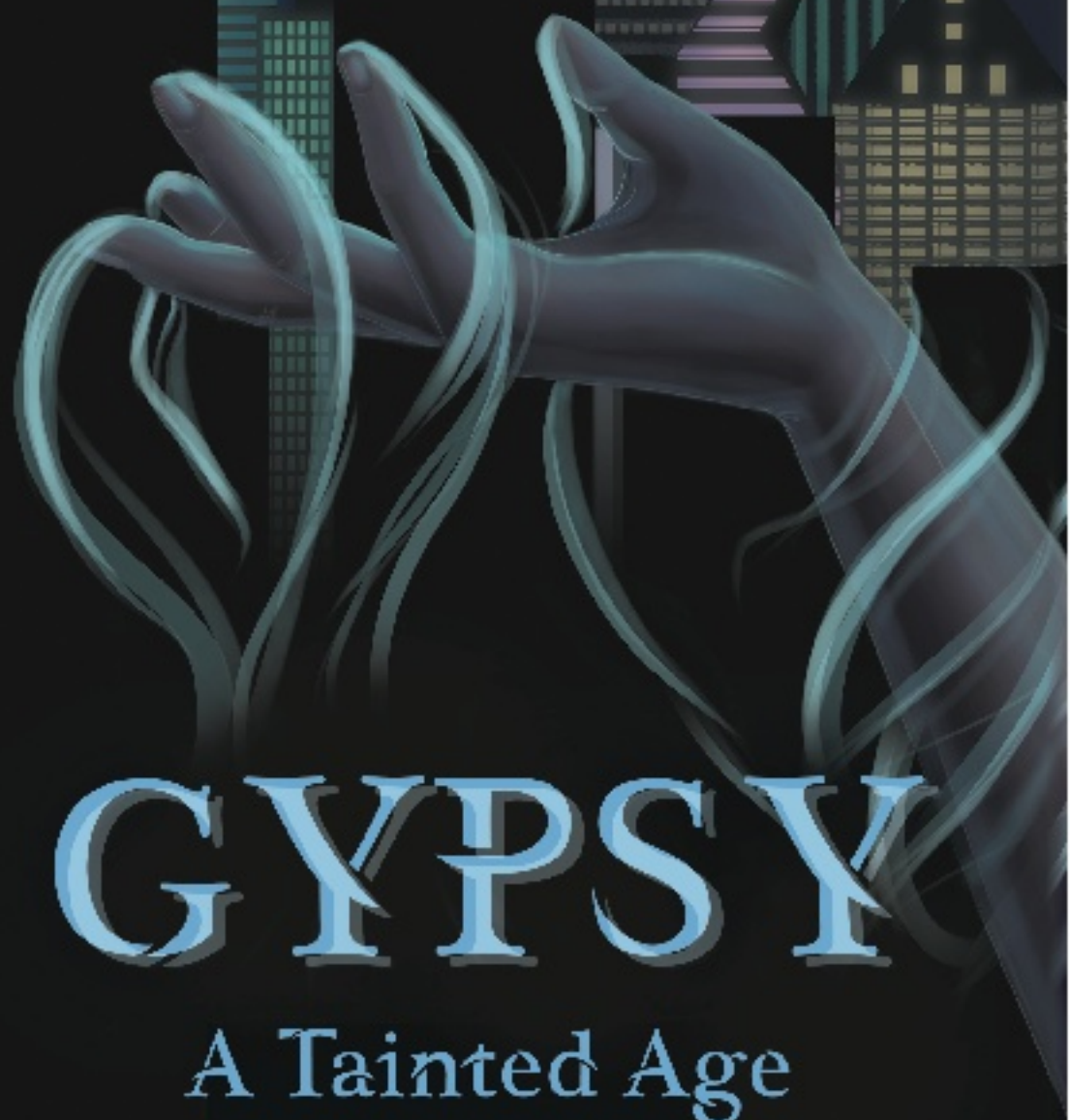
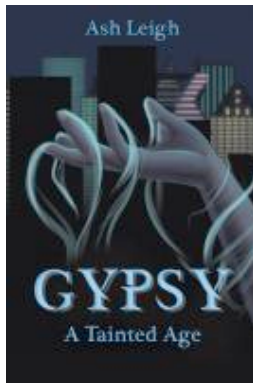


Ash Leigh



# GYPSY

A Tainted Age



*Delle was cast out of society years ago for her secret - a secret that Attis was willing to die protecting. Now was her chance to return the favor. Without Attis, Delle's life is a mass of confusion. Without him, there's no one to convince her to ignore her secret - to stop her from being what she really is. That's why she has to find him. No matter what the obstacles. No matter what the cost.*

## **Gypsy (A Tainted Age)**

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**GYPSY**  
**A TAINTED AGE**

**Ash Leigh**

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# CHAPTER ONE

“Delle!”

I felt something yank me away from the edge just as a narrow blue light streaked by – a poorly aimed electrobullet. Attis released me and I staggered.

“Scrap it, Delle,” he cursed. “Stay away from the edge! That’s where they want you to go.”

I glanced over the edge of the building at the three-hundred-foot drop awaiting us below. I stepped away and looked in Attis’s direction. The Runners were just coming into sight, closing in on us. I fought the sick feeling in my stomach as I realized that for the first time there was nowhere else to run.

“Steffy, stay right beside me,” I whispered, taking the little girl’s hand and moving further from the edge.

She didn't look at me. Her mouth was a tight line and her eyebrows were drawn together. She was a brave kid, but she was afraid. I wanted to tell her that everything was going to be okay and there was nothing to fear, but I couldn't. It would have been a lie. The truth was that I was terrified too.

Attis stepped back and we were nearly in a line, facing the oncoming Runners together. It should have felt familiar, but it didn't. I knew that everything was about to change. I had the terrible feeling that we weren't going to make it out of this one.

"Why don't they just give up?" Jag gasped, still catching his breath from the long, useless sprint we'd just finished.

Jag's question was a good one. Why didn't they just give up? Why did they hate us so much? Was it really just because we were Gypsies?

"Now isn't the time to be asking that," Attis answered shortly.

Of course, Attis was right too. Attis was always right. The "why" didn't matter – not anymore. They were getting too close for it to matter. Surviving was the only thing of importance now.

I looked at Attis nervously. His fists were clenched and his jaw was set. I knew that look. For once he was just as scared as the rest of us. Usually he acted like the fearless one and we were happy to let him. Today everything was changing.

"I have one more bullet," I said quietly.

“Save it,” Attis said instantly, reaching back without looking at me and grabbing my hand before I could load my gun.

I let my hand fall away from the belt and Attis released me.

There was no way we could beat this troop in a fight. Our best chance was to stall them. One bullet could probably do that. Probably. Maybe. There was no guarantee it would work and even if it did they wouldn’t be distracted for more than a few seconds.

“Att,” I said.

He barely looked at me.

“Attis,” I persisted. “What do we do?”

He was silent for a moment as we watched the Runners approach, guns drawn.

“See that wall?” he asked sharply, not even waiting for us to answer before continuing. “There’s a door there. Go in and turn left when you get the chance. Find somewhere to hide. All of you,” he said, turning and looking at us fully for a moment, his crystal blue eyes fierce with determination.

I didn’t like his plan and I knew that he could tell, but we were out of options at this point. The Runners were close. They were close enough now that I could see some of them grinning, like they were really going to enjoy shooting us. The remaining few just looked bored, like they were ready to be done with this chase and they didn’t really care what that meant for us.

If I had to choose, I would side with the second type. I would also love this chase to be over – as long as we were allowed to end up alive.

“What do you mean *us*?” I asked sharply, my stomach fluttering because I was pretty sure that I knew exactly what Attis meant.

He didn’t answer me. He just clenched his jaw tighter. It wasn’t reassuring.

“Protect Steffy,” he said stiffly, even though he didn’t need to because he already knew that I would.

I could sense Attis tensing up, like he was getting ready to spring. If they decided to pull the trigger on one of their scrapping guns Attis didn’t stand a chance. Depending on what kind of bullets they were using, they would either electrocute him until he was as good as dead, or electrocute him until he was unrecognizable as a human being.

“They’ll fry you,” Jag protested, appropriately voicing my own concerns.

“Surrender and you won’t be harmed,” the lead Runner ordered, although the lack of sincerity and tone of obligation in his voice didn’t go unnoticed.

We never learned the actual name of this particular troop’s leader, but over the years we had come up with lots of names for him, the least offensive of which was “Scars”. We came up with the name after noticing the fierce scar that wrapped all the way around his hand and up his wrist, like someone had lit a rope on fire and wrapped it around



his arm. At least that was our theory for how it happened. Despite the fact that he had been chasing us around since we were children, we weren't exactly on friendly terms with the guy, so asking how he got his wound was out of the question.

I eyed Scars warily and could see his damaged hand twitching, like it couldn't wait to strangle the life out of us – out of me. The man had been chasing us ever since I could remember. You could say that we'd made his life difficult, but it's not as if we did it on purpose. If he had just left us alone from the beginning there would have been no issue and both our lives would have been easier.

"We haven't done anything," Attis challenged, which was pointless because we'd already stated the fact of our innocence more times than I could count, always to no avail.

"You've done more than enough," Scars growled, as he usually did. "I've wasted too many years chasing you wretched children and my patience has reached its limit."

"I find it hard to believe you have any sort of positive trait, least of all patience," I retorted, not because it was irresistibly clever, but because I had taken it upon myself long ago to frustrate this man as much as possible.

Okay, so maybe I did provoke them a bit.

"By harboring this one," he snarled, ignoring my words but pointing at me. "– you've broken countless laws and the penalty should be even harsher than the one I've been ordered to carry out."

I tightened my grip on Steffy's hand.

*Not this again.*

Maybe if we threw something really heavy at his head he would miraculously lose his memory and forget that my existence was a crime. Unfortunately, the throwing-random-junk strategy had never worked for us before, so remaining as motionless as possible was probably our best bet for staying alive as long as possible.

"I'll make you a deal," Scars said, like he'd decided to show some sort of kindness for the first time in his life. "I'll just take that one," he said, pointing at me with his gun and refusing to use my name, even though I was sure he knew it by now.

How can you chase someone for eight years and not know their name? He'd definitely heard Attis shout it enough when I stepped too close to danger. A long time ago I theorized that the reason Scars wouldn't use my name was because that would be like admitting that I'm a real person – and real people are much harder to kill than genetic accidents.

"We're not giving her up," Attis said, taking a step to block me from Scars's view.

Scars just smiled. This smile was something I hadn't seen before. It was triumphant – and terrifying.

"Before you make another feeble attempt to be a hero, you might want to let me finish my offer," the man said smoothly, obviously

quite aware and even reveling in the fact that he had the upper hand in this situation.

I could see Attis's fists clenching at his sides again. I knew that he wanted to take this guy down – no negotiations included. He was using every bit of his self-control not to harm Scars.

"I am giving you the option to give up just one of your caravan in order to save the rest," Scars continued calmly. "I think any reasonable person would agree that taking this deal and saving three out of the four of your group would be far more heroic than surrendering your entire caravan to be killed."

Attis spat at him and I wished I had thought of it first. Despite the unwavering smile on Scars's face, I didn't miss the icy gleam in his dark eyes.

"So be it. I can see that it's all or nothing for you." He gestured at his troops and they raised their guns. "I can't say I didn't try."

"We're dead," Jag breathed.

"Three...two," Scars said slowly, giving my friends one last chance to sell me out.

"We're going to die," Jag confirmed grimly.

I could see the Runners flipping the switches on their weapons to release the electrobullets into the barrels of the guns. I felt like my heart was desperately trying to claw its way up my throat. I blinked hard. I knew this was it. This was the moment I needed to give myself up. I always knew it could come to this moment. I had planned for it.

I had never discussed it with Attis because I knew he would try and stop me if the time came.

I took a deep breath and opened my mouth to surrender, hoping that Scars would keep his promise – take me and leave the others alone. I stepped forward at the exact moment Attis did.

“Wait!” Attis shouted, holding up his hands just as I was about to shout the exact same word.

The countdown stopped and Scars raised an eyebrow. He opened his mouth but didn’t get more than the beginning of a sound past his lips before he was huddled on the ground, clutching his stomach.

Attis moved like a blur. He punched a Runner in the face and caused another one to crumple to his knees with a strike too fast for me to catch. He slammed another’s head against the wall and I winced at the sharp crack of bone colliding with stone. I sometimes forgot what an amazing fighter Attis was since he rarely deigned to join in the local ruckus.

That was when I remembered what Attis said about getting to the door. I nodded at Jag whose eyes were wide with horror then I picked up Steffy and moved quickly and silently towards our escape. Jag followed as I put my back against the wall to stay as far from the action as possible.

Miraculously, we got through the door without being noticed. Our movements had been swift and silent, and although I felt like time was moving ridiculously slowly, the entire escape had taken no more

than a second. Attis was doing a fantastic job of keeping Scars and his troop busy. Last I'd seen, he had taken a Runner's gun and was using it for both smashing and shooting purposes. He never told me where he learned to fight, but I knew that he was good and that was enough. I had never seen him lose before.

I had barely turned around to look for Attis before the Runners who weren't busy trying to shoot him without shooting each other noticed us creeping away. Attis looked up and met my eyes. I froze – not because of the imminent danger we were in – but because I was always paralyzed when he looked at me that way. He nodded for us to go on.

*This isn't part of the plan.*

Attis needed to be the one leading us to safety. We couldn't do this without him.

Suddenly, one of the Runners saw their opportunity and used the distraction to step forward and aim at Attis. The Runner raised his gun, pointing the barrel directly at Attis's chest. I heard a small snapping sound and then a *pftzz* – and suddenly Attis was falling down. I shrieked in a way I didn't know I was capable of and nearly dropped Steffy. Sheer terror like I had never experienced in my life curled like fire through my veins.

"Attis!" I screamed, staring at his body that lay shuddering on the ground, flickering with blue electricity. In that moment I was certain the sky was falling in on me.

Suddenly, something grabbed me by the waist and started dragging me down the hallway, away from Attis. I couldn't process what was happening. We couldn't leave without him. I didn't know what to do. Things had been bad before but never this bad. They'd never shot one of us before. I couldn't think straight. Was I still screaming?

"It won't do any good for us to get shot too!" Jag yelled in my ear – and then the screaming stopped and I was free.

I suddenly noticed Steffy shaking in my arms and I glanced down at her to see tears running down her face, her eyes wide with terror. She didn't know what was happening. She only knew to be afraid. She'd never been around death before, not since she was a baby. She didn't understand the concept. Suddenly I wasn't sure that I did either.

I snapped back into action as footsteps thundered down the hallway. Jag grabbed my arm and pulled me around the corner. I was suddenly in control of my body again and looking for a hiding place like Attis had directed, saving the panic for later.

There was only one door in the short hallway. Jag and I didn't even look at each other or bother to think about what could be behind it. We opened it and practically flew into the dim closet, shutting the door behind us as quickly and quietly as possible. I wasn't sure if this would buy us any time or not, but surely it was better than being out in the open.

I set Steffy down and ran my hand along the wall. It was almost too dark to see and the room smelled terrible in a sickly-sweet way,

like rotten food. I heard footsteps and yelling and I knew that the Runners would realize our trick any second and come crashing down the hallway and straight through the flimsy door. My fingers passed over some sort of button on the wall and I hesitated.

“Delle?” Jag asked quietly, all the dread inside of me mirrored in his voice.

I gritted my teeth and slammed my palm against the button without any further thought. Suddenly the floor fell out from beneath us. I didn’t even have time to scream.

I landed on a spongy mound of something I didn’t recognize and although I wasn’t in immense pain, I definitely got the wind knocked out of me. The impact jarred me to the bones, despite whatever we had landed on being relatively soft. I gasped but my lungs fought me as I tried to force them to take in air. Once I was able to suck in what I expected to be a breath of good oxygen I could tell that the air was even more rank here than it had been in the closet now somewhere far above us. The smell was wafting up there from whatever we’d landed on.

My first thought was for Steffy and then Jag, but behind it all was Attis – Attis who’d taken care of us since we realized that the Provincials would never accept us. Attis who had taken care of me since we were children. The panic was rising in my throat again so I quickly diverted my thoughts.

“Steffy?” I coughed, trying to speak and inhale at the same time.  
“Jag?”

I felt Steffy’s tiny fingers scratch blindly against the leg of my pants and immediately grabbed her hand. We couldn’t lose anyone else.

“Jag?” I whispered, fear seizing my heart again.

“I’m here,” he answered instantly, but I didn’t miss the sharp edge that pain was adding to his voice.

I could hear Jag’s heavy breathing and sense his motion, but it was too dark to see exactly where he was. I expected my vision to adjust to the blackness, but that didn’t happen. The darkness was overwhelming. What was worse, I knew I could fix it. I could do exactly what Attis always told me not to and reach for the power that was constantly right beneath my fingertips. I could feel the temptation to make our dire situation better for even a moment, but it was too dangerous. Attis would have been furious. To risk exposing the secret we’d given everything to protect would be more than foolish. It would be stupid. I forced myself to focus and after a moment I noticed a little spot of light in the distance. I shook my head and took a breath of the wet, sour air. Whether I was hallucinating the little light or not, it was our only chance.

“Jag, do you see that light?” I murmured, staying completely still so I could listen to him shifting around, hopefully in the right direction.



He finally grunted in a way that I assumed meant, “Yes, Delle, I do see that light.”

“I think that’s a way out,” I whispered, hoping I sounded much more confident than I felt. “Let’s go.”

I didn’t know what we were crawling on, but some of it was slick and soft and all of it smelled disgusting. As we approached the light, I realized that it was actually sunlight shining in through a small square cut out of the walls of the building. I pulled myself through the hole then clumsily stood up to find myself in the middle of an alley, somewhere behind the building. I turned around and reached back through the hole to pull Steffy out after me. Jag came last, to my relief, but I barely glanced at him because I was already checking Steffy for possible injuries. Other than a couple bruises starting to form on her coffee-brown skin she was fine.

As Jag pulled himself out, a rotten fruit peel and a couple biodegradable food wrappers fell to the ground. It was then that I understood what we’d landed on and why the impact hadn’t killed us. We’d gone down the compost chute and landed on a heap of rotten food.

I had to wonder if Attis knew. Did he somehow know there was another way out of the building? Was that why he sent us down that hallway? Attis must have been inside that building before. That was the only explanation.

The idea that I knew less about Attis than I thought was more than a little unsettling, so I shoved it to the back of my mind. Now wasn't a time to question Attis. He had gotten us out of more life-threatening situations than I cared to remember, including this one.

"Attis," I heard myself murmur dumbly, my voice breaking.

I looked over at Jag and could see the pain in his eyes mirroring my own, although I wasn't sure if it was from an injury or the loss of our best friend. Probably both.

"Is there any way...?" Jag asked, sounding just as desperate as I felt.

I thought about the blue electrobullet I'd seen. It was blue – not red or yellow – so I knew there was no way that Attis could have withstood a direct hit like that. The blue bullets were the ones that killed. Suddenly I heard an angry shout from somewhere above us.

"Against the wall," I said instantly, slamming my back against the concrete wall, bruising my spine even more as I pulled Steffy to my side, looking up towards the roof.

We could hear more shouts and angry cursing. If I craned my neck to look straight above me I could see the Runners leaning out of windows and balconies, searching for us. We were just barely out of their line of vision. We'd gotten away from them again – most of us.

*Attis.*

I wanted to crumble to my knees and sob. I didn't even want to think the word, but it didn't change the fact. Attis was gone. Dead.

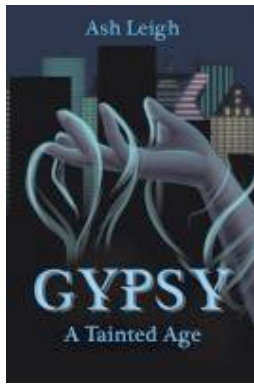
Shot and electrocuted by a bunch of Provincials with nothing better to do than ruin our lives.

What made it even more tragic was that they didn't even want Attis. They wanted me. The only reason I wasn't dead was because of Attis – Attis and the fact that the Runners seemed to keep messing up.

Unfortunately, I knew Scars wouldn't let his troop mess up twice in a row, so as soon as the last one ducked his head back inside the building, I picked up Steffy and ran. I probably could have run faster if I tried, but I was fighting myself the whole way. Every step taking me farther away from Attis was physically painful, like my heart was being torn out of my chest inch by inch.

I wanted to run back and find Attis, alive and grinning at us. He would say, *"Have a little faith, Dally."* Even though that wasn't my name and I always pretended to be annoyed when he called me that. *"Have I ever steered you wrong?"*

I could feel tears welling up in my eyes as I ran, but I had to blink them away because they were blinding me. We didn't speak and I couldn't cry because if I did my throat would close up and I wouldn't be able to breathe. There was no oxygen for speaking or crying – only for running – for getting as far away as we could.



*Delle was cast out of society years ago for her secret - a secret that Attis was willing to die protecting. Now was her chance to return the favor. Without Attis, Delle's life is a mass of confusion. Without him, there's no one to convince her to ignore her secret - to stop her from being what she really is. That's why she has to find him. No matter what the obstacles. No matter what the cost.*

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