

## Chapter 15

Violet

I began walking, feeling three pair of eyes burning in my back—but I had already made my decision. Whatever was in that box, whatever it had to say, I would deal with it.

I was afraid, petrified—but it had to be done. It was only fair.

About one hour in, nothing had happened yet. So far so good.

I wasn't completely fine, though. With the others, it took about an hour for the first signs to show, and now that I was past that mark, I felt a tight feeling in my chest. I was mortified of what might come next.

The others kept a close eye on me, as if all three of them were ready to jump in if I couldn't handle it. I tried to stay relaxed, tried to breathe—but every muscle in my body was tensed, waiting for disaster.

"We're almost halfway," Dylan encouraged. "If we keep up this tempo, we'll be there in no time."

I nodded, my lips feeling way too dry to even form a sentence. The walk reminded me of the beginning of a bad fever. You knew it was coming, you just didn't know when.

Then, I heard it.

'Violet.'

My name was getting whispered over and over. The voices sounded like several older women, all calling out to me but none of them were in synch. I tried to keep my cool, glancing around quickly, but no one else seemed to notice, so I kept walking—determined to ignore it.

It was useless because it didn't make the whispers stop.

'Tell them about your glasses.'

The voices grew louder, coming from everywhere at once. They came from the box, the woods, even inside my head—and it was starting to get to me.

I gulped, gripping the box in my hands even tighter, pretending like nothing was happening. I couldn't let them see me freak out. Not yet.

'Tell them the glasses are to control you, to hide you from what you really are.'

'Open the box, and we won't bother you anymore.'

The voices multiplied, first it were three, then six, and now I couldn't keep count anymore.

'He hates you. Your brother wants you dead. The fraud wants you gone.'

'The beast craves you, but the man rejects you. He'll never want you.'

'I can see your future. Bound by fate, but torn by greed and desire.'

I focused on keeping my feet moving, trying to convince myself that none of it was real—but so far, everything the voices had said had been disturbingly spot on. These whispers knew my past, my present—and possible my future.

'You need to tell them about the glasses.'

'Open the box, Violet. Do it and we'll leave you alone.'

'Remove the glasses!'

'Open it.'

'Open the box.'

My throat tightened as I swallowed, trying to block out the voices.

'Do you want to see us? Do you want to know what Claire was hiding from you? Remove the glasses.'

'Open the box. The truth is waiting.'

Mom?

My fingers twitched around the box at the sound of her name. Mom had never kept anything from me—this had to be illusions, tricks to get in my head.

'Take them off. They're hiding you. Open the box.'

'Don't you know you're one of us? You silly girl.'

'She's not one of us. She's the devil's child!'

The voices laughed inside my head, and kept on multiplying until it felt like there were over fifty of them. My heart pounded, I couldn't focus. I was losing it, going crazy—but I couldn't let anyone see. I couldn't let them see me as weak. Not here, not now.

Just a bit longer, Violet.

'Leave her alone!' Another voice broke through the many. This one was different—gentler.

The other voices faded for a few seconds, leaving a moment of silence. Then I heard it again—yelling, screaming, the sound of pure panic.

'It's Adelaide, run!' one voice shouted before vanishing into the background, and then, everything went quiet.

Adelaide?

My head spun, hearing that name. I'd heard it before—it was the name Esther had accidentally called me.

It was the name of the girl in the picture with Mom, her best friend.

Why would they call out her name?

'Drop the box, Violet,' the same kind voice urged.

Like I was in a trance, I moved without thinking and dropped the box. There was a loud thud on the ground, all heads turned to me.

The panic I had been holding back, slowly began to release itself, and before I could stop it, tears blurred my vision.

"Violet!" Dylan rushed to my side, then wrapped his arms around me. When he held me close, I realized I had been shaking. I tried so hard to keep it together, but it was all too much. The voices, the whispers, the temptation.

A sob escaped my throat, and I buried my head into Dylan's chest.

"It's okay," he whispered, hugging me tightly. "You're okay."

I clung to him, forgetting every bit of tension or disagreement we'd ever had. None of that mattered anymore. I just wanted to disappear from the embarrassment. I couldn't bear the thought of facing anyone, and I definitely wasn't in the mood for Kylan's mocking or cold words.

All I wanted to understand was why I'd heard Adelaide's voice—and how she knew my name.

"This isn't working," Dylan said, rubbing my back. "We're making camp."

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We gathered around the fire, our only source of light in the dark. I didn't like the dark, I didn't like voices—and now I had dealt with both of it.

I kept glancing around nervously, expecting for something or someone to jump from the shadows. The box carried so many voices—there surely had to be some kind of presence around.

Clearing my throat, I shifted uncomfortably as I tried to distract myself from their piercing gazes. Kylan and Nate hadn't said much, but I could see the way they looked at me.

They pitied me.

Yes, Kylan pitied me.

Eager to break the silence, I reached into my bag and pulled out a pack of protein bars. "I got snacks!" I waved the bag around with an awkward smile. "Anyone wants some?"

No one reacted. They just kept staring at me, as if they were waiting for me to fall apart any second. "Your loss," I shrugged, ripping open the wrapper.

"We should've never let her carry that thing," Nate was the first to speak, his voice filled with regret.

I looked at him, then shifted my gaze to Kylan, who was staring directly into my eyes. His gaze was all over the place—confused, irritated and...concerned?

Was my reaction really that bad for Kylan to look concerned?

"I think the box is connected to the ancient dark witches," Dylan spoke.

Kylan, still staring at me—finally looked away and focused on Dylan. "What do you mean?"

"These witches," Dylan began, "they source their energy from gold—in this case, the box. They can't physically harm us, but they play with your mind," he glanced at me before looking back at the box in front of him. "They manipulate those who carry big secrets or show fear."

So the box was fed by big secrets and fear?

As it went dead silent again, I knew the box had found its right candidates.

"Rochwall must've given us this box to see if we can work as a team, to test our ability to trust one another," Dylan continued. "He wanted to make us think as a team to solve some ridiculous challenge—like fighting a bear or some other creature—but we're only fighting ourselves."

Kylan scoffed, glancing down at the ground. Nate left out the scoff, but his reaction was pretty much the same.

These were people trained for every physical altercation, but now that it was something emotional, they didn't know how to handle it.

"Is there a way to stop this?" Nate asked, his voice careful.

Dylan nodded. "Yes," he said, squeezing his eyes shut, and I already didn't like where it was going. "The way to break the spell is to share your fears and your biggest secret."

Everyone let out a collective sigh, knowing what was awaiting us. A knot formed in my stomach at the thought of opening up. I'd always been a private person, and I wasn't ready to share anything.

But it didn't matter—the box demanded, and now we had to deliver.