

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

‘Oh, *this* doesn’t sound like a good idea,’ Claire said, looking down at the paper that had been shoved into her hand by a passing student. She paused in the shade of the Science Building porch to read it. Only idiots stood around in full sun at Texas Prairie University in the middle of the afternoon – well, idiots and football players – so Claire angled herself into a corner where she wouldn’t get buffeted by the streams of people pouring out after the end of class. There were a few hardy salmon trying to swim upstream, but she didn’t think they’d make it.

People all around her were carrying the same goldenrod sheet of paper she had – stuffed into pockets, crammed into books, held in hands.

She was one of the last ones to get pamphleted, she guessed. She was just a little surprised anybody had

bothered at all, given the fact that she, Claire Danvers, was small for her age, looked younger than her mid-seventeen-going-hard-on-eighteen years, and tended to blend into the crowd at the best of times. This even though her ultra-fashion-conscious housemate Eve – with all the best possible intentions – had made her sit down in the bathroom and get her brown hair all highlighted so it glowed red in the sun. Still. She just wasn't...noticeable.

She'd learnt it the hard way: early admission to college *sucked*.

Someone stopped next to her in the relative quiet of the shade. It was a tall, good-looking boy, and he dropped his backpack on the tiled floor with a thump as he looked over the same flyer she held. 'Huh,' he said, and glanced over at her. 'You going?'

Once she got over the dazzle of his good looks (truthfully, it didn't take that long; her boyfriend was just as cute), she checked his wrist. He was a Morganville native; he was wearing a bracelet around one wrist made out of copper and leather, with an ornate-looking symbol engraved on the central plate. It meant he was vampire property – property of Ming Cho, who was one of those vampires that Claire had never directly run into. She liked it that way. Really, her circle of vampire acquaintances was way, way too large as it was.

‘Hey,’ he said again, and rattled the paper in front of her face. ‘Anybody in there? You going?’

Claire looked down at the paper again. It had a bunch of pictures and symbols on it, no words. A musical note, which meant a rave was on the menu. Some pictures of party favours, which meant that mostly illegal stuff was going to be floating around. The address was coded in the form of a riddle, which she solved easily enough; it was an address on South Rackham, among all those decaying warehouses that used to be thriving businesses. The time was pretty obvious: midnight. That was what the graphic of the witch was for – the witching hour. The date was several days out.

‘Not interested,’ she said, and handed him her copy. ‘Not my thing.’

‘Too bad. It’s going to be out there.’

‘That’s why.’

He laughed. ‘You a training-wheels partyer?’

‘I’m not much of a partyer at all,’ Claire said, and couldn’t help but smile; he had a really nice laugh, one that made you want to laugh with it. He wasn’t laughing *at* her, at least. That was different. ‘Hi, by the way. I’m Claire.’

‘Alex,’ he said. ‘You coming from Chem?’

‘No, Computational Physics.’

‘Oh,’ he said, and blinked. ‘And I have no idea what

that is. Right, carry on, Einstein. Nice to meet you.'

He picked up his backpack and moved off before she could even explain about many-body and nonlinear physical systems. *Yeah, that would have really impressed him. Instead of walking away, he'd have been running.*

She felt a little hurt, but only a little. At least he'd talked to her. That was ninety-nine per cent better than her usual score with college guys, except the ones who wanted to do something terrible to her. *Those* guys were very chatty.

Claire squinted against the bright sunshine and looked out onto the courtyard. The big open brick space was clearing, although there were, as always, a knot of people around the central column where flyers were posted for rides, rooms, parties, and various services and causes. She had time before her next class – about an hour – but hiking all the way in the unseasonably late heat to the University Centre coffee bar didn't sound attractive. She'd get there, have maybe half an hour, and then she'd have to walk another long way to get to her next class.

TPU really needed to look into mass transit.

The Science Building was closer to the edge of campus than most others, so it was actually a shorter walk to one of the four exit gates, across the street, and then to Common Grounds, the off-campus coffee

house. Of course, it was owned by a vampire, and not a nice one, either, but in Morganville, you couldn't be too choosy about those kinds of things if you valued your caffeine. Or your blood.

Besides, Oliver could mostly be trusted. Mostly.

Decision made, Claire grabbed her heavily laden book bag and set off in the withering sunshine for Vampire Central.

It was always funny to her now – walking through town she could tell which people were 'in the know' about Morganville, and which weren't. The ones who weren't mostly looked bored and unhappy, stuck in a nothing-doing small town that rolled up the sidewalks at dusk.

The ones who did know still looked unhappy, but in that hunted, haunted way. She didn't blame them, not at all; she'd been through the entire adjustment cycle, from shock to disbelief to acceptance to misery. Now she was just...comfortable. Surprising, but true. It was a dangerous place, but she knew the rules.

Even if she didn't always *obey* the rules.

Her cell phone rang as she was crossing the street – the *Twilight Zone* theme. That meant it was her boss. She looked down at the screen, frowned, and shut it off without answering. She was pissed at Myrnin, again, and she didn't want to hear him go on, again, about why she was wrong about the machine they were building.

He wanted to put a human brain in it. So not happening. Myrnin was crazy, but normally it was a good crazy, not a creepy crazy. Lately, he seemed to be pushing the far end of the creep-o-meter, though. She wondered if she seriously ought to get some vampire psychologist to look at him or something. They probably had someone who'd been around when Dr Freud was just finishing medical school.

Common Grounds was blessedly dim and cool, but mercilessly busy. There wasn't a free table to be had, which was depressing; Claire's feet hurt, and her shoulder was about to dislocate from the constant pull of her book bag. She found a corner and dumped the weight of knowledge (potential, anyway) with a sigh of relief and joined the line at the order window. There was a new guy working the counter, again, which didn't surprise Claire much; Oliver seemed to go through employees pretty quickly. She wasn't sure if that was just his strict nature, or whether he was eating them. Either one was possible, but the latter wasn't likely, at least. Oliver was more careful than that, even if he didn't really want to be.

It took about five minutes to reach the head of the line, but Claire put in her order for a café mocha without much trouble, except that the new guy spelt her name wrong on the cup. She moved on down the counter, and when she looked up, Oliver was staring

at her from behind the espresso machine as he pulled shots. He looked the same as always – aging hippie, greying hair pulled back in a classy-looking ponytail, one gold stud in his right ear, a coffee-splattered tie-dyed apron, and eyes like ice. With all the hippie-flavoured details, you didn't tend to notice the pallor of his face, or the coldness of his stare, right away unless you already knew him.

In the next second, he smiled, and his eyes changed completely, like another person had just stepped into his body – the friendly coffee-shop guy he liked to pretend to be. 'Claire,' he said, and finished dumping shots into her mocha cup. 'What a nice surprise. Sorry about the lack of seating.'

'I guess business is good.'

'Always.' He knew how she liked the drink, and added whipped cream and sprinkles without asking before handing it over. 'I believe the frat boys by the window are about to leave. You can get a seat if you hurry.'

He was right; she could see the pre-leaving preparations going on. Claire nodded her thanks and grabbed her bag, pushing between chairs and apologising her way to the table so that she arrived just as the last frat boy grabbed his stuff and headed out the door. She was one of four aimed for the vacancy, and missed it by the length of one outstretched, well-manicured hand.

‘Excuse me, *our* table,’ Monica Morrell said, looking down at her with unconcealed delight. ‘The junior skank section is over there, by the trash. Beat it.’

The mayor of Morganville’s sister sank down on one of the four chairs, flipping her shiny dark hair back over her shoulders; she’d added some blond highlights to it again, but Claire didn’t think they did her any favours. She’d accessorised with arm candy, though, in the form of a big linebacker-style guy with one of those faces that was beefy but still handsome. He was blond, which seemed to be Monica’s new type, and (Claire knew from the one class she’d shared with him) dumb, which was *always* Monica’s type. He was carrying Monica’s coffee, which he put down in front of her before taking a seat next to her, close enough to drape his big arm around her shoulders and stare down her cleavage.

It would have been the safe thing to just back off and let Monica claim her petty victory, but Claire was really not in the mood. She wasn’t afraid of Monica anymore – well, not normally – and the last thing she wanted to do was let Monica spoil the one thing she’d been looking forward to during the entire walk over: a decent seat in which to enjoy her drink.

So Claire put her café mocha down at the third place and sat down, just ahead of Jennifer, who was making for the space. Gina, Monica’s other ever-

present girlfriend/minion, had already taken the last seat.

Monica, oddly, didn't say anything. She stared at Claire as if she couldn't quite figure out what the hell *that* was doing sitting down at her table, and then, once she got over the shock, she smiled, as if it occurred to her that maybe this could be fun. In a nasty sort of way. Her new temporary boyfriend didn't seem to be noticing any of it as he smirked and did a virtual high-five with some friends across the room.

Jennifer stood there glaring down at Claire, clearly not sure what to do, and Claire was acutely aware that she had her back to the girl. Never a good plan. She didn't trust *any* of them, but she trusted Jennifer these days least of all. Gina had kind of discovered humanity, in a vague sort of way, and Monica...well, Monica could usually be counted on to do what was good for Monica.

Jennifer was unpredictable, and six of the worst kinds of crazy. Gina was mean, and Monica could be vicious, but Jennifer didn't seem to have any sense of boundaries at all. Plus, Jennifer had been the first one of the three to push her. Claire hadn't forgotten that.

Claire sensed a movement at her back, and almost ducked, but she forced herself not to flinch. *Nothing will happen, not here. Not in front of Oliver.* It wasn't that Oliver was fond of her, exactly, only that he didn't

like conflict inside of his business that he, himself, hadn't started.

Monica's eyes went to Jennifer – wide and a little odd, as if Jennifer spooked her, too. 'Jesus, Jen, get a grip,' she said, which made Claire want to turn around and see if the other girl was getting out a knife, but she managed to resist. 'Just get another chair. It's not rocket science.'

Jennifer's tone of voice made it clear she was still glaring at the back of Claire's head. 'There aren't any.'

'Well? Go scare somebody out of one. It's what you do.'

That was cold, even for Monica, and Claire suddenly felt uneasy about this. Maybe she should just...move on. She didn't want to be in the middle, because if Monica and Jennifer really went at it, the one in the middle was going to get killed.

But before she could decide what to do, she heard Jennifer walking away, towards a team of people studying in the corner with books and calculators and notes spread on every available table inch. She zeroed in on the biggest guy, tapped him on the shoulder, and whispered in his ear. He stood up. She grabbed his chair and carried it back with her, as he stood there in complete bafflement.

It was, Claire realised, a really good strategy. The

guy didn't seem like the type to come and pick a fight over something that small, especially with a girl of Jennifer's size (and reputation). So he finally shrugged and stood there awkwardly, resigned to his fate.

Jennifer jammed the chair in between Monica and Claire and sat down. Monica and Gina clapped, and Jennifer, finally, stopped glaring and grinned, proud to have earned their approval.

It was just...sad.

Claire shook her head. She still wanted to sit down and rest, but it really wasn't worth the small victory to be part of this. She stood up, grabbed her chair, and towed it across the crowded room to slide it next to the guy Gina had stolen the chair from, who was still standing. 'Here,' she said. 'I'm leaving anyway.'

Now he *really* looked confused. So did Monica and her Monickettes, as if the concept of givebacks had never crossed their path before. Claire sighed, shifted the weight of her backpack, and prepared to leave, mocha in hand.

'Hey!' Monica's grip on her elbow dragged her to a stop. 'What the hell? I want you to stay!'

'Why?' Claire asked, and jerked her arm free. 'So you can needle me for an hour? Are you really that bored?'

Monica looked even *more* confused. Nobody ever turned down being part of the queen bee's inner circle.

After that second of vulnerability, though, her face hardened. ‘Don’t diss me, Danvers. I’m warning you.’

‘I’m not dissing you,’ Claire sighed. ‘I’m ignoring you. There’s a difference. Dissing you implies I think you’re actually important.’

As she walked out, she heard someone behind her laugh and clap. They were quickly hushed, but it still warmed her just a little. She didn’t often get up in Monica’s grille that directly, but she was sick of the games. Monica just needed to move on and find somebody else to poke her pins into.

The mocha was still delicious. Maybe even just a little bit *more* delicious for being outside in the open air, come to think of it. Claire nodded to a few people she knew on the street, all of them permanent residents, and strolled down the block. She wasn’t in the mood to shop for clothes, but the little, faded bookstore farther down beckoned her.

Book Mad was a dusty hole-in-the-wall, crammed floor to ceiling with stacks of volumes in – as far as Claire had ever been able to tell – only a vague sense of order. Generally, non-fiction was at the front and fiction at the back, but you really could never tell. The stacks never seemed to get any smaller, nor was the dust ever disturbed, but she was always finding new stuff she hadn’t seen before.

That was weirdly entertaining.

‘Hi, Claire,’ said the proprietor, Dan, a tall guy about her father’s age. He was thin and a little nerdy, but that might just have been the glasses, which were either wickedly retro or seriously lame; Claire could never decide. He had on a funny T-shirt, as usual. Today’s featured a cartoon figure running from a giant T-rex that said underneath, Exercise: some motivation required. She tried not to smile, but lost the battle. It really *was* funny. ‘Got some physics stuff that just came in. It’s over there.’ He gestured vaguely off into the distance. Claire nodded.

‘Hey,’ she said. ‘Where do you get the books? I mean, they’re old. Some of them are really kind of ancient.’

He shrugged and looked down at the antique register on the counter, and brushed some dust off the keys. ‘Oh, you know. Around.’

‘From a storage room in the library? Maybe on the fourth floor?’ She had him. He looked up at her, eyes narrowing. ‘I’ve been in there. I was wondering what they were going to do with all that stuff once they were done with it. So, who gives you the books?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Dan said, and all the warmth was gone suddenly. He looked uncomfortable and suspicious, and the funny T-shirt didn’t fit his mood at all. ‘Let me know if you find anything you want.’

The fourth floor of the school’s library had been

a locked maze of boxes of old books, gathered from who-knew-where by the vampires. At the time Claire had visited – well, broken in – vampires (no doubt reporting to Amelie, the town's Founder) had been combing through looking for one *particular* book. She'd wondered what they'd planned to do with all the rest once their quest was finished.

Naturally, it turned out Amelie was making money off of the extra books. Vampires were nothing if not practical.

As Claire was thumbing through the dusty stacks, squinting to read faded titles, occasionally sneezing from the smell of old paper, she found a slim, leather-bound volume that was still in pretty good condition. No title on the spine, so she pulled it out and looked at the front. Nothing on the front, either.

Inside, on the first page under a sheet of old onionskin, was a black-and-white photograph of Amelie. Claire blinked and took her time looking; yes, it really was her. The Founder of Morganville looked young and fragile, with her white-gold hair piled up in a complicated style on top of her head that showed off her very long, elegant neck. She wore a black dress, something from the 1800s, Claire guessed, with lots of sleeve and tons of skirts and petticoats. There was something about her eyes – the photograph had made them even lighter than the icy grey they usually were.

It was deeply spooky.

Claire flipped a page and read the title:

A HISTORY OF MORGANVILLE

ITS IMPORTANT CITIZENS AND EVENTS

A CHRONICLE OF OUR TIMES

She blinked. Surely they hadn't meant for *this* to end up in the used bookstore, where anybody could pick it up and find it. She'd never seen anything like it before.

And, of course, she *had* to have it. She'd been burning up with curiosity about Amelie ever since she'd met her; the Founder seemed to have so many secrets that it was hard to know where they started and stopped. Even though Amelie had, from time to time, helped her out, and had given her Protection that had saved her life at one time, Claire really didn't know that much about her, except that she was old, regal, and scary.

The pencilled price on the inside of the cover was only five dollars. She quickly found a few more obscure science titles, buried the history in the stack, and hauled it up to the front.

Dan snorted. 'You're never going to cram all that in your backpack.'

'Yeah, probably not,' she agreed. 'Could I have a sack?'

'What do I look like, Piggly Wiggly? Hang on.' He

rooted around behind the counter, sending up choking clouds of dust that made even *him* cough, and finally handed over a battered old canvas bag. She started counting out money, and he quickly flipped open the books and added up the totals. He wasn't paying attention, which was good; he just added it up and said, 'Twenty-seven fifty.'

That was an awful lot, pretty much all she had at the moment, but she kept smiling and handed it over. As soon as the cash had left her palm, she grabbed the bag and started stuffing things inside.

'What's your hurry?' he asked, counting out the fives and ones. 'It's not close to sundown.'

'Class,' she said. 'Thanks.'

He nodded, opened the register, and put the cash inside. She felt him watching her all the way to the door. It occurred to her that she didn't know which vampire owned this business, or how he (or she) might feel about the sale of the book...but she couldn't worry about that now.

She really *did* have class.