

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 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.

CHAPTER ONE

Eve Rosser's high-pitched scream rang out through the entire house, bouncing off every wall, and, like a taser applied to the spine, it brought Claire out of a pleasant, drowsy cuddle with her boyfriend..

'Oh my God, what?' She half jumped, half fell off the couch. Mortal danger was nothing new around their unofficial, four-person frat house – their screwed-up frat house. In fact, mortal danger didn't even merit a full-fledged scream these days. More of a raised eyebrow. 'Eve? *What?*'

The screaming went on, accompanied by thumping that sounded like Eve was kickboxing the floor.

'Damn,' Shane Collins said as he scrambled to his feet, as well. 'What the hell is wrong with that girl? Was there a sale at Morbid R Us and nobody told her?'

Claire smacked him on the arm, but only out

of reflex; she was already heading for the hallway, where the scream echoed loudest. She would have moved faster, but there wasn't panic in that scream after all.

It was more like...joy?

In the hallway, their roommate Eve was having a total fit – screaming, bouncing in hoppy little circles like a demented Goth bunny. It was made especially strange by her outfit: flouncy black sheer skirt, black tights with neon pink skulls, a complicated-looking corset with buckles, and her clumpy Doc Martens boots. She'd worn her hair in pigtails today, and they whipped wildly around as she jumped and spun and did a wiggling victory dance.

Claire and Shane stood without saying a word, and then exchanged a look. Shane silently raised a finger and made a wide, slow circle at his temple.

Claire, eyes wide, nodded.

The screaming dissolved into excited little yips, and Eve stopped randomly bouncing around. Instead, she bounced directly at them, waving a piece of paper with so much enthusiasm that Claire was lucky to be able to tell it *was* a piece of paper.

'You know,' Shane said in an entirely too-calm voice, 'I kind of miss the old Morganville, when it was all scary monsters and dodging death. This

would *never* have happened in the old Morganville. Too silly.'

Claire snorted, reached out, and grabbed Eve's flailing wrists. 'Eve! What?'

Eve stopped bouncing, and grabbed Claire's hands, crushing the paper in the process. From the jittery pulse of her muscles, she still wanted to jump, but she was making a great effort not to. She tried to say something, but she just couldn't. It came out as a squeal that only a dolphin would have been able to interpret.

Claire sighed and took the paper from Eve's hand, smoothed it out, and read it aloud. '*Dear Eve,*' she said. '*Thank you for auditioning for our production of A Streetcar Named Desire. We are very pleased to offer you the role of Blanche DuBois—*'

She was interrupted by more bouncing and screaming. Defeated, Claire read the rest and handed it on to Shane.

'Wow,' he said. 'So, that's the town production, right? The annual?'

'I've been auditioning *forever,*' Eve blurted out, dark eyes as wide as an animé character's. 'I mean, *forever.* Since I was twelve. Best I ever got was one of the Russian dancers for the Christmas performance of *The Nutcracker.*'

'You,' Shane said. 'You dance.'

Eve looked offended. 'You've been to parties with me. You know I dance, jackass.'

'Hey, there's a difference between shaking your ass at a rave and *ballet*.'

Eve levelled a black-nailed finger in his direction. 'I'll have you know I was good on pointe, and anyway, that isn't the issue. I got the part of *Blanche*. In *Streetcar*. Do you know how wicked huge that is?'

'Congratulations,' Shane said. He actually sounded like he meant it, to Claire's ears at least, and she was pretty sure he really did. He and Eve yanked each other's chains hard enough to leave marks, but they really did care. Of course, Shane was a guy, and he couldn't leave it at that, so he continued. 'Maybe I should go out for it. If they picked you, they'll love my Marlon Brando impression.'

'Honey, nobody likes your Brando. He sounds like your Adam Sandler. Which is also terrible, by the way.' Eve was calming down, but she was smiling like a lunatic, and Claire could tell she was on the trembling verge of another jumping fit – which was OK, really. Eve excited was quite a show. 'Oh my God, I've got to find out about rehearsals...'

'Page two,' Claire said, and pointed at the paper. On the back was a neatly printed schedule of what looked like an awful lot of dates and times. 'Wow, they're really working it, aren't they?'

‘Of course they are,’ Eve said absently. ‘The whole town turns out for – oh, damn, I’m going to have to call my boss. I’m going to have to switch shifts for some of these...’

She hustled off, frowning at the paper, and Claire sighed and leant her back against one wall of the hallway while Shane took the other. He raised his eyebrows. She did, too.

‘Is it really that big a deal?’ she asked him.

Shane shrugged. ‘Depends,’ he said. ‘Everybody does go, even most of the vampires. They like a good play, although they’re usually not so hot on the musicals.’

‘Musicals,’ she repeated blankly. ‘Like what? *Phantom of the Opera*?’

‘Last one I saw was *Annie Get Your Gun*. Hey, if they’d put on *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, I’d definitely go, but somehow I don’t think they’d have the guts.’

‘You don’t like musicals? Unless they involve transvestites and chain saws?’

Shane pointed both thumbs back towards his chest. ‘Guy? In case you forgot?’

That made Claire smile and tingle in deep, secret places. ‘I remember,’ she said, as indifferently as she could, which was not very. ‘And I’m changing the subject, because I need to get to work.’ A glance at

the window told her that it was an ice-cold spring afternoon, with the freezing Texas wind whipping old leaves down the street in miniature tornadoes. 'And so do you, soon.'

Shane pushed off and crossed the distance fast, pinning her in place with his hands flat against the wall on either side of her. Then he bent his elbows and leant in, and kissed her. The warmth spread from his lips to hers, then out in a rushing summer heat that moved over her entire body in a wave, and left her feeling like she was glowing inside.

It went on a long time, that kiss. She finally put her palms flat against his chest with a wordless (and mostly weak) sound of pleading.

Shane backed off. 'Sorry. I just needed something to get me through another eight hours of the exciting world of food service.' He was working at Bryan's Barbecue, which wasn't a bad gig as jobs in Morganville went. It gave him all the barbecue he wanted, which meant a lot of free brisket and ham and sausage for the rest of them when he carted home a goody bag. The job also brought decent money, according to Shane, and as a plus, he got to use a sharp knife most of the day, carving meats. Apparently, that was cool. He and some of the other guys practised throwing them at targets in the back when the boss wasn't looking.

Claire kissed him on the nose. ‘Bring home some brisket,’ she said. ‘And some of that sauce. I’ve had enough chilli dogs this week to last me a lifetime.’

‘Hey, my chilli dogs are the best in town.’

‘It’s a really small town.’

‘Harsh,’ he said, but he was smiling. The smile faded as he said, very seriously, ‘You be careful.’

‘I will,’ she promised.

Shane played with knives, but she had the dangerous job.

She worked with vampires.

Claire’s job was lab assistant to a vampire mad scientist, which never made sense when she thought of it that way, but it was still accurate. She hadn’t *meant* to become Igor to Myrnnin’s Frankenstein, but she supposed at least it was a paying, steady income.

Plus, she learnt a lot, which meant more to her than the money.

She’d been on job leave, with permission, for a couple of months while the vampires got themselves back together and fixed the damage that had been done, at least physically, during the tornado that ripped through town. Or the vampire war that had burnt down part of it. Or the rioting by the human population, that had left some scars. Come to think of it, the construction was going pretty well, all

things considered. So she hadn't been to the lab for a while – today was, in Myrnin's words from his note, the 'grand reopening.' Although how you had a grand reopening of a hidden lair beneath a tumbledown shack, Claire had no idea. Was there cake?

The alley next to the Day House – a virtually identical twin of the Glass House where Claire lived, only with different curtains and nicer porch furniture – looked the same. The Day House was a shining white Victorian house, and the alley was narrow, dark, and seemed to get narrower as you went along, like a funnel.

Or a throat. Ugh. She wished she hadn't thought of that.

The shack at the end of the alley – a leaning, faded wreck, tired and abandoned – didn't look any different, although there was a shiny new lock on the door. Claire sighed. Myrnin had forgotten to give her a key, of course. That didn't present much of a problem, though; she tested a couple of boards and found one that easily slid aside enough for her to crawl in.

Typical Myrnin planning.

Inside, most of the space was taken up by a set of stairs that went down, like a subway station. There was a bright glow coming up from it.

'There'd better be cake,' she said, mostly to herself,

and hitched her backpack higher on her shoulder as she headed down into the lab.

The last time she'd been here, it had been totally destroyed, with hardly a stick of furniture or a piece of glass left intact. Someone – most likely Myrnin himself – had been busy with a broom and maybe a dump truck to sweep out the mounds of shattered glass, scrapped lab equipment, broken furniture, and (worst of all, to Claire's mind) ravaged books. The place had always had a mad-scientist-meets-Jules Verne flair to it, but now it *really* did – in a totally good way. There were new worktables, many of them wood and marble, a few shiny metal. New electric lights had been installed to replace the odd collection of oil lamps, candles, and bulbs that Thomas Edison might have wired together; now they had indirect lighting behind elegant fan-shaped shields. Modern, but retro-cool.

The floor was still old flagstone, but the hole Myrnin had punched in it the last time she'd been here had also been repaired, or at least covered with a rug. She hoped there was something *under* the rug, but with Myrnin, you really could never tell. She made a mental note to poke it before she stepped on it.

Myrnin himself was shelving things in a new bookcase that must have been ten feet tall, at least.

It came with its own little rolling ladder – no, as Claire looked around, she realised that the entire room was surrounded by the same tall bookcases, and the ladder was on a metal rail so it could slide all around. Neat.

‘Ah,’ her boss said, and looked down at her through the little square antique glasses perched on the end of his long, straight nose. ‘You’re late.’ He was five feet up in the air, on the top step of the ladder, but he hopped off as if it were pretty much nothing, landed light as a cat on his feet, and straightened his vest with an absentminded little tug.

Myrnin wasn’t especially tall, but he was just... strangely cool. Long, curling, lush black hair that fell to his shoulders. His face was vampire-pale, but it suited him, somehow, and he had the kind of sharp face that would have made him a star, if he’d wanted to be in the movies. Big, expressive dark eyes, and full lips. Definitely cover-model material.

If the lab was neater, so was Myrnin. He was still favouring old-timey clothes, so the coat was dark green velvet, flaring out and down to his knees. The ensemble also included a white shirt, bright blue vest, a pocket watch chain gleaming against the satin, tight black pants, and...

Claire found herself staring at his feet, which were in bunny slippers.

Myrnin looked down. 'What?' he asked. 'They're quite comfortable.' He lifted one to look at it, and the ears wobbled in the air.

'Of course they are,' she said. Just when she thought Myrnin was getting his mental act together, he'd do something like that. Or maybe he was just messing with her. He liked to do that, and his dark eyes were fixed on her now, assessing just how weirded-out she was.

Which, on the grand scale of zero to Myrnin, wasn't much.

'I like a good bunny slipper. I'm surprised you didn't get the ones with fangs,' she said, and scanned the room. 'Wow, the place looks fantastic.'

Myrnin's eyes brightened. 'They have some with fangs? Excellent.' He got a faraway look for a moment, then snapped back to the here and now. 'Thank you. I've had quite a time ordering all the instruments and alembics I need, but did you know that you can find almost anything on the new computer network, the Interweb? I was quite amazed.'

Myrnin hadn't paid much attention to the past hundred years or so. Claire wasn't too surprised he'd discovered the Internet, though. *Wait until he finds the porn.* That would be a very uncomfortable conversation. 'Yeah, it's great; we like it a lot,' she said. 'So, you said you needed me today...?'

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ he said, and walked over to one of the tidy lab tables, one laden with boxes and wooden chests. ‘I need you to go through these, please, and see what we can use here.’

‘What’s in them?’

‘No idea,’ he said as he sorted through a stack of ancient-looking envelopes. ‘They’re mine. Well, I think they are. They might have once belonged to someone named Klaus, but that’s another story, and one you don’t need to worry about just now. Go through them and see if there’s anything useful. If not, you can throw it all away.’

He didn’t seem to care one way or the other, which was another odd mood swing from him. Claire almost preferred the old Myrnin, when the illness he (and the other vampires) suffered from had made him genuinely loony, and desperate to regain control of himself. This version of Myrnin was both more in control, and less predictable. Not violent or angry, just – never quite where she expected him to be. For instance, Myrnin had always struck her as a keeper, not a tosser. He was sentimental, mostly – more than a lot of the other vamps – and he seemed to really enjoy having his things around him.

So what was this sudden impulse for spring cleaning?

Claire dumped her battered canvas backpack in a

chair and found a knife to slide through the ropes that held the first box closed. She immediately sneezed, because even the *rope* was dusty. It was a good thing she took the time to grab a tissue and blow her nose, because as she was doing that, a fat, black spider crawled out from under the cardboard flap and began to scuttle down the side of the box.

Claire gave out a little scream and jumped back. In the next fast heartbeat, Myrnin was there, bending over the table, examining the spider with his face only inches from it. ‘It’s only a hunting spider,’ he said. ‘It won’t hurt you.’

‘So not the point!’

‘Oh, pish. It’s just another living creature,’ Myrnin said, and put his hand out. The spider waved its front legs uncertainly, then carefully stepped up on his pale fingers. ‘Nothing to be frightened of, if handled properly.’ He lightly stroked the furry back of the thing, and Claire nearly passed out. ‘I think I’ll call him Bob. Bob the spider.’

‘You’re insane.’

Myrnin glanced up and smiled, dimples forming in his face. It should have looked cute, but his smiles were never that simple. This one carried hints of hunger, and arrogance. ‘But I thought that was part of my charm,’ he said, and lifted Bob the spider carefully to take him off to another part of the lab.

Claire didn't care what he did with the thing, so long as he didn't wear it as an earring or a hat or something.

Not that she'd put that past him.

She was *very* careful as she folded back the old cardboard. No relatives of Bob appeared, at least. The contents of the box were a tangle of confusion, and it took her time to sort out the pieces. There were balls of ancient twine, some coming undone in stiff spirals; a handful of what looked like very old lace, with gold edging; two carved, yellowing elephants, maybe ivory.

The next layer was paper, loose paper made stiff and brittle and dark with age. The writing on the pages was beautiful, precise, and very dense, but it wasn't Myrnnin's hand; she knew how he wrote, and it was far messier than this. She began reading the first paper.

My dear friend,

I have been in New York for some years now, and missing you greatly. I know that you were angry with me in Prague, and I do not blame you for it. I was hasty and unwise in my dealings with my father, but I honestly do believe that he left me little choice. So, dear Myrnnin, I beg you, undertake a journey and come to visit. I know travel no longer agrees with

you, but I think if I spend another year alone, I will give up entirely. I would call it a great favour if you would visit.

It was signed, with an ornate flourish, *Amelie*. As in, Amelie, Founder of Morganville, and Claire's ultimate – although she didn't like to think of it this way – boss/owner.

Before Claire could open her mouth to ask, Myrnin's cool white fingers reached over her shoulder and plucked the page neatly from her hand. 'I said determine if we can use these things, not read my private mail,' he said.

'Hey – was that why you came to America? Because she wrote to you?'

Myrnin looked down at the paper for a moment, then crumpled it into a ball and threw it in a large plastic trash bin against the wall. 'No,' he said. 'I didn't come when she asked me. I came when I had to.'

'When was that?' Claire didn't bother to protest how unfair it was that he wanted her to not *read* things to figure out if they needed them. Or that since he'd kept the letter all this time, he should think before throwing it away.

She just reached for the next loose page in the box.

‘I arrived about five years after she wrote to me,’ Myrnin said. ‘In other words, too late.’

‘Too late for what?’

‘Are you simply going to badger me with personal questions, or are you planning to do what I told you to do?’

‘Doing it,’ Claire pointed out. Myrnin was irritated, but that didn’t bother her, not any more. She didn’t take anything he said personally. ‘And I do have the right to ask questions, don’t I?’

‘Why? Because you put up with me?’ He waved his hand before she could respond. ‘Yes, yes, all right. Amelie was in a bad way in those days – she had lost everything, you see, and it’s hard for us to start over and over and over. Eternal youth doesn’t mean you don’t get tired of the constant struggles. So...by the time she wrote to me again, she had done something quite insane.’

‘What?’

He made a vague gesture around him. ‘Look around you.’

Claire did. ‘Um...the lab?’

‘She bought the land and began construction on the town of Morganville. It was meant to be a refuge for our people, a place we could live openly.’ He sighed. ‘Amelie is quite stubborn. By the time I arrived to tell her it was a fool’s errand, she was

already committed to the experiment. All I could do was mitigate the worst of it, so that she wouldn't get us all slaughtered.'

Claire had forgotten all about the box (and even Bob the spider), so focused was she on Myrnin's voice, but when he paused, she remembered, and reached in again to pull out an ornate gold hand mirror. It was definitely girly, and besides, the glass was shattered in the middle, only a few silvery pieces still remaining. 'Trash?' she asked, and held it up. Myrnin plucked it out of her hand and set it aside.

'Most definitely not,' he said. 'It was my mother's.'

Claire blinked. 'You had a—' Myrnin's wide stare challenged her to just *try* to finish that sentence, and she surrendered. 'Wow, OK. What was she like? Your mother?'

'Evil,' he said. 'I keep this to keep her spirit away.'

That made...about as much sense as most things Myrnin said, so Claire let it go. As she rummaged through the stuff in the box – mostly more papers, but a few interesting trinkets – she said, 'So, are you looking for something in particular, or just looking?'

'Just looking,' he said, but she knew that tone in his voice, and he was lying to her. The question was,

was he lying for a reason, or just for fun? Because with Myrnin, it could go either way.

Claire's fingers closed on something small – a delicate gold chain. She pulled, and slowly, a necklace came out of the mess of paper, and spun slowly in the light. It was a locket, and inside was a small, precise portrait of a Victorian-style young woman. There was a lock of hair woven into a tiny braid around the edges, under the glass.

Claire rubbed the old glass surface with her thumb, frowning, and then recognised the face staring back at her. 'Hey! That's Ada!'

Myrnin grabbed the necklace, stared for a moment at the portrait, and then closed his eyes. 'I thought I'd lost this,' he said. 'Or perhaps I never had it in the first place. But here she is, after all.'

And just like that, Ada flickered into being across the room. She wasn't alive, not any more. Ada was a two-dimensional image, a kind of projection, from the weird steampunk Frankenstein of a computer located beneath Myrnin's lab; that computer was the *actual* Ada, including parts of the original girl. Ada's image still wore Victorian skirts and a high-necked blouse, and her hair was up in a complicated bun, leaving wisps around her face. She didn't look quite right – more like a really good computer generation of a person than a person. 'My picture,' she said. Her

voice was weirdly electronic because it used whatever speakers were around; Claire's phone became part of the surround sound experience, which was so creepy that she automatically reached down and switched it off.

Ada sent her a dark look as the ghost swept through things in her way – tables, chairs, lights.

'Yes,' Myrnin said, as calmly as if he spoke to electronic ghosts every day – which, in fact, he did. 'I thought I'd lost it. Would you like to see it?'

Ada stopped, and her image floated in the air in the middle of an open expanse of the floor without casting a shadow. 'No,' she said. Without Claire's phone adding to the mix, her voice came out of an ancient radio speaker in the back of the lab, faint and scratchy. 'No need. I remember the day I gave it to you.'

'So do I.' Myrnin's voice remained quiet, and Claire couldn't honestly tell if what they were talking about was a good memory, or a bad one.

'Why were you looking for it?'

'I wasn't.' That, Clare was almost sure, was another lie. 'Ada, I asked you to please stop coming here, except when I call you. What if I'd had other visitors?'

Ada's delicate, not-quite-living face twisted into an expression of contempt. 'Who would visit *you*?'

'An excellent point.' His tone cooled and hardened

and took on edges. ‘I don’t want you coming here unless I call you. Are we understood, or do I have to come and alter your programming? You won’t thank me for it.’

She glared at him with eyes made of static and ice, and finally turned – a two-dimensional turn, like a cardboard cutout – and flashed at top speed through the solid wall.

Gone.

Myrnin let out a slow breath.

‘What the heck was that?’ Claire asked. Ada creeped her out, and besides, Ada *really* didn’t like her. Claire was, in some sense, a rival for Myrnin’s attention, and Ada...

Ada was kind of in love with him.

Myrnin looked down at the necklace and the portrait lying flat in his palm. For a moment, he didn’t say anything, and Claire honestly thought he wouldn’t bother. Then, without looking up, he said, ‘I did care for her, you know.’ She thought he was saying it to himself more than to her. ‘Ada wanted me to turn her, and I did. She was with me for almost a hundred years before...’

Before he snapped one day, Claire thought. And Ada died before he could stop himself. Myrnin had told her the first day she’d met him that he was dangerous to be around, and that he’d gone through a lot of assistants.

Ada had been the first one he'd killed.

'It wasn't your fault,' Claire heard herself saying. 'You were sick.'

Myrnin's shoulders moved just a little, up and down – a shrug, a very small one. 'It's an explanation, not an excuse,' he said, and looked up at her. She was a little startled by what she saw – he almost looked, well, human.

And then it was gone. He straightened, slid the necklace into the pocket of his vest, and nodded towards the box. 'Continue,' he said. 'There may yet be something more useful than sentimental nonsense in there.'

Ouch. She didn't even like Ada, and that still stung. She hoped the computer – the computer that held Ada's still-sort-of-living brain – wasn't listening.

Fat chance.

The afternoon passed. Claire learnt to scan the sheets of paper instead of read them; mostly, they were just letters, an archive of Myrnin's friendship with people long gone, or vampires still around. A lot were from Amelie, over the years – interesting, but it was all still history, and history equalled *boring*.

It wasn't until she was almost at the bottom of the second box that she found something she didn't recognise. She picked up the odd-shaped thing – sculpture? – and sat it on her palm. It was metal,

but it was surprisingly light. Kind of a faintly rusty sheen it had, but it definitely wasn't iron. It was etched with symbols, some of which she recognised as alchemical. 'What's this?'

Before the words were out of her mouth, her palm was empty, Myrnin was across the room, and he was turning the weird little object over and over in his hands, fingers gliding over every angle and trembling on the outlined symbols. 'Yes,' he whispered, and then louder, 'Yes!' He bounced in place, for all the world like Eve with her Blanche DuBois note, and stopped to wave the thing at Claire. 'You see?'

'Sure,' she said. 'What is it?'

His lips parted, and for a second she thought he was going to tell her, but then some crafty little light came into his eyes, and he closed his hand around the sharp outlines of the thing. 'Nothing,' he purred. 'Pray continue. I'll be – over here.' He moved to an area of the lab where he had a reading corner with a big leather armchair and a stained glass lamp. He carefully moved the chair so its back was towards her, and plunked himself down with his bunny-slipped feet up on a hassock to examine his find.

'Freak,' she sighed.

'I heard that!'

'Good.' Claire sawed through the ropes on the last box. It exploded.