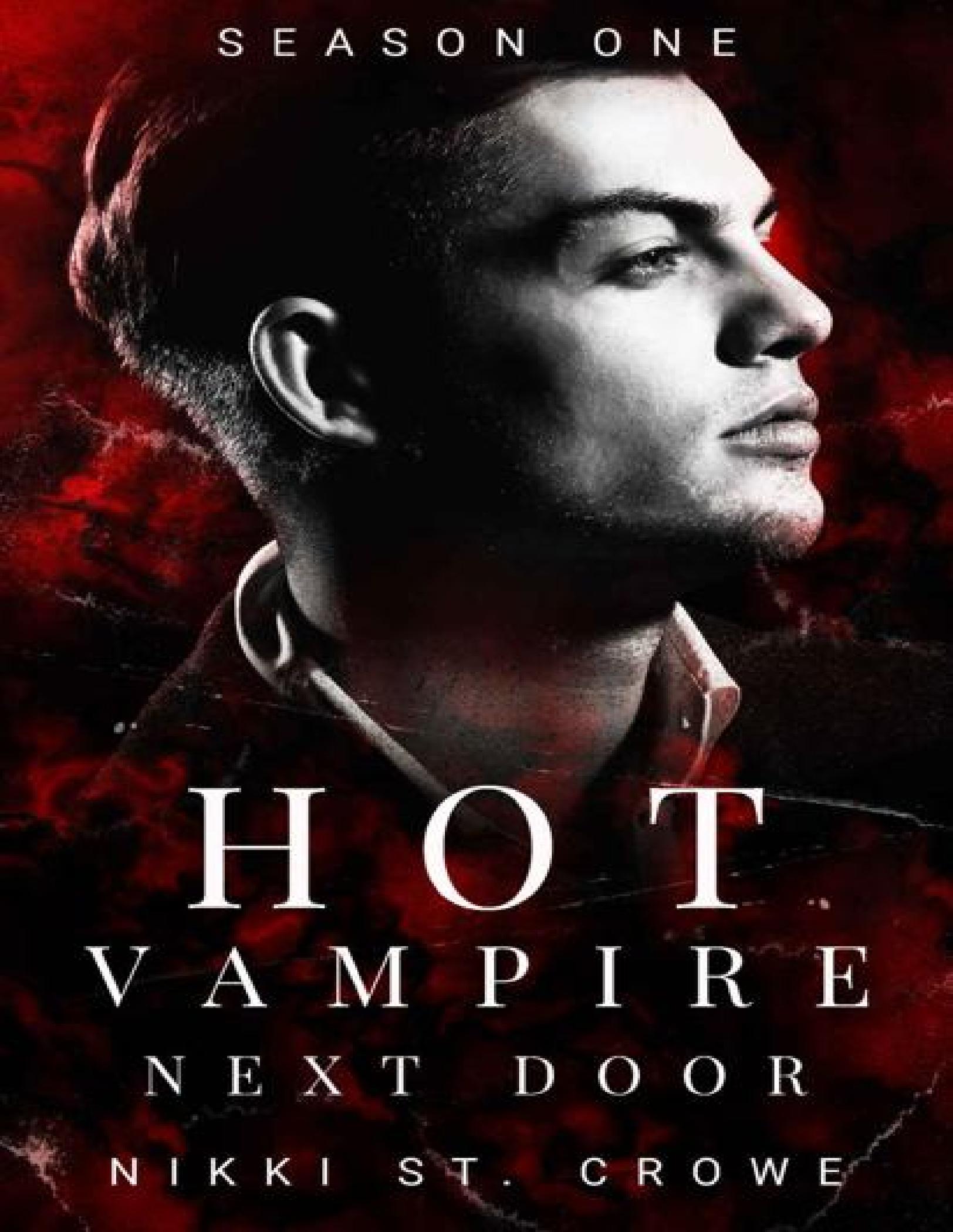


SEASON ONE



HOT
VAMPIRE

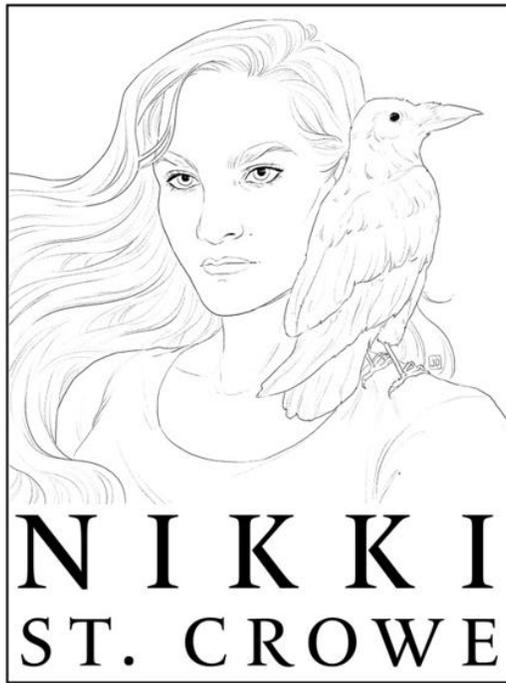
NEXT DOOR

NIKKI ST. CROWE

HOT VAMPIRE NEXT DOOR
SEASON ONE

NIKKI ST. CROWE

BLACKWELL HOUSE LLC



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ONE

I WAS TWO YEARS OLD THE FIRST TIME I HAD DINNER WITH A VAMPIRE.

My mother loved to tell the story of how I threw mashed potatoes on the crisp black button-up shirt of Julian Locke.

“I was embarrassed at first,” Mom would say, “but then, when that man took his shirt off to soak the buttery stain, oh boy.” At this point, Mom loved to fan herself for dramatic effect. “I was grateful to you, Jessie-girl. So damn grateful.”

Every family member that’s come before me has bound themselves to the Locke Vampire House since the early 1800s when the treaty between mortals and supernaturals was signed. By binding ourselves to them, once we’re of age, our veins are like a 24-hour juice bar.

There are rules, of course.

1. A vampire shall not pierce the flesh of a mortal without their permission.
2. A vampire shall not enter the dwelling of a bound mortal without their permission.
3. A vampire shall not drain a mortal’s veins.

No one wants an empty 24-hour juice bar, so it’s really in everyone’s best interest that they only take what they need.

I’ve lived in Midnight Harbor my entire life, so I’ve always been surrounded by the things that go bump in the night.

Though supernatural creatures coexist in Midnight, it’s not without its drama.

The vampires hate the wolves *obviously*.

The witches are extremely protective of their virgins, but the vampires love to sink their teeth into an innocent every now and then.

And the shifters will throw an absolute tantrum if the witches cast spells near their territory. Apparently, witch magic to a shifter nose can stink up a house for a week.

And the fae just want to go back to the faerie realm but can't, so they're disgruntled about being permanently displaced and cut off from their family and their courts.

The humans are split on their opinions of the supernaturals. Except for me. My opinion is very clear. I plan to leave Midnight Harbor to escape the supernatural world.

When you turn twenty-one, you're legally required to pledge yourself to a House, and my birthday is right around the corner. It's expected that I'll pledge to the Lockes, but I don't want to be a blood bag.

Not that I want to be some shifter's mate. And I certainly don't want to be a virgin for the rest of my life. Though I'm not even sure I'd qualify at this point. I know how to take care of my own pleasure, and I have the toy collection to prove it.

What I *want* is a normal life. Somewhere out in the world where I'm not required to tap a vein like a juice box.

"Jessie," my boss says. "Did you hear me?"

"Huh?"

Rita frowns at me. Her dark braids are wound up in a knot on top of her head. Giant emeralds hang from her earlobes. Perfect winged eyeliner accentuates her big almond eyes. She smells like spices and incense.

Rita is a witch and a powerful one at that. She owns the Magic Coffee Shop and was kind enough to give me a job last year when I begged and pleaded.

"I said I'm leaving for the day, but if you need anything, holler. I'm just gonna be home working on spells."

"Okay, have fun. Don't sacrifice too many virgins!"

She chortles as she pushes through the front door. "Oh darling," she says over her shoulder, "everyone knows sacrificing a virgin is bad luck!"

After Rita's gone, and with the place empty, I busy myself with cleaning and restocking. I may not be the most proficient barista, but what I lack in coffee-making skills, I more than make up for in organization. There's just

something about matching labels and boxes lined up on shelves and full canisters that makes my heart sing. Sometimes I can't relax until a place is cleaned and organized.

Rita had me help her move some boxes in her house last month, and when I saw her apothecary room, I almost keeled over. It was like a pack of rabid dogs ran through there. Spoiled toad's stool and blackening mugroot. Peeling labels and empty containers.

My fingers itched just looking at that room.

"Don't judge me on my messes," Rita said when she caught me wide-eyed in the doorway. "Every Hallow's Eve, I make a vow to be cleaner and more organized, and every year I break it."

"Then let me help you straighten up," I said. "Please dear god."

She agreed, though I've yet to get an invitation back.

The bell above the door jingles, and I call out from the stock room. "Be right out!"

I set aside the box of coffee filters and smooth down my Magic Coffee apron before heading out to the front.

When I see who's at the counter, the air freezes in my throat.

Bran Duval.

Black sheep of the Duval vampire family.

And also my neighbor.

Blood floods my face when he turns his heavy gaze on me. He's caught me peeping in his windows more than once. I can't help it if my second-story bedroom window looks in on his bedroom window. And he never shuts his blinds.

I saw him naked just last night and part of me wonders if he lingered in the square of his window just to give me a show.

He drives me mad.

I've had more than one hate-sex dream about him.

In fact, I'm having one right now.

Crap.

Gelatin cake.

Gelatin cake.

You don't grow up in a town of supernaturals without learning the lesson of guarding your scent, especially when you're feeling horny.

My best friend Sam and I decided early on that in order to stop lusting after the supernaturals, we'd think of gelatin cake. The old-fashioned kind, shaped like a loaf with the gross meat pieces suspended inside.

I get sick to my stomach just thinking about it. And as soon as I have that image firmly burned in my mind, I feel my body unwind and settle.

I can totally do this.

Be cool. Be cool.

"Hey," I say as I come behind the counter.

Bran's black hair is messy and wet like he just got out of the shower. He's wearing his usual: black t-shirt and jeans, black boots. Everything about Bran is dark and a little dangerous. Even in a town of supernaturals, he's not the type you'd want to bring home to Mom.

"That boy is trouble," my sister said when she watched him move in next door. "If I had a choice and the means, we'd be moving right now."

"Did you call him a boy?" I'd said. "He's several hundred years old."

"Well, he looks like a boy, so that's what I'm calling him. It makes me feel better."

Bran was turned into a vampire when he was twenty-ish years old. He may be one of the oldest in town, but he's one of the youngest in appearance. It somehow makes him more menacing. Like a wolf in sheep's clothing.

"I think this is the first time I've ever seen you in here," I say to him, now trying to act casual when I am freaking the fuck out. "I never took you for a coffee connoisseur."

"And I never took you for a peeping Tom, and yet here we are."

Fucking hell.

Shame flares in my face, and I'm sure it's making my freckles stand out even more. With my pale Irish skin, it makes it impossible to hide my embarrassment.

Bran stares at me, blank-faced. Vampires, on the other hand, have always been very, very good at hiding their emotions.

I lick my lips and decide to ignore that accusation since it's technically true. "What can I get for you?"

"Care to tap a vein?" he asks.

Now I'm starting to sweat. I need to get him out of here.

I smile tightly at him. “We’re not allowed to tap a vein in a witch-owned property. But you know that.”

He smiles back, but it’s the coldest smile I’ve ever seen. “I suppose I did.”

“Now, coffee. What can I get started for you?”

“I didn’t come here for coffee.”

I take a step back. I’m not exactly sure what he’s jiving toward, but better to be prepared than sorry. There hasn’t been a nonconsensual vampire attack in over a hundred years, but if someone broke that law, I’m pretty sure it would be Bran.

He’s not only arrogant and rebellious, but insufferably difficult. I mean, he lives in suburbia next door to me when he could live in the Duval Mansion outside of town. I don’t know why he moved out of the mansion, but rumor has it that he got into a big argument with his older brother and got kicked out.

“What did you come for then?” I ask carefully.

His bright amber eyes seem to glow in the dim lighting as he says, “I came to warn you, little mouse.”

TWO

I DON'T LIKE THAT BRAN DUVAL, SECOND IN LINE IN THE DUVAL VAMPIRE House, is insinuating that I'm a rodent, but that's not the most shocking part of that sentence, so I let it go.

"Warn me about what?" I ask.

"Your Pledging," he says. "I thought you might want to know that the Duval House plans to put a bid on you."

"They what?!"

He *tsks* like he's annoyed with my reaction, as if it's an *overreaction*.

IT'S NOT.

Most families have been established so long, the Pledge is more of a formality than anything. If I actually planned to stay in Midnight, everyone would expect me to pledge myself to Locke House as a blood donor, since that's who my family has been with for nearly two hundred years.

Never in my wildest dreams would I have expected a rival vampire family to bid for me.

"Why would they do that?" I ask. "That doesn't make any sense."

"I agree. I told my brother he was out of his fucking mind."

I snort. "You don't have to be an ass."

"I know a difficult blood bag when I see one."

My eyes widen. "Excuse me? You don't even know me!"

He taps at his ear. "Vampire hearing, remember? I've been listening to you whine and complain for months."

By the time this night is over, I think I will have filled my embarrassment quota for a lifetime. And I might also be wanted for staking

a vampire.

“You’ve been *listening* to me?”

“It’s not as if I enjoy it.”

My mind flips through all of the possible things he’s heard me say and do. So many embarrassing and—

Oh god.

Has he heard me getting myself off?

I am so ready to leave Midnight Harbor. I hate this place. I hate supernaturals!

“I need you to leave,” I say. “Before I call the Guard.”

“Now why would you do that?” he challenges.

I grab a bamboo straw from the canister on the counter and brandish it like a knife. “Because I’m about to murder a vampire.”

His eyes flare bright gold. In a flash, he’s disappeared from my line of sight.

I stumble back, because I know what it means when a vampire disappears. They’re using their supernatural speed, and who the hell knows where they’ll pop back up.

As I reach for one of the knives in the block on the counter, Bran slams into me, his hand around my throat. The air rushes out of me.

I stab blindly, first with the knife, because let’s be honest, I don’t want to kill him. I’m not the killing type.

The knife lands with a sickening *shwump* in his chest. He looks down at the hilt protruding from his flesh as I let out a little yip of shock.

The air takes on the tangy scent of his blood.

He breathes fast through his nose as his eyes turn molten.

The first lesson my mother taught me as a child of Midnight Harbor was that when a vampire’s eyes change color or glow, don’t run, *walk* away. Slowly, carefully. It was one of those lessons passed down from mother to daughter from a time when the lessons were hard won.

I haven’t had to worry about tangling with a pissed off, hungry vampire.

They’ve all minded their manners.

Until now.

Bran pulls the blade out of his chest and, with a quick flick of his wrist, lodges the blade in the hardwood floor. I wind back with the bamboo straw,

ready to strike again, but Bran catches me before I can get close. He yanks the straw from my grasp and snaps it in two with one hand.

Teeth gritted, he forces me back against the wall and presses into me.

“I don’t want to fight you,” he says. His breath fans down my neck. A new kind of thrill races across my shoulders.

I’m suddenly so turned on, I want to melt into a puddle and disappear through the floor boards. Never in my life has my body ever been such a fucking traitor.

Bran scents the air, and his eyes flash again. His mouth comes to my ear, and he whispers, “Naughty girl.”

I buck beneath him. He pushes more of his weight into me and laughs, low and beneath his breath.

“Get off me,” I say and throw a punch at him. He catches my fist. Before I can comprehend what he’s doing, he has both my hands trapped above my head. My back arches automatically; my chest pushes out, and the V-neck of my t-shirt pops open. Bran’s eyes sink to my cleavage.

“There are rules,” I say through clenched teeth.

He inhales. “And?”

“And if you don’t follow them—”

“If I don’t follow them,” he says, “there’s no one to stop me.”

“Rita would gut you.”

He pulls back and laughs. “Rita won’t stand against a Duval, and certainly not me.”

Though it’s been a while since I kept up on town gossip and the shifting alliances, I think Bran might have a good point. I’m just a mortal, not even a bound one yet. I wouldn’t be worth starting a war with the vampires.

And though I don’t exactly know what drove Bran out of Duval House, I do know that no one messes with him. He’s the kind of vampire that parts a crowd.

“Fine. Go on then,” I challenge. “Bite me. Let’s get this over with. I have shit to do.”

He laughs again, lets me go, and disappears from sight.

I hear the bell clang before I catch sight of him again. He stops in the open doorway.

I pick up a piece of the bamboo straw. With its uneven break, it’s even more of a weapon now. And I’m not pulling my punches.

Bran says, “One more thing you should know.”

I make a stabbing motion with the straw. “Oh yeah?”

“It was your sister that encouraged the Duval bid.”

I suck in a sharp breath, and by the time I exhale again, Bran is gone.

THREE

WHEN I GET HOME AFTER CLOSING THE COFFEE SHOP, I FIND MY SISTER ON the couch, watching *Real Housewives*, a glass of wine in hand.

Though every donor family receives a stipend from their vampires, Kelly works full-time at the city clerk office. I don't exactly know what she does, but it often leads to her downing a bottle of wine every night.

There's already an empty bottle on the kitchen counter.

"Hey," I call.

"Hey. How was work?"

I look at Bran's house through the kitchen window. I think his house is a mirror of ours. His kitchen looks at our kitchen, which would mean his dining room was opposite ours, and his living room is in the front of the house.

There's a light on in the dining room, but I don't catch any movement.

Maybe he's watching me from the shadows and will use this against me in the future.

I turn away.

I will be extremely happy when I move from this place.

"The shop was slow tonight," I answer Kelly and plop down on the other side of the couch.

"Mmmmm," she says as she sips at her wine, her attention more on the TV than on me.

"I have a question for you," I say.

One of the women on the TV shouts at another. Kelly waves at me and says, "Hold on just a sec."

On the show, more women join in until the whole room is screaming at one another.

While I cleaned up the coffee shop, my mind wandered over the possible reasons my sister could have to encourage Duval House to bid on me over the Locke House.

Maybe the Lockes haven't been treating her well? After our parents died, Kelly and I would have dinner with Julian Locke at least twice a month. I thought he was going to ask Kelly to be his blood mate, but his visits stopped all of a sudden.

I just assumed she'd turned him down.

The Duvals have more money than the Lockes, so maybe my sister just wants to think of my future?

Or maybe there's a reason that I'm not even thinking of.

"Kels," I try again.

"Can this wait? You know this is my favorite show."

If I wait another hour to talk to her, she's going to be drunk and passed out. I have to catch her after work and before wine.

With a sigh, I stand up. "Sure."

"Thanks, Jess," she says before taking another sip. She's drinking red tonight, which usually means she had a really, *really* shitty day.

There's another reason Kelly might encourage a Duval bid—maybe she wants to get rid of me.

Humans pledged to different vampire Houses can't live together. When a vampire drinks from you, their scent is all over you. Humans co-habiting share scents, too. Vampires, much like the shifters, are a territorial lot.

Kelly did take on a lot of responsibility after our mom died. Kelly was only twenty-six at the time. I was seventeen. She sold her condo on the river and moved back home so I didn't have to disrupt my life.

I was so deep in the grief that I never did thank her for it.

And maybe now she's ready to move on from the responsibility.

"Kel?" I say.

"Hmmm?"

"Love you."

She finally looks over at me and smiles. "Love you too, you nerd. Now go."

I grab my bag from the counter and disappear upstairs. In my room, I collapse on my bed and check my phone to find a text from my best friend, Samantha.

Party at the Harbor tomorrow night, the text reads. You game?

I call her because I have so much to tell her, and it's too much to type.

"Say yes," Sam says by way of a greeting.

"The party? Sure I guess."

"Yay."

"So, I have a super weird story."

"Oh do tell."

I roll over on my belly and hold myself up on my elbows. I can just see a sliver of Bran's bedroom window. The room is dark. He can probably hear me talking, but I don't care.

I relay the coffeeshop story to Sam.

Being my best friend, she responds accordingly with, "What. The. Fuck."

"I know. You think Bran's lying?"

I can just picture him hearing this and rolling his eyes in a very smarmy vampire way.

"As much as I want to say yes, why would he? Has he ever even talked to you before?"

"You know how to make a girl feel so damn cool."

Oh shit, shouldn't have said that. Now Bran's gonna think that I've been wanting him to talk to me and that him talking to me somehow makes me feel better about myself.

Or maybe I'm reading way too much into Bran and his feelings, or lack thereof.

Sam munches on something on the other end. "I'm just saying, why would he come to the coffee shop of all places to tell you something completely out of left field?"

"Maybe he's just trying to get beneath my skin? I think I annoy him."

"Did you ask Kelly?"

"Not yet. I tried. She shooed me away."

"Oh yeah. Real Housewives night."

I stretch just a little when I see a light flick on in Bran's bedroom. I'm half hanging off the bed at this point. I catch sight of him in the window

frame, and then he's gone again. My heart skitters in my chest.

"So why don't you go next door and ask him?"

Bran comes back into view of my window and looks across the valley between our houses. I let out a yelp, and in my haste to duck out of sight, I end up falling off the bed and landing with a thud on the floor.

"I can't do that," I say to Sam, my face mashed into the rug.

"Yes you can."

I didn't tell her he attacked me at the coffee shop. Technically, it was in response to me threatening to murder him, but those are minor details.

"Just go knock on his front door and ask him what he knows," Sam says like Bran is any old neighbor and my request is for a cup of sugar and not secret details about his family asking for my blood pact.

"Just don't go inside the house. Stay on the front porch. There's no telling what someone like Bran Duval would do to a poor innocent virgin like yourself."

"Sam!"

He probably heard that. Not that I necessarily care if he knows I'm a virgin. In a town like this, it's practically stamped on our driver's license.

"Go over there," she coaxes. "Then tell me what he says. This is kind of a big deal. When's the last time a rival vamp family bid for someone's expected blood bag?"

"A long time."

"Exactly. And if he came to warn you, I'd think that meant he cared to some degree."

I sit up. "I highly doubt that."

"Go on. Go."

"Okay fine. I'm going."

"Atta girl."

We say goodbye, and I slip my phone into the back pocket of my jeans. If Bran attacks me again, I want a lifeline.

When I go back downstairs, my sister is still fully invested in her TV show and barely notices me leave through the back door. I make my way around the house and go up the few steps to Bran's wide front porch. The sun has already set, and the street lights glow golden along the curb, but Bran's porch is dark.

I reach out and knock on his door.

Immediately, my heart rams into my throat.

What the hell am I doing?

Did he not just have me around the throat in the coffee shop?

I'll just stay on the front porch like Sam suggested. I'll keep my distance.

When Bran doesn't answer, I sigh and turn away—

And nearly run right into him.

FOUR

I YELP AND LURCH BACK LIKE THE SCARED HUMAN I AM.

Bran is leaning against one of the porch columns, arms crossed over his chest.

“What the hell!” I yell and clutch at my chest. “I think I’m having a heart attack.”

“You’re not having a heart attack.”

“How would you know?”

“I can hear your heart. It’s fine. Now what do you want?”

After I catch my breath, I level my shoulders and say, “Don’t pretend like you weren’t just listening to my phone conversation.”

“Contrary to what you might think, little mouse, my world does not revolve around you.”

I huff. “Okay. Well...you must know why your brother would agree to bid on me, and I’d like to know what you know.”

“I must, mustn’t I?”

“Don’t do that. Don’t be all vampire-y. Just tell me.”

He pushes away from the porch column. I step back.

At his front door, hand on the doorknob, he says, “Come inside, and I’ll tell you.”

Oh, he was definitely listening to my phone conversation.

“I’m not doing that,” I answer.

“Why, little mouse?” His voice lowers an octave, and his eyes flare briefly. “Are you afraid?”

“I’m not a mouse,” I say through clenched teeth. “And no, I’m not afraid.”

He pushes the door in and disappears into the shadows. “Then what are you waiting for?”

The door hangs open. I peer inside, trying to gauge the level of shit I’d be stepping into if I walked over the threshold.

I was right, his house does seem to be a mirror of ours. I can just make out the outline of a sectional couch in the living room and a coffee table in front of it. There’s a table in the dining room and beyond that, the kitchen. There’s still only the one light on in the dining room.

Now that I’m standing at his front door, I’m starting to doubt my actual reasons for being here. I think it might have less to do with my upcoming birthday and Duval House and more to do with my fascination with Bran.

But I’m never going to tell him that.

Or anyone.

I step inside.

The door shuts behind me, and I find Bran standing behind it, his eyes glowing in the darkness.

“You’re a liar,” he says.

“No, I’m not. About what?”

“About being afraid.”

Goosebumps lift on my arms. The hair rises on the back of my neck. All of my mom’s old warnings run through my head. And some of Sam’s too.

Don’t go inside, she said.

So what do I do?

I’ve always been a glutton for punishment. And the truth is, I really wanted to see inside the house of the infamous Bran Duval. It doesn’t look like a murder den, so that’s definitely good.

There are framed black and white pictures on the angled wall beneath the staircase. The images are grainy like they were taken with a very old camera. Beneath the framed art is a skinny hall table with a stack of history books on top.

Despite the murky lighting, I can tell the house is extremely clean and clutter-free.

I immediately like it.

Kelly has always been a hard worker, but when it comes to our house, she's thrown all effort out the window. I know she's busy and tries to provide for us, but sometimes the clutter drives me bananas.

"So little mouse," Bran says as he walks around me to the kitchen, "what is it you want to know?" He flicks on a hanging light over the kitchen island. There are no dishes on his counter, no stacked coffee cups in the sink. There's a top-of-the-line espresso maker on the counter, but it looks untouched. Which is in stark contrast to the many liquor decanters on the old cabinet between the kitchen and dining room.

Some of the decanters are half empty, some full.

"You said my sister encouraged the Duval bid. How do you know?"

He goes to the cabinet and pulls out the cut crystal top from one of the decanters. The cork makes a loud *fwop*.

Bran fills a tumbler and takes a long swig. "She met my brother two nights ago," he says. "You want a drink?"

"Sure. You got any whiskey?"

Bran fills a second glass. I take it when he offers it and swallow back a gulp. When the alcohol burns down my throat and settles some of my nerves, I feel infinitely better.

"Your sister met with Damien," Bran goes on, "and told him that if he bid for you next week, she'd give him something he's been wanting for a very long time."

"And what's that?"

"I don't know." He slings back the rest of his liquor and sets the glass down.

"You don't have any idea at all?"

Bran just stares at me, face blank.

I narrow my eyes. "You *do* know."

"I have my suspicions."

"So tell me."

"That's not my business to tell, little mouse."

"Stop calling me that."

He smirks.

I knock back the rest of my drink too and put the glass in the sink. I might like his exceptionally clean house, but dirtying it up gives me a smug thrill.

“Thanks for nothing then,” I say.

“You could just turn it down,” he says.

I stop just out of the reach of the kitchen light, but with his vampire sight, I know he can probably see every hair on my head. “I’m leaving Midnight Harbor the first chance I get, so I’m not accepting any bid.”

This is the first time I’ve admitted this to anyone, and it shocks me that it’s Bran I’m telling.

I’ve made comments in passing to Sam, that someday I might want to move away, but I’ve never outright told her I’m doing it and probably soon.

She’ll be crushed, but I have to do what’s right for me, and I don’t fit in Midnight Harbor. I’ve always felt that way.

Bran comes forward. He’s still wearing the black t-shirt I stabbed him in, so there’s a fresh hole in the chest. I’m proud of that hole. “Fleeing the nest, are you?”

I nod. “Just think, you won’t have to listen to my whining and complaining anymore.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

“Well okay then.” I start for the door, silently cursing myself for listening to Sam. I didn’t exactly get anywhere with Bran.

Just as I reach out for the doorknob, Bran appears in front of me. All of the amusement is gone from his face. He’s serious and distant again. I’m not sure which Bran I like more. Or hate less.

“Ask your sister about the day you were born,” he says. “That might be a good place to start.” Then he opens the door and shoves me out. I stumble into the twilight and then hurry down the steps.

As I cross back into my yard, Bran calls out, “Hey little mouse?”

I stop and look back.

He’s leaning against the open door as he says, “You don’t want to know what I’d do to poor innocent virgins like you.”

My mouth drops open. “How dare you—”

He slams the door shut, leaving me standing there between our houses, fuming and suddenly throbbing between my legs.

Because the truth is, I do want to know.

FIVE

“HERE YOU GO, SUGAR,” RITA SAYS TO ME AND HANDS ME TWO BLENDED coffees. Whenever I come to Magic Coffee Shop outside of my work schedule, I always insist on making my own drinks, and Rita always insists that I not.

I throw a five-dollar bill in the tip jar, and Rita plucks it out and crams it in my hand. “You keep your money. I know you have dreams.” She winks at me and busies herself with the steamer.

Knowing it’s pointless to fight a witch, I pocket the money. “Thanks, Rita. I’ll see you later.”

I join Sam outside on the sidewalk. It’s just a little after ten in the morning, so Sam has been up for about ten minutes, tops. I couldn’t sleep last night and rolled out of bed, exhausted and frustrated at eight a.m.

Sam takes the frozen coffee from my hand. “The suspense is killing me. You have to tell me about last night. You never called me back.”

We walk west down River Street. Since only the oldest vampires can walk in the daylight, and even then, only early morning and late afternoon, and the shifters have a shopping center in their territory, Sam and I pass mostly witches and humans as we head toward River Street Bridge.

Finally, I can talk without having to worry about extraordinary hearing.

I fill Sam in on the very little info Bran gave me.

“So he said to ask Kelly about the day you were born?” Sam says as she fishes out a heaping scoop of whipped cream from her drink with her straw. “And did you ask Kelly about your birthday?”

We stop at an intersection as traffic rolls through beneath a green light.

“Not yet. She was up early and off to work before I had the chance.”

“Has she said anything to you about the Pledge coming up?”

I shake my head. “She hasn’t even asked me about the party afterward. And you know how much—”

“—Kelly loves planning a party.”

“Exactly.”

When the light switches, we cross. Already the patio at Silver Garden is full of brunchers, and the din of conversation rises over the faint rushing of the river down below the street.

A few witches we know call out hello as we pass the restaurant’s back deck.

Since the bridge will take us to the shifter side of town, Sam and I take the stone steps down to the river walk and follow it north.

A jogger runs past, her ponytail swinging behind her. Up ahead, a mother wipes the face of a toddler while a baby wails in a stroller. When the wind shifts, I catch the faint sugary scent of their fae magic.

I set my drink down on a nearby bench and approach the stroller. There’s an adorable little girl nestled in a thin blanket with two pointy ears sticking out around a bowed headband. Her face is red from crying so hard.

“Hey little one,” I say. “It’s okay.”

The mom exhales. “I knew getting ice cream so early was a mistake,” she says as she tries to wipe a glob of chocolate from the toddler’s face.

“I can try to settle her while you finish up with the little guy,” I say.

“Oh you would be a life saver, thank you.”

I unclip the stroller straps and hoist the baby out. As soon as she’s upright and blinking in the sunshine, she settles, fat tears streaming down her face. I bounce her on my hip and coo at her.

Sam hangs her elbows over the walkway railing and scrolls through her phone. She has six little brothers and sisters. She has more experience with children than most mothers, but she really, really dislikes children.

I used to babysit for a fae family a few years back and have some experience with the finicky fae babies. I heard that being born on the mortal side and being unable to travel back to their realm causes colic in a lot of little ones. The baby I watched wouldn’t ever let me put him down. He was permanently attached to my hip while I was there.

By the time the mom finishes cleaning up the toddler, the baby is smiling at me, tears dried up.

“You are amazing,” the mom says. “She’s been in a mood for days.”

“I think we all have been.” I boop the baby’s nose, and she giggles.

“Come on, Mommy!” the toddler shouts. “I wanna see the fish!”

“Thanks again.” I hand the baby back, and the mom settles her on her hip before pushing the stroller away.

“Ew, babies,” Sam says when we start walking again.

“What? She was adorable.”

Sam slides her phone back into her pocket. “I’m never having kids. That will be part of my Pledge requirement. If the Mulligan witches want me, they’ll have to give me a lifetime supply of witch birth control.”

I twirl my straw around my drink. If ever there was a time to tell Sam I plan on moving, it would be now.

I think I want kids someday. Maybe? I don’t know, honestly. I’ve always craved something else other than being a blood bag, but I guess I never really sat down to figure out what that was.

If I told Sam that I want to leave Midnight for something normal, I know she’d remind me of her older sister who tried to leave and go to college and eventually found her way back home. She’s now married to a witch.

Knowing that Sam will just try to talk me out of it, I decide to hold on to the secret a while longer.

I’ll tell her eventually.

We hang out for the rest of the morning, walking down the river walk before heading to Whimsy Books at noon. Sam works there most afternoons. It certainly pays better than babysitting her siblings.

I say goodbye to her after my coffee is gone and head home. I had plans of cleaning my room, but now that I’m sitting on my bed, I can’t stop staring at Bran’s house.

It’s still mid-afternoon, so he’s probably sleeping. Bran uses blackout shades in his bedroom, but the rest of his windows are unprotected.

As I stare at the window, I can’t help but picture him in a king-sized bed, tangled in black silk sheets. He probably sleeps naked.

And thinking about Bran naked brings to mind the image of him standing in his window two nights ago completely bare.

Am I hoping for a repeat?

No.

This is my bedroom goddammit. And this is my comfy window seat. I lived here first. I can sit wherever I want.

Gods, I hate him.

I can't figure him out.

I want to know why he cares what happens to me, why he would go out of his way to warn me.

He left Duval House. Technically, leaving means he's a sovereign entity. He could start his own house if he wanted to. So even if I accepted a bid from Duval, Bran wouldn't have to see me. If I annoy him as much as he says, if I accepted a Duval bid, Bran would probably see me less than he does now because I'd have to move.

It doesn't make any sense. And it'd have helped if I'd actually paid attention in school when they taught us lowly mortals about the different Vampire Houses and the relationships between members.

There was a whole semester dedicated to it. I didn't pay attention because 1) I was already planning on leaving Midnight by then, and 2) even if I hadn't been, I'd be pledged to the Locke House.

The little I know about the Duvals is that Bran and his older brother Damien are Turned brothers, *and* blood brothers, born to the same parents. They were turned by Vincent Montenaro in the 1700s somewhere in Europe. They came to America at the turn of the century (the 19th to be more specific) and were original founders of Midnight Harbor.

I know that Damien is considered the charismatic brother, the nicer brother, though there have been whispers that he's just really good at hiding his darker side while Bran doesn't bother.

Of the five vampire families in Midnight, the Duvals are equally loved and hated. They wield a lot of power and money and influence. If you want something, whether you're human or witch or something else, you'll acquire that thing much easier if you have the support of the Duvals.

So why did Bran leave his house?

I really want to know now that he's warned me about the possible bid.

Did he leave because of something sinister?

I mean, I can't imagine what could possibly ruffle Bran's feathers enough to get him to abandon his house and his brother.

At a little after three in the afternoon, after I've sat in my window seat so long my butt has gone numb, Bran's blackout shade snaps upward. The movement catches my attention and without thinking about *why*, my gaze immediately goes to his window.

He stands in front of the glass, his arm propped on the window frame as he leans into it, just as casual as can be.

And yep, he's naked.

SIX

I CAN'T STOP STARING AT HIM. I CAN'T TEAR MY EYES AWAY.

Bran is ridiculously manscaped.

Well, not ridiculously.

Expertly.

Perfectly.

And what he has below that manscaping is—

It's at this moment that I realize I've been staring at his crotch for far too long, and I drag my eyes up to meet his.

There's a smile on his face that I can only label as *self-important*.

I scowl at him and though my window is shut, I yell, "You're doing that on purpose. Now who's the perv?"

He raises a dark brow, and his lips move in reply.

I think he says, "You were waiting for me."

So I say, "No, I wasn't."

Ahem, I think 'Yes, I was.'

I definitely was.

I look away for just a second, and when I look back, he's gone and I spend the rest of the afternoon avoiding my bedroom even though I really want to catch sight of him again.

I can't help but wonder what he's doing, what he's thinking. Why is he torturing me? He probably gets a rise out of making me blush.

And it infuriates me even more.

When Kelly comes home from work, she's got two bags of groceries in her arms. I take one and start unpacking it.

“I am so glad it’s the weekend,” Kelly says as she drops her bag on the counter. “This has been an extremely long week.”

I put away a block of cheese and a tub of yogurt in the fridge. “What happened?”

She slides onto one of the bar stools at the island and scrubs at her face. “The shifters are trying to slip out of paying their share of the summer taxes, and the witches have had it *up to here* with the vampires because one of the Rowan vamps stole one of the Mulligan virgins and debased her.”

I put the bread in the cupboard and the box of cheese crackers in the pantry as Kelly goes on.

“But let me tell you, that virgin was not going to stay a virgin much longer. I saw her flirting with the grocery store clerk a week ago. I’m surprised she didn’t jump his bones right there! I don’t get paid enough to deal with this.”

“What’s the shifters’ excuse for not paying taxes?” I ask not because I care but because I know Kelly needs to vent, and the quicker I let her do that, the quicker I can ask her about this Duval nonsense.

“They’re trying to say their land is smaller than the vampires’ land, so their share should be smaller, which I don’t exactly disagree with, but these things were agreed upon over a century ago. If they want to change it, they have to go about it the fair and legal way, instead of just *not* paying taxes. Don’t they understand that that money helps fund the schools?”

“Lots going on then,” I say.

She blows out a breath. “You have no idea.”

For the first time, I notice the heavy bags beneath Kelly’s eyes. She might be a disaster in organization and house chores, but she’s extremely particular about her facial care and spends an insane amount of money on it every month. She usually treats her eyes with patches at least twice a week.

With all of the groceries put away, I cross my arms over my chest and lean into the island. “So...my Pledge is coming up, and I was wondering...”

Kelly sighs again. “Right. I know.” She gets up and pulls the corkscrew from the drawer. “That snuck up on us, didn’t it?” She tears off the foil from the bottle of wine she bought and then turns the corkscrew into the cork.

“Yeah definitely snuck up on us.”

I don't know how to slide into this conversation without being obvious. Kelly instigated the Duval bid, though I'm only getting that from Bran. Sam had a good point—why would Bran come to me with something so outlandish if it wasn't true? But then again, who do I trust more? My sister or the annoyingly hot vampire next door?

Maybe I should just come right out and ask her.

“Speaking of birthdays,” I start.

Kelly yanks out the cork with a loud pop.

“What was it like for you when Mom brought me home?” I ask.

My dad died before I was even born, so I know everything surrounding my birth was chaotic and traumatic and a complete blur.

Kelly's back is to me, so I can't see her face, but the way she tenses up and goes still leads me to believe I've hit on something.

“Why do you ask?” she says carefully.

“I don't know. I was just thinking...like it must have been weird for you because you were older and you were used to being an only child and then this wailing baby comes home and disrupts everything.”

Kelly pulls a wine glass from the shelf. “I never thought that. You were cute and chubby, and you smelled like sugar and heather and thistle.” The wine glug-glugs into the glass. “I used to rock you to sleep sometimes because you would cry and cry some nights. When I'd finally get you to calm down, you'd suck your thumb in the most adorable way. Like the poster child for all babies in the world.”

I laugh. “You never told me that.”

She grabs the glass around the stem and turns to me, one arm folded over her middle. “I took the role of big sister seriously.”

“You definitely did. You even became my guardian after Mom died. Not every sister would do that.”

She nods. “We're a team. You and I. I wouldn't have left you to the wolves.”

In Midnight Harbor, that phrase is almost literal.

Kelly comes over and gives my shoulder a squeeze. Her dark brown hair is wound up into a perfect bun on top of her head. Several wispy strands hang around her thin face. The older she gets, the more she looks like our mother. She got Mom's nose and Mom's thin lips, and sometimes

when she wrinkles her nose at something annoying or disgusting, it's like déjà vu.

"About my Pledge," I start, "is there anything—"

Kelly's phone rings in her bag. She breaks away to dig for it. When she pulls it out and reads the screen, her mouth screws up in a grimace. "Shit."

"What is it?"

"Julian. He wants me to come to the house." She looks forlornly at her wine. "Goddammit." She puts the glass into the fridge and picks up her bag again. "I'll be back later, okay?"

"Sure."

She plants a quick kiss on my cheek before hurrying out the door, leaving me to stew longer in my unanswered questions.

Sam texts me a little after seven to remind me of the Harbor Party. *I'll swing by to pick you up in a little over an hour.*

Sounds good, I type back and then hurry into the shower.

Harbor parties are always a mixed bag, so I'm not planning to try too hard. As I flip through my closet, my phone rings. I don't recognize the number, but it's local. I slide to answer it and say distantly, "Hello?"

"Are you going to the Harbor party tonight?"

The voice is hoarse and sensuously rich, and the sound of it in my ear is like silk dragging over my skin.

My reflection in the mirror shivers.

"Why do you care?" I ask Bran and put the phone on speaker. If he keeps talking directly in my ear, I might spontaneously combust.

"My brother might be there," he says.

"So?"

"What will you wear?" he asks, dodging the question.

I come out of the bathroom and go to my bedroom window, phone in hand. I'm not surprised to find him at his bedroom window too. At least this time he's fully clothed in a black t-shirt and jeans. The shirt is loose around the collar, and even from across the space between our houses, I can tell the

material is thin. His dark hair is wet, and several chunks stick up at his forehead like he just raked his fingers through it.

Bran is the type of vampire that makes careless look sexy as hell, and it makes me angry.

I'm still in a bath towel, and when he sees me, his eyes ignite.

I know that look. I've been around enough vampires to know when one is hungry for a bite.

"Will you be there?" I ask.

He leans into the window frame. "Maybe," he says into the phone.

"Then you'll see what I'm wearing when I get there."

"Perhaps I want a sneak peek." He levels his gaze at me.

He's baiting me, and I think I'm about to bite.

I don't know why.

I'm not exactly sure what makes Bran so irritating and tempting at the same time.

"Fine." I turn away and disappear back into my bathroom and into my closet. Up until this point, I'd planned to wear jeans and a baggy sweatshirt, but if I put that on for Bran, he's going to—

I was about to say *be disappointed*.

Why the fuck do I care?

I shake my head and pull out the jeans and my tie-dye sweatshirt. After setting them out on the table, I open the drawer for a pair of panties and hear Bran tsk-tsk through the phone.

"What?" I ask.

"No panties."

"Hey! How the—"

He knows the sound of my panty drawer opening?

I stand frozen in the middle of my closet, my core clenched tight. I'm suddenly flush all over and so fucking turned on, I want to scream at him.

No panties.

No panties?!

The thought makes me wet.

I'm tingling between my legs like a live wire has been jacked into me.

Shit.

Murdering Bran is looking more and more likely.

Except...a little part of me wants to do as Bran says if only to show him how much I don't care. The no panties thing feels like a dare, and I'm not about to chicken out.

SEVEN

I DECIDE AGAINST THE JEANS AND PULL OUT A SHORT BLACK BODYCON SKIRT and an oversized vintage white tee. I put the clothes on and tuck the shirt into the skirt.

Back at my bedroom window, hand curled around my hip, I raise a brow and say to the phone, “Well?”

Bran’s eyes flash again, and my chest flutters with butterflies. He says nothing, and I get the question in his gaze.

I turn sideways so as not to give him a show and lift the hem of my skirt, baring my thigh all the way up to my hip.

“Good girl,” he says. “Behave yourself tonight.”

“I don’t plan on it,” I say back.

He smirks at me and ends the call. We stare at each other across the expanse between our houses.

It’s at this moment I realize he told me Damien would be at the party. Is Bran warning me again? Should I be worried?

I’ll be with Sam, and Harbor parties are notoriously packed. And I’ll be wearing the protection rune Mom gave me before I was old enough to know what it was.

It hasn’t failed me yet.

I turn away from the window, but I can feel Bran’s eyes on me until I disappear inside the bathroom again.

Once I’m safely out of sight, I press into the wall and suck in a deep breath. A voice in the back of my mind says I shouldn’t be playing these games with a vampire like Bran Duval.

But I can't seem to help myself.

I never understood the adrenaline junkies I've seen on TV. Jump out of an airplane? No, thank you. Careen down a steep mountainside on nothing but two skis? Nope.

Tempt a vampire?

The rush is downright intoxicating.

Downstairs, I pour a glass of Kelly's wine while I wait for Sam. My glass is empty by the time she shows up. As usual, she's ten minutes late. We drive downtown, and Sam parks on a side street since all the good spots are taken.

By the time we walk down the slope to the water, the party is already well underway.

The Harbor sits at the end of the river where the freshwater meets the salty ocean. The building was built in 1901 and was originally the Guards' water rescue station. They rebuilt on the north side of the river about ten years ago, so the original building was converted into a community space.

Mostly, it's for weekend parties and Pledges now.

It's a two-story building, clad in white cedar shake shingles. The window casings are painted hunter green, with the hardware and gutters painted black.

The front entrance is a thick, arched door.

Music wends out the open windows, and voices carry from the deck on the water.

Sam and I go in the front, and I tug down the hem of my skirt as some of the witches call out hello.

"Why do you keep fidgeting with your skirt?" Sam asks me as the witches come over.

I am, in no way, going to tell her I'm going commando because Bran Duval told me to. Just thinking about that confession brings heat to my face.

"It's itchy," I say instead. "I think Kelly forgot to use fabric softener."

Bianca is the first witch to reach us and air kisses our cheeks. "Evening, dolls," she says.

For most of my life, I've wanted to hate Bianca Mulligan. She's tall, thin, blonde, rich, and extremely powerful. Everything about her screams mean girl, but while she knows she wields power and influence, she's never acted like it matters to her.

She's always been kind to me and to all the humans in Midnight. There's just something about her that radiates warmth and charisma.

Bianca hooks her arm in mine. She towers over me by several inches despite the fact that she's wearing flat heeled boots and I'm wearing chunky sneakers. "Jessie," she says as she steers me to the bar. "Are you getting nervous yet for your Pledging?"

When we come up to the bar, the bartender is immediately at our call. That's what hanging with Bianca will get you. "Jack and Coke," Bianca says.

"Whiskey sour," I say.

The bartender gets to work, and Bianca turns her attention to me.

This is the other thing I love about her. Though people are always vying for her attention, when Bianca is engaged in a conversation with someone, her focus is solely on that person. She knows how to make someone feel valued and important.

I've always wondered if that's something she was taught or if it just comes naturally. I think in the long run, giving someone her full attention wins her more than her looks.

Except right now I want to squirm beneath her big green eyes.

When will I tell people I plan on leaving? I don't know when the right time is.

I should probably say something before my Pledging. It's scheduled for Tuesday night, the night of my birthday. But every time I think about telling someone, it makes my heart race and my hands clammy.

Everyone except for Bran, apparently. Somehow telling him a secret no one else knows feels like a token of intimacy.

"I'll pledge to the Locke family," I say. "Nothing really to be nervous about."

"Hmm," Bianca says as she rests an elbow on the bar top. "Is that what you want?"

"I don't know. It's what's expected."

She cants her head and frowns at me. "But not what you want."

It isn't a question, but I still don't know how to answer her.

I'm saved by Sam. "What did you order?" she asks when she sidles up.

"Whiskey sour."

“Caleb!” she calls to the bartender. “Can you add one more whiskey sour?”

“You got it,” he calls back.

The rest of the witches join us. There’s Gwen, Rita’s niece, and Lannie Lo.

Lannie nods at my bottom half. “I love the skirt.”

This reminds me that there’s nothing beneath that skirt, and my throat thickens around a reply. There’s a little part of me that feels...well, *improper* for going without panties, and I think that’s exactly what Bran intended.

Without thinking about it, I scan the crowd for him.

The sun has already set below the tree horizon, so the younger vampires have joined the party. Usually, you can tell when a Duval vampire is afoot because they’ll be surrounded by people who hang on their every word.

Those people are usually humans, and we call them the Besotted.

Not every human family in Midnight is Pledged to the super elite, but there are a lot who wished they were. There’s the power that comes with favor, and the money.

“Who are you looking for?” Sam asks as the bartender sets our drinks on the bar top.

“Oh, no one.” I grab my whiskey and drink it back. The alcohol burns down my throat and hits my bloodstream. I was already feeling a little warm with the wine, and now I’m downright fuzzy.

“Come on,” Bianca says and coaxes us out to the back deck.

Beneath the pergola, mixed groups have already claimed several tables beneath the twinkling string lights suspended from the rafters. Along the water, there are three separate sitting areas, the chairs situated around raised fire pits.

Fire crackles in all three pits, and we go to the gathering space on the far left.

“Bianca!” everyone calls out.

There are a few shifters—wolves, to be more specific—and two humans. One of them is a virgin. Tessa, I think her name is.

Sam and I go to the railing and lean against it. We’re quickly swept up into a debate about whether or not a virgin should be paid more for her blood the older she gets.

“Like a vintage wine,” Tessa says. “If I’m going to be a virgin for the rest of my life, I should get paid for my sexual frustration.”

Everyone laughs. My glass is nearly empty, and the alcohol is definitely going to my head. Everything is funny, especially this.

“I can’t imagine being a virgin forever,” I say.

Evan hangs back over his chair, and I can feel his eyes drinking me in. “That would be a travesty, Jess. A damn travesty.”

I warm beneath his gaze, and he scents the air, catching my faint interest.

Evan hasn’t taken a mate yet, and I gotta say, he’s looking sexy as hell in his navy-blue tank. I know he’s wearing that particular outfit so he can show off the heavy lifting he’s been doing, but I don’t care. His hard work is paying off.

As the night goes on, and the drinks keep flowing, and the twilight glows brighter, I find myself drifting toward Evan. Soon I’m sitting on his lap, my arm draped casually over his shoulders, his arms wrapped around me. His hand is on my bare leg, and I’m distantly aware that there’s not much material between his fingers and my core.

If he just inched up his hand...

He inhales again, and his gaze turns heavy. “Jess,” he purrs and readjusts us. I can feel him growing hard beneath me.

“Yes?” I say back as my drink sloshes over the rim of the glass and wets my t-shirt. Evan laughs. I laugh. “Dammit! That was gonna be a good sip.”

“I’ll get you another soon.” He pushes a lock of my hair behind my ear. “How come we’ve never hooked up?” he asks.

Voices rise in the distance, but I’ve got more important things to pay attention to.

“Because you’re a wolf,” I say.

“So?”

“So...my mom warned me about wolves.”

He laughs, his eyes catching a glint of the string lights. “I’m sure she didn’t mean *me*.”

“Oh no?”

“No.” He leans in, his hand cupping the side of my face. I go in to meet his mouth when a strong arm wraps around my waist and hauls me back.

I’m just about to fight the person when his scent fills my nose.

Amber and musk and something deeper.

By now, I know who that scent belongs to, and my body, being the traitor that it is, knows too.

Bran Duval.

EIGHT

“LET ME GO.” I TRY TO WIGGLE OUT OF BRAN’S GRIP, BUT HE HAS MY BACK crushed against his chest, his arm still locked around my waist. It’s like fighting the wind—pointless.

Evan lurches to his feet. “The fuck, Duval?”

“The little mouse has had enough for one night,” Bran says. “She’s leaving.”

“Quit calling me that! And I am *not* leaving.”

I was just starting to have fun.

“You don’t control her,” Evan argues. “She isn’t even from a Duval family, for Christ’s sake.”

“And she’s not wolf bait either,” Bran says.

“And *she* is standing right here,” I say.

Bianca appears in my line of sight, but her gaze is firmly on Bran. I think they might be close to the same height, so being stuck between them, I really do feel like a mouse.

“Bran,” Bianca says. “What are you doing?” Her voice is level. There’s no snark, no accusatory bend to her question. It’s just a question. And the way she delivers it begs it to be answered.

“Yeah,” I say. “What are you doing?” As if she needs my drunken help.

Bran pushes me behind him, but he keeps one hand wrapped around my wrist. He takes a step toward Bianca, proving that he does have a few inches on her. She folds her arms over her chest.

Get him, Bianca! Curse him!

But then she frowns and steps back, and I realize that here, Bran is the oldest by several centuries. He out ranks us all. Even in Midnight, where different factions operate by their own code, Bran is clearly at the top of the unspoken hierarchy.

No one messes with Bran Duval.

I know that.

I've always known that.

Sam steps forward. She's been downing drinks just as quickly as I have, so she's got the courage of alcohol and the fierceness of a best friend at her back. "I would like it very much if you got your hands off my best friend." Sam sways as she delivers this request.

"Who here is sober?" Bran asks the crowd.

Adam, the other wolf, raises his hand.

"Take that one home," Bran says when he points a finger at Sam.

Adam nods and hurries to Sam's side.

"Jess?" Sam says.

I scowl up at Bran. He looks down at me, and I catch a glint of fangs.

"I'll be okay," I tell Sam. "I brought my backup stake."

Bran snorts.

"You sure?" Sam's expression hardens. "I could call the Guard."

Bran rolls his eyes.

"I'm sure."

Adam puts his hand gently at Sam's lower back and motions her toward the parking lot.

Bran tucks me in beneath his arm, his hand on my hip, and using his vampire speed, tears us away from the Harbor.

The first time I was introduced to vampire speed, I was five.

Julian Locke and several other Locke vampires came over for a BBQ. One of the female Lockes, Sasha, threw me onto her back, told me to hold on tight, and carried me away into the night.

It was like riding a roller coaster. That was what I told my mom later when Sasha deposited me, starry-eyed and breathless, by the bonfire.

“She was so fast!” I shouted and everyone laughed.

Being carried off by Bran is nothing like that.

It’s like being caught in a tornado.

His speed is ten times faster than Sasha’s.

And when he stops and rights me in the middle of Midnight Cemetery, it takes the world about another full minute to catch up to me.

Bran puts his hands on my shoulders, keeping me upright.

When I finally have my bearings, I curl my hand into a fist and punch Bran.

Except I’m a human, and he’s a vampire, and he catches my punch easily.

“No,” he says. That’s it. Just *no*.

I fight to get my hand back, but he won’t let me go, and worse, he doesn’t budge an inch as I flail in his grip.

“Why are...you—” I yank harder “—being such...an...asshole?!”

He lets me go abruptly, and I stumble back.

He turns away and stalks toward the cemetery fountain. I can hear the water splashing into the pool, but it’s too dark to make out the bronzed shape of the intertwined lovers at the fountain’s center.

“Running with the dogs?” Bran says to the darkness. “Beneath you, little mouse.”

I let out a growl of frustration and charge at him and leap on his back.

He deftly swings me around, and in a blink, he has me pressed against the trunk of an old oak tree.

The air leaves my lungs in a useless gasp.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, mouse.”

“Stop fucking calling me that.”

His eyes flash in the darkness, and the prey in me shrinks beneath his stare. My skin erupts in goosebumps.

“This is your fault, you know,” I say, and as the words come out, I know I’ve just set my own trap.

Bran laughs, low and beneath his breath. “My fault? How so?”

“You told me not to wear panties, so by the time I got to the Harbor, I was horny as hell.”

What I don’t say is that I thought he was going to come to the party for me, but I think he knows that.

His gaze levels, dangerous and dark. “So you threw yourself to the wolves?”

“He was willing.”

I lick my lips, and Bran watches my tongue dart out. I feel him grow hard against my thigh, and that burns away the last of the alcohol in my bloodstream. It yanks me back into reality.

He’s hard.

Because of me.

A thrill builds in my belly.

Bran’s hand comes to my face. His fingertips press hard at my jaw, but his thumb is gentle as he wipes the wetness from my lips.

“And now?” he asks. “Are you horny now?”

“Nope.”

He leans in and puts his mouth at my ear. “Liar.”

With no fabric to shield me, my wetness is coating my inner thighs. I knew he’d know that, but I like watching how he reacts to my defiance.

“Why did you bait me anyway? Tell me to go commando?” I squirm beneath his weight, but he just presses closer. “Was this your plan all along? Get me riled up and see what I’d do about it? Then show up at the Harbor at the last minute just to humiliate me?”

He laughs. “No. I did it to test your obedience.”

My eyes widen, and I grit my teeth and start swinging, but he dodges me easily and then catches both wrists, pinning them above my head.

I don’t know how I keep ending up in this position with him, but I both like and hate it.

Bran drops his free hand down to the hem of my skirt, fingers trailing along the press of my thighs.

A thrill races up to my core.

“If you want my help mouse,” he says, “then you need to listen to me.”

My eyes flutter closed as his fingers slip beneath my skirt. “I don’t need your help.”

“No?”

My entire body tenses up like a flower curling beneath the heat of a wild flame.

I’m going to get burned, but there’s nothing I’ve ever wanted more than what I want in this moment.

I want him to touch me. Hell, I've fantasized about this so many times, I have to wonder if this is a dream.

His fingers coax my legs open, and I readjust, opening my thighs for him.

"Do you really plan to leave Midnight without knowing why your sister is pawning you off?"

I can feel the heat of his touch just inches from my wet center. He's so close. So impossibly close.

A moan escapes me, and I squirm in his grip.

"Mouse?"

"Huh?"

"Look at me."

I open my eyes to find his glowing impossibly gold. It's the flame all over again, burning bright in the dark.

"Look at me when I touch you."

And then he sinks two fingers inside of me, and my world comes undone.

NINE

I MOAN AS BRAN FILLS ME UP, AND HIS THUMB FLICKS AT MY CLIT. HE drops my wrists, and I have to put my hands on his shoulders just to stay upright. My knees are shaking, thighs quivering. I want more of him. I want him to throw me on the mossy ground and fuck me until I can't—

“Mouse.”

My eyes are closed again. I widen them, my vision a little blurry and distant.

He strokes my clit, and pleasure builds at my center. I feel like a firecracker ready to explode.

“Why were you throwing yourself to the wolves?”

I pant as he slowly enters me again and curls his fingers deep inside of me.

“I...because...you...”

“Yes?”

I think a little part of me wanted to make him jealous. But I can't tell him that. He strums at my clit again, and a shiver races through me. “Oh god.” I arch my back again, and he presses closer, his cock digging into me. He's so fucking hard. Does he actually want me or is this just a vampire power play? Some kind of game of lust and dominance?

Maybe I don't care.

The crescendo gets closer. My wick has been lit.

He's going to make me come.

Bran Duval is going to make me come in the middle of Midnight Cemetery.

And just as I toe the edge, he pulls out of me.

I blink stupidly at him as the thrum of the orgasm slips away. “What are you doing?” I say a little breathless.

“The wolves are not allowed to touch you.”

“What?” I lean heavily against the tree, the bark biting into my back.

“If I see that fucking dog touching you again, I’ll neuter him.”

I swallow hard, trying to catch my breath. My clit is still throbbing, and I can feel my juices coating my inner thighs. “I don’t care about the wolves,” I say because I think I might say anything just to get his nimble fingers on me again.

“If you want my help, mouse,” he says, “do as I say. Stay away from the wolves.”

“What—” I push away from the tree to argue, but I take one step, and suddenly, he’s gone.

I turn a circle. The moonlight has found a pocket between the trees, and it shines through the cemetery now. I don’t catch any movement. “Hey! Don’t just leave me here!” I shout.

The crickets go quiet at my outburst. I hold my breath to listen.

Nothing.

He really fucking left me?

I clench my hands and let out a long, drawn out growl.

“I’m going to murder you, Bran!”

The cemetery is on the northeast side of town, and I live on the southeast side. It takes me nearly a half hour to walk home, and by the time I come through the front door, my buzz is definitely gone and has been replaced with rage.

I am seething.

Bran has been messing with my head and my body, and all I want to do is jam a stake through his heart.

No, you don’t. You want to screw him, a voice says in the back of my head. Let him be the first.

Well maybe I can sleep with him and then murder him.

How dare he tease me, order me to stay away from the wolves, and then leave me!

The house is dark save for the light over the kitchen sink. I go there and fill a glass of water and drink it down. My throat is raw, and my head is starting to pound. I grab some aspirin from the cupboard and down two.

As I'm standing at the window, plotting all the ways I might be able to murder Bran, I catch movement in his house.

It's Damien Duval.

Damien is about the same height as Bran, but his build is stockier, his black hair close-cropped.

I remember Bran warning me that Damien would be at the Harbor, but I never did see him. Was he planning to go to see me?

I can't wrap my head around Damien wanting me in his house. Blood is blood. There are no special humans, no special blood to covet.

Why the hell would Damien risk peace to bid for a human destined for the Locke vampires?

Bran says something to Damien, and I can see the irritation plainly on Bran's face as he points his finger at his brother's chest.

Damien throws his hand up, exasperated, and Bran shakes his head and turns away.

What I wouldn't give for vampire hearing right now.

Dare I sneak outside and listen in?

I feel like this is the least of what Bran deserves. I might not have the strength or the speed to match him in a physical fight, but vampires aren't granted supernatural intelligence when they're turned. One thing I can fight with is my brain.

Except one might argue that eavesdropping on two extremely old, extremely powerful vampires is a very, very stupid idea.

As I make my way for the back door, I talk myself through a list of possible excuses should I get caught. I was stargazing. Watering the grass. Taking out the trash. Chasing a raccoon.

The possibilities really are endless.

I quietly shut the door behind me and make my way across the deck and realize my shoes are clunky and loud. I shuck them off and put bare feet to the wood. Much better.

On the grass, I tiptoe across the yard that separates our house from Bran's.

The closer I get, the louder their voices are until I'm right below one of the cracked kitchen windows.

"You're going to start a fucking war," Bran says.

Damien grumbles. "They're keeping secrets, Bran. Something is going on here."

Who are they talking about?

I dare a peek through the window. Bran is standing in the center of the kitchen, his arms crossed over his chest. Damien is pacing.

"This isn't the way to do this," Bran says.

Damien stops. "I need to do something. You know I must. The Lockes need to be put in their place anyway. They've been shifting their weight around. Have you not felt it?"

Bran frowns like he doesn't want to agree with his brother, but gives a quick nod just the same. "I still don't think this is the way to manage this. If there is something special about the girl, they're not going to just give her up."

I clamp my hand over my mouth to stop a startled gasp from escaping.

They're talking about me.

Something special? What does that mean?

Bran goes on, "This kind of war would be bloody and violent. There are better ways. More discreet ways."

"Like what?" Damien asks. "We're running out of time."

"Her Pledge is still a few days away." Bran shoves away from the counter. "Give me at least that before you do or say something. All right?"

Damien runs his hand over his close-cropped hair. "Fine. Fine."

Bran picks up a glass of liquor and slings it back. He gives an almost imperceptible wince. Damien grabs a glass out of sight and empties his too, then he sets it down with a thud. "Keep me updated."

"Of course."

Damien nods. He gives Bran a pat on the back and then makes his way for the door.

I hear it open and shut a second later.

I stay still outside the window and watch Bran from the darkness outside the house. His arms are crossed over his chest again, and he stands

there in the kitchen, unblinking, unmoving like he's trapped in a deep thought.

The wind shifts, and a chill shoots down my spine. I exhale, and Bran's eyes dart to me.

At the last second, I duck out of sight and crouch in the grass, my back pressed against the side of his house. If he comes out to look, I am so dead.

I stay there for what feels like an hour but might actually be ten minutes. When I think the coast is clear, I scamper across the yard, slink up the steps to my back deck and then slowly, carefully open and shut the back door.

Once I'm inside, I let out a relieved breath. I don't know if he saw me. I think if he did, he would have come out to confront me. Peeping Tom and an eavesdropper now. He'd never let me live that one down.

I go upstairs to my bedroom and find his bedroom shade already drawn even though it's barely after midnight.

I yank my curtains closed to send the same message.

Now more than ever I need to talk to my sister. I need to know what the hell is going on. Clearly, she's telling the Duvals something that isn't true, but why?

Not wanting to miss her again, I grab my pillow and my phone and make a bed on the couch downstairs. I set my alarm for an hour before she usually gets up.

Except, I'm startled awake before sunrise and yelp when I see Kelly standing over me.

It takes me a second to blink away the sleepiness, and when my eyes finally focus, I lurch to my feet.

Blood is pouring down my sister's neck from a massive torn wound.

"Help me," she says right before she collapses in my arms.

TEN

"KELLY! OH MY GOD. KELLY!"

The blood pouring from my sister's neck soaks the front of me when I catch her as she falls. Her eyes flutter. Her skin is clammy and pale. I grab my pillow from my makeshift bed on the couch and yank off the pillowcase, pressing it into her neck.

"Help! Someone help!" I scream.

Where's my phone? I know I brought it downstairs with me before I curled up on the couch, but—

The back door slams open and bangs loudly against the wall. I let out a startled yelp.

"What is—" Bran stands in the rectangle of early morning light. When he scents the blood, his eyes flash amber. "Mouse, are you hurt?" he asks, his voice dropping an octave.

"It's my sister." I hoist her up. She's almost dead weight in my arms.

"Invite me in," he says.

I lick my lips, swallow hard. What was Bran just saying to his brother earlier?

This kind of war would be bloody and violent. There are better ways. More discreet ways.

I look down at my sister. Did Bran do this? Is this some kind of twisted game to get invited into our house?

I try to sort out all of the reasons he might want to be invited in, but the panic has my thoughts jumbled.

"Mouse," he says again, more sharply this time.

"I'm not inviting you in."

"She'll die then."

I curse beneath my breath. I could call the Guard, but they're human. They travel on four wheels, not two legs. Kelly's already lost a lot of blood...

Goddammit.

Winding my arm around her waist, I drag Kelly to the back door. She's not completely unconscious, and her legs mostly stay beneath her.

"This is ridiculous," Bran grumbles. "Invite me in."

"I'm not inviting you in!"

I get to the kitchen, past the island, and Kelly's legs buckle beneath her. I catch her before she goes down and switch tactics by hooking my hands beneath her arms and dragging her backwards. When I get her shoulders out through the door, Bran pushes me aside and grabs her, yanking her the rest of the way out of the house.

There's blood everywhere. I'm covered in it. My hands are soaked in it. I can't decide if I want to sob or scream.

She's going to be okay. She has to be okay.

We live in a town of supernaturals. People don't just die.

Bran puts his wrist to his mouth, eyes flashing as he bites into his arm. I've grown up around vampires, but I'll never get used to the sound of teeth piercing flesh, the skin ripping open, the blood rushing out.

I step back, arms crossed over my middle as Bran positions his bleeding wrist over my sister's mouth. "Drink, Kelly," he orders, and my sister's eyes flutter, her lips moving as the blood drips down her throat.

It only takes a few seconds for her to swim back to consciousness, and then she grabs Bran's arm and brings it to her mouth, taking in a long drink.

I've never had vampire blood before, but I've heard that when you're ill or wounded, the blood is like a drug. It takes the pain away, eases out the knots in your muscles, the ache in your bones.

"All right," Bran says and yanks his arm back. "That's enough."

Kelly collapses to the deck, panting at the brightening sky, Bran's blood coating her mouth.

"Kelly?" I scurry to her side. "Are you okay?"

She runs her tongue over her teeth. "I... think so?"

"Do you remember what happened?"

Still covered in blood, she sits upright and smooths over her disheveled hair, painting her blond highlights in streaks of red. The wound in her neck is gone. "I'm not exactly sure what happened," she answers as I help her to her feet. When she spots Bran, she scowls. "What is he doing here?"

"He saved you," Bran says.

Kelly scoffs.

"You don't remember?" I frown. "You were bitten."

Her gaze goes distant.

"She's been compelled," Bran says.

"No, I haven't," she argues.

"Then where were you thirty minutes ago?"

"I was—" She cuts herself off and blinks several times. "I was...somewhere...and..."

"Did you do this to her?" I ask Bran.

He scowls at me. "Why would I?"

I want to throw his words back at him—*There are better ways. More discreet ways*—but what would it prove other than my eavesdropping? Besides, I have a very distinct feeling in my gut that Bran wasn't responsible for this. Now that I'm out here, now that he's saved her... I mean, I suppose saving her could also be a way to get beneath my skin, but we've already established that he is very, very much beneath my skin already.

"She was called to the Lockes earlier," I tell Bran.

"Did you see her when you got home?"

"You mean after you abandoned me in the cemetery?"

"He abandoned you in the cemetery?" Kelly asks.

"Focus, mouse," Bran says. "Did you see her afterward?"

When I came home, I automatically assumed Kelly was already in bed, but I never bothered to check.

"I'm not sure," I admit. "She might have been gone."

Bran's expression softens, and he puts his hands gently on Kelly's shoulders, forcing her to look at him. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," she says. "Just...jittery."

"That's the blood," he tells her. "Go inside and take a shower, then lie down. Okay?"

She gives a reluctant nod before turning and disappearing into the house.

Bran looks over at me. "She could have died."

"But she didn't."

"Why didn't you invite me in? It's not against the rules. You were risking nothing by doing it."

"Risking my innocence maybe."

He makes a PAH sound before pulling off his white t-shirt. I've seen him naked half a dozen times, but the sight of him shirtless, the shadowed lines between his taut abs, the swell of his biceps—it catches me off guard every single time. Like you know the sun is going to set every day, but every day, when it burns at the horizon, when it paints the sky in jeweled shades of red and pink and orange, you can't help but admire it.

Bran catches me staring and smirks. I curl my upper lip at him until he comes over and takes my hand in his and swipes away the blood with his balled-up t-shirt.

"What are you doing? You're going to stain your shirt—"

"Will you stop fighting me?" His eyes light up in the silvery early morning light. "You are infuriating."

"You're a menace."

A hint of a smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. When my hands are as clean as they're going to get, he steps closer and threads his hand through my hair, fingertips pressing against the back of my skull as he forces me to tilt my head up to him.

The shiver that takes over me is involuntary. Primitive.

He draws the shirt over the line of my jaw. The sweep of it, the pressure of his caress, forces my lips to part, and Bran's gaze sinks to my mouth.

A few hours ago, his fingers were inside of me, but somehow, the thought of his mouth on me is more illicit.

And then I blink back to reality and remember my sister was just attacked and Bran gave her his blood and he's plotting something that has to do with me and my Pledge.

I bat his hand away. "I'm fine. Thank you."

"Are you?"

"Yes. Goodnight." I start for the door when he grabs my wrist and yanks me back.

"No," he says.

He seems to like that word.

"No what?"

"Your sister was just attacked. You really think I'm going to let you stay in that house when I can't get inside?"

My mouth drops open. "What? But...why the hell do you even care?"

"I gave you my word I'd help you, mouse, and I always keep my promises. Until we know who attacked your sister, you'll stay at my house."

And then he pulls me down the deck and across our yards and into his house.

ELEVEN

AS THE SKY TURNS PINK AND THE BIRDS START SINGING, BRAN PUSHES IN his back door with a kick of his boot. The door wasn't latched to begin with, just slightly ajar. An indication of how fast he left his house when I started screaming in mine.

That knowledge warms my gut, and the warmth runs over my body, and I can't help but wonder why he would even care. I know he's sticking to his word or whatever, but why does he want to help? There's more to his motivation than what he's telling me, which isn't much at all. I just need to figure out what game he's playing and keep playing it in the meantime.

When he shuts the door behind us, he looks me up and down, his eyes flashing in the murky morning light.

I'm covered in blood. He's covered in blood.

I catch a glint of fangs.

He dragged me over here under the guise of protecting me, but I'm suddenly questioning just how safe I am in his house, covered in blood.

I take in a breath. "I need to go. I shouldn't be here." I turn back for the door, but he's suddenly in front of me, his arm barring me from leaving.

"I won't hurt you," he says quietly with a low rumble in his chest.

I roll my eyes and try to play it off like that's the last thing I was worried about. "My sister was literally just attacked. I'm not leaving her alone."

"I'll call the Guard and the Lockes," he says and shoves away from the wall. "Julian will put someone on the house. Unless he was the one responsible for tearing up her throat."

I follow him across the kitchen to the wet bar. "That's unlikely. My sister is one of Julian's favorites. In fact, I heard he asked her to be his blood mate, and she turned him down."

Bran gives me a look.

"What?"

"Have you ever been bitten by a Locke?"

I'm not sure why that's relevant. "No."

"Why?"

"I'm not pledged yet."

He scoffs. "A Pledging is just a formality. And anyone over eighteen can give consent to being bitten. Has a Locke ever asked you?"

"Well...no."

Pulling a tumbler out of the bar's cabinet, Bran pops the top off a decanter and pours himself a jigger's worth of scotch. "And why do you think that is?"

"I don't know. I never thought about it, I guess."

"I'll tell you why." He slings the drink back and empties the glass in one gulp. He barely winces when he swallows it. "Your sister didn't turn Julian down. She agreed to be his blood mate if he promised that you would remain untouched until your Pledging."

"That's ridiculous. And how would you even know that?"

"I know a lot of things."

I snatch the glass from him and hold it out for a pour. He furrows his brow at me but finally gives in and lets a splash of amber liquid fill the bottom. He watches me as I drink it back. The liquor is smokey but smooth, and it immediately makes everything feel better. I'm exhausted and keyed up and anxious and confused. I need something. Something to take the edge off.

"Another," I say.

He frowns at me and doesn't move to refill my glass.

I cock out my hip. "Really?" I reach for the decanter, and in a blur, he moves it out of my reach. "I'm not a fucking child."

"Compared to me, you're just a baby."

"So what does that make you? A cradle robber?"

He snorts. "I haven't fucked you yet, mouse."

Hearing him say that out loud makes my face immediately heat up. I definitely, *definitely* like it when he talks like that, but really, *really* wish I didn't.

Setting the glass down with a thud, I take a step closer to him. My heart is beating harder, and my belly is soaring as I repeat, "Yet?"

His eyes glint again in the early morning light. The air grows charged between us. I'm daring him even though I'm not entirely sure I'm prepared to be fucked by Bran Duval. I'm not afraid of having sex. And I'm not really worried about my first time, considering I've got plenty of toys at home. But the thought of losing my virginity to someone like him makes everything clench up tight.

It's like taking your driving test in a Lamborghini.

Nothing afterward will ever compare, and I'm not sure I want to be chasing that high for the rest of my life.

Oh yes you do. Chase that dragon, girl.

I swallow hard, feeling a flush of heat sinking lower in my belly.

Bran's nostrils flare.

"Mouse," he says in a purr.

"Yes?"

His eyes burn brightly now, like two candle flames lighting up the dark.

"You should take a shower," he says.

I blink. "What?"

"You're covered in blood, and my control is growing weak."

"I thought you said you wouldn't hurt me."

The corner of his mouth lifts in a smirk. "Oh, mouse, I promise it wouldn't hurt."

I huff and turn for the door again, but Bran snatches my arm in his grip and pulls me into him so close, I can feel the tickle of his breath on my neck.

There's nothing quite like a vampire's mouth being close to your throat. It's like reaching your hand out to pet a feral dog. The thrill is exhilarating. The fear almost tangible.

"Am I not free to go?" I challenge.

The line of his Adam's apple sinks low in his throat right before his tongue darts out and wets the swell of his lips. His glowing eyes are firmly locked on the beating pulse of my heart in my neck.

I suddenly don't care what his answer is because the devil on my shoulder is saying, *Feel those teeth sink into your throat and his cock inside of you. Why not take the risk now before you leave town? When you can do it and get away with it?*

I was never one to sow my wild oats. I'm not a huge risk-taker. Leaving Midnight is the biggest leap I've ever thought about taking. And even then...a little part of me has been wondering if leaving town is a coward's way out. That in reality, I'm afraid that if I stay, I might actually like being pulled deeper into the world of the supernatural. That I might like toeing that dark line.

Bran takes a step back and holds his arm out with a flourish. "If you want to leave..."

Fear is telling me to *go, go*.

But everything else is saying: *stay, stay*.

And not just in Midnight, but here, now, in Bran's house.

I want to sink into his wickedness and let him do wicked things to me.

"I don't have clean clothes," I say because that's the only logical thing that comes to mind.

"Guess you'll have to go without."

With a smirk, he turns for the stairs.

I go to the staircase and peer up. He's already out of sight, but I can hear him opening a door somewhere in the recess of the second floor. Do I dare go up? It's suddenly dawning on me that I'm alone again in Bran Duval's house. I can't shake the feeling that I've crossed over some threshold that I can't return from.

Screw it.

Hand on the banister, I go up.

TWELVE

AS I GO UP THE STAIRS TO THE SECOND FLOOR OF BRAN DUVAL'S HOUSE, IT feels like my heart is lodged in my throat. I'm sure he can hear my rapid pulse. I'm sure he thinks it's hilarious.

I keep going.

When I reach the second-floor landing, I follow the sound of running water and end up in Bran's bedroom. There's a rectangle of light stretching across the dark hardwood floor as the sun rises outside.

Bran should be in bed soon. He might not burst into flames if he's caught in daylight in his own house, but I've heard the effects can feel like the flu to a vampire. I don't want to be the cause of that. I'd never hear the end of it.

I take a tentative step inside.

I've fantasized about being in this bedroom. And I often wondered what it would look like from this side of the window.

The bed is king-sized with a headboard done in rich brown leather. The dark charcoal duvet looks like expensive linen, the kind that when rubbed between your fingers summons images of rainy afternoons in bed, a cup of hot tea in hand, steam rising around your face.

The room smells like Bran, like amber and leather and musk.

It makes my head swim.

Iron tables sit on either side of the bed with emerald green sconces hanging from the wall.

The bed is made, the corners tucked in neatly.

It's all a goddamn delight.

His neatness makes my nerdy side damn near glow.

In the attached bathroom, the shower turns on.

I turn around the room, trying to drink in all the details before he comes out. There are more black and white photographs framed on the wall above the six-drawer dresser. From afar, they look like landscape photographs, but when I get in close, I can just make out the silhouette of someone in the background.

“My self-portrait phase,” he says, suddenly beside me, and I step back, feeling like I got caught snooping.

“That’s you?” I ask and nod at the center image. The camera is facing the edge of a cliff and a cloudy valley down below. The figure stands at the cliff’s edge, facing a darkening, stormy sky.

Bran nods and leans a shoulder against the bathroom’s doorframe. “Taken in the 1950s.”

The other two images are taken on a bridge and in an underpass.

“They’re incredible.”

“Thank you.”

I shift my gaze to him, looking for sarcasm and finding none.

“Shower is ready,” he says. “I have to go to bed.”

“I really can go home. I don’t have to keep you—”

“Don’t,” he says.

“Don’t what?”

“You’re not going home. You’re staying here. End of discussion.”

I’m not sure why when he talks to me like that, my panties practically turn into a puddle. I usually hate being talked down to. It’s why Kelly and I used to fight so much when I was a kid.

With Bran though, it’s not an older sister trying to boss me around. It’s...almost like he’s protecting me.

But from what?

He stares at me a moment longer, then blinks and shifts away. “Don’t open the blinds. Come to bed when you’re done.”

“You want me to sleep with you?”

“My bed is the safest place for you.” He darts to the nearest window and pulls down the dark blind.

“I’m not sure I believe that.”

“I’ll behave.” He’s a blur as he crosses the room and pulls down the second blind plunging us into mostly darkness. “For now.”

The shiver that hits me morphs into a blazing heat that sinks to my pussy.

Bran tsk-tsks.

I roll my eyes in the dark and follow the bleed of light from the bathroom.

If I survive this night, or rather *day*, I might start to believe in miracles.

I shut the bathroom door but don’t lock it. What’s the point? Bran could smash through it with nothing but the power of his pinky finger.

His bathroom is as dark and rich as his bedroom with white subway tile done with black grout in the shower stall and around the double vanity. The counter is spotless. There’s nothing on it except for a glass bottle of hand soap.

What a dream.

I tear off my bloody clothes and toss them into the garbage can. No sense trying to scrub the stains out.

When I pull open the glass door on the shower, steam spills out. I duck inside and test the water. It’s scalding hot. I dial down the heat and then get in beneath the stream.

I breathe out. There is nothing like the power of a hot shower when you’re feeling filthy and out of sorts. The water immediately soothes some of my earlier anxiety and fear.

Beneath the showerhead, everything feels like it could be okay.

I soak my hair then use Bran’s shampoo. The bottles on the tiled shelf are black, the writing in French. The soap is pearly white and smells like the woods.

It’s as I’m rinsing the suds from my hair that I hear the shower’s glass door click open and feel a blast of cold air on my backside.

I know it’s Bran before I turn around. “I didn’t invite you,” I say, feeling the distant stir of a thrill at my core, the rapid thump of my heart in my chest.

“It’s my shower,” he says at my ear.

The air is hot, but my skin is cold as his hands trail down my arms and lift goosebumps.

My inner walls clench up as my clit throbs.

“Bran,” I start, not exactly sure where I’m going, but feeling like I need to go *somewhere*.

His hand follows the flat plane of my stomach, then dips down, down.

I moan. I can’t help it.

It’s the promise of his touch. The feel of him hard at my back.

He cups my mound, and I wiggle against him, trying to rock to leverage some friction. But he tightens his hold on me and presses me against the cool shower wall.

“Needy little mouse,” he says at my ear, his voice rough like rock salt.

I think I knew that if I let him drag me home, that if I stayed here and went up those stairs, we’d end up exactly right here.

I think I knew it, and that’s why I stayed.

I’m not sure what’s going on between us, or if this really is just some ploy to gain my trust, or break me in some other inconceivable way, but I think I’m too far gone to stop it.

I think maybe I want to give in to it regardless of the consequences.

He flicks a finger over my clit, and I tremble beneath him.

“Why are we doing this?” I say to the tiled wall, panting hard now.

“Because it’s fun?” His fingers curl, sliding between my wet folds.

“I think you like torturing me.”

“You might be right.” His hand disappears, and I moan in disappointment. But he spins me around to face him.

Water droplets glisten on his face and in his raven hair. He’s so devastatingly hot that it almost makes me angry.

“Is this part of the game then?” I ask, feeling bold and a little drunk on the moment.

He leans in, his mouth just an inch from mine. “Oh mouse, everything is a game.” And then he kisses me, hard and fast.

I’m suddenly ravenous and blind with the need for him.

This feeling burning through my veins is like shouting at the moon, like running through empty streets after midnight, like stepping on the gas pedal and blasting through a red light.

The thrill is intoxicating.

I don't care if we don't like each other.

I don't care if I'm supposed to pledge myself to the Locke vampires.

Or that I plan on leaving Midnight.

Or that Bran might be twisting me for his own ends.

I just fucking want him. Just flesh and bones and fucking and kissing and—

He pulls away from me and sinks to his knees. I look down to find his eyes glowing that vampire fire.

Fangs protrude from his mouth.

His earlier warning comes back to me, “...*my control is growing weak.*”

I'm tempting him, and I want to be tempted too.

The thought of him biting me—

“Tell me to stop,” he purrs.

I hang my head back, let the water spray across my body. I'm burning hot and I think a little delirious.

“Not a chance.”

He lifts my leg, draping it over his shoulder, baring me to him and then he sinks his fangs into my inner thigh.

I can't help it—I hang my head back and cry out in ecstasy.

THIRTEEN

I'VE KEPT MYSELF IN NEAT AND TIDY LITTLE BOXES MY ENTIRE LIFE. BE THE dutiful daughter. The quiet little sister who never rocks the boat. Those neat and tidy little boxes spill over into my life with my clothes organized by color and type, my desk clean, everything in its place.

I like the control. The order. I like that labels spell things out, cut and dry, no question.

Being bitten by Bran Duval in his shower is the most chaos I've ever invited into my life.

And I'm surprised at how good it feels.

If this is what it's like being bitten, why haven't I tried it yet?

The euphoria washes over me like a break of warm sunlight.

Bran sucks at my thigh while his fingers slid inside of me. I moan and grip at his shoulder to keep myself upright.

The pain of the bite, the pleasure of his fingers, it's damn near delirious.

He twists his hand so he can slide his thumb up to my needy clit. He flicks at me, causing me to jolt and then he goes still.

With heavy lids, I look at him as he straightens in front of me.

Fangs sharp and protruding from his mouth, he's covered in my blood, eyes glowing such a bright amber, I swear they're phosphorescent.

He runs his tongue over his lips, lapping up the last drops.

"You taste just as fucking sweet as I thought you would," he says, and I pant out a breath as my pussy clenches up again.

I want more of him.

I can't believe this is happening, and I don't want it to stop.

“Fuck me,” I say.

“No,” he says.

I whine. “Please.”

He gets in close to me, the spray of the shower bouncing off his broad shoulder, wetting my eyelashes.

“I’ll fuck you when I’m good and ready,” he says, but while his words show restraint, I can feel the head of his cock prodding at me. I shift, rising on my tip toes and rocking my hips so his shaft slides between my legs.

He growls, his hand coming to my chin, fingers pressing hard against my jaw. “You don’t control this.”

I arch my back, rubbing against him. I’m nearly blind with the desire for him.

“I don’t see you pulling away,” I say.

He laughs through his nose, eyes still molten metal. “Watch me.”

And then he’s gone, the shower door softly clicking closed behind him.

“What the hell?” I shout.

I’m breathing heavy, and my clit is buzzing.

“I’ll just finish myself then.” I lean against the shower stall and reach down, but Bran is suddenly there again tsk-tsking at me.

“No.” He takes my arm and pins it against the wall. “You don’t get to come until I say so.”

I scowl at him. “Why not?”

He leans in at my ear and whispers, “Because deep down, you like me telling you what to do.”

I buck against him. He laughs.

I want to prove to him just how wrong he is, but the truth is, I like control, but I also like being controlled by him.

Apparently, Bran Duval knows just how to press my buttons, because while I’m horny as hell and near delirious with wanting to come, doing it myself now doesn’t hold the same thrill.

What does make me buzzy is the thought of listening to him.

I go still against the wet shower wall. Bran’s nostrils flare, and he arches a brow. He lets go of my arm, hands dipping to my hips. With his knee, he nudges my legs open just enough to open my thighs.

“Is this what you wanted, mouse?” he says, voice rumbly and hoarse as he slides his cock between my legs. The head of his shaft sends a

shockwave of pleasure straight through me as it drags over my clit.

“Fuck. Yes.”

He pumps his hips, pressing me against the wall with his weight as he fucks my wet folds hitting that pleasure zone again and again, building the buzz of an orgasm with barely any effort at all.

The spray of the water beads on my face. Bran’s mouth comes to my jawline and kisses slowly as he switches his pace, teasing me more than fucking me.

“Bran.” My voice is reedy and far away.

He kisses down my jaw, to the hollow behind my ear, then sinks to the pulse in my throat.

Razor sharp fangs graze at my flesh.

He keeps sliding that hard cock between my legs, every nerve ending firing like a wick.

“You want to come, mouse?” he asks and puts his mouth on the rapid beat of my heart.

“Yes.”

“Say please.”

I whimper when he stops entirely and drags the tip of his tongue over my throat.

My knees are shaking. My pussy is so tingly, it feels electric with the craving to come.

I know giving in to Bran’s demand is the same as giving in to a monster, but goddammit, I think I might say or do anything right now.

“Please,” I moan out.

Bran’s grip tightens on my hips as he picks up the sliding tempo of his cock, fucking my clit as the pressure builds and builds.

“Go on then,” he says at my ear, “let me hear you come, naughty little mouse.”

That does it.

The dam breaks.

I grip at his shoulders, eyes clenched tight, starbursts behind my lids as the orgasm spills over me in a delicious wave of heat and pleasure.

I cry out, body quivering on Bran’s thick shaft.

“Fuck, mouse,” he says, and then he groans loudly, muscles coiling up tight as he comes. Cum spills all over my pussy and drips down my legs.

I collapse against him and breathe hard against the rise of his shoulder, holding on to him for dear life as the last of the orgasm fades out, leaving me spent and trembling in his arms.

“Oh my god,” I say. “Oh my god.”

He pulls away and looks down at me, lips swollen and wet, vampire eyes glowing amber.

I make a move to wash myself between my legs, but he snatches my wrist. “No,” he says, and that’s all he has to say now, because he and I both know I’m going to listen.

He helps me rinse out my hair and then shuts the shower off.

When I step out of the stall, he towels off the dampness, then tosses it to the corner, takes me by the hand, and leads me out into the pitch-black bedroom.

I can only hear the soft rasp of the sheets as he pulls them back, then his command: “Get in bed, mouse.”

I slowly feel my way to the bed and climb in beneath the sheets. I’m immediately enveloped by the soft cotton and Bran’s scent, like whiskey and oak.

It’s the most delicious scent that immediately makes me want to sigh into the pillow as I lay my head down.

Bran slides into me and pulls me into his chest, arms wrapped around me.

“Good girl,” he says, his voice hoarse and sleepy.

“Shut up,” I mutter. He tightens his hold on me, tucks me into his side.

I lay there, blinking into the darkness, thinking there’s no way I’m going to sleep in this situation, but before I know it, I’m out.

We wake to an incessant pounding noise.

Groggy, I moan and roll over. “What is that?”

Bran is already up and has flicked on a lamp on the bedside table. He pulls on a pair of jeans, no boxer briefs, I notice.

“Someone’s at the front door,” he answers and then disappears in a blur.

Oh god. What if something happened to Kelly while I was descending into horny madness?

I slip from the bed and then realize I'm still naked with no clothes to put on. I decide since part of the reason I'm here and naked is because of Bran, he owes me a shirt or two. I go to his walk-in closet and find rows and rows of clothing. Most of it is black, but I find a few flannel shirts that are big enough to be a dress on me.

Pulling one on, I'm filled with a tiny thrill that I'm in Bran Duval's house, dressing in his clothes.

Nothing like this would ever happen in the real world. Or rather, the world outside of Midnight Harbor where people think vampires and witches and fae are fiction.

Once the shirt is buttoned enough to cover the important bits, I follow the hallway then descend down the stairs. The circular window on the first landing shows dark, stormy clouds outside, making it seem later than it actually is.

"Where is she?" a familiar voice says at the front door.

Bran is standing in a rectangle of dusky light, the jeans hanging low on his naked hips. From my vantage point on the stairs, I can see every ridge of muscle in his back, every dimple. His hair is still mussed, but it looks more like sex hair than it does sleep hair.

"In my bed," comes Bran's reply.

A hand slaps hard against the door, but Bran has it firmly in his grip, and it doesn't budge.

"She may not be pledged to my house yet, but rest assured, Duval, she's mine. Now go fucking get her."

Julian Locke is here?

The shadowed lines of muscle between Bran's shoulder blades grows deeper as his body coils. The hair on my arms rises, goosebumps covering my skin.

"Say that again and find out how true it is," Bran says, almost a growl.

"I don't know what you're up to, but this won't end well. Jessie is ours."

I come down the rest of the steps, and the vampires cut themselves off, finally realizing that I'm there.

When I step around Bran, Julian looks me up and down in nothing but a buttoned flannel shirt and clamps his mouth shut.

Julian Locke appears to be at least ten years older than Bran, when in reality, in vampire years, he's nearly fifty years younger. It's easy to forget that when they're standing next to one another.

Where Bran's skin is flawless, smooth, without wrinkles or blemishes, Julian's got pronounced lines around his eyes and in his forehead. His dark hair is shaved close to the scalp while his face is covered in thick facial hair.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Julian licks his lips. "Your sister is worried about you."

"Me? She was the one who came home last night with her throat all torn to shreds."

Bran takes a step closer to me. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you Julian?"

The way he goes pale, the flash of a blue glow in his eyes says that yes, he does know something about it.

"What happened to her?" I ask.

"I wasn't with her last night," he answers. "But if someone got rough with their bite, I'll see to it they're punished."

"It wasn't just the bite." Bran crosses his arms over his chest and takes another step my way, close enough that half his body shields me now. "Kelly was compelled."

Julian's nostrils flare. "Like I said, I'll look into it. In the meantime, it's time for Jessie to come home."

I've known Julian Locke my entire life, but while he's been a fixture in my world, I never exactly felt comfortable around him. There was always something about the way he looked at me, like I was a zoo animal, and everything I did was a performance for him.

I think deep down a little part of me wanted to leave Midnight Harbor because I didn't want to align the rest of my life with Julian and the Locke vampires.

"I appreciate your concern, Julian," I say, "but I'm just fine staying here."

I catch Bran's smug grin out of the corner of my eye.

"I would advise against that," Julian says.

"Why?"

Julian looks at Bran. Some unspoken language passes between them. The tension boils in the air, and instinctively, I take a step back, letting Bran act as my shield.

“You don’t want to do this,” Bran says.

Julian scowls, deepening the lines around his eyes. “You don’t have the power of the Duval house at your back.”

“Have you forgotten who I am, Julian?” Bran moves to the threshold. “I don’t need it.”

There’s an obvious twitch to Julian’s expression. Finally, he backs off, and the tension fades. Julian looks past Bran at me. “Just be careful, Jessie. I’ve known Bran for centuries. He’s broken a lot of hearts in that time.”

With that, he turns and disappears out of sight.

Bran gives the door a shove, and it slams closed.

“What was that all about?” I ask.

Bran stalks past me and goes upstairs. I follow and find him tugging on a black t-shirt in his bedroom, then boots. “Nice shirt,” he says.

I frown and cross my arms over my chest. His flannel is easily three times as big as me, and it hangs off my body like a bedsheet on a clothesline.

“I like you in my clothes,” he says. “I like thinking about you pantieless in my clothes even more.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

He stands and crosses the room to tower over me. “It’s too bad we have somewhere to be. I can still taste your sweetness in the back of my throat, little mouse, and I’d very much like another bite.”

Heat flames in my cheeks. “Well, you’ll have to wait for another century to pass, because I’ve thankfully come to my senses.”

He smirks at me, clearly reading my bluff. “Uh huh. Let’s get you home and get dressed.”

“Where are we going?”

He steers me out of the room and down the stairs. “I think it’s time we go talk to your boss.”

“What? Why?”

He nods at the protection rune hanging around my neck, the one my mom gave me when I was just a kid. “Because of that.”

I lift the pendant by its clasp. The stone is black obsidian with the rune carved into its face. The rune itself always reminded me of an upside-down chicken leg. “What about it?”

“It was made by Rita.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because, mouse, it smells like her. Now tell me, why would a witch give a mortal girl a protection amulet when she was just a child?”

A lump wedges itself in the column of my throat. That’s a very good question. One I never looked at too closely. Witch charms are common in Midnight Harbor, obviously, but not usually protection charms, not when that mortal family has been pledged to a vampire house for decades.

But I barely knew Rita before she gave me a job at the coffee shop. She would have said something if she was the creator of the charm, wouldn’t she?

Unless it was supposed to be a secret.

FOURTEEN

MY HOUSE IS EMPTY WHEN I GO INSIDE. I CAN FEEL IT. ALL OF KELLY'S blood from the night before is gone, almost like it never happened.

Last night I was worried sick about my sister, but today, in the daylight, I'm more pissed than sympathetic.

Kelly is keeping secrets from me too, and I think she's been artfully dodging me this entire time, taking advantage of my willingness to let things slide so as not to create waves.

My sister knows me so damn well.

Upstairs, I unbutton Bran's flannel shirt. I consider folding it up to return it to him, and then decide against it. It smells like him. Just holding on to it gives me butterflies. He's screwing with my head, driving me mad. When I'm thinking outside of the lust, I feel silly for obeying him, even if it does send a fresh wave of desire straight down my belly.

I'm caught in the storm of Bran Duval, and I'm not sure how to find my way out, or even if I want to.

After pulling on jeans and a white V-neck t-shirt, I check my reflection in the bathroom mirror. Shadows from smudged mascara circle my eyes. My hair dried funny while I slept, so it's kinked on one side. I look disheveled and unhinged.

Bending over, I tie my hair into a messy bun, then run a wipe over my face. Starting with a somewhat clean slate, I put on a fresh coat of mascara and a run of rose-tinted lip balm on my lips.

"Better than nothing," I mutter and then grab my bag and hurry back downstairs to find Bran waiting on the front porch for me.

In the fading light, he's hot as sin, deadly as lightning, and when his eyes drag over my body, and the irises flicker with desire, I tense up as if anticipating a rumble of answering thunder. There's this wild roaring in my gut when he comes to stand beside me the second I cross over the threshold. I like that he stays near me as if he's telling the world I'm his, even though that makes little sense. Even though the very thought makes me feel like I've lost touch with gravity.

I don't know which way is up anymore. What happened between us early this morning has changed something, and I'm still spinning, wobbling on my axis.

I pull the door closed and start down the porch steps, Bran following behind.

"Are we driving or walking?" I ask.

"With your useless mortal legs?" I can practically hear the eye roll in his words. "Walking would take forever. We'll drive."

"You don't have a car," I point out. Most vampires in Midnight Harbor don't. They can get anywhere on foot much faster than a car could.

"No, but you do." He holds out his hand.

"You're not driving my car."

"Why not?"

"It's a classic 1995 BMW M3 Coupe." I'm not a car fanatic, but I know this one is a gem. My dad bought it brand new off the lot, and my mom babied it after he died. Kelly let me have it when my mom passed.

It's got a 5-speed manual transmission and original leather interior with hardly a crack.

I love that car.

"Do you even know how to drive?" I quip.

"I've been driving since cars were invented." He flicks his fingers at me, indicating I should hand over the keys.

A little flare of defiance ignites in my gut, and I cross my arms over my chest, my bag banging against my hip.

"Mouse," he says, a warning edge to his voice. In one fluid motion, he's suddenly inches away from me, towering over me. "Don't make me make you."

I think that's exactly what I wanted and just the barest promise of it has my insides clenching up. And he knows it too. He knows it so damn well.

With a sigh, I dig into my bag and produce the keys attached to the retro motel keychain I bought online. I drop it into his outstretched hand, and he turns over the plastic tag.

“*Dude, where’s my car?*” he says, reading the cursive text on the keychain tag.

“What? I think it’s hilarious.”

“Please tell me you don’t actually like that movie.”

“It’s a funny movie.”

The grumble of revulsion rumbles in the back of his throat. “I suddenly think less of you.”

Snorting, I follow him across the front yard. The BMW, shining candy red in the street lights, sits waiting on the blacktop.

“Okay then, tell me a better movie than *Dude, Where’s My Car?*” I challenge.

“How about any?” He opens the driver’s side door and looks at me across the roof. “Literally any other movie.”

“Oh really? I take it you haven’t seen *Transylmania* then.”

He climbs into the car, his long legs scrunched up between the seat and the steering wheel. He adjusts it, and the seat slides back with a thunk.

“Christ, mouse, you’re practically eating the dash in this thing.”

“We can’t all be six-five gods.”

“Six-four,” he corrects.

Shit, he’s nearly a foot taller than I am. I mean, I know he’s much bigger than I am, but putting it into actual numbers makes me feel even smaller.

Bran turns the engine over then wraps his hand around the stick shift.

I have this thing with guys driving stick-shifts. A fetish, maybe. Man and machine working in beautiful, quick unison. I once went on a date with a guy who drove a stick-shift, and I could barely hear a word he said. I was so focused on his hand moving through the gears as he sped down the freeway.

I think I fell more for his way with cars than I did for him. We only went on the one date.

The anticipation of seeing Bran drive my car suddenly overwhelms me. I think subconsciously my defiance on the keys wasn’t because I was

worried about the safety of the Bimmer, but what seeing Bran drive it might do to me.

He pushes in the clutch and shifts into reverse. The car has always been lithe and speedy, but with Bran behind the wheel, it feels like it's propelled by rocket fuel.

We're in the street and shooting through the night before I can settle into my seat.

"Slow down," I chide.

"I will not," he answers and shifts into second, his thigh working as he pushes at the clutch.

"So," I start, hand still griping at the door handle as the headlights cut through a dark section of road, "we're going to the coffeeshop to confront my boss about the necklace I've been wearing since I was a kid that apparently smells like witch?"

"Yes," Bran says, "exactly that."

"And what if she laughs at us? What if she shoves us out the door?"

Or worse—what if she fires me? I need the job to save up money to move out of Midnight Harbor, even though my Pledging and moving feels so far away.

"She'll answer me." Bran takes a sharp turn. The car hugs the shoulder, and the velocity forces me to the left, closer to Bran. "Rita owes me."

I can't help but laugh. "Seriously? For what?"

He looks at me briefly before turning back to the road, the car slipping through the night.

"What could you possibly have done for a witch?"

"The 'what' doesn't matter."

"Rita hates vampires. I know this as fact. She's probably going to toss you out the front door the second you walk over the threshold."

"I will enjoy the look on your face when you realize you're wrong." He slows for another sharp turn and downshifts.

I bury a happy little sigh watching him work at the clutch with confidence.

God, he's hot.

"Shall I pull over?" he asks, eyes on the road.

"For what?"

"You must be soaking wet," he says. "Judging by the scent on the air."

My mouth drops open, and then I stubbornly cross my legs as if doing so will hide the smell of my desire.

I hate vampires!

“Maybe I’ll take you in the backseat,” he says, eyes still on the road, hand loose on the steering wheel. “Maybe I’ll bend you over the hood of the car and—”

A little moan escapes me, and I rub my thighs together without thinking.

He glances at me, smug as hell. “Over the hood it is.” The car slows down.

“Stop that!” I say, groaning. “Like I said before, what happened in the shower was a momentary lapse in judgment. It won’t be happening again.”

“Oh mouse.” He downshifts again as the street spills into downtown Midnight Harbor. “It’s cute that you think so.”

Just the promise of more of him makes my pussy throb and my stomach clench up.

Fuck. I’m in trouble.

Bran parks right out front of the coffee shop. There’s lots of foot traffic in this part of town, and heads turn our way when we climb out of the car, and people realize a McMahan is with a Duval vampire.

There are no rules against our being together, but it’s highly unusual for someone from a family typically pledged to the Lockes to be seen with a Duval.

In all of Midnight Harbor, the Lockes and the Duvals probably have the biggest rivalry. They’re founding families, and its members, by their very nature of being immortal vampires, have been around the longest.

If anyone were to ask my opinion, I’d say the Duvals hold more power. Bran and his brother Damien are some of the oldest in Midnight Harbor, but more than that, they were turned by a Montenegro, which is one of the oldest vampire houses in the entire world.

I’ve never been one to care about power, but it’s hard not to be swayed by the pull of it, especially with Bran.

Car keys jangling from his hand, Bran goes up on the sidewalk and rakes his eyes over the people staring. They quickly look away and hurry out of sight. It's like I've walked into the middle of town with a black panther at my hip. People give the Lockes a wide berth, but they don't part seas.

I meet Bran in front of the bay window of the coffee shop. Gold string lights glow from inside where my window display from last week shows off Rita's charms, apothecary jars (with my remade labels), and several different flavors of bagged ground coffee. I'm supposed to work tomorrow and redo the display, provided I can get past all the shit that's currently going wrong in my life.

Bran pulls the door open and holds it for me.

With a deep breath, I step inside.

Indie folk music plays alongside the hiss of the milk steamer and the grind of coffee beans. Rita stands at the end of the counter, looking over some paperwork, while Winnie, another witch from Rita's coven, mixes some drink orders.

The tables are nearly full, and the din of conversation fills the cozy space.

The decibel lowers when Bran walks in behind me, and it makes me want to address it to absolve myself of some of the guilt and shame I'm feeling. Not that I have any reason to feel either. I owe no one allegiance. I'm promised to no house. And if my mom were alive, I know she'd support whatever decision I made. Even if she did have a massive crush on Julian Locke.

When I catch one of the shifters eyeing me up and down then Bran, I almost shout, "What? What are you staring at?" But then think better of it.

When Rita looks over at me, a smile spreads across her face until she realizes who stands beside me. Her smile quickly vanishes.

I hurry over and lower my voice. "Can we talk in the back?"

Her gaze goes to the space behind my shoulder, and while I didn't hear him move, I'm positive Bran is behind me already, probably looking like the bad decision he most definitely is.

"Sure," Rita says and scoops up her work. "He coming too?"

"Is that okay?"

“Don’t ask for her permission,” Bran says to me, even though he’s staring at Rita while he says it. “Because I don’t need it.”

Rita huffs and turns for the swinging door to the back room. “Someday that mouth of yours is gonna get you in trouble.”

“It hasn’t yet.”

I put my fist to my mouth, hiding a laugh.

Bran gives me a dead look.

“What? She’s probably right.”

I follow Rita through the swinging door, through the storage room, and into her office. There are no windows in the interior room, but Rita hired an artist to paint a trompe-l'œil painting that looks like a stone balcony overlooking a whimsical English garden. More string lights hang from the ceiling and are strung around the painting, giving it the look and feel of fireflies in the garden.

Rita dumps her work on her desk amongst several other piles then stands at its corner, one hand on her hip, the other splayed on the desk.

Being in her office always makes me itchy. It’s a complete and utter mess. There are old sticky notes stuck to the filing cabinet that I’m absolutely sure hold no relevancy anymore.

Pencil nubs dot every surface along with several uncapped markers that are probably so dry, you could use them to whittle wood. On the opposite wall, three long shelves hold books, jars, and various other treasures, but there’s no rhyme or reason to the display with jars stuck between books and books stacked on top of jars.

My gaze gets stuck on a jar with a peeling label that says *fae quarrel*. The inside is nearly empty save for one red flower. Despite the fact that the flower has been snipped from its stem, the petals are still vibrant with color and look velvety smooth.

“So what’s this about?” Rita asks.

I lick my lips trying to figure out how to start the conversation. It’s not every day you accuse your witch boss of making you a protection amulet that she and your mother have kept a secret.

“Well...so there’s this thing...well, what I mean is...Bran was saying...”

Bran leans against one of the filing cabinets. “What the little mouse is trying to ask is, why did you make her a protection amulet?”

I send a withering glare his way. I've been letting him get away with the nickname in private, but calling me mouse in front of my boss is crossing the line. Except my anger does nothing to him. He isn't even looking at me. His attention is squarely on Rita.

I turn back to my boss to find her lips parted, ready to deny, but somehow locked in the second before the words can get past her lips.

Then she sighs and drops into her desk chair. "How did you know?"

"I can smell you on it," Bran replies.

The line of her dark brow sinks over her wide, brown eyes. "Truly? I made that thing over twenty years ago."

"I have a good sense of smell," Bran answers.

She scoffs and turns in the chair, the casters creaking beneath her weight. "Your mom asked me for it," she tells me.

"Why?" Bran pushes away from the cabinet and comes to stand beside me. I don't know if he's sensing the world is starting to shift for me, if Rita's admission has caught me off guard, or if he just wants to be near.

Either way, I'm grateful for him, even though I want to hate him, even though every rational thought in my head is telling me that falling for the devilish vampire is a mistake.

Am I though? Am I falling for him?

I look up at him beside me, at the strong line of his jaw, the straight slope of his nose, the swell of his lips, the way his hair runs back in thick, jet-black waves, and every detail about him, every angle, every curve sends butterflies into a frenzy in my gut.

Oh shit.

I think I am falling for him.

He looks down at me, eyes narrowing as he tries to read my sudden panic.

This is clearly not the most important thing going on in this room!

I need to get my head together.

Rita props an elbow on a stack of pamphlets for the coven's annual fiscal report and scratches her nails through several of her tight braids. "I didn't ask the why," Rita says and exhales, long lashes fanning over her cheeks. "And it's not a protection amulet."

"Really? Are you serious?" I take a step toward her, the amulet now clutched in my hand. "Then what is it?"

FIFTEEN

THE AMULET SWINGS FROM THE END OF THE NECKLACE. “PLEASE TELL ME, Rita.”

She takes a deep breath and then—“It’s a binding amulet.”

My heart squeezes in my chest. The world spins.

I drop into one of the vintage waiting room chairs that sits in front of her desk and bend over, head in my hands.

Nothing is making sense.

Rita must be lying.

But why would she? This isn’t some kind of gotcha game. Rita would have no reason to lie.

I suck in several deep breaths. No one says anything as I try to get a handle on the swirling thoughts in my head.

“Jessie,” Rita says. “I’ve wanted to tell you, but your sister asked to keep it between us for now and—”

I lurch upright. “Kelly knows it’s a binding?”

Rita frowns. “I suspect your mother told her on her deathbed.”

Of course. Of course! “What else don’t I know?” On my feet, I put my hands on the mess on Rita’s desk and lean into her with venom in my voice. “What else have you been keeping from me, Rita?”

The boldness comes out of nowhere, and guilt turns sour in my stomach at the surprise that registers on Rita’s face.

This is so unlike me. I’m only bitchy with Bran because he’s earned it.

“I’m so fucking tired of the secrets!” I yell.

A hand comes to the back of my neck, fingers gently pressing at the knotted muscle. The rich tenor of Bran's voice is at my ear. "Calm down, mouse."

Rita blinks in quick succession as the surprise morphs into agitation. I can see the regret pinched around her brown eyes. "I wanted to tell you. I really did, but it wasn't my place."

Bran pulls me back. "Do you know what was bound?" he asks her.

Rita shakes her head. "Bindings, for the most part, can be applied universally. I only ask the why if I suspect its being abused. In this case, it was a mother asking for her child."

"How do we undo it?" Bran asks. I'm glad he's thinking rationally, asking the right questions. I can't keep my thoughts straight. I just want to scream with rage. I can feel it burbling up at the base of my throat. But I clench my teeth together to keep my voice locked away.

"I need a new moon," Rita tells us.

I pick up the amulet again and turn it over in my hand.

Bran says, "When is that?"

Without looking at the calendar, Rita answers right away. Witches and shifters always know the cycle of the moons. I couldn't care less. *Usually.*

"This coming Thursday."

Two days *after* my Pledging.

Great.

"Will you do it?" Bran asks her.

"Of course."

"Do you need anything from us before then?"

I catch the thinly veiled contempt that comes across her face before she says, "Us? Is there an *us*, Mr. Duval?"

It's funny hearing Rita use the title considering that in appearances she's nearly thirty years older than he is.

It's a sign of respect, I realize, one you give to your elders.

And Bran is our elder by several hundred years.

"The only reason I'm here asking these questions is because Bran clued me in," I say. "He didn't have to, but he did. So yes, there is an *us*. For now, anyway."

"You're cute when you're defending me," Bran says.

I whack him in the abs, but he barely flinches. It's like hitting a wall of iron. "Stop doing that."

"Stop doing what?"

I wave in the air. "This. Being this way. Saying those things. Acting all ___"

Annoyingly hot and stuff.

Bran is smug from his lofty height.

"Thank you for telling me now," I say to Rita, eager to get the hell out of here. "And I really appreciate you undoing the binding."

"It's your right to have it undone. I should have said something earlier." She takes a step toward me. "But Jessie, give some consideration to the consequences." Her gaze is heavy and intense as she adds, "We have no idea what we're unbinding. Just be prepared for that."

I give her a quick nod and shove Bran out the door.

I barely look up as we exit the coffee shop. I don't feel settled until we're back into the night, and Bran is behind the wheel of the Bimmer and I'm in the passenger seat. He turns the engine over and pulls out of the parking spot, making his way down River Street.

Pressure is building in my chest, making my ribs ache. What the hell is going on? Up until this moment, I'd wanted to think that Kelly pawning me off on the Duval House was just some kind of big sister I-know-better-than-you move. But now...now it's so much bigger than that and it's growing by the second and—

I have a sudden flash to the conversation I overheard between Bran and his brother Damien. In all of the chaos with Kelly, I completely forgot about it.

Turning in my seat, I regard Bran with suspicion.

He gives me a quick look before returning his eyes to the road. "Well spit it out."

"Everyone is keeping secrets from me, including you."

"Me?"

“I heard you talking to your brother. You said, ‘If there is something special about the girl...’ And now look, we find out I’ve been bound for some unknown reason. What did you mean by that? What do you know? What does Damien know?”

“I thought I smelled a mouse outside.”

“Besides the point!”

Bran slows and downshifts to turn onto a side street, away from the main part of downtown. He licks his lips, teeth raking over his bottom lip. I see the moment he makes a decision.

“All right. Fine. Maybe I’ve kept some things from you too, but only because there are still a lot of unanswered questions, and if there’s anything I’ve learned in my multitude of centuries, it’s that making assumptions can cost you more than you’re willing to pay.”

“That sounds like a really fancy way of saying you’ve been lying to me.”

“Lies are different than unspoken truths.”

I grumble and face the road again. “I’m officially extremely excited about leaving this fucking town.”

Bran shoots me a look. “You’re still planning on leaving?”

“Of course. Even more so now. Because everyone is keeping shit from me.”

“Don’t you want to know why?”

“No.”

“Now who’s lying?”

I cross my arms over my chest and slump in the seat. Deep down, I do want to know, but I’m too afraid of what the truth might reveal.

Bran slams on the brakes and whips the wheel around. I brace myself with one hand on the door handle and the other on the dash. “What are you doing?”

“You’re right. You deserve transparency.” He takes us back the way we came. “I promised you I’d help you, so I will.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

We don’t head downtown though. Bran takes the next left turn, and the headlights sweep over a roadside sign that reads *So Good Food—where you can fill up on so good food for just \$10!*

That’s a Locke House restaurant.

“Earlier you asked me how I knew certain details about the Locke house.” Bran shifts and the car picks up speed again.

I’m momentarily distracted by the movements, but I shake myself out of the hypnosis. “Right. Yeah. I did say that.”

Bran smiles at me, his face highlighted by the soft neon glow of the dash lights. “I know things because I have a spy in Locke House.”

I have to say, I’m not surprised by this news. I’m gathering that Bran Duval deals in information. It’s cleaner than fists and blood.

It makes me like him even more.

When So Good appears on the horizon, the back deck that sits over the river is lit up with big-bulbed string lights. Bran slows and pulls into the parking lot.

“Here?” I say and sit forward in the seat.

The parking lot is packed. It’s a Saturday night, after all, so I’m not surprised. I am surprised, however, that a Duval vampire is totally casual about stepping foot inside.

“Your spy is here?”

“Yes, but maybe don’t call them my spy when we walk in the door.”

We climb out, and laughter and revelry filters out the open windows and from the deck. Bran leads us up the three wide steps to the wrap-around porch and then holds open the screen door for me.

I’ve been to So Good many times before but usually with Kelly, and sometimes with a Locke or two. Never with a Duval.

I’m braced for the same reaction that we got at the coffeeshop, but no one pays us much notice as we step inside.

I relax a little. Maybe this won’t be as bad as I thought.

“This way, mouse,” Bran says at my ear and then steers me toward the back with a hand at my hip.

We go down a hallway, bypassing the dining room all together. When we come to a closed door with a metal placard labeled MANAGER, Bran knocks.

Within seconds, the door pulls open, and a woman peers out at us.

It's Runa, one of the higher-ranking Locke vampires. I've always thought of her as one of the cooler ones with her nose piercing and her full-sleeve tattoos. Her hair is dyed lavender and shaved on one side of her head, and long on the other. Today the long side is braided into a thick fish-tail braid.

Her bright blue gaze sweeps from Bran to me and then back to Bran. Her eyes narrow, and then she speaks to him in a language I don't recognize.

He replies immediately in the same language.

I think it might be Italian or Latin

Then she slams the door in our faces.

"What was that all about?" I ask.

"Come on." Bran guides me back through the restaurant, then out the front door and back into the car.

"What is happening? What did she say?"

Bran starts the car up and drives us a few miles down the road. "Runa just told me to go fuck myself."

"I thought she was your spy?"

"Oh she is."

"I'm so confused."

"We have a standing meeting every other week, but I needed her sooner than that. We can't use phones to communicate. Too obvious. So I asked her if she thought Julian would be pissed if I bit you in the restaurant, and Runa told me to—well, you know."

"Okay...so now what?"

"She'll meet us at our usual spot. We just have to give her a while." He sends a devilish look my way. "However will we pass the time?"

"Very funny."

Bran takes us to an upscale part of town where the river widens and spills into Midnight Lake. Here the houses are further apart, and each comes with its own dock and boathouse. They are as fancy as the people that inhabit them.

We turn down a winding driveway back through the trees and finally come up on a modern house, constructed of black steel and glass and stone.

"Whoa." I duck down so I can see the house better through the windshield. "Whose place is this?"

“It’s mine.”

Car parked, he pulls up on the parking brake.

“Are you serious? Why would you live in suburbia next door to me if you have a place like this?”

“I have many places like this.”

“That still doesn’t answer the question.”

He climbs out, so I’m forced to follow. At a large steel door on the lower level, Bran punches in a code into a keypad, and the deadbolt thunks open.

The interior is dark and cold. It smells like Bran but only vaguely, like it’s been a few weeks since he inhabited the space.

He punches in a second code into a security system, shutting it down, then flicks on a light. The entire ground floor lights up with soft, inset lighting.

I don’t wait for an invitation.

The main living space is massive and open-concept with a modern kitchen to the right and a living room and dining space to the left. In the far corner, floor-to-ceiling windows overlook Midnight Lake, and the dark, still water is dotted with the lights of the night, making it look like an impressionist painting.

The house is neat as a showroom, and it makes me fucking giddy. There are no empty wine bottles in the sink or stacks of random bills on the concrete counters. No shoes kicked off into a corner or sweaters hung over chairs.

“If this place were mine, I’d never leave it,” I tell him.

He’s at the built-in bar behind me pouring himself a drink. “It’s a little cold for my taste.”

“So why did you buy it?”

“I didn’t buy it. I built it. And mostly to piss off Julian Locke.”

Laughter spills out of me before I think better of it. “Why?”

“He wanted to buy this waterfront and put in a marina. So I bought up the waterfront instead.”

I roll my eyes. “And then built a million-dollar house just to prove a point?”

Drink now in hand, he leans against the bar and meets my eyes. “Precisely.”

“Why don’t you like Julian?”

“That’s a very long story.”

“We’ve got time.”

He slings back the drink. “We don’t, actually.”

The front door bangs open, and someone darts inside, a blur to my mortal eyes.

Runa grabs Bran by the throat and slams him against the wall. “You can’t come into my bar demanding my attention. You’re going to get us caught!”

I go still beside the leather sofa, trying not to be conspicuous.

Bran’s eyes fire amber. The line of his jaw flexes as he grits his teeth.

I’ve yet to see someone get the best of Bran, and while I have no idea what the dynamic of this relationship is, there’s a roiling trepidation in my gut that tells me it won’t end well.

Bran grabs Runa by the arm, his hand circling her wrist. His gaze is pinned on her, face blank.

Then I hear a bone snap and Runa falters.

“You do not come into my house,” Bran says after the second crunch of bone, “and threaten me.”

Runa lets go of Bran’s throat and cries out as her knees buckle.

“I don’t work for you,” Bran goes on, his fiery gaze following her as she crumples to the floor. “If I want your services, I’ll get them however I wish. Do we understand one another?”

My heart is beating hard in my chest, and I bump into the sofa without realizing I’ve been backpedaling.

Sometimes, it’s easy to forget the danger of a vampire.

Sometimes it’s easy to forget just how insignificant we are in the eyes of an immortal.

“I can’t hear you, Runa,” Bran says even though she hasn’t answered him. She’s been too busy crying out in pain.

“Yes! All right! I hear you.”

Bran lets her go, and her hand flops uselessly against her arm.

I slap a hand over my mouth as the urge to vomit sneaks up on me.

I guess I was wrong about Bran's currency. His investments are in information. But he deals in violence. And right now, he's spending what he's earned.

Bran steps around her and gathers his empty glass and a bottle of scotch. “Would you like a drink?” he asks as if he didn’t just crush her arm.

Runa takes a hiccupping breath, arm held close to her chest. “Yes.”

I may have been surrounded by vampires my entire life, but I’ve never witnessed the intimate inner workings of the power dynamic. Everyone behaved in the Locke circle. And if there were showdowns between houses, that happened outside the awareness of the mortals. Or at least *this* mortal.

It’s unsettling how casual they are about this.

Bran dips down and offers Runa a glass. Her wrist is popping, her arm straightening out as her body heals the wound. She takes the glass with her good hand and slings back the dark caramel liquid, then huffs out a breath as the alcohol burns down her throat.

“Mouse?” He raises the bottle at me.

“Yes please.” My voice comes out a little too breathy, and his gaze lingers on me as the fire dies out of his irises.

He pours as he walks to me then holds out the glass.

He doesn’t speak, but I still hear him loud and clear. *She deserved it.*

Deep down, I know that the show of dominance is important in a world of dominant creatures, but damn if it isn’t a little scary.

And if I’m honest, hot as hell.

Which must make me sick as hell, right?

Hand unsteady, I take a sip then pull the glass away, but Bran stops me and urges me to tip it all back.

Our eyes are locked on one another while I empty the drink, and as the rich, smokey liquor goes down, tears well up beneath my lids.

“You good?” he asks.

If I said no, what would he do?

A pinch appears between his dark brows.

“Yes,” I answer. “I’m good.”

He gives me a quick nod before turning away. “Get up,” he tells Runa, and she climbs to her feet as he deposits the liquor back on the bar. “What can you tell me about Jessie in relation to the Locke house?”

Runa’s attention wanders to me. She stretches out her arm, wiggles her fingers. There’s a ring of bruising on her wrist, but at least her hand isn’t flopping around like limp cheese.

“That’s a broad question,” she says.

“Julian showed up at my house earlier tonight trying to stake his claim.” Bran is a blur as he crosses the room to stand just to the left of me. “Why would he go to all that trouble?”

“The MacMahon family has been pledged to the Lockes for decades. Of course he’d try to protect what he thinks is his.”

“But I’m not his,” I point out, my voice still a little shaky. “My Pledging is still a few days away.”

“Look, I wish I could help on this.” She tugs down the hem of her shirt after it rode up in the tussle. “But I’m rarely privy to Pledging details.”

Bran paces away. “Think harder, Runa.”

“I’m serious. I’ve got nothing.”

Bran darts to the kitchen. I hear a drawer open, then something slice through the air.

A wooden stake lodges itself in Runa’s right shoulder. This time, she bites back her cry as blood seeps from the wound.

“Try again.” Bran pulls a second stake from the drawer and tosses it in the air, end over end, catching it again. “I’m waiting.”

I’ve never seen a vampire staked before. I heard it’s messy and that when the vampire dies, they burst into ash, permeating the air with the stench of burning hair and cinders.

I really don’t want to witness that.

“Bran,” I start. It’s not that important. Not important enough to take a life.

But he cuts a withering glare my way, and I quickly clamp my mouth shut again.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” Runa says, voice wobbling on the pain. “I have—”

The second stake hits the air and whizzes past her head, sinking itself into the wall behind her.

“Okay! Fine!” She holds up a hand. “There is something. It was a long time ago.”

“I’m listening.” Bran pulls out a third stake.

She talks fast. “A bunch of the Lockes were at the MacMahon house for dinner. Jessie would have just been a kid at the time. One of the vamps, Sasha, took Jessie for a joy ride. Tossed her on her back and raced away. It was just for fun. We do it with the littles all of the time.”

Runa looks at me guiltily. “Except when Sasha came back, she was acting strange.”

I remember that night. I remember holding on to Sasha for dear life while I laughed and laughed as the world blurred past and then...nothing. There was a blank space in that memory. I could never remember the ride back.

“Go on,” Bran says.

“The next day,” Runa says, “Sasha was dead. Because Julian killed her.”

SIXTEEN

SASHA IS DEAD?

“No,” I say and shake my head for emphasis. “I was told Sasha moved away. I specifically remember that.”

With a grit of her teeth, Runa removes the stake from her shoulder. The one Bran threw at her with terrifying precision. The second stake missed, but I suspect that was on purpose.

“Julian can tell you whatever he wants you to hear,” Runa says as she walks over to a nearby table and sets the bloody stake on top.

I’m suddenly itching for a rag so I can clean that mess up. I know it’s just my brain looking for anything to distract me and stop the agonizing mental pain of my life going sideways.

Bran comes over to me, but he speaks to Runa. “What did Sasha do to earn that punishment?”

“That I don’t know.” Runa examines the new hole in her leather jacket where the stake pierced her flesh. She frowns at the mangled material. “There is a rumor, however, that a shifter witnessed whatever happened.”

“Which one?” Bran asks.

Runa smirks. I sense a roadblock before she even answers.

“Cal.”

I catch the barely perceptible flinch on Bran’s face.

Callen Crawford. The Alpha of the Midnight pack.

Great.

Just fabulous.

“Well, I guess that’s our dead end,” I say.

Bran scowls at me. “If you think an alpha is going to stop me, you’re sorely mistaken, mouse.”

“Oh really? You’re what, you’re going to visit the Midnight Pack and demand to see the alpha and ask him what he maybe saw over ten years ago? Besides, don’t you think that if he did witness Sasha doing something she shouldn’t have, he would have reported it? Cal may be vicious, but he’s always followed the rules.”

Except...now that I think of it, Kelly was just complaining about the pack not wanting to pay their taxes. Something about land disputes.

Bran doesn’t answer me. Instead, he goes to the table and retrieves the stake. Runa cringes. “I’m telling you what I know. I swear it.”

“Go.” He nods her toward the door.

“I expect payment for this.”

“I’ll have something for you by the end of next week.”

With a quick nod, she’s gone, and the front door clicks closed behind her.

“What do you pay her?”

Bran tosses the stake into the sink and taps on the faucet. “Information about her blood descendants.”

“Really? She can’t find out that information on her own?”

“There’s this whole thing with a witch curse on her blood line and Julian forbidding her from contacting them because of it.” He opens a cabinet to reveal a row of yellow tubs holding disinfecting wipes. He pulls one out. “I get an update on the family and I tell her what I know and she can carry on her immortal life, feeling cozy about her blood line.”

“That’s actually...kinda sweet.”

The look he gives me could singe hair. “Don’t try to paint me as a good guy. You’ll be sorely disappointed.” He says this as he wipes the blood from the table, scrubbing it clean.

“If you say so.”

“Mouse.” The word comes out throaty and vibrating with a warning.

But while I just witnessed him crush a vampire’s arm and then stake her, there’s this little voice in the back of my head that says I have nothing to fear from Bran Duval. Other than my heart getting broken.

Goddamn that heart anyway.

Best to protect it with everything I have.

“Yes, you’re the bad guy. That’s something we can both agree on. So now what?”

He tosses the bloody wipe and washes his hands. “Now we visit the Midnight Pack.”

The shifters live on the north side of the river in a self-contained community surrounded by hardwoods and pine. I think I’ve crossed the river a total of one time in my life when we went on a field trip to the Guard station when I was a kid.

The Guard is Midnight Harbor’s version of a police force, but in a town of supernatural creatures, their power is limited. They mostly deal with mortal disputes, but when their station was rebuilt on the north side of the river, on the edge of the shifter neighborhood, there was talk that they had an unspoken alliance with the shifters.

It was the squabbling and gossip that originally led me to want to leave Midnight. I hate politics. And politics with supernaturals is politics on steroids.

The second we take the Crawford Bridge across the river, I feel like we’re being watched.

The tall pines loom over us as Bran drives the car around a sharp turn on the road. When we get near the shifter neighborhood, maple and oak trees start to take over the woods, and the headlights cut across several driftwood sculptures hanging from the lower branches.

They’re called Valhalla ladders, and they’re made from collected wood that’s then strung up on twine and hung for protection. I know this because Sam’s dad is primarily Norwegian and made a ladder with the kids one year to hang in their bay window.

While the Midnight Pack is diverse in its members, Cal is Scandinavian and the pack is steeped in Scandinavian culture because of it.

When we crest the next hill, old-fashioned lampposts appear along the side of the road and send soft golden light into the night.

I can’t help but take it all in. I immediately like it. There’s a quintessential small-town vibe to it with one block of shops, the buildings

original to the early 1900s judging by their style.

Music filters out from a bar and grill where the front doors have been propped open by rusty milk cans. There's a sign hanging in the window, the curling neon tubes spelling out *Galloway's* in a bright orange glow.

"Do you know where you're going?" I ask Bran.

He's got one hand casually on the steering wheel, the other curled around the head of the stick shift.

"Of course I do." He nods to the end of the main street and to a massive estate house sitting like a lord at the top of the hill.

I've heard about the pack house, but it's even more formidable in person.

The light of the waning moon sends a soft glow around the many steepled roofs and jutting chimneys. Once we turn off the main street, Bran has to navigate to an unmarked road that is at an almost constant incline as it winds back through the pines.

Finally, the road cuts into the property and wraps around the house. There's a parking lot to the south with at least half the spots taken.

Bran parks and shuts the car off. The engine ticks in the quiet as it cools down.

"We're really doing this?" I ask.

With the car off and the dashboard dark, I can only see the barest hint of Bran's face. I can't read his expression, but there's a buzz of energy in the air like he's preparing for battle.

"You want answers, don't you?"

"I'm not sure what I want." I pick at the frayed hem of my t-shirt. "This still feels like a dream."

"Then let's wake you up."

I snort. "Easier said than done."

"You'll be glad you went this far when it's all over."

"But what is *it*, exactly? Aren't you a little worried? We can't stuff this goose back into the oven."

He laughs, his raspy voice filling the intimate interior of the car.

"I'm serious."

"I know you are." He reaches across the center console and takes my hand. The skin-on-skin contact sends an immediate, needy thrill between

my legs even though there's nothing sexual about it. Even though there are much bigger things to be thinking about.

"I suggest you get that under control if we're walking into a pack house," he says.

I hang my head back against the headrest. "This is a horrible idea."

"You can't control yourself around me," he teases in that thick, horny voice of his. "I'm not surprised." He unlocks our hands and drags a soft touch across my palm. That needy thrill turns hot and buzzy.

Gelatin cake.

Gelatin cake.

It's not working!

His hand leaves mine and goes to my thigh. The curl of his fingers hit just a few inches from the seam of my thigh to my center, and I've never wished for a skirt more in my life.

Why did I have to wear pants?!

He grips me harder, hand trailing closer, and a gasp escapes me.

"If it'll help get you through this meeting," he says and leans across the center counsel, bringing his other hand to my jaw, tipping me toward him, "how about I give you something to look forward to?"

"And what's that?"

"I'll fuck you."

My clit throbs and my inner walls clench up at the scant promise of his cock inside of me. I've fucked myself with a dildo before, but something tells me fucking Bran will be a ride I won't soon forget.

"But..." I say and pant out a breath, my brain trying really hard to remind my mouth that I already told him I didn't want him.

"But what?" His mouth finds my throat and kisses then nips, and I shiver beneath his teeth.

I gulp down air. I don't know what my objection was going to be. It's gone now, lost to the wind.

"Fuck me now," I say.

"Needy little mouse."

"What's to stop us?"

"We're in a pack parking lot, and I don't relish the idea of getting staked with my cock buried in that tight little pussy."

“Oh fuck.” I love it when he talks like that. “Then drive us away. We can come back.”

His hand trails closer to my center. “No.”

“Why?” I moan.

“Because I like seeing you desperate.”

The noise that comes out of my throat can only be described as *sexually frustrated*.

He lets his finger graze the seam of my jeans, sending a buzz through me.

“If you don’t fuck me soon, I might be the one staking you.”

“You could try. You would fail.” He laughs in the quiet cab of the car and then pulls away, leaving me panting and so fucking horny. He finds a pocket of moonlight, and in that silver glow, shoots me a devilish grin.

“I really do hate you.” My eyes are heavy, and I’m sure I’m flushed.

“I know, mouse. You hate me so much, I bet your panties are fucking drenched.”

He’s not wrong.

It takes me a few seconds to get control of myself, and the walk from the parking lot to the front of the house in the cool night air helps unravel some of my arousal.

And thank god too because we’re stopped before we even make it up the stone steps to the double front door, proving my earlier suspicion that we were being watched the second we crossed the bridge.

The shifter that meets us is the pack’s beta, Fox, which is ironic, considering he’s a wolf shifter. The story I heard from Sam was that his real name is Waagosh, which means “fox” in the Ojibwe language. Fox is half Ojibwe. I’m not sure how he found himself here in Midnight Harbor, but from what I’ve heard, everyone loves him. Unless you’ve found yourself in the unfortunate position of being on his bad side. I guess you don’t get to be beta without breaking some bones.

“Bran Duval,” Fox says, his voice like sandpaper drawing over cut wood. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Bran is loose and casual, but I sense his energy, standing as near to him as I am. He's a master at appearing one way while being another. I admire the way he does this as if he's confident he can walk into any room and make friends, or enemies, and he's okay with either.

I've always wanted people to like me, and sometimes, I've gone overboard, trying to fit in or belong.

"I need to speak to Cal," Bran answers.

Fox leans his shoulder against one of the stone columns that runs three stories high to the roofline above us. He crosses his arms over his chest. "What for?"

"I have a question for him."

"Whatever you have to ask him you can ask me." Fox tilts his head, regarding us like we're peasants.

"All right." Bran steps forward. "I was wondering if Cal knew why Julian Locke might stake one of his own."

Fox goes still. Clearly that's not where he thought this conversation was going. He narrows his eyes. "Why would he know anything about that?"

"A little birdie told me."

"You and your birds." Fox grunts. "You always were too nosy for your own good."

"And you're too bold for your age."

"This is pack territory," Fox says. "I shouldn't have to remind you of that."

Bran clasps his hands behind his back. "Now that we've pissed around, can we get on with it then?"

The front door bursts open, and several younger pack members spill out. They see Fox and quickly bow their heads and dart away.

Fox catches the heavy door before it slips closed and holds it for us. "Come in and I'll see if Cal is about."

Bran takes my hand and drags me behind him. As we pass, he says to Fox, "As if you don't know where your alpha is at all times."

"As if I'm going to give you free access to him whenever you want."

"This is starting off great." I let out a nervous laugh, hoping to lighten the mood, but no light can penetrate the dark moods of these two men.

We enter into a foyer with a domed ceiling far above us with a wrought iron frame and stained glass inlaid between. Hanging from its center is a

chandelier that looks small in the cavernous space, but I bet it would easily be three times the size of me if I were standing next to it.

Fox takes us down the hall to the left. The pack house might be massive, but there's a comfortable din of conversation and laughter in the air like it's a house well-loved and inhabited by family.

I suppose being part of a pack gives you that, whether they're blood or not.

Being absorbed into the pack life was never even a consideration for me, but feeling the warmth of the house makes me wonder if I snubbed it for no good reason.

"She can wait here," Fox says as he stops at the open pocket doors.

"She comes with," Bran says.

"Yeah, this is technically about me," I point out.

"Humans don't get access to the alpha without being pack pledged." Fox almost sounds bored explaining this to me. I guess he probably has better things to do.

"I'm not going to leave the little mouse in a house full of dogs," Bran says.

Fox straightens, a rumble sounding in his chest.

"Take it back," I say out of the corner of my mouth.

Bran sighs. "Fine. Wolves. Better?"

Fox doesn't look like it's better.

"You'll have to excuse him," I say. "He's not used to civilized conversations." I end with clenched teeth and a frown at Bran. He just scoffs.

"Please," I beg, even though I'm aware that I didn't want to come here in the first place, and now I'm groveling to get Bran on the inside. He's really going to owe me, and thinking of him owing me...

Gelatin cake. Giggly gelatin cake!

"Fine." Fox turns away. "This way, Duval."

Bran gives me one lingering look. I can feel him hesitating, so I put my hands to his back and shove him away. "Go. Before he changes his mind."

"Behave," he says beneath his breath. "And don't let any of the mutts touch you."

I roll my eyes.

"Mouse."

“Yes. Fine. Now go.”

He turns away and darts after Fox.

Of course, not even ten minutes later, I’m surrounded by wolves, with Evan and Adam at the head of the group.

“Jess!” Evan calls out and wraps his arm around my shoulders. “What are you doing here?”

“Bran,” I say. “He had to talk to Cal.”

Evan makes a snide comment that I don’t hear, but that makes Adam and a few others laugh.

“That explains why you smell like him.”

“I do?” I lift my shirt to sniff it and catch a lingering scent that reminds me of Bran. That rich amber smoke.

“Are you *with* Duval?” Evan steers me out of the room and down the hall, his arm still around me.

“Um...no. He’s just helping me with something.”

The others fall into step behind us and start discussing a movie they’ve all just watched.

“He seemed awfully possessive of you the other night at the Harbor,” Evan points out.

“Yeah, well...” I trail off because I really have no explanation for it. He did seem possessive, and he seemed possessive ten minutes ago, and while it should piss me off, it just makes me fill up with butterflies.

Arm still around my shoulders, Evan guides me into a billiard room where five pool tables are set up in the center beneath stained-glass bar lights. There are three games in session, with the last two tables open.

“Want to play pool with us while you wait?” Evan smiles down at me with that dazzling smile of his. He really is handsome in that All-American footballer kind of way. The cut of his bicep flexes against my shoulder as he deposits me at one of the tables.

“Sure, why not.”

Playing a game of pool is innocent enough, right?

Except ten minutes later, we’re in the middle of a game, and Evan plays one of the oldest tricks in the book.

“Here, let me show you how to get that shot.” He slides in behind me, his groin suddenly at my ass.

Oh shit.

He wraps his arms around me and rests his hand over mine, the pool cue between us, his mouth at my ear.

And that's when Bran walks in the door, and his eyes light up with fiery rage.

SEVENTEEN

I ONCE HEARD MY MOM LIKEN THE RAGE OF A VAMPIRE TO A SUMMER storm.

“It can come out of nowhere,” she’d said. “Quiet one minute, roaring the next. And it will destroy everything around you before you even know what hit you.”

When I spot Bran at the doorway, when I see his eyes light up fire orange, I know I’m standing at the edge of a storm.

The air freezes in my throat.

I swear the hair rises along my arms and along the length of my neck.

Don’t let the mutts touch you.

Evan is draped over me, his arms around me one minute and the next he’s flying across the room.

Everyone starts moving, but most wolves can’t match the speed of a vampire the age of Bran Duval.

A split second before Evan crashes against the bar, Bran is there catching him with a fistful of his t-shirt. He slams him straight down to the floor.

The hardwood cracks, shards exploding in the air. The impact ripples out through the floor, and I feel the answering reverberation a half second later as it echoes up through the soles of my shoes.

I don’t think I breathe. Not one breath.

And then Fox is sprinting across the room, fist cocked back, ready to strike.

“Bran!” I shout.

Bran doesn't turn, doesn't flinch, and yet he catches Fox's fist in the cup of his right hand.

The room goes still.

Fox grits his teeth, winds back with his left fist. Bran catches that one too.

"He knew what he was doing." Bran's voice is strangled and raw.

Fox curls his upper lip, strain appearing in the raised tendons in his neck. I don't think he's trying to punch now so much as he is trying to retreat. And Bran isn't letting him.

"He knew what he was doing," Bran goes on, "the second he smelled me on her."

Evan coughs from the floor, the sound wet and reedy.

Fox grunts.

A lock of my hair flutters in front of my face. I look to my left just in time to see a blur of muscle and plaid dart past.

Something cracks. More splinters hit the air.

When I turn to Bran, Cal Crawford, Alpha of the Midnight Pack, is at his back, the sharp end of a broken pool cue pressed between his shoulder blades, angled toward his heart.

"Let him go," Cal says.

The others shrink back, heads bowed.

The tension in the room is thick enough to choke on.

Bran's nostrils flare, his jaw flexing as he weighs his options.

Come on, Bran! Let him go!

"I know you, Duval," Cal says. "How much would it piss you off to die in pack territory?"

I think I know that answer.

Bran lets Fox go, and the shifter shakes out his hands as if he's trying to bring feeling back to his fingers.

Cal tosses the broken cue. "Outside. Now."

I'm frozen in place as the Midnight Pack's alpha stalks toward the door, right past me. I've seen Cal around, obviously, but I've also seen the sun in the sky. Doesn't mean I can handle standing right next to it.

Cal Crawford is large and impressive. I don't know his exact age—shifters live longer than mortals, but they aren't immortal. But if I didn't know any better, I'd think he just stepped out of a Viking saga.

His blond hair is shaved short on the sides, but left longer on top. There are black tattoos running back along the sides of his skull, down the back of his neck to disappear beneath the collar of his red and black flannel. A neatly trimmed goatee hides what I'm guessing is a sharp jawline, judging by the cut of his cheekbones.

When he passes me, he barely looks at me.

Talk about feeling insignificant.

Bran takes me by the hand and leads me out of the room and through the foyer and out the front door.

Cal waits for us in the dark in the middle of the gravel drive.

Fox trails behind us.

"Let's get this out of the way first," Cal says, the boom of his voice echoing around the open space. "One, you are hereby banned from shifter territory. If I catch you on our lands again, I'll tear out your heart with my bare hands."

Bran tightens his hold on me when I let out a little hiccup of fear.

"Two, the only reason you're leaving here on two legs is because I govern this pack with a very clear set of rules. Evan overstepped. He'll be dealt with." Cal's dark gaze cuts to me. I think I catch a flash of pity in his eyes. "Three...Jessie I've been waiting for you to come to me for a very long time. You want to know what I saw that night in the woods."

It's not a question.

I swallow around the lump forming in my throat.

"You were there?"

He nods.

"What did you see?"

His gaze slips to the house, then back to me. "Not here. Come. I'll tell you what I know, and then you'll be gone."

Bran and I have no choice but to follow.

Cal leads us along a dirt path that winds back through the pines to a cabin that overlooks the river. Fox stays at our backs, the two wolves boxing us in.

It makes my skin crawl. Bran seems totally fine even though he was threatened with imminent death if he so much as stepped out of line.

The windows of the cabin are lit up from within, but when we step inside, the place is empty. Though the fireplace is cold and dark, I catch the faintest scent of burning wood on the air. There's a coffee cup on the wooden table in the center of the main space, but I can't tell if the coffee inside is fresh or not.

"Sit," Cal orders.

I dutifully take a seat, but Bran stays standing and leans against the wall behind me.

Cal all but rolls his eyes.

Fox stays near the door.

"We're waiting," Bran says.

I send him a withering look over my shoulder, but he ignores me, his gaze fixed on Cal.

Cal goes to the vintage fridge and yanks on the metal handle. The glow of the fridge spills out around him as he ducks inside and pulls out a bottle of beer. He doesn't offer us one. Not that I'd take it.

With a twist of the cap, the beer hisses. He takes a swig then props a hand on the counter and leans a hip into it.

"You want to know what I saw in the woods," he states.

"Yes. We've established that," Bran answers.

Cal runs his tongue along the inside of his bottom lip as he stares at Bran.

"Please tell me." I wring my hands in my lap, knee bobbing beneath the table. If there's something to know, I need to know it now. I can't take this suspense anymore.

What happened with Sasha when I was a kid?

"I was running," Cal says. "I run in the woods at night. Always have. I stopped by the riverside to take a drink when I heard a child laughing."

Fear flutters in my chest.

"I went up the riverbank to see who it was, and that's when I spotted Sasha coming to a stop with Jessie on her back."

That I remember. I remember the world spinning to a halt.

"Sasha set Jessie down, and Jessie tripped over some exposed tree roots, and she went down in an instant."

His gaze lands on me. “You started crying, and you kept saying your necklace fell off. Sasha ducked down to help you, and I immediately smelled blood on the air. Sasha noticed too. I could see her eyes glowing across the clearing.”

My heart beats a little harder.

“‘It’ll be okay,’ Sasha said to you. ‘Let me see.’ You lifted your hand to her and there was a cut on your palm, blood running down your arm. At this point, I think Sasha was just panicking that you were hurt and then...then something changed.”

I sense Bran moving closer to me.

“I’ve seen bloodlust in vampires plenty of times before, but this was different,” Cal says. “This was almost...hypnotic.”

My knee bobs faster.

“She was on you in a second, teeth sunk into your wrist. I raced out of the woods. By the time I reached you, she was backtracking and swaying on her feet. ‘Oh shit,’ she said. ‘Something is wrong.’ I tried grabbing you, but she snatched you away before I could and like that—” he snaps his fingers “—she was gone.”

A cold sweat breaks out along the back of my neck.

“Why didn’t you report it?” Bran asks.

“I don’t get in the middle of vampire business. I did tell Jessie’s mom though.”

His voice is distant and muffled like I’m underwater. I swallow hard again, this time because I think I might be sick.

“What did she say?” Bran asks. “Her mother?”

“She made me a deal.”

I lurch away from the table. Bran pulls me into him. “What kind of deal?”

“Keep my mouth shut, and she’d make sure the pack got what it needed. It’s one of the reasons the Guard station was rebuilt on our side of the river.”

“You asked for that?” Bran says.

I’m vaguely aware of Cal nodding. “Vampires hold too much power. My opinion on that likely is no surprise to you. Controlling the Guard station gave me more sway.”

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

Bran ushers me out the door. I make it just in time to the side yard and collapse to my knees as the retching starts.

Nothing comes up.

Bran kneels beside me and holds my hair back as my stomach violently tries to deal with this information and finds it impossible to get anything out.

It's just me gagging in the dirt, eyes burning, tears streaming down my face. It's like I'm trying to purge my soul.

"Mouse," Bran whispers. "It's going to be all right."

"You...don't...know that."

"I do."

I can finally suck down a full breath. "What is happening?"

"I don't know."

Footsteps sound behind us. Bran looks up. "Is there more?"

"That's it," Cal answers.

"Then we'll be on our way." Bran puts his chest to my shoulder and then scoops me up in his arms effortlessly. I want to tell him to put me down, but I have no energy for it. And besides, the feel of his arms around me, holding me close...it's the only thing keeping me together.

"Thank you," he tells Cal.

"It's the last you'll get from me," Cal warns. "And mostly I did it for her."

"Then I thank you for her."

Arms tight around Bran's neck, I snuggle in close to him, feeling the burn of tears.

My mother betrayed me. My sister betrayed me.

And for what?

I don't know who to trust anymore, and the fucked-up thing? I think the only person I *can* trust is Bran Duval.

It takes Bran less than a minute to get us back to the Bimmer. He gently sets me in the passenger seat and then clips my seat belt around my body. I'm

numb and so far away, I barely notice. I barely notice the car ride back to the house either. So when Bran guides me into his house, I don't protest.

He sits me at his table and pours me a tumbler of bourbon.

"Drink," he says.

It isn't until the alcohol is burning down my throat and warming my belly that I finally blink back to consciousness.

"How could they do this to me?" I blurt out.

He's sitting in the chair next to me, his long body stretched out. He's got his own tumbler of bourbon in hand, long, pale fingers curled around the glass.

"My guess? Your mom was protecting you. And your sister was passed the torch."

"That's far too nice of an explanation." I take another sip. "You bit me. Did you sense anything weird?"

"You were wearing your necklace," he points out. "Cal said that night you lost it when you fell."

"But Rita said in order to undo the binding, it has to be destroyed. So why would it matter if I was wearing it?"

"To undo it, sure. But when it comes off? That might distance the effects of the magic and let whatever it is they're trying to hide leak through."

Whatever they're trying to hide.

Something about me.

My mother and my sister have been hiding something about me. I don't understand why or how. I don't care in this moment.

I just want to know.

I sling back the rest of the drink and hiss at the burn. When I set the heavy glass down, it thuds in the quiet.

"Then let's find out what they're trying to hide."

Bran frowns at me.

I unhook the necklace and let the charm dangle in the air between us. We both watch it spin from the end of the chain.

"Bite me." I drop the necklace and hold out my wrist. His eyes sink to the blue veins running beneath my skin.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes."

His pale fingers circle my wrist as he angles my arm up to him.

His irises flare, and my heart thuds against the back of my tongue as he licks his lips, fangs sharpening.

I think he wants to know as much as I do.

I think he's also just as afraid as I am.

He reaches beneath the table, and I hear a loud pop. When he brings his hand back, there's a sharpened stake in his grip. He gives it to me.

"If something happens," he says, "use it."

"I won't do—"

"Jessie."

It's the first time I've heard him use my name, and it kicks up a wave of fear in my gut.

"Promise me," he says.

I think I might promise him anything if it means getting some answers.

"Okay. I promise."

He gives me a quick nod and then sinks his teeth into my flesh.

EIGHTEEN

GROWING UP WITH VAMPIRES, YOU HEAR STORIES ABOUT WHAT IT'S LIKE TO be bitten.

A pinch. A pleasure. A heady mix of lust and fear.

But I'm realizing now that being bitten isn't a one-size-fits-all thing.

It's like a sunrise.

Not a single one is the same.

When Bran sinks his teeth in my flesh, I gasp in surprise at the first pinch of pain. It sends a shockwave up my arm and instinct has me pulling away.

But Bran's grip is tight, his hunger stronger.

I feel the blood leave me as he sucks from my vein, a mild pressure, and then the pain is fading away, replaced with a buzzy warmth that runs through my body like honey.

It's over within seconds, and when he disengages from me, he collapses against the chair and slouches like he's drunk, head lulled back, blood dripping from his fangs.

"Anything?" I ask. I'm feeling a little swimmy and lightheaded.

Bran's bright amber eyes land on me, heavy and half-lidded. "It's sweeter than it was before."

He runs his tongue over his bottom lip, sucking back the last drops. His mouth is bright red, teeth stained with blood.

"Do you feel okay?" I ask.

"I feel horny."

I swallow hard, my gaze straying to his crotch and the considerable bulge of his cock.

“Besides that...”

He reaches across the table and grabs me by the arms, hauling me onto his lap so that I’m straddling him. He’s so hard it almost hurts.

He grabs my ass, rocking me against him, and a fluttery breath escapes me. I wrap my arms around his neck, leaning into him, and he brings his mouth to the V of my shirt, kissing along the sensitive flesh just above my breast.

“Do you remember me making you a promise, mouse?” He tugs down the collar of my shirt, exposing the cup of my bra.

“Yes,” I say, feeling the answering thrill of that promise between my legs.

He kisses along my bra, a tease of his lips on my skin.

“I always keep my promises,” he says.

“I know but—”

“But what?”

“But...shouldn’t we talk about this? When you bit me, could you tell if there was something wrong with me? Because—” his lips trail up the curve of my throat, closer to the rapid beat of my heart “—because I’m starting to worry and...”

He stops his pursuit of my pulse and looks up at me, eyes bright in the shadows. “There *was* something different,” he admits, “but I don’t know what.”

“Okay. So?”

He grabs my wrist again and holds my arm out where blood is still beading in the puncture wound, droplets sliding down toward the crook of my elbow.

Bran drags his tongue from the end of the trail all the way up to the teeth marks. He draws from the wound again, and his eyes glow brighter.

“Bran,” I moan. “Please. I don’t know what’s happening, and I feel out of control.”

He pulls back and regards me with a look so hot, I’m nearly trembling beneath it. “Then bend to mine, mouse.”

“What?”

“Bend to my control.”

My clit pulses beneath his words.

I think he's trying to distract me. And it's working.

Whenever he gets me like this, I'm mindless. Just body and pleasure and the delirious need for him.

He slides his hand around to the back of my neck, fingers almost bruising as he grips me tightly and rocks his hips forward, grinding me on his cock. "Say yes, mouse."

Maybe he knows exactly what I need right now.

Maybe he knows better than I do.

I'm anxious and worried and...*afraid*. I'm afraid of what we're uncovering.

And right now, I just want to run away from it.

As my life burns down around me, the only thing that feels right is giving in to the pleasure of Bran Duval.

"Okay."

He stands in one swift motion, and I slid down the length of him. His grip still on my neck, he steers me into the living room. "Take off your clothes."

The pressure disappears, and when I turn around, I find him leaning against the back of the couch.

"All of them?"

He says nothing, just watches, waiting.

Hands shaking, I take up the hem of my shirt and slide it off. I let it drop to the floor and then move to the button of my jeans, taking down the zipper.

Pants off, I kick them aside and stand awkwardly in my panties and bra.

"Go on, mouse." He's stoic and distant, but there's a very clear bulge in his pants.

Reaching behind me, I unhook the bra, let the straps slide off my shoulders. Tossing it aside, my nipples immediately bud in the cool air.

"Pull your hair back," he tells me, so I do, sliding it behind my shoulders so there's nothing to shield me from his gaze.

With a deep intake of breath, I slip my panties off and stand there naked in front of him.

We were naked in the shower together, but somehow this is different.

I've never felt so vulnerable.

He's silent as he takes in the sight of me.

"Get in that chair," he orders and tips his head at the side chair behind me.

I make a move to sit, but he tsk-tsks. "No. Turn around. Knees on the seat."

Oh god.

I give him my back, and as instructed, kneel on it, hands propped on the chair's low back.

"Good girl," he says, coaxing a buzzy thrill from my pussy. "Legs spread."

I open as much as the chair will allow, bearing everything to him.

I can't catch my breath, and I'm shaking and wound up tight.

I don't know what he's planning to do, but I'm nearly faint with wanting.

Goosebumps travel down my spine as the air parts when he comes over. He grabs me by the neck again as his other hand trails up the back of my thigh.

"Mouse," he says, "you're already dripping down your legs."

I moan at the pressure of his grip and wiggle my hips as if I'm trying to tempt him to move faster.

And then he slaps my pussy with the flat side of his palm.

I let out a little yip and instinctively pull away, but he's still got me by the neck and holds me in place.

"Who's in control?" His mouth is suddenly at my ear.

"You are."

His fingers come to barely an inch from my pussy, and I'm sick with wanting him to touch me.

Blood rushes to my clit, pulsing through me. I want to shift to feel him but have to clamp down on the need. I think he'd leave me high and dry and not think twice about it.

Now that I'm in it, as the lust is pounding through me, I need this. I need him to fuck me and drive away the chaos.

I need to feel in control by Bran being in control.

"We need a safe word, mouse," he says, teasing his fingers closer to my wet slit. "Just in case I pound this little virgin pussy too hard."

"I'll be okay," I say.

He spanks me again, and I jolt from the sting and pleasure, his fingers just grazing my clit enough to send a bright flash of pleasure through me. I exhale in a delirious rush.

“Give me a word, mouse. It can be anything.”

“Um...” I can’t think straight. I don’t want to delay it any longer. I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “Tomato.”

There’s a distant chuckle behind me. “Tomato,” Bran says. “Promise me you’ll use it if you need to.”

“I promise.”

“I’ll behave, but I plan to fuck you hard and fast. I will not be gentle.”

My chest tightens with the thrill of it. “Okay.”

He inches closer to my opening, and I get just the barest sensation from his fingertip grazing my wet opening. A ripple of excitement courses over me.

“You want to be fucked, mouse?”

“Yes.”

He finally drags his fingers over my wet center, and I moan into the back of the chair, arms shaking. He slips two fingers inside of me, but it’s not enough. Not nearly enough.

“Go on then.”

“What?” I squeak.

“Fuck yourself.”

He’s making *me* do it?

His grip on my neck squeezes just a fraction, coaxing me into action like I’m an animal. And maybe I am. I don’t feel cognizant of anything except for the driving need between my legs.

I shift my hips, pushing my ass back, fucking myself on his fingers.

“That’s a good girl,” he says and applies more pressure to my neck, driving me faster on his fingers.

The pressure builds. My breathing quickens. My shoulders are like gelatin, arms trembling. My swollen pussy is so slick, I can hear the distinct wetness of it as Bran’s fingers slide in and out.

I find a delicious rhythm chasing the orgasm, and then—

“Stop.”

His voice rings out with command, and I come to a halt, his fingers still curled deep inside of me.

I let out a little mewl of frustration.

I'm so close. My nerves are blinking like pulsating stars.

I want to come. I've never wanted anything more than I've wanted this.

I pant against the chair's back, waiting and waiting.

"I can feel you clenching around me."

"When?" It's the only word I can get out.

When will you fuck me?

When will you end this torture?

How is he so in control?

The rasp of his zipper causes me to moan with anticipation.

"Get upstairs," he says.

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I climb off the chair and hurry up the stairs completely naked and dripping wet.

"Faster, mouse," he says on my heels.

I pick up the pace, the sensation of being chased sending a shiver down my spine.

I hurry down the hall and stumble into his bedroom.

Without warning, he's on me, tossing me onto the bed on my stomach. He forces my legs open, grabs me by the hips, and yanks my ass into him.

The hot throb of his cock is suddenly at my wet opening.

I quiver against the sheets.

He holds himself there, the head of his shaft pressing so close. So close.

I have to fight the instinct to push into him.

"Bran, please," I moan. "Please."

"Don't forget your safe word, mouse."

"I won't."

And then he pushes inside of me.

The feeling of him filling me up is a sensation I wasn't prepared for. And the hard drive of his hips, the pulse of his thickness, it makes white stars dance behind my eyes.

This is nothing like fucking myself with my toys.

This is raw and real and so fucking hot. I can't find my voice or my thoughts.

I've never been so inside my own body and flying all at the same time.

Bran's pace is brutal, punishing and not at all human.

I cry out, fingers clawed into the sheets.

The pain of being torn through for the first time ever is faint and faraway as the searing heat of him sheathed inside of me takes over, turning me mindless and blind.

There is only the pleasure and the descent into the madness of being steered into an orgasm by Bran and his commanding words.

I know in that moment I'm his.

I'll do anything he tells me to do if only to experience this feral bliss every fucking day.

He grows harder the faster he punishes my pussy and my own orgasm builds.

"Not yet, mouse," he says.

"I'm close."

"Not yet."

My inner walls clench up as if my pussy is willing him to let me let go.

In a blink, he pulls out of me, spins me around so I'm in his lap again, straddling him.

His hands at my hips, he guides me down the length of him.

"So fucking tight, mouse." He pumps into me. "I knew fucking this pussy would be good, but I wasn't prepared for how good."

"You've thought about this?"

"I thought about this pretty little pussy on my cock every fucking day."

Oh my god. Somehow this admission does more than the fucking. Pleasure is drumming through me now, threatening to spill over.

"Oh god," I say on an exhale. "I can't...anymore..."

"Go on," he orders. "Come on my cock."

That's all it takes.

The orgasm tears through me. I can't control the loud cry that comes out of my throat. Bran grips me tighter, holds me to him as my body quivers through the shock waves, curling into itself.

"Fuck, mouse." The head of his cock throbs at the center of me, and then his pumping cadence falters, muscle and tendons constricting along his chest and down his arms as he spurts cum inside of me, a growl of pleasure coming out through his gritted teeth.

I'm still burning through my own pleasure, but I have to see him.

I want to see what I can do to him.

He lets out a panting breath, eyes burning in the shadows. The pleasure is etched in his face, in the lines around his eyes and the flex of his jaw as he pumps another load into me.

We ride through the last ebb together and then collapse against one another, breathing hard. We stay like that for a long time before Bran finally pulls out of me.

“That was...intense,” I admit with a laugh.

“Don’t leave Midnight,” he says suddenly.

“What?”

“Don’t leave.”

“Why?”

The glow in his eyes intensifies as he grits his teeth as if me making him elaborate is a discomfort he doesn’t want to endure.

“Why Bran?”

“Because I don’t want you to.”

His admission burns through me, lights a fire in my chest.

I wish I could leave it at that, bask in the glow of it.

But I can feel there’s more.

“And?”

“And,” he says. “I did sense something in your blood.”

“You did? What?”

He lifts me off of him and sets me on the edge of the bed.

“Bran.”

In a blur of movement, he’s gone. The tap in the bathroom turns on.

“Bran!”

I find him bent over the sink, water dripping from his face.

“Tell me.”

He sighs. “Fae,” he answers. “When I bit you without the necklace on, I could taste fae in your blood.”

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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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