

1

I don't want to be here.

Rain slashes my face, the wind turning my long hair into whips. I feel like I've been walking for hours, but I suspect in the light of day I'll discover it's a mere half mile from the tall iron gate to the front steps of the house looming in front of me. It looks like something out of a gothic novel, towering peaks and narrow windows, all dark and vaguely faded as if it's stood on this hill for time unknowing.

Probably because it has.

I readjust my grip on my suitcase and march up the steps. There's no point in turning and running as far and fast as I can. I already tried that and it got me a brand new scar on my knee and a limp that made the hike up here agonizing. The only reason my father healed me the little bit that he did was to keep me from being fully damaged goods. The man in this house won't care about a few scars. He's interested in what lurks beneath my skin.

Specifically, my blood.

I don't knock. The vampire in this house knows I'm coming. There's no point in playing the courteous guest or pretending I want this. I make it three steps inside before the door slams shut behind me, sealing off the roar of the storm and leaving only eerie silence in its wake. I glance over my shoulder, but I don't expect to see anything.

Vampires move faster than the human eye can see. And while I'm only fifty percent human, I'm tainted by that lineage enough to not be able to see more than a blur of movement. Another way I'm seen as damaged goods. At least if I had full vampire reflexes and strength, it might make up for my

lack of magic. As it is, I'm barely better than a human. Barely better than prey.

The knowledge sticks in my throat, preventing a shriek of surprise when I turn around and find a man looming close. No, not a man. A *vampire*. It's there in his pale skin, the barest hint of fang pressing against his bottom lip. It's the slightest loss of control, and it makes me wonder how long it's been since the last sacrificial lamb was sent to this house.

He's gorgeous in the way all vampires are, flawless beauty and hidden strength. This one has dark brown hair that falls in a sleek wave to his shoulders, fathomless dark eyes, and a muscular body slightly too thin for his frame. He holds himself stiller than any human ever could. "I apologize."

I blink. Of all the things I expected him to say, that didn't number among them. "What?"

"Cornelius sent you."

It's not a question, and I can't quite stifle the flinch at my father's name. At the reminder of who I can blame for my current circumstances. "Yes."

"You know why."

Now his stillness makes sense. He's barely preventing himself from attacking me. My heartbeat kicks up, and I can see well enough in the dark to note how his nose flares as he inhales my scent. I'm running out of time. I want to stay silent, but there's no point. Despite my best efforts, my voice wobbles a little with nerves. "He gave me to you."

"Yes." It's hardly more than a sigh. "We'll discuss this...after."

"After—" This time I can't stop the shriek of surprise. One blink he's a few feet away, and the next he hits me with the force of a runaway truck. He still manages to control our fall so I don't bash my head on the marble floor, but I don't have a chance to appreciate the consideration. Not when he surges forward and bites my neck.

"Fuck!" My curse turns into a breathy moan. I knew to expect this, but being lectured on the pleasure of a bloodline vampire's bite does nothing to translate how *good* it feels. It's as if every pull of his mouth is connected directly to my clit, pulsing through my body and turning my resistance liquid. I don't *want* to want this, but my body doesn't care. I arch against him, reaching up to pull him closer to me.

One of his hands is in my hair, using the leverage to keep my neck bared to him, and the other snakes around to press against the small of my

back, urging me closer to him. As if I wasn't already straining against him.

I have the distant horrified thought that I'm going to come if he doesn't stop. "Wait!"

"I'm sorry." I feel more than hear his murmur. His tongue strokes my neck and then he moves to the other side. "I can't stop."

"But—"

He bites me again and I whimper. Fuck, that feels good. My dress is tangled up around my hips and I wrap my legs around his waist, arching closer. I can feel my blood warming his cool body, and evidence of his bite is already hardening against me. He rolls his hips and growls against my skin, but he doesn't move his hands from their spots. He doesn't touch me like I'm suddenly desperate for him to do.

"More," I moan.

He gives a hard pull to my neck and I slide my hands down his back to his ass, holding him close as I roll my hips, grinding myself on his hard cock like a wanton thing. It doesn't matter I'll regret this later, I'll hate both him and me for this loss of control. I need to come more than I need my pride. It will still be there on the other side of this.

I work myself against him, and I have half a thought to reach for the front of his pants, but it would mean stopping this delicious friction, and I'm not willing to do that. Another time.

It's what I'm here for, whether I chose this role or not.

I realize he's stopped sucking my blood, but the endorphins have nowhere near worn off. I should stop. I know I should stop, but the subtle pressure of his fingertips against the small of my back urge me on. Pleasure winds through me, tighter and tighter, and for one breathless moment, I think I won't get there, that I'll be poised on the brink for an eternity.

My orgasm hits me even harder than the vampire did earlier and I come more intensely than I ever have before, crying and panting as I hump him like I really do want this. The last wave crests and I slump back to the cold marble floor, my head feeling fuzzy and too light. "You took too much," I murmur, my words coming as slowly as taffy.

His tongue strokes my neck and he gives another of those growls I don't want to enjoy. "You don't taste like a human."

It's strange to be having this conversation on the floor while he's pressing between my thighs, but I can't seem to find the energy to shove him off. "I'm not." I lick my suddenly dry lips. "I'm half bloodsucker."

“Ah.” He inhales and slowly, oh so slowly, he releases me and sits up. There’s a new flush in his pale cheeks and his eyes are blazing with power. He kneels between my legs and his gaze strokes over me in a way I can almost feel, lingering on my lips, on my bloody neck, where my breasts are nearly escaping this ridiculous dress, where said ridiculous dress isn’t covering my panties any longer. My panties that are *soaked*.

I start to cover myself, but he catches my wrists, easily overpowering me. He does another of those long inhales and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt he’s scenting my arousal. He shifts my wrists to one hand and reaches for my panties with the other.

“Wait!”

The vampire’s eyes are pure black and his fangs are on full display. The little glimpse of control from earlier, of regret, are nowhere in evidence. Gods, I’m in trouble. His gaze drops to my panties again. “You know why you’re here.” His knuckles brush the wet fabric, lightly stroking against my pussy. Despite just coming, I have to fight the desire to lift my hips in invitation. I *know* it’s the aftermath of the bite, but I hate myself a little for it.

He pauses, his hands shaking as if he’s fighting himself. He could have broken my wrists, could do so much more damage and there’s nothing I could do to stop him. “Say it.”

I don’t want to. I very much don’t want to. But the words spill from my lips, almost as if he compelled them with his low voice. “I’m here to satisfy your hunger.”

“Hungers, little dhampir. All of them.” He strokes me again. “Lift your hips.”

I obey even as I argue. “You said we’d talk.”

“Yes, after.” Still, he hesitates. A drop of blood drips down his chin and I dazedly realize he’s bitten himself. “Say yes.”

The fact he isn’t simply taking what he obviously wants confuses me even as I hate him for making me say it. Would he really stop if I tell him to? I’ll never know. “Yes.”

His eyes flash to my face as he grips the crotch of my panties and tugs them down my legs. He could have just ripped them off—it probably would have taken less effort—and that little show of restraint almost makes this worse. Or better. I’m honestly not sure.

I didn't choose to be in this house, to be a sacrificial lamb, but that doesn't stop my body from shaking with need. I bite my bottom lip as he moves down my body and I know I should argue more, should never have let the word *yes* leave my lips, but he gives my pussy another of those light strokes and the touch short circuits my brain.

"Please," I whisper. I don't know what I'm begging for, for him to stop or not stop. It doesn't matter. He shifts slight to the side and strikes, quick as a snake, sinking his fangs into the sensitive skin of my upper thigh.

I come again instantly.

I keep coming, wave after wave, until I'm sobbing and begging, but I can't begin to guess what I'm begging for. For him to stop. For him to fuck me. It doesn't matter. Before I can decide, he lifts his head.

And then he's gone, a flash of motion up the curving staircase, and I'm left alone in the entrance hall. Wet. Bleeding. And filled with enough confusion that my head feels like it's spinning wildly on my shoulders. "What the *fuck* just happened?"

2

I think I blackout. I must, because one moment I'm lying on the cold marble floor and the next I'm blinking up into a darkened bedroom. I go perfectly still out of habit, forcing my heartbeat to slow and my breathing to stay even. I can see well in the dark, courtesy of my vampire blood, and I pick out the features of a bedroom that must have been the height of luxury sometime in the last few hundred years. It hasn't been kept up in the meantime. There's dust on every surface of the heavy wooden furniture and the canopy overhead is filled with holes and worn nearly transparent.

I count to one hundred slowly, and then do it again.

Nothing moves in the room except for the steady rise and fall of my chest.

I can't lay here forever, no matter how much part of me wants to curl into a ball and wait for this all to be over. Maybe another woman in my position would. Maybe the last sacrifice sent to this place did.

It's not who I am.

My life has been hell since I was old enough to realize my position within the vampire colony my father rules. I am the worst of all things. Magic-less. Bastard. The product of my monster of a father and one of his human mistresses he pretends is there of her own free will, rather than an exotic pet he likes to keep to prove his power. Unlike other dhampir children of bloodline vampires, I have no magic to speak of. I fit nowhere, and so every move I made was an insult deserving punishment.

For years, I didn't understand why he resisted killing me and getting me out from underfoot once and for all.

Now, I do.

This is where he planned to send me all along. A sacrificial lamb. A womb just waiting to be filled with one of the failing vampire bloodlines my father holds so highly. And if I die before accomplishing that? He'll lose no sleep over it.

Under other circumstances—mainly, if I'd inherited his magic like I should have—my getting pregnant would make me his heir. Now, he wants me to serve as a vehicle to bring another bloodline under his control. It seems particularly cruel, but I've long since stopped expecting anything resembling kindness from my father.

I let rage propel me to sit up and gingerly touch my neck. The bites are small puncture wounds. The vampire didn't so much as tear my skin, though I'm not about to thank him for it.

Him.

Malachi Zion.

If my father is to be believed, this vampire can trace his bloodline back to one of the original seven vampires. There are only two types of vampire. Turned and bloodline. Over time, the number of turned vampires has far outnumbered the bloodline ones born—something rare even before vampires withdrew and hid away from humans, and now practically nonexistent—which means those family lines are in danger of dying out.

Which is supposedly where I come in.

I sigh and climb carefully off the bed. My thigh aches, but my busted knee aches worse. The hike did me no favors. I limp to where my suitcase is tucked near the door. It appears untouched, but when I lay it down and open it, I find things rifled through. "Nosy ass vampire," I mutter. A quick search finds what I feared. He's taken my knife. I glare at the mess of clothing in the suitcase. "What's the fucking point? You're like two hundred years old, and I'm half human. I couldn't kill you with that knife if I tried."

If he's lurking close enough to listen to me rant, he makes no appearance to reveal it. It's just as well. Even with my vampire side accelerating my healing, I'm a little light-headed from blood loss. I need to eat something, but I might as well wish on a star as hope that kitchen is stocked.

Still.

The alternative is hiding in my room until the vampire starts wanting a snack and seeks me out again. My body hums at the thought, entirely too onboard with the idea. I'd heard bloodline vampires had a pleasurable bite, had even seen it play out during my father's *services* when he moves through the room and bites a few of his chosen followers, but I chalked it up to vampire-on-vampire nonsense. The few times I haven't been fast enough to avoid one of the turned ones' fangs, it *hurt*.

I glance at the bed, at the reminder I'm here as more than blood donor. All part of my father's grand plan to bring the vampire race back to supremacy or some bullshit. He never asked me what *I* want, but then a bastard magic-less dhampir is more tool to be utilized than actual person from where he's standing. I clench my fists.

The house will be watched. My father is too smart to leave anything to chance. He figures if he throws me in this place, it's only a matter of time before Malachi either knocks me up or kills me. Either will suit his purposes. If I *do* get pregnant, I suspect I won't live past the live birth. It won't matter if my child manages to inherit powers or if they are born without magic like their mother. I'll have served my role.

Fuck that.

I'll find a way out of here, even if I have to carve my way through Malachi and every vampire guarding this house. I need to bide my time and wait for the right opportunity. I doubt I can kill them, but I should be able to find a way to incapacitate them long enough to get the hell out of dodge.

First thing's first; I won't be worth a damn while I'm dizzy and exhausted.

I glance at the bed again and shake my head. Even without the sheer amount of dust and moth-eaten fabric, there's no reason to make it easier on the vampire. *No reason to tempt myself, either.* I won't be sleeping there.

I dig a power bar out of my suitcase. I only stashed a handful, which means I *do* need to figure out food at some point. Starving to death is not on my agenda. A faint sliver of light trickles through the window. I push wearily to my feet and move to look outside. Dawn is here. And I'm on the second floor. I try to open the window, but it's been painted shut. Great. Not that I expected much else. If this house has been updated since it was built, I haven't seen any evidence of it.

Now I'm stalling.

I grit my teeth and open the bedroom door. Nothing happens. Just like nothing happens when I step out into the hallway. It looks just like the entranceway and the bedroom—old and dusty and threadbare. The carpet beneath my shoes is black or purple or maybe gray. It's hard to determine in the low light and with age fading it. The walls are equally faded, though I can tell they were originally green. Paintings line them, but I ignore the art for now. Getting caught up in curiosity isn't an option.

I find the front stairs easily enough. This place seems laid out logically, which is a relief in a way. Not that I know what I'm supposed to *do* with that information. For all my dreams of running, there are several harsh realities standing in my way.

First and most insurmountable is the vampires themselves. They're faster than me. Stronger than me. And all of them, from Malachi to my father to the guards no doubt lingering at the edges of the property, have a vested interest in me staying trapped exactly where I am.

But it's more than that. The only things I know about human society are what I've gleaned from the few servants my father keeps and the books my mother somehow managed to smuggle into the colony. It might be enough to whet my appetite for freedom, but I'm not naive enough to think I'm anywhere near prepared to slip into their world.

Knowing all that won't stop me looking for an escape, but it's enough to keep me from doing something truly reckless. Like trying to flee right now, this morning.

The kitchen is slightly more updated than the rest of the house. The appliances look like things I recognize, and there's power when I flip on the lights. I study the dusty hanging lights. "So the bloodsucker likes a little modern convenience after all." Apparently he has some way to order in resources, which is useful knowledge to have.

"Such charm you have, little dhampir."

I startle like a cat, straight up into the air and over a good six feet. The vampire doesn't move from where he's standing against the doorframe I just walked through. He looks...amused. And healthier. There's a flush to his pale skin from *my* blood.

The thought sends a pulse through my body, directly to my core. I didn't hate being his snack as much as I want to, and even as I tell myself I'll fight him to a standstill before I let him bite me again, part of me wants it, and wants it now.

Part of me wants *more*.

I glare, hating that now *my* face is flushed. “If you drink any more from me, you’ll kill me and my father will probably make you wait another twenty-five years before he sends a replacement.”

The vampire—Malachi—pushes off the doorframe and takes a purposefully slow step into the kitchen. He looks like he’s concentrating, as if it’s more natural for him to move too fast for me to really see. “You’re here for a reason. Don’t forget that.”

“Why not tattoo *sacrifice* on my forehead in case I forget?”

His brows inch up. “The last one wasn’t so mouthy.”

“And look what happened to her.” I don’t know much about the stranger who occupied this position before me. Only that she was chosen to continue Malachi’s bloodline and my father was infuriated by her ability to breed—and stay alive. I’m not even sure how long ago it was. “Thanks, but if I’m going to die in this house, I refuse to cower for the time I have remaining.”

His sensual lips curve, and I loathe I notice they’re sensual at all. “Are you mad I didn’t fuck you earlier?”

My jaw drops. “You’re out of your fucking mind!” I throw my hands up when he drifts another step closer. “I didn’t even want you to bite me.”

“Mmm.” Another step. I retreat and he stalks me through the kitchen. He’s edging me back into the corner of the counter, and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it. He finally stops a bare six inches from me and braces his hands on the counter on either side of my body. This close, it’s impossible not to notice, no matter how rundown the house, *his* clothing is new and smells faintly of tobacco and something spicy. He wears a pair of fitted pants and a shirt that would be at home on some historical romance about a pirate. It leaves a slice of his pale chest bare, and I can see a number of raised scars there.

It looks like someone tried to hack out his heart.

“I’ve tasted a lot of humans over the years.” He sounds almost like he’s musing to himself. “Even a few dhampirs before you.” His gaze coasts down my body, lingering on my breasts. “None of them tasted as good as you.”

I blink. “Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“It’s a fact.” He shifts another inch closer. “It intrigues me.”

“Back off.” My voice comes out hoarse. My skin is tingling and I wish I could say it’s tingling with danger or fear. It’d be a lie. I’m fighting not to

press my thighs together from the remembered pleasure.

Malachi leans down a little until he's looking directly into my eyes. His eyes are so dark, they seem to draw in the light of the room. There's a hunger lurking there, and I can't stop the horrified suspicion he's seeing that hunger reflected right back at him when he looks into my eyes.

His lips curve slowly. "You don't want me to back off."

"Wait."

"You keep saying wait, little dhampir. Not stop. Shall I slow down farther?" He lifts his right hand with agonizing slowness. I stand perfectly still as he traces his thumb over my collarbone to the thin strap of my dress. Now's the time to say stop. I don't know if he'll respect it, but I should voice it all the same. Should tell him how much I loathe his touch. How much I never want him to lay hands on me again.

I don't.

I hold my breath and lift my chin.

He eases the strap off my shoulder and down, tugging it until the fabric falls to bare my breast. The cool air of the kitchen pebbles my nipple. Or that's what I tell myself as he stares down at me. Using that same exaggerated slowness, he moves to my other shoulder and gives it the same treatment, until I'm naked from the waist up.

Malachi's gaze flicks to my face, and whatever he sees there has him licking his lips. "You know why you're here."

He's said the same thing to me multiple times last night. As if he's checking in with me, which is laughable. He's no different than my father, than all the other vampires I've been forced to interact with over the twenty-five years of my life. He wants what he wants, and he'll mow down anyone who gets in his way. Including me. *Especially* me.

My anger blooms again, ready and waiting for the least provocation. I glare. "Just call me your resident blood bank and womb. Suck me, fuck me, do whatever you want. It's not like I'm a real person to you. I'm just a *little dhampir*, after all."

"You're *my* little dhampir now." He brackets my waist with his hands, his fingers digging in the slightest bit. I have the borderline hysterical thought he could literally rip me limb from limb right now and there's not a damn thing I could do about it.

Wouldn't *that* ruin my father's day? I laugh. I can't help it. It comes out angry and derisive. "I might have been traded like a possession, but I'm not

yours. I never will be.”

“I suppose we’ll see, won’t we?” He closes the last bit of distance between us and I lose my grip on my rage. It shudders out of me in a sigh that’s almost a whimper. Malachi’s so *strong*. I don’t know why that surprises me. All vampires are stronger than they look. Hell, so am I, even if I can’t compare to a full-blood. But there’s something about the way he touches me, as if tempering that strength so he doesn’t harm me sends my body into a dizzying spiral into desire.

I am so fucked.

3

“I’m feeling generous.”

I stare up at Malachi’s handsome face. “What?” I should be fighting right about now, but the only thing I’m fighting in my desire to arch against his hard body.

He flashes a little fang in a quick grin. “I’ll let you choose where I bite you this time, little dhampir. But only if you speak quickly.”

“You can’t.” I sound like I’m asking a question, rather than giving a command. I lick my lips, achingly aware of the way he follows the movement. “Unless you really do want to kill me.”

“I’m not hungry for your blood.” He leans down and his lips brush against the shell of my ear. “I want to feel you come again.”

I open my mouth, but not a sound emerges. I expected a lot of things when my father laid out my fate in that cold way of his. Pain. Torment. Maybe even death. I didn’t expect this. I’m not even sure what *this* is. “What?”

“I can bite you here.” He gives my neck a slow kiss, dragging his mouth over the spot where he bit me last night. Malachi keeps moving down, stopping at the top of my chest. “Or here.” His gaze flicks to my face and he descends to flick his tongue out and stroke my nipple. “Or here.”

“Do it.” I don’t even sound like myself. I sure as hell don’t feel like myself. It takes everything I have not to reach for him as he holds my gaze and sinks his fangs into the soft skin of my left breast just above my nipple.

Pleasure bows my back and I cry out. Gods, it shouldn’t be *so good*. And then his mouth closes around my nipple and it gets even better. He

cups my other breast and loops his free arm around my waist, pulling me tighter against him. He strokes me with his tongue and I'm lost.

I barely register letting go of the counter. One second I'm clinging to it for dear life and the next my fingers are tangled in his long dark hair, holding him to me. My knees buckle, and he eases us to the floor with me straddling him. Careful. He's so fucking *careful*. He's not really taking blood right now, not more than a few drops. His hold on me is tight, but nowhere near tight enough to hurt me.

Like before, each pull of his mouth sends a bolt of lust directly to my clit. I whimper and arch closer. "Please." I'm so empty. I need to come. I need to fuck, hard and quick. I simply need.

He shifts his grip around my waist, urging me down until I'm pressed against his cock. He's hard again, and I have the dazed thought that he's massive, but I can barely cling to it. Not when he rocks me against him, sliding my pussy along his length through his pants. It's not enough, but it feels too good to stop.

Over and over again, building my pleasure stroke my stroke, pull by pull of his mouth.

He releases my breast and I cry out in protest, but Malachi moves to my right one. This bite is a little rougher, and it propels me into a brutal orgasm. I cry out and grind down on him, coming so hard he has to tighten his hold to keep me from collapsing. He licks my nipple one last time and lifts his head.

I look down and find twin bite marks marring my breasts. Thin trickles of blood run from each puncture wound, and the sight threatens to ramp up my desire again. Especially when he leans down and drags his tongue over my skin, cleaning me.

Now's the time to say something. To remind him again I'm not here because I chose to be. I don't actually want this, humping him in the kitchen notwithstanding.

Malachi looks up at me and gives that slow smile. "Don't worry, little dhampir. I *will* fuck you, and soon. This was simply a little taste of what it will be like."

There's no point in protesting. He *will* fuck me. It was inevitable from the moment I walked through the door, but it feels almost like fate in this moment. A fate I'm not quite sure I want to fight. If it's this good with a

bite and most of our clothes on, will it be better when we're both naked and I'm entirely at his disposal.

Will I survive it?

Vampires can go into a frenzy when they fuck. It doesn't happen often as long as everyone's getting regular feedings, but Malachi has been alone in this house for at least as long as I've been alive. I don't know why he doesn't hunt, but the last sacrifice my father sent was before I was born. No matter how good his control right now, it might not hold.

He might kill me.

"Let me go," I say quietly.

He slowly releases me and leans back to prop his hands on the floor. He's studying me like I'm a puppy who's done something unexpected. "You enjoyed what just happened."

Yes, I did. A lot. I also want it to happen again as soon as possible. I have too much self-preservation to admit as much, though. "Your bite is orgasmic. Of course my body liked it."

"Ah."

I need to get up, especially when I can feel his cock pulsing against me, but my legs aren't cooperating. Or that's what I tell myself as I glare at him. "And stop ambushing me. I get you need blood, and that's what I'm here for, but unless you want this sacrifice to be short-lived—literally—you need to knock that shit off."

His brows inch up, and he's back to looking like he's half a second away from laughing at me. "I'll take that into consideration."

"I'll need food, too." I brace my hands on his shoulder to push to my feet, but somehow my wires get crossed and I rock my hips against him. Just a little. I bite my bottom lip. "What are you *doing* to me?"

"Nothing." He very slowly, very gently, replaces his hands on my hips. "Nothing at all."

"I don't believe you." My desire is spiking again, my body hot and pliable. I have to get out of here, and I have to do it now. Otherwise I'm in danger of doing something unforgivable, like reaching between us to free his cock and taking him deep inside me. I want it. I want it more than I want my next breath.

I shove to my feet.

Or at least, I try.

My bad knee buckles halfway up, and Malachi catches me before I make harsh contact with the floor, his hands beneath my knees. I barely have a chance to register what happened when he moves us, lifting me up and setting me on the counter. He pushes my dress to bare my knee and frowns at it. “This is recent.”

No point in denying it. The truth is written right there on my skin in ugly purple scars. “Yes.”

“I was under the impression dhampirs heal quickly.”

“Not as quickly as vampires.”

“That is not an answer.”

He’s like a dog with a bone. I don’t understand where he’s headed with this line of questioning. “Yes, I heal quickly.”

“And yet you have an injury like this.” His face takes on a forbidding look. “Explain.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. I shove at his shoulders, but I might as well try to shove a mountain. Frustration bubbles up inside me, hot and cloying. “As I’m sure you’ve probably figured out, I didn’t exactly volunteer for this gig. I tried to run. My father made sure I wouldn’t be able to again.”

He goes still in that predatory way that makes every instinct I have scream at me to flee, which might be laughable under other circumstances. Flee. Sure. That’ll work out great.

Malachi’s thumb traces the most prominent bit of the scar, the spot where my father beat my knee again and again, until the bones were little more than pebbles. “There is no quick fix for this type of injury.”

“Thanks for that, Doctor Malachi, but I’m already aware. Even with my accelerated healing, I’ll never walk right again.” It’s something I can’t think too closely about or it might be the thing that breaks me. My entire life has been spent running, even if it was contained within the colony walls. I’ve escaped beatings and worse because of my ability to flee. No longer.

He presses a hand to the center of my chest. “Stay.”

“I am not your dog to command.”

“Stay,” he repeats.

I don’t know why he bothers to tell me what to do. He moves so quickly, I barely have a chance to tense before he’s back between my thighs again, this time holding a knife. I freeze. “A vampire with a knife. How novel.” Which reminds me. I narrow my eyes, trying to ignore the blade glinting between us. “Return my knife.”