

MARGARET ROGERSON

# VESPERTINE

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# ONE

**I**f I hadn't come to the convent's cemetery to be alone, I wouldn't have noticed the silver gleam of the censer lying abandoned at the base of a tombstone. Every novice and sister carried one, a thurible on a chain to defend ourselves against the Dead, and I recognized this censer by its shape and its tracery of black tarnish as belonging to Sophia, one of the youngest novices, brought to the convent only last winter. When I crouched down and touched it, the metal still felt warm. I had to press my wrist against it to be sure, because my scarred hands weren't good at telling temperature.

I knew right away that Sophia hadn't dropped it while climbing trees or playing among the tombstones. She wouldn't have burned incense unless something had really frightened her; even children knew that incense was too precious to waste.

I straightened and looked toward the chapel. A bitter wind whipped loose strands of my braid around my face, lashing tears

from my eyes, so it took me a moment to locate the ravens sheltering beneath the eaves, huddled against the mossy gray stone. All of them were black, except for one. He sat apart from the rest, nervously preening his snow-white feathers, which the wind kept ruffling in the wrong direction.

“Trouble,” I called. I felt in my pocket for a crust of bread. As soon as I held it out, he launched himself from the roof in a wind-buffed flurry and landed on my arm, his claws pricking through my sleeve. He tore apart the bread, then eyed me for more.

He shouldn’t be alone. He was already missing a few feathers, cruelly plucked out by the other birds. When he’d first come to the convent, they’d left him in a bloody heap in the cloister, and he had almost died even after I’d taken him to my room in the dormitory and pried his beak open every few hours to give him bread and water. But I was an older novice and I had too many responsibilities—I couldn’t watch over him all the time. Once he’d healed, I had given him to Sophia to look after. Now wherever she went, Trouble followed, especially indoors, where she had a habit of upsetting the sisters by hiding him inside her robes.

“I’m looking for Sophia,” I told him. “I think she’s in danger.”

He fanned out the feathers on his throat and muttered to himself, a series of clicks and grunts, as though thinking this over. Then he mimicked in a little girl’s voice, “Good bird. Pretty bird. Crumbs!”

“That’s right. Can you take me to Sophia?”

He considered me with a bright, intelligent eye. Ravens were clever animals, sacred to the Gray Lady, and thanks to Sophia, he knew more human speech than most. At last, seeming to understand, he spread his wings and flapped to the tumble of earth and stone that shored up the chapel’s rear wall. He hopped along the

length of a slab and peered into a dark space beneath.

A hole. Last night's storm must have eroded the chapel's foundation, opening an old passageway into the crypt.

He looked back at me. "Dead," he croaked.

My blood ran cold. Sophia hadn't taught him to say that word.

"Dead," Trouble insisted, puffing his feathers. The other ravens stirred, but they didn't take up the alarm.

He had to be mistaken. Blessings reinforced each stone of the convent's walls. Our lichgate had been forged by holy sisters in Chantclere. And yet . . .

The passageway yawned beneath a fringe of dangling roots. I had approached it without thinking. I knew what I should do—I should go running back and alert Mother Katherine. But Sophia was too young to carry a dagger, and she'd lost her censer. There wasn't time.

I unhooked the censer that hung from my chatelaine. Gritting my teeth, I forced my clumsy fingers to open the tiny hatch and fumble with flint and incense. The scars were the worst on my left hand, where the shiny red tissue that roped my palm had contracted over time and pulled my fingers into permanent claws. I could close them into a loose fist, but I couldn't open them all the way. As I worked, I thought of Sister Lucinde, who wore a ring set with an old, cracked ruby. The ring had a saint's relic sealed inside, whose power allowed her to light candles with a mere gesture.

Finally, the spark caught. I blew on the incense until embers flared. Then, wreathed in smoke, I stepped into the dark.

Blackness swallowed me. The smell of wet earth closed in, as smothering as a damp rag clapped over my nose. The opening's thin, watery light faded away almost at once, but like all girls taken in by the Gray Sisters, I possessed the Sight.

Strands of light swirled around me like cobwebs, their ghostly

shapes resolving into a contorted face, a reaching hand. Shades. Groups of them congregated in places such as these, drawn to graves and ruins. They were a type of First Order spirit, frail and nearly formless. Their fingers plucked at my skin as though searching for a loose thread to unravel, but they posed little harm. As I hurried past, the smoke that spilled from my censer mingled with their translucent forms. Sighing, they dispersed along with the incense.

Shades were so common that Trouble wouldn't have paid them any mind. Only something more dangerous, a Second Order spirit or higher, would have caught his attention.

"Sophia?" I called.

Nothing answered but echoes of my own voice.

The wavering ghost-light revealed niches filled with yellowed bones and scraps of decayed linen. Nuns were traditionally interred in the tunnels surrounding the crypt, but the age of these remains surprised me. They looked centuries old, crumbling and clotted with cobwebs—older than the Sorrow, when the Dead first rose to torment the living. If this section of the tunnel had been sealed off at some point in the convent's distant past, it was possible a spirit had risen from one of these piles of bones and haunted the catacombs for years without anyone knowing.

A sound shivered through the passageway's thick underground silence, almost too soft to identify. A child's sob.

I broke into a run.

The shades whipped through me, each touch a sudden shock of cold. My censer banged against my robes until I wrapped the chain tightly around my hand. I drew it in front of my face in the defensive position taught to me by Sister Iris, the convent's battle mistress.

A glow bathed a bend in the tunnel ahead. When I rounded the

corner, my stomach turned to stone. Sophia had climbed into a niche to hide, her face buried in the knees of her robes. Hovering just outside, a ghoulish form peered in at her, the crown of its bald head visible over a hunched and knobby spine. A shroud flowed weightlessly around its cadaverous body, shining with an unearthly silver light.

For a heartbeat, I stood frozen. The last seven years melted away and I was a child again. I smelled hot ash and burning flesh; my hands throbbed with phantom pain.

But that had been before the Gray Sisters found me. Before they had saved me—and taught me that I could fight back.

I slid my dagger from its sheath. The spirit whipped around, alerted by the whisper of steel against leather. It had the hollowed face of an emaciated corpse, its lips shriveled back from an oversized set of teeth that took up nearly half its skull, bared in a permanent grimace. There were no eyes above, only empty sockets.

Sophia lifted her head. Tears shone through the dirt on her cheeks. “Artemisia!” she yelled.

The spirit’s form blurred and vanished. Instinct saved my life. I turned and swung the censer, so when the spirit reappeared a handspan in front of my face, the incense held it at bay. A groan shuddered from its jaws. It flickered out of existence again.

Before it could re-form, I lunged forward and threw myself in front of Sophia’s niche, already swinging my censer in a well-practiced pattern. Only the most powerful spirits could pass through a barrier of incense smoke. To reach Sophia, it would have to fight me first.

I knew what it was now. A common Second Order spirit called a gaunt, the corrupted soul of someone who had died of starvation. Though known for their speed, gaunts were fragile. A single well-placed blow could destroy them.

I raised my dagger. Gray Sisters wielded misericordes: long, thin

blades designed precisely for such a strike. “Sophia, are you hurt?”

She sniffed loudly, then said, “I don’t think so.”

“Good. Do you see my dagger? If anything happens to me, promise me you’ll take it. I hope you won’t have to, but you need to promise. Sophia?”

She hadn’t responded. The gaunt reappeared near the bend in the tunnel and flickered closer, zigzagging an erratic path toward us.

“I promise,” she whispered.

She understood the danger of possession. If a spirit managed to gain control of a person’s body, it could break through barriers designed to repel its kind, even walk among the living undetected for a time. Luckily for most people, only the Sighted were vulnerable to possession. Otherwise Loraille would have been overrun by the Dead long ago.

Another flicker. I sliced my dagger through the air just as the gaunt materialized in front of me, its bony hands grasping. The consecrated blade etched a line of golden fire across its shroud. My breath stopped as the fabric dissolved into vapor, laying bare the unharmed sinew beneath. I had only caught its sleeve.

Its hand closed around my wrist. Splinters of cold shot up the nerves of my arm, wrenching a cry from my throat. I struggled to free myself, but it held my wrist fast, captured in the space between us. Past its clawlike nails, its face swam into focus: drawing closer, the huge jaws parting as though breathing in my pain, sampling the taste. Any moment now my numb fingers would no longer be able to grip the dagger’s hilt.

Deliberately, I dropped it. Sophia screamed. As the gaunt’s attention caught on the glint of falling steel, I grabbed my censer in my bad hand and drove it upward into the spirit’s chest.

It looked at me in surprise. Then it coughed up a trickle of

smoke. I thrust the censer higher, barely feeling the metal's heat. The gaunt shrieked, an eerie, echoing sound that sent a shock wave of cold through the tunnel, stirring the brittle bones in their niches. It arched its spine and clawed at its chest, its form blurring in every direction, violently shredding apart, until it suddenly exploded into wisps of glowing fog.

Sophia's uneven breathing was the only sound as the tunnel darkened. I knew I should say something to reassure her, but I could barely move for the pain in my frozen wrist. It was coming alive again in waves of pins and needles, and there were already lines of bruised-looking purple where the gaunt had touched me and blighted my skin.

"Artemisia?" Her voice scratched like a mouse behind a wall.

"I'm fine," I said. I hoped that was true in case I needed to fight again, but I doubted I would. A single gaunt might escape Mother Katherine's notice, but she wouldn't fail to sense the presence of more. I turned to Sophia and let her climb down into my arms. "Can you stand up?"

"I'm not a baby," she protested, brave now that the danger had passed. But as I poured her onto the ground, she abruptly seized my robes, jolting a stab of pain from my wrist. "Look!"

Light seeped into the tunnel ahead, throwing a crooked shadow across the wall. It was accompanied by the sound of hoarse, indistinct muttering. Relief flooded me. I knew of only one person who would be wandering down here talking to herself.

"Don't worry. It isn't another spirit. It's just Sister Julianne."

Sophia clutched me tighter. "That's worse," she whispered.

As Sister Julianne shuffled into view, still muttering, her face hidden by draggled waist-length hair lit white by the lantern, I had to admit that Sophia had a point.



Julienne was the convent's holy woman. She dwelled as a hermit in the chapel's crypt, watching over the holy relic of Saint Eugenia. Her unwashed robes reeked so pungently of sheep's tallow that my eyes began to water at her approach.

Sophia stared, eyes wide as saucers; then she knelt and scooped up my dagger, silently pressing it into my hand.

Sister Julienne didn't seem to notice. We might as well have been invisible. She shuffled past us, close enough that her hem trailed over our shoes, up to the niche that Sophia had just vacated. I strained to make out what she was mumbling as she poked the disturbed bones back into order.

"Heard it down here for years, moaning and wailing . . . finally quiet now . . . Sister Rosemary, wasn't it? Yes, yes. A hard year, a terrible famine, so many dead . . ."

My skin prickled. I didn't know of anyone named Sister Rosemary. But I suspected that if I checked the convent's oldest records, I would find her.

Sophia tugged on my robes. She whispered in my ear, without taking her eyes from Sister Julienne, "Is it true she eats novices?"

"Ha!" Sister Julienne exclaimed, wheeling on us. Sophia started. "Is that what they're saying about me now? Good! Nothing better than a nice, tasty novice. Well, come along, girls, come along." She turned and began to shuffle back the way she had come, the lantern swinging in her wrinkled hand.

"Where is she taking us?" Sophia demanded, following reluctantly. She still hadn't let go of my robes.

"We must be going through the crypt. It's the safest way back to the chapel."

Truthfully, this was only a guess, but as Sister Julienne took us through a series of doors fitted into the roughly hewn tunnels, it

seemed increasingly likely. I was sure of it when we reached the final door, a heavy black monstrosity of consecrated iron. The lantern's light leaped over its banded surface as Julianne opened it and ushered us inside.

The air eddied with ribbons of incense smoke, so thick that my eyes stung and Sophia coughed into her sleeve. We had entered a stone chamber, pillared and vaulted. Robed statues stood in the archways between the columns, their hooded faces shadowed despite the candles that guttered at their feet in puddles of dripping wax. Sophia peered around suspiciously, as though searching for a cauldron hidden in one of the corners, or maybe the gnawed bones of past novices scattered across the floor. But the flagstones were bare except for the holy symbols carved here and there, their shapes worn nearly invisible with age.

Sister Julianne let us gawk for a moment, then impatiently beckoned us onward. "Touch the shrine now, for Saint Eugenia's blessing. Be quick about it."

The shrine dominated the middle of the crypt: a white marble platform with a life-sized effigy of Saint Eugenia lying atop the lid of the sarcophagus, her beautiful stone face serene in death. The candles arranged around her body cast a shifting glow over her features, lending her a faint enigmatic smile. She had died a martyr at fourteen years of age after sacrificing herself to bind a Fifth Order spirit to her bones. The spirit was said to have been so powerful that it burned her entire body to ash except for a single joint of her finger, a relic that now rested inside the sarcophagus in unseen splendor. It wasn't like the minor relic in Sister Lucinde's ring, useful for lighting the occasional candle. It was a high relic, wielded only in times of desperate need.

Solemnly, Sophia stepped forward to touch the effigy's folded

hands. The marble was shinier there, where countless pilgrims had touched it over the past three centuries.

Sister Julianne wasn't watching Sophia. She was watching me, her eyes glittering through a tangled curtain of hair. "Your turn. Go on."

Sweat itched beneath my robes from the heat of the candles, but the chill in my wrist intensified as I neared the shrine, its pain throbbing in time with my heartbeat. Bizarrely, I didn't want to touch the effigy. The closer I got, the more my body tried to strain away from it without my permission; even my hair felt like it was trying to stand on end. I imagined this was the way most people felt at the idea of touching an enormous hairy spider, or a corpse. Meanwhile, here I was experiencing it instead at the idea of touching a holy shrine. Maybe there was something wrong with me after all.

The thought drove me forward like the punishing sting of a whip. I stepped onto the dais and planted my hand on the marble.

I regretted it immediately. The stone grabbed hold of my palm as though it were coated in birdlime. I felt a sudden, stomach-lurching plunge, and the crypt fell away into darkness. I saw nothing, heard nothing, but I knew I wasn't alone. I was surrounded by a *presence*, something vast and ancient and hungry. I had an impression of feathers shifting in the dark, less a sound than a sensation—the stifling weight of imprisonment, and a devouring, anguished fury.

I knew what this presence was, what it had to be: the Fifth Order spirit bound to Saint Eugenia's relic. A revenant, one of only seven that had ever existed, each now destroyed or imprisoned by the long-ago sacrifices of the high saints.

Slowly, I felt its regard turn in my direction, like a beacon sweeping through the dark. Terror squeezed my throat. I tore

my hand from the sarcophagus and blindly stumbled away, nearly singeing my sleeve on the candles. Light and sound flooded back. I might have fallen if a bony grip hadn't caught my shoulder.

"You sense it." Sister Julienne's voice rasped in my ear, puffing sour breath against my cheek. "You feel it, don't you?" She sounded eager.

I gasped for air. The crypt's candles burned on uninterrupted. Sophia was watching me in confusion, beginning to look alarmed. She obviously hadn't felt anything when she'd touched the shrine. I had long suspected, but now I was certain—what had happened to me as a child had damaged me somehow, left an empty space inside. No wonder I had such an affinity for spirits. I had a place carved out for them already, waiting to be claimed.

I stared grimly at the floor until Sister Julienne released me. "I don't know what you're talking about," I answered, so clearly a lie that heat crept dully to my face as I spoke. I moved away and took Sophia's hand. She looked genuinely frightened now, but when she clutched me back I realized with a pang of gratitude that it was Julienne who was scaring her, not me.

"Suit yourself," Sister Julienne muttered, shuffling past us to open another door, beyond which lay the stair to the chapel, spiraling upward. "But you can't run forever, girl. The Lady will do what She wants with you. She always does, in the end."