

CHAPTER ONE

DROP-DEAD GORGEOUS

I was waiting for the other combat boot to drop.

My life in Dullsville had turned perfectly exciting. I was living the nightmare I'd always dreamed of—I was in love with a gorgeous vampire, I had fabulous Underworldly friends and a hauntingly gothic nightclub where I could dance until dawn. The only thing I was missing was being an actual member of the Coffin Club—by becoming a real vampire. But if I couldn't be a vampire yet, then I would gladly enjoy the moment while I thought of new ways to convince Alexander I was truly ready to be turned.

So much had happened recently. Alexander's best friend, Sebastian, had escaped the clutches of his new girlfriend, Luna, who had been set to dig her fangs into him for eternity. Sebastian was solo now, safe and crashing out in a downtown apartment in Dullsville. Scarlet and Onyx, my two vampire ghoul friends, were still inhabiting the Crypt and each had their mark on a guy—Scarlet had her sights set on my nemesis, Trevor Mitchell, which made me uneasy. While I didn't want to date Trevor, it was odd to see him in the company of a vampire. And Onyx had her eyes on Luna's twin brother, Jagger. And Jagger, Alexander's former nemesis, was basking in the moonlight now that his club was a hit in Dullsville. My best friend, Becky Miller, had learned Alexander's and my other friends' true vampire identities and was accepting this unexpected news as best as any mortal could. Alexander was as dreamy as ever, feeling more relaxed with a peer vampire population in this small town, and both of us were eagerly anticipating the arrival of his little sister, Athena "Stormy" Sterling.

It was slightly after midnight, a week after our birthday bash, when Alexander and I entwined our bodies, dancing to the music of Vlad and the Impalers at the Crypt. I was lost in his gaze, his chocolate eyes as irresistible to me as his red-licorice-hued lips. His brilliant smile glowed on his handsome, pale face. I felt as if we were the only couple in the club, or the world, for that matter. No one else existed to me. His pointed fangs glistened in the pulsing strobe lights, and I melted in his slow embrace. He leaned in to me, his fangs continuing to catch the flashing light. I'd been on the other end of them before, in sight and sultry temptation, but not in true bite, and each time was like it was the first—fresh, real, and tantalizingly dangerous. I imagined the bite that would take me into his world forever, and how it would feel against my neck. Would it sting like getting my ear pierced again or hurt like getting a shot, or far worse, like a bite of an animal? Or would his knifelike teeth slide in painlessly as if they were always meant to have penetrated my skin?

My blood would not be solely mine anymore but ours. I was mesmerized by my one true love and knew he was the one I'd been dreaming about to live with for an eternity. We'd cohabit in the Underworld, strolling through cemeteries at night and cuddling in our king-sized coffin all day. I'd decorate the Mansion and run my gothic and vampy mag while Alexander painted masterworks in our attic bedroom. I'd fulfill his need for nourishment and he for me while we laughed, danced, and kissed in the darkness. Alexander's fangs slid farther down the nape of my neck until I was jarred out of my dream state. I felt myself pushed back from him, and suddenly someone was dancing between us. At first I thought a wayward dancer had bumped into us, but when I saw long, bubblegum-pink hair, I knew it was intentional. Luna swayed her lithe, fairylike body to the morbidly slow beat and then threw her head back as if she'd just been

bitten. No one was going to come between Alexander and me! I scooted myself in between them and pushed her out with all my might.

Luna sailed into another dancer and fell into his arms. I glanced over and noticed the dancer had blond hair. It was Trevor, who had once dated Luna. Scarlet wasn't going to be as gentle as I was with another girl coming between her and her man—after all, she was a real vampire. Scarlet lunged at Luna and hissed like a cat as her eyes seemed to turn bloodred. Luna ignored her and instead flashed her long, glittery pink lashes at Trevor, who was helplessly caught in her charms. Scarlet grabbed Trevor by his polo sleeve and yanked him away from the entrancing Luna. Trevor was startled by Scarlet's bold move but then smiled about the tug-of-war and possible catfight over him. He shot me a look as if to say, "See what you're missing?"

As Scarlet dragged Trevor off the dance floor, Luna appeared unfazed. She glanced around until she saw the nearest male clubster—Matt Wells, my best friend's boyfriend. Becky and Matt were jamming when Luna sidled up to Matt. He was caught off guard, and his face flushed cherry red with her sudden attention. Poor Becky seemed blindsided and didn't know what to do. I pushed my way through the crowd of dancers and pulled Luna away from my favorite couple. I'd clobber anyone who came between my best friend and her soulmate.

I gave Luna a death stare. She returned my fiery gaze, tensed her soft, pale cheeks, and bit her baby-pink lips. It must be hard for someone as beautiful as Luna to accept rejection. Until recently, rejection had been something I'd been accustomed to—it was acceptance that was new to me. However, Luna had first been rejected by Alexander and now by his best friend, Sebastian.

Luna had been a Sulky Sue since Sebastian had hightailed it out of the Crypt when he found out the covenant ceremony he was performing with Luna was on sacred ground. If he'd bitten

her as they planned, they'd be bonded together as vampire lovers for eternity. Jagger had tried to trick Sebastian into being a mate for his twin sister for a lifetime—and beyond.

Who knew what other tricks the Maxwells had up their torn sleeves? I would have to keep them in my sight.

But with Luna on the rebound and apparently moving in on our boyfriends, it was going to be impossible for any of us girls to be happy with her being solo. Everyone but Luna in relationships meant only one thing—trouble. And I knew that the guy she craved the most was my beloved Alexander.

Even though Luna was my adversary, when I gazed into her starlet-blue eyes I saw a lonely girl gazing back at me; a girl who longed for true love, just like I had before I met Alexander. And even though she was sneaky and troublesome, she, too, deserved happiness. There had to be someone out there for her to make her dreams come true—someone who wouldn't get in the way of my or my friends' love lives.

I looked away from the scowling Luna and gazed around the club hopelessly until I spotted someone familiar.

Romeo, the hot bartender from the Coffin Club, was serving bubbly liquid at the Crypt. Why hadn't I thought of him sooner? He had been right under her nose and mine. I'd never seen Romeo hanging out with one particular girl here or at the Coffin Club in Hipsterville, so I was hoping he was available for a romantic setup.

I turned back to Luna but she was gone. I couldn't see her pink hair anywhere. I pushed through the crowd and found Alexander talking to Sebastian by the club's entrance. Sebastian was eyeing all the girls in the club, but one in particular had grabbed his attention since the split

with Luna—Onyx. She was hanging by Jagger’s side as he attended to business concerning the club.

I gave my hot-and-steamy Alexander a kiss on the cheek.

“I’ll be right back,” I said.

“I’ll be right here.” His dark locks fell over his eyes; his soft smile was mesmerizing.

I headed back to the dance floor and grabbed Becky by the sleeve.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“We’re on a mission.”

She sighed. “Aren’t we always?”

I started to guide her off the dance floor.

“But I want to dance,” she whined.

Becky was growing accustomed to the club, too, along with the other students at Dullsville High. But this matter took precedent above our happiness for the night. If we didn’t attempt to handle Luna’s singlehood, we’d have a bigger mess on our hands later.

“This is more important than dancing,” I insisted.

“But I don’t want to leave Matt alone,” she said as she followed me reluctantly. “I don’t trust Luna. She seems to be trying to get her hands on every guy here at the club.”

“I know. And we have to fix that.”

“What can we do? If I leave Matt alone, she may try to come around again.”

“I’ll take care of that,” I said.

“What are you doing?” Scarlet asked as she caught up to us.

“Trying to find a soulmate for Luna,” I answered swiftly.

“Oh, good!” she said. “I’ll come with you! But can we leave her alone with our guys?”

“We can in a bit,” I replied to the bewildered girls.

I stormed over to the bar, where a member of Jagger’s security team was watching the dance floor. The burly guard was as wide as he was tall. And he was very tall.

“Can you make sure that that pink-haired girl,” I said, pointing to Luna, who was now dancing alone at the edge of the dance floor, “stays away from those three guys?” I gestured to our dates—Alexander and Sebastian, by the club’s entrance, and Matt, who was hanging out by a pool table with Trevor.

“Uh . . . isn’t she Jagger’s sister?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, he’s the boss.” He towered over me like a concrete building.

“And I’m the customer,” I insisted. “Isn’t the customer always right?”

But just like a concrete building, he didn’t budge.

I dug into my Hello Batty evening bag and pulled out a five. I waved it in front of him.

But the security guard didn’t even look. I slipped the money into his behemoth-sized palm.

He glared at me as if I’d handed him a penny.

“Here,” Becky reached into her purse and took out a few dollars. “Our love lives depend on it.”

The hulky guard couldn’t help but grin as he loomed over us.

“Yes,” Scarlet said, handing him another bill.

“Okay—” he finally said, “but this stays between us.”

“Of course,” we agreed.

“Tick a lock,” I said, winding a pretend key against my dark-stained lips.

I grabbed the girls' hands and we tore through the crowd to the bar. It was impossible to find an empty stool and even harder to get Romeo's attention.

I squeezed between a preppy couple, leaned over the bar, and scooted as close to Romeo as I could. I didn't have any more money to wave. Instead I held up a white cocktail napkin.

"Romeo, over here!" I called.

But Romeo was pouring and delivering as many drinks as humanly possible, even for a vampire. At this rate, we'd be waiting at the bar all night.

I couldn't wait any longer.

As he passed me by, I reached over the bar and grabbed his tattooed wrist, causing him to spill one of the drinks.

"Hey! What's going on?" he yelled.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I just need to speak with you." I knew Romeo recognized me from our previous meetings at the Coffin Club.

Romeo was handsome and a great fit for Luna, I thought. He had a tattoo of Munch's *Scream* on his bicep and Chinese characters on his wrists. His shaggy dark hair couldn't hide the countless silver studs and hoop rings in his ears. He wore a Berlin T-shirt and ripped jeans.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" He wiped off the bar and the back of his drink-soiled hand.

"It's imperative I speak with you now," I said urgently. "What do you think of Luna?" I asked him with a hopeful smile.

"Luna?" he said, half listening, as he served another drink.

"Luna Maxwell. Jagger's sister."

"I know who she is," he said as if I was bothering him.

"Well, what do you think of her?"

He turned to face me. Romeo was cute with his dark, wavy hair and intense stare. “DDG,” he said.

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“Drop-dead gorgeous,” he replied.

I beamed. “Then why don’t you ask her out?” I asked.

“I dunno.”

“I think you should. Why don’t you?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Uh . . . she’s, like, sixteen.”

“No—she’s, like, eighteen. Maybe even nineteen.”

“Really?” He perked up.

“Yes. And she’s single.”

“That’s cool.” He bounced a bit as he wiped down the bar.

“You should ask her out,” I said.

“Maybe.”

“I think you should. Now.” I was getting impatient.

“Yes, you should,” Becky repeated.

“Ditto,” Scarlet added.

“Okay . . . maybe later,” he finally answered.

“Later?” I asked. “We don’t have time for later!”

“I can’t do it now,” he said as if I was crazy. “I’m working.”

“How about I help out?” Scarlet whisked around the bar and joined Romeo.

“You aren’t a bartender,” he scoffed.

“I am now,” she said.

“Who wants a cold one?” Scarlet shouted to the patrons.

Several hands raised high in the air.

But Romeo didn’t move. Instead he seemed distracted by the help that Scarlet was providing him.

“I can’t leave,” he told me. “I could get fired.”

Why did work have to come in the way of his love life—and mine? I couldn’t wait until the end of his shift to get Luna hitched.

“We have to get her over to the bar,” I said to Becky. At least with Scarlet helping out Romeo, he might have more time to talk to her.

“What are you doing?” Alexander asked me when he found us looking for Luna in the crowd. “I thought we were dancing.”

“I just need to fix something,” I said, scanning the crowd for pink pastel hair.

“Fix what?” Alexander shouted over the music. He drew me in to him. “Can’t you do it later? I wait all day to see you, and the nights that we have together are cut short by you having to go home. This is our time together.”

“I know,” I said, feeling pulled in two directions. I didn’t want to be apart from Alexander anymore than was forced on us by the sun. “But you’ll have to trust me on this one.” If Luna wasn’t in a romantic relationship, then the time I was apart from Alexander would be even harder for me since I knew she’d still be after him.

I reached up and gave him a quick peck on his tender lips. “I won’t be but a moment. I promise.”

Alexander shook his head, and Sebastian asked, “What’s up?”

“Just Raven getting into another one of her messes, I’m sure,” Alexander said with a chuckle.

I spotted pink hair out among the blondes and brunettes; Becky, Onyx, and I raced over.

I took Luna aside while my friends hung behind me.

“I think Romeo wants to talk to you,” I said in as sweet a voice as I could to my adversary.

“He said he really likes you.”

“Romeo?” she asked skeptically.

“Yes, don’t you think he’s hot?” I asked as if it were fact.

“He’s the bartender,” she said flatly.

“Yes. The *hot* bartender.”

Onyx and Becky nodded their heads enthusiastically.

“I guess.” Luna couldn’t be bothered with my small talk and tapped her pink Mary Janes to the music.

“Haven’t you noticed him before?” I asked.

“Uh . . . yes. He works for Jagger.”

“I know. So what do you think of him?” I inquired eagerly.

She just shrugged her shoulders.

I didn’t know much about Romeo except that he was a bartender and that he was nice. In fact, I didn’t even know if he was a vampire, but I assumed that, because he worked at the Coffin Club and was in Jagger’s inner circle, he must be. I wasn’t sure what else to tell her, other than what I’d seen of him.

“He’s really worldly,” I said, recalling his T-shirt.

“How do you know that?” she asked.

“He’s been to Berlin. He loves to travel.”

“So? I’ve been there, too.”

“You have? See, you already have things in common. There aren’t many guys here who have been to Chicago, much less Berlin.”

“I guess that’s cool,” she said with halfhearted interest.

Becky and Onyx nodded again.

“And he loves art,” I added, remembering his tattoo. “He’ll take you to the greatest museums.”

“He’s an artist, too?”

“I think so,” I fibbed. “Maybe he can use you as a model for a painting,” I suggested.

“He sounds just like Alexander,” Becky interjected.

I was ready to stomp on my friend’s foot, but Luna’s sparkly pink-lashed eyes lit up like a crystal.

That was all Luna needed to know. She sailed over to the bar, and a guy offered her his stool.

She hopped on it, threw back her long pink hair, and leaned her elbows on the bar.

“What can I get you?” Romeo asked.

It was magic when their eyes locked.

“Well, that depends,” Luna said in a sultry voice. “What’s on the menu?”

“Romeo, I need your help!” Scarlet called. She was up to her elbows in drink orders.

Oh no! I’d finally made a love connection for Luna that didn’t involve any of my or my friends’ guys, and it was going to be messed up within seconds.

“Stay where you are!” I said to Romeo. “We’ll help her.”

Becky followed me as we raced behind the bar.

“I don’t know the first thing about making drinks,” Becky said, overwhelmed with our new mission.

“I don’t, either. But since there isn’t alcohol in them, it can’t be that hard.”

“I’m not so sure. . . .” Becky whimpered.

“Just stick an umbrella in it,” I said. “It’s that easy.”

I found bartending wasn’t as easy as adding cute garnishes to frosted glasses. I had to take back as many drinks as I served, and Scarlet was taking in all the tips. Becky and I owed more than we came with, and I hadn’t had a chance yet to get back to Alexander.

Alexander finally found us at the bar, exhausted and spent.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, shocked. He and Sebastian sat down on two empty stools. I was pouring a cola from the soda gun; my hair was falling in my face and my charcoal-colored eyeliner was smearing in the heat.

“What would you like?” I asked him. “How about a Serial Killer?”

“We were looking everywhere for you,” he said, concerned. “You didn’t answer your phone.”

“Oh, sorry! I didn’t hear it ring,” I apologized. “It must be in my purse. I had no idea how hard this job can be. There are three of us here, and we still can’t keep up.”

“Why isn’t Romeo working?” Sebastian asked.

“He is. Look,” I said. Romeo and Luna were lost in each other’s gaze. “Isn’t that sweet?”

“That’s what this is all about?” Alexander said, scrutinizing them.

“I’m glad she has her fangs on someone else,” Sebastian said, his blond dreads bobbing as he turned her way. “That girl is cook-a-loo—!”

“She is not,” I chimed in. “Well, sort of. I mean, she wanted you,” I said to Alexander, “and then you,” I said to Sebastian. “And you both rejected her at the altar. How should she feel?”

“What do you know about Romeo?” Alexander asked me as I wiped off my hands with the bar rag.

“I know he isn’t you. And to me that’s all he has to be. Besides, why are you worried about who she dates?”

Alexander shot me a look. “I just want you to be matchmaking for the right reason.”

“I am,” I replied. “I want her to be happy so she doesn’t try to steal you away. I think that is the best reason one could have.”

“Why would she steal me away?” He leaned in close and took my hand. “Don’t I have a choice in this? Don’t you trust me?” he asked.

I trusted a lot of things—I was confident with my style, taste, and opinions. And I was secure with my relationship with Alexander. However, Luna, who was sneaky to say the least, had known Alexander before I did and had grown up with his family in Romania. And now that she was inhabiting Dullsville and living in the Crypt, which was only a few miles away from the Mansion, she was too close for comfort. I didn’t trust either her or her brother, and without Sebastian as the object of her romantic attentions she would surely aim her affection toward my true love, Alexander, once again.

“I don’t trust *her*,” I said.

He pushed my sweaty hair away from my face and took the drink from my hand and placed it on the bar.

“You did all that so we could be together?” he asked, massaging my cola-sticky hand.

“Uh-huh.”

“That might be one of the sweetest things in the world,” he said. “But don’t worry—it will take more than pink eyelashes to keep me away from you.”