



*Cryptic
Cravings*

A Vampire Kisses Novel

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Ellen Schreiber

Vampire Kisses 8

Cryptic Cravings



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To my husband, Eddie, for being my high school crush

“Rumors are spreading that there are vampires living in Dullsville!”

—Becky Miller

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Epigraph

Chapter 1 - Blood Exchange

Chapter 2 - Dead End

Chapter 3 - Menace

Chapter 4 - Creeping in the Crypt

Chapter 5 - Sneaking In

Chapter 6 - Club Rumors

Chapter 7 - Ghouls Night

Chapter 8 - Interior Decorator

Chapter 9 - Freak Factory

Chapter 10 - Ghoul Fight

Chapter 11 - Buzz Kill

Chapter 12 - Mortal Makeout

Chapter 13 - Midnight Madness

Chapter 14 - Rumor Mill

Chapter 15 - Birthday Bash

Chapter 16 - The Crypt

Chapter 17 - Familiar Visitor

Chapter 18 - The Covenant

Chapter 19 - A Storm Is Brewing

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Praise for Vampire Kisses

Also by Ellen Schreiber

Copyright

About the Publisher

Chapter 1

Blood Exchange

I had to admit it, Dullsville was no longer dull.

In fact, for me, Raven Madison, the morbidly monotonous town I'd grown up in had finally become the most exciting place on earth.

Not only was I madly in love with my vampire boyfriend, Alexander Sterling, but I witnessed for the first time in my vampire-obsessed existence an actual vampire bite. The only problem was that it wasn't my neck being bitten.

This wouldn't have been such a tragedy for me if the recipient of the bite had been Onyx or Scarlet, the superfabulous Underworldy friends I'd met at the Coffin Club, but the bite was given to my own vampire adversary, a real vampire and gothic beauty, Luna Maxwell.

I'd been waiting almost a year to be bitten, since I'd met Alexander, not to mention my entire life of immortal dreaming, but for Luna it happened within hours of meeting another vampire. That night, on Alexander's lawn, there had been an amazing group of partygoers—handful of vampires mixing with the mortal local students. It was something I'd never thought would happen. While playing spin the bloody bottle, Luna and Sebastian, Alexander's handsome and hapless best friend, had locked eyes and gone in for more than a juicy lip-lock. His fangs pierced the soft flesh of her swanlike neck. Luna had stared up at me, her eyes dreamy, as if she were some hippie tripping at Woodstock. She glowed even more radiant than she normally did as a morbid fairy girl fashionista. Most of the partyers missed the action, but those who saw the bite passed it off as a macabre prank.

Sebastian had since moved out of the Mansion, and the rest of the vampires were perhaps back in Romania, or haunting the Coffin Club several towns away in Hipsterville. We hadn't gotten word of their whereabouts, and I hadn't seen any signs of them at Dullsville cemetery.

For the week following the love bite, I tried my best to get Alexander's mind off his disappointment. He was suffering because his best friend's impulsive behavior had put not only himself and Luna but even Alexander's secret in possible jeopardy. Happily, tonight Alexander was finally obliging.

We were lying in the grass on a hilltop that overlooked Dullsville. From there we were able to see the glamorous sites of Hipsterville, such as the graveyard, but I didn't notice them because I was lost in Alexander's lips.

I hadn't broached the tender subject of receiving my own love bite with Alexander in a while. But I saw this evening, alone with him and without distractions, as my chance for another try.

Fiddling with a link chain hanging from his black leather belt, I asked, "Do you think it's easier for Sebastian to fall for a girl and to take her blood?"

Alexander furrowed his brow.

"Or was it easy to do what he did at the party," I continued, "because Luna is already a vampire?"

"I can't speak for someone else."

“But I want to know what you think.”

Alexander paused. ~~“Then yes, I think it’s easier for him. He is very impulsive.”~~ His tone was clear and matter-of-fact.

I sighed.

Alexander reached for me and guided my hair back from my face with his fingers. “It means more to me than that,” he said directly.

“Me too,” I said, touching his shoulder. “But what if I were already a vampire?” I asked thoughtfully. “What if someone else turns me—not on sacred ground—so I won’t be bonded to them forever. But—”

Alexander withdrew his arm. “That’s what you want?” he asked, his voice almost cracking. “To be turned—by anyone? Sebastian? Or Jagger?”

“I was just thinking out loud,” I quickly refuted. I didn’t realize I’d hurt him.

“It would be that easy to have someone turn you? Just like that?”

When Alexander posed it to me like that, my fantastical solution didn’t seem so romantic or practical in its reality.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Are you so sure? You’d have my best friend bite you? Or worse, my longtime enemy?”

“But now you are friends with Jagger,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

“That’s not the point.”

“Of course not—I only want you. . . . I was just trying to take the pressure off of you. I was just thinking out loud.”

Alexander didn’t seem pleased with my response and continued to stare off into the distance.

“Let’s be clear,” I said, turning his face toward me. “I want to be a vampire. But I want to be one with you.”

He barely broke a smile.

“I’m turning eighteen soon and you’ll be seventeen,” he finally said. “It’s something to think about, Raven. You. Me. Our future. I want you to know that. But this is something that is life changing—especially for you.”

“I know.” I gazed up at my dreamy boyfriend’s eyes. His face was so handsome in the moonlight. “But will you really be eighteen? Or something else, in vampire years?”

“I will really be eighteen,” he said.

“And then the next year?”

“Uh . . . nineteen,” he said as if I should have known.

“But you are immortal.”

“The aging process will slow down. But that’s many, many years from now. Is that what you are worried about? Us not being able to be together unless you are immortal, too?”

“I’ve always wanted to be a vampire, since I was born,” I said to him urgently. “But then when I met you, I wanted to be one—to be turned by you. To have the covenant ceremony that you didn’t have with Luna in Romania. A beautiful wrought-iron lace trellis with a coffin and two goblets, on sacred ground. I’d be dressed in a black corset dress and hold black roses.

You’d be wearing a black suit and have a black rose in your jacket lapel. We’d say a few Romanian words and drink from each other’s glasses. Then, you’d turn me.”

“Wow!” he said with a laugh. “I guess you have thought about it, too.”

“But it’s not about me living forever. It’s about me being romantically bonded with you and experiencing the world as a vampire.” I stared up at him, the stars shining above him.

I waited for him to laugh, to think my ideas were childish and naive.

Instead he leaned into me and stared straight into my eyes, his chocolate ones dreamy and seductive. “There is a yearning that I have for you—that goes deeper than love,” he said. “It’s a desire that is palpable.” He took my hand and raised it, exposing the inside of my wrist. “This desire courses through my veins,” he said. He traced a prominent vein with his fingertip. “And yours. But I’d never put you before my own needs. What I struggle with isn’t something that you should have to as well. It’s a complicated life—more so than you realize.”

“I know it’s complicated. If you don’t want to talk about it . . .” I figured it was best to drop the subject. I didn’t want to be a nagging girlfriend, and Alexander had been through so much already with Sebastian’s antics. Why couldn’t I be more patient and not spoil our precious quality time alone together?

“Well, you already know it’s complicated,” Alexander commented. “I’m not sure how I can keep convincing you.”

I smiled. “I like it when you try,” I teased. “But sometimes I worry that you’ll leave the Mansion and return to Romania. And I’ll be stuck here, alone for the rest of my life.”

“Well, I am not planning on leaving.”

“But you weren’t planning on coming here, were you?”

“No . . .”

“See?”

“But I didn’t have the same reasons to stay there as I do here,” he said. “Is the only way I can convince you how much I care to . . .”

I waited. Maybe this was my chance to demand my need to be a vampire. But it had to be a decision he was ready for as much as I was.

“It isn’t something we need to decide tonight, is it?” he asked.

If I said yes and his answer was that he wasn’t going to turn me, what was I to do then? Normally I was daring. Adventure ran through my blood just as much as oxygen did. But this kind of risk—the emotional kind—was far different than sneaking into rumored haunted houses or cemeteries. This was my love life.

I gave him a puppy-dog face. “Of course not. But I wonder if it is something you want,” I said with trepidation, “or is it only my fantasy?”

I waited. I knew Alexander had thought about it. We’d discussed it before. But as he said, he was going to be eighteen and me seventeen—and, most important, I was now being faced with watching other vampires bite. It wasn’t something we could put off forever.

“I can guarantee you it’s not just your fantasy,” he re-assured me. Then he glanced away, looking in the direction of the Mansion sitting atop Benson Hill. “You are so much like my grandmother . . .”

“But wasn’t she lonely? For the rest of your family? Is that the fate you’d wish for me?”

Alexander faced me and stroked my cheek. “The only fate I’d wish for you is for us to be together.”

My heart skipped a beat.

Slowly and seductively he leaned me back on the blanket. I gazed up at Alexander, the starlight filling my eyes. He began tickling me.

When I'd wrestled with Billy growing up, I'd learned to relax my muscles, which resulted in my no longer being ticklish. My little brother would run off, disgruntled, and I'd claim victory. But Alexander was no Billy Boy. I squirmed in my vampire boyfriend's powerful clutches and giggled like a little girl.

My head whipped side to side and my face hit something jagged on the ground.

"Ouch!" I cried.

Alexander released his grip. "Are you okay? I didn't mean to hurt you."

He helped me sit up. I felt only a slight bit of pain. But it was Alexander's reaction that disturbed me.

He was staring at my mouth.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Alexander didn't speak. Instead his gaze was fixed.

I touched the corner of my lip.

A mixture of lavender lipstick and dark red liquid stained my ultrawhite fingertips. Oozing blood. To Alexander it was like an exotic perfume. Tantalizing and irresistible. Fresh blood to a hungry vampire.

I'd only been in this situation with Alexander once before, when he had come to my house to take me to the Snow Ball. I'd nicked my fingertip on the corsage pin. He'd had that same intense expression as he did now, only then I hadn't known he was a vampire, and I'd just quickly wiped the blood away.

But tonight was different. I knew that Alexander was a vampire. And the way he stared at me, so transfixed and intense, slightly frightened me but also made me feel wanted and alive.

Though this blood was my lifeline, Alexander needed my blood—or anyone else's—for his own existence. Others' blood was his lifeline.

Alexander wasn't repulsed by the sight and scent but intently attracted to it. I'd never witnessed it as much as I did today. It was apparent he was fighting his impulses. I wasn't sure if I wanted him to.

He shut his eyes and turned away from me.

"What would it be like?" I asked.

"Don't . . ." Alexander's appearance was scornful. Then his eyes softened. "I want to help you. Take care of your cut. But I can't. Don't you see how hard it is for me? I can't even help the one person I love. I can't come near you or I might—"

Alexander was fighting his natural impulse, and I was fighting mine. He rose up, his hands balled up in fists. He was biting his own lip. But I followed him.

I held my bloodstained fingers out to him.

I wanted Alexander to crave me more than he already did. Like Sebastian had craved Becky. But was that possible? Alexander was so intense and passionate as it was—was there anything deeper that he could feel or show me? And didn't he already crave me and my blood without me tempting him in this way?

I wondered if Alexander was right—that I might not like the vampire lifestyle after all, or that my lifelong dream of hiding from the sun and rising by the moonlight might not be as

romantic as it seemed. Ultimately, becoming a vampire would be a decision I couldn't change. A test I couldn't retake. An ill-fitting dress I couldn't exchange. It would be for life. Forever. For eternity. But this wasn't about being turned. Alexander and I weren't on sacred

ground. This was about something different.

~~My boyfriend stared at me, consumed by the scent of blood and the irresistible desire to devour it. "This is what you want? Me to be like the others—Jagger and Sebastian—Impulsive, needy?"~~

"No. I want you to be you. This was never about being anyone else," I said.

I could see Alexander was in turmoil. I was tempting him with something that was bigger than a fantasy to him. This was his everyday reality—a basic desire he had to fight against.

"It's okay," I said. I moved back and glanced away from him.

But instead of retreating, too, he stood still. I could feel his gaze fixed on me with a power that was hypnotic.

"No," he said. "Don't go."

I was surprised by Alexander's response and heeded his plea. I wasn't sure what he would do next. I almost gasped. Instead of leaving me, he stepped closer and took my face in his hands.

Alexander was so close to me, his alluring presence took my breath away. He slowly reached his hand to my cheek. I froze as if the events were happening in slow motion. As his firm hand slid seductively along my face, I melted with it. Then he tenderly wiped the blood from my mouth. It was as if he had touched my soul. My blood was now staining his fingers just as it had stained mine.

I waited with bated breath as the biggest moment of my life unfolded. I didn't think anything could have been dreamier than the first time we kissed or I slept in his coffin. Alexander was moments from taking my blood as his own.

I was suddenly filled with guilt and sadness as I thought maybe Alexander was doing this for the wrong reasons. Maybe I'd just worn him down.

I took his hand and lifted my sleeve to wipe the dripping blood away. "You don't have to. . . ." I finally said.

Alexander gently blocked my hand with his free one. "I want to," he said intensely.

The moment seemed surreal, and I felt as if I were in a dream. My body flooded with warmth.

Alexander stared at the dewy blood droplets now trickling down the side of his ghostly white palm. It was as if he was making the decision of a lifetime. This wasn't just any blood to him. It was *my* blood.

Alexander glanced at me and smiled. His sharp fangs caught the moonlight and glistened like icicles. Then Alexander drew his hand to his mouth. I watched, my mouth agape, as he took his bloody hand to his lips, pressed his hand to his mouth, and the red droplets disappeared. He inhaled a huge audible breath, as if he were breathing the life of me into him.

I gazed at Alexander. He appeared transformed. For a moment it seemed as if his pale complexion was almost alive. Alexander whipped toward me with unbridled intensity. He leaned into me, his hair flopping over his forehead, and kissed me with such force my knees shook and my flesh quivered. I thought I might die of heavenly bliss.

Alexander held me, limp in his arms, and I felt bonded to him in a deeper way than I ever experienced. He'd let me into his world, further than ever before.

Alexander squeezed me so tightly, it was as if we were one person. He picked me up and

swung me around, the twinkling lights of Dullsville swirling by me.

~~When he let me down, we both were giddy and dizzy. When I regained my vision I could~~ see my school, the country club, and the vacant Sinclair Mill off in the distance. It was then I noticed something unusual.

Alexander found me lost in thought.

“What is it?” he said. “I hope you aren’t—”

“No—everything is fine,” I reassured him. “It’s nothing.” I didn’t want anything to break our perfect moment.

“What’s wrong?” he insisted.

I had to squint to make out the object. It was then I could see clearly a familiar car—only rather, hearse.

I tried to block Alexander’s view by attempting to pull him away, but he didn’t budge.

Alexander was already staring at the barren factory.

His blissful expression sharpened slightly, and I could tell it registered to him that it was Jagger’s car.

I remained in his comforting clutches, bound to my love in a way I hadn’t been before. We clung to each other, both reluctant to break our euphoric encounter and face the situation that we now overlooked.

So Jagger hadn’t gone back to Romania or Hipsterville when Alexander’s party was over. There had to be a reason why he didn’t return and was apparently staying in the factory.

Alexander and I shared one last kiss before giving over to the distraction that lay at the bottom of the hill.

Chapter 2

Dead End

Not wanting to draw attention to us, Alexander parked the Mercedes in a grassy area more than fifty yards away from the mill. I was still beaming over Alexander taking my blood from his own. We tiptoed over the gravel road that led to the factory with a connection that couldn't be broken. As we neared the entrance, the dreamy look in Alexander's eyes continued and was only slightly marred by his concern over the discovery of Jagger's presence. We walked quietly through the shadows, and Alexander squeezed my hand extra tight.

The two antique smokestacks pointed toward the heavens like giant grave markers. The desolate and dilapidated factory was riddled with graffiti, broken and missing windows, rusted doors, and overgrown weeds and grass. Discarded boxes, trash, and beer cans were scattered around the grounds.

We turned a corner and came upon a vintage black mustang—Sebastian's ride.

Alexander stopped in his tracks. He sighed and slumped, let down by the discovery that his best friend was in the company of his former nemesis.

"Maybe Sebastian felt he had nowhere else to go," I offered encouragingly.

"Now that he's fallen for Luna," Alexander said, "he's probably under Jagger's spell, too."

Alexander took a deep breath and started for a white wooden door with the words "GET OUT" spray-painted in black.

"Well, then I guess we're going in," I said.

But instead of charging in, Alexander stopped.

"Maybe we should wait," he said, pausing at the doorway. "They obviously didn't want us to know that they're still here. Maybe we shouldn't let them know we found them."

"But how are we going to find out what's going on with them?"

"I could go in myself—undetected," he said, alluding to his nocturnal powers.

"That hardly seems fair," I said with the disappointment of a child who is told she is too short to go on an amusement park ride. "If I could change into a bat, I'd do it, too."

Alexander realized my limitations were upsetting me.

"Besides," I said, "it might be dangerous to leave me here alone in this dark, desolate place."

He nodded in agreement. "We'll see what we can find out from here." Alexander cupped his pale and once bloodstained palm. I stuck my combat-booted foot in his cradled hands and he lifted me up. I struggled at first but managed to grab on to a ledge and pulled my head slightly above it so I could peer in through a broken windowpane. My black fingernails were in stark contrast with the gray cement.

Breathless, I peered in. At first it was hard to see. My vision had to adjust to the dim lighting. A flickering candelabra sat on a wooden table, and then I spotted a flash of white hair.

"Over there," I whispered to Alexander.

He adjusted his stance a few feet to our left to where I could now see clearly. Jagger was

sitting with his back to me, his red-flamed Doc Martens boots resting up on a crate and his fingers woven together, supporting his white-haired head. He was the king of this crumbling castle. Sebastian, however, was fidgety. Alexander's best friend repeatedly pushed his dreadlocks away from his face, his many rings catching the candlelight. He didn't see me perhaps the glare from the light above them hid me or he was so deep in thought he wasn't focused on anything else. He tapped his leg repeatedly, like a junkie waiting for a fix. I had never seen him this frazzled.

"We'll need to start tomorrow," Jagger declared, "to get this thing up and running."

"So soon?" Sebastian asked.

"What are we waiting for?" Jagger countered.

Sebastian drummed his black-painted fingers on the table.

But Jagger and Alexander now had a truce, and Jagger wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that—or would he?

"The Coffin Club is a success," Jagger said. "So there's no reason not to start one here, too."

"This town isn't filled with vampires," Sebastian said. "Not like the other one, anyway."

"This town needs a place to dance," Jagger said. "For everyone to come alive—at night."

Sebastian couldn't argue with that. "I agree—there isn't anything to do in this town."

"And then the vampires will flock here. Like we did. Alexander, Luna and me, and now you. Mortals above and vampires below. The Coffin Club was a success and this one will be, too. We are sitting on a gold mine here in this abandoned factory."

"The Coffin Club Two?" Sebastian said.

"I already have a name for it: the Crypt."

"But are the preppy girls in this town going to want to hang out at a place called the Crypt?"

"I have ways to entice them besides the name alone," he said in a creepy but sexy tone.

"And vampires?" Sebastian asked skeptically.

"The mortals won't even know they're here. Besides, I have surprises planned for the club."

"What kinds of surprises?" Sebastian wondered.

"If I told you, then they wouldn't be surprises, would they? Besides, that's weeks away. We have a club to build first."

"What about Alexander?" Sebastian asked.

"He can be a partner, too. But I'm not sure if he's the type to own a club. He's very private."

"He is my best friend. I feel funny about this—without him being on board."

"Is your best friend, or was?" Jagger challenged. "Well, you'll have a place to stay here as long as you like."

Sebastian paused for a moment. He was the type that traveled constantly, his coffin covered with stickers from countries and cities around the world. It was something I could tell he was contemplating—a place to call home.

"But there is more of a vampire culture in bigger towns, am I right? Here it's just Alexander. And let's be clear. I think he likes it that way. I think we should respect that," Sebastian said.

Jagger cracked his knuckles, trying to mask his frustration.

~~“He escaped everything,” Sebastian added. “Persecution from mortals and persecution from . . .”~~

“My family?” Jagger sat up. “The irony, you mean. That he’d travel so far away from my family and ultimately we’d wind up settling here, too?”

“You guys have a truce.”

“I know. He helped my brother, Valentine. When Valentine was weakened and alone, Alexander cared for him and returned him to me. I’m not suggesting we restart that feud. But does that mean that what’s good for Alexander is good for us, too?” Jagger asked pointedly. “Do we have to live our lives around his? Besides, maybe a vampire club is just the thing he needs. He won’t be so alone on that hill with only a butler to attend to his needs.”

“I’m just saying. I know he’s still mad at me for what I did to Luna at his party. I know he thinks it jeopardized his existence here. And more of us coming to town—the kind that might be like me and act on impulse . . . it wouldn’t be good for any of us.”

“You were just being you. Just being us.” Jagger leaned in. Even from far away, his blue and green eyes were piercing. “I can’t help it if Alexander’s more . . . restrained. He should have bitten Raven a long time ago. Why let it drag on?”

Just then my foot slipped and I knocked over the empty soda can on the windowpane.

“What was that?” I heard Jagger say.

“I think someone is outside.”

I held my breath. Alexander did, too.

Alexander and I stood against the wall. A pigeon was walking along the window ledge.

Alexander tossed a twig near the bird. Startled, it flapped its wings wildly and flew off past the window.

“It’s just a pigeon,” I heard Sebastian say.

Alexander cupped his hands and helped me up again.

“You shouldn’t be on edge,” Jagger said. “Why are you so worried? It’s just a club.”

Sebastian thought, then finally spoke. “But it’s a club with vampires—in a place that has been inhabited by only one. Alexander fights every day to be who he is and do the right thing. Just because you and I might be more alike? That doesn’t mean he’s the one that’s wrong.”

Jagger now was the one riffling his fingers through his white locks.

“I really want to run this past him,” Sebastian said.

“And what’s he going to say, yes? Besides, you can’t tell him you’ve been hanging out here with me and Luna.”

Sebastian hung his head low.

“Don’t despair,” Jagger said. “It’s going to be awesome. Music blasting, drinks flowing, dancing until dawn. Beautiful girls everywhere. What’s not to like?”

Sebastian’s face lit up in the candlelight.

The Crypt sounded like the kind of club I’d want to hang out in. Just like the Coffin Club—but only a few miles from my house. I bit my lavender lip in excitement.

“I know he’s mad at me . . .” Sebastian said, “but I still have his back.”

“He’ll see the club once it’s open,” Jagger said, rising. He put his arm around Sebastian. “It won’t be too long. We’ll decorate at night. I have ways of getting these things settled very

quickly.”

Sebastian bit his black nails.

“Just think it over,” Jagger said, slapping Sebastian on the back like a coach does to a football player. “You have a place to stay, a new best friend, and . . .”

“A girlfriend,” a sweet, ethereal voice said.

Just then pink hair bounced in from behind the shadows.

Luna was dressed in a wickedly cool frock—a pink mini-dress with black spiderwebbed tights. Her perfectly straight baby pink hair appeared as soft as something out of a shampoo commercial.

Sebastian shot up.

She took his hand and pulled him into her. They shared a kiss that probably would have gone on forever if Jagger hadn’t cleared his throat.

“It’s Luna,” I whispered to Alexander. “Now we should go in—”

Alexander helped me back to the ground and I told him what I’d heard. He shook his head. “We need to wait,” he said.

“Really?” I was surprised by Alexander’s sudden change in course.

“Yes,” he said. “But not for too long. I’m always getting Sebastian out of predicaments. Maybe this time he needs to figure things out himself.”

“But what about this new club?” I asked. “It will be here, in Dullsville.”

“That we will have to fix. But I don’t have to at this moment.”

We heard the sound of a car driving over the gravel. Alexander pulled me back into an alcove.

A white Beetle painted to look like a skull drove past us and parked. Scarlet and Onyx hopped out of their car.

“I think it will be fun to hang with them here for a little while longer,” Onyx said.

“That’s because you want to be next to Jagger at all times.”

“I do not!” she declared.

“It’s okay,” Scarlet reassured her. “I’d like to try to see that Trevor guy again.

He’s such a prep—but I have to admit, I really think that’s hot!”

Onyx giggled.

“Too bad I can’t bring him here,” Scarlet said. “Maybe I’ll just show up at his school in his locker room.”

The two girls giggled as Onyx opened the trunk.

“But he can’t know about us,” Onyx said. “That’s why it’s best to date vampires. We don’t have to hide. Maybe you should like Sebastian?”

“He’s all into Luna. That girl gets on my nerves. I sense something fake about her.”

“Like she’s not a real vampire?” Onyx asked as they retrieved several bags of groceries.

“No—like she’s up to something. She’s either really saccharine-sweet or totally aloof.”

“Do you think she really likes Sebastian?” Onyx asked as they headed for the door with groceries in hand and passed by us.

“I think she likes—” Scarlet said, but we couldn’t hear her answer. They had disappeared

into the factory.

Alexander took my hand and led me away from the abandoned mill.

“I have other things on my mind tonight,” he said, his eyes still dreamy from the blood

exchange, and he drove me back to the Mansion.

~~As I lay in my bed, I cuddled Nightmare in my arms. Alexander had finally taken my blood as his own. The moment felt as intense for me as it was for him. To be one of the few living humans in the world to have blood taken by a vampire thrilled me beyond belief. And that it had been done in a harmless and loving way made the whole event exhilarating and blissful. The most important part to me was that Alexander showed me that he needed me, craved me, wanted me. The feeling of connection I now felt to him was stronger than blood.~~

And that moment was much different than when Sebastian had taken Becky's blood. One, she hadn't known it had happened; two, she wasn't aware that Sebastian was a vampire; and three—and most important—she wasn't in love with him.

With Alexander, this was something we shared together as a couple. He needed me—inside and out, just as I did him. Heart, soul, and blood. And if he'd done this, something I never thought he would do, did that mean that he was one step—a big step—closer toward turning me? I threw my head back on the pillow in laughter. At this moment, I didn't care about being a mere mortal. A vampire had taken my blood! I'd experienced much more beyond belief since meeting Alexander Sterling. I'd always dreamed that vampires existed and now I knew. I'd fallen in love with one—and this very night, he'd acted as a true vampire and shown me how much he needed me.

But what should have been a uniquely blissful moment was complicated once again by the nefarious vampire twins, Jagger and Luna. If only I could spend time just thinking about Alexander. Finally our lives could be about just us. I wondered if that would ever happen.

I was torn about the Crypt. When I thought about what Jagger was proposing, a fabulous new dance club where none before existed, I was ecstatic. Practically speaking, though, there was nothing worse than having vampires (ones other than Alexander and his family, of course) inhabiting our town and mixing with mortals. If this place became a second Coffin Club, we could only guess what new vampires would do. Would they put the lives of unsuspecting students or townspeople in danger? But the other part—the dance club itself—was exactly what I'd really wanted all my life. A club, a haunted happening, only a few miles from my own house, that I'd be able to attend. A place, unlike school and all of Dullsville itself, where I would finally fit in.

My mind raced. Maybe I could help Jagger and the others with the plans, marketing, and decorating the Crypt. I could be the very thing they needed to bring life to the club.

Could this really be the gift I'd always dreamed of, and just in time for my birthday? But this one thing that would bring excitement into my life might bring disaster to Alexander's. The increase in vampires in Dullsville could bring attention to them and ultimately reveal the secret identity of the one vampire I cared about the most.

Or maybe, just maybe, this could be a place like the Mansion, where Alexander could finally be himself. No hiding or pretending to be anything but himself. Just drinking red Bloody Marys and dancing until dawn.

It was a gamble, knowing Alexander's former nemesis. Jagger was a vampire who craved attention and seemed to receive a lot because he owned a vampire club. Ultimately I was

skeptical about his underlying intentions for this new club.

I was restless. For the first time in my life, the one thing I knew I needed to stop from happening was the one thing I wanted to make sure happened. Jagger, Sebastian, and the

others were holed up inside the factory making plans for the Crypt while I was reduced to
studying, homework, and insomnia.

Chapter 3

Menace

“What happened to your lip?” Becky asked when I hopped into her truck the following morning before school. “Did Alexander get carried away with you?”

“Is it that noticeable?” I pulled down the visor and checked my reflection in the mirror—an act I wouldn’t be able to do if I were a vampire someday. I struggled with the idea that I would no longer be able to see myself and what that simple task would mean for me. I would never be able to adjust things such as makeup, hair, and my clothes. Alexander was gorgeous naturally. I wasn’t sure that I was ready for the world to see me without being able to present myself the way I wanted to be seen.

As I touched up my cut with corpse white cover-up, I felt a renewed sense of confidence. It wasn’t the kind of confidence one feels when securing oneself with makeup but rather an internal assurance and peace. I felt as if I couldn’t contain my glow.

“What’s up with you?” Becky said. “You can’t seem to stop smiling.”

“I’m just in love. . . .” I said dreamily.

“Me too. We are both so lucky we found good guys. I still can’t believe that we both have boyfriends, can you?”

“No,” I said honestly.

We drove past the covered bridge that met the winding road leading up to the factory on the outskirts of town. I could see the smokestacks high above the trees, as if they were deliberately taunting me—reminding me of Jagger’s presence.

“But I have so much on my mind,” I said, slightly hinting to Becky.

“What’s up?”

“If there was something you wanted to happen but it might be a threat to others, what would you do?”

“I wouldn’t want it to happen.”

“It’s that simple?” I asked.

“Why would I want something that was not good for everyone?”

Becky was an altruist. That’s why she was such a good friend to me. But in this case, I would have preferred she be a bit more cynical.

“Why would it be bad?” she asked, worried. “Is this about you and Alexander?”

“It might not be bad,” I confessed, and it was true, since I didn’t ultimately know Jagger’s plans. I was just going by his previous history.

“I think it would be easier if you just told me what you are talking about instead of being so cryptic.”

“It’s not really a threat, not now anyway,” I said.

“I guess you’d have to take the threatening part away. That’s the only way it would work.”

I thought about what Becky said. If somehow I made sure that no vampires were invited to the Crypt, other than the ones already inhabiting the vacant mill, then maybe they wouldn’t be a threat. I knew Onyx and Scarlet, and so far they didn’t seem to take advantage

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