

*Blood Sports*

# BLOOD SPORTS

A NOVEL

by

Jeromie Carr

# PHOENIX GUNSLINGERS

## Season Schedule

Week Playing	W	L	Score
1 at Portland Emperors			-
2 Manchester T-Rex			-
3 Reno Silver Wings			-
4 at Long Beach Superstars			-
5 at Albany Spyderz			-
6 Santa Fe Sungazers			-
7 Amarillo Thunder			-
8 Boulder Bobcats			-
9 at Memphis Pharoahs			-
10 at Sacramento Bulldogs			-
11 Long Beach Superstars			-
12 at Dakota Stallions			-
13 Santa Cruz Tradewinds			-
14 at Amarillo Thunder			-
West B Wildcard			-
West B Quarterfinals			-
West Division Championship			-
National Championship			-



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# Chapter 1

## Trouble in the Graveyard

Darkness and chaos. Martin Wiggins suddenly found himself in his element as the lights all went out. While the few other late-night customers and employees of the CTW Discount Warehouse groped and grumbled in what he assumed was a complete power failure, Martin could still see each individual bottle and jar in the beauty products aisle where he stood. Though he doubted that anyone else present could see much more than their dark shoes on the pale linoleum, he could still read the cursive on the labels of spa soaps and lotions ten feet from him.

The unique abilities of his affliction were not limited to night vision, however. Without turning around, he sensed the movements of the cashier twenty feet behind him as she braced herself in the blackness by placing her right hand on her counter. Four aisles away, he sensed that a customer had narrowly missed crashing her cart into a display of purses, though this mishap was well beyond his peripheral vision.

Momentarily, the backup lighting kicked in, but the cheap battery powered units were frustratingly ineffective. After a few seconds of concentration, Martin formed a mental picture of a wide swath of the large store from his bat-like sixth sense, which he could not describe or even fully comprehend himself. While the tall shelving on either side of him dampened this secret skill somewhat, its effective range was probably about one hundred feet on all sides and above him. There were a few random people groping around. One person sat down against a wall. In the distance, one man used a cell phone flashlight as he paced around.

Martin turned to face the front of the store. Peering out the windows, he saw that the parking lot, street, and neighboring businesses were all without electricity. At least, he thought, 12:10AM was the least disruptive time for a twenty-four-hour store to have a blackout. With a shrug, he decided that, as night store manager, he had better find a way to assist in his customers' safety and comfort.

Before Martin could take three steps, however, the rapid motion of a dark figure in another section caught his attention. Crouching, the figure made its way past the racks of cheap watches and bracelets and opened the gate to the unattended jewelry counter. Making no attempt at silence, this person rattled and jostled the counter's sliding doors, probably trying to find one that was unlocked.

*Why does everything always have to happen at once?* Martin wondered to himself as he darted toward the jewelry section. "Hey, you! You're not supposed to be back there!" he shouted. The person poked his head above the counter trying in vain to discern who was approaching him. However, the darkness was no barrier to Martin in identifying this person as Tony Rongain, a night maintenance employee.

Martin reached for his two-way radio, stating, "This is Wiggins. We have a security incident at the jewelry desk."

Tony tucked a medium-sized Plexiglas display carousel full of sale jewelry under his arm and ran frantically toward the rear of the store, nearly tripping over several obstacles in the dim light. Martin detected the faint beam of a security guard's flashlight clear at the northeast end of the store in hardware. Tony was now almost halfway to the southwest exit, which was a pretty good lead on the approaching security guard, who was still trying to get his bearings.

As Martin eyed the fleeing suspect, the thought of an employee getting away with a criminal act on his shift was too much for Martin to take lightly. Within the span of four seconds, concern turned to temper turned to primitive rage. His blood felt as hot as lava as his baser instincts took over. He launched himself down the aisle in pursuit of the thief. Even in dress khakis, Martin's fit legs allowed him to close the distance to Tony quickly.

Tony arrived at the rear exit, fumbling to push the door open with the bulky carousel still in hand. Martin caught up with him just as he forced himself outside. With a shove, Martin knocked Tony onto the gritty cement walk. Tony ejected the carousel, which tumbled to the ground and cracked open, spilling gold and gemstone earring boxes everywhere. Tony had taken the brunt of the fall on his right arm, sustaining a shallow open wound.

Martin grabbed Tony by the shoulders, rolling him to his back, and then straddling his chest. Even though Tony was five or six years younger than him, Martin held him down with ease, feeling as if he was channeling the strength of a wild animal. With his senses heightened, Martin smelled the blood starting to ooze from Tony's wound. It was a musky, bold scent with the added tanginess that fear often brought.

"What do you think you're doing?" Martin asked the junior employee in a growl. As Tony squirmed beneath him, Martin brought his grip up from the shoulders to the base of the neck and tightened it. Tony issued panicked pleas to be released, sprinkled with profane epithets. Martin continued to press him to the ground. His thoughts focused on the struggling young man's blood and torn flesh. Female blood was sweeter and lighter to the taste, but Tony's male blood harkened Martin to his middle school years when he first got a whiff of another boy's blood, before he understood who, or what, he was becoming.

"Let go! You're hurting me! I give up! Please!" Tony cried. Martin realized that he had allowed his grip to become much tighter, and now his fingers were sinking into Tony's flesh. Martin almost forgot how much more power his darker side lent to his already athletic build. He released the thief as a lone security guard thrust the door open to take over. The guard had not been expecting to find the perpetrator in the hands of the night supervisor.

The guard pulled Tony from the ground. Martin took a minute to allow his blood to cool. Beads of sweat had formed on his forehead beneath his short but mopyy brown hair. As the guard took Tony away, Martin muttered, "Tony, you're fired."

## *Blood Sports*

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“I really have to say I didn’t expect that,” the thin, nearly balding man said to Martin, sipping a coffee. “I had to read the police report before I believed it.” It was 9:00 on a July morning. The sun was bright in the blue Arizona sky. Martin sat in a chair farthest from the row of windows in the Head Manager’s office above the store. Mr. Groven put down his organic beverage in its equally organic cup and continued. “You took Tony Rongain down. In the dark.”

“That’s kind of an exaggeration. I pushed him and he fell down and I held him until store security arrived. The power came back on a few minutes after that.”

“Still, I have mixed emotions about it. Officially, company policy says that no merchandise is worth risking life and limb over, but thanks to the power outage, we have no camera footage and no other witnesses. He saw a perfect opportunity. If you hadn’t caught up to him, he probably would have gotten away with it and we’d be out six thousand dollars’ worth of product and no arrests.”

Martin fidgeted in his seat, partially because he had no idea where this conversation was headed, but mostly because the filtered sunlight through the thick, closed curtains was beginning to penetrate his skin. “Well, a few pieces are now scratch and dent clearance, and the carousel’s toast.”

Groven chuckled. “Look, I’m not mad at you, but I also can’t officially reward you. You have guts and drive. It’s not just taking down shoplifters. It’s your high retention rate and perfect safety record and lord knows all of the other things you do. Do you know how hard it is to find someone of your abilities to work the graveyard shift?”

“Graaaaaaveyaaaaaard!” Martin mimicked the undead.

“I would like your permission to send your file to Corporate,” Groven said, chuckling again. “You’ve distinguished yourself as one of the best supervisors in the region and I can tell that your talents aren’t being utilized very well. You should be a corporate trainer. Their starting salary is twice what you make now, and it only goes up from there.”

“I’m sorry, Sid, but I really can’t move into that kind of position,” Martin replied. “I’d like to, but you know why I had to take the night shift in the first place.”

“I know, I know. You have sensitivity to sunlight. They can make reasonable accommodations to you and you could still live in Phoenix.” Groven played with a pen on the desk. “We’re the third largest discount retailer in the country, and we need people like you to push us up another spot.”

“Thank you,” Martin said. “Really, you’re a fantastic boss and CTW is such an awesome company, but it wouldn’t be fair to the trainees to make them take their classes at night, and my health has to come first. I’d love to advance in the company, but for now, I’m stuck with the night shift.”

Nodding, Groven said, "I understand. Just don't go after too many more shoplifters. Policy, you know."

With a polite goodbye smile, Martin headed back out to his car, shielding himself from the summer sun with a thick canvas as he jogged through the parking lot. The Arizona summer heat was never a problem for him, only the radiant sun. Once he jumped into his heavily tinted seven-year-old blue Subaru, he was back in his comfort zone. It was straight to his condo for him, where he, like most other night workers, spent the bulk of the day sleeping soundly in a darkened bedroom.

## Chapter 2

### The Bard's Needle

Martin sat in the back room of The Bard's Needle tattoo shop, which was his frequent home away from home on his nights off. “Do you want me to put this in the fridge?” he asked John Brandt as he tapped the case of energy drink cans on his lap.

“Nope,” John replied, wiping some excess ink from the shoulder of his current customer. “The essence of the NitroMaxx experience is taking it however it comes. If they’re boiling hot from sitting in the back seat of my car all day, that’s all the better.”

“Uh, okay. They're not quite at that point.” Martin said. He placed the case next to the duct taped chair. John himself was twenty-nine, sporting short, spiked, brown hair with conspicuous muttonchops. The image of a superhero was inked on his right arm above the message *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, and a closed eye with the words “I cannot know” was on his left. He wore a plain black muscle shirt. While John finished inking the aging, bearded man who was the last customer of the slow night, Martin occupied himself by doing curls with a pair of dumbbells he found in a corner, making idle chat with the shop's owner.

Once the customer left and John was cleaning up, Martin plucked a can of NitroMaxx from the box as he waited for John to finish up with his last customer. “Guess what I did last night.”

“You escaped from your cage and ate an innocent villager?”

“I’m a vampire, not a cannibal.” Popping the tab from the can, Martin took a deep swig of the fruity, room temperature beverage. The warm, carbonated liquid was not a pleasant sensation going down his throat.

“Uh, oh. I’m going to tell your dad you used the ‘V’ word.” John squirted antibacterial gel on his hands.

“That’s what I feel like right now...a vampire.” Martin searched for words as he put the can on the floor. “I mean, I guess I did a good thing. I busted an employee who was trying to steal a case of jewelry during the big power outage.”

“You did what you had to. Maybe I won’t tell your dad after all.”

“It was what happened at the end. I let my emotions get the upper hand, and I felt like sucking his blood.”

John froze in place. “Did you?”

“No,” Martin replied. “A security guard came pretty quick. I don’t think I would have, though, but it’s been on my mind.”

“How long have you gone without, you know, real human blood?”

“Almost two years.” Martin said. “The last time was when Vivi introduced me to that messed-up chick and I took a safety pin to her wrist.” John grabbed a can of NitroMaxx. Glancing at the piercing chair in the next room, Martin said, “Every time I come in here, I smell blood a little bit. It’s not that I’m all that tempted. It’s just that raw meat doesn’t have the same...energy. Even when I put ash on beef or pork, it keeps me alive and it tastes good, but it’s just not the same.”

John said, “You know, Tomas said he found this website one time where vampires can connect with people who’re willing to be bitten.”

Martin commented, “I doubt any of those people have ever met a real nosferatu. They’re all only fetishists and cutters. Besides, Anne O’Toole told me about some folklore that every time a vampire sucks somebody’s blood, they lose a little part of their soul.”

“Are you and O’Toole still talking?”

“We chat online once and a while. She’s got her own orchestra now.”

The entry buzzer sounded in the front of the shop. A slightly overweight man in his early thirties entered. His dishwater blonde hair was mussed and he wore a wrinkled white button-up shirt, a pair of dirty cargo pants and loafers. He carried a produce sack full of oranges.

“Come on back, Clavius,” John called to him.

The oddly dressed man approached the two others and dumped the oranges out on a table. Indicating the oranges, he said, “Guys, I’d like you to meet my new friends.”

“Hello, Clavius’ friends,” Martin said, studying the fruit for any hidden meaning.

Grabbing the energy drink can that Martin had already opened, Clavius said, “Some blogger girl suggested that her readers try this exercise to help them refine their social skills. Just like humans, oranges are unique organisms with their own unique predispositions. That’s Freddie, Arthur, Juan, Sloan, and the biggest one I call Sampson. Juan has a little green splotch on top. Sloan has a scar shaped like a rocket ship. Freddie can’t sit up straight because one side is fatter than the other. Just like humans, some of their differences are from experiences and some are genetic.”

Martin said, “I think you’ll find that all oranges from the same tree have the same genetic makeup.” After noticing Clavius turn his eyes downward, he added, “Wait. I’m sorry. That was rude. I shouldn’t have said that. I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Really? What’s on your mind?” Clavius asked as he took a swig of NitroMaxx.

“It’s nothing,” Martin said.

John explained. “Martin almost bit someone yesterday night. He’s bummed about it.”

“Of course he almost bit someone,” Clavius said. “He is a chiiiiild of the niiiight. Mwa ha ha!”

“It’s not just that,” said Martin. He put down the dumbbells. “I’ve been thinking about my life and my career. I didn’t move to Arizona and put myself



through college so I could work at CTW for the rest of my life. Besides, wolves are children of the night, not vampires.”

“Don’t they have an alumni development program?” John asked.

“Wolves?” Clavius interjected. “I don’t think so.”

“I suppose,” Martin said, “It’s not that easy, though. My boss offered me a chance to advance in the company, too, but I had to turn him down. I really don’t think I can risk my health by taking a daytime job.”

“Life lesson learned?” John asked.

“The lesson learned is that I have no business trying to exist in society. I have no business pretending to be normal. I haven’t been normal in a long time. Sometimes I wonder if I’ve ever been normal.”

“‘Normal’ is just a label,” John said, making quotation marks with his fingers. “Look at me. I’m not ‘normal’ because I’ve got ink all over my body and I don’t know how to tie a necktie and my grandmother’s scared of me. Society says that anyone who doesn’t live in a house with a white picket fence and have 2.3 kids and drink domestic beer is not normal.”

“Nobody’s ever called me normal,” Clavius added.

Martin picked up Juan the orange. “I appreciate what you’re saying, but you’ve got to admit that I’m less normal than most people. There are probably only a thousand or so true nosferatu in the world right now. Do you know what I feel like? I feel like a blood orange, which is actually really good but it looks too creepy to buy.”

“What’s your degree in?” John asked.

“My first major was Accounting, and then it was Cyber Security for a while, but the piece of paper on my wall says Environmental Economics. The night programs were pretty limited.”

“Ooh,” John commented. “Generi-degree. Have you explored your career options?”

“Night manager at a 24-hour store. Janitor. ER nurse. Credit card application processor...work from home, set your own hours, \$10,000 a month potential.”

John said, “You’re always welcome to work in my shop, even part-time. That would get you into a more free-thinking workspace. Vivi could teach you how to do piercings, and you could do my financials.”

Martin replied, “Thanks for the offer, but too much blood involved.” He gave Juan to Clavius, who seemed to exchange affirming glances with the fruit. Martin shook his head. “Besides, it’s not me. Working at a body art studio is too...”

“Goth?” John interrupted.

“I was going to say ‘cliché,’ at least for a nosferatu. I know I probably shouldn’t take it this way, but it would be settling for a stereotype. Movies portray us working at body art studios or mortuaries or blood banks, or playing in metal bands.”

“What about Tomas?” Clavius asked.

“He works in a smoke shop and wears a skull belt buckle. As far as I know, he’s happy in that lifestyle, but I couldn’t be. I just don’t know if there are any feasible alternatives. It’s so easy to let our affliction trap us in the darkness. There are nosferatu who go way past the goth thing and end up dealing drugs, being in gangs, or

homeless. O'Toole is the only really successful nosferatu I know, but she was in a great career before she turned."

Clavius said, "There's that one guy in New York who has a reality TV series."

"Almost had," Martin corrected. "They cancelled the show before it aired. It was probably for the best. The fewer people who know we exist, the better."

"Can I finish this NitroMaxx?" Clavius asked.

"Knock yourself out," John said. "You know, Martin, your problem isn't nosferatism, it's just the night life. Lots of people, myself included, work night hours. It's the same for all of us as it is for you. We end up in dead end jobs. We work when most people go on dates..."

"Don't talk to me about dates," Martin said. "I'm not attracted to ER nurses or club drones."

"Don't forget piercers," Clavius inserted.

"I'm not going out with Vivi. Forget it. She's worthy of a good tapping, but I need to settle down with a nice girl. Maybe not quite the white picket fence and the 2.3 kids, but someone who can see beyond my, eh, 'affliction'."

John looked Martin right in the eyes. "Hey, bud, someday you'll meet the sweetest, hottest girl ever, and someday you'll have a great job. Just be patient. When fate calls, you'll know."

"Would that be the same fate that's made my life such a joy?" replied Martin as he watched Clavius down twenty ounces of room temperature energy drink in fifteen seconds.

"Sometimes fate needs a little nudge, that's all. Life isn't a spectator sport. You gotta get that ball and run for the end zone."

Martin chuckled. "Actually, I've been mentally preparing myself for change for some time now. Maybe I should take the plunge while I still have options." Shrugging, he changed the subject to Internet jokes. After he and Clavius assisted John in closing up shop, Martin did the few errands he could do at 11:15 on a Tuesday night and headed home.

\* \* \*

The next morning, a message alert from Martin's phone woke him from his slumber.

John B.: Hey  
*Today, 10:29AM*

Hey. What's up?  
*Today, 10:32AM*

John B.: Did I wake you?

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*Today, 10:32AM*

Yes. No worries, though.

*Today, 10:33AM*

John B.: I just saw the perfect job for you!!!

*Today, 10:34AM*

What?

*Today, 10:34AM*

John B: Try out for the Phoenix Gunslingers!!!

*Today, 10:35AM*

lol

*Today, 10:35AM*

John B.: I'm serious. You love football and they play indoors. No sun exposure!!

*Today, 10:35AM*

They would never look at me. I haven't played football since high school.

*Today, 10:36AM*

John B.: Its amateur time, bud!! Look at their website!!

*Today, 10:37AM*

Ok I'll look later. Got to get more sleep now.

*Today, 10:49AM*

Martin woke on schedule at 1:00 in the afternoon. After cereal and coffee, he found himself on his stair stepper contemplating what he remembered about that morning's text conversation. As he worked out, he pretended that he was facing a defensive line, darting toward the sideline to make a reception. He knew his numbers; he was in better condition now than in his high school football days despite his athletic aspirations being cut short by his affliction. During his shower, he scrutinized the capabilities of his bare arms and legs. He was fit, but he was not certain if he was 'football' fit.

John's suggestion that he try out for the newly-formed indoor football team was off the wall, but it had awakened his passions. He recalled being the seventeen-year-old varsity star with two youth trophies and a regional high school championship plaque. He craved the physical and mental challenge of the game.

After taking in a movie on cable and doing some laundry, Martin went to his PC and looked up the Phoenix Gunslingers website. As he knew already from numerous news reports, the Gunslingers were a brand new expansion team of the

CFX indoor football league. They were hosting open tryouts on the Saturday after next. He mentally chided himself for even looking at the website. There was no way they would take him, and even if they did take him, he could never pull it off. Nosferatu needed to maintain a low profile, and, while games were played indoors, there certainly was too much risk of incidental sun exposure. There was no way he was going to bother with such absurdity. He bookmarked the webpage.

## Chapter 3

### The Bad Girl

Tuesday was Martin's final night off before the new work week. Even though he had not reported to work since his somewhat heroic shoplifting bust on Sunday, he had already received several online thumbs-up. That didn't make him feel any more at ease about nearly losing control over his cravings for blood. He had skipped breakfast that morning and slept in an extra three hours that afternoon. By sunset, he was starving.

Tearing off a large branch of a head of broccoli and pulling out a few pieces of cooked chicken, he placed his evening meal on a plate. Before placing his plate in the microwave, he set the plate back on the counter, replacing the chicken with a pre-measured bag of raw stew beef. Proceeding to the cupboard, he grabbed a large bottle with a homemade label saying "ash." He liberally sprinkled the ash on the beef until its surface was completely grayish.

The ash made the moderately pleasant scent of the raw meat slightly more human-smelling, but it still was no substitute for the real thing. This was a meal he needed to consume at regular intervals to keep his nosferatu blood from breaking down, but today, his mind was on satisfying a craving rather than survival.

*What would Anne O'Toole think of me right now?* Martin wondered. He could picture a motherly scowl masking his mentor's deep concern. *It's just meat, not human blood,* he imagined saying to her. She would probably be unwilling to let him off so easily, telling him that he was in no state of mind to give temptation a foothold; that once he gave in, he would want the real thing.

He set the raw beef aside in favor of the normal, cooked, warm chicken, which offered him no satisfaction beyond the same nutrition and full stomach it offered everybody else. Even as the chicken and broccoli were heating in the microwave, his own thoughts prodded him: *In the end, you're going to eat the beef. Why fight it?*

Martin stopped the microwave, eyeing the beef still on the counter. Consuming the beef and ash in a warmed but still raw form would probably stave off the tiny tempest in his gut that pouncing on Tony had created. Yet, he knew that the imaginary advice from O'Toole was wise. He focused on the microwave's clock, a foam rubber golf ball on the table, and anything else to distract him. *Eat the damn chicken and if you're still in the mood after that, you can have the beef.* Shrugging, he restarted the microwave and put the beef back in the fridge.

Even when he actually sat down to eat the chicken and broccoli, it repeatedly occurred to him that if he could not eat the raw beef, he deserved at least to have a fully-fried steak or burger. The poultry tasted as bland as ever. *You'll die if you don't*

*eat some ash blood beef sometime this week, he reminded himself. Besides, you already put the ash on it. It will go bad even faster now. You need to eat it by tomorrow. You won't be over your bloodlust by then. Might as well have it tonight.*

He found some lemon juice to put on the chicken, which had always been his favorite way to eat chicken when he was growing up. At least it added a bit of flavor and moisture. Taking his meal in front of the TV gave him the final bit of distraction to finish his food.

Next, Martin checked his e-mail. "Gunslingers Registration" was the first message, informing him that he was now signed up for the Phoenix Gunslingers website, which he had done the previous evening. Since the team had not actually played its first game or recruited any players, the included graphic depicted only stock photos of cheering fans and the team logo (an ornery-looking feller with a yellow cowboy hat and red bandana). That gave him enough of a smile to draw his mood away from his internal conflict over supper.

Soon enough, he was happily browsing the web. In the midst of reading about celebrity bad boy drug habits, his doorbell rang. With some reluctance, he let Vivienne Perez in. She was slightly older than he was, somewhat short with sleek black hair. No less than four piercings adorned her lips, brows and nose, with several others in her ears. Her scoop neck blouse exposed her voluptuous, defined cleavage and a collarbone inked with swallows and hearts. After the customary hi-how-are-you conversation, Vivi lowered herself onto the sofa next to where Martin had been sitting, stating, "John told me about the bad weekend you had. I was just in the neighborhood, so I thought I should stop by and see if there's anything I can do."

Martin knew all too well what the primary piercer at The Bard's Needle had in mind. "So, what were you doing when you were 'just in the neighborhood?'" he asked her.

"Maybe I was following my fancy," she replied. "Is it okay that I came here?"

"It's okay," Martin said. "Can I get you anything?" He glanced at the tiny window above the door, which was the only uncovered window in the main part of the condo. The sun had set. Going out for a walk in the dusk seemed a more favorable activity at the moment than entertaining his current guest.

"I've been kind of down all day," Vivi said, averting her gaze from Martin. "I was rude to a few people and I feel like a failure."

"Don't beat yourself up too bad." Martin said, mostly to be polite.

"I thought that since you're having an off week, we could maybe keep each other company for a while, and maybe go for a drink or something."

"Is that what your...fancy...is leading you to do?"

Vivi caught a glimpse of his notebook PC. "Hey, what's this?" She grabbed it before he could reach over the coffee table to keep it from her. "Arizona Gunslingers?"

"Yeah, they're an expansion team of the CFX indoor football league."

Vivi would not give the notebook back. "Cool. I've seen some CFX games at the sports bar. You gonna get some tickets?"

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"Well," Martin replied reluctantly, "Actually, John thought I should try out for the team." Vivi giggled. "You think that's funny?" Martin said, finally sitting down next to her. "I was a star receiver in high school," Martin said. "I ran over 600 yards for 7 touchdowns."

"I can't imagine you playing football," Vivi said, placing the notebook on the floor. "You don't belong in sports."

"That's the problem. I'm trying to figure out where I belong."

Vivi placed her hand on Martin's shoulder. "You belong with us."

"Us?" He plucked her hand from his shoulder.

Resisting, Vivi said, "How many people out there would be cool with you if they knew what you were?"

"So now I'm a what instead of a who?"

"That's not what I meant." For the first time, she looked him square in the eyes. "Listen, if you want to know the reason why I came here, it was to find out if you were going to run away. You need to be with someone who can help you embrace who you are, not someone who will judge you."

"Would that someone be you?"

"We deserve another chance together," Vivi said as she placed her hand closer to his face.

"Vivienne," Martin began, "Just because we went to a concert together..."

"You know you need someone like me," Vivi interrupted, pulling herself closer to him. "You have a dark passion in you that most people don't understand. You and I are alike, Martin Wiggins! Let's embrace that passion in each other." When Martin did not respond to her advances, she rose, spinning around in front of her host. "Is there something wrong with me?"

Taking in her curvy figure, Martin admitted, "No. Nothing wrong. It's just that I don't want to jeopardize my friendship with John by seeing one of his employees. Plus, I'm in a vulnerable position right now."

"So, you're telling me the old 'it's not you, it's me,' story?" Vivi wandered into the kitchen, her rear wiggling a bit beneath her short plaid skirt.

"Chemistry doesn't lie," Martin said, still wishing he could be on an evening stroll by himself. "Chemistry is telling me to hold off, that's all."

"Got anything to drink," Vivi asked.

"Just beer."

Vivienne opened the fridge and pulled out two cans of domestic brew. As she placed the cans on the counter, she noticed the bottle of ash. Picking it up, she inquired, "What's this?"

"It's nothing," Martin responded. "You might as well bring the beers over here."

As if she had not heard him, Vivi opened the bottle and took a whiff. She cringed at the smell.

"You don't need to be getting into that. It's kind of expensive," Martin called out from the couch.

"So, is this real human ashes?" She took a pinch out to feel its dusty, cobwebby texture.

"No, it's not," Martin answered. "They just call it that. No humans were harmed in the making of this ingredient."

"How can you stand this crap?" Vivi replaced the cap and put the bottle back on the counter.

"It tastes alright to me," Martin said, "But I've heard that it tastes pretty bad to people who aren't nosferatu."

Opening both beers, Vivi brought them back to the couch and sat down.

"How often do you need to use it?"

"Usually once a week, but if I've had sun exposure or I'm feeling light-headed, I use it more often."

"Does it satisfy you?"

"It keeps me alive."

"You know what I think?" Vivi said, putting her foot on the couch, giving Martin a glimpse of her thigh. "You're settling when you don't have to."

"Settling? I don't think so."

"Come on," Vivi edged closer. "This is a golden opportunity. We have kindred souls and if you'd give me half a chance, you'd see that. I'm not asking for a commitment. Just give me a try. It doesn't have to be tonight."

In a defiant tone, Martin asked, "Do you want me to screw you or bite you?"

Vivi barked, "Don't act so high and mighty. I saw what you did to Carmen. I saw how you seduced her when you were dancing together. I saw that look in your eyes. You weren't some poor guy suffering from some mystical condition called nosferatism. You were a vampire when you jabbed her wrist with that safety pin and started lapping up her blood!"

Martin felt laid bare, though he would not let it show. Everything she said was true. She would not let him live down a moment of passion that had occurred two years before. In the heat of the moment, he had lost himself and drank the blood of a girl whom Vivi had invited to a get-together. That had been the last time he had tasted human blood.

Vivi continued: "By the morning, poor Carmen didn't even remember what you did to her. I had to tell her the mark was from a drug needle. At least you could be doing it to someone who's willing!"

Martin countered, "Do you realize that people who are bitten by vampires don't become vampires?"

"Do you honestly think that's why I want to hook up with you?" Despite the temper in her voice, Vivi did not pull away from her host.

"You tell me." Martin could feel his temperature rising, and a hunger brewing inside him. The faint scent of raw meat still lingered in the air, even though he knew Vivi could not smell it. This was the wrong evening for her to come onto him.

With no warning, Vivi thrust herself at him, causing the notebook PC to fall on the floor. Before Martin could object, she grabbed his head with both her hands and pressed her mouth against his. Bearing all her weight on him, he nearly tumbled



to the floor himself. Relentless, she powered her tongue behind his lip and rocked herself forward to prevent him from getting up. Breaking her kiss, she climbed up on him.

As Martin voiced objections, he felt her breasts slide across his chest and then his face as she bucked herself farther forward. He was now so sensitized that he could feel his own heart beating and the subtle pressure changes as his blood went sloosh-slush, sloosh-slush through the veins in his head. Arousal quickly followed.

"Have me," Vivi whispered.

Knowing he would have to stop this before it went too far, Martin shoved her away hard, upsetting one of the beers on the table. Vivi did not appear vexed. Rather, she picked herself up from the floor, raised one brow at Martin, and headed for the kitchen. She hastily dug through several drawers until she found a filet knife.

"What are you doing?" Martin asked. He could not muster the courage to say "Leave now," which was what he desperately wanted to tell her, but a sudden admiration for her body and her wily tactics held him back.

Vivi pressed the knife's point up to her left arm, near where one normally inserts an intravenous line. "How many ways does a girl have to say yes before it sinks in?"

Even as Martin looked away, he could sense her presence drawing closer to him. "Vivienne!"

Dramatically, Vivi pressed the knife's sharp, curved point into the skin of her arm, nearly puncturing herself, but not quite. She knelt beside him. Unaware of his rapidly escalating strength, he again pushed her away, sending her sprawling across the room until she landed with a thud against the far wall. Fortunately, she ejected the knife from her grip before she could be injured with it in the tumble.

Martin finally realized the severity of his state. "Please. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. Are you okay?"

"See," Vivi said, her eyes afire. "There's a beast within you! We're both dark, tortured souls, and we can draw energy from each other. Let me give you what you need...what you deserve." She approached him again but kept her distance just the same, glancing back at the knife on the floor.

The voice within Martin beckoned, *Time to give in. This is what you really wanted all night. It's what you need to calm you so you can be fully functional at work tomorrow.*

Martin sighed. Of course, that thought was ridiculous. A taste of sanguine would only drive him to desire more of it, which was what he figured Vivi wanted him to feel. "What trashy novel did you get that line from?" he asked, trying to shift his focus from his temptation.

Vivi took a few graceful steps backward until the knife was at her feet. "My diary," she replied to his question as she squatted to pick it up.

He knew that Vivi was toying with him, but he also knew that she was crazy enough to draw her own blood. He knew his only chance to avoid losing control was to distract her before it was too late.

Fixing his gaze on her, Martin slowly commanded, "Come here" while motioning with his finger. He did not take his eyes off her as she obeyed. Rising to meet her, Martin took her firmly into his arms. As he repeatedly kissed her mouth, neck and cheek, she melted, sending them both to the floor. Martin tried all his moves on her, coercing her to give herself willingly to him and, ultimately, to drop the knife and forget about drawing blood.

His plan worked. Soon, they were on the couch pleasuring each other. After the better part of an hour, things cooled down for both of them and they ended the evening in light conversation. When Martin suggested, "It's getting kind of late," Vivi agreed, departing with no protest.

Finally, Martin got to go for a stroll in the warm evening, joining the few joggers, cyclists and dog walkers who had the same idea. He was able to clear his head of the scent of raw beef and ladies' deodorant. After the bout with Vivi, he became more convinced that his life, as well as his career, needed a jumpstart. It was time to call Anne O'Toole.

## Chapter 4

### The Proving Grounds

"So Anne O'Toole was really okay with this?" Clavius asked Martin as both of them stood in the snaking line in the EssentialFunds Arena lobby. The huge display in the atrium boldly said, "Gunslingers Tryouts South Entrance Only." Clavius wore a generic "Let's play football!" tee shirt and jeans, while Martin wore his favorite yellow college sweats over a pair of athletic shorts, which was similar in concept to most of what the other two hundred people in line were wearing.

Martin replied, "At first, she was like, 'That's a huge risk,' but we talked for a while I and told her that this wasn't that different from the orchestra she conducts every night. She agreed and wished me good luck."

"How are you feeling so far?" Clavius asked. "It's 10:37 in the morning."

"I'm fine," Martin answered, verifying the time on his phone and updating his status. "There's no direct sunlight, and I'm not the least bit sleepy. That's the great thing about CFX football. It's all played in indoor arenas. This place is a pit with three feet of concrete on all sides. A lot of football players hate the idea of coliseum football because they like playing in the sunshine."

"Okay, buddy," Clavius said, hushing his own voice against the low roar of the crowd around him. "Just let me know if you feel faint. I've scoped out the tunnel system in this place and I think I can have you in the dark in thirty seconds, but we may have to sneak past that cleaning lady first."

"Only you," Martin shook his head.

"John told me that he gave you the idea and he'd feel awful if anything happened to you. He said that you don't have to prove to anybody that a...," Clavius again hushed his voice to a whispery mumble, "...vampire...can hold a day job."

Martin put his phone in his pocket. "Really, that has nothing to do with it. I need to prove to myself that I still can accomplish some worthwhile goals. When I found out in high school that I had nosferatism, my goals were, pardon the expression, sidelined. I'm here to pick up where I left off."

He took some time to observe the others around him, each of whom were trying out for a position on the brand new team. Many of them wore expensive workout gear. One of them had on a pair of \$600 sneakers. While most of them were alone, a smattering of them had their fathers, brothers, or friends with them. More astonishing to Martin, men who appeared to be trainers or coaches accompanied several prospective players, though the rules of the open tryouts forbid any third parties from entering into the actual play area.

"I hope I do okay," he said to Clavius. "I've always worked out, but I've really only been in hardcore training mode for nine days. These dudes are mostly younger than me, and in really good shape. I mean *really* good shape."

"Of course they're younger than a vampire. You're...what...a hundred years old?"

"Face palm!" Martin replied. "I'm twenty-six, thank you."

"Well, you still look great." Clavius patted him on the back. "If I was a bartender, I'd card you."

"That kid over there in the green shirt doesn't look old enough to be in college."

"Straight from high school into the pros, bud," Clavius said. "Every young athlete's dream."

"That could have been me," Martin said. "I was the best athlete at Nawat High School. I guess that's not saying much, but I gave us a district championship." Gazing off at the myriad of hopefuls around him, he continued with a sigh, "Then I got sick, and that was that. I almost died just trying to attend class, much less spending all that time on the field in the sun. Even before Anne told me what was happening to me, I had pretty much shut my life down."

"Yet, here you are," Clavius replied.

Before another word could be exchanged, the stadium's PA system announced, "*All offensive positions proceed to Entrance A. Offensive positions to Entrance A.*" The crowd shifted, half the participants funneling to a gate that had just opened on the left side of the lobby. Clavius departed, telling Martin to call him when he was finished.

Fifteen people at a time, the hopefuls proceeded through the gate to check in, dropping off their written evaluations and physical exam sheets. After being taken down into the players' area and through a maze of halls, the field of the indoor stadium was in front of them. It was pretty much what Martin had expected. It resembled an elementary school field day. Even though the field had lines configured for soccer, the front half was a patchwork of cones, tires, barbells, high jump bars and sandboxes. The back half was wide open, certainly to accommodate running, catching and play simulations.

A volunteer in a team tee guided the pack to the first area, which was a snaking line of small cones. *Here I go*, Martin told himself as the volunteer gave specific instructions about how to navigate the cones and gave them what seemed like an impossibly fast time limit to do it. Martin felt energized, even though he was normally still asleep at this time of day. Part of his energy came from the previous night's dinner, laced with a dash of ash, and part of it came from the two cans of NitroMaxx he downed on the way to the stadium.

The volunteer had each of the fifteen hopefuls repeat the course over and over again, one at a time, urging them to beat their own best time. "Tighter!" the volunteer roared. A few times, someone went too tight and kicked over a cone, which the volunteer told them to replace before the next person could try again.

## *Blood Sports*

The first three times Martin had a go at it, his times were disappointingly low, especially when compared to the others in his group. As the volunteer urged the group to go tighter and faster, however, the fastest of the group were the ones to falter, as their accuracy suffered with increased speed. Martin guessed that it was the volunteer's purpose to make each one of them fail under increased pressure (something the youngest and least experienced might not have surmised). By his tenth and eleventh round, his times were among the best, and he had not kicked any cones.

Soon, a whistle blew. The volunteer instructed the group to proceed to the next station while a new group rotated in. The second drill was a high jump. The volunteer at this station had each participant do a single jump followed by a series of three without shifting stance. The pace here was less intense than the first cone course, and after four rotations, the volunteer told them all they had done as well as they could and allowed them to sit until the next station change.

During the downtime, several of the participants who knew each other from the university began to shoot the breeze. Soon, Martin was chiming in, explaining that he had been accepted to ASU and intended to try out for the team, but an illness in high school prevented him. It was a football version of the same general story that he had told a hundred times, whenever somebody asked him why he worked at night, or why he avoided sunlight, or why he didn't follow the traditional undergraduate program. None of it was a lie, but Anne had warned him from the beginning not to disclose too much.

Another whistle sounded, and it was off to a short shuttle drill, where the players darted back and forth between three cones to measure how rapidly and accurately they could change direction. This one was more fast-paced, as the players took turns until each had five tries at the drill.

The next drill was a sled, where the volunteer had two participants at a time try different hits against a padded steel sled. Even though the rival was metal instead of human, Martin connected with this test. A measure of accuracy, agility and strength, the sled brought out some of Martin's best abilities, which he found had been somewhat enhanced by his nosferatism. For the first time that morning, the same predatory instinct that had been Tony Rongain's demise kicked in slightly, though a good lunch of ash-laced meat the day before assured that he would not lose control. The volunteer even had him go toe-to-toe with two other prospects to compare their abilities directly to his.

Whistle. Change stations. This one was a course of tires on the turf through which to run. Just like the first cones, the volunteer pushed each participant to go faster and more accurately over and over, taking higher steps, behaving more like a drill sergeant than any of the others before.

Between tries, one of the group, a boisterous black man with short hair, commented to Martin, "This is football. When are they going to give us, um, a *ball*?"

"All in good time, my child," Martin replied in his most sage demeanor, even though this guy was probably as old as him.

Chuckling, the black man replied, "Hey, you kicked butt back on the sled. What school did you go to?"

"ASU, but I didn't play," Martin said.

"That's cool. My name's Kamil, by the way. Kamil Ransom. I went to NAU."

"Martin Wiggins." They high-fived. "You did good on the shuttle. I'll bet you're dangerous with that ball thingy you asked for."

"Tight end," Kamil said. "Gotta be."

"Wide receiver," Martin replied.

"Really? With a shoulder like that?"

"Pay attention!" the volunteer interrupted. Martin obediently waited his turn before high-stepping through the tires yet again. Kamil followed soon after and the rotation continued until the next whistle.

The remaining morning was more drills, as each group of fifteen moved through the course one station at a time. There was another cone drill, a long jump, a bench press and a 40-yard dash in the open area before lunch break, when Martin had Clavius go for tacos and bring them to him inside the stadium.

As the tryouts resumed, each participant was given a set of shoulder pads and a practice jersey. "Now we get to do foootbaaaall!" Kamil celebrated as the group proceeded to the next set of exercises at the open end of the field. These were one-on-one and two-on-two blocking drills. During these less formal, more focused drills, there were no whistles, and team trainers followed them around instead of third-party volunteers along with coaches with clipboards and video cameras.

Martin started to wear down a little. Normally, he would not have noticed it, but the players who were in better condition seemed to have more of their endurance left. During one speed drill, his times were among the worst in his group. In a receiving drill, the passer tossed a ball downfield to him as he ran. He knew exactly where the ball was as it sailed through the air, but it was too high over his head for him to catch. "It would help if you passed something catchable," he mumbled to the passer on his return. When the coach said that it was a twenty-yard pass, the same as the passer had thrown to everyone else, Martin realized that the fault was his; he had been too slow.

"Time to crash, burn and die!" Holden Lohrinil, the Offensive Coordinator, said to the group, leading them to an area next to the sideline. There was a narrow line of cones forming a circle at the far end. In the center of the circle stood a giant of a man. Martin guessed he was about 6'8" with barrels for biceps. His sandy, curly hair was a tangled mess, and flame tattoos covered both his arms.

"Okay, kids," Lohrinil said as the group gathered around. "This is Reed Hoyhurst."

"Reed Hoyhurst?" one of the prospective players muttered.

"Yep," Lohrinil replied.

"Didn't he get kicked out of the pros?" another one asked?

Lohrinil issued a dramatic chuckle. "Yep. He not only stopped the offense...he took a lot of them down...hard. After giving three players injuries in a

single game, they had to let him go. He kindly offered his services in thinning the herd here today. I'm going to snap each of you the ball, and you have to get past him. He represents the kind of competition you'll face week after week, who doesn't care about anything but keeping you from scoring. If you really want to impress the coaches, sneak by Reed without going outside the circle."

The first player in line took his position and got down low. Lohrinil snapped him the ball and dove out of the way. The player firmed his grip on the ball, charging down the line of cones at his foe. When the two players collided, Reed deflected the receiver to one side, pressing him back so his foot went out of bounds of the cones.

Lohrinil blew his whistle. "Not bad for a first attempt. Next."

Another player tried the exercise. He veered off slightly to the left to dodge Reed, as one might do on an open field, but the cone circle, only a few yards wide, allowed little lateral movement. He hit Reed hard, but Reed countered, pushing him back, past the cones behind him. The next few guys tried. One dropped the ball. One managed to push Reed back a bit, but not enough to get past him. Two others tried to roll around him, but he pushed one out of bounds and took the other one to the ground.

Martin was next. Seizing the opportunity to become energized, he allowed the scent of the angered blood in the veins of the players around him to stimulate his Nosferatu senses enough to bolster his strength. Lohrinil snapped the ball to him. The blood scent worked. His mind's eye was keenly aware of every move that Reed made and his exact position. As Martin bolted toward the large former defensive lineman, he sensed Reed's left leg twitch slightly, bringing his left foot forward. Instantly, Martin made a connection that others had missed. In his last two footfalls, Martin suddenly adjusted his run to Reed's right side, impacting Reed's right side and shoulder. Reed was forced to block with his right arm, but Martin was already pressing against his flank, and the defender did not have time to compensate. In what seemed like a nanosecond, Martin was beyond Reed, jogging down the field.

"Good job!" Lohrinil said, blowing his whistle. One other player who had already failed applauded. Kamil slapped Martin on the back when he returned to the group. Martin whispered into Kamil's ear, "He's a lefty. Hit his right."

After one more participant went up against Reed but failed, Kamil took his turn. He exploded down the cone line, heading straight for Reed's right side. Reed corrected his stance, jolting Kamil to the side as the two collided. Kamil lost his balance, forcing him to take a step backward. Reed rushed just as Kamil noticed that both of his feet were still in bounds. Lowering his body, Kamil thrust himself toward his opponent, smacking Reed's right side with his shoulder. Reed grabbed the air, attempting to find something onto which to brace himself when Kamil rotated around him. Kamil gave Reed one more shove with his butt, sending the hulking figure to the ground as he tripped safely past. Kamil could not help but spike the ball at the other end of the cones before he rejoined the group.

Reed Hoyhurst's secret was out. Three others in the group were able to get past him after that. While Kamil's footwork had been the most spectacular, the participants credited Martin for cracking the code and achieving the objective first.

Nobody was actually culled from the herd, but that was the first of a long set of interactive drills and practice formations, many of which were against the defensive tryout prospects. The coaches would call various participants in and out as they switched out the plays and blocking they wanted to see. It became evident that some players were being called in rarely if at all. Martin took it as a good sign that he stood in for fifteen or twenty plays, making a few pretty good catches in the process. By the time the whole affair was over at 4:45, Martin was ready to call it quits for the day even though he was still emotionally energized.

"Well," Clavius asked him when he picked him up, "How did it go?"

"I'm really happy about how I held up," Martin replied. "I wasn't feeling any effects from sunlight. I'm just not as sure about my athletics. I was really starting to wane after lunch. I did a lot of great drills, but I just haven't had the opportunity to work out like a lot of those guys do." He covered his whole body with a canvas for the sunny ride back home.

"If I do quality, though, this is probably going to be the biggest problem," he said. "Once I'm in the stadium, I'll be fine, but I'm not used to being in a car so much in the sun." When Clavius drove out of the parking lot, Martin settled in a bit, almost nodding off. "By the way, how are your orange friends?"

Clavius simply replied, "Delicious!"