

Jamie Craig



Unveiled A NOVEL

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...Her feet refused to move. Her muscles denied her any freedom at all. All she was capable of was standing there, suffused with the desire permeating the room. She didn't even want to blink for fear of missing something.

Gideon shifted his attention to Jesse's upper-thighs, and the red wax reflected the overhead light. It reminded her of blood. It must have reminded Gideon of blood as well, because he seemed utterly fascinated by the patterns he was creating with each casual flick of his wrist. They were silent except for Jesse's harsh breathing, until he howled without warning.

"Oh, *fuck*, Gideon."

The air was so thick that she couldn't breathe, and she inched forward, pressing her breasts to the door jamb. It put pressure on her taut nipples at the same time, and she moved in small fractions to create suddenly needed friction.

"You know I'm going to decorate your balls at the party, too," Gideon said. "It's far too pretty for me not to." His head ducked all of a sudden, giving a clear view of Jesse's back, and though she couldn't see exactly what Gideon was doing, the movement of his head from the small of Jesse's back to between his thighs gave it away. All she didn't know was whether or not he was using his tongue or teeth to blaze the path across Jesse's ass to his hanging sac.

"Then I hope they won't be able to hear me through the

mask,” Jesse said between gasps. “Because that will definitely make me scream.”

“Maybe I should gag you.”

ALSO BY JAMIE CRAIG

Keeping Time
Master Of Obsidian
Mosaic Moon

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BY

JAMIE CRAIG

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CHAPTER 1

The streets of downtown Chicago echoed with the wind's shrieks, bouncing off windows gone dark, slamming into whatever hapless bodies were caught in the winter storm. Hunched against the gale, two figures darted between a pair of parked cars as they raced for safety. They passed from pools of light cast by the streetlamps to the pitch separating them, over and over until they reached the haven of the doorway they sought. Then they had to stop, pressing themselves to the walls, as one fought to catch his breath and the other scowled into the darkness.

"As much as I love this town," Gideon Keel muttered, "I hate the fucking winters."

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Jesse nodded, his teeth chattering. “Maybe we should migrate south for the winter. I hear Florida’s nice. A million senior citizens can’t be wrong, right?”

A snort of laughter created a white plume in front of Gideon’s face that quickly dissipated in the night air. “Let’s just hope Rina’s not wrong about this party going down tonight,” he said. His ungloved hand found the doorknob at their backs, snapping it open, and he stepped out of the way, allowing Jesse to enter first. The wind and blowing snow were small annoyances for Gideon; for Jess, they could be deadly.

Jess hurried inside, rubbing his hands together and stomping his feet. “Let’s hope if she’s right, they don’t have some sort of brute squad for security.”

Silently, Gideon echoed his agreement, but now, with the door slipping shut behind them and the unknown looming ahead and above, conversation needed to cease. According to Rina, some soiree was supposed to take place in the apartment over the sporting goods store—out-of-towners who’d been bragging around town about showing off their “good taste.” She wasn’t the type of vampire who brought tips like this to Gideon, but when one of the college girls she hung out with disappeared, Rina took the right step and came to him. He credited part of it to her wanting to atone for attacking Jesse the previous summer when she’d been high on obsidian, too. But the why of it didn’t matter too much to him.

All he cared about was making sure it wasn’t the massacre he feared it might be. One sniff of the stale stairwell air, however, told him they were too late.

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Holding his hand against Jesse's chest, Gideon kept his partner behind him as he turned his attention to the narrow steps leading upstairs. His features shifted, his vampire visage coming to the fore, and he cocked his head as he strained to hear any sounds that might filter from the rooms above. Nothing came. Not the faint pulse of a human heartbeat, not a whisper of a breath.

"Stay behind me," he murmured.

Jess nodded, falling in step. They climbed the steps quickly and silently—Jess was getting better at stealth. There was a single door at the top of the landing. Gideon tested the knob. Unlocked. He looked over his shoulder, and Jess had his crossbow at the ready. But Gideon knew before he pushed the door open there wasn't going to be anybody there.

The stench as they walked into the front room was overwhelming. Blood and semen and sheer, unadulterated terror lingered in the air, crawling under Gideon's skin like an army of fire ants determined to eat him from the inside out. The wind made the glass rattle in the panes, but all the lights had long been extinguished. It didn't make a difference to Gideon. He still saw everything perfectly. He saw everything *too* perfectly.

"You can put it away," he said without looking back. "We're too late."

Jess dug through his bag. The click of a flashlight preceded the narrow beam of light flashing over the room, before falling on the body. The beam shook as it illuminated what remained of the party—the carnage—before it snapped suddenly away.

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“Oh...Christ.”

There were reasons why, even after nearly three years of working together, Gideon didn't like Jesse coming out with him when he was on a case. It wasn't just that he wanted to keep the man he loved from harm; Jesse had become quite adept with weapons in the time they'd worked together. There was also the overwhelming desire to keep the darker shadows from tainting Jess, shielding him from witnessing the evil Gideon attempted to keep at bay on a nightly basis. Some things were better left unseen.

The body pinned to the wall was one of them.

It had been female when it had been alive, and Gideon knew, as he closed the distance to Jesse's side and rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder, it was better for the girl that she was now dead. Her wrists were fastened in place with heavy shackles, and her left hand had been posed with heavy wire to be extended, fingers crooked as if to beckon someone even closer. The same wire positioned the head and legs, but none of it was molded over the muscles. Instead, it had been threaded beneath the skin to act like a second skeleton, and the rivulets of dried blood left in the wire's wake looked like open veins along her skin.

Jesse turned his back to the sight, his light coming on again. He surveyed the room for several seconds before murmuring, “It was an actual party, Gideon. This isn't the work of some sicko on his own. She was the entertainment for the night.”

“I know.” Leaving him to examine the rest of the room,

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Gideon stepped up to the body, memorizing every detail so Jess wouldn't have to do it later. It was difficult to tell, but the few distinguishing characteristics they hadn't destroyed—the fall of black hair, blue eyes wired open to watch the debauchery taking place in front of her—matched those of Rina's friend. Bite marks savaged her bared breasts, but the skin was clean. He could almost see the tongues licking the precious blood away.

“There were at least five vampires,” he said. “There's five distinct sets of fangs marking her.”

“Not just vampires, unless they're the sort of vamps with a taste for champagne, caviar and...” He paused and sniffed. “Oh, something very foul smelling. I don't think it's actually food. Hey, look at this. I think somebody dropped their invitation.”

Gideon glanced back in time to see Jesse pick up a piece of black card from the heavy coffee table in the middle of the room. The flashlight shining across its surface illuminated careful white script, the reflection from which cast silver shards along the walls.

“Is that engraved?” Gideon returned to Jesse's side, taking the invitation to peer at it more closely. “This isn't some home office job. The paper's too expensive, and there's a watermark imprinted in the web.”

“Everything's too expensive. The only thing that doesn't fit is the location. Why a tiny apartment above a sporting goods store?” He took out a pen and a small notepad. Gideon didn't miss the slight tremor in Jesse's fingers. “Got to follow

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up and find out who has the lease.”

Gideon reached and closed his hand around Jesse’s, stopping the scratching across the paper. “We can do that back at the office.”

Jess looked up. “I don’t want to forget anything.” He nodded at the remnants of the party. “This all could be a clue to...my God, who would do something like this?”

“Someone very bored and very rich.” His gaze trailed back to the wall. “And more than a little unhinged.”

“I have my camera, if you want to take some pictures of the...room. And we should probably turn on the light and see if there’s anything else,” Jess said, trying to sound normal, like this was any other case. But he refused to look to the end of the room, and he didn’t seem thrilled about turning on the lights.

“Give it to me.” He held out his hand and waited while Jesse slipped the camera strap from around his shoulder and passed it over. “Why don’t you go sit on the stairs and write out what you can? I’ll get the pictures so we can get out of here as soon as possible. We need to call the police and report the scene anyway.”

Jess nodded and turned to the door. Gideon waited until he was gone before he turned on the light for the photographs. The body was thrown into sharp contrast, each thin line of blood standing out like rubies against its white skin. There was blood on the wall behind her, on the floor, and signs of a struggle. They had threaded the wire through her skin after they hung her to the wall, but before she finally died. Her

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screams would have echoed through the small apartment for hours.

Gideon snapped pictures of every inch of the room, not shying away from a single detail. When he took the entire roll of film, he ducked out of the room and found Jess sitting on the bottom step, furiously scrawling over a page already covered in notes.

“Solved our case already?” he tried to joke.

“They didn’t make any real effort to hide anything. Vampires normally don’t care what the authorities are doing, but there weren’t just vampires in that room. When the police discover her, it’s going to be a media circus. It’ll probably attract national attention. Her high school photo plastered across four twenty-four hour news channels. I doubt...well, I doubt she’s the first victim. Why flaunt her?”

“Maybe they were interrupted.” But even as Gideon said it, he knew it wasn’t the case. There were no signs of a rushed exit, and though the scents were still strong, the blood had already started to cool. “But we should get out of here. The sooner the cops arrive, the sooner they can start gathering evidence that might lead them to the human half of this little bash.”

Jess took Gideon’s hand and pulled himself to his feet, then carefully packed everything away and took his camera back. “What’s your plan for the rest of the night? I’m going to start some research, see if what we found is ritualistic.”

“Find Rina. See what else she heard, if she knows anything about humans being invited to the party. Hell, to find out how

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she knew anything at all if there's as much money behind this as I suspect there is." They headed down the stairs, the whipping winds outside growing louder with every step. "I'll call Derek and give him the tip-off about the scene. Then we don't have to worry about being kept in the loop on what they find."

Jess pulled his coat tightly around his thin frame as they neared the door. He didn't hesitate to step out into the driving wind, keeping his head down as he hurried back to the car. As they drove back to the office, Jess looked like he wanted to speak several times, even opening his mouth to let the words escape, but then he'd shake his head and shift his attention back to the window.

When they reached the office, Jess went to his desk, and Gideon went to the phone. Jess didn't speak, but Gideon recognized the tension in every line of his body and by the way he hunched over his books, almost defensively.

* * *

The storm calmed some time around dawn, but Gideon's mood didn't. Every passing hour led to further frustration. Rina was nowhere to be found. Derek was at the crime scene, but the extensive nature of the evidence meant forensics was taking its own sweet time collecting it. Every time Gideon called, he got the same old song and dance, was told to call back later, or better yet, to wait for Derek to call him. He debated going out again and showing up at the scene, but in the end, decided against it. He didn't need to put Derek on the

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spot when the man didn't know anything.

Jesse never said a word. Gideon listened to him from his office, listened to the pages turning in the books, the scratching of his pen over paper, the tap of his fingers on his keyboard when he would get on the computer to check on something. He kept expecting Jess to come in with some grand clue that would give them a fresh lead, but it never happened. In fact, by the time Gideon broke down and ventured out to ask, he found Jesse with his cheek resting on an open book, his lashes dark against his cheeks as he slept at his desk.

It was good one of them could sleep. Gideon only hoped Jesse wasn't having nightmares about what they'd seen.

With a mug of blood growing cold on his desk, Gideon stood in front of his map of Chicago, blind to the meandering streets. He had seen a lot of atrocities in his lifetime. Hell, he'd been the *source* of a lot of atrocities. Being around for over four hundred years meant bearing witness to too much human nature, too much demon nature. It should have meant losing a taste for it, or becoming inured, or at the very least, learning how not to let it get to him so badly.

But it didn't.

Because every time he blinked, he saw the girl pinned to the wall. He saw the horror in Jesse's eyes. Every time he blinked, he was reminded he'd been too late.

Again.

By the time he heard Jesse stir in the outer room, all Gideon wanted was to get the fuck out of the office.

"So," he said, leaning against the jamb as he watched Jesse

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rub the sleep from his eyes, “who wants to go to Sangre tonight?”

CHAPTER 2

Going to Sangre would not have been Jesse's first choice. It was a waste of time he should use for a better purpose. It felt cold, heartless. It felt like the girl's death meant nothing if they were capable of forgetting about it for a night. It felt like he was about to crawl out of his own skin, and watching Gideon pace through the office like he wanted to tear the place apart didn't help.

He saw the girl every time he closed his eyes, and her specter haunted his dreams. He mourned in his own way for every body they ever found. He knew it wasn't healthy to carry those deaths with him, but he couldn't forget the wasted lives, the wasted opportunities. He was already making

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himself sick with the same image, over and over, and he couldn't eat. He would sleep again, but only after pushing his body beyond the point of exhaustion.

So though Sangre didn't seem right, Jesse understood why Gideon wanted, needed, to go there. It was an outlet for all the anger, frustration, shock, horror, and even helplessness that Jess knew they were both experiencing. They'd vent, they'd sleep, and when they emerged from the bedroom the next day, the world would look a little different.

Plus, there was always the chance they'd pick up a new clue or trail. The club was huge, and Jess had never met a vampire that wasn't happy to divulge every detail of his or her current evil enterprise. Most of their investigative work was listening—no other skills were required. Jess didn't know where this need to brag and gossip came from, but he thought it was probably rooted in arrogance and, oddly, an inferiority complex.

It didn't matter how many times they entered Sangre, Jess always felt a thrill of exhilaration, followed by a swift stomach drop as he remembered what he was stepping into. Gideon changed as soon as he stepped into the door, his hand tightening on Jesse's leash, and he changed, too. He became wanton, shameless, unconcerned about the outside world.

He knew Gideon needed to blow off steam. He prowled through the club like a hungry panther, his eyes narrowed, his body moving with a predator's grace. Seeing him like this turned Jesse's stomach to jelly, and he almost preened with each appreciative glance Gideon received as he made his way

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deeper into the crowd. Regardless of what took place, he belonged to the vampire that turned every head when he walked in the room, and in many ways, that vampire belonged to him.

Jesse knew what was going to happen as soon as Gideon found an unclaimed couch, but he didn't make a single preemptive move. He held his hands behind his back, his legs spread slightly, his back straight, and waited for Gideon to tell him what he wanted. For the rest of the night, he wasn't going to have a single thought or feeling, except for what Gideon told him. He wasn't going to think about the monsters they couldn't find, couldn't control. It would make Gideon feel better to have absolute power over the situation, and Jesse felt more than a hint of relief when Gideon took that sort of control.

He never expected him to pull the two-foot long crop out from the inside of his jacket.

Instead of sitting down, Gideon let go of the leash, circling Jesse in slow, lazy strides as he slapped the crop against his thigh. "We've got quite an audience here tonight," he commented. His voice was low, and while Jess thought the words were meant for his ears, there was no mistaking the piqued attention of the nearby vamps. "It would be a shame to disappoint them, don't you think, boy?"

"Yes, it would be," Jess answered thickly, the cock ring already pulling tight against his shaft. He followed Gideon as much as he could with his eyes, but didn't turn his head or otherwise move. As if Gideon created the audience by naming

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it, more vamps appeared in Jess's peripheral vision.

The crop snapped across the back of his thighs. "Don't forget your place, *boy*. I won't warn you again." He appeared in front of him, but instead of looking to Jesse, Gideon caught the eye of a vampire hanging at the edge of the couch, a stocky blond in a white wifebeater that strained over his chest. "You," he said. "You want a taste? Get up here."

The vamp nearly tripped over himself in his eagerness to get the first taste. Jesse kept his gaze carefully averted, avoiding eye contact, but he almost smelled the bloodlust. Hunger had its own smell in the club, its own sound and taste, but this was a little darker. The vamp reached out, running his hands over Jess's shoulders and down his arms.

"Strip him," Gideon ordered. Finally, he took a seat on the couch, lounging directly in front of Jesse, their gazes locked. Gideon rested his ankle on his knee and tapped the crop against his foot as the blond vamp tore at Jesse's clothes. "He's all greased up and ready to play." Jesse's hard cock sprang free, and Gideon's mouth twisted in a hungry leer. "Let's see how much we can make his balls ache, shall we? I'm going to say, he doesn't come until...a dozen of you do."

Jess bit back his whimper, but barely. The flash of Gideon's eyes told him he was aware of Jess's not-quite-vocalized protest. His clothes were discarded, forgotten rags, and the blond vamp eyed him thoughtfully. It wasn't unlike the way Jess eyed steaks at the butcher's.

"Get on your knees," Blondie said gruffly.

"Yes..." Another warning glance from Gideon. "Sir."

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Jess dropped to his knees, still gripping his hands behind his back. Blondie stepped behind him and put a large hand on the back of his head. Without another word, he pushed him forward, forcing Jess to drop his hands to catch himself. He held his breath, waiting for several seconds before he felt the large vampire behind him. He watched Gideon from beneath his lashes, waiting for any reaction on his otherwise impassive face.

He was still tapping the crop against his foot. It took Jesse a moment to realize Gideon was matching the beat of the music pulsing through the club. He could almost feel it tattooing the same pattern to his vibrating flesh.

“Something about this isn’t right...” The softer tone of Gideon’s voice was countered by the calculating gleam in his eye, and several seconds passed where nobody moved, where only the steady staccato of the crop made any sound at all. It ended when Gideon suddenly sat forward and Jesse felt the tip of the crop trace along his jaw. “You’re going to want to suck on something, aren’t you, boy?” he asked, almost casually. “I mean, you haven’t actually seen the size of the cock aimed at your ass at the moment, but with something that big, you’re going to want something to stop from screaming, I think.”

Jess swallowed hard, his throat suddenly tight, his mouth dry. Seeing Gideon like this was enough to make his balls throb and heat his blood until every inch of his body was tingling and sensitized. “Yes, please, I would like that very much. Sir.”

The crop left his face, and with two expert flicks of his

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wrist, Gideon had the leash wrapped around it, using it to pull Jesse forward. When Jess reached the edge of the couch, Gideon leaned back and spread his knees to make room for him.

“Take me out,” he instructed. “And we’re going to make this a little more interesting.” He skimmed the crop over Jesse’s bare back, tilting his head to watch the muscles twitch. “You don’t come until I do. I don’t care if it’s twelve or twenty people who get off on you first.”

Jess eagerly unzipped Gideon’s pants, though he knew Gideon had the self-control to drag out this night for a very long time. His cock was hard and ready for Jess’s mouth, but he resisted the urge to wrap his lips around the head and suck the pre-come from the slit. He glanced up, waiting for a signal from Gideon. A sharp nod indicated he should continue. As soon as Jess wrapped his lips around Gideon’s shaft, he felt the tip of Blondie’s cock against his ass. He thrust in without further warning, driving Jess forward onto Gideon’s cock, his nose brushing against the stiff hair at Gideon’s base.

He didn’t know if anybody else heard it, but frankly, Jesse didn’t care. He did. He heard the soft sigh of pleasure that came from Gideon’s throat as Jesse swallowed down his cock, and he heard the way Gideon forced himself to cut it off before it became too obvious. He closed his eyes and savored the smooth shaft filling his mouth, waiting for Gideon to make the next move.

“Fuck him,” he heard Gideon say. The riding crop slithered along his side, matching the smooth tone of Gideon’s

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voice. "I want to see him drowning in come."

Blondie didn't need to be told twice. He pounded into Jesse, and Jesse didn't resist the punishing rhythm at all. He turned his body over to the vampires completely, relaxing his throat to accommodate Gideon each time he was pushed forward. He kept his eyes on Gideon's face, though in the dim light, he saw Gideon watching the vampire behind him. Gideon's cock twitched against his throat, and Blondie's cock twitched and jerked against his walls, and Jesse began to moan around Gideon's shaft.

Bodies pressed closer, encircling the threesome. With a nod from Gideon, the sound of zippers filled Jesse's ears, and he felt hands and cocks begin to stroke his bare skin. One vamp slid beneath him and promptly swallowed his shaft, but Jesse was prevented from reacting to the contact by the sudden sting of the crop against his back.

He looked up to see Gideon smirking at him.

"Just remember who comes first," he said.

Like I could forget. Jesse nodded, thankful the cock ring was tight. But he almost didn't need it anymore. Gideon had trained him very well. Still, the vampire beneath him had an amazing mouth. And unlike Gideon, he didn't seem to have any desire to torment him, which only made his agony worse. His hips jerked forward, and sweat began to roll down his face, neck, and ribs. He tried to figure how many vampires were around him, how many cocks were brushing against his skin, but it was impossible to tell.

Blondie came first, pulling out to shoot across his back. He

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felt the thick liquid mingle with the sweat, and Gideon's cock jerked in his throat, but otherwise, he gave no sign he was anywhere close to coming.

Gideon lifted his arm and used the end of the crop to paint the come over Jesse's skin. "That's one," he murmured. He didn't need to say more when another body pressed into the back of Jesse's thighs, and another cock slid into his ass. He simply pulled the crop away, and in full sight of Jesse, ran his finger along its edge to collect the sticky fluid it had gathered. In the next stroke, Gideon sucked the finger into his mouth in order to clean away the come.

Jesse's eyes rolled in the back of his head, his body tightening with a wave of desire. His balls were now throbbing to the rhythm of the music, and that steady throb was taking over his entire body. *That's one. That's one.* The words echoed in his mind, a desperate mantra. The mouth around his cock didn't pause, like the unknown vamp *wanted* him to be punished, like he wasn't going to give up until Jesse's come was covering his face. The new vamp behind him was thrusting just as hard as Blondie, like it was a race.

Something warm splashed on Jesse's cheek, and Gideon reached forward, entangling his fingers in Jesse's hair to pull him off his length. He held Jesse still while he smeared the fresh come forward to his waiting mouth.

"You can have this taste," Gideon said. He coated the head of his cock with the sticky fluid and pulled Jesse back down again. "But I'm going to let everybody else lick the rest of it off you."

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Jess lapped at the salty fluid eagerly, his skin erupting into goose bumps at the thought of the vampires hungrily, greedily licking his body. It would drive them crazy to be that close to his blood, and Jesse knew they wouldn't be careful about their fangs. None would bite without Gideon's permission—not if they didn't want Gideon to smash their teeth down their throat—but they would scrape and scratch until his blood mingled with their come in thin rivulets.

He felt warm fluid against his shoulder, and then a second splash, lower on his ribs. How many was that? Was it four? Jess looked up to Gideon's face, looking for any sign of how close he was, but there were no clues. And then he felt their mouths exactly as he imagined, alternately soft and sharp as they attacked him with lips, tongues, and teeth.

Hungry growls filled his ears, and with each one, Gideon's grip on the back of his head tightened a little bit more. The sting of a fang at his hip made his breath catch in his throat, but there was no time to savor it before another scraped against his shoulder, and then another, and another.

"They all want you," Gideon murmured. It was probably meant for his ears only, but in the presence of so many vampires, Jesse knew the words were heard by all. "You should see how desperate they are, tasting what they can. But they can't have you, now can they?" He pulled Jess off his cock, his other hand fisting his length. Every stroke had the head slapping against Jesse's mouth. "Tell them, boy. Tell them why they can't have you."

"Because I'm yours," Jesse answered immediately, even as

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his body writhed against the mouths and hands, and what might have been a new cock in his ass. “I belong to you.”

“All of you. Your ass, your mouth, your blood, your heart. It’s all mine.”

Fresh pre-come seeped from the slit, prompting Jess to catch what he could on his tongue. When he felt the vampire behind him pull out and spray across his lower back, he fully expected the next to take its place without pause. It took him by surprise then when Gideon suddenly let him go, bending over to shove the other vampires surrounding him away.

“Get up here,” he snarled. Scooping his hands beneath Jesse’s arms, he hauled him onto his lap in a single breath. In the next, he buried his cock deep inside Jesse’s ass.

Jess dug his fingers into Gideon’s shoulders, the relief he felt at Gideon’s unexpected act eclipsed only by his pleasure. It never really mattered how many vamps fucked him; he only ever wanted Gideon, and it was only Gideon that could make him forget the rest of the world. The whole club might have been watching them, and Jess wouldn’t have noticed or cared.

“It’s all yours,” Jess gasped as Gideon began guiding him, his large hands gripping Jesse’s hips tightly.

“Everything.”

Without letting go, Gideon yanked him off-balance, their mouths slamming together. The assault of his tongue was sharpened when Jesse felt the fangs descend, the first heat of his own blood flooding his taste buds. Gideon growled.

“Not going to last,” he warned.

Jesse couldn’t even nod. His whole body vibrated, pulled

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as taut as a guitar string. One hand abandoned his hip to close around his cock, finally freeing him from the cursed cock ring. He buried his other hand in Jesse's hair and yanked his head back. Jess's balls tightened, and Gideon drove deeper into his body, and he didn't know how he managed to keep himself from exploding. He gasped pitifully, his jaw working, but he didn't have enough breath to beg.

Then he didn't have any breath left at all.

Gideon's fangs struck at the same moment his body tensed beneath Jesse's, the hot flood of his come mirroring the hotter pull of blood from his throat. That first drag was the only impetus Jesse needed, crying out Gideon's name with a choked sob as his world imploded. His cock jerked in Gideon's hand as he flooded their stomachs with shot after shot of sticky come, and he clawed at the powerful arms holding him, desperate to make it last as long as possible.

And still, Gideon drank.

A buzzing started in Jesse's ears as Gideon pulled more and more blood from him; that buzz became a roar long before Gideon retracted his fangs. As usual, there was no thought of pulling away, no trace of fear, just a growing ecstasy disguising a darker fate—all it took was Gideon to misjudge what Jesse could give and that would be it. But he never misjudged, and when he finally slid his fangs out and began lapping at the bruised skin, Jess didn't have the strength to do anything except slump in his arms.

Gideon tightened his hold, keeping Jesse upright when he would have melted into nothing. When Gideon's mouth slid

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up his neck to his ear, the soft words that came next made goose bumps erupt along his skin.

“You’re not just mine,” Gideon breathed. “I’m yours, too.”

It wasn’t the first time Gideon had offered the sentiment, but it didn’t matter if it were the millionth. There were no other words in the English language that could strike Jesse with such force, or fill him with such confused wonder. To think such a thing was even possible bordered on ridiculous, but it wasn’t just possible, it was true. Jesse absolutely believed that. Gideon wouldn’t have said it otherwise.

“Thank you,” Jess whispered, “for not making me wait as long as you threatened.”

Gideon chuckled. “I did make you wait. I just couldn’t wait any longer myself.”

Jess kissed his jaw and then his neck, hoping Gideon didn’t intend to make him get up any time soon. “That’s because, fortunately for me, you’re greedy.”

He gasped when he felt Gideon’s cock twitch inside him.

“And still hard,” Gideon said. He dropped a hand to begin massaging Jesse’s ass. “You better be ready for round two.”

Jesse lifted his head and studied Gideon’s face in the club’s erratic light. He knew at a glance he only had one option—nod. The hunger in Gideon’s eyes was enough to make his stomach drop and his cock stir, but the slow glide of his cock against Jess’s sensitive flesh as he slid out heated his blood. When he pushed forward, Jesse’s breath caught in his chest, and then the colors swirled around him, and once again, Gideon was all he felt, all he saw.

CHAPTER 3

Jesse skirted the large crowd on his way back to Gideon, keeping mostly out of sight and ducking through the shadows against the back wall. He didn't think anybody would bother him, but that didn't mean he could stroll through the club like he owned the joint. And though he had carefully scrubbed his skin clean of blood and come, he knew he still reeked of it. Even the scent of the ointment he had smeared over every bruise and open scrape couldn't hide the enticing smell of sex.

There were all sorts of chains, ropes, chairs, and stockades in the back. Some of them were empty, some weren't. Jesse barely noticed them anymore. He barely noticed anything that went on in the club. If he ever took the time to pay attention to

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every person, every circle of vampires, every corner, he'd be overwhelmed. And probably inspired to try to rescue many of the humans. But he did notice one. A young lady was bound by the neck, the wrists, and the legs, a bar keeping her spine straight, a gag keeping her silent. And she was utterly alone.

Even at a distance, Jess saw the terror and distress on her face. Momentarily forgetting where he was, and the fact he needed to get back to Gideon, he hurried over to her.

She was naked, which wasn't unusual in and of itself. This was Sangre, after all. Pleasure was what it peddled. What *was* unusual was the lack of marks on her skin, the complete absence of bruising or bite marks that typified the humans who were brought to the club. Beyond the restraints of the stockade, she didn't even wear a collar to signify ownership. Her porcelain skin glowed with health under the lights, and only a pink flush across her cheeks marred her otherwise flawless complexion.

As Jesse neared, her head turned in his direction, thick waves of dark-blonde hair swinging over her bare shoulders. Eyes the color of melted chocolate met his, and in spite of his rush to approach, he faltered for a moment under her regard. She was beautiful, like she stepped out of one of his art history texts at Cambridge, but the unmitigated panic in her eyes captured him. Humans at Sangre fell into one of two camps—those who were dead to the pleasures being taken from them and those who were exhilarated by adrenaline in being used thus. Jesse fell into the latter camp. He knew fear in Sangre, but beneath it all, he trusted Gideon to protect him.

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This girl most definitely didn't belong to either.

He couldn't touch her, though his fingers itched to see if her skin was as soft as it looked. They'd be able to smell him on her, and he was wary of doing anything that might encroach on somebody else's territory. Which also meant he couldn't remove the gag. But he couldn't walk away either. If she was there against her will, he couldn't allow her to stay. That was not acceptable. And when she looked up at him with such naked fear—like she didn't know if he was going to free her or beat her—he knew he couldn't just continue to stand there stupidly.

Though he was sore, he crouched in front of her, so they were eye level. “You don't belong here, do you?”

A whimper came from her throat, and when she shook her head, the ends of her hair tickled across his arm. Goose bumps erupted on Jesse's skin. After several seconds, she lowered her gaze, dragging his downward at the same time, and he watched as she unclenched the fists she'd made, stretching her fingers out as if to reach for something along the ground.

Jesse was drawn to her, despite himself. He reached out, brushing his fingers across her hand.

And promptly, fell back on his ass.

Shaking his head, it took him a few seconds to realize the sudden jolt came from her. His first thought was she was wired to something to discourage touching, but that didn't make sense. How could her skin be electrified?

Jess tried again, bracing himself. It wasn't electricity. It was pure, raw emotion—panic. “Fuck,” he whispered. “Hey,

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listen, I'm not going to leave you here. Do you understand?"

Her thick lashes shot up. It could have been a trick of the lighting, but Jesse would have sworn a tiny measure of the terror that had darkened her eyes had been replaced by the burn of hope. A tremor visibly wracked through her soft body, and the sigh that escaped around the ball gag rippled over Jesse's skin.

"I can't get you out of this myself, but I will get you out. I promise." His hand hovered over her face for a moment, but then he touched her cheek in what he hoped was a comforting gesture. The panic flared through him just as brightly, but the hope he thought he saw before was like purple threads in a flash of orange. He briefly thought of Gideon's dark mood—this wasn't going to be easy.

He tore himself away from her and hurried across the club to the bar, where he found Gideon downing what looked to be a shot of blood. He was surrounded by vamps, and Jess knew he couldn't demand they talk. He sidled up close to him and waited for acknowledgement.

The wait lasted for nearly five minutes. Five excruciating, tense minutes where Gideon only glanced in his direction twice, where it felt like every vampire in the place was watching him, where all he could feel was the girl's terror thrumming through his veins. By the time Gideon set down his shot glass and picked up the leash, Jesse felt like he was going to jump out of his skin.

He nearly did when Gideon pulled him into a loose embrace, twisting the leash behind his back as he splayed his

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hand across Jesse's ass.

"You smell like fucking heaven," Gideon growled, burrowing his nose in Jesse's neck.

Jesse sighed, gripping Gideon's arms. He didn't seem to have any intention of pulling away from the embrace, which was good for Jess. He dropped his head, his mouth close to Gideon's ear and whispered, "I need to talk."

It was only because he'd spent the past six months in every possible intimate scenario with Gideon that Jesse detected the slight change in his lover's body. To the casual onlooker, Gideon was simply caressing his human toy. To Jesse, Gideon had already relinquished his normal command for the more equitable relationship they maintained outside the bedroom.

Gideon's mouth worked over Jesse's skin, but the kisses masked the word that was barely a breath. "Here?"

Jesse inclined his head. It would be easier to talk if they left the club, but he was not going to step out of that door without the girl. "Bathroom?"

Gideon's answer was to pull away, the leash looped loosely around his wrist, as he guided Jesse around the edge of the floor to the narrow corridor that led to more private facilities. Normally, he allowed Jesse privacy, but now, Gideon entered the bathroom first, not saying a word until the door was closed shut behind them.

"What happened?" His dark eyes swept over Jesse. "Did someone approach you?"

Jesse almost asked if Gideon thought there was anybody left in the club who hadn't already had their share, but decided

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now wasn't the time. "No, no, nothing like that." Gideon looked relieved, but then slightly annoyed. "There's a girl in one of the stockades. I don't know who brought her, or what she's doing here, but she's scared. No, wait, she is fucking terrified."

Gideon paused, but when Jesse didn't add anything, he shrugged. "And?"

"And she doesn't want to be here. Look, I know there are a lot of people around here who are frightened. I'm usually a little scared. But she's not enjoying it. I know I'm going home at the end of the night, she...she doesn't." Jess paused before adding. "I told her we'd take her out of here."

That got the response he hadn't gotten earlier. "You told her *what*?" Gideon stared at him in disbelief. "You know that's not how it works here, Jess. If she's in a stockade, she belongs to somebody. You can't just...fuck, what were you thinking?"

"I don't think she *does* belong to anybody," Jess countered. "There was nobody near her. There wasn't a single mark on her body. There was no jewelry, no collar. But if she did belong to somebody, could you find out?"

"Well, yeah, but..." His mouth compressed into a thin line, and he seemed to weigh what Jess had said. "Show me where she's at," he finally offered. "I'll talk to her."

"I'll take you to her but she's...well, she's gagged."

"How do you know she's so scared then?"

"I felt it." At Gideon's arched brow, Jess sighed. "Look, I know how that sounds, but I touched her." He touched

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Gideon's hand to demonstrate. "And I felt it. It knocked me on my ass." Jess frowned. "I think she's an empath. A very, very strong empath."

For a moment, he thought Gideon was going to dismiss his concerns. It wasn't often that they couldn't come to an agreement on matters, but the doings at Sangre were not the same as their cases. Gideon would be well within his rights to say no to Jesse's wishes, in order not to disturb the status quo within the vampire community, and Jess knew it.

But then Gideon nodded. And Jesse exhaled in relief.

"Let's see what we can do," he said.

Jess pressed his mouth to Gideon's. "Thank you."

Picking up the end of the leash again, Gideon paused before opening the bathroom door. "I'm going to hold this," he said, "but I'm going to let you lead to where she's at. Maybe you didn't see an ownership mark on her, but there's no way a human isn't in here for some purpose."

Jess nodded. He didn't doubt she was there for some purpose, but he didn't care what that purpose was if she didn't want to be there. Gideon stuck close as Jess led him on the same path he took before, going unerringly to the beautiful girl. She was exactly as he left her—alone, frightened, and mute. He smiled at her, silently reaffirming his promise.

The leash fell to his side as Gideon released him, and Jess stepped back, allowing Gideon the room to prowl around the girl. They had only been there for mere seconds before a female vampire slithered in from the darkness, an obsequious smile gracing her mouth as she draped her arm through

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Gideon's.

"Isn't she lovely?" she purred.

"Quite," Gideon replied. "Too lovely to be left alone like this."

"She won't be left alone for long," she promised. "She'll be going home tonight with some very lucky vampire." She ran her tongue over her fangs. "I'd take her for myself, if I could."

"And why can't you?"

She laughed. "I'm not made of money. If I knew a treat like this was going to be available, I would have...acquired some cash." With a shrug she added, "Maybe whoever wins her will share."

Jess caught the frown Gideon shot him before his features settled back into the charming mask he wore for the other demons in the club.

"I didn't think Sangre was hosting auctions any more," Gideon remarked casually. "That must make this one...extra special."

"Oh, she is." She stepped forward, threading her fingers through the girl's hair. "I heard Slater was going to keep her for himself, but when he realized how much he could get for an empath, he set up a silent auction. It's closing in an hour, if you want to make your bid."

Gideon circled the stockade again, armed with the fresh knowledge of what was truly going on with the girl. At least Jesse now understood why she wasn't marked. She was merchandise. They were saving that pleasure for her new

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owner.

Coming to a stop in front of her, Gideon crouched down to meet her eye to eye. The female vampire backed away, but the girl's dark eyes were fixed on Gideon, wide and luminous as he reached forward and stroked her cheek with his knuckle. Though it was the scantest of touches, Jesse saw his reaction the moment there was contact, that slight flare of his nostrils, the unmistakable expansion of his pupils. Apparently, she could transmit her emotions to vampires as well.

"Well, well...you are special, aren't you?" Gideon murmured. He withdrew his hand, but didn't straighten, merely glancing at the female vamp out of the corner of his eye. "Slater, you said?"

"Yep. He's taking the bids in his office." She touched his shoulder. "Good luck. Maybe if you win her, you could bring her by sometime?"

The smile he shot her was blinding. "I'll think about it."

The second the vampire left, Gideon straightened and grabbed Jesse's leash, pushing him back to the wall. Using his body to block out the rest of the club, he leaned in and said, "Go get your clothes. Then get out to the car and grab the spare bag in the trunk. She's going to need something to wear."

Jess nodded, then watched as Gideon marched off through the crowd. He hoped she could receive as well as transmit, and as he passed her, he brushed his fingers over her shoulders, trying to send her something warm and promising, even soothing. He dressed without trouble, and nobody accosted or

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blocked him on his way to the door. Snagging the keys from the valet, he hurried to the lot and grabbed the small bag—clothes he might have worn himself given the rather sad state of his own outfit—and almost sprinted back to the club.

When he entered again, he went directly to the back, relieved to see Gideon and Slater were already unlocking her from the stockade.

“You have to tell me how you break her,” Slater was saying. “Better yet. Bring her back and do it here. There’s a lot of people who are going to be very disappointed they weren’t the ones to take her home tonight.”

Gideon chuckled. Catching Jesse’s eye, he stepped back and nodded toward the girl. “Take her to the bathroom and get her dressed, boy. And be quick about it.” He leered at Slater. “I have to know if what they say about empaths is true.”

Jess wanted to put a protective arm around her shoulders, but he settled for putting his palm against the small of her back and trying to shield her from the curious vampires as he guided her to the bathroom. He knew the only thing keeping them from tearing him away and going after her was Gideon’s reputation.

As soon as they reached the bathroom, Jess immediately took the shirt out of the bag and draped it over her shoulders.

“Thank you.” Her voice was soft as she edged away, putting distance between them as she slid her arms into the sleeves. She regarded him through her lashes as she fumbled with the buttons, but her eyes kept darting to the bite marks on his neck. “How’s he...” She stopped, swallowed, tried again.

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“What’s he going to do to me?”

“He’s probably going to take you back to the office, make sure you’re not hurt, find out how you got in a place like this, then hunt down whoever is responsible.” Jess smiled gently. “Gideon isn’t going to hurt you, I promise you. And hey, when have I ever lied to you?”

“Gideon...” She rolled the name around on her tongue, as if she was trying it out. “Why would he do that? Because you asked him to help me?”

“No, it has nothing to do with me. Don’t let this place or this”—he gestured at his throat—“give you the wrong idea about him. He’ll do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

She still seemed unsure and took a tentative step toward him. Reaching out, she paused as she lifted her gaze and asked, “May I?”

Jess nodded. “Do what you have to do.”

There was a slight tremor in her fingers as she pressed them to the fresh puncture wounds in his neck. Though he was prepared for the contact this time, the surge of heat that leapt from her to him still managed to make Jesse gasp. A sense of curious awe accompanied the residual fear, and the longer she held her hand to his skin, the more intense the emotions became, swirling and swelling in eddies impossible to take apart. By the time she pulled away, they were both panting.

“Thank you,” she breathed, and then as if an afterthought, “I don’t know your name.”

Jess felt like he needed to sit down. For a very long time. “Jesse. Jesse Madding. What’s yours?”

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“Emma Coolidge.” Though she hugged her arms around her soft curves, the smile she gave him was genuine. “We should go before somebody tries to offer Slater more money for me. You look like you could use about a week’s worth of sleep, too.”

Jess glanced at himself in the mirror above the sink. “Yeah, a week’s worth sounds about right. It’s good to meet you, Emma Coolidge, though I do wish it was under better circumstances.” He took her hand. “Wait a second...” A soft knock came on the door then and Jess smiled. “That’s Gideon.”

Gideon led them out of the club without speaking, both men sticking very close to Emma. Jess sighed with relief when he stepped into the cool air for the second time. Emma’s sigh echoed his, and thanks to the contact, he didn’t have to imagine how relieved she was.

CHAPTER 4

She knew she shouldn't. After everything Jesse and Gideon had done for her, getting her out of Sangre and away from the opportunistic Slater, Emma knew snooping around in their apartment and office bordered on ungrateful, if not illegal. But she couldn't sleep, even knowing Jesse wouldn't let anything happen to her. She had spent too many days on edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop, to stop being wary so easily, especially since she was in the home of a vampire. And it wasn't like she was stealing anything. She was just looking. Assessing her new situation as best she could until somebody woke up and stopped her.

It was a nice office and an even nicer apartment. Both

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were fussy neat, with the exception of one of the desks buried in stacks of books. It looked exactly as Jesse had told her it was—the office of a private investigator who worked within his own set of guidelines. Emma hadn't even realized such a vampire could exist. The question of why he would have a human lover made it even more fascinating. Made *him* even more fascinating. She hadn't been able to read him—and for once, she disparaged the fact vampires were so much more difficult to get a feel for than humans—but she'd felt Jesse's emotions regarding Gideon. There was no denying the complete trust there. Or the love.

Right now, that was good enough for her.

She was in the kitchen, making her second pot of coffee, when she heard the distant sound of the toilet being flushed. By the time she'd poured out two cups, Jesse stood in the doorway, and she smiled at him over her shoulder.

"I wasn't sure if it was going to be tea or coffee," she confessed. "So I went with the one I can actually make."

"Coffee's good," Jess said, accepting the cup with a grateful smile. He took an experimental sip and nodded. "Coffee's very good." Shuffling over to the table, he gestured for her to join him. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

By the light of day, his clear blue eyes seemed even more intelligent, though the just woken up tumble of his dark hair gave the impression of innocence. Even if she hadn't touched him the night before, Emma knew he was someone she would trust regardless of how they met. Pulling out the chair opposite him, she curled up in it, drawing her knees to her chest and the

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oversized shirt they'd given her over them.

"No," she admitted. "But I pretty much stopped sleeping two weeks ago."

Jess nodded. "I wish I could have stayed awake and kept you company." He fiddled with his mug, sliding it back and forth on the table. "How are you feeling? Well, besides like an insomniac?"

"Relieved. Scared. Curious." Her stomach grumbled, and she blushed. "And hungry, too, apparently. Sorry."

"If you don't mind waiting, Gideon usually makes breakfast after a night at the club. He'll be out in a minute. But maybe I can help with something else. You don't have to tell me what you're scared of yet, but I'll be happy to answer any questions you have."

She couldn't resist sneaking a glance at the empty doorway behind Jesse. A vampire who cooked. Any other time and the domesticity of the situation would have made her laugh with its absurdity. Considering everything that had happened to her, it actually made sense.

"So you've been to Sangre before?" Her blush deepened at her frivolous question. "I'm sorry. That's none of my business."

Jess shrugged. "Don't worry about it. I said I'd answer any questions you have. Yeah, we've been a few times. Enough so that the vamps there know who I am and I can move around freely, more or less. That's why I could help you."

"For which, I will be eternally grateful." Picking up her coffee, she blew across the surface to cool it down. "Let's just

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hope eternity lasts longer than today.”

Jess looked up, the sleepy look entirely gone from his face. “Emma, nothing is going to happen to you. You’re safe here.”

“It’s not here I’m worried about.”

Jesse frowned. “Are you planning on leaving?”

“I have to.” The words hurt coming out. It was the last thing Emma wanted. “I have to find her before it’s too late.”

He straightened. “Who?”

“My sister. She went missing almost a month ago.” Though she had long ago thought herself cried out on the subject, exhaustion and the sheer relief at having somebody she could talk to made her eyes well with unshed tears. “Which means she’s probably dead already.” She ducked her eyes. “Damn it.”

Jess stood, circled the table, and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Emma, you don’t have to look for her by yourself. We’re investigators. This is the sort of thing we do, and there’s nobody in the city better at finding people than Gideon.”

She shook her head. “I can’t pay you. I can’t even pay you back for whatever Gideon bought me for last night.”

“No, Gideon doesn’t do this for the money. I do, but don’t worry about my paycheck, I’m fine.”

His small joke made her smile, and she rubbed at her weary eyes with the heel of her hand. “I guess I’ve just gotten so used to being on my own I’ve forgotten how to accept help when it’s offered.”

“Well, I’m not offering. I’m insisting.” He squeezed her

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shoulder briefly before releasing her. “We’ll do the best we can to find your sister.” His stomach growled almost as loudly as hers had. “And if Gideon doesn’t get out here and start cooking soon, I’m going to drag him out of bed myself.”

Emma glanced at the door, then back at the cupboards behind them. “I can cook,” she said. “I just didn’t want to impose more than I already had.”

“We’ll give him a few more minutes.” He reached for his coffee. “Though I’ll be tempted to let you, if your food is as good as your coffee.” He watched her over the rim as he finished the liquid. “Does your sister have something to do with why you ended up at Sangre?”

“My cooking is *better* than my coffee,” Emma teased. His question was sobering, though. “But yeah, that’s why I was there. I finally found the guy she was seeing when she went missing, except...I got a little too close and he recognized me. That Slater offered to get rid of me for him.”

“Slater is a greedy, opportunistic bastard, but that worked in your favor. He could have tossed you into...” Jess stopped suddenly and grimaced. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

The baritone from the doorway took her by surprise, even though she had been half-expecting the vampire to show up at any minute. Emma automatically straightened in her chair, watching Gideon walk past the table and head straight for the coffee pot. Jesse’s eyes followed him as well, but she didn’t need to touch Jess to feel the adoration in his gaze.

“For nearly making an ass of myself.” He walked over to

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Gideon's side and silently held out his cup, waiting for his refill. Emma watched as Gideon poured the coffee and Jess touched his arm lightly, almost absently, before walking back to the table.

Gideon leaned against the counter, arms folded across his broad chest as he regarded Emma. His dark eyes narrowed as they swept over her, and she had to suppress the shiver that threatened to run down her spine.

"You didn't sleep," he said. "Something wrong with the couch?"

"No, no, the couch is fine," she rushed. The heat was rising in her cheeks. "Just...something wrong with me." She tried to smile and failed. In spite of how gentle he'd been with her at Sangre and how she knew Jesse idolized him, Gideon in the flesh—in the broad, well-muscled, perfectly groomed flesh—was more than imposing. And it didn't help that he watched her with eyes that felt like they were boring right through her skin. "But thank you anyway. For everything."

"Gideon," Jess said softly, "remember when we talked about not staring at our clients like you're trying to see the wall behind them?"

His quiet comment made both Gideon and Emma start, though she was surprised to see the look of embarrassment flicker across the vampire's face before he redirected his attention to Jesse. "She's a client now?" His head swiveled back to Emma. "You're a client?"

"She's looking for her missing sister. In fact, that's how she ended up in Slater's clutches. I told her there was no sense

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in putting herself at risk again.”

“I’ll understand if you don’t want to, though,” Emma said before Gideon could speak. “You’ve already done so much for me. I don’t expect—”

“Of course we’re going to help you,” he interrupted. “I’m just sorry you had to go through what you did at Sangre. They haven’t had a human auction there in years, but then again, you’re...”

His voice faded away, but she heard the word he’d used the night before echo inside her head. *Special*. Too special for Slater to let get away.

“Perhaps after breakfast you can fill us in on the details. When you last saw your sister, who you saw her with, anything else you might remember. Would that be okay?”

Her gaze flickered between them, unsure where to settle. “It’s not much,” she admitted. “I only got as far as I did because of...what I can do.”

“You’re an empath,” Gideon said, like he was testing what he already knew to be true.

Emma shrugged. “I’ve never put a label on it. I’ve just always been able to know what other people are feeling, and if I want to, I can project my feelings onto someone else. I don’t do well with vampires, though, which is why I didn’t understand why Slater thought I was so valuable.”

“There’s a lot of lore and superstition surrounding empaths,” Jess answered. “Vampires are interested in empaths for all manner of reasons. Some might be interested in harnessing that power, some get a rush from the blood, some

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just appreciate...owning...something so rare. Then there's the fact ...” He glanced at Gideon. “Well, you'd attract most of the vamps in Sangre even if you weren't an empath.”

Her flush of embarrassment was made worse by the naked appreciation in Gideon's gaze. Stumbling to her feet, Emma backed toward the door, suddenly aware of how short the shirt she wore really was.

“If you don't mind,” she said, “I'm going to wash up. I'll be back.”

She didn't wait for them to try and stop her. Whirling on her heel, Emma bolted for the bathroom and a few minutes of peace to collect her wayward thoughts.

* * *

As soon as he heard the bathroom door slam shut, Gideon chuckled. “And you give me a hard time,” he teased. “You scared her away.”

“I scared her away? She was fine until you came in here and started staring at her. You were practically licking your chops.”

“I was not licking. And it's not my fault I have eyes. She's a beautiful girl.” Walking over to the refrigerator, Gideon opened it and began taking out the items he'd need to make breakfast for them. “Don't try and tell me you didn't notice her breasts.”

“I didn't,” Jess said, so evenly Gideon almost believed him. “She *is* a beautiful girl, but she's also been through an awful ordeal. She wants to run. Let's not give her any excuses

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to bolt before we know she's safe."

"I'm not going to give her a reason. And if she gives me a hard time, I'll remind her I bought and paid for her..." At Jesse's stern glance, he shook his head. "Which I'm kidding about, Jess. Of course, I'm not going to let anything happen to her. You didn't see the list of bids Slater had for her by the time I got to his office. I don't know what the deal is with her sister, but there are a lot of vamps out there who've gotten a good long look at our guest. If there's even a hint she's actually available, they're going to be all over her."

Jess sighed. "That's what I was worried about." He wandered back over to Gideon's side, watching as he started putting breakfast together. "She told me Slater was getting rid of her at somebody else's behest. The man she suspects is responsible for her sister's disappearance. No doubt if he catches wind she's walking around free as a bird, he'd be interested in finding more permanent ways to dispatch her."

"So we've got a missing girl, an empath on the run with half the vampire community interested in owning her, and a mutilated body we can't identify." Gideon grinned as he broke an egg into a bowl. "And I thought the job was getting a little boring."

Jess tried to look stern for a moment, but his face cracked into a grin that matched Gideon's. "Things did just get a bit more interesting, didn't they? Do you think I should try to lure her out of the bathroom?"

He shook his head. "Let her come out on her own. She needs to know we trust her and she's safe to do whatever she

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wants around here.” Carrying the bowl over to the stove, he turned on the burner. “You can set the table, though. Make sure there’s a setting for her.”

“Like I planned to make her sit on the floor,” Jess muttered, pulling plates down from the cupboard.

Gideon only smiled as he got to work on the bacon, the sounds of Jesse working behind him as comforting as listening to his heartbeat. He had no qualms about taking Emma in while they tried to help her, but even more fascinating than having an empath under his roof was watching Jesse’s protective side come into play. Jess always rooted for the underdog, and whether it was a vampire who’d killed her human lover or a girl locked in a stockade, he followed his instinct to do the right thing.

It was one of the things Gideon loved most about him. Even those times when it was inconvenient or annoying.

He heard the bathroom door open as he was dishing out the last of the scrambled eggs, but refrained from commenting. He didn’t even speak when she slid noiselessly into her chair. Carrying the hot pan over to the sink, he rinsed it out and set to heating up his own breakfast.

“I really can cook,” Emma said. “If you’re going to help me, I want to be able to do something in return for you. Cooking, cleaning, you name it.”

Gideon expected Jess to insist, once again, that it wasn’t necessary, like he had during their earlier conversation. But he didn’t.

“The office is a disaster area. Well,” he amended, “my area

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of the office. I've got books and papers and I don't even know what they are, not to mention the ones I can't seem to find, the ones I still need to pay Michelle for, and the ones I need to collect after loaning out...The files, the reports, the follow-ups. I wouldn't mind a bit of help there."

Her smile was grateful, and her eyes luminous as she gazed at Jesse. Gideon kept his scrutiny discreet as he listened to her agree to the terms, but it was difficult not to be obvious in his curiosity. He sincerely doubted Jesse was even aware of how responsive Emma was to his presence. That would work out best for them, he decided. If she couldn't get comfortable around Gideon, at least Jesse would always be able to get through to her.

"I'm glad somebody's going to get these guys," she was saying. "I know they call it art, but I still think it's murder. And worse."

Jesse had been lifting a forkful of egg to his lips, but dropped it, forgotten, as she spoke. "What do they call art?"

Gideon's attention sharpened as well. The sudden focus from both men made Emma's chewing visibly slow, and it took her a moment to swallow what was in her mouth.

"The people they're kidnapping," she said slowly. "I didn't see Lizzie, but I saw at least two other people they had on display. They completely forget about feeding them most of the time, and they just starve to death."

Jess looked up to meet Gideon's eyes, and a silent communication passed between them. Emma had been lucky they found her, but it seemed they had been just as lucky in

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finding her. The information she could provide might shave days, or even weeks, off their investigation, and he knew Jess was thinking the same thing.

“Lizzie is your sister? Are you quite certain that’s who kidnapped her?”

“Yes.” A frown was drawing her fine brows together. “What do you know about it?”

“About your sister, nothing,” Gideon said smoothly. “But it’s possible we’ve seen some of their other...artwork.”

“Very possible. What do you know about the displays?”

“Just what I saw, which wasn’t much.”

Emma toyed with her eggs, the appetite she’d displayed earlier seemingly fading. Gideon smelled the exhaustion seeping from her pores. Maybe now wasn’t the best time to be pumping her for all the information.

“If you’re going to stay here, you’re going to need some things,” he said. He offered her a small smile. “I’d offer more of my clothes, but I’m not exactly your size.”

Emma shook her head. “I haven’t been back to my place in two weeks. Is it safe?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll get what you need.” His smile widened. “Ask Jesse. I’ve got a good eye.”

Jess shrugged. “I’m barely allowed to dress myself anymore. But I’ve got no complaints.”

Her mouth twitched. “You mean he lets you wear more than a collar and leash around the office?”

Jess seemed startled by the question, but then he smiled easily. “Yes, but only on days we intend to get work done.”

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“Which will be every day until we stop these guys,” Gideon said.

Emma leveled her gaze at him, not backing down for the first time since he’d walked into the room. “And find my sister.”

“And find your sister,” he assured. Setting down his mug, he headed for the doorway. “As soon as I get you some clothes.”

CHAPTER 5

Jesse's part of the office wasn't some unmitigated disaster area, but he knew Emma would be uncomfortable until she found a way to pay them back. Letting her organize their workspace seemed like the best short-term solution, and he could tell by the way she wanted to begin right away—despite her obvious exhaustion—he had been correct in his assessment.

He thought a quick tour would be the best way to get started. And the tour was very quick. He stood in the middle of the reception area and explained, “You're welcome to come and go here as you please, but that door”—he pointed to the interrogation room—“and that one”—Gideon's office—“are

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mostly off-limits.”

Emma looked back and forth between them, and though it seemed there was something she wanted to say, she merely nodded. “How long have you worked here?” she asked instead.

“About three years now, but Gideon’s been doing this on his own for much longer than that.”

“So you two have been...together for three years?”

“Oh, no,” Jess answered, gesturing for her to have a seat. “At first, I just did the odd job for him. I gradually started doing more and more work, until we became friends, and then partners.” Jess paused, his brow furrowing. “Business partners, that is. We’ve only been together, as you say, for the last six months.”

Emma sat in the corner of the couch, tucking her legs beneath her. “I know it’s none of my business. But I’ve never known anybody who had a vampire lover. Or, you know, survived having a vampire lover. From everything I’ve seen, we’re either toys or food for them.”

Jess joined her, but he made sure not to crowd, keeping a respectful distance. “Mostly, that’s right, though I am aware of a few other exceptions. But Gideon isn’t like other vampires, in general. As I’m sure you’ve already noticed. And don’t worry about asking questions. If it makes you feel more comfortable to know what’s going on around here, I don’t mind answering them. I know this is more than a little out of the ordinary.”

She smiled at him then, soft and shy, before ducking her

UNVEILED

head and tucking a loose strand of her long hair behind her ear. “My whole life has been more than a little out of the ordinary,” she said. “You don’t know what a relief it is to be able to talk to someone human who doesn’t see me as a freak.”

“Are you the only empath in your family?”

Emma nodded. “My parents kept trying to convince me I was just high-strung. They didn’t want to believe me even when I projected feelings back at them. Lizzie’s been the only one who ever really accepted me, but then again, she was always attracted to the weird and abnormal. I think that’s why she fell in with the guy who kidnapped her for his collection.”

Jess wanted to pry more information from her about Lizzie, but he didn’t want to upset her or give her reason to flee into the bathroom again. “That must have been very difficult for you. I had sort of the opposite experience. I learned about vampires and demons at a fairly young age. My father studied the *weird and abnormal* pretty obsessively my entire childhood. I didn’t realize until much later how...odd that was.”

She looked up at him through her lashes. “I don’t think you’re odd.”

Jess blinked, touched by her declaration. “And I don’t think you’re a freak. But come on, be honest, you don’t think I’m a little strange?”

“No,” she said unhesitatingly. “I think the *situation* is a little strange, but that’s just because I didn’t know vampires could be like Gideon. I didn’t know it was possible to trust them.” She paused. “But you do, and I felt last night how

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much you do, and that has to come from something real. And that's good enough for me."

Jess inclined his head. "I didn't know anybody, human or vamp, could be like Gideon until I met him." The mention of what she felt when she touched him brought him to other questions he had. "Can you always tell what people are feeling? I imagine that you must have had to develop ways to shield yourself from that."

"Yeah, I stopped touching people." Her joke drew small chuckles from both of them, but her smile quickly faded. "It's not something I can turn on and off whenever I want, but most of the time, I can block the worst of it out. Like those noise machines people use to help put themselves to sleep. The only problem is, it's gotten easier for me to pick up on things as I get older. It used to be that I could only do it through physical contact, but now, if the emotions are strong enough, it's like they find me." She wrapped her arms around herself as if she was cold. "It makes being in places like Sangre even worse."

Jesse blanched. He couldn't even begin to imagine what being in the club had been like for her. All the pain, the hunger, the lust, and darker impulses swirling around the place in a fog so thick even Jesse felt it—it must have been a sort of special hell. He wished they could do something to make it clear to Slater selling humans was not acceptable, but there wasn't really anything they could do. Frustration flared in his chest, and he looked over to see if Emma noticed.

"What if I touched you? Would I be able to tell what you're feeling now, like I could last night?"

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Her eyes widened. For some reason, it surprised him how innocent she appeared. “Only if I projected,” she said. “But...why would you want to do that?”

“Why would I want to do what? Touch you?” Jesse smiled sheepishly. “Because I tend to be the sort of person who accosts people with casual, thoughtless contact, and I keep stopping myself with you. I don’t want to invade your space, or make you feel uncomfortable. Or get the sort of shock I got last night.”

“I’m so sorry about that,” she rushed to say. “But it was the only way I could think of to get somebody to help me.”

He held up his hands. “No, please, don’t apologize. I’m glad you did it. Given my earlier activities last night, I may not have noticed a weaker signal.”

Her gaze immediately flickered to his neck. “You really...*like* that sort of place?”

Jess hesitated. “Yes. No. It’s difficult to explain. When we’re here, in the office, we have a pretty equitable relationship. Well, as equal as things can be, given how controlling and demanding Gideon is. But when we’re there, we’re both afforded a certain...freedom to behave and respond in certain ways.”

Emma sat there for a minute, mulling over his words. “I guess if you love a person enough, wanting to make them happy can become what makes you happy. I’ve just...I don’t think I’ve ever been in a relationship like that. I *know* I’ve never loved anybody like that.”

“You’re right about how it makes Gideon feel, and how

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that makes me feel, but that's not the...it isn't the only reason I agree to go there with him." Jess didn't know why it was so important to him she understood. She didn't know them, and he had no reason to believe she even cared about his explanations. "I get my own satisfaction from the experience."

"Sexual satisfaction."

Jess shrugged. "Eventually."

This time, her gaze dipped to his lap, and a shadow of her smile returned. "Well, I would hope so."

Jesse laughed. "You're a bit surprising, you know that?"

Emma relaxed farther into the couch, leaning her head against the back of it. "That makes two of us then."

He studied her sympathetically. "Are you as tired as you look?"

"More. I've been too afraid to fall asleep for more than a few minutes at a time since I got caught."

"Why don't you try to get a nap now before Gideon gets back?"

Her answer was slow in coming, like she was hesitant to admit it. "Because it's been even longer since I felt comfortable enough to talk to anybody like this," she said softly. "Some things are more important than sleep."

"I'm not going anywhere." He hesitated before giving into the impulse to cover her hand with his. "If you want, I'll be right here when you wake up again. We have plenty of time to talk later, and you'll feel better if you sleep."

"I already feel better, but I promise I'll try. Can we...talk some more?"

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Jess was encouraged by the fact she didn't pull away from him, and momentarily placated by her promise to sleep. Though he suspected if he kept her talking, she might nod off. "Of course. Most people don't actually request to spend more time talking to me."

"Well, it's not every day I get to meet people like you. Or Gideon." Emma chewed at the corner of her lip, clearly weighing her next words. "Why does he do it? Help people, I mean. You said he was doing this before you even knew him, but vampires don't do that. At least, none of the vampires I've ever known."

He frowned thoughtfully, knowing he couldn't answer the question satisfactorily—not completely, anyway. He could outline the events that led to the establishment of Gideon Investigations, but he couldn't tell her exactly how Gideon's mind worked.

"A little over forty years ago, Gideon fell in love with a young woman. Her name was Mary. He doesn't talk about her often...well, at all, really. I know she was heavily involved in the Civil Rights movement, and she died soon after they met. He chose to honor her memory by fighting on behalf of the city, instead of using it as his own personal all-you-can-eat-buffet."

Emma took a deep breath, long and slow, that softened her features. When her lashes fluttered shut, he thought she might actually be finally dropping off, but then they opened again, just as clear as ever. "Yeah," she murmured. "That fits."

He tilted his head. "How do you mean?"

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“It fits with what I sensed,” Emma explained. “Generally speaking, I can’t pick much up from vampires, but last night, when he touched me, I was projecting so hard, trying to get him to understand, there was a second where he was open to me, too. Just for a second. I didn’t even know what to do with it.”

Jess felt a prick of jealousy, before that was swept away with curiosity. He lived and worked and slept with Gideon, and in many ways, the vampire was still a mystery to him. “What did you...what could you sense?”

For the first time since broaching this subject matter, Emma faltered. “It’s hard to explain.” She looked at where his hand still covered hers and slowly pulled away. “It would be easier to show you.”

“Show me? How would you do that?”

“I can focus on what I felt in him, and then project that instead of my own emotions.” A pink stain began to creep up her neck. “I don’t do it very often. It always makes me feel sneaky.”

Jess knew this was his chance to tell her he didn’t want her to do it. It *was* sneaky. But did the concern for the moral gray area outweigh his curiosity?

No. And it wasn’t like she could read Gideon’s thoughts and pass them on, Jess reasoned.

“I can see why you’d feel that way. But I...I’m really interested.”

His desire seemed to be all she was waiting for. With a small nod, Emma closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, just as

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she had right before she'd made her earlier observation. It lasted longer this time, her breathing slow and regular, until several minutes later, without opening her eyes, she reached out and cupped the side of his face.

It wasn't the jolt he'd experienced the night before. This began as a warm wash over his skin, soothing and gentle. As Jesse relaxed into the touch, his heart thudding against his ribs, the soft comfort was followed by a swift barrage of conflicting emotions.

Glee.

Fury.

Anguish.

Pride.

And binding it all together, silver strands of guilt.

Jesse caught his breath, but he didn't pull away from her touch. She broke the contact first, but he couldn't open his eyes immediately to look at her. They weren't his emotions, they weren't his reactions, but once he felt everything, he couldn't stop feeling it. Each one seemed to echo through him several times, only losing power after several long seconds.

Was this how Gideon felt all the time? Jess knew he carried a certain amount of guilt at his past actions, but he didn't know it was so sharp. The fury was also sharp—a nebulous cloud saturating everything else. But it didn't overwhelm everything. It touched the pride and glee, but didn't dampen it. It hurt Jess, in a way, but at the same time, his heart seemed to expand.

And did Emma have to experience this each time she

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touched somebody? Did their emotions just keep reverberating through her until the feeling eventually faded? Did she ever wonder where her emotions ended and a stranger's began?

Her soft voice helped the sensations to dissipate. "Did I help?"

"Yes," he said, opening his eyes. "Yes, that was... May I?" She nodded, and he touched the back of her hand, focusing on how grateful he was for the small window into Gideon's mind, and how grateful he was that she was willing to share her gift with him. "I know it might sound odd to say even after three years I didn't know about what you felt, but Gideon is not big on sharing."

Emma smiled. "Now *that* sounds like every other vampire I've known," she teased.

Jess returned her smile. "How many vampires do you know?"

"Too many." A yawn took them both by surprise, and she pulled her hand away to cover her face in embarrassment. "Doing that always knocks me out," she said in explanation.

"I'd apologize, but I'm not averse to you getting some sleep. Looking at you makes me feel tired."

She touched a self-conscious hand to her hair. "Do I really look that bad?"

"You don't look *bad* at all. I'm not even sure that's possible. But you do look exhausted."

With a heavy sigh that was almost another yawn, she burrowed more deeply into the cushions, though she looked far from comfortable doing so. "I should probably get used to

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sleeping on this couch, I suppose,” she said sleepily.

Jess slid closer to her until their legs were touching and took her hand again. He didn't forget how shocked she was when he asked if he could touch her, or how she allowed him to hold her hand, and he wanted her to feel comfortable. She hadn't allowed him to feel what she was experiencing, but he knew she must still be frightened. Frightened enough to keep her from sleep.

“No, not up here in the office. The couch downstairs converts into a bed. I made frequent use of it.”

Lifting her eyelids to look at him seemed to take more from her than was right, but her gaze was steady as she regarded Jesse, long seconds passing before she shifted to nestle against his shoulder. She was warm and soft pressed into his side. It took no effort at all to curl his arm around her and pull her closer.

“I guess it's better than a doghouse,” she murmured, and then chuckled lightly. “It's not like you don't already have the leash.”

“Made use.” Jess chuckled. “Past tense. That's one thing you have to be prepared for if you're going to work here, you know. Gideon thinks nothing of twenty-four hour shifts.”

“Stupid vampires.” And her voice was even lower now, her lashes thick as she finally closed her eyes. “They never sleep.”

“No,” Jess agreed softly, watching as her face relaxed and her breathing evened. He willed nothing to disturb her. Gideon would be quiet when he came in because he always moved

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like he was skulking in shadows. He just hoped the phone wouldn't ring and no unexpected visitors arrived. He felt quite certain he would do bodily harm to anybody who disturbed Emma's sleep.

CHAPTER 6

Winter skies made it easier to move around in the city during the day, but Gideon still went about the task of buying clothes for Emma as swiftly as possible. He wanted to get back to the office and get more details about the human displays she claimed to have seen. If they were the same as the one he and Jesse had found, Emma was their best chance at locating the men and demons behind them. Emma was their best hope at stopping them.

Emma was an interesting development, all around.

He had never known an empath before. He'd heard of them, and he'd heard claims of what they could do, but not once in his entire existence had he ever crossed paths with

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one. Touching her at Sangre had been like touching a live wire. The jolt of emotions that shot through him had made him hard, her terror as potent as drinking blood straight from a beating heart. It had been fleeting, though, and he'd known immediately what an infringement it was, but still, the impression remained.

He was incredibly curious about what it had felt like to Jesse. When he got back to the office, it would be one of the first questions he asked once they had some privacy.

Gideon stopped in the apartment first, ready to give Emma his purchases. There weren't many, but it was enough for her to get by for a couple days until she felt safe enough with them to go out with Jesse and get her own things. He didn't find either of them, though, and he left the bags in the living room while he continued on upstairs.

He paused in the doorway to the office. The soft rhythm of Emma's breathing filled the outer room, joined by the slightly quicker pace of Jesse's. Both were on the couch, both with their eyes closed, but though Emma was half-lying on top of Jesse, Gideon knew he wasn't asleep. He knew everything there was to know about this man's body—when it was excited, when it slumbered, when it was sated. This was a state of extreme relaxation, but beneath it all, he was wide awake.

"It looks like she's feeling a little safer around here," he commented softly.

Jess opened his eyes. "A little," he murmured. "She wanted to stay awake, but I eventually talked her to sleep. I

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think I'm trapped, though."

Entering the room, Gideon sat on the edge of Jesse's desk to make it easier to address him without Jess having to move and disturb Emma. "She looks very warm." He smiled. "Lucky bastard."

"Yeah, she is." He shifted slightly, letting his hand rest on her back. "She told me she only projects when she wants to, but I think I can feel a little bit of what she's dreaming. I wonder if she can pick up on feelings in her sleep."

What Jesse suggested was fascinating. The questions tumbled out. "You got her to talk about it while I was gone? What is it you think you can feel?"

"She told me a bit, yes. She said she mainly picks up on emotions through touch, though touch isn't always necessary. She also told me she can share her emotions if she chooses to, but she can shield them, as well. Oh, and, big surprise here, vampires are hard for her to read." He paused for several seconds before answering Gideon's second question. "It's hard to explain. I couldn't feel anything until she fell asleep, and now I'm getting a little bit of anxiety and confusion, but no fear."

"Of course not. She trusts you." His smile faded. "I'm the one she's afraid of."

"I don't think she's afraid of *you*," Jess said. "I think, like most people, she has good reason not to trust vampires. But she trusts you."

"Did you get her to talk any more about her sister?"

"A little bit. Apparently, she was always into the weird and

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abnormal, and that's how she met the man who kidnapped her. I was trying to keep her here and relaxed, so I didn't push too far on that point."

As if she knew they were talking about her, Emma shifted in her sleep, halting all conversation as they watched her snuggle into Jesse's chest. Her dark blonde hair fell across her cheek, and her small hand curled into his stomach. Gideon smiled. There was no hope of Jesse getting untrapped any time soon.

"Well, I think you succeeded." He paused. "I suppose it would be rude to ask if I could touch her, too."

"I think you probably could," he said softly. "I don't think it'll bother her. Maybe you'll be able to pick up a little bit on what she's feeling, too. I don't know if she's shifted into a new dream, but the anxiety is gone. She's just very....serene."

Carefully, Gideon slid off the desk and crossed the few feet to crouch in front of the couch. Tilting his head, he extended a hand to push back the hair hiding her face, being careful not to make contact with her skin. "Let's hope we can keep it like this for awhile," he murmured. "There's no telling what she's going to feel if it turns out her sister's part of what we saw the other night."

"Do you think she is?" Jess frowned. "I have to admit it seems likely, but...I don't think I would have necessarily made the connection to *art*."

"I think the similarities are too close for us to ignore," he said without raising his voice. "Maybe you wouldn't call it art, but what we saw was definitely a display. Plus, all that

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money? And the invitation? It's got all the earmarks of a real showing. There are some vampires out there who consider their kills as art, you know."

Jesse looked at him from the corner of his eye. "Yeah, I know. And you're right, it does make sense. And I bet the guy who gave Emma to Slater is the same psycho behind the display. Hopefully she'll feel like talking when she wakes up."

For some reason, in spite of his earlier excitement about experiencing Emma's emotions again, Gideon couldn't bring himself to close the contact. Instead, he brushed his fingers across Jesse's chest, stealing some of the heat that flushed his body.

"You smell like her now."

Jesse took his hand. "Come here, I want to try something." He pulled Gideon down, seeking him out with his mouth. The kiss started as a teasing caress, but Jess deepened it gradually, like he wasn't in any great hurry. When he broke away, he glanced down at her with a smile. "Do you think she's picking up on what I'm feeling?"

With an amused chuckle, Gideon shook his head, ready to joke about Jesse's motivations. But when he glanced down at Emma, the words disappeared. Her breathing had quickened, and a definite flush had risen in her skin. It even looked like she might be smiling.

"So what you're saying is, the way to keep her calm and happy, is for you to be holding her while we make out?" Gideon teased.

"Well, making out keeps you calm and happy, so that

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sounds reasonable,” Jess returned. “She can also...broadcast things she picked up from others. She told me when she was trying to get through to you, you were open to her for a second.”

He stiffened. “I was?” His mind raced, wondering if she’d picked up on how arousing he’d found the shock of her emotions. “Did she...what did she tell you?”

“She didn’t tell me anything. She touched me, and I felt what she picked up on.” Jess watched him, like he was waiting for a certain reaction. “I didn’t know that was the way you felt. The guilt...and the rage...is that how you always feel?”

He would have much preferred having her tell Jess he’d gotten hard for her. Pulling away, Gideon retreated to the corner of the desk again, folding his arms over his chest as his gaze settled on her sleeping form. “I feel a lot of things,” he said carefully. “Why are you asking?”

Emma frowned before turning her head into Jesse’s chest, hiding her face. He dropped his head back to the couch cushion, but he didn’t look as relaxed as before. “No reason. I was just curious.”

There was more; it was obvious in Jesse’s face. But Gideon didn’t want to talk about guilt, or anger, or feelings that had been dredged up with the advent of helplessness at finding the girl too late. He wasn’t ready for that. He wasn’t sure if he ever would be.

A knock at the office door saved him from further questions. Jesse’s arms tensed at the sharp sound, but before Emma could stir, Gideon leapt from the desk to answer it.

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Detective Derek O'Dell stood on the other side of the door. He looked tired, the lines around his hazel eyes deep, and his prematurely gray hair stood up in wild shocks around his head. It didn't look like he'd slept since Gideon had tipped him off about the murdered girl.

"How do I let you drag me into these cases?" Derek commented without preamble. He brushed past Gideon to enter the office, halting when he saw Emma and Jesse sitting on the couch. "New receptionist?" A brow quirked. "Interesting dress code."

Jess touched his lips with his fingers. "Shh. She's a client. A very tired one. There's some coffee downstairs, if you'd like a cup."

Derek's eyes swept over her body, lingering for a moment on her bare legs. "Your clients beat the hell out of mine," he said. Reaching into his jacket, he pulled out an envelope and tossed it on the desk. "I don't have time for coffee. It's going to get in the way of sleeping once I get out of here and get home."

With a frown, Gideon picked up the envelope and turned it over in his hands. "What's this?"

"The preliminary results from forensics. I told you you'd get them as soon as I heard anything."

Jesse tensed like he wanted to stand, but Emma made a small sound in the back of her throat, forcing him to relax against the cushion again. "We appreciate that. What does it say?"

"There's not much. We ID'd the dead girl easily enough,

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but we didn't get any hits off the DNA samples we were able to collect. And there were lots of partials, but most of them were inconclusive. The only one we were able to identify was a girl who went missing a month ago."

"And it's not the girl who was killed?" Gideon asked.

Derek shook his head. "Descriptions don't match. The girl we've got the print from was reported missing by her family. They thought she'd been kidnapped, but we can pretty much discount that theory."

"Why?"

"Do *you* know a kidnapper that feeds its victims champagne and caviar? We got her prints off one of the champagne flutes. She was definitely part of the party."

Gideon flipped through the folded pages from the envelope, but when he found the details about the identified fingerprint, he froze. "You're sure about this?"

"One hundred percent."

Jess silently put his hand out, waiting for Gideon to hand him the pages. Gideon passed it over with a hint of hesitation, and Jesse's eyes widened. "One hundred percent?" He looked to Gideon hopefully. "Maybe there's more than one missing girl named Lizzie Coolidge in Chicago?"

Derek watched the exchange with a growing frown. "If you guys know something—"

"We don't." Gideon kept his gaze steady. "But thanks for bringing by the results."

For a second, he thought Derek was going to push the issue, but then Derek shook his head and ran his fingers

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through his hair again. "I'm too tired to argue with you about this," he said, turning on his heel and heading for the door. "Whatever you know, Gideon, don't fuck around with it. We've got a whackjob out there who likes to mutilate young girls." He paused in the door way and glanced back, his gaze resting momentarily on Emma before returning to the two men. "Call me."

Jesse nodded. "We will." They both watched the man disappear before he said softly, "I know this report isn't conclusive, but my gut tells me Emma doesn't know her sister as well as she thought."

When it came to Jesse's gut, Gideon knew better than to ask questions, especially when he already agreed with it. "We're not going to be able to keep it from her, though," he said. "She's going to know something's up."

"No, I don't think we should keep it from her. How are you going to tell her?"

Gideon blinked. "Me? You're the one with the silver tongue. Plus she likes you more than she likes me."

"She won't like me for much longer if I tell her that her own sister is an accomplice, not a victim. Or suspected to be an accomplice."

"So the logic here is she's already afraid of me so a few more bad feelings won't make a difference?"

Jesse nodded. "But I can see you're unconvinced by my bullet-proof logic."

"More like terrified of it." Gideon sighed, running his hand over his hair. "Maybe I'll go buy her some more clothes first."

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Get her in a good mood before I rip her heart out.”

“I don’t know if clothes will really make up for that sort of shock.” Jess watched for a long moment, his sympathy and concern naked on his face. “We’ll tell her together. We can just tell her what the report says and allow her to draw her own conclusions. Maybe there’s a perfectly good explanation for it.”

He knew his relief was palpable; he didn’t care. “Together. That’s good.” He smiled. “I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

“I’m sure you will. Am I a horrible person if I suggest we tell her after she tells us everything she knows about the man who held her captive?”

Gideon shook his head. “No, that’s strategy. If we tell her first, she could get upset and then we have to wait for her to calm down again before getting what we need. Which makes both of us horrible people, but hey, we can be horrible together.”

Jesse offered a small smile. “Good. The rest of my strategy includes letting her sleep, giving her a chance to freshen up, feeding her a good dinner, and then picking her brain.”

“I don’t suppose she’s mentioned a favorite food?” He shrugged at Jesse’s cocked brow. “If we’re buttering her up, we might as well go all the way.”

“No, our conversation didn’t go that direction. But my guess is she’s not accustomed to anybody even caring what her favorite food is, much less cooking for her. I think just making the effort would be enough to butter her up.”

Gideon agreed, though inwardly, it saddened him to think

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of a girl like Emma being thrust into the position she was in. Vampires eager for a taste of her. A sister whose believed proclivity for the weird and abnormal had dragged her into a logistical mess. Empathic abilities isolated her from all the stuff that made life worth living. He hoped for the brief period he and Jesse were able to protect her that Emma found a measure of peace.

She stirred in her sleep. Perhaps unconsciously, Jesse tightened his arms around her, and Gideon remembered how shaken his lover had been at the sight of the display when they'd found it.

He would make sure *both* of them gained some peace.

CHAPTER 7

It didn't surprise Gideon when Jesse fell asleep. In spite of the worry caused by the new information about Lizzie Coolidge, a lot had transpired in the past forty-eight hours, enough to weigh down even the most determined of minds. Add in the warmth of Emma's soft curves nestled into his side, and Gideon thought Jesse never had a chance. He left the pair on the couch, going downstairs to start the preparations for a fabulous dinner for both of them.

He had only just started chopping the onions for the Bolognese when the stairs creaked. Glancing behind him, he frowned when Jesse emerged from the stairwell, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

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“Where’s Emma?” he asked.

“Asleep, still.” He looked over Gideon’s shoulder to the onions. “You might want to wait on that for awhile. I don’t think she’ll be getting up any time soon.”

Gideon didn’t break his rhythm with the knife, the swift whisk a welcome staccato. “Well, you still have to eat. And the best part of spaghetti sauce is how well it heats up.”

Jess wrapped his arm around Gideon’s waist, resting his forehead against his shoulder. “I’m not hungry right now.”

Jesse’s body was still ripe with stolen heat from Emma, seeping through their layers of clothing to make Gideon’s pace lessen in order to enjoy it. “You’re letting this new case fuck with you too much,” he said softly. “You barely ate yesterday, you tossed and turned all night. I just want to take care of you for a little while, Jess. I think we need it.”

“I know. But I had a very nice nap.” Jesse’s arm tightened around him. “There are other ways to take care of me. I need you.”

Gideon chuckled. “You always need me,” he teased. But he set down the knife and pushed the cutting board away, twisting around to face Jesse. There were still sleep lines fading on his cheek, and his hair was mussed, pushed up on the side where he’d rested his head atop Emma’s. The impulse to thread his fingers through it was great, but Gideon settled for brushing his thumb over Jesse’s mouth. “We should move this somewhere our guest won’t hear us.”

“There is no such place, unless you promise not to make me scream at the top of my lungs,” Jess murmured, sliding his

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fingers between Gideon's. He began walking backward, pulling Gideon with him.

The corner of his mouth lifted, and his cock jumped at the image that suddenly presented itself. "That's what gags are for."

Jesse's smile matched his. "But if you gag me, there won't be any begging either."

"Then we've got a problem," he murmured, though he continued to glide across the floor with Jesse toward the bedroom. "Because once I get my hands on you, it's impossible for me to make the sort of promise you want."

"Maybe there are enough walls between us and the office," Jess suggested, as they stepped into the bedroom. He pushed the door closed and grasped the front of Gideon's shirt, pulling him close for a kiss. Jesse still tasted like sleep, his lips warm and soft.

Gideon took his time with the caress, keeping his hands steady on Jesse's hips rather than giving in to the urge to start stripping him then and there. It was his turn to savor the languid pace they set, the tip of his tongue tracing Jesse's mouth over and over again, and his sigh of satisfaction warmed their faces when they finally parted.

"I don't want you to beg," he murmured, slipping a hand around to cup Jesse's ass.

Jess slid his hands under Gideon's shirt, his fingers smooth and hot against Gideon's back. "Oh?" He brushed his lips across Gideon's jaw and neck. "What *do* you want?"

"You." He closed his eyes as Jesse nibbled at a soft spot at

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the hollow of his throat and brought his other hand up to curve around the back of his head. “Naked.” He groaned when Jesse pushed a hand inside his waistband, his nails scratching across the upper curve of his ass. “Buried so deep inside you, you’ve got the taste of me in your mouth when I come.”

Gideon heard Jesse’s heartbeat quicken, felt the sudden flush of heat against his skin, smelled the strong scent of arousal. Words would have been redundant at that point; it was clear Jess wanted the exact same thing. Gideon clawed at the back of Jesse’s T-shirt, pulling it up his back and over his head. As soon as he tossed it aside, Jess sought out his mouth again, the kiss edged with new hunger.

Their mouths fused together as Gideon ground his erection against the hard line of Jesse’s cock. His senses were flooded with too much information, but then that was the way it always was when they were together. He knew every beat of Jesse’s heart, had every inch of his body burned into his memory. Now, though, there was the added scent of Emma clinging to his skin, the fresh residuals of her warmth steeped within his muscles. It stoked Gideon’s desire even higher, prompting him to push Jesse back toward the bed, onto its mattress. He gazed down at him with a hunger newly whetted.

“Now, I distinctly remember saying I wanted you naked,” he commented almost casually as he began to undo the buckle on his belt.

Jesse lifted his hips off the bed, shifting as Gideon pulled his pants free to join the shirt on the floor. He stretched out on the bed, entirely comfortable under Gideon’s hungry stare, his

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body still marked in red scrapes and fading bruises, the colors sharp against his pale skin. He tilted his head back, revealing the deep mark of Gideon's fangs.

"You look a little overdressed," Jess said, his eyes half-closed.

The observation seemed to jar Gideon from his scrutiny, and his mouth quirked. "Was my being naked part of the deal?" he asked.

"It might make the second part of the deal a bit easier," Jess pointed out.

His smile broadened. "All my clothes have to be off in order for me to get my cock out? I think I'm flattered."

Jess sat up and reached for Gideon's waistband, then fell back again, pulling Gideon with him. "Is there a particular reason you don't want to take your clothes off?"

He propped himself up on his knuckles, letting Jesse work the button and zipper on his pants. "Maybe I just wanted you to do it for me," he said. He ducked his head and licked over the puncture marks, reveling in Jesse's shudders as he traced the small holes with his tongue.

"I can do that," Jess murmured, pushing Gideon's pants down his hips. Gideon sighed against Jesse's throat when he ran his palm over Gideon's shaft, but there was just a hint of contact before Jess turned his attention to the buttons on Gideon's shirt.

Every brush of fingertips across his skin sent a new frisson of lust down Gideon's spine, so by the time Jesse pushed his shirt off his shoulders, everything inside him was coiled, ready

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to strike. Having his cock resting heavily on Jesse's stomach didn't help, either, and he pushed up, peeling away from the delicious heat of Jesse's skin, in order to kneel between his legs.

"Let's see that gorgeous ass of yours now," he said, gripping Jesse's hips.

Gideon flipped Jess onto his stomach, revealing more bruises on the expanse of his back. Jess pulled his knees beneath him without being told, sticking his ass in the air. Despite the time that had passed since the night before, and the weird lotions and ointments Jess used to help heal, he looked like he'd spent a good portion of the night before getting fucked.

Dragging a finger down the crack, Gideon's mouth watered as the muscle reflexively tightened at his touch. "You're not going to need much stretching, I don't think," he mused out loud. Jesse whimpered as he traced the hole. "Are you going to be able to stay quiet enough so we don't wake up Emma?"

"Yes." Jesse sighed as Gideon continued to caress him with the tip of his finger. "She won't hear a thing."

"What if I do this?"

Without warning, Gideon slapped Jesse's ass, the loud crack of skin meeting skin echoing in the room.

Jesse jumped, but caught his surprised shout in his throat, stopping it before it could escape. "That was a...mean trick," Jess said, but he didn't sound upset.

Gideon only half-heard the comment. The bloom of pink

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left by his hand decorated Jesse's ass in his favorite shades, the heat jumping from flesh to flesh more addictive than seeing others mark his boy in such ways. He smoothed his hand upward, past the small of Jesse's back and along each knob of his spine, then back down again over the fired skin.

"I didn't think it was mean." His palm made contact again, this time in a fresh spot, and when Jesse jumped this time, Gideon dug his fingers into his hip to hold him still. "I'm just seeing if you're as good as you say you are."

Jess whimpered, lowering his head to muffle the sound against the bed. The whimper turned to a moan when Gideon made contact for a third time, turning his pink skin a darker shade of red. "I am," he said, between deep breaths.

"Really?" The warmth in his hand spread into his wrist as he landed more blows, each subsequent strike followed with a stroke of his palm over the quivering muscle in order to soothe away the worst of the sting. His attention was split between the fired skin and the way Jesse was biting into the pillow, the sinew in his neck straining as he fought to keep his cries at bay.

"Gideon...please..." Whatever he was about to say was lost as he buried his face against the pillow again. "Gideon..." His body jerked as Gideon's hand came down again, and with a loud groan, he reached between his body and the bed, fisting his cock.

Gideon slid his hand over the back of Jesse's thigh, reaching to cover Jesse's with his own. It forced him to bend down, and the waves of heat rolling from Jesse's skin flamed

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his cheeks.

“I’m impressed,” he murmured. He kept his grip on Jesse tight, forbidding him the release of stroking. “You lasted a lot longer than I thought you would.”

Jess was tense beneath him, but he didn’t try to pull his hand free. “It was sheer force of will.” He looked over his shoulder, his eyes bright. “Please fuck me now?”

His lashes dipped as he looked at the clenching and unclenching of Jesse’s pucker. “You might be stretched, but you’re not nearly wet enough,” Gideon said. Nuzzling his cheek along his ass, he licked a path to the waiting hole, tracing it with his tongue. The muscles twitched, and he couldn’t resist releasing Jesse’s cock to grip each cheek and spread him even farther apart. “Gotta do this right, after all.”

“Oh…” Jess started as Gideon ran the tip of his tongue over his muscle. He pushed through the opening, sliding deeper into Jesse’s tight flesh. “Oh *fuck*.” He dropped his head again, but the pillow barely muffled his exclamation.

With his nose buried in Jesse’s skin and his tongue stroking the inner walls, all Gideon felt was the heat pouring off his body, the way it sucked him in, the way it made his body throb in a matching rhythm as Jesse succumbed to the need to start pulling at his length again. The growls rose in his chest as he licked and sucked at the tight ring, and the growing moans coming from Jesse went straight to his aching cock.

“That’s enough,” he said when he couldn’t take it any more. Rising back to his knees, he wiped the pre-come dripping from the head along the crease of Jesse’s ass before

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lining up at the wet hole. Jesse glanced back, and when he saw how blown his pupils were with desire, Gideon vamped out. “Going to fuck you now,” he said, pressing his hips forward. He didn’t look away for a moment as he sank in, inch after inch. “Still think you’ve got the will to hold out on me?”

“God, no,” Jesse gasped, once Gideon was fully sheathed. “Maybe a gag wasn’t a bad idea.”

“You never believe me,” he muttered. He began thrusting right away, unable to pause long enough to savor the tight heat around his cock. He needed this rhythm and knew it wouldn’t be long before he’d be pounding into Jesse’s willing body, even sooner before Jesse would be begging him to do so. Wrapping his arm around Jesse’s waist, he dragged him upward so that he was pressed to Gideon’s chest, his body shaking from the force of his strokes. “You know how much I love you,” he murmured in Jesse’s ear. “One of these days, you’re going to realize that means I know what’s best for you.”

Jess reached back, linking his hand around Gideon’s neck. “I know. I know. Oh...oh God, faster...please...Gideon...” Gideon’s free hand went over Jesse’s mouth, trapping the loud pleas before they became genuine shouts. His hand vibrated with Jesse’s moans, but Jess didn’t try to jerk his head away from the strong fingers.

It took even less time than Gideon anticipated for him to speed up. His cock pistoned in and out of Jesse’s tight muscle, and he dropped his head to rake his mouth along the curve of Jesse’s shoulder. Gideon deliberately let his fangs catch the

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skin, drawing droplets of blood to well in the shallow cuts, and he shuddered with each bead that hit his tongue.

Jesse's hand was still on his cock, but he stopped stroking himself and now held his shaft loosely. The fingers of his other hand dug into Gideon's neck, clawing at the skin, and each press of his nails sent chills down Gideon's back. He breathed in short, sharp gasps through his nose, and his lips were hot against Gideon's palm. He was still making desperate moans and wordless pleas, but they were losing force with each thrust as his breath came in shallower bursts.

He felt Jesse choke on the air the moment he scraped across the man's prostate. "That's what you were waiting for, wasn't it, boy?" Deliberately, he hit it again and grinned when a renewed burst of sound threatened to escape through his fingers. "I'm going to keep doing this, you know. Because I'm not coming until you do."

Jesse nodded slightly, indicating he understood. He shuddered with each thrust, shaking from the top of his head to his feet. His flesh against Gideon's was heated, but covered in small goose bumps. His moans turned to stifled howls, and that's when he finally began stroking himself again. But Gideon didn't make it easy for him, deliberately altering his rhythm, scraping his teeth harder against his shoulder, finding other ways to distract him. Jesse's wrist faltered, but when Gideon pulled out of him nearly completely and slammed forward, Jess bit down hard on Gideon's hand and coated his stomach and fist with come.

The scent was intoxicating, the sting of Jesse breaking skin

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with his teeth even more so. Without thinking, Gideon roared in the split second before burying his fangs in Jesse's neck, his body wracking with every blast of his cock inside Jesse's slick passage. The soft assuage of Jesse's tongue against his palm only spurred him to suck harder at the blood filling his mouth, but he only allowed himself two long draughts before pulling free. More would be too much.

"Love you," he whispered in Jesse's ear. His voice was thick with emotion and the rich texture of blood still lingering in his throat. "Love you so much."

Jesse sighed softly as Gideon's hand fell away from his mouth. Neither made a move to break apart, so Gideon lowered them to the mattress, his arm still tight around Jesse, his cock still buried in Jesse's ass.

"Love you, too," Jess whispered.

His fangs retracted, and he smoothed his tongue over the fresh marks on Jesse's neck. "Go back to sleep," he instructed. Inhaling the musky scent of his skin, Gideon slid his hand down to Jesse's sticky cock and smeared the come over his balls. This was his favorite position of all, deep inside Jesse's ass with their every inch pressed to the other's. "Remember. I know best."

"Yes, sir," Jesse said, a smile in his voice. "Have I mentioned lately how bossy you are?"

"And you love it."

Jess rested his hand on Gideon's hip. "I do. God help me, I do." His eyes fell shut. "I'm not that tired. Don't let me sleep too long." But even as he spoke, his voice was fading.

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“I won’t.”

He pressed one last kiss to his bite before settling his head back on the pillow. He had no intention of moving until Jesse forced him to.

* * *

Her skin tingled from the dizzying emotions washing through her. So much love and lust and humor and need emanated through the door that Emma was forced to withdraw her hand before the feelings overwhelmed her, retreating back to the stairs and the office on the floor above. She had only meant to find where Jesse had gone to, but the air had been so thick with what they were experiencing she had been drawn uncontrollably to their closed bedroom door, touching the surface as if to soak up the sensations they created.

If she had had any doubt about their devotion to each other, it was banished now. You couldn’t fake that kind of love, that kind of passion. She was almost jealous of how deep their feelings ran. In all her life, Emma had never known that kind of love for herself. Her only experiences came vicariously through others.

But what it also told her was how driven they were to do the right thing. Because it wasn’t just their love she felt. It was their determination. It was so strong she had even felt Gideon’s.

If anybody could help her, they could.

CHAPTER 8

“Lizzie was *where*?”

Emma stared at Gideon and Jesse in disbelief. Though neither was in touching distance, the wariness they exuded was palpable, reaching across the distance of the office waiting room to twist around her body and turn it to ice. She hadn't been bothered by having to wait until morning to talk to them more about Lizzie. After witnessing—albeit from a distance—their lovemaking, she had gone back to bed, content she was in the right hands. Now, those hands were folded across chests, tucked inside pockets, their shoulders nearly touching as they stood next to each other in front of Jesse's desk to provide a united front.

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She certainly never expected them to tell her her sister was a part of the monstrosities she'd witnessed.

Jesse reached behind him and picked up a plain folder. He held it out, patiently waiting for her to take it, though her fingers were numb. "They were able to make a positive ID on a print. She was definitely present at some point during the night."

She glanced over the reports in the folder, the words blurring to nonsense before her eyes. Only the important details stood out. The name. The police report their parents had filed when she'd gone missing. It was her sister, if not the sister she thought she had known.

"Maybe she was there under duress," she said. "Maybe Andre dragged her along for the ride."

Jesse and Gideon exchanged a brief glance that spoke louder than anything Jess could have said. That didn't stop him from trying, though.

"Maybe. There are several possibilities. But at least we know she's still alive, and she's still in the city."

Emma thrust the file back at them, unwilling to look at it any more closely. "It doesn't change anything. We still have to get her back from him."

"Him." Apparently, Gideon was done being the strong, silent one. "Is that this Andre you mentioned?"

She nodded. "That's who handed me over to Slater. Lizzie's boyfriend. I didn't know he was a vampire until after I'd been caught."

Jesse moved from Gideon's side to sit next to her. "How

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were you caught?”

“By being dumb,” she said, her voice harsh. It still rankled how naïve she had been about the whole situation, and talking about it, even with Jesse and Gideon, was embarrassing. “When the cops started making noises about giving up, Mom and Dad went the whole private investigator route to try and find Lizzie. I talked him into letting me tag along when he went to question all her friends. It didn’t take me too long to figure out who was lying about not seeing her.”

Gideon frowned. “Wait. Since when does being an empath make you a human lie detector?”

“It doesn’t. But I can tell when someone’s agitated and pretending they’re not.” Gideon still looked unconvinced, so she tried again. “Feelings are like clothes. People wear them. When somebody lies who either doesn’t want to or doesn’t want to get caught lying or something like that, it’s like they’re putting on a jacket and not closing it up. I can still see what they’re wearing underneath.” She looked to Jesse. “That’s the way it was with her friend Paula. Paula was always getting Lizzie in trouble, but when the PI was questioning her, she got very anxious. So I started following her. And she led me to Andre.”

“Were the cops treating this like a missing persons case? She is an adult, after all. Did they have any reason to suspect foul play?” Jesse asked.

“There wasn’t any evidence of much of anything, and some of her stuff was missing, including a suitcase, so at first, they gave Mom and Dad the brush-off. But when Lizzie didn’t

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show up for work, and her rent came due, my parents started lighting fires with the authorities.” Her cheeks pinked in embarrassment. “We don’t have a lot of money, but my parents know a lot of people. A lot of *influential* people. They’re the ones who kept Lizzie’s case open.”

“But you never saw Lizzie with Andre, right?” When she shook her head, Jess added, “How do you know Andre is her boyfriend, then?”

“She talked about him,” she said. “A lot. She kept saying how much he and I had in common, because I have a degree in art history and he’s some kind of artist.” Goose bumps rose on her arms as the memories of what she’d seen at his house rose before her mind’s eye. “Maybe if I’d listened to her a little more, I wouldn’t have been so shocked by what I saw. But I walked into his house, and I...froze.” Ducking her head, she hid her face from them by letting her hair fall over her cheeks. “I told you it was dumb.”

She sensed a brief hint of trepidation from Jesse, like he didn’t want to know what had made her freeze. That faded quickly, though, replaced by a stronger concern. He touched her arm. “We don’t think you’re dumb, Emma. You were worried about your sister. What did you see?”

Though they couldn’t see her face, she squeezed her eyes shut anyway. “People,” she said softly. “Mutilated, but still alive. He had two of them nailed to the wall, and there was a girl, younger than Lizzie, who was strapped spread-eagled to this wooden table thing.” She swallowed down the bile that had risen in her throat. “He’d cut her open like a human

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cadaver, except...she was still alive.”

“Nailed to the wall like an exhibit,” Jess said, so softly she barely heard him. He paused for so long, she wondered if he had any more questions. Just as she was about to break the silence herself, he asked, “Then he found you and held you for about two weeks before arranging a deal with Slater?”

“Yeah. I only ever saw him and one of his goons. I kept asking about Lizzie, and he just laughed at me, like I was saying something hysterically funny.”

“So you know where this Andre lives,” Gideon commented. At Emma’s nod, he looked to Jesse. “I think I need to go pay someone a visit.”

“What sort of visit? A gathering information visit? Or a breaking limbs visit?”

A dangerous gleam appeared in Gideon’s eye. Twenty-four hours earlier, it would have terrified Emma. Now, it sent a tiny electric thrill through her veins.

“As good as it would feel to string him up,” he said, “we need to know what he knows. There was more than one person there the other night, and we’re not even sure yet if he was one of them.”

Jess nodded and turned his attention back to her. “Emma, did you ever hear him talking about...the people, or the party? Did he ever mention anything around you at all? Did he ever...did he ever indicate you were in danger of becoming an exhibit yourself?”

She didn’t look away, in spite of the desperate desire to run. “Every single time he came to see me. Why do you think

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it was so hard for me to sleep? I was terrified of waking up and finding myself on the wall, or in a box, or in pieces.”

The wave of sensation that hit Emma from Jess was a strong combination of sympathy, horror, and disgust. “You should move fast on this,” Jess said, looking up to Gideon. “Do you need anything?”

“Just an address.”

Gideon rose from where he leaned against the desk and picked up a notepad and pen, handing them over to Emma. She scribbled down the information he’d asked for and held it back out to him.

“Isn’t he going to know you’re the one who bought me at the auction?” She wrinkled her nose. “And, God, that sounds just really wrong.”

Tearing off the sheet of paper, Gideon folded and put it in his pocket. “Even if Slater did tell him who he sold you to, Andre won’t know it’s me. According to Slater’s records, a vampire named Simon bought and paid for you.”

“Why would he do that?”

Gideon grinned. “Because he doesn’t want to end up dust like his old business partner.”

“Wait a minute,” Jesse said, rising. He disappeared into Gideon’s office, and when he came back, he was carrying a thick envelope. “It hasn’t been easy to research any real leads, since we haven’t been sure what we’re dealing with, but if this is cult or ritual based, you might need some sort of token or referral. To prove you’re trustworthy.”

As Gideon peered inside the envelope, Emma asked,

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“What’s that?”

“It’s an invitation to the party your sister attended. We found it at the scene.” Gideon pulled it from the envelope, and Jess pointed to the raised, silver lettering. “It’s not personalized. You might be able to pass it off as yours.”

“Anything that helps.” With a smile and nod in her direction, Gideon left.

Emma looked at the closed door with amused contemplation. “He’s very focused once he gets going, isn’t he?”

“Yes, that’s one way to put it,” Jesse said. “I used to worry when he’d rush off like that as soon as he got a name and an address. Sometimes he doesn’t even have that much before he’s out the door. But then I remember he’s survived four centuries without me babysitting him.” He perched on the edge of his desk and looked at her with thoughtful eyes. “I froze, too. When we discovered the girl in the apartment.”

There was no denying the understanding rolling from him. It helped a little, thinking it wasn’t her own narrow worldview that had been her downfall. “It’s good to know you haven’t been inured to all the badness you must see every day,” she said softly.

“Sometimes I wish I were. It would make the job easier.” Jess grimaced. “That sounds horrible. Don’t tell Gideon I said that.”

The corner of her mouth lifted. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about that with Gideon.”

“No, but he worries about me and all the badness I see

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every day. How are you feeling?"

She took a moment to contemplate the question. "I can't believe Lizzie can be a real part of this," she said carefully. "It doesn't seem like the Lizzie I know. But other than that...I'm good." Her smile was warm and genuine. "You make it very easy to trust you."

Jess smiled. "Well, that's my job. Literally, that's what I was hired to do. Gideon doesn't generally put people at ease, at least not when they first meet him."

Though she nodded in agreement, it was almost tentative. "I can see that. Which is a shame because they don't see how much of it is an act."

Jesse's smile shifted, became softer. "It is. But he doesn't want people to know that. In fact..."

Before Jesse finished his sentence, the door flew open with a tumble of snow. A figure covered from head to foot ducked in, pushing the door shut against the driving wind, and stomped his feet loudly.

"Where's Gideon?" a muffled voice asked from behind a thick scarf.

"Good morning, Officer O'Dell," Jesse said, without a hint of surprise at the sudden arrival. "You just missed him."

Emma rose on instinct, retreating from the newcomer's way in order not to intrude on what was obviously official business. She watched Officer O'Dell unwind the scarf from where it covered his face and was surprised to see the youthfulness of his features beneath the gray hair. When his gaze flickered to her, the friendliness she saw there made her

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eyes widen. Gideon and Jesse were friends with a cop. Another good omen.

“I’m just here to give you an update on what we’ve found out,” he said, turning back to Jesse. He shook some of the snow from his hair before reaching into his pocket and extracting a crumpled envelope. “Considering it’s not good news, maybe it’s better I’m not around when Gideon hears it.”

Jesse took the envelope with a hint of wariness. “You know I love it when I get to break bad news to him,” he muttered, opening it. He pulled out a paper and skimmed the contents, his frown deepening. “Oh yeah, he’s going to love this.”

O’Dell’s gaze returned to Emma, and he took a small step toward her. “Don’t let the rotten luck we’re having on my case deter you with these guys,” he said with a smile. “They’re good. They’ll help you however you need.”

“I know.”

He took another step and stuck his hand out. “I’m Derek, by the way.”

Emma hesitated for a brief moment, but an almost imperceptible nod from Jesse gave her the encouragement to take Derek’s hand in greeting. A flood of warmth jumped from him to her, a combination of trust and disappointment—probably at the lack of progress on his case—covering a low undercurrent of interest. In her, she was astonished to realize.

“Emma,” she said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Emma.”

“So this Michael Juarez owned the entire building?” Jess

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asked.

“Yes,” Derek answered, looking annoyed at being interrupted.

“Whoever did it tried to make it look like an accident,” he observed.

Derek turned away from her. “Yeah, but not very hard. It looks like a vamp, and not one with a light touch, if you know what I mean. Whoever killed him just wanted him dead. The cover-up was half-hearted at best.”

“Was he your only lead?”

“He was our best lead,” Derek corrected. “Everything else we’ve got is side door stuff. Unless we find this Lizzie Coolidge. She’s the only one we’ve been able to get any kind of positive ID on. None of the other physical evidence is panning out.”

Emma stiffened at the mention of her sister’s name, but kept her features neutral. If Jesse had wanted the cop to know she was related to Lizzie, he would have introduced her to him as such. The fact he hadn’t meant he wanted to keep it between them for now. Protecting her from further interrogation, most likely. Questions she wouldn’t want to answer, in spite of the fact it looked like this Derek O’Dell was familiar with the world of vampires.

“Do you have any idea who the dead girl was?”

“We’re still working on it. She’s not in the system, so until somebody reports her missing, or we get a break someplace else, she’s still a Jane Doe.”

“That makes sense,” Jesse said, with a touch of sadness.

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“Look, Gideon is out now following up on a few of his own leads. If we get a name for the girl, or anything else you can use, I’ll give you a call.”

Derek nodded. As he turned to leave, he caught Emma’s eye and flashed a farewell smile before disappearing through the door.

“He seems nice,” she commented when they were alone again.

“He is,” Jess said, putting the folder down. “Most of the police around here know about vampires, but tend to ignore that side of the city. Derek doesn’t turn a blind eye, even though it would be easier for him if he did.”

“Do you think I should talk to him about Lizzie? Maybe I can offer them some insight into finding her.”

Jesse’s lips thinned. “No. Not yet, anyway.”

Emma frowned. “Isn’t it better to have more manpower on this? And if you trust him—”

“Emma, right now Lizzie is going to look more like a suspect to him than a victim. He will turn the city upside down looking for her so he can question her. If she’s lucky, it’ll just be questioning.”

The explanation made sense, even if she didn’t completely like it. As nice as he was, Derek was still a cop. He didn’t know Lizzie, and even Emma had to admit the circumstances surrounding her presence at this party Gideon and Jesse had stumbled into looked pretty bad. He was going to have to be a last resort, and hopefully, one they never had to tap into.

To be safe, though, she reached out and touched Jesse’s

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arm, transmitting as much of her trust in him as she could muster.

Jesse's eyes widened, and he covered her hand with his, squeezing it. He might have said something, but the door slammed open for the second time, and a very cold and angry looking woman trampled in. Jesse stiffened immediately, pulling away from Emma and standing, as if to shield her from the intruder.

“Where the hell is Gideon?” she demanded.

CHAPTER 9

The house wasn't what Gideon expected. First of all, it was in Rogers Park, in the middle of a residential area so close to Loyola it could have been student digs if it hadn't been such a nice property. Second, it screamed middle-class America, a two-story colonial complete with picket fence. Five stairs led up to the front porch, and Gideon darted from his car parked on the curb to the front door with his head bent against the raging wind.

He wasn't really surprised when he saw the swing on the porch. Nothing about this case surprised him any more.

Ringing the doorbell, he stepped to the side to try and peer through the windows. Heavy curtains blocked his view of the

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interior, even more proof it was a vampire who resided there. If he wanted, Gideon could break the door down and enter of his own free will, but he wasn't ready to go that route. There was always the possibility the house was owned by someone human and still alive, and if that was the case, he would be alerting Andre and any other vamps inside of his less than honorable intentions. Better to try the civilized route first. Even if the civilized route bored him to tears.

Gideon's finger hovered over the bell as a small eternity passed, but finally, he heard the distinctive sound of the latch. The door opened a crack, allowing an almost overpowering stench of blood and sex to waft out, and a pair of suspicious green eyes stared at him from the shadows.

"What do you want?"

The urge to reach through the opening, wrap his hands around the man's throat, and squeeze until his head popped off forced Gideon to momentarily thrust his fists into his pockets. The hard edge of the invitation scraped against his thumb, and he pulled it out, holding it up so that the writing could be seen.

"I'm looking for Andre."

The door slammed long enough for the man to work the chain free. When it opened again, it revealed a deceptively youthful face. He was clearly a vamp, but whoever had turned him had liked them young. Both eyebrows were studded with silver piercings, and he had a large silver stud through his nose, a thin chain linking it to a hoop in his lip.

"You found him." He gestured for Gideon to step inside.

As he crossed the threshold, Gideon tucked aside the fresh

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piece of information. The house wasn't owned by humans. That would be good to know if he ever had to make a return trip.

Hardwood floors made his footsteps echo, and Gideon paused in the foyer to survey his surroundings. There was little furniture in the front room, but two different sections of the wall were splattered with blood and nail holes. If he squinted, he imagined he could still see the bodies pinned to the plaster like bugs on a board. It was no wonder Emma had frozen long enough to get caught. Even Jesse, who saw more than his fair share of evil in Chicago, had been sickened by what they'd found.

Oak stairs led to the upper floor, and through the far doorway, he saw the dining room and kitchen. The slightly hollow sound of the floorboards meant there was a basement as well. Gideon would lay bets that was where they had stashed Emma.

Andre hovered at his elbow, waiting expectantly. Offering what he hoped was a knowing smirk, Gideon said, "I missed the party the other night. I'm hoping for a raincheck of some sort."

Andre snatched the invitation from his hand and studied it with narrowed eyes. The tip of his tongue absently worked over the ring in his lip, and Gideon almost thought he was going to throw the invitation back in his face.

"Any other time, I'd tell you to get the fuck out," Andre said, handing the invitation back to him. "There are rules, you know?"

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“Any other time?” Gideon glanced around the room. “What’s so different now that got me so lucky?”

“What? You mean you haven’t heard?” Disgust dripped from Andre’s words, but it wasn’t directed at Gideon. “The clean-up crew didn’t get there in time, and now we’ve got cops sniffing around. It’s nothing to worry about, but I’ve already had three cancels. Buncha pussies. I never had this problem in New York.”

New York. That meant this wasn’t a one-time deal. Worse, that meant this was far more organized than they’d anticipated. A clean-up crew was proof of that.

“Cancellations? That means you have open slots.”

Andre shrugged like he wasn’t very interested in the conversation. “Two.” He walked down the hall, leading Gideon to a small room that seemed to function as an office. Andre sat at a computer and wiggled the mouse, bringing up a spreadsheet. “I can put you on the list, but I don’t have a date yet.”

Gideon tried to scan through the spreadsheet, but most of it didn’t mean anything to him. Jesse would have known at a glance what was going on. He’d have to find out the old-fashioned way. “Why don’t you have a date yet?”

“What? Do you live under a rock or something? It’d be a pretty shitty party without an attraction, wouldn’t it? The conversation isn’t usually that good. The guy with the contract backed out, and now we’ve got to replace him. Until we do, everything’s on hold.”

On hold. He almost sighed in relief. *On hold* meant no

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more murders. “That’s probably going to be tough,” he commented. “I heard this last one was a real work of art.”

“No, not at all. The amateurs are crawling out of the woodwork. I wouldn’t mind, but it’s a pain in my ass, you know? I’ve got better things to do with my time.” He looked up, his fingers trained on the keys. “Name? Also, do you plan to bring a guest?”

“Keel. Gideon Keel.” He paused. He didn’t want Jesse anywhere near this, but it was better to be safe than sorry. “Put me down for one guest, but I’m not sure if he’ll actually be able to make it until I talk to him. Is there an easier way for me to get a hold of you instead of knocking at your door?”

He typed quickly, adding Gideon’s name to the list, before reaching into the desk drawer and pulling out a business card. There was a phone number in the middle, but no name or any other identifying information.

“Call me back in three days for the time and place. I’m going to have an exhibit lined up by then if I have to do it myself.”

Gideon pocketed the card, his mind in double-time sorting through the new facts. “Three days,” he repeated as he retreated for the door. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, no problem. Hey, if anybody asks, do me a solid, okay? Tell them everything is on schedule. The last thing Xavier wants is bad publicity, and the last thing I want is to deal with him in a bad mood.”

The new name almost made Gideon turn around and ask who it was. Fear of losing this opportunity by not recognizing

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a major player stopped him. If Andre was afraid of somebody, he wasn't in charge of the whole show, and eliminating him would take out Gideon's only lead to the real ringleader. There would always be somebody like Andre ready to do the dirty work; what Gideon had to figure out now was how to get to this Xavier.

"You can count on me," he said. He pulled his collar up, preparing to make a dash for the car. "The last thing *any* of us needs is bad publicity."

* * *

Jesse wasn't scared of Rina, but he wanted to keep her away from Emma. The vampire would be fascinated by her—and not just because she was an empath. The last thing they needed was Rina sniffing around and trying to find a way to weasel into Emma's graces, especially since she was good at it. Jesse didn't know why, but young women generally wanted to trust her, even if they knew she was an undead bloodsucker.

"Gideon is busy," Jesse said calmly. "What do you want?"

"I wanna know what the fuck he found out about Jules, that's what I want," Rina snapped. She prowled closer. "I gave him everything he needed. Now did he find her or not?"

Jesse made a mental note to remind Gideon that breaking bad news to crazy vampires was not part of his job description. He didn't ask for clarification. There was only one person she could be referring to. "I thought he contacted you already. We found her remains."

She stopped in her place, as if somebody had just nailed

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her feet to the floor. “Remains?” All belligerence was gone from her voice. “What happened to her?”

“She was...murdered at the party,” Jesse said, his tone softening. It was easy to forget Rina cared about her friends, in her own way. “We’re working with the police to figure out who was responsible.” He took her upper arm and pointed her toward the couch. “Any details you can give us will be a big help.”

There was no fight left in her, and she folded into a third her size as she collapsed onto the couch. “I told Gideon what I know already,” Rina said. Her thin wrists poked out the ends of her sleeves, her even thinner fingers curling and uncurling like she didn’t know what to do with her hands. “I don’t know anything else.”

Before Jesse pressed, Emma pushed past him to sit next to Rina on the couch. His heart leapt when she took Rina’s hand in hers, but Emma didn’t show any outward signs of distress.

“You do,” she said. “And I know it’s tough, losing somebody who means something to you, but Gideon and Jesse can’t find who did this if you give up already.”

Rina was frowning, and as Emma finished speaking, she glanced to Jesse, as if seeking confirmation that it was okay to take this stranger’s aid.

“She’s right. Why don’t we start at the beginning?” Jesse suggested, pushing down his annoyance and alarm at Emma getting so close to Rina. “You might remember something. Why did you come to Gideon for help to begin with?”

“Because Jules was in over her head,” she replied

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automatically. “She’s a good kid, but she doesn’t know how to say no. To anybody.”

That much was obvious, Jesse thought. Anybody who ended up hanging on the wall and threaded with wire was clearly in over her head. “Who couldn’t she say no to? Who were you trying to protect her from?”

“Her fucking cousin.” She spat out the answer, venom returning to Rina’s tone. Emma stiffened where she sat, but she didn’t let go of Rina’s hand, rubbing the back of it as if to calm her. “That asshole was always trying to get Jules to do stuff for him. Usually I could talk her down from whatever scheme he was working, but this time, it was like talking to a brick wall.”

“Was her cousin’s name Michael Juarez?” Jesse guessed.

Her eyes widened. “You know the fucker’s name and you haven’t nailed him to the wall yet?” she demanded. “If Jules is dead, it’s his fault. No two ways about it.”

Jesse picked up the folder and gestured with it. “I know the fucker’s name because somebody’s already nailed him. The police found him dead late last night.”

Rina bolted from the couch so quickly Jesse jerked back, but not before she snatched the folder from his hands. Her fingers were manic as she flipped through the papers, eyes darting so fast that it looked like a tic. He didn’t know how she could actually comprehend anything, skimming at that rate, but soon enough, she was mumbling under her breath.

“Son of a bitch. Serves him fucking right. Hotshot photographer, my ass.”

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Jesse pried the folder from her, worried she'd storm out with it. "I'm sure Gideon will be in touch if we find anything else."

She didn't move to leave. "If Michael's dead, and the cops are still looking, does that mean somebody else did this?"

"Other people might have been involved," Jesse answered vaguely. "That's what we're looking into. She wasn't alone with Michael that night, after all."

He caught Emma's curious glance as he hurried Rina to the door. The sooner he got Rina out, the more comfortable he would be. Thankfully, the young vampire didn't argue with him, casting one last, "Gideon better fucking call me this time," before disappearing down the stairs.

"Why didn't you tell her anything specific?" Emma asked after he closed the office door.

"Because Rina has a big mouth. The police have held details back from the press, and I don't want to be inadvertently responsible for leaking anything. Besides, she's impulsive, and I don't think she's very bright. God knows what sort of trouble she'd cause."

"She's really upset about her friend, though. If you're worried about her acting impulsively, make sure Gideon keeps her in the loop. She'll act out otherwise."

"Gideon will tell her what he thinks she needs to know. And she should be happy for that much. She's lucky she wasn't staked on sight."

He turned his back on her frown, reorganizing the papers Rina had skewed inside the folder. "But..." Emma stopped.

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When she spoke again, her tone was curious. “Why don’t you like her? She seemed nice enough. Well, for a vampire.”

“Oh, she’s generally very nice when she wants something. But she likes to spend her free time shooting up with young girls. Jules may have been her friend, or she may have been a regular customer. But I guarantee you, we don’t get frantic messages when something she’s done results in a mysterious disappearance or an untimely death. Plus she got high on obsidian last summer and tried to kill me.”

“Oh.” His explanation seemed to make her deflate, and Emma sank onto the couch, resuming the spot she’d shared with Rina. “Well. When you put it that way.”

“I know she seemed like she deserves your sympathy. Maybe she does. But not everybody who comes into this office is necessarily a good or decent person. Sometimes we have to work with downright disgusting individuals to get the job done. It’s not ideal, but it’s the reality we live with.”

“No, no, I get that. I do. I guess...I don’t know how I would be able to deal with doing this kind of job every day if I had to ignore some of the feelings I get from people. I mean, take Rina, for example. I could feel her pain all the way from the other side of the room, and she’s a vampire. I usually can’t do that. I couldn’t...I *can’t* just block it out.”

Jesse felt sympathy for Emma, but nothing she could say about Rina’s pain would pull a thread of sympathy from him for her. It was too easy for him to think about the pain of her victims’ families. A part of Jesse actually looked forward to the day she’d stop being a good source of information,

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because that meant her use to Gideon would be expired and there would be no reason to allow her to roam the city.

“Her pain probably was very real, Emma. She’s not incapable of mourning. But just because a creature can feel pain over a loss doesn’t really mean they’re worth your sympathy. She doesn’t work with us because she wants to make the world a better place. As long as she feeds Gideon scraps of info and news, he won’t stake her. I don’t know what her relationship was like with Jules, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it was equally self-serving.”

Emma was nodding along with everything he said, but her expression seemed far from content. “Not knowing where to draw the line has always been my problem,” she said, rising to her feet. She retreated to the stairs that led down to the apartment. “I think I’m going to go lie down for a little bit. I’m feeling a little...overwhelmed from everything today.”

Jesse watched her go without making an attempt to follow her. He knew she probably wasn’t satisfied with what he said, but he also knew Rina would most likely go drown her sorrows in a fresh, young thing who should be home with her parents instead of shooting up heroin with vampires.

He glanced at his watch, hoping Gideon would be back soon. He couldn’t even deal with Emma’s feelings or his own ambivalence toward Rina; there was a larger issue. Jules had apparently been lured to the party by her own cousin, a trusted and, no doubt, loved family member. Just when he thought this case couldn’t disgust him more, they found a new low.

The girl wasn’t going to die in vain. Jesse didn’t care what

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it took, or what he had to do, he was going to find every last person responsible and make sure they could never hurt anybody again.

CHAPTER 10

Jesse waited for Gideon without moving, his mind working over each detail they had acquired, trying to fit them into a new pattern. He knew he was missing too much of the picture to make something coherent out of the mess, but that didn't stop him from trying. A lead weight had settled in his stomach, and he hoped Jules didn't know Michael was behind it.

When the door finally opened, Jess spoke without looking up. "We had some visitors. Derek tracked down the owner of the apartment, Michael Juarez. He was murdered. Rina gave us an ID on the girl. Her name was Jules. She was Michael's cousin."

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He heard rather than saw Gideon remove his jacket, dropping it over the back of the chair before sitting down on the couch. “I got another name to throw at you,” Gideon said. “Xavier. Andre’s just a foot soldier. This Xavier is the one who’s in charge of these parties.”

Jesse lifted his head. “Did Andre volunteer that information, or did you have to beat it out of him?”

“He started talking the second he realized I had a valid invitation. From the sound of it, things have gone to hell in a handbasket because their clean-up crew didn’t get to the last site in time. They’re losing reservations and, apparently, there’s some sort of exhibition to find the next so-called attraction.”

“That would probably explain Michael’s death. Trying to tie up loose ends before the police could find him. Derek told me he was their best lead.” Jesse frowned and rubbed the back of his neck. “They’re looking for a new attraction? We have a little bit of time.”

“No, we have three days.” Gideon frowned. “Time for what?”

Jesse didn’t reply immediately, trying to fit this new information into the pattern. Looking for a new attraction. Three days. Exhibits. Nobody had a death sentence hanging over her head. Not yet.

“Time to save the next girl,” he murmured. “Did Andre say anything about the exhibition?”

“Not anything specific. They need to find a new attraction, and Andre will make one himself if they can’t find one in

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time. I have his number to find out when the next party is going to be..." His voice faded away, his obvious concern deepening. "Are you all right?"

Jesse tried to smile, but he thought it probably looked worse than a frown. "I'm fine. Gideon, we can't let another person get trapped in this mess. We can't. It's not enough for you to go to the next party and try to find Xavier. You need to call Andre and find out more about the exhibition."

Slowly, Gideon pulled his phone and a small card out of his pocket, but he hesitated after flipping it open. "Maybe we should take a step back on this," he said. "You're clearly not fine, and I'm not even sure what you expect me to find out."

Jesse licked his dry lips. He knew Gideon would not like his suggestion, but he didn't see any other alternative. This was the obvious solution, and if Gideon thought about it logically, he would have to agree.

"You're the one he's looking for, Gideon." He rushed on before Gideon interrupted, though he didn't miss the way Gideon tensed. "He doesn't know it yet, but it's true. It's the only way we can keep another girl from being butchered. That's why you need to call him."

Gideon didn't look away. He didn't even blink. His words when they came were so low and taut they sent a shiver down Jesse's spine.

"You are *not* suggesting I offer you up as the next attraction," he said.

Jesse held his gaze. "Yes, I am. Because it's the only thing that makes sense." Gideon opened his mouth to protest, but

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Jesse stood, putting his hand up to stop him. “If we’re inside this, we stand a better chance of finding Lizzie, figuring out who this Xavier is, and shutting them down before they can target somebody else.”

“At the expense of putting you at the center of the risk.” Gideon’s hands balled into fists. “That’s not acceptable, Jess.”

“I won’t be at risk,” Jesse said softly. “You’ll be there. You wouldn’t let anything happen to me.”

Gideon’s exasperated sigh was accompanied by the ducking of his head, his fingers knotting in his hair. “These aren’t one-on-one affairs,” he said. “There’s going to be a whole group of people there. I can’t keep an eye on you and do what needs to be done at the same time.”

“If the victims are treated like art, hands-on interaction might not be encouraged,” Jess pointed out, though he sounded braver than he felt at the moment. “We don’t know what happened to Jules. It looked like she was a victim of several bites, but that might have been with permission or a planned part of the show.”

Abruptly, Gideon rose from the couch and marched across the room for his office. Jesse watched as he disappeared inside, wanting to follow but unable to get his feet to move. Drawers slammed, curses were muttered, the phone was picked up and slammed down again. His steps were uncharacteristically heavy when he came marching back to the doorway, and his eyes were nearly black as he leveled them at Jesse.

“This is a fucking terrible plan,” he said. “I want you to

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know that.”

Jesse nodded, crossing the room to stand in front of him. In many ways, it *was* a fucking terrible plan. But, at the same time, Jess was convinced it was the *right* plan. “It’s our best chance. I’d love to do something else if you can think of another way.”

Gideon’s lip curled into a snarl. “I was ready to burn down the son of a bitch’s house until I found out he wasn’t the one in charge.”

The air fairly crackled around Gideon, and Jess thought he would have liked to do more than just burn down Andre’s house. “Ahh, arson. It’s a classic for a reason.” The small attempt at levity didn’t actually lighten anything. He stood helplessly for a moment, at a loss, before reaching out to touch Gideon’s arm.

The first glance triggered an instantaneous reaction—Gideon’s hand snapping up to encircle Jesse’s wrist so swiftly he didn’t even see it. A brief flare of pain shot up his arm from the force of Gideon’s grip, but there was no time to contemplate it before Gideon was tugging him forward against his hard body, his other hand clamping around the back of his neck.

“I am not going to let you turn out like that girl,” he growled.

“I know,” Jesse said immediately, his free hand gripping Gideon’s arm. He did know, but it was nice to hear it. “For starters, we can think of something that doesn’t include razor wire. Or razors.”

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Gideon squeezed his eyes shut, as if Jesse's words had called forth the specter of the girl on the wall. "No, we most definitely can come up with something...not that."

Jesse slid his arm around Gideon, leaning forward to rest his forehead on Gideon's shoulder. "It's supposed to be art, right? Emma majored in art history. She might be able to help us think of something fairly safe, but will satisfy their...demands."

Another growl rumbled through Gideon's chest, and Jesse felt the brush of lips across his temple. Gideon didn't move, though, and neither did he loosen his hold, as if maintaining his pose would keep Jesse safe.

"I'll do this if you promise me one thing."

"Of course," Jesse said, his eyes closed.

"No playing hero. First sign of trouble, I get you out of there and we find a new way of doing this. No questions asked."

Jesse only hesitated because he wasn't sure what Gideon would define as trouble. He didn't want to call off the plan without good reason; the stakes were too high. But if he didn't agree, the stakes would be lost altogether. "No playing hero," he agreed. "And no questions."

Strong fingers tightened around his skull, guiding his head upward so that their eyes met. After only a few seconds of searching, Gideon murmured, "Rina got to you today, didn't she?"

Jesse blinked. He knew he shouldn't be surprised Gideon read him so easily, but sometimes he was. "A little. Well,

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more than a little. It's hard to be around her anyway, but she had upsetting news, and she upset Emma."

"Emma?" His dark gaze flickered to the office behind Jesse, as if only realizing she wasn't there. "What did she do to her?"

"Rina didn't do anything to her. But she was, apparently...very hurt when she found out about Jules. Emma sensed it. I think that was upsetting enough, but my apparent indifference to Rina's plight probably didn't help. I told her Rina was lucky I didn't stake her."

Finally, Gideon let him go, allowing Jesse to reluctantly peel off of him. "I'll have a talk with Rina about stopping by unannounced. The last thing I want is for you to ever think of the office as an unsafe place." He jerked his head toward the stairs. "Is Emma in the apartment?"

"Yeah, she went downstairs to lie down. I think we should talk to her but...give me a second. I don't want to be all agitated when we go down there. That probably won't help."

When Jesse sat on the edge of his desk, Gideon moved behind him, hands strong where they settled on his shoulders. He began massaging the tense muscles, kneading with a touch that had been expert long before mapping Jesse's body to memory. Practice over the last six months had simply made such caresses sublime.

"I think whatever we end up doing, we have to find a way to hide your face," Gideon said. He kept his tone smooth, matching his hands, and gradually worked inward toward Jesse's spine. "Maybe we can even find a way to use that new

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hood I got for you.”

Jesse couldn't help but smile. It was a nice hood. This wasn't exactly how he envisioned using it, but Gideon made a good point about covering his face. “Yeah, I like that idea. Have I mentioned lately how amazing your hands are?”

He chuckled. “Yes, but it should really be a part of your daily repertoire. You know, you wake up, suck me off, go brush your teeth, then come back to bed and ride me while constantly telling me how wonderful each and every part of me is.”

The weight in his stomach began to ease. Having a plan was good. Even if it was a scary plan. But he believed nothing would happen to him as long as Gideon was there. It was even easier to believe that while Gideon's hands were on him.

“I practically do all of that anyway,” Jesse murmured. “But if you like, I can do it in that order tomorrow.”

“Far be it for me to curb your sexual urges.” The heel of his hand smoothed down every knob of Jesse's spine, ending at the small of his back. “It'll be interesting to see you try and do it with Emma in the next room, though.”

Jesse considered that for a moment. “She's a big girl. I'm sure she understands people act on certain urges in the privacy of their own bedroom. Though we might have to limit ourselves to the bedroom for the time being. Unless you want to give her a show.”

Keeping his hand in the small of Jesse's back, Gideon leaned forward so that his chest pressed tightly against him. “Now that would be an interesting way to get her mind off

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being upset about Rina,” he murmured, his mouth directly on Jesse’s ear. Chills rolled through Jesse’s body at the seductive huskiness in his voice. “Can you imagine what it would be like to be in Emma’s shoes? She would get to feel what I do to you at the same time as feeling what you do to me.”

He sighed, leaning into Gideon. “Take her mind off Rina? Hell, she probably wouldn’t be able to think about anything at all for at least a day. If *my* experience is anything to go by, that is.”

Another chuckle went straight to his cock. “Let’s not break the girl.” He pressed one last kiss to the side of Jesse’s neck before backing away. “At least, not yet.”

Jesse stood and rolled his shoulders. “You’re right, timing is everything.” He took a deep breath. “Let’s go check on her.”

Gideon nodded and followed him downstairs. The apartment was completely still, and Jesse wondered if she had decided to take a nap, but then the unmistakable smell of frying meat led him to the kitchen. They found her in the kitchen, with hamburger patties frying on the stove and a fresh pot of coffee brewing. Jesse didn’t even know he was hungry until he entered the room.

When she glanced back at him over her shoulder, her cheeks were pink from the rising heat of the stove. “Oh,” she said with more than a little surprise. “I didn’t realize Gideon was back already.” She looked to the burgers and then back to the pair standing in the doorway. “Do you eat people food?”

“Don’t worry about me,” Gideon replied. He crossed to the

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refrigerator and took a blood packet out of the freezer. “I’ll take care of my own lunch.”

Jesse took two plates out of the cupboard and placed them on the table out of habit, but he never took his eyes from Emma. Her face was oddly closed off, and she avoided making eye contact, focusing instead on cutting tomatoes and onions for the burgers.

“How are you?” he ventured.

“Fine,” came the automatic response. “I’ve been doing some thinking. Things are a little clearer now.”

“Oh?” He watched Gideon go through the familiar ritual of preparing his meal. “How so?”

A thick strand of golden hair had slipped from where she’d clipped it back, and Emma pushed it distractedly off her face. “I hadn’t realized how intense it gets around here. And I just...get in your way. So I think I should get out of it.”

Jesse stared at her as her meaning sunk in. A dozen protestations, and twice that many questions came to mind, but he didn’t want to bombard her with them. So he started with the first one. “I don’t think that’s a good idea right now, Emma. Not while we’re still neck deep in the case.”

“It’s the perfect time,” she countered. The knife she wielded began slicing faster. “You saw what happened up there with Ri—that vampire. It’s only going to get worse, the more you find out.”

“If you don’t want to spend time in the office, that’s one thing. But, Emma, it’s dangerous for you to leave right now. Andre is still out there, we don’t know what’s going on with

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your sister, and I'd...I'd really worry about you." He looked to Gideon for help. *Tell her.*

The frown had returned to Gideon's face, all vestiges of his good humor wiped away at her declaration. "You think it's intense here?" he said to her. "You should've been with me when I was at Andre's this morning." She stiffened at his words, but it didn't stop him from taking a step closer. "He had you in the basement, didn't he? You don't have to answer. I already know he did. Know what else I know?" Another step. "His walls are empty, Emma. Not a display in sight. Guess who he's going to use to replace them if you don't let us protect you now? That is, if he lets you *live* when he catches you this time."

The knife slipped, and a brilliant stripe of red bloomed across Emma's thumb. "Damn it," she muttered, dropping the knife. Turning on the tap, she thrust her hand beneath the water, the blood dripping from her hand to run down the drain.

Jesse rushed to grab a towel and sent Gideon a pointed glance. *Stop helping.* He gently took Emma's hand and wrapped the cloth around her finger, holding it tightly to staunch the blood.

"Gideon might not win any awards for tact, but he's not wrong," Jess said softly. "Hold this tight. Yeah, like this." He left her gripping the towel and reached for the first-aid kit beneath the sink. "And you're not in my way. I'm sorry if I gave you that impression, I didn't mean to."

Only when he turned back did he realize her hands were shaking. "It's not just about being in your way." The bravado

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was gone from her voice as well; it was now stripped down to the barest bones of her fragile emotions. “Ever since Lizzie went missing, it’s like somebody’s turned the contrast up on the world. Everything is sharper, and everything is harder, and it’s getting worse every day. I thought it was just because I wasn’t sleeping, but I’ve slept great since coming here, and this morning was off the charts.”

Jesse paused, focusing on every tranquil image and thought he could before reaching for her hand again. He knew he wasn’t going to be able to project perfect inner peace, but he hoped she felt something warm or soothing. He carefully pulled the towel away, revealing a thin, but deep, cut.

“If that’s the case, this might not be the best environment for you to be in constantly. I understand. I know somebody who has a safe, quiet place. You can spend some time there. I’ll call her this afternoon, and maybe we can go out tonight to meet her.” He continued working as he spoke, wrapping her finger in a bandage.

“Besides,” Gideon spoke up before Emma could agree, “we need your expertise to get close enough to Andre so we can stop what he’s doing, once and for all. You can’t go anywhere, because I’ll just fuck it up if I do it on my own.”

“We have a plan,” Jesse explained. “One that’ll get us into the parties and, hopefully, give us a chance to get to the man behind all of this. But we don’t have the necessary background in art.”

She paled at his usage of the word *art*. “You can’t think I’m going to help you do... *that* to some girl, can you?”

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Jesse frowned, stung. “No, absolutely not. We wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“Then what?”

“We’re going to put Jesse into their exhibit,” Gideon explained. “But the only way we can get away with it without Jess getting hurt is if you help us come up with something original. Something non-invasive. Something that won’t spark the bloodlust in every vampire in the place.”

Her gaze flew back to Jesse, her eyes wide and haunted. “And you’re okay with this?”

Jesse put the first-aid kit back before answering. “It was my idea. Gideon learned there was a small delay because they’re looking for a new...exhibit. If we do it, nobody else will be at risk.” He nodded at Gideon. “I’m probably more okay with it than he is.”

“To put it mildly,” came the wry response.

Emma cradled her bandaged hand against her chest. She still seemed hesitant about the entire arrangement, but Jesse knew he couldn’t blame her. She had been just as shaken by the displays as he had, and he already knew it was her nature to be protective. He’d felt her gratitude firsthand; the last thing she wanted was for him to suffer.

Gideon took advantage of her hesitation to speak up again.

“It’s not just about helping us with this,” he said, his voice softer. “And don’t think of it as just about staying safe. You said it yourself. You slept great last night. Here. How well are you going to sleep when you’re out there on your own, knowing what you know? It’s not necessarily a bad thing to be

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selfish every once in awhile and take care of yourself first, you know.”

“You won’t be able to help Lizzie if you’re not sleeping, and you’re always looking over your shoulder,” Jesse added gently.

Emma sighed. “All right, I’ll stay. But if it’s okay with you guys, I’m going to avoid the office from now on.” She offered a smile, the first he’d seen since before Rina’s visit. “That open door policy you’ve got is killer.”

Jesse returned her smile. “That’s fine. Most days, I want to avoid the office, too.” He directed her toward the table. “Now let’s eat the lunch you made before it gets cold, and then we’ll figure out what we’re going to do.”

CHAPTER 11

“Have you come to your senses yet?” Michelle greeted after the second ring. It was her standard response when she saw his name on the caller-id these days, always delivered with a mixture of curiosity and resignation.

“No, not yet.” He doodled on a scrap of paper, making intricate loops and swirls across the sheet. Emma and Gideon had only been gone ten minutes, and he was happy for the excuse to call Michelle and distract himself from thinking about their errand. “How are you?”

“In one piece,” she answered amicably. “Your timing is bad. I was in the middle of closing the store.”

“It’s a little bit early, isn’t it? Big date tonight?”

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She snorted, and he could imagine her broad frame settling on the narrow stool behind the counter. “No, tonight isn’t date night. I’m starting inventory.”

Jesse straightened. “Really? Is it already that time of year?”

“Yes, it is.” She chuckled. “I thought that’s why you were calling. Are you going to come by and give me a hand?”

Jesse loved helping Michelle go through her inventory at the bookstore. It was an elaborate affair spanning two weeks and almost always resulted in a box of free books as Michelle made room for the year’s new shipments.

“I want to, but I don’t think I can this year. I’m a bit busy.”

“Oh? All tied up?” she asked with a sarcastic edge.

“No,” Jesse replied patiently. He never once mentioned his activities with Gideon, but she’d seen the rope burns on his wrist one afternoon, and didn’t ask for, or need, an explanation. “Well, in a way. We’re in the middle of a complicated case.”

“That girl they found above the sports store?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“I have my ways.”

“You read about it in the newspaper and realized it was just bizarre enough to catch Gideon’s attention?”

“I read it in the newspaper and thought it was just bizarre enough to be Gideon’s work.”

Jesse sighed. “Michelle, look, Gideon...”

“Has changed, he’s not the monster he used to be, he wouldn’t hurt a fly, and you’re really tired of me harping on

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you?”

“Yes.”

“Noted. If you’re not coming over to help, what do you need?”

Jesse wasn’t bothered by her brusque tone. Michelle was a brusque person. She always sounded impatient and harried, even when she was smiling. “A request.”

“You already owe me for twelve favors.”

“Eleven. Last month I staked that vampire picking off your customers.”

“Because he was trying to pick off you.”

“It still counts,” Jesse said defensively. “He wouldn’t have been trying to kill me if I hadn’t been there to bring you tea, remember? Anyway, this isn’t a favor. I’ve found somebody who can help you with your inventory.”

“Oh, really?” She only sounded mildly interested.

“We’re helping a young woman. It’s a rather complicated situation.”

“Is she a vampire?”

“No. She’s an empath.”

“An *empath*? Where did you find her?”

Jesse paused. The truth might prompt another lecture from Michelle, but if he lied to her, even by omission, she’d probably find out, and that would prompt more than just a lecture from her. So he started at the beginning, ignoring her grunt of disapproval at the mention of Sangre, and concluded with the discussion they had over lunch. He left out their plan to stop Andre and the mysterious Xavier, focusing only on

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Emma's story.

"I don't want her to be alone when we're out working, and she can't handle being in the office right now. The store seemed like a good compromise."

"Would she be willing to work?"

"Oh, yes. She's very concerned with paying us back. Plus, I think she'd enjoy helping you go through the books. She's a good person, Michelle, you'd like her."

"Does she need a place to sleep?"

"That would be up to her. I think she's comfortable here."

"Well, you'll have to bring her by tomorrow. You know how I feel about people in the store. I want most of them in and out."

"I think you'll like this one, Michelle. She's a good sort."

Even as he spoke, he expected a dig about his ability to judge character, but she surprised him with a soft question, the gruffness entirely gone from her tone. "How are you doing, Jesse? I haven't seen pictures of that girl, but I heard enough to know it wasn't a pretty sight."

"No, it wasn't. She...it was rather gruesome."

"Do you know who was responsible?"

"We have a pretty good idea. We're going to be moving in on that, which is another reason I'd like Emma to be with you, instead of being alone here."

"Bring her by tomorrow. Stop and get some bagels. We'll talk over breakfast."

Jesse smiled. "Thanks, Michelle."

"I only told you to bring her by because I need help."

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“I know.”

“Jesse, promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I’m always careful. I’ll see you tomorrow morning, okay?”

“Bring cash, too. I’m settling everybody’s tab.”

“Bagels and cash. Got it. Have a good evening, Michelle.”

She grunted and hung up the phone. Jesse grinned, tucking his cell in his pocket. He knew he could count on Michelle, even if she did keep track of every penny and favor he owed her. The fact was, even if he owed her a hundred favors and a million dollars, she wouldn’t begrudge him.

Jesse wadded up the paper that was now completely covered in pen marks and tossed it in the garbage. And immediately started drawing on the next blank sheet, his foot tapping an erratic tattoo against the floor. He knew Gideon and Emma weren’t going to be home any time soon; they were probably just barely arriving at the warehouse.

He needed an outlet. After filling the second page with mindless scribbles, he pushed away from his desk and hurried downstairs. He could at least do something productive with his nervous energy. He pulled out old bed sheets and stacks of newspapers, then went back upstairs to the interrogation room. It was the largest room, with the fewest things to move. He spread the sheets and newspapers on the floor, ensuring at the very least there wouldn’t be a big mess to clean up afterward.

* * *

In spite of her distress over Rina and her reluctance to stay

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on at Jesse and Gideon's, Emma was in a state of excitement as they waited at the front of the warehouse for their supplies to be brought out to them. She had always been more of an aficionado than an artist, but helping Jesse and Gideon with their plan had brewed feelings of anticipation about what it would be like to get into the trenches, so to speak. The fact that her suggestion had been met with Gideon's approval and Jesse's appreciation probably contributed to those feelings. Emma didn't care. This was a welcome diversion from worrying about Lizzie. Worrying about everybody. She was glad she had agreed to stay.

Gideon was waiting with far more patience than she was, straddling one of the chairs that had been left for them and watching her as she paced back and forth. She kept craning her neck to try and see what they were doing in the back of the warehouse. He was unreadable, but she didn't need to be an empath to know she was amusing him for some reason. She caught the cant of his mouth out of the corner of her eye every time she reversed direction.

"It doesn't actually work, you know," he commented.

She didn't break her flow. "What doesn't?"

"Pacing. It doesn't make them come any faster. Trust me. That's four centuries of experience talking. And having a partner who considers thoroughness next to godliness."

In the distance, a door slammed, reverberating through the wide open space. Emma stopped to peer through the dim light, but after several seconds of silence, she sighed and turned back to Gideon.

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“It just feels good to actually be doing something,” she said. “Maybe it’s a little step, but I know it’s going to lead to stopping these people. And getting Lizzie away from them.”

The way his eyes shuttered was more damning than if he’d said the words out loud. He and Jesse didn’t think Lizzie was as innocent of the atrocities as Emma did, but they didn’t know her, either. They hadn’t grown up with her.

“That’s what we do.” The smile Gideon offered was tight. “You should see how many white hats I’ve got hanging in my closet.”

Curiosity drove her back to the chair at Gideon’s side. This was a golden opportunity, she realized. Jesse had been rather open about Gideon’s past, but the answers he’d provided had been sketchy, out of sheer lack of information. This was a chance for her to learn more about why a vampire would do what he did, especially since most of the time, his emotions were closed to her.

“How long have you lived in Chicago?” she asked casually.

Gideon shrugged. “A century, give or take a decade. You?”

“Born and raised. Which means not nearly as long as you have.”

“If anybody has been in this town as long as I have, I’ll eat my white hat.”

Her laugh echoed throughout the nearly deserted warehouse. “Now you’ve got me imagining vampire cowboys. Which I’m sure there were, but it still seems weird.” She

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paused. “Maybe not as weird as a vampire trying to do what you are, though.”

“You live as long as I have, weird pretty much loses its meaning.”

His lapse into silence meant Emma was going to have to keep asking questions if she wanted to find anything else out. The longer she knew Gideon, Jesse’s assertion that he wasn’t very forthcoming about his past was holding truer and truer. It only made her want to know even more.

“So why do you do it?” she asked. Blunt was going to be her best means for success; when it came to subtlety, Gideon was either completely oblivious or too willing to ignore her hints. “You have to admit it’s not the norm. And Jess said you’ve been doing it for a long time.”

“Sounds like you and Jess have been talking a lot.”

“You’re his favorite topic.”

This elicited a smile. “He’s a little biased. I’m not nearly that interesting.”

“Oh, I don’t know. You seem pretty interesting to me.”

Gideon glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “Isn’t that because it’s harder for you to read me, though? I know you said it was getting overwhelming for you, but come on. You’ve spent your whole life able to figure out people because you can tell what they’re feeling. It must be driving you crazy not knowing for sure what to think of me.”

“Just because it’s harder, doesn’t mean I can’t.” Emma debated briefly about how much she should reveal. “I mean, most of the time, you’re a blank wall, but compared to most

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vampires I've had experiences with, you're a lot more in tune with your emotions than they are, so I'm picking up more than I usually do." She chuckled. "Which is more than a little ironic considering how much you value your privacy."

He regarded her for a long minute before shifting in his seat. "I just don't feel the need to dredge up history that doesn't change anything," he said. "Life goes on. What matters is what we do from this point onward."

Emma had the distinct suspicion that was going to be all he said on the matter. If she pressed, he might give her a spare detail or two, maybe a platitude about what it was that drove him, but that was going to be it. She had to be satisfied with what he felt comfortable offering, and really, who was she to be interrogating him? He didn't know her. She was just another case to him. It didn't matter if she was starting to consider Jesse a friend. That didn't change the circumstances of why she was in their lives in the first place.

"I know this morning was rough for you, but I'm glad you're sticking it out." She jumped a little at Gideon's voice, but when she looked over at him, he was still watching the other end of the warehouse. "And not just because it means you're safe. You shouldn't have to be alone, no matter what you are."

"Thanks," Emma murmured. She knew he meant it. Jesse had told her about how many years Gideon had spent alone, that he was the first business partner Gideon had ever had. She'd felt the depth of their connection, too. She was almost a little jealous that he'd finally found somebody.

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“I’m expecting you to help me at least get started,” he said. It took her a moment to realize he’d gone back to the subject of the audition for the exhibit. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“No, not at all.”

“Good. Because we can’t afford to fuck this up. Andre said he’s got quite a few people lined up to exhibit at this thing, which means they’ve got plenty to choose from. If we don’t make an impression, we’re not going to get another shot.”

Whether he was doing it to ensure she didn’t go anywhere, Emma didn’t know. She only knew she was being included in their plans. She wasn’t going to have to hide in the shadows while somebody else swooped in to help Lizzie.

“Was this Jesse’s idea?”

He shot her a lopsided smile. “No. I do occasionally come up with one of my own, you know.” A scraping of metal against concrete resounded from the opposite end of the building, and Gideon rose from his chair. “Looks like we’re good to go.”

Emma hung back as he negotiated the final price with the young man managing the warehouse. Another step closer to this entire debacle being over. And she owed it all to Gideon and Jesse.

She owed a lot to Gideon and Jesse. Hopefully, one day, she’d be able to pay them back properly.

CHAPTER 12

Jesse swallowed around the lump in his throat as four hands spread gray body paint over his chest, back, neck, and throat with soft sponges. He couldn't move, couldn't even twitch when Emma hit a ticklish spot on his ribs, or Gideon purposefully brushed against the sensitive area along his lower back. His thighs were beginning to itch as the mold hardened around his legs, and his shoulders ached. But it was a familiar ache, and something he could focus on, in spite of the fact that Emma was spreading another layer of paint over his stomach and kept sending him shy glances. Or the fact that Gideon occasionally brushed his lips across a bare patch of skin before coating it with the sponge.

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“How long will it take for this to set?” Jess asked.

“Not long,” Emma said without looking up.

Her warm breath fanned across his lower abdomen, slithering downward, inside the covered waistband of his underwear. The molding hid his hips completely at the moment, but as soon as it was hard enough, Gideon was going to carve parts of it away, exposing portions of Jesse’s legs so that he looked like one of Michelangelo’s unfinished statues. The idea had been Emma’s. It was elegant and unusual, and Jesse’s favorite part was that it wasn’t going to shed his blood in a room full of rabid vampires. He just had to sit still while Gideon and Emma did all the work.

Which, unfortunately, was easier said than done. It was very difficult to remember this was serious business, when all of his senses were telling him something else entirely. Restrained and almost entirely immobile, in a room full of toys he couldn’t see but knew were there, while soft hands continually teased and caressed him. His mind was at war with his body, and his body was winning. He needed something to distract him, and he desperately sought questions to ask. Anything would do, as long as they were talking about serious business and not about the growing ache in his groin.

“What about my head? Are you going to put the hood on me today?” As soon as he asked, he regretted it. What if the answer was yes? The sensory deprivation would make him infinitely aware of every single whisper of breath, every bit of contact.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” He never even felt Gideon

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move behind him; the sudden words across his ear made goose bumps erupt along Jesse's arm. "You should see what we're doing to you at least once. I want you to know exactly what the others are going to see."

Jesse almost sighed with relief. "Oh, okay."

He looked down to the top of Emma's blonde head, but he couldn't see her face. She hadn't even batted an eye when he began to undress, but then, why would she? She had already seen him in his birthday suit, and at the time he had been more concerned about her safety than his own modesty. Still, he couldn't help but wonder if some of the looks she cast over his body had more behind them than just professional curiosity. And then he wondered why he cared, and then he wondered if she knew what he was thinking about.

"I itch all over. This paint is going to drive me crazy."

"That's only because it's still wet," Emma offered. "Here. I'll show you."

Setting aside her sponge, she turned her head and pursed her lips. A warm blast of air rippled over his forearm, and Jesse's breath hitched. At his back, Gideon stiffened slightly, and the hand that had been painting along his spine slowed. He didn't need to look over his shoulder to know Gideon was watching Emma. What he didn't know was whether she knew the effect she was having on him or not.

"There." She sat back on her heels and looked at him with eyes so dark, they were almost black. "It's dry. Does it itch now?"

"No," Jesse said, his throat tight. "It feels better now."

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Some devil prompted him to add, “But my chest still itches.”

Emma tilted her head like a curious cat, and her eyes took on a definite shine as she weighed his words. Slowly, she gathered her long hair with one hand and held it out of the way at her nape before leaning in toward his body. Inches away, she pursed her lips again, directing her warm breath across his left nipple.

Jesse didn't shudder, but he did tremble slightly. He could sense Gideon, still hovering over his shoulder, watching everything. Emma would be able to sense what he was feeling, and he didn't have a prayer of hiding his arousal from Gideon. The fact that they both knew what they were doing to him only heightened the sensation. It was a vicious and unfair cycle.

Her breath slowed, then stopped, but Emma only pulled back enough to create the smallest of margins between her mouth and his skin. “Would you like for me to do the other side, too?” she murmured, looking up at him.

No. Yes. Fuck.

“I'd appreciate that.”

His fingers curled into fists as she mimicked her earlier action, nails digging into his soft palms. He didn't know what to think about this. Up until that moment, he had recognized her beauty in a sort of objective way, but he'd never thought of her sexually. Now ants were marching down his spine, and the sudden damp brush of Gideon's tongue against his ear made his heart race.

“Watch her,” Gideon whispered, his voice so low Jesse

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sincerely doubted Emma would be able to make out the individual words. “On her knees. Asking permission. Now you know how you make me feel when you act the same way.”

Jesse had always known what sort of reaction it got from Gideon—that’s why he did it, after all. But he had never been interested in reversing roles, and now he had a taste of what it felt like. It was far more stimulating than he’d expected. His cock twitched, pressing painfully against the plaster holding him captive. The ache didn’t distract him; it echoed and throbbed through him. His nipples were hard beneath her warm breath, and he felt mingled relief and regret when she moved back again, putting respectable distance between them.

Her hand fell from her hair, the long blonde waves spilling over her shoulder to draw his eye downward. The sharp points of her nipples were visible through her thin blouse, and for one brief, razored moment, Jesse had the overwhelming desire to catch them between his teeth.

“You’ll have to make sure you’re completely dried off when you do this for real,” Emma said. The sound of her voice dragged his attention back to her face and the pink stain coloring her cheeks. “You don’t want to be uncomfortable.”

“No, I wouldn’t want that,” Jesse said thickly. She tilted her head slightly, and he noticed her neck was flushed as well. Behind him, Gideon had abandoned his ear and was now nuzzling against his neck, but he was spreading paint down Jess’s other shoulder. He had a brief vision of both Emma and Gideon compassionately saving him from a night of itchy skin, their mouths close to his chest and arms and...

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Jesse frowned. “My legs aren’t going to be the same color. You’ll have to paint me first.”

Emma started, her eyes jumping to the molding covering his lower half. “Well, shit,” she said. “How did we miss that?”

At his neck, Gideon chuckled. “I don’t know about you, but I was too busy thinking of what he was going to look like bound and helpless.”

The obvious lust darkening Gideon’s voice didn’t faze Emma, and she returned her focus back to Jess. “Are you going to do that here or at the staging area for the exhibit then?” she asked. “Because I can’t help if you do it there.”

Jesse didn’t know why she was asking *him*, like he was in any position to make these sorts of decisions. “Uh...I think painting here would be smart. That way, it’ll be dry by the time we get to the staging area.”

As he finished speaking, he congratulated himself on his even delivery and the solid, logical reasoning behind it that had nothing to do with how hard he was at the moment.

“We’re going to need more paint then.” Emma rose to her feet, backing for the door without taking her eyes off him. “Gideon should...practice sculpting while I’m gone.”

“Oh, no worries there,” Gideon said.

She nodded, her hand fumbling behind her for the door knob. After several tries, she found it, and she turned and fled from the room.

“I don’t know if I should be relieved or sorry she left,” Jesse murmured.

Broad hands came around his chest, pinching his already

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taut nipples. “You do know she’s not buying paint, right?” Gideon bit at Jesse’s neck, his blunt teeth moving from spot to spot, finding fresh patches of skin to torture. “I’ll lay odds she’s in the shower already, with her hand between those lovely thighs of hers.”

Jesse caught his breath. “Was she...that worked up?”

“Aren’t you?” A hand stole down Jesse’s stomach, stopping at the edge of the molding. “I know you’re hard, Jess. I can smell it. And if I know, you can bet she picked up on it.”

Jesse nodded. That made sense. When she had transmitted to him, hers and Gideon’s emotions had felt like *his*. It made sense his arousal would have the same sort of effect on her.

“It’s all just...a bit overwhelming. I’m surprised by how worked up I actually am.”

“I’m not.”

Gideon disappeared then, and Jesse twisted as best he could to see him go back to the weapons cabinet and pull out a heavy dagger. His chest tightened, his eyes fixed to the sharp blade, as Gideon came back and crouched at his side.

“Time to start practicing,” he said.

Jesse initially hoped *practicing* meant freeing him from the damned plaster and easing the pain still radiating through him. But as Gideon began to slowly and carefully chip away the material, Jesse realized he might actually intend to prolong the experience. The steady scrape of the dagger over the plaster sent wave after wave of vibrations through his thighs, and he was captivated by the easy way Gideon handled the blade, his fingers expertly manipulating the blade.

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“Why aren’t you surprised?” Jesse asked, his tongue feeling thick again.

“Because I know you.” A slice along his thigh freed a larger portion of the plaster, and the fresh blast of air along his exposed skin made Jesse gasp. “You were helpless. Ours to touch however we wanted.” The tip of the blade grazed along his hip. “You’ve been waiting to be released ever since you sat down on that stool.”

Jesse couldn’t argue with that, because it was completely true. He inclined his head, nodding toward his groin. “Can you give me a little release now? This pressure is really painful. It feels like my cock might be bent in half.”

Though Gideon smiled, he didn’t shift from his task. “That’ll teach you to position your cock right next time.”

It was on the tip of Jesse’s tongue to point out there was no right way to position his cock when he was surrounded by plaster, but it wouldn’t do any good to argue. So he shifted tactics, hoping deferment would make Gideon a bit more merciful. “Yes, you’re right. I should have thought of that.”

“Besides...” Another chunk fell away, large enough for Gideon to worm his way beneath the white molding, his hand cool against Jesse’s sweat-slicked thigh. “...it’s not like you’re the only one who’s hard.”

“Yeah, but your pants don’t bend your cock in half,” Jesse murmured.

Gideon’s hand stopped, inches away from Jesse’s erection. “And then there’s always the option I stop right now and leave you like this, boy. Emma’s not the only one who can get

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herself off in the shower.” A wicked gleam appeared in his eye. “Or I could fuck her instead. Bring her back in here, spread her out so that you have a bird’s-eye view, and make her scream instead of you. Is that what you want?”

Jesse swallowed hard, unsure if Gideon meant it, yet certain he meant every word. The mingled feelings of helplessness and frustration, combined with the vision of Gideon getting himself off, or fucking Emma, only intensified the throbbing he had been trying desperately to assuage. “No...No, that’s not what I want. I’m sorry.”

The apology coaxed Gideon into moving again, though it wasn’t closer to his cock. He pulled his hand free and clawed at the plaster covering Jesse’s crotch, breaking free enough to relieve the pressure around his length. The relief flooded through Jess, and his head fell back, eyes fluttering shut as the air cooled his heated skin.

“Fuck,” Gideon muttered. Jesse opened his eyes again in time to see Gideon stand back and gaze down at him, lids heavy, the bulge in his jeans thick. “You are so gorgeous like this, boy.”

His cock jerked, and he longed to reach for Gideon and return the favor by unzipping his pants and wrapping his fingers around Gideon’s shaft. The intensity of Gideon’s eyes, more than the words themselves, made him flush with pleasure. His bare skin was covered in goose bumps, but his face and thighs were hot and slick with sweat. He shifted on the hard stool as his ass clenched.

The movement drew Gideon’s attention, and his heavy

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gaze crawled downward, lingering on Jesse's trapped legs for seconds before returning the journey back to where his wrists were bound behind him. "You're going to be stiff in more than one way," he mused. His eyes flickered upward, and Jesse's followed, both men looking at the hook in the ceiling. "I should probably do something about that."

Jesse nearly squirmed, eager to forget all about the reasons why he was encased in plaster. But despite the hunger in Gideon's eyes, he continued scraping and cutting, revealing Jesse's body inch by inch. His hips, his ass, the back of his thighs. Each time Gideon cleared a piece away, he ran his cool fingers over Jesse's heated skin until he shivered. Finally, there was enough room for Jesse to straighten his knees, but his lower legs were still trapped.

Setting aside the dagger, Gideon straightened and went behind the stool, his fingers trailing along Jesse's shoulder and then down his arm. "I'm going to have to release one of your wrists to reposition you," he murmured in Jesse's ear. One of his wrists sprung free, but before Jess relieved the ache in his muscles, Gideon curled his hand around it and pulled the arm over Jesse's head. "Stand up."

Jess straightened slowly, his tight muscles protesting as he stretched them. Gideon pulled the stool from the plaster and tossed it aside with one hand without releasing him. Gideon caught his other hand and brought it above his head, locking his wrists together once again before securing him to the chain. Jesse whimpered softly, thankful for the restraints holding him in place.

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Feather strokes drifted down his arms, along his sides, plucking away stray pieces of molding when they came to Jesse's hips. Gideon's broad body pressed to his back, the firm outline of his cock nudging against his ass, as his hands grabbed the edges of Jesse's underwear and ripped the fabric.

"Did you like seeing her on her knees?" Gideon whispered. The sudden fisting of Jesse's cock made him cry out, arching into the touch, but Gideon's powerful arm wrapped around his waist and dragged him back. "She was practically begging you to let her paint you again. I can't say I blame her. All this skin to cover..."

Jesse imagined Emma on her knees once again, covering more than his chest with the paint, using her fingers instead of the sponge to spread the smooth liquid over his skin. Her hands would be a heady contrast to Gideon's larger, rougher fingers, her touch silk light where his lover's was firm.

"Yes, I did," he admitted softly.

"She won't be the one who gets you off, though." Each word was a whipcord caress, lashing across his flesh to make it quiver as effectively as any leather strap Gideon might own. "She'll be wet, and she'll be ready, and if I asked her to, I'll bet she'd even beg you to fuck her." The sound of a zipper being opened filled Jesse's ears, but the grip around his cock only tightened when it jumped in response. "But it's going to be me, driving into your ass, that's going to give you your release. Just like I'm going to do now. I'm going to split you open so wide, you'll go hoarse from screaming." The wet tip of Gideon's cock dragged between the taut cheeks of his ass.

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“Should we call Emma back in here? Put her on her knees in front of you, tell her to open her mouth, and wait for you to shoot all over her?”

Jesse caught his breath, the image Gideon painted flaring brightly in front of his eyes. That hadn't occurred to him, and now he wasn't sure he would be able to shake the thought. Would Emma even want that? At the moment, it didn't matter, because just the possibility of it intensified the throbbing in his cock and balls. But even that intoxicating image began to fade as Gideon continued teasing him with the head of his cock, and all Jesse could focus on was Gideon's low promises. He could almost feel Gideon's cock driving into him.

“I just want you to fuck me,” Jess answered honestly. “I just want you, please.”

“That's my boy,” came the dark murmur.

All contact disappeared, and Jesse fought the urge to twist around to see what Gideon was doing. The pounding of his heart drowned out any sound that might betray Gideon's intent, and he nearly jumped when slick fingers wrapped around his cock again.

“No stretching for you today,” Gideon said. His other hand pulled Jesse's cheeks apart, the lubed tip probing at his waiting hole. “I can't wait.”

And with a vicious shove, he buried his cock in Jesse's ass.

Jess shouted, the chain rattling as Gideon pulled him back against his body. Tensing, he clenched around Gideon's cock, and he barely had time to adjust to his length before Gideon pulled back and slammed forward again. His body ignited in

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Gideon's embrace, and everything burned—skin and flesh with each hard thrust, his throat from each ragged shout.

“That’s it,” Gideon crooned. The softness of his voice was an aching contrast to his brutal strokes, each a deliberate assault that left Jesse raw. “You wanted this all along. Wanted this...”

A scream ripped from Jesse as Gideon scraped across his prostate, pulling out to slam into it again without hesitation. Fire licked deep inside, and he tightened convulsively around the thick length pummeling his ass.

Gideon kept a tight grip around his shaft, and his fingers only tightened with each brush against Jesse's prostate. He thought he was going to explode, when he could think at all. All the blood had drained from his head, and he knew if Gideon would stroke him once, that would be it for him.

“Let me come, please,” Jesse gasped. “Please, I need to.”

Gideon's fingers dug into his hips, and Jesse knew there would be bruises, purple blooms that would be their only reminder of this particular coupling. Because as much as Jess wanted to feel Gideon sink his fangs into his neck, he knew it wouldn't happen. The hood didn't go down that far, and a fresh mark left exposed to unknown vampires might be construed as an invitation, regardless of Gideon's promise to protect him. He had to settle for feeling open and tender, for the memory of hands holding him in silent desperation.

But he still needed to come. And Gideon wasn't helping. In a last frenzied plea, Jesse squeezed around his cock as hard as he could.

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Gideon groaned. His forehead fell to Jesse's shoulder. And his hand stripped down Jesse's shaft in a single brutal stroke.

Jesse's final shout seemed to come from low in his stomach, building momentum as it tore through his throat. His cock pulsed against Gideon's strong hand, shooting stream after stream of come, some of the warm liquid splashing onto his thighs and stomach, even as Gideon's length jerked against his walls. Jesse felt Gideon's come dripping down the back of his thighs when he began to pull out, but before Jess could even catch his breath, Gideon thrust forward again, eliciting a weak groan from his raw throat.

There were more thrusts, each slower and slipperier than the last, until finally, Gideon smoothed his come-covered hand down over Jesse's balls. "I think we've fucked up the paint job," he chuckled.

"Well, now we know what we should avoid doing before the audition," Jesse said weakly.

Slowly, Gideon peeled away, reaching above Jesse's head to unhook him from the chain. "Maybe we shouldn't let Emma help, either," he said.

Jesse's skin flushed again, but this time it was with shame instead of arousal. Vague regret after sex wasn't a new experience for Jesse, but this was the first time he'd experienced it without actually having sex with the person in question.

"Yeah," he agreed softly, rubbing his wrists, "that's probably a good idea."

Gideon wrapped his arms around Jesse's chest and gently

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pulled him back against him. “Don’t be sorry,” he murmured. “There’s nothing wrong with desire. She’s a beautiful girl.”

Jesse dropped his head back, resting it on Gideon’s shoulder. “Yeah, she is. But I want her to be comfortable here with us, and if she was only picking up on half of what I was feeling...I guess I’m probably lucky she can’t read minds, too.”

“Why? What were you thinking?”

Jess shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s all kind of blurry now. Probably something inappropriate and lust-driven.”

“Lust is inappropriate?” Gideon clicked his tongue. “Haven’t I taught you anything?”

Jesse chuckled. “I think it can be.” He looked down at his body. The paint on his chest was largely unblemished, and his legs looked like they ended just below the knee, and he was perched on a chunk of stone. “How was this looking before...everything? Like it was going to work?”

“Yeah, it’s going to work.” Gideon let him go to kneel at his feet, picking up the dagger he’d set aside to begin cutting large chunks of the molding away from Jesse’s calves. “We just have to hope they’re as serious about their art as they are about their little parties.”

Jesse watched him work, thoughtfully. He knew why he didn’t think Emma should help them prepare for the audition, but he wasn’t sure about Gideon’s logic. Was it just concern for her well-being? For his? Something else entirely? There was only one way to find out.

“Why do you think we shouldn’t let Emma help?”

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Gideon shrugged. “Because she’s a nice girl and I don’t want things to be awkward for you.” The grin he shot Jesse was more than a little wicked. “Not that I wouldn’t mind watching you get hard for her, or smelling how wet she gets from it. But you two have gotten to be friends, I think. I don’t want to fuck that up.”

The molding fell away from one leg, and Jesse reached down to run his fingers through Gideon’s hair. Remembering Gideon’s hesitation to risk their own friendship for the sake of fucking, he wasn’t entirely surprised, but he was still touched. “I don’t want to fuck it up either.”

“Then we won’t.”

And like that, Jesse knew the decision was made for Gideon. It helped dispel the last of his fears about facing Emma again. There would be embarrassment, yes, but he could manage that, knowing the incident wouldn’t be repeated.

Jesse stepped free from the last of the molding, relieved to be out of the hot material. But even if the plaster was constricting and a bit uncomfortable, it was better than most of the alternatives. He looked down at his shiny chest and arms, smiling wryly. “I look like the Tin Man. I don’t suppose I could talk you into helping me clean up?”

Gideon’s answer was to tangle their fingers together and lead him toward the door.

CHAPTER 13

Gideon tried to give Jesse more space than usual as they prepared to go to the exhibit. He refused to speak about it, but the tension Jess exuded was like grit in the back of Gideon's throat, dry and coarse as it threatened to choke him. They didn't know what to expect. Andre's details had been vague, and the only thing they knew for sure was there were three other people vying for a single spot. They had no clue how many vampires—or people—would be in attendance, nor how they were being judged.

“How can you put restrictions on art?” Andre had said.

So Gideon loaded the van they'd rented, while he waited for Jess to return from dropping Emma at Michelle's. As he'd

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predicted, she had begged off helping to bodypaint Jesse, though the excuse she gave made it unclear whether it was personal or pragmatic.

“You don’t want to smudge the paint,” she’d said. “You have the time to do it there anyway.” Her luminous eyes had held steady, as had her hands, all the way until her fingers brushed against Jesse’s as she passed over the sponges they used. Only then did Gideon gauge a jump in her heart rate. Her composure remained serene, though. Jess never even knew until Gideon pointed it out afterward.

He was slamming the back door of the van shut when Jesse’s car pulled into the parking structure. “Well?” he said as Jesse got out to join him. “Did Michelle have her stack of ‘why Gideon is evil’ books ready to indoctrinate Emma?”

Jesse smiled wryly. “Michelle promised me they were going to work on the inventory tonight. Of course, there’s no guarantee they won’t be inventorying the entire ‘why Gideon is evil’ section.”

“I’ll be surprised if Emma comes back not hating me. She’s going to pick up on how much Michelle does, I’ll bet you anything.”

“And she’s going to pick up on how much I *don’t* hate you,” Jesse replied. “So we should cancel each other out, and she’ll be left to make up her own mind.”

Running his hand through his hair, Gideon shook his head in apology. “I’m making a mountain out of a molehill, I know. But all of this is winding me up the wrong way. I’ll feel better once we’re all back at the office.” He went around to the

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driver's side door. "Where I can keep an eye on both of you."

Jesse pulled himself into the passenger seat and slammed the door behind him. "Well, that'll make two of us."

In the confines of the van, Jesse's anxiety was even more noticeable. He reeked of it, and the scent filled the small cabin. He kept rubbing his palm against the side of his pants, as though he was trying to wipe something nasty off his hand—a sure tell.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you," Gideon assured as he pulled out of the parking structure. "You know that, right?"

"I know," he answered quickly. "I just feel...strange. Something like this, I should have my notebook and recorder and camera...but now I won't even be able to hear anything."

Gideon had to bite his tongue to hold back the "this was your damn idea" that wanted to come out. They were in too deep now to back out, and besides, Jess didn't need the added stress. Instead, Gideon reached across and rested a hand on Jesse's thigh. "I'll get you out of there as soon as I possibly can. Are we picking Emma up tonight or tomorrow?"

Jesse covered Gideon's hand with his. "I told Michelle I'd come by tomorrow morning. I didn't know how long we'd be at Andre's, and I didn't want them to worry about us if we were running late."

"That's probably best," Gideon conceded. "I'm sure Michelle doesn't want me popping around anyway."

Jesse looked at him from the corner of his eye. "Does it bother you? What Michelle thinks of you?"

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It didn't normally bother Gideon, but already Jess was getting distracted from worrying about what was to come. If that's what it took, he didn't have any qualms playing it up a little.

Gideon shrugged. "I'm used to it. But I can't help but wonder if Michelle will pull another stunt like she did with you and that book she gave you last summer. How do you think Emma would react if she saw something like that?"

Jesse frowned. "I don't know. Probably not the same way I did. But, Gideon, this is different. She always made it clear she didn't like me working for you, but she never tried anything like that until she saw you were chewing on the back of my neck."

The picture of Emma's flawless skin rose before his mind's eye. "Well, nobody could ever think I've touched Emma, that's for sure," he said.

Jesse squeezed his hand lightly. "No. She's clearly healthy and entirely uncorrupted. Michelle won't be able to fault you for a thing."

When it was said like that... "Okay, maybe what Michelle thinks *does* bug me a little."

Jesse didn't reply immediately. "I know she's not...very fair to you. But that's because she cares too much."

Gideon held his silence as he turned toward Rogers Park. He knew all too well how much Michelle cared; that had always been the big problem. But Jesse didn't know the particulars of why she and Gideon didn't get along, and now wasn't the time to add to his burdensome thoughts by

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dredging up history best left forgotten.

They continued like that, each in his own head, until Gideon pulled onto the street that led to Andre's house. The exhibit was slated for there; he had designated a bedroom to each of the participants for getting ready. Gideon would have preferred it being a little closer to home, but at least it was a layout he was reasonably familiar with.

"We're just about there," he said. "You should put the hood on so that they can't see who you are when I take you in."

Jesse reached behind the seat and grabbed the hood, twisting the heavy fabric between his fingers. He waited until Gideon brought the van to a stop and then leaned over, gripped the back of Gideon's neck, and kissed him briefly on the mouth.

"How will I know when it's you?"

It was a question he'd already been mulling. "It'll have to be by touch," he mused out loud. "Someplace you can't misconstrue as casual or accidental." His eyes flickered over the outline of Jesse's body. "Your back? Between your shoulder blades."

"Show me."

The shadows cast by the streetlamps hid most of Jesse's face, but Gideon heard the fear in his voice anyway. Turning toward him, he reached around and delicately stroked the top knob of Jesse's spine, smoothing down the first few inches.

"Will that do?"

Jesse nodded. "That'll do."

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He moved as if to put the hood on, but paused again. With a small smile, he pulled a thin collar out of his pocket and secured it around his neck.

“I like this one better,” Jess offered as an explanation, and then his smile disappeared as he pulled the hood over his face.

This was not the first time Jesse had used a hood, but it was the first time it was in a non-sexual atmosphere, and Gideon had the sudden, gut-wrenching fear Jess would forever correlate the events of the exhibit with the soft piece of leather they had picked out together. Though he could still see Jesse’s bright eyes, it wasn’t enough to banish the anxiety, and he placed his hand again at Jesse’s nape, in hopes the touch would calm them both.

Jesse responded by gripping his arm. His fingers were surprisingly steady—Gideon expected to detect at least a slight tremble, but Jesse didn’t betray the fact his heart was racing. They remained locked like that for a moment before Gideon pulled away, snapping the leash onto the collar. Jess relaxed back in his chair, waiting patiently while Gideon stepped out the door and circled to the passenger side. Even though Jesse couldn’t see or hear anything through the hood, he allowed Gideon to guide him out of the van without hesitation.

It wasn’t a long walk to the front door, but those stairs to the porch seemed endless. Keeping the leash loose in his grip, Gideon lifted a hand that was far calmer than he felt and pushed the doorbell. He was smiling by the time the door swung open.

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“The party can start on time now. Your winner’s just arrived.”

* * *

Surrounded by books that threw up dust every time they were touched, Emma scanned through the printouts of impossibly small text, looking for the titles Michelle was sure she had in stock, and doing everything she could not to think about where Jesse and Gideon were right at that very minute. It was the busiest she had been since she’d taken the leave of absence from work to find Lizzie, but still, it wasn’t quite enough to keep the scattering thoughts at bay

“What time is it?” she asked for the third time since arriving.

“It’s just after ten,” Michelle said without looking up. Keeping her eyes on her work, she reached for the plate of cookies in front of her and held it out. “Here. This’ll make you feel better.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to protest she felt fine, but one look at Michelle’s strong profile and Emma stopped it from coming. She took the topmost cookie and nibbled at its edge, wishing she could appreciate its delicate flavor. “Did you make these?” she asked, desperate for conversation to distract her from all the bad places her mind kept drifting.

Michelle laughed, like it was a joke. “Oh no, not at all. They’re from my secret admirer.”

Emma’s brows shot up. “I’m assuming you know who the secret admirer is if you’re eating unknown baked goods.”

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“Of course, the baked goods are perfectly safe. She owns the shop on the corner.”

Another surprise, though in retrospect, Emma realized it shouldn't have been. The inventory forgotten, she took a bigger bite of the cookie, this time noticing the small cinnamon chips it was stuffed with. “Doesn't it defeat the purpose of it being a secret if both of you know?” she asked.

“Not at all. She pretends to be sly, I pretend to be coy. It's part of the game. We'll figure out who the winner is in a few weeks, I suppose.”

She smiled at the surety in Michelle's voice. “You'll have to tell me how it works out for you. And just so you know, I'm a sucker for happy endings.”

“I am, too. That's why I've had so many of them,” she said breezily. “But you can ask Jess, I don't give something for nothing. If I tell you my story, I'll expect to hear one from you.”

Emma immediately shied away from that. She didn't know how much Jesse had told Michelle, and as nice as the other woman was—and as safe as she felt—she wasn't ready to share even more of the secrets that had gotten her into the mess she was in.

“Mine's boring,” she said, picking up her paperwork again. “And I've definitely never had secret admirers to spice it up.”

“No happy endings either?”

She ducked her head, her hair hiding her face. “That remains to be seen.”

“Oh?” Michelle hadn't moved at all, but she seemed

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closer, like she was somehow invading the space around Emma. “What sort of happy ending are you looking for?”

It was hard to put into words what barely made sense in her head. “Anything peaceful. Where the people I care about come out unscathed. Or at most, with minor bruising.”

“That’s a good ending, as far as endings go,” Michelle said amicably. “You look a little pale. Do you need a drink?”

There was no mistaking what she meant, but it didn’t stop Emma from looking up at her in mild shock. “Won’t that put a crimp in getting this inventory done? Well, done right, I mean.”

Michelle sniffed. “I think the fact you can’t concentrate for more than three seconds is putting a crimp on the inventory.”

Ouch. Though she did have a point. Emma looked down at the list she was holding and realized she was getting nowhere in doubletime. “I’m just worried about them,” she confessed softly.

Michelle pushed herself to her feet and crossed the room. Emma couldn’t tell what was in the clear bottle—except it looked amber when it reflected the light. “I’ve been worrying about Jesse since the moment I met him. It hasn’t done a bit of good.”

She didn’t speak as Michelle poured some out into two mugs and carried them back to hand one to Emma. “At least I’m here and not there,” she said. She took a sip of the alcohol and nearly gasped from the sharp burn that scalded her throat. It settled almost immediately into a liquid fire through her muscles, though, and she sipped again without hesitation. “If

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I'm this anxious without having them around, I'd hate to know what a wreck I'd be if we were all in the same room."

"Jesse filled me in on what's going on. I imagine if you were there, you would have more to worry about than being anxious."

Emma didn't need the reminder. She'd been there for the dry run-through. She'd been down on her knees and absorbing every ounce of Jesse's desire. It had been erotic and confusing and mind-spinning, and she still wasn't sure which was hers and which had been theirs she'd simply picked up on, but in the end, all that mattered was having their friendship. It was one reason why she'd latched onto the reason not to help with the body painting this time. But only one.

"I appreciate you letting me stay here tonight," she said. Her drink was half-gone. She didn't remember sipping that much more. "I don't have a lot of friends I can turn to in times like this."

"Oh, it's no trouble to me. I gave Jesse a hard time about it, but I enjoy the company." She took a swallow of her drink. "Besides, you should never drink alone."

Emma glanced around at the towering shelves. "How long have you had the store?"

Michelle settled down again, reaching for another cookie. "Most of my life, though it wasn't always here. I had a tiny little building that used to be somebody's tiny little house." Her eyes turned wistful. "It was dank and bad for the books, but you know, it was mine."

Her concession reminded Emma of her earlier statement,

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that she always expected something in return. If Michelle shared details of her life, she was going to have to be prepared to share some of hers. All of a sudden, that didn't seem like such a bad thing. She didn't have to talk about Lizzie or about what was going on, but there was no reason she couldn't relate more mundane details. Michelle seemed more than willing to entertain those as well as the more lurid aspects of her current situation, and besides, Emma liked her. It was very hard not to.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting something for yourself," she said softly. "It's to be admired, really."

"The bookstore is all I ever really wanted for myself. What about you? What do you want for yourself?"

Though she might have resigned herself to having to share, she hadn't expected Michelle to come out with the heavy-hitting questions first. The truth of the matter was, she wasn't sure what she wanted. Relationships were tough because she always knew when things were going bad, and it got too difficult to try and pretend all the time she wasn't like she was. Being around Jesse and Gideon, as stressful as some of the emotions that were generated in their presence was, was the first time she had ever been able to be open about her abilities with someone other than family.

"What I want isn't that tangible," Emma mused. "Fitting in somewhere, mostly. Feeling like I can be me. I'd do almost anything to be able to have that."

Michelle nodded. "That's what everybody wants, in the end. But most people have a warped idea of what it means to

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fit in, or they get too greedy, and they never really reach that goal. Don't always rely on somebody else to give you what you want. This store is the only place I could ever be myself."

Emma was tired of not knowing how much she could say. "How much did Jesse tell you about me?"

Michelle eyed her for a moment before answering, "Are you asking if I know you're an empath? Of course I do. I would have been able to tell even if Jesse never said a word."

"Really? How?"

"When you've been around as long as I have, it's easy to spot people's secrets. I've seen everything at least once, it seems, if not twice."

"So you've known other empaths?"

"Two or three," Michelle confirmed. "Your kind is rare, Emma, but not impossible to find. You aren't completely alone in the world."

It was far more of a relief to hear those words than Emma would have thought. She had never been presumptuous to think she was unique, but she had also never dared to hope to find someone who might understand what it meant to go through what she did.

"It's always felt like that," she confessed. "Jesse and Gideon are the first ones outside of my sister to not make me feel like a freak, but in the end, they can't completely understand. They didn't know how hard it was for me to be around the office until I said something."

"I don't think you should stay with them," Michelle said plainly. "I have a guest bedroom, and enough work to keep

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you busy here until this mess gets sorted out.”

It was tempting. *So* tempting. But the sudden fear of being separated from the two men who made her feel safest was even stronger.

“What about after? Once Lizzie’s home and I don’t have to worry about anybody else wanting to hurt me, would you consider it then?”

“If you tell me why you won’t take me up on my offer now.”

“Because Jesse and Gideon need me to help them get my sister back,” she said. She paused, unsure of how much more to say and then decided to hell with it. “Because they make me feel safe enough to know I can.”

“If you think you’re safer there, you must not know Gideon very well.”

Emma didn’t blink. “I don’t need to. I know what I felt from him. And I know what I felt from Jesse. That’s all I need.”

“Yeah, I know what you felt from Jesse,” Michelle muttered. “He’s a smart kid, but he doesn’t always use his brain.”

“It’s not about brains,” Emma said. “It’s about conviction. And when it comes down to it, both he and Gideon have more than anybody else I’ve ever felt. And that’s good enough for me.”

* * *

Gideon watched Andre lead the small group of people

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around the room. The exhibit wasn't what he expected. Each of the "artists" auditioning their work hovered near their humans, talking about their work when the clutch with Andre reached them. It wasn't a party; it was a fucking dog show, with the blue ribbon and grand prize going to whatever tickled the so-called judges' attention best. It was just a very good thing Jesse couldn't see or hear through the painted hood. If he'd thought the wired dead girl had been bad, having the horror in triplicate would keep him up for days.

What was more interesting than the humans he couldn't help, however, was the girl who walked at Andre's side, arm laced through his. There was no mistaking the similarities. It was Lizzie Coolidge. The hair was darker, her skin freckled, the body not nearly as appealing, but the eyes were the same.

Well, Gideon thought, not *exactly* the same. Lizzie lacked her sister's warmth, her compassion. He looked into this girl's eyes and he only saw death.

He listened to the squat vampire next to him describe to the group how he'd used various bodily fluids to paint his human's skin, and though his enthusiasm for his subject was obvious, his audience wasn't nearly as enamored. One gaunt woman in the rear even yawned. They murmured among themselves, but nobody mentioned names. Gideon had no idea which one was Xavier. Hopefully, he'd be able to find out when it came his turn.

"Gideon," Andre greeted, leading the pack to stand right in front of Jesse. They pushed forward, surrounding and crowding him, necks craning to get a better look. "Why don't

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you tell us about your display? Why is he wearing a hood?"

"Because it's all about verisimilitude," Gideon replied smoothly. Emma had talked him through some of the history, but he hadn't expected to have to use it to explain himself. *Thank God for Emma.* "If you imagine Michelangelo's unfinished statues, very few if any had the heads completed. The hood is my attempt to be true to the spirit of the original. I don't want you looking at the subject's face." He moved to Jesse's side, resting one hand on his upper back first to let Jesse know it was him, before gliding his other over Jesse's painted abdomen and onto the dried plaster at his hip. "I want you to focus on the body emerging from the stone. Find that beauty instead."

The woman who had yawned before stepped forward, eying Jesse critically. "I would have liked to have seen more of his body. The concept is interesting, but our guests want to see more...flesh."

Gideon smiled. "Of course, they do." Without removing his hand from Jesse's back, he broke off a small piece of the molding, revealing a fresh patch of skin. "Had this been a real party, I would've encouraged the guests to finish the sculpture themselves. Why should I take away the pleasure of discovering what he's like within the shell?"

Her eyes lit up, and for the first time, she didn't seem quite so bored with the whole affair. She reached forward greedily, but paused, her claw-like hand hovering above Jesse's leg. "May I?"

Gideon glanced at Andre, who merely blinked. *Great. No*

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help there. Asshole. He didn't want anybody touching Jesse, but if he didn't sell these people on the idea, they weren't going to get any closer to rooting out Xavier. Concessions would have to be made.

He stepped back out of her way, giving her implicit consent. He didn't take his hand away from Jesse's spine, however. Instead, he started stroking it lightly, like he had in the car. Gideon hoped it was enough.

She snapped a piece of the molding away from his hip with something that might have been a smile—or maybe she was baring her teeth. Gideon couldn't tell. She brushed her fingers across the silver piece of skin she exposed, nodding thoughtfully.

"I think Xavier will like this. He spent three hours last night bemoaning the general lack of originality." She looked over her shoulder to Andre. "What do you think?"

He shrugged. "It's definitely original."

Gideon's gaze flickered around the group. The way she talked, Xavier wasn't part of it. That wasn't good.

"Maybe we should get Xavier here to decide for himself," he suggested.

"Xavier trusts *our* opinion on these matters," she said icily.

Andre smiled tightly. "He's a very busy man, as you can imagine. But our tastes, especially Cristi's, are in line with his. We haven't disappointed him yet."

"And you won't be, if you let me create something else for you. This is just the tip of the iceberg."

Cristi didn't look entirely convinced. "We'll have to talk it

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over. Come on.”

The crowd fluttered away without a murmur, following her out of the large room. Andre brought up the rear, but he flashed what Gideon thought was an encouraging smile. He hoped their discussion would only last a few moments; despite the awkwardness at the end, he thought he was the best candidate.

But a few minutes stretched into several, and then a half hour crawled by. The other vampires in the room kept leering at Jesse as the scent of his sweat and nerves spread through the room. Gideon kept a hand on Jess at all times, but it was hard to be reassuring as those assholes extended the wait. What the fuck were they doing in there? And how long could Jesse tolerate this?

Finally, as Gideon began to experience violent impulses, Andre returned to the room. He walked straight to Gideon and handed him a piece of paper.

“This is the address, time of the party, and instructions. Don’t be late. Cristi wants something colorful next time. You can contact me if you have any questions.”

Gideon nodded. “Great. Can I leave now?”

“Sure.”

Gideon caressed Jesse’s spine reassuringly, and then began to tear the molding from his legs.

CHAPTER 14

The lamp was still on when Jesse opened his eyes, casting a low, golden light over Gideon's body. He rolled to his side and propped his head up on his hand, happy to quietly watch his sleeping lover. It was rare to wake up before Gideon, and he didn't know if he had slept for minutes or hours, but he wasn't interested in going back to sleep—going back to the dark. He wasn't interested in closing his eyes and being alone again.

The entire time he sat motionless and disoriented, a part of him was afraid he would never be free of the hood. And time had become completely elastic. How long did it take Gideon to cover his body in silver paint? How long did it take to pour

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the thick molding over his head and legs? How long did it take to set? To chip it away? How long had he been trapped, his shoulders aching, with nothing but his own thoughts?

Gideon was always there, though, his hand firm on Jesse's back. How long? It might as well have been an eternity, but despite the dark fear it would never end, Gideon had torn the hood from his head once they were in the van again, allowing Jess to take his first easy breath of the night.

He would have to do it again. The thought made his stomach try to escape through his throat, but he could deal with that. He had Gideon.

Gideon didn't breathe or stir at all, but he was a light sleeper. He would wake if Jesse gave in to the impulse to run his fingers down his chest, to run his lips over Gideon's thighs, to straddle him and slide the length of his body against Gideon's solid frame. But it wasn't just an impulse to touch Gideon—it was a need to put the isolation, the fear of the isolation, behind him.

Jesse had been stiff when they had finally returned to the apartment, his muscles screaming with each step, his shoulders throbbing. Gideon had to help him out of the van and into the apartment, supporting him as they made their way to the bathroom. Jesse didn't know if he could remain on his feet, but the scorching water and Gideon's firm hands eased the pain.

By the time they had stumbled out of the shower, Jesse's skin was flushed pink and free of silver paint. He had only wanted to collapse on their bed and put as much time between

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him and the audition as possible. Gideon had naturally reached for the light, but Jesse put a hand on his arm, silently entreating him to leave it on.

Now, Jesse took a deep breath and rolled over, straddling Gideon, their chests pressed together. He brushed his mouth against Gideon's lips, exhaling softly, blowing warm air across his skin.

Several seconds passed where nothing happened. Then Jess felt the almost imperceptible shift of muscles beneath his, followed by the faint but definitive touch of fingers on his hip.

"Is it morning already?" Gideon murmured against his mouth.

"I don't know," Jesse answered, running his hands over Gideon's shoulders. He slipped the tip of his tongue between Gideon's lips, kissing him softly. The longer Jesse kissed him, the more he wanted, and he was loath to break the contact, even when he needed to breathe. "I don't know. I can't go back to sleep."

The hand barely skimming his side tightened. "Don't tell me you had bad dreams."

"No." Jesse kissed the corner of his mouth, his cheek, the line of his jaw. He buried his face against Gideon's neck, inhaling the faint smell of soap on his skin, his hand still moving over Gideon's shoulder. "It was just dark."

"Oh, Jess." His other arm came up, and he wrapped Jesse in a strong embrace. Turning his head, Gideon glided his mouth along the rough stubble of Jesse's jaw, the tip of his tongue dancing along the textured skin until he found his ear.

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“I’m so sorry,” he breathed. “I should have gotten you out of there sooner.”

“I’ll be fine,” Jesse said, his voice muffled. He lifted his head, offering a small smile in response to the skepticism in Gideon’s eyes. “I will be. I just...I just need to...” He shifted his body, sliding forward, his cock slipping against Gideon’s stomach. He couldn’t explain what he needed, but he could show it. He rocked back until his shaft brushed against Gideon’s, trailing his mouth down Gideon’s throat to his chest.

The bands of Gideon’s arms loosened, and a small sigh escaped Gideon’s throat. His fingertips jumped from knob to knob as they glided up Jesse’s spine, ending to scrape against his scalp through the short hair at his nape. “You don’t have to do this,” he said, but his protestations were merely lip service. Already, his cock was hardening against Jesse’s, filling the space between their stomachs.

“I don’t have to,” Jesse agreed, circling Gideon’s nipple with his tongue until it was hard, and then pulling the skin between his teeth. “But I want to. The whole time...I was thinking about you, thinking about every inch of you.” He scraped his teeth over Gideon’s chest, then lower, to his abdomen. Gideon’s cock brushed against his chest, and his mouth watered, but he lapped and kissed the taut skin of his stomach, delighted each time Gideon’s muscles quivered beneath his touch.

“Fuck,” Gideon muttered. He lifted his hips in unspoken invitation, but Jesse ignored the plea, closing his eyes as he

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concentrated on the silken taste filling his mouth. The tip of his nose grazed over the skin as he licked along the rippled muscles, so that all he could smell was the rising musk of Gideon's arousal. He held strong, though. He wanted to do this right.

Jesse smoothed his hands over Gideon's ribs and across his chest. He wanted to touch him everywhere he could reach, and his fingers roamed over Gideon's body as his mouth moved lower. He slid his tongue along the seam of Gideon's thigh, the coarse hair brushing against Jesse's cheek. He felt a familiar urge to ask Gideon what he wanted, but that wasn't necessary now. Gideon would get what he wanted, eventually. In the meantime, what Jesse wanted was to taste every inch of him.

Gideon bent his legs, planting his feet on the mattress as he spread his knees and exposed the dark crack of his ass. A shudder wracked his body as Jesse ran his tongue further down, along the velvet skin below the heavy sac, and his hand came down to curl around the back of Jesse's skull.

"Now why is this entire set-up feeling all too familiar?" Gideon teased.

Jesse glanced up through his lashes. "The set-up isn't complete as planned. I haven't started telling you how wonderful you are yet." He ran the flat of his tongue from Gideon's balls to his puckered hole, over the sensitive skin over and over, until Gideon grunted and pushed against his mouth. "I guess that'll come later, when my mouth isn't so busy."

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“Trust me. Trading compliments for...” His hips lifted off the bed as his fingers dug into Jesse’s scalp, forcing him closer when Jess let the tip of his tongue breach the tight muscle. “Trading compliments for your fantastic mouth is more than worth it,” Gideon managed.

Jesse couldn’t help his flush of satisfaction at Gideon’s reaction. He couldn’t count the number of times he wanted to push Gideon to the bed and simply show him everything he was thinking, everything he was feeling. This sort of opportunity was rare, and all the more satisfying due to that. That was all the encouragement he needed to stop teasing Gideon. Jesse gripped Gideon’s ass, pulling his cheeks apart to further expose him to his waiting mouth. He attacked with his lips and tongue, alternately licking the muscle and probing into his flesh.

Gideon’s grunt became two, three, finally stretching into a long, continuous growl only broken by the small catches when Jesse would sink his tongue into his hole. That’s when Jess would feel the muscles tremble beneath his hands, and that’s when the grip on his head grew almost painful as Gideon pulled him even more tightly into his body. It forced him to bury his nose in Gideon’s balls, inhaling the musk as his mouth watered for even more.

Jesse gripped Gideon’s cock and began to stroke him, which prompted Gideon to ease the pressure off the back of his head. He paused to lick his finger, slicking it enough to slide into Gideon’s ass. Jesse’s finger brushed against Gideon’s prostate as he curled his tongue around Gideon’s

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sac, pulling his balls past his lips.

The sudden clenching of Gideon's ass was accompanied by his muttered, "Oh, fuck." It trapped Jesse's finger for a second, but didn't stop the slow roll of the soft sac along his tongue, the edges of his teeth grazing across the tender skin. Gideon swore again, his hips lifting off the bed, and he finally eased the tension in order to allow Jesse the room to start sliding in and out of his hole.

Jesse closed his eyes, losing himself to the sounds, smell, texture, and taste of Gideon's body. His cock throbbed, and he rocked against the mattress, smearing pre-come on the sheets and creating just enough friction to relieve a bit of the pressure that was steadily building. His own growing desire prompted him to move faster, stroking and fingering and sucking harder, until Gideon started to buck against him.

"Need you to suck me." He didn't stop writhing, but he did bring his hand up to cover Jesse's, forcing his grip to tighten. "Do it, Jess. I want to shoot on your tongue."

Jesse guided Gideon's cock to his mouth and swallowed him to the root, his tongue wrapping around the shaft. As he pulled back, he began stroking Gideon again, moving his fist in time with his mouth. He continued to thrust his hand, increasing the pressure to Gideon's prostate. When Jesse sensed he was close, he scraped his teeth down Gideon's length, and buried the tip of Gideon's cock deep in his throat.

Spasms wracked so roughly through Gideon's body that he nearly knocked Jesse off his cock. Jess threw his free arm over Gideon's stomach, holding him down as best he could, and

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milked every last drop of come from his throbbing cock. The moment he felt the shudders start to ease, he pulled out and off, sliding up the muscular body, driving his mouth to Gideon's to share what he hadn't swallowed. Their tongues tangled and twisted, slippery and hot, and right then, Jess thought he could stay like that indefinitely.

Gideon's cock was half-erect against Jesse's shaft, but hardened again as Jesse ground against him. He lifted his head to study Gideon's face, tracing his fingers along his cheek and over his lips softly. Gideon looked back with half-closed, dark eyes. They were impossible to read. Jess lowered his head to skim his lips across his jaw and down his neck to lap at his skin. His skin was firm and sensitive, and before Jess could even consider why, he sunk his teeth into the column of Gideon's throat.

The shout torn from Gideon's chest quickly deteriorated into a growl that made the hair stand up on Jesse's neck. Arms like steel vises coiled around his back, and then he was spinning, twisting around as Gideon flipped their positions to burrow Jesse into the mattress.

The sting of fangs raked over his shoulder. "Wrap your legs around me," Gideon rasped against his skin. One arm disappeared from where it held Jesse, and the sound of the nightstand drawer being opened filled the room. "I need to fuck you. Now."

His legs went around Gideon immediately, encouraged and hotly curious. He sought out Gideon with his mouth, alternately licking and biting his shoulders and his neck. Each

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time his teeth came in contact with Gideon's skin, the vampire shuddered, a growl escaping his throat. Jesse's entire body clenched, vibrating against Gideon's with each growl.

"Love that." The scrape of Gideon's voice was countered by the slick glide of his fingers at Jesse's ass. At some point, he'd greased his hand up with the lube he'd retrieved, and now, he probed past the tight ring of muscle to scissor his fingers inside Jess. "Fuck. You always fucking surprise me, boy."

It was Gideon's words as much as his slick fingers that made Jesse feel light-headed. The bed seemed to dip beneath him, and the ceiling spun above Gideon's head. He raked his fingers down Gideon's back, his nails digging deep into his flesh, aching for his cock. Gideon pulled his hand away, and Jesse felt him pushing against his slick hole.

"Yes," he panted against Gideon's throat. "Oh, yes, yes."

Spread and waiting, Jess thought he would pulse out of his skin in the seconds it took Gideon to breach his opening. Once he started, though, Gideon was relentless, sinking his thick length inside until Jesse felt the heavy slap of his balls against his ass. He didn't give him time to adjust. He began pistoning in and out of his passage, letting his girth be the final stretch Jess needed, and his weight bore him deeper into the mattress with every thrust.

Jesse sought out Gideon's mouth, their lips fusing and muffling Jess's long moans. Gideon thrust his tongue against Jesse's, as hard and demanding as he pushed into Jesse's ass. Fangs caught against Jesse's lips and tongue until his own

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blood coated his mouth, tasting copper sweet.

For every drop that spilled, Gideon chased another that had already fallen, sucking away Jesse's breath while his cock pounded into him. When Jess tried to break away for air, Gideon released one hand to card his fingers through Jesse's hair, gripping the back of his skull to keep him from moving away. Spots danced in front of his eyes, but he didn't care. It was worth it to feel the vibrant sensations of being split open at each end, raw and exposed as he melted into Gideon.

Jesse managed to take a breath through his nose, though it was shallow, and his chest burned. The muscles in his thighs and legs ached with the strain as he tightened his hold around Gideon's hips, but nothing could make him break apart at that moment, or put a single unnecessary inch of space between them. Gideon didn't lift his head until Jess thought his chest would burst, and then he only allowed Jesse enough time to gasp once before he crushed his mouth to Jesse's once again, drawing more blood from his swollen lips.

It was reaching the point where he thought he might have to beg for mercy—a not unpleasant notion—when suddenly, Gideon's angle shifted. He rolled his hips as he slammed into Jesse's ass, and the vicious graze across Jesse's prostate made his body stiffen, shocks curling from toe to groin making his skin sizzle.

Gideon didn't adjust again. Every stroke created the same cascade, every suck at his mouth wrought the same burn. He felt like he was going to explode, but it was Gideon's increasingly erratic tempo that broke first.

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With a snarl that tore the inside of Jesse's lower lip, Gideon buried his cock inside Jess, his come blasting deep to coat his inner walls. It was the only impetus Jesse needed, and in the split second after, he shot against their stomachs, the sticky fluid binding them even closer together.

When Gideon looked up, his eyes had gone from bright yellow back to brown. Tilting his head, he lapped at the blood still smeared on Jesse's lips, drawing soft sighs from Jess. Jesse gradually relaxed his legs, but he remained wrapped around Gideon, unwilling to lose the comforting weight pinning him against the mattress.

"You did that the other night, too," Gideon mused softly. It took a moment for Jesse to realize he meant the biting, but Gideon's eyes had gone back to being inscrutable as they scanned his face. "What's brought all that on?"

Jesse tried to blink the fog from his mind so he could offer a coherent answer. "I...just did it the other night to keep from shouting. But you seemed to like it, so I thought...I'd try it again."

The corner of his mouth lifted as he chuckled. "Like isn't nearly strong enough. I'm still a vampire, remember."

Jess licked his lips. "I definitely remember that." He ran his fingers over Gideon's throat, but the marks he left were already beginning to fade. "I don't really get the chance to do it often, though."

"I'll just have to give you more opportunities then."

With a grunt, Gideon rolled onto his back, taking Jesse with him. His cock slipped out, leaving strands of sticky come

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that spidered along Jesse's skin, and his broad hands smoothed downward to cup Jesse's ass.

"You feel better?" he asked, his fingers delving between the cheeks to trace the raw edges of Jesse's battered hole.

Jesse sighed, resting his head on Gideon's shoulder. He was still throbbing, still hot and sore, but the audition was more of a distant memory than anything. How could he think about being alone in the dark when he was stretched out on top of Gideon, his come still drying on his skin?

"Yes. Much better. Just don't make me move yet."

"Go back to sleep." Lips brushed the side of Jesse's head. "We'll move later."

"Love you," Jesse murmured, his eyes falling shut without further hesitation. Gideon's only response was to kiss him again. He smiled softly, warmed by the simple gesture, as he drifted into a peaceful sleep, his earlier fears forgotten.

CHAPTER 15

Jesse normally enjoyed his visits to the Art Institute, but it was difficult to get into the spirit of the place as he followed Emma and Gideon from room to room. Emma had insisted on buying the Institute's guidebook, and she dutifully flipped through it as they moved from exhibit to exhibit. Gideon, of course, couldn't resist the chance to show off, and he regaled her with little known facts about the artists that would have never been mentioned in the publication.

Jesse listened to it all with half an ear. He was torn between thinking about the purpose for the excursion, and thinking about how much Emma seemed to enjoy the museum. She was wearing a genuine smile, and when a work

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really caught her attention, her eyes lit up. Those moments made the entire errand seem much more pleasant.

“This is what I was thinking you might need to emulate,” she said, grabbing Gideon’s hand and dragging him toward a large canvas mounted on the wall. It was nearly six feet long and eight feet high, with grays, blacks, and splashes of yellow spattered across its surface. Jesse didn’t need to see the placard to know it was a Jackson Pollock. The style was distinctive.

Gideon frowned. “The colors are too dull. They specifically want bright this time.”

Jesse was surprisingly uninterested in the decision process, but if he had to be anything, he supposed there were worse things than a living Jackson Pollock canvas. “I like it. We could probably find something with a bit more color.”

“And the style works.” Jess was surprised when Emma turned toward him, flashing him a smile and taking his wrist to guide him to the wall next to the painting. Gently, she pulled his heavy coat from his shoulders and pressed them back, holding there for a moment to indicate he shouldn’t move. “Pollock was an active painter,” she said. “Spattering, spilling, whatever he needed to get his point across.” She flicked her fingers at him, her fingernails grazing across his chest through his thin button-down shirt. “The wax will probably be hard to control, so it should repeat the patterns easily.”

Gideon stepped forward, standing by her side and effectively trapping Jesse against the wall. Jesse smiled gamely and tried not to think about how close they both were.

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“Well, it would definitely justify the use of the wax. They might be curious why you avoided blood again.”

“Blood only comes in red. Cristi wants to see color, and I’m going to give it to her.” A single strong finger began drawing random designs on Jesse’s front, starting at his clavicle and moving downward. “I could do it in layers,” Gideon said. “One color at a time.”

“Start with the darker colors first.” Emma’s finger joined Gideon’s, dancing around in different swirls, never once making contact. “Then go lighter and lighter.”

An older gentleman watched them curiously and Jesse flashed a quick, self-conscious smile. The man just shook his head and shuffled away. “How many layers are you considering?”

Emma and Gideon exchanged a look, each regarding the other with such careful consideration that Jess imagined for a crazy second they were actually communicating telepathically. All the while, their hands continued to move, as if they were already creating their canvas.

“Four would be good,” Emma said.

Gideon nodded. “Blue, red, yellow, and white.” He glanced at Jesse. “It’ll keep the sensations fresh for you.”

Jesse shivered at the thought, remembering the one time they had experimented with wax. Each slow dribble over his back had sent a jolt of pleasure directly to his cock. He didn’t think he wanted to be intensely aroused in a room full of vampires, but he didn’t know of a way to avoid that particular side effect.

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“Okay, that sounds good,” he agreed weakly.

Emma looked up at him, her hand slowing to a halt over the middle of his chest. “I think I’m beginning to regret not getting to see this one,” she said. The pulse at the hollow of her throat grew visible, the delicate skin fluttering from its force. “This is going to look amazing.”

“You can,” Jesse said. “We’re going to practice tonight.” He looked to Gideon. “Right?”

“We need to,” Gideon confirmed. His fingers stopped as well, at a sensitive spot near Jesse’s waist. “Do you want an audience?”

Jesse glanced at Emma and then back to Gideon. He had volunteered that information without thinking, and now he thought about how aroused he would most definitely be, and what happened—or could have happened—the last time she was in the room while he was that hard. In general, Jesse would love an audience. In that particular situation, it was a very bad idea.

“Maybe you can just snap a Polaroid,” Jess muttered.

Her eyes looked even blacker, and the smile that curved her mouth was far from innocent. He wasn’t sure if that was him reading into it, or something more, though, because when she spoke, her voice was as soft and friendly as it always was.

“If that’ll make you more comfortable.” Her gaze strayed to his chest, her hand beginning to move again, this time with more deliberate strokes. “But take more than one picture, please. I want the full effect of being there.”

Gideon’s fingers were still on his waist, but they were

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moving again, too, and for a moment, he couldn't remember why he was averse to having Emma as an audience. This felt great. He pushed the thought away. Self-control was never one of his strong suits, but he was going to have to try harder.

"Absolutely," Jesse agreed, stepping sideways and gently trying to break free of their hands. "Gideon has a good eye for photography."

Gideon was also blocking his easy escape.

"Am I going to be able to get wax on his hood?" he asked. One hand gripped Jesse's hip while the other went to his throat, wrapping lightly around it to keep his head still. "And I'm going to have to come up with another excuse why he's wearing it, damn it."

"That one's easy," Emma offered. "Pollock doesn't do people."

"So a face would ruin the effect," Jesse agreed, not making a second attempt at escape. "The wax will probably ruin the leather, but..." He was going to say that he doubted he'd ever want to use it again but shifted his approach. "But it can be replaced."

Gideon nodded, but it was the flat of Emma's palm against his chest that drew Jesse's attention.

"The important thing is you can't be," she said softly. A calming warmth began to seep through his shirt, gilded in what was her unmistakable gratitude. "So thank you so much again for doing this for Lizzie."

Jesse forgot the growing tension in his body, and covered her hand with his, giving her fingers a light squeeze. "I won't

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say it's my pleasure, but you know we'll be happy to get her out of there."

"Well..." He caught a wicked glint in Gideon's eye. "...there's been *some* pleasure involved."

Damn him, Jesse thought as the memories of the pleasure involved overtook him. Emma's hand felt hot on his chest. "Well, yes. Some. So I guess it would be fair to say it's been our pleasure to help you in any way we can."

The damage done, Gideon dropped his hands from Jesse's body and stepped back, allowing him the room to move away from the wall whenever he wanted. "Let's see if the gift shop has any Pollock books," he said. "To keep the inspiration...fresh."

Jesse moved out of touching distance of both of them, re-establishing his personal space, for all the good that would do. His eyes roamed the room, looking everywhere except at the two people who currently had his blood pressure skyrocketing. A woman caught his attention. She looked oddly familiar. Just like Emma, in fact.

"Emma," he said, nodding toward the stranger.

She turned away from the Pollock placard she was reading, meeting his eyes. When he nodded again toward the woman, they both looked in her direction, only to be met with the empty space where she'd been standing.

"What was it?" Emma asked with a slight frown.

"I thought I..." He paused. What good would it do to tell her he thought he saw somebody who might have been her sister? "It was nothing. Never mind. Come on, let's go check

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out the gift shop.”

* * *

They parted company after dinner, with Gideon and Jesse retreating to the interrogation room and Emma staying in the apartment to clean up. In spite of his compliments on her lasagna, he had picked at his food, his nerves hopping so giddily that Emma’s stomach was doing flipflops as well. Gideon just seemed amused by the whole scenario, though when he rose from the table to clear the dishes, her surreptitious glance at his midsection revealed the definite imprint of his hard cock.

When they had first come up with the idea of the hot wax as his next medium, Emma had been skeptical. She thought it would hurt. Only Gideon’s assurances he knew what he was talking about, and then the online proof Jesse presented about how it could be perfectly safe convinced her they could pull it off. But it was the trip to the museum that morning that had cemented her fascination.

It had been fun, yes, getting to flaunt some of the knowledge she had, getting to giggle at Gideon’s inappropriate filler facts, getting to appreciate what she truly considered art. She loved the Institute. She’d spent hours upon hours there while she was in school—even before college, as a teenager and before as a child. It was a haven when life grew too chaotic for her to deal with. Within its walls, Emma found peace and quiet and beauty, without having to worry about too many runaway emotions. People who came to the Institute

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were generally calm.

This morning, however, when they'd found the Pollock she thought Gideon could use as a jumping off point, things had shifted. She had merely intended to show the vampire how she envisioned it working. She hadn't intended for him to start touching Jesse, too, and the desire that had already been simmering at her fingertips escalated until she couldn't remember why it was she wasn't supposed to help them practice after all. Her regret had been acute when Jesse had mentioned photographs, but Emma knew he was right. It was better this way.

She was still thinking about it when she put away the last dish.

Her gaze strayed to the doorway. How far along would they be? How was Gideon going to pose Jesse? Would he be standing? Lying down? On his stomach or on his back? She knew the palette that would be used and felt a moment of sympathy for Jess that she'd suggested using the darker colors first. From what he'd shown her, colored wax hurt more than the white. He would be feeling that long after their practice session was over.

Though she knew what they'd agreed upon, Emma headed for the stairs on feet with their own agenda. She wasn't going to interrupt, like she had promised. But if the door was open, maybe she could get a quick peek to see what Gideon was doing, how it was turning out. Just a little something to satisfy the curiosity that was burning inside her.

The knob turned easily in her hands, and she very quietly

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pushed the door open an inch to peek through the crack. Gideon was standing over Jesse with his back to her, and Jesse was resting on his forearms and knees, face down, in a piece of equipment similar to the one she had been held in at Sangre. He seemed to be entirely immobile, his wrists and ankles locked in bars, a thick collar holding his head in place. He was already covered in blue wax, and Gideon was dribbling the red over his shoulders. She could easily sense Jesse's arousal, but she even caught threads of what must have been Gideon's excitement.

"You know, you're dripping even more than this candle." The low rumble of Gideon's voice was directed at Jesse, but Emma felt every word as if she was the one in the stockade and each velvet promise was being laid across her skin. "What are we going to do about that?"

Jesse moaned softly. "I don't know, but I hope we do something about it soon."

Gideon shifted, and a sudden hiss from Jess filled the room. "Let it all out now, boy," he murmured. "Because when I have you at that party, I don't want you making a single sound. You're going to turn them on enough as it is, but do that, and they'll be ready to eat you alive." He bent over, putting his mouth next to Jesse's ear. "And nobody does that but me."

Jesse whimpered, and Emma was hit by another wave of arousal. She couldn't see his cock from her position, but she could believe he was dripping like a candle. "I won't make a sound," he promised, his words rushed. Gideon trailed the

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candle down his spine, leaving a long, thin line of wax to cool against Jesse's sensitive skin. A shudder wracked his frame. "Even if you do that."

She knew she should go back to the apartment. Every fiber and every instinct inside Emma was telling her this was far too intimate for her to be witnessing, that she'd sated her curiosity about what would happen and now was the time to retreat.

Her feet refused to move. Her muscles denied her any freedom at all. All she was capable of was standing there, suffused with the desire permeating the room. She didn't even want to blink for fear of missing something.

Gideon shifted his attention to Jesse's upper-thighs, and the red wax reflected the overhead light. It reminded her of blood. It must have reminded Gideon of blood as well, because he seemed utterly fascinated by the patterns he was creating with each casual flick of his wrist. They were silent except for Jesse's harsh breathing, until he howled without warning.

"Oh, *fuck*, Gideon."

The air was so thick that she couldn't breathe, and she inched forward, pressing her breasts to the door jamb. It put pressure on her taut nipples at the same time, and she moved in small fractions to create suddenly needed friction.

"You know I'm going to decorate your balls at the party, too," Gideon said. "It's far too pretty for me not to." His head ducked all of a sudden, giving a clear view of Jesse's back, and though she couldn't see exactly what Gideon was doing, the movement of his head from the small of Jesse's back to

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between his thighs gave it away. All she didn't know was whether or not he was using his tongue or teeth to blaze the path across Jesse's ass to his hanging sac.

"Then I hope they won't be able to hear me through the mask," Jesse said between gasps. "Because that will definitely make me scream."

"Maybe I should gag you."

Jesse seemed to consider that for a moment. "No. No, I don't want that." His tone went up an octave on the last word, his body jerking forward as much as the restraints would allow.

Gideon didn't have a reply to that, but the distinct sound of sucking had Emma pushing the door open half an inch further and straining her neck to try and see what it was he was doing. There was a second where she thought Gideon's shoulders straightened. She held her breath, ready to dart back out of the doorway if he moved even more, but a fresh whimper from Jesse said Gideon was back to work, most likely on his balls again.

She exhaled when he reached for the red candle and resumed his practice, now dripping the wax down the back of Jesse's thighs.

"Do you think this was what Emma envisioned when she had you up against the wall at the museum?" he asked. His voice was almost casual.

"Oh, God," Jesse sighed. "I don't know, but I don't think she was just thinking about the wax."

Her cheeks burned. She hadn't expected them to talk about

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her, though that was probably a little naïve. And how much had Jesse picked up on? Had she inadvertently transmitted some of her desire when she'd tried to show him how grateful she was for his help?

“Oh? Why's that?”

Jesse didn't answer immediately. “The way she was touching me.” He caught his breath. “The way she smiled. The look in her eye. It just...seemed like more than professional interest.”

“But you liked it.” His chuckle was dark and rich, and when he angled his body to the side, Emma shrunk back out of direct view of the crack in the door, just in case he happened to turn his head and see her lurking. “I felt how your heart was hammering long before I put my hand on your throat.”

“You and her both, no doubt,” Jesse muttered. “What do *you* think Emma envisioned when she had me against the wall?”

“She wasn't aroused at first,” Gideon said. “She was too caught up in what we were doing.”

Gideon tilted his wrist and the candle flickered as the wax made a new pattern on Jesse's sac. Jess grunted, but it sounded more like a muffled scream. He took several deep breaths before he tried to speak again. “At first? So I wasn't reading her wrong?”

“No.” He reached to the side, his hand out of view, and came back with a small, thin dowel. One end was pointed, kind of like a pencil, and it was that Gideon used to drag through the cooling wax. Emma's breath hitched with Jesse's,

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but Gideon seemed oblivious, talking through the panting and soft moans. “I don’t think she envisioned you positioned like this. Bent over. I’ll bet Emma’s version has you strapped to the wall and me dripping the wax down your chest and on your cock.”

Jesse rocked forward, but Gideon put a firm hand on his thigh, stilling him. Even from her position, she could see Jesse was trembling, but that didn’t distract Gideon from his careful work.

“Maybe that’s why she wanted pictures.”

“Something tells me, she’s going to be more than a little surprised when she gets them. How much do you want to bet she gets herself off to them tonight?”

“Gideon, remember how we discussed not sacrificing friendship to temptation? What you just said is not helping.”

No, it’s most definitely not, Emma thought. Because that had been her exact thought when she’d agreed to Jesse’s photo idea. In her mind, it was still being true to the intent of their friendship. What she did behind closed doors was her own business. They weren’t to know. Now, if she did anything, she was going to be taunted with the fresh images of Jesse bent over beneath Gideon’s will, Gideon’s dark voice whispering to both of them whether he knew it or not.

She clenched her thighs together. Her hands were shaking. She really should go back to the apartment.

“We’re just talking, Jess,” Gideon said. “I’m not telling you to go out and fuck Emma. This is just a little bit of roleplaying. We’ve certainly done that before.”

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Jesse let out his breath in a long sigh. “Yes, we have.” He paused. “In that case, I’m not going to take that bet. You’re the one taking the photos, after all. You’ll cheat.”

“I don’t need to cheat. You have no idea how delicious you look like this.”

Gideon set aside the candle and dowel and picked up the yellow candle that rested on the tray. With a flick of the lighter, a new flame danced at the wick, and he held it still for a few moments to let the wax pool at the top.

“Can you imagine doing this to Emma?” he commented. “All that pale skin, not a mark on it. The wax would really stand out.”

Jessed looked up from the corner of his eye, moving his head as much as the collar allowed to get a better view. “Would you let me?”

Her heart was pounding as she watched Gideon contemplate his response. “If that’s what you wanted,” he said. A ghost of a smile twisted his mouth as he tipped the candle to the side and dribbled hot wax along the crack of Jesse’s ass. “You’d have to prove to me how badly you wanted to do it, though.”

Jesse’s immediate response was a choked shout that turned into a low moan. “How...how would I do that?”

“Well, there would definitely be begging involved.” His finger traced the path the wax had taken, stopping at Jesse’s hole. “And crawling to me on your hands and knees.” Emma’s eyes widened as Gideon slipped not one but three fingers into Jesse’s ass, not stopping until he reached the last knuckle.

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“Would you want to do it to her? Watch the wax drip down over those gorgeous tits until her nipples were all hard and begging to be bitten?”

“Christ,” Jesse panted, every line of his body tense. Sweat rolled down his face, and his whole body seemed to glisten. “Yes. Yes, I would want that very much. I’d beg. I’d do whatever you want.”

As Gideon’s fingers began to pump in and out of Jesse, the wax continuing to drip in torturous droplets where he had it positioned over the taut flesh, Emma slipped her hand inside her jeans, pushing past the damp curls to sink between her swollen pussy lips. In that second, she would have done anything Gideon wanted, too, to make those promises happen. Even getting placed back into a stockade so similar to the one that had bound her at Sangre was acceptable.

“And the best part about the wax,” Gideon was saying, “is that it won’t leave a mark. You get to watch her go all pink and pretty, probably shove her to her knees to make her swallow your cock when you’re ready, but when you want to do it again later, she’s just as untouched as she was the first time. Waiting for it.”

“Yes, yes,” Jesse gasped, though it wasn’t clear what he was agreeing to. All of it? “Gideon...I need...” Gideon thrust his fingers faster. “Please, I need to come.”

“You don’t need me to touch you for that.”

His wrist twisted, and unconsciously, Emma mirrored his motion, the heel of her hand now grinding against her clit. Jesse cried out, arching within the stockade as best he could,

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and she knew Gideon had hit his prostate. Then hit it again.

On the third thrust, Jesse shouted, his body tensing as she saw his come splash onto the floor. Her orgasm hit a split second after, and she had to bite the palm of her hand clamped over her mouth in order to stifle her cries.

Jesse shuddered, shifting in the stockade, but the restraints didn't allow him to relax. Despite his orgasm, his cock was still semi-erect, come hanging off the tip in long strings. Gideon's shaft was clearly hard against the confines of his pants, and despite the layer of wax covering Jesse's back and thighs, she could see his ass clench as Gideon pulled his hand away. Jesse whimpered at the loss of contact, and Gideon reached for the white candle.

Slowly, Emma backed away from the door, her muscles finally obeying her silent commands to move. She needed a shower. A cold one. Her skin was still too hot to the touch, and if she stuck around, one of them was going to notice her spying on them. She wasn't completely sure she'd be able to stifle her urges to stay away if she saw the pair of them together, either. There was something dark and beautiful about the way their need for each other wrapped around them, and the more she saw, the more Emma wondered what it would be like.

It would have to stay as wondering. Jesse and Gideon were her friends. She'd heard Jesse say himself he didn't want to sacrifice that friendship.

She wouldn't be the one to make him.

CHAPTER 16

Gideon didn't need to look at the guests' faces to know the effect Jesse was having on them. He smelled it. Heard it. Could almost taste it, the air was that thick with arousal.

On the patch of floor he'd requested, Jesse was prone, his body a near X as spreaders kept his legs and arms in position. The colored wax Gideon had dribbled over his body dripped down his muscular form, over his sides to pool on the canvas they'd brought, layers of bright hues that had been swirled and mixed by the pointed dowels Gideon had used in their practice run. Though it had been tempting, he'd avoided getting anything on Jesse's exposed balls. By Jesse's own admission, he wouldn't be able to hold his shouts of pleasure, and Gideon

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didn't want that kind of disruption drawing the unwanted attention of the guests. It would be an invitation to the vampires in the room. From the looks of it, it would have caught the attention of some of the humans, too.

Cristi prowled along the opposite edge of the canvas, annoyed because Gideon had denied her the right to take part. "Are *you* the invited artist here?" he'd asked her. He wasn't as keen on keeping goodwill with someone who was clearly not in charge; she was inconsequential compared to getting Xavier.

His rebuff had soured her mood, and with a final glare at Gideon, she whirled on her heel and headed over to the bar set up in the corner.

"It's probably a good thing the rest of the guests like your work so much," Andre greeted as he approached, his eyes on Jesse.

"Of course, they do," Gideon replied smoothly. "Look at him. He's beautiful."

Andre tilted his head. "He is. Where did you find him?"

Gideon knew the standard glib answer he gave when he was asked the same question at Sangre wouldn't serve him here. "In a library of all places. It worked out well, though. All those years of being inside meant his skin was perfect for this kind of thing."

"The library, huh? I'll have to keep that in mind." He circled Jesse slowly, and Gideon didn't miss the bulge in his pants. "We don't normally do this, but I'd like you to do the next show as well."

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It was a good thing Jess couldn't hear anything; both of them had assumed this was going to be it. "Great," Gideon said. "But why don't you normally do that?"

"Normally the displays don't survive the first show," Andre said bluntly. "Many rely too heavily on blood and audience participation." His eyes turned thoughtful. "But you've done a good job of piquing everybody's interest. That could be worth something more to you."

"More? What are you talking about?"

"Money. There are people in this room right now who'd pay top dollar to take him home."

Everything inside Gideon froze. Apparently, Andre saw auctioning off humans as something more than a way to get rid of unwanted girls poking their noses into his business. It was another item for his bottom line.

"It would have to be a *lot* of money," he said, his voice almost a growl. "He's very valuable to me."

Andre shrugged, unperturbed by Gideon's tone. "Well, if you're interested, just let me know the minimum bid. But speaking of money..." He pulled an envelope from his jacket pocket. "Here's what we owe you. I'll throw in another five hundred if you're willing to sign up for a second night."

He slid the money into an inside pocket without a second glance. This had never been about getting paid. "Let's see how tonight goes." He glanced at Cristi, still lurking in the background. "I'll give you an answer before we go."

"No problem. Just be sure to grab me before the end of the night." He sent another appreciative glance at Jesse. "But I'm

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telling you, you'll leave behind some very disappointed people if you don't agree."

Before Gideon could respond, a woman came up and burrowed into Andre's side. Her light brown hair was pulled back into a sleek ponytail, a black dress that was a shade too tight hugging her body. Lizzie Coolidge. Looking just as much of an ice princess as she had the last time he'd seen her.

Jesse had told him about spotting a woman who'd looked like Emma at the Art Institute. Gideon wished he'd seen her for himself. That way he could know for sure whether or not Lizzie had seen the three of them together. She would recognize Gideon, that was certain. If it had been her, she'd recognize Jesse as well. He had to gauge her reactions closely.

He flashed the smile he'd used thousands of times before to charm unsuspecting victims. "What about you?" he asked, directing his question at Lizzie. "Would you be disappointed if we didn't come back?"

She hardly spared a glance at Jesse. "He's pretty enough, but don't you think the wax was a little...tame?"

The disdain in her tone made him wonder how it was she could in any way be related to Emma. Even more, how could Emma think for a second Lizzie was a victim here?

"You like your art with a little more bite, I take it."

"Yes," she said, meeting his eyes evenly. "You're a vampire. Don't you?"

"When I know I don't have to worry about greedy strangers taking away my favorite toy," came his swift response. "But if you have concerns about whether or not I

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can get a little bloody, why don't you ask Andre here? He can tell you my boy's been *more* than sampled."

Andre nodded. "There are marks on his neck."

Lizzie still didn't look very impressed. "I heard you were inspired by Pollock. Are you a big fan of the abstract expressionists?"

"Not particularly," Gideon said. "I'm a fan of genius. Pollock did art his way and told the world to fuck off. That deserves respect."

"That's why I always like him," Lizzie conceded.

"Lizzie's pretty good at telling the world to fuck off," Andre said with unmistakable fondness in his voice.

She brushed her lips across his jaw. "Do you mind if I go upstairs a bit early tonight? I'm getting a bit of a headache."

She was gone before Andre could say yea or nay, and Gideon tried not to look too interested in where she was going. He turned his back on the stairs she disappeared up and looked over the crowd.

"It's a good thing for me she's not in charge of booking," he commented. "Anybody else I should be on the lookout for? Other than Cristi, of course."

Andre turned to survey the room. "It depends on what you're looking for. We've got some heavy hitters here tonight. Did you want to meet anybody?"

It was the best opening he was going to get. "Which one's Xavier? Might as well start at the top."

"Oh, Xavier is still in New York. He was supposed to be here tonight, but something came up. Which, between you and

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me, is why Cristi is being such a bitch tonight. She doesn't get any for a few days and we all have to pay."

There were a lot of vampire/human combinations in this arrangement, it would seem. Maybe that was part of why Andre had been willing to give Gideon a break on not hurting Jesse tonight. But if Xavier wasn't here, then nothing was going to get accomplished by being at the party. He couldn't stop a man who wasn't present. The only good thing to happen was he had an invitation to the next party, but whether that meant he was going to get another shot at Xavier, he had no idea. Could he really keep asking Jesse to do this? The audition had been tough enough, and Gideon knew he loathed the hood now. It was only going to get worse. Especially if the guests demanded something a little more interactive next time. Or bloody.

"Speaking of..." Gideon muttered as Cristi steered back toward the exhibit.

Cristi looped her arm through Andre's, and the stench of alcohol hovered around her head in a cloud. She fished a cigarette out of her purse and unsuccessfully tried to light it. "Andre, there's something wrong in the kitchen. I don't know what's going on, but you know how these people get if their food is delayed."

She only gave Andre time to cast Gideon an apologetic glance before towing him away, leaving Gideon standing there alone, wondering what the hell he was going to do next. He glanced at his watch. Two more hours to go.

"Where the fuck did Andre go?"

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Lizzie's voice behind him made his skin crawl, but Gideon had his smile ready when he turned to face her. "Cristi needed him for a second," he explained. "I thought you weren't feeling well."

"More like feeling bored." She smiled apologetically, and she almost looked like Emma. "No offense. He does look good." Her eyes darted around the room, but then returned to him when she didn't find Andre. "I'm just tired of this place and Andre has the goddamned key to our room."

He tilted his head toward the bar. "Why don't we get a drink? I'll keep you company until he gets back." He stepped closer, pitching his voice lower. "I'm sure we can find *something* interesting to talk about."

She eyed him as though he were the one on display. "Yeah, I could use a drink." Lizzie led him over to the bar and beckoned at the bartender. "Another white wine please. And my friend here will have...?"

He scanned the bottles. "No blood on tap, I take it?" At the bartender's bemused shake of his head, he said, "Red wine then." As they waited for their drinks, he looked down at Lizzie. "So what would you do, if you got to make the display?"

Lizzie worried her bottom lip with her teeth for a moment before answering. "I really liked what they did with Jules. Oh, you weren't there for that party, were you? But I'm assuming you heard about it. Listen to me, everybody's heard about it at this point. I was intrigued by the posing. It was all very dynamic."

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Gideon wished he had a recorder of some sort, so that he could play back Lizzie's comments for Emma. Maybe then they could get her to believe her sister wasn't nearly as pure as she believed.

"What they did to her was what got me interested in coming to one of these." It was the truth, after all, even if not exactly how she would probably take it. "I heard it was fucking gorgeous."

"Oh, it was. It was a good show, all around. They put her in some interesting poses, and allowed a lot of interaction. I was a little surprised Andre chose something as static as your work after that, but I suppose he was interested in playing it safe. I mean, what you've done is less likely to bring the cops sniffing around, right?"

He knew it was irrational, but part of Gideon bristled at her words. Static. Safe. In all his existence, those were two words that had never applied to him. Ever.

Bitch.

"That's the sign of a good organizer," he said. "He knows how to mix it up. Keep a balance so the guests don't get bored. Xavier's done well having Andre in charge."

Lizzie accepted her drink from the bartender and smiled softly. "Andre really is something, isn't he? But he's been doing this for a long time, so I guess it's second nature. I try to tell him he should be running the whole show, but he says he likes this gig."

"Maybe he *should* be in charge." Gideon took a sip from his glass as he looked over the crowd. "If Xavier can't even

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make it to one of his own parties, why bother?”

“I don’t know what’s up with him. I never met the guy. He doesn’t sound like anybody I want to know, quite frankly. Plus, his wife is such a bitch.”

“Wife?” Gideon blinked. “Cristi?”

“Yeah, her. Sometimes I wonder if this whole thing is just an elaborate way to keep *her* entertained. Not that I’m complaining.”

The more he heard, the less Gideon liked. Vampires didn’t take wives. They took partners. Or toys.

Humans took wives.

All of this had been orchestrated by somebody human, not vampire.

He was suddenly very, very, *very* glad neither Jesse nor Emma could hear this conversation.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” he said, leaning closer to Lizzie. He didn’t like her, but the more he got her on his side, the easier this was going to be. “I’d planned on making the display a little more hands-on until Cristi jumped the gun. I changed my mind to piss her off.”

Lizzie snickered, her smile genuinely delighted. Her humor had such a sharp edge he wondered if Emma was ever on the wrong end of it. “Well, it serves her right. It’d explain why she’s been sulking all night. She didn’t get to play, and everybody here is going on about how much they’re enjoying your work.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Andre emerge from the other room, pausing in the doorway. It took a few seconds

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for him to spot them at the bar, and then a few more to navigate the party to get to them.

“Did we get lucky and Cristi fell into the soup?” Gideon commented.

“I think she might be on the phone with Xavier. She got that funny look on her face and scurried outside.” He wrapped his arm around Lizzie. “I thought you were going to our room?”

“You still have the key,” she reminded him.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” He fished the cardkey out of his pocket and pressed it into her hands. “Thanks for keeping her company.”

“Hey, it was my pleasure. And any other time you want me to entertain a smart and beautiful woman, just say the word.”

Lizzie kissed Andre’s cheek and then pulled away, running her fingers over Gideon’s arm as she passed him. “You can entertain me any time you like.”

Gideon opened his mouth to respond, but a movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. Two men—they definitely weren’t vampires—were standing directly over Jesse’s form, each holding a flickering candle, but neither actually touching Jess yet.

With a growl, he marched past Andre. Both men looked up as he approached, but neither seemed perturbed until he snatched the candle out of the closest man’s hand. A single drop of wax splashed over the edge, but it landed on the canvas between Jesse’s spread thighs.

“He’s perfect the way he is,” he snarled. “No more.”

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“Hey, man, lay off. I was trying to touch him up a little.”

“This isn’t an interactive display. You want that, you have to come to the next party.”

His eyes lit up. “Well, I hadn’t planned to, but if that means I can get a piece...”

Inwardly, Gideon kicked himself. He’d already decided he was going to have to accept the invitation for the next party, and now he’d stepped into committing to something that would involve others touching Jesse. But what choice did he have? Xavier wasn’t here.

He turned to Andre. “If you can guarantee me that Xavier will be at the next party, I’ll come,” he said. “From the sound of it, he’s the only one who can keep control of his wife and I’m not going to come back if she’s going to fuck up my work.”

Andre lifted his shoulder in a half-shrug. “Xavier’s plane is landing tomorrow at eleven. Unless something totally unexpected happens, he plans to be in town for the next week.”

“Then count me in for another party this week if you want me.”

Andre beamed at him and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. “Fantastic. Here’s the bonus I promised you.”

As he took the money, his stomach sank. Jesse was going to hate this.

But not any more than Gideon already did.

CHAPTER 17

Jesse's eyes drooped as Gideon smeared cold lotion over his back, soothing away the sting left from the wax, but he didn't allow himself to fall asleep. Gideon had refused to talk about the party up to that point, and Jesse wasn't going to rest until he had a full report. Still, a part of him suspected Gideon was trying to lull him, because his hands felt amazing, and he occasionally brushed his lips across Jesse's neck.

The night had been hell. Each hot dribble of wax had heightened his arousal, and even thinking about the monsters that were no doubt slobbering over him couldn't deaden his response. The result was almost painful. He had no hope of relief, and he hated every second of it, and he just wanted

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Gideon to touch him, and he was terrified. His body was pulling him one way, his brain pulling him another, and his instincts just told him to flee.

Gideon trailed his long fingers over the curve of his ass, and Jesse sighed. "I have been thinking about this all night."

A low chuckle rumbled through Gideon's chest. "Getting the wax off, or me playing with your ass?"

"Both. It's not very comfortable once it dries into a shell."

The fingers didn't stop, continuing on over the backs of Jesse's thighs. "You looked amazing, though," he said. "Everybody thought so."

"That's hardly a surprise, is it? I imagine you didn't allow a single drop of wax to land where you didn't want it."

The silence yawned between them, though Gideon never stopped massaging the lotion into his skin. He worked lower and lower, kneading even where Jesse wasn't nearly so sensitive. When he reached his feet, Gideon moved back up to his neck, starting over at the tight sinew.

Jesse turned his head, looking up to watch Gideon's face. He needed to ask for details, but as soon as he did, they would have to deal with it. He just wanted to deal with Gideon's massage for another few minutes.

"I don't suppose there are any photos documenting tonight's work?"

Gideon shook his head. His eyes were averted, dark and inscrutable, and the tight set of his mouth belied the gentleness of his hands. "You'll have to borrow Emma's if you want to see," he said. Jesse kept waiting for him to turn it into a joke

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or an entendre, but it never came.

Jesse frowned. Clearly, they were going to have to get the discussion out of the way, because they'd both be tense otherwise. "So what happened tonight?"

"Not what I'd hoped," came the terse reply. With a dissatisfied sigh, Gideon climbed off the bed, disappearing into the bathroom. The sound of running water echoed through the open doorway, and Jesse sat up, against the protest of his screaming muscles, to better hear what came next. "Xavier wasn't there."

His stomach seemed to rise to his throat. "He wasn't there? So we still don't have any idea who this guy is?"

"Oh, we've got an idea," he heard Gideon mutter. The water turned off, and he returned to stand in the doorway, wiping his hands off on a navy hand towel. "He's human, for starters."

Jesse's jaw actually dropped. He knew a human had been responsible for Jules's death. He suspected Lizzie was involved on some level. But he never thought the brain behind the operation could be a human. For several reasons.

"He's human, but he's got vampires working for him, and he regularly throws parties designed to attract and entertain vampires and God knows what else?"

"Let's not forget his wife. That was the bitch I told you about who wanted to break you out of the molding herself at the audition. Lizzie thinks this Xavier does these mostly to entertain her."

Jesse pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to process all

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the information. He couldn't close his eyes, because then he saw Jules, and he imagined a woman he never met cackling in glee over the spectacle, with Lizzie at her side. It was better to keep his eyes open and focused on Gideon.

"Well, it sounds like tonight wasn't a complete bust. You confirmed Lizzie is with Andre, right? And I imagine if we know where Cristi is currently staying, we can track down Xavier. How much time do we have before the next party? Will Andre be holding another audition? That might give us a larger window."

In the brief moment before Gideon turned and walked back into the bathroom, Jesse was convinced he saw a grimace cross his handsome features. "Andre's going to call me with the details of the next party," Gideon said. His voice sounded hollow where it was bouncing off the tiles. "But it'll be some time in the next week. Probably only two or three days."

Gideon's answer set off more than one alarm. Jesse pushed himself off the mattress, hobbling across the room on stiff legs. Leaning against the bathroom door, he asked, "Why is Andre going to call you with the details?"

Bits of colored wax flecked the sink where Gideon was digging them out from under his fingernails. "We can't show up if we don't know when and where it's going to be, now can we?"

"I'm sorry, I think I misheard you. I must have misheard you, because there's no way you just said what I think you said."

"It's the only way to get Xavier. Andre promised he'd

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show up for the display this time.”

If they had discussed this when his muscles weren't screaming, and his skin didn't still feel tight and burned, and his face wasn't slightly chafed from the hood, and the memory of being utterly helpless wasn't still so goddamned fresh, Jesse might have taken the news calmly.

“So you just agreed to make me go through that again without even talking to me first? I don't even get a courtesy warning?”

“Fuck!” The sudden crash of Gideon's fist into the wall cracked the tiles, sending ceramic shards and white dust raining over his hand. When he turned to face Jesse, his face was a mask of pure fury, though somehow, Jess suspected it wasn't aimed at him. “You think I like this? They're out for blood, Jess, and if I hadn't stepped in, they might have tried taking it tonight. I didn't have a fucking choice. Unless you *want* to find another girl strung up like Jules again, in which case, I'll give Andre a call and get us cancelled.”

“That is a hell of a thing to say to me.”

He pushed away from the door and turned to the bed, but knew he wouldn't be able to sleep. He switched direction and shuffled over to the dresser. “Can you even understand what it's like?” Jesse demanded without looking at him. “They're out for my blood and there's fuck-all I can do about it, and now you're telling me that...” He yanked a drawer so hard it came right off its runners and fell to the floor at his feet.

Gideon was there before he could crouch down and pick it up, scooping up the clothes that had spilled to the floor. He

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growled when Jesse batted his hands away, but refused to budge as they both slid the drawer back into place.

“I’m telling you that you’re going to be safe,” Gideon said. “I’ll figure out some way to satisfy the bloodlust without it affecting you. You *know* I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Gideon, I know this will come as a great surprise to you, but you don’t, and you *can’t*, control everything. There’s one of you and how many of them? A million things can go wrong, and I’ve had time to sit there and think about each and every one. How can you satisfy their bloodlust without actually giving them what they want?” He snatched a pair of sweats and leaned heavily against the wall to pull them on.

“I don’t know,” Gideon conceded through gritted teeth. “I haven’t figured that part out yet.”

Jesse straightened. “I don’t want Derek to find my body the morning after the party. And I especially don’t want him to be able to count the bite marks to try to piece together what happened. I don’t want to be in a position where this is even a possibility. And you didn’t even give me the chance to choose my own fate.”

“I thought you trusted me.”

“This has nothing to do with how much I trust you, Gideon. Nothing.” The room seemed to close in around him and he yanked the door open. “This is not a controlled environment. You fucking *saw* what they did to her. Look at me and tell me that tonight everybody was on their best behavior and nobody once tried to cross the boundaries you imposed.”

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Gideon looked at him, all right. And didn't say a word.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Jesse said, before leaving the room. He didn't like to walk away from Gideon when they were arguing—it made it too easy for Gideon to retreat into his own head. Things didn't blow over then; they just smoldered. But he couldn't stand to stay in that room, and he didn't want Gideon to see the naked fear on his face.

Because if he stripped away the thin veneer of anger, that was all that was left.

He thought about going up into the office, but he knew he couldn't take the stairs. So he went to the kitchen, pulling a beer out of the fridge for his suddenly parched throat.

Gideon didn't emerge from the bedroom. Frankly, Jesse wasn't surprised.

He had downed half the beer when he heard the light tread on the stairs, but he was too busy trying to reach oblivion to turn around. He knew who it was. Knowing when the party was going to end meant Michelle could bring Emma home at their pre-designated hour, but it was after two in the morning and she would be getting ready to go to bed right away.

He didn't even turn around when he heard her soft intake of breath in the doorway.

"What happened?" Emma asked.

She wouldn't believe him if he told her nothing happened; Jess was sure she probably felt his tumultuous emotions from outside the building. He finished off the bottle and tossed it into the trash with a little too much force.

"Xavier wasn't at the party, so Gideon, in his infinite

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wisdom, agreed to a second party. Without bothering to ask the display if that was going to be a problem. But that's okay, I have nothing to be afraid of except a room full of vamps, and humans, and their bloodlust."

Her eyes darted around the room, her head finally turning to fix on the bedroom door. Emma stared at it for long seconds before shifting back to Jesse. "Did you get hurt tonight?"

"No." He rotated his head, stretching the muscles in his neck. "No more than what was planned, at any rate."

"So why..." She stopped, her frown deepening as she looked behind her. In the next second, she was stepping out of the way as Gideon came barreling into the kitchen.

"What the fuck did you expect me to do?" He ignored Emma to march forward and shove Jess into the refrigerator. He was oblivious to Jesse's wince as fresh pain bloomed in his back, though Emma's sharp gasp meant she was more than aware. "You can't think I actually like this, can you?"

Jesse pushed both hands against Gideon's chest, allowing himself just enough room to get past Gideon. He wasn't going to be cornered and shouted at, or cower beneath Gideon's hard eyes, like he had done something wrong. Like he was being the unreasonable one.

"I'm sorry, I'm having a bit of a hard time putting myself in your shoes, Gideon. I didn't realize it was so fucking hard on you to be the one free to walk, and talk, and fight, and leave, and not be locked alone in the dark."

Emma blocked his exit. Twin spots of color had risen in her cheeks, and her breathing had quickened, but she remained

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firm when he attempted to navigate past her.

“Tell him you’re scared.” Her dark eyes were beseeching. “Tell him anything, Jess.”

“I did.” Jesse didn’t bother to disguise the fact that he was hurt. “But that doesn’t seem to matter right now.”

“No, what matters is that you trust me to make this right,” Gideon barked.

Emma’s head snapped around to stare at him. “You’re not helping.”

“Gee, and you figured that out all on your lonesome, did you?” His mouth curled into a sneer. “If you’d let us go after your bitch of a sister with guns blazing, we wouldn’t even be in this mess.”

Jesse spun to face Gideon, appalled. It was one thing for Gideon to lash out at him—Jess knew eventually they would put all of this behind them—but he didn’t expect him to be so vicious to Emma. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Don’t talk to her like that.”

“It’s okay, Jess.” Her voice was surprisingly calm. “He’s just trying to bait me so we don’t end up talking about what’s really wrong here.”

Gideon jabbed an angry finger in their direction. “Being able to tell Jess is pissed does not give you permission to interfere in this.”

“No, the fact that you two insisted on me sticking around when I wanted to go is. And Jess isn’t the only one I can read right now.”

Gideon’s eyes flashed. “Vampire, remember? You can’t

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read me.”

“I can’t read you *easily*. But the more I get to know you, the easier it gets.” Emma took an even step back in his direction. “And I’m not going to touch on the fact that you both are so wired right now, I’d have to be deaf and blind not to know how hurt both of you are.”

Jesse’s head was pounding. His inherent need for everybody to get along was starting to pull at his anger, and a part of him wanted to abandon his own frustrations and work on smoothing things over between Gideon and Emma. It was an almost ridiculous impulse, but it was strong. But beyond that, he wanted to scoff at Emma’s words. What had hurt Gideon? That Jesse didn’t want to quietly submit to something so fucking dangerous and painful?

“It doesn’t matter,” Jesse muttered, making another attempt to get past Emma.

This time, she grabbed his arm. “It *does*,” she said. “Don’t run away, please.”

Warmth radiated from her palm and spread up his arm. He recognized immediately what she was trying to do—replace the frustrated pain with something more peaceful. At first, he resented the attempt. These were his emotions, and he came by them honestly, and he had every right to suffer through every hellish second of them. But at the same time, the spark of heat was a welcome relief. But it was only a spark.

“We need to talk about this,” Gideon said.

The tips of Emma’s fingers began to stroke the underside of his arm. “I know how scared you are.” Her voice was as

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soft as her touch. “But you were there for me when I was so terrified at Sangre and the next morning. Let me be here for you now. Please, Jess.”

Jesse relaxed slightly, no longer poised for flight. He turned his attention to Gideon. “Do you want to talk about this? Or do you just want me to agree with you?” The question was more curious than confrontational. Even if Emma wasn’t fighting each wave of anger with her touch, Jesse was too exhausted to sustain the argument for much longer.

“I would’ve talked to you about this at the party if I’d had the chance,” Gideon said.

Jesse knew that was probably true, but despite his protests, that wasn’t the only thing bothering him. Gideon seemed to have complete disregard for what Jesse was feeling, and that was more confusing than anything else. He had never been so caught up in the greater good he was willing to sacrifice Jesse’s life for it, and now Jess didn’t know how to reconcile this apparent contradiction.

He felt like they were in a stalemate.

“Emma, can you...can you show him? What I’m feeling?”

Her eyes flew to Gideon, but before he could put up a protest, she slid her hand down to Jesse’s and entwined their fingers, dragging him back to face his lover. She kept Jesse at her back, pulling his hand around to rest it on her stomach. It effectively put them into a half-embrace, but in spite of the added warmth being pressed to her spread through his body, it was the way Gideon’s eyes locked on his that kept him still.

“Let me do this.” The repeat of her earlier intent was

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directed at Gideon this time, and slowly, Emma lifted her free hand to his broad chest. He flinched at the initial contact, only to gasp in the very next second.

Jesse was prepared for the slight pull of Emma tugging filaments of his feelings toward Gideon. What he wasn't prepared for was the slam of emotion that came ricocheting back.

Like before, it was easy to separate his emotions from Gideon's—even though in many ways they were similar. First, there was something like fear, though it wasn't the same sense of panic that Jesse couldn't shake. It was more specific. He was worried about his own lack of control—which Jesse found comforting. At least some part of him could acknowledge that Jesse was right about something. The fear threaded through frustration, which was pretty obvious, even without Emma's help.

But it was the wisps of helplessness and sorrow that smacked Jesse across the face. They seemed so completely foreign, so at odds with the mask Gideon presented the world. He did the only thing he could. He reached for Gideon's hand.

There was an undeniable tremor in the fingers that tangled with his. If it was possible for Gideon to get any paler, he had, and now his eyes darted from Jesse to Emma and back to Jesse again as he struggled against his own demons.

"I didn't realize," he whispered. "It's just..." His throat worked, and his tongue came out to moisten his dry lips. "Mary died because I didn't step up to the plate. I didn't want to take a...the risk, so she went out and did it instead. Without

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me. And died because of it.”

Jesse caught his breath, guilt lancing him—his own for thinking the worst of Gideon in his fear, as well as Gideon’s for everything, it seemed. Emma was trembling against him, and he thought this was probably an overload, too much for her. But he couldn’t stand the thought of breaking away and severing the connection.

“I didn’t...I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You couldn’t know. I never told you.”

“I’m sorry for lashing out at you. I know you wouldn’t...I know you don’t want me at risk, but it’s just...”

“I know.” Gideon’s dark eyes fixed on Emma. “Now.”

The hand she’d held over Jesse’s on her stomach was damp with perspiration, shaking though she didn’t move it away. “For two people who love each other so much,” she teased softly, “you two don’t talk nearly enough.”

“No,” Jesse agreed. “We don’t.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “Mainly because Gideon is as stubborn as an old mule.”

“Am not,” came the automatic response.

Emma’s hair was soft on Jesse’s bare chest as she turned her head to look back at him. “Did that help enough?” she asked softly.

“Yes. Thank you.” He leaned down on impulse, brushing his lips across her forehead. He relaxed his arm, loosening his hold and allowing her room to move away. “We’ve still got to talk, but at least things probably won’t come to blows.”

Her smile was as warm as his flesh, and as she slipped out from between them, Emma tilted her head toward the door.

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“Let’s do it sitting down then. You two look dead on your feet.”

As soon as she suggested sitting down, every damned ache and pain he had forgotten during the fight made itself known. Jess followed her to the living room, Gideon on his heels, and collapsed on the sofa without further warning. He held out a hand to Gideon, pulling him down to the cushion. Their bodies fit together perfectly, and Jesse closed his eyes, relieved. When he opened them again, Emma was gracefully lowering herself to the floor near their feet. He couldn’t help but smile at her.

“So what exactly happened tonight?” she asked, looking to Gideon. “You said Xavier wasn’t there. And...Lizzie? You saw her?”

They listened as Gideon related the events of the party, his conversation with Andre, how he’d coaxed information out of Lizzie. Emma blanched as Gideon detailed her ruthless comments, but outside of knotting her hands together in her lap, she didn’t interrupt, sitting silently until he finished speaking.

“So Xavier’s human, and Andre’s a vampire,” she said. Gideon’s nod had her ducking her eyes, her hair falling across her cheek as she processed it all.

Jesse watched her trying to make sense of it. He wouldn’t have chosen Gideon’s method of delivering the news—but he was rarely as blunt as Gideon. Her confusion and distress was evident to him, and it seemed like the space between them was much too wide, that she was isolated out of his reach, out of

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his ability to help her.

“Emma, why don’t you come up here and sit with us?” he invited, tapping the cushion beside him.

He felt the wave of relief before she rested a tremulous hand on his knee and slid onto the couch. As easily as he fit into Gideon’s side, she fit into Jesse’s, his arm going around her back as she burrowed her face against his chest.

“I didn’t want to believe it,” she pushed out on a breath. “I’m so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid.” The gentle scold in Gideon’s voice took Jesse by surprise, though he imagined it could be a deliberate attempt to placate her after his mean-spirited attack in the kitchen. “You wanted to believe in the best of someone you love.”

“As far as mistakes go, it’s not the worst one you can make,” Jesse added. Believing the worst of someone you love easily outstripped that, in his opinion. “But we do need to rethink what we want to do with her. I don’t think this is a rescue attempt anymore.”

When she lifted her head, a small frown creased her brow. “They’re human,” she said. “Shouldn’t that police friend of yours take care of it at this point?”

“Derek should definitely be involved,” Jesse agreed, “but we can’t just send him in. He knows about vampires, but the police, in general, don’t carry around wooden stakes and holy water.”

“So we take care of the vampires.” Gideon looked genuinely interested in the idea, brightening for the first time

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since the subject of the party came up in the bedroom. “Andre’s going to give me the details of the party ahead of time, so I can pass those along to Derek. We just make sure he arrives after it’s only humans left.”

Jesse nodded. “As far as I can tell, the parties always start and stop at the stated time. It’ll be easy enough to use Andre’s anal-retentive nature against him. We should make sure I have some mobility, and maybe choose a new hood that allows me to hear and see.” These were things Jesse probably would have insisted on anyway, but he felt good having a concrete reason for them.

“How big are these parties?” Emma asked.

“Not big,” Gideon said. “There were about a dozen people there last night. Half humans, half vampires.”

“Can you handle that many on your own?”

Jesse met Gideon’s eyes, and he saw the certainty there. Before Gideon could brashly proclaim his ability to take on small armies, Jesse cut in. “It depends on a number of things. But if they’re all drinking, and they’re not armed, then it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“But it would be better if you had more help.”

“It wouldn’t hurt,” Jesse admitted slowly. “Are you angling for an invitation?”

“Angling, sidestepping, asking head-on. Which one is going to get you to agree?”

“None of them,” Gideon said. “You’re not going.”

Gideon was using his firm, no-arguments-will-be-tolerated tone. It sort of made anything Jesse had to say redundant,

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because as far as he was concerned, there really was no arguing with him when he sounded like that.

“You’ve never staked a vampire, have you?”

The guilty slide of her eyes was a good enough answer for Jesse, but Emma spoke anyway. “No, but Michelle has, and if I asked her—”

“No.” Gideon had stiffened beneath Jesse again. “Don’t even think it.”

Jesse also felt mild alarm at the suggestion. “I think what Gideon is trying to say is that it’s very dangerous. And it’s not as easy to stake a vamp as you might think.”

Her jaw set. “I’m the only reason you’ve gotten as far as you have,” Emma said. “And the way I see it, you can either figure out how to get me in safely, or Michelle and I will crash the party and you’ll have to live with the consequences of me getting hurt.”

“How do you think we’ll feel if we agree to this and Andre finishes what he started?” Jesse asked softly. “Well, I can tell you how I’d feel. Pretty damned shitty.”

Though she still looked determined to argue, his testimony made her pause, her eyes softening as they jumped from Jesse to Gideon. With a sigh, Emma rested her cheek back on his chest and closed her eyes, coiling her arm around his trim waist.

“All right,” she conceded. “I won’t go.”

Gideon relaxed once again. Jesse dropped his head to his shoulder, realizing he was very comfortable between Emma’s heated body and Gideon’s cool, hard form. He kissed

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Gideon's skin lightly and glanced up through his eyelashes, watching his lover's face. Emma shifted, her hair tickling his stomach.

Jesse wanted to go to sleep.

"We'll have to work this all out tomorrow," he murmured. "We've got a lot of things to consider."

"We do," Gideon agreed. He glanced at Emma. "Do you want me to move her so we can go to bed?"

"I'd like to stay here a bit longer, if you don't mind."

With a small shake of his head and a smaller slant of his mouth, Gideon bent his head to brush his mouth across Jesse's temple. Then he leaned his hand against the back of the couch and closed his eyes.

Jesse knew they would have to deal with the fight and the emotions that were laid bare. Gideon would no doubt disagree, but Jesse understood now the price of keeping everything hidden and bottled up was too great. Still, he felt no pressing need to deal with it at that moment.

He kissed Gideon once again, mouthing "love you" against his shoulder, before closing his eyes. Emma's steady breathing lulled him to sleep.

CHAPTER 18

They left the office in silence after Gideon loaded the van with the necessary supplies. Jesse couldn't find anything to say. There was no small talk to make, and the details of the evening had already been discussed and hashed over and then discussed some more. But traffic was heavy, and the venue was on the other side of the city. Which meant they had a lot of time to brood over their own thoughts.

Jesse turned on the radio and began to fidget with the dial, but he hit nothing but static and commercials. It reminded him of the ongoing debate they were having about getting a cd player for Gideon's car. Gideon insisted it would ruin the classic veneer. Jesse insisted they could take baby steps into

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the twenty-first century. He flipped the radio off and the car plunged into silence again.

“I should have told you about how Mary died a long time ago,” Gideon said out of the blue. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel, his gaze fixed on the heavy traffic ahead. “I’m sorry.”

Jesse blinked. Gideon could have announced his heart was now beating, and Jess didn’t think it would have surprised him more. “Gideon...you don’t need to apologize for that. It wasn’t really any of my business.”

“It is when it means I make choices that hurt you because you don’t understand.”

“Well, that’s true,” Jesse agreed. “But I’m not sure it wouldn’t have hurt me even if I did understand.”

Gideon glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “Would it have made a difference in how angry we got with each other if you’d known ahead of time?” he asked. “Would we still have needed Emma to intercede?”

“It probably would have made a difference,” Jess conceded. “I think...yes, it would have made a difference for me to see the situation from your perspective. I don’t always understand what goes on in your head.”

“So I should have said something. My apology stands.”

Jess smiled. “Your apology is accepted. How ’bout next time, I give you a chance to explain before I...” He meant to make a joke of it, but he was still ashamed of himself, and his words faded.

Silence filled the car for a few more blocks. When they

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made a left that shifted them out of the heavy flow of traffic, Gideon said softly, “I’m not glad how it happened, but I *am* glad Emma did what she did. That was...intense. I didn’t expect it to feel like that.”

“It was. What did it...what did it feel like for you?”

“Like my worst nightmare come to life. Only I knew I had the power to do something about it this time.” When he caught Jesse’s frown out of the corner of his eye, Gideon shook his head. “I worry about making the same mistakes,” he admitted. “About repeating history that shouldn’t be repeated. And feeling how terrified you were and how betrayed you felt showed me how close I was to doing it, even when that was the last thing I wanted.”

Jesse closed his eyes. “You’re not going to make the same mistakes. I’m not going to let you.” He opened his eyes and added, “Okay, I don’t know what all those mistakes were. But, Gideon, I didn’t mean...you don’t know how much I regret that. What I thought.”

“You were angry. And hurt. Neither one is conducive to being rational. Look at what I said to poor Emma.”

“You know, if you didn’t happen to be about one hundred times stronger than me, I would have laid you flat for that.”

The sideways glance this time was more curious. “You’re very protective of her,” Gideon commented. “Do you know you fell asleep within seconds of when she did that night?”

“I was exhausted.” Which was true, but Jesse wasn’t sure he was being entirely honest. “And maybe she needs somebody to be protective of her.”

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“Well, I’m just glad her judgment seems to be improving. I’d much rather she trust us than that bitch of a sister.”

Jesse grimaced. He didn’t know what Emma was going to do once the parties were shut down, the vamps were staked, and the humans were arrested. She hadn’t volunteered, and he hadn’t been able to ask. But he knew a large part of her future plans had been centered around getting her sister back, and now...

“God, I’m going to be so happy when this is over and our lives go back to something like normal.”

“We need a vacation.” Gideon scowled at the slush piled at the sides of the road. “Someplace warm.”

“Right. Florida. I tried to talk you into that before, if you remember. Maybe next time you’ll listen to me.”

His hand reached across the distance to cover Jesse’s. “Next time, I will.”

Their destination loomed in the distance, and Gideon started to slow down, a frown creasing his brow as he peered more closely through the windshield. Jess followed his line of sight and saw a young man with multiple piercings pacing up and down on the sidewalk in front of the house, hands fidgeting restlessly at his side. The instant the man saw the approaching van, he leapt forward, coming out to the curb as Gideon rolled to a stop.

Gideon rolled down his window. “What’s wrong, Andre?”

Jesse looked away, not eager to give Andre a chance to study his face even though Andre’s chances of surviving the night were slim at best. But Andre didn’t seem to notice him.

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Jesse didn't know if the vampire was always so agitated, but he had the sound of a man right at the limit of his patience.

"Everything, that's what. God, I fucking hate this town. I really fucking do. The guy who owns the house decided he didn't want anything to do with it. Threatened to call the cops. Gave us a whole hour notice to pull our shit together and find another place."

Everything about Gideon stilled. "Does that mean there's no party tonight?"

Jesse tensed, unsure he could handle such a delay. Every part of him just wanted this to be over.

"No. Xavier wants to move on to New Orleans by the end of this week, and he committed to three parties here. He's already secured a new place. But you're only going to have thirty minutes to set up. Here." He passed a piece of paper through the window.

Gideon only gave it a glance before passing it over to Jesse. "That's going to affect my display, you know," he said. "I'm not going to have the time I need to make it as interactive as I promised."

"Do the best you can. Look, I know you've been wanting to meet Xavier. This is your one shot to impress him, so make it count."

With a terse nod, Gideon pulled into the nearest drive and turned around, heading back in the direction from which they'd come. As soon as he rolled up his window, however, a stream of curses erupted from his mouth.

"Get Derek on the phone," he said, tossing his phone at

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Jesse. “We need to catch him before he goes so he knows the change in address.”

Jesse was dialing before Gideon finished speaking. The phone rang and rang, finally kicking over to voicemail. He hung up and tried again, and a third time. On the fourth attempt, he left a frustrated message explaining the move and giving the new address. “Fuck.”

“Don’t tell me you can’t find him.”

“He’s not answering his phone. I don’t know, maybe he turned it off.”

It was Gideon’s turn to swear. “That’s not acceptable. We have to make sure he knows the change.” He paused for only a moment. “Call Emma.”

“What? Are we going to have her hunt him down?”

“Do we have a fucking choice? We can’t risk Derek not getting the message.”

Jesse didn’t think they did have another choice, but he had his doubts that it was a *good* choice. He dialed Michelle’s number and sighed with relief when she picked up almost immediately.

* * *

The Firebird roared through the streets, the seat rumbling beneath Emma’s bottom as she watched the other cars fall behind. Michelle handed the car like a pro, her foot heavy on the accelerator, and maybe under other circumstances, it would have left Emma gripping the arm rest, wondering if she was going to make it to her destination in one piece. Now,

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however, she was simply grateful Michelle's competence extended to her vehicle. There wasn't any time to waste. If Emma didn't get to Derek at the station before he left, Gideon and Jesse would end up in even graver danger than they already were.

The paper on which she'd scribbled the address was getting soft at the edges where she was worrying it with her fidgety fingers. One glance from Michelle had Emma tucking it into her pocket, but without something to do with her hands, she felt even more at loose ends. All she could think about was Gideon and Jesse walking in without back-up. Jesse was already on edge with the whole idea of going back anyway, and his détente with Gideon seemed tenuous at best to her. She didn't want this to be something that tore them apart. The fact they could easily not make it out alive only darkened her thoughts.

"Thank you for doing this for me," she said to Michelle for the third time since leaving the book store.

"I'm not," Michelle said, without taking her eyes from the road. "Not just for you at any rate. We're still a few blocks away. Use my phone to call ahead to the station, see if Derek is still there."

Grateful for something concrete to do, Emma picked up Michelle's phone and hit redial, her blood pounding in her ears as she waited for the front desk to answer. It took only a minute to confirm that Derek was still in the building, but just as she was about to say thank you and hang up, the secretary cut her off with a, "Wait a second, here he comes."

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Michelle glanced at her when she fell silent, but when the familiar voice of the detective came over the line, some of Emma's control snapped.

"The address for the party's changed," she blurted. "Jess and Gideon are headed there now, and they tried to call you, but you weren't answering your phone so they called me instead, so I could let you—"

"Wait. Wait. Slow down. Is this Emma?"

She grimaced at her stupidity. "Yeah, sorry. It's..." She almost said her full name before remembering they'd hid the fact she was Lizzie's sister from Derek and finished, "...me. We met that day at their office, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. Where are you now?"

"On my way to see you, actually." Emma took a deep breath, ready to try this again. "I know about what you're supposed to do with Jesse and Gideon tonight. But when they showed up at the address they already gave you, they found out the location had been changed. Jess said he left a message in your voicemail, but they were so worried about you not getting it in time they called me to see if I could get you in person."

There was a pause, and then rustling and muted cursing. "I've lost my phone. Okay, tell me the address. I imagine the time frame has changed. Did he mention anything?"

Emma pulled the paper back out of her pocket and read off the address down near the docks. "But everything else is still the same," she finished. "Apparently, they've only got half an hour to get ready instead of the usual two hours."

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“All right. Got it. Thanks, Emma.”

He disconnected before she could say good-bye, though Emma couldn't fault him. He was on a schedule. He had very important things to do.

And now she was left hanging again, wishing she was anywhere but sitting in the middle of traffic, wondering if the people she cared about were going to survive the night.

“How long do you think it would take us to get down to the docks?” she asked, studiously avoiding looking at Michelle.

“We could probably beat Derek there,” Michelle answered evenly. “Is that what you want to do?”

“Beat Derek there? No. But I would like to be there, just in case they need any extra help.” She risked a glance. “I owe Jess for getting me out of Sangre. I want to be there if he needs me.”

“Jesse told you he didn't want you there,” Michelle reminded her.

“That was before everything he had planned started to unravel,” Emma argued. “I'm not stupid. I'm not going to storm the castle. That's what Derek's for. But I know for a fact Jesse wouldn't sit back and do nothing if he thought for a second he could help. That's all I'm asking for. A chance to be there, in case they need me.”

“You promise me you're not going to do anything to get yourself killed,” Michelle said, taking a sudden left. Horns blared as they raced down the block. “And the second there's trouble, we're getting out of there. I just got a new paint job.”

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“I promise.”

Her heart was thundering again, though now for an entirely new reason. She would keep her word—to both Michelle and Jesse—but now, at the very least, she felt like she wasn’t sitting idly by while others did all the dirty work. She had been a part of this from the beginning.

She *needed* to be a part of it now at its end.

* * *

The change in venue had done nothing to diminish the guest list. Gideon stood near the cage, sipping at his red wine, as people milled about the expansive living room, their voices a low murmur that did nothing to drown out the tension roaring through his veins. It didn’t help that the smell of Jesse’s blood, drifting through the bars at his back, kept him hard and on edge, in spite of what was scheduled to happen in the next hour. He had to concentrate, though. The luxurious condo Xavier had managed to secure was uncharted territory. He needed to be aware of every exit possibility before they made their first move. He didn’t want anybody to escape what they deserved tonight.

Andre peeled himself away from the two men Gideon had stopped at the last party to saunter over to where he and Jesse had set up the cage. It took up a sizable portion of the room, but it also blocked the large front windows, preventing anyone to use them. Fortunately, their excellent reception at the last party had given them *carte blanche* to do their preparations in solitude. If they had had to do it with an audience, their plans

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would have been torpedoed even before they began.

“Looks like everybody made it,” Gideon commented as Andre approached.

“I had Lizzie stay behind to make sure everybody got the new address. She should be back any minute, though. She wouldn’t miss tonight for anything.”

Gideon made a mental note to keep an eye out for her arrival. He didn’t want Derek to miss arresting her when the time came.

“So Xavier is the one in the Armani at the bar?” It was the only unfamiliar face. It had to be the man.

Andre didn’t look away from the cage. “Yes. That’s him. Want to meet him?”

He didn’t want to look anxious, and the way Andre kept eyeing the cage made Gideon nervous anyway. “Oh, there’s no rush,” he said with a smooth smile. “I’m sure I’ll get the chance at some point tonight.”

“Count on it. Xavier is very interested in meeting you.” He leaned forward, his voice dropping. “I think he’s got a special request for tonight.”

Gideon’s nerves sharpened. “Oh? And what’s that?”

“Xavier wants to fuck him,” he nodded at the covered figure, “first. Cristi may have been put out last time, but she was very generous in her description of your pet. I’m telling you this because it would be better if you offered before he asked, you know?”

As his gut clenched, Gideon followed Andre’s attention back to the cage. Things were working a little differently

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tonight. Everything inside was set up for what Gideon had called his “unveiling” for later in the night. At the back, the sheet draping what he and Jesse had prepared barely showed the vague outline of a male body. Nobody could see the cuffs that suspended him from the bars, but those, too, were discernible if somebody got close enough.

Gideon didn’t want them close. It was another reason why he was sticking so near to the cage.

“I’ll remember that,” he said. “I take it the blood isn’t going to bother him?”

Andre smiled, not unlike a crocodile. “Do you think I’d work for him if it did?”

He chuckled, though maintaining the façade made him a little sick to his stomach. “Just making sure. Some of these humans...they like the *idea* of a little blood, but as soon as they have to do something other than look at it, they pussy out.”

“Not any of the people on Xavier’s guest list,” Andre assured him. “Look at them, Gideon. All these people go to their jobs every morning, go to their families every night, and long for an outlet. They’d never do anything on their own. They’d never take the chance. But here...” His fangs extended and he ran his tongue over the sharp tips. “They get to pretend they’re one of us.”

Gideon had the urge to wrap his hand around Andre’s throat and show him how the pair of them was *not* the same, but he stifled the urge by draining the rest of his wine. “Not quite, though,” he said, setting his glass down on a nearby

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table. “There’s no way they can appreciate just how good he smells right now, for instance.”

Andre’s nostrils flared. “Like heaven,” he agreed.

The comment eased some of his anxiety, and he elbowed the smaller vamp, almost good-naturedly. “Tell you what. When the time comes, why don’t you and me tag team with my pet? It’s the least I can do after everything you’ve done.”

Andre practically beamed, his fangs flashing through his piercings. The effect was chilling. “I haven’t had an offer that good in years.”

With Lizzie as a bedpartner, Gideon thought, it wasn’t surprising. But it didn’t matter how good Andre thought the suggestion was. When the time came, he was going to be as much dust as the rest of the vampires in the room. In fact, if Gideon had his way, he’d be the first to go.

* * *

Jesse could hear the party for the first time. It sounded like a normal get-together—chatter, laughter, glass clinking against glass. He imagined he could hear Gideon’s familiar deep voice as he waited for their signal. Derek was scheduled to arrive within the hour, but Jesse was keyed up, his body taut with anticipation. He tried to keep himself calm. He didn’t want to attract any unwanted attention, and an elevated heartbeat and waves of adrenaline would probably attract any vampire that happened to pass the door.

Jesse paced within the tiny confines of the designated prep room—a green room, of sorts, he supposed. There had even

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been refreshments waiting for Gideon when they arrived. Nothing for Jesse, of course. He licked his dry lips and wished Andre or somebody had at least provided a bottle of water. He supposed he couldn't complain too much—at least he was free to move and not locked in that cage.

Jess double-checked the weapons he had stashed at various points on his body. Three stakes and two blades that had been sharpened to a razor edge. He wore a set of brass knuckles on one hand, but he didn't plan to get in any fistfights with vampires. He wanted to avoid any violent altercations with the people, but he wasn't going to hesitate to bust their faces if it became necessary.

Despite everything, he was far from nervous. He was excited. Soon, all those nasty excuses for human beings and their evil vampire buddies would be stopped.

The door flew open, an almost-familiar girl standing in the hall. They both froze, staring at each other.

Perhaps it would all be over sooner than they planned, Jesse reflected, as she opened her mouth to scream.

CHAPTER 19

Through the closed car windows, Emma heard the rising wind as they approached the address Jesse had given her. They were close to the lake, that meant. Further proof was the occasional snowflake that clung and then melted on the windshield.

The location itself was a condo, in the middle of one of those lakefront properties that always cost about two hundred percent more than anything else in the city. This one looked large, though, but what that might mean for Jesse and Gideon, she had no idea. Other vehicles were scattered around, but it looked for all intents and purposes like a quiet night, and a quick swivel of her head told Emma the cops had yet to arrive.

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Her gaze fell on the van she recognized all too well. At least she had confirmation the guys were actually here. Was everything going to plan? Had they been discovered for their duplicity? Was Lizzie here, too?

She had too many questions and zero answers. For the first time since deciding she wanted to come, Emma was beginning to regret her choice. She'd given her word she'd sit on her hands and stay out of danger. Now that she was here, that was going to be a lot harder to stick to.

"Do you think we'll be able to hear anything out here?" she mused out loud.

"I think you need to relax," Michelle said bluntly. "I'm sure when all hell breaks loose, we'll know it."

"Aren't you worried about them?"

Michelle studied her face for a long moment before answering. "No. Gideon has been in worse spots than these. And Jesse isn't stupid, despite that one stupid thing he does."

It was tempting to argue with her about the foolishness of Jesse's involvement with Gideon. Emma knew how Michelle felt about Gideon, would have known even if Michelle hadn't made more than one pointed comment about the vampire, but she also knew that it would be impossible to try and explain what she felt every time she came into contact with him. There were reasons Gideon kept that part of himself secret to the world, and Emma wasn't going to be the one to spread them around, no matter how much she liked Michelle.

"I'm still worried," she said, turning back to the window. Slivers of light from the party inside filtered through the

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closed curtains. “I don’t think I’ll be able to relax until I know this is over.”

“I know. But they’re both going to walk out of there in one piece. I promise you. Do you think if I didn’t believe that, I’d agree to bring you here?”

“I guess not.”

Her breath was starting to fog the glass, and she lifted a hand to wipe it away. She didn’t want anything obstructing her view. Michelle might have confidence they’d be aware of the upcoming fight, but Emma wasn’t so sure. Right then, that condo might as well have been in another state for as close as she could get to it.

Be careful, guys.

* * *

The screams from the upper floor made everything in the room stop. Heads jerked in the direction of the stairs, limbs immobile as the unexpected sound rooted them to their spots. Only Gideon and Andre reacted, both vampires taking a step toward the stairs. There was no mistaking who the scream belonged to. It was Lizzie.

And Jesse was upstairs.

Just as quickly as the cries of Andre’s name had split the air, they disappeared, leaving several seconds of dead silence as the implication sank in. The murmurs began in the far corner, and a pointed frown from Xavier had Andre holding up his hands to get their attention as he backed toward the stairs.

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“It’s just Lizzie, folks,” he said. “She probably saw a spider in the sink or something. I’ll go take care of it.”

Though he climbed the stairs as if there weren’t an emergency, Gideon saw how tense the muscles in his back were. They mirrored how he felt. He had no doubts that Lizzie had found Jesse. And now Andre was on his way. If Lizzie was hurt, Andre would lash out, and Jesse would be at the brunt of that.

His instincts screamed at him to go up and take care of the problem. But with Andre gone, the crowd had resumed its normal conversation and more than a few of them were glancing in his direction. If he left the cage, they’d discover the ruse, and the humans might escape before Derek arrived.

His dark eyes flickered to the ceiling. Jesse had weapons. Jesse had killed his fair share of vampires before, and this was a single adversary. He had to trust Jesse to take care of himself.

That didn’t mean he liked it.

* * *

Jesse lunged for her, but he wasn’t fast enough to stop her from screaming Andre’s name over and over. He reached for her arm, but she jumped back, and his fingers brushed over her smooth hair. He gripped a handful and yanked her into the room, slamming the door behind her. She was still shouting for Andre. His free hand came down hard over her mouth, finally cutting off the sound.

“Shut up,” Jesse hissed.

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She struggled passionately against his attempt to pull her against him, her elbow going directly into his ribs. Did she go berserk like this every time she stumbled over somebody unexpected? There was no way she could recognize him. And even if she did, why would she immediately start screaming for Andre?

Despite the pain in his ribs, Jesse's hold on the girl didn't loosen. He gripped her face with bruising strength and held her head immobile against his chest. She dug her nails into his hand and clawed it away from her mouth.

"I know who you are," she spat.

"What?"

"I saw you with her." She brought her heel down on his foot, startling him into releasing her. She spun around, her eyes flashing. "What do you think you're doing here? Did she send you here?"

Jesse finally noticed her eyes, the shape of her lips and nose, even the sound of her voice. "You're Lizzie."

"Nothing gets by you. I told her I wasn't leaving Andre, and I meant it."

"Was that before or after Andre locked her in the basement?" Jesse flung back.

She didn't even have the grace to look ashamed. "We were just trying to scare her a little."

Jesse clenched his fist. He had never hit a woman, and he wasn't going to smash her teeth in, even if he was sorely tempted. "What about selling her to Slater? Was that just to scare her, too?"

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Her eyes narrowed. “You made a big mistake coming here. I don’t know what she told you, but I guess it doesn’t really matter. You’re never going to see her again.”

As if on cue, the door flung open, and a short vampire with very familiar piercings stalked into the room. Despite his flashing yellow eyes and sharp teeth, Lizzie immediately ran to him, ducking behind his back. Jesse reached for the stake resting in his belt.

“You must be Andre,” Jesse greeted calmly. He wasn’t nervous, despite Andre’s superior speed and strength. This was the man who had cruelly held Emma captive, who had sent her into a den of monsters. This was the man who had orchestrated Jules’s death and countless others.

“Who the fuck are you?” His nostrils flared, and Jesse didn’t miss the confusion and sudden recognition in his eyes. “What’s going on here? You’re supposed to be in the cage.”

“There was a slight change of plans,” Jesse said, holding the stake at the ready.

Andre snarled. Jesse didn’t know which enraged him more—that once again, plans had changed without his consent, or that Jesse was threatening him with a stake. Either way, Andre clearly wasn’t going to tolerate the situation. He sprung at Jesse, coiled strength erupting into the air. Jesse stood his ground, positioning the stake over his heart, pointed at Andre’s chest.

The vampire landed on him hard, sending them both to the ground. Andre froze. For a single second, he was nothing but dead weight. There was no struggle. He didn’t move to rip out

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Jesse's throat. And then he was dust.

When Jesse lifted his head, Lizzie was gone.

* * *

The single set of footsteps descending the stairs turned Gideon's stomach to lead. As Lizzie came into view, he edged around the corner of the cage, positioning himself in easy reach of the weapons they'd already stashed. If everything had worked according to plan, he wouldn't have moved until it was time to give Jesse the signal, but this wasn't the plan. This was a fucking mess. He didn't know if Jesse was alive or dead, and he couldn't even risk running to the second floor to find out. That would trap both of them upstairs. He had to count on Jesse's skill and intelligence to survive Andre's attack.

Gideon palmed the stake, honing in on the nearest vampire. He remained tense as Lizzie came flying off the stairs, but when she ignored him completely to head for the bar, his gaze jumped back to the upper floor.

No sign of Andre. That was both good and bad.

She grabbed Xavier's elbow, forcing him to bend to speak in his ear. Despite her hushed tones, Gideon heard her clearly—as did all the other vampires, no doubt.

“Andre is dust.”

The ripple of tension that spread through the crowd was mirrored in Xavier's stiff shoulders. His shrewd eyes scanned the crowd before leaping back to Lizzie's. “How is that possible?”

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“A stake through the heart,” Lizzie said icily. “Isn’t that the normal way? Somebody’s crashed your party. He’s upstairs now.”

The vampires were moving before she’d even finished speaking, but before any of them could reach the staircase, Gideon was there, blocking their way.

“What, skipping out so soon?” His hand shot forward, driving the heretofore unseen stake through the chest of the nearest vamp. “Anybody else want to try leaving?” he said through the falling dust.

“She sent you both, didn’t she?” Lizzie asked, her words laced with disgust. “Sorry, Xavier.” She took him by the shoulders and kissed him soundly on the lips. “It’s been fun, but I’m out of here.”

Gideon barely had time to notice her making a dash for the kitchen before the rest of the vampires surged forward. With their human companions hanging back—all too confident that this single dissident would be dispatched soon enough—they attacked with fangs bared, hands curled into claws and fists that tried to pull Gideon away from the stairs.

He lashed out at the first to grab him, the heel of his hand driving into someone’s nose. Bone crunched and blood spurted over his palm, but the fresh scent only spurred the others on. Snarls filled his ears, but in their evening finery, they weren’t as equipped as Gideon was for the fight he knew would come that night. One woman tripped when an overzealous vamp stepped on the hem of her dress, and the subsequent distraction was enough for Gideon to send two

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more sailing across the room.

Gideon sensed Jesse behind him as two more vampires approached, but he couldn't focus on what Jesse was doing. They would take advantage of any opening he provided—and allowing Jess to distract him was definitely an opening. He braced himself, slamming his fist into the vampire on the left, connecting with his gut. He shifted his weight to attack the second vamp, but before he could make contact, the vamp burst into dust.

“Sorry,” Jesse said, stepping beside him. “She split before I could stop her.”

“But you got Andre.” The first vampire was already straightening, and Gideon grabbed the fist aimed at his face to twist the arm behind his would-be assailant's back. “And things were getting a little boring down here anyway.”

He fell forward when the vampire he held adjusted his center of gravity, leaving Jess alone as the other vamps tried to fill Gideon's place. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jess throw a heavy dagger he'd used to decapitate more than one demon in the past, but the blade missed its mark, embedding in the neck instead of slicing through. The vampire stopped, his voice a bloody gurgle, but before he could reach and yank it out, Jesse was on him, hands tight around the hilt, muscles straining as he sliced through the sinew.

He fell to the ground as the vampire exploded into dust beneath him.

Gideon caught an elbow to the ribs from his distraction, but just before he turned his full attention back to the fight at

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hand, he saw Jesse roll onto his back in time to bury a stake he'd had tucked up his sleeve into the chest of a third attacking vampire.

Gideon grinned, his punches renewed with fresh energy.

He worried too much about Jess sometimes. The boy was fucking beautiful when he was on the mark.

* * *

She had been so intent on the front door that she almost missed it. A shadow separated from the side of the condo, rushing through the dark toward the street. Emma's heart leapt into her throat when she recognized her sister's familiar shape, and before Michelle could stop her, she was fumbling with her door, scrambling out, and darting to intercept.

"Lizzie!" she called.

Lizzie stopped short and turned slowly. To Emma's relief, she looked the same—she looked healthy. "Emma? Is that you?"

In spite of everything Gideon had told her, Emma couldn't stop from feeling glad Lizzie was alive and well. She closed the distance, vaguely aware of a car door slamming shut behind her, and searched her sister's face.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You have no idea how worried I've been about you."

"I am now." Lizzie wrapped her arms around Emma, pulling her into a tight hug. "Oh, God, Emma, you have no idea how awful it's been."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say, "yes, I do," but

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Emma was too overwhelmed by the fact that Lizzie had gotten out alive to do anything more than squeeze her sister back. Only when Lizzie pulled away did Emma find her voice.

“What’s going on in there?” She nodded toward the condo. “How did you get out?”

“Xavier knows Gideon was there to get me out. He didn’t want me to go. Gideon told me to get out and...tell you to take me somewhere safe.”

Emma looked again at the front windows, but they were just as dark and still as they had been before. “I can do that,” she said, slipping her hand into her sister’s. She began pulling her back to the car. “My friend will get us both out of here.”

Lizzie stuck close as they approached the car. The Firebird’s engine revved to life, and the headlights flashed on, momentarily blinding her. Lizzie dove into the front seat as soon as Emma opened the passenger door, and Michelle looked at her with an arched brow.

“Is this your sister?”

Emma slid inside, pinning Lizzie between them. “Yeah,” she said, leaning forward to meet Michelle’s eyes. “So we’re going to take care of her.” She rested her hand on Lizzie’s knee and squeezed, giving her a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry. It’s all over now.”

* * *

The second he saw the humans start heading in the same direction Lizzie had taken, Gideon grabbed the collar of the vampire attacking him and threw him at Jess, shouting a word

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of warning at the same time. It gave him the time and space to cut the humans off, and he smiled around his fangs when they visibly paled.

“Torture a few girls and you people think you know what it means to be a vampire,” he sneered. “Have you figured out how wrong you were yet?”

Jesse positioned himself between the crowd and the front door, looking like he was just waiting for somebody to give him an excuse to use his brass knuckles.

“Just who the fuck do you think you are?” Xavier demanded.

“The evening’s entertainment, remember?” He jerked his head toward the cage. “And if you don’t want to end up looking like a Picasso, I suggest you get in there where I can keep an eye on you.”

Xavier looked over his shoulder to Jesse and then back to Gideon, like he was weighing his options. The humans around him shifted, looking at the cage disgust, but nobody made a move. Cristi clung to Xavier’s arm, genuine fear reflected on her face.

“You’re going to regret this,” Xavier warned, leading his wife into the cage.

Flashes of strobing scarlet danced behind the drawn curtains, followed by the distant sounds of doors slamming. Gideon caught Jesse’s eye and nodded toward the door before nudging the nearest human with the blunt end of his stake.

“It’s going to be hard for you to do anything when you’re behind bars. And I don’t mean these.”

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Jesse watched the police approach for a few seconds before opening the front door. He held up his hands, reassuring the new arrivals that he wasn't a threat and called out, "Come on in, Officer O'Dell. Everybody's waiting for you."

He stepped back, allowing Derek and several other armed officers to enter. One of the women started to cry.

Derek barked instructions for his men to start cuffing the humans before coming to stand at Gideon's side. "A woman crying in your presence," he commented casually. "Color me not surprised."

"Oddly enough, she didn't like the show."

"She's going to like jail even less."

"What happened to Lizzie?" Jesse asked.

"*Fuck.*"

The satisfaction Gideon had been feeling dissipated. Lizzie was the only person they could connect to Jules's death. Without her, there was no proof any of the people present tonight had done anything wrong. Without her, everybody would walk, including Xavier. Without Lizzie, this would all start up again in a brand new city with brand new victims.

And Lizzie was gone.

CHAPTER 20

Though Derek insisted he needed him to stick around for a statement, Gideon took off for the kitchen, blocking out all the scents of food and blood and dust filling the condo to concentrate on finding Lizzie's scent. Jesse was right on his heels, but he didn't say a word as Gideon stood in the middle of the room, eyes closed as he focused.

The cook had singed the shrimp for the cocktails.

One of the women had been menstruating.

Another had been wearing Hanae Mori.

And there it was, overlaying all of them, the scent so similar to Emma's, laced with fear and anger.

With long, determined strides, Gideon followed it to the

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back door, stepping out in the night. The frigid air intensified the trail, but the winter provided fresh aid. Lizzie's hurried footsteps gleamed in the broken snow, leading him away from the condo and around its side. Jesse stayed close behind, out of the way, even when Gideon's pace slowed to accommodate the change in the trail.

She had slowed down.

He followed it only a few more feet before he saw the other set of footprints leading up to Lizzie's.

"She met somebody," Gideon muttered. He sniffed, and the added scent made his jaw clench. Without looking back at Jesse, he barked, "Call Michelle."

He heard Jesse dial the number, heard the phone ring twice, and then Michelle's distant voice. "What's going on, Jess?"

Jesse walked over to Gideon's side, studying the small prints. "Derek's got all of the people in custody, as planned. Do you have Emma?"

"Yes."

"Do you have her sister?"

"Yes."

"Ask her if everything is under control," Gideon said without looking away from the trail.

"Are the three of you okay?"

"We're fine."

Gideon started to walk, following the trail to the tire tracks. Jesse followed. "Would you like us to meet you somewhere? Or send some of Derek's men?"

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“You don’t need to worry about anything. Everything is going well over here.”

He listened to Jesse disconnect, his pulse already slowing down from his initial anxiety following Gideon. Jesse believed Michelle. While Gideon wasn’t quite as quick to put his faith in her, he did have faith in Emma. That would do.

* * *

Lizzie’s arm was warm against Emma’s, the Firebird’s interior cozy. Michelle’s driving had slowed a little after leaving the condo, and now she was slowing even more as she pulled off the familiar stretch of highway. Jesse’s phone call had startled Emma, but what he was asking Michelle, she had no idea. Only Michelle’s calm demeanor allayed her fears. If Michelle wasn’t scared, then she wouldn’t be either.

“Where are your things?” she asked Lizzie.

“At Andre’s house,” Lizzie muttered. “But I don’t need anything. I just...I just want to put all of that stuff behind me.”

“You know, Mom and Dad have been really worried.”

Lizzie took a deep breath. “I know. Emma, you have to believe me, I never meant to hurt them. But Andre...”

As Michelle turned the final corner to their destination, Emma met her sister’s eyes. “Oh, I know all about Andre. But you stayed with him for a month anyway, now didn’t you?”

“Emma, I didn’t stay,” she immediately protested. “He wouldn’t let me leave. You should have heard some of the things he used to say to me.”

“Oh? Like what?”

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Lizzie responded without hesitation. “If I left him, he’d find you and kill you. Mom and Dad, too. Everybody I loved. He said he’d hunt you all down one by one. I didn’t have any reason to think he was lying.”

“So you were in his house the entire time?”

“I...I don’t know. It was all so confusing.”

Emma’s gaze never wavered. “Did he tell you he chained me up in his basement? Or that he tried to auction me off to a bunch of vampires? Did you get to see what he called art, Lizzie?” The car slowed as Michelle prepared to turn into the parking lot. “Or did you give him his inspiration for what he did to those girls?”

Now Lizzie’s veneer began to crack. Her eyes widened, her lips parted, and instead of the steady waves of fear and relief that Emma had picked up, she felt a sudden flash of anger, like unexpected lightning touching down from a blue sky.

“What are you talking about, Emma? Are you really accusing me of...something so horrible?”

“I don’t have to.” Her eyes flickered to the police station looming in front of them. “The cops will do it for me.”

Lizzie stiffened, and now all of that fear seemed genuine. “Turn this car around. Emma, tell her to turn it around, or anything Andre did to you will seem like a caress.”

“Nothing’s worse than knowing how wrong I was about you all these years,” she replied. “You might want to work on your whole showing remorse act. Considering how much evidence the police have against you, I think they’re going to

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be an even harder sell than me.”

Lizzie moved suddenly toward Michelle, like she planned to rip the wheel from her hands. Michelle calmly put her hand up, the heel of her palm connecting solidly with Lizzie’s nose.

“You don’t ever touch the steering wheel,” she admonished. “It’s dangerous.”

“If you think I’m going in there, you’re crazy,” Lizzie said bitterly. “As soon as you open that door, I’m gone.”

“You do that, and Michelle will shoot you.” Emma leaned forward to look at her friend. “Won’t you, Michelle?”

“Oh, yes. I know you thought Andre and his boss were untouchable, but they could only fantasize of the connections I have. I’d be home and in bed before your body was even cold.”

“Do you want to see me shot, Emma? Would you be able to sleep at night if you knew you were the reason Mom and Dad had to go through the pain of burying their child? Their *normal* child?”

Emma smiled, though her heart was breaking from what she’d had to do. “Considering all the pain and suffering you’ve been responsible for, I’m beginning to think being normal is hugely overrated. This is it, Liz. The end of the line.”

* * *

“Yeah, thanks, Michelle.” Jesse hung up the phone and looked across the room to where Gideon stood with Derek, giving the last of his statement. Derek had wanted Gideon to

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come with him up to the station because Gideon's statement promised to be very long, but Gideon had refused. Jess wished they had gone directly to the station—but according to Michelle, Emma was fine and she was going to take her back to the store for tea.

Jesse had been on the receiving end of Michelle's tea more than once, and he thought that sort of comfort was exactly what Emma needed.

"Michelle and Emma turned Lizzie in," Jesse announced.

Gideon and Derek looked up at the same time. "What was that?" Derek asked.

"They drove her directly to the station and turned her in. Lizzie is in custody, and Michelle said Emma is fine. They're going back to the store now."

"I guess I better get down there." Derek closed his notebook and slipped it into his pocket. "I'll probably give you a call tomorrow."

Gideon nodded. "I've got a few things at the office that might help your case," he said. It amazed Jess how calm Gideon was, how calm he'd been ever since hearing from Michelle the first time. He had been patient and helpful with the police as they'd cordoned off the scene, and now, walking with Derek out to his car, he acted as if he didn't have a care in the world. It was mildly disconcerting.

Jesse felt a swell of relief as Derek settled in his cruiser. He knew the whole ordeal was far from over. They still needed to gather enough evidence to press charges on Xavier and Cristi, at the least. Then there was the trial, and the fear

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that Xavier had enough influence and money to get out of the trial. But he knew Derek would do everything by the book, and his own contribution was over. From here on in, everything was out of his hands, and he had to be happy that he did his best.

That they all did their best. He was so proud of both Gideon and Emma. Especially Emma. She had been in a hard place, but she made the right decision.

Gideon had bent to talk to Derek, but straightened as he pulled away, leaving them alone in the parking lot. Jesse walked over to his side with a deep sigh. “You ever notice how our plans rarely go as well as we envision?”

Gideon shrugged. “The way I figure it, one of these days, the world is going to realize how brilliant we are and just let us do our job for a change.”

“Come on,” Jesse said, turning to the van. “I need to get home and shower. Vamp dust is itchy.”

They walked side by side, Gideon’s strong arm brushing against Jesse’s. Within a foot of the passenger door, however, the arm disappeared in a swift flash of movement that had Jesse pushed face first into the cold metal. Gideon pressed into him from behind, one hand like steel on Jesse’s hip, the other jerking Jesse’s coat collar to the side, and then he was sucking at Jesse’s neck, biting and licking at the exposed skin.

“You were fucking amazing tonight,” Gideon growled. He ground his hips against Jesse’s, and even through his coat, Jesse felt the definite line of his erection. “When you dragged your knife through that vamp’s throat...” A tremor ran through

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him. The next moment, he sank his blunt teeth into the first spot he'd ever bitten Jess.

Jesse moaned, dropping his head to the side. A jolt went from his throat directly to his groin, but it was the praise more than the gentle bite that warmed him. He covered the hand on his hip, squeezing Gideon's fingers. "I guess I'm getting better at hand-to-hand."

Gideon inched his fingers forward, seeking out the hardening length of Jesse's cock. "We need to start training more together." Roughly, he rubbed his palm down the shaft, cupping Jesse's balls through the soft denim. "I can show you some new moves."

Jesse shuddered, thinking about what it would be like to train with Gideon. He was sure Gideon would take it seriously—mostly. He pushed back against Gideon's groin, grinding into his erection. "I'd like that. We can start tomorrow."

"It already is tomorrow." He yanked down Jesse's zipper and slid his cold hand inside. "And I've got other plans for right now."

Jesse sucked his breath in sharply. His balls tightened at the first cool contact, but Gideon's hand began to warm as he gripped Jesse's heated shaft. He began pumping his wrist, creating more warmth from the friction, turning Jesse's knees to rubber. Too many layers of clothes separated him from Gideon's cock, and he jerked his hips with frustration.

"The back of the van is empty," Jesse reminded him, eager to see exactly what Gideon had planned.

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“The back of the van is too fucking far away,” Gideon muttered. Releasing his hold, he grabbed Jesse’s wrist in an iron grip and hauled him the two feet sideways until Jess was shoved against the hood of the car. Keeping his palm between Jesse’s shoulder blades to keep him down, Gideon yanked on his jeans, exposing his ass to the chilly air. “Oh, yeah...” He could practically hear Gideon licking his lips. “I’m going to split you open right here, boy. I’ve wanted to do this all night.”

The dark promise, the firm weight of Gideon’s hand on his back, and the edge of the hood pressing into his stomach made him weak with desire. If this was the sort of treatment he could expect after killing vampires, he’d go out and find a few to stake every damned night. His cock throbbed even as his skin erupted in goose bumps.

“Oh, yes,” he murmured, though his encouragement wasn’t needed.

Gideon ran his finger along the crack of Jesse’s ass, skipping over his waiting pucker to reach between his thighs and grab Jesse’s balls. There was nothing gentle about the way he fondled them, squeezing and rolling them between his powerful fingers until Jess was squirming against the cold metal. When he gave them a particularly vicious tug, Jesse yelped in surprise, arching back until Gideon shoved him to the hood again.

“Like you’re not dripping for even more,” he taunted.

Abruptly, he released his hold. Jesse blinked, but when he opened his eyes again, Gideon’s hand was right in front of

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face, fingers probing his mouth.

“Suck them, boy. I’m not waiting for lube, so this is all you’re going to get.”

Jesse quickly parted his lips, his tongue gliding along Gideon’s rough skin. He sucked on the fingers eagerly, wetting them up to the third knuckle, his ass clenching every time Gideon thrust his hand forward. Gideon pulled away after only a few moments, and his fingers immediately went to Jesse’s waiting hole. He cried out as Gideon pushed two in without warning, and then rotated his wrist to add a third.

“Fuck, but you’re tight,” Gideon muttered. His strokes were rough, his nails scratching against the inner walls. He let go of Jesse’s shoulders, and in the next second, the sound of a zipper filled Jesse’s ears, followed immediately by the heavy tap of Gideon’s cock slapping against his ass as it sprang free.

Jesse held his breath as Gideon pulled his fingers out. Grasping his hips, Gideon used his thumbs to spread Jesse’s cheeks, the tip of his cock running down the exposed crack. There was no hesitation when it skimmed over his hole. Gideon slammed his cock past the tight outer ring, not bothering with any more niceties of stretching him, not bothering to even stop until his heavy balls slapped against Jesse’s thighs.

Jesse bit down on his lip to keep from screaming and attracting attention, but he didn’t know how long he’d be able to remain silent. It felt like Gideon was making good on his promise to split him open, and each hard thrust sent Jesse’s teeth deeper into his soft skin until the familiar taste of copper

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filled his mouth. Though he kept the screams at bay, he wasn't silent. All the pleasure and frantic hunger building in him needed an outlet. Grunts and desperate moans rose above them, and the car rocked with the force of Gideon's pistoning hips.

A growl seeped through his own frenzied noises. It took Jess a moment to realize it came from Gideon and not himself, but by the time his brain had made the connection, Gideon was leaning heavily against him, grinding Jesse's aching cock into the icy hood.

"Your lip is bleeding," Gideon hissed. "You did that on purpose, didn't you? Don't deny it. You've got a fucking knack for knowing exactly how to make my head spin."

Jesse didn't know if he did it on purpose or not, but he wouldn't deny Gideon's charge. When Gideon was pounding into him, Jesse couldn't deny him anything. He couldn't speak either. So he turned his head, resting his ear against the hood, and letting Gideon see the blood that was pooling in the indentations on his lip.

Gideon growled again. Lifting a hand, he threaded his fingers through Jesse's hair and yanked his head up, slamming their mouths together. He sucked at the lower lip, cleaning it of the blood, and when they parted, his eyes were glittering.

"Know what else I love about this case being over?" he said. His features shifted, his fangs extending to gleam in the dull winter night. "I don't have to worry about leaving fresh marks on you any more."

"Oh, God, me too. Me too," Jesse panted, tilting his head

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without shame. A large part of him wanted Gideon to take him home and cover him with fresh marks to make up for all the times Gideon couldn't bite him in the past week and a half.

Gideon raked his fangs over Jesse's neck, leaving behind slivers of heat that started a fresh round of shivers through his body. His ass burned from Gideon's savage strokes, but Jess no longer felt the cold, his flesh warmed through by the flush of his lover's promise, the fire of imminent release.

"You were so fucking hot tonight," Gideon murmured. "But I like you best when you're at my mercy, when I'm drowning in the taste of you, drowning in our come." He dragged his fangs again along Jesse's skin, scoring a second set of scratches, and stopped over his favorite spot right at the curve. "Beg me to bite you, boy. Tell me how bad you want it."

"Bite me," Jesse gasped, his body taut and quivering, his head spinning. "Please, Gideon, I need it...I need to feel your teeth. I want to feel you...inside of me...completely."

The strike came without added warning, pinpoints of pain and pleasure that sank and spread until Jess felt them scorching every spare inch of him. Gideon groaned at the first ferocious suck, and his hips jerked, his cock spasming as he blasted deep inside Jesse's ass. But that wasn't enough. It was followed by a second drink, and then a third, each subsequent pull deeper than the last.

Jesse closed his eyes, getting swept away in his own lack of control. He was at Gideon's mercy in every way, and the mercy of his own body. As the blood flowed freely from his

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veins, his cock jerked, and Gideon' wrapped his strong fingers around Jesse's throbbing shaft. Jesse did shout now, but the sound was weak as his come splashed off the car, and Gideon took one final swallow.

As Gideon licked over the open puncture wounds, Jesse leaned his head back against his shoulder, each gasp for air sending sharp stabs of ice to his lungs. "We need to get you home," he heard Gideon say. "Look at all that delicious come we've wasted."

Jesse sighed. "I think it was a small price to pay."

"Think you might be up for feeling my whip on your back?"

Jesse's mouth ran dry. "Yes. Yes, I think I can handle that."

"You better be." With a groan, Gideon eased back. "Because if you're not, I'll just do it harder."

Jesse shivered at the promise and slowly pulled his pants up. It took a moment to straighten his clothes, and he noticed with a grimace the liquid was already starting to dry—or freeze—on the car's front panel. He wiped at it with the cuff of his coat before Gideon pulled him away, partially dragging him, partially leading him to the van. He was already half-hard with anticipation, and each time Gideon looked at him with dark eyes, his cock twitched in response. Jesse didn't care what Gideon used on him. He was just looking forward to long hours with absolutely nothing between them except pleasure and need and the satisfaction of a job well done.

CHAPTER 21

Jesse straddled the kitchen chair, his arms resting on either side of the tall back, his hands cradling a cup of steaming tea. Gideon was still in bed, and Jesse would still be with him except for a parched, scratchy throat. Only the promise of tea could pull him from Gideon's side, but he intended to return as soon as he finished his drink. He swallowed a few painkillers with it, the steady ache in his throat and back intensifying from a low throb to something more distracting.

Not that Jesse was going to complain about that. He loved waking up stiff and sore with a thousand reminders of everything Gideon did to him, of everything they did together. Even so, he'd need to take it easy for awhile. But they both

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deserved a vacation.

Jesse frowned thoughtfully. But if they both took a vacation at the same time, Jesse would never get the chance to rest. It was a vicious cycle.

He was still mulling the possibilities when he heard the door open upstairs, and then Emma's familiar light step as she descended the stairs.

She wore a long coat against the cold, unbuttoned to reveal the simple v-neck sweater and jeans beneath. Her long hair hung in waves around her wind-pinked face, but the peace in her dark eyes was new. Jesse's fears that she would be troubled by her decision to turn in her sister dissipated.

A small smile was on her mouth as she entered the kitchen, but the moment she spied him at the table, it vanished, her eyes widening.

"Michelle didn't tell me the fight was that bad," she said, rushing to close the distance between them. Her fingers skimmed along his arm, upward toward his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"It wasn't," Jesse rushed to assure her. "I'm fine. I didn't even have a scratch on me once all the dust cleared." He could tell her that with confidence, because Gideon had looked him over the night before. Thoroughly.

She didn't seem completely satisfied with his response, the tiny line remaining between her brows as she brushed her fingertips along his cheek. It drew her attention to the glimpse of Gideon's bite mark low on Jesse's neck, and the moment Emma noticed it, her small smile returned.

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“At least it’s over,” she said, dropping her hand. “I guess Gideon is still sleeping? The office was deserted.”

“Yes. This is going to be a lazy day, I think.” He nodded at the chair at his side. “Here, have a seat. Do you want some tea? I could make you a cup.”

Emma shook her head. “Don’t get up. I’m not going to be here for long anyway. I just came by to pick up my things.”

Jesse’s eyes widened. He knew she couldn’t go on sleeping on their couch, of course, and the danger was gone, but he hadn’t really thought about her leaving. In fact, it had never crossed his mind once.

“Oh. Oh, right. Well, have a cup of tea with me, and I’ll help you get everything together. Where are you going? To your parents’?”

“No, no, they’ve...got their hands full with Lizzie. They’re taking her side, naturally, and after a few rounds of ‘how could you do that to your own sister?’, we kind of decided it might be better if I not get involved.” She shoved her hands into her pockets and took a step back. “So I talked to Michelle, and I think I’m going to get away from Chicago for awhile. Go someplace quiet. Like Montana, maybe.”

Jesse listened to her explanation calmly, sipping his tea while she talked. When she finished, he stood and walked over to the sink, putting the entire kitchen between them. He stood with his back to her, unable to look at her because he was unable to smile, to tell her he was happy about her decision. Going someplace quiet made a lot of sense. She didn’t need the stress of a city like Chicago. Besides, how many times had

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he been tempted to throw in the towel and run away to the west?

There were a million reasons why he should be happy for her. There was no reason for her to stay.

Except he'd miss her.

"That sounds nice," he finally offered.

"It was Michelle's suggestion," Emma said. "Not a lot of people, beautiful country. She even thinks she can find somebody who can help me learn how to control my powers." She paused. "Which will mean moving again when she does, but wherever I have to, it'll be worth it, I figure."

"Michelle probably knows what she's talking about. I've never been to Montana." He rinsed the cup out to keep his hands busy. "It'll be great if she can find somebody who can help you. If anybody can do it, it'll be her."

"You and Gideon should come out and visit me. If you haven't been. Like a vacation or something."

"We'll do that," Jesse promised her, but the words were hollow. In the past three years, he and Gideon had discussed vacations numerous times. California, New York, Mexico, Florida, Europe. They had a lot of plans, and Gideon wanted to show off and play tour guide. But it never happened. Some people didn't get to take vacations. He sighed and finally turned to face her. "No, we won't. We'll want to. We'll even make plans for it. But it won't happen."

Her smile faded. "Oh. Right. I guess...never mind." She retreated toward the door, jerking a thumb behind her. "I should really get my things. Tell Gideon I said good-bye,

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okay?”

“Don’t leave,” Jesse blurted. “I mean...Montana will be there tomorrow, right? We can have dinner tonight. You can say good-bye to Gideon yourself.”

Emma stopped at his words. When she lifted her eyes to him, they shimmered from some unknown emotion as she shook her head. “I’ll just be in the way,” she said softly. “And you guys are busy...” Her teeth caught her lower lip as her gaze flickered to his neck again. “...celebrating.”

“You know, I already told you once you’re not in our way, and I meant it.” He rolled his neck. “And I don’t think we’ll be celebrating any more this afternoon. I’m a mere mortal, after all.”

Her soft exhalation was accompanied by the return of her smile. “There’s nothing ‘mere’ about you, Jess.”

Jess grinned a little self-consciously. “We can go out, if you like. Or we can stay in. Why don’t I go get Gideon while you gather your things, then we’ll decide?”

“I haven’t said yes yet.”

“It’ll save us both a lot of time if you say yes now.”

“Gee, you get bossy when you’ve saved a few lives.” But her smile widened as she nodded her head. “All right, you win. This time.”

Jesse returned her smile. “I’ve taken lessons from Gideon.”

Emma stepped aside to give him room to pass, but as he did, she touched his arm, pulling him to a stop again. “I’ll tell Gideon later,” she said. “But I just want you to know how

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much everything you did means to me. It's easy for me to forget sometimes that good people like you and Gideon are still out there. So...thank you."

Jesse wished they could have done more. He wished they had the power to give her back her sister. The one that had existed in her ideal world, not the one currently fighting murder charges in the real one. He took her hand and squeezed it gently. "You're welcome, Emma. You really are."

He released her and hurried into the bedroom. Gideon was lounging in bed, but his eyes were awake, alert. Jesse sat down on the edge of the mattress. "How much did you hear?"

Gideon rolled onto his side, propping his head up in his hand. "Somewhere around Montana being there tomorrow. What's going on?"

"Apparently, Emma and Michelle decided at some point that it would be best if Emma went somewhere quiet. Somewhere with fewer people. Which makes a lot of sense. I'm not saying it doesn't. I just...I'm having a hard time being supportive of this decision. Not that it matters. Emma doesn't need my permission. I talked her into having dinner with us instead of letting her split like she wanted. Even though that would be easier and I'll...stop babbling now."

Extending his free hand, Gideon stroked the top of Jesse's thigh. "Why don't you want her to go?"

"I'll miss her," Jesse said softly. "I'll worry about her when she's gone. I don't think we'll ever see her again if she leaves."

"Did you tell her that?"

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“No. Well, I told her I didn’t think we’d be able to come out and visit her. We’d want to but...” Jesse grimaced. “She probably took that the wrong way. Sometimes, I shouldn’t be allowed to talk to people.”

Gideon snorted. “We’re doomed if you’re not the one with the silver tongue,” he commented. Pushing back the blankets, he rose from the bed and walked over to the wardrobe. “Think we can talk her into getting something in? It’ll be easier to convince her to stay if we don’t have to worry about what we say in public.”

“She’ll probably be agreeable to that.” Jesse watched Gideon dress for a few moments before asking. “Why don’t *you* want her to go?”

He buttoned the last of the buttons on his dark shirt before glancing back at Jesse. “Because she reminds me of what I used to be like before you came along,” he confessed. “Emma doesn’t need to be isolated to feel safe. She needs to be around friends.”

Jesse nodded. He never mentioned it, but she reminded him a little of Gideon as well. “I hope she realizes we are her friends. That she’s more than just an average client. I mean, after everything we shared...”

“Something tells me she doesn’t go around randomly touching strangers.” He grinned. “And if I find out she does, we’ll just have to chain her up so she can’t do it any more.”

“Gideon, be careful not to mention that over dinner. Being chained up by you isn’t a selling point for everybody.”

He dismissed the comment with a wave of his hand. “Just

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a matter of time.”

When they emerged from the bedroom, Emma glanced up from where she was folding a top into a waiting backpack. “I think I’ve got everything,” she said. “I still need to pay you back for the clothes you bought for me. And for what you paid at the auction.”

Gideon shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll count them as expenses and get the city to cover it when I send Derek the bill for my services.”

Her surprise was genuine. “You can do that?”

“You should see how creative Gideon can get with the bookkeeping,” Jesse muttered. “It’s really rather impressive.”

“Hey, you get paid, don’t you?”

Jesse held up his hands in surrender. “I wasn’t complaining. I’m just hoping nobody ever looks too closely at your expense sheets. So with that in mind, Emma, what would you like for dinner?”

She laughed, a clear sound that warmed Jesse through. “Something cheap. Ease my guilt.”

“There’s a good pizza place around the corner,” Gideon offered. “They’ll deliver and it’ll save us from going out in this cold.” When both Jesse and Emma nodded, he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and retreated to the corner to place the order.

Jesse waited until Gideon was distracted to lean over and say, “You were at the condo last night. What happened?”

A flare of alarm sparked in her eye. “I didn’t interfere,” she said quickly. “Michelle made me promise, too, before

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she'd agree to take me. But when I saw Lizzie run out, I just...I didn't think at all. But then she lied about Gideon sending her out, because he didn't even know I was there and she said he'd specifically sent her out to me, and I knew everything he'd said was true about her. So I did what I had to do."

"You did the right thing," Jesse assured her. "You did. Obviously, I wouldn't have suggested that course of action, but I'm glad you were there. Lizzie is very important to Derek's investigation. She would have got away if you weren't there."

She searched his eyes for long seconds before relaxing. "It helped being there." Her voice was subdued. "I was worried about you and Gideon. Michelle kept telling me you'd be okay, but it wasn't enough."

Jesse couldn't help but be encouraged by her admission. He knew she must have had some feelings for them, something that might stop her from leaving. "Well, maybe your concern wasn't misplaced. Things went to hell in there."

"And apparently, hell brings out Jesse's badass." Gideon stood over both of them, an amused smirk curling his lips. "Don't let him snow you. He even got Andre, and that one was a scrapper."

"That sounds more impressive than it was," Jesse said. "I just let him fall on my stake. But...maybe I was a little badass."

Emma had gone still at Gideon's declaration, but the second Jess finished speaking, she launched herself forward,

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throwing her arms around his neck as she practically fell into his lap. Her body was warm and soft, and his hands came up automatically to her hips, steadying her as she pressed her mouth to a spot near his jaw.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

A part of him—a very significant part—wanted to tighten his hold on her hips and keep her right there on his lap. He knew he couldn’t do that, so he compromised by doing nothing, neither pulling her closer nor pushing her away.

“I was happy to do it. If anybody ever deserved it, it was him.”

Emma wasn’t moving. He felt the tickle of her lashes as she must have closed her eyes, and then...

“Nobody’s ever been as good to me as you and Gideon have. I’m going to miss you both so much.”

Jesse glanced up to Gideon, but he wasn’t any help. His fingers tightened on her hips, almost of their own accord.

“Then don’t leave Chicago. You don’t...” His mind seemed to be slipping, but he called up Gideon’s earlier words. “You don’t need to be isolated. You don’t need to be alone and away from people who care about you, who want to be your friends.”

The brush of her cheek against his as Emma straightened left a searing trail he felt long after she’d pulled away. “Are you?” she asked. “My friends, I mean. Michelle said...Michelle made it clear you have a tendency to Florence Nightingale, and after how you got me out of Sangre...” She

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shrugged, an almost embarrassed gesture as she glanced guiltily at Gideon. “I didn’t want to assume anything.”

“Michelle’s not nearly as smart as she thinks she is,” Gideon said dryly.

“I don’t have a tendency to...” Jesse stopped. “Okay, I have the occasional tendency to Florence Nightingale, but that’s not what this is about, Emma. I enjoy your company. If we had met under completely different circumstances, I’d still want to spend time with you.” He frowned. “Did she really say that?”

“Well, the Florence analogy was mine, but that was only after hearing her go on for hours about it.” Emma slipped back off his lap, and he wondered if the reluctance he felt in her muscles was his imagination or something else entirely. “I mean, you two *have* been pretty insistent about taking care of me the past couple weeks.” She grinned. “Every time a girl tries to leave, one of you puts up a fight.”

“Maybe you should just take that as a sign you should stay,” Jesse said.

“Maybe.” She looked up at Gideon. “What do you think?”

“I think hiding never solves anything. It just delays the inevitable.” He sat on the end of the couch so he wasn’t looming over them any more. “And I think you’d be very sorely missed if you suddenly disappeared on us.” He caught Jesse’s eye. “Isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” Jesse agreed without hesitation, already sorely missing her to some extent. “I know I’d miss you, and wonder about you, and worry about you.”

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“You worry too much,” Emma teased softly. Her hand was suddenly back on his arm, and though the contact was gentle, the shock that jumped from her to him was not. Jess barely had time to register the emotion she was transmitting before her lips touched his, this kiss a little more firm, a little less platonic than before.

As soon as their mouths touched, Jesse wanted to push her back to the couch, cover her body with his, and kiss her thoroughly. He knew he was broadcasting this desire, but just for a second. Then his former training kicked in, unconsciously. It was too easy to compare this situation to all the moments he was so close to finally giving in to Gideon—all the times they could have kissed, all the times each touch could have been extended into a caress, all the times where nothing happened at all. It was a necessary defense mechanism.

She pulled away from him, and he took a deep breath before he could speak, struggling to remember what she said before she touched him. “I know I do. It’s better for my health if you just stay here.”

Her gaze lingered on his mouth for a second too long, before she leaned back against the couch, her shoulder brushing along Gideon’s knee. “I’m going to have to find a new job if I stay,” Emma said. “Something without a lot of human contact preferably.”

“What about the Institute?” Gideon suggested. “You liked it there.”

“I did. It probably wouldn’t hurt to apply.”

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“That sounds like a good idea to me,” Jesse agreed, feeling much better about the situation. He didn’t want to coerce Emma into staying in Chicago if she would truly be happy elsewhere, but Jesse honestly didn’t believe she would be. Not after the way she reacted to their request that she stay. Not after her lips seemed to burn his.

He wasn’t going to think too much about that kiss, though. Or about his motivations for asking her to stay.

The bell rang, alerting them to the fact that somebody was in the office. Jesse looked up to Gideon. “Food’s here.”

Nodding, Gideon rose to his feet. “You two get the table ready while I pay. I’ll be right back.”

Emma was smiling as she and Jesse stood as well. Following him into the kitchen, she said with a laugh, “Those bossy lessons are coming from a pro, aren’t they?”

Jesse smiled fondly. “Indeed. But you get used to it. I’ll let you in on a secret that you’ve probably already figured out. He’s a pussy cat.”

Jess handed her the plates as she laughed, and warmth spread through his chest. He liked the way she sounded when she was happy, when the weight of the world wasn’t sitting on her shoulders. Gideon returned, carrying the pizza, and the look on his face was enough to tell Jesse he heard the secret Jess had shared with Emma. Jess grinned at him until Gideon returned his smile, intensifying the warmth.

At that moment, there was so much contentment flowing through his body he knew it couldn’t all belong to him. He caught Emma’s eyes and her small nod told him all he needed

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to know. He hoped Gideon felt it, too. He knew in that moment that, despite the fear and anger, he would do it all again.

This sort of happiness, this sort of relief, was always worth fighting for.

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.

* * *

***Don't miss Mosaic Moon, by Jamie Craig,
available Fall 2007, at AmberHeat.com!***

Emma Coolidge is accustomed to isolation. Born with the ability to read emotions, Emma reached adulthood without learning how to control her special gift, leading to a life of self-imposed seclusion. Until she meets Gideon Keel and Jesse Madding, a vampire fighting for good and his human lover. Both men befriend her and introduce her to people who can help her create a normal life for herself. Everything is great for Emma for the first time in her life—except for one small problem. She longs to be part of Jesse and Gideon's lives, and their darker games involving bondage and sadism, but believes her desire can be nothing but a private fantasy.

Gideon adores Jesse and wants nothing more than to give him everything he wants. When Gideon realizes Jesse wants Emma, as well, he decides to invite Emma into their games. But a disturbing new crime distracts Gideon from his goal. Jesse and Gideon are forced to investigate a string of grave desecrations that are somehow siphoning power from the most powerful mage in Chicago. They must unravel the mystery of who is stealing Black John's power, why, and how to reverse it before they can devote their time and energy to their mutual desire for a third in their bed.

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