

CHAPTER ONE

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, shrivelled-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

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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 realised 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 grey. 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 coloured.

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!'

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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 make-up 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 smelt 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 OK. It's all going to be OK.' 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

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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 towards Claire and Eve.

'Oh God,' Eve whispered.

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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 recognise 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 burnt. He got out. His sister wasn't so lucky.

Oh *God*, 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 *own 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 the *vampires*. 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!'

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‘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 towards 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.

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'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

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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 towards 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—'

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'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

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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 – defence, not offence. 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, towards the kitchen.

Then Shane spun around, lunged forward, and

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grabbed Claire and Eve by the arms. 'Come on!' he hissed, and towed them both stumbling towards 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 leant 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

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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 smelt 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 OK?'

'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

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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

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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.