

## 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'd 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, 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—a 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 liplock. His fangs pierced the soft flesh of her swanlike neck. Luna had stared up at me, her eyes dreamy, as if she was some hippie tripping at Woodstock. She glowed even more radiantly 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's 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 I 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 pure 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 reassured me. Then he turned 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 be 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 ghost 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'd 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—I'm happy. 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—or, 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.