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"Nonstop vampire action ... will captivate readers and leave them craving more."—Darque Reviews

Praise for the Morganville Vampires Series

*Carpe Corpus*

“Ms. Caine offers readers an intriguing world where vampires rule, only the strongest survive, and romance offers hope in the darkest of hours. Each character is brought to life in superb detail, with unique personality quirks and a full spectrum of emotions. Carpe Corpus is well described, packed with action, and impossible to set down.”

—Darque Reviews

“Rachel Caine has carved out a unique niche in the urban fantasy subgenre with her super young-adult Morganville Vampires. The latest thriller contains plenty of action, but as always in this saga, Carpe Corpus is character driven by the good, the bad, and the evil.”

—Midwest Book Review

“The pace is brisk and a number of loose ends are tied up as one chapter on the town of Morganville closes and a new one begins.”

—Monsters and Critics

*Lord of Misrule*

“Ms. Caine uses her dazzling storytelling skills to share the darkest chapter yet ... an engrossing read.”

—Darque Reviews

“Filled with delicious twists that the audience will appreciatively sink their teeth into.”

—Genre Go Round Reviews

*Feast of Fools*

“Fast-paced and filled with action.... Fans of the series will appreciate Feast of Fools.”

—Genre Go Round Reviews

“Thrilling ... a fast-moving series where there’s always a surprise just around every dark corner.”

—Darque Reviews

“Very entertaining ... I could not put Feast of Fools down.... There is a level of tension in the Morganville books that keeps you on the edge of your seat; even in the background scenes you’re waiting for the other shoe to drop. And it always does.”

—Flames Rising
“Fantastic.... The excitement and suspense in Feast of Fools is thrilling, and I was fascinated reading about the town of Morganville. I greatly look forward to reading the next book.”

—Fresh Fiction

Midnight Alley

“A fast-paced, page-turning read packed with wonderful characters and surprising plot twists. Rachel Caine is an engaging writer; readers will be completely absorbed in this chilling story, unable to put it down until the last page.”

—Flamingnet

“Weaves a web of dangerous temptation, dark deceit, and loving friendships. The nonstop vampire action and delightfully sweet relationships will captivate readers and leave them craving more.”

—Darque Reviews

The Dead Girls’ Dance

“If you love to read about characters with whom you can get deeply involved, Rachel Caine is so far a one hundred percent sure bet to satisfy that need.”

—The Eternal Night

“Throw in a mix of vamps and ghosts and it can’t get any better than Dead Girls’ Dance.”

—Dark Angel Reviews

Glass Houses

“Rachel Caine brings her brilliant ability to blend witty dialogue, engaging characters, and an intriguing plot.”

—Romance Reviews Today

“A rousing horror thriller that adds a new dimension to the vampire mythos ... Glass Houses is an electrifying, enthralling coming-of-age supernatural tale.”

—Midwest Book Review

“A solid paranormal mystery and action plotline that will entertain adults as well as teenagers. The story line has several twists and turns that will keep readers of any age turning the pages.”

—LoveVampires

Praise for Rachel Caine’s Weather Warden Series
“You’ll never watch the Weather Channel the same way again.”

—Jim Butcher

“Rachel Caine takes the Weather Wardens to places the Weather Channel never imagined!”—Mary Jo Putney

“The Weather Warden series is fun reading ... more engaging than most TV.”

—Booklist

“A fast-paced thrill ride [that] brings new meaning to stormy weather.”

—Locus

“An appealing heroine with a wry sense of humor that enlivens even the darkest encounters.”

—SF Site
THE MORGANVILLE VAMPIRES

Glass Houses
The Dead Girls’ Dance
Midnight Alley
Feast of Fools
Lord of Misrule
Carpe Corpus
Fade Out
Kiss of Death
To the wonderful people in Des Moines, Carroll, Fort Dodge, Rockwell City, and Clive for making me welcome in the great state of Iowa! To my wonderful friends at Legacy Books (Dallas), the Mystery Bookstore (LA), Murder by the Book (Houston), and Borders Express (Exton, PA) for all your support and enthusiasm. See you soon, I hope!
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Far too many awesome people have made it possible for this book to be in your hands today, but I must send extraspecial thanks to my Sunday Night pals (Pat, Jackie, Bill, Heidi, J.T., and Joanne), who make even the worst weeks bearable. Also, Joe Bonamassa, Lucienne Diver, Anne Sowards, Jim Suhler, Felicia Day, Jim Conrad, and M. Conrad—all of whom make my days a little brighter. Bless.
INTRODUCTION

WELCOME TO MORGANVILLE. YOU’LL NEVER WANT TO LEAVE.

So, you’re new to Morganville. Welcome, new resident! There are only a few important rules you need to know to feel comfortable in our quiet little town:

- Obey the speed limits.
- Don’t litter.
- Whatever you do, don’t get on the bad side of the vampires.

Yeah, we said vampires. Deal with it.

As a human newcomer, you’ll need to find yourself a vampire Protector—someone willing to sign a contract to keep you and yours safe from harm (especially from the other vampires). In return, you’ll pay taxes ... just like in any other town. Of course, in most other towns those taxes don’t get collected by the Bloodmobile.

Oh, and if you decide not to get a Protector, you can do that, too ... but you’d better learn how to run fast, stay out of the shadows, and build a network of friends who can help you. Try contacting the residents of the Glass House—Michael, Eve, Shane, and Claire. They know their way around, even if they always end up in the middle of the trouble somehow.

Welcome to Morganville. You’ll never want to leave.
And even if you do ... well, you can’t.
Sorry about that.
The way the Glass House worked, on a practical level, was that there was a schedule for the stuff that had to be done —cooking, cleaning, fixing things, laundry. Technically, they were all on every housemate’s list. In practice, though, what happened was this: the boys (Michael and Shane) bribed the girls (Eve and Claire) to do the laundry, and the girls bribed the boys to fix things.

Claire glared at her new iPod—which was actually really nice—and put it on shuffle as she looked at the mess she’d made of her latest laundry effort. And there was the problem: she loved the hot pink iPod, which had been a heck of a good bribe, and she really didn’t deserve it, because the laundry was ... also pink—which would have been almost fine if it had been a load full of girls’ underwear or something.

But not so much with guy clothes; she could not even imagine what kind of screaming that was going to bring.

“Yeah.” She sighed, staring at the very definitely pink piles of shirts, socks, and underwear. “Not going to be a good afternoon.” It was amazing what one—one—stupid red sock could do. She’d already tried running it all through the washer again, hoping the problem would just go away. No such luck.

The basement of the Glass House was big, dark, and creepy, which wasn’t really such a surprise. Most basements were, and this was Morganville. Morganville went in for dark and creepy the way Las Vegas went in for neon. Apart from the area Claire was in, with a battered washer and dryer, a table that had once been painted some kind of industrial green, and some shelves filled with unidentifiable junk, the rest of the basement was dim and quiet. Hence the iPod, which pumped cheery music through the headphones and made the creepy retreat a little less creepy.

Creepy, she could fight.

Pink underwear ... apparently not.

She had the music cranked up so high that she failed to hear steps coming down the stairs. In fact, she had no clue she wasn’t completely alone until she felt a hand touch her shoulder and hot breath against her neck.

She reacted as any sensible person living in a town full of vampires would. She screamed. The shriek echoed off the brick and concrete, and Claire whirled, clapped her hands over her mouth, and backed away from Eve, who was collapsing in laughter. The Goth look usually didn’t go well with hysterical giggles, unless they were evil giggles, but somehow Eve managed to pull it off.

Claire ripped the headphones out of her ears and gasped. “You—you—”

“Oh, spit it out already,” Eve managed to say. “Bitch. I am. I know. That was evil. But, oh my God, funny.”

“Bitch,” Claire said, late and not at all meaning it. “You scared me.”

“Kind of the point,” Eve said, and got herself under control. Her mascara was a little smeared, but Claire supposed that was all part of the Goth thing, anyway. “So, what’s up, pup?”

“Trouble,” Claire replied with a sigh. Her heart was still pounding from the scare, but she was determined not to let it show. She pointed at the laundry on the table.

Eve’s eyes went wide, and her black-painted lips parted in horrified fascination. “That’s not trouble; that’s fail. Tell me that isn’t all the whites. Like, Michael’s and Shane’s, too.”

“All the whites,” Claire said, and held up the guilty red sock. “Yours?”

“Oh, damn.” Eve snatched it out of Claire’s fingers and shook the sock like a floppy rattle. “Bad sock! Bad! You are never going anywhere fun ever again!”

“I’m serious. They’re going to kill me.”

“They’ll never get the chance. I’m going to kill you. Do I look to you like someone who rocks pastel?”

Well, that was a definite point. “Sorry,” Claire said. “Seriously. I tried washing them again, without the sock, but—”

Eve shook her head, reached down to the lowest level of the shelf, and pulled out a bottle of bleach, which she thumped down on the table next to the laundry. “You bleach; I’ll supervise, because I’m not taking the chance of getting a drop on this outfit, ’k? It’s new.”

The outfit in question was hot pink—it matched Claire’s new iPod, actually—with (of course) black horizontally striped tights, a black pleated miniskirt, and a blazing magenta top with a skull all blinged out in crystal on it. Eve had done up her dyed black hair in a messy pile on top of her head, with stray bits sticking up in all directions.

She looked creepy/adorable.

As Claire reloaded the laundry, with a shot of bleach, Eve climbed up on the dryer and kicked her feet idly. “So, you heard the news, right?”


“Hot is good,” Eve confirmed. “Michael got another call from that music producer guy. You know, the one from
Dallas? The important one, with the daughter at school here. He wants to set Michael up with some club dates in Dallas and a couple of days at a recording studio. I think he’s serious.”

Eve was trying to sound excited about it, but Claire could follow the road signs. Sign one (shaped like an Exit sign): Michael Glass was Eve’s serious, longtime crush/boyfriend. Sign two (DANGER, CURVES): Michael Glass was hot, talented, and sweet. Sign three (yellow, CAUTION): Michael Glass was a vampire, which made everything a million times more complicated. Sign four (flashing red): Michael had begun acting more like a vampire than the boy Eve loved, and they’d already had some pretty spectacular fights about it—so bad, in fact, that Claire was not sure Eve wasn’t thinking about breaking up with him.

All of which led to sign five (STOP).

“You think he’ll go?” Claire asked, and concentrated on setting the right temperature on the washer. The smell of the detergent and bleach was kind of pleasant, like really sharp flowers, the kind that would cut you if you tried to pick them. “To Dallas, I mean?”

“I guess.” Eve sounded even less enthusiastic. “I mean, it’s good for him, right? He can’t just hang around playing at coffee shops in Jugular, Texas. He needs to ...” Her voice faded out, and she looked down at her lap with a focus Claire thought the skirt really didn’t deserve. “He needs to be out there.”

“Hey,” Claire said, and as the washer began chugging away, washing away the stains, she put her hands on Eve’s knees. The kicking stopped, but Eve didn’t look up. “Are you guys breaking up?”

Eve still didn’t look up. “I cry all the time,” she said. “I hate this. I don’t want to lose him. But it’s like he just keeps getting farther and farther away, you know? And I don’t know how he feels. What he feels. If he feels. It’s awful.”

Claire swallowed hard. “I think he still loves you.”

Now she got Eve to look at her—big, vulnerable dark eyes rimmed by all the black. “Really? Because ... I just ...”

Eve took a deep breath and shook her head. “I don’t want to get dumped. It’s going to hurt so bad, and I’m so scared he’ll find somebody else. Somebody, you know, better.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen,” Claire said. “Not ever.”

“Easy for you to say. You haven’t seen how the girls throw themselves at him after shows.”

“Yeah, you’d never do that.”

Eve looked up sharply, smiled a little, then looked back down. “Yeah, okay, whatever. But it’s different when he’s my Michael and they’re the ones who are all, you know ... Anyway, he’s just always so nice to them.”

Claire jumped up next to her on the dryer and kicked her feet in rhythm with Eve’s. “He has to be nice, right? That’s his job, kind of. And we were talking about whether you guys were breaking up. Are you?”

“I don’t know. It’s weird right now. It hurts, and I want the hurt to be over, one way or another, you know?”

Eve’s shoulders rose and fell in a shrug that somehow managed to be depressed at the same time. “Besides, now he’s running off to Dallas. They won’t let me go, if he does. I’m just, you know. Human.”

“You’ve got one of the cool frat pins. Nobody would stop you.” The cool frat pins were a gift from Amelie, the town’s Founder, one of the most frighteningly quiet vampires Claire had ever met, and Claire’s boss, technically. They worked like the bracelets most people in town wore, the ones that identified individuals or families as being Protected by a specific vampire, only these were better.... People who wore these pins didn’t have to give blood or take orders. They weren’t owned.

As far as Claire knew, there were fewer than ten people in all of Morganville who had this kind of status, and it meant freedom—in theory—from a lot of the scarier elements of town.

This was all because they’d gotten in over their heads, had to fight their way out of it, and done some good for Amelie in the process. It was heroism by accident, in Claire’s opinion, but she definitely wasn’t turning down the pin or what the pin represented.

“If they decide Michael can go, I’ll still have to file an application for temporary leave,” Eve said. “So would you, or Shane, if you wanted to tag along. And they could turn us down. They probably would.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re mostly asshats? Not to mention bloodsucking vampire asshats, which doesn’t exactly make them fair from the beginning.”

Claire could see her point, actually, which was depressing. The air filled with the smells of laundry, which was homey and didn’t go too well with depressing. Claire remembered her iPod, which was still blaring away at her headphones, and clicked it off. They sat in silence for a while, and then Eve said, “I wish the dryer were running, because man, I could use a good ... tumble dry.”

Claire burst out laughing and, after a second, Eve joined her, and it was all okay.

Even in the dark. Even in the basement.

In the end, the laundry was only a little pink.
Dinner was taco night, and it was Claire’s turn for that, too, which somehow seemed wrong, but she’d switched with Michael when she’d been staying late at the university library, so she was stuck with Chore Day. Not that she minded making tacos; she liked it, actually.

Shane blew in the door just as she was chopping the last of the onions, which was typical Shane timing; five minutes earlier, and she’d have made him do the chopping. Instead, he arrived just as she was wiping tears away from her stinging eyes. Perfect.

He didn’t care that her eyes were red, apparently, because he kicked the kitchen door shut, slammed the dead bolt with a gesture so smooth it looked automatic, set a bag on the counter, and leaned over to kiss her. It was one of those hi-I’m-home kisses, not one of his really good ones, but it still made Claire’s heart flutter a little bit in her chest. Shane looked ... like Shane, she guessed, which was fine with her. Tall, broad, he had sun-streaked slacker hair and a heartbreaker’s smile. He was wearing a Killers T-shirt that smelled like barbecue, from his job.

“Hey!” she protested—not very sincerely—and waved the knife she’d been using to chop onions. “I’m armed!”

“You taste like barbecue.”

“You taste like barbecue.”

“And that’s a win-win!” He grinned at her, reached over, and rattled the paper bag he’d set on the counter. “How about some brisket tacos?”

“That is so wrong, you know. Brisket does not go in tacos.”

“Twisted, yet delicious. I say yes.”

Claire sighed and dumped the chopped onions into a bowl. “Hand me the brisket.” Secretly, she liked brisket tacos; she just liked giving him a hard time more.

“You know,” Claire said as she got the barbecue out of the bag, “you really ought to talk to Michael.”

“About what?”

“What do you think? About what’s going on with him and Eve!”

“Oh hell no. Guys don’t talk about that crap.”

“You’re serious.”

“Really.”

“What do you talk about?”

Shane looked at her as if she were insane. “You know. Stuff. We’re not girls. We don’t talk about our feelings. I mean, not to other guys.”

Claire rolled her eyes and said, “Fine, be emotionally stunted losers; I don’t care.”

“Good. Thanks. I’ll do that.” The door opened, and Michael shuffled in, rocking the worst bed head Claire had ever seen him with. “Whoa. Dude, you look like crap. You getting enough iron in your diet?”

“Screw you, and thanks. I just woke up. What’s your excuse?”

“I work for a living, man. Unlike the nightwalking dead.”

Michael went straight past them and from the refrigerator took a sports bottle, which he stuck in the microwave for fifteen seconds. Claire was grateful the smell of the onions, brisket, and taco meat covered the smell of what was in the bottle. Well, they all knew what it was, but if she pretended really hard, it didn’t have to be quite as obvious.

Michael drank from his sports bottle, then wandered over to look at what they were doing. “Cool, tacos. How long?”

The doorbell rang. “I’ll get it!” Eve yelled, and there was something in her voice that really didn’t sound quite right. More ... desperate than eager, as if she wanted to stop them from getting to it first. Claire glanced over at Shane, and he raised his eyebrows.

“Uh-oh,” he said. “Either she’s finally dumping you, Mikey, and her new boy’s coming for dinner, or—”

It was the or, of course. After a short delay, Eve opened the swinging door just wide enough to stick her face inside. She tried for a smile. It almost worked. “Uh—so I invited someone to dinner,”

“Nice time to tell us,” Shane said.

“Shut up. You’ve got enough food for the Fifth Armored Division and all of us. We can fill one more plate.” But she was having trouble keeping eye contact, and as Claire watched, Eve bit her lip and looked away completely.

“Crap,” Michael said. “I’m not going to like this, am I? Who is it?”

Eve silently opened the door the rest of the way. Behind her, standing with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans jacket, head down, was her brother, Jason Rosser.

Jason looked—different, Claire thought. For one thing, he usually looked strung out and dirty and violent, and now he looked almost sober, and he was definitely on speaking terms with showers. Still skinny, and she couldn’t say much for the baggy clothes he was wearing, but he looked ... better than she’d ever seen him.
And even so, something inside her flinched, hard, at the sight of him. Jason was associated with several of her worst, scariest memories, and even if he hadn’t actually hurt her, he hadn’t helped her, either—or any of the girls who’d been hurt, or killed. Jason was a bad, bad kid. He’d been an accomplice to at least three murders and to an attack on Claire.

And neither Shane nor Michael had forgotten any of that.

“Get him out of here,” Shane said in a low, dangerous-sounding tone. “Now.”

“It’s Michael’s house,” Eve said, without looking at any of them directly. “Michael?”

“Wait a second—it’s our house! I live here, too!” Shane shot back. “You don’t get to drag his low-life ass in here and act as if nothing happened with him!”

“He’s my brother! And he’s trying, Shane. God, you can be such a—”

“It’s okay,” Claire said. Her hands were shaking, and she felt cold, but she also saw Jason lift his head, and for a second their eyes met. It was like a physical shock, and she wasn’t sure what she saw, or what he saw, but neither one of them could hold it for long. “It’s just dinner. It’s not a big deal.”

Shane turned toward her, eyes wide, and put his hands on her shoulders. “Claire, he hurt you. Hell, he hurt me, too! Jason is not some stray mutt you can take in and feed, okay? He’s psycho. And she knows it better than anybody.” He glared at Eve, who frowned but didn’t glare back as she normally would have. “You expect us all to just play nice with him now that he figures out the bad guys aren’t winning, so he cranks out a quick apology? Because it’s not happening. It’s just not.”

“Yeah, I figured it would go this way. Sorry I bothered you,” Jason said. His voice sounded faint and rusty, and he turned and walked away, toward the front door and out of their line of sight. Eve went after him, and she must have tried to stop him, because Claire heard his soft voice say, “No, he’s not wrong. I’ve got no right to be here. I did bad things, sis. This was a mistake.”

Of all of them, only Michael hadn’t spoken—hadn’t moved, in fact. He was staring at the swinging door as it swayed back and forth, and finally he took a deep breath, set down his sports bottle, and went out into the hallway.

Claire smacked at Shane’s arm. “What the hell was that, macho man? You have to come to my rescue all the time, even when nobody’s trying to hurt me?”

He seemed honestly surprised. “I was just—”

“I know what you were just doing. You don’t speak for me!”

“I wasn’t trying to—”

“Yes, you were. Look, I know Jason’s no saint, but he got himself together, and he stuck with Eve when all of us were—out of commission, when Bishop was in charge. He protected her.”

“And he let his crazy buddy Dan grab you and almost kill you, and he didn’t do anything!”

“He did,” Claire said flatly. “He left me to find help. I know because Richard Morrell told me later. Jason went to the cops and tried to tell them. They didn’t believe him or they’d have gotten help to me a lot earlier.” Earlier would have meant a lot less terror and pain and despair. It wasn’t Jason’s fault that they’d figured him for crazy.

Shane was thrown, a little, but he came back swinging. “Yeah, well, what about those other girls? He didn’t help them, did he? I’m not friend ing up somebody like that.”

“Nobody said you had to,” Claire shot back. “Jason’s done his time in jail. Sitting at the same table isn’t like swearing eternal brotherhood.”

He opened his mouth, closed it, and then said, very tightly, “I just wanted to make sure he didn’t have a chance to hurt you again.”

“Unless he uses a taco as a deadly weapon, he hasn’t got much of a shot. Having you, Michael, and Eve here is about the best protection I could want. Anyway, would you rather have him where you can see him, or where you can’t?”

Some of the fire faded out of his eyes. “Oh. Yeah, okay.” He still looked uncomfortable, though. “You do crazy crap, you know. And it’s contagious.”

“I know.” She put her hand on his cheek, and got a very small smile in return. “Thanks for wanting to keep me safe. But don’t overdo it, okay?”

Shane made a sound of frustration deep in his throat, but he didn’t argue. The kitchen door swung open again. It was Michael, looking fully awake and very calm, as if bracing for a fight. “I talked to him,” he said. “He’s sincere enough. But if you don’t want him here, Shane—”

“I damn sure don’t,” Shane said, then glanced at Claire and continued. “But if she’s willing to give it a shot, I will.”

Michael blinked, then raised his eyebrows. “Huh,” he said. “The universe explodes, hell freezes, and Shane does something reasonable.”

Shane silently offered him the finger. Michael grinned and backed out of the kitchen again.
Claire handed Shane the biggest knife they had. “Chop brisket,” she said. “Take out your frustrations.”

The brisket didn’t stand a chance.

Jason didn’t say much at dinner. In fact, he was almost completely silent, though he ate four tacos as if he’d been starving for a month, and when Eve brought out ice cream for dessert, he ate a double helping of that, too.

Shane was right. The brisket was delicious in the tacos.

Eve, compensating for her brother, chattered like a magpie on crack the whole time—about dumb-asses at the coffee shop where she worked, Common Grounds; about Oliver, her vampire boss, who was a full-time jerk, as far as Claire was concerned, although apparently he was a surprisingly fair supervisor; gossip about people in town. Michael contributed some juicy stuff about the vampire side of town (Claire, for one, had never considered that vampires could fall in and out of love just like regular people—well, vampires other than Michael, and maybe Amelie.) Shane finally loosened up on his glares and brought up some embarrassing stories from Michael’s and Eve’s pasts. If there were embarrassing stories he knew about Jason, he didn’t get into telling them.

It started out deeply uncomfortable, but by the time the ice cream bowls were empty, it felt kind of—normal. Not great—there was still a cautious tension around the table—but there was guarded acceptance.

Jason finally said, “Thanks for the food.” They all stopped talking and looked at him, and he kept his own gaze down on the empty dessert bowl. “Shane’s right. I got no right to think I can just show up here and expect you not to hate my guts. You should.”


Jason didn’t seem to mind. “I needed to come and tell you that I’m sorry. It’s been—things got weird, man. Real weird. And I got real screwed up, in all kinds of ways. Until that thing happened with Claire ... Look, I never meant—she wasn’t part of it. That was all on him.” Him meant the other guy, the one none of them mentioned, ever. Claire felt her palms sweating and wiped them against her jeans. Her mouth felt dry. “But I’m guilty of other stuff, and I confessed to all of it to the cops, and I did time for it. I never killed anybody, though. I just—wanted to be somebody who got respect.”

Michael said, “That’s how you think you get respect around here? As a killer?”

Jason looked up, and it was eerie, seeing eyes exactly like Eve’s in such a different face, simmering with anger. “Yeah,” he said. “I did. I still do. And I don’t need a frigging vampire to set me straight about that, either. In Morganville, when you’re not one of the sheep, and you’re not one of the wolves, you’d better be one mean-ass junkyard dog.”

Claire glanced over at Shane and was surprised to see that he wasn’t hopping on the angry train. In fact, he was looking at Jason as if he understood what he was saying. Maybe he did. Maybe it was a guy thing.

Nobody spoke, and finally Jason said, “So anyway, I just wanted to say thanks for helping get me out of jail. I’d be dead by now if you hadn’t. I won’t forget.” He scraped his chair back and stood up. “Thanks for the tacos. Dinner was real good. I haven’t—I haven’t sat at a table with people for a really long time.”

Then, without making eye contact with any of them, he walked away, down the hall. Eve jumped up and ran after him, but before she got to him, he was out the front door and slamming it behind him. She opened it and looked out, but didn’t follow. “Jason!” she called, but without any real hope he’d come back. Then, finally, hopelessly, she called again, “Be careful!”

She slowly closed the door again, locked it, and came back to flop in her chair at the dinner table, staring at the remains of their taco feast.

“Hey,” Shane said. “Eve.”

She looked up.

“It took guts for him to come here and try to apologize. I respect that.”

She looked surprised, and for a second she smiled. “Thanks. I know Jason’s never going to be ... well, a good guy in any kind of way, but he’s—I can’t just turn my back on him. He needs somebody to keep him from going off the rails.”

Michael took a drink from his sports bottle. “He’s the train,” he said. “You’re on the tracks. Think about what’s going to happen, Eve.”

Her smile faded. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that your brother is a junkie and one sick dude even if he’s feeling sentimental right now. That’s probably not really his fault, but he’s trouble, and now we sat down with him and he apologized and it’s all done, okay? He’s not coming back. He’s not family. Not in this house.”

“But—”

When Claire had first met Michael Glass, he’d been cold and kind of harsh to her, and now that Michael came out again...
At Eve.

“Eve, we’re not going to argue about it,” Michael said flatly, and he looked like an angry, angry angel, the smiting kind. “House rules. You don’t bring that kind of trouble in the door.”

“Oh, please, Michael, don’t even think about pulling that crap. If that’s the rule, are you throwing Claire out now? Because I’m betting she is the most trouble that ever walked in here on two feet. You and Shane drag your own hassles in all the time. But I don’t get to have my own brother over for dinner?” Eve’s voice was shaking, she was so angry now, and she was trying not to cry, but Claire could see the tears welling up in her dark eyes. “Come on! You’re not my dad!”

“No, I’m your landlord,” he said. “Bringing Jason in here puts everybody at risk. He’s going to go back to the dark side on us, if he ever left in the first place. I’m just trying to keep things sane around here.”

“Then try talking to me instead of just ordering me around!” Eve shoved dishes off onto the floor, spilling the remains of tacos everywhere, and dashed for the stairs.

Michael got there first, easily; he moved in a blur, vampire speed, and blocked her access. Eve came to a skidding halt, pale even underneath her rice-powder makeup. “So you’re proving your point by going all vamp on me?” she said. “Even if Jason was still here, you’d be the most dangerous thing in the room and you know it!”

“I know,” Michael said. “Eve. What do you want? I’m trying, okay? I sat down with Jason. I’m just saying once was enough. Why am I the bad guy?”

Shane muttered, loud enough for only Claire to hear, “Good question, bro.” She hissed at him to be quiet. This was private, and she was feeling bad for both Eve and Michael, having witnesses to all this. It was bad enough to be fighting and worse to have Shane making snarky comments from the sidelines.

“I don’t know, Michael. Why are you the bad guy?” Eve shot back. “Maybe because you’re acting as if you own the world!”

“You’re being a brat.”

“A what?”

“You’re going to dump crap all over the floor and walk away? What else do you call it?”

Eve looked so shocked, it was as if he’d hit her. Claire winced in sympathy. “It’s okay; we’ll do it,” Claire said, and started picking up plates and piling them up. “It’s not a big deal.” Shane was still staring at their friends as if they were some kind of sideshow exhibit; she kicked him in the shin and shoved plates at him. “Kitchen,” she said. “Go.”

He raised his eyebrows, but he went. She began cleaning up the mess on the floor. In Shane’s absence, it felt as if things changed, as if the balance shifted again. Claire kept herself small, quiet, and invisible as she worked at scraping up the spilled food into a pile with napkins.

“Eve,” Michael said. He wasn’t angry anymore, Claire realized. His voice had gone soft and quiet. She glanced up and saw that Eve was silently crying now, tears dragging dirty trails of mascara down her cheeks, but she didn’t look away from him. “Eve, what is it? This isn’t about Jason. What?”

She threw herself into him, wrapping her arms around him. Even with vampire reflexes, Michael was surprised enough to rock backward, but he recovered in just a second, holding her, stroking her back with one hand. Eve put her head down on his shoulder and cried like a lost little girl. “I don’t want to lose you,” she finally snuffled. “God, I really don’t. Please. Please don’t go.”

“Go?” Michael sounded honestly baffled. “What? Where would I go?”

“Anywhere. With anyone. Don’t—I love you, Michael. I really do.”

He sighed and held her even more tightly. “I’m not going anywhere with anyone else,” he said. “I swear. And I love you, too. Okay?”

“You mean it?”

“Yeah, I mean it.” He seemed almost surprised and let out a slow breath as he hugged her tighter. “I mean it, Eve. I always have, even when you didn’t believe it.”

Eve dabbed at her running mascara, hiccuping little breaths, and then looked past Michael to Claire, who was getting all the mess put onto one plate for disposal. Eve looked stricken. “Oh God,” she said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—Here, let me. I’ll get it.”

And she pulled free of Michael and got down on her hands and knees to clean up the rest.

And Michael got down there with her. Claire backed through the kitchen door with a load of stuff, and as it swung closed, she saw Michael lean over and kiss Eve. It looked sweet and hot and absolutely real.

“Well?” Shane asked. “World War Fifteen over out there, or what?”

“I think so,” she said, and hip-bumped him out of the way at the sink to dump her armload of plates. “You’re washing, right?”

“I’ll play you for it.”
“What?”
“Best high score wins?”
That was the same basic thing as doing it herself now and saving herself the humiliation, Claire thought. “No bet,” she said. “Wash, dish boy.”
He flicked suds at her. She shrieked and laughed and flipped more at him. They splashed water. It felt ... breathlessly good, when Shane finally captured her in his soapy hands, pulled her close to his wet T-shirt, and kissed her.
“And that’s World War Sixteen,” he said. “Officially over.”
“I’m still not playing Dead Rising with you.”
“You’re no fun.”
She kissed him, long and sweet and slow, and whispered, “You sure?”
“Well, I’m certainly changing my mind,” Shane said, straight-faced, at least until he licked his lips. His pupils were large and dark and completely fixed on hers, and she felt as if gravity had reversed, as if she could fall up into his eyes and just keep on going.
“Dishes,” he reminded her. “Me dish boy. And I can’t believe I just said that, because that was lame.”
She kissed him again, lightly this time. “That’s for later,” she said. “By the way? You look really hot with suds all over you.”
The kitchen door opened, and Eve walked in, dumped a plateful of trash in the can, and practically danced her way over to the sink. She still had smeared mascara, and her tears weren’t even dry, but she was smiling, and there was a dreamy, distant look in her eyes.
“Hey,” Shane said. “How about you? Want to play Dead Rising?”
She wandered out. Shane blinked. “That was not what I expected.”
“She’s floating,” Claire said. “What’s wrong with that?”
“But she didn’t even insult me. That’s just wrong. It disturbs me.”
“I’m taking advantage of all this calm,” Claire said. “Study time.”
“Bring it downstairs,” Shane said. “I need a cheering section, because she is going to suck at zombie killing tonight. Just way too happy.”
Claire laughed, but she dashed upstairs and grabbed her book bag, which promptly ripped right down the seam, spilling about twenty pounds’ worth of texts, supplies, and junk all over the wooden floor. “Great,” she said with a sigh. “Just great.” She gathered up what she needed in an untidy armload and headed back downstairs.
She was halfway down the stairs when someone knocked at the front door. They all stopped what they were doing —Michael, in the act of picking up his guitar; Shane and Eve, taking seats on the couch with game controllers.
“Expecting anybody else?” Shane asked Eve. “Is your distant cousin Jack the Ripper dropping in for coffee?”
“Screw you, Collins.”
“Finally, the world is back to normal. Still not up to the usual Rosser Olympic-level insult standards, there, sunshine. Never mind. I’ll get it.”
Michael didn’t say anything, but he put down the guitar and followed Shane to the end of the hall, watching. Claire descended the rest of the steps quickly, trying to keep her pile of stuff from tottering over, and dumped it on the dining table before hurrying over to Michael’s side.
Shane checked the peephole, stepped back, and said, “Uh oh.”
“What?”
“Trouble?”
Michael crossed the distance in a flash, looked out, and bared his teeth—all his teeth, including the vampiry ones, which didn’t exactly bode well. Claire sucked in a deep breath. Damn stupid book bag, picking a bad time to break; usually, she’d have brought all the stuff down, but she’d left her antivamp supplies upstairs in the ruined bag’s pocket.
“It’s Morley,” Michael said. “I’d better go out and talk to him. Shane, stay here with them.”
“Word of advice—stop telling me to stay with the girls,” Shane said, “or I will seriously bust you in the mouth one of these days. Seriously. I could break one of those shiny fangs.”
“Today?”
“Ah ... probably not.”
“Then shut up.” Michael opened the door just wide enough to slide out, looked back, and said, “Lock it.”
Shane nodded, and as soon as the wood thumped closed, he shot all the bolts and glued his eye to the peephole.
Claire and Eve, by common silent decision, dashed to the living room window, which gave them an angled view of the porch—not perfect, but better than nothing.
“Oh no,” Eve whispered.

Michael was standing in a wash of moonlight, facing not just one vampire, but three. Morley—a ragged, rough vampire who rocked the homeless look, although Claire knew he actually did have a home—was standing there, with two of his crew. He had quite a number of them, disaffected vampire youth, although youth was a relative term when you talked about vampires. It was mostly a matter of status, not just age; the have-nots, or the ones feeling squeezed by those who had power over them.

They also had a human with them.

Jase.

And he wasn’t there voluntarily, as far as Claire could tell. One of the vampires had a hand around his arm in what looked like a friendly grip but was probably bone-crushing hard.

“Jase,” Eve whispered. “Oh God. I told you to be careful!”

Shane left the door, came into the living room, and dragged a black canvas bag out from under a chair. He unzipped it and took out a small crossbow, cranked it back, and loaded it with an arrow. He tossed silver-coated stakes to Claire and Eve, then joined them at the window. “So,” he said, “your brother’s already said he was a vampire wannabe. Does he need rescuing, or is this his idea of a really great date?”

“Don’t be an asshole,” Eve said, and gripped the stake so hard her whole hand turned paler than normal. “They wouldn’t turn him, anyway. They’d just drain him.” It was a lot of work for a vampire to turn a human, and from what Claire had seen, they didn’t seem all that eager to go through it themselves. It hurt. And it took something out of them. The only one she’d ever seen take any real pleasure out if had been Mr. Bishop, Amelie’s vile, old vampire father. She’d seen him turn Shane’s father, and that had been—horrible. Really horrible.

This was why Shane, however he felt about Jason Rosser, was loading up a crossbow, and was more than prepared to use it.

“What’s Michael doing?”

“Talking sense,” Shane said. “It’s always his A game. For him, it usually works. Me, I’m usually Plan B, all the time.”

“B for brute force?” Eve said. “Yep, that’s you.”

Shane slotted the arrow in place and raised the window sash. He kicked out the screen on the other side and aimed the crossbow right at Morley.

Morley, who was dressed in clothes that seemed pieced together out of rags, except for one brand-new Hawaiian shirt in disgustingly bright shades of neon, looked straight at the window, smiled, and tipped his head just a little in acknowledgment.

“Just so we’re clear, bloodsucker,” Shane said.

“Can he hear you?”

“He hears every word. Hey, Morley? I will put this right between your ribs, you got me?”

Once again, Morley nodded, and the smile stayed in place.

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Eve whispered. “Threatening him, I mean?”

“Why not? Morley speaks fluent threat.”

It went on for a while, all the talking; Shane never took his eyes off Morley. Claire kept her hand on him, somehow feeling as if that were helping—helping them both—and finally Morley made some polite little bow to Michael, then waved at the other vampire, who was holding Jase.

The vampire let go. Jason stumbled backward, then took off at top speed, running flat out down the street. The vampires watched him. Nobody followed.

Eve breathed a slow sigh of relief and leaned against the wall.

Shane didn’t move. He still had the crossbow aimed at Morley’s chest.

“Emergency’s over,” Eve said. “Stand down, soldier.”

“Go open the door. I stand down when Michael’s back inside.” Shane smiled, all teeth. Not quite as menacing as a vampire smile, but it got the point across. Eve nodded and ran to the door. Once it was open, Michael—still looking cool and calm—backed in, said good night, and shut the door. Claire heard him shooting the locks, and still Shane kept his aim steady until Morley, touching a finger to his brow, turned and walked off into the dark with his two followers.

Claire slammed down the window, locked it, and Shane let out his breath in a slow sigh, removing the arrow from the bow. “Nothing like a little after-dinner terrification,” he said, and gave Claire a quick kiss. “Mmmm, you still taste like brisket tacos.”

She would have called him a jerk, but she was shaking, and she was too short of breath, anyway. He was already down the hall by the time she pulled in enough air, and she used it to follow him. Michael was standing beside Eve, an arm tight around her waist.
“So?” Shane asked. “What’s Morley hanging around for? Waiting for us to get ripe?”

“You know what he was here for,” Michael said. “We haven’t gotten his people passes to leave town yet, which is what you promised him in return for not killing you three when he had the chance. He’s getting impatient, and since you three are on the hook as his own personal blood donors, I think we need to get serious about making that happen.”

“He wouldn’t dare.”

“No? Can’t say that I agree with you. Morley isn’t afraid of much that I can tell, including Amelie, Oliver, or a wooden arrow in the heart.” Michael nodded at Shane. “Still. Thanks. Nice.”

“Brute force. It’s what I do.”

“Just keep it aimed the right way.”

Shane looked as innocent as Shane ever could and put his hand over his heart. “I would never. Unless you flash fang at me again, or ever tell me to stay with the girls. Except for that.”

“Cool. Let’s go shoot some undead things on the TV, then.”

“Loser.”

“Not if I win.”

“Like that ever happens.”
The next day, Claire had classes at Texas Prairie University, which was always a mixture of fascinating and annoying; fascinating, because she’d managed to finagle her way into a lot of advanced classes she really didn’t have the prerequisites for, and annoying because those not in the know about Morganville in general—which was most of the students at the school—treated her like a kid. Those who didn’t, and knew the score about the vampires and the town of Morganville itself, mostly avoided her. It occurred to her, the second time somebody tried to buy coffee for her but not make eye contact, that some people in town still looked at her as important—as in Monica Morrell-level important.

This seriously pissed off Monica, Queen Bee of the Morganville Under-Thirty set. Still, Claire had come a long way from the clueless early-admission freshman she’d been last year. When Monica tried to bully her—which was virtually certain to happen at least a couple of times every week—the outcome wasn’t usually in Monica’s favor, or always in Claire’s, either. But still, a draw was better than a beat-down, in Claire’s view. Everybody was left standing.

Claire’s first stop was at the campus student store, where she bought a new backpack—sturdy, not too flashy, with lots of pockets inside and out. She ducked into the next bathroom she found to transfer the contents of her taped-together book bag to the new one, and almost threw the old one away … but it had a lot of sentimental value, somehow. Ripped, scuffed, stained with all kinds of things she didn’t want to remember, but it had come with her to Morganville, and somehow she felt that throwing it away would be throwing away her chance of ever getting out of here.

Crazy, but she couldn’t help it.

In the end, she stuffed the rolled-up old backpack into a pocket of the new one, hefted the weight, and jogged across campus to make her first class of the day.

Three uneventful (and mostly boring) hours later, she ran into Monica Morrell, who was sitting on the steps of the Language Arts building, sunglasses on, leaning back on her elbows and watching people go by. One of her lipstick mafia girls was with her—Jennifer—but there was no sign of the other one, Gina. As always, Monica looked expensive and perfect—Daddy’s estate must be holding up well no matter what the economy dudes were saying on TV—and Jennifer looked as though she shopped the cheap knockoffs of what Monica bought for full price. But they both looked good, and about every thirty seconds some college boy stopped to talk to them, and almost always got shot down in flames. Some of them took it okay. Some of them looked as if they were one more rejection from ending up on a twenty-four-hour channel as breaking news.

Claire was heading up the steps, ignoring them, when Jennifer called out brightly, “Hey, Claire! Good morning!” That was creepy enough to stop Claire right in her tracks. She looked over, and Jennifer was waving.

So was Monica.

This, from the two girls who’d punched and kicked her, thrown her down a flight of stairs, abducted her at least twice, threatened her with knives, tried to set her house on fire … yeah. Claire didn’t really feel like redefining the relationship on their new buddy-buddy terms.

She just gave the two of them a long look, and kept on up the stairs, trying to focus on what it was she was supposed to remember today about early American literature. Nathaniel Hawthorne? So last week …

“Hey!” Monica grabbed her two steps from the top, yanking on the strap of her new book bag to drag her to a halt. “Talking to you, bitch!”

That was more like it. Claire glanced down at Monica’s hand and raised her eyebrows. Monica let go.

“I figured it couldn’t be me,” she said. “Since you were acting so nice and all. Had to be some other Claire.”

“I just thought since the two of us are more or less stuck with each other, we might as well try to be friendly, that’s all. You didn’t have to act as if I stole your boyfriend or something.” Monica smiled slowly and pulled her sunglasses down to stare over the top. Her big, lovely blue eyes were full of shallow glee. “Speaking of that, how is Shane? Getting bored with the after-school special yet?”

“Wow, that’s one of your better insults. You’re almost up to junior high level. Keep working on it,” Claire said. “Ask Shane yourself if you want to know how he’s doing. I’m sure he’d be glad to tell you.” Colorfully. “What do you want?”

“Who says I want something?”

“Because you’re like a lion. You don’t bother to get up unless you’re getting something out of it.”

Monica smiled even wider. “Hmmm, harsh, but accurate. Why work harder than you have to? Anyway, I hear you and your friends made a deal that’s getting you into trouble. Something with that skanky homeless Brit vamp—
what’s his name? Mordred?”

“Mordred is from the King Arthur stories. It’s Morley.”

“Whatever. I just wanted to tell you that I can take care of it for you.” Her smile revealed teeth, even and white.

“For a price.”

“Yeah, I didn’t see that coming,” Claire said with a sigh. “How are you going to take care of it, exactly?”

“I can get him the passes out of town he wants. From my brother.”

Claire rolled her eyes and adjusted her book bag a little more comfortably on her shoulder. “Meaning what? You’re going to forge his signature on a bunch of photocopies that will get everybody thrown in jail except you? No thanks. Not interested.” Claire had no doubt that whatever Monica was offering, it wasn’t real; she’d already talked to Monica’s brother, Mayor Richard Morrell, several times about this and gotten nowhere. But Monica liked to pretend she had “access”—with full air quotes. “If that’s all, I’ve got class.”

“Not quite,” Monica said, and the smile vanished. “I want the answers to the final exam in Lit 220. Get them.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Do I look like I’m kidding? Get them, or—well, you know what kind of or there is, right?” Monica pushed the sunglasses back up. “Get them to me by Friday or you’re fried, special needs.”

Claire shook her head and took the last two steps, walked to her class, dumped her bag at her lecture hall seat, and sat down to think things over.

By the time class began, she had a plan—a warm, fuzzy plan.

Some days, it was absolutely worth getting out of bed.

When Claire got home, the sun was slipping fast toward the horizon. It was too early for most vampires to be out—not that they burst into flames that easily; most of the older ones were sort of flame-retardant—but she kept a sharp lookout, anyway. Instead of going straight to the Glass House, she turned at the cross street and went a few more blocks. It was like déjà vu because her parents’ house looked almost exactly like the Glass House; a little less faded, maybe. The trim had been painted a nice dark green, and there were fewer bushes around the windows, different porch furniture, and a couple of wind chimes; Claire’s mom loved wind chimes, especially the big, long ones that rang those deep bell sounds.

As Claire climbed the steps to the porch, a gust blew by her, sounding the bells in a chorus. She glanced up at the sky and saw clouds scudding by fast. The weather was changing. Rain, maybe. It already felt cooler.

She didn’t knock, just used her key and went right in, dumping her backpack in the entry hall. “Hey, I’m home!” she yelled, and locked the door behind her. “Mom?”

“Kitchen,” came the faint yell back. Claire went down the hall—same as in the Glass House, but Mom had covered this version with photos, framed ones of their family. Claire winced at her junior high and high school photos; they were unspeakably geeky, but she couldn’t convince Mom to take them down.

Someday, you’ll be glad I have them, Mom always said. Claire couldn’t imagine that would ever be true.

The living room was, again, disorientingly familiar; instead of the mismatched, comfortable furniture of the Glass House, the stuff from Claire’s childhood occupied the same space, from the old sofa to her dad’s favorite leather chair. The smells coming from the kitchen were familiar, too: Mom was making stuffed bell peppers. Claire fortified herself, because she couldn’t stand stuffed bell peppers, but she almost always ate the filling out of them, just to be nice.

“Why couldn’t it be tacos?” She sighed, just to herself, and then pushed open the door to the kitchen. “Hi, Mom, I’m—”

She stopped dead in her tracks, eyes wide, because Myrnin was sitting at her mother’s kitchen table. Myrnin the vampire. Myrnin her boss. Crazy mad scientist Myrnin. He had a mug of something that had better not be blood in front of him, and he was almost dressed like a sane person—he had on frayed blue jeans, a blue silk shirt, and some kind of elaborate tapestry vest over it. He wore flip-flops for shoes, of course, because he seemed to really love those. His hair was long around his shoulders, black and glossy and full of waves, and his big, dark eyes followed Claire’s mother as she busied herself at the stove.

Mom was dressed the way Mom usually dressed, which was way more formal than people Claire’s era would ever think was appropriate for lounging around the house. A nice pair of dress pants, a boring shirt, mid-heeled shoes. She was even wearing jewelry—bracelet and earrings, at least.

“Good evening, Claire,” Myrnin said, and transferred his attention over to her. “Your mother’s been very kind to me while I waited for you to get home.”

Mom turned, and there was a false brightness to her smile. Myrnin made her nervous, although Myrnin was obviously making a real effort to be normal. “Honey, how was school?” She kissed Claire on the cheek, and Claire tried not to squirm as her mom rubbed at the lipstick mark left on her skin. At least she didn’t use spit.
“School was great,” Claire said, which completed the obligatory school conversation. She got a Coke from the fridge, popped the top, and settled in across the table from Myrnin, who calmly sipped from his coffee cup. “What are you doing here?”

“Claire!” her mother said, sounding a little scandalized. “He’s a guest!”

“No, he’s my boss, and bosses don’t drop in on my parents without an invitation. What are you doing here?”

“Dropping in on your parents without an invitation,” Myrnin said. “I thought it would be good to get to know them better. I’ve been telling them how satisfied I am with the work you’ve been doing. Your research is some of the best I’ve ever seen.”

He really was on his best behavior. That didn’t even sound a little crazy; overdone, maybe, but not crazy.

“I’m off today,” Claire pointed out. Myrnin nodded and rested his chin on his hand. He had a nice smile, when he chose to use it, as he did now, mostly directed at Claire’s mother, who brought over a coffeepot and refilled his cup.

Oh, good. Not anything red being served, then.

“Absolutely. I know you had a full class schedule today,” he said. “This is a purely social call. I wanted to reassure your parents that all was going well for you.” He looked down into his coffee. “And that what happened before would never happen again.”

*What happened before* was code for the bite marks on her neck. The wounds were healed, but there was a scar, and as she thought about it, her hand went up and covered the scar, on its own. She forced it back down. Her parents didn’t have any idea that Myrnin was responsible for that; they’d been told that it had been some other random vamp, and that Myrnin had helped save her. It was partly true, anyway. Myrnin had helped save her. He’d just also been the one to bite her.

Not that it had really been his fault. He’d been hurt, and desperate, and she’d just been there. At least he’d stopped himself in time.

She certainly hadn’t been able to stop him.

“Thanks,” she said. She couldn’t really be mad at him, not for any of it. It would have been easier if she could have. “Are you staying for dinner?”

“Me? Delicious as it smells, I fear I’m not one for bell peppers,” he said, and stood up with one of those graceful moves vampires seemed so good at pulling off. They moved like humans, but better. “I’d better take my leave, Mrs. Danvers. Thank you so much for your hospitality, and the delicious coffee. Please tell your husband I thank him as well.”

“That’s it?” Claire asked, mystified. “You came to talk to my parents, and now you’re leaving?”

“Yes,” he said, perfectly at ease, and perfectly weird. “And to drop this off for you, from Amelie.” He patted his vest pockets, and came up with a cream-colored envelope, which he handed over to her. It was heavy, expensive paper, and it was stamped on the back with the Founder’s Seal. It was unopened. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Claire. Don’t forget the donuts.”

“I won’t,” she said, all her attention on the envelope in her hands. Myrnin said something else to her mother, and then the kitchen door opened and closed, and he was gone.

“He has such beautiful manners,” her mother said, locking the back door. “I’m glad you work for someone so—civilized.”

The scar on Claire’s neck throbbed a little. She thought of all the times she’d seen Myrnin go off the rails—the times he’d curled up weeping in a corner; the times he’d threatened her; the times he’d raved like a lunatic for hours on end; the times he’d begged her to put him out of his misery.

The time he’d actually given her samples of his own brain—in a Tupperware container.

“Civilized,” she repeated softly. “Yeah. He’s great.” He was; that was the awful thing. He was great until he was horrible.

Kind of like the world in general.

Claire slit open the envelope with a kitchen knife, slipped out the heavy folded paper inside, and read the beautiful, looped handwriting—Amelie’s, without a doubt.

*In accordance with recent requests, I hereby am providing you with passes to exit and return to Morganville. You must present these to the checkpoints at the edge of town. Please provide them to your party and give them the same instructions. There are no exceptions to this rule. Coordinate with Oliver to arrange your exit time.*

Claire’s breath left her in a rush. Morley’s passes! Perfect timing, too; she didn’t know how much longer any of them could keep Morley and his people from losing patience, and coming to take it out in blood. They wanted out of Morganville.
She could give it to them. She realized immediately, however, as she took the passes out of the envelope, that there weren't nearly enough. Morley's people would need about thirty passes in total. Instead, there were only four in the envelope.

The names read Michael Glass, Eve Rosser, Shane Collins, and Claire Danvers.

What the hell was going on?

Claire pulled out her cell phone and hit SPEED DIAL. It rang, and rang, but there was no answer. She hung up and tried another number.

“Oliver,” said the voice on the other end.

“Um, hi, it’s Claire? Is—is Amelie there with you?”

“No.”

“Wait, wait, don’t hang up! You’re on the town council—I just got a letter that has some passes in it, but it’s not enough for—”

“We turned down Morley’s request for emigration out of Morganville,” Oliver said. He had a low, even tone to his voice, but Claire felt herself go cold anyway. “He has a philosophy that is too dangerous to those of us who wish to remain ... What’s the phrase? Under the radar.”

“But—we made a deal. Me, Shane, Eve, and Michael. We said we’d get them passes.”

“I’m aware of your deal. What is your question?”

“It’s just—Morley said he’d kill us. If we didn’t get the passes for him. We told you that.”

Oliver was silent for a long second, then said, “What part of I’m aware did you not comprehend, Claire? You and your friends have passes out of Morganville. As it happens, Michael requested leave to travel to Dallas for his recording and concert session. We’ve decided to allow that, under the condition that all of you travel together. With escort.”

“Escort?” Claire asked. “You mean, like police?” She was thinking of Sheriff Hannah Moses, who would be good company in addition to a bad-ass bodyguard; she’d liked Hannah from the moment she’d met her, and she thought Hannah liked her, too, as much as a tough ex-soldier could like a skinny, geeky girl half her age.

“No,” Oliver said, “I don’t mean police.” And he hung up. Claire stared at the screen for a moment, then folded the phone closed and slipped it back in her pocket. She looked down at the passes, the envelope, the letter.

Amelie had decided to really piss off Morley, but at least she’d also decided to get Claire and her friends out of town. With an escort.

“Go get your father,” her mom said, and began setting dishes on the table. “He’s upstairs on the computer. Tell him dinner’s ready.”

Claire gathered up everything and put it in her backpack before heading upstairs. Another wave of same-but-not-quite washed over her; her mother and father had reserved the same room for her here that she had over in the Glass House, though the two were nothing alike. Home—in name, anyway—had her frilly white bed and furniture, stuff she’d gotten when she was ten. Pink curtains. Her room at the Glass House was completely different—dark woods, dark fabrics. Adult.

Dad’s computer room would have been Shane’s bedroom in the other house, which woke all kinds of thoughts and memories that really weren’t appropriate right now and caused her face to heat up as she poked her head in the room and quickly said, “Dad, dinner’s ready! Help me eat the stuffed bell peppers before I gag and die?”

Her father looked up from the computer screen with a surprised, guilty jerk, and quickly shut down what he was doing. Claire blinked. Dad? Her dad was ... normal. Boringly normal. Not an activist, not a freak, not somebody who had to hide what he was doing on the computer from his own daughter. “Tell me you weren’t looking at porn,” she said.

“Claire!”

“Well, sorry, but you did the guilty dance. Most people I know, that means porn.”

Her dad pulled in a deep breath, closed his eyes, and said, “I was playing a game.”

That made her feel oh-so-much better. Until he said, “It’s one of those online multiplayer games.”

“Yeah? Which one? One of the fantasy ones?”

He looked mortally embarrassed now. “Not—not really.”

“Then what?”

In answer, he brought up the screen. On it was a night scene, a castle, a graveyard—typical horror fare, at least if you were from the 1950s.

A character appeared on the screen—pale, tall, dressed in a Dracula cape and tuxedo.

With fangs.
Her mouth dropped open, and she stared at her father, her normal, boring father. “You’re playing a vampire game?”

“It’s called Castlemoor. I’m not just playing it. I get paid to be there, to watch what people are doing online.”

“You—get paid—to play a vampire? By who?” Her father sat back in his chair, and he slowly shook his head.

“That’s my business, Claire.”

“Is it Amelie? Oliver?”

“Claire.” This time, his voice had the parental ring of authority. “Enough. It’s a job, and I get paid well enough to do it. We both know it’s the best thing I can find, with all my restrictions. The doctors don’t want me exerting myself too much.”

Her dad wasn’t well, and hadn’t been for a while now. He was frail, fragile, and she worried about him more and more. About her mother, too. Mom looked frayed around the edges, with a kind of suppressed panic in her eyes.

“You’ll be okay?” Claire said. Somehow she made it a question, although she didn’t mean to. “Did they find anything else?”

“No, honey, everything’s fine. I just need time to get stronger.”

He was lying to her, but she could tell that he didn’t want her to pursue it. She wanted to; she wanted to yell and scream and demand to know what was going on.

But instead, she swallowed and said, “Playing a vampire online. That’s a pretty wild career move, Dad.”

“Beats unemployment. So, stuffed bell peppers, huh? I know how much you love those.” Claire made a gagging sound. Her dad reached over and ruffled her dark hair. “Why don’t you just tell her you don’t like them?”

“I did. I do. It’s a mom thing. She just keeps telling me I used to like them.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “That’s a mom thing.”

Dinner passed the way it normally did, with Claire picking out edible parts of the bell pepper and her mother holding forth about whatever she was doing for the week. Claire contributed when direct questions came her way; otherwise, she just stayed out of it. She always knew what Mom was going to say, anyway. And she knew Dad wouldn’t say much, if anything.

What he did say was, “Why don’t you bring Shane over some night for dinner?”

It was as if time stopped. Her mother froze, fork halfway to her mouth; Claire froze, too, but unfortunately she was in the process of gulping down a mouthful of Coke at the time, which meant coughing and sputtering, watering eyes, the whole embarrassing bit.

“Honey, I’m sure Shane’s very busy,” her mother said, recovering. “Right, Claire?”

“I’d like to talk to him,” her father said, and right now there wasn’t any warm-and-fuzzy daddy vibe. It was more PARENT, in big, flashing red letters. “Soon.”

“Uh—okay, I’ll see if—Okay.” Claire frantically cut up a piece of stuffed bell pepper and ate it, bell pepper and all. She nearly choked again, but she managed to get it down. “Hey, I might be taking a trip.”

“What kind of a trip?”

“To Dallas. With my friends.”

“We’ll see,” Dad said, which meant no, of course. “I’d need to talk to Shane first.”

Oh God, now they were bargaining. Or she was being blackmailed. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference. Claire mumbled that she’d try, or something like that, choked down another bite of food that no longer tasted even a little good, and jumped up to clear her plate. “Claire!” her mother called after her as she dashed into the kitchen.

“You’re not running off tonight, are you? I was hoping we could spend some time with you!”

“You just did,” Claire muttered as she rinsed the plate and put it in the dishwasher. She raised her voice and yelled back, “Can’t, Mom! I’ve got to study! All my books are over at the Glass House!”

“Well, you’re not walking over there in the dark,” Mom said. “Obviously.”

“I told you, I’ve got a pin from Amelie! They’re not going to bother me!”

Her dad opened the door of the kitchen. “And what about just garden-variety humans? You think that little pin protects you from everything that could hurt you?”

“Dad—”

“I worry about you, Claire. You take these risks, and I don’t know why. I don’t know why you think it’s okay.”

She bit her lip. There was something in his voice, a kind of weary disappointment that cut her to the core and nearly brought tears to her eyes. She loved him, but he could be so clueless.
“I didn’t say I’d walk, Dad,” she said. “I make mistakes, sure, but I’m not stupid.”

She took out her cell phone, dialed a number, and turned her back on her father. When Eve answered with a bright, chirping, “Hit me!” Claire said, “Can you come get me? At my house?”

“Claire,” her father said.

She turned to look at him. “Dad, I really have to study.”

“I know,” he said. “I’ll drive you home.” He said it with a funny little smile, sad and resigned. And it wasn’t until she smiled that she realized what he’d really said.

Home. The Glass House.

“It’s hard for us to let go,” he said. “You know that, right?”

She did. She hesitated for a second, then said into the phone, “Never mind, Eve. Sorry. Dad’s bringing me.”

Then she hugged her father, and he hugged her back, hard, and kissed her gently on the forehead. “I love you, sweetie.”

“I know. I love you, too.”

“But not enough to eat more stuffed bell peppers and play Jenga with your folks.”

“No more bell peppers, but I’d completely play Jenga,” she said. “One game?”

He hugged her even harder.

Three games of Jenga later, Claire was tired, happy, and a little bit sad. She’d seen her mom laugh, and her dad look happy, and that was good, but there’d been something odd about it, too. She felt like a visitor, as if she didn’t fit here anymore, the way she once had. They were her family, but seen from the outside. She had too many experiences now that didn’t include them.

“Claire,” her dad said as he drove her home through the darkened streets of Morganville. It was quiet out, only a few cars moving about. Two of them were white police cruisers. At least three other cars they passed had heavy tinting, too heavy for humans to see through. “Your mom had a talk with me, and I’m not going to insist you keep on living at home with us. If you want to live with your friends, you can.”

“Really?” She sat up straight, looking at him. “You mean it?”

“I don’t see how it makes much difference. You’re seventeen, and a more independent seventeen than I ever was. You’ve got a job and responsibilities beyond anything I can really understand. It doesn’t make much sense for us to keep trying to treat you like a sheltered little girl.” He hesitated, then went on. “And I sound like the worst dad in the world, don’t I?”

“No,” she said. “No, you don’t. You sound like—like you understand.”

He sighed. “Your mother thinks if we just put more restrictions on you, things would get back to normal. You’d go back to being the same little girl she knew. But they won’t, and you won’t. I know that.”

He sounded a little sad about it, and she remembered how she’d felt at the house—a little out of place, as if she were a visitor in their lives. Her life was splitting off on its own.

It was such a strange feeling.

“But about Shane—,” her father continued.

“Dad!”

“I know you don’t want to hear it, but I’m going to say it anyway. I’m not saying Shane is a bad guy—I’m sure he’s not, at heart—but you really need to think about your future. What you want to do with your life. Don’t get in too deep, too fast. You understand what I’m saying?”

“You married Mom when you were nineteen.”

He sighed. “I knew you’d bring that up.”

“Well? It’s okay for you to make decisions before twenty, but not me?”

“Short answer? Yes. And we both know that if I really wanted to, I could make Shane’s life a living hell. Dads can do that.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“No, I won’t, because I do think he really loves you, and he really wants to protect you. But what Shane may not get at that age is that he could be the worst thing in the world for you. He could completely derail you. Just—keep your head, okay? You’re a smart girl. Don’t let your hormones run your life.”

He pulled the car to a stop at the Glass House, behind Eve’s big monster of a car. There were lights blazing in the windows—warmth and friendship and another life, her life; one her parents could only watch from the outside.

She turned to her father and saw him watching her with that same sad, quiet expression. He moved a strand of hair back from her face. “My little girl,” he said, and shook his head. “I expect you for dinner soon.”


He smiled, and she quickly got out of the car and ran up the cracked walk, jumped up the steps to the porch, and waved at him from the front door as she got out her keys. Even so, he waited, watching until she’d actually opened
the door, stepped in, and closed it. Only then did she hear the engine rev as his car pulled out.

Michael was playing in the living room. Loud. That wasn’t normal at all for him, and as Claire came around the corner, she found Eve and Shane sitting on the floor, watching the show. Michael had set up an amplifier, and he was playing his electric guitar, which he rarely did at home, and damn. That was impressive stuff. She sank down next to Shane and leaned against him, and he put his arm around her. The music was like a physical wall pushing over her, and after the first few seconds of fighting it, Claire finally let herself go; she was pulled away on the roaring tide of notes as Michael played. She had no idea what the song was, but it was fast, loud, and amazing.

When it was over, her ears were left ringing, but she didn’t care. Along with Shane and Eve, she clapped and whooped and whistled, and Michael gravely took a bow as he shut down the amp and unplugged. Shane got up and high-fived, then low-fived him. “Nothing but net, man. How do you do that?”

“No idea, really,” Michael said. “Hey, Claire. How are the folks?”

“Okay,” she said. “My dad says I can officially move back in.” Not that she’d ever really moved out.

“I knew we’d wear them down,” Eve said. “After all, we really are amazingly cool.” And now it was Eve’s turn for the high five with Shane. “For a bunch of misfit geeks, slackers, and losers.”

“Which one are you?” Shane asked. She flipped him off. “Oh, right. Loser. Thanks for reminding me.”

Claire dug in her backpack and came out with the passes Myrnin had delivered. “Uh—I got these today. Somebody want to fill me in?”

Michael, at vampire speed, crossed the distance and snatched the paper out of her hand. He spread out the individual passes and stared at them with a blank, shocked expression. “But—I didn’t think—”

“Apparently, somebody agreed,” Claire said. “Eve?”

Eve frowned. “What? What is it?”

“Passes,” Michael said. “To leave town, to go to Dallas. To do the demo.”

“For you?”

“For all of us.” Michael looked up and slowly smiled. “You know what this means?”

Shane threw back his head and let out a loud wolf howl. “Road trip!” he yelled! “Yes!”

Michael put his arms around Eve, and she melted against him, her pale-painted face against his chest, hands around his waist. Claire saw her dark eyes flutter closed, and a kind of peaceful happiness came over Eve’s face—and then her eyes snapped open. “Wait,” she said. “I’ve never—I mean—outside? Of Morganville? To Dallas? You can’t be serious. Michael?”

He held up a pass with her name on it. “It’s signed. Official.”

“They’re letting us leave town? Are they insane? Because once I hit the shops in Dallas, I don’t think I’m ever coming home.” Eve made a face. “And I can’t believe I just thought of Morganville as home. How much of a saddie am I?”

“Eight out of ten,” Shane said. “But we do have to come back, right?”

“Right,” Michael said. “Well, I have to come back. I’ve got nowhere else to go. You guys…”

“Stop,” Eve said, and put a hand over his mouth to enforce the order. “Just stop there. Please.”

He looked down at her, and their eyes locked. He took her hand away from his mouth, and then lifted the backs of her fingers to his lips for a long, slow kiss. It was just about the sexiest thing Claire had ever seen, full of sweetness and love and longing. From the expression on Eve’s face, it was just about the sexiest thing she’d ever seen, too.

“We’ll talk about it on the road,” Michael said. “The passes are good for a week. I’ll make some calls and see when they need me in the studio there.”

Eve nodded. Claire doubted she could put any words together, right at that moment.

“Hey,” Shane said, and tapped Claire on the nose. “Snap out of it.”

“What? What!”

“Seriously. You’ve got this chick flick hit-by-the-romance-hammer look. Stop it.”

“Ass.”

He shrugged. “I’m not one of those romantic guys,” he said. “Hey, date Michael if you want that.”

“No, don’t,” Eve said dreamily. “Mine.”

“And there goes my blood sugar level,” Shane said. “It’s getting late, Claire has school tomorrow, I’ve got a long day of chopping fine barbecue—”

“I think we’ll stay down here,” Michael said. He and Eve still hadn’t blinked or looked away from each other.

“I am really not sticking around for that.” Shane took Claire’s hand in his. “Upstairs?”

She nodded, hitched her bag on her other shoulder, and followed him up. Shane opened the door of his room, turned, and lifted her hand up to his lips. He didn’t quite kiss it. His dark eyes were wicked with laughter.

“Ass,” she said again, more severely. “You couldn’t be romantic if your life depended on it.”

“You know what’s lucky? Most bad guys don’t ask you to be romantic on command, so that probably won’t
matter.”
“Only girlfriends do that.”
“Well, they can qualify as supervillains. But only if they have a secret underground base. Wait—you’ve got a mad scientist for a boss, and a lab—”
“Park it,” she said, and smacked his arm. “Are you going to kiss me good night, or what?”
“Romantic on command. See?”
“Fine,” Claire said, and this time she actually did feel a little annoyed. “Then don’t. Good night.”
She pulled away from him and walked away the few steps to her own room, opened the door, slammed it, and flopped on her bed without bothering to turn on the lights. After a few seconds she remembered that in Morganville that was never a smart choice, and switched on the bedside Tiffany lamp. Rich colored light threw patterns on the wood, the walls, her skin.
No monsters were hiding in the shadows. She was too tired to check under the bed or in the closet.
“Ass,” she said again, and put her pillow over her face to scream her frustration into it. “Shane Collins is an ass!”
She stopped at the sound of a soft knock on the door. She put the pillow aside and waited, listening.
The knock came again.
“You’re an ass,” she yelled.
“I know,” came Shane’s voice through the door. “Let me make it up to you?”
“As if you can.”
“Try me.”
She sighed, slid off the bed, and went to open up.
Shane was standing there, of course. He came inside, closed the door behind him, and said, “Sit down.”
“What are you doing?”
“Just sit down.”
She did, perching on the edge of the bed and already frowning. There was something really different in the way he was acting now—the flip side of how he’d been just a few moments ago, teasing and teen-boy.
This seemed much more ... adult.
“When you were in the hospital, after Dan ... well, you know.” He shrugged. “You were kind of drugged up. I’m not sure what you remember.”
She didn’t remember all that much, really. A boy had abducted her and hurt her pretty badly. She’d lost a lot of blood, and they’d given her something for the nightmares. She remembered everybody coming to see her—Mom, Dad, Eve, Michael, Shane. Even Myrnin. Even Amelie and Oliver.
Shane ... he’d stayed with her. He’d said...
She couldn’t really remember what he’d said.
“Anyway,” Shane said, “I told you this was for later. I guess it’s kind of later, so, anyway.”
He took out a small velvet box from his pocket, and Claire’s heart just ... stopped. She thought she might faint.
The top of her head felt very hot, and the rest of her felt very cold, and all she could look at was the box in his hand.
He wasn’t. He couldn’t.
Was he?
Shane was looking at the box, too. He turned it in his fingers restlessly. “It’s not what you think,” he said. “It’s not—look, it’s a ring, but I don’t want you to think—” He opened the box and showed her what was inside.
It was a beautiful little ring, silver, with a red stone in the shape of a heart, and hands holding it on either side.
“It’s a claddagh ring,” he said. “It belonged to my sister, Alyssa. My mom gave it to her. It was in Alyssa’s locker at school when she—when the house burned.” When Alyssa died. When Shane’s life completely collapsed around him.
Tears burned in Claire’s eyes. The ring glittered, silver and red, and she couldn’t look at Shane’s face. She thought that might destroy her. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered. “But you’re not asking—”
“No, Claire.” He suddenly sank to his knees, as if the strength had just gone out of him. “I suck, I know, but I can’t do something like that, not yet. I’m ... Look, family doesn’t mean to me what it means to you. Mine fell apart. My sister, my mom—and I can’t even think about my dad. But I love you, Claire. That’s what this means. That I love you. Okay?”
She looked up at him then, and felt tears break free to run hot down her cheeks. “I love you, too,” she said. “I can’t take the ring. It means—it means too much to you. It’s all you have left of them.”
“That’s why it’s better if you have it,” he said, and held out the box, cupped in one hand. “Because you can make it a better memory. I can barely look at this thing without seeing the past. I don’t want to see the past anymore. I want to see the future.” He didn’t blink, and she felt the breath leave her body. “You’re the future, Claire.”
Her head felt light and empty, her whole body hot and cold, shaking and strong.
She reached out and took the velvet box. She pulled the ring out and looked at it. “It’s beautiful,” she said. “Are you sure—”

“Yes. I’m sure.”

He took the ring from her and tried it on her right hand. It fit perfectly on the third finger.

Then he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it, and it was definitely better than Michael had done it, definitely sexier, and Claire dropped to her knees with him; then he was kissing her, his mouth hot and hungry, and they fell back together to the throw rug next to the bed, and stayed there, locked in each other’s arms, until the chill finally drove them up to the bed.
Of all the mornings Claire didn’t want to get up, the next one was the worst. She woke up warm and drowsy, cuddled like a spoon against Shane, their hands clasped even in sleep. She felt great. Better than any day, ever, in her whole life.

In the still hush of early morning, she tried to freeze the moment, the sound of his soft, steady breathing, the feel of him relaxed and solid next to her.

*I want this,* she thought. *Every day. For life. Forever.*

And then her alarm clock went off, shrieking.

Claire flailed and slapped at it, then succeeded in knocking it to the floor. She dived for it and finally got it switched off, feeling like a complete fool that she’d ever left it on in the first place. She twisted around and saw Shane had opened his eyes, but hadn’t otherwise moved. He looked drowsy and sweet and lazy, hair mussed, and she leaned back down to kiss him, sweet and slow.

His arms went around her, and it felt so natural, so perfect, that she felt that glow again, that feeling of absolute rightness.

“Oh, you’re cute when you’re panicked.”

“Just when I’m panicked?”

“Ouch. Yeah, that didn’t come out as absolutely complimentary as I’d planned. And you hang around Eve way too much.” His fingers drew lazy circles on her back, which felt like trails of sunlight. “What’s the plan for today? Because I’m in favor of nothing but this.”

She so wanted that, too. But there was a reason her alarm had gone off. “I have class,” she said with a sigh.

“Skip it.” He kissed her bare shoulder.

“—you’ve got work! Remember? Sharp pointy knives and beef to chop?”

“Fun as that is, this is better.”

Well, his arguments were persuasive. *Really* persuasive. For about another thirty minutes, and then Claire forced herself to get up, grab the shower before Shane could get to it, and try to get her mind off the fact that he was lying in her bed.

And he still was when she came back in to grab her backpack. His hands were behind his head, and he looked ridiculously satisfied with the world—and with himself.

She smacked his bare foot, which was sticking out from under the sheet. “Get up, Lord of the Barbecue.”

“Ha. Don’t have to yet. You’re the one who had the bad idea to sign up for seven a.m. classes. Me, I go to work at a sensible hour.”

“Well, you’re not lying around in my bed all day, so get up. I don’t trust you alone in here.”

His smile was wicked and really, really dangerous. “Probably a good idea,” he said. “Not that you can exactly trust me in here when you’re with me.”

Oh, she was not going to climb back in bed with him. She was not. She had things to do. After gulping in a few deep breaths, she leaned over, gave him a quick kiss, avoided his grabby hands, and dashed to the door. “Out of my bed,” she said. “I mean it.”

He yawned. She grinned and shut the door on her way out.

Downstairs, the coffeepot was already brewing, and Michael was sitting at the table, a laptop computer open in front of him. She was a little surprised; Michael wasn’t really the computer type. He had one, and she supposed he had e-mail and stuff, but he wasn’t always on it or anything. Not like most people their age. (Not like her, honestly.)

He looked up at her, then down at the screen, and then back up, to stare at her as if he’d never seen her before.

“What?” she asked. “Don’t tell me some of Kim’s skanky home video made YouTube.” That was something she really didn’t ever want to think about again. Kim and her little sneaky spying habits. Kim and her plans to make herself a star with all her hidden video cameras recording every aspect of life in Morganville.

Yeah, that hadn’t gone so well for Kim, in the end.

He shook his head and went back to the computer. “I’ve been checking about the studio, the recording session, you know? They’re serious, Claire. They want me in there on Thursday.”

“Really?” She grabbed a cup of coffee and slid into a chair across from him, then doctored up her drink with milk and sugar. “So we have to leave Thursday morning?”

“No, I’m thinking we leave tonight. Just in case. And besides, it gives us some time to get used to Dallas, and I don’t want to travel during the day.” Right. Vampires. Road trip. Sunlight. Probably not the best idea.

“We can’t take your car, can we? I mean, the tinting’s not legal outside of Morganville.”
“Yeah. Which is another reason for night driving. I figure we can take Eve’s car. It’s roomy and it’s got a big trunk, in case.”

In case they got caught in the sun, he meant. Claire tapped her fingers on the coffee cup, thinking. “What about supplies?” she said. “You know.”
“I’ll stop at the blood bank and pick up a cooler,” he said. “To go.”
“Seriously? They do that?”
“You’d be surprised. We can even put Cokes in there, too.”

That didn’t seem too sanitary, somehow. Claire tried not to think about it. “How long are we going to be gone?”
“If we leave tonight and I do the demo on Thursday during the day, we could be back on Friday night. Or Saturday, depending on what kind of stuff you guys want to do. I’m easy.”

That made Claire remember something. “Uh—you know we’re going to have an escort, right?”

“No idea. All I know is Amelie’s letter said we had to clear our departure time with Oliver.”

Michael kept on frowning. He reached for his cell phone and dialed as he sipped more coffee. “It’s Michael,” he said. “I hear we have to clear leaving town with you. We’re planning on going tonight, around dusk.”

His face went entirely blank as he listened to whatever Oliver said on the other end. Michael didn’t say anything at all.

Finally, he put the coffee cup down and said, “Do we have a choice?” Pause. “I didn’t think so. We’ll meet you there.”

He hung up, carefully laid the cell phone down on the table next to his coffee, and sank back in his chair, eyes closed. He looked—indescribable, Claire decided. It was as if there were so many things inside him fighting to come out that he couldn’t decide which one to let off the leash first.

“What?” she finally asked, half afraid to even try.
Eyes still shut, Michael said, “We’ve got an escort, all right.”

“Who?”
“Oliver.”

Claire set down her own coffee cup with a thump that slopped brown liquid over the rim. “What?”
“I know.”
“We have to be trapped in a car with Oliver?”
“I know.”
“So much for the fun. Fun all gone.”

He sighed and finally opened his eyes. She knew that look; she remembered it from when she’d first met him. Bitter and guarded. Hurt. Trapped. Then, he’d been a ghost, unable to leave this house, caught between human and vampire.

Now he was just as trapped, only instead of the house, his boundaries were the town limits. He’d felt, for the last few hours, as if he could break free, be someone else.
Oliver had just taken that away from him.

“I’m sorry,” Claire said. He shut the computer, unplugged it, and stood up. He didn’t meet her eyes again.
“Be ready at six,” he said. “Tell Shane. I’ll tell Eve.”

She nodded. He kept his head down as he walked toward the kitchen door. When he got there, he stopped for a few seconds without turning back to look at her. “Thanks,” he said. “Sucks, you know?”

“I know.”

Michael laughed bitterly. “Shane would have said, And so do you.”

“I’m not Shane.”

“Yeah.” He still didn’t turn around. “I’m glad you’re happy with him. He’s a good guy, you know.”

“Michael—”

He was already gone by the time she said his name, just the swinging door left behind. There was no sense chasing him. He wanted to brood in private.

She called Shane to tell him what time they were leaving, but not about Oliver. Frankly, she didn’t want to have that grief just yet. She went on to class. After her early ones, she had a two-hour break, which meant she had things to do, so she could leave town with a clear conscience.

And besides, she’d been looking forward to this since she’d first thought of it.
First step—she walked the few blocks from campus to Common Grounds, Oliver’s coffee shop, and ordered up a mocha. He was behind the bar—a tall older man, with hippie hair and a tie-dyed T-shirt under his coffee-stained apron. When he was serving customers, you’d never know he was a vampire, much less one of the meanest she’d ever met.
Mocha in hand, Claire texted Monica’s cell. *Meet me at Common Grounds ASAP.*

She got back an immediate *Btr B good.*

Oh, it would be.

Claire sipped and waited, and Monica eventually rolled up in her hot red convertible; no Gina and Jennifer this time. Monica seemed to be getting out more and more without her backup singers, which was interesting. Claire supposed even they were getting tired of providing constant on-demand validation.

Monica blew in the front door of the shop in a dress that was too short for her, but showed off her long tanned legs; the swirl of wind *almost* made it illegal. She shoved her expensive sunglasses up on top of her glossy black hair and scanned the room. The sneer that twisted her full lips was probably mostly reflex.

After putting in her coffee order, Monica slipped into a chair across from Claire. “Well?” she said, and dropped her tiny purse on the table. “Like I said, this had better be good.”

When Oliver brought over Monica’s coffee, Claire said, “Would you mind staying for a minute?”

“What?”

“As a moderator.” Oliver was a broker of deals in Morganville. Common Grounds was a key place where humans and vampires could meet, mingle in safety, and reach all kinds of agreements that Oliver would witness and enforce. Pretty rarely between humans, though.

Oliver shrugged and sat down between the two girls. “All right. Make it quick.”

Monica already looked thunderously angry, so Claire spoke first. “Monica made a deal with me for test answers. I want you to witness me handing them over.”

Oliver’s eyebrows twitched up, and the look on his face was bitterly amused. “You’re asking me to witness a schoolyard transaction for cheating. How ... quaint.”

Claire didn’t wait. She pushed over a thumb drive toward Monica. “There’s an electronic file on there,” she said. “It’s password protected. If you can figure out the password, you can have the answers.”

Monica’s mouth dropped open.

“You put them under a password?”

“You little *bitch.*” Monica’s hand flashed out—not for the thumb drive, but for Claire’s arm. She crushed it to the table, her nails digging in deep enough to draw blood. “I told you, I’ll fry your ass.”

“With you, I know that’s not an empty threat,” Claire said. “Alyssa Collins is proof of that.”

Monica went very still, and something flickered across her eyes—shock? Maybe even regret and guilt. “I’m not taking this thing. You give me the answers without the password.”

Oliver cleared his throat. “Did you specify how she had to give you the answers?”

“No,” Claire said. “She just said I had to. I did. Hey, this is the nicest way I could have done it. I could have given it to her in Latin or something.”

“Let go of her,” Oliver said mildly. When Monica didn’t, his tone turned icy. “Let. *Go.*”

She pulled her hand back and folded her arms over her chest, glaring at Claire, her jaw set hard. “This isn’t over.”

“It is,” Oliver said. “Not her fault you made a poor definition of what it was you wanted from her. She satisfied all requirements. She’s even given you a reasonable chance of discovering the password. Take it and walk away, Monica.”

“This isn’t over,” Monica repeated, ignoring him. When she reached for the thumb drive, Oliver’s pale, strong hand slapped down over it, and over her fingers, holding her in place. Monica yelped. It must have hurt.

“Look at me,” he said. Monica blinked and focused on his face, and Claire saw her pupils widen. Her lips parted a little. “Monica Morrell, you are my responsibility. You owe me respect, and you owe me obedience. And you will leave Claire Danvers alone. If you have cause to attack her, you will tell me first. I will decide whether or not you can take action. And you do not have my permission. Not for this.” He let go. Monica yanked her hand back and cradled it against her chest. “Now, take your business and your coffee elsewhere. Both of you.”

Monica reached out and snapped up the small memory stick. As she did, Claire said, “The thumb drive cost me ten bucks.” Monica’s glare reached nuclear levels, but since Oliver was still sitting there, she dug in her tiny purse, found a crumpled ten-dollar bill, and flung it over the table to Claire. She smoothed it out, smiled, and put it in her pocket.

“If you’re quite finished,” Oliver said. “Leave. Monica, go first. I won’t have you doing anything messy. I’m not your maid.”

Monica sent him a look that was definitely *not* a glare; it was much more scared than angry. She picked up her purse, the coffee, and stalked to the door. She didn’t look back as she piled into her convertible and burned rubber
pulling out.

“One of these days,” Oliver said, still looking toward the street, “you’re going to be too clever for your own good, Claire. You do realize that.”

She did, actually. But sometimes, it was just impossible to do anything else.

“I guess you’re coming with us tonight?”

Oliver turned his head to look at her this time, and there was something so cold and distant in his eyes that she shivered. “Did you hear me when I told you to leave? I don’t like being used to settle your problems.”

She swallowed, picked up her stuff, and left.

The afternoon was spent with Myrnin at his freaky mad-scientist lab, which was actually much nicer after the renovations he’d done: new equipment; computers; nice bookcases; decent lighting instead of crazy turn-of-last-century things that emitted sparks when you tried to turn them off or on.

Still, no matter how nice the decor, Myrnin was never less than half crazy. He was under pressure from Amelie, Claire knew; with the death—could computers die?—of Ada, the town’s master computer; he was struggling to figure out a way to make a replacement, but without putting a human brain into it, which Claire strongly discouraged, seeing how well that had worked out with Ada, and the fact that Claire herself was almost certainly the next candidate.

“Computers,” Myrnin said, then shoved the laptop she’d put out for him aside and glared at it as if it had personally insulted him. “The technology is entirely idiotic. Who built this? Baboons?”

“It works fine,” Claire said, and took command of the computer to bring up the interface she’d designed. “All you have to do is explain to me how Ada was connected into the portal and security systems, and I can build some kind of connector. You can run it right from this screen. See?” She’d even gotten an art student at the school to design the interface in a steampunky kind of way, which she thought would make him feel more at home. Myrnin continued to frown at it, but in a less aggressive way. “Try it. Just touch the screen.”

He reached out with one fingertip and pressed the screen over the icon of the shield. The security screen came up, all rusted iron and ornamental gears. He made a humming sound in the back of his throat and pressed again. “And this would control the programming.”

“Yeah, it’s GUI—a graphic user interface.”

“And this program would be able to detect vampires and humans, and treat them differently?”

“Yeah. We just use heat-sensing technology. Vampires have a lower body temperature. It’s easy to tell the difference.”

“Can it be cheated?”

Claire shrugged. “Anything can be cheated. But it’s pretty good.”

“And the memory alteration?”

That was a problem—a big problem. “I don’t think you can actually do that with a computer. I mean, isn’t that some kind of vampire mind thing?” Because Ada had, in fact, been a vampire. And the machine that Myrnin had built to keep her brain alive had somehow allowed her to broadcast that vampire power on a wide field. Claire didn’t really understand it, but she knew it worked—had worked.

“That’s a rather large failure. What’s this?” Myrnin tapped an icon that had a radar screen icon. Nothing happened.

“It’s an early-warning system, to monitor approaches to town. In case.”

“In case what?”

“In case someone like Mr. Bishop decides to visit again.”

Myrnin smiled and leaned back in his chair, folding his hands in his lap. “There is no one like Mr. Bishop,” he said. “Thank the most holy. And this is excellent work, Claire, but it doesn’t solve our fundamental problem. The difference engine needs programming to allow for removal of dangerous memories. I know of no other way to achieve what we need than to interface it with a biological database.”

“A brain.”

“Well, if you want to be technical.”

Claire sighed. “I am not getting you a brain, because I am not that kind of lab assistant, Dr. Frankenstein. Can we go through the map again?”

The map was a giant flowchart that stretched the length of the lab, on giant notepads. She had painstakingly mapped out every single if, then, and and/or that Myrnin had been able to describe.

It was huge. Really huge. And she wasn’t at all sure it could be done, period—except that he had done it, once, to Ada.

She just wanted to take the icky brain part out of the equation.

“It’s so much easier,” Myrnin insisted as they walked the row of pages. “The brain is capable of processing a
staggering number of calculations per second, and is capable of incorporating variables and factors that a mere computer cannot. It’s the finest example of a calculating machine ever developed. We’re fools not to use it.”

“Well, you’re not putting my brain into a machine. Ever.”

“I wouldn’t.” Myrnin picked a piece of lint from his shiny vest. “Unless it was the only answer, of course. Or, of course, unless you weren’t using it anymore.”

“Never. Promise.”

He shrugged. “I promise.” But not in any way that mattered, Claire thought. Myrnin’s promises were kind of—flexible. “You’re leaving town the rest of the week?”

“Yeah, we’re leaving tonight. You’ll be okay?”

“Well wouldn’t I?” He clasped his hands behind him and paced back and forth, staring at the charts. He was wearing shorts today, and flip-flops, of course—like some homeless surfer from the waist down, some Edwardian lord from the waist up. It was strange, and ridiculously Myrnin. “I’m not an infant, Claire. I don’t need you to take care of me. Believe me.”

She didn’t, really. Yes, he was old. Yes, he was a vampire. Yes, he was crazy/smart—but the crazy part was always as strong as, or stronger than, the smart part. Even now.

“You’re not going to do anything stupid, are you?” she asked him. He turned and looked at her, and looked utterly innocent.

“Why in the world would I do that?” he asked. “Have a good time, Claire. The work will still be here when you return.”

She shut down the laptop and closed the lid, packing it up to put it away. As she did, he finally nodded at the machine. “That’s not bad,” he said. “As a start.”

“Thanks.” She was a little surprised. Myrnin didn’t often give out random compliments. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Certainly. Why wouldn’t I be?”

There was just something off about his mood. From visiting her parents to the way he was restlessly prowling the lab—he just wasn’t his usual, unsettlingly manic self. He was a different manic self.

“I wish I were going with you,” he finally said. “There. I’ve said it. You may mock me at your will.”

“Really? But—we’re just going for Michael, really.” That wasn’t true. It was a chance to get out of Morganville, experience life out in the real world. And she knew it would be amazing to feel free again, even for a little while. “Couldn’t you go if you wanted?”

He sat down in his leather wing chair, put on his spectacles, and opened a book from a pile next to it. “Could I?” he asked. “If Amelie didn’t wish me to leave? Not very likely.”

She’d never considered that Myrnin, of all people, could be just as trapped in Morganville as everybody else. He seemed so ... in control, somehow, at the same time he was wildly out of control. But she could see that of everyone in town, Amelie would trust Myrnin the least in terms of actually exiting the town limits. He had too much knowledge, too much insanity brewing around in that head of his.

As careful as Amelie was, she’d never take the risk. No, Myrnin, of everybody in Morganville, would be the next to last to leave, right before Amelie herself. He was her—pet? No, that wasn’t right. Her asset.

It had never really occurred to Claire that he might not altogether like that.

“Sorry,” she said softly. He waved at her, a shooing motion that left her feeling a little lost. She genuinely liked Myrnin, even though she was always intensely aware, these days, of the limits of that friendship—and of the dangers. “Call me if you—”

“Why? So you’ll come running back to Morganville?” He shook his head. “Not likely. And not necessary. Just go, Claire. I’ll be here.”

There was a grim sound to that she didn’t like, but it was getting late. Michael had said to be ready at six, and she needed to pack for the trip.

When she looked back, Myrnin had given up the pretense of reading and was just staring off into the distance. There was something horribly sad about his expression, and she almost turned back....

But she didn’t.
The Glass House was chaos when Claire opened the door. Mostly that was Eve and Shane, fighting stereo wars and yelling at each other upstairs. Eve was favoring Korn; Shane was fighting back by blasting “Macarena” at the limit of the boom box knob. There was no sign of Michael, but his guitars were cased and sitting in the living room, along with a duffel bag and a rolling cooler that looked like it could hold any normal drinks. Claire just wasn’t sure what it did hold, and she didn’t open it to find out.

She dropped her backpack, which she figured she’d take anyway, and jogged upstairs. Eve was standing in a pile of clothes, an open suitcase on the bed, holding two identical-looking shirts and frowning at them. Terminal fashion indecision. Claire dashed in, tapped her right hand, and Eve gave her a grateful grin and tossed the shirt into the suitcase. The music was so loud, conversation was impossible.

As she passed Shane’s door, she saw him sprawled on his bed. He had a duffel bag, like Michael’s but brown instead of blue. He looked bored, but he brightened up when he saw her.

“Seriously?” she yelled. “‘The Macarena’?”

“It’s war,” he yelled back. “I had to bring out the heavy artillery. Next up, Barry Manilow!”

Claire hit the POWER button on the stereo, leaving Korn thundering victoriously through the house. After a second or two, Eve turned it down. “See how easy that was?” Claire said.

“What, giving up? Giving up is always easy. It’s the peace that follows that sucks.” Shane slithered off the bed and followed her as she headed for her room. “How was it?”

“What?”

“Everything.”

“You know.” She shrugged. “Normal.” Yeah. She’d manipulated the second most powerful vampire in town into taking her side against a psycho bitch-queen sorority girl. She’d talked rationally about putting people’s brains into computers. This was a normal day. No wonder she was screwed up. “How was yours?”


“Did you just see me walk in?”

“Oh. Yeah. Guess not, then.”

He parked himself on her bed, flopped out again as she opened up her one battered suitcase and began filling it. That wasn’t tough; unlike Eve, she wasn’t a clothes fanatic. She had a couple of decent shirts, a bunch of not-so-great ones, and some jeans. She put in her one skirt, along with the shoes that matched it, and the fishnet tights. Shane watched, hands laced behind his head.

“You’re not going to try to tell me what to take?” she asked. “Because I figured that was why you followed me.”

“Do I look crazy? I followed you because your bed is more comfortable.” His smile widened. “Wanna see?”

“Not right now.”

“Last chance before we hit the road.”

“Stop it!”

“Stop what?”

“Looking so ...” She couldn’t think of a word. He looked just as ridiculously hot to her now as he had this morning, when it had been so tough to leave. And that was a good thing. “I’ve got to get stuff out of the bathroom.”

“Good luck. I think Eve took everything already except the aftershave.”

Actually, Eve hadn’t; it was just that Claire didn’t have a whole lot. Shampoo and conditioner, all in one bottle. A little makeup bag. A razor. She didn’t really need a blow-dryer, but if she did, Eve would have packed one—or two. From the size of the suitcase, Eve was planning to take everything she’d ever owned.

Back in the bedroom, Claire almost shut her suitcase, then stopped and frowned. “What did you take?” she asked.

“For, you know, protection?”

Shane lifted himself up on his elbows. “What, like, uh, protection?”

“No!” She felt her face flush, which was pretty ridiculous, considering what they’d done this morning. “I mean, against any vampire things that might happen. You know.”

“Stakes in the bottom of the duffel bag,” he said.

“Brought some extra silver nitrate in bottles, too. We should be okay. It’s not as if there’s a big vampire problem where we’re going.”

Maybe not, but living in Morganville had made it a reflex. Claire couldn’t honestly imagine not planning for it, and she hadn’t been raised here, in the hothouse. She was surprised Shane seemed so ... calm.

But then, Shane had been outside of Morganville, for two years. And they hadn’t been a good two years, either,
but at least he knew something about what it was going to be like; more than Michael and Eve, anyway.

Claire dug in her underwear drawer, came up with four silver-coated stakes, and dumped them in on top of her
clothes. Just in case. Shane gave her a thumbs-up in approval. She slammed the bag shut and locked it, then wrestled
it off the bed. It was heavier than she’d expected, and it wasn’t one with wheels and a handle. Shane, unasked, slid
off the bed and took it from her. He lifted it as if it were the weight of a bag of feathers, went into his room, grabbed
his duffel, and headed toward the stairs. As he passed Eve’s room he looked in, shook his head, and yelled, “You are
totally on your own for that one!”

Claire saw why, as she looked in. Eve had closed the suitcase and somehow gotten it to the floor, but it was the
size of a trunk.

At least it had wheels.

Michael was downstairs when Shane and Claire came down; Shane thumped their bags down and said, “You’d
better wrangle your girlfriend’s bag, man. I would, but I don’t want to spend the entire trip in traction.”

Michael grinned and zoomed upstairs. He came down carrying the suitcase as if it were nothing. Claire noticed it
was new and shiny, and had hand-applied death’s-head stickers and biohazard marks. Yeah, that was definitely
Eve’s. Oh, and it was black. Of course.

“Snacks!” Eve yelped, and dashed into the kitchen. She came back with a bag full of things. “Road food. Trust
me. Totally necessary. Oh, and drinks—we need drinks.” She caught sight of the cooler. “Okay, not you, Michael.
The rest of us.”

They were loading the second cooler with non-blood-related drink items when the doorbell rang. Claire opened it
to find Oliver standing on the doorstep. The sun was still up, but he was wearing a hat and a long black coat, which
didn’t in any way make him less sinister. His hair was tied back and must have been tucked up under his hat. She
wondered if it was flammable, like the rest of him. Age had made him flame-retardant, but he’d still suffer out in the
sun, and eventually burst into flames, if he couldn’t get out of it.

He came in without waiting for an invitation. “Yeah, welcome.” Claire sighed and shut the door. “We’re getting
stuff together. Uh, is that all you brought?” It was one bag, smaller even than Michael’s or Shane’s.

Oliver didn’t bother to answer her. He walked past, into the living room, and straight for Michael. Eve and Shane,
who were bickering over the placement of the Cokes versus the bottled iced coffees, fell silent, and Claire joined
them.

“You’re surely not taking all this,” Oliver said, looking at the pile of stuff on the floor. It was, Claire had to admit,
a lot—mainly because Eve’s suitcase was the size of Rhode Island, but they’d all contributed. “Is there room?”

“I have a major trunk,” Eve said. “It’ll fit.”

Oliver shook his head. “I hate traveling with amateurs,” he said. “Very well. Get the car loaded. Michael and I
will wait inside until the sun is down.”

He acted as if he were the boss, which was annoying, but the truth was, he was the boss. Amelie had assigned him
as escort, and that meant he could boss them around all he wanted. Heaven, for Oliver. Hell, for everybody else.

Claire shrugged silently, then picked up her suitcase and backpack and led the way.

Packing the car was hilariously awful, because trying to get Eve’s suitcase wedged in was a drama nobody
needed. It finally worked, and everything else fit in, including the guitars and the coolers. It left the three of them
sweaty, annoyed, and exhausted, but by the time they’d worked it all out, the sun was safely down.

Nobody tried to call shotgun. Oliver took the front seat, Michael got in the driver’s seat, and Eve, Claire, and
Shane took the back. It wasn’t even all that crowded.

“Passes,” Oliver said, and held out his hand. Michael handed them over, and Oliver examined them as if he didn’t
know they’d already been cleared to leave town. “Very well. Proceed.”

“Tunes!” Eve said. “We need—”

“No music,” Oliver said. “I will not be subjected to what you consider tunes.”

“FYI, I know it’s a disguise, but you even suck at being a hippie,” Eve muttered. “At least like the Beatles or
something.”

“No.”

“It’s going to be a really long trip,” Shane said, and put his arm around both Claire and Eve, since he was in the
middle. “But at least I’ve got all the babes. Backseat, for the win.”

“Shut up,” Michael said.

“Come back here and make me, Dad.”

Michael and Shane exchanged rude gestures, and then Michael started up the car and pulled away from the curb.
Eve squirmed in her seat and clapped her hands.

Oliver turned and glared at her. He took off his black hat and set it on the dashboard, next to Eve’s nodding
skeletal figurine. “Enough of that,” he said. “It’s bad enough I have to be trapped in a car with you children. You’ll
do your best not to act like children.”

“Oliver,” Michael said, “back off. It’s our first time out of town. Let us enjoy it a little.”

“The first time for some of you,” Oliver said, and looked out the window as the houses of Lot Street began to roll by, one after another. “For some of us, this is not quite as life-changing an event.”

That was kind of true, but still, Claire felt Eve’s excitement was contagious. Michael was smiling. Shane was enjoying being the dude in the backseat. And she was … leaving Morganville behind, at least for a little while.

At the town limits, Claire watched the WELCOME TO MORGANVILLE sign approach. This side said PLEASE DON’T LEAVE US SO SOON!

They rocketed past it doing at least seventy, maybe eighty miles an hour. Beyond the sign sat a police cruiser—one of Hannah Moses’s crew. Claire felt her breath rush out, but the cop behind the wheel just waved them on, and Michael didn’t even slow down.

Morganville, in the rearview mirror.

Just like that.

It shouldn’t have been so easy, Claire thought. After all that, all the fighting and the terror and the threats.

They just … drove away.

Michael switched on the radio and found a scratchy rock ‘n’ roll station, and although Oliver kept glaring, he turned it up, and before long they were all singing “Born to Be Wild,” out of tune and at the top of their lungs. Oliver didn’t, but he didn’t pitch an übervamp fit, either. Claire was almost certain that once or twice, she saw his lips moving with the lyrics.

The sunset was glorious, spilling colors all over the sky in shades of orange and red and gold, fading into indigo blue. Claire rolled down the window and smelled the cool, crisp air, flavored with dust and sage. Outside of Morganville there was scrub desert, and a lot of it. Nothing to see for miles except flat, empty land, and the two-lane blacktop road stretching into the distance, straight as an arrow.

“We have to do some jogging around on farm roads,” Michael said, once the song was over and the music shifted to something not as karaoke worthy. “Should be on the interstate in about two hours or so.”

“You’re sure you know where you’re going?” Shane asked. “Because I don’t want to wake up in the Gulf of Mexico or something.”

Michael ignored that, and Claire slowly settled into her seat, feeling relaxed and light. They’d left. They’d actually left Morganville. She could feel the same suppressed thrill and relief in Shane, and, on his other side, from Eve, whose dark eyes just glowed with excitement. She’d been dreaming of this her whole life, Claire realized. Maybe not being trapped in a car with Oliver, or that Michael would be a vampire, but leaving town with Michael had always been one of Eve’s top-ten fantasies.

And here they were, more or less, anyway, which just went to show you that your top-ten fantasies might turn out to be completely different experiences than you’d ever thought.

“We’re out,” Eve said, almost to herself. “We’re out, we’re out, we’re out.”

“You’ll go back,” Oliver said, and turned his head to stare out the side window. “You all go back, eventually.”

“Even for a vampire, you’re a ray of sunshine,” Shane said. “So, we should probably talk about what we’re going to do in Dallas.”

“Everything!” Eve said, instantly. “Everything, everything, everything. And then everything else.”

“Whoa, hit the brakes, girl. We’ve got, what, a hundred bucks between the two of us? I’m pretty sure the all-inclusive everything party package costs more.”

“Oh.” Eve looked surprised, as if she hadn’t even thought about money at all. Knowing Eve, she likely hadn’t.

“Well, we have to at least go to some of the good clubs, right? And shopping? Oh, and they have some really good movie theaters.”

“Movies?” Michael repeated, looking in the rearview mirror. “Seriously? Eve.”


“You’re going to waste your first trip outside of Morganville inside a movie theater?”


Shane just shook his head. “Not really. Where’s the fun, Eve?”

“That is fun!”

Oliver sighed and let his head fall against the window glass with a soft thump. “One of you is going to be left to walk to Dallas if you don’t shut up.”

“Wow. Who got up on the wrong side of the coffin this evening?” Eve shot back. “Well? You’re the expert. Where would you go?”

Oliver straightened up and looked back at her. “Excuse me?”

“I’m asking your opinion. You probably know where the best places are to go.”
“I—” Oliver seemed at a loss for words, which was pretty funny; Claire couldn’t imagine the last time that had happened to him. Probably not in the last couple of centuries, she guessed. “You’re asking for my recommendations. Of things to do in Dallas.”

“Yep.”

He stared at Eve for a long, silent, chilly moment, then turned back, face forward. “I doubt our tastes have anything in common. You’re too young for the bars, and too old for the playgrounds. I know nothing of what you’d like.” Then, after a second’s pause, he continued. “Perhaps the malls.”

“Malls!” Eve almost shrieked it, then clapped both hands over her mouth. “Oh my God, I forgot about the malls. With actual stores. Can we go to the mall?”

“Which one?”

“There’s more than one! Okay, uh—one with a Hot Topic store.”

Oliver was—from Claire’s point of view—almost smiling. “I believe that could be arranged.”


Claire reached up and threaded her fingers through his. “We can do other stuff.” When he glanced over at her, and she realized that everybody else was looking at her, too, she colored and added, “Cultural stuff. You know. Bookstores. Museums. There’s a cool science museum I’d like to see.”

“Is there not a video game store in this entire town?”

“Let’s just get there first,” Michael said.

That was good advice, Claire thought as the last colors faded from the sky and night took over. That was really good advice.

She dozed a little bit, but she woke up when the car jerked violently, veered, and she heard the tires squeal. She was still trying to understand what had happened when Oliver snapped, “Pull over.”

“What?” Michael, in the glow of the dashboard, looked like a ghost, his eyes wide and his face tense.

“You’ve never driven outside of Morganville. I have. Pull over. Vampire reflexes will put you into an accident, not save you from one. Humans can’t react in the same way you can. It takes practice to drive safely around them on the open road.”

So Michael must have tried to dodge a car. Wow. Somehow, Claire had never considered that vampire reflexes could be a downside. Michael must have felt spooked enough to agree with Oliver, because he pulled the car off to the shoulder, gravel crunching under the tires, and got out. He and Oliver changed places. Oliver checked the car’s mirrors with the ease of long practice, eased the car back on the road, and the whole thing settled into a steady, rolling rhythm. Claire looked over at the other two in the backseat. Eve had her headphones on and her eyes closed. Shane was sound asleep. It was ... peaceful, she supposed. She looked out at the night. There was a quarter moon, so it wasn’t all that bright out, but the silver light gilded sand and spiky plants. Everything in the wash of the car’s headlights was vivid; everything else was just shadows and smoke.

It was like space travel, she decided. Every once in a while you could see an isolated house, far out in the middle of nowhere, with its lights blazing against the night. But mostly, they were out here alone.

Oliver took a turn off the two-lane highway, heading for the interstate, she supposed. She didn’t ask—not until they passed a road sign that had an arrow pointing to Dallas.

The arrow pointed left. They headed straight on.

“Hey,” she said. “Hey, Oliver? I think you missed your turn.”

“I don’t need advice,” Oliver said.

“But the sign—”

“We have a stop to make,” he said. “It won’t take long.”

“Wait, what? What stop?” It was news to Michael, apparently. That didn’t ease the sudden anxiety in Claire’s chest. “What’s this about, Oliver?”

“Be still, all of you. It’s none of your affair.”

“Our car,” Michael pointed out. “And we’re in it. So it looks like it is our affair. Now, where are you taking us, and why?”

Shane woke up, probably sensing the tension in Michael’s voice. He blinked twice, swiped at his face, and leaned forward. “Something wrong?”

“Yeah,” Michael said. “We’re getting hijacked.”

Shane sat up slowly, and Claire could feel the tension coiling in him.

“Easy, all of you,” Oliver said. “This is a directive from Amelie. There’s a small issue I need to address. It won’t take long.”

Eve, who’d removed one earphone, gave a jaw-cracking yawn. “I could stretch my legs,” she said. “Also,
“bathroom would be good.”
“What kind of small issue?” Shane asked. He was still tense, watchful, and not buying Oliver’s no-big-deal attitude. Oliver’s cold eyes fixed on him in the rearview mirror.
“Nothing of consequence to you,” he said. “And this isn’t a debate. Shut up, all of you.”
“Mikey?”
Michael gazed at Oliver for a long few seconds before he finally said, “No, it’s okay. A short stop would do us all good, probably.”
“Depending on where,” Shane said, but shrugged and sat back. “I’m cool if you are.”
Michael nodded. “We cool, Oliver?”
“I told you, it’s not a debate.”
“Four of us, one of you. Maybe it could be.”
“Only if you want to answer to Amelie in the end.”
Michael said nothing. They drove on through the inky night, surrounded by a bubble of backwashed headlights, and finally a faded sign glowed green in the distance. Claire blinked and squinted at it.
“‘Durram, Texas,’” she read. “Is that where we’re going?”
“More importantly, does it have an all-night truck stop?” Eve groaned. “Because I was serious about that bathroom thing. Really.”
“Your bladder must be the size of a peanut,” Shane said. “I think I see a sign up there.”
He did, and it was a truck stop—not big, not very clean, but open. It was crowded, too—six big rigs in the lot, and quite a few pickup trucks. Oliver took the exit and pulled off into the truck stop, edging the car to a halt at a gas pump. “Top off the tank,” he told Michael. “Then park it and wait for me inside. I’ll be back.”
“Wait, when?”
“When I’m done. I’m sure you can find something to occupy yourselves.” And then the driver’s side door opened, and Oliver walked away. As soon as he was outside of the wash of the harsh overhead lights, he vanished.
“We could just leave,” Shane pointed out. “Fill up and drive off.”
“And you think that’s a good plan?”
“Actually? Not really. But it’s a funny plan.”
“Funny as in getting us killed. Some more than others, I might add.”
“Fine, rub the resurrection in our faces. But seriously. Why are we doing this? We ditch Oliver; we never have to go back to Morganville. Think about it.”
Claire licked her lips and said, softly, “Not all of us can walk away, Shane. My parents are there. Eve’s mom and brother. We can’t just pick up and leave, not unless we want something bad to happen to them.”
He looked actually ashamed of himself, as if he’d really forgotten that. “I didn’t mean—” He gave a heavy sigh.
“Yeah, okay. I see your point.”
“Added to that, I’m Amelie’s blood now,” Michael said. “She can find me if she wants me. If you want to include me in the great escape, I’m like a giant GPS tracking chip of woe.”
“Whoa.”
“Exactly.”
Eve said, plaintively, “Bathroom?”
And that closed the discussion of running away.
At least, for the moment.

The Texas Star Truck Stop was worse on the inside than the outside. As Claire pushed open the door—with Shane trying to open it for her—a tinny bell rang, and when she looked up, Claire found herself being stared at—a lot.
“Wow,” Shane murmured, close behind her as he entered the store. “Meth central.”
She knew what he meant. This was a scary bunch of people. The youngest person in the place, apart from them, was a pinched, too-tanned skinny woman of about thirty wearing a skimpy top and cut-off shorts. She had tattoos—a lot of them. Everybody else was older, bigger, meaner, and uncomfortably fixed on the newcomers.
And then Eve stepped in, in all her Goth glory, bouncing from one Doc Marten-booted foot to the other. “Bathroom?” she asked the big, bearded man behind the counter. He frowned at her, then reached down and came up with a key attached to a big metal bar. “Thank you!” Eve seized the key and dashed off down the dark hall marked as RESTROOMS; Claire wasn’t sure she’d have the guts, no matter how much she had to pee. That did not look safe, never mind clean.
Michael stepped in last, and took it all in with one quick, comprehensive look. He raised his eyebrows at Shane, who shrugged. “Yeah,” he said. “I know. Fun, huh?”
“Let’s get a table,” Michael said. “Order something.” Under the theory, Claire guessed, that if they spent money, the locals would like them better.

Somehow, she didn’t think that was going to work. Her gaze fell on signs posted around the store: **YOU DRAW YOUR GUN, WE DRAW FASTER. GUN CONTROL MEANS HITTING WHAT YOU AIM AT. NO TRESPASSING—VIOLATORS WILL BE SHOT; SURVIVORS WILL BE SHOT AGAIN.**

“I don’t think I’m going to be hungry,” she said, but Michael was right. This really was their only option, other than sitting outside in the car. “Maybe something to drink. They have Coke, right?”

“Claire, people in Botswana have Coke. I’m pretty sure Up the Road Apiece, Texas, has Coke.”

By the time they’d gotten seated at one of the grungy plastic booths, still being stared at by the locals, Eve finally joined them. She looked more relaxed, bouncy, and more—well, Eve. “Better,” she announced, as she slipped into place next to Michael. “Mmm, much better now.”

He put his arm around her and smiled. It was cute. Claire found herself smiling, too, and snuggled up against Shane. “How was the bathroom?”

Eve shuddered. “We shall never speak of it again.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“You want a menu?”

“Absolutely. They might have ice cream.”

The last thing bouncy, happy Eve needed was a sugar rush, but ice cream did sound good. Claire looked around for a waitress and found one leaning against the cracked counter, whispering to the man on the other side. They were both staring straight at Claire and her friends, and their expressions weren’t exactly friendly.

“Uh, guys? Maybe ixnay on the ice cream-ay. How about we wait in the car?” she asked.

“And miss ice cream? Hella don’t think so,” Eve said. She waved at the waitress and smiled. Claire winced. “Oh, relax, CB. I’m a people person.”

“In Morganville!”

“Same thing,” Eve said. She kept on smiling, but it started getting a little strained as the waitress continued to stare but didn’t acknowledge the wave. Eve raised her voice. “Hi? I’d like to order something? Hellooooooo?”

The waitress and the guy behind the counter seemed frozen in place, glaring, but then they were blocked out by someone stepping into Claire’s line of sight—more than one someone, in fact. There were three men, all big and puffy, and with really unpleasant expressions.

Shane, who’d been slumped lazily next to her, straightened up.

“Don’t y’all got no manners where you come from?” the first one asked. “You wait your turn. Sherry don’t like being yelled at.”

Eve blinked, then said, “I wasn’t—”

“Where you from?” he interrupted her. The men formed a redneck wall between the table and the rest of the room, pinning the four of them in place. Shane and Michael exchanged a look, and Michael took his arm away from Eve’s shoulders.

“We’re on our way to Dallas,” Eve said, just as cheerfully as if the situation hadn’t gone from inhospitable to ominous. “Michael’s a musician. He’s going to record a CD.”

The three men laughed. It wasn’t a nice sound, and it was one Claire recognized all too well—it was deeper in register, but it was the same laugh Monica Morrell and her friends liked to give when stalking their prey. It wasn’t amusement. It was a weird sort of aggression—laughing at you, not with you; sharing a secret.

“Musician, huh? You in one of those boy bands?” The second man—shorter, squatter, wearing a dirty orange ball cap and a stained University of Texas sweatshirt with the arms cut off. “We just love our boy bands out here.”

“I ever meet those damn Jonas Brothers in person, I’ll give ‘em what for,” the third man said. He seemed angrier than the others, eyes like black little holes in a stiff, tight face. “My kid can’t shut up about ’em.”

“I know what you mean,” Eve said with a kind of fake sweetness that made Claire wince, again. “Nobody’s really been worth listening to since New Kids on the Block, am I right?”

“What?” He fixed those dead, dark eyes on her.

“Wow, not a New Kids on the Block fan, either. I’m shocked. Okay, I’m thinking not Marilyn Manson, then.... Jessica Simpson? Or...” Eve’s voice faded out, because Michael’s hand had closed over her arm. She looked over at him, and he shook his head. “Right. Shutting up now. Sorry.”

“What do you want?” Michael asked the men.

“Your little freak vampire girlfriend needs to learn how to keep her mouth shut.”

“Who you calling little?” Eve demanded.

Shane sighed. “Wrong on so many levels. Eve. Shut up.”

She glared at him but made a little key-and-lock motion at her lips, folded her arms, and sat back.
Michael had locked gazes with the third man, the angry one, and they were staring it out. It went on for a while, and then Michael said, “Why don’t you just let me and my friends have our ice cream, and then we’ll get back in our car and leave? We don’t want a problem.”

“Oh, you don’t, you whiny little bitch?” The angry man shoved the other two aside and slapped his palms flat against the table to loom over Claire and her friends. “Why’d you come in here, then?”

Eve said, in a very small voice, “Ice cream?”

“Told you to shut the hell up.” And he tried to hit her with a backhanded smack.

Tried because Michael leaned forward in a flare of motion, and had hold of the man’s wrist in a flicker of time so fast Claire didn’t even see it. Neither did the angry man, who looked just kind of confused by being unable to move his hand, then put it all together and looked at Michael.

“What?” Michael said. It was soft, and it was a warning, through and through. “You try to hurt her again and I’ll pull your arm off.”

He wasn’t kidding, but the problem was, none of them was kidding. While he was holding the angry one, the guy in the orange cap reached in his pocket, flicked open a big, shiny knife, and grabbed Eve by the hair. She squeaked, raised her chin, and tried to kick him. He was good at avoiding her. It looked as if he’d had practice. “Let Berle go,” Orange Cap said. “Or I’ll do a hell of a lot worse than slap this one. I can get me real creative.”

Shane was cursing softly under his breath, and Claire knew why; he was stuck in the corner, she was in front of him, and there was no way he could be effective in helping Michael out from that angle. He had to just sit there—something he wasn’t very good at doing. Claire stayed very still, but she looked Orange Cap in the eyes and said, “Sir?” She said it respectfully, as her mom had taught her. “Sir, please don’t hurt my friend. She didn’t mean anything.”

“We don’t like smart-mouthed freaks around here,” he said. “We got our ways.”

“Yes sir. We understand now. We were just trying to have a little fun. We won’t be any trouble, I promise. Please let my friend go.” She kept her tone calm, sweet, reasonable—all the things she’d learned to do when Myrnin was running off his rails.

Orange Cap blinked, and she thought he was seeing her for the first time. “You need better friends, little girl,” he said. “Shouldn’t be running around with a bunch of freaks. If you was my daughter—” But he’d lost his edge, and he let go of Eve’s hair and wiped his hand on his greasy jeans as he folded up his knife. “You get on up out of here. Right now. You let Berle go, and we’ll let this pass. Nobody gets hurt.”

“We’re going,” Claire said instantly, and grabbed Shane’s hand. Michael let go of the angry guy, Berle, who snatched his arm back and rubbed at his wrist as if it hurt. It probably did. Claire could see white marks where Michael had held him. That was restraint, for Michael; he probably could have broken the bone without much effort. “Sir?” She spoke again to Orange Cap, treating him like the man in charge, and he nodded and clapped his friends on the shoulders.

They all stepped back.

Claire slipped out of the booth and squeezed by the men, practically dragging Shane with her. Eve and Michael followed. They walked away from the table, into the store, and Claire pushed open the door and led them all outside, into the harsh white light near the gas pumps and the car.

She looked back at the store. The three men, the people working the restaurant, and practically everyone else were looking out the windows at them.

Claire turned on Eve first. “Are you crazy?” she demanded. “Just couldn’t shut up, could you? And you!” She pointed at Michael. “You’re not in Morganville anymore, Michael. Back there you were a big dog. Out here, you’re what we were back there. Vulnerable. So you need to stop thinking that people owe you respect just because you’re a vampire.”

He looked stunned. “That’s not what I—”

“It was,” she said, interrupting him. “You acted like a vamp, Michael. Like any vamp getting back-talked by a human. You could have gotten us hurt. You could have gotten Eve killed!”

Michael looked at Shane, who lifted his shoulders in a tiny, apologetic shrug. “She’s not wrong, bro.”

“That’s not what it was,” Michael insisted. “I was just trying to—look, Eve started it.”

“Hey! That thump you heard was me under the bus, there!”

Shane shrugged again. “And now Michael’s not wrong. Hey, I like this game. I don’t have to be the wrong one for once in my life.”

“Shut up, Shane,” Eve snapped. “What about you, Miss Oh, sir, please let my friends go; I’m such a delicate little flower? What a crock of shit, Claire!”

“Oh, so now you’re mad because I got you out of it?” Claire felt her cheeks flaming, and she was literally shaking now with anger and distress. “You started it, Eve! I was just trying to keep you from getting killed! Sorry you didn’t
"You just—can’t you stand up for yourself?"

"Hey," Shane said softly, and touched Eve’s arm. She whirled toward him, fists clenched, but Shane held up both hands in clear surrender. “She stood up for you. Might want to consider that before you go calling Claire a coward. She’s never been that.”

“Oh, sure, you take her side!”

“It’s not a side,” Shane said. “And if it is, you ought to be on it, too.”

Michael had been watching, calming down (or at least shutting down), and now he reached out and put his hands on Eve’s shoulders. She tensed, then relaxed, closed her eyes, and blew out an impatient breath. “Right,” she said. “You’re going to tell me I can’t be upset about nearly getting my face cut off.”

“No,” Michael said. “But don’t take it out on Claire. It’s not her fault.”

“It’s mine.”

“Well...” He sighed. “Kind of mine, too. Share?”

Eve turned to face him. “I like my blame. I keep it close like a warm, furry blanket.”

“Let go,” he said, and kissed her lightly. “You’re taking my side of the blame blanket.”

“Fine. You can have half.” Eve was calmer now, and relaxed into Michael’s embrace. “Damn. That was stupid, wasn’t it? We nearly got killed over ice cream.”

“Another thing I don’t want on my tombstone,” Shane said.

“You have others?” Claire asked.

“He held up one finger. “I thought it wasn’t loaded,” Shane said. Second finger. “Hand me a match so I can check the gas tank.” Third finger. “Killed over ice cream. Basically, any death that requires me to be stupid first.”

Michael shook his head. “So what’s on your good list?”

“Oh, you know. Hero stuff that gets me rerun on CNN. Like, I died saving a busload of supermodels.” Claire smacked his arm. “Ow! Saving them! What did you think I meant?”

“So,” Claire said, taking the high ground, “what now? I mean, I guess ice cream is kind of off the table, unless you’re okay with random violence as a topping.”

“Got to be something else in town,” Michael said. “Unless you just want to sit here and take up a gas pump until Oliver gets his act together.”

“He told us to wait here.”

“Yeah, well, I’m with Michael on this one,” Shane said. “Not really into doing what Oliver wants, you know? And this is supposed to be our trip, not his. He’s just along for the ride. Personally, I like moving the car. Even if we’re not leaving him behind.”

“You really do have a death wish.”

“You’ll save me.” He kissed Claire on the nose. “Mikey, you’re driving.”
Durram, Texas, was a small town. Like, really small. Smaller than Morganville. There were about six blocks to it, not really in a square; more like a messy oval. The Dairy Queen was closed and dark; so was the Sonic. There was some kind of bar, but Michael quickly vetoed that suggestion (from Shane, of course); if they’d gotten into trouble asking for ice cream, asking for a beer would be certain doom.

Claire couldn’t fault his logic, and besides, none of them was actually bar-legal age, anyway. Though she somehow doubted the folks in Durram really cared so much. They didn’t seem like the overly law-abiding types. Cruising the streets seemed like a big, fat waste of time; there weren’t any other cars on the streets, really, and not even many lights on in the houses. It seemed like a really boring, shut-up town.

Shades of Morganville, though in Morganville at least you had a good reason to avoid being out after dark.

“Hey! There!” Eve bounced in the front seat, pointing, and Claire squinted. There was a tiny, dim sign in a window, a few lights were on, and the sign might have said something about ice cream. “I knew no self-respecting small Texas town would shut down ice cream service at night.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Shut up, Shane. How can you not want ice cream? What is wrong with you?”

“I guess I was born without the ice cream gene. Thank God.”

Michael pulled the car to a stop in front of the lonely little ice cream parlor. When he switched off the engine, the oppressive silence closed in; except for street signs creaking in the wind, there was hardly a sound at all in downtown Durram, Texas.

Eve didn’t seem to care. She practically flung herself out of the car, heading for the door. Michael followed, leaving Claire and Shane behind in the backseat.

“This isn’t going at all how I’d thought,” Claire said with a sigh. He laced their fingers together and raised hers to his lips.

“How’d you think it would go?”

“I don’t know. Saner?”

“You have been paying attention this last year, right? Because saner isn’t even in our playbook.” He nodded toward the ice cream parlor. “So? You want something?”

“Yes.” She made no move to get out of the car.

“Then what—oh.” He didn’t sound upset about it. He’d been telling the truth, Claire thought. He really didn’t have the ice cream gene.

But he did have the kissing gene and didn’t need that much of a hint to start using it to both their advantages. He leaned forward, and at first it was a light, teasing brush of their lips, then soft, damp pressure, then more. He had such wonderful lips. They made her ignite inside, and it felt like gravity increased, all on its own, dragging her back sideways on the big bench seat; pulling him with her.

Things might have really gone somewhere, except all of a sudden there was a loud metallic knock on the window, and a light shined in, focusing on the back of Shane’s head and in Claire’s eyes. She yelped and flailed, shoved Shane away, and he scrambled to get himself together, too.

Standing outside of the car was a man in a tan shirt, tan pants, a big Texas hat.... It took a second for Claire’s panicked brain to catch up as her eyes fastened on the shiny star pinned to his shirt front.

Oh. Oh, crap.

Local sheriff.

He tapped on the window again with the end of a big, intimidating flashlight, then blinded them again with the business end. Claire squinted and cranked down the window. She licked her lips nervously, and tasted Shane. Inappropriate!

“Let’s see some ID,” the man said. He didn’t sound like the Welcome Wagon. Claire searched around for her backpack and pulled out her wallet, handing it over with trembling hands. Shane passed over his own driver’s license. “You’re seventeen?” The sheriff focused the beam on Claire. She nodded. He shifted the light to Shane.

“Eighteen?”

“Yes sir. Something wrong?”

“Don’t know, son. You think there’s something wrong about taking advantage of a girl who’s under eighteen on a public street?”

“He wasn’t—”

“Sure looked that way to me, miss. Out of the car, both of you. This your car?”
“No sir,” Shane said. He sounded subdued now. Reality was setting in. Claire realized they’d just made the same mistake that Michael had—they’d acted as if they were home in Morganville, where people knew them. Here, they were a couple of troublemaking teenagers—one underage—making out in the back of a car.

“You got any drugs?”

“No sir,” Shane repeated, and Claire echoed him. Her lips, which had felt so warm and lovely just a minute ago, now felt cold and numb. This can’t be happening. How could we be this stupid? She remembered Shane’s list of ways not to die. Maybe this ought to be number four.

“You mind if I search the car, then?”

“I—” Claire looked at Shane, and he looked back at her, his eyes suddenly very wide. Claire continued. “It’s not our car, sir. It’s our friend’s.”

“Well, where’s your friend?”

“In there.” Claire’s throat was tight and dry, and she was holding Shane’s hand now in a death grip. If he searches the car, he’ll open the coolers. If he opens the cooler and finds Michael’s blood ...

She pointed to the ice cream shop door. The sheriff looked at it, then back at her, then at Shane. He nodded, switched off his flashlight, and said, “Don’t you go nowhere.”

Through all of that, Claire had only a blurry impression of him as a person—not too young, not too old, not too fat or thin or tall or short—just average. But as he walked away, his belt jingling with handcuffs and keys and his gun strapped down at his side, she felt cold and short of breath, the way she had when she’d faced down Mr. Bishop, the scariest vampire of all.

They were in trouble—big trouble.

“Fast,” Shane said, as soon as the door started to close behind the sheriff. He yanked open the door, grabbed Michael’s cooler, and looked around wildly for someplace to put it. “Go to the door. Cover me.”

Claire nodded and walked up to the door, looking in the grimy glass, blocking any view past her of the street. She made little blinders out of her hands as if it were hard to see in. It wasn’t. The sheriff had walked straight up to Michael and Eve, who were still standing at the counter of the ice cream shop. Eve had an ice cream cone in her hand, fluorescent mint green, but from the look on her face, she’d forgotten all about it.

Claire glanced back. Shane was gone. When she looked back into the store, the sheriff was still talking to Michael, Michael was answering, and Eve had a terrified look in her eyes.

Eve didn’t even look calm. She looked, well, distressed. “But we didn’t do anything!” she was saying, as they came outside. “Sir, please—”

“Got a report of trouble up at the Quik-E-Stop,” the sheriff said. “People fitting your description threatening folks. And to be honest, you kind of stand out around here.”

“But we didn’t—” Eve bit her lip on blurting that out, because in fact they had. Michael had, for sure. “We didn’t mean anything. We just wanted to get some ice cream, that’s all.”

Hers was starting to leak in thin green streams. Eve, startled, looked down and licked the melted stuff off her fingers.

“That’s an ice cream headache, right? Not an aneurysm?” Eve sighed and bit into the cone part of her dessert. “I’m tired. Are you tired?”

Michael wasn’t saying anything. He was staring at the car, and the cop searching it—going through bags, purses,
glove box, even under the seats. He finally glanced over at Shane. “What about the weapons?”
Shane’s mouth opened, then closed.
“Uh—”
Right at that moment, the cop opened Claire’s suitcase and pulled out a sharp silver stake. He held it up. “What’s
this?”
None of them answered for a few seconds; then Eve said, “It’s for the costumes. See, we’re going to this
convention? And I’m playing the vampire, and they’re playing the vampire hunters? It’s really cool.”
That almost sounded real.
“This thing’s sharp.”
“The rubber ones looked really fake. There’s a prize, you know? For authenticity?”
He gave her a long look, then dropped it back into Claire’s bag, rummaged around, then closed it. He left the
suitcases and bags outside the car, scattered around, and after checking in the wheel wells and in the spare tire
section, he finally shook his head. “All right,” he said. “I’m going to let you all go, but you need to go right now.”
“What?”
“I need to see your taillights disappearing over the town limits. And I’m going to follow to make sure you get
there nice and safe.”
Oh crap. “What about Oliver?” Claire whispered.
“Well, we can’t exactly give him as an excuse,” Eve whispered back fiercely. She ate the last bit of ice cream
cone and smiled at the cop. “We’re ready, sir! Just let us get loaded up.”
Michael grabbed Shane, and they had an urgent conversation, bent over Eve’s giant suitcase. Eve leaped up,
tripped over a random bag, and went down with a yelp that turned into a howl.
The sheriff, proving he wasn’t a total jerk, immediately came to bend over her and see if she was okay.
This gave Michael enough vampire-speed time to retrieve the cooler from the alley, put it back in the car, and be
innocently reaching for the next bag before the sheriff helped flailing, clumsy Eve up to her feet.
“Sorry,” Eve said breathlessly, and gave Michael a trembling little smile and wave. “I’m okay. Just bruised a
little.”
“That’s it,” Shane said. “No more ice cream for you.”
They finished loading things in the car, and Claire took a last look at the deserted streets, the flickering, distant,
dim lights. There was no sign of Oliver; none at all.
“Well?” the sheriff said. “Let’s go.”
“Yes sir.” Eve slid into the driver’s side, closed her eyes for a second, then fumbled for her keys and started the
car. Michael took the passenger seat in front, and Claire and Shane climbed in the back.
The sheriff, true to his word, got in his cruiser, parked across the street, and turned on the red and blue flashers;
no siren, though.
“Thanks,” Michael said, and sent Eve a quick smile. “Good job with the tripping. It gave me time to get the
blood.”
“Wish I’d meant it, then.” She put the car in reverse. “And could we please have another word for blood, outside
of Morganville? Something like, oh, I don’t know. Chocolate? Red velvet cake?”
“Why is it always sugar with you?” Shane asked.
“Shut up, Collins. This one was all on you, you know.”
He shrugged and put his arm around Claire’s shoulders. “Yeah, I know. Sorry.”
“What are we going to do?” Claire asked. “About Oliver?”
Nobody had an answer.
The sheriff’s cruiser let loose a shocking little whoop of siren, just to let them know he meant business. Eve
swallowed, put the car in reverse, and backed the sedan onto the street. “Guess we’ll figure it out as we go,” she
said. “Anybody got his cell number?”
“I do,” Michael and Claire said, simultaneously, and exchanged guilty looks. Michael took out his phone and
texted something as Eve drove—staying well under the speed limit, which Claire thought was very smart—and as
they passed a sign announcing the town limit, the sheriff’s car coasted to a stop. The lights were still flashing.
“Keep going?” Eve asked. She kept looking in the rearview mirror. “Guys? Decision?”
“Keep going,” Shane said, leaning forward. “We can’t get back as long as he’s watching. If we’re going back at
all. Which I don’t vote for, by the way.”
“Better idea,” Michael said, and pointed up ahead, on the left side of the narrow, very dark road. “There’s a motel.
We check in, wait for Oliver to join us. We’re going to have to sit the day out somewhere, anyway.”
“There?” Eve sounded appalled, and Claire could see why. It wasn’t exactly the Ritz. It wasn’t even as good as
that motel in the movie Psycho. It was a little, straight line of cinder-block rooms with a neon sign, a sagging porch,
and one big security light for the parking lot.

And the parking lot was empty.

“You can’t be serious,” Eve said. “Guys. People get eaten in places like this. At the very least, we get locked in a
room and terrible, evil things get done to us and put on the Internet. I’ve seen the movies.”

“Eve,” Michael said, “horror movies are not documentaries.”

“And yet, I really think a serial killer owns this place. No. Not going to—”

Michael’s phone buzzed. He flipped it open and read the text. “Oliver says to stop here. He’ll join us in about
another hour.”

“You are kidding.”

“Hey, you’re the one who had to have the ice cream. Look what kind of trouble we got ourselves into. At least
this way we’re safe in a room with a door that locks. And the sign says they have HBO.”

“That stands for Horrible Bloody Ohmygod,” Eve said. “Which is the way they kill you. When you think you’re
safe.”

“Eve!” Claire was starting to get creeped out, too. Eve put her hands up, briefly, then back down to the wheel.

“Fine,” she said. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, while we’re all screaming and crying. And I’m sleeping in my
clothes. With a stake in both hands.”

“It’s probably not run by vampires.”

“First, you wanna bet?” Eve hit the brakes and put the car in park. “Second, sharp pointy things tend to work on
everything else, too. Including cannibals running creepy motels.”

They sat in silence as the engine ticked and cooled, and finally Shane cleared his throat. “Right. So, we’re going
in?”

“We could stay in the car.”

“Youh, that’s safe.”

“At least we can see them coming. And also run.”

Claire sighed and got out of the car, walked into the small office, and hit the bell on the counter. It seemed really,
really loud. She heard doors slamming behind her—Shane, Michael, and Eve finally bailing out. The office was
actually nicer than the outside of the building, with carpet that was kind of new, comfortable chairs, even a flat-
screen TV playing on the wall with the sound turned off. The place smelled like ... warm vanilla.

Out of the back room came an older lady with graying hair tied back in a ponytail. Claire couldn’t imagine anyone
looking less like a serial killer, actually—she looked like a classic grandma, even down to the small, round glasses.
She was wiping her hands on a dish towel and was wearing an apron over blue jeans and a checked shirt. “Help you,
honey?” she asked, and put the towel down. She looked a little nervous as the others came in behind her. “Y’all need
a room?”

“Yes ma’am,” Claire said softly. Michael and Shane were doing their best to look like nice boys, and Eve was,
well, Eve. Smiling. “Maybe two, if they’re not too expensive?”

“Oh, they’re not expensive,” the lady said, and shook her head. “Ain’t exactly the Hilton, you know. Thirty-five
dollars a night, comes with breakfast in the morning. I make biscuits and sausage gravy, and there’s coffee. Some
cereal. Ain’t fancy, but it’s good food.”

Michael stepped up, signed the book, and counted out cash. She read the register upside down. “Glass? You from
around here?”

“No ma’am,” he said. “We’re just passing through. Heading for Dallas.”

“What the hell possessed you to come all the way out here?” she asked. “Never mind; glad you did. Fresh sheets
and towels in the rooms, soaps, some complimentary shampoo. You need anything, you just call. You kids have a
good night. Oh, and no hell-raising. We may be outside of town, but I know the sheriff personally. He’ll make a
special trip.”

“Why does everybody think we’re so insane?” Eve asked, and rolled her eyes. “Honestly, we’re nice. Not
everybody our age rolls with anarchy.”

“You would, if anarchy offered free ice cream,” Michael said. He accepted the two keys and smiled. “Thank you,
ma’am—”

“Name’s Linda,” the lady interrupted. “Ma’am was my mother. Though I guess I’m old enough now to be ma’am
to you folks, more’s the pity. You go on. Let me finish up my baking. You stop back later. I’ll have fresh chocolate
chip cookies.”

Eve’s mouth dropped open. Even Michael looked impressed. “Oh—thanks,” he said, and they retreated out to the
parking lot, staring at one another. “She’s making cookies.”

“Yeah,” Shane said. “Terrifying. So, how are we doing this thing?”

“Girls get their own room,” Eve said, and plucked one of the keys out of Michael’s hand. “Oh, come on, don’t
give me that face. You know that’s the right thing to do.”

“Yeah, I know,” Michael said. “Looks like they’re right next door to each other.”

They were, rooms one and two, with a connecting door between. Inside, the rooms—like Linda’s office—were really pretty nice. Claire checked out the bathroom; it was nicer than the one at home—and cleaner. “Hey, Eve?” she called, sticking her head around the door. “Should I be terrified now, or later?”

“Shut up,” Eve said, and flopped on one of the two beds, crossing her feet at the ankles as she reached for the remote on the TV. “Okay, it’s not Motel Hell. I admit it. But it could have been.... Hey, check it out—there’s a Saw marathon on HBO!”

Great. Just what they needed. Claire rolled her eyes, went out to the car, and helped the boys unload the stuff they needed—which was, actually, pretty much everything by the time they finished. Eve remained loftily above it all, flipping channels and searching for the most comfortable pillow.

Shane dragged her suitcase into the room and dumped it on the floor beside her bed. “Hey, Dark Princess? Here’s your crap. Also, bite me.”

“Wait, here’s your tip—” She flipped him off, without taking her eyes off the TV. “Nice to know we can still be just the same even outside of Morganville, right?”

He laughed. “Right.” He looked at Claire, who leaned her own suitcase against the wall and looked around. “So I guess this is good night?”

“Guess so,” she said. “Um, unless you guys want to watch movies?”

“I’ll bring the chips.”

Two hours later, they were lying on the beds, propped up, groaning and wincing and yelling stuff at the screen. The sound was turned up loud, and what with all the screaming and chain saws and such, it took a few seconds for the sound outside the room to filter through to any of them. Michael heard it first, of course, and nearly levitated off the bed to cross the room and pull back the curtains. Eve scrambled to mute the TV. “What? What is it?”

Out in the parking lot, Claire could now hear hoots, drunken laughter, and the crash of metal. She and Shane bounced off the bed, too, and Eve came last.

“Hey!” she screamed, and Claire winced at the rage in her voice. “Hey, you assholes, that’s my car!”

It was the three jerks from the truck stop, only about a case of beer more stupid, which really didn’t seem possible, in theory. But they were going after Eve’s car with a great big sledgehammer and two baseball bats. The glass in the front window shattered at a blow from the sledgehammer, which was swung by Angry Dude. Orange Cap swung a baseball bat and added another deep dent to the already horribly damaged hood. The last guy knocked off the side mirror, sending it to left field with one hard blow.

Orange Cap blew Eve a gap-toothed kiss, reached in his back pocket, and pulled out a glass bottle filled with something that looked faintly pink, like lemonade....

“Gas,” Michael said. “I have to stop them.”

“You’ll get your ass killed,” Shane said, and flung himself in the way. “No way. This ain’t Morganville, and if you end up in a jail cell, you’ll die. Understand?”

“But my car!” Eve moaned. “No no no ...”

Orange Cap poured gas all over the seats inside, then tossed in a match.

Eve’s car went up like a school bonfire at homecoming. Eve shrieked again and tried to lunge past Shane, too. He backed up to block the door and dodged a slap from her. “Claire! Little help?” he yelped, as Eve actually connected. Claire grabbed her friend’s arms and pulled her backward. It wasn’t easy. Eve was bigger, stronger, and more than a little crazy just now.

“Let go!” Eve yelled.

“Calm down. It’s too late. There’s nothing you can do!”

“I can kick their ass!”

Michael had already come to the same conclusion as Shane, and as Eve broke free from Claire, he got in her way and wrapped his arms around her, bringing her to a fast stop. “No,” he said, “no, you can’t.” His eyes were shimmering red with fury, and he blinked and took deep breaths until he was himself again, blue-eyed Michael, under control—barely.

The three men in the parking lot whooped and hollered as Eve’s car burned, then scrambled for their big pickup truck as the motel’s office door slammed open.

Grandma Linda stood there, looking like the wrath of God in an apron. She had a shotgun, which she pointed at an angle at the sky and fired. The blast was shockingly loud. “Get lost, you morons!” she yelled at the retreating three men. “Next time I see your taillights I’ll give you a special buckshot kiss!”

She racked another shell, but she didn’t need to reload; the truck was already peeling out, spitting gravel from tire
treads as it flew out of the parking lot, did a quick, drunken U-turn, and headed back inside Durram’s town limits.

Grandma Linda shouldered the shotgun, frowned at the burning car, and went back into the office. She returned with a fire extinguisher, and put the blaze out with five quick blasts of white foam.

Shane opened the door and got immediately mowed down by Eve, who blew past him, with Michael right behind. Shane and Claire followed last. Claire felt physically sick. The car was utterly trashed. Even with the fire put out, the windows were shattered, the bodywork dented and twisted, the headlights broken, tires flat, and the seats were burned down to the springs in several places.

She’d seen better wrecks at the junkyard.

“Those three ain’t got the sense God gave a virus,” Linda said. “I’ll call the sheriff, get him out here to write up a complaint. I’m sorry, honey.”

Eve was crying, violent little jerks of sobs that came with shudders as she stared at the wreckage of the car she’d loved. Claire put her arm around her, and Eve turned and buried her face in Claire’s shoulder. “Why?” she cried, full of rage and confusion now. “Why did they follow us? Why’d they do that?”

“We scared them,” Michael said. “Scared people do stupid things. Drunk, scared bullies do even stupider things.”

Linda nodded. “You got that right, son. It’s a damn shame, though. Hate to see something like this happen to nice kids just minding their own business. People like that, they just got to pick on somebody, and everybody around here’s had enough of ’em. Guess they figured you for the new toys.”

“They figured wrong,” Michael said. His eyes glittered briefly red, then faded back to blue. “But we’ve got problems. What are we going to do for a car?”

“Just be glad we got our stuff out of it,” Shane said, and Michael, knowing what he was getting at, looked briefly sick, then nodded. “Eve and I will do some shopping tomorrow. See what we can get in town.”

Eve sniffled and wiped at her eyes, which made a mess of her mascara. “I don’t have the money for a new car.”

“We’ll find a way,” Shane said, as if it made sense and happened to him on a regular basis. Claire guessed, with his history, it probably had. “Come on, moping around out here isn’t fixing anything. Might as well go in for the night. We’re not going anywhere.”

Linda sighed. “Hate to see this kind of thing happen,” she said again. “Damn fools. You wait here a second.”

She went back into the office, carrying the fire extinguisher, and came back out with a small ceramic bowl full of...

“Cookies,” Shane said, and accepted it from her. “Thanks, Linda.”

“Least I can do.” She kicked a rock, frowning, and shook her head. “Damn fools. I’ll sit up the rest of the night, make sure they don’t come back here.”

Somehow, Claire didn’t think they’d take the chance. Linda had looked pretty serious with that shotgun.

The joys of the movie party were over, but the cookies were warm, fresh, and delicious. Eve’s tears dried up and left a feverish anger in their place. She took a long shower to burn it off, and when she came out of the bathroom, she looked small and vulnerable, stripped of all her Goth armor.

Claire hugged her and gave her a cookie. Eve munched it and hugged her black silk kimono around herself as she climbed onto the bed. “Boys gone?” she asked.

“Yeah, they’re gone,” Claire said. “Mind if I—?”

“No, go ahead. I’ll just sit here and watch my car smoke.” Eve stared moodily at the curtains, which were closed, thankfully.

Claire shook her head, grabbed her stuff, and went in to take her own bath. She did it at light speed, half convinced that Eve would find some way to get herself in trouble while she was gone, but when she emerged pink and damp and glowing from the hot water, Eve was exactly where she’d left her, flipping channels on the TV.

“This is the worst road trip ever,” Eve said. “And I missed the end of the movie.”

“Jigsaw always wins. You know that.”

There was a soft sound at the motel room door. Something like a scratching sound; then a thud. Eve came bolt upright in bed. “What the hell was that? Because I’m thinking serial killer!”

“It’s Shane, trying to freak you out. Or maybe it’s those guys again,” Claire said. “Shhh.” She went to the curtains and peeked out, carefully. The light was dim in front of the door, but she saw someone slumped against the wall. Alone. “Just one guy—I can’t really see him.”

“So the serial killer option’s still on the table? New rule. The door doesn’t open.”

They both jumped as a fist thudded once on the door. “Let me in,” Oliver’s voice commanded. “Now.”

“Oh,” Eve said. “In that case, new rule. Also, technicallly, he is a serial killer, right?”

Claire didn’t really want to think too much about that one, because she was afraid Eve might have a point on that. She slipped back the locks and opened the door, and Oliver came into the room. He made it two steps before his
knees gave out on him, and he fell.

“Don’t touch him!” Claire said as Eve slipped off the bed to approach him. She could see cuts and blood on him. “Get Michael. Hurry.”

That wasn’t a problem; Michael and Shane were already opening their own door, and the four of them were standing together when Oliver rolled over on his side, then to his back, staring upward.

He looked bad—pale, with open wounds on his face and hands. His clothes were cut, too, and there was blood soaked into them. He didn’t speak. Michael dashed back into his room and came back with the cooler. He knelt next to Oliver and looked over his shoulder at the three of them. “You guys need to leave. Go next door. Now. Hurry.”

Shane grabbed the two girls and steered them out, closing the door behind him and leaving Michael alone with Oliver.

Claire tried to turn around.

“No, you don’t,” Shane said, and shepherded them into his room. “You know better. If he needs blood, let him get it from the cooler. Not from the tap.”

“What happened to him?” Eve asked the logical, scary question, which Claire had been at some level trying not to face. “That’s Oliver. Badass walking. And somebody did that to him. How? Why?”

“I think that’s what we have to ask him,” Shane said. “Providing he’s not having a serious craving for midnight snacks.”

“Damn,” Eve said. “Speaking of that, I left the cookies. I could use another cookie right now. How screwed are we, anyway?”

“Given the car and whatever trouble Oliver stirred up? Pretty well screwed. But hey. That’s normal, right?”

“Right now, I wish it really, really wasn’t.”

They sat around playing poker until Michael came back, with Oliver behind him. He was upright and walking, though he looked as if he’d put his clothes through a shredder.

He didn’t look happy. Not that Oliver ever really looked happy when he wasn’t playing the hippie role, but this seemed unhappy, plus.

“We need to leave,” he said. “Quickly.”

“Well, that’s a problem,” Shane said, “seeing how our transpo out there is not exactly lightproof anymore, even if we didn’t mind sitting on half-burned seats.” Not even the trunk, anymore, thanks to the sledgehammer’s work.

“Plus, we’ve got t-minus two hours to sunrise. Not happening, anyway.”

Michael said, “Oliver, it’s time to tell us why we came here in the first place. And what happened to you.”

“It’s none of your business,” Oliver said.

“Excuse me, but since you dragged us into it with you, I’d say it is our business now.”

“Did my business destroy your car? No, that was your own idiocy. I say again, you don’t need to know, and I don’t need to tell you. Leave it.” He sounded almost himself, but subdued, and he sat down on the edge of the bed as if standing tired him—not like Oliver.

“Are you okay?” Claire asked. He looked up and met her eyes, and for a second she saw something terrible in him: fear—overwhelming, tired, ancient fear. It shocked her. She hadn’t thought Oliver could really be afraid of anything, ever.

“Yes,” he said, “I’m all right. Wounds heal. What won’t is what will happen if we remain trapped here. We can’t wait for rescue from Morganville. We must get on our way before the next nightfall.”

“Or?” Claire asked.

“Or worse will happen. To all of us.” He looked... haunted. And very tired. “I need to rest. Find a car.”

“Ah—we’re not exactly rolling in cash.”

Without a word, Oliver took out a wallet from his pants, grimaced at the scratches and tears in the leather, and opened it to reveal a bunch of crisp green bills.

Hundreds.

He handed over the entire stack. “I have more,” he said. “Take that. It should be enough to buy something serviceable. Make sure it’s got sufficient trunk space.”

After a second’s hesitation, Eve’s fingers closed around the money. “Oliver? Seriously, are you okay?”

“I will be,” he said. “Michael, do you suppose there is another room in this motel I can occupy until we are ready to leave?”

“I’ll get one,” Michael said. He slipped out the door and was gone in seconds, heading for the office. Oliver closed his eyes and leaned back against the headboard. He looked so utterly miserable that Claire, without thinking, reached out and, just being kind, put her hand on his arm.

“Claire,” Oliver said softly, without opening his eyes, “did I give you permission to touch me?”

She removed her hand—quickly.
“Just—leave me alone. I’m not myself at the moment.”
Actually, he was pretty much like he always was, as far as Claire could tell, but she let it go.
Eve was fanning out the money, counting it. Her eyes were getting wider the higher she went. “Jeez,” she whispered. “I could buy a genuine pimped-out land yacht with this. Wow. I had no idea running a coffee shop was this good a job.”
“It’s not,” Shane said. “He probably has piles of gold sitting under his couch cushions. He’s had a long time to get rich, Eve.”
“And time enough to lose everything, once or twice,” Oliver said. “If you want to be technical. I have been rich. I am currently ... not as poor as I once was. But not as wealthy, either. The curse of human wars and politics. It’s difficult to keep what you have, especially if you are always an outsider.”
Claire had never really thought about how vampires got the money they had; she supposed it wouldn’t have been easy, really. She remembered all the TV news shows she’d seen, with people running for their lives from war zones, carrying whatever they could.
Oliver would have been one of those people, once upon a time. Amelie, too. And Mymin. Probably more than once. But they’d come through it.
They were survivors.
“What happened out there?” Claire asked, not really expecting him to answer.
He didn’t disappoint her.
Once Oliver had his own room—room three, of course—at the motel, Claire, Eve, and Shane set out lightproofing the rooms Michael and Oliver would be staying in during the day. That wasn’t so hard; the blackout curtains in the windows were pretty good, and a little duct tape around the edges made sure the room stayed dim—that and a DO NOT DISTURB sign on each knob.

“Dead bolt and chain,” Shane told Michael as the three of them left the room. Dawn was starting to pink up on the eastern horizon. “I’ll call when we’re at the door again, on your cell. Don’t open for anybody else.”

“Did you tell that to Oliver?”

“Do I look stupid? Let him figure out his own crap, man.”

Michael shook his head. “Be careful out there. I don’t like sending the three of you out by yourselves.”


“Actually, Linda’s driving us. We said we’d buy her breakfast and haul some heavy stuff for her at the store. Kind of a good deal, plus I think everybody likes her. Nobody’s going to come after us while she’s with us.”

It might have been wishful thinking, but Michael seemed a little relieved by it, and he knocked fists with Shane as they closed the door.

“Well,” Eve said, “it’s the start of a beautiful day in which I have had no sleep, had my car burned, and can’t wear makeup, which is just so great.”

The no-makeup thing was Shane’s idea, and Claire had to admit, it was a good one. Eve was, by far, the most recognizable of their little group, but without the rice powder, thick black eyeliner, and funky-colored lipsticks, she looked like a different person. Claire had lent her a less-than-Gothy shirt, although Eve had insisted on purple. With that and plain blue jeans, Eve looked almost... normal. She’d even pulled her hair back in a single ponytail at the back.

Not a skull in sight, although her boots still looked a little intimidating.

“Think of it as operating in disguise,” Shane said. “In a hostile war zone.”

“Easy for you to say. All you had to do was throw on a camo T-shirt and find a ball cap. If we can find you some chewing tobacco, you’re gold.”

“I’m not in disguise,” Claire said.

Eve snorted. “Honey, you live in disguise. Which is lucky for us. Come on, maybe Linda’s still got some cookies left.”

“For breakfast?”

“I never said I was the Nutrition Nazi.”

Linda was up—yawning and tired, but awake—when they opened up the office door. She was sipping black coffee, and when Eve said good morning, Linda waved at the plate of cookies on the counter. Eve looked relieved.

“Ah—could I have some coffee, too?”

“Right there on the pot. Pour yourself a big one. It’s already a long day.” Linda had put on another shirt—still checked, but different colors—but otherwise, she looked pretty much the same. “So, you kids get any sleep at all?”

“Not much,” Shane mumbled around a mouthful of cookie as Eve poured a chunky white mugful of coffee. He held out his hand in a silent demand for her to get him some, too. She rolled her eyes, put the pot back on the burner, and walked past him to the cookie tray. “Hence, Miss Attitude.”

“The attitude comes from someone not even wanting to fetch his own coffee.”

Shane shrugged and got his own, as Eve raided the cookie tray and Claire nibbled on part of one, too. She supposed she ought to feel more tired. She probably would, later, but right now, she felt—excited? Maybe nervous was a better term for it. “So,” she ventured, “where do you go to buy a car here?”

“In Durram?” Linda shook her head. “Couple of used places, that’s all. Any new cars, we go to the city for them. Not that there’s many new cars round here these days. Durram used to be an oil town, back in the boom days, pumped a lot of crude out of the ground, but when it folded, it hit the ground hard. People been leaving ever since. It never was huge, but what you see now ain’t more than half what it was fifty years ago, and even then a lot of those buildings are closed up.”

“Why do you stay?” Shane asked, and sipped his coffee. Linda shrugged.

“Where else I got to go? My husband’s buried here; came back dead from the war in Iraq, that first one. My family’s here, such as they are, including Ernie, my grandson. Ernie runs one of the car lots, which is why I figure we can find you what you want at a good deal this early in the morning.” She grinned. “If an old woman can’t make her own grandson get out of bed before dawn to do her a favor, there’s no point in living. Just let me finish my
coffee and we’ll be on our way.”

She drank it fast, faster than Shane and Eve could gulp their own, and in about five minutes the four of them were piling into the bench seat of Linda’s pickup truck, with more rust than paint on the outside, and sagging seats on the inside. Claire sat on Shane’s lap, which wasn’t at all a bad thing from her perspective. From the way he held her in place, she didn’t think he objected, either. Linda started up the truck with a wheezing rattle of metal, and the engine roared as she tore out of the gravel parking lot and onto the narrow two-lane road heading toward Durram.

“How?” she said as they passed the town limits sign, barely readable from shotgun blasts. “Usually there’s a deputy out here in the mornings. Guess somebody overslept. Probably Tom. Tom likes those late nights at the bar, sometimes; he’s gonna catch hell for blowing it again.”

“You mean fired?”

“Fired? Not in Durrarm. You don’t get fired in Durrarm; you get embarrassed.” Linda drove a couple of blocks, past some empty shops and one empty gas station, then took a right turn and then a left. “Here it is.”

The sign said HURLEY MOTORS, and it was about a million years old. Somebody had hit it with buckshot, too, once upon a time, but from the rust, it had been a while ago—maybe before Claire was born; maybe before her mother was born. There was a small, sad collection of old cars parked in front of a small cinder-block building, which looked like it might have been built by the same guy who’d built Linda’s motel.

Come to think of it, it probably had.

The cinder blocks were painted a pale blue with dark red trim on the roof and windows, but the whole thing had faded to a kind of pale gray over time. As Linda stopped the truck with a squeal of brakes, the front door of the shack opened, and a young man stepped out and waved.

“Oooh, cute,” Eve whispered to Claire. Claire nodded. He was older, maybe twenty or so, but he had a nice face. And a great smile, like his grandma.

“Oh, he is cute!” Shane said in a fake girly voice. “Gee, maybe we can ask him out!”

“Shut up, you weasel. Claire, hit him!”

“Pretend I did,” Claire said. “Look, he’s bleeding.”

Shane snorted. “Not. Okay, out of the truck before this gets silly.”

Linda, ignoring them, had already gotten out on the driver’s side and was walking toward her grandson. As they hugged, Claire scrambled down from Shane’s lap to the pavement. He hopped down beside her, and then Eve slithered out as well. “Wow,” she said, surveying the cars on the lot. “This is just—”

“Sad.”

“I was going more for horrifying, but yeah, that works, too. Okay, can we agree on nothing in a minivan, please?”

Yep,” Shane said. “I’m down with it.”

They wandered around the lot. It didn’t take long before they’d looked at everything parked in front, and from Eve’s expression, Claire could tell there wasn’t a single thing she’d be caught dead driving—or, more accurately, caught with the dead, driving. “This sucks,” Eve said. “The only thing that has decent trunk space is pink.” And not just a little pink, either; it looked like a pink factory had thrown up all over it.

Linda’s grandson wandered over, trailed by her. He caught the last bit of Eve’s complaint, and shook his head. “You don’t want that thing, anyway,” he said. “Used to belong to Janie Hearst. She drove it fifteen thousand miles without an oil change. She thinks she’s the Paris Hilton of Durrarm. Hi, I’m Ernie Dawson. Heard you’re looking for a car. Sorry about what happened to yours. Those fools are a menace—have been since I was a kid. Glad nobody was hurt.”

“Yeah, well, we just want to get the heck out of town,” Eve said. “It was my car. It was a really nice old classic Caddy, you know? Black, with fins? I was hoping maybe somebody could tow it in, fix it up, and I could pick it up later on, maybe in a couple of weeks?”

Ernie nodded. He had greenish eyes, a color that stood out against his suntanned skin; his hair was brown, and wavy, and got in his face a lot. Claire liked him instinctively, but then she remembered the last cute stranger she’d liked. That hadn’t turned out so well. In fact, that had turned out very, very badly, with her blood getting drained out of her body.

So she didn’t smile back at Ernie-much.

“I think I can set that up,” he said. “Earle Weeks down at the repair shop can probably work some magic on it, but you’d have to leave him a pretty good deposit. He’ll have to order in parts.”

“Hey, if you can make me a good deal on a decent car that isn’t pink, I’m all good here.”

“Well, what you see is pretty much what you get, except—” He gazed at Eve for a few long seconds, then shook his head. “Nah, you won’t be interested in that.”

“In what?”

“Something that I keep out back. Nobody around here will buy it. I’ve been trying to make a trade with a
company out of Dallas to get it off my hands. But since you said big classic Caddy—"
Eve jumped in place a little. “Sweet! Let’s see it!”
“I’m just warning you, you won’t like it.”
“Is it pink?”
“No. Definitely not pink. But”—Ernie shrugged—“okay, sure. Follow me.”
“This ought to be good,” Shane said, and reached into his pocket for a cookie he’d hidden there. He broke it in
half and offered it to Claire.
“Can’t wait,” she said, and wolfed it down, because Linda was world-class with the cookies. “I can’t believe I’m
eating cookies for breakfast.”
“I can’t believe we’re stuck in Durram, Texas, with a burned-out car, two vamps, and the cookies are this
good.”
And... he had a point.

Eve had a look on her face as if she’d just found the Holy Grail, or whatever the Gothic equivalent of that might be.
She stared, eyes gone wide and shiny, lips parted, and the glee in her face was oddly contagious. “It’s for sale?” she
asked. She was trying to play it cool, Claire thought, although she was blowing it by a mile. “How much?”
Ernie wasn’t fooled even a little bit. He rubbed his lips with his thumb, staring at Eve, and then at the car. “Well,”
he said thoughtfully, “I guess I could go to three thousand. ’Cause you’re a friend of Grandma’s.”
Linda said, “Don’t you go cheating this gal. I know for a fact you paid Matt down at the funeral parlor seven
hundred dollars for the damn thing, and it’s been sitting for six months gathering dust. You ought to let her have it
for a thousand, tops.”
“Gran!”
“Don’t Gran me. Be nice. Where else in this town are you going to sell a hearse?”
“Well,” he said, “I’ve been working on making it more of a party bus.”
It was gigantic. It was gleaming black, with silver trim and silver curlicues on the same, and faded white curtains
in the windows at the back. Grandma Linda was right—it was covered in desert dust, but underneath it looked sharp
—really sharp.
“Party bus?” Eve said.
“Yeah, take a look.”
Ernie opened the back door, the part where the casket would have gone... and there was a floor in there, with lush
black carpet, not metal runners or clamps as there would have usually been for coffins. He’d built in low-riding seats
down both sides, two on each side, facing each other.
“I put in the cup holders,” he said. “I was going for the fold-down DVD screen, but I ran out of money.”
Eve, as though in a trance, reached in her pocket and pulled out the cash. She counted out three thousand dollars
and passed it over to Ernie.
“Don’t you want to drive it first?” he asked.
“Does it run?”
“Yeah, pretty well.”
“Does it have air-conditioning?”
“Of course. Front and back.”
“Keys.” She held out her hand. Ernie held up one finger, ran back to the shack, and returned with a set dangling
from one finger. He handed them to her with a smile.
Eve opened the front door and started up the hearse. It caught with a cough, then settled into a nice, even purr.
Eve stroked the steering wheel, and then she hugged it—literally. “Mine,” she said. “Mine, mine, mine.”
“Okay, this is starting to seriously creep me out,” Shane said. “Can we move past the obsessive weird love and
into the actually driving it part?”
“You guys go on and take it out for a spin,” Ernie said. “I’ll get the paperwork ready for you to sign. Be about
fifteen minutes.”
“Shotgun!” Shane said, one second before Claire. He winked at her. “And you get the Dead Guy Seat.”
“Funny.”
“Wait until there are actual dead guys sitting back there.”
It wasn’t safe to say that, not in front of Ernie and Linda; after a second, Claire saw Shane realize that. He blinked
and said, “Well, maybe not. But it would be funny.”
“Hilarious,” Claire agreed, and went around to the back. Getting in was a bit of a challenge, but once she was
sitting down, it felt kind of like what she imagined a limo would be. She looked around for a seat belt and found
one, then strapped herself in. No sense dying in a car crash in a hearse. That seemed a little too tragically ironic even
for Eve. “Hey, there really are cup holders.”
“Fate,” Eve said with a sigh.
“I’m not sure fate had to burn up your car to get the point across,” Shane said, buckling his own seat belt.
“No, not that. The hearse. I’m going to name it Fate.”
Shane stared at Eve for a long, long few seconds, then slowly shook his head. “Have you considered medication, or—”
She flipped him off.
“Ah. Back to normal. Excellent.”
Eve pulled the hearse around carefully, getting used to the size of the thing. “It probably gets crap gas mileage,” she said. “But damn. It’s so dark!”
Claire moved aside the white curtains to look out the back window as they drove past the front of the used car lot. Linda and Ernie were standing in front of the shack, waving, so she waved back. “I’m probably the first person to wave from back here,” she said. “That’s weird.”
“No, that is awesome. Awesome in the deliciously creepy sense. Okay, here we go, hold on...” Eve hit the gas, and the hearse leaped forward. Shane braced himself against the dash. “Wow. Nice. I thought it might only go, you know, funeral speed or something.”
“You’re not seriously naming this thing.”
“I am. Fate.”
“At least call it Intimidator. Something cool.”
“My car,” Eve said, and smiled. “My rules. You can go buy the pink one if you want.”
He shuddered and shut up.
Shane bailed out. Claire scrambled to slide out the back and found him waiting for her, grabbing her around the waist and helping her out. He didn’t let go immediately, either. That was nice, and she felt herself sway toward him, as if the world had tilted his direction. “I guess we’d better go in and make sure she doesn’t pay him even more money,” Shane said, “because you know she would, for this thing.”
“She’s a giver,” Claire agreed. “Also, maybe Linda’s got more of those cookies.”
“That’s a good point.”
Inside, they found Eve already signing the papers. Her driver’s license and proof of insurance were already on the table, and as Ernie said hello to the two of them, he gathered up her information and made a copy at the back of the office. It was small, and crowded, and pretty dusty. It looked as though Ernie was the only one who worked here, at least most of the time. Linda was leaning against the wall, staring out at the car lot through the big glass window. She looked pensive.
“Is there something wrong?” Claire asked her. Linda glanced at her, then shook her head.
“Probably nothing,” she said. “I just wonder why the sheriff hasn’t been around yet. He’s usually circling the town pretty regular, and he hasn’t been here yet. Deputy wasn’t at the sign, either. Strange.”
Ernie filled out the title and handed it over, along with the paperwork and Eve’s driver’s license and insurance. Eve juggled all the paper to shake hands with him, and he gave her a smile that was definitely flirting. “Thanks,” he said. “You staying in town long?”
“Oh—ah, no, I’m—we’re heading out. To Dallas. With my boyfriend.” Eve said it without too much emphasis, which was good; Claire didn’t think Ernie was a bad person or anything. And Eve was cute, even when she hadn’t made an effort to dress herself up Goth-style.
Ernie winced. “Should’ve seen that coming,” he said. “Well, enjoy the new ride, Eve. And don’t be a stranger.”
“No stranger than I am already,” she promised, straight-faced, and then they went out to admire the big black hearse again.
Linda moved straight past them to her own truck. “Hey,” Shane called. “How about breakfast? We were going to buy—”
“No need,” she said, and climbed into the cab. Through the open window she said, “I’m going to go see the sheriff, see if I can find out what the heck’s going on today. If I don’t see you kids before you go, have a safe trip. And thanks for livening up my week. Hell, my whole month, come to that.”
“No, thank you,” Shane said. “Your motel is great.”
She gave him a tight, quiet smile. “Always thought so,” she said. “Goodbye, now.”
She took off in a spray of gravel, raising plumes of dust as she skidded back onto the road. Ernie, who’d come out with them, sighed. “My grandma, the race car driver,” he said. “Have a good trip, now.”
They said their thanks, got into the hearse, and headed back to the motel.
They never got there. As they passed the town limits sign, and the road rose up a little in a mini-hill, Claire caught sight of flashing red and blue lights up ahead. “Uh oh,” she said. Eve hit the brakes, and she and Shane exchanged a look. “That’s the motel, right? They’re at the motel.”
“Looks that way,” Shane said. “This is not good.”
“Ya think?” Eve chewed her lip. “Call Michael.”
“Maybe they’re—”
“What, hanging out there looking for somebody else? Call him, Shane!” Shane dialed the number of Michael’s cell phone, listened for a second, then closed his phone. “Busy,” he said. “We need to get in there.”
“And do what, exactly?”
“I don’t know! You want your boyfriend dragged out to french fry in the sun?” Eve didn’t answer that. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, looking agonized, and then said, “I’ll apologize later, then.”
She hit the gas, and the hearse picked up momentum coming down the hill. It zipped past the motel, doing way past the speed limit.
One of the police cars—there were two in the parking lot—backed out and raced after them. Eve didn’t slow down. She hit the gas.
“Eve, what the hell are you doing? We can’t outrun them in a hearse, in the middle of the desert!”
“I’m not trying to,” she shot back. “Claire, look out the back. Tell me if the other car joins in.”
It took a few seconds, but then Claire saw another flare of red and blue flashers behind them. “They’re both following,” she called back. “And how is this good, exactly?”
“Text Michael,” Eve told Shane. “Tell him the coast is clear and to get his butt out of there.”
“What about Oliver?”
“Michael’s too much of a Boy Scout not to tell him, too. Don’t worry about that.”
Shane texted fast. “It’s still kind of sunny out, you know.”
“Oliver’s older,” Claire said. “He can stay out in the sun a lot longer than Michael. Maybe he can lead the police away, or something.”
“That’s up to them,” Eve said. “I just need to keep driving as long as I can before we give up. The more we piss these guys off, the more chance Michael and Oliver have of getting away.”
It turned out, as the police cars cranked it up, that Eve’s hearse really wasn’t made for car-chase speeds. They were overtaken in about another mile, and boxed up in another two.
Eve, surrendering, eased off the gas and hit the brakes to slow down and pull over.
“Okay, here’s the deal,” Shane said. “Keep your hands up, and play nice. You panicked, that’s all. We were telling you to pull over, but you locked up. Got it?”
“It’s not going to help.”
“It will if you play the ditz. Better sell it, Eve. We’re in enough trouble already.”
The rest of it went straight out of the reality-TV-show playbook. The police ordered them out of the car, and before she knew it, Claire was being thrown up against the back of the hearse and searched. It felt humiliating, and she heard Eve crying—whether that was acting or not remained to be seen; Eve cried over smaller things. Shane was answering questions in a quiet, calm voice, but then, he’d spent a lot of time getting hassled by the Morganville police. For Claire, it was kind of a new experience, and not at all a good one. She had the deputy, she supposed; he was a tall, skinny guy whose uniform didn’t fit very well, and he seemed nervous, especially when he put handcuffs on her.
“Hey,” Shane called as his own hands were secured behind his back. “Hey, please don’t hurt her. It wasn’t her fault!”
“Nobody’s hurting anybody,” said the sheriff from the night before. “Okay, let’s just calm down. Now, let’s have some names. You?” He pointed at Claire.
“Claire Danvers,” she said. Oh man, there went any chance at all of ever getting into MIT. She was going to have a mug shot that got pasted all over Facebook. People were going to mock her. It would be high school all over again, times a million.
“Address?”
She gave him the address in Morganville, on Lot Street. She didn’t know what the others would have done; maybe she ought to have lied, made something up. But she didn’t dare. Like Shane had said—they were in enough trouble already.
Eve gave her name in a trembling, small voice, and then Shane finished things up. They both gave the Glass House address.
“So, you’re all, what, sharing a house?” the sheriff asked. “Where’s the blond kid from last night?”

“I—” Eve bit her lip and closed her eyes. “We had a fight. A big one. He—he left.”

“Left how? Seeing as the car you came in is still smoking in the parking lot back there, and it ain’t going anywhere. There’s no bus coming through here, young lady.”

“He hitched a ride,” Eve said. “With a truck. I don’t know which one. I just heard it on the road.”

“A truck,” the sheriff repeated. “Uh huh. And he wouldn’t be back there in Linda’s place with the door all locked up, then.”

“No sir.”

That, Claire reflected, might be almost true, because if Eve’s gamble had paid off, Michael and Oliver weren’t there any longer. Where they were was another story.

“Well, we’re waiting for Linda to get back; then we’ll open up those doors and see what’s going on. Sound okay to you?”

“Yes sir,” Eve said. “Why the handcuffs?”

“You three are a bunch of desperate characters, way I see it,” the sheriff said. “I find you causing trouble last night, get a report your car’s been trashed by the very same boys who say you threatened them, and next thing you know, I’ve got one man dead and two men missing this morning. The dead one got found in his pickup truck just about a mile up the road from your motel.”

“I—” Eve stopped, frozen. “Sorry, what?”

“Murder,” the sheriff repeated, slowly and precisely. “And you were the last ones to see them alive.”
For a long, long moment, nobody moved, and then Shane said, “You don’t think we killed—”

“Let’s just stop right there, son. I don’t want to be making any mistakes about how we do this.” The sheriff cleared his throat and recited something about rights and remaining silent. Claire couldn’t make sense out of it. She felt sick and horribly faint.

She was being arrested.
She was being arrested for murder.

Eve’s crying was uncontrollable now, but Claire couldn’t help her. She couldn’t help herself.

Shane stayed uncharacteristically silent as they loaded him into the back of the squad car, then put Claire and Eve in with him. The sheriff leaned in before he closed the door to look at them. He almost looked kind now. That didn’t make Claire feel any less sick.

“I’m going to have the deputy drive your, ah, vehicle back into town,” he said. “Can’t leave it out here. Might get stolen, and you folks already lost one car in Durram. Don’t want it happening again.”

He slammed the door on them. Claire felt Eve flinch all over at the boom of solid metal.


The sheriff got in the front, on the other side of a wire mesh screen. He put on his seat belt, looked in the rearview mirror, and said, “No talking.”

Then they drove back to the motel, where Linda’s truck had just pulled in. She looked pale and worried, but she didn’t betray much of anything at the sight of her three former guests in the back of a squad car. She listened to the sheriff, nodded, and went into the office to get master keys.

She opened up all three rooms they’d rented. Shane let out a sigh of relief even before the sheriff went in to look around. “They’re gone,” he said. “They got out. Somehow.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because Michael’s smarter than me, and he’d have found a way. Ow, Eve, stop squirming. Not like there’s a lot of room in here!”

“Sorry,” Eve said. She sniffled uncomfortably. Her eyes were red and puffy, and so was her nose, and in general she looked pretty miserable. Claire bumped shoulders with her gently.

“Hey,” she said. “It’ll be okay. We didn’t do this.”

“Yeah, they never put innocent people on death row in Texas,” Eve said. “Don’t kid yourself. We’re in big trouble. Big trouble. Like, not-even-Amelie-can-get-us-out-of-it trouble.”

Her eyes started to tear up again. Claire repeated the shoulder bump. “Don’t. We’ll be okay. We’ll figure this out.”

Sniffle. “You’re just Little Miss Optimist, aren’t you? Do you come with accessories, like a glass half full and lemons to make into lemonade, too?”

“I’m not an optimist,” Claire said. “I just know us.”

“Damn straight,” Shane said. “Look, they’ll separate us at the station. Don’t say anything about anything. Just watch and listen, okay? No matter what they say, just stay quiet.”

“I’ve seen cop shows,” Eve said, offended. “I’m not stupid, you know.”

Shane leaned forward and looked across her at Claire. “Okay, Eve’s going to spill her guts the first time they look at her harshly. What about you?”

“Quiet as a mouse,” Claire said. Her heart was pounding, and she wasn’t sure she could keep that promise, but then again, she’d kept secrets from Mr. Bishop.

This wasn’t nearly as bad.

Was it?

The sheriff’s station in Durram, Texas, was basically two rooms, if you didn’t count the bathroom; there was a small open area with a couple of desks and computers, some cork boards on the walls full of notices and pictures, and behind that, a door with iron bars. But first, before they got to the iron bar part, Claire and Shane were seated on a wooden bench—it was a lot like a church pew, only with big bolts drilled into it on either side—and cuffed to the bench; too far apart, for Claire’s comfort. She really ached to be held by him right now.

“Hey, sir? Could I use the bathroom?” Shane asked.

“Not until you’re processed.”

“I’m not kidding. I really need to go. Please? Or would you rather clean it up?”
The deputy stared at him, harassed and doubtful, and Shane did a convincing squirm that Claire wasn’t absolutely sure was fake. The deputy finally sighed and unhooked him to escort him to the small bathroom off the main room.

Eve, meanwhile, had been taken straight to the sheriff’s desk, where he offered her a big box of tissues and a glass of water.

Claire was wondering what the heck to do, when she saw a flash of a face in the window of the station, behind the sheriff’s back. A tall, lean figure in a long black coat, hat, and gloves.

Oliver. Dressed for the sun. Out and moving, getting an assessment of where they were and what had happened. He saw her watching him and gave her a quick nod that told her nothing at all, not even, Don’t worry. Then he vanished.

Her phone gave out an ultrasonic ringtone. She blinked and looked around, but neither the sheriff nor the deputy had noticed it at all. Eve had, but after that first involuntary glance, she kept her back turned and stared off into space, Kleenex crumpled in both hands.

Claire squirmed and managed to get her phone out of her pocket without attracting attention.

She had a text message, from Michael. It read, We’ll get you guys out of there soon. Meanwhile, stay quiet. It was pretty much the same advice Shane had given. She wanted to believe it, but her insides were still shaking. She was definitely not meant to be a career criminal.

Right. She should just sit here, then, and—think of something else. Like science. Some people recited baseball scores to distract themselves; Claire liked to go through the entire periodic table of elements, and once she’d finished with that, she started on all of the alchemical symbols and properties Myrnin had taught her. That helped. It made her remember that there was something out there beyond this room, this moment, and that there were people out there who might actually care if she didn’t come back.

Shane came back from the toilet and was cuffed in place again. He edged over a little closer to her and leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, head hanging down so his hair covered his face.

“There’s a window in the bathroom,” he said. “Not very big, but you could get out of it. Doesn’t open, though. You’d have to break it out, and that would be noisy.”

Claire coughed and covered her mouth. “I’m not breaking out of jail! Are you crazy?”

“Well, it was a thought. I mean, seemed like a good idea at the time.” Shane sat back up and looked at her, forehead crinkling in a frown. “I just don’t want you here. It’s not—” He shook his head. “It’s just not right. Me and Eve, yeah, she piled into it head-on, and I’m always in trouble. But you ...”

“I’m okay.” She reached out and put her palm against his cheek, feeling the slightly rough stubble there. It made her steadier. It made her want to be somewhere else, like in the motel room, with the door closed. “I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“I am such a bad influence on you.”

“Trying to get me to stage a jailbreak? Yeah. You really are.”

“Well, at least you didn’t do it. There’s that.”

The deputy got up from his desk and came to unlock Shane from the bench. “Let’s have a talk, Mr. Collins,” he said.

“Oh, let’s,” Shane said, with totally fake enthusiasm. He winked at Claire, which made her smile for a second, until she remembered there really was something tragic here—one man dead; two missing. Granted, they hadn’t been the nicest people, but still...

She realized, with a grim, cold, drenched feeling down her spine, that she had no idea what Oliver had been doing when those men were being killed.

No idea at all.

The sheriff kept them talking for hours, then locked them in the cell in the back. Shane went in one cell; Eve and Claire together in the other. All of their stuff was taken away, of course, including cell phones. Claire had erased the text messages, but she figured it was only a matter of time before the sheriff got them, anyway. And then he’d know for sure that Michael was out there, a fugitive from justice.

That sounded romantic, but probably wasn’t, especially since he was a vampire caught without shelter in the daytime.

She hoped he and Oliver had remembered to take the cooler of blood with them. They might really need it, especially if they got burned.

And here I am, worrying about a couple of vampires who can take care of themselves, she thought. I ought to be worrying a lot more about what’s going to happen when they call my parents. They would—and that would make it just about a million times worse.

“Hey,” Shane said from the other side of the bars. “Trade you cigarettes for a chocolate bar.”
“Funny,” Eve said. She was almost back to her old un-Gothed self again, though there were still red splotches on her cheeks and around her eyes. “How come you’re always behind bars, troublemaker?”

“Look who’s talking. I didn’t try to outrun the cops in a hearse.”

“That hearse had horsepower.” Eve got that moony look in her eyes again. “I love that hearse.”

“Yeah, well, I hope it loves you back, because otherwise, that’s just sad. And a little sick.” Shane drummed his fingers on the bars. “This isn’t so bad. At least I’ve got better company this time around.” And he wasn’t scheduled to be turned into a vampire, or burned alive, but that kind of went without saying. “And they even have toilet paper.”

“Oh, I really didn’t need to hear that, Collins.” Eve sighed and paced around the cell again, hugging herself tight.

“It tells me way too much about your past.”

Claire leaned into the bars. Shane leaned in from the other side, and their fingers brushed, then intertwined.

“Hey,” he said. “So, this is familiar.”

“Not for me,” she said. “I’m usually outside the bars.”

“You’re doing fine.”

Claire smiled at him, then drew in a quick, shaking breath. “I have to tell you something,” she said. “It’s important.”

Shane’s fingers tightened on hers, and his index finger stroked gently over the silver claddagh ring, with its bright stone. “I know.”

“No, you don’t. I saw Oliver,” she whispered, quickly and as softly as she could. Clearly, that was not what Shane was expecting to hear, and she watched him go through a whole list of reactions before he finally settled on annoyed.

“Great,” he said. “When?”

“Outside the windows while they were talking to you,” Claire said.

“Was he barbecued?”

“No, he was wearing a big coat and hat. I don’t guess he was any too excited about being out in the daytime, though.”

“I guess barbecued was too much to hope for.” Shane fell silent as he thought about it, then finally shook his head. “They’ll wait for dark,” he said. “They’ll have to, whatever they plan to do; Michael’s just too vulnerable out there in the day. I wish we knew what they were doing.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re thinking the same thing about us,” Claire said. “Since they probably have no idea what happened. As far as they know, this hassle is all about Eve’s bad driving.”

“Hey, I heard that!” Eve said.

Shane smiled, but it was brief, and his dark brown eyes never left Claire’s. “I don’t like this,” he said. “I don’t like seeing you two in here.”

“Yeah, well, welcome to my world,” Claire said. “I haven’t enjoyed it much seeing you behind bars, either.” She laughed sadly. “This was supposed to be a fun little trip, remember? We should be in Dallas by now.”

“My dad used to say that life’s a journey, but somebody screwed up and lost the map.”

Claire wasn’t sure she wanted to think about his father right now. Frank Collins wasn’t the kind of ghost she wanted drifting around between them, especially since being in jail—again—probably made Shane think a lot about his dad. Not that Frank was a ghost. Unfortunately. He’d been a terrible, abusive father, and now he was a vampire, and she couldn’t really imagine that it had improved him all that much.

Even if he had saved her life once.

“As long as we’re together,” she said. “That’s what matters.”

“Speaking of that,” Shane said, “we could be together and headed anywhere when we get out of this, you know. I’m just putting that on the table.”

He was talking about not going back; about leaving Morganville. She’d been contemplating it, and she knew he had, too. “I—I can’t, Shane. My parents ...”

He bent his head closer and dropped his voice to a whisper. “Do you really think they want you to be there? Risking your life, every day? Don’t you think they want you out, and safe?”

“I can’t, Shane. I just can’t. I’m sorry.”

Shane was silent a moment, then let out a long breath. “I bet I could convince you if I could get through these bars....”

“You’d get arrested all over again.”

“Well, you’re just that tempting. Jailbait.” He kissed her fingers, which made her shiver all over; his lips lingered warm on her skin, reminding her of what it felt like to be alone with him, in that timeless, special silence. “Not a lot we can do until—” He stopped, then, frowning, looked over at the barred door that led into the sheriff’s office. “Did you hear that?”
“What?” Even as she asked it, Claire heard the growl of an engine outside—a big one. It had to be some kind of truck, maybe, but not just a pickup—a big delivery van, or an eighteen wheeler. The brakes sighed, and the roar of the engine cut out. “I guess they’re getting some sort of delivery, maybe?”

Maybe, but somehow, Claire didn’t think so. She had a bad feeling. From the way Shane was staring at the jail door—which wasn’t telling them anything—he was feeling the same thing.

And then in the outer office, glass crashed, someone yelled, and Claire heard laughter.

Then more crashing. More yelling.

Shane let go of her. “Claire, Eve—get to the back of the cell.” When they hesitated, he snapped, “Just go!”

They did it, not that there was anywhere in particular to go, or to hide. They sat together on one of the two small cots, close together, watching the jail door to see what would come through.

What came through wasn’t Oliver. It wasn’t even Michael.

It was Morley, the vampire from Morganville, in all his homeless-bum glory. He was dressed in layers of threadbare clothes, and he had a large, floppy black hat on his head over his straggly graying hair.

He looked at the bars on the jail cell door, sneered, and snapped the whole thing off its hinges with a heave. He tossed the iron aside as if it weighed next to nothing.

Morley stepped through the open space, surveyed the three of them, and swept off his hat in a low, mocking bow. He was good at the bowing thing. Claire supposed he’d probably had a lot of practice. He seemed old enough to have lived in a time when bowing well got you somewhere.

“He looks cramped in there, my friends. Shall I get you out?”

“Actually, it’s pretty roomy,” Shane said. “I’m feeling better about it all the time.”

“Perhaps ...” Morley turned. “Ah, you’re playing the gentleman, I see. Of course, by all means. Ladies first.”

“No!” Shane lunged at the bars. Morley had his eyes fixed on Eve and Claire now, and Claire thought, with a sinking sensation, that putting on a brave face wasn’t going to get her very far—not with him. “Changed my mind. Sure. I’ll go first.”

Morley shook his finger gently in Shane’s direction, but without taking those shining eyes off the girls. “No, you had your chance. And I despise those who think themselves gentlemen in any case. You’re not making friends that way.”

“Fleas suck blood,” Morley said mildly. “Quite the cousin of the vampire, those clever little creatures, so why should I find that insulting? You really must find more interesting ways to bait me, boy. Tell me my beard would better stuff a butcher’s cushion. Or that I have more hair than wit. Live up to your heritage, I beg you.”

Shane had no idea what to say to that. Claire cleared her throat. “Like ... you’re... an inhuman wretch, void and
empty from any dram of mercy?” She hated Shakespeare. But she’d had to memorize lines back in high school for a production of *The Merchant of Venice*.

And it had finally paid off, from the surprise in Morley’s face. He actually took a step back.

“It speaks!” he said. “And in lilting, glorious words. Though I am not so partial to the Bard, myself. He was a pitiful man to drink with, always dashing off to scribble away in the dark. Writers. Such a boring lot.”

“What are you doing here? Because I know you didn’t come to get us,” Claire said. She advanced and wrapped her hands around the bars, as though she wasn’t at all afraid of him. She hoped he couldn’t hear her heartbeat, but she knew he could. “We’re not important enough.”

“Well, that’s certainly true. You’re entirely incidental. Actually, we’re in search of a town. Something small, remote, easily controllable. This seemed a good possibility, but it’s rather too large for our purposes.”

We. Morley hadn’t just slipped out of Morganville alone. Claire remembered the big, throbbing engine outside. Might be a big truck. Might be a bus. Either way, it would probably hold a lot of vampires—like the ones Morley had applied to be allowed to leave Morganville with in the first place.

Oh, this just got better and better.

“You can’t just move in here,” Claire said, trying to sound reasonable, as if that would do any good. She let go of the bars and backed away as Morley took a step toward her again. “People live here.”

“Indeed, I’m not planning on it. Too much trouble to subdue such a large population. However, we’re in need of supplies, and this town’s quite well stocked. Couldn’t be better.” Morley suddenly lunged forward, grabbed the bars of their cell, and ripped the door off—just like that, with a shriek of iron and sharp snapping sounds.

Eve, behind Claire, screamed, and then the sound went muffled, as if she’d covered her mouth.

Claire didn’t move. There didn’t seem to be much point. Shane was yelling something, and for some odd reason the place on her neck hurt, the place where Myrnin had bitten her, where there was still a nasty scar.

Morley stood there for a moment, hands on both sides of the doorway, and then stepped inside. He glided, like a tiger. And his eyes turned red, the irises lighting up the glittering color of blood.

“Get down!” somebody yelled from behind him, and Claire hit the floor, not daring to hesitate even for a second. There was a loud roar that it took her a second to identify as gunfire, and Morley staggered and went down to one knee.

The sheriff looked dazed, and there was blood on the side of his head, but he held his gun very steady. “Get down, mister,” he said. “Don’t make me shoot you again.”

Morley slowly toppled forward, face-forward, on the floor. The sheriff breathed a sigh of relief and gestured for Eve and Claire to come out. Claire did, jumping over Morley’s outstretched hand and expecting that any second, any second at all, he’d reach up and grab her, just like in the movies.

He didn’t. Eve hesitated for a few seconds, then jumped for it, clearing Morley by at least a couple of feet, straight up. The sheriff grabbed them and hustled them off to the side, then unlocked Shane’s cell. “Out,” he said. “Help me get him inside.”

“It won’t do any good to lock him up,” Shane said. “He already ripped off two of your doors. You want him to go for three?”

The sheriff had clearly been trying not to think about that. “What the hell are these people?” he snarled. “Some kind of damn monsters?”

“Some kind of,” Shane said. He’d put his hands on Claire, and now he wrapped his arms around her, and after a second, included Eve in the hug, too. “Thanks. I know you don’t believe us, but we’re not the bad guys here.”

“I’m starting to think you might be right about that.”

“What gave you your first clue? The fangs, or the door ripping?” Shane didn’t wait for an answer. “He’s not dead. He’s playing with you.”

“What?”

“You can’t kill him with that thing,” Eve said. “Can’t even slow him down, really.”

The sheriff whirled to stare at Morley, who was still facedown on the floor. He aimed his gun at the body again and kept it there.

Morley didn’t move.

“No, he’s down,” the sheriff said, and walked over to press fingers to Morley’s dirty neck. He yanked his hand away quickly, stumbling back. “He’s cold.”

Morley laughed, rolled over, and sat up, doing his very best risen-from-the-grave imitation. It helped that he was filthy and looked kind of crazy scary.

The sheriff backed away, far away, all the way to the wall, then aimed his gun at Morley and pulled the trigger, again.

Morley brushed his clothes lightly, dismissing the bullet even before the echoes from the shockingly loud gunshot
stopped ringing in Claire’s ears. “Please,” he said, and practically levitated to his feet. He reached out and took the sheriff’s gun from him, then tossed it in the corner of the cell where Eve and Claire had been kept. “I hate loud noises. Unless it’s screaming. Screaming’s all right. Let me demonstrate.”

He reached out and grabbed the sheriff around the neck.

Something pale and very fast flashed through the doorway, and suddenly another vampire was there—Patience Goldman, with her slender hand wrapped around Morley’s wrist. She was a dark-haired young woman, pretty, with big dark eyes and skin that would have probably been olive had she still been alive. It added a honey undertone to her pallor.

“No,” Patience said. Claire had met her—and the entire Goldman family—more than once. She liked them, actually. For vampires, they had real concern for other people—as demonstrated by Patience’s trying to keep Morley from killing the sheriff. “There’s no need for this.”

Morley looked offended, and shoved her back with his free hand. “Do not lay hands on me, woman! This is none of your concern.”

“We came to—get supplies,” Patience said. She seemed uncomfortable with that, and Claire immediately realized that supplies was code for people-to-eat. “We have what we need. Let’s go. The longer we delay, the more attention we attract. It’s unnecessary risk!”

Patience and Jacob, her brother, had been hanging out with Morley for a while, and they’d wanted to break out of Morganville, and their parents’ restrictions—Theo Goldman was a good guy, but kind of strict, as far as his family went, or at least that had been Claire’s impression. Claire could easily believe that Morley had convinced Patience and Jacob to come along, since he was leaving, anyway, but she also didn’t believe they’d go along with killing people.

Not unnecessarily, anyway. Vampires in general were a little shaky on the details of morality in that area—a hazard of being top predator, Claire guessed.

“Hmmm,” Morley said, and turned his gaze back to the sheriff. “She does have a point. Fortunately for you.” He released the man, who slammed back against the wall, looking sick and shaky. “Stay. If you move, speak, or in any way irritate me, I’ll snap your neck.”

The sheriff froze in place, clearly taking it all very seriously. Claire didn’t really blame him. She remembered her first encounter with vampires, her first realization that the world wasn’t the neatly ordered place she’d always been told it was. It could really mess up your head.

In fact, she wasn’t entirely sure hers had ever recovered, come to think of it.

She was just starting to relax when Morley reached out and grabbed her and Eve by the arms. When Shane yelled a protest, Morley squeezed, and Claire felt agony shoot in a white bolt up her arm. Yeah, that was almost broken.

“Don’t cause a fuss, boy, or I’ll be forced to shatter bones,” Morley said. “The girls come with us. If you want to run, you may. I won’t stop you.”

Like Shane would. Or even could, being Shane. He fixed Morley with a bleak, grim stare and said, “You take them, I’m coming, too.”


He hustled Claire and Eve out into the open room that was the police bullpen. Desks had been shoved around, papers littered the floor, and Deputy Tom was lying half hidden behind one of the chairs. Claire was glad she couldn’t really see him. She hoped he was just...knocked out.

Somehow, though, she really didn’t think so.

Shane followed behind Morley. Patience walked next to him, but she didn’t try to touch him—which was probably smart, given the fiery look in Shane’s eyes. His muscles were tight, his hands bunched into fists, and the only thing holding him back from punching Morley was the certain knowledge that it would be Claire and Eve who’d get hurt.

Morley shoved open the glass outer door with a booted foot, and glanced up at the blazing sun. “Quickly, if you please,” he said, and dragged Eve and Claire across the open ground at a stumbling run to an idling bus.

It was an old passenger bus, with darkened windows, and the next thing she knew, Claire was being shoved up the steep, narrow steps ahead of Morley, with Eve being dragged along behind him. It was dark inside, with only a few overhead reading lights on to show her the interior. There were worn, fraying velvet seats, and in almost every one sat a vampire, at least in the front two-thirds of the bus.

In the back were mostly humans—tied up, gagged, and looking desperate. There were no Morganville residents, at least that Claire could spot offhand, but she saw two immediately familiar faces—Orange Cap and Angry Guy, from the diner, who’d trashed Eve’s car. The sheriff had said they’d disappeared; she’d assumed they were dead, like their friend who’d been left with his pickup truck.
Morley had grabbed them. Claire thought that the other one, the one who’d died, had been more of an accident than deliberate murder, although maybe he’d done something to make Morley angry, too. There was no way to tell, really.

The two bullies weren’t looking quite so in control now. Their eyes were wide, their noses were running, and they kept wrestling against the ties that held them in place.

“Friends of yours?” Morley asked, seeing her expression. “I’ll see if I can seat you in the same section. Aisle or window?” He shoved Eve into a seat next to a window, across from Orange Cap, and then slung Claire into the empty chair beside her, on the aisle. Then he turned to Shane.

Shane sat down silently in the chair in front of Claire. Patience, watching this, bit her lip and shook her head, but when Morley snapped the orders, she broke out some plastic cable ties and fastened Claire and Eve to the seats, then turned to Shane.

“I’m sorry for this,” she said softly. “You should have gone. Gotten help. I would have made sure no harm came to them.”

“I don’t trust their lives to anybody but me,” he said. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Patience said with a sigh. “But Morley will require you to provide blood. He’s promised not to drain any of our captives, but I’m sure you understand his temper. Resistance would not be wise.”

Shane shuddered and looked away. He didn’t like giving blood, even at the Bloodmobile or the blood bank, and that was a lot more removed from having a vampire taking it, no matter whether they used medical equipment or went the old-fashioned way. Claire wasn’t too cool with it herself, and she knew Eve well enough to know she’d fight it, hard.

“Let us go,” Claire blurted. Morley had wandered away toward the front of the bus now, talking to someone else, and Patience was leaning over her, checking her bonds, which were very tight. “Patience, please. You know this isn’t right. Just let us go.”

“I can’t do that.”

“But—”

“I can’t,” Patience said, with soft but unyielding emphasis. “Please don’t ask again.”

She straightened and walked away without another glance, leaving them in the back, pinned like the other UnHappy Meals. At least she hadn’t gagged them. Claire supposed she would, if they started screaming. *Note to self: don’t scream.* Good advice.

Shane twisted around in his seat to peer at her over the top of the seat. “Hey,” he whispered. “You okay?”

“|I’m fine. Eve? |

Eve was fuming, her cheeks bright, her eyes hot with fury. “Fine,” she snapped, biting off the word and leaving a sharp, broken silence. After a second, she softened a little. “Pissed off. Really pissed off. What kind of stupid trip is this? So far, I’ve been assaulted, insulted, arrested, and now I’m tied to a chair by a bunch of vampires in case they crave a little O negative at lunch. And my boyfriend is out there somewhere, dodging sunbeams. This *sucks!*”

“Ah—” Claire didn’t quite know how to answer that. She looked at Shane, who shrugged. “He’ll be okay.”

“I know,” Eve said with a sigh. “I’m just—I need him right now, you know? Shane was all gallant and came with you. I feel... abandoned, that’s all.”

“You’re not abandoned,” Shane said. “Dude, don’t bag on Michael. It’s a whole different problem when you’re flammable.”

Eve turned her face away, toward the window, and said, “I know. I’m just—Gah, seriously, I *hate* being helpless! We have to do something,” she said. “We have to get out of this.”

But, as Morley dropped into the driver’s seat of the bus, slammed the doors closed, and put the beast in gear, Claire wasn’t at all sure what options they really had. Morley wasn’t interested in bargains, and they had nothing to trade, anyway. No way they could threaten him, not even with Amelie; he’d already given Amelie the finger on his way out of Morganville, and he clearly wasn’t worried about her coming after him—or, if so, what would happen when she did. Claire didn’t have anything else in her bag of tricks; nothing at all.

“Wait it out,” Shane said, as though he knew what she was thinking—and he probably did, actually. He was starting to get really good at that. “Just wait and watch. Something will happen. We just need to be ready to move when it does.”


“Sorry,” Shane said to Claire.

“For what?”

“That you’re sitting next to Little Miss Sunshine. It’s not going to be a fun trip.”

He was right about that. It wasn’t.
Eve mostly sat in silence, but she was just crackling with anger. Claire could feel it coming off her like static electricity. She wasn’t cooling off anytime soon, either; Claire thought she was being angry to keep from being scared, which wasn’t a bad choice. Being scared under these circumstances wasn’t going to get them anywhere. It certainly hadn’t helped Orange Cap and Angry Guy much, or the five other people Claire could spot who were bound and gagged, waiting for a vamp to get hungry.

She saw it happen once, but in the medically approved way; Jacob Goldman—Patience’s vampire brother, and under other circumstances kind of an okay guy—had fixed somebody up with a tourniquet and drawn out about ten tubes of blood from one of the men sitting two rows up. He was good at it. Theo, his dad and a doctor, had probably taught him how to do it. She supposed there was one advantage to having a vampire draw your blood—he wasn’t likely to miss a vein and have to try again.

Jacob looked unhappy about what he was doing, and at the end, even patted his victim on the shoulder in a gentle, reassuring way. Claire half expected him to hand over a lollipop—although since the man was gagged, that probably wouldn’t make much sense.

“Not happening,” Eve whispered next to her. “No, not happening. This cannot be happening. Where the hell is Oliver? Isn’t he supposed to be our chaperone?”

Claire didn’t know and couldn’t begin to reassure Eve, because there was a creeping sense of doom coming over her, too. Michael wasn’t showing up, and neither was Oliver, and that had to be bad. It just had to be, somehow. Oliver, at least, could stand the sun; she’d seen him outside the jail before Morley had made his dramatic entrance. So why wasn’t he stepping in?

*Because you’re not important,* Claire’s little, traitorous voice whispered. *Because you’re just human. Fast food on legs.*

No, that wasn’t true. Even Oliver had treated them—well, not exactly nicely, but he had developed a kind of basic respect for them. Maybe, in Eve’s case, even a little liking.

He wouldn’t just stand by and watch things happen.

*Unless he thought he couldn’t win,* the little voice responded, and ugh, the little voice was way too logical for Claire to argue with. Oliver wasn’t the self-sacrificing type, except maybe—maybe—where it applied to Amelie—and only in little glimpses.

But Michael was, and Michael would have shown up unless something had stopped him.

Or someone.

Claire cleared her throat. “Jacob? Can I ask you something?”

Jacob slipped the blood vials into a pocket of his jacket and came back down the aisle of the bus. He swayed gracefully with the motion of the road, not even bothering to check his balance against the tops of the seats, the way a human probably would have. He crouched down next to Claire, bringing them to eye level.

“I’m so sorry,” he said immediately. “This was not what we’d planned. We never intended to do it this way, but we couldn’t get to either the blood bank or the Bloodmobile—they were both well guarded. We had to choose—" Or pick them up at the convenience store?" Claire tried to keep the judgy tone out of her voice, but it was hard.

“That’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

Jacob nodded, waiting.

“Have you seen Michael?”

Jacob’s eyes widened. “No,” he said, and he was an even worse liar than Claire expected. “No, did he come with you?”

“Jacob, you know he did.” Claire said it softly, and hoped that Eve couldn’t hear what she was saying. “Did something happen to him?”

Jacob stared at her for a few long, sick seconds, then said, “I don’t know.”

He stood up and walked away. Claire bit her tongue on an almost-overpowering urge to yell something after him; it probably would have just gotten her gagged, anyway.

Shane was turned in his seat, as much as his bonds would allow, and he was staring at her. He knew, too.

Claire risked a glance at Eve, but she was staring out the window. Not crying, not anymore. She just looked... distant, as if she’d removed herself from everything happening around her.

Shane was right. There was nothing to be done now except wait.

Claire was bad at it, but she spent the time trying to think through the problem. What would Myrnin do? Probably
invent some device made out of fingernails and coat threads that would cut through plastic handcuffs. Then again, Myrnin would be cheerfully chugging down the blood, so maybe he was not such a good example to follow. Sam. What would Michael’s grandfather have done? Still a vampire, but he’d never have gone along with this stuff. He’d have stood up for people. He had his whole life, both as a human and a vampire. 

And he’d have never been handcuffed to a seat, genius, Claire’s little voice reminded her. How about Hannah Moses? That was a good suggestion, for once. Claire couldn’t imagine how Hannah, who’d been a big-time soldier, would have gotten out of this, but it probably would have involved a concealed knife—which, of course, Claire didn’t have.

The steady throb of the road was hypnotic, and since the windows were blacked out, there wasn’t much to see out there except some passing shadows. The vampires were mostly whispering among themselves, and she could feel their suppressed excitement. It was strange, but the vampires seemed to feel they’d been prisoners in Morganville, too—which, mostly prisoners of its strict rules of conduct, but Claire knew they hadn’t been allowed out of town freely any more than the human residents.

It was odd that the vampires would now be feeling that same freedom that she, Eve, Michael, and Shane had felt leaving the town borders. It seemed ... wrong.

“Eve?” Claire tried bumping Eve’s shoulder with her own. She did it often enough to finally pull Eve out of her staring trance and get her attention. “Hey. How you doing?”

“Fantastic,” Eve said. “Adventure of a lifetime.” She dropped her head back against the seat’s built-in pillow and closed her eyes. “Wake me for the massacre, okay? Don’t want to miss it.”

Claire had no idea what to say to that, so she just settled her own head back, closing her eyes, too. The road hiss became a kind of white noise in her head, and then ...

She was asleep.

When she woke up, the bus was pulling to a stop. Claire flinched, tried to lift her arms, and immediately was reminded that plastic handcuffs hurt as they cut into her skin. She took a deep breath and relaxed, deliberately, looking around. Eve was awake, too, her dark eyes narrow and glittering in the dimness. In the row ahead, Claire could see the back of Shane’s head as he tried to make sense of whatever was outside the window.

“Where are we?” Claire asked. Shane’s head shook.

“No idea,” he said. “Can’t really see a whole lot. It looks like maybe some little town, but I can’t tell.”

“They don’t need more, uh, supplies. No empty seats.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Shane said. There was nothing in his voice, but Claire knew he was feeling just as worried as she was about this development.

Morley brought the bus to a stop with a hiss of air brakes and a lurch, then opened the door and descended the steps. It was still daylight out there; the light spilling in from the opened accordion doors was milky white and intense.

None of the other vampires tried to follow. They just waited. Morley came back, stood at the front of the bus, and grinned. “Brothers and sisters,” he said, “I have stopped for gas. Feel free to snack while I attend to the fuel.”

“Oh no,” Eve whispered. “No no no.”

Claire tried to get her hands free, again. The plastic handcuffs cut deep, almost drawing blood, and she had to stop; the smell of blood wouldn’t be a good thing, just now.

The vampires were turning to look at those in the back of the bus, and their eyes were glowing.

Patience and Jacob Goldman weren’t among them. They were closer to the back, and they had their heads bent together, whispering. Patience seemed upset at something Jacob was saying, but he was insistent, and as the first vampire got up to get his snack, Jacob suddenly flashed out of his seat and stood in the way.

The vampire was a woman, nobody Claire had ever met; she looked older, and not very nice. She also didn’t like Jacob’s getting in her face, and she said something in a language Claire didn’t recognize. Jacob must have, because he spat something right back.

Patience finally got out of her seat and stood nearby, clearly backing him up.

Jacob reached into his pocket and handed over two blood vials. He switched to English to say, “This will hold you for now. There’s no need for anyone to be killed, and you know what will happen if we allow feeding in here. Take it and sit down.”

“Who do you think you are, Amelie?” The woman bared her fangs in a mocking laugh. “I left Morganville to escape these stupid rules. Give me what I want, or I’ll take it.”

“The rules are not stupid,” Patience said. “The rules are sensible. If you want to alert humans to our presence and restart the bad old times, the times when we ran for our lives, owned nothing, were nothing—then wait until we have reached our destination. You can go off on your own and do what you will. But while Jacob and I are here, you will
not feed directly from these people. I will not see them dead because you can’t control yourself.”

She sounded absolutely sure about what she was doing, and very matter-of-fact, as if only an idiot would argue with her. The other vampire frowned, thought about it, and then made a sound of frustration. She grabbed two vials from Jacob’s outstretched hand. “I’ll expect more,” she snapped. “You’d better start draining them. You have a lot of mouths to feed.”

Jacob ignored her. “Who else? I can give out four more....”

Four more vampires got up and accepted the vials. Jacob took out his medical kit and handed it to Patience. “I’ll stay here,” he said. “Draw the blood.”

“Yeah, don’t make any of them short ! one of the other vampires called, and there was a ripple of laughter.

“Enough,” Jacob said, and there was a hint of relaxed humor in his voice. “You’ll all get what you want. Just not now. And not here.”

He looked over his shoulder at Patience, who was strapping a tourniquet around the first human she’d found—a woman, this time. There was a little resistance, but not much, and Patience proved herself to be just as good at drawing blood as her brother. She filled ten more vials, which she handed over to Jacob for distribution as she moved on to the next donor.

So it went, even after Morley came back inside after fueling up the bus. He saw what was going on, and shook his head. “You can take the vampire out of Morganville ... ,” he said, and left the rest unsaid as he dropped into the driver’s seat. “Right, young ones, bloodbath later. First, we drive.”

Claire half hoped that the vamps would be done with lunch before Patience worked her way back to her row, but no such luck. However, she turned left, and started with Angry Guy, whose bug eyes and muffled shrieks seemed to make no impression on her at all. She did the blood draw quickly and easily, pocketed the vials, and moved on to Orange Cap, who’d lost his cap now and was crying wet, messy tears. His nose was dripping, too.

When Patience was finished tapping him, she turned to Claire. She looked at her for a long moment, then said, “I will not take your blood. Nor that of your friends. Not yet.”

Next to Claire, Eve let out a little sigh of relief. Shane, who’d been sitting tensely in the row ahead, relaxed as well.

Claire didn’t. “Why?”

“Because—we owe you a favor, I think. Let this be payment.” She started to move on to the next row.

“Wait,” Claire said. Patience’s dark, strange eyes returned to her face. “They’re going to kill us all. You don’t want that, you and Jacob.”

“Jacob and I are outnumbered,” Patience said softly. “I am sorry, but there is little we can do more than we are doing now. Forgive me.”

“There has to be something—” Claire bit her lip. Eve was paying attention now, and Shane, although Claire was trying to keep the whole conversation to a whisper. “Can’t you maybe let us loose? We promise, we won’t tell Morley.”

“Child, you have no idea what you’re saying,” Patience said, a little sadly. “He’ll catch you, and then Morley will find out what he wants to find out. He has no reason not to rip this information from you, and it would be suspicious enough that I haven’t drawn blood. He already thinks Jacob and I are too weak. You put us at risk, as well as yourselves.”

“So what’s our choice?” Eve hissed, leaning over as far as she could. “Getting fanged to death? No, thank you. Pass. If I’d wanted that kind of gruesome, horrible horror-movie ending, I could have stood on a street corner in Morganville and saved myself the trouble!”

Patience looked even more uncomfortable. “I can’t help you,” she said again. “I’m sorry.”

That was her final answer, apparently. Claire watched her continue on with her blood work, apparently satisfied that she’d done her good deed for the day.

“We’re screwed,” Shane said, in a matter-of-fact voice, and turned back, face forward. “Still want to go back to Morganville? Because every day is pretty much just like this, one way or another.”

Eve sighed, slumped against the window, and looked as if she was close, again, to bursting into tears. She didn’t. Claire almost wished she would. It wasn’t like Eve, all this nervous anger. It made her nervous, and the last thing she needed right now was more to raise her pulse rate.

“Michael will find us,” Eve said. “They’ll come for us.”

Claire wished she felt that sure about it.
Patience and Jacob distributed all of the collected blood, two vials per vampire, and gave the rest to Morley, who chugged it back like shots at happy hour. It was disgusting, watching all the vampires having their snack; Claire’s stomach turned, and she found it was easier staring down at her feet than actually paying attention.

Some of the blood donors had actually passed out, though whether that was just sleep, low blood pressure, or panic, Claire wasn’t sure. It was quieter, at least. Morley kept driving, and it seemed like hours before he slowed the bus again. He didn’t stop, just geared down and beckoned to a vampire sitting behind him. The vampire nodded, pointed to three others, and gestured for them to follow.

“What’s going on?” Shane asked. “Can you tell?”

“No,” Claire said, and then gasped as Morley opened the bus doors. The bus was still rolling along at maybe thirty-five or forty miles an hour. The four vampires up front put on coats, hats, gloves—sunny-day wear—and lined up on the stairs.

One by one, they bailed out.

“What the hell?” Shane twisted around awkwardly to the limit of his ability. “Eve, can you see anything? What’s going on?”

“I can’t—wait, I think—” Eve squinted, leaned her head against the window, and finally continued. “I think they’re going after something behind us. A car, maybe.”

Four vampires had just bailed out of a moving bus, in broad daylight, to attack a car that was behind them. Following them?

Claire gasped as an electric shock zipped up her spine. Michael. Oliver. It had to be! They’d figured it out. They were right behind them.

Yeah, her tragic, pessimistic little voice said in her head. They’re right behind us, and four vampires are about to drag them out of the car and leave them to fry.

“Can you see—” Claire’s voice was shaking now. Eve didn’t answer. “Eve!”

“I’m trying!” Eve snapped. “It’s all just shadows out there, okay? I can barely tell there’s a car! Oh no ...”

“What?” She and Shane blurted it out together, leaning toward Eve as if somehow they could make things out any better.


“Dammit,” Shane said. “Probably was some farmer driving to market. Didn’t have anything to do with all this crap.”

“Doesn’t matter now,” Eve whispered. “They’re not coming now.”

She began to cry, producing wrenching sobs that made her whole body vibrate, and banged her forehead against the window glass—hard. Claire instinctively tried to reach out for her, and came up against her restraints, again.

“Hey,” she said, trying hard to sound compassionate and soothing. Her heart just ached for Eve, who sounded so lost. “Eve, please don’t. Please don’t do that. It’s going to be okay; it’s all—”

“No, it’s not!” Eve screamed, and turned toward Claire in a tearful fury. “It’s not okay! Michael! Michael!”

She started thrashing against her restraints. Shane tried to calm her down, too, but Eve wasn’t listening anymore—not to anybody.

Patience came and, with a sad but determined look at Claire, leaned over and gave Eve a quick injection in her shoulder. It was so fast Claire couldn’t react to try to stop her, and Eve stopped thrashing to say, in blank surprise, “Ow!”

Then her eyes rolled back in her head, and she went completely limp in her chair, her head tilting toward the window, wild strands of hair covering her face.

“What did you do?” Claire demanded, and tried not to scream it. She’d just seen what screaming got you.

“She’ll sleep,” Patience said. “She’s not injured. It’s better this way. She could hurt herself, otherwise.”

“Yeah, can’t have that,” Shane said bitterly. “Gotta save that for you guys. What was that, with the vamps getting off the bus?”

Patience put the cap back on the needle she’d used to inject Eve and put it in her pocket. “Someone was following,” she said. “They’re not now. That’s all you need to know.” The bus changed its pitch again, air brakes sighing, and slowed to a relative crawl. The doors banged open again, and two vampires got on, wearing hats and gloves and long coats against the sun.

One of them was smoking, even with all the protective gear.

The other one, a little taller and thinner, grabbed Morley by the neck, dragged him out of the driver’s seat, and tossed him right out the door.

“Go!” he shouted, and stripped off his hat.

The tall one was Oliver.
Michael—who was the incoming vampire trailing wisps of smoke—raced down the aisle, slammed into Patience and Jacob, and knocked them out of the way. Nobody else had time to stand up, although a few vampires lunged and caught pieces of his coat as he ran toward the back of the bus. Oliver was right behind him, and as they reached the rows where the humans were, Oliver turned and snarled at the other vampires, who were starting to get to their feet. They were hampered by close quarters, but there were a lot of them.

Jacob bounded up, gave Oliver a second’s dark look, and then jumped up on top of the headrest of the seat next to him, crouching like a bird of prey. Patience did the same on Oliver’s other side.

“No,” she said flatly, as the vampires started to move toward them. “Stay where you are.”

Michael reached them and snapped Claire’s bonds first. It took him a precious few seconds, because the plastic was tougher than he’d thought, and he had to try not to hurt her. As soon as she was free, he leaned over Eve and pushed out the side window with one powerful punch. Metal bent and shrieked, glass shattered, and the whole window assembly fell out onto the road.

Light streamed in, pure and white-hot, and hit him full in the face. Michael jerked back into the shadows with a choked cry. Claire had a blurred impression of burns, but he didn’t give her time to worry about him. “Out!” he yelled, and grabbed her by the waist to boost her toward the window. The inch of skin exposed between his coat and gloves sizzled like frying bacon. Claire grabbed hold of the jagged edge of the window and looked down. The bus was still rolling, and it was picking up speed as it started down the hill. “Claire, jump!”

She didn’t really have a choice.

Claire jumped, hit the hard pavement with a stunning thump, and rolled. She managed to protect her head and curled up in a ball on the white-hot surface.

The bus kept on rolling. She could hear screaming—and fighting. Another window broke, next to Shane.

“Come on,” Claire whispered, and clambered to her feet. She hurt all over, and her ankle felt as if she’d sprained it, but that didn’t matter right now.

She watched the bus.

Nobody came out the window.

Claire started to run after the bus—limped after it—and had to stop when her ankle folded under her after a dozen steps. “Shane!” she screamed. “Shane, come on! Get out!”

Her attention was completely fixed on the bus, but she had good survival instincts, thanks to Morganville’s harsh training; she sensed a shadow behind her, and dropped just in time.

Morley. He was baking in the blazing day—not sizzling like Michael, but definitely turning toxic-sunburn red. And he was angry. His hand blurred through space where she’d been, and if she’d been in the way, he would have broken her neck. She rolled and stumbled back to her feet, felt the left one give way again, and hopped backward.

Morley gave her a feral, awful grin. “Nobody leaves the tour,” he said. “Especially not you, little girl. Amelie wants you back. I’m certain of that. You’re my insurance. No fair limping off on your own.”

He reached for her, and out of the corner of her eye, Claire saw a black shape hurl itself from the shattered bus window and streak toward them. At first she thought it was Michael, but no—Oliver.

He hit Morley like a brick wall and threw him fifty feet down the road in a rolling, slapping mess. Then, after an irritated look at her hopping on one foot, he scooped Claire up in his arms, then turned back to shout, “Michael, leave it! Get out!”

A car was roaring over the hill behind them—a police car, with half the light gear ripped off and dangling, and holes punched in the doors and windows. It had clawlike scrapes in the hood.

It didn’t slow down for Morley, who scrambled to his feet and dived out of the way as the cruiser rocketed past. It screeched to a sliding halt, crossways to the road, and the driver threw the passenger door open, then the back. Oliver tossed Claire into the back of the car, left the door open, and raced back to the bus. He leaped up, clinging to the open window, reached in, and grabbed something—a handful of black coat—and dragged.

Michael toppled out the window and fell heavily on the road. Oliver dropped down, cat-steady, and reached down to pull Michael to his feet. He took off his own hat and jammed it down on Michael’s bare blond head, stripped off his own long black coat, and flung it over him as additional protection.

Michael fought to get free, but as Claire flailed and struggled to sit up, Oliver dragged her friend all the way to the police car, shoved him in the back door, and slammed it, hard, penning Michael inside. The handles didn’t work, of course. Michael landed half on top of her, heavy and smelling like burning hair, but he quickly rolled up and tried to smash out the window glass—which, Claire realized with a shock, was painted over black—spray painted. Only the driver’s side part of the front window was left unaltered.

Oliver got in the front, turned, and drove a fist through the metal grating that separated the back of the squad car from the front. He peeled back the metal, grabbed Michael’s arm, and said, “You can’t help them by dying. You tried. We’ll try again. This isn’t over.”
“Eve’s still in there! I can’t leave her there!” Michael yelled, and yanked free.

Oliver, with a weary, impatient sigh, grabbed him by the neck this time, and pinned him back against the stained vinyl seat. “Listen to me,” he said, and peeled back more of the grate so their eyes could meet, and hold. “Michael, I swear to you that we will not abandon your friends. But you must stop this nonsense. It’s doing nothing to help them, and everything to destroy your usefulness to me and everyone you love. Do you understand?”

Michael was still tense, ready to fight, but Oliver held him there, staring him down, until Michael finally let go of Oliver’s arm and held up both hands in surrender. His whole body slumped. Defeated.

Still, Oliver didn’t let go. “Drive,” he told the man behind the wheel. “Follow the bus. Morley’s already back on board. He’ll keep driving, but we should hang back out of sight.”

“I can’t follow it if I can’t see it!” the driver protested, and Claire knew that voice, but it didn’t sound like the sheriff from Durram, or even his deputy. It sounded...

No way.

Claire leaned forward and peered through her half of the grate, which was still in place. “Jason?” Jason Rosser? Eve’s brother? “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Oliver needed some support that wouldn’t combust,” Jason said. “Besides, that’s my sister in there, right?”

Eve. Eve was still in the bus—that was why Michael was fighting so hard. Claire felt strangely behind the curve right now; maybe she’d banged her head harder than she’d thought. It ached on the right side. She was starting to feel a whole lot of aches, as the adrenaline started to recede a little.

Shane. Shane was still on the bus, too. Why was he still on the bus?

“Jason. Use this to track them,” Oliver said, and pulled something out of the glove compartment of the cruiser. It looked like a GPS navigation device. “It’s been keyed to follow the bus.”

“You bugged the bus?”

“I bugged your sister. I slipped a cell phone into her pocket during the confusion. Hopefully she’ll have an opportunity to use it.”

He handed the device over to Jason, who stuck it up on the dashboard, angled so he could see the colored roadmap display. “Nice,” he said. “Hey, if you could unlock the shotgun, that would be good, too.”

“No,” Oliver said flatly. “The last thing I trust you with is a firearm. Just drive.”

“I put it in her pocket,” Oliver said. “Unless they search her again, I doubt they’ll find it. There were plenty of distractions.”

“What about Shane? Is he okay?”

“I don’t know.” Oliver kept staring at Michael. “Was he?”

“I got one of his hands free,” Michael said. “I could have gotten them both out. You just had to give me one more—”

“One more second and you’d have been pulled to pieces, which would have done me no good at all,” Oliver said. “Patience and Jacob were stepping aside. They know a lost cause when they see one, and you couldn’t have gotten Eve and Shane both out in any case. It’s better to leave them together, where they can protect each other. Now, are you going to behave yourself? Or do I need to prove to you, again, who is master here?”

Michael didn’t answer, but he dropped his hands to his sides.

Oliver let him go. “How do you feel?”

Michael let out a brittle little laugh. “What, you’re concerned?” He looked bad, Claire realized, even in the dim light bouncing in from Jason’s side of the front window. He was burned red, his face swollen.

“Not really,” Oliver said. “I’m concerned you’ll be a liability. Which is almost certainly going to be the case, if you continue to act like some lovesick boy instead of a thinking man. Are we understood? If you want to save your fragile little friends, you must be a great deal smarter about when you risk your own safety.”

It was hard to tell what the expression on Michael’s swollen face was, but there was no mistaking the flash of hate in his eyes. Claire swallowed, hard. Michael took a deep breath and turned toward her. “You’re okay?” he asked, and stripped off his gloves. His hands were pale, but just above the line where the gloves had been were vivid black and red burns. He gently touched her face, turning it to one side, then the other. “You’re going to have some action-star bruises, tough girl.” But she knew what he was looking for, really.

“No fang marks,” she said. “Well, none that weren’t already there, from before, you know. Look, not even any needle marks.”

“Needle marks?”

“Patience and Jacob, they insisted that all blood get drawn with a needle. I think they were trying to sort of ration it out.”

“They were trying to keep you alive,” Oliver said, turning back to face the front. “That many vampires in an
enclosed space, a feeding frenzy would be inevitable. None of you would have survived it, especially not restrained as you were.”

As Eve and Shane still were. Claire felt sick. She also felt horribly, horribly guilty. “Why me?” she asked. “Why save me, not Eve? Or Shane?”

“You were the closest,” Michael said. “And—you’re the youngest. Eve and Shane would both kick my ass if I tried to save them ahead of you.” But he looked sickly guilty, too, and she knew he was thinking, just as she was, of Eve. “I heard her screaming for me. That was why we—why we decided to go in.”

“It was that or listen to his yowling the rest of the drive,” Oliver said. “I’ve never been in love, and more and more, I’m glad I haven’t. It seems to make you foolish, as well as very tiresome.”

Jason snorted; it might have been a choked laugh. “Yeah, you got that right.”

Oliver smacked Jason in the back of the head. “I don’t need your agreement. Drive.”

Claire tried to pull her head back together. “Wh-what are we going to do?” she asked. “Just follow them? What if—what if something happens on the bus? Are we just going to sit here?”

“Yes,” Oliver said. “Because going back now, we’ve lost the element of surprise, and Morley will be ready for us. In fact, he may try to engineer a provocation, to force us to do something stupid. We follow them until they stop. Once they’re off the bus, we have a much better chance.”

Jason said, “What about, you know, ramming the bus? Out here in the sun, they can’t really chase us down on foot. Not for long.”

“Ramming a bus will simply yield us a car that will no longer drive, and will not ensure the bus is disabled,” Oliver said. “It would take something larger. Much larger. In any case, it’s not prudent. Too much risk of damage to your delicate little humans on board.”

“But—”

“Oh, just shut up and follow,” Oliver snapped. “I am tired of debate. There will be no more.”

Claire knew a door slamming when she heard it. She twisted around a little and pulled up the pant leg over her left ankle. It was puffy and starting to bruise. Yep. That was sprained. “Do we have any first aid stuff in here?”

Oliver dug out a box and passed it through the torn grate on Michael’s side. She found some of that rubberized wrapping bandage stuff, and tried to do it herself, but Michael took it away from her, removed her shoe and sock, and wrapped it for her without saying a word.

“Thanks,” she said softly. It felt better, once that was done, although there was still a dull red ache that flared up every time she moved. “Is there anything—”

“I’m healing,” Michael said. He put the medical kit down and let his head fall back against the seat. “Man. This has not been the trip I planned.”

“Really?” Oliver’s voice was dry. “It’s exactly what I expected. Sadly.”
They drove for what seemed like a very long time, but according to the clock built into the cruiser’s dashboard, it was only a couple of hours. The bus kept taking crazy back-road turns, as if they were searching for something. Finally, though, the dot stopped moving. “What is that?” Jason asked, and tapped the screen. It magnified. “Is that a town?” Claire couldn’t see through the grate, other than a dot on a map. “It’s tiny, if it is. Smaller than that last place where you got yourselves jacked.”

“No other roads in,” Oliver said, looking at the display. “They’ll see us coming in any case. The land is as flat as a griddle. And just as hot.”

“Yeah, who ever decided to locate Vampireville in Texas, anyway? Whose good idea was that?” Jason asked. “Amelie’s,” Oliver said. “And none of your business why she chose it. It’ll do us no good to wait until dark—they will only have sharper senses with which to detect us. Better to strike in the day, if we can. Unfortunately, my army consists of one unreliable criminal, one girl with a disability, and one incredibly foolish young vampire with a tanning issue. I am not confident.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Claire said. “We have to go. Eve and Shane—”

“I am more concerned with what Morley is doing,” Oliver interrupted. “He’s defying Amelie. Defying me. I can’t allow that to go unanswered.”

It boiled down to the same thing, luckily—they didn’t have a choice, and Oliver had to help. He thought about it in silence for a few minutes as the cruiser continued on its path to the dot on the map, then nodded sharply. “All right,” he said. “We go in. Now. But when we do, you must be fast, and you must be ruthless. Michael, since you’re so hell-bent on saving the girl and your friend, that will be your mission. Claire, Jason, you will stay with me. I may require someone to act as distraction.”

“He means bait,” Michael said. “You’re not using Claire.”

“She’s a wounded deer,” Oliver said. “She’s perfect.”

“You’re not using Claire. And that’s not optional. I don’t care if you think you’re the boss; you’re not using her.”

Michael sounded utterly, completely dedicated to that proposition, and Oliver, after a second’s frozen silence, nodded.

“Very well. I’ll use the criminal. He’s serviceable, I suppose.”

Jason cleared his throat. “Do I get the shotgun if you’re staking me out for bait?”

“No,” Oliver said. “Not ever.”

Claire was struck by a random thought, which was proof her brain was finally shaking off the effects of bailing out of the bus at speed. “Hey,” she said. “It takes hours to get here from Morganville. How did Jason—”

“Jason says shut up,” Eve’s brother snapped. “It’s none of your business, okay? Let’s just say I was in the neighborhood.”

Oliver said nothing. That meant that either Jason had tried to get out of Morganville and managed to get himself caught, by Oliver—or he’d been on Oliver’s business errands. Either way, there was some kind of relationship there that Claire was sure hadn’t been in force a month ago. In fact, Oliver had been pretty definitely on the “Let’s execute the jerk” team. So why was Jason suddenly part of his crew—and a trusted part, if Jason had gotten some kind of permission to leave Morganville?

Claire figured she would probably never know. Jason was angrily not talking; Oliver was never Mr. Great Communicator even when he was in a good mood, and this wasn’t one.

He looked angry, focused, and very, very dangerous.

“Take us in,” Oliver said. “You all know what’s required. Do it. Get allies from Morley’s people if you can, by whatever means you can. Intimidate if you can’t persuade. Don’t allow yourself to be surrounded. Arm your friends, destroy your enemies, and whatever the cost, win. Are we understood? I will take care of Morley.”

Michael nodded. His face was healing faster than Claire had expected, but she guessed it wouldn’t last, not if they were going out in the daylight again. She wondered how much he could really take, before the pain and damage got too much and just overwhelmed him.

She hoped she wouldn’t have to find out.

Jason drove way too fast, gunning the engine to race-car levels, chasing dust devils down the road, and grinning like the maniac he was, from Claire’s glimpses of his expression. He looked more than ready for a fight. She’d never exactly seen him like this, and it was more than a little frightening.

Next to her, Michael was closed off, focused on controlling the pain he had to be feeling, and the worry. Oliver probably didn’t feel anything. He’d sneer at the idea of being worried.
Claire wanted to throw up, but she was determined to hang on and be as strong as she could. She rooted through the first aid box and found a couple of extra-strength pain relievers, not that they would help much. She also asked Michael, quietly, if he had any kind of weapon he could give her.

He silently dug a silver-coated stake out of his pocket and handed it to her. It had a wicked-sharp tip, enough to slice as well as stab, and it felt cold and solid in her hand as she gripped it hard enough to leave sweat prints on the shiny surface. “Last resort,” he told her. “Don’t get close enough to need it, okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed, and tried for a smile. She thought she actually managed to pull one off. “Does it hurt? Never mind; stupid question. Of course it hurts. I’m sorry.”

His pale hand, with its vivid red burns at the wrist, gripped hers tightly for a few seconds. “You’re a good person, Claire. You know that, right?”

“So are you.”

“Technically not really a person anymore, as Shane likes to remind me.”

“Shane can be an idiot.”

“But a good friend.”

“That, too.” She sighed. “We have to get them back, Michael. We have to.”

“And we will,” he said. “I promise.”

He might have said more, but just then the car’s acceleration slowed. Jason eased off the gas and said, “Okay, we’re here. Looks like about three blocks’ worth of town, if that. Maybe thirty buildings total? What’s the plan?”

“Find the bus,” Oliver said. “They won’t have gone far.”

“Why not?”

“Because Morley is a lazy sod, and he won’t want to put himself out. Look for the biggest building, and you’ll likely find the bus parked right in front of it.”

Sure enough, as Jason turned the sharp corner into town—if you could call it a town; it was more like a random collection of buildings—the bus was immediately and obviously parked right in front of what looked like a miniature version of the Morganville Courthouse—sort of Gothic, with towers and peaked roofs, and constructed of gray stone blocks. It looked about twenty years out from any kind of maintenance work; the iron fence around the place was leaning, rusted through, and the grass inside was ragged and overgrown.

The sign said BLACKE TOWNSHIP CIVIC HALL AND COURTS. In front of the entrance sat some kind of civic monument—a big, not very good greenish bronze statue of an old man wearing an antique suit, looking very self-satisfied. The plaque at his feet, visible even from the street, said HIRAM WALLACE BLACKE. Hiram hadn’t fared too well. There were dents in his bronze form, and the whole thing leaned a little to the left, as though built on unsteady ground. Another few inches, and the whole thing was going to do a faceplant of Hiram into the overgrown grass.

The bus looked deserted. The doors were wide-open. There was no sign of Morley, his people, or anybody else.

“How do you blow this screen up? Oh yeah, I see,” Jason said. “Okay, the phone is inside the building. That’s where they’ve got Eve, anyway.”

“You know what to do. Michael, when you find your friends, bring them back here if you can. If you can’t, find a defensible position and hold it, and wait for me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Find Morley,” Oliver said. “And explain to him why it is a terrible idea to make me come after him. This will be over quickly. Morley’s not a brave man, and he’ll order his people to comply. The only risk is that something could happen before I find him and ... convince him.”

The way he said that last part made Claire shiver. Oliver was capable of a lot of things, and some of them were really not very civilized. She’d seen some of it. It still woke her up at night, heart pounding.

But right now, at least he was pointed in the right direction. Kind of like a cannon.

“Go,” Oliver said. He didn’t yell it, and there wasn’t any special emphasis to it, but Claire heard the absolute flat command in the word. He flung open his door, opened Michael’s side in the back, and then he was moving toward the door, walking, not running, moving with deliberate speed, as if he had all the time in the world, and couldn’t be stopped by anything or anyone. Jason scrambled out and scurried to keep up. He forgot to open Claire’s side, but that was okay; Michael zipped around in less than two seconds, opened it, and flung Oliver’s extra coat over his head to give himself extra protection from the fierce afternoon sun. “Check the bus!” he ordered.

“Wait, where are you—”

Too late. Michael was gone, racing at an angle across the overgrown grass, heading for the leaning shadow of the building. He got there and slammed his back against the stone, bent over and shaking, and finally stripped off the coat and shattered one of the windows that led into the courthouse.

It was odd, Claire thought, that there wasn’t a single person coming out of the buildings to see what was going on.
—not even out of the Civic Hall and Courts. There wasn’t a soul anywhere in sight. Blacke couldn’t have very many people in it, but it must have at least a hundred or so.

They couldn’t all be completely clueless, especially if Morley had been his usual obnoxious self.

Claire lurched for the bus, hobbled up the steps, and found the whole thing deserted. None of the prisoners were still in their seats, and the floor was littered with cut plastic ties in the back.

She left the bus at a limping run, crossed to the broken window—Michael hadn’t waited—and groaned when she realized it was almost head-high for her. With no time to complain about it, she jumped, grabbed the sill, and ignored the cuts she got from the broken glass. Michael had swept away most of it; what was left was irritating, that was all. Her arms trembled with the strain, but she managed to lift herself up, get the toes of her right foot into one of the cracks in the stone, and boost up onto the window’s broad ledge. From there it was easy enough to swing her legs in, but it was a longer drop to the floor than she’d thought, and she hit too hard. Her left ankle let out a fiery burst of pain, and she paused to brace herself against the cold stone wall, panting and waiting for the agony to subside.

She was in some kind of office, but it hadn’t been used in recent years; the desks looked like something left over from the turn of the century, but these weren’t antiques; they were junk. The wood was rotten, drawers were cracked and hanging loose, and in some cases the legs had actually broken off.

She surprised a mouse in one of the broken drawers, and nearly screamed as it zipped across the dirty floor in her path. Deep breaths. Come on, keep it together; they need you. Shane needs you.

Claire pulled the heavy silver-coated stake out of her pocket and held it in her left hand as she opened the door with her right, ready to attack if she had to ... but the hallway was empty.

She could hear running footsteps, though. Noise upstairs. That didn’t mean there weren’t bad guys down here, however. Thanks to a thorough education in Morganville—Survival 101—she always assumed there were bad guys around every corner.

There was a lot of chaos going on upstairs—furniture crashing, thumping, running feet. People yelled—Claire tried not to think of it as screaming—and it sounded like that might be where Oliver had chosen to go after Morley.

But where was Michael?

Claire opened another door and found an office, with a desk and a computer and an old cup of molding coffee sitting on top of some papers. Nobody there. She tried the next door—same result, only no coffee.

In the third one, she found a woman slumped in the corner. She was unconscious, not dead, thankfully, as Claire discovered on checking her pulse, which proved to be strong. Claire moved the woman into a more comfortable position, rolled over on her side; recovery position, it was called. Shane had taught it to her—he was good at first aid.

The woman was older, kind of heavy, and she looked tired and pale.

Pale.

Claire checked her neck on both sides, but found nothing. Then she checked the woman’s wrists and found a slowly bleeding wound, and not a neat one, either. Claire shuddered, breathed in a few times to steady herself, and then looked around for something to use to tie up the wound. There was a scarf on the woman’s desk; Claire carefully wrapped it around her wrist and tied it tight, and checked the woman again. She was still unconscious, but didn’t seem to be in any trouble.

“It’ll be okay,” Claire promised, and went on. The thing that was worrying her now was that while she certainly wouldn’t put it past Morley and his crew to be snacking on random people, this hadn’t just happened. The blood streaking the woman’s hand had been mostly dried and flaking off, the wound had been half healed, and Morley’s party bus had only just arrived in town.

That didn’t sound right at all.

Out in the hall, the fight was still going on upstairs, and as Claire carefully edged toward the stairs, trying to get a look, there was a sudden thump-rattle-crash, and a body came flying into view, hit the wall, and tumbled down the big, scarred wooden steps to sprawl at her feet.

It was a vampire.

It was not one of Morley’s vampires. She’d gotten a look at every one of them on the bus, and they’d all been typical Morganville folks. None of them had looked Shane’s age, or been wearing a bloodstained, tattered old football jersey that smelled like dead feet even from twenty yards away.

This was not a Morganville vampire.

This was something else.

And it rolled up, bared terrifying lengths of fangs, and came after her with a roar full of fury, hunger, and delight.
Claire yelped, backed up, and got the stake level just in time to bury it in his chest. His momentum drove him onto the silver-coated wood, and pushed her into the wall behind her with a bruising slam. Her head hit the bricks, and she felt a hot yellow burst of pain, but she was more concerned by his bloody red eyes, crazy with rage, and those sharp, sharp fangs....

Then he slumped against her; she shoved, and he toppled off her and down to the floor with a crash, hands thumping out to either side. Man, he really _stank_, as if he hadn’t bathed or washed his clothes in a year. And he smelled like old blood, which was sick.

His eyes were open, staring at the ceiling, but Claire knew he wasn’t dead—not yet. The silver in the stake was hurting him, and the stake itself was keeping him immobilized for now. Whether or not the silver would kill him was a question of how old he was, but somehow she didn’t think he was one of the ancient ones, like Amelie and Oliver and Morley. He was more like some bully who’d turned vamp a few years back, if that.

The silver was burning him. She saw black around the wound now.

_He tried to kill me._ She swallowed hard, her hand tentatively touching the stake, then dropping away.

Except she really needed that stake. Without it, she was unarmed. And she knew—because Michael had told her—that getting staked was painful. Getting staked with _silver_ was agony.

Claire reached for the stake to pull it out. She’d just grabbed hold when a voice behind her said, in a rich, rolling English accent, “You don’t want to be doing that.”

Morley. He must have come down the stairs while she was otherwise occupied. He was bloody, clothes ripped even worse than they had been before, and he had open scratches across his pale face that were healing even as Claire turned to stare at him.

She tightened her grip on the stake and yanked it free as she rose out of her crouch, turning to fully face him.

Morley sighed. “Do any of you fools actually ever _listen?_ I said _don’t_ do that!”

“He’s hurt,” Claire said. “He’s not getting up any time soon.”

“Wrong,” Morley said. “He’s not getting up at all. But then, he doesn’t really have to.”

She felt something cold brush her aching ankle, then wrap hard around it. The teen vamp had grabbed her and was pulling himself toward her.

Morley reached out, grabbed the stake from her hand, and stabbed the vampire again, with easily three times the strength Claire had used. She heard the crunch as the stake pushed through bones and into the wooden floor beneath. The boy, no older than Shane, went limp again. His skin started to smolder from the silver.

“You can’t—,” she began, and Morley turned on her, his face hard.

“It might have dawned on you by now that I _can_,” he snapped. “It might also have occurred to you that this boy is not one of my little flock. Doesn’t that make you at all alarmed, Claire?”

“I—”

“It should,” he said, “because apart from those vampires gathered in Morganville, there shouldn’t be more. Amelie, whatever you think of her, is a thorough sort. Those who didn’t agree to participate in her social experiment in Morganville were put down. There are no vampires still walking that I don’t know.” He nudged the boy with one worn boot. “But I don’t know him, or his pack of jackals who just ate my supplies!”

“Pack?” Claire looked up, startled, at another thump and crash from upstairs. Morley ignored her and dashed for the stairs, racing in a blur. There was screaming up there. “Hey, wait! Ate your— _supplies_—you don’t mean—”

Morley got to the top of the stairs and disappeared before she could manage another word. “My friends?” she finished lamely, and then blinked, because two seconds after Morley had crossed out of sight, Michael emerged from the shadows up there, with Shane beside him.

Michael was carrying Eve, who still seemed unconscious. They came down the stairs fast, and Claire didn’t like the tense worry she saw on Michael’s face—or on Shane’s.

“We have to go,” Michael said. “Now. Right now.”

“What about Oliver? And Jason?”

“No time,” Michael said. “Move it, Claire.”

“My stake—”

“I’ll make you a shiny new one,” Shane promised. He sounded short of breath, and he grabbed her hand and towed her at a fast limp after Michael, who was heading down the hall for the broken window where they’d entered.

“You all right?”
“Sure,” she said, and controlled a wince as she came down wrong, again, on her ankle. But in the great scheme of things, yeah, she was all right—more all right than the people upstairs, from what Morley had said. “What is going on up there?”

“Morley’s having a very bad day,” Michael said. “Tell you later. Right now, we need to get out of here before—”

“Too late,” Shane said, in a flat, quiet voice, and the four of them stopped in the middle of the hall as two vampires glided out of the shadows at either end, blocking them in. One was a shuffling, twisted old man with crazy eyes and drifting white hair. The other was a young man, wearing a football jersey—teammate of the vamp Claire had already staked, she guessed. This one was broader than Shane, and taller. Like the old man, he looked ... weird; crazy, even for a vampire.

“Give,” the old man said in a rusty, strange voice. “Give.”

“Holy crap, that’s creepy,” Shane said. “Okay, plans? Anybody?”

“In here.” Michael slammed his foot against the door on the opposite side of the hall and blew it back on the hinges with a splintering crash. Shane hustled Claire ahead of him into the room, and Michael jumped in after, slamming the door in the faces of the two vampires and shoving his back against it. “Barricade!”

“On it!” Shane said, and nodded for Claire to grab the other end of a heavy wooden desk, which they slid across the floor to block the door as Michael, with Eve in his arms, jumped effortlessly up onto the desk’s top and then lightly down as it slid past. “Think that’ll hold?”

“Hell no,” Michael said. “Did you see that guy?” Eve stirred in his arms, murmuring, and he looked down at her, his face going still with concern. As she restlessly turned her head, Claire saw a matted spot in her hair—blood, almost invisible against the black.

“What happened?” Claire blurted.

“She got on Morley’s bad side,” Shane said. “He backhanded her into a wall. She hit her head on the corner. I thought—” He went quiet for a second. “Scared the shit out of me. But she’s okay, right?”

“I don’t know,” Michael said.

“Well, use your superpowers or something!”

“I’m a vampire, idiot. I don’t have X-ray vision.”

“Some supernatural monster you are,” Shane said. “Remind me to trade you in for a werewolf, bro. Probably be more useful right now.”

Claire ignored the two of them and moved to the other side of the room. There was a window, but as she unlocked it and threw up the sash—which didn’t want to move, and was caked with dust and old, dead bugs—she discovered that the grime had disguised a thick set of iron bars on the other side. “Michael,” she said, “can you break these?”

“Maybe. Here.” Michael handed Eve over to Shane, who balanced her with a lot more difficulty. He looked at the bars, which were in full, blazing sunlight. “That—could be a problem.”

He was still wearing his leather coat, but his gloves were ripped—it looked as if somebody had shredded them with claws. Pale strips of skin showed through on the backs of his hands.

Shane, who was leaning against the desk that blocked the door, was almost knocked over as the vampires on the other side slammed into the barrier, sliding the desk nearly a foot before Shane dug in his feet and shoved back. The desk slid toward the door, inch by slow inch, until he’d jammed it hard against the old vampire’s grabbing hands caught in the doorway. “Decide quick!” he yelled. “We’re running out of time!”

Michael took a deep breath, grabbed one of the ancient, dusty drapes on the side of the window, and yanked it down. He wrapped it over both hands, then grabbed the bars. Even then, the sleeves on his coat rode up, and Claire saw the strips of reddened skin, already burned from before, start to smoke and turn black. Michael shook with effort, but the sun was too much for him. He let go of the bars and stumbled backward, panting, eyes gone red and wild. “Dammit!” he yelled, and tried kicking the bars. That worked better; his booted feet and jeans protected him better, and the first kick landed solidly, bending the bars and rattling the bolts.

He didn’t have time for another one, because the vampires on the other side of the door hit it again, sliding the desk halfway into the room and sending Shane stumbling into Claire. Michael whirled in time to face the first vamp in, which was the younger one in the ragged football jersey.

Michael was fast, but his multiple exposures to the sun had slowed him down, and the other vamp hit first and hard in a blocking tackle, and Michael was thrown all the way into the back wall. He shook it off and rolled back to his feet just as the bloodsucking jock reached out for Claire.

Michael wrapped a fist in the back of the boy’s jersey and yanked him off his feet, throwing him down with a bang flat on his back. He planted a knee on the guy’s chest, holding him down, but that wasn’t a permanent solution, and as Claire watched, the other vampire, the twisted old man, shuffled into the room, grinning with one side of his mouth. He looked even more dead than most vampires, and there was something familiar about the disorganized
way he was moving, something—

She didn’t have time to think about it, because the old man jumped at them like some creepy hunting spider, hands outstretched and hooked into claws. Shane dived one way, burdened by Eve; Claire dived the other. That put Shane and Eve closer to the door, and with a tormented look back, Shane ducked out.

“Claire, go!” Michael said. “Run!”

“I can’t run,” she said, very reasonably. Hobbling wasn’t really an option; either one of these vamps could take her down in seconds. One slow, sliding step at a time, she backed away from the approaching old vampire, heading for the window.

He didn’t seem to get her plan until he’d followed her into the sunlight and begun to burn. Even then, it seemed to take a few seconds to really sink in that he was in trouble. He kept coming in that awkward crab walk even as his clay white skin turned pink, then red, then began to smoke.

Then, finally, he howled and ducked away into the shadows.

Claire, pressed up against the windowsill and bathed by the hot sun, breathed a sigh of relief. Briefly.

“Smart,” Michael said. He stayed where he was, holding Vamp Boy down, and watching the older vampire shuffle around and stalk Claire. “Stay where you are. He may try to grab you and pull you out of the sun. If I let this one go—”

“I know,” Claire said. “I’ve got it.” She didn’t, really, but what choice did she have? She looked around frantically for something, anything, to use, and blinked. “Can you throw that over here?” she asked, and pointed. Michael looked around and picked up something off the floor, frowning.

“This?”

“Throw it!”

He did, and Claire snatched it out of the air just as the older vampire made his run at her, howling.

Claire buried the pencil in his chest. She got lucky, sliding it between his ribs just as Myrnin had taught her to do in his occasional, completely random self-defense classes, and the older vamp’s eyes went wide and he fell at her feet, in the sun. Claire rolled him out of the way, but she left the pencil in his chest.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Michael said, and shook his head. “That is just embarrassing.”

“Have you noticed something about them?” Claire asked, shaking now that the surge of adrenaline was passing. The vampire Michael was leaning on swiped at him, but Michael easily avoided the blow.

“These guys? They’re not too smart.”

“They’re sick,” she said. “I recognize the way the older one moved. Notice that they’re not really talking? They can’t. They’ve been broken down to basic levels. Hunt and kill. Like the worst-off vampires in Morganville when I got there.”

Michael clearly hadn’t thought of that. His whole body language changed, and for a second Claire thought he was going to get up and move away from the other vampire, but sense won out over fear, and he stayed put. Michael had never gotten sick from the disease the rest of the vampires had carried; as the youngest, he’d never had the chance. But he’d seen what it had done to some of the others in Morganville. He’d seen the creatures they’d become, confined for their own protection in cells in an isolated prison.

“It’s okay,” she said. “You’ve had the shot, Michael. I don’t think you can get it now.”

She hoped that was true, anyway. If this was some new strain of the disease, then that was worse. Lots worse, especially if—as she suspected, from the condition of these two vamps, and the one she’d staked in the hall—they were actually getting sicker a lot faster than the typical Morganville vampire had.

Shane came pelting into the room, almost tripped over the pencil-staked vampire, and looked around, lost. “Uh—what happened?”

“Where’s Eve?”

“I left her next door,” he said. “She’s okay.”

“You left her?” Michael snapped. “Oh, you’d better tell me you didn’t just say that.”

“She’s fine, Mike. She’s awake, kind of. I left her with a letter opener, hiding under a desk. She’s safer than any of us right now.” Shane looked down at the staked vamp at his feet. “Claire?”

“Yes?”

“You staked a vampire with a number two pencil.”

“I didn’t actually check the number.”

“Have I told you lately how freaking awesome you are?”

She tried to smile, but her heart was fluttering in her chest now, and not in a good way. “Compliments later. We really need to get out of here and get to the car. Any ideas?”

“Find another pencil and I’ll pin this one down, too,” Michael said.

“You know how weird that sounds, right?” Shane said. “Right, never mind. Number two pencil, coming up. Why
do I feel like we’re taking a test?”

“Claire.” Michael looked past Shane, at her. “Go to Eve. Make sure she’s okay.”

Claire nodded and hobbled out the door, across the hall. The door was shut but not locked, and she pushed it open ...

Only to have to duck an awkward lunge from Eve, who was standing up, clinging to a chair and holding a glittering silver letter opener in one deathly tight-gripped hand. Eve yelped and opened her fingers to drop the knife when she saw what she’d almost done, and fell into Claire’s arms with a sob of relief. “You’re okay, you’re okay,” Eve whispered, and hugged her with feverish, shaking strength. “God, so sorry. I thought you were one of the creeps.”

“No today,” Claire said, and winced at the blood trickling down the side of Eve’s face. “That must hurt.”

“No so much now.” Eve’s eyes looked kind of vague and unfocused, but she was staying on her feet. That had to be a good sign. “I thought—I thought I saw Michael. But then Shane was here, and—”

“Michael’s here,” Claire said. “He was carrying you, but he had to fight. He’s coming, Eve. I told you he would.”

Eve squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, breathing deep. “Okay,” she said then, and her voice sounded stronger. “Okay. We’ll be okay.”

From the other room, Claire heard the sound of metal bending, and then a loud clang. “Yo!” It was Shane’s voice, ringing off stone and wood. “Girls, the party’s over. We are leaving!”

“Come on,” Claire said, and put her arm under Eve’s shoulders to keep her upright. “Time to go.”

“Where’s Jason?” Eve almost sounded in focus now, and on just the wrong topic. “We have to find him!”

“He’s with Oliver,” Claire said. “We’ll find him. First, we have to make sure we stay alive, okay? Very important.”

The two of them staggered across the hall into the room where two vampires were lying on the floor, pinned by pencils, and Michael and Shane were standing at the window. The bars were broken out. Michael was sensibly off to the side, away from the sun, and he’d draped one of the thick, dusty curtains over his shoulders.

But neither he nor Shane was moving.

“What?” Claire asked, and as she came to the window and looked out, she realized what the problem was. The police car was on fire.

And so was the bus, with big, crackling, very public flames.

And nobody, nobody had come out to gawk. No police had come running. Not even the volunteer fire department.

Blacke was a dead town—literally.

“We are screwed,” Shane said, very matter-of-factly. “Plan B?”

“There isn’t one,” Michael said.

“You know, I kind of saw that one coming,” Eve said. “Even with a concussion.”

They stood there for a moment, watching the car and bus burn, and for a few seconds nobody said anything. Then Michael said, “Morley didn’t do that. Morley isn’t that stupid.”

“It damn sure wasn’t Oliver,” Shane added. “So what the hell is going on around here?”

“You should tell us. You were riding with Morley; we just got here.”

“Yeah, funny thing, getting tied up and hustled around by hungry vampires made me not notice the little things. All I know is that we got into the building, Morley was making some speech, and next thing I knew, one of Morley’s crew was yelling that we were being attacked. I grabbed Eve and tried to get her under cover, but she got clocked by Morley when she got between him and some guy he was fighting. She hit her head.” Shane paused and glanced at Michael. “What’s your excuse?”

“I lost track a while ago,” Michael said. “Right about the time Oliver detoured us into Crazytown for no good reason. Unless this is what he was looking for all along.”

“What, a town full of sick vampires?” When Claire said it, suddenly it made sense. “He was. He knew they were here. Somewhere, anyway. He was looking for them!”

“He thought they were in Durram,” Michael agreed. “That’s why he went off in the middle of the night searching. But if they ever were there, they moved on, to here. Smaller town. Easier to control, before they got too sick to care.”

“But these dudes are not exactly historical,” Shane said, and nodded toward the kid in the football jersey. “That’s not some vintage outfit he’s wearing; he can’t have been vamped more than a few months ago, a year at the most. So how did he—”

“Bishop!” Claire interrupted. “Bishop was looking for Amelie. And he was making new vampires all the time, just making them and leaving them.” She shuddered. “He must have come through here, or someplace close.”
Bishop was Amelie’s father—both physically, and in a vampire sense, apparently. And in neither sense was he going to win a Father of the Year award. Or get a humanitarian plaque, either. He’d snacked on necks, and this was what he’d left behind him.

Scary, and disgusting.

“If Oliver was looking for them, he must have some kind of plan,” Eve said. She was leaning against the wall now, holding one hand to her must-be-aching head, and she still looked kind of vague and unfocused. “Find him. He’ll know what to do.”

“He might have had a plan, but that was before Morley and his merry bunch of idiots crashed into it,” Shane said. “Now we’re in the middle of a three-sided vampire war. Which would be an awesome video game, but I’m really not interested in playing for real. I like my reset buttons.”

“Then we have to find another car,” Michael said. “One that runs.”

“No, man, I have to find another car,” Shane said. “And black out the windows. And get it back here so you don’t combust strolling around town shopping for one. So here’s an idea: You take care of the girls; I’ll get the wheels.”

“Did you just tell me to stay with the girls?” Michael said, and grinned. Shane did, too.

“Yeah,” he said. “In your face, man. How does it feel?”

They tapped fists. Eve sighed. “You are both morons and we’re all going to die, and my head hurts like crazy,” she said. “Can we please just get out of here? Please?”

Michael went to her and put his arms around her, and Claire heard her let out a little, sad sob as she melted against him. “Shhh,” he whispered. “It’s okay, baby.”

“So not,” Eve said, but she’d lost her edge. “And where the hell were you while I was getting dragged along on the party bus, nearly getting fanged?”


“Oh yeah,” Eve said. “But I was unconscious for all that part, so I couldn’t really appreciate how brave you were. This is all right, though. Being with you.”

Shane exchanged a look with Claire, made a gagging sound, and got her to laugh. Then he took her hand, held it for a second, then lifted it to his lips. His mouth felt so warm, so soft, that she felt every muscle in her body shiver at the touch. His thumb brushed over the claddagh ring, their secret little promise.

“Wait for me,” he said. “Any requests on the kind of car?”

“Something with armor?” she said. “Oooh, and headrest DVD. Bonus for surround sound.”

“Rocket launchers,” Michael said.

“One hot yellow Hummer with optional mass destruction package, coming up.” Shane squeezed her fingers lightly, one more time, then ducked out the window. Claire watched him drop to the grass, roll to his feet, and take off at an angle through the afternoon glare.

The glare, she realized, was at a lower level than before.

It was late afternoon, and the sun was heading west, fast.

“Nightfall,” she said. Michael stepped up near her, out of range of the sun still flooding the window. “We don’t have too long before it gets dark, right?”

“Right,” he said. “But if we stay here in this building, I think we’re going to have even less time. There are a lot of these... other vampires. And they’re not exactly shy.”

He grabbed the two fallen vampires and dragged them out into the hallway, where he dumped them next to the one still decorated with Claire’s silver stake—that one was definitely dead now, burned by the silver. She tried not to look too closely.

Michael barricaded the doors again and sat Eve down in a somewhat-secure chair, in the corner. “Stay,” he told her. “Rest.” He ripped down the other half of the dusty, thick curtain and wrapped it around Eve; one of those cute romantic gestures that was a little spoiled by her bout of uncontrollable sneezing as a gray cloud floated up around her face.

Claire stayed by the window, staring out. Not that it would help; even if she saw Shane, even if she saw he needed help, what was she going to do? Nothing, because she was human, slow, and had a torn-up ankle on top of all that.

But somehow, it was important that she stand there and watch for him, as though it were some agreement they’d made, and if she didn’t keep it, something bad would happen.

Superstition. Well, I’m standing in some kind of pseudo-Gothic castle thingy with a bunch of vampires fighting in the halls. Maybe superstition just makes sense.

“Did you see Jason?” Eve was asking Michael. “Was he okay?”

Michael acted as if he didn’t hear her. He came to join Claire at the window, although just to the dark side of the sunlight. “Anything?”

“Nothing yet,” she said. “Did you see him? Jason?”
“Not really.”
“That’s not really an answer, is it?”

Michael shot her a look. Whatever he was about to say was interrupted by a thump from overhead—a hard one, followed by what sounded like scratching. Lots of scratching, like very sharp claws. Maybe knives.

Like something was digging down through the floor-boards from the second floor.

“Okay, that’s not a good sound,” Eve said. “Michael?”

He was standing very still, staring upward, his face marble white in the shadows.

Dust filtered down from the ceiling. Pieces of old plaster rained down in flakes, like snow. Claire backed away from the window, away from that sound—all the way back to the heavy desk blocking the door leading into the room.

Suddenly the door shoved against her, as someone outside the room hit the door with a shocking crash and howled. More scraping, this time at the wooden door. Michael lunged forward and slammed the desk back in place and held it there as the door shook under the force of the battering. “Dammit,” he hissed. “Where is he?”

Overhead, something snapped with a dry crack—boards, being broken and peeled away, ripped free, and tossed aside.

They were digging through.

Eve stood up, bracing herself on the wall, and kicked loose the leg of a rickety smaller table lying near her chair. It broke loose with a splintered end, not as sharp as a spear, but not as blunt as a club, either. She gripped it in both hands, dividing her attention between the ceiling, which was now snowing plaster like a blizzard, and Michael, who was struggling to hold the desk in place as a barricade at the door.

“We’re going to die here,” Claire thought. It came to her with terrifying clarity, as if she’d already seen the future through an open window in time. Eve would be lying there, her eyes wide and empty, and Michael would die trying to protect her. Her own body would be a small, broken mess near the window, where Shane would find it....

No.

The thought of Shane’s finding her, more than just the dying itself, made Claire refuse to accept it. He’d seen enough; suffered enough. Adding this on top of it—no. She wouldn’t do it to him.

“We have to live,” she said out loud. It sounded half crazy. Michael glanced at her, and Eve outright stared.

“Well, duh,” Eve said. “And I’m the one who got clocked today.”

The ceiling gave way with a low groan of wood and a flood of plaster and debris, and three bodies, covered in blood where they weren’t white with plaster dust, dropped through the opening. They looked like monsters, and as the taller one turned to Claire and she caught the glint of fangs, she screamed.

The scream lasted for about a heartbeat, and then recognition flooded in—and relief. “Oliver?” Great. She was relieved to see Oliver. The world was officially topsy-turvy, cats were living with dogs, and life as she knew it was probably over.

Oliver looked ... well, like a monster—like a monster who’d fought his way out of hell, inch by inch, actually, and, weirdly, loved every minute of it. He grinned at Claire, all wickedly pointy fangs, and whirled toward Eve as she lunged at him with the business end of her broken stick. He took it away from her with contemptuous ease and shoved her into Michael, who had checked himself before attacking, but was clearly just as stunned as Claire felt.

“Are you all right, soldiers,” Oliver said, and it was almost a laugh. Next to him, Morley slapped white dust from his clothes, raising a choking cloud that made Claire’s eyes water as she coughed. “I think we’re still allies. At least for now.”

“Like Russia and England during the Second World War,” Morley agreed, then looked thoughtful. “Or was that the first? So difficult to remember these things. In any case, enemies with a common worse foe. We can kill each other later.”

The third person in the group was Jason, who looked just as bad as the other two, and not nearly as fine with it. He was shaking, visibly shaking, and there were rough bandages wrapped around his left wrist and hand that were soaked through with blood.

Eve finally, belatedly, recognized her brother, and reached out to grab him into a hug. Jason stayed frozen for a moment, then patted her on the back, awkwardly. “I’m okay,” he said. That was a lie, Claire thought, but a brave one. “You’ve got blood on your face.”

“Hit my head,” Eve said.

“Oh, so, no damage, then,” Jason said, which was such a brother thing to say that Claire smiled. “Seriously, that looks bad, Eve.”

“No broken bones. My head hurts, and I feel dizzy. I’ll live. What the hell happened to you?”

“Don’t ask,” Jason said, and stepped away. “Need some help, man?”

Michael had grabbed hold of the desk and shoved it back against the door again, and he was now struggling to
keep it in place. “Sure,” he said. Not that Jason’s muscle power was going to work any miracles, Claire thought; he was stringy and strong, but not vamp-strong.

“Let them in,” Morley said, and finished redistributing dust from his clothes to the rest of them with a final slap. “It’s my people. Unless you don’t trust us?”

“Now, why wouldn’t we?” Eve said sweetly, and turned to Michael. “Don’t you dare!”

“You’d rather leave them out there to be torn apart?” Morley asked, without any particular emphasis, as though it didn’t really matter to him one way or the other. “I would have thought someone with so much compassion would be less judgmental.”

“Excuse me, but **you tied us to seats. And put needles in our arms. And drank our blood.** So no, I’m not really seeing any reason to get all trusty with you!”

Morley shrugged. “Then let them die. I’m sure you’ll have no problem listening to their screams.”

Someone was, in fact, shouting on the other side of the door now, not so much battering on it as knocking.

“Michael! Michael, it’s Jacob Goldman! Open the door! They’re coming!”

Michael exchanged a quick look with Claire, then Eve, then Oliver. Oliver nodded briskly.

Michael grabbed the desk and pulled it backward, nearly knocking Jason to the ground in the process. “Hey!”

Jason protested. “A little warning next time, man!”

“Shut up.” Michael shoved him back as the door pushed open from the outside, and vampires started flooding into the room.

Morley’s people. They, like Morley, hadn’t come through this unharmed; every one of them, including Jacob and Patience Goldman, looked as if they’d fought for their lives. A few were wounded, and Claire knew from experience that it took a lot to hurt a vampire, even temporarily.

Jacob was cradling his right arm, which was covered in blood. Patience was supporting him from the other side. Even Eve looked a little concerned at the sight of his ice-white face and blind-looking eyes. He seemed to be in serious pain.

Patience settled him against the wall and crouched next to him as Morley and Oliver, with Michael’s help, engineered some kind of barrier for the door when the last of Morley’s people were crammed into the small room.

There weren’t nearly so many as before.

“What happened?” Claire asked Patience. The vampire girl looked up at her, and there was a shadow of fear in her face that turned Claire cold inside.

“They wouldn’t stop,” Patience said. “They came for our prisoners. They wouldn’t—we couldn’t make them stop. Even when we destroyed one, two came out of the shadows. It was—we couldn’t **stop** them.” She looked down at Jacob, who had closed his eyes. He looked dead—more dead than most vamps. “Jacob almost had his arm torn off trying to protect them. But we couldn’t help.”

She sounded shocked, and deeply distressed. Claire put a hand on her shoulder, and Patience shuddered.

“You’re okay,” Claire said. “We’re okay.”

“No, we’re not,” she said. “Not at all. These are not vampires, Claire. They are animals—vicious beasts. And we—we are just as much prey for them as you are.”

“Right,” Morley said, raising his voice over the rising babble of conversation. “Everybody, shut it! Now, we can’t stay here—”

“The bus is burning,” someone said from near the window. Morley seemed to pause, obviously not expecting that, but he moved past it at light speed.

“Then we don’t use the bus, clot-for-brains. We find another way out of this accursed graveyard of a town.”

“In the sunlight?” Jacob asked. His voice was soft and thready with pain. “Not all of us will survive for long, and those who do will suffer. You know that.”

“Your choice—go and burn; stay and be torn apart.” Morley shrugged. “For my part, burns heal. I’m not sure that my disconnected pieces would, and I’d prefer not to find out.”

“Something’s coming,” a voice called from the window. “A truck. A delivery van!”

Claire shoved through the crowd of vampires, ignoring the cold touch of skin and the hisses of annoyance, and managed to get a clear space right in front of the window, where a solid couple of feet were still bathed in sunlight. Eve had already claimed it, but she let Claire squeeze in beside her.

The van was a big yellow thing, some kind of bread truck, with a boxy, windowless back. As Claire watched, it jumped the curb and bounced up onto the lawn, charged forward, and knocked down the leaning iron fence around the Civic Hall. It missed the statue of what’s-his-name, the town’s patron saint, but the vibrations caused the whole thing to wobble uncertainly, and as Claire watched, it toppled over that last couple of inches, and gravity took over, slamming the smug statue’s face into the grass once and for all.

Thankfully, not in the way of the van.
The van reversed, turned, and then backed up fast toward the window. It stopped a few feet away, and Shane hopped down from the driver’s side. He ran to the window and grinned at Eve and Claire.

His grin faded fast as his eyes adjusted to the shadows, and he saw all the vampires in the room. “What—”

“Morley’s people,” Claire said. “I guess we’re all in this together right now.”

“I’m ... not loving that.”

“I know. But we all need to get out of here.”

Shane shook his head, shaggy hair sticking in damp points to his face, but he turned and opened up the back doors of the van. Inside, there wasn’t much space, but there was enough to hold all the vamps—maybe. “I’ll take as many as can fit,” he said. “But seriously, once they’re out of here, all bets are off.”

“Agreed,” Morley said, and stepped forward into the sun. If it bothered him, it was only to make him narrow his eyes a little. He grabbed the frame of the window and, with one hard pull, ripped it right out of the stone and tossed it out into the overgrown grass. “Right, youngest first. Go, now.”

There was a hesitation, until Morley gave a low-decibel growl, and then vampires started stepping up, quickly throwing themselves out into the sunlight and moving fast to the sheltering darkness of the van. In only a few seconds it was just her, Michael, Jason, Eve, Morley, and Oliver, with Shane standing outside the window.


“I stay with my friends.”

“Then it would appear you get to tan with them, as there’s no more room in the back.”

“No,” Oliver said. “Michael goes in the back. You and I ride outside.”

Morley let out a black bark of a laugh.

“I’m sure you’re familiar with the concept.” Oliver, without even looking at him, grabbed Michael by the shoulder and almost threw him across the open space to the back of the van. Michael crashed into the small open space left and was pulled inside by Patience Goldman, who looked anxious, almost frightened. Shane slammed the back doors of the truck and ran to the front. “Right. Move it, ladies.”

Jason didn’t wait for girls first; he jumped out and went. Oliver boosted Eve up to the window, and she ran for the cab of the truck, where Jason was already climbing inside. Claire followed, avoiding any help from Oliver, and as she pulled herself up on the truck’s mounting step, she saw Oliver and Morley jump out of the building and flatten themselves on top of the truck, in full sun, arms and legs spread wide for balance. She banged the door shut behind her and squeezed in next to Eve, with Jason on the other side next to Shane.

“We couldn’t have done this boy/girl?” Shane complained, and started up the car. “Back off, freak!” That last was for Jason, who was pushing too close for Shane’s comfort, evidently. Claire tried wiggling closer to the passenger door, but the cab wasn’t made for four, no matter how relatively skinny they might be. And Shane wasn’t small.

“Just drive, smart-ass,” Jason snapped. Shane looked like he was considering hitting him. “Unless you want the two on top baked golden brown.”

“Crap,” Shane spat, and glared at the steering wheel as if it had personally offended him. He put the truck in gear, ground the gears, and got it roaring through the grass. It bumped hard over the curb, sending Claire into the dashboard, and she flailed to regain her balance as the truck slewed back and forth, got traction, and roared off down the street.

“Where the hell are you going?” Jason yelled.

“Your sister gets to talk. You don’t.”

“Fine,” Eve said. “Where the hell are you going, Shane?”

“The library,” he said. “I promised I’d bring the truck back.”

Claire blinked, looking over at him, and Eve, wide-eyed, shook her head.

“You know it’s desperate,” she said. “Shane is going to the library.”

And in spite of everything, that was actually funny.
The library was about a block down, on the left. They passed a lot of empty, blank buildings, broken windows, destruction that seemed like the aftermath of a good looting. It didn’t seem recent, though.

The library’s windows were all intact, and there were people patrolling outside it—the first living people Claire had seen in Blacke, actually. She counted four of them, armed with shotguns and crossbows.

“My kind of library,” Shane said. “What with all the weapons and everything. I tried to boost the truck, and they finally let me have it, but I had to bring it back. This looks like the place to be. At least we can find out what the hell is going on, maybe get a bus or something.”

The guards outside the library were certainly paying attention. The guys with shotguns tracked the truck as it approached, and they looked really serious about firing, too. Claire cleared her throat. “Uh, Shane—?”

“I see it,” he said. He slowed the truck to a crawl. “So, I’m guessing, Hi, we’re friendly strangers with a bunch of vampires in your bread truck probably isn’t the way to go here.” He put the truck in reverse. “Guess this wasn’t as good an idea as it looked at a distance.”

“Maybe we should—”

Whatever Eve was about to suggest became useless, because two police cruisers, carrying more armed bubbas, came screaming out of alleys on either side of the library building and blocked Shane’s exit. Shane hit the brakes. In seconds, Claire’s door was yanked open, and a huge man with a shotgun glared at her, grabbed her, and dragged her out onto the hot pavement. He pressed fingers to her throat for a second, then yelled, “Live one!”

“This one, too!” yelled his buddy, who was pulling a fighting, screaming Eve out of the cab. “Watch it, girl!”

“You watch it, you pervert! Hands!”

“Hey, leave her alone!” That was Jason, flinging himself out after Eve, looking every bit the feverish little maniac Claire remembered from the first time she’d seen him. Maybe a little cleaner. Maybe.

He must have moved too fast for the armed guard’s comfort, because he got hit in the guts with the stock of the shotgun, and collapsed to the street. Eve screamed his name, and got picked up and bodily carried into the library, along with Claire. “No!” Claire screamed, and looked back at the truck. Shane was getting wrestled out of the driver’s side, and Jason was being dragged to his feet.

This was not going well. And where the hell were Oliver and Morley? They weren’t on top of the van anymore....

Oliver dropped from the overhanging roof of the library and drop-kicked the bubba holding Claire. He shoved Claire out of the way as the one holding Eve aimed a crossbow and fired; Oliver snatched the arrow right out of the air and snapped the thick shaft with a twist of his fingers, grinning. “Let the girl go,” he said. “I’ve played this game with many better than you. And they all died, friend.”

He was looking pink from exposure to the sun, but not burned. Not yet. Uncomfortable, maybe. The guard’s eyes darted around, looking for support, and found it in the form of two more cowboy-hatted men racing to the rescue.

With shotguns.

Claire threw herself forward, throwing her arms wide. Eve let out a warning cry, but Claire stepped in front of Oliver as the shotguns came up. “Wait!” she yelled. “Just wait a second! He’s with us!”

The shotguns focused on her.

Oh, crap.

“You’re running with the bloodsuckers?” one of them said in a soft, dangerous voice. “Little girl like you?”

“He’s not like—like those things at the courthouse,” she said. She put her hands up in the surrender position and took a step toward them. “We’re not supposed to be here. We just want to leave, okay? All of us. We want out of town.”

“Well, you ain’t leaving town,” the guy holding Eve said. “You or any of your fanged little friends. We’re not letting this thing spread any farther. Blacke is under quarantine.”

The heavy library doors opened, and a small, gray-haired woman stepped out. She didn’t look much like a leader—Claire wouldn’t have picked her out of a crowd at first glance—but immediately, everybody looked toward her, and Claire felt the gravity of the scene shift in her direction.

“Charley?” the woman asked. “Why are you pointing a shotgun at this pretty little girl? I heard somebody say she was a live one.”

“She’s with them!”

“There are no collaborators, Charley. You know that. Either she’s infected, or she’s not. There’s no in-between. Now lower your gun, please.” The woman’s pleasant voice took on a steely undertone. “Lower it. Now.”

“That one behind her, he’s infected,” Charley said. “Guaranteed.”
“Actually,” Oliver said, “in the sense you mean it, I’m not infected. Not in the way you’re thinking.”

The older woman, without so much as a pause, un-slung a strap from her shoulder, loaded a crossbow bolt, and fired it right into Oliver’s chest.

He toppled over and hit the ground with a heavy thud. Claire screamed and ran to his side. When she reached for the bolt to pull it out, the woman grabbed her arm and pulled her back, struggling. She shoved Claire at one of her guards, who held her securely. “You know what to do,” she said to another one of them, nodding toward Oliver. “Let’s get these kids inside. I don’t want them to see this.”

“No, you don’t understand!” Claire shouted. “You can’t—"

“I understand that he’s a vampire, and for whatever twisted reason, you want to protect him,” the woman said. “Now be quiet. You’re not in any danger here.”

Claire thought about all the vampires locked in the back of the truck. Michael.

She couldn’t tell them about that. If they were going to kill Oliver, just like that, she couldn’t imagine what they might do to a whole, confined load of vampires. It’d probably be way too easy. The sun was sliding steadily toward the horizon. Maybe, when it was blocked by the eastern buildings and there was enough shadow, they could get out of the truck and scatter.

The woman looked at her sharply. “You seem to be thinking very hard,” she said. “About what?”

“Nothing,” Claire said.

“I see. What’s your name?” When Claire didn’t answer, the woman sighed. “All right. I’m Mrs. Grant. I’m the librarian. I’m what passes for authority in Blacke these days, since all our peace officers and elected officials are dead. Now, let’s be friendly. I’ve told you my name. What’s yours?”

“Claire,” she said.

“And where are you from, Claire?”

Claire looked her right in the eyes and said, “None of your business.”

Mrs. Grant’s graying eyebrows hitched up, but under them, her faded green eyes didn’t seem surprised. “All right. Let’s get you and your friends inside, and you can tell me why you thought that vampire was someone you ought to be caring about.”

Claire looked back over her shoulder as she was pushed/pulled along. Oliver was being carried away, limp as a bag of laundry.

And there was nothing she could do about it.

The inside of the library was cool and dark, lit mostly by the natural sunlight trickling in the windows, although there were some camp-style fluorescent and LED lanterns scattered around, and even some old-fashioned oil lamps on the tables. The Blacke library was larger than Claire would have expected, with rows and rows of books, and lots of rooms off to the sides. In the middle was a kind of command center, with a small desk, a laptop computer, and some kind of small pedal-powered generator. Ranked on the shelves nearby were weapons, including a pile of silver chains—jewelry, Claire guessed, ransacked from all over town. There were a lot of first aid supplies, too.

Inside the library there were about twenty or thirty people; it was hard to see, because they were scattered around on cots between the aisles of books. Claire heard a small voice, then someone crying; it sounded like a little kid, maybe four or five. “What is this?” she asked, looking around. Mrs. Grant led her over to a long reading table and pulled out a chair for her.

“This is what’s left of our town,” she said. “The survivors. We’re a tough bunch, I’ll tell you that.”

“But”—Claire licked her lips and settled into the seat—“what happened here?”

Mrs. Grant waited while the others—Eve, Shane, and Jason—were deposited in chairs around the table, with varying degrees of gentleness. Shane was furious, and he looked as if he were seriously thinking of grabbing a fistful of weapons from the racks. Mrs. Grant evidently saw that, because she pointed at two of her burly cowboy guards and had them stand behind Shane, blocking him in at the table.

“Blacke’s never been what you might call a cross-roads,” Mrs. Grant said. “Most folks living here were born here. Their families have been here forever; we don’t see new people real often out here.” That was, in fact, pretty much like Morganville, minus the attraction of Texas Prairie University. It was pretty much like every other small town in the area, too. Claire nodded. “One night, we got us some visitors. An old man in a suit, and his niece and nephew. Foreign people. French, maybe.”

Claire looked at Eve and Shane. Eve mouthed Bishop. Confirmation for what they already had guessed—Mr. Bishop had hit Blacke on his way through to Morganville.

And he’d had fun.

“They stayed at the Iron Lily Inn,” Mrs. Grant continued. “It’s the closest thing we’ve got to a hotel. Or had, anyway. Mrs. Gonzalez owned it. She made the best apple pie in the world, too.” She slowly shook her head. “Next morning, Mrs. Gonzalez was missing; never showed up at the school—she worked in the office up there. Sheriff
John went around to the hotel and found her dead. No sign of those ... people.”

That couldn’t be the whole story, Claire thought; she knew how vampires were made, and if Mrs. Gonzalez had been drained to death, she wouldn’t have come back. So she just waited. Mrs. Grant seemed to want to take her time, and Claire was trying hard not to think about what might be happening outside, with Oliver. Morley had run off, she supposed. And she had no idea what would happen to the vampires still in the back of the truck.

“We thought the murder of Mrs. Gonzalez was the end of it—shocking, first serious trouble this town had seen in close to thirty years, but still, the end. And then the next night Miss Hanover just vanished from her store—gas station, right up the street. Best we can tell, those two women were the first victims. We know the three strangers left town that night; somebody saw them driving that big, black car of theirs like a bat out of hell. Didn’t matter. They left this behind.”

Mrs. Grant looked down at her hands, which were spread out on the table in front of her. Strong and scarred, they suggested she hadn’t always been a librarian. “It started slow. People started disappearing, maybe one every few weeks. Disappearing, or dying. Then it got bad, fast, just—in days, it all of a sudden seemed like half the town was gone. Sheriff John didn’t call for help soon enough. Next thing we knew, we saw them for the first time, in force. Terrible things, Claire. Terrible things happened. And we had to do terrible things to survive.”

“Why didn’t you just—,” Eve began to ask, but was interrupted as Mrs. Grant’s head came up sharply.

“Leave?” she snapped. “Don’t you think we tried? Phones were out, landlines and cells. Internet went down with the power the first day; they ripped the power station apart while they were still thinking. We sent everybody we could out of town on the school buses. They never made it. Some kind of trap on the road, blew out all the tires. Some made it back here. Most didn’t.”

It was like some horror movie come to life. Claire had thought Morganville was bad, but this—this was beyond bad.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “But why stay here? Why don’t you just—try again?”

“You know how many people used to be in Blacke?” Mrs. Grant asked. “One hundred seventy-two. What you see here in this building is what’s left. What’s left still breathing, anyway. You think we can just walk away? These were our friends, our families. And if we leave, what happens? How far does this spread?” Mrs. Grant’s eyes hardened until they were like cold green ice. “It stops here. It has to stop here. Now, you explain to me how you’re traveling around with one of them.”

“What’s more important is that Oliver wasn’t—like those people you’re talking about. They’re sick. He’s not.”

Mrs. Grant let out a sharp laugh. “He’s dead. That’s as sick as it gets, Claire from nowhere.”

“Look,” Shane said, leaning forward and putting his elbows on the table, “I’m not saying the vampires aren’t the essence of freaky; they are. But they’re not like this. Not—normally. They can be—”

“And how do the four of you know anything at all about vampires?” Mrs. Grant asked. None of them answered, and her eyes narrowed. “There are more out there. More of them. Even if we finish here, there are more.”

“Not like these!” Claire said again, desperately. “You have to believe me; they’re not all—”

“Not all bad,” said Morley, who stepped out of the shadows of one of the racks of books, looking terrifying and bloody and as unreassuring as possible. “No, we’re not. Although some of us are no doubt better than others.”

And Oliver appeared on top of the bookcase, looking down. In his long black coat, he looked very tall, very strong, and even more intimidating than Morley. More came out of the shadows, too. Claire spotted Patience and Jacob, near the edges of the group.

And Michael, golden Michael, who smiled at Eve as though it would all be all right, somehow.

Mrs. Grant came out of her chair and lunged for the weapons.

Shane slammed his chair backward, throwing the two guards behind him off balance. That was all the time Oliver needed to jump from the bookcase to the table, then to the floor, and take the guns out of their hands.

He didn’t hurt them. He didn’t have to.

Morley did that way-too-fast vampire thing and was suddenly at the weapons rack ahead of Mrs. Grant, baring his fangs and grinning. He made a little finger-wagging gesture, and she skidded to a stop and backed off, breathing fast. Scared to death, of course, and Claire didn’t blame her.

Michael, meanwhile, was already at Eve’s side. She threw her arms around his neck. “How did you get out?” she asked, her voice muffled against his shirt. He rubbed her back gently and rested his chin against her hair.

“The building across the way casts a pretty big shadow,” he said. “We bailed as soon as we could. From there it wasn’t hard. They thought they had everybody they needed to worry about.”

“You didn’t—”

“No,” Michael said. “We didn’t hurt anybody. Patience made sure of that.”

The townspeople of Blacke—all twenty or thirty of them—were gathering together in a tight block now, with their kids safely in the center. They looked about to make their last stand. Not one of them, Claire realized, thought
they were going to live through this.

“Hey,” she said to Mrs. Grant. “Please. Don’t be afraid. We’re not going to hurt you.”

Morley laughed. “We’re not?”

“No, we’re not,” Oliver said, and piled the weapons on the table. “Shane, get the silver.”

“Can I keep some?”

Oliver smiled grimly. “If it makes you happy.”

“You have no idea.”

“Distribute the chains to everyone else. Make sure they’re wearing silver at their necks and wrists. It’ll help protect them, should some of us, Morley, suffer a lapse of character.” He checked each shotgun for shells, and tossed them to specific individual vampires, who snatched them out of the air with lazy accuracy. “Right. I’m afraid Mrs. Grant is quite right; we can’t allow this infection—and it is an infection—to spread any farther than it has already. We must hunt down and dose everyone who’s contracted the disease, or destroy them. That’s as much for our kind as yours, you see.”

“Dose them?” Mrs. Grant blurted. “What are you—”

Patience Goldman opened up a small black satchel—her father’s doctor bag, Claire realized—and inside were dozens of vials of liquid, as well as some bottles of red crystals. Claire herself had helped develop those; the liquid contained a cure for the bloodborne disease that Bishop had spread here, or at least she hoped it did. The crystals would help restore people’s sanity, temporarily. It worked best doing the crystals, then giving the shot. It had for the far-gone vampires in Morganville.

“They can be saved,” Oliver said. “Your family and friends can be restored to sanity, we believe. But they can’t be restored to human. You understand? What’s done is done on that score. But you can have them back, if you can adjust to that small difference.”

“This is insane,” one of the guards said, a little wildly. His crossbow was now in the hands of one of Morley’s vampires, a little guy with a lined, twisted face and a limp. “We have to fight! Lillian—”

“We’re not here to fight you,” Oliver said. “And we’re not here to save you. I am here to stop the spread of this infection by any means necessary, which, as I see it, aligns with your goals. My other friends,” he said, putting some irony into that last word, “are just passing through your fine town. None of us have any reason to want to harm you.”

“You’re vampires,” Mrs. Grant said blankly.

“Well, obviously. Yes.” Oliver snapped another fully loaded shotgun closed and tossed it through the air.

To Mrs. Grant.

“Any questions?” he asked.

She opened her mouth, closed it, and looked around. There were a lot of vampires—just about as many as there were humans. And none of them were making threatening moves. Shane walked around, handing out silver chairs to people, smiling his best I’m-a-nice-guy smile. Even Jason seemed to be doing his best to be non-threatening, which wasn’t exactly easy for him.

“Then let’s sit down,” Oliver said, and pulled out a chair at the table. “I, for one, have had a very hard day.”
Night fell as tensions gradually eased; the people of Blacke never quite got comfortable, but they loosened up enough to put on some stew in the library’s small kitchen, which had a miniature stove that ran on gas. Apparently, the gas was still flowing, even though the electricity was out. As the light faded outside the windows, Mrs. Grant and three of her burly cowboy-hatted guards—Claire guessed the cowboy hats were a kind of uniform—made the rounds to barricade the doors and windows.

Morley joined them, and after a long, uncomfortable moment, Mrs. Grant decided to ignore his presence. The guards didn’t. Their knuckles were white on their weapons.

“May I assist?” he asked, and put his hands behind his back. “I promise not to eat anyone.”

“Very funny,” Mrs. Grant said. Morley gave her a grave look.

“I wasn’t joking, dear lady,” he said. “I do promise. And I never make a promise I don’t intend to keep. You should feel quite secure.”

“Well, I’m sorry, I don’t,” she said. “You’re just—”

“Too overwhelmingly dashing and attractive?” Morley grinned. “A common problem women face with me. It’ll pass. You seem like the no-nonsense sort. I like that.”

Claire smiled at the look on Mrs. Grant’s face, reflected in the white LED light of the lantern she was holding. “You are really—odd,” the older woman said, as if she couldn’t quite believe she was even having the conversation. Morley put his hand over his heart and bowed from the waist, a gesture that somehow reminded Claire of Myrnin. It reminded her she missed him, too, which was just wrong. She should not be missing Morganville, or anyone in it. Especially not the crazy boss vampire who’d put fang marks in her neck that would never, ever go away. She was doomed to high-necked shirts because of him.

But she did miss him. She even missed Amelie’s dry, cool sense of power and stability. She wondered if this was a kind of vacation for Amelie, too, not worrying about Oliver, or Claire, or Eve, or any of them.

Probably. She couldn’t imagine Amelie was losing any sleep over them—presuming she slept, which Claire really wasn’t sure was the case, anyway.

“Hey.” Shane’s hip nudged her chair, and he bent over, putting his mouth very close to her ear. “What are you doing?”

“Thinking.”

“Stop.”

“Stop thinking?”

“You’re doing way too much of it. It’ll make you go blind.”

She laughed and turned her face toward his. “I think you’re thinking of something else.”

“I’m definitely thinking of something else,” he said, and bent over to kiss her. It was a long, sweet, slow kiss, full of gentle strokes of his tongue over her lips, which parted for him even though she was sure she hadn’t exactly told them to do that. Warmth swept over her, making her oddly shivery, and she grabbed the neck of his shirt when he tried to pull away and kissed her some more.

When she let go, neither of them moved far. Shane sat down in the chair next to her, but scooted it over and leaned in so they were as close together as possible. There weren’t many lights here in the corner, where Claire had retreated to eat her cup of stew and think, and it felt wildly romantic sitting together by candlelight. Shane’s skin looked golden in the glow, his eyes dark, with only a hint of shimmering amber when the light hit them just right. His chin was a little dark and rough, and she felt it with her palm, then smiled.

“You need a shave,” she said.

“I thought you liked me scruffy.”

“Scruffy is for good dogs and bad rockers.”

“Oh yeah? And which am I, again?” He was so close to her, and in this little bubble of candlelight it felt as if everything happening around them, all the craziness, all the bad things, was taking place a world away. There was something about Shane that just made it all okay, for as long as she was with him, for as long as he was looking at her with that wonderful, fascinated glow in his eyes.

He moved a little strand of hair back from her face. “Some road trip, eh?”

“I’ve had worse,” Claire said. His expression was priceless. “No, really. I have. I went on a trip with my parents all the way to Canada once. A week in the car, with my folks, having educational experiences. I thought I’d go nuts.”

“I thought you liked educational experiences.”
“Bet you could teach me a few things.”
He kissed her again, hungrily, and there was such focus in him that it took her breath away. She wanted—yeah, she knew what she wanted. She knew what he wanted, too. And she knew it wasn’t going to happen, not here, not tonight—too bad, because if she got killed before getting some privacy with Shane again, she was going to be really upset with Oliver.

Somebody coughed out in the shadows, at the edges of their candle, and Shane sat back. Claire licked her damp lips, tasting him all over again, and struggled to try to focus on something else, such as whoever was interrupting them. “What?” That came out a little harsh.

“Sorry.” That was Jason, and he didn’t sound sorry at all. He sounded kind of amused. “If you want to go on with the porn show, please. I’ll wait.”

“Shut up,” Shane growled.

“You know, we could get into this make-me-no-you-make-me kind of thing, but I think we have better things to do,” Jason said. “I’m not talking to you, anyway. I need Claire.”

She needed a lot of things, all from Shane, and she couldn’t think of a blessed thing right now that she needed from Jason Rosser. It made her voice go even colder. “Why?”

He rolled his eyes, just like his sister, which was creepy. She didn’t even like to think they came from the same gene pool, much less shared things she thought were cute and funny in Eve. “Because Oliver wants you, and what Oliver wants, Oliver gets, right? So get your sweet little butt up already.”

“Hey,” Shane said, and stood up. “I’m not telling you again, Jase. Stop.”

“What, because I said she had a sweet little butt? You don’t think she does? Hard to believe, since you spend so much time staring at it.”

Shane’s hands closed into fists, and Claire remembered Jason on the street in the dark outside Common Grounds, coming after them—after her and Eve, specifically, at least that was what he’d said to Shane.

Shane didn’t forget.

“You and me, man, one of these days, we’re going to finish this,” he said softly. “Until that day, you stay the hell away from my girl. You understand?”

“Big tough guy,” Jason said, and laughed. “Yeah, I understand. Personally, she’s too skinny for me, anyway.”

He walked off, and Claire saw a tremor go through Shane, something she figured was an impulse to slam into Jason and knock him flat, and then pound him.

But Shane didn’t move. He let out a slow breath and turned back to face her. “That guy,” he said, “is not normal; I don’t care what Eve says. And I don’t like him around you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, I know.” He forced a smile. “It’s just that—” This time, he shrugged and let it go. “Oliver, huh?”

“I guess.” Claire picked up the candle and headed through the stacks for the unofficial—or official?—command desk, where Oliver was now sitting, talking to a couple of vampires whose faces glowed blue-white in the light of the fluorescent lamp.

“About time,” Oliver said. “I need you to see if you can get a message out on this thing.” He nodded to the computer, which sat there dead and unresponsive.

“There’s no electricity.”

“They’ve been trying to use this,” he said, and pointed toward the pedal generator. “They tell me it should work, but there’s some problem with the computer. Fix it.”

“Just like that.”

“Yes,” Oliver said. “Just like that. Whine about it quietly, to yourself.”

She seethed, but Shane just shrugged and looked at the pedal generator, which was sort of like an exercise bike. “This thing could be a real workout,” he said. “Tell you what: I’ll pedal; you do the magic. Sound fair?”

She liked that he was willing to help. Their fingers intertwined, and he kissed her again, lightly.

“Sounds fair,” she agreed.

She turned the laptop over and took a look at it. Nothing obviously wrong jumped out—nothing cracked or broken, anyway. Shane climbed on the seat and started turning the pedals—which must have been harder than it seemed, because even he seemed to be working at it. The resistance built up energy, which translated into electricity, which went into a power strip with some kind of backup battery built into it. Immediately, the battery began beeping and flickering a red light. “Right, that’s working,” Claire said. “It’ll probably take a while to recharge the backup, though.”

“How much time are we talking?” Shane asked.

She grinned. “Slacker.”

“Well, yeah, obviously.”
In a few moments, the computer’s power light finally came on, and she booted up and started looking into the computer problem. It took her thirty minutes of diagnostics before she located the problem and got the operating system booted up.

Shane, poor thing, kept pedaling. He stopped wasting his breath with quips after a while. When the power strip’s battery finally clicked over to green, he stopped, gasping for breath, slumped over the handlebars. “Okay,” he panted, “let’s not screw it up, shall we? Because I do not want to do that again. Next time, get a vamp. They don’t need to breathe.”

Claire looked over at Oliver, who was ignoring them and jotting down notes on a map of Blacke. But he was smiling a little.

“It’s booting up,” she said, watching the lines scroll by. “Here goes....”

The Windows tones sounded, and it felt like everybody in the library jumped. Mrs. Grant and Morley abandoned their security sweep and came back to stand by Claire’s elbow as the operating system load finished, and the desktop finally appeared. She let it finish, then double-clicked the Internet icon.

“Four oh four.” She sighed.

“What?” Morley peered over her shoulder. “What does that mean?”

“Page not found,” she said. “It’s a four oh four error. Let me try something else.” She tried for Google. Then Wikipedia. Then Twitter. Nothing. “The ISP must be down. There’s no Internet service.”

“What about e-mail? It is e-mail, yes?” Morley asked, leaning even closer. “E-mail is a kind of electronic letter. It travels through the air.” He seemed very smug that he knew that.

“Well, not exactly, and would you please either back off or go find a shower? Thanks. And to send e-mail you have to have Internet service. So that doesn’t work.”


“Does anyone else think it’s too quiet?” Oliver asked, and looked up from the map.

There was a moment of silence, and then Mrs. Grant said, “Sometimes they don’t come at us for a few hours. But they always come. Every night. We’re all there is for them.”

Oliver nodded, stood up, and gestured to Morley. The two vampires stalked off into the dark, talking in tones too quiet for human ears to catch at all.

Mrs. Grant stared after them, eyes narrowed. “They’ll turn on us,” she said. “Sooner or later, your vampires will turn on us. Count on it.”

“We’re still alive,” Claire said, and pointed to herself, Shane, Jason, and Eve. Eve was sitting a few feet away, curled in Michael’s arms. “And we’ve been at this a whole lot longer than you.”

“Then you’re deluded,” Mrs. Grant said. “How can you possibly trust these—people?” She acted as if that wasn’t the word she wanted to use.

“Because they gave you back your guns,” Claire said. “And because they could have killed you in the first couple of minutes if they’d really wanted to. I know it’s hard. It’s hard for all of us, sometimes. But right now, you need to believe what they’re telling you.”

Mrs. Grant frowned at her. “And when exactly do I stop believing them?”

Claire smiled. “We’ll let you know.”

There weren’t a lot of kids in the library, but there were a few—seven total, according to Claire’s count, ranging from babies who were still being bottle-fed to a couple of trying-to-be-adult kids of maybe twelve. Nobody was too close to Claire’s own age, though. She was kind of glad; it would have been just too creepy to see the kind of blank fear in their faces that she saw in the younger kids. Too much like seeing herself, in the beginning of her Morganville experience.

She wound up thinking about the kids because Eve had brought over a lantern, gotten them in a circle, and started reading to them. It was something familiar, from the few words Claire could hear; it finally clicked in. Eve was reading Where the Wild Things Are. All the kids, even the ones who would probably have said they were too old for it, were sitting quietly, listening, with the fear easing away from their expressions.

“She’s got the touch, doesn’t she?” That was Michael, standing behind Claire. He was watching Eve read, too. “With kids.” There was something quietly sad in his voice.

“Yeah, I guess.” Claire glanced over at him, then away. “Everything okay?”

“Why wouldn’t it be? Just another day for us Morganville brats.” Now the smile was quietly sad, too. “I wish I could take her away from all this. Make it all—different.”

“But you can’t.”

“No. I can’t. Because I am who I am, and she is who she is. And that’s it.” He lifted his shoulders in a shrug so small it almost didn’t even qualify. “She keeps asking me where we’re going.”
“Yeah,” another voice said. It was Shane, pulling up a chair beside Claire. “Girls do that. They’ve always got to
be taking the relationship somewhere.”
“Yeah,” he said. “I get it; somebody’s got to be looking ahead. But it makes guys think they’re—”
“Closed in,” Michael said.
“Trapped,” Shane added.
“Yeah?” Michael’s blue eyes were steady on Eve, watching her read, watching her smile, watching how she was
with the kids clustered around her. “Is it?”
Claire didn’t answer. Suddenly, she was the one who felt closed in. Trapped. And she understood why Michael
was feeling so ... strange.
He was watching Eve with kids, and he was never going to have kids with Eve. At least, she didn’t think vampires
could... She’d never really asked. But she was pretty sure she was right about that one. He looked like someone
seeing the future, and not liking his place in it one bit.
“Hey,” Shane said, and nuded Claire’s shoulder. “You noticed what’s going on?”
She blinked as she realized that Shane wasn’t figuring out Michael—that he hadn’t even really noticed all the
personal stuff at all. He was, instead, looking out into the shadows, where there had been vampires patrolling at the
edges.
“What?” she asked. She couldn’t see anyone.
“They’re gone.”
“What?”
“The vampires. As in, no longer in the building. Unless there’s a big line for the bathroom, all of a sudden. Even
Jason’s gone.”
“No way,” Claire slid off her chair and went to the desk. There was no sign of Oliver, or Morley. The map of
Blacke was still spread out on the table, anchored with weights on the corners, marked in colored pencils with things
she didn’t understand. She grabbed the lantern and went to the library doors, where Jacob Goldman had been
standing.
He wasn’t there.
“See?” Shane said. “They’ve bailed. All of them.”
“That’s impossible. Why would they just leave us?”
“You have to ask?” Shane shook his head. “Claire, sometimes I think your head’s not really in the survival game.
Think: why would they leave us? Because they can. Because as much as you want to believe the best about
everybody, they’re not the good guys.”
“No,” she blurted. “No, they wouldn’t. Oliver wouldn’t.”
“The hell he wouldn’t. Oliver is a rock-solid bastard, and you know it. If he added up the numbers and it looked
like it might benefit him by adding even a second or two to his life, he’d be out of here, making up some sad story.
It’s how he survives, Claire.” Shane hesitated for a second, then plunged on. “And maybe this is a good thing.
Maybe if he’s taken off, we should, too. Just—run. Get as far away, as fast as we can.”
“What are you saying?”
“I’m saying ... ,” he began with a sigh. “I’m saying we’re out of Morganville. And Oliver is all that’s stopping us
from heading anywhere in the world, other than there.”
She really didn’t want to believe that Oliver was gone. She wanted to believe that Oliver was, like Amelie,
someone who took his word seriously, who, once having granted his protection, wouldn’t just walk away because
the going got tough.
But she really, really couldn’t be sure. She never was, with Oliver. She had absolutely no doubts about Morley; he
was all vampire, all the time. He’d smile at you one minute and rip out your throat the next, and wouldn’t see any
contradiction in that at all.
He was right, though. Oliver was all that stood between them and a life out in the world; a life free of
Morganville.
Except for the people they’d leave behind.
She glanced back at Eve, surrounded by the kids in a circle of light, and at Michael, watching her from the
shadows with so much longing and pain in his face.
And it hit her.
“Michael,” she blurted. “Whatever Oliver might do to us, he can’t leave Michael behind to die. He can’t. Amelie
would kill him.”
No doubt about that. Amelie had deeply loved Sam, Michael’s grandfather, and when she’d turned Michael into a
vampire, she’d considered him family—her family. If Oliver planned to throw them to the infected wolves, he was going to have to figure out how to do it and somehow save Michael, without letting Michael know what had happened to the rest of them.

Michael must have heard her say his name, because he looked over at her. Shane crooked a finger at him. Michael nodded and walked over.

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“Maybe we can get it back to that quiet town it used to be,” Claire said.

Mrs. Grant gave her a long look. “Just you and your friends?”

“Hey,” Shane said, snapping a shotgun closed with a flick of his wrist. “We’re just trying to help.”

“And stay alive,” Eve added. “But trust me, this is not the worst situation we’ve ever been in.” She sounded confident about that. Claire raised her eyebrows, and Eve considered it for a few more seconds. “Okay, maybe tied for worst. But definitely not the Guinness Record for awfulness.”

Mrs. Grant looked at each of them in turn, and then just walked away to rouse her own men.

“Seriously,” Shane said, “this kind of is the worst situation we’ve ever been in, right?”

“Speak for yourself,” Michael said. “I got myself killed last year. Twice.”

“Oh yeah. You’re right—last year really sucked for you.”

“Boys,” Eve interrupted, when Michael started to make some smart-ass comeback. “Focus. Dangerous vampire attack imminent. What’s the plan?”

“Tied for worst.”

“Excellent,” Shane said. “Then next trip, we hit the strip bar.”

“I am never taking a trip with either of you ever again.” Eve said. “Ever.”

“Michael!” Claire called, and he jumped down from the top of a bookshelf next to the window to land next to her, barely seeming to notice the impact. She didn’t see him coming, either, which made her fumble the phone and almost drop it. “Hey! Scary-monster move! Don’t like it!”

“I’ll try to whistle next time,” he said. “What?”

She showed him. He did whistle, softly, and thought for a few seconds.

“If it’s not him?” Claire said. “What if it’s, I don’t know, them? They got him, and they’re using his phone to lure us in?”

“They didn’t strike me as particularly clever with the planning, but you’ve got a good point. It could be a trap.” He frowned. “But if Oliver is calling for help, it’s about as bad as it gets.”

“I know.” Claire felt short of breath. “What do we do? He probably thinks Morley’s here!”

“Well, Morley’s not.” Michael looked around at the library, at the cluster of kids sleeping on cots in the middle of the room. “I don’t like leaving them, but we can’t just ignore it. Not if there’s a chance he’s really in trouble. It’s close to dawn, at least. That’s good for them, bad for Oliver.”

They found Mrs. Grant, who listened to them, read the text message, and shrugged.

“Tied for worst.”

“You want to go, go,” she said. “We held out before any of you got here. We’ll hang on long after you’re gone,

An hour passed, and nothing happened. Eve got anxious about Jason’s absence, but Claire was starting to feel a little confident that nothing would happen tonight at the library, as the minutes clicked by and the night around the library continued quiet, with nothing but the wind stirring outside in the streets.

And then the walkie-talkie Mrs. Grant had given her squawked for attention, making her jump. Claire figured it would be Shane; he’d stationed himself on the other side of the building, apparently because she was so distracting (which really didn’t disappoint her, when she thought about it).

But it wasn’t Shane.

It was Eve. “I’m coming out,” she said. She sounded breathless and worried. “You need to see this.”

“I’m here,” Claire said. “Be careful.”

In under a minute, Eve was beside her, holding out an open cell phone. Not hers—this one, for instance, didn’t have all the usual glow-in-the-dark skulls on it. Eve wouldn’t have a boring cell like this one.

“Oh yeah. It was the one Oliver had slipped into her pocket on the bus. The only one they had now, since the rest were probably still dumped in a drawer back in the Durram police station.

There was a text message on the phone. Wounded, it said. Bring help. Garage.

It was from Oliver.

And that was it. Just the four words. Claire had gotten the occasional phone call from Oliver, but never a text.

“Oliver texted me,” Eve said. “I mean really. Oliver texted. That’s weird, right? Who knew he could?”

“Mrs. Grant said the cell phones didn’t work here.”

“No, she said they went out. This one’s working. Kinda, anyway.”

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“Tied for worst.”

“You want to go, go,” she said. “We held out before any of you got here. We’ll hang on long after you’re gone,

...
too. This is our town, and we’re going to be the last ones standing around here. Count on it.”

“Yes ma’am,” Claire said softly. “But—the kids—”

Mrs. Grant smiled bleakly. “What do you think we fight so hard for? The architecture? We’ll fight to our last for our kids, every one of us. Don’t you worry about that. You think your friend needs you, go on. Take the weapons—we’ve got plenty. This used to be a big hunting town.” Mrs. Grant paused, eyeing Claire. “In fact, hold on. Got something for you.”

She rummaged in a closet and came up with something that was huge, bulky, and looked very complicated—but once Claire had it thrust into her hands, she realized it wasn’t complicated at all.

It was a bow. One of those with the wheels and pulleys—a compound bow?

Mrs. Grant found a bag stuffed full of arrows, too.

“I don’t know how to shoot it,” Claire protested.

“Learn.”

“But—”

“If you don’t want it, give it back.”

“No,” Claire said, and felt ashamed of herself. “I’m sorry. I’ll figure it out.”

Mrs. Grant suddenly grinned and ruffled Claire’s hair as one would a little kid’s. “I know you will,” she said. “You got spark, you know that? Spark and grit. I like that.”

Claire nodded, not quite sure what to say to that. She clutched the bow in one hand, the bag of arrows in the other, and looked at Michael. “So I guess we’re—”

“Saving Oliver,” Michael said, straight-faced. “Maybe you’d better try shooting that thing first.”

While Michael, Shane, and Eve straightened out whatever it was they were going to do to get to Oliver—who was, according to the map and Mrs. Grant, at an old adobe building near the Civic Hall called Halley’s Garage—Claire set up a couple of hand-drawn paper targets on pillow-padded chairs, pulled one of the arrows out, and tried to figure out how to put it on the bowstring quickly. That didn’t work so well, so she tried again, taking her time, then pulling back the arrow and sighting down the long, straight line.

It was surprisingly tough to pull the string back, and hold the arrow in place, and not waver all over the place. She didn’t even hit the chair, much less the target, and she winced as the arrow hit the wall at least four feet away. But at least she’d fired it. That was something, right?

She picked out another arrow and tried again.

Twenty arrows later, she’d managed to hit the pillow—not the target, but the pillow—and she was starting to understand how this whole thing worked. It was easier when she thought of it in terms of physics, of potential and kinetic energy, energy and momentum.

As she was working out the calculations in her head, she forgot to really worry about all the physical things that were getting in the way—the balancing of the bow, the aiming, the fear she wasn’t going to get it right—and suddenly it all just clicked. She felt it come into sudden, sharp focus, like a spotlight had suddenly focused on her, and she let go of the arrow.

That instant, she knew it would hit the target. She let the bow rock gracefully forward on the balance point, watching the arrow, and it smacked into the exact center of her crudely drawn paper circle.

Physics.

She loved physics.

Shane arrived just as she put the arrow into the center, and slowed down, staring from the target to Claire, standing straight and tall, bow still held loosely in one hand and ready to shoot again. “You look so hot right now,” he said. “I’m just saying.”

She grinned at him and went to pick up all the arrows. One or two had suffered a little too much from contact with the wall, but the rest were good to reuse, and she carefully put them back into the bag, fletching end up. “You just like me because I might actually be able to be useful for a change.”

“You are always useful,” Shane said. “And hot. I mentioned that, right?”

“You’re mental. I need a shower, clean clothes, and about a year of sleep.”

“Okay, how about a hot mess?”

“Let me be Eve for a minute,” she said, and flipped him off. He laughed and kissed her.

“Not even close,” he said. “Come on, we’ve got some cranky old vampire to rescue.”
It was still dark outside, but it felt ... different, as if the world was still dreaming, but dreaming about waking up. The air felt cool and light, and the darkness was just a tiny bit lighter than before.

“Not long until dawn,” Michael said. “Which is good news and bad news.”

“Good news for us,” Shane said. “Present company excepted.”

“You’re such a bro.”

“You start smoking, I’ll roll you into the shade,” Shane said. “Can’t ask for more than my being willing to save your bloodsucking ass.” They stood outside of the doors of the library for a few seconds, getting their bearings. Mrs. Grant had equipped them with sturdy LED lanterns, but it didn’t feel like the light fell very far. There could be anything lurking ten feet away, Claire thought. And there probably was.

Michael shut down his lantern and just ... disappeared. It was startling, but they knew he was going to do it, at least; the plan was that he’d get out ahead of the light and look for trouble. Kind of a cross between a scout and bait. Claire’s walkie-talkie clicked a moment later—no voice message, just the quiet electronic signal. “Go,” she said. “We’re okay.”

The three of them went at a jog, watching their steps as best they could in the confusing jumble of shadows and harsh, flickering light. Blacke looked like a nightmare, or Hollywood’s idea of a disaster movie—cars abandoned, buildings closed and dark, windows shattered. The big, Gothic Civic Hall loomed over everything, but there weren’t any lights showing inside. The statue of Hiram what’s-his-face remained facedown in the thigh-high weeds, which Claire thought really might have been the best place for it. At least it wasn’t leaning over and threatening to fall on people. Especially on her, because that would have been the worst Darwin Award-qualifying death ever.

They made it to the sidewalk beside the Civic Hall. Shane pointed. “That way,” he said. “Should be on that corner, facing the hall.”

Michael suddenly zipped into view at the edge of the light. “They’re coming,” he said. “Behind us and to the left. Back of the Civic Hall.”

“Run! “Shane said, and they took off, lanterns throwing crazy, bouncing light off broken glass and metal, turning shadows into ink-filled blots. The iron fence around the Civic Hall was leaning outward, into the sidewalk, and Shane had to flinch and duck to avoid a sharp, rusty arrow-point bent low enough to scrape his face. Claire almost tripped over one of the metal bars that had fallen loose from the fence. She kicked it out of the way, then paused and grabbed it, juggling the lantern.

“Don’t stop!” Eve hissed, and pulled her on. The iron bar, with its sharp arrowhead top, was heavy, but straight, like a spear. Claire managed to hang on to it as they ran, but at the next curb she missed her footing and had to scramble. Her lantern broke free of her fingers and smashed on the ground. It flickered, brightened, then faded and died.

Out of nowhere, Michael was next to her, handing her his own switched-off lantern and grabbing the iron bar from her. “Keep going!” he said, and turned with the iron bar to guard their backs. Eve looked back, her face pale in the white LED lights, and her dark eyes looked huge and terrified.

“Michael?”

“Don’t stop!”

He fell behind in the dark after only three or four steps, lost to them. Claire heard something like a snarl behind them, and what sounded like a body hitting the ground.

Then came a scream, high and wild.

Up ahead, she saw a flash of what looked like faded pink. There was a leaning metal sign flapping and creaking in the predawn wind, and Claire wasn’t sure, but she thought the rusty letters might have said GARAGE.

It was a square adobe building with some old-fashioned gas pumps off to the side that looked as if they hadn’t worked since Claire’s mom was a kid. The windows were broken and dark, but they were blocked up with something, so there was no way to see inside.

Shane arrived at the door of the building—abig wooden thing, scarred and faded, with massive iron hinges—and banged on it. “Oliver!” he yelled. “Cavalry!”

Funny, Claire didn’t feel much like the cavalry at the moment. They rode in with guns blazing to save the day, right? She felt more like a hunted rabbit. Her heart was pounding, and even in the cool air she was sweating and shaking. If this is a trap ...

The door opened into darkness, and a hand reached out and grabbed Shane by the shirt front, and yanked him inside.
“No!” Claire charged forward, lantern blazing now and held high, and saw Shane being dragged, off balance, out of the way. Not having time or room for the bow, she dropped it, grabbed an arrow out of the bag, and lunged for the vampire who was taking Shane away.

Oliver turned, snarling, and knocked the arrow out of her grip so hard her entire hand went numb. She gasped and drew back, shocked, because Oliver looked ... not like Oliver, much. He was dirty, ragged, and he had blood all down his arm and the front of his shirt.

There was a raw wound in his throat that was slowly trying to heal.

That was his own blood on his clothes, she realized. Something—someone—had bitten him, nearly killing him, it looked like.

“Inside,” he ordered hoarsely, as Eve hovered in the doorway, peering in. “Michael?”

Michael appeared out of the darkness, racing fast. He stopped to grab up Claire’s fallen bow, and then practically shoved Eve inside the building as he slammed the door and turned to lock it. There were big, old-fashioned iron bolts, which he slid shut. There was also a thick old board that Oliver pointed toward; Michael tossed Claire her bow and slotted the bar in place, into the racks on either side of the door.

As he did, something hit the door hard enough to bend the metal bolts and even the thick wooden bar. But the door held.

Outside, something screamed in frustration, and Claire heard claws scratching on the wood.

Michael wasn’t hurt, at least not that Claire could see; he hugged Eve and kept one arm around her as they came toward Claire, who was still in a standoff with Oliver.

And Oliver was still holding Shane with a white, clenched fist twisted in the fabric of his shirt.

“Hey,” Shane said. “Off! Let go!”

Oliver seemed to have forgotten he was even holding him, but as he turned to look at Shane, Claire saw his eyes turn muddy red, then glow hotter when Shane tried to pull away.

“Don’t,” she said softly. “He’s lost a lot of blood; he’s not himself. Stay still, Shane.”

Shane took a deep breath and managed to hold himself steady, but Claire could tell it really cost him. Everything in him must have been screaming to fight, rip free, run away from that glowing red hunger in Oliver’s eyes.

He didn’t. And Oliver, after a few eternal seconds, let go of him and stepped back, then suddenly turned and stalked away.

Shane looked over at Claire, and she saw the real fear in his eyes, just for a second. Then he pushed it away, and smiled, and held up his thumb and index finger, pushed about an inch apart. “Close,” he said.

“Maybe you’re not his type,” Michael said.

“Oh, now you’re just being insulting.” Shane reached out for Claire’s hand, and squeezed it, hard. He didn’t mind letting her feel the nerves that still trembled in him, but he wasn’t going to let Michael see it, obviously. “So what the hell is going on in here?”

A vague shape loomed up behind him out of the shadows. Then another one. Then another. Shane and Claire quickly moved to stand back to back. So did Eve and Michael. Among the four of them, they were covering every angle.

“Lurking isn’t answering,” Shane said. “Oliver? Little help?”

Instead, one of the shapes stepped forward into the light. Morley. Claire felt relieved, and annoyed. Of course it was Morley. Why had she ever doubted it? He was the champion lurker of all time.

“What did you bring?” Morley rasped.

“Besides charm and beauty?” Eve said. “Why? What did you need? What are you doing here?”

“They’ve been helping us,” whispered someone out of the dark. Eve turned up the power on her lantern to max, and the dim, cold light finally penetrated the shadows enough to show the people lying crumpled on the dirty floor of the garage. Well, people might have been a little bit misleading, because Claire realized they were all vampires; their eyes caught the light and reflected it back.

She didn’t recognize them. And then it finally occurred to her why she wouldn’t.

These were the vampires of Blacke. The sick ones. And there must have been at least ten of them, in addition to another ten or fifteen of Morley’s crew, crammed into the small adobe building.

“We went after them one by one,” Morley said. “We’ve been at it for hours now. Some of them were a damn nuisance to bring here, let alone dose. But your witch potion does seem to work, little Claire. If we can get some of the crystals in them, they become rational enough to accept the cure.”

Claire was stunned. Somehow, having seen how far gone things were, she’d never really expected them to be able to save people—but here they were, lying exhausted on the floor, shaking and confused. Unlike the vampires Claire had dealt with in Morganville, these were newbies, like Michael; people who’d been turned against their will in the
first place, and made sick at the same time. For some reason, they’d been more susceptible to getting on the crazy train than Michael; maybe that was because he was originally from Morganville, and had some kind of better resistance. But they’d certainly gotten sick a lot faster, and a lot worse, than any vampires she’d ever seen.

Consequently, they were healing a whole lot more slowly. It hadn’t taken Myrnin and Amelie and Oliver long to recover after taking their doses when Bishop was safely out of the way, but then, they were far older, and had already coped with being vampires.

Claire focused on a boy about her own age. He looked scared, devastated, and alone. He looked guilty, as if he couldn’t forget how he’d been surviving these past few weeks or what he’d done.

“They’re coming around,” Morley continued. “But the more we get of them, the more vulnerable we are; they can’t get up and fight yet, even if we’d trust them to do so. And the others over there, they’ve tracked us here. Oliver did a gallant job, but they’re no doubt on their way here now.”

“Uh, I think we might have pretty much led them straight over,” Eve said. “Sorry. Nobody specified stealthy in the message.”

“I was hoping one would take it as implied,” Oliver snapped. “I should have known better.”

“And where the hell is my brother, you jerk?”

“He has orders,” Oliver said. “That’s all you need to know.”

“Children, children, this anger gets us nowhere,” Morley said, in a mocking, motherly tone. “There are about fifteen of them left we haven’t been able to catch and give the cure, and sadly, we have very little left at this point. The ones we can’t cure, we must confine, until we can get the drugs from Morganville.”

Funny, Claire had never really thought of him as being a humanitarian—vampiritarian? Anyway, someone who put the best interests of others first. But getting out of Morganville—and away from Amelie—seemed to have done something good for Morley. He seemed to almost care.

Almost.

“Confine, not kill,” Oliver said, and turned to come back toward them. His eyes had gone safely dark again, although Claire could see how tired and hungry he was in the sharp moves he made, and the tense set of his muscles.

“And how precisely do you think we should do that, Morley? It’s been difficult enough to trap these creatures singly and pacify them. Morning isn’t far away, and in case you have failed to notice, you’re down quite a few followers on your side.”

Morley shrugged. “Some stayed near the library. Some simply wanted to go, so I let them. The whole purpose of this exercise was to earn our freedom, Oliver. Even if you don’t understand the concept of freedom in the slightest—”

“Freedom?” Oliver barked out a laugh. “Anarchy is what you want, Morley. It’s what you always wanted. Don’t dare to—”

“Hey!” Claire said, and stepped away from Shane, facing both vampires. “Politics later! Focus! What are we going to do, if they’re coming? Can we hold them off?”

“This is the most defensible position in town, other than the library,” Morley said, suddenly all business. “We can hold it with the men we have, even against the local talent.”

“I’m sensing a but coming up soon,” Shane said.

“But,” Morley said, “we failed to bring much in the way of supplies. In fact, most of ours ended up stuck between the teeth of our friends across the way. And those who are recovering will need to feed, quickly.”

There was a short, deadly silence. Oliver said nothing, but he looked drawn and weary.

“Wait,” Eve said slowly. “What are you saying?”

More silence. Claire felt cold trickle down her spine. “You’re saying we just volunteered to be blood donors.”

“You are not serious,” Shane said. “You are not snacking on us.”

“Not all of you, obviously,” Morley said. “The girl’s exempt; she’s Amelie’s toy, and I wouldn’t harm her for the world. Michael, of course, isn’t the appropriate meat for our table. But you and our lovely living dead girl—”

“No,” Claire said. “Never going to happen. Back off.”

“My dear, do you think I’m actually offering you a choice? It’s an explanation. An apology, of sorts. Oliver didn’t send you the message. I held him down, took his telephonic device, and used it myself. Why do you think he’s so badly mussed?”

It was weird, Claire thought, to feel so clear at this moment. So calm. “You’re telling me you’re going to take Eve and Shane and drain them.”

“I could make them vampires when we’re done, if you just can’t face losing them. I’m terribly progressive that way. Then you would be the only breather in your little pack, Claire. How long do you imagine you’d last, especially if your boyfriend there declared his undying love?” Morley fluttered his eyelashes like a cartoon character and put both hands over his heart. “If I were you, I’d volunteer to join them. Being human is not precisely a clever
“Yeah? How’s this?” Claire, in one smooth, fast motion, pulled an arrow from the bag on her shoulder, slotted it home on the string, and pulled the compound bow back to full extension. She was aiming the arrow straight at Morley’s crossed hands, over his heart.

He laughed. “You aren’t serious—”

She fired.

The arrow went through both of Morley’s hands, pinning them to his chest with the fletching at the end. He stared down in shock at the wood piercing his chest, stumbled, and went down to his knees.

Then just down, face forward. The arrow stuck up out of his back, like an exclamation point.

“I will,” Claire said softly, and let the bow rock forward as she reached one-handed for another arrow and notched it home. “I’m not a really good shot, but this is a really small room, so let me make this very clear: the first vampire who tries to lay a hand on either of my friends gets a new piercing, just like Morley. Now, if you need food, I will figure it out. But you don’t get to use my friends like vending machines. Are we clear?”

Around the room, vampires nodded, casting disbelieving looks at Morley. Even Oliver was staring at her as if he’d never really seen her before. She didn’t know why; he’d known she could do it—hadn’t he?

Or was she different, somehow?

“Shane?” Claire asked. He stepped up to her side. “Use Eve’s phone. Call Mrs. Grant at the library. We need to organize something.”

“What?”

“A blood drive,” she said.

“Hang on—”

“Shane.” Claire tilted her head up to look at him, and didn’t smile. “They’ll do it. These are their friends and family. They’ll do it to save them. I’d do it to save you.”

He touched her cheek gently. “I think you would,” he said. “Crazy girl.”

“Ask Morley how crazy I am,” she said. “Oh, wait. You’ll have to take the arrow out, first.”

“Maybe later. Facedown is a good look for him.” Shane gave her a quick, beautiful smile, and turned away to make the call.

Michael was shaking his head. Claire, without loosening her draw on the bow, gave him a quick, nervous look.

“What?”

He laughed. “You,” he said. “Jeez, Claire. If I didn’t love you, you’d scare me.”

“I don’t love her,” Oliver said acidly. “And if you ever point that arrow anywhere near me, Amelie’s pet or no, I will take it away from you and introduce you to the sharp end, with great pleasure. Are we clear, girl?”

“Yeah,” she said, and kept the arrow pointed away from him. “You got your butt kicked by Morley, and you’re threatening me because I actually solved your problem for you. I think we’re very clear. But don’t worry. I won’t hurt you, Oliver.”

For a brief, deadly second, there was utter silence.

Then Oliver laughed.

It wasn’t the bitter, angry, terrible laugh she expected. Oliver actually sounded almost human. He sagged back against the wall, still laughing, and sank down to a crouch, hands loosely braced on his knees. It sounded as if he hadn’t laughed that much, or that deeply, for a very long time. It was weirdly infectious; Eve giggled in little hiccups, trying not to; Michael started laughing at her struggle not to laugh. Before too long, even Claire was fighting to keep her aim steady on the arrow.

“Ease up,” Michael said, and touched her arm, which was trembling with effort. “You made your point. Nobody’s coming after us. Not in here.”

She sighed, finally, and loosened the draw on the bow. Her shoulders were aching, and her arms felt like raw meat. She hadn’t even felt the strain until it was gone.

“Claire,” Oliver said. He looked over at him, suddenly alarmed and wondering if she had the strength to try to draw the bow again, but he was smiling. It gave his sharp face a relaxed look she wasn’t really used to seeing, and his eyes held what looked like genuine warmth. “It’s too bad you’re not a vampire.”

“I guess that was a compliment, so thanks, but no thanks.”

He shrugged and left it at that. Still, Claire had a second’s flash of temptation. All those years. All those things to learn, to feel, to know ... Myrnin lived for the excitement of knowledge; she knew that. The only difference between the two of them, really, was that he could go on forever learning.

But despite all of that, despite all the shiny immortality and the fact that there were a few vamps she didn’t actually hate—even Oliver now—Claire knew she was meant to be human. Just plain Claire.

And that was really okay.
As if to prove it, Shane slid his arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. “You rock, you know that?”

“I’m a rock star,” she said, straight-faced. “I’m probably the saddest little rock star ever, though. What did Mrs. Grant say?”

“She says they’ll set up a donation center there and bring it over in bottles. She’s not risking her people to bring it over. Somebody has to go pick up and deliver.”

“Does she believe us?”

“She wants to,” Shane said. “Her husband’s in here, somewhere. So’s her son.”

And that, Claire thought, was why Morley had been right about this, even if he was a complete vampire about it.

You had to save what you could.

Amelie had understood that all along, Claire realized. That was why Morganville existed. Because you had to try.

Oliver ended up doing the blood pickup himself, maybe as a kind of offhand apology for putting Eve and Shane at risk in the first place, though that of course went unsaid. As the stuff was being passed around—one small plastic cup per vampire, to start—Claire knelt beside Morley’s still body, rolled him on his side, and snapped the arrow off just below the point. Then she pulled it out of his chest and hands with one sharp tug, dropping it to the concrete.

Morley took in a huge gasp of air and let it out in a frustrated shout. He held up his hands and stared at the holes punched through them until the flesh and bone started to knit itself again.

He rolled over on his back, staring up at nothing, and said, “I was going to say you aren’t a killer. And I still stand by that statement, because evidently I’m not dead. Only very upset.”

“Here.” Claire handed him a cup of blood. “You’re right. I’m not a killer. I hope you’re not, either.”

Morley sat up and sipped, eyes narrowed and fixed on her. “Of course I’m a killer, girl,” he said. “Don’t be stupid. It’s my nature. We’re predators, no matter what Amelie likes to pretend in her little artificial hothouse of Morganville. We kill to survive.”

“But you don’t have to,” Claire pointed out. “Right now, you’re drinking blood someone gave you. So it doesn’t have to be kill-or-be-killed. It can be different. All you have to do is decide to be something else.”

He smiled, but not with fangs this time. “You think it’s so simple?”

“No.” She got up, dusting her knees. “But I know you’re not as simple as you like people to think you are.”

Morley’s eyebrows went up. “I know nothing of me.”

“I know you’re smart, people follow you, and you can make something good happen for the people who trust you. People like Patience and Jacob, who’ve got good instincts. Don’t betray them.”

“I wouldn’t—” He stopped, and looked away. “It doesn’t matter. I promised to get them all out. They’re out. What they do now is up to them.”

“No, it’s not,” Oliver said. He was standing near them, leaning on a stack of old tires as he sipped from his own plastic cup. “You made yourself responsible for them when you left Morganville, Morley. Like it or not, you’re now the patriarch of the Blacke vampires. The question is, what are you going to do with them?”

“Do?” Morley looked almost panicked. “Nothing!”

“Not an answer. I suggest you devote some thought to it.” Oliver smiled, eyes unfocused as he drank with evident pleasure. “Blacke could be an ideal location, you know. Remote, isolated, little traffic in or out. The humans remaining have a vested interest in keeping your secrets, since their own have been turned. It could be the start of something quite ... interesting.”

Morley laughed. “You’re trying to make me Amelie.”

“Goodness, no. You’d look terrible in a skirt.”

Claire shook her head and left them arguing. Dawn was rolling over the town’s sky in waves of gold, pink, and soft oranges; it was beautiful, and it felt ... new, somehow. The destruction was still there; Hiram’s statue was still facedown in the weeds; there were still a dozen feral vampires hiding out somewhere in the shadows.

But it felt as if the town had just come alive again. Maybe that was because across the square, the Blacke library doors were wide-open, and people were coming outside into the cool morning air.

Comming across the square to see those they’d thought they’d lost forever.

Shane was sitting on the curb next to the old, cracked gas pumps, eating a candy bar. Claire plopped down next to him. “Half?” she asked.

“And now I know you’re my girlfriend, since you’re not afraid to demand community property,” he said, and pulled off the uneaten half to hand it over. “Look. We’re alive.”

“And we have chocolate.”

“It’s not just a miracle; it’s a miracle with chocolate. Best kind.”

Eve emerged from the garage doorway and settled down next to Claire, leaning her chin on her fists. “I am so tired, I could throw up,” she said. “What’s for breakfast? Please don’t say blood.”
“Champions?” Eve mumbled around a mouthful of sticky goodness.
“Not unless it’s competitive eating,” Shane said. “So, Morley’s staying? He’s becoming King of Blacke?”
“I think it’s more like Undead Mayor, but yeah. Probably.”
“So can we ditch Oliver now?”
“Don’t think so,” Claire said. “He says we leave soon.”
“How are we planning to do that, exactly?”
“No idea——”
She heard the engine first as a faint buzz, like a stray but persistent mosquito; then it built into a roar.
A big, black hearse slewed around the corner from the highway and skidded to a stop in front of the garage.
The window rolled down, and Jason Rosser looked out. He grinned. “Anybody need a ride? I figured I’d head
back to Durrand and grab yours, sis. Since it’s officially legal and all. Oh, and I got your cell phones, too.”
“Bro, you rock.” Eve lunged up to her feet and ran possessive hands over the paint job. “Okay, creep, out of my
driver’s seat. Now.”
Jason held the door open for her. As she started to get in, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him,
hard, even with the door between them. He looked surprised.
And so relieved, it hurt Claire a little to see it.
“Come on,” Eve said. “We have to lightproof the back.”
“Give me a sec,” Jason said. “I need a bathroom.”
“There’s one in the library,” Shane said. “Hey, how’d you get out of town?”
“I stole a tractor,” Jason said.
“What?”
“A tractor. It took me all night to get to Durrand. Wasn’t sure if I’d ever make it, either. I ran out of gas two miles
from where they’d towed the car.”
“Huh.” Claire could tell Shane was grudgingly impressed. “So you walked?”
“No, I flew on angel wings.”
“Ass.”
“How’d you get it out of impound?”
“Trade secret,” Jason said. “But it involves not actually asking. Same with the phones. Speaking of which ...” He
dug in the pocket of his hoodie and came up with them, which he handed over to Shane. They didn’t tap fists or
high-five or anything, but Shane nodded, and Jason nodded back.
“No signal,” Claire said, checking hers. “Man, the Morganville provider network sucks.”
“It works when Amelie wants it to work,” Shane said. “Apparently, she doesn’t want it working right now.”
“Michael needs to call the guy in Dallas. You know, let him know we’re on the way.”
“Let him know we got trapped in a vampire town and fought off a vampire zombie army, you mean?”
“I was thinking maybe car problems.”
“Boring, but effective,” Shane said. “I’ll go see if we can make it work. Maybe cell phone wastage doesn’t apply
to vampires.”
As they were talking, Jason walked across to the library, head down, looking like a thin stick in blue jeans. Claire
wondered if maybe, just maybe, there was a chance for Eve’s brother.
Not much of one, but ... maybe.
EPILOGUE

“It’s you,” Eve said, and gave the wig a final tug on Claire’s head, setting it just right. All of a sudden, it looked right—not just some random collection of plastic threads stuck on top of her scalp, but... hair. Pretend hair, sure, but, it looked ...

Claire couldn’t decide how it looked. She cocked her head first one way, then the other. Tried a pose.

“Is it cool? I think it’s cool. Maybe?” The girl looking back at her wasn’t just a mousy, skinny girl anymore. The new, improved Claire Danvers was taller, a little more filled out, and she was wearing a new hot pink shirt layered over black, a pair of low-rise jeans with skulls on the pockets, and pink and white hair. She was rocking the streaked wig. It flowed down over her shoulders in careless waves, and made her look mysterious and fragile and smoky, and Claire just knew she had never been smoky or mysterious in her entire life.

“That is absolutely so you,” Eve said with a happy sigh, and jumped around in hoppy circles in her new patent leather black shoes with red skull imprints. “You have got to get it. And wear it. Trust me, Shane will go nuts. You look so dangerous!”

“Shane’s already nuts.” Claire laughed. “Did you see him in the T-shirt aisle? I thought he was going to cry. So many sarcastic sayings; so few days of the week to wear them. And I’m not sure I really feel comfortable looking... y’know, dangerous.

Eve gave her a long, serious look. “You are, you know. Dangerous.”

“Am not.”

“It’s not the hair. You just—you’re something else, Claire. It’s like when all the rest of us don’t know where to go, you... just go. You’re not afraid.”

“That is so not true,” Claire said with a sigh. “I’m scared all the time. Down to my bones. I’m lucky I don’t run away like a little screaming girl.”

Eve smiled. “That’s my job. You’re the heroic one.”

“Not!”

“Oh, just shut up and get the wig already,” Eve said.

“No.”

“Get it get it get it!”

“Okay! Jeez, you’re scaring the other freaks!”

They both broke into manic giggles, because it was true; a couple of very Gothy Goths were edging away, casting them both odd, apprehensive little looks. Being from Morganville gave you an attitude, Claire guessed. And that wasn’t a bad thing, especially when you were in a scary-big city like Dallas, where everything seemed to move ten times faster than she was used to, including the traffic. She didn’t know how Eve had managed to get them to the hotel, or get Michael to his studio appointment after dark, but she had, and it was fabulous.

The hotel rooms had free soaps and shampoos and robes. It was amazing. And they were all modern, with flat-screen, high-definition TVs, and beds so soft that sleeping on them was like sleeping on angel wings.

It was so not like the life she was used to living, which was, she supposed, what made it extra special cool.

“I am a rock star,” Claire said to her reflection. Her reflection seemed to agree, although it still made her laugh inside to think it. She remembered Morley’s surprise when she’d actually shot him, and Oliver’s laughter, his genuine approval.

Maybe she was, a little tiny bit.

She flipped the hair over her shoulders and thought about makeup. “What do you think about heavy eyeliner?” Claire asked, which was totally redundant, because Eve never went anywhere without heavy eyeliner. It was her number one fashion tool.

Instantly, Eve whipped out her Mac tools and began doing Claire’s eyes for her. When she checked again, Claire looked... really mysterious. Her face had taken on depth, shadows, secrets.

Wow. It was amazing what a little change could do.

And a little sleep, Claire thought. She felt better than she had in months, knowing there was nobody lurking around the corner to kidnap her, munch her neck, or otherwise present a serious danger.


“Not literally, hopefully.”

“The idea is to knock other people dead, sweetie. I didn’t think I really had to explain that part.”

Shane rounded the corner of the aisle with a double armload of T-shirts, every one of them bound to offend someone in Morganville, and skidded to a stop at the sight of the two of them. His mouth opened and closed. Eve
stepped away, but Shane didn’t notice; his eyes were fixed on Claire, and he looked as if he’d been hit in the forehead with a two-by-four.

“How do I look?” she asked, which was a completely ridiculous question, given how he was staring at her.

He dropped the T-shirts and kissed her, long and sweet and hard, and she felt a fierce kind of joy blow into a storm inside, wild and crazy and free.

The Gothy McGoth twins, in their leather and spikes and dyed hair, sniffed and walked off, clearly offended by the sight of so much happiness in one place.

When Shane let her up for air, Claire said, “Maybe we should actually buy the stuff before we celebrate?”

“Why wait?”
And he kissed her again.

*     *     *

Dallas was amazing. All the lights, the dizzying buildings, the crazy amounts of traffic, the noise, the people. After a long morning of shopping, Claire was dog-tired, too tired and dazed to even properly admire how awesome their hotel was, with all the glass and marble and fancy furniture. Michael wasn’t due to be in the studio until eight p.m., so she fell into bed and slept in her clothes, for a long time. When she woke up, Eve was just finishing her makeup—back to Goth Girl Gone Wild—and checking her lace skull-patterned minidress in the mirror. Her legs looked taller than Claire’s entire body.

“How,” Claire mumbled, and sat up. The mirror showed her just how horrible her bed head could be. “Ack.”

“The shower is amazing,” Eve said, and turned to the side, smoothing down her dress. “Is it too much?”

“For Morganville? Yeah. For Dallas? No idea. But you look fantastic.”

Eve smiled, that secret little smile, and her eyes glittered brightly.

She was thinking about Michael, obviously.

Claire yawned, slipped off the bed, and went to try the shower. Thirty minutes later, her hair fluffed into relative cuteness, she was clean, dry, and dressed in jeans and her best cute blue top, the one Shane said he liked. She even stopped for a little makeup, although she knew it was a lost cause, considering Eve’s outfit.

Shane rapped on their door ten minutes later, and when she answered, he looked sleepy but relaxed. Freshly showered, which was always a look she loved on him; his hair was even more insane than usual, as if he’d toweled it dry and then forgotten about it. She smoothed it down. He kissed her and called, “Yo, Eve? Crazy train’s leaving the station!”

“I’m coming!” Eve yelled breathlessly, and came out of the bathroom, again, smoothing down her dress.

Shane blinked, but he didn’t say anything. “Michael’s waiting. He’s freaking out that he’s going to be late.”

“Well, he won’t be,” Eve said. “Do I look okay? Like a rock star’s girlfriend?”

“No,” Shane said, and when she looked hurt, he laughed. “You look much better than that, scary girl.”

She blew him a kiss and set off down the hall. Michael was pacing next to the elevators, crackling with nervous energy; his gear was piled next to the wall, and he had a strange, closed expression on his face that disappeared the second he saw Eve.

Claire sighed in sympathetic happiness as Michael kissed his girlfriend and leaned over to whisper something in her ear—something that made Eve laugh and cuddle even closer.

Shane rolled his eyes. “I thought you were in a hurry, man.”

“Never in that much of a hurry,” Michael said, and picked up one of the guitars.

Shane picked up the other and offered him a fist to bump. “Let’s go rock it, Mikey.” Michael just looked at him for a second. Shane held steady, and said, “Michael. You can do it. Trust me.”

Michael took a deep breath, returned the fist bump, and nodded as he pushed the elevator call button.

There was a car downstairs—a big black town car, like a limousine only not as fancy—with a driver in a black jacket. He gave Eve a hand in, then Claire; Michael and Shane took the facing bench seat. The guitars, Claire assumed, went in the trunk.

Michael was looking pale, but then, when didn’t he? He reached across the open space and took Eve’s hand as the car began to roll. “Love the dress,” he said.

“Love you,” she said, very simply. His eyebrows rose a little, and he smiled.

“I was getting to that part.”

“I know.” Eve patted his hand. “I know you were. But you’re a boy. I thought I’d just cut to the chase. You’re going to be great, you know.”
They didn’t say anything the rest of the short drive; the roof overhead was clear, and it gave them an amazing view of the tall buildings and the colored lights. Claire felt her heart pounding. *This was really happening.* She couldn’t imagine what was going on in Michael’s head—or heart. It seemed like a dream. *Morganville* seemed like a dream, one that had happened to someone else, and the idea that they’d leave this reality and go back to that one...

Shane didn’t have to, Claire thought again. Of the four of them, he was the one who could walk away, and there was nothing in Morganville to hold him.

Nothing but her, anyway.

At the studio, which was in a plain-looking industrial building at the edge of downtown, the driver unloaded the guitars and saw them inside, where two people waiting immediately focused on Michael. Claire, Eve, and Shane suddenly became his entourage, which was funny and kind of awesome, and trailed along as the two recording people explained the process to Michael.

Shane carried both the guitars. He did it with a smile, too, that said clearly how proud he was of his friend. Michael looked fierce—he was concentrating on every word, and Claire could see him already putting himself into performance mode, that place that made him so different when he was onstage.

At the studio door, one of the two studio guys turned and held out a hand to Eve, Claire, and Shane. “You guys need to wait in the box,” he said. “Through that door.” He pointed to a thick metal door with a window inset, and took the guitars from Shane. Then he flashed them a quick grin. “He’ll be great. Trust me, he wouldn’t be here if he wasn’t.”

“Damn right,” Shane said, and led the two girls into the box—which, it turned out, was the recording studio’s control room. A big man with frizzy hair was sitting at the mixing board, which looked more complicated than the inside of the Space Shuttle. He said hello and gestured for them to take a seat on the big, plush couch at the back of the room.

It was an amazing place, the studio, full of people who were all just really, really great at their jobs. The engineer behind the giant, complicated mixing board was relaxed, calm, and very easygoing, and the two on the other side of the glass helped Michael get set up, did some sound checks, and then left him alone to join the rest of them in the control room.

“Right,” the engineer said, and nodded to his two assistants—if that was what they were; Claire wasn’t sure. “Let’s see what he’s got.” He flipped a switch. “Michael? Go ahead, whenever you’re ready.”

He started out playing a slow song, head down, and Claire felt the mood in the room change from professional to really interested as he settled into the music. It flowed out of him, silky smooth, beautiful, as natural as sunshine. It was an acoustic guitar thing, and it put tears into Claire’s eyes; there was something so soft and sad and aching about it. When he finished, Michael held the chord for a long moment, then sighed and sat back on his stool, looking through the glass toward them.

The engineer’s mouth was open. He closed it, cleared his throat, and said, “What’s that called, kid?”

“’Sam’s Song,’” Michael said. “It’s for my grandfather.”

The engineer closed the microphone, looked at the other two, and said, “We’ve got a live one.” How darkly hilarious, Claire thought. If only he knew.

“He’s great,” Shane said softly, as if he’d never actually realized it before. “Seriously. He’s great. I’m not crazy, right?”

“You’re not crazy,” the engineer said. “Your buddy has insane skills. They’re going to love him out there.”

Out there. In the world.

In the real world.

Where Michael couldn’t really go for long.

The booth door opened, and Oliver walked in. He was in a normal human mode, looking fatherly and inoffensive. The aging hippie, complete with tie-dyed T-shirt and faded jeans and sandals. Claire bet that if she’d told the engineer Oliver was a vampire, he’d have laughed and told her to lay off the crack.

Oliver perched on the arm of the sofa, listening. They all scooted over, because even Claire didn’t really want to lean against him, no matter how nice he was apparently being. He said nothing at all. After a while, they all relaxed a little, as Michael continued to pour out the amazing rivers of music on the other side of the studio glass. Fast, slow, hard rocking—he could do it all.

When the last song was over, two hours later, the engineer hit the microphone into the studio and said, “Perfect. That was perfect; that’s a keeper. Okay, I think we’re done. Congratulations. You are officially on your way, my man.”

Michael stood up, smiling, holding his guitar in one hand, and caught sight of Oliver watching him.

His smile almost faded, but then he moved his gaze over to Eve, who was on her feet, blowing him kisses. That made him laugh.
“Rock star!” Eve yelled, and clapped. Claire and Shane stood up and clapped, too. Oliver sat quietly, no expression at all on his face, as they celebrated Michael’s success.

It was their last night in Dallas.

Oliver had allowed them to have a nice dinner out, at a fantastically expensive restaurant where all the waiters were better dressed than Claire ever had been. He didn’t go, of course, but somehow Claire could feel his presence, feel him watching.

It was still an amazing meal. She tried everything on her plate, on Shane’s, even off Michael’s and Eve’s. They laughed and flirted, and after the dinner—which went on Oliver’s credit card—they went to a dance club across the street, full of beautiful people and spinning lights. No liquor allowed for them, thanks to the glowing wristbands they didn’t get, but they danced. Even Shane, although he mainly held on to Claire as she danced—which was fantastic. Hot, sweaty, exhausted, happy, the four of them piled into a cab and headed back to the hotel.

It was on the elevator ride up when Shane asked, “Are we really going back?”

It was a long ride; their rooms were on the very top floor of a very tall building. Nobody spoke, not even Michael. He rested his chin on top of Eve’s head and held her close, and she put her arms around him.

Shane looked at Claire, the question plain in his eyes. She felt the heavy weight of it, the absolute vital importance of it.

The claddagh ring on her right hand felt cold, suddenly.


“Do I?” Michael asked. He sounded tired and defeated. “How long do you think I could last before something went wrong, man? Morganville’s safety. This is—beautiful, but it’s temporary. It has to be temporary.”

“It doesn’t,” Shane insisted. “We can figure it out. We can.”

Before Michael could answer, the floor dinged arrival, and they had to get out.

Oliver was standing in the hallway, wearing his leather coat and serious expression. No more Mr. Nice Hippie, obviously. He was standing as if he’d been waiting for them for a while.

Creepy.

All four of them came to a sudden halt, staring at him; Claire felt Shane’s arm tighten around her waist, as if he was considering moving in front of her. To protect her from what?

There was something odd about the way Oliver was looking at them—because he wasn’t looking at them, exactly. It was not his normal direct stare at all.

Instead, he silently dialed a number on the cell phone in his hand and put it on speaker, right there, standing in the middle of the hotel hallway. All the plush carpet and lights and normal life seemed to fade away as Claire heard a calm voice on the other end of the phone say, “Do you have them all?” Amelie. Cool, precise, perfectly in control.

“All except Jason,” Oliver said. “He’s on an errand. He’s not involved in this in any case.”

Silence for a few seconds, and then Amelie said, “I want you to know I take no pleasure in this. I have made it clear to you, Claire, that I value your service to me and to Morganville; that you are important to us. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Her throat felt dry and tight, and her skin cold.

“Michael,” Amelie continued, “I have spoken with you in private, but I will make this public: you must return to Morganville. This goes equally for Claire. You must return. There is no argument, no mitigation. Oliver understands this very well, and he is standing as my enforcer in this matter. No doubt the lights are very bright in Dallas, and Morganville seems far away. I assure you it is not. I don’t doubt you have spoken of running away, of securing your freedom, but you must understand: my reach is long, and my patience is not infinite. I would much rather your parents continue in blissful ignorance of their danger, Claire. And yours, Eve. And even yours, Michael—even though they have left Morganville, they remain under my control, and always will.”

“You bitch,” Shane muttered.

“Mr. Collins, I will tolerate much from the four of you, including your occasional rudeness. I will allow you a great deal of freedom and latitude. But make no mistake: I will not let you go free. Make your peace with it as you can. Hate me if you must. But you will come back to Morganville, or suffer the consequences. You of all people know that I am quite serious about that.”

Shane went pale, and Claire felt every muscle in his body draw tighter. “Yeah, I know,” he said hoarsely. “Found my mom floating in a bathtub full of her own blood. I know how serious you can get.”

Amelie was silent again, and then she said, “Morganville may not be paradise, and it may not be the future you believe you deserve. But in Morganville, you and your families will remain safe and alive while it is within my power to ensure it. I give you my word, as Founder, that this will be so. Is this understood?”
“You’re holding our families hostage,” Claire said. “We already knew that.”

“And I wanted you to hear it from my lips, so there would be no mistakes,” Amelie replied. “And now you have. I will expect you back tomorrow. Good night.”

Oliver shut the phone off and put it away. He said nothing to them, just moved out of the way. For a few seconds the four of them just stood there, and then Shane said, “So that’s it.”

“Yes,” Oliver said. “Tomorrow, we return. I suggest you make the most of the time you have tonight.” He turned to leave, and then looked back over his shoulder—just one, fast glance. “And I am sorry.”

Shane, without another word, took Claire’s hand and led her to his room.

In the morning, with the sunlight falling over the two of them as dawn rose on their last day of freedom, Shane rolled over to look at her, propped himself up on an elbow, and said, “You know I love you, right?”

“I know.”

“Because I suck at saying it,” he said. “It’s a work in progress, all this relationship stuff.”

She hadn’t really slept all night. She’d been too busy thinking, worrying, wondering. Imagining all kinds of futures. Imagining this moment. And she felt as if she were falling from a very tall building as she asked, “Shane? Are you—are you going to come back? To Morganville?”

Apart from Frank, his now-vampire dad, there was nobody Amelie could hold over his head ... nobody but Claire and Eve and Michael, and, anyway, Amelie had never really needed Shane. Claire needed him, though. With every heartbeat she needed him more.

He looked at her, holding the stare for so long it felt as if the fall would go on and on, falling forever....

And then he said, very quietly, “How can I not go back? How can I let you go, Claire? We all stay, or we all go back. I’m not letting you go on your own.” He touched a fingertip to her nose, startling a laugh out of her. “Somebody’s got to be your bodyguard.”

She kissed him, and their skins warmed together in the sunlight; silently, Shane raised her right hand to his lips, and kissed her fingers and kissed the claddagh ring glittering there, that promise of the future that had so much meaning for him, in the past.

And then, one more time, while they were still completely free, he told her how much he loved her. Afterward, going back to Morganville didn’t seem so dark.
As always, music drives the creative bus for me, so here are some songs that rocked this little road trip. Feed the artists, please. They deserve your support.

“Good 2 U”
“Fire”
“Guilty as Charged”
“Call in the Cavalry”
“Troubled Land”
“Luisa’s Bones”
“Looking Pretty, Pretty”
“Post Blue (Dave Bascombe Mix)”
“Running up that Hill”
“Sister Rosetta (Capture the Spirit)”
“Circle the Fringes”
“Nighttiming”
“I Can’t Do It Alone”
“Wish We Were Older”
“That Dress Looks Nice on You”
“Kill Kill”
“I Love You Good-bye”
“Prime Mover”
“I Don’t Live in a Dream”
“Down Boy”
“People C’mon”
“The Future’s Nothing New”
“Snakes and Lions”
“Gift”
“World Can’t Have Her”
Dave Mason
Daniel Lanois
Gym Class Heroes
The Shys
John Mellencamp
Crooked Fingers
TAB The Band
Placebo
Placebo
Noisettes
The Gutter Twins
Coconut Records
3OH3
Metro Station
Sufjan Stevens
Lizzy Grant
Thomas Dolby
Steve Stevens
Jackie Greene
Yeah Yeah Yeahs
Delta Spirit
The Alternate Routes
Melpo Mene
Curve
Cobra Verde
“Go My Way (The iPod Song)”
“Don’t Let the Devil Take Your Mind”
“Keeper”
“Lonely Ghosts”
“Mama Told Me (Not to Come)”
“2080”
“Wild Life”
“Architeuthis”
“On Fire”
“I’m Good, I’m Gone”
“Disappearing”
Bacon Brothers
Jackie Greene
Butterfly Boucher
O+S
Three Dog Night
Yeasayer
Bacon Brothers
Bacon Brothers
JJ Grey & Mofro
Lykke Li
Simon Collins

More playlists at www.rachelcaine.com
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In addition to the Morganville Vampires series, **Rachel Caine** is the author of the popular Weather Warden series, which includes *Ill Wind, Heat Stroke, Chill Factor, Windfall, Firestorm, Thin Air, Gale Force*, and *Cape Storm*. Her ninth Weather Warden novel will be released in August 2010. She also writes the Outcast Season series, which currently includes *Undone* and *Unknown*. Rachel and her husband, fantasy artist R. Cat Conrad, live in Texas with their iguanas, Popeye and Darwin.

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The Dead Girls’ Dance
Midnight Alley
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