

Chapter Three

Jules

Two weeks later . . .

My jaw about hits my lap as I pull through the tall wrought-iron gates. A gigantic stone chalet looms through the towering spruce trees, looking like a castle ripped straight out of a fairy tale with a foot of snow blanketing the roof.

I drive through a little stone tunnel attached to the structure and enter a large enclosed courtyard. My heart races as I pull into a spot marked “Guest” and climb out of the van.

It’s only been a week since a friend of mine managed to get my website up and running, and I was stunned when this guy’s head of security reached out to book a consultation only a few days later.

The house is a whopping thirteen thousand square feet. With six bedrooms, seven bathrooms, and a detached mother-in-law cabin, it’s the kind of place that must have set the owner back at *least* fifty or sixty million. Every detail of the exterior is absolute perfection, but my eyes go to the sleek black cameras mounted along every corner of the house.

I straighten up and discreetly check my lipstick in the side mirror. Though I don’t officially have any employees, I will by the time we book our first clean.

Today, I’m dressed as the company owner in a simple pair of gray slacks, white button-down, and a tailored black suit jacket. I managed to tame my unruly onyx waves into a professional style, and my boobs are safely contained in the most expensive bra I own.

My stilettos clack against the fancy cobblestone courtyard, and I stumble more than a few times when a heel sinks into the crack between two stones.

Hopefully, no one is watching on the cameras.

Feeling nervous, I clasp my clipboard tighter to my chest and lift the heavy iron knocker in my hand.

Since I don’t personally know anyone with a huge antique knocker in the shape of a wolf’s head, I don’t know the correct etiquette for announcing my arrival. I settle with rapping three times in quick succession before standing back and taking a deep breath, trying to appear more confident than I feel.

There's no reason this Beckett guy needs to know that this is my company's very first job. I came prepared with glowing references from every cleaning service I've ever worked for, as well as a few private clients.

A long minute passes, and I start to shiver. I left my heavy winter coat in the van, and it's starting to snow.

Feeling slightly panicky, I look down to double-check the address that Beckett gave me and cross-reference the pin on my navigation app.

Yep, this is the place.

Swallowing down my nerves, I lift the heavy iron knocker again and let it fall with a resounding thud — two, three, four more times.

Still nothing.

Pulling my phone out of my back pocket, I let my finger hover over Beckett's number. I don't want to have to call to see what's going on, but I know I'm in the right place. Maybe I got the date wrong?

I'm about to run back to the van and crank the heat for a few minutes while I check when the heavy wooden door flies open.

I'm staring up at a gigantic man whose frame fills the entire doorway. He towers several inches over six feet tall, and he's got a pair of shoulders that would put a linebacker to shame.

The man is dressed in slacks and a rumpled Oxford shirt, which he's rolled up to the elbows. Curly dark hair covers his massive forearms, and he's left the top four buttons of his shirt undone, offering a glimpse of a hard muscular chest that I have the inexplicable urge to run my fingers down.

Clearly, it's been way too long since I've seen any action if I'm thinking of rubbing my hands all over this unkempt stranger.

I swallow and force my gaze up to a face that looks as though it was chiseled from stone and polished to perfection. A mass of dark stubble covers the lower half of his jaw, accentuating a pair of sharp tanned cheekbones.

Damn.

His deep-brown hair is attractively mussed, and two chips of amber glare down at me through inky black lashes. He smells like burnt cedar, spice, and something I can't quite identify, and I try not to be obvious as I inhale his heady scent.

“Who the hell are you?” the man rumbles. His deep voice resonates throughout my whole body, and my heart gives a nervous little jolt.

That’s *not* the greeting I was expecting.

“Julianna Navarro,” I splutter, sticking out my hand. “You can call me Jules. I own White Glove Maid Service.”

“I didn’t *hire* a maid service,” the man snaps, staring down at my outstretched hand with obvious distrust.

“You didn’t?”

Shit. Are there two Winterwood Lanes in Aspen? How *else* would I have screwed this up?

“No.”

My chest flutters with nerves, and I draw back my hand. My immediate impulse is to flee, but I need to figure out where I went wrong. “You’re not Mr. Beckett? We spoke Tuesday about —”

“*No.*” The man’s reply is so short and unfriendly that I take a half step back. I open my mouth and close it again. *No*, he’s not Beckett? Or *no*, he didn’t call about hiring a maid?

Taking a few beats to compose myself, I pull on my most professional smile and hold my head a little higher. Whether this man believes me or not, Beckett and I had an appointment. I’m not about to be run off by this rude stranger. “I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“*Clearly.*”

The word comes out more like a hiss, and something inside me snaps. As far as I know, I’m right where I’m supposed to be, and I’m fed up with this guy’s attitude. “Look, I spoke with Mr. Lazos’s head of security about my company’s offerings.” I reach down to grab a card off my clipboard and hold it out for the man’s inspection. “We are the premier cleaning service in Aspen and provide an end-to-end first-class experience. I was under the assumption that Mr. Lazos required a housekeeper. But if he doesn’t —”

“He does,” the man cuts in, taking me by surprise.

My eyes narrow in confusion, and I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Understanding softens his features, and the man looks suddenly sheepish. “*I’m* Mr. Lazos,” he admits. “You can call me Dimitri.”

“O-oh,” I stammer, trying to hide my surprise that the unshaven man in the wrinkled white shirt is the same man who owns this massive house.

Dimitri Lazos. Dimitri Lazos. Why does that name sound so familiar?

“Beckett didn’t tell me he’d called you,” Dimitri says quietly. “Sometimes my head of security . . .” He rolls his eyes. “Well, Beckett has a way of forcing me to accept what he thinks I need.”

The corner of Dimitri’s mouth twitches. It isn’t quite a smile, but it draws my attention to a pair of decadent lips.

“Right,” I say, shifting my clipboard in my arms. Does this mean he’s *not* going to chase me off his property? Should I go straight into my pitch or wait for Beckett to arrive?

“Come in,” Dimitri growls, stepping aside to let me pass and looking unreasonably flustered. He acts as though he’s never invited someone into his home before and isn’t sure how to do it.

I take a deep breath as I walk through the door, my heart doing a funny little somersault as Dimitri’s warm scent washes over me.

I look around the dimly lit entryway to get my bearings, and my breath catches in my throat. I’m standing in a grand foyer with natural stone flooring and a tall arched ceiling.

An enormous iron lantern hangs over the entryway like a chandelier, its glass frosted over with a layer of dust so thick I could write my name in it. Cobwebs snake up the thick chain, and more flank the exposed beams that criss-cross the ceiling.

“How does this usually work?” he asks, pausing just inside the entryway and running a hand through his messy hair.

“I like to do a brief walkthrough — just to get a feel for the house and assess its general condition. Then the two of us will sit down to discuss your needs, and I’ll prepare a quote.”

Dimitri nods as if that makes sense and leads me silently down the hallway. I’ve never been in a house as grand as this, and I’m a little intimidated by the prospect of Dimitri being my very first client.

We pass a living room with a tall cathedral ceiling and a giant stone fireplace coated with soot. The wide-plank walnut floors are caked in a layer of dust and grime, and clothing is strewn all over the furniture. A plate of half-eaten food rests on the arm of the couch, and the antique end tables are littered with empty glasses and beer bottles.

“I apologize for the mess,” says Dimitri, his voice tight as he continues down the hallway. “I wasn’t expecting visitors.”

“A mess we can handle,” I say, grateful to be in my element. Filth and grime are where I thrive. I can make anything shine.

I walk slowly behind him, pausing to peer into a dining room that looks as though it's never been used and a kitchen that's an absolute disaster. Pots and pans are piled in the sink, and nearly every available surface is littered with dirty dishes, utensils, and empty food packaging.

Does this guy live here all alone? I wonder.

Does he really not know how to keep a reasonably tidy house, or does he simply not care?

Dimitri rounds the corner and stops outside a room at the very end of the hallway. Glancing up at his face, I brush past him through the doorway, and a little gasp escapes me when I step inside the study.

The room has perfect unobstructed views of a scene ripped straight from a storybook. Spruce and pine trees tower around a small frozen pond, and a family of deer stand stock-still among the shrubs, as though they know they've been caught. The snow-covered mountain rises sharply behind the house, glistening in the sunshine.

The inside of the room, however, looks like an active crime scene. A window in the corner has been boarded up, and the floor is scattered with broken glass. Books are heaped on the floor, and several look as though they've been torn apart by a wild animal. One of the couches is in shreds, and there are water stains on the floor.

"Uh . . ."

"We had a bear break in," Dimitri stammers after only a moment's hesitation. "He really did a number on the place."

"Oh, geez. That must have been really scary."

Dimitri shrugs, though his whole body looks stiff.

I raise my eyebrows and let out a sigh, still not quite able to believe it. Living in the mountains, I've heard stories of bears letting themselves into people's kitchens, but I've never heard of one breaking a window and ransacking a study.

Suddenly, I wonder if I should charge Dimitri more than the rate I'd planned on charging. If this is what this guy's main living areas look like, how filthy is his bathroom?

"Right," I say, trying to gather my thoughts. "After our talk today, I'll quote you a flat rate for a one-time deep clean, and then there will be a separate rate for weekly upkeep. Given the current state of things, the cost of that initial clean will be a bit steep."

"Fine."

Dimitri's terse reply makes me turn to look at him. He looks angry and closed-off again, and something tells me the bear story is a lie.

I swallow and start back down the hallway, feeling Dimitri's gaze on me with every step. I stop when I reach the filthy living room and turn slowly to face him.

"Would it be all right if we talk in here?"

"Fine with me."

I nod and cross to the couch, discreetly moving an empty Doritos bag out of the way before sinking down onto the cushions.

"Is there . . . anything else I should know about you?" I ask as he takes the seat across from me.

Dimitri stiffens.

"About your schedule, I mean. Or any special preferences with regard to how you like things to be cleaned."

Dimitri's shoulders relax, but the rest of him remains tense and alert. I'm tense, too, if I'm being honest. There's something about this man that puts me on edge, and yet my gaze is drawn to that rugged jawline and his big strong hands. I find myself wondering what they would feel like roving over my body . . .

"I work in the city, so I split my time between this house and my home in Denver," he explains. "I do not like to be disturbed when I'm here, which is why I haven't employed a housekeeper in quite some time."

"I understand."

"I keep unpredictable hours," he says roughly. "You'd need to be able to accommodate that."

"Of course. We'll stay out of your way. A lot of our clients have fluctuating schedules."

It's a tiny fib. I don't actually have any other clients right now, but I'm used to working around people's work schedules when I clean.

Dimitri's amber eyes bore into mine as though he knows I'm lying, and I shiver under his gaze.

"I don't have any other household staff at the moment, so I would need a . . . *full-service* experience."

His eyes flick down to my lips as he says it, and I automatically clench my thighs together. It's such a quick look that I briefly wonder if I imagined it, but heat pools in my core nonetheless.

"Laundry, meal cleanup, the works."

I swallow to wet my parched throat, hoping my voice doesn't come out as a croak. "Of course."

"There is one other thing," says Dimitri, scratching absently at his stubble as if trying to decide exactly how to phrase his request. "I require absolute discretion from all those who work for me. You will need to sign a confidentiality agreement stating that anything you see or hear within my home never leaves these walls."

At those words, all the blood drains from my face. I still have no idea what Dimitri does for a living, but by the sound of it, it's something illegal.

Whatam I getting myself into?

"Absolutely," I say after too long a pause, thinking I can leave if things get too shady. "And you don't have to worry about a thing. All of our maids are background checked, and all are required to sign confidentiality agreements."

I make a mental note to find a template for one of those on the internet.

Dimitri narrows his eyes, irritation knitting his brows. "I assumed *you'd* be my housekeeper."

I take a quick breath to buy myself some time to respond. I can't tell him exactly who will be cleaning his house since I haven't hired anyone yet, but I also don't want him to think that I'm going to be his long-term housekeeper.

"I would be here to start with," I say slowly. "Then, once I have a chance to get familiar with your particular needs, you'd be paired with one of our other expertly trained housekeepers."

All of a sudden, Dimitri's body language changes. His jaw tightens. His shoulders go stiff, and his eyes narrow into slits. "No."

No?

Panic thrums in my chest. Clearly, that's *not* what he wanted to hear, and he looks as though he's about ready to march me straight out the door and slam it in my face.

I can't let that happen. I need this job to get my business off the ground. Dimitri's house is giant. It would be a *huge* payday, and he'll probably never even be here.

It's all right, I tell myself, taking a deep breath. I can still salvage this.

“I can assure you, Mr. Lazos, all my housekeepers are true professionals. You won’t even know they’re here.”

“That may be true, but the fact that *you’re* here means my head of security has already run his own background check — one that is much more in-depth than whatever you run on your own employees. He has spoken with all the references you provided and some you did not. He has likely questioned your former co-workers and your landlord.”

My spine stiffens, and my palms go sweaty at the idea of Beckett digging into my past. It’s not as though I have anything to hide, but his attempt to unearth any skeletons in my closet sounds like some CIA shit — not standard due diligence.

“Since you are here, it means that my head of security believes you can be trusted. I will not have some random maid he has not vetted wandering around my home.”

“I-I’m sorry,” I stammer, shaking my head. “But that’s just not how this works.”

If I had any doubts that Dimitri was into something illegal, they’re gone now. But even as I voice my refusal, I wonder if I’m shooting myself in the foot.

This man is *clearly* accustomed to getting what he wants, and the lack of other staff tells me he’s not going to let just anyone walk in here. But I started this business so I wouldn’t have to spend my whole life scrubbing floors and end up with a bad back and two wrecked knees.

“What’s your rate?” Dimitri asks. “I assure you, money is no object.”

I raise an eyebrow at his cockiness and nervously rifle through the papers on my clipboard.

This isn’t what I want. I’m supposed to be running the business — not doing the actual cleaning.

I’m not a maid anymore. I’m an entrepreneur. It only took me a week to get my first lead. I can find another client . . . one who’s not so damned shady.

But Dimitri is staring at me with those stunning amber eyes, one brow raised in a challenge. I can’t just walk away — not when this man is practically handing me a blank check. I should at least see what he’s willing to pay me. For market research, of course . . .

Clicking my pen, I take a deep breath and write down a number. It’s crazy high compared to what I’d planned on charging him, but he just told me money was not an issue.

My hand is sweaty as I hand it over, second-guessing my quote the instant Dimitri’s long tanned fingers close around the paper.

He barely glances at what I've written before looking at me in confusion. "This is your daily rate?"

"The top number is the price for the initial deep clean. The bottom number is the cost for weekly upkeep."

He shakes his head. "I need a live-in housekeeper."

For a moment, I just stare at him. No one has a live-in maid anymore. It's so uncommon I don't even have pricing for it. It's certainly not something *I'd* ever consider.

"I'm sorry," I say. "But that's not something we currently offer."

"I thought you said you could provide a full-service experience," Dimitri counters.

"We can — I mean, we do." I pause, chewing on my bottom lip as I try to figure out what to say. "But I can't *live* here."

Dimitri raises his eyebrows in a mixture of surprise and indignation. "Are you married?"

"No," I grit out, annoyed that he would even ask.

Something like amusement dances in his eyes. "Kids?"

"No."

"May I?" Dimitri holds out a hand for my pen, and I give it to him. He scoots to the very edge of his chair, and I watch his muscular forearm flex as he crosses out my bottom number and writes down another.

"I can offer you Saturdays off and three weeks of paid vacation per year," he says, flipping the paper around so that it faces me.

I blink twice, staring at the number without comprehending it.

"Is that sufficient for your weekly salary?"

"*Weekly?*" I choke, not even caring that I sound incredulous. That's more money than I've earned in six months at previous jobs, and Dimitri wants to pay me that much for a week's worth of work?

My chest swells with fresh excitement. In my wildest dreams, I never imagined landing a job that paid this well. And, if I was living here, I wouldn't have to pay for rent or utilities.

My heart skips a beat at the thought of living under Dimitri's roof — breathing the same air as this man. He's sexy and mysterious and totally off-limits. I've never been one to shit where I eat, and I don't intend to start now.

My body deflates a little at that, but I try to refocus on his offer. If I spent six months working for Dimitri, I could save up enough to pay three maids' salaries for a year and then some. I could purchase two more vans — my very own fleet — and get this business off the ground.

It sounds *way* too good to be true, and a tiny voice in my head tells me that it probably is. Nobody pays this sort of money for a live-in maid. There has to be a catch.

“You understand that I’m *just* a housekeeper,” I say, pointedly arching one eyebrow and praying that he understands my meaning.

Dimitri tilts his head to the side, those perfect lips pursing as he studies me with those stunning amber eyes. “I thought you were the owner of the company.”

“I am,” I say quickly, feeling flustered and off my game. What *is* it with this man? He’s clearly a slob and into something illegal, and yet I can’t stop myself from imagining what his bottom lip would feel like caught between my teeth. “I-I just mean . . .” I gesture in the air with my hand, hoping he’s not going to make me spell it out. “You understand I’m only going to be cleaning and doing your laundry.”

Those sultry lips lift in a grin, and I shiver as he leans in closer, propping both elbows on his knees. That spicy burnt-cedar scent surrounds me like a cloud of smoke, and my eyes dart automatically to the broad expanse of bare chest peeking out from under his shirt. “Why, Ms. Navarro. What else would you be doing?”