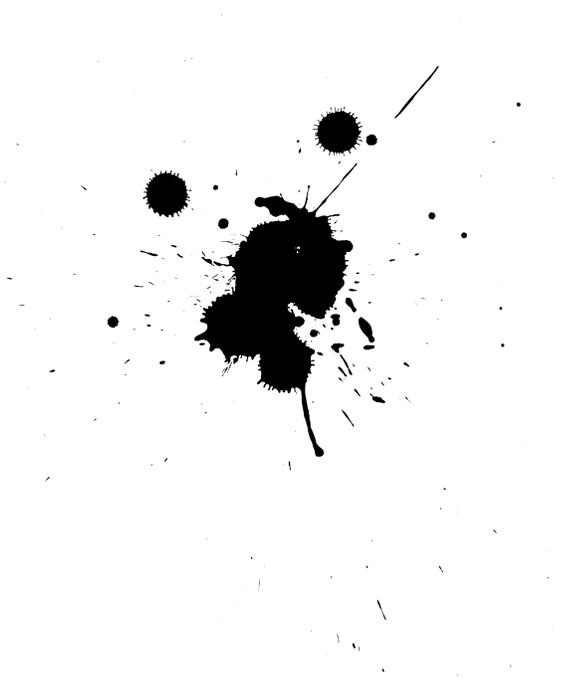




REVENGED
ADA ADAMS

REVENAMPED



ADA ADAMS

ANGEL CREEK



SAMPLE

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PROLOGUE

A sharp, searing pain pierced through my chest as I watched the guy I liked—*the guy I was falling in love with*—kiss another girl. With every fiber of my being, I willed myself to look away, my vision blurring in a desperate attempt to escape the agonizing scene before me. My mind failed to obey; my gaze remained firmly glued to the couple.

Powerless, I surrendered to the nightmare, for a brief moment allowing myself to imagine that his muscular arms were, in fact, embracing me. After all, the girl's face, with its pale complexion, high cheekbones, straight nose, and cupid-bow lips, was identical to mine. Her glossy brown hair cascaded all the way down her back, each wave perfectly matching my own. Even her slender body curved in precisely the same places. Looking at her was like gazing into the smooth, reflective surface of a moving, breathing mirror.

She was me.

Or was I her?

She fluttered open her long, dark lashes, and pulling me out of the fantasy, revealed the one perceptible difference between us: her emerald green eyes. While hauntingly beautiful, they looked nothing at all like my pale violet ones. She stared directly at me, tightening her grip on the one person in the world I wanted to be with. Mocking me for being too late.

"Aurora," he whispered in her ear.

In that instant, I knew with certainty that he was not thinking about me.

CHAPTER ONE

“Dawn! Watch out!” A frantic scream echoed through the courtyard. The cry reverberated off the old stone walls, reaching my ears just as a burly vampire slammed his fist into my side. His extended fangs gleamed menacingly as he readied himself for another powerful blow. I braced for the attack, firmly grounding my legs and twisting my torso to the side to evade the strike. The assailant continued to pounce, his arms oscillating in a blur of rapid punches. I swiftly blocked each one, then delivered a disabling kick to his stomach. The hit sent him soaring through the air, and his body emitted a loud *crack* upon contact with the hard surface of the courtyard wall.

I struggled to regain my bearing as two other vampires charged at me. Nostrils flaring and eyes blazing, they thirsted to avenge their fallen comrade. I divided my attention between them, defending from callous punches and hazardous kicks. At the same time, I distributed my own skilled strikes. When the smaller vampire clipped my jaw with her knuckles, I grabbed her arm, and with all my strength, hurled her into her much larger partner.

The two collided, tumbling to the ground next to the first assailant, just as a new group of vampires manifested in front of me. Armed with an array of weapons, they surrounded me from all sides. The next few moments passed in a blur as I evaded a sharp sword, leapt over the chains of a deadly mace, and blocked vigorous blows from a pair of nunchucks.

I was prepared to carry on the defensive dance for as long as my body could hold out, but was secretly relieved upon succeeding in seizing the nunchucks from their owner. In one calculated throw, I entangled both the sword and the mace, disarming the remaining vampires. Stripped of their weapons, the attackers appeared to lose all power, enabling me to easily triumph over them. When it was all over, the three assailants lay on the ground by the rest of their team, panting and whimpering in agony.

I looked around, satisfied at the tableau before me. Aside from a few minor bruises and scratches, I had escaped unscathed. I steadied myself with a deep breath of warm summer air, then smoothed out my black tank top and brushed the dirt from my dark jeans. Running a hand through my disheveled brown locks, I attempted to loosen the tangles that had formed during the fight.

When I was certain that I had fully regained my composure, I turned toward the awe-struck

group of child vampires.

“And that, class, is how you defend against multiple attackers,” I said, smiling triumphantly. My own fangs were now peacefully retracted. “Any questions?”

Five pairs of wide eyes gawked at me in amazement and admiration. In the early sessions of their training at the prestigious Scarlet House Program for New Vampires, the youngsters had learned much about defense and combat. Today, however, was the first time they had ever seen the lessons put into practice.

One of my brightest students, seven-year-old Julie, raised her hand. “Miss Dawn? Will this be on the final?” she asked in a small, but confident voice; the same voice that had frantically called out to me during the fight.

Before I had a chance to respond, an elderly Scarlet House guard approached me. He glided over with an air of importance, his red and gold tunic swaying with each stride.

“Miss Dawn, the President has requested your presence in his chambers,” he said, giving me a brief nod of acknowledgement.

From the corner of his eye, he shot a pitiful glance at his six fellow guards—the same vampires who had acted as my practice attackers just moments before. They were resting on the courtyard floor, dolefully nursing their wounds. I stifled a smile, certain that the gray-haired guard was secretly relieved it hadn’t been his turn at the training station today.

“Please tell the President I’ll be on my way shortly,” I told him before turning my attention back to the students. “That’s all for today. Great work everyone!”

I snatched a soft pouch filled with a mix of donor blood and all-natural fruit juice from the snack table.

“Remember kids, Blood Juice is a healthy, appropriate meal,” I said, tossing the concoction to a nine-year-old named Eddie. “Your human friends at school are not. I heard what happened at recess last week.” I shot the boy a disapproving look as I exited the courtyard.

I briskly strode toward the building that housed the vampire president’s office, the heels of my long, black boots pounding against the winding cobblestone path leading to the mansion. The July sun had begun to fade beyond the horizon, but I could still feel the warm, comforting heat of its rays against my skin.

As the imposing structure of the Scarlet House came into view, I relished in its familiarity. Never having been allowed to venture far from the building and its grounds, they were everything I had ever known. The lavish thirty-room estate was made entirely of exquisite white stone, adorned with marble accents and animal sculptures. Eagles, falcons, and other

birds of prey could be seen perched high on its exterior, but one had to examine the manor in more detail to discover the serpents, lions, and tigers carved into its walls.

My favorite part of the Scarlet House had always been its large, reflective windows. Depending on the time of day and the strength of the light, the structure would morph, taking on unique characteristics. This evening, as the red and orange glow of the setting sun reflected against the glass, the entire building looked ablaze. Conversely, on some calm, clear nights, as I strolled through the garden and glanced back at the house, the silver moonlight dancing across the sleek window surfaces bestowed upon it a glistening, watery effect. It was such an exhilarating sight, one that never failed to fascinate me.

The grand mansion was full of surprises. Most, who had seen the building, likened it to an ethereal castle. Today, the living and the undead from all over the world congregated for daily tours of the premises, but for more than a century before, the only information anyone had about the mansion's location was that it could be found "a hundred or so miles northeast of one of the largest cities in America". Three years ago, the U.S. vampire president's command center was finally revealed to the public. His press office had proudly christened it, *The Scarlet House*.

"After all, the Scarlet House is exactly like the White House, but in a more vampiric sense," they gushed, delighted with their ingenuity.

Upon entering the grand hall of the headquarters, I was greeted by an assembly of guards. As I passed by, they bent their heads in greeting, the fabrics of their long burgundy cloaks spilling gently around them with a soft *swish*. I made my way to the back of the building, weaving through a maze of dimly lit halls. Within seconds, I found myself in front of the president's chambers. Without pausing to knock, I pushed open the heavy oak door, quietly slipping into the room.

Though the house was equipped with the best amenities and most current technology, the office interior was dark and stuffy. Thick blood-colored curtains hung across the windows, drowning the entire room and the lavish Victorian furniture inside it, in deep crimson. The only light emanated from a lone candle within an oversized wrought iron chandelier. The shadows created by the candle's weak flame flickered across the stone walls, desperately trying to escape the confines of the dark environment.

The president sat in his usual wingback chair, staring ominously at a pile of papers strewn across his desk. He was a tall, well-built man, and although he was made vampire only in his late thirties, his dark brown hair was already lined with silver, bestowing him with a mature,

distinguished appearance. His neatly-pressed black suit and long cloak added to his stately image, simultaneously making him seem both modern and ancient.

“Really, Father, why must you live like this?” I groaned into the darkness. In one quick motion, I swiped open the curtains, allowing the diminishing sunlight to crawl into the room.

My father flinched, as if the sun’s rays had somehow burned him. “How many times have I told you, Dawn? We must keep up appearances!” he lectured.

Being born a human in 1818 and made vampire in 1856, my father had never had any difficulty embracing the modern way of life. From the few stories he had shared with me, I discovered that with each new era, he and his followers would learn to adapt and grow, much like technology and inventions had over time. Nevertheless, the romantic within him took great solace in reenacting a time long ago; a time when vampires lived in secret and were only found in fictional tales of love, lust, and terror. I often had to remind him that those days were now long gone.

A little over three years ago, due to a *love-of-all-things-vampire* mania brought on by the emergence of copious popular novels, television shows, and films glorifying the vampire race, vampires had proudly surfaced into the public eye. In the early spring of 2012, after centuries upon centuries of being forced to hide their existence, vampire citizens were finally free to walk in the light. The first few who emerged out of the darkness feared vast repercussions, but the human public was enthralled by them, greeting them with open arms and in some cases, even extended necks.

In fact, the big cities—the first areas to see the emergence of vampires—became such hotspots and tourist destinations that mayors of all small towns across the United States launched an elaborate *Vampire Immigration Campaign*. They offered protection, fame, fortune, discounts to blood banks—whatever it took to encourage vampires to move to their areas.

Of course, certain rules had to be established so that, throughout the world, vampires and humans could coexist peacefully. The constitution was fairly basic, consisting of two main laws. The first law stated that “no vampire was allowed to draw blood from an unwilling human”. The word *unwilling* had to be added into the amended law, as some lovesick teens complained that it wasn’t fair for their parents to keep turning their vampire girlfriends and boyfriends in to the authorities, just because they engaged in some much-enjoyed necking.

The second law was created by the U.S. Vampire Council and stated that “no vampire—under any circumstances—was permitted to turn a human”. The rule was not established for the protection of humans, but rather, to maintain the exclusivity of the vampire race. After all,

vampires were now the new celebrities; they were invited to all the best parties, followed everywhere by paparazzi, and even offered starring roles in the latest films. The vampire council, headed by my father, President Alastair Fairchild, was in charge of preserving this exclusivity; though its efforts often went unnoticed. After all, the humans were not interested in some politician's way of life. The public only had eyes for the young, good-looking vampires who were living life in the fast-lane and gracing the pages of tabloids. According to my father, "the good, dark days when vampires had a little more dignity and were not such sellouts were long gone."

Frowning at the curtains, but declining to close them, my father stood up from behind his desk and slowly approached me.

"Dawn," he said with an air of regality. "I've called you here for a very serious matter. I trust I can count on your help."

I nodded obediently. It was not a question, but an order. Being the president's only child—his star warrior—it wasn't like I had any other choice. All my life, my father had only cared about three things: my safety, my education, and my training. I spent most of my childhood and young adulthood on the Scarlet House grounds, working on strengthening my mind and body. Before I could even walk, I began combat training. The skills I learned drew from a combination of ancient martial art disciplines and more contemporary battle techniques.

Weapons were my specialty. By age ten, I was wielding a katana in one hand and a crossbow in the other. My father flew in tutors from every corner of the world to ensure that I was well-versed on every subject that ever existed. Foreign languages had always been my favorite. I loved the charm and musicality of language, my tongue and lips ravenously indulging in each new word.

Satisfied by my compliance, my father relaxed a little, offering me a sincere smile. "Good. Thank you, Dawn."

He placed one of his large hands on my shoulder and patted me awkwardly. I stiffened, surprised by his touch. Never having been one to show much affection, my father was apparently just as startled as I by this uncharacteristic gesture. His green eyes widened as he pulled his hand away, briskly striding back to his desk. The brown leather chair gave out a small sigh as his burly frame settled into it once again.

"So, what's up?" I asked, plopping myself into a seat across from him. I attempted to seem casual; all the while, my shoulder burned. Most nineteen-year-olds—both human and vampire—would not think twice about a pat on the shoulder from their dad. However, for my

father, this was a first. I never doubted that he cared deeply for me, but he made certain that there was a firm emotional barrier between us.

One day, many years ago, I accidentally overheard him arguing with my nanny, Miss Elisa, about this particular subject matter. I was on my way to his chambers to show him a new weapon that I had acquired from my trainer, when I caught their hushed voices mentioning my name. I froze in front of the closed office door, pressing my ear against the fine wood. Without much strain, my superior hearing had enabled me to listen in on the conversation.

“You need to be more affectionate towards Dawn!” I could imagine Elisa pacing back and forth as she spoke. “The poor child is growing up without a mother and you treat her like your soldier,” she said furiously. The most admirable thing about my nanny was her ability to—regardless of the circumstances—always speak her mind.

“I can’t get close.” The agony in my father’s voice made me flinch. “She reminds me too much of *her!*”

I quickly pulled away from the door, stifling back tears. Those few little words stung more than I could ever have anticipated. I didn’t dare stay and eavesdrop on the rest of the conversation, painfully assuming that my father was referring to my mother; the woman who, I was told, died shortly after giving birth to me.

Thinking about my mother always left me with an empty, aching void in my chest. To this day, she was a taboo subject within the walls of the Scarlet House. There were no pictures of her in our home, and while I desperately yearned to learn anything I could, the only thing I knew with certainty was that, like me, she had been one of the special vampires—a *Born*.

Vampires exist in two varieties—the *Born* and the *Made*. My father, along with most vampires in the world, was part of the *Made* group; those who were once human and were turned by their vampire sires through an exchange of blood in death. There had always been much speculation regarding this procedure, but the only way for a human to be successfully turned was for him or her to ingest vampire blood in their dying moment. Because of the complex timing of this procedure—the human must have vampire blood coursing through the body as his or her heart stops—the turn was often made out of a loving gesture between the individual and his or her sire.

The *Born*, on the other hand, are actually born vampires. Most vampires cannot have children, but in rare circumstances, a *Born* vampire can give birth to another *Born*. This occurs as a result of a union between a *Born* and a vampire she has sired with her own blood. The offspring of the couple—always a daughter—is a being more powerful than any *Made*

vampire. The Born grows and ages much like a human child, and if she does not give birth, she continues out her lifespan and perishes in old age. Upon giving birth to another Born, however, the mother is frozen in time at that particular age for all eternity.

In total, only about ten vampires are born in the world in every generation. Though their origin is unknown, most legends state that they are the direct descendants of Dracula himself. The Born are the envy of the entire vampire race, not just for their power, but also because they have the opportunity to choose a more “human” life. They are able to experience birth and even die of old age if they so desire. Unfortunately, the downside to a vampire giving birth is that it is a very dangerous feat, and most, like my mother, lose their own life in the process of bringing forth another.

The only time that I had ever gotten close to learning about my mother had been on the eve of my sixteenth birthday. As Miss Elisa carefully brushed out my long hair—a bedtime ritual we developed when I was too young to remember and had carried on over the years—I begged her to tell me everything she knew about Zora Fairchild. They had been old friends, and I was yearning to learn anything I could about the woman who gave her life in exchange for mine.

“Your mother was extraordinary in every way,” Elisa began, her blue eyes brimming with memories of a time long ago. “She was full of life, so kind and loving. She adored your father and she would have loved you with all her heart if she had gotten a chance to meet you.”

“Tell me more,” I whispered, fearing that if I spoke too loud, it would break Elisa’s trance. To my relief, she continued to speak.

“Zora was graceful and charming, but also very child-like.” Elisa smiled wistfully at the recollection. “Her laughter sounded like a thousand little bells going off at once.”

“What did she look like?” I pressed more bravely.

“She was very pretty,” Elisa said, scanning my face. I straightened my shoulders and lifted my chin in an attempt to emulate an air of confidence and regality that I had always attributed to the imaginary Zora within my mind.

As if she knew exactly what I was doing, she smiled sadly. “Zora was extremely slight, only about five feet tall and very pale, with straight, white-blond hair,” she explained.

“So, she looked nothing like me?” I asked, blinking back tears.

“Oh, Dawn! You are your father’s daughter. You’re taller and have darker hair than your mother. And you’re even more beautiful—the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.”

When she realized that flattery did not appease me, Elisa quickly added, “But you two did have one special thing in common,” she gushed, stroking my cheek lovingly. “Your eyes! I’ve

never seen anyone else with eyes the color of amethysts.”

I brightened at the prospect of sharing something unique with my mother, but was suddenly overcome by a darker, more chilling thought.

“If my mother was one of the Born, and my father was made vampire by her in 1856, then how did she give birth to me in 1996? The Born don’t stop aging until they have a child.” Numbers and equations ran through my head at lightning speed. “She would have been almost a hundred and fifty years old by the time I came into the world!”

Elisa fell silent. For a long time, she just sat there, nervously running her fingers back and forth over her lips, as if racking her brain for something clever to tell me. She was about to speak, when my father entered the room, startling us both and causing Elisa to jump out of her seat.

She bent her head to mine, urgently whispering, “Dawn, your birth was a complicated procedure. Be a good girl and don’t ask any more questions. You don’t want to upset your father.” She never said another word about my mother or my birth again, and I never dared to ask.

Now, sitting in my father’s office, across from the only man who knew everything there was to know about my mother, I wondered if I would ever gather enough courage to ask the many questions I had surrounding the mystery of my birth.

“Dawn? Are you still with me?” my father asked, pulling me back into the present with a sudden jolt.

I quickly focused my eyes back on his face and nodded.

“Good. I have something very important to show you.” He opened the door of a massive wooden cabinet, revealing a large flat-screen television.

I bit back a smile. Here was a man trying to “keep up appearances” by hiding from the sun and using candle chandeliers, who at the same time dispensed assignments on big-screen, high-definition televisions.

With a click of a remote, images of a quaint little town began to flash in front of us.

“Angel Creek, population nine hundred,” my father narrated. “Over the past three years, all nine-hundred of those human lives were protected by a group of five extremely powerful vampires. They were known throughout the town as the Fab Five.”

My eyes widened at the sight on the screen. Two tall, slender female vampires and three strikingly muscular male vampires strutted down a small street. Their luscious hair swayed in the wind as their chiseled faces and toned bodies moved from side to side in rhythmic motion.

The five looked like they had stepped directly out of the latest fashion magazine, or perhaps as if they belonged in some high-end perfume ad. As they paraded by a bright blue sign with the words “Welcome to Angel Creek” inscribed on it in white, I could no longer contain my laughter.

My father shot me a disapproving glare.

“Yes, they were young and good-looking, but they had more skill and power than some of our most seasoned teams,” he explained, his voice somber. “More importantly, they were adored by the humans in town.”

I didn’t even have to use my imagination to decipher what that meant. I was bombarded by images of the hotshots in various compromising positions with an assortment of their human peers. No amount of eye-rolling on my part could convince my father to turn off the television until the clip finished playing.

“A week ago, it all came to an end. The council summoned the Fab Five to New York City to aid our army forces in a covert operation against a legion of rebel vampires. Once they arrived in the city, things completely unraveled.” My father’s voice was grave, his face solemn.

“They were killed by the rebels?” Even though I fought it, I couldn’t hide the panic in my voice. I had always known peace among the vampires in both my home country and around the world. At the same time, I was well aware of the gruesome tales of unrest and war from my father’s initial years as president, back in the early 1900s.

“They weren’t killed, Dawn,” my father said, frowning. “Didn’t I say they were strong and skilled? No, the Fab Five quit the organization for other pursuits,” he explained. “A couple of them were cast in the *Next Vamp Idol*—that new program looking for hot young vampire triple threats. The others flew to Europe for *Transylvania Shore*.”

I stared at him blankly.

“You know, the *television* shows?” he offered. “You must have seen them!”

I shook my head. “I can’t say that I spend much time watching TV.” Then, a little more teasingly, I added, “But I’m glad to see that our president does.”

“Don’t look at me like that, Dawn.” A sheepish expression crossed my father’s face. “It’s for research purposes,” he said. “Plus, it’s reality television at its best.”

I simply smiled, opting to let this one slide. After all, having dedicated his entire existence to his presidency and the vampire public, my father did deserve a break occasionally.

“As I was saying,” he continued, “Angel Creek has lost its guardians. Without a group of vampires to protect the town, the humans are vulnerable. There has been peace among our

people for a long time, but we have recently been receiving reports that rebel vamp groups are popping up in various areas across the country. While our council is strong and we have ensured protection of large cities, it's the small towns that are at risk. We can't take our chances. We need to defend the humans and maintain peace between our two worlds," he said firmly. The man in front of me was no longer a reality-show fanatic, but was, once again, a powerful leader, well-respected and admired by vampires and humans around the world.

"Unfortunately, many young vampires are leaving their assigned posts in rural towns to chase after their dreams in the big cities. We have lost countless talented warriors this year to vampire casting calls in Hollywood and charitable organizations like *Vamps Without Borders*," he sighed, rubbing his temples. "And that doesn't even factor in the human love affairs we're constantly faced with."

"Can't you prevent that from happening?" I asked. "Maybe threaten them with persecution?"

My father shook his head. "In the early stages, we tried, but once vampires get an idea that they're going to be the next big thing, even persecution can't deter them from that path. Sure, we succeeded in keeping them at their posts, but they spent more time and energy on acting classes and singing lessons than on being active town guardians."

"Anyway, the solution is simple," he said, brightening. "We just need to gather the remaining vampires in the towns and establish them as the official guardians."

He rose out of his chair and, in a rapid flash, crossed over to my side of the desk. He leaned against its ledge, fixing his intense emerald gaze on me.

"And that's why I need your help, Dawn," he declared. "You're my finest trainer, my best warrior. Not to mention, you're also my most trusted confidante."

As he spoke, I held my breath, trying my best to not make a sound.

Was it finally happening?

After years of training, was I finally getting my wish?

As if he had read my mind, my father nodded. "You're getting your first assignment outside of the Scarlet House grounds."

I had been begging my father for a mission ever since I turned sixteen and could officially be granted one, but he had always made excuses as to why I wasn't able to partake in any assignments. His reluctance had baffled me, as he had ensured that I was better trained than even his highest ranked generals. But none of that mattered anymore. My dreams were finally coming true.

I broke out into a huge smile, resisting the urge to fling my arms around his neck and squeal with delight. Instead, I summoned up all the maturity I could muster and stoically asked, “So, what’s the assignment? I just have to go to Angel Creek and train a couple of vampires to protect this little town?”

My father cleared his throat. “The situation in Angel Creek is somewhat complicated.” He looked away from me, but not before I could see the guilty expression on his face.

“There are currently only four vampires left in the town and they will need some help getting...*organized*. It may be a bit tricky, but it’s a very low-risk assignment, I promise.”

He continued to speak, but I could no longer hear the words coming out of his mouth. I was too preoccupied trying not to burst with excitement.

I’m the luckiest girl in the world, I thought gleefully.

If only I had known just how wrong those words would turn out to be.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning, I set out on my mission. My mind entirely preoccupied with daydreaming about the new recruits, I was eager to reach my destination as soon as possible. I hadn't been granted access to their files until right before my departure from the Scarlet House, so I was very much in the dark as to what lay ahead.

The three-hour journey through lush farmlands and gentle rolling hills dragged on forever. I knew it was only my imagination, but each mile marker seemed to stretch out for ten. My body vibrated with fervent energy as I attempted to steady my hands on the steering wheel. Had I not been carrying so many supplies, I could have easily run the distance in half of the time it took to drive.

Following the directions on my GPS, I finally turned my black convertible off the deserted highway and onto an unmarked dirt road. The path traversed through a thick forest, continuing on without an end in sight. I was beginning to consider the possibility that my GPS had misled me, when the trees suddenly opened up, revealing a picturesque little town within a large valley. Quaint and charming, Angel Creek was smaller than I had anticipated it to be, yet it had a compelling, almost dazzling, presence. Everything about it—from the unusual cobblestone sidewalks to the pristine architecture—was stark-white.

I steered my car into the heart of the town, coming upon a blue-and-white banner hanging proudly above the road.

Angel Creek. A Place Where History Resides.

The sign was attached to a bridge that served as a pedestrian passageway, which, judging by the look of the desolate street, was used only for ornamental purposes.

Main Street, Angel Creek's largest street, held the town's most significant buildings—the small, but majestic town hall, the library and post office, medical offices and law firms, a grocery store, no less than five antique shops paradoxically boasting the latest fashions, and a few mystery buildings without any signs to suggest their functions. Further up the road, on top of a small hill, I spied a wide, one-story schoolhouse. Beside it was a church; its grand bell tower soaring high toward the clouds.

My history tutor, Françoise, would have been impressed by my ability to identify the influence of the neoclassical movement in the architecture of Angel Creek. The bright stone

structures with their smooth, rounded columns and symmetrical, stately windows drew inspiration from classical Greek and Roman structures, adding on a few unique Gothic twists.

The most striking site in the entire town was the renowned Hamilton Park. In my brief research, the only information that I could find about Angel Creek was regarding its historic park and the white gazebo that the town founder, Henry Hamilton, had built for his bride, Angela. According to the records, the gazebo was the first structure erected on the land. It had stood the test of weather and time since 1805, staying in place even after the creek that once ran next to it had dried up.

I pulled into an empty parking space in front of the town hall. Though it was late July, the day was cool and windy. Dark, heavy clouds gathered in the sky above, threatening rainfall. The gloomy, grim weather could do little to diminish my high spirits. After all, I was on my first mission away from the Scarlet House. As far as I was convinced, I was living out a fantasy.

I eagerly made my way toward the library, clutching a sleek electronic tablet to my chest. It was a gift from my father, given to me to contain the information on the four vampires I was to train. My plan had been to study the reports at the library before heading out in search of the recruits, but as I approached the steps of the gray building, I noted that it was closed until noon. The Roman numerals on the worn-out town hall clock indicated that I had over an hour to kill.

I turned on my heels and started back toward my car, dismally scanning all the firmly locked doors and curtained windows along the street. Suddenly, my eyes caught a glimpse of a faded sign that I had missed during my earlier tour through the town. It flaunted a hand-painted picture of white angel wings, the words *Angel Creek Diner* scrawled above it in bold blue letters. A faint melody of a country song floated out from behind the doors, causing a renewed surge of excitement to pass through me.

Light rain began to drizzle as I rushed through the diner doors, silently scolding the chiming bell that announced my entrance to the patrons. The door slammed behind me, as I took a moment to adjust my eyes to the dim interior. The periphery of the diner was lined with old-fashioned booths made of coarse, dark wood. Their rough table surfaces peeked out from underneath green-and-white checkered tablecloths.

A pungent aroma of fried oil filled my nostrils as I conducted a quick inventory of the place. There were only five people in the diner. A gruff-looking elderly gentleman nursed a beer at the bar, while a young couple lovingly shared a basket of fries in one of the front booths. A pretty red-haired waitress sang along to the tune on the radio as she wiped down a dessert display. A young man I imagined to be the bartender hunched over the bar, almost completely concealed by

the myriad of bottles on the counter. All except the bartender, who busied himself with mixing a drink, looked curiously toward me when I entered.

Trying not to draw any more attention to myself, I silently sank into one of the empty corner booths. As I switched on my tablet, an overwhelming sense of exhilaration washed over me once again. Fighting to remain professional and contain the giddy laughter bubbling up inside me, I settled on a silent smile instead.

Mid-grin, my eyes locked with a dazzling pair of honey-colored ones. The stranger's gaze was so magnetic; I had to physically force myself to look away as he came out from behind the bar and approached my booth. The warm, sultry eyes were complemented by a rugged mess of dark golden tresses. He appeared to be in his early twenties, average in height, well-built, and muscular. His green plaid shirt and faded blue jeans clued me in to the fact that the face and body I was now staring at a little too attentively belonged to the bartender.

He was also studying me, slowly taking in every part of my face. I was glad that vampires did not blush easily, or else I would have undoubtedly taken on a deep burgundy shade. I cleared my throat and, in an attempt to emulate his confident smirk, put on what I had hoped was a friendly smile. I was a level-headed, self-assured, and intelligent girl, but nineteen years of training under my father's direct supervision hadn't allowed for much opportunity to develop skills for dealing with boys.

To say that I was rusty in the romance department would be an understatement of the century. I couldn't even be called rusty. For that, there would first have to be something to rust. My only interaction with guys at the Scarlet House extended to combat practice with men centuries older than me—both in human and vampire years. So, here I was, almost no longer a teenager, and meeting my first cute boy. A human, no less.

"Hello there," the stranger greeted me in a slight Southern drawl. I barely caught the accent in his deep, raspy voice, but it was a pleasant sound, adding to the air of mystery surrounding him.

"Hi," I said, doing my best to match the sultriness of his tone in my own voice. Even if I sounded poised and elegant on the outside, in my head, I felt like a complete dork.

"What can I getcha?" His playful smirk was now a full-fledged smile, complete with slight dimples on each of his chiseled cheeks.

When I failed to respond, he laughed again, his eyes twinkling teasingly. "Nothing on the menu looks appealing?" he asked, pointing to the notepad and pen in his hand.

"Oh, everything looks great," I said. *Even things not directly on the menu.* "I'm just not very

hungry,” I explained. “I needed to get out of the rain, but nothing else in town seems to be open.”

“That’s Angel Creek for you. How about I bring you a glass of water while you hang out?” the bartender offered. “On the house,” he joked.

“Water sounds great.” At this point, I not only felt like a dork, but I was sure that I sounded like one too.

“It’ll be right out,” he announced. “You sure you don’t want anything to eat?” His eyes searched mine curiously.

I wondered if he could tell that I was a vampire. Vampires could easily distinguish other vampires from humans, but identifying vampires was more difficult for humans. Yes, we had fangs, but those only came out voluntarily, and aside from being cooler to the touch, vampires and humans looked physically identical. Many love-struck humans and some vain vampires swore that all vampires were much better looking than humans; though I personally believed that vampire attractiveness had a lot to do with the fact that most lived for very long periods of time and had learned to fake confidence over the years. In this particular moment, I cursed myself for not being one of those old, wise vamps.

I looked up at the bartender and shook my head. “No, thank you.”

“Okay, just let me know if you change your mind,” he said, grinning. “Our regular cook is off until the evening dinner rush, but I can fry some mean fries. Or anything else you wish.” I couldn’t tell if that was simply an innocent proposal of a cheeseburger, or if he was expecting me to ask for a pint of blood.

“The name’s Ethan by the way,” he added casually as he disappeared behind the bar.

Glancing down at the electronic device in front of me, I rapidly sobered up.

Cute guy or not, I had to get back to my assignment.

I planned to spend the next hour finally getting down to work, but before I had a chance to open the first file, the red-haired waitress approached my booth.

“Hi!” she exclaimed much too loudly and much too enthusiastically for my liking. “What’s your name? What brings you to Angel Creek? Are you visiting someone?”

Before I could even respond—I hadn’t yet decided if I wanted to go with a cover story about my mission to make things a little more exciting for myself, or simply state the facts since there wasn’t actually anything covert about what I was doing in town—the girl continued rambling on.

Her name was Hannah Johnson, she was eighteen years old, she was born and raised in Angel Creek, she had a little sister named Margaret, she worked at the diner as a waitress to save up for her ailing mother’s medical expenses, she was planning on going to college next year to

become a vet—did she mention she loved animals? She was a Capricorn...

Thankfully, Ethan came by with my water and, for a brief moment, his presence interrupted Hannah's verbal-diarrhea. She sighed longingly, studying his muscular arm as he set the tall glass of liquid on the table. He nodded at her and gave me a warm smile. When he turned to leave, Hannah looked at me, her large blue eyes full of longing.

"Isn't he dreamy?" she asked, once again not actually allowing time for me to provide an answer. "His name is Ethan, he just moved here less than a week ago, he's twenty two years old, he's a Leo, he's single—I checked. Did you hear that voice? *Mmm...*" She closed her eyes and smiled, tiny freckles dancing across her cheeks and nose.

I wouldn't have minded spending the afternoon listening to Hannah talk about Ethan, but I had a job to do. I needed to gather the four vampire recruits and commence their training. I politely excused myself, left a tip for Ethan, and rushed out.

By the time I exited the diner, the rain had ceased, though the clouds looked even more menacing. A strong gust of wind tormented the branches of the trees, forcefully attempting to rip away the *Angel Creek* banner from its secure place atop the pedestrian bridge. The weather had little effect on my body temperature, but on such an extraordinarily cool summer day, I felt comfort in having thrown on a light jacket over my usual attire of a black tank-top, dark jeans, and combat boots.

Back in the car, I turned on the tablet and entered in the password that my father had given me. The first recruit's file appeared on the screen, revealing a photo of a young blonde girl in a blue-and-white cheerleading uniform. The word *Angels* was printed across her chest; the polyester fabric of the top stretched out the letters as it clung to her curves. Her dark blue eyes were caked in bright makeup, her straight, shoulder-length hair bleached so pale it was almost white. Layers upon layers of glowing orange self-tanner covered her light skin, hiding all visible traces of her vampirdom.

"Brooke Mason. Seventeen. Turned in 1960. Spent the past fifty years competing for cheer captain spots on various high school squads throughout the U.S.," the information in the document read.

Wow, fifty years of nothing but pep? Who in their right mind would want to do something like that? I wondered as I put away the tablet.

My question was answered the moment I pulled into the parking lot of Angel Creek High. Brooke was loitering under the football field bleachers, twirling around in her short cheerleading skirt as she called out to the players on the field. She beckoned to them with a pair of bright

silver pompoms, and at once, the entire team formed a line under the bleachers.

I approached, watching in disgust as Brooke leaned in, kissed one of the players on the lips, bit his neck, drained some blood, then sent him on his way. She repeated this with the next boy, and the one after that, until only a few remained.

“That explains it,” I muttered under my breath in response to my earlier question. I rapidly made my way across the field, reaching the bleachers just as Brooke was about to sink her teeth into the big, burly team captain. I put a firm hand on her shoulder, stopping her mid-bite.

“Give us a minute, boys,” I ordered sternly.

Brooke looked up at me and frowned. “Go away,” she grumbled, shooting the players an apologetic smile.

“Come to join in the fun?” The captain winked at me, licking his lips. “There’s plenty to go around.”

I stood my ground, ignoring the lewd stares and obscene whistles emanating from the team. “I’m not going to ask again. Move it!”

Intimidated, the football players scattered away.

“*Ugh!* What’s your problem?” Brooke whined, annoyed. “Can’t a girl have some fun?”

She stepped back, narrowing her eyes as she looked me up and down. “Are you new?” Her tone was cold and suspicious. “I’ll have you know that there’s only one prom queen spot in this school, and this year, the crown will *finally* be mine!” She bared her pearly white fangs at me.

I took a deep breath, fighting the urge to extend my own sharp fangs in her direction. “I can assure you that I have no interest in your high school drama, Brooke,” I said instead. “I’m here because you’ve been summoned by the vampire president to become one of the official guardians of the town of Angel Creek.”

This information caused Brooke to break out into a high-pitched squeal. “*No way!* Does that mean that I finally get to join the Fab Five? Those guys are *so* hot! And the girls are so pretty and so very catty. I’ll fit in perfectly! *Ahh!* I’ve always wanted to be one of them.” She threw her arms around my neck, and pulled me into a tight hug. “This is *way* better than prom!”

“Whoa, okay.” I carefully peeled her arms away, taking a step back. “You’re not joining the Fab Five. That group has been dissolved. You’re forming a new group.”

“A new group? This just keeps getting better! Can I be the captain?” Brooke squealed again. This time, the shriek was even more deafening.

I reluctantly joined in Brooke’s cheers, reminding myself that I had to treat my trainees with patience and respect. The better I did on this mission, the greater my chances of impressing my

father and being sent on more exciting assignments in the future became.

“Follow me,” I said, leading her away from the bleachers. “We have to gather the others.”

Back in the car, I fired up the tablet again, flipping quickly to the next file. A photo of a short, thin girl with a smooth, dark complexion appeared on the screen. Her raven-black hair was gathered at the top of her head in a tight bun, and her face wore a timid, almost fearful, expression. Large, round glasses framed her chocolate brown eyes, and the buttons of her plain, gray dress were securely fastened all the way to her chin. The picture was recent, taken with a modern camera, but the small girl looked as if she belonged in a different era.

“Sophie Reed. Eighteen. Turned in 1918. Librarian at the Angel Creek Public Library,” I read under my breath.

Brooke forced her way across the partition between our seats and peered over my shoulder.

“*Her?* Are you serious?” she asked, her wispy blond locks brushing against my cheek. “*Sad Sophie?* You know she’s, like, really weird and a total bookworm. She mopes around the library all the time and never leaves.”

I should’ve saved Brooke for last, I thought as I shot her a strained smile. “Let’s go get Sophie.”



It was well after twelve o’clock by the time Brooke and I reached the library. The broad double doors were now wide open, revealing rows upon rows of colorful titles. The moment we stepped inside, we were enveloped in a musty scent of old paper and dark ink. For a brief moment, I was transported back to the Scarlet House library; a place where I had spent much of my childhood sprawled across the plush red carpet, surrounded by my father’s ancient texts. I loved running my fingers along the brittle pages of the books, watching dust particles escape from the paper and float about the room. They always found their way to the rays of sunshine streaming in through the windows, forever disappearing into the light.

Sophie sat hunched over the librarian’s desk, her small, round face almost entirely swallowed up by the book in front of her. She looked precisely as she had in the picture, only even frailer. The heavy oak table she was sitting at seemed as it was fashioned for a giant.

“This is a bad idea,” Brooke whispered loudly, pulling on my arm to prevent me from approaching Sophie. “Why would you allow such a nerd in the group? I don’t wanna be seen around town with a geek.”

I held my finger to my lips. “*Shush,* Brooke! This is a library.”

I walked over to Sophie's desk, quietly settling into a nearby chair. Her body twitched slightly, but she didn't tear her gaze away from the book. Brooke reluctantly joined us, loudly dragging her tennis shoes across the carpet.

"Hi Sophie," I said gently.

Sophie looked up, briefly glancing at me through her dark lashes, then dug her nose even further into the book.

"My name is Dawn," I said, trying to meet her eyes. "I'm here to summon you on an important mission. You've been chosen to join a group of vampires in charge of guarding Angel Creek."

Sophie looked up abruptly, her eyes widening in fear. "*Vampires?*"

I sighed. "Yes, vampires. You *are* aware that you're a vampire, right?"

She smiled bashfully. "Well, yes. But I don't know much about being a vampire. Everything I know about our kind comes from reading books."

Brooke rolled her eyes. "Wow, pathetic. How do you feed?"

"Oh, uhh, Pete..." Sophie trailed off, nervously waving at a young man cataloguing books nearby. His face lit up at the attention as he stumbled forward, sending a pile of heavy encyclopedias tumbling to the floor.

A disgusted look crossed Brooke's face. "Nerd feeding on nerds. So *ick*."

I rubbed my temples. *It was going to be a long day.*

"Don't worry. I'll teach you all about being a vampire," I promised Sophie with a warm smile, all the while struggling to drown out Brooke's incessant whining. "We have two more rounds to make. Let's go."

I took Sophie's hand in mine, tenderly pulling her up and out of her seat in one easy move. She resisted at first, as if unsure if she should follow me.

"You're going to be great," I whispered, and she finally gave in. With my other hand, I grabbed Brooke's cheerleading sweater and led the two girls through the library door.

Once outside, I turned my attention to the tablet again. This time, the file showed a picture of a sullen, sickly-looking male vampire.

"Hunter Woods. Twenty-one. Turned in 1983. Former lead singer of the punk band, Blood Vultures," I read. "Alcoholic. Drug addict." *Great.*

Sophie gasped. "Can vampires be like *that*?" she asked timidly.

"You mean drunks and junkies?" Brooke snorted. "Of course. There's plenty of booze-flavored blood in stores and bars nowadays, and he can always drink the blood of druggies in

order to get high. Gross, right?”

Sophie’s jaw dropped.

“It’s really too bad, because he’s kinda hot.” Brooke sighed wistfully.

After a few minutes of searching around town, we spotted Hunter. He was leaning against the wall of the diner I had visited earlier in the day, sporting torn denim jeans and a stained t-shirt with some obscure eighties band logo printed on it. His long, light brown hair was streaked in electric green and blue, and dyed bright red at the tips. His jade green eyes had a worrisome, reddish tint to them.

Hunter didn’t take notice as we neared; he was too busy gulping down on a mystery substance concealed inside a brown paper bag. Even from a distance, the stench of alcohol was overpowering.

Trying my best not to look unnerved, I put on a cheerful smile and raised my hand in greeting. “Hunter, you’ve been called upon by the vampire president to take on the role of an Angel Creek guardian.”

He flinched at the sound of my voice, his eyes darting wildly from me, to Brooke, to Sophie, and then back to me. “I guess those pretty boys must’ve done something wrong if they need my help,” he said, taking another swig of the mystery liquid.

“Those *pretty boys*—I assume that you’re speaking of the Fab Five,” I began, cringing at the nickname, “are no longer with us,” I explained as Hunter downed the last drop of the foul-smelling drink.

Taking Hunter with us to meet with the fourth recruit would be counterproductive, I realized. He needed some time to collect himself—and hopefully brush his teeth—before the group assembled for our first meeting.

“Sober up, clean up, and come to this address in two hours.” I handed him a card inscribed with directions to a covert location on the outskirts of town.

My father had secured a small, secluded cottage located deep in the Angel Creek forest for the team to reside in while undergoing training.

“It’s very private. None of the Angel Creek residents even know about it. It will be equipped with all the tools you’ll need upon your arrival,” he had assured me.

As Hunter searched through his backpack for another bottle, I checked the tablet for the last target of the day. A photo of a plump, black-haired teen holding a video game console filled the screen.

“Seth Lee. Sixteen. Junior at Angel Creek High. 2015 *Role-Playing Game Olympic*

Champion. Turned two weeks ago by—” I shot Brooke a startled look. “*Brooke Mason?*”

“It was an accident!” she exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air.

Hunter chuckled.

“He was like the geekiest kid at school, so I thought I would tease him a little, show him a good time, you know? So I bit him. I just forgot to stop, and after a while he was kinda dying. Then, I was like, ‘Not cool, Brooke. Not cool!’ ...I turned him because I figured that he should at least graduate from high school. But then I realized that he won’t because he’s well, dead—*duh!* So, like—”

I put out my hand to quiet her. “Please, stop!” I begged, my mind racing. I couldn’t believe that the council had let Brooke get away unscathed after she took it upon herself to turn an innocent human. My father, despite his intimidating demeanor, had always had trouble enforcing this particular law. Though he wouldn’t admit it, I was certain it had something to do with the fact that he himself had been turned by my mother.

“Where is Seth now?” I asked.

Brooke avoided my glare. “Well...”

“*Brooke!*”

“He kinda didn’t take the whole vampire thing very well. He’s holed up in his parents’ basement, playing video games and crying. He’s hung up tons of garlic all over his place, so I can’t even go over there and help him,” she said, pouting.

Sophie shot her a questioning look. “Vampires aren’t bothered by garlic. You must know that,” she said in her quiet voice.

“Oh, I know.” Brooke sighed. “I just didn’t wanna smell bad. I only eat garlic in vitamin form.”

“Of course you do,” I grumbled. The training hadn’t even started yet, and I was already exhausted.

“Let’s just go get Seth—” I began, then, experiencing a sudden change of heart, handed the girls the same directions I had given Hunter just moments before.

“You two should head to the meeting place while I talk to Seth. I have a feeling that, despite your short skirt, he’s not going to be very happy to see you, Brooke.”

“Fine,” Brooke agreed. She blew a kiss to Hunter as she turned to leave.

Sophie’s eyes widened at the realization that she would have to be alone with Brooke. Despite her panic, she obeyed my request. “See you later,” she said, giving me a small wave.

I watched the girls disappear down the street, then turned back to Hunter. Just as I was about

to tell him to get going, Hannah rushed out of the diner.

“*Hunter!* You can’t loiter around here. You know that!” She clapped her hands in delight when she spotted me. “Oh, hey, Dawn! Are you back for another chat?” she asked eagerly.

“Oh, actually...” I began.

Hannah looked back and forth from me to Hunter, her eyes widening in delight. “So it’s true! I can’t believe it!”

“Can’t believe what?” I asked.

“Well, I heard a little rumor that a tough vampire chick was coming to town to train some new guardians,” she said, looking at me expectantly.

“Uhh...”

“It *is* you! Oh, wow! When you were at the diner today, I totally didn’t connect it together because you’re really young and so pretty and—” she paused to take a breath; an act, I noticed, she didn’t engage in very often. “I was heartbroken when I heard the Fab Five had left. I actually had a little fling with one of the guys, believe it or not. It was mostly one-sided—on my side, actually—but it’s all okay now because there are five new vampires to take their place.”

“*Four,*” I corrected, not quite sure why I bothered with such a minute detail. Most likely, I was just content to be able to slip in a word.

“Five, silly! Hunter here, good luck with him; Sophie, the poor sweetie really needs to get out more often; Brooke, *ugh,* she’s such a skank; the newbie Seth, he’s gonna need a lot of work; and, of course, Sebastian. Now there’s a guy who could’ve fit right in with the Fab Five. Between him and Ethan, I’d say that Angel Creek is suddenly very blessed!”

“*Sebastian?*” I was certain that I had received instructions regarding only four vampires. I quickly flipped through the files on the tablet, searching for a fifth name.

Nothing.

Seeing my puzzled expression, Hannah put her finger in the air. “Wait right here!” she exclaimed as she ran back into the diner. A few moments later, she returned, waving around a piece of yellow notepad paper.

“Here,” she said, handing it to me. “This is all the info I managed to collect on Sebastian. It’s not much, he’s kinda a secretive guy and doesn’t socialize with anyone, but you should pay him a visit. Anyway, I gotta get back to work. I can’t wait to tell Ethan all about this.”

Before I could ask her not to say anything to anyone, she was already gone. I was sure that, by tonight, all of Angel Creek would know about me.

Despite being intrigued by the mysterious fifth vampire, I resolved not to look at the paper

Hannah had given me. One crisis at a time, I figured, scanning Seth's file for his address.

"Don't be late for our meeting!" I shot Hunter a warning look as I headed back to my car.



Seth's parents' house was a plain, two-story structure located on the periphery of town. It blended in with the rest of the residential cookie-cutter properties, except for its bright red welcome mat, greeting the guests in both English and in Korean characters. The doorbell yielded no answer, but like in most small towns across the country—especially now that vampires were known to protect the residents—the door was unlocked. I chuckled, thinking that if this was a Hollywood film, I would require a formal invitation to enter.

I made my way through the deserted first floor, reveling in the elegant, yet simple décor of the dramatic red walls, colorful oriental rugs, and dark, lacquered wood furniture. Picking up on the strong scent of garlic, I followed the trail all the way into the basement. The small underground room was damp and stifling, putrid fast-food cartons and pizza boxes strewn all about.

A dark-eyed, spiky-haired teen appeared from a shadowy corner. He lunged at me, clutching a wooden stake in one hand and holding onto a clove of garlic in the other. His face was stern and brave, but his hands trembled in fear.

"Th-that cheer skank sent you, didn't she?" he wailed, waving the stake around frantically. "Stay away, demon! Or else!"

"Or else what?" I asked calmly, in an attempt to lighten the mood. I had to admit that watching the vampire newbie do the stake and garlic dance was a little amusing.

"Or else, I'm going to *stake* you!" Seth yelled, lunging at me with the sharp wooden object. In one smooth move, I disarmed him of his weapon, pinning his arms against the wall.

Seeing the terror in his eyes, I released his hands and offered him a kind smile. "Hi, Seth. My name is Dawn and I'm here to help you. Please have a seat." He had at least a hundred pounds on me, but I lifted him with ease, gently placing him onto the least-soiled part of the couch.

"Due to an unfortunate incident with an air-headed cheerleader, you are now a vampire," I explained. "Congratulations."

To my surprise, Seth placed his hands over his face and began to sob. "My life is ruined!" he cried.

"Please don't cry," I urged over his loud wails. "A make-out session with a cheerleader could have led to worse results," I joked, but my attempt at humor had no effect on the young vampire.

“I’m sorry,” I added more softly. “I didn’t mean to make fun of you. I know that you must be very confused right now, but I’m here because you’ve been summoned to become a guardian of this little town.”

“A guardian?”

I nodded. “Vampire guardians ensure that the humans in town are protected from harm. The danger can range from smaller incidents like burglaries to even bigger things like murder or rogue vamp attacks.”

Seth pouted, but his tears ceased. He was now looking at me with more interest.

“It’s not so bad, I promise. I’ll help you polish your skills and become a great vampire—just like a video game hero.”

Suddenly, he perked up. “I’m gonna be a hero?” he asked, wiping his eyes.

“Yes, you will.” I smiled, breathing a sigh of relief at his abrupt mood shift. “Now, you already noticed some changes in your strength, right?”

To my dismay, his face fell. “Negative.” He shook his head. “I’ve become even weaker than before.”

“Oh?” The news caught me by surprise. After the initial twenty-four hour period following the transformation from human to vampire, most new vampires experienced an improvement in strength, speed, and agility. Other, more exciting perks, developed over time.

“My brother and his friends can still beat me up.” Seth touched his side, wincing in pain. “They’re five,” he added under his breath.

Oh, great! This team just keeps getting better.

The more time I spent in Angel Creek, the less thrilled I was becoming with the prospect of the assignment.

“We’ll work on that later,” I said, motioning for him to follow me. “We need to meet the other recruits now.”

Seth nodded dutifully. He rose off the couch with enthusiasm, giving me an army salute. Immediately, he dropped back onto his seat, landing on the cushions with a heavy *thud*. His face was bone-white, paler than the complexion of even the most ancient vampires. Tiny beads of sweat formed under his lip and hairline.

“You look starved. What have you been eating?”

Seth bowed his head sheepishly, looking over at the piles of empty pizza boxes and crumb-filled chip bags scattered around the room.

I sighed. “Carbs aren’t going to cut it anymore.” Thankfully, I had come prepared. “Drink

this,” I said, pulling out a can of the popular carbonated blood drink, Blood Cola, from my backpack, and handing it to the fledgling vampire.

A few years ago, vampires could only get blood from live human donors and blood banks, but now, bloody snacks were sold in every convenience store and gas station across the country. In fact, last year, the company that originally manufactured Blood Cola was bought out by one of the largest, most popular soft drink conglomerates in the world.

“You can be assured that no humans were harmed in the making of this lunch,” I smiled encouragingly as Seth took a sip. “Unlike Brooke, most vampires can and do live without hurting people.”

Seth shuddered at the mention of Brooke’s name, but looked slightly stronger after the quick snack.

“Ready to go?” I asked, raising the window blinds and getting ready to climb through the small opening. My goal was to sneak Seth out of the basement and minimize the risk of running into his parents at the front door—whatever it took to avoid having to explain his sickly state.

The sun’s weak rays spilled into the room, causing Seth to recoil in pain.

“Ow! That hurts!”

I quickly drew the blinds, drowning out the light. “Sorry, I haven’t dealt with a newbie in a while.” I tore a head of garlic from the long string on Seth’s table and handed it to him. “Here, eat this. Four to five cloves a day will protect you against the sunlight.”

He looked at me, dumbfounded. “You’re kidding, right?”

I grinned. “The vampire world works in mysterious ways.”



On the way to meet the others, I decided to take a quick detour to the location Hannah had scribbled down for me. There was no mention of a vampire named Sebastian in my assignment files, causing my interest in the enigmatic fifth vampire to become too unbearable to ignore.

I was surprised to find that Hannah’s directions led deep into the woods, only about a mile or so from our training base. I parked the car at an entrance of a long, winding driveway, devoid of an actual address, but matching the description of the place in Hannah’s notes.

I ordered Seth to wait in the car, and slowly made my way up the dirt path in the direction of what I had hoped was Sebastian’s residence. The longer I walked, the darker and more daunting the clouds above me became. Finally, with a booming crash of thunder, the sky tore open, releasing a fresh downpour of cool rain. This time, it was faster and heavier, pummeling against

Hannah's note, drenching her small, neat writing.

I considered turning back and meeting with Sebastian another time, but my curiosity got the best of me, forcing me to push forward. I examined the note, squinting to make out some of the smudged words.

Sebastian York is a twenty-one year-old Scorpio. He has gorgeous silver eyes, the color of sparkling glaciers. His midnight-black hair is slightly curly, and just long enough to make you daydream about running your fingers through his locks. He's super tall and really, really hot. Just try to peel your eyes away from all those lean muscles! Yum! He's brooding, mysterious, strong, and self-deprecating (or at least, he seems like the type)—the perfect vampire!

I had to stop myself from reading the rest. Hannah's report on Sebastian was a little over-the-top for my taste. Not to mention, much too unbelievable. Scrunching up the soaked paper, I tucked it into the pocket of my jeans. I couldn't help smiling at the thought that the bubbly redhead had a promising career ahead of her as a writer of cheesy romance novels.

The hike through the forest led to a secluded clearing. The trees parted, revealing a striking building, more akin to a grand mansion than a house in the woods. While made in the same style as the buildings in town, the three-story structure had a stately, regal air about it. Clad in white stone with Grecian temple-inspired columns towering across its entire façade, it very much resembled the majestic inn on the grounds of Hamilton Park.

The driveway finally came to an end, and I found myself next to a luxury antique car. Its cherry-red hood was propped wide open, and it took a moment before I noticed that there was a figure tinkering with the machinery underneath. He wore a pair of loose, black pants; the muscles on his bare back flexed as he strained to tighten something with a metal wrench.

Hannah's words flashed through my mind as I stood frozen in place, observing Sebastian's profile. My gaze traveled along his tall, lean frame, my pulse quickening in response to the wet raindrops sliding down his chiseled arms. Flustered, I quickly raised my eyes up to his face, gliding over his sharp angular jaw and high cheekbones, and finding a resting place atop his glistening, dark locks. Embarrassed by my unexpected attraction to the vampire in front of me, I sharply looked away, thankful for the cooling sensation of the wet raindrops against my skin.

Suddenly, Sebastian sensed my presence. His entire body tensed as he spun around, firmly grasping the wrench in his hand, ready and poised for an attack. The moment his eyes fixed on me, he froze, a look of sheer terror seizing his face. The metal tool fell out of his hand, hitting the cobblestone with a loud *clank*. The noise seemed to break the spell he was under. As his gaze connected with mine, the look of horror that came over him just moments before immediately

vanished.

“Sebastian?” I asked breathlessly, unnerved by his startling reaction.

He didn't reply. Instead, he continued to examine every inch of me with his cool eyes. My entire body blazed under his scrutinizing stare, but despite my uneasiness, I couldn't bring myself to look away. His gaze was both terrifying and thrilling, all at once.

The wind frantically tugged at my hair, as if trying to snap me out of my trance. In spite of nature's best efforts, I simply stood there, locked in an unnerving staring contest with the mysterious vampire. A deafening clap of thunder shook the earth, causing me to jump, and startling Sebastian back to his senses.

“Who wants to know?” he finally responded. There was a sharp edge to his smooth, velvety voice.

“My name is Dawn,” I said, attempting a smile. “I'm here on an assignment from the vampire president to train the new guardians of Angel Creek. Since you're one of the five vampire residents, I thought you'd want to know about the mission and take part—” I stopped abruptly, distracted by the angry scowl forming across his face.

Another earsplitting roar of thunder sounded before he spoke. “Not interested,” he said curtly, his eyes still intent on me. He was boldly exploring my face, his gaze slowly traveling down my body.

“Dawn, did you say?” he asked curiously, his voice a little less brisk.

I nodded, crossing my arms in a self-conscious effort to shield myself. “So can we count you in?” I asked hopefully.

“No.”

“What do you mean ‘no’?” I sputtered in disbelief. I was quickly becoming annoyed with the shirtless, ill-mannered vampire.

“No. Nope. *Not interested*. Is that clear enough for you?”

“Really?”

“Yes, really—*no*.” He turned away, waving his hand in my direction as if to let me know that I was dismissed.

“Why?” I asked, stretching out to grab his arm. Thankfully, he moved just before I could reach him, as mid-grab, I realized that touching Sebastian was a bold move I hadn't fully thought out.

He turned around to face me, the heated look in his eyes causing me to take a slight step back.

“I don’t really embrace this whole *vampire fad*. I’m not interested in anything related to vampires, being a vampire, or serving the president. Got it?”

“What about your obligation to protect humans?” I questioned.

“I’m not interested in humans either, not even the sad, vulnerable ones so many vampire idiots fall for. You could say, I’m only interested in myself.” He smirked, his tone once again reaching sub-zero temperatures. “So if you wouldn’t mind leaving, I’d love to get back to work.”

“But...you can’t do that. When I tell the president that you’re here, he’ll order you to join the group.” I was grasping at straws.

All of a sudden, Sebastian charged toward me, thrusting his face directly into mine. He was so close our noses almost touched. I raised my eyes to meet his, the raindrops from his wet locks dripping onto my forehead. I fought the temptation to blink as droplets of water slid down my eyelashes. I wasn’t about to show him any weakness.

“For the past century, I’ve been doing exactly what I want, when I want. I don’t owe anything to any human or vampire—*especially* not the president. Now, please leave, before I make you leave,” he warned through clenched teeth.

“*Fine!*” I yelled, pressing my fists tightly against my legs in an effort to prevent myself from striking him. “But, just so you know, you’re a really *sucky* vampire.” I mentally kicked myself for the lame retort. At the same time, I also chastised myself for having wanted this aggravating snob to join the group in the first place.

“Please don’t come around here anymore.” With those final words, Sebastian stormed off into the house, slamming the door behind him.

I was left alone on the wet driveway, feeling confused and angry, but also somewhat thrilled by our meeting.



That evening, nestled in the small, cozy cottage in the depths of the Angel Creek forest, I glumly surveyed the vampires gathered around the dining room table. Hunter was resting his head on the linen tablecloth, desperately struggling to stay awake. Every so often, he would succeed in lifting his heavy lids and focus his eyes on me, only to instantly retreat into his intoxicated coma. Sophie sat to Hunter’s right, her forehead scrunched tightly as she squinted at the tiny print of her historical fiction novel. Her pupils moved at lightning speed as her eyes traversed the pages of the book, hungrily devouring the story. Across from them, Brooke was polishing her nails with a sharp, pink file. She paused after each stroke to carefully inspect her handiwork and

ensure that she was creating the perfect shape. Seth sat at the foot of the table, a large head of garlic in his hand. He peeled off a clove and popped it into his mouth, wincing as the bitter flavor reached his taste buds. All the while, he shot dirty looks in Brooke's direction.

Drawing in a deep, calming breath, I launched into a short speech I had prepared earlier in the day.

"Congratulations new recruits! The four of you are now in training to become the official guardians of Angel Creek. This is both a great honor and an important task. Are you ready to band together and work with me?" I asked with as much excitement as I could muster.

"Hmm?" Hunter murmured, raising his head.

"Y-yes." Sophie whispered.

"Okay," Brooke said. "But it better make me super popular."

Seth narrowed his eyes at Brooke. "As long as I don't have to work too closely with *her*."

It was the best I was going to get, I realized. And that would have to change.

"Tomorrow morning we begin our train—" Before I had a chance to finish my sentence, a sudden blur of movement outside the window caught my attention. I only saw it for a split second, but it was enough to convince me that someone was lurking in the woods.

Someone had found our secret location.

Not wanting to panic the recruits, I casually made my way to one of the dining room windows. Wiping away layers of dust that clouded the glass pane, I pressed my forehead against its cool surface, scanning the horizon for the origin of the activity. It was hard to make out through the thick sheets of rain, but right at the edge of the forest, concealed by the shadowy trees, stood a tall, dark silhouette.

From its frame alone, I couldn't tell if it belonged to a human, a vampire, or some other being altogether. I was only sure of one thing—it was watching us. I rushed outside to investigate, but by the time I reached its hiding spot, the stranger had vanished into the darkness.

