

Gypsy Blood

ALL THE PRETTY MONSTERS

BOOK 1

KRISTY CUNNING

GYPSY BLOOD

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This entire series is a work of fiction and should not be looked at for historical accuracy. A vast amount of creative liberties have been taken to forge a world of fantasy and escapism. Almost all coincidences, names, and places are simply that—a coincidence.

Gypsy Pride:

- (1A) Only maintained if a gypsy doesn't stray too far from the Code.
- (1B) A gypsy with gypsy pride is known to draw in the gypsies who've lost their own.

The song of a Gypsy's Pride:

The tea leaves warned of blood and death.

Four gypsy first-borns breathed the last breath.

War! War! Beyond the double-dutch doors!

Sing, sweet gypsies, who will be mistaken no more.

Six gypsy families all stood nigh.

Five gypsy families for one sacrifice.

Four gypsy families broken apart.

Three gypsy families turned cold of heart.

Two gypsy families couldn't back down.

One gypsy family went underground.

Forever is such a long time to bleed.

Worst are the gypsies brought to their knees.

Sing, gypsies, sing of your lies.

Never trust a gypsy with no gypsy pride.

Sing, gypsies, sing of your truths.

The apples have all rotted; the oranges just bruised.

Prologue

VIOLET

There's a lot to being a Portocale gypsy. There's an entire cult devoted to wiping out the last of our bloodline for a "Forsaken" deity of some sort. That's just the beginning of our bad luck.

Sounds fun to be me, huh?

Don't judge me for not having the details. This cult doesn't give many details when they're attempting to kill you and stuff. Maybe their parents didn't love them enough and it made them stabby?

Most Portocale gypsies fake their deaths young and don't come out of hiding until much later on. I'm sketchy on those details too, since Mom always said she'd tell me when it was time.

It's hard to rely on the stories I've heard, because gypsies are natural-born storytellers, and you never know which stories are fact or fiction.

Most people think it's because we're constantly exposed to the semi-undead and have to contend with the wild stories the dead tell. The 'dead men tell no tales' thing is a total load of crap, by the way. Ghosts never shut the hell up, and it's hard to believe half the shit they say.

I didn't even start seeing ghosts until this past year or so, but my crazy-level grows with each new one that pops into my life.

They whine more than I have this week. I'm not usually a whiner, but today is the exception. Today is the day I'm watching them carry my mother's casket into a viewing room, and I clutch the program in my hand a little harder than necessary.

"The chick in the coffin has a total hot mom vibe. Yours, I presume," the ghost riding my mother's casket says just as I break a gypsy's number one rule: **Never make eye contact.**

I suck at that rule. Again, the ghost thing is new for me, so I deserve a break.

A grin curves the red head's lips as she hops off the coffin and struts toward me. "Well...I think we should talk, since I know you can see me. Tell me, does this bra make my boobs look disproportionate?"

When I don't answer the disrespectful ghost, who is dressed only in her skimpy bra and panties, and won't stop probing at her phantom breasts, she moves right up beside me. My focus is on the casket as they lift the end that shows my mother's face, and I have to lower myself to the chair when my knees try to wobble.

A single tear rolls down my cheek as the ghost takes a seat beside me.

"Man, if you're her daughter, you guys must get hotter with age. Because she is *way* hotter than you. She's tanner too...and *she's dead.*"

The dead aren't a sensitive people once they've lost their physical foothold in the world of the more sensitive living.

“You're totally cute, though. Your lips are definitely a fun feature about you. I'd kiss you if I could, just so I could feel those lips, and I'm not even particularly into girls.”

“Do you mind?” I hiss, giving her side-eye.

When she grins, I glare at her and look back over at the door, wondering if someone—*anyone*—else is going to show up. I've never met another Portocale gypsy, but Mom always swore we had family out there.

I wish her spirit would rise so I could ask her all the really important questions wadding in my gut.

“How'd she die?” the ghost asks.

Since I'm now alone in here with her and simply waiting on my mother's spirit to emerge, I answer. “There was no definitive cause of death.”

“Oh, that sucks,” she answers with a firm nod. “How long's she been down?”

“Four days.”

“Well, at least they were quick with the funeral stuff.”

“Too quick,” I mutter under my breath.

“So...why are you staring at her like you expect her nose to wiggle? Do you not see that she's dead?”

“I'm waiting on her spirit to detach. It sometimes takes up to five days. There's a reason wakes once lasted a lot longer.”

“There’s no spirit inside that body,” she tells me like I should know this already.

“Yes. There is,” I state tightly.

“No. There isn’t. I’m a ghost. We know these things.”

An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach. If the cult got her, they wouldn’t be able to also capture her spirit. So does that mean a spirit hunter is also after her? There’s no other way she’d be anywhere but right here right now, otherwise.

I told her I could see ghosts now. She knows I could see her too.

I check my phone, seeing my father has left a message.

DAD: Can’t get out of here early enough to get out there before the funeral procession. Sorry.

Instead, of replying, I simply drop my phone into my purse.

“My name’s Anna, by the way,” the ghost tells me.

“Anna, if you start stalking me, I will salt you at every given opportunity,” I warn her while sighing and pinching the bridge of my nose.

“Do you have salt right now?” she asks.

“No.”

“Good to know,” she chirps as she glances around the otherwise silent, empty room.

“Your mom was popular, huh?”

I shrug a shoulder, not letting the next tear fall. Mom would be pissed if she knew I was crying in front of her casket right now.

“When you’re a Portocale gypsy, it’s hard to keep friends,” I answer absently.

“Why?” Anna muses.

My eyes cut away from my mother’s body as I sigh. “Because we never know who wants us dead.”

“I hope you don’t think that makes you interesting,” she calls to my back as I stand. “Just wait until I tell you about how awesome I am. You’ll never let me go.”

Chapter 1

VIOLET

Tearing the covering away from the couch, I look around and start swatting at the dust plumes. It takes less than three months for an entire home devoid of life to be covered in dust.

Fortunately, I've yet to see any pests. I'd probably be tempted to burn the place down if something with fur or scales scurried across my foot right now. This day is shitty enough.

"You could totally pay someone to do this," Anna says as she follows me through the home.

"I totally could not," I remind her absently, lifting a picture of my mother and me, swiping a finger through the dust that carries over our faces, revealing hidden smiles.

Mom's eyes have always held soulful secrets. She said it was a Portocale thing. But my eyes never seem to hold soulful secrets, so I'm starting to think that gaze must skip a generation.

Clearing my throat, I put the picture down.

"You could be rich. With a curvy body like that, I'd be rich," Anna states candidly, still following me through as I push open the three doors on this side of the stairs.

"I guess I was born in the wrong era," I state distractedly.

More things are covered. More daunting layers of dust are still left to contend with.

“It’ll take me months to get this house clean,” I groan.

“Or you could use your ass and get rich,” Anna unhelpfully counters, as I continue tearing away the many coverings. “Better yet, use your gypsy magic!”

“That’s not how gypsy magic works.”

“Okay, so how does gypsy magic work?” she volleys.

“I’m not entirely sure, but I do know it doesn’t allow you to circumvent manual labor,” I say as I move into a different room that has a sickly feeling trickling up my spine.

“I think I was a gypsy once,” she says on a sigh. “Traveling the road, tempting male travelers with debauchery, as my shady brothers cleaned out their pockets. I didn’t know I was setting a fashion trend that would catch fire in the twenty-first century,” she says on a wistful sigh.

“That is the romanticized version of it,” I tell her absently. “You’re not a gypsy if you think that’s the truth of it, though.”

“Well, consider me an honorary gypsy and tell me the truth,” she says as I lift some fallen books from the ground and place them inside the bottom cabinet before me.

“The word *gypsy* is actually used as a racial slur in most countries still to this day. I’m fortunate to live in a time and place where gypsy culture is appreciated and even embraced by a lot of gadjo—”

“Gadjo?”

“Non-gypsy,” I state dismissively. “Can be an offensive term, depending on the tone,” I add.

She pops her head out of the curio cabinet suddenly, and I groan while working around her, as she pretends like she’s trying to find a comfortable place to sit.

“Anyway, gypsies have lived through religious persecution, unprovoked violence, unrepentant prejudice, and unapologetic massacres that rarely get more than a footnote’s mention in the history books. And in some parts of the world, they’re still facing all the same barbaric problems.”

“Bummer,” she states. “Anyone ever tell you that you shouldn’t piss on rainbows? Are you still cranky because of the dead mommy issues?”

I’m not really sure why I try to tell her things.

“What does the town look like?” I ask her, lifting a cushion on the sofa in Mom’s office.

This room hurts the worst so far. It has so much of her in it.

“Lots of ghosts are out there. Seems like the town is full of them,” she answers dryly.

It’s getting more and more difficult to figure out when she’s telling the truth.

“Great,” I state instead of grilling her to see if she’s being truthful.

No, I’m not some special person because I can see ghosts. It’s a gypsy thing. Sometimes you can see glimpses of the future, and sometimes you see remains from the past.

“Oh, and there are some major hotties in town, so there are a few perks. I can watch you like that one time when we invaded the frat house and you started that orgy,” Anna goes on.

I palm my face, groaning internally. “I did *not* start an orgy. I’ve never even been to a frat house. And you’re getting more ridiculous by the second,” I snap, before I turn away and blow out a long breath.

I constantly remind myself to be patient with her, because she can’t help the lies or the scattered way her mind works. But my patience is waning today.

“Have you ever started an orgy other than that one time?” she asks, clicking her tongue, completely infuriating me as she abruptly appears in front of me.

I hate it when she does that.

I level her with a cold look. “I’ve *never* and will *never* start an orgy!” I shout. A little too loudly.

Especially since my eyes lock onto a man’s mystic blue peepers, when my gaze darts over Anna’s slightly shorter head.

She whirls around, her eyes going round, as she moves closer. “Hubba Hubba,” she stage whispers.

I hate her so hard right now that I’m tempted to salt her.

The man with blondish hair and the beginnings of an intentional beard is grinning at me, as he arches an eyebrow with flawless condescension.

“Well, that’s possibly the first time anyone has ever shouted that at me before we even made introductions,” he drawls, letting his eyes rake over me before they meet mine again.

His suit-and-tie look isn’t usually my thing, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man wear a suit the way he does. Anna starts fanning me, which fortunately debunks the electrical current in the air.

I should probably look into fumigating the house for residual magic before I do something stupid...like attack a man for being indecently tempting in a suit while I’m still emotionally vulnerable.

“Tell him I spent the thirties as a gangsta’s prostitute, so I learned a few things. Tell him now,” Anna says a little dreamily.

Pretending not to see the horny ghost at my side, since he can’t see her and I already look insane, I try to play it off. “I find it best to leave the most memorable first impression possible, no matter how outrageous the memory may seem.”

His grin only grows.

“So another Portocale gypsy is in town?” he muses, taking a step closer and perching at a lean on the wall as his arms cross over his really impressive chest.

“Tell him the prostitute thing,” Anna says like she’s still in a lusty trance.

“I’m actually Marta’s niece by marriage, so there’s no gypsy blood in me,” I lie easily, weirdly causing both his

eyebrows to bounce up in confusion. “I’m Violet Carmine,” I add tightly.

He straightens and adjusts his tie, his facial expressions closing down like he’s turning into an entirely different man before my eyes.

“I don’t think he was expecting that,” Anna rhetorically points out.

“Violet *Carmine*?” he asks as though he’s struggling to believe that, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“Yes,” I state warily, wondering why he seems to believe otherwise.

The man before me distracts me from my silent concerns when he runs a hand over the back of his neck, smiling tightly. “I’m Vancetto Valhinseng. Head of House of Valhinseng,” he tells me, his eyes meeting mine expectantly.

“Valhinseng...oh! You’re one of my aunt’s clients,” I say with a breath of relief. Mom wouldn’t be collecting enemies as clients to pass onto me. “I’m taking over the business, so I’ll start sending your supplies within a week or so, unless you’ve already made other arrangements.”

He cocks his head, his eyes studying me even more intently. “My current arrangements have been temporary and by far less sufficient than your *aunt* was capable of. You carry the gypsy gift?”

Very few people even believe in gypsy magic—or any magic, for that matter—any more. Shadow Hills is one of the few exceptions. It’s a tourist town for the believers, the curious, or the weekend fixers.

“No. I’m not of gypsy blood, but I do have the recipes, and a gypsy friend who helps out with the more majestic side of things,” I state vaguely, using my rehearsed lines like the seasoned liar any *gifted* gypsy should be these days.

His lips almost give into a curve of amusement, but his eyes are no longer playful. They’re full of guarded intrigue and wary curiosity.

The eyes, in case you’re wondering, are the answers to the thoughts in someone’s mind. Though, it’s never easy to accurately read them. It’s all an educated guess, based on context and observable information regarding one’s surroundings.

I’m not exactly a pro at it...

When he just continues to stare like he expects more, I add, “You may have to use a little more of my recreational products for it to be as potent as Aunt Marta’s, but it’ll be closer than anything else you can find.”

“You are so a gypsy drug dealer, you sassy little fiend,” Anna scoffs, causing me to inwardly groan.

Vancetto scrubs a hand over his jaw, eyes locked like he’s lost in thought as he presumably tries to unravel me. It’s unnerving, because it feels like he thinks I’m hiding something.

I don’t like it when people seem to see right through me.

“Will you be taking over her medium clients as well?” he muses, almost as though he followed my train of thought and decided to bait me.

“I’m afraid not. Medium work is more advanced and incredibly dangerous without proper training or at least gypsy blood,” I answer, smiling tightly as I once again reiterate my lie and leave it at that.

I get a vibe from him that has the hair on the back of my neck raising, even as the rest of my body seems inclined to appreciate the very sight of him.

He nods like that’s acceptable and claps his hands together. “Well, then, Ms. Portocale, don’t let me keep you from getting set up. If you find yourself in need of assistance, I’d be happy to let you pick a few of my maids to help you along.”

“My name is Carmine. And are you offering to let me *pick* some of your workers as if they’re property, Mr. Valhinseng?” I ask a little bitterly, smiling a little less friendly.

From sexy to douche in under ten minutes. Not a new record, but definitely close. I’ve dated the ones who snap their fingers and bitch about the temperature of their soup, when I’m just happy it’s not scalding my tongue right out of the microwave.

“My panties are still wet. I don’t care if he is an unapologetic rich prick,” Anna states seriously.

I really do hate her as much as I love her.

His lips twitch again. “I pay them generously. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind.”

“I’ve got this,” I tell him, reminding myself I know his name because he was a big-spending client of my mother’s.

Douche or not, his account alone will pay the bills and most of my living expenses.

“Very well. But if you change your mind, you have my number and address. Feel free to use either,” he states, a sardonic grin briefly ghosting his lips.

“I’ll let you know when your order is ready,” I tell him dismissively.

His grin spreads like he expected that answer. “For a moment, Violet *Carmine*, I think you almost liked me. How very novel.”

He turns and *struts* away, leaving that weird remark lingering in the air.

“I feel like you should be insulted, but I’m not sure why,” Anna states thoughtfully. “Or maybe it was a compliment?”

I wait until I hear the front door close before saying, “I hate you.”

“You didn’t tell him I was a gangsta’s prostitute in the thirties,” she says accusingly, turning an annoyed look on me. “It’s *I* who hates *you*.”

I’m back to the forgotten face-palming. “Because you were a lounge singer in the thirties. We’ve gone over this. You weren’t ever an astronaut, nor were you a prostitute, nor did you kill Hitler, since Hitler didn’t even die in the thirties!”

“Or so they want you to think,” she states in a hushed, conspiratorial tone, pointing her finger at me.

“Why am I feeding your delusions? I’m supposed to be ignoring you unless you’re telling the truth,” I grumble as I turn and start down the stairs.

“Rude!”

“No, it’s called therapy. No ghost comes back from this phase, but I’m determined to make you the first,” I call over my shoulder. “Step one is getting you to focus on what is *really* happening.”

For whatever reason, I happen to like the pretty redhead who died in her prime when her boyfriend got jealous and shot her in the bedroom after catching her with another man.

She’s stuck in ghost limbo, unable to move on.

And sadly, she’s the closest thing to a real friend I’ve ever had.

My mother’s most important rule? Never grow fond of the dead. They still have a worse death coming for them.

Chapter 2

VANCE

“A Van Helsing is truly walking onto my land,” Emit says as I step onto his patio.

He’s bloody naked under the robe that he hasn’t bothered to tie shut. Some things never change, no matter how many centuries flit by.

“It’s always puzzled me why you think your dick is really worth showing off,” I drawl, pocketing my hands as I lean against the side of his house.

He gives me a crooked, smug grin, as he drinks from a glass of wine.

“It’s always puzzled *me* why you have to look at my cock before my eyes,” he fires back.

I almost forgot why I hate speaking to the mutt. The only one looking at his dick is himself. Matter of fact, that’s where his eyes are now, as he grins down at it.

Neanderthal.

“Why the hell did you ask to speak with me? I rather prefer our arrangement of sticking to our own corners of town,” he says more seriously, eyes finally up.

“Violet Carmine is in town,” I tell him, watching for his reaction to see if he’s visited her yet.

“Marta’s niece? So? We knew she was coming to take over her aunt’s shop,” he says, eyeing me like I’m an idiot.

Definitely hasn’t gone to see her.

“She has Portocale blood.”

He looks caught off guard, frowning. “Okay. Most Portocale gypsies use fake names, so it’s not a shocker. But another Portocale comes to live in Shadow Hills? Is this one also willing to supply us?”

“Indeed. She said she’d have orders running soon.”

“Marta was a unique Portocale. She hated us but didn’t mind taking our money and giving us the things we need. As unusual as it all is, I don’t see how this second one is so special as to warrant a face-to-face conversation,” he states distractedly as he flicks through his phone. “We all actively avoided Marta after observing her for a brief day or so.”

“This new little Portocale had no idea who I was,” I tell him, waiting on his slow wheels to start turning and catch up.

I’m worried smoke is about to plume from his ears when he continues to stare at me like he needs more information and is overworking that canine brain of his.

“She’s lying about her name *to me*...and about her gypsy heritage. However, she’s certainly not lying about the fact she doesn’t know *me*. I gave her my name, and she never blinked an eye. Had I not made a minor oversight in wording, involving this era’s version of manners, she very well may have stayed pleasant,” I explain.

He still looks confused.

Fucking idio—

“It sounds like you’re trying to tell me that a Portocale met you and still posed as a non-Portocale and has no idea who *you* are, but that makes no sense, *unless she has no idea who you are...*”

“You really do overcomplicate things,” I dutifully inform him.

“Whoever she is, Marta left her everything, and Marta sure as hell knew who you are. Every Portocale does. How long have we been alive?” he asks, sounding genuinely baffled.

“It got a little depressing to keep count, so I stopped trying for the sake of my health,” I say in a droll tone and a roll of my eyes. “You just simply can’t count that high.”

He growls, and I give him an unimpressed glare.

“The point is, there’s no such thing as a Portocale who doesn’t know *you*.”

“Or you,” I point out, since he’s making it sound as though I’m in this on my own.

He gives me a bored expression before sipping more of his wine.

“Is she playing you by any chance?” he asks as he sits back.

“I’m not sure what the point would be. We certainly don’t pose a threat to Portocale gypsies—*anymore*. With Marta dead, her fake *niece-by-marriage* just likely became someone’s new prime target, if they even know she exists.”

“You’re sure she’s a Portocale?” he asks seriously, and I nod in response. “Marta had a daughter that died a couple years back. January Portocale. Is it her?”

I smirk. “January *Violet* Carmine—Marta’s ex-husband’s surname,” I tell him. “She didn’t bother to be too creative, which means her faked death must have been really convincing.”

“Some details were that it was gory and bloody, but I never got specifics. Someone tried to cover it up, and I’m leaning toward it being the ones behind her death as opposed to Marta, if that’s the case,” he continues.

“I’d toss you a treat if I had any,” I say with thick condescension, as he scowls at me. Rolling my eyes, I add, “Yes, someone thought they covered their asses, but Marta was damn powerful. She could have easily manipulated minds, or possibly had Damien to do it as payment for his life debt.”

He snorts from behind me. “That debt will never be paid. The Portocale gypsies love our punishment too much.”

I shrug a shoulder.

“If this is her daughter, why didn’t she instill that same traditional hatred?” I point out, causing him to bristle. “See, Wolf? It’s possible Damien paid her mother a life debt, though he’d *never* share that information with us.”

Even though the chance of Marta being able to do that is lower than what could be considered *minimal*...it’s still something Damien could be persuaded with.

He sits back, seeming lost in thought. This time, I think I smell his brain smoking.

“There’s something else, though, which is another reason I’m here,” I tell him idly.

He puts his glass down and leans forward, finally covering himself...somewhat.

“I’m listening, but I’m not known for my patience, so save your typical, theatrical pauses for Damien,” he says on a sneer.

I smirk. “She has a ghost hanging around her. Rather attractive one too,” I tell him.

He arches an eyebrow. “Glad you’ve got a boner for a dead chick, but I thought there was an important—”

His eyes widen like he finally gets it, being the slow, daft bloke he is.

I decide to set the record straight while he finishes putting together the obvious. “I’m not quite so easy to get erect; a pretty ghost didn’t do it for me. It’s hard to impress me these days,” I say as I pick off a piece of lint from one of my lapels. “But she must have died in her underwear. Terrible waste. Could have met her in her time—”

“Stop talking about the ghost. This Violet girl can’t be a Portocale. She’d be sucking the life right out of that ghost.”

“Her pet ghost has reached the phase of *pathological liar*, and still, she’s perfectly well, instead of a pile of salt. No ghost that far along in the final decay could be in the presence of a Portocale for that long, and it seems like they’re rather familiar with each other,” I continue.

“Then she’s not a Portocale,” he says again. “You just don’t want to admit you’re wrong, per the usual.”

“I know perfectly well the scent of Portocale blood. You’re not the only one with that particular curse,” I go on.

“My head hurts,” he says on a groan, leaning forward to massage his temples.

“Doesn’t take much, does it, mutt?”

When he gives me a feral growl, I grin and push off from the house.

“I’ll be the true test. She’ll hate me worse than even you,” he says as he stretches his arms above his head. “I’ll do my own lie detection test, while making sure you’re not just full of shit, which you probably are.”

“Have fun with that. When you realize she’s an anomaly by being a clueless Portocale, don’t let her in on the secret just yet,” I pointedly tell him, since it’s possible he’s stupid enough to open his mouth.

“Like I’m that stupid,” he growls, almost prompting me to slip up and grin too much as I turn to walk away.

“Watch your manners, since she’s a stickler like that,” I call over my shoulder. “But remember, she’s still a Portocale, even if she doesn’t know what that means.”

“What the hell kind of fucking thing is that to say?” he gripes at my back.

I continue grinning as I turn around, deciding not to give him the true warning. Violet Portocale has all the subtle Portocale beauty without the Portocale bitterness foaming from her very intriguing lips. There’s a certain vulnerability about her that I’ve not had to see in a Portocale’s eyes for too many centuries to count, and it’s unnervingly distracting.

Emit should be as caught off guard by that as I was.

“She doesn’t know we can see her ghost. Good luck keeping a straight face,” is what I say instead.

“Bullshit. She’s faking it or you’re pulling my dick,” he says to my back, when I turn and walk away again, leaving him to think whatever he wants.

It’ll have more humorous charm when he sees for himself.

Chapter 3

VIOLET

The vapor engulfs the room, and I cough like my lungs are trying to hack their way up my throat. I can feel the bruises forming as I blindly stumble and fumble my way around the unfamiliar hard edges of the furniture in the cluttered house.

Tearing my throat raw with the violent coughs, I finally reach the outside.

Doubling over with my hands on my knees, I try to breathe air into my starving lungs, but I'm burning up and struggling on which hell is currently worse. The heat is licking up my veins, and I feel like I'm on fire, as I start shedding my clothes as quickly as possible, cursing the day I decided I liked Anna enough to try and save her.

"I don't think it worked too well! I feel the urge to tell you I spent five years possessing Bonnie's body when she was fucking Clyde, and I'm pretty sure that's a lie!" she calls out as I heave for more air. "Or is it? Did you fuck Clyde while making me watch?" she calls out with an indignant gasp, taking an abrupt turn with no blinker to warn me.

Utter failure. I possibly have chemical burns on my internal organs for no reason at all.

"No, I did not fuck Clyde," I bite out in frustration. "The only Clyde I know has four legs and a long snout, and before

your sick mind goes there, I will kill you for making any disgusting jokes like that—”

My words stop short when I see a man barely grinning, as though he’s entertained. His eyes rake over my *Ghost Busters* panties and a bra that I actually made. I’m a terrible seamstress, so the bra is horrendous and makes my nipples look unintentionally pointed in different directions. And maybe slightly warped...

Why? Just why?

“My life sucks so hard,” I mutter under my breath as I pinch the bridge of my nose, putting my other hand on my hip, as I exhale harshly.

After an awkwardly silent moment of collecting myself, I lower my hand and stare at his long, darkish hair first... because, it’s not the norm. Long hair on guys doesn’t usually work, but...some exceptions are definitely legit.

He’s tall and rough around the edges with just the right amount of beard. In fact, he’s the sort of gorgeous specimen that will no doubt have Anna spewing all kinds of crazy sex lies the second she—

“Ooooo la la. Hello, you sexy, devilish *savage*,” Anna purrs, appearing beside me. “Tell him I’m a porn star from the nineties. Or was it early two-thousands when they started keeping the downstairs painfully tidy?” she asks, tapping her chin with her index finger while seriously deliberating the matter.

Sometimes she knows she’s lying but enjoys it. Sometimes she has no clue if she’s lying at all. The urge to lie is growing

stronger, regardless of which kind of lie she's telling.

"Can I help you?" I ask the man, not even bothering to scrape together my dignity by this point.

Anna takes a lot out of me.

He gives me an incredulous look.

"Just to be safe, tell him I have a neatly trimmed landing strip instead of the tangled forest," Anna goes on. "I'd check to see what's actually down there, but I can't physically move my underwear," she adds while passing her hand through her pelvis.

I need to start carrying around salt.

"Rather odd way to introduce yourself, don't you think, little Portocale?" the man asks in a weirdly sexy gravel-like tone that doesn't usually do it for me.

He's an anomaly, it seems. Wrong hair. Wrong voice. Entirely too tall. Much too broad shouldered—*he could crush me*. Still, it's like it all just *works* on him, for whatever reason, and even at this terrible moment, I simply can't help but notice just how *well* it works.

I'm genuinely too emotionally vulnerable to be cold and dismissive of attractive men right now.

Anna makes several thrusting motions because she doesn't have a functioning brain cell.

I'm a little distracted by the fact he seems oddly amused, which quickly reels my headspace back in to the fact Anna is humming *Ghost Busters*...and actually singing the part about there being *something strange* in the neighborhood.

When she wildly points to me and thrusts her hips again, it becomes abundantly clear I did something awful in a previous life to deserve the shit that happens to me.

“I’m Carmine, not Portocale. I’m not related to the Portocale family by blood,” I reply on autopilot, recovering from the surprise of having an audience who...looks like *him*. “And if seeing a girl in her fashionable underwear isn’t a memorable first impression, then I don’t know what is.”

“Are you trying to be memorable?” he muses.

“Seems that way,” I chirp, not missing a beat. “If you’re a client, I’ve been working on your supply list. Deliveries will start as soon as Monday, and I swear I will be clothed during all future encounters.”

“Prude,” Anna pops off immediately. “I’d pull that hair of his while asking him who’s been a naughty savage,” she adds, mocking a playful bite in the air.

Heaven help me.

“I’m Emit Morrigan. Head of House of Morrigan,” he informs me as he intensely studies me, absently running a hand over his beard.

Yep. I’m off to a great start. One of my other wealthy clients, who will help afford a good life, is getting a *memorable* first impression of me.

“Very nice to meet you, Mr. Morrigan. I usually wear clothes. Would you like to come inside?” I ask, the overheating gone as I quickly start pulling my clothes back on.

All my necklaces are clanging together, the protective charms tangling and jingling as I jostle around, drawing more

gloriously awkward attention my way with the noise.

A few other people are on the street and gawking. Some are taking pictures...or possibly live-streaming this entire situation, so I make sure to hide my face and just give them my mostly panty-clad ass. The fun never ends.

I'm going to be the crazy gypsy girl of the town. Awesome.

I was the crazy gypsy girl in the last town too. Shit happens.

As soon as I'm dressed, I notice him staring skeptically at the entryway.

"Is it safe?" he asks.

I glance inside, and then look back at him. "Good question."

He gives me a dubious look. "Are you sure you're going to be capable of recreating Marta's products?"

"Aunt Marta was gifted and admittedly better, but I'm good at what I do. I'm testing out some new stuff. Trial and error comes with new territory, but I have a gypsy to bless the stuff," I explain, feeling more confident once I'm fully covered. "But as a show of good faith, I'll run in and get you a sample pack."

The second I turn my back on him, I hear him ask, "Are you sure you're not a Portocale?"

Frowning, I glance over my shoulder, not showing any outward signs of the growing knot of worry that is spreading with each person who questions me.

"Why is that so hard to believe?"

While I have some things in common with all the Portocale gypsies, I've never had their signature features, such as the eyes, the curly hair, nor the perfectly almond skin tone.

For the most part, I have my Dad's genes. I look just like his grandmother when she was my age. I've had to hear that my entire life, no matter the age.

His jaw relaxes slightly, and I note that he looks late twenties or early thirties as he allows his sinfully playful lips to curve in a secretive grin. "No reason."

Great. He's a weirdo with soulful and secretive eyes, distracting lips, and vague responses after asking me probing questions. Does he have to wear a sleeveless shirt? Why does he have to have arm porn?

Those athletic pants should *not* look that sexy. He's one of those annoying people who make slouchy clothes look fashionable, while also looking like...well, a sexy savage, as Anna has pointed out. I'm not telling her that, though.

Shaking off the silly distraction, I jog up the steps and through the house, coughing a little at the lingering vapor.

Quickly, I retrieve a small box with my sample work, and bring it back out, ignoring the slight burning in my veins and the urge to strip again when I emerge.

Really glad he didn't come in now. I'd probably have lost the account.

If the lingering vapor is working that strongly on me, a normal person would probably be running around and screaming in pain.

He accepts the box of vials, but he's still staring at me like he's trying to solve a puzzle. It's the way Vancetto stared at me.

"I can't believe you're doing a drug deal in broad daylight," Anna says on a horrified gasp.

"Try it out and see if it's close enough. The three on the right are your recreational—"

"Drugs," Anna says like she's finishing my sentence, and I clear my throat before continuing.

"—*orders*. The ones on the left are for healing."

"Healing?" he asks, sniffing it and wrinkling his brow.

"My own recipe."

"Interesting," he says with a growing grin, his eyes once again raking over me. "You don't have the traditional Portocale eyes."

"Well, I'm *not* a Portocale." I'm not sure why he's making this an issue, but again, I trust Mom wouldn't do business with men who would kill her.

She wasn't taken by surprise because she turned her back on the wrong person. She was hunted down. That much I know, due to the vague voicemail she left me the night of her death.

"Your eyes are very unique," he goes on, taking a step too close for my comfort, staring at me so intensely, as something almost palpable in electric energy moves between us.

His eyes seem to dance with flakes of autumn embers, coming to life as I feel myself lean forward like there's a

subtle pull on my body, dragging me.

The hair on the back of my neck raises once more, while gravity plays tricks on me.

Even without touching him, I almost feel warmth from his body, and it's like my head tries to get lost when his pupils dilate.

Anna is suddenly at my side and fanning me again.

"I just came," she states in a loud whisper. "All from *that* look."

It's enough to defuse the weird crackles of electricity surrounding us, and I take a spacious step back while clearing my throat, as he mutters something I can't hear.

"I'll have your order delivered on Monday, should you still want it," I tell him, recovering and sounding somewhat professional, even as I battle the weird chill slithering over me.

I'm so tempted to apologize for my ridiculous amount of *leaning in*, but I'm afraid that'll just make it weird.

If Anna were real, I'd cut her for whatever she just did to my body.

He eyes the vials and closes the small box, before he tucks it under his arm. "Will you be delivering it yourself?" he muses.

"Yes. I've deemed Mondays and Fridays as delivery days. The rest of the time will be allotted to opening the store. At least until I have things caught up enough to hire some help."

His lips thin like he finds that confusing.

I'm not quite sure what the paradox is.

“Then until Monday, Ms. *Carmine*,” he says before backing away.

I turn and start toward the house, unsure what to say to that, since it sort of sounds like he’s still questioning my surname.

He makes some sound from behind me, but when I turn to look back, he’s gone.

Anna is singing *Ghost Busters* once more and dancing on the porch, her back to me. I walk on by, ignoring her as she puts my name in the lyrics.

I’m officially the weird chick in this town, and I keep wondering why people act weird around me. Little hypocritical, I suppose.

“Why didn’t you fuck him? He gave you all the right signals, along with that smoldering look,” Anna says in utter disappointment.

“I’m almost positive you just did something to me, and you better not do it again,” I caution her.

“I won’t do it again,” she agrees, but that doesn’t mean anything. Hell, she may not even know if she did it.

“What are you doing?” Anna asks as she follows me up the stairs.

“Well, I’m going to go through more of my mother’s things, and then I’m going to see if I can rework that potion that went so wrong. But first I’m going to take a cold shower,” I answer as I start stripping, eager for some cool relief, thanks to the freaking potion that went awry.

“I could use a cold shower too. That savage man radiated barbaric sexual energy.” She makes a scratching sign like she has claws, and then adds a little feminine *roar*.

Groaning, I push through to the bathroom and slam the door in her face.

It’s the one room I have salted, and she can’t enter because of it.

So instead, she starts singing loudly through the door as I step into the cold spray of the shower, trying not to think about the overwhelming amount of things I need to do.

Also, I hope none of my other clients happen to be insanely gorgeous. This is getting annoying.

Chapter 4

EMIT

“Well?” Vancetto drawls as he joins me at my side. “Are we using our exceptional vision to spy on the little Portocale through her bedroom window like common perverts?”

I forgot how much I hate him. I’ve seen him twice in a matter of days now, which is two times more than I’ve seen him in over half a century.

“I suspect you’ve been visiting Damien, since I can smell his stink all over you,” I say instead.

“Ah, yes. He’s about as pleasant as you,” he answers dryly. “He doesn’t believe me either, so he’s going to do his own analysis,” he adds in a droll tone.

It’s been a while since anything has captured our interest. Most things have grown redundant or boring over the centuries, but a Portocale with no fucking clue who we are? Seemingly no clue about herself, although she certainly knows she’s a Portocale?

It’s the makings of my newest obsession.

“She didn’t have a clue who I was yesterday, which became apparent when she continued to turn her back to me like I was a harmless nobody. I’ve been watching her ever since,” I tell him, staring the thirty or so yards of space

between myself and her home...and hoping she doesn't glance this way.

She's arguing with the mostly naked ghost about yet another insane lie. It seems to be how she spends most of her free time.

"Careful, mutt. As I said, she's still a Portocale," he drawls.

My fist grinds. He could have damn well warned me about the temptation a clueless Portocale would bring. He knows my instincts are crazed right now with the full moon rising tonight, and my baser urges are just as jacked.

"You can certainly fucking tell she's a Portocale, even without some of the more telling features. She smells just as good and forbidden as they all do," I bite out.

He makes an amused sound that has me resisting the urge to punch his pompous face.

"She's only half gypsy, which means she's weaker," he points out. "But the strongly gifted Portocale blood is definitely in there, even without it having a second gypsy bloodline to feed on," he adds.

"I can't believe Marta had a child outside of gypsy blood," I say with a shudder. "She must be insane."

"Or she's simply tired of her people continuing to suffer and is trying to kill off her bloodline by diluting it until it's gone," he says a little quieter. "It hasn't worked before, but... everything changes on occasion, as we're well aware."

He scrubs a frustrated hand over his face.

“If the mortal Portocales all die out, we lose our chance at ending the fucking nightmare of our life debt curses,” I tell him like he’s an idiot, the way he always talks to me.

I snarl at him when he just gives me a dry look, flipping the you’re-an-idiot stare back at me.

“It’s amazing to me that you manage to run your House with all that keen instinct,” he states in a bored tone.

“It’s amazing you don’t have any friends,” I state with as much sarcasm, causing his eyes to roll.

“Someone needs to leash Shera. She needs to keep her mouth shut if she can’t stow her fangs,” he states with less amusement as he gets back on topic. “This Portocale is planning to make house calls.”

“I’m aware,” I say through clenched teeth as my spine prickles, the beginnings of the moon’s cycle tugging at me.

“You should probably go frolic in your forest now, mutt. Leave the perverted window-watching to those of us who don’t have to grow a tail on a full moon,” he says like the condescending prick he’s always been.

“Come visit me tonight. See how much I *frolic*, blacksmith,” I say with my own smirk, even as my canines begin to elongate.

“One day, I’ll take you up on it. Don’t think I won’t.” His eyes narrow like he’s baiting me, a blade peeking out of the jacket of his suit coat.

The last time he stabbed me, it took the damn wound a full day to heal. He won’t be stabbing me today.

“I’ve been waiting on it to happen for centuries, yet all you ever do is stab me when I’m not looking,” I say with a smug grin as I turn and start walking away.

He snorts, and I glance over my shoulder one last time to see Violet, as she coughs out her window, another pointless potion going awry.

I pause and glance at Vance, just as his gaze come back to mine. Exhaling harshly, I turn back to face him fully.

“She’s trying to save that ghost,” I tell him.

His lips thin. “Then she really doesn’t have a fucking clue what’s going on right now.”

“Gifted Portocale blood with no gifted Portocale knowledge,” I state a little quieter.

“What the hell was Marta thinking?” he asks on a frustrated breath.

“Marta lived longer than any Portocale before her. Maybe she figured out something and never planned on not being around to see it through herself,” I suggest.

“Leave the thinking to me, mutt. I’ll call you if anyone needs to be ripped to shreds,” the tosser says dismissively.

Without a second thought, I blur to him when he turns his back, and hear him curse when I slam my fist against his side. My knuckles almost break on impact, but it’s bloody well worth it when he yelps in pain and gets launched forward from the force.

He topples off the side of the roof, and I soak in the satisfying *crunch* I hear when he crashes into the pavement

below.

Proud of myself, I peer over, not seeing any witnesses. He slowly starts popping his bones back into place, making a frustrated sound when manages to flop to his back and reaches a hand up to feel his mangled face.

That's going to take some work and some re-breaking. Now I feel better about life, and the moon's tug isn't quite so imposing with that off my chest.

“Oh, you stupid fucking mutt,” he growls.

“Sucks when you don't see it coming, doesn't it, Blacksmith?” I call down.

“I'm going to kill you this time!” he emptily threatens.

“Make sure she doesn't go into the woods tonight.”

A dark smile curves my lips as I turn and head to the back of the courthouse in a town that is quiet this evening.

After all, it's Shadow Hills.

Everyone knows to stay in on a full moon. The wolves always howl.

Chapter 5

VIOLET

“*Ah, Honey, Honey,*” Anna sings as I knock on the door of the Arion household.

Weirdly, the only name on the order is Shera Ward. No Arion.

My best paying clients call their homes House of *insert pompous rich name here*. Four *families* do this. House of Arion is my first delivery. I confirmed over the phone, and since I’ve not yet made a fool of myself by being caught off guard, I’m putting my best foot forward.

The door swings open, and an elderly woman greets me with a weighted smile when her eyes dip to the *Portocale Magic* box in my hands.

“Are you working for the Portocale shop, dearest?” she asks me.

“Actually, I own it. My aunt left it to me in her will.”

Her eyes widen as her heavy smile falls completely away. “Why would you come here?” she asks in a worried whisper, looking behind her and back at me. “You know better than to cross the gates right now. Our alpha is still—”

“What do we have here?” a woman drawls from behind me, interrupting the older lady’s weird ramble.

I whirl around, feeling a prickle up my spine as the redhead's eyes pass over me.

“Tell that bitch you already have a redheaded sidekick, and to get lost,” Anna chimes in from...somewhere.

“I'm just dropping off an order. I confirmed last week that the House of Arion would still be getting their supplies from Portocale Magic,” I state with a strange uneasiness gathering in the pit of my stomach.

The new chick's eyes meet mine.

“Yes, but since when are Portocale gypsies brave enough to step foot on Arion land?”

This again? Really?

“I'm not actually a Portocale. Marta was my aunt by marriage,” I explain, my eyes darting from her to my van... then back to her.

Why does her brow crinkle? More importantly, why does she *sniff* the air really loudly?

Hesitating for only a second, I manage to keep my poker face in place.

“Her ex-husband's niece is more exact, but I was all the family she had in the end,” I resume, pretending not to be attached to my mother while playing the part of an estranged niece.

I'm not really sure why she licks her lips, nor do I understand why her pupils seem larger than they did a minute ago.

My gaze darts to my van, and then back at her again, double-checking the distance. Everything about this is incredibly weird, and if I had a spidey sense, I bet it would be tingling.

Anna appears behind her, sniffing her like she has a sense of smell. “This girl smells like a sour whore. Maybe she smells herself and thinks it’s you? That’s gonna be awkward later when she peels those tight pants off and realizes what she was *really* smelling.”

It really doesn’t help to adopt a ghost these days.

“I wasn’t aware there was any conflict with my name, since the orders came from my aunt’s shop and I’m using as many of her same recipes as possible,” I go on. “I called to confirm,” I say again, just because she’s not speaking or even blinking, as those pupils dilate more.

She looks utterly stunned for a flicker of a second, but then she schools her features. “Fascinating,” she says, her eyes going studious on me. “Well, Ms. *Carmin*e, allow me to take that heavy package off your hands. Would you care for some tea?” she asks, doing an abrupt one-eighty that I really don’t feel comfortable with.

“I have a lot of deliveries to make, so I’ll graciously have to decline this time, ma’am,” I say.

The *ma’am* being said to a woman, who’s about my age, just makes it all...weirder, but I’m not really sure what else to call her.

“Will you also be visiting the other Houses today?” she asks idly, but for whatever reason, I think she’s hoping I’ll say

yes.

Shrugging like she's not freaking me out a little, I nod. "I'm visiting a lot of houses."

She continues to eye me like she's expecting a trick, as she takes the box from my hands. "Well, then. I won't keep you. Let me know if you decide you want tea sometime."

Anna has disappeared, but I can't exactly wait on her.

I just give this slightly creepy woman an awkward *goodbye* and start toward the van.

Anna lands in the seat beside me just as I start up the van, still feeling the weight of that woman's gaze on me.

Pretending not to notice, I back out of the driveway and head in the direction of the next house, hoping it won't take too long to get the store back on its feet and into hiring territory.

"Deliveries are officially my least favorite thing," I mutter.

"Yeah, well, you're delivering goods to vampires. There was some serious blood drinking going on in that house," Anna states in a dead-serious tone.

I groan, wishing the last fifteen potions had done at least a little to alleviate her urge to constantly lie.

"I was a vampire once, until a bitch staked me through the heart. They called her Buffy," she manages to add with a straight face, appearing a little bitter. "She looked more like a Sarah to me, though, if I'm being honest."

Ignoring her, I turn up the music for the next few miles until I reach the massive estate similar in size to the last one.

These people love their creepy, slow-opening gates and long, ominous driveways.

“I could be reading into things, but the people here seem a little dangerous and far too interested in you,” Anna says as we both lean over the dash to stare up at the massive house I’ve just parked in front of.

I catch sight of a curtain shutting upstairs.

“I’m a Portocale. People always seem dangerous,” I tell her absently.

“These people seem pretty certain you’re a Portocale. It’s like no one believes you’re not. Are you sure you’re safe here?”

“Mom wouldn’t have left me everything if she didn’t want me coming here.”

“Sure. Makes perfect sense, since she died here,” she states with dramatic sarcasm. “And you call *me* crazy.”

“You think Buffy killed you. *You are crazy.*”

“Actually, I think it was an astronaut who killed me when I was on the space station,” she says, as I shake out of the trance and hop out of the driver’s side. “Again, are *you sure* you’re safe here?”

“Despite the creepy feel of it, I trust my mother. This is probably the safest place I can be.”

“How long did she work here before she died?” she asks me like she doesn’t already know the answer.

I answer, even as I rein in my own doubts. “Three months.”

“And you still think you’re safe?” she asks incredulously.

“That’s actually a fair point, but I still trust her, Anna. The will stated I received it all—and this is all she had. She wouldn’t have led me here if she thought I’d be in danger.”

“Risky assessment, considering she wouldn’t even let you visit her after she moved here,” she immediately fires back.

Refusing to allow her to chip away at my resolve, I ignore her. I’m certain Mom wanted me to come here. Considering she was killed here, it’s also the best place to start finding answers.

Then I’ll have wine with my mother’s ghost, wherever she is. That’s the only reason I can think of that her spirit is in hiding. She’d come to me otherwise.

They can likely still harm her even from beyond the grave, possibly even track her the way she used to track spirits, and she won’t lead them to me. Which means there’s a high probability that I’m dealing with gypsies.

“Where do you think your mother is right now?” Anna asks as I start picking through the boxes, finding the correct one.

“If I’m right, she’s as far away from me as possible,” I mutter as I lift the box and start carrying it toward the front door.

Anna waves her hand and the back doors of the van fly shut.

“I told you to stop using your powers. It speeds up the disease,” I groan.

Yeah, that’s the other bad thing about Anna. My only friend is a pathological liar who is hurdling herself toward the

final stages of her last decay—In short, she’s a dying ghost.

The fun lying will stop when the crazed dementia kicks in. Sometime, after she’s lost all sense of who, where, what, and *when* she is, she’ll suffer in agony for a final three days before vanishing into the air, leaving nothing behind but a pile of salt.

I keep trying to detach myself from the situation, preparing myself for what happens next if I don’t find a cure that no other more qualified gypsy before me has found.

“Let it. I can’t even tell half the time when I’m lying anymore,” she says a little too soberly, enough to trigger that pang of dread.

Her constant distraction has been one of my many coping mechanisms to keep me focused instead of falling apart like I did the first two months after my mother’s death.

“Give me time,” I tell her from the side of my mouth. “I’m working on a fix.”

“And so far you’ve blown the house up and created zombies,” she says, causing me to huff out a groan.

“No, I haven’t,” I grumble just as the door swings open.

Did I knock?

I forget how to speak when I see the guy in front of me, who leisurely props against the frame, his lips tilted in a barely-there grin.

“*Ohhhhh*, he’s a yes-please with a side of fuck-me-now and a tall drink of orgasms-galore,” Anna says in an awed whisper.

I take in the man's open shirt that leads down to the semi-dressy slacks that have the top button undone, along with the loose tie that hangs on both sides of said unbuttoned shirt, dangling in a way that's oddly mesmerizing. It's like he's trying to pose for me, and it's really distracting, because this is my new favorite pose on a man.

In my entire life, I've never met a man quite this... entrancing.

"Are you counting his abs too? Because at least he can't see me drooling," Anna says from beside me, causing me to snap my eyes up.

I feel my cheeks burning when he grins knowingly. It's not like it's the first time I've seen a nice body, so I have no idea why I'm acting like a blushing virgin when his grin turns into a smug, self-satisfied smirk.

"So it's true. A Portocale is hand-delivering her goods to the families. I've seen it all now," the man with almost blindingly blond hair says in a voice that's borderline hypnotic.

That hair on anyone else would look ridiculous. But on him? It's like he wouldn't be nearly as sexy if it were any other color.

"You remember how to talk, right?" Anna asks when my mouth opens and closes a few times.

Clearing my throat and giving myself a mental shake, I tell him, "Sorry. I'm a Carmine, not a Portocale. I'm not sure why it's so shocking I'm delivering things. I'm trying to get everything caught up before hiring help."

With what they're paying, it won't take long. But I find it weird my mother barely had enough money in her account to cover the back payments. I had to come before I drained the last of it.

His eyebrows hit his hairline.

"What?" I ask, growing annoyed with the ominous, cryptic responses and mysterious facial tics everyone keeps giving me.

"I'm trying to decide if Marta was brilliant or stupid." Before I can respond to that, he adds, "Or if you're faking all this."

"Faking all what?" I ask incredulously.

His lips do that twitching thing the others have been doing. "Let's not play coy. You know you're a Portocale, and Portocale gypsies are notorious for their enemies. I understand why you'd try to hide your name, but...surely you know that's not always possible or plausible."

I bristle, wondering how we went from cryptic to just digging right into the meat of things; although some of what he's saying still sounds a little murky.

"Man, they are really not believing this estranged aunt thing, because you're a terrible liar," Anna says from beside me. "But I'm brilliant at it. Tell them you're a dominatrix with your own dark room under the house..."

Damn you, Anna. Not now.

"Sorry. Again, just a Carmine. I barely knew my aunt. Portocales have enemies because they have a lot of power in their bloodlines. And I'm sure my aunt wouldn't have left me

things in a town where I wouldn't be safe. Don't you think, Mr. Morpheous?" I ask.

I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing his odd last name correctly.

"The name Morpheous is derived from Greek mythology, meaning God of Illusion," Anna tells me matter-of-factly, but it could be utter bullshit.

"Indeed, she would not," he states as he runs his hand over his smooth, strong jaw in a thoughtful sort of manner. "I can assure you this town is possibly the only safe place for a Portocale...*or their estranged kin.*"

He adds that last part like he's mocking my lie.

"Yeah, except for the fact your mother survived for plenty of decades before meeting her demise here after just three months," Anna points out, causing me to regret all the things I've shared with her.

Still refusing to let her ebb away that steely resolve that brought me to this unnatural town, my jaw grinds.

"A little sensitivity would be nice," I say to her...and then remember I shouldn't talk to ghosts in front of people who can't see them.

It makes me look like the crazy one.

"I apologize. I'm sure losing your *aunt* you barely knew was hard," he tells me, apparently believing me to be speaking to him.

I roll with it, since it's out there. "It *is* hard, regardless of closeness. Especially since I still don't know how she died,

and the sheriff here refuses to discuss an open case that has no suspects, no cause of death, and no murder weapon. Her file is already collecting dust, and I've seen how quickly dust can accumulate on things that aren't being touched. To them, she's just another dusty, slim folder already."

We both just stare at each other for a second, though I can't read anything on his expression or in his eyes. I've never seen anyone so well guarded.

"I heard she was stabbed in the heart," Anna tells me, forcing me to fight off a flinch, because sometimes her blurted lies sting too deep.

Mom wasn't stabbed. There were no visible marks on her. According to the autopsy I had overseen by my own hired professional, nothing indicated a cause of death.

"You truly have no idea what's going on around you, do you?" he muses.

Never show how curious you are, Violet. People will use it against you. Be careful who you trust, because their knife may just find your back. Betrayal is the normal in our world. Trust me. Trust your father. Trust yourself.

My mother's words flit through my head as if to remind me. Dad wants me far away from here and not following the breadcrumbs Mom left for me, so it's hard to trust one without denying the other.

"I'm not really concerned about finding out what's going on around me, Mr. Morpheus—"

"I'd rather you call me Damien," he interrupts, mouth twisting at one corner in a grin.

Starting again, I say, “I’m not really concerned about finding out what’s going on around me. I’m simply here to start the life my aunt afforded me.”

“Liar,” the pathologically lying ghost scoffs.

Salt. Why don’t I ever remember the salt?

His hand comes up so fast I don’t see it at first, and he cups my chin, causing my breath to freeze in my lungs as something dark and exciting stirs within me.

His eyes are so pretty when his pupils dilate like that; I just want to be closer.

I lean forward, mesmerized by the way his eyes seem to turn into changing windows I feel desperate to see inside. The bit of blue in his complicated, beautiful irises seems so much brighter than a second ago. So perfect. So—

“Intriguing little thing you are. Maybe Marta was more brilliant than stupid,” he murmurs. “You’re very different, Violet Portocale.”

It’s like a light comes on behind those dark windows. Images roll through them and into my mind...images of us on a bed as he fucks me like he never plans to love me, shoving my hands into the mattress, as he takes all he wants from my body.

It’s like I can feel him inside me, touching me, caressing me...

A little shudder rolls through me.

Another image pops into my head of me kissing my way up his stomach...maybe even licking...

It's like my hands move on their own, touching the skin his undone shirt reveals. He hisses out a breath as I run my hand over him, feeling the firm skin as my veins begin to burn in a really good way.

With a groan, he releases my chin and takes a quick step back, causing me to blink rapidly, as a metaphorical bucket of cold water drops over my head, dousing the flames of mortifying stupidity, and allows humiliating smoke to start drifting up.

I think my teeth actually chatter when the unnatural cold settles into my bones.

What the hell?

“Very intriguing,” he says again as he takes the box I don't remember putting down...and simply turns and walks inside like nothing ever happened.

“You totally just ran your hands all over those sexy abs. *In real life!* You're my hero,” Anna states with wide, disbelieving, doe eyes.

My hands feel like ice when I start trying to blow heat into them, quickly walking back to my van. The loss of the warmth generating from his body has left me bereft and too cold from the inside out.

Which is *insane*.

In less than twenty minutes, another one of my richer clients has turned me into a bumbling idiot. Only this time, I touched him. Without even asking for freaking permission, which I doubt he would have just agreed to.

Mom's death is seriously fucking with my head, and I can't seem to figure out how to make it stop and just get better. A stone settles on my stomach when I think back to the powerless feeling I just suffered through.

It wasn't my grief making me vulnerable. That man wasn't just a man...

"He did something to me just then," I warily and quietly tell Anna when we get into my van.

Idly, I think back to Emit Morrigan as well. Maybe it wasn't Anna; maybe it was him. What the hell is going on right now?

I waste no time getting the hell away from this house, already in the van and gassing it the second it cranks.

"Yeah, he did. He worked his abs. I'd have licked them, but that's just me. You're more subtle than I am," she tells me before she does her feminine roar again.

"No," I tell her, trying not to second-guess my mom right now, knowing she'd never put me in harm's way. "It was something else. It was some form of magic."

"You should have seen the claws on that puppy outside. I bet when a full moon comes—"

"Anna, stay focused. This is serious. Those guys—"

"Was he a werewolf too? Like that one guy with the big penis?" she asks, devolving next to me and leaving me to think to myself.

She's fully ranting about the werewolves and vampires again in this town, doing her lying thing at a manic level, lost

to her own crazy mind.

I glance in my rearview mirror, wondering if maybe I'm not the only true gypsy in this town. Though, he never seemed to notice Anna...

So, again, *what the hell is going on? Or am I just going crazier than I already am?*

Chapter 6

DAMIEN

My hands are steeped in front of my face as Emit walks around mostly naked, nothing covering him but an open robe on as he shakes more water from his hair.

Vance makes a disgusted face as he moves away from Emit and closer to me. I sneer, and he snarls at me, before he moves back toward another window that puts him farther away from both of us.

“It’s almost a shame that she’s a Portocale,” I decide to say to break the silence.

Emit finally closes his damn robe and ties it, as Vance takes a seat and props his feet up. I keep playing out those little images she put in my head, though there’s no doubt she thinks I put them there.

“What happened when you touched her? Did you sense anything?” Vance finally asks me, even though I know he hates to ask me anything.

I relish the fact that they both want me out of here, so I take my time, drawing it all out to better torture them.

Vance’s eyes narrow on me. “Just because I’ve learned to control my urges, that doesn’t mean I’ve grown into a patient man,” he bites out.

“See? Sucks when it’s not you,” Emit says with a smirk in Vance’s direction.

Vance cuts his eyes toward Emit and snarls. The head Van Helsing is probably the wrong man to rile up in a roomful of monsters, but I do enjoy a challenge. It’s been entirely too long since I’ve had one.

But alas, I’m more intrigued by this little Portocale, who is the reason for us all even being in the same room.

“It was a visual of me fucking her, rather roughly at that, if you must know. Slightly personal, but since you’re relentlessly prying...”

I let the words trail off and grin as they both swing their incredulous gazes back to me. My hands stay steepled together as I continue to comfortably relax in my chair.

“Obviously, you *made* her see that,” Vance immediately accuses.

“Or he’s just lying,” the alpha wolf volleys.

“I left her *sober*. However, I stripped all her inhibitions, smashing any false pretenses in her path. Instead of visualizing a way to remove my head or genitals, the way *all* Portocales do, she was visualizing having me over *and* under her. It’s abundantly clear that she is truly and utterly ignorant of her current situation.”

I grin, simply because neither of them seem to believe me about what she projected in her mind. However, the wolf clears his throat and looks away, and my smile slips.

“Something you want to add, Wolf?” I ask as he smirks and glances out the window.

“I visited before the full moon, when my pheromones are at their strongest, and there was a spark,” he says with a shrug.

“Have you two seriously lost your damn minds? This is a Portocale,” Vance points out as he stands and scrubs a hand over his jaw. He moves to peer out the window. “Even you two can’t be so fucked in the head that you’d consider that.”

Emit grows serious, and I heave out a heavy breath.

“Unwind your coattails from your asshole,” I say dismissively to Vance’s rigid back, as he shoves his hands into the pockets of his slacks.

“What the hell does that even mean?” Emit asks me, looking at me like I’m an idiot. “I don’t think that’s the right saying,” he adds.

“That’s because you don’t know what coattails are, you nude barbarian,” Vance says, unable to pass up any chance to take a jab at Emit.

Emit reaches a hand down between his robe folds and grabs his bare prick, a twisted smile on his lips. “At least I know what the important parts are, unlike some mostly impotent blacksmiths I know,” he quips.

“Silversmith,” I interrupt. “He only works with silver and not irons,” I go on.

“One impotent by curse. One impotent by choice. It’s obvious you two would have an issue with the only true male in the room,” the mongrel says, causing my fists to form.

“I’m hardly impotent,” I say tightly.

“I’d say you’re close enough,” he drawls.

“This is about as productive as I’d imagined when I included the two of you,” Vance resumes as he grabs his suit jacket and pulls it back on, smoothing out the pristine fabric.

“What about Arion?” I muse. “That Portocale has no idea who he is, and he might sweet talk her out of her blood when he smells it.”

A growl rumbles out of Emit at just the mention of Arion returning. I’m surprised it’s the first growl. However, the volatile bloodsucker is the number one enemy on Emit’s list right now.

They like to build up that growing cliché.

“She does smell very powerful for a half-blood,” Vance states quietly.

“Marta’s plan clearly backfired. If Portocale blood could be forced dormant, it would have died out long ago. We know she’s not the first to attempt this,” I say in agreement, glancing around at some of the changes that have been made to this room over the past...

I’m not sure how long it’s been since I was last here, to be honest.

“I considered the same thing,” Vance says quietly, probably plotting his own plan of action.

“We still have a couple of years before Arion becomes an issue,” Emit growls.

Obviously, we’re all planning something we have no interest in telling the other. I’m not sure why we’re meeting at all.

“Maybe we can find a way to leave him underground,” I suggest to Vance’s back as he grabs his discarded weapons by the door.

Odd how we managed to put Arion down without ever once sitting in the same room to discuss the specifics, but a Portocale anomaly has us all chatting like semi-non-murderous fellows, even with no important specifics to discuss.

Vance snorts. “We were lucky to force him under to begin with,” he reminds me. “Don’t press our luck. He’s already going to be vengeful enough.”

“I guess he shouldn’t have slaughtered so many of my wolves,” Emit says on a feral growl, the words almost lost in the gravel of it. “Nor so many of Damien’s fucking *things* either.”

I genuinely don’t know why I’m here.

“His curse fucked his head up long ago,” I remind them all as I stand as well, not defending him in the least, but leaving them to think I am.

It’s fun fucking with their heads and giving them the fear of their worst nightmare coming true—Arion and I mending fences.

With a wave of my hand, I give the illusion I’m no longer in the room, and they both stare at the spot where I was. I take a few steps over just to ensure they can’t see me, feeling satisfied when they don’t shift their gazes to my new direction.

“I hate it when he does that,” Emit says on a snarl, glancing around as though he’s searching for me.

Personally, I don't like giving them a visible back to stab. It's better to slip out unseen so as not to be betrayed once more by men I once considered more important than my own brothers.

Now my skin crawls just being in the same room as them.

Still, for the first time in too long to count the years, we sat in a room without attempting to kill each other. It makes the Portocale pretending not to be a Portocale all the more intriguing.

I decide to go comb through Marta's things and see if she had a plan of some sort for this remarkably unique daughter of hers, who collects ghosts without draining them of their life.

I can smell a storm in the air, which makes my timing all the more perfect, since the little gypsy will certainly be distracted, even if she is at home.

Chapter 7

VIOLET

“You’re getting worse at this!” Anna shouts as I stay safely on the second-floor landing, far away from the toxic vapor.

Anna hacks like she has lungs, and I roll my eyes at the drama queen.

“Tell me how you died,” I call down to her, backing away from the edge.

She immediately jumps up in a karate stance and kicks out a leg. “We were in the Congo, surrounded by gorillas—the furry, chest-beating kind, not the militia guerillas with guns or no conscience—and I had to guide us to safety with no bullets left in the guns.”

I huff out a groan while shaking my head.

It’s getting even worse instead of better, and she won’t stop using her ghostly powers that only speeds up the damn process.

I’ve been distracting myself from the weird introductions I had to my wealthy clients by trying to find out where my mother’s money went, who killed her, if it’s linked to the money instead of the gypsy world, and curing Anna.

Fortunately, things have gotten boringly routine since those introductions, and everything has settled into an uneventfully

normal status. Even the skittish housekeeper I met now acts like there's nothing wrong with me popping up at the Arion residence twice a week with a box of goods.

“Three weeks, and I'm still no closer to saving you. How the hell am I going to find my mother's killer when my mother didn't even see them coming?” I mutter as I turn and walk down the stairs, pulling on the gas mask as I go.

She meets me when I reach the kitchen and begin moving around some of the ingredients.

“Since there's no known cure, I'm assuming you're not the first powerful gypsy to fail at saving the ones who're already dead. It's okay to give yourself a pass on this one, kid. I'm okay with dying.”

“That's a lie,” I tell her, knowing if it was true she'd have already moved on and wouldn't be facing the final decay at all.

“Probably,” she confesses with a firm nod. “Still doesn't mean it's up to you. Take that weight off your shoulders.”

Just as I grab the ingredients to try and start a new batch by altering some of my measurements to tweak the recipe, thunder rumbles overhead.

Anna and I both swing our gazes up.

“Am I lying when I say it was just sunny and bright without a cloud in the sky?” she asks dryly.

“No,” I say quickly before pulling off my rubber gloves and moving through the house, tearing off the gas mask as I dart outside.

Definitely not a natural storm. I can feel the power rolling around, confusing the hell out of me. Who or what has that kind of power? Surely this town doesn't have enough ghosts to give off that sort of electrical charge.

I dart inside as the temporary toxic fumes start to dissipate, and glance over at Anna. "Sorry. You're about to be ejected until whatever is going on stops. It's possibly spirit-related, but that's all I've got."

"Just do it," she says as she leaps through the wall.

Chanting quickly, I hear the salt spill in the kitchen. I feel it rush around me as I keep my eyes closed, chanting as fast as I can. Listening to the grains rattle across the floor is hard to do when the thunder grows increasingly loud.

More and more salt spills, shooting out of the storage closets, bags of it ripping open. I gauge it all by sound alone, keeping my eyes closed so I can concentrate on using the right words I made up when I was a kid.

The second the salt stops skittering around, my eyes fly open, finding all the perfect lines across the house. After grabbing my rubber boots, I hop one-footed until the process of putting them on is complete.

My gaze moves to the window where the storm is growing. It's abrupt and random and much too cosmically strong to be made from a single individual, but gypsy covens are strictly forbidden.

The most likely reason is that it's being caused by spirits only, and that's entirely alarming on another level.

The front door starts shaking, and I look around, seeing people running through the street, rushing into their homes. Shops start dropping wooden shutters over their windows and slamming heavy wooden doors.

Do they know something I don't? The entire town?

"This is super weird out here!" Anna calls. "Llamas are crashing through the clouds at accelerating speeds!"

My eyes jerk up to the clouds because I'm a gullible moron. Instead of the promised llamas, I see fat raindrops growing stronger and stronger, pelting vehicles with a *tink tink tink* that turns into a *thunk thunk thunk* when it shifts into hail. Lightning strikes here and there, and my entire body turns to stone as I check the salt lines.

Electricity and I do *not* get along. There's a reason I only wear shoes with thick rubber soles.

This is *not* normal on a day when there was zero chance of rain.

"Do you think it's *them*?" Anna calls over the storm. "Are they gypsies like you?"

"Can't be. Those guys haven't seen you, and you're impossible to ignore," I remind her. "This is purely spirit related, which means there's a shit-ton more ghosts here than we realized."

She looks like sex on legs in lacy lingerie that was probably considered insanely indecent in the thirties. They'd definitely notice, even if they're into men instead of women.

Thunder crackles again, and I look up, seeing something smoky rising to the sky. Something familiar sizzles through

the air, and it almost steals my breath.

But it's gone before I can be sure.

Just as abruptly as it all started, the storm ceases, and the sun peers out like it's been there all along. I'm starting to wonder if *I'm* a pathological liar when it's over so fast that I almost question whether or not I made the whole thing up.

Shops start opening immediately, shutters lifting and people walking out with smiles on their faces...like nothing ever happened. It's as if I've entered an alternate dimension, because no one even questions anything.

They chatter on about the beautiful weather as though they're oblivious to what just happened.

Opening my door, I stare outside without leaving the safety of my house, feeling the wind stir as the salt recedes, all of it traveling back to its place.

"That dog just took a shit in our yard!" Anna shouts, pointing an accusing finger at a...fire hydrant. "Shoo, you nasty dog! Shoo!" she shouts at the fire hydrant.

Before I can come up with a way to distract her from needlessly yelling at an inanimate object that is certainly not taking a shit in our yard, I hear a *thump* come from overhead.

My blood freezes in my veins when the slightest *creak* comes from that really terribly loud attic floor.

If someone was up there, they'd have to be louder. It sounds like a herd of elephants invading when someone is simply walking around.

Another creak and slight shuffling has me turning and silently moving up the stairs, grabbing my loaded shotgun from the corner as I go. Mom was always light on her feet, so it's safe to assume another gypsy assassin would have the same stealth.

It grows silent long before I finally reach the attic door, and my heart is thundering in my ears when—

“Shazaam!” Anna shouts as her head pops through the attic door and her eyes meet mine.

I'm screaming and flailing backwards before I realize what's going on, and I land hard, just as I go deaf from a loud explosion rocketing through my ears.

Splinters rain down on me, along with really bright sunlight, as I struggle to hear and shield my face. The gun beats me on top of the head when it falls on me, punctuating my spectacular performance.

It takes me exactly one delayed second to figure out what just happened.

The gun flops to my side when I shove it off my head. I've now blown a hole in my freaking ceiling because my finger was still stupidly on the trigger, and my stupid ghost stalker's lips are moving as she shouts something I can't hear over the temporary deafness.

I should have shot the pain-in-my-ass ghost instead of my ceiling. Roofing is always so expensive, damn it.

No, it's not the first time I've accidentally shot a hole in a roof. Fortunately, it doesn't seem like I've hit any wiring this time.

“Why are you shooting a gun in the house?” is the first thing I can finally hear, even though there’s still a steady ringing in my ears. “Are you ignoring me? You’re a lunatic!” Anna shouts before she follows it up with a shake of her head. “Those damn puppies are going to climb in here now. There’ll be no stopping them.”

“I. Hate. You,” I bite out between angry breaths as I sit up, clutching my aching head. “*What the hell are you doing?*”

She moves through the attic door fully so I can see all of her mostly naked body, and I glare at her.

“I heard a noise, so I came to investigate the attic,” she says unapologetically. “Then I heard another noise. The second noise was you,” she says as though she’s dutifully explaining why she has to terrify me so often.

“You were just yelling at a fire hydrant! You know I hate it when you pop out in front of me like that, especially when I *just* saw you somewhere else. Why can’t you walk around instead of just doing your disappearing shit and popping up somewhere else?” I demand, making sure she knows the hole in the ceiling is *her* fault. “And what’s in the attic?”

“I don’t actually walk. I just make it look like I do. And there’s a kangaroo boxing a mannequin in there. Strangest thing I’ve ever seen,” she informs me with a straight face.

I scrub a hand over my own face while groaning, leaving the gun on the ground—since I don’t feel worthy of carrying it around at the moment. After pushing up to my feet, I walk through her and push open the attic door. When I step inside, I find... a box lying haphazardly on the ground.

“Did you do that?” I ask Anna.

There’s the immediate realization that it’s stupid to expect answers.

“No. The kangaroo did it when he was jumping out the window,” she says seriously.

Rolling my eyes, I go to the window just because she’s got me worried *someone* went out of it. It’s locked, so my eyes land back on the box that has been turned over.

An odd, almost electric current zips up my back when it feels like something brushes up against me, and I whirl around, looking at nothing but a mirror’s reflection of me.

Which still makes me squeal, because for an unnerving second, I think it’s someone else. I really need a break if my own reflection is making me jump and squeal like a pansy.

Shaking off the lingering sensation that someone is in here—since it’s a small room and it’d be easy to spot someone—I lift the box from the ground, wondering if maybe the brief thunderstorm rattled the house enough to knock it off.

“I really hope there aren’t rats up here,” I say with a shudder, but all thoughts blank when a familiar red cloak falls to the ground, tumbling from the half-opened box.

Putting the box on the small table it used to be on, I bend and slowly lift the scarlet, luxurious cloak, smiling softly as memories of my mother wearing it dance in my head.

“*You look like a grown-up Red Riding Hood,*” I remember telling her.

“Red is the color of the Portocale gypsies clan. And Red Riding Hood couldn’t slay a pack of wolves if necessary. I, however, can,” she’d boasted with a wink.

“Earth to gypsy girl. Come in, gypsy girl,” Anna is saying annoyingly close to my ear. “Is that a magic cloak? Like Harry Potter’s?”

Carefully, I pull it on and tie it at the collar, before pulling the hood over my head and turning to face the mirror.

“No. Mom wore it when she went hunting,” I say absently, feeling the soft, velvety material as it sparkles with my mother’s residual magic.

It’s almost like I can feel a piece of her in it.

“Hunting?” she asks incredulously.

“She hunted for ghosts who were possessing humans and causing them to go insane,” I elaborate, leaving out the part where she killed them a second time.

It’s not like I know how to do that, so there’s no need in risking Anna’s possible panic attack. She’s under the impression that all girls grow up to be their mothers.

“What’d she do when she caught them?” Anna asks like she’s riveted by this conversation.

“I don’t know,” I sort of lie as I study myself in my mother’s cloak.

“I’ve never possessed anyone before. Or have I? Is it difficult?” she muses.

“It’s actually very complicated to successfully achieve, and it’s incredibly draining on the ghost. Not to mention what

happens to the host. When a person doesn't know what's going on, it causes them to go insane, because they lose pieces of their life and find themselves in the middle of somewhere they don't remember going, with every successful possession. Mom isn't the only gypsy huntress out there," I add dismissively.

"Gypsy huntress? That sounds like she's hunting gypsies," Anna argues as I check the pockets of the cloak, pulling out a small, crinkled receipt.

"Don't overthink it," I answer distractedly. "She was a gypsy hunter because she was a gypsy and a hunter."

"First you said huntress and now you're de-feminizing it. Truly disappointing," Anna prattles on, while my head tries to wrap around the large amount of cash my mother dropped in one store.

My eyes dip to the date that is from the night before she died, and my brow furrows. It's not an itemized receipt, but the bottom dollar is still on it. It's odd this hardware store has an address that's from a completely different town.

"So what you're saying is that a ghost can possess someone without the host going crazy if they're aware of what's going on?" Anna drawls.

"That's not at all what I'm saying, so don't get any ideas. You're not hijacking my body," I say without looking at her, but I *hear* her immediately start to pout, as I tuck the receipt back into the cloak's pocket.

"I'd really like to get my hands on that Morpheous fellow," she says distractedly. "I'd do all the leg work, get a few

orgasms, and evacuate your body in time for you to get yours as well,” she adds.

Something clatters to the ground, startling the fuck out of both of us, and I whirl around to see another box has randomly tipped over.

“I think that storm did something to the house,” I tell her, frowning. “It sure as hell wasn’t a natural storm.”

“Well, that’s *just* a red cloak. Doesn’t turn you invisible like little Harry’s. You totally got gipped. Not even a wand in this joint,” she resumes.

I groan while pushing the hood down, but my brow furrows when I see snow starting to drop outside. That’s... very freaking random.

My breath comes out in a fog as I move to the window, unlock it, and push it open, feeling a cold, wet dollop of the legitimate snow hitting my hand.

“I realize it’s November, but it hasn’t been particularly cold enough to snow,” Anna states rhetorically as we both stare out at the rapidly falling snow that is slowly but surely starting to blanket the town.

“This place just gets more confusing by the second,” I tell her as I pull my hood back on my head.

“Where are you going in that cloak?” she asks from behind me. “You look ridiculous without a basket of goodies for Grandma,” she adds as I shut and relock the window.

“I haven’t unpacked my snow coats yet, and now’s the perfect time for a hike,” I tell her before walking out of the

room and hurriedly jogging down the stairs, knowing she'll follow.

“The bizarre snowfall is the perfect time for a hike?” she asks like she's confused. “You're right!”

What has me pausing is the slight shutting of the attic door, and I look up, seeing nothing there, but the door is definitely closed.

I didn't shut it. Maybe it was the wind...

This weather is playing tricks on my mind, or maybe it's the house, or maybe it's this freaking cloak that I really don't want to take off right now.

It feels like Mom is still here protecting me with it on, and I could use the false sense of security. Especially since I'm about to trek out into the woods to see if I can find the spot where they said my mother's body was found.

With the bipolar weather as a sign of too much paranormal activity, there's a good chance I can use my magic to try and catch a reflective image of the past right now.

I swallow the lump in my throat and pull the warm cloak around me a little tighter.

“We're going to freeze to death,” Anna says as she catches up, mocking a shiver.

“You're already dead, and I'm not normal,” I assure her, watching as the chunky snow continues to stack a harder trail in front of me.

“Where are we going?” Anna asks as she catches up.

“To the place where my mother’s body was found,” I answer quietly.

“Are you insane? It’s stupid to go somewhere you already know is a death spot.”

“It’s not like my mother’s killer is going to be lingering in the woods all these months later,” I remind her.

I don’t tell her I’m stupidly hoping for something like that, even though that’s not my prime objective. With a subtle dark grin, I move faster. My boots kick up the snow with my determined, forced strides.

Chapter 8

VIOLET

“To Grandma’s house we go, to Grandma’s house we go... hi-ho fellatio, to Grandma’s house we go,” Anna sings, prompting me to groan.

“I don’t think you know what fellatio means,” I mutter under my breath.

“It rhymed with *ho*, and everyone knows *ho* and *fellatio* go hand-in-hand. I excelled at fellatio myself, and I wasn’t much of a spitter,” she tells me.

Bile rises to my throat.

“I’m not sure why I acknowledge you sometimes,” I add as I look around the snowy forest, while the thick snowdrops continue to relentlessly fall.

“Crazy weather we’re having,” she states as the wind comes in from an odd angle.

“It’s from too much paranormal activity congested in one place. In other words, this town has too many ghosts haunting it,” I tell her more decisively than the last time, now that I’ve had a chance to really feel the power so far away from the town. “Which is probably why the shopkeepers and townspeople shrug it off—they’ve just gotten used to it and likely think it’s part of the town’s unique flair.”

“Where is this death spot?” she asks, not even acknowledging my comment.

“Grandma’s house,” I assure her.

She nods like that’s pleasing.

“You should have brought a basket,” she goes on.

I glance up at the sun, making sure I’m still heading west, and hurrying because it looks like the sun is getting ready to descend for the day. I really don’t want to get caught out here at night.

Like every scary forest scene in a horror movie, I hear an ominous *crack* that has me coming to an abrupt halt and spinning around.

Anna jumps, whirling around as well, and we both stare for a second.

“It’s going to be right behind us. One of us should have stayed facing the other way,” she says as she screws her eyes shut and tenses.

“You’re already dead,” I hiss at her.

A shadow accompanies a scurrying sound, and I spin back around, searching my body for anything that can be used as a weapon. I elect to use my belt, since it’s just for looks. My pants are in no danger of falling off my ass without it, so I tear it away and wind it around my hand.

There’s nothing but white, dimly lit snow, and I glance up. Even though the sun still has an hour or so until it sets, it’s getting lost in the distance, the thick canopy of the tall trees in the woods blocking it out.

Not good.

At all.

I should have planned against that, but despite having an excellent sense of direction, trekking around in the woods isn't something I've ever done before.

"Is now a good time to tell you how stupid it was to come out into the woods alone?" Anna snaps.

Before I can point out that she's the only 'person' I know in town, there's a loud, vicious growl sounding much too close to my back.

Anna disappears, and I slowly close my eyes while trying not to make any sudden movements.

"Don't worry! It's just Grandma!" Anna shouts from somewhere behind me.

I'm not sure why gulping is a thing when you want to piss your pants, but it is. Because I do that just before giving a little tremble of terror.

"Oh my, what big teeth you have, Grandma," Anna adds dramatically. "And those eyes are so big," she prattles on as fear inches its way up my spine.

You have got to be kidding me. A wolf? A freaking wolf? I glance down, not amused by the irony of the fact I look way too much like the stupid Red Riding Hood who elected to leave her shotgun behind.

I should have brought that damn basket full of wolf's bane. At least I could have used it to create an on-the-fly potion to scare them off...

Damn it. Anna told me to bring a basket.

My eyes open just in time to see a flash of gray, black, and reddish-brown fur scurry by in the distance, as a telling howl almost makes this horrifying moment in my life feel cliché.

My mother always said the universe has a twisted sense of humor, hence the reason gypsies like us even exist.

I'm not amused.

“Has Grandma always had this tail?” Anna asks like she's confused.

I can't even.

Shadows slowly turn into more visible forms, as the wolves from the distance inch closer with slow, deliberate motions, teeth bared and growls rumbling.

“Oh, Grandma has a lot of friends,” Anna says with a slight tremor of fear in her voice. “I don't think they're here to play Bingo.”

Heavy paws clap the forest floor, sending up chunks of snow, as they prowl closer and closer.

“Holy fucking shit. Grandma is a wolf, and so are all her friends!” Anna shouts with a hint of lucidity.

“Don't worry. Don't do anything stupid. I'll be fine—”

“Hoooo-yaaaaa!” she shouts as she unleashes the small bit of telekinesis she's mastered.

A wolf yelps as it crashes into a nearby tree, and all the wolves growl and begin snapping their jaws in response.

“That’s the *something stupid* I was referring to,” I gripe, just as they all lunge.

I twirl the cloak over me as I drop to my knees, shielding myself from at least watching my own body get ripped to shreds, clinging to the pointless belt still in my hand.

A startled wolf cries into the air, just as a weight crashes into my side, sending an explosion of pain rippling through my body, as I briefly lose control of all my extremities.

My body folds in on itself, feeling airborne for a sickening second, before I feel the revolting sensation of dropping. The fall is worse than the landing, because I sink into the powdered snow...the three feet it has rapidly risen.

Another wolf yelps and I brace, worried it’s about to do whatever again, but nothing happens.

Spitting out blood, I tear the hood back and push my hair out of my face, dimly seeing a man’s figure as he spins, kicking out a foot and nailing a wolf in the chest.

“Do you really think this will end well for you lot?” a familiar voice drawls, while the lone figure stands ready against the seven wolves who are surrounding him now.

My vision adjusts in time to see Vancetto Valhinseng, the man with the mouthful of a name, *talking* to the vicious, possibly rabid wolves, as they snap their jaws at him.

“Well, then. I guess we’ll play it your way,” he says as he leisurely removes his jacket and neatly folds it over a low-hanging branch like he has no fear at all.

My brow furrows when he pulls out what looks like two handles, and very shiny swords grow from the handles like

they were magically hidden all along.

The wolves take a step back, almost as though they're hesitating. Vancetto smirks when one finally launches itself at him from the side.

In an unnatural blur of motion, he dodges the wolf. I never saw him swing the sword, but the wolf crashes with a yelp as blood starts staining the snow around him.

When he's slow to get up, the other wolves fly at Vancetto in a mass attack.

Anna is on her knees at my side, her eyes as wide as mine, while we watch Vancetto move like air, never disturbing the ground under him. He slices and moves through the fray, never once even ruffling his perfect shirt or dressy slacks.

He's even careful to dodge the sprays of blood, masterfully flipping, moving, and fighting as though he was bred for exactly this.

He almost looks like he's enjoying himself as he toys with them, hurting them, punching them, leaving them gravely wounded but still alive after each of his strikes.

"I take it back. I want to borrow your body and fuck him instead of the Damien fellow," Anna says a little dreamily.

I'm too stunned to really say anything.

The wolves give one final cry of furious frustration before turning and fleeing, leaving only one behind that is breathing shallowly, eyes half closed like he's dying.

I pat down my body, finding two vials of my healing potion tucked away in my bra. Stupidly, I move to the wolf,

who barely cants its head at me, while Vancetto yells to the ones retreating.

“Come on my land, and this ends very fucking differently next time,” he shouts, still seeming to be enjoying himself above all else.

The wolf growls at me, trying and failing to move when I approach. Animals don't know any better, especially since Anna struck first. It's not its fault for being true to its nature.

Without getting *too* close, I pour the liquid on the most fatal wound.

“What the hell are you doing? Get away from him!” Vancetto snaps. “This is wolf territory, and he likely feels as though it's his right to eat you alive if he desires, because you certainly have no right to be here. You shouldn't have been able to get in.”

Vancetto grabs me under the arm, roughly tugging me to my feet, and I cast a look over my shoulder, seeing the animal almost appear confused, as Vancetto begins dragging me away.

Maybe I hit my head too hard.

“He's just an animal, and that barbed-wire fence isn't exactly a huge hurdle to have to overcome to get onto this land,” I point out.

“Why are you out here?” he growls as he grabs his jacket with his free hand and continues to drag me out of the darkening forest.

I don't put up a fight, because I'm definitely ready to go, and it's clear he's my safest option for getting out.

“Are you a gypsy hunter?” I ask him seriously. “Because the way you moved back there—”

His head tips back and he outright laughs, his steps slowing, while he laughs so loud it echoes through the woods.

Anna twirls her finger in a circle next to her ear before making a *coo-coo* sound.

I ignore her, because, well, I think everyone out here is actually a little crazy, so there’s no room for judgment.

Since, he still hasn’t acknowledged Anna, I feel stupid for asking him if he’s a gypsy hunter. They can see ghosts, after all. But what the actual hell is he if not a gypsy hunter? No regular person can move like that.

His laughter tapers off into sort of a confused sound, as his eyes narrow on me.

“You’re not playing dumb right now, are you?” he asks, renewing his efforts to steer us out of the forest at a pace I struggle to keep up with.

“She has a flesh and blood vagina that has been collecting cobwebs since before I knew her, so no, I don’t think she’s *playing* dumb,” Anna says sourly. “Perfectly good waste of a corporeal form when the alpha male of all alpha males saves your precious vagina’s life,” she adds under her breath.

Vancetto sighs as he looks away, lightly shaking his head. I almost think he’s heard her, but I realize that would warrant at least some form of reaction from someone who hasn’t dealt with her for months.

It takes a while to keep a straight face around Anna.

“Can I ask why you just happen to be in the woods with two handles that turn into swords? Where did those go? What are they?” I go on.

“The man doesn’t have a single speck of dirt or blood on him after singlehandedly dispatching a pack of wolves, and you ask about his damn swords? Life is just too unfair at this moment. Ride his fucking shiny di—”

“Handles,” he says on a condescending snort while shaking his head, as he fights a reluctant grin, unknowingly interrupting Anna.

And I’m certainly sure now that it is *unknowingly*, because if *that’s* what he finds amusing, he definitely *cannot* hear the raving lunatic at my side who has diverted into a tangent about my deprived vagina.

I don’t know why I couldn’t have gotten a really prudish little old lady haunting me. I could have gotten bad cardigan advice instead hearing about the travesty of a “dried up raisin” my downstairs is becoming.

She’s known me for less than four damn months.

“So? Any answer?” I ask as a ghost of a grin toys with the edges of his lips.

“How about we discuss why you’re traipsing around on Morrigan property. Do you have any idea who those wolves were?” he says instead.

I look at Anna, who shrugs, and I stare at Vancetto’s profile with a little more wary cautiousness, as he concentrates on the direction he’s dragging me in.

“I don’t care if he’s weird. I still want to ride him until he screams my name and begs me to punish him for being such a bad boy. I’ll let him lick my shoes clean while I spank his ass with a paddle,” Anna says seriously.

I really, truly, genuinely *want* to hate her in this moment. Because I actually hiccup out a bit of laughter when a very disturbing image pops into my head from her vivid description.

He makes a frustrated sound, and I try to recover.

“Are you asking me to identify them? Like they have names? Or the type of wolves they are? Timberwolves? Is that a thing? Am I right?” Nervousness does terrible things to my mouth, and now that the adrenaline is wearing off, I’m getting more and more nervous.

Seriously, how did he just *happen* to find me out there? And does he always walk around with mystical swords? Am I just supposed to pretend that’s a normal thing?

“I think you’re only one more question shy of twenty, if you want to slip another one in and change the meaning of that game,” Anna states dryly. “No wonder your vagina is a raisin,” she adds on a mutter.

This time, I’m the one to make a frustrated sound and glare at her, because this is a very potentially dangerous situation. I’m mostly alone in the woods with...whoever he really is.

His steps slow as he stares ahead like he’s confused, and with a very subtle turn of his head, he gives me a look that I can’t really decipher.

“Do you know what just happened?” he asks more seriously.

I weirdly feel my pulse in my ears for a brief second before I answer like I’m compelled to do so. “I was attacked by a pack of wolves.”

“Do you know who they were?”

Again, as if I have no choice, words are dragged from my throat as my pulse grows louder, almost aching in my chest and ears at the same time.

“They’re just wolves?” I say, hearing the words sound like a question all over again.

The pulse in my ears grows even louder, and I try to blink or move but...can’t. The helplessness seizes me as he takes a step closer. I try to ask him what the hell he’s doing to me, but my lips won’t move. It feels like they’re simply awaiting their next command.

A sense of panic claws up my throat when I feel his breath so close to my face, as he leans down, bringing our gazes more level.

“*Just* wolves? What kind of wolves?” he asks patiently, as my panic only doubles. Panic is bad. So dangerous. He has no idea who he’s toying with right now.

“Wild fucking wolves!” I shout just as the pulsing sound and ache cease in relieving unison.

I blink rapidly, and my breath flutters through my lips in shaky gasps, as I stumble and fumble my way away from him, my feet dropping through the painfully hindering heaps of snow.

He reaches for me, and I dodge him before trying to run, only to trip because the snow is a fucking nightmare to walk in, and running is impossible.

A scream tears from my throat when he reaches down, cursing me for writhing away from him, as he struggles to lift me.

“What the hell did you just do to me?!” I shout before finally wrestling my knee up and slamming it into his balls.

He grunts and curses as he falls to the side, and I push to my feet while he’s down. With all the strength I can muster, I try to run in the deep snow again.

“For fuck’s sake, you’re going to get yourself killed,” he growls from behind me, sounding much too close.

I whirl around, finding nothing but Anna squatting like she’s trying to pee, as a hand comes around my mouth and a warm body presses to the back of mine.

Immediately, I start struggling, but before I can do damage, he securely restrains me with his hold as he says, “I’m not trying to hurt you. All I did was force you to be honest.”

The second he releases my mouth, I shout, “I *was* being honest, you lunatic! What sort of answers do you want about those damn wolves? I’ve only lived here for less than a month, so it’s not like I know anything about your freaking wildlife!”

He groans and laughs next to my ear, weirdly pressing his head to the side of mine. I freeze, trying to figure out just how certifiably insane he has to be in order to find any reason to laugh in this moment.

“It’d be funny, if it wasn’t so fucking inconvenient. At the same time, it *is* funny, because it’s possibly the most hysterically ridiculous thing to happen in far too damn long,” he says on a heavy breath.

“Don’t let his crazy turn you on,” Anna says. “I already called dibs. Now lend me your vagina,” she adds seriously, lifting her hand and making a ‘gimme’ motion.

“Utterly fucking ridiculous,” he adds from behind me.

Without warning, he lifts me so abruptly that I’m in his arms before I can even register the movement, and he starts walking quickly, as though my weight is absolutely no burden.

“*Hubba hubba*. He’s just trying to keep my panties in a state of *damp*,” Anna says dreamily.

Reflexively, my arms go around his neck, even as my heart thumps heavily in my chest.

“What did you do to me?” I ask again. “This time tell me how you did it.”

“I used a potion when you weren’t looking,” he says dismissively.

A howl from deep in the woods behind us has me chancing my luck with the creepy swordsman, since wolves have actually tried to kill me once tonight.

“I think you need some ground rules, clueless Portocale,” he says just as we near the barbed wire fence.

“I’m not a Portocale,” I remind him.

“Stop with that little game. Trust me, you just sound silly when you tell that lie,” he assures me. “And I’m not your

enemy.”

Without ever missing a step, he leaps over the fence like it's no big deal, and lands in an easy crouch, never even jostling me. He moves a helluva lot quicker when I'm in his arms instead of getting dragged through the snow. It's like the deepening snow requires no extra effort for him to trudge through.

His glassy blue eyes meet mine just as we reach the freshly plowed road, where a very nice car is idling off to the side.

“Why is it so hard to believe I'm not a Portocale?” I ask him, my eyes not leaving his.

His gaze narrows. “Because we know a Portocale when we see one, Violet. And you, little clueless one, are in more danger than you realize. What in the hell did Marta plan to accomplish by leaving you fully in the dark about the world you're very much a part of?”

My brow furrows, because...*crazy talk*...

“Don't mind me. I'm just inspecting his ass for the paddle size I'll need when you finally agree that lending me your body makes you a good friend,” Anna drones on.

A terrifying howl echoes from deep in the woods, and I clutch him tighter as I stare over his shoulder. He can be crazy so long as he keeps the pointy end of his swords facing things that want to eat me.

He drops me to my feet as abruptly as he picked me up, and he opens the passenger side door, as another ominous, somewhat closer howl rocks the night air, joined by a lot of much smaller howls.

“Sorry, but we’re kind of in a hurry,” Vancetto states with a dry expression as he gestures for me to get into the warm car.

I look at the black leather, then toward the woods, then at him as he sighs impatiently.

“Really, Violet, I’d rather not have to kidnap you after having just saved you, in an effort to save you again.”

When the howls sound a helluva lot closer, I hop in and decide he’s still the lesser threat.

The door slams just as I get completely in, and his side opens almost as quickly, which is impossibly fast for a man to move.

“The snow is about to be a pain in my ass,” he mutters to himself, even though it’s not as deep on the road as it was on the ground.

I don’t know when a snowplow came through, but clearly it did at some point.

I’m not sure how, but he slams it into gear and barrels down the road in reverse without ever once looking behind him.

“If I could shit myself, I totally would right now,” Anna says from the backseat, not even startling me with her surprise entrance.

I’m too busy getting white knuckles, as Vancetto cuts the wheel, forcing the car to do a sliding one-eighty until we’re facing in the right direction. I get dizzy when he shifts the gears again, and I focus on not vomiting as he propels us forward too fast on slick snow.

Chapter 9

VIOLET

“I’d hold your hair back if I could use my ghostly powers that way,” Anna assures me as I embarrassingly continue to retch in the fancy, incredibly well-groomed bushes next to the fancy mansion while standing on the fancy driveway.

Because...I’m *not* fancy.

“Thank you for managing to wait until we got out of the car before doing that,” Vancetto says from behind me in a bored drawl. “But when you’re done, it’s best to get inside. I have a feeling a visitor will be here shortly, and it’s much safer for you inside. My visitors usually show up with uncontrollable tempers and anger issues.”

“Want me to take the wheel and drive your body for a bit? Give you a break? I promise not to have too much fun with your vagina,” Anna offers with as much sympathy as she can muster, while I ineloquently wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Do you ever think about anything besides sex?” I ask...a little too loudly, as though I want everyone in the back to freaking hear.

“I can assure you, after what I’ve been witnessing for the past few minutes, sex is certainly not entertaining my thoughts

at present,” Vancetto states emotionlessly from somewhere behind me.

“I’m talking to the two fireflies getting it on despite the blizzard,” I say to him without missing a beat, causing Anna to snort and choke back her laughter. “I hate you,” I add quietly to Anna as she continues to struggle not to laugh.

Why does my dead bestie have to be a relentless bitch?

Finally, I turn around, finding Vancetto holding my cloak out for me to take.

“None of that was normal,” I decide to point out as I warily take back my cloak and weigh the options of stepping into his home.

The sun has completely set now, so it’s dark, daunting, and super creepy in front of his mostly dark mansion. Power bill must be a bitch, so maybe that’s why it’s so dark?

“Depends on your standard of normal,” he states while dusting snow off him, as he offers his arm to me like some sort of archaic gentlemanly gesture that makes my eyebrows hit my hairline.

“He’s clearly got money and chivalry, so I’m not sure why manners seem to baffle you,” Anna states, still sighing dreamily as she runs her hand over his chest, much to his oblivion.

His eyes stay fixed on me, but I pass up his arm and move toward his home, getting under a covering to stay out of the snow.

“You keep calling me a Portocale, wolves randomly attack me in the woods while I’m on my way to see where Marta

Portocale was found dead, and then—”

“Marta Portocale was certainly not found dead on Morrigan property,” he interrupts as he pushes open the door to his home.

His eyes find mine, and I weirdly believe him. Which is stupid, but I almost feel like it’s the right thing to do.

Taking a step back, my eyes narrow.

“Are you somehow forcing me to believe you?”

“Certainly not,” he says with his lips twitching. “But you should get inside. I smell the stench of wolf in the air. We’re going to have visitors soon.”

“The wolves are tracking us?” I ask incredulously.

I sniff the air, smelling...nothing but the outdoors and wet snow.

“I can’t believe this is really happening,” he says while pinching the bridge of his nose. “No one is going to believe the extent of your ignorance.”

“*Dayum*. He just said that,” Anna states while blinking in surprise.

“Did you seriously just call me stupid?” I ask him like he’s lost his mind.

“I certainly did not,” he assures me. “There’s quite a difference between stupidity and ignorance. Ignorance is *not* knowing one’s circumstances well enough to carry on appropriate conversations about such. Stupidity is standing outside after I’ve already told you the danger hasn’t yet

passed,” he says while arching a condescending eyebrow at me.

“Okay. *Now* he called you stupid. It’s time to use that indignant tone again,” Anna says as she stands next to me like she’s showing solidarity. “Or just let me use your body and I’ll give him a good slap,” she suggests, ruining the moment of comradery as she hedges her way back to the topic of renting the use of my vagina.

When I hear another howl, I decide to yell at him from the safety of the house. It’ll be *stupider* to walk home right now, even though none of this makes any sense. I can afford to make some stupid decisions in ways others can’t, so I decide to roll the dice.

He follows behind me in less of a hurry, and he shuts and locks the door with an annoyed smile on his face.

“Just how much do you know about the town you’ve moved into, Violet Portocale?” he asks with a serious expression.

My eyes flick over his that I can barely see in the dimly lit room, and I exhale harshly as I tally the events of the day. From the freak hailstorm that turned into a sunny sky, to the freak blizzard that is still active even now, to the uncaring townspeople who never missed a beat, to the wolves randomly attacking me *while* I was wearing a red cloak...

The red cloak isn’t important to the overall outcome of the day, but it’s important to point out the entirely too maddening irony.

“Something tells me I don’t really know much of anything,” I confess as a woman comes scurrying in.

The room brightens just a little, as though there’s an actual dimmer on it and no one feels the need to blind us.

A fire starts on either end of the massive room, and I glance around at all the antique decorations, things this family has probably been collecting from generation to generation. You know, the way old-money rich people do.

He’s so rich that his monthly order alone could sustain me if I didn’t want to bother with any other clients.

I’ve been considering only working for the four *Houses*, but I feel like that’s also a reckless decision, since they’d hold all the keys to my financial fate.

My mind stops wandering around the pointless corners when the unnamed woman suddenly puts a pretty teal drink in a martini glass in my hand. It even has a totally adorable orange twisty thingy wrapped around a large cherry’s stem.

The cherry at the bottom actually makes my mouth water.

My grin spreads when the cherry cracks open suddenly, and little fizzy bubbles float to the top, creating a cool gold color that takes over the teal.

The two cherry halves float to the top as well, as the disconnected stem floats with the orange twist.

“You’re supposed to actually *drink* it before getting drunk,” Anna points out like this confuses her.

How can she be confused? Is she not watching this drink right now?

The little bubbles in the gold finally shift, and the color begins to clear until the drink is just as transparent as purified water.

Vancetto's dark, knowing look is the first thing I see through the glass...as my smile slowly slips, realization sweeping over me with a sickening *pop*.

It's times like these I remember how much of a Portocale gypsy I am. We really like colorful, ornate, over-the-top things. We're often a slave to our desire to admire pretty things.

"You've been staring at him through that glass for ten minutes. For fuck's sake, do something *less* awkward," Anna stage-whispers.

"Now, Violet, what did you say your last name was?" he asks me as my jaw slowly grinds.

I've now fallen for this twice, unable to resist either time. The last time got me stabbed. This time just has me squirming...so far.

I glance around, seeing that aside from Anna, we're alone and closed up inside this room. I suppose there's no point in denying it now.

"I was under the impression illusion capsules were quite impossible to come by," I say, clearing my throat.

"I have my ways. The capsules seek out *old* gypsy blood. The stronger the blood—"

"The longer the illusion," I finish, clicking my tongue as I smile through my ire. "Well aware."

“Portocales usually last a full ten minutes if they’re very young,” he says, and I tense as he steps closer, his hand lifting to my face.

Just the tips of his fingers brush my cheek. I flinch at first, but relax when I realize he’s not going to hurt me. He’s doing that intense studying thing again like he’s searching for something.

“Your greatest weakness isn’t your lack of knowledge, though,” he murmurs, eliciting a tremble from me when his thumb brushes over my lower lip.

My eyes remain locked on his as he leans forward, the warmth of his breath fanning my lips. The tip of my tongue barely brushes his thumb when I wet my suddenly-dry lips and swallow, trying to remember what we were even discussing a second ago.

A soft, subtle groan is muffled in his throat before he exhales. “Your greatest weakness is your unsullied age,” he finishes, releasing me and turning abruptly as he lifts his own glass to his lips and begins to drink it.

I think he’s confused about what age most women stop being *unsullied*. It’s a lot younger than twenty-five in most cases. Certainly in my case.

I gulp the clear drink in my hand, coughing a little when it burns my throat. He’s going to think I’ve never had a drink before.

“This is a nice foyer,” I say while clearing my throat and glancing around at what appears to be a library.

“Smooth,” Anna deadpans, quirking an eyebrow at me.

“I’m not even sure what room we’re in. We had to park at the curbside entrance because the snow was blocking my private entrance,” he says dismissively.

“What’re you talking about? We stopped in front of your house. We came through the front door. I’ve never been beyond the threshold, so this is the first time I’m seeing this room,” I go on, rambling like most nervous people who’ve had a bizarre day like mine.

I opt to take a seat on the small, pristine, somewhat uninviting sofa.

“Why on earth would the front of this house be facing the road, when the glorious mountain views are a much better focal point?” he asks seriously, turning and looking at me like I’m an uncultured smudge on his sofa.

“You mean to tell me that’s the side entrance?” I ask incredulously.

Just how big is this house? It’s hard to tell with the massive wall that blocks sight of the property and stretches around the entirety of it. All one can see is the *side* entrance that looks like a front entrance.

“Unless I’m hosting a party, it’s the only entrance available to the public,” he states almost absently, turning his head so he can listen better at the window.

“Rich. Gorgeous. Brave,” Anna says on a little sigh, her eyelids almost fluttering shut like she’s simply basking in his presence. “It’s like he was made for me.”

“Just how many ghosts are occupying this town for so many things to be so crazy?” I ask him as he keeps his

attention focused solely on the window. “And who-slash-*what* are you?”

Pushing my red cloak out of the way, I get more comfortable on the uncomfortable sofa, like I’m waiting for a scary story and need to feel something firm against my back.

“Too many ghosts,” he states quietly.

“Why?”

“Too many reasons to list,” he deflects.

“And what’s up with the slightly rabid wolves?”

“No wolves appreciate other predators in their territory,” he goes on.

“Why does it feel like you’re refusing to give me any specifics?”

“Because I rather like your ignorance,” he states vaguely, his attention remaining strained. “It’s simply too refreshing to take away so soon.”

I sip my drink to keep from saying something snide, since we’re *too alone* for me to run my mouth with confidence.

“I know he’s an ass, but I still love the way he talks. And that accent. It’s so...unique,” Anna purrs. “I think we have three kids together, though. He owes me some back child support. Those little fuckers are expensive to feed.”

“This town is one of many towns built on a solid foundation of hysterical fear,” he tells me as he moves away from the window like he’s satisfied about something, returning his attention to me.

Idly, I notice him tug up one pant leg just enough to show a holster of some sort on his ankle. He drops a small knife, and it lands perfectly in said holster, as he takes a step, releasing his pant leg. All of it happens in one smooth motion that really impresses me more than I allow to show on my face.

And he does it like it's a common, simple task without even glancing my way.

“In the sixteen-hundreds, Shadow Hills was a small, barely settled town,” he tells me as he takes a seat. “However, it has a violent past hidden from historical records,” he continues, swirling his drink in his hand as his gaze holds mine.

“That’s actually why it’s such a touristy town—all the historical witch killings. It’s not so much a hidden fact as it is a selling feature,” I inform him. “People come hoping to see something ghostly.”

“Yet they rationalize everything they see,” Anna says on a frustrated groan. “Tell me, how do they explain the purple ogres that hang out by the watering hole in town?”

Sometimes I can't translate Anna's meanings. This is definitely one of those times.

“Certainly. They tell about the ten poor women who were mistaken for witches in a time where hysteria was becoming a spreading pandemic,” Vancetto states as though he's educating me.

He's such a condescending ass.

His gaze is on the fire as he continues. “They don't tell you about the fifty men, women, and children who were burned in their homes when the hysteria was at its peak.”

My brow wrinkles in confusion, and I sit up. “That’s impossible. There’d be a record of that.”

He nods. “I’m positive everyone on earth knows every blemish in history to the fullest extent,” he says in that condescending way of his again, his eyes flicking back to mine as his eyebrow quirks in silent challenge, daring me to argue that.

“People talk,” I start, preparing a different argument. “You can’t erase the whispers, and eventually the whispers get louder and distort the actual events to have been worse...not gentler.”

“Unless all the ones who were left to whisper had blood on their hands and guilt eating them alive,” he counters like he knows for a fact what happened.

With a dark, somewhat sinister smile, he adds, “Guilt always has the guilty downplaying their actions. Fear is a powerful, unstoppable motivator, Ms. Portocale. But when the fear starts to fade, we’re left to face the consequences of our actions in an unforgiving world.”

“Fear isn’t a good excuse to the wronged ones, Mr. Valhe —”

“Just call me Vance,” he interrupts, smiling tightly. “Most people do.”

I pause, forgetting what I was saying, and then pick back up where I think I left off.

“I can see how the world can be considered unforgiving in such instances.”

“True,” he says with a tight smile and a distant look in his eyes. “But judging situations from the outside is a much simpler task when you’re not the one living it in a time when you think you have all the relevant facts. You don’t truly know fear until it consumes your every thought and drenches you with undiluted paranoia every second of every day. The people who did this were common folk. Possibly decent human beings. It’s fear that unleashes evil.”

Anna shoots me a confused look when *Vance* seems to get lost inside his own head.

“You’ve never relied on whispers to be truth so you could make a well-informed decision about survival,” he continues. “You’ve never spent full months with your heart in your throat, just waiting on the shoe to drop and name you a fool for trusting someone else with your life. Someone you didn’t share blood with.”

“What does that have to do with this town?” I ask him.

He clears his throat when he looks away from the fire.

“All-consuming fear turns into widespread panic and paranoia eventually, Ms. Portocale. When it’s your life or someone else’s, you learn just how selfish you really are. It’s the very core of each individual, whether they admit it or not.”

I’m...still confused.

“Are you trying to tell me the many spirits haunting this town are angry because they were wiped out by paranoid fanatics?” I ask, trying to follow his train of conversation and how it relates to anything we’ve been discussing.

“No. I’m merely having a moment of transference,” he states in a bored tone as he stands. “I’m telling you, that like many towns across the world, this town is a place of great power because of all the innocent blood-sacrifices staining its lands, and to a magically gifted gypsy bloodline, it can be very safe or very dangerous. Until you learn to be very safe, you need a little guidance. I can—”

Before he can finish that confusing sentence, the window across from him explodes, and shattered glass sprays across the room.

I drop to my stomach as a man crashes into the room, rolling up to his feet in time to grab Vance by the throat. I watch in horror as Vance is thrown through a wall, pieces of it crumbling as Vance disappears from sight. Emit Morrigan, fully *naked* and out of his motherfucking mind, stalks toward the new opening.

“Oh, you really fucked up now, mutt,” I hear Vance growl as I tuck myself under the sofa, trying to figure out what in the actual hell is going on right now.

“*I* fucked up?” Emit asks in a really unnaturally gruff tone, almost sounding animalistic. “You came onto *my* land and attacked *my* wolves, you stupid son of a bitch!”

Oh shit.

What happens when he finds out I was the catalyst to that problem?

I don’t get to think about it very much, because Vance is suddenly leaping through the hole, and his foot connects with

Emit's chest, sending him flipping back and crashing through the broken window.

Half of the wall is practically ripped out with it when Emit's massive body tears it down on the way out. My eyes widen impossibly more when I peer around to see Emit leap to his feet and shake off the debris. He doesn't even flinch in the snow, despite the fact he is super naked.

"Wow, that's a big, beautiful, *blessed* man," Anna states as she sways.

She's already at the window as Vance pushes his sleeves up, winks over at me like this is any other day, and hops out the giant hole.

"You're lucky I didn't kill them. They attacked me first," Vance assures Emit.

I hear a hard crunching sound, and then something crashes against the door that is too damn close.

"I guess we're really bloody doing this, then?" I hear Vance gripe.

"*You* came onto *my* land, blacksmith. Yes, we're really fucking doing this."

I have no idea what the hell is going on, but I slide out from under the sofa. No longer is Vance and his home the lesser threat.

No two people get thrown around so hard when they're human. They can't see Anna, so they're not gypsies. And one of them is fighting naked while the other is psychotically winking on his way out to get punched some more.

Something crashes against the door again, and I bolt for the other door that takes me into a massive hallway...that seems never-ending on either side because of all the damn mirrors.

“Just don’t run up the stairs!” Anna calls from behind me as I gamble and pick a direction. “The secondary characters always end up dead first when they go up the stairs, and you’re simply not interesting enough to be the lead character in this story,” she adds, as a really scary, animalistic battle cry sounds from outside.

“I’m bringing salt with me next time,” I bite out as I round another corner, wondering just what sort of monsters I’ve stumbled across, and what the hell my mother left out of my gypsy lessons.

Chapter 10

VANCE

Emit drags himself up from the ground as I spit out some blood and pant a little, feeling oddly rejuvenated. Just how long has been since I had a good fight?

Since putting Arion under?

I bounce on my heels, take a few practice swings, and catch my second wind, as he heaves for air.

“Down for the count, mutt?” I ask him as he pushes to his feet, wiping blood away from his nose.

“Why the fuck were you on my land?”

“Saving a Portocale gypsy’s ass, because the girl is oblivious,” I state as I take another practice swing in the air.

He glares at me.

“She had on the red cloak, and they were—”

“She had on the red cloak because it was her mother’s, you fucking idiot. Her mother’s death is still fresh, and she’s a rather young, sensitive thing. She hasn’t lived long enough to forget how to feel anything yet. So go piss on your own trees, and leave me be.”

He growls as he advances a step. “You’re getting as reckless as Arion, second-guessing me, thinking there’s still a shred of me that doesn’t hate you all as much as you hate me.

Trust me when I say you've pushed too far, Vance. Too fucking far. My land and my wolves are off limits."

"Your land is where she was. Your wolves were going to rip her to shreds, simply because she wears a cloak that reminds her of her mother. It's not like the damned girl was hunting your people's spirits," I state dismissively.

He lunges, but I duck out of the way, missing him by inches, as my eyes flick toward the inside of the house, seeing...her *not* under the sofa anymore.

Well damn.

It'll take three weeks to search that motherfucking house—

My thoughts rattle the rest of the way around, because my ears ring when my head is jarred to the side. Fucking dick just sucker punched me.

Again.

Just a hint of wolf scent from my right guides my punch, and pain shoots up my arm as he groans on impact.

My vision clears when he charges me again, but he stops just before he hits me, because we both hear the incessant chattering of the stalker ghost right above our heads.

"That may be the largest penis I've ever seen. Do you think they'll do it? They've stopped fighting now and they're staring lovingly into each other's eyes," the infuriating little pest is saying from somewhere over our heads.

Emit and I both snarl at each other as we fight the urge to turn the infuriating lunatic into salt.

“Why the hell was she on my land in that damned cloak?” Emit growls, chest heaving for air as his claws slowly begin to retract.

“She thinks her mother was found dead on your land,” I answer, glancing up to see a streak of red through the third floor window as Violet runs up another set of stairs, her chattering ghost on her heels.

“She’s wearing the cloak because of me.” Damien’s voice has us both jerking our heads to the left, finding him leisurely propped against a tree as he dusts snow off his shoulders.

“Explain,” Emit demands.

“Fuck off, mongrel. I came to explain, so don’t think you can order me around,” Damien drawls. “I was snooping around her attic, and knocked it off. Accidentally, of course.”

“You led her to that cloak?” Emit asks incredulously.

“Why does it matter? The only thing it does is allow her to pass over boundaries she shouldn’t be able to. She’s been doing that, even without the cloak, every time she makes a delivery,” Damien answers.

Unlike Emit, I sit back, letting Damien slowly unravel whatever intent he had that started this downward spiral of a night.

“She knew her mother was a huntress. She didn’t know the true purpose of the cloak. Still doesn’t. She just likes it because it’s red, shiny, and belonged to her mother,” he continues, grinning wickedly at us. “Then your wolves attacked, and she used it like armor. Sort of cute.”

“You watched the whole thing?” I ask curiously, finally breaking my silence.

It’s unnerving I never sensed or smelled him. The wolves often stink up the air too much when they’re around.

“Of course I did,” he says with a shrug. “Then I came to watch the after party as well,” he adds with a grin, gesturing to the two of us. “You drive like a maniac, so it took a little bit to catch up, even with my speed.”

“Oh my damn. It’s the white-haired panty buster! He’s here with them now! And he’s sucking the big man’s dick!” the ghost shouts enthusiastically.

Damien scrubs a hand over his face, and I watch from my peripheral as Violet tries to stealthily shut the top floor window the ghost is screaming out of.

“I find that ghost to be quite a nuisance,” Damien confesses in a quiet tone.

“I find you both to be fucking worse. My wolves and my land are off limits to everyone. Don’t make this hard on me. Not so soon after what Arion did,” Emit growls seriously, pushing his hair out of his face as his eyes narrow. “Things with my people are still tense, even all these decades later.”

“So let her die on your land next time?” I drawl. “You’d rather suffer through our curse that accompanies a Portocale death?”

He glares at me.

“I’ll speak with Ian, inform him about the novelty of this particular Portocale. He was just defending my land,” Emit growls.

“From what? A girl bumbling her way through the snow and talking to her dying ghost friend, while searching for the place where her mother died? Good wolf senses he has,” I decide to point out, smirking over at the furious wolf.

“She struck first,” he adds on a snarl.

“No, the ghost struck first. Ian just doesn’t have the blessed gypsy blood in him and didn’t see her,” Damien inserts.

“You were just going to watch her die?” I ask him as my brow furrows.

“His land. His wolves. I know my place, Vance. Unlike you and Arion,” he says stoically, comparing *me* to that deranged, homicidal lunatic.

“Arion would have ripped their spines out and mailed them to their alpha,” I say as I take a step toward the man full of menace he hides too well. “What are you trying to stir?”

Damien’s grin merely grows. “You always want to play the hero, Vance. Constantly denying you’re a monster like the rest of us. However, that little Portocale will be certainly terrified of you both now. Who else is left?”

After pointing to himself, he winks and vanishes from sight. I can only assume he’s still lurking, since Emit sniffs the air and wrinkles his nose. The longer Damien is around, the stronger his scent becomes.

I can’t smell anything over wet wolf, so Emit has fucked up my senses at the moment.

“We’re not finished discussing this,” Emit says as he turns and jogs off into the shadows.

I hear the moment he shifts, and assume he did it that far away to keep from traumatizing the Portocale girl, in case she's watching.

We've remained far too quiet for even her ghost to overhear during our impromptu meeting.

I glance up, wondering why that ghost has been quiet for this long, and decide they must have come back down to escape after realizing the house is large, but it's not quite friendly to those who want to hide.

"Please get rid of the salt around the bathroom," the ghost says as if she's been summoned.

I work hard not to react to the fact she's directly beside me. Alone. While Violet is apparently somewhere else.

My eyes dart around, searching for any sign of that red cloak.

"She done dug-to-China kind of gone," the ghost adds like she's trying to talk to me. "It's just you and me, Handsome. Now go take a shower and make a crack in the salt line so I can join you."

Continuing to pretend the ghost doesn't exist, I sigh and search for the tracks I can find before the snow covers them all up. Damn girl is going to freeze to death out here.

Chapter 11

VIOLET

Teeth chattering, I sip my cocoa, pulling the blanket tighter around me, as I scoot in closer to the fireplace.

Anna pops in and takes a seat beside me, sighing wistfully.

“The werewolf is a wild one you can’t trust, but Vance Van Helsing—”

“Anna, not now,” I groan.

“What?” she asks seriously.

“Just...not now,” I say quieter, eyes still on the fire.

She disappears from sight, causing my lips to tense. Her attention is getting divided too easily, which means she’s getting even closer to the dementia stage.

Just as it grows quiet again, my brow furrows, her random words sifting through my mind as I stand abruptly and go to my desk, lifting my book.

Valhinseng...

Van Helsing...

Maybe it’s a coincidence that the really bad anagram and Van Helsing have the same letters? Maybe Anna’s delusional mind is snapping those pieces together and now making my

saner mind follow her down her rabbit hole because of this tiring, insane day?

Werewolves...

That would explain the attack in the woods that started this domino-effect of a night. It'd also explain why Emit showed up naked and how they were both so strong and resilient.

It's also completely, utterly, and unquestionably insane. Or maybe it's not.

I mean, Mom hunted ghosts as a hobby. Most people don't believe in ghosts. Who's to say there's not an entire world of monsters that's been kept from me?

After all, I believe monsters exist. I have no choice but to believe that, because I know at least one monster lives.

Things stir in my head that have no business stirring, and I try to put together pieces that don't fit.

Something bumps and knocks against the window, startling me, and I curse the wind when I accidentally knock off my mother's potion book.

My gaze lands on the book, and a buried memory from the day I turned thirteen climbs to the surface just as I kneel down.

Blood coats my hands as I rock back and forth, crying so hard I can't catch my breath. "I'm sorry, Mommy. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Shhh," she says as she pulls me against her, not bothered by the blood all over me, dripping from my hair, staining my clothes, and invading my mouth with its disgusting taste...

She patiently consoles me as I sob.

“It’s not your fault. It’s theirs,” she says so quietly. “They shouldn’t have been here.”

“I’m a monster,” I whisper, hiccupping around a sob.

“I can assure you there are real monsters out there, January. You’re not one of them,” she goes on, kissing the top of my forehead. “Anything you do is simply to survive. That doesn’t make you a monster.”

As a child, it sounded like she was so certain, but in this moment, I hear the hesitance and tremor of fear in her voice. That was the day my father became an over-the-phone sort of dad. That was the day my mother threw herself into her work.

That was the day I realized there was something terrifying inside me, and if I panicked too much, it came out to defend me.

I just don’t know what it is, and neither did Mom. Now I wonder about this town with possible monsters, and look over at the name of a legendary monster hunter.

Vance fought a pack of possible werewolves—which could just be the crazy in my head talking—and he barely wrinkled his shirt. What happens when he finds out what I am? I can’t fight like that. Mom said, given my dark side, it was a terrible idea to ever be a threat, so I was never taught to fight.

The book is open to a page about this town—a potion that locks out the negative energy from the house. Picking it up, I jerk back, because the door blows open and Vance walks in, cursing as he gapes at me.

“How the fucking hell did you manage to get yourself back here without freezing to death?” he snaps.

“Gypsy warming potion,” I lie, blinking in surprise to find him here so suddenly.

He shakes off the snow, cursing a little more, and starts pulling off his wet clothes.

“Do you have any fucking idea how stupid that was?” he demands. “I’ve been searching everywhere because I thought there was no way you could make it this far on foot, you foolish little girl.”

It would have been stupid...if I could literally freeze to death.

“Is Emit Morrigan a werewolf?” I ask, catching *him* off guard with the abrupt shift in conversation.

He narrows his eyes at me as he shuts the door behind him and continues to strip out of his snow-drenched clothes.

Where’d Anna go?

She must be chasing Emit or Damien around.

“He’s not just *a* werewolf. He’s *the* alpha. All the packs in this region are under him, and several betas actually run the packs. You can’t go roaming around on his lands, since clearly you know more than you’ve let on.”

I’m not sure how it happens. One second I’m standing, and the next I’m dizzy and lifting off the ground. It all happens within a blink of my eyes, though I’m not sure exactly how long it took.

My mind is trying too hard to process everything, and it’s overwhelming.

“Or maybe you don’t know anything at all,” Vance says, drawing my attention over to him.

Swallowing thickly, I stand and back away.

Somehow, in those few seconds, he’s gotten down to his boxers, revealing a lot of firm, toned, tan skin. He snatches a blanket from my sofa and wraps it around his waist.

I scramble to adjust my own blanket over my hideous pajamas. He just quirks an eyebrow like he’s amused by all this.

“Do you kill monsters?” I ask with an unreasonable sense of calmness.

His eyes drop to the paper where I scratched out the letters of his name, toying with an impossible anagram.

When his gaze cuts back to mine, his smirk looks a little dark. “You mean, am I a Van Helsing?”

“A Van Helsing? As in there’s *more*?”

“Aye,” he says as he takes a seat near my fire, being far too casual about all of this. “There’s a lot I won’t tell you, Violet Portocale. But there’s a lot someone *has* to tell you before you get yourself killed. What I’m curious about is why your mother knowingly sent you to a town full of monsters without warning you first.”

Staving off the tears that try to fall, I don’t let my mind wander down dark paths. Why would my mother send me, a sure monster, to a town with a legendary monster hunter, who scared me even when I thought him to be a myth?

She wouldn't do anything to harm me. Couldn't. Wouldn't. Never.

A wad of emotion gets caught in my throat as my tears waver on my lids, and he studies me like he's trying to figure out why I want to cry.

"She's going to hurt someone innocent one day, Marta. I'm sorry, but I don't feel safe here anymore," I remember hearing my father say.

"You're a coward."

"I never signed on for this! You said gypsy magic and occasional ghosts. Not monsters and...whatever she is. It's not natural, Marta. You can't expect me to handle this. I'm just human! I love my daughter, but whatever is inside her...it terrifies me."

We never spoke of it, even to this day. Dad left because he got a new job, and that's the only reason I've ever acknowledged to either of them.

I wanted to forget I'm a monster.

Now there's a monster hunter in my living room who didn't kill a single werewolf tonight, despite the fact they're clearly monsters.

"Why did you spare them?" I decide to ask.

"His land, his mutts," he says as if on autopilot. "Make no mistake, if they try that shit on my territory or in town, I will happily—and legally—rip them to shreds."

I swallow harder. There are rules to being a monster?

“But despite what that stupid wolf thinks, I only bend rules—I don’t break them,” he goes on with a shrug. “I am the Van Helsing assigned to this area because of my history with the three other monster alphas who occupy the outskirts of town.”

“Three other monster alphas?” I ask, feeling dizzy again as I move closer to the fire and take a seat there.

He purses his lips as he takes a seat close to me, and I pretend to not be scared of a monster hunter, since only monsters should fear him.

“There’s no delicate way to explain your current situation, Violet Portocale. But you are, indeed, safe in this town, despite appearances,” he adds.

When he glances around, my eyes follow his.

“I don’t exactly feel safe,” the monster girl says to the monster hunter, who has no idea she’s a monster.

“You will once I explain,” he says as his eyes come back to mine.

The familiar sensation of my heartbeat pulsing in my ears returns, causing that edge of panic to seep back in when I fear what he’s about to ask.

“Everyone has a calming, coping mechanism. How can I keep you the calmest while I explain?” he asks.

Once again, as though dragged from my throat, my words tumble from my lips without permission. “My mother always gave me a pedicure when she delivered heavy, life-altering news.”

“And that helps?” he asks as my pulse grows louder.

“Yes,” I state on autopilot. “It’s calming and soothing.”

He sighs harshly, as the hold he has over me breaks, and I watch as he drops the blanket and moves through my house in just his boxers.

“That’s not a potion at all, is it?” I ask his back, swallowing thickly and remembering not to act afraid of the monster hunter, while he weirdly starts rifling through drawers.

I pretend to have nothing to hide, so I don’t get overly defensive about the prying nature of his rummaging around my private things without permission.

“It’s a gift of mine...extracting the truth,” he states absently. “Doesn’t always work, but the younger the subject, the more potent it seems to be,” he adds. “As I said, your age is the gravest weakness you suffer right now. I’m quite worried you’re going to have a mental breakdown at some point, because there’s an overwhelming amount of information to deliver.”

Awesome.

He disappears into my kitchen after palming something from the drawer. Shortly after that, I hear him in the downstairs bathroom toward the other side of the circling layout of my new home.

Where the hell is Anna? I need her for once so she can spy on what he’s currently doing, though half of what she reports could be utter nonsense.

Anna said there were vampires too...

“How are vampires and werewolves real?” I call out, hoping his voice will tell me where he’s moved onto, since I no longer hear him in the bathroom.

“I’m afraid the origins story will have to wait until another time,” he answers from upstairs, confusing the hell out of me.

When and how did he get upstairs without me seeing him?

He’s carrying a large, round tub of some sort, as he descends my staircase. I’m not even sure where he found that or what he’s doing, until he sits down in front of me and starts putting down all the things he’s been gathering.

Steam is rising from the tub, as he moves through the house again. I stare at the pumice stone, lotion, and various other things that definitely point to an upcoming pedicure.

Which just makes this night doubly confounding.

The monster hunter is going to give the monster a pedicure? You can’t make this shit up and have it sound logical. In fact, it sounds like a terrible lie Anna would tell.

When he returns with a bottle of nail polish and a chair, I stare at him like he’s lost his mind.

“Sit,” he commands as he points at the chair.

He walks over to the corner to grab two stools and returns to put the tub on one, and takes a seat for himself on the other, still wearing nothing but his boxers.

I just simply blink at him as I stand, blanket still wrapped around me, and take a seat in the chair.

“You’re seriously going to give me a pedicure right now?”

“I’m seriously hoping it keeps you calm during the life-altering news,” he says as he lifts one of my feet and peels off the wooly sock.

A breath hisses out of me when my foot is plunged into the overly warm water.

He shows my other foot the same attention, moving it a little more gently into the water that smells like lavender and something else.

“What’s in that?” I ask as my eyes grow a little heavy.

“It’s one of your recreational products,” he says with a smirk. “Just to ensure you’re truly and fully calm.”

My body relaxes more as the seconds tick by, and he gently massages one of my feet in the water, only adding to the soothing air around me.

“What are you—”

“You know I won’t hurt you, Violet. I hunt monsters, not harmless gypsy girls,” he says softly. “Just relax.”

Easy for him to say. He’s not aware of all the details.

“Your biggest clients are rich because they’ve lived for centuries in a world that made it easy to earn money after a while of figuring it all out,” Vance starts.

My head lulls to the side as my eyes work to stay fixed on him instead of closing, relishing the magic in his hands.

“Your mother was the first Portocale to actually live in Shadow Hills,” he continues.

“Why?” is the only word I can manage.

“Because Portocales typically avoid our kind. The other families and I moved here shortly after the great massacre I told you about earlier tonight,” he continues.

I giggle a little, because he’s ridiculous, even though his hands are magic and the lavender air is spectacular to breathe in. I feel like I could pluck petals off the flower from the air if I tried.

“Maybe I used too much for your weaker tolerance,” he mutters under his breath, sighing harshly.

“You’re not possibly that old,” I say around a grin, looking over his face.

His eyes are soulful and wise, but his face is far too young.

“Once upon a time, immortality is all man sought. One day, I’ll have no choice but to tell you how we came across the nightmare we sought so diligently, but today is not that day. For now, let’s pretend you know all about immortality and its rules.”

“Sure,” I dutifully agree, and then grin broader as my limbs grow heavy.

I’m certainly not numb. I can feel every glorious touch of his hands as he continues on with my pedicure. I should feel embarrassed, not so relaxed and...

Oooohhh...pretty.

My gaze is riveted to the water when it turns pink and gold, swirling around his hands. But it fades back to clear when he takes the lotion and starts massaging it into my calves.

I think I moan. I know I want to.

“We were assigned here after the war ended,” he continues. “Strained alliances and necessary truces were made when we grew tired of constantly tearing each other to shreds. However, resentment festers long after a war ends. We’re not so different from mortals in that respect.”

“What wars?” I ask absently, my eyes fluttering shut when he continues to massage my calves, working his way up to my knees and then back down to my ankles, leaving my feet still submerged.

“The obvious wars,” he tells me flatly. “Werewolves, vampires, my kind...and two others that are a little more difficult to explain. The bloodshed was getting us nowhere, and we all finally came to the same agreement when our fear faded.”

Two others? Four families...

The math isn’t adding up, but there are more important questions to ask. I think. The water is pretty again...and distracting.

“What fear?” I ask around a moan when he works out tension from my feet I didn’t know even existed.

“The fear I alluded to earlier,” he says quietly. “Paralyzing fear that consumes and destroys.”

He pauses his ministrations, and I glance down as he lifts my feet from the water and places the small tub out of the way. He grabs a towel from the floor, and starts patting both my feet dry as his eyes come back up to mine.

“When the world changes before your very eyes, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it, you can only make decisions based on the knowledge you have on hand,” he continues. “Whether your actions make you a monster or a hero is to be determined by those who win the war and write your history. In war, there’s always a great deal of wrong done by all parties involved. Unlike my kind, humans rarely live long enough to feel the full weight of their actions, in the event they’re wrong.”

“I’m confused,” I mumble as I try to sit up straighter, but find that task to be impossible. “Are you saying I’m immortal?” I ask groggily.

He finishes patting my feet dry, and I just watch, too relaxed and languid to do much else.

“Of course you’re confused, because I’m deliberately speaking in vague terms to avoid the specifics of the wars. And you’re a Portocale. Portocale gypsies aren’t immortal,” he says quietly. “They age and wither as quickly as humans, should they be fortunate enough to escape their enemies.”

“Our enemies aren’t monsters,” I murmur, causing his head to come up. “At least not by nature. But *monster* is a relative term, don’t you think?”

His lips twitch as he unscrews the cap on the nail polish. “Indeed,” he agrees like he’s amused. “Do you know why they want you dead?”

My mind, freed by the drugs seeping through me, travels into the dark corners I should avoid. The normal panic is absent though, so I travel freely through the past, collecting the pieces of fragmented memories I rarely try to put together.

“By the power of divine blood and birthright, I sacrifice this Portocale and myself in the name of the Forsaken.”

My mind quickly shuts down, unable to watch the man plunge the knife into my body, and certainly unable to revisit what happened next. I can still remember my screams and the scent of my own blood as they started sawing at my arm, and bile rises to my throat.

“Violet?” Vance says softly, hand cupping my cheek when I realize he’s now directly in front of my face, a concerned look etching his features.

“I don’t want to think about the enemies with the red patch,” I say through loose lips.

His lips thin. “You’ve actually met the cult that hunts your bloodline?” he asks softly.

“Why do they hunt us? Mom always said it was an ancient cult with no motivations beyond prejudice. And until she brought me to a town of monsters who all somehow *know* I’m a Portocale—without so much as warning me—I believed every word from her mouth,” I tell him with a false bravado as I fight back any emotion that wants to surge forth.

He lifts the tub when he sees me struggling, and I’m thankful to breathe in the steam full of the drug that shoves back the panic, enabling me to speak, without fearing what I might reveal in front of the monster hunter.

He puts the tub back down when he views me calming once again.

The lavender seems to be seeping into my bones, and I moan a little again when he gives my feet one last massage.

“That’s part of the story I can’t yet give you.”

“Why not?” I ask as he begins carefully and slowly painting my toenails.

A legendary monster slayer is painting my toenails. Maybe I’m a ghost and I’ve truly advanced to the delusional stage that causes me to be a pathological liar, because this is insane, even by my standards.

“It’s too complicated right now,” he answers, staying cryptic. “However, I can explain the ins and outs of being in monster territory. And I’ll expand little by little, so as not to overwhelm you, so long as you learn to trust me.”

“He says after drugging the daft girl,” comes a new male voice. “It’s not surprising, really. You always were a fool with women, old chap.”

I’d startle if I wasn’t so heavenly sedated.

My gaze flicks to the wall when motion catches my attention, but I’m too relaxed to really react. The new man is perched at a lean against the wall, and though I should probably find that unnerving, I’m not exactly motivated to demonstrate the proper amount of fear.

Must be a ghost, so no fear is necessary. Vance doesn’t even glance in the direction of the man or acknowledge his presence.

“Are you seriously painting the girl’s bloody toes, mate?” the man asks with genuine horror in his voice, loudly talking over whatever Vance is saying.

It makes it really hard to focus, given my current headspace.

He pinches the bridge of his nose, exhales harshly, and shakes his head as though he's embarrassed for Vance.

As though he can't bear another second of this, he turns to walk through the wall, but pauses. I cock my head, studying his back, curious as to what period the clothes he's wearing belong in so that I can date his death.

Early nineteen hundreds? The ruffled edges of his collar are soft, flat, and open on his smooth chest. Anna will be pissed she missed out on this particular ghost.

He must not use his ghostly powers much if he's not showing symptoms of the final decay.

Then again, I've met some ghosts over two hundred years old who still haven't even started the final decaying process.

My mind continues to wander for so long that I don't even realize I'm staring directly into his eyes. When did he turn back around? How long have I held eye contact? Does he know that I've seen him?

"Violet, are you too high to listen?" Vance asks on a sigh, causing my eyes to snap away from the new ghost and back to the man who has started on my other foot.

"Bloody fucking hell," the other man says on a harsh whisper. "You can see me," he adds as I pretend I certainly cannot see him.

"I'm sorry, what?" I ask Vance. "I saw a distracting bug on the wall," I tell him.

I think the man looks at the wall to check out my lie, and I keep my expression neutral.

“I was just telling you about some of the ways to protect yourself,” Vance goes on, his eyes dipping back to his task.

He’s not very good at coloring inside the lines, I notice, but since his trade is putting down the things that go bump in the night, I decide not to critique him.

“How can you see me?” the other guys goes on. “Wait, don’t answer that in front of him. How about you ask him about Emit, the werewolf who tore apart his house tonight.”

“How do I protect myself?” I ask Vance, actively ignoring the ghost I stupidly made eye contact with. “I have a ton of charms.”

I lift some of my necklaces.

“Gypsy charms won’t do you any good. Wearing those is nothing but redundant. As I said, this town is safe and dangerous for gypsies.”

“Yeah, he’s a bit of an obnoxious dick when he talks in circles that way,” the guy says from directly beside me, causing me to swallow back a sound of surprise as he studies Vance with me. “Telling you something and nothing at all in the same breath. You need to ask him specifics.”

“I don’t understand,” I say to Vance, hoping the ghost thinks it was a fluke that our eyes met and moves on soon.

The last ghost I made eye contact with is enough for one gypsy to handle. And I’m starting to worry about her, since she’s been gone for so long.

“If vampires or wolves approach you, just tell them you’re a Portocale,” Vance goes on as though it’s no big deal, as he streaks up the side of my pinky toe.

His foot and leg massages might be heavenly, but his painting skills lack—

So not important right now.

Straining to focus, I open my mouth to speak, but the other ghost speaks first.

“That’d be stupid. Then your *enemies* will find you if you start claiming to be a Portocale gypsy in the same town where everyone knows monsters lurk. I can be vague too, Portocale gypsy, if that’s your thing,” the ghost says really close to my ear.

For a second, I almost swear I can feel the heat of his breath on my neck, but that’s impossible, because ghosts don’t have breaths.

“Ask him what Damien is,” the ghost goes on, and for whatever stupid reason, the words fly out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“Damien Morpheous...what is he?”

Vance pauses, polish brush stopping mid-stroke, as his eyes come back up to meet mine.

“He’s going to give you a bullshit answer, but at least now you can’t pretend not to hear me,” the unnamed ghost says as he takes a seat on the floor, grinning like he’s won a prize as he stares at me.

I only notice him from my peripheral, as I make a vain effort to continue ignoring him.

The new ghost seems entirely too amused with me now.

“Damien is a complicated one to understand, considering he’s a mixture of lores that bleed together and fuse a creature that exists only as him. His creations—”

“His creations?” I ask incredulously.

“Like vampires and werewolves, he can turn humans into something. Though he turns them into things different from himself,” he answers, literally telling me something and nothing at all, just as the annoying new ghost I’ve collected said.

“Such as?”

He finishes painting my toes at last and puts down my foot as he twists the cap back onto the polish.

“Explaining would take up too much time, and your pedicure is finished. Tell people you’re a Portocale,” he goes on.

“Told you his answer would be shite. Don’t worry, love. I’ll fill you in later,” the ghost says as he stands and mimes dusting his hands off, though the sound is absent, obviously.

My gaze flicks to him on reflex, seeing the front of his shirt tucked into a pair of what I think are some kind of old-school bad boy trousers, with somewhat puffy sides, and a narrower ankle on them that slips seamlessly into a pair of tall, leather hunting boots of some sort.

What was he doing when he died? Why does this damn drug keep leaving me vulnerable enough to stare at a ghost I would easily ignore under normal circumstances?

He gives me a smirk and a wink before vanishing from sight.

Vance glances to the vacant spot and then back to me.

“Are you okay?”

“Not even a little bit,” I confess, not bothering to look back at him. “And if I tell people I’m a Portocale—”

“The ones who hunt you are mortal. I can dispatch them easily enough,” he says dismissively.

My eyes do come back to him.

“Then why didn’t you save my mother while she was living here?”

His eyes hold mine for a long moment. I’m positive he’s not going to answer, but he finally does.

“Because your mother would have rather died than ever accept my help under any circumstances.”

“Why?”

“There’s going to be a resounding *why* to follow up every question I answer, because it’s not as simple as one direct answer. The questions and answers are threaded through some very lengthy, complicated histories that will take a lot of time to sort through. The only thing I can hope is that your ignorance makes you wiser than her.”

That’s not confusing *at all*.

He struts over to the couch and starts lying out a blanket.

“What are you doing?”

“Making my bed.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m sleeping here tonight,” he answers without turning around.

My lips prepare to parrot my constant question, when another voice startles me.

“There really is a resounding *why* to follow up every answer he allows,” Anna says from the corner of the room as she swoons a little.

“How long have you been there?” I groan.

“Long enough to remember why I fell in love with him back when he was a Cuban dictator.”

The Van Helsing looks more Norwegian to me.

“I’m sorry, but what?” he asks, glancing over his shoulder at me, reminding me he doesn’t know there’s a ghost in the room.

Does he know I can see ghosts?

It’s safe to make no assumptions or confessions in this... state of mind that has rendered me unable to get out of this damn chair.

“Where are you from?” I ask him by way of recovering. “Originally.”

“My family migrated to Romania two generations before I was born,” he answers absently. “I tan fairly better than they do,” he answers without actually answering. Or maybe Romania is the answer?

“Are they still alive?”

“Immortality,” he murmurs a little angrily.

Immortality. Yeah. No. I'm not sure if I buy that.

He aggressively finishes making the bed and exhales harshly as he turns to face me. His hair is just slightly disheveled, and I watch with some amusement as he pushes it back into place, only to seem annoyed when it falls over his forehead again. It's the most untidy I've seen him, and that says a lot after the night we've had together.

"Why the fucking hell are you grinning?" he asks me seriously.

"Because you're so beautiful," Anna answers him, and for once, I might agree with her.

I guess the final decay is like being in a constant state of high on gypsy spice.

No wonder they pay me so much money. I've always been careful not to sample the goods for fear of what I might do on them.

"You worried your stash wouldn't be as strong as your mother's, but considering the calm I've had while discussing this, I believe it's damn possible yours is stronger. So why aren't you collapsed on the floor and passed out, little mortal gypsy?"

"Because I can't get out of this damn chair," I answer in a crucial tone.

It's unbearably adorable when the monster slayer cracks a grin that he can't seem to immediately wipe away. Especially with that errant lock of hair still haphazardly flopped over his forehead, while he's standing so confidently in front of me in nothing but those very distracting boxers of his.

“Are you asking for my help, gypsy girl?”

“No. I’m simply alluding to the need of assistance, just to be vague,” I inform him, almost tipping out of the chair when I finally give it all I have to stand.

He’s immediately at my side, lifting me effortlessly before I face-plant the ground.

“He’s only touching you because he can’t touch me,” Anna says, reminding me she’s still here as *Van Helsing* starts carrying me up the stairs.

I don’t even help him with my weight, because I’m thoroughly wrecked.

“How do you know where my room is?” I ask as the colorful dots begin to speckle my vision with the swaying motion.

“You’ll find you’re the most interesting thing to stumble into our stale lives in some time. Your room is the least invasive thing I currently know about you.”

“He’s so creepy sexy,” Anna states on a dreamy little sigh. “Just give me fifteen minutes alone with him in the wood shed before he realizes just how boring you are and loses all interest.”

“You’re not borrowing my vagina,” I state sleepily, hearing a snort from above me as a soft mattress finds my back.

Covers are being pulled over me as I try to wiggle into a more comfortable position but fail.

“Certainly not when you’re in this state,” Vance states like he’s amused as he backs away, glancing at me for a second

before turning and walking out.

“Ever heard the term ‘use it or lose it?’” Anna asks dryly.

I wait until I hear the click of the door before muttering, “I hate you.”

Chapter 12

DAMIEN

Vance is sleeping on her motherfucking couch. Are you shitting me with this right now?

Carefully and silently, I move all his weapons away from where he'll know he left them, and then I mask them so that they look like innocent objects just lying around. I flip him off as I turn and start up the stairs.

I'm supposed to be the reckless one. Arion is the psychopath. Emit is the broken, savage beast. Vance is the one who has his knickers jammed up his asshole and is supposed to keep the rest of us in line.

Yet here he is crossing a major line.

Unbelievable.

Staying quiet, I navigate my way around any of the creaking boards I've mapped out to keep her from discovering when I'm in her house. Good thing I'm here to check in, since that tool is being very creepy and actually sleeping in nothing but his damn boxers.

Has he no boundaries?

Pushing through her door, I find her literally snoring. Rather loudly and not at all dainty. I guess she slept through a

man breaking in and taking up residence downstairs because she couldn't hear him over that hellacious noise escaping her.

“She’s only snoring because she got so high,” comes a familiar voice at my back, as I do all I fucking can not to alert the ghost that I’m aware of her presence. “She usually sleeps so quiet and still that I think she’s dead.”

How could I have possibly forgotten to stay invisible while this thing lurks around and haunts the curious gypsy?

“She got so high she fucked three men at once, and then she turned around and stole my baby from my arms while I was distracted. I already checked her trunk. It’s not there. But thank you for coming to help me find it, Dr. Morpheous,” she adds, reminding me it’s a safe bet the Portocale gypsy can’t trust a word out of her pet ghost’s mouth.

“My vagina does tricks. She also begs for treats. I feel like you should—”

The ghost squeals just before I’m shoved against the wall, feeling it crack behind me as my breath comes out in a rush. The Portocale gypsy snores right through it, as I grin in the face of the ever-stoic Vance Van Helsing, who is giving me an unimpressed look.

“Any reason you broke into her home and slept on her couch?” I drawl.

“I slept here with invitation.” His lips purse as my brow lifts in confusion. “Sort of,” he adds, bristling as he glares at me. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I come around to make sure she’s not simply making a fool of us all, and watch her from time to time when she

doesn't know anyone's watching."

His look is weirdly horrified.

"Do you have any idea how sick and creepy that is?" he whisper-yells.

"Highly doubtful that it's as creepy as you lounging on her sofa with your hand down your boxers," I'm fast to point out.

He narrows his eyes at me. "Do *not* come into her house to watch her—"

"Don't give me this self-righteous tirade. You and Emit watch her from just down the street. I've seen you," I interrupt, rolling my eyes. "You simply can't get as close as I can."

His glare would be chilling and terrifying to any sane monster. He's likely one of the few souls with the power to kill me. I know with absolute certainty he never will, and it only fuels my hatred for him.

He will, however, hurt me without mercy.

"This is crossing a line," he bites out.

"So you're the judge of what lines can or cannot be crossed? I haven't slept over, Captain Underpants. And why do you have nail polish smudges all over your normally preppy fingers? Isn't your OCD driving you insane?" I ask, distracted by the errant streak of pink here and—

"Is it on your face too?" I ask, noticing a smudge on his cheek.

His eyes narrow even more, turning into near slits, as my lips begin to twitch. "Did you paint the bloody girl in her

sleep, you kinky fuck?”

Even with the knowledge that he won't kill me during one of the few times in my long life that I'd like to not die, I still flinch and stare at him incredulously when a sharp blade is suddenly kissing the flesh of my neck.

“Do you really walk around with something wedged up your ass, or can you now make weapons appear from thin air?” I ask him, actually expecting him to answer this one.

He gives me the usual dry expression.

“I strongly advise you to avoid crossing this line in the future, Damien,” he says with a curt smile.

“This is like all my dreams come true,” the ghost says as she rises up beside us, her hands passing through our shoulders.

I'm sure he's suppressing the same creeped-out shudder I am.

We both glare at each other as we try to keep the appropriate amount of tension between us, despite the *purring* ghost beside us.

“I'm way more interesting than her,” she assures us.

“So that means I'm to perv on her from the same thirty or so yards you shits do, then?” I ask him, my lips curving in a grin when I get back to the conversation at hand. “That's the line you're marking?”

“So hot,” the ghost says, mocking the sound of heavy breathing.

Why does that gypsy let this thing hang around?

Violet snores on, unaware of anything going on.

“What’d you give her? Just for future reference, so I’ll know what those boundaries are as well,” I go on, metaphorically poking the bear.

He’s like a ghost when he moves. So quick it’s eerily silent, and so rapid you don’t register the motion no matter how fast you are. It’s being one step ahead that always gives him the edge to deliver that killing blow.

The blade pricks into my side, and my face is smashed into the wall, because he’s turned me and is wrenching my arm behind my back before I can process it all. I blame it on the lack of feeding I’ve been able to do for the past millennia.

“Don’t test me, Damien. Arion will be back soon, and he’s going to be enough to handle after being in the ground for a century,” he growls.

I laugh bitterly and possibly too loudly. “What are you going to do, you cunt? Kill me? We both know you won’t, even when I beg,” I say with a fitting amount of resentment.

He’s the only man to ever see my pride fall, and now I have to live with the knowledge that he knows how miserable I’ve gotten.

“No. But we both know I don’t mind hurting you,” he quips like the chipper ass he is when he’s making me miserable.

Then, like the prick he always fucking is, he slams the blade into my thigh. I swallow down the sound of pain that catches in my throat, and glare at him as he grins like the cheeky lunatic the Van Helsings are.

“Care to get this out of my leg now that you’ve sufficiently pissed me off. I’d like to punch your smug face,” I state through a little strain.

“Gladly. We’ll take it to my place,” he says, looking far too thrilled with the prospect of me taking a shot at him.

Emit didn’t look so great last night, but I’m faster than Emit, and it’s been a long damn time since I bruised that smug face of this Van Helsing.

He yanks the damn sword from my leg with no gentle finesse, and I bite back any sound that would bring a smile to his sadistic delight meter.

“Shall we?” he asks, holding up the bloody sword as the snoring ceases.

I smirk as I vanish, masking the blood he’s carved out of me, along with masking the wall that is now in dire need of some repair.

Vance is left out to dry as he whirls around, bloody sword in hand, and Violet scrambles up in the bed, yanking the sheet against her like it’ll protect her better than that pointless cloak would have against wolves.

I hate how attractive a vulnerable Portocale looks. It’s annoyingly distracting and infuriatingly haunting.

“Well, I’m sure this looks entirely wrong,” Vance says tightly, casting a glare in my general direction.

I hope he feels the silent laughter I’m holding back.

“W-w-why the sword,” she stammers, a hint of sleep rasping her voice in a way I shouldn’t find so fascinatingly

sexy. “I-i-is that blood?”

I’m going to have to hate this Portocale for being such a damn struggle for me. I’ve been numb for too long to remember the sensations of desire. It’s simply cruel torture to *feel* anything at all.

Yet the enigma she is, along with the possibilities such a novel thing, holds my attention with too much ease...

It’s continuously chipping away at that very necessary numbness. He’s right. I shouldn’t be coming here, because she’s as drawn to me as I am to her.

Well, when she’s aware that I’m around.

Not that I’ll tell him he’s right. He’s a smug prick sleeping on her couch. If I’m wrong, he’s fucking wrong too.

I’ll point that out when she can’t hear me. For now, I sit back and enjoy the fact Vance, for possibly the first time ever, looks to be struggling for the right words.

“He slayed a dragon for you. I vote you give him a blowie as a reward,” her little ghost friend says as she slides onto the bed next to her.

I don’t envy Vance right now as he struggles not to show any expression. “I’m sure you’re quite terrified, given the events that led up to the daunting confessions last night,” he says in that firm but deflective way of his as the sword recedes, tucking into something he has clutched in his hand.

She stares at his hand for a moment before meeting his eyes, not making a sound.

What have his idle hands come up with now? I used to keep better track of his newest weaponry.

“For now, I should go. I think I’ve worn down my welcome, and I’m sure I have some house staff who’ve woken up to the shambles the Morrigan mutt left my home in last night. I should go deal with that. We’ll talk soon,” he calls as he leaves like it’s not a problem she’s woken up to him holding a bloody sword in her bedroom.

She just sort of stares, as though she can’t figure out how to react. I roll my eyes. What happened to the good old days when the women screamed their heads off until they fainted?

I’d love to see him hold his composure in the face of that at this moment.

“I know what you’re thinking, but he’s still mine,” the dead girl says to Violet. “Eyes off my merchandise,” she adds for good measure.

Why the hell is she talking about him like he’s the one she’d choose? She stalked me the entire time I swam in my pool, something that is usually relaxing for me.

Why the bloody hell am I getting bent about it? *Please, for fuck’s sake, haunt his pool instead of mine.*

“What just happened?” Violet finally asks when she hears the door shut downstairs.

I glance out the window, finding a fully clothed Vance glaring up toward her window like he knows I’m smirking down at him. He makes a throat-slicing motion that I completely ignore as I return my attention to the intriguing Portocale.

“He boxed the Morpheous fellow and stabbed him in the leg when he caught him checking out your snoring face,” the ghost tells her.

Why now? Why does she now tell the truth?

“Anna,” she groans as she drops back, pulling the pillow over her face. “This is serious.”

“So are my needs, but you’re still leaving me with blue balls daily,” Anna sighs like she’s genuinely distraught.

I find it odd the gypsy doesn’t salt the dead nuisance from time to time.

“That sword was bloody. Did he really stab someone in here?” she asks more seriously, sitting upright again and glancing around the room.

My jaw grinds. Damn ghost. I can’t keep the illusion in place if I’m gone. And I can’t stay here all the time. That would royally irritate far more than just Vance.

We’re all really crossing a line by not reporting this, simply because we’re selfish and want to keep this to ourselves as much as possible. Shera is the only outsider to know of this, and only because she’s standing in for Arion until his return.

Violet’s eyes search the floor as she gets up like she’s inspecting it for blood, and she blows out a breath of relief when she doesn’t find any.

“Santa shouldn’t have come down that chimney if he didn’t want to lose a finger or two,” Anna tells her like she’s offering another suggestion to the bloody sword debacle.

“Cheese and rice on garlic toast,” Violet says while palming her face, though I have no idea why she’s randomly discussing an odd food combination.

“Mac and cheese on mayo and bread,” Anna jumps back in. “Nope. That tactic doesn’t work. Now I think it was the Cookie Monster in the library with the candlestick who done it,” she adds.

Groaning, Violet walks into the bathroom and slams the door. I stare at it, half tempted to open it up and peer inside when I hear the shower cut on. But that damn ghost is singing at the door and would definitely notice it opening.

Plus, that might be one of those un-crossable lines. I’ll wait and judge her reaction to the current line I’ve crossed.

Chapter 13

VIOLET

Already stuck with the hangover from hell, I woke up to the bone-deep terror that froze me in bed this morning, almost melding into irreversible panic.

Seeing *a* Van Helsing, the most legendary monster slayer, holding a bloody blade over his head in your bedroom is undeniably every monster's worst nightmare.

His back being to me is the only thing that kept me from completely losing it, since I was confused.

Now?

Now, I'm staring at a wall that will need a lot of repair work, blood all over my bedroom floor, and I'm literally shuddering.

I never once saw anyone else in the room. Vance's back was turned like he was facing someone down, and now there's this mess I *could not* see earlier.

My head feels fucked with.

It's a...*distraction* from the daunting overload of information I still haven't fully absorbed. Information I'm not sure I even know how to process. Instead, I decide to ignore all of it, because I'm not in an emotional state of mind to do it at this moment.

“Anna!”

“There’s the crime scene, boss!” she shouts, pointing a finger at the mess. “I knew the elves broke in and slaughtered the lamb.”

“I can’t deal with this right now,” I mutter.

After grabbing my purse, keys, and pepper spray, I head out the door.

I don’t care if he is the most insanely gorgeous monster hunter I’ve ever seen, I won’t hesitate to castrate him if there’s not a damn good reason for his presence in my bedroom. Why were *they* in there?

I drive my delivery van to Vance’s house, half-ass a parking job, and stalk up the sidewalk. I pound on the *side* door, even though it feels silly, since there’s a gaping hole in the house’s wall next to me.

The door opens, and a woman with all the same dignity as she elegantly held last night smiles in greeting, as though it’s just any other day.

“Ms. Carmine. Lovely to see you again. Mr. Valhinseng said to take you to him when you arrived,” she informs me.

“It’s hot that he was expecting you, considering you didn’t even know you were coming here,” Anna states, as she pretends to adjust her bra.

“Shall we?” the prim and proper woman asks me as she beams at me and offers to show me in.

“She’d be Ms. Pots in a fairytale,” Anna says before disappearing.

It's guilty relief that she's giving me a moment of privacy as I follow the woman upstairs. Once we reach the top of the stairs, I quickly realize I haven't been given privacy after all, because Anna is poking her head through doors one by one in search of him.

She sees me, and her eyes widen as she speeds up her process, as the woman leads me down the hallway, unaware that Anna sees this as a race.

I know which door we're heading to when Anna runs inside one.

"Oh, *lawd*. He's working out," she calls out loudly. "He's sexy and sweaty and oh so lickable still."

I hear something clank loudly, just as my escort throws the door open to the room. Vance is breathing heavily as he turns to face me, giving me a small, sideways grin when I sort of stumble.

It's getting bad when I continue to agree with Anna about anything involving men, but his entire body is glistening with sweat. He should look gross, but I'm quickly learning that Shadow Hills is a place where nothing works as it should.

"Was Damien Morpheous in my bedroom this morning?" I ask him, snapping out of my distraction as he starts tugging off some sort of athletic gloves.

"Yes," he tells me with a shrug as he tosses the gloves aside and grabs a bottle of water to drink.

I absently notice the huge room that is full of weights, exercise equipment, mats, and lots of weapons. Not to mention, the entire room is walled with mirrors, which makes

it impossibly hard to tell exactly how much of it is room or illusion.

“You *really* like looking at yourself,” I say like a mild accusation, verbalizing my mental tangent as I think back to the many walls of mirrors I found while running around aimlessly in search of a way out of here just yesterday.

“This is actually Damien’s home. I seized it from him decades ago as punishment,” he says absently as he moves to another wall.

I notice the door is closed, though it’s hard to actually see the door that now blends in with the rest of the mirrors.

“And yes, he *loves* himself that much,” he adds on a dry note as he begins toweling off his chest. “Or at least he used to.”

The distraction is brief. Sort of.

“Can you tell me how that works? You policing monsters?” I ask, getting diverted from my purpose for being here.

“I don’t police them. I kill them or imprison them, depending on the laws they break. There’s a delicate system in place to ensure a strong society.”

“How does he say these things with a straight face?” Anna asks as though she’s impressed. “Does he sound crazier than I do?”

“It’s a draw,” I tell her, looking back as he arches a questioning eyebrow at me, a smile toying with one corner of his mouth.

“I should step up my game,” she drawls, garnering my attention again. “He can’t be pretty, rich, brave, and even with me on the crazy scale. It makes him the alpha in our relationship if he’s more perfect than me. You know I don’t want to ride shotgun. I’m a driver.” She puts her hands at the ten and two position before adding, “*Vroom. Vroom.*”

“Do you have any salt?” I ask him as he stares at me like he’s trying to patiently wait on me to remember he and I are the only two people in this room.

He leans over and pulls out a small basket that is nothing but salt.

“This town may not see and hear the things blessed gypsies do, but they do know to always have salt close by,” he tells me.

“Oh, don’t be stingy. I saw him firs—”

I toss the salt over my left shoulder, and the words cut out as she’s ejected from the room—temporarily. It’ll be long enough to get back on track and remember my prime objective.

“You said you wanted to help me?” I ask, watching his eyebrow lift.

“I can hurt Damien. In fact, it’s one of my favorite things to do, so you just barely have to ask,” he says with a dark grin, and I swear his damn eyes twinkle for a second.

So it really was Damien in my room this morning? Is that what he’s saying?

I hesitate, wondering about the *curse* part of being a Van Helsing. How much does he get off on killing things?

“I don’t need you to hurt him unless this conversation doesn’t go well, so stop doing that creepy excited thing over the prospect of violence,” I tell him as I slowly back up.

“You’re doing exceptionally well with adjusting to the ‘life-altering’ news that got you a pedicure.”

“And you got me high. That’s an entirely other issue we’ll work out after I’ve dealt with the much larger issue of Damien in my bedroom. I have no idea what he is, so it’d be stupid for me to charge in without the facts. You have swords, but please don’t use them until he gives me a valid excuse for that extreme invasion of privacy.”

He snorts derisively as he lifts one sword off the wall, twisting it over in his grip as though he’s inspecting the weight.

“What are you doing?” I ask when he slides his hand down the blade.

“Making sure this is as dull as I hope it is.”

“It’s annoying answers like that which lead to resounding *whys*,” I decide to point out.

His lips quirk in a grin as just his eyes lift to meet mine. “Because you’re going to let me hurt him. And a dull blade hurts a hell of a lot worse.”

A slight tremor runs up my spine. “I’m not adjusting quite that fast,” I decide to tell him, and he struggles to restrain his smile.

“Duly noted,” he states as though he’s patronizing me.

“He’s twice as obsessed with you now,” comes a voice that causes me to clear my throat in an effort to mask the slight squeal I can’t choke back in time. “You’re his new favorite person just because you asked him to wail on Damien.”

The ghost from last night is in the room, perched at a lean on the wall in his turn-of-the-century, peculiar wardrobe.

I almost hate that I sent Anna away now, because I really want her to meet this ghost and find some sort of ghostly orgasm. He’s exactly her type—gorgeous. She’s easy to please. It’s terribly pathetic that her sex life is more distracting than my situation.

Vance looks around, following my line of view. How long have I been staring? Why do I keep doing this?

The man in the corner grins broadly at me, showing off his perfect smile on his stupidly perfect face. Damn it. I hate that I miss Anna right now.

This is why I don’t carry salt.

“Are you okay?” Vance asks, sounding slightly concerned as he steps into my line of view.

Blinking out of the trance, I clear my throat and stare up at him, just as a voice comes at my ear.

“I really thought they were overestimating your true value, but I’m certainly seeing just how appealing you can be, gypsy girl,” the unnamed ghost says from too close behind me. “If you don’t go in first, make sure to wait a minute, unless you want blood on your shoes,” he weirdly adds before disappearing.

“Let’s just go.” *Before Anna comes back and I have to spend the rest of the day apologizing,* I silently add as I turn and...struggle to find the door in the roomful of mirrors.

Vance smirks when he opens it for me...on the other side of the room.

“My sense of direction works better without mirrors,” I defend when I see his mocking grin spreading. “And put on a shirt, please. My life is distracting enough at this point.”

He turns me around, and I start back in the direction we just came in.

“If I have to wear a shirt, I need the closet on this end,” he says by way of explanation for the change in course.

“Why?” I ask, per the usual as of now.

“Because this end has all the shirts I don’t mind getting bloody. It’s inconvenient to fight in a shirt I happen to like,” he answers evenly.

I stop abruptly, arching an eyebrow at him as he continues to walk on, acting as though that’s a perfectly reasonable thing to just say. Rich monster slaying problems are beguiling...and incredibly unsettling at the same time.

“I’m not adjusting that fast,” I remind him.

He slows but doesn’t stop. “Duly noted,” he says again.

Shaking my head, I start following him again. “And there’s no need for it to be bloody.”

“Of course there’s not,” he says like he’s still patronizing me.

“Will he attack me?”

He scoffs and looks at me like I'm ridiculous.

“Yes, it's completely absurd to ask if an unknown monster may attack me after slinking around in my room and getting stabbed by you,” I state, the words dripping with sarcasm.

“I offered to protect you just last night, and you think I wouldn't tell you if Damien is a threat?”

“You haven't volunteered any information on the details that led to me waking up to you wielding a bloody sword, and you seem to find this all amusing. I can't read between the lines, and I don't know you well enough to try. So yes, I get to ask questions, even if they seem silly to you, so stop being so condescending when I have no idea what the hell is going on around me. This is hard enough.”

He just stares at me for a second as I take a few calming breaths.

“He won't harm you. I can assure you of that,” he says with a quiet, serious tone.

“Then there's absolutely no reason to worry about blood.”

He smirks and continues walking toward the blood-approved closet.

He's seriously overestimating the adjustment period I truly need.

Chapter 14

VIOLET

I jump back too late, because blood sprays across my shoes the second the door opens. My eyes widen as Damien stumbles back and hits the wall, cupping his bloody nose.

“You fucking cunt!” Damien shouts as Vance smiles and shakes out his hand.

“Is the violence really necessary?” I ask, feeling slightly queasy at all the blood.

There’s been an awful lot of blood over the past twenty-four hours, and it’s starting to get to me. My stomach is only so strong.

“I told you so,” the ghost says as he appears against the wall beside where Damien is slowly standing to his feet.

I glance at the blood on my shoes and back up to him.

“Take four steps to your left,” the ghost says.

I do exactly as he says, which draws a very dark and somewhat scary grin from him, as though he enjoys my compliance a little too much.

Damien lunges, tackling Vance to the ground, sending snow spraying into the air in the exact spot where I just was. This ghost must haunt them quite often.

I huff out a breath as I try to picture this from the outside. Just two guys fighting. Not a monster and monster slayer tackling each other hard enough to crack the sidewalk, while a ghost and a gypsy look on.

“I really haven’t adjusted yet,” I say as I turn and walk into the house.

“Very brave for a Portocale gypsy to simply walk into unknown monsters’ homes. Or stupid. Which are you, Violet Portocale?” the ghost says as he sticks with me instead of lingering with his usual targets.

“I know you’re probably starved for conversation, and I made the stupid mistake of meeting your eyes, but that doesn’t mean I want to spend the rest of my life being at your beck and call. I already have one ghost. Two is one too many.”

“I promise not to be too clingy,” he assures me with a devastatingly charming grin.

“Fine. But only if you promise to be nice to my ghost. Chat away. Tell me your woes, distract me from that madness out there while they finish up.”

He bites down on his bottom lip before guiding me into a room, holding his hand out as though to gesture for me to walk in first. My life just keeps getting weirder.

The fun never ends.

“I’m seconds away from a possible nervous breakdown that could result in temporary or permanent hysteria, so you might want to make it quick,” I tell him as I spot a massive liquor cabinet.

I'm tempted to pour a drink, but decide my mind has been clouded enough in the past twenty-four hours.

He smiles as he takes a seat next to me, crossing his arms over his chest as he props his feet on the table, giving the illusion of a flesh-and-blood man lounging comfortably next to me.

“What makes you so fascinating, Violet Portocale?”

“Anna keeps asking me the same thing. Really, you two should meet,” I state dryly, massaging my temples to stave off the impending migraine.

“If you're planning to be around them, you should know this is how they usually interact. You should also know they won't ever actually kill each other, no matter how bad those fights may get,” he adds.

“Really, talk about *anything* else,” I tell him tightly with an edge of warning in my tone.

“Very well. Do you know what sort of computer a fellow should buy if he was in the market?” he muses.

I give him an incredulous look. “No,” I state simply, and then let my head fall back as I try to ignore the crashing sounds outside.

I can feel his weird grin.

“Your dad doesn't have gypsy blood?” he asks next.

“No. He didn't even know magic really existed until my mother. He fell in love with her because of how amazingly seductive it all was. Caught up in *magic's thrall*, is what he calls it.”

“Sounds like a great guy,” he tells me, seeming much too amused for a confession I don’t mind telling the dead.

They don’t like it when you’re the one whining. At least not usually.

“He actually is,” I tell him on a quiet breath. “I took too much energy out of a person. My mother was the only one I know who could have ever handled a daughter like me.”

“Which is why you’re searching for her killer,” he states in a pleasant tone.

Narrowing my eyes, I face him a little better. “How do you know that?”

“All they do is talk and obsess over you, and all I do is stalk them. Usually. To be completely honest, you’re starting to ensnare my attention now, simply because I’m fascinated by how fascinated they are.”

“To be fair, I’m not at all fascinating,” I assure him, brow furrowing. “And I don’t know how I feel about the fact they’re discussing me so much.”

“You’re a puzzle. Live long enough, and the world stops producing things that are truly puzzling. Usually they obsess for a moment, figure it out, and then move on. Yet here we are, almost a month later, and they’re still obsessing,” he goes on just as a loud curse is shouted and something shatters in the distance.

“They always fight?” I ask instead of chasing him down that rabbit hole.

I have enough to process. I don’t need to wonder why *immortal* monsters and a monster hunter are finding me to be

puzzling or obsessing over me. It's simply too much too soon.

"Do you always have your world turned upside down and just carry on like it's a small hitch in the road?" he volleys.

I glance over at him. "I grew up in a house where I waited for my mother, with sick knots in my stomach, to return from her jobs, knowing they were dangerous, because she came home bruised and battered. She dealt with hostile spirits."

As if cued, something shatters, and he turns to face me more. If he's been watching *them*, then nothing I can say will even phase him.

"But she always came home," I go on. "You start taking it for granted, growing less sensitive to the word *dangerous*. My mother built a separate set of rules for survival for me than she lived with for herself, but on both our lists there was one rule."

"Which is?" he asks, seeming genuinely intrigued as he props his elbow on the back of the couch, angling his body toward mine.

"You lose when you take time to fall apart just when things are starting to unravel around you," I tell him in an almost muted tone. "You can eventually have your moment of weakness; you just have to be patient."

"Sound advice that isn't so easily followed," he murmurs as though he's lost in thought. "How do you pause fear?"

I wish I could answer that, but I'm scared of my answer right now.

Fortunately, I don't have to answer, because we both hear the absence of things breaking. It doesn't take long for Vance to walk in, nursing his split lip.

It looks like he's already washed up somewhat, and there's only one drop of blood on his otherwise immaculate, blood-approved T-shirt. The shirt looks brand new, so I'm not sure why it was considered a toss-out.

Which isn't the important part...

"Damien is just changing. He's always messy when he fights," Vance says in a disapproving, putout tone.

"Common occurrence between you two, then?" I muse.

He doesn't answer as he goes to pour himself a drink. It's really too early to drink, but since I considered it myself, I decide to not be a hypocritical/judgmental twat about it.

"Not so much anymore," the dark haired, tall ghost says from beside me as he leans in closer, as though he's getting ready to deliver some juicy gossip. "In fact, Damien hasn't even had the urge to fight anyone in far too long. This is why I'm finding you more interesting by the second, gypsy girl."

I watch as Vance turns to face me, sitting down in a chair across from me.

"Damien and I hate each other a little more coldly these days," Vance states tightly.

"Damien's pride is suffering because he begged Vance to kill him a few centuries back, apparently," the gossiping ghost from beside me informs me, causing me to clear my throat. "It's theorized that a Van Helsing could truly kill any alpha with the right conditions, weapon, and mentality of focused intent."

Vance is also speaking, but I'm more interested in the man at my side, who is still whispering in a conspiratorial tone.

The single-word question that really is getting redundant gets swallowed down, since Vance is still speaking.

“...but he really does need to work on his left. I’ve told him this. None of them ever listen,” is all I catch from Vance’s conversation just before his phone rings.

He excuses himself and goes to the back of the room to answer, as the man at my side continues speaking, answering the question I don’t have to ask.

“Damien’s curse is cruel,” he informs me.

“He’s cursed?”

“They’re all cursed, gypsy girl. Surely you don’t think being a monster is a blessing,” he states as though he’s educating me.

“But Vance is a monster hunter,” I remind him very quietly.

Vance turns and glances over his shoulder, looking around, eyes passing over me like he heard me speak and is searching for who I may have spoken to.

Great. Super hearing. Just freaking awesome.

“Yes. His hearing is exceptional,” the ghost states as though he’s reading my mind.

“*Who are you?*” I mouth.

“I’m your Ace, sweetheart. When you want to really fuck them over, I’m your key to success,” he informs me.

Ace seems to be making assumptions about a predictable future, which just sets off my wary alarm again as I redirect my attention to Vance. I’m not sure why I thought it was cool to cozy up to a monster hunter on day two.

It's like trying to tackle a problem head-on and not seeing the danger present because it's wrapped in a pretty package with a disarming smile and boyish sincerity. I start wondering why Damien is taking so long, and dread the possible answer.

Ace said they wouldn't—

Damien walks in, and I weirdly blow out a breath of relief, happy no one has died because of me today. I'm still struggling to believe the immortal thing.

His eyes flick over to mine and he rolls them while giving me a bitter smile. "I won't come into your home unannounced again," he tells me, causing my eyes to dart over to Vance's back, as the Van Helsing continues to stay really quiet on his phone.

"She healed the wolf who was hurt. The wound was no longer bleeding profusely or quite so fatal when he limped off with his tail between his legs. Some pride is hurt," I hear Vance grinding out. "Their grievance is with me."

Damien glances over his shoulder, distracted by Vance as well, since he's getting louder.

"It's *your* wolves. *Do* something about it then. It may mean doing more than fucking your omegas, drinking yourself into a stupor, getting high on gypsy spice, or running around as your wolf, you lazy mutt," Vance says before hanging up.

"Emit's all patched up and liking you about as much as I do right now, eh?" Damien asks with a cold smile.

Vance just gives him a bored look before returning his attention to me.

“The question of *why* he was in my room has remained unanswered, and that’s the entire reason for this trip,” I remind Vance, who exhales harshly and shakes his head like he dreads what’s about to come out of Damien’s mouth.

“Because I wanted to, of course. Needed to know you’re not full of shit,” Damien says with a shrug. “You could still be fucking us around, since my investigation has been temporarily halted.”

“You came into my room while I was sleeping,” I start, a modicum of calm barely staying in place, “*because you wanted to?*”

He nods like it’s not a big deal. “I’ve been doing it since you stopped in at my house and did that saucy sex scene flash in my head without an ounce of modesty. No Portocale thinks of sex with me when I touch them,” he goes on, as though he’s explaining. “Obviously, I was intrigued.”

I blink. Several times.

Vance just steepled his hands and presses his mouth into a thin line, though I swear he looks amused.

They’re certifiable.

“I may seem harmless to you, but I am a Portocale gypsy, as you’re all apparently already aware of.”

“Portocale blood is very easy for us to scent,” Damien tells me in an unconcerned tone as he takes a seat, lounging as though he has nothing to apologize for.

“But Portocale gypsies have gifts,” I go on.

“If you don’t want him intrigued, you should probably stop talking,” Ace says, amused as he leans up and watches me with rapt attention.

Damien seems over it by this point, as though now that he’s gotten caught, the fun is over and there’s nothing left to discuss.

“Your sad little gypsy gifts, sweetheart, are comparatively rubbish next to mine,” he says as he lights a cigar and puffs from it, not even glancing at me now as he rubs his bruised jaw. “You make potions and gypsy drugs.”

Everything in the room suddenly turns white, and I can’t see anything except for Ace at my side.

“He’s being an ass because he just got his ass kicked by Vance. It’s a pride thing, you’ll learn,” Ace informs me around a bored yawn.

I swallow thickly, trying not to act too jarred by the fact everything, for as far as I can see, looks like a vast white room.

“Would you like to finish your threat now?” Damien’s voice echoes all around me. “Or have I proven my point?”

Ace’s eyes dart to the side as I close my eyes, remembering the room, remembering my blindfolded sessions that my mother and I used to have.

“Learn to stay calm when blind, Violet. Sometimes opponents always go for the eyes first,” my mother’s voice chants in my head.

“Portocale gypsies just make damn good clothes and damn good potions,” Damien continues.

A tickle of power rolls through my fingertips as my lips tug up on one corner of my mouth.

“Oh, I certainly like you a little more now,” Ace says just as a strangled sound causes my eyes to spring open, finding the white-room illusion fading quickly, as Damien is slammed against the wall behind where he was sitting.

The unraveled strings of the draperies are pinning him in place, slipping tighter around him, binding him as the circulation around his limbs and throat grow more constricted.

His eyes widen as his jaw tics, but I swear I see an eerie tint of dark amusement glimmer in his gaze as he narrows his eyes on me.

“Generally speaking, illusions are just illusions. Cut off the head of the illusionist, and they disappear,” I say with a saccharine sweet smile I use just for show, and wipe it away before my next words. “Stay out of my house.”

The threads all snap at once, and he’s dropped to the floor with a groan.

“Ass kicked by a young Portocale gypsy. You really have reached an all new low,” Vance says with a barely restrained grin as he steps over Damien and comes to nudge me toward the door.

Damien coughs on air, and slowly climbs to his feet, eyes glued to me like I’ve renewed his interest. But at least now he should think twice about just how vulnerable and *young* I am, since my youth keeps getting tossed around like an insult. They act like I’m some kid who has lived a sheltered lifestyle.

Cults have tried to kill me on more than one occasion. My mother hunted ghosts and fought like a badass. And...I've got something dark and lethal trapped inside me. I'm twenty-five.

I'm not a freaking kid.

"Told you you'd just intrigue him more. Hell, I'm half tempted to be clingy now," Ace states from behind me, entertained as he bounces his gaze between us.

Shit.

Vance puts his hand on the small of my back, guiding me toward the door.

"Well, when Vance isn't pretending to be some sort of modern-day gentleman, he's staring through your bedroom window," Damien says from behind me as a chill spreads up my spine.

"You tattling little twat. It was only in the initial observations," Vance bites out like he's still arguing about an entire conversation that apparently went on when they were out there tearing down yet another house.

My eyes cut to Vance, and I let out a huff as I turn and stalk out the door on my own.

The door slams behind me, and I pull a potion bottle from my bra, tossing it over my left shoulder. I hear the glass shatter just as two heavy *thumps* slam into the door.

"I'm not adjusting this fast!" I shout over my shoulder as I walk quickly, knowing that won't hold them back for long, unfortunately.

“Well, now I’m just downright intrigued. Tell me, did you place Vance firmly in the friend-zone because he painted your toenails for you, or do you know he’s gay?” Ace asks me as he joins me at my side.

I dig around in my bra for the tiny little ball of caged salt and toss it over my left shoulder. I don’t hear him speak again, so I assume it’s done the trick.

I’m halfway down the street when an obnoxious red sports car screeches to a halt beside me, making this moment nauseatingly cliché. The “savage,” as Anna calls him, fortunately doesn’t have on a leather jacket or dark sunglasses to knock the cliché over the top, or I’d vomit right now.

“Get in,” Emit snaps.

“Really not adjusting *this* fast,” I say under my breath, exhaling heavily. “I’d rather not. I have issues with all three of you now, so I think I’ll just cut ties and leave town while I’m just a little behind. Besides, I think you want me dead.”

I start walking, but he revs the car and cuts me off.

I have a loaded bra full of small but powerful potions, and he’s tempting me to use them all on him at this moment.

“You want to see a spot on my land, and I need to hold my own private audience with you, since it seems to be the new normal,” he bites out. “I’m sure Vance has told you why you’re safe with us,” he adds.

“Actually, no, he hasn’t. If I go based on what he’s said, this is a safe and dangerous place, and you’re all safe and dangerous. It doesn’t make sense. I’m seconds away from losing my shit, and I’d really rather no one be around to

observe it. So either try to kill me, or be safe and go the hell away, because I need a fucking second!”

I’m breathing heavily by the end of my tirade when my voice breaks. My hands are shaking, and my lip trembles for the first time since this all dropped in my lap. And it’s really pissing me off that I’m trying to be patient and save my impending breakdown for a more appropriate time, yet slipping so soon.

Mom made it always sound so easy, and it seemed so rational and wise.

He shakes his head and exhales harshly. “Get in,” he says with a slightly gentler tone.

“*Fuck. Off,*” I state with a firmer tone.

He glares over at me, but I hear a door crashing in the distance, and decide I’d rather gamble than deal with either of those perverted lunatics right now.

So I get in the car.

He smirks as he continues the cliché with an old-fashioned burnout, and darts off at a nauseating speed. Why couldn’t they be speed limit monsters at least?

Chapter 15

VIOLET

I decidedly hate sports cars, but at least I don't feel like I'm about to burst out in tears anymore. However, I do stare a little blankly at the familiar barbed wire fence before me.

“Did you bring me out here to kill me as some sort of sick joke?” I ask dryly.

“Vance said you think your mother was found out here. I can assure you she wasn't, but you can get a glimpse right now. Until the snow melts, there's a window,” he tells me as he gestures out to the thick blanket coating the ground. “I'm sure you can use me to tap into that window.”

I'm not really sure why I'd need to use him.

“Last time I stepped out there, wolves attacked. You weren't happy about the outcome, and now I've been trying to avoid a downward spiral ever since. So why bring me back?”

He stares out in front of him. “Vance pointed out that you healed one of my wolves,” he says a little coldly. “After a quick inquiry, I found out which wolf. He said you genuinely thought he was a simple animal only doing what nature intended, and you left your throat exposed in the process of saving him. I got in the car after that,” he says like he's annoyed with the entire thing.

My fingers quickly touch my throat in reflex, and I swear he almost smiles in reaction.

“Never do that again—expose your throat to a wolf. He was one who’s fortunately old enough to fight his instinct,” he says as he gets out.

“I can’t catch a break,” I say in frustration as I push my own door open. “There’s way too much happening all at once. This is insane!”

He comes to tower over me, and I look at his proffered hand like snakes are going to shoot from his fingers. At this particular moment, I wouldn’t rule anything out.

Emit Morrigan is a *werewolf*. I want to laugh and cry at the same time.

He pulls his jacket off when I shiver against the wind, and he doesn’t let me refuse it, before he just tosses it over my shoulders. He’s an idiot for having on a thin T-shirt and some sweatpants, but he’s a wolf or something. In short, I don’t feel bad about keeping the jacket.

I wrap up in it as I struggle to walk in the snow, trying to keep up with his slow strides, but losing more and more visibility as snow stirs and starts pouring all of the sudden.

Shiit.

Not this again.

I pause, listening for the sound of snow crunching under a boot, but thicker dollops of snow start falling harder. I keep having to blink the white powder off my eyelashes as it starts falling in heavier sequences, and the chill spreads up my spine again.

I stand perfectly still, wondering if he's just cruelly hanging around to watch me squirm, or if he's really left me behind. We're only a mile from where we left the car, so I decide to turn around and abandon this death trap of a mission.

"This is simply the cruelest time you've ever salted me," Anna says as she reappears directly in front of me.

A scream is torn from my throat, and I feel myself flailing in the air, realizing too late that I'm falling...until the breath is slapped out of me.

"I'm Batman. You're Robin. You don't get to salt me during the guy time, you prudish hen," she rants, pointing a finger down at me as I rock from side to side, trying to suck in a single drop of the air that just exploded from my lungs when I hit the ground.

She rants on, as I flop like a fish on dry land, unable to breathe and momentarily wanting to die.

"I get that I can be annoying, but we can come up with some signal for me to dial it back. No more salting. I need to see all the pretty monsters," she angrily continues, just as I take a breath that sounds like a donkey braying, catching my first gust of air so hard it makes me cough.

"And they all said I'm far more interesting than you. I heard it in the early fifties when we were roller derby queens," she prattles on, getting on a tangent.

"I don't think they had roller derby queens in the fifties," I tell her on a small, painful laugh, as a stray tear rolls out of my eye.

"How would you know? You weren't there," she argues.

“You just said I was,” I remind her, another tear randomly leaking from my other eye.

“You’re such a liar,” she says as though I’m exhausting.

“Hey, Anna,” I say on a steady exhale.

“What?” she asks sharply.

“I actually missed you.”

“Good. Tell the pretty monsters to get rid of their salt too,” she says on a sniff, and then frowns as she looks around. “Are we on our way to Grandma’s house again? I thought we decided Grandma was a bitch.”

“She’s definitely that, so let’s get out of here.”

“Aye! Land ho!” she shouts as she starts trekking in the wrong direction.

“Land ho in the opposite direction,” I call to her back.

She does an abrupt about-face and starts marching in the opposite direction, causing my smile to lift as I clear my throat.

Wiping my tears away, I push up to my feet, seeing a glimpse of the sun through the heavy snowfall. Just as I take a step, there’s suddenly a massive body in front of mine, and I scream. Again.

For fuck’s sake, can’t people understand this is a seriously critical moment in my life, and scaring the hell out of me is not cool at all?

Emit smirks down at me.

“You clearly need help, so climb me so we can get there before nightfall,” he says in an even tone.

I ignore all of that.

“Is the alpha wolf afraid of his own pack?” I ask him warily.

“No. It’s going to drop twenty degrees, at the very least, when the sun goes down. It’s already dropped ten since we’ve been out here. You have my jacket, and I’m starting to get cold,” he states like it should be obvious.

“What does he mean about climbing him? That’s the important part,” Anna butts in.

“I’m not climbing you,” I say with an indignant scoff, and take a slight step back from him.

He really is the tallest of the three, and one mountain of a man.

“Tell him about the time I took a ride on Aquaman. It’ll give my vagina celebrity accolades,” she drones on.

He wipes a hand over his mouth and mutters something I miss, before bending swiftly. It happens so fast that I don’t realize what’s going on, until a few seconds after my world is turned upside down.

“He really is a savage! He just threw you over his shoulder like a true barbarian, and now he’s off to have his wicked way with you! Why does it always happen to the boring ones?” Anna squeals and groans, alternating between the two as she bounces around behind me.

“Are you serious?” I snap as I stop my head from knocking against his ass for a third time.

“I really can’t be out here all fucking night,” he says on an exasperated breath.

When I feel how fast and smoothly he’s moving us, I stop complaining. I’m not lazy, but this is a hell of a lot quicker, and I don’t want to be out here at night either.

How the hell did the day get away from me so fast? It was certainly late when I got up, but—

“He is so turned on right now,” Anna says from somewhere in front of him. “I can see the outline. It’s still huge, in case you were wondering. The cold doesn’t cause this one shrinkage like it does the really pretty guy,” she adds. “Maybe I’ll borrow your vagina for him instead of those two.”

He stumbles, and my hands slip, which has my head bouncing really hard off his super firm ass.

He adjusts me to where my waist is more on his shoulder instead of my thighs, and my head doesn’t hang near his ass anymore.

My hands push up on his ass to keep from slipping again, and Anna squeezes his ass under my hands.

“Is it firm?” she asks seriously. “I bet it’s firm. Like rock hard.”

“We’re here. I think. Based on the directions Vance said you vaguely gave him at some point last night,” he says as though he’s beyond relieved as he drops me to my feet. “Is this it?”

I glance around, taking in the surroundings as I pull out my phone, unable to remember telling Vance anything like that, and silently worrying what else I can't remember saying. I quickly pull up the picture, and I hand it off to him, distracted by the unsettling feeling in my stomach.

“This is it. You said this was in the report you received?”

I nod in response to his question, trying to detach myself from the very real chance I'm standing where my mother was killed. But words can't form at the moment, as that unsettling feeling spreads.

“Did they not tell you?” I manage to quietly ask.

“When a Portocale gypsy dies, it's handled with discretion. Your mother didn't tell you even that?” he asks me as I kneel and close my eyes.

“When a Portocale dies, no one ever gets punished,” I say quietly. “It's our family curse.”

“That's entirely incorrect,” he says with a soft, subtle edge to his tone, as I force myself to detach from the world, not caring what his next words will be.

There's a dizzying moment when someone quickly pushes themselves to the brink of death with very little effort. Straddling the line of dead and alive is usually a tedious, dangerous task, but it's one of the very few things I'm good at.

It's not something most do with very little preparation in the middle of the woods with a notably dangerous, strange werewolf at their side.

Unfortunately, there's no mirror to my mother's death here, and with all the spirit energy fueling the air, it doesn't take

much effort to see that very clearly.

When my eyelids blink, I find Emit staring down at me with a furrowed brow as he runs his hand over his beard, dusting the snow away.

“You didn’t just do what I think you did without any ritual whatsoever, did you?” he asks me quietly.

“I’m a Portocale. We’re a little more gifted in some areas than other gypsies,” I say dismissively as I stand.

“I’m aware of what the Portocale gypsies are skilled in and that’s not one of the areas,” he says with a hint of suspicion in his tone. “What just happened? How did you do that by simply closing your eyes?”

“Tell me all your secrets, and I promise I’ll tell you all mine,” I say with a straight face.

Chapter 16

EMIT

She cocks a challenging eyebrow at me as I play off my uneasiness with a smirk. “Touché.”

“Can you tell me what happened? You knew for a fact she didn’t die here, and then you start spewing about a code for handling gypsy deaths, and—”

“When a Portocale gypsy dies, the Portocale council handles the case,” I interrupt, wondering why in the hell Marta wouldn’t have told her daughter that very important fact about her heritage.

Her mother’s death prompted our curse...

Clearly she has the blessed blood...

This girl is such an unorthodox enigma at this point.

“What are you talking about?” she asks like she’s so confused that she’s simply asking on autopilot.

“When you faked your death—”

“How is the fact I faked my death common knowledge?” she asks incredulously.

“—your mother would have had to have approval from them to do it. Faux deaths is a common practice among Portocale gypsies who carry stronger blood. Which clearly you

do,” I tell her, watching her face and the true oblivion in her eyes.

“They would have come to speak to you directly. They become very involved when a Portocale fakes their death, because they try to keep track of anyone and everyone with saturated Portocale blood. Changing your name is one thing, but after executing that path, you’re usually not allowed to visit any of the fault lines.”

“Fault lines?” she asks, which is one I shouldn’t be surprised by.

I guess Vance has only started telling her the basics, even though this is pretty basic shit too.

“Towns like Shadow Hills, because they’re filled with creatures who can smell your sweet blood,” I explain.

The snow continues falling as Anna runs by us screaming about bees sawing down trees and coming after her.

“My mother knew all this?” Violet asks softly, eyes on me like she’s trying to wrap her mind around the sheer volume of secrets she’s been left out of.

“Of course. She was the first Portocale to ever live in any fault line town, and certainly the first to ever do business with us,” I say as she starts to shiver.

Her eyes stay on me expectantly as the breaths puff out between her slightly bluish lips.

“You’ve sat with two monsters today. Are you up for a third?”

“I sat with a monster and a monster slayer,” she corrects, before she blows out a heavy breath.

“Trust me when I say Vance is more monster than human.”

“That’s it. I want them all,” Anna, the lingerie ghost, chimes in, waving her hand in my general direction. “I’ll climb atop his mountain peak first.”

“Vance was perving on me through my bedroom window, apparently,” Violet grumbles as she looks down, and I...keep my mouth shut about my part in the same crime, even as my lips twitch.

“You dirty homewrecker, I already called dibs and now you’re stripping for them on your flag pole?” Anna asks her on an indignant gasp.

I only know that damn ghost’s name because she kept shouting it in my ear when I was trying to fall asleep, since she hoped it would subconsciously stick with me as the name I would ‘forever scream out during sex.’

Bloody relentless dead people sometimes...

Ian’s scent catches my attention, though it’s distant. I can tell he’s on his way to us, and I’d rather not have a discussion about a Portocale while one is with me.

“You want to climb me or get tossed over my shoulder?” I ask her, drawing her attention back up to me. “We need out of here before the temperature starts to plummet real damn fast.”

“Tell me what you meant about a Portocale being safe with the three of you, two of which are sick perverts.”

She is really bent about the window-watching. I'm not sure why I find that...cute.

“Because if all the Portocale gypsies die, we lose our chance at breaking the painful curse,” I tell her, leaving out the part where we suffer in agony with every Portocale death.

I think it's best if we ease her into the truth, since she's getting bent about the little things.

She just blinks at me.

“Let me guess, it's not as easy as a simple direct answer as to why that's a thing,” she states dryly.

You can tell she's been asking questions and not getting many answers.

“Are you sure you want to know the dark secrets of monsters, Violet Portocale?” I ask her more seriously.

“I do,” she says as she glances around. “But maybe some other time in some other place.”

“Are you climbing or riding over my shoulder?” I ask her as the snowfall picks up.

She looks too tired to argue about it this time, and without too much hesitation, she gets on her tiptoes, putting her hands on my shoulders without any warning.

Trying not to think too much about the fact a Portocale is willingly touching me, I lift her from the ground, suppressing my own groan when she immediately buries her face in my neck and wraps her legs around my waist.

Her warm breath teases my skin, but I focus on putting my hands in *safe* places, so as not to make this situation worse

than it needs to be.

“You’re far too trusting,” I murmur as she finishes tightly winding herself around me.

“I’m clinging to a werewolf alpha the day after werewolves attacked me. All while adjusting to the fact werewolves are real...I’d say that’s an understatement,” she says against my neck, her lips innocently brushing the skin there.

I never let anyone so close to my throat. Maybe I’m the one who is far too trusting of the mysterious Portocale who has us all obsessed to an unhealthy level.

“I really do hate you, and your cobwebbed vagina,” the pest says, reminding me there’s a ghost still stalking our every move.

Moving quickly through the snow, I continue to ignore the damn pest, even as she drops to her knees right in front of my path.

“He’s got another boner! I think it’s bigger than last time. Ooo la la,” she adds.

Violet shakes her head against me as I pass through the ghost like I can’t see her at all.

“I just gave him a phantom blowjob. If I lick it first, that makes it mine!” she shouts from somewhere behind us.

I speed the hell up, and Violet’s arms tighten around my neck in response.

“Do you know who killed my mother?” she asks quietly.

“Not definitively. It’s speculated it’s the same ones who try to kill all the Portocale gypsies. Followers of the Forsaken.”

She goes stiff against me. It looks like I've finally said something that she does have knowledge of.

"Do you know how to find them?" she asks, hiding any emotion from her voice, her lips still far too close to my skin to carry on talking without distracting me.

"If I did, they'd already be dead. As I said, it's important for the Portocale gypsies to all live."

"So this unknown curse can be lifted," she states dryly. "Though why that's a thing...I may never really know, huh?"

"Shhh," I say on a hushed breath, sensing Ian nearing. "That's not something we discuss too loudly."

"Why?" she asks on a tired sigh.

"Because the more people who know that secret, the more enemies a Portocale collects—our enemies become yours, and we have a hell of a lot more."

She tenses just as a howl ignites the air, and I tip my head back, responding with my own howl. Violet startles in my arms, scrambling to get closer to me.

I guess she does have the ability to feel appropriate fear.

For whatever reason, I sense Ian coming closer instead of leaving, as I just commanded him to do by responding. The rest of his pack have turned back, but he's still advancing. My brow furrows as I cant my head, sniffing the air, certain I have to be wrong.

"Please don't tell me there are wolves surrounding us. I can't have this day happen twice," Violet murmurs against me.

“Only one wolf approaches. He must have something important to say. The car isn’t far from here, so—”

A sharp growl has me jerking my head to the right and narrowing my eyes at Ian’s wolf form, as he snarls at the Portocale in my arms.

Violet clings to me harder, burying her face that much more in my neck. “They’re yours, right?” she whispers, causing Ian’s growl to intensify and my eyes to narrow more on him.

What’s he playing at right now?

The gray wolf paces back and forth, growling and snarling, eyes staying fixed to the shivering girl in my arms.

“The car isn’t far. Walk there. No other wolves are in the area,” I assure her.

She clears her throat and slowly slides down my body.

“Oooh, Grandma is back!” Anna shouts as she lands next to Violet’s side.

“Tell me what to do so that I don’t provoke him before I walk away,” Violet says very quietly, her eyes down at the snow.

“Don’t make eye contact,” I say as I step in front of her, cutting off Ian’s view.

His eyes come up to meet mine, and I can tell his night is about to get really fucking bad, because he’s clearly lost his damn mind.

“My general rule in life,” Violet mutters before I hear snow crunching.

She walks away with her back turned, showing that foolish trust too much with that action.

I don't have to see it to know what's going on. My eyes stay trained on the idiot beta, who has apparently forgotten his place.

Ian shifts, bones snapping and cracking as his fur recedes. He stands as a man, anger etched on his face.

"She attacked your wolves just last night, brought a Van Helsing with her to do the dirty work, and you lob her onto our land today?" he bites out.

"It's actually *my* land. You forget your place," I say with just enough warning.

He takes a step toward me, eyes not lowering. "This is more our land than yours. We're the pack. Your only role is to keep the other monsters in place so they don't take cheap shots at us, but you've been failing in your role quite a lot in the past century or so, don't you think, *Alpha?*" he asks, spitting the last word out like he's forgotten how to respect the title.

A smirk dons my lips, and in the next instant, I've crossed the ten feet between us and am gripping his throat, all before he even realizes what I've done.

Slamming him against a tree, holding him only at his throat, I watch as the rebellious gleam in his eyes shows just a hint of trepidation. Ian has gotten ballsy, it seems.

All wolves need a reminder of their place from time to time.

"This is my land," I say again.

He starts to speak, but my claws begin to extend, biting into his throat.

He wisely elects to remain silent instead.

“*My* wolves are on *my* land,” I go on. “I’ve done more for our people than you’ll ever understand.”

“Past tense,” he spits out with a venomous tone, eyes staying fixed to mine. “You used to do more for our people, but you’ve gotten weak.”

My gaze rakes over his face, seeing nothing but contempt, and wondering when the hell he got this stupid.

“Arion tore our people apart right under your nose, and all you did was give him a slap on the wrist,” he goes on. “Now this gypsy shows up, red cloak on as she hunts down our people’s spirits to strengthen her own, and you just brought her back. Even fucking cuddled her, you trai—”

My fist slams into his face twice before he can finish that sentence, and blood sprays as I drop him to the ground, his face slightly mangled but fixable.

“The next time you speak to me like that, it’ll be more than a little tough love, Ian,” I tell him as I turn my back, the gravest insult any alpha can give his beta, and walk away, trying to calm my own wolf before I tear him to shreds.

The last thing I need is my people fearing my sanity. Not right now. Things are too tense among my people, thanks greatly to Arion and his psychotic endeavors to always be right.

I can smell Ian’s retreat as I reach the car, and I huff out an angry breath when I realize Violet Portocale isn’t waiting there

for me.

The snow is falling too fast, so there aren't any immediate tracks. Sniffing the air, I take off in the direction where I smell my own scent mingling with hers, but stop.

There's a patch of my jacket on the snow, and I frown, seeing a few more squares of fabric that have been torn off and dropped like breadcrumbs.

I follow those breadcrumbs to a dead end and sniff the air again, not finding the scent to go on farther, but weirdly find a lot of it in the other direction.

Turning, I jog in that direction, following a new trail of patches that do the same thing—lead me down a false path.

Then I catch a whiff of just her scent in a different direction, and I start running in a circle, smelling her but not seeing her, until I suddenly kneel in the snow, finding a few threads of her shirt and rolling them around between my fingers.

“Clever fucking stupid gypsy,” I mutter under my breath.

Her scent is scattered everywhere now, the wind picking up and blowing thin threads all around, along with pieces of my deconstructed jacket.

“You're going to fucking freeze!” I call into the wind, cursing when no answer is returned.

“She said she can't adjust this quickly,” the ghost says as she pops up at my side. “But she's not as interesting as me, because I'm totally good with the whole violent wolf thing,” she adds cheerily.

Stalking to my car, I throw the door open and get in, revving the engine the second I crank it.

Anna joins me in the passenger seat as I spin the car around and start racing down the road, expecting to run up on the half-naked gypsy idiot who will be dead soon if she's out in this shit with barely anything on.

She's just mortal, and a daft one at that.

"I don't mind the window-perving either. Feel free to watch me with your friends anytime you want," Anna chatters on. "I do like riding in the front seat. Makes me feel more like your girlfriend."

She reaches over and puts her hand through my crotch.

"I'd really like to show you what else girlfriends in the front seat do for their—"

Her words end on a scream, and she flies through the front windshield when I slam on my brakes and skid across the snow, barely sliding to a stop in front of Damien, as he stands in the middle of the road.

The ghost picks herself up from the ground, mutters something about monster drivers, and disappears.

Damn it. I bet she knows exactly where the freezing gypsy is.

"What the fucking hell?" I ask him on a growl.

"Don't play dumb. I smell her all over you," he says with a sneer. "And I need to talk to that little gypsy."

"Good luck finding her," I tell him as I hold up threads from her shirt that I pocketed earlier.

His lips twitch. “She’s learned to use her Portocale seamstress talents in some rather unusual ways,” he says with a shrug of his shoulder. “This method is less impressive than the last.”

“What was the last?” I ask him absently, sniffing the air and still finding her scent scattered all around.

“She strung me up on the wall, and *I* couldn’t break a few simple threads to free myself,” he states, quickly bringing my attention back to him as my eyebrows bounce to my hairline.

“You’re being serious.”

“Dead serious,” he assures me as he lifts a thread of her shirt from the snow and easily tugs it in half, something even mortals would be capable of. “I’ve never seen the Portocale gypsies use their seamstress gifts as an offensive weapon. Violet Portocale may not know all our secrets, but we apparently know none of hers either.”

I stare at him for a minute before my jaw clenches. She opened a window to the past without much effort. That alone is attention-snaring.

“Where’s Vance?” I finally ask.

“Probably tracking these threads scattered throughout the land, same as you are,” he states idly as he pulls out his phone.

“Actually, I’m here,” comes Vance’s voice from behind Damien.

The gypsy’s threads have officially obstructed my senses, because he’s not that good at sneaking up on me.

“She locked us in Damien’s house with a simple potion,” Vance tells me, jaw grinding like his pride is hurt and he’s pissed about it.

I try not to smile. I really do.

But my unbidden smile slips quickly when I tell him what I just witnessed.

“She opened a window to the past in less than five minutes to search for her mother’s death in a spot that wasn’t her death spot. No ritual. No energy drawn from a stronger source. Just five-fucking minutes. As though it’s something she can casually do anytime she wants.”

“That’s impossible. You have to push yourself to the brink of death to open a window, and it needs heavy supervision or you could actually die, especially as a mortal,” Vance argues. “Why would you even let her attempt it?”

“I didn’t know she was going to do it so abruptly, which is why I was hurrying us along. I thought we’d be out there until at least nightfall, and I was prepared to link to her to let her see for herself Marta didn’t die on my land. And I didn’t say I understood it. But I did just witness it. I don’t think she even understands the magnitude of what she did, but I heard her heart slow for three short minutes until it was less than twenty beats per minute. It began beating normally after the two minute window into the past closed.”

It seems none of us really know what to say for a minute. Damien is finally the one to break the silence.

“I’ve forgotten how annoying it can be to not have all the answers.”

“Imagine how she feels right now,” is all Vance mutters in response as he turns and walks away.

“She *should* feel real damn proud of herself for leaving us all stuck out here with our thumbs up our asses,” Damien calls to his back.

Chapter 17

VIOLET

A loud knock at my door has me groaning as I turn over in the bed.

“Breakfast!” a woman sings from the other side.

“She doesn’t want breakfast. She wants to hide from her life,” Anna tells the woman who can’t hear her.

“Go. Away,” I say over my shoulder.

“Are you okay, Ms. Carmine?” she asks as she knocks again.

“No. She’s terrified of sexy monsters because she doesn’t like stepping outside of her comfort zone,” Anna answers.

“Fine,” I snap.

I’d normally be nicer, but that *Do Not Disturb* sign has been getting ignored for the past three days, because that woman knocks breakfast, lunch, dinner, and sometimes in between—just to check in.

“You should have chosen a hotel instead of a Bed and Breakfast if you don’t want fairies tinkling in your coffee cup,” Anna goes on, her attention riveted to the TV as she watches *American Werewolf*.

“Maybe if she knew you only had a bra and panties to wear out in public, she’d leave you alone,” Anna adds on a drawl.

“That stolen toga you wore in should suffice, though.”

The curtains start unraveling, the threads quickly dropping into a heap, and light spills inside the room, causing me to squint. When the threads start forming a very floral jumpsuit, Anna scoffs.

“Just because you can make clothes out of curtains without getting out of bed doesn’t make you interesting. You lack the *wow* factor I have in spades,” she states, jutting out her chin.

The zipper and zipper tracks unravel from the cushion of the sofa, and it pops onto the new one-piece, hideous jumpsuit that will have to do, because the bedding here is too thin. And the comforter is...even more hideous with little kittens on it.

The *stolen toga* is one of those thin sheets I snatched from a basket near the window when I walked in.

“My ancestors once made robes and gowns for royalty. Does that make me more interesting?” I ask Anna, happy for the distraction.

“No. That simply makes *them* marginally more interesting. I bet they’d be proud their descendant is a gypsy drug dealer,” she states dryly.

“Stop calling me that,” I groan.

“Stop being that and I will. And stop selling polka dot pajamas on the side. Polka dots haven’t been cool since the early nineteen-hundreds when I was commanding the British army.”

I pull a pillow over my head as she begins to devolve into a spiral of absurd lies.

“We should sell rainbows instead of gold. The gold should be a prize at the end of the rainbow,” she resumes.

“The leprechauns beat you to that already,” I grumble from under the pillow, just as there’s another knock at the door.

“Go away,” Anna and I both say.

The knocking grows more insistent, because Ms. Bleaker, the owner of this particular B&B, is very persistent about getting me to eat, even when she has to hand-deliver the food.

Making a frustrated sound, I stand up, pull on the new hideous jumpsuit, and yank open the door, expecting to find the short little woman with a huge bun on her head.

Instead, all I catch a glimpse of are two dark figures, the glint of a blade as the sun catches it, and solid black eyes, before I’m gasping for air and stumbling back into my room.

I see blood.

Where did the blood come from?

I hear screaming.

Why is Anna screaming?

The figures clad in all black barely enter my dimming vision when I collapse to the floor, feeling a burning in my throat as the disorienting dizziness overwhelms me.

My hand weakly comes up, feeling the gash across my neck, and I squeeze, trying to stop the blood from pouring out as my vision grows dimmer.

“They should have mentioned how good her blood smells,” I hear a man saying around a groan.

In the very next instant, I see him blasting through the wall as Anna charges him. So many pretty dots dance in my vision as she shouts at them, and the second one goes flying out the window.

Pain explodes in my chest, and my head falls downward, seeing the knife sticking through me, causing my heart to stutter in its rapid beats that are echoing in my ears as I try to piece together the scattered scene going on around me.

“You have to fight, Violet!” Anna shouts. “I can’t take on the entire army without my captain! Release the kraken!”

It’s the last thing I hear before it all fades to black.

Chapter 18

VIOLET

“It’s better to die than to fight. When people think you’re dead, you don’t have to fight so hard,” Mom tells me as she ties on her cloak.

“But if I fight with you, maybe we won’t ever have to fight again. You can train me. Teach me to be as good as you,” I tell her as I chase her through the house.

“You’re too gentle for the world of fighters, Violet,” she says quietly without looking at me.

“Right now, I’m sick of sitting here and worrying about you, when I could be at your side.”

“I work better alone,” she scoffs. “Besides, the more badass you are, the more people want to take you down a notch. We only need one warrior in the family. We also need one secret weapon.”

“How am I a weapon if I can’t even defend myself?”

She turns, her eyes staring directly into mine with more seriousness than she usually reveals to me.

“Because you’re the perfect storm, Violet.”

“That makes no sense.”

She smiles sadly as she gently brushes my hair out of my face. “Let’s try not to draw attention to the perfect storm.

People want to kill the things that are different, or they want to use them to their advantage. Trust me, Violet. In all things, trust me. And always wake up."

"Always wake up?" I ask her incredulously as she hands me two bracelets, two anklets, and a necklace, all of them adorning the same charms on them.

"Yes. First you fall asleep," she says as I start pulling them on. "But always. Wake. Up!"

Startling awake, the first thing I hear is Anna chattering, and I barely peek open an eye in the really dark room to see her outline as she rocks back and forth.

"I tried to possess them. I almost succeeded on one. I think. He flicked salt over his shoulder like he knew what was going on. Why does everyone carry salt?" she's rambling.

My lips won't part to make a sound, and my throat aches as the feel of satin tickles against my neck, a ribbon stirring into place. Looks like I got a chance to do step one of the survival lessons my mother instilled in me long ago.

It's sort of odd in the sense that step-one is to let the enemy kill me. Generally speaking, that's the very thing most people's survival plans try to avoid.

I'm not all that special. I just simply can't seem to die.

My super power is actually fainting on command so that I can wake up when I want to, instead of dealing with the searing pain of feeling my "fatal" wounds being sewn back together.

Enduring the pain, I lie still, listening, allowing my head time to stop spinning from all the blood I lost. Apparently I

went unconscious before I could purposely faint.

Step two is to return the favor, because obviously they'll never see it coming. But I can't risk making any noise until Anna stops spinning inside this room we're in. Or is the room spinning around her?

"I'm going to rip their eyeballs out just as soon as I trust what's going on around me so I don't muck it up this time too," Anna rattles on, a catch in her voice that causes me to roll my eyes. "Such a waste of a good vagina."

She's grieving my corporeal vagina, because she's actually expecting the new-and-unimproved ghost me to rise, no doubt.

It's fortunately a welcome distraction, which brings me to step three.

Step three is to never panic, because I'm not entirely sure what I am at this point, given the fact there are apparently an abundance of monsters in existence, but I do know I'm incredibly terrifying when I panic.

There's a moment where my brain shuts down, and the only thing on my mind is survival. Which is odd, since I can't actually seem to die. Maybe that's why that true panic is very rare, thankfully.

Most people don't simply wake up after having their throat slashed.

The healing ribbon that is still painfully threading itself through my throat means I've woken too soon.

My fingers and toes are numb. I really lost too much blood.

Did they have to overkill me? Was the throat slashing not enough, for fuck's sake?

Since I can hear the patter of feet outside the door, I have to bite through the pain and hold my silence, because I need that satin tied off real tight before I go trying to escape this place. My pain tolerance is my second secret weapon.

With any luck, there's just the two men who blindsided me earlier. Should be simple enough, if so.

As the final drag of the satin pulls into place and tugs the skin tightly over my heart, the room mostly stops spinning. I think we're actually in a dark closet.

More light spills under the door, like there's a second door beyond it that's opening.

"Get her. She's not a Portocale. Whatever was supposed to happen didn't happen, so your fucking source was wrong," a man is saying in an exhausted tone.

"You smelled her blood too, and it was—"

"It was sweet. Sometimes, sweet blood is just sweet blood. Doesn't have to be gypsy blood, and certainly doesn't have to be Portocale blood, you stupid shit. We don't have the special talent to sniff it out, unlike some," the man adds, saying the last part a little bitterly. "Just get her out of here."

There's some cursing, and a few sounds that resemble the noise made by presumably a fist hitting the wall.

"What now?" one of them says.

"Damien fucking Morpheus just went to Georgina's home, asking about the dead girl we have in our closet. She's

called a meeting with the covens to investigate.”

“Why? Everyone knows the Portocale gypsies handle their own, no matter what. Why does he suspect vampires in the foul play?”

“We killed something they wanted to play with, and it was all for fucking nothing. I told him this was a stupid idea. We could have found another Portocale. But he’s such an arrogant...”

The words trail off like the man is walking away and lowering his tone at the same time.

This is why I woke up too soon. They’re not quiet, and my mind only likes to slink into unconsciousness for so long. The inside of my head is actually scarier than the world I’ve seen so far, so I can’t blame my mind for wanting to run back into the safety net of reality at the first opportunity it can find.

“I bet as a ghost,” Anna says on a snuffle, “you’d be so much less boring. I’ll bet you’d miss your vagina as much as I do.”

My eyes shut just as the door opens, and I remain perfectly still as someone’s hands clasp over my ankles.

“What the actual hell is she wearing?” another voice asks, as I’m dragged out of the closet.

“Looks like bad curtains. Some gypsies, man...they’ll wear anything.”

A few good-spirited chuckles over my dead body at the expense of my terrible wardrobe sets the tone for the types of guys I’m dealing with. I was really hoping for hysterical, guilt-ridden first-timers who are prone to panic attacks.

The chuckling dies off, and I hear the spinning of thread somewhere in the room...the very subtle *whirring* of it they surely don't notice.

"I can't wait until her spirit jumps out. She's so going to explode the two of you. I bet gypsies ghosts are badass," Anna states before she starts actually barking.

I imagine she's bouncing around, since the barking is coming from all sorts of directions. If she were a dog, she'd be a damn miniature schnauzer.

"What the hell is that?"

Shit. How the hell did they notice the thread? Who pays attention to any fabric in the room ever?

I remain still, deciding it's still the only trick in my pony's saddlebag.

"I don't know. Looks like...soft pink stitches or some shit," the other voice says as though he's truly puzzled.

If I wasn't playing the role of a stiff corpse, I'd totally relax.

"Someone sewed her up?"

"With satin?" another man asks as the scrape of calloused fingers touch my cold body.

The hardest thing in the world to do is lie still and not panic when two men, who have already tried to kill you once, touch the still painful wounds they've left you with.

The gentle whirring of the threads continues, as the subtle tugging sound of it across hardwood only finds my ears because they're so close to the floor.

“So that’s not just in my head then. That’s really there,” Anna says as though she’s impressed. “Maybe I’m not crazy after all.”

The most gratifying thing in the world is hearing two shocked yelps erupt as those calloused fingers are ripped away, and that crawling sensation I have vanishes with the arrival of the upper hand.

I hear the telling sound of two bodies crashing on either side of the room. I jackknife to the seated position, eyes flying open as I do, and Anna’s wide, horrified eyes meet mine just inches in front of my face.

For a second, we just stare at each other as the two men strangle against either wall and struggle in vain.

Then Anna’s face falls, her mouth opens, and she releases an ear-splitting scream that seems endless.

Grinning, I leap up to my feet, glance over, and...try not to piss myself as my grin turns to a shocked, gaping-distorted-mouth sort of thing.

Those black eyes I barely glimpsed before they slit my throat are there. Fully black eyes, in fact. That wasn’t a loss-of-blood hallucination.

My head moves from man to man, watching as their fangs—*freaking fangs*—elongate. Well, this day officially sucks worse than it already did.

Anna continues screaming like she’s in the seedy backseat of a car at the start of a horror flick.

“That...is so not normal,” I say under my breath as the... *vampires* begin struggling really damn hard against the

threads, making the only sound they can—bone-chilling, feral hisses.

Vampires.

Freaking vampires are real. This is really happening.

Later, Violet. Now's not the time to go into shock.

The threads are a cool trick, but they don't actually stay so strong for very long, and those vampires should totally be dead by now. But vampires don't die by strangling in the movies.

As paranoid and delusional as the concept of vampires makes me feel, my *they-won't-fall-for-it-twice* dread kicks in and I spring into action. Sort of.

Swallowing thickly, I glance around the room, spotting a wooden table.

Anna comes right in front of me as I sweep the lamp off it, and she grabs—*or tries to grab, rather*—my shoulders. Then she screams even louder.

I'd say it's almost like she's seen a ghost, but I hate a bad pun.

“Oh, horror movie obsession, don't fail me now,” I say as I slam the table onto the ground like they do in all the movies when they're hurting for a good wooden stake.

The table hits, vibrates really hard through my arms, and I fall down on top of it, feeling pain shoot up my leg when my knee bangs a hard angle all wrong.

This is my mother's fault. Because my mother wouldn't let me become a badass. I stupidly let her dictate my life to make up for the fact she had a monster for a daughter.

“What are you doing?” Anna shouts, still partially screaming.

“Trying not to panic because panicking is very bad!” I shout as I struggle to kick at the legs of the table.

All that happens is that my hip is jolted. The sturdy table remains unfazed. At this rate, I’m well on my way to doing more damage to myself than the vampires did to me.

“Did they feed off me?” I bite out, kicking a little more aggressively, to no avail.

“Yes. They fed a lot. You lost a lot of blood and they all orgied and took turns sucking your neck,” Anna says, pacing back and forth.

“I really hope that’s a lie,” I gripe as I release a frustrated sound, unsuccessfully still kicking the shit out of the unrelenting table leg.

“You look ridiculous and they’re going to kill you again!” Anna shouts.

“What the hell? Is this the best piece of furniture ever made or what?” I snap as I push to my feet, sliding across the slippery surface of the hardwood.

My stomach gets a little queasy. I’m pretty sure that’s my blood making the floor slippery.

Spotting a fireplace poker thingy, I grab it and run back over to the table before whacking the hell out of the table leg closest to me.

“Buffy would *so* kick your ass,” Anna informs me like it’s her duty to do so.

“I lost a lot of blood. It’s a little weakening,” I grunt at her in between my failed whacks.

“Excuses won’t save your life, and I suck at saving your life!”

“Well aware,” I bite out just as pieces of wood finally splinter off the damn incredibly well-crafted table.

I grab two chunks that look nothing like the pretty stakes in the movies, and I run to the man who is nearest.

He snaps those fangs at me, eyes still black and red veins bulging on his face, as he strangles but finds himself unable to die. Been there. Sucks.

He should learn to properly faint.

Fortunately, he’s restrained enough for me to slam the stake into his heart. Apparently, I miss.

So I stab him again. And again. And—

Fourth time’s the charm, because his veins start quickly filling in black as his struggle ceases. That’s extremely anticlimactic after all that work.

The other one starts panicking and struggles in a frenzy to escape when he sees his comrade dead.

“They’re supposed to turn into dust! You did it wrong!” Anna shouts, causing me to hesitate, but I don’t have time to overthink things.

The threads strangling them fortunately silence their screams for help.

But...the racket I stirred by making stakes probably did enough damage in the noise department.

“Never mind! He’s dead enough!” Anna gasps as she examines the first dead body.

Racing over to the other, I stab as hard as I can this time, really driving it deep. I don’t miss on my second vampire of the day.

“I really hate the sight of blood,” I groan as it drizzles from his wound.

Shuddering and making sure their blood isn’t on me, I start sprinting toward the window.

“Why the second floor?” I groan as I look down.

“If you can’t die, just jump!” Anna hisses.

“Bones still break, and it takes a while to mend. My bra is empty. I can’t feel a single vial in it, which means no healing potions. That means an even longer time to heal.”

“They totally felt you up as a corpse,” Anna says, making me wish I’d killed them a little harder.

Maybe seeing the flailing lunatic I am best their vampire selves was enough misery in their final moments.

I jog through the only doorway that doesn’t lead to a closet or balcony, and my eyes drop to a chest that is sitting open, spilling over with very pretty wooden stakes.

Anna and I both simply stare down at it with disbelieving expressions.

“I bet you feel a little silly now, don’t you?” she asks, clearing her throat.

I glare. “I hate you,” I tell her.

Unfortunately, I hear two voices coming our way, so I drop and land like a bad puppet whose strings just got cut, suppressing the groan I want to release when I rupture a kidney or something.

My life sucks so hard sometimes.

“What the hell is the dead chick doing in the hallway?” one guy snaps.

“I’m going to kill those worthless sons of bitches,” another growls.

At least there’s a chest of stakes right beside me this time, as the whirring of threads subtly drifts through the air.

I’m really, *really* not ready for this to be my life.

“For the record,” Anna says as approaching footsteps vibrate the floor slightly, “you just got severely less boring.”

Chapter 19

VANCE

I almost don't believe what I'm actually seeing when I spot a familiar missing gypsy on the side of the road...wearing...*a lot* of awful things. Three and half days of nothingness, and suddenly she's right in front of me after feeling compelled to turn down just one road?

She glances over her shoulder, and I can tell she doesn't look quite so thrilled to see me as I pull over. As I lean over and push open the passenger door, I pull my phone out.

My gaze flicks to the rearview mirror where I can see her just glaring at the back of my car like she's weighing her options.

"Hello?" Damien answers, sounding high with just that one word.

"I've found our missing gypsy," I tell him, brow furrowing as I take in her ridiculous choice of clothing.

"Is she happy to see you spying on her through the window on her impromptu, mental health holiday, you hypocritical fuck?" he quips.

"She's wearing a floral jumpsuit with a zipper down the front."

"What?" he asks incredulously.

“The fit is all wrong, and that material looks unnaturally stiff—”

“Why the hell are you calling me?”

“Not to mention the hideous orange scarf that clashes with the yellow backdrop on the fabric with all the loud, bright red and pink florals.”

“Are you seriously calling me to discuss your Portocale girlfriend’s shit taste in clothing right now?” he asks like I’ve lost my mind.

“She’s on Martin’s road,” I tell him more seriously as Anna, the ghost who has been missing this entire time as well, chatters about being Buffy before a spike of some sort killed her.

“Funny. Thought you said Martin swore there was no way a Portocale gypsy was in town,” Damien says quietly. “He pretended to have no knowledge of her existence.”

“Martin wouldn’t be stupid enough to bring her anywhere close to his residence if he knew we were searching her out,” I’m fast to point out. “And Martin is most definitely on the other side of the country right now. There shouldn’t be anyone on his road.”

“Is she hurt?” he asks with something akin to reluctance in his voice.

“I’m not entirely sure, but I can smell too much of her blood from my car. Fill Emit in.”

“Why the hell can’t you do that?” he asks as Violet starts and stops and then starts again, moving toward the passenger’s side with angry strides.

“Because it looks like she’s just made a decision,” I say as I hang up.

A massive, snow-covered boot lands in my floorboard, and snow sprays all over the black interior. Lovely.

She takes a seat, bringing her other snow-covered boot into the car with the same lack of concern.

“Is it my imagination, or have your feet grown three sizes since last we met?” I drawl as she shuts the door and puts on her seatbelt.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she states like she’s experiencing a bit of ire. “But can we please get out of here?”

I put the car in drive, turning around and heading back toward town.

“Nice...outfit,” I manage to say with a completely neutral expression.

“I don’t want to talk about that either,” she says on a huff.

“I suppose the scarf is off limits as well then? Been to Grandma’s house lately?” I muse, flicking at the orange monstrosity when the long tail of it tickles across my hand.

“Grandma is a wolf!” Anna shouts right in my bloody ear, and I damn near forget not to react.

I hate that infernal pest.

“I really, *really* don’t want to talk about it,” Violet says again, staring out the window.

“Hey, he’s a vampire hunter. Ask him for some tips on being Buffy,” the ever-so-random ghost suggests.

“There’s not much time to adjust to this world I’ve unintentionally stumbled into, is there?” Violet asks almost absently.

“How old are you?” I ask, pretending as though I don’t already know she’s twenty-five.

“I doubt I need to answer that. Care to explain your perverted interest in me?” she volleys.

“I’ve let it be known how intriguing you are,” I state unapologetically. “I feel, given the circumstances, Emit and I were appropriately respectful of boundaries by looking in and seeing what anyone who was looking on from the outside would see,” I add with a reasonable tone.

She exhales very harshly.

“Emit too?” she asks in exhausted exasperation.

I’m never going to hear the end of this. He’ll accuse me of tattling like Damien rushed to do. Fucking infants.

I’m the one to exhale harshly this time, as she groans.

“Damien’s the only one who crossed a line,” I carry on, deciding to give her the right person to focus her anger on. “You’re only so sensitive because you’re too young to know better.”

“He’s usually better with smooth talk than this,” Anna says from behind me, making no sense at all.

I’m not trying to talk her into bed; I’m trying to talk her away from the ledge.

She’s clearly fragile, given the fact she has no clue what’s going on around her, and I’ve forgotten how to fucking be

sensitive to the extreme she requires. How do I even handle something that delicate?

“Any chance you want to talk about where you disappeared to after you shredded all your clothing to threads and left us on a wild chase?”

“Why chase me at all?” she fires back immediately, sounding truly tired of all of this.

“You don’t seem to realize just how many enemies you have.”

“Apparently more than I thought, and that has happened since moving to town and becoming fascinating to all of you,” she states a little accusingly.

“What?” I ask as I shift gears, completely confused.

“I said I don’t want to talk about it,” she grumbles.

Infuriating female. This is exactly why I elect to forgo sex. Women are too bloody complicated, and sex grows boringly monotonous and tedious after centuries flit by like years. It’s simply not worth it.

Shifting gears again, I drive us quickly toward town. At least now my restlessness to hunt her down is settled and I can finally sleep again.

“How did you just happen to be driving down that road at that moment?” she asks.

“Let me tell you a little bit about my curse,” I state as I cut down another road, taking a slight detour. “When someone I’ve pledged protection to disappears without a word, I’m

compelled to hunt for them. I can't sleep, eat, or even rest until I've recovered them."

She bristles. "So you've been forced to hunt for me this entire time because you're a Van Helsing and that's how it works?"

"Far more complicated than that, but sure. We'll start there," I say with a bitter smile, my eyes trained on the road. "I drive. I feel compelled or I don't feel compelled to go places. I felt compelled to finally turn on that road just a few minutes before spotting you. First time I've felt anything in days."

She bristles once more.

"Is it weird that I was kind of hoping for anyone to drive by, since I was freezing and can't walk in these boots—"

"Why are they so big?" I ask...simply because I can't help myself.

"Because they were the smallest ones I could find, and I don't want to talk about it," she says in exasperation. "Anyway, I had the thought I'd even settle for one of you. Then *poof*. There *you* were."

She gestures at me a little wildly.

"Yet you still deliberated on whether or not to join me for a solid ten minutes," I remind her.

"Because it was a little freaky."

"My gift for hunting didn't work until you conceded you wanted me to find you," I admit, hoping it's not a mistake to tell her that, but knowing I have to give a little bit before she breaks off and runs again.

I can't afford to spend my time chasing her every time she has a fit, no matter how intrigued I am by the curious gypsy girl.

"What's the point in only hunting for people who want you to find them?" she asks like she's genuinely intrigued.

"It's not like that for everyone. Only the Portocale gypsies can be found by a Van Helsing at their behest," I go on, telling her the safer things she'd normally know under usual circumstances.

"Why?" she says, and then I catch sight of her grinning, like hearing that word come out of her mouth has turned into an amusing game of sorts.

Why is even that action so damn distracting? Why does the curl of her lips always draw my eyes to her mouth? I've lived long enough to not be blinded by a pretty smile.

"You're very easily amused," I note.

"Apparently the same applies to you. How do you stare at me and still drive perfectly between the lines?" she muses without looking at me.

"Damn. My girl just showed off some of her game. *Boom*," Anna chimes in from the backseat, being notably quieter than usual.

I still want to salt her.

Violet actually grins broader.

Rolling my eyes, I look back at the road, until she says, "I'm expecting an answer to that. Why do Portocale gypsies get preferential treatment from your hunting abilities?"

My hands tighten on the steering wheel.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I state with a droll tone.

She reaches up to turn the heat on, and her hand brushes mine when I make a move to do the same thing. It’s instinctive to stiffen when I’m touched by anyone unexpectedly, but the second the icy glide of her skin grazes mine, I slam on the brakes.

Violet shouts something about lunatics and broken balls. Anna screams as she’s launched through the front windshield, which is terribly dramatic and unnecessary, considering she can’t *actually* be thrown from a vehicle.

I shove open my door and stalk around to Violet’s side, throwing open her door so hard one of the hinges snaps and the door half collapses on the ground.

There’s a streak of terror in her eyes that has me calming just slightly as I kneel down and pull her freezing hand into mine.

“Why the hell are you so cold?” I bark, feeling a weird panic climb up me.

It was stupid to pledge protection to someone who intrigues me this much. I blame it on the fact she’s a Portocale and I may be able to finally pay my life debt and stop being punished every time one of their short lives ends.

That’s a fool’s dream, but that niggling sensation of hope is the only thing I can accuse for this ridiculous fascination.

“Because it’s cold outside, and I walked five miles before I got desperate enough to settle for you,” she says very warily,

as though she's watching for me to make any sudden movements.

"How is this not affecting you?" I ask her.

I notice now that her eyes are a little sunken in with subtle, dark circles highlighting them, and she's a lot paler than usual.

"It's by sheer stubbornness alone that I'm not passed out and sleeping this off until I'm warm. Can we shut the door and keep the little bit of heat that's left inside?"

Blinking out of my trance, I release her immediately, grimacing at the door now. What the hell is my problem?

Quickly peeling off my jacket, I put it on her. Then I quickly lift the door into place and wedge it shut.

After getting back in and quietly shutting my door, clearing my throat, and adjusting my tie, I calmly put the car into gear, and slowly accelerate us until we're at top speed, as I drive toward her house.

"Unless you want vomit on top of the snow in the floor, I strongly urge you to slow down," she says with a small, warning gag.

"I can't handle watching her spew," Anna says as she also gags before she disappears.

I let off the damn gas. I regret taking that detour right about now.

"Why didn't you tell me you were freezing?" I ask, double, triple, and quadruple checking to make sure the heat is maxed out.

“Because I still have the ability to turn the heat up myself. *You* freaked out. Not me,” she says like she’s the one being reasonable now, exhaling heavily in relief when I slow all the way down to the speed limit.

“It’s a common courtesy you tell your driver that you’re freezing,” I grind out.

“I didn’t go to etiquette school, Mr. Van Helsing, sir,” she retorts, returning her attention to the window.

I hate it when people are condescending to me. That’s my specialty.

“Any reason why you’re still being hateful to me, or should I expect this sort of hostility during all our future encounters?”

She gives me a dubious look. “Do not stare through my windows ever again, and I’ll be much more cordial. I’m forgiving, but there’s a ceiling limit to that forgiveness.”

“Noted,” I say tightly. “But while you’re sitting there and judging, you should take into account the person you’re sitting with.”

When I look over, I see the confusion in her eyes.

“Living forever is the dream of every man who fears death,” I answer softly, my gaze shifting back to the road. “You want to see the world, even if you’re not a traveler. You want to taste every food out there, even if you’re a picky eater. You want to rule the world, even as you endeavor to remain humble. It’s the curse of mortality.”

I cut down her road, speeding up just a little over the limit, checking her for nausea. She’s just staring at me like she’s

genuinely intent on hearing me continue.

“After living for so long, you either do it all, or you do nothing at all,” I finish. “Either way, you simply find nothing that excites you anymore. Nothing holds your attention for long periods at a time. You held our attention. None of us have been intrigued by any one person in far too long to dignify with an estimated number of years. I respected your boundaries, whether you believe it or not, by limiting myself to that small bit of my curiosity being sated. Trust me, it’s highly respectful, all things considered. You’re no longer in a world where you have the high-road as a true option, and no one is going to give you the luxury of being coddled just because you’re too young to understand.”

She clears her throat, glancing down.

“I suppose that’s true. If I’d never come here, would monsters even know I exist?” she asks, glancing to the side window.

“No one would know you as anything other than Violet Carmine, Marta’s niece-by-marriage, most likely. Your background is really well charted and seemingly true. Only the alphas and the Van Helsings know the full scent of Portocale blood. But it still smells sweet enough to garner attention, even if they don’t know the mistake they’re making when they grow tempted.”

“Why’s it a mistake?” she asks, shivering a little under my jacket that she’s wearing like a blanket.

I pull into her driveway, and barely get the brake on before I’m out the door and walking around to her side, texting Damien short details as I go. The passenger door falls off

completely when I open it, punctuating the agonizingly slow, frustrating car ride.

She doesn't fight me when I lift her from the seat and start carrying her toward the door.

“Because we can smell the blood on lips for days after, and it's a sure death sentence if we beat the Portocale Council to them,” I answer with a dark smile. “Most people just don't know why, or Portocale gypsies would be far more hunted than they already are.”

Before she has to ask the one-word question that has begun amusing her, I elaborate while pushing through her door, breaking the knob off in the process.

I'll fix it later.

My voice growing quieter, I say, “When a Portocale gypsy dies, the alphas suffer in agony through every Portocale death in history. It's up to taking a week for me now, before the agonies and deaths stop. The only reason I'm telling you this is because it should make you understand how protected Portocale gypsies really are by us, whether they want our protection or not.”

Her cold fingers rub over my neck, like she's drawing in my warmth, as I lay her on her bed and start covering her up with as many blankets as I can find.

I move through the house, finding several more, and run them back upstairs. A curtain is missing from the window next to her, and a hideous bird-fabric toboggan is on her head and covering her ears when I return.

“It’s hard to believe your family used to set the fashion by designing for the royal households,” I say in true horror, distracted for just a second.

She rolls her eyes.

I start pulling my shirt over my head, and she barely bats an eye.

“You better be offering body heat and nothing else,” she mumbles.

“Five miles shouldn’t have left you this wrecked,” I tell her as I move to the other side of the bed and slip in under the covers.

She immediately presses against me, and I don’t overthink it as I put my arms around her and draw her close.

She’s unbearably cold, and there’s no part of me that should be the slightest bit aroused. It’s wrong on so many levels, considering she’d likely hate me, as all Portocale gypsies do, if she had all the facts.

“One second you’re accusing me of being too tough, and the next I’m too weak,” she grumbles, causing my lips to twitch.

“Why do I smell your blood?”

“You always smell my blood, according to you.”

“You’re deflecting. There’s certainly a difference from smelling it in the vein as opposed to smelling it outside of it.”

She lifts her arm over my face, and I notice a wound for the first time. It’s small, nothing to account for the blood loss,

but I think my curse and the need to protect her is a little overly worked up.

“My mother knew monsters lived here, and she left me unspoken instructions to come here as well. She knew you’d discover me. Knew you could smell my blood. Apparently there’s a Portocale council I’ve never even heard of—”

“Emit mentioned that,” I interrupt, and she makes a sound of disapproval.

“Sorry. Please continue your rant,” I state blandly, trying not to smile when she just pushes closer.

“My point is, she knew all that, and still sent me here after her death. She’s earned blind trust, but...”

Her words trail off, and I brush her hair away from her face as she stares over my shoulder like she’s lost in thought.

“But now you find yourself wondering why she ever even came here to begin with. I’m sure you have no idea if your limited knowledge into your true world is a good thing or not. Marta was a very popular Portocale at one point in her early career, and disappeared until she popped up in our town months ago—”

I pause when I realize she’s not even paying any attention. She’s staring over my shoulder still, and now I realize it’s that odd gaze she’s gotten a few times recently. It’s like she’s frozen and staring at someone, but once again, no one, not even a ghost, is there.

She grins suddenly, but she wipes that grin away like she doesn’t want me to see it. My brow furrows as I look at the vacant space and then her.

“Are you okay? Is the cold making you hallucinate or something?”

I’m fucking burning up, and she’s still really cold to the touch.

“Fine,” she says as she presses up against me with a little less tension.

I’m a little concerned it’s a trap when she tosses her leg over me and wraps her arms around my neck with careless abandon.

It’s been a long time since things got *hard* without more effort, and I’m not sure why my cock picks this particular moment to be errant.

She’s still bent out of shape over the window-watching thing, so I’m positive feeling my arousal during her vulnerable moment will likely not bode well for me.

Subtly adjusting to keep her from noticing, I try not to think about how, even through that rough fabric garb she’s wearing, I can still feel every curve of her body easily molding against me.

I’m not sure what’s loosened her up, but I genuinely fucking hate it. Especially when I find myself tempted for the first time in far too long. And she’s much too forbidden for that.

Maybe that’s half the damn problem and the vast majority of her intriguing allure.

I hear a car pulling up, and I silently count the numerous reasons why I should extract myself from her. But I can’t seem to do it.

My arms slide around her waist, and one of my hands drifts down her side to her leg that's over my hip, slipping my hand slowly around to her ass, giving her ample opportunity to stop me. However, I abruptly stop when I hear her soft snore near my ear.

Now I feel just a little dirty.

She's a lot warmer to the touch, so I carefully extract myself, pull my shirt and tie back on, and walk out without thinking about the fact I almost felt up a sleeping Portocale.

I need a drink.

Damien is lounging on her couch when I reach the bottom of the stairs.

“What the hell happened to your Jag?” he asks without looking up from his phone, pretending he has no continued interest in the gypsy and isn't fucking giddy I've asked him to look after her.

“I...don't want to talk about it,” I decide to answer.

He gives me a bored expression, but then his eyebrows bounce up when he looks me over.

“Your shirt is wrinkled and you don't have the buttons lined up,” he says like he can't believe the sight before him.

My spine stiffens.

“I had to break the door to get in, and—”

“Had to?” he asks skeptically.

“She was freezing, and she didn't look like she would have her key on her,” I impatiently explain. “The point is, she's

sleeping now. Stay only until she wakes up, and fix the door. Understood?”

“Your favorite tie is crooked,” he says like he’s still fascinated with my disheveled appearance. “Where’s your favorite jacket?”

I don’t even want to answer him right now.

“Didn’t wear it,” I say as I flip him off and turn to walk out.

“You always wear your favorite jacket with your favorite tie,” he calls to my back.

“Stay out of her room,” is all I call back.

It’s never good when Damien notices things he can use against me. I should have fucking called Emit. Not that he’d be any better.

Motherfucking infants.

After once again wedging the door onto my car enough to help block out some of the cooling temperatures of this shitty damn week, I get into my car and head back to Martin’s road.

As soon as I get parked, Emit pulls up beside me in his mid-life crisis car.

He unfolds his massive body from the small car, and stares at the pitiful sight my favorite car has become.

It’s when he grins that I decide to stab him before we leave here.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him dryly.

But we both lose interest in each other when we get a whiff of the same thing the second the wind stirs.

Our heads jerk to the house, and he's gone as quickly as I am.

I slink around the side, smelling the distinct stench of vampire blood.

I shimmy up the side of the building, heaving myself over a second floor balcony. Following the scent from the strongest point of entry, I stealthily and warily take in my surroundings. I can only assume Emit is coming in from the other side of the scent to counter me.

Swords drop from the hilts in my hands, and I use the reflective surface of one blade to peer around the room. I pause it when I see a lifeless body lying on the ground, and then I circle my view around the room, pausing again on a second body.

It's silent in the house, and I catch the faintest scent of Emit as he draws nearer.

Stepping into the room, I give a quick look around. I eye the body nearest to me. What has most of my attention are the threads that are fraying around his neck, arms, and legs.

My gaze swings up to the curtains that have been unraveled, partially hanging from the ornate drapery rod.

On another sweep of the room, I notice a table haphazardly turned over, a fire poker out beside it, and one leg of it badly hacked. The hacked pieces have been sloppily jammed into the two dead vampires that have been left behind for anyone to find.

“That lying little gypsy,” I say under my breath, slightly in awe of how utterly stupid I feel as my swords retract and the hilts get pocketed.

Emit walks in just as I place my hands on my hips and truly observe the scene, confounded by how exactly this came about, when she only just learned vampires exist.

She can't be that good of a liar, can she?

“There are two more bodies in the hall, both looped with threads, and have stakes in their hearts. There's also a full chest of stakes out there,” he tells me with the same amount of surprise.

“Martin has been swearing for years that vampires break into his house when he's away, so he has tons of chests full of stakes,” I murmur idly.

“Martin's literally insane, delusional, and paranoid,” Emit says absently, kicking at one of the vampire bodies as though he needs assurances the guy's dead.

“Is he? That's a count of four staked bodies that are proof he's correct. What about the rest of the house?”

“No one else is here, but this is one hell of a mess,” he says on a harsh breath. “Did she snap?”

“And come to Martin's house to kill vampires who shouldn't be in Martin's house?” I ask incredulously.

“Okay...so what happened?”

I run a hand through my hair. “At this point, only she can answer—”

The untouched curtains blow in the wind, and we both snap our gazes to smears of blood on the ground.

He moves to the closet door and swings it open, and I stare a little uneasily at the very large puddle of blood in the floor there.

“She’s a mortal Portocale gypsy,” Emit says quietly.

“She’s a mortal Portocale gypsy who doesn’t feed on ghosts to survive a curse she doesn’t seem to know about,” I tell him in agreement, knowing where he’s going with this.

“Mortal Portocale gypsies couldn’t survive losing that much blood unless they fed on a spirit during all of this. Damien said you told him she was cold.”

“Very fucking cold,” I state as I walk over to the hallway and peer at the two dead bodies on either side out there.

More of her blood is smattered on the ground. Why wasn’t it staining her clothes? Or was it? That horrible floral pattern was on a yellow background, but there were a lot of *red* florals. I didn’t pay it much attention because it was too hideous to look at.

When I look back over, I notice one of the vampires is missing a pair of shoes. I also notice half of an orange blanket has been peeled apart, matching a very familiar scarf’s material.

“This fucking gypsy is going to be the death of me,” I mutter under my breath before scrubbing a hand over my face.

“How’s Martin’s house?” I hear Damien asking, and I whirl around to find Emit holding up his phone, turning it from side to side to show him what we’re seeing.

I watch his eyes go from the screen and flick up, and can tell from the background Damien is in Violet's room.

"She's not as innocent as she looks, is she?" he muses. "True gypsy woman."

"We need to clean this up, but none of these vampires are marked," Emit tells him.

"All the easier to clean up the unregistered, and killing them simply saved Vance the trouble," Damien drawls, eyes still not on the screen.

My own gaze narrows.

"Tell Vance I found his favorite jacket. He left it with a gypsy," the prick says before the call ends.

"You left her your favorite jacket?" Emit asks me on a disappointed exhale. "You need to apologize for making her his newest obsession. Because he wants to take away anything you might even consider caring about."

"It's not like he can touch her," I say with a cruel smile.

He tries not to smile, but I feel like his barely restrained amusement is mocking me. "He can touch her. He just can't enjoy it," he reminds me as he turns and walks out.

My smile immediately falls, and I reach down, grabbing one leg of the vampire closest to me.

"I now remember why I started hating you in the first place," I call out as I haul the body behind me.

Couldn't she have at least killed them in someone other than Martin's house? It doesn't matter how much we clean, he'll still somehow know we were here.

Crazy old codger might not be quite as crazy as we thought.

“Why would vampires be here?” I hear Emit asking more seriously as he drags the two from the hallway over to the window.

“I know we complain about how boring life has gotten, but this is getting ridiculous,” is the only answer I have available, as I go back for the last vampire.

I pause and walk toward the closet, bending when I see a knife off to the side, almost hidden from sight. I lift it, smelling Violet’s blood on it.

“You lying little gypsy,” I say again, quieter as I try to figure out how the pieces fit together...but come up empty.

If she fed from ghosts, Anna would already be dead. Feeding from nearby ghosts isn’t optional. Portocale gypsies don’t get to pick and choose who they steal from, unlike monsters.

“I guess I’ll be the one to get answers out of her, since she thinks you and Damien are peeping perverts,” Emit gloats, and I grimace as I prepare myself for the ridicule.

“Yes, right,” I state dryly. “About that...”

Chapter 20

VIOLET

My eyes flutter open, and I moan in the cocoon of warmth as I stretch. I pause mid-stretch when I realize I'm wearing Vance's jacket. How did that happen? It was wrapped around me but my arms weren't in it.

The scarf is still firmly hiding my newest stitches, since it's stitched to the stitches for that reason. I need something—

“Damien's in your room right now,” Ace says, causing me to jerk my attention to the corner where he's still sitting.

I spot him idly staring down at his nails.

I forgot he was in here, and I really didn't expect him to stick around. He's a ghost with some observable measure of boundaries, which is new.

I don't speak, since his words sink in and I feel the urge to tug the covers up.

“He's curious as to why you staked four vampires in the heart, and he is watching to see what your response is when no one is looking,” he goes on. “I'd like to hear this story as well, if we're being honest with each other.”

I glance around, trying not to be obvious.

“He's right beside me. Don't worry. He can't hear or see me, but you could really freak him out if you look...”

He lets his words trail off, and I follow him as he moves. He gives me a smug grin as he takes a seat.

“...into my eyes,” he says like he’s finishing his sentence.

I stare directly into his eyes, because that seems to be something I can’t actually avoid with him.

He shifts, and I shift with him, following his eyes, and noticing his grin. When he stands and moves, my gaze follows him.

Suddenly, Damien becomes visible, and Ace steps out of him, laughing under his breath as Damien narrows his eyes on me.

“How could you see me?” he asks angrily.

The insane urge to grin is almost infectious. I think ghost insanity can be catching if you interact with the crazy ones for too long.

“Why are you in my room again?” I ask in deflection.

“Who are you?” he demands.

“Which name would you prefer right now? Violet or January?”

He actually growls at me.

“Are you part animal? Is that the kind of monster you are?” I ask curiously.

Ace outright laughs, his head tipping back, as Damien just continues to stare.

“You killed four vampires today, and now I realize you can apparently see me. Don’t you think you have some questions

to answer?" he asks seriously.

"Tell me your secrets, and I'll tell you mine," I say with a sweet smile.

"He doesn't quite know what to do with you. All his normal tactics are pointless, because you're an untouchable Portocale," Ace says as though he's enjoying all this too much.

Damien's eyes cut away from me, and he moves to the dresser where some flowers are. "I fixed your door, and if you're hungry, there's a tray of food on the table beside you. I brought it up when you first started stirring, but it should still be warm," he says, confusing me with his abrupt one-eighty.

I glance over and see the food on the tray. It's all laid out so neatly, and the plate is covered by a clear covering of some sort. There's even a little rose on the tray, along with coffee, tea, and water. At least I'm assuming that's water, since I don't smell any vodka.

"I wasn't sure what beverage you prefer," he adds, the generous notion in no way an excuse for his invasive attitude toward personal boundaries.

"Why are you being nice?" I ask, suspicious.

"Clearly he plans to seduce you," Ace answers as though that should be obvious. "You won't let him close enough for him to study any other way at this point. And you're wearing Vance's favorite jacket."

I really wish I could point out how very little sense all that makes.

"You should let him work his magic. You look like you could use some loosening up," my newest ghost stalker adds.

Is it a requirement for all ghosts to get horny when they lose the ability to have sex ever again?

Damien casually rolls up his sleeves, as though he wants me to see the toned, tanned forearm porn he has going on. He really is quite possibly the most gorgeous man on the face of the planet. It's like the tempting outer layer that coats the creepy monster center.

"At some point, we both need to start answering questions. You don't want me becoming obsessed with you, Violet Portocale," he says in a conversational tone, though it sounds distinctly like a veiled warning. "It's best for everyone that I remain numb in my indifferent, dismal corner."

"You may not believe it, but he used to be a lot of fun," Ace says with a grin as he props up like he's getting comfortable.

"It's fascinating how you seem to want to make any of this my fault. Does this tactic work for you very often?" I muse.

"Worked perfectly fine before women's lib," Ace drawls. "He hasn't had to try very hard *at all* since, because panties don't get dropped; they get thrown," he adds in a stage-whisper. "The twenty-first century is definitely a fast fave."

"I'll set up a lunch for us in the near future. Maybe we're going about this all wrong," Damien says in a voice that's almost enchanting.

"Think of skunk when he talks like that," Ace says, and I do.

The skunk thing works, because I snap out of the trance before I'm too lost to it.

“Stop using your mojo on me, or I’ll be forced to unravel some threads. I’m really tired. It’s been a long day.”

“You killed four vampires,” he says again like he knows for certain it had to be me.

How could they possibly figure that out so fast?

I just stay silent.

“There are rules about killing things, Violet. You got lucky this time,” he cautions me.

“What happens when it’s self-defense?” I ask, keeping things vague, since I definitely do not trust him.

“Why were you in Martin’s home?” he asks instead of answering me.

“Why do you answer questions with questions, when the original question is valid?”

“Keep that up, and he’ll hate you for making him want you,” Ace says around a yawn. “Personally, I prefer my women a little more subdued. Little more plump in the chest area too, but I could work with a smaller stack like yours.”

Okay, now I want to slap the ghost more than I want to slap Damien.

“Kidding. Obviously,” Ace says with a grin. “It’s cute how your ears get a little red when someone’s pissing you off.”

“What are you looking at?” Damien asks me as I cut my eyes back to him.

“Just waiting on the right answer before giving you my full attention,” I say.

“You crafty little thing. You really are a gypsy, because you know how to sell a lie,” Ace says as he leans up like he’s finally interested in all this.

Damien gives me a less impressed look, since he’s not in on the inside joke.

“Self-defense changes things. Works without question on unregistered vampires like the four you left behind today. Not so much on registered or respected vampires,” he informs me, studying me a little differently.

“I haven’t been abridged on the pecking order or politics.”

“Unregistered vampires are illegal, and they get killed by Van Helsing when he hunts,” he explains. “The pecking order starts when you’re registered. Don’t worry. You’ll figure out how that works the longer you’re in Shadow Hills.”

“All the vampires live here?”

“All the monsters have regions. They can’t live just anywhere in the world. There’s a system in place. Those who break the important rules pay the price. With technology being what it is, we can’t afford too many slips.”

“If you say it’s because humans can’t know—”

His laughter cuts me off, and I glance over to see Ace is suppressing his own laughter.

“Half the government are monsters in almost every country. Humans are well aware of our existence, and the higher up the chain you go, the more people you’d be surprised are what they are. It’s never the ones you suspect,” Damien says conspiratorially.

“However,” he continues, his smile slipping, “it’s the more simple minded, herd mentalities or fear mongers we prefer to avoid. We have a complicated but effective system to deal with the progression of each new era, and we deal with the fanatics who get too close when necessary.”

“You’re hiding in plain sight,” I state flatly. “In large clusters they could probably wipe out if they wanted to.”

“The humans know how important the alphas are to the overall order of the worldly pecking order, if you understand me,” he continues, perching up against the wall. “It took them a really long time to come to grips with the true reality of things, but money solves almost all problems,” he adds.

“That’s very true,” Ace says, getting bored again as he starts looking around my room, poking his head through my drawers and my closet.

“Without us, the apocalypse rolls in, and chaos will ensue,” he adds, smirking for whatever reason. “Have a good day, Violet Portocale. Try not to kill anymore vampires without a license to do so,” he adds as he steps out of my room.

I hear him jog down the stairs and hear my front door shut. My eyes flick to Ace, and I start to speak, but he puts his finger over his smirking lips in the universal *hush* sign.

He disappears from sight, and my gaze darts over just as he pops up near my door, gesturing to his eyes. “Right here,” he says.

I hold his gaze as he walks to the left...and back to the right...then back to the left.

Damien appears, and I arch an unimpressed eyebrow at him as Ace steps out of him and comes to drop down on the bed beside me, staring on at Damien with amusement.

“You’re going to tell me how you’re doing that at our lunch,” Damien bites out as he turns and stalks out.

Again, I hear the sound of him jogging down the stairs, and hear the telltale sign of the door slamming.

My eyes move over to Ace who says, “He’s really gone this time.”

Tires scream just outside as if to punctuate the departure.

“The older they get, the more tantrums they throw,” he draws.

“How long have you stalked them?”

“Enough about me,” he says as he turns over and puts his hand under his head as he faces me, pretending he needs to support his head. “Why did you kill four vampires and how?”

“They attacked me, kidnapped me, and tried to kill me.”

“Why didn’t they just kill you to begin with if they wanted you dead?” he asks as though that’s the first question anyone should ask.

“Maybe they planned to drink me?”

“They’d be tempted, but it’d be death raining down on them if they did. A vampire can’t hide the scent of Portocale blood on their breath for a while. Unless they have a willing Portocale—which is highly unlikely—it’s an immediate death sentence.”

“Nice to know I’m a forbidden delicacy,” I state dryly. “That’s the second time today I’ve been told that.”

His gaze rakes over me. “Forbidden you are,” he murmurs under his breath. “The forbidden is always the most tempting.”

His gaze swings up to meet mine again, and I give him an exasperated look. “Are all ghosts so fixated on sex?”

“Are all flesh bags such prudes?”

I’m not sure why I grin.

He waggles his eyebrows at me as he pushes closer on the bed.

My smile slips as the reality slowly sinks in. “Why do wooden stakes work on vampires?”

“Because so many humans around the globe truly believe that to be a fact,” he says with a shrug of one shoulder, as though it’s an easy conclusion.

“That’s not—”

“The power of the mind is the absolute strongest force out there. Gypsies carry an abnormal amount of that power; the same is true for the witches out there.”

Witches. Great. There are witches.

“However, humans collaborating under one unified belief carry a great deal more power than they can or will ever realize. It’s one of the many secrets your new monster entourage don’t share with anyone who has less than alpha status, nor do they share it with the human allies,” he goes on.

“Then I probably shouldn’t know it,” I say very quietly, tension ratcheting up my spine as I look around, paranoid

Damien has come back without Ace noticing him.

“Probably not. But now that I’ve told you a secret, you owe me one,” he says idly.

“You told me one of their secrets. Not one of yours,” I feel the need to point out as a grin tugs at my mouth again.

Oh, no. I’m flirting with a *ghost*.

Why am I flirting with a ghost?

“You asked, though,” he goes on with another shrug and a boyish grin. “And I gave you a direct answer.”

“An answer that sounds sketchy.”

“Sports metaphors work on you? I’ve been watching a lot of basketball in the pubs this past decade or so,” he says, staring at me expectantly.

“My dad is a basketball man, so maybe I can follow,” I say on a sigh.

“Proof of the power of the human mind,” he says as he moves in a little bit closer, our faces mere inches apart now. “When a team scores a certain amount of unanswered points, the other team calls a timeout. Why?”

“To ice momentum,” I state like I should win a prize for knowing the answer.

“Exactly,” is what he says, though it’s not quite as rewarding as I feel I deserve.

“It’s a common thing for a team’s shots to start going in with more and more confidence brewing. People seeing and believing in the momentum makes it’s visible to the human eye just how powerful the mind can be. Same for when a

player is having a hot streak. Some of the fans are rooting against them, dreading each shot they see go up and in, because it's like this guy can't miss. Some of them are hoping and believing in said streak, cheering louder than ever when they see it playing out before their very eyes."

He's moved so close that my eyes are so very near to his, seeing the dark slate-gray color of them.

"When someone wants something and believes in it, and they have enough people all wanting it just as much in that same moment, it takes fewer people to generate that power. But still, that's how monsters are killed. In the end, the humans don't even know the power they've held over the monsters for too many centuries to count."

"I really wasn't expecting that sort of answer," I tell him honestly.

I've gotten so many circling answers that it's refreshing to have someone simply explain something to me that makes weirdly perfect sense, adding a bit of reason into the mix that helps me sort through things with a different point of view.

My horror movie obsession really might come in handy.

A piece of my mind flits back to my mother coaching me on my threading as I unraveled the curtains of our kitchen.

"How can we do this?" I remember asking.

"Because our ancestors made clothes so divine, that enough people started believing there was magic in our bloodline's fingers."

It'd been an intriguing answer as a child and a silly one as an adult that led me to the conclusion my mother didn't have

the real answer. Maybe that was the real answer after all.

“This is the part where you tell me something. Did you hear the vampires say any names, or drop any hints as to what they were up to?” Ace asks, drawing me out of my reverie.

Since I can't mention the dying part, considering I don't know him well enough to expose my most precious secrets, I shrug. “They mentioned a woman...Georgina, I think. They said she called a meeting after Damien asked about me.”

He nods like he's thinking that over. “Damien was more concerned about your sudden disappearance than he'd ever admit.”

“Should I mention it to them?” I ask him, feeling nervous about getting more caught up in monster crosshairs.

“No,” he says with a shake of his head. “No, Georgina has a stick up her ass and is a stickler for rules. But if these unregistered vampires knew of Georgina, then that calls to question her integrity. However, Van Helsing can't go after Georgina.”

“Why?” I ask, and then grin to myself.

“Because she's a top tier beta who runs her own house. Only her alpha can question her about something like that without any concrete proof,” he tells me as his eyes meet mine again. “And he's underground right now.”

“Arion. That's the only one missing from the deliveries. A Shera chick is there for him. Arion is the vampire alpha, isn't he?”

I swallow hard after saying that, because that means Shera is probably a vampire if that's so.

“I’d call you clever, but that’s obvious by this point,” he says with a smirk.

“I’ve known about monsters for less than a week. I’d say I’m sitting at the front of the class right now.”

“You look like a give-the-teacher-an-apple sort of pupil,” he observes, eyes flicking over my ridiculous scarf and even more ridiculous head-wrap that has somehow stayed on during my sleep.

“I was actually the weird chick who was obsessed with death and dark poetry and sat in the back of the class to write said tortured poems,” I clarify, causing his grin to quirk up again.

“We’re all obsessed with death. Anyone who says they aren’t...they’re lying or in denial.”

“Why is Arion underground?”

“From what I hear, he’s a deranged psychopath who slaughtered over a hundred of Emit’s wolves, and just as many or more of Damien’s abominations,” he says too casually.

My eyes widen.

“Vancetto Van Helsing had to put him underground as punishment. It’s actually a very complicated tale,” he adds.

“What is Damien?” I decide to ask.

“Damien isn’t what he creates,” he says instead of answering. “Damien is a cluster fuck of a storm, and there are only so many creatures truly like him,” he continues.

“What are his creations?”

“I think we’ve talked enough about the monsters in town. How about you tell me the secrets that make Violet Portocale. Is your dad truly not a gypsy?”

“He’s so far from gypsy that it’s laughable,” I assure him. “He gets weirded out by the magic now.”

I’m not sure how exactly it happens, but I gloss over the darker parts, and somehow semi vomit the rest of my life story to him. Maybe it’s because he’s a ghost who’s lucid and can’t really tell anyone these things. I’m one of the few gypsies stupid enough to continuously make eye contact.

Even mediums convince the ghosts they can only barely hear them during certain parts of the day when they’re summoned.

I’ve stripped out of Vance’s jacket now that I’ve gotten hot, and the sun has lowered at some point, when I finally near the end of my story. He’s patiently listened, prompted me to continue, seemingly eager to learn all there is.

“Her voicemail said she’d just updated her will, and that she might have to go off grid for a while. She thought she was being hunted, but she didn’t seem entirely certain. That was the night before she died, and she racked up a bill at the hardware store.”

“Hardware store?”

“Mom’s favorite store. She made all her own weapons.”

“What does a gypsy hunter need with weapons? Ghosts don’t die with weapons,” he says, more educated on that subject than possibly any other ghost in existence.

“Weapons to trap those ghosts—iron mostly.”

“Ah,” he says with a firm nod. “Things made with enough iron that can be melted down.”

“I guess. I don’t know. I never got to be a part of that, because she wanted me away from all of it.”

“I’ll explain that to you at a later date, love,” he says as he stands abruptly.

“I bored you to death,” I state on a sigh, feeling stupid now that I realize exactly just how long I’ve been talking about *myself*.

He’s smiling when I look over. “On the contrary, I’m more intrigued than ever. I just have to go haunt some other people. Told you I wouldn’t be clingy,” he says as he winks and disappears from the room.

He reappears almost immediately, leaning over the bed on the other side and startling me as he mimics the motion of moving my hair out of my face.

“Vampires need an invitation to come in. None of the other monsters do,” he says like that’s important for me to remember.

“That Martin guy’s house was welcoming?”

“Martin is a certifiably insane gypsy. It’s possible he invited them in without realizing it,” he tells me.

Like those are the perfect parting words, he disappears again. At least now I know what Martin is now. I hope I never meet him.

Anna pops in the second he’s gone, and I groan.

“You just missed the ghost I’ve been trying to introduce you to,” I tell her.

“You just missed your boyfriends riding dragons and burning down villages they wanted to pillage,” she replies with a straight face.

“Shouldn’t pillaging come before arson?”

“I tried to tell them that,” she assures me as she takes a seat on the bed. “Now tell me about what just happened in that house. Why did those ribbons come out of your bra and go into your neck? Or did that happen?”

“That happened,” I say on a sigh as I sit up. “The charms get the healing ribbons to go into place so that all that’s usually finished by the time I wake up.”

“Usually? That’s normal?” she asks on a squeak.

“Nothing about me is normal, but no. It’s only happened two other times, almost a third—not counting this last time.”

“What happened on the third time?” she asks in a hushed tone.

“I panicked before I could faint. It’s not pretty when I panic.”

“What happens when you panic?” she asks like she’s waiting for a ghost story.

“I thought you wanted to know about the ribbons,” I say, distracting her.

“I do,” she says as she perks up. “And I’m now more impressed with the fact your bra is part of your arsenal instead

of just the unofficial holding ground for tiny, consistently unused potion vials.”

“When you were a child, did you ever hear the story about the girl who always wore the ribbon around her neck?”

She frowns.

“No?” she says, though it sounds like more of a question.

“You’d know if you’d ever heard it,” I assure her. “It’s pretty twisted.”

“Well, I’m learning the same is true about you. I’m not sure how I feel about the fact you’re now almost as interesting as me. It’s threatening my place in this friendship.”

I tug at the scarf that unthreads from the stitches when I do, and I pull it away, my eyes landing on the mirror as the satin stitches start coming apart, my skin already sealing back together as I pull one of the healing potions out of my bedside table to hurry the process along.

“I thought you were going to tell me a story about a girl with a ribbon on her neck or something,” Anna says as I watch the ribbon return to be the lacing in my bra.

“There was a girl—”

“All stories start with *once upon a time*,” she interrupts, brokering no room for argument.

I groan as I drop back. “This is so not that kind of story. And we’ll talk about it when I wake back up, because I can already tell you’re going to interrupt me a lot right now.”

Pulling the covers back over my head, I start to drift off.

“Watch for Morpheus,” I mumble sleepily. “Apparently ghosts have the ability to see him even when he doesn’t want to be seen.”

“Why can’t you just tell the ribbon story to me now?”

“I need to pay a trip to the hardware store first,” I mutter under my breath just before the world fades away and the dark edges of my mind toy with me.

Chapter 21

VIOLET

Anna stays quiet as I pull the box out from under my bed that stays hidden and charmed so that no one else can open it.

She already went to Damien's house to ensure he's inside. Apparently he's soaking in a bubble bath.

I needed that assurance before I started this unceremonious lecture. Hopefully, she's not telling a lie. It doesn't sound over-the-top insane, so it's possibly the truth.

She watches like a little kid about to open the first present on Christmas morning as I slowly unwrap the box, pulling off one pink-satin ribbon, then another, and remove the bronze charm that was tethering them together.

It all looks rather innocent in my hands, but in another's, there'd be some screams of agony and some strangling if they tried to open this box.

Mom was paranoid about my secret, but understood my need to have collective pieces of a puzzle neither of us could solve. She'd kill me for revealing it to a ghost, but Anna has been good and kept her word and hasn't mentioned it at untimely times.

Anna peers over at all the pretty satin ribbons in my box, along with some slightly terrifying drawings that started as a thirteen-year-old girl.

Then I start pulling out the printed pages, small books and various other little story pieces.

“Mom said if someone ever found this, they’d assume the worst. So, if by some miracle this box is opened without my permission, it all goes up in flames. No part of my secret ever leaves this box,” I say to her.

“What’s the worst?” Anna asks.

“Well, now I think she was trying to tell me I was a monster that belonged in a town like this with other monsters and a monster slayer to keep me in line.”

The music is playing in various rooms of the house, since I know their hearing is exceptional and I don’t want to risk someone listening to me from a nearby rooftop.

I have little alarm strings set up with bells also hidden, and one motion sensor that sounds like a fog horn if someone moves in front of its discreet location...in front of my bedroom door.

All my windows now have little alarms that also go off when they’re raised. I’ve spent a lot of time and money at the hardware store today.

In short, men who can turn themselves invisible has made me paranoid. I don’t even know what’s going on around me anymore.

“There are actually numerous variations of the tale,” I say to Anna as I show her the really old stack of papers that have been aged by time and tears.

I open a book up, and flip through the other little stories, that are of no importance, to get to the story that I’ve read

thousands of times, my fingers touching the green ribbon on the image.

“In each story, there’s a girl with a ribbon around her neck. In each story, there’s a boyfriend, lover, or husband who is told they can never touch the ribbon or ask questions about it, in exchange for her love.”

“Which means she can’t ever trust men, apparently,” Anna states flatly.

“In each story, the boyfriend, lover, or husband grows more and more curious about the ribbon, until they become obsessed and fixate—”

“Like the monsters are obsessed with you,” she states like she’s trying to link this story to my current predicament and is searching for ways to do so.

“Do you want me to tell this story?” I ask on a sigh.

She gestures me on.

“In at least one variation, she’s old and dying and—”

“If you can’t die, then this story clearly isn’t about whatever you are,” Anna dutifully points out.

“That’s just one variation,” I cut in. “In one variation, she doesn’t age, and her aging husband finally pulls the ribbon off. In some variations, the curious boyfriend or lover pulls the string while she’s sleeping. Whether they’ve had permission or not, they always pull the ribbon.”

“What happens when they pull the ribbon?” Anna asks as she inches closer.

“Her head falls off and rolls onto the floor. Sometimes she’s instantly ‘dead.’ Sometimes she chastises them as her head rocks around.”

The horrified expression on her face is about what I expected.

“Why would people tell this story to their *children*? *That* is what is wrong with this world!” she shouts as though she’s genuinely disturbed and traumatized.

Male monsters are sexy to her. Female monsters with ribbons holding them together are disturbing. Duly noted.

“I would assume the moral of the story is that being selfishly curious could cost someone their head?” I suggest, and then shake my own firmly-attached head. “The point is, I never believed in vampires, werewolves, or anything of the sort. But I believed in this story, because it seemed so real to me.”

“You and I have a very different opinion of realism, sister,” the psychotic ghost says.

“I know. You think you had sex with a Kennedy,” I state dryly.

“I did,” she’s quick to defend. “I really did.”

“Anyway, Mom said she had no clue if such a thing could exist. Yet, the first time I should have died but didn’t, she knew I just needed some ribbon to string me back together. Now I infuse my ribbons with my healing potions to speed the process along.”

“If she knew you needed ribbons, then—”

“Don’t go down that road. I’m second-guessing my mother too much. She always called me the perfect storm of a gypsy, but she never really explained what she meant by that.”

“And you didn’t ask?”

“My mother wasn’t a woman to give compliments too often, and it sounded so much like a compliment every time she said it, that I didn’t want to question it.”

“You poor, sad, pathetically sweet girl,” she says so patronizingly, earning a glare from me. “Go on about your ribbons, ribbon girl,” she adds on a sympathetic sigh.

“I think the ribbons were a test to see if the guy could really love her enough to just trust her that pulling the ribbon was a bad idea. Gypsies can make themselves look aged if needed. Mom went out in her old lady gear all the time after just a few properly mixed potions.”

“Well, that’s downright creepy,” Anna chirps.

“Anyway, back to the ribbon girl story. If the men made it until the end of that time, she let them pull the ribbon.”

“Therefore causing them cardiac arrest in their old age when their beloved wife’s head goes rolling across the floor because of something they just did? Sounds cruel. Not romantic.”

I bristle, because it did sound romantic until she worded it that way. I’ve romanticized my existence for as long as I can remember, just to keep from feeling like life is simply too complicated.

“She’s finally giving him the chance to see behind the curtain,” I point out. “Rewarding his unyielding trust

throughout the years.”

“No, she’s sick and twisted and just broke his heart while simultaneously stopping it as well.”

“Well, maybe she’s doing him a favor by letting them die together because their love is so epic he wouldn’t want to live without her,” I challenge.

“Or maybe, since she doesn’t really die, she’s just a horrible person who’s sick of boning the old dude and is ready to move on,” she counters.

“Why are you so lucid?” I ask, for once not happy about it, since within a few seconds, she’s managed to shatter the semi-romantic illusion I’ve spent years piecing together to explain my existence in the least disturbing way.

“If I’m lucid and we’re really having this conversation, then the world has gone to hell in Grandma’s handbasket,” she states with critical seriousness.

“You’re unbelievable,” I grumble as I start packing away everything again, my hands shaking as I do so.

“Why does it look like you’re about to burst into tears?” she asks as I sniff and ignore her, lacing the box back together with the charm.

“Because you’re the first person I’ve ever shared that with, outside of my mother, and you just made the girl with the ribbon around her neck sound like a sadist monster, judging me before I barely skim the surface of my darkest secrets,” I add quietly as I wipe away a stray tear and slide the box back under the bed.

“Or, I’m simply pointing out that the girl with ribbons is just a pretty monster,” she calls to my back as I walk into the bathroom. “Like all of *them*,” she adds as I flip on the shower and hesitate.

Annoyed, I open the bathroom door to find her smiling.

“I’m not going to sugar coat it and let you carry on with your head in the sand. We had vampires and zombies—”

“No zombies,” I sigh, leaning up against the doorway.

“We had vampires and flying monkeys—”

I shake my head, and she stops mid-sentence again.

“We had vampires try to kill you,” she says, waiting to see if I agree or not, and at my nod, she continues on. “You have some mortal cult of some sort who hunts Portocale gypsies and kills them as some sort of sacrifice to some Forsaken idol or something.”

At my impatient sound, she hurries on.

“The point is, you need to start being realistic. You don’t die, and you can somehow sew yourself together even when you’re unconscious.”

“The charms help the ribbons to hurry, but most of the ribbons have been trained to work on their own now,” I explain.

She blinks like that makes no sense.

“Heart wounds and head wounds usually result in unconsciousness instead of purposeful fainting,” I add.

“So how do the girls get their heads back on after the guy loosens the thread?” she asks curiously. “Or is that not a head

wound?”

“Those are just one portion of the story. Shera is probably a vampire, based on what I’ve learned, yet I’ve her out during the day. She wasn’t in direct sunlight, but she wasn’t sizzling in the shadows either. Werewolves were out on a night other than the full moon.”

“You just lost me.”

“I’m saying the truth doesn’t have to identically match the myth. Only certain parts are stronger because of mind power or whatever.”

“Are *you* lucid?” she asks me with a dubious expression.

Ignoring her, I decide to stick to the simplest answer. “The ribbon girls from the stories could have had charms that sew them up when they sleep, like I do. Or someone else sews them up. Or, like me, they’ve trained the ribbons to work on their own.”

Her lips form an *O*.

“So *that’s* what your charms do.”

“Some of them. Believe it or not, I do have survival training. Just not the standard-issue kind,” I say as I turn my back and head toward the shower, leaving the door open for once so she can talk.

“Do you think they’re so fascinated because you’re a ribbon-girl monster?” she asks as I step under the spray of water.

“I think I’m the perfect storm,” I mutter as I tip my head back.

“Well, if you are a monster, maybe you should do what monsters do.”

“What’s that?”

“Make monster allies, study other monsters to learn their secrets, and have lots of sex.”

I groan for a second when she goes off on a tangent about my ignored *needs*, but then something she says sort of clicks.

I’m worried about hiding as they work twice as hard to pick me apart. What if I become boringly unoriginal, therefore lose their interest, while also making some allies? Winning situation all around.

It’d be stupid and dangerous if I could die, but that’s a nonissue for me. I’m allowed to take reckless chances.

So long as they don’t know my secrets, I have the secret upper hand.

“You should try the ribbon trick with Van Helsing, see if he’d be curious enough to break your rules and untie the ribbon from your neck. I’d bet he’d pass inspection,” Anna says, breaking back into my thoughts.

“Oh, Vance isn’t like that, so I have a better angle to work for him,” I tell her, bringing her into the middle of my thought process.

“Like what?” she asks like she’s confused.

“Vance is into guys,” I say as I shampoo my hair.

“What?” she shrieks. “*Noooooo!* He was still my top pick to use your vagina on when I snatch your body.”

“It makes sense, now that I think about it. He’s sort of obsessed with designer clothes and stuff. It’s not a common trait among heterosexual men,” I go on.

“Did he tell you for certain he’s into men?” she asks with a heavy huff of disappointment.

“No. A ghost who stalks him told me. It helped me realize the window-watching, at least on his part, really was sort of innocent. And I think it’d be smart to be friends with a monster killer who has an ironic urge to protect me, now that I know he’s not a creep staring through my window with his hand down his pants.”

“This is just terrible. Is this ghost you’re cheating on me with a reliable source of information? I met a pirate ghost in Jamaica, and I tell you, he really led me for a loop. Woke up in China with no clothes on and haven’t been the same since,” she informs me.

“That’s...so fucking ridiculously inaccurate,” I mutter under my breath.

“What?” she shouts.

I peek my head out of the curtain and give her an innocent smile, seeing her toeing the very edge of the salted room.

“He’s more reliable than most ghosts,” I say with a saccharine tone.

“I feel like you just insulted me,” she deadpans as I put my scheming gypsy brain to work.

I have an *Ace* up my sleeve. I just have to wait on him to return.

He'll know what I need to do to form allies. Anna's not wrong about needing that.

This is my life. Time to accept it.

Chapter 22

EMIT

“The Carmine girl from the gypsy herb shop is requesting to see you,” Collin says from the doorway, poking just his head inside my bedroom as I finish tying my towel around my waist.

“Violet Carmine?” I ask, confused.

That fucking blacksmith tattled and told her I’ve watched through the window as well. Accidental confession my ass. Now she’s here to berate me.

I find it all too easy that she’s at my home just two days later requesting an audience, so I decide to just wear the towel. Maybe she’ll feel like we’re even if she gets to look her fill.

“Send her in,” I tell him as I flip on the TV, pulling up the forest fire coverage that shows the newest wildfire is getting too damn close to my woods.

“Are wildfires part of your alpha duties?” a familiar, feminine voice asks, devoid of all the anticipated hostility.

My eyes dart to the door to see Violet standing there, a package of some sort tucked under her arm, and a gypsy’s smile on her lips.

I don’t like that look. What’s she up to?

“Anything close to my woods is part of my duties. But you really shouldn’t be running around and talking too much about the small amount of knowledge you’ve acquired. You’ve been told things Portocale gypsies are privy too, but that doesn’t mean just anyone knows these things.”

“How will I know what I’m allowed to know and what a Portocale knows?” she muses, her reasonable tone only causing me to use more caution.

Her ghost is marching back and forth behind her like she’s guarding her back. I have to pretend not to notice, but it grows increasingly difficult when the peculiar ghost starts running around the room and shouting.

“The ants! General, the ants are in my pants!”

Violet rolls her eyes and grinds her jaw. “Do you have any salt?” she asks me.

“I’ll stop, *Gov’nah!*” Anna shouts with a faux Southern accent. “Please don’t throw salt in my vagina again!”

For fuck’s sake... “I have an entire drawer full of salt if you need it,” I say with an annoyed smile. “Did you come out here to borrow salt? Most neighbors ask for sugar.”

Her lips twitch, and I find a certain uneasiness within me at her burst of notable confidence.

“No, she came to wax your giant dick,” Anna says from right beside me.

Fuck my life, now that image is in my head, and no Morrigan should be thinking of any Portocale that way. Especially not one as infuriatingly intriguing as this potential menace.

“Are werewolves also born? Or just scratched?” Violet asks me abruptly as she puts down the terrible looking quilted covering over the package she’s been holding.

“Both.”

“Which are you?” she asks as she takes an apple from the bowl next to my bed and starts eating it. “Pure blood?” she prompts when I don’t immediately answer.

Unnerved by the peculiar quilted thing on the table, I go to it, sniffing the air, and finding something that smells really damn good.

The scent guides me as I start unzipping the uneven zipper. What is this hideous, knitted creation?

“Did you make this?” I decide to ask, since she is a Portocale, after all.

“Yes.”

“Portocale gypsies are usually known for their unparalleled seamstress abilities.” I wiggle the hellish nightmare of the horrid stitch job on the shit design.

“I’m aware,” she states dryly.

I pull out a tin can that is really warm and open it to some damn good smelling cookies in the shape of...bones. She’s got jokes, huh?

“However, Portocale gypsies aren’t usually known for their sense of humor,” I go on, unamused as I bite the dog biscuit that tastes like...something really orange and not at all like the cinnamon I was smelling.

My senses are extremely confused. Where's the cinnamon? Is that on the knitted nightmare instead?

The cinnamon scent in the air almost feels like an illusion as it begins to fade, and the familiar scent of orange grows to replace it.

"I'm aware of that too," she goes on.

I'm caught off guard when I actually like the surprise orange flavor, and I shove the rest of the cookie into my mouth before turning back around.

"Why the hell are you bringing me treats?" I ask around the next mouthful.

"Because she wants you to be a good dog," the annoying ghost chirps, causing me to swallow the next mouthful and quickly wipe my lips free of crumbs.

My eyes flick to the curious gypsy in the room, as she absently eyes her pink nails. "I don't know anything about monsters, and the alpha werewolf is the only werewolf I happen to know. Who better to fill me in on how I should or shouldn't act in the presence of a werewolf in the future? But don't ask me to tell people I'm a Portocale."

"That's Vance. He thinks the Portocale gypsies are safer when announced. More people pay attention to them, and it's harder to get away with taking one down."

She sits down on the couch as I mute the TV.

"I think you're a fool for painting an unnecessary target on your back. Only alphas, such as Vance and I, truly know your blood," I state, tossing in my two cents.

“How many alphas are there?” she asks as she clears her throat.

Deciding these are safe questions, I return my interest to the treats, feeling I deserve the rest as I pick the bowl up and move to the couch beside her.

“Better question. How did you know to bring me treats?”

“It was actually my idea,” Anna says as she purrs and moves onto my lap, sitting right on the cookies.

I have to lift the next one up through her crotch, and it’s awkward. I really wish I could salt her without the gypsy or her noticing it.

“Wolves and food. Seemed to make sense,” Violet answers with a coy smile. “It’s customary to bring a gift when stopping by unannounced.”

“Why couldn’t I have had gypsy friends when I was alive? All the pricks that stopped by unannounced to see me just wanted to take. Never give,” Anna sighs wistfully.

I swallow down the next cookie as she finally gets out of my lap and moves to lie down and...start swimming in the floor. I only notice from my peripheral.

“What do you know about yourself?” I ask Violet as I try to pretend it’s a casual question.

“That I’m the Portocale gypsy who sucks at making pretty things,” she deadpans.

“It’s because you’re a gypsy freak,” I tell her as I eat another cookie.

It gets really quiet.

“Take the bone away. Bad dog! *Bad dog!*” Anna shouts.

She then starts bouncing around as she barks at me, sounding like some little ankle-biting menace with more bite than bark.

Pausing a cookie at my mouth, I peer over at Violet and arch an eyebrow.

She’s giving me a blank look.

“Did you really just call me a freak?” she finally asks, and I roll my eyes.

“Not in the derogatory sense of the word. In the actual meaning. Gypsy freaks are reasonably common, and not always discriminated against. It’s just a term to explain the misfit pieces when a gypsy doesn’t perform as expected: You can’t use your threading gift to create clothing fit for royals, but you’ve managed to somehow turn it into an offensive weapon, which is a first.”

She bristles, and I carry on.

“You quite frankly suck at killing things, and you’re entirely too sloppy, unlike the typical Portocale, but you manage to scrape by because you’re a true old-blood gypsy, regardless of how bad you are at it.”

“I’m actually quite good at being a gypsy. Just not at being a seamstress or a vampire slayer, one of which isn’t supposed to be in my genetics,” she corrects, causing my grin to lift.

My grin falls as I continue speaking after finishing another cookie.

“The main reason you’re a gypsy freak, is the fact you don’t actually seem to need ghost spirits to stay alive,” I go on, tasting the orange on my tongue and the urge to eat the next cookie.

“What do you mean?” she asks as she moves closer, brushing some crumbs off my beard.

Her fingertips feel just a little cool to the touch, because it’s apparently her default setting when snow’s on the ground. Still, every time she touches me, it’s like a jolt of electricity through my bones, and I pause, my gaze darting back over to her.

“You lost a lot of blood in Martin’s house. Care to explain what you were doing there now that you’ve had a few days to calm down?”

“I did lose a lot of blood, but I’m a gypsy, as you said. We scrape by. I’m better now. Tell me about the ghosts,” she goes on, but I get very damn distracted as she gently pushes a crumb from my lip into my mouth.

“He’s so out of your league,” Anna says on a sigh. “But he’s eating out of your hand. Literally. How *do* you do it, sensei?”

My lips lightly close over the gypsy’s thumb as my eyes stay fixed to her unusual ones. Green with a violet rim, no doubt the reason she has her name at all.

Then my gaze dips to her lips as she pulls her thumb back, leaving just the hint of orange in my mouth again.

I find myself leaning forward as if my body is thinking for itself, and she gently stops me with her hand at my chest.

“Why would I need ghost spirits to stay alive?”

“Because it’s the Portocale curse. You learn your curses starting at age thirteen,” I answer as she lifts another cookie to my mouth.

I take a bite as my eyes stay locked on hers.

“What Portocale curse?” she asks me, gently running her slightly cool hand up my cheek as she inches closer.

“The curse that kills Portocale gypsies. The curse that keeps Portocale gypsies from living in true hiding so they can be hunted down like cattle. The curse that—”

Something chimes, and I blink as I look over, wondering if Vance is right and I really am fucking stupid. I glance down to the empty bowl with only some crumbs remaining.

It’s my dignity alone that keeps me from licking the crumbs out of the bowl right in front of her.

“If you decide you want more treats, knock on the front door. No more slinking around my windows. I’m not the one who bites,” she says as she stands.

I find myself unnaturally riveted to her ass as she turns and struts out, confusing the hell out of me.

What just happened? Why do I already want more cookies?

I glance down at the bowl of crumbs, and I quickly decide it’s okay to the lick the bowl now.

Chapter 23

DAMIEN

Why is there a gypsy smiling at me through my window?
Our lunch isn't until tomorrow.

I smile back, since women love my smile, and I go to swing open the door, wondering if this is going to be far easier than I anticipated. Sort of sad, really. She seemed like the type to finally give me a challenge.

It's been so long since there was a fun challenge.

"I got your roses," she says with a smile, referring to the roses I sent yesterday when I decided to channel my energy into my new endeavor.

Took a whole twenty-four hours to achieve my goal.

"Did you?" I drawl, using that charm I know she'll enjoy.

She lifts a small, hideously knit stocking, and I warily accept it. I think that color is called *vomit green*.

"Where in the hell do you find these ugly shades of colored fabrics?" I ask on an exasperated exhale.

"My mother's trunk had a lot of faded yarns in it, and for the record, it's rude to make someone stand outside in the cold while you criticize the wrapping of the gift they just gave you."

My lips twitch as I glance back over at her disapproving look, along with a slight blush hitting her cheeks.

“You wrapped my gift in a stocking?”

“Seemed fitting. I peg you as the Grinch type. An early Christmas present would certainly irritate the Grinch.”

“And you endeavor to irritate me, gypsy girl?” I muse as I step back and let her into the house.

Even though the chase has ended quickly, she does make this part enjoyable when she’s being fun and prickly at the same time—my favorite combination.

After shutting the door, I set the gift aside and take her coat, since Vance mentioned something about her expecting a certain decorum of manners.

The concept alone is amusing—a *monster with manners*.

“So this is actually Vance’s house, right?” she asks as she looks around at the tacky floor-to-ceiling fabric walls.

“No art. No color. Just bland. Like the owner. And if I change something in his home, he changes something in mine. I want my house exactly the same when I return,” I gripe.

Just thinking about that smug prick lounging in my Jacuzzi in the Japanese garden—that I bet he hasn’t pruned—pisses me off.

“Why is he punishing you?” she muses as I study her.

“Why are you here?” I ask instead, and she turns and grabs the present I’ve put off to the side.

“It’s customary to bring a gift when showing up unannounced,” she says, as her stalker ghost drops to a chair

and starts pretending to be snapping pictures of my ass in my slacks.

I'm not sure why I tighten my ass and discreetly pose a little like there's a real camera, but it's grating on my nerves that she's even here.

I take the sock again, curious about why Violet's smiling like that, and pull out a small, antique...mirror.

The shine on the glass surface is immaculate, not even a speck of dust, smudge, or lint marring the perfection of it.

It's quite possibly the most beautifully crafted mirror I've ever seen.

“Where did you—”

“It belonged to my grandmother.”

“It's far too nice to be a gift, gypsy girl,” I state absently, my eyes running over the finer, clearly hand-crafted edges.

“I was actually hoping you might trade with me.”

There's nothing that feels better than finding something like this to barter for.

“What would you want in return?” I ask without looking away from the detail in the finishing.

True silver wrapped over just enough iron to give it proper firmness.

“Little of this and that, but mostly some self-defense skills. If monsters are my new normal, I need more than one trick in my pony's saddlebag,” she says, confusing the ever loving hell out of me.

“What?”

“I need to be able to protect myself from things that don’t die from being strangled, and I’m asking you to help with that.”

“Wouldn’t a Van Helsing be the far more obvious choice for that task?” I muse, caught up with the reflection as my attention returns to the mirror.

“I don’t want to hunt things. I just want to fend them off and effectively get out of potentially sticky situations. You’d be better for that,” she goes on, moving closer to me.

“And I’m really curious about what you are,” she says as she steps closer, her head tipping back so she can stare up at me.

Feeling her gentle, cool touch is the only thing that breaks my concentration from my new mirror.

“I definitely want to take a spin on him. Like one of those sit-and-spin toys kind of spin,” Anna says from too close beside me, but not even she can distract me from the gypsy eyes I’m staring into.

“Have you ever heard the legend of Dorian Gray?” I ask as her breaths get a little shaky, her proximity to me messing with her head.

Terrible gypsy. Everyone knows to avoid the eyes. Why does she always look there first?

My hand slides against her cheek, and she leans into the touch as a drunken haze presumably fogs her vision. Like pure putty in my hand.

“The immortal who was all about orgies and whoring, but could die if he ever looked upon his special painting or something?” she asks quietly, a slight rasp to her voice as her hand slips inside my open shirt.

I hate that I *feel* it when she touches me. I deadened myself so long ago that it shouldn't be possible to feel her. But her touch is just cold enough to force me to acknowledge it as she drags her hand up to my chest.

“Is that why I feel like this when you do whatever it is you're doing?” she asks on a hushed tone.

A barrage of images assault my mind, as the dirty little gypsy fantasizes about all the things she'd love to do with me. She really doesn't understand how dangerous it is to not fear me the way she should.

Someone should tell her.

“In a sense,” I murmur, brushing my hand over her cheek.

“So you're Dorian Gray?”

“No, I'm Damien Morpheus,” I tell her, lips twisting with wry amusement when her eyes dance with intrigue. “Dorian is just my bastard brother, who my father refused to ever give the family name. He's far more popular than I, even to this day. However, that's only because he doesn't have the family curse, nor is he afflicted by my own personal additional curse. He and my other siblings enjoy life so much more.”

“What curse?” she asks as I drag my thumb across her lips, entranced by how soft they are.

“My personal curse? I can give a woman plenty of pleasure. But if I find my own, it'll be at the cost of her life.”

Her hooded gaze stays fixed on mine. “Why are you the only one with that curse?”

Putting the mirror in my back pocket, my other hand snakes around her waist like I simply can’t help myself. She’s made my damn heart start beating with the images she won’t stop seeing—images of my hands all over her bare body.

It’s pure torture to a deviant such as I.

“Because once upon a time, two gypsy women cursed me at the same time as punishment, and they turned me into a bigger freak than I already was.”

My attention is still snagged on her lips, and her hands are sliding up my chest, moving up to my neck.

“Seems harsh,” she murmurs as her fingers tangle in my hair.

“You’d likely disagree if you heard the whole story,” I tell her. “Though, I think I’ve more than been punished for long enough.”

“This is really happening,” Anna says excitedly from somewhere close by.

Everything on me is hard as I press Violet against the wall, letting her feel what she’s doing to me as I rock against her, tempting her with the forbidden the same fucking way she’s doing me.

“You did hear the part about my curse that comes with the possibility of a death sentence, right, gypsy girl?” I muse as I lean over to her ear, nipping it.

She shudders against me, and her nails press into my shoulders.

“So not a problem. Do it, Violet. *Do it now*,” Anna, the daft, reckless ghost, cheers from the sidelines.

“According to Emit, I’m a freak too,” she says as she drags her lips across my cheek, her hands climbing up again and tangling in my hair as I lift her from the ground.

Her legs wind around my waist as I leverage her between the wall and my body and kiss a spot on her neck, telling myself I can have a small taste and back away.

“You’re a gypsy freak,” I say against her skin. “I can assure you it’s entirely different,” I add as she starts pushing my shirt off my shoulders.

I really should stop. She’s not thinking clearly, and neither am I.

Throw two forbidden fruits into the same fucking basket, and there’s no telling what chaos will spring free after that.

“How?” she asks, though it’s more of a moan, since I’ve found a spot on her neck she particularly loves having kissed.

My grip tightens on her ass as I grind against her, unable to stop myself when a fresh flurry of images roll around in my mind.

“Boring easily is a shared affliction among my kind,” I tell her as her lips brush the edge of mine and we both freeze.

“And?” she asks quietly, her tongue barely touching the corner of my mouth and driving me out of my motherfucking mind in a way that surely shouldn’t be possible.

“Sex is our weapon,” I go on, touching her cheek. “Illusions are our birthright. But I’m the only one who can’t have pleasure. That means a piece of me, the monster I am that craves the carnal, is denied unless I kill someone during the process, because it drains their life to give me that pleasure. Sort of a mood killer when your date drops dead before you can fully finish,” I tell her dryly, even as my stomach sours.

“What if you found someone who can’t die?” she asks as I press into her harder.

“Vampires die. Werewolves die. Creatures I’ve created die. I’m an alpha, Violet. Nothing is stronger than me,” I say as I stop myself from tearing her clothes off.

Just barely.

Her lips are on mine in the next instant like the insane gypsy just can’t refuse anything forbidden, and I forget everything when her tongue touches the seam of my lips.

For the first time in longer than I can remember, I kiss someone back, opening myself up to all the frustration I stopped allowing myself to suffer through.

She moans into my mouth, which just fuels everything in all the wrong directions.

Just as I decide to give her the pleasure she wants, minus the risk, of course, she tears her lips away from mine, breathing heavily as she reaches into my back pocket and pulls out the mirror.

I blink a few times, feeling a little confused about why the fucking hell I’ve just told her so much. But with her still pressed up against me, it’s hard to think about anything other

than giving her what she really came here for. Maybe the frustrating aftermath would be enough to free myself of this cumbersome obsession I've developed with her.

"We really shouldn't do this," she says quietly.

"I don't have to be inside you to make you feel better than you've ever felt," I say against her ear, nipping it again. "You aren't at risk unless I'm inside you, and the only way I can find true pleasure is that way. No worries, gypsy girl."

She hisses out a breath when I start kissing my way down her neck again.

"Maybe training with you is too ambitious. There's definitely something that magnifies freaks when they're in the same place at the same time, it seems," she says, causing me to grin against her neck.

"Curse of the forbidden," I state without hesitating.

"I guess there's a curse for everything," she says as I start kissing her again.

She groans against my mouth, pulling me closer one second, and then shoves me away in the next.

I drop her to the ground and take a step back, running a hand through my hair. "I'm really confused," I decide to tell her, frustrated for a new set of reasons.

She grins as she touches her red lips, eyebrows lifting. "Enjoy the mirror."

My jaw grinds as she starts toward the door, without a rhyme or reason as to why she's leaving, dropping the mirror off by the door again on her way.

“I can’t accept the mirror if you’re going to get Emit to train you. We haven’t bartered for anything.”

“I guess you can owe me,” she says as she leaves without a backward glance.

“What the actual hell?” I say under my breath, putting a hand over my rapidly beating heart as I try to slow it back down to the almost deadened beat it normally has, as my other hand scrubs through my hair again.

My heart, however, does not slow down, which really pisses me right the hell off. And the crafty little gypsy just left me with a debt, because I can’t possibly give up that mirror, something she has no idea will drive me insane.

“She really doesn’t deserve that vagina,” Anna says on a disappointed sigh as she walks out too.

I glance around, finding the mirror to be on the dresser next to the door where she’s left it, and a cold, sinking sensation sinks in as she pulls out of my driveway.

Did I really just fucking tell her who and what I am?

Why would I do that?

I’m in the middle of slapping my forehead when I catch the scent of wolf, and I snarl at the door. The barbarian bangs on it like he has something urgent to discuss.

Cursing, I swing open the door, and there’s the alpha mongrel himself, pushing that long, sloppy hair of his out of the way as he shoves a bowl against my chest.

“Smell that,” he growls.

“You’re out of your damn mind,” I say, even as I lift the damn bowl to sniff it.

I curse when something wet touches my cheek before I even get a whiff of anything. All I smell is wolf, wolf, and more wolf.

“Why is it wet?” I snap.

“Because I licked it for like a fucking hour,” he says like he’s really pissed off.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I bark as I toss the bowl at the wanker’s head.

He snatches it out of the air and shoves it back at me. “Just smell—”

“Portocale oranges,” I say on a hushed breath as I finally catch the scent of something I haven’t smelled in ages. “No wonder you licked the bowl,” I add with an insuppressible grin. “Please fucking tell me you know how to get more.”

“Possibly. But don’t trust the cost,” he says, snapping me out of my trance as I put the bowl down and furrow my brow.

“Explain.”

“I just ate a bowlful of cookies made with those oranges. I didn’t even realize what I’d actually eaten until ten minutes ago when the bowl finally stopped having any taste at all. Not one bitter bite in the batch, Damien. Which means that treat took a lot of her time. The information I spewed isn’t a full debt. Which means I’m still in debt to her.”

I have never envied him more than I do in this moment, and I’m seconds away from stabbing him...if I can find

anything to stab him with.

“Where’d you get the damn cookies?” It’s the most ridiculous question to ask with such an urgency to one’s tone.

“From the only Portocale gypsy who wouldn’t have any clue just how big of a deal it was,” he tells me.

“So what’s the cost?” I ask him like nothing else matters.

Damn her. My heart is beating harder again, just because my senses are nowhere nearly deadened enough right now, not after what she just did to me. Finding anything interesting at this moment is a certain pain in the ass to come.

“She fed me these, and I couldn’t stop yammering on about the fucking Portocale curse when she asked me questions.”

My eyes widen as a sick feeling settles on my stomach. “What the hell did you tell her?”

“Nothing about our part in her curse, of course. But I damn near got close. That gypsy is much more fucking dangerous than we give her credit for being. Even after she staked four fucking vampires, we’re still treating her with the same carelessness we do a typical mortal,” he growls as I look over to my newly acquired mirror.

I go to pick it up, careful not to look at the reflective surface, and just stare at the back.

“What’s my one rule?”

“Never really explain what you are,” Emit states as if on autopilot.

“Not only did I tell her what I am, I specifically used Dorian’s name to explain,” I tell him, more annoyed with

myself than with her.

“Are you serious?” he snaps as he comes over and looks at the mirror in my hand. “How’d she know you fancy mirrors?”

“How’d she know it’s the one gift I can’t refuse?” I ask, getting to the more important question. “Especially when she only just learned of what I am?”

His eyes meet mine. “Vance,” he bites out.

“Why would Vance give her any information on us?” I ask him pointedly.

“What if she hit him first?”

“He’d be here right now, bitching just like us about that conniving little gypsy,” I say as I run a hand over my mouth that can’t decide if it wants to scowl or grin.

It’s been far too long since I’ve dealt with a gypsy woman who has gypsy pride, and I love it as much as I hate it.

Emit looks to be showing the same frustrating confusion on his face.

“She hit your house before mine. What if she’s on her way to Vance’s next?” I ask him.

“She’ll likely drive really fucking slow,” he tells me, causing me to arch an eyebrow.

“So we can beat her there.”

I pull on a jacket and tuck in the mirror in the inside pocket.

“It’s been a while since I felt the power a gypsy with pride can possess with a simple gift,” I tell him. “Especially one

with Portocale blood pumping through their veins.”

“I don’t think she really even knew she was using it,” he fires back.

“Possibly. Which means she was coached. But who the hell by?”

I throw my door open and stalk out.

Emit’s embarrassingly small sports car is in the driveway, and I walk right by it to get into my Range Rover. I’m confused when he gets in on the passenger side, as I crank it up and start spinning up snow until my tires gain traction on the pavement and launch us forward.

“Why the hell are you stinking up my car with your wolf smell?” I snap as I turn a sharp curve, and almost roll the damn vehicle.

Fortunately, Emit’s gargantuan self helps with the weight distribution of the vehicle, and I hurdle us forward again in the direction of Vance’s house, taking the bypass road to avoid town.

“We’re both going to the same place,” he says a little defensively before looking out the window.

“You could have still folded yourself into your penis-car and—”

“It’s a *small* car. What does that have to do with *my* penis?” he volleys, but his jaw is grinding.

A grin spreads over my face before I can help it. “You dodgy fucker. You actually hate the car. Why are you still driving it?”

“Would you shut up?” he snaps, not looking at me. “What all did she get you to confess? And why the hell are you—”

He stops speaking, and then I hear him groan. “Your heart is beating.”

That causes me to bristle. “Things got intense, and it hasn’t slowed down yet. Just deal with it until we get to Vance’s and —”

“Shit,” he hisses.

He suddenly starts trying to duck, lay the seat back and hide his face, all at the same time. It takes me a second to realize what his problem is.

A *Gypsy Magic* delivery van is right in front of us, and I curse as I continue to drive like hell’s on my ass and pass her with barely a blink, seeing her lips moving in sync with the little ghost in the van with her.

“Are they fucking singing?” I ask as the small glimpse I get sticks in my head.

“She’s definitely on her way to Vance’s,” Emit says as he peers over the seat. “Wonder what she’s taking him to render him helplessly under her thrall, and if she’ll feed it to him with those daring little fingers of hers.”

I snort derisively as her van becomes a dot in the rearview mirror.

“Maybe she’s gifting him another stick to shove up his ass,” I suggest as I cut down another road.

Chapter 24

VANCE

I blink at Emit and Damien, noting that Damien's heart is most definitely beating, and he looks both thrilled and furious about that at once.

“You really had your hands all over a Portocale and didn't burst into flames or anything?” I ask.

“That was a fucking concern?” he asks incredulously, staring at me in horror.

“Everything is a concern where Portocale gypsies are involved,” I say with a careless shrug, trying not to let my lips twitch.

“While you find this funny, think about this: I told her who and what I am, something most people, who don't already know, never actually learn. I really love my secrets. It makes me more interesting,” he bites out.

He's right about that.

“I can't get those orange cookies out of my head. I want to go beg her for more, but I'm terrified of what's going to come out of my mouth while I'm putting those in it,” Emit bites out, while crushing a can in his hand.

“The cookies she made looked like dog biscuits?” I ask, clearing my throat around the laughter that bubbles up.

Emit growls, even as Damien swallows down his own amusement.

Rolling my eyes, I stand. “I really need answers about the vampire thing.”

“Then you better out-gypsy her. She’s on the hunt for her own answers, and she’s not looking to answer questions,” Damien fills me in, running a hand through his hair. “Then she’ll just strut out and leave a man alone with a beating heart he can’t slow back down,” he petulantly adds.

“Margie, don’t answer the door,” I say over the intercom, half questioning my damn sanity.

“You two couldn’t refuse her gifts?” I ask them.

“Could you resist the taste of Portocale oranges?” Emit bites out.

Damien pulls a mirror from the inside of his jacket and holds it up to me.

“It’s exquisite. Far too exquisite for her to simply part with without my debt being ridiculous,” he growls.

I start to touch it, but he jerks it back out of reach. “You can look, but touch and I’ll make you bleed, Van Helsing. Let’s have a rematch with my heart beating.”

I start to point out they’re both lunatics, which is disturbing on its own level, when there’s a buzzing over the intercom that means someone is coming down the driveway.

Emit darts out of the room, and I hear the giant stomping around. My eyes go back to Damien, who also rushes out of the room.

Rolling my eyes and pinching the bridge of my nose, I follow, because I have no idea how else to react. Emit is acting like a raving lunatic over oranges I can't even remember, and Damien's heart is beating. This day is officially the most peculiar day I've had in too long.

"She's going to get you to train her now," Damien says to Emit, who groans like he's already tortured.

"Why would he train her instead of me?" I'm quick to counter.

"She doesn't want a monster slayer training her," Damien drawls with a mocking grin. "Guess this gypsy prefers monsters."

"Shh! She's coming!" Emit hisses, shoving at Damien as they both duck to be under the window, looking utterly ridiculous, since the wall across from them is mirrors.

I still drop to the ground and try to hide when I hear her start knocking...as though I've been infected by their stupidity. Two monsters and one monster slayer hiding from a young gypsy.

The indignity is unbearable.

"Ms. Woods?" I hear the little gypsy call out as she knocks again. "Vance?"

Emit barely stretches up, peers one eye out the window, and ducks back down like his life depends on staying out of sight.

Margie walks in, stumbles to a halt, and just gawks at the fact three men are on the ground, ignoring the girl who is knocking.

She slowly backs away like she's reached her crazy quota for the day, and I huff as I stand and go to the door.

"Don't!" Damien hisses, swiping for and missing my leg as I pass.

I pull open the door just as Violet is turning away, and she grins over her shoulder when she looks back and sees it's me.

She never smiles when she sees me.

So why is she smiling now?

"I wasn't expecting you today," I tell her as she fully turns to face me.

Her brow furrows when an obnoxious snort comes from within the house. Fucking infants.

She glances at the Range Rover that has been abandoned at the curb, lifts a little eyebrow at me, and hands me a hideously knit bag of some sort.

"I just wanted to stop in and say thank you for being so nice the other day," she tells me as she puts her hand on my arm.

I'm better prepared for a trap than them, given their warning, so I smile politely while merely glancing down at the bag.

"You really don't have to bring gifts, little Portocale."

"I like bringing gifts as a show of gratitude," she counters, causing my eyes to narrow as she pats my arm.

Not very seductive in her approach with me, it seems. Why am I getting different treatment?

She turns and starts to leave, surprising me still.

“So this was just a gift drop?” I ask as Anna hops out of the van that Violet is heading toward.

“Told you, I just wanted to say thank you. So thank you, Vance,” she says with a smile over her shoulder before hopping into the van.

Anna sighs beside me, her eyes raking over me as she shakes her head. “Such a waste,” she says in a tscking sound.

She disappears and squeals inside my house about finding her *two favorite pets*, as Violet drives off.

I’m sorry, but since when the actual hell do I get the short end of the straw? Why is Anna not saying something perverted about my ass or my dick for a change? Why did Violet leave me with nothing more than a friendly pat and a hideous knitting?

“Well, I guess we rushed over here for nothing,” Damien says in an amused tone from somewhere behind me. “I forgot how maddening gypsy women can truly be,” he adds, sounding chipper.

That fucking heartbeat of his is now mocking me.

If she fed Emit and kissed Damien’s toxic lips, she should have at least done more than simply touch my arm in a friendly manner. After all, I’ve actually been somewhat nice to her, unlike them.

“Unbelievable,” I mutter as I open the bag and...pull out the most spectacular pocket watch I’ve seen in ages. At least, one that I don’t already own.

“Yee-haw!” Anna shouts as I click open the face of the timepiece, seeing the ornate silver etchings.

“Where did she get this?” I say on a heavy breath.

“At least yours isn’t a debt. It’s just gratitude,” Damien grumbles as he walks away.

“Van Helsings aren’t allowed gratitude,” I remind him quietly as I back up and...pause, frowning over at the scene before me.

Anna is in Emit’s lap as he works to keep a straight face, and she’s...spinning...saying something about a dickie-sitting-spinner.

“I think a drink is in order at this point,” I say on another harsh breath as I turn and walk out of the room.

Chapter 25

VIOLET

“So they liked the gifts?” Ace asks from beside me as we both stare up at my ceiling.

I’m grinning for a multitude of reasons, one being the fact he’s here. The only one to show me an ounce of respect since coming here happens to be a man who died a really long time ago by ways he’s not really sure about.

“They did. Fortunately, my grandmother’s old things are always near.”

“I can’t believe you have access to Portocale oranges,” he groans. “I bet they’re sensational.”

“They’re just oranges, but they are good,” I agree, inching closer as I lift one from a bowl.

“No bruises,” he says as though he’s lost in thought as he stares at the orange in my hand.

I start peeling it, shrugging a shoulder.

“I pick them long before they bruise,” I explain like it should be obvious.

“Mmm,” is his only response, still seeming lost in thought.

He’s been here a lot the past few days; noticeably, it’s only when Anna’s gone.

“Do you have a problem with Anna?”

“I don’t particularly like ghosts,” he informs me, causing me to snort back laughter. “They don’t particularly like me either.”

He weirdly doesn’t say more than that on the topic.

“Did you get your answers?” he asks me as his head turns to the side, eyes on mine.

“I got more answers than I’ve gotten so far, but Emit finished the cookies a lot faster than expected. Damien...puts images in my head that really fuck with me when he’s too close, so I had to extract myself. But I still got some of the answers I wanted from him.”

I try not to fan myself when I think back to both of those encounters, and end up clearing my throat a few times when I feel blush rising to all the usual places.

“Good. Wish I could have been more help,” he says with a soft smile as he inches closer, putting our faces inches apart, as I finish up the orange and put the peelings back in the bowl.

“You’re the only person who seems to want me to find answers, so I’d say you’ve helped a lot. Besides, Grandma always called those her bartering supplies, so I’m glad they finally have a purpose,” I say quietly, my eyes moving over his dark ones.

“You should have carried on with Damien, since he’s restricted to being only a giver,” he states very seriously, even as he stares at my mouth like he wants to be the one kissing me.

His hair is a little old-school—a Mr. Darcy sort of cut that doesn't do things for me usually, but he's a ghost. I can look past the hair if I can look past the fact *he's a ghost*.

His hand comes up, stroking my cheek with a touch I can't feel.

"I've made some progress on your vampire case," he goes on, his hand moving down to my shoulder, slowly easing lower.

"And?" I ask distractedly as I watch the hand I wish I could feel.

"I'll let you know when I have something concrete for you to take to Van Helsing, love," he assures me with a small grin. "Now, tell me, sweet gypsy, why it is you're single enough to go drive two out of three men and one ghost out of our minds?"

I roll my eyes, even as I battle a little bit of a smile, because it's really, *really* rare I get flattery of any sort.

His hand travels back up to my face, making me wish I could actually feel his touch. It figures that the one guy who shows real interest in me, as something other than a simple fascination, is already dead.

That's just my life.

"Right before everything happened with Mom, I'd just ended a two-year relationship," I decide to tell him, since it's so easy to tell him anything. Well, almost anything.

I keep my dark secrets to myself. Even Anna thinks I'm a monster now, though she likes monsters. I don't want him thinking the same.

“Oh? And this lad was someone you loved?”

My smile grows tight. “Have you ever had to keep a part of yourself hidden? So hidden that you know there’s never going to be any way to show someone else without them running away?”

He grins. “Gypsy magic can be terrifying for mortals. Monsters, however, seem to love a little gypsy in their lives.”

“Ha,” I state dryly. “The monsters like to study me like I’m a science experiment, and now I’m doing the same to them. I’ll stop when they do. It’s a game between us. They have zero interest in me on a true romantic level.”

“Too bad Vance is gay. He’d be the most obvious choice for a corporeal boyfriend, eh?” he asks, seemingly amused.

“I wouldn’t go that far. But I weirdly feel more comfortable with him, knowing he’s not interested in women,” I confess, causing his grin to only grow.

“So this lad you ditched...what was his name?” he asks idly.

“Jerome,” I answer on a sigh. “He wanted me to move in, but how could I explain the weird things that happen in my life? What happens when that insane cult hunts me down and he gets caught in the crosshairs? Before I could decide what to do, he actually dumped me.”

“What?” he asks, confused as he props up, as though he can’t fathom someone dumping me.

Again, I don’t get such flattery under normal circumstances, so I eat it up a little, while trying not to be obvious about it.

“I wasn’t spontaneous enough, was one reason,” I say with a shrug. “It’s hard to be spontaneously sexy in some closet when you have a slightly dangerous arsenal always packed in your bra and can’t let your guard fully down. I felt responsible for his life when I was with him, and I took the responsibility serious.”

“How do you fit so many things in that bra of yours?” he asks more seriously, though his lips twitch.

“Very small glass vials,” I state dismissively. “The point is, unhooking my bra at random could have been bad. And when he showed up at my place, I had to kick him out if there were potions cooking on the stove. He couldn’t know I was a gypsy, and I couldn’t stop being a gypsy.”

“We never stop being what we are, even when it’s an inconvenience,” he says as his lips touch my cheek...I think.

Hard to tell, since there’s no sense of physical feeling.

“You should be very glad I’m not in flesh. It’d be hard to get rid of me,” he says, back to the flattery I pretend to be used to, so I can seem cool and stuff.

My phone rings, interrupting us, and I glance down to it.

“That would be the Van Helsing now,” Ace says with a small grin as *Vancetto Valhinseng* flashes across my screen.

I programmed the names long before I knew my best clients were monsters or a monster hunter.

I answer, hearing Anna shouting about starting a harem in the background. I guess she’s still with the ‘*pretty monsters*’ who beat me to Vance’s house.

Tattletales.

“I can’t accept gifts of gratitude,” Vance tells me very sternly, causing my grin to grow, since that’s a weird thing to say.

“Oh, shit. You gave him the gift as gratitude?” Ace asks, laughing as he turns his head away.

Pressing the mute button, I explain to Ace, “I saw Emit and Damien peering through the window when I got there, so I played it by ear.”

Ace laughs harder as I return to my call, unmuting it.

“Why can’t you accept a gift of—”

“It’s a Van Helsing thing. Our curse demands we kill, save, and never be thanked with any sort of token of appreciation. I can’t keep this unless you’re willing to barter, and I would like to keep it.”

They really do like the gifts, which means Ace definitely knows his shit.

“Hmm. I’ll think of something to trade for it.”

“Actually, I thought about giving you a small weapon.”

All the background noise cuts out, and Ace’s laughter ceases as well.

“O...kay...”

Ace clears his throat as I sit stupidly, not sure why this is apparently a big deal.

“You’re giving her a weapon?” I hear Damien asking incredulously.

“A small one worth more in estimated value,” Vance’s muffled voice replies.

“There’s something special and forbidden about a Van Helsing weapon, isn’t there?” I decide to ask.

“Only when it’s given and not stolen,” he tells me. “It’ll be the first time I’ve gifted a weapon to anyone outside of my knights.”

I sit up a little, trying to give him my attention since this sounds big. I’ll ask about these knights when my brain isn’t already short-circuiting.

“Just for an old pocket watch?”

“It’s a very exquisite timepiece, and it’s a gift from a Portocale. The only justifiable gift I can give in return must match the debt, but it comes with conditions.”

Ace exhales like that’s a good thing.

“I’ll explain the magnitude of the gift later, but considering you’ve been attacked by vampires recently, it may not be a bad idea for you to have protection,” Vance continues.

I feel like I’ve accomplished something, weirdly enough. “Okay,” I say again, though this time there’s more excitement in the word.

A Van Helsing weapon? I wonder if it’ll be a little disappearing handle-blade thingy I can tuck in my bra. He said it’d be small.

“No more gifts. I’ve forgotten how hard it is to resist a gift from a Portocale gypsy,” Vance adds before hanging up.

“Is there anything you can tell me about the history between gypsies and monsters?” I ask Ace as I put the phone away.

He stands abruptly.

“Gypsies and monsters have a very long and intertwined history. I’m afraid there are some secrets not even I can divulge,” he tells me idly. “I should go do more recon work on the vampire situation.”

He’s gone before I can argue, and I drop to the bed, trying to figure out how I started falling for a ghost. Though, I have to admit, he gives exceptional advice on monsters and their weaknesses.

“You have your smitten face,” Anna says, causing me to startle on the bed when she appears beside me. “I missed your ghost boyfriend again, I suppose,” she adds on a sigh.

“Yes. You did. How was your day with the pretty monsters?” I ask her on a smile.

“We went to Disney World,” she says wistfully.

“Of course you did,” I tell her as I stand and start to head to the bathroom so I can privately enjoy my musings about another ghost.

“Is it true that ghosts grow entirely lucid when they possess a body, even if they’ve started the final decay?” she asks seriously.

Pausing, I turn and look over my shoulder.

“What makes you ask that?”

“There was a set of dead triplets who showed up at Disney World and told me as much when I was trying to possess a woman to have fun with the wolf man.”

“You’re too far into the disease to possess someone unless they’re willingly possessed, and it’s wrong to just try to take someone’s body. You’re dead, Anna. Don’t hurt the living just because you’re not happy about it.”

She mocks a gasp. “Harsh.”

“You got real with me about my ribbon girl theory and made me face up to being a monster. This is me returning the favor and pointing out your reality.”

I go to the shower, and she follows, predictably toeing the salt line. If I shut the door, she’ll start singing, and I’d rather talk than let my gypsy urges cause me to sing along with her again.

“I would like to be lucid for one perfect day,” Anna says quietly as I climb into the shower.

“It would drain you to possess me if that’s what you’re asking. I’ve already told you this. I’m a gypsy. It’d be twice as hard, even with my permission, for you to keep living after ejection.”

“The triplets think it would be safer with a gypsy, actually.”

I’m not sure if these *triplets* of hers even exist, and I’m not an expert on possessions and what it does to ghosts, so I shut up.

“Violet, are there pink elephants dancing atop your shower rod?” she asks as I tip my head back and look.

I've decided not to rule anything out, and it's starting to make me feel more and more gullible.

"No."

"Would I see pink elephants in your body?"

"Doubtful. I've never seen pink elephants."

"See where I'm going with this?"

"You just think you want to hijack my vagina," I remind her.

"No, I think I want to have a day where I can enjoy a glass of smooth bourbon, the feel of silk against freshly cleaned skin, and the touch of a man before I forget I was ever a person and slip into the next phase of this disease that will leave me lost until I'm a pile of salt."

It's the most serious she's sounded since she rode into my life on my mother's casket.

I pull open the shower curtain and see her standing there with hopeful eyes.

"Let me ask Ace what he knows about ghosts and possessions, and I'll think about it."

"Really?" she asks on an excited squeal.

"You can't have sex with Damien, because he can't know that he can't kill me," I remind her.

"Yeah, but what if he *can* kill you? You heard what he said about pixies and fireflies, remember?" she states, trying her damndest to reason with me.

“Vampires and werewolves, not...you know what? It doesn't matter. The point is, I'm positive he can't kill me, because I know I can't die as certainly as I know I can't fly.”

“I could fly once. I was Amelia crossing the Pacific.”

“I thought Amelia crossed the Atlantic. Or tried to.”

“No, it was definitely the Pacific,” she argues. “I remember.”

I close the curtain back and turn off the water before toweling off. As I get the towel wrapped around me and step out, I decide to go to the wall and pull up a piece of chalk.

Writing on the small chalkboard—my new way of communicating with Ace, since he can't find me as easily as Anna—I try to ignore the weird butterflies in my stomach.

Need to talk.

Maybe when he pops in and sees it, he'll hang around and wait on me like he's started doing. The butterflies that accompany his presence are just a random fluttering—not the beginnings of an epically pointless crush.

Lies. All lies. I'm definitely crushing on a ghost.

“What about Emit?” she asks, getting back to her important topic.

“He's a mountain of a man. He'll crush you. I'm not sure he's the kind of guy to take a spin on after being out of the saddle for so long,” I tell her as I move throughout the house.

“Are you sure Vance is gay? Because he watches your ass when you walk away.”

I pause, but then decide she's ridiculous. Ace has been right about positively everything. Besides, even if Vance wasn't gay, I'm certain he's way out of my league. He's too sophisticated and proper.

"I'm sure," I tell her dismissively.

"Damn."

"I'll work something out for you *if* I decide this isn't going to kill you to try."

"So what if it does?" she asks flippantly. "I'm already dead, and soon I won't have any piece of my mind left that isn't invaded by hungry hippos."

She blinks at me, and I try to pretend there's not a pang in my chest.

"I'll work something out," I tell her again while turning and walking away, batting away the stray tear that slips out before she can see it, as a weight settles onto my chest.

Never get attached to the dead, Violet. I always end up hurt when I don't listen to my mother's advice.

Chapter 26

VIOLET

“It *will* kill her,” Ace tells me as he follows me through the house.

A sick, queasy feeling gathers in my stomach as I clutch the edges of the countertop. He cages me in from behind, his hands passing through mine like he’s trying to hold them as his face leans in next to mine.

“But there might be another way,” he finally says on a quiet exhale.

I turn around, and he pulls his head back, still leaning so that he’s more level with me as his eyes stay on mine.

He really is *hauntingly* gorgeous, and it’s devastatingly cruel that I found him a century or so after he’s been dead. My life sucks so hard sometimes.

“What other way?”

“You’re a gypsy,” he says as he looks around like he’s worried who’s listening.

A chill slithers up my spine, and I also glance around the room.

“A Portocale gypsy, to be more exact,” he goes on. “The ghost sickness is a side-effect of the Portocale curse.”

“What?” I ask on a rasp. “You’re saying Anna is dying because non-freak Portocale gypsies have to kill ghosts to stay alive after their thirteenth birthday?”

He gives me a sympathetic look as he presumably cups my chin, making me hate the fact I can’t feel him right now.

“You poor dear. Someone called you a gypsy freak?”

“Emit. He swore it wasn’t derogatory,” I tell him, wondering if I should feel retroactive offense now.

Mom has some reading material on gypsy freaks that I’ve not gotten started on yet.

“From Emit’s lips, it likely wasn’t derogatory. Careful who you let call you that, though. It’s not the same with all people, and you’ll look silly if you can’t tell the difference.”

Rolling my eyes, I look away. “I just learned monsters exist, and now I’m toying with alphas just because they’ve been toying with me. I already look silly.”

“Indeed,” he says too quickly, and I look over to see him smile. “But it’s certainly adorable to see you silly. And to you, a Portocale gypsy who could be the answer to their freedom from one particularly nasty curse, they are certainly harmless,” he assures me.

“How can I be the answer to their freedom?”

He lifts his head like he’s listening for something, and I shake out of my own derailed thoughts.

“So Anna’s dying for the same curse Portocale gypsies have to kill ghosts for,” I say quickly, hoping he isn’t about to

bail abruptly—the way he normally does when he does that listening thing. “Why?”

“Doesn’t matter why. All that matters is that there may be a way to change it,” he says, smiling tightly as his eyes dip to meet mine.

Clearing my throat, I look down. “I feel like I owe you a debt for everything you’ve told me that no one else has bothered to. Since it’s been a lot, actually. More than I thought I’d get when I was running in circles. I hate to ask for more, since the debt is actually getting heavy on my mind, but—”

“Gypsies and monsters hate their debts,” he says with a smirk, winking at me. “I know. We’ll call it even up to this point if you promise to never tell your monster entourage they’ve had me for a stalker,” he says with a shrug. “They wouldn’t appreciate that, and I’d consider it the biggest personal favor I could ever ask for.”

“I promise,” I tell him without hesitation.

“A gypsy’s promise means the deal holds no matter what,” he tells me, smirking, as he gives me what would be a nudge...if he had a physical body. “So be sure you mean it.”

I’m not sure why I smile. Maybe because *he’s* trying to educate *me* on being a gypsy.

“I know what a gypsy’s promise is. When a gypsy breaks their promise, they’re no longer trusted. By anyone.”

“And that precious gypsy pride gets whittled away. You’re the first truly powerful gypsy to have pride in longer than I can remember,” he says a little more soberly, like he’s seriously making me consider this.

“I consider this a fair and equal trade. But you were saying something about curing ghost sickness, and that’ll be a new debt,” I go on, ensuring he knows that, because a sizeable debt such as that will certainly have to be paid, and I don’t know how I can repay a ghost for something like that.

“Curing the ghost sickness would be payment to me as well. Don’t get your hopes up. There’s a damn good chance this isn’t going to actually work, but everything’s worth a shot,” he tells me as he looks around. “I’ll be back with details as soon as I have a firmer handle on them.”

He’s gone in the next blink, and I exhale a groan as I lean over a table, refusing to hope for something that could crush me when it inevitably fails. I can’t lose Anna right now. She’s quite literally the only thing holding me together on some days.

Anna lands in my living room in the next instant like I’ve summoned her by thinking about her for too long.

“I think I have my shopping list sorted.”

“What shopping list?” I ask as I discreetly and quickly wipe away the stray tears and turn to face her, putting to use my best smile.

“The list for my big day.”

“What if you don’t really want a big day, but you’re touching the delusional phase and think you—”

“Have you seen the crazy ghosts who walk around in the delusional phase?” she asks me with a condescending expression. “I can assure you I’m not there yet. Other than the purple gorilla in the corner humping the donkey, I see nothing

out of the ordinary today. But I'm still lucid enough to be certain that's not legit."

She gives me a firm nod like she's trying exceptionally hard to let me know she's of the sanest mind possible to make this decision.

It reminds me just how dire her situation really is. What's the point in going on when you're no longer really even there?

Trying not to get my own hopes up that Ace is going to return with an impossible cure at the last possible moment like the heroes do in movies, I don't mention it to Anna.

Only one of us should have to feel disappointed.

"Let's go shopping," I say, smiling when she squeals in excitement and does her horrible happy dance.

Chapter 27

DAMIEN

“I haven’t seen much of our gypsy girl, and since she can somehow see me now, though it should be impossible—”

“There are plenty of gypsy freaks who can see you when you should be invisible,” Emit interrupts, talking over me as he runs a frustrated hand through his hair.

The four bitches on his sofa are lounging in robes, waiting on their alpha to remember they’re in the room.

He growls as he stares at the still-empty bowl the Portocale gypsy left him with.

It’s sitting right next to the warped knit covering she brought it in that smells just like her and that sweet blood of hers.

I pat my mirror in my coat pocket like I do every five minutes or so, just making sure it’s still there.

It goes where I go. At least until the new wears off.

“It’s like going stone cold sober for centuries, and then *bam!* I’m hit with an overdose—a Portocale gift and Portocale oranges in the same day, along with a debt to a Portocale,” he says very quietly, since he doesn’t want the she-wolves overhearing his moment of weakness.

“I didn’t come here to talk about you. I came to talk about me,” I remind him.

“Why do I give a damn about you? I’d much rather talk about me,” he volleys, narrowing his eyes.

“Can you get rid of them so we can talk about either one of us?” I ask on a bored drawl when the wolves tire of waiting on him and start without him.

“Take it to my room,” he snaps over his shoulder.

They roll their eyes, but still comply with an impressive amount of pep to their step. I’m annoyed that my heart is *still* beating enough to taste the pheromones in the air.

It’s driving me insane.

“She couldn’t see me but then she could,” I carry on once the female mongrels are in another room far enough away for me to stop getting a head rush from all the pheromones. “I walked around in her attic right behind her, and she never even looked at me until that bloody ghost said something that caused me to lose my concentration and I fumbled.”

“She pushed those damn crumbs into my mouth, teasing me, yet made out with you? I’m a fucking legend, and you can’t even get it up,” he carries on, not having the same conversation.

“It goes up just fucking fine, thank you very much. It’s just pointless to use it unless I want to end up fucking a corpse at some point,” I tell him, and then shudder and swallow bile before clearing my throat.

“All the more reason to make out with me and feed you the damn crumbs. It seems symbolic, which is stupid, since you

were lurking in her room while she was changing and stuff.”

“She changes in the bloody bathroom because that ghost is always around. If she leaves the door open, she changes in the shower,” I defend.

“So you draw the line at creeping into the bathroom?” he asks, finally paying me attention.

“She salts it. My illusions won’t work beyond her salt lines—I’ve tried—and she’s a vicious little gypsy when she’s upset,” I grouse, huffing a little.

He gives me an irritated look. “And she kissed *you*? You had to do something to her.”

“My heart wasn’t beating until *she* affected *me*,” I remind him.

“Motherfucking crumbs. I should go over there and show her what it actually feels like to—”

“You have four bitches in your room right now who are waiting for you. How about handling them before you sit around the watering hole, shooting the shit about the one who fed you crumbs? Meanwhile, I have a fucking beating heart, and that takes precedence over your dick complex.”

“I do *not* have a dick complex,” he growls as he points a finger in my face.

“I have a dick complex.” The sudden confession comes from *Anna The Overly Friendly Ghost* as she pops up right beside me.

Emit curses when he startles just a little, almost giving us away. It’d be really stupid to let the ghost know that we know

she exists when she's so close to slipping into that delusional phase and consequentially becoming a nonissue.

“The complex is not having one. Inside me. Ever,” she continues. “So are these creepy tour thingies that supposedly do a show-and-tell on all the creepy things rumored to be around town for real?” she asks. “I mean, do they come by here and show tourists where the werewolves live and stuff? Or is it the pretend nonsense that people walk away from feeling silly and bored?”

Emit and I just look at each other.

“I bought the patio set I wanted,” I tell him, letting him know we're done talking for now.

“As if I fucking care. We're talking about the fact I don't have a dick complex,” he growls, apparently not finished talking.

“Sure. If you really want to talk about your tiny sports car that you have to fold yourself inside of—”

“How does a car that's too small have anything to do with *my* dick?” he gripes.

“Dick *complex*,” I remind him. “All men with tiny dicks get themselves a flashy red sports car.”

“You're just making that up,” he argues very defensively.

“Am not,” I say with a cheeky grin.

“I hate it when your heart is beating,” he says before he turns and stalks away from me, slamming the door on his way out.

“I thought this was his house. Not yours,” Anna says, confused as she simply lingers. “For the record, I’ve seen his dick. It’s *huge*.”

I count to five before he’s stalking back in.

“This is my house. You get out!” he shouts.

Doing all I can to maintain a serious face, I move to my feet as he narrows his eyes.

“We’re not friends,” he adds as he takes a step forward, causing my smile to tense. “We’re forced into an alliance none of us particularly care for, after cutting each other’s people down for centuries,” he adds.

“Oh, this is getting interesting,” Anna croons, and I arch an eyebrow at him for running his mouth in front of the ghost.

Clearing his throat, he turns and slams a fist through the wall like he’s so frustrated he just has to hit something. Living in denial about his dick complex is amusing to watch.

“She’s never going to let me use her vagina on one of you two. The violent wolf really will crush her body, and the Dorian Gray wannabe can’t even get it up in a room that is just down the hall from where girls sound like they’re getting orgasms without the prudish men.”

Anna disappears, and Emit pants as he catches his breath, groaning in frustration at the hole he’s made in his wall. It’s next to another three holes. His house is full of holes he needs to patch.

“She just called you a Dorian Gray wanna—”

“I heard her perfectly fucking well. She also called *us* prudish,” I muse, smirking, even as I hide the fact my jaw is secretly grinding over the Dorian insult.

She has no idea just how insulting that really is.

He exhales harshly while removing his hand from the wall completely, just as his bitches stroll back in, eyes raking over me. A few of them growl...until they feel me pushing their own pheromones back at them.

Then they drop to the ground, forgetting we're even here, to pick up right where they left off in the bedroom.

“Fuck’s sake, really?” Emit snaps at me as I pat my jacket, feeling for my new mirror. “You can’t just leave me here with this mess. They could be at it for hours now, you prick!”

“It’s your house,” I call over my shoulder as I start to leave, but stop.

Emit is snapping at the girls to stop rooting each other in his living room and get out. I wait until he shuts his mouth to ask an important question.

“She wouldn’t really let *Anna* borrow *that*, would she?”

He seems to struggle to figure out what I’m asking for a moment, but then it must sink in, because I can see him thinking hard about it. Emit’s the kind of guy anyone can read.

“No,” he says like he’s certain.

“And you know her well enough to make that assessment with confidence?” I ask as I start backing toward the door.

He pauses and frowns. “No,” he confesses.

I disappear in the next instant, at least to his eyes, and I see him curse as his eyes dart around like he's searching for me.

I leave his house and quickly drive to see the Portocale gypsy in question.

She really should start locking her door. Does the fool girl have a death wish? Not that a locked door could keep *me* out, but I'm not a death sentence, so I don't count.

Well, I suppose I am a death sentence if things get out of hand, but they won't.

I expect to find Anna chatting away in the house about Emit's floor orgy, which will likely swing the odds in my favor in front of the young, mostly innocent, young Portocale.

Instead, I find her with her back turned, wearing some terrible knit slippers on her feet. They don't even match, and you can certainly tell she's the one who crafted them.

It's become abundantly clear that her gypsy freak setbacks include being unable to use her threading abilities to the Portocale standard. Because any Portocale would balk at her for tarnishing the name.

The ghost is absent from the room, which is frustrating, since she keeps the Portocale talking, usually. I learn more when her lips are moving.

She's actually swaying her hips to some music, and I lean back against the wall, silently content to simply watch her dance.

She pauses packing a small knit sack and the peculiar dancing stops as her eyes pop up to a corner. My gaze follows hers, but there's nothing there.

In the next instant, she sighs heavily and glances over her shoulder. Her eyes collide with mine, and internally I curse. Still, because it makes no damn sense to me whatsoever, I move from side to side, annoyed when her eyes patiently follow mine and a little grin tugs at her lips.

“We had an agreement,” she tells me as she redirects her attention to her knit bag.

“I only remember you making empty threats,” I say as I give up the ruse of being under cloak.

She doesn't even glance up at me as she continues on with her task. She finally drops her bag to the bed and moves over to her dresser, pulling out her mother's cloak.

“People must threaten you often for you to be so desensitized to it,” she absently says.

“People threaten me daily. Hourly, if I'm around them for too long,” I say as my brow furrows. “Whatever are you up to, gypsy girl?”

“I'm trying to save Anna...my pet ghost,” she tells me, but leaves it at that, which is fine, because I have zero interest in Anna.

Chasing after a cure to a curse is about as productive as trying to swim up a waterfall.

Been there. Done that. The metaphorical waterfall never lets you win.

However, I am intrigued by her dedication.

“Portocale gypsies are usually so bitter and cold that they simply kill ghosts after luring them in as mediums to speak

with the family or loved ones they've left behind. After the family goes, the ghost has advanced to the last stage of final decay, and the Portocale gypsy then consumes their energy," I tell her, gauging her for her reaction.

She looks paler after hearing that, but shakes it off.

"Why is it you only want to tell me the worst things, and never explain the more helpful things that I could actually put to use?" she grinds out. "Stop sneaking into my house with your Grinch parade," she adds as she pulls the cloak on and starts to walk out.

My hand darts out and grabs her arm, and my heartbeat kicks up a few beats. This was a shit idea, since I'm trying to make it *stop* beating again.

She glances down at my hand and back up to my eyes, the absence of fear alarmingly worrisome.

"It wasn't smart to come to our houses, tease us, play with us, and then walk away. And we haven't found something to exchange for the mirror you gave me."

I pat my pocket with my free hand, ensuring it's still there, and she grins up at me.

"You're carrying it around? I didn't think you'd like it that much."

I hate the genuine way she says something, because she's a gypsy. Everyone knows you can't trust a gypsy, and she's proven that very well already.

"You happen to have Portocale oranges—"

“I didn’t realize they’re such a delicacy,” she says with a shrug as she walks off. “Now I know, and it’s just more to barter with in the future,” she adds over her shoulder as she walks down the stairs.

Her naivety is both charming and infuriating sometimes, because I never know when she’s being naïve and when she’s being calculating. Maybe that was Marta’s grand plan for her—to drive us to the edge of paranoia with the most fascinating Portocale gypsy to walk into our worlds in too many centuries to count.

“And you just happen to have an exquisite mirror on hand to simply pass on to me,” I call out a little accusingly, even as my eyes stay fixed to her lovely ass, now that I’ve started noticing her body more and more.

The more my heart beats, the sexier the peculiar gypsy becomes. Even in her terrible wardrobe full of too many loud colors.

“I’m not letting you stall long enough to do your freaky mind trick on me and turn me into a flesh-and-blood version of a horny ghost,” she says, confusing the hell out of me for the briefest of seconds.

“I’m afraid that’s all you, Violet Portocale,” I chirp, grinning at her when she turns to give me an unimpressed look. “I can only lower your inhibitions,” I tell her more seriously.

Her gaze flicks to my lips once again, and predictably back up to my eyes just as quickly, telling me she’s already struggling with our proximity, which is probably why she’s trying to get away from me.

Taking a step closer, I push her hair away from her face, letting my fingers linger on her cheek as images of her dropping to her knees before me and doing indecently glorious things with her mouth appear in my mind.

“You’re trying to say you’re not giving me a vision of me —”

“All you, gypsy girl,” I say as my thumb drags over her lips, remembering how soft and delicate they feel when she’s letting me bruise them with mine.

She swallows thickly and steps into me. Just when I think she’s going to finally fucking kiss me again, which has honestly taken entirely too long, I’m suddenly yelping and collapsing to my knees as excruciating pain rockets from my groin to my gut.

A groan is ripped out of me, even as I struggle to breathe, while the vicious gypsy who just kneed me in the balls and felled me like a tree is kneeling down and kissing me on the cheek.

“Don’t come in without knocking. Stop being invisible so you can attempt to spy on me. And stop playing games with my head. I have enough shit to deal with,” she says softly, kissing my cheek again before standing and walking out.

I’m busy trying to roll back up to my knees, so all I do is glare at her when she darts back in, hissing out a breath as she dances from foot to snow-covered foot and pulls off the knit slippers.

“Forgot my shoes,” she says before quickly changing them out and darting away again.

Downed by a gypsy too foolish to learn how to properly fear, and who can't even remember her bloody shoes. This is an all new low.

Chapter 28

VIOLET

“I may be in love with you now,” Ace says at my side, still grinning even ten minutes after leaving Damien on the floor.

I feel bad about it now, damn it. But he can’t follow me, and he doesn’t need to know why. And he really does need to stop being a total creep.

“Just his face was priceless. I feel like I owe you a debt,” he says on a happy sigh.

“You constantly tell me to let Damien have his wicked way with me, despite the danger—”

“He’d never endanger you,” he immediately points out. “Portocale gypsies are safe from alphas.”

“Regardless, you want me to go to bed with him—”

“And let me watch so I can be with you through vicarious means,” he interrupts again, because all ghosts are prone to interrupting to insert their dirty agenda.

Ignoring the really inappropriate butterflies that make me feel even more abnormal than I already am, given the fact he’s a ghost wanting to watch me have sex with a monster so he can pretend it’s him instead, I go on. “—yet love seeing him get kneed in the balls.”

“I didn’t say I like him,” he says with a small smirk. “But in the interest of your well-being, I think having Damien under your thumb would be wise. And you’re the first thing to interest him in far too long.”

“Are you ever going to tell me how long you’ve stalked them?”

“All things come out eventually, love,” he tells me before gesturing to the cloak. “Time to pull it on. Spirits on this land are vicious, and that will protect you.”

I pause at the archway that has vines grown all over it, wedging the gates shut. It looks like I’m the first person to visit this place in decades.

“It couldn’t be a normal cemetery? Those are creepy enough,” I mutter under my breath as I pull on the cloak and tie it under my chin.

“Afraid not. This cemetery isn’t even known to exist, and it’s very important that Vance doesn’t know we’re out here, so move quickly and do exactly as I say.”

“What happens if Vance finds me?” I ask him quietly, now second-guessing this idea, since I never want to have to get on a monster hunter’s bad side.

“Stay here,” he tells me as he disappears.

I honestly don’t think I can ever kill someone I know, regardless of my mother’s strictest instructions to never let anyone live after witnessing me die.

Why would you ever let anyone who thinks they’ve killed you just walk away, Violet? Be smart, sweet girl. Life isn’t sunny-side-up. Her words always play in my head anytime I

have doubts, as though she's still instructing me from right at my side.

Ace returns, popping up in front of me.

“We have less than ten minutes before one of his obnoxious drones flies back over. If it spots motion or body heat, it will sound an alarm. Remember that Vance won't hurt you, but that he can imprison you for trespassing on Van Helsing property. It's a grave offense, I'm afraid.”

I exhale harshly, seeing my breath fog over in front of my face.

“Great. So I need to hurry,” I say as I pull my satchel strap tighter and start heaving myself over the vine-ridden gate, ignoring the spiders and other insects that crawl over me as I do so.

“My kind of woman,” Ace says from the ground.

I turn to look back, seeing him wink at me before he disappears again. Stupid, inappropriately-timed butterflies wreak havoc on my stomach, causing my transparent grin to spread much too easily. He knows he's reached the point where he can say the simplest things and make me an idiot.

I land on the other side of the wall, and he turns to start quickly running through the graveyard.

He's all ghost grace and poise, while I try not to trip over the headstones.

“Why is there a hidden cemetery back here?” I ask a little uneasily.

“It was here before Van Helsing,” he assures me, leaping over one set of really tall headstones that I elect to run around.

I’m not a very good jumper. At all.

“This town killed a lot of proposed witches in search of actual witches who were indeed slaughtering and butchering townspeople for the sake of working dangerous blood magic. They moved on after the paranoia hit full steam, and left the mortals to suffer their punishment in their stead.”

Before I can comment on the morbid share, he stops abruptly.

“It’s here,” he says, looking over his shoulder at me. “Violet, don’t get your hopes up. This is very much a longshot.”

“I spent the day buying Anna all the things she wants for what may very well be her last day,” I say as my hands shake, and I begin opening the satchel I made myself. “I’m not getting my hopes up,” I add, even though my hopes are up just a little.

Putting the bowl on the ground first, I kneel, quickly pulling out the air-tight container that holds the oranges I was worried Damien would smell.

As I unload the oranges, I look up at Ace as he kneels and smiles down at the ground.

“So now I just spill my blood over this spot?”

“Portocale blood on consecrated ground will possibly do the trick,” he says very quietly.

Before I can make any move to do anything, I hear a loud buzzing, and Ace's eyes widen.

"Run," he says sharply, looking back as one of the head-sized drones come soaring right toward us.

Heat and motion sensors...

I drop to the ground, letting my heartbeat drop as low as safely possible, as I absorb the cold from the snow.

My teeth chatter for just a second until my heart is too slow to allow my body to move. The drone continues right over me, never once picking up any signatures, and Ace's head pokes over mine as a quizzical expression dons his face.

"How in the world did you manage that?"

I'm slow to sit up, and my heart is slow to speed back up to where it needs to be for me to be quick, but I languidly lay out potions exactly like the diagram I drew while he coached me.

"Cold snow and still girl," I tell him absently.

"Far too simple," he says with narrowing eyes.

His gaze darts over my head, distracted by the retreating drone, as I finish placing all the very volatile vials in their places.

Turning my head to guard my eyes from the blinding flash, I strike one, and feel the vibrations of them all going off at once.

The light flashes from behind me, and a cracking, creaking, and groan sound behind it.

Fortunately, that's as loud as it gets, and I turn back around to see the snowy fog before me as I close my hand over a

blade and hiss out a breath when I feel the burn of pain.

“I still don’t know what part the oranges play,” I tell him as I let my blood drip.

“Strong, sweet scents such as that can have a sort of guiding power for the lost and a soothing effect on the restless. Plenty of restless spirits in the area who will need calming once you do this,” he says as he lowers himself next to me, eyes riveted to the blood steadily running from my hand in a thin stream.

“That should be plenty, love. Wrap your hand before you lose too much blood,” he tells me when I get a little dizzy.

I quickly reach into the bag, hiding my hand as I feel the satin stitches from the inner pocket of the satchel start lacing my hand together. His attention is on the ground before us.

The ground is broken up in a rectangle, and the oranges have toppled off and into the large crevices the exploding vials have made.

“Last step, love,” he coaches as he absently reaches over like he’s patting my arm.

I wrap up my hand in the gauze I brought, hiding the fresh satin stitches, before pulling out the last vial.

“You’re sure that’s the most potent acid you could create?” he asks me, eyes moving back to mine.

“Well, I may be terrible at some things, but creating destructive potions by mistake when trying to create something else happens to my specialty.”

His lips twitch. “Very well.”

“Here’s to hoping for a miracle,” I say under my breath as I toss the vial into the deepest spot I can find.

The second I hear the glass break, I pull my head back, because I also feel my nose hair melting. I think. My nose is on fire because that shit burns.

Coughing, I push to my feet, grab the satchel, and take off running back to the gate to get away.

I glance back, not spotting Ace, but I don’t have the luxury of slowing down when I see the green fog climbing its way out of the newly made hole.

It slithers across the ground, melting every bit of snow and blackening each inch of the earth it touches.

My gaze swings forward just before I collide with the wall, and I scramble back over it with even less finesse than I entered.

Landing on the ground hard, I grunt as I peer through the archway gates what little bit I can, seeing a huge, blackened spot of death and decay.

But I have no idea if it actually worked.

The green fog hovers but doesn’t continue spreading, as the ground around the main concentration of the potion begins to collapse in on itself.

I pull out the last orange from my satchel and put it down on the ground, just like I’m supposed to. Stepping back, eyes on the gate in front of me, I wait to feel any cosmic sign that I’ve somehow broken the curse.

What happens instead leads to me screaming and stumbling back as true horror seizes my lungs and almost freezes my muscles.

A gnarled, sizzling, mummified hand shoots from the earth.

I almost fall as I watch in horror.

Sharp claws stab into the ground as a second hand joins it, and the creature's sickly arms start flexing as it heaves itself up. Its back is to me, and a dark cloak shrouds the rest of its body as it continues to rise, and I remain trembling in place as my eyes only grow wider.

A hissing, clicking noise permeates the otherwise silent air as snow sizzles on all the charred pieces of ground it tries to land on.

My breaths fog so quickly in front of my face that it almost obstructs the visibility of whatever catastrophe I've just created.

I catch a flash of red eyes under the dark hood as the figure turns its gaze toward me, and my stomach plummets to the ground when it just stares, the face hidden from view inside the cloak's shadows.

My trembling hands fumble, and my gaze drops to my bra as I start pulling out vials from my arsenal, searching for anything that could stop it.

"Ace! What's going on?" I shout, but hear no answer as I continue to search.

Just as I pull up one possibly nasty little emergency potion, my eyes snap back, and the cloaked figure is gone.

I whirl around, constantly feeling a tickle at my back, but nothing, a little more nothing, and even more nothingness is all that surrounds me.

A noise startles me, and I spin back around to see the orange by the gate rolling to a stop near me. Quickly breaking away from the distraction, I whirl around again when I feel a cold breath blow against my neck. With my heart jack-hammering against my chest, I spin again, but once more there's...nothing.

The drones pass over the area, pausing over the blackened earth, and when I glance back, the orange has gone missing.

“What the hell have I done?” I whisper under my breath as a sick feeling of betrayal inches up my spine.

Where the hell is Ace, and what did he just trick me into doing?

An angry tear rolls down my face as I fight the tremble in my jaw, and I turn to start racing away from the cemetery.

The only thing I can do now is tell the man who kills monsters that I've just unleashed something unnaturally fast with sharp claws and red glowing eyes.

Because I'm a stupid, gullible girl.

*Only trust me or your father, Violet. Never anyone else.
Never.*

I should have listened to my mother.

Chapter 29

VIOLET

“But where is he?” I ask Margie after she informs me Mr. *Valhinseng* is gone.

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to discuss that,” she says sweetly before simply shutting the door in my face.

I huff out a breath, and with hands that haven’t stopped shaking yet, I pick up my phone and call him, but it goes straight to voicemail.

Cursing, I jog to my van and hurriedly pull up my business phone contacts, finding Emit’s number.

“Hello?” a woman asks in a bored drawl.

“I really need to speak to Mr. Morrigan, please,” I tell her, trying to keep the panic from my tone.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. *Mr. Morrigan* is currently busy with some of his...girls.”

“As in daughters?”

I didn’t know he had kids—

The abrupt, almost hysterical laughter over the phone lets me know that is a stupid question to ask. But...*Ohhh. Gotcha.*

Not sure why I’m bothered by the fact he’s a man slaking his needs. A wolf man. A monster. A very unimportant factor

at the moment.

“It’s incredibly important that I speak to him,” I tell her a little angrily when she just continues to laugh.

“I’m sure it is. Don’t worry. He’s on a mission, as of this morning, so I’m sure you’ll get your turn, dearest. What’d you say your name was?”

I hang up, and angrily dial Damien’s number instead.

Every time it would come in handy to have a monster or monster hunter, I find myself on my own. The rest of the time they’re stalking me.

After ringing forever, it goes to voicemail, and I groan as I talk, “When you get this, please call me back. I’ve very likely done something impossibly stupid, and—” My voice cuts out when the mortifying reality of just how sickeningly gullible I really am sinks in bone-deep, and I exhale harshly. “Just call me. We’ll consider it the trade for the mirror. I’m sorry about your balls. I really hope you’re just angry and ignoring me.”

Hanging up, I quickly dial Vance again, and when voicemail starts talking, I leave another message. “I *really* want to be found by a Van Helsing right now. We can consider it an even trade for the pocket watch.”

“Anna, where are you?” I shout, wondering why she’s been missing most of the damn day as I hang up.

She pops into the passenger seat as if prompted, grinning at me. “Did you just scream my name or was I dreaming things?”

“I need you to find Damien and hurl his phone at his head.”

“That’d be using my ghostly powers.”

“I’m aware,” I bite out. “But just this once, I really need ___”

Her scream erupts as my words cut out, because the brake pedal of the van randomly slam on as if there’s a phantom foot on it. My heart flutters in my chest as the van’s back end skitters sideways in a stomach-churning sensation. With all my strength, I use my foot and try to pry the brake up from the floor, but it’s no use.

Anna does that ridiculous thing where she flies out the window for no reason at all.

My eyes feel like they can’t get any wider, and I have no idea if I’m clenching my teeth or if my jaw is slack. However, I definitely know my ass is clenched, as the van completely slings around twice, miraculously not flipping.

Everything is rocked hard as the van comes up off its wheels for an eternity of a second, before slamming back down to a quiet rattle of a halt. Shera Ward is standing in front of me, red lips curved in an ominously dark grin, and her arms crossed in front of her chest.

I’m so confused about what just happened that I don’t even realize the door is being yanked open until someone is dragging me out by my hair. A hiss of a pained breath is all that escapes my lips as I remind myself not to struggle.

I barely manage to get my feet under me in time to keep from slamming into the hard man’s body as he roughly yanks me again.

Shera struts forward in skin tight clothing that looks like she's a comic book nerd's wet dream on her way to cut down zombies. Weapons are hanging from her belt, jingling as her high-heeled boots click against the pavement.

"Smart girl. Don't struggle," she says as the man holding my hair starts dragging me backwards.

Struggling leads to unnecessary pain, and my survival doesn't start until they think they've killed me.

I doubt it's a coincidence that I unleashed something less than twenty-five minutes ago, and now vampires are attacking me at twilight.

"He said not to hurt her," Shera says in a singsong voice.

"She just needs to know the tone of this meeting," the man still dragging me by my hair says as I stumble and fall to the ground.

A cry is dragged from my throat when he yanks harder, pulling me across the ground with his hold. It feels like he's trying to rip my scalp away from my skull, and I try to crawl, roll, stand...anything to lift my head up just a little more.

I'm finally heaved up to my feet and shoved into a dark car so hard that my cheek slams into something hard.

"For fuck's sake, he said *not to hurt her*," Shera says, making the last part louder.

I scramble to curl into the corner when she steps into the back of the car with me. She grabs my chin, and I don't fight her as she turns my head to get a better look at it.

“You’ll live,” she says as she releases me and shuts the door. “He, however, probably won’t,” she adds on a sigh that sounds as though she’s been terribly inconvenienced by that.

Swallowing thickly, I calmly buckle up, and she watches me with an amused smile as the car we’re in drives us slowly toward a destination that probably doesn’t end well for me.

“I’m guessing this elaborate kidnapping isn’t to force me into that tea I rudely turned down a while back, is it?” I ask, my shaky tone betraying my will to sound calm and composed.

She flashes me a fanged smile, but the fangs recede so quickly that I almost worry I simply imagined it.

“You’re awfully calm for a girl being abducted. This sort of thing happen to you very often?”

“It’s usually the start of a bad day. In this case, it’s just the exclamation mark to punctuate the bad day,” I state evenly, getting my voice under control.

She moves, and I startle a little. I see her grinning from her profile like my fear is pleasing to her. I knew she was crazy.

She pulls two glasses from a compartment, and then she pulls out liquor of some sort. Gin, I decide, when she removes the cap.

My nose wrinkles. It always feels like I’m swallowing pine needles when I drink gin. I focus on that instead of the vampire woman beside me.

“Not long ago, I was abducted by vampires,” I decide to tell her as she pours two glasses of the gin, treating this as

though two girls are just having a fun drink in the back of a car.

“Oh?” she muses, though I can’t tell if she’s genuine in her oblivion or not.

“I was under the impression it was in no way related to the alpha house in Shadow Hills. However, I’ve recently learned I can’t really trust the source I’ve gotten the vast majority of my information from,” I say on a mostly steady breath, aside from one minor catch in my throat.

She just stares ahead, swirling her glass under her nose as she hands me mine. I take it and drink it without hesitation, swallowing down a liquefied Christmas tree like it’s great.

I’d rather be drunk if someone’s going to attempt murdering me soon.

She doesn’t offer to pour me another, however, as she takes a slow sip.

“Do I get a clue as to what’s going on?”

“You’re so adorably clueless, and I’ve been ordered to keep it that way,” she states patronizingly as she continues to sip her gin.

“So we ride around in silence until you take me somewhere for more vampires to kill me—”

“You’re not to be harmed, Violet. Don’t be so melodramatic,” she says like she’s already tired with *my* theatrics.

Exhaling heavily and observing the sort of crazy I’m dealing with, I decide I’m definitely screwed. Why can’t it

ever be the bumbling first-timers instead of the cold, calculated ones who want to kill me?

I put my one-trick pony saddlebag on standby and let the dread mount as we ride along in uncomfortable silence. Nothing is worse than riding to one's possible doom in uncomfortable silence.

That's when Anna lands in the car, and begins talking about dinosaurs in the park. I miss the uncomfortable silence really quickly.

Chapter 30

VIOLET

“Can I at least get a deadline on how much longer it’s going to take?” I ask Shera as she plays a game on her damn phone, still sipping her first glass of gin an entire hour later.

“Just another few minutes.”

The windows are so darkly tinted that I can’t see anything, and there’s a closed divider window in front of us. For all I know, we’re in the middle of a forest.

“You should know, House of Arion certainly did not condone nor play part in the attack on you. I was only just made aware of the attack today. You really should have taken me up on that tea. I could have been a very good friend to have.”

“*Could* have been?” I ask, noting the past tense of her wording.

“You clearly have a judgmental attitude toward the female monsters of this town, but have no problem leaving your sweet scent in every other alpha home in Shadow Hills.”

I bristle, feeling a little judged all of the sudden. *Judged by a vampire.*

“I hate to say it, but she has a point,” Anna unhelpfully chimes in.

Judged by a vampire and a ghost.

I'm not okay with this being my new normal yet.

"I'm...sorry?" I try saying.

"I'm sure you'll be sorry. You'll really want me as a friend now that you're about to have *him* in your life. Try not to be the crying-and-rocking-in-the-corner type. Those girls are tediously exhausting."

My mouth opens and closes a few times, as she stares down at her fingernails.

The car pulls to a stop, and she pushes her door open, leaving the freezing cold air to shoot into the vehicle. "And for the record, I make the best tea in town."

With that, she turns and struts away, and I lean forward, staring through her door to the house we're in front of.

We've driven for over an hour, closer to two, and we're in front of the House of Arion? This is just ten minutes from where I was grabbed!

"Oye! It's a massacre in here!" Anna shouts from inside the house as Shera passes through her and disappears inside the home.

I really hope Anna isn't seeing the real world right now.

Lurch is suddenly leaning in and roughly pulling me out of the car, using my hair as a handle once again. A strangled sound of pain escapes me, because I think he's managed to find the same exact spot that is still tender from the last time.

Stumbling around, I manage to right myself, not making the mistake of falling again, and keep pace at his side.

“See? You’re learning,” he praises, talking to me like I’m some sort of pet.

I make a mental note to never do business with vampires again, once I leave town. I’m tougher than a normal person, and tears are dangerously close to teetering on my eyelids from his rough treatment.

I keep my hands balled at my sides as I’m led into the house I’ve never once stepped foot inside. Warmth hits me, knocking off the chill just a little...until I’m stumbling again at the sight before me.

Lurch yanks me harder, forcing me to walk when I try to stop, and I swallow down any sounds I have, because I really don’t want to draw attention to myself right now.

It looks exactly like my mind feared it would look inside a vampire home.

Blood is smeared across the walls, and I gag a little when I see a heap of bodies lying haphazardly around the stairs I’m being dragged by. I’m actually forced to step over one headless body, as *Havana* plays over the house speakers.

“I found a hot ginger! Holy grail!” Anna shouts from a room just before I’m steered into it.

Shera is doing the *cha cha* with a tall, red-haired man, and Anna is turned over and dancing with her ass in the air behind him.

A body rolls down the stairs in the room, slamming into the wall hard enough to crack it, and it lifelessly drops to the ground. Even though there are plenty of others standing and

breathing around us, I'm the only person in the room to react, and my hair is yanked again as punishment.

Fresh tears spring to my eyes without warning and almost tumble down my cheeks, as the pain bites through my skull. I force myself to calm and actively stop my heartbeat from trying to slow.

If my heart slowed, there'd be less pain. There'd also possibly be a monster unleashed in a roomful of vampires who know how to deal with...whatever I am.

There's less blood in here. In fact, all the bodies on the ground look to be completely depleted of blood.

Shera laughs as the man twirls her, and they end the dancing abruptly when the guy kisses her. Meanwhile, a second body comes tumbling down the stairs, and I try really hard to be as stoic about it as everyone else.

My survival plan seems really flimsy at the moment, because the bodies on the floor are dead vampires. Lots of dead vampires. All the eyes have been left black, the same way they were when I killed those four.

If this is what they do to their own...

"Arion, she's here!" Shera shouts up the stairs.

My heart starts hammering in my chest just as my mind finally clicks together the most obvious picture, leaving me feeling like the world's biggest, naïve, gullible fool.

My eyes dart to the top of the stairs when a familiar, shirtless man dressed only in a pair of sweatpants that barely hang on his hips starts dancing his way down them, licking blood off his fingertips as his head tips back. He dances up

two steps, and then he dances back down the rest of the way, his eyes closed as he moves toward us with the beat of the music.

His eyes open and hone in on mine, sending a trickle of painful awareness and dread coursing throughout me, just as the song changes. A wicked smile curves his lips as he keeps dancing his way down them, hips moving in a salsa rhythm in beat with the music.

I've tipped my head back without even realizing it, staring like I can't believe this is actually happening. At some point, Lurch apparently let go of me, and it's a struggle to stand on my own when my knees threaten to give way.

"Ace," I say on a rasp as the devil in flesh grins down at me.

"Call me Arion, love. It's more fitting," he says like this is all a cordial, friendly affair—monster style.

His smile falls immediately as his eyes dip to my cheek, and he glances over at Lurch.

"Shera," he says like it's a command of some kind.

Shera sighs as she pushes away from her dance partner and walks over to Lurch, who looks to shrink a little.

A gentle touch on my chin turns my head away just as Lurch gets bashed over the back of the head by some unknown beast of a man behind him.

I miss the rest, because my eyes are back on Arion's.

"Is that entirely necessary? You have no idea how fucking hard it's been to train new recruits since your last tantrum,"

Shera's boyfriend says as he walks by us, groaning.

"We'll discuss that later," Ace, also known as *Arion*, also known as the *vampire alpha* of Shadow hills, also known as a *psychopath* of some kind that I just unleashed onto the world, says.

My lip trembles just barely before I can stop it, and he narrows his eyes as he moves quickly. One second I'm standing on the floor, and the next I'm sitting on the bar in the room with him standing between my legs, putting us at eye level.

The breath hisses between my teeth as the dizzying motion almost makes me sway with the abrupt shift in location.

"Don't be scared, love. The bodies are just my gifts, and they're the perfect gifts," he says as he turns and gestures around him.

He really is a murderous psychopath, just like *Ace* said *Arion* was.

At least it wasn't all a lie.

His nose drags along my neck as I remain rigid, and I fight the urge to tremble again as he inhales very deeply and groans in the back of his throat.

This day started out with hope to save my friend.

It's ending with the murderous vampire alpha sniffing my neck.

All because I'm a trusting idiot.

My life can suck so hard sometimes.

“I’m very much enjoying touching you,” he whispers, his breath chilling the skin on the side of my neck, only adding more all around me. “And you smell even more incredible than I imagined you would,” he adds on a hushed breath that chills me to my core.

What have I done?

Chapter 31

VANCE

Wiping blood from my face, I step over the two bodies and toss a match onto the gas before walking out.

Damien is glaring at me when I exit the burning home, and I look away from him to ensure no one else is witnessing my departure.

It's still just as quiet out here as it was when I went in a few minutes ago.

My attention returns to Damien, who is leaning against my car.

"I just bought that," I point out with a dark smile. "I'd rather there be no smudges on it."

"Killing some of mine without so much as a polite warning?" he drawls, gaze flicking down to his nails.

"Two succubae needlessly draining mortals of their life source doesn't garner you a polite warning. They're freshly registered, and barely cared I was killing them. Someone turned them against their will, and they wanted it to end."

His lips purse as he glances toward the burning house and back at me.

"Who could turn them against their will? I'm the only one in this region with the power to turn," he points out.

“Hence the reason why I didn’t give you a polite warning,” I state pointedly.

“If you’re accusing me of something, spit it out, Van Helsing, because I have something far more pressing to talk to you about.”

“More pressing than an illegal turning? It’s not the dark ages anymore, Damien. The more we’re exposed, the more vulnerable the gypsy—”

“Twenty-eight vampires were captured outside of Shadow Hills and reportedly hauled to the House of Arion,” he interrupts dryly, causing my brow to furrow.

“Why is that more important than this?”

“It’s rumored that they’re unregistered. Aren’t the unregistered vampires your responsibility? Since when does Shera take it upon herself to transport unregistered vamps over town lines? It’s unlikely she’s tidying up problems she doesn’t want to have.”

I exhale harshly, running a hand through my hair.

“Or it could be Isiah stepping up in Arion’s absence,” I point out. “He’s played a stronger role than Shera, even though she was appointed head in his absence.”

“Pfft. Shera rules the roost and you know it. Isiah just thinks he does more. I’m not concerned with theories or competitive vampire politics. I’m concerned with the fact there are twenty-eight unregistered fucking vampires inside town limits, and they were alive when escorted inside the home. Sounds like a Van Helsing should pay a visit,” he goes on, grinding his jaw. “These unregistered vampires recently

attacked a fucking Portocale who luckily managed to escape by the skin of her teeth, as I'm told."

Instead of even bothering to acknowledge that ludicrous possibility, considering Shera knows her fucking place, I pull my phone out and hand it to him.

"You have two missed calls from Violet," he says with a frown.

"The pictures, you idiot. Stop looking through my phone and look at the damn pictures I had it on."

He rolls his eyes, but then he cants his head when he sees the pictures.

"These women definitely aren't mine," he says with a very disconcerting grin.

"Whose are they?"

"Can't you tell by the marks on their necks? My brother always did love leaving a little trading card," he says in a droll tone as he passes my phone back to me.

I glance down, barely noticing a mark there. It's a dull, red mark that could easily be mistaken for a birthmark. "Dorian," I say harshly.

"Looks like an alpha forgot to report he was coming to town. Perhaps you should pay him a visit. Beat on his face a little," he suggests. "After you call Violet."

He lifts his phone and pulls it to his ear.

"Don't fucking call Dorian and tell him—"

"I'm checking my voicemail. The Portocale left one, but I assumed it was just to curse me more for being in her home

again.”

The world’s most impossible task: Being a fucking Van Helsing amongst unapologetic monsters.

Annoyed, I lift my phone and walk away from him, listening to the message she’s left me.

I hear his sharp intake of air, but before I can turn around, Violet’s trembling voice comes across the line.

“I really want to be found by a Van Helsing right now. We can consider it an even trade for the pocket watch.” I can hear the edge of terror she’s straining to cover up as she fights to keep her voice even. *“Anna, where are—”*

Her muffled shout cuts out as the message ends, and I look over my shoulder to see Damien lowering his phone as well.

“Where is she?” he snaps as I close my eyes.

My mind races, traveling down the roads like they’re directly in front of me, the scent of Portocale blood guiding me.

An echoed scream passes me when I get to a familiar junction, as though something happened here. Just a hint of Violet’s blood rests in the air.

The trail quickly continues, racing through my mind in a circle. A long, tiring, seemingly never-ending circle.

My eyes fly open as a growl rumbles out of me, and my gaze locks on Damien’s.

“Someone is running her in a loop. Or was. Only a few know that trick. Where’s Emit?” I ask him curtly.

He's already dialing someone, presumably the fucking mutt in question.

Straining my hearing, I listen as the wolf answers on a groan. "I really need to fucking sleep right now, so—"

"Violet's been spinning circles. Any chance you've nabbed her like the barbarian you are?" Damien asks him.

"Are you fucking shitting me right now?" Emit growls.

"You were overly sensitive to the fact she didn't want to kiss a dog when she could have a sex symbol. It's not a far stretch to assume you'd do something stupid, since she's leaving panicked calls and asking a Van Helsing to find her," he adds, proving the dick listened in on my message.

"I don't have her. I've spent the day trying not to think about her since you left my house. What do you mean she's leaving panicked calls and—"

Hanging up on Emit, Damien holds my gaze. "Twenty-eight unregistered vampires are transported into town just before Violet starts leaving cryptic messages for help. Arion bends the rules too much for Shera, and she knows more than she should."

I don't say anything else as I get inside my car, cursing myself for dealing with the succubae instead of answering Violet's calls. She's a constant distraction that is causing me to do a lot of stupid things, such as deciding on a whim to entrust her with one of my weapons.

Damien gets in beside me. "Your car is faster than mine," he says with a shrug. "And I parked ten miles downwind so you wouldn't smell or hear me coming. This matter isn't

settled. You're required to give me at least a courtesy call when exterminating—”

“Not. Now,” I bite out as I gas the car and sling us out on the road.

The extra boost of horsepower seems more feasible than ever, and I appreciate the new car more than I did when we hit one-forty in no time at all.

“Her mother knew her blood would smell suspiciously sweet to vampires. Why bring her to our fucking town?” I ask aloud.

“Marta Portocale stayed in town without a single vampire incident. Why is Violet different?” he volleys. “Violet is different because she's ignorant about our world, and they confuse ignorance as weakness. That Portocale is dangerous because she thinks like a true gypsy, and she adapts eerily quickly to things going on around her.”

“She's had the Forsaken Cult after her since she was born, I'm sure. Her father took off when she was thirteen, the most pivotal moment in every gypsy woman's life—the day she inherits her gifts and a curse—and survived a cold, harsh, and incredibly impatient woman like Marta, even seems to have loved and greatly respected her. It's not at all surprising she's able to adapt and adjust. You just don't know anything about her other than how far your tongue can go down her throat.”

I take a sharp curve, and I feel the dick grinning at me as I keep my eyes on the road. “You're as bad as Emit. It kills you two that she's showing interest in the only one of us who can't actually enjoy her.”

“You’re using your Morpheous charm on her—”

“I realize none of you believe me, but I merely lower—”

“Lower her inhibitions around me and see what happens,” I cut in, causing him to exhale as if exasperated.

“It’s not cheating if she still has the ability to walk away,” he defends like a sullen child.

“Which she did. Even after you cheated,” I point out with a smirk.

But the smugness dissipates as I near the town.

“What would Shera be up to if she is the one with Violet?” he asks, his mind seemingly jumping onto the same route as mine.

“Nothing that will end well for her,” I state quietly as the steering wheel whines under my grip. “Shera’s been far too compliant in his absence, almost as though she’s been biding her time. Violet wants to be found, but this loop is really hard to break through, so someone planned for that.”

“I was just starting to like Shera,” Damien says on a disappointed sigh.

Chapter 32

VIOLET

“It’s like a sea of bodies caught up in a never-ending orgy,” Anna says like she’s swooning, clearly seeing something entirely different than what’s going on.

Arion grins back over at me as he thumbs my chin and leans in, almost brushing his lips over mine. A cold chill shoots through my spine.

“My gifts are to pay you for the debt I owe you for springing me a little early and ruining Vance’s shiny, impenetrable coffin so that he’ll have to spend at least a couple of decades making a new one to hold me. I’ll be stronger this time. I’ve learned a few tricks in my absence,” he says, whispering the last part near my ear.

He’s watched them.

He wasn’t haunting them. He was fucking studying them.

“It’s awesome having your stupidity pointed out to you,” I say a little tightly, trying to sound like I’m composed, while silently hoping the cross around my neck has some sort of power against him.

He flashes that smile at me, though I can barely see it, because his face is still close enough for me to feel his breath ghosting my lips. I remember really hating life when I couldn’t feel his touch, and now...

He kisses a spot at the corner of my lips before brushing his lips over my cheek.

“Shera, get everyone out. I need a moment to explain Ms. Portocale’s gift to her,” he says in that same voice that put butterflies in my stomach when he was a harmless, helpful, caring, flattering ghost.

“You heard him!” her boyfriend shouts loudly, flailing his arms around like he’s shooing people out.

“Yes. They heard him,” Shera says like she’s scolding her boyfriend as she guides him out of the room.

Arion just continues grinning at me like I’m his new favorite toy, and I stare into the eyes I once wanted to be real.

It’s like a genie has granted a fucked up wish. This is why people don’t make wishes. They’re always loaded with unforeseen consequences.

“After your attack, I started doing some digging. It’s still a work in progress, but these are from two of the nests who underestimated you, and there’s more to come,” he elaborates in a tone that makes me believe he sees this all as romantic or something.

I...have no idea what to say. Kidnapping a girl and showering her with dead bodies as roses is not something I can adjust to at all. Nope.

Too much. Too soon.

My hands tremble.

“Thanks,” I say tightly, willing to play along, especially since his lips are on my neck again right now.

He sucks the skin into his mouth as he presses closer to me, and he releases a groan against my throat.

“You’re too tense,” he murmurs as he releases my skin. “You wanted me in the flesh, love. You know you did.”

“Do you know how to cure final decay?” I ask quietly, tensing again when he kisses his way down my throat and drags my body closer, angling me as he starts pushing my long shirt up my legs.

“I’m afraid it’s irreversible. Like all curses,” he says on a heavy exhale.

“Whoa. This guy is totally forward,” Anna says as she pops up beside us. “I like it.”

“I can tell you’re still terrified,” he says on a harsh exhale like he’s trying to be patient with me, and I idly note he’s not covered in blood smears. He also doesn’t have it all over his face—thankfully—the way horror movies depict.

Which is weird, given the amount of really dehydrated bodies in the room. It should be messy, like in that first room.

“You remember your gypsy promise?” he muses as a cold settles over me and snaps me out of my inner tangent.

“I’m not meant to uphold promises to people who betray me,” I point out with a glare.

“I’m not sure how I betrayed you,” he says with a smirk.

When I open my mouth to point out the very obvious, he continues on, talking before I can.

“I told you it was a long shot, and not to get your hopes up. I told you the oranges would lead the lost. I told you it would

calm the spirits. It did guide me. I was buried much deeper than the traditional six feet. Deep enough that I had no idea which way to actually dig because all the scents of the earth collided. I told you to loosen the soil, but you never asked why —”

“Because I started feeling redundant and trusted you,” I bite out, tears pricking my eyes for a whole new reason.

He cups my chin again, running his thumb along my jaw. “You trusted me because you thought I was dead and couldn’t share your secrets with anyone. You thought I had stock in ghosts not dying, so you trusted me more. Most gypsies don’t make eye contact,” he goes on. “In your mind, I was no threat.”

“How?” I ask him as I look up, refusing to let the tears fall.

“The others, well, they haven’t even been able to get you to seriously consider them, because you’re a Portocale,” he goes on, not answering my question. “Portocale gypsies don’t really trust anyone. Not even another Portocale.”

“I trust my mother,” I’m quick to argue. “And my father.”

“The human father who doesn’t have the ability to instruct you on how *or who* to be when he has no way to fathom the exact predicament you find yourself in? The one who knows nothing about your true life, because you have to keep it all quiet, since you’re worried he’ll run again when he hears what your new life is shaping up to look like?” he asks, using our long chats on my bed against me right now.

I word-vomited my life story one piece at a time, fortunately leaving out the darkest, most dangerous secrets.

And he's one of those people who uses it against a girl.

"I trust my mother," I amend.

"Your dead mother who's not here, even though she knows you can easily see her and she could still be here for you? The mother who sent you to a town full of monsters with no warning?" he volleys.

"Damn. He doesn't pull punches when he's trying to hurdle you right into Stockholm's Syndrome," Anna states like she's impressed. "Just give in. I've heard it can be hot," she adds very seriously.

"Mom's obviously being hunted—"

"The only ones who hunt spirits are other Portocale gypsies. They can't consume one of their own kind, so they can't rid the world of a gypsy spirit. In fact, the Portocale gypsy spirits are very likely the reason the town is under mounds of snow right now. They're entirely too pissed about the fact the Portocale Council hasn't found your mother's killers, and they're probably reminding them they're still waiting for results."

He says it all as though it's common knowledge and I'm supposed to already know. I have no idea if he's telling the truth or just spewing bullshit to warp my head.

"I'm going to help you figure out a way to ease the curse —"

"Ease the curse?" I ask incredulously.

"There's always a way to ease it, but every curse is irrevocable, in most cases."

He's talking in circles. I know a good circle-talk when I hear it. I grew up with the best circle-talker there ever was.

His fingertips dance along my neck, since he's shown a lot of attention to my throat, unsurprisingly, given the fact he's a starved vampire.

He steps between my legs again as he stares directly into my eyes.

"What do you want from me?" I finally decide to ask, clearing my throat.

"He wants you to get Stockholm's," Anna dutifully reminds me.

My eyes stay on his as his lips twitch in a grin.

"Why trick me into breaking you free? What are you planning to do?" I go on.

"Isn't it as obvious to you as it is to me, Violet?" he murmurs as he leans over, nuzzling the side of my face with his like he can't stop touching me.

I'm so numbed by terror that I barely feel it, but I unfortunately do feel a little of his touch, and small pieces of my mind fuse that with him being Ace. The man I've talked for weeks about anything and almost everything.

The one who listened and didn't seem at all as psychotic as he does right now as...*Arion*.

"There's not a war on the horizon," he says like he's assuring me. "The wars have already been fought. The bloodshed will never be over, but bloodshed and war are very

different,” he says when I stare vacantly ahead at the bodies still piled up as my *gift* for raising him.

I have no idea if they’re really affiliated with the ones who took me, considering no one else has bothered following up to see if the dead girl is really dead now that four unimportant vampire assassins have gone missing.

“You,” he goes on, lifting me on the bar as the song changes to *Weak* by AJR, “are simply the beginning of the end of the story,” he continues saying as he carries me.

I remain a board of dead weight in his arms as he puts me down, and begins dancing with me, singing along with the lyrics like this song was turned on just for him.

His voice is almost hauntingly enchanting, and as he tips his head back to really enjoy the lyrics while dancing me around the room full of corpses, I try to just stare at his chest, worried what I’ll see if my gaze strays around the massacre.

Don’t panic, Violet. There’s no need. You can’t die.

More of Mom’s words try cajoling me as my breaths get quicker and quicker.

Oblivious to the panic attack I’m barely staving off, he keeps dancing as the song flips again to a salsa-dancing melody.

“And by that, I don’t mean *the end*. I simply mean you’re the beginning of whatever in the fucking hell happens next, because it’s time to move the fuck on,” he prattles on, holding me closer as he lifts me and spins me over one dead body.

I swallow the bile in my throat as I’m lowered back to the ground, and he kisses the top of my head, an action that both

terrifies and soothes me.

Head kisses are reserved for concern and tenderness. Affection without sexual undertones.

“I like this monster. You dance around an orgy with him, and he doesn’t hide that he wants you,” Anna says on an awed sigh. “Give in to the Stockholm’s.”

I feel Arion’s grin against my forehead.

“Our story started in another country, in another language, and in a much different time. It started with a brotherhood of gypsies...until one woman. Then it devolved quickly into betrayal, lies, rage and a legion of curses we’re still stuck with for possibly all eternity,” he tells me conversationally as he sways to the new song: *Lips of an Angel*.

“Gypsies?” I ask on a rasp as I snap out of my trance and look up, finding his cold, dark eyes on mine.

His slow grin forms. “You think I’m the only one who’s hidden my true identity, Violet?” he muses as a hand slips into my hair.

I hiss out a pained breath from the tender scalp that hasn’t stopped fully aching, and he frowns as he stares expectantly.

“I was put in my place before getting tossed in here to stand before the vampire alpha,” is all the explanation I give him.

“I’m sure Shera is currently handling that. Good vampire help has always been hard to find,” he says by way of what I think is an apology.

I barely resist the urge to snort, since I'd rather he not be pissed off by me being disrespectful or something.

“But yes, Violet. The alphas in this town, and every other fault line, are most certainly from strong gypsy bloodlines,” he adds, sending a chill up my spine.

“Wait. That means they can see me,” Anna says incredulously.

Arion grins down at me. “First rule of being a gypsy: Never make eye contact with the dead.”

“Why wouldn't they have told you that?” Anna asks me.

“Second rule of being a gypsy with pride,” Arion answers for me with a little shrug and a wicked smirk. “Never trust a gypsy, because you don't know if they have pride or not, unless you're a prideless gypsy.”

“Gypsies with pride are rare these days,” I say, echoing my mother's words with my eyes fixed on Arion.

“Yet you have pride, don't you, love? Can I kiss you?” he asks so randomly, and I actually startle when he leans over like he's going to try.

He immediately pulls back, sighing as he shakes his head.

“You're clearly not understanding what I'm telling you. I'm giving you the world right now, Violet. Four alphas you could reunite around your sweet Portocale blood and effortless intrigue.”

“Is he seriously asking you to be their happily-ever-after?” Anna asks like she can't believe what she's hearing, giving me

a phantom slap on the arm like she's making sure I'm paying attention to the screwed-up situation at hand.

What else could I possibly be focused on in this moment?

"Yes," Arion says as he looks over at Anna.

She squeals when he makes eye contact.

"I am," he adds, looking back down at me with a dark grin.

"Oh! Violet, do it! You have to do it! I will die the happiest-ever woman if I know you're about to be the happy ending to a monster orgy love story."

I wish someone would try to kill me so I could faint and get it over with.

"The others will take a little work, but you've already started laying the groundwork, unintentionally, so it shouldn't be too terribly hard to make them see the way. Especially given how exquisitely intrigued with you they *all* are," he assures me. "I'd like to think we've all grown a lot over these past few centuries."

I wonder about the speed a vampire alpha might have, when I glimpse an orange on the table. The reddish tint to it and the sweet, familiar scent in the air reminds me how quickly that orange went missing in front of the cemetery.

And I never even caught a glimpse of anyone taking it.

That window seems a lot farther away all of the sudden.

"He's my favorite monster ever!" Anna says as she starts dancing around the dead bodies she thinks are having sex. "And he's *almost* as hot as Damien. Maybe equal with the sexy savage, even though the savage has slightly harder abs."

But still, the vampire is just a peg down from the gay Van Helsing,” she adds. Then, in an assuring tone, she looks at Arion. “You’re still super hot. Just not *as* hot as them. And your personality makes up for what you lack in abs. The other guys have eight. You barely have six. Is that because you’ve been buried a while. Is that why you’re so pale, or is it the vampire thing?”

She continues rambling, but I tune her out.

I’m stuck in a room with a psychotic vampire and an insane ghost, and no one will kill me so I can pass out for a little while and reboot.

“Do you see, Violet?” he asks me seriously as he tosses salt over his left shoulder.

Anna is unceremoniously kicked out of the room, either because she’s annoying him, or because she ranked him too low on her hot-monster tier.

My one piece of security is ripped out with her ejection, and the chill settles deeper into my bones.

He steeple his hands in front of his face, studying me like he’s trying to figure out which angle is best to crack me from. My hands have taken a white-knuckle grip on the edge of the counter I’ve been backed against, as I continuously flick my gaze to the window closest to me.

My breath rushes out again when I find myself sitting atop the counter once more, and the vampire is magically missing from in front of me.

It’s when the music cuts out that I look back over at him, seeing him lowering a remote that he’s apparently got no

trouble using. I guess he spent time stalking the twenty-first century's new amenities.

He starts singing, distracting me with an old song I can remember my mother singing while we did double-dutch jump-roping with my father.

I barely even hear him singing the words, because my mother's voice rises up in my head with the dusty, old memory, and I feel that lyrical charm wash over me with remembered feelings of laughter and me tripping over the rope every single time I reached thirteen.

No true gypsy can jump the rope more than thirteen times. It's how you know you're a gypsy, according to Mom. I was so excited I was going to be a gypsy when I turned thirteen.

"The tea leaves warned of blood and death. Four gypsy first-borns breathed the last breath. War! War! Beyond the double-dutch doors. Sing, sweet gypsies, who will be mistaken no more..."

Arion stands in front of me as my mother's voice trails off in my head, and I see the knowing smirk on his lips.

"Strike a memory, love?"

He backs up and starts singing again as violin music starts playing in the background to the same tune my mother sang.

"Six gypsy families all stood nigh. Five gypsy families for one sacrifice. Four gypsy families broken apart. Three gypsy families turned cold of heart. Two gypsy families couldn't back down. One gypsy family went underground."

He moves toward me, his intense eyes trained on mine as he resumes singing, and I hear his voice over my mother's

when he continues on his slow approach to me.

“Forever is such a long time to bleed. Worst are the gypsies brought to their knees. Sing, gypsies, sing of your lies. Never trust a gypsy with no gypsy pride. Sing, gypsies, sing of your truths.”

He pauses, caging me in as his lips move to be too close to mine, eyes locked and waiting expectantly. “What’s the last line, Violet?” he asks me.

Swallowing thickly, it takes my lips moving a few times before words will come out.

“The apples have all rotted; the oranges just bruised,” I say on a rasp whisper.

A sinister, slow grin crawls across his lips like I’ve said the magic words.

“I have no idea what any of that means. It was just a twisted song that my mother would sing on occasion, and we turned it into a double-dutch chant.”

“You’ve missed the story is all I’m telling you, which is such a good thing, sweet gypsy girl. You don’t bear the scars of the past. That horrific tale has already been written. No one ever hears what happens *next*—after they finish a tale. No one sings songs of a brighter future. Everything is always about the bloody war, no matter what story is told. You’re the chapter just after the epilogue...the part where life actually begins... again.”

I’m sure he finds that not at all confusing and very much poetic, given the look in his eyes. I’m worried he thinks this is a date, and I’m not sure how those signals got so crossed.

When he just continues staring at me expectantly, like he's waiting on my permission to kiss me, I turn my head. I'd love to push him away and get a little space between us, but I keep my grip safely on the edge of the counter.

“So,” I say while clearing my throat and staring blankly at the wall across the room where five bodies are piled up, “you want me to be your chapter after the epilogue, after tricking me into getting you out of the ground—”

“Ah, love, don't be so sore about that. It was only another two or so years that I was going to have to remain in that hell hole,” he says dismissively as he leans over, running his nose along the side of my throat as I continue to stare at the wall.

“And,” I go on, undeterred, “you think I'm destined to be shared between the four of you—”

“Not destiny. Destiny turned its back on us long ago when we went against the natural order,” he interrupts. “You're just the perfect hiccup in the universe because you can change everything. Life debts can be paid, pain can stop, vengeance can finally be over...”

He lets his confusing sentence trail off.

“And you sing a double-dutch song that makes no sense, yet expect me to just do...what exactly?”

His lips twitch as his eyes narrow. “All I want to do is feel your touch right now, sweet gypsy. I've been stuck underground and you're the only one who saw my projection —”

“Projection?” I ask on a shaky breath as his hands move to my hips and drag me back to the edge again, just as I'd finally

gotten myself pushed back.

“You’re the only one who saw me,” he says quieter. “And I haven’t felt any sort of touch in over a century.”

It’s understandable that he’s completely insane, and since he seems moderately obsessed with just touching me in non-sexual places and not trying to eat me, I decide to keep him happy. Like any good captive.

“How could I see you if other gypsies couldn’t?”

“Maybe because you have so much gypsy pride,” he points out, feeling my relaxing body and groaning against my throat when I ease my hands up his chest.

A rumble of appreciation sounds from his chest as he adds, “You have so much gypsy pride that any prideless gypsy would happily bare their soul to you. I’ve been resisting since I got my hands on you, because my soul would terrify such an innocent gypsy.”

Well...that’s far less poetic and very much a reminder of the dangerous game at hand.

He told me how to play Damien, and it’s the only lesson I have to fall back on with aggressive monsters.

A sound of pleasure seems to vibrate from him as I simply let my hands glide over his chest and up to his shoulders. I even give a little massaging squeeze to his shoulders that has him shuddering against me.

“If I were Emit, my tail would be wagging right now,” he says, his grin spreading against my neck.

I blink a few times, stopping myself from smiling, so that I don't *actually* end up with Stockholm's. It seems like laughing at your captor's unexpected jokes is the first step down the dark road.

I'm still hoping the lying gypsy monster hunter shows up.

A door crashes somewhere in the house, and Arion's head pops up as he looks over my shoulder, a slow, calculated, dark grin tugging at his lips as he cups my chin.

Someone shouts and something else crashes, and I actually end up leaning into my captor, because he, unfortunately, seems like the safest option at the moment.

"It's going to get ugly, love. You should probably go home," he says like simply leaving has been an option all along. "I'll take that kiss later."

My head turns when I hear someone throw open the double doors to the room, and a full body sigh of relief crashes through me when I see Vance stepping inside.

His eyes widen, and Damien comes to the same wide-eyed, abrupt halt beside him as they both stare in shock and anger at the man I'm essentially pressed fully against.

"Would you boys like to warm yourself by the fire?" Arion draws. "It's rather cold outside."

Vance takes a step forward, jaw grinding as a sword slides free from the little handle tucked in his hand.

Arion's grin only grows as he leans over to whisper in my ear. I don't even really hear what he says, but I feel a warmth in my chest and a little dazed just before he releases me and steps to the side.

“How exactly did you get out?” Damien asks him as he slowly moves toward me. “Vampires can’t walk those grounds.”

Arion just smirks and moves toward the fireplace, as though this is all casual. “Yes, well, I’m an alpha vampire. You know what that means.”

I don’t, so I wish he’d elaborate.

“How did you get out?” Vance asks in that voice he’s used on me before, and the urge to confess bubbles out of me.

“It’s my fault,” I blurt out.

All the gazes in the room swing to me, and Arion’s grin only grows larger.

“Van Helsing’s aren’t the only ones who can walk consecrated grounds,” Arion drawls. “But don’t blame her. Obviously she had no choice in the matter,” he easily lies.

I open my mouth to argue, but no words come out in my defense.

“That casket of yours will be quite pointless, though, so it looks like I’m here to stay,” Arion states as he lifts the remote, turns on some more upbeat music, and starts dancing back around the bodies.

Vance’s gaze darts to me for a brief second before returning to Arion, but Damien has disappeared.

The scent of cigar smoke has me turning back around to see Arion finishing up lighting one, waving a match until the fire turns to smoke once he’s finished.

He puffs the cigar and dances carelessly while saying, “It’s a wicked new century, don’t you think?”

Vance doesn’t answer, and I keep my gaze trained on the vampire in the room.

He lifts a knife from the table, flips it over in his hand, and I tense as he smirks over at me.

Vance shouts something as Arion flings the knife, and my eyes screw shut as it flies at me.

A harsh grunt has my eyes cracking open, and an exhale of relief comes out of me when I see the knife suspended in mid-air next to my face. But then my eyebrows lift as Damien comes into view, blood dripping around the knife wound in his hand that was apparently reaching for me.

He glares at Arion as he rips the knife from the center of his palm.

“You can see me?” Damien growls at him.

“Everyone can see you right now,” Arion answers with a shrug.

I open my lips again to speak, but I remember why I can’t this time. I made a gypsy promise. Gypsy promises come at the cost of gypsy pride if broken, even when one is tricked into a promise under false pretenses.

“You don’t get to save her,” Arion adds with a smirk, his eyes trained on me. “She’s free to go, so she doesn’t actually need saving.”

“Then I think it’s time she left. You and I should have a talk,” Vance says to Arion, even as Damien steps out in front

of me.

Swallowing thickly, I carefully hop off the bar.

I start to leave, but then remember the fact I now have a vampire stalker to add to my list of monster problems. It's best to show respect in a home of a gypsy alpha vampire, regardless of the circumstances that brought me here. Especially if I want to stay on his good side.

Something tells me that leaving Shadow Hills right now would be damn near impossible. I have a feeling he'd hunt me just to carry through with his really insane plan of me somehow reuniting the band of monster brothers he's stalked from his grave. Literally.

I used to think my life was complicated. I feel silly now that it's actually gotten extremely complicated.

Damien hisses out a breath when I move toward Arion, and Arion's lips twitch as I approach.

"Violet," Vance bites out like he's chastising me.

Arion just smirks down at me when I reach him, and I get up on my tiptoes as he leans down. Without overthinking it, I quickly press a kiss to his cheek, the way my mother instructed me to do if I ever visited another gypsy's home.

His arm snakes around my waist before I can withdraw, and the show of respect backfires when I worry he's not going to let go.

"I'll see you later, sweet gypsy," he murmurs close to my ear before releasing me.

I'm not sure if it's a threat or simply a warning, but I turn and walk away the second his grip loosens.

Vance's jaw is grinding as I near him, and his hand comes up to my chin, cupping it and gently halting the retreat I really want to make.

His eyes flick over my cheek that hasn't started healing yet, and he cuts a lethal gaze toward Arion.

"The bloke who left that mark should be ready soon," I hear the freshly risen vampire answering from the right, instead of the left, where I expect his voice to come from.

My eyes dart to where Arion is standing behind the bar as Vance releases my chin. As if summoned, the doors open on the other side of the room, and a large keg rolls in, loudly sloshing around.

"Ah, there he is. Anyone else want a drink?" Arion asks as he goes to lift the keg with one hand.

The doors behind him close without anyone ever coming into view.

My stomach churns when I realize Lurch's blood must have been drained into that keg.

Without hesitating more than I already have, I turn and walk out, hearing Arion talking behind me.

"I knew I'd come back to a mess if you weak-balled prats were in charge all on your own for a damn century," Arion is saying conversationally. "I have quite a few people to kill, it seems."

I walk a lot faster, ignoring the chill up my spine as I take in the gravity of the situation. For at least the next two years he was supposed to be buried, anything he does will be all my fault, because I was the stupid, trusting gypsy who made eye contact and let a ghost lead me.

Damien takes two seconds to join me at my side, following me out to my van that has been parked in the driveway like I drove myself here.

My knees give out before I can make it halfway there.

END OF BOOK 1.

AUTHOR NOTE—

Don't kill me. Please. This would have been a nine thousand page book if I'd tried writing it without a cliff-hanger. The story moves the slowest in the first book, and gradually builds speed and momentum. Violet's story wouldn't allow me to start in the middle. I had to start at the beginning, and that's a first for me. It's the beginning of the end... according to Arion.

I love this series. I hope you do too. I'll be releasing the second book in about three weeks. Thank you for giving it a shot! <3

As always, I love the hell out of you.

xx,

C.M.

