



Go over to my computer and pull up Google. I type in *Santa Monica* and the word *attack*. A second later, a news item pops up. The headline makes my jaw drop:

SURFER FOUND ON SANTA MONICA BEACH WITH SEVERE NECK WOUND; IN STABLE CONDITION AT HOSPITAL.

“Oh no,” I whisper.

I shrink backward in my chair, terror gripping my throat. There’s no way this is a coincidence. Somehow I feel responsible, as if I should have done something to prevent this. As if I need to do something now.

I glance wildly around my room. I could call the police, but then I’d run the risk of everyone discovering I’m a vampire. I could — I could — I close my eyes, overwhelmed. Then, in the next instant, there’s nothing I can do.

Because I’m transforming into a bat.

POISON APPLE BOOKS

The Dead End by Mimi McCoy

This Totally Bites! by Ruth Ames

Miss Fortune by Brandi Dougherty

Now You See Me . . . by Jane B. Mason &
Sarah Hines Stephens

Midnight Howl by Clare Hutton

Her Evil Twin by Mimi McCoy

Curiosity Killed the Cat by Sierra Harimann

At First Bite

by Ruth Ames



SCHOLASTIC INC.

New York Toronto London Auckland
Sydney Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to: Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

ISBN 978-0-545-32487-8

Copyright © 2011 by Ruth Ames
All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc.
SCHOLASTIC, POSION APPLE, and associated
logos are trademarks and/or registered
trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

11 12 13 14 15 16/0

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
First printing, November 2011

For Noah and Margot,
who are always perfect
to me



Chapter One

There are a few myths about vampires that I should clear up, right from the start.

Myth #1: Vampires are waxy and pale.

This is totally untrue. Take me, for example: Ashlee Samantha Lambert. My skin is rosy and glowing (helped along by blush sometimes, but whatever). With my long blond hair, glossed lips, and skinny jeans, I appear to be a perfectly normal twelve-year-old girl. I hope.

Myth #2: Vampires drink blood.

Um, ew? Okay, yes, there are *some* of us out there who hunt small wild animals for this purpose. But thankfully my amazing vampire mentor, Arabella, told me about Sanga!, a refreshing blood substitute

drink that comes in these adorable frosted cups with rounded lids, like Frappuccinos. Sanga! was invented by a genius vampire who was as grossed out by hunting as I am.

Myth #3: Vampires sleep in coffins.

No way. I sleep in my white canopy bed, high above the streets of Manhattan. Of course, now that my family's moving to Los Angeles, I'll no longer be able to see skyscrapers from my pillow, but I guess I'll see the ocean instead. Not a bad trade-off, and much better than staring up at the velvet lining of some creepy coffin. Obviously.

Myth #4: Vampires turn into bats.

All right . . . this is, well . . . this actually seems to be the case. At least, in my limited experience. It's how we're meant to hunt (if we have to) or hide from the prying eyes of non-vampires. The problem is, I stink at bat-shifting. You have to visualize wings sprouting from your body and fangs shooting out of your mouth — and then presto, you're transformed. Instead, I start to transform when I *least* expect it, like in the middle of a stressful math exam. Then I have to dash to the nearest bathroom and wait to shift back. It's horrifying — worse than split ends *and* chipped nail polish combined.

This is what I'm thinking about tonight as I'm packing up my bedroom with my best friend, Eve Epstein. I'm cramming books into a box and praying that I won't suddenly feel my ears going all long and pointy. I reach up and touch them to make sure. My teeny diamond studs are still there, so I let out a relieved breath.

"What are you *doing*?" Eve demands from across the room. She's standing on my desk in her wedge booties, removing the Christmas lights I'd strung across the wall. It's already January, but I forgot to take them down. "I asked you the same question, like, three times now."

"Oh, sorry," I say, blinking. "I was wondering — um, if there'll be enough space for all my clothes in my new bedroom."

Eve doesn't know the truth about me. No one does. Not my mother, not my brother. No one.

Well, there *is* one girl from school who knows. We were never friends (she's not in the popular crowd, even though she's now sort of dating the cutest boy in the grade), but she swore to keep my secret. Still, I've been terrified she might tell someone. At least in my new school, I won't have to avoid her in the hallway anymore. Whew.

“I was *asking*,” Eve says impatiently, “if you think you’ll get to be on TV.” She hops off my desk and flops onto my bed, her brown ponytail bouncing.

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. Or maybe crying.

My mom is going to be on her own reality show, *Justice with Judge Julia*. That’s why we’re moving to LA. But there’s no way I’ll ever be on TV. I don’t show up in photographs or on film. (Another vampire myth that is, sadly, true.) I learned that the hard way in November, when I tried to iChat with my other BFF, Mallory D’Angelo, and all she saw was my desk chair. Luckily, Mallory isn’t too sharp, so she bought my explanation about the computer being broken.

“Probably not,” I answer, fighting down the lump in my throat. I’d always dreamed about going to Hollywood and being picked to star in a movie. “You know I don’t like to be on camera anymore,” I add. “Not since I got self-conscious about my eyebrows.” That’s the explanation I’ve come up with for Eve. (In truth, I like my eyebrows just fine.)

“That’s right. You’re such a weirdo,” Eve giggles

as she reaches across the bed for my laptop. From where I stand, I can see my screen saver, which is a slideshow of all the pictures in my iPhoto album. There I am: giving my acceptance speech as student council president; posing next to the cupcake tower at my birthday party, surrounded by dozens of admiring faces; trying on a dress at Bloomingdale's that every girl in school wanted the next day . . . all reminders of the way things used to be.

Don't get me wrong. I'm still popular. I shudder to think what *not* being popular would be like (worse than surprise bat-shifting, possibly). But it's undeniable that everything in my life has changed.

It all started when I turned twelve, back in September. My teeth began to hurt, like they were growing, and I came out blurry in photographs. Then, one rainy night in October, I received a personalized, crimson-colored invitation . . . to my vampire initiation ceremony. The invitation explained that my great-great-grandmother on my mother's side had been a vampire from Transylvania. Apparently, I had inherited this secret trait, and the invite said I could tell no one about my "condition."

Of course, I freaked out. I almost told Eve and Mallory, but I knew they'd think I was crazy. So I went to the ceremony on my own. There, I was joined by many other frightened twelve-year-olds from around the world. The Empress of Vampires recited an incantation and we all bat-shifted for the first time. Then we followed older vampires — also in bat form — into Central Park as they hunted down small wild creatures. The things I saw and heard that night still send shivers down my spine two months later.

“Are you sure you don't want to come to Mallory's tonight?” Eve is asking me now as she checks her e-mail. “It's the party of the year.”

“The year just started,” I remind her drily, but she doesn't look up at me.

Mallory is hosting an End of Winter Break bash at her apartment, and, as the invite said, *Everyone who's anyone will be there!* Mallory blatantly stole that line from an old slumber party invite of mine. So I don't really feel like going.

The thing is, I've sort of been avoiding parties — and people — ever since I became a full-fledged vampire. My skin is cold to the touch, so I duck away from hugs. All my senses are heightened: Kids look at me like I'm nuts when I can smell what's for lunch

a mile from the cafeteria. I got so paranoid about hiding my ginormous, creepy secret that I even resigned as student council president (Eve immediately took my place). And I started spending more time in my room and less time shopping, so I lost my title as fashion queen. In December, when Mallory wore little woolen shorts over her tights, all the girls copied *her* look.

That's why I'm actually excited about moving across the country. In California, I can make a fresh start. I'll be the new, cool girl from New York City. I'll be back on top in no time at all. I can't wait.

"You've gotten so lame." Eve sighs, echoing my thoughts as she snaps my laptop shut. "It's your last night here!"

I narrow my eyes at my friend, wishing she could understand. I feel a twinge of self-pity. I didn't *ask* to become a vampire, but here I am, stuck in this sorry situation.

"Well, I need to finish packing," I argue as I shove the last book into the box.

The other reason I'm hesitant to leave is that I'm suddenly super-thirsty for some Sanga! I still eat regular food, but if I go too long without Sanga! I get shaky and weak.

"Whatever," Eve scoffs, standing up. Then she

freezes, and her brown eyes widen. She points right at me. “Wait. Is that — is that . . . a *bat*?”

My stomach turns to ice. *No*. I’m too scared to touch my arms and see if they’re becoming leathery wings. *This can’t be happening!* I think, panic rising in my throat. *Not in front of Eve, when she’s about to go to the party of the year, and I’m —*

“Behind you!” Eve says, pointing emphatically. “Outside! Gross!”

Knees shaking, I turn to look out my window. The bone-white moon glows between the snow-dusted apartment buildings. Then I see it — a quick, dark shape darting past my window again and again, as if impatiently pacing back and forth. It takes me a second to recognize the distinctive red markings on the wings. I shake my head in disbelief. It’s my vampire mentor, Arabella. Why would she show up unannounced?

“I think it’s just a bird!” I blurt, too loudly, whipping around and pressing my back against the cold window. “A bat-bird. I did a project on them in science class. They’re all over the city.”

Eve squints at me suspiciously. I swallow hard, waiting for her to nudge me aside and throw open the window to see for herself. But I guess she’s gotten

used to me acting like a lunatic, because after a minute, she shrugs.

“I should get over to Mallory’s anyway,” she says, giving me a quick hug. “Ooh, you’re always freezing,” she adds, pulling back and shuddering. “I guess this is bye.”

“Yeah, bye, I’ll text you from LA,” I babble, waving. I thought that Eve and I would have a tearful, extended farewell. But now I want her to leave as quickly as possible. I can practically *feel* Arabella hovering outside.

With another questioning glance in my direction, Eve takes her coat and slips out of my room, closing the door behind her. I wait until I hear her say good-bye to my mom and brother in the kitchen. Then I spin around and yank open my window, letting in a blast of frigid air.

“Arabella!” I hiss, and she appears, flapping her wings innocently. “*Eve* was in here! Why didn’t you call first?”

Arabella flies into my bedroom, zipping past my ear. I slam the window shut and by the time I’ve turned to face her, she’s transformed. Her red curls tumble down her back, and her platform pumps make her look even taller than she already is.

“I’m on a serious deadline, Ash,” Arabella explains, smoothing out a crease in her black cashmere poncho. “But I wanted to see you before you leave tomorrow.”

Arabella Lowe was assigned to be my mentor the night of my initiation ceremony. All young vampires get a mentor — a guide who can help them through this strange new world. I feel super-lucky that I got paired up with Arabella. She’s only twenty-five, but she’s an editor at a top fashion magazine, which is what I’d like to be someday. I only wish Arabella had more time to spend with me; she’s always busy attending runway shows.

“Oh — thanks,” I say, softening, and Arabella grins at me. “I’m going to miss you so much,” I admit, heading to my closet to get a Sanga! “Are you sure there’s no way you can come to California with me?”

Arabella sighs. “Honey, you know I’d love to. But I have my work and my family here, and Beau, too.” Beau is Arabella’s boyfriend, another vampire, and he’s totally dreamy. “You’ll be *fine* without me,” she adds. “Better than fine. Besides, we’ll e-mail.”

“And text,” I agree, pulling the red-and-white cooler from the back of my closet.

Sanga! has to remain at a certain temperature to stay fresh, so it comes in special insulated cups that you have to store in a cooler. Luckily, Arabella gave me the hot new vampire must-have: a Sanga! mini-cooler that I can carry in my schoolbag. She ordered it from the Sanga! online store. Only vampires have the password to the site, and we can order a six-month supply at a time.

I pluck out a container filled to the brim with bright red liquid: The drink looks so much like blood that it's best to sip it in private. I stick in a straw and take a long, quenching gulp. *Ahh*. Delicious. Right away I feel a surge of energy.

"But listen, Ash," Arabella says, her tone growing serious. I glance up and see that her green eyes have darkened with concern. "I also came to warn you about something."

Fear makes the back of my neck prickle. I shut the cooler and get to my feet. "Warn me?"

Arabella nods. "I've been hearing rumors that" — she takes a breath — "Dark Ones are hiding in Los Angeles."

I must look confused, because before I can even ask, Arabella says, "I'm sorry, Ash — sometimes I forget you still have a lot to learn." Then she pauses,

glancing at my closed door. As a more experienced vampire, Arabella has even sharper hearing than I do; it takes me a few seconds to hear my mom's footsteps coming down the hall.

"She's probably going to the bathroom to apply her rejuvenating clay mask," I whisper, eager for Arabella to continue.

Arabella nods. "Dark Ones are vampires who bring shame upon the rest of us," she whispers back. I feel small tremors down my spine. "They shun Sanga! and they don't drink the blood of small wild creatures. No, Dark Ones, like the vampires of long, long ago, are only content with one thing: drinking human blood."

My heart is pounding in my throat and I set down my Sanga! on the dresser. "That's disgusting," I whisper. "And awful. But they can't hurt *me*, can they?"

"No, but they are very dangerous," Arabella whispers back. "And —"

"Ashlee!" a voice calls outside my door.

Uh-oh.

It's my mom. She must have decided the rejuvenating clay mask could wait.

Arabella and I exchange frantic glances. How will I explain Arabella's presence in my bedroom? Or the

Sanga! on my dresser? Mom has already asked me about “that red drink” she once saw me with. And then there was the time I was midmorph and she glimpsed my fangs and asked me if I needed a special orthodontist appointment.

“I should get out of here, Ash,” Arabella says, hurrying over to the window. “But text me if you encounter anything suspicious, okay?”

Mom is turning the doorknob. I look from the door back to Arabella, my palms growing clammy. I don’t want my mentor to leave yet. I still need to know more.

“Like what?” I whisper as Arabella pulls up my window, the night wind catching her curls and blowing them in all directions. “What sort of suspicious —”

“Ashlee Samantha!”

Suddenly, my mom is in my room, hands on her hips, and I have just enough time to knock my Sanga! into the trash basket behind me . . . *and* to see a bat take flight from my windowsill. I watch its shape as it sails off into the night.

“Were you talking to someone?” Mom demands. But before I can invent a fib, she moves on to a new topic. “Why is your lipstick on like that?”

“Wha—I—” I glance at the mirror over my dresser. (Thankfully, the myth about vampires not showing up in mirrors is a false one.) Horrified, I see that some Sanga! is smeared around my mouth. I brush my hand quickly over my lips, and Mom nods approvingly. She always likes everyone to be as neat and pretty as she is.

My mother has big blue eyes and silky blond hair that she wears cropped short. She says we look alike, which makes me happy, but she says I have my dad’s chin, which I’m not sure is a good thing. I don’t know my dad very well: He and Mom divorced when I was little, and he lives in London. For as long as I can remember, it’s been me, Mom, and my older brother, Dylan, (and a rotation of nannies) living in this apartment. Mom was working as a big-shot judge downtown when she got the call from Los Angeles about the reality show. She agreed immediately: Mom loves the idea of a fancy, famous life. I’m sure having a vampire for a daughter doesn’t fit into that plan.

“It’s time for dinner,” Mom says, motioning to the door. “I ordered sushi — your favorite.”

“Yum,” I say halfheartedly; I wish I’d finished my Sanga!

As I follow Mom out of my room, I glance back at my bare walls and stack of boxes. It's crazy to think that the movers will come first thing in the morning, and then Mom, Dylan, and I will board an airplane.

I feel a tingle of excitement — but then a chill of worry. Arabella's warning lingers in my mind. I'll have to ask her more about the Dark Ones as soon as possible. Otherwise, her words will continue to haunt me.

Chapter Two

“Check out all the palm trees!” Dylan shouts the next day, rolling down the window of the airport taxi. “*Sick!*”

I roll my eyes. “Stop trying to sound cool, Dylan,” I groan. My fifteen-year-old brother is a major dork. I’m talking computer obsessed, no social skills, bad dresser. If it weren’t for his blond hair and blue eyes, I’d swear we weren’t related.

But for once, I have to agree with him. Los Angeles is gorgeous. We’re zooming down a wide boulevard lined with tall green palms. The sky is cloudless, the air smells like flowers, and the sapphire ocean shimmers to our left. I let out a happy sigh. Arabella’s unsettling visit last night has slipped my mind.

“This area is called Santa Monica,” Mom explains from the passenger seat. “And this,” she adds as the cab comes to a stop, “is our new home.”

“Seriously?” I gasp. The house is big and cream colored, with a wraparound balcony. It looks, as Dylan would say, pretty sick.

“Seriously,” Mom laughs while Dylan whips out his iPhone and starts tapping away at the screen. I have no idea what he’s doing, but I don’t care. I’m in California! I burst out of the cab with my heavy duffel bag. The bright sunshine warms my shoulders, and I can’t wait to change out of my cords and turtle-neck sweater.

After the driver unloads our luggage, we straggle up to the house and Mom unlocks the front door. As we step inside, I’m surprised by the sudden, hushed emptiness. Cobwebs dangle from ceilings, and a lonely shaft of sunlight slices the living room walls. Long, twisting hallways lead to dark corners. It’s a little spooky, and I shiver.

“Hey, check it,” Dylan says, holding up his iPhone. “I looked up the address online, and it turns out a movie was filmed in this house ages ago! A *horror* movie.”

“Really?” I ask, my stomach tightening. No wonder

the inside feels ominous. I can almost hear the faint echoes of screams, and I can picture a beautiful actress fainting by the doorway. . . .

“Yeah, it was called *At First Bite*,” Dylan says, glancing at the screen. “So cool! Mom, why didn’t you tell us?”

“Whatever,” I snap. “It’s not cool, it’s *creepy*.” When you’re basically *living* a horror movie, you don’t want to have anything to do with one. I’ve never heard of *At First Bite*, but the sound of it makes my teeth throb. I hope I won’t feel a fang start to form.

Mom shakes her head as she sets down her suitcase. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she tells me. “A million different movies have been filmed in a million different homes here. I know the space is unfamiliar now, but when our furniture arrives and we put down rugs, it’ll be *perfect*.”

Perfect is my mom’s favorite word. I like it, too. And I know she’s right. I was just being silly, getting weirded out by the new place. It’s time to relax and settle in. As if reading my mind, Mom tells Dylan and me to go upstairs and unpack.

“Okay, but I get dibs on the bigger bedroom!” Dylan hollers as he thunders up the stairs, the frayed laces on his Converse flapping.

“You’re pathetic!” I yell after him, but I follow close behind, my duffel bag swinging from my shoulder.

Dylan grabs the first room off the stairs, so I end up with a more private one down the hall. Best of all, it has a floor-to-ceiling window that opens up onto the balcony. I smile and step outside, and I see that I’m facing the beach. My heart leaps. Golden sand, crashing waves, and, in the distance, a Ferris wheel. I can see kids in shorts, carrying boogie boards and laughing.

And I know what I have to do.

I hurry back into the room, kneeling down to unzip my duffel bag. When I start my new school tomorrow, I will have the world’s best tan.

Ten minutes later, with Mom’s permission, I am flip-flopping across the sand in my pink bikini, a towel tucked under one arm. The beach is crowded, which is no surprise. It’s a Sunday, and according to Dylan (and the weather app on his iPhone), unseasonably warm for mid-January. People are dozing in loungers or playing volleyball

When I find an empty spot, I spread out my towel, lie down, and breathe in the salty air.

Ahh.

This is heaven. It's been about eight hours since I left cold, slushy New York, but it feels like a lifetime ago. *Maybe*, I think recklessly as I stretch my arms over my head, *I won't even be a vampire here anymore. Maybe everything that happened in New York was like a bad dream.*

After all, who can dwell on things like bats and blood when the sun is this strong and seagulls are cawing overhead? I'm not even craving the Sanga! that's stashed in one of my suitcases back at the house.

Not really, anyway.

I take my cell phone out of my bag and text Eve and Mallory:

Arrived in LA. Lying on the beach. JEALOUS?

Grinning, I hit SEND and stretch out again, the sun beating down on me. Maybe it'll warm my skin enough so that when people touch me, they won't think I'm freezing. Still, I wonder if I should put on more sunblock. I slathered on a little SPF 15 back at the house. *In a minute*, I think, digging my toes into the sand. *I'll just rest and —*

“Excuse me?”

A boy's voice breaks into my dreamy thoughts.

Annoyed, I blink a few times. A boy about my age is standing by my towel, wearing board shorts, a baseball cap, and a T-shirt that says S.M.A. BEARS. He's kind of cute, with curly brown hair, caramel-colored skin, and big brown eyes. I'm surprised I didn't hear him approach, but maybe, happily, my vampire-hearing isn't so sharp anymore.

"Yes?" I ask, sitting up and smiling. Wouldn't Eve and Mallory *really* be jealous if they knew I'd already found a possible crush?

"Well," the boy says shyly, shuffling his feet. "I don't mean to bother you, but, um . . . it looks like you've got a really bad burn."

"What are you talking about?" I snap, annoyed again. I glance down at my arms. They do look sort of red, but that's because I've got on my pink-tinted sunglasses.

I bristle. Who does this boy think he is? In New York, people know better than to bug random strangers out of nowhere.

"Maybe you should go to the lifeguard station," the boy is saying, not noticing my glare. "They have some special ointment if you want —"

"No, I don't *want* anything," I interrupt. "Leave me alone." This boy has *no* idea who he's messing with.

His face falls and he shrugs. “Okay, okay,” he says, taking a few steps back. “Sorry about that.”

“You’d better be,” I mutter, watching him walk off down the beach. In a huff, I reach for my tote bag, ready to move to a different spot. But as soon as my hands make contact with the bag’s handle, an intense pain shoots up from my palms.

“*Ouch!*” I cry. Confused, I whip off my sunglasses and stare down in horror at my hands, which are bright red. As are my arms . . . my gaze travels down . . . and my legs . . . my heart is thudding. I jump to my feet, which look like twin lobsters.

The boy was right. I have an awful sunburn. But how? I haven’t been out here that long! I wonder if other people are noticing how burned-to-a-crisp I am. Panicked, I glance around. I have to get back to the house immediately.

I grab my tote bag and towel — *ouch!* — shove on my flip-flops, and start running across the sand. Suddenly, I’m dying for a Sanga!. I snuck one in New York this morning, but I shouldn’t have gone this long without another. My throat is dry and my stomach is growling and I really, really hope I won’t start to bat-shift. I feel like I’m about to collapse as I ring the bell to my new house.

When my mother opens the door, *she* looks like she might pass out. Her face goes white and her eyes bug out of her head.

“What on *earth* have you done?” she demands, grabbing my arm — *ouch!* — and pulling me inside. “Come, see for yourself,” she adds, all but dragging me into the first-floor bathroom. She turns me toward the mirror . . .

. . . and I scream.

It’s so much worse than I thought. My entire face is the color of a cherry tomato. It looks like someone splashed red paint across my collarbone and shoulders. Even my *eyeballs* look sunburned.

And I have to start a new school like this.

At that thought, I scream again. Talk about a horror movie.

“What’s going on?” Dylan asks, appearing outside the bathroom. “I heard a scream —” He pauses, then doubles over in a fit of hysterical laughter. “Ba-ha-ha-ha!” he howls. “Hey, Ash, I think you have something on your face. . . . No, I mean . . . How was it, chillin’ on the surface of the sun?” He can barely catch his breath between his dumb jokes.

I’m so mad I’m shaking. I feel like I could cry, but I don’t want to give my brother the satisfaction. Instead,

I grab a magazine from my tote bag — *ouch!* — and fling it at his head. Unfortunately, he ducks.

“Dylan, leave your sister alone,” Mom barks. As he scoots away, still laughing, Mom turns to me, looking disappointed. “I don’t understand, Ashlee,” she says crisply. “Haven’t I taught you about proper skin care?” She sounds furious, like I chose to become a human fire engine on purpose. “I’m just glad I negotiated to not have you or your brother appear on the show,” she mutters to herself.

“Mom, I don’t know how this happened!” I wail. But deep down, I have a sneaking suspicion. I may have read about it in a book or seen it in a movie, but yes, I am pretty sure that vampires are supposed to stay out of the sun.

Except it doesn’t make sense — back home, I could go out on sunny days and be fine. True, I was bundled up in a scarf and coat, since I’ve only been a vampire since the end of October. My thoughts are swirling, but I know there’s one person I can turn to.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell my mom frantically. “I have to, um, call Eve.”

“Wait —” Mom says, then shakes her head. “Fine. I need to pick up the new car from the dealer

anyway. I'll stop at the drugstore on the way back to see if I can find something to fix this."

"Thanks!" I say, darting around her and dashing up the stairs. I'm relieved that she'll be gone for a while.

In my room, I take out my cell phone — *ouch!* — but before I can send a text, I see I have one waiting for me. A reply.

Sweet! Send us pix of ur tan. We're having hot cocoa & ice-skating! Eve & Mal

I feel a stab of hurt. I can never send my friends a picture of my (not exactly tan) self. But most of all, it bothers me that they're together, having cozy fun without me.

Whatever. I have more important things to deal with. I tap out a simple message, wincing as my sore fingers hit the keys:

EMERGENCY!

One endless minute later, my phone buzzes with an incoming call.

"What's wrong?" Arabella asks, her voice taut with worry. "What did you see? How badly are they hurt? Were there other witnesses?"

"Arabella, I look like a monster and you never told me that I wasn't supposed to go sunbathing and

now I have to go to school —” I stop babbling as her words sink in. “Wait, *what* did you say?”

Arabella sucks in a breath. “What did *you* say? You told me there was an emergency! I thought you were calling about . . .” She drops her voice to a whisper. “*Dark Ones.*”

“Oh.” I’d somehow forgotten all about Arabella’s haunting warning. “That. Well, yeah. No. I got a bad sunburn.”

There’s a moment of silence, and I suspect Arabella is taking her deep yoga breaths, which she sometimes does when she’s angry.

Then she speaks, slowly and carefully. “Ashlee, I’m at the office on a Sunday. Fashion Week is right around the corner, and things are crazy. Now, don’t tell me you went to the beach or wore a bikini or just slapped on some SPF 15 or something?”

Now it’s my turn to be silent. “All three,” I finally whisper.

“Ashlee!” I hear her rings knock as she slaps her hand on her desk. “You’re a vampire now. Our skin is very, very sensitive to sunlight, unless we’re in bat form. In colder climates, it’s not a problem. But you have to promise me that you will wear SPF 75 if you go to the beach. And it’s best to wear long

sleeves and pants if you'll be outside for a while. Oh, and sun hats."

"Sun hats?" I feel like crying again.

"Yes," Arabella says. "You should know this, Ashlee. It's in the Handbook."

Right. Arabella gave me the Transylvanian Vampire's Handbook back in November. I skimmed it, but it was totally boring. Right now, it's packed alongside my Sanga! cooler in my giant purple suitcase — the one Mom thought was suspiciously heavy this morning.

"Anyway, I need to go," Arabella is saying. "But remember, sweetie: SPF 75. Read the Handbook. And call me if you see anything —"

"Suspicious. I know, I know." I sigh, then tell Arabella good-bye and hang up.

My stomach growls as I walk over to the suitcases that Mom must have brought up while I was out. I open my purple one — *ouch!* — and take out my Sanga! cooler. Once I'm finally sipping the sweet drink, I sink down onto the floor and rest my back against the wall. So much for my not being a vampire in LA.

I glance inside the suitcase, ignoring the black leather cover of the Handbook. My eyes drift

mournfully over some of my wonderful warm-weather outfits. The blue-and-white romper; the yellow dress with the green trim; the lavender tank top . . . All fabulous options for my first day at Santa Monica Academy.

But not anymore.

Reluctantly, I pick up my phone and call my mother. She answers on the first ring.

“Hi, Mom,” I say, forcing the words out. “Are you at the drugstore yet? I think I’m going to need a sun hat. . . .”