

KAITLYN DAVIS

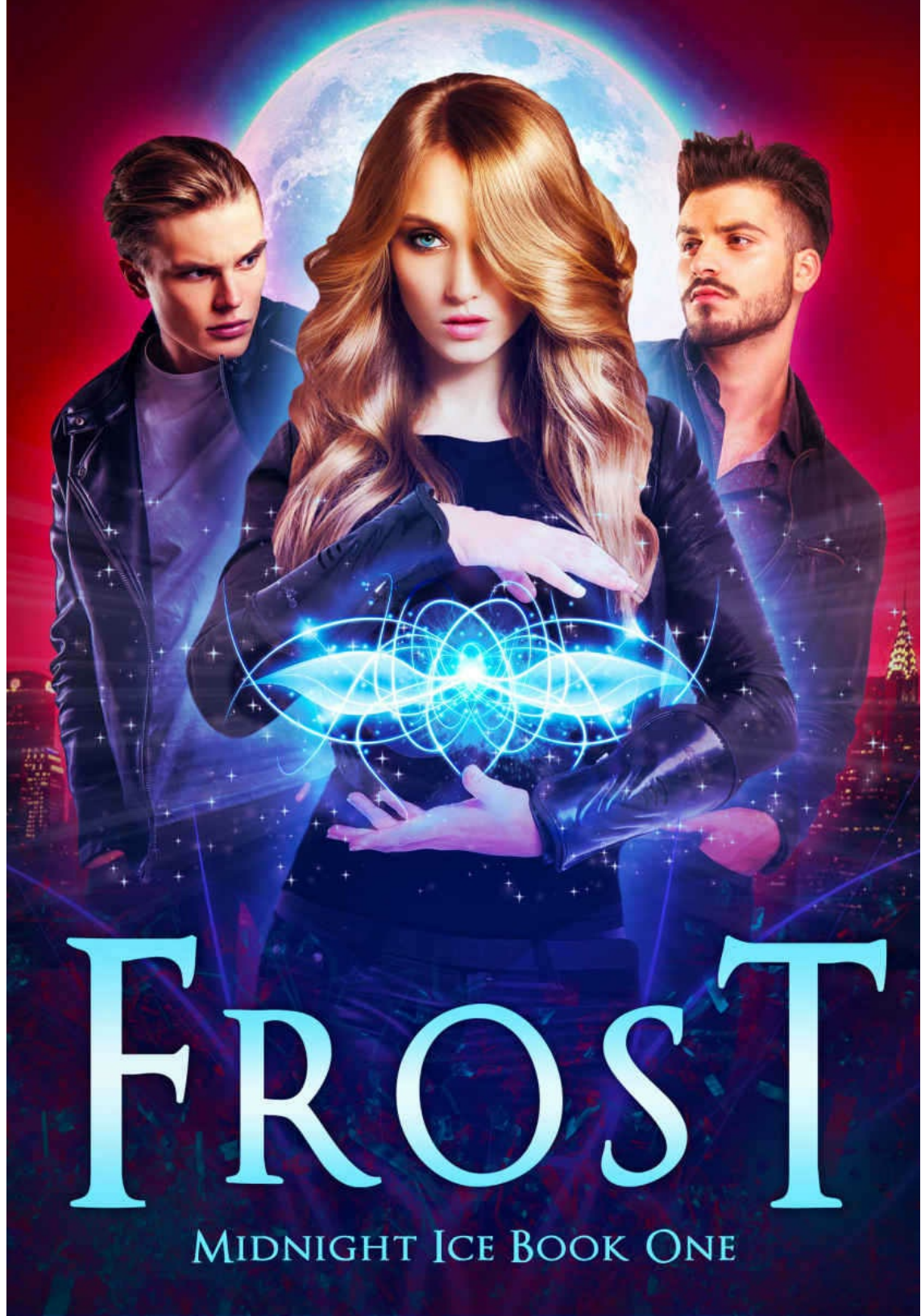


# FROST

MIDNIGHT ICE BOOK ONE



KAITLYN DAVIS



**Frost**  
**Midnight Ice Book One**



**By**  
**Kaitlyn Davis**

eBook Edition

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## **All Titles by Kaitlyn Davis**

### **Midnight Fire**

Ignite  
Simmer  
Blaze  
Scorch  
Burn

### **Midnight Ice**

Frost  
Freeze  
Fracture  
Shatter

### **Once Upon a Curse**

Gathering Frost  
Withering Rose  
Chasing Midnight  
Parting Worlds  
Granting Wishes

### **The Raven and the Dove**

### **A Dance of Dragons**

The Shadow Soul  
The Spirit Heir  
The Phoenix Born  
Leena's Story – The Novellas

To my family for their unconditional love,  
my friends for their overwhelming support,  
and my fans for their incredible enthusiasm.  
Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

# **Table of Contents**

[All Titles by Kaitlyn Davis](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Preview of Freeze \(Midnight Ice Book Two\)](#)

[About the Author](#)

## Chapter One



When Pandora Scott woke on the morning of her twentieth birthday, she knew there'd be no cake, no flickering candles waiting to be blown out with a wish, no presents to rip open, no friendly voices teasing her in song, no cards waiting in the mail slot downstairs.

Because Pandora Scott didn't have friends.

She didn't have family.

And even though she was immortal, she didn't have time for birthdays.

There would, however, be other things she liked. Blood. Threats. Danger. And lots and lots of money. An entire bathtub full. So much she could wipe her butt with the stuff without giving a damn. Not that she'd keep it all, but...

The alarm on her nightstand started beeping .

"I'm up, I'm up," she grumbled, speaking to herself as she slapped her hand down on the plastic clock, annoyed to be pulled from such a glorious train of thought—on her birthday, no less! But in her haste, she smashed the thing completely to pieces.

Somehow, the broken bits kept beeping.

"Oh, come on." She groaned, fangs sliding out with her frustration. After forming a fist, she pounded the alarm to dust and then rolled over, opening her eyes just enough to take in the world outside her window.

Two months in New York, and it was the eighth clock she'd smashed.

This city was definitely getting to her.

*And yet...*

Pandora smiled, hand still covered in plastic shards as she closed her eyes, blissfully listening to the hustle and bustle taking place outside. New York was loud and busy, especially for a person with supernaturally enhanced hearing. Cars honked every second of the day. Pigeons squawked. People spoke nonstop—in their apartments, in restaurants, walking down the street. There was no peace and no quiet, but Pandora loved it. Because there



was so much room to pretend, so many lives to lose herself in, so many places a girl could go to forget.

The enclave had been different.

Isolated.

Highly secure.

Inescapable .

She'd grown up in the middle of the woods, far off the main roads, tucked in a valley in the middle of the Rocky Mountains. But the enclave had needed to be hidden to keep her people concealed from normal human life, to keep their secrets safe. The ancient Greeks had first called them titans. The original gods. The creators of all things.

They weren't. Not even close. But the name had stuck.

Titans.

In the ancient times, they'd wanted to be treated as gods among men. Almost every culture referenced them in some way. The Greek god Zeus. The Aztec god Camaxtli. The Roman goddess Minerva. The Celtic god Alator. The Egyptian god Seth. The list went on. They had once been the kings and queens of wars and hunts, of strength and immortality, of power. And they'd let themselves fade into myth, into legend. Because they were never meant to be gods or celebrities or saints. Thousands of years ago, they'd been given power beyond belief for one purpose and one purpose alone—to protect mankind from the evils it didn't even know existed.

Werewolf.

Witches.

Demons.

Fae.

And a hundred other supernaturals whispered about in storybooks.

Pandora had been born to protect mankind, raised to use her power for good, bred to join the Order of Othrys—the titan police force that kept the peace all across the globe, in every continent, every country. Not all supernaturals were evil, but as the saying went, when they were good, they were very, very good, and when they were bad, they were horrid. If any creature anywhere stepped out of line, threatening people's safety, they'd face a titan soon enough. And they'd lose.

*But I'm not a titan, not anymore* , Pandora corrected with a frown, sliding her tongue over the sharp canines that extended past her lip, hungry for the only thing her body now craved—blood. She hadn't been one of them

for a long time.

Four years ago, she'd left the enclave—she'd run away, not sparing even a second to glance behind, because she'd never fit with the titans anyway. The Order of Othrys was divided into twelve segments of power. There were trackers, hunters, bolters, and other groups tasked with capturing any misbehaving supernaturals. There were mindbenders and readers, groups responsible for making sure the supernatural world remained totally secret and separate from the human realm. There were others, like the alchemists, who could manipulate the natural world, or the archivists, who could pass memories between generations to keep titan secrets safe. And then, there was Pandora.

She'd never belonged.

Her powers had never fit into any titan category. And because they couldn't make her fit, they'd turned their backs on her instead—they'd abandoned her long before she'd ever abandoned them. So when she turned sixteen, the official age a titan was supposed to be initiated into the Order of Othrys, she'd done the only thing she could—one final act of rebellion against a people who'd never wanted her anyway. She became one of the very things that titans protected human beings against.

A vampire.

*Let's not think about home*, she urged silently, blinking away her dark thoughts, fighting to clear her mind. *Only happy things on my birthday, like the informant I'm about to meet, the money I'm about to make, all the people I'm about to piss off. Happy, happy things.*

With a deep breath, she stood up, shaking her head, clearing it of all things from her life before. This was her life now. And in this life, no one cared that today was her twentieth birthday, no one cared about her sob story, no one cared about excuses. They cared about punctuality and results, which meant she had somewhere she needed to be.

Because Pandora wasn't just a vampire.

She was a vampire thief.

A very good, very in-demand, very infamous vampire thief... At least, she liked to think so. And there was someone she was late to meet, someone who was paying her quite a lot of money to do what she did best—piss a really powerful vampire off.

Who would she be pissing off this time?

Multiple vamps, most likely. She'd only been in New York for about

two months, but the list of people who wanted to murder her was already pretty long. Not that it mattered, of course. Plenty of people wanted her dead

*That's just what happens when you break into the Oval Office, steal a painting from the president, and leave an IOU on his personal stationery for the Secret Service to find.*

Pandora grinned as she pulled a white cotton T-shirt from where it had been hanging on her bedpost and slid it over her slim ivory shoulders.

*Worth it.*

And it had been.

Because she'd stolen that painting for the head vampire of Washington, DC, in return for protection against the head vampire of Los Angeles, who, well, wanted to kill her for sneaking into his dungeons and freeing a handful of his prisoners. That particular job had been pro bono, of course. Pandora had been following the LA jerk for a few days, working on a different paid job to steal some ancient something or other from his vault. But when she saw him corner a poor twelve-year-old girl, feed on her, and put her in chains, she'd decided to ditch the paying gig and focus on payback instead. Naturally.

*Such an ass*, Pandora sneered inwardly, annoyed by even the memory of that slimy vamp. The poor girl had been lost and alone, without anyone to take care of her, probably just another runaway like Pandora had once been, trying to survive in an unforgiving world. Yeah, freeing her and everyone else in that prison had felt good. And stealing from that vamp, taking him down a notch? That had felt even better.

Of course, when she saw the head vampire of DC do nearly the same thing to another lonely soul, she couldn't help but act accordingly.

Now, both of them wanted to kill her.

Like she'd said—long list.

And, well, it was only a matter of time before the head vampire of New York, Tatsuya, was added to it. Because two months in his city? That was more than enough time to piss him off. And the job she was working on today? On the outside, it was about stealing a very valuable sword from his private collection. But to Pandora, it was about sizing up the competition. Because just like the head vamp of LA and the head vamp of DC and every freaking head vamp in the entire damn world, Tatsuya had a dungeon full of forgotten prisoners somewhere in this city. And Pandora was determined to

set each and every one of those innocent people free, to make sure they understood that there was at least one person who hadn't abandoned them.

Word on the street was that Tatsuya's high lords were already discussing a coup, saying he was losing his touch, and the time was right to strike. The fact that she'd stolen some pretty jaw-dropping precious gems from one of Tatsuya's personal vaults probably wasn't helping, but she'd needed to test run his security and, well, announce her arrival to the city. Besides, pawning off her cut—a hefty diamond bracelet—had been more than enough to pay for her rent indefinitely. And, come on, New York was expensive—and that wasn't even including tuition. She'd been looking into maybe taking a few classes at NYU. If, of course, she managed to stay alive for an entire semester.

Not easy.

*But I do play the part of a college student well*, she thought, looking into the mirror as she tugged an NYU sweatshirt over her head and threw on a pair of grungy jeans. The school year didn't officially start until next week, but she already had a set of colorful pens and two blank notebooks stuffed into a messenger bag in her closet—just in case.

It was a pipe dream, obviously.

She'd had the same set of pens and notebooks for two years, and they were still blank, still unused. A life on the run wasn't exactly conducive to higher education or, well, normalcy. Not that her life had ever been normal, with the titans and the enclave and the secret society...

*Ugh. Freaking birthdays*, she chided, shaking her head, clearing it of all thoughts of home. Three hundred and sixty-four days out of the year, she could pretend everything was all right. But her birthday was the one day when all those darn memories tried to revolt. Which was exactly why she'd planned the meeting with her informant for this morning—she needed a distraction, fast.

And yet, when she opened the closet to pull out a pair of Converse sneakers, completing the stereotypical college ensemble and removing all inklings of her true vampire self, the absolute last thing she needed at that moment happened. A distraction, all right, but the worst one possible.

A picture tumbled out with the shoes.

A picture she'd tried many times to burn but always ended up shoving in the back of her closet instead. Because even though she hadn't seen him in four years and never planned to see him again, she couldn't destroy the last

little bit of him she had left.

Jax.

Jackson Rodriguez.

Her best friend. The only boy she'd ever loved.

The one who'd hurt her the most.

*I wonder what he looks like now*, she thought, unable to pull her gaze away from the photo resting upside down on the floor. Even from this angle, his seafoam eyes jumped out of the frame, capturing her gaze, not letting go. And that smile, the one that used to make her melt, it still made her cold, dead vampire body warm just a little. He'd been scrawny and tall, long limbs with scraps of muscles, a boy still growing into a man. But a lot could change in four years.

Against her better judgment, Pandora kneeled down and scooped the photo off the floor. Gently, she ran her fingers over the glass, still able to recall the smooth touch of his skin, hot and simmering with vibrant energy, so electric his mere presence made her nerves tingle to life. But that was how he'd always made her feel—alive, seen, noticed in a way she'd never been before.

Pandora had been a shy, meek little girl without any friends, but what else was to be expected with strange powers that didn't fit, a mother who'd killed herself, and a father who treated her as less than dirt, focused only on work, only on the titan mission, instead of on raising a child. During the summer of her eighth birthday, Jax and his family had moved to the enclave, and the first night they met was still burned into her brain—a single, brief moment in time that changed everything.

Jax was playing guitar in his bedroom, softly plucking at strings, searching for notes he didn't yet understand. And she'd turned her lights off to stare at him under cover of darkness, nose pressed against her bedroom window, mesmerized by the way his fingers moved. After half an hour, he put the instrument down gently. She'd thought he was going to bed, but instead, he reached over to his window and slid it open. Pandora had dropped to the ground, heart skipping wildly in her chest, cursing herself for not going invisible when she'd had the chance—that was her power, of course. The irony of ironies, her gift was knowing how to disappear. And normally, she was very good at it. But not that night.

"I know you're there," Jax had said into the empty space between their houses. "I'm a tracker. I can sense you."



She'd lifted her head just enough to look across the short space between their windows, meeting his saltwater eyes. And even though she'd heard people say there was no such thing as love at first sight, she felt her soul find a match in the depth of his irises. Even at eight, barely a girl, let alone a woman, she'd fallen for the boy next door. Hard.

"What's your name?" he'd asked. "I'm Jax."

She slid her window open a little farther, hesitant and scared, nervous as always. "Pandora," she murmured.

But he heard, and he smiled, nodding as though he enjoyed the sound of it. "So, you know I'm a tracker. Which of the twelve are you?"

Her breath had caught, because in their world, that question was as normal as breathing but her answer wasn't. Everyone in the enclave fit into one of the twelve sections of the Order of Othrys, everyone except for her.

"I don't know," she'd whispered, shrugging self-consciously.

But instead of rejecting her like everyone else, instead of shying away from her otherness, Jax leaned forward. His bright eyes widened. "Really? I thought everyone knew. What can you do?"

"Um." She paused, pulling her bottom lip into her mouth, not wanting to ruin the moment. Her throat had been so clogged, so tight she couldn't speak. So instead, she showed him—she disappeared. To Pandora, not much had changed, but Jax's jaw dropped open, and his eyes popped wide as he stared at what he saw as completely empty space. Instantly too nervous to focus, Pandora lost her hold on her invisibility. She dropped her gaze to the floor, too afraid to gauge his reaction.

But Jax hadn't responded with fear the way everyone else in her life had, nor disgust, nor totally weirded out silence. He hadn't backed away or closed his window or been told by an adult to leave her alone. The second she reappeared, he'd leaned closer and said this, "That is so cool!"

"Really?" Pandora asked, eyes flicking up as she smiled for the barest moment.

"Just think of all the trouble we can get into," he'd said, hardly noticing her tepid response. "You'll never get caught. Dory—oh, can I call you Dory?" Pandora nodded eagerly. A nickname! "Well, Dory, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Don't you?"

One word—friendship.

One moment.

But it had been everything.

Because it was the first moment she'd ever felt even an ounce of belonging.

The moment he'd become her best friend.

So sudden.

So undeniable.

Until everything changed the summer he turned sixteen.

*The summer I decided to stay fifteen forever.*

Pandora grimaced, shoving the picture frame back into the farthest corner of her closet, where it had been hidden.

*Freaking Jax!*

*Freaking birthday!*

But really, she only had herself to blame. And when she stood up, Pandora paused, eyes caught by the sight of her own reflection. Same blonde hair. Same long legs. Same youthful expression. Not a thing about her appearance had changed.

That was part of the deal, after all.

Eternal youth.

But other things were unrecognizable. Her spirit, for one. Her attitude, for another. Pandora had once been a meek, soft-spoken girl, one who ached to please, who wanted nothing more than to belong, who would have given anything to feel loved.

But that girl was gone.

She'd died four years ago.

And she was never coming back.

*Good riddance*, Pandora thought, tearing herself away from the mirror. It was almost noon. And she had somewhere she needed to be—meeting with the vampire who was paying her a lot of money to steal from Tatsuya, getting back to her real life and all the concrete plans she'd made.

Not giving herself another second to think, Pandora crossed the small space of her studio apartment and flung open the door. She stepped outside before closing it resolutely behind her. The hallway was empty, so she took the opportunity to do her favorite thing—disappear.

Taking a deep breath, Pandora called on the shadows. The world around her dimmed as she pulled the darkness closer, fading away from the light, as though she was looking through a black veil, slipping into a void. She had been able to retreat into the shadows, to vanish from sight, for as long as she could remember. And becoming a vampire hadn't taken the

power away—it had enhanced it. Because now, she was faster, quieter, and far more lethal.

And in her own little private sanctuary, Pandora was more than ready to leave the world behind. Surrounded in the shadows, protected by them, she was finally able to shrug off the memories and give in to the present, finally able to forget her birthday and focus on the task at hand.

Glancing toward the camera in the corner of the hall, Pandora smirked, noting the red light was still dark. In an effort to keep the existence of vampires and all things supernatural a secret from her human neighbors, she'd dealt with the security in her building a while ago. And luckily for her, the apartment manager was too cheap to replace all the cameras she'd destroyed. The only footage he'd ever caught of her speed was video of the front door opening and closing on its own. But she was always out so fast it looked like little more than a strong breeze and an insecure lock.

Today would be no different.

In a flash, Pandora launched into hyperspeed, racing down the emergency steps and out the front door, grinning wildly. After a deep breath of late summer air, she let the vampire take over. A wave of adrenaline pumped through her body, the high of invincibility and freedom. Running in New York felt like a video game—jump this way, dodge those pedestrians, leap over that illegally turning taxicab. Every second amped her up. Every moment brought an exalted glow to her eyes, sending her energy into overdrive. By the time she arrived at the Central Park Zoo, her skin was practically buzzing.

*I'm in the zone*, she thought, slowing her racing steps, returning to a normal speed.

But when she stepped through the front gate of the zoo, her gaze fell on the sea lion exhibit, and all reason for being there fell away. Pandora shifted through pedestrians, giving herself one little birthday present, one little moment of joy. The tank was in the public portion of the zoo, right at the front and extremely crowded, but she found a free spot to rest her forearms against the rail. Leaning over, she watched as a sea lion zipped by beneath the water. It surfaced for a moment before diving like a torpedo back into the blue. Another one chased behind, playing a game of tag, curving and swerving its pliable body, leaping over the rock bridge the zookeepers used for feedings to follow its friend around the tank.

Pandora smiled, laughing softly to herself as she watched. And then

she stiffened, frowning as she shook her head. *A vampire who likes animals?* With a sigh, she pushed herself off the rail, standing tall. *I'm pathetic.*

Why had she chosen the Central Park Zoo as the meeting point? It'd been months since she'd let herself come to one of these places, let herself reminisce about old dreams that had no hope of ever coming true. Animals used to calm her, used to intrigue her. Back when she thought escaping the supernatural web of her life was possible, she'd dreamed of becoming a vet—and not just for dogs and cats, but for all sorts of exotic animals too. That's why she was always signing up for classes, trying to enroll in a university. That's why a bag of untouched pens and notebooks sat idle in her closet. That little spark of hope that some dreams were still within grasp was hard to snuff.

Really, really hard.

But her life was vampires and heists and danger. She'd come too far to turn back now, run too far and too fast to ever stop. Besides, there were people depending on her, people the rest of the world had forgotten.

And she had to remember that.

Pandora slid her phone out of her pocket and glanced at the time. Almost noon. She'd wasted too many precious minutes. Now she'd have to rush. Her contact for the job was probably already at the meeting spot, waiting for her.

Still wrapped in the shadows, completely out of sight, she wove through the crowd, making her way to the building where they housed the tropical animals. When she pushed the door open, the air temperature rose about ten degrees, and the humidity stuck to her skin. Of course, the added heat did nothing to warm her. The chill she lived with was bone deep—the icy grasp of living death.

Glancing to the side, Pandora saw a mother with a stroller. Her toddler was running ahead with his gaze focused on a tank in the distance. The little boy pressed his forehead against the glass, eyes going wide, inhaling sharply. His heart sped faster, blood pumping, the inherent reaction of excitement and fear intermixing.

*A snake, it's got to be a snake*, she thought, trying to distract herself.

But against her will, Pandora's stomach tightened as her teeth pressed to the surface, aching for a bite. Innocent blood always smelled better for some reason, but in all her time as a vampire, she'd never lost control enough to bite a child. The very idea repulsed her.

Hovering just inside the entrance, she listened for more steps, more heartbeats. There were none. There was, however, the stench of stolen blood wafting in from the other end of the hall where it bent to the right, disappearing around a corner. Her mark, it had to be, and luckily, the rest of the exhibit was empty.

Glancing at the family one more time, Pandora stepped purposefully forward. She was careful not to breathe in the scent of the sleeping baby as she walked past the stroller, not even sparing a glance at the still-awestruck little boy. Hopefully, she'd be out before they'd even moved on to the next tank.

She rounded the corner, pausing briefly to take in the vampire waiting by the bat cage at the far side of the room—exactly where she'd told him to be.

A little ironic, sure .

But even vampires had a sense of humor.

Well, some anyway.

Pandora stepped behind him, still hidden in her own private world, cloaked by the darkness. And then she reached her hand up, clasp ing his neck, so her very sharp fingernails pressed into his supernaturally tough skin, deep enough to nearly draw blood, but not quite.

He didn't even flinch.

He did, however, swallow very slowly.

Pandora grinned, not releasing her grip, holding steady. Vampires only spoke one language—power. And right now, she had it.

"Do you have what I asked for?" she whispered, changing the sound of her voice so he wouldn't recognize it in the future.

The vamp slid a bag off his shoulder and handed it back to her without attempting to turn around. "One third of the payment, as you asked. It's all there in cash, and the rest will be delivered when we receive the item you were hired to procure—the *katana* sword from Tatsuya's private collection. My employer is very eager to see the deal done."

"So am I," she said with a growl, fusing ice and iron into her voice. Rumor was, the sword was being auctioned off at Tatsuya's charity ball tomorrow night, and Pandora was more than ready to finally come face-to-face with the head vamp, to finally stare into his evil eyes and know he wouldn't be so cocky for too much longer. "If everything goes according to plan, I'll have the sword for you by tomorrow night. Meet me here on



Sunday, same time, same rules. Only one vamp, and if I smell any hint of backup, the sword and I will be gone before you have time to blink."

The vamp twisted his head an inch to the side. She dug her fingers into his throat even deeper, this time drawing a thin line of blood. The only things tough enough to break through vampire skin were the teeth or nails of another vamp—and she intended to make sure he understood exactly what she was. And that she wasn't playing around.

He stopped trying to peek over his shoulder. "Is there anything else you require?"

"Yeah," she retorted. "Get out of here fast, and don't stop running until you're a mile away. Because if I see you lingering around outside, trying to figure out who I am, you and your employer will find out just how sharp my nails really are."

Pandora released the vamp and shoved him away.

But he was bigger, stronger, most likely a lot older than her four years of being undead. He didn't go very far. Half a second later he spun, hissing, revealing sharp fangs and hungry blue eyes. Vampires didn't really like being threatened...which was probably why she did it so often. But come on, she couldn't help herself.

Even now, Pandora grinned instead of cringing in fear. If he could see her, maybe she'd be worried. Probably not, but maybe. Now? She couldn't help but laugh silently to herself as he retracted his teeth. His eyes flashed with annoyance as they took in nothing but open space and empty air. He tilted his head, stretching out with his senses, trying to locate her, but the effort was futile. When she was wrapped in the shadows, there wasn't a single thing about her he could trace. So, she stepped brazenly closer, leaned in, and whispered a single word into his ear.

"Go."

His arm snapped out faster than lightning, but Pandora expected it, ducking easily under his bicep and skipping away. He searched the space one more time, frustration mounting. But the creak of a wheel distracted him. The family was turning the corner, entering the second half of the exhibit. And the vampire finally heeded Pandora's advice. It was time to go.

He walked calmly out the door at the end of the hall. Pandora listened to his footsteps disappear as he transferred to hyperspeed the second he was outside, running as far away as she had told him to. Hopefully farther.

She glanced at the little boy one more time. He was tugging on his

mother's hand, urging her to push the stroller faster, smiling freely, practically hopping up and down with so much eagerness to see more and to see it faster.

*Have I ever looked so carefree?*

Once, maybe, with Jax.

But that was a long time ago—a time she would never get back.

Pandora fled the memories and the family, sneaking through the door, not releasing the shadows until she was huddled in a bathroom stall behind a locked door. Immediately, she reached into the bag the vamp had dropped at her feet. She'd smelled the money well enough to know it was there—cotton fibers mixed with ink, crisp and fresh. She'd expected it was newly printed and pristine, but when she zipped open the bag, her throat still stuck. Staring at over three hundred thousand dollars in bills was a little overwhelming, after all—even for the most experienced vampire thief.

Pandora brushed her fingers over the tightly packed stacks. If she'd had a heartbeat, it would be pounding. Instead, all she felt was hungry, euphoric, and in need of blood. But she swallowed the feeling down, fighting the high as she lifted a wad of hundred-dollar bills and fanned herself with it, smirking.

*All about the Benjamins, baby* , she thought, grinning.

Hey, she might be a vampire, but she was still a child of the new millennium. So she couldn't help but laugh a little as the image of tossing a wad of cash into the air filtered into her mind.

*Make it rain!*

Except, she was in a dirty New York bathroom, and to be honest, her super-strong vampire senses weren't doing her any favors in here.

*So gross .*

Refocusing, Pandora counted the money, then grabbed one hundred thousand for herself before opening her backpack to reveal the donation envelopes she'd stolen from the front entrance of the zoo a few days ago. Taking each stack one by one, she stuffed the envelopes and wrote *anonymous* across the form. Maybe she'd keep a little more of the next payment, but for now, her cold, dead heart was thinking of the sea lions in their inescapable tank, forever circling without anywhere to go, and she thought they needed it more.

Before she could change her mind, she lifted her hood and slinked her backpack over one shoulder, then rushed back to the fresh air. A few minutes

later, she was standing at the donation drop box, filling it with envelopes, smiling a little more each time she heard one fall like a brick to the bottom.

She should have smelled him.

She should have felt his presence.

But she was too wrapped up in her own pride to notice.

"Becoming a vampire seems to be a pretty lucrative decision these days," a deep voice purred the second the final envelope slipped through her fingers.

Pandora froze, body jerking upright.

Jax was here.

## Chapter Two



Pandora didn't move. Her hand remained hovering over the donation box as the rest of her stood stock still, jarred by shock. His scent filled her flared nostrils, even more overwhelming than the sound of his voice. The subtle hints of saffron and rosemary along the outer edge of his lip, the metallic scratch of steel strings permanently etched into his fingers, and, most recognizable, the lingering traces of bark and dew and fresh morning air clinging desperately to his clothes. Everything about him brought her back to those warm summer nights, to those long lingering gazes, to the days of sweat and sun and smiles, and to the dreams whispered tentatively under cover of starlight.

Back to the world she had left behind.

But there was something new too. Something she had never noticed before. Something that now called out to her senses more brazenly than all the rest.

His blood.

Sweet and salty, brimming with an undercurrent of undeniable power—titan power. Against her will, her sharp fangs pressed into her lower lip, pushing slowly out from hiding, drawn by the incredible allure of that tantalizing scent.

She should leave.

She should run.

Keep going. Never stopping. Just as she'd been doing for the past four years—always a new place, always a new cover, always a new identity. The order had sent others before him—after all, a titan outcast was still a titan, and they didn't let their own go so easily. But each time, she slipped away before they even had the chance to get close, even had the chance to spot her.

But this time, she didn't.

This time, she stayed right where she was—frozen.

Because the smell of him brought her back to a place she hadn't been in a long time—a place that felt almost like humanity, almost like home.

It was inevitable the titans would send him. She'd tried to prepare herself to resist the temptation. But now, the lovestruck teen she'd once been was whispering in the back of her mind, wondering how different he looked from the boy in the picture, wondering if he missed her, wondering if he'd ever expected to find her like this .

As this.

Jax leaned in closer, completely unafraid as his breath tickled the back of her neck, sending a shiver along her normally lifeless skin. "Happy birthday, Dory."

Hearing that name tumble from those lips jarred her back to the present.

He'd lost the right to call her that name.

He'd forfeited it.

"My name is Pandora," she growled, turning on her heels.

But the moment she looked into his seafoam eyes, all the anger vanished, dropped away in an instant. Because just like that, after so many years spent running, she'd finally been found. For the first time since she had woken up alone, cold, and not at all human, her heart jerked into motion, beating once, painful in a cold chest unaccustomed to the warm spark of life. Yet comforting. Exciting. Terrifying.

She stumbled back, overwhelmed.

Those eyes pierced her soul the same way they always had. Well, what was left of it at least. And they didn't look away as he stepped determinedly forward, the slow stalk of a panther at hunt, closing in on its victim.

Jax's gaze pinned her to the spot.

But hers roamed. The last time she'd seen him, he was scrawny, barely taller than her, barely stronger, merely a boy, and she had still found him beautiful. Now, he was a man. And he wasn't beautiful. He was a force of nature washing over her, melting every iced-over part of her body. His golden-brown skin was even richer than she remembered, sizzling with the heat of the memories she had tried so hard to bury. He was taller and broader, thicker, with muscles defined even through the hug of his clothes. But mostly, there was an air about him that she didn't recognize, confident and harsh, demanding and arrogant, stronger and more focused than the popular, happy boy who used to live in dreams and sing her sweet lullabies in the dark.



What did he see when he looked at her?  
The same fifteen-year-old girl? Just as lost? Just as lonely?  
“Dory,” he whispered, deep voice thrumming.  
Part of her yearned to whisper his name.

*Jax .*

But the other part won.

The part still clinging to his betrayal, perpetually aching from it.

*I should have left when I had the chance , she cursed inwardly. Why did I turn around? Why, oh why, did I actually look at him?*

Pandora swallowed her rising emotions back down, flipping the switch inside her head, letting the vampire take over. With a cool, crisp voice free of the taint of human feeling, she asked, "What are you doing here?"

His soft green eyes flashed, revealing his surprise. But then he crossed his arms, responding with a challenge of his own. "What are you doing dropping what could be an entire life's savings into an anonymous donation box for a zoo? "

Pandora ignored the question. "Are you alone?"

A lazy smile crawled across his face, one she recognized immediately because it was the same grin he wore in the photograph she'd stuffed in the back of her closet. Carefree and confidently amused. "You really think I need backup to face you?"

She shrugged absently. "None of the other titans came alone."

"None of the others know you like I do," he murmured, voice silky as he reached across the space between them, a distance that seemed both vast and nonexistent at the same time, gently running his finger over the bare skin of her hand. And again, her pesky heart thumped once, alive for a moment, ignited by his touch. Without even a hint of hesitation, he latched his fingers around her forearm, palm burning hot through her sweatshirt. But his brows came together as he felt the frozen temperature of her skin, confirming what he'd seen with his own eyes—that she was a vampire.

"Let go," Pandora demanded, pushing past him hard enough to make him stumble.

But he just tightened his hold. "Not so fast."

"Jax," she warned.

His entire face brightened, eyes sparkling like the ocean on a sunny day. "So you do remember my name! I was starting to get a complex about spending four years chasing after a girl who'd completely forgotten me."

Pandora took the opening he'd provided. "Four years, huh?" She scoffed, mocking him. "I always wondered when they'd send you. It never crossed my mind you've actually been trying to find me this whole time."

"I haven't," he denied.

But Pandora knew the truth—the body didn't lie, and his was abuzz with feeling. His heart was pounding, a heavy beat of blood that smelled deliciously alluring. His throat was tight as he fought to maintain a relaxed façade, unaware that she could read past any front he put up, could hear his stilted breath and one very slow, purposeful swallow. Jax was overflowing with anticipation—he just didn't want to admit it.

Before Pandora could retort, he tugged on her arm, dragging her away from the donation box. "Let's go."

"No." She yanked against his hold, but it was no use. Titans were annoyingly powerful and annoyingly similar to vampires. They had all the good stuff like superstrength, superspeed, and superinvulnerability without any of the downsides—the blood sucking, the immortality, the unavoidable frost of death.

Just another thing for Pandora to hate about her former best friend.

"Jerk."

"Dory." Jax sighed, lifting their arms so his bicep came around her shoulder, pulling her against his side—a place she'd been many times, under different circumstances, of course. And yet he felt different, solid in a way he hadn't been before, broader and taller too. She was hyperaware of his flexing muscles, of the heat building in the small space between them, of the way her body seemed to mold perfectly to his—as though after all this time, they'd finally grown up enough to fit.

To the outside viewer, they could be a couple in love. In reality, his fingers were digging into her shoulder blade. All he'd done was secure a more inescapable grasp, yet Pandora still found herself melting the slightest bit in his embrace.

Jax leaned down and whispered in her ear. "If you're not careful, you might actually start acting like my best friend instead of the bitch you're trying so hard to be."

Pandora stiffened, standing tall.

"Let go," she ordered again, more forcefully this time.

"Not a chance." Jax clutched even tighter. "We both know the first thing you'll do the second I let go. It's the same trick you pulled on everyone

else, and I've waited too damn long to let that happen."

Pandora opened her eyes wide, feigning innocence. "Whatever do you mean?"

He scowled.

She grinned.

He was obviously referring to her pesky little ability to disappear completely from sight, and he was right—the second he let go, that was exactly what she'd be doing. Because she never should have turned around. She never should have looked into his eyes. She never should have talked to him. The second she heard his voice, she should have disappeared and run, the same way she had when every other titan had gotten too close for comfort.

But he wasn't every other titan.

He was Jax.

And even after four years, apparently, that still made all the difference.

"You have to talk to me, really talk to me," Jax implored, steering her away from the exit, back toward the crowded area of the zoo, where it would be harder for her to escape. "Because you know what? If you run again, I'll just keep looking. I can find you anywhere, any place, any time. And you know as well as I do that I won't stop. Because the last night I saw you is burned into my mind. I can't erase the look in your eyes, can't erase the memory of you running away from me. So, we're going to talk, whether you want to or not."

Pandora paused, taking a deep breath, thinking back to that last night.

But her mind was blank.

The truth was, she couldn't remember her last night at the enclave, her last one as a human. She couldn't recall the way Jax had looked at her right before she'd run away, couldn't envision their final moments together. Because when she'd started this new life, she'd forced herself to forget them. The truth of that night had been too hard to handle. It had broken her, destroyed her. So rather than live with the pain, she'd washed the memories away, leaving only the raw hate and anger behind. Leaving just enough emotion to constantly remind herself that she could never go back. Everyone she loved had betrayed her so deeply that she'd lost who she was, lost everything. Now all that remained was the throbbing pulse of disgust that had taken the place of her heartbeat.

"No, we're not going to talk," Pandora countered. "Because no matter what you say, I don't belong at the enclave. I don't belong with the titans. I never did. I never will. And I'm never going back. Now, for the last time, let go."

But the moment Pandora tried to shrug free of Jax's arm, his shirt pulled down, exposing his collarbone—exposing the little brownish-purple spot staining his chest. Immediately, she forgot that she was supposed to be angry with him, supposed to run away, supposed to leave all parts of her former life behind. Pandora reached her hand up, gently skimming her fingers over the outline of the bruise, eyes wide.

Jax inhaled sharply at her touch.

His heartbeat sped up.

His skin grew hot.

His breath came short and fast.

His blood boiled, rushing to a singular spot in his body.

All things a vampire could notice that a titan could not.

Pandora dropped her hand, meeting his soft gaze for a moment before stepping as far away as his hold would allow—so, not very. But the last thing she wanted to notice right now was his unabashed attraction, a painful reminder of all the memories she was trying to forget.

"Why do you have a bruise?" she asked quietly, concern overpowering everything else.

Jax took a deep breath, turning his eyes away, gaze falling to the ground. She didn't need to be a vampire to notice the way he paused just a second too long, hiding the truth. "Because New Yorkers are a pretty angry bunch. Elbows were flying right and left on the subway."

Pandora frowned. Why wouldn't he tell her? Why was he dodging? In her fifteen years at the enclave, she'd never seen a spot on him—on any of them. Titans weren't immortal, but they were supposed to be indestructible. What had changed while she was gone? "You know what I mean. We're—I mean, you're not supposed to bruise. Titans are supposed to heal."

His brows drew together. "Why do you care if you're never coming back?"

The gruffness in his voice sounded contrived, almost like a cover-up for something painful, a knife still lodged in his chest. Part of her wanted to heal the imaginary wound. And part of her still wanted to pretend as though she didn't give a damn.

"You're right, I don't," she snapped.

"You ditched us," he told her, grip digging deeper into her skin. "You ditched me. So you don't get to know my secrets, not yet."

That little *not yet* concerned her.

Pandora sighed, glancing around, noticing the eyes subtly shifting in their direction. "We're gathering some attention, so if you have something to say, do it quick or leave. "

He leaned into her, nose brushing softly against her cheek. The spot burned like wildfire, its effects spreading recklessly across her nerves in frenzied abandon.

*I will not shiver. I will not shiver .*

Once upon a time, she couldn't control the reaction her body had whenever his was this close. But now she could, and she held her muscles rigid as his breath tickled her cheek and his lips moved precariously close to her skin, another display for watching eyes.

"Smile and walk with me," he whispered.

When he stepped forward, she paused for a moment. She could fight him off. He was strong, but so was she. He was fast, but she could disappear. A few minutes was all it would take to toss him over her shoulder, punch him once or twice until he loosened his hold, and then vanish just as she'd done with all the other titans who'd come before. But the more she glanced around, the less possible escape seemed. The zoo grew more and more crowded by the minute, and a fight between a titan and a vampire would inevitably catch some attention and trap an innocent in the crosshairs. No, she'd have to wait for the perfect moment to strike. He'd always been kind with her, gentle and trusting. His guard would drop eventually.

Pandora eased into his hold, keeping up the pretense of a young couple in love as he led her to the very spot she'd started—the sea lions. He leaned over the rail, gripping her hand tightly and pulling her down beside him .

"You know, as soon as I stepped foot in New York, I had a feeling I'd eventually find you here," he whispered, keeping his eyes focused forward, talking gently, voice melodic. "Not a tracker feeling, a Jax and Dory feeling." And then he looked at her, eyes bright against his dark skin and even darker hair. Pandora stared straight ahead, but it did little to dull the awareness creeping across her skin, sparking her every cell to life. "You always used to go to the woods or to our tree house whenever you were stressed or sad or



needed to think. You always wanted to be closer to the animals, to use them to take your mind off things." As he spoke, his grip loosened. The edge of his lip curled into a nostalgic grin. "Do you remember that time we found the bird's nest?"

Pandora snorted. A smile came to her lips even as she tried to suppress it. "Yeah, it was broken and shattered against the ground, and three of the five eggs had already cracked open, but I was determined to keep the other two alive."

"So determined you kept them wrapped in your scarf the entire way home and ordered me to get supplies."

"They needed to stay incubated."

"You were a slave driver!" he teased, squeezing her hand with affection before releasing his hold a little bit more. "'Jax, go get me a heating lamp. Jax, find me a thermometer. Jax, print out the twenty pages of research on fledglings I found. Jax, sneak out of training with me to turn the eggs. Jax, stay home from school to watch them hatch.' I got into so much trouble that week when the teacher called my dad. "

*I didn't* , Pandora thought grimly. The teacher had never called her father—the teacher had never even noticed she'd been gone. Because to everyone in the enclave—the other kids, the teachers, the members of the order, her own father—Pandora had been the invisible girl, all too easy to forget. At least until she'd done the one thing they couldn't abide by—run away and tried to actually disappear.

Pandora lifted her brows as she stared ahead, still not ready to face those eyes that had been the only ones to ever truly see her. "Well, it worked, didn't it?"

He puckered his lips, amused. "You know what I remember the most?"

"What?" she asked wryly.

Jax kept his gaze pinned on her face, drawing hers from the spot where she'd been purposefully not watching him. But he was magnetic like that, unable to be ignored for very long. And right now, his expression was intense, fueled by a molten undercurrent of suppressed emotions now fighting to reach the surface. "I remember watching you while those two little birds broke their way through those shells, totally transfixed by the gleam in your eyes—it was the most alive, the most excited I'd ever seen you. I didn't even see them hatch, because I couldn't tear myself away from you, from the

wonder transforming every closed-off corner of your face. I'll never forget that day because it was the first time I remember thinking, *I want to kiss this girl. I want to make her look at me like that .* ”

*And you did ,* Pandora thought, glancing away. *But what do you see in my eyes now?*

She couldn't ask it out loud. She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

And when her gaze landed on the sea lions once more, Pandora realized that sometime during their conversation, Jax had stopped clutching her hand. Instead, their fingers were loosely intertwined, holding on to one another equally, comfortably, one person's grip no stronger than the other.

She subtly slipped her palm free.

*I should definitely leave. Vanish. Now, before he notices his mistake .*

But she didn't.

Pandora watched the sea lions take the same path over and over, spinning in the same endless rotation. And before she was even aware what she was doing, the words slipped out. "Why are you here, really? You know I'm a vampire. You know I can't go back even if I wanted to. So why are you still chasing me?"

Jax didn't take his gaze from her face. "You know it's not permanent anymore. I'll admit, I was pissed as hell when I realized you did this to yourself, that you turned into one of them. But there's a way to undo what you did. And you can put up this tough front, but I see right through you, Pandora Scott. This isn't the life you want for yourself. It's not the life you always dreamed of. So come with me, get the cure, be the girl I know you want to be. ”

Pandora shut her eyes tight, squeezing.

She knew what he was talking about. A few years ago when it was first discovered, it was all anyone was talking about—the cure for vampirism. When she'd first heard the news, she hated herself for the immediate sense of relief that had flooded her heart—maybe she could go back, maybe she could stop running. But then the betrayal sharpened, reminding her there was no home to return to.

And the same thing happened now.

At first, she weakened, shoulders hunching, relieved that Jax hadn't given up on her. And then she hardened, letting the ice freeze her heart, remembering that everything Jax said was just empty sounds, that he'd broken every other promise he'd ever made. Even still, his next perfectly

hollow words made the frozen cube in her chest fracture.

"Come home," he whispered, purring, voice so sincere, so honest that it hurt. For a moment, her mind flashed back to the boy who used to sing her songs across the space between their open windows, whose voice once lured her to sleep. "Come back to me."

"I can't," she rasped, feeling the heat in his gaze melt her resolve.

"Dory."

"I can't, Jax, so stop asking."

He reached for her immediately, realizing her hand was no longer wrapped in his, but he was too late. She had already stepped away .

Pandora turned and ran.

He chased after, following close on her heels, but as soon as she got out of sight behind a building, she did what he knew she would.

She vanished without a trace.

Pandora became one with the shadows, watching the world dim as she pulled the darkness closer, wrapping it around her like a shield. Once upon a time, Jax had been able to sense her even when she was out of sight, had been able to locate her in the void when no one else could. But now she was a vampire, and that changed everything. Because before, he'd been able to sense her beating heart, her soul. But now, when she slipped away, there was nothing to trace, nothing to find.

She became nothing.

And even a tracker as good as Jax couldn't find what wasn't there.

"Dory?" he called out.

At the sound of his voice, she paused, pressing her back tight against the side of the building, unable to leave. At least, not yet. Because hearing him shout her name so desperately made her wonder if there maybe was a little something lingering deep down in some hidden part of herself that he could still tap into. If there were a little human morsel struggling to stay alive in her undead body, one only Jax could sense .

Two feet pounded toward her, no longer the slow, graceful saunter of a panther but the desperate slap of a hunter who'd let his prey slip through his fingers.

Pandora made herself small, wrapping the shadows closer as she watched him round the corner. She waited to see if he could still find her in the darkness. But those seafoam eyes that had just made her heart beat for the first time in four years, that had melted a little bit of the ice wrapped around

her insides like a protective shield, were now frantically searching for a girl he feared he'd never see again.

*And he won't see me again* , she silently promised herself. *Never ever again* .

"Dory!" he demanded, louder this time, firmer. "Don't disappear on me again. I'll find you. I always have, and I always will. Just talk to me, please. I'll do anything for you to just talk to me."

Pandora pressed her lips tightly shut to keep her dark laughter from slipping out. *What do you want to talk about, Jax? What could we possibly have to talk about? You did this to me. You and everyone else I once thought I loved. I trusted you, and you betrayed me. What's left to talk about?*

"I'm going to find you," he said, his voice a growl, frustration mounting. "I won't stop. I can't."

Pandora pushed off the wall and stepped slowly toward him as he continued to scan for a hint of the girl he'd lost. Those panicked irises passed over her once, twice, three times, blind to the body she kept invisible, not sensing her even when she was a foot away. Cautiously, she reached up, stretching her palm toward his face, stopping an inch from his cheek, shivering as the heat from his body brushed against her skin.

She stayed like that for a moment, wishing beyond anything else to close the gap, to pretend even for a second that things were different. Wishing that his eyes would somehow locate hers through the void, wishing he could still find her when no one else could. But her heart was still, her chest was empty, there was nothing there.

And she had to remember that.

So she lowered her hand, wrapped her fingers around his neck, and let the vampire take over. Pandora squeezed, digging her nails into the soft flesh of his throat, choking him.

*You shouldn't have followed me* , Pandora thought, grip tightening as the bitterness rose, bubbling up from somewhere dark and dangerous, from the memories of the past that she kept suppressed—too difficult to face, too difficult to remember. But even though she couldn't remember all the details of that night four long years ago when her entire world changed, she remembered enough. Jax had said he loved her, but he'd still chosen them. He'd still chosen the titans. And the ache of his betrayal was just as strong as ever. *You shouldn't have come, Jax. You should have known better than to piss off a vampire who seriously didn't want to be found, than to pick a fight*

*with a woman very much scorned. Me .*

But as quick as the satisfaction of hearing his sputtering breath came, it was gone. Because she made the mistake of looking into his eyes—his beautiful, woeful eyes. And then she noticed the arms limp by his sides, the crease digging into his forehead, the burn gathering in his heart. And her grip softened.

Jax wasn't going to fight her.

He wasn't going to give her what she wanted—another reason to hate him.

"Leave me the hell alone," Pandora demanded instead.

Then she used her superstrength to throw him like a rag doll across the empty space of the alley. He smacked against the ground, cursing when his chest hit the dirt. Pandora stayed a second longer, watching as he slammed his fist against the earth so hard he left a dent before jumping to his feet, alert.

After this last job, she was leaving New York.

And wherever she went next, one thing was certain.

Jackson Rodriguez would never find her. Because leaving him once was tough, twice doubly difficult, and a third time might be too much to bear.

Taking one last moment, she breathed in his scent.

And then she really did disappear.

## Chapter Three



Pandora didn't stop running until she reached her studio apartment, closed the door behind her, and fell back against it. Lifting her hands, she realized her fingers were still trembling.

*I'm a vampire, for god's sake*, she thought, annoyed. *I'm tougher than this*.

But was she?

Seeing Jax had brought back a lifetime of feelings she'd spent the past few years trying desperately to forget. Obviously, she hadn't been as successful as she'd hoped.

*Obviously, I haven't been very successful at all.*

But that was about to change.

Because today was her twentieth birthday, and it was time to finally move on. Like she'd said to Jax, she was never going back, and it was time to start acting like it.

Spurred on by new resolve, Pandora ripped open her closet door and dug through the shoes and clothes bundled on the ground. A sharp metal corner pricked her palm. She yanked the photograph of Jax out.

But that wasn't the only thing it was time to destroy.

Swallowing deeply, Pandora stretched her hands farther into the closet. She pulled out the only other thing she still had from her life before—a tote bag that was flattened and smashed against the ground. Resting the cotton on her knees, Pandora fingered the broken strap, the mud-stained spots, the zipper that refused to close. The bag was completely unusable—she'd pretty much destroyed it during her escape from the enclave. But for some reason, she'd never been able to let it go. On the night she'd left, she was pretty sure she'd grabbed it just because it was the biggest one she owned, could hold the most stuff. It was only after, when she'd woken up alone and as a vampire, realizing for the first time that there really was no going home, that she remembered what the tote really was. A present her father had gotten her for her thirteenth birthday, special because it was the

only thing he ever bought that had required any bit of thought, that wasn't related to titan life. Knives from the armory when she was ten. Her mother's secondhand combat boots at fifteen. A worn-out, plastic bow-and-arrow set when she was seven. But this bag was something she'd torn from the pages of a magazine and left on the kitchen counter, a subtle hint she never dreamed he'd notice. But miraculously, he had .

*Good grief.* Pandora sighed, eying the two items in her hands. What sort of life had she lived that the photograph of a boy who'd broken her heart and the ratty old gift of a father who'd never once told her he loved her still meant so much?

*I've got to get out of here* , she thought, shaking her head and standing. *Freaking birthday!*

And she knew just the place to go.

Bound.

It was a blood bar in the meatpacking district. And no, the irony wasn't lost on her. One of the rules of being a vamp was that only human blood did the trick—no animals, no way to cheat. So even though the trendy area had once been New York's personal slaughterhouse, only human blood was served there now.

Tatsuya had funded the bar, one of the head vamp's many efforts to keep the mass murdering a little more under control in his city. Vampires weren't known for being especially careful with their food, but this had helped. The cocktails were crafted with the blood bags Tatsuya secured from the Red Cross, and there was a room in the back with willing victims, but Pandora had never seen it. Just the idea made her shiver. She'd fed on people before, out of desperation in the early days, and she remembered those vacant, exalted human eyes all too well. She couldn't erase the memories from her mind. The volunteers were little more than junkies searching for their next hit, and unfortunately, there were plenty of vamps all too willing to comply .

*Nope, I think a cocktail will be just fine, thank you very much.*

She just needed a bit of an escape.

A moment to unwind, to lose herself, to forget.

Already grinning with the ingenuity of the idea, Pandora dropped the picture and the bag on her bed, then scoured her closet for the right thing to wear. Sure, it was still the middle of the day, but vampires loved themselves some sexy, revealing attire. And, well, so did she, especially when she was

going out. Because becoming a vamp as a teenager? Not exactly the best thing ever. Her face still looked young, fresh, far too youthful. Her body, on the other hand, did not. At fifteen, she'd already been about five foot ten, well endowed with a woman's curves. So even though she'd stopped aging, passing for her actual age of twenty wasn't too difficult. Especially when she'd ditched her baggy sweatshirt and grungy jeans for hip-hugging high-rise leather leggings and a midriff-baring crop top. She'd once been a Goody Two-shoes titan, but she wasn't anymore. And sometimes it just felt good to be bad.

*Much better* , she thought, staring at her almost unrecognizable reflection. Hunger made her eyes glow the supernatural frosty-blue of a vamp, and when she smiled, fangs slipped over her lower lip, drawn out by the anticipation.

The birthday girl was gone.

The vampire had returned.

Normally she'd fight it, but not today. Twenty was a new era, a whole new decade. And maybe seeing Jax had given her the closure she needed to finally let go. Sure, he'd looked amazing. And sure, he'd made her heart beat for the first time in years. But the pain was still there, raw and deep, and Pandora didn't think it would ever go away. So, she grabbed the photo and the tote, determined to make a quick pit stop on her way to the bar.

Twenty minutes later, she was standing at the edge of a dock on the Lower West Side, watching the water flow quickly downstream. The surface was choppy and tumultuous, spraying up to splatter her feet in a strong gust of wind.

Pandora held the tote bag out, staring at the fraying edges for a moment, and then let go. The cotton floated on the surface of the river as though suspended in air, and then a strong wave pushed it under, far enough that the striped pattern vanished from sight.

*So long* , she quipped.

But Pandora paused before dropping the photo of Jax, cradling it gently in her palms as the Hudson River continued to rush by beneath her feet. His smile was the same—that was the one thing that hadn't changed. Those penetrating eyes, they'd grown older, harder, not nearly as open. His body had grown stronger, manlier, tougher. But his smile had been just as easy and entertained as ever.

She brushed her thumb over the glass, outlining his lips.



*Oh, Jax . She sighed. How did it end up like this?*

She drew her hand back as her chest throbbed painfully, a reminder that it had been his choice. But as she searched her mind for the reason, there was nothing there, just pain floating in empty space, tied to nothing yet tied to everything at the same time.

The last thing Pandora remembered before waking up as a vampire was the day before Jax's birthday. The two of them had been in their tree house, daydreaming about running away, just as they always had—speaking in what-ifs and maybes, never serious, always playful. But for Pandora it had been real, always. She'd never belonged with the titans. Her strange ability to disappear had always kept her separate from everyone else—undefinable, other, different. Her father never loved her. Her mother was dead. She had nothing at the enclave to live for besides Jax, no reason to stay. But he had been different—a clear-cut tracker, the superstar of their class, popular and strong, always ready with a smooth smile and a joke. There was no doubt that when he turned sixteen he'd be initiated into the Order of Othrys, no doubt about his role in life. Pandora had always known that he would go one way and she would go another. She'd always planned to run away from the enclave once he was initiated—to go become a vet, to lead a normal life.

So, what had happened that day he turned sixteen?

What had changed so drastically that her entire world had flipped upside down? That she'd had to become a vampire to escape? What had made his birthday so painful, so utterly catastrophic that she couldn't even live with the reminder of it? That she suppressed it so deeply inside her soul there was no memory left ?

*Doesn't matter , she thought, closing her eyes tight. It's in the past. And I'm moving forward, just like I always do. I'm moving on.*

Pandora released the photograph, letting the frame slide through her fingers, and heard it splash. By the time she opened her eyes, it had already disappeared with the current, carried away.

*Good-bye, Jax.*

She tore her gaze from the river and swallowed the knot in her throat. For once, she didn't run away. She walked at a slow human pace back down the dock and onto the sidewalk, gathering herself and building her wall back up before she slipped through the inconspicuous front door of Bound.

The heady scent filled her nostrils immediately.

Blood.

Pandora took a deep breath, trying to control the paralyzing hunger working its way through her system. Her dry veins ached, scratching her insides like knives, begging for sweet relief. But the club always had that effect on her. The blood was too potent, too overwhelming. And that was part of the lure—to get high on that euphoria, to lose herself in it.

Even in the middle of the day, Bound was crowded. Tables were full. There was already a line for the back room, where the living humans were held. And the dance floor was packed with vamps drunk on their hunger, grinding up against each other in total abandon—skin pale, lips red, eyes blazing blue. Where any blood dripped free, a hungry tongue was sure to follow, wild and uncontrolled .

Pandora made her way to the bar instead. Five minutes later, she secured a Bloody Mary from the bartender—heavy on the bloody—and found a spot in the shadows where she could be alone. No one was paying attention to her, and that was part of the reason she liked it here. She could fade away and feed without anyone even noticing.

Pandora lifted the glass to her lips and took a long sip, closing her eyes as the thick liquid slid down the back of her throat. There was no human food in her memory she could think to compare the sensation to, because it wasn't like eating dinner, it was like drinking life. As soon as the blood touched her heart, as soon as it filtered to her fingers, her toes, everything about her felt more alive. The lights were brighter, the smells more vibrant. Her muscles were stronger. The icy frost encasing her dead body lifted just a little as the warmth spread.

But along with the high came the hate.

The self-loathing of what she'd become.

Pandora slid the shadows around her, disappearing as she drank. For some reason, knowing no one else saw made her feel better, even if those other people were vampires who wouldn't judge her for the pleasure flashing in her eyes. All around, everywhere her laser-sharp gaze turned, were irises lit with the undeniable crystal glow of bloodlust. To all those vampires, it was natural. To her, it never would be.

Wanting a distraction, Pandora reached out with her ears, letting her eyes slip closed. Tomorrow night, at his charity ball for the Red Cross, she'd be facing Tatsuya for the first time. All his high lords and all the most powerful vampires in the city would be there. And what else would be there? The item she was getting paid just over a million dollars to steal right out

from underneath their noses. A samurai sword, or *katana* as the client had called it. Apparently, the head vamp had taken it with him when he left home five hundred years ago, and now a group of very powerful Japanese vamps was paying her to get it back. And they didn't care that today was her birthday, that today she'd seen her only love for the first time in four years, that she'd finally said good-bye. They only cared that she delivered...or else.

Normally, Pandora preferred to steal for a good cause, more of a supernatural Robin Hood, some might say. Blonder of course, with a much better ass. But sometimes the commission was a little too good to turn down. And this wasn't just about money—it was about sizing up her competition, seeing how strong Tatsuya really was. Because just like every other head vamp, he had a dungeon full of lost souls, and she intended to see it destroyed before she moved on to the next town and the next target.

No, there was no time for pity.

Tomorrow, she had to be on top of her game.

So Pandora decided to take advantage of being the invisible lurker in the corner and did a little eavesdropping, just in case something informative came up. At first, it was just the usual. He saw this vamp. She punched this werewolf. They escaped this or killed that or bit someone. And then she heard something a little more intriguing.

"I heard he's worried," someone said in the far opposite corner of the club. Pandora tilted her head just a little, finding a better angle to listen. "Bringing on more security. Constantine said he met with someone earlier this week, but no one knows who. He's scared."

"He's never scared," a deeper voice said, scoffing. "He has no reason to be."

"Maybe he does. Two hundred and twenty-five years is a long time to be in charge. And I've heard there's someone new in town, someone ready to take his place. All the high lords are afraid, not just him. Maybe—"

"That's enough," a higher-pitched voice interrupted, a woman's voice, sharp as a razor as it cut him off. "Not here. Go drink, go enjoy. I hear there's a new boy in the back. His blood smells like caramel. I intend to see if it tastes like it as well."

*Asshole*, Pandora sneered, imagining the poor kid stretched out like a druggie on a pedestal, waiting for his next bite. But there was nothing she could do about it, and there were other people she could save, the ones Tatsuya held trapped. So she focused on their other words—that he was

worried, that he was bringing on more security, that the high lords were afraid.

*Excellent.*

Pandora grinned, downing the rest of her drink .

That was exactly what she'd been hoping to hear, and just in time too, because her glass was empty, and she was in the mood for a refill. All she wanted to do now was forget. Forget Jax, forget everything he'd stirred up, forget her birthday. So, she downed another bloody cocktail, this time O-negative. And another after that. She let the feeding frenzy take over, let the high of fresh life wash through her.

She drank.

And danced.

And lost herself in the blood and the music and the touch of other cold bodies just like hers, searching for that little spark of life, reveling in it.

"You look good enough to eat," a sultry voice whispered in her ear.

Pandora whipped around lightning fast, flashing her fangs. "I bite."

The man smiled, lips practically dripping with sin. "Me too."

Normally, this was when she'd punch and run. Seduction wasn't really her thing. It just made her think of another boy and another time she'd never get back. But tonight was different. Tonight she wanted to be free. Tonight she was determined to move on, to move forward.

So she grinned back, taking the stranger in. And really, a girl could do worse, much worse. He was tall, broad, with bright golden hair that seemed almost aflame in the darkness of the club. His vampire-blue eyes were just as bright as hers, flashing with unabashed hunger, brazen want. His skin, though, was what really caught her eye. It was sun-kissed and bronzed, not pallid, not washed out by his ebony shirt. Somehow he looked almost warm to the touch.

Before she could stop herself, Pandora lifted her fingers, stretching for the triangle of hard skin at the base of his throat, exposed between two sets of open buttons.

He stepped swiftly to the side.

The darkness seemed to follow, wisps of ebony clinging to his frame, undulating with his every movement.

"Not yet," he murmured, never once taking his eyes off her.

The longer he held her gaze, the more familiar it seemed to become, as though she'd seen those eyes before, as though this wasn't the first time

they had caressed her body.

"Have we met?" she asked.

His smile deepened, filling with secrets she could tell he had no intention of spilling. "Not like this."

"Like what then?"

But he looked away without answering, sweeping his stare down to her lips, to every inch of exposed skin, lifting back to her throat, pausing there. She didn't move. There was a dangerous sort of confidence about him, but against her will, she found it alluring, intriguing in a forbidden way. She'd always been drawn to things she wasn't supposed to have. Usually, she took them anyway.

She reached out again, trying to touch him .

He moved deftly away, almost made of air as he circled behind her.

"Pandora," he whispered into her ear, breath like a kiss against the soft skin of her neck, making her shiver.

And then the word he spoke registered.

Her name.

He knew her name.

"How...?" She spun around, trailing off when she realized there was nothing there, no one there.

A ghostly finger brushed against her elbow, tracing a burning path up her arm. "You're not the only one who knows how to disappear."

Pandora spun again.

But he was gone.

*That's my trick* , she thought, annoyed, trying to mask the shiver racing down her spine, trying to ignore it. Because she couldn't quite tell if it was desire or fear—and to be honest, neither option sounded appealing at the moment.

Pandora stole a drink from a nearby table, not caring what sort of blood was inside as she took a deep gulp, shaking off the strange encounter, trying to get lost in the music once more.

When another vamp sidled up next to her, snaking a hand around her waist, Pandora hissed, flashing her eyes in warning. One more move and she'd bite. Because sometimes, all a girl really wanted, especially on her birthday, was to dance like no one was watching and to be left the hell alone.

## Chapter Four



*They all look so elegant* , Pandora thought, staring across the street at the line of men in tuxedos and women in sparkling gowns exiting their limos, making their way toward Tatsuya's charity ball.

*And I...* Pandora looked down, taking in her standard high-stakes heist outfit. Leather jacket. Black gloves. Knee-high boots. Onyx leggings with just enough shimmer to look like liquid covering her long limbs. And, of course, a high bun that held her coiling honey-blond hair into a weave so tight no running, fighting, or jumping would undo it. *I look like Spy Barbie.*

But the thought just brought a grin to her face. *Excellent* .

She was in the zone.

And no visit from the past was going to distract her now.

It was time to focus .

Pandora walked across the street, completely invisible to the taxicabs and limo drivers stopped in a gridlock, waiting for the light to turn green. The shadows were wrapped tightly around her, keeping Pandora safe from any watching eyes. The humans, of course, would just wonder what the heck a girl dressed like a biker chick was doing walking into a black-tie affair. But the vampires and any other supernatural creatures in attendance would know better. They'd smell the immortality on her skin.

So she kept out of sight as she made her way through the crowd, unable to stop herself from noticing all the diamonds glittering in the streetlights. Her fingers twitched. But no—she'd restrain herself. Those jewels weren't her mark. And besides, she wasn't a common thief taking from everyone, just the people who deserved it. Like Tatsuya.

*Speaking of...*

Pandora's gaze followed the red carpet trailing up the grand front steps of the building. There he was. Tatsuya. The man of the evening—or should she say vamp of the evening. Pandora had never seen him face-to-face before, but she'd heard enough. The head vamp of New York was unmistakable. With him wearing an ebony tuxedo in a sea of black-tie attire,

his crisp white shirt, secured with a bow tie, only served to highlight the otherworldliness of his pristine ivory skin and trademark silver hair. His eyes were just as blue as any vampire's, but there was a wisdom within them that hinted at his age, a number Pandora couldn't even begin to guess. He shook the hands of all his guests, greeting them right as they stepped through the front door—eyes hard, smile soft enough to hide his true nature, from the humans at least. But Tatsuya was the head vampire of one of the most important cities in the world. There was no mistaking his power, his authority. It practically oozed from his cold, dead pores.

Pandora drew the shadows closer, closing her mouth, not breathing, steeling her muscles so the chill covered any ounce of life. When she was sure she was completely undetectable, she mounted the grand staircase leading into the building, walking directly behind a human woman in a wide ball gown, using the rustling tulle as a cover for the ever-so-soft sound of her feet. The woman and her husband paused at the top of the steps as Tatsuya reached a hand out to greet them.

Pandora remained calm, remained perfectly still.

The vamp bent down to kiss the woman's palm, and for just a moment, his gaze flicked to the empty space where Pandora stood invisible, narrowing so fast only vampiric eyes would ever notice. By the time he stood, the warm smile was back on his lips, as though nothing had even happened. A server with glasses of champagne stepped toward the couple, ushering them into the room with a complimentary drink.

Pandora raced inside.

Close call.

Too close.

Did he see her? Sense her?

Did he know she was here ?

He'd probably heard something—the shift of her foot on the carpet, the brush of her leather sleeve against the edge of her pants. Just enough to catch his attention, but not enough to convince him she was really there, not enough to make him cause a scene in front of an entire line of guests.

Whatever it was, it didn't matter anymore. She was in. But just when Pandora was about to get to business, a scent filtered into her nose. Blood. Sweet blood. Blood that smelled of sunshine and fire and power too alluring to ignore.

Conduits.

*Where?*

Pandora spun, stepping back against the wall, making herself as small as possible. Out of sight and out of the way, she scanned the room, searching for the last supernatural she ever thought she would find at Tatsuya's event. Conduits were the mortal enemies of vampires—the only supernatural beings in the world who could kill them. They weren't strong or fast or unbreakable, but they could do one thing, one very powerful thing.

Conduits could channel the power of the sun.

From where the sun rested in space, its heat wasn't strong enough to be fatal. Vamps could walk just fine through broad daylight, feeling hardly more than a light sting as the rays hit their skin. But conduits could funnel that fire through their bodies, bringing the scorching heat millions of miles closer to Earth as they spewed flames from their hands that could burn vamps to a very fatal crisp. Aside from a conduit, the only thing in the world that could kill a vampire was another vamp, but even that was tough. Pandora could sink her fangs or nails into another vamp, slicing open their skin in a way nothing else could. But the only way for one vampire to truly kill another vampire was decapitation. They healed too fast for anything else to be truly lethal.

Which begged the question, why in the world were conduits here? At an event hosted by the most powerful vamp in the city, attended by all his high lords and a ton of other super-strong bloodsuckers? Were they really so brazen, so bold? They were outnumbered fifty to one. And even a conduit wasn't strong enough to beat those odds—the fire could only burn so many vamps at once, and without that power, they were barely stronger than humans.

They were vulnerable.

"Why are they all looking at us like we're food?" a deep male voice whispered. Pandora honed in on the sound, trying to locate the conduit blood she smelled, trying to see these enemies in her midst.

"Because to them, we are food," a girl responded, tone laced with mock annoyance.

*There.*

Pandora spotted them standing to the side of the dance floor. The man was tall, decently good looking with a slightly crooked nose, maybe in his midtwenties. At the sight of his shimmery blond hair, she released a sigh of relief. There were two species of conduits—protectors and punishers. Blond



conduits were protectors, which meant their fire wasn't meant to kill a vampire, only to contain one long enough for whoever they were protecting to escape. The red-haired conduits were the ones to fear—the punishers. Their fire was fatal.

Luckily, the girl standing next to the protector boy had the same bright blond hair that seemed fused with light. She was shorter, eyes a little more calculating as they surveyed the room. Even from this distance, Pandora could see the flames dancing at the edges of her evergreen irises, as undeniable a supernatural trait as a vampire's crystal-blue ones.

*Conduits.*

*Here.*

She shook her head in disbelief.

*And not even punisher conduits, who could do some serious damage to all the nasty bloodsuckers in this room—myself excluded, of course. But protectors. And pretty freaking brave ones at that to come into this lion's den, outnumbered like this.*

Did Tatsuya know?

He had to.

Had he invited them?

Pandora knew she should turn away, start searching for the auction items before the event really began, steal the sword, hunt for information, survey his security, and get one last look at her adversary Tatsuya, leaving before anyone was any wiser. But for some reason, she couldn't tear her gaze away from the pair with sun-kissed skin that smelled of warmth and light. They'd moved into the center of the dance floor, brazenly spinning in graceful circles, not caring whose attention they drew. Glancing around, Pandora realized she wasn't the only vampire watching. She was, however, the only vampire watching whose eyes weren't glowing with cerulean hunger.

*Ballsy*, she thought appreciatively.

Those conduits knew exactly what they were doing. And clearly, they didn't care. The girl laughed in the boy's arms, arcing back. He watched her every move, drinking her in the way only a man in love would, as though he was staring at perfection. They twirled in step, smiling at each other as her green skirts swished against his black tuxedo. Pandora watched on as an intruder in the shadows, a voyeur wishing to live vicariously for a moment. Because in all her life, there had only been one time a man had watched her so carefully, so freely, so lovingly.

*Jax* , she thought wistfully, allowing herself one moment of weakness to remember his soft, sea-glass eyes. He used to look at her as if she were the only person in the world, the only person who mattered. And behind her closed eyes, four years disappeared in an instant as she recalled the nights they'd spent in their hideout, away from their responsibilities and futures. He'd looked at her like that all the time, but most often while he strummed an old wooden guitar and softly sang words he'd written just for her.

"Excuse me."

Punched out of the moment, Pandora snapped her eyes open. But the voice wasn't speaking to her—thank god. She was still hidden, still wrapped in shadows. The words had been spoken to the two conduits, who'd stopped dancing to speak to a prim and proper vampire who reeked of subservience.

"Your master needs us?" the girl asked.

There was only one master here. Tatsuya.

*That's my cue* , Pandora thought, pushing off the wall and weaving through the crowd, following the odd threesome to the back of the ballroom where Tatsuya waited, silver hair glistening.

This was what she'd been hoping for—some time alone to observe the head vamp, probe for weaknesses, and try to figure out what exactly his special power was. Most vamps had them—abilities above and beyond the normal vamp strength and speed, powers like Pandora's own invisibility. But head vamps always had the strongest abilities of all—it was what gave them their status, what made them too dangerous to cross. Rumor was, Tatsuya could force even the most resilient vamp to bend to his will, but she knew better than to believe in rumors. She wanted to see his strengths and weaknesses with her own two eyes before figuring out a course of action.

So when Tatsuya slipped open a door Pandora hadn't previously noticed, one made to blend into the wall, it was a no-brainer to follow. She jumped through after the head vamp and the conduits, sneaking by just before the opening slammed closed. They were in the staging area where all the items for the auction had been set up. Boxes lined the simple space, which was completely different from the gaudy, gilded ballroom on the other side of the door .

"This is the item I hired the thief to steal," Tatsuya said, voice calm and calculating.

Pandora halted dead in her tracks.

*The item he hired the thief to steal?*

But she was stealing from Tatsuya. Why would he hire her to steal from himself? Why—

*It's a trap*, she realized, eyes going wide, surveying the room for other conduits or other vampires, any clue that she was being ambushed right then and there. *Does he know I'm not just a thief? Does he know what happened in DC and LA? Does he know what I'm really after—freeing all the innocent people I know he has trapped?*

But the room was free of heartbeats, free of cold bodies. There was no one else here—no secret team of vamps meant to trap her. Just the conduits and Tatsuya and Pandora shrouded in her shadows.

"Is that a samurai sword?" the male conduit asked, voice colored with disbelief, drawing Pandora's attention back to the little meeting happening a few yards away.

*They don't know I'm here. They can't.*

She crouched down just in case, leaning onto the balls of her feet, ready to jump and run at any moment.

But Tatsuya's response was nothing but bored. "The correct term is *katana*, but yes, and a very ancient one at that, from my private collection. Is there a problem?"

"Of course not," the boy responded, swallowing a gulp that was quite audible to a vampire's ears. "It's just that I was envisioning a necklace, a ring, maybe a nice broach. Not a deadly weapon I've only ever seen in comic books but am pretty convinced could chop my head off with one clean slice."

Pandora rolled her eyes.

But in reality, it was a little hard to believe that conduits, who were little more than humans with some mega fire-wielding skills, were the only beings in the world who could bring a vamp down. Especially when Pandora had grown up around titans, who could do almost everything a vampire could but couldn't kill them, couldn't injure their impenetrable skin. Not in the same way a conduit's flames could.

The female conduit seemed to remember that as strong as Tatsuya was, in a way she was stronger. She cocked her hip, bringing a little grin to Pandora's face with her spunky response. "I think what Luke means to say is, why on earth would you ask the thief to steal this? He's already a vampire with the power to disappear. Did you really have to throw a sword into the mix too?"

*They think I'm a boy?* Pandora thought, a little peeved. *Why? Because*

*only men can be thieves? Only men are strong enough to best a head vamp on his home turf? Yeah, right. Give me a break. This is the twenty-first century, people.*

"Hmm," Tatsuya responded, pulling Pandora out of her own head. His voice remained just as detached as before. "I'm not used to thinking of such things. My skin is unbreakable, after all."

*Not from me* , she added wickedly. At that moment, a very large part of her wouldn't mind seeing him bleed, just a little, just to show him he wasn't as powerful as he believed. And the female conduit seemed to be having the same idea.

Flames surged to life in her eyes as she crossed her arms. "Yes, well ours isn't."

"Then I guess you'll have to work quickly," Tatsuya commented, glancing at his immaculate gold watch. *Maybe I'll take that too* , Pandora thought, *right off your wrist* . "It's almost time for my speech, and the auction begins after that. Do what you need to do and then return to the ballroom. All the items will be placed on the stage, and that's when they'll be most vulnerable."

"And what about your public support for the cure for vampirism?" the female asked.

*Aha* , Pandora silently exclaimed. That was why the conduits had agreed to help their mortal enemy—they were made to kill vampires, but they'd also been the ones who discovered the cure, discovered a way to use their flames to burn the vampirism out of a human body. Ever since the news had spread, the world of vampires and conduits had been in complete turmoil. Vamps were flocking to the conduit base in Florida, searching for their lost humanity, but there were just as many vamps eager to cut down what they saw as traitors to their own kind. Pandora had seen it herself, back when she'd been living in Washington, DC. She was at a popular blood bar when a sympathizer for the cure got into a fight with one of the high lords of the city—suffice it to say, he didn't last long. Within minutes, he'd been stuffed into a back room, out of sight. But to every vampire in the club, the sound of his head being ripped from his body was unmistakable.

Pandora shivered, remembering it.

This time when Tatsuya responded, his annoyance was palpable. "I'll hold true to my word if you hold true to yours. When I have the thief, I'll begin making my viewpoint known through all the right channels. I'm

nothing without my honor."

*Interesting*, Pandora thought, watching as the female conduit nodded her consent. A thief in return for a head vamp's support for the cure? Was she really so important? The trade-off seemed a little one-sided, even Pandora could admit it. Why did Tatsuya want her so badly? Surely it couldn't only be because she'd stolen some of his jewels...and some of his high lords' jewels...and, well, some other things as well? Supporting the cure was a huge statement, especially from the head vamp of New York.

When Tatsuya turned, walking away, Pandora paused.

Should she stay with the conduits, take the sword while it was here in the back room, and slip out with Tatsuya none the wiser? She could still meet with his agent tomorrow to make the drop, maybe grab the guy and question him for information about his master.

Or should she go with Tatsuya, observe the head vamp for a little while longer to see if there was any more she could learn about him or his dungeon, and take the sword sometime during the auction?

One way was definitely smarter.

The other would require a bit of a show.

Of course, there was a third option now that she realized Tatsuya had been expecting her all along, now that she knew the whole heist was an elaborate trap—cut her losses and leave.

But Pandora had never been one to back down from a challenge. And she had no doubt that even if it was a trap, she'd have no problem slipping away.

*Door number two it is... Showtime.*

With one glance over her shoulder, Pandora tried to hold back a grin as she watched the male conduit lift the sword and start arcing it over his head, cutting through empty space, while the female was completely oblivious, mind still on the mission.

*They aren't like I thought conduits would be.*

But she didn't have time to figure the pair out. Tatsuya launched into hyperspeed, and Pandora followed, returning to the party. She used the music and the conversation as cover for her movements, trailing closely behind, listening as he greeted guests and made his way slowly to the front of the room.

*What do you want with me?* she thought, not sure if she'd learn anything else tonight. *Where are you hiding all those people—where's your*

*dungeon? Do you know they're what I'm really after? Are you just trying to stop me before I get them, or is there something else you want, something I can't quite see ?*

His smiling face was lit with a spotlight, and he began his speech, thanking all the oblivious, wealthy humans for their kind donations supporting such a worthy cause.

But Pandora wasn't paying attention to his words. She was just absently staring at him, mind wandering. It couldn't be that he was afraid of her. She wasn't powerful enough to merit that sort of response from a head vamp—at least she didn't think so. Anger? Yes. Fury? Often. Fear? Not a chance.

And then she realized the only possible explanation.

*He wants to use me.*

*He wants to use my invisibility.*

If the rumors were true and Tatsuya really did have the power to bend even the strongest vampire to his will, what better weapon to have in his arsenal than a nearly indestructible undead with the power to disappear? He could order her to do anything in the world, go anywhere in the world, kill anyone in the world. And she'd be able to do it—to surprise even his toughest adversary.

As Tatsuya stepped down from the stage, allowing some survivors to say a few words about how blood donations had saved their lives, Pandora couldn't help but notice the way he scanned the room, searching every shadow, looking for her. The conduits had come out of the back room and were sitting at a table close to the stage. Their gazes were roving too.

*I should go.*

*I should definitely go .*

*I should one hundred percent, not a doubt in my mind, drop everything and go. Forget the cash. Forget my pride. Forget this heist. And go. Away from Tatsuya. Away from Jax. Just flee New York and leave everything behind.*

*Yes.*

*I really, really should.*

Instead, Pandora stepped closer, sensing her eyes shift into the undeniable frosty glow of hunger, but not for blood—for the danger, for the impossible odds, for the chance to prove her strength.

If Tatsuya was watching, she would give him a show. She'd let him

know that she didn't care how powerful he was, didn't care that he was a head vamp, didn't care about his rules. She'd still find his dungeon. She'd still free his prisoners. And tonight, she'd still steal that sword. She'd be out so fast they'd never come close to catching her. And then maybe he'd understand that he'd chosen to underestimate the wrong girl.

The first item went up for auction.

Pandora bided her time, waiting out of sight.

Another item sold.

And another.

And another.

Until finally, they brought the sword from the back room, setting it off to the side until it was ready for the stage.

*Now or never* , Pandora thought. And then she grinned wickedly. *Definitely now.*

Leaping from her spot at the side of the room, Pandora lurched into hyperspeed. She zipped through the tables, not taking care to keep her feet silent. Let Tatsuya hear. Let any vamp hear. Because in a moment, there'd be enough noise to cover everything.

Her fangs were already out, prodded by the adrenaline pumping through her recently refilled veins. So she used them, acting too fast to think, to process her movements. A moment later, her teeth sank into soft, wrinkled flesh, cutting deep and quick. By the time the pain registered and the woman screamed, Pandora was already across the space. Lips bloody, she dropped to another neck, eliciting another bloodcurdling scream from the opposite side of the room.

Eyes darted in her direction, but Pandora didn't take a second to pause, to think. She jumped, bending down, springing off the floor, nearly flying. She wrapped her hands around a thick metal chain hanging from the ceiling and landed smoothly on the top of a chandelier. Looking down, she noticed the table full of people below and took a moment to observe the conduits standing at attention. Before any doubts had time to creep in, she used her strength to rip the chain, popping a single metal link open.

Gravity did the rest.

Before Pandora even touched the ground, the crystals were chiming, clinking together as the chandelier grew unstable, trembling beneath its own weight now that the chain's strength had been compromised.

*Three.*

*Two .*

*One.*

The cable snapped.

The chandelier plummeted toward the ground, almost melodic if it weren't so utterly terrifying.

*Have I gone too far...?*

Pandora waited a second, watching as the people leapt from their table, diving out of the way. But as soon as she knew everyone was safe, she turned her back on the chaos. Tatsuya was standing in front of the sword, waiting for her with a smile on his lips, aware he was the only thing standing between her and victory.

So smug.

So arrogant.

*So idiotically full of himself*, she thought.

Still invisible, Pandora pressed herself flush against the wall, moving slowly closer, watching to see if Tatsuya could hear her.

He couldn't.

Taking a deep breath, she looked at the sword a mere foot away, looked at the incredibly powerful vamp also standing a mere foot away, and acted.

In one quick move, she flipped, reaching down with her hands as her feet came up and over, arcing in midair to grab the sword. She tumbled head over heels to the opposite side, pulling the sword into the shadows with her, making it disappear too.

Tatsuya heard the shift in the air, the *swoosh* of the sword as it left the table .

He acted on instinct, turning toward the sound.

Turning the wrong way.

By the time he realized his mistake, Pandora had already landed gracefully on her feet, utterly invisible, and sprinted with everything she had for the exit, trying to hold back her crazed laughter as she raced into the night, leaving the party and its patrons behind. She had no doubt they would try to follow—*try* being the operative word. Because Pandora was fast, and she had absolutely no intention of being caught.

The heist was over.

The fun, however, had only just begun.



## Chapter Five



Pandora ran, not sparing a moment to glance over her shoulder as she flew through the door and down the grand staircase, into the night.

Going to her apartment was out of the question.

Just in case Tatsuya or one of his vamp cronies was following, she needed to lead them somewhere unexpected, somewhere she'd never need to return. Sure, she wanted to break into his dungeons and free his prisoners, but she was still weeks away from being able to do that, weeks from having all the information she needed—information like where the dungeon was, for starters, and what sort of security it had. Just, well, little things like that. Tonight was only supposed to be her first look at her competition, not the final face off. So she needed to lose him, fast.

And Pandora knew just the place .

A cemetery.

Every time she moved to a new city, she memorized where the local cemeteries were, and New York was no different. Queens. That's where she needed to be. Something about so many dead bodies in a single place made vampire senses go haywire. If Tatsuya followed her there, she'd evade him in the shadows. He wouldn't be able to smell her or hear her. The constant reek of decay was too much, seeping up from the ground and wrapping around a vampire's body, blocking everything else—as though the dead were trying to reach out and grab hold, trying to drag the vamp into the dirt and into death where it belonged. Of course, she'd forfeit a lot of her power too. They'd be on almost even ground, except for one little detail—her invisibility, the perfect leg up. She'd be able to lose him easily, and right now, that was all that mattered.

Pandora shifted directions, swerving around taxis and pedestrians, heading east toward the bridge. Before long, she was in Queens, hopping the cast iron gate at the entrance to the cemetery and wrinkling her nose as she searched for the best place to hide. As much as she hated it, she knew what that place would be.

In a grave, completely masked by the stench of the dead.

Spotting a row of mausoleums at the top of the hill, Pandora picked one, and dove inside. It wasn't exactly what she'd been picturing—gothic, scary, generally creepy. Instead, it was ultramodern and sleek, totally pristine. The walls were utterly flat, lined with square marble inlays signifying the different graves built into the sides of the building. Overhead, a glass dome allowed for the moonlight to pour in. The only decoration in the entire structure was a tomb in the center of the room, topped with the statue of a man holding a woman, sheltering her from something unseen.

At first, Pandora wanted to turn and run.

The only accessible grave in here was the tomb beneath the statue—a little too obvious for her liking. But the second she shifted her head toward the door, voices carried to her ears, far away and not quite clear since her senses were dampened by the heaviness of these sacred grounds. The presence of so many corpses brought a ringing to her ears and a plug to her nose, stripping her supervamp abilities away.

Was it Tatsuya?

One of his men?

She paused for another moment, straining. And then she relaxed when the words finally became clear.

"Come on, babe," a deep voice said, faint and far away but audible. "I've got a blanket in my bag, a bottle of wine, some candles. We're away from the noise, under the stars. It's romantic, just go with it."

*Freaking hormonal teenagers, ruining my hiding place.*

Pandora sighed, glancing out the door for a split second, unable to make out the two figures in the distance, shrouded in the dark—a boy and a girl. For a moment, she paused. Could it somehow be the conduits from the ball? But it wasn't possible. Conduits didn't have superstrength or superspeed. There was no way they could have followed her—not when she was five times as fast, not when she was wrapped in the shadows, not without superhearing or superscent or any other superability capable of tracking her.

No, these were just teenagers in the wrong place at the wrong time.

They had to be.

The girl giggled—high-pitched, gleeful, and annoying as hell. Pandora snarled, curling her upper lip, wanting to slap her. The instinct only increased when she spoke.

"But it's so scary."

*You ain't seen nothing* , she thought, letting her fangs pop out just a little.

"Don't worry, I'll keep you safe."

And then they were kissing like dogs in heat, totally obnoxious.

Pandora rolled her eyes.

*Thank god I don't have my supersenses right now* , she thought, stepping back from the door. Those two wouldn't give her any trouble, but they were wandering a little too close for her liking. On the one hand, there'd be no better protection from Tatsuya than two sex-crazed teens making out in her hiding spot, covering any possible clue that she was there. On the other hand, ugh—she didn't need to be witness to that.

But safety was more important .

Escaping was more important.

Pandora shifted her gaze to the tomb in the center of the room, sighing.

*No time like the present.*

She pushed the heavy lid of the tomb to the side, using the stone statue as a hold. Even with her strength, the thing was surprisingly heavy, but it slid open nonetheless, revealing the dank black space beneath.

*This is so disgusting* , Pandora thought as she stepped closer, searching for clothes or a skeleton or any hint of what was hiding beneath. The rotten smell of stale air told her the body inside was old. How old, she didn't really want to know.

Outside, the girl shrieked. "You have to catch me first!"

*A coy game of chase... How original...*

Cringing from both the sappy lovefest going on outside and the dead body about to become her new best friend, Pandora crawled through the hole into the narrow space of the tomb. Using her hands and knees, she lifted the lid and balanced the uneven weight of the statue as she slid it back over, removing the light and surrounding herself in darkness. Trying not to think of the uneven grooves of bones digging into her back, she wrapped the shadows closer around herself, pretending that her invisibility also meant she wasn't really going to second base with a corpse right now.

A vamp could dream.

Right?

"Gotcha," came the muffled sound of a male voice seeping through the heavy stone. "What's my prize? "

"Me," the girl said.

Pandora closed her eyes. *Please, go away. Please, don't make me listen to you make out for an hour. Oh, dear god, please do not use tonight to live out some rebellious fantasy about doing it in a graveyard. It's not that romantic, I swear.*

*Please.*

*Please.*

*Please.*

"Now," the girl whispered.

Pandora's eyes shot open.

Now?

What the heck did that mean?

But trapped in the darkness, she had no clues but the drowned-out noises traveling through the stone. No smells. No sights. Nothing.

"Well, that's a bit of a letdown," the boy said, clearly disappointed.

"I don't get it. The tracker said he was right here."

*Tracker?*

Pandora reached for the sword strapped to her back—her heist, her prize, her moment of victory. Feeling along the handle, she scrunched her entire face into an angry, wrinkled mess.

*Crap!*

Right beneath the handguard, nestled into the corner of the handle, was an unusual little bump. She plucked it off and brought the button in front of her face. The subtle red blink was impossible to miss .

*They tracked me.*

*They freaking tracked me!*

It was genius.

It was a royal pain in her ass.

And despite her previous doubts, it was definitely the two conduits from the ball. No vampire ever thought to use modern technology—not even Pandora, and she'd been practically born with a computer on her lap. The superstrength, the superhearing, the superspeed—they'd made her soft. And now that she was really paying attention, she couldn't help but notice that the temperature of the stone on either side of her face was rising. Oh, they were conduits all right. Because there was no doubt in her mind that outside this tomb, the entire mausoleum was drowning in flames.

But it was okay.

She could get out of this.

She was a master thief.

She could get out of anything.

Pandora tuned back into the conversation.

"Kira," the male conduit said. And the name made her pause—she swore she'd heard it somewhere. Kira. Kira. Why was that name so familiar?

"What?" the girl snapped, frustration evident. "Why are you twitching like that?"

Pandora sighed, realizing that the guy must have been jerking his head toward her hiding spot. She must not have put the lid on perfectly centered .

*I really am off my game tonight.*

But everything was fine, no reason to panic. They were conduits after all. Even if they had realized the sword was hidden in the tomb, it would actually be entertaining to watch them attempt to lift the lid. A huge stone statue? They had no chance. None. And even if they did, she was invisible. All they'd see was a dead body, not the sword and certainly not her—not with the shadows wrapped close. Or maybe she'd drop the sword, release it from the shadows and return it to the light, and then all they'd see was the sword and the tracker, and absolutely no sign of her.

She was fine.

Totally and completely fine.

Great even.

"Show yourself," Kira commanded.

Pandora snorted. *Yeah, like that's going to work.*

The boy must have thought the same. "That was convincing..."

Not to be told off, Kira tried again. "Come out, and we won't hurt you."

*Sure, I'll believe that...never.*

Pandora smiled. This *was* entertaining. And the more time they spent talking, the more a new plan filled Pandora's thoughts. These conduits had been hired by Tatsuya—they'd spent time with him, and they'd probably seen things that could help her. Maybe if she gave herself up, maybe if she came out and played nice, they'd let something slip. Pandora still needed to find out the location of Tatsuya's dungeon, the level of security it had, how powerful he truly was—maybe these conduits had information that could help her.

And if not? Well, they were only protector conduits. Their fire couldn't kill her, just trap her. Even if they doused her in flames, she'd be able to edge her way to the door or maybe jump through the glass sunroof—she'd bested protector conduits before. Somehow, she'd be able to wriggle her way free and escape into the night, same as always.

Pandora pinched the tracker and attached it to the wall of the tomb. Without that, they'd never be able to find her. In a few minutes, she'd be free and maybe armed with a little more information than she'd started with.

The plan was perfect.

Well, maybe not perfect, but it would do.

High on the anticipation, Pandora pressed her hands against the lid, lifting it just enough to slide it over a few inches. Immediately, the black air around her was flooded with a fiery orange glow that prickled her skin, hot enough to suffocate her frozen body.

*Come out, and you won't hurt me?*

Pandora scoffed.

*Yeah, right.*

And though she knew she should ask politely, give a little please and thank-you to snuff out the vampire-crisping flames, she couldn't help but unleash a snappy, taunting retort instead. "I'd believe that a little more if this place didn't resemble an inferno right now. "

"You're a woman," the guy blurted.

Pandora frowned, narrowing her eyes. Why did everyone always think she was a boy? It was infuriating. "And?" she couldn't help but call out. "A master thief can't be a girl?"

Safe to say that the whole *be nice* plan had gone out the window.

But that was okay.

It was much easier for her to be a jerk.

And apparently, this conduit Kira liked her style, because instead of siding with her accomplice, she backed Pandora up, teasing the boy. "Yeah, what did you mean by that, Luke?"

Okay, Luke—he had a name.

Kira and Luke.

Kira and Luke.

Why did they sound so freaking familiar?

The answer was on the tip of her tongue...

"Um, nothing," the guy, Luke, responded hesitantly. Clearly, he was

in retreat mode. "I just—wait, how'd this get turned on me? We're supposed to be trapping a vampire, not debating feminism."

"Oh, it's not a debate," Pandora called out again, unable to keep her big mouth shut. But she was smiling from ear to ear—really, the poor boy was making it too easy to tease him. And all she was doing was speaking the truth. "Women are obviously the superior sex. It's just so much easier to manipulate men when they think they're in control. "

"Well, lucky me then," Luke said, tone utterly sincere. "Because I learned a long time ago that I'm never in control."

Kira laughed softly, trying to cover it up with a cough, but Pandora heard the mirth in her tone. *I never thought I'd like conduits this much*, she thought, mentally shrugging. Tonight was without a doubt one of the most bizarre nights of her life.

"Wait," Luke said a second later, realizing his mistake. "I mean—"

"No, that was accurate," Kira interrupted jokingly, eliciting another bout of respect from Pandora. Until her tone shifted just enough for Pandora to realize they were getting back to business—getting back to being mortal enemies. "But as much as I like your style, he has a point. We have a job to do, so come out. Or, actually, stay in—it doesn't really matter much to us."

Hmm, getting them to talk was going to be more difficult than Pandora had initially thought. And then those last few words registered. Why didn't they care if she came out to face them or remained hidden in the shadows?

"Why?" Pandora asked, almost to herself.

"Because," Kira responded, voice completely in control of the situation, "in a few minutes, we won't be alone anymore and—"

"Hate to break it to you," a deep voice cut in, "but you already have company."

*Oh, for the love of god !*

Pandora recognized the tone.

She'd know it anywhere.

Jax.

Never-listens-to-a-word-she-says Jax.

Sneaking up on her again.

*Why is he here?*

*Why won't he just leave me alone?*

*How does he keep frigging finding me?*

*Ugh.*

She knew he was going to be insufferable. No one on the planet was more annoying (or more annoyingly adorable) than Jax when he went all macho trying to protect her. She'd seen it before. And she was undoubtedly about to see it again. But she wasn't that meek girl she used to be.

This time, she didn't need saving.

In fact, all he'd managed to do was make her chances of surviving even slimmer. Because getting out of here on her own would have been hard enough. But getting out of here without killing Jax would be even tougher. And getting out of here without killing Jax, but instead saving his annoying little ass, would be nearly impossible.

A shift in the light caught her attention.

The flames seeping in through the open crack of the lid dimmed, not so hot, almost dull.

*Is she trying to contain him with her fire? Does she think he's a vampire?* Pandora questioned, confused. Conduits and titans were on the same side—both slaying bad guys who needed to be taken down. They should have been able to recognize each other. The conduit should have known that her fire wouldn't have any effect on a titan—after all, conduit flames burned vamps and vamps alone. They couldn't even light a stack of wood on fire, let alone a titan.

"Who are you?" Kira asked, voice laced with the smallest bit of fear, as though she'd never seen a titan in the flesh before, as though she had no idea who or what he was.

But Jax had gone into full protection mode. He wasn't bothering to answer the girl's question. In fact, his tone had just gone even more threatening. And dammit, that aggressive edge just made him sound sexier. Pandora hated herself for melting just a little. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will if you don't leave now."

"In case you hadn't noticed, it's two against one," Kira fired back, all strength again. Pandora winced—not the right move to push his buttons right now. Did she really not know he had superstrength? Did she really not understand that Jax could crush her if he wasn't one of the good guys at heart?

Obviously not.

Jax just grunted. "I'll take my chances."

"Don't come any closer," the male conduit ordered.



Pandora envisioned Jax's cocky grin as he took in the man standing before him, trying to hand him commands. Sure, they were both tall and of a similar height. For humans, that would make a difference, but not when the fight was between a titan and a conduit. And Jax knew it .

"Or what?" he asked smugly.

Pandora pressed her hands and knees against the stone, ready to throw the lid to the ground and join the conversation, but a sound stopped her. The sound of a fist smacking into a palm that was harder than the rock above her head. The sound of the conduit Luke trying to stand up to someone he had no hope of besting.

Pandora sighed, cringing, waiting for what she knew would come next.

And there it was.

A body slammed into stone and dropped like dead weight to the ground.

*Jax, you idiot. That wasn't even a fair fight.*

He didn't seem to care when he nonchalantly spoke. "Looks like it's one against one now."

*Not quite.*

Because Pandora had listened to enough.

"I don't need you to save me!" she fumed. In fact, what she needed was for him to finally leave, so she could make her grand exit and ditch him for good.

"Could've fooled me," Jax shot back immediately.

*Grr!*

Pandora pushed, moving the lid far enough over that she could stand up and leave the dark behind. But the second the stone moved, the flames came surging back over the lid of the tomb, hot enough to burn where they touched her skin.

"Ow!" she yelled. Wasn't this chick a protector conduit? Her fire wasn't supposed to sting quite so much, but dang, Pandora felt her skin boil after only a few seconds. It didn't make any sense. "Could you put those freaking things out?"

Instead of disappearing, the flames only intensified, pouring out of the conduit's palms, dousing Pandora completely in scorching air, a blaze so hot she gasped.

*Bitch!*

Jax must have thought so too, because he grabbed the hem of the conduit's dress and spun her around with a venomous look in his eyes. "I don't like hitting girls but that doesn't mean I won't. Put them out. Now."

For a moment, Pandora didn't think the conduit would listen. But after a second, her face softened, as though she'd seen something deep in Jax's eyes that she for some reason trusted.

The fire vanished.

Pandora sighed, shaking the lingering heat off. She'd never thought she'd feel comforted by the frozen presence creeping across her limbs, the icy pull of death, but against that raging inferno, it was a relief.

"Look, I was telling the truth," Kira said, speaking to Jax, ignoring Pandora since she still stood out of sight, wrapped in shadows and hidden from the world. The conduit's voice had shifted to something kinder, something almost caring. "Any minute, the head vampire of New York is going to be here, and you probably want to be gone before that happens."

"I'm not afraid of a vampire," Jax responded immediately, all bravado

Pandora shook her head. *Idiot.* Titans weren't immortal, and a head vampire was nothing to turn his nose up at, especially one as powerful as Tatsuya, especially one—

*Wait.*

Pandora snapped her gaze to the conduit, tone no longer snarky but dead serious. "Tatsuya is coming?"

For some reason, she thought the conduits would bring her to him. That they were the only thing she still needed to be running from tonight. If Tatsuya was coming, that whole question-the-conduits-for-information plan was out the window. If he was on his way, then she was seriously running out of time.

*Stupid, stupid mistake!*

Pandora glanced at Jax, torn. His chest was puffed out, his heartbeat was utterly calm, and he wasn't the least bit concerned. All of that just made her more nervous. Because if Tatsuya was coming, he'd take her alive. But he had no reason to be so merciful with Jax.

*That boy is going to be the death of me.*

*Literally.*

But there was no time to stall. Pandora released the shadows, letting the moonlight touch her skin, returning to the world of light.

She had to get Jax out of here.

And knowing him, she was going to need to do it the hard way.

## Chapter Six



The conduit stared at Pandora, noticing her the second she reappeared. But she kept her fire trapped beneath her skin, remembering Jax's previous threat, and instead gave Pandora an annoyed once-over. Then she sighed.

"He hired us to find you," Kira admitted, shocking Pandora a little bit by revealing the truth—something she was sure Tatsuya had wanted to keep secret. After all, it was a touch embarrassing that an incredibly powerful head vamp had needed the help of his enemies to track down little old her. Before Pandora could mentally gloat, the conduit added, "Guess you pissed off the wrong people."

"Story of my freaking life." Pandora rolled her eyes, unable to contain her frustration. And then she turned to her first love and now constant source of aggravation. "Jax, you have to go, and I'm not joking. "

"I'm not leaving unless you come with me," he responded immediately, just as strong and rigid as the muscles coiled tight beneath his shirt.

*Obviously*, Pandora thought, *because nothing in my life is ever easy.*

Crossing her arms, she held her ground, not backing down. It was time for Jax to finally understand she wasn't the girl he remembered—he was chasing a fantasy. "What part of leave me the hell alone do you not understand?"

"The part where I leave you the hell alone," Jax replied smoothly, lifting the corner of one lip in an undeniably sexy lopsided grin.

Pandora's fingers itched to remove the smile from his face, if only to stop the sudden tightness in her own chest.

"I'm not going back," she said roughly, giving him one last chance to just take a hint and leave. "Not ever."

Unsurprisingly, he didn't listen.

Instead, Jax stepped closer, reaching his hand forward, stretching for her skin, stopping short. Pandora glanced at the space between them, fighting the electric yearning for his touch. Her whole body ached to close the

distance. Against her will, she felt her eyes spark with the uncontrollable desire to go with him, to just give in, to stop running, and to go home.

The wish was always there.

Always lingering in the pit of her stomach.

Always aching longingly .

But she'd perfected the art of ignoring the homesickness, ignoring the broken heart, ignoring the dreams.

"I've been chasing you for four years," Jax said softly, the love he still felt undeniable in the gentleness of his tone, so different from the strong, hard man he seemed to have become. "And I'm not going to stop until you come home. We need you. I need you."

Pandora extended her hand, slumping her shoulders as she bowed her head, seemingly falling under the spell of his words. Their skin touched, sparking, sending a bolt down her spine. His eyes brightened as though sensing her reaction. She paused, holding still for a moment, reluctant to make her next move.

She felt a little guilty for tricking him like this.

A little.

But really, Jax had left her no choice.

He'd practically forced her into it.

Before she lost her nerve, Pandora latched her fingers around his, then clenched all of her muscles as she yanked him forward and crouched down, flipping him up and over her head before he could do anything more than widen his eyes in shock. Pandora bit her lip to keep from grinning as he sailed backward and slammed into the wall behind her almost in slow motion, everything about him growing more and more pissed by the second. But before he could retaliate, she leapt for him, landing heavy on his chest to keep him anchored down as she punched his perfectly sculpted cheekbones once—twice—three times .

*And he's out* , she thought smugly, not at all concerned. Titans didn't stay injured for long—he'd be healed in a matter of minutes. And hopefully by then she'd be gone, along with any threat to his life.

Leaning over him, she couldn't help but think that he was so much cuter when he was out cold, eyes closed, jaw slack, black hair falling over his forehead—so much cuter when he was quiet, when those eyes weren't looking at her as though he wanted to kiss her and throttle her at the same time.

Pandora brushed the backs of her fingers against his cheek. Even unconscious, his body radiated life, was charged with it in a way hers would never be again. She found his lip, tracing it with her thumb.

If she'd had the time, if she'd been alone, Pandora would have done the one thing she regretted not doing before. She would have kissed him good-bye.

But the conduits were watching.

And Tatsuya was coming.

So Pandora snatched her hand back, hating how her icy heart hung like a dead weight in her chest, and lifted Jax from the ground, then turned around and faced the open tomb.

*He'll kill me for this*, she thought for a moment and then shrugged. *He'll have to find me first...which, apparently, he's become annoyingly great at. So typical.*

With a sigh, she dropped him into the shadows and slid the lid back over, locking him inside. Oh, when he woke up lying on a dead body and surrounded by black, he was going to be the definition of rage. But one way or another—free or as Tatsuya's prisoner—she'd be far away when that happened. And he'd be safe, which, when it came down to it, was all that mattered to her.

Dusting off her hands, she turned back to Kira, who was watching with her mouth slightly agape. "Like I said before," Pandora commented, shrugging, trying to put on a braver face than she felt. "Men are so much easier to manipulate when they think they're in control."

She met the conduit's eyes, green and full of dancing fire—completely alive. Completely different from the frigid-blue vampire eyes Pandora had now.

They stared at each other.

Neither moving.

Just watching each other.

Waiting.

But there was no more time to waste.

The conduit hadn't brought her fire back out, which meant Pandora had exactly one second to make her move and get out while she still had the chance. Moving as slowly as possible, she reached back and gripped the bottom of the sword to keep it steady as she started to bend her knees. One strong push was all it would take to launch herself through the glass dome

overhead and out into the night. One more minute.

Pandora leapt.

But it was too late.

The conduit reacted faster than she'd thought possible. Fire flooded from the girl's hands, slamming into Pandora's chest before her feet had even made it a foot off the ground. Instantly, she was thrown back as though hit by a freight train at full speed, totally pummeled. Her back hit the wall so hard she heard stone crack as she bounced off, ricocheted by the impact, and dropped to the floor.

The sword clanged uselessly to the ground.

Pandora gritted her teeth as the inferno strengthened, sending her stumbling back until she was pressed tightly to the wall with nowhere to escape, not even an inch to move. There was no chance she'd be able to edge her way to the door. The fire held her stock still, a bug squished under a swatter, totally outmatched. Protector fire wasn't supposed to be like this, not this powerful, not this all-consuming. Kira was different somehow, stronger than should be possible, like nothing Pandora could have anticipated. The flames sank into the pale skin of her arms, burning it red, scorching her every nerve, making her wince as the pain dug deep.

The ache was unbelievable.

So much worse than anything Pandora had ever felt from a protector conduit before, as though she were being burned at the stake, crisped and fried like meat on a grill.

But she wasn't going to let Kira know that.

"And here I thought we were becoming friends," Pandora sneered, trying to sound as unaffected as possible, as though getting into life-or-death battles against her mortal enemy were just another Saturday night .

The conduit frowned. "It's not personal, just business."

*She's left me an opening* , Pandora thought, trying to focus through the pain. Because Kira wasn't a normal conduit, she'd caught Pandora off guard, and if Tatsuya was coming, he was almost here. At this point, surrounded by surprisingly impenetrable fire, her capture was starting to feel sort of inevitable.

In the little time she had left, she needed to focus on the other aspect of her plan, gathering as much information as possible about the head vamp and his power. Because that dungeon she'd been meaning to break into? Well, it looked as though she would probably be going there a few weeks

ahead of schedule—as a prisoner, no less.

*Maybe if I feign ignorance, she'll tell me everything I need to know* , Pandora thought. After all, conduits were used to being the good guys—working with a head vamp went entirely against her nature. If Pandora could come off as an innocent victim, maybe the girl would sympathize with her—maybe she'd feel the need to justify her actions.

It wasn't her best plan.

It wasn't even a great plan.

But it was the only one she had left.

"And what business could a conduit possibly have with Tatsuya?"

Kira shrugged. "He asked us to find you."

Pandora narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

The girl shrugged again .

*Okay, different angle .*

"In exchange for what?" Pandora asked instead. She already knew the answer, but she just wanted to keep the girl talking to see what she might reveal.

The conduit paused as though torn, and then softly admitted, "He's going to publicly support the cure for vampirism."

And as she stared into Kira's honest eyes and heard those words, for some reason, everything finally clicked. Why her name sounded familiar. Why she was so brazen. Why she was so powerful. Why Tatsuya had called her, of all people, for help. Why she'd make a truce with someone so evil. Why she cared about supporting the cure so much.

Pandora dropped her jaw open and she gasped. "You're her, aren't you?"

The conduit grinned. "If by her, you mean Kira, the girl who discovered the cure, then yes, yes I am."

A few years ago, this girl was all anyone in the supernatural world could talk about. Her name was on every tongue, in every conversation. The incredibly powerful conduit who'd fallen in love with a vampire, who'd risked her life to save his, who'd done something no one had ever thought possible—cured him.

*I wonder if she could cure me. Right here, right now.*

Pandora couldn't stop the thought from coming, and as soon as it was there, she wished she could take it back.

*Idiot .*



She had to stop allowing the cracks to show, allowing the hopes and the dreams and the nostalgia to creep out. It just made everything so much harder, so much more painful.

And this time, she couldn't even blame it on Jax.

It was all her.

The fire pressing against Pandora's skin eased up, growing less painful, leaving a little more room for her to breathe but not quite enough to escape. She turned her attention back to the conduit, staring at her through the flames, noticing how her skin glowed vibrantly in the heat.

Kira stepped closer, staring at Pandora as if she were a code to decipher.

"Why do you steal things?" she asked softly.

Pandora swallowed around the sudden tightness in her throat, trying to wrap the icy freeze of vampirism around her limbs again, trying to bring back the wall the fire had somehow melted away. Channeling her last little bit of defiance, she replied, "I like to live on the edge."

Kira's expression just grew more prodding. Completely unafraid, fully aware she had the upper hand, the conduit moved even closer. "What are you running from?"

*When did I become so easy to read?* Pandora thought, wondering what had happened to the big bad vampire mojo she was supposed to have—the one that made her an emotionless rock, that made her a lifeless undead.

But she didn't feel that way, not really .

And maybe it was the fact that this conduit was looking at her as though she were someone worth saving, or maybe it was the general strangeness of the evening, or maybe it was the fact that she was talking to someone she was certain she'd never have to see again. Whatever it was, Pandora wanted to be honest, just this once. Maybe that would make it easier to keep running, to keep going.

Because as much as she tried to convince herself otherwise, she knew she wasn't running from Jax. She wasn't running from the titans. She wasn't running from their betrayals and their false words and their lies. She wasn't running from her past.

She was running from her future.

Running from a destiny she couldn't face.

Running from a fate so horrible she'd erased it from her mind, leaving only the gut reaction to keep going and going without ever looking back.

Pandora stared into the conduit's eyes. Her reflection stared back, clear as though there were a mirror deep in those flaming irises, forcing her to admit the truth to herself for the very first time.

"I'm running from the same thing everyone else is," she answered, voice gritty. "Myself."

Kira looked away as a sort of understanding flickered in her expression, as though maybe she'd once been running too. Her gaze dipped toward the tomb, toward Jax, before she spoke. "You could go home, you know." And then she lifted her gaze back to Pandora. "Seems like there are people there who miss you. I can help you get there. I can help you become whoever you were before."

Pandora laughed, an empty, bitter sound. This girl didn't understand. No one did. Maybe not even Pandora herself. "There's no turning back, not for me. I—" But then she stopped, listening as voices carried on the wind, still unintelligible, but this time Pandora wouldn't be fooled. There were no rebellious teens, no groundskeepers, no nothing. Just Tatsuya coming to carry her away. "He's here."

The conduit bit her lip, eyes ticking back and forth as she thought. And then she stepped forward, closing the distance between their two bodies, not the least bit concerned that her neck was close enough to bite. One nip, one slurp of conduit blood, and Pandora could be free. Drinking their blood gave a vampire immunity to their flames—their greatest weakness. One sip and she could slip away into the night. She could disappear. And with the smell of that sweet conduit blood filtering through her nose, reeking of warmth and power, the idea was definitely tempting.

*No. Stop.*

Pandora forced her fangs back in, pushing the hunger away to listen. Because she needed information more than she needed to escape. No matter what happened, she wasn't going to turn her back on all those forgotten people Tatsuya had trapped somewhere in this city. Either way, she'd face the head vamp eventually—tonight or in a few weeks. The choice was hers. But the conduit was about to reveal something big—Pandora knew it. And she might never get another chance like this one.

"Don't look into his eyes," Kira whispered directly into Pandora's ear. "After an hour or so, his power will wear off, and if you're invisible, he won't be able to touch you."

*Is it really so easy to escape him?*

Pandora stared at the conduit, utterly shocked. Tatsuya could only control her if he had eye contact with her? And the control only lasted for an hour at a time? All she needed was one second of freedom, one moment, and she'd turn invisible. Without access to her eyes, he'd never catch her again.

*Whoa.*

She'd been hoping for some information, any information, but this was way more than she'd bargained for. And she'd gotten it by being honest—not through her fists.

*Huh. Maybe I should rethink my whole punch first, ask questions later motto...*

Kira's voice grew hurried. "Don't let fear own you. When you're ready to face whatever you're running from, come find me. Your life doesn't have to be this way. Trust me, I know because I've seen it. I've saved it."

Her tone was utterly sincere.

And despite herself, Pandora buried the words deep in the center of her soul, right in the core of her frozen heart, in the little dying flame of her humanity, just in case one day she needed them .

Without a moment to spare, the door to the mausoleum flew open, slamming against the wall with a thunderous bang.

Tatsuya was here.

"My thief," he murmured, delighted.

Pandora had never seen the head vamp as anything but utterly controlled, almost mechanical. But now, his eagerness flashed. With each passing moment, his eyes glowed brighter and brighter.

The conduit stepped back, turning toward Tatsuya and leaving Pandora trapped within her burning flames.

"Delivered as promised," Kira said.

*Yes, you did .* Pandora grunted, annoyed, as she futilely pushed against the wall of fire one final time. *There might as well be a freaking bow attached to my forehead .*

But the conduit continued. "I expect you to make good on your end of the bargain."

Tatsuya finally lifted his excited gaze from Pandora, giving her a moment's relief from the many terrible possibilities his eyes seemed to hold. "As I said before, I'm a man of my word. You'll have your public support. Expect the whisperings of my changing views to spread within the week."

His attention snapped back to Pandora.

Without another word, he walked calmly toward her, moving through the flames without an ounce of pain or hardship.

*He's got a conduit trapped in that dungeon of his* , Pandora thought, disgusted. It was the only way he could possibly be moving so fluidly through fire that had easily nailed her to the wall. Before coming here, Tatsuya had clearly had his fill of conduit blood, drinking enough to make himself immune to their power.

*Well, enjoy it while you can. 'Cause you won't have that conduit too much longer* , Pandora seethed silently, fuming at the thought of any poor, innocent person being trapped within his care like nothing more than another blood bag.

Maybe right now he was winning.

Maybe right now he thought he'd won.

But Pandora knew the truth. She was a fighter. She'd never stop. And now that she knew his secret, knew his power only worked through eye contact, she just needed to bide her time and allow him to think she'd been beat. Eventually, the perfect moment to strike would come. Because a few moments ago she'd had her chance to escape, and she didn't take it. She chose to stay and fight—so that was exactly what she intended to do.

Tatsuya gripped Pandora's chin.

She kept her eyes wide open, and she met his blazing cerulean irises with blatant defiance, promising that her time for vengeance would come.

Just, well, not right now.

"Hold your hands behind your back," Tatsuya said. Against her will, her arms immediately snapped backward, folding completely uselessly against her lower back. Her eyes, though, remained sharp as daggers. "Retract your fangs, and remain within two feet of my body without touching me or anyone else until I say otherwise. Oh, yes, and one more thing. No more turning invisible unless I ask you to."

*This crap better wear off soon .*

Pandora struggled against his command as best she could, but it was useless. Her teeth retracted back into her gums, no longer threatening. Her body inched closer to his, even as the fire dug into her skin, making her cringe. And when she tried to pull the shadows around her body, tried to hide herself from the light in the way she'd been able to for as long as she could remember, nothing happened. The shadows either weren't there, or they weren't listening.

Tatsuya's lip twitched into a smile that vanished a moment later. Then he turned back to Kira. "You can release your power now."

The conduit slid her gaze to Pandora and held it for a prolonged second, as though trying to memorize her face. Something about her expression was apologetic, almost pained.

As soon as the fire was gone, Tatsuya flew into hyperspeed, leaving Pandora no choice but to follow. Outside the mausoleum, the rest of his hunting party fell in behind, following as they raced deep into the night.

*At least Jax is safe* , Pandora thought as her feet moved of their own volition, churning to someone else's command, leading her miles away from the boy she would always love—the boy who, still unconscious in a tomb, would be cursing her name soon enough .

*I wish I could say the same about myself* .

Unfortunately, Pandora wasn't so lucky.

There was no doubt in her mind she was being taken to one of the most secure dungeons in the world—the one holding Tatsuya's most prized possessions, all the people she was determined to set free. And she had a sneaking suspicion that if she couldn't figure out how to escape, she was about to become his crown jewel.

Instead of being afraid, Pandora just smirked.

So things were happening a few weeks ahead of schedule—big deal. She was currently being personally escorted to his secret prison. She was going to get a firsthand look at all his security. And she knew his greatest weakness. If everything went well, she'd be breaking his prisoners out before the night was over. Heck, she'd be leaving New York before the sun even had the chance to rise.

Pandora had always been good at improvising, so as her body raced toward captivity, her mind raced toward freedom.

*Challenge accepted* .

## Chapter Seven



So...things weren't going exactly how she'd planned.

Okay—they weren't going at all how she'd planned.

"Pick up the knife," Tatsuya ordered from the other side of her glass enclosure.

Immediately, she complied.

"Carve my name into your forearm."

Gritting her teeth, Pandora slid the blade into her ivory skin, watching red beads bubble to the surface, first a *T*, then an *A*, all the way to the end. But she didn't cry out. Didn't gasp. Didn't make a sound, even as her blood dripped to the floor, joining the pool already soaking her feet.

*It's not really my blood anyway*, she thought, looking down at the ever-expanding crimson ring.

"Now drink," Tatsuya murmured, shoving a blood bag through a thin opening at the base of the cell, a dip in the stone just large enough to make her wonder if escape was possible, all the while knowing it wasn't.

Pandora dropped the knife, watching as her wounds sealed shut, already forgotten as her body began to heal itself. But her veins scratched painfully, aching empty, and her throat hurt from the hunger. Her insides burned, too dry, as her mouth turned to sawdust, begging for relief. Greedily, she snatched the bag from the opening, ripped through the plastic, and sank her fangs into the thick liquid, drawing in the sweet relief.

"We can go on like this forever, Pandora, and I'm starting to think we might have to," Tatsuya continued. He sat on the other side of the glass, legs crossed, face utterly blank. The fluorescent lights cast a sickly, putrid glow over his silver hair. "I have an entire arsenal of weapons crafted from sanded-down vampire teeth and nails, all created for the sole purpose of torturing stubborn souls like yours into compliance. And I've had many lifetimes' worth of practice on how to use them."

She didn't stop drinking.

She didn't move.

"Now, I'll ask you one more time. Would you like to do this the hard way? Or will you save yourself the unnecessary pain and make the vow to serve me?"

Pandora slid her gaze along the stone floor, over the blood, to the photograph sitting at the other end of her cell. The photograph of a young woman, probably her age, with olive skin and deep brown eyes that seemed to bore into her heart—a defiant young woman who Tatsuya wanted Pandora to hunt down and retrieve.

Why?

She had no idea.

But she did know one thing. There was no way she'd help him, no way she'd become his invisible fighting machine. There was no way she'd be making any vow anytime soon.

He could make her stab herself as many times as he wanted, could make her play as many torturous mind games as he wanted, but she wouldn't break. She was stronger than that. Stronger than he knew. So strong that he hadn't even realized she was no longer under his spell, under his control. She'd been careful not to look him in the eye for the past hour, to look close but not direct. And the last three times he commanded her to cut his name into her skin, she'd done it out of sheer will, not by force.

"Answer me," he ordered calmly. "Will you work for me?"

Pandora looked up, staring into the ridge of his nose, the spot directly between his eyes. Still crouched over the blood bag, she dropped her hand to the floor and felt for the knife. Without glancing down, she carved her answer into her now pristine skin, listening as new droplets fell almost soundlessly to the floor, splashing so softly only a vampire could hear.

No .

Tatsuya's nostrils flared. In a blink, he stood, hands clenched, as he took her in with disgust.

"You think this is the hard way? You think it won't get worse?"

*Oh, I know it will* , she thought but didn't move. She could play these games for as long as it took. The perfect time to strike would come eventually. And when it did, she'd kill him. None of her other jailbreaks had been so personal, but Tatsuya was the one who'd made it this way by trying to break her into submission. And for that, he'd pay.

"Cut off your finger."

Pandora swallowed, clutching the handle of the blade. Before she had

time to second-guess, before she made the mistake of revealing she'd broken through his control, she used her vamp-enhanced speed to slash the weapon through the air and slam it into the ground, directly through her flesh.

This time, she did cry out.

She screamed.

Tatsuya smiled. "Next time, it could be your arm or your leg. Next time, it could be so many things an innocent mind like yours probably hasn't considered, things that don't even require weapons, things that will warp your thoughts so completely you can't tell up from down. So think good and hard about your decision, because when I come back in sixty minutes, I won't be so merciful. Now, look at me."

Through the gasps and the pain, Pandora lifted her head a few inches, staring right back into the same spot between his eyes—close but not close enough.

"You want to heal? Drink the blood off the floor like a dog. Lick it clean. And then sit calmly and wait for my return. No invisibility, no escape attempts, no speaking at all."

Glancing away as quickly as she could, Pandora dropped to all fours and sank her mouth into the sticky liquid still warm against the cold floor. Slurping like a child, she sucked it up, in too much pain to be anything but grateful for the delicious distraction of the blood sinking down her throat, euphoric as it slowly healed the stub where her finger used to be.

Tatsuya quietly left.

But she followed his orders, licking the floor like an animal until every last drop of blood was back inside her body. And then she sat, crossing her legs, staring through the glass, pretending to follow his orders. A camera blinked in the upper corner of the room, zeroed in on her.

Pandora ached to go invisible.

Ached to punch her fists against the glass so hard it shattered.

Ached to fight, to escape.

But she knew better. He had weapons made of vampire teeth—she wasn't the first bloodsucker to be held here. The glass surrounding her was undoubtedly created to withstand all the force she could throw against it. There was no way it would break. Not a chance. The only way she was getting out of here was to wait until he had underestimated her so thoroughly that he opened the door and set her free.

So the best course of action was to sit like a good little girl and make



him think he had her controlled, make him think he could waltz into her cell and do whatever he wanted, that he was safe from her. And while she waited, she would plot and observe. The security cameras in the corners weren't the only ones she'd noticed. Tatsuya had been arrogant enough to leave her eyes uncovered as he led her to her cell, so Pandora had seen it all. The entire place was wired with cameras. All the doors were protected with keycard access. Vampire guards had been stationed down each hallway, but there was a bored look in their eyes, hollow. She could slip by them easily if she were invisible. And if she let the healthiest prisoners out first, they'd be able to fight their way out, fight the way clear for the weaker ones. If she could just get her hands on one of those keycards, maybe make her way to the control room, she'd be golden.

It was only a matter of when.

When—

"Nicely done," a voice whispered from over her shoulder, warm breath fluttering over her neck, bringing goose bumps to her icy skin. "Even I'm not sure when exactly you regained your autonomy. Chopping your own finger off? Very thorough. I'm impressed. Then again, you've always been a fighter."

Pandora inhaled sharply but managed to hold still for the camera.

She'd only heard that silky voice once before, but she recognized him—the man from the club. A phantom, a vampire, a figment of her imagination? She wasn't really sure which. But she did know he'd been the first person to ever disappear on her. Eying the camera again, she opened her mouth a hair, letting one word slip out. "How?"

"Pandora," he murmured, letting her name roll off his tongue smoothly, with the barest hint of pleasure, as though saying her name was a treat, as though it was a word he savored. For some reason, the sound sent a subtle tingle down her spine, the barest shiver. "I got in the same way you can get out, if you're willing to trust me."

Pandora swallowed, letting her gaze roam the cell. His voice had shifted, no longer at her back but coming from the front. Yet she couldn't see him, couldn't even sense him. He was completely and utterly invisible.

And he was stalking her.

And disturbingly skilled at breaking and entering.

And most likely insane.

*Just my luck .*

But what options did she have, really? No one else was helping her. And if he was a ghost, maybe he had some otherworldly wisdom he could shine down on her.

"How?" she whispered again, barely parting her lips, still unwilling to break Tatsuya's direct commands when the camera was focused directly on her. Unless this guy offered a better option, Pandora was sticking to her own plan .

"Join me in the shadows," he said, undeniably alluring. His voice cast a spell over her, making her want to listen. Some inexplicable force blossomed deep in her gut, urging her to follow him, to believe in him, as though part of her somehow belonged to him. As though she were already his.

Burning fingers grazed the skin at the back of her neck, tracing a line of fire across her icy core as they gently shifted her hair to the side. Lips pressed against her ear. "I can teach you how to use your power, to really harness it. You're so much stronger than you know, so much stronger than they led you to believe."

"What?" Pandora snapped at his words, breaking through the trance. Camera forgotten, she pulled the shadows around her, disappearing from sight and wrapping herself in darkness as she jumped to her feet and spun. He was standing directly behind her, merely a few inches away, watching over her with a sort of affection that spoke of history—much more history than what she remembered, much more history than a few stolen words in the middle of a crowded club. Those blue eyes were intense and bright and hungry. She fought the sudden dryness in her throat. "What do you mean by *they* ? What do you know about my power?"

He lifted his hand to her cheek.

To her surprise, she let him, entranced by the warmth in his touch. What was he? Those frosty eyes spoke of vampire, but the heat in his touch and the tanned hue of his skin spoke of something else entirely. Something she didn't understand—yet .

"I know everything there is to know about your power," he said, using his thumb to stroke her skin, a loving sort of gesture, so gentle that for a moment she wondered if she was imagining him. "Because it's my power, and it has been for a long time. I can show you everything, if you'll let me. But first, we need to get out of here."

He dropped his hand, stepped around her, and pressed his palms to the

glass.

"Wait," she blurted, blinking as though waking from a dream. The distance between them gave her room to breathe, room to think—some much-needed fresh air. "Who *are* you?"

He turned, looking at her over his shoulder, lifting the corner of his lip into a devilish smirk. "You can call me Sam."

Sam?

But that was so...ordinary.

So all-American schoolboy, prom king, quarterback of the football team, goes to church on Sunday, ordinary.

And the man in front of her was anything but that.

"Sam?" she questioned, not fully able to keep the snark from her tone.

He shrugged, smirk deepening. "Yeah, Sam."

"How old are you?"

Lifting a single brow, he shook his head and turned back to the glass, drawing her attention to his golden hair in the process. It was long, longer than boys usually wore it these days, meaning he was probably old—vampire old. Intriguingly old—as in, why would he care what happened to her, a newbie vamp and a thief at that, old. It looked so smooth, so soft, so utterly graspable—like sexy, midkiss, passionately in-the-moment graspable.

*Why am I thinking about this?*

*I should not be thinking about this.*

*Escape. Escape first, swoon second.*

*No, wait. Swoon never.*

*Resist the swoon at all costs.*

Shaking her head to clear her foggy thoughts, Pandora took a quick peek at her finger—still healing, still a stub. Chances were her plan would cost her another limb or two before the time to strike came. If Sam could get her out before that happened, she had to try.

Pandora reached down, grabbed the knife made of vampire teeth, and stuffed it into her back pocket—just in case. And then she stepped up beside him, pressing her hands to the glass. "What now?"

"Now," he said, almost excited, "we—"

An alarm interrupted him, blaring mind-numbingly loud to her sensitive vampire ears. But above the noise, she heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps pounding closer. Tatsuya's cameras had picked up on her invisibility—he was coming for her, coming to get her back under his control

once more. She had to be gone before that happened.

"What do I do?" she asked, determined and completely focused, forcing the fear to a small place in the back of her mind .

"The shadows are a separate plane of reality," he said, speaking quickly, flashing his blue gaze toward the door. But he wasn't so much nervous as annoyed. "You aren't just drawing the darkness around you to vanish from sight. You're moving your body into a different place entirely. Or at least you will be, with the right training."

"Training that starts now?" she asked.

Sam grinned. Then, with a shove, he pressed into the glass and, well, passed right through it.

*A ghost.*

*Definitely a ghost.*

Pandora's jaw dropped and just as quickly snapped back up. "I can't do that!"

"You can," he said, now watching her from the other side, watching her from freedom. "You just don't know it yet. Go deeper into the darkness than you've ever been before, drown yourself in it and believe."

Drown herself in it and believe?

A little easier said than done.

Taking a deep breath, Pandora calmed her senses, tugging at the shadows, drawing them closer. But before she could even try to go deeper, the door to the room slammed open, iron smacking into stone, distracting her completely.

She heard Sam scoff.

A moment later, she knew why, because her own nostrils flared.

What the heck was he doing here? Here, of all places, when she'd left him buried safely out of sight in a tomb? When she'd risked her own ass to save his? When he was the only reason she was trapped here in the first place?

Okay, maybe not the only reason.

But a big one.

The shadows fell away immediately as her anger propelled her right back into the world of the light.

"Jax!" she yelled.

He stepped through the door, dressed head to toe in titan combat gear, grinning from ear to ear with a blowtorch in his hands. "Dory, Dory, Dory."

We have to stop meeting like this."

*Smug little...*

"What are you doing here? What the hell are you doing here?"

"You know," he drawled, sauntering forward, enjoying this moment a little too much for Pandora's liking. "If I were you, I might try a little less screaming and a little more groveling. Oh, Jax, thank god you're here. Thank you for coming to rescue my sorry, ungrateful but adorable behind. Thank you for continuing to chase me down day after day even though I keep telling you to leave me alone and punch you until you're unconscious and lock you inside tombs."

Her chest contracted uncomfortably.

She did feel a little guilty about punching him...twice. But there was just something about the way he watched her, as though he knew every lie spilling from her lips, could read every ounce of truth brimming in her eyes, that was infuriating—infuriating in a way she'd never quite experienced before.

And he was doing it right now .

"You were fine," she snapped, crossing her arms and cocking her hip in the same moment, keeping her guard fully up. "In fact, I'd say I did you a favor, wounding your ego, bringing it down a notch or two from its extremely high perch."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, mocking her. "Which one of us is captured right now, and which one of us is part of the rescue team? Who exactly has the boosted ego?"

"I've got it under control," Pandora growled. "I'm fine."

Jax continued to step closer until he was right on the other side of the glass, very close to where Sam had been standing a few moments ago. Was he still here? Still watching unseen from the shadows?

"You're fine?" Jax asked.

Pandora pursed her lips. "I'm handling the situation."

"I see..." He eyed the stub of her finger dubiously. She dropped her hands behind her back. "And what's the big plan?"

Pandora narrowed her eyes but remained silent. After all, she couldn't exactly tell him her plan was to enter another plane of reality and walk through a wall of glass so thick that even a vampire's considerable strength couldn't shatter it.

He grinned. "Ask me for help."

"No."

"Dory," he chided. "We're running out of time. The window to escape is narrowing by the second, and I know how to get you out. Just say the words. Just say you need my help. "

If looks could kill, he'd be dead.

"My name is Pandora." She forced the words through her gritted teeth. "And I don't need your help."

His smile only deepened, making his perfectly white teeth even more noticeable against his dark skin, making his eyes shine even brighter. Four years and he hadn't changed a bit—he still loved nothing more than getting under her skin. Only this time, it wouldn't end with a kiss-and-make-up.

Definitely, definitely not.

He reached into his black vest and pulled a key card from the pocket. "You see this? I stole it off the vamp who'd been guarding your room. The now very dead vamp who'd been guarding your room. One swipe and the glass will rise, and you'll be free. For once, just admit that you need my help, and we can go."

*Okay, that's it.*

Pandora dove back into the shadows, falling through the darkness, wrapping herself in waves and waves of ebony. Over Jax's shoulder, Sam watched her intensely, smiling ever so slightly, urging her on.

Because she would prove Jax wrong. Oh, yes, she'd show him that she didn't need his help, not now and not ever. All he ever did was swoop in and make promises he had no intention of keeping. All he ever did was get in her way.

*Drown myself in it and believe, she thought, repeating Sam's words.*

*Drown myself in it and believe .*

*Drown myself in it and believe.*

*Drown myself in it and—*

Pandora lashed out, punching her fist into the glass, envisioning her knuckles sliding through the wall, landing smack-dab in the middle of Jax's cheek, and erasing that knowing gleam from his eye. She believed, heck yeah she believed. Everything about her wanted to prove him wrong, wanted her body to slide smoothly through the glass, proving once and for all that she didn't need Jackson Rodriguez's help anymore, and she wouldn't need it ever again. So she kept the image strong, kept it in the forefront of her thoughts as she infused all her vampiric strength and speed into that punch.

And—

"Shit!" she screamed as her hand crashed against the glass, bones shattering upon impact. The shadows flew away as she dropped to the ground, cradling her completely broken hand against her chest, whimpering from the pain.

Jax snorted, immediately lifting his palm to his mouth and trying to cover it with a cough, but she heard. Oh, she heard.

"That, was, um, interesting," he said, struggling to get the words out. "Are you ready to accept my help now?"

She glared up at him from her position on the floor. "Open the door, Jax."

"Dory..."

She jumped to her feet and smashed her palms against the glass, ignoring the new bout of pain. "Open the door right now, Jax, or I swear I'll, I'll..." She looked around, searching for a threat, any threat. "I'll bite you," she hissed, flashing her fangs.

He leaned in close, winking as a fiery glow entered his green eyes. "Wouldn't be the first time."

Rage.

That was all she felt. Pure, blinding rage. But she couldn't quite tell if it was at him or at her own traitorous mind for flashing a quick memory of the moment he was referencing.

Heat burned her chest, a lightning spike.

"Jax!" she shouted, because she didn't know what else to say, and she was determined to keep the blame on him.

"Give me a week," he said quickly, sensing she'd reached her limit.

But Pandora wasn't ready to make that sort of promise. "We have to go. We don't have time for this. Just open the cell so we can get out of here while we still have the chance."

"No way, Dory," he said, shaking his head, not even an ounce of urgency in his words. "I'd rather get thrown in there with you than let you out without knowing you won't just disappear on me again. Promise me one week. Give me one week to convince you to come home. And if I can't, I'll stop following you. I'll let you go. One week, that's all I ask. And after that, you'll never have to see me again."

"One week?" she repeated softly. Seven days. That didn't sound too bad. But considering it had only taken a single night to turn her world upside

down and one moment to turn into a vampire, a week suddenly seemed like an awfully long time. Yet she was running out of options. The alarms were still ringing, Tatsuya was probably on his way to her cell, and once again, Jax's ass was on the line whether he realized it or not. She didn't have the luxury of waiting for her perfect moment, not anymore.

"Okay, one week," she agreed quickly before she could take the words back. As soon as she spoke them, she felt Sam vanish. Not disappear, but vanish. She couldn't explain it, except to say that the same awareness that had mysteriously drawn her toward him felt undeniably empty after she'd made the agreement with Jax. There was no justification except that he was gone just as quickly as he'd come.

But Jax was unaware, nodding in agreement. Surprising her with his lack of gloat, he raised the keycard to a spot on the glass, and it shot open.

"Let's go," he said, reaching for her fingers, pulling her toward freedom.

And at first, she followed. She really did.

But then they reached the door.

"Are you serious?" she muttered under her breath. Because on the other side of that door was a raging freaking inferno—conduit fire so strong she could hardly breathe and was already burning from the heat.

How in the world was she supposed to make it through that alive?



## Chapter Eight



"I know what you're thinking, but don't worry," Jax said quickly, squeezing her hand.

She shook free of his grasp. "Don't worry? Don't worry? Easy for you to say. You won't be the one frying to a crisp."

"Neither will you," he retorted, exasperated by her attitude. "Here."

He shoved a vial into her hand, raising his brows expectantly. Pandora glanced down, realizing it was a vial of crimson blood. And even with the stopper in place, she could smell the fire infused inside.

"Conduit blood?" she asked, opening the vial, letting the full scent fill her senses. Her fangs immediately popped out, and she couldn't be bothered to put them away—it just smelled too damn good. "How'd you get conduit blood? "

Jax turned away from her as a pained expression passed over his face. Staring into the flames filling the hallway, he said, "How'd you think I got in here? By myself? I went to the local group of punisher conduits and told them I knew for a fact that Tatsuya had conduits trapped in his prison. They said they already knew and had been working on a raid for weeks. Apparently, we both got lucky you decided to get caught the day before they'd planned this massive break-in."

But something didn't sound quite right about that. "So you told them you wanted to come along and rescue a vampire friend of yours, and they just gave up their blood, their biggest source of protection, just like that?"

"Yeah," he replied smoothly, glancing at her. "Just like that."

Pandora frowned. "What'd you have to give them in return?"

"Nothing," he grunted, moving them both closer to the door. "I just explained the situation, and they agreed. No secret plans. You might not remember this, but conduits and titans are sort of on the same side."

But while his words made sense, his expression didn't.

He wouldn't look at her.

He was pointedly turned away, and her vampire senses picked up on

the clog in his throat, noticed how it strained his voice, how his heart sped just a little with the lie.

He'd given them something.

Or he'd told them something he didn't want her to hear .

"Jax," she murmured slowly.

"Would you just drink it already?" he interrupted. "We don't have all day."

Pandora wanted to press the issue, wanted to ask why his grip on her arm had tightened, why his muscles had frozen up, why the vein in his neck had started to tick.

But he was right.

Escape first.

Questions later.

Well, all but one.

She hadn't forgotten her goal in coming to New York, her real job. She hadn't forgotten all the people in the cells around her, even if the rest of the world had. And she wanted to see them freed before she gave Jax the seven days she'd promised, before she ran away with him and put her own life on hold.

"Are they releasing everyone?" Pandora asked softly. "Are they helping all the prisoners escape? Not just the conduits he has trapped?"

That caught his attention. Jax glanced at her quizzically. "Why?"

Pandora shook her head. She didn't owe him an explanation. She didn't owe him anything, even if he had just set her free. "Just tell me."

"Yeah," he said, still unsure. "They're freeing everyone. They always do when they plan these sorts of raids."

"Promise?" she asked, though she wasn't sure why. He never kept his promises anyway .

But his expression was sharp and honest when he answered. "Promise."

*Then my work here is done.*

Pandora downed the vial, gasping as the blood dripped down her throat. It spread through her veins, filling her frozen body with fire. The power she'd just consumed was undeniable, burned her from the inside out in some deliciously painful way she'd never experienced. Her body felt stronger, her senses clearer. Glancing down, she realized her finger had completely healed, far faster than she ever would have expected. Invincibility ran

through her veins, so euphoric she was sure her eyes glowed a bright cerulean blue.

But Jax was no longer looking at her.

He couldn't.

"Let's go," he blurted and stepped into the fire. "Try to keep up."

And with that, he was gone, moving fast—titan fast, tracker fast. But vampire fast was still faster. Pandora caught up in no time, marveling at how the flames rolled over her skin, not touching her, not burning, not anything. Just hours before, she'd been pummeled by protector conduit flames—fire meant only to contain a vampire and not kill it. And here she was, walking through an entire prison of punisher conduits who were shooting fatal fire through their palms, watching as those blazes burned vampires all around her until they were little more than dust, and she was racing through unharmed. Untouched. The heat prickled her skin like little pulses of static electricity, igniting her icy core and making her feel alive .

Too distracted by her awe, Pandora followed Jax silently—turning when he turned, keeping to his speed. Chivalrous as always, he kept the path clear for her—tossing any vamps in their way to the side with a good hard shove, forcing all the doors open, weaving a clear path toward freedom. They were spectators in the middle of battle, moving nearly unseen through the individual fights of conduit versus vampire happening in slow motion around them, as though the world were on pause while they moved in fast-forward. Jax glanced back at her a few times, relief flashing when he realized she was still there, still visible, still with him.

"That's the exit up ahead," he called over his shoulder, pointing to a circular vault door resting open in the distance.

They were close, so close to freedom.

"Pandora, stop!"

It was Tatsuya.

Reacting on instinct, she reached forward, pulled on Jax's arm, and forced him to halt in his tracks, stopping right beside her.

"Come on," he said, pulling against her hold. "We can beat him to the door."

Pandora glanced up, holding Jax's confused eyes for the barest second, noticing the sweat sheen on his forehead from the heat. "Whatever you do, don't look into his eyes. Let me handle this."

He furrowed his brows. "He won't catch us. We can just go. "

She shook her head, remembering her promise from before. Tatsuya had made things personal, he'd chosen to up the stakes, he'd chosen torture, and he was about to get a much-deserved taste of his own medicine. Because Pandora had spent most of her life as the outcast, the one people didn't understand, the one they were okay forgetting. But now she was strong and confident and tired of giving people the luxury of underestimating her. Not a head vamp. Not an ex-boyfriend. No one.

"I have unfinished business," she murmured, words sharp.

"Don't," Jax said quickly, eyes widening when he understood the unspoken threat in her tone. But before he could mutter another word, Pandora released him and disappeared, stepping quickly out of his reach.

"Trust me," she whispered, unable to stop herself from adding, "I've always kept my promises."

And then she turned to face Tatsuya.

"Come now, Pandora, come back where I can see you," he said smugly, not at all concerned. And that's when she realized he'd never seen the surveillance footage from her room. He'd been too preoccupied with the army of conduits breaking into his prison to notice the poor vamp he'd left alone in a pool of blood. Maybe he didn't realize she'd completely broken his control. Maybe he thought his power still lingered in her blood.

*This is the moment I've been waiting for*, she thought, wrapping the shadows even tighter around her body, stepping closer to the head vamp. "That little trick of yours stopped working on me about an hour and a half ago. You were just too blinded by the thought of victory to notice."

His eyes widened minutely.

A moment later, he lunged toward the sound of her voice, launching into hyperspeed, grabbing at her with his perfectly smooth ivory hands.

But she was faster.

And, unlike him, she had the benefit of being able to see his every move.

"I think we'll do this the hard way," she commented, pulling the knife out from her back pocket where she'd stashed it. Wrapped in the shadows with her, the knife was invisible. The vamp never saw it coming as the blade slashed a deep groove into his back.

Tatsuya hissed, spinning on his heels.

Pandora swiped the knife again, this time catching his cheek.

He snapped his hand toward her and managed to grab her forearm,

digging his nails deep enough to sting. But it was the wrong hand—the empty hand. And before he could get a good hold, she used her other hand to drive the knife directly into the crook of his elbow, impaling him and dancing away as he howled.

A second later, the weapon clanged to the floor.

And, oh yeah, Tatsuya was pissed .

Pandora grinned. *Payback's a bitch. Or maybe I am. But either way, it felt good, and that jerk deserved it.*

Tatsuya froze, clutching his arm as he glanced up with fury in his blazing blue eyes. His gaze swept the room, searching for her but landing on Jax—Jax who was strong and a titan and could handle himself against almost anything. But in that moment, Pandora didn't see the muscular, capable, grown-up Jax. She saw her best friend. She saw the boy who used to sing her songs in the moonlight to help keep the nightmares away, the boy who was gentle and caring and kind, the boy who'd stolen her heart without doing anything at all.

Until that moment, Pandora wasn't really sure she wanted to kill the head vamp—it was a line she had yet to cross. Incapacitate? Yes. Hurt enough that he would never underestimate her again? Definitely. But kill? Not quite.

Yet, the second his gaze landed on Jax, something within her clicked.

Tatsuya launched himself into superspeed.

Jax sensed the change and started backing away, keeping his eyes focused on the floor as she'd told him to, while his hands were raised and ready to fight.

And Pandora reacted.

She flew across the room, moving on adrenaline and pure animal instinct as she launched into the air and landed on Tatsuya's back, possessed by her own rage. Without thinking, she dug her nails into his shoulders, cutting into his skin as her teeth found his throat. No hesitation, she sank her fangs deep into his carotid artery and snapped clean through it. Mouth full of flesh and fluid, she yanked, ripping a gaping hole in his neck and throwing her body away as he fell to the floor.

She spat the taste of him from her mouth, watching absently as his blood leaked onto the floor, spilling out in waves. But he wasn't dead. He could still recover from this, could still go after Jax for revenge or for leverage. So she reached down as Tatsuya inched back, trying to escape with

the strength he had left, but it wouldn't be enough. Using both hands, she gripped the sides of his head and in one smooth motion wrenched it clean off of his body.

As she eyed his severed neck, only one thought entered her mind.

*Now he's dead .*

Jax gasped softly. "Dory."

She looked up from her crouched position, letting the shadows fall away, noting the horror on Jax's face as he stared at the blood dripping down her chin, soaking her hands. But blood was her life now, it had been for years, and Tatsuya deserved everything he got. So she stood, facing Jax challengingly as she wiped her mouth with her sleeve, not backing down. "He was an evil man who did evil things."

Jax swallowed, eyes narrowing as he looked at her, really looked at her and what she'd become, seeing her for the first time. And then he nodded. "Let's go," he said, voice strained. Softly, he added, "Pandora."

The word broke her, just a little, just enough .

The little bit of humanity she held on to cried out, wanting more than anything to still be Dory, to be the person she used to be.

But she wasn't.

And she never would be again.

This was what she was now—a vampire. A killer. The sort of beast Jax hunted down all the time to keep the rest of the world a little bit safer.

He didn't say another word as he slipped through the vault door, and neither did she. After following a long dank hall and passing through a few more open doors, they emerged into the cool, starless night, glancing around at the abandoned waterside buildings and construction machines parked all around them. Noticing the golden glow of Manhattan haloed across the sky, Pandora guessed they were in Brooklyn somewhere, maybe Queens. Planes rumbled overhead, preparing for landing. The clangs and shouts of fighting filtered fuzzily through the door Jax had closed behind him. Water lapped and splashed. But where they were, the world was silent. Too silent for Pandora. She needed the noise to block everything else out, to block herself out. So she opened her ears, growing numb to the world, letting Jax lead her blindly along.

He held her hand as they walked aimlessly along the water's edge.

He eased her down into a boat resting beside the dock they found .

He sat her down before leaning over to snap the ropes and locks.

And then he turned on the engine and sped them both off into the silky darkness of the ocean at night. Pandora didn't blink. She fixed her eyes on the golden lights of the city, watching them fade with each passing second. Another home she'd been forced to leave behind. Another place where no one would miss her.

She didn't realize she'd been crying until Jax finally sat down and wiped his thumb across her cheek, watching her softly. Until that moment, she hadn't actually realized vampires could cry.

"What happened to you?" he whispered.

She finally closed her eyes. "Nothing."

"I mean your life, Dory," he said. "What happened to your life?"

She swallowed, opening her eyes, looking directly into his. "I grew up."

"No," he murmured sadly. "No, you grew hard. Cold."

"I had to," she muttered harshly. "I was fifteen and alone and a vampire. I had no one, nothing. I learned to depend on myself. I realized that life is tough, and people are mean, and nothing was going to get handed to me. I figured out how to take what I wanted whenever I had the chance. And tonight? I wanted Tatsuya dead. So I killed him."

Jax shrugged. "You were right. He was a bad guy. The world is better off without him. But you liked it. You enjoyed it. "

She swallowed. *Maybe a little.*

But was that so bad?

Was it?

"You were initiated into the order when you were sixteen," she said, turning the accusation around. "You've been a professional titan tracker for years. What do you think happens to all the people you track? All the people you help catch?"

"It's different..."

"Why?" she demanded, sitting up straighter. "Because I used my teeth?"

He swallowed slowly, pursing his lips as he scanned the water, searching for something, anything. And then he glanced back at her with a deep, heavy sigh. "Do you think for just one night we could stop fighting? Do you think for one night we could pretend that we're still fifteen, sitting in our tree house in the woods, not worried about anything in the world except for each other?"

Pandora's heart twinged painfully, growing warm for a moment. But the moment passed. "I can't go back."

"I'm not asking you to," he said. "Tomorrow, maybe, but not tonight. I just want a few hours, a few meager, pathetic hours I can lock away for safekeeping. And then when the sun rises, I can go back to trying to convince you to come home. You can go back to flipping me off. We can go back to fighting because it's so much easier than actually talking. And when the week is over and you're still being a stubborn ass and you say good-bye to me forever, at least I'll have one night to look back on and remember."

Pandora raised an eyebrow, stuck on the little *stubborn ass* comment. "You know, your sweet talk hasn't improved much in four years."

But despite her snappy comeback, she was softening.

Because secretly, she wanted one night too.

One unspoiled night.

Jax grinned, lifting the corner of his lip as he looked down at her. "You never complained before. And besides, I thought that was pretty good."

She grumbled.

But when he stretched out his arm, opening it wide, she crawled into the space he'd offered, curling against his chest, the air between them electric. It was a spot she'd been in many times before, but it had never felt more right than in that moment.

Before, she'd been a girl. He'd been a boy.

They'd fit in an awkward, nervous, exciting sort of tangle. She was too tall. He was too scrawny. She was too shy. He was too polite.

But now, everything was familiar, yet different.

Better.

His chest was meant to hold her head. His bicep was meant to act as her pillow, to flex reassuringly as he pulled her closer. His palm was meant to cup her waist, to grip her skin in a way that promised to never let go. And her hand was meant to pass over the ridges of his abdomen, to feel the hard grooves of his chest, to come to a rest right above his rapidly beating heart. Her body was made to curve against his.

They fit.

Perfect.

*I'm home*, Pandora thought, closing her eyes tight against the idea, hating it and relishing it at the same time. *This will just make everything harder, will just make leaving harder.*



And yet.

She couldn't force herself to move.

Instead, she sank deeper into the embrace.

Because she'd spent the past four years running and running and running, charging ahead without looking back, and for the first time in a long time, she finally felt as if she were home. She finally felt at peace, lying there listening to his heartbeat, to the breath flow in and out of his chest. His warmth sank into her skin, relieving the frigid frost perpetually clinging to her soul, letting her pretend for a moment that she was still alive, still human.

The water rocked their little boat.

The air grew colder.

The wind blew stronger.

The stars shone brighter and brighter, breaking through the clouds.

And just when she thought Jax was asleep, he did the one thing she was most afraid of—he sang their song softly in her ear, brushing his fingers through her hair as he held her closer.

"*Querida, querida* ," he crooned in a deep, rumbling tone that vibrated through his entire body, through her entire body. "*Con el pelo como el sol y los ojos como la luna. Mi amor, mi amor, tan cerca, tan lejos. Hasta mañana, que sueñes con los angelitos. Mi corazón está contigo.* "

The first time he whispered those words in her ear, she had no idea what they'd meant. She figured it was something he'd heard his father tell his mother, a Spanish phrase passed down through the family, something she wasn't supposed to understand.

The second time he'd sung them to her, she couldn't resist her curiosity. But when she asked, he just smiled softly and looked away.

The third time, she memorized them to look up when he wasn't watching. And the fourth time, hearing him say those words, knowing what they meant, she'd kissed him and changed everything.

Now, they touched her frozen heart.

They melted it.

They made it beat rapidly, in a vibrant fervor so new and unknown to a chest that had grown used to stone-cold stillness.

She should stand and walk to the other side of the boat.

She should move or turn away.

She should—but she didn't.

*Tomorrow* , she thought. *Tomorrow, I'll go back to hating him.*

*Tomorrow, I'll remember the anger and the betrayal burning deep in my gut.  
Tomorrow, I'll keep running .*

But tonight, she stayed right there.

Tonight, she listened as he repeated the words, and she smiled, translating them in her mind, enjoying the way her heart beat in tune with the rise and fall of his voice. Sure, he'd been a sappy, lovestruck fourteen-year-old when he wrote it, but it was still her favorite poem in the world.

*My dear, my dear, with hair like the sun and eyes like the moon. My love, my love, so close, so far away. Sweet dreams until tomorrow. My heart is with you.*

And she did have sweet dreams.

For the first time in a long time, she slept completely at peace.

## Chapter Nine



Pandora knew the sun had risen before she even opened her eyes. The rays sparked along her skin, tickling her, sending little shock waves across her body. But the sun always felt like that to a vampire. It always burned a little.

*Just enough to remind me that I'm not human* , Pandora thought with a sigh, remembering the conduit blood from the night before. It must have worn off if the sun was prickling her again. After all, conduit fire was really just the sun's rays brought down to Earth—they channeled that same heat that was touching her now. It was just a heck of a lot hotter from five feet away instead of something like five hundred billion.

*Okay. Enough delaying. Time to wake up .*

And yet, she couldn't get her body to move. Her arm still rested over Jax's chest. His hand still gripped the side of her waist. And his heart still thudded gently in her ear, almost rhythmic .

Neither one of them had moved.

Not even an inch.

The entire night had passed, drifting into day, and yet the two of them had remained still, motionless, stuck in that moment and unwilling to let go.

Except something was different. His heart was beating faster, and his breath wasn't quite steady, almost as though...

Pandora glanced up, meeting Jax's open eyes.

He was awake.

Watching her and totally awake.

*Crap .*

Pandora pressed her hand into his chest, using his body for leverage, starting to ease into a seated position. But he gripped her waist tighter, stopping her.

"Wait," Jax murmured.

Pandora held his gaze, not sure she liked the way his lips were softening, not sure she liked the certain sort of fire starting to spark deep in those saltwater irises. "We said one night, Jax."

"Just wait," he said again, hooded gaze dropping to her mouth before flicking back up, making the space between them twenty degrees hotter.

She should've sat up.

Should've backed away the moment he got that gleam in his eye. Because she knew exactly what it meant. She'd seen it before .

But instead, she did what he asked. She waited, not moving as the hand around her waist shifted her that much closer, as his other hand came to rest on the back of her neck, strong and sturdy. The only reminder that time was somehow passing was the steady slap of water on wood, a gentle beat out of place in a world that suddenly seemed stopped on a dime. So many memories flashed between them, flickering in their unbroken gazes, all the times they'd been there before, in a perfect unspoiled moment. Pandora was too afraid to blink, to move. And when Jax slowly lifted his head, still watching her, purposefully closing the space between them, she definitely should have pulled away. Instead, her lips relaxed, expecting his touch, yearning for it.

And then they were kissing.

Slow at first, soft, remembering the days when they were fifteen and unsure and figuring things out for the first time with each other. Their touches were hesitant, cautious.

Until suddenly, they weren't.

Until suddenly, they remembered that they weren't fifteen.

And just like that, everything shifted.

Moved in fast-forward.

Intensified.

Jax moved his fingers into her hair, holding her with undeniable strength, as his lips grew more demanding. And Pandora answered that demand, pressing against him, digging her hands into his shoulder, gripping tight enough to make him grunt in pain, but the sound quickly turned to pleasure as they shifted their bodies closer. The heat of his bare palm found its way to her hip, slipping beneath her shirt, drawing a path of fire up her icy skin.

"Dory," he rasped.

But the word stopped her, brought her back to reality, broke the spell.

She couldn't do this.

Not with him. Not like this.

Not as though nothing had changed, when in fact, everything had.

Everything.

"Jax," Pandora said against his lips, not even sure herself if the soft sound was meant to push him away or draw him closer. *Traitorous voice!* Whatever her body craved, her head knew that it was high time to get back to hating him, knew that what she needed was space to breathe, and that what Jax needed was a nice, cold shower.

Rolling over before his lips had the chance to change her mind, she flipped them so Jax was on top. He mistook the move for one of passion, trying to deepen the embrace. But Pandora had already shifted her legs. In one swift motion, she pushed her feet into his stomach and shoved his chest with her arms, sending him up and over the edge of the boat, splashing into the water.

*Did I actually just throw Jax into the ocean?* she thought as a wave of cold droplets splattered against her cheeks. After twisting and jumping up to lean over the edge of the boat, she searched the dark water, trying her best not to laugh. Glancing around, she realized how far away from shore they'd traveled. The only indication that there was any land close by was a small strip of brown on the horizon. The rest of the world was blue.

"I can't believe you," Jax sputtered the moment his head broke the surface, a few feet away from the boat, already carried by the tide. His tone was annoyed but unsurprised, as though he should have expected it.

Pandora stared at him pointedly. "You broke our agreement. Last night was supposed to be a one-time deal."

"So you threw me into the ocean?" he grumbled.

She shrugged.

"I could die out here!"

Pandora rolled her eyes. "You're fine. Don't be so dramatic."

"Dramatic?" he questioned as he started to swim back toward her. "Do you have any idea how cold this water is? I could get hypothermia."

She narrowed her eyes in challenge. "Titans are immune."

He opened his mouth to retort and then frowned, dipping his head under the water and using his strong arms to push himself closer. And then he popped back up. "I could drown. What if I'd hit my head on the side of the boat?"

"You didn't. "

"But what if I did? Would you have come in here and saved me?"

Pandora rested her elbows on the edge of the boat, sitting her chin on

top of her hands, and watched, thoroughly amused, as he fought the current. "Maybe."

He wrinkled his nose, treading water to stare at her. "I think I have a cramp," he murmured casually, sinking a little farther beneath the undulating surface.

"You don't have a cramp."

"Ooh," he grunted painfully, grabbing at his side and thrashing unconvincingly as his head dipped beneath the water and remained there for a few prolonged moments before bursting back up. "If only there was someone close by who could save me," he cried sarcastically before disappearing beneath the water again. For one second.

Two.

Ten.

Fifteen.

"Jax."

Thirty.

"Jax, this is not funny!"

Forty-five.

"Jax?"

Fifty.

"Jax! Come out right now!" Pandora shouted, jumping to her feet to stare at the murky water, searching for his outline or his shadow, unable to spot anything except for the exact spot where the light stopped filtering through the water and the ocean turned dangerously dark.

"I knew you'd save me," his voice teased.

Pandora spun on her heels, nostrils flaring with annoyance as she took him in. Jax was still half in the water, but his arms were crossed and propped against the side of the boat, cradling his chin like a soft pillow as he grinned up at her.

"What about sharks?" he asked with faux seriousness. "What if I had become fish food? Wouldn't you feel the least bit sorry about turning me into bait?"

Pandora curled her upper lip, trying her best to look at him with total disdain and not the slightest bit of relief. "I'd feel sorry for the shark."

"Why? Because you know I could take him?"

"No," she retorted, watching as he kicked with his feet to hurl himself back into the boat, unable to keep her gaze from the muscles flexing beneath

the wet, clingy folds of his shirt—muscles she now understood the feel of all too well. When he landed with a heavy *thud*, she snapped her focus away and turned toward the shoreline. "Because you're a sorry excuse for a meal."

"I think I'd taste pretty good," he commented lightly.

Pandora snorted.

"You used to think so too."

She whipped her head around so fast she was afraid it might twist off, but before she could think of a snappy retort, her gaze landed on his now bare chest, and the words got lodged in the side of her throat, utterly stuck. Jax's grin deepened as he held his shirt between them and wrung it out onto the previously dry deck.

"You know what I think?" Jax asked, still holding her captive as his bronze skin gleamed in the sun, muscles expanding and contracting as water continued to drop with each twist of his shirt. And dammit, he was cut like a sculpture that had suddenly come bursting to life, hard as a rock yet brimming over with energy. "I think you still do."

Was it possible for vampires to feel lightheaded?

Was there enough blood in her system to feel flushed?

Because her icy body was sweltering, and her throat was dry as she forced a response out. "Do not."

Okay, not the best, obviously.

But she was working under a limited capacity right now.

"Do too," Jax whispered, as though it was a dirty little secret between them. "In fact, I think you liked what happened this morning so much that it scared you, that it maybe made you question why you've been fighting me so much, maybe made you wonder why you've spent the past four years running away when we could have spent them together."

And then he flapped his shirt one time in the breeze, snapping it for emphasis before laying it out in the sun. Lifting one eyebrow, he moved his hands toward his pants and unbuckled his belt.

"What are you doing?" she burst out.

"Get your mind out of the gutter," he replied innocently, enjoying this way too much, taking his time. "I've got to dry off somehow. Maybe you should have thought of that before tossing me into the ocean. Besides," he added, pausing to leave her mind open to many possibilities as he finished unzipping his pants and stripped down to his black boxer-briefs. "I think I'm going to withdraw my offer."

Pandora snapped her gaze up from where it'd been dangerously wandering and met his sparkling green ones. "What?"

"You heard me," he continued conversationally as he laid his pants down and then followed them to the deck, lounging completely at ease nearly naked in front of her, letting the sun warm the goose bumps off his wet skin. "Until you agree to come home, to stop running, I'm making myself off limits."

Pandora swallowed. "You can't exactly threaten someone with something they don't want."

He looked at her, brows raised. "Don't you?"

Yes.

*Wait, no!*

*Maybe...just a little...*

Instead of responding, she sneered.

Jax began humming under his breath, a cheerful little tune to match the cloudless sky and the otherwise beautiful day.

"Would you stop? Please?" Pandora grumbled .

"Don't mind me," he responded merrily, eyes closed. "I'm just warming up in the sun, getting my tan on, displaying my forbidden fruit..."

"Jax—"

"No," he interrupted. "No matter how much you beg, I'm staying right here, on my own side of the boat, far away from you."

"What is going on?" she murmured, scrunching her face in a mix of annoyance and utter confusion. "Is this all some play to try to get me to strip down to my underwear too?"

He stopped humming. "Why? Is it working?"

*Aha!* she thought. *Now this I can work with. Let's see how he likes it.* "Doesn't matter if it is or it isn't, because, well, I'm not wearing any underwear to strip down to."

He started choking as his eyes popped open, then he stared at her for a prolonged moment. His entire body paused, gaze turning suspicious as his eyes narrowed. "Yes, you are," he said, sounding as though he was trying to convince himself. "You are."

Pandora grinned, winking at him. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Crossing his arms like a petulant child, he sat up, facing her. "You know what I'd like to know?"

"What?" she challenged right back, charging head first into the



tension filling the space around them, making their small boat seem even smaller. Anger was way easier to deal with than desire—way, way easier .

"Why?" he said simply.

But she didn't understand. "Why what?"

His green eyes grew sharp, intense, and the air grew thicker. "Why'd you run? Why'd you leave?"

Pandora sucked in a breath, fumbling for a response. Because she didn't know why. During her transformation into a vampire, something in her mind had clicked. Something beyond her control had built a wall inside her head, trapping those dark memories deep inside her soul, far, far away, where she wouldn't have to relive them ever again. Because they'd destroyed her—utterly, completely destroyed her. And when she became a member of the undead, that pathetic, broken girl had been buried beneath layers and layers of pain and betrayal and hate—layers that still cocooned her shattered heart, constricting it painfully, aching warningly whenever she tried to remember.

Like right now.

Her chest squeezed so tight she gasped with the hurt, a reminder that no matter how good Jax looked, no matter how good it felt to tease him, to talk to him, to touch him, he'd destroyed her once. They all had. And something in the back of her mind told her he would only do it again.

"I told you before," she said gruffly, a threat edged into her voice, "it doesn't matter, and I don't want to talk about it."

"It does matter," he said immediately, leaning forward, invading her space so she couldn't breathe. "Because I know why you ran away. I just want to hear you say it. I think it's finally time for us to talk about that night, the night of my initiation, the night you left."

"Stop!" she shouted, digging her fingers into her chest as though trying to rip out her heart, her unfaithful little heart that wouldn't stop beating with every one of his words.

"We said we were going to run away together, we made a pact. I promised I wouldn't go through with the initiation. I promised we'd leave and go do all the things we always said we would. That you'd go to college in LA and study to become a vet while I took gigs in bars and searched for an agent. That we'd forget about titans, about our duties and our obligations and our families. I promised the future we both dreamed of," he said, voice reaching a crescendo. And then he stopped, breathing heavily as he stared at her, eyes dark with unspoken pain. His shoulders slumped in, and his voice was soft

when he continued. "And then I snatched it all away. Just like that. No explanation. No apology. One moment I was charging toward my father, ready to confront him, ready to tell him I wasn't going through with the ceremony. And then the next I was searching for you, head hanging low, neck burning with the tattoo confirming what I was, what I'll always be, what we were born to be. A member of the order. A titan. A protector. And when I found you, all it took was a single glance, and you knew. Without even looking at my tattoo, you could tell everything had changed. And you ran without giving me the chance to explain." Jax stepped closer, reaching out, imploring. "Let me explain. "

"No." She stepped back, rocking the boat as her hand still hovered over her rapidly beating heart, as the wall in her mind cracked, a snap that reverberated painfully across her skull. "No. I don't want an explanation. I don't need one."

But even as she said it, a memory filtered through the seam. Jax, the boy she remembered, scrawny and kind and in love with her, standing twenty feet away, surrounded by the trees, eyes burning with newfound purpose, newfound pain, newfound heartbreak. It had been the last moment she'd seen him before she turned and ran away, disappearing before he had a chance to follow.

And that one little moment was enough to rip her apart all over again.

She didn't want to relive any more.

She couldn't survive it a second time.

So she turned her back on Jax.

She spread her arms wide, and she dove, flying over the edge of the boat, leaping to freedom, landing gracefully against the surface of the water and sliding into its dark depths before he had a chance to stop her.

The water was cold, just like he'd said.

It was freezing.

And she relished in it.

The moment her head dipped into the icy ocean, her heart stopped beating, shocked to a dead halt. The warmth disappeared and so did the pain. The frost normally encasing her soul slid back into place—the numbness being a vampire provided. And sometimes she hated it, but sometimes, rare times like this, she savored the escape from her humanity, from the emotions and the raw pain of being alive. Instead, she wrapped the frozen shell of death around her, detaching herself completely from the girl she'd once been

and the memories that for just a moment had threatened to seep through. As Pandora sank deeper into the water, she sank deeper into the void, running, always running, and never looking back.

An engine revved overhead, the boat surging to life.

Pandora looked up, opening her eyes despite the salty sting, and gazed through the depths, pausing for a moment to notice how much the color of the sun streaming through the water reminded her of Jax's warm irises. And then she shoved that thought away, pumping her legs, and broke through the surface, reborn.

"Get back in the boat and talk to me," Jax said the moment she emerged.

"No," she replied simply, voice empty.

"Dory, get—"

"You know what's great about being a vampire?" she interrupted, meeting his worried expression with an utterly blank one. "I can't get hypothermia. And I can't drown. And if a shark tried to bite me, his teeth would break before they'd be able to sink into my skin."

"What's your point?" He sighed, tired.

"My point," she answered sharply, "is that I have superspeed and superstrength and superstamina, and I don't need a boat to take me to shore, even if it is miles away. My point is that I don't need to sit up there and listen to you lecture me or tease me or tell me things I don't want to hear when I'm perfectly fine down here. My point is that being around you is exasperating, and I get hungry when I'm angry, and right now you're the only thing that's close enough to eat, but I won't give you the satisfaction."

Pandora paused.

"My point," she finished softly, "is try to keep up."

And then she dipped beneath the water, pumped her legs and arms, and swam as fast as she could for the shore, grinning as the sound of the engine grew quieter and quieter as she sped faster and faster away.

## Chapter Ten



When she got close to the shore, Pandora slid back up to the surface, bobbing in the waves. Jax was following only a few minutes behind, so she took one last minute to enjoy herself before the inevitable bickering began anew. Eying the swells, she waited for a large one to roll in before pumping her arms, grinning as the water crashed over her, carrying her body with the force, so she flew toward the shore, weightless. With a sigh, she swam the rest of the way to the beach and flopped against the sand, staring up into the sun, nostalgic for the days when its warm caress felt soothing instead of painful.

Her peace was completely destroyed when a motorboat crashed through the shallow waves and slid up and onto the beach, spewing sand in every direction before the engine came to a thunderous stop .

"Subtle," she whispered, rolling her eyes as she flipped onto her stomach to scan for witnesses. Since it was already September, she hadn't expected the beach to be too crowded, but the few people walking along the boardwalk and resting on the sand were watching them, wide-eyed and utterly shocked.

Could she blame them?

It was sort of hard to miss a boat crashing into the beach, manned by a man wearing only his boxers. And, well, it was probably also hard to miss a girl lying in the wet sand while wearing a leather jacket, black tights, and combat boots.

No.

Inconspicuous they were not.

"Put a shirt on, will you?" Pandora muttered, jumping to her feet and turning to tug Jax from the boat. "We're drawing too much attention. We have to leave. Now."

As if realizing for the first time that they had an audience, Jax jolted, looking around before quickly throwing his wet shirt back over his head and stumbling back into his pants. Then he catapulted himself over the edge of

the boat and landed easily against the sand. "Let's go."

Quickly, they scurried up the beach toward a long wooden boardwalk running parallel to the water's edge, keeping their eyes averted from any unwanted glances.

"We've got to get some new clothes," Jax said under his breath.

Pandora looked around, surveying the shoreline. Her gaze rolled over the beachfront homes stacked one after the other, and she noticed hotels in the distance. "There," she murmured, jutting out her chin. "There's got to be a store or something."

"Do you have any idea where we are?" he asked, glancing around.

Pandora searched the landscape for clues, taking in the long boardwalk, the piers stretching out into the water, the big homes on small lots, and the many staggered grid-like streets before turning once more to the hotels in the distance, trying to read the names in big letters stretched across their facades. For some reason, she recognized this place. Somehow, the whole scene was familiar, even though she could swear she'd never been there before. "I think we might be in Atlantic City. Don't those look like casinos to you?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I think you're right."

"So we go there, steal some clothes, maybe some cash too, and then what?"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down," Jax butted in, looking at her. "Steal? Why do we have to steal anything?"

*God, you're so straightlaced*, Pandora thought, eying him pointedly. "Do you have any money?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Do I have any money?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "By your tone, I'm guessing no."

"Right." She nodded. "But what do we have? "

"A girl with the ability to disappear who's apparently become a kleptomaniac since the last time I saw her..." he muttered under his breath.

Pandora chose to ignore him. "We have a master thief."

"Who just recently was caught and almost killed," he retorted.

She sneered. "I would have been fine if you hadn't shown up at the graveyard. I only got caught trying to save your sorry ass."

He stopped dead, widening his eyes and placing his hand over his heart. "I'm touched."

*Great, well at least we're back to normal* , she thought as her hands clenched. *I want to kill him again.*

Taking a deep breath, Pandora tried to calm down. "Look, if I'm stuck with you for a week, I just want to know what the plan is. We grab some clothes, some money, maybe hijack a car, and then what? What do you want with me for seven whole days? When can I get back to my life?"

"Your oh-so-important life of being alone all the time and charging head first into idiotic life-or-death situations?"

Pandora looked up at him. "And your point is...?"

Jax sighed, walking faster down the boardwalk, annoyed. "I was thinking maybe a road trip—"

"I always have wanted to see the world's largest rubber-band ball..." Pandora interrupted, teasing.

Jax plowed through the rest of his sentence. "To Florida. "

She stopped walking and gaped at him. "You better mean Disney World."

"I don't."

"You better not be thinking about trying to take me to the top secret—but actually very well-known—conduit base in Florida where they're curing vampires left and right, because I explicitly told you over and over again that I have no intention of ever going back to the girl I was before."

"Dory." Jax sighed, reaching for her. But she stepped back, stepped away, and his hand dropped heavily to his side. "I just want you to see it for yourself, with your own two eyes, before you make a decision."

"There is no decision." She shook her head. "No."

He turned away and kept walking. "We'll talk about it more later. For now, let's just go one step at a time. First clothes. Then money."

"Then food," she added quietly, keeping her gaze on the ocean, unable to look at him. "I need to find a blood bar or something."

He swallowed loud enough that her vampire senses could actually hear the way his throat constricted, tight and tense. "Okay. Clothes. Money. Then...food."

They walked the rest of the way without speaking, letting the sun dry their clothes and the waves soothe their troubled minds. They'd spent so many hours together, in conversation and in comfortable silence, that they didn't need words to communicate anyway. Where Pandora stepped, Jax was already walking. When he opened a door, she was already charging through

it. So, without saying a word, they made their way into a clothing store right off the boardwalk, grabbed a few things off the racks, and made their way to a changing room in the back left corner. Pandora took the shirt and shorts from Jax's hands and brought his clothes with her into the changing room while he walked out the front door of the shop, pretending to be a bored boyfriend waiting for his girlfriend to finish shopping.

After he left, Pandora stared into the mirror.

*Aren't these stupid things supposed to be superficially flattering?*

But all she saw looking back at her was a sad, lonely girl with pristine pale skin and completely empty blue eyes. Pallid. Plain. Worn out. And, well, pathetic.

She glanced away, then turned around and stripped off her clothes from the day before, noticing that the swim hadn't completely removed the blood and grime—evidence of her short, yet impossibly long stay with Tatsuya. When she glanced at her forearm, she could still see his name carved into her skin, could still see the beads of blood sliding down her arm and dropping to the floor.

He'd deserved to die.

He had.

But she still flinched when she stared at her shaking hands, remembering just how frighteningly easy it had been to rip his head right off his shoulders, to snap a man, even a vampire, in two. The girl from four years ago? The girl who Jax remembered? That was something she would have never been able to do.

*I've got to get out of here*, Pandora thought, suddenly claustrophobic. So she tossed a tank top over her shoulders, ripped off the tag, and slipped into a pair of jeans.

Just keep going.

That's what she always told herself.

Just keep going, and don't pause to look back.

So she left, wrapping the shadows around her and turning invisible as she clutched Jax's change of clothes to her chest, taking it into the darkness with her. The sales girl at the register didn't notice as she walked right on by, quickly grabbing a pair of sunglasses, flip-flops, and a cute leather purse on her way out.

Not too loudly, she knocked against the glass door to signal Jax. He opened it, pretending to search for his girlfriend while Pandora snuck by. Still

invisible, she wrapped her fingers around his wrist and dragged him down the boardwalk a little, not stopping until she found a nook out of sight where she could reappear.

"Here," she said, shoving the T-shirt and shorts he'd selected into his arms, then adding the pair of sneakers she'd grabbed to the top of the pile. "Go change, and I'll wait."

He eyed her for a moment, as if unsure she'd really be there when he got back, but in the end, he walked away without saying a word, searching for a place to change .

Pandora retreated into the shadows, leaning against the side of the building, staying out of sight as she watched the waves crash against the shore. Again, a sense of *déjà vu* washed over her. Something about this boardwalk, this hotel, this image, was uncomfortably familiar. A nagging sense pricked at her mind, as though there was something she needed to remember. But her thoughts whirled in circles, going nowhere, so she turned her gaze from the beach, instead eying the people walking by on the boardwalk. A mom with a baby stroller. Two men out for a light jog. A security guard rolling by on a Segway. An old man whose small white dog was barking at seagulls as they picked at breadcrumbs in the trash cans. Everyone was in his or her own world. The beach did that to a person. The calm undulation of the waves crashing, the fresh air blowing quickly by, the constant *thud* of feet on the wooden planks, a meditative sort of pitter-patter.

But Pandora didn't want to get lulled into a daydream.

It was dangerous.

Because she had no idea where her mind might wander.

So instead, she focused on the second part of the plan—money—starting with the security guard on the Segway who was practically screaming to get robbed. Like, hello, it was a gorgeous sunny day. Use those legs. Breathe in some fresh air. Get that blood pumping. Though with one whiff, Pandora grimaced. Whatever was pumping through his veins reeked of vodka and whiskey and something else—she didn't even want to know what, but it wasn't appetizing in the slightest .

But that bulge in his back pocket?

That piqued her interest.

With nimble hands, she casually walked up behind him and slipped the wallet from his pants, then pulled it out of sight and into the shadows with her before she counted the bills. Sixty bucks. Not bad. She stuffed the cash



into her purse and put his wallet back, leaving him none the wiser.

Glancing around, she chewed on her lip, searching for another target. But she couldn't steal from a brand-new mom out for a morning walk with her peacefully sleeping (and ridiculously adorable) baby. There was a little pink bow stuck to the girl's bald head—a bow! She couldn't ruin their day.

And that left who? The adorable old man eating a sandwich on a bench while he looked out at the water and ripped off pieces of bread to feed his fluffy miniature pooch? Sure, she was a vampire, but she had a heart, even if it was an icy, shattered mess.

No.

They could make sixty bucks last for a few hours. Buy some snacks. Lunch at a diner. And they could break into a hotel for the night, stow away in an empty room, and leave before housekeeping found them.

Sixty bucks was totally fine.

It wasn't, well, the hundred thousand dollars or so she'd stashed in her apartment in New York a few days before. But it would do.

*Freaking Jax .*

She sighed, glancing around to see if he'd come back.

*I mean, really, how long can it take to throw on shorts and a pair of shoes? This is absurd.*

But she paused midspin, stopping as an ominous little tingle tickled the back of her neck, the sort of feeling she always got right before something very bad was about to happen. And, of course, Jax chose that same moment to reappear.

Hurrying back to their meeting spot, Pandora stepped out of the shadows.

"We have to go," she said quickly, glancing around.

Something was wrong.

Something she just couldn't place.

Something creeping and crawling across her nerves in an unsettling sort of way, a memory she should recall but for some reason couldn't grasp.

"Jeez." Jax jumped, startled by her sudden reappearance at his side. "I know, I know. Clothes, then money, then food."

"No," Pandora said, shaking her head. "I grabbed some money. Food can wait. Let's go find a car, now."

His dark brows furrowed as he eyed her with concern, suddenly dead serious. "Why? What happened? What's wrong?"

"I don't know," she said, reaching up to rub the back of her neck, trying to wipe the unnerving sensation away. Why did this hotel seem so familiar? Why did this beach? "Something's not right. I can just sense it. We've got to get out of here. We've— "

And then she stopped midsentence, eyes widening as she turned around and stared straight into the face of a vampire she knew without a doubt wanted to kill her. He was a hundred feet away, maybe a little more, dressed in a dark suit that was so out of place on the boardwalk and surrounded by three other vampires also in suits, also looking oddly formal for the beach.

He paused, staring at her.

Even from a distance, she noticed his eyes switch to the icy, glowing blue of a vampire on the hunt, saw the sinister smile creep across his lips.

And in that moment, she remembered. She hadn't been here before, but she'd seen photos of this hotel, blueprints and mock-ups and a dozen images taken from every angle—the boardwalk, the beach, the street. She'd heard him talk about his new business venture with the head vamp of Philadelphia, heard him boast about a new age where vamps would unite together, heard him promise this was the first step toward a new future. A hotel for vampires, but so much more than that. A spot free from regulations. A place they could let their true nature take over. A place to start a revolution against the secrecy the rest of the supernatural world held in such high regard.

Pandora could see it all so clearly as she stared at him from across the boardwalk, met the evil gleam in his eyes with defiance.

The men around him turned, eyes just as bright as the cloudless sky .

"Jax, run," she whispered, stepping back, stepping away.

"What? Who is that?" he asked, not understanding.

But there was no time to explain.

No time at all.

"Jax, run!" she shouted and then spun, pumping her feet into swift motion as Jax followed, right by her side, listening despite his ignorance.

"Who is that?" he asked again between deep breaths.

Pandora glanced over her shoulder. They were gaining. She wasn't fast enough. Jax wasn't fast enough. They'd have to dodge, try to run in circles, try to lose the vamps in the streets. The boardwalk was too open, too exposed.

"Claude," she spat, turning back around. "The completely deranged head vampire of Washington, DC."

"And let me guess," Jax said, somehow still managing to fill his voice with annoyance in the middle of a full-on sprint. "He wants to kill you?"

At the next opening, Pandora cut left, ignoring Jax and swerving off the boardwalk, hopping the railing to land in the delivery entrance to a hotel. The main street was a block ahead, and once they were into the grid, they'd have a chance to shake the vampires currently chasing them.

"Are there any vampires left on the East Coast that you haven't pissed off?" Jax questioned as he landed next to her, not missing a beat.

Pandora spared one moment to raise a brow and meet his heated gaze. "One or two, I'm sure. "

But the moment cost her.

Dearly.

By the time she turned her eyes back to the front, it was too late. A car came barreling toward them at full speed, too close to dodge, and it slammed into them like a bowling ball, sending them each flying.

## Chapter Eleven



*Freaking Jax* , Pandora thought while tumbling head over heels in midair, a moment before her body slammed into a concrete wall and crashed to the ground.

The next second, she was on her feet.

Vampires were pretty tough to break. And luckily, so were titans.

"What the hell?" Jax cursed as he rolled up from the ground in one smooth, mostly uninjured motion. Standing next to her, he eyed the driverless car that had run them over and was now rolling in reverse for another round of target practice.

"Come on." Pandora grabbed his hand, quickly flicking her gaze back toward the boardwalk, noticing the vampires vaulting over the rail the same way she and Jax had. "We've wasted too much time."

She tugged on his arm, making for the road again .

But then a dumpster ripped free of the wall and rocketed toward them at full speed.

"Duck!" Jax shouted, dropping his entire body to the ground and taking Pandora down with him.

The dumpster soared harmlessly overhead and crashed into the opposite wall, fissuring the concrete.

"Please don't tell me this vamp is telekinetic," Jax muttered, already up and running.

"Oh, he's not telekinetic," Pandora replied.

But the blast of a gunshot drowned out her response, thundering across the narrow alley. Then another. They turned the corner, exited the driveway, and cut into the main road. But it was too late.

Pandora glanced over her shoulder, vampire senses on high alert as she zeroed in on the two bullets zipping through the air, moving not in a straight line, but turning the corner and following her.

"He can manipulate metal," she admitted, grimacing as the two little spheres moved closer. *This is going to hurt* .

And then she was knocked off her feet as the two bullets slammed into her back, one after the other, sending her flying. And because the world was against her, she sailed right into a lamppost, snapping her back, and dropped like dead weight to the ground.

"Mother f—" Pandora cried out.

But Jax interrupted, screaming, "Dory! "

Easing to her knees, Pandora reached behind and plucked the two bullets from where they'd become embedded in her back, unable to break her skin. She hissed with the pain. 'Cause sure, they wouldn't kill her. But that didn't mean they didn't hurt like hell.

"I'm okay," she groaned and stood, then twisted her sore spine. "I'm okay."

But her ears had already picked up on the feet pounding around the corner. The vamps were close—too close to lose on the streets. And apparently Claude, the head vampire of Washington, DC, really knew how to hold a grudge and hadn't been joking about his total disregard for the most sacred rule of the supernatural world—secrecy.

"Inside," Pandora said, turning toward the glass doors at the front of the hotel. But once inside, she realized there was nowhere to hide, no hallways, nothing except two huge escalators that were completely exposed.

What else could she remember from those blueprints?

How could they get away?

"Let's go," Jax urged, taking the steps two at a time as the vampires barreled through the entrance after them.

About halfway through the ride, the spinning steps started to slow. Pandora grimaced. *Come on. Come on* . But it was too late. The escalator started to roll backward, to spin down. So they ran and ran, like hamsters on a wheel, but it was no use.

"I'm going to throw you to the top," Pandora muttered .

Jax gaped at her. "Excuse me?"

She sighed. "We don't have time. I'm going to throw you to the top and then go invisible. They'll chase after what they can see, and I'll circle back around to help. Got it? Can you handle them on your own for a while?"

He lifted his brows, offended. "Do you really have to ask?"

She made a face at him and then cupped her palms, kneeling down for more leverage as the escalator carried them both farther and farther down. Jax held her gaze as he stepped one foot onto the launch pad she'd created with

her hands. Before he had time to say anything, she jumped up with everything she had, flinging him as he pushed off of her fingers. Jax sailed toward the floor above and landed with a tuck and roll. The second he got to his feet, Pandora disappeared, launching herself over the side of the escalator and dropping fifteen feet to the ground. She huddled in the shadows, watching and waiting for the vampires to make their move.

As predicted, they immediately raced up the escalator after Jax.

Well, all but one.

The worst one.

"Oh, Pandora," Claude whispered in a creepy singsong voice, searching around, trying to locate her despite her invisibility. His blue vampire eyes blazed, stark against his pale cheeks and onyx hair, impossibly bright. "What a fortuitous coincidence that you would come stumbling back into my life while I was here on business. Do you remember all the glorious plans I have for this place? Plans I thought you shared? Plans your little stunt in my prison delayed? You got away once but not again. You can't hide from me."

*Wanna bet?* she thought, wrapping the darkness closer to her body, diving in even deeper.

"I can sense the buttons on your jeans, the studs in your ears," he murmured, gaze zeroing in on her hiding spot. "I smell the iron in your stolen blood."

*Well...crap.*

"Claude," she said, still remaining invisible as she backed away. But he followed her movements with his eyes, smelling her even if he couldn't see her. "Can't we talk about this?"

He smirked. "Talk? You want to talk?"

Pandora stepped back.

He stepped forward.

She moved to the side.

So did he, casually and calmly walking closer and closer with each passing second, not the least bit concerned, not the least bit rushed.

"Let's talk about how I shared my dreams, my plans with you. How I offered to keep you safe and warm when one of my peers was hunting you," he said.

Pandora bit her lip—that had been a few months ago when the head vamp of LA had been hot on her tail. And sure, Claude had kept her safe, but

not for free. She worked her butt off stealing things for him as payment, things like paintings from the Oval Office and the blueprints for this hotel and a ring from the home of the head vamp of Philadelphia, just to catch his attention. Pandora had been vital in laying the groundwork for this little sanctuary of his.

*But clearly he's forgotten those little details .* Pandora grimaced as he continued to drone on.

"And how did you repay my kindness? By breaking into my prison, releasing my prisoners, and disappearing without a word. Let's talk about how you helped that little witch I'd been tracking for months get away, about —"

"She was fifteen and afraid," Pandora snapped, unable to stop herself.

He paused, lifting his brows and laughing quietly to himself. "Now that's sweet. Did she remind you of someone? Yourself, maybe?"

No , Pandora thought, sullen.

But she had to keep him talking, keep him distracted. If she could just get away for ten seconds, just enough to find a more crowded place with more metal, she might lose him.

"I," she said, stuttering fearfully, trying to make him think she was afraid rather than focused, "I didn't mean it."

But her eyes were sharp as they scanned the entry. Going back outside would maybe work if she could get through the doors. The cars and the noise might be enough. But Jax was the other way, was deep inside the hotel, facing off against three vampires. He was strong, but the odds against him were stronger. No, outside was out .

So she spun, ignoring Claude as he continued droning on about the prisoners she'd released, the conduits it had taken him months to capture, the other vampires he'd spent years tracking, lifetimes in some cases. And then she saw an elevator bay on the other side of the room.

That was it.

Her one chance.

Still invisible, she edged around the outskirts of the room as Claude's gaze followed, his eyes popping wide when he saw the light for the elevator blink on.

He stopped midlecture. "Really, a metal box is your grand plan?"

Pandora pressed her back against the sliding door, hearing the elevator sink closer and closer, listening to the hum of the sliding cables, not

responding. The light went out. The doors behind her opened. And everything happened in an instant.

Claude leapt for her, surging across the room faster than a human eye could blink. But Pandora was ready, because she wasn't human. And while he could sense the metal in her veins, he couldn't actually see her. And that metal box he'd been so snarky about? Well, she was hoping it would mask her scent just a little, just enough.

So when he reached for her, ready to pin her against the back wall of the elevator and snap her neck, Pandora ducked. And he didn't realize. He toppled, legs fumbling over her crouched body as he tripped and fell into the open elevator right as the door started to close .

That split second was all she needed to run.

He was standing in a blink and turning to face her, to find her. He forced the doors to slide back open. Metal handles clinked against the glass doors behind her, screws falling to the ground as the knobs broke free. They raced toward her while the escalator sped in reverse.

But Pandora scrambled, scaling the wall to the next floor as the handles blew into the spot where her body had been and embedded into the stone with the force. Claude tugged on the metal he could sense in her clothes and her blood, but it wasn't enough to stop her, and she'd known it wouldn't be. Because like all vampires with power, he had a dirty little secret. Tatsuya's had been eye contact. And Claude's was saturation. He could sense all metal, but he could only manipulate it when it was concentrated enough for him to grab on to. The bullets in his gun were specially crafted to be heavy enough for him to control. But the earrings she was wearing? The buttons on her jeans? The iron in her blood? It was all too small for him to really latch on to. And if she could just move fast enough, the amount might be small enough that he'd lose track of her entirely.

Pandora hooked her fingers around the ledge, then tossed her body up and over the railing just as the metal sliding door to the elevator ripped free of the frame and sped toward her. But it soared harmlessly overhead as she landed smoothly on the second floor and ducked low to the ground. Claude hurried behind, zipping up the escalator, hot on her tail. To her left, a truly confused woman sat behind the check-in counter, gaze on Claude and the broken elevator door that had come to a screeching halt in the middle of the lobby. Pandora raced past her, past the security guards, through the room, noticing for the first time that there was an arch lined with bright white



statues garbed in togas spanning the foyer, somewhat resembling the Roman Colosseum. The ceiling was painted to look like the sky. And the hallway in front of her was lined with columns, decorated like the Roman Forum, with a plaque that said *Caesar's Atlantic City* . She did a double take as she raced past a man dressed like a gladiator holding a round shield and an alarmingly large sword.

*I really hope that's plastic.*

But there was no time for jokes.

*Where are you, Jax? Where are you?*

While she ran, she stretched out with her ears, hearing Claude's light and swift steps behind her, searching for Jax's voice, for anything. But all she heard up ahead were ringing slot machines, shuffling cards, clanking chips, and a bloodcurdling scream.

*Wait, what?*

Yup. A woman was screaming at the top of her lungs, utterly and completely losing her mind.

Pandora grinned.

*That's my cue .*

And sure enough, when she barreled into the casino, it took less than a second to spot Jax. He was standing in the center of the slot machines, hands latched around a vampire's ankle, spinning to gain some momentum before he released. The woman screamed again as the vamp went flying across the room and slammed into a poker table that snapped in half with the force of the blow. Of course, a second later he stood right up and charged Jax, who was by that point already preoccupied with another vamp who was charging him while holding a craps table over his head. And, yes, then he threw it at Jax, who dove to the side, twisting in midair to swerve out of the way, and landed on his feet with all the grace of a jungle cat.

And he was grinning.

Full-on grinning with the high of the fight.

*Freaking Jax* , Pandora thought, but the corners of her lips pulled up against her will into a smile as she raced over to join him.

"Time to go," she murmured.

Jax gasped, clutching at his chest, losing focus. "Jesus, you have to stop sneaking up on me like that."

"Sorry." She shrugged, still invisible. "It never used to scare you."

"Yeah, well, we didn't used to get in so many fights." He punched

another vamp in the face, then twisted to kick another in the gut. "I'm a little too busy with all the bloodsuckers trying to kill me to focus on tracking you."

Pandora rolled her eyes, but she had to admit he was sort of right when she jumped onto a vampire's back two seconds later, then clung to him like a leech as she sliced her nail across his throat, cutting deep and taking him out for a few minutes at least.

Before her feet even touched the ground, Claude was there.

*Stupid, stupid*, Pandora cursed.

Jax could never slice open a vamp's skin—fight, yes, but cut, no. Only another vampire's teeth or nails could do that. Which meant she'd made herself too obvious, and paid.

Claude encircled Pandora's throat with his pale hand, gripping deep as his fingers sank into her skin, choking her, cutting off the flow to her brain.

She snapped out of the shadows, becoming visible once more as he pushed her back. Her spine slammed against a wall as he squeezed tighter and tighter, bringing his other hand to her neck to finish the job, trying to pop her head right off with the pressure.

*Not like this*, she thought.

*Not like this*.

Pandora cleared her mind, searching for the calm within the fear. Most people tried to rip off an attacker's hand, but with a grip like that, not possible. Others went for a strong punch to the side of the head, or they tried to sneak a kick to the groin, but in most cases, the blow wouldn't be strong enough to break a choking grip. But she knew better. Thanks to her titan roots, she'd trained better. And the way out was actually relatively simple. Lifting her shoulder and bending her head to the side, she trapped his palm in the groove, holding it in a vicelike grip. Then she twisted in one fast wrenching motion, dragging his ensnared arm with her and dislodging his grip as he lost his balance.

Before Claude had time to grab hold again, Jax was there. He slipped the head vamp's own gun out of its holster and sent every remaining round directly into Claude's pale exposed neck. The bullets lodged deep in the pliable skin of his throat, not breaking skin but burying far enough to cut off the vamp's circulation, pinching his veins. Claude dropped to the ground with a groan, but it would only stop him for a minute, two tops.

"Let's go," Jax ordered, making a run for it. She followed him, sprinting through poker tables before racing up a set of stairs in the middle of

the room to another level of the casino. At the top, she grabbed Jax by the hand and yanked him into a narrow opening between two metal slot machines.

"What—?" he asked.

But Pandora slammed her palm over his mouth and wrapped her other arm around his hard body, drawing him close. Eyes zeroed in on the steps they'd just crested, Pandora reached for the shadows, diving into the darkness, saying good-bye to the world of the light and taking Jax with her. Just as Claude's head appeared, the two of them disappeared, vanishing from the light.

She had no idea whether or not it worked. She'd never tried to bring someone else into the shadows with her, to make another living person vanish from sight. But she remembered Sam's words from the day before in Tatsuya's prison, as he'd pressed his palms to the glass cage encasing her and slipped easily through as though the barrier didn't exist at all. *You're so much stronger than you know*, he had said, watching her sadly, *so much stronger than they led you to believe*.

And in that moment, she had to trust that he was right, that he knew something she didn't, that even though he was little more than a mysterious phantom who had suddenly popped into her life, he wanted to help.

Claude reached the top of the stairs and scanned the room. His gaze roved every inch of the casino floor, sliding over the slot machines, under the pool tables, across the bar, into and out of every crevice. The other three vamps stopped behind him, waiting for orders, not nearly as strong as their leader.

Pandora didn't breathe.

Jax didn't either.

Hidden in the shadows, they were utterly and perfectly still, stopped on a moment, waiting to see what would happen next. But Pandora's mind raced full speed ahead. *He'll smell the iron in my blood. He'll smell the power coursing through Jax's body, sense the heat emanating from his veins, blood too alluring to ignore. He'll smell us. He'll find us.*

Except he didn't.

Instead, Claude sneered, hissing as he dropped his sharp gaze and straightened his suit jacket, smoothing out the wrinkles. Running a hand through his black hair, he glanced around once more and then motioned to his henchmen. The group of four turned around and slowly descended the stairs

behind them .

Pandora waited a full ten minutes before relaxing her grip on Jax's strong arms, before reluctantly stepping away from his warm body and releasing the shadows.

"We should go," she whispered, unable to meet his eyes.

He didn't speak as they cautiously followed signs for the parking lot, keeping their focus sharp. He didn't speak as they broke into a car and hot-wired it to a rumbling start. Didn't speak as they eased onto the street, careful not to draw attention as they merged with traffic and left the shore behind them.

He waited until they were on the highway, zipping quickly away, before finally saying the one thing she knew would be on his mind. "When did you learn how to do that? How to take someone into the shadows with you?"

Pandora bit her lip, staring out the window. "About an hour ago. I've never done it before."

"Is your power getting stronger?" he asked softly, a hint of fear laced through his voice. The titans had always been afraid of her abilities, afraid of how different and how unknown they were. But Jax never had been before.

Pandora snapped her gaze around, meeting his green eyes. "So what if it is?"

He held her attention, trapping her for one prolonged moment as his lips wobbled, holding back words just aching to get out. And then he released a long, slow breath, turning his attention back to the road, silent.

"What?" she demanded.

But Jax didn't flinch .

*He's hiding something , she thought. Something that has to do with me*

"Jax," she said, reaching for his shoulder. But the moment she latched her fingers on to his skin, he hissed in pain, flinching. Pandora furrowed her brows, confused, as she leaned closer, and he had no choice but to let her.

When she pulled his shirt away from his neck, her jaw dropped. A deep purple bruise stained his brown skin. Farther down, she noticed blood seeping through the cotton, a small open wound.

"Jax, I don't understand," she whispered, setting his shirt back gently. "Your skin isn't supposed to break. It's supposed to be tough like mine, untouchable. You're supposed to heal. Titans are supposed to heal."

"Just leave it alone, Dory," he muttered, refusing to look at her, refusing to meet her worried eyes.

"But—"

"No," he interrupted, angry now, but she wasn't entirely sure why. Before she could challenge him, he changed the subject. "You want to talk? Why don't we talk about the fact that you turned your back on me, on everyone and everything you'd ever known, to become this? To become someone who's being chased down and hunted every second of the day, someone who never has a moment of peace, someone who doesn't even consider the consequences of her actions, who runs into danger headfirst without thinking, who doesn't give a rat's ass about her own life? "

Pandora gritted her teeth. *You stop caring about how many people want to kill you when you've got nothing to live for, no one to live for.* But she didn't say that. She couldn't.

And it didn't matter anyway, because Jax barreled forward, not letting her interrupt. "I'd hoped that when I found you, you'd at least have done something with your life. I'd hoped you'd maybe gone to school, trained to be a vet like you always said. I'd hoped you were happy, that you'd found some peace, that you'd carved out a place for yourself in a world that never seemed to understand you. But if I'd known you were going to turn out like this, I would have—"

"What?" she finally broke through. "You would have what? Left me alone to my miserable life?"

"No," he whispered, closing his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. "I would have tried to find you a lot sooner."

Pandora swallowed. "What do you mean?"

He gripped the steering wheel tight, twisting the rubber, as he stared hard into the horizon. "I haven't been searching for you for four years. I told the order that I was, but I lied. I only really started looking for you a few months ago."

"Why?"

"Because, Dory," he said, sounding more exhausted than she ever remembered hearing him. "I wanted to give you a chance to live. I wanted to give you a chance to make all those dreams you always rattled on about come true. I wanted you to do something with your life, anything, before I had to drag you back to a place I knew you hated, a place where you never felt you belonged, where you always felt trapped, where..." But his throat caught, and

he trailed off, leaving that last thought unsaid.

Pandora paused, licking her lips. There was something she still wasn't grasping, something she didn't understand. "Why do they want me back so badly?"

Jax clenched his jaw tight, holding, holding, holding. And then every muscle in his body relaxed in a single moment, as though every part of him had given up, had stopped fighting. "Why do you think?" he murmured, finally flicking his gaze in her direction. But underneath his voice, Pandora could hear his heart beating wildly in his chest, betraying the weight of his words, the heaviness of things left unsaid. "You're the director's daughter. Did you really think they'd let you go so easily? Did you really think he would?"

Pandora turned her gaze back to the window, crossing her arms as she rested her feet against the dashboard. She didn't want to think about her father, not for a second. So instead, she let her head fall back, closed her eyes, and waited for sleep to take her.

## Chapter Twelve



*Pandora waited, sitting in the damp grass, back pressed against the wooden rungs of the ladder leading to the top of their tree house. Hours before, she had fallen to the ground, delirious as she raced to find Jax, to find the one person who would understand, the one person who would never betray her the way everyone else had. And when she'd seen the tree house dark and empty, she'd tripped in her shock, stumbling to her knees. Without the energy to climb, she'd simply flipped over in the dirt and used the ladder as a backrest, waiting.*

*Because he would come.*

*He had to.*

*He would never do this to her.*

*They would. But not Jax. Never Jax.*

*So she waited, eyes staring into the shadows created by the moonlight, searching for his body with every sound, every shapeless shift in the trees. And with each passing moment, she whispered to herself.*

*He's coming.*

*He's coming.*

*He's coming.*

*Rocking back and forth, pulling her knees into her chest as the tears started to fall, she whispered those words like a prayer.*

*But then moments turned to minutes.*

*Minutes to hours.*

*And she knew he'd come but not for the reason she wanted him to. But she couldn't leave without seeing for herself, without being sure he'd made his choice. Because a small part of her still hoped he'd chosen her.*

*And then he was there, a black blur shifting through tree trunks, tan skin set alight by the silver starlight streaming through the branches. He stopped fifteen feet away, unsure. Pandora stood, shaking, as she looked deep into his eyes, his beautiful green eyes, and for the first time didn't recognize the soul hiding inside. She didn't need to see more, didn't need to hear the*

words tumbling from his lips, didn't need to touch the tattoo freshly carved into his skin, branding him—a permanent reminder of his choice, of his betrayal.

*She ran.*

*Without once glancing back, she disappeared into the darkness of the night, racing through the forest and pulling her shadows around her, hiding her body from the light. All she heard was her heart pumping, her nose sniffing, and her feet pounding farther and farther away.*

*The terrain turned blurry, no longer the woods and the mountains of her home, shifting too fast for her to make out, as though she were moving too fast for the world to keep up .*

*"Run, Pandora," a voice whispered in a silky tone as smooth as the liquid black of a starless night.*

*She turned her head to find another person was with her in this blurry world, running by her side, just as fast, but his face was calm, smiling gently, not the teary red mess she knew hers must be. His golden hair barely shifted in the breeze as her blonde waves smacked her in the face, whipping in the shifting air. And his blue eyes glowed, eager and excited.*

*"Run," he said again, smile deepening.*

*Sam, she thought, the word coming through the fog. "Sam?"*

*"Keep running, and don't ever look back," he told her. "Don't forget, I'll always be able to find you. And I will, as soon as I can."*

*And then he was gone.*

*And she was alone again, in this world that wasn't real, shifting too fast for her to understand, for her to process. Her feet continued to pound as she mindlessly ran and ran, not stopping, not looking back.*

*Until she smacked into something, a body, still warm, burning hot compared to the icy cold invading her veins, stealing the life from her limbs. And without even glancing to see if it was a boy or a girl, fangs she didn't realize she possessed slipped out, and she bit, drinking in the heat, sucking the fire into her heart, more and more and more as her tired legs continued to race forward, not stopping, never stopping, never—*

*"Dory!" Jax shouted, shaking her shoulder roughly.*

*"What?"*

*She gasped, sitting up, out of breath as she rapidly blinked, trying to clear her eyes, trying to see the real world zipping by through the window her forehead had been pressed against .*



"You were screaming," Jax said, voice alarmed. "One minute you were sound asleep, and then you were screaming."

"I was?" she asked, still foggy with sleep, confused.

He turned toward her, pulling his gaze from the road for a second. "Do you still have nightmares?"

"No," she said quickly then paused, brows furrowing. "Well... I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "I never knew I even had nightmares until you told me, until you started waking me up by tossing rocks at my window or calling my name. I guess I could still have them, but no one's been around to let me know until now."

"Do you remember what it was about?" Jax asked.

Pandora shook her head, trying to hold on to the tendrils of a memory, but they slipped through her fingers. "I think maybe you were a part of it, and someone else. And there was blood. At least I think so, but it's all so blurred."

He frowned, turning his attention back to the empty highway. Pandora blinked again, swallowing as she sat up and dropped her feet from the dash, wiping the sleep from her eyes. The world was black aside from the two beams of light stretching out in front of the car. She'd been sleeping for hours.

"Where are we?" she mumbled, yawning.

"Somewhere in North Carolina."

She swallowed, then chewed on her lip before asking, "And where are we going?"

Jax looked at her out of the corner of his eye, just for a moment, before staring resolutely ahead. "Florida."

She could have told him no. She could have told him to turn around. She could have started another fight with another unsatisfying ending. But instead, she held her tongue and stared at the halo created by the headlights, watching the road flash by.

Did she want to go to Florida? No.

Did she want to go to the conduit base? No.

Did she want her vampirism to be cured? No.

Of course, none of that mattered to Jax. He was a man. He was stubborn. He was her former best friend and long-ago love of her life. So obviously, he thought he knew more about her needs than she did. And when

it came down to it, she'd rather humor him for as long as she could and then disappear at the last possible second, especially when the other option was to fight with him for two days and then do the same damn thing. Like she'd said to that conduit girl in the graveyard—men were so much easier to manipulate when they thought they were in control.

So she dropped her head back against the seat, determined to stay civil—at least for a while. "So," she started casually, remembering their earlier conversation, "if you haven't been chasing me for four years, what have you been doing? "

Jax sighed. "Tracker stuff, titan stuff. The usual."

"Ooh, interesting," she said mockingly, rolling her eyes. *Come on, Jax. Work with me here.* "Care to elaborate? I'm trying this little thing you might have forgotten how to do. It's called having an actual conversation."

"Well," he said, voice tight, "since you never got initiated, I'm not exactly authorized to tell you what I've been doing. It's confidential unless you're a full member of the order."

Pandora blew a heavy breath through her lips. *Give me something, Jax, anything. I just want to get to know you, adult you.* She tried again. "Okay, forget titan stuff. What about life? What about everything else?"

He tightened his grip on the wheel, but for the first time, his reaction didn't seem about her. Not really. "Work is my life, Dory. There is no other stuff."

"Oh, come on," she challenged, sitting up, tired of the games. "You can't say all that stuff to me you did before, how you're so disappointed that I didn't chase my dreams, so angry that I ended up the way I did, and then tell me you did the exact same thing. What about your music? What about that dream?"

Jax swallowed, green eyes darkening a shade. "I don't play anymore."

"Why?" She gasped, staring at him. Almost every memory she had of Jax was tied to music, to watching the effortless way he moved his fingers across the strings, how he got entirely wrapped up in the song, how he closed his eyes when the words became too emotional, too raw, and he had to pretend he was somewhere other than the real world just to get through. She couldn't imagine him without his guitar, a gift from his father, a talent both men shared. And when she and Jax had nurtured those childish dreams of running away and starting a new life together, music was always his escape, his future, his what-if.

Pandora had once been his certainty. Music had once been his dream.  
How had he lost them both?

"Why, Jax?" she asked again, softly, sadly.

Brows tight, he darted his gaze in her direction, his eyes piercing with their intensity, saying what his lips could not. "I just didn't have anything to sing about anymore."

Pandora looked away, fiddling with her fingers. "Well, what about your parents? What about your friends?"

"I don't know," he murmured.

"Jax—"

"Look," he interrupted, "I'm going to make this simple. I wake up, and I work, and I go to sleep. That's about it until I came to find you. I haven't spoken to my parents in a year, and I haven't been back to the enclave in about three. I travel a lot, which doesn't leave much time for friends, and I try not to stay in any one place too long."

Pandora stared at him, chest tight as she listened to the heavy *thunk, thunk, thunk* of his heart, the sad, isolated way it was beating, painful in its monotony .

*I'm not the only one who's been running* , she thought, hearing him take a deep, uneven breath and release it just as unsteadily.

"Is it all my fault?" she whispered.

"No," Jax said gruffly, and then he paused, not breathing, letting everything about his body calm down. And then softer, he repeated, "No." He looked at her with the ghost of a smile across his lips, murmuring a phrase they used to say to get out of a fight. "You take half the blame, and I'll take the other."

Pandora's lips curved up hesitantly. "Deal."

His smile widened for a moment before disappearing entirely. "I tried to stay at home for a while, but I just couldn't. Staring into your dark window every night, knowing your room was empty, knowing you weren't coming back? You became the ghost next door, and I had to get out. I had to leave. So they told me to find you since I was a full tracker and we were so close I'd have a better shot than anyone else, but I didn't want to find you, not right away. I wanted to give you a chance to live, so I traveled instead, saying I'd picked up on traces here and there, saying I was following you, when really, I was wandering aimlessly from one titan enclave to another. I went to Spain to see the enclave where my dad grew up, to China, to Egypt, to Chile, to

enclaves all over the world. I helped them if I could, doing side jobs, waiting for time to run out, waiting until I'd have no choice but to finally track the one person I didn't want to find."

Pandora lifted a brow, pretending to be insulted .

Jax laughed, an airy, vacant sound. "You know what I mean. I don't think a day went by when I didn't think about you, didn't wonder where you were or what you were doing or if you missed me, but what I wanted didn't matter. It never has. And you wanted time, so I tried to give it to you as best I could. But..."

She picked up where he left off. "But my twentieth birthday was a few days ago, and if this titan wants to be initiated into the Order of Othrys, wants to inherit her full powers and become a full member, it has to happen after her sixteenth birthday but before her twenty-first? That about right?"

Jax shrugged, voice hollow as he spoke. "We don't make the rules. We just live by them."

Pandora chewed her lip, not sure how far she wanted to take this conversation. But as per usual, she chose the more difficult path. "Did my father tell you to get off your ass and stop wasting time? Did he know what you were doing?"

Jax nodded, forcing the words out. "Something like that."

Pandora collapsed against her seat, closing her eyes as the image of her father's face fluttered up from the crevice she'd smashed it into. Penetrating dark-brown eyes. Thin, hard-set lips. Deep, grooved wrinkles. Receding hairline, black peppered with gray. He hadn't been an old man when she'd left, but he'd looked like one, aged by the stress of his job, by the pressure to lead the American branch of the order. Everything had always been about the job, about the enclave, about following the path laid out and never deviating.

*Everyone has a fate , he used to say, and God gave me mine because he knew I was strong enough to take it.* And then he'd look at her, eyes soft for the merest moment before hardening up once more, always keeping her at a distance, always keeping the job first and his own child second. *You too, Pandora , he'd say, voice as rigid as his posture, always calling her by her name, never sweetie or my little girl or even Dory . You'll handle whatever comes because you're a Scott, and we were born to be strong enough to do what needs to be done.*

And if it was a particularly bad day, his eyes would go blank as they

watched her, just for a second, hardly enough to reveal what he'd been thinking. But Pandora could read him. She'd always been able to, even when she didn't want to. And in those rare moments, she could tell that he was looking at her and seeing her mother—not a Scott, not strong, but a weak woman who'd killed herself when Pandora had only been a toddler. She understood that he was watching her with doubts, remembering she was only half Scott, and the other half still had the potential to be oh so very disappointing.

*I guess we both know which half I turned out to be* , she thought, pushing the image of her father from her mind, trying to shove the pain away, trying to bring back the icy calm of the undead. But her heart still hurt, too much for even an empty vampire to ignore.

"For what it's worth," Pandora said, opening her eyes and staring into the dark road ahead, "I tried. "

"Hmm?" Jax asked, pulled from his thoughts by the sound of her voice. "Tried what?"

"To be better," she murmured. "When I first became a vampire, I tried to be better. I tried to enroll in a school, tried to forge my papers, tried to get a job, tried to live a normal life. But I was fifteen, nearly sixteen, and I didn't even have a driver's license. And most vampires join some sort of coven, pledge their loyalty to a head vamp somewhere, or at least a strong vamp, someone who will show them the ropes, who will get them the paperwork they need and provide a home or at least some sort of security. But the vampire who turned me disappeared on me, was gone by the time I woke up from the transformation. I was alone. And the only people who showed any interest in trying to help me wanted something in return, something I wasn't prepared to give—a life, an oath—all blood on my hands. So I needed some way to survive."

Pandora crossed her arms, staring out the window at the dark outline of trees passing by. "I started small, stealing a blood bag here, some clothes there, breaking into a hotel or an empty apartment just so I'd have a place to sleep at night. And day by day, it became easier to take things that weren't mine. I got used to it. And once word spread about a vampire with the ability to become invisible, offers came in for sums of money too large for me to ignore, all to take little things—a painting from a museum, a jewel from a vault. I didn't even realize I'd gotten in so deep until suddenly I was drowning, sneaking into secret lairs, walking past humans who'd been fed on

so many times they were little more than breathing blood bags. Or past conduits trapped in dark cellars, too weak to use their fire to escape. Or witches or werewolf or fae, anything and anyone a vamp thought he could use to his or her advantage. And then one day, I forgot what I was being paid to steal and decided to steal one of those poor souls instead, to free them. And I liked it, so I kept doing it, and the more people I freed, the more vamps I pissed off, the more they continued to try to hunt me. So I run, and I keep running, because sometimes, there's no other option. Sometimes you're running so fast for so long that if you stop, everything that's chasing you will catch up. All the cards you've so carefully stacked will come crashing down, so you have no choice. You just keep going."

Pandora smashed her lips together, forcing her mouth to close, forcing her racing mind to slow, forcing the words to stop tumbling through her lips, admissions she never meant for Jax to hear.

After taking a deep breath, she let one more word slip out. "Okay?"

He didn't look at her. He didn't need to. "Okay."

"Okay," she repeated, nodding to herself. *Okay* .

"I'm tired," he said into the permeating silence. Pandora flicked her gaze in his direction, but his face was purposefully blank. For her benefit, because he knew she hadn't meant to say all the things she'd said, he was ignoring them. "How about we find a hotel for the night? Get some actual sleep in an actual bed? I think we could both use the break. "

Pandora stared at him, grateful for his words, surprised that he was for once letting her off the hook, was for once not pressing the issue.

"I mean, if you need to stop..." she said, voice just on the verge of teasing. "But we're getting a room with twin beds, just in case you get tempted to try something stupid."

The corner of Jax's lip twitched. "I wouldn't dare."

## Chapter Thirteen



They pulled into a hotel a mile or two from the exit in the middle of a small row of strip malls. There was some sort of little league tournament in town that weekend, so all the twin rooms were taken, leaving the two of them with a queen.

*Just my frigging luck* , Pandora thought when Jax pushed open the door.

The bed was the major elephant in the room.

She couldn't look away.

Jax, on the other hand, couldn't be bothered. Without saying anything to her, he pulled the covers back, slid off his dirty T-shirt, and crashed onto the mattress. Within five minutes, he was asleep, face up with an arm flung casually over his head.

*Typical* , she thought, frowning. *So typical*.

And the longer she stared at his peacefully slumbering face, his softly pouting lips, his bare chest hardly covered by the blankets, the more annoyed she got. This was so like Jax, to act as if everything was fine, as if it were normal for them to be sharing a bed, sharing a room, as if it didn't matter at all.

*Well, I can pretend too* .

And she would.

But first, she desperately needed to shower the saltwater from her hair, desperately needed to scrub the grime from her skin, just desperately needed to be clean. She slipped into the bathroom, then turned the water to full heat so it scalded her frozen skin, steaming up the mirror and sizzling upon contact. She washed the past few days away, shampooing twice and using nearly the entire bar of soap as brown water collected around her feet. But there were some things she couldn't wash away—the feel of Jax's lips pressed against hers, how incredibly light Tatsuya's severed head had felt in her hands, the sound of that conduit's voice as she told Pandora life could be different, told her she could be saved.

Shaking her head, Pandora turned off the water and pushed the shower curtain aside. Before her mind could wander any further, she grabbed a towel to dry off with. But it was useless. The hotel was too quiet. The room was too small. Jax's presence was too large. All her mind continued to do was race and race and race as she left the bathroom, slipped her clothes back on, and crawled underneath the covers, facing the wall.

Her awareness of Jax's body was sharp, a constant distraction, a tingle along her spine that kept her awake as it grew stronger and stronger, hotter and hotter, demanding to be acknowledged. After five minutes, she sighed, flipping over.

*Maybe if I just look at him, I'll be able to stop thinking about him .*

But life didn't work that way.

Once her gaze landed on Jax, she couldn't look away. Her attention was glued, her mind fixed and annoyingly alert. Light from the parking lot streamed through the window, a bright fluorescent white seeping through the thin curtains, silhouetting his profile. Her focus wandered up the straight ridge of his nose, over his forehead to the soft black strands being feathered by the light, velvety hair she could vividly remember running her hands through, could vividly remember gripping tightly in the heat of their passion. She shifted her gaze down, over the strong curve of his jaw, skipping past his lips because she couldn't bear to stare at them. His arms must have been twice the size that she remembered, so bulky compared to the boy in her memories, so much stronger, sturdier. Her fingers ached to trace the edge of his bicep, but she curled them into her chest. The two feet of space between their bodies was necessary, because once that wall crumbled, Pandora wasn't sure she'd ever crawl back to her own side.

As if sensing her scrutiny, Jax sighed in his sleep, rolling over and presenting her with his back.

Such a simple motion.

And yet, it hit Pandora like a cold shower.

She flinched at the sight of the black tattoo inked into the brown skin at the base of his neck, the symbol of the Order of Othrys, the titan seal. There were twelve starbursts aligned in a circle, representing the twelve original titans of myth and the twelve factions they fell into today—trackers like Jax, hunters like Pandora's father, mindbenders like the ones who were probably already in Atlantic City, cleaning up the mess she and Jax had left behind, and nine other spheres of power titans fell into. Those stars were



connected by straight lines, extending to the left and right and then through the center to the star on the opposite side, representing the brotherhood, representing strength in unity. And in the center, covering the spot where the lines intersected, was the shape of a shaded-in keyhole. Only full members of the order knew what it meant, but Pandora assumed it was a symbol of the secrets the order kept, the secrets the titans had been privy to during the many hundreds of years of their existence.

What did Jax know that she didn't?

What was he hiding from her?

What secrets were locked in his heart?

Pandora's hand crossed the invisible barrier, moving before she even realized, and hovered over the tattoo, stopped by the heat emanating from his skin and sinking into her cold fingers. Not touching him, she traced the keyhole and the stars, traced the brand between his shoulder blades.

He'd chosen them.

She'd chosen, well, anything but them.

Almost as a reminder of her decision, her fangs slid out, pressing into her lower lip, called by the scent fluttering in through her nose, a smell she'd only just noticed .

Blood.

Jax's blood.

The cut on his back still hadn't healed, not completely. It was scabbed over, caked in dried clots that were haloed by a translucent red stain where the blood had soaked into his T-shirt. The sight was so odd on titan skin, skin that was almost as tough as a vampire's—at least, it was supposed to be. But that wasn't what Pandora was thinking about as she licked her lips, fingers hovering over the wound, trembling. She was thinking that she hadn't fed in a long time, that all the fighting had made her hungry, that all the healing had depleted her stores, that her veins were painfully dry and scratchy, empty and aching for relief.

She was thinking, *I wonder what he tastes like* .

And then she wasn't thinking any longer.

Without realizing she'd even moved, she'd brought her mouth an inch away from the wound, and her eyes were glowing blue, so bright she could almost see the reflection on his skin. The bloodlust consumed her, taking control of her senses, sending her thoughts whirling away as an innate hunger took over, too strong to ignore. Her lashes fluttered as she drew the scent into

her nose, more potent from this closer distance, more alluring. The power sat on her tongue, teasing her senses, rousing them as her body picked apart the strength in his blood, the bright hum of vibrant life mixed with something else, something more, something that couldn't be defined—a raw sense of might that made her head spin .

Pandora's tongue darted out, quick and soft, a featherlight touch.

Jax sighed in his sleep.

She swallowed, eyes closing as his blood dripped down her desert throat, a slowly moving oasis. The power in his blood was like a drug, drawing her out of herself into someplace dangerous. She pressed her tongue against his muscles, longer this time, drawing in more. But not enough.

Consumed by the craving, Pandora rolled Jax over gently, turning him face up as he blinked his eyes open, confused.

"What?" he murmured, half-asleep.

"Shh," she whispered, face still pressed against his skin as she crouched over him, using her nose to follow the trail of his pounding blood, to follow the veins pumping life up his chest. She hovered over his heart, then found what she was looking for. An artery. She pressed her lips gently against his chest, once, twice, slowly moving up as she slid her palms from his abdomen to his shoulder, just enough weight to hold him down, to hold him still.

"Dory?" he whispered, unsure if he was in a dream.

But Pandora was beyond speaking as she brought her mouth to the spot she'd been searching for, as his pulse ticked against her lips, blood surging faster and faster as he grew more and more awake with each passing moment.

"Shh," she murmured again .

He relaxed back into the bed, hands finding her hips, tracing up the contours of her back, breath growing short, the beat against her skin racing as his temperature spiked to an inferno.

"Dor—"

She bit.

Jax groaned, half agony and half ecstasy. He dug his fingers into her skin, not pushing or pulling, just holding her still, wavering. Pandora sank her fangs deep, mind going blank as his blood began to course through her, primal instincts taking over.

"What the—!" Jax snapped out of the trance, grabbing her hair in a

fist and yanking her head from his neck, horrified.

She hissed, flashing her teeth.

The girl he knew was gone.

The beast living inside had taken over, and right now, all it wanted was blood. She'd waited too long, fought too much, healed too much—the hunger had crept up on her, slow and then all at once, too much to control. Her nails carved into his chest, flesh wounds meant to distract him. It worked. He released her hair and grasped her by the shoulders, but she brought her legs up and sat on his chest, holding his arms in place as she dipped her head down again. He tried to push her off but couldn't dislodge her thighs. Pandora's teeth found his neck once more, and she drank as fast as she could. Until suddenly, she wasn't—she was rolling over as his body came on top of her. Jax pinned her to the mattress as he grabbed her arms and lifted them up over her head, immobile. She snapped her jaw, trying to rip out his throat, but he jerked out of the way.

"Dory!" he shouted at her.

The blood was still dripping from his wound, landing in her open mouth.

"Dory!"

He rattled her arms, trying to wake her. The entire bed shook as she fought to free herself from his hold, but it was unbreakable.

"Dory!" he yelled one last time.

She froze, snapping back to reality.

In an instant, she pushed him off and then jumped away, flying backward as though pulled by a string. She didn't stop until her spine hit the wall, then she fell to her feet and just kept sinking into a crouch as she stared at the blood dripping down his bare chest, the two puncture holes in his neck, the claw marks slashing across his abdomen.

*I'm an animal*, she thought, gasping, eyes widening.

She didn't even remember doing any of it.

Didn't even remember biting into his skin.

But the evidence was still soaking her lips, warm, and despite herself, she licked the last bit of his blood from her mouth. Pandora hated herself for how good it felt as she swallowed it down.

Jax sat up, watching her with concern. "It's not as bad as it looks. "

He was trying to console her—he was worried about her. But she wasn't the one bleeding out.

"I," she said, pausing as her lips twitched, unsure. *I'm sorry. I can help you. I can seal the wounds.* But what popped out was, "I have to go."

"Dory, really, I'm already healing," he said, reaching toward her.

But she backed away, shaking her head. "I have to go."

He stood, shifting his head to the side, brows pulling in tight as his gaze probed hers, searching. "You didn't mean it. I know that. It wasn't you. It's not your fault."

"Not my fault?" she countered, voice rising an octave as the alarm started to really set in. "Not my fault? Jax, look at yourself. I did that, me, and I didn't even realize. What if you—what if I—" She shook her head back and forth uncontrollably. "No, I have to go."

"Where?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, already racing for the door and yanking it open. "I just have to go."

And then she was gone before Jax could say another word.

Feet pounding.

Eyes wide.

Cold heart stopped dead.

Jax's blood hot in her veins.

Mind carrying her even faster than her vampire speed.

*I bit him.*

*I bit Jax .*

The bloodlust hadn't hit her that hard since she'd first turned. To many vamps, she was still a newbie, still learning, but she'd never experienced anything quite like that before, quite so all-consuming. Maybe it was the hunger. Maybe it was the titan power in his blood. Maybe it was just because it was Jax, and he'd always had a way of overwhelming her. But whatever it was, she'd never be able to get that image out of her mind or the taste of his blood off her lips.

*This is who I am.*

*What I am.*

*What I chose to be.*

*A monster.*

Except what if she weren't?

What if she chose differently?

Wiping the rest of Jax's blood from her chin, letting the world turn into a blur of flashing lights, Pandora let herself consider the idea, just for a

moment.

*What if I were cured?*

Pandora tried to push the idea from her mind as soon as it came, but it wouldn't budge.

*What if I were a titan again? I could still run almost as fast, could still disappear, could still have my own life. I wouldn't need to go back to the enclave. I wouldn't need to undergo the initiation, wouldn't need to bend to my father's will. I could keep going, keep moving from place to place, keep hiding. And by the time I turned twenty-one, everything would be over. The zone for my initiation would pass, and my father would let me go. And then, as a regular human, no more titan powers, maybe I could be normal. Not a vamp. Not a titan. Just a girl. Maybe I could go to school, actually be a vet. Maybe, eventually, I wouldn't need to keep running. Maybe I could just stop, could just live. And maybe Jax would come with me.*

That stopped her.

No, he wouldn't come with her.

He'd already been initiated. He'd already made his choice.

What had happened that night?

The night he chose? The night she left?

For the first time, a small part of Pandora wanted to remember, wanted to bring all those dark memories out from hiding, to relive the nightmare just so she could know what had been so terrible that she'd done this to herself. Because four years later, more alone and lost than ever, Pandora wasn't sure if she would make the same choice given a second chance. Back then, she'd been a naïve fifteen-year-old girl, sheltered for her entire life, secluded from the harsh realities of the world. What had seemed unbearable back then could be just another day in her current life—or it could be so much worse than she ever imagined.

Jax said she'd run because of him.

He said he knew why she left. Because he broke his promise, because he broke her heart, because he shattered her dreams and left her the one way he swore he wouldn't—alone. But is that really why she'd given up her life? Why she'd turned herself into this monster? Because of a boy?

*No, she thought. There has to be more. There has to.*

She refused to believe she'd ever be so stupid as to throw everything away for a boy, even for Jax, *the* boy, the one she thought she'd be with forever. Even as an innocent fifteen-year-old, she'd been smarter than that.

Pandora trusted her gut—she always had.

And she would keep trusting it because she had no other choice.

*I became a vampire because I thought it was permanent. I thought I was taking the choice out of my hands. I thought I was doing something that couldn't be undone—I'd wanted to do something that couldn't be undone. Because I knew, I knew, that eventually I'd want to go home, to go back to Jax. I knew the temptation would be too much, and maybe it is. But I'm stronger now. I'm tougher. I'm a Scott. I can do what needs to be done.*

She stopped running.

Pandora opened her senses, letting her fangs slide out, and embraced the thing she hated most. Even from this lonely spot in the woods, she heard a hundred pulses ticking, a clock winding down. Blood lingered in the breeze, an enticing, faint scent.

She followed the trail.

First she would eat—controlled this time, smooth and easy.

And then she'd face Jax.

## Chapter Fourteen



It was dawn by the time Pandora returned to the hotel. Jax was waiting for her, relieved when she opened the door and slipped inside.

"I wasn't sure you'd come back," he said.

"Yeah, well," she replied, shrugging. "I just figured you'd keep stalking me if I didn't, so I saved us both some time."

"You're probably right," he told her, grinning.

There was a drawn-out pause.

"Look, Jax—"

He interrupted. "No, Dory, really. Don't apologize."

"But—"

"I meant what I said last night. It wasn't your fault."

She widened her eyes in frustration, staring at him. "Jax—"

"Stop," he said, but this time his tone had grown more playful, and there was the hint of a teasing smile on his lips, a certain sort of gleam in his eye. "If you'd stuck around a little longer last night, you'd know that when I said it wasn't your fault, I meant it. It wasn't your fault—it was mine. I'm just too damn irresistible."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, well, obviously that's the reason I couldn't keep my fangs to myself."

"It was too much for you," Jax said with a shrug, trying his best to maintain a straight face. "I was there, sleeping, shirtless, sexy as hell, and totally at your mercy, tempting you with my forbidden fruit again. Who could blame you for taking advantage? I certainly don't." But when he said those last three words, there was something deeper in his gaze, something unspoken. And he held her attention for a prolonged moment, before blinking and looking away. "So let's just head back to the car and try to go one single day without someone trying to kill us, okay?"

"Jax." She wrinkled her face, whining. "You can't jinx us like that. Now we're definitely going to get attacked by something."

"Nah," he responded nonchalantly, shaking his head. "I have a good

feeling about today."

"Oh, you do?" She raised her brows, eying him.

"I do."

"Why?"

"Just because."

But he was smiling and downright cheerful, and all it did was make Pandora suspicious. "Why are you so damn chipper right now? I don't trust it."

"Nothing. Don't worry about it."

"Jax."

"Okay, fine," he murmured with a sigh. "Because by nightfall we'll be in Florida. By nightfall, we should reach Sonnyville, the conduit base."

Pandora winced. *Great, just great. That means I have less than twelve hours to figure out how to ditch you and make sure you won't follow. Because I made my decision—I'm not getting the cure. I can't.*

But she didn't say any of that.

She didn't say anything at all.

With a heavy breath, she just slipped out the door and made her way to the parking lot. After sliding into the passenger seat, she put her head back. Jax started the car and eased back onto the road while Pandora sealed her lips and closed her eyes, pretending to sleep. But her mind whirled.

How would she leave?

How would she get away?

How would she stop him from spending the next year tracking her down day after day until she finally turned twenty-one and it didn't matter anymore?

Maybe by breaking his legs? Sure, it would hurt. Sure, he'd be pissed. But if she snapped the bones in enough places, especially with the weird delay in healing he'd been experiencing, he'd be out for at least a week or two, maybe a month even. And that would be a pretty decent head start.

If she opened her car door and jumped out, it would sting for a second, but she'd be healed by the time her body stopped rolling over the pavement. Add a second to go invisible, and there'd still be plenty of time before Jax was able to stop the car and jump out after her. A couple of good punches to the head, using her unfair advantage of being able to disappear, and he'd be unconscious in a matter of minutes. From there, it was really just a matter of getting a good grip on his legs so she could break them little by



little, and before he came to, she'd be gone.

*Am I really considering this?*

*What sort of a heartless shrew am I?*

Pandora rolled over, still feigning sleep, totally unaware of how much time had passed as her thoughts continued to stack one after the other after the other.

If she really cared about Jax, she would have left last night. She would have let that be the end of it—a messy break, but a good one. If she really loved him, she would have let the image of his blood on her lips be the last one, the memory of a monster he could hate.

But she didn't leave last night.

Because she couldn't.

She just couldn't have that be their end, after so much.

She couldn't let that—let a bite and blood—be their good-bye.

But maybe she could find a better way, an easier one. Maybe she could wait until they reached the conduit base and then slip out in the night while he was asleep and none the wiser. But in all honesty, she wasn't sure if that plan would be any less painful for him to bear. And she wasn't sure she'd have the will to run away when the cure was right there, staring her in the face, totally within grasp. She was strong, but she had limits. And she didn't want to test them.

*So maybe I dive out of the car and just run. Jax will follow, but I can run faster—I'll just run faster than I ever have before. I'll run straight to a head vampire, and I'll do whatever he asks in return for sanctuary. I'll do whatever horrible things I have to do to survive until my twenty-first birthday, and then I'll spend the rest of eternity trying to atone for it. Jax won't be able to find me if I join a head vamp's coven, if I take an oath, not unless he can amass another group of conduits to do the fighting for him. But am I really worth all that trouble? Would my father really go through so much just to get me back? Just to save himself the embarrassment of having a daughter who denied the initiation?*

"You're not asleep," Jax commented wryly.

Pandora squeezed her eyes shut. "Yes, I am."

"I know you," he said. "I can practically see the escape plans floating in the air above your head."

She snapped her eyes open. "What are you talking about?"

He turned toward her, lifting a single pointed brow. "Do you really

think I'm that stupid? Do you really think I'm so full of myself that I'd actually believe I've changed your mind in less than forty-eight hours when you've been running away from me and the cure for years?"

Um...yes .

Pandora bit her lip, holding the admission back in, choking on it. "Of course not."

Jax snorted. "So what's the big plan, rip the car door open and jump out in the middle of the highway while I'm driving at eighty miles an hour?"

Um...yes .

Pandora's mouth dropped open, releasing a lame puff of air. "Uh, no."

"Oh my god, that was your plan," Jax said, mocking her. "That was really your plan?"

"No," she repeated, holding the word for an extra couple of notes while in the back of her mind all she was thinking was, *dammit* .

He shook his head, tsking. "I expected more from you, Dory. More originality, more creativity, more finesse. Just more."

"Keep talking," she muttered incoherently under her breath, *and I'll go back to my first plan of breaking your legs*. Crossing her arms, she turned toward him, this time speaking loudly and perfectly clear. "And what's your big plan, Jax? Annoy me into submission?"

He smiled a charming little half grin that made her cold heart twinge. "Why? Is it working?"

Pandora narrowed her gaze. "Not in the slightest."

"Okay, then I'll try my other approach."

"Which is?"

"Using the facts, common sense."

"Oh?" Pandora scoffed. "I can't wait for this. "

Jax stretched out his neck, leaning his head to the left and then the right, flexing his arm muscles as he tightened his grip on the steering wheel, as though preparing for battle. And then he shrugged, simply stating, "Drinking blood has got to suck."

"It does. But I can deal," she said. "Next."

"But don't you miss burgers and fries? Miss a nice pint of ice cream on a hot summer's day or hot chocolate in front of a fire on a cold winter's night?"

"Sure, who wouldn't? But again, I can deal. Next."

"You used to love hiking with me, being outside, going swimming in

the lake near the outskirts of the enclave. What about the fact that the sun can kill you now? Little by little?"

"It's not as bad as you might think. On a day-to-day basis it just stings, like being outside when you have a sunburn, not enough to hurt. The sun can only kill me when a conduit channels it through his body, and I don't plan on pissing any conduits off anytime soon. So, next."

Jax frowned. Pandora heard his heartbeat slow as he opened his mouth to say these next few words. "It must be strange to not age, to know you're going to be fifteen forever."

*Strange? Try downright depressing* , Pandora thought, then swallowed the words back down. No one in her right mind would want to be a teenager for all eternity, but there was no way she was telling him that.

"There are a lot of eighty-year-old women who'd be dying to have that problem in life," Pandora shot back instead, trying to sound as sincere as possible. "Next. "

"Really?" he retorted, keeping his gaze ahead as his voice grew deeper and more impassioned. "Because if you asked them, I don't think they would. Sure, maybe at first, but not if they really thought about it. Because age isn't just about getting old, it's about living, it's about seeing time as precious because you don't have an unlimited amount of it, it's about being in the moment and falling in love and growing old with someone. Life is about the journey, about the mistakes and the triumphs, the memories. And when you can't age, you're just stuck in one place, forever."

Pandora licked her lips, unsure what to say.

Jax flicked his focus out the window, nudging his chin toward a car passing them on the highway. "See that bumper sticker?"

*What?* she thought, totally confused by the shift in topic until she noticed what he was pointing to. The sticker read, *Baby on Board* .

"I always thought you'd make a great mother," he confessed sadly.

Pandora swallowed and then spoke, voice barely a whisper but filled with warning. "Jax."

But he didn't stop. He kept going. And there was something pained in his voice, something torn as though a knife were lodged somewhere, cutting as he spoke. "Back when we were together, I'd think about it sometimes, what our life could be like. I mean, we were just kids, but I thought about it, I did. I thought we'd be free of the order, that you'd be working with animals and I'd be playing music, and that someday we'd have children, a little girl maybe,

then a boy."

"Please stop," she murmured, throat burning. She didn't want to hear this. She wanted to run, but there was nowhere to go. The walls were closing in on her. The space between them seemed to shrink, to constrict as the pressure beneath her skin built.

But his eyes were glassy as he kept talking, staring straight ahead, staring at nothing. Jax wasn't even aware that she'd spoken. He was lost in his own head. "I never said anything to you because I thought you'd be afraid. After the sort of parents you were stuck with, I was worried you'd never want to become one yourself. But deep down, I knew we'd figure it out. I knew you'd make a great mother if you had the chance." He swallowed, blinking a few times, clearing his eyes before he turned toward her, soft green irises still moist and bright. After a moment, he looked away, back toward the road, jaw hard-set as he continued. "You do have the chance, if you'd only take it."

Pandora's frozen heart was heavy in her chest, a lifeless lump, not beating, just hanging there like a stone weighing her down. "That was a low blow, Jax."

"The truth hurts, Dory. It's time you faced it."

"And what exactly do you think I've been doing all this time?" she questioned, sitting taller, getting angrier, letting the tension ooze from her body to fill the space around them. "Living in freaking la-la land? I made a choice. I made a decision. And I didn't make it lightly. "

"Didn't you, though?" he countered, voice challenging as he smiled darkly. The temperature of the car rose a few degrees as heat billowed from his skin, a pot about to boil over. "You were fifteen and pissed at me and pissed at your dad and pissed at everyone and everything you'd ever known. You weren't in your right mind. You weren't thinking when you did this to yourself. You just did it, and after the dust settled you tried to tell yourself that it was the only way just so you wouldn't have to face the fact that you'd made the biggest mistake of your life."

"And what about you?" she asked, seething. Pandora stared at him and leaned over the console, getting in his personal space to try to force him to look at her. The muscles in his cheek clicked, forcefully clenched as he kept his eyes on the road. His triceps bulged as he gripped the steering wheel tighter. Pandora just shifted closer. "You broke my heart—you made a choice too. And then you couldn't face it. You ran away from home too. You just did it by the books, jumping from enclave to enclave, never settling, never going

back because you couldn't stand to look into my empty bedroom, knowing it was partially your fault. You stopped talking to your parents. You stopped following orders. You stopped singing. You stopped playing music. You didn't even look for me. You waited years, delayed and delayed until you couldn't delay any longer, because you knew that as soon as you laid eyes on me, you'd have to face the fact that you'd made the biggest mistake of your life by getting that tattoo on the back of your neck, by choosing them instead of me." Pandora took a deep breath, then watched the hairs on his neck rise as the cool air she released brushed over his skin. He gulped, Adam's apple bobbing slowly. Pandora softened her voice, whispering these final words, the ones she knew would cut the deepest. "And guess what, Jax? Unlike mine, that's not a choice you can undo."

He slammed on the brakes, then jerked the car onto the shoulder, bringing it to a dead halt as he spun toward her, not realizing how close to him she'd moved. "You!"

"What?" she yelled, right in his face, not backing down.

They were nose to nose, hardly an inch apart, breathing heavy, eyes burning, skin burning even hotter. The world slowed, wobbling on a sharp precipice as the tension around them thickened, gunpowder ready to explode, just waiting for a spark.

Fury.

Passion.

The choice hung between them, precarious.

Jax's gaze dipped to her lips.

Pandora took a deep breath, chest lifting.

And then his hands were on her cheeks, and he was pulling her toward him, decision made. The moment their lips touched, the static air caught fire, sending a shockwave through her body. Pandora moved against him, hungry and desperate for more. He lifted her off her seat and dragged her body across the divide. She went willingly, settling onto his lap as she roved her fingers up his chest, searching for his velvet hair, then gripping it tight as she held his face against hers. There wasn't time to breathe or think. They were two souls trapped in an inferno, drowning in flames together, sinking to a dangerous place they knew they weren't supposed to go, yet neither of them cared. They held on tight, clutching each other as the air electrified, hot and wild.

His hands burned her frozen skin, bringing goose bumps as he tickled

the sensitive area of her waistline, reaching for the hem of her shirt, then pulling it over her head and yanking it off. He tore his lips free of her mouth, traveling them down the side of her neck, over her collarbone, tantalizingly slow and purposeful. Pandora's head fell back as her eyes fluttered open in pleasure.

And then she froze, eyes wide in shock, mouth gaping, speechless as she looked into Sam's eyes—Sam's bright blue eyes, which were currently glaring at the back of Jax's head as he sat with arms crossed in the back row of the car, fuming.

She gasped. "What the hell?"

He disappeared, vanishing into the shadows as Jax whipped his head up and stared at Pandora, dazed and disoriented, as though he wasn't even sure how they'd gotten there. She jumped out of his lap, slid back to her side of the car, and rushed to put her shirt on.

"I'm sorry," Jax said, still breathless, face flushed. "I didn't mean—I don't—I—" He paused, shaking his head and running a hand through his messy hair as he swallowed slowly. "That was unexpected."

"Yeah," Pandora agreed. *You have no idea* .

And then a voice from the back of the car chimed in, just as smooth as ever. "That was nauseating."

Pandora darted her gaze toward Jax, but he didn't seem to hear. He was just staring straight ahead, eyes wide, utterly blank.

"Him? Really?" Sam whispered, closer to her now, breath tickling the back of her neck, warm and inviting. "You're falling for him again? Unbelievable."

Glancing over her shoulder, she scowled, knowing he was close enough to see even if she couldn't tell where exactly.

How long had he been there?

How long had he been watching?

"I can't believe you brought him into the shadows," Sam continued, "into our shadows."

What?

He knew about Atlantic City?

That was it. The last straw.

Who the heck did Sam think he was? Following her? Spying on her? None of that was okay. None of it was acceptable or endearing or anything else he was trying to be.

Pandora went invisible, wrapping the darkness around herself as she flipped over in her seat, infuriated.

"What are you doing here?" she mouthed the words fiercely, not sure if she knew how to hide her voice in the shadows for only Sam to hear. "Why are you following me?"

He didn't respond. He just flashed her a wicked grin, winking .

And dammit, she couldn't deny that the secrets in that smile were intriguing—maddeningly intriguing. But she widened her eyes and flared her nostrils, emphasizing her frustration.

"Uh, Dory?" Jax asked, confused. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," she said, grunting as she turned back around and casted the shadows away. None of this was going to get solved through furious mouthing and exaggerated facial expressions. She needed to talk to Sam, needed to tell him to stop. Crossing her arms, she stared resolutely ahead and said, "I have to pee."

"What?" Jax asked, brows coming together. "Vampires don't pee."

She turned to him, expression made of stone. "Then I have to powder my nose, okay?"

He frowned, searching her eyes for the hidden meaning in her words, positive this was about him and the kiss that never should have happened but still not understanding her reaction. Finally, he sighed. "Should we talk about this?"

Her gaze darted to the rearview mirror. "No."

"If this was your escape plan, I'll admit, I didn't see it coming," he murmured, trying to lighten the mood as always.

Pandora sighed. "Just find a freaking rest stop, Jax."

Then she dropped her head against the seat rest and closed her eyes, determined not to open them until the car came to a complete stop .

One annoyingly attractive stalker she could handle.

Two was a stretch.

Both at the same time? Impossible.

## Chapter Fifteen



They pulled over a little while later. Pandora immediately hopped out of the car and gunned for the bathroom, seeking safe haven inside a stall. Taking a deep breath, she wrapped the shadows around herself, shaking her head.

*Who does this Sam guy think he is?*

*A killer smile and alarmingly piercing blue eyes do not give you the right to follow me around, to avoid answering all my questions, to sneak up on me in the middle of a very vulnerable and private moment in my life!*

*Oh, he's about to get a piece of my mind.*

*Oh yes, he is.*

Armed with her rising fury, Pandora slipped out of the stall, perfectly silent, and exited the bathroom.

Sam was leaning against the wall with one knee bent, wrapped in the shadows, waiting for her. Again she noticed how his power seemed different from hers. She had to pull the shadows closer, to gather them around herself, but they clung to Sam's frame, as though the shadows were his natural world, and in order to enter the light, he had to push them away, to forcefully keep them at bay. Upon seeing her, he grinned and used his bent leg to push off the wall, movements as smooth as the liquid darkness pulsating around him.

"Come with me," Pandora said harshly, walking right past him. "Now."

He followed, not trying to put up a fight. Of course, this was probably what he'd been after all along—snagging a few moments alone with her while Jax filled the gas tank.

Moving quickly, she exited the rest stop and walked around the edge of the building, not stopping until she was out of sight of the parking lot and out of earshot—they were invisible, but she still wanted to be cautious.

And then she spun on her heels, shoving her hands into Sam's chest, but he jumped out of the way at the last second, just out of reach.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she snapped.

He gazed at her as if she were a petulant child and soothingly



murmured her name. "Pandora."

"Oh, don't *Pandora* me," she retorted, crossing her arms, trying to fight the tingle creeping up her spine at the sound of her name rolling off his lips. Something about his voice cast a spell over her, made her want to trust him, to believe him, against her better judgment and her will. She straightened her back, forcing her insides to harden and to freeze, fighting the power he was trying to use over her. "I don't even know who you are! Why are you following me?"

"I'm Sam," he said casually, shrugging.

She clenched her fists. "I don't know anything about you aside from your name, *Sam*, and I'm sorry, but that's not good enough."

He stepped closer, cerulean gaze probing as it searched hers, warm and intoxicating. He raised his hand and let it hover next to her cheek, just close enough to make her hyperaware of his nearness without actually touching her, just close enough to make her want to lean in and close the gap. "You know me better than anyone," he urged. "Even if you don't remember, your soul does. And I know you sense it too. We're connected. We always have been, and we always will be."

Pandora edged back, pulling away from his touch as her brows came together. "What does that even mean?"

"We're so close this time," he whispered. "So close."

She shook her head, stepping away from that hopeful look in his gaze. "I don't know who you think I am, but you have to leave me alone."

"I know exactly who you are," he murmured, expression falling. "You're the one who keeps forgetting."

She stopped moving. "Then tell me. Who am I?"

"I can't." He dropped his hand.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Who are you really? "

He brought his brows together, serious and pained. "I can't."

Pandora sighed, infuriated by the game he was playing. "I don't understand."

"You're not supposed to," he said as a sad smile danced across his lips.

*Maybe it's not a game*, she thought, watching his soft expression, watching the deep pain and agony streaked through his bright blue eyes, the deep, concerned grooves etched into his sun-kissed skin. But game or not, she wanted answers. She needed them. "If you can't tell me anything, then why

are you here?"

A fiery expression passed over his face. "Because I hate that guy."

Pandora lifted a brow, staring at him. "Jax?"

*Is he...jealous?*

*I don't even know him!*

*This is insane!*

But Sam was ignoring her question, yet again, curling his upper lip and clenching his fists instead. There was a really infuriating pattern developing here, one she planned to nip in the bud. But right as she was about to repeat the question, firmer this time, Sam finally spoke.

"I hate that he calls you *Dory* ," he admitted, voice laced with bitterness, as though a sour taste was stuck to his tongue. "Like he's the one who knows you better than anyone else ever has. And I hate the way he speaks to you, like he knows what's best. And I hate that he can touch you when I—" He paused, lifting his hands, so his fingers brushed against her bare shoulder, hardly a whisper, no stronger than the wind, as though he were nothing more than a ghost. And then he retreated, blue eyes shifting back to hers, touching her to her core, piercing and intense. "Most of all, I hate the way you look at him like he's the most important person in the world."

Did she?

Still?

Pandora licked her lips, tilting her head to look at Sam, to really see him. Something about his vibrant blond hair, his strong, callused hands, his broad frame—something about him seemed familiar, as if he were a valiant knight from one of her schoolgirl fantasies, not real and at the same time just real enough. But how could she have forgotten him? If she loved him the way he thought she did, how could she have possibly forgotten him? And how was that even possible when she loved Jax, when her whole life until four years ago had been about Jax and no one and nothing else?

It wasn't possible.

It was crazy.

Yet his words resonated in some hidden part of her soul, some deep dark place she couldn't quite remember, a part of herself that had faded away like a beautiful dream in the soft morning sun.

Just when she was about to ask more, to follow him down the rabbit hole, a voice stopped her .

"Dory?"

Jax.

Calling her name.

Wondering why it was taking her twenty minutes to powder her nose.

When Pandora turned toward the sound of his voice, Sam sneered.

"I have to go," she said.

"Running back to him?" Sam acidly teased.

But Jax had brought her back to the real world, out of the fantasy Sam was trying to weave, the impossible web he was luring her into. "Look," she said, putting her hands on her hips, standing her ground. "Just stop following me. Leave me alone. I'm not the girl you want me to be, so go mysteriously haunt someone else. Okay?"

"I'll leave you alone," he said, almost like a warning, eyes flashing. "I will. I won't come back unless you call for me, unless you want me to, and you will. But first, you need to do something."

"What?" Pandora asked, tired. *Anything. I'll do anything to get at least one of you off my case, to be left alone to my many mistakes, to my life.*

Sam uttered one word. "Remember."

*Well, that's annoyingly vague .*

"Remember what?" she replied, snarky as ever. "I'm going to need a little more information here because apparently, I've got early-onset Alzheimer's or something, what with all these prior loves and places and people I seem to have forgotten."

Sam smiled at her tone, lifting up one edge of his perfectly crafted lips, crinkling the corners of his eyes. "I deserved that."

She glared at him. "Yeah, you did."

"Dory?" Jax's voice came again.

Sam stepped closer, pulling her attention away from the sound as he spoke urgently. "Remember that night, Pandora, the night you ran away. Remember it."

She inhaled sharply, no longer joking but utterly serious. "What do you know about that night?"

He shifted his head to the side, watching her sorrowfully. "Your soul cried out to me that night, and I answered the call. I'm the one who suggested you become a vampire. I'm the one who put the idea in your head, who told you where to go and who to find. I thought it would solve all of our problems. You see, I thought the change would be permanent. I thought there would be no going back. I thought it'd be best for you to forget so you could

heal the ache in your heart that much faster. I thought he was a childhood crush, nothing more. I didn't think he'd be able to change your mind or your heart so easily. But he has. And now, with the cure, everything has changed. So you need to remember."

"Wait...you...that night—you?" Pandora said, incoherent as her thoughts raced, and her head twitched back and forth, as though the two sides of her brain were fighting, unable to comprehend. He'd told her to become a vampire? He'd convinced her? But they'd only met a few days ago in the blood bar. Hadn't they?

"Pandora," Sam whispered, bringing his finger under her chin, skin warm and soft, a half touch, real but not real, just like him. Ethereal. Calmed by his caress, Pandora's mind stopped whirling, and she looked up into his eyes. "Remember."

"I can't," she confessed. The constant ache in her chest spiked at the very idea, hot and demanding, painfully burning her insides, the reminder that she didn't want to remember, that it would break her to remember. "Just tell me."

"You wouldn't believe me," he said, gaze penetrating deep and demanding, holding her captive. "You have to remember for yourself."

"How?"

"The cure," he said, strained, as though the words themselves were fighting against him. "Get the cure. The wall holding your memories back is built into your vampirism. If it goes, you'll be able to force yourself to remember. And when you do, I'll be there if you need me, if you need someone to make sure you keep running."

"The cure?" she repeated, unable to believe his words.

*Am I really back to this?*

*Why can't I escape it?*

"Dory?" Jax called again, closer this time, drawing her attention. Pandora turned in time to watch him round the corner of the building, searching the empty space for a sign of her. "I know you're here. I can sense you—tracker mojo and all. If this was your big plan to escape, you sort of suck at it."

"Pandora," Sam said, sensual and smooth.

She turned back to him and stared into his blue eyes, getting lost in them, enchanted by some spell she didn't understand. He lifted his thumb and ran it over the edge of her lip, sending a shiver down her spine as he

murmured, "We were so close."

And then the shadows curled around his broad shoulders, hugging his frame like long-lost friends and swallowing him up, surrounding Sam in an ebony cloud, pulling him deeper into the darkness than she could go, to a place where she didn't yet understand how to follow. He left her with one final word.

"Remember."

Pandora stared at the empty spot for a moment.

Was he even real?

More importantly, did she believe him?

"Dory, come on," Jax said again, an edge of annoyance leaking into his tone. "This is getting ridiculous. I know you're right here somewhere. You're good, but you're not that good."

She released the shadows, pushing them away, letting the light touch her once more. "I am that good, Jax, and don't forget it."

He lifted his brows at her dubiously. "If you weren't trying to run, then what are you doing back here by the dumpsters? "

Pandora glanced to the side, eying the overflowing bin. *Damn, Sam is good* . He'd wrapped her up in him so much she didn't even notice the smell. But now, her super vampire senses couldn't focus on anything else. Gross.

"Let's get out of here," she muttered.

Jax put his hand out, stopping her. "Okay, well, that's why I was trying to come find you."

Pandora scrunched her brows, confused. "What?"

Jax sighed, staring at her almost apologetically with his saltwater eyes. "Remember when I said I had a good feeling about today?"

"What'd you do?" she asked immediately.

"Me?" He scoffed indignantly. "I didn't do anything."

But her gaze narrowed. "You jinxed us. You totally jinxed us."

"Well..."

She slapped him on the arm. "I told you this was going to happen!"

"Yes, Dory, you're right," he replied sarcastically.

*I usually am* , she thought, but he plowed on.

"My commenting that we might be able to go one single, solitary day without fighting for our lives is one hundred percent the reason there's a horde of vampires surrounding this rest stop as we speak. It couldn't possibly be because vampires have been at war with each other ever since the cure was

discovered, that they've been trying to stop any of their own kind interested in the cure from reaching the conduits, that for months and months they've been killing any vampires who crossed the border into Florida without permission. It couldn't possibly be that. No, of course not. It's all *my* fault."

"Jax?"

"What?"

"Shut up."

He opened his mouth to speak, but she flew toward him and covered his lips with her palm.

"No, really, shut up. I need to listen."

At that, he froze.

Pandora stretched out with her ears, listening for the featherlight step of a vampire at high speed, searching for the sound of thick, tar-like blood pumping slowly through a frozen body without the aid of a heartbeat.

At first, she didn't hear anything.

And then it came in waves.

She'd heard there were gangs of vampires waiting at the Florida border, trying to stop anyone from getting the cure, determined to destroy what they saw as traitors to their own kind. But she'd shrugged it off as gossip. She hadn't believed it could possibly be so bad, hadn't believed there could possibly be so many.

Clearly, she'd been wrong.

Her eyes flew wide. "We have to go, now."

"What?" Jax asked, concerned.

Pandora shook her head. "How many did you see? Before you came to find me? "

He shrugged. "Five, maybe six, walking up through the parking lot."

"There're more coming," Pandora said, cursing silently as the pitter-patter of swiftly moving feet crunching on leaves filtered into her ears. Dozens. Too many for the two of them to handle. As though her presence had triggered some sort of silent alarm, had alerted an army. "A lot more."

"Then let's go," Jax said, already turning around.

But it was too late.

Three vampires walked casually around the side of the building, gazes sharp, teeth sharper. Pandora and Jax spun to the other side, but two more were already turning the corner, eyes bright blue with hunger.

They were outnumbered.

They were surrounded.

Real talk?

They were in deep, deep shit.

## Chapter Sixteen



"To the roof?" Pandora whispered.

Jax nodded. A moment later, they were airborne, jumping twenty feet up before landing smoothly on the flat gravelly surface. But it was only a temporary fix.

"How far away is the conduit camp?" Pandora asked as they moved to the center and stood back-to-back, gazes locked on the edges of the building, ready for whatever was coming.

"I don't know." Jax shrugged, shoulder blades moving against hers. "An hour, maybe two driving. Could be shorter if we figure out how to cut through the woods on foot, but I'm not that confident with my navigational skills."

Pandora raised a brow even though he couldn't see. "You're a tracker."

"Yeah, I track people, not places, and I don't have anyone to trace. "

"The girl!" Pandora exclaimed. "The conduit girl, Kira—you spoke to her at the graveyard. Track her. She's there. I know she is."

"Good idea," he muttered, already concentrating. A couple of seconds later, he said, "Okay, I think I've got a faint path, enough to go on for now, but I'm not sure how accurate it is."

"That's fine," Pandora added quickly, scanning their surroundings. And then she paused. "Hey, Jax?"

"Yeah," he replied absently, mind still on the trail.

"Why didn't they follow us up here?" she wondered aloud, easing out of her fighting stance to put her hands on her hips, confused. "They should be up here by now. We should be fighting by now."

He groaned. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"Don't say that," she whined. "That's worse than when you have a good feeling."

He stepped away from her, then edged to the side of the roof, peering over just enough to get a view of the ground. He nodded resolutely. "Yup, they're surrounding us. And there's more here. Twenty at least."



"And more coming." Pandora squeezed her eyes shut. *Think, think.*

But Jax came up with an idea first. "Make us invisible. It worked in Atlantic City."

She bit her lip. "I can try, but that was the first time I'd ever taken another person into the shadows with me. I don't know if I can repeat it. And if we're moving too?" She paused, shaking her head, hating to admit her own limits. But he needed to know. "I'm not sure how long I'll be able to keep it up during a fight."

"Okay," Jax said. "Then you go invisible."

"What?" She spun on her heels to face him. "Absolutely not. I'm not leaving you to face these guys alone. They'll kill you!"

"I have no intention of fighting a hundred vampires all by myself. I'm not that stupid," he said and then grinned. "But it's nice to know you're concerned."

"Oh, shove it," she muttered.

Jax's expression grew more serious. "No, I mean it. Go invisible and hide. Obviously, they're here because they sensed a vampire. If you're gone, they'll leave me alone. Why would they want to kill a titan? One, it's not that easy. And two, the ramifications would be far more trouble than they're worth. Vamps aren't hesitant to kill their own, but when it comes to offing other supernaturals, they know their place. Like those vamps back in Atlantic City—if not for you, they wouldn't have come near me. And even with you, they were just trying to incapacitate me, not kill me."

"Are you really willing to bet your life on that?"

Jax turned toward her, his seafoam gaze capturing hers. "My life isn't the one I'm concerned about."

She melted, right there on the spot, frozen insides warming up and dripping away as her heart gave an ever-so-gentle beat. "Jax—"

"No, just listen to me for once. Go invisible, and then I'll get down. They'll leave me alone, and I'll go back to the car like you don't even exist. Find me on the road when the coast is clear."

And then he leapt off the roof, making the decision for her.

*Freaking Jax!*

She clenched her fists, wanting to punch him for being so idiotically heroic, but instead she for once just listened, wrapping the shadows around her and disappearing just in the nick of time. A second later, ten vampires flew up onto the roof and landed easily on their feet, searching for the girl

they knew came up but they'd never see go down.

The gravel, though, now that was an issue.

Pandora shifted her weight ever so slightly, but the crunch was unmistakable. Ten sets of blue eyes honed in on her location, peering through narrowed lids at the empty space, suspicious.

*One giant leap it is—Neil Armstrong style .*

Pandora knelt down, wincing as the tiny stones beneath her shoes scratched against one another with her shifting weight. One of the vamps stepped closer, nose up, trying to smell her sticky, stolen blood. But he was too late.

Pandora launched, shooting up into the air and out over the ledge before falling gracefully toward the ground. She landed in a tuck against the sidewalk near the front entrance of the rest stop and rolled to her feet. But when she glanced over her shoulder, she paused. None of them were following. All ten vamps stood at the edge of the building, looking down toward the ground, unhurried, more intimidating than anything else.

And the more Pandora edged away, the more disinterested they seemed to become. A few trickled off. They all stopped watching, stopped caring. And as she followed Jax to the edge of the parking lot, the more wrong everything just seemed to feel. None of them were following him. None of them had even stopped him. They let Jax waltz right on through to the car, and they gave him absolutely no problems as he sat inside and started the engine. The hairs on the back of Pandora's neck stood erect as everything in her body screamed, *this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong*.

But Jax merged back onto the highway. Pandora followed after, using her superspeed to keep pace with the car. Every so often he glanced around, wondering where she was, but her gut urged her to remain invisible, to keep following at a distance.

*It can't be this easy.*

*Nothing is this easy.*

*Nothing.*

And then she heard it.

The patter of light, swift footsteps. One. Then a dozen. Then too many to keep track of. And before Pandora could do anything, vampires emerged from the trees, moving faster than the human eye could see, and barreled into the side of Jax's car. Immediately, the SUV flipped, rolling onto its side, screeching as metal bent and twisted, as pieces tore off and scratched.

The force of the hit was so strong the car flew off the road, somersaulting into the forest before disappearing from sight, taking Jax with it.

Pandora tore off the highway, sprinting after the car. By the time she got there, Jax was already surrounded. He pulled himself through the shattered window, strong titan skin bleeding from the crash, bright red and flowing in a way that made Pandora gasp—a way that wasn't supposed to even be possible. As soon as he landed with his back against the dirt, catching his breath, the vampires pounced.

When the first one attacked, Jax jumped to his feet, ignoring the pain, and punched him in the throat, sending the jerk flying. The second went for his back, but Jax turned, sensing the movement, and kicked him in the gut so hard he rolled head over heels away. The third got Jax by the arm, digging sharp nails into his skin and drawing even more fresh blood. Jax flung him off, but the vamp just licked his fingers and stood, ready for another round.

*So much for that whole theory about vamps not killing other supernaturals*, Pandora thought, biting her lip, unsure how to proceed. *We're not really known for impulse control*.

Sure enough, as she thought it, two vamps broke off from the pack, not going for Jax but for the car. They licked his blood from the paint, eyes igniting when they tasted the power hiding beneath his skin. The scent stretched across the small clearing, turning each vampiric gaze brighter and brighter, more and more intrigued.

But before they could touch Jax, Pandora was there—the definition of no impulse control as she blindly attacked, no plan, just pure adrenaline.

She jumped on one vampire's back, then dug her teeth into his neck and ripped it apart. She let his stolen blood sink into the forest floor, not bothering to watch as she moved swiftly to the next and kicked him in the back, using his body for leverage to reach the vamp closest to Jax. When that guy reached for Jax's neck, Pandora grabbed his instead, then sank her nails into his skin and threw him back. A woman tried to pounce on Pandora from behind, but she misjudged her location, barely nudging Pandora's shoulder. Pandora reached out with her palm, grabbed the female vamp's throat, and clamped, twisting. Her neck snapped, and she dropped. In a few minutes, it would heal, but that was just enough time for Pandora to get through the crowd.

She kneeled over Jax.

"Are you okay?"

He grunted. "I'll live. At least," he added, glancing around at their somewhat precarious situation, "I hope so."

"Then get your ass up and help me," she ordered, reaching for his hand and then pulling him to his feet.

Without hesitation, they went back-to-back again. Jax didn't need to be able to see her to sense her movements. He knew her too well. They'd trained together too often. They could do this with their eyes closed. And as the vamps came, they fought as one perfect unit, always moving in a circle, always guarding the other's back, always keeping one another safe from harm. When a vamp got within reach, they attacked, one after the other, faces and bodies blurring until all that was left was instinct, quick punches and strong kicks, not enough to kill but enough to keep the horde back, enough to stay alive.

For now.

But they couldn't keep it up forever.

The vampires pressed closer.

And before Pandora realized what had happened, the pressure of Jax against her back disappeared. His warmth vanished, leaving her cold.

She spun.

Two vamps had him, one on each arm, pulling.

He screamed, a guttural sound that ripped through his throat as his arms reached their max, and the vamps kept pulling on opposite sides, trying to tear him in half. Never one to give up, he kicked off the ground, did a back flip, and used his momentum to throw the vamps off balance just enough that they released him. But when he landed back on his feet, his left arm hung uselessly by his side, and a grimace passed over his face. Before Pandora could move, he gripped his bicep, then clenched his teeth and gasped as he popped his shoulder back into place and raised his fists to keep fighting.

*I can't let him do this .*

*They'll kill him.*

*Eventually, they'll kill him.*

As soon as the thought came, Pandora let the shadows fall away, let the light touch her body, reappearing in the blink of an eye. And just as fast, the vamps grabbed for her, cutting their nails into her skin, one set and then two, and then five.

"Dory!" Jax yelled, forgotten as the vampires pounced on her—their true target.

Fangs pierced her skin, drawing out her blood as nails continued to slice gashes that bled and healed, over and over as they forced her lower, legs bending even as she tried to stand. With each drop of blood that fell to the ground, with each drop that was sucked into their hungry mouths, Pandora weakened, strength seeping out.

But she didn't fight.

She let them.

She was giving Jax time to run away.

"Go," she yelled as her knees slammed into the dirt, and the world began to blur. But she could see Jax, and he was trying to fight his way closer. "Go!" she said again, quieter this time, not quite able to use her full voice.

Pandora blinked, eyelids heavy.

And when she opened them, the world was consumed by fire.

Flames slammed into her back, sending her face-first into the dirt as the other vamps toppled over with her, pushed back by the flames, tumbling as the heat forced them farther and farther away .

*Protector conduits* , Pandora thought as the fire licked her skin, burning enough to sting but not sinking in, not diving deep down and scorching her to her core like a punisher conduit's would. It was more like a mobile wall, pressing against all the vampires, impenetrable, shoving them away. Her world was awash in orange and yellow as she kept rolling over the grass and sticks with each new bout of fire, bright enough she had to squint to find Jax where he stood in the middle of the onslaught, completely unaffected.

His gaze found hers, flashing with relief.

"There," he called. "She's right there."

The flames receded, soaring over her head as a group of conduits moved closer, surrounding her, protecting her from the other vampires being kept away by the heat.

A man with blond hair knelt down and touched the wounds scattered across her arms, eying the holes torn into her clothes. The cuts had already mostly healed. The puncture wounds from the fangs would take a little longer, probably wouldn't close all the way until she was able to get some blood.

"You're here for the cure?" he asked, attention snapping to her face.

Pandora eased to a seated position, muscles weak but not totally

depleted. Six other conduits stood around them in a circle, creating an unbreakable ring of fire. Jax waited and watched, still standing in the middle of the raging inferno as though he didn't even see it, gaze piercing as it held hers, hopeful and fierce. Pandora opened her mouth, but she couldn't speak, couldn't form the words .

"Look, we don't have all day," the guy urged, attention darting to the side before returning to her. "We can't keep this up for very long. We have to go while we have the chance. Now, do you want the cure or not?"

Pandora held Jax's gaze one second longer, wavering.

Sam's plea fluttered to the forefront of her mind.

*Remember.*

And, really, at the moment, surrounded by a horde of bloodthirsty vamps, what other choice did she have?

Before she could change her mind, she answered. "Yeah, I want the cure."

The conduit grinned.

So did Jax.

Her heart thudded heavily in her chest, coming alive with her words, pounding in rage, telling her, *no, no, no* , but she was out of options. Stay and die, or go and live and maybe wait for a chance to keep running.

"Follow me," the guy said, looking up and meeting the eyes of his comrades. "Okay, let's move."

The conduit yanked her to her feet, and as a unit of eight, they shuffled back, still surrounded by fire, the eye of a very hot hurricane. Jax followed, just outside the group, walking along the edge, never taking his eyes off of her.

Back on the road, a van was waiting, door open, and Pandora was shoved inside, forced into a seat as the conduit who'd spoken to her held his palm out and sent a wave of fire over her frame, doing his best to pin her to the seat, trapping her beneath the blazing flames. The hold was nothing compared to the one Pandora had experienced back in the graveyard, nothing compared to Kira's power. Already, she could sense the weakness at the edges. The fire pressed against her instead of sinking painfully deep. There really should have been two different conduits locking her in place, because one roll to the side and she could slip free.

But Jax didn't know that.

"What are you doing?" he snapped as he shoved his way inside and

reached for the conduit's throat. Jax's grip was tight, but the fire didn't let up, even as the man began to choke. "Drop the flames."

"Listen, titan, this is our turf," another conduit said with a sneer, but this one was a redhead, and every vampire in the world knew what that meant. Blond conduit equaled protector, equaled relatively okay. But redhead conduit? That meant danger, that meant punisher, that meant fatal. He lifted his hand to show the flames dancing over his palm, sizzling with their killing heat, just waiting to be thrown out with force.

"Jax, let him go," Pandora said quickly, not at all interested in being burned alive today. "I'm okay."

Jax turned toward her, then waited for a second. She nodded reassuringly, and he released the conduit before dropping into the empty seat next to her.

The conduit kept his flames raging, not flinching for a second, even as he used his free hand to rub the now red area of his neck. "I'm not going to hurt her," he said, throat scratchy. "We need to take precautions. There've been vamps before who've tried to use this as an in, a way to break through our defenses. I'm just following protocol. She stays in her seat, no moving, no blood, nothing until she can convince the people in charge that she's legit."

While he spoke, the van lurched into motion. The remaining conduits scattered to the windows, opened them wide, and held their hands at the ready. Every so often, one would send a wave of fire from the car. Pandora would then hear a body slam back into the trees, undoubtedly a vampire trying to attack. But she couldn't turn around to see, and honestly, she was too preoccupied with the unrelenting gaze coming from the seat next to her to care.

But instead of meeting Jax's probing gaze, she looked into the conduit's fiery green eyes. "Thanks for the rescue."

He shrugged, snorting. "That might be the first time I've ever heard a vamp show some gratitude."

Pandora grinned. *Yeah, that sounds like us* . And then she closed her eyes. Because she couldn't look at Jax, didn't want to creepily keep staring at the conduit, and to be honest, the bright glow of the fire was sort of hurting her eyes.

"How much longer?" she whispered with an exaggerated sigh.

"About an hour. Give or take," the conduit answered, sounding amused. "You're sort of impatient for an immortal."

Pandora frowned.  
*You have no idea .*



## Chapter Seventeen



Pandora's eyelids flew open when the van jerked to a halt. Immediately, she winced as the flames still engulfing her flashed painfully bright. To be honest, she'd sort of forgotten they were there. These protector flames had a subtle sort of sting she'd gotten used to—totally different from the scorching heat of the fire Kira had used on her in the graveyard. But they were still alarmingly intense to her supernaturally enhanced eyesight.

Ow .

She winced against the harsh orange light, wishing she could at least stretch her muscles for a moment, but these guys were relentless. As though hearing her thoughts from before, a second conduit had joined the first when the initial danger had cleared, and for the rest of the car ride, two of them kept her pinned at all times. They took ten-minute shifts, constantly changing, so the flames never had a chance to weaken. She hadn't had a moment's relief since stepping foot in the car.

"Are we there?" Pandora asked, hopeful.

"Finally," one of the conduits holding her muttered, not looking at her but at the other conduit, the one who seemed to be in charge, the one who'd taken the first and now hopefully last shift in keeping her contained. So far, he'd been the only one to speak directly to her.

He glanced to the side, nodding once to his comrade. "You can let her go. I'll take it from here."

Pandora turned back to the other guy. "You heard the man. Let me go."

He shook his head, exasperated, but let his flames wither out. The head conduit maintained focus on Pandora, fire just as intense as ever.

By her side, Jax clenched his fist. He hadn't spoken the entire time they'd been in the car, but his eyes had been intense and fuming, speaking volumes despite his silence. Feeling the firm muscles of his thigh against hers, taut and tense, Pandora suspected the car ride had been harder on him than on her. The fire wasn't too painful, but it probably looked a lot worse

than it was. And for all his teasing, Jax had never been one to stand by while Pandora was being hurt—not when they were children in the schoolyard and certainly not now in more intense life-or-death situations.

Pandora patted his leg reassuringly, but it did little to calm him.

The conduits filed out of the van one by one, but Jax remained steadfastly by her side, ignoring their signal to come with them.

“You should go,” the head conduit ordered.

“I’m not leaving,” Jax muttered. Pandora cast a sideways glance at him, hearing his teeth grind.

“And I’m not asking,” the conduit said forcefully, choosing that moment to glance pointedly out the door of the van toward the punisher conduit waiting close by. As if on cue, flames danced over the conduit’s fingers—deadly hot.

“Go,” Pandora whispered. Remembering the fight back at the graveyard and the conduit boy who’d ended up thrown against a wall, she added, “And be nice.”

Jax eyed her stubbornly, shaking his head. But she implored, and outside, the punisher conduit took a step closer, gaze turning toward the van. Jax reluctantly exited the vehicle, leaving Pandora alone with the head conduit.

“We’ve reached the outer edge of Sonnyville,” he told her, all business. “A member of the council is on his way to question you before we drop the defenses and open the gate to let you inside. We like to question all vamps and visitors alone. It’ll be a few more minutes.”

“Aren’t you worried those vamps from before will come back while we’re just waiting here like sitting ducks? Shouldn’t we do this part, I don’t know, after we’re sure we’re all safe?”

The conduit eyed her coolly. “We are waiting until we’re sure we’re all safe,” he said matter-of-factly, making Pandora fully aware she wasn’t included in that we—that she was the thing they needed to be sure they were safe from. “Besides,” he continued, “it’s been a long time since any vamp thought to challenge us this close to our home turf. No vamp, not even a gang of a hundred bloodsuckers, would survive a fight here.”

Pandora gulped. “Well, if we’re waiting, could you at least give me like an inch of breathing room to stretch? These seats aren’t as comfortable as you might think.”

The conduit didn’t respond, but she felt his fire ease up the slightest

amount, not quite touching her skin, giving her an ounce of space to move. Pandora took it, rolling her shoulders, twisting her neck, shifting her balance. And before she knew it, the fire was back in full force, nailing her to the seat.

"Hello," someone said, tone deep with an authoritative timbre. He eased into the van, revealing that the voice belonged to an older man with a head of white hair and balding patches, with a face full of wrinkles that was hard-set and focused, and a frame that was once strong and still spoke of power despite the cane. "I'm Councilman Peters. What brings you to us today?"

Pandora licked her lips, almost nervous as he took her in, his eyes filling with the barest hint of pity. Throat dry, she murmured, "I want the cure."

He tapped his cane on the floor, thinking as he narrowed his eyes. "And why didn't you go through the normal channels? Why didn't you have conduits bring you in? For the past three years, the procedure has been to ask for sanctuary from a local conduit branch so they can bring you here in secret, avoiding the sort of flashy, public, potentially fatal display that went on this afternoon. You were lucky a patrol happened to spot you, lucky we sent one out today."

She gazed at him, hesitant. "Um, well..." Pandora glanced through the open door, trying to locate Jax, unsure what story she should tell. But he was gone, being questioned by someone else. "I didn't know?"

She smiled lamely. But really, what could she say? *Oh, maybe because I've been brought here against my will by my ex-boyfriend, who is stalking me and trying to get me to come home, which I'm not going to do. And there's this other guy following me who might be a figment of my imagination, but he says I need the cure too. And even though I'm here, and even though they both think I should get the cure, I'm still not really sure I should actually be cured. So, it's highly possible I might launch an escape attempt at any moment. So, yeah...that's why I didn't come the normal way.*

Right, because that would land her an invite into the conduit safe haven and stronghold.

Sure...

The councilman hardened his expression, green eyes darkening a shade as he grew suspicious. "Why are you really here?"

*Crap. Crap .*

Part of her wanted the cure, part of her was totally confused, and part

of her was still one hundred percent positive she needed to remain a vampire. But all of her understood that if the conduits thought she was trying to break into their secret town to launch a murderous vampy rampage, she'd be dead before she even saw the punisher fire coming .

"Kira told me to come," Pandora exclaimed, suddenly remembering the girl and the graveyard and the invitation. If that really had been *the* Kira, the one to discover the cure, surely dropping her name would mean something? Right?

But Councilman Peters just pursed his lips, mistrust growing.

The conduit still dousing her in his fire snorted. "Really? You expect us to believe that?"

"It's the truth," she spat back, forgetting for a moment that her life was literally in his flame-expelling hands.

"Sure it is," he replied, voice dripping with sarcasm. "She came to you in a dream, right? Or maybe her voice spoke through you, telling you it was time to change, that you could be better, be more. We've had more vampires getting visions and hallucinations of Kira than you can even imagine, so I'd think of a better story, fast."

Pandora wrinkled her nose at him. "Oh yeah?" she retorted, wishing she could move just enough to throw some more attitude behind her words. "What about this? I saw her five days ago in New York City. She was sent there to work with the head vampire of New York on a top secret mission to help him track down a vampire thief. Just in case you're too thick to see where this is going, I'll spell it out. That thief was me. And right before she handed me over, she told me that if I got away, I could come here, I could find her, and she'd help me because she owed me one. Have you heard that story before? "

*Smartass* , she added silently.

The conduit's jaw dropped.

And then he quickly picked it back up off the floor and swallowed slowly, unable to speak from the shock.

Pandora grinned smugly.

But Councilman Peters dramatically rolled his eyes as if asking the heavens for patience and shook his head with a heavy sigh, mumbling something about a girl always getting herself into trouble. Then he glanced over his shoulder, shouting to someone outside the van. "Get my granddaughter."

*Granddaughter?* Pandora's eyes widened.

Yet, sure enough, ten minutes later a familiar blonde head poked through the open door, its owner casually saying, "Hey, Grandpa. What's up?" And then she looked around the van, nodding to the other conduit before settling her fiery green gaze on Pandora. After a moment, her eyelids widened in surprise, and a smile broke out across her lips. "You got away! That was fast."

Pandora shrugged. "Being a prisoner just isn't really my style," she responded, glaring pointedly at the conduit still trapping her in his fire. *That's your cue to let me go!*

He didn't.

Kira lifted a pointed brow. "Yeah, I can see that."

Pandora frowned. "Could you just tell them you invited me already? "

But instead of saying anything, Kira jumped into the van and took a seat, staring at Pandora intensely. "Why are you here?"

*Oh, come on. This again?* Pandora sighed. "I want the cure."

"When I saw you a few days ago, the cure seemed like the absolute last thing on your mind," Kira said, leaning forward, so her elbows rested on her knees, staring through the fire, eyes pinning Pandora to the spot even more than the flames. "What changed?"

"I learned some things," Pandora told her, totally honest for the first time that day. "Found out some information that gave me new perspective."

Kira pulled her lower lip in, then chewed for a moment while she thought. "And you want this? You? That titan guy pouting outside, itching to break his way into the van, isn't forcing you? Because the transition isn't always easy—you need to want it or it might not work."

Pandora swallowed.

Did she want this?

She'd spent four years running away, running from everyone, running from the cure, running from any path that might have even the slightest chance of turning toward home. The cure could be the best decision of her life. Or it could be the worst. If her memories of that long-ago night returned, they could break her all over again, could ruin all the walls she'd tried to build around her heart, could shatter all the resolve she'd spent so much time strengthening .

Did she want the cure?

Yes. She *wanted* it. Wanting the cure had never been her problem.

Even if she never admitted it to herself, Pandora had been dreaming of a cure since the day she woke up lusting for blood.

But could she live with being cured?

Would she survive finally facing the night she'd spent four years running from? Would she be able to look Jax in the eye when she finally remembered every little detail of what he'd done? Or would Sam be right? Would she call out for him, needing someone to help push her forward, to make sure she kept running, when all she wanted was to lie down in a ball and cry?

There was only one way to find out.

*Remember.*

The word slid across her mind.

Whether real or just a figment of her imagination, Sam had been right.

It was finally time to remember.

Pandora looked directly into Kira's eyes, totally sure, and said, "Yes. I want the cure."

"Great!" Kira jumped up. "Follow me."

"Kira," the councilman chided, his voice so adoringly serious it could only be used with family.

She tossed a look over her shoulder. "What, Grandpa? I've got this, trust me. She's fine. We don't need to go through the whole long, arduous process of making sure she's not a crazy, evil, insane vampire on the loose." And then she turned back around, muttering in a voice only Pandora's supervamp ears could pick up. "You make one little mistake, and they never let it go..."

The councilman nodded to the conduit still waiting patiently with fire spewing from his hands. A second later, Pandora was free. Before they could change their minds, she zipped out of the car.

"Dory!" Jax called from the side of the road, relief heavy in his voice. Using his superior strength, he severed the hold two guys had on him and ran over. "Are you okay? What'd you say?"

Attention on the asphalt beneath her feet as she kept walking, Pandora said, "I told them I want the cure."

Jax reached down and latched on to her fingers, then stopped them both as he spun her around, forcing her to meet his sharply inquisitive, hopeful eyes. "You mean it?"

"Yeah," she whispered, holding his gaze as her throat squeezed tight,

burning.

But Jax didn't see the fear pass over her eyes, the dread that came with not knowing, the terror of wondering if she'd ever look at him the same way again. He was too busy with his own joy to notice the lack of any in her gaze. His eyes were shining too bright to see the darkness in hers.

"You really mean it?" he asked, gushing. And then he swallowed as his expression seemed to harden, as he seemed to finally register that her reaction wasn't quite the same as his, wasn't as excited as he thought it would be. He coughed, pushing his emotions away, closing himself off. And then he spoke again in a much more rigid voice, a tone she really couldn't read or place. "What changed your mind? Not that I ever doubted my skills, of course. I'm just curious."

*You.*

She wanted to say it, wanted to give him the one thing he wanted to hear. But she didn't. Because he wasn't the reason. Sure, seeing him again had stirred things in her that she'd forgotten existed. Had warmed a heart she'd thought had frozen over. But if it had been totally up to him, Pandora would still be running.

*Remember.*

That one little word playing over and over in the back of her mind for the past hour and a half, that was the reason. Because while at first it was Sam's dark and dangerous, silky-smooth whisper, now it was her own voice, pleading and begging, urging her to go back to that night, to break down the wall and relive the memories, to understand why she'd run and why she needed to keep running.

No, Jax wasn't the reason.

Jax was the opposite of a reason.

Because her heart wanted to stay in the bubble, this place where she didn't remember his betrayal, couldn't vividly picture it in her mind, and could, therefore, pretend it maybe didn't really exist. Could listen to his sultry voice, his sweet, sweet words, and believe for a moment that they were real. Loving Jax was the reason she wanted to turn and run right now. Because she knew, deep down she knew, that the second she was cured the spell would be broken, that the love that once gave her life would vanish, that she'd be left colder and more hollow than ever before. She knew that the second she was cured, she'd just keep running farther and farther away from him—the only difference was she'd be a little bit slower when she did.

Pandora didn't answer Jax.

She looked into his saltwater eyes and remained silent, holding back all the things she was too afraid to say, because right now they were unfounded doubts, but as soon as she said them, they'd be real. They'd be good-bye. And the very idea terrified her much more than an eternity as a vampire ever would.

A second later, she was saved.

"Who are the newbies?" a voice asked.

Pandora and Jax turned to see a tall blond boy had joined them on the road, placing a protective arm across Kira's shoulders, hugging her close to his side. Immediately, she recognized him from the graveyard. *What was his name?*

"Luke," Kira murmured affectionately but then cringed, suddenly hesitant. "Um, you've sort of met them before."

"I have?" he asked, brows coming together as he lifted his gaze, fiery irises turning from the bright sparkle of adoration to a dull sort of confusion and finally to sharp fury. "You're the jerk who threw me against a wall!"

Jax put his hands up in a sign of peace, taking a step back. "It wasn't personal, man. "

Luke reached up and rubbed the back of his head, wincing a little as his fingers must have grazed a sore spot. "It felt pretty personal to me. Still does."

"Let's not dwell on the past," Kira said, jumping in quickly, nudging Luke and tossing a pleading expression up toward him. "They've come for the cure, they're turning a new leaf, and they need our help."

Luke held her gaze, almost as though they were having a silent battle of wits. And then his shoulders slumped in, and he sighed, the sort of heavy breath that made Pandora think he'd been in this situation too many times before.

"Luke Bowrey," he mumbled, offering his hand.

Jax shook it. "Jackson Rodriguez. Great to meet you."

And then the conduit boy turned to her. "Invisible vampire thief?"

"It's probably easier to just call me Pandora." She grinned.

"Nah," he said, waving a hand through the air. "I have a thing about nicknames, and this is great material to work with. The disappearing klepto. Sticky fangs. Ooh, the nimble nibbler. Right? Right?"

*The nimble nibbler?* Pandora stared at him blankly. *What have I*



*gotten myself into?*

But Kira jumped in before she could respond. "As fun as Luke's nickname game is, we should go. Because the UV wall just turned off, and my grandpa is getting that stubborn look in his eyes that says it might not stay that way for long. And while the man walks with a cane, he's surprisingly quick with his fire."

Pandora didn't need to hear any more. Following Kira's lead, she turned away from the van, for the first time taking note of the iron gate blocking the road and the immense stone wall cutting through the trees to either side. The gates were wide open, but Pandora had heard enough stories to know that by no means meant it was safe. And even though Kira had said the UV wall was off, Pandora wanted a little more assurance. It was, after all, an infamous invisible barrier pulsing through the stones and shooting fifty feet high that was capable of burning vamps to dust in less than a second.

Kira walked through the entrance first, followed by Luke, followed by Jax.

Pandora waited, hesitant, eying the structure. And then she reached her hand through fast, cringing in expectation of the heat. But there was nothing.

"I said it was off," Kira called across the barrier. "The thing is a freaking energy drain. We only keep it on when we know vamps are close."

"I believe you," Pandora said halfheartedly—wouldn't be the first time this girl had pulled a fast one on her. She had handed her over to Tatsuya, after all. "I just wanted to make sure, given our recent history."

And then she walked through the entrance.

Nothing burned.

Nothing stung.

Pandora nodded to herself, reassured. But when she looked up, Kira was rolling her eyes with a slight scowl.

Sensing the mood shift, Luke stepped in, facing Pandora and spreading his arms wide. "Welcome to Sonnyville, where the sun is hot, but the people are hotter...literally."

She stared at him blankly again.

"Oh, come on," he said, looking at all three of them. "That was a great one. Because we're conduits, and we shoot fire out of our hands? Hot, hotter? Get it?"

"Dude," Jax said pityingly.

Kira patted Luke on the arm, shaking her head gently as his expression fell in slow motion, drooping into a sullen pout. "No, just no."

"But..."

Kira kept shaking her head.

Luke sighed. And then just as quickly, his seemingly perpetually happy grin was back. "The nimble nibbler, though, that was a good one. You've got to give me props for that one."

Kira's mouth twitched, hinting at a smile as she fought to stay straight-faced and failed. "Okay," she relented, half laughing as she spoke. "That was a good one."

Pandora grimaced. *I don't belong here. These people are too freaking cheerful. Too much sun is bad for the brain.*

Her gaze flicked toward Jax and she noticed that he had an equally doubtful look in his eyes. But before she could comment, Kira's voice interrupted .

"Okay, enough dillydallying. Let's go get our cure on."

"Wait," Pandora blurted. "Right now?"

Kira looked at her, raising an eyebrow. "Yeah, right now. We're not really in the habit of letting vamps have free rein of our home until they're fang free—even if I owe you a favor. So, let's head over to the reintegration center. Most vamps don't even remember anything when they wake up, so we don't like to waste time. A quick intro, some fire, and voila, you're cured. That's when the real work begins."

*Voila* , Pandora thought, taking a deep breath, trying to ignore the way her chest clenched painfully tight at the idea. *Here goes nothing* .

## Chapter Eighteen



The vampire reintegration center was a small village of houses set apart from the rest of the town while still remaining within the protective confines of the UV wall, safe from any vampires with a grudge. The roads were the same tree-lined, manicured roads. The homes were the same quaint, white picket fence, rocking chair on the front porch, small-town homes. But the mood was completely different. Whereas the main center of Sonnyville seemed too good to be true, this area felt real to Pandora, felt more relatable. There was a darkness in the air. A heavy cloud had settled on the streets, an undeniable sense of being in between. People were walking and chatting quietly to each other, but their smiles were hesitant, their laughter soft, their eyes not quite as bright.

And when Pandora walked by, everyone turned to look.

Panic .

Alarm.

Nostalgia.

Empathy.

Pandora could smell it all in the air, an odd jumble that sent the hairs at the back of her neck straight up, that made her stomach tie into a mess of knots.

Kira must have sensed it, or maybe she'd just been through this enough times to know, because she leaned over and whispered, "Don't mind them. It's not you, per se, just the reminder of what they once were, of the things they once did, the way they once lived. Happens every time a new recruit comes in."

Pandora nodded, keeping her eyes straight ahead. They stopped when they reached a small grassy square.

"Crap," Kira muttered, turning to Luke. "Any idea where he is? I thought he had a history class in the square at this hour."

Luke swallowed, looking up at the clear blue sky as he shrugged and pursed his lips. "No idea."

Kira frowned. "He's at it again, isn't he?"

"Don't know what you mean..."

Kira narrowed her eyes, grumbling, "He lets you use the flamethrower one time, and you totally flip. Traitor." And then she turned, breathing in deep, bringing her hands to create a cone in front of her lips, and shouted, "Tristan!"

With her hypersenses on high alert, spurred on by curiosity, Pandora reached out, searching for a response. Not too far away, she heard an audible groan and the click of what sort of sounded like the safety of a gun.

She turned to the noise and watched as a boy around her age, maybe a few years older, ran out from behind a house, racing toward them. Immediately, she grinned appreciatively. He was dressed in head-to-toe camouflage with a rifle strapped across his back, another gun in his hands, and what looked to be a sash of rubber bullets draped over his chest. And, the boy was built. Even beneath the clothes, she could tell he was chiseled, but it was his face that drew her in. Strong jaw, shaggy black hair, striking hooded eyes laced with honey highlights, and soft lips that were smiling wide, digging dimples into his cheeks. But there was depth there too, a shadow over his irises, hinting at something more.

Part deranged bad boy.

Part brooding dreamer.

*He's going to be my reintegration teacher?* Pandora thought.

But before she could introduce herself, Kira cut in, giving him a once-over as she crossed her arms and cocked her hip to the side. "Teaching your history class outside, are you? Taking advantage of the early fall weather, isn't that what you told me?" Tristan deepened his smile, lifting one corner of his lips higher than the other, making his dimple even more visible. Kira just shook her head. "Those dimples won't get you out of this one, buddy. I've become immune."

"I never lied," he told her quickly, voice sounding measurably proper, hinting that while he looked to be in his early twenties, his true age could be far older. "I said I was teaching a history class outside, and this is a history class, and I am outside. I just neglected to tell you that the history of modern warfare class is a little more hands-on than most."

"Oh, come on," Kira snapped. "You look like a freaking GI Joe."

Pandora bit her lip to keep from laughing, unable to stop a small snort from escaping. She glanced quickly at Jax, eyes sparkling with mirth and

confusion, but he was watching on with a somewhat vacant expression.

But before she had time to wonder why, Kira spun on her heels, pulling Pandora's attention away as she dug a finger into Luke's chest. "And you knew!"

Luke took a step back, holding his hands up. "Whoa, I didn't *know* know, I just, well, sort of expected."

Kira grimaced, muttering, eyes going to the sky as if praying for strength. "I think I actually miss the days when you two hated each other."

But before she could say anything else, Tristan stepped around her, offering his hand to Pandora. "Tristan Kent. Pleased to meet you. I'm the head of the cured vampire reintegration program here in Sonnyville."

Pandora gripped his fingers. "I'm Pandora, and this is Jax."

Tristan reached a hand out to Jax but then frowned just slightly. "You're not..."

"No," Jax said, cutting in quickly. "I'm here for moral support. I'm a titan, and Dory was too before she changed. "

"Well, she will be again," Tristan said nonchalantly, shrugging. "If the other supernaturals we've cured are anything to go by."

"Oh." Pandora frowned. "I won't be human?"

For some reason, she'd thought—maybe hoped—the cure might cure everything, might solve all her problems, might take the idea of Jax and home and the titans off her back.

"Nah," Tristan said. "You should go back to being what you were, which I guess in this case was a titan, though we've never cured one of you before. Why? Does that change anything?"

"No," Pandora said, voice determined.

At her response, Jax's heart flipped inside his chest.

She squinted, trying to read beyond his blank expression, listening as his pulse raced faster and faster with each passing second. She'd been too distracted by her own thoughts, too distracted by the conduits, to notice his shift in demeanor, but the subtle hints were there. His rising body temperature. The light sheen of sweat on his hands. How he licked his lips, trying to relax them, trying to smooth out the thin line they'd stretched into.

Was he holding back his excitement?

Trying not to overwhelm her?

But then why were his teeth slightly clenched? Why was his chest burning, blood pumping in a way that made her hungry, made it hard to

focus? Jax wanted this. Jax had wanted this all along, had dragged her to Florida, begged her to get the cure. He wanted her to be Dory again. So why the sudden hesitation?

Pandora met Jax's gaze, finding the light had vanished from his expression, finding he was watching her with torn, almost sad eyes, as though wrestling with an idea, struggling with some inner demon.

*Maybe he's only just realizing that I meant what I said—I'm not going back. Maybe he's only just realizing what the cure really means is good-bye.*

"Right," Tristan said, interrupting her thoughts. He blinked away his curiosity, returning to the business at hand, and Pandora tried to do the same. The cure, she was here for the cure because she wanted it, because she needed to remember, and because deep down she wanted to be human again. And Jax? Whatever was going on with him would have to wait. "Well, there's just a little bit of information we like to give you first, and then we get right to the cure as soon as possible."

"Where's Pavia?" Kira asked, glancing around.

Pandora's brows came together. Something about that name sounded familiar, triggered a memory buried far away in the back of her mind.

Tristan looked sheepishly at Kira. "She, well, took another history of modern warfare class out into the woods for some more realistic training. "

Kira took a tight breath through clenched teeth and then slowly released. "Well, can you tell her to come back? She's always so good with them when they wake up."

Tristan nodded, reaching into one of his many pockets and then pulling out a phone. He tapped his fingers on the screen a few times, eyes focused and concentrated, but nothing seemed to be happening, and his expression was growing more and more frustrated.

"Oh, give me that," Kira said, snatching the phone from his fingers with a sigh. "You've figured out how to use an AK-47 but still can't for the life of you understand how to use a smartphone." A few moments later, after some under-her-breath grumbling from Kira, the phone in her hand buzzed. "Okay, she's on her way, but she told us to get started."

"Great." Tristan turned back to Pandora. "If you'll just follow us, we'll take you to the cure room, talk for a little while, and then get started."

Pandora swallowed, still not totally sure but resolutely determined. "Lead the way."

And he did. As a group of five, they set out, traversing the streets

toward a destination that would change Pandora's life, would change everything. And the more they walked, the more unsure she became, the more nervous, the more uncertain.

"You're not coming home, are you?" Jax whispered, jolting her out of her thoughts. He'd slid silently closer as they walked, now reaching out to slip his hand into hers, warm and the slightest bit sweaty yet still comforting, still a jolt of caffeine shocking her nerves to life. His touch had always had that effect on her, and it probably always would.

Pandora looked up into his tumultuous gaze, swallowing. "No."

And she meant it. The cure changed nothing.

She wasn't going home, not as a vampire and certainly not as a titan. When this was over, Pandora was still leaving, would still be running. And when their seven days were up, Jax had promised not to follow.

He closed his eyes, shutting them tight as though blocking out the idea. A small burst of disappointed air escaped his lips.

"I'm sorry, but I can't go back. I just can't," she said, squeezing his hand. But he knew her better than anyone else, knew her story even better than she did, so he should have expected it. "But I'll be twenty-one in less than a year..."

Jax's chest burned so hot Pandora could sense the heat surging into the air around him as his throat constricted painfully tight, making it a struggle for him to swallow, to even speak.

"I mean that as a good thing," she said, laughing darkly. "I'll be twenty-one and out of the initiation range, so my father will leave me alone. Maybe then I'll come find you. Maybe then I'll be your stalker, and you'll be on the run from me. Or maybe it can be like we always planned... "

*Maybe we can be together* , Pandora finished silently, a futile dream.

Jax lifted the corner of his lip halfheartedly.

But it was no use.

There was nothing to say.

He'd chosen initiation. She'd chosen freedom.

And there was no way to come back from that. And when she finally remembered what had happened, finally remembered those last few hours that passed between them, Pandora suspected the divide would only be further set in stone.

She released his hand, realizing they were no longer walking. The conduits had brought the group to a stop in front of a large brick building that

sort of resembled a Victorian manor house or a really expensive private school. But Pandora suspected it was something more, the heart of the reintegration program. And her suspicions were confirmed when the conduits led them inside with Jax trailing silently at the back.

The inside of the building was sparsely decorated. The front hallway focused on a fireplace surrounded by seats and couches, a warm place to sit and chat. But mostly, they passed classrooms filled with chairs and desks and a chalkboard at the front. A few rooms were set up like offices. A few more with lounge chairs and private spaces to talk more seriously. And in the far corner of the building was the cure room.

When Tristan twisted the knob, Pandora's heart sank at the foreboding *click* . He pushed open the door to welcome her inside. She swallowed, trying to send some moisture down her suddenly dry throat, but it was no use. Deep in her core, there was an undeniable voice telling her to turn and run, telling her this was the wrong choice, telling her there was no way she would come back out this door as anything but broken.

And yet, she stepped through.

Because those doubts and fears were sewn into her soul, were part of the wall around her heart, part of the block keeping those long-lost memories away. And even stronger than the dread was the need to know, the desire to remember, the demand to finally face what she'd spent the past few years running from.

Jax wouldn't look at her.

"You can take a seat here," Tristan said, gesturing to an empty armchair with plump cushions.

Pandora listened, and the rest of the group sat around her in a circle, dragging less-comfortable chairs from the edges of the room.

"How long have you been a vampire?" Tristan asked, eyes deep and concerned, so utterly honest it made Pandora uncomfortable, as though he could see her in a way other people who'd never experienced this life couldn't.

"Four years," she answered, gaze going to Jax as though pulled by a magnet. He was finally watching her, seafoam eyes intense against his dark skin, bright but almost in a pained way instead of an excited one, an expression silently whispering good-bye .

"Good," Tristan said, pulling Pandora's focus back to him. "That'll make things much easier for you. I was over a hundred and fifty when I was



cured, and let me tell you, the world can change a lot in a century and a half."

Pandora furrowed her brows. "What do you mean?"

"Well," he said, starting slow and easing into the details. "A lot of vampires don't remember anything about being a vampire after they're cured. Take me, for example. I thought it was still eighteen sixty-four, and I couldn't remember a single thing about my life. We think it's because human souls go dormant during the change. Vampires are so cold, almost frozen on the inside, and we think the freeze puts the human soul to sleep in an odd way. It's what allows vampires to act so brutal, to do things no human in his or her right mind would imagine doing. But when a vampire is cured, the human soul is brought back to life in the fire, and the only way to reconcile the evil acts performed as a vampire once returned to a human is to simply block them out. But since you've only been a vampire for four years, there hopefully aren't too many bad memories to worry about, and the world hasn't changed so much that it'll be completely new to you. You have a much better chance at remembering. Younger vampires always seem to retain more, to do a little better with the cure."

"Do better?" Pandora asked hesitantly, hands suddenly heavy with the weight of Tatsuya's head, ears suddenly full with the sound of his spine snapping in half, of his skin tearing until his skull ripped clean off. For a moment, she could taste Jax's blood on her lips, could feel her teeth sinking easily through his flesh.

Tristan leaned forward, sensing her distress, and folded his hands together, resting his elbows on his knees, speaking to her in a soothing, reassuring tone. "The reintegration program isn't just about teaching newly cured vampires about their new modern world. Sure, we give history classes and literature classes. We teach them how to use technology like computers and cars. But for some vampires, that's not enough. Their souls wake up broken. Some are haunted by nightmares, living visions, or flashbacks to the things they did as a vampire, almost like post-traumatic stress disorder. That's one of the reasons we've started this new army-training program, or, um, history of modern warfare class. A lot of the cured have gone on to enlist. The regimented schedule, the brotherhood, the other people who understand living after such trauma, it's very alluring. But," he said, pausing as he sat up, changing to brighter topics, "I don't think that will be you. So, do you have any questions before we dive into the details about the actual process of the cure?"

"So there's a chance I won't remember my life as a vamp?" Pandora asked softly, keeping her gaze on Tristan, forcing herself not to look at Jax.

He nodded. "A chance, but you're so young, there's an equally good chance you'll remember everything."

Pandora licked her lips, then forced the words through the clog in her throat. "What about before my time as a vampire? Will I remember the night I turned? Will I remember the days leading up to it?"

Jax's gaze was a physical force boring into her, a weight against her cheek, but Pandora refused to look at him, worried that adrift in his eyes, she'd lose the will to remember, lose the will to say good-bye.

Tristan shrugged, oblivious to the secret depth of her question. "Most vampires wake up remembering everything up until their maker enters the scene, up until the point where the idea of vampires creeps in, too much for the human soul to handle. I was wounded during a battle in the Civil War, and I remember being shot, remember falling to the ground, remember dying as other soldiers screamed around me. But I don't remember my maker finding me in that field or anything that happened until I woke up a few years ago, human once more. But at the same time, everyone is different. We have some theories going, but personally, I think it all depends on you and what you want to remember. I know who I am, I know my heart, and I know that becoming a vampire must have destroyed me inside. There was no part of me that wanted to remember. But maybe you're different."

Pandora heard Kira suck in a sharp breath at his words, heart pounding inside her conduit chest, hot with pent up burning fire. But on the outside, she was calm, as though it were nothing more than a familiar old wound being pricked.

The conduit glanced at her, smiling softly. "Are you ready? "

Pandora swallowed, bringing the unfazed façade back. "I'd be more ready if you'd all stop staring at me like I'm a fragile porcelain doll that might shatter at any moment. I'm not going to break."

The words were full of more bravado than she felt, but they did the trick. Everyone laughed smoothly, easing some of the tension in the air. And then a knock sounded softly against the door.

"Pavia?" Kira asked.

The door slipped open, and a red-haired boy poked his head through. "Nope, just me."

Kira smiled regardless and jumped up to greet him with a hug. Luke

stood, then walked over to give him a slap on the back. "Good to see you, man. When'd you get back?"

"This morning," the guy answered. "They've got some nasty-ass vamps in Argentina. I was about to crash for about a weeklong nap, but they said you could use a hand over here."

Kira spun and found Pandora's eyes. "This is Robby. He's the punisher who'll be helping us with the cure today. And Robby, this is Pandora, new recruit, and her friend Jax."

They greeted each other politely but got back to business quickly. Kira moved her chair to one side of Pandora while the new guy, Robby, moved to the other. Tristan and Luke walked over to a cabinet and pulled a few things from a drawer that Pandora couldn't quite see. And Jax stood behind her, one hand resting heavily on her shoulder, almost as though he was holding her down, making sure she wouldn't disappear and escape. Yet he brushed his thumb over her skin, gentle and somewhat hesitant, a loving gesture.

"Okay, Pandora, can you pull that lever on your seat?" Kira asked.

She did, realizing her chair was actually a recliner as the feet popped up and the back dropped down, leaving her exposed as Jax leaned over, watching from above, hand still heavy on her shoulder. Beneath his palm, her heart suddenly beat, one quick and heavy thump as the fears crawled out of the spot she'd shoved them into.

Kira continued, unaware. "So, basically, I'll use my protector powers to protect your human heart and human soul while Robby here uses his punisher fire to burn the vampirism out of your body. Sounds complicated, I know, but trust me, we know what we're doing."

Pandora nodded, throat going dry.

"So, we just need you to do one thing before we start," Kira added, signaling to Tristan and Luke. They brought over two needles and a few bags, red and clear, hanging like IVs from a hook.

"If you could just use your nail to pop open a vein at each elbow, it makes the process much easier. Tristan is going to give you a little sedative we came up with. It'll help with the pain, but it'll also make it really hard for you to move, keeping us all safe just in case your vampire side tries to fight dirty, which they often do. And Luke has a bag of blood and a bag of water to keep you hydrated and to make sure you don't suffer blood loss when you wake up. A lot of vamps come to us pretty hungry, so we've found this helps.

Does that sound all right?"

Pandora paused.

Now or never.

Stay or run.

*Remember.*

Did she really want this?

Was she actually ready to face all those fears walled up in the back of her mind?

*Remember.*

In a quick motion she couldn't take back, Pandora sliced open her skin, then offered them her arms as she leaned back, settling into the chair. Her veins were screaming for blood, itching painfully, empty and aching to be filled. But soon they wouldn't be. Soon she'd be human again, and it would be her stomach rumbling, hungry the normal way, hungry in a way she hadn't been in so very long.

*Maybe this won't be so bad, she thought. Maybe I've been running for nothing, maybe it's not as bad as it seems, maybe I'm afraid over nothing.*

The idea gave her comfort.

Just enough comfort to drop her defenses and look up, directly into Jax's eyes.

A fist clamped around her heart.

He was watching her with a look of terror, green eyes hard and penetrating. And she knew her expression must look the same, just as wide-eyed and frightened, just as desperate. Because in a few minutes, she'd wake up, and she'd remember every detail of the night that had utterly destroyed her, the night Jax had chosen the titans over her, and this thing that was still lingering between them would be well and truly over.

"Jax?" Pandora asked, but the words came out as hardly more than a whisper. Her jaw was heavy, her tongue nearly useless. The sedative had coursed through her body, quick and painless, leaving her limbs immobile, nothing more than a living corpse, cold and dead, hoping to be brought back to life.

She wanted to tell him she still loved him.

That she always had.

And that she'd missed him—would always miss him.

But even without words, he seemed to understand.

"I'm here," Jax said, kneeling down as he reached over to grip her

hand. And though his words sounded loving, there was something else in his tone, something only Pandora could hear, having known him better than she knew herself.

*What?* she wanted to ask.

But her lips wouldn't move.

The sound wouldn't come.

She was stuck, staring at him, unable to look away even if she wanted to, unable to run from the truth slowly being unveiled in his shattered expression, as though the mask he'd been wearing for days had finally cracked and little pieces were falling to the ground, slowly revealing the truth in their wake. He glanced away, unable to hold her probing gaze, as a single tear slid down his perfectly carved face, glistening in the light of the room, stark against the brown hue of his cheeks. And then he leaned forward, stretching over her body to cup her cheek in his hand, hiding his face from view as it pressed into the crook of her neck.

His lips caressed her ear, the barest hint of a kiss, before he whispered, voice cracking, "I'm sorry." And then he leaned back, lips quivering, eyes dark and clouded, clear of their usual shimmer. "Please remember that I love you, that I always have and I always will. And that you were right. Because I regret not choosing you. I regret it every single day. But there was no other way. There was no other choice I could make."

And then he sat back, leaving her cold.

Out of the corner of her eye, Pandora saw him slide his hand into his pocket, and then she heard the distinct click of a cellphone she never even realized he had turning on.

*What have you done, Jax?*

*Oh, god, what have you done?*

Pandora wanted to scream the words.

Wanted to throttle him.

Wanted to jump off this chair, to run and run and run.

But she couldn't.

She was stuck.

Try as she might, her mouth wouldn't move. The protest wouldn't come. Her fists couldn't punch. Her legs couldn't kick. Her entire body was useless. Her nerves were disconnected. The power had turned off. Everything worked, yet nothing did .

"Okay, this might hurt a little at first," Kira said, giving her an

apologetic look before fire surged to life from her palms. The punisher did the same.

*No!*

*Stop!*

*Please!*

*They're here. I know they are. They've come for me. Jax just called them. He chose them again. I have to go.*

But no one heard her pleas.

No one heard anything.

No one noticed the tear falling down the side of her cheek, disappearing into her hair. No one except Jax. But his jaw was set in a hard line, clenched tight as he closed his eyes, ignoring the cries he knew were in her heart, ignoring the alarm he saw highlighted in her cold blue eyes.

*Please don't let him take me.*

*Please.*

Pandora begged.

The titans were here, waiting. Her father was here, waiting.

Jax was here, waiting to hand her over, waiting to finish the job he was supposed to do four years ago, the one she couldn't remember but dreaded with every fiber of her being. He was betraying her again.

And the conduits had no idea.

Fire sank into her skin, blazing. But she couldn't cry out, couldn't fight the pain, couldn't even grit her teeth against the ache. All she could do was bear it silently, her own personal torture. The flames soared into her core, hot and demanding, scorching her until she was sure her skin bubbled, sure boils were rising along her arms and legs, sure her bones were turning to ash beneath the torrent.

The vampire inside cried out.

The human did too.

Different reasons, equally unbearable.

"Sorry I'm late," a voice said. A second later, a face appeared through the fire, highlighted orange. A face Pandora recognized deep in her soul, a face that made the wall around her memories crack, fighting to be free. The luscious black hair was familiar, the plump lips, the arched brows, the olive skin. All of it she recognized, yet she didn't.

But the girl recognized her too.

Her eyes widened as her jaw dropped open.

"Stop!" she cried.

*Yes! Yes! Help me!*

"Kira, stop," the girl called again.

"I can't, Pavia," Kira said, alarmed as her fire trembled, wavering underneath Pandora's skin. "We've come too far. If we stop now, she'll just die."

"No, but I know her," the girl whispered, voice hoarse. "You can't do this. We can't. I promised she'd be okay."

"She will." Kira assured. "She'll be better than okay. She'll be cured."

And then the fire around Pandora's heart blazed hotter, a raging inferno that wrapped around her soul, burning it back to life as the rest of her sizzled and boiled, baking in the heat, melting away to nothing.

*Remember*, Pandora prayed as her consciousness began to sink away, as the world around her started to disappear.

*Remember.*

*Remember.*

*Remember.*

It was her only hope.

## Chapter Nineteen



*Pandora leaned her head against Jax's shoulder, bony as it was, the arm of a boy who'd only just begun to turn into a man. But she loved it nonetheless, loved the little crook that held her head just right, loved the feel of his arm wrapped around her, loved listening to his heart thumping in his chest.*

*"I can't believe it's my birthday already," he whispered, voice strained.*

*Pandora arced her head up just a little, just enough to meet his eyes. "Don't say that. Don't you want to stay in the bubble a little longer? Tree house rules."*

*Pandora flicked her gaze up to the wooden boards overhead, nailed together with the help of Jax's father, their little oasis in the woods, their place to get away. They'd been coming here ever since that first summer he moved to the enclave. They found the spot one night when Pandora was running away, one of many attempts. But Jax had come racing after her, determined to follow, determined to bring his best friend home where she belonged—with him. He'd packed snacks and a tent, and they'd found this tree, and they'd parked themselves here for one night. Which turned to two. Which turned to a week. And by the next summer, building the tree house had become the only thing on their minds, their escape. And now, it was the only place they could ever come to get away, to be themselves, to pretend for a few moments to be free. The place where they'd shared their first kiss, their first I love you, their first taste of real passion. So many firsts, and now one more, their first good-bye.*

*"Right, tree house rules," Jax murmured, pulling her closer. "Only fun and dreams, nothing serious."*

*"Right."*

*"Except..." He paused, turning his face down so his eyes could find hers, deep as the ocean, full of all the hidden truths they'd been too afraid to say. "My initiation is in a few hours, so maybe, just for one night, we should break the rules while we still can."*



Pandora sighed, easing out of his arms. She sat up and stared down over him. "I have to go, Jax. You know why. I can't stay here. There's nothing for me. I'm hardly even a titan—my powers don't belong. If I got initiated, where would they even put me? There's no division for disappearing girls. I'd be the same freak I've always been. But if I leave, I can maybe go to college, maybe actually become a vet, maybe have a normal life, the life I've always wanted, the life we dreamed up together."

"I know—"

"No," she interrupted, speaking up in a way she only ever did around him, speaking with the strength he helped give her. "You're like King Jackson in the enclave, the best tracker, the star recruit. People are fighting to have you join their team after you're initiated. This is your life, here—this is where you belong. And it's only a few years, right?" She paused to swallow back the clog in her throat, fighting the tears starting to burn her eyes. "I'll come find you when I turn twenty-one, when I'm too old to be initiated, and we can be together then. The order will let us. They'll have to."

"I don't want to wait five years, Dory," he said, voice hard and determined.

"Me neither, Jax, but what other choice do we have?"

He sat up, brows coming together as he slid his palm against her cheek, brushing his thumb over her skin, soft, tingling. "I can come with you."

"Jax." She gasped, mouth falling open.

"Hear me out," he said quickly. "We always talk about it, about what that future would look like. We dream and play pretend, follow our tree house rules, but it can be real. Everything we've imagined for ourselves can be real. I don't need to be a titan. Tracking is what I do, not who I am. Music is who I am. It's a part of me, and I would be completely happy following that dream if it meant I'd be able to have you too."

She glanced toward the ground, fiddling her thumbs as her heart began to race. She imagined that life, already wanting it more than anything else. "But what about your family?"

"My parents will love me no matter what," he rushed to say. "I'll figure out how to see them without the enclave knowing, at least until we're both twenty-one. I can find a way."

"But your initiation is tonight."

"So we go tonight. "

"But we haven't planned anything, haven't packed anything, haven't

—"

"Dory," Jax crooned.

She took a deep breath, meeting his gaze, trying to hold back her mounting hope, because this couldn't be real, could it? Her life was the butt of a joke, not the fairy tale come true. But his eyes were wide open and highlighted with anticipation, his lips were curved in a smile, his tan skin was bright with an inner glow.

"Do you love me?" he asked.

Her body seemed to melt. "You know I do."

"Do you want to be with me now and not in five years if they'll let us?"

"You know I do."

"Then let's go, now, tonight," he said, voice growing louder, more animated with excitement. "Let's go home, pack our things, meet back here, and just leave. I've been absolutely dreading my birthday for weeks, for months, hating that I woke up every morning with it one day closer. For the first time in I don't know how long, I'm breathing in fresh air. The weight is lifted. We can both be free, we can be together. Just say yes. Please, please, say yes."

"Jax," Pandora said, biting her lip, afraid to wake up at any moment and realize none of this was true. For weeks, she'd wanted to put this idea in his head, she'd been dreaming he'd want to come with her, but she never thought it was real, never thought he'd want this for himself. And she hadn't wanted to force her future on him. She wanted him to choose his life for himself.

"Dory," he pleaded, squeezing her knee with his free hand, imploring

He wants this, she thought suddenly. He really wants this. I'm not imagining it.

"Okay," she said, hardly able to believe her own voice. "Okay, let's do it."

Before the words were even out, he pressed his lips to hers, swallowing them up in his touch and his laughter. And she joined him, so light she felt she might float away, that maybe they'd just escape into the sky, two birds soaring into the horizon, free.

He pulled back, grinning. "We're doing this."

"We're doing this." Pandora matched his joy.

*And then they were kissing again, lightning touches, quick hard pecks, over and over as they gripped the other's face tight, holding each other closer, unable to contain their mounting fervor.*

*Before Pandora even knew what was happening, they were racing through the forest, figuring out a plan, figuring out how they would leave and where they would go and all the wonderful things that could happen. With one last kiss and one last rushed I love you, they parted ways at the edges of the shared backyard stretching across both of their houses. Jax walked confidently from the trees, spine tall, giving no clue as to his secret intentions as he marched into his house, totally at ease, not caring if his parents were home or not.*

*But Pandora was different.*

*She didn't have his strength. His conviction.*

*Her stomach was a ball of knots as she stared at the light seeping through the window of her father's study, knowing he was home, knowing he'd see every rule-breaking thought in her mind with a single glance at her hunched shoulders and hooded eyes. So she wrapped the shadows around herself, shuffling across the yard, shrinking away from the light as she disappeared from the world, only comfortable once fully shrouded in the darkness.*

*Hesitant, Pandora slipped in the back door, then eased through the empty, dark kitchen, tiptoeing toward the staircase, only taking a breath once she'd snuck into her room. Hastily, she grabbed a bag from her closet, the largest one she had, and filled it with a few changes of clothes, her toothbrush, a little makeup, and her favorite book. She had nothing of her mother's aside from the boots on her feet and nothing she wanted to remember about her father. So she left extra room to grab some food from the kitchen and filled the inside pocket with a meager wad of bills that made up her entire life savings.*

*The front door opened and closed, loud in the silence of her house.*

*Pandora jerked as voices filtered up the staircase. Straining to hear, she sucked in a breath when Jax's name seeped under the opening of her door and into her ear.*

*Softly, she slung her bag over her shoulder and left her room. Then she pulled the shadows even closer as she stopped at the top of the stairs, trying to identify who had come at this late hour when most of the town was preparing for Jax's initiation ceremony.*

*"I have to tell him, Malcolm," the voice said. And Pandora recognized it—after all, she heard it almost every day. Jax's father, Javier. "I have to tell him before the ceremony. I have to let my son know what he's signing up for, what the mark means. If I don't, he'll never forgive me. She's the love of his life, for god's sake."*

*"Absolutely not." Her father's voice was harsh and rigid.*

*"But, Malcolm—"*

*"I said no," her father interrupted. "He'll tell her, and then everything we've spent fifteen years covering up will be undone. Everything our people have spent centuries sacrificing their lives for will be undone. I can't risk it. I won't."*

*"Dammit—"*

*"Lower your voice, Javier."*

*Jax's father took a deep, unsteady breath. "I know my son, Malcolm. I know my son. And when he learns the truth, when he learns who she is, what she is, he'll make the right choice, no matter how difficult. He'll do what needs to be done. But I need to tell him before he's initiated. He needs to make this choice knowing all of the facts, or it will break him."*

*"I'm not in the habit of risking everything so a sixteen-year-old boy won't have his heart broken," her father responded softly, emotionless. "I've lost too much already."*

*"Not his heart, Malcolm. His soul."*

*"Souls?" Her father laughed darkly, scoffing. "Don't talk to me about souls. Mine broke a long time ago, on what was supposed to be the happiest day of my life, the day my daughter was born—the day her mother and I realized that the child we spent years trying to conceive, months planning for, a lifetime dreaming of, was a child who could destroy the entire world, was a child I would have to murder the very second she turned sixteen. Don't talk to me of souls, Javier. I don't have one anymore."*

*Pandora gasped, body shaking as her entire life became clear in a single second. Why her father hated her. Why her mother took her own life. Why the adults always watched her with pity. Why they told their children to stay away. Why she was different. Why she never fit in.*

*Something about her power terrified them.*

*Something about what she was, what she'd always been.*

*Pandora stood and scrambled back up the steps, back toward her room. She had to get away, had to run, had to find Jax to warn him before it*

was too late.

*In her haste, she tripped and slammed to the floor.*

*"What was that?" her father snapped.*

*"Nothing," Javier said, brushing it off, trying to focus on their conversation. "I'm telling him, Malcolm, with or without the order's permission. Punish me, do what you will, but he needs to know."*

*"Pandora!" her father shouted, ignoring Javier. "Come downstairs right now."*

*"They're at the tree house," Javier said, sighing heavily. "I saw them leave hours ago."*

*"Pandora!"*

*She didn't care if he heard. She ran—back to her room, out the window. She jumped from the second floor and rolled against the soft grass, knowing her titan strength was enough to keep her from getting hurt. And then she sped away, wrapped in the shadows, racing through the forest.*

*The tree house was dark when she got there, no candles, no sign of Jax.*

*He's coming, she told herself. He's coming.*

*He'll choose me. He'll come. He will .*

*So she waited, hiding in the shadows, watching the trees nervously as her eyes darted to every moving shadow, every shifting light. Footsteps pounded on the dirt. Her heart lifted, eyes widening, breath stopped on a moment, listening, waiting.*

*But the footsteps were thunderous.*

*There were too many to be only Jax.*

*Pandora huddled in the shadows, watching from a distance as her father tore into the opening around the tree house, eyes sharp as he searched for her, trying to drag her back. Three trackers came with him, gazes focused, searching for any sign of her, using their powers to try to touch her soul. But they wouldn't. As long as she was careful to remain still and to not make a sound, no one would find her in the shadows. No one could except Jax, and he wasn't there.*

*Because he's being initiated.*

*The thought came sharp and swift, a knife in her chest, but she pushed it away.*

*No, he's biding his time, she reasoned silently . He'll be here soon. He'll come. He saw my father leave, knew I'd be better off hiding without*

him, and decided to wait until the coast was clear. He's coming. He's coming. He is.

*Fifteen minutes later, her father gave up. Ten minutes after that, she heard the trackers finally slip away.*

*Crawling over leaves and sticks, she pulled herself to the tree house on sheer will alone, then stopped at the base, unable to find the strength to climb to the top to wait for Jax, instead collapsing against the ladder, using it as a backrest to stare into the woods, listening, hoping, waiting.*

*"He's coming," she whispered .*

*He's coming, she thought again.*

*The rungs dug into the skin of her back, painful, but she didn't care because it meant she could still feel something. Her heart was hollow, empty, as though it had been ripped from her body and left back in the space between their houses. She wondered if Jax would find it.*

*He's coming, she repeated, pulling her knees into her chest, rocking back and forth as quiet tears fell, thinking the words over and over again, a soundless whisper, a silent prayer.*

*He's coming.*

*He's coming.*

*Hours later, he came.*

*Pandora hardly noticed him at first, too tired, too delirious. His footsteps were soft, cautious, barely disturbing the sticks and leaves beneath his feet. He stopped fifteen feet away from the tree house, just at the edge of the clearing, one cheek bathed in moonlight, eyes still hidden in the shadows.*

*"Dory?" he whispered, soft and scratchy, voice one thread away from shredding completely. "They told me to find you. They told me..."*

*Jax stepped forward into the light.*

*And in that second, Pandora knew.*

*In that second, she couldn't deny it any longer.*

*Because for the first time since they'd met, she gazed into his soft green eyes and didn't recognize them. They were hollow, broken, so very far away, so much older than the boy he'd been a few hours ago, still living in the ease of ignorant bliss.*

*Now, he knew.*

*Knew more than she, probably .*

*She didn't need to see his tattoo.*

*He'd been initiated.*

*He'd made his choice.*

*Pandora released the shadows wrapped tight around her body, returning to the world as she stood, staring at Jax, unable to speak, unable to feel anything besides the knife digging deep between her shoulder blades, the knife he put there.*

*He stepped back, cringing.*

*What am I?*

*The thought came painfully swift as Pandora stepped back, body molded to the ladder of the tree house, unable to retreat any farther. Jax watched, unable to step forward, unable to close the gap between them.*

*What am I? she asked again, too afraid to say the words out loud. What could I possibly be that my own father wants to kill me? That an entire town has been preparing for my death for sixteen years? That Jax, my best friend, my everything, would choose them over me?*

*Her hands trembled.*

*Her heart burned.*

*Her chin quivered.*

*And the longer Jax watched, the more she could see the war raging inside his head, the two sides of before and after, of the boy who loved her and the boy who now needed to see her dead.*

*Oh, god, what am I? she silently cried. What am I?*

*Jax took a deep breath, reaching his hand out, softening. But was it old Jax or new Jax? Was it the boy who loved her reaching out in comfort, trying to help, trying to apologize, trying to explain? Or was it the boy who needed to drag her back to her father, the boy who belonged to the order, the boy she didn't recognize?*

*She would never know.*

*Because she ran.*

*The instant he stepped toward her, Pandora withdrew into the shadows and sprinted into the forest behind her, pumping her legs, mind racing faster than her feet could follow. She didn't want to know any more, not about Jax, not about herself. She couldn't take it, couldn't survive it. She wasn't strong enough.*

*So she ran.*

*No plan. No place.*

*Just the urgent need to escape, to get away before the answers to the questions burning in the back of her mind swallowed her whole.*

*Jax didn't follow.*

*He let her go.*

*He watched immobile as she raced away, watched immobile as the other titans finally caught up to him, asking where she was, where she'd gone, if he'd found her.*

*His silence was another choice.*

*But it was too little.*

*Too late.*

*Pandora kept running for hours, not stopping as the sun crept into the sky, as the forest turned to a flat plain, as the hunger in her belly ached to be satisfied. Her feet kept pounding, trying to outrace her mind, losing. It took a very long time for her enhanced titan strength to give out, but eventually it did when she tripped, nearly blind, unable to see through eyes blurred both by tears and exhaustion. She landed hard on the ground, unaware of the world around her, letting the sun burn into her cheeks, blazing hot at the height of midday. Her lids slipped closed, turning the world burnt orange before it faded entirely away as she sank into a deep, dark dream.*

*But she woke utterly alert under cover of night.*

*Eyes slipping wide, she sat up and quickly jumped to her feet.*

*Because somehow, she knew where to go.*

*A guardian angel had appeared to her in the middle of the night, a man with glowing blond hair, brighter than a halo, and eyes that watched her with adoration, concerned and full of love. The more awake she became, the more his image slipped away, sand between her fingers, pulled from her mind by a force beyond her control. But his sultry voice reverberated clear and smooth, murmuring a single word into her ear.*

*Pavia.*

*The name burned all her other thoughts away. Pavia. A vampire in Charleston, a vampire with the power to warp minds.*

*Find Pavia.*

*Erase this awful night and the knowledge it had brought.*

*Become a vampire.*

*Die before they had a chance to kill her and spend eternity outrunning fate before it had the chance to catch up.*

*Because if she could wait long enough, there was a light at the end of the tunnel—someone was waiting for her, a guardian angel, a man who would make her forget any other boy had ever even existed.*



*So Pandora ran.*

*And would keep running until he found her.*

## Chapter Twenty



Pandora's eyes flew open. Gasping as she sucked in air, she breathed into lungs that were warm and desperate for oxygen, desperate for their first hint of real life in four years.

Where was she?

What happened?

A girl leaned over, olive skin, lush wavy hair. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry."

Pandora sat up, blinking away the drowsiness still clinging to her limbs, the fog still hanging in her mind. "What happened?"

Someone touched her hand, a blonde girl. "My name is Kira. Do you remember me? Do you know where you are?"

Pandora licked her lips, her brows coming together as she glanced around the room, gaze roaming past the girls to the four boys huddled in the back. Three were facing away, shoving the fourth up against a wall, but he didn't seem to be putting up a fight. He seemed limp, lifeless. Her gaze traveled up his sturdy frame, stopping on his eyes, those perfect seafoam eyes.

And just like that, she remembered.

She brought her hand to her mouth, catching the gasp as her eyes immediately filled with water, mouth quivering as she stared into Jax's eyes —Jax's traitorous eyes.

"You..." She trailed off, unable to speak.

He closed them tight, turning his face away, ashamed.

Pandora jumped to her feet. "I have to go."

Pavia stepped forward, reaching for her arm. Their eyes met, having an entire conversation in the span of a single second. This human girl had once been the vampire who had changed Pandora. She remembered now, remembered everything. How she'd found Pavia in Charleston, a desperate fifteen-year-old begging for help, begging to forget. And how Pavia had granted her wish, sinking her teeth into Pandora's neck, reliving that night

with her as she locked the memories away, as she sealed them behind the wall of Pandora's vampirism, tucking them into the depths of her lost human soul. Pavia understood better than anyone else why Pandora was running, and why she needed to keep going.

"I'm sorry," Pavia said, voice unsteady and utterly sincere. "If I'd been here sooner, I could have stopped them. I would have. But we can still keep you safe. If you stay, we'll protect you, we'll—"

"It's okay," Pandora told her. "It's not your fault." She paused, turning to Jax with words ready to cut deep. "It's better this way. I needed to remember. I needed the reminder that I'm on my own, that love is just a lie we tell ourselves, that there's no one on this earth I can trust."

Jax didn't say anything. He met her eyes as a broken man.

"You can trust us," Kira said, jumping in, pulling Pandora's attention back to her. "Whatever is going on, we can help you."

"You can't." Pandora shook her head. "They're coming. It might already be too late."

"Who?"

"The titans," she answered, already reaching out for the shadows, relieved to know they hadn't abandoned her. They were still there, loyal. "And we both know that conduits aren't strong enough to stop them."

"Dory," Jax rasped, finally finding his voice.

But she didn't turn around, didn't look at him. She drew the shadows around herself, disappearing from sight as the conduits gasped in shock, eyes on the space where she had been.

"We'll be here if you need us," Kira called.

Pandora held on to those words as she raced away, feet pounding loud against the tiled floors, the steady slap of human weight and human feet that had the speed of a titan without the grace of a vampire. But it was more than that. Her body felt clunky and out of sorts, new and uncomfortable. She was fast, but not as fast. She could hear, but not as far. She could see, but in the distance, things were the tiniest bit blurrier than they had been before. And she was hungry, starving. Her breath came in short, shallow gasps, her lungs unused to exercise and exertion. Fighting off the sedative they'd given her, her body tried to remember what it felt like to pump true blood, to have a heart that beat constantly, a figure that warmed and sweat and was alive.

Her soul, though, was still ice.

Frozen. Frigid.

The rest of her burned, coming awake for the first time in four years, aching in a wonderfully human way, but deep in her heart, there was only frost.

The icy sting of betrayal.

Still fresh.

Growing colder and harder by the second.

*I'm such an idiot* , Pandora thought as she sprinted into the trees, on alert for the wall surrounding the town, ready to soar over it to freedom. *Such an idiot for letting him weasel his way back into my heart, such an idiot for trusting him again, even for a second.*

Stones appeared through the foliage, and Pandora leapt, gripping any grooves her fingers could find, using the titan strength and titan endurance she'd missed to carry her up and over the wall, foot by foot, until she was vaulting over the other side. She landed smooth against the ground, one inch closer to freedom.

She kept running.

Always running .

But her mind was on the other side of the wall, was with Jax, lingering over the last few words he'd said.

*Remember that I love you.*

*I regret everything.*

Digging her heels in, Pandora scowled, more determined than ever to get away.

*Regret, my ass. Then why did you do this? Why did you have to make me want you again, have to dangle the dream before my eyes, when you knew it would eventually be ripped away? Wasn't once enough? Wasn't delivering me to the firing squad enough? What, you just had to break my heart again too?*

As soon as she thought it, she realized it was true.

Her heart was shattered.

She was older, stronger, different.

But deep down, she was the same girl she had once been, vulnerable, utterly in love with Jax, and not nearly as immune to her emotions as she wanted to be. And remembering had gutted her, just as she predicted it would. Pieces of her littered the forest, a trail of tears and shards and broken bits she'd never get back, never be able to recover, never be able to put back together.

*What am I?* she thought suddenly.

That idea stung even deeper than Jax's betrayal.

Days ago in that graveyard, Kira had asked why she was running, what she was running from. *Myself*, Pandora had answered, not even fully aware how true her words had been, how utterly inescapable they were .

Her father had been planning to murder her for sixteen years.

Her mother had killed herself to get away.

Her people had done nothing to intervene, had ostracized her to make the decision easier, had chosen death as her fate ever since the day of her birth.

And Jax.

In the end, he'd chosen that too.

And the very idea of his betrayal destroyed her, made her want to scream until her throat was raw, made her want to pound her fists into the ground until they bled, made her want to cry until there was nothing left. But it didn't make her want to run.

*What am I?*

That was what she was running from.

What she'd always been running from.

But there was one problem with that. No matter how fast, how quick, how nimble, she couldn't outrun herself. Eventually, her mind would catch up. Eventually, the questions would find her. Eventually, the truth would snatch her.

But something else caught her first.

Pandora cried out as electricity pulsed through her body, sending a shock wave through her nerves, pulling her from the shadows and propelling her back into the light. Her body jerked, and she fell forward, face slamming against the dirt, head snapping to the side as the volts raged through her. Her body twitched, beyond her control, caught in the lightning crackling the air around her, the bolts zapping her skin, making her convulse. Her eyes closed in defeat as her body shook.

There was no denying what this was.

Bolters.

Titans with the power to create lightning. She'd been too loud with her steps, too obvious in her haste. She'd forgotten her body no longer had the featherlight swiftness of a vampire, but all the weight of titan life. They must have sensed her, heard her, even if they couldn't see her. And now, with the

lightning shocking her system, she was a sitting duck, out in the open, no shadows, no place to hide.

In no time at all, hands were digging into her shoulders, turning her over as the lingering effects continued to pulse through her nerves, making them useless, too stunned to work properly.

"It's her," a voice said.

Pandora opened her eyes, looking into a face, recognizing a boy she'd grown up with, a boy she'd known her entire life. He watched her as though she were a bug to be squashed, no acknowledgment in his hard brown eyes. Then he glanced to the side, toward someone waiting just beyond her line of vision. It didn't take long to figure out who.

"Pandora."

The sound, hard and empty, devoid of any true emotion just as it'd always been, made her soul shudder.

She swallowed and then forced her lips to open, forced her voice out even as her body screamed with the pain. "Father. "

Malcolm Scott leaned down, dark-brown eyes nailing his daughter to the forest floor, lips drawn thin enough to slice. The grooves across his forehead had deepened, wrinkles having grown even more pronounced in the time she'd been gone.

*Does he notice I haven't changed at all?*

*Does he even care?*

Almost as if sensing her thoughts, he turned away and looked toward the bolters who'd caught Pandora in their lightning, who still held her contained. "Two of you, go retrieve Jackson from the conduits, as I have little doubt he's currently unable to extricate himself. And the rest of you, secure the target and bring her with us. This job is done for now."

And just like that, he was gone, walking away, out of sight and leaving the rest of the team to finish the job. Pandora had been trained enough to understand what was coming next, to be unsurprised when another woman she'd known all her life knelt down and pressed her fingers to Pandora's temple.

"Patrice," she rasped, barely a whisper as her body lay still, fried by the electric bolts that had slammed through it.

But the woman ignored her.

*I've known you my entire life.*

*Your daughter is only two years younger than me.*

*You know who I am!*

But Pandora knew the pleas wouldn't matter. And she refused to beg. Titans were just as determined as they were stubborn—neither side would bend .

So instead, she gritted her teeth and hardened her eyes, staring Patrice down, gaze boring into the older woman's head, full of hate and judgment and the promise of vengeance. Regardless, warmth surged beneath her skin, emanating from the fingers pressed to her forehead, tingling as the sensation traveled deeper, blurring her mind, replacing her thoughts with a blank gray mist.

Patrice was a mindbender.

And within seconds, Pandora slipped away.

Gone.

## Chapter Twenty-One



Pandora woke cold and alone, face pressed against a polished floor. After blinking rapidly to clear her eyes, she took in the bright white lights, the barren surface her body was splayed upon, the flat walls surrounding her on every side, three stone and one perfectly clear glass. The small room was empty aside from a lumpy feather mattress, a tray of food, and a small cubby tucked into one corner hiding a toilet.

Pandora stood and stumbled to the tray as her belly roared with hunger, demanding food. But the starvation was almost comforting, because at least with everything else, she was no longer longing for blood. Grabbing quickly, as though it might disappear at any moment, she downed the two slices of bread and gulped in the glass of water before picking the bowl up and slurping down the soup. There were no utensils, nothing breakable, nothing sharp. All plastic, all dulled around the edges, all safe.

She smiled darkly, pressing her forehead to the glass, laughing softly, probably delirious.

She knew exactly where she was.

There wasn't a single doubt in her mind.

All titans were taught about this place from a very young age—the place where the tracked went, where the hunted were sent, where the criminals and the bad people were put until their fate was decided. Humans knew it as Area 51, but when she was growing up, the titans had simply called it the jail. Normally, only those initiated into the order and select government officials were allowed inside. But then again, Pandora wasn't there as a titan.

She was there as a prisoner.

And her fate had already been decided. It was only a matter of time.

But how much time?

That was the question.

What was her father waiting for? Some sort of ceremony? Some sort of ritual?



Why wasn't she dead already?

When exactly would the guillotine fall?

Focused, squinting her eyes, taking in every detail, Pandora slid her gaze over the space visible beyond her cell. A long windowless hall. Cameras hitched to the ceiling. ID scanners to either side. More soundproof cells would be on either side of her. Doors upon doors upon doors rested between her and the outside world. Doors and, of course, guns and guards and titans and every other form of security imaginable. Rumor was the North American prison was the hardest place to break out of in the world, at least if everything she grew up hearing was true.

But Pandora learned a long time ago not to believe everything she was taught as a child. And she wouldn't let a little detail like impossible odds stop her.

After all, she wasn't just another captive.

Pandora was a master thief.

And she was about to have her biggest heist of all—stealing the thing the titans wanted most right out from underneath their noses.

Herself.

And she wasn't going to do it alone.

"Sam," Pandora whispered, withdrawing into the shadows, going where all the cameras and all the security in the world couldn't follow. "You were right. I remember now. And I'm ready. I need you."

Because she was done running.

Done fleeing.

Done pretending.

Once she'd escaped this place, Pandora would face her fate head-on, and somehow, she'd find a way to change it.

~~~

**Thank you for reading! I hope Pandora stole your heart the way she did mine!**

**If you have a moment, please consider leaving a review. Even a few words can make a huge difference in someone deciding to give my book a chance.**

**The adventure continues in the sequel, Freeze (Midnight Ice Book Two), which is available now wherever ebooks are sold! Keep reading for a free preview or click below to grab your copy.**

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**Locked up doesn't mean locked in.**

Pandora Scott is in jail...again. Everyone she once loved betrayed her... again. And some of the most powerful people in the world want her dead... yes, again. Sound familiar? But if there's one thing Pandora is good at, it's wriggling her way out of life or death situations, and this time is no different.

Armed with her ability to disappear and aided by the mysterious Sam, Pandora's got a plan. Escape the most secure prison in the world. Evade the most powerful trackers on the planet. Forget every word that Jax has ever told her. And figure out how to change one teeny tiny thing—fate. Easy, right? Well...doable, at least.

**Keep reading for a preview of the first chapter!**

## Chapter One



Pandora woke in a fog of hazy memories, unable to see clearly, unable to think clearly, adrift in a space where time had no meaning. She blinked, once, twice, trying to clear the heady confusion.

Slowly, a face came into view.

A beautiful face, almost too perfect, as though chiseled from stone, crafted by an artist's hands. Pandora had always thought so, even before he'd fully grown into those just-plump-enough lips and sultry hooded brows. The lashes that any girl would kill for were currently closed in sleep, hiding his best feature—those sometimes-brooding, always-loving seafoam eyes.

Jax.

Her heart thudded painfully.

*Painfully?* Pandora thought, her own brows coming together in a frown as her chest continued to constrict, as her pulse quickened, as her groggy mind fought for clarity.

Jax moved toward her, rolling almost imperceptibly closer in his sleep. A lock of hair fell over his forehead, slipping down over his eyes. Pandora reached for it instinctually, fingers moving on their own to push the wayward strands back behind his ear, to run through his silky hair, to feel him, to be near him.

Her palm hit a wall, stopped by an invisible barrier.

Pandora bolted awake, sitting up in an instant, bringing her other hand against the thick, unbreakable, pristinely clear glass.

*Jax*, she sneered.

Jax with his perfect lips and perfect jaw and perfect hands—hands that always knew just what they were doing, hands that could unravel her with the softest caress or spell her doom with the swiftest push of a button. Jax with his empty words and broken promises. Jax who made her love him twice. Jax who'd locked her in this cell.

Pandora curled her fingers into furious fists. She slammed them against the glass as her blood boiled—her titan blood—and all the memories

of the past few days came crashing down around her.

Jax finding her in New York.

Jax charming her.

Jax traveling with her.

Jax pretending he only had her best interests at heart.

Jax make-believing he still loved her.

Jax pressing his hands against her shoulders as the conduit fire started to rage around her, pushing the buttons to call the other titans, to tell them she was weak and vulnerable, to inform them her vampirism was being cured, to give them the signal to move in. Jax doing nothing as they carried her away, as they brought her here, to the titan jail, to the most fortified prison in North America.

Four years of running.

Four years of hiding.

Undone.

But that wasn't even the worst part.

Pandora closed her eyes, fingers falling open as they dropped away from the glass wall and collapsed in a defeated lump, no longer fighting, instead resting uselessly on her lap. Jax, the cell, the prison—all of it faded away as the memory washed over her. The memory she'd tried so hard to forget, the memory that being cured had unleashed from the hidden depths of her mind. The memory of her last night with the titans. The night Jax had been initiated. The night she'd run away. The night she discovered that her own father meant to kill her and no one, not even Jax, was trying to stand in his way.

*What am I?*

The thought came swift and quick, eliciting a gasp from Pandora's lips as it sliced right through her, a deep, painful cut.

What was she?

And without even trying, she was drawn back—not a woman trapped in a prison, but a frightened girl huddled on the stairs, eavesdropping on a conversation she was never meant to overhear, balanced on the blade's edge of before and after.

*Souls?* Pandora could almost hear her father's dark laughter as he spat the word at Jax's father that night four short years ago. *Don't talk to me about souls. Mine broke a long time ago, on what was supposed to be the happiest day of my life, the day my daughter was born—the day her mother*

*and I realized that the child we spent years trying to conceive, months planning for, a lifetime dreaming of, was a child who could destroy the entire world, was a child I would have to murder the very second she turned sixteen. Don't talk to me of souls, Javier. I don't have one anymore.*

Before that moment, Pandora had been a naïve fifteen-year-old about to run away with her one true love, dreaming of freedom from a life and a destiny she'd never wanted.

And after?

After, she'd been broken.

Broken by the iron sound of her father's voice as he spoke of ending her life.

Broken by the sight of Jax in the woods, tattoo freshly carved into the soft skin at the base of his neck letting her know he'd chosen his side and it wasn't with her.

Broken by the lies.

Broken by finally having heard the truth and, instead of instinctively denying the possibility that she could mean something so evil, having the soul-crushing realization that all the pieces of her life were somehow falling into place, that somehow it all made sense. The fact that her mother killed herself. The fact that her father never once showed her an ounce of love. The fact that the titan parents didn't want their children getting close to her. The fact that her power of invisibility never fit. The fact that she herself never fit.

Pandora was born to be discarded.

But that didn't mean she'd go willingly. Because something else had happened during her four years of running and running and never looking back—she'd learned how to fight for herself.

*And I've become pretty freaking great at it* , Pandora thought, taking a deep breath before feeling her lips twitch with the whisper of a smile. *If I do say so myself* .

And then she stood, easing to her feet before brushing the nonexistent dust from her pants. Not bothering to take another look at Jax, Pandora reached out and coaxed her shadows, wrapping herself in a thin veil of ebony, letting the world fade as the darkness surged around her. She became invisible to the cameras relentlessly focusing and refocusing through the glass. The lens was constantly pinned on her location, searching for a target who'd disappeared.

"Sam," Pandora called into the space around her, knowing he'd

somehow hear, knowing without a doubt that he'd come when she called. Because while she was strong and independent and sure she could figure out how to fight this battle on her own, it never hurt to have help. And as much as she hated to admit it, a small part of her brightened at the idea that there was at least one person standing by her side. A small part of her was grateful that she wasn't completely alone.

"Pandora," a deep voice whispered, breath brushing the back of her neck, shooting a delicious little tingle down her spine.

"Would you stop doing that?" she grumbled, jumping and spinning in one quick, shocked motion. *Every freaking time*, she thought, annoyed that she couldn't control her own body's response to his sudden appearance, couldn't quiet the flutter of her heart. Maybe she could have when she'd been a vampire, but she was utterly human at the moment—and frustratingly hormonal, at that. Getting her period again for the first time in four years? Yeah, not fun. But it was almost over, thank god.

Sam just shrugged, grinning. The shadows undulated around his frame, pulsing quietly as though they moved in tune with his heartbeat, somehow alive, somehow part of him. Then he quipped, "Probably not."

"Why?"

"Because I enjoy watching you squirm," he teased, stepping next to her. And then he leaned closer, lips a hairsbreadth from her ear as he whispered, "And I like knowing that even after a thousand years, the sound of my voice still makes your blood sing. That even the softest brush of my breath still brings a swarm of eager goose bumps to your skin."

Pandora swallowed, cheeks growing warm as those very goose bumps he mentioned rippled with delight.

But Sam stepped past her, letting his words linger, probably basking in the swell of feelings he knew they brought rising within her.

*Well, in that case...* Pandora mused, mentally shaking herself out of it. Then she turned, tracking his movements before tossing out a single question. "A thousand years?"

Sam lifted a brow as if to say, *I thought you'd catch that*. But he just cast a wry glance toward the glass wall of her cell. "Walk through that, and I'll explain."

Pandora pursed her lips, fighting back a groan. She'd been in this cell for three days. And for three days, Sam had appeared, teased her with little tidbits of information, and goaded her into attempting to walk through solid

glass. Guess what else had happened for three days? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Because she could become invisible, and, well, that was about it.

“You can do it,” Sam urged, tone earnest. “I know you can. The only thing holding you back is you, and the lies they always told you, the doubts they put in your mind to make you weak. Discard all of that, believe in yourself, and you’ll succeed. I know you will. After all, you’ve done it before.”

Another piece of bait.

Another juicy little tidbit for her to hang on to.

When had she done it before?

And how had he known her for a thousand years?

And—

*Fine, damn you* , Pandora cursed, taking a deep breath and stepping up to the glass. She needed answers, and if there was one thing she’d learned about Sam in the short time she’d known him, it was that answers didn’t come easy—if they ever came at all.

Palms pressed against the cool glass, Pandora closed her eyes and drew the shadows closer, letting the darkness swell as she slowly sank deeper and deeper into the abyss, letting her mind empty, letting all thoughts of the real world drift away until there was only swirling black and Sam’s presence by her side. The prison disappeared. The cool presence of the glass faded. The boy lying fast asleep on the other side of the wall drifted away. When her body was entirely calm, entirely relaxed, Pandora took a small step forward, and—*smack* .

Pandora groaned, eyes snapping open as the world drew back into acute focus, bright and mocking. She flicked her gaze toward Sam and noticed his frown.

“You’re holding back,” he said.

“I am not,” Pandora protested, glaring at him. “Maybe you’re just not explaining it very well.”

“At the last second, you’re holding back,” he repeated, ignoring her accusation as he narrowed his eyes and stared again at the wall as though trying to unravel its secrets. “You don’t trust me,” he mumbled to himself. “Or maybe you don’t trust your power. Or maybe you don’t entirely trust yourself.”

*And why should I?* Pandora mused, rolling her eyes. *I haven’t exactly been the role model for good decision-making, what with turning into a*



*vampire, letting the same guy break my heart twice, and falling for the same tricks over and over again.*

Sam whipped his head around as though he could hear the thoughts running through her mind, gaze inquisitive, blue eyes penetrating as he analyzed her. And then his expression cleared. "I have an idea."

Pandora rolled her eyes. "That's new."

"Just take my hand," he drawled, tossing her an amused stare.

Pandora was immediately intrigued. Normally he danced around her, keeping his distance, getting close but not too close, teasing her with the warmth of his presence before gracefully pulling away. But now he held his palm out, golden skin lit with an inner glow that somehow absorbed the darkness always pulsing around him. Slowly, Pandora extended her hand and entwined their fingers. She inhaled sharply at the burning feel of his touch.

"Focus on me," Sam murmured, almost hypnotically.

*Yeah, like I could focus on anything else .* Pandora almost snorted but managed to control it at the last second. His closeness was intoxicating, overwhelming. She couldn't help but tighten her grip, thumb brushing over his knuckle. But as always, there was something not quite real about him—as though the palm touching hers was there, yet not. He wasn't quite solid. Heat and life surged into her skin, yet her fingers felt wrapped around little more than a temporarily firm patch of air, as though Sam himself was little more than a shadow pretending for the moment to be a man.

"Close your eyes and listen to the sound of my voice," he continued, soft and alluring, pulling her in deeper. "Let yourself get lost in my world. Join me here. I know you can."

Pandora focused on the warmth of his touch, willing it to become more real, more solid. The shadows pressed closer, not needing to be pulled, only welcomed as they enshrouded her in darkness, wrapping her in ebony, stealing the light from her eyes and blackening out the real world. Pandora brushed her thumb against Sam's knuckle again, this time feeling the soft ridges of his skin, the curves of his bones. He flexed his hand, grabbing her tighter, his own fingers dancing with hers like long-lost lovers finally returning home. Distantly, she heard his breath skip a beat, heard him release a long, trembling sigh, as though he'd been waiting a lifetime to hold her again, to feel her again. Pandora leaned in closer, pressing her shoulder against his arm, her hip against his leg, longing to rest her head against the nook of his neck, a spot she somehow knew she'd fit into perfectly.

Sam stepped away.

Pandora followed, thinking only of closing the gap between them, willing his ghostly presence to grow more solid with each passing second, willing him to life.

Sam stepped.

Pandora followed.

Again and again.

Until.

“Open your eyes,” he whispered, nose pressed to her ear, breath the lightest tickle.

Pandora listened, holding on to her invisibility but letting the shadows fall away just enough for her to realize she’d followed Sam straight through the glass and cleanly to the other side.

“I did it!” she said, spinning and throwing her arms in the air, body extending for an excited hug before her mind caught up and she froze.

Sam sidestepped the embrace, little more than smoke and air and spirit once again. A smile wavered on his lips, sad for a moment before firming to something sturdy, something proud.

Pandora dropped her arms to her sides, and she swallowed thickly, fighting the sting of rejection. A somewhat forced smile rose to her lips. “So,” she said, willing the grin to become real as the challenge rolled off her tongue. “I’ve done this before, have I? You’ve known me for a thousand years, have you? Time to spill. Start talking, mister.”

“Walk back through by yourself,” Sam said, a challenge of his own, “and I will.”

“Hey.” Pandora’s brows came together in a frown. “No fair.”

“You want to escape this prison?” Sam asked, turning to face her as he slowly walked backward. “You want to get out of here alive? You’re going to have to learn how to walk through more than glass to do it. This is only the beginning, Pandora. Only the beginning.”

And then he retreated to the shadows, melting into the silky darkness as he eased back, drifting completely away before reappearing on the other side of the glass.

Pandora clenched her fists, wanting to wring his neck just a little. But she knew he was right. The titan prison was more fortified than anything she’d tried to break into or out of before. She needed to become stronger, more powerful, and she needed to do it fast. Because she’d been trapped for

three days already, and the clock was winding down—it was only a matter of time before her father made good on his word, before the titans decided to kill her, before whatever moment they were waiting for finally arrived.

Against her will, Pandora's gaze traveled down ever so slowly, eyes fighting her instincts until they landed on Jax and stayed there, stuck.

This was the third time she'd woken up to find him asleep outside her cell, body pressed to the glass as though he could somehow osmose his way inside. It was the third time she'd retreated into the shadows, refusing to speak to him, refusing to give him the satisfaction of waking up to find her watching him. Because she wasn't quite sure which expression her gaze held—pure fury or pure agony? The gaping tear in her heart hinted at the latter, as much as she wished it weren't true, and there was no way she'd let Jax know just how easily, just how hard she'd fallen once again.

Pandora knelt, reaching for Jax's face—his perfect, backstabbing face.

Her hand hovered above his cheek, and she held it there, uncertain. The heat from his skin drifted up, melting into her palm, making her wince. Part of her still yearned to brush the hair from his forehead, to tuck it safely behind his ear, to lie down and let him wrap his arms around her and tell her he was sorry, tell her that everything would work out in the end. And the other part of her? The furious, spewing, nearly volcanic part of her? Well, that part yearned to wrap her fingers around his throat just to show him she didn't give a damn, to show him the titans hadn't won yet.

Her thumb twitched, curling inward.

Jax sighed, rolling onto his back, neck straining toward her as though he'd heard her thoughts and was offering himself up for judgment. Pandora paused. Had he noticed her presence somehow? Had he felt her soul aching deep within the shadows, a place where only he and Sam had ever been able to sense her?

"Dory?" The words came out as a puff of air, a sleepy sigh lured to life from whatever scene played behind his closed eyes. The edges of his mouth curved up. A sound passed through his slightly parted lips, a humming purr, satisfied and happy—the stuff of dreams.

His entire body froze.

Pandora snatched her hand back and hugged her wayward fingers to her chest.

Jax's eyes shot open.

“Dory?”

She jumped away and pulled the shadows tighter.

Jax rolled to his feet, staring into her cell, expression sharp as a thousand different emotions passed over his face, fluttering like bright lights in the depths of his eyes. He pressed his hands to the glass, aggressive and frustrated, fists clenched as he saw her cell was empty—a sure indication that she was still hiding from him, still unwilling to talk. And just as fast, all of that gave way to utter hopelessness. He dropped his head between his raised hands, shoulders bending in as his back hunched, as his muscles all gave out, barely having the strength to hold him upright. He directed his gaze to the floor, ashamed, unable to look at the empty space where she might be standing. A silent sob shuddered through him.

And then he paused, head tilting as though he’d heard something strange.

Or sensed something strange, maybe.

Ever so slowly, his gaze shifted, rolling over the floor, lifting up, up, up, and landing on the exact spot where she stood hidden, completely invisible on the wrong side of her cell.

His brows drew together, his expression curious.

He took an uncertain step toward her.

Pandora dove into the shadows, plunging into the darkness, knowing it would be there for her, knowing it was the one thing that had never abandoned her—not as a titan, not as a vampire. The shadows had always been there in her deepest, darkest moments, sheltering her, saving her, protecting her when no one and nothing else would. She trusted these ebony tendrils more than anything else in the world—more than her own mind, definitely more than her heart.

Unseeing, unfeeling, letting her power lead her, Pandora walked.

Five steps.

Not a long distance.

But when she opened her eyes, she was on the other side of the glass, back in her cell but no longer trapped, no longer a prisoner. Now there by choice, biding her time, emboldened by the sudden advantage she’d earned—something the titans would never see coming.

Jax was forgotten behind her. Wherever he moved or whatever he said was blocked by the soundproof wall at her back, and she didn’t care to turn around. Because when she looked up, hungry cerulean eyes held her

captive. She was lost for a moment in the pleasure and elation sparkling like the sun across the deep sea in his gaze.

Sam's lips twitched into a grin for the barest moment, and then he nodded, signaling that he'd never doubted her and had always known she could do it. "Good work."

Pandora lifted a teasing brow, high on her own bursting confidence. "Good work? That's all I get?"

The corners of his eyes crinkled as a bright light flashed across them. "What else do you want?"

The suggestive undercurrent in his voice, smooth and controlled, made her pulse quicken. But she forced the attraction down, forced her mind to clear. "I want answers. How have you known me for a thousand years? How have I done this before? Who are you? Who am I? What's going on?"

Sam dropped his gaze with a sigh, shaking his head. "Those aren't the right questions."

"Then what are?" she pressed.

He took a step closer, lifting his hands so his palms cupped her cheeks, whispering against her skin like fluttering silk, there but not there—always teasing, always elusive. He tilted her head so she looked up at him, realizing how much taller he was—just the right height to make her want to stretch onto her tippy-toes, wrap her arms around his shoulders, and close the gap.

"I have a question, one I've wondered for many years, many lifetimes," he murmured, gaze flicking over her shoulder to the man possibly still standing outside her cell, wondering if she'd ever speak to him again. Pandora knew the answer to that question—no.

Sam brought his attention back to her and brushed his thumb adoringly across her cheek, as though she were fragile, precious. Her focus was completely on him when he continued in an open voice, one laid bare, vulnerable.

"What is worse?" he said simply, with an undeniable undercurrent of despair. "Is it worse to love someone with your entire being and have that love stripped away, realizing it exists only in your heart? To carry that love from afar, never being able to hold her, to touch her, to comfort her? To watch her die a thousand lonely deaths or survive a thousand broken hearts, knowing you can never save her, knowing that even with all your strength and force and invincibility, you are powerless in the one area that means the

most to you? Or is it worse to love someone with your entire being and have that love stripped away, forgetting that it existed in the first place? To live a thousand lives with the unyielding sensation that a part of you is missing, that a part of you is empty and wrong, the part you gave him but have now lost? To be always searching for someone just out of reach, stumbling through life utterly alone? Which is worse, do you think, Pandora? To know love, to feel love, and to lose it over and over in an unending cycle you can't break? Or to forget your love ever existed in the first place?"

Pandora couldn't breathe.

Couldn't move.

Deep down, her soul felt suffocated by his words, was choking on his heartbreak, struggling to find an answer she had lost so long ago, one she couldn't remember.

Still gently caressing her cheek, Sam disappeared into the shadows. One moment he was there, watching her with the weight of a history she didn't understand, and the next he'd faded from sight, slipping deep into the darkness, gone.

Pandora stumbled on shaky feet, a boat abandoned by her anchor, floating without a tether, off balance and unsure.

*Damn you*, she thought, annoyance acute as the fog his presence created suddenly cleared.

"That wasn't an answer!" she shouted into the emptiness of her barren cell, listening as her voice reverberated across the stone, bouncing from wall to wall, filling the small space. "You still owe me! You promised!"

For a moment, there was nothing.

Pandora's gaze raced across the stone walls, up to the ceiling and down to the floor, passing over the glass wall just long enough to notice that Jax had disappeared.

And then she sensed it.

Laughter rippling through the shadows. Pure, untainted amusement that washed over her in a crashing wave, dispersing the darkness and piercing through her. And despite her best efforts, the response brought a frustrated yet somehow honest, somehow joyful smile to her lips.

*Men*, she huffed, wondering how to retaliate.

But at the same moment, the smell of hot oatmeal drifted to her nose, and she turned just in time to see a little tray of food pass through the hidden door in the glass. Her stomach grumbled as the opening snapped shut, sealing

her breakfast into the cell. Just like always, there were no utensils, no knives. The bowl was plastic and the cup was paper, nothing sharp, nothing breakable.

Pandora's grin only deepened.

If they thought a concrete cell and dull dinnerware were enough to stop her, they had another think coming. Because now that she'd walked through walls once, she was sure she could do it again. So it was only a matter of time before she waltzed her adorable, invisible behind out their front door, escaping right beneath their noses.

The answers could come after she was free.

Because no matter how intriguing, how sexy, how slyly evasive he was, Pandora had no intention of letting Sam off the hook so easily. One way or another, she'd steal the secrets hiding in his smile.

She did, after all, have an uncanny knack for thieving.

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## A B O U T T H E A U T H O R



Bestselling author Kaitlyn Davis writes young adult fantasy novels under the name Kaitlyn Davis and contemporary romance novels under the name Kay Marie.

Always blessed with an overactive imagination, Kaitlyn has been writing ever since she picked up her first crayon and is overjoyed to share her work with the world. When she's not daydreaming, typing stories, or getting lost in fictional worlds, Kaitlyn can be found indulging in some puppy videos, watching a little too much television, or spending time with her family.

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# Table of Contents

[All Titles by Kaitlyn Davis](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Preview of Freeze \(Midnight Ice Book Two\)](#)

[About the Author](#)