

## CHAPTER ONE

‘Happy birthday, honey!’

In the glow of the seventeen candles on Claire’s birthday cake, her mother looked feverishly happy, wearing the kind of forced smile that was way too common around the Danvers’ house these days.

It was way too common all over Morganville, Texas. People smiled because they had to, or else.

Now it was Claire’s turn to suck it up and fake it.

‘Thanks, Mom,’ she said, and stretched her lips into something that didn’t really feel like a smile at all. She rose from her chair at the kitchen table to blow out the candles. All seventeen of the flames guttered and went out at her first puff. *I wish...*

She didn’t dare wish for *anything*, and that, more than anything else, made frustration and anger and grief roll over her in a hot, sticky wave. This wasn’t the birthday she’d been planning for the past six

months, since she'd arrived in Morganville. She'd been counting on a party at her home, with her friends. Michael would have played his guitar, and she could almost see that lost, wonderful smile he had when he was deep in the music. Eve, cheerfully and defiantly Goth, would have baked some outrageous and probably inedible cake in the shape of a bat, with liquorice icing and black candles. And Shane...

Shane would have...

Claire couldn't think about Shane, because it made her breath lock up in her throat, made her eyes burn with tears. She missed him. No, that was wrong... *missed him* was too mild. She *needed* him. But Shane was locked up in a cage in the centre of town, along with his father, the idiot vampire hunter.

She still couldn't quite get her head around the fact that Morganville – a normal, dusty Texas town in the middle of nowhere – was run by vampires. But she could believe *that* more easily than the idea that Frank Collins was somehow going to make it all better.

After all, she'd met the man.

Bishop – the new master vampire of Morganville – was planning something splashy in the way of executions for Frank and Shane, which apparently was the old-school standard for getting rid of humans with ideas of grandeur. Nobody had bothered to fill

her in on the details, and she guessed she should be grateful for that. It would certainly be mediievally awful.

The worst thing about that, for Claire, was that there seemed to be nothing she could do to stop it. *Nothing*. What was the use of being a main evil minion if you couldn't even enjoy it – or save your own friends?

*Evil minion*. Claire didn't like to think of herself that way, but Eve had flung it at her the last time they'd spoken.

And of course, as always, Eve was right.

A slice of birthday cake – vanilla, with vanilla frosting and little pastel sprinkles (and the exact opposite of what Eve would have baked) – landed in front of her, on her mom's second-best china. Mom had made the cake from scratch, even the frosting; she didn't believe in ready-made anything. It'd be delicious, but Claire already knew that she wouldn't care. Eve's fantasy cake would have tasted awful, left her teeth and tongue black, and Claire would have loved every bite.

Claire picked up her fork, blinked back her tears, and dug into her birthday treat. She mumbled, 'Wonderful, Mom!' around a mouthful of cake that tasted like air and sadness.

Her dad seated himself at the table and accepted

a slice, too. 'Happy birthday, Claire. Got any plans for the rest of the day?'

She'd had plans. All kinds of plans. She'd imagined this party a million times, and in every single version, it had ended with her and Shane alone.

Well, she was alone. So was he.

They just weren't alone *together*.

Claire swallowed and kept her gaze down on the plate. She was about to say the honest truth: *no*. She didn't have any plans. But the thought of being stuck here all day with her parents, with their frightened eyes and joyless smiles, was too much for her. 'Yeah,' she said. 'I'm...supposed to go to the lab. Myrnin wants me.'

Myrnin was her boss – her *vampire* boss – and she hated him. She hadn't always hated him, but he'd betrayed her one time too many, and the last time had been a doozy: he'd turned her and Michael and Shane over to their worst enemy, just because it was easier for him than being loyal to them when things got tough.

She could practically hear Shane's voice, heavy on the irony: *Well, he's a vampire. What did you expect?*

Something better, she guessed. And maybe that made her an idiot, because, hey, he's a vampire, and Myrnin had never been big on sanity anyway. She would have refused to work for him after that...only

she couldn't refuse anything Bishop ordered her to do directly. Magic. Claire didn't believe in magic – it was, as far as she was concerned, just science that hadn't been fully investigated yet – but this felt uncomfortably close to meeting the standard definition.

She didn't like to think of that moment when she became – as Eve had so clearly put it – the pawn of evil, because she was afraid, down in the sickest depths of her nightmares, that she'd made the wrong choice. As she reached for her glass of Coke, her long-sleeved shirt slipped back on her forearm to reveal what Bishop had done to her – blue ink, like some tribal biker tattoo, only this ink *moved*. Watching it slowly revolve and writhe under her skin made her sick.

*No such thing as magic. No such thing...*

Claire tugged her sleeve back down to hide it – not from her parents; they couldn't see anything wrong with her arm at all. It was something only she could see, and the vampires. She thought that it had become a little lighter since the day that Bishop had forced it on her, but maybe that was just wishful thinking. *If it fades out enough, maybe it'll stop working.* Stop forcing her to obey him when he gave her orders.

She had no way of knowing whether it was getting

weaker, one way or the other, unless she was willing to risk openly defying Bishop. That was slightly less healthy than swimming in a shark tank, smeared with fish oil and wearing a big Eat Me sign.

She'd ransacked Myrnin's library, looking for any hint of what Bishop had done to her, and how to get rid of it, but if the information was there, he'd hidden it away too well for her to find. *For your own good*, he'd probably have said, but she wouldn't believe him. Not anymore. Myrnin did only what was good for him, and no one else.

At least she could define what the tattoo had done to her – it had taken away her will to say no to Mr Bishop. *It's not magic*, she told herself for the thousandth time today. *It's not magic because there's no such thing as magic. Everything has an explanation. We just may not understand it yet, but this tattoo thing has rules and laws, and there's got to be a way to make it go away.*

Claire again tugged down the sleeve over the tattoo, and her fingers skimmed over the gold bracelet she still wore. Amelie's bracelet, with the symbol on it of the former vampire ruler of Morganville. Before Mr Bishop had arrived, it had been a mark of Protection...it meant she owed Amelie taxes, usually in the form of money, services, and donated blood, and in return Amelie – and the other vampires –

would play nice. It was sort of like the Mafia, with fangs. And it hadn't always worked, but it had been a lot better than walking around Morganville as a free lunch.

Now, though, the bracelet wasn't such an asset. She hadn't seen or heard from Amelie in weeks, and all of Amelie's allies seemed to be MIA. The most prominent vampires in Morganville were in hiding, or maybe even dead...or else they were under Bishop's control, and they had no real will of their own. Seemed like that was happening more and more as time went along. Bishop had decided it was more trouble to kill the opposition than to convert them.

Just like he'd converted her, although she was pretty much the only human he'd bothered to put directly under his thumb. He didn't have a very high opinion of people, generally.

Claire finished her cake, and then dutifully opened the birthday presents her parents brought to the table. Dad's package – wrapped by Mom, judging by the neat hospital corners on it – contained a nice silver necklace with a delicate little heart on it. Mom's package revealed a dress – Claire never wore dresses – in a colour and cut that Claire was sure would be drastically unflattering on her smallish frame.

But she kissed them both and thanked them, promised to try the dress on later, and modelled the

necklace for her dad when her mom buzzed off to the kitchen to put away the rest of the cake. She put it on over the cross necklace Shane had given her.

‘Here,’ Dad said, trying to be helpful. ‘I’ll get that other one off.’

‘No!’ She slapped a hand over Shane’s necklace and backed away, eyes wide, and Dad looked hurt and baffled. ‘Sorry. I...I never take this one off. It... was a gift.’

He understood then. ‘Oh. From that boy?’

She nodded, and tears prickled at her eyes again, burning hot. Dad opened his arms and held her tight for a moment, then whispered, ‘It’ll be OK, honey. Don’t cry.’

‘No, it won’t,’ she said miserably. ‘Not if we don’t *make* it OK, Dad. Don’t you understand that? We have to *do* something!’

He pushed her back to arm’s length and studied her with tired, faded eyes. He hadn’t been in good health for a while, and every time she saw him, Claire worried a little more. *Why couldn’t they leave my parents out of this? Why did they drag them here, into the middle of this?*

Things had been fine before – well, maybe not fine, but stable. When she’d come to attend college at Texas Prairie University, she’d had to leave the crazy-dangerous dorm to find some kind of safety,

and she'd ended up rooming at the Glass House, with Eve and Shane and Michael. Mom and Dad had remained safely far away, out of town.

Or they had, until Amelie had decided that luring them here would help control Claire better. Now they were Morganville residents. Trapped.

Just like Claire herself.

'We tried to leave, honey. I packed your mom up the other night and headed out, but our car died at the city limits.' His smile looked frail and broken around the edges. 'I don't think Mr Bishop wanted us to leave.'

Claire was a little bit relieved that at least they'd tried, but only for a second – then she decided that she was a lot more horrified. '*Dad!* Please don't try that again. If the vampires catch you outside the city limits—' Nobody left Morganville without permission; there were all kinds of safeguards to prevent it, but the fact that the vampires were ruthless about tracking people down was enough to deter most.

'I know.' He put his warm hands on either side of her face, and looked at her with so much love that it broke her heart. 'Claire, you think you're ready to take on the world, but you're not. I don't want you in the middle of all this. You're just too *young*.'

She gave him a sad smile. 'It's too late for

that. Besides, Dad, I'm not a kid anymore – I'm seventeen. Got the candles on the cake to prove it and everything.'

He kissed her forehead. 'I know. But you'll always be five years old to me, crying about a skinned knee.'

'That's embarrassing.'

'I felt the same way when my parents said it to me.' He watched as she fiddled with Shane's cross necklace. 'You're going to the lab?'

'What? Oh, yeah.'

He knew she was lying, she could tell, and for a moment, she was sure he'd call her on it. But instead he said, 'Please just tell me you're not going out today to try to save your boyfriend. Again.'

She put her hands over his. 'Dad. Don't try to tell me I'm too young. I know what I feel about Shane.'

'I'm not trying to do that at all,' her father said. 'I'm trying to tell you that right now, being in love with *any* boy in this town is dangerous. Being in love with *that* boy is suicidal. I wouldn't be thrilled under normal circumstances, and this isn't even close to normal.'

No kidding. 'I won't do anything stupid,' she promised. She wasn't sure she could actually keep that particular vow, though. She'd happily do something stupid if it gave her a single moment with Shane. 'Dad, I need to go. Thanks for the necklace.'

He stared at her so hard that she thought for a second he'd lock her in her room or something. Not that she couldn't find a way out, of course, but she didn't want to make him feel any worse than she had to.

He finally sighed and shook his head. 'You're welcome, honey. Happy birthday. Be careful.'

She stood for a moment, watching him play with his piece of birthday cake. He didn't seem hungry. He was losing weight, and he looked older than he had just a year ago. He caught her look. 'Claire. I'm *fine*. Don't make that face.'

'What face?'

Innocence wasn't going to work on him. 'The my-dad's-sick-and-I-feel-guilty-for-leaving face.'

'Oh, that one.' She tried for a smile. 'Sorry.'

In the kitchen, her mom was buzzing around like a bee on espresso. As Claire put the plates in the sink, her mother chattered a mile a minute – about the dress, and how she just knew Claire would look perfect in it, and they really should make plans to go out to a nice restaurant this week and celebrate in style. Then she went on about her new friends at the Card Club, where they played bridge and some kind of gin rummy and sometimes, daringly, Texas Hold 'Em. She talked about everything but what was all around them.

Morganville looked like a normal town, but it wasn't. Casual travellers came and went, and never knew a thing; even most of the college students stayed strictly on campus and put in their time without learning a thing about what was *really* going on – Texas Prairie University made sure it was a world unto itself. For people who lived here, the real residents, Morganville was a prison camp, and they were all inmates, and they were all too afraid to talk about it out in the open. Claire listened with her patience stretching as thin as plastic wrap, ready to rip, and finally interrupted long enough to get in a hasty, 'Thanks,' and, 'Be back soon; love you, Mom.'

Her mother stopped and squeezed her eyes shut. 'Claire,' she said in an entirely different tone – a genuine one. 'I don't want you to go out today. I'd like you to stay home, please.'

Claire paused in the doorway. 'I can't, Mom,' she said. 'I'm not going to be a bystander in all this. If you want to be, I understand, but that's not how you raised me.'

Claire's mom broke a plate. Just smashed it against the side of the sink into a dozen sharp-edged pieces that skittered all over the counter and floor.

And then she just stood there, shoulders shaking.

'It's OK,' Claire said, and quickly picked up the broken pieces from the floor, then swept the rest off

the counter. ‘Mom – *it’s OK*. I’m not afraid.’

Her mom laughed. It was a brittle, hysterical little laugh, and it scared Claire down to her shoes. ‘You’re not? Well, I am, Claire. I’m as afraid as I’ve ever been in my life. *Don’t go*. Not today. Please stay home.’

Claire stood there for a few seconds, took a deep breath, and dumped the broken china in the trash.

‘I’m sorry, but I really need to do this,’ she said. ‘Mom—’

‘Then go.’ Her mother turned back to the sink and picked up another plate, which she dipped into soapy water and began to scrub with special viciousness, as if she intended to wash the pink roses right off the china.

Claire escaped back to her room, put the dress in her closet, and grabbed up her battered backpack from the corner. As she was leaving, she caught sight of a photograph taped to her mirror. Their Glass House formal picture – Shane, Eve, herself, and Michael, caught mid-laugh. It was the only photo she had of all of them together. She was glad it was such a happy one, even if it was overexposed and a little out of focus. Stupid cell phone cameras.

On impulse, she grabbed the photo and stuck it in her backpack.

The rest of her room was like a time warp – Mom had kept all her things from high school and junior

high, all her stuffed animals and posters and candy-coloured diaries. Her Pokémon cards and her science kits. Her glow-in-the-dark stick-on stars and planets on the ceiling. All her certificates and medals and awards.

It felt so far away now, like it belonged to someone else. Someone who wasn't facing a shiny future as an evil minion, and trapped in Morganville for ever.

Except for her parents, the photograph was really the only thing in this whole house that she'd miss if she never came back.

And that was, unexpectedly, kind of sad.

Claire stood in the doorway for a long moment, looking at her past, and then she closed the door and walked away to whatever the future held.

## CHAPTER TWO

Morganville didn't look all that different now from when Claire had first come to town, and she found that really, really odd. After all, when the evil overlords took over, you'd think it would have made some kind of visible difference, at least.

But instead, life still went on – people went to work, to school, rented videos, and drank in bars. The only real difference was that nobody roamed around alone after dark. Not even the vampires, as far as she knew. The dark was Mr Bishop's hunting time.

Even that wasn't as much of a change as you'd think, though. Sensible people in Morganville had *never* gone out after dark if they could help it. Instincts, if nothing else.

Claire checked her watch. Eleven a.m. – and she really didn't have to go to the lab. In fact, the lab

was the last place she wanted to be today. She didn't want to see her supposed boss Myrnin, or hear his rambling crazy talk, or have to endure his questions about why she was so angry with him. He knew why she was angry. He wasn't *that* crazy.

Her dad had been right on the money. She intended to spend the day trying to help Shane.

First step: see the mayor of Morganville – Richard Morrell.

Claire didn't have a car, but Morganville wasn't all that big, really, and she liked walking. The weather was still good – a little cool even during the day now, but crisp instead of chilly. It was what passed for winter in west Texas, at least until the snowstorms. They'd had a few days of fall, which meant the leaves were a sickly yellow around the edges instead of dark green. She'd heard that fall was a beautiful season in other parts of the country and the world, but around here, it was more or less a half hour between blazing summer and freezing winter.

As she walked, people noticed her. She didn't like that, and she wasn't used to it; Claire had always been one of the Great Anonymous Geek Army, except when it came to a science fair or winning some kind of academic award. She'd never stood out physically – too short, too thin, too small – and it felt weird to have people focus on her and nod, or just plain stare.

Word had got around that she was Bishop's errand girl. He'd never made her *do* anything, really, but he made her carry his orders.

And bad things happened. Making her do it, while she was still wearing Amelie's bracelet, was Bishop's idea of a joke.

All the staring made the walk feel longer than it really was.

As she jogged up the steps to Richard's replacement office – the old one having been mostly trashed by a tornado at City Hall – she wondered if the town had appointed Richard as mayor just so they didn't have to change any of the signs. His father – the original Mayor Morrell, one of those Texas good ol' boys with a wide smile and small, hard eyes – had died during the storm, and now his son occupied a battered old storefront with a paper sign in the window that read, MAYOR RICHARD MORRELL, TEMPORARY OFFICES.

She would be willing to bet that he wasn't very happy in his new job. There was a lot of that going around.

A bell tinkled when Claire opened the door, and her eyes adjusted slowly to the dimness inside. She supposed he kept the lights low out of courtesy to vampire visitors – same reason he'd had the big glass windows in the front blacked out. But it made the small, dingy room feel like a cave to her – a cave

with bad wallpaper and cheap, thin carpeting.

Richard's assistant looked up and smiled as Claire shut the door. 'Hey, Claire,' she said. Nora Harris was a handsome lady of about fifty, neatly dressed in dark suits most of the time, and had a voice like warm chocolate butter sauce. 'You here to see the mayor, honey?'

Claire nodded and looked around the room. She wasn't the only person who'd come by today; there were three older men seated in the waiting area, and one geeky-looking kid still working off his baby fat, wearing a T-shirt from Morganville High with their mascot on it – a snake, fangs exposed. He looked up at her, eyes wide, and pretty obviously scared, and she smiled slightly to calm him down. It felt weird, being the person other people were scared to see coming.

None of the adults looked at her directly, but she could feel them studying her out of the corners of their eyes.

'He's got a full house today, Claire,' Nora continued, and nodded towards the waiting area. 'I'll let him know you're here. We'll try to work you in.'

'She can go ahead of me,' one of the men said. The others looked at him, and he shrugged. 'Don't hurt none to be nice.'

But it wasn't being nice; Claire knew that. It was

simple self-interest, sucking up to the girl who acted as Bishop's go-between to the human community. She was *important* now. She hated every minute of it.

'I won't be long,' she said. He didn't meet her gaze at all.

Nora gestured her towards the closed door at the back. 'I'll let him know you're coming. Mr Golder, you'll be next as soon as she's done.'

Mr Golder, who'd given up his place for Claire, nodded back. He was a sun-weathered man, skin like old boots, with eyes the colour of dirty ice. Claire didn't know him, but he smiled at her as she passed. It looked forced.

She didn't smile back. She didn't have the heart to pretend.

Claire knocked hesitantly on the closed door as she eased it open, peeking around the edge like she was afraid to catch Richard doing something...well, non-mayorly. But he was just sitting behind his desk, reading a file folder full of papers.

'Claire.' He closed the file and sat back in his old leather chair, which creaked and groaned. 'How are you holding up?' He stood up to offer her his hand, which she shook, and then they both sat down. She'd become so used to seeing Richard in a neatly pressed police uniform that it still felt odd to see him in a suit – a nice pin-striped one today, in grey, with a

blue tie. He wasn't that old – not even thirty, she'd guess – but he carried himself like somebody twice his age.

They had that in common, she guessed. She didn't feel seventeen these days, either.

'I'm OK,' she said, which was a lie. 'Hanging in there. I came to—'

'I know what you're going to ask,' Richard said. 'The answer's still no, Claire.' He sounded sorry about it, but firm.

Claire swallowed hard. She hadn't expected to get a no right off the bat. Richard usually heard her out. 'Five minutes,' she said. 'Please. Haven't I earned it?'

'Definitely. But it's not my call. If you want permission to see Shane, you have to go to Bishop.' Richard's eyes were kind, but unyielding. 'I'm doing all I can to keep him alive and safe. I want you to know that.'

'I know you are, and I'm grateful. Really.' Her heart sank. Somehow, she'd had her hopes up, even though she'd known it wouldn't work out, today of all days. She studied her hands in her lap. 'How is he doing?'

'Shane?' Richard laughed softly. 'How do you expect him to be? Pissed off. Angry at the world. Hating every minute of this, especially since he's stuck in there with nobody but his father for company.'

‘But you’ve seen him?’

‘I’ve dropped in,’ Richard said. ‘Official duties. So far, Bishop hasn’t seen fit to yank my chain and make me stop touring the cells, but if I try to get you in...’

‘I understand.’ She did, but Claire still felt heartsick. ‘Does he ask—’

‘Shane asks about you every day,’ Richard said very quietly. ‘Every single day. I think that boy might really love you. And I never thought I’d be saying that about Shane Collins.’

Her fingers were trembling now, a fine vibration that made her clench them into fists to make it stop. ‘It’s my birthday.’ She had no idea why she said that, but it seemed to make sense at the time. It seemed *important*. Looking up, she saw she’d surprised him with that, and he was temporarily at a loss for words.

‘Offering congratulations doesn’t seem too appropriate,’ he said. ‘So. You’re seventeen, right? That’s old enough to know when you’re in over your head. Claire, just go home. Spend the day with your parents, maybe see your friends. Take care of yourself.’

‘No. I want to see Shane,’ she said.

He shook his head. ‘I really don’t think that’s a very good idea.’

He meant well; she knew that. He came around

the desk and put his hand on her shoulder, a kind of half hug, and guided her back out the door.

*I'm not giving up.* She thought it, but she didn't say it, because she knew he wouldn't approve.

'Go home,' he said, and nodded to the man whose appointment Claire had taken. 'Mr Golder? Come on in. This is about your taxes, right?'

'Getting too damn expensive to live in this town,' Mr Golder growled. 'I ain't got that much blood to give, you know.'

Claire hoisted her backpack and went out to try something else that might get her in to see Shane.

Of course, it was something a lot more dangerous.

She tried to talk herself out of it, but in the end, Claire went to the last place she wanted to go – to Founder's Square, the vampire part of town. In broad daylight, it seemed deserted; regular people didn't venture here anymore, not even when the sun was blazing overhead, although it was a public park. There were some police patrolling on foot, and sometimes she could believe there were shapes flitting through the shadows under the trees, or in the dark spaces of the large, spacious buildings that faced the parklike square.

Those weren't people, though. Not technically.

Claire trudged down the white, smooth sidewalks,

head down, feeling the sun beat on her. She watched the grimy, round tips of her red lace-up sneakers. It was almost hypnotic after a while.

She came to a stop as the tips of her shoes bumped into the first of a wide expanse of marble stairs. She looked up – and up – at the largest building on the square: big columns, lots of steps, one of those imposing Greek temple styles. This was the vampire equivalent of City Hall, and inside...

‘Just go on already,’ she muttered to herself, and hitched her backpack to a more comfortable position as she climbed the steps.

Claire felt two things as the edge of the roof’s shadow fell over her – relief, from getting out of the sun, and claustrophobia. Her footsteps slowed, and for a second she wanted to turn around and take Richard’s advice – just go home. Stay with her parents. Be safe.

Pretend everything was normal, like her mom did.

The big, shiny wooden doors ahead of her swung open, and a vampire stood there, well out of the direct glare of sunlight, watching her with the nastiest smile she’d ever seen. Ysandre, Bishop’s token sex-kitten vamp, was beautiful, and she knew it. She posed like a Victoria’s Secret model, as if at any moment an unexpected photo shoot might begin.

Just now, she was wearing a skin-tight pair of low-rise blue jeans, a tight black crop top that showed acres of alabaster skin, and a pair of black low-heeled sandals. Skank-vamp casual day wear. She smoothed waves of shiny hair back from her face and continued to beam an evil smile from lips painted with Hooker Red #5.

‘Well,’ she said low in her throat, sweet as grits and poisoned molasses, ‘look what the cat dragged in. Come on, little Claire. Y’all are letting all the dark out.’

Claire had hoped that Ysandre was dead, once and for all; she’d thought that was pretty much inevitable, since the last time she’d seen her Ysandre had been in Amelie’s hands, and Amelie hadn’t been in a forgiving kind of mood.

But here she was, without a mark on her. Something had gone really wrong for Ysandre to still be alive, but Claire had no real way of finding out what. Ysandre might tell her, but it would probably be a lie.

Claire, lacking any other real choice, went inside. She stayed as far away from the skank as she could, careful not to meet the Vampire Stare of Doom. She wasn’t sure that Ysandre had the authority to hurt her, but it didn’t seem smart to take chances.

‘You come to talk to Mr Bishop?’ Ysandre asked.

‘Or just to moon around after that wretched boy of yours?’

‘Bishop,’ Claire said. ‘Not that it’s any of your business, unless you’re just a glorified secretary with fangs.’

Ysandre hissed out a laugh as she locked the doors behind them. ‘Well, you’re growing a pair, Bite-size. Fine, you skip off and see our lord and master. Maybe I’ll see him later, too, and tell him you’d be better at your job if you didn’t talk so much. Or at all.’

It was hard to turn her back on Ysandre, but Claire did it. She heard the vampire’s hissing chuckle, and the skin on the back of her neck crawled.

There was a touch of ice there, and Claire flinched and whirled to see Ysandre trailing pale, cold fingers in the air where the back of Claire’s neck had been.

‘Where’d you learn to be a vampire?’ Claire demanded, angry because she was scared and hating it. ‘The movies? Because you’re one big, walking, stupid cliché, and you know what? *Not impressed.*’

They stared at each other. Ysandre’s smile was wicked and awful, and Claire didn’t know what to do, other than stare right back.

Ysandre finally laughed softly and melted into the shadows.

Gone.

Claire took a deep breath and went on her

way – a way she knew all too well. It led down a hushed, carpeted hallway into a big, circular atrium armoured in marble, with a dome overhead, and then off to the left, down another hallway.

Bishop always knew when she was coming.

He stared right at her as she entered the room. There was something really unsettling about the way he watched the door, waiting for her. As bad as his stare was, though, his smile was worse. It was full of satisfaction, and ownership.

He was holding a book open in his hand. She recognised it, and a chill went down her spine. Plain leather cover with the embossed symbol of the Founder on it. That book had nearly got her killed the first few weeks she'd been in Morganville, and that had been well before she'd had any idea of its power.

It was a handwritten account, written mostly in Myrnin's code, with all his alchemical methods. All the secrets of Morganville, which he'd documented for Amelie. It had details even Claire didn't know about the town. About Ada. About *everything*.

It also contained jotted-down notes for what she could think of only as magic spells, like the one that had embedded the tattoo in her arm. She had no idea what else was in it, because Myrnin himself couldn't remember, but Bishop had wanted that book

very, very badly. It was the most important thing in Morganville to him – in fact, Claire suspected it was why he'd come here in the first place.

He snapped the book closed and slipped it into the inside pocket of his jacket, where a religious person might keep a copy of the Bible handy.

The room he'd taken over for his own was a big, carpeted office, with a small, fancy sofa and chairs at one end of it, and a desk at the other. Bishop never sat at the desk. He was always standing, and today was no different. Three other vampires sat in visitors' chairs – Myrnin, Michael Glass, and a vamp Claire didn't recognise...she wasn't even sure whether it was a man or a woman, actually. The bone structure of the pale face looked female, but the haircut wasn't, and the hands and arms looked too angular.

Claire focused on the stranger to avoid looking at Michael. Her friend – and he *was* still her friend; he couldn't help being in this situation any more than she could – wouldn't meet her eyes. He was angry and ashamed, and she wished she could help him. She wanted to tell him, *It's not your fault*, but he wouldn't believe that.

Still, it was true. Michael didn't have a magic tattoo on his arm; instead, he had Bishop's fang marks in his neck, which worked just as well for the life-challenged. She could still see the livid

shadow of the scars on his pale skin.

Bishop's bite was like a brand of ownership.

'Claire,' Bishop said. He didn't sound pleased. 'Did I summon you for some reason I've forgotten?'

Claire's heart jumped as if he'd used a cattle prod. She willed herself not to flinch. 'No, sir,' she said, and kept her voice low and respectful. 'I came to ask a favour.'

Bishop – who was wearing a plain black suit today, with a white shirt that had seen brighter days – picked a piece of lint from his sleeve. 'Then the answer is no, because I don't grant favours. Anything else?'

Claire wet her lips and tried again. 'It's a small thing – I want to see Shane, sir. Just for a few—'

'I said *no*, as I have half a hundred times already,' Bishop said, and she felt his anger crackle through the room. Michael and the strange vamp both looked up at her, eyes luminously threatening – Michael against his will, she was sure. Myrnin – dressed in some ratty assortment of Goodwill-reject pants and a frock coat from a costume shop, plus several layers of cheap, tacky Mardi Gras beads – just seemed bored. He yawned, showing lethally sharp fangs.

Bishop glared at her. 'I am very tired of you making this request, Claire.'

'Then maybe you should say yes and get it over with.'

He snapped his fingers. Michael got to his feet, pulled there like a puppet on a string. His eyes were desperate, but there seemed to be nothing he could do about it. ‘Michael. Shane is your friend, as I recall.’

‘Yes.’

“‘Yes, *my lord Bishop.*”

Claire saw Michael’s throat bob as he swallowed what must have been a huge chunk of anger. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘My lord Bishop.’

‘Good. Fetch him here. Oh, and bring some kind of covering for the floor. We’ll just remove this irritation once and for all.’

Claire blurted out, ‘No!’ She took a step forward, and Bishop’s stare locked tight onto her, forcing her to stop. ‘Please! I didn’t mean... Don’t hurt him! You can’t hurt him! Michael, don’t! Don’t do this!’

‘I can’t help it, Claire,’ he said. ‘You know that.’

She did. Michael walked away towards the door. She could see it all happening, nightmarishly real – Michael bringing Shane back here, forcing him to his knees, and Bishop...Bishop...

‘I’m sorry,’ Claire said, and took a deep, trembling breath. ‘I won’t ask again. Ever. I swear.’

The old man raised his thick grey eyebrows. ‘Exactly my point. I remove the boy, and I remove any risk that you won’t keep your word to me.’

‘Oh, don’t be so harsh, old man,’ Myrnnin said, and

rolled his eyes. ‘She’s a teenager in love. Let the girl have her moment. It’ll hurt her more, in the end. Parting is such sweet sorrow, according to the bards. I wouldn’t know, myself. I never parted anyone.’ He mimed ripping someone in half, then got an odd expression on his face. ‘Well. Just the one time, really. Doesn’t count.’

Claire forgot to breathe. She hadn’t expected Myrnin, of all of them, to speak up, even if his support had been more crazy than useful. But he’d given Bishop pause, and she kept very still, letting him think it over.

Bishop gestured, and Michael paused on his way to the door. ‘Wait, Michael,’ Bishop said. ‘Claire. I have a task for you to do, if you want to keep the boy alive another day.’

Claire felt a trembling sickness take hold inside. This wasn’t the first time, but she always assumed – had to! – that it would be the *last* time. ‘What kind of task?’

‘Delivery.’ Bishop walked to the desk and flipped open a carved wooden box. Inside was a small pile of paper scrolls, all tied up with red ribbon and dribbled with wax seals. He picked one seemingly at random to give her.

‘What is it?’

‘You know what it is.’

She did. It was a death warrant; she'd seen way too many of them. 'I can't—'

'I can order you to take it. If I do, I won't feel obliged to offer you any *favours*. This is the best deal you are going to get, little Claire: Shane's life for the simple delivery of a message,' Bishop said. 'And if you won't do it, I will send someone else, Shane dies, and you have a most terrible day.'

She swallowed. 'Why give me the chance at all? It's not like you to bargain.'

Bishop showed his teeth, but not his fangs – those were kept out of sight, but that didn't make him any less dangerous. 'Because I want you to understand your role in Morganville, Claire. You belong to me. I could order you to do it, with a simple application of will. Instead, I am allowing you to *choose* to do it.'

Claire turned the scroll in her fingers and looked down at it. There was a name on the outside of it, written in old-fashioned black calligraphy. *Detective Joe Hess*.

She looked up, startled. 'You can't—'

'Think very carefully about the next thing you say,' Bishop interrupted. 'If it involves telling me what I can or can't do in my own town, they will be your last words, I promise you.'

Claire shut her mouth. Bishop smiled.

'Better,' he said. 'If you choose to do so, go deliver

my message. When you come back, I'll allow you to see the boy, just this once. See how well we can get along if we try?'

The scroll felt heavy in Claire's hand, even though it was just paper and wax.

She finally nodded.

'Then go,' Bishop said. 'Sooner started, sooner done, sooner in the arms of the one you love. There's a good girl.'

Michael was looking at her. She didn't dare meet his eyes; she was afraid that she'd see anger there, and betrayal, and disappointment. It was one thing to be forced to be the devil's foot soldier.

It was another thing to choose to do it.

Claire walked quickly out of the room.

By the time she hit the marble steps and the warm sun, she was running.