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Opening extract from

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Prologue

Something moved in the darkness.

Something to be feared, always.

The Blood Ghost.

That's what they've started calling it. It's all over my local radio. I bet it will have its own Facebook page soon.

A woman glimpsed it first on New Year's Eve. It was a dusty-grey morning and she was rushing off to the local shop. She was walking quickly down the lane where she lived when she heard an urgent, high-pitched screech.

'Like a really angry parrot,' was her description of it. She peered up into the sky, half expecting to see a bird fluttering about. But instead a figure came floating towards her.

Hard to make out much about him as it was so shadowy and loomed dazzlingly high above her. All she could really see were its hands. They were just like the hands of a skeleton, very long and spindly and they seemed to be beckoning her forward. Dripping off them was something which made her whole body shudder with horror – blood.

Those skeletal blood-soaked hands writhed and twisted in front of her. She wanted to run away from them. But the hands seemed to be casting a terrible spell over her. And instead, she was frozen to the spot.

Then, as fast as a striking cobra, one of the hands swooped at her. There was a huge rush of air, and just for a moment she caught a glimpse of its deathly, pale face. And it terrified her. Then it displayed all its teeth at her. It was the most horrific smile she'd ever seen, because its dark eyes were completely blank and lifeless.

She felt as if this awful, dead creature was trying to pull her towards it and carry her away. And all her strength seemed to have drained from her body. Then she felt her knees buckle. She couldn't stop herself falling onto the ground while it loomed right over her.

She'd almost passed out when she heard quick, urgent footsteps tearing towards her. Afterwards she said how lucky it was that her husband had realized she'd forgotten her purse and come after her. 'I

say lucky,' she said, 'yet actually what could it have done - except scare me? It was only a very nasty ghost.'

But it wasn't only a ghost. I knew exactly what it was too.

And I so wished I didn't.

CHAPTER ONE

Three days earlier

Monday 29 December

9.30 a.m.

Hi, blog.

I'm back.

Remember me? Marcus - or Weirdo.

I was totally normal until three months ago when I turned thirteen. On the night of my birthday my parents, ever so casually, announced that they were half-vampires and I was about to start transforming into one too.

I was still trying to get my head around that newsflash when a white fang slammed itself into my mouth - and stayed there for a couple of days. And that was just the start. After that I was poisoned by a pizza (it had garlic in it) and I got a craving for blood when I was at the cinema on a blind date. It did not go well.

Still, you say it must be cool being a half-vampire.

Do you want to know the truth? It totally is not. In fact, it's all hiding and hassle. Worst of all, you feel separate and odd and different to everyone else. It's as if I'm permanently freaky. I can't tell you how much I hate that.

But come on, surely there must be some highlights? Yeah, OK, here they are - I can stay up until 3 a.m. every night. And sometimes I go flitting - that's when I transform into a bat and can fly about for - well, over half an hour last night.

Back in November I acquired a special power too. For a few hours I could beam out my thoughts to the only other teenage half-vampire I know - a dead cool and funny girl called Gracie. I was able to pick up her thoughts too.

Now that was awesome. Especially as just a few half-vampires have a strong special power - only a tiny number would be able to do telepathy, for instance. In fact, I could only do it for a few hours. But a special power was supposed to zoom back to me - only permanently

this time. It wouldn't necessarily mean I could do telepathy again, although a power that strong would be fantastic. It might be anything - being extra-strong or discovering I could suddenly run really fast. So I was excited - but nowhere near as excited as my parents.

And we all waited - and waited - for a special power to land on me again. And stay this time.

We're still waiting.

'We've just got to be patient,' Dad kept saying, acting all cheerful to my face. But I also heard him and Mum whispering away about how it really should have manifested itself by Christmas.

And now I've just had a total bombshell.

You're not going to believe this, blog. I can hardly believe it myself. But at the time of year when every school in the country - in fact, in the *world* - is closed, I've got to go back to school tomorrow. Only not my usual school. No, I'm being packed off on a special two-day crash course for half-vampires 'in my situation' at a place called Fangstone House.

'It's to help you bring out your special power,' said Mum.

'Absolutely and definitely not,' I said. 'I go to school enough. Right now I just need to relax.'

'We agree,' said Mum unexpectedly.

'So what are we arguing about?' I asked.

'We're not arguing, we're discussing,' said Dad. 'And we agree you need to relax. We just think you'll do that better at Fangstone House.'

Have you ever heard of anything more insane in your whole life? I tried to explain to them just how mad this plan was. But they wouldn't listen.

'We've discussed this enough now,' said Mum suddenly. 'We've made up our minds, so that's an end to it.'

'My opinion doesn't count then,' I said.

'Of course it does, and we've let you have your say,' said Mum, 'but we are your parents.'

It so annoys me when they say that. They know they've lost the argument so they just resort to – 'We are your parents, and we know best.'

Tuesday 30 December

10.45 a.m.

They've finally told me where Fangstone House is. It's in London, just off Covent Garden, down a road called Gore(!) Avenue. Apparently, it's a favourite place for half-vampires, although no human can ever know that, of course.

Dad's spoken to Dr Chaney, who runs things. My overnight bag is packed. And we're off any second. I can't wait.

10.47 a.m.

Yes, I can.

6.45 p.m.

I'm now writing to you from my cell – oops, I mean my room. Gore Avenue was full of big posh houses (some half-vampires must be loaded) and Fangstone House was right at the end. There was a little sign outside which just said *Dr Chaney*.

Mum pressed the doorbell and a woman with a dead fierce expression bustled to the door. She'd have made a great bouncer. There was a bit of whispering between her and my parents which irritated me. I'm not six. Then the Bouncer announced that my parents could leave me here now and she'd ring when I was ready to be collected.

I was more than a bit sorry to see my parents go. But of course I didn't let on, as I was also very, very annoyed with them.

Then the Bouncer, breathing noisily like a mad bull, escorted me into a room which was a bit like a dentist's waiting room. Only nowhere near so cheerful. Two boys and one girl were sitting bolt upright on posh chairs. They looked as if they were about to sit the world's toughest exam.

'Hey, this is fun, isn't it?' I said. 'I'm Marcus, if you want to know. And you really should. So, who are you?'

But before anyone could reply this deep, solemn voice declared, 'There is no point in finding out people's names. You won't be here long enough for that.' A stern-faced man was standing very still in the doorway with his arms folded. He was tall and quite old, with a long pointy beard. He was dressed in a black suit and looked more like an undertaker than a headmaster. This was Dr Chaney.

He said, 'We have a one hundred per cent success rate in helping half-vampires tease out their special powers. So if you trust us and work with us, all will be well. And I hope your stay here will be very short and highly successful. Now I am going to entrust you to your personal tutor who is waiting for you in your tutorial rooms. Miss Ramsay will escort you there first, Marcus.'

The Bouncer led me to a room right at the end of a long corridor. I was told to knock on the door and walk straight in. I did, expecting to see tables and chairs, but it was empty save for a phone on the wall, and not like a normal classroom at all. It was also totally deserted. And I was thinking, Why have they pushed me in here? And, I really want to go home now, when I realized I wasn't alone at all. Someone else was there – lying on a large yellow roll mat on the floor.

A youngish woman beamed up at me, said her name was Tara and she was very pleased to meet me. She was wearing a multi-coloured top, green trousers and pink trainers. She looked just as if she'd escaped from a TV show for two-year-olds. Then she asked me what I'd like most in the world.

'Right now,' I said, 'to emigrate.'

Amazingly, that wasn't the right answer. I should have said what I most wanted was to develop my own special, half-vampire power. Tara said this special power was trying to break through but couldn't because I'd put up an invisible wall around myself.

'Not meaning to be rude, Tara,' I said to the figure still lying on the floor, 'but that's total rubbish. I was up for the special power but it just hasn't happened yet.'

'But do you know why?' said Tara, and without waiting for me to reply she went on, 'Because you need unblocking.'

'I'm not a drain,' I muttered.

Then I had to lie down next to her on an 'especially soothing' roll mat, which was waiting for me. She told me my half-vampire self was like my shadow self which I kept pushing away from me. 'But' - and she got all excited then - 'there's gold inside that shadow self which you'll find when you befriend it.'

After which she said I had to greet my half-vampire self by stretching my hand out and shouting, 'Hi there, half-vampire self, you're very welcome.'

'Really?' I said.

'Yes, please.'

'How about if I do it on my own later?'

'No, now please.'

So there I was, lying on the floor next to a total stranger - and chatting to my hand. I murmured very quietly, 'Hi there, half-vampire self, you're very welcome,' while feeling totally, totally stupid.

'You can do much better than that,' she said. 'And you will.'

Two centuries later I was allowed to stop talking to my hand and instead I had to chant, 'Hey, I'm a really great half-vampire, so happy with everything.' After which Tara really expected I'd feel a tingling in my hands – this would be the first sign my special power is breaking through.

She kept asking if I was sure I couldn't feel the tiniest tingle. And when I confirmed my tingle-free situation this caused a bit of a downer in the general atmosphere. Tara even stopped smiling for five seconds. But then she said determinedly, 'We'll just have to carry on unblocking tomorrow.' Then she got up and started talking into a phone. 'Hello, Miss Ramsay. Alas, no breakthrough yet but we're stopping now. So will you show Marcus to his room, please . . . What? Oh, really? Well, that's excellent news. Bye.'

'What's excellent news?' I asked.

Tara didn't seem at all keen to tell me, and then said very quietly, 'Two of the students you met are now ready to go home.'

'So their special power has come through already.'

'That's right, but it's not a competition. And we shan't be downhearted. A breakthrough could happen at any moment, couldn't it?'

'If you say so,' I muttered. I was just so fed-up with the whole business.

'A meal will be waiting for you in your room. Your parents said you didn't have any special dietary requirements.'

'No, except for barbecue hula hoops, that's a big dietary requirement. And jelly babies, just passionate about them. And HP sauce . . .' I babbled on until the ever uncheerful Bouncer showed me to my room.

How can I describe it to you? It was a delightful shade of vomit yellow. It had a bed and a table in it (on which was perched a deeply unappetising salad) and that was it, except for a bathroom and loo which had obviously been designed for a midget elf. Anyway, I'm not allowed to leave this room again tonight - and just to make sure I don't, it's firmly locked. They think the silence will calm and centre me. But actually, I hate those silences which just stretch on and on.

Still, at least I can text Gracie (the only person I can ever tell about this place). She's as angry as me that I'm here.

She texted: [redacted]

I texted back: [redacted]

9.35 p.m.

Gracie is now bombarding me with silly texts like: [redacted] She alone is keeping me sane.

Wednesday 31 December

8.30 a.m.

I was woken up by the Bouncer for breakfast. My jaw nearly fell off when I saw what I was being served up - lumpy porridge. Apparently

it's bursting with vitamins. It's certainly not bursting with flavour. Even Oliver Twist would have refused seconds.

12.50 p.m.

I've now completed four hours of intensive relaxation exercises with Tara. We've done deep breathing, followed by not so deep breathing and chanting. And I don't think I've ever felt so unrelaxed.

1.20 p.m.

Just heard the other student who came here with me has also left armed with his special power. So now there's just me, still unblocked.

8.15 p.m.

Well, blog, I'm back home. And remember I told you Fangstone House has always had a one hundred per cent success rate? Well, I've totally messed up their statistics. I'm sort of chuffed about that. Anyway, late this afternoon they gave up on me and sent for my parents.

Tara gave them a list of exercises I must perform every night. 'If Marcus really gets stuck in, I'm sure wonderful things could still start to happen,' she said. Tara also gave me her phone number if ever I wanted to talk over anything. This seemed highly unlikely, but I put it on my mobile anyway.

My parents were trying to act all cheerful in the car. But once I noticed Dad take hold of Mum's hand in a sloppy sort of way. And Mum whispered, 'No, no, I'm all right. I haven't given up hope.'

Thursday 1 January: New Year's Day

12.30 a.m.

Mum, Dad and I toasted in the New Year with a small glass of blood. Then Dad said, 'I've got another toast now - to Marcus's special power. It's certainly taking its time.' Quick glance at Mum here. 'But it will be worth waiting for when it finally appears.'

Actually, I'm convinced my special power is a no-show. Fangstone House wouldn't have chucked me out if there was the remotest chance of it making an appearance. And yeah, all right, I am a little bit gutted about that. I'd like to have been a suave superhero. Who wouldn't? Plus, I'd have loved to have really blown my parents' socks off - and not disappointed them yet again.

But a superhero isn't really me. It never was. And deep down I always knew that. So I don't care any more. I truly, honestly don't.

I've even made a New Year's Resolution. Here it is. Not only will I refuse to go on any more crash courses, but I shan't ever think about my special power again.

Instead, I'm going to concentrate on something much more important - girls.

I got a text yesterday from Joel, my best mate, saying that Katie, his girlfriend, was dropping round his house on New Year's Eve. They've been going out together for a record-breaking six weeks now. And I'm chuffed for him. Of course I am. But news like that makes you think. And yeah, you guessed it, I'm pretty envious too (understatement).

Especially as I'm single right now. An astonishing fact when you consider my immense charm and good looks and overall modesty. Really I should be some sort of international girl magnet. Actually, girls do sort of like me. Well, I can make them laugh.

Except the one I really fancy - Tallulah. I've decided she's a total stunner. But you won't find a boy in my class who'll agree with me.

And yeah, I know Tallulah can be very fierce and bad-tempered - and that's when she's in a good mood. You really wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of her. She also never wears a scrap of makeup and doesn't ever dress up either. But I sort of admire that about her. And she's still dead pretty, with her heart-shaped face and huge eyes that can look right into you.

Lastly, but firstly really - Tallulah's obsessed with vampires. She's so mad about them she even started up her own website, **Vampira**, as she believed that vampires lurk right here in Great Walden.

Now I have inside information on this, so I can tell you that humans have got nothing to fear from my very distant relatives, despite what you might have read in books. You see, it is animal blood that vampires like, not human blood (too sour). Only now there's a new sect - the deadly vampires - who believe that human blood, despite its foul taste, can give them incredible new powers. They don't care how much of it they take either.

These deadly vampires are truly to be feared - by everyone. And last November one moved here and started attacking innocent humans until Tallulah - ably assisted by yours truly - caught it.

Impressed? My parents weren't. No. They gave me a massive rollicking. You see, I had put the secret identity of half-vampires in danger. And the first and most important rule of being a half-vampire is: no human must ever discover our true nature. And I totally get that. For if people discovered there were half-vampires living in their road it would scare the living daylights out of them - even though you couldn't find a more peace-loving species than us. So my parents made me promise I'd keep away from vampires, deadly vampires - and Tallulah.

But meanwhile, Tallulah was meeting up with this vampire hunter called Giles. He believed more deadly vampires were on their way to Great Walden, and they must be stopped. So he enlisted Tallulah as a vampire fighter.

The next bit of my story is embarrassing and I don't come out of it well. So I'm going to get it over with quickly. Tallulah tried to enlist me as a vampire fighter too. And I broke my promise to my parents - and agreed. Why on earth did I do that?

Well you see, Tallulah confided in me how she'd caught this very nasty bug while on holiday. And she just can't shake it off either. So I felt sorry for her. And don't forget, I do like her.

But right away I knew I'd made a very bad decision.

After that, though, I got flu and so did Tallulah. Giles even ended up in hospital with it. So absolutely nothing has happened for weeks.

I did send Tallulah some texts, though. And I really thought she and I had bonded so I waited and waited for her to reply. She took ages even to do that. And when she finally did they were so frost-bitten, so nothing, that I immediately un-enlisted myself from any vampire fighting. I haven't told Tallulah yet. Well, I might even not have to, as it all seems to have fizzled out anyway.

And as for me ever going out with her, that's just another dream, like me having special powers or being an international girl magnet.

It'll never happen.

I totally see that now.

12.30 p.m.

Just had a text from Tallulah. Here's what it said:

[redacted]