

Vampire Beach

Ritual

Alex Duval

Random House Children's Books

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About the Author

Also by Alex Duval

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About the Book

Beautiful people, fabulous parties – life in Malibu is pretty cool for Jason. And now things are looking even better as Sienna, the most gorgeous girl in town, seems to be interested in him. Jason is learning to live with Sienna's dark secret – that she and her friends happen to be vampires – but is she more trouble than she's worth?

When he's warned by a psychic of danger ahead, Jason dismisses it as rubbish. But after he's attacked on the beach and another student is killed, he realizes that his and Sienna's lives are in peril . . . A killer with a crossbow is on the loose.

A glamorous slice of vampire life – with a sinister edge!

VAMPIRE BEACH RITUAL

Alex Duval

RED FOX BOOKS

For Deborah Rose Bramwell

Special thanks to Laura Burns & Melinda Metz

One

'LET'S SIGN UP for an angel reading!' Jason Freeman's little sister, Dani, exclaimed from the back seat of his 1975 Volkswagen Karmann Cabriolet. 'It says here that the psychic is in touch with the angels all around us and passes on information from them.'

Jason was chauffeuring Dani and her friend Kristy to the Arcana Psychic Fair, since neither of them was quite old enough to have a driver's license. He had agreed to do this only because Dani had promised to do his chores for three weeks in payment.

Their parents were in New York for some business thing of his dad's, so they couldn't take the girls to the fair. And Kristy's parents had given a big 'no way' when she had asked them to drive. Maria - Dani and Kristy's designated driver, who was a year older and had already taken driver's ed - was sick. That left Jason, who now had three sweet chore-free weeks to look forward to.

'The angel reading sounds good,' Kristy told Dani. 'But top of my list is one of those pictures where you can see your aura. You can tell which are your strong points - like creativity or a healing nature.'

'Yeah, and a picture would be a great souvenir too,' Dani agreed.

'I don't know if the aura picture is a good idea. Yours looks a little oily to me today,' Jason teased his sister. 'When's the last time you washed it?'

'You're being paid to drive, not talk,' Dani joked back, her chin-length auburn hair blowing round her face.

'I'm getting paid? All right. Because getting up at six on a Saturday morning is insane. Is there a reason this thing had to be out in the middle of the Mojave instead of right in our own Malibu?'

'The area near Joshua Tree has great spiritual vibrations,' Kristy explained.

Jason nodded. 'Well, I'm thinking that four weeks of chores isn't really enough to cover the early hour and the almost three-hour drive, so I'm glad you're throwing in some cash.' Not that driving down the highway through the desert was so bad. Jason loved driving the Bug, top down, on a nice, flat stretch of mostly empty road.

'*Three weeks,*' Dani protested, just the way Jason knew she would. 'Three weeks. Not four! That's your pay. That's what you agreed to and that is what you're getting. No money, no nothing else. And, actually, I think *two* weeks would be a lot more reasonable since you're getting to use Maria's ticket, which cost forty bucks.'

'Yeah. You're getting into the fair for free,' Kristy agreed. 'And the ticket includes one reading of your choice. You should knock off a week of chores for that.'

'That's OK,' Jason responded. 'I already know what the angels would say: "*Jason, you're so hot.*" "*Jason, are we going to hook up at the next party?*" Stuff like that. I mean, that's what they say at school.'

'Cheeseball,' Dani muttered.

'You two can have the extra reading,' Jason said. 'I think I'll go get a coffee or something and pick you guys up later.'

'He thinks the whole psychic fair is silly,' Dani explained to her friend.

'Maria was in London over Thanksgiving and she said everyone there is really into the occult. Girls go get crystal therapy as often as manicures. Not that it's just a girl thing,' Kristy added quickly. 'We'll find you a good manly reading, Jason.'

He glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw Kristy and Dani leaning over the brochure for the fair – as if they didn't have it memorized by now.

'Tarot cards?' Dani murmured. 'Past-life regression? Channeling? Hmmm. Channeling. I want to try that. Maria said channelers can warn you about bad things that are going to happen to you, so that you can be prepared.'

Jason wasn't crazy about the sound of that. 'Guys, you know a fair like this is going to bring out a lot of people who are just after your money,' he said. 'I want you to have fun. But don't let anybody convince you to whip out your AmEx and pony up five hundred dollars for a charm of protection or love potion or something. Just think of the whole thing as entertainment, OK?'

'Don't you believe in *anything*, Jason?' Kristy asked.

'I believe in a lot of things,' Jason answered.

'Yeah,' Dani put in. 'You believe in surfing, and fish tacos at Eddie's, and your car, and—'

'Wait! Here's the perfect thing for your brother,' Kristy interrupted. 'It's a total guy thing. It's not a reading, but it says you can use a reading ticket.'

'"*A lecture that reveals the dark magic of vampires*"', Dani read over her friend's shoulder. She laughed. 'Kristy, we've got to start him out small. Maybe the lecture on herbal healing would be better. Jason's head will probably implode if he tries to accept that *vampires* exist.'

But the weird thing was that Jason did. He completely accepted it. Because, since moving from Michigan to DeVere Heights, Jason had found the body of a girl killed by a vampire, been attacked by a vampire, and made friends with a vampire. In fact, Jason had even fallen in love with a vampire, because the strange fact was that, here in DeVere Heights, all the coolest kids were vampires.

'There it is!' Kristy called out. 'The Joshua Tree Center for Mind, Body, and Spirit.'

There it is, and nothing else, Jason thought as he parked the Bug. He could forget about his plan of escaping for some coffee and down time. Unless he wanted to drive twenty miles back to that barely-a-town before the turn-off.

'You think they have coffee in there anyplace?' he asked the girls. 'Soda? A place where I can get caffeine injected directly into my heart?' Why had he agreed to do anything that involved getting up before noon on a Saturday?

'It says in the brochure that they have all kinds of food and stuff,' Kristy told him.

'Does that mean you're coming in?' Dani inquired.

'Lead the way,' Jason told her.

'I wonder if we'll see anyone from school here,' Dani said as they crossed the parking lot.

'Why would we? We're hours away from Malibu,' Jason pointed out. He definitely didn't want to be seen at the Arcana Psychic Fair. It's not that he didn't have an open mind. Or believe in *things*. But this was a completely woo-woo, touchy-feely kind of event at which no self-respecting guy should be seen.

'It's not like we're the only ones interested in this stuff,' Kristy said. 'And this is the biggest psychic fair in Southern California.'

'OK, let's get one thing straight. You see anyone from school, you give me a heads up, because I'll be struck with the sudden urge to use the bathroom. And no telling anyone I was here or I'll never drive either of you anywhere again. Got it?' Jason demanded.

Dani pulled the tickets out of her purse and thrust them at him. 'Fine,' she said. 'Like Kristy and I spend our time gossiping about *you* anyway.'

The two girls hurried into the big adobe building ahead of him. Jason handed the tickets to the guy at the door, shoved the stubs into his wallet and slowly followed the girls. The large cavern of a room was filled with row after row of booths, some selling stuff like herbs or books - one actually

looked like it was selling *broomsticks* - some set up with people doing tarot readings or crystal gazing. Jason was surprised how normal many of the supposed psychics seemed. A lot of them were wearing jeans and shirts that could have come straight out of Gap.

And why shouldn't they? he asked himself. *Why should psychics wear headscarves and those long gauzy skirts?* After all, the vampires he knew looked like normal people. OK, incredibly popular, insanely good-looking normal people, but normal nonetheless. They didn't wear long black capes. They didn't have fangs unless they were drinking blood. And they didn't sleep in coffins or only come out at night. In fact, they didn't fall into any of the vampire clichés.

Jason headed after Dani and Kristy, not bothering to catch up to them. The air in the center seemed weighted down with the scent of candle wax, incense and old paper. But he could see equipment that looked ultra high-tech too, and massage tables that looked like they'd been pulled straight from a sports med clinic.

He paused at a booth that sold jewelry. There was this one thing that grabbed him. A simple, perfectly round crystal, dark and iridescent, hanging from a slender silver chain. He could see Sienna wearing it - maybe even at the masked ball at Sandhurst Castle that was coming up, depending on her dress. But he knew it wasn't something he could buy her. He could maybe get away with giving her some goofy little thing, but that was it as long as she was with another guy. Which she was. Another guy, who also happened to be a friend of Jason's.

But that won't be forever, will it? Jason wondered. *They—*
'Jason, we thought you'd want to know,' Kristy said, appearing beside him and breaking into his thoughts. 'We just saw Belle Rémy heading over to talk to the guy who gives instruction on astral projection. That's just one row over.'

‘And you know that where there’s Belle Rémy, there’s usually Sienna Devereux,’ Dani added, her gray eyes sparkling. ‘Now, are you still sure you don’t want to see anyone from school? Because you usually like to see Sienna.’

‘One row that way, or that way?’ Jason asked, not sure if he wanted to know so that he could head toward or away from Sienna: a feeling he often had about her – the girl he was in love with, even though he shouldn’t be.

Dani and Kristy looked at each other and cracked up. And Jason realized he’d been had. By two little sophomores. He rolled his eyes. ‘Very funny.’

‘It was very funny,’ Dani agreed. ‘You should have seen your face.’ She widened her eyes and let her mouth drop open, and she and Kristy cracked up again.

‘Remember who drove you here,’ Jason mock-threatened. ‘Remember how far you’d have to walk to get home – through the desert, in your silly little shoes.’

They both ignored him. ‘Oooh, I’m going to sign up for one of those massages,’ Kristy said, looking over at a booth across the aisle. ‘They don’t even touch you. They just manipulate your energy field. It’s supposed to make you feel amazing. You want me to put you down?’ she asked Dani. ‘Look how long the line is already.’

‘I think I’d feel weird getting massaged in front of everybody like that,’ Dani said. Jason nodded agreement, glancing at the masseur, who stood over a woman lying on the table in his small booth, plucking the air around her body as if he was playing the bass.

‘That won’t bother me,’ Kristy answered. ‘I’m going to go and put my name down. Be right back.’ She hurried over to the booth.

‘So what is the deal with you and Sienna anyway?’ Dani asked Jason. ‘I’ve seen how you are together at parties, and sometimes even just in the hall at school. There’s this vibe between you.’

‘We’re friends,’ Jason told her. ‘She was one of the first people I met when we moved here.’

Dani raised one eyebrow. ‘And that’s it? Friends?’

Jason shook his head. ‘Dani, you know every detail about every person at DeVere High. That means you have to know that Sienna and Brad Moreau have been—’

‘Together practically forever,’ Dani finished for him. ‘I know. But I also know what I see. And I see a vibe, and it’s definitely not on the *friend* frequency.’

Jason knew where Dani was coming from. He did feel a more-than-friend vibe about Sienna, and he was pretty sure Sienna felt the same way about him, which is why they had ended up kissing once or twice – hot, passionate kisses that turned him inside out.

After the last time, they had promised each other that they would figure out the whole them-slash-Brad thing. But it had been a couple of days and he and Sienna hadn’t spoken at all. Jason didn’t know what that meant. Maybe it meant Sienna just wanted to pretend the kissing had never happened and stick with Brad. The trouble was that if Jason couldn’t be with her soon – with no hiding and no pretending necessary – he felt he’d go mad.

‘Am I wrong?’ Dani asked.

‘You’re not wrong,’ Jason said quietly. ‘But, like I said, Sienna’s with somebody else.’ He felt relieved when Kristy bounded back over to them. He didn’t want to discuss the Sienna situation with his sister.

‘Hey, Kristy, don’t you think Sienna and my brother would make a cute couple?’ Dani asked.

Jason’s mouth dropped open in shock. How could she just ask something so blatant? ‘Danielle—’ he began.

‘Absolutely,’ Kristy replied. ‘Couples are all about the contrast. Sienna has black hair and almost black eyes.’ She turned to Jason. ‘And you’re more young Heath Ledger-ish, all blond and blue eyes and everything. You two would look amazing together.’

‘And that’s all that matters,’ Jason joked, trying to act as if this subject didn’t bother him.

‘No, but you guys have the vibe too,’ Kristy added.

Did everyone see this thing that sparked between him and Sienna? Jason wondered. Did Brad?

‘The vibe is more important really,’ Kristy went on. ‘The looks thing is just—’

‘Madame Rosa’s Palm Reading,’ Jason said loudly, interrupting her. ‘You guys have got to do that. Can’t miss it.’

‘Jason, this wasn’t on the list we made,’ Dani said as she followed him over to a blue and purple tent that had been set up between two of the booths.

‘But look at it. It’s the best thing here,’ Jason answered. Anything to get them off the Sienna subject. ‘And, hey, look, no line!’ He ducked into the tent and saw the kind of psychic he’d expected to see all over the fair. She wore a long, gauzy skirt of white and gold, a white peasant blouse and a necklace made of small gold coins. There was no headscarf, but Jason could see gold hoop earrings glinting beneath Madame Rosa’s wild gray curls.

‘Vel-come,’ she said.

Outstanding, Jason thought. *She’s actually going for a Romanian accent. Well, good for her.* Jason would have had an easier time believing a psychic prediction from somebody in regular jeans and a T-shirt than from this lady right out of some old movie but, whatever, he was here for the distraction and Madame Rosa was certainly that.

‘My sister wants to get her palm read,’ Jason told Madame Rosa. ‘I’ll pay.’

‘Can you tell who is going to ask her to the masked ball?’ Kristy demanded as Madame Rosa took Dani’s hand.

‘Can you tell me if that note I found near my locker was for me or for someone else?’ Dani asked.

‘Oh, and you have to say if Max likes her or not. She keeps saying he doesn’t, but I know he does,’ Kristy added.

'Oh, thanks, Kristy,' Dani said. 'That's so gross.'

Operation Madame Rosa successful, Jason thought. Dani and Kristy were so interested in what the psychic had to say that they'd forgotten all about him and Sienna.

'Hush,' Madame Rosa said. 'I need to concentrate.' She stared down at Dani's palm for a long moment, then ran her finger over the deepest line that ran horizontally across the top of Dani's hand. 'This is your heart line. Do you see this star, here?'

Jason leaned forward and saw several short lines crossing the main line in a way that looked sort of like a star - in that way that little kids draw stars. 'A star means happiness in your marriage,' Madame Rosa continued.

'I better not be getting married soon,' Dani said. 'I'm planning to have some fun first. My Aunt Bianca might let me work in her casting agency.'

'Yeah, you need to be available for any of those hot actors that come in wanting to be discovered,' Kristy agreed.

'The marriage comes later,' Madame Rosa confirmed.

Jason had the feeling she was the kind of fortuneteller who made money by telling people exactly what they wanted to hear. People like Dani made it especially easy by spelling out exactly what Madame Rosa should, quote unquote, predict.

'But the star is also significant now,' the old lady was saying. 'Stars hold the key for you. Stars will lead you to your heart's desire. They will lead to your true love. Keep your eyes on the stars.' Madame Rosa released Dani's hand.

'Is that everything?' Kristy asked, echoing Jason's thoughts. He had read more substantial predictions in newspaper astrology columns.

'I tell people vat they need to know,' Madame Rosa said, tossing in a little accent again. 'Sometimes zat takes hours. Sometimes a few minutes. Your friend now knows everything she needs to in order to find the love she vants.'

'Will I find it soon?' Dani asked.