



THE DEAD GIRLS' DANCE

THE MORGANVILLE VAMPIRES, BOOK TWO

RACHELCAINE

1

It didn't happen, Claire told herself. It's a bad dream, just another bad dream. You'll wake up and it'll be gone like fog....

She had her eyes squeezed tight shut. Her mouth felt dry, shriveled-up, and she was pressed against Shane's hot, solid side, curled up on the couch in the Glass House.

Terrified.

It's just a bad dream.

But when she opened her eyes, her friend Michael was still dead on the floor in front of her.

"Shut those girls up, Shane, or I will," Shane's father snapped. He was pacing the wooden floor, back and forth, hands clasped behind him. He wasn't looking at Michael's body, shrouded under a thick, dusty velvet curtain, but it was all Claire could see, now that she'd opened her eyes again. It was as big as the world, and it wasn't a dream, and it wasn't going away. Shane's dad was here, and he was terrifying, and Michael—

Michael was dead. Only Michael had already been dead, hadn't he? Ghostly. Dead during the day...alive at night...

Claire realized she was crying only when Shane's dad turned on her, staring with red-rimmed eyes. She hadn't felt that scared when she'd stared into vampire eyes...well, maybe once or twice, because Morganville was a scary place, generally, and the vampires were pretty terrifying.

Shane's father—Mr. Collins—was a tall, long-legged man, and his hair was wild and curly and going gray. Long enough to reach the collar of his leather jacket. He had dark eyes. Crazy eyes. A scruffy beard. And a huge scar running across his face, puckered and liver colored.

Yeah, definitely scary. Not a vampire, just a man, and that made him scary in whole different ways.

She sniffled and wiped her eyes and quit crying. Something in her said, Cry later; survive now. She figured that voice had spoken inside of Shane, too, because Shane wasn't looking at the velvet-covered sprawl of his best friend's body. He was watching his father. His eyes were red, too, but there were no tears.

Now Shane was scaring her, too.

“Eve,” Shane said softly, and then, louder, “Eve! Put a sock in it!”

Their fourth roommate, Eve, was collapsed in an awkward heap against the far wall by the bookcases, as far from Michael’s body as she could get. Knees up, head down, she was crying hard and hopelessly. She looked up when Shane yelled her name, and her face was streaked with black from running mascara, half her Goth white makeup gone. She had on her death’s-head Mary Jane shoes, Claire noticed. She didn’t know why that seemed important.

Eve looked completely lost, and Claire slipped off the couch and went to sit beside her. They put their arms around each other. Eve smelled of tears and sweat and some kind of sweet vanilla perfume, and she couldn’t seem to stop shaking. Shock. That was what they always said on TV, anyway. Her skin felt cold.

“Shhhh,” Claire whispered to her. “Michael’s okay. It’s all going to be okay.” She didn’t know why she said that—it was a lie; it had to be a lie; they’d all seen... what happened... but something told her it was the right thing to say. And sure enough, Eve’s sobbing slowed, then stopped, and she covered her face with shaking hands.

Shane hadn’t said anything else. He was still watching his dad, with the kind of intense stare most guys reserved for people they’d like to pound into hamburger. If his dad noticed, he clearly didn’t care. He continued to pace, up and down. The guys he’d brought with him—walking slabs of muscle in black motorcycle leather, shaved heads and tattoos and everything—were standing in the corners, arms folded. The one who’d killed Michael looked bored as he flipped the knife in his fingers.

“Get up,” Shane’s dad said. He’d stopped pacing, and was standing right in front of his son. “Don’t you dare give me any crap, Shane. I told you to stand up!”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Shane said, and slowly stood, feet slightly apart. Ready to take (or give) a punch, Claire thought. “Michael wasn’t any threat to you.”

“He’s one of them. Undead.”

“I said he wasn’t a threat!”

“And I say that you just don’t want to admit your friend’s turned freak of nature on you.” Shane’s dad reached out and awkwardly punched Shane on the shoulder. It was supposed to be a gesture of affection, Claire supposed. Shane just rode with the blow. “Anyway, done is done. You know why we’re here. Or do you need a reminder?”

When Shane didn’t answer, his father reached into his leather jacket and took out a handful of photographs. He threw them at Shane. They bounced off of Shane’s chest, and he reflexively tried to catch them, but some drifted free and fell to the wood floor. Some

slid over toward Claire and Eve.

“Oh God,” Eve whispered.

They were pictures of Shane’s family, Claire guessed—Shane as a cute little boy, arm around an even tinier little girl with a cloud of curly black hair. A pretty woman standing behind them, and a man she could barely recognize as Shane’s dad. No scar, back then. Hair cut short. He looked...normal. Smiling and happy.

There were other pictures, too. Eve was staring at one of them, and Claire couldn’t make any sense of it. Something black and twisted and—

Shane bent over and snatched it up, fumbling it back into the pile.

His house burned. He got out. His sister wasn’t so lucky.

OhGod, that twisted thing was Alyssa. That was Shane’s sister. Claire’s eyes filled up with tears, and she covered her mouth with both hands to hold in a scream, not because what was in the picture was gross—it was—but Shane’s sown father had made him look at it.

That was cruel. Really cruel. And she knew it wasn’t the first time.

“Your mother and sister are both dead because of this place, because of thevampires . You didn’t forget that, did you, Shane?”

“I didn’t forget!” Shane shouted. He kept trying to make the pictures fit into a neat stack, but he didn’t look at them at all. “I dream about them every night, Dad. Every night!”

“Good. It was you got this started. You’d better remember that, too. Can’t back out now.”

“I’m not backing out!”

“Then what’s all this crap, Things have changed, Dad ?” Shane’s dad mimicked him, and Claire wanted to punch him, never mind that he was about four times her size and probably a whole lot meaner. “You hook up with your old friends and next thing I know, you lose your nerve. That thing was Michael, right? The Glass kid?”

“Yes.” Shane’s throat worked hard, and Claire saw tears glitter in his eyes. “Yeah, it was Michael.”

“And these two?”

“Nobody.”

“That one looks like another vamp.” Shane’s father fixed his red-rimmed glare on Eve, and took a step toward where Claire and Eve were huddled on the floor.

“You leave her alone!” Shane dropped the pictures into a pile on the couch and jumped into his father’s path, fists clenched. His dad’s eyebrows raised, and he gave Shane a scar-twisted grin. “She’s not a damn vampire. That’s Eve Rosser, Dad. Remember Eve?”

“Huh,” his father said, and stared at Eve for a few seconds before shrugging. “Turned into a wannabe, then, just about as bad in my book. What about the kid?”

He was talking about Claire.

“I’m not a kid, Mr. Collins,” Claire said, and clambered to her feet. She felt awkward, all strings and wires, nothing working right. Her heart was hammering so hard, it hurt to breathe. “I live here. My name is Claire Danvers. I’m a student at the university.”

“Are you.” He didn’t make it a question. “You look a little young.”

“Advanced placement, sir. I’m sixteen.”

“Sweet sixteen.” Mr. Collins smiled again, or tried to—the scar pulled the right side of his mouth down. “Never been kissed, I’ll bet.”

She felt her face go red. Couldn’t stop it, or keep herself from looking at Shane. Shane’s jaw was set tight, muscles fluttering. He wasn’t looking at anything in particular.

“Oho! So it’s like that. Well, you watch yourself around the jailbait, my boy.” Still, Shane’s dad looked weirdly pleased. “My name’s Frank Collins. Guess you figured out that I’m this one’s father, eh? Used to live in Morganville. I’ve been gone a few years now.”

“Since the fire,” Claire said, and swallowed hard. “Since Alyssa died. And—Shane’s mom?” Because Shane had never said a word about her.

“Molly died later,” Mr. Collins said. “After we left. Murdered by the vamps.”

Eve spoke for the first time—a soft, tentative voice. “How did you remember? About Morganville, after you left town? I thought nobody did, once they left.”

“Molly remembered,” Mr. Collins replied. “Little bit at a time. She couldn’t forget Lyssa, and that opened the door, inch by inch, until it was all there. So we knew what we had to do. We had to bring it down. Bring it all down. Right, boy?”

Shane nodded. It didn’t look like agreement so much as a wish not to get smacked for disagreeing.

“So we spent time preparing, and then I sent Shane here back to Morganville to map the town for us, identify targets, do all the stuff we wouldn’t have time to do once we rolled in. Couldn’t wait any longer once he yelled for help, though. Came running.”

Shane looked sick. He wouldn’t look at Eve, or Claire, or Michael’s body. Or his father. He just—stared. There were tear tracks on his cheeks, but Claire couldn’t remember seeing him cry, really.

“What are you going to do?” Claire asked faintly.

“First thing, I guess we bury that,” Mr. Collins said, and nodded toward Michael’s shrouded body. “Shane, best you stay out of the way—”

“No! No, don’t you touch him! I want to do it!”

Mr. Collins gave him a long frowning look. “You know what we’re going to have to do”—he glanced at Eve and Claire—“to make sure he doesn’t come back.”

“That’s folklore, Dad. You don’t have to—”

“That’s the way we’re going to do things. The right way. I don’t want your friend coming back at me next time the sun goes down.”

“What is he talking about?” Claire whispered to Eve. Sometime in the last few minutes, Eve had gotten up to stand next to her, and their hands were clasped. Claire’s fingers felt cold, but Eve’s were like ice.

“He’s going to put a stake in his heart,” Eve said numbly. “Right? And garlic in his mouth? And—”

“You don’t need all the details,” Mr. Collins interrupted. “Let’s get this done, then. And once we’re finished, Shane’s going to draw us a map of where to find the high-rolling vampires of Morganville.”

“Don’t you know?” Claire asked. “You lived here.”

“Doesn’t work like that, little girl. Vamps don’t trust us. They move around—they have all kinds of Protection to keep themselves safe from retribution. But my boy’s found a way. Right, Shane?”

“Right,” Shane said. His voice sounded absolutely flat. “Let’s get this done.”

“But—Shane, you can’t—”

“Eve, shut up. Don’t you get it? There’s nothing we can do for Michael now. And if he’s

dead, it won't matter what we do to him. Right?"

"You can't!" Eve yelled it. "He isn't dead!"

"Well," Mr. Collins said, "I guess that'll be his problem when we plant a stake in him and chop off his head."

Eve screamed into her clenched fists, and collapsed to her knees. Claire tried to hold her up, but she was more solid than she looked. Shane instantly whirled and crouched next to her, hovering protectively and glaring at his father and the two motorcycle dudes standing guard over Michael's body.

"You're a bastard," he said flatly. "I told you, Michael was no threat to you before, and he's no threat now. You killed him already. Let it go."

For answer, Shane's father nodded to his two friends—accomplices?—who then reached down, seized hold of Michael's body, and dragged him out and around the corner to the kitchen door. Shane bolted back to his feet.

His father stepped into his path and backhanded him across the face, hard enough to stagger him. Shane put up his palms—defense, not offense. Claire's heart sank.

"Don't," Shane panted. "Don't, Dad. Please don't."

His father lowered the fist he'd raised for a second blow, looked down at his son, and turned away. Shane stood there, shaking, eyes cast down, until his father's footsteps moved away, toward the kitchen.

Then Shane spun around, lunged forward, and grabbed Claire and Eve by the arms. "Come on!" he hissed, and towed them both stumbling toward the stairs. "Move!"

"But—," Claire protested. She looked over her shoulder. Shane's father had gone to look out the window, presumably at whatever they were doing in the backyard (oh God) to Michael's body. "Shane—"

"Upstairs," he said. He didn't leave them much choice; Shane was a big guy, and this time he was using his muscle. By the time Claire got herself together, they were upstairs, in the hallway, and Shane was shoving open the door to Eve's room. "Inside, girls. Lock the door. I mean it. Don't open it for anybody but me."

"But—Shane!"

He turned to Claire, took hold of both of her shoulders in those big hands, and leaned forward to plant a warm kiss on her forehead. "You don't know these guys," he said. "You're not safe. Just—stay in there until I get back."

Eve, looking dazed, murmured, “You have to stop them. You can’t let them hurt Michael!”

Shane locked eyes with Claire, and she saw the grim sadness. “Yeah,” he said. “Well, that’s pretty much done. Just—I have to look out for you now. It’s what Michael wants.”

Before Claire could summon up anything else in protest, he pushed her back over the threshold and slammed the door. He banged on it once with his fist. “Lock it!”

She reached up and flipped the dead bolt, then turned the old-fashioned key, as well. She stayed where she was, because she could feel, somehow, that Shane hadn’t moved away.

“Shane?” Claire pressed herself against the door, listening. She thought she could hear his uneven breathing. “Shane, don’t let him hurt you again. Don’t.”

She heard a breathless sound that was more like a sob than a laugh. “Yeah,” Shane agreed faintly. “Right.”

And then she heard his footsteps moving away, down the hall to the stairs.

Eve was sitting on her bed, staring into space. The room smelled like a fireplace, thanks to the fire that had raged next door, in Claire’s room, but there was only some smoke damage, nothing really serious. And besides, with all the black Goth stuff everywhere, you couldn’t even really tell.

Claire sat down on the bed beside Eve. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Eve said. “I want to go look out the window. But I shouldn’t, right? I shouldn’t see what they’re doing.”

“No,” Claire agreed, and swallowed hard. “Probably not a good idea.” She rubbed Eve’s back gently and thought about what to do...and that wasn’t much. It wasn’t like allies were exactly falling off the trees around here.... Besides Shane, they had nobody else. Their second-best choice was a vampire.

How scary was that ?

Still, she could call Amelie . But that was a little like arming a nuclear weapon to take care of an ant problem. Amelie was so badass, the other badass vampires backed down without a fight. She’d said, I will make it known that you are not to be troubled. However, you must not further disturb the peace. If you do, and it is your fault, I will be forced to reconsider my decision. And that would be...

“Unfortunate,” Claire finished aloud, in a whisper. Yeah. Pretty unfortunate. And there was no way that this didn’t constitute disturbing the peace—or wouldn’t, as soon as Shane’s dad got rolling. He’d come to kill vampires, and he wasn’t going to be stopped

by any little considerations like, oh, his son's life and safety.

No, not a good idea to call Amelie .

Who else? Oliver? Oliver wasn't exactly at the top of Claire's Best Friends Forever list, although in the beginning she'd thought he was pretty cool, for an old guy. But he'd been playing her, and he was the second-most badass vamp in town. Who'd use them, and this situation, against Amelie if he could.

So no. Not Oliver, either. The police were bought and paid for by the vampires. Her teachers at school...no. None of them had impressed her as being willing to stand up to pressure.

Mom and Dad? She shuddered to think what would happen if she put in a frantic yell to them...For one thing, they'd already had their memories altered by Morganville's strange psychic field, or so she assumed, since they'd forgotten all about ordering her home for living off campus. With boys. Mom and Dad weren't exactly the kind of backup she needed, not up against Shane's dad and his bikers.

Her cousin Rex...now, there was an idea. No, Rex had been sent to jail three months ago. She remembered Mom saying so.

Face facts, Danvers . There's nobody. Nobody coming riding to the rescue.

It was her, Eve, and Shane against the world.

So the odds were about three billion to one.

2

It was a long, long day. Claire eventually stretched out on one side of the bed, Eve on the other, each wrapped in her own separate cocoon of misery and heartache. They didn't talk much. There didn't seem to be a lot to talk about.

It was almost dark when the doorknob rattled, sending Claire into a heart-pounding terror seizure; she advanced slowly, and whispered, "Who is it?"

"Shane."

She unlocked fast and opened up. Shane came in, head down, carrying a tray on which sat two bowls of chili—which made sense, because it was nearly the only thing Shane knew how to fix. He set it down on the edge of the bed, next to Eve, who was sitting like an unstuffed rag doll, limp with grief and dejection.

"Eat something," he said. Eve shook her head. Shane picked up a bowl and shoved it in her direction; she took it just to avoid wearing it, and glared at him.

Claire saw her expression change into something else. Blank at first, then horrified.

“It’s nothing,” Shane said as Claire came around to see. It wasn’t nothing. It was bruises, dark ones, spilling over his cheek and jaw. Shane avoided looking at her. “My fault.”

“Jesus,” Eve whispered. “Your dad—”

“My fault,” Shane snapped back, got up, and headed for the door. “Look, you don’t understand. He’s right, okay? I was wrong.”

“No, I don’t understand,” Claire said, and grabbed his arm. He pulled free without any effort at all and kept walking. “Shane!”

He paused in the doorway and looked back at her. He looked bruised, beaten, and sullen, but it was the desperation in his eyes that scared her. Shane was always strong, wasn’t he? He had to be. She needed him to be.

“Dad’s right,” he said. “This town is sick, it’s poisoned, and it’s poisoning us, too. We can’t let it beat us. We have to take them out.”

“The vampires? Shane, that’s stupid! You can’t! You know what’ll happen!” Eve said. She put the bowl of chili back on the tray and got off the bed, looking tear streaked and forlorn but more like herself. “Your dad’s crazy. I’m sorry, but he is. And you can’t let him drag you down with him. He’s going to get you killed, and Claire and me, too. He already—” She caught her breath and gulped. “He already got Michael. We can’t let him do this. Who knows how many people are going to get hurt?”

“Like Lyssa got hurt?” Shane asked. “Like my mom? They killed my mom, Eve! They were willing to burn us up in this house yesterday, don’t forget, and that included Michael.”

“But—”

“This town is bad,” Shane said, and looked at Claire, almost pleading. “You understand, right? You understand that there’s a whole world out there, a whole world that isn’t like this?”

“Yes,” she said faintly. “I understand that. But—”

“We’re doing this. And then we’re getting out of this place.”

“With your father?” Eve managed to put a whole dictionary of contempt into that. “I don’t think so. I look good in black, but not so great in black and blue.”

Shane flinched. “I didn’t say—look, just the three of us. We get out of town while my dad and the others...”

“We run?” Eve shook her head. “Brilliant. And when the vamps have a big party and roast your dad and his buddies, what then? Because they’re definitely going to come looking for us. Nobody escapes who had any part in killing a vampire, you know that. Unless you really believe that your dad and his idiot muscle are going to be able to take down hundreds of vamps, all their human allies, the cops, and, for all I know, the U.S. Marines.”

“Eat your damn chili,” Shane said.

“Not without something to drink. I know your chili.”

“Fine! I’ll get you Cokes!” He slammed the door behind him. “Lock it!”

Claire did. This time, Shane didn’t linger in the hall; she heard the hard thump of his boots as he went downstairs.

“Did you have to do that?” she asked Eve. She leaned against the door and folded her arms.

“Do what, exactly?”

“He’s confused. He lost Michael, his dad’s got him—”

“Say it, Claire: his dad’s got him brainwashed. Worse. I think his dad’s beaten the fight out of him. He’s certainly beaten the brains out of him.” Eve wiped at her face impatiently; there were more tears streaming down her cheeks, but it was more like water escaping under pressure than real sobs. “His dad wasn’t always like this. He used to be—well, not nice, because he was kind of a drunk, but better. Way better than this. After Lyssa he just went—crazy. I didn’t know about Shane’s mom. I thought she just, you know...killed herself. Shane never really said.”

Claire hadn’t heard any footsteps on the stairs, but she heard and felt a soft knock through the door, and then a rattle of the doorknob. She unlocked and swung it open, holding out her hands for the Cokes she expected Shane to thrust at her...

...and there was a grinning, smelly mountain of a man in the doorway. The one who’d stabbed Michael.

Claire let go of the door and stumbled back, thinking only an instant later, Stupid, that was stupid—you should have slammed it... but it was too late; he was already inside, closing the door behind him.

And locking it.

She looked in terror at Eve. Eve lunged forward, grabbed Claire, and hustled her around to the far side of the bed...and stepped in front of her. Claire looked frantically around for a weapon. Anything. She picked up a heavy-looking skull, but it was plastic, light and utterly useless.

Eve yanked a field hockey stick from under her bed.

“Let’s do this nice,” the man said. “That little stick isn’t going to do you any good, and it’s only going to piss me off.” His lips widened in a grin, revealing big, square, yellow teeth. “Or get me all excited.”

Claire felt sick and faint. This wasn’t like Shane coming into her room the other night, not at all. This was the flip side of men, and although she’d heard about it—you couldn’t grow up without that—she’d never really seen it. Some jerks, sure, but there was something horrible about this guy. Something that looked at her and Eve like pieces of meat he was about to devour.

“You’re not touching us,” Eve said, and raised her voice. “Shane! Shane, get your ass up herenow !”

There was a touch of panic in her voice, although she was putting on a good front. Her hands were shaking where they gripped the hockey stick.

The man glided around the end of the bed, prowling like a cat. Six feet tall, at least, and as broad as two of Eve, maybe bigger. His bare arms were ripped with muscle. His blue eyes looked shallow and hungry.

Claire heard the thump of footsteps outside, and then abang as Shane fetched up against the locked door. He rattled the knob and pounded hard. “Eve! Eve, open up!”

“She’s busy!” the biker yelled, and laughed. “Oh yeah,gonna bereal busy.”

“No!” Shane screamed it, and the door shook with the strength of the blows he put into it. “Stay away from them!”

Eve backed Claire up, all the way to the window. She took a swipe at the biker, who just stepped back out of range, still laughing.

“Get your dad!” she yelled at Shane. “Make him do something!”

“I’m not leaving you!”

“Do it, Shane,now !”

Footsteps pounded down the hall. Claire swallowed, feeling suddenly even more alone

and vulnerable. “Do you think his dad will come?” she whispered. Eve didn’t answer.

“Swear to God, you come near us and—”

“Like this?” The biker sidestepped a slash from the hockey stick, grabbed it on the way, and yanked it out of Eve’s hands. He tossed it over his shoulder to land on the floor with a clatter. “This near enough? Whatchagonna do, doll girl? Cry all over me?”

Claire hid her eyes as the biker reached out for Eve with one tattooed hand.

“No,” Eve said breathlessly. “I’m going to let my boyfriend beat the crap out of you.”

There was a dull thunk of wood meeting flesh, and a howl. Then another, harder thunk, and a crash as a body hit the floor.

The biker was down. Claire stared at him in disbelief, then looked past him, to the figure standing there with the field hockey stick in both hands.

Michael Glass. Back from the dead, again, a gorgeous blond avenging angel, breathing hard. Flushed with anger, blue eyes flashing. He glanced at the two girls, making sure they were okay, and then put the blade of the hockey stick on the biker’s throat. The biker’s eyes fluttered and tried to open, but didn’t make it. He relaxed into unconsciousness.

Eve flew toward Michael, leaped over the biker’s body, and fastened herself around Michael like she was trying to be sure he was all there. He must have been; he winced from the force of the impact, then kissed her on the top of her head without looking away from the man lying limp at their feet.

“Eve,” he said, and then glanced at her and gentled his tone. “Eve, honey, go open the door.”

She nodded, stepped away, and followed instructions. Michael handed her the hockey stick, grabbed the biker by the shoulders, and towed him quickly out into the hallway. He closed the door again, locked it, and said, “Right, here’s the story—Eve, you knocked him out with the hockey stick and—”

He didn’t finish, because Eve grabbed him and pushed him back against the door, wrapping herself around him like a Goth-girl coat. She was crying again, but silently; Claire could see her shoulders shaking. Michael sighed, put his arms around her, and bent his blond head to rest against her dark one.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “You’re okay, Eve. We’re all okay.”

“You were dead!” she wailed, muffled by the fact that her face was still pressed against his chest. “Damn you, Michael, you were dead, I saw them kill you, and—they—”

“Yeah, it wasn’t too pleasant.” Something passed fast and hot across Michael’s eyes, the reflection of a horror that Claire thought he didn’t want to remember or share. “But I’m not a vampire, and they can’t kill me like a vampire. Not while the house owns my soul. They can do pretty much anything to my body, but it just—gets fixed.”

The prospects of that made Claire sick, like standing on the edge of a huge and unexpected drop. She stared at Michael, wide-eyed, and saw he understood the same things she did: that if Shane’s father and his merry band of thugs found out, they might decide to test that out. Just for fun.

“That’s why I’m not here,” Michael said. “You can’t tell them. Or Shane.”

“Not tell Shane?” Eve pulled back. “Why not?”

“I’ve been watching,” he said. “Listening. I can do that when I’m, you know—”

“A ghost?” Claire supplied.

“Exactly. I saw—” Michael didn’t go on, but Claire thought she knew what he’d been about to say.

“You saw Shane’s dad hit him,” she said. “Right?”

“I don’t want to make him keep secrets from his dad. Not now.”

Footsteps pounding up the stairs, then slowing when they hit the hallway. Michael touched his finger to his lips and eased out from Eve’s frantic grip. He pressed his lips silently to hers.

“Hide!” Claire whispered. He nodded and opened the closet, rolled his eyes at the mess inside, and forced his way in. Burying himself in piles of clothes, Claire hoped. Miranda had been trapped in that closet after trying to knife Eve, before the house had caught fire; she’d really done a job of messing things up. Eve was going to be furious.

Both girls jumped at a hard blow on the door. Eve hastily unlocked the door and stepped back as it flew open, and Shane charged through.

“How—?” He was breathing hard, and he had a crowbar in his hand. He’d have broken through the locks, Claire realized, if he’d had to. She came toward him slowly, trying to figure out what he was feeling, and he dropped the crowbar and wrapped his arms around her, lifting her up off the ground. His face was buried in the crook of her neck, and the warm, fast pump of his breath on her skin made her shiver in raw delight. “Oh Christ, Claire. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Not your fault,” Eve said. She held out the field hockey stick. “Look! I hit him. Um,

twice.”

“Good.” Shane kissed Claire’s cheek and let her slide back down to the floor, but he kept hold of her arms. His eyes, bright under the bruises and swelling, surveyed her carefully. “He didn’t hurt you? Either of you?”

“I hit him!” Eve repeated brightly, and brandished the stick again for emphasis. “So, no, he didn’t hurt us. We hurt him. You know, all alone. Without any help. Um, so...where’s your dad? He charges to the rescue pretty slow.”

Shane closed the door and locked it again as the biker in the hall groaned and rolled over on his side. He didn’t answer, which was answer enough. Shane’s dad needed his bikers more than he needed Eve or Claire. They were expendable. Worse, they’d probably just become rewards.

“We can’t stay here,” Eve said. “It isn’t safe. You know that.”

Shane nodded, but he looked bleak. “I can’t come with you.”

“Yes, you can! Shane—”

“He’s my dad, Eve. He’s all I’ve got.”

Eve snorted. “Yeah, well, what you’ve got I’d give back.”

“Sure, you just walked away from your folks—”

“Hey!”

“Didn’t even care what happened to them—”

“They didn’t care what happened to me !” Eve almost shouted it. Suddenly, the hockey stick in her hands wasn’t so much for display. “Leave my family out of this, Shane—you don’t have a clue. Not a clue .”

“I’ve met your brother,” Shane shot back.

They both went quiet. Dangerously quiet. Claire cleared her throat. “Brother?”

“Leave it alone, Claire,” Eve said. She sounded dead calm, not at all like herself. “You really don’t want to get into it.”

“Bones in every family closet in Morganville,” Shane said. “Yours rattle pretty loud, Eve. So don’t judge me.”

“Here’s a thought: why don’t you get the hell out of my room, you asshole !”

Shane picked up his crowbar, opened the door, and stepped outside. He reached down and hauled the biker to his feet, and shoved him toward the stairs. The biker went, still groaning and weaving.

Claire peeked through the gap in the door until she was sure they were gone, then nodded to Eve, who dumped the hockey stick and opened the closet door. “Oh, crap,” she sighed. “I hope nothing’s torn in there. It isn’t easy to get clothes in this town. Michael?”

Claire looked over her shoulder. A pile of black and red netting stirred, and Michael’s blond head appeared. He sat up, brushing off Goth, and silently held up a pair of black lace panties. Thong.

“Hey!” Eve yelped, and grabbed them from his fingers. “Personal! And...laundry!”

Michael just smiled. For a guy who’d been stabbed, hacked up, and buried less than twenty-four hours ago, he looked remarkably composed. “I’m not even going to ask what you wore them with,” he said. “It’s more fun to imagine.”

Eve snorted and gave him a hand up. “Shane’s taken our new boyfriend downstairs. What now? We can’t exactly shimmy down a drainpipe.”

“Not in fishnets, you can’t,” he agreed, straight-faced. “Get changed. The less attention you attract from these guys, the better.”

Eve grabbed a pair of blue jeans from the floor of the closet, and a baby-doll T that must have been a gift; it was aqua blue, with a sparkle rainbow over the chest. Very not Eve. She glared at Michael and tapped her foot.

“What?” he asked.

“Gentlemen turn around. Or so I’ve heard.”

He faced the corner. Eve stripped off her spiderweb-lace shirt and the red top beneath, and stepped out of the red and black tartan skirt. The fishnets were garters—totally sexy. “Not a word,” she warned Claire, and rolled them down. She didn’t take her eyes off of Michael. There was red burning hot in her cheeks.

Dressing took thirty seconds, and then Eve grabbed up the scattered clothes, the garter belt, and the fishnets, and stuffed them into the closet before saying, “Okay, you can turn around.”

Michael did, leaning against the wall with his arms folded. He was smiling slightly, eyes half-closed.

“What?” Eve demanded. She was still blushing. “Don’t I look stupid enough now?”

“You look great,” he said, and crossed to kiss her lightly on the lips. “Go wash your face.”

Eve went to the bathroom and shut the door. Claire said, “You’ve got some kind of a plan, right? Because we don’t. Well, Shane thinks we should let his dad do whatever, and run, but Eve doesn’t think it’s a good idea—”

“It’s suicide,” Michael said flatly. “Shane’s dad is an idiot, and he’s going to get Shane killed. You, too.”

“But you’ve got a plan.”

“Yeah,” Michael said. “I have a plan.”

When Eve came back from the bathroom, Michael put his finger to his lips again, unlocked the door, and walked them across the hall. He reached behind the picture frame and pushed the hidden button, and the paneling creaked open to reveal one of the secret rooms of the Glass House. Amelie’s room, Claire remembered. The one the vampire liked the best, probably because there were no windows and the only exit was from a concealed button. How weird was it to be living in a house built—and, really, owned—by a vampire?

“Inside,” Michael whispered. “Eve. Cell phone?”

She patted her pockets, held up a finger, and dashed back to her room. She came back holding it up. Michael hustled them up the narrow staircase, and the door hissed shut behind them. No knob on this side, either.

Upstairs, the room was just as Claire had last seen it—elegant Victorian splendor, a little dusty. This room, like all of the house, seemed to have a sense of something present in it, something just out of sight. Ghosts, she thought. But Michael seemed to be the only ghost, and he was as normal as could be.

Then again, the house was alive, kind of, and it was keeping Michael alive, too. So maybe not so normal.

“Phone,” Michael said, and held out his hand as he sat down on the couch. Eve handed it over, frowning.

“Just who are you planning to call?” she asked. “Ghostbusters? It’s not like we have a lot of options....”

Michael grinned at her and pressed three keys, then activated the call. The response was nearly immediate. “Hello, 911? This is Michael Glass, 716 Lot Street. I have intruders in

my house. No, I don't know who they are, but there are at least three of them.”

Eve's mouth flopped open in surprise, and Claire blinked, too. Calling the police seemed so...normal. And so wrong.

“You might want to tell the officers that this house and its occupants are under the Founder's Protection,” he said. “They can verify that, I guess.”

He smiled and hung up a moment later, handed the phone back, and looked very smug.

“And Shane?” Claire asked. “What about Shane?”

Michael's self-assurance faded. “He's making his own choices,” he said. “He'd want me to look out for the two of you first. And the only way I can do that is to get these guys out of my house. I can't protect you twenty-four/seven—in the daytime, you're vulnerable. And I'm not going to float around and watch while you get—” He didn't finish, but Claire—and Eve—knew where that was going. They both nodded. “Once they're out of the house, I can keep them from coming back, unless Shane lets them in. Or one of you, though I can't see that happening.”

More headshakes, this time more violent. Michael kissed Eve's forehead with obvious affection, and ruffled Claire's hair. “Then this is the best way,” he said. “It'll shake them up, anyway.”

“I'm sorry,” Eve said in a small voice. “I didn't think—I'm so used to thinking of the cops as enemies, and besides, they were just trying to kill us. Right?”

“Things change. We have to adapt.”

Michael was pretty much the king of that, Claire thought. He'd gone from a serious musician with his whole focus on making a name for himself, to a part-time ghost trapped in a house, to a part-time ghost trapped in a house forced to take in roommates to make the bills. And now he was trying to save their lives, and he still couldn't escape himself.

Michael was just so...responsible. Claire couldn't even imagine how someone got that way. Maturity, she guessed, but that was a lot like a road through fog to her. She had no idea how she was supposed to get there. Then again, she supposed nobody really did know, and you just stumbled through it.

They waited.

After about five minutes there was a wail of sirens in the distance—very faint, because the room was well soundproofed. That meant the sirens were close. Maybe even by the house already. Claire rose and pressed the button concealed in the lion's-head arm of the couch, and the sirens immediately increased in volume as the secret door opened. She hurried down the steps and peered out. No one in the hallway, but from downstairs she

heard angry shouting, and then the sound of a door banging open. Motorcycle engines roaring, tires squealing.

“They’re going,” she yelled up, and pelted out into the hallway, down the stairs, breathless to find Shane.

Shane was up against the wall, and his father was holding him by the throat. Outside, police sirens suddenly cut off.

“Traitor,” Shane’s dad said. He had a knife in his hand. “You’re a traitor. You’re dead to me.”

Claire skidded to a stop, found her voice, and said, “Sir, you’d better get out of here unless you want to end up talking to the vampires.”

Shane’s father turned his face toward her, and his expression was twisted with fury. “You littlebitch,” he said. “Turning my son against me.”

“No—” Shane grabbed at his father’s hand, trying to pry it free. “Don’t—”

Claire backed up. For a second, neither Shane nor his dad moved, and then Shane’s father let him go, and raced for the kitchen door. Shane dropped to his knees, choking, and Claire went to him...

...just as the front door banged open, splintering around the lock, and the police charged in.

“Oh man,” Shane whispered, “that sucks. We just fixed that door.”

Claire clung to him, terrified, as the police swarmed through the house.

3

Shane wasn’t talking to the cops. Not about his dad, and not about anything. He just sat like a lump, eyes down, and refused to answer any questions from the human patrol officers; Claire didn’t know what to say—or, more importantly, what not to—and stammered out a lot of “I don’t know” and “I was in my room” sort of answers. Eve—more self-possessed than Claire had ever seen her—stepped in to say that she’d heard the intruders downstairs breaking things, and she’d pulled Claire into her room and locked the door for protection. It sounded good. Claire supported it with a lot of nodding.

“Is that so?” A new voice, from behind the cops, and they parted ranks to admit two strangers. Detectives, it looked like, in sport jackets and slacks. One was a woman, frost pale, with eyes like mirrors. The other one was a tall man with gray close-cropped hair.

They were wearing gold badges on their belts. So. Detectives.

Vampiredetectives.

Eve had gone very still, hands folded in her lap. She looked carefully friendly. “Yes, ma’am,” she said. “That’s what happened.”

“And you have no idea who these mysterious intruders might have been,” said the male vamp. He looked—scary. Cold and hard and scary. “Never saw them before.”

“We didn’t see them at all, sir.”

“Because you were—locked in your room.” He smiled, and flashed fang. Clear warning. “I can smell fear. You give it off like the stench of your sweat. Delicious.”

Claire fought back an urge to whimper. The human cops had backed up a step; one or two looked uncomfortable, but they weren’t about to interfere with whatever was about to happen. Which—was nothing, right? There were rules and stuff. And they were the victims!

Then again, she didn’t suppose the vamps cared all that much for victims.

“Leave them alone,” Shane said.

“It speaks!” the woman said, and laughed. She sank down into a crouch, elegant and perfectly balanced, and tried to peer into Shane’s face. “A knight-errant, defending the helpless. Charming.” She had an old-world accent, sort of like blurred German. “Do you not trust us, little knight? Are we not your friends?”

“That depends,” Shane said, and looked right at her. “You take your orders from Oliver, or the Founder? Because if you touch us—any of us—you have to take it up with her. You know who I mean.”

She lost her amused expression.

Her partner made a noise, halfway between a bark of laughter and a growl. “Careful, Gretchen, he snaps. Just like a half-grown puppy. Boy, you don’t know what you’re saying. The Founder’s mark is on the house, yes, but I see no bands on your wrists. Don’t be stupid and make bold claims you can’t back up.”

“Bite me, Dracula,” Shane snapped.

Gretchen laughed. “A wolf pup,” she said. “Oh, I like him, Hans. May I have him, since he’s a stray?”

One of the uniformed cops cleared his throat. “Ma’am? Sorry, but I can’t allow that. You want to file the paperwork, I’ll see what I can do, but—”