to the rest of the party, I noticed Dove had been staring in the same direction. She jumped and gave me a small smile.

"How long are you staying in town?" Morrigan asked Dove.

Her dark red hair turned a lovely shade under the rich light of the setting sun.

"Just this weekend."

"But you will be here for the holidays, right?" Garnet jumped in.

"Yes. I'll be back in a couple of weeks."

Morrigan turned to me. "They both love old stuff and restoration. Dove has been working in some fancy company in Porto, Portugal."

"Wow. That's amazing," I cheered.

“Thanks.” Dove’s cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink. “He’s exaggerating. I’m just an intern and it’s almost over anyway.”

“It better be.” Garnet beamed in excitement. “I think I found the perfect building for us.”

“Are you two ever going to tell the rest of us what your plans are?” Morrigan complained.

“Nope. Not until we work out some stuff.”

Morrigan crossed his arms, frowning.

I chuckled. I was glad I came.

* * *

“There you are.” Rune spoke into my ear as I grabbed a refreshment, taking another small break from mingling.

I had met Julian’s ex-wife, Sarah and their daughter Beatrice, who everyone called Bee. She was hilarious and full of energy. Rune’s family had surpassed my expectations. They teased each other and played around, but they were also interested in each other’s lives and genuinely caring.

And they had extended that same interest to me. They had asked me about my work and ambitions and my family. They never allowed me to feel out of place, and it was greatly thanks

to Morrigan. I owed him for never leaving my side when I was sure he had better things to do than babysit me.

Now however, being next to Rune, I didn't care about the party anymore. I peeked over his shoulder to make sure no one was paying attention to us. He was standing a bit too close to me, but from a distance we might just look like two coworkers having a friendly chat.

"Having fun?" I asked, happy to note none of my insecurities regarding Clara Goldberg hanging from his arm all afternoon had slipped into my voice.

She was the only dark point of the day. And I was almost reluctantly certain the woman was just as lovely and kind as her peers. I was glad to have only briefly interacted with her, which I was almost certain was Rune's doing. I couldn't face her knowing I was sleeping with her fiancé. The thought still left a weird taste in my mouth, even after all of Rune's reassurances and my understanding of the situation.

"Are you kidding me?" Rune reacted to my question as if I had asked him to run naked through the party. "I'm in excruciating pain. I need a break from all this. Come with me

inside?”

I bit my lip. “Won’t people notice we’re gone?”

“Morrigan can come up with something if anyone asks. But we can say I was showing you around. There’s nothing wrong with that.” His tone of voice told me he was thinking of other things that were indeed wrong. My stomach flipped at the prospect. Maybe we could escape early and go back to his place soon.

CHAPTER NINE

AS SOON AS WE WALKED INSIDE, out of sight of guests and servers alike, Rune took my hand, leading me to the massive staircase.

“Why do you work as a lawyer when you have all of this?” I couldn’t keep in the question any longer. I had never seen this level of luxury in my entire life and couldn’t even imagine what it would be like to live like this.

Rune glanced over his shoulder, pulling me up the stairs after him. “Trust me, the parties and gatherings and glamour all get pretty old after a while. There’s only so much entertainment to be

had before you start stretching those limits.”

“I guess that explains the stories of heirs and heiresses turning to the wild side.”

“Precisely.”

“How did you end up as a lawyer though?”
He could have chosen anything to do with his life, yet he had chosen a job which required such long hours and not a lot of room for big profits. He could have built a business or simply worked on investing his money. I wanted to know why he chose to work for others.

At the top of the stairs, Rune led me through a long corridor with closed doors on both sides and a big window at the end.

“Growing up, we all volunteered at my mom’s charity. Seeing her work and how hard it was to find lawyers willing to devote their time, mostly for free, I decided I was going to be available to her and the people she helps.”

“What’s the charity’s focus?” I asked.

He opened one of the doors towards the middle of the corridor and gestured for me to enter first.

“She does a lot. My mom and her team help other mothers who want to build their careers but struggle with all the responsibilities already

in their plates. Some women who used to be stay at home moms and leave those relationships struggle to get back into the work force in their preferred fields because of gaps in their resumes. The charity provides childcare in the city which can be extremely expensive. They also aid *deviants* who suffer discrimination when searching for jobs. And they have scholarships for kids from poorer families.”

“That’s amazing.” If they accomplished even half of what Rune was claiming they had a huge impact in these people’s lives.

I was momentarily distracted from the wholesome conversation. I was mesmerized by being able to see yet another space of his.

“No childhood bedroom?” I asked, slightly disappointed.

The room was amazing, with huge windows facing the sea. Though not very lived-in, the space had been decorated with Rune in mind. It was classical and elegant yet simple.

“Sorry to disappoint.” Rune grinned. “This house is fairly new. My parents bought it after they retired and permanently moved out here. My sister Noor kept the brownstone where we grew up in the city and my parents traded the

previous vacation home we had. But I don't think it will be long until my mom sells this one too."

I gasped. "What do you mean? This house is gorgeous."

Rune sat on a couch under one of the windows, his arms splayed on the back showing off the expansion of his chest. "I think she has plans to buy a bigger property and build homes for each of us. We're all adults and will eventually have our own families. She wants us to have our own space while staying relatively close."

I nodded as if I understood, but this thought process was way out of my tax bracket. Instead of lingering on that thought, I roamed around the room, stopping by the mantle where pictures were displayed of all the kids together having fun and doing group activities during what I assumed was summer break. He was so cute. Everyone else had changed too much for me to identify them.

Before I could comment, Rune turned me around and kissed me.

He kissed me like he had been waiting all day to do it. Like it had been as painful for him as it had been for me to be at the same place, with the same people, but unable to touch and talk freely.

I looped my arms around his neck, stretching to bridge the remaining distance even my high heels couldn't reach. I was addicted to his taste, his touch, his body. It was crazy how in the span of a couple of weeks I had gotten comfortable with talking to him, hanging out, sharing how our days went after the long work hours.

I knew I should be more freaked out and maybe even maintaining more distance between us. Being sucked into Rune's orbit was dangerous but I was powerless to stop it.

I was on a free fall and I didn't know how long I had before I hit the ground.

Rune kissed down my neck, pulling the strap of my dress to the side to reveal more of my naked skin.

"Too bad we can't be gone for long," Rune said against the base of my throat. "I would love to lick you up right now and see how wet you are. While we're hiding out in my room, everyone is outside waiting for us."

I moaned.

Rune covered my mouth. "Shh. No noise. We don't want my poor mother to come looking for us and hear more than she bargained for."

He guided me to the window and turned me

to face outside.

“Look at them down there. They don't know I'm about to fuck you while you watch them.”

I bit hard on my lip to hold back my sounds, cursing him. He knew exactly how to tease me.

As I braced my hands on the windowsill, Rune lifted my dress and wasted no time pulling down my thong. His fingers dragged back up my thighs and I shivered. It was insane how ready and needy I was with such minimal preparation. He reached my center and rubbed me. Even though I couldn't see him, I could feel his fingers becoming instantly wet.

Voices from downstairs drifted up. Rune's family and friends were chatting and laughing and drinking and eating, completely oblivious to what was happening upstairs. All any of them had to do was glance up, and Rune and I would be exposed.

“What's making you this wet?” Rune rubbed his cock against me. As my focus had been on his fingers, I'd completely missed him undoing his pants. “Is it the thought of getting caught, or is it watching them go on, oblivious to what's happening up here?”

“Rune,” I whined, lifting my hips against his

hardness.

He entered me slowly, teasing me, stretching me to accommodate him.

After having sex with him this many times, the novelty should have worn off. Instead, it was quite the contrary. With every time we did it, we learned something new about each other. We knew exactly what to do or say. Where to touch and not to. It was getting better and better with time. It really wasn't fair to have this kind of chemistry with someone I had no future with.

"Hurry up," I demanded, wanting him to move and get it over with.

Not a lot of people remained at the party at this hour. Someone was bound to wonder where we went.

Rune pulled almost all the way out, forcing a cry from me. I did my best to muffle it but wasn't very successful. Then, he slammed into me with brutal force. I bit my lip. Hard.

"If you want me to be quiet, you have to tone it down," I warned him.

"Make up your mind, love." I could practically hear the smirk in his voice.

Standing in this position, bent over the windowsill, I had to use both hands to brace

against the punishing rhythm of Rune's thrusts to avoid being slammed against the glass. I couldn't cover my own mouth. Meanwhile, Rune pretended not to hear me, continuing to fuck me hard and fast, eliciting scream after scream from me. I was as quiet as I could, but if someone was to walk down the corridor, there was no mistaking what was happening inside the room.

"Don't close your eyes. Watch them," Rune ordered.

I hadn't even realized I had closed them. I tried in vain to control my reactions, focusing on my breathing and staying upright, but the delicious burn and stretch of Rune's cock was impossible to ignore.

Rune pushed my legs wider for him and played with my clit. I came with a strangled cry. I was a mess as Rune continued to pound into me over and over. A long, satisfied groan announced Rune's orgasm.

Kissing my shoulder, he pulled out shortly after, making me wince. He gathered me in his arms and sat me down on the bathroom vanity. Again. I rolled my eyes.

The silence was comfortable as we regained our breath and cleaned up.

Afterward, we stood side by side in front of the mirror, grins stretching our faces.

“We look like we just had a good tumble,” I joked.

Rune pulled me closed and kissed my brow. “Let’s go back before my mother sends out the search party.”

* * *

When we emerged out to the garden once again, the sun was setting behind the house, painting the landscape in oranges and reds.

“There you are.” Morrigan startled us both and we jumped apart. “Oh, you don’t have to look so guilty. It’s just me.”

I punched his arm. “Don’t scare me like that.”

“I’m sorry.” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

“Rune. Can you come here for a second?” Noor, his older sister, asked.

He frowned, clearly not wanting to leave my side, but he went. His hand grazed my fingers and I smiled.

Morrigan continued his whiny rant as if we hadn’t been interrupted. “I’m the one who is single as fuck and doesn’t have anyone to sneak away with and fuck like rabbits at all times of the

day.” He whispered the last part so only I could hear.

I rolled my eyes and pulled Morrigan with me to the refreshments table. I was parched.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to leave you alone.”

“You promised to stay by my side the entire time.” Morrigan crossed his arms, acting like a kid.

I shook my head and then shivered. With the sun setting, the air was turning chilly, especially after being inside where it had been much warmer.

“Here.” Morrigan handed me his suit jacket. “Wear it and don’t leave my side and I’ll forgive you for liking my brother better.”

Looping my arm through his, I leaned closer and spoke as softly as possible. “Just because I like his cock better, doesn’t mean I like him better.”

It was a little risky to say something that outrageous to a coworker. However, since I was sleeping with his brother, I had already crossed the lines of propriety anyway. And I was also aware there were no secrets between Rune and Morrigan.

Morrigan’s eyes lit up. He doubled over,

laughing hard. He even wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. Across the lawn, his family members glanced at us surreptitiously, confused by the outburst.

“What’s so funny?” Rune reappeared, eyes narrowed on us. I felt like we were two kids in the principal’s office, being reprimanded.

Morrigan and I glanced at each other and burst out laughing even harder. Rune made it worse when he started to scowl.

Clara joined us, dimming some of my mood. “You two would make such a cute couple.”

Rune shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants. “They aren’t a couple.”

She closed her mouth, her eyes jumped between the three of us, clearly confused at Rune’s reaction.

Amaryllis walked over, taking Rune’s arm. “Hey, kids. I’m getting cold. Why don’t we move inside?”

After everyone agreed, she led us to a sitting room big enough to comfortably sit the entire group.

I handed back his jacket to Morrigan. I didn’t need it inside. Rune nodded in approval, tempting me to take it back just to mess with

him. Morrigan must have noticed the same thing I did as he was hiding a snicker. Rune was acting territorial.

While Rune took an armchair next to his oldest brother Julian, I sat with Morrigan. The couch was extremely comfortable, and if I was more relaxed, I probably would have fallen asleep right there. Rune had worn me out and while I was extroverted and didn't mind interacting with people, this afternoon had been quite intense.

The dad, Gabriel, shared another couch with Noor. The two of them were deep in conversation, their voices soft so as not to disturb the rest of the room.

"Where did Bee go?" Their middle sister Adeline asked Julian. I hadn't talked much with her, but I got the sense she didn't take easily to strangers. Like everybody else, she had been nice and welcoming though.

"She left with her mom. It's her week," Julian answered. "Didn't she say goodbye?"

"No." Adeline pouted.

"I'm sure she forgot. She is at that age where only her friends and her phone are important."

Adeline chuckled. "Oh it's fine. I

understand.”

“What about Garnet?” Julian asked. “I think I saw her leave, but we barely had a chance to speak today.”

“Garnet and Dove left to take advantage of the last few hours before Dove has to leave for Portugal again,” Morrigan explained.

“We’re almost all here,” Noor commented. “Why didn’t Phoenix come?”

“He has exams and needs to study” Amaryllis said.

“Exams. Probably a party.” Morrigan coughed into his fist.

His mom shook her head, amusement shining in her eyes.

“Now that most people present are family, tell me about this case and going against the Dumont group.” The dad asked, eyeing me with a silent question.

Rune could answer the question vaguely and everyone would be informed I was not to be trusted with sensitive information.

“Ruby knows everything.” Rune was quick to dispel his worries. “In fact, she is the reason I even have the right details. My client wasn’t exactly forthcoming when she came to me.”

His father nodded, giving me his approval. I was oddly touched and pleased though I had only met him today.

Rune explained the situation without giving away all the nitty gritty details to preserve client confidentiality.

"I don't like to see you going against that man," Gabriel said. "He is vindictive and has friends in high places."

"I'm not afraid of him. I want to get one of the Wellingtons to project what Ginny saw. It should be enough to force him to settle with a comfortable amount and keep things out of court and the media."

"The Wellingtons. Another bunch I don't like."

Rune's lips twitched. "They have their uses. We don't need to befriend them to hire them."

"I think you shouldn't be too confrontational in this one," Gabriel advised his son. "I know you like to make a statement with your cases, but this one has the potential to harm you more than do you good."

Rune nodded, rubbing his eyes.

"You look tired, honey," Amaryllis said. "Are you getting enough rest?"

Morrigan coughed into his hand again, but this time no words could be made out. I side eyed him, staring daggers at his smirking face, silently warning him to shut his mouth.

“He’s probably overworked,” Morrigan said, instead of poking at him. “He takes on too many cases at the same time and then doesn’t have enough help. You need another assistant.”

Rune gave Morrigan a cheeky grin. “Or I’ll convince Ruby to leave corporate and she can continue to do her sleuthing in case I get lied to by clients again.”

I snorted. “You would have figured it out eventually. It was all in the timeline. You didn’t need to do any sleuthing of your own. And there’s no way you can pry me away from the fun of corporate.”

“Fun?” Rune’s eyes went round, incredulous.

Morrigan laughed and extended a hand for a fist bump. I didn’t leave him hanging.

“Yes,” Morrigan confirmed. “Most of your cases are depressing. We get to dig up people’s secrets.”

“You look at contracts all day,” Rune countered.

“It’s fun.” I agreed with a grin.

Rune rolled his eyes. "You're both crazy."

Adeline interjected. "And what enjoyable things have you uncovered lately?"

Morrigan chuckled. "The merger we've been working on has been particularly juicy."

"So far, we have found two secret love children and one mistress," I said.

"And I might be adding another mistress to the count next week," Morrigan added.

"Really?"

"Yes. I'm still following the money trail but the math isn't adding up."

"Awesome," I concluded.

Rune who rolled his eyes.

I didn't know what passed between the twins, but a pillow flew from Rune to Morrigan. He grabbed it before it hit him in the face and then returned fire.

"Asshole," Rune mumbled.

No one else batted an eye. These types of interactions must have been a normal occurrence.

"Well, we should get going," Clara's father said.

Everyone rose from their seats to see them off. Rune shook the older man's hand and

followed him out while they spoke quietly.

And then it was only me and the Hills. I might have been well-received, but I was still very much aware I was out of place among them.

Amaryllis took a seat, smiling at her children. “You can all stay and sleep here. It’s getting late to drive back to the city.”

Morrigan tumbled to the couch with a groan. “Yeah, I think I’m staying.”

“Julian and I have a meeting tomorrow morning. I think I would rather be in the city already instead of facing traffic.” Noor explained and Julian agreed.

Rune returned with his jacket on and mine on his arm.

“What about you, dear?” Mom asked him. “Don’t you want to stay the night?”

“I’m going back. I’m Ruby’s ride.”

Taking the hint, I rose to my feet.

Rune extended the jacket as if he was going to help me put it on. I took it from his hands before he could.

To me, that gesture applied to dates and relationships, not coworkers.

I also noticed the confusion going around the room.

We had been careful not to be seen arriving together only for him to blurt it out upon leaving. I had even spent all afternoon glued to Morrigan's side. It hadn't been much of a sacrifice, Morrigan was funny and I enjoyed our conversations.

However, I would have loved to know what was going through their heads. The parents were clearly having some nonverbal conversation from across the room.

Morrigan was smirking as he hugged me goodbye, patting Rune in the back.

Amaryllis surprised me with a hug as well. "It was nice to meet you, Ruby. Come back anytime."

"Thank you. It was lovely meeting all of you."

CHAPTER TEN

✨🍆✨: My office. Bring your bag with you.

The message sent a thrill through me. I wasn't too proud to admit I practically sprinted to his office immediately. Despite having no idea what he had in mind, I knew I'd enjoy it immensely as always.

Pierce told me go in as soon as I reached his desk.

"You wanted to see me?" I asked, closing door at my back.

“Lock the door.”

Rune’s face was serious, unreadable. However, his eyes shone with mischief. And heat.

My body tingled with anticipation.

I did as he asked and stood still, waiting for his next order. I loved it when we played these games.

He pushed his chair back and widened his legs. Even from across the room I could see the tension in his shoulders.

“Do you need something?” I asked.

The corner of his mouth lifted. “Yes. I have something I need. Come here.”

I sauntered over, loving the way his eyes ate up every single one of my steps. I left my purse on one of the chairs and stopped next to the desk, barely out of reach.

Rune rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, revealing veiny forearms. My mouth dried. He was so effortlessly sexy.

“Did I tell you to stop there?”

I smirked. “You weren’t very specific.”

“Did you decide to be a brat today? I’m not in the mood to be patient,” he warned.

If he thought to use it as a deterrent, then the joke was on him. My insides warmed up and heat

pooled on my already wet panties. I loved it when his voice was low and growly. And I loved it even more when he was rough with me. I was addicted to him in all his forms apparently.

“Allow me to be clear then.”

He leaned forward, took my arm and guided me to stand between his spread legs. My shoes were flat so I didn't tower over him. He trailed his fingers up my legs, stopping at the hem of my skirt. I forced myself to stay still. It was arduous work, but I wanted to see what he would do next.

Rune kissed me. Deep and dirty and hard. His hands tangled up in my hair to hold me in place. His tongue speared in and out of my mouth as if he was fucking it.

I moaned. I was needy and greedy for more.

“On your knees.”

I obeyed the order before my brain even had time to process the words.

“You're so pretty when you do what I tell you.”

I ran my nails down his thighs. His bulge was already big and straining against his pants. It seemed to move when I touched him as if even his cock was eager for more.

Rune undid the top button on his pants and

lowered the zipper. He pulled his cock out of his boxer shorts and pumped it with a tight fist.

Unable to resist the scene before me, I leaned forward and took over for him. I took him in my hand and watched as the tip leaked. Then, I licked the bead of pre-come.

Rune sighed. It was as if he had been waiting all day for this and he was finally realizing his wish. Well, I was there to deliver.

I took him into my mouth, sucking shallowly at first as I got used to his considerable size. Then, I took him deeper, slowly getting more of him each time.

His sounds of pleasure urged me on.

“So eager to suck my cock.” Rune cupped my face. His thumb brushed the side of my mouth where it stretched to accommodate him. “Are you going to take me down your pretty throat?”

I moaned around his cock and he cursed.

His hand moved to my hair. He wrapped it around his fist and used it as leverage to guide my head up and down his cock, setting the pace and the deepness too. Heat pooled between my legs. My hips moved of their own accord.

“Tap my leg it it’s too much, ok?” Rune asked.

I peered up and met his eyes. He was feral. I nodded as much as I could.

Having been given permission to let go of his leash, Rune took me deeper. I gagged. He eased up a bit and then did it again. I breathed deep from my nose and allowed Rune to fuck my throat raw.

My eyes watered and poured down my face. Spit dripped down my chin. The degradation was absolute. I loved it.

My core ached. My clit pulsed. I had never been this turned on in my entire life. And all because I was being used like a toy.

I undid the button of my pants with my free hand, needing some sort of relief even if it wasn't by the hand I desired.

"No touching yourself," Rune ordered.

I complained against his dick and in response he took me deeper, choking me.

I continued to mentally curse him every time he released a satisfied sound, my insides clenching with the need to be filled.

"I don't even know where I want to come. If I want to paint your gorgeous face or if I'd rather watch you suck it all off and swallow it greedily like the dirty slut you are."

I moaned against his cock, almost choking when he pushed forward.

His movements turned frantic and I knew he was close. I sucked hard and he came down my throat. I gobbled it all up greedily like the slut he had called me. Sometimes I didn't recognize myself when I was with him.

Rune released my hair and sat back, breathing hard. I loved watching him go limp from pleasure like this. It filled me with a deep sense of satisfaction even though my clit still throbbed and my throat was as scratchy as if I had been screaming.

Reaching down, Rune pulled me to his lap. He caressed my back and arms and then repositioned my left leg to straddle his lap, facing away from him. The button on my pants already undone, Rune reached inside to finally touch my core. I whimpered, too sensitive. He speared two fingers inside me and rubbed his palm on my clit. In my wound-up state, I came hard and fast despite the simple rhythm.

He kissed my temple tenderly, cleaning away the remnants of my tears with his other hand.

"Thank you. You did so good."

I smiled. "Fuck. You're a sadist."

He chuckled, a soft intimate sound. “Don’t pretend like we’re not the same brand of messed up.”

And that was exactly what scared me the most about this entire situation. It was too easy to forget this relationship wasn’t supposed to last.

The desk phone rang. Rune decided to ignore it, but it immediately restarted ringing.

“It could be important,” I pointed out.

I didn’t want to rupture the bubble yet, but we had stolen too much time already. Someone would be missing us soon.

I leaned forward to see the extension on the little screen.

“It’s Pierce. Didn’t you say he wouldn’t bother you if it wasn’t important?”

Rune groaned. “Fine.” He picked up the phone and listened, his jaw tightening with each passing second.

“What is it?” I asked once he set down the receiver. “Bad news?”

“Clara is here.”

I froze, my eyes widening. “She’s here?” I jumped out of his lap and turned accusingly to him. “What is she doing here?”

He ran a hand down his face. “I don’t know.”

He sounded tired all of a sudden.

I looked down at myself. I couldn't go out there and face her like this.

Rune rose and approached as if he meant to touch me. I couldn't have his hands on me right now. I'd never been stupid when it came to men, but apparently with this one, I was.

He sighed as if I was the one disappointing him.

"You can use my bathroom to freshen up."

I took the chance to flee from his presence. At least he had the foresight to ask me to bring my bag. He was always prepared. I couldn't leave his office resembling a used toy. Even if that was exactly what I was.

He hadn't counted on his fiancé though. And now she was here. If I was lucky, he'd take her somewhere else, far away from me, and I wouldn't have to see her.

I took my time in the bathroom, cleaning my face and then reapplying my makeup. My hair started off as a tangled mess which I brushed into smoothness with my fingers. After I was done pulling myself together, I looked in the mirror, happy to find all traces of him gone. I was myself again, not his plaything.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Rune was sitting on one of the chairs, staring into the distance. I didn't think I'd ever seen him so still and not working. Usually, when he wasn't interacting with people, he was reading something on his phone or typing. Now he looked almost lost.

I shook my head. I shouldn't be romanticizing the man who I'd been having sex with and who also happened to be engaged to another woman. Yes, that was what I should remember.

"Did you leave her waiting this entire time?" I asked, surprising him out of his reverie.

Rune glanced up, frowning. His eyes searched mine for something I didn't know. My own face displayed only the blankness of professionalism.

"I'll get going," I said.

"Stay."

I pursed my lips to rein in my temper.

"No. I will not be a witness to this no doubt delightful conversation."

Rune prowled to me. For a moment, I was afraid he was going to object or make some other claim of not letting me go. However, he reached

behind me and opened the door for me. I stood frozen for a second. Then I step out.

“Ruby, hi,” Clara said with a smile.

“Hello, Clara. I have to get going. Excuse me.”

I didn’t want to hate a woman I didn’t know, or to remember how lucky she was to have been born with her status. With her bloodline. With her power.

I’d never needed those things. I’d never wanted them. And I didn’t recognize this person who wondered what would have happened if my father had married my mom when she fell pregnant. I hated how Rune had me thinking like this.

I wasn’t the kind of person who could claim him and I would never be. And the fact that I had to keep reminding myself of it was yet more proof of my stupidity.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FOLLOWING DAYS, I DID MY best to avoid Rune. Work took over my life and I was glad.

My head was a mess.

My feelings were even worse.

I wasn't even supposed to have any of those. This hadn't been part of the plan. I was off kilter and confused. And sad. I was mourning this relationship.

Morrigan clearly wanted me to open up to him. He often asked how I was doing when we were alone, the question loaded with deeper meaning.

But I didn't want to share what existed between Rune and I with him. In a way, it almost felt like a betrayal. Our messed-up relationship should stay between us. If I wasn't ready to talk to Rune, I shouldn't be pulling anyone else into it.

Especially Morrigan, who was as close to Rune as I was to my own sister. I didn't want to put him in a position of picking sides, or taking whatever I told him to Rune without proper context. I enjoyed my relationship with Morrigan as a separate thing. We talked about work and hobbies and other random stuff, but never our emotions and worries.

If I wanted to talk about those things, I'd go to my sister. Maybe that was the missing piece. What I needed to feel centered once again. I hadn't been spending enough time with my family lately.

* * *

I left work slightly earlier than usual and went to my mom's office. Being by her side while she worked reminded me of my childhood.

Back then, she had been building up her business, working from our tiny apartment. I would sit beside her and watch or play, absorbing

the comfort of her presence. In the following years, the ritual remained the same. Even after the business grew and took off. After she got married and our lives significantly improved. Whenever I had a problem, I would sit beside her while she planned her events.

When I walked through the door, my mom hugged me tight. Somehow, she always knew when I needed it. It was probably a mom thing.

Her office occupied the entire third floor of a building downtown. It was split into sections, each of her employees working on different projects.

My joy for her threatened to burst out of me and bring tears to my eyes. I was so proud of her. Even with a baby in her arms and a destroyed career, she had been able to pull herself together and build something that was all hers.

I sat on a stool, memories taking me back to my childhood, while my mom organized wedding invitations.

“What is it?” Mom asked.

I sighed. I had never planned what to say to her when I decided to come here. I didn’t want her to be disappointed in me.

“I messed up,” I finally admitted. “Turns out

all those things you tried to teach me didn't prevent me from making the same mistakes."

Mom stopped working, turning her focus on me. Though her face held no judgement, I still lowered my head.

She lifted my chin with an understanding smile. "Who is he?"

"One of the owners of the firm." I groaned. Saying it out loud only added to my shame.

Mom sighed but she didn't appear as mad or disappointed as I thought she would be.

"You're not pregnant, are you?"

The dry comment surprised a chuckle out of me. "God, no. I learned that lesson. At least I don't think so. I haven't exactly checked. But I'm careful."

Mom nodded and pulled me into her side with an arm around me. Her sweet floral scent enveloped me. She smelled like home, and some of the tension instantly left my body.

"I'm not going to ask if he's treating you right. If he was, you wouldn't be crying on my shoulder. But don't let him walk all over you. You know your worth. I know I taught you properly."

"You did, mom. And that's the thing." I shook

my head, frowning. “He does treat me well. When we’re alone, I’m not this insecure. Quite the contrary. But when I’m outside his bubble, I’m reminded of our differences. And I know I should walk away. I just can’t find the strength to do it.”

I got up and paced the length of her office, pushing my hair back. The reality of the situation crashed over me. Speaking my dilemma out loud somehow made it real in a way sneaking around with Rune never had.

“I’m not going to tell you what to do,” my mom said.

I stopped pacing and stared at her. “You probably should because I know I’m going to mess it up.”

Mom stood and cupped my face, smiling. “You’ll be fine. Trust your instincts.”

“Thanks, mom.”

She gave me the strength I needed to face down the world. I just hoped it lasted.

* * *

My confidence was slowly draining as I stood in front of Rune’s door, waiting for him to open. The concierge of the building already knew me

and let me in without delay.

Rune opened the door. He was wearing black sweatpants and a t-shirt. His hair was damp. He had probably been to the gym or for a run after work.

“Hey.” His small smile was a surprise. “Come in.”

His hand on my lower back burned as he directed me to the living room.

“Do you want something to drink or eat? Have you had dinner?” He asked.

“I’m fine. Thank you. I ate with my mom.”

Reclining back on the couch, Rune looked up at me. When I didn’t seat with him, his smile slipped as if finally realizing something was wrong.

“What’s going on?” He voiced my suspicions.

I pushed my shoulders back. “I’m going to make this quick. After what happened Monday, I don’t think I can keep doing this.” I didn’t move, not even to pace. I stood frozen staring at his handsome face as if he was a skittish client and I was relaying the facts of a case. “I can’t continue to cross paths with her and pretend like nothing is happening. I don’t have it in me to deal with this situation anymore. Sneaking around like I’m

doing something wrong. Lying to your family. To your fiancé.” The word felt dirty in my mouth.

I ran my hands over my already messy hair, finally breaking eye contact to stare at the floor. “Look, I’m sorry. I know I agreed to it. And you didn’t do anything wrong. But I’m backing out. We’re over.”

I waited for him to say something. I didn’t even know what I wanted to hear. If it would be better or worse if he fought against my decision.

Ultimately, he didn’t say anything. And before the silence could stretch to an awkward proportion, I turned around and walked back to the door. I didn’t want to see the expression on his face. I was a coward but I couldn’t face his indifference. I was a convenience to him. I had no doubt he had enjoyed our time together as much as I had, but things had started to change for me without my consent or even my awareness. And now it was too late to return to the beginning. I was at a point of no return.

“Ruby.” He called my name right as I reached for the doorknob.

I froze with my back to him.

“Don’t you think I should be able to say my

piece as well?"

I took a deep, settling breath before turning to him. His face wasn't blank and neutral as I had come to expect from him. He was tense, eyebrows heavy, mouth in a straight line.

"You say you don't have it in you to deal with being with me and all it entails." He walked to me, his steps slow and highlighting every word. "What if I say I don't have it in me to watch you walk out that door?"

My heart jumped at the admission. Stupidly so. It might have hurt more, but it would be much easier if he simply allowed it to happen.

I shook my head but Rune wasn't done.

"I don't know when it happened or why, if it's the sex or how much we talk. But I've gotten used to having you in my space. You're under my skin. I can't let you walk out of my life like this. And I know it's not fair to ask it of you. I understand what this situation is doing to you, but I have to be selfish because the alternative is unfathomable for me. I'll do anything to keep you with me. You tell me what you want, what you need, and I'll give it to you." He stopped a hair's distance from me, breathing hard as if he had just finished working out. "If you don't want

to hide, we don't."

"Your family—"

He took my chin in his hand, forcing me to meet his eyes. "I'll deal with my family. Morrigan's fiancé has always dated publicly and no one cares."

But he would still be engaged. Nothing about the situation would be different, except people would be aware of it. Did I want it to be different? Did I want to date him? I wasn't sure. All my carefully put together thoughts and arguments were falling at his feet and I was unable to pull them back together to form a defense against Rune. My heart was painfully tight.

And Rune wasn't over apparently. "You don't want to see Clara again? I can arrange it. What I can't do is let you leave right now, like this. Did you really think you could come here and break up with me? And I wouldn't fight it?"

I put my hands on his chest. "I didn't think you would care this much." He went to object but I stopped him. "I know you enjoy our arrangement, but I didn't think you would fight this hard to maintain it."

"I thought we had already established how we meet each other's freaks way too well.

Certainly, too well to let it go. Are you tired of me?"

"I'm tired of feeling uncertain. Of lying and hiding. Sneaking around at the office is fun. But the anxiety I have at being seen with you in public isn't good. For either of us."

He nodded. "I know what you need. You're coming with me to the charity gala next weekend."

I gasped. Was he crazy? "A gala? I can't go to a gala."

"Yes, you can. Clara won't be there. You don't have to worry about her."

"That's not why I did this."

"I know, but doing this suits me as well. I'm still unhappy with my parents for pushing the engagement the way they did. Call it a little bit of teenage rebellion if you like. But you are going to walk inside that ballroom in my arm and everyone will know I'm the lucky son of a bitch who gets to take you home at the end of the night."

I shook my head. It was too much to process in one sitting.

How did he always manage to change my mind? It wasn't normal.

Was this what I wanted? Would I have been able to walk away like I had intended to? If he had been indifferent or even understanding maybe. But this new facet of Rune, earnest and resolved was irresistible.

Having a few more weeks with him would be wonderful. He was right in saying our desires were perfectly aligned. I didn't want to lose such a meaningful connection and go back to looking for one-night stands. My *deviant* status was unknown and keeping the power under wraps depended on having a healthy way of releasing excess energy. Rune was my perfect escape.

Since I wasn't one to delay the inevitable after a decision had been made, I bridged the last bit of distance between us and kissed Rune. Unsurprisingly, he took over the kiss and devoured me. Hands on my hips, he lifted me and I wrapped my legs around him, never breaking the kiss. He took me to his room and splayed me down on the bed, climbing on top of me to perfect align our bodies.

I pulled back from his kiss, lingering close to his lips. "Same arrangement? No feelings?"

Rune looked deep into my eyes.

"No feelings," he agreed.

PASSION OF YEARNING

A small part of me died a bit, but I nodded and kissed him again, losing myself in him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SATURDAY NIGHT, I STARED AT myself in my bedroom mirror in a daze.

The forest green floor-length dress was beautiful, but I was too nervous to be amazed. When I'd chosen it, I'd thought it brought out the green in my eyes. The slit on my left thigh was sexy without detracting from the classic cut. My hair was done in smooth and shiny soft waves and my makeup was smokey without going overboard.

Though I could see all these things

objectively, on the inside, I was a pile of nerves.

My first *deviant* charity gala. The first time I was going to interact with people like my biological father. I wasn't ready.

More than anything, the Hills' reaction worried me. Rune's mother had been kind and welcoming, his father charming and warm. I didn't want them to hate me or judge me.

Someone knocked on the bedroom door.

"Come in."

Rose, one of my roommates, peered inside with a cute grin. "Your date is here."

I turned away from the mirror. It was show time.

"Thank you for letting me know."

She stepped inside, glancing over her shoulder. "He's hot. You've been holding out of us," she whispered, accusingly. "It's not fair. You know our entire lives and you hide someone like that?"

"It's recent," I said, apologetic. "There wasn't much going on before now. But I'll tell you about it during Monday dinner."

"Deal. Don't you dare hold back on the details."

I chuckled again and followed her out to the

living room.

Rune sat on the couch, typing on his phone. Before getting to know him intimately, I thought he was always working, reading research or responding to emails. But now I knew the Hill kids had a very active group chat and most of the times I've caught him on his phone he was responding to his siblings.

Much like with everything else he wore, Rune looked amazing in a tuxedo. Absolutely delicious. I was out of my league here in more ways than one. My dress wasn't necessarily cheap, but it was for sure much less expensive than his clothes and shoes and watch. I didn't even want to do some math. That was sure to mess up with my already overwhelmed nerves.

His eyes lit up when he saw me, drinking in every single detail of my outfit from head to toe. From the way his eyes darkened, I would say he liked what he saw.

Good. Thinking of getting naked later tonight was the perfect distraction. The familiar territory helped me forget for a moment that I was diving head-first into the unknown tonight. And how this simple decision could have disastrous consequences.

“Have fun, kids.” Rose took up position on the couch as we left. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

We laughed and wished her a good night.

“Rose is nice,” Rune commented as we were heading down on the elevator.

“She is. You have to meet Camilla too. They are both incredibly nosy, you know how it is.” I grinned. “They are going to torture information out of me Monday night if they don’t catch me before then.”

“That’s unlikely. You’ll be with me all weekend.”

With that cocky remark, Rune pulled me outside my building and opened the door to the backseat of a slick, black car. Apparently, we had a driver tonight.

He closed the door and rounded the car, entering beside me. His hand immediately found my thigh, bared by the slit of my dress.

“I have something for you.” Rune reached inside a side compartment of the car and retrieved a green velvet box. “To compliment the look.”

“Rune—“

He opened the box to reveal a diamond

necklace. It was resplendent. A string of dangling diamonds connected by slightly smaller stones.

“I can’t—“

“You can,” Rune insisted.

He removed the necklace from the box and gestured for me to turn so he could fasten it to my neck.

“It’s a gift. For going out with me tonight. These parties can be brutal and this is to show my appreciation of your willingness to step into the line of fire with me.”

After he was finished, I turned back to him. “I don’t like this.”

“You don’t like it?” He deliberately misunderstood. “We can exchange it tomorrow.”

I pushed on his thigh, pursing my lips. I ran my fingers through the necklace. It was delicate but would draw the eye.

“The necklace is beautiful.” I sighed. “Thank you.”

He smiled, taking my hand and lacing our fingers. “You’re welcome. And you look absolutely stunning tonight.”

Sitting back as the city sped outside the windows, Rune was completely relaxed, as if everything was right in the world.

After our conversation at his place Thursday night, he'd convinced me to sleep at his apartment for the rest of the week. He drove me to my apartment to get clothes and toiletries and whatever I needed, but he was set on me sleeping in his bed.

I didn't know if he'd been afraid I was going to change my mind again. He never said anything, simply claimed my time as if he was entitled to it.

We fell back on the routine we had created together. Cooking and working and talking and fucking. Our bubble was securely back in place.

And tonight, we were going to open it up to the public and allow them to see the inside.

* * *

A ballroom. I was inside a glamorous and intricate and expensive ballroom. My life had turned into a movie.

Gold pillars supported the incredibly high ceiling where three glittering chandeliers hung. The tables were outfitted with golden candelabra and gold napkin rings. I was pretty sure gold wasn't simply a color scheme but also the main material. I was dizzy from the glamour of it all,

way over my head. I had thrown myself at the deep end of the pool without even knowing how to swim.

I clung to Rune's arm as if my life depended on it. Suddenly, my heels felt too high, my dress too tight, my skin too clammy.

Rune walked with me, slow and steady, as if he knew exactly how much I was freaking out. He spoke softly, telling me who certain people were. If he liked them or not, or ff he made the effort to be polite simply because it suited him and the family. I barely registered the words through the ringing in my ears. But the tone of his voice was soothing and grounded me in reality.

Pushing my shoulders back and lifting my chin, I didn't cower beneath their stares. I didn't owe any of these people anything. They collectively amassed way too much wealth and I wasn't less of a person than they were because I owned less properties and my bank account had less commas. I was worthy. Not because of my blood. Or my name. Or my wealth. Because I was a person. A *deviant*.

Eyes followed us as we crossed the grand entryway and made our way farther into the

room. Rune entertained no one. He got me a drink from a passing server's tray and didn't stop for more than a few short greetings.

When I finally caught a glimpse of his parents in the center of the room receiving guests, I understood why he had appeared to be on a warpath.

Rune looped his arm around my waist, leaving no question as to the nature of our relationship.

He and his father shared an intense look. A challenge.

Amaryllis hugged me. It was awkward with Rune's arm around me, but he refused to relinquish his hold.

"Ruby, it's so good to see you again."

I smiled through my nerves, never allowing them to see how their reactions affected me. These were shark infested waters and unfortunately, I could not allow myself to bleed for anyone.

"It's nice seeing you too. The party looks amazing."

"Thank you." Amaryllis turned to Rune, expecting him to say something. Maybe she wanted an explanation. But Rune didn't give her

anything. He was serene and neutral, pretending not to understand the undercurrent of tension between the four of us.

“Morrigan?” He asked.

His mother pursed her lips. “At the bar.”

Rune frowned and turned at me. “Shall we go see him?”

His mother interrupted. “It’s time to sit down to eat. Please, go to the table. I will get Morrigan.”

Rune led us to the table. The little plate with my name on it sat between Rune and Morrigan’s, while their parents were to Rune’s left. My name was a surprise. I didn’t know Rune had let them know I’d be his plus one.

“Did we really come just in time for the meal to start?” I whispered to Rune.

Rune shrugged. “I didn’t want to mingle.”

Maybe. Or maybe he wanted to shield me from some of the gossip. I had heard more than one comment asking about me. Who I was. Why I was with Rune. What all of this meant. I ignored them all, of course, and kept my brilliant smile in place at all times. These people didn’t affect me. I didn’t need their approval.

Morrigan arrived at the table shortly after we sat down just like Amaryllis had promised.

“Ruby!” He hugged me and bumped shoulders with his brother.

His steps were sloppy as he took his seat.

“What’s going on?” I lowered my voice and leaned over to peer at his unfocused eyes.

He smiled brightly, shaking off whatever was bothering him. “First gala, uh?”

“Don’t remind me.” I searched for my champagne flute.

Morrigan chuckled and extended his tumbler for a toast.

“I’m glad you’re here. Finally,” he said, conspiratorially.

I shook my head but clinked my glass with his and drank deeply.

“Where is everyone else?” I asked.

I’d seen Noor and Adeline briefly when we arrived, but no one else.

“Garnet is somewhere with her friends. She always brings them to these things.” He glanced around the room as if to catalogue the whereabouts of his siblings. “Phoenix is still busy with school, so they let him off the hook.”

Rune leaned over, his chin on my shoulder. His short beard was rough against my skin and a shiver climbed my neck.

“I’m surprised you came,” Rune commented.

Morrigan rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t going to, but mom called me all frantic after you told her you had a date. Apparently, I had to come to the rescue. A little heads up would have been nice.”

Rune played with my hair. “Thanks for coming. I know Ruby is more comfortable with you here.”

I turned to him, peering at his eyes. They were soft. He rubbed his nose with mine.

“Mind if I go say hi to some people who just arrived?” He asked.

“Of course.”

Morrigan gestured him away. “Go. I’ll entertain the lady.”

Rune kissed my shoulder and left. I followed him with my eyes until Morrigan claimed my attention by proposing another toast. I indulged him, though I wasn’t certain he should be drinking any more.

As I was turning, I caught Amaryllis’ eyes on me. I gave her a small smile and broke eye contact. I didn’t want to invite any more of her judgement.

I lifted my drink for a toast, but Morrigan’s eyes were narrowed somewhere behind me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Cordelia.” He spat the word as if it was a curse. Though his tone held some other nuance I could not place. Longing? It didn’t seem right.

“Who is that?”

He finally gave me his attention. “You don’t know? I thought Rune would have told you everything about everyone by now.”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

Rune had told me bits and pieces, stories of his family members, but I had a feeling he kept most things relating to his twin a secret. Perhaps out of a brotherly protective instinct.

“My dearest fiancé is called Cordelia.”

I lifted a brow. The elusive fiancée he never talked about. “Is she here?”

“Yup.”

“Who is it? Show me.” I pulled on his arm. My curiosity was killing me.

He rolled his eyes and gestured behind me with his chin.

“The blond in the red dress.”

The woman in question was tall, with a glow and a presence that commanded attention. Indeed, she had an army of adoring fans staring at her as if she hung the moon. There was

something otherworldly about her, as if she wasn't quite human. This was someone who could never hide she was *deviant*.

I wondered how she walked outside with such a presence, or if perhaps she was playing it up for attention. I had noticed more than one person releasing their hold on their power, allowing their skin to reflect light or using the beam to point out something or call for someone's attention.

Cordelia glanced our way. Her eyes narrowed on me and Morrigan.

I gave her a small smile and turned to him with my mouth hanging open.

"Morrigan, she's gorgeous."

He nodded. "She is. And everyone knows it." He finished his drink in one sitting and rose from his chair. "I need a refill. Be right back."

"I thought you weren't supposed to leave me." I tried keeping him from the bar.

"Rune is back."

I had been too busy gawking at Morrigan's goddess of a fiancée to notice his return.

Rune stood next to his mother's chair as the two exchanged conspiratorial whispers.

I touched Morrigan's arm. "Are you sure you

want to continue drinking before dinner?”

Morrigan patted my hand. “Just one more. I promise.”

I bit my lip. “Did you drive here?”

“Yeah. But I’m not driving back. I’m not stupid.” He rolled his eyes and handed me his keys. “Here. Keep these if it makes you feel better.”

I took them and shoved them inside my tiny purse. “Thank you.”

As he walked away, I turned to Rune and called his name.

He immediately gave me his attention, following my worried gaze to Morrigan.

“I tried stopping him from drinking more.”

Rune smiled in thanks. “It’s alright. We’ll drive him home when we leave.”

“I got his car keys.”

“Good. Did he tell you why he’s drinking?”

“I think it might be something to do with Cordelia? What’s their relationship like? Are they fighting?”

Rune shook his head. “He doesn’t like talking about her.”

He glanced at his parents and I realized even if he did know or if he had any theories, none

would be shared in front of them.

Amaryllis extended a hand to me. "Give me his keys, dear. I will ask one of the drivers to take the car to his apartment."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE FOOD WAS DELICIOUS.

At first, I thought the small portions and intricate embellishments would be insufficient. However, I had been pleasantly surprised. Every dish stood out for its elegance and distinctive taste, and the multiple course meal guaranteed I satisfied my hunger without being bloated.

I took pictures of everything to show my mom, not caring if anyone was judging my lack of decorum. She would love to know what the party looked like and comment on the things she

liked and disliked and the different choices she would have made.

After dinner, the plates were lifted and people were on their feet again, ready to mingle. I found myself momentarily alone with Rune's dad.

Gabriel Hill noticed the absence of others at the same time as I did and moved one chair over, to Rune's, charming me with a small smile.

"How are you enjoying the party, Ruby?"

"It's lovely. I'm sure your wife is very proud."

His smile turned soft and tender. "Oh, I'm sure she is. But she is probably also worried about a million little things that aren't to her exact taste."

I smiled. My mom was the same.

"I wanted to tell you something. And I hope you don't take this the wrong way," Gabriel said, his expression sobering. "Be sure this is what you want. Not only the relationship, but all that comes with it as well. There's no going back after you enter this world."

It was good advice and I didn't think he was being malicious. Actually, I understood the concern. Being on Rune's arm was already bringing scrutiny to me. It might also out me as a

deviant. This event was covered by the media with photographers at every corner. When I returned to work on Monday morning, all my colleagues at the firm might know I was sleeping with one of the owners.

My stomach tightened. My mom had spent her entire life warning me against these people and here I was presenting myself as a sacrificial lamb. But I had decided to come. To be with Rune publicly. No matter the consequences. I would deal with the aftermath to the best of my ability.

I squeezed Gabriel's arm. "Thank you for worrying."

When Rune returned, standing over our shoulders, his eyes held a question.

I smiled and leaned back, reassuring him I was perfectly fine.

* * *

Morrigan sobered up after putting some food in his stomach. He also appeared to have let go of whatever had been pulling him to the bottom of a cup. I was happy to believe Rune and I had been the reason, providing a distraction and entertaining him with good conversation.

Throughout the entire night, Rune's touch was my only constant. He took my hand and kissed the back of my fingers while I spoke with Morrigan. He twirled my hair around his finger as he kept conversation with his parents.

I hadn't expected him to be into public displays of affection, but I was happy to be proven wrong. And even though I was dying to comment on them, I didn't want to embarrass him and have him stop. I loved how sweet he was being.

"Mom's speech is about to begin." Rune patted Morrigan's shoulder and then rested his arm around my waist.

Amaryllis was absolutely radiant as she climbed the three steps of the dais and became visible to the entire room.

"Thank you all for being here tonight."

The crowd clapped politely as she thanked a bunch of people whose names I didn't memorize or recognize. They must have been important for the foundation and big donors. She went on to explaining how this year's donations would reach a record number of families and provide them with a little relief this season. To help them put food on the table and to give their children

presents for the holidays.

I was moved by her emotions.

Next, Amaryllis spoke of the college scholarships which they would be expanding the following year to account for the rising number of applicants.

The speech winded down to a few more mentions of all the good things they had been doing and were hoping to achieve with the money these people were donating.

And back to mingling we went. A string quartet took over the dais. I wondered how much longer this party was supposed to last. And was about to ask Rune exactly that when I noticed his jaw clenching.

“What is it? Did you see someone you don’t like?”

“I most definitely did.” Rune took my hand and laced our fingers together. “Adrien Wellington is here. I wasn’t expecting him.”

I froze. This couldn’t be happening to me. On my very first outing to *deviant* society?

I glanced behind me and there he was. My sperm donor in the flesh. In the same room as me. For the first time in my life.

No one would have guessed at the familial

relationship. His hair was more grey than black these days and he had lines around his eyes. I didn't take much after him, thankfully.

His wife and two sons were with him. To his right, holding court, was his mother. She was speaking with a polite smile as if she held complete control of the room. She hadn't changed much since the last time I had seen her.

I immediately shifted my attention back to the table. He wouldn't recognize me. Since we had never officially met, and my mom wouldn't have given him pictures of me. His mother was the only one who'd visit a couple of times a year as I was growing up. But she had stopped when I was around fourteen and she realized I wanted nothing to do with her. I hadn't seen her in years. If I was lucky, she wouldn't notice me either.

I chanced another small peek to see Adrien Wellington walking in our direction. I ducked my head, pretending to search for something in my clutch.

"I'm going to be bathroom," I told Rune. "I'll be right back."

I escaped before he could reach the table.

Leaning against the bathroom sink, I inspected my reflection in the mirror. I couldn't

hide in here all night. Neither did I want to. I had nothing to be ashamed of. Still, I gave him enough time to greet the Hills and get lost.

Pushing back my shoulders, I returned the main room of the party. Only to be stopped by a man standing in front of me. A man I immediately recognized.

“What are you doing here?” Adrien sneered.

So much for going unnoticed.

Feigning nonchalance, I plucked a glass of champagne from a passing server to keep my hands busy. And then, to help me hold my tongue, I took a big gulp. The rage this man elicited in me could make me lose my head and I didn’t want to cause a scene at Amaryllis’ party.

I made sure Rune was still at our table and no one else from his family could see us. “I was invited. What are you doing here?”

From Rune’s reaction, the Wellingtons weren’t often invited to his family’s events. Perhaps this time they had been in hopes of securing their help with Ginny Lawrence’s case.

Adrien’s neck turned red. Apparently, he didn’t enjoy being questioned.

“Are you here to ask for money?” His lips twisted in an ugly jeer. “You are nothing and

never will be. If you think causing a public scene will help you, you are mistaken—“

“Money?” My grandmother, Pearl Wellington, joined the conversation, followed by his wife and two sons. “I have told that mother of yours multiple times, you aren’t owed anything from the inheritance. If you are trying to create a scene by appearing here, you’re out of luck, girl.”

She didn’t sneer—it was beneath her—but she stared down her nose at me as if I was a piece of trash under her shoe.

I lift a brow, canting my head. “If I wanted my inheritance I’d have it already, or do you think I’m such a bad lawyer I wouldn’t get every cent I’m owed?”

From the confusion plastered on their faces, neither Adrien’s wife nor his kids understood what was happening. They exchanged glances, but each shrug and shake of the head corroborated their lack of information.

“There you are.” Rune looped his arm around my waist, ignoring my poor taste in company. “Did you get lost on the way to the bathroom?”

I attempted to chuckle through my nerves. “More like on the way back.” I showed him my

glass. "I was thirsty, so I stopped for a drink."

I exchange a pointed look with Pearl. I didn't care how much my brothers or their mother heard. They weren't my problem. But Rune didn't need to be dragged into my messed-up family situation. I only hoped she didn't attempt to humiliate me in front of him by airing all our problems.

She turned her polite smile on Rune. "This is such a lovely party. I'm glad we could make it."

"I'm sure my mother appreciates you taking the time. How did we end up in this lovely conversation?"

His narrowed eyes inspected each of us. He had noticed the undercurrent of tension and I knew he wouldn't rest until he uncovered its origin.

I racked my brain for a way out of this situation, preparing a lie, something to the effect of the Wellingtons being polite and introducing themselves. As if they were nice people. But Adrien spoke before I could.

"You know, when I turned down your proposal, I never expected you to stoop this low in your desperation. Using bastards to compensate for your lack of negotiation ability is

a terrible business model. But then again, I don't know why I would expect better from the likes of you. I hope you enjoy being disappointed." Adrien's voice dripped with venom as he spat the words.

Rune's arm tightened around me. "You have a bastard, uh? How interesting."

Pearl glared at her son. He'd messed up and mommy was going to pull his ear.

I chuckled but the sound was cut short when she turned to me with the same warning gaze. I hid my face in my glass.

"Thank your mother for the invitation," Pearl told Rune. "We had a lovely time but sadly need to leave." She turned to me. "We'll talk soon."

"I sincerely hope not." I saluted her with my glass.

Pearl pursed her lips as she herded her family away. The brothers glanced over their shoulders at me, their gazes full of curiosity. That was going to be a fun car ride.

I couldn't even breathe a sigh of relief and think of some way of extricating myself out of the explanations Rune would soon demand of me, when someone else decided to join us. It was

time for unpleasant conversations apparently.

“Ah, Hill. I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

Harry Dumont sauntered to us in all his glory.

Wonderful.

“I have no idea why that would be,” Rune countered.

It was my first time meeting the man and I immediately didn’t like him. His eyes were kind of sinister.

Dumont smirked. “You know, I admire your drive to do the right thing. It appears to run in the family.” He gestured vaguely to the room around us. “But I don’t think you have grasped how to pick your fights quite yet.”

I returned my empty glass to a passing server and rested my free hand on Rune’s chest, subtly giving him my support.

His thumb rubbed my hip. He understood.

“I’m sure you have advice,” Rune said.

It was clear he wanted this conversation over as fast as possible.

Dumont smiled. “Of course. I would start with picking your opponents wisely. After all, it would be a shame to be seen deliberately antagonizing a generous donator to your cause. And without proof as well.” He shook his head,

never losing the smile. “I was speaking of this with Valentine Linwood today. I’m sure you know him. He is one of the leading people helping you pass that discrimination bill of yours, right?”

A muscle feathered in Rune’s jaw. I narrowed my eyes on Harry Dumont.

“Harry, how are you?” Gabriel stepped in, shaking the slime’s hand with gusto.

I was happy to see Dumont struggling with the strong handshake.

“Good. Good. Lovely party.”

“I shall pass the compliment to my wife.”

Rune took a step back, leading me away. “I’ll leave you to catch up.”

“It was good seeing you,” Dumont replied to Rune’s back.

“What was that?” I asked as soon as we were out of earshot.

“That was a threat for me to drop Ginny’s case.” Rune glanced over, his face hard. “Welcome to the circus. The clowns have begun their act.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SITTING ON THE BACKSEAT OF Rune's car, I sighed in relief. For my first outing in *deviant* high society, I'd consider it a success. But I was ready for it to be over and to return to the bliss of normal life and anonymity.

Rune's hand on my bare thigh was distracting me, preventing me from analyzing each interaction.

"You're so tense," he commented.

I smiled. "It was an interesting evening, but I'm glad it's over."

Despite the unpleasantness towards the end, I had loved the party and spending time with his family. The cause and Amaryllis's passion for it were inspiring. If only the Wellingtons hadn't shown up to ruin my mood.

Rune's hand traveled up my thigh, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake.

I tensed for another reason, aware of the driver on the front seat.

"Perhaps I can help with all this tension," Rune spoke into my ear, the words only for me.

I shivered as his breath tickled my neck. And when his fingers teased the edge of my thong, I jumped.

I glared at him, glancing meaningfully at the driver.

Rune smirked but didn't stop. "If you don't want to be caught, you should learn how to be quiet."

My eyes widened as the meaning of his words settled into my bones. He could not mean to follow through with what he was threatening.

His pointer finger slipped through the side of the lace.

I'd been waiting for this all night. Seeing Rune in a tuxedo was a wet dream, and I'd been

wanting to strip him of his clothes since I first saw him at my apartment. Better yet, I wanted him to touch me while wearing it.

But I'd never considered myself to be interested in public sex.

As with every other time he touched me, I was left incapable of telling him no or asking him to stop.

Rune teased the edge of my core, never actually touching me where I was beginning to ache. He kissed below my ear and then bit the side of my neck, licking the hurt with his hot tongue.

I leaned farther back, gluing my shoulder blades to the seat while giving Rune better access to all of me.

He took it. He took everything I gave him and even more. He kissed and bit and licked his way down my neck, while I squirmed on the leather seat as he reached the places he knew were most sensitive.

"Rune," I whined, turning my face to the crook of his neck to hide the sounds I was attempting, and failing, to swallow.

Rune circled my clit with the exact amount of pressure he knew would drive me wild.

I gasped, the noise too loud to my sensitive ears. I was highly aware of my panting, the rustle of Rune's clothes, the cars passing by outside the window. It was all too much.

"So wet," Rune whispered. "Do you like the idea of getting caught? Is that why you're dripping all over my car?"

"Don't—" I held on to the wrist of the hand currently pushing me to the edge of orgasm.

I didn't want to come in front of someone I didn't know.

Rune stared down at my face while he speared a finger inside me, knuckle by knuckle.

"Come on." His words were laced with honey. The finger inside me was immovable, even when I cocked my hips to force some friction. "No one will see or hear anything. And if they did, our staff is paid to be discreet. We're almost at my place. You can give me one. Consider it an appetizer."

When I didn't voice another objection or pushed him away, Rune removed his finger and dragged it back in, excruciatingly slow, eliciting another shiver. It wasn't enough for me to come, but it built the tension in my body. I was ready to beg for more, dripping my arousal all over his

hand.

Rune kissed my jaw. "Such a good girl, letting me do whatever I want, wherever I want." He bit my lip, dragging his teeth over it while he added another finger to my pussy. "Would you let me fuck you in front of him if I asked?"

I gasped. His fingers fucked me the way I needed it. The thumb hit my clit with every movement. I could barely comprehend the words, only the deliciously raspy tone of arousal and Rune's outrageous demands. They would never happen. We were both too possessive to share even the sight of each other in the throes of passion.

"You would, wouldn't you?" Rune continued, increasing the pace. "You would love for everyone to know how well you take my cock. How eager you are for me. How well I stretch you—"

I came in an avalanche of sensation, hard and unexpectedly. Rune slammed his mouth against mine to swallow my cries of pleasure.

As the kiss slowed to a stop, he removed his fingers from inside me and cleaned them with his pocket square with a satisfied smile.

"I can't wait to splay you down on my bed

and spend hours between your thighs.”

I rolled my eyes, still gasping for air. “Hours? A bit much, don’t you think?”

“All I hear is a challenge.”

* * *

“Help me?” Standing in front of the full-length mirror in Rune’s bedroom, I gestured to the zipper of my dress.

I could technically do it myself if I twisted my hand. I had put it on without help after all. But my arms felt like jelly and I’d rather have his hands on me than my own.

Rune ditched his jacket and removed the cuff links, rolling the sleeves of the button-down up his forearms. He stood behind me and lowered the zipper, taking his time, fingers trailing down my spine.

The satin fabric slid down my body like water. I turned with my arms around his neck and kissed him deep. His hands went from my waist to my ass. Cupping. Squeezing. Pulling me tighter.

When he pulled back, I was breathless. And I blamed the kiss for how long it took me to process his next words.

“Why were you discussing an inheritance with the Wellingtons?”

My eyes widened. I tried pulling away, but Rune held me in place with a hand on my lower back and the other on my chin. He kept my eyes on his even though I tried to look away.

“Fuck,” I cursed.

Of course, he had heard everything. He had the worst timing possible. And now this family managed to ruin my night for the second time.

I pushed against Rune’s chest. He was immovable.

“Just say it,” Rune urged. “I already figured out you’re related to them somehow. How bad could it be?”

Well, it could be the worst thing in the entire world. At least in mine.

I didn’t want Rune to know. Or anyone else for that matter. I didn’t want my name associated with that person. All he had ever done was give me some DNA. It was the extent of his role in my life and I was glad for it. The taint of his name would change the way people saw me.

“Adrien Wellington is my biological father.”

Rune rubbed my back as if soothing away whatever he saw on my face, the harshness from

my voice, the tension from my body.

“Why are they denying you?” He asked, softly as if afraid I was going to bolt at any moment.

I sighed, playing with the buttons on Rune’s shirt. Touching him centered me and it gave me something to do with my hands.

“I don’t want their money and I wasn’t registered with his name.” I undid the buttons, one by one, never looking up as I forced the explanation out. “My mom used to work at their company. They fell in love.” My mouth twisted. That man didn’t know the meaning of the word. “When she got pregnant, he didn’t want anything to do with us. He ghosted her, fired her, prevented her from finding another job. He’s a piece of shit.”

I searched Rune’s face for any hint of judgement and found none. Opening up about this hadn’t been easy. He better appreciate it for the gift it was.

“Thank you for telling me,” he said.

Then, he kissed me, making me forget everything else. My messed-up family. His disappointed one. All the reasons why I shouldn’t be in this room. But tonight, I was raw, exposed,

and I wanted to take something for myself without thinking of anyone else. I wanted to be selfish and indulge in Rune and all he made me feel.

He laid me on the bed and kissed every single inch of me. No curve and crook and cranny were left untouched by him. We didn't talk anymore except to provide whispered directions. The sound of panting and gasps and moans filled the room.

Rune fucked me, slow and deep, staring into my eyes the entire time.

During those moments, I could imagine he was mine. I could see us enjoying our nights just like this. Coming together at the end of a long day to find solace in each other's arms. To expel the demons of the outside world at the door to this bedroom and simply feel.

And so, for hours I pretended it was all true.

* * *

Hours later, we laid side by side. My eyes were closed and Rune's thumb caressed my wrist, his hold soft and loose.

"You know the identity of your father doesn't change anything right?" Rune turned his head in

my direction.

“Do you mean you won’t hold it against me?”
I tried to lighten the mood but I was too depleted of energy to be convincing.

“It doesn’t change who you are. You are brilliant and beautiful and successful, not because of him but in spite of him. And I can’t imagine a bigger fuck you to the asshole than that.”

My lips formed a frail smile. And my eyes burned. It was exactly what I needed to hear and he didn’t even know it.

I turned on my side and curled up against him, feeling and hearing his heart beating under my ear.

In the moments before I fell asleep, I was glad he had never asked or guessed about my powers.

Since we had met at a *deviant* club, he knew what I was. Most people’s powers were the basic absorption and reflect light. He didn’t know I had inherited the Wellington special power of projecting images from someone’s mind.

No one but my parents and my sister knew this dangerous, little detail. And I intended for it to remain so. If I told him and he asked for help with his case, I was going to end up doing it.

But it would expose me. And after we parted ways, when it was time for him to do his duty to his family and get married, I would be left alone to suffer the consequences. The discrimination all *deviants* not powerful and rich enough had to deal with regularly.

No. I would not tell him. Not because I didn't trust him. But because even in my delusions I knew I had to protect myself.

* * *

I woke up to the annoying sound of a phone vibrating.

The sheets rustled by my side as Rune groaned and turned, hopefully intending to end the infernal noise.

"It's yours," he said, lying back down.

The words took a moment to register in my sleep-addled brain.

Then, I turned to the bedside table on my side of the bed and plucked it from the charger. The simple domesticity we had fallen into still struck me sometimes. The small surface was covered in my things. My charger. My watch. My earrings. The hand moisturizer I like to use before going to sleep.

Like taking a cold shower, I stared at the caller-id. My mom. Today was Sunday. Shit. She would be expecting me. But I didn't want to leave this bed. I wanted to hunker down on this cocoon and pretend the rest of the world didn't exist.

The call ended and restarted almost straight away.

"Who is it? Why don't you pick up?"

"It's my mom," I groaned, turning on my side and taking the call. "Good morning."

"Good morning." My mom's voice was deceptively calm. Too calm. It was impossible for her not to know what had happened last night. "What time are you arriving for lunch? I need to know when to turn the oven on."

I hummed. "I don't think I can make it today."

Rune lifted a brow.

I shook my head.

"I'm not asking if you want to come, baby. I want to see you. And bring that man of yours with you."

Rune's eyes jumped to mine. In the silence of the room, he could hear the entire conversation.

"Mom—"

Rune leaned over. "We'll be there at one."

“What?” My eyes widened. “No way.”

I covered his mouth. But the damage had already been done.

“Good,” my mom said. “Don’t be late.”

I stared at the phone. “She hung up on me.”

Rune shrugged.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I demanded.

“You’ve met my family. What’s wrong with me meeting yours?”

I pulled the pillow over my head and screamed into it.

* * *

I was a ball of nerves by the time we pulled up to my family home. Rune took my hand as we walked up, soothing me with the soft circles of his thumb. I was being stupid. This was fine.

Charles greeted us at the door and let us in. So far so good.

Taylor and mom were on the couch engrossed on my sister’s phone.

“What’s up?” I asked, clutching Rune’s hand.

They glanced up in unison as if they hadn’t realized we were there.

“We’re looking at pictures from last night,”

Taylor explained with a big smile as she took Rune in. “Your dress was gorgeous.”

“Thanks. How bad is it?”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “The pictures are great. Everything else is garbage.”

The media had decided to pick up the story. Great.

Mom came over. She hugged me and patted Rune on the arm. “Let’s eat.”

* * *

Taylor dominated the conversation, asking for details on the party—who was there and who they were with.

Rune was happy to indulge her, but I noticed he kept a close eye on my mom and her reactions to what he said. I did too. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for her to say how stupid we both were.

“I took pictures of the decoration for you,” I told my mom as she served the lasagna. My mouth watered at the sight.

She smiled. “Was it pretty?”

I nodded. “Amaryllis has great taste.”

Rune smiled beside me as I handed him his plate.

“It was all great until the Wellingtons showed up,” he commented.

It was as if the entire family had been hit by lightning. They sat up and exchanged worried glances.

I lifted a brow at Rune. He knew exactly what he was doing.

“Why is that?” Mom asked.

“Dear sweet Adrien was being his asshole self, not caring who was within hearing distance,” I explained.

I glanced at Rune meaningfully.

Taylor’s mouth was wide open.

“He knows—“

“Yes,” I confirmed.

Charles took my mom’s hand.

“Did you talk to Adrien?” He asked me, worried.

“Yeah. His whole family was there. Pearl looked like she wanted to spank him for almost causing a scene. It was funny.”

“Vile woman,” mom spat. “I don’t care about him or the rest of the family, but that woman better never show her face in front of me. I might actually physically hurt her.”

“Why her and not him?” Rune questioned.

“Ruby wasn’t forthcoming with details.”

“She tried to buy my baby from me but I told her where she could shove her money.” Mom sighed. “She came over every few months for the first years of Ruby’s life, always with the same offer. Then, when she realized Ruby didn’t have their abilities right away, she tried to pay me to never reveal her parentage. As if we wanted anything to do with them.”

Turning to her, I gave her a silent warning not to reveal too much.

Rune, ever the lawyer, leaned forward. “Did she ever give you any papers to sign?”

Mom lifted her chin proudly. “I might not have the right blood, but I’m not stupid. I never took any of their money. Never agreed to any of their demands. And never signed anything.”

“That’s good. And he was never tempted to go against his family’s wishes?” Rune wondered.

Mom scoffed. “Hell, no. He went straight to mommy when I told him I was pregnant. From then on, I only spoke to her. He was too much of a coward to face me again.”

* * *

Lunch ended with no more mention of the

Wellingtons. And I was happy to have the people I cared about together around the table.

When we left, Rune took me to Central Park where we walked hand in hand among the Christmas decorations.

"It appears our mothers are more alike than I thought," he commented.

"How so?"

"My mother is what yours could have been, had your father stayed with her."

I scoffed. "Your mom didn't get pregnant by accident."

"No. But my dad was already divorced and my mom didn't have an influential family name. He chose to marry her out of love. Your dad could have done the same thing, had he the courage to stand up to his family."

I groaned. "I don't like thinking like that."

"You could have had this life."

"I've never wanted to be an heiress or to have their money. Don't get me wrong, the money would have come in hand—my student loans are kind of insane—but at what cost? I could have gone to my grandmother. She would have taken me in and molded me in her image. If I had pleased her enough, she would bring me into her

social circles. She would find me a husband who presented the best deal for the family and I would have served my purpose.”

Rune nodded, understanding better than anyone how this relationship would have worked.

“I wouldn’t have gotten far,” I continued. “I couldn’t have forced myself to be meek and quiet. Her voice alone makes my skin explode in rashes. Adrien did us a favor by being a coward. Our life was hard in the beginning, before my mom’s business took off, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything.” I changed into a more lighthearted tone. “Maybe I would have met you sooner though.”

“I wouldn’t have liked you as a shallow heiress.”

“See?” I grinned. “I only have reasons not to want that life.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, I WAS walking on cloud nine.

At the office, I caught the curious gaze of coworkers. However, to my relief, none were openly hostile. Marie was colder than usual—which wasn't much worse, to be honest—and she piled menial work on me like she was training for the Olympics of demanding supervisors.

But it was fine. I could deal with whatever she threw at me. I did that work and whatever Morrigan needed for the merger. And though I

worked late every single night, Rune always waited for me and took me to his place afterward.

The reward was more than worth it.

As promised, I went back to my apartment Monday night for dinner with the roommates. It was a lot of fun. We ordered in since none of us cared much to cook and I was exhausted. We talked and drank an entire bottle of wine. Though we were all of different ages and at different stages of our lives, we managed to find common ground in our personal experiences.

Alana, the paralegal, and our other office building friends, gave me a lot of grief for not warning them about my relationship with Rune. We had to have lunch outside the building, where they were free to be loud and obnoxious without being overheard by coworkers.

I laughed at their antics more than anything. They meant well and though I didn't give them any scandalous details, I knew I could trust them.

It was freeing to be out in the open. Rune had been right to push us in this direction. It wasn't until this point—when I could mention him and our relationship openly—that I realized how dirty I had been feeling regarding the entire

situation. Now, I smiled all the time, giddy and happy.

Whatever happened, I would not worry until I was forced to.

Pierce knocked on my open door.

I smiled at him. "Hey, what's up?"

"I have someone here for you," he explained.

I frowned. This wasn't a part of his job. If someone wanted to talk to me one of the people in the main reception would call.

And then the answer presented itself when he stepped to the side and Noor Hill entered my small, humble office.

I rose, greeting her. "Noor. This is a surprise."

We shook hands.

"Thank you, Pierce."

He nodded and turned to go. As he closed the door, he mimicked "Good luck."

I threw him a grateful smile.

"What can I do for you?" I gave Noor my full attention.

My office didn't have a sitting area or a conference table like her brothers'. I gestured for the single chair in front of my desk and then I returned to my seat.

"Thank you for seeing me without notice,"

Noor said. "I don't want to waste any of our times, so I'll get to the point. Do you know what you're doing?"

I crossed my hands on the cool surface. "In what regard?"

Rune hadn't been kidding when he said his family members pushed their way into each other's lives.

"Is a relationship with my brother really what you want?" Noor said, plainly. "If you're not careful, this world will eat you alive."

"You know, your father said something very similar to me the other night. And like I told him, your concern is appreciated."

Noor leaned forward. Her dark eyes were identical to Rune's, even down to the seriousness. "This isn't simple concern. You've kicked the nest of vipers by going against my parents' wishes. There is more at stake than even Rune is aware. And if you don't get out of the way soon, you will be caught in the crossfire along with the rest of us."

She appeared genuinely worried. Almost scared even. And I would be stupid not to heed the warning. I was going to have to ask Rune. It was time he had an open talk with his family on

the subject.

“Look, you’re smart.” Noor licked her lips. “You have a good career ahead of you. And I’m not trying to tell you what to do. I have a feeling you’re a lot like my brothers and have a tendency to do the opposite. I’m simply asking you to think. To decide if you’d be willing to give up your career for Rune. The truth is, we’re all set for life. We pick wars and challenge people, quite simply because we can. Our father built an empire and even if we lost everything tomorrow, we would have more than enough money to finish our days in comfort. Ask yourself if you can afford to do the same.”

Noor rose and I followed suit, shaking her hand. In the wake of her departure, I deflated.

My bubble of happiness had officially been burst. The conversation left me more shaken than it should.

To add to the party, someone I had never expected to hear from called my office, throwing me into even more of a spin.

Today was the day for unexpected meetings.

* * *

Adrien Wellington did not ask me to meet him in

an office building. No, people like him didn't do mundane things like work nine to five at a desk. Instead, they gathered to scheme and plan over expensive old drinks and cigars.

The private club on the Upper East Side was surprisingly busy in the middle of the afternoon of a week day. At the leather and velvet chairs and mahogany tables, people chatted while some were doing business and others worked on their laptops.

The hostess directed me to a private room where Adrien sat with two other men. I didn't have the faintest idea why he had asked me to come but I hadn't expected anyone else to be there.

I recognized one of them though. Harry Dumont.

Curious.

Initially, I had thought he wanted to talk about the gala, perhaps to issue threats. To warn me to keep my distance from his family. However, I might be completely wrong.

"What do I owe the pleasure of this meeting?" I asked, skipping pleasantries in an attempt to get to the point as fast as possible.

"Miss Byrne, welcome." Dumont said, though

none of the three men rose from their seats. Apparently, I wasn't worth the good manners. "Please take a seat."

He truly looked disgusting, reclining back on his chair as if he owned the place, flanked by his pals.

I rolled my eyes and addressed Adrien. "You interrupted my work day and asked me to come all the way here. I admit I came out of curiosity, but that will only take you so far. Will you tell me what you want or not?"

"Have you met Valentine Linwood?" Adrien gestured to the third man.

The name rang a bell and explained the vague familiarity of his face. He was a beloved politician with some sort of rivalry with Rune from his time as a judge.

"I haven't had the pleasure," I replied.

"The pleasure is all mine." His smile was charming, I could tell why the general public gravitated towards him.

Adrien cleared his throat. "Hill was a good target. I have to give you props. But it will end. Now."

I cocked my head, waiting for the punch line. "And why is that?"

With a sneer, the sorry excuse of a father leaned forward. "I will not allow my blood to be tainted by filth. Worse, I will not give him the chance to obtain the power of my family."

I chuckled. "Are you afraid to lose your monopoly for party tricks?"

He sneered. "Be funny if you must. But you will do as you're told."

He was more delusional than I imagined. He actually thought I would obey him.

"Well, I assume you have some sort of proposal." I gestured for him. "Let's hear it."

"In exchange for leaving him and keeping your parentage secret, you will receive one million dollars. I will also arrange for a job at the company so you don't have to keep working for the Hills."

He was being more generous than I thought him capable. However, I had some questions.

"You're making a lot of promises." I narrowed my eyes on him. "Did you ask your mother for permission beforehand? I think we all know the person who can make good on these terms isn't you. Therefore, I'm a bit skeptical."

A red flush climbed Adrien's face and neck. I hoped to see a few veins pop up, maybe even one

in his brain to rid me of him and this tedious conversation.

Dumont shook his head and winked at me. I refrained from appearing outwardly disgusted but barely.

Finally, Linwood decided to spot watching. He put a pacifying hand on Adrien's arm. "What my friend Wellington has failed to mention are the consequences to your lack of adherence to his rules." His voice had the quality of a radio host, strong yet charming. "Consequences which will be of course Rune's to suffer. His public image is vital to him and his ability to perform a good job. And Dumont is in a privileged position to persuade the masses."

I froze. "What are we talking about specifically?"

"Assassination of character. Public. Career ending," Linwood summarized.

"And you want me to leave him. That's it? You have nothing to say about the case against Mr. Dumont?" I asked, suspicious.

Dumont chuckled. "The case will run its course. It will be good for the Hill boy to lose. He needs a dose of reality and humility."

The gall of these people was incredible.

I looked once more at the man who had fathered me and left.

Apparently, I had a choice to make.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER deviant holiday party.

I had lost track of the amount of events Rune took me to this holiday season. Slowly but surely, the attention we garnered bothered me less and less as did the curious looks following us everywhere we went. We weren't news anymore and seeing no hints of scandal, people lost interest in us, turning their sights to juicier prey.

At this particular party, I was more nervous than usual. Clara was in attendance and I still

didn't know how I was supposed to act around her. I was in a relationship with her fiancé. What was my life?

When the Hills gathered to greet Clara and her father, I excused myself to go to the bathroom.

The dark, gleaming interior barely registered as I planted myself at the vanity and stared in the mirror. I barely recognized the reflection. Not because of the expensive clothes or the makeup, but my actions. And where they had taken me.

Was this really my true self?

Noor's words echoed in my head. Then Gabriel's. And finally, Adrien's.

Was I throwing everything away to be with Rune for a few more months?

I wished my mom would have been outraged when she found out. I wished she would have given me a clear path forward. Or an excuse. That was what my thoughts sounded like. I groaned. I didn't even know why I had run. Probably shame. Being with Rune made me the happiest version of myself. And even though it brought on all these ugly emotions, I could never regret him. I simply regretted not having more time with him.

The door of the bathroom opened and Clara entered. I offered her a tight smile and went to leave.

"Sorry, can I have a word?" Clara asked.

I froze, but nodded, keeping my chin high as I expected something catty and mean.

"I just wanted to say, when I accepted the arrangement between the Hills and my family, I didn't know Rune was involved with someone." Clara dropped her clutch on the vanity. "I would never want to come between you two and I feel terrible about this entire thing."

I breathed deep, releasing the tension I didn't know I had been holding in my entire body.

"I'm sorry I've been avoiding you." I smiled. "I didn't know how to deal with any of this."

Clara smiled back. "I completely understand. And I've been talking to my father to see what we can do. Our families have been friends for many years. There has to be another way of presenting a united front."

I nodded, unconvinced.

When I returned to the party, I almost stopped in my tracks. I could not catch a break tonight.

Valentine Linwood caught my eye from

across the room and gave me a sweet smile and a nod. As if we had some sort of agreement. My stomach dropped and the champagne I had been drinking earlier soured in my stomach.

Instead of joining Rune, turned around and left the floor of the party. I found a door leading outside and welcomed the chill winter air. The sky was heavy with clouds, threatening the fall of snow. I loved the view.

From up here, the city was alive. The lights and the clouds and the faint sounds of the people and cars all came together to paint a vivid picture. But it wasn't enough to quiet my mind.

My emotions were hard to contain. Too strong. Too painful.

I wanted things I couldn't have. Things that didn't belong to me. But even through my pain, I didn't regret becoming involved with Rune, and all the things we went through together.

The nights at his apartment with a view similar to this one. The little escapades in his office, thrilling and intense because we could be caught at any moment. The soft moments when he held me in his arms after playing my body and wringing every last drop of pleasure from me like only he knew how to do. The hours spent

talking about everything and nothing. About our lives and families and what we wanted from life. About work and the passion we shared for what we did. How well we worked together, our ways of thinking aligned and complementary. I would think fate had bound us if I believed in such things.

But he wasn't for me. I can't have him. Even if by some crazy luck, he shared the same feelings.

I wasn't alone for long.

I didn't turn around and he didn't say a word, but I knew it was Rune from his footsteps. I always knew when it was him. Would this awareness fade over time, or would I forever be haunted with knowledge of Rune Hill?

His hands landed on my shoulders, big and warm. He ran them down my chilled arms and I closed her eyes.

Why did it have to feel so right when he touched me? This world had chosen to be extremely cruel to me and I could not fathom the reason.

"You're cold," Rune said. "We should go in."

His voice was low, soothing, as if he understood I was going through some inner

turmoil without having to voice it.

I sighed and stared at his eyes. Clear and understanding. Filled with warmth.

I nodded.

* * *

I spent Christmas at my parents' house. In fact, I slept in my old room for the entire week.

Rune went on a brief skiing trip with his siblings as was their tradition, something Julian and Noor organized every year apparently.

And I took the time away to think. To distance myself from him, even though we still spoke every day.

My mom knew something was going on. Multiple times, I caught her staring at me from across the room with a wondering look. But she didn't pry. And I was glad she didn't.

I didn't want to break down in front of her again. She had been right, as was usually the case. I needed to decide for myself what my next step was going to be.

On the twenty-fifth, my birthday, Rune invited me out to dinner. I had all the excuses planned, wanting to spend the day with my parents and staying in, but he had invited

everyone and they were excited to go. I didn't have the heart to deny them.

Taylor and I got ready together in my room while I attempted to scrounge up some sort of excitement.

Rune picked us up in a limo. Taylor gushed and hugged him. Charles shook his hand and even my mom gave him a knowing smile. I didn't know how it was possible, but Rune had won over my family with little to no effort, simply by being his calm and reliable self.

Once my family was inside the car, he approached me, drinking in the sight of me as if he had been lost at sea and I was the safe harbor. How I wish I could be.

"I missed you," he said, taking hold of my waist to pull me closer.

I went without complaint, basking in the warmth of his body. In the way we fit as if we had been made to never be apart.

"We spoke this morning."

His eyes were shining with mischief and warmth, a rarity I was privileged to see more often. "It wasn't enough. I don't know how to sleep by myself anymore. You have to come to the ski trip next time."

My heart lurched but my smile didn't slip.

"I very much enjoyed watching Christmas movies on the couch with Taylor."

He laughed.

His kiss was soft and slow and tame. It felt like coming home. Like the first snow of the year. The first flowers of spring.

When we pulled apart, he leaned his forehead on mine.

"We should go before your mom comes looking for us. I don't want to be spanked before dinner."

I laughed. "Apparently, you have won her over. She would probably blame me for keeping you."

He winked and kissed my temple.

* * *

The restaurant was dark when we stepped up to the entrance.

I turned to frown at Rune—perhaps he had confused the address—but he wasn't beside me anymore. Neither was my family. They were slipping in.

Then, the lights came on and everyone came out yelling "Surprise!".

I laughed. They had caught me completely by surprise.

My parents smiled among the crowd. Jamie and my other college friends were here. So were my roommates. People from the firm and the lunch friends. Several of the Hill siblings. It was amazing. Everyone I cared about in the same space.

Rune was the first to approach me.

“Thank you,” I said.

We didn’t have more time to talk as I was swept into hugs and happy birthday wishes.

* * *

“What do you think?” Rune smiled, looping an arm around my waist.

Instinctively, my body melted into his and my lips stretched in a matching smile.

“I love it. Thank you for doing this.”

“No problem.” He kissed my temple. “I hope being with your loved ones helps with whatever has been happening in your head.”

I pulled back to see his face, frowning. “What do you mean?”

He watched me as if trying to read my thoughts, his face serious and almost sad. “You’ve

been pulling away. Even when we talk every day, I can feel the distance and I don't know what to do to stop it."

I bit my lip, feeling guilty. Of course, he had noticed. He was always paying attention, even when he was physically distant.

"I'm sorry I let you feel that way instead of talking to you directly."

I took a step back, pulling away from his arms. It was cold.

Rune frowned, waiting and giving me time to speak. But he was clearly bracing for my words. As he should be. What I was about to do would crush me. Crush both of us.

I took a deep breath and decided to get it over with. This was no time to be a coward.

"The truth is, this was a beautiful dream but it's not realistic. There is no future for us. Your engagement is still happening and I would never want to come between you and your family. This relationship has been a surprise for me. It's been amazing and I will never forget it. But I think it's time to say goodbye."

Rune opened and closed his mouth multiple times as if he regretted the words before he could speak them. Or perhaps I had caught him

completely off guard and he had no idea of what to say to me.

My heart was in shambles for putting him in this position. I believed everything I was saying. I wasn't simply doing this because Adrien Wellington had scared me with his threats. I had no intention of working for him or his company and I was definitely not touching any of his money.

But the threats to Rune's well-being and career were real. And the only way to stop them was by knowing the reason behind them.

Even if there was no going back from what I was doing right now.

Rune's face hardened, and I knew his words were going to hurt. It was alright. I was ready for them.

"It's your decision." He took another step back as if being in my vicinity was too toxic for him. "I'm not going to beg you to stay with me. To believe in us. I think I've done enough of that. And if you can walk away from this—from me—this easily, maybe it's for the best. Maybe you don't feel as strongly for me as I do for you."

My eyes stung with unshed tears. I didn't hide my pain. I didn't need to do that with Rune.

But I held strong, never lowering my head. I didn't want this to be easier on me. I saw his pain just as he did mine. Even if he didn't understand why I had to do this.

"Enjoy the rest of your party."

He walked away and I closed my eyes. The tears I had been holding finally fell down my cheeks. I couldn't bear to see him with his back to me, possibly walking away for the last time.

I just ruined the best thing to ever happen to me.

Morrigan found me shortly after, as I was cleaning up my tears.

He enveloped me in his arms. "Tell me what's going on."

"We broke up." I gulped. "I broke it off."

"Why?" Morrigan cupped my shoulders, shaking me a little. "You're in love with him. Why would you do this?"

I pushed his hands away and shook my head. "It was time. It was going to happen sooner or later. We were only deluding ourselves."

Morrigan crossed his arms. "I don't believe you. Something happened."

I shook my head again. "Go. Don't leave him alone."

PASSION OF YEARNING

Morrigan wanted to keep arguing, it was written all over his face. Ultimately, his loyalty to his twin won and he followed Rune.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I ALLOWED MYSELF TO WALLOW in self-pity until the new year.

My roommates had gone out of town to be with their families, and since I didn't want to be alone, I continued the trend I'd started on Christmas and I moved myself temporarily to my parent's house. With Taylor home from college, it was like we were teenagers again. I soaked in all the comfort my family provided.

To my surprise, none of them hovered or asked questions, as if they sensed the darkness of

my mood.

On New Year's Eve, my phone lit up with a text message from Rune. I jumped out of the couch when I saw his name on my phone. Sprinting to the bedroom, I only opened the message behind my closed door. Distantly, I could hear Taylor yelling in confusion, asking what was going on.

Rune: Happy New Year. Have fun tonight.

I sagged against the door and stumbled to the bed, falling face first on the comforter.

Me: Happy New Year. Taylor and I are in for a very exciting and fun rom-com marathon tonight.

I bit my lip after pressing send, trying to think of anything else to say. But nothing came out. He didn't text me back either.

Several of my friends called and texted to make plans, to invite me to parties, but I turned them all down. I wasn't in the mood. I wanted to finish wallowing and eating my feelings in the

form of my mom's delicious food. For the first time in a very long time, the idea of a fun night of drinks and dancing didn't appeal to me. I was preparing for war.

On January first, I called Noor Hill.

* * *

By the time February rolled around, I had settled. Now, wiping my sweaty palms on the sides of my skirt as I walked from my office to the meeting room, an entirely new set of nerves contorted my insides.

This was it. Today was the point of no return. Once this cat was out of the bag, there would be no wrangling it back in.

Morrigan exited his office as a passed by his door, matching my pace.

"It's time," he said. "Everyone is here, just like you asked."

I nodded.

"Are you sure about this?"

I glanced at him. His posture was relaxed but the crease between his brows belied his worry.

"I have to," I said.

He stopped before a closed door, facing me. "You don't. Rune can survive not winning one

case. This will change everything for you.”

Morrigan was one of the biggest surprises of the last few months. He had become one of my closest friends and such an important part of my life.

I squeezed his arm. “I want to do this. Not only for him, but for me as well.”

He gave me a long, assessing look. “Then by all means.” He opened the door for me with a flourish.

Lifting my head high and pushing my shoulders back, I stepped into the room.

On the side of the long table closest to me, Rune sat with Ginny. Dumont and his lawyer occupied the opposite side. Silence reigned in the room.

Dumont narrowed his eyes upon seeing me. “Is this going to take long? I’m losing money sitting around like this. I know you people couldn’t possibly understand,” he sneered. “But some of us actually have valuable things to do.”

“I’m sorry for the delay,” I said, no hint of apology in my voice. “One more moment and we will be ready to begin.”

Rune rose and took me by the arm to just outside the door where the others couldn’t hear

us. Morrigan stood close by.

“What are you doing here?” Rune demanded. “Why is Morrigan setting up meetings with my clients without my knowledge?”

I was momentarily at a loss for words. It had been too long since I had the opportunity to openly admire him. To stand close and bask in the full effect of his presence.

To no one’s surprise, he looked good. Really good. His navy suit highlighted the breadth of his shoulders. And even though he was frowning—because he hated being out of the loop on things—his face was as painfully handsome as ever.

I cleared my throat, trying to dispel the effect he had on me. “It will all make sense in a moment. Please, let me do the talking in there.”

When he turned to Morrigan, his brother simply said, “Let it happen, man. You’ll be happy you did.”

A muscle feathered on Rune’s jaw as he inspected first his brother and then me. He was confused and certainly more than a bit mad. It was fine. Hopefully, in a moment, when he understood what I intended, he wouldn’t be as angry.

Reentering the room, I leaned down next to Ginny. Dumont and his lawyer whispered to each other with their hands covering their mouths. I ignored them. Whatever they thought they were planning was about to become inconsequential.

"Ginny," I said. "I want you to think of the moment when you found Mr. Dumont in a compromising position in his office. Think of the two conversations he had and keep them in mind as clearly as possible. Can you do that?"

Ginny turned to Rune, but his eyes were on me. She agreed and I rose to my full height.

Rune blocked my path. "If you're thinking of doing what I'm thinking. Don't. It's not worth it."

I gave him a small smile. "You let me worry about what's worth it."

I turned to address Dumont and his lawyer.

"*Deviant* powers aren't admissible in court as evidence as we have no way to prove the veracity of the projections or illusions. However, I believe we can agree, Mr. Dumont, that certain images speak louder than words, and the courts aren't the only place where justice is served."

He narrowed his eyes. Up until now, he'd thought he had it in the bag, but he was in for the

surprise of his life.

I asked Ginny to turn her chair to the blank wall and stepped behind her.

“Please try to relax,” I instructed. “I’m going to touch your temples. Just keep the memory in focus. The light will do the rest.”

Her eyes widened as she realized what was happening and she nodded.

The Wellington’s *deviant* specialty was projecting images from either their own minds, or the minds of others. What my dearest grandmother had failed to notice was that I might have come to my *deviant* powers a little later in childhood, but when they emerged, it was with the full power of their bloodline.

Back then, it had taken my mother countless conversations for me to agree to hide the ability. However, I had thanked her for the decision for all of my adult life. Taylor had been my willing subject over the years, until I learned to master it.

I knew my eyes had become reflective like mirrors when the images appeared, projected on the wall in front of me. It was just like a film, with the edges blurred, but the necessary details in stark highlight. The voices were muffled, but enough of the conversations could be heard to

glean its content.

The disgusting sexual display at his place of work had barely begun when Dumont launched himself off his chair.

“Enough.” His face was flushed as he reached for me.

I blinked and the images stopped.

His attorney held him back, just as Rune stepped in front of me, his face hard daring him to take another threatening step towards me.

“Did you get all that?” I asked Morrigan.

He checked his phone where he could see the images from the camera hidden on the farther side of the room. His grin was evil. “All of it.”

“While these images don’t serve as evidence,” I told Dumont. “They would certainly cause quite the stir in the media. What do you say? Are you going to continue wasting our time, or are you settling?” I smiled at him. “Oh, and if your friend Linwood would like a private demonstration, we are more than welcome to provide.”

We already had people with dirt on him who were willing to share their memories.

The threat held.

Dumont stormed out of the room.

Ginny was shaking when she squeezed my

hand. "Thank you." It was probably a relief to be proven right after suffering a smear campaign and being called a liar on all news outlets.

Rune nodded to Morrigan who led Ginny and Dumont's lawyer out, leaving Rune and I alone in the meeting room.

"You know he's going to tattle to Wellington, right?"

Rune rested his back against the table, hands in his pockets, casual as can be. Meanwhile, my heart was racing and I was sweating, the complete opposite of casual.

I chuckled. "I wish I could be a fly on the wall when they hear about this. My dearest grandmother is going to be livid."

"Have you been paying attention to the news?" Rune's voice was an aphrodisiac to me, especially when it lowered like this.

I went to the windows, wishing the city would help calm me down. "You know, I've been pretty busy with the new clients."

"Have you seen it or not?"

I sighed. "Yes."

"I wouldn't want there to be misunderstandings regarding my stance on the matter. Or to reinforce your reasons for breaking

up with me.”

My lips curled up involuntarily. He had officially broken off the engagement a couple of days after Christmas. The tabloids had speculated as to the reasons and my name had been mentioned a couple of times next to pictures of the two of us at events. I hadn’t seen any more comments from him or his family on the matter.

However, it was time to dispel this notion that I had created distance between us because of the engagement. It had been an unpleasant situation for sure, but not the whole story.

I turned my back to the city and focused on the extraordinary man before me.

“Did you know your dad and your sister, on separate occasions, both approached me to ask if I was sure I wanted to be with you, considering the exposure it would bring me?”

His face darkened. “My own family is against me. Did they seriously convince you to do it?”

I shook my head. “They were simply looking out for me and being nice. And I didn’t break up with you because of them or even the engagement. I did it to protect you.”

“From what?”

“Adrien was afraid you were attempting to steal his special bloodline.” I started pacing in front of the table as I explained the content of the conversation I had with him, Dumont, and Linwood. “Or at least that was their claim. But I know there had to be more to the story.”

Rune rose to his full height, letting go of all pretenses of being at ease. He ate up the distance between us, halting close. Too close for me to think through the fog in my mind.

“Since when do you care what he thinks?” Rune demanded.

“When Noor and I first spoke, she hinted at a bigger danger to you and the family. I needed to distance myself from you to keep Adrien and his friends at bay while I figured this out.”

He ran one hand through his hair. And when I tracked the movement almost hungrily, I realized I was touch-starved. For him. Always him. The small distance between our bodies felt insurmountable, and him not touching me, criminal.

I focused on the story, though he made it almost impossible to form coherent sentences.

“I talked to Noor again and then your parents as well. They were reluctant to share anything

with me until I revealed my powers to them and how I could use them to help you. After that, they opened up about your dad's former business partner, Tobias James, and all the things he has been doing to undermine him and the family."

Tobias James had been the force behind Linwood's political threats and then Adrien's sudden interest in protecting his legacy. He had wanted to exact some petty revenge on Gabriel Hill and his family.

"You talked to my sister? And my parents?" Rune shook his head as if trying to wrap his mind around everything I had said. "And they only helped you after you told them about your powers."

It wasn't a question but I still nodded. "They were protecting their secrets. I understand."

"No." Rune was adamant. "You know I never had any interest in that, right? Even though I suspected it all along?"

"You did?"

He cupped the side of my neck. "Your eyes turned silver when we were in bed once and after knowing who your birth father is, it was a logical conclusion."

I sighed holding on to his wrists.

“Why go to all this trouble, though?” Rune asked. His voice sounded frustrated. “Why didn’t you just talk to me?”

“I didn’t even know if any of this was fixable. Especially our relationship. If Linwood went ahead with his threats, they would have dragged you through the media. Your reputation and the trust your clients put in you is important to you. I love you too much to allow you to be hurt when I can do something to prevent it.”

His eyes widened and he took my arms, cutting off the stream of words. With such intensity focused on me, I simply stopped and stared at him, afraid of what he was going to say.

“Say it again,” Rune asked.

I blinked. “What?”

“What you just said. Say it again.”

Oh. I softened. I hadn’t intended for it to come out this way. Hopefully, he was happy and not mad at me for blurting it out when we weren’t even together anymore.

“I love you,” I repeated.

“Again.”

“Rune.”

“Just one more time.” He cupped my face.

“I love you.”

He kissed me. His familiar, soft lips fit against mine as if they had been molded to be together by whatever higher being had crafted this universe. He was hungry and insistent and when I gasped at the intensity of the kiss, Rune took full advantage to tangle his tongue with mine. I was high on the taste of him, the feel of his hands on my neck, my arms, my waist.

“Are you done running from me?” He said against my lips.

I pushed on his hard chest, but he was glued to me and didn’t move an inch. Good. This was where he belonged. I pulled back until I could see his face.

“I was trying to protect you.”

“I don’t need protecting. I need you. Do you know why? Because I’ve been miserable without you. You swept into my life, made me fall for you, and then disappeared and nothing made sense anymore without you.”

My shin trembled.

“I love you, Ruby. In case it wasn’t obvious.”

I sealed his lips with mine, sighing contently.

He kissed the sides of my mouth and then my nose, as if mapping my entire face, getting

reacquainted with me after more than a month apart.

“No more running.” Rune’s forehead rested against mine as we stared into each other’s eyes. “Even to protect me. We face things together.”

I nodded.

“Promise me,” he insisted.

“I promise.”

EPILOGUE

Six months later

SUMMER HAD ARRIVED IN THE city and I could not have been happier. Sometimes, I had to remind myself I hadn't dreamed these last few months.

I gazed out at the sea. Standing on the edge between the backyard of the Hills' house and the beach, I sipped from my sweet cocktail. Rune's arms wrapped around my waist and he kissed the side of my neck. I smiled up at him.

We had been spending a lot of our summer

weekends here, enjoying the pool and the beach. At first, I had been reluctant. Summers were extremely popular over here and family was always around. But we were also given space and alone time whenever we wanted it.

With school ending, Rune's niece Bee also spent a lot of time with her grandparents and I loved chatting with her. She was funny and sweet, with a typical teenager snark in the mix.

Today, the Hills weren't the only ones at the house. My half-brother had joined us. Yes, my mind was still not used to that.

After the fatidic meeting where I had revealed my powers, the news spread like wildfire. As to be expected. What I didn't predict was for one of Adrien's sons to reach out wanting to meet me. Sebastian was Taylor's age and I had to admit it had endeared him to me almost immediately.

At first, I didn't know what to expect of him. Perhaps, I had envisioned him to be snobbish like his father and grandmother, but he was actually quite nice and down to earth. And I had been enjoying spending time with him and getting to know him.

Meeting as adults, we didn't know what our

sibling dynamic was like but we were discovering how to be friends, which I was more than happy with.

Today, he had joined me and the Hills for lunch. It was the first time he hung out with the entire family but he was quite similar to me in regards to being social. He spoke to everyone and didn't appear to be intimidated by their questions, no matter how invasive they were.

And there had been some invasive questions. The family had grown quite protective of me, especially now that I was a high commodity and people were coming out of the woodwork wanting something from me. Not only previous acquaintances, but people wanting in on the Wellington's business. Having access to their powers was a juicy opportunity for business rivals and adversaries. It was hard to parse through all the new interest, but Rune and his family had been of great help.

Sebastian had taken it all in stride, answering them without cowering. I think they respected him for it, which I was grateful for.

His brother didn't share the same interest. According to Sebastian, Santiago—who was older—was firmly under their grandmother's

control. He was being trained to be her successor where her son had failed.

“I can feel you thinking your deep thoughts,” Rune said against my skin.

“I’m just happy to be here with you.”

He trailed kisses to my ear and then turned me in his arms to take my mouth. I ran my hands through his hair and smiled against his lips.

“Have I told you I love you?” He asked in between small kisses.

I pretended to think. “I don’t remember. You’ll have to remind me.”

He grinned and kissed me again. “I love you.” Kiss. “I love you.” Kiss. “I love you.”

When he was done, I was breathless.

“I think I got it now,” I gasped.

When he chuckled, I pulled at the hair at the back of his head.

He ran his nose over mine maintaining eye contact.

“I’m so glad I went out that night.”

I smiled. “Me too.”

Rune released me from his embrace and took my hand to return to the patio where the others were gathered.

PASSION OF YEARNING

On the far side of the backyard, Dove was slipping away towards the pool deck, followed loosely by Julian.

Huh.

I glance at Rune. "Where are they going?"

Rune's speculative gaze piqued my interest even more.

"I don't know," he said. "But I'm not going to ask."

I shrugged and we shared a laugh.

Thanks for reading!

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