

Chapter Ten

Jules

I excuse myself to visit the ladies' room so that I can fix any evidence of my make-out session with Dimitri. It's a good thing, too. My lips are swollen from his kiss — my lipstick smeared all over my face. My cheeks are flushed, my hair is mussed, and my dress is riding down low in the front.

I pretend not to notice the sidelong looks from the other women in the bathroom as I finger-comb the tangles out of my hair and apply fresh lipstick. Once I'm presentable, I reenter the ballroom and cast around with a flutter of nerves in my belly.

It's fine, I tell myself. I belong here just as much as anybody. No one knows that I almost had sex in the courtyard with my boss.

I'm just about to head to the bar to get another drink when I feel a tingle along the back of my neck and Dimitri's warm hand along my spine.

"You are beautiful," he rumbles in my ear, pressing his fingertips into the small of my back and sending a fresh surge of heat spilling into my belly.

Okay, so the uncontrolled feelings inside me aren't doing much to ease my nerves, but I hold my head a little higher as Dimitri steers me toward our table.

The waitstaff is preparing to serve dinner, and the guests are beginning to find their seats. I spot Dimitri's name scrawled in a delicate hand on a white card at the table, and to my astonishment, there's a little card next to his that reads "Julianna Navarro, Guest."

I blink as Dimitri pulls out my chair. The other men at the table barely spare a glance my way as I sit down, but when Dimitri takes the seat beside me, they all gruffly introduce themselves.

One is a hedge-fund manager for some big financial service company. The rest are founders of tech startups I've never even heard of.

"God, the help in this place is *awful*," grumbles a man in a tuxedo, pulling out the seat next to mine and flopping down into it.

He looks to be around Dimitri's age — probably in his early thirties — and his straight copper hair is gelled in a severe windswept style. His bow tie hangs undone around his neck, and

he's tucking a vape pen into his breast pocket. "I asked for a scotch and soda twenty minutes ago and nothing!"

"I'm sure they're just busy," says Dimitri coolly.

"Not busy doing their *jobs*," the man guffaws. He withdraws the vape pen and takes a short drag. "Someone puked all over the bathroom floor, and no one's even cleaned it up." He shakes his head. "This place is a dump."

I raise my eyebrows and glance at the man's name placard. It just says "Ian Gray, Influencer," and my stomach twists at the thought of how these people would treat me if my name card included what I do for a living.

"I'm staying at the resort," says the hedge-fund manager, who looks to be in his mid-fifties. "Do you know they'll only change your linens every three days unless you specifically request otherwise? I asked for extra towels when I first arrived . . . I had to call the front desk four times!"

"They're probably understaffed, just like everywhere else," chimes in one of the startup guys.

The hedge-fund manager snorts. "If a five-star resort can't find help, then we're all well and truly fucked."

The man called Ian Gray shakes his head. "I swear, the pandemic was an absolute *disaster* for the service sector. Nobody wants to work anymore — not even for a wildly overinflated wage."

"Wildly overinflated?" I repeat before I can stop myself.

The chatter at the table dies down immediately, and the men's gazes swivel over to me. I get the feeling this is the first time they've really noticed me, and I can sense Dimitri's eyes boring into the side of my head.

"Wages aren't overinflated — at least not here," I continue. "The cost of living in Colorado is way higher than the national average. Rent alone has gotten ridiculous. People can hardly afford to live here."

"That's why you don't rent," Ian scoffs, a slow grin spreading across his face as he glances over my shoulder at Dimitri. "Not in this state."

There's a round of patronizing chuckles from the other men at the table, and I'm pretty sure they're all laughing at me.

"Owning is the thing," Ian adds.

“Yes, but hardly anyone can afford to buy a home in this market,” I explain. “Certainly not when they’re making minimum wage.”

Ian lifts his eyebrows. “And how is that *my* fault?”

“It’s not,” I say hotly. “But if people can’t afford to live —”

“Then they should move somewhere less expensive.”

I shake my head at his callous comment, anger flaring in my chest. Is this man *really* this out of touch, or does he just not care that he sounds like an asshole?

“If they moved, then there would be no one left to make your scotch and soda.”

“I’ll make it myself,” Ian drawls, taking another drag from his pen and tilting his head back to expel the vapor. “At this rate, it would be faster.”

“Turnover is already a huge problem in the service sector,” I continue. “Workers are leaving in droves, and employers —”

“That’s what happens when you give handouts,” hedge-fund guy interjects. “Nobody *has* to work, so why would they? If the government’s just going to pay them to sit on their asses . . .”

“Well, I expect you’d know, since people pay you to do the exact same thing,” I retort, my temper getting the better of me.

Silence seems to swallow our table as the men turn to look at me, and a wicked grin spreads across Ian’s face. He lets out an uneasy laugh, then licks his lips and meets Dimitri’s gaze with an expression that makes my insides curdle. “Lazos, I think you might need to put a leash on your woman.”

His words hit me like a slap, but before they even have a chance to sink in, Dimitri is on his feet. It happens so fast that I don’t even see him move. All I see is Ian Gray’s chair fly back a split second before he hits the ground, legs wriggling in the air.

A few people seated nearby gasp, and there’s a clatter of silverware just before a ripple of unease fans out over our table. Dimitri is hovering over Ian, his eyes two amber slits in a mask of rage. I can feel the power rolling off Dimitri’s body in waves, and judging by the way everyone remains glued to their seats, they can feel it, too.

“*You’re* the one who needs a leash, Gray,” Dimitri growls.

Ian Gray winces as he tries to sit up, his face flushed a deep shade of crimson tinged with purple splotches. “That’s assault, Lazos,” he huffs, his suit jacket all askew as he struggles to his feet.

“No. *This* is assault.”

Dimitri’s fist swings out so fast that I don’t see it coming. It connects with Ian’s jaw so hard that his face whips to the side, spraying blood and spit.

Ian Gray stumbles back, colliding with the table behind ours and catching himself on his elbow. A red mark is already blooming along his jaw, and when he slides his gaze over to me and spits blood on the floor, I realize that I’m on my feet.

Dimitri’s chest is heaving with rage as his huge hand closes around mine. He tugs me gently away from our table, turning to call over his shoulder. “You can tweet my lawyer, Gray.”



My nerves are shot by the time the valet pulls the car around. Dimitri slams my door and stalks around to his side, a muscle working in his jaw.

A toxic silence fills the car as he drives us back to the chalet. I’m still breathing hard from the scene in the ballroom, my mind replaying the sight of Dimitri punching Ian Gray over and over again.

Dimitri floors it when we reach the wrought-iron gate outside the chalet, the mirrors clipping the thick black bars as he speeds on through. My heart shoots into my throat at his obvious lack of control, and I scrunch the burgundy fabric at my knees as Dimitri kills the engine.

He doesn’t look at me as he climbs out of the car, nor does he open my door. He just strides toward the house as though he plans to torch the place.

It takes me a few seconds to gather the silk of my dress and extricate myself from the Jaguar without getting any slush on my outfit. My heel catches between two of the cobblestones as I get out, and I swear as I yank it out, causing the heel to break.

“Fuck!” I shout, my anger finally ripping through me. In one rough motion, I tug the shoe off my foot and stomp half-barefooted through the fresh layer of snow that’s accumulated in our absence.

I barge into the kitchen through the side door and find Dimitri standing at the island, pouring himself a drink.

“You didn’t have to hit him,” I finally grit out, pissed that he made such a scene at the gala and annoyed with his silent treatment.

“You didn’t have to bait him.”

“*What?*” I shake my head in disbelief, blinking up at Dimitri.

Is he *seriously* defending Ian Gray and the rest of those pretentious assholes?

He raises his eyebrows but doesn’t meet my gaze as he lifts the glass to his lips. “Read the room next time.”

My mouth falls open in furious indignation that he’s chastising me for speaking my mind. “I *did*,” I bite out, unable to calm the tumultuous rage that’s churning in my gut. “And what I found is a bunch of overprivileged assholes with no clue how the other half lives!”

“Of *course* they’re overprivileged assholes, Jules! That’s practically a prerequisite for these things!” Dimitri’s voice booms out all around me, but I don’t shrink away.

“So I should have just kept my mouth shut?” I retort. “Just sit there and look pretty while they spill their toxic, entitled bullshit?”

“No. That’s —” Dimitri lets out a huff and pinches the bridge of his nose. “That’s not what I meant. But there is a *protocol* for how one behaves at these sorts of events, and you clearly missed it.”

“Oh!” I cry. “Oh, a *protocol*. Of course! I should have just punched him in the face!”

“I only hit Gray because he was out of line,” says Dimitri in a low voice. “No one speaks to you like that in my presence. *Ever*.”

Something flutters weakly in my stomach at his words, but I clench my abdominals to strangle the feeling. “But it’s fine to tell me to keep my fucking mouth shut as long as we’re not in *public*?”

Dimitri’s eyes flare a brilliant gold, and the glass in his hand shatters. The stench of bourbon burns my nostrils as it showers the floor, and a few drops of red pool in the mess.

I suck in a breath and chance a glance at his face. Dimitri looks angrier than I’ve ever seen him — even angrier than the instant before he punched Ian Gray.

I take a step back as he shakes his head, more glass and blood peppering the floor. Dimitri’s face is a mask of rage, and he seems totally unconcerned with the inch-long shards of glass still embedded in his palm.

“I’m not telling you to keep your mouth shut,” he snarls, closing his fist around the broken glass. “I’m not like them, Jules. Don’t put me in that box. I’m simply asking you not to make things even harder for me than they already are!”

Dimitri doesn't shout, but there's something about the quiet timbre of his voice that shakes me to the core.

I don't shrink back, though. I'm too angry to give him the satisfaction. "Oh, yes. Poor Dimitri. It must be so *hard* for you to live in your sixty-million dollar mansion with only your stock portfolio to keep you warm."

I know that my comment hit below the belt, but at this point, my fury has taken on a life of its own.

"My nana worked *everyday* of her life until she was sixty-eight, scrubbing toilets for people like you. She scrimped her whole life just to get by and watched my mother do the same. Now she can barely afford to eat because of her medical bills and property taxes and all the fucking *bullshit* regular people have to worry about! So excuse me for not having the decency to sit there like a good girl while those horrible men railed on people who are just like my family!"

For a moment, Dimitri looks stricken. His normally olive skin looks a bit pale, and his eyes are like two chips of gold. But then he drops his gaze to the counter, hands curling into fists at his sides.

"I am not oblivious to my privilege," he growls, his voice still low and deadly. "But you have no *idea* what it's like to be me — to have the weight of a multibillion-dollar company riding on your shoulders and *no one* you can trust." He sucks in a tight breath, finally glancing my way. "I asked you to come tonight because I thought you would help make this evening tolerable. I wouldn't have asked if I knew you were going to insult and humiliate the very people I need not to hate me."

"The fact that you feel there's no one you can trust says more about you than it does about them," I snap. "That's the only reason you asked me to come tonight! You thought I'd behave because I'm your employee."

"Exactly!" Dimitri bellows, and I realize I've said the wrong thing. A crushing silence follows his reply, threatening to swallow me whole. "You are my employee!" he growls. "*Nothing* more."

I should have expected this — should have seen it coming. But I didn't, and the wave of hurt that rises up inside me is evidence of what a fool I've been.

Dimitri doesn't have feelings for me. He doesn't see me as anything more than a piece of ass and a disobedient employee.

Hot tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. I've had my fill of humiliation for the night.

"Get out!" I yell, too caught up in my own swirl of fury and heartbreak to wonder if I can actually kick Dimitri out of his own house.

He raises his head to meet my gaze, and the look in his eyes makes my insides twist. Dimitri drags in an uneven breath and then backs away from the counter.

I don't look up. I don't need to.

A second later, I hear the kitchen door slam. Dimitri is gone.