

Missing Chapter of Wilde & Deadly

This chapter was supposed to appear between chapters 16 and 17.

The Plaza Hotel's grand ballroom was a masterpiece of old-money grandeur—towering chandeliers casting warm golden light, candlelit tables arranged with perfect symmetry, and a string quartet playing softly beneath the low hum of conversation. The scent of expensive perfume and aged bourbon lingered in the air.

It was all a distraction.

Rowan barely registered the opulence. Her focus was singular: find Atlas Frost, figure out what the hell he was up to, and get out.

She scanned the room with the same tactical precision she used in a firefight. Threat assessment. Exit routes. Security presence. The men stationed around the perimeter weren't hotel staff. Private detail—discreet, armed, and positioned at every entrance. Definitely Frost's people.

Beside her, Davey exuded effortless confidence in his tailored tux, every inch the powerful CEO. The cut of his suit masked the tension in his shoulders, but Rowan knew better. His posture was too measured, his jaw set just a little too tight.

He led them toward a table near the edge of the ballroom, one that offered a clear vantage point without inviting scrutiny—close enough to track movement, far enough from the stage to avoid drawing direct attention. His stride was unhurried, his expression smooth, but Rowan caught the telltale flex of his fingers against his glass. A quiet, controlled tension.

Rowan swept her gaze over the exits, cataloging security. No ideal escape route—too many bodies, too many eyes—but better than being trapped in the center with no way out.

She spotted Sabin, Dominic, and Liam moving through the crowd, dressed as catering staff. Invisible, but listening. Watching.

They'd passed Brody laughing it up at the hotel bar, surrounded by a flock of women dripping in glittery fabric and jewels.

Sullivan stood at the ballroom entrance, playing the part of hotel security, looking every bit like a bouncer.

And Elliot was in their ear, a steady, composed voice feeding them information through their comms.

"Still no sign of Frost," Elliot murmured. "But keep your eyes open. He'll make an entrance."

Rowan exhaled slowly. Anticipation crawled up her spine; the waiting was always worse than the action.

And then, the hush.

A ripple through the crowd, subtle but unmistakable. Conversations faltered mid-sentence, and laughter dulled to a murmur. A shift in energy, the kind that came not with noise but with *presence*.

Rowan followed everyone's gaze to the grand entrance.

And there he was.

Atlas Frost.

Tall, composed, dressed in a deep midnight-blue tux that screamed understated dominance. He didn't walk into a room—he commanded it. White teeth flashed against tawny brown skin, his icy sea-green eyes cutting through the room like a blade. His black hair, sleek and perfectly styled, gleamed under the chandeliers. He was beautiful in the way a cobra was—elegant, mesmerizing, and coiled with barely restrained lethality. He knew all the eyes were on him, welcomed the attention, let it feed the illusion he so carefully cultivated. The perfect philanthropist, the generous billionaire, the man who could change the world with a stroke of his pen.

Rowan's pulse ticked up.

Then she saw who was on his arm.

Her breath stalled.

The world narrowed. The music blurred into a distant hum, the glittering ballroom suddenly too bright, too sharp.

Rue.

Her sister.

Standing beside the man responsible for the contract on Davey's life.

A different kind of adrenaline spiked through her system. Her muscles coiled, her vision narrowed. The need to move, to act, warred against the cold, logical part of her that screamed at her to stay still.

Sabin's voice crackled in her ear, laced with amusement. "Well, now. That's interesting."

Davey's breath had gone slow and measured, the way it did right before a fight.

Elliot swore, a sharp inhale hissing through his mic—barely audible but unmistakable. His voice was tight, clipped. "What the hell is she doing with him?"

Rowan swallowed hard against the emotions clawing at her throat. "I don't know."

Rue looked poised, confident, utterly at ease in a dark emerald gown that hugged her frame. Her honey-blond hair was swept into an elegant twist, not a strand out of place. She moved through the ballroom like she belonged there, nodding graciously at passing billionaires, her expression smooth.

Like this was just another night.

Like she wasn't standing beside a man who ordered assassinations as easily as most people ordered wine.

Elliot's voice came again, quieter now, frustration layered beneath something else. "Tell me she's not in on this."

Rowan's hands curled into fists. "She's not."

Then, as if she felt Rowan's stare, Rue turned slightly.

Their eyes met.

And for a second—just one second—the mask slipped.

Her sister's smile faltered.

First came recognition.

Then irritation.

What the hell are you doing here? It was written all over Rue's face.

Then, something else. A flicker of realization. Wariness.

"Yes," Rowan wanted to shout at her. *"This is dangerous. Get out of here!"*

Dammit. Rue always danced too close to chaos, but this was taking it a step too far.

Frost murmured something against Rue's ear. She tilted her head toward him, listening, before turning back to the room, her perfect, effortless smile returning as if nothing had happened.

Rowan's stomach tightened. A slow, cold knot of understanding.

This wasn't a coincidence.

Frost knew exactly who Rue was.

And worse—he'd known Rowan would be here.

A move made long before she stepped into the ballroom. A game she hadn't even realized she was already playing.

Davey leaned in slightly, voice low so only she could hear. "Don't react."

She clenched her jaw so hard it hurt.

Davey kept his gaze outwardly neutral, but his hand found hers beneath the table, pressing briefly against her palm. A silent question.

You good?

She inhaled slowly. No, she was not. But she'd pull it together.

Every instinct screamed at her to move, to grab Rue and get her the hell out of there. But she didn't move.

Across the room, Frost lifted his glass in a silent toast, a smirk playing at the edges of his mouth. Yeah, this was all just a big chess match to him, and he knew he was three moves ahead.

Then, with calculated ease, he turned and started toward them.

Rowan straightened, tension coiling tight in her muscles. Every instinct screamed at her to move, to strike first. Not yet. Not until she knew her strike would be deadly.

She barely had time to school her features into a carefully neutral smile before he arrived.

"David Wilde." Frost's voice was smooth as ever as he extended a hand, his watch catching the light from the chandeliers. The movement was effortless, deliberate—a play, not a courtesy.

Expression blandly unreadable, Davey ignored the offered hand. "Not long enough."

"Ah, ever the charmer." Frost's smirk widened, his amusement as polished as his tux as he easily shifted gears. He turned those pale, calculating eyes on Rowan. "And you must be the infamous Rowan Bristow. I've heard quite a bit about you."

Rowan met his gaze without flinching. “That doesn’t surprise me. Men like you love to talk.”

Frost let out a soft, indulgent laugh like she’d just confirmed something he already suspected. “Oh, I do like you.”

Beside him, Rue stiffened. “Atlas—”

He touched her back lightly in a subtle, possessive motion. “Forgive me. Where are my manners?” He gestured to Rue as if presenting her. “I believe you know my lovely date, Miss Bristow.”

Rowan forced her jaw to unclench. “I wasn’t aware you two were acquainted.”

Rue lifted her chin. “Frost Industries is funding my next expedition.”

Rowan’s gaze darkened. “So you’re his trophy now?”

Rue’s eyes flashed. “Says the woman playing arm candy for a Wilde.”

Frost let out a quiet laugh. “Ah, family. Always so complicated.” His smirk deepened as his gaze flicked between them. “Loyalty. Expectations. Blood. It never quite works out the way it should, does it?”

Rue stiffened. Just a fraction, but Rowan saw it. Felt it. A tension that hadn’t been there before.

Frost, of course, noticed too. His smirk lingered a second longer like he was savoring the moment, letting it breathe. Letting the words sink in.

Then, with the same easy confidence, he turned back to Davey. “I must admit, I’m surprised to see you here, David.” His pale eyes gleamed, sharp with calculation. “Given recent... business matters, I would have thought you’d be otherwise occupied.”

Davey’s smile was slow and lethally polite. “You know, I was just thinking the same about you. You’ve made some interesting alliances lately.”

Frost hummed, swirling the amber in his glass. “As have you.” He flicked a glance at Rowan, smirk deepening. “Strange bedfellows, indeed.”

Davey lifted his drink slightly in a mocking toast. “Some deals make more sense than others, though. Don’t you think?”

Frost’s fingers curled against his glass, but his expression remained perfectly composed. “That depends on who’s calling the shots.”

Rowan ignored them both. Davey could handle Frost—she knew that much. But Rue? Rue was still standing beside him. Still looking at him like he was just another man in a suit instead of the bastard who paid for people to disappear.

She needed to get her out. Now.

But Rue was watching the exchange, her expression shifting—slowly, piece by piece—as if she was only just now realizing this wasn’t pleasantries and business small talk. Her gaze flicked between them, widening as she tracked the conversational tennis match. She was an agent of chaos, but she wasn’t clueless. She was catching up.

Rowan’s fingers twitched, every muscle primed for movement. If she stayed here another second, she was going to put a knife between Frost’s ribs.

Instead, she turned to Rue, voice low and sharp. “Come with me.”

Rue frowned. “What?”

Rowan grabbed her wrist, not hard, just enough to make it clear she wasn’t asking.

“Bathroom. Now.”

Rue hesitated, glancing at Frost.

Frost’s lips twitched. “Oh, don’t let me keep you.”

Rowan was already moving, pulling Rue along. She felt Frost’s gaze on her back, but she didn’t care.

This wasn’t new. She’d been dragging Rue out of trouble her entire damn life.

Yanking her back from the edge of the mountain when she got too close, laughing, fearless, daring the wind to take her. Catching her sneaking out of the barracks at sixteen, tangled up in one of their dad’s trainees—some idiot with more muscle than sense who thought he could handle her. Pulling her out of a bar in Laramie after she hustled a group of off-duty Marines at pool and nearly got a broken nose for it. Hauling her out of a wrecked ATV when she swore she could take that jump.

Rue was always chasing the rush. And Rowan was always one step behind, catching her before she hit the ground.

But this? This was next-level stupid.

Of all the places, of all the people, of all the damn messes—she had to pick Atlas fucking Frost?

The thought burned as Rowan shoved open the bathroom door, barely resisting the urge to slam it behind them. She spun on Rue, fury crackling through her. “Of all the goddamn reckless things you’ve done, *this* is at the top of the list. What the fuck are you doing with him?”

“Jesus, Rowan.” Scowling, Rue ripped her arm away. “I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“The hell you don’t.” Rowan swept a quick glance at the stalls—empty. Good. Inhaling slowly, she planted her hands on the marble counter, grounding herself.

Stay in control.

That was always a tall order when it came to dealing with her sister.

“You’re standing next to Atlas Frost like you belong there, and you think you don’t need to explain yourself?” Her voice was low, sharp. “At least tell me you know who he is.”

“Yes. A billionaire who is paying me a lot of money to take some scientists to Antarctica.”

Rue let out an irritated breath and pulled a tube of lipstick from her clutch, moving over to the mirror to reapply. “You’re being dramatic.”

God, she was brushing this off. Not taking it seriously. It was so patently *Rue*. Rowan wanted to throw her over her shoulder, haul her to the airport, and put her on the first plane back to Wyoming. Let their dad deal with her for once. But that wasn’t going to happen without Rue making a big scene.

So she snatched the lipstick out of Rue’s hand. “Don’t act like this isn’t a big deal.”

“Oh my God.” Rue rolled her eyes and swiped the tube back. “You think *everything* is a big deal. It’s just business.”

“C’mon, you’re not stupid, Rue. You don’t actually believe this is just business for him. He’s playing games. With Davey, with me, and now with you. He’s fucking with us.”

Rue hesitated for just a fraction of a second, just long enough for Rowan to see the crack in her armor. But then she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, her expression cooling. The Bristow mask.

“Not everyone I work with is a saint, Rowan.” Without missing a beat, she smiled with exaggerated sweetness and added, “You’d know all about that.”

“That’s a low blow.”

“Is it?” Rue’s laugh was sharp and bitter as she dropped her lipstick back into the tiny purse and snapped it closed. “You don’t get to talk to me like I’m the reckless one. You don’t get to drag me into a bathroom and demand answers when you disappeared on *us*.”

Rowan exhaled slowly. “I left to protect you. I—”

“No,” she said, cutting off the explanation. “You didn’t leave to protect me. Or Mom. Or Dad. You can tell yourself that, but you left because it was easier.”

The word hit like a blade to the ribs—sharp, deep, and impossible to ignore.

“You think you’re the only one who knows how to survive? That you’re the only one who can handle dangerous people?” Rue took a step closer, fury rolling off her in waves. “I’m not some kid who needs you to come save me, Rowan. You *left*. You walked out on our family, on me, and now you think you get a say in my life? That you get to decide who I work with?”

For a long moment, they just stared at each other.

Rue’s expression was unreadable, but Rowan knew her too well. The squared shoulders, the barely-there shift of her weight. Not defensive. Not dismissive. Calculating.

It hit Rowan all at once—Rue wasn’t just being stubborn. She was hiding something.

The tension in her gut tightened, a slow, creeping certainty.

“You suspect something, don’t you?” She took a step closer. “What has he done? Has he hurt you?”

“No!” The protest came too fast, too sharp to be the truth. “He’s been a complete gentleman.”

Rowan didn’t believe that for a second. Not because she thought Rue was lying, but because she knew how good people like Atlas Frost were at appearing harmless.

“Blackmail then?”

Rue let out an exasperated breath, throwing up a hand. “See, this right here? This...” She gestured vaguely at the air like she was searching for the right words. “This *paranoia* of yours? It’s exactly why I’ve never wanted to be part of your world. Part of Dad’s world. I like to believe people are generally good.”

“It’s not paranoia. And you can believe whatever the hell you want, but—” Rowan stopped short, exhaling slowly, forcing a breath into her lungs.

Calm. Stay in control.

“It doesn’t change the fact there are people in this world who take and use and destroy others to further their own ambitions. That’s Atlas Frost. And I don’t care how mad you are at

me. I don't care how much you want to prove that you don't need my help. I am *not* letting you get tangled up with him."

"Oh God, you really think you get to say that, don't you?" She let out a short, humorless laugh, then took a step back. "Well, you don't." Her voice rose, heat creeping into every syllable. "You don't get to play the big sister card when you weren't there when I needed you."

Rowan felt the words like a blow to the ribs. Sharp, deep, impossible to ignore.

When I needed you.

The words looped around her heart and tightened. When? When had Rue needed her?

She opened her mouth to ask—

The bathroom door swung open.

A woman stepped inside, taking one look at them— Rue stiff with anger, Rowan standing too close, the air still crackling between them— and immediately ducked back out, clearly wanting nothing to do with whatever was happening.

Rue exhaled sharply, rolling her shoulders as she backed up a step. "I have to get back."

Rowan clenched her teeth so hard it sent a spike of pain through her jaw. "Rue, just—"

"I *have* to."

Rowan's throat went tight. She could push harder. She could demand answers, could keep fighting until Rue cracked—until she admitted whatever had her keeping such dangerous company.

But if she pushed too hard, she knew exactly what would happen. They both had their father's brand of stubbornness, and neither of them knew how to back down.

Rue would dig in. Shut her out completely.

And she couldn't risk that.

So she forced herself to take a step back. Forced her hands to unclench. Forced her voice to stay even. "Just... be careful."

Rue hesitated for just a fraction of a second. Then she nodded once, turned, and pushed out the door without another word.

Rowan didn't move right away. She just stared at the door, Rue's words echoing in her head.

When I needed you.

Dammit.

Her fingers curled against the marble counter as she fought to shove down the frustration, the guilt, and the gnawing certainty that whatever Rue was caught up in, it wasn't just reckless. It was dangerous.

You weren't there when I needed you.

Well, she was here now.

And if Rue wouldn't— or couldn't— protect herself, Rowan damn well would.

She blew out a sharp breath and shoved down the urge to slam her fist into something. Then she pushed off the sink and strode after her pain-in-the-ass sister.