

## Chapter Eight

### Jules

I awake the next morning with a wild giddiness thrumming through my body. My heart is pounding as if I just ran a mile, and I can't stop smiling.

Dimitri asked me to be his date to the gala. The man who has everything — and could have anyone — asked *me* to go with him.

Even though I know that he didn't mean anything romantic by it — and even though his PR people had to twist his arm to get him to attend in the first place — I can't fight this soaring feeling in my chest or the deep ache in my belly.

Dimitri chose me.

Buoyed by that thought, I hop out of bed, pull on my robe, and make a quick stop at the bathroom sink to run my fingers through my hair. I rinse out my mouth and splash cold water on my face, determined not to look like a swamp creature if Dimitri and I cross paths.

I try to act natural as I breeze into the kitchen, but he's not downstairs. Thinking he must have gone for a run, I putter around making toast and eggs, humming a little tune.

I've just poured my first steaming mug of coffee when I hear a sharp knock at the door. Puzzled, I make my way down the long hallway and peer out the side window.

A woman dressed in a fine mink coat is standing on the front porch. She looks to be in her mid-sixties, so I doubt she's Dimitri's secret girlfriend or anything. Beside her is what appears to be some sort of cart draped in a white plastic cover.

As I watch, the woman's brow knits in irritation, and she leans forward to lift the giant iron knocker. The sound echoes through the whole house, and it's a little jarring for the early hour.

I pull open the door to tell her she has the wrong address but pause with the words halfway to my lips. The woman carries herself with all the poise of a queen, and her gaze is just as regal. Demanding.

Her skin is smooth and unwrinkled despite her age, and her makeup is understated, apart from a bright-red lip. Underneath a fluffy Russian fur hat, her hair is drawn up in a neat twist that exposes a long graceful neck.

"Uh, hello?"

“Good morning,” says the woman in a thick accent that strikes me as vaguely Eastern European. “You must be Julianna.”

“I am,” I say, though my reply comes out sounding like a question. I have no idea why this woman would be looking for *me*, of all people.

“Excellent. Then ve can get started.”

She holds out a hand to signal me to step back, and another small man I didn’t see before pops out to wheel the cart through Dimitri’s front door.

“I’m sorry . . . you are?”

“My apologies,” says the woman with an airy smile. “My name is Natasha, Mr. Lazos’s personal stylist. He called and asked me to bring a few pieces for you to try on for zee gala.”

My eyebrows shoot up as she shoves past me, though my heart flutters at the gesture. I’d planned on swinging by the mall later this week to pick something out, so this is going to be a serious upgrade. Judging by the way the little man is grunting and pushing to wheel the cart in, Natasha brought more than a few pieces.

I follow the man with the cart into the living room and watch as he unzips the cover. A dozen or more floor-length gowns glisten like jewels in the weak morning sun — some satin, some sheer, a few hand-embroidered with little glass beads, and some plain and understated.

“Pay no attention to zee sizes,” says Natasha with a careless flick of her wrist. “Men can never guess a woman’s size correctly, and ve vill just alter whichever you choose.”

I suck in a breath as I stare at the dresses, suddenly overwhelmed. Part of me can’t believe that Dimitri went to all this trouble just so that I could have something to wear. The other part of me is nervous that I’ve underestimated what a big deal this is.

Carefully combing through the gowns, I pull out a shimmery gold number and let the intricately beaded fabric pool in my hand.

“Not zat one,” says Natasha with an impatient click of her tongue. “It vill not do your complexion justice.”

I quickly put the dress back on the rack and take a deep steadying breath. Even though it’s technically up to me what I wear, I can’t shake the feeling that I’m going to choose wrong.

“Try this,” says Natasha, plucking a deep-blue number off the rack and handing it to me. “Hangs beautifully.”

“Uh, okay . . .” I say, taking the dress. Natasha bends down and plucks a white box off the bottom of the rack, shoving it into my arms.

“Shoes.”

I nod and pivot toward the hallway, but Natasha stops me before I’ve gone three paces.

“Verr are you going?”

“Uh . . . the bathroom,” I say, extricating one arm from the pile of fabric to indicate the powder room.

Natasha shakes her head, and my stomach clenches. Is she going to make me strip naked in front of her?

“Go upstairs to try it on and come back down. Zee venue has stairs,” she says, splaying her palms as though it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “You must choose a gown that moves well on stairs.”

I open my mouth but then close it again. Who am I to argue with this beautiful, terrifying woman?

Careful not to tread on the hem of the designer dress, I climb the stairs and go into my room, shrugging out of my bathrobe and PJs and slipping into the silky blue dress. It’s more low-cut than I’m used to and hangs oddly around the hips.

One look at me, and Natasha clicks her tongue. I don’t even make it down the stairs before she turns away to select a different gown.

The pile of silk and tulle on my bed grows rapidly as Natasha hands me dress after dress. Each one is accompanied by a pair of the most gorgeous shoes that I’ve ever worn in my life.

At one point, as I slink out of a skintight black number, I start to wonder if I’ve been chosen for some crazy reality TV show where this woman actually has an endless supply of dresses outside in a van.

Finally, though, I slip a deep burgundy number over my head and shiver as the silk cascades down over my breasts. The dress hugs every single bump and curve and plunges dangerously low in the back. The keyhole detail below the bust is more revealing than what I’d usually wear, but when I look at myself in the full-length mirror, something within me settles.

This is it.

I can't fight the flutter of nerves in my belly as I step into a pair of three-inch heels. Natasha is already waiting for me at the foot of the stairs, and her eyes flash with something like pride when I start my descent.

For the first time, I understand what Natasha meant when she said a dress must "move well" on stairs. The silky fabric slides effortlessly over my thighs, brushing my shins with every step before rippling back into shape.

When I finally stop on the bottom step, Natasha is wearing a look of immense satisfaction. "Zat is zee one."



DIMITRI

"I fucking hate these things," I mutter, shifting my weight from one foot to the other as Beckett ties my bow tie. "It feels like I'm wearing a collar."

"Better than a leash," Beckett muses, two lines appearing between his brows as he finishes the knot.

You'd think I'd know how to tie a bow tie after how many stupid functions I've attended, but I lack the patience for something so intricate, and ex-snipers are nothing if not patient.

"I don't think I've ever seen you this nervous," my head of security mutters, the corners of his mouth twitching in amusement.

"What makes you think I'm nervous?" I snap, jerking away from him with a scowl and straightening the tie myself.

"I can smell it. And you only fidget when you're nervous."

"I'm not fidgeting," I mutter, but Beckett knows me too well. We were pack brothers long before I launched Nesteg, and he's maybe my only friend.

His dry chuckle chases me all the way out of my suite and has me fleeing to the living room for a drink. Jules hasn't said she changed her mind, yet part of me is *certain* she's going to back out.

It's fucking weird that I asked my housekeeper to go as my date — and even weirder that she said yes. Jules is smart and beautiful and completely fucking irresistible. I can't imagine what she'd see in a disgraced broken man like me.

But then I hear the sound of footsteps in the upstairs hallway, and my wolf instantly perks up. The footsteps are coming from Jules's suite, and they slow as she reaches the stairs.

I set down my drink and shrug into my jacket, trying to calm my frayed nerves as I step into the foyer.

I busy myself with straightening my lapels so she doesn't think I'm waiting on her. It shouldn't matter that Jules agreed to go to this thing — she's just sweet like that — and yet I can't deny that it does. My heart is a relentless drumbeat against my ribs, and it feels as though I have an electric current surging through my veins.

When I lift my eyes to the top of the stairs, my heart stops beating altogether.

If I thought that Jules was beautiful before, there are no words to describe how she looks in that dress. Her skin practically glows against the lush burgundy silk, and my eyes draw a straight line from her lips to her breasts to the little circle of exposed skin where the material gathers.

Cabernet silk ripples like water as Jules descends the stairs. With those dark waves cascading over her bare shoulders, she looks like a goddess come to life.

*Mine.*

The word is a growl I can't ignore, and I have to plant my feet and curl my hands into fists to resist the very real urge to toss her over my shoulder and carry her back upstairs.

I suck in a breath as Jules comes closer, trying not to stare at the way that dress hugs each and every curve. She is *painfully* beautiful to look at — much too alluring to share with the world. I'm worried that if I let her out of the house where other males can see her, I might do something I regret.

Jules lifts her eyebrows when she reaches the bottom step, hunching her shoulders up around her ears before dropping them in a questioning shrug.

“What do you think?” she asks, fingers skimming over the silk at her thighs. “Do I look okay?”

Is she *seriously* asking me that? Is this woman blind, or is she really that oblivious to her own beauty?

“You look —” I shake my head. It's not as if I don't have the words. I just can't bring myself to say them.

Stunning. Gorgeous. Irresistible. Sexy.

*Mine. All mine.*

I want to say all those things to her and more, but I know that if I open my mouth, it's going to become *very* apparent that I see Jules as more than a housekeeper.

"You look beautiful," I finish, managing to sound totally appropriate as I turn and offer her my arm.

Jules takes it, and her delicious cinnamon scent wraps around me until I'm drowning in it — drowning in *her*. And I don't want to come up for air.