

THE STORY SO FAR

Claire Danvers was going to Caltech. Or maybe MIT. She had her pick of great schools, but because she's only sixteen, her parents sent her to a supposedly safe place for a year to mature – Texas Prairie University, a small school in Morganville, Texas.

One problem: Morganville isn't what it seems. It's the last safe place for vampires, and that makes it not very safe at all for the humans who venture in for work or school. The vampires rule the town...and everyone who lives in it.

Claire's second problem is that she's gathered both human and vampire enemies. Now she lives with housemates Michael Glass (newly made a vampire), Eve Rosser (always been Goth), and Shane Collins (whose absentee dad is a wannabe vampire killer). Claire's the normal one...or she would be, except that she's become an employee of the town Founder,

Amelie, and befriended one of the most dangerous, yet most vulnerable, vampires of them all – Myrnin, the alchemist.

Now Amelie's vampire father, Bishop, has come to Morganville and destroyed the fragile peace, turning vampires against one another and creating dangerous new alliances and factions in a town that already had too many.

Morganville's turning in on itself, and Claire and her friends have chosen to stand with the Founder, but it could mean working with their enemies...and fighting their friends.

CHAPTER ONE

It was all going wrong, and Morganville was burning – parts of it, anyway.

Claire stood at the windows of the Glass House and watched the flames paint the glass a dull, flickering orange. She could always see the stars out here in the Middle of Nowhere, Texas – but not tonight. Tonight, there was—

‘You’re thinking it’s the end of the world,’ a cool, quiet voice said behind her.

Claire blinked out of her trance and turned to look. Amelie – the Founder, and the baddest vampire in town, to hear most of the others tell it – looked fragile and pale, even for a vampire. She’d changed out of the costume she’d worn to Bishop’s masked ball – not a bad idea, since it had a stake-sized hole in the chest, and she’d bled all over it. If Claire had needed proof that Amelie was tough, she’d certainly

got it tonight. Surviving an assassination attempt definitely gave you points.

The vampire was wearing grey – a soft grey sweater, and *pants*. Claire had to stare, because Amelie just didn't do pants. Ever. It was beneath her, or something.

Come to think of it, Claire had never seen her in the colour grey, either.

Talk about the end of the world.

'I remember when Chicago burnt,' Amelie said. 'And London. And Rome. The world doesn't end, Claire. In the morning, the survivors start to build again. It's the way of things. The human way.'

Claire didn't particularly want a pep talk. She wanted to curl up in her warm bed upstairs, pull pillows over her head, and feel Shane's arms around her.

None of that was going to happen. Her bed was currently occupied by Miranda, a freaked-out teenage psychic with dependency issues, and as for Shane...

Shane was about to *leave*.

'Why?' she blurted. 'Why are you sending him out there? You know what could happen—'

'I know a great deal about Shane Collins that you don't,' Amelie interrupted. 'He's not a child, and he has survived much in his young life. He'll survive this. And he wishes to make a difference.'

She was sending Shane into the predawn darkness with a few chosen fighters, both vampire and human, to take possession of the Bloodmobile: the last reliably accessible blood storage in Morganville.

And it was the last thing Shane wanted to do. It was the last thing Claire wanted for him.

‘Bishop isn’t going to want the Bloodmobile for himself,’ Claire said. ‘He wants it destroyed. Morganville’s full of walking blood banks, as far as he’s concerned. But it’ll hurt *you* if you lose it, so he’ll come after it. Right?’

The severe, thin line of Amelie’s mouth made it clear that she didn’t like being second-guessed. It definitely couldn’t be called a smile. ‘As long as Shane has the book, Bishop will not dare destroy the vehicle for fear of destroying his great treasure along with it.’

Translation: Shane was bait. Because of the *book*. Claire hated that damn book. It had brought her nothing but trouble from the time she’d first heard about it. Amelie and Oliver, the two biggest vamps in town, had both been scrambling to find it, and it had dropped into Claire’s hands instead. She wished she had the courage to grab it from Shane right now, run outside, and toss it in the nearest burning house to get rid of it once and for all, because as far as she could tell, it hadn’t done anybody any good, ever – including Amelie.

Claire said, 'He'll kill Shane to get it.'

Amelie shrugged. 'I gamble that killing Shane is far more difficult than it would appear.'

'Yeah, you are gambling. You're betting his life.'

Amelie's ice grey eyes were steady on hers. 'Be clear on this: I am, in fact, betting all our lives. So be grateful, child, and also be warned. I could concede this fight at any time. My father would allow me to walk away – only me, alone. Defeated. I stay out of duty to you and the others in this town who are loyal to me.' Her eyes narrowed. 'Don't make me reconsider that.'

Claire hoped she didn't look as mutinous as she felt. She pasted on what was supposed to be an agreeable expression, and nodded. Amelie's eyes narrowed even more.

'Get prepared. We leave in ten minutes.'

Shane wasn't the only one with a dirty job to do; they were all assigned things they didn't particularly like. Claire was going with Amelie to try to rescue another vampire – Myrnin. And while Claire liked Myrnin, and admired him in a lot of ways, she also wasn't too excited about facing down – again – the vampire holding him prisoner, the dreadful Mr Bishop.

Eve was off to the coffee shop, Common Grounds, with the just-about-as-awful Oliver, her former boss. Michael was about to head out to the university

‘Hey,’ Claire said. ‘Is this really a good time to start laundry?’

Eve rolled her eyes. ‘Cute. So, some people didn’t want to be caught dead in their stupid ball costumes, if you know what I mean. How about you? Ready to take that thing off?’

Claire looked down at herself. She was honestly surprised to realise that she was still wearing the tight, garish bodysuit of her Harlequin costume. ‘Oh, yes.’ She sighed. ‘Got anything without, you know, skulls?’

‘What’s wrong with skulls? And that would be a no, by the way.’ Eve dumped the armload of clothing on the floor and rooted through it, pulling out a plain black shirt and a pair of blue jeans. ‘The jeans are yours. Sorry, but I sort of raided everybody’s stash. Hope you like the underwear you have on; I didn’t go through your drawers.’

‘Afraid it might get you all turned on?’ Shane asked from over her shoulder. ‘Please say yes.’ He grabbed a pair of his own jeans from the pile. ‘And please stay out of my closet.’

Eve gave him the finger. ‘If you’re worried about me finding your porn stash, old news, man. Also, you have really boring taste.’ She grabbed a blanket from the couch and nodded towards the corner. ‘No privacy anywhere in this house tonight. Go on, we’ll fix up a changing room.’

The three of them edged past the people and vampires who packed the Glass House. It had become the unofficial campaign centre for their side of the war, which meant there were plenty of people tramping around, getting in their stuff, who none of them would have let cross the threshold under normal circumstances.

Take Monica Morrell. The mayor's daughter had shed her elaborate Marie Antoinette costume and was back to the blond, slinky, pretty, slimy girl Claire knew and hated.

'Oh my God.' Claire gritted her teeth. 'Is she wearing my *blouse*?' It was her only good one. Silk. She'd just bought it last week. Now she'd never be able to put it on again. 'Remind me to burn that later.' Monica saw her staring, fingered the collar of the shirt, and gave her an evil smile. She mouthed, *Thanks*. 'Remind me to burn it *twice*. And stomp on the ashes.'

Eve grabbed Claire by the arm and hustled her into the empty corner of the room, where she shook out the blanket and held it at arm's length to provide a temporary shelter.

Claire peeled off her sweat-soaked Harlequin costume with a whimper of relief, and shivered as the cool air hit her flushed skin. She felt awkward and anxious, stripped to her underwear with just a

blanket held up between her and a dozen strangers, some of whom probably wanted to eat her.

Shane leant over the top. 'You done?'

She squealed and threw the wadded-up costume at him. He caught it and waggled his eyebrows at her as she stepped into the jeans and quickly buttoned up the shirt.

'Done!' she called.

Eve dropped the blanket and smiled poison-sweet at Shane.

'Your turn, leather boy,' she said. 'Don't worry. I won't accidentally embarrass you.'

No, she'd embarrass him completely on purpose, and Shane knew it, from the glare he threw her. He ducked behind the blanket. Claire wasn't tall enough to check him out over the top – not that she wasn't tempted – but when Eve lowered the blanket, bit by bit, Claire grabbed one corner and pulled it back up.

'You're no fun,' Eve said.

'Don't mess with him. Not now. He's going out there alone.'

Eve's face went still and tight, and for the first time, Claire realised that the shine in her eyes wasn't really humour. It was a tightly controlled kind of panic. 'Yeah,' she said. 'I know. It's just – we're all splitting up, Claire. I wish we didn't have to do that.'

On impulse, Claire hugged her. Eve smelt of powder and some kind of darkly floral perfume, with a light undertone of sweat.

‘Hey!’ Shane’s wounded yell was enough to make them both giggle. The blanket had drooped enough to show him zipping up his pants. Fast. ‘Seriously, girls, *not cool*. A guy could do serious damage.’

He looked more like Shane now. The leather pants had made him unsettlingly hot-model gorgeous. In jeans and his old, faded Marilyn Manson T-shirt, he was somebody down-to-earth, somebody Claire could imagine kissing.

And she did imagine, just like that. It was, as usual, heart-racingly delicious.

‘Michael’s going out, too,’ Eve said, and now the tension she’d been hiding made her voice tremble. ‘I have to tell him—’

‘Go on,’ Claire said. ‘We’re right behind you.’

Eve dropped the blanket and pushed through the crowd, heading for her boyfriend, and the unofficial head of their strange and screwed-up fraternity.

It was easy to spot Michael in any group – he was tall and blond, with a face like an angel. As he caught sight of Eve heading towards him, he smiled, and Claire thought that was maybe the most complicated smile she’d ever seen, full of relief, welcome, love, and worry.

Eve crashed straight into him, hard enough to rock him back on his heels, and their arms went around each other.

Shane held Claire back with a touch on her shoulder. 'Give them a minute,' he said. 'They've got things to say.' She turned to look at him. 'And so do we.'

She swallowed hard and nodded. Shane's hands were on her shoulders, and his eyes had gone still and intense.

'Don't go out there,' Shane said.

It was what she'd been intending to say to *him*. She blinked, surprised.

'You stole my paranoia,' she said. 'I was going to say, *Don't go*. But you're going to, no matter what I say, aren't you?'

That threw him off just a little. 'Well, yeah, of course I am, but—'

'But nothing. I'll be with Amelie; I'll be OK. You? You're going off with the cast of *WWE Raw* to fight a cage match or something. It's not the same thing.'

'Since when do you ever watch wrestling?'

'Shut up. That's not the point, and you know it. Shane, *don't go*.' Claire put everything she had into it.

It wasn't enough.

Shane smoothed her hair and bent down to kiss

her. It was the sweetest, gentlest kiss he'd ever given her, and it melted all the tense muscles of her neck, her shoulders, and her back. It was a promise without words, and when he finally pulled back, he passed his thumb across her lips gently, to seal it all in.

'There's something I really ought to tell you,' he said. 'I was kind of waiting for the right time.'

They were in a room full of people, Morganville was in chaos outside, and they probably didn't have a chance of surviving until sunrise, but Claire felt her heart stutter and then race faster. The whole world seemed to go silent around her. *He's going to say it.*

Shane leant in, so close that she felt his lips brush her ear, and whispered, 'My dad's coming back to town.'

That so wasn't what she was hoping he'd say. Claire jerked back, startled, and Shane put a hand over her mouth. 'Don't,' he whispered. 'Don't say *anything*. We can't talk about this, Claire. I just wanted you to know.'

They couldn't talk about it because Shane's father was Morganville's most wanted, public enemy number one, and any conversation they had – at least here – was in danger of being overheard by unfriendly, undead ears.

Not that Claire was a fan of Shane's father; he was a cold, brutal man who'd used and abused Shane,

and she couldn't work up a lot of dread for seeing him behind bars...only she knew that Amelie and Oliver wouldn't stop at putting him in jail. Shane's father was marked for death if he came back. Death by burning. And while Claire wouldn't necessarily cry any big tears over him, she didn't want to put Shane through that, either.

'We'll talk about it,' she said.

Shane snorted. 'You mean, you'll yell at me? Trust me, I know what you're going to say. I just wanted you to know, in case—'

In case something happened to him. Claire tried to frame her question in a way that wouldn't tip their hand to any listening ears. 'When should I expect him?'

'Next few days, probably. But you know how it is. I'm out of the loop.' Shane's smile had a dark, painful edge to it now. He'd defied his dad once, because of Claire, and that meant cutting the ties to his last living family in the world. Claire doubted his dad had forgotten that, or ever would.

'Why now?' she whispered. 'The last thing we need is—'

'Help?'

'He's not *help*. He's chaos!'

Shane gestured at the burning town. 'Take a good look, Claire. How much worse can it get?'

Lots, she thought. Shane, in some ways, still had a rose-colored view of his father. It had been a while since his dad had blown out of town, and she thought that Shane had probably convinced himself that the guy wasn't all that bad. He was probably thinking now that his dad would come sweeping in to save them.

It wasn't going to happen. Frank Collins was a fanatic, car-bomb variety, and he didn't care who got hurt.

Not even his own son.

'Let's just—' She chewed her lip for a second, staring at him. 'Let's just get through the day, OK? Please? Be careful. Call me.'

He had his cell phone, and he showed it to her in mute promise. Then he stepped closer, and when his arms closed around her, she felt a sweet, trembling relief.

'Better get ready,' he said. 'It's going to be a long day.'

CHAPTER TWO

Claire wasn't sure if *get ready* meant put on her game face, brush her teeth, or pack up a lot of weapons, but she followed Shane to say goodbye to Michael first.

Michael was standing in the middle of a bunch of hard-looking types – some were vampires, and many she'd never seen before. They didn't look happy about playing defence, and they had that smelling-something-rotten expression that meant they didn't like hanging out with the human help, either.

The non-vamps with Michael were older, post-college – tough guys with lots of muscles. Even so, the humans mostly looked nervous.

Shane seemed almost small in comparison – not that he let it slow him down as he rushed the defensive line. He pushed a vampire out of his way

as he headed for Michael; the vampire flashed fang at him, but Shane didn't even notice.

Michael did. He stepped in the way of the offended vamp as it made a move for Shane's back, and the two of them froze that way, predators facing off. Michael wasn't the one to look down first.

Michael had a strange intensity about him now – something that had always been there, but being a vampire had ramped it up to about eleven, Claire thought. He still looked angelic, but there were moments when his angel was more fallen than flying. But the smile was real, and completely the Michael she knew and loved when he turned it on them.

He held out his hand for a manly kind of shake. Shane batted it aside and hugged him. There were manly backslaps, and if there was a brief flash of red in Michael's eyes, Shane didn't see it.

'You be careful, man,' Shane said. 'Those college chicks, they're wild. Don't let them drag you into any Jell-O shot parties. Stay strong.'

'You too,' Michael said. 'Be careful.'

'Driving around in a big, black, obvious lunch wagon in a town full of starving vampires? Yeah. I'll try to keep it low profile.' Shane swallowed. 'Seriously—'

'I know. Same here.'

They nodded at each other.

Claire and Eve watched them for a moment. The two of them shrugged. ‘What?’ Michael asked.

‘That’s it? That’s your big goodbye?’ Eve asked.

‘What was wrong with it?’

Claire looked at Eve, mystified. ‘I think I need guy CliffsNotes.’

‘Guys aren’t deep enough to need CliffsNotes.’

‘What were you waiting for, flowery poetry?’ Shane snorted. ‘I hugged. I’m done.’

Michael’s grin didn’t last. He looked at Shane, then Claire, and last – and longest – at Eve. ‘Don’t let anything happen to you,’ he said. ‘I love you guys.’

‘Ditto,’ Shane said, which was, for Shane, positively gushing.

They might have had time to say more, but one of the vampires standing around, looking pissed off and impatient, tapped Michael on the shoulder. His pale lips moved near Michael’s ear.

‘Time to go,’ Michael said. He hugged Eve hard, and had to peel her off at the end. ‘Don’t trust Oliver.’

‘Yeah, like you had to tell me that,’ Eve said. Her voice was shaking again. ‘Michael—’

‘I love you,’ he said, and kissed her, fast and hard. ‘I’ll see you soon.’

He left in a blur, taking most of the vampires with him. The mayor’s son, Richard Morrell – still in

his police uniform, although he was looking wrinkled and smoke stained now – led the humans at a more normal pace to follow.

Eve stood there with her kiss-smudged lips parted, looking stunned and astonished. When she regained the power of speech, she said, ‘Did he just say—?’

‘Yes,’ Claire said, smiling. ‘Yes, he did.’

‘Whoa. Guess I’d better stay alive, then.’

The crowd of people – fewer now than there had been just a few minutes before – parted around them, and Oliver strode through the gap. The second-most badass vampire in town had shed his costume and was dressed in plain black, with a long, black leather coat. His long greying hair was tied back in a tight knot at the back of his head, and he looked like he was ready to snap the head off anyone, vampire or human, who got in the way.

‘You,’ he snapped at Eve. ‘Come.’

He turned on his heel and walked away. This was not the Oliver they’d known before – certainly not the friendly proprietor of the local coffee shop. Even once he’d been revealed as a vampire, he hadn’t been *this* intense.

Clearly, he was done pretending to like people.

Eve watched him go, and the look in her eyes was boiling with resentment. She finally shrugged and took a deep breath. ‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘This’ll be so

much fun. See ya, Claire Bear.’

‘See you,’ Claire said. They hugged one last time, just for comfort, and then Eve was leaving, back straight, head high.

She was probably crying, Claire thought. Eve cried at times like these. Claire didn’t seem to be able to cry when it counted, like now. It felt like pieces of her were being pulled off, and she felt cold and empty inside. No tears.

And now it was her heart being ripped out, because Shane was being summoned impatiently by yet another hard-looking bunch of vampires and humans near the door. He nodded to them, took her hands, and looked into her eyes.

Say it, she thought.

But he didn’t. He just kissed her hands, turned, and walked away, dragging her red, bleeding heart with him – metaphorically, anyway.

‘I love you,’ she whispered. She’d said it before, but he’d hung up the phone before she’d got it out. Then she’d said it in the hospital, but he’d been doped up on painkillers. And he didn’t hear her now, as he walked away from her.

But at least *she* had the guts to try.

He waved to her from the door, and then he was gone, and she suddenly felt very alone in the world – and very..young. Those who were left in the Glass

House had jobs of their own, and she was in the way. She found a chair – Michael’s armchair, as it turned out – and pulled her feet up under her as humans and vampires moved around, fortifying windows and doors, distributing weapons, talking in low tones.

She might have become a ghost, for all the attention they paid her.

She didn’t have to wait long. In just a few minutes, Amelie came sweeping down the stairs. She had a whole scary bunch of vampires behind her, and a few humans, including two in police uniforms.

They were all armed – knives, clubs, swords. Some had stakes, including the policemen; they had them, instead of riot batons, hanging from their utility belts. *Standard-issue equipment for Morganville*, Claire thought, and had to suppress a manic giggle. *Maybe instead of pepper spray, they have garlic spray.*

Amelie handed Claire two things: a thin, silver knife, and a wooden stake. ‘A wooden stake in the heart will put one of us down,’ she said. ‘You must use the silver knife to kill us. No steel, unless you plan to take our heads off with it. The stake alone will not do it, unless you’re very lucky or sunlight catches us helpless, and even then, we are slower to die the older we are. Do you understand?’

Claire nodded numbly. *I’m sixteen*, she wanted to

say. *I'm not ready for this.*

But she kind of had to be, now.

Amelie's fierce, cold expression seemed to soften, just a touch. 'I can't entrust Myrnin to anyone else. When we find him, it will be your responsibility to manage him. He may be—' Amelie paused, as if searching for the right word. 'Difficult.' That probably wasn't it. 'I don't want you to fight, but I need you with us.'

Claire lifted the stake and the knife. 'Then why did you give me these?'

'Because you might need to defend yourself, or him. If you do, I don't want you to hesitate, child. Defend yourself and Myrnin at all costs. Some of those who come against us may be those you know. Don't let that stop you. We are in this to survive now.'

Claire nodded numbly. She'd been pretending that all this was some kind of action/adventure video game, like the zombie-fighting one Shane enjoyed so much, but with every one of her friends leaving, she'd lost some of that distance. Now it was right here in front of her: reality. People were dying.

She might be one of them.

'I'll stay close,' she said. Amelie's cold fingers touched her chin, very lightly.

'Do that.' Amelie turned her attention to the

others around them. ‘Watch for my father, but don’t be drawn off to face him. It’s what he wants. He will have his own reinforcements, and will be gathering more. Stay together, and watch each other closely. Protect me, and protect the child.’

‘Um – could you stop calling me that?’ Claire asked. Amelie’s icy eyes fixed on her in almost-human puzzlement. ‘Child, I mean? I’m not a child.’

It felt like time stopped for about a hundred years while Amelie stared at her. It probably had been at *least* a hundred years since the last time anybody had dared correct Amelie like that in public.

Amelie’s lips curved, very slightly. ‘No,’ she agreed. ‘You are not a child, and in any case, by your age, I was a bride and ruled a kingdom. I should know better.’

Claire felt heat build in her face. Great, she was blushing, as everybody’s attention focused on her. Amelie’s smile widened.

‘I stand corrected,’ she said to the rest of them. ‘Protect this *young woman*.’

She really didn’t feel like that, either, but Claire wasn’t going to push her luck on that one. The other vampires looked mostly annoyed with the distinction, and the humans looked nervous.

‘Come,’ Amelie said, and turned to face the blank far wall of the living room. It shimmered like an

asphalt road in the summer, and Claire felt the connection snap open.

Amelie stepped through what looked like blank wall. After a second or two of surprise, the vampires started to follow her.

‘Man, I can’t believe we’re doing this,’ one of the policemen behind Claire whispered to the other.

‘I can,’ the other whispered back. ‘My kids are out there. What else is there to do?’

She gripped the wooden stake tight and stepped through the portal, following Amelie.

Myrnin’s lab wasn’t any more of a wreck than usual. Claire was kind of surprised by that; somehow she’d expected Mr Bishop to tear through here with torches and clubs, but so far, he’d found better targets.

Or maybe – just maybe – he hadn’t been able to get in. Yet.

Claire anxiously surveyed the room, which was lit by just a few flickering lamps, both oil and electric. She’d tried cleaning it up a few times, but Myrnin had snapped at her that he liked things the way they were, so she’d left the stacks of leaning books, the piles of glassware on counters, the disordered piles of curling paper. There was a broken iron cage in the corner – broken because Myrnin had decided to escape from it once, and they’d never got around to

having it repaired once he'd regained his senses.

The vampires were whispering to one another, in sibilant little hisses that didn't carry even a hint of meaning to Claire's ears. They were nervous, too.

Amelie, by contrast, seemed as casual and self-assured as ever. She snapped her fingers, and two of the vampires – big, strong, strapping men – stepped up, towering over her. She glanced up.

'You will guard the stairs,' she said. 'You two.' She pointed to the uniformed policemen. 'I want you here as well. Guard the interior doors. I doubt anything will come through them, but Mr Bishop has already surprised us. I won't have him surprising us again.'

That cut their forces in half. Claire swallowed hard and looked at the two vampires and one human who remained with her and Amelie – she knew the two vampires slightly. They were Amelie's personal bodyguards, and one of them, at least, had treated her kind of decently before.

The remaining human was a tough-looking African American woman with a scar across her face, from her left temple across her nose, and down her right cheek. She saw Claire watching her, and gave her a smile. 'Hey,' she said, and stuck out a big hand. 'Hannah Moses. Moses Garage.'

'Hey,' Claire said, and shook hands awkwardly.

The woman had muscles – not quite Shane-quality biceps, but definitely bigger than most women would have found useful. ‘You’re a mechanic?’

‘I’m an everything,’ Hannah said. ‘Mechanic included. But I used to be a marine.’

‘Oh.’ Claire blinked.

‘The garage was my dad’s before he passed. I just got back from a couple of tours in Afghanistan – thought I’d take up the quiet life for a while.’ She shrugged. ‘Guess trouble’s in my blood. Look, if this comes to a fight, stay with me, OK? I’ll watch your back.’

That was so much of a relief that Claire felt weak enough to melt. ‘Thanks.’

‘No problem. You’re what, about fifteen?’

‘Almost seventeen.’ Claire thought she needed a T-shirt that said it for her; it would be a great time-saver – that, or some kind of button.

‘Huh. So you’re about my kid brother’s age. His name’s Leo. I’ll have to introduce you sometime.’

Hannah, Claire realised, was talking without really thinking about what she was saying; her eyes were focused on Amelie, who had made her way around piles of books to the doorway on the far wall.

Hannah didn’t seem to miss anything.

‘Claire,’ Amelie said. Claire dodged piles of books

and came to her side. ‘Did you lock this door when you left before?’

‘No. I thought I’d be coming back this way.’

‘Interesting. Because someone *has* locked it.’

‘Myrnin?’

Amelie shook her head. ‘Bishop has him. He has not returned this way.’

Claire decided not to ask how she knew that. ‘Who else—’ And then she knew. ‘Jason.’ Eve’s brother had known about the doorways that led to different destinations in town – maybe not about how they worked (and Claire wasn’t sure she did, either), but he definitely had figured out how to use them. Apart from Claire, Myrnin, and Amelie, only Oliver had the knowledge, and she knew where he’d been since her encounter with Mr Bishop.

‘Yes,’ Amelie agreed. ‘The boy is becoming a problem.’

‘Kind of an understatement, considering he, you know...’ Claire mimed stabbing with the stake, but not in Amelie’s direction – that would be like pointing a loaded gun at Superman. Somebody would get hurt, and it wouldn’t be Superman. ‘Um – I meant to ask, are you—?’

Amelie looked away from her, towards the door. ‘Am I what?’

‘OK?’ Because she’d had a stake in her chest not

all that long ago, and besides that, all the vampires in Morganville had a disadvantage, whether they knew it or not: they were sick – really sick – with something Claire could only think of as vampire Alzheimer’s.

And it was ultimately fatal.

Most of the town didn’t have a clue about that, because Amelie was rightly afraid of what might happen if they did – vampires and humans alike. Amelie had symptoms, but so far they were mild. It took years to progress, so they were safe for a while.

At least, Claire hoped it took years.

‘No, I doubt I am all right. Still, this is hardly the time to be coddling myself.’ Amelie focused on the door. ‘We will need the key to open it.’

That was a problem, because the key wasn’t where it was supposed to be. The key ring was gone from where Claire kept it, in a battered, sagging drawer, and the more Claire pawed through debris looking for it, the more alarmed she became. Myrnin kept the weirdest stuff... Books, sure, she loved books; small, deformed dead things in alcohol, not so much. He also kept jars of dirt – at least, she hoped it was dirt. Some of it looked red and flaky, and she was really afraid it might be blood.

The keys were missing. So were a few other things – significant things.

With a sinking feeling, Claire pulled open the half-broken drawer where she'd kept the bag with all the tranquilliser stuff, and Myrnnin's drug supplies.

Gone. Only a scrape in the dust to indicate where it had been.

That meant that if – *when* – Myrnnin turned violent, she wouldn't have her trusty dart gun to help her. Nor would she have even her trusty injectable pen, so cool, that she'd loaded up for emergencies, because it had been in the bag with the drugs. She'd lost the other supplies she'd had with her.

But even worse, she didn't have any medicine for him, other than the couple of small vials she had with her in her pockets.

In summary: so very screwed.

'Enough,' Amelie said, and turned to her bodyguard. 'I know this isn't easy, but if you would?'

He gave her a polite sort of nod, stepped forward, and took the lock in his hand.

His hand *burst into flame*.

'Oh my God!' Claire blurted, and clapped her hands over her mouth, because the vampire guy wasn't letting go. His face was contorted with pain, but he held on, somehow, and jerked and twisted the silver-plated lock until, with a scream of metal, it ripped loose. The hasp came with it, right off the door.

He dropped it to the floor. His hand kept burning.

Claire grabbed the first thing that came to hand – some kind of ratty old shirt Myrnin had left thrown on the floor – and patted out the fire. The smell of burnt flesh made her dry heave, and so did the sight of what was left of his hand. He didn't scream. She almost did it for him.

'A trap,' Amelie said. 'From my father. Gérard, are you able to continue?'

He nodded as he wrapped the shirt around the ruin of his hand. He was sweating fine pink beads – blood, Claire realised, as a trickle of it ran down his pale face. She realised that as she was standing there right in front of him, frozen in place, and his eyes flashed red.

'Move,' he growled at her. 'Stay behind us.' And then, after a brief pause, he said, 'Thank you.'

Hannah took her by the arm and pulled her to the spot in the back, out of vampire-grabbing range. 'He needs feeding,' she said in an undertone. 'Gérard's not a bad guy, but you don't want to make yourself too available for snack attacks. Remember, we're vending machines with legs.'

Claire nodded. Amelie put her fingers in the hole left by the broken lock and pulled the door open...on darkness.

Hannah said nothing. She didn't let go of Claire's arm.

For a long moment, nothing happened, and then the darkness flickered. Shifted. Things came and went in the shadows, and Claire knew that Amelie was shuffling destinations, trying to find the one she wanted. It seemed to take a very long time, and then Amelie took a sudden step back. ‘Now,’ she said, and her two bodyguards charged forward into what looked like complete darkness and were gone. Amelie glanced back at Hannah and Claire, and her black pupils were expanding fast, covering all the grey iris of her eyes, preparing for the dark.

‘Don’t leave my side,’ she said. ‘This will be dangerous.’