

Chapter 1:

The bright overhead spotlights of the North Fowler Creek high school auditorium spat into the hazel eyes of a short boy. The boy ran a hand through his shaggy hair, fixating on the one strand that always seemed to be longer than the rest. He took a deep breath and clung to a beat-up trumpet.

The band director shut the auditorium door then claimed a seat amongst the panel of judges. He scratched his sloppy combover and cleared his throat. “As you know, I’m Mr. Grover. To my left is Tommy, our trumpet section leader.” An exhausted kid reluctantly raised a bony hand. “Beside him are the other section leaders. Begin whenever you’re ready, Finn Howard.” Mr. Grover scribbled something on a sheet, filling the auditorium with the echo of rustling paper.

The gears in Finn’s brain turned. They ground together, before coming to a startling halt as Finn’s audition song, “Eye of the Tiger” by Survivor, evaporated from his brain. He brought the trumpet to his thin quivering lips and prayed the minimal memory of the rhythm of the song would suffice. Perhaps Mr. Grover would be impressed at how well he thought on his feet and Finn would be instantly accepted into the band.

Finn blew into the trumpet. His cheeks turned blue violet. Spit splattered the slick wooden stage. Despite his efforts, all the trumpet produced was tiny moans and throttling squeaks. Finn chewed his tongue then eased the trumpet from his lips. He breathed slowly then gave it one last shot. Finn wiggled his fingers aimlessly along the keys while singing the basic tune, “Do, do, do, do, doo-”

Mr. Grover rose. He waved his arms like an air traffic director. His scowling face was beet red. “What on Earth is this? Do you even play the trumpet? Is this some sort of joke?”

“No, I-”

Scrawny Tommy leaped from his seat. “I could play better with my butt-cheeks!”

Mr. Grover shushed Tommy, then stomped to the stage and pointed at the exit. “Listen, I don’t think this is a surprise. You don’t have what it takes kid. Get out of here and quit wasting my time.”

Finn bowed his head. He loosened his grip on the trumpet and held back a singular tear. “But I didn’t get to finish my song.” He straightened up and looked Mr. Grover in the eye.

The disgruntled band director looked at his watch. “I’m telling you, I don’t have time for this. I’ve got twenty more auditions. Don’t give up your day job.”

Without warning, Finn sprinted out of the room. He pushed through the heavy wooden doors and stepped into the fluorescent lights of the auditorium lobby.

A cluster of high school students sat huddled along a wall of lockers as Finn sprinted through. They murmured amongst themselves, gossiping about how Finn must have failed, given by his red hot cheeks and the way he looked as though he’d burst into tears at any moment.

Finn ignored them, and threw open the exterior door grumbling. “Screw the marching band, if they don’t want me I’ll join the newspaper staff instead.”

With marching band out of the question, Finn now had to find a new extracurricular for the year. North Fowler Creek high school was obsessed with student involvement. The new

principal had implemented a policy to increase it. Every student had to be involved in at least one extra curricular. The only exception was by a written note signed by a parent or guardian.

Last year, Finn had struggled to find an activity, and had begged his mother to sign him off. She refused, which caused him to be drafted into the fencing club. Despite the intriguing concept of the sport, fencing club was hell on Earth. The club consisted of all the members being given sharp pointy sticks by the laziest gym teacher, then told to fence as the teacher made his way up to the bleachers for an important meeting with a meatball sub. Due to the poor structure, last year a kid lost an eye.

Finn refused to return. He was not going to become the next great NFC Fencing Club tragedy. He decided his best bet was to try the newspaper staff. It was well known throughout the county, and had won multiple awards. Finn was sure it would look good on a college application, besides, he enjoyed writing anyway.

Outside, Finn scanned the parking lot for his brother's car.

Cliff's olive green monster sat at the back of the lot. It vibrated from steady rock music pumping from the stereo, as the lanky driver with dyed black hair drummed along on the stained steering wheel.

Finn stomped up the hill then hammered on his brother's window.

Cliff rolled his eyes and unlocked the door. "Don't bang on her like that. You'll hurt her."

Finn opened the door. The smell of rotting meat, which always lingered in Cliff's beast, assaulted his nostrils. Finn gagged then brushed the crumbs off the seat before settling down and stuffing his mother's used trumpet to his feet.

"How'd it go?" asked Cliff. He adjusted his sunglasses and hit the road.

Finn took a deep breath and stared out the window. "Let's just say, I think I'll join the newspaper staff instead."

Finn was propelled forward, bonking his head on the dashboard, as the car came to a skidding stop.

Cliff pivoted. "Hell no you won't!" He grabbed Finn's hoodie by the collar. "No brother of mine is joining the damn newspaper staff!"

Finn furrowed his brow. "Why not?"

Cliff leaned in close, giving Finn a whiff of rotting breath that was almost as toxic as his car. Through clenched teeth he whispered, "The newspaper staff is infested with vampires."

Finn rolled his eyes. "You're just salty that you can't write."

Cliff sat there motionless, with the car in park in the middle of the lot.

"Bozo, we need to get home, Mom'll kill us if we're not there in time to let Sarah in."

Cliff took a deep breath. "You'll come to your senses, but listen, if you join the newspaper staff you'll be riding the bus. I don't give rides to vampires." He put the car in drive without another word.

Finn ignored his brother and focused on the scenery drifting past his window.

Fowler Creek was a mid-sized town in Missouri. It was large enough to warrant two decent sized high schools, although both hosted a portion of students from farther out in the county. NFC was considered the nicer school, despite how the roof leaked every time it rained.

Across from the school was the extravagant town hall and the towering historic library. The historic buildings buried the shabby condominiums that backed up to the woods.

Highway 70 split the town in two. It divided the businesses from the larger cluster of neighborhoods that grew more entangled the farther east one went.

Finn and Cliff drove under the highway and past the grocery store before turning into their neighborhood.

A house backed up to the road had a tiny yard full of umbrellas. A woman with long black hair and pale skin parked her car in the driveway. The brothers could barely make out her form.

“The head vampire!” Cliff exclaimed.

Finn didn’t respond. He allowed his brother to stew in his conspiracy, hoping that he’d soon forget it all.