

Chapter Seven

Dimitri

Fifty-six hours and twenty minutes later, I'm pulling through the gates at my home in Aspen. The lights are on in the kitchen, and my heart gives a jolt when I see Jules standing at the sink.

The past few days have been absolute torture — nothing but back-to-back meetings, takeout, and endless fucking traffic. I haven't let my wolf out to run since I left, and it feels as though he might claw his way out of my chest if I don't shift soon.

But I've had one thing on my mind these last two days, and she's standing in my kitchen.

I'm certain my eyes are practically golden as I prowl in through the side door. Her intoxicating cinnamon scent hits me the moment I walk in, and I close my eyes and breathe it in.

"Oh! You're home!" comes Jules's surprised voice. "I wasn't sure when you'd be —" Then she breaks off, and I open my eyes.

Jules is barefoot, dressed in an oversized T-shirt and a pair of ripped jeans. Her tantalizing raven waves are pulled back in a loose braid, though a few strands have worked their way out and curl around her face.

It's a far cry from the neat black uniform she usually cleans in, but I like this look better on her. She's taken all the shelves out of the industrial refrigerator and appears to be in the middle of scrubbing them. Her soft brown eyes are scrunched with concern as she looks me up and down.

"Are you okay?" she asks. "You look kind of . . . pale."

"Fine," I rasp, clenching my fists at my sides as my restless wolf claws to the surface. *God*, it hurts to look at her without being able to touch her. "I just . . . traffic," I finish lamely.

Jules's face relaxes in understanding, and she nods. "I'll just, um, get these out of your way." She gestures at the hodgepodge of clear shelves and caddies that are strewn all over the counters.

"Don't worry about it," I say, shaking my head. "Come have a plunge with me."

Jules's eyebrows shoot up, and I realize what I've said. I know immediately that it's a mistake, but I refuse to take it back.

“Like, in the lake?” A slow nervous smile spreads across her face as she glances out toward the pond.

“Yes.” Then an odd noise erupts from my throat. It’s a violent, spastic sound, and I realize it’s the first time I’ve laughed in . . . I don’t know how long.

Jules is staring at me with a mixture of shock and delight. “Uh . . .”

She’s hesitating. *Why is she hesitating?* I wonder, mentally cursing myself for asking her to take a cold plunge in an ice-capped lake. If I’d asked her to do something less daunting and she said no, at least I’d know it was because of me and *not* because it’s fifteen degrees outside.

“Okay.” Jules laughs as she cringes, her eyes dancing with nerves and . . . something else.

My stupid heart leaps and soars. She said yes. I can’t believe she said yes.

Jules scurries upstairs to change. I pull on some sweats, grab towels, and then head outside. I preheat the sauna on the lower deck and make my way down to the small wooden dock protruding from the ice.

It’s been a long time since I took a night plunge, and I forgot how peaceful it is at dusk. A few deer nose lazily at some twigs, but they take off as soon as they catch my scent. Even when I’m in human form, other animals can sense a predator.

I’ve got a pretty decent-sized hole made by the time Jules emerges from the house wearing a pair of oversized sweats. Her hoodie isn’t zipped all the way, and it hangs off one delicate shoulder, exposing the thin strap of her bathing suit.

Mine.

The word reverberates in my head like a prayer, and for once I don’t shove it away. It might not be appropriate or even sane to be having these feelings for Jules, but if there’s one thing I realized being gone, it’s that I don’t want to leave her again.

“Are you ready?” I ask once she’s within earshot.

Jules makes a scared face and hugs her sweatshirt tighter. “*Brrr.*”

“It’ll be over quickly. I promise.”

She gives me a playful squint. “What’s the point of this again?”

“For me?” I shrug, but Jules is looking at me with genuine curiosity, so I can’t just brush off the question. “Clarity,” I answer honestly. “It’s like a reset button for my brain.”

Too bad I already know the cold water can't erase the burning need I feel for this woman.

"Because your brain can't think of anything except how cold it is?"

I grin. "Basically."

"All right, then," says Jules, eyeing the hole I've made nervously. "You first."

I've plunged enough times that I'm no longer intimidated by the prospect of the cold. It hits your nervous system like a sledgehammer at first, but as soon as your body realizes it's not dying, the cold really isn't so bad.

I tug off my sweatshirt and strip out of my pants until I'm standing in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs. I normally plunge naked, but after the incident in my basement, I don't want to make things awkward if Jules doesn't return my feelings.

And yet I can sense her checking me out as I step toward the edge of the dock. My nerves come alive with the knowledge, and the alpha in me preens.

It's a stupid reaction. I know I'm not repugnant to the opposite sex. I'm used to women looking at me, but with Jules, it feels completely different. My skin heats everywhere her eyes caress my body, and I feel my blood surge south.

I jump off the edge of the dock before the evidence of my desire becomes painfully obvious, and every cell screams in rebellion as the frigid water engulfs me.

It feels like a thousand icy knives stabbing every single inch of me. For three heartbeats, I can't think about anything except the overwhelming chaos of sensation, and for the first time in days, my wolf is blissfully quiet.

Cold air smacks my face as I kick back to the surface, and I blink the water from my eyes. Jules is staring at me with a mixture of admiration and horror, her dark waves blowing in the breeze as her breath forms a halo around her.

"You coming in?" I ask, my teeth starting to chatter.

She seems to remember that she committed to the plunge and fumbles with her clothes. Goosebumps spring up all over her perfect golden skin as she shucks off her sweatshirt and slides down her pants.

Underneath she's wearing a daring sapphire one-piece that hugs every inch of her supple breasts and the soft curves of her hips. It's a good thing I'm treading in near-freezing water. Otherwise, I'd have an instant hard-on.

I nearly groan when Jules turns around and climbs down to the top rung of the ladder. Her suit is completely backless, and it rides high up along her thighs, exposing the side of each round butt cheek.

If she weren't my employee, I'm not sure I'd be able to stop myself from reaching out, gripping her ass, and sinking my teeth into those scrumptious curves.

"What are you doing?" I ask through chattering teeth.

"I'm getting in!"

"You can't *climb* in. You have to jump."

Jules turns around on the ladder, staring anxiously at the frigid water. I can practically taste her nervous anticipation as the water laps at her toes. Then she screws up her face in the cutest expression, plugs her nose, and jumps.

I reach down and grasp her by the waist before she can slide beneath the solid sheet of ice. Her body feels scorching compared to the water, and I resist the urge to pull her against me as her head clears the surface.

Jules's fingers grip my shoulders as she heaves in a sharp gasp. I read the panic and exhilaration in her eyes and hold her tighter just in case she forgets to tread water.

"Just breathe through it," I say calmly. "You'll get used to it in a minute."

"H-how d-d-do y-you e-ever get u-u-used t-to *this*?" Her teeth are chattering so loudly I can hear them, and her lips are turning blue.

I want to tell her I've been plunging for years, but in fairness, shifters run hotter than humans, so it doesn't feel as cold to me.

"*Breathe*," I repeat. "Your body will adjust."

"B-b-b-bullshit."

I can't help it. I laugh. My chest aches as the frigid water rips through my lungs, but it feels so damn good.

After a moment, I feel Jules relax. Her lips are still blue from the cold, but her breaths are steady, and she no longer looks as though she wants to burst out of her skin.

Jules seems to realize her fingers are digging into my shoulders, but she doesn't let go. "I don't see what all the fuss is about," she says with an eye roll. "It's not *that* cold."

“No.” Then her warm brown eyes meet mine, and I swear I stop breathing. Jules’s gaze drops to my lips, and I tighten my hold on her waist.

“Okay, I lied!” she cries. “It’s fucking *freezing*.”

Chuckling, I circle around her and grip the ladder, pulling myself out of the water. I reach down to help her up, and she shudders as the cold air laps at her skin. Her nipples are two hard peaks, clearly visible through her bathing suit. I hurriedly drape a towel over her like a cape so I don’t do something I’ll regret.

“Thanks,” she mumbles, self-consciously straightening her sodden raven locks, which are plastered all over her face. Her teeth are still chattering, so I rub my hands up and down her arms to warm her with the friction.

“Come on,” I say. “Let’s get you warm.”

“Aren’t you cold?”

“Nah. I run hot.”

“Cocky much?”

I raise an eyebrow in a challenge, and, before she can react, scoop an arm behind her knees and hoist her into the air.



JULES

I shriek and kick as Dimitri picks me up, but I’m powerless to break his hold. The man hauls me into his arms as though I weigh nothing and smashes me against his hard muscular chest.

For a minute, I’m so taken aback that I stop fighting completely. Dimitri’s spicy cedar scent floods my senses, and my skin heats everywhere we’re touching. I can feel his strong heartbeat against my breast, and I have the insane urge to rest my head on Dimitri’s shoulder and let him take me wherever he wants to go.

His bed. My bed. The couch. The floor. Just as long as it’s warm and dry and I have this man.

Nope.

I can't be having these thoughts.

Dimitri hauls me around the pond toward a small wooden structure on the lower deck. As we get closer, I realize it's a sauna, and my whole body hums with relief.

"So *this* is your secret," I say to Dimitri as he carries me into the enclosed space. The dry heat hits me like a wall, and I sigh against his body.

The sauna is a lot more spacious than it looked from the outside. There's a wooden bench along one wall opposite a large window. Through it, we can see our frosty pond and the towering trees just beyond.

Dimitri sets me gently on the bench, and my towel rides down a bit. His gaze flicks rapidly to my breasts before casting around the sauna. It's so quick I question whether I imagined it but hurriedly readjust the towel. It's not large enough to cover my thighs, but with the delicious heat lapping at my body, I won't need it much longer.

"Better?" he asks, perching on the bench beside me.

I sigh again and lean back, closing my eyes as my body warms. "*Much* better."

I can still feel Dimitri watching me, so I pivot slightly to face him.

Big mistake.

He's naked apart from a pair of boxer briefs, his muscular thighs on full display. His tanned olive skin is still glistening with water, errant drops sliding over his bulging pecs and down his delicious abs.

Leaning back with one arm thrown over the top of the bench, he looks like a fucking god.

"Do you make all of your maids jump in a frozen lake as a way to prove their loyalty?"

I'd meant it as a joke, but a dark look flashes through Dimitri's eyes, and I wish I hadn't said anything. He swallows twice, and there's something about the hard set of his jaw that makes me think I've said the wrong thing. "No."

I clear my throat to break the tension and quickly avert my eyes.

"You are the first."

My breath catches in my chest, and I steal another quick glance. Dimitri's expression has shifted from closed-off — almost angry — to something else entirely. He looks . . . thoughtful. And a bit nervous.

“What happened in Denver?” I ask quietly. Then, realizing it’s not the sort of question a housekeeper asks her boss, I add, “I know it’s none of my business — you can tell me if I’m overstepping. But you seem . . . different from how you were before you left.”

Dimitri releases a heavy breath, and for a moment, I see the weight he’s carrying. It’s written in the fine lines around his eyes and the tired droop of his shoulders.

I might not invest in the stock market, but I read those articles. I know enough to know that Nesteg is in trouble. And, from what I can tell, Dimitri is at least partially to blame for his company’s current woes.

His throat bobs as he swallows, and for an instant, I’m sure he’s going to shut me out. He doesn’t.

“There are people at my company who think that I should step down as CEO,” he says, dragging a hand through his damp hair. “It’s not the first time someone has questioned my leadership, but it’s the first time I’ve wondered if they’re right.”

I frown, blown away by his revelation. I’d been expecting him to brush me off or tell me something generic. For him to confide that the people around him doubt his abilities . . . I don’t take that lightly.

“Does this have anything to do with you laying off a bunch of your top employees?” I ask.

Dimitri’s eyebrows shoot into his hairline, and I let him see my grimace. “I . . . might have read up on you a bit.”

He nods as if he expected that and scratches the back of his head. He looks so resigned, so beaten and broken, that I have the sudden urge to crawl into his lap and wrap my arms around him. “A few months ago, my co-founder tried to recruit enough support within the company to force me to step down as CEO.”

My stomach clenches at his admission, and I wait for him to continue.

“He was a good friend of mine, and it . . . shook me.” A look of regret sweeps over his beautiful face, and he props his elbows on his knees. “I shouldn’t have reacted so . . . *intensely*. I see now that it was a mistake. It was bad for the company, and the damage was significant. That’s why I went to Denver — to discuss how to regain shareholders’ confidence.” His expression turns sour. “In *me*.”

“Oh.”

No wonder Dimitri had looked so drained when he'd first returned. The man really *did* have the weight of the world riding on his shoulders. He'd been betrayed by someone he trusted, and there were still people at his company who thought that he should resign.

Now I understood why he lived alone in this giant house with no staff to run it. He didn't know *whom* he could trust.

"Is there . . . anything I can do to help?" I ask.

It's a ridiculous question, and I know it. I'm just Dimitri's maid. But my chest aches at seeing his defeat, and in this moment, I just want to comfort him.

"Actually . . ."

My chest flutters with hope and nervous anticipation.

Dimitri grimaces, and I can tell that, whatever it is, he *really* doesn't want to ask. "There's this gala on Saturday," he says slowly. "A lot of important people are going to be there, and my head of PR really wants me to go."

"Okay . . ." I say, trying to keep my voice neutral. I have no idea where he's going with this.

He lets out a huff, looking troubled. "I'm supposed to bring . . . a date."

I lift my eyebrows as the realization hits me, trying *very* hard not to laugh. Judging by the tortured look on his face, one would think someone asked him to show up buck naked and dance on the tables as the evening's entertainment.

"A *date*?" I repeat, a smile twitching at the corners of my mouth.

He nods as though the very word pains him. "My people could arrange something for me, of course, but I'd rather spend the evening with someone who . . . whose company I enjoy."

My stomach does a funny little twist, and I chew on my bottom lip to keep the grin from spreading across my face. This is getting truly weird.

"I know Saturday is your day off," he adds quickly. "I'd compensate you for your time, of course . . ." He trails off, and I stare at him. Is he trying to *pay* me to be his date?

"You're asking *me*?"

"I know it's wildly inappropriate," he says, shaking his head as though dismissing the idea. "You don't have to say yes. It won't affect our working relationship here."

My chest pinches at those words as heat unfurls in my belly. Dimitri might be a recluse, but he's also sinfully handsome and a billionaire. I seriously doubt any woman would refuse him if he asked, and yet he's asking *me*.

"Would you accompany me to the gala?" he asks, his voice slightly breathless.

This time, I can't hold back the goofy grin that spreads across my face. Does he *always* sound so awkward when he asks women on dates? It makes me like him even more. "I would *love* to go to the gala with you."