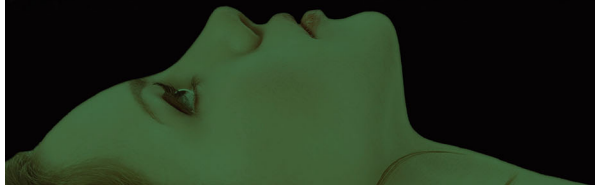


JENNIFER ABRAHAMS

IN THE
BLOOD

BOOK #2 IN THE VAMPIRE'S WITCH SAGA



IN THE BLOOD

**Book #2 in
The Vampire's Witch Saga**

Jennifer Abrahams

About Jennifer Abrahams

Jennifer Abrahams is the author of *The Den*, *In the Blood*, and *The Seventh Day*.

While studying Psychology and Sociology at Boston College an event took place that significantly altered her life and ultimately inspired the creation of *The Vampire's Witch Saga*. She lives with her husband in New York City.

Jennifer loves to hear from you, so please visit www.jenniferabrahamsauthor.com to stay in touch.

Books by Jennifer Abrahams

THE VAMPIRE'S WITCH SAGA

THE DEN (Book #1)

IN THE BLOOD (Book #2)

THE SEVENTH DAY (Book #3)

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Desire

*Where true Love burns Desire is Love's pure flame;
It is the reflex of our earthly frame,
That takes its meaning from the nobler part,
And but translates the language of the heart.*

-Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Inspired by Actual Events ...

-One-

Hopeless

Skyla covered her eyes as she stormed away through the cobblestone maze of the French Quarter. She did not want Alex to see her cry, again. Ever since they had embarked on their road trip from New York City to New Orleans, she had been on an emotional roller coaster.

It was nearing midnight and Skyla could see that a crowd was forming in Jackson Square. She took her hands off her face and saw a girl dressed all in black. The girl held a sign that read “Madame Charlotte’s Vampire Tours.” Skyla had just met Charlotte at Steve’s Place. She looked around, hoping not to see her again. She wondered which one of Charlotte’s vampire-in-training girls was holding the sign, Lydia or Sylvia. She did not care enough to go back and ask her friend, boyfriend, ex, whatever—Alex. It didn’t make a difference now anyway.

Skyla saw a young boy waiting around with his parents. Skyla considered rushing to the mother and advising her to run from this place. She had an overwhelming urge to shake the boy. “Don’t be brave! Keep your eyes shut!” she

would say. But the idea slipped away as quickly as it had come. She wondered if these parents would be so inclined to bring the boy on a tour if they had seen what Skylia had over the past few days. Probably, they would not.

Of course, these tourists would not be welcome to take a real vampire tour into the *den*—the dark dormitory below the bar called Steve’s Place. No outsiders could witness the secret meditations and practices that took place there.

Skyla walked the rest of the few blocks to the Chateau St. Simeon hotel, sneaking looks over her shoulders. She peered down the deserted alleyways. The French Quarter had its own sounds. Alex had given her lessons on some of New Orleans’ past on the drive down. This city had been plagued with diseases, fires, hurricanes, and other tragic events throughout its history. She listened closely to see if she could hear the cry of the tortured souls echoing off the buildings and cobblestones. She thought that, from the corner of her eye, she saw a man running through the street, and she jumped. Her pace quickened.

What is this place? Skylia wondered if she could really leave. She wondered if she had the strength to try.

*

Alex had watched Skylia storm away. He racked his mind for a better explanation, one that could persuade her to stay with him in New Orleans. He had watched as Skylia turned the corner and headed to the hotel to pack for her most recent home, New York City.

Alex knew it was hopeless. His den brother, James, would never let Skylia stay away. If James had to, he would kill Skylia and wait for her to return to him in

the next life. Then James would track her soul down again—the soul of his former beloved Rebecca. Alex’s sister, Lucy, and his other den brother, Peter, would be setting off to look for Steve. Alex feared that Steve could be on James’ side. Steve could order that Skyla was to stay at the den. Steve would want his adopted daughter to be back where he thought she belonged—in the den.

Steve could not be found, though. He had been out of contact with the den for longer than he ever had been before. It was as if Steve had known something was going to go wrong. He had told everyone not to contact him for any reason. Now Steve had just simply disappeared into thick, swampy air.

Alex hopped off the bench. He would try going after Skyla again. Either way, he would not let Steve or James track Skyla down and take her away from him. *She is mine, now.* Alex ran toward the hotel. He would think of something to say to keep his Skyla with him.

Alex ran through an alleyway and cut Skyla off in front of the hotel. He started to speak but thought better of it. He did not want Skyla to start screaming at him again.

Alex reached up and wiped the tears off of Skyla’s cheeks. He began where their fight had left off. “I know you are your own person, Skyla. It is just that I have never been away from home. I didn’t know how things worked. When I finally saw you living your life so freely in New York City, I didn’t want to bring you back here.”

“Yet you did bring me here.” Skyla began to sob.

“Please don’t cry, Sky. James came to get you. I didn’t want him to have you. I thought maybe I could bring you home and convince Steve that I am better for you.

That we were in love and meant to be together.”

“In love?”

“Don’t you love me, Skyla? I am giving up my entire life for you.”

Skyla looked down at her folded hands. She pondered the question.

“Don’t you love me?” he whispered this time.

She felt an ache in her heart. She knew that she didn’t want to be without him. She could feel the fear well up in her chest.

“Yes. Yes, I do love you.” She did not add the “I think” at the end.

Alex put his arms around Skyla and kissed the top of her head. He held her for a few moments longer.

They entered the hotel, and Skyla spotted the old woman sitting behind the desk. It was always the same woman, day or night. She didn’t move much, and she hardly spoke. The couple passed by her without an attempt to engage in conversation and walked up to the room. The stairwell was very dim. Skyla ran her hand along the wall to guide her up the stairs. It was rough on her fingers. Above the handrail there was chipped paint. Below, there was wallpaper. It was a fleur-de-lis pattern on raised red velvet. She hadn’t noticed it before. She moved her hand below the railing to brush it along the soft and soothing texture. Skyla realized there were lots of things she had failed to properly observe. She didn’t want to think anymore now. She wanted to forget everything, fall fast asleep, and wake to find that this nightmare had vanished with the vapors of the night. Alex followed her into the room and locked the door. He turned to find her facedown on the bed, and he gently sat down next to her. He put a hand on her back.

She sat up suddenly and looked him in the face. She smacked his chest with her open hands. “Why?” she demanded. “Why should I believe what you told me? Why should I believe that I was here in my past life?”

“Don’t you know it’s true? Doesn’t it sound familiar to you?” he asked as he held her arms. “We can all teach you more tomorrow. Lucy, Peter, James, Mara and I will help you to find your complete meditative state. Then you can start focusing on your past lives. You will see that some of your memories have traveled through time with you. Some things are just a part of your being—your soul. It takes a lot of patience and trust, but we use the downstairs below the bar as our safe haven, our den. Also, the ... bottled blood we drink helps us to tap into our abilities. It is the key, our secret ingredient. You will see the drink really is amazing. It is actually the only thing I missed, besides Lucy, while I was away. It will help you see things you have never seen before. You will view the world from an entirely different perspective. It is mind-altering.”

“Past *lives*? That’s right—I would have had more than the one. Then why does James think I am his? Maybe there was someone else. Maybe I was married to another man in my last life.” Skyla stood up and began to pace.

“No, Skyla. You died young in your last life,” Alex said as he grabbed her arm and pulled her back to the bed.

“What?”

“Well, from what I heard, you were eighteen years old and an apprentice to a glassblower in Murano. You were on your boat heading home to Venice when you were hit head-on by a speedboat. The driver ... was never found.”

“Who was the driver?” Skyla asked.

“Skyla, James wanted you back as soon as possible. He needed to end that life so you could return to the den as a woman, as his wife.”

Skyla did not respond.

“Souls alternate between male and female in their lifetimes. Before your Venetian lifetime, you were living here, in New Orleans. You and James were in training. He was made a vampire, but before you could be made, your life was taken. All of us have returned, to the den, to continue our evolution. We all hope that in this life we will be made immortal like Steve and James.”

“You say all this like it is fact. How do you know all this? What makes you think it’s true? I mean, alternating lives? This sounds nuts!”

“It’s my truth. I told James that I didn’t know anything except what Steve told me. But that is not really true. I know these things in my heart. I know it must sound confusing to you. It can be difficult to understand. We, our den, only know our last few lifetimes. We haven’t evolved enough yet. Steve teaches us, but he is still learning. He is young even, in comparison to his maker, Charles. James is obviously even younger than his maker, Steve.”

“I don’t even know if I believe in fate. If I belonged with James, then maybe I wouldn’t be so frightened of him. If I belonged with him, then maybe I wouldn’t want you.” Skyla stopped. Maybe she’d said too much.

Skyla and Alex stared at each other for a long moment. Skyla dropped her eyes and bit her lip. Alex took in a deep breath and blew it out in a whoosh. He lifted her face back up so that her eyes met his.

“I know we are all involved in each other’s lives, but I don’t know how it will end up. I want you, too, Skyla, and I know that we belong together. I want you to be mine.” Alex leaned in and kissed Skyla, gently.

“Then let’s leave,” Skyla whispered. “We don’t have to stay at the den. Let’s pack our bags and go. We don’t have to go to New York either. We can go anywhere.”

Alex considered it for a moment. The thought of losing Skyla made it hard to breathe. “We can’t leave now. We won’t make it traveling at night.” He paused. “We can leave at first light. James can’t come after us then. Plus, he will have to stay at the bar tomorrow night because Lucy and Peter are leaving.” He brushed her cheek and hoped his words had appeased her for the moment. At least she would get a good sleep.

“If he does come after us, then the den won’t be protected, right? Mara will be left alone and helpless. Lucy and Peter will be out searching for Steve. They will be on their own without any help from their home base.” Skyla felt a twinge of remorse.

Lucy was Alex’s only living relative, and Skyla was spending all her energy trying to separate him from the only home he’d ever known and the only family he could remember. She thought of her own mother, Vera, walking around the big empty house in Massachusetts. Vera would be so lonely tonight. It was a Friday night and all her friends would be at home with their husbands and children. Skyla had to swallow hard to fight tears. Vera’s best friend, Brooke’s mother, lived all the way in Nantucket. When Brooke popped into Skyla’s head, she couldn’t hold it in

any longer. She began to cry. She missed her mother and her friend so much that it made her heart skip a beat.

Skyla was relieved because she thought that Brooke was safe and sound in New York. As much as she missed her only friend, she was glad she had not involved her in this mess. This was something that definitely could not be worked out over a pot of coffee and an all-night powwow. How could she ever face her friend again? There would be no way she could explain all that had happened. How do you tell your best friend that you enjoy drinking blood?

Skyla's thoughts wandered back to Alex and their conversation. He was waiting patiently for her to speak up.

-Two-
Promises

“So, even if we wanted to, we could not leave New Orleans now,” Skyla said. “We would have to wait until daybreak. James really can’t go out in light?” She hadn’t thought about that part.

Skyla remembered back to that afternoon in Chestnut Hill when James claimed to have visited her. She remembered it so clearly, even though it had been so many years ago. Skyla had been swinging on her tire in the yard when she saw *him*. He was covered from head to toe even though it was a sweltering summer’s day. The sun was setting. Daylight lingered only in the western part of the sky.

“Well, he does go out at times,” Alex said. “If he is dressed in all black and completely covered, he might do it. It would be too painful for him otherwise. He could never expose his skin to the sun.”

“What would happen to him?”

“Haven’t you ever read any vampire books?”

“Oh, is that stuff real?”

Alex laughed. “Well, I don’t know if he would be turned to ash. It would take a long time probably. Mostly it would just be intolerable. His skin would definitely burn and blister, and others would notice his chalky-white face. You haven’t seen him in the daylight. It is quite a sight. His face is as pale as the dead. It’s important to watch for that in this town.”

Skyla nodded and rolled her eyes. She was collecting warnings like lost pennies around here.

“Skyla, listen to me,” Alex insisted. “You must always make sure to keep your eyes open for those who are dressed fully in black. There is an old saying that parents in the Quarter teach their kids. Commit this to memory: ‘Cape and gloves in the middle of the day? It’s best you turn the other way.’ Got it?”

Skyla just laughed.

“Promise me, Sky,” Alex insisted.

“Okay. I promise. Thanks for the tip. I guess. ... I mean ... are there a lot of different ... clans around here?”

“Ha. Clans? I guess the den is a clan. I would say yes, there are others. When Steve and Charlotte have one of their parties, there are many who come from all over Louisiana. Some of them travel in small groups, but others come alone.”

“Are Lydia and Sylvia orphans like you, Lucy, Peter, and Mara?”

“Yes, they are. They live in an apartment above the Book Boutique. However, we sort of keep to ourselves at the den. Steve trains us differently. We practice more meditation and higher learning. We are discovering all the things that human blood can do for the mind and body. We work toward enlightenment. Others, including Charlotte, take it for granted. They do not tap into themselves the way we do.”

“I don’t understand you.” Skyla shook her head.

“Skyla, there are cultures all over the world where it is tradition to consume human flesh. In ancient times it was customary. Even now, in different regions of

the world, warring tribes will consume the remains of their enemies. They do it to gain the strength and favorable characteristics that these humans were leaving behind in this world. Human blood can do amazing things for us. Think about it. How did you feel after you drank from the bottle of blood?"

"What blood?" Skyla struggled to look Alex in the eye.

"Skyla, you know that was blood that you were given during the meditation session. You took the bottle from Lucy's hands. You drank from it and you liked it. Don't pretend to be innocent. Don't lie to yourself or to me. I know it was the best thing you ever tasted. It's Steve's creation. He mixes the blood with raw cane sugar and some other things. Many of us in the area drink it. It is quite a lucrative business for him. Now, how did you feel? You want to do it again, don't you?"

"I felt, well, I felt sort of high. Like I could do anything," Skyla said.

"Right. That's why we combine that with 'the practice.'" Alex pointed his finger at her.

"What is ... the practice?"

Alex explained more slowly. "Steve has a specific program: We drink the blood and combine our ritual with chants and meditation. Together, in the den, we practice mind reading and levitation, among other latent talents that are yet to be discovered. You drank the blood. You took part in *The Seven Sacred Let Lines*."

Skyla remembered Peter and James chanting in the den. She remembered the lines so very clearly:

Let no one disturb this circle of light.

Let all who are within the sphere be kept safe from the outside world.

Let the light follow and protect us wherever we may go.

Let us understand each other in every way.

Let us have the gift of sight in darkness.

Let us hear each other in our minds.

Let us feel each other in our hearts.

Skyla tried to wrap her head around the human-blood aspect. She had done it. She had known what she was doing when she took the bottle and drank the blood. She didn't know where it came from. She hadn't thought about that before.

Had someone donated it? Or had someone gone out into the town to ... collect it? Skyla couldn't think anymore.

"Okay then, we'll go to the den tomorrow," she said. "We'll check out of here in the morning. I want to spend one more night here with you, alone."

She dragged her bag out from under the bed. She packed her things in the big bag that would never fulfill its intended purpose of carrying snowboarding equipment. She would bring the bag to the den the next morning. She would not fight it. She would stay there just until Lucy returned.

Alex asked what had brought on the change of heart. He tried to stop her manic packing to talk about it some more. He asked what had just happened to change her mind. She did not tell him. She did not know herself. It could have been the moment of introspection when she imagined Alex without contact with his only family. The possibility of Alex's floating around in this world without any anchor was too much to consider tonight.

If Skyla were completely honest with herself, she would have admitted there was another reason. She harbored a curiosity about “the practice” that was happening at the den. She wondered if she could home in on her own latent abilities. A psychic, Yvette, had told Skyla that she was a powerful witch, but Skyla’s mind reading and other freaky abilities were buried deep down. Yvette had also warned that friends from a past life were coming to get Skyla. Maybe Yvette had gotten it completely right. Maybe this trip was meant to be. It didn’t have to mean that Skyla was meant to live with James. Maybe she was meant to visit the den and learn all she could before leaving and bringing that knowledge away with her. Maybe that was her fate. If Skyla were being honest with herself, she might have been able to admit that.

When Skyla finished packing, she zipped the bag and nodded to Alex. He lifted it off the bed and placed it by the door. His bag was already packed and waiting there. Skyla lay down on the bed, and Alex joined her. She curled up into Alex’s arms. Her head was overflowing with visions of night creatures. She didn’t sleep soundly.

*

“It’s time now. We should leave,” Peter whispered to Lucy. He gently tapped her arm to wake her.

Lucy opened her eyes and began to sit up. She had slept the entire day. Her head was fuzzy. She hesitated on her elbow and tried to find the words. How could she ask if it were even possible to find Steve? Peter was so sure he knew what he was doing. She did not want to insult him. Peter caught the gist of her thoughts.

“If Steve is around, we will run into him for sure. Let’s go.”

“What if, by chance, we run into trouble?” Lucy asked. “What would we do? I mean, would another vampire honor Steve’s family? Would another one even take the time to inquire who we were?”

“We will be very careful. We’ll make sure that we don’t run into any strangers. If we can’t find Steve at the sugar plantation, we will wait until daylight to go out on the swamp. Beverly is the manager there. She will help us out. If Steve made it there, then she will know what happened.”

“Okay, I will pack an overnight bag just in case we have to stay at the plantation.” Lucy guessed it would be smart to bring two changes of clothing and something comfortable to sleep in. She deliberated a bit too long about what she would wear if they did sleep for a few hours. It was quite ridiculous. She saw Peter every single day. He certainly had seen her at her worst. It wouldn’t matter to him what she wore. She should know. She had been listening to his thoughts extra-carefully these past few months. If he were next in line, she wouldn’t have much time left. If she wanted something with him, it would have to be now or maybe never. Of course, James thought it was possible to “date” a mortal person. He was fully made and trying to be with Skyla. However, Skyla could sense that he was different. She feared him. Would Lucy fear Peter? She thought she might. Sometimes James made her cringe. It was obvious that she feared Steve. Of course she loved Steve. They all did. He was their father, savior, and teacher. Even if Peter did want to be with a mortal, it did not mean that it would be Lucy. He might want someone different. Maybe he would want Lydia. He was always talking to her. He

thought about her a lot, too. Especially when he went to sleep in the morning. Lucy could hear his thoughts loud and clear. It was so hard to shut it off once you tuned in.

“Let’s go.” Peter nudged her arm and went upstairs with his own bag in his hand.

Lucy did not get up. She tried to think about what she would pack, but she couldn’t seem to actually get her feet onto the concrete floor to start doing it. Her mind was consumed with what Peter would most like her to wear. Did he prefer her in the pretty pink dress, or did he like her in old cutoff shorts and a tank top?

“Let’s go!” Peter shouted down from the upstairs bar. She could see his foot on the ladder.

Whatever. She grabbed a handful of clothes and a toothbrush and threw it in her old backpack. She took a good look around. She hoped it wasn’t the last time she would be in the den. She climbed up the stairs with the backpack slung over her right shoulder. Peter was waiting by the door.

James was behind the bar. Lucy stopped to give him a hug. It always made a shiver run up her spine, but she did it anyway. It might be the last time she ever saw him.

James laughed and hugged her back. “Don’t worry, Lucy. You will be fine. Everything will work out the way it is supposed to.”

“I know! I don’t know why I’m so anxious all of a sudden. I just have this feeling ... never mind.” Lucy closed her eyes and shook her head.

“We will be here taking care of the den. You will be pleased to know that your brother has decided to grace us with his presence. Alex called and said that he and Skyla will arrive in the morning. Alex said that the two of them would stay until you and Peter return. I, of course, have a feeling they will stay even longer than that. Either way, you will have a full den to come home to.” James gave her a squeeze and pushed her toward the door.

Lucy turned and hugged Peter. A smile spread across her face. She was so happy that Alex was coming home. It would be just like old times. Lucy and Peter turned to look at Mara.

Mara sat on the edge of the stage, letting the drummer flirt with her. He looked pretty tasty. *Maybe if the band isn't any good, I'll have a late-night snack.* The doomed drummer smiled back.

Mara noticed Lucy standing by the door with Peter. She ran over and threw her arms around Lucy and began to sob. Peter got between the two girls and dragged Lucy out the door.

Tears streaked Lucy's cheeks. She tried to wipe them away, but more kept coming. Peter stopped and gave Lucy a kiss on one of her wet and salty cheeks. Then he smiled and curled his lips playfully over his fangs. He could taste Lucy's tears on his tongue.

“Don't cry, Lucy. I won't let anyone hurt you,” Peter promised.

Lucy took a deep breath and attempted to dam her tears by holding her palms over her eyes. Peter grabbed Lucy's hands and pulled her out the door.

Peter kept one of Lucy's hands in his as they walked down the street to the truck.

*

"Will the passenger Brooke Leigh Collins please come to the gate? Brooke Leigh Collins, your flight is boarding."

Brooke raised her hand slightly, and the attendant behind the desk waved her over with an annoyed "Let's go, please."

Brooke walked toward the gate. She was going to do this. She was going to surprise Skyla by showing up in New Orleans. Brooke took a deep breath and handed over her boarding pass.