



To  
Taste  
the  
Dawn

Jamie Craig

## TO TASTE THE DAWN

...“Come here, boy.”

Reluctantly, Jesse pulled away, nearly stopped by Emma’s mewl of protest. He crawled down the length of her body to kneel again between her spread legs.

Gideon dropped a free hand to the top of Jesse’s head, caressing his cheek before cupping the back of his skull. He pulled Jesse forward until his face met the bulge in Gideon’s groin, hard and heavy with the promise of filling Jesse’s hole later. Though Gideon didn’t give him much room to do much more than breathe in his musky scent, Jesse mouthed the thick shaft through the smooth fabric.

“Next step is to start stretching you,” Gideon said. “Feel like fucking our boy here, Emma?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jesse saw Emma’s toes curl in excitement.

“Oh, God, yes, please, Sir.”

“Then, looks like he needs to get you ready.” Gideon released him and held out the harness. His eyes glinted with barely restrained hunger. “I’ll have my own fun while he’s doing that.”

The strap-on harness was a very simple affair. It consisted of two leather belts. One that went around Emma’s hips, and another that went between her legs and attached to the second belt in the back, securing the plate in place. Jesse’s fingers moved quickly. He had secured the harness around Emma many times in the past, and even with her on her back, he had no difficulty getting it in place. He didn’t have any problems until he picked up the dildo Gideon had brought to be attached to the harness. It wasn’t as thick as Gideon’s shaft, but it was still quite large. His ass clenched as he fit it against the belt’s plate...

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# TO TASTE THE DAWN

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BY

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TO TASTE THE DAWN  
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# CHAPTER 1

The worst part of dealing with Djar demons was the blood. It was as thick and sticky as tar, and had the same high, sharp smell. As far as Jesse Madding knew, it was impossible to remove it from clothes. Once a drop landed on a pair of jeans or a T-shirt, that was it. The clothes were lost forever. And Gideon always made him clean the weapons they used, which could take a full day of continuous work. That was really the only reason Jesse decided to forego using a blade in favor of his bare hands. He could get the thick, gooey substance off his skin much easier than he could the metal.

The nest they found in the abandoned “no-tell” motel was relatively small. Their packs could get up to twenty individuals, but Jesse and Gideon only found five Djar demons. Unfortunately,

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they also found the remains of at least four people. And they weren't really remains so much as *hints* of the victims scattered through the ancient hotel room. A pair of glasses here. A shoe there. A wallet in the corner. Gideon had been straining for a fight, and as soon as they knocked in the door, he practically jumped into the room, with a smile of what could only be described as exuberance.

Jesse, for his part, took the time to get a good idea of just how many awaited them before he followed Gideon's lead.

The fight was short and brutal. Believing Jesse to be a regular human, all five of the Djar demons turned on him, their long snouts dripping with white saliva, their teeth clicking together with unrestrained hunger. Jesse didn't mind being the center of their attention. As long as they were focused on him, they weren't paying close attention to Gideon. Jesse fended off each attack with a graceful ease, his body moving automatically, each blow nothing more than a logical follow through from his previous act. He could have done more than fend them off. He could have killed each one of them, but he preferred to watch Gideon deliver the final blows.

Flashes of his pale, powerful arms caught in the dim light. Gideon had been pragmatic about this fight. He'd deliberately opted for a form-fitting T-shirt, something that wouldn't get snagged very easily, with less fabric to worry about staining. Jesse hadn't been surprised when he'd spent over half an hour deciding what to wear, but lounging on the bed, watching a half-naked Gideon shuffling through his wardrobe, had been worth every second of the wait.

It was good now, too. Because he moved like a shadow between the stouter Djar, twisting beyond their reach to land crushing punches where they least expected them.

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Two charged Gideon at the same time. He crouched as if to take them on, then leapt forward at the last moment. He caught a slobbering snout in each hand, heedless of razor-like teeth digging into his palms, and used the holds to twist the demons' necks as he soared over their heads.

The distinctive cracks made the hair stand up on the back of Jesse's neck. The other three snapped their attention away from him to fix black eyes on Gideon and the two bodies he tossed casually aside.

He smiled at them, his fangs glistening. "First blood, boys." He flicked a few thick droplets from his fingers in their direction. "Too bad they didn't live long enough to actually taste it."

The three remaining demons completely lost interest in Jesse. He had never studied the anatomy of the beasts, but he was pretty convinced they relied on smell far more than sight. Their immediate reaction to Gideon's blood confirmed that theory. They honed in on the scent, all three charging Gideon at once. Without thinking, Jesse teleported to place himself between Gideon and the demons. He took advantage of their stupefied shock, smashing one in the snout with enough force to send it flying across the room.

"Hey," Gideon complained good-naturedly behind him. "I was just starting to have fun here."

"You're welcome to the other two," Jesse tossed back.

Gideon growled his pleasure at the response, snatching Jesse out of the way when one of the remaining two went for his legs. Gideon took the collision instead, and the pair went down in a heap, all flashing teeth and surly snarls. Blood sprayed from a fresh wound, but the rake down his bare arm only enraged Gideon further. He drove his fist into the demon's chest, the muscles in his forearm flexing. Several beats passed with the two frozen in the

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macabre position. Then, the demon went limp, the life literally squeezed out of it.

The demon Jesse had tossed pushed itself to its feet, clearly stunned, blood pouring from its ears. Instead of following the scent of Gideon's blood, or the sound of its struggling comrade, it lowered itself to the ground and barreled toward Jesse's legs. Jesse waited until he felt the demon's hot breath right on his legs, and then teleported again, sending the demon into the opposite wall. A crack formed beneath its head, traveling up to the ceiling. Cockroaches streamed from the plaster.

He heard the death scream of Gideon's other prey, but didn't dare look away from their lone enemy now. Its arms fumbled blindly for some kind of purchase against the wall. When it managed to curl its claw around a gnawed limb Jesse hadn't noticed until now, Gideon made a sound of disgust and marched over to it.

The Djar was helpless as Gideon drove his heel into its snout. A second kick to its head splattered thick blood against the wall behind it.

"It's a good thing this place is already out of business," Gideon said as he surveyed the carnage. "The cleaning bill alone would bankrupt it."

"That's if they could even find anybody who'd be willing to take the job. How's your hand?"

The sticky Djar blood coated Gideon's skin, all the way past his wrist. "Just a scratch. Think the water is still on in this place?"

"Yeah, but..." Jesse gingerly stepped over a sticky puddle. "Let's find a different room."

Gideon didn't argue, though he did grin as he followed Jesse through the smashed door. "Since when are you squeamish about a

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little blood?”

“I’m not squeamish. Maybe I don’t like cockroaches.”

“That must be why I always see Emma wielding the shoe when you find one in the house.”

“Well, they’re disgusting. With their eyes and their antennae.” Jesse tested a knob but it refused to turn. With a grunt, he pushed the door off its hinges, revealing a surprisingly clean—compared to the Djar nest—room. “After you.”

Gideon made sure not to get any of the Djar blood on him as he stepped past, heading straight for the open bathroom door. The sound of running water echoed against the walls.

“I think we got them all,” Gideon called out. “I’m not sensing anything else around here but us.”

Jesse agreed that the motel was probably clean. He had the feeling that the nest of Djar kept the whole place free of the vagrants that were typically attracted to abandoned hovels like this. That, on top of the unseasonably warm spring weather, made Jesse fairly certain nobody was going to try a surprise attack.

“And the night’s still young. I cleared our whole schedule for this trip.”

The water stopped. When Gideon reappeared in the doorway, he leaned against the jamb and smiled, his fangs gleaming white in the dark shadows across his face. “That almost sounds like you had plans I don’t know about.”

Jesse gasped with mock indignation. “Are you implying I had anything on my mind tonight except doing a good and thorough job?”

“I don’t hear you denying it.”

Jesse’s lips twitched, but he bit his smile back. “Now you are. I absolutely didn’t have any ulterior motives.”

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“Then I guess mentioning I’m hard as a rock and starving would be a waste of time.” He shrugged and moved to go back into the bathroom. “Your loss.”

Jesse didn’t have a hard time believing that. Even in the dim light, he could see the outline of Gideon’s erection against his tight pants. “Wait. Wait. Let’s not be too hasty here. You know how...flexible I am. My plans can change.”

Gideon paused and tilted his head back toward him. The knowing smile had returned. “Something tells me this is exactly the plan you had in mind, boy.”

Jesse closed the distance between them, crowding Gideon into the narrow bathroom. “Only because you’re always hard as a rock and hungry after a fight.”

A strong hand caught Jesse’s wrist, squeezing enough to still him. His strength was actually greater than Gideon’s, a fact they were both aware of, but most of the time, he suppressed it in favor of Gideon’s dominance, swaying to his power eagerly, desperately. Now, he remained motionless while Gideon pushed his other hand beneath Jesse’s shirt, his fingers still slightly damp from where he’d washed them, and shoved it up to expose Jesse’s chest.

“I’ll just take a little something to take the edge off,” Gideon murmured. His dark head bent, and Jesse tilted his chin back, ready to meet his lips. What he got instead was Gideon bowing even lower, and then the sharp drive of his fangs directly into Jesse’s taut nipple.

A sharp blade of hunger sliced through him at the very first prick of Gideon’s teeth. His cock stiffened to the point of pain, his pants suddenly feeling two sizes too small. A fight always got his blood pumping, and knowing how a good spot of violence aroused Gideon just made his heart race faster. But he was still a little

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surprised how swiftly his body reacted to Gideon's bite. His teeth sank deeper, and the blood erupted from his skin, filling Gideon's mouth. He watched, fascinated, as Gideon pulled at his flesh, his throat working as he took a second swallow.

But before Jesse could get lost in the familiar sensation, Gideon lifted his head and licked the scarlet blood from his lips. There was a dangerous glint in the vampire's eye that told Jesse the short drink had done anything *but* take the edge off.

"Strip," came the curt command. He released Jesse's wrist and folded his arms over his chest, the biceps seeming obscenely large in the atypical T-shirt he wore. "Or I'm going to tear those clothes off you and force you to go home naked." His mouth canted. "Without teleporting."

The threat wasn't necessary, though Jesse had no doubt that Gideon meant every single word. In the four years since he had received his extraordinary powers from Michelle, the strangest things had simply become commonplace. Gideon had become remarkably tolerant of the fact that Jesse popped in and out of rooms without warning. He also became adept at adopting Jesse's skills to his own ends.

Jesse tugged his shirt over his head, letting it drop to the floor without concern. There was a good reason he bought T-shirts that came in packs of ten. His shoes and pants followed, and by the time he was completely naked, his blood was pounding in his ears, and his cock was leaking.

Gideon pressed his hand flat against Jesse's chest, directly over the already healing marks on his nipple. His fingers curled, digging into the muscle, and his gaze never wavered as he pushed Jesse back, slowly, firmly, until his shoulders met the cold tiled wall behind him.

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“So what exactly were your plans, boy?” Though his voice was low and hypnotic, it wasn’t enough to distract Jesse from the path of his other hand, especially when it wrapped around Jesse’s shaft and squeezed. “Tell me how flexible you’re being.”

Jesse honestly couldn’t remember if he actually *had* other plans, or if it had all been a ploy. When Gideon got that close to him, he often forgot important details. Gideon’s mouth was so close to his, Jesse could almost feel it. A bit of blood still clung to the corner of his lips, and Jesse’s pulse thrummed in response.

“After taking out the nest, I planned to...”

Gideon’s grip tightened. “Yes?”

Jesse gasped. “Do a complete sweep of the motel, and the surrounding area. You know, better safe than sorry.”

His tongue darted out, licking Jesse’s lower lip. When Jesse opened for the kiss, Gideon retreated again, leaving him hard and aching. Instead, he raked his fangs along Jesse’s shoulder, down over his collarbone, honing directly for his unmarked nipple.

“Sometimes, safe’s overrated,” Gideon mumbled, the split second before he sank his teeth into the hot flesh.

Jesse’s spine went rigid, and he automatically grasped Gideon’s upper arms, reaching for anything to keep him steady. The bite wasn’t as clean as it could have been, and Jesse suspected Gideon did that on purpose. He tore at the flesh, to make it hurt a little more. To make sure he had Jesse’s complete attention as he swallowed mouthful after mouthful of the heated blood.

His head swam. Gideon sucked hard at his veins, making him feel it all the way to his toes. He never loosened his grip on Jesse’s shaft, either. If anything, his hand got tighter, sliding upward to just below the crown.

Then this drink was over, too, and Gideon was moving again,

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not up, not against Jesse, but down, to his knees, barely giving Jess a moment to catch his breath before pushing his leg to the side. He exposed the inner thigh, licked along the line between leg and balls, and promptly buried his fangs into the femoral artery.

Jesse could experience blood loss without any negative consequences, but that didn't mean there weren't any effects at all. When Gideon tore into his flesh, it hurt. And when the blood gushed from his artery—flowing all the faster because of his rapidly pounding heart—he felt light-headed. He also felt that too familiar desire welling up inside of him, beginning at the bottoms of his feet and pushing upward, until it enveloped him. He curled his fingers in Gideon's hair, gripping him tightly, holding him in place, becoming lost in every long pull of blood.

A moan filled his head. When it vibrated against his thigh, he realized it came from Gideon. The back of his knee quivered, and he shifted his weight to lean more heavily against the wall, unwilling to lose his balance and this intoxicating connection between them.

Gideon retracted his fangs and licked over the ragged puncture wounds he left behind. "I swear to God, you taste better every time I get my teeth into you," he said, his voice thick and husky. His nose pushed against Jesse's sac, his hand starting to stroke up and down his shaft. "You smell like fucking heaven, boy."

Jesse whimpered as the words echoed through him. He shivered, and he felt the muscles in his thigh quiver. He knew Gideon would notice it, too. Gideon always noticed every little tremor, every twitch, every sign that Jesse was inching closer to his breaking point.

"Can I get a taste of you, Sir?" Jesse asked thickly. "You mentioned being hard as a rock."

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“When I’ve had my fill.” He sat back on his heels, angling the tip of Jesse’s cock toward his mouth. “And I’m not nearly full enough yet.”

Dragging the flat of his tongue over the dripping head, Gideon collected the pre-come wetting the skin before digging into the slit for more. Jesse tightened his hold on the back of Gideon’s skull, desperate for the balance he provided. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the sight of Gideon’s mouth, the full lips, the blood that still stained the corners. He saw the moment Gideon dropped his jaw, and he saw every inch of his cock disappear into the tight swelter of his lover’s mouth, the fangs barely scraping along his length as Gideon sank to the root. Jesse prepared for the assault to start, the in and out of Gideon’s throat that would push him around the bend.

What he got instead was a fresh sting, sharp pricks into the shorn skin at the base of his cock as Gideon dove in for yet another drink.

Jesse’s shocked cry stilled at his throat, lodged at the very back of his tongue with what remained of his breath. For a moment, the pain eclipsed everything else. In a way, Gideon’s fangs were no worse than the cock rings he regularly wore, but there was one key difference. The cock rings were tight, and often contained points that made him bleed, but those rings did not have the pressure, and the precision, of Gideon’s jaw as it closed around his base.

Gideon sucked once, tightening the seal around Jesse’s cock and filling his mouth with blood. Jesse’s knees buckled, and he would have gone down, except he managed to catch the ledge of the sink with slick fingers, holding on with enough force to whiten his knuckles.

Heat enveloped his cock. The haze of his thoughts prevented

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him from figuring out what it was for long seconds, seconds Gideon took advantage of to start tracing up and down the crease of Jesse's ass. The blood. His blood. Gideon wasn't swallowing right away, choosing instead to hold it in his mouth to bathe Jesse's skin with it. When he growled, the echoes went straight through Jesse's flesh, joining with his pounding pulse until he couldn't tell one from the other.

He chose to finally swallow and pull another mouthful at the same time he pushed the tip of his finger past Jesse's tight ring of muscle.

Jesse was accustomed to holding off, to making himself wait until Gideon gave the explicit order to come. Gideon had trained him to literally last for hours, to extend his own torment until it felt like every cell vibrated with the need for release. But with Gideon's mouth full, he couldn't issue orders, or warnings. And Jesse didn't think anything short of the end of the world would make Gideon release him, especially since he wouldn't even allow a single drop of blood to overflow and leak from the corner of his mouth.

Gideon's finger worked deeper into his body, pushing until his nail brushed against Jesse's prostate. The contact was fleeting, and the pressure almost nonexistent. It might not have happened outside Jesse's imagination, except for the fact that his entire body vibrated like a tuning fork. Gideon swallowed, and his cheeks hollowed as he took another deep drink. Jesse's chest seized, and a sudden spasm made his hips jerk hard. His flesh tore farther against Gideon's teeth, and a fresh heat surrounded Jesse's cock. He closed his eyes, the world tilting dangerously, pleasure sapping the strength from his muscles as he shot into Gideon's waiting throat.

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The constriction as Gideon swallowed only made it worse, but Gideon clamped his forearm over Jesse's stomach and pinned him to the wall. The fangs retracted, and while the immediate pain dissipated, the tightness left behind by Gideon's mouth and throat overcame its absence. When the edge of the sink broke off in Jesse's white-knuckled grip, he grabbed Gideon's shoulder instead, all too needy of his strength.

Gideon's swallowing gradually slowed, then stopped as he eased back slightly on Jesse's shaft. He didn't let the softening length slip from his mouth, choosing instead to suck at the oversensitive skin, and Jesse trembled like a leaf caught in the wind by the time he reached the crown and swirled his tongue along the ridge.

Jesse jerked his hips, trying to push his length into Gideon's mouth. He'd even accept the sharp ring of teeth around his base again, but Gideon put a hard hand on his hip and stopped him from thrusting forward. His teeth caught against the thin skin at his crown, and fresh blood mingled with the remaining come. Gideon sucked at it greedily, catching the new drops against his tongue.

"Stop," Jesse finally gasped. "Stop, please, Sir. I can't..."

A warning growl rumbled from Gideon's throat. Jesse had no choice but to hold his breath and wait out those interminable seconds before Gideon was done.

He ended with a long swipe over the swollen, red tip, his lips stained an even darker red from the residual blood. "This plan turned out much better than yours, I think," he said, glancing up at Jesse with a smirk.

Jesse exhaled a shaking breath. "Your plans usually do turn out better."

Gideon let him go and straightened, pressing Jesse's naked

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body into the cold tile. “So the question is, do I fuck you here, or risk scaring up some more cockroaches in the next room?”

“I have the feeling you won’t be able to resist all that carnage.”

“And you love it.”

Gideon bent his head, his intent to kiss Jesse all too clear, when he stiffened and cocked his head. Jesse recognized that reaction. Gideon heard something. Or smelled something. In some way, he’d sensed something else nearby.

“Jesse?” The female voice was faint, but clear, followed immediately by a low, masculine murmur.

“Shit,” Gideon muttered. Releasing his hold on Jesse, he bent and scooped up his clothes. “You should probably get dressed.”

Jesse didn’t need to be told. He was already yanking his pants over his sore cock, his mind racing. What was Dominique doing there? Was there an emergency? Was somebody hurt? He couldn’t think of any other reason she would track them down to a demon’s nest, but if there was a genuine emergency, it would have been faster and easier to call him.

“Jesse?”

“Wait...” He coughed, clearing his throat. “I’ll be right there.”

Gideon’s features smoothed, his eyes returning to their normal brown, his fangs retracting. “I’ll see what she wants.” He shook his head. “Sometimes, I have no idea how that girl managed to make it to adulthood. As far as she knows, there could still be demons around.”

“She made it to adulthood because we wouldn’t let any of the demons get her,” Jesse muttered.

“Well, we should’ve taught her better to be careful.” Gideon opened the door only wide enough to slip out, not enough to expose Jesse in case Dominique stood on the other side. Not that

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Dominique hadn't caught him in similar or even worse circumstances. Just not since she'd moved out of the house.

He dressed quickly, but the sound of Dominique's voice neared with each second. As he slipped on his left shoe, Gideon's sharp, "Don't even think it," was followed by the bathroom door being flung wide open.

Dominique stood on the other side. At the age of twenty, she wasn't any taller than she'd been when he'd first met her. Barely five feet with a riot of black curls spilling down her narrow back. Her dark skin merged with the shadows of the dim room, but the flash of her brilliant smile lit her up as always, even when she threw herself inside and grabbed Jesse's wrist.

"There you are." She tugged hard enough to pull him off-balance, his shoe clattering to the floor. The distinct scent of beer wafted from her breath. "Come on. I've been looking for you all night."

"You were looking for me? You couldn't wait back at the house instead of wandering around in a dangerous neighborhood?"

"I tried stopping her." The declaration came from an unfamiliar male voice, probably the same one Jesse had heard earlier. Jess followed Dominique out of the bathroom to see Gideon standing near the doorway, a grim expression on his face, and a muscular young man nearby. At the sight of Jesse, the young man stepped forward and held out his hand, the fingers wide and blunt. "I'm Cory Swain. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Mr. Madding."

"Cory Swain," Jesse repeated slowly, searching his memory for the name, but he drew a blank. "Did Dominique tell you we could help you?" It wouldn't be the first time Dominique had referred a friend to them as a client.

Her light laughter floated around him as she came around to

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Cory's side. Her arms looped around Cory's waist. "Cory can hold his own. Trust me."

Behind them, Gideon cleared his throat. "Dominique, maybe you and Cory should go home for the night. We're working here."

"Oh, please." She sniffed and raked her eyes down Jesse's body. "I've seen you guys after too many fights not to know you were stuffing him in there."

Jesse sighed. "Dominique."

"What? Am I wrong?"

"You haven't told me yet what you're doing in this very dangerous demon's nest." Jesse narrowed his eyes. "How did you even know we were here?"

"Emma told me."

Gideon snorted. "I sincerely doubt Emma gave you the exact location. She knew this was dangerous."

Her stubborn chin lifted. "It's not my fault Jesse has had the same filing system for the last five years. All his notes were right there, in the second drawer of his desk."

Jesse growled, taking her arm to lead her toward the open door. "How many times have I told you not to go through my desk? Come on, let's go home and we'll talk about exactly how long you're going to be grounded."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he froze. Cory was looking at them with drawn, confused brows. Gideon seemed vaguely amused. Dominique's mouth was pulled into a frown of annoyance.

"Sorry." He released her. "My point still stands about not going through my desk."

"Fine. Point taken. But I only did it because I wanted you to meet Cory."

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"I did tell her we shouldn't bother you while you're working," Cory apologized. "But, well, I'm sure you know how hard it is to stop Dominique once she gets an idea in her head."

"Why's it so important that I meet Cory right now?"

"It's not that important," Cory said. "But we were talking tonight about how last week Dominique introduced me to Gideon and Emma, and decided it was time I meet you, too. I just didn't realize she meant, you know, tonight."

"What?" Jesse looked over to Gideon. "What the hell is going on here?"

With a sigh, Gideon stuffed his hands in his pockets. He looked like this was the last place on earth he wanted to be. "Cory and Dominique are dating."

"Not just dating," Dominique announced. "After the semester is over, we're moving in together."

Jesse reacted without thinking. "No, you're not."

"What?"

"You are not moving in with some guy."

"He's not some guy! He's my boyfriend, and I love him."

"And I'm the guy who is paying for your school, and your rent, and everything else you need, and I say that you're not moving in with him."

"Actually, *Gideon* is paying for those things."

Gideon held up his hands. "Hey, you are not dragging me into this. This is exactly why I told you to hold off on the introductions."

"Did you know they were moving in together?" Jesse demanded.

"I knew she was thinking about it." Gideon shot her a fierce glare. "She should've thought a lot harder."

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Dominique didn't back down, though Cory's arm tightened around her, as if to keep her from leaping forward. "It's my life. I'll do whatever I want."

"How could you even think about moving in with him? How long have you even known him?"

"Long enough. He taught that history class I took last year, the one I got the A in."

"Maybe this isn't the place to be having this conversation," Gideon jumped in.

Jesse's eyes widened. "You've been seeing him for a year? He's a professor? You're a professor? Just how old are you?"

"I'm a grad assistant," Cory said quickly. "And Dominique earned that A. We didn't start dating until after she'd finished the course."

"Yeah." Dominique smoothed her hand along his waist, fingertips dipping inside his waistband before he grasped her wrist and pulled it free. "It took me two months to wear him down."

"You've been seeing him for that long and you didn't even think to mention it to me?" Jesse turned toward the door. "Come on. Gideon's right. We shouldn't be having this conversation here."

Dominique didn't move. "What? You're going to make us take the long way home? I told Cory you'd teleport us."

"It's not a party trick, Dominique. You found your way here, I'm sure you can find your way home again."

When she opened her mouth to speak again, Gideon moved forward to clamp his hand over it. "Don't do it," he hissed.

Gently, Cory pulled her back. "Sorry about this." He even sounded sincere. "She just wanted us to finally meet. I'll get her home. Don't worry."

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“Great,” Jesse said curtly. “We’ll talk about this—*all* of this—there.”

Dominique didn’t look exactly happy about the prospect, but she allowed Cory to lead her out of the room. Jesse folded his arms, watching them go, and wasn’t surprised when his eye started to twitch. It was an automatic reaction he had developed not too long after he became Dominique’s legal guardian.

“You know she was drunk, don’t you?” Gideon said. “She wouldn’t have done this if she was sober and thinking straight.”

“Sure. If she was sober and thinking straight, she would have delayed telling me for what? A week? A month? Another year? And what’s your excuse?”

A muscle twitched in Gideon’s jaw. “I thought we were going to talk about this back at the house.”

“Yeah. Right.”

He didn’t want to wait until they were back at the house, but at that moment, Jesse realized he wasn’t in the mood to talk, either. It wasn’t difficult to remember the days when Dominique told him absolutely everything that happened to her. She never acted like she had any reason to keep secrets from him. Jesse wasn’t sure when that changed—until five minutes ago, he hadn’t been aware anything had changed at all. And he certainly had no reason to think Gideon would keep Dominique’s secrets. But apparently, he had been wrong about that, too.

Without another word, he teleported to his office. And left Gideon at the hotel.

## CHAPTER 2

A small part of Gideon really didn't want to go home. Telling Jesse about Cory wouldn't have been easy under the best of circumstances, and this, especially with Dominique drunk off her ass, was far from ideal. It was in an entirely different country from ideal. He sincerely hoped Cory was as smart as he looked and just took Dominique back to her apartment rather than the mansion. The way she seemed to have her boyfriend wrapped around her finger, though, Gideon doubted he would be so lucky.

He paused at the front door, listening for heartbeats. Jesse was in his office, while Emma's slow and steady pulse came from the kitchen. She wasn't alone. Two others were with her, one quick and excited.

Gideon sighed and shut the door behind him. Dominique never

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did anything the easy way.

Though he wasn't exactly keen on either of the two options before him, Gideon crossed to the office and knocked on the closed door. He owed Jesse an explanation first. As difficult as it might be.

Gideon expected Jesse to open the door. He didn't expect a curt, "What?"

He rubbed at his eyes. Maybe he should've gotten Emma to help him with this part. "I'd like to talk."

Jesse flung the door open, and it slammed back against the wall. Gideon wouldn't be surprised if it put a hole right through the plaster. Sometimes when Jesse was annoyed or distracted, he forgot his own strength. "Now you would like to talk? What about before? You didn't feel like it then?"

No, he really hadn't wanted to do it then, either, but he wasn't about to admit that to Jesse now. "Can we not do this out here, please? I'm sorry you found out like this, but I really don't feel like fighting about it."

"No, we're pretty much going to fight about this, Gideon. So if you're not feeling up to it, you're welcome to go."

"And go face off with Dominique instead? No thanks."

"Why? It sounded like you two were best chums now."

"No, I just happened to be awake when she dropped by last week. But the way you reacted tonight is exactly why I didn't tell you about Cory sooner."

"Did it occur to you that maybe the way I reacted tonight had something to do with the fact that she completely *blindsided* me?"

"No," he replied honestly. "Because you've always been a little crazy as far as Dominique is concerned."

"Somebody's needed to be a little crazy where Dominique is

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concerned. It's not easy taking care of a teenage girl, Gideon. Though maybe you're right. Maybe I didn't do as good of a job as I should have."

Gideon blinked. "I never said that."

"I know, I just meant...never mind." Jesse pried the door from the wall with a small sigh. It began to drift close, half-shielding Jesse's face. "I'm not really in the mood to talk right now. Maybe later."

"Jess..."

But the door was already shut, the soft click thundering in Gideon's ears. He could push it open and demand they talk about this, but he had as much desire to do that as Jesse did. Besides, he knew in this particular case, he wasn't necessarily completely in the right. Wanting to prevent Jesse's meltdown at the thought of Dominique growing up wasn't the most selfless choice he'd ever made.

Leaving the office behind, he marched toward the kitchen, fury rising in every step that Dominique would put them in this position in the first place. He flat-handed the door and snapped, "Do you even think before you pull stunts like this?"

Dominique's light snore answered his question. Emma and Cory looked up from where they sat at the table, each with a cup of coffee in front of them. Cory, at least, looked startled at Gideon's sudden question, but Dominique didn't even stir.

"Gideon..." Cory started.

"Why don't I get you some coffee?" Emma cut in smoothly.

He waved at her to stay seated. "I'll get it. We might have a long night ahead of us before Jesse comes out."

Emma frowned. "I don't think he's going to be emerging from his office any time soon. He's pretty upset."

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Gideon didn't need Emma's confirmation, though knowing she could sense his emotions eased his mind a little bit. She would be using her own gentle ways to try and make Jesse feel better about the whole situation—provided, of course, he didn't have any walls up to stop her from transmitting to him. They had grown very adept at keeping their emotional contacts to a bare minimum since Emma had returned to their lives four years earlier. The fears that her powers might still be used against her tempered their every decision.

With a cup of hot coffee cradled in his hand, Gideon leaned against the edge of the counter and frowned at Cory. "Why would you let Dominique talk you into this? We told you how Jesse was going to react to the news."

"Because I thought it was time we told him. It's not fun being somebody's dirty little secret. And Dominique decided she was going to track him down and tell him tonight whether I agreed with her or not."

"Dominique was drunk."

"Dominique was tired of having to hide him," Emma said softly. "And I can't say that I blame her."

Gideon couldn't either, in the long run. He just wished she'd had a little more tact about how she'd made her announcement.

"So now what do we do?" He directed the question to both of them. For all his annoyance at Dominique's stunt, he liked and respected Cory. The boy had a good head on his shoulders, and he clearly adored Dominique, even if he let her get away with murder half the time.

"Maybe I should try to talk to Jesse," Emma suggested. "Tonight really took him by surprise, but I think that once he's had time to adjust, he'll probably be okay."

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“He needs to get to know Cory, so he can realize Dominique didn’t make a stupid decision here.”

Emma nodded thoughtfully. “That might be a good idea.”

“I’ll be happy to do anything I can,” Cory said quickly. “Dominique mentioned that he spends a lot of time in that old book store. Maybe I can help him there?”

“That might be a good idea,” Gideon said. “We probably should have thought of that last week.”

“Or last year,” Emma added dryly. “I know Dominique thought Jesse would overreact, but he might be less upset now if she hadn’t kept it from him for so long.”

“Because he’s got such a great track record when it comes to her boyfriends? I’ll bet she still hasn’t forgiven him for what happened at prom.”

“What happened at prom?” Cory asked.

“Nothing too bad,” Emma said. “Jesse insisted that he had to chaperone, claiming that vamps or demons might see the prom as a golden opportunity. Of course, when Dominique pointed out that hadn’t happened before, he refused to listen.”

“But he didn’t just insist on chaperoning. He basically scared everybody away from dancing with her,” Gideon pointed out. “She was furious.”

“Well, there was that, too,” Emma conceded. “But his heart was in the right place.”

Gideon sipped his coffee, wishing he could drag Jesse in to hear all this. It might make a difference. “You don’t have to worry about taking Dominique home tonight. She can sleep this off in her old room.”

“Sure, but I’d like to stay with her. She always needs somebody to help her out the morning after.”

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He cocked a single brow. “You really think sleeping with her under Jesse’s roof when he reacted the way he did is the smartest thing to do under the circumstances?”

Cory smiled sheepishly and nodded. “You’re right. Why don’t I come around tomorrow after breakfast to pick her up? And maybe I’ll get a chance to make a better impression on Jesse.”

Gideon wasn’t sure that was a good idea, either, but it was better than Jesse waking up and seeing both of them at the breakfast table. “Get here around nine,” he instructed. “Jesse usually heads to the store at nine-thirty, but breakfast will be over by then. Emma and I will take care of Dominique’s hangover.”

Cory stood, but paused long enough to brush an unruly curl away from Dominique’s face. The small touch didn’t awaken her, but she did smile a little in her sleep and shift toward Cory’s hand. When she slept like that, she almost looked like an angel. Almost.

“Nine o’clock. I’ll be here. And I am sorry about all the drama we caused.”

“It’s not your fault,” Emma said. “Don’t worry about it.”

Gideon nodded. “That’s our job. You need me to walk you out?”

“No, I can find it. Good night.”

When they were left alone in the kitchen, Gideon sighed and set down his coffee. “We really fucked this one up, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, we did.” Emma chewed on her bottom lip for a moment before adding, “You know, he’s not angry right now. He just feels really...hurt.”

“Because we didn’t tell him.”

Emma lifted one shoulder. “I don’t know if it’s because *we* didn’t tell him.”

“I thought he’d gotten better about letting Dominique go,

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though,” Gideon argued. “She’s been out of the house for over two years. She’s got her own life.”

Emma shook her head. “What if I kept an important secret from you for a year, and then chose the worst possible way to reveal it?”

“That’s different.”

“How is that different?”

“You’re a partner in this relationship. There’s expectations in that. Dominique is her own person, and what’s more, she isn’t going to live nearly as long as any one of us. If Jesse doesn’t start learning how to let her go, he’s going to have a devil of a time when he doesn’t have a choice in the matter.”

“But you just see Dominique as the kid who lived in your house for three years and got underfoot,” Emma pointed out. “Other than the two of us, I don’t think Jesse is closer to anybody else. I think he has the right to feel a little betrayed by this. Besides, how will he learn to let her go if she doesn’t behave like an adult?”

He scowled at the girl in question. “Sometimes, I miss the days when I could threaten her with chains.”

“She never took your threats seriously, did she?”

“No, but it sure as hell felt good.”

Emma smiled. “There is that. Do you want to take her up to her room? Though it’d serve her right to sleep at the table all night and get a kink in her neck.”

“No, I’ve got her.”

Emma rose and hovered in the background as Gideon scooped Dominique into his arms. She was feather light, a contradiction to the force of nature she was when awake, and she burrowed into his chest without fluttering an eyelash. Moments like this, he almost felt paternal, but only almost. He would never fully understand the

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depths of the relationship Dominique and Jesse shared. They had bonded in ways impossible for Jesse to do so with anyone else.

He had just set his foot on the bottom riser of the stairs when the office door opened. Jesse stood there, his face uncharacteristically inscrutable, watching the three of them.

"She passed out," Gideon said, unsure of what else he could say. "I'm just taking her up to her room."

"I see that. And where's... her friend? Did he already leave for the night?"

Gideon nodded. "He thought it was best." Better to give Cory the credit for that decision. He was going to need all the bonus points he could get.

Jesse stepped toward him and put out his arms. "I'll take her up to her room."

He passed her over without hesitation. He sincerely doubted Dominique was going to wake up, but if she did, she deserved to find Jesse there instead of him.

"Do you want me to come up with you?" Emma asked.

"No, that's all right. I'll just put her to bed and be back down in a bit."

Nodding, Gideon stepped out of the way to allow Jesse room to pass unimpeded. At his elbow, Emma watched just as earnestly, not speaking until after Jesse and Dominique had disappeared in the upstairs hall.

"I almost wish Cory was still here," she said. "I think Jesse is really going to like him once he gets over the shock."

Gideon curled his arm around her waist and pulled her close. He needed the acceptance of at least one of his lovers right then. "One thing at a time."

## CHAPTER 3

In an attempt at apology, Gideon woke up early and made breakfast. Jesse didn't miss the fact that Gideon had specifically chosen his favorite food, including beans, bacon, and fried bread. Jesse appreciated the effort, and even though he lacked any sort of appetite, he ate everything Gideon put in front of him. He at least wanted Gideon to understand that though he was still angry about certain facts being withheld from him—and he was definitely very angry about that—he did appreciate Gideon's effort.

He did not, however, speak to anybody over breakfast. He didn't want to try to make Gideon understand why he was so angry at the situation, and though he thought Emma would get it, he also wasn't in the mood to talk about it. They would just say that he was always unreasonably protective over Dominique, and they

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didn't seem to understand that there was nothing *unreasonable* about it. She had lost her parents, her foster mother, and Michelle all before she turned sixteen. She had been entrusted to him—this precious girl who had so much to offer the world had been *his* responsibility. And even when she had her own issues, her own sorrow, she had been there for Jesse during the blackest point of his entire existence. Of course he was protective of her. She was the closest thing to a daughter he would ever have.

And she was growing away from him by the year. Most parents had at least eighteen years before their children flew from the nest. Jesse had barely had three. But he had always comforted himself with the fact that Dominique could always rely on him. That she knew he would *always* be there for her, that he would use the full strength of all of his power to help her, if necessary. But if that were the case, then why keep such an important part of her life from him? What had he done to create that rift between them?

Jesse was still pushing his beans around his plate and mulling that question when the echoing doorbell pulled him from his thoughts. Emma jumped up to answer the door. Jesse didn't know why, but Cory's sudden appearance in the kitchen surprised him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, knowing he sounded sour and not caring.

Neither Emma nor Gideon reacted to Cory's presence, except to glance between him and Jesse as he stepped farther into the room. "We didn't really meet under the best circumstances last night," he said. "And I wanted to make sure Dominique was okay this morning."

"Dominique is still asleep. I'm sure she'll grace us with her presence in time for lunch."

"You want something to eat?" Gideon asked, taking out

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another plate before Cory could respond. “I made plenty.”

Cory glanced from Gideon back to Jesse. “Do you mind?”

Jesse gestured at the empty seat. He wasn’t going to stop Cory from joining them, but he wasn’t going to go out of his way to encourage it, either. “Sure, you can have her portion.”

Gideon had the plate in front of him by the time Cory sat down, and several seconds passed where Cory got settled. He thanked Emma for the cup of coffee that appeared without a specific request for it, and the knowledge that she’d brought it to him without having to ask for his preferences churned Jesse’s stomach.

“I wanted to apologize again for taking you by surprise last night,” he said before he took a bite. “I know it’s too late to fix, but I really would like to start over this morning.”

Jesse looked up long enough to study Cory’s eager face before shifting his attention back to the remnants of his breakfast. Cory was just the sort of man Dominique would find attractive—physically and mentally. In high school, she had dated a few boys who were not very bright, and the fact that they couldn’t keep up with her drove her crazy. He couldn’t even really be shocked by the difference in their ages. Dominique never let anything as inconsequential as age distract her from a man she found attractive. When Jesse tried to point out that wasn’t wise, she threw Gideon back in his face.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-eight. I’ll be finishing my masters this year.”

“*Twenty-eight*? You were graduating from college while she was still in middle school!”

Cory seemed entirely unflustered by his outburst. “Actually, I couldn’t start college until I turned twenty. I had to take the time off to help my mom out with the bills.”

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“And how does that change the fact that she was twelve when you started college?”

“Jesse,” Emma admonished.

“No, it’s okay, Emma.” Cory cut into his sausage. “Mr. Madding has every right to express concern. Though I think if he saw the way she leaves guys her own age in the dust, he might not be so worried.”

Jesse sighed. Clearly the age thing wasn’t going to get him anywhere. If Cory didn’t have a problem dating Dominique the previous year when she was nineteen, he wouldn’t be swayed from living with her just because she was only twenty. *Only* twenty, for God’s sake. Why on earth would anybody *want* that sort of commitment at such a young age? Maybe youth really was wasted on the young.

“How long have you been living in Chicago?”

“Since I was four. My mom moved me and my little brother here from Toledo after she split up with my dad.”

“Uh huh. What’s your mother’s name?”

“Shonda.” Cory took a bite, regarding him carefully. “If you’d like her number, I’d be more than happy to give it to you. She’ll probably flirt with you, though.” He dug into his food, though Jesse suspected he saw him smile. “She’s got a thing for accents.”

“Shonda. And what about your brother? What’s his name? Does he go to school?”

“Jesse, you don’t need to ask for his entire life history.”

“I’m not asking for his entire life history,” Jesse said reasonably. “I just want to make sure he is who he says he is.”

“I already ran the check last week.” Gideon shrugged when more than one set of eyes snapped in his direction. “Please. Like we haven’t always done background checks on Dominique’s

boyfriends.”

“You had time to run a background check, but not time to tell me what the hell was going on?”

“Jesse, we didn’t mean to...” Emma started.

“Don’t. All right? I don’t want to hear it right now.” Jesse’s fork clattered against his plate and he stood up. “I’m going to the store. I’ve got a delivery coming in this morning.”

Cory startled him by rising as well. “Do you need help? I’m more than happy to answer whatever questions you might have.”

Jesse’s first instinct was to tell the younger man to sod off. His store was a place of comfort. And not just because of the books. Ever since he became a full Guardian, he found the store to be a respite from the constant humming and fluctuations of the dimensional walls. Even now, vibrant colors, endless vibrations, and the crushing sense of *eternity* surrounded him. But the store had been Michelle’s sanctuary, and now it was his.

On the other hand, it would be easier to conduct his own background check without Gideon and Emma right on top of them.

“Yeah, I could use a bit of help. Those boxes can get heavy.”

Cory picked up the cup of coffee and gulped it down. Grabbing a sausage, he smiled at Gideon and Emma before following Jesse to the door. “Dominique said your collection is really impressive. What are you getting in today?”

“Unless the University of Chicago has turned its history department into a program on the occult, nothing you’ve heard of before.” Jesse paused, and threw a suspicious glance over his shoulder. “Are you interested in the occult?”

“Interested? No, not that. I mean, I know about it. It’s kind of hard to live in this town and not know there’s weird stuff going on. And Dominique has never exactly been closed-mouthed about

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some of the things she's gone through. But all I'm interested in knowing is what I need to help keep the people I love safe." He hurried forward to get the door for Jesse. "As far as I'm concerned, that means having yours and Gideon's phone number memorized."

Jesse couldn't tell if Cory was being sincere or looking to score points. He wanted it to be the latter, but something stopped him from throwing himself completely into his cynicism. Perhaps it was Cory's open smile. Or the fact that he readily stepped into the sunshine without turning into ash or having any other violent reaction.

"You didn't seem too shocked when Dominique mentioned teleporting. What did she tell you about that?"

"Not much. Just that you could, and Gideon hated it. She seems to take particular joy in mocking Gideon, though I haven't figured out why yet."

"Because it's easy to do. So, she hasn't explained why I have this ability, or what its proper use is, or anything?"

"She told me you got it from her foster mother, some kind of transfer of power thing, but no, not too many details."

"And you believe her when she says things like that? Because, let's face it, that's a pretty outlandish thing to say."

Cory fell silent as they continued out to the garage. He didn't speak until Jesse glanced back at him in curiosity.

"I didn't believe her stories in the beginning," he said with a shrug. "But she showed up at my place one night half drunk and in tears, and told me the whole story about Michelle's death. It was the anniversary, apparently. So I started treating it all a little more seriously after that, because seeing Dominique like that was the hardest thing I've ever done." He gave Jesse a small half smile. "Harder than meeting you, even."

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Jesse didn't even know that Dominique was still having that much trouble with Michelle's death. Another thing that Dominique had failed to mention to him—or he had failed to figure it out. He did his best with Dominique, but he knew that even at his best, he hadn't been the most available person in the world.

Realizing he couldn't spend an entire car ride listening to more stories, he made the snap decision to teleport them both. Before Cory could even catch his breath, he was standing in what used to be Michelle's back office.

Cory crumpled as soon as Jesse let him go, barely making it to the trash can at the edge of the desk before losing what little he'd eaten back at the house. The sound of his retching filled the small space, and when he finally lifted his head, beads of sweat dotted his furrowed brow.

"God, that's embarrassing." He reached for a tissue from the box on the desk. "Please don't tell Dominique. She'll never let me live it down."

"Please. Do you think she's never puked after a surprise trip?"

"Dominique? Girl's got a stomach like a rock." He tossed the tissue, grimacing at the can. "Is there someplace I can throw this out, maybe rinse my mouth out?"

"She might have a stomach like a rock, but she's still human." Jesse gestured at the door behind Cory. "The bathroom is through there."

Cory nodded with appreciation, and carried the bin into the bathroom with him. Jesse immediately opened his safe and pulled out a variety of herbs, potions, and powders. Most of them would react instantly if they came into contact with anything non-human, demonic, or from another dimension. And only a few of them were actually harmful. Jesse decided to save those for last.

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When Cory returned, he'd pulled himself back together, the trash can empty, no remaining evidence of his momentary weakness. "What time does the delivery arrive?"

"The courier usually shows up by ten. Here, can you hold something for me?"

Cory obediently put his palm out, and Jesse set a consecrated oak root in his waiting hand. That type of wood caused nasty burns to at least three types of demons—Jesse was sure the consecration was just so the supplier could charge him extra.

"How does that feel?"

With a frown, Cory glanced down at the root in his hand. "Uh...smooth?"

"It doesn't feel warm or anything?"

"No. Is it supposed to?"

"No, no." Jesse took it back, surreptitiously sprinkling brak demon bones on Cory's hand as he did so. The sneezing fit should have happened immediately, but Cory just looked at him, utterly without response. "So why history?"

"The charm of history and its enigmatic lesson consist in the fact that, from age to age, nothing changes and yet everything is completely different." Cory's smile was almost embarrassed. "Aldous Huxley. My favorite teacher in high school turned me on to him. I saw that quote, and I knew what I had to study."

"Do you plan to get your doctorate?"

His smile widened. "With a history degree? A doctorate's the only chance I have for getting a decent job."

"With a doctorate in history, the only decent job you're likely to find is as a professor. A young guy like you wants to spend all his time in academia?"

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

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"I'm just saying it's not a life for everybody. I just wanted to make sure that you're sure. Here." Jesse opened a book and thrust it toward Cory. "Can you read the first paragraph on the left side?"

Cory scanned it over before finally stumbling over the archaic French. His pronunciation was atrocious, but close enough for the spell to still work. Jesse regarded him carefully, waiting for the blisters that would mottle his skin if he was a warlock.

Nothing happened.

"What exactly is this?" Cory asked, glancing up from the text.

"Nothing. I was just seeing something." Jesse took the book back and shut it with a sharp snap. "Look...why do you have to move in with her? She's not even old enough to go out and get a legal drink. What is the rush?"

"I love her." The simple response came without pause. "I can't imagine my life without her, frankly. I asked her to marry me, you know, but she turned me down. I wasn't about to say no when she suggested we live together instead."

"You want to...you want to *marry* her? What...what..."

It occurred to Jesse that he could send Cory to another dimension, and nobody would be the wiser. He'd even find a nice dimension. One that could be counted as a paradise. Cory could live out the rest of his days swimming in some sapphire blue sea far, far beyond the reach of Dominique. She would be miserable, but she was also young. She'd bounce back and move on.

Except, when he was her age, he was pretty much fucking a new person every night, and obsessing over a vampire that lived on the other side of the planet. So maybe his sense of what was appropriate for a twenty-year-old was skewed.

"She's so young. You're both so young. Do you know what it would do to her if you changed your mind?"

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“I’m not going to, Mr. Madding. And eventually, I’ll convince you and Dominique of that. Even if it means we just live together for the next fifty years.”

If Jesse set aside the hurt of being kept out of the loop for a year, and the sense of betrayal, he could almost see what Dominique was thinking. He didn’t have a hard time believing Cory was attentive, since he hadn’t taken his attention from Jesse once. He was old enough to have a fairly good idea of what he wanted with his life, and he apparently wanted to share it with Dominique. Everything about Cory shouted *stable*, down to his sensible shoes. If Dominique wanted to create a home—her home—then Cory was not a bad candidate.

“You don’t have to convince me. It’s not my opinion that matters.”

The corner of Cory’s mouth lifted. “Well...it matters to Dominique. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have dragged my ass all around town last night to find you.”

“No, if it mattered what I thought, she would have mentioned you at some point in the past year. She dragged you around last night because she was drunk and wanted to show off.”

“That just meant she finally had the nerve to tell you. She cares, Mr. Madding. Too much.”

Jesse wasn’t so sure he believed that, but he was saved from saying as much by the knock on the back door. He supposed he would find out soon enough just what was going through her head. In the meantime, he would put Cory to work and see if the life of an academic had already made him soft.

## CHAPTER 4

Though Gideon grumbled every step of the way, Emma finally convinced him to go back to bed after Jesse and Cory left. He'd barely slept all night, too fixated on Jesse's anger to relax. Making breakfast had helped a little bit, but when Jesse had huffed off with Cory at his heels, Gideon had promptly sagged.

"Know what other days I miss?" he'd complained. "The days I could just chain Jesse up indefinitely in the playroom until he behaved the way I wanted."

She'd wanted to tell him he still did that to some degree, but the clarification would have been lost on him. She settled for promising to let him know when Jesse got home, though she sincerely hoped Jesse would be the one to wake him, ready to really talk about what had happened.

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Emma normally spent Saturdays at her small gallery, but with Dominique still asleep, she focused instead on tasks around the house, listening for any noise at all to indicate the presence of one of her loved ones.

The first came from the direction of Dominique's room. Emma dropped her dust rag and headed straight for the kitchen to get the works to calm what was likely to be a raging hangover.

Dominique stumbled into the room not long after, collapsed into the nearest chair, and put her head down in her arms. "Oh, God. What happened? Why am I here?"

Emma carried the glass of water, the banana shake, and the aspirin over to the table and set them down in front of her. "You don't remember coming here last night?"

"I don't remember *anything* about last night." Dominique looked up, blinking bloodshot eyes. "Except beer and...there might have been a few shots of whiskey involved."

"So...you don't remember the part where you dragged Cory across Chicago to introduce him to Jesse in the middle of a job?"

"No. I...wait. That happened? It wasn't just a dream or something?"

Emma slid into the seat opposite her. "No, it happened, though I'm pretty sure the only person who was happy about that last night was you."

"Where's Jesse? Where's Cory? Please tell me that Jesse didn't send him to the cornfield or anything like that."

"Cory came back this morning to try and smooth over some feathers about getting sprung on Jesse like that, and the two of them went into the store together. It'll be good," she assured at the stricken look on Dominique's face. "This will give them a chance to really get to know each other. Cory will fix this."

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“Cory will fix Jesse’s insane paranoia?” Dominique snorted. “He’s a history guy, not a shrink.”

Emma pressed her lips together. She loved Dominique to death, but her youth and rather unique perspective on the world sometimes made it a little frustrating trying to talk to her. She’d used her abilities to help gauge Dominique’s moods in the beginning, but one particularly bad argument about invading Dominique’s privacy left Emma hesitant to ever do so again.

“Jesse doesn’t need a shrink,” she said. “He needs you to trust him a little more.”

“He needs me to trust him? What about all the times he didn’t trust me?” Dominique ticked off her fingers as she spoke. “There was the prom. And then the time I wanted to go out with Devon Walker, who was only the best looking guy in the school, and Jesse basically locked me in my room. And the less said about graduation night, the better.”

“You were in high school then. What has he done since you moved out? Seriously.”

Dominique pursed her lips. “He called me every night for like a year. Like he was checking up on me to make sure I didn’t have boys in my room.”

“Or maybe like he actually missed you?” Emma sighed. “I know Jesse’s overprotective. Trust me. I know that very well. But that’s because he’s so afraid of losing people. You two always had a special bond, and then you moved out. You don’t think he felt that loss?”

Dominique sighed and wiped a bit of moisture from the otherwise untouched glass. “I missed him, too. But I needed a chance to grow up a little and it always felt like he didn’t want me to have that chance. I bet he’s really pissed at me right now, huh?”

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“Um, not you so much. More like me and Gideon for not telling him when we found out.”

“So if I track him down, he’s not going to yell at me for showing up last night in the middle of a job?”

“Oh, no, he’s annoyed at you for that,” Emma said. “You know how dangerous it is. And Cory doesn’t have any training. You’re lucky nothing happened.”

“I know. Jesse’s at the store? Maybe I should go talk to him. Or rescue Cory.” Dominique stood up, groaned, and sank back to her chair. “But not until the room stops spinning. I can tell you right now, I’m never drinking like that again.”

Emma chuckled and pushed the aspirin and water closer. “Uh huh. We all say that. Until the next time it seems like a great idea to have just one more drink.”

“No. I’m really serious this time. I feel like my brain is trying to erupt from my skull.”

Emma made the appropriate sounds of sympathy as she lifted her cup, but the sudden crashing from the front of the house made her spill hot coffee on her pants. Cursing under her breath, she jumped up. Dominique was already racing from the room, running into possible danger instead of away from it, despite her obvious pain. Emma followed close on her heels as the thump of the door slamming shut echoed through the house.

Cory and Jesse stood in the entryway, both of them laughing and gasping for breath. Cory was covered in dust and dirt, as though he had been caught in an avalanche of mothballs, and Jesse didn’t look much better. Jesse’s shirt wasn’t just filthy, it was also shredded—probably by something with hideously long claws. Both of them were bleeding, though Jesse’s injury had already healed itself, and there was nothing but a dry, red stain on the corner of

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his mouth.

“What the fuck happened?” Dominique asked.

“Jesse saved my ass, that’s what happened.” Cory laughed. He shook his head and a fine dust sprinkled to the tiled floor. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anybody move that fast before in my life. Not even the freshmen on the last day of finals.”

Emma came up to Jesse’s side and did a cursory examination, her hands fluttering over his torn clothing to make sure it didn’t hide anything worse. “Did something attack the store?”

“Huge somethings,” Cory jumped in before Jesse could respond. “With these Freddy Krueger fingers and massive teeth.” He grinned at Jesse. “I thought your head was going to explode when they shredded those books.”

Dominique’s eyes widened with alarm. “Huge demons attacked the store? Why would they do that? Is everything okay?”

“Sure,” Jesse said, nonchalantly. “They were just friends of the Djar.”

“And Jesse kicked their asses!” Cory gushed. “Seriously. He, like, turned into the Hulk when they went after his books.”

“You weren’t so bad, either. Most people wouldn’t think to improvise the way you did.”

“I just didn’t want them to turn my insides out.”

Emma rested a hand on Jesse’s arm, getting his attention back. “Is there anything we need to do? Should I go wake up Gideon?”

“No, everything’s fine,” Jesse promised. “I’m pretty sure it was just retaliation for taking out that nest last night. And there were only three of them. I could have handled them, but Cory jumped right into the middle of it all with a chair.”

“It was a move I learned from watching wrestling,” Cory admitted sheepishly.

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Dominique slapped at his arm. "Are you fucking crazy? You don't know anything about these things. What if it had hurt you?" Suddenly, she threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. "No more jumping into things with just a chair. You don't do anything like that without me right there to watch your back."

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Cory assured her, wrapping his arm around her back. "And I don't think I'll be jumping into the fray again anytime soon. Besides, you can't play innocent with me. Jesse told me all about the stunts you've pulled."

"You can use the guest bathroom to clean up," Jesse said. "Dominique can show you where it is."

Grabbing his hand, she hauled him toward the stairs, her hangover forgotten. "I'll stitch you up, too."

"You're not a nurse."

"In this house, everybody's a nurse."

Emma watched them disappear upstairs with an amused smile. "How much do you want to bet she is never going to let him out of her sight again?"

"She could just do what she's been doing for the past year and keep him out of our sight. Then she won't have anything to worry about."

When she turned back to him, she was disappointed to see his lighter mood gone. "She's not going to do that. I think she realizes she made a mistake not introducing you two sooner."

Jesse sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't think I'm convinced of that. But she could do worse than Cory." He nodded at the stairs. "I'm going to go shower. Wash my back?"

Her heart leapt at the invitation. It was a step in the right direction, opening up about how he felt. She'd hated every second

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he'd spent separate from them, and his distance at the breakfast table had been excruciating. Even if he didn't say a word in the shower, she could at least touch him, show him that nothing had changed, that she was sorry for holding back the truth from him, and most importantly, that she loved him with all her heart.

Slipping her hand into his, she let him lead the way upstairs, not speaking a word until they were safely ensconced in their bathroom. Gideon hadn't moved a muscle as they'd crept past, but once the door was shut, she slipped around in front of Jesse and rested a careful hand on his chest.

"Did you want me to wake up Gideon and have him join us?" she asked.

"No, let him sleep." Jesse bent to turn on the water. Steam began to rise from the tub almost immediately. "He's going to need his energy later when I feel like making up with him."

She smoothed her hands along his shoulders, carefully pulling his ruined shirt down his arms. "How much later are we talking? Because he really does feel awful about what happened."

"Oh, I think until tonight. I think I deserve to at least get dinner out of it." He shrugged out of the shirt, but otherwise remained still as she shifted her attention to his pants. "And it does still sting a little bit. But I know you weren't trying to be...malicious."

As her fingers worked the fly, Emma pressed her mouth to his back, kissing down the smooth line of his spine. "We weren't. But I wish we'd been a little more open about what was going on. I'm so sorry we weren't."

"Do you have any other deep, dark secrets you're keeping from me? Now is probably a good time to mention them."

"No, nothing." She let her fingers caress the hard angles of his hips as his pants fell to the floor. "Well, except for the stash of

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body jewelry I've got waiting to spring on you when the time is right."

"Body jewelry? Is that for me or for you?"

"If I tell you that, it's not a secret anymore."

"True, but I think you owe me one spoiled secret. Don't you?"

"In that case, it's for both of us. That way, we all win. Including Gideon."

Jesse touched the back of her hand, and she could feel him pushing at the wall they tried to keep between them. "I suppose you can show me later tonight. When I decide it's time to make up with Gideon."

"I'd love that," she murmured. Resting her cheek on his back, she closed her eyes and debated whether or not she let the walls all the way down. There was a risk to it, other than the obvious. They'd wake Gideon, for starters, and Jesse didn't seem ready for that. But she didn't want to deny him anything right now. "I don't want to move."

"We're going to have to move in a minute," Jesse murmured.

He continued to lightly nudge at her walls until she finally conceded and lowered her defenses. Not completely. But enough to let him in. They were still in danger of generating a feedback loop, but both of them had worked hard to learn how to control that. She felt his frustration, and his self-doubt, and a low level of sadness that made her heart ache.

"Oh, Jesse..." Ignoring the rising steam around them, she slid around to his front, maintaining as much physical contact as she could. It soaked into her thin shirt, gluing it to her skin, but she was far more interested in the shadows darkening Jesse's eyes, the soft set of his mouth as he gazed down at her. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me for making such a mess of this."

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“Emma...I know. I forgive you. The worst thing wasn’t that you and Gideon found out before me, or kept it from me. The worst part is that you did it at Dominique’s request. And now, she’s moving in with some guy who wants to *marry* her. And before long, she’ll be done with school, then starting her own family, and I’ll just be here...watching her grow older and farther away from me.”

“And the fact that she even trusts a guy enough to consider marrying him? That’s because of you, Jess. That’s because of everything you’ve done for her, everything you’ve shown her about what it means to love. You’ve given that to her, and if you think for a second she’s going anywhere you’re not going to be a real part of her family, you’re not giving her nearly enough credit.”

“It took her a year and how much alcohol to finally tell me what was going on?” Jesse sighed. “But there’s more to it than that. I don’t know...” He brushed damp hair from her face, his fingertips lingering on her cheek in a light caress. “I don’t know how Gideon can handle it. Watching people get older when you never change.”

She smiled and tilted her head into his touch. “Oh, Gideon’s changed. We all change. But I’m sure it took him time to learn how to deal with it. And Michelle would never have entrusted you with this responsibility if she didn’t think you were strong enough to make the transition.” She caught his wrist, turning just enough to skim her mouth over his skin. “You’re the strongest person I know, Jess. You’ll figure this out.”

“How can I doubt it when you’re so certain?”

Jesse reached for the hem of her shirt with his free hand and started pulling it up her ribs. It tickled a little, but she was too distracted by the warmth of his palm against her lips to really pay

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attention to it. Once he had the shirt bunched at her breasts, she stepped back long enough to pull the material over her head. As soon as she was free of it, she stepped back to his body, pressing against his chest.

"I think this is my favorite part of your fights." Coiled one arm around his neck, she worked with her other hand to push her jeans and panties down her hips. "Though sometimes I wonder if you deliberately get extra dirty when you're fighting, just so I'll wash your back."

"Do you really wonder that?" His arm went around her and he easily lifted her from the floor and clear from her pants. "I thought you figured out my evil plan long ago."

He held her that way as he climbed into the tub, shielding her from the first hard spray with the long, lean lines of his body. Her toes skimmed along the bottom, but she felt no danger, no alarm that she might slip. Jesse had her. He'd never let anything happen.

"You're not evil," she teased. "You're diabolical. There's a difference."

Jesse grinned for the first time since the whole mess with Dominique started. "I actually prefer to think of myself as proactive about what I want."

She rubbed the droplets of water splattering across his cheeks into his skin. "Clearly, that's a lesson you've learned from Gideon."

"One lesson among many." Jesse tilted his head and kissed the corner of her mouth. His lips left a trail along her jaw, gathering up the drops of warm water slowly moving down her skin. She dropped her head back with a soft sigh, a gentle feeling of bliss rolling through her. She wasn't sure if it was hers, or Jesse's—not that it mattered either way.

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There was nothing swift about his exploration, nothing demanding, just the tender attention of his mouth and the soft puffs of his breath caressing her damp flesh. Emma cupped the back of his head and held him close, grateful he'd forgiven her lapse of judgment. She loathed his distance, felt it like a hole within her. Though they didn't fight often—they never really had—she ached with each moment that separated them, especially when she was the one at fault.

Her free hand massaged along his chest, helping the water wash away the worst of the dust and grime. When she reached a flat nipple, she scratched over it with the edge of her thumbnail, just enough to let him know she reciprocated his need.

Jesse gently pushed her back to the wall. The tiles were a cool surprise against her shoulders, but he wouldn't let her twist away from them. His mouth continued to explore her skin, and each light caress of contact made her sigh with pleasure. No matter how much time they spent together, no matter how often he touched her, she could never get too much. They had spent the last four years trying to make up for lost time, but it felt like they could spend every day together for the next twenty years, and it still wouldn't quite make up for it.

Her hands continued to move over his body, sluicing the hot water from his shoulders and back. She was relieved that she could do that without fear of finding an injury, or exacerbating a wound. It might have taken some time to adjust to his new powers as a Guardian, but she couldn't complain about the fact that nobody could cause him serious harm again.

Though the tip of his erection bumped against her stomach, Jesse seemed to ignore his own arousal in favor of sampling her skin. She shuddered when his warm tongue circled her nipple,

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goose bumps stippling across her shoulders. Her breath caught, refusing to expel even when he abandoned that breast to lick a path to the other. Every flutter of her pulse vibrated through her skin, and she steadied the tremor rushing through by reaching between his legs and cupping his balls.

He moaned around her nipple, encouraging her to squeeze just a little bit harder. She knew exactly how to get him on his knees, if that was what she wanted. But she wasn't interested in that. At least, not while Jesse nibbled at each nipple, applying just enough pressure with his teeth to make her squirm, but not enough to send a flare of pleasure-pain through her core. At one point, he ran his tongue over Gideon's mark on her breast, letting the tip dip into each small indentation.

Her head swam. The mark was always sensitive, though she often wondered if that was her own projection of the memories or any real lasting effect. She had to clutch at Jesse's shoulder to maintain her balance, and her head bent to skim a kiss across his temple.

Even under the water, he tasted hot and salty, enough so to make her mouth water. She kissed him again, her tongue darting out to lick along his cheekbone, and a small groan escaped her throat. She wanted to tell him how much she loved him, how she would always be there for him, no matter what changes wrought in their lives, but the words seemed inadequate. Only one way would suffice, and she lowered her walls even farther to allow the emotions more room to escape.

Emma's stomach fluttered as she felt the beginning of the feedback loop. It wasn't anything more except a tickle across her senses, but there was the familiar doubling, the strange sensation of experiencing somebody else's pleasure so intensely that it could do

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nothing but spark more of her own. Jesse abandoned her breast, lifting his head to capture her mouth in a hard kiss. After the gentle caresses, the force of his mouth against hers made her head spin.

With an arm around her waist, he lifted her off the ground. She automatically wrapped her legs around his body, and the hot spray peppered her skin and flowed down her calves. She could taste the steam on his mouth, and weighing against her skin. His cock slid against her lips, hotter than the steam surrounding them.

She was tired of waiting. Tightening her legs, she urged him to push forward, the tip of his cock easing inside her slick channel. Her tongue mapped out the hot corners of his mouth, as hungry as his, as needy, but none of it distracted her from the slow stretch of her pussy, her muscles molding around his throbbing length. He didn't stop until there was nowhere else to go, and even then, he pushed a little harder, flattening her against the cold tile to start a molten burn through her hips.

"Oh, God." She panted, breaking away from the kiss. She buried her face in his neck, sucking hard at his skin as her body shook. Her silent plea for more carried through the bond between them.

Jesse rocked his hips, creating an easy rhythm, but didn't let even an inch of his cock slip from her body. Like he couldn't stand losing any of her heat, or the pressure of her muscles fluttering around his shaft. She kept her mouth sealed to his neck, alternately sucking and biting on his corded muscle, trying to encourage him to just move a little bit faster. He rested his hand against the small of her back, his fingers tensing and relaxing with every small jerk of his hips.

"I repeat..." Her teeth raked along the tense muscle. "Diabolical. You want me to totally lose it and beg you for more, I

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just know it.”

“It’s hard to be diabolical when you know me inside and out.”

“And yet, you find new and certain ways, just when I least expect it.”

“I think you might have expected this,” Jesse murmured, easing from her. She knew what was coming, and tried to brace herself for it, but there was nothing she could do to prepare for the sudden surge of pleasure rocking through her body. She cried out, the sound echoing off the walls, rising above the thundering water. It occurred to her that Gideon had probably heard her, but the thought was fleeting, flimsy against the onslaught of sensation coming from Jesse.

Her nails dug into his skin, uncaring of whether or not they broke through. She couldn’t hold back the tide of emotions any longer, funneling them back to Jesse with a frenzied cry. She dug her heels into his ass until his strokes lengthened, now driving in and out of her with a firmer thrust, and sought his lips once more, fusing their mouths together to steal back the breath he’d taken from her.

The water hitting her arms and legs began to cool, but even that didn’t slow Jesse, or force them to break the connection between them. It wouldn’t be the first time they were so caught up in each other that they didn’t even notice when the water turned to ice. It was difficult to worry about anything as mundane as that when he filled her, physically and emotionally. When she lost track of when her own body ended and his began.

But time had taught them many things, not the least of which was how to focus those feelings into something positive, something that fueled them rather than took anything away. She could abandon herself to Jesse without fear of losing complete

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control. When her orgasm began to swell deep inside her, she knew how much of it to share with him and how much to hold back. She focused on grinding her clit into the base of his cock on every stroke, and raking her nails down his back, turning his attention to the fire along his skin rather than the flames erupting in her veins.

As soon as Emma reached her peak, she was held there, buoyed by Jesse's pleasure. It consumed her, and her body tightened, each muscle tensing, until she was rigidly locked around Jesse's frame. She opened her mouth to gasp, but even her chest was frozen in the moment. Bliss filled her, expanding more and more, until there was nothing to do but shatter. They both shouted, their mouths coming together in time to muffle the noise. The tension was gone, leaving nothing but watery limbs and shaking breaths.

She traced around every corner of his mouth, claiming him for her own at that moment. Wet fingers threaded through his hair, holding him still, holding her balance, until her thighs refused to cooperate anymore and her ankles loosened from his hips. Jesse slid his hands lower to cup her ass, but it was a gesture of support, not sexual. He didn't want to break the physical connection between them, either.

Finally breaking away from the kiss, she rested her cheek upon his shoulder. "It's nice to know this will never change," she murmured.

"I wish I could just stay in here for the rest of the afternoon. Do you think anybody will notice if we never leave the bathroom?"

"I think it'll eventually leak out, yes." She traced along his collarbone, so fine and yet so strong. "You need to tell Dominique how you feel about all this, you know that, don't you?"

"I know. You mean I need to talk to her today, don't you?"

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“The sooner the better. You two have waited too long as it is.”

Jesse sighed. “I guess I’ve got to be the adult about this whole thing.”

She pulled back to meet his solemn gaze. “And remember that she’s an adult, too, now.” Her lips twitched as she fought back a smile. “Don’t use her occasional lack of impulse control against her, or I’ll be forced to pull out a certain stack of photos from when you were at college.”

“It’s not her occasional lack of impulse control that bothers me. God knows I still have a hard time with my own impulse control, and college was...” He grimaced. “A long time ago.”

He was getting morose again, the waves of sadness infiltrating their earlier euphoria. Emma slapped lightly at his chest, diverting him with the immediate sting. “Don’t focus on the time that’s already gone by. Focus on everything we have to look forward to. Starting with your talk with Dominique.”

“But I’m not actually looking forward to that.” Jesse pressed a soft kiss to her mouth and gently set her on her feet. “I’m sorry I refused to talk to you this morning. I meant to say that earlier.”

“Hey, I got great make-up sex instead. That was more than sufficient.” She shivered against the cold water and quickly reached to turn it off. “Just don’t forget me when you get around to the make-up sex with Gideon.”

Jesse smiled. “Of course not.” He pushed the shower curtain aside and stepped out, taking her hand to assist her in the same. “I hope he’s not too upset at being left out. Though I guess if he is, you can soothe him.”

Emma smiled. “I’m sure we’ll both find a way.”

## CHAPTER 5

Jesse thought he would probably have to track down Dominique in the mansion. She was pretty good at avoiding him when she didn't want to be found. The possibility didn't bother him. If nothing else, it would give him time to get his thoughts together. He was just about stronger than any being in the dimension, and yet, the thought of facing down that slip of a girl brought back all the old insecurities that he had thought were long since dead and buried. He supposed those feelings would never truly be gone.

But it didn't come down to a hunt through the house. Dominique was waiting for him in his office, sitting in the chair behind the desk like she owned the place. She idly flipped through a book, but Jesse could tell she wasn't really reading it. Her hair

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was damp, but Jesse decided it was best if he just ignored that small detail.

“You two staying for dinner?” Jesse greeted.

Her face brightened when she looked up, and a smile more hesitant than usual curved her mouth. “If we haven’t burned our invite, we’d love to.”

“I have the feeling Gideon is going to be cooking tonight.” Jesse didn’t tell her to move. Instead he settled in the chair at the side of the desk, his legs stretched out in front of him. “Where’s Cory?”

“I gave him my old copy of your playroom key and told him to go take a look around if he wanted a real education.” At Jesse’s stricken look, she laughed and waved it off. “He’s nosing around my room. He said something about wanting to know what kind of things I liked when I was a kid, and I did not want to be around for that.”

“You mean, the sort of things you liked when you were a kid three years ago?”

Her smile faded. “A lot can change in three years.”

“Yeah, I know. I guess things change faster than I expected.”

She nodded at his declaration, toying with the corner of one of the pages. “You’d think that’s a lesson we both would’ve learned by now. Maybe we’re not as smart as we think we are.”

“Maybe. So...what happened here?” Jesse had far more questions than that, but he didn’t want to turn the argument into a fight. And every other question that came to mind would definitely put her on the defensive.

“I don’t know.” The words were soft, blunt, honest in the way only Dominique could be. “This isn’t how I wanted it to turn out at all. I thought...” Her face scrunched up as she sagged back in his

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chair. "Well, I'm not completely sure what I was thinking last night, since I don't really remember much. But before, I just thought if me and Cory could stick it out long enough, you'd trust I'd know what I was doing."

Jesse shook his head. "It sounds like you didn't trust me to know what I was doing. This is a significant part of your life that you actively kept from me for a year. Holidays. Your birthday. Just nights when you stopped by to do your laundry and watch a movie. Any of those times, you could have mentioned it. Or dropped a few hints."

"I didn't want you to scare him away."

"I'm sorry for whatever I did to you that makes you think I would interfere in your private life that way."

Dominique sighed. Pushing against the desk, she rolled the chair closer to Jesse, close enough to drape her calves over his. "I wasn't looking for an apology. Hell, I should be apologizing to you. I stuck my nose in your business often enough. But neither one of us has ever been good about stepping back."

"I'm not saying that I would have been perfectly behaved. I would have needed some time to adjust to the idea of you dating a much older man."

Jesse swallowed back all of the arguments that instantly fought their way to his lips. Dominique was not going to be swayed, and if he didn't want to lose her completely, then he needed to accept that. Even if a part of him still thought that Cory was too old, Dominique was too young, and they both had too much living to do before they settled down.

"But," he continued, "I wouldn't have made it my mission to drive him away. I want you to be happy."

"I know you do. And Cory makes me happy. And I'm sorry I

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didn't tell you about him sooner, but..." One slim shoulder lifted. "No way about it, things get crazy intense around here. Cory's solid, but it took me a long time to get the nerve to even tell him Gideon's a vamp. I don't know what he would've done if I'd dumped it all on him from the start." She snorted. "Which, by the way, I got lectured for when I was stitching him up. When I was telling him all this, he got annoyed I didn't trust him more. Go figure."

"Things do get crazy intense around here." Jesse took a deep breath. "And I can understand that you wanted to keep your normal life away from the...craziness that's almost always happening around here. I'll even understand if you would like to continue doing so."

"That's not what I want." Her legs disappeared, and she leaned forward, her eyes flashing. "You and Cory are the two most important people in the world to me. It's been killing me, keeping you two apart."

Jesse studied her face. It changed every year, growing more mature. More beautiful, even. Before too long, there would be lines around her eyes and mouth. He would be able to mark the years by how much she changed, and how little he would. Dominique had too few years anyway—even if she lived to be one hundred it was less than she deserved—to be wasting time on stupid arguments.

"What do you want?"

She seemed mildly taken aback by his blunt question, and hesitated a moment before answering. "I want you to like him," she finally said. "I want you to look at him and think, damn, Dominique did good. He's smart, Jess. Almost as smart as you. And he's good to me. He treats me better than anybody ever has except for you. I want him to be as welcome here as I am." She

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swallowed. "I want us to be a family."

"Dominique...we're always going to be a family. No matter what happens. No matter where you go, or what you do, or how far away you get, we're going to be a family. That's not going to change. And if that means I have to accept Cory as part of the deal, then I will." Jesse paused with a wry smile. "Actually, that came out wrong. I don't hate Cory. And I believe he's good to you. I meant, that no matter what, if somebody is important you, then that person is important to me, too."

She held still for a moment, though he felt the restrained energy beneath her skin. In the next second, she erupted from the chair, throwing her arms around Jesse's neck in a choking hug and nearly knocking him off-balance.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbled into his neck. "I am. I should've told you a long time ago, and just told you to fuck off if you went all psycho protective on me."

Jesse returned her hug, not surprised by how nice it felt to have her thin arms wrapped around his neck. "See, I would have known how to deal with that, at least. In the future, try to stick to that policy."

He felt her smile against his skin. "We are one messed up family."

"We're not unlike The Addams Family. I guess Gideon can be Lurch."

She laughed. "I'd like to see you tell him that."

"Maybe I will while he's still feeling too guilty to get mad at me."

"Yeah, right. He'll use it as an excuse to drag you down to that playroom and make you pay for it." She sat back, her nose wrinkled into a moue. "On second thought, I don't want to see you

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tell him.”

“You make a good point. Maybe I’ll casually mention it after dinner. Oh, and I already teleported Cory today. So you can cross that off your list.”

“What list?”

Jesse shook his head. “Just a joke, since you were so insistent I teleport him last night.”

“Ah. So I guess this should be the point where I tell you I was so drunk, I really don’t remember much from last night, huh?”

“From now on, try to avoid demon nests when you get that drunk.”

“Trust me. I have no plans to ever put a drop of alcohol past these lips again.” She regarded him carefully, though the shadows in her eyes had long since faded. “So are we good here? Clean slate and everything?”

“Yes. A clean slate. But I reserve the right to give Cory a hard time as I see fit.”

With a roll of her eyes, she perched on the edge of the desk, swinging her legs so her heels rhythmically hit its side. “Good luck with that. The boy is so straight, he makes your cop buddy Derek look like a fucking pretzel.”

“I’m sure I’ll find something. How is he doing, anyway? I didn’t think I let him get too hurt.”

“He’s fine. I’ve seen him get banged up more playing football with the guys. But I think he’s going to be a little weird about all his scrapes and bruises. He was acting all proud upstairs like he’d passed some sort of hazing.” Dominique grinned. “I think he’s going to be disappointed when it sinks in that’s just another day in the life around here.”

“Well, he really was quite brave. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to let

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him strut around a little bit longer. Especially since most people would take one look at those demons and run the opposite direction. And I don't just mean running from the store."

Her smile warmed. "It's like I told you. He's solid." She pointed a finger at him. "Don't go breaking him."

"Me? I think I could say the same thing to you."

"He likes the way I break him."

"Let's avoid mentioning anything like that in the future, okay?"

She laughed. "It's about time I get paybacks for all the different ways you scarred me."

"Hey, I never intentionally scarred you. If I ever did, it was because you were snooping around where you shouldn't have been."

"If thinking that makes you feel better, go right ahead." She hopped off the desk and grabbed his hand. "Now come on. I want to watch you two talk. I've got a year to make up for here."

"You want to *watch* us talk? Do you think you're going to see anything interesting?"

"With you two? There's no telling."

Jesse snorted and allowed Dominique to pull him to his feet. He hadn't seen her that excited since before she moved out of the house for school. Which made him feel excited, too. Emma had teased him more than once that he always folded too easily when it came to Dominique. Maybe that was the case. All Jesse knew was that his life was much easier, and much happier, when Dominique was smiling.

## CHAPTER 6

Though dinner was less tense than breakfast had been, Gideon still found it impossible to fully relax. He sat at the end of the table, jumping up whenever anyone needed anything, listening to Cory and Jesse talk history whenever his ass managed to stick to his chair for longer than a couple minutes. Emma and Dominique chatted about moving plans, with the occasional interjection from the men, and while Jesse glanced in Gideon's direction every once in a while, he made little effort to engage him in the conversation.

Gideon didn't blame him. Jesse never reacted well when Gideon held information back from him. Their lines of communication were better than they'd been in the first few years they'd been together, but clearly, they still had lapses.

He tried not to clear away the plates before they were empty,

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but when Dominique announced she and Cory were calling it a night, Gideon had to fight not to be the first one to get to the front door. He shook Cory's hand and brought up the rear of the group as they walked them out.

After closing the door, Emma turned to Jesse and said, "So, since Gideon cooked, do you want to wash or dry?"

"Let's not clean up just yet," Gideon said before Jesse could respond. "I was thinking we might go out for a drive. Maybe go to Osaka Garden and walk off dinner."

Jesse nodded. "Yeah, if you don't mind leaving that mess, then I don't, either."

"I think a walk sounds lovely," Emma said. "I could use some fresh air."

"Good. I'll get my keys."

He tried not to look excited at Jesse's quick agreement, but still returned probably a little too quickly, holding the door open for them as they stepped into the warm night air. Summer was arriving early, stars already sparkling overhead, moths flocking to the front porch light. His gut tightened even more when he saw Emma slide into the back seat of the Mazda. Jesse had to choose now between sitting up front with him, or torturing him even more by sitting with Emma.

Gideon pulled the car door open, lingering while he waited to see what Jesse would decide. He tried not to release a sigh of relief when Jesse slid into the passenger seat, like he always did. Like there wasn't even a question that he would ride up front, beside Gideon. He slid behind the wheel, itching to reach out and touch Jesse like he normally would. Emma put a hand on Jesse's shoulder, squeezing him briefly, before settling back in her seat.

"We should probably talk about the attack at the store today,"

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Jesse said, once Gideon pulled out of the garage. "At some point."

"Some point." He turned onto the nearly abandoned street. One of the things he'd grown to love about their house was how quiet the neighborhood was. "Can it wait until tomorrow?"

"Yes. I don't think there will be a repeat attack, but we should probably figure out just why they thought it was a good idea. If they're allies with the Djar, or if we just got ourselves stuck in a middle of a territory war."

Gideon caught Emma's reflection in his rearview mirror, her brows pulled into a frown. "You know, it would be really nice if you two took jobs that didn't constantly pull you into all these little turf wars."

"They don't all do that," Gideon said, and then flashed her a smile over his shoulder. "Just the fun ones."

Jesse grinned. "Actually, I'd settle for all the nasties in Chicago just realizing that when they involve us in their turf wars, they lose."

"We'd never have any good fights that way," Gideon complained.

Emma shook her head. "You two are hopeless."

"Gideon is the hopeless one. I could do without any more really good fights," Jesse said lightly.

He snorted. "Right. I'll remember that the next time you can't keep your hands off me after a good knock down, dragged out brawl."

"I can't keep my hands off you? Who cornered whom in the bathroom yesterday?"

"You were the one with all the plans. Something about being flexible, you said."

"And you certainly found out just how flexible I can be."

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"I always miss out on all the good stuff," Emma commented. "Next time, I want to go with you."

"No, but next time, we can wait until we get home for the good stuff," Jesse promised.

"I'm going to hold you to that."

Traffic was light as Gideon headed for Jackson Park, almost as light as his spirits were starting to get. Jesse was teasing and flirting like he always did, with few hints that there had been any sort of disagreement at all. Things weren't normal, not by a long shot, but they felt close enough to give Gideon hope, even when the interior lapsed into a warm, comfortable silence as he drove along.

About halfway there, his hand stole across the distance between them and rested gently on Jesse's knee. He didn't glance over. He just hoped Jesse would leave it there.

Every second, he expected Jesse to push him away, but he allowed Gideon to leave his hand there. He normally would have covered Gideon's fingers with his own, and Gideon missed that contact, but he didn't dare push for more. He just wanted to enjoy the warmth of Jesse's skin, and the thrum of his blood, and the comforting rhythm of his breath as they finished the drive. When he parked, he waited until the last second to break the contact.

As they got out of the car, Jesse wrapped his arm around Emma's waist, pulling her close. She fit against him snugly, her long hair shining in the moonlight. Gideon locked the car and fell in step beside them.

When they passed under the gate, the scent of the flowers filled his nose, beckoning them deeper into the garden. The path wound amongst the greenery, turned silver under the stars, and he led them toward Moon Bridge, his favorite part of the entire park. The

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sound of the rushing water grew louder as they approached, but the silence that carried with their footfalls was different than what they'd had in the car. Gideon felt too much like the outsider, the *other*, with their arms around each other. It was a harsh reminder of his part in Dominique's deception.

"So...your talk with Dominique went well, it looked like," he said, trying to regain their earlier camaraderie.

"Yes. She apologized, and we talked about why she did it, and we came to an understanding. I think we're going to be okay."

Emma's eyes were downcast, but the tension in her body spoke volumes. Her walls had to be at least partially up, too. Gideon couldn't feel a thing. But she wasn't going to interrupt them or help him out, at least for the immediate future. He would have been annoyed if he didn't already know she'd gone through this process with Jesse herself earlier that day. Now, it was Gideon's turn.

"I owe you an apology, too." His hands tensed inside his pockets, but he managed to keep his voice even. Hopefully, Jesse wouldn't pick up on how fearful he was this would be nowhere near enough. "I never meant to hurt you, Jess."

Jesse released his breath. "I know. I just wish I understood why you did it at all. I know, you were worried about my reaction. But it couldn't have been worse than what actually happened."

"Well, I never expected Dominique to crash one of our fights drunk, for one thing." But as soon as the words came out, he realized he shouldn't have been so glib. "Finding out first was just an accident. And we told her from the start, she needed to come clean to you. But none of us were completely sure how you'd take it. Sometimes, you can be a little...singular in your thinking."

Jesse arched his brow. "Don't you think that's a little rich

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coming from you?”

“I’m not the one who crashed Dominique’s graduation party with a flame thrower strapped to his back.”

“Ha ha, I didn’t do that either. I *checked* her graduation party with a few stakes on hand. And do not even get me started on all the insanely overprotective and single-minded things you’ve done in the past several years.”

“Oh, please. You love the cage.”

The corner of Jesse’s mouth lifted. “That’s beside the point.”

“So maybe we’re two of a kind. That doesn’t change the fact that Dominique was worried about how you were going to react. And she’s not a kid anymore. She asked us to let her be the one to tell you, so that’s what we did.”

Jesse released Emma and turned to lean against the railing. There was a certain tension in his shoulders that still made Gideon uneasy. “I know she’s not a kid anymore. And you had to respect her wishes. But...I don’t know. Maybe this wouldn’t have been so bad if it wasn’t a big, glaring reminder that this is only the beginning.”

“It wouldn’t have been so bad if I’d been a little bit smarter about it in the first place, either.” Carefully, Gideon stepped next to him and assumed a similar position, gazing out over the motionless water. Their arms brushed, their only contact, but the heat was enough to prompt him to continue. “We’ve been going along like nothing’s really that different, and I haven’t been paying attention to the fact that it’s not. I should’ve seen all this as an opportunity, and I didn’t. I’m really sorry I fucked up and it turned out this bad, Jesse.”

“I’m wondering if it’s going to feel like a punch in the gut every time she reaches a new milestone. I hope not, because that

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can get pretty exhausting.”

He wanted to tell Jesse it got easier, that time dulled the fact that he was standing still while the rest of the world revolved around him. But Gideon couldn't lie to him, not now, not ever again.

“It's always going to hurt,” he said quietly. “Unless you've reached a point where you've stopped looking. But if you want to go with this punch metaphor, think of it as learning how to take a hit. When you're learning how to fight, you learn where to let the blow land so it does the least amount of damage. That's what we've got ahead of us.”

Jesse reached over, curling his fingers around Gideon's colder hand. “No wonder you wanted to keep your distance from me. And, well, from most everybody. It's probably easier all around.”

“It *is* easier.” He couldn't take his eyes away from their linked hands. “It's not better.”

“But forever is a long, long time.” Jesse shook his head. “I literally can't think about it. When I do, it feels like it'll just crush me.”

“It's not,” Emma said, standing on the other side of Jesse, her hand resting on his back. “Because you don't have to face it alone.”

Gideon nodded. “It's smarter not to think about it anyway. A large proportion of the world never considers its own mortality. They live today. Tomorrow. Maybe plan ahead a couple years, or work on their 401k. But until they're faced with it, most of them don't actively consider their own death. This is the time, more than ever, to remember that part of being human.”

Jesse looked up from the corner of his eye. “Do you ever miss being human? Even a little bit?”

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“Occasionally,” he confessed. “Sometimes, I wish I could see the world the way you and Emma do. Or before you, before Mary even, when things would get especially dark. But if I’d been human, I never would have met Mary, or you, or Emma, so that trade isn’t really worth it for me.”

“There are still aspects of being human that you could miss without necessarily wishing that you still had your old existence. But maybe I’ll think about it less with some distance.” He lifted his head, flashing a quick smile. “Not that it’s terrible to have what amounts to superpowers. I don’t mean to sound like I’m complaining or anything.”

“I’m not complaining, either,” Emma said. “I wouldn’t be here without them.”

Jesse squeezed Gideon’s fingers lightly. “I’m sorry I took most of this out on you.”

Relief flooded through him at the hope they had finally found some middle ground. “Hey, I’ve got the broadest shoulders.” He cast a sly smile at Emma. “It’s easier for me to take it than a couple of girls.”

She lifted a single brow. “You know, I’d actually pit Dominique against you any day. She’s a little scrapper.”

Jesse nodded. “I might bet on Dominique, too. The girl isn’t afraid to fight dirty.”

“Poor Cory’s going to have his hands full.”

“I don’t think you need to feel too sorry for him. I talked to him a lot today, and he seems fully aware of what he’s getting himself into.”

“And he still wants her to move in?” Gideon shifted his gaze back out to the water, though he tightened his hold on Jesse’s hand, relishing the renewed contact between them. “Maybe they deserve

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each other, after all.”

“I think they make a gorgeous couple,” Emma said. “And at least he’s local. We don’t have to worry about her announcing that she’s moving to Singapore and we’ll see her again in ten years.”

“For now,” Jesse corrected. “He plans to get his doctorate and be a professor. Which means he’s going to have to go wherever he finds a job. Fortunately, traveling isn’t really an issue for us.”

Gideon smiled. “If we haven’t done enough in Chicago to pull a few strings and make sure Cory gets something here, we’ve been doing something wrong.”

Jesse snorted. “I didn’t realize there were strings to be pulled in the history department at the university. You’re going to have fill me in on that one sometime.”

“And give away all my secrets in one fell swoop? How am I going to keep you interested for the next century if I do that?”

“Oh, I can think of at least a dozen ways for you to hold my attention. And Emma’s got a pretty good imagination, too.”

“Wait a second.” Letting go of Jesse’s hand, Gideon turned sideways and leaned on his elbow against the railing so he could better get a good look at both of them. “Didn’t I hear the two of you in the shower earlier today?”

“Given how sharp your ears are, chances are pretty good you did.”

“So...if Emma got to show you how sorry she was, don’t I get a chance now to do the same?”

Jesse smiled. “Here in the middle of the park?”

“Not like that’s ever stopped us before,” Emma said.

“As much fun as that would be...” Gideon said. “We did deny Emma the good stuff after the fight last night. And I need to show you just how sorry I am. I have more ways of doing that if we go

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home.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Jesse tugged Gideon’s hand, gently pulling him toward the foot of the bridge. “Let’s go home.”

Gideon didn’t fight Jesse’s lead, grateful that he seemed perfectly happy holding both of their hands for the walk back to the car, rather than just Emma’s. To be safe, however, he said quietly, “I really do regret hurting you as much as we did, boy. My biggest and best job is to make sure you don’t get hurt, and I messed that up. I won’t let it happen again.”

“I know. And if it does happen again...I’ll just keep in mind that neither one of us are perfect. Even if I do have the tendency to keep you up on your pedestal.”

“He looks good up there,” Emma said.

“I look good everywhere,” Gideon countered.

“I’ll never understand why you have that much confidence, even without a mirror.”

“Years and years of experience.”

And he had every intention of putting that experience to good use, to show Jesse just how much he loved him, once he had both of them safely ensconced in their playroom

## CHAPTER 7

Jesse's library was full of books, painstakingly reassembled after the fire in Gideon's apartment basically destroyed every volume he owned. It took him years and trips to every corner of the Earth to rebuild his collection. Gideon had rolled his eyes occasionally, muttering a few things about how they have the Internet now, but mostly, Jesse was allowed to assemble his library in peace. Over their years in the large mansion, many of the rooms had assumed certain personalities, each one reflecting the primary user's needs and desires. Jesse mainly kept to the library, his office just off the library, the kitchen, and the den when either Emma or Dominique could coax him into watching a movie with them. But despite the hours, the days, that he had invested in the rooms he had claimed for his own, there was one room he liked above all

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others. In fact, it was pretty much his favorite place in the world.

The playroom had evolved subtly over the five years since they had moved into the mansion. At first, it had just become more cluttered as Gideon had acquired new whips, new chains, new pieces of furniture, new toys. When the clutter began to offend Gideon's sensibilities, he had specially designed cupboards installed. More chains hung from the ceiling, each one different in small, barely perceptible ways. Gideon had become more exact as both Jesse and Emma's needs changed. Jesse, because of his strength and invulnerability. Emma, because of her experiences in Castelain's dimension.

But regardless of the changes, external or internal, when Jesse stepped into the room, he felt a sense of comfort. Like returning home after a long journey. Of course, that was immediately followed by a strong sense of arousal. But when they were in the playroom, everything made sense. Just stepping into the room made him want to hit his knees. There wasn't a single part of him that didn't want to crawl across the floor to wait at Gideon's feet. But even that simple act of submission would be inappropriate if he acted without instruction. Instead he stood at the door, Emma by his side, patiently waiting for Gideon's first instructions.

Gideon acted like they weren't even there. He prowled around the edge of the playroom, touching a chain here, caressing a steel bar there. He stopped more than once to open a cupboard, but always, he closed it within a few seconds, moving on to the next with a single-minded grace.

"What is he doing?" Emma murmured.

"Listening to someone speak without having permission," Gideon said without breaking stride. He didn't turn his head in their direction, or raise his voice. He didn't have to. "You know

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better than that, Emma.”

Her apology came easily off her tongue, but Jesse couldn’t help but wonder why she’d spoken in the first place. Unless it was to deliberately goad Gideon by misbehaving, though that was usually one of Jesse’s ploys.

“You obey better when you’re naked.” Gideon had stopped again, this time crouching at a set of rings embedded in the floor. “Strip each other, then get on your knees.”

Jesse did not need to be told twice. There was no awkwardness in the action. He moved first, pulling Emma’s blouse over her head before focusing on unbuttoning her skirt. She kept her attention glued on Gideon while Jesse worked—even when he unsnapped her bra and slid the straps down her arms. When he glanced over his shoulder, Gideon had ropes in his hand. Did he plan to use the set of rings? Who would he be tying down?

Neither question could be voiced while Emma returned the favor. He felt her curiosity as she touched him. As much as he didn’t want to, he put up the walls that would shield his emotions from her. He had the feeling that whatever Gideon had planned, it would probably preclude the sort of control Jesse needed in order to properly handle the feedback loop.

When they were both naked and on their knees, Gideon motioned them forward with the crook of two fingers. Emma dropped to her hands first, and her heavy breasts swayed as she crawled toward him. Jesse let her get a few feet ahead before following. The sight of the creamy slope of her ass added a new thrum through his veins, especially when she reached Gideon and bent to lick his bare foot, lifting her hips even higher.

The corner of Gideon’s mouth tipped. Gently, he pushed her chin up with his toe. “If that’s to make up for speaking out of turn,

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you're forgiven."

"No, Sir," she said with a small, enigmatic smile. "It's just because I love you."

Golden flecks danced in Gideon's eyes. Those kinds of displays of unexpected submission always brought his demon out to play sooner. Silently, Jesse thanked Emma for the smart move. The time in the playroom would be better for all of them, the sooner Gideon let himself go.

"Lay down, Emma." Gideon stepped back, out of the reach of the space they used for the rings. "Stretch as far as you can."

Jesse remained on his hands and his knees as he watched Emma do as she was told. The rings had her spread-eagled, her arms stretched above her head, her stomach pulled taut. Jesse's gaze was drawn to her nipples, which were already tight, the firm peaks practically begging to be licked. Her hair fanned out around her, and her blue eyes gazed up at Gideon expectantly. He bent and began securing her to the ground, first looping the rope around her wrists, and then tying her ankles. As Gideon worked, Jesse's mind raced, trying to figure out just what his Master had planned. Not that he was ever very good at anticipating Gideon's decisions.

Once her foot was bound, Gideon smoothed a hand over Emma's calf, caressing up and down as he shifted his attention to Jesse. "I plan on fucking you, boy, but not just yet. I want to get your ass primed for me, so you're going to work up to my cock."

He clenched at the prospect of Gideon tearing into his hole, but held steady in his kneeling pose, even with the distraction of Gideon's hand sliding farther up Emma's leg. "How do you mean, Sir?"

"Getting you slick, for starters." Abruptly, he straightened and stepped back. "Straddle Emma's face. She can eat your ass while I

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get the other toys we need.”

Jesse crawled over to her side, his fingers already trembling slightly with his anticipation. Emma watched him expectantly, obviously looking forward to getting her mouth on his body. He would have happily traded places with her—and he had been chained to the floor countless times—but he realized that Gideon wanted to prove to him how sorry he was by making Jesse’s pleasure the center of attention. A part of him had to admit that as much as he hated fighting with Gideon, making up was always worth it.

He straddled Emma, reaching behind him to spread his cheeks for her. Her breath felt cool against his heated skin, and he could already smell the scent of her arousal. Her pussy glistened with it between her spread thighs, and that only made Jesse’s cock ache. At the first touch of her tongue against his pucker, that ache turned into something far sharper, something that stabbed through him.

It was a delicate balancing act. He had to keep himself raised high enough on his knees so he didn’t smother her, and low enough for her to comfortably reach, all without the use of his hands, since the only way for her to get to his opening was for him to display himself for her. His thighs trembled at the precarious stance, but part of that, too, was his rising hunger as he watched Gideon go to the cupboards. He couldn’t see what Gideon was removing, though he could guess because of its placement. The anticipation made him drip even more, and clear droplets of pre-come landed between Emma’s breasts.

She rimmed him differently than Gideon did. Where Gideon attacked like Jesse was an all-he-could-eat buffet, Emma explored him almost delicately, pointing her tongue as small and sharp as she could to trace around the outer ring. It tickled at first, and

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within seconds, he'd lowered himself another inch, strengthening the contact between them. Even that didn't do much more than make her licks longer, sweeping over the muscle until she finally shivered and pushed her tongue inside.

Jesse hoped Gideon planned to return to them with a cock ring in hand. It took a great deal of concentration to keep himself under control, especially as Emma's enthusiasm grew with each sweep of her tongue. He would rather just concentrate on the warmth and texture of her tongue, instead of doing his best to distract himself from the pleasure. But even his best could not stop his balls from throbbing, or the sheen of pre-come gathering on his crown. Jesse knew that if Emma had her hands free, she would be gripping him with hard fingers, holding him in place while she continued to fuck him with her mouth.

Gideon finally returned, towering above them with the light behind him, his eyes shadowed. He held Emma's harness with a thick dildo attached, as well as a long, thin flogger. The sort that would slice through skin with a light touch.

"Come here, boy."

Reluctantly, Jesse pulled away, nearly stopped by Emma's mewl of protest. He crawled down the length of her body to kneel again between her spread legs.

Gideon dropped a free hand to the top of Jesse's head, caressing his cheek before cupping the back of his skull. He pulled Jesse forward until his face met the bulge in Gideon's groin, hard and heavy with the promise of filling Jesse's hole later. Though Gideon didn't give him much room to do much more than breathe in his musky scent, Jesse mouthed the thick shaft through the smooth fabric.

"Next step is to start stretching you," Gideon said. "Feel like

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fucking our boy here, Emma?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jesse saw Emma's toes curl in excitement.

“Oh, God, yes, please, Sir.”

“Then, looks like he needs to get you ready.” Gideon released him and held out the harness. His eyes glinted with barely restrained hunger. “I'll have my own fun while he's doing that.”

The strap-on harness was a very simple affair. It consisted of two leather belts. One that went around Emma's hips, and another that went between her legs and attached to the second belt in the back, securing the plate in place. Jesse's fingers moved quickly. He had secured the harness around Emma many times in the past, and even with her on her back, he had no difficulty getting it in place. He didn't have any problems until he picked up the dildo Gideon had brought to be attached the harness. It wasn't as thick as Gideon's shaft, but it was still quite large. His ass clenched as he fit it against the belt's plate.

The crack of the whip sizzled across his senses, causing him to flinch even though it didn't hit his skin. Gideon crouched behind him and, reaching around, fisted Jesse's shaft as he pressed his mouth to Jesse's ear.

“You can touch yourself as much as you want, boy,” came the silken whisper. The slim, hard handle of the whip snaked down Jesse's spine to trace his crack, pushing against his opening before slithering back up again. “But not until you've got her cock buried inside you. I expect you to ride her for all you're worth.” Gideon's low chuckle made all the hair on Jesse's nape stand on end. “If you can concentrate that much, that is.”

Concentrate? Jesse didn't think he would be able to focus on anything. Already, his brain was clouded with his arousal, and the

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thought of riding Emma made him weak. His muscles were watery, and sweat was already rolling down his brow and stinging his eyes. He wanted to straddle her immediately, but he still had the wherewithal to remember that he needed to slick up the thick toy before he did anything. He glanced up her body, noticing the way her fingers curled around the rope binding her, the rapid rise and fall of her chest. She was holding herself still, but just barely. Jesse was certain it took a great deal of effort to keep herself from jerking her hips.

Jesse poured a healthy amount of the lube into his palm, but before he had the chance to spread it on the toy, the next lash of the whip fell across his shoulders. Jesse's spine straightened, and a small whimper escaped his throat. How could he concentrate on doing what he needed to do as the heat spread through his body? But if he wanted to ride Emma, he would need to find a way.

He took the dildo between both hands, coating it with his slick palms. Drops oozed down to the fake balls and then onto Emma's skin, glistening as it goaded Jesse into distraction. It would be so easy to reach down and caress her, push the lube into her own ass and finger fuck her as he settled onto the toy. The hunger in her eyes begged him to.

But a second strike across the upper swell of his buttocks jerked him to his knees, away from the temptation of her flesh. His cock knocked against the dildo, and he pushed the toy vertical to position it behind his balls. As the unyielding tip pushing at his opening, he squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for its entry.

Another lash across his shoulders drove him downward, several inches sinking into his passage. The sliver of fire it left behind came with a distinct trickle of blood. Gideon had broken the skin, if only for a moment before it stitched itself back together again.

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But a moment was all Jesse needed for Gideon to get a whiff of it and vamp out completely.

By the time he was fully seated, Emma was writhing beneath him. Each twist of her hips made the shaft inside of him jerk, change angles, slide against his flesh in maddening ways. Gideon's earlier words came back to him. He could touch himself. He could stroke himself as he rocked up and down on the toy, but he chose to grip Emma's hips instead. He held onto her with firm fingers, his grip tightening as a second thin cut opened on his back. He felt Gideon's teeth immediately after the whip, scraping across his skin, drawing fresh blood. Jesse shivered, even though his skin felt flushed and more sweat dotted the back of his neck.

Keeping his walls up had been a good idea. Even after all the years they'd been together, Emma still didn't care for some of the edgier play that left Jesse bleeding and temporarily broken when Gideon was done. As the whip descended again and again, finding new places to shred, new skin to score, Jesse understood why Gideon had positioned them like this. It had been a deliberate choice, one meant to give Jesse what he most craved and still shield Emma from the worst of its visual effects.

Because he had no doubts his back would be raw and oozing by the time Gideon was done. Every other stroke came with a corresponding drag of fangs, more blood drawn in hot, stinging lines as Gideon's tongue caught stray droplets. Once, he drove his teeth into the tight muscle above Jesse's shoulder blade, sucking hard once before letting him go to resume the whipping.

Jesse slammed against Emma's hips after that one, his shout bouncing off the playroom walls. Her breathless, "Please do that again, Sir," only sent his pleasure spiraling higher.

Gideon could have ignored her plea, but he was clearly in an

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indulgent mood. Gideon skimmed his lips across Jesse's back, collecting drops of blood before settling his teeth over Jesse's other shoulder. The strong, sudden bite sent a surge of energy through Jesse, and he slammed down again. Emma arched off the floor, her hips driving the cock even deeper into his passage. His cock was leaking clear fluid, the tip dragging across Emma's skin. Jesse was forced to close his eyes for a moment, his flesh vibrating from being caught between his two lovers.

Emma's soft whispers, begging Gideon to do what he would, coaxing Jesse into letting go, wrapped around his tense limbs and drew his hands forward, over her quivering stomach and across her ribs. It angled his back differently, offering new patches of skin for Gideon to taste. Even better, it dragged the length of his shaft across her slick abdomen, the heat bleeding into him just as Gideon stole it from behind. He gasped with each bite. None were too deep. None lasted more than a moment. Each carried with it the promise of everything Gideon would do for him.

Jesse gradually began moving faster, seeking out more heat, more friction. Emma moved with him, her head whipping back and forth as Jesse fucked himself. The harness had a small stimulator on the plate, and he knew it was brushing against her clit with each hard, downward stroke. He dropped his head back, trying to catch a glimpse of Gideon's face. Trying, and failing. Behind him, the lash of the whip, the sting of the fangs, continued. Each action was completely measured. Completely under control. But Jesse knew the taste of his blood, the smell of Emma's arousal, their quickening breathing was probably enough to drive Gideon out of his senses.

His hand acted on its own accord. He gripped his own length, stroking his cock once as he slammed down. The tip of the dildo

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brushed against his prostate and his shaft throbbed. Crying out, he moved at the same angle, at the same speed, becoming completely absorbed in the fresh waves of pleasure moving through him.

Weight appeared at his back. Hard, supple, muscular—the arms that held him when he slept. They reached beneath his to grab Emma's hips and hold her still, while the blood dripping down Jesse's back glued his upper body to Gideon's.

"Shoot all over her," Gideon murmured in his ear. Fangs nipped at his lobe. "I'm dying to clean her up."

The soft command was all Jesse needed to hear. It would have been enough, even if Jesse's hand wasn't flying up and down his cock. The way his low words wrapped around him, the unmistakable promise of more, the dark temptation in each word. Gideon had long ago perfected that tone. It made the base of his spine tingle for several beats until everything exploded within him. Gideon timed it perfectly, and as the first stream of come erupted from Jesse, Gideon buried his fangs at the juncture of Jesse's neck and shoulder.

The world tunneled into points of darkness and heat. Gideon pulled the blood from his veins by long, powerful sucks, and covered Jesse's hand with his own, squeezing even harder as the long strings coated Emma's stomach and breasts. He couldn't see her. He could only feel and hear. Sweat sticking the insides of his legs to her sides. Her anguished cries for her own release. Her harsh breathing...or maybe that was his. He didn't know. All he knew was the join of their bodies and the weight against his back.

Until that disappeared again. Jesse gulped for breath and opened his eyes to see Gideon come around, his shirt gone, his pale, perfect chest now streaked with Jesse's blood. Blood stained his mouth, too. He crouched at Emma's side and smeared his hand

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through the come to spread it over the nearest puckered nipple.

The muscles in Emma's throat worked, her body straining toward him. "Please, Sir..."

Gideon smiled. Cupping her coated breast, he bent down and sank his teeth into the soft flesh.

Emma screamed and arched away from the floor and her bonds. Her orgasm tore through her with such force, her emotions pummeled against the walls Jesse had erected.

Jesse kept rocking on the dildo, loath to pull free from it. Emma shook beneath him, the aftershocks of the orgasm rolling through her, coaxing Jesse's cock back into an erection. Gideon took several long draws from Emma's body, filling himself with her blood. She shuddered after each swallow, her fingers opening and closing, trying to reach for something, her eyes fluttering. After several beats, Gideon abandoned her breast, licking the fresh mark until the blood stopped dripping from the indentations. His mouth moved lower, his tongue darting out to taste the salty heat of Jesse's come.

His mouth got closer and closer to Jesse's cock, lips shiny, fangs shinier. Jesse slowed, then stilled, his heart pounding at how close Gideon really was. He didn't dare move his hands. He didn't want to break the spell. Beneath him, even Emma stopped quaking, holding her breath as they both waited for what to come next.

Gently, almost delicately, Gideon lifted Jesse's semi-hard length and exposed his sac. "Looks like you're ready for round two already." His tongue, warm from their stolen heat, dragged over Jesse's balls. "Think you're stretched enough for me, boy?"

"Yes," Jesse responded instantly. "Yes, Sir. Please."

Releasing Jesse's cock, Gideon straightened and stood. "Good. Untie Emma while I get undressed. I'll let you fuck her while I'm

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fucking you.”

Jesse eased himself off the dildo and knelt at Emma’s side. She was already straining against the rope, doing her best to get free from the knots Gideon had tied. She wouldn’t be able to undo the knots if she tried for the rest of the night, but her obvious hunger made him work faster. If she was anything like him, the memory of her first orgasm was already fading, having done nothing except prime her for more.

As soon as he freed her arms, she embraced him. With a moan, she pulled him against her, and their mouths crashed together in a hungry kiss.

Her salty skin rubbed against his raw back, heightening the sting that lingered from the whip. If she noticed, she didn’t show it, holding onto him tightly enough to make his lungs scream for oxygen. Damp hair clung to her cheeks and temples, and he smoothed it away as he cupped her head and held her still. The swipes of her tongue made the desire worse, and they both knew it. By the time they parted, he was fully erect again, ready to bury himself inside her.

Her gaze slid past his shoulder, and an impish smile curved her mouth. “Judging from the look on Gideon’s face, you’re not going to be able to walk by the time he’s done with you,” she whispered.

“That’s the plan,” Gideon said. A strong hand delved between Jesse’s cheeks, three fingers sinking effortlessly into his hole. “Even if I have to fuck him all night to get that result.”

*All night.* Jesse believed Gideon had every intention of doing just that. Given his ability to heal, it might very well be necessary. His body clenched around Gideon’s fingers, and despite the way Gideon filled him, he needed more. So much more. He wanted Gideon to pound into him until he forgot everything in this world

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except where their three bodies connected. He might even lower his walls a little bit when Gideon bit him, so that the joining—the melding—could be complete.

“We can’t do anything with me still in this get-up,” Emma complained. She wiggled her hips, nudging against the men, and elicited a chuckle from Gideon.

“She’s speaking out of turn again, but she does have a point.” Gideon withdrew his hand, leaving Jesse empty and aching. Those same fingers flew over the harness, undoing the buckles in record time. “I should leave your ankles tied down for that little mistake, Emma.”

“No, please, Sir.” She propped herself up on her elbows. The fluids still sticking to her breasts rolled slowly down to her stomach. “I’ll be good. I promise. I can’t wrap my legs around you if they’re tied down.”

That was a perfectly reasonable argument to Jesse’s ears, but he didn’t dare make a move until Gideon inclined his head with the smallest of smiles. Jesse concentrated on her right ankle, and then her left, forcing his fingers to cooperate with him, despite the tremor running through the digits. As soon as she was free, she hooked her feet around his hips, but she caught herself in time, and didn’t try to pull him toward her.

“I think her misbehaving is all your influence,” Gideon murmured in Jesse’s ear. His arm curled around Jesse’s waist, finding his arousal and stroking it in long, hard pulls. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Sir...I don’t misbehave,” Jesse protested breathlessly. He said it with a straight face, but he didn’t miss Emma’s smile.

Gideon angled his cock downward, dragging the tip over Emma’s mound and between her swollen lips. “You don’t? Too

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bad. I guess I don't need all these toys to punish you, then."

"No," Jesse countered. "You need all these toys to reward me for not disobeying you, Sir."

Emma shuddered when Gideon brushed Jesse's cock across her clit. Her heels slipped down to the back of his thighs, giving Gideon room to press closer, his shaft nestling between Jesse's cheeks.

The slight scrape of fangs along Jesse's neck sent goose bumps rippling down his bare arms. "Which do you need most, boy?"

"You, Sir. I need you. To fuck me. To be inside of me. Please."

Then, it was Gideon's turn to shudder, and he buried his face in the curve of Jesse's neck. "Always, boy." He guided Jesse's cock to Emma's opening, pushing forward with his hips to prompt Jesse into entering her. As soon as the first inch was inside, Gideon let go and grasped his own, positioning at Jesse's hole and mirroring the thrust forward. "The three of us."

There was never any doubt in Jesse's mind of where he belonged. Of who he belonged with, and who he belonged to. The delicate balance they found, the improbability of their union, the times where they were almost lost to each other completely—it could all be so overwhelming. But at their core, at their most basic, when everything was stripped away, there was just the three of them. And blood. And a world they were willing to fight for and carve out of evil and darkness. The three of them. Forever.

## JAMIE CRAIG

Jamie Craig is the collaborative efforts of Pepper Espinoza and Vivien Dean. Both successful authors on their own, they began working together in early 2006. Pepper lives with her husband and cats in Utah, where she attends graduate school, and Vivien resides in northern California with her husband and two children.

\* \* \*

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