

CHAPTER ONE

Special Delivery

The letter arrived mysteriously.

I imagined the deliverer was an enigmatic figure masked in a centuries-old black hooded cloak, slipping undetected through the darkness past the Mansion's wrought-iron gate. He may have approached the Sterlings' haunted-looking house in a hearse. Or perhaps he'd flown over the menacing fence in the form of a bat.

By nightfall, the Mansion's mailbox was usually as hollow as an empty coffin, sitting lonely at the bottom of Benson Hill, at the end of a long and windy driveway. So the letter would go unnoticed for several hours as I was stolen away in Alexander's attic room, pressed against my vampire boyfriend's deathly pale, but full of life, lips.

Several weeks had passed since Alexander and I had returned from our adventure in Hipsterville, and though Alexander hadn't bitten, he did make this mortal feel a part of the Underworld. During that time, we began to experience the vampire life without distractions. There was no school to interrupt my daytime sleep, no Trevor Mitchell to be a thorn in my side, and no Dullsville High students to ridicule my dark attire. There were no teen vampires lurking in the cemetery, disrupting Alexander's and my stardust dates. No threat of a preteen

Nosferatu attempting to turn my younger brother and his nerd-mate immortal. Free of the feuding Maxwells, Alexander and I were now able to unite our mortal and immortal worlds as one.

I was also beginning to do something I'd never had the opportunity to do before—make the Mansion my home. And why shouldn't I? On a dare, in my youth, I'd snuck into it by squeezing through the abandoned estate's broken basement window. Now, invited, I could confidently walk right up its splintered stone path and through its creaky unlocked front door.

I had never been so happy in my life.

I transformed the Mansion into Alexander's and my private vampire castle. I felt like a medieval queen and Alexander was my handsome king. Instead of spending the rest of summer break in my tiny bedroom, I suddenly had full reign over a palatial estate. I replaced Alexander's torn and aged bedroom curtain with a brand new black-lace one. I added some candelabras I'd found at a rummage sale to the ones his grandmother had brought from Romania. I placed black roses in pewter vases and lavender-scented votives and rose petals on all the empty hall and antique end tables.

Jameson, Alexander's butler, didn't seem to mind. In fact, he even appeared to delight in a woman's (or, in my case, teen girl's) touch around the barren estate.

It even seemed like the Mansion itself was amused by my presence. The floors appeared to give an extra squeak when I ran over them, as if the uneven boards were greeting my stay. The wind sounded louder than I'd remembered as it whistled through the cracked windowpanes. The creaking in the foundation warmly echoed off the hollow walls at a higher volume than it had before.

The massive house glistened with candles and cobwebs.

During the day I nestled in Alexander's corpse-cold arms, cuddling in his coffin. At night we cranked Rob Zombie and had midnight showings of *Fright Night*.

Alexander gave me the next best thing to a sparkling diamond ring—a dresser drawer. His dresser was as ancient as Dracula himself. A family-owned chipped oak bureau with glass knobs held his clothes in five three-foot-long drawers. Alexander emptied the middle one for me, to be filled with anything I liked. One of the glass handles had broken and he replaced it with a wooden raven. There was even a lock on the dresser. At first I thought it was a facade, but on closer inspection it was revealed to be real. Whereas everything in my bedroom—clothes, magazines, hair products—was cast about in an unorganized mess, my drawer at the Mansion was in perfect order. Alexander brought out the best in me. It held a pair of socks, my Emily the Strange hoodie, a

few T-shirts, and a bat-shaped sachet. I often felt jealous of the accessories I left there, which got to call the Mansion their home, while I returned to my house on Dullsville Drive.

I even managed to bake at the Mansion. I prepared ghost-shaped cookies, cupcakes with witch hats, and chocolate Rice Krispie treats. With my new independence I found a side of me that I didn't know existed.

My parents were pleased too, as long as I returned home for dinner and didn't stay out after midnight. My spirits were high and they were content that I wasn't hiding under the covers all summer long.

Alexander seemed happier too—and inspired. When we weren't roaming the cemetery at night, he painted landscapes and portraits of me. He began to churn out one beauty after another. Many of them were upbeat pictures of places around town we'd visited. The golf course, Dullsville High, Oakley Park, Hatsy's Diner, the swings at Evans Park, and the historic library. These paintings were bright and vivid and sweet and reflected his fondness for the town. I knew he had truly found his home here.

But unbeknownst to Alexander and me, all that was about to be changed, by the letter that awaited him under the glow of the Mansion's lights.

Alexander took my hand in his as we left the Mansion and strolled down its drive. When we reached the gate, he drew me close.

"These last few weeks have been great. This is how it should always be. Just you and me."

"For eternity?" I asked, and stared up at him.

His hair hung sexily over his soulful eyes. There was a contentment I hadn't seen in Alexander. He gave me a long, breathtaking, weak-knee-making kiss. When we finally broke apart, something alongside the mailbox caught a reflection from the streetlight. The mailbox flag was sticking up.

"Funny. Does the mailman deliver your post at night? I thought only I knew your true identity."

Alexander appeared puzzled too.

"Jameson is diligent about bringing the mail in as soon as it arrives."

"Well, that couldn't have been later than noon," I said.

"Maybe they made a special delivery."

"I'll get it later," Alexander resolved with a shrug and put his arm around my shoulder. "I'll walk you home first."

"Forget that," I said before he could lead me away. "Maybe it's an invite to a party. Or notification that you won a trip to London."

"Or it could be a batch of coupons for pizza."

I glared up at him.

"Well, we'll never know unless you open it," I said coyly.

Alexander paused. Then he reluctantly leaned against the rickety box. He reached his pale fingers out to open the lid when we were struck with a few drops of rain.

"That's funny. It's not supposed to rain until tomorrow," I said.

Alexander drew back the metal door. "Be my guest."

I stared into the rusty mailbox, which was as dark as any tomb.

I half expected to see a detached hand holding out a letter. This was, after all, a vampire's mailbox. But I saw nothing.

"Are you afraid? It won't bite. But I might," he said, tickling me in the side.

"You promise?" I giggled as a few more drops of rain tapped me on the head. I imagined I could get snapped by a bird protecting its young or a field mouse hoping for a snack. I took a deep breath and reached my black chipped fingernailed hand into the dark box but felt only a spiderweb. I reached in farther, allowing my ashen palm to disappear until I couldn't even see my Eve L wristband. Then I felt something pointy.

"It's not a package," I said, yanking it out. I had grasped a single standard-size black envelope.

I held it toward the streetlight. The letter looked odd. First of all, there wasn't a stamp, or even a postmark. Perhaps I had been right about a fang-toothed flying mailman. In perfect beautiful silver calligraphy it read: MR. ALEXANDER STERLING.

As I handed the envelope to my boyfriend, a few sprinkles of rain hit the letter A and the ink began to run.

"Looks like I'll have to drive you home," he said resignedly.

Alexander tucked the letter into his jacket and took my hand and we raced up the mile-long driveway, escaping into the Mansion.

I stood in the foyer of the magnificent Mansion. Lavender wafted through the estate. A new portrait of me stared back, a substitute for one of the original portraits that once lined the hallway.

"There's no return address," I remarked, smoothing out my hair.

"I recognize the handwriting."

"Really? Then who is it from? A long-lost girlfriend?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"I bet you get millions of love letters from old girlfriends."

Alexander placed the envelope on a hallway table. "Wait here while I ask Jameson for his car keys."

"Aren't you going to open the letter?"

"Eventually."

Alexander was patient and disinterested. I was neither.

"You must tell me who it's from," I said, snatching his mail. "Or *I'll* open it," I teased.

Alexander paused. "It's from my parents."

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

It had been ages since Alexander's parents had been to Dullsville, and Alexander rarely spoke of them. Most of the time, I forgot they existed.

"Well, open it up," I pushed, handing it back to him.

"Maybe they sent you a check."

Alexander took a white gold S shaped letter opener lying on the hall table. Unlike me, who ripped open mail like a wild animal, Alexander carefully severed the envelope.

He opened the black letter with a bloodred border. A check didn't fall out. Not even a Romanian leu.

Alexander began to read the letter to himself.

"What does it say?" I asked, bouncing around him and desperately trying to take a peek. But all I could make out was regal-looking letterhead with an inscription I couldn't decipher.

Alexander playfully held the letter out of my sight. But when he finished reading, he turned serious.

"What does it say?" I asked again.

Without answering, he put the letter in the envelope and returned it to the table. "I'll take you home now."

"What does it say?" I repeated.

"Nothing really."

"Your parents wrote to tell you nothing?"

"Uh-huh."

"Is everyone okay?"

"Yes."

"So why aren't you smiling?"

Then I thought maybe reading a handwritten note from them made him homesick. A creepy but kind butler wasn't a substitute for parents in a lonely old estate.

"I'm sure you miss them. I bet you wish you could see them soon."

"I will," he said. "They're arriving tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" I asked, shocked.

"Yes. That means things are about to change."

I glanced around the Mansion. We felt like two teens who'd trashed the house with a party only to find their parents were returning from their vacation early.

"Our 'coffin clutches' will have to end."

Alexander nodded reluctantly.

"And my decorations will have to be removed."

"It looks that way."

"What about my drawer?"

"I found the dresser key," he said with a smile.

As Alexander closed the door behind us, I managed to catch a last glimpse of the black rose petals lying on the hallway table. The painting of me would have to be shelved and the original ones returned. The votives would have to be stored away.

One thing was for sure: This time Alexander, not Jameson, would have to clean up the Mansion.