

Chapter Fourteen

Jules

My chest spasms at the sound of footsteps coming down the staircase. Suddenly, I'm second-guessing my entire plan to confront Dimitri, and I mentally calculate the odds that I'll be able to reach the door before he appears at the foot of the stairs.

Deep breaths, Jules, I tell myself, trying to practice the special breathing technique I once learned in a yoga class. In for six, out for eight.

Except that I don't make it to six. Adrenaline is spilling into my bloodstream, making my heart and lungs behave erratically. The room suddenly feels much too small, and my underarms are damp with sweat.

I glance down at my collection of items, realizing what a fool I am for thinking I'm equipped to handle . . . *him*.

After I ran out this morning with the only clothes I could grab, I sat in my van for nearly two hours, blasting the heat and reading everything I could about werewolves on my phone. Mostly, the question "how to deal with a werewolf" brought up a lot of sarcastic comments in online forums — advice like "file their claws" and "feed them snacks," which was less than helpful.

Eventually, though, I did uncover the basics. It took a trip to the butcher, the health-food store, and an old friend who still hunts deer and elk.

I stiffen when Dimitri enters the room, followed closely by Beckett. Dimitri is dressed in a pair of low-slung jeans that leave the tops of his hipbones exposed. He isn't wearing a shirt. I can see every ridge of his broad toned chest, and, despite my newfound fear, my stupid body responds.

Tingles race all over my skin. Heat blooms in my core. My heart feels as though it might punch out of my chest, and I suddenly have no idea what to do with my hands.

Dimitri looks paler than usual, the hollows under his eyes discolored. His dark hair is mussed as though he's been running his hands through it, but his irises are no longer that unsettling gold color.

Ordinary hazel eyes stare back at me. Human eyes.

At the sight of me sitting there, Dimitri's shoulders stiffen, but I see the relief on his face. His gaze rakes over me, head to toe, as if checking to confirm that I'm all in one piece.

"You're still here," he rasps. His voice sounds scratchy and ancient, as though he hasn't spoken to anyone in years.

I shift my weight awkwardly on the couch, unsure if he's pleased or not. "I did leave for a while."

Something like hope ignites in his eyes, which don't leave my face for a second. "But you're here now."

I nod once, swallowing around the lump in my throat as I gather up the courage to ask the question that's been eating me since this morning. "Do you want me to go?"

It comes out so softly I'm not immediately sure Dimitri heard me, but the look on his face says he did. "No."

I flinch when he takes a step toward me and curse my cowardly instincts. I'm not afraid of him, but my body remembers the huge gray wolf he turned into.

Dimitri quickly schools his reaction, but I see the hurt in his eyes. There's a long awkward pause. Beckett clears his throat, and my gaze flicks to him. Even though he's Dimitri's head of security, I've rarely seen them together. Judging by the look on his face, he knows his boss's secret.

"You've been busy," says Dimitri after a long while, nodding at the supplies I've spread out on the coffee table.

"Yes," I say. "That's why I left."

"To go grocery shopping?" Beckett remarks dryly, eyeing my stash with amusement. "And . . . *hunting?*"

"I did some reading," I admit, cutting a nervous glance at Dimitri, who is also studying my supplies. A shotgun is lying on its side, though I have no *idea* how to use it. There's also a giant slab of raw beef on a plate and a foot-long swag of garlic heads.

"Is that yours?" Beckett asks, staring pointedly at the gun.

I shake my head. "I . . . borrowed it."

"And do you plan on using it?" There's an aggressive edge to Beckett's voice, and I remember that his job is to protect Dimitri. Though, based on what I saw, it's not as if he *needs* protecting.

“No.” I gulp, wiping my sweaty palms on my thighs. “I . . . couldn’t find any silver bullets, but my friend assured me that this model could take down any mammal in North America.”

Beckett snorts. “He’s obviously never met a wolf shifter.”

My eyebrows shoot up, and I turn to Dimitri. “You mean you can’t . . . *die*?”

“I can,” says Dimitri, moving slowly around the coffee table.

When I don’t flinch, he lowers himself onto the couch beside me, though I notice he positions himself as far away as possible.

“I’m just harder to kill than most. Shifters aren’t immortal, though we’re immune to most human diseases. We also heal extremely quickly — comes from our ability to shift.”

I nod, trying to process everything he just said. Beckett and Dimitri both used the word “shifter,” not “werewolf.” For some reason, that small distinction puts me at ease and makes this whole thing seem less like a bad TV show.

“If you’re a wolf shifter, does that mean there are other kinds of shifters?”

Dimitri nods. “There are bear shifters, mountain lion shifters, eagle shifters . . . I met a fox shifter once, but those who change into smaller animals tend to keep their identities hidden.”

“Wow.” This is just too much to process.

“What’s the steak for?” Dimitri asks, nodding at the bloody slab of meat in front of us.

“Oh, uh . . . I thought you might be hungry.” Blood heats my cheeks at my own ignorance, and I look down at my hands, which are still clutching my knees.

“I took care of that,” says Beckett gruffly. “But that was smart.”

I lift my head, surprised by the compliment.

Beside me, Dimitri grimaces. “Shifters are much more volatile when we’re hungry.”

“And the garlic?” Beckett cuts in.

I shrug. “It works on vampires.”

Both men snort, and I frown in irritation.

“Not on shifters,” Beckett says, wrinkling his nose. “It just stinks up the house.”

“Is there anything that *does* work on you guys?” I snap. Would they even tell me if there was?

I was addressing Dimitri, but Beckett is the first to speak. “Yes. Shifting regularly, for a start. Lots of physical activity. Plenty of food — though not just meat. And not denying your wolf.”

He cuts a harsh look at his boss as he recites his list, and a muscle tics in Dimitri’s jaw.

“That’s why Beckett is here,” he says. “He’s going to be helping to enforce my new . . . regimen.”

Dimitri grumbles the last word as though Beckett is making him go on a diet, and a rogue chuckle works its way up my throat at the thought of the beefy head of security forcing Dimitri to eat only salads.

“He told me what happened,” Beckett explains. “And he’s agreed to cooperate from this point forward.” His face grows serious as he adds, “As long as he follows my orders, I can assure you that this will never happen again.”

I nod, though I’m not sure how Beckett could promise something like that.

“I have not been shifting as often as I should,” Dimitri admits. “That’s the main reason I lost control of my form this morning. My wolf, he . . . needs to stretch his legs every now and again.”

“You speak as though you’re two different people — er, beings,” I say.

“We are.” Dimitri squints one eye and cocks his head to the side. “At least, that’s how it feels.”

“When the wolf and the man are more integrated and the animal’s needs are being met, a shifter is much less volatile,” says Beckett. “That’s why it’s important not to deny one’s wolf.”

Deny one’s wolf.

There was that phrase again — the one part of Beckett’s “regimen” that still didn’t make any sense.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

Dimitri rubs the back of his head, shooting a pointed glance at Beckett. The head of security casts one more look in my direction before stepping out of the room.

Once he’s gone, Dimitri shifts on the couch to orient his body toward mine, and I get the feeling that whatever he’s about to tell me is serious. “Do you remember me telling you about my co-founder? The one who tried to force me to step down?”

I nod. I remember everything Dimitri’s ever said to me, and I read every article I could find about the eccentric CEO when I first took this job.

Dimitri's jaw goes stiff, and I can tell it bothers him more than it should. "Rhys wasn't just my co-founder or the CFO. He was my pack brother . . . and my best friend."

My eyebrows shoot up at his admission.

Dimitri has a *pack*? I've never seen anyone around the house apart from Beckett, and Dimitri rarely goes anywhere except the Denver office. How is it that he has a pack?

"To say I haven't been as present with my pack lately would be a gross understatement." He sighs, running his fingers through his hair so that it sticks up along the top. "As their alpha, I shouldn't be hiding away in my house. I'm supposed to be managing things — taking care of my wolves. Only, these last few months, I've barely been able to take care of myself."

I raise my eyebrows. Not only does Dimitri have a pack, but Dimitri is their *alpha*?

I guess I shouldn't be surprised — not with the way he commands a room with nothing but his presence.

"Wolves are pack animals," he continues. "And we shifters are no exception."

"So that's what you meant by denying your wolf," I say slowly. "You need to spend more time with your pack?"

"That's part of it." Dimitri looks suddenly cagey, and I wonder what more he could possibly have to tell me.

"There's . . . a myth among shifters. At least, I *thought* it was a myth." He takes a deep breath and presses the tips of his fingers together, staring down at his own hands. "Every wolf has a fated mate — another individual somewhere in the world who is made for them in every way."

My heartbeat quickens, and my blood runs hot. "Like a soul mate?"

Dimitri shakes his head. "It's more than that. Fated mates are bonded in a way that's . . . undeniable. They say the strength of the bond is such that a wolf would be driven insane trying to resist it."

I take a deep breath, my heart sinking. "So . . . your wolf needs to find his mate."

There's a long pause as Dimitri studies me, and the air between us seems to electrify. "I've already found her."

"Oh." My breath hitches, and I can't seem to fill my lungs. What is he saying? That he's supernaturally bound to some other girl, or . . .

"*You're* my fated mate," he says in a rough voice, his eyes swirling with amber. "I knew it the moment we first met, but all this time . . . I've tried to deny it."

A sudden warmth blossoms in my chest, growing and growing until it snuffs out all the doubts and apprehension I've been feeling.

So I *haven't* been imagining this strange connection between me and Dimitri. In the beginning, I thought it was just a mutual attraction, but when we fought after the gala, I knew it was something more. Sending him away caused me physical pain — a soul-deep ache I'd never felt before.

Hot tears sting my eyes, and I don't realize how close we've gotten until Dimitri swipes one away with the pad of his thumb. His touch is featherlight along my cheek, and I find myself craving more.

"I shouldn't have told you all of this," he growls, clearly angry with himself. "It's too much."

"N-no," I choke, shaking my head. "I'm glad you told me." I drag in a shuddering breath, trying to get it together, but I can't seem to stop the flow of tears. "I just don't understand . . ."

"Understand what?"

Despite my efforts to be strong, I feel suddenly vulnerable. Exposed. "Would it really be so bad?"

Dimitri's forehead scrunches in confusion.

"To be with a *human*, I mean. That's why you're denying your wolf, right?" My bottom lip quivers as I fight the swell of emotion threatening to overtake me. "That's why we can't be together?"

A thousand tiny expressions flit through Dimitri's eyes — understanding, hope, relief, elation.

"No," he says, shaking his head as he scoops my hands into his. My chest pinches as he brings my fingers to his lips, holding them tenderly as he plants a quick kiss on my knuckles. "No." Another kiss. "There is nothing wrong with you, Jules — and no one else I want to be with."

"Then what is it?" I ask, my voice cracking. "I know I'm just your maid, but —"

Dimitri gives a hard shake of his head, and a steely look comes over him. "Jules, you were never *just* my maid." He drops his gaze, voice quivering. "You are *everything* to me."

At those words, my heart cracks open, and I'm overcome with the urge to touch him — to crawl into his lap and wrap myself around him. To never let him go.

But there's still something he's not telling me — some reason we can never be. "Then what is it?" I ask, not caring that I sound desperate. "Why can't we be together?"

Dimitri's expression hardens. He drops our joined hands to his lap, though he doesn't let me go. "You don't know what you're asking," he growls. "What it would mean to be with me."

"So tell me!" I demand, fed up with all the secrets. "Is it shifting every full moon? Bringing back dead animal carcasses after a hunt? What could be so bad that you won't just *tell* me?"

Dimitri sucks in a breath, staring at our intertwined hands, and I can tell that, whatever it is, it's more serious than that. "To be with an alpha wolf is no small thing," he says quietly, drawing closer to me. His eyes have lightened to that amber color that I love so much, though they're filled with a look that chills me to the bone. "We wouldn't just be dating, Jules. You'd be mine. The mating bond is . . ." He takes another breath. "I would need to claim you — body and soul."

At those words, my heart gives an irregular stutter. Everything inside me screams yes — that I *want* to belong to this man — but based on the way he's acting, I feel I should ask more questions. "What does that entail, exactly?"

"A bite," he says simply, caressing the tender spot where my neck meets my shoulder with the side of his thumb. "It would embed my scent in your flesh and tell any other shifter around that you belong to *me*."

I drag in a shuddering breath, imagining his wolf's long white fangs puncturing my skin.

"It will hurt," he says. "But I've heard it can be pleasurable, too, since it's usually done in the act of . . ." Dimitri trails off, and my face heats at the thought of his hands, his tongue roving over my body.

"What else?"

Dimitri snorts. "There's no exam afterward. It's just a bite. But . . ." He drags in another sharp breath. "You need to be sure this is what you want — that *I'm* what you want. Because once I sink my teeth into you, Jules, I won't be able to let you go."

My heart quickens as Dimitri's words wash over me. A lifetime bound to an alpha wolf sounds intense, but if Dimitri had hoped to scare me away, his little speech has had the opposite effect.

"What if I don't want you to?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

When I look up at Dimitri, his face is full of such love and hope that it steals my breath away. He doesn't speak. He doesn't need to. He just takes me by the hand and leads me back upstairs.