



NEVER
REVAMPED
ADA ADAMS

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SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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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 down her back, each loose 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 only person in the world I had ever 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 of the old stone walls, reaching my ears just as a burly vampire slammed his fist into my chest. 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, finally delivering a disabling kick to his stomach. The hit sent him soaring through the air. 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 worked to distribute my own skilled strikes. When the smaller vampire clipped my jaw with her knuckles, I utilized her extended limb to my advantage. Grabbing her arm and locking it in place, I used her body as a weapon against her much larger partner. With all my strength, I hurled her into the male vampire, sending both flying across the courtyard.

The two collided, tumbling to the ground next to the first assailant, just as another group of vampires manifested in front of me. They surrounded me from all sides, carrying an array of weapons. One gripped a sharp sword, the other a pair of nunchucks and the third clenched tightly onto a chain mace. The next few moments passed in a flash. I evaded jagged blades, leapt over deadly metal chains, and blocked vigorous blows.

I was prepared to carry on the defense dance for as long as my body could hold out, but was secretly relieved upon succeeding in seizing the nunchucks away from their owner. In one calculated throw, I entangled them around 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 vampires laid on the ground next to 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 completely unscathed. I drew in a deep breath to steady myself, filling my lungs with warm summer air. In one swift motion, I smoothed out my black tank top and brushed off 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 an 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 that 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 lay on the courtyard floor, dolefully nursing their wounds. I stifled a smile, certain that the gray-haired guard was secretly relieved that it hadn’t been his turn at the training station that afternoon.

“Please tell the President that 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 student 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 on my cool skin.

As the imposing structure of the Scarlet House came into view, I relished 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 perched around its exterior, but one had to examine the manor in more detail to discover the serpents, lions and tigers carved into its walls. In the many years that I had spent exploring the house, I still had not found them all.

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 surfaces would give 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 US Vampire President's command centre was finally revealed to the public. The president's 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 swiftly 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, and quietly slipped 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 all 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 late afternoon light to fill 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 finally became free to walk in the light. The first few who emerged out of the darkness feared vast repercussions, but the human public was absolutely 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 in their vampire girlfriends and boyfriends to the authorities, just because they engaged in some much-enjoyed necking.

The second law was created by the US 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 that 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, as well as 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 his 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, but 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 almost imagine Elisa pacing back and forth as she spoke. “The poor child is growing up without a mother and you treat her like a 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—*The 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 five 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 death 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 possibly 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 about her,” I whispered, fearing that if I spoke out loud, it would break Elisa’s trance. To my relief, she continued to speak.

“Zora was graceful and charming, but also very child-like,” she said, smiling 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, looking at my face intently. I straightened my shoulders and lifted my chin in an attempt to emulate an air of confidence and regality I had always attributed to the imaginary Zora within my mind.

As if she knew exactly what I was doing, Elisa 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 burning tears.

“Oh, Dawn!” her voice suddenly became stronger. “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 the 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 so 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 over 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 stifled a chuckle. 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 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 in the early 1900's.

"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 on TV."

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 the 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 even charitable organizations like *Vamps Without Borders*,” he sighed dejectedly, 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 fairly simple,” he said, brightening. “All we need to do is 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 eyes 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 are 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.

“You see, there are currently only four vampires left in town and they will need some help getting, uhh, *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 excitedly set out on my mission. Eager to reach my destination as soon as possible, my mind was preoccupied with daydreaming about the new recruits. I wasn't 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 of 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 large, blue-and-white banner hanging proudly above the road.

Angel Creek. A Place Where History Resides, it read.

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

Main Street, Angel Creek's largest street, held all of the town's most significant buildings—the small but majestic town hall, the library and post office, the medical offices and law firms, a grocery store, no less than five antique shops which paradoxically boasted 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, soared 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 Angel Creek Park. According to 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, Angelica. According to the records, the gazebo was the first structure to be 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 Angel Creek 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 Angel Creek 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 notified me 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 brandished 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 diner 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 man I imagined to be the bartender hunched over the bar, almost completely concealed by the many 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 and brown plaid shirt and faded blue jeans clued me in to the fact that the face and body I was now staring at just a tiny bit too attentively, belonged to the Angel Creek Diner 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 studying and 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. So here I was, almost no longer a teenager, developing my very first crush—on a human no less. I had succeeded in all this, without actually exchanging a single word with the guy.

“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.

I drew in a long, calming breath before attempting to speak. “Can I help you?” I asked, doing my best to match the sultriness of his tone in my own voice. Even if I had sounded poised and elegant on the outside, in my head, I felt like a complete dork.

“I think I should be asking you that,” 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. “What can I getcha?” he asked, pointing to the notepad and pen in his hand.

“Oh, uhh, nothing. Can I just sit here for a bit?” At this point, I not only felt like a dork, but I was sure that I officially sounded like one too.

I should’ve just ordered water or something, I thought, chastising myself for allowing the cute bartender’s smile to have such a powerful effect on me.

“Water!” I quickly blurted out. *What in the world was wrong with me?* I wondered. I’d never acted like this around anyone before. *But, I’d also never met anyone like this before,* I argued with my own mind.

At that moment, I became aware that I was gaping directly at the bartender. He gazed back at me, an expression of fascination on his face. I was the first to break our staring contest, looking down at the electronic device in front of me and rapidly sobering up.

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

“You have the most beautiful eyes,” he suddenly said, once again making me feel thankful for not being able to blush.

“Thank you,” I said, catching myself before adding on, “you too”.

“I’ve never seen such unusual eyes.” This time, it was he who blushed. “Uhh, sorry. Your water will be right out. Do you want anything to eat?”

I wondered if he knew that I was a vampire. Vampires could easily distinguish other vampires from humans, but identifying vampires was more difficult for humans. Yes, vampires 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 him and shook my head. “No, thank you.”

“Okay, just let me know if you change your mind,” he grinned. “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 said casually as he disappeared behind the bar.

I planned to spend the next half 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 anything actually 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 gorgeous?” 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. Isn’t he so *dreamy*? Did you hear that voice? *Mmm...*” She closed her eyes and smiled, tiny freckles dancing across her cheeks and nose.

Though I wouldn't have minded spending the afternoon listening to Hannah talk about Ethan, 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 leaves and 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 in a blue-and-white cheerleading uniform. The word *Angels* was printed across her chest, the polyester fabric of the top stretching out the letters as it clung to her curves. Her dark blue eyes were caked in bright make-up, 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 vampirism.

"Brooke Mason. Seventeen. Turned in 1960. Spent the past fifty years competing for cheer captain spots on various high school squads throughout the US," the information printed 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 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 there’s only one Prom Queen spot in this school, and this year, the crown is *finally* going to 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 oh 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? *Ohmigod!*” 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.

“Now 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 to 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 nearly 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 glance up 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 gaze. “I’m here to summon you on an important mission. You have been chosen to join a group of vampires in charge of guarding Angel Creek.”

Sophie looked up abruptly, her dark eyes widening in fear. “*Vampires?*” she asked, her voice quivering.

“Yes, vampires,” I stammered. “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, Peter...” 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.

“*Yuck!*” Brooke exclaimed, a disgusted look crossing her 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 into 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, as Sophie 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. *So gross!*”

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 colors 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 substance 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 have been summoned by the Vampire President to take on the role of the 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 nerdiest kid at school and 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, *ohmigod* what should I do? That’s so not cool. So I turned him because I figured that he should at least graduate from high school. But then I realized he wouldn’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 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 once 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, quivering voice.

“Oh, I know.” Brooke sighed. “I just didn’t want to smell bad. I only eat garlic in vitamin form. *Duh!*”

“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 *is* 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 action, 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 have 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 minutes 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 Chinese. The doorbell yielded no answer, but as 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 big 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 to 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 hands 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.” Even though he had at least a hundred pounds on me, 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 said 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 by the Vampire President to become a guardian of this little town.”

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, Seth 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 must have 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 experience an improvement in strength, speed and agility. Other, more exciting perks, develop 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 and better, I thought.

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 and gave me an army salute. Immediately, he dropped back onto his seat 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 away in pain.

“Ow! That hurts!”

I quickly drew the blinds, drowning out all 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 assignments 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 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 and drenching her small, neat writing.

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

Sebastian York is a twenty-one year-old Scorpio. He has gorgeous light gray 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. I scrunched up the soaked paper and tucked it into the pocket of my jeans. I smiled to myself, thinking 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 the Angel Creek 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 flexing 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 on 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, the wrench firmly grasped 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, gray eyes. My entire body blazed under his scrutinizing stare, but despite my uneasiness, I couldn't bring myself to look away from him. His gaze was both terrifying and thrilling all at once. The strong 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 paused 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 from his gaze. “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 I was dismissed.

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

He turned around to face me, the feverish 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 Vampire 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, 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. As I raised my eyes to meet his, the raindrops from his glistening locks dripped onto my forehead. I resisted the temptation to blink as droplets of water slid down my eyelashes, not wanting 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, leave before I make you leave!” he said 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 heavy door behind him. I was left alone on the wet driveway, feeling confused, angry, but somewhat excited 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 focusing 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 vampire recruits! The four of you are now 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.

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

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 could not 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 had reached its hiding spot, the stranger had vanished into the darkness.