

Frost
Midnight Ice Book One



By
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eBook Edition

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All Titles by Kaitlyn Davis

Midnight Fire

Ignite
Simmer
Blaze
Scorch
Burn

Midnight Ice

Frost
Freeze – Coming Spring 2017!

Once Upon A Curse

Gathering Frost
Withering Rose
Chasing Midnight – Coming Soon!

A Dance of Dragons

The Shadow Soul
The Spirit Heir
The Phoenix Born

A Dance of Dragons – The Novellas

The Golden Cage
The Silver Key
The Bronze Knight
The Iron Rider

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.

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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.

Werefolk.

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, claspng 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, eyeing 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.

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