



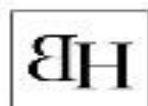
SEASON THREE

HOT
VAMPIRE

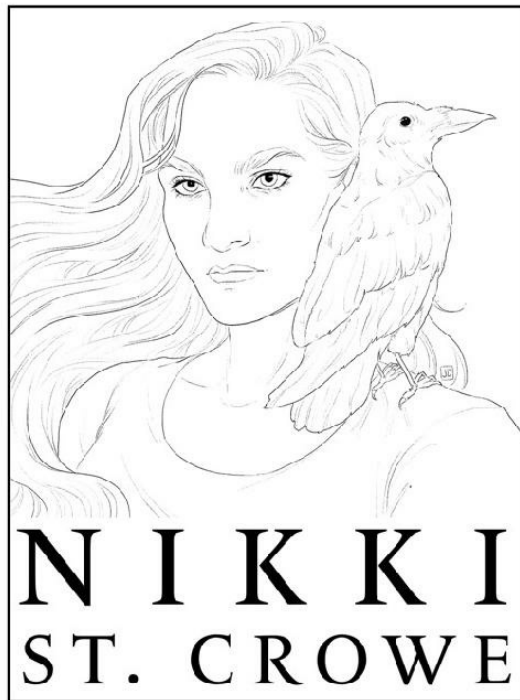
NEXT DOOR

NIKKI ST. CROWE

H O T
V A M P I R E
N E X T D O O R
S E A S O N T H R E E
N I K K I S T . C R O W E



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BEFORE YOU READ

Please be aware that Hot Vampire Next Door: Season Three is a boxset of episodes 34-53 of the serial version of the story.

Hot Vampire Next Door is, first and foremost, a serial story published on Vella and is currently ongoing with no scheduled end.

Ebook boxsets will continue to be published for readers who wish to read only as an ebook.



Some of the content in this book may be triggering for some readers. If you'd like to learn more about CWs in my work, please visit my website here:

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EPISODE 34

TERRIFYING THINGS TO COME

THE DIGITAL CLOCK SAYS IT'S A LITTLE AFTER ELEVEN A.M. WHEN I WAKE, but blackout blinds have the room feeling like it's the middle of the night.

Even though I can't see him, I sense Bran filling up the bed beside me.

He's mine. All mine. I can't believe it.

There was a time when I thought he hated me.

And now he's confessed he loves me.

I'm not going to dismiss his warning that I don't entirely understand what it means to have the love of a Duval, but I'm not going to waste it either.

Does Kelly know what it is to have the love of a Duval?

Damien attacked in the middle of a vampire court to get her to safety, and while there is inherently some value in keeping her safe—because of who I am and who Kelly is to me—I think he did it mostly for himself.

Is he currently sleeping next to her?

The little sister in me is just nosy enough to want to know.

I ease from the bed. Bran doesn't stir. I'm not entirely sure what it means for a vampire to sleep, since they're technically *dead-ish*. Do they breathe? Are they dead-dead while they sleep?

We're taught a lot about vampires in school, but there are some secrets they've always closely guarded. Like how a vampire becomes a vampire. I still don't know. But I have heard it's a long, drawn-out process and incredibly painful.

I tiptoe from bed, carefully open the door, and slip out.

Diffused daylight fills the Anneliese. What an odd design decision for a vampire. The house is literally a snow globe.

From the kitchen, there's the distinct sound of pans clanging together and

the smell of fresh coffee.

Jimmy assured me the Anneliese was the safest place in Midnight, but a clever human could probably break inside.

Clever human, dumb human. You couldn't pay me a million dollars to break into a Duval property.

When I turn the corner into the kitchen, I find my sister at the stove.

"Hey," I say.

She jumps, putting her hand to her chest. "Christ. I didn't hear you get up."

"I'm quiet. Like a mouse."

She looks at me and then bursts into laughter. I can't help it. I laugh too.

"What are you making?" I ask her.

"Eggs and toast. That's all there was in the fridge. I'm guessing they didn't have time to plan ahead for humans to be staying here."

I go over to the cupboards and start opening doors. I find black coffee mugs in the cupboard by the sink and fill one with fresh coffee just as my sister heats up a cast iron pan on the stove.

"How do you feel?" I ask and pull myself up on the counter by the sink, legs dangling over the edge.

"Better." She taps an egg on the pan, cracks it open. The white sizzles when it hits the heat.

"Did Damien stay with you?"

She says nothing, adds a second egg.

"Kels, did he?"

"I slept alone. As it should be."

"But—"

"There is no Damien and I," she says.

"Yes, there clearly is."

She sighs and brings her hand to her forehead, presses at the center as if massaging out an ache. "It's complicated."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere."

She flips the eggs with a spatula. "He's mad at me. Damien isn't as easy to please as your vampire."

I snort. "Easy to please? Bran is like one of those novelty puzzles. You know the ones you impulse buy at gift shops and don't actually have solutions?"

"Yes, they do. And if that's your comparison, then Damien is the creator

of the puzzle.”

I lift my brows. “Oh? Okay. Well. I’m sorry?”

I recall overhearing a conversation my sister had on the phone with one of her coworkers. Damien had come into the City Clerk Office for what I assumed was business. She told her coworker that Damien was an iceberg. I thought she meant because he was cold. But now I wonder if she meant that with him, you only see what’s above the surface, that the real danger lingers beneath in the dark.

“There was a time when I thought Damien sent Bran to live next door,” Kelly admits.

“Really?”

She presses the button on the toaster, sinking the bread to the bottom. “I thought he wanted to keep an eye on me, but now—” She looks over at me. “Clearly it was only you.”

I frown at her. “Kels. That’s not...I mean...I think Damien does care about you. If that’s what you want? *Is it what you want?*”

“I don’t know what I want,” she admits.

The kitchen fills with the smell of toasting bread and fried eggs. She reaches around me for two plates she set aside. Using a towel for the pan handle, she lifts it and slides the eggs onto the plates.

“Want to have breakfast in the belvedere?” she asks me.

I smile over at her. “Nothing would make me happier.”

With plates and coffee cups in hand, we go to the dining room surrounded on all sides by windows. I was right in my assumption last night—we’re surrounded mostly by greenery but have a clear view on the one side of the courtyard and Duval House. The main house is mostly dark and sleepy right now, considering most who live there are vampires.

“So what do you think happens next?” I push the tines of the fork into the egg yolk and the liquid spills out. I quickly soak it up with the toast.

“I honestly don’t know. What happened last night at court won’t go unanswered and—” She pulls to a stop.

“What?”

“Tomorrow is your birthday.” Her eyes are wide.

“Yes. And?”

“Tomorrow is your birthday! And your Pledge and the party!”

“We’ve covered this, Kels. Don’t you remember? We don’t have to do a party.”

“But it’s your birthday.”

“But is it?”

Her mouth drops open as if she means to argue, but the energy behind it quickly wanes when she realizes the truth—we don’t actually know when I was born.

We don’t know anything about who I am or where I came from. Clearly the fae realm, but why? Who gave me to my mother? Was it my birth parents? What kind of fae were they?

Out of all the supernatural beings in Midnight Harbor, the fae are the kind I’m least familiar with. The gate was already closed by the time I was old enough to pay attention. I know a few fae families—there was the family I babysat for as a teenager—but their numbers are scant compared to the vampires and witches and shifters.

What I do know is that on the fae side, they have legit courts, the *royal* kind, and that they’re broken up into Seelie and Unseelie. The light and the dark. The Unseelie rarely frequented our side, so those that live in Midnight are all Seelie.

The fact that I could be either is both frightening and exciting.

“Even if we don’t know your true birthday, we’ll move ahead as if we do. Besides, you have to Pledge and you’ll accept the Duval bid.”

“Oh, will I?”

“Jessie.” She gives me her mom look, the one with the wide, stern eyes.

“Yes, you will.”

Kelly and I both jump at the sound of Bran’s voice.

“This is the part I hate about living with vampires,” Kelly says. “I’m always on the edge of a heart attack.”

Bran’s shirtless and his jeans hang low on his hips, revealing that fine-as-hell V that is like an arrow pointing at his cock.

Fucking hell.

Why does everything about him have to be so deliriously sexual?

He walks into a room and I’m wet.

That’s literally all he has to do.

He pulls out the chair across the table from me and sits in a slouch. The muscles and tendons running across his shoulders flex with the movements.

I look down at my egg, but the seeping golden liquid just has me thinking of blood and cum and it doesn’t help me at all.

“Damien will bid on you,” Bran says, “and you will accept.”

“Even though none of us know what I am?”

“Even though.” He reaches across the table and snatches my coffee cup, taking a long swig even though it’s piping hot.

The steam kisses his face as he looks at me over the dark rim.

“I could be a liability,” I say.

“We can’t protect you if you’re not under our House.”

“It’s the right move, Jess,” Kelly says.

“I know you think so. You already went to Damien about it. It’s the whole reason Bran came to the coffeeshop to warn me.”

Kelly turns to Bran. “You did?”

He’s still looking at me. “She deserved to know.”

“Was that before or after you seduced her?”

“Kelly. That’s not—” I start.

Bran sets the coffee down. He turns to my sister in a way that is decidedly sinister.

“I’ve risked my life for Jessie. What the fuck have you done? You’ve just made a mess of—”

The front door opens and suddenly Damien is standing at the end of the table.

“No,” he says.

Just one word.

That’s all Damien Duval has to say to quiet a room.

Kelly licks her lips and swallows so hard, I can hear it across the table.

“Kelly did what she thought she needed to do,” Damien says. “We’ll not hold it against her. Understood?”

Bran takes in a long, exasperated breath. “Yes, fine, dear brother. As you wish.”

“He didn’t seduce me,” I say.

They all look at me.

“What? I’m a big girl. My sex life is not up for discussion. All right?”

Bran winks at me, causing me to blush.

“Finish your breakfast,” Damien says. “Jessie needs to file her paperwork for her Pledge. Unless you’ve done so already?”

“I haven’t,” I answer. I had thought I’d be long gone by now. “After what happened last night, I didn’t think we’d want to leave the house.”

“The court is powerless against me,” Damien admits. There’s no bravado in his voice. It’s just a fact. “The *vasill* will be too afraid to speak ill, and the

shifter and the witch won't defend one dead vampire.”

It's a little disconcerting, the fact that Damien and Bran can just walk into a court and start tearing out hearts with very little consequence.

But I'm grateful for the power, nonetheless. Because I need it. I need them on my side unless I want to be a slave to Julian.

I don't know who—or what I am—but my mother's warning keeps ringing in my head.

The things you did, Jessie...you were only a year old and it terrified me.

What did I do?

Why couldn't she tell me in the letter?

I don't feel powerful. I don't feel terrifying.

And yet...

I can't help but feel like my Pledge is only the beginning of the unraveling of my secrets and the beginning of so many terrifying things to come.

EPISODE 35

STAY PUT, MOUSE

IN BRAN'S BEDROOM IN THE ANNELIESE, I FIND MORE CLOTHING HANGING IN the closet from thick wooden hangers. There are several dresses, a few t-shirts, sweaters, jeans, and leggings. Since we're going to the human court to file paperwork for my Pledge, I decide I better act the part of a respectable mortal and go with a deep crimson dress with a pleated skirt and a white Peter Pan collar.

It's as I'm getting dressed that Bran comes into the room and steals the panties I have sitting out on the bed.

I try to snatch them back, but my speed is no match for his.

I put my hands on my hips. "Is this another test of my obedience?"

He tosses the ball of fabric into the bathroom. "This time it's for my pleasure and nothing more."

A buzzy warmth fills my veins. He scents the air, his eyes burning golden, and then bends down to me and plants a chaste kiss on the corner of my mouth.

Then he turns away.

"Wait...is that it?"

"Did you expect more?" he asks from the door.

"Yes. You just took my underwear. That feels like a promise."

I'm wound up tight, waiting for him to touch me, grab me, slip his hand beneath the dress. But he doesn't, and the ache starts immediately.

"Come, Mouse, we really should be going." His face is blank, but I know him well enough by now to sense he's pleased with himself and my wet desire.

I could put the panties on. Pretend I'm not vexed by this at all.

But the promise of him having easier access to me is enough to make me abandon the idea. And I think he knows that.

I follow him out of the room and down the hall. We find my sister filling the dishwasher and Damien on a call on his cell phone.

He cuts it short when he spots us.

"In and out," he tells Bran. "Let's play our cards right. Don't piss anyone off."

"I take offense to that, brother. I'm a goddamn delight."

I snort beside him. He smiles down at me.

"Don't leave her side," Damien adds.

Bran's tone of voice immediately turns biting. "As if I would."

Damien seems satisfied with this and gives his brother a nod. "Call me if you need me. I can be there quickly."

Bran sets his hand on the small of my back. But before we leave, I look back at my sister. "You'll be all right while I'm gone?"

"Of course." She dries her hands on a plush gray towel. She's looking at me, but I think most of her awareness is on Damien.

"I'll look after her," Damien tells me.

I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing.



My mother worked in the human government until she died and my sister has been in the clerk's office since she was old enough to have a job there. I've been to the court a lot, but never on official business.

Our court isn't as fancy as the vampire court, but it feels imposing anyway with its creaking, wide plank floors that gleam beneath old-fashioned pendant lights.

The main floor houses the clerk's office, the Pledge office, and the county surveyor with a maze of waiting rooms and smaller offices throughout. The second floor has one main courtroom and three smaller ones with several large offices for our mortal judges.

Years ago, I overheard one of the receptionists telling another woman that one of the judges asked out my sister only for him to be turned down. I vividly remember them whispering, "If she'd said yes, I would have worried we'd find the judge staked in his bed the next day!"

At the time I thought it was strange that they were insinuating Julian would have staked a mortal judge because of a date, but now I'm wondering if they maybe knew more about my sister's love life than I did and were gossiping about her involvement with Damien.

I vaguely recall seeing him at the mortal court once in a heated conversation with my sister.

There are all of these little memories that I brushed off at the time, thinking they were nothing.

Would Damien go so far as to kill a mortal for touching my sister?

I think Bran would.

I think his brother might be worse.

Sometimes it's weird to think back on all of the forked paths we ignored, and the others we took.

The Pledge office is at the end of a hallway where arched doors open to an annex. There's a high counter that separates the annex from the rest of the admin.

Alice, one of the assistants, stands at the counter stamping paperwork with vigor.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk-thunk.

Bran and I enter the annex and Alice looks up and sputters on a greeting.

"Hi Alice," I say, trying to stop her flustering.

"Jessie! Hi! Wow. Hey." She looks at Bran with quick interest, her face burning red before turning back to me. "Is it time for your Pledge already?" She trails off in a nervous giggle.

"Yep. Can you help me get started?"

"Of course." She sets the stamp down and grabs a few sheets of paper and a pen. "Come this way. I'll put you in one of the consultation rooms and a Pledge Clerk will be with you shortly."

She leads us down another hall of closed doors and shows us into room #3.

"Go ahead and get started on that paperwork. I'll have a clerk in soon."

"Thanks."

The door clicks shut behind us a little too loudly.

I sit at the table in the center of the room while Bran circles it with interest.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for cameras or microphones."

"Seriously? I don't think the mortal court has a budget for that."

"Better to be sure."

There are two windows behind me that overlook the nearest side street. Bran stops at one and leans against the casing while I work at the forms.

It's basic information that I've filled out many times before, but now I have to question whether any of it is true. Parents? Not biological. Birthday? Who knows? Ethnicity? No clue.

"Should I even be here?" I ask Bran while marking off several boxes on the form. "I'm technically not human."

"They don't know that. And we're not going to offer it. Not yet, anyway."

"What happens afterward? Like after I'm Pledged? After Rita undoes the binding? There isn't a single fae in Midnight bound to a vampire house. Someone's going to get bent out of shape about it."

"But there's little they can do after the fact."

I finish one form and start on the second.

Bran shifts to the other window.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm finished with the paperwork but the clerk has yet to visit us. "How long is this going to take?" I drop back against the chair. "Do you think they forgot about us?"

Bran's gaze goes distant. "No, they're currently discussing me being here with you."

"Oh, really? Well, if they stopped gossiping, they could speed this up."

Bran comes over, grabs me at the hips and sits me on the edge of the table. "However will we pass the time?"

His hands come to my thighs, fingers slipping in under the hem of my skirt.

"You planned this," I say up to him.

"Not this, exactly, but the ability to touch you whenever I'd like? That I will always be guilty of."

"What are they doing now?" I ask him as he brings his mouth closer to mine.

He listens, then, "Discussing who will take your case." His hand trails higher.

"How long do you think we have?"

Leaning over me, he brings his mouth down on mine, gentle at first, a brush of his lips, a flick of his tongue. It's enough to send a shock of anticipation through me, sinking to a buzz in my clit.

The thought of getting Bran in a waiting room while people are just beyond the door going about their days is exhilarating.

"Sounds like Ed is getting the short stick," Bran says, his mouth still on me, his hands slipping further up my thighs, sending gooseflesh up and down my body. "He's grumbling now."

"Why?" I circle my arms around Bran's neck, urging him closer.

"He's telling the office girls he wants to leave here with his head attached to his neck."

I hook my feet around Bran's legs and my skirt slips up my thighs. I'm so close to being completely bare for him. "You'll behave, won't you?"

He adjusts his grip on me, grabbing my ass and yanking me to the edge of the table. "In what way?"

"No heads will leave their necks."

"Mmm." He kisses me again. "Ed is telling Alice that his wife is making a lasagna and they plan to re-watch *Lord of the Rings*. 'You heard what the Duvals did at the vampire court last night, didn't you? Alice, I can't miss Lord of the Rings! Janet will kill me!'"

I burst out laughing. "I think Ed might be more terrified of his wife than of you."

"Every man knows that to be fact."

"What's that?"

"That if his partner is not happy, then he might as well dig his grave now."

I roll my eyes as his mouth sinks to my neck. "With regular people, maybe, with you? Never. You aren't afraid of me in the slightest."

"On the contrary. I'm terrified of you." And then he nips at my neck, breaking the flesh.

I jolt beneath him from the sharp pain, but he tightens his hold on me and flattens his tongue against the bead of blood.

I breathe a little faster, heart drumming a little harder. "You are not terrified of me."

"I'm terrified of how you make me feel."

"How's that?"

He pulls back, meets my eyes. There's a stain of red on his teeth. "Whole," he answers. "Awake."

"And that scares you?"

"I think I'm more terrified of losing it. And you."

"You won't."

"I won't if I do my job." He runs his tongue over his teeth, swiping away the blood.

"Which is?"

"To protect you. Which circles us back to the original argument. If you are unhappy—or unwell—then I might as well dig my grave."

I reach between us and unbutton his jeans. "We'll be all right." With the zipper down, I slip my hand into his pants and grope him. He growls deep in the base of his chest. "We make a good team."

His eyes close as I put more pressure on his cock. "Indeed we do, Mouse."

"You think you can fuck me in the time we have before Ed comes in?" I pull his cock out, fist him in my hand, and his eyes flare up.

His attention wanders for a split second to the hall beyond our waiting room and then he spins me around and impales me on his cock in one swift motion as he sits in the chair, me on his lap, my back to his chest.

Just as the door clicks open.

I yelp and scramble to climb off him, but he tightens his hold on my hips and says, "Stay put, Mouse."

His cock throbs deep inside of me just as Ed walks in the room.

EPISODE 36

YOU KNOW BETTER

A CHOKED SOUND LEAVES MY THROAT AS ED STUMBLES INTO THE ROOM LIKE someone shoved him.

He loosens the knot of his blue tie and says, “Good afternoon, Ms. MacMahon,” his voice wobbling on my name.

Ed is a short man with thinning brown hair and black-framed glasses that are threatening to establish dominance over his face.

“Afternoon,” I answer, my voice so high-pitched, I’m surprised the windows don’t shatter.

Bran’s fingers dig into my hips as he buries himself a little deeper inside of me.

“Mr. Duval,” Ed says, barely looking at Bran, barely registering that I’m literally sitting on Bran’s lap despite the fact there are three other chairs at the table.

“Good afternoon, Edward,” Bran says. “How’s Janet?”

Ed’s face turns red as he pulls out a chair and tumbles into it. “She’s fine. Just fine, thank you.”

I don’t know Ed well, but he’s now joining me in the same room where I’m being fucked by a vampire.

My face burns with shame and the shame makes my inner walls clench. It’s dirty and it’s wrong and for some reason, it’s making me so much wetter.

“I’ll try to be brief,” Ed says as he shuffles some papers in his hands. “For a Pledge register, it’s mostly just perfunctory. Dot the T’s, cross the I’s.” He shakes his head. “I mean...not...cross the T—”

“We knew what you meant, Ed,” Bran says as he sits forward a little, jostling me just enough that his shaft drags in and out an inch.

A strangled little cry threatens to spill out so I clamp my teeth over my bottom lip.

“You probably know this,” Ed says, “but I’m required to inform you that you are free to choose whichever house you’d like to be bound to, though it is within a House’s right to deny you. You, too, are free to deny a bid and forgo being bound to a House altogether.” He turns a piece of paper around and slides it across the table to me. “If you understand this, please mark this box and sign here.”

I carefully, slowly, reach forward for the pen, but Bran is quicker.

“Here, let me,” he says, but he flicks the pen across the table and says, “Apologies. Sometimes my vampire speed gets the better of me. Can you grab that, Jessie?”

“Of course,” I say through gritted teeth.

Ed’s attention is solely on the paperwork as he shuffles and reshuffles like he lost something.

I lean forward but have to stand a little to reach the pen and Bran’s cock slides out of me, inch by inch.

Sweat beads on my temple.

This is so fucking dirty.

I snatch the pen and Bran pulls me back down, seating himself fully inside of me. My clit buzzes, not from the friction or the pressure, but the illicit thrill of fucking Bran out in the open, in public, in front of someone.

The head of his cock throbs at my center as he brings his mouth to the shell of my ear and whispers, “Good girl.”

I choke on a breath, flushing all over. Bran rocks his hips again, punishing me. I’ve never felt so *full* of him. I’ve never felt every little twitch and swell of his cock as acutely as I do now.

Ed frowns at the papers. “Looks like I forgot something.”

“Maybe you should go get it,” I suggest a little too quickly.

Bran chuckles. I reach down between us and grab his balls and he groans. I’m soaking wet and my juices are slick across him.

I’m losing all sense of decency. I’m about to fuck him with Ed in the room or not in the room. It doesn’t really matter.

“It’ll just take a second,” Ed says.

“Take your time,” I say.

Ed shoves the chair back and the legs groan on the hardwood floor. “Be right back.”

“Close the door behind you,” Bran tells him.

“Right. Of course.”

The door clicks shut.

Bran is suddenly moving.

He lifts me off him and lays me back on the table and bunches my skirt around my waist, baring me to him. He teases my clit with the flick of his tongue. I cry out and he clamps his hand over my mouth, snuffing out the sound of my pleasure.

“Be quiet, little mouse,” he warns and laps me up.

I moan around his hand, wrapping my fingers around his wrist, holding on for dear life. He’s quick with my clit, bringing me so close I’m squirming on the table.

“Not yet, Mouse. I want to feel you on my dick while you come.”

I pull his hand away. “Then you better fuck me now.”

He lifts me up again and sits me on his lap facing him. I’m needy for his cock, quick to line myself up, my knees on the seat of the chair.

“Fuck. This is...*fuck.*”

He pushes inside of me and his eyes brighten, his mouth coated in my pleasure.

“Bounce on my cock,” he orders me, so I do, finding a quick rhythm as his hands slip up my thighs, shoving the skirt of my dress aside.

He watches our joining and a new thrill pounds through me.

“Faster, Mouse.”

I increase my speed, his grip going to my ass, spreading me wide for him.

“You have about eight seconds to make me come,” he tells me, his eyes bright gold in the fading afternoon light. “You think you can?”

I try to catch my breath. “Yes.”

“Seven seconds.”

I brace myself on the arms of the chair, bouncing faster as he grows harder.

“Six.”

My heart is racing in my head, pounding in my chest as my own pleasure stalks through me.

He feels so good. All of it. Every part of him.

“Five.” He grits his teeth, bucks his hips. We’re pounding together so loudly now, they have to hear it in the office. And the illicit, shameful rush of it has me racing toward my own orgasm.

I'm so frantic for release. Bran's rock hard.

"Four," he says.

"Fill me up, Bran. *Please.*"

I meet his gaze as his jaw flexes, his fangs sharpening.

He stills me against him with a death grip and then—

He growls loudly, spills inside of me, and I reach between us, rubbing my clit with a swirl of two fingers. It's all I need. I hang my head back, moaning at the ceiling as the release sparks through me like a firecracker, hot and fast.

Bran brings a hand up to my throat, fingers circling my neck, driving me back down on him so he can spill the last of his load.

We collapse against one another, panting.

"How many seconds left?" I say, tired and so lost to the ecstasy, I don't really care.

Bran laughs against my neck.

"What?"

"They heard us."

I curl into him, a little delirious. "I should be embarrassed, shouldn't I?"

"I'm not. I'd fuck you in the town square so everyone could watch and know you were mine."

I lean back so I can look him in the face. "That will never happen."

"As you wish, Mouse." He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. "How about we go out there and hurry this along? Then I'll take you out for a grilled cheese and French fries as a celebratory lunch."

"For fucking you?"

"For filing your paperwork. But if the dirty girl wants to celebrate my cock, I'll let her."

I laugh and lift myself off of him. I spot a box of tissue on a cabinet, but before I can grab one, Bran is in front of me. "You know better, Mouse," he says, a devilish look in his eye.

His hand slips beneath my skirt and he walks me back, pressing me against the wall. "You know better than to clean my cum from your pussy." He dips his thumb inside of me, then brings it up and rubs it across my bottom lip. My tongue flicks out to meet him so I can taste him, taste me.

Then he kisses me, slow and gentle.

When he pulls back, he's smiling.

"What is it?" I ask.

"They're flipping coins now."

I laugh and thread my hand with his. “Come on. Let’s put them out of their misery.”

We leave the room together, his cum dripping down my thighs.

EPISODE 37

ROCK THE BOAT

I'M AWARE, ON A VISCERAL LEVEL, THAT WHEN I WALK OUT OF THE WAITING room in the Pledge office, I am officially marked as Bran's girl in the eyes of the mortals in Midnight.

If there was any doubt before, it's all gone now.

Jessie MacMahon belongs to Bran Duval.

I knew this before now. I know that he loves me. But there's something inherently thrilling about other people knowing it too.

When we reach the annex, we find everyone in the office in a gossip huddle behind the counter. Bran clears his throat and leans a shoulder casually against the door frame, arms crossed over his chest.

Most of the office people scatter like scraps of paper caught in a gust of wind.

Only three remain. Alice and Ed and a dark-haired girl I don't recognize.

Alice won't look me in the face and I can't tell if it's because she's disgusted by me, Bran's whore, or if she thinks of me as some lucky interloper who stumbled her way to a throne. Because whether we admit to it or not, there is a hierarchy in Midnight and being attached to a Duval is like being attached to a king.

I suppose even royal whores hold power in court.

I decide I don't care what Alice thinks of me. I won't be ashamed. In some twisted way, fucking Bran loudly in a government office has secured me a certain level of power I didn't know I wanted or needed.

So, while his cum drips out of me, I take the crown and act the part.

"I got tired of waiting," I tell Alice. "Will someone please get me the right paperwork?"

I swear it's like watching bumper cars at the state fair.

Alice turns around and runs into the dark-haired girl. Ed trips over Alice's foot and lurches backward to catch himself, but he bumps a tray of paperwork and it spills off the back counter, crashing to the floor.

Good god. Is this what it feels like for Bran when he walks into a room?

As Ed picks up the mess of paperwork on the floor, Alice locates what I need and places the forms neatly on the counter. "Sign here. And here. Initial here."

I mark where indicated and finish the last signature. "Good?"

"Yes. All good." She nods excessively.

"Thank you, Alice."

"Of course. Our pleasure."

The dark-haired girl giggles at the word *pleasure*. My gaze only shifts to her because the sound is a contrast from the silence.

But as soon as my eyes land on her, she stiffens and clamps her mouth shut.

A dark flame at the center of me grows a little brighter.

This is *fun*. I like it more than I should.

"Come, Mouse," Bran says and smiles smugly at me. He slips his hand into mine and pulls me away. Once we're in the hall and moving for the exit, he bends down and says beneath his breath, "My ruthless little mouse."

"I wasn't being ruthless."

He holds the door for me and I slip out ahead of him.

The sun has dipped low enough that I can no longer see it over the rooflines of the surrounding buildings and the descending light has painted the sky in soft pastel shades of pink and lavender and orange.

The air smells of summer and possibilities.

"I like you pulling rank," he tells me. "It's fucking sexy."

Heat rises to my cheeks. "Stop it. You're being ridiculous."

He slips his arm around my waist and spins me around, pressing me against the railing on the stairs. "Don't tell me what to do."

"As if I could ever boss you around."

He plants a chaste kiss on the corner of my mouth. "You were getting pretty bossy in that waiting room. 'Fill me up,'" he says, mimicking me and now I'm really and truly blushing.

I decide to roll with it. "Yeah, and you listened to me. So maybe I was wrong. Maybe I can get what I want from you if I'm clever about it."

"Naughty little mouse." He tightens his hold on me, sending butterflies zinging across my chest. I like his hands on me. I like being so close to him that I can see the gold flecks in his irises, the throb of his pupils.

Being close to him means he trusts me, and somehow having his trust is almost as good as having his heart.

"You made your mouse a promise. Do you remember?"

He kisses me again. I'm aware that we have an audience with a few onlookers across the street. And it finally dawns on me that Bran has never engaged in PDA with me. Not on this level.

"Mmmm," he says against my mouth. "Who makes the best grilled cheese in Midnight?"

"Stanley." I don't have to think about it.

"And where does this virtuoso of the grilled cheese wield his spatula?"

I laugh again. Bran brings his hand up, threading his fingers through my hair. "At The Greasy Spoon."

A rumble starts at the base of his throat. "I always thought that was an atrocious name for a diner."

"Nevertheless..."

"To the Greasy Spoon we go then," he says.



The diner is close enough to the courthouse that we walk and Bran keeps my hand in his the entire way.

Every time we pass someone on the sidewalk and their gaze strays to our hands, my stomach fills with more butterflies.

The Greasy Spoon is one of those little 1950's diners crammed into the leftover space between a nail salon and a real estate office. It's only big enough for the kitchen, a counter, and narrow booths along the wall.

A neon sign buzzes in the window while rockabilly music plays through the sound system. The floor is black and white checkered, the walls painted pale blue and pink, the counter covered in chrome, and the booths trimmed to match.

I love it here.

"Where were you in the fifties?" I ask Bran as we slide into one of the booths near the front window.

"On a journey of self-discovery."

I snort. "That sounds like bullshit."

He leans back against the booth, spreading his arm over the seat, his bicep straining against the sleeve of his shirt. "Remember the photo you saw in my bedroom? The self-portrait at the cliff? I mentioned it was taken in the fifties."

"Yes. I remember."

"That was taken in the Porcupine Mountains in Michigan. I had never been to Michigan before then. You can live hundreds of years and still not see every corner of the world." His attention darts to the door as a new customer enters, but seemingly satisfied that the man bears no threat, Bran looks back to me. "By the fifties, Duval House was well established in Midnight and I was growing bored with it all. My brother and I have always gotten along, but sometimes his need to control everything is insufferable."

A waitress comes over. She's dressed in a bubblegum pink uniform with a white apron tied around her waist. Her name tag says Gertrude, but I know her name is Judy.

"Evening, sugar," she says to me and then gives Bran a side-eyed look frothing with wariness. "It's been a while since I've seen you in here."

I've been coming here so long, Judy and Stanley are like my surrogate grandparents, always asking how I've been and what I'm up to. They sometimes feed me more than Kelly does.

"It's been a wild few weeks."

Judy looks at Bran again. "I'll bet."

Bran frowns at her, clearly unaccustomed to humans giving him shit. Especially little old ladies. I can't help but smile. "Can I have my usual?" I ask before Bran can get temperamental.

"Of course." Judy slips her pencil into her bun out of respect for Bran because of the whole stake-thing. "And you?"

"Coffee," he answers.

"Coming right up." She darts away, but not out of fear, out of efficiency. Judy may be in her seventies, but I think she could give me a challenge in a foot race. Bran watches her go.

"So... Damien wanted to control everything," I repeat. "What did you want?"

He sits forward and lowers his voice to a sinister octave. "I wanted to corrupt innocent virgins in the Porcupine Mountains."

"You're lying and deflecting."

He collapses back against the booth. "Yes. I am."

"Tell me."

He picks up the wrapped silverware, unfurls the napkin and takes the knife in hand. The metal glints beneath the fluorescent lighting. "My brother has always believed vampires are the superior race and he's always wanted to be in control. It suits him. He does it well. I won't deny that."

None of this surprises me, but it's still massively insulting to hear Damien thinks Kelly is inferior to him because she's mortal. Or is she an exception?

"The Montenaros," Bran goes on, "the House we were turned by, has always ruled by fear. And their belief was that strength lay in likeness. It's why, when we established Midnight, we segregated into houses." He sets the knife down but separates it from the fork and the fork from the spoon. "That's a Montenegro philosophy."

Judy comes over and I'm frustrated by the interruption. She sets down my glass of cola. Bran gets his black coffee, taking the mug in hand.

"Right back with your food, sugar," Judy says and leaves again.

I'm impatient to hear the rest of what Bran has to say. We've been so wrapped up in me and who I am and my Pledge that I haven't had the chance to peel back his layers.

Now that I am, I'm desperate for more, desperate to get to the center of him and see what lies there.

"What do you believe?" I ask.

Steam from the coffee rises between us.

"I think that there is strength in diversity." He turns the mug, focusing on the swirl of the dark liquid inside.

"Like a mixed house?"

"Exactly."

"Why?"

He pauses, looking around the diner as if to reassure himself there's no one worth worrying over. "Because if you can earn the loyalty of the strongest of each house and they come together under one roof..." He picks up the fork, the knife, the spoon. I know what the symbolism means—you possess all of the tools, all of the talents, all of the skills.

"So do it," I blurt.

His eyes narrow.

I reel back, shocked to hear the words come out of my mouth. I hadn't

meant to say it. I hadn't meant to insinuate he should abandon his brother and all of the systems in place in Midnight Harbor. Change centuries of tradition and rock the boat so hard, it might threaten to tip.

But now that it's out, I can't take it back, even if it is a little crazy.

And I have to admit, I'm incredibly curious to hear what he has to say about it.

EPISODE 38

BRUTAL BROTHER

BRAN

I CAN HEAR MY LITTLE MOUSE'S HEART BEATING OVER THE SHIT MUSIC playing through the diner's meager sound system.

I think she thinks she's excited about the prospect of me starting a new house, but I know better.

She's running.

My little mouse has always been running from something.

It's why she wanted to leave Midnight. She didn't fit in and she didn't want to try and it was just easier to leave.

She doesn't think she has a legitimate place in Duval House. But I'm not letting her get off so easy.

I have too much to lose and so much to gain.

She peers up at me with wide eyes.

I love her when she's like this. When she's just a girl full of raw hope.

It makes crushing her that much harder.

"Maybe we could rescind that deal with Julian," she tries. "We could use your lake house as your house and—"

"Mouse."

She's learned to bend to the sound of my voice and she stops rambling immediately.

"I can't leave my brother."

The line of her brow sinks. "But you already have. You did when you moved in next door to me."

"That was always meant to be temporary."

"Don't you want to be out from under your brother's control? You said —"

"I know what I said." I take a drink of the coffee but it's no longer biting hot and the tepidness does nothing to hide the bitter taste of the cheap grind.

Mouse takes a breath and organizes her thoughts again. "I think diversifying a house is a good idea and—"

"I obviously agree, but I can't afford to dilute my power by splitting Duval House. It puts us both at risk."

Her dejection tastes almost as bitter as the coffee.

I would give my life to protect her, but we have a much better chance of surviving if I have Damien by my side.

I need my brutal brother.

But I can't be second in rank any longer.

I do need to lead if I'm to shield her from the worst.

"Finish up," I tell her. "I need to speak to Damien."

"Why? What are you going to say?"

"All of the right things."

My little mouse is quiet on the ride back to the house. I sense her trepidation growing. She's stuck on a tidal wave, crashing toward a destiny she doesn't want and isn't ready for.

I want to reassure her, but I need to see my brother first. I take her to the Anneliese and deposit her inside so she's safe beyond the threshold. "Stay here. Do not leave."

She crosses her arms over her chest and her tits swell against her shirt. She screws up her tight little mouth. I like it when she acts like a brat. Makes me hard as fuck, makes me want to punish her.

"For how long?" she asks.

"As long as I tell you."

Damien is mid-conversation with Sky when I enter his office.

"Look what the cat dragged in," she says.

I grab the pack of cigarettes from my brother's desk and steal one, then his lighter. The tobacco crackles when I put the cigarette to flame and inhale, the smoke filling my lungs.

"Did you make that transfer?" Damien asks Sky.

"I did. It's in the account now."

He gives her a nod, taps at something on a tablet, then hands it back to her. "Leave us. Shut the door behind you."

"Sure thing." Sky comes over to me and puts her hand on my shoulder. "Is it ironic that the cat dragged in something that smells distinctly like pussy?"

"Don't be vulgar, Sky. It does not become you."

She smiles at me, fangs sharp against her full lips. "Everyone's talking

about her, you know."

I take a deep breath before I lose my fucking shit. "Then clearly you're not doing your fucking job."

"I can't stop all gossip."

"Then try harder."

She smirks. "I'll see what I can do."

Fucking Sky. I almost think I need to worry more about her than I do Julian.

When the door clicks shut, Damien says, "She's not wrong, you know." He stands at the bar pouring us each a drink. "Did you really have to fuck her at the human court?"

"That's what they're talking about? That didn't take long."

I'll admit, it was a moment of weakness, fucking that tight pussy out in the open, making her come loudly while everyone was out in the office listening.

My cock grows hard, recounting it in my head. Everything Mouse does, every second she's on my dick makes me hunger for more of her.

Damien hands me a tumbler and I pour half of the bourbon down my throat. The alcohol is a different burn from the cigarette, but a welcomed one just the same.

As the bourbon warms my gut, I push away the thoughts of Mouse and her wet pussy. There will be plenty of time for that.

"She wants me to start my own house," I tell Damien.

That's my opening move. The first right thing to say.

Damien goes rigid. His reaction doesn't register on his face, but I've known my brother long enough to know when he's weighing his options, half of them bad.

I take a long hit from the cigarette and it burns like a wick between my fingers.

"And?" he finally asks. "Are you considering it?"

"Maybe."

His jaw flexes. "Don't condescend to me."

I take another hit. Smoke curls in the light.

"What do you want?" he asks, resigned, as he goes to the balcony doors and pulls them open. "Name your price."

If I wasn't so desperate to protect Jessie, I might have considered her idea. I might have left my brother for good and established my own house, been

the king of my own keep. It does hold a certain appeal. Damien has always been the proverbial older brother, too stubborn for his own good.

"Co-Head of House."

His attention cuts to me like a whip. "Absolutely not."

My brother has always been insufferably predictable.

"Then I guess we're leaving." I start for the door and make it barely three steps.

"Wait."

I bury a smile.

It feels a little unconscionable, using Jessie as a bargaining chip, but I knew before I walked into this office that Damien wouldn't want to let her go. He's just as desperate as I am to control her, for different reasons, in different ways.

The difference is I'd die for her.

And Damien wants to control the shiny new toy, the one that glimmers in the light.

"Is that it?" he asks.

I turn back to him. "I think we should revisit the idea of bringing on a few witches."

He snorts.

"Now who condescends?" I counter.

"Why?" he asks.

"Because we're going to need magic. We're not going to understand all of the intricacies of having a fae in our house. And I don't know if you noticed or not, but we're shit at protecting what's ours in the daylight."

He knows I'm right.

He lights his own cigarette and flicks his wrist, snapping the lighter shut with a resounding clack.

"You really think you can find a witch who would leave their house for ours?"

"Half this town would abandon their post to be a Duval."

"Who would you approach first?"

His gears are turning. The chess player has pulled up a chair.

"Bianca."

"Mulligan? Why?"

"She's ambitious."

"She's young."

"Young enough to mold."

"Mmm." He takes another hit and paces out to the balcony. "The shifters will lose their fucking minds if we take on a witch. So will the other vampire houses."

"The other vampires will begin recruiting the day after the news breaks."

He sighs. "You're probably right." He goes to the balcony railing and leans against it looking back to me. "It could be a dangerous move."

"I don't think we have a choice at this point."

He takes a hit, lets the smoke cloud from his mouth before sucking it in through his nose. "You never wanted to lead with me before."

"I never had a reason to want it."

"You're different with her."

"You want to go down that road? You want to rehash all of the stupid decisions you've made for her sister's pussy?"

Damien darts back into the house and stops just a foot from me. Rage cuts into the fine lines around his mouth. "Careful, little brother." His voice is sinister and dark.

"Then let us both agree to tread carefully when it comes to our MacMahon sisters."

He rakes his teeth over his bottom lip, annoyance plainly written across his face. Damien doesn't want to admit just how much Kelly gets beneath his skin and it pisses him off when I force him to show it.

"Fine," he says and shifts away again, this time for the door. He stops with his hand on the knob. "We'll make the announcement tonight. From this day forward, Duval House is ours, together. Well played, little brother."

Well played, indeed.

Looks like I said all of the right things.

And as much as I like the fantasy of starting my own house with Jessie, my gut is telling me this is the right decision.

In fact, I think it might be the only one we've got.

EPISODE 39

GIVE ME AN EXCUSE

I SIT IN FRONT OF THE MIRROR IN THE BATHROOM IN KELLY'S ROOM AS SHE pins up my hair in a neat bun. There's to be a celebration tonight at Duval House and Damien is going to announce that Bran will be Co-Head of House.

I know he did it for me.

Even though Bran has the influence and the self-assurance to be a leader, I get the distinct impression he never wanted to bother with it, almost as if the responsibility was beneath him.

But I guess being a co-leader is better than a sole one, as much as I liked the idea of him having his own house.

Maybe that was my own selfishness, wanting to desperately get away from vampires like Sky. She's going to make my life miserable here. As much as Bran promises to shield me and protect me, he can't be with me at all times.

I guess I better learn to deal with it.

Pins hang from the corner of Kelly's mouth as she works her way around the bun. When she plucks one from between her teeth and sinks it into my hair, I notice a new ring shining on her pointer finger. It's thin with a low profile but it's encrusted with several tiny diamonds.

Kelly has always loved her nice things, but I've never seen this piece of jewelry before.

"Where'd you get the new ring?"

Her face immediately pinks and I think I have my answer.

"Damien?"

She keeps working at my hair. Damien must know my sister well if he's gifting her shiny objects. It's literally the interstate to her heart. "If he's

giving you gifts, that must be a good sign.”

She snorts and then talks around the pins still hanging in her mouth. “Damien is literally a billionaire. This is like pocket change for him.”

“Are you exaggerating?”

She shakes her head. “Bran is too, I’m sure.”

“How—”

“They’ve been around a long time and they are both incredibly smart.”

I knew they were rich, but *that* rich? Duval House is elegant and luxurious and huge, but the brothers don’t act like billionaires.

“Well, regardless of the cost, it’s still a gift.”

Kelly sighs. “It’s just another way for him to mark me as his. Damien has always been extremely possessive. And I maybe—”

She frowns at my hair, but I think she’s lost in thought.

“You what?”

She sets the pins on the vanity and they plink against the marble. “Sometimes I push him too far just so he’ll show it. I get a perverse sort of satisfaction when he acts all possessive like that. And then we’re both pissed off and obsessive and then when we end up in bed—” She meets my gaze, reading my thirst for more. “No. Stop it,” she says.

I pretend to be innocent. “So tell me, how long has it been since you’ve *ended up in his bed?*”

She whacks me on the arm.

“Hey! I could use a distraction and your screwed up love life is exactly what I need. Please.”

Folding her arms over her middle, she leans into the vanity. The color of her cheeks flushes a deeper shade of scarlet.

“Kelly?” I coax.

“Okay, fine. While you were gone.” The smile that spreads on her face nearly swallows her up.

“Ohhhh, ohhh, sister. Okay. Okay. I thought you were going to say like a few months ago or something or... You have to tell me. Tell me what it was like.” Bran is in the main house with Damien as far as I know, so he can’t scold me for asking about our siblings’ sex life. And I really want to know.

“Damien and I...when we’re...” She winces and trails off.

I think it’s adorable that my sister is having a hard time getting the dirty details out. Come to think of it, she’s never really divulged this kind of thing to me. For a very long time, she’s been more parent than sister.

But maybe that can change now.

“Go on.” I lean forward.

“When he lets go, and I let go—

“Yes.”

“It’s—” Her eyes sink closed and her entire body shivers. “It’s consuming. Mind-blowing.” She lets out a breathy sigh and then, “Okay, listen. I have to tell you this because I have to tell someone. But promise me you won’t freak out.”

A secret. YES.

“I promise.”

“Sometimes he’ll tie me to the bed.”

I know the shock must register on my face because Kelly pulls back. “Is that weird? I shouldn’t have told you. Am I crazy for letting him do that?”

“Um, no. Not at all. Do you like it?”

“Yes.” She tilts her head, looks at the floor, her eyes wide, maybe revisiting their last encounter. “I like it a lot.”

I feel like I’m relearning who my sister is. How is it that you can live with someone in the same house and yet barely know them? “Then it’s not crazy,” I say. “You like what you like. As long as you’re safe.”

She nods. “Before him, I had never done anything like that. Like my sex life had been so vanilla until Damien and I didn’t know it could be that way. Like...I don’t even know how to describe it.” She shivers again. “Sometimes when I’m with him, it feels like I leave my body. Like all time and space ceases to exist and there’s only him and me and the *euphoria*.”

“I know that feeling well.”

She smiles over at me. “We may have strapped ourselves to a rocket ship.”

“Maybe. But it’ll be a wild ride. Has he bitten you?”

“Yes, but it’s been a while. When I was with Locke House, we were able to cover our scent with witch charms that we got from a Vane witch. But a bite leaves a stronger scent.”

I pinch my fingers together and bring it to my mouth. “When Bran bites me—chef’s kiss.”

She shakes her head and I can tell she’s fighting her sister/mom reaction, which is to reprimand me. “I still can’t wrap my head around all of this. You being with Bran. Me here at Duval House. How the hell did we get to this place?”

“I don’t know but I don’t hate it. I just wish Sky didn’t hate me so much.”

“I heard.” Kelly grabs a bottle of hairspray and gestures for me to close my eyes. She blasts my bun with spray. “Damien said if Sky doesn’t behave herself, he’ll kick her out.”

“Seriously? Over me?”

“I don’t think you realize how much sway you hold here.”

It’s hard for me to believe that I’m anything other than the old me. The skin is much harder to shed even though it’s peeling off and starting to chaff.

I don’t know who I am as this new person and I guess I won’t fully know until Rita unbinds me and I find out more about my origins.

“I don’t want her to get kicked out,” I tell Kelly. “I just wish she’d leave me alone.”

“And that is entirely up to her at this point. She’ll learn quickly once Damien puts her in her place.”

I can’t imagine witnessing that.

But not going to lie, I’m kinda looking forward to it.

By the time Bran returns to me, I’m a vision of party perfection thanks to Kelly. She finished my hair, then my makeup, and helped me pick out a dress. We decided on an emerald green lacy dress with a silky lining underneath. The scalloped edges of the bodice neckline plunges all the way to my navel and the back is completely bare, making it clear I’m not wearing a bra.

Jimmy let me borrow some jewelry—a set of gold tassel earrings and a tiered gold necklace with a simple star charm on the end. The charm hits at my sternum.

When Bran sees me in our bedroom, he does a double-take and my insides light up like a supernova.

He comes close, slides his hand around to the back of my neck, and draws me into him so he can speak directly at my ear. “You look lovely, Mouse. I’m already fantasizing about all of the things I will do to you in this dress.”

I warm beneath him and then pull away so I can look up at him. “First, we celebrate. You deserve that much.”

“It’s not as special as you’re making it out to seem.”

“Bullshit.”

He tilts his head down, narrows his eyes. “Careful, little mouse. I’m not above making the party wait for me.”

I breathe out and grin. “So you can fuck me?”

He drags his thumb over my bottom lip. “So I can punish this smart mouth. Give me an excuse. Any one will do.”

His touch turns punishing as his fingers trail down to my chin, forcing me to turn, exposing my neck.

My breath quickens, heart thumping loudly.

And then a knock sounds on the door and Bran groans. “It’s Jimmy,” he tells me even though the door is closed and there’s no way for him to see through it.

He darts over to it and whips it open. “You have impeccable timing, Jimmy.”

“If you’re going to be Head of House, you’ll have to get used to everyone always needing something from you.”

The line of Bran’s shoulders rises with a deep, exasperated breath. “I detest it when you make points I can’t argue.”

“I’m glad to be of service.” She nods at me. “You look beautiful, Jessie.”

My face is probably still flushed. I’m sure she heard us. “Thanks, Jimmy. You too. That dress is amazing.”

She’s left her hair natural and the curls spring with her movements. Her gauzy gold dress looks gorgeous against her dark skin. Giant emeralds swing from her ears.

“Thank you.” She gives us a spin. “It’s vintage Chanel.”

Bran scowls. “Coco was insufferable.”

“You hated her because she was brilliant.”

“I hated her because she bought that flat I wanted. Right out from beneath me.”

Jimmy rolls her eyes. “Ignore him. He collects real estate and when he loses out on it, he gets grumpy.”

“When isn’t he grumpy?” I counter.

“Also another excellent point.” Jimmy smiles innocently at Bran.

“I can see the two of you together might very well be the death of my last nerve,” he says.

“And how we will delight in it.” Jimmy waves us on. “Now hurry up. You both are the guests of honor tonight and the party is waiting for you.”

Chop-chop.” She disappears from the doorway.

Bran winds his arm around my waist, drawing me to his hip. “Stay by my side tonight,” he tells me. “And if you’re a good girl, maybe I’ll treat you like a bad one after.”

I try to pretend like that doesn’t sound like the best night ever.

EPISODE 40

TOUCHE

THE PARTY IS BEING HELD IN THE BALLROOM BECAUSE *OF COURSE* DUVAL House has a ballroom.

A dozen chandeliers hang from the soaring ceiling, their crystals glittering in the light. Round tables dot the perimeter of the room while a raised dais to the left of the entrance holds a full band. People have coupled off to dance in unison in a way that reminds me of all of the Regency romance movies Mom used to watch when I was a kid.

Over the years, I've attended a few Locke House vampire parties, but nothing like this. Nothing that was planned at the last minute and somehow turned out like an event that was planned by a team for a year.

Bran leads me across the room and the crowd parts for us, the others bowing or bending their heads to him as he passes. He ignores them.

We come to a private table where Damien sits at the head. Jimmy is there too with a few other vampires that I recognize but whose names escape me.

"Late, as usual," Damien says, his tone scolding.

"Sorry, brother. But you know what they say about those who are chronically late."

"No, I don't think I do. Enlighten me."

"They don't give a shit."

Damien scowls. Jimmy curls her hand over her mouth trying to hide a laugh and Damien turns his displeasure on her.

"Oh, don't give me that look," Jimmy says, the laughter still trilling in her voice. "It's funny because it's true."

"Yes, well, if he's going to be Head of House and you're going to be second in line, then you both need to act the part."

Bran and Jimmy share a look like, *can you believe this guy?*

I don't know if I'll ever be able to penetrate the tight-knit relationship the three of them share, but I hope I can find a place on the edge at the very least.

There's something to envy about what they have and it immediately makes me miss Sam.

It feels like a year since I spoke to her last.

"Let's get the fun part over with," Damien says and rises from the table. "Come to the dais."

Bran looks at me. His hand is still at the small of my back, very clearly an act of possession, and it makes me flush inside and out.

"I won't be long," he says to me.

"I'll be okay."

"Behave," he warns me, with a glint in his eyes.

Some distant, dark thought comes to mind that if I don't, he'll punish me for it, and he's been oh-so-clever with his punishments.

"Mouse," he says, nostrils flaring, a rumble in his voice.

He can smell me, smell the first hint of my desire.

"Sorry," I say. But am I?

And then, in the middle of a Duval party with literally everyone in attendance, he kisses me on the forehead.

It's a simple act but it speaks a thousand words.

Together, Bran, Damien, and Jimmy make their way across the ballroom. If the crowd parted for Bran, it practically gets to its knees for the three of them together.

Because I had always been dead set on leaving Midnight, I never paid careful attention to the vampire politics and the hierarchy.

I never realized just how powerful these three are.

Like the sun and the moon and the earth. Everything and everyone has to bend to them.

Julian never commanded a room like this.

When they reach the stage, the band lets their current song fade out and the room quickly falls to silence.

Damien takes the lead while Bran stands on his right and Jimmy on his left.

They are a sight to behold. Damien and Bran look ridiculously handsome standing next to one another in their dark designer suits, and it's easy to see them as brothers. Jimmy radiates power and energy and dazzles in her dress.

And in this moment, I am ridiculously grateful to be where I am. I want to be a part of their group. I want to command a room with them.

I've never hungered for significance...until now.

"Thank you all for gathering here tonight on such short notice," Damien says, his voice booming across the room. "We have an announcement to make."

Excited energy breezes through the crowd.

"As you all know, my brother and I helped found Midnight Harbor and this house wouldn't be what it is today without him. So I'm pleased to announce that Bran and I will now lead Duval House together as Co-Heads of House and Jimena will assume the role as second-in-command."

The crowd comes to life with applause.

When it dies down again, Damien adds, "And as many of you are aware, we've welcomed two new members to our house."

Oh shit.

The crowd's attention starts to wander, half of it landing on me, the other half finding Kelly by the bar.

Now I wish I would have gone to her earlier so I wouldn't be standing here like a butterfly pinned to a board.

I distinctly feel like I'm on display.

"I know many of you have wondered why we have a Locke human within our house. All you need to know as of right now is that Kelly MacMahon is under our protection, and tomorrow, at her Pledging, Duval House will bid on Jessie."

My face warms beneath the attention as the whispers start.

"Like Kelly, Jessie is under our protection. And if I catch any of you trying to haze her, you can expect a private meeting with me. Do we understand one another?"

The crowd quickly murmurs its agreement.

"Now that business is done," Damien says, "carry on with your celebrations and be responsible with your blood drinking."

The vampires hoot and whistle as their Pledged humans prepare for a night of being human juice boxes.

I hover by the abandoned table waiting for Bran to return to me, but as he leaves the dais, he's cornered by Sky.

My insides immediately clench up.

She gets in close to his side and leans in to whisper something to him, her

hand on his arm. He laughs at whatever it is.

My chest tightens as a cold sweat prickles down my arms. Has he only been pretending to be indifferent to Sky?

There is a voice in the dark depths of my mind that says: *Get back at him.*

I scan the crowd for a familiar face and spot Lance, the vampire valet who parked the Bimmer the first time I came here with Bran.

“Lance!” I practically shout. “How are you?”

He’s mid-drink of a glass of blood and nearly chokes on it when I sidle up to him.

“Me?” He looks behind him.

“Yes, you. Is there another Lance here?”

Lance isn’t a bad looking guy. I’m not exactly sure what his story is, but I don’t think he’s one of the older vampires, otherwise he wouldn’t be a valet.

“I needed a friendly, handsome face,” I tell him. “Can you be my friendly, handsome face, Lance?”

“Ummm...” He clutches at his glass, hand shaking. “I’m not so sure—”

I bat my eyelashes up at him, smile as brightly as I can, and put my hand on his arm, just like Sky did with Bran. Honestly, coming over here I just wanted to make Bran jealous, but now that Lance is bumbling beneath my attention, there is a bright flare of pride igniting at the center of me.

If I have this kind of power, what else can I do with it?

“How long have you been at Duval House?” I ask him, and sip from my drink, elongating my neck as I tip my head back. His eyes immediately zero in on the pulsing artery in my throat.

“1983,” he answers. “I was twenty-six at the time.”

“So that makes you...”

“Sixty-five. I’m sixty-five years old.”

He could be a grandfather right now if his life had turned out differently.

I look back toward the dais and find Sky still talking to Bran, but he’s not looking at her. He’s looking at me. And his eyes are bright, burning gold.

The thrill intensifies and my clit pulses.

Oh fuck.

The absolute satisfaction I’m getting out of this is so fucking wrong.

But...

Lance follows my line of sight. “Oh shit. Bran,” he says, even though we’re a football-field apart and the room is full of the cacophony of the party. “I’m sorry. We were just talking.”

My heart beats harder.
And in the next blink, Bran is gone.
Lance yelps and darts away.
Goosebumps erupt on my skin as that dark flame burns brighter.
He's going to come for me.
I turn around and run.

I'm like a child that's just lit a bomb.

And now I'm running away, both terrified and giddy, waiting for it to go off.

There are three side doors to the ballroom and I take the closest one to me. The hallway is empty beyond and the lighting is low with just a few hanging pendant lights sending a halo of golden glow over the polished hardwood floors.

The sound of the party fades behind me as my heart hammers in my head.

When I turn down the next corner, a hand lashes out, grabs me by the arm, and yanks me into a darkened room.

I know it's Bran the second I inhale. There's no mistaking his scent—the sweetness of amber, the richness of leather.

He has me pressed against the wall in no time at all, and I let out a little moan.

"I told you to be a good girl tonight." His voice is hoarse and edged with a sinister rumble. "It's like you want to be punished."

I clench up, clit throbbing. I'm wearing panties tonight, but the fabric is already soaked.

"Am I not allowed to talk to other guys?" I ask.

"Am I not allowed to talk to other girls?"

"*Touché.*"

He smiles. "Do you know the origins of that word?"

I wiggle beneath him. He tightens his grip on me, pressing closer. "I can't say that I do."

"It's French," he says, "and it means *to touch.*"

My heart kicks up. Bran takes in a deep, satisfying breath.

"Oh, little mouse, you thought you could play me, did you? Manipulate

me into punishing that pussy.”

I lay my head back against the wall, exposing my throat. The tingling sensation between my legs is so intense now, I squeeze my thighs together trying to hold it at bay.

When is he going to touch me? When will he end the torture?

“Is that so wrong?” I ask him.

He laughs, low and beneath his breath, and then reaches into his pocket and pulls out a black teardrop-shaped object. He holds it up by its flat bottom.

“Open up, Mouse.”

“What—”

He shoves it past my lips. It’s cool to the touch with layered petals around the head, almost like a rose.

I watch him as he fucks my mouth with it, slow and steady, and then he pulls it out fast, making my lips pop.

“What is that for?”

He kicks my legs apart, reaches beneath my dress, shoves aside my panties, and slides it into my pussy.

I exhale in a rush, surprised by its use and shocked at how much wetter I already am because of it.

In his other hand, he holds up a remote.

I don’t think I need an explanation for that.

He presses a button and the plug buzzes deep inside of me.

The moan that escapes my throat is both shrill and lacking oxygen.

“Before the little mouse decided to play games, she should have asked herself what the rules were.”

He presses the button again and the vibration shifts rhythm and my clit throbs harder.

“Bran,” I say, gulping down air.

He wraps his hand around my throat and kisses me gently, then nips at my bottom lip.

“Okay, I give in,” I say. I want more than this. I want his hands on me. I want him inside of me.

My clit is swollen and needy and without thinking, I reach between my legs, desperate to rub myself.

But Bran snags my wrist and tsk-tsk. “Come on, Mouse. We have a party to attend.”

“Wait.”

“No.”

I wanted him to bend me over a desk and fuck me. Or throw me on a fainting couch and punish me with his cock. Not this prolonged torture.

Wrapping his hand around the back of my neck, he steers me like an animal from the room, the plug still buzzing.

I’m finding it more difficult to walk the more the pleasure builds. The layers on the plug cause friction with every step and the vibration pulses from my clit to my ass.

Fuck, I’m about to go rabid.

“Bran, please.”

When we reach the ballroom again, Bran stops me at the threshold and says at my ear, “Before the little mouse decided to play games, she should have asked herself if she knew how to win.”

Then he pushes me into the ballroom.

EPISODE 41

DARKER THOUGHTS

BRAN

HITTING THE OFF BUTTON FOR THE PLUG, I GIVE THE LITTLE MOUSE A BREAK as she stumbles through the party.

She holds herself up on the back of a chair and sucks in a deep breath.

Her cheeks are flushed.

I'm going to fuck her hard later, make her scream my name.

But not yet.

I am a patient man. I think she forgets that.

My little mouse is always too eager to plot how she'll win.

Once upon a time I warned her not to play games with me, but I think I'm eating my words.

I'm enjoying this far too much.

Taking a deep breath, Mouse straightens, smoothing down the front of her dress. I know she's drenched and thinking about her soaked panties has me so fucking hard, it hurts.

I track her through the party as she nears the bar a little unsteady on her feet.

The band switches music and plays Handel's Water Music Suite No. 2 just as three vampires approach. One of them says, "Bran, can we tell you—"

"No."

I grab a tumbler of scotch from a passing waiter and sling back half of it.

Mouse catches my eye. More blood paints her cheeks and my fangs sharpen.

"Sorry," the vampire says, "but maybe we can—"

"No," I say again and finally look at them.

I don't recognize their faces. Damien has always been more interested in knowing everyone's name. Where they came from, what their story is. Damien is devious like that. He knows he can use even the lower-level vampire to his advantage someday. But I'm not mining coal here.

I just want the gold.

That's why I've focused more of my attention on making the right friends in the right houses.

"Bran," Jimmy says as she sidles up next to me and hooks her arm

through mine. “The boys wanted to share something they overheard. Perhaps hear them out?”

I watch Mouse for another second as she orders a whiskey neat, tilting her head so she can hear the bartender over the rise of the music.

Fuck, if everything she does makes me this hard, we’re going to spend the rest of our lives in our bed.

Our bed.

The thought catches me off guard.

Our bed?

It’s decidedly *my* bed. I bought it.

But I want her in it. Always. It will become her bed too.

It’s the little things like this that I am unprepared for, the minute details of loving something that you don’t want to break.

I’ll buy her a dozen beds. I’ll fuck her and love her in all of them.

But first I need to torture her.

“Bran?” Jimmy says.

I finally meet her eyes. She’s annoyed with me. Maybe she has a right to be. I just manipulated my brother into giving me Co-Head of House and I’m already bored with its duties.

“Listen,” she says, and pinches my arm with a nasty little grit to her teeth. “*Please.*”

I sigh. “What is it?”

The vampire on the far-left bumbles over his words. “I don’t know if you know this or not or maybe you do but—”

“If I knew it, then why would you be here telling me?”

“Right. Right. Of course.”

“Spit it out. Contrary to what you may think, I have better things to do.”

Like fuck my mouse senseless.

Across the ballroom, Mouse gets her drink—in record time too, now that she’s princess of the house—and she takes a long pull from it, breasts swelling at the lacy collar of her dress.

I press the remote again and she chokes on the drink, clamping her hand over her mouth to keep from spitting it out.

She glares at me across the room and a sick little flare of pleasure lights in my chest.

It’s a reminder that I control her pleasure. Her pussy belongs to me.

The vampire tries again. “I was turned about a decade back so I still have

family around here. My dad works at the guard station and he overheard the chief talking to Cal about Jessie's Pledging tomorrow."

That gets my attention.

"In what regard?"

"Cal is planning on coming."

The Alpha of the Midnight Pack is going to attend a routine Pledging?

Even if the pack wanted to bid on Jessie, they wouldn't send the Alpha to do it.

"Did your father say why?"

The boy looks sheepish as his friends fidget by his side.

"I don't have all night, kid."

"It's Julian, I think," the kid says. "It sounded like the chief and Cal were discussing Julian planning something big at Jessie's Pledge."

Of course he is. This part isn't surprising. It's the Alpha caring that is.

"Thank you for telling me," I say.

The kid gulps and nods. "Y-you're welcome."

"Now get the fuck out of here."

They're gone in a second.

When I look back at Jimmy, she's frowning at me.

"What?" I say. "Don't start."

"You can't be Head of House and be an asshole."

"Yes, I can. Damien does it every day."

"Damien isn't obvious about it, though, which is why people respect *and* fear him."

I grumble. "I don't need their respect, Jim. Just the fear."

I hit the remote again and Mouse takes a heavy breath. She's collapsed in a chair now, panting.

I can just imagine how wet her pussy is, how swollen her clit must be.

"So what do you plan to do about it?" Jimmy asks.

"About what?"

"Jessie? Her Pledging? Julian?"

Good question.

"I'll talk to Damien about it later. In the meantime, can you get me a meeting with Bianca Mulligan before tomorrow?"

"The witch?"

"Yes."

Jimmy shrugs. "Maybe? What do I tell her?"

“Ask her if she’s open to new opportunities and see what she says.”

Taking a step back, Jimmy crosses her arms over her chest and regards me with her cool indifference. “You got Damien to agree to expand the house, didn’t you?”

I smile at her. “You know I always get what I want.”

“Mmm. Sometimes at the expense of everything else.”

“Set it up.” I start to walk away.

“I’m not your assistant,” she says.

I stop and give her my most innocent smile. “Please, Jimmy? My dearest, oldest, best friend? Will you set up a meeting with Bianca?”

She rolls her eyes and her earrings swing from her ears. “Fine. But we’re getting you an assistant. I don’t have time to do your errands.”

“I don’t want an assistant,” I call over my shoulder.

“Too bad!”

Mouse has her eyes closed and she’s slouched in one of the chairs at an empty table.

I hit the button again and her eyes pop open.

I disappear into the crowd.

She looks for me and when she doesn’t find me, she bolts from the room again.

Naughty little mouse.

I’m not sure if she’s running from me or trying to provoke me into chasing her again.

Either way, it doesn’t really matter.

I love the hunt.

I love the sound of her rapid heartbeat and the blood rushing through her veins.

She won’t get far.

Little mice never do.

I catch her halfway between the ballroom and the French doors that lead to the courtyard.

It’s easy to wind my arm around her waist and haul her into the nearest office.

She's breathless, forehead a little clammy, heart rate accelerated.
I spin her and press her against the closed door.
"Bran," she moans and fuck if I'm not hard all over again.
My name on her lips is a sin I will not repent.
Iron sconces are lit in the office and the soft light burnishes Mouse in gold.

She is a dream.

She's more than I deserve.

Blood pounds through her veins and I salivate at the thought of sinking my fangs in her while I fuck her hard.

The plug is still buzzing and with my cock pressed against her, I can feel the soft vibration of it in my balls.

"Take it out," she begs. "And fuck me."

I had planned on it, but now I have other thoughts.

Darker thoughts.

"No," I tell her.

She mewls beneath me. "Have I not suffered enough?"

I run my thumb down her cheek, dragging it roughly over the corner of her mouth. Her tongue darts out to meet me.

The air is overwhelmed by the scent of her desire and I am overwhelmed by her.

Her thighs rub together as the plug continues to buzz.

There is a sensation in my chest and deep in my gut, something I cannot contain when Mouse is like this, when she's desperate for me to fill her up.

If she knew what she did to me, she would play games with me all day long.

I am powerless against her.

"Bran," she says again.

"Yes, Mouse?" I kiss at the corner of her mouth and she wiggles beneath me, her hands coming to my hips to drag me closer. I grind against her, so fucking hard, I want to pound her pretty pussy until she can't breathe.

"Fuck me. Now." Her words are a whisper against my lips.

I can't take it anymore.

"Try that again," I order.

"Fuck me, please?"

Fucking finally.

I pull her to the desk. It's bare save for a pen holder, an armillary sphere,

a few leather-bound books.

“Hands on the desk,” I tell her.

She curls her grip around the opposite edge.

“Don’t let go.”

She pants out an agreement when I relieve her of her panties and shove her dress up around her waist.

Bare for me, I push her head down, pull her ass up.

Fuck if she isn’t glorious.

“You’ve made a mess of that plug, Mouse.”

She moans. I hit the remote again and change the tempo of the vibration. She gasps out in delight.

“I thought you were going to fuck me,” she says around several gulping breaths.

“I am.”

I spit on her ass and it glistens in the light.

“Both holes will be filled up tonight, Mouse.”

And then I shove my cock in her ass.

EPISODE 42

LIFE CHOICES

I THINK THE MOST SUBLIME PART ABOUT BEING A VAMPIRE'S GIRLFRIEND IS that Bran has been around for centuries and knows all of the devious ways to make me feel vile and wicked.

And oh how vile and wicked I feel being bent over a desk with the plug inside of me and Bran in my ass.

I gasp out as he pushes in and accidentally let go of the desk as the sensation takes me by surprise.

"Mouse," he warns, "what'd I tell you? Hands on the desk."

Goosebumps roll up my arms as I resume my position like a dutiful little mouse.

"Good girl," he says and then shoves back into me.

It hurts at first as my body automatically tenses up, but then when I take a deep breath and settle into the sensation, I realize being filled up, *really* filled up, is fucking nirvana.

And when Bran is fully inside of me, it forces the plug forward so that it buzzes against my clit.

I don't even have to touch myself and I'm already *this close*.

I'm throbbing and so fucking wet and Bran's hands on my hips sends a flare through my belly.

Every time he slides into me, fingers bruising my flesh, it feels like him claiming me all over again.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

Fuck, I'm so close.

My clit rubs against the edge of the desk as Bran slows his tempo, savoring the feel of me wrapped around him.

“My little mouse,” he says, sliding a hand up to the back of my neck, to the back of my head, pressing my face against the desk. “Taking your punishment like a good girl.”

I pant out as the plug buzzing in my pussy meets the buzzing in my clit.

“Oh god,” I say, knuckles white as I hold onto the desk.

“Your ass is so fucking tight, Mouse.” He leans into me and curls his hand in my hair, pulling on it, forcing my back to arch, my ass to push into him and he claims me harder, faster, the desk sliding over the hardwood floor with each thrust.

The pressure builds in my clit as the plug buzzes against my inner walls.

“I want you to come while I fill up your ass,” Bran orders.

I exhale in a rush, words failing me.

“Mouse,” Bran says sharply.

“Okay.”

He thrusts forward. The desk groans, the legs scraping forward another inch. I keep holding on.

The wave builds. Butterflies fill my stomach and sink to my clit.

Bran pounds into me, forcing the vibrating plug to rub against the front of my inner wall.

The sensation lights me up and suddenly I’m hot all over and moaning loudly against the desk.

Bran picks up his tempo.

The orgasm rushes through me, blinking through every muscle and nerve.

I clench up. Suck in a breath.

The wave rushes out.

The air gets stuck in my throat and then Bran buries himself deep and lets out a guttural groan and the plug rocks against me and a second orgasm comes out of nowhere, pulsing through me.

It’s like my body is exploding with pleasure, like my nerves have turned to firecrackers, the blood in my veins to honey.

I can’t contain it.

Can’t control it.

I hold onto the desk with everything I have as my legs tremble and the wave turns into a tidal wave and I scream out.

“Oh fuck! Oh my god! Bran!”

He wraps his hand around my throat, yanks me back, pulls down the front of my dress and sinks his fangs into the curve of my neck.

Sparks light up behind my eyes. Instinctively I try to pull away, but Bran tightens his grip and pushes his cock in further, spilling more cum as he sucks the blood from my neck.

My body turns into a kaleidoscope. Full of color and wonder and spark.

Bran pulls us upright and his hand sinks between my legs, holding me as if he can feel the pleasure just by touching my clit.

I jolt, still overly sensitive. He pulls more blood from my veins.

The room spins.

Bran rides me as the pleasure ebbs out, his other hand still firmly wrapped around my throat.

He pulls his fangs out first but leaves his cock in my ass.

“You took your punishment well, Mouse,” he says, his voice ragged, his breath hot on my bare shoulder.

Several beads of blood well in the puncture wounds and he dips down, lapping them up with a soft swipe of his tongue.

I shiver. “That was amazing. I’ve never come twice before. I didn’t think that was possible.”

“When I’m done with you, Mouse, you’ll be coming a dozen times.” He pulls out and steps back and I immediately lose my footing, I’m shaking so badly.

Bran scoops me up before I hit the floor and cradles me in his arms. “Jessie?” There’s blood on his lips, fire in his eyes.

“I’m okay. Set me down.”

“I will not.” He carries me over to a leather chair and sits with me, cradling me in his arms. He shuts off the plug. “Open your legs.”

I pry my knees apart, thighs quivering, body still jolting through the aftershocks, as he reaches down, and gently takes the plug out. It glistens in the golden light. Bran drags his tongue over the petals.

“Fuck, Mouse,” he says, his eyes burning again. “You taste so fucking good.”

Another tingle rocks through me making my toes curl. Bran sets the plug aside and tucks me closer.

“I’m going to put you to bed,” he says, his mouth at my temple. “Clearly that was too much for you.”

I laugh against him and snuggle into his chest. “No, it wasn’t. It was just

enough.”

“Did you learn your lesson?”

I tip my head back to look up at him. He’s mopped up the blood, but his lips are still stained red. “If you’re asking if I’ve learned my lesson not to provoke you, the answer is absolutely not. That was incredible.”

“Mouse.” His voice is edged in warning.

“I made my life choices. I’m not going to regret them.”

He sighs and runs his fingers through my hair. “You will be my undoing.”

“I’m just getting closer to your gooey center.”

“Never say that again.”

“I know the truth.”

“*Mouse.*”

I smile against his chest, close my eyes and drink in the scent of him, knowing damn well that whatever version of Bran I get, it’s not the same as what other people get.

He may fuck me into oblivion, but being snuggled in his arms, surrounded by the strength and solidity of his grip, is enough to tell me I get the very best version.

We stay there for several minutes before Bran rouses me.

“Let me take you to bed.”

“Fine.” I *am* sleepy. And my legs are still a little wobbly.

When I get to my feet, I can feel cum leaking out of me, but of course I don’t clean up. I know better.

Bran threads his fingers with mine and pulls me into the hallway.

And we run right into Sky.

Almost like she was waiting for us.

“Well,” she says, eyebrow arching as she takes in the sight of me a little disheveled, “I think the entire house might have heard that.”

My face pinks.

“Didn’t know you had it in you, Jessie,” she adds.

Bran goes rigid, drops my hand, and closes the gap between him and Sky. She backpedals and slams into the opposite wall, but there’s laughter in her voice.

“It must just kill you,” he says down to her.

She curls her mouth. “What’s that?”

“The fact that you had me for a century, but never had my love. It took Jessie barely any time at all.”

Holyyyyyy shitttt.

He did not just say that!

I clamp my hand over my mouth to hide the smile that involuntarily spreads across my face.

I don’t want to gloat, but...*holy shit.*

What was it Bran said to me earlier?

Before the little mouse decided to play games, she should have asked herself if she knew how to win.

Bran loves me and he’s not afraid to tell everyone he does and somehow *that* feels like winning.

Sky glares up at Bran. “You’ll break her eventually,” she says. “Like you break everything you love.”

Bran’s shoulders rock back and the air grows charged.

I don’t have to be a mind reader to sense his thoughts have gone dark.

I don’t know if it’s bravery or stupidity, but I step between them. “What do you want, Sky?”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Damien wants you,” she tells Bran.

“For what?”

“The Alpha of the Midnight Pack just showed up on our doorstep asking to see you and Damien.”

I glance at Bran over my shoulder. “Were we expecting Cal?”

I know Bran much better than I did a month ago and the look on his face is the look of a secret.

“Bran,” I say again. There should be no secrets between us. He promised me.

“We weren’t expecting Cal. Not exactly,” he admits.

“What does that mean?”

“He knows something about your Pledge tomorrow. Something about Julian.”

Sky pushes away from us and starts down the hall. “Apparently, the Alpha has a psychic on his payroll and the psychic had a vision,” she says as

she walks away. “It’s smart, really, if you can find a legit psychic. Most are charlatans.”

“Did he say what the vision was?” I ask.

“Just that Kelly is going to die.”

EPISODE 43

THAT ONE IS MINE

KELLY IS GOING TO DIE.

Sky's declaration is like a bomb going off.

"What?" I shout and my voice echoes down the hallway. "Bran? *No*. We can't—"

He grabs me to pull me to a stop. "Look at me."

My heart is racing and my body is numb with panic.

"Mouse."

I meet his eyes.

"Your sister is under the protection of Duval House." His face hardens. "*I* will protect her. Do you hear me?"

I swallow and nod.

"And Damien would sooner light himself on fire than let something happen to Kelly."

"*Really?*"

"Yes," Bran says. "You have me and you have my brother and nothing is going to happen to you or your sister."

That helps calm me down a little. I know that when it comes down to it, Bran and Damien are the ones you'd want at your back.

I know that, but I can't shake the bad feeling in my stomach.

My Pledge is an impending doomsday, apparently. I no longer want to leave Midnight, but I suddenly don't want tomorrow to come either.

"Come on." Bran takes my hand and pulls me down the hall. Sky is already gone. She dropped the bomb and quickly dodged its destruction.

Bran leads me through the maze of Duval House. We don't return to the party. Instead we cross through the foyer, go down another hallway, then

another, and enter a large office. It's rich and masculine and smells like tobacco and liquor and dark forests.

Damien is at the bar pouring bourbon.

And the Alpha of the Midnight Pack is sitting in one of the leather club chairs looking sorely out of place.

I've rarely crossed paths with Cal and now I've been in the same room with him twice in a month.

He stands when we come in. He's the tallest in the room and that's saying something because Bran and Damien are tall on their own.

Cal is all muscle and raw power. If the Duvals are a hurricane, then Cal is a landslide.

He could easily bury you before you could take a full breath.

Dark jeans, ripped at the knees, cover his muscular thighs and a black t-shirt skims his body in all of the right ways.

The dark Scandinavian tattoos on the side of his scalp somehow look more menacing in this lighting and without an overshirt, his full sleeve tattoo on his left arm is on display.

I chose Bran and I love Bran, but goddamn, Cal is hot.

I swallow hard and Bran wraps his hand around the back of my neck and brings me close, his mouth at my ear. "Careful, little mouse. I will lock you in a room if I must."

Taking a deep breath, I try to drive away any dirty thoughts of what that might entail and focus on the task at hand. Cal is here for business, not to overwhelm me with his raw sexiness.

I pity the girl that gets his heart. She's going to be in so much trouble.

"Jessie," Cal says. "Are you well?"

His question is clearly an interrogation of the Duvals.

Damien comes over with a glass of bourbon and hands it to the Alpha and says, "You are in my house. Disrespect me and we'll have a problem."

Cal takes the glass, not at all put out by the threat. "Jessie is just a girl caught in the predator's snare. You'll have to excuse me for caring about her well-being."

They both look at me.

They're all looking at me.

I lick my lips and try not to fidget beneath the overwhelming attention of three alpha men.

"I appreciate your concern, Cal, but I'm good. Really."

And also...why does he care?

Cal isn't a man that just does things out of the goodness of his heart. I have heard he is fair and just, but he's also the Alpha. He's got better things to worry about.

"Why are you here?" Damien asks. He goes to his desk and leans against the front edge of it. He takes a long pull from his bourbon and then sets the glass aside. He's still wearing his party clothes but he's left his jacket off, the sleeves of his white Oxford rolled up to his elbows. There's an expensive watch on his wrist that glitters in the light.

"I told you already." Cal sets the bourbon aside without sipping from it. He has on a watch too, but his is chunky black, more rugged than elegant.

That's the difference between these two men. All you need to know you can know by the timepieces they wear.

"A psychic, yes," Damien says. "How is it I'm just hearing about this now?"

"You think I play all of my cards at once?" Cal shakes his head, amused. "You clearly don't know me, Duval."

Bran crosses the room to stand beside his brother. "How accurate is this psychic?"

I go to one of the club chairs and drop into it. All of the energy has been sapped from my body. Because of that out-of-this-world sex and the immediate panic that came after it.

"Well," Cal says as he eyes Damien, "the psychic knows you're fucking a Locke blood bag."

Damien goes rigid. Bran lashes out and puts his hand on his brother's arm, anchoring him.

"Cal," I say. "That's my sister you're talking about."

His face softens. "Of course. Please accept my apology."

I catch a barely perceptible uptick in Bran's expression.

Something weird is happening here and we're both picking up on it.

The Alpha is giving me considerable leeway.

"Why are you here?" Damien repeats.

"I have information about Jessie's Pledging tomorrow. Specifics about what may go down there."

"Why give us this?" Bran folds his arms over his chest. "What's in it for you?"

Cal's hands are loose fists at his side, but when he looks at me again, his

thumb rubs back and forth over the inside of his fingers like he's thinking hard on what to say and how to say it, like maybe he doesn't want to say anything at all, but knows he has to.

"Someday I'm going to need a favor from Jessie," he says.

"Me?"

"What favor?" Bran asks.

"I can't tell you that."

"Bullshit. You can't? You mean you won't."

Damien's gaze cuts to me. Immediately my skin tingles. I don't know how my sister handles his attention. I want to crawl beneath the chair when he looks at me. His dark brow pulls together like he's trying to cut beneath my layers and figure me out.

"If you can't tell us," Bran says, "then we don't know the cost and if we don't know the cost, we don't know if there's equity in the exchange."

God, it's sexy when he talks like that.

I had no idea intelligence could be such an aphrodisiac. I'm coming to the realization that Bran's allure isn't just the vampire strength, the control in the bedroom, or the power of being a Duval.

It's all of those things, and the constant mental chess he plays.

I like being caught in that snare sometimes. I like it very, very much.

Like the plug, the sex, being filled up—

All three of the men take in a deep breath and look at me.

"Jessie," Bran says. His irises light up.

"Sorry." Heat rushes to my cheeks.

Gelatin cake. FUCKING GELATIN CAKE.

Cal trembles.

Bran pushes away from the desk and straightens his spine, leveling his shoulders. "Careful, Alpha."

Cal's jaw clenches. "Contrary to what you may think about shifters, it isn't the full moon that sends us off kilter. It's the absence of the moon. I'm on edge, but I have it handled."

"I don't care if it's the cosmic equivalent of Armageddon," Bran says and points a finger at me. "That one is mine. Not yours."

Cal growls. "I know that."

I want to turn into a puddle and slip from the room.

Good god.

I might have to ask my sister if she has any more of those Vane witch

charms, the ones that guarded her scent. I could use about fifty.

Cal settles and some of the tension ebbs from Bran's body. Bran rests against the desk again and says, "Regarding this favor, the answer is no."

"I can appreciate the chivalry. You Duval brothers trying to protect Jessie from the big bad Alpha. But Jessie owes you nothing. She isn't Pledged yet. Which means she can make the decision on her own." The Alpha turns to me. "What is *your* answer, Jessie?"

I lick my lips and then worry at the corner with a drag of my teeth.

There is something I admire and respect about Cal. I don't think he'd screw me over. Maybe Damien and Bran, but not me.

After all, when he witnessed Sasha bite me all those years ago, he went to my mother because it was the fair and respectful thing to do.

But beyond all that, if my sister's safety is on the line, I'll give him pretty much anything he wants.

"Think about this carefully," Damien warns.

"You need this information as much as I do. Unless you're okay with something happening to my sister?"

Damien's jaw flexes, teeth grinding together.

"That's what I thought." I get up, legs still a little wobbly. "You have a deal, Cal." I hold out my hand.

The Duvals don't contradict me, but I can tell neither of them is happy about this.

Cal comes over and slides his hand into mine. His skin is much softer than I'd expect an Alpha's to be. But his grip is strong and my hand is nearly lost in his.

"Now tell us what you know," I say.

"Midnight has been ready for a shake up for a very long time," Cal says as he sits in the leather club chair across from me. "Unfortunately, you're caught in the middle. These two know that Julian has been trying to assume more power. And I've made it no secret that I think the vampires hold too much sway all-around."

"We founded this town," Damien says. "We have a right to the power."

Cal glances at him over his shoulder. "Well, times are changing, old man."

Best catch up.”

“What does this have to do with me and my Pledging?”

“Julian has allied with a witch house,” Cal answers.

“Christ,” Bran says beneath his breath. “What the fuck did I tell you?” he says to Damien.

“Fine, brother. You were right. Are you happy?”

“Pleased as punch,” Bran says, but his voice is cold.

“Which house?” Damien asks.

“Renshaw.”

Bran’s eyes slip closed and he presses at the bridge of his nose as he takes in a deep breath.

Damien says nothing.

Renshaw witches are the Addams family of Midnight Harbor. They live in an all-black Victorian on the marshy side of Midnight Lake. They’re a small house and they mostly keep to themselves. But when they don’t, you know about it.

There’s a thread of dark magic that runs through the family dating all the way back to Catherine de Medici, the Poison Queen of France.

It wasn’t actually poison though; it was magic that was her weapon of choice.

“They plan to make a stand before Jessie’s Pledging has been finalized,” Cal goes on. “Kelly will be on the north end of the Pledge Hall when she’s struck down. The vision wasn’t clear which direction the strike would come.”

“Okay,” I say, trying not to freak out. “It’s good that we know this ahead of time. How do we stop it? What do we do?”

“Cancel the Pledging,” Bran says.

“We can’t,” Damien answers. “Besides, that’s exactly what Julian is hoping will happen. The longer she’s untethered to a house, the more time he has to scheme.”

“Kelly will stay here.” I sit forward in the chair. “That’s the easy solution.”

“Of course she will,” Damien answers. “But if the Alpha’s psychic saw it happening, then just leaving Kelly at home likely won’t solve the problem.”

Cal nods and winces when he looks at me. “Sorry, Jessie, but he’s right. When it comes to visions, the strategy must always be how to react to it, not prevent it. Because you usually can’t prevent it.”

I lurch upright. “So my sister has to die? Is that what you’re all telling

me? No. Fuck no.”

“There is an obvious solution,” Bran says.

“Which is what?”

Damien scowls at him. “Don’t even fucking suggest it.”

“It solves all of our problems and it fits in the narrative of the vision.”

“What?” I say. “Tell me.”

Damien turns his hardened expression on me. “He means turn your sister into a vampire.”

EPISODE 44

BIG, BAD WOLF

TURN MY SISTER INTO A VAMPIRE? I ONLY HAVE TO THINK ABOUT IT FOR TWO seconds before I know how I feel.

“I’m with Damien on this one,” I say.

Never thought that would come out of my mouth.

“Why don’t you ask Kelly what she wants?” Bran says to his brother. “Or do you make all of her decisions for her?”

Damien pushes away from his desk to face his brother. “And if it was Jessie?”

Bran looks over at me. “I’d trust my little mouse to make the right decision.”

The Alpha of the Midnight Pack scoffs. “All three of us in this room might like to think we’d relent to our women, but let’s be honest. When it comes to protecting them, we will not bend. I don’t think you should give Kelly a choice.”

Damien glares at the Alpha. “You don’t have a woman,” he points out. “And no one asked you.”

The Alpha grumbles.

“Why are we against this idea?” Bran says. “Who cares if Kelly is a vampire? I like being a vampire and I know you fucking love it.”

I watch Damien for a reaction because in all honesty, I am a little curious as to why he opposes it. Fine lines appear around his eyes. There is a reason, but he’s not willing to say it.

It does make me wonder what my sister would want. Her future is decidedly up in the air right now, what with Julian and the supposed blood mate certificate. Even if it’s real, I think he might have compelled her to sign

it. But it's still a thorn that needs to be dealt with.

Once it is...what does she want? Does she want to be with Damien for the rest of her life?

I don't want my sister to become a vampire, but I don't want her to die either.

"Maybe Bran is right," I say. "Maybe we should ask Kelly."

Damien's jaw clenches. "Oh, should we?"

"And I think you should be the one to do it. But ultimately, let her decide."

Damien is stoic for several long seconds. I try not to fidget beneath his gaze. "Fine," he says and starts for the door. "I'll give her the choice. If this should go wrong, then the guilt will rest on your shoulders, Jessie. I hope you can live with that."

Bran sighs. "Ignore him."

"I don't want my sister to be a vampire, but I'm not entirely sure why he doesn't want her to be."

"Because it changes us," Bran says. "It always does. And he's probably terrified of what it'll do to her. If she'll wake up a vampire and realize she doesn't need or want him."

I think I'm beginning to accept the fact that Damien Duval legit loves my sister.

"I need to talk to Jimmy," Bran says. "Alpha, I'm sure you can find your way out."

Cal stands. "I'll be at the Pledge tomorrow. Let me know if you need me before then." He goes to leave.

"Wait," I say before I can think better of it.

Both men glance at me. I make an apologetic face at Bran before I make the request because I know he's going to hate this.

"I need to speak to Cal...alone."

"Absolutely not."

"Bran."

"No, Mouse."

"Do you trust me?"

He grits his teeth, inhales through his nose.

Cal waits halfway to the door.

"Fine." Bran's smile is tight. I might catch hell for this later. "Mind your manners, Alpha."

“I have more than you do, Duval.”

Bran grumbles. “Come find me later, little mouse. That’s an order.”

I give him a nod and then he’s gone.

Leaving me alone with the big bad wolf.

“That was brave,” Cal says and folds his massive arms over his chest.

“I need to know what that favor is.”

It’s not the most important thing going on right now, but that’s exactly why I have to know it. I hate loose threads and I especially hate secrets and mysteries.

“Jessie.” He sighs and uncrosses his arms. “I can’t—”

“Yes, you can.”

The Alpha relented with me earlier, which makes me think he might give me what I want now.

And I’m betting that now that the Duvals are gone, Cal might be more willing to share.

“I have a lot going on in my life, Cal. I don’t want that unknown thing haunting me in the back of my mind. Please.”

He turns away from me, rubs at the back of his head. “It’s about my fated mate.”

“Really?”

Cal’s lack of a mate is gossip fodder for Midnight. The *Midnight Sun* does annual coverage on it, usually around the blood moon.

Midnight’s Most Eligible Bachelor – Will this be the year the Alpha takes a mate?

I’m sure he must hate it.

There’s a lot about pack politics and fated mates that I don’t know and never gave the time to figuring it out. Most of the mates chosen for pack members are chosen based on politics or convenience. There are several mortal families that have been almost universally bound to the pack.

But fated mates...that’s something else entirely.

That’s magic. There’s nothing political or convenient about it.

“What about him or her?” I ask.

“Her,” he says and then turns back to me. “I know who she is.”

“Okay. And what does that have to do with me?”

His tongue pokes at the inside of his cheek, his nostrils flaring. “We don’t like each other.”

“Oh. Ohhhh.” Okay, I’m really glad I asked about this now because I could stand for some drama that’s not mine.

“I know she’s my mate, but *she* doesn’t know yet and she comes from a family not typically bound to the pack.”

“Complicated. I like it.”

He growls.

Do I need to be worried about his edginess on the new moon?

I would put a billion dollars on a bet that Bran is actually just down the hall listening in to be sure nothing happens to me.

It does make me a little bolder.

“Go on,” I say.

The Alpha sighs. “I’m going to need her to submit to me. Sooner rather than later. My wolf will not wait much longer.”

“I still don’t know how I factor into this.”

He meets my gaze, scrubbing a hand over the blond stubble on his jaw. “You know her.”

“I do?”

“She’ll listen to you.”

“Who—”

Oh god.

Ohhhh god.

“No,” I say.

“Yes.”

“Sam?”

He doesn’t deny it.

“Sam is your fated mate?” My voice has turned shrill. “But she’s promised to the Mulligan witches. They’ll expect her to Pledge to them and ___”

“Over my fucking dead body.” This time when he growls, it rumbles deep in his chest, almost animalistic.

“Okay. Okay.” I hold up my hands. This is the oddest shit I’ve ever witnessed. He says he doesn’t like Sam, but the absolute torture on his face right now at the mere thought she’d Pledge somewhere else...

Oh, Sam. Oh, I can’t wait to tell her! Oh, but she is really, really going to

hate this. Because she *does* hate the Alpha. Her dad was the pack's handyman until Cal fired him for reasons unknown.

Sam's family is big, tons of kids, and their mom doesn't work. They don't have a lot of money. Her dad had a hard time finding a new job. He'd been the handyman for the Pack House for nearly two decades.

I once heard Sam say if she could castrate the Alpha, she would.

"So you want me to talk my best friend into pledging to your house and becoming your mate? The Alpha's Mate?"

"Yes," Cal says. "Exactly that."

I laugh, bring my hand to my mouth. I laugh again.

"Jessie." His voice rumbles.

"Oh, I am very sorry for you, sir. Because you are going to have your hands full with Sam."

"You think I don't know that? Every time I'm around her, I want to strangle her."

I laugh again. Cal's shoulders rise with a deep, disgruntled breath.

"Sorry. It's just...I needed this."

He glares at me. "I am glad my frustrations amuse you. Now will you do it?"

"I mean...yeah. I'll talk it through with her. When?"

"I can handle waiting until after your Pledge."

"I appreciate that. There's a lot going on."

"I've noticed."

"You'll be at the Pledge tomorrow? On our side?"

"You help me with Sam, you'll get anything you need from me."

"All right. You have my word on that. And thank you for telling me. Really." I come around the leather chairs. "You've actually been really kind to me and I won't forget that."

He softens. I think the Alpha might have a gooey center. If he and Sam can find even ground, she might be the most spoiled girl in all of Midnight by the end of the year.

"I need to get back to the house," Cal says. "But please, don't say anything to Sam before I'm ready. I need to prepare for the firestorm. Promise me that."

"I promise."

He gives me a nod and starts for the door. "And Jessie?" He looks at me over his shoulder. "My psychic was vague on most of the particulars about

tomorrow, but one thing was sure—your sister will die one way or another. At least as a vampire, she'll come back.”

When the Alpha is gone, I collapse back into one of the chairs.

My head is spinning.

My sister might become a vampire. My best friend is the fated mate of the Alpha.

Just a regular Monday night now.

EPISODE 45

FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

THE ALPHA OF THE MIDNIGHT PACK SHOWS HIMSELF OUT OF DUVAL HOUSE so I go in search of Bran as I promised I would. When I don't find him, I head back to the Anneliese a little annoyed with how big Duval House is and the fact that I still don't feel like I belong here.

Bran finds me just before I reach the courtyard.

"Did the Alpha tell you his favor?" he asks.

"Yes, but it's a secret," I say, pushing the boundaries because now I know what it'll get me.

"Mouse." His gaze turns dark.

"Oh, fine." I go through the French doors to the open courtyard where crickets are chirping in the garden. Low lights send a soft glow over the walkway. "It was about his fated mate."

Bran is in front of me in a second and the expression that comes over his face is filled with horror. "I swear to fucking god, if you say you're his fated mate, I will tear off his cock and balls and serve them to him on a fucking dish."

"Bran!"

"I'm fucking serious, Mouse."

I trail off in laughter as I push past him and follow the paved stone path to the Anneliese. "You are one sneeze away from murder every second of the day, I swear to god."

"Only where you are concerned."

"I'm not his fated mate."

I hear his soft exhale of relief.

"But you know who is," he says.

“I do.”

“Tell me.”

“Later.”

“Mouse—”

As soon as we’re inside the safe house, I catch the soft whimpering of my sister from Damien’s room down the hall.

Immediately, I’m on high alert.

I race down the hall and push in the bedroom door and come to a halt.

Kelly is swallowed up in Damien’s embrace, sobbing into his chest.

He’s holding her like he doesn’t want to let her go.

Like he wants to take all of her pain away.

When I stumble over the threshold, he turns to me, looking at me over the top of Kelly’s head, a deep scowl on his face.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“It’s my bedroom, is it not?” he says. “In fact, this entire house is mine, last I checked.”

“Not just yours,” Bran reminds him from behind me. “Speak to my mouse like that again and I’ll cut off your cock and balls too.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Kelly pulls away from Damien and wipes at her face. “It’s okay. I’m okay. Everything is okay.”

“You told her, I take it?” I ask the older Duval.

“I did.”

I take another tentative step. “How do you feel about it, sissy?”

I haven’t called her by that nickname since I was ten years old and I didn’t exactly mean to use it, but once it’s out, it causes fresh tears to well in her eyes.

“How do I feel about being turned into a vampire? I don’t know. Confused. Afraid. Really, really unsure. Just...lots to think about.”

Damien’s jaw tenses.

“Well...maybe we can find some other solution. What about Rita?” I suggest. “She might be able to create a protection charm or—”

“I respect Rita,” Bran says, “but she’s not powerful enough to stand against the Renshaw witches.”

“Okay. So who is?”

Damien crosses his arms over his chest. “Maybe the Mulligans.”

“We’re setting up a meeting with Bianca,” Bran adds.

“Really?”

Damien nods. “It was your boyfriend’s idea.”

I have to stop a smile from spreading over my face, hearing Damien refer to his brother as my boyfriend. I get the sense in his tone of voice that he might not be happy about the turn of events. Maybe he wanted to use me for whatever magical secrets I might possess, but he probably didn’t want his brother to fall in love with me.

Complicates things, I’m sure.

But too bad for him.

“I just talked to Jimmy,” Bran says. “We have a meeting with the witch in an hour. So put your piss poor attitude away, brother, so we can make something happen.”

“I don’t have a piss poor attitude,” Damien argues.

Bran cocks his head at an angle, regarding his brother with an amused expression on his face.

Damien growls, exasperated, then looks at my sister. “I’ll return to you later. Do not leave the house.”

She nods and then he’s gone.

“Is he always this churlish?” I ask my sister.

She sighs. “When he doesn’t get his way.”

“I can attest to that,” Bran says.

I look back at him. “What exactly are you hoping will happen with Bianca, anyway?”

Bianca seems like an odd choice for an ally. She’s my age. There are plenty of more experienced witches in Midnight Harbor. But she is extremely powerful. And I suppose it’d be harder to get the older witches to agree to work with vampires. They all have formed opinions on the Duval brothers.

“I’m hoping that whatever agreement we come to will help keep your sister alive.”

“Bianca will help if she can.”

“I’m counting on it.” He reaches over, grips the back of my neck and hauls me to him, planting a kiss on my forehead. “Stay in the Anneliese. Both of you.” His gaze cuts from me to Kelly, then back at me. “Say you understand, little mouse.”

“Yes. Fine. I understand.”

Kelly nods. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“We’ll be back in a few hours. Be good girls while we’re out.” He gives

me a devilish grin and then disappears after his brother with his vampire speed.

Kelly lies down on the bed and I hover in the middle of the room unsure of what to do with myself. This is the first time I've been inside Damien's bedroom in the Anneliese and now that I have a chance to look around, I'm surprised by the décor. Bran's room is a reflection of him—dark, masculine, full of hard lines and solid furniture.

Damien's room is very...feminine, and it reminds me of Kelly's condo on the river.

The wall behind the bed is painted dark red, but the giant rug on the floor is thick, white, and furry, almost like sheepskin. The duvet is soft creamy linen, the pillows thick and matching.

The bedside tables are blonde wood with gold handles and matching gold lamps.

Behind me is a sectional couch the same color as the duvet with mismatched throw pillows, all with various patterns done in the same shade of red as the accent wall.

Now that I've been in Damien's office, I know that this isn't his style—this is Kelly's.

Damien designed this room in the safest place in all of Midnight precisely to my sister's taste.

God, how far back do they go?

"Can I join you?" I ask my sister.

"Of course."

I kick off my shoes and climb onto the bed. She opens her arms for me and I snuggle into her side like I used to when I was a kid.

Her hand absently trails along my hair.

"So...a vampire."

She sighs and the breath tickles at the hair along my crown causing me to shiver.

"Once upon a time, I wanted a family," she admits.

"Really?"

I feel her nod against my forehead.

“But...” I coax.

“But then...Mom died and I had you to take care of and Julian...” She sniffs. “I stopped wanting a family a long time ago so it doesn’t matter now.”

My heart aches for my sister, for all of the things she wanted and never got. All of the paths she wanted to take but couldn’t.

And now...

“Do you want to be with Damien? He’s rather broody.”

She laughs. “He is. More than he was when we first got together, but part of that is my fault.”

“Why?”

She sighs. “Because I broke his heart.”

I frown, trying to realign everything I thought I knew about my sister and the older Duval.

I guess it’s easy to think vampires don’t have hearts, and especially not vampires like the Duval brothers. But I know Bran does. Somehow, I managed to wiggle my way through his cold, unaffected exterior. It stands to reason my sister found a way in through Damien’s aloofness.

“Has he forgiven you?”

“I think we’re getting there.”

I immediately go back to the sight of them in a tight embrace and think they might be closer than Kelly realizes.

“So are you going to do it?” I ask. “Are you going to let him give you his blood?”

“I don’t think I have a choice.”

“You always have a choice.”

“I’m not leaving you. And I’m not going to break Damien’s heart a second time.”

“He doesn’t want you to do it though.”

“Only because he asked me once before and I told him no.”

I lurch upright, propping myself up on my elbow. “He did? When?”

“It was a long time ago.”

“When, Kels?”

“Before my Pledge.”

“That was...nearly ten years ago.”

“I know.”

“You guys have been secretly seeing each other for ten years?”

She scrubs at her face and then looks at the ceiling. “Not all of ten years.”

Off and on.”

“Holy shit. How did I not know this?”

“You had your own life.”

“Yes, but this is...why did you turn him down?”

She looks over at me, fine lines deepening around her eyes. “I turned him down for you. To protect you.”

The guilt is immediate and overwhelming.

“If it wasn’t for me, would you have taken him up on his offer?”

She nods. “Back then, absolutely.”

“And now?”

“Now...we come with a lot more baggage now.” She laughs, but there’s nothing funny about it. “I would rather have more time, you know? Time to think about it and consider my options. But—” she pulls me back into her side “—you’re fae, Damien is a vampire—I’d be the only one getting old and gray. This is the best option. This way I can be around for you for as long as you need me.”

“I can take care of myself. You don’t have to do it anymore.”

She gives me an affectionate pat on my head like I’m a little kid again. “Let’s pretend that’s true.” When she laughs this time, it’s genuine.

“Hey.” I sit up again. “I have an idea.”

“Okay. What?”

“Remember when we used to curl up together on the couch and eat popcorn and watch cheesy 80s movies?”

The smile that comes to her face is genuine and lights up her eyes. “I do.”

“Let’s do that while our vampire boyfriends are out playing. What do you say?”

She considers it for just a second and then says, “That sounds amazing, actually. Which movie?”

“Easy.” I slide off the bed. “*Footloose*.”

Kelly lets out a quick burst of laughter. “I thought you were going to say *The Goonies*. Remember when you used to hide treasure around the house and then would draw me a map and make me go search for it? Classic Jessie.”

“I love treasure hunts.”

She follows me to the door and ruffles my hair. “I know you do, you nerd.”

We fall in step together as we make our way to the kitchen, joking about

what used to be, how we were.

Come tomorrow, the MacMahon sisters will have been irrevocably changed.

For better or for worse.

EPISODE 46

WORTH IT OR NOT

BRAN

DAMIEN HAS ALWAYS HATED MY DRIVING.

“You know,” he says from the passenger seat of my Audi, “these days, car accidents account for nearly 2% of all vampire deaths. When a head gets lopped off, it’s hard to come back from that.”

“If a vampire were to piss off his brother, he might get his head lopped off anyway.”

He barely looks away from his phone in his hand. “I’m just saying—if you’re dead, who will protect your little mouse from Julian?”

The leather steering wheel creaks beneath my grip.

“That’s what I thought,” Damien says because he’s a fucking know-it-all.

As the road cuts right, I let off the gas and the speedometer sinks. “Better?”

“Yes,” Damien says, his eyes still on his screen.

“I need to tell you something.”

He finally looks up.

“It’s about Jessie.”

“You have my attention.”

Red and blue lights flash in my rear-view. “Christ.” We’re out in the countryside, so it’s likely a deputy.

“See,” Damien says. “If you’d been obeying traffic laws—”

“Oh, shut the fuck up.”

He laughs. “I’ll just eat him. I could use a drink.” He taps out of whatever he was reading on his phone, darkens the screen, and slides the phone into the inside pocket of his bomber jacket.

“Let’s make it a game instead.” I slow the car down and pull to the shoulder. The car is fast and nimble and stops with ease.

Turning in the leather bucket seat, Damien’s eyes flare with interest. “Which game?”

“How about we play Worth It or Not?”

He considers it, then, “All right. We placing bets?”

“Of course.”

The lights get closer as the Sheriff’s car catches up to us.

“I call Not,” he says.

“Fine. Worth it.”

“If I win, I’m sending this ridiculous car to the junkyard.”

“I’ll just buy another one.”

“Yes, but I’ll get a great amount of satisfaction watching it get pulverized.”

“All right. If I win, I’m kicking Sky out of the House.”

He frowns at me. “She’s my assistant.”

“And she’s my pain in the ass.”

The way she spoke to Jessie tonight was the last fucking straw. I know my little mouse thinks I was flirting with Sky right after our House announcement. I did laugh at her, but only because she was being fucking ridiculous.

“How long before you dump that mortal and come back to my bed?” Sky had said.

I’d laughed and replied, “When the sun stops rising and the air no longer fills my lungs.”

The Sheriff’s car pulls up behind us, the lights still flashing. We’re on a desolate back road, not a house in sight.

Damien sighs. “I suspect Kelly won’t want Sky around anyway. So you have a deal.”

“Bowling at her feet already, are you?”

“Fuck off.”

In my side mirror, I see the deputy climb out of his car. He’s late twenties by the looks of it, stocky, likely works out. I hear the crackle of his radio from inside the car.

“I’ll get the deputy,” I tell my brother. “You get the dash cam and the radio.”

“Count of three,” Damien says.

“One.”

“Two.”

We’re out of the car on three.

The deputy sees the blur that is my brother and me, but it takes his stupid mortal brain an extra two seconds to comprehend what that means.

His hand is on his duty belt, unclipping his gun by the time I reach him. I tear off his body cam, drop it and smash it beneath my boot.

Damien rips off the passenger side door of the car, wings it into the field,

and tears out all of the comms.

I use compulsion to bring the deputy to a standstill and his hands go limp at his sides.

Damien shuts off the flashing lights and then comes around the front of the car, a cigarette clipped between his lips. He lights the end, curling his finger around the filter as he takes a long hit.

“Evening, Deputy”—I look for his gold nameplate—“Kent. What’s your first name?”

He blinks at me. “Mike.”

Damien takes another hit from the cigarette, the smoke curling in the light of the deputy’s headlights.

“Mike, tell us your biggest secret.”

His pupils pulse beneath the compulsion. His face is blank, but his hands are trembling.

Sometimes the big dumb ones can fight against being compelled, but never hard enough to get out of it. Geniuses are the easiest to control. It’s the hubris and the naïve belief no one can outwit them.

Mike starts sweating.

“He probably thinks murder is the worst sin,” Damien says and hands me the cigarette.

Clipped between two fingers, I take a drag and fill my lungs with burning smoke. “Whatever it is, he doesn’t want to give it up.”

Mike’s lips are trying to form the words and his face is turning red from the effort not to spill them.

“Spit it out, Mike,” I say. “Deepest, darkest secret.”

“I cheated on my wife!” He immediately dissolves into giant, heaving sobs.

Damien and I share a look. Mike buries his face in his hands.

“Pathetic,” I say and hand the cigarette back.

Damien comes around and snaps his fingers. “Mike. Look at me.”

The big idiot straightens, fat tears wetting his face.

“You love this wife of yours?”

“Yes. I love her with all my heart.”

“Then why the fuck did you cheat on her?” I ask him.

“Temptation.”

“Is that all?” Damien asks.

“We’ve been having problems.”

“I didn’t know this was going to turn into a marital therapy session,” I say. “Should have brought booze.”

In the field to my left, an animal rustles the dry grass. We’re still alone way out here in the middle of nowhere.

“Problems can be fixed,” Damien says. “So why haven’t you?”

“I’m scared,” Mike admits.

“Of what?”

“Losing her.”

“You keep dipping your dick in other pussy, you will, Mike,” I say.

He starts sobbing again.

“Hey, Mike. Get your shit together.” Damien gives the bigger guy a shove. “Look at me.” Mike does as commanded. “Call your wife right now and tell her everything. She’ll decide your fate.”

“What do you mean?” He drags his cracked knuckles over his face, wiping away the tears.

“Your wife will decide if you’re worth it or not,” I tell him. “If you’re not, we’re going to kill you. Now go. Call her.”

He returns to his car, retrieves his cell phone, and taps at the screen.

Damien drops the spent cigarette to the pavement and crushes the ember beneath his boot. “What were you going to tell me? About Jessie?”

Mike’s wife answers the phone and he launches into a blubbing confession.

I pull Jessie’s mom’s letter from my pocket. The one that told the story about going to the fae realm with a baby dying in her womb. How she returned with something else. I took the letter when Mouse wasn’t looking.

“Read this.”

Damien frowns at me as he takes the slip of paper and unfurls it. He starts reading.

“I love you so much, baby. I’ve just been so overwhelmed at work,” Mike says. “I’ve been trying to distract myself. I don’t love her. You’re the only woman I’ve ever loved.”

His wife is sobbing on the other end of the phone. I can hear a baby crying in the background.

“Go get the baby,” Mike says. “We can talk about all of this when I get home. If you’ll let me come back.”

There’s a long pause on the other end. The wife sniffs and says, “Yes. Please come home.”

The wind shifts and the animal in the field catches my scent. It's gone in a flash.

"Why didn't you tell me about this sooner?" Damien says behind me.

"Because I wasn't sure how you'd react."

Mike says his goodbyes in a long, drawn-out pathetic mewl.

"I wish I could say she's just a changeling," Damien says.

I turn to him. He's leaning against my car, his legs crossed at the ankle, the left side of him bright against the glare of the headlights. The letter is hanging from his hand.

"But changelings don't have terrifying abilities," I say.

"Precisely." He thinks for a second. "There are only a few brownies in Midnight. We could track them all down, see what they know."

"Worth a shot."

He folds the letter back up and returns it to me. "If she's more powerful than you or me—"

"Don't."

"What?"

"Don't go there."

"Bran—"

"If she's more powerful than you or me, then we'll be glad she's on our side."

He narrows his eyes.

"We're having Rita undo the binding," I tell him. "And you'll not stop us."

He watches me with that cool indifference. I know my brother unsettles most people, but I will always know him as the brother who held our little sister in his arms, sobbing over her dead body.

Death reveals who we really are, deep down, and my brother has always been the type who loves harder than anyone. And I know he loves me.

We are all we have left of our blood. He'll do what I ask.

"The fae gate closed right around her arrival," he points out.

"I know."

"There are very few reasons someone would close a fae gate."

"I know that too."

"And if the gate were to be opened again, and we find out she's—"

"I know, all right? I've thought about all of that."

"Here, we're kings. But standing against one of the princes from the

Unseelie Court? We would not measure up.”

“I know that. For fuck’s sake.”

Mike slips his phone in his pocket and stands in the middle of the road, a little shellshocked.

“You could just let it go,” Damien says. “I could talk to Rita, tell her to pretend to perform the unbinding. Jessie won’t know any different. We could go on with our lives. You would have Jessie and I would have Kelly and everything would be as it should be.”

Mike’s shoulders are drooping, but his eyes are clearer. Will he be better off having risked his entire life just for the truth?

“Your wife is keeping you?” I call out to the deputy.

Mike nods numbly.

“I guess you were worth it.” I dart across the road and stop a foot from him. I zero in on his pupils as I tap open a connection so I can compel him one last time. “You’ll go to your wife and you’ll treat her like she’s a goddess and you’ll be faithful to her for as long as the breath fills your lungs. Say you understand, Mike.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now get in your car and go.”

He quickly slides in behind the wheel and takes off, gravel crunching beneath the bite of the tires.

When it’s just my brother and me, I turn back to him. “Jessie deserves the truth.”

“You think she’s worth it, do you?” he asks, prolonging the game.

“Yes.”

He gives me a quick nod. “Then let’s hope you’re right.”

EPISODE 47

TEACH ME A LESSON

I WAKE TO BRAN GIVING ME A GENTLE NUDGE. “MOUSE.” HIS VOICE IS QUIET but raspy like he spent all night shouting. He’s crouched beside the couch in front of me, putting him at eye-level.

“Hi,” I say, stretching on the couch. “What time is it?”

He reaches over and pushes a stray lock of hair away from my face and instinctively I turn into his touch.

“It’s four a.m.”

“Really? You’ve been gone a while.”

“Damien and I got hung up.”

For the Duval brothers, “hung up” could mean a hundred different things, half of which would be bloody.

I don’t ask because I don’t want to know.

I look down the length of the massive couch to find Kelly’s head in Damien’s lap. His fingers are trailing through her hair. Neither of them is speaking, but I still get the impression that what they’re saying can be heard loud and clear.

My sister is in love with Damien Duval.

And Damien is in love with her.

Whatever has to happen today for them to be together will be worth it.

And thinking this—*today*—makes me realize it’s my birthday.

“I need you to get up,” Bran says.

I groan. “Can’t you just carry me to bed?”

“It’s not that.”

I look up at him with clearer focus. “Then what?”

Please tell me it’s not some other crisis. Some other secret or war on the

horizon. I can't take anymore.

"Bianca is here and she wants to speak to you."

"Oh?" I sit up and look around the living room, but don't spot my witch friend.

"She's in the main house," Bran says. "Come." He straightens and offers me his hand. Before I take it, I give my sister another glance. "Kels?"

"Hmmm?" she mumbles, her eyes still closed.

"I'll be back in a bit. You're okay?"

"I'm fine." Her voice is muzzy and faraway.

I follow Bran out of the Anneliese and smooth down my hair as we walk. I've never gotten the impression that Bianca is the type to judge people, but it's hard not to feel sloppy and inferior next to her. She's always put together. Always looking fierce.

Bran leads the way across the courtyard, then through the halls of Duval House. The hallways are full of vampires either returning to the party or leaving it. There's still a few hours left of darkness and they seem dedicated to taking advantage of it in one way or another.

Everyone we pass nods at Bran then immediately casts their gaze to the floor.

He ignores all of them.

We enter a sitting room with a giant fireplace and an oil painting of a black horse hanging over the mantel in a gilded frame.

I immediately know this is one of Bran's personal spaces. It smells like him. Feels like him. And looks like him.

Except for the horse painting. That's the only thing that sticks out from the décor.

I never took him for a horse enthusiast. Of course, he comes from a time when horses were the only mode of transportation so maybe I'm wrong.

Bianca rises to her feet when we enter. She's wearing a pleated plaid skirt with a navy-blue sweater, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows.

As she rises, two delicate gold chains slide down to her wrist.

Despite the late hour, she looks like she just walked off stage from a mock political campaign at a New England boarding school.

I must look like I just rolled off a couch.

"Jessie, hi," she says and smiles brightly at me.

"Hey, Bee. It's nice to see you."

She nods and then looks at Bran.

He sighs behind me. "I promised Bianca I'd let her speak to you alone. I am a man of my word." But he smiles tightly while he says it, like it gives him no great pleasure. "You have ten minutes," he adds and then leaves, shutting the door behind him.

"He's probably just listening somewhere beyond the room," I warn her.

"I know." She breathes out through her nose with exasperation. "But I suppose it's the show of privacy that's most important. Come here. I feel like it's been forever since we saw each other last." She holds out her arms to me and I give her a quick hug.

"Things have been...wild," I say.

"Yes. That might be an understatement."

"I appreciate you not saying anything about what happened at the trial at the vampire court. This whole thing with my sister and Julian is—"

"Wrong," she says.

I nod. "Yes. That." I sit in one of the leather wingbacks. "So did you agree to help my sister against the Renshaw witches?"

"Not quite yet." She sits down in the chair next to me. "How much did Bran tell you about his plan?"

"Not much. Only that he wanted to ally with you because you might be strong enough to stand against the Renshaws."

She nods. "He also asked me to join Duval House as their personal witch."

"He *what?*"

"I wanted to hear your opinion before I gave him an answer."

"But...he...*hold on.*"

"I know it's unprecedented, but I will admit, I like being a trailblazer."

"So...you would leave your house and join Duval House? Would the Mulligans even let you do that?"

"Witches aren't the same as wolves and vampires. We're not territorial. My dad will hate it. My mom will love it." She rolls her eyes at the mention of her mother. "The coven will really, really hate it. But like I said, they can't force me to stay and they won't want to stand up against the Duval brothers. Not when I came by choice."

"But why would you do that?"

"You have to seize an opportunity when it comes to you even if it sounds potentially foolish." She laughs to herself. "If I'm honest, Bran really sold me on you."

“Me?”

“He told me you’re fae.”

I go still in the chair.

“So it’s true?” she asks.

With a sigh, I give her a nod.

“Then my decision is made.”

I snort. “Because I’m fae? There are plenty of fae in Midnight.”

“Yes, but why has your identity been hidden? And why is Julian so desperate to possess you and your sister?”

Leave it to Bianca to suss out the details in literally a few hours of possessing just a few pieces of the puzzle. She was always the smartest in school. She graduated Valedictorian of her class. She could have gone on to one of the ivy league schools if she’d wanted.

“Instinct has always been my driver,” Bianca goes on. “You have to listen to your gut, but more than that, you have to hone that skill so that when the time comes, you know exactly what decision to make based on nothing more than a feeling.” She sits forward and clasps her hands in front of her, elbows on her knees. “And my gut is telling me not only will you and your sister need me, but that whatever type of fae you are, I will want to be on your side because of it.”

My throat thickens and I swallow against it. “I’m no one special, Bee.”

Her red lips spread into a grin. “I don’t believe that, Jessie. And I suspect deep down, neither do you.”

A shiver races up my spine.

I don’t know what to say to that. Is there anything to say? My brain is telling me I’m no one special, but everything else—*everyone else*—is saying the opposite.

Thankfully, Bran saves me by coming into the office without knocking. “Now that that’s settled,” he says. “We need you to work your magic on Kelly.”

Bianca nods. “Of course. Lead the way.”

Since Bianca is technically human, the magic of the invitation doesn’t apply to her and she walks into the Anneliese between me and Bran with no trouble

at all. We find Kelly and Damien sitting silently in the living room.

When Damien sees Bianca, he says, "Do we have a deal?"

"We do," she says. "But we should talk about our options before you decide on the best course of action."

Damien gestures to a chair. "Sit."

Bee sits in one of the two chairs by the window and takes a deep breath before explaining. "Vampire blood is a good plan, but it's permanent, right? So I think it should be our last resort. There are several other spells I could perform, all of which would have varying degrees of protection and success.

"I'm sure you know that spells are like keys and without knowing the corresponding lock, it'll be impossible to give you a hundred percent guarantee that Kelly will be safe."

"We know how magic works," Bran says. He's standing at the edge of the living room, his arms crossed over his chest. "What's the next best line of protection after vampire blood?"

Bee glances at Damien. His gaze is on her, but she doesn't shrink away from him. "You could link Kelly to you. You are immortal. Your life essence is infinite. If she was to die, the spell would activate and your energy would flow her way."

Damien doesn't react. Kelly scoffs. "We're not doing that," she says.

"Yes, we are," Damien answers.

"You should know the risk," Bee says.

"I don't care what the risk is."

"Damien!" Kelly shouts. "You're not doing that."

He finally looks at her. "You don't tell me what I can and can't do, *mon petit chaton*."

She scowls at him, but clamps her mouth shut.

I arch a brow at Bran, but he just shakes his head at me.

What does *mon petit chaton* mean? I'm definitely going to ask him later.

"What are the risks?" Bran asks.

Bianca clasps her hands together, her arms resting on her thighs. "Whatever happens to Kelly, happens to Damien. That's the way I'd structure the spell. If it's a life we're worried about, Damien has plenty to give. So it wouldn't be an issue. But there can be a sort of backdraft of magic depending on the power behind it or the type of spell the Renshaws use, and the current can shift to the deeper well, that is, *Damien*."

The brothers talk over us, but this time they speak in a language that is

neither English nor French.

“That’s not fair,” I say. “Bee?”

She shrugs at me. “That sounds like Greek. I don’t speak Greek.”

“Bran,” I say. “Quit cutting us out of the conversation.”

Damien glares at me then carries on.

Bran gives him one more answer in Greek and then sighs. “We’ll do the linking spell.”

“What if I refuse?” Kelly asks.

“I won’t allow it.” Damien settles his darkened gaze on her. “You will do the spell. I won’t tell you again.”

I don’t know if I should hate Damien for trying to boss my sister around or be a little jealous of Kelly. I know what it’s like to be commanded by a Duval.

Damien is even better at it than Bran.

“What do you need?” Damien asks Bee.

“Just blood.”

“No herbs or crystals or any of that shit?” Bran asks.

Bianca shakes her head. “Mulligans don’t need accoutrements.”

Damien stands up. “Then let’s get started.”



Because Bianca doesn’t need all of the witchy accessories that Rita does to perform magic, I have to admit, it’s not quite as magical.

There’s just a knife and a stainless-steel bowl on the kitchen island.

“We draw blood,” Bee explains, “and the blood from both of you will go into the bowl. I’ll perform the spell and that will link you. It usually lasts a few days before the effects wear off.”

“What will it feel like?” Kelly asks.

“I’ve never been linked myself, but I’ve been told it’s different for different people. Some describe it as nothing more than a phantom sensation. Others have been able to sense what the other is feeling. It really all depends on how close you are.”

How close are my sister and Damien? Maybe they love each other, but they’ve been holding each other at arm’s length for a while, I suspect.

“Ready?” Bianca asks.

Damien gives her his hand. “Be quick,” he tells her. “The wound will heal fast.”

She nods and pulls the blade over the palm of his hand, then turns him toward the bowl. She gets out barely a dribble before the wound is closed.

“Is that enough?” Damien asks.

Bianca winces. “Not quite.”

He takes the blade from her, fists it in his other hand, then jams the blade right through his palm.

Kelly yelps and staggers back. Bianca frowns. Seems living with Duvals requires constant exposure to blood and guts. I’m coming to expect it now.

With the blade still stuck in his flesh, Damien holds his hand over the bowl and lets the blood trail down.

“That should be good,” Bianca says after a few seconds.

Damien pulls the dagger out, spins it around and hands it to Bianca, hilt first.

She hesitates a second before taking it.

Next, Kelly holds her hand over the bowl and Bianca draws the blade over the fleshy part of her palm.

Kelly hisses from pain as blood wells in the wound, then trails down into the bowl, mixing with Damien’s.

When Bianca is satisfied with what they’ve gathered, Damien bites his wrist and adds his blood to my sister’s glass of wine.

“Drink,” he orders her.

“I thought the whole reason we were doing this is so I wouldn’t turn into a vampire? If I drink that and I die tomorrow, I will be changed.”

“It’s for the wound in your hand,” he tells her.

She frowns at him. “You expect me to believe that?”

He doesn’t answer.

With a huff, my sister takes the offering and drinks it back.

“I’ll link you now,” Bianca says. “If you’re ready?”

“Carry on.” Damien crosses his arms over his chest as my sister slouches against the edge of the counter.

Beside me, I sense Bran growing agitated and when I look over at him, his brow is sunk in a deep V. It makes me wonder what the conversation in Greek was.

Bee holds her hands over the bowl of mixed blood and whispers Latin beneath her breath.

The hair along my arms rises.

Bran takes a step closer to me.

The bowl ignites with a *WHUMP* and bright green flames dance inside of it, highlighting Bianca's face in a sinister glow.

Kelly lurches and in a blink, Damien is beside her, his arm around her waist. "*Minou?*" he says, worry hardening his eyes.

"I'm okay."

"It's done," Bee says.

"That's it?" I ask.

"Magic, at the root of it, is very, very simple."

"Thank you," Damien says.

I have a feeling Damien doesn't thank people very often.

"You're welcome," Bianca answers.

"Sky," Damien calls.

Bran says something in French.

Damien responds in English. "You'll get what you're owed. Just not today."

Sky appears outside the Anneliese, hands on her hips. "You summoned me?"

"Show Bianca out."

"I can find my own way," Bianca starts, but Damien shoots a warning glance her way and she relents. "When would you like me to move into the house?"

"As soon as you've wrapped up your business with the Mulligans and have packed your things. You tell me how quickly you can make it happen."

"Give me two days."

The brothers exchange a look. "That will suffice," Damien says. "But be at the Pledge today."

She nods and then follows Sky back through the courtyard.

"Do you guys feel any different?" I ask.

Kelly's face is flushed and her chest is heaving, almost like she just ran around the block. Damien meets her gaze. Some silent conversation passes between them and then Damien grabs my sister by the wrist and drags her out of the house.

"Hey! Where are you—"

Bran wraps his hand around my upper arm and swings me around to stop me from chasing after them.

“Let them be,” he tells me.

“But where—”

He gives me a look.

“What? What is it?”

“Listen to me.”

“I am.”

“Let. Them. *Be.*”

It finally dawns on me.

“Oh. *Ohhhh.*”

“Yes.”

I sigh and scrub at my face. “I’m just worried about her.”

“I know you are.” Bran pulls me into him and wraps me into a hug. “I think she’ll be fine.”

“So why were you talking in Greek? What were you trying to hide?”

I try to pull away so I can look him in the face, but his embrace is tight.

“Bran.” I grumble against his chest.

I don’t need a magical linking spell to tell me what Bran is thinking and feeling. “You’re pretending everything is fine, but you’re worried about Damien.”

He finally lets me go and heads to our bedroom.

“Talk to me.”

In the room, he goes to the bathroom and flicks on the light. Under-cabinet lighting glows against the stone floor. He turns on the tap and splashes cold water on his face.

“Bran.”

“If you must know, he was telling me that should something happen to him, I would find the necessary paperwork for the estate in his safe. And I was telling him that nothing would happen to him and if it did, I’d kill him twice.”

He hunches over the vanity and inhales deeply, water dripping from his nose.

“You love him a lot, don’t you?” It’s not really a question.

“He’s all I have left, Mouse.”

I go to him, placing my hand on his back. “This is all my fault.”

“No.” He narrows his eyes at me. “Don’t you dare say that.”

“But it is.”

“Mouse.”

“If it wasn’t for me—”

He straightens. “This is Julian’s fault and the Renshaw witches, should they side with him. Not yours. Don’t even think that.”

The guilt is still there, though.

“Sometimes I wonder what would have happened to all of us if I’d just left Midnight.”

He puts his hands on either side of my face and forces me to look at him.

“Say that again and I will bind and gag you until you learn your lesson.”

Blood rushes to my cheeks at the thought of being bound and gagged by him.

He clucks his tongue at me. “I have to come up with better punishments, apparently.”

With everything that’s going on, I want a distraction.

My sister is getting one. Go sissy.

“Do it now,” I say, my voice going reedy. “Teach me a lesson.”

He presses closer, his hands dipping to my waist. “You should rest.”

“I will. *After.*”

His tongue runs over the sharp tip of his incisor as amber fire comes to his irises. “Don’t tempt me.”

I don’t just want a distraction. I *need* one. There’s no chance I’ll sleep now.

“Sometimes I wonder,” I say and then lick my lips, drawing out the temptation.

“Mouse.” His voice rumbles in the base of his throat.

“—what would have happened to all of us—”

The brightness in his eyes grows.

“—if I’d just left Midnight.”

The air goes still.

I have approached the center of the storm and the hair rises along the nape of my neck.

My heart is thudding loudly in my head and heat is settling between my legs.

Without warning, Bran hooks his fingers into my panties, yanks them off, then shoves them into my mouth.

“You asked for it,” he says, and spins me around.

EPISODE 48

WATCH HOW YOU GLOW

I CAN SMELL MY DESIRE WITH MY DAMP PANTIES STUFFED IN MY MOUTH.

I breathe hard through my nose.

Bran's belt buckle clatters as he undoes it. The leather snaps when he yanks it from the loops.

In two seconds, he has it twisted into a figure 8, then yanks my arms behind my back and slips the restraints over my wrists. When he pulls the tail, it tightens, binding me.

The leather is biting.

His hand comes around my throat, his hardness pressing against the back of me.

I huff out another breath as our eyes meet in the mirror.

"Is this what you wanted, little mouse?"

I clench up, buzzing with sudden heat and need.

His pupils are blown wide, fangs sharp in his mouth.

I am nothing but prey now, caught in the predator's snare.

But I chose to be here, to feel the terror of being used by someone more powerful than me.

I'm still wearing my party dress and Bran yanks the plunging neckline off my shoulders, baring me.

He still has one hand wrapped around my throat, veins bulging, running along his knuckles.

His other hand sinks to my breast and pinches at my nipple.

I arch against him, but he presses back, pushing my hips into the edge of the counter. I mewl around the lacy fabric stuffed in my mouth and wiggle against the restraints.

He pinches again and pain and pleasure mingle in my gut.

“If I could keep you like this all night, I would,” he says. “Keep you bound and gagged and just on the edge of coming until you can’t take it anymore.” His fingers trail over my chest, sending goosebumps down my arms. “I would fuck you until you were begging for release.”

My clit is buzzing, desperate to be touched. Any friction at all would do, but Bran takes his time teasing over the sensitive flesh of my breasts, then grazing my nipples just enough to force them to peak.

“Do you know all of the wicked things I want to do to your body, Mouse?” he asks.

I breathe hard and close my eyes, just imagining it.

“Ah-ah,” he says and tightens his grip on my throat. “Eyes open. You’ll watch me punish you.”

My pussy clenches and I moan, eyes widening.

Bran’s other hand dips lower and drags up the hem of my dress. I’m swollen and wet and buzzing and needy.

Touch me.

For god’s sake, touch me.

In the mirror, I watch as his hand disappears beneath the fabric. I breathe hard, anticipating his touch.

I part my thighs for him and he slides his fingers down my slit and I almost lose my mind.

I clamp my teeth over the lace.

“So. Fucking. Wet.” Bran’s irises are bright gold fire when I meet his gaze. He slips his hand out and brings it to his mouth, then sucks each finger clean.

The groan that comes out of me, watching him taste my desire, is feral.

With my bound hands, I try to reach between us to grope him, but he’s faster than me and grabs at the center of the binding and yanks me to a standstill.

“You don’t get to touch.” He lifts my dress up and smacks me on the ass.

I jolt from the sting and collapse on the counter, only for him to bury his hand in my hair and yank my head back up, forcing me to bend.

“Eyes on me, Mouse. Don’t disobey me.”

My clit swells, throbbing at his words.

I need him to fill me up.

Now. Right now.

I give him a quick nod.

“Good girl.”

He steps back. I keep my gaze on him in the mirror and watch intently as he lifts his shirt off with a quick snap of his wrist. I appreciate the view while I have it, the deep lines between ab muscles, the swell of his biceps, every fiber of muscle that twines across his chest as he unbuttons his pants.

Bran’s body is a symphony when it moves. A dark and dangerous symphony and I want to sink into the music of it.

When his cock is free, he fists it in his hand and gives it several pumps until pre-cum glistens at the tip.

I test the strength of the belt, straining against it, but there’s no give.

I push out my ass, desperate for his attention.

He keeps stroking his cock, watching me struggle, enjoying it even.

Cool air is stealing beneath the hem of my dress, reminding me of the untouched heat and the unspent desire.

I’m going to break soon if he doesn’t do something about it.

He strokes faster, muscles working hard, his breath quickening.

He better not come without me.

Oh god, what if he does?

What if that’s the punishment?

I groan around my panties.

“What’s wrong, little mouse?” he says.

He knows I can’t respond, which makes him grin in the most wicked way.

I grumble again.

“Get over here,” he orders.

I lift myself off the counter and hurry to him.

“Get on your knees.”

I sink in front of him like I’m worshipping at his altar.

He stops pumping at his dick, pulls the fabric from my mouth, and tosses it aside. “Open up.”

I pop my lips open for him, butterflies filling my stomach.

“No,” he says, his eyes brightening. “Stick out your tongue.”

I heave out a needy breath and do as he asks, flattening my tongue for him.

One hand on the back of my head, the other around his cock, he strokes himself again and again, growing harder as I peer up at him, waiting like a good little mouse.

With a growl, teeth clenched and fangs sharp, he comes on my tongue, pulling on the back of my hair while he goes to angle me up to him.

It's so much cum that I can't hold it all and it drips down my chin and then down my chest and his gaze darkens as he makes a mess of me.

My clit pulses as Bran breathes heavily above me. "Swallow it, Mouse."

I close my mouth and swallow the taste of him down my throat. Being used and commanded sends a flush down my entire body.

"That's my good girl." He lets up his grip on my hair, then yanks me to my feet. Using his vampire speed, he removes the belt, but I'm only free a fraction of a second before he's binding me again, this time with my arms in front.

Before I know what he's doing, I'm pressed against the opposite wall. He lifts my arms above my head and hooks me by the belt on one of the towel hooks.

He covers my body with his and I am lost in the size of him.

"Now that you have a taste of me on the tip of your tongue," he says, his voice raspy at my ear, "perhaps it's my turn to get a taste of you."

I whimper beneath him, trussed up by the hook. I'm at his mercy and I want him to do anything and everything to me.

He trails from my ear down the curve of my throat, then kisses gently at my rapid pulse point.

A shiver rolls up my spine.

His fangs graze my flesh.

Instinctively I curl into myself, curling away from the predator, but Bran grabs me by the jaw and opens me back up.

He bites me. I squeak. He pulls on my blood and all of the fight runs out of me. I melt into him.

"Bran," I say on a breath.

The pressure at my clit is so intense, I think I could go off at the slightest touch. But I need to go off. I need to come.

My pussy is tingling and my body is shivering and I can barely breathe.

"Bran."

When he pulls back and runs his tongue over his fangs, his eyes are burning brightly.

"Yes, little mouse?"

"I need...I need—"

He bends into me, his forearm propped on the wall beside me. "Yes?" he

asks and kisses me, just a quick graze of his lips.

“I need—”

He covers my mouth with his and I can taste the tang of my blood. His tongue slides over mine, and fills me with the coppery, sweet taste. He’s hard again, digging into my thigh. I go up on tiptoes so I can feel the hot throb of his cock at my wetness.

He rocks his hips forward, sliding between my thighs.

I’m so wet, he finds no resistance and teases me with a slow back and forth motion, hitting my clit with every thrust.

“Just like that,” I say, practically begging.

The pressure builds. He grabs my ass and positions me better to find the most leverage between us.

“Oh fuck.”

“Maybe I’ll make you wait,” he says.

“Oh god, no.” I focus on him, pleading with my eyes.

“I’ve only had half my fill of you, little mouse,” he says and steals the heat of his cock from me.

“Bran.” I whimper and pull at the binding. “Please. Stop teasing me.”

He drops to his knees. “Spread your legs for me.”

I widen my stance and he lifts one of my legs, draping it over his shoulder.

In the mirror across the bathroom, I watch him as he leans into me and devours me with his mouth.

I exhale with a rush and arch away from the wall, the hook capturing me by the belt.

I am entranced by the reflection, by the sight of the back of Bran’s head as he moves against me, lapping me up.

The sight of him, the feel of him, the sensation of the flat of his tongue against me makes the pressure build and build.

“Oh my god,” I say as he dips down to my entrance and fucks me with his tongue, then comes back up to my clit, nipping at it, causing me to moan and quiver.

I’m buzzing and burning, chest heaving. If it wasn’t for the belt and the hook, I’d be sinking to the floor.

Bran repositions himself, his hand trailing up my thigh, then closer and closer to my wet slit.

“You’ll come in my mouth,” he tells me. “I want to taste all of you when

you let go.”

He fills me up with three fingers, stretching me.

“Go on,” he orders and sucks at my clit.

“Shit. Oh fuck.”

He licks and sucks and fucks me with his fingers and the orgasm slams through me and I buck against the wall.

Bran holds me still with one arm hooked around my thigh.

He leans into me as I cry out, riding the wave through.

“Look at yourself,” he says up to me. “Watch how you glow.”

As the orgasm spasms through me, I force myself to look at my reflection as I tremble all over.

I’m flush, sweating, shaking.

But he’s right.

There’s something otherworldly about me in this moment as the pleasure fills my veins and my own juices drip down my thighs.

I’ve never felt so empowered. Even when I’m strapped down by a belt to the wall.

Bran pulls his fingers from me and stands in front of me, his lips swollen from the effort of eating my pussy.

“Did you learn your lesson, little mouse?”

I sag against the wall and he unhooks me, unlatching the belt. “Yes,” I tell him, even though I think it’s a lie.

He catches me when my knees buckle once I’m free.

His arm winds around my waist as the other arm hooks behind my knees and he carries me to bed. I’m practically boneless when he lays me on my side.

He disappears in a blur, then returns a few seconds later with a hot, wet cloth. “Open, Mouse,” he tells me and I spread my knees apart so he can clean me up.

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to clean your cum from my pussy,” I say, my voice thick with exhaustion.

“You’re not. I’m cleaning you up. There’s a clear difference.”

I laugh when he hits my still sensitive clit. “A girl could get used to this.”

He disappears again to take care of the cloth, then flicks off the bathroom light, lengthening the shadows in the room.

Next, the bedside lamp goes dark and then he’s sliding into the bed with me.

“Naughty little mouse,” he says against my neck as he pulls my back to his chest.

I sigh contentedly. “I will never learn my lesson.”

He snorts. “I can see I have my work cut out for me.”

I snuggle into the pillow, my head suddenly heavy. “Bran?”

“Yes, Mouse?”

The air conditioning runs through the vents with a whir. I can hear the ticking of the analog clock that sits on Bran’s dresser.

“Will we be okay today? After my Pledging?”

His arms tighten around me. “Whatever happens, I will protect you. You have my word.”

I sigh and tangle my legs with his. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Mouse.”

EPISODE 49

DANGEROUS AND EXTREMELY RECKLESS

WHEN I WAKE, I ROLL OVER AND REACH OUT FOR BRAN BUT FIND THE BED empty beside me.

The windows are still shuttered so it's impossible to tell what time it is.

I stretch for the bedside table and pat around in the dark for my phone. When the screen lights up, I read 4:00 p.m.

That's early for Bran. Late for me.

My Pledge is in three hours.

I flop to my back, air rushing out of the thick pillows and surrounding me with Bran's scent.

Today is the day when everything changes.

If all goes according to plan, by the end of the day, I will officially be a member of the Duval Vampire House.

I will be Bran's and there will be no turning back.

My brain is telling me I should be freaking out. It's a lifetime commitment. But my heart and my gut are telling me this is exactly where I should be.

If only there was a better way to guarantee my sister's safety without her having to make the very permanent transition to vampire.

In the dark hush of Bran's bedroom, my mother's words echo in my head.

The things you did, Jessie...you were only a year old and it terrified me.

What could I do at such a young age to terrify my mother enough that she bound me?

And now that I'm twenty-one...

I place my hand over my beating heart and wish someone could just tell me these terrifying things I'm capable of.

Maybe if I knew, I could help protect my sister.

Because the fae gate has been closed since I was born, my knowledge of them and their abilities is minimal.

We are two days away from the new moon Rita said she needed to undo the binding, but...is it possible to weaken it?

I sit upright in bed as a thought comes to me.

Whenever my necklace is off, the taste of fae is much stronger in my blood. Bran said maybe when the necklace is off, the magic thins.

I toss the blanket back and click on the bedside lamp. I don't hear much beyond the bedroom.

I dress quickly in jeans and a t-shirt, then slip on a pair of tennis shoes.

Out in the main part of the Anneliese, I find my sister in the kitchen making a cup of coffee.

"Hey," I say. "How are you?"

She looks tired, but there's a new glow to her cheeks.

"I'm okay," she says. "You?"

I shrug. "Impatient for today to be over."

She brings the mug to her mouth and breathes across it, stirring the steam.

"You and me both."

"Where's Bran?"

"He and Damien are in the main house discussing strategy for today."

I worry at my bottom lip, contemplating what I'm about to do. Bran will be pissed. But his anger is worth it if I can help my sister. I suspect I only know the half of what she's done to protect me since Mom died.

"I'm gonna go to the main house," I tell Kelly. "If you see Bran before I do, will you let him know?"

"Sure." Kelly's gaze is distant and glassy as she takes another sip from the coffee.

"Thanks."

She doesn't respond, which is just as well considering what I'm about to do.

Somehow, I make it out of Duval House without anyone questioning me. I find the Bimmer in the parking lot and drive off without any trouble at all. I

feel a little guilty as Duval House fades in the rear-view mirror.

Since it's mid-afternoon, I know I can probably find Rita at the coffeeshop.

I park outside and head in, the bells chiming above the door when I open it.

Rita looks up. "Jessie, hi. Happy birthday!" She frowns, then adds, "What are you doing here?"

"I need a favor."

The frown deepens and aged lines appear on her forehead. "Why do I have a bad feeling about this favor?"

I scan the coffee shop and spot a few witches, none of them close allies of Rita's house, the Bowens. "Can we talk in the back?"

"Sure." Rita passes by Gwen and gives her a squeeze on the shoulder. "I'll be back out in a bit. Let me know if you need me."

"Will do." Gwen smiles at me.

In Rita's office, my skin crawls when I see the mess on her desk.

Don't look at it. You're here for a very specific reason and that reason is not to organize Rita's office.

"Remember when I came here to ask about the necklace and the binding and you said we needed a new moon to undo it?"

Rita folds her arms over her chest. "Of course."

"Whenever I take off this necklace"—I finger the charm hanging from the chain—"the magic is distant. I know that because Bran can taste fae blood when he bites me."

Rita turns her office chair and plops into it. "What are you asking, sugar?"

"Is there any way to undo the binding early?"

"Well, sure, we could try, but a spell that old, I'd much rather err on the side of caution and do it right the first time."

My stomach drops. I pace the small room. "Is there a way for you to take the necklace and help distance the magic? Like some kind of neutralizing spell or something?"

What I don't say is—is there a way for me to tap into my terrifying power *today*?

But I think Rita probably knows that.

Maybe not the terrifying part.

Rita thinks this over, her hands folded on top of a pile of crinkled

receipts. “I suppose it’s possible, but...” She looks up at me. “Is this because of your Pledge and the rumblings I’ve been hearing about it?”

I bite at the corner of my lip, considering how much to tell her. I know I can trust Rita, but I’m not sure Cal wants everyone knowing he has a psychic.

“The Renshaw witches are working with Julian and we think they’re planning something for my Pledge and I don’t want anyone to get hurt in the crossfire.”

“You don’t even know what your power is,” Rita points out. “You wouldn’t know the first thing about using it.”

“But could I? With whatever spell you do? That’s what I need to know.”

If I could use the power when I was just a year old, then surely I can use it when I’m twenty-one. I just need to have access to it.

“I mean...theoretically, yes,” she says. “A binding is a current just like any other magic. So yes, I think I could dam it temporarily until we can really undo it. But Jessie...what you’re asking me is dangerous and extremely reckless.”

“All of this is happening because of me. I need to be an active part of this, Rita. *Actively* defending those I love.”

She pursues her lips, breathing out heavily through her nose.

“Bran will probably kill me,” she says with a weary laugh.

“Let me handle Bran.”

She arches a brow. “Well, all right. I suppose you want to do this now?”

“My Pledging is in three hours. It needs to be now.”

Out in the shop, the steamer hisses as Rita gets up. She goes to her shelves and slips her reading glasses on, scanning the jars that are haphazardly arranged. She finally selects one that is full of a mixture of dark herbs and what looks like crushed crystals.

“Take off your necklace,” she says as she brings the jar down.

I undo the clasp and the chain tickles my skin as it slides off my neck. When I hold it out, the charm spins from the end.

Rita takes it and then pops off the lid of the jar, placing the necklace inside. “I’ll need some blood. Not a lot.”

“All right.”

She sets the jar on her desk and pulls a jeweled dagger from a drawer. I hold out my hand for her and she drags the blade over the palm of my hand, biting into my flesh.

I hiss and instinctively want to pull away but hold my hand steady in her

warm grip.

Once blood wells in the wound, she turns my hand over to the mouth of the jar and several drops patter into the herbs and stones and covers the binding charm.

“That should be good,” Rita says and nods at a box of tissue on the filing cabinet.

I pull a few out and press them to the wound as Rita whispers to herself, holding the jar in her grip.

A flame immediately ignites inside, tendrils of smoke and fire dancing over the rim.

Rita whispers one final word, then clamps the lid on, snuffing the flame.

My skin tingles.

A shiver creeps across my shoulders.

I lick my lips, still tasting the bite of Rita’s magic on the air.

“Is that it?” I ask as blood soaks through the tissue.

“That’s it.”

“Did it work?”

“I don’t know. Only you will.”

“I don’t feel different.”

Though I do feel naked without the necklace. I’ve rarely taken it off since I was a kid.

“I should go,” I say. “Bran will be wondering where I am soon.”

Rita nods. “I’ll be at your Pledging, just in case. You have me and the support of the entire Bowen house. Just so you know, sugar.”

“Thank you, Rita.”

I hurry to her side and wrap her in a hug. Beyond the magic, she smells like coffee and tea and warmth and familiarity.

“I really, really appreciate you.”

When I pull back, her eyes are glistening. “That’s very sweet of you. Now go on. Before I have a cantankerous vampire breathing down my neck.”

I laugh as I leave. “I’m definitely going to use that someday. Bran’s going to love it.”

I keep checking my phone all the way back to Duval House, half expecting to

find a barrage of texts from Bran admonishing me for leaving.

But there are none.

I think he's distracted. I think he and Damien are probably trying to plot for every contingency.

When I get back, I hurry in through a side door and avoid looking any of the vampires in the face as I pick up the pace for the Anneliese.

The house is empty when I walk through the front door.

I decide to shower and get ready. The earlier the better, I suppose. And I need the distraction.

What if Rita's spell didn't work? What if we try the unbinding on the new moon and it fails too? What if I never know who I am and what I'm capable of?

I suppose my mother warned me not to go down this road anyway.

I linger in the shower, soaking up the heat and scrubbing the blood from my hand.

I'm not sure if I should be surprised or relieved when I find the cut on my palm has vanished.

I've always healed quickly, but not *that* quickly.

The tingle returns, racing down my limbs, lifting goosebumps on my arms despite the intense heat of the water.

When I finish, I wrap a towel around myself and step out and find Bran waiting.

"Good morning, little mouse," he says.

"Afternoon," I correct.

"You start living with vampires, you'll realize soon enough that afternoon and morning are interchangeable."

He straightens as I come over to the vanity.

I sense his eyes on me.

"Where is your necklace?" he asks.

Inwardly, I groan. Of course he noticed. Nothing escapes Bran.

"I took it off."

"Mouse."

"Oh, don't Mouse me. I'm allowed to take it off."

"Where is it?"

"Not here."

"Now is not the time for surprises."

I want to help. I need to help.

If only I could figure out how to tap into this well inside of me. The one my mom said terrified her.

What can I do?

I meet my gaze in the mirror and try to dig up my secrets. I can't sense magic inside of myself. I don't even feel fae most of the time.

Who am I?

Who am I?

"Put the necklace back on," Bran orders. "Right fucking now."

I turn to him and clutch at the towel. "No."

"Mouse."

"I don't have the necklace," I say, anger tightening in my chest. "So I can't put it back on."

"I have vampire speed. I can retrieve it in ten minutes, tops."

"I'm not putting it back on."

"This was not part of the plan."

"You didn't let me be part of the plan. So I made my own."

His eyes narrow, jaw flexing. "What do you know of war and strategy, little mouse? Nothing."

"I'm not putting it—"

The bedroom door opens and there's a current of air as Jimmy appears in the bathroom doorway. She sees me in a towel and apologizes.

"It's okay," I say.

"What is it?" Bran asks, his words biting.

"The pack is here."

"Which wolf is it? The Alpha?"

Jimmy cants her head and her chain earrings swing. "You're not listening to me. I said, the pack is here. As in, the *entire pack*."

The surprise on Bran's face is a delight. It takes a lot to catch him off guard.

"For what?" he says.

"The Alpha said he's giving Jessie a personal escort to her Pledging."

Bran scowls and starts for the door. "The fuck he is."

EPISODE 50

VERY MUCH MISTAKEN

THE ALPHA SHOWING UP WITH THE PACK HAS GIVEN ME THE DISTRACTION I need. Bran has all but forgotten about the necklace as he stalks from the room.

“Wait,” I call and jog to catch up. “Bran, wait.”

He stops at the end of the hallway. Jimmy is already gone.

“Think about this for a second.”

“Which part, Mouse?” he challenges. “The Alpha thinking he can insert himself into *my* business or you disobeying me?” There is a pulsing glow in his irises and a clear bite to his words.

Maybe he hasn’t forgotten about the necklace after all.

“I’m not your *business*,” I correct. “I’m your girlfriend and I would think you’d use any tool at your disposal to protect me. Also you don’t have to be territorial all of the damn time.”

“Yes. I do.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, fine, but Cal is an asset and not taking advantage of him is a stupid strategy. If you want to be all tactical or whatever.”

The angry glow fades from his eyes.

“If Cal wants to risk his life for this, let him.”

Some of the tension ebbs out of his shoulders. “Perhaps you have a mind for war after all.”

I try not to beam beneath the compliment.

“So the Alpha stays?”

Bran huffs out a disgruntled breath. “Fine. Yes, he stays. Now hurry up and get dressed. If I have to look at you in nothing but a towel for much longer, I will be bending you over the nearest piece of furniture.”

A searing heat comes to my clit and Bran gives me one quick shake of his head. “No. We do not have time for that. Now go.” He smacks me on the ass.

“Hey!”

“Go on, naughty little mouse.”

“Fine. I’m going. You’ll wait for me?”

Pulling out his cell phone, he taps at a name and gives me a nod. “I promise,” he says.

Bran never breaks his promises.

Back in the bedroom, I pull out my Pledge dress from the closet. Kelly had it finalized for me months ago before all of this went down. Bran had someone return to our house to fetch it and I’m grateful he did.

I’m not one to go gaga over a dress, not like Kelly. But this one is special.

It was Mom’s Pledge dress.

Mom had always had a thing for Audrey Hepburn, or really anything from old Hollywood. The dress was an A-line made of green satin with beading along the modest V-neck.

Kelly and I had it taken in at the waist to fit me better and had the sleeves taken off.

When I pull it on and stand in front of the full-length mirror, I’m suddenly overcome with emotion.

I wish Mom were here.

I wish I didn’t have to worry about my sister.

I wish Mom would have told me who and what I was before she died, what this power is that might be running through my veins.

There is still no hint of what that power might be.

Why did you keep this secret from me, Mom?

Why?

Before I turn into a blubbering mess, I pull in several breaths and close my eyes, counting to ten.

No sense dwelling on what is and what isn’t. I can’t go back and Mom isn’t coming back so I have to deal with the hand I’m dealt.

“Jess?” Kelly’s voice sounds from the hallway.

“I’m in here. You can come in.”

She appears behind me in the mirror a few seconds later and when she takes in the sight of me, her eyes get misty.

“No,” I say. “No crying.”

She bites at the corner of her bottom lip. “Sorry. I’m trying not to get

emotional.”

“Let’s focus on the dress instead. How does it look?” I hold up the skirt and do a half turn.

“Lovely. Mom would have loved seeing you in it.”

“I think so too. It turned out so well.”

She comes into the bathroom and messes with my hair. “You should have blow-dried this. Now it’ll be all messed up.”

“Just put it into a bun.”

“I suppose I could do that. Sit.”

I pull out the stool from beneath the vanity and sit.

Kelly fusses behind me. “I wish I could be there.”

“I do too. But promise me you’ll stay here? In the Anneliese?”

“Of course I will.” With skills that border on magic, Kelly tames my hair into a neat bun, then pulls a few wispy strands out along my face. “Any makeup?”

I grab a tube of mascara and lipstick. “This will do.”

Within a few minutes, I’m ready to go.”

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“Everything will go according to plan.”

A lump forms in my throat. Kelly plants a kiss on my cheek.

“Love you, sissy,” I say.

“I love you too.”

We leave the bedroom together and find Bran and Damien waiting by the front door, both in tailored black suits.

When Bran sees me, his eyes widen and his body goes rigid.

“What?” I ask.

“You look gorgeous, little mouse.”

He rarely compliments me in this way. I think for Bran, physical appearance is not as important as it is for other people. He operates on feeling and gut instinct and what we have is something far deeper than physical attraction.

But even so, hearing him say those words makes me immediately blush and want to bat my eyelashes like an idiot.

What, this old thing?

He’d admonish me for playing *that* game.

“Thank you,” I answer.

The look in his eyes tells me that if we survive this day, he will be doing very naughty things to me later. It'll give me something to look forward to.

"If you're done," Damien says wearily, "we should be going. Kelly, you'll stay here with Jimmy. There will be several vampires stationed outside the Anneliese. You are not to leave under any circumstances, understood?"

She nods. "I got it."

"Now come," Bran says and takes me into the wide sweep of his arms. "Let's go see what the Alpha has to say and then we'll be on our way."

Jimmy wasn't lying. The entire Midnight Pack is waiting outside Duval House.

"Well, this is unprecedented," Damien says from the wide wrap-around porch. The sun has already sunk below the trees, but the night is still light enough to make out the vast size of the pack. There must be sixty men and women here.

Cal stands at the head with Fox at his left. The rest of the shifters are behind.

"Alpha," Bran says, "we didn't discuss this."

"I made a deal with Jessie, not you," Cal calls back, his deep, raspy voice reverberating across the property.

Bran's tongue runs along the inside of his bottom lip.

"Bran," I mutter beside him.

He clamps his mouth shut and takes my hand. He and Damien have me sandwiched between them as we make our way down the steps.

We come to a stop several feet away from the Alpha.

"What does this deal entail?" Bran gives me a sidelong glance before turning to Cal.

"I promised her I'd have her back," Cal answers. "In exchange for her help with my mate."

"And who is this mate?" Damien asks.

Fox steps forward. "That's none of your business."

Cal holds out his arm, stopping his beta from going further.

"I'm just here to lend my support," Cal says. "Imagine what your enemies will think when they see you show up with the pack behind you."

“I imagine they’ll wonder if I have enough dog food to feed you all.”

“Bran!” I shout.

He crosses his arms over his chest.

“No need to worry, Jessie,” Cal says. “I suspect I will be growing on your vampire boyfriend soon enough.”

Bran’s mouth drops open. “Excuse me? Why do you say that?”

“I have a psychic, remember?”

“Yes, I do. And if you’re insinuating that I might come to regard you as a friend or ally, you are very much mistaken, Alpha.”

Cal snickers and turns away. The pack parts for him.

“Alpha!” Bran shouts.

“We should be going,” Cal calls over his shoulder. “The night is getting away from us. If you’ll drive, the pack will run beside you.”

I can’t help but laugh. This is a gift I didn’t know I needed. But is Cal being serious? That seems a silly thing to joke about. I suspect Cal doesn’t exactly want to be friends with Bran, but maybe our interests will continue to intersect and the two alpha men will come to an understanding.

I like the thought of it. Especially if Sam is destined to be with Cal.

“Stop smiling, Mouse,” Bran mutters.

I clamp my hand over my mouth, but I’m sure he can tell the smile is still in my eyes.

He scowls and starts for his SUV, grumbling the whole way.

Bran drives with me tucked in the back, hidden behind dark tinted windows. Damien is in the passenger seat.

We don’t speak.

I watch the blur of the pack racing through the woods beside us.

My stomach turns into knots the closer we get to the Harbor.

I can get through this.

It’s going to be fine.

Most Pledges are just routine ceremonies. You make your Pledge. You sign some papers. You carry on with your life.

Nothing will be different about mine at all—

Except when we pull into the parking lot outside the Harbor, my heart

drops.

It's packed.

More packed than on any other Pledge Day.

Judging by the number of vehicles and people milling around outside, everyone who matters is here.

"Holy shit," I say from the back. "Who are all these people? Is there another Pledge today? Maybe ten?"

"No," Damien answers, "yours was the only one on the schedule."

Christ.

Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

There is always reserved parking for the Pledgees, so Bran parks along the front of the building.

And standing just outside the entrance is none other than Julian, with half the Renshaw coven beside him.

EPISODE 51

THE SPEED OF MAGIC

SEEING JULIAN MAKES MY STOMACH TWIST AND MY BLOOD TURN HOT.

There was a time when I thought he was on our side, that he was concerned with our safety and well-being. But after what he did to Kelly, I know that was never true.

Julian Locke is only out for himself and he's willing to do whatever it takes to get what he wants.

Once we're out of the car, Bran offers me his arm and I eagerly take it. Damien steps to my other side and behind me are Cal and Fox. I catch sight of Bianca hurrying up the sidewalk. She's not wearing heels but sensible tennis shoes with a pleated plaid skirt.

Tennis shoes are always better for running. Is Bianca worried about getting away?

"An escort from the wolves?" Julian calls over to us as we make our way up the main walk. "Bran, I'd think that was beneath you."

My body goes rigid.

"Do not engage," Bran says beside me.

"I won't," I say beneath my breath, but then grip harder at the crook of his elbow.

"If I wasn't a vampire," he says, "I think you would be piercing my flesh."

"Sorry." I let up a little and exhale.

Everything will be all right.

Bianca falls into step on Bran's other side.

"You're late," he says to her.

"Apologies. My father tried stopping me from coming."

“Don’t make that my problem.”

“It won’t be. I’ve handled it.”

The Renshaw witches line up behind Julian. They’re all in varying shades of black, white, and dark gray. The coven leader—Tabitha—watches me from Julian’s left. Her gaze is penetrating and it makes me shiver. I’ve never had the bad luck of crossing paths with Tabitha until now. They’ve mostly stuck to themselves. The fact that they’ve aligned with Julian makes me wonder what they’re getting out of it.

When we finally enter the Harbor and are out of their prying eyes, I exhale. But the relief is short lived.

I’m used to the Harbor being busy. I mostly only come here when there are parties to attend, so seeing the halls full of people is nothing out of the ordinary. But the two dozen witches and shifters and vampires just lingering in the hall for a routine Pledge is certainly *out* of the ordinary.

And worse, everyone’s eyes are on me. “There are so many people here,” I whisper to Bran.

“Everyone is ready for a show,” he answers.

We go left, bypassing the onlookers.

The Pledge Hall was added to the Harbor sometime in the fifties. It was constructed as a circular amphitheater with sloping seating on tiers so that everyone in the back can see easily down to the front.

When we enter, we go down to the reserved seating.

The Pledge director, Carl Philmore, greets us with a wide smile. “Jessie! Did you see the turnout today? My god, this must be exciting for you.”

If only he knew.

“Yes, so exciting,” I say as he shakes my hand vigorously.

“We’re just about ready to get started if you are.”

I swallow hard and Bran watches me.

“I’m ready.”

“Great. Excellent.” Carl rubs his hands together and the dry skin rasps. He’s a nice man with a small family in Midnight. He’s not Pledged to anyone, since he’s Pledge Director. He’s a man of the humans, as I’ve heard him say on more than one occasion. “Have a seat,” he tells me, “and we’ll bring the room to order.”

I drop into the padded seating and try not to fidget.

I have several powerful, strong allies on my side.

How can any of this go wrong?

Carl disappears into a side room while my heart races and my hands grow clammy. When he returns in a black robe, much like a judge, my knee starts bouncing. Bran reaches over and grips me reassuringly, and I can barely meet his eyes, afraid that if I do, I'll start sobbing with nerves and anxiety.

I have to get through this. There's no way out but through.

"We call to order Pledge number 207 of this year for Jessie MacMahon. Jessie is twenty-one as of today and now eligible to Pledge to a House in Midnight Harbor."

Behind me, I hear chairs squeaking and clothing rustling and bodies shuffling around as everyone finds a seat and gets settled.

I dare to look over my shoulder and catch sight of Julian taking a seat two tiers up. But he's noticeably alone.

My stomach drops.

Carl rubs his hands together again. "Now, I know many of you are familiar with the Pledge Code, and this part will bore you to death, but my boss makes me do it. Of course, my boss is the law." He laughs to himself. There is a weak chorus of laughter behind us.

"As soon as we get through this part, we can move on to the fun stuff!" Carl opens a book in front of him and starts reading from one of the passages. He's not lying—the Pledge Code is boring and dry and if I wasn't so keyed up, I would be sleeping by now.

Bran gives me another squeeze. I lean into him and whisper into his ear. "I'm so glad you're here with me."

"I wouldn't be anywhere else, Mouse."

Carl flips a page and continues.

I catch sight of Bianca on the other side of Bran, her big, wide eyes searching as much of the room as she can from her vantage point in the front.

Beside me, Damien is still as water, but I sense an underlying tension in his body.

Finally, Carl reads the last of the code from his book—blah blah a Pledge agrees to show his or her house the utmost respect and be a stand-up representative of his or her chosen House.

When he shuts the book with a thud, I have a hard time taking in a full breath.

This is happening.

It's really happening.

"Now!" Carl booms. "We'll start with House bids and will conduct

opening bids in alphabetical order.” He steps back where the wall has been divided into twelve sections, each with a button and an old-fashioned light bulb above it with the House name in bold, block letters.

“Abernathy,” Carl calls. Witches. There is silence in the room for a beat and then Carl goes to the next house. “Bowen.” Silence again.

We make it through several more houses before finally reaching Duval House and when Carl calls out the name, both Damien and Bran stand up.

“We would like to formally bid on Jessie MacMahon to be a member of our house,” Damien says.

“Excellent!” Carl taps at the button for Duval House. The old-fashioned light bulb glows bright gold before Carl calls out the next name. “Locke House.”

Fuck.

Behind us, Julian stands up and I hear the shuffle of papers. “Before I formally make my bid,” Julian says, “I’d like to submit to the court a promissory note from her mother.”

“What?” I shout.

Bran grabs my hand and holds me in my seat.

Carl frowns and makes his way up two tiers to retrieve this supposed promissory note. He squints as he reads. “Interesting. Did you have this authenticated?”

“I did. I had it authenticated by both the human court and by the Renshaw witches.” Julian hands over a second piece of paper.

I lurch from my seat. Bran reaches out for me, but for once, I’m able to dodge him. “Fuck you, Julian,” I yell.

The crowd takes in a collective breath.

“That’s probably a lie just like my sister’s blood license. Or did you compel my mother too? Make her your puppet?” Anger and frustration and fear are pounding through my veins. I don’t know what else to do other than to lash out. “I’m not Pledging to your house. Fuck you and fuck the Lockes, and you can fuck off!”

The scandal of it all races through the room. People are snickering and openly gaping.

If they wanted a show, they’re about to get one.

Julian’s teeth grind together. There is a tell-tale twitch at the corner of his mouth and glowing ire in his blue eyes.

“Your mother did make this promise, and she was under no compulsion.

She knew what was good for you and Bran Duval was not on that list.”

Bran stands up to flank me. “You don’t get to decide that, Julian. She’s not going to be yours.”

Julian sighs. It’s not a sigh of defeat, but of exasperation. As if we’re petulant children he now has to correct.

Still in his seat, Damien’s cell phone buzzes in his pocket. He pulls it out and lights up the screen and I can’t help but be distracted by it, by him. Because watching him digest the message is like watching someone learn they’ve just been diagnosed with a fatal disease.

His shoulders level out, his eyes widening, nostrils flaring.

He looks up at his brother and Bran looks down at him.

“Jimmy just woke up,” he mouths.

It doesn’t take me long to parse out the meaning of that.

Jimmy just woke up... meaning she was either knocked out or had her neck snapped.

If Jimmy just woke up, then Kelly—

One of the doors in the far back pulls open and a Renshaw witch steps through.

And held in her grip is none other than my sister.



We knew this was coming and yet now that it’s happening, I think we’re all a little shocked by it.

What was it Cal warned us about?

“Kelly will be on the north end of the Pledge Hall when she’s struck down.”

And where is Kelly now?

On the fucking north end.

I can barely hear the whispering of the room over the rapid thudding of my heart.

Damien is on his feet in a second. “Julian,” he says, his voice rumbling with warning. “I don’t think you fully understand what it is you’re doing.”

“On the contrary.” Julian steps into the aisle. “You think I would, *what*, just let you take something that was owed to me? Something powerful beyond comprehension?”

“I’m not *something*,” I say. “I’m a fucking human being.”

He screws up his mouth. “Don’t play dumb, Jessie. We all know you’re far from human.”

The whispers pick up in the room.

“Wait,” Carl says. “Jessie isn’t human?”

Julian’s face falls as he realizes his grave error.

“If she isn’t human,” Carl starts.

Julian gestures to one of the Locke House vampires and he darts over to the director, compelling him to forget this minor detail—if I’m not human then I can’t Pledge.

“This is a stupid plan,” Damien yells. “You have two hundred witnesses in here. You can’t compel them all.”

“I won’t need to.”

The Renshaw witch drags my sister further into the room and down two steps. Kelly fights against the woman, but judging by my sister’s lack of progress, I’d say the witch is using some kind of magic to keep her under control.

“What do you want?” Damien asks.

Quietly, slowly, people start backing out of the room.

“I want what’s rightfully mine. Both Jessie and Kelly. Those are my terms.”

“Absolutely not,” Bran and Damien say in unison.

“Then you leave me no choice,” Julian answers.

The witch at my sister’s side pivots behind Kelly and places her hands on either side of her head.

For a fraction of a second, I see Damien ready to move, ready to spring and save my sister.

But even he can’t beat the speed of magic.

The air around my sister’s head undulates like heat rising from an oil fire.

Then her eyes roll back so that all I can see are the whites. Blackness appears beneath the fingertips of the Renshaw witch and the black spreads like wiggling tendrils of ink beneath Kelly’s skin.

Beside me, Damien jolts.

Darkness is seeping into his skin too.

And within seconds, Damien and Kelly are consumed by the spell and both hit the floor with a resounding thud.

EPISODE 52

BLOOD ON MY HANDS

WAR CAN COME IN MANY SHAPES.

It can be like a storm cloud, the darkness rising on the horizon, the sky flashing with lightning long before the storm lands. You know when a storm is coming. You can see it and you can feel it.

But war can also be like an earthquake. One minute your life is normal and the next it's falling in around you, the ground cracking beneath your feet.

This is like a storm and an earthquake. Because we felt this coming, but I don't think we were prepared for the ground to shake.

Everything is still and then suddenly everyone is moving.

A Renshaw witch stands from her seat in the back of the room and lifts her arms in my direction. She mutters something to herself.

Bianca whips her hand toward me and there is a clash of air two feet away, followed by the overwhelming scent of magic—like tinder and wild earth.

The hair rises on the back of my neck.

“Mouse!” Bran yells. He is caught between coming to me or going to Damien. He picks me, but a Locke vampire catches him off guard and puts his hands on either side of Bran's head, ready to give his head a swift yank to break his neck.

And that's when the Alpha jumps in.

Cal slams into the Locke vampire and the sound of bones breaking rings in my ears.

Bran looks at Cal and gives him an appreciative nod.

The room erupts in battle.

Witches fighting witches and wolves tearing through vampire flesh.

Vampires darting back and forth, tossing people like they're nothing more than dolls.

What do I do?

What about Kelly and Damien and—

Another vampire punches Bran in the chest and his ribs cave in. He gasps for air as blood spills from his mouth.

Those who aren't ready for a fight scatter from the room, screaming and flailing, ducking when a body flies overhead.

This isn't right.

Everyone I love is in this room.

There is the sharp tang of blood in the air and the whiff of defeat.

We don't have enough witches on our side. Julian has the entire Renshaw house.

I'm not cattle. I cannot be bought or bartered for, but if my mother really promised me to Julian...then by law, I have to go with him. It's an old rule left over from the founding days of Midnight Harbor. No one uses it anymore.

I never would have thought my own mother would turn on me. And worse yet, I can't even yell at her.

Bran goes down when a vampire and a witch gang up on him.

He's covered in blood. He's healing just as fast as they're beating him.

If something happens to Kelly and Bran, I will not survive it.

What is the point of being terrifying if I can't do anything to save them?

"Stop," I hear myself saying in a shaky whine, tears blurring in my eyes. "Please stop."

Julian comes up on Bran and takes a fistful of his hair, yanking him to his feet.

"No," I whisper and take a step, goosebumps lifting on my arms, a chill racing up my back.

A witch throws a hit at Cal and the Alpha is tossed into a row of seats.

"No."

Everywhere I look, there is carnage and pain.

"Your problem," Julian says to Bran as Bran sways on his feet, "is your arrogance. You and your brother always assume you'll be the most powerful person in the room. What you don't factor in, is someone who is smarter."

Bran spits in Julian's face, splattering blood across Julian's cheek. "You're the dumbest little shit I've ever met," Bran says. "I've never doubted

that.”

One of the Renshaw witches flicks her hand at Bran and Bran’s body lets out a horrible crunch.

Fire comes to Bran’s eyes as he grits against the pain.

Behind him, one of Julian’s vamps grabs a chair and snaps the leg in two.

“No, please...” My voice rises, hands shaking.

Two witches stand over Cal, hands raised in a spell. The Alpha roars.

Damien and Kelly still aren’t moving.

Fox is cornered by two Locke vamps as more shifters are caught in battle.

“I will be glad to be rid of you,” Julian says.

The Locke vampire lifts the makeshift stake behind Bran, ready to strike at his heart.

No. No.

I can’t lose Bran.

I can’t lose this battle.

It’s too much.

It’s all too much.

“STOP!” I shout.

And the room goes eerily still.

I’m gasping for air. I’m hot all over. My skin is crawling.

What is happening?

No one is moving. Everyone is frozen mid-stride.

They’re all breathing, though, blinking through the disbelief.

“Mouse,” Bran says. He can’t seem to turn his head my way, but he can speak. He’s caught in place in front of Julian, the Locke vampire at his back, the stake inches from piercing Bran’s flesh. “Mouse.”

“I don’t know what’s happening,” I say, voiced edged in panic.

Julian blinks, his teeth gritted, his hand half-raised. “You undid the binding?”

“No,” Bran answers, not moving a muscle.

“Wait—” I take a step and Julian’s eyes narrow as if he wishes he could dart away. “You’re not surprised by this? What is it?”

Julian doesn’t answer.

“Tell me right now or I swear to god—”

“You’ll what?” Julian challenges. “You don’t know the first thing about your power. Not what it is or how to use it.”

“Mouse,” Bran says again.

“What?”

“Use your voice.”

It’s an echo of what he’s said to me before. Use my voice. Speak my mind. Quit hiding what I want and who I am.

But he means it differently now. Julian was wrong—Bran is always the most powerful and the smartest person in the room.

He’s put it together much quicker than I have.

I used my voice. I told the room to stop and they did. All of them. Caught like a bug in a drip of amber.

Use my voice.

The things you did, Jessie...you were only a year old and it terrified me.

A year old, when a child, especially a fae child, might learn to speak.

A tingling chill runs through my entire body.

I turn on Julian. His eyes narrow.

“Jessie,” he says.

My heart thuds in my ears.

“You know what I can do,” I say. He doesn’t deny it. I think he’s known since Sasha bit me and I think he must have somehow forced my mother into admitting it. “You knew and you kept it from me and everyone else because you wanted to use me for your own gains.

“That’s not what it was—”

“You’ve been conniving and controlling and manipulative from the beginning because you knew that if you possessed a power that no one else did, you would be the most powerful person in the room. You would strip Bran and Damien of that title and you would take over Midnight to be the king of a castle he stole.”

“Jessie—”

The heat builds in my chest. The blood pounds through my veins. And that dark thing, that dark feeling I had after Bran and Damien decimated the vampire court swims much closer to the surface.

I can feel it yawning inside of me, no longer tethered.

And the thirst for vengeance takes root.

I want him to die.

I want Julian to burst into ash beneath my hands.

“Jessie,” Bran says again.

I go behind him and take the stake from the Locke vampire. The bigger man grunts and groans, but there’s nothing he can do to stop me.

“Help me get out of this and I will take care of this for us,” Bran says. “Let *me* have blood on my hands.”

I stop in front of Julian, the stake held firmly in my grip.

“Mouse.”

“You deserve to suffer for what you did to my sister,” I tell Julian. “But I’m too impatient.”

“Don’t do this,” Julian begs.

“Fuck you.”

“Mouse!”

I drive the stake right through Julian Locke’s heart.

There is a moment between Julian’s life and death where he just blinks at me and then down at the stake protruding from his chest.

His lips move, as if he means to protest.

But before any words can come out, he bursts into ash.

A gasp wends through the room and the last of Julian Locke paints the air in swirls of dust.

“Mouse,” Bran says again. “Unfreeze me.”

I stagger back.

“Mouse, please.”

I bump into him, swallowing hard.

“Jessie,” he says, as if my real name might better get my attention.

I turn around to face him, caught between shock and awe.

I just killed a man and froze an entire room.

The tears start running down my face.

The line of Bran’s brow sinks over his eyes. He takes a breath. “Unfreeze me.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Just say the words, Mouse.”

I take in a breath and nod. “Okay.” Closing my eyes, I try to focus on

what I want. I don't know exactly how to use this power that burns through my veins, but it *is* mine. It's always been mine. "Um...*Bran*...you can move freely."

When his hands come to my face, I open my eyes and meet his gaze. More tears blur my vision. "Are you okay?" he asks.

I nod and bite at my bottom lip, not entirely sure I can keep it together for much longer. "I'm okay." For now.

Bran blurs away and sinks beside his brother, turning Damien on his back. I go to Kelly's side and check her breathing, putting my ear to her heart. The blackness from the spell has disappeared, leaving her unmarred. It's almost like she's sleeping.

"Kelly?" I give her a shake. "Can you hear me?"

She doesn't respond, so I pinch her arm. Still nothing.

"What did they do to you?" I whisper.

"Jessie, I need you to unfreeze Cal," Bran calls. "Get Fox and Bianca, and anyone else that we consider an ally."

"I...I'm not..."

He looks up at me. "You can do it, Mouse. But hurry."

I go to Cal first. He's closest and the strongest. One of the Locke vampires has a fistful of his shirt in his grip. He's got his teeth gnashed as he watches me, unable to stop me. There's blood spilling from the corner of Cal's mouth, and several splatters painting his blond hair.

I still don't know how this power works, but hopefully it's enough just to believe in the words. Otherwise, we're all in a world of shit.

"Cal," I say and push emphasis into my meaning, "*you can move freely.*"

Like a movie suddenly set to PLAY, Cal staggers forward and then pries his shirt from the Locke vamp's hand.

"Thank you, Jessie," he says.

One by one I go around the room and unfreeze those we consider friends. And with every one, my body aches a little more, my vision gets blurrier, and my heart races in my head.

By the time I've done the last one, I feel faint, legs shaking. I nearly crash to the ground before Bran is behind me, catching me.

"Come on, little mouse," he says and scoops me into his arms. My body is boneless in his grip, but I cling to him because I don't know what else to do.

"I've got your brother," Cal calls. Damien is slung over his shoulder.

“Kelly?” I ask.

“Fox has her,” Bran tells me.

The rest of the room—the remaining Locke vampires, the Renshaw witches—are still frozen in the grip of whatever power I wield.

“How long do you think they’ll be like that?” I ask.

Bran carries me toward the door. “This can become their tomb for all I fucking care.”

“You can’t just leave us like this!” one of the Renshaws says.

“The fuck we can’t,” Bran says as he leaves.

“Hey! Please! Don’t leave us!”

Someone shuts the door behind us, muffling the sound of their calls for help.

EPISODE 53

AT YOUR SERVICE

I'M NUMB ALL THE WAY BACK TO DUVAL HOUSE.

Numb and faraway.

The things you could do, Jessie...

When we reach the house, we pull in beneath the *porte-cochère*. Jimmy is there, waiting with several other vampires. They have pole stretchers for Damien and Kelly.

They still haven't regained consciousness.

I turn in the passenger seat of the SUV to glance back at my sister. Bran settled them into the crook of the SUV's back door with Damien leaning against it and Kelly tucked into his side.

Will they ever wake up? Or are they trapped in a spell like Sleeping Beauty, forever waiting for the other's kiss?

Once we're parked, Jimmy and another vampire slowly open the back door and pull Damien out first and deposit him on a stretcher. Kelly slumps over in his absence, before Bran catches her and lifts her out like she weighs nothing at all.

"Take them to the infirmary," Jimmy orders.

I don't have the energy to be shocked that Duval House has an infirmary.

Bianca races up to us, having driven separately. She's disheveled and there's still a smudge of blood on her cheek.

Is she already regretting joining Duval House?

"I'm here," she says, panting.

It isn't until Bran comes around to the passenger side that I realize I'm still sitting in the SUV. "Come on, Mouse." He offers me his hand. I just blink at it.

“I...I’m not...”

“Can you walk?” he asks.

“I...”

He moves to carry me out, but I push him away. “I can walk.”

“Then I need you to do it. Come.”

I slip out of the SUV and feel slightly better once my feet are on solid ground, once I drink in a deep breath of fresh air. It’s dark beyond the golden glow of the house, and the crickets are chirping in the warm summer night. I wish I was doing anything else other than this.

Bran hooks his arm around my waist and drives me toward the side entrance. He barks orders as we walk. “Michael and Anthony on the east side of the property, Isaac and Danielle on the west side. Jimmy, get the rest of the guard on the north and south ends and then double check that the security system is functioning properly. Bianca.”

“Yes?” she says from my right side.

“I need you to tell me what happened to my brother and Kelly.”

“Of course. I’ll do my best.”

“Your best is only good enough if it gets me answers.”

Bee nods at him. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Good. If you need something in the meantime, ask Jimmy. No expense is too large. Whatever it is, you’ll get it. Keep me updated.”

“I will,” she promises before she veers off, chasing after Damien and Kelly.

“I want to see my sister,” I say, but my voice sounds far away.

Bran says nothing. He steers me through the house, through the French doors and into the Anneliese. He’s silent still as we enter the house and go to the bedroom and finally to the bathroom. He starts up the shower.

“Bran,” I say, my voice wobbling. “I want to see my sister.”

“After you shower,” he says.

“I don’t want a shower. I want to—”

“I can smell Julian on you, Mouse. You reek of his death. I need you to shower. Right now. *Please.*”

I finally look at him and meet his eyes. There’s no glow to his irises. But there is something else. Some shifting shadow.

Fear.

He’s being gentle. When has Bran ever been gentle with me?

I swallow hard and try not to let my own fear consume me.

“I don’t know what that was back there,” I tell him, the hysteria making my voice shake. “I don’t know how I did it. Maybe it was just a fluke or—”

Steam fills the bathroom.

“Please get in the shower.”

Every muscle in his body is coiled.

Every fiber of him on the edge of vibrating.

I nod and strip off my clothes and get in the shower.

Once I’m beneath the hot spray, some of the tension eases out of my muscles. That is until I hear the bathroom door click closed.

I can feel the distance widening between us.

I stopped Bran in his tracks with nothing more than a single word.

The things you could do, Jessie...

Something tells me Bran Duval isn’t familiar with being powerless.

Everything has changed. Did he expect it to be this way? He knew I had a hidden power. Surely he must have known it was something with some worth, otherwise Julian wouldn’t have gone to all the trouble.

But maybe this is worse than he thought.

Maybe I *am* terrifying.

I finish up and get dressed. Hair still dripping and knotty, I make my way to the living room and spot Bran in the courtyard smoking a cigarette. I’ve yet to see him smoke, but I’ve smelled it on him.

There’s something inherently sexual about the way he inhales, how the curl of his finger is exaggerated as he pulls it away from his mouth.

When he exhales, he paints the night in smoke.

“Are you okay?” I ask him.

He takes another hit, holding the smoke in his lungs a beat. “I don’t know,” he admits and exhales.

“Anything from Bianca yet?”

“Not yet.” He goes over to a stone bench nestled among flowering bushes and sits.

I join him and am horribly aware of how rigid he is beside me.

“Bran—”

“You’re more powerful than I thought you’d be,” he admits, then snorts, bringing the cigarette back to his lips. He takes another long drag, the ember blazing orange. When he pushes the smoke back out, he goes on. “I thought maybe you could wield fae magic like a weapon. Maybe you could cast a really, really deceptive glamour. Controlling an entire room of extremely

powerful supernatural creatures?” He shakes his head to himself and looks across the garden. “That...that I never would have imagined.”

I lean into him and hook my arm through his, resting my head against his shoulder. “I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say.”

“But...what does this mean? Are you...I mean, are we...?” I don’t know what I’m trying to say. *Are we okay? Will we survive this? Am I terrifying to you?*

He drops the cigarette and crushes the ember beneath his boot, then takes my hand in his. “Make me a promise, Mouse.”

“Of course. Anything.”

“Give me a safe word.”

“What?”

“Something we can both agree on that should *that* happen again, if I use the word, you’ll release me immediately.”

“Bran—”

“Give me this, Mouse.”

I meet his gaze and find a pulsing glow in his irises. There’s desperation there.

“Okay. What’s the word?”

He squeezes my hand and brings it to his mouth. His breath is warm across my knuckles as he thinks.

“Lavender,” he finally says.

“Really?”

“It reminds me of home.”

I don’t think he means Duval House and it makes me realize I know nothing about where he was born or what life he had before he was turned. The only thing I know about him is who he is in Midnight Harbor at this moment in time.

“Okay. Lavender. You can use it at any time, for any reason,” I say. “Not that I plan on using that power on you. I don’t know if I’ll ever use it again. In fact...what if we just don’t undo the binding? I mean...I could put the necklace back on and we could forget about it and—”

“No.” He stands and pulls me up beside him. “It’s part of you and you should absolutely use it for that reason. But beyond that, everyone who matters was in that Pledge Hall tonight. You’ll have to use it. Because if you don’t, they’ll use you.”

Bran's attention wanders away from me and Jimmy appears a second later. "Damien?" he asks her.

"No." There are bags beneath Jimmy's eyes and her lips are chapped. She looks about as great as I feel. I don't know what the Lockes did to get past her and grab Kelly, but I am absolutely sure she did everything in her power to protect my sister.

"If it's not Damien," Bran says, his words turning coarse, "then I don't —"

"There's someone at the front door," she blurts.

Bran's brow furrows. "Who?"

"A brownie." Her gaze darts to me. "Says he knows Jessie. Says it's time they talk."

"The fuck is a brownie doing here?" Bran says.

A tingling numbness rushes down my limbs. "The letter," I say. "The one my mom wrote."

Bran sighs. "Fuck."

"Yes."

My mom mentioned a brownie in her letter, the one she crossed paths with in the park when I was just a year old. The same one who knew instantly what I was and asked my mom if she stole me.

"What do we do?" I ask.

Bran turns a circle, his hands on his hips as he considers it. "If a brownie wants to speak with you, he'll find a way. It's better to do it on our territory, when we know the lay of the land."

I nod. "All right. I'll follow your lead." I don't want Bran to worry about where we stand.

He starts for the French doors. Jimmy and I follow him out and down the hall and to the front door.

"Where is he?" Bran asks.

"He refused to come in," Jimmy answers. "He's on the front porch."

I have to quicken my pace to keep up with Bran's determined gait. At the front door, hand on the knob, he hesitates.

We all know that everything has changed. But a fae showing up on our doorstep is a true marker of it.

Bran pulls the door open.

I immediately recognize the brownie.

It's Stanley from The Greasy Spoon.

The cook who makes the best grilled cheese in all of Midnight Harbor.

Usually I see Stanley in his Greasy Spoon uniform—a pale blue shirt with his name embroidered over a pocket on his chest, The Greasy Spoon logo embroidered on the back. Now he's in a pair of dark trousers and a rough cotton button-up shirt with a tweed cap on his head.

In this setting, he seems different. Less grizzled diner cook, more withered fae. Like he just stepped out of the hollow of a tree and has yet to shake off the magic of the forest.

“Stanley?” I say and come out on the porch. “You're a brownie? How come you didn't—”

He takes a mirroring step back. “You used your magic.”

I level my shoulders, feeling defensive of it. “Yes. It is my magic, isn't it?”

“They'll feel you,” he says.

“Who?”

His eyes dart to Bran just behind me. “This your idea?”

“Of course not, old man. I tried to stop her.”

“Who, Stanley?”

“The Autumn Court,” he answers.

“The court isn't here though and the gate is closed.”

He licks his lips, nods. “Now that you've used your power, they'll find a way to get through.”

“Why?”

He looks at Bran again. “You could take her away from here. Compel her to forget.”

“Excuse me—”

“I won't do that to her.”

“I'm right here.”

Stanley's gaze darts back to me. He removes his hat and clutches the brim in his gnarled hands. “They'll come for you, Jessie, and it's hard saying what they'll do when they find you. Are you ready to become who you are?”

“Do you mean my fae side?”

“That is half.”

“What's the other half?”

“Are you prepared?” he asks again. “Once you decide, there's no turning back.” His voice is deep and hoarse. I used to think he smoked a lot, but now I wonder if it's just age. Brownies can be ancient. He could very well be

older than Bran by a millennium.

“I’m not running, if that’s what you’re asking me.”

“Very well.” He turns his hat in his grip and then he sinks to one knee.

My mother’s words come back to me in a rush.

He immediately came over to us and got down on one knee in front of you...

I thought she meant he knelt to get down to my eye level.

But this is not that. For one, I’m an inch or two taller than Stanley. And two...his head is bowed.

The panic takes hold quickly, turning into a band across my chest.

“You’ll need all the help you can get,” he says. “When they come, they will not be merciful.”

“Stanley,” I whisper-shout, desperate for him to get up.

“The name is actually Grimwall,” he says. “And I am at your service, Your Royal Highness.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NIKKI ST. CROWE has been writing for as long as she can remember. Her first book, written in the 4th grade, was about a magical mansion full of treasure. While she still loves writing about magic, she's ditched the treasure for something better: villains, monsters, and anti-heroes, and the women who make them wild.

These days, when Nikki isn't writing or daydreaming about villains, she can either be found on the beach or at home with her husband and daughter.

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