

## Chapter Nine

### Jules

The ride down town is tense and quiet — the air alive with anticipation. I can't tell if Dimitri is nervous about the gala or if it's just me projecting my nerves onto him.

He drives us in his black Jaguar, one hand gripping the wheel while the other operates the stick shift. Every so often, I feel him watching me, but each time I turn to face him, I find him staring straight ahead at the road.

Truthfully, I wish he *would* look at me so I could stare at him without feeling like a total weirdo. Dimitri is breathtaking in his bespoke tuxedo, which hugs every single muscle and moves as though it's part of him. His spicy masculine scent fills the car, and I drink it in.

I know I'm playing a dangerous game, agreeing to be his date to this thing. I started working for Dimitri to save money and get my business up and running, but ever since he returned from Denver, I haven't been able to think about *anything* except the way those amber eyes devoured me back at the lake and the feeling of him against my body as he carried me to the sauna.

I can no longer deny the pull I feel toward my annoyingly handsome boss. I missed Dimitri when he was away, and I look forward to our little daily interactions more than I should.

Tonight has only made things worse. He's made me feel beautiful and important, which is as ridiculous as it is dangerous.

He's the billionaire CEO of a Fortune 500 company. I'm his maid. Even if Dimitri is attracted to me, there's no future for us. It's not often you hear about CEOs marrying the hired help. The best I can hope for is a pity-fuck, and I'm not that girl.

By the time we pull up in front of The Stalwart, I've resolved to build a wall around my heart and stop entertaining the ridiculous idea that Dimitri might actually be interested in me. He's not a real possibility — just a gorgeous distraction that could cost me everything if I'm not careful.

But then he comes around to open my door, and when I take the hand he offers me, little sparks shoot up my arm.

He tosses his keys to the valet as though he does it all the time and rests his hand along the exposed skin of my back. My body ignites where he touches me, and heat surges to my core. My knees wobble, and I start to feel lightheaded as he guides me into the resort lobby.

The Stalwart is an enormous red-brick structure that looms over the corner of two tree-lined streets. Each roofline of the resort juts out like a turret over the snow-covered hillside — the building creating a sort of fortress around the grand brick courtyard within.

Soft jazz is playing overhead as Dimitri ushers me inside, and immediately, I feel overwhelmed. The lobby is full of fancy-looking people in evening gowns and tuxedos — each of them wealthier and more important-looking than the last.

Several heads swivel to stare at Dimitri as we press through the crowd, and more than a few male eyes snap onto me.

My breath gets stuck somewhere in my chest as Dimitri snakes his arm around my waist, drawing me closer until my side brushes against his leg. I can feel the heat coming off him, and when his hand inches lower to cover my hip, I feel a gush of wetness between my legs.

So much for my new resolution.

Dimitri steers me toward the bar, ordering a bourbon for himself and a very nice red zin for me. He hands me my drink and ushers me into the corner, shielding me with his body as though he fears that someone might make an attempt on my life.

“Everyone is staring,” I whisper, gripping the sleeve of his suit jacket for leverage as I stretch onto tiptoe to deliver my message.

“Yes,” he replies, his voice low and stiff as he scans the crowd.

“Lazos!” booms a loud male voice from the other side of the room.

Dimitri whips around to face the man — a balding guy in a tuxedo with a gross gray mustache — and I swear I hear a low growl rumble up his throat.

“Didn’t expect you to show up,” the man half yells as he comes toward us, slapping Dimitri on the arm and causing his drink to slosh over the rim of his glass.

“Yes, well, duty calls.”

“Didn’t think you’d show your face, to be honest.”

Dimitri doesn’t respond to that, but his jaw tightens as he stares down at the man.

“And you’ve brought this *ravishing* young lady with you,” Mustache continues, his gaze dropping to my chest in a way that’s anything but subtle.

“Yes,” Dimitri rumbles, shifting sideways to block me from the man’s lecherous gaze. “She’s with me.”

A jolt of heat shoots through me at those words, though I’m sure he only said them to send the creep on his way.

It works. I don’t see what happens next, but two seconds later, Mustache turns and scampers away, his face red and splotchy.

“Come on,” Dimitri growls, shifting his grip back to my waist and turning me toward the main ballroom. Guests are beginning to trickle in, but they all give us a wide berth as Dimitri guides me through the doors.

The smell of expensive perfume tickles my nostrils as we enter the ballroom. Round tables draped in white linen take up nearly half of the room; the other is dedicated to a dance floor, where a five-piece orchestra is playing. Sparkling crystal chandeliers adorn the ceiling, and servers in white uniforms circulate with trays of champagne.

I expect Dimitri to head for one of the tables in the corner, but instead he pulls me onto the dance floor. My heart gives a fantastic leap when he pivots me to face him and takes my hand, tugging me gently closer.

Holy shit.

Suddenly, Dimitri is *much* too close — those extraordinary amber eyes boring into mine. I could count every one of his inky black lashes. Trace the decadent line of his upper lip.

That intoxicating scent of him fills my nostrils, and the thrum of power coming off his strong body seems to create its own little bubble that insulates us from the crowd. I’m still vaguely aware that people are staring, but it’s no longer making my skin itch.

“I didn’t know you danced,” I say, partly to ease the tension in my own chest as his other hand settles along the curve of my waist.

Our height difference means I have to tilt my head back to see his expression, when I really want to lean in and rest my cheek against his chest.

A wry smile twists that tantalizing mouth, and he bends forward so that his lips are mere inches from my ear. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

My insides clash together at our sudden proximity, and I feel a rush of heat between my thighs. My skin tingles everywhere we’re touching, and there’s a fire roaring in my belly that’s threatening to engulf me completely.

I'm vaguely aware of the sweetness of the music as Dimitri leads me around the dance floor. His steps aren't choreographed like he's had lessons, but he moves with a fluid ease and confidence that draws every set of eyes in the room.

Soon the space between us has vanished, and I'm pressed against his broad chest. Dimitri's hand is splayed possessively along the curve of my back. My heartbeat is an embarrassing thud against his ribs, and my panties are completely soaked.

When his fingers slip beneath the silk that just barely covers my ass, I suck in a strangled breath and force myself to meet his gaze.

Two chips of amber stare down at me, and I know I'm not imagining the heat in his eyes. Dimitri's lips part, and he draws in a sharp breath — the motion causing the fabric of my dress to rake against my hardened nipples with excruciating friction.

By now more guests have filled the ballroom, and I notice Dimitri has steered us to the very edge of the room. We're somewhat concealed by the other dancers, and my body surges with anticipation.

Moved by insanity, I allow my hand to slip from his shoulder and trail down the broad expanse of his chest. I tuck a finger between the folds of his shirt, reveling in the feeling of hot naked skin and the prick of hair.

It's a tiny thing, but the fantasy that flashes through me is overwhelming and violent. I imagine what it would be like to rip his shirt open, sending buttons scattering all over the floor.

What would it feel like to run my hands all over the hard planes of his incredible body? To take my time exploring every single inch of him with my fingers, lips, and tongue . . .

As if he can see the thoughts forming in my filthy mind, Dimitri covers my splayed hand with his own and takes my fingers gently in his. "Come. There's something I want to show you."

My heart skips a beat as he leads me out of the ballroom, through the doors, and out into the crisp night air. His grip on my hand tightens as we descend a brick staircase that unfolds into the enormous courtyard below, which is illuminated by twinkling lights in every shrub and tree. I can still hear the music drifting from the main ballroom, but the courtyard is deserted.

Something soft and warm envelops me, and I look up as Dimitri arranges his jacket over my bare shoulders.

It's such an unexpectedly sweet gesture that my throat burns with emotion. "It's nice out here."

Dimitri nods, but he isn't looking out at the courtyard.

"Not very crowded," I observe as our footsteps echo off the brick.

"No."

I turn to face him, lifting an eyebrow. "Sort of defeats the purpose of rubbing elbows with the people you're supposed to be impressing."

"I don't care about that," says Dimitri in a low growl.

Cold air fills my lungs as I suck in a breath. Something fragile and unspoken hangs in the air between us, and the urge to know his true feelings nearly overwhelms me.

"Why did you bring me out here?" I ask with great effort.

Something dark flashes through Dimitri's eyes, and his brows knit together. "Does it matter?"

"Yes."

He takes a step toward me. "You *really* want to know?" His tone is harsh and dangerous. Towering over me in the deserted courtyard, I should be scared of him, but I'm just terrified of what he might say next.

"Yes."

Dimitri presses his lips together, his breath coming out through his nose in a low, frustrated hiss. "*Fine*," he growls. "I brought you out here because I couldn't stand how every other male in that room was undressing you with his eyes. I couldn't stand how they looked at you — like you were theirs for the taking. I knew that if I stayed in there any longer, I was going to rip somebody's throat out for even *thinking* — " He breaks off, raking a hand through his dark hair with an expression that tells me he said more than he meant to.

I just stare at him, but Dimitri isn't finished. "These last two weeks have been absolute fucking torture. Seeing you every day. Smelling your scent. Knowing you're right down the hall from me, and I can't do a damned thing about it. Then you come down in that dress tonight, and I have to take you *out*? Share you with all those other men and act as though there's nothing between us? Be near you without being able to —"

Before I can even process his words, Dimitri's huge hand comes down to cup the back of my neck, and he smashes his mouth against mine.

His lips are warm and soft and just as kissable as I'd imagined, and I gasp at the slight scrape of stubble as he lays claim to my mouth. As I do, my lips part, and Dimitri thrusts his tongue

into my mouth, swirling around mine with expert teasing strokes that leave my lungs burning for air.

His kiss is not at all the soft romantic kind I've been imagining since our cold plunge. It's hard and demanding and full of need, and I feel my body respond.

My nipples harden into points, and my core aches with desire. I stand on tiptoe and run my fingers through his silky dark hair as Dimitri's grip tightens. One hand comes around to cup my cheek, while the other slides down to my ass.

I moan against his lips as he squeezes me through the silk, lifting me toward him until I'm pressed against his hardness. The physical evidence of his desire sends a bolt of heat shooting between my legs, and I tilt my hips forward to grind against his erection.

We devour each other in a clash of teeth and tongues, his bruising kiss tearing down the walls I painstakingly built around my heart.

I tilt my head to give him better access, and he strokes a thumb along my cheek with a gentleness that's so at odds with the savagery of his kiss. I wrap an arm around Dimitri's neck, and his other hand comes up to cup my breast.

Something inside me seems to snap, and all the pent-up desire I've been burying surges out of me at once. I moan into Dimitri's mouth and slide my softness along his shaft.

I need more, but we're out in the open, and I can't do anything in this damned dress.

Dimitri shifts us until my back hits the cold wall of the alcove. His hands splay on the brick behind me — effectively caging me in. Then he reaches down between my thighs, and fireworks explode inside my core as he cups my mound through the thin fabric of my dress.

His thumb rolls down my very center, stroking my sensitive clit. I moan against him, bucking my hips, and Dimitri increases the pressure.

My body is a live wire, thrumming with my need for him. I dig my fingers into his neck, trying to use the wall for leverage, but I can't seem to get the friction I need at this infuriating angle.

Dimitri seems to read my mind, because he reaches down and grabs the back of my thigh, twining my leg around him so our bodies are pressed together.

Then a roar of drunken laughter shatters the moment, and I freeze when I hear a glass break.

"Just wait until I get you truly alone," Dimitri growls, nipping my lower lip with his teeth and giving my pussy one last squeeze.

He pulls back as footsteps draw nearer, skillfully straightening my disheveled dress and pulling me away from the wall. I'm sure my hair is a ratty mess from where it snagged on the brick behind me, but the drunken businessmen don't seem to notice as Dimitri leads me up the stairs, out of the courtyard, and back into the ballroom.