



Black Rose

Between Shadows And Lightning

by

Vivienne Lorret



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Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

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The Wild Rose Press

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A low rumble of thunder shook the thin, warped glass of Viviana Ragar's living room window in her Seattle apartment, and the air was thick with the threat of rain.

"It's almost here," her friend, Cami, remarked gravely as they stared toward a small clock, hanging purposefully alone—artistically off center—on a chocolate painted wall.

The secondhand seemed to hesitate ominously before breaching the twelve.

Midnight.

"Happy birthday, Viviana." Cami swiped away the short, dark bangs that fell across her forehead, lifted her champagne flute, and scooted across the Persian rug to clink glasses.

Twenty-five. It rang in her ears as she sipped and then stood, staggering toward the window to watch the approaching storm, the clouds rolling, winding, tangling together in a radiant dance. *Twenty-five.*

In twenty-five years she'd succeeded in not only getting her doctorate in bio-chemistry, but in recently selling her formula for a salve to heal burns and scars to a major cosmetic company for a whopping 6.2 million dollars.

At twenty-five she had plans underway to build a house on the ocean front property she'd purchased earlier today—or was it yesterday? She wasn't quite sure. This was not the first champagne toast of the night.

The two friends had been toasting each other since early in the evening, partly due to Viviana's success and partly to Cami's future acquisition of this apartment.

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At twenty-five she had everything; friends, family, a home, a fortune ... She released a lengthy exhale, rustling the pale, gauzy drapes before her. There was still something missing—or rather—someone.

Viviana had spent her life believing so strongly in the idea of destiny revealing her soul mate that she busied herself, knowing that whoever she was meant to be with would simply appear one day and fit into the life she'd set up.

But that day had yet to come. Up until now, each day sped past and she was caught up in the flow of making herself into the person she wanted to be ... and now she felt old. A third of her life had drained away and the future looked empty.

Destiny hadn't knocked on her door.

Derisively, Viviana studied her reflection in the window, wondering if her shoulder-length auburn hair was too wavy, or her wide, smoky eyes too exotic, or her nose too straight, or her lips too full. Perhaps it was her trim, athletic figure, and average sized breasts. It could even be that her voice was too soft, too feminine to match her outer appearance.

Then again, maybe it was none of what she saw before her. In her mind she knew it was more than possible that destiny had called—only she'd been too busy to answer.

She sipped again and turned away from the window, spotting the red-ribboned package on the table peeking out from the soft leather folds of Cami's purse. In an instant of perfect clarity, as if the effects of the champagne lifted a veil from her eyes, she knew what she wished would be inside that box.

A man.

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She wanted a man for her birthday. A man in her life.

But not just any man. She wanted the man who haunted her dreams, the one who drifted in like a fog, enveloping her in his arms. And when he kissed her it was like a flash before a sudden storm, volts of electricity coursing through every vein.

She shuddered, closing her eyes for a moment as she thought of her dreams of him, and how each night when she laid her cheek atop her pillow she knew he would be there, as if he, too, were waiting for the moment she'd close her eyes—

A heavy knock fell on the door. Viviana and Cami both jerked their heads toward the sound and then to each other.

"Who could that be at this hour?" she questioned Cami, wondering if she should be suspicious of a birthday surprise awaiting her on the other side.

Instead of seeing a mischievous glint in her eyes, Viviana noted her hesitant glance toward the door and knew in a moment of caution Cami was not the cause of their midnight caller.

Through the peephole, she saw nothing more than the opposite wall.

Without warning, a crack of thunder tore through the apartment, vibrating the windows as a sudden flash of silver-blue lighting illuminated the small space.

As the lights in the hall flickered, a liquid chill rushed down her spine, and Viviana hesitated before she opened the door, taking a calming breath as her hand held fast to the chain.

She peered out. "Who is it?"

No answer.

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She shot one last glance down the hall, and almost had the door closed when she saw something on the floor. Curious, she opened the door as wide as the chain allowed.

"Is anyone there?" Cami whispered, too close behind her.

Alarm vaulted her forward, her pulse jack-rabbitting even faster than before. "It's a box," Viviana screeched, her throat dry as death.

She stilled. Then squinting, she lowered herself for a closer look before she straightened and put her hand on the lock—

"Wait!" Cami's hand covered hers. "The box didn't knock on the door all by itself. There is probably someone out there."

Viviana shrugged her off. "And that someone wants me to have whatever that is."

"Exactly," Cami whispered fiercely. "And that's why you should close the d—Wait! What are you doing?" She put her hand on the door as Viviana released the chain.

"It won't fit through the door unless it is open," she explained in her usual forthright tone.

Cami's mouth opened on an argument but then closed when she saw Viviana's determination and stepped away from the door.

There was no one in the hall, only long triangular shadows from wall lamps stretching out like claws and fading into darkened doorways. She reached for the box, but found it much heavier than she imagined.

"Help me," she called quietly over her shoulder, taking one of the metal handles as Cami took the other and they dragged it inside her apartment together.

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"I think it's made of iron," Cami observed as they stood apart from it and eyed the black chest warily.

Viviana agreed, noting the large lock that hung from the latch.

Instantly, she remembered receiving something last week from her father which seemed odd to her at the time. A key.

It had been taped inside a birthday card he'd mailed early. When she'd opened it and saw the key, along with the words, *you are the first female heir in over two hundred years*, scrawled neatly below, she'd only assumed it was his charming, yet ambiguous, way of saying she still held the key to daddy's heart even though she was all grown up.

She walked over to the marble-topped console and opened the drawer. The large, black key was right where she'd left it. It was cold and heavy, and holding it gave her an overwhelming sense of foreboding.

Cami watched her inquiringly, but Viviana did not waste time with answers. She kneeled and then lifted her shaking hand to the lock.

The air in the room chilled and a phantom breeze lifted the hair off her neck.

Across from her, Cami rubbed at markings on top of the iron chest. "*Mal—edic—*" she stumbled over the foreign letters. "I can't make out a single word. Is this Latin or something?"

Viviana looked up, dazed; the lock fell to the floor. She blinked and finally focused on the engraved letters, translating the phrases as she read. "*The curse of Lazo Dragomir. One so vile to have blood on his hands shall*

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forever walk the earth in torment and taste only blood. The cursed will be judged by my blood, my daughter. Only then will a vampire be reborn as man, if she deems him worthy."

"Whoa. I guess that's Latin for *open at your own risk*, huh?" Cami let out a sardonic snort. "Is this some kind of joke?"

Viviana traced over the letters with delicate fingertips. "Funny," she laughed softly and her voice took on a dreamlike tone. "I always thought it was a joke. My father told me about the family curse when I was a kid, but I was sure it was only a story. You know, those sorts of things parents say to distract you or to scare you into staying in your bed all night?"

All of the sudden, she needed to step away and put some distance between herself and the unlocked chest. Strange as it seemed, Viviana felt her skin grow hot and cold at the same time when she was too near, or perhaps it was just the memory of the bottomless sound of her father's voice as he'd told her the tale, or even the dread she'd seen lurking in the depths of his eyes.

But why would there be dread? What haven't you told me, Dad?

"From what I remember, it all started a long time ago in Romania, and the person responsible for the tale was my great-great grandfather's great-grandmother, Nicoleta Ragar. Her best friend, Ionela, was in love with this wealthy noble, only she wasn't in his league. Out of the blue he started to show interest in her, paid her family's taxes—you know the type—and she ended up believing he loved her despite the

fact that she was a peasant." She picked up her glass and drained the champagne before distractedly twirling the empty flute in her fingers. "Of course, back then women saved themselves for marriage—"

"—Sort of like you and that dream guy of yours?" Cami's sarcastic tone received a narrow-eyed look from across the room.

She continued on as if nothing was said, turning back to the undulating storm off in the distance, watching as volatile segments broke free to moved across the sky in banded bursts of energy, creating as much noise as possible without any rain. "So, when he cast her aside, she threw herself off a cliff. Evidently, Grandma Ragar didn't like the fact that Dragomir went off to sample more of the local flavors." She pivoted on her heel, shrugging in a matter-of-fact way while, secretly, her insides churned with apprehension, "so she put a curse on him—only to be undone by the first female born to the family—me."

Silence smothered the air as the two women stared at each other and then at the iron chest.

Perspiration settled behind her neck and inside her palms as she moved toward it and then kneeled down as she did before, hating the nausea churning inside her.

Cami was the first to speak, her tone disbelieving, even though her voice was barely above a whisper. "But a vampire? They aren't even real."

Viviana gulped before letting out a nervous laugh, looking down at her stark, white hands on both sides of the lid. "Silly ... how I can't seem to open the box, isn't it?"

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Quiet filled the room and closed in as anxiety swelled within her lungs, making each breath a challenge. She looked up to Cami, to her wide doe eyes, seeing the mirror of her distress.

She gulped. "If it isn't a hoax—if what you were told is actually real ... then what do you think is in there?"

"We're about to find out." She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and flung the lid open, her heart beating wildly in her chest.

Cami let out a shriek, and instinctively Viviana lifted her arms in defense, turning her head. "What is it?"

"A box," Cami said, breathlessly. "It's just a box." Her tone changed to mild disappointment.

Opening her eyes, Viviana reached over and swatted her arm. "Then why did you scream? You scared me to death."

Sheepishly, she shrugged. "Sorry, I guess I was caught up in the moment."

The pale wooden box seemed new, or at least not nearly as old as two hundred years, but the date burned into the upper right corner confirmed its age, 1796.

Cami sighed, obviously bored as she looked over the blackened letters. "Latin, again, huh?"

Viviana picked up the box. "*Before the final cycle of the first full moon of the twenty-fifth year.*"

"Okay," Cami began as she stood unsteadily and brushed her palms across the tops of her thighs. "Even though you translated, I still don't get it ... *and* I don't care anymore." She yawned and stumbled over to the couch, plopping down and absently reaching for the throw by her feet. "I think I've

decided I'm done with surprises and I'm too tired to care about the cursed vampire. So, if he happens to fly in through the window..." She yawned again, gesturing with a flip of her hand and mumbling incoherently as she settled her head onto a violet chenille pillow.

Ignoring her friend's usual, derisive nature, Viviana examined the box, which had the appearance of a block of wood, with no discerning hinges or latches to open it. When her finger accidentally depressed a small square into the block, she quickly figured out it was designed to be a puzzle.

She couldn't quench the excited anticipation she felt as her fingers searched frantically, hoping for a combination to release a latch, and in no less than ten minutes she pulled out a long, slender rectangle.

Yet before she had it all the way out, the words *Sapere aude*, were bared to her. "*Dare to be wise*," she murmured into the air just before she heard the tell-tale click as a narrow seam appeared amidst the fine grains of the gray wood.

There was nothing inside. The inner chamber was flat, more like a book than a box at all, with the front and back covers pressed together. A sound of utter disgust slipped from her lips as she saw only three lines of burned-in text.

Dum Spiro, Spero

Omnia vincit amor

Nunc aut nunquam

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"While I breathe, I hope/ love conquers all/ now or never. That's it?" It all sounded more like lyrics to an old Elvis song than anything remotely believable. Irritated, she closed the box, dropped it back into the chest and locked the lid shut.

It was suddenly and blatantly obvious to her that this had all been a joke. After all, it was just the sort of thing her father, a professor of literature and linguistics, found amusing.

All the pieces fit; first the stories, then the key, then the Latin phrases only she or someone with her educational background could decipher. *Very clever, Dad.*

She wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of calling him now and telling him how she nearly fell for it. Instead, she decided to go for a quick run before the rain came, clear her head, and work off some of the residual effects of her momentary anxiety.

* * * *

It was quiet out and everyone seemed to be tucked safely in their beds, sheltered and oblivious to the occasional flash of lightning and the low rumbles, off more in the distance now than they had been an hour ago. Nights like this, when the air was charged with electricity, were her favorites, and she prolonged her run.

After a while, she found herself by Denny Park and decided she'd stop for a stretch before turning around and heading back to her apartment. She breathed in the heavy night air, arched, pressing her fists into her lower back, and let out a contented sigh.

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"I do not believe in wasting time, Viviana," a deep voice announced from beside her.

Viviana was just falling back into her skin when she turned to see the figure of a man. Only in a flash did she realize how tall the trees and shrubs were around her, how secluded this spot was, and then how ironic the briefly parting clouds seemed as they revealed the fullness of the moon; for this man was bathed in darkness, a being created for drifting among shadows of hazy moonfall.

His raven hair fell to broad shoulders sheathed in a long black coat. His skin was pale, but his features dark—thick like his Romanian accent—his arched brows, sooty lashes, hypnotic gray eyes and high, prominent cheeks bones held shadows beneath, and his generous lips were the color of merlot. The very portrait of the man in her dreams.

She was waiting for a burst of fear-induced adrenaline to move her feet, but she remained leaden, shaking a bit as he loomed over her.

"I have waited too long," he murmured as his hand dove into her hair while the other snaked around her waist and his mouth brutally descended on hers.

She had no will of her own as her arms lifted to press palms against his unyielding, expansive chest, fingers gripping leather lapels. A strange sense of familiarity consumed her as she stared into his eyes, breathed in his exhalant, and felt the provocative dampness of his lips on hers. The gradual awareness of him, of who and of what he was, was not of a fact that she was actually acquainted with him, but more so that she contained a memory of his

presence, of his aura—as if she held his mark and it was his duty to reclaim her.

Images, foreign memories, rushed into her brain, swirling around and making her dizzy as he deepened the onslaught for another eternity, which seemed all too fleeting as he severed their connection.

She sagged against him, each breath uneven and raspy, as if, somehow, she was not whole without him.

Then he released her, letting her fall formlessly onto the dewy grass, and staggered away, swiping the back of his long-fingered hand over his mouth. She swallowed, gingerly running her tongue over her bruised mouth, tasting blood from a small tear in her upper lip—most likely caused by the force of first contact, she reasoned.

Sudden anger sparked. "Bastard!" Viviana recalled the images from two centuries ago as she struggled to stand on quaking limbs. "I saw what you did to that poor girl. She gave you her heart and soul but you spurned her after ruining her for any other man. You were glad to be rid of her, glad she took her own life and saved you the trouble."

He turned, fierce denial in his eyes and on his lips. "No."

"Just as I could see her, I also felt the rage in you as she dogged your heels and threatened to go to your father, preparing to tell him that she was carrying your child."

He raised his fist in the air. "She lied. You have not seen enough to know." His fluid movements brought him to her again, but this time he held back. "She wanted money. She was not the innocent she pretended to be—she was nothing like you—and they were all fools believing in justice. But you

must know," he whispered tenderly, mesmerizing her with the husky timbre of his voice. He leaned in and brushed his lips across hers once again. "Ah, virgin's blood—a potent aphrodisiac."

She gasped and opened her eyes, first coming to the realization they were closed, and then to see he was gone—vanished—as quickly as the clouds veiled the moon, leaving her to question her own mind and the chimerical chants of distant echoes of thunder.

Not quite herself, she swayed on her feet and gingerly traced her lips to affirm her sensibility. Yes, there was blood, but was all that just happened a hallucination?

* * * *

Cami was still sleeping on the couch when Viviana came home. Though she tried to convince herself that her encounter with Lazo Dragomir did not happen, seeing the chest on the floor gave her pause.

Is this really happening, she questioned and touched her mouth again.

The evidence of their kiss lingered, just as much as the words she'd read. "*Before the final cycle of the first full moon.*" Tomorrow ... or was it tonight?

She laughed in disbelief. It was obvious, given the timeframe she had to work with, that her great grandmother didn't really want Dragomir to be mortal again. If what she'd read and experienced in the last two hours was real—and her logical, scientific brain repudiated any and all of it—but if it could possibly be real...

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She sighed, shaking her head in disbelief as she stripped out of her sweaty clothes and stepped under the steamy shower spray. Her mind wandered back to the fantasy of Dragomir—for surely, that was exactly what he was—to his eyes, to the way it felt to be in his solid embrace...

He'd known she was a virgin by the taste of her blood. The very thought sent a shiver through her, and she couldn't help but wonder what else he knew about her. How could it be possible she knew him without ever having met him ... until tonight?

Yet, he'd been in her dreams countless times, and so vividly that she consistently awakened with the sensation of her hand clasped within his.

Her sanity wavered again. *Could it have been real?*

"Of course not," she told herself. None of this was happening. It was late. The moon was full. Her emotions were running high, that was all. *Right?*

She convinced herself she was just tired. The past few weeks had been both exhilarating and overwhelming. Perhaps losing one's mind was a side effect of being nearly content with one's life? Her brain tried to function and come up with answers that held more weight. She needed something plausible to grasp.

She reasoned her desire for this man must have manifested itself into a hallucination. During that vision, she must have bitten her lip. Stranger things have happened after one drank high volumes of champagne and then went out for a run, she was certain.

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Logic made her feel better and far surer of herself, and she agreed, wholeheartedly, with her logic as she towel dried her hair, briskly running a comb through her wavy locks, and slid a pale blue satin nightgown over her head before walking toward the bedroom.

Her logic faltered the moment she stepped through the door.

"*Viviana*" the unearthly voice called from shadows in the corner.

She gasped and reached for the switch. The lights didn't spark.

The door closed behind her with a faint click and she spun around to see ... nothing.

"Who's there? I-I mean, I've got a gun-and I know judo. Don't come any closer."

A deep laugh answered her. "*That* is what I love about you, Viviana. You are fearless."

His voice sounded closer, but she heard no rustling of clothes, saw no movement between surrounding shadows and the lightning outside her window.

Then he touched her cheek. "Yet you always tremble in my arms."

It wasn't right to relax the instant she felt him near, to press her cheek against his hand, and to long for his arms to coil around her waist ... but it wasn't real. She told herself, it couldn't be.

She sighed, again feeling the effects of the champagne wash over her. "Always?"

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"Nearly every night," he whispered in her ear. "You could not forget."

"No," she agreed, breathless, moving closer still. "But it wasn't real. Just like this isn't real. It's a dream. I must have fallen asleep before any of this happened. Maybe I'm sleeping near the window."

"Of course," he whispered against her lips before tasting her. Slowly. Provocatively.

Then he pulled back as far as the fingers threading into his hair would allow. "But what do I feel like, Viviana? Do I vanish in a rush of steam when you touch me, or am I flesh? Do you not taste the salt of my tongue inside your mouth, just as you taste your own blood? Do you not feel the presence of my desire pressing against you?"

"Do you not know that I am the man who entered your dreams to woo you into releasing me from a curse only to fall in love with you, and to be tormented with the knowledge that we have only this one night? How I have waited for this night and wished dreams could put you in my arms." He kissed her face skimming his hands over her hair, her cheeks, her neck, as if memorizing all of her. "You must know I have tried."

Her heart beat heavily against her chest, like a caged animal trying to free itself. "Lazo," she said in a broken whisper, hoping that if this were a dream she would never wake up. She wanted nothing more than to believe in him, and, right now, he was very real to her.

In one fluid motion, he swooped down and picked her up in his arms. He held her wonderfully captive as he looked into

her eyes. "Viviana, I need you to know I have never killed for blood." He paused, a look of torment lurking in his gray depths.

Gazing deeper, Viviana witnessed a vision of his blood-stained lips as he left a slaughterhouse, grief and humiliation expressed in his manner. "The temptation was great, yet not nearly as powerful as my visions of you. I knew you would come. Nicoleta showed me your face on one of my many trips into the village to beg forgiveness.

"I was young and arrogant when I seduced Ionela. I can never restore her life, but I would with my own if it could be done."

She brushed the silky hair back from his face and saw his immeasurable sincerity. "I believe you," she said softly to her beautiful apparition.

His eyebrows furrowed. He spoke earnestly. "Viviana, these arms that hold you are not imagined. I am real. I am here. As I give you my love, so too, my life. They are yours. Eternally."

Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his, wholly immersed in this magnificent fantasy. She could taste his pain and loneliness as if they were her own.

Suddenly, she realized she had fallen in love with a phantasm, a vivid creation of own imagination. There was nothing more she could do than whisper the words that would set him free. "*Dum Spiro, Spero...*"

* * * *

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Bright morning light sliced through the parted curtains and Viviana smiled as she remembered her dream. His name escaped her lips in a reverent sigh. Oh, how she wished the night would never end.

Eyes still closed, she stretched her exhausted limbs languorously, repeating her prayer, hoping the daylight would vanish and she would be in his arms again.

Unexpectedly, her foot came in contact with something solid and warm at the edge of the bed.

Her eyes flew open as she clutched the sheet to her naked breasts and gasped.

"Good morning, Viviana."

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