

## Ghoulish Guest

It was a deadly kiss—the kind of kiss that stole my breath, forced my heart into overdrive, left me hopelessly weakened and desperately gasping for more. The kind of kiss where I felt as if I'd die if it ever ended. I, Raven Madison, was in terminal bliss.

Alexander, my vampire boyfriend, and I were nestled together in the dusty depths of the Mansion's basement, passionately clinging to each other like a broken spiderweb. I'd transformed the wine cellar into a ghastly haunt as a present for him. I wanted him to have an alternative macabre sanctuary when he needed a retreat from painting in his attic room.

After Alexander's parents returned to Romania, I had decided to once again give the Mansion a feminine touch. Upon moving a portrait for storage in the basement, I stumbled across something I'd never seen before. Behind the staircase and toward the north wing of the house I found an arched wooden door secured with a heavy wooden beam. I had no idea what lay on the other side, and since Alexander was upstairs creating a masterpiece, I didn't want to disturb him. I paced in front of the door, deliberating whether to wait until he was finished. My impatience got the best of me, so I figured a quick peek wouldn't hurt anyone.

It took all my strength to pry open the beam, but less to open the rusty door. What lay on the other side was a dark, dusty, and chilly room. I was awestruck. The floor was made of uneven stones and the arched ceiling and narrow walls of gray bricks. Centuries-old Romanian and other European bottles were evenly stacked on dozens of wooden racks. On closer inspection, some of the bottles appeared different from the cabernets and merlots I'd seen resting on the three-tiered metal rack in the Madison family kitchen.

Curious, I lifted one of the Sterlings' bottles from the shelf to inspect it further when I felt an icy shadow behind me.

I gasped.

Slowly, I turned around to find Alexander standing in the doorway. I held out the bottle, which was shaking in my hand. He nodded his head, and it was then I knew—these bottles weren't filled with wine. They were filled with blood.

And now, a month later, the wine—or, rather, blood—cellar also housed votives, a portable DVD player, and an amorously entangled mortal and vampire. As the candelabras dripped blood-red wax, my body melted around Alexander's. He, in turn, held me in the clutches of his strong, pale arms. The cool air of the cellar only added to the chills dancing up and down my spine from Alexander's tantalizing fingers. His deep, dark eyes stared boldly into mine, his fangs gently grazing my neck. For a moment, I was tempted to pull him into me—so hard he would be forced to sink his teeth into my flesh.

Then I'd be a vampire. Forever. For eternity.

But as I stared back at him, I knew that that wouldn't be fair. The quiet and reclusive Alexander had already shared so much with me—his family, his nemesis, his home. He had to be ready to take me completely into his world just as much as I was ready to *be* taken.

While I contemplated my plunge into the Underworld, three hard knocks came from above the rustic ceiling and echoed off the basement staircase walls. I wasn't about to end our embrace, but Alexander pulled away.

It was critical that nothing separate us—not time, homework, or an unwanted visitor.

I fingered his metal chain-link necklace and gently drew him back toward me. He leaned in for another kiss and I closed my eyes. As I waited for his lips to touch mine, three loud thumps echoed again. I opened my eyes to find Alexander gazing at the door instead of me.

Jameson, Alexander's butler, was out on the town catching a late-night flick with his girlfriend, Ruby White. It couldn't have been him. It was too late for deliveries, and no Dullsvillian in his or her right Ivy League-schooled mind would dare venture out to the old lonely Mansion and up its spooky driveway in the middle of the night.

"Perhaps it's a ghost," I teased. "Begging for souls."

For a few minutes, there was silence. I was relieved.

Then, suddenly, a louder bang.

"I'll only be a minute," he said, rising.

"And leave me here alone?" I argued.

"You aren't afraid, are you? I thought you felt like the Mansion was your home."

The cellar was certainly spooky, dark, and foreboding, and I was far more comforted by it than I was afraid. However, there was nothing I could do alone, and since Alexander and I were destined to be separated by the sunlight, our darkened moments together were priceless.

"Me? Afraid? Only of being apart from you."

It sounded corny, something from a greeting card or a sappy TV movie, but I meant every word.

Alexander extended his hand and led me up the basement stairs and past the candelabra flickering in the hallway.

We reached the foyer, and Alexander grabbed the door handle. I took his hand before he opened it. "Aren't you going to look out the peephole before you answer?"

Alexander glared down at me. He was, after all, a vampire. Who could be on the other end of the door that could frighten *him*?

The Mansion door slowly creaked open, and I waited anxiously to see who was brave enough to be standing in the shadows on the broken steps.

Candlelight streamed out from the Mansion, partially illuminating an unfamiliar figure. I craned my neck to get a better glimpse of the stranger. A handsome guy, appearing to be around Alexander's age, with wildly wiry short blond and brown dreadlocks, boot-shaped sideburns, goatee, and a thin, ashen face, stood before us. Tattoos crept out from his unbuttoned vintage white shirt, and gold earrings hung from his ears. He had a glistening gaze and an alluring smile.

"Dude! Where have you been?" the visitor asked enthusiastically.

"Sebastian—" Alexander was shocked. My boyfriend was familiar with the guy I thought was a stranger. "What are you doing here?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you. I had to find out from your parents that you weren't returning to Romania. But now I see why . . ." His gaze bore through me. "Well, aren't you going to introduce us?"

"This is Sebastian," Alexander said politely. "Sebastian, this is—"

"Raven." Sebastian took my hand in his. He wore more rings than I did and sported black polish on his bitten fingernails. He kissed my hand. I couldn't quite tell if this character was charming or just an annoying flirt.

"Well, aren't you going to invite me in?" he asked with a wide grin.

"Of course," Alexander replied, still surprised.

Alexander stepped back, but Sebastian didn't follow.

"Just a minute," Sebastian said. "I'll get my things."

“Things?” Alexander asked, his mouth hanging agape.

Sebastian had already taken off toward a vintage mint-condition 1960s black Mustang with silver racing stripes, which was parked in the Mansion’s drive.

“Alexander . . . who is . . . ?” I began softly.

Alexander didn’t answer. Instead, he remained focused on Sebastian.

The handsome visitor popped open the trunk and reached inside. I could see in the distance that he was pulling out a large duffel bag and setting it on the drive. He reached in again and placed another bag on the broken pavement. Then another.

I assumed Sebastian intended to spend the night, but judging from the amount of luggage he possessed, I wasn’t sure just how many nights he planned on staying.

I wasn’t quite sure how I felt about this stranger’s visit—or move—into the Mansion. Alexander’s parents left Dullsville and we were free to resume our independence. Now we were accepting boarders?

But more important, who was this person and why was he here?

“I better help him,” my boyfriend said, and headed for the Mustang.

From my vantage point on the crumbling steps, I wasn’t privy to their conversation. But by their gestures, I could tell the two chatted like reuniting brothers. After a few minutes, they carried Sebastian’s bags back toward me. I trailed the ghostly pair back into the Mansion, up the stairs, and into one of the vacant rooms.

The room was stark and cold. A velvet eggplant-hued curtain covered a single window. There wasn’t so much as a bed or air mattress. The only decoration present was a tiny vase with dead lavender flowers I’d placed on a small table a few days before.

“Appears you still like living in the past,” he said to Alexander. “Where’s the TV, man?”

“Down the hall,” Alexander said, pointing to the far end of the house.

Alexander retrieved a candelabra sitting on a table in the hallway. He lit a match and illuminated the room.

Sebastian dumped his oversized bags on the floor. They landed with a thud, making me suspicious about the weight of his clothes. He walked around the room with the candelabra.

“Lavender?” Sebastian asked as the candles spread light on the vase.

“It’s just Raven’s touch,” Alexander said.

“I can put it in another room if it bothers you,” I offered.

Sebastian gazed down at me. His eyes glistened in the candlelight. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Alexander stepped between us. “I’ll give you some time to settle in,” he said. “You must be tired from your trip.”

Sebastian surveyed his new digs and stretched out his arms while Alexander closed the door behind us.

I stopped Alexander before he moved. “Who is this guy?” I asked. “One of your relatives?”

“No. He’s my best friend.”

I was shocked. Alexander spoke so little about himself and Romania, I’d never heard about any friends, much less one best friend named Sebastian.

“You never mentioned you had a best friend,” I told him.

“He never came up.”

“Never came up? I talk about Becky all the time.”

“You talk about a lot of things,” he joked.

Alexander had a point. I liked to talk about every mundane thought I had during every minute of my day, while Alexander kept mum on even the most important subjects.

“So how long do you think he’ll stay?” I asked. I could only wonder what it would be like for the three of us to hang out at the cemetery, my house, or the Mansion.

“Perhaps a few days.”

“I thought he’d be here for weeks.”

“Sebastian? He won’t want to wear out his welcome.”

There was one piece of information I couldn’t wait to find out.

“I wanted to ask you,” I whispered. “Is he like you?”

Sounds of banging and hammering came from inside Sebastian’s room. Was he, too, redecorating the Mansion?

The door creaked open and I saw Sebastian kneeling on the wooden floor, a hammer in one hand and a nail in the other. Boards peeked out of his duffel bag. He was building a black coffin.

Alexander quickly reached for the door.

Just then we heard the locks being unlatched from the front door below.

“That’ll be Jameson,” Alexander said, closing the bedroom—or in this case, coffin room—door behind him. “He will have to take you home tonight.”

“So soon?” I whined.

“It’s really late, actually. Even Jameson’s date is over.”

“So what are you guys going to do? I hope you’re not going clubbing.”

“In this town?”

“Or hiring escorts or something.”

Alexander shot me a look.

“I watch cable. I see what guys do.” And these guys weren’t like most others—these guys were vampires. “One of you might get hungry,” I inferred.

“Don’t worry. I’m the same guy with him as I am with you,” he reassured.

And with that, Alexander gave me a quick good-night peck on the cheek, a stark contrast to the passionate, long lip-lock we had just shared in the cellar.

Reluctantly, I jumped into the Mercedes and Jameson drove me at a creeping pace toward my house. I caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror. Reflected back was a scowl not unlike that of a four-year-old child who hadn’t gotten her way.

It wasn’t fair. Two guys partying at the Mansion while I had to go home to bed. If I was a vampire, I’d be able to hang out with them all night and chill out during the day near them in my coffin. I’d fit in and not have any reason to be excluded—no longer a mere mortal with a reflection and a curfew.

I fantasized that Alexander would bite me and take me into his exciting and mysterious darkened world. It had been a dream of mine to become a vampire long before I’d even met him. But now that I was dating a vampire—this particular vampire—my broad childhood desire about joining the Underworld had morphed into a specific desire—to be turned by Alexander. But so far that hadn’t happened. I knew in my heart that there was the possibility that Alexander might not ever turn me, that maybe we would share life side by side but separated by our two worlds. I knew the reason he hadn’t bitten me was as much out of love as it would be if he had bitten me. I’d fallen for the one vampire in the world who didn’t put his needs above his morals. This only made me love him more. And I couldn’t imagine that Alexander’s fear might be right—that I might not like being a vampire after all, that something I’d desired all my life in its reality might



not live up to my grandiose expectations. But how could that world be bad if I was sharing it with him?

And now, with the arrival of Sebastian, two immortals were partying it up in the Mansion without me.

At this point, as I was being driven home by Jameson, I was as much disappointed about not being a vampire as I was just being me and not being included in my boyfriend and his best friend's sudden plans.

This situation would have to be fixed—sooner rather than later.