Midnight Alley

Rachel Caine

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

The instant the phone rang at the Glass House, Claire knew with a psychic flash that it had to be her mother.

Well, it wasn't so much a psychic flash as simple logic. She'd told Mom that she would call days ago, which she hadn't, and now, of course, it could only be her mother calling at the most inopportune moment.

Hence: had to be a call from Mom.

'Don't,' her boyfriend – she couldn't believe she could actually call him that, *boyfriend*, not a boy friend – Shane murmured without taking his mouth off of hers. 'Michael will get it.' And he was giving her a very good argument in favour of ignoring the phone, too. But somewhere in the back of her mind that little voice just wouldn't shut up.

She slid off of his lap with a regretful sigh, licked her damp, tingling lips, and dashed off in the direction of the kitchen door.

Michael was just rising from the kitchen table to head for the phone. She beat him to it, mouthing a silent apology, and said, 'Hello?'

'Claire! Oh my goodness, I've been worried sick, honey. We've been trying to call you on your cell for days, and—'

Crap. Claire rubbed her forehead in frustration. 'Mom, I sent you guys an email, remember? My cell got lost; I'm still working on getting another one.' Best not to mention how it had got lost. Best not to mention anything about how dangerous her life had become since she'd moved to Morganville, Texas.

'Oh,' Mom said, and then, more slowly, 'Oh. Well, your father forgot to tell me about that. You know, he's the one who checks the email. I don't like computers.'

'Yes, Mom, I know.' Mom really wasn't *that* bad, but she was notoriously nervous with computers, and for good reason; they had a tendency to short out around her.

Mom was still talking. 'Is everything going all right? How are classes? Interesting?'

Claire opened the refrigerator door and retrieved a can of Coke, which she popped open and chugged to give herself time to think what, if anything, to tell her parents. *Mom, there was a little trouble. See, my boyfriend's dad came to town with some bikers and killed people, and nearly killed us, too. Oh, and*

the vampires are angry about it. So to save my friends, I had to sign a contract, so now I'm basically the slave of the most badass vampire in town.

Yeah, that wouldn't go over well.

Besides, even if she said it, Mom wouldn't understand it. Mom had been to Morganville, but she hadn't really seen. People usually didn't. And if they did, they either never left town or had their memories wiped on the way out.

And if by some chance they started to remember, bad things could happen to them. Terminally bad things.

So instead, Claire said, 'Classes are great, Mom. I aced all my exams last week.'

'Of course you did. Don't you always?'

Yeah, but last week I had to take my exams while worrying that somebody was going to stick a knife in my back. It could have had an effect on my GPA. Stupid to be proud of that…'Everything's fine here. I'll let you know when I get the new cell phone, OK?' Claire hesitated, then asked, 'How are you? How's Dad?'

'Oh, we're fine, honey. We miss you is all. But your father's still not happy about your living in that place, off campus, with those older kids…'

Of all the things for Mom to remember, she had to remember *that*. And of course Claire couldn't tell her *why* she was living off campus with

eighteen-year-olds, especially when two of them were boys. Mom hadn't got around to mentioning the boys yet, but it was just a matter of time.

'Mom, I told you how mean the girls were to me in the dorm. It's better here. They're my friends. And really, they're great.'

Mom didn't sound too convinced. 'You're being careful, though. About those boys.'

Well, that hadn't taken long. 'Yes, I'm being careful about the boys.' She was even being careful about Shane, though that was mostly because Shane never forgot that Claire was not quite seventeen, and he was not quite nineteen. Not a huge age difference, but legally? Huger than huge, if her parents got upset about it. Which they definitely would. 'Everybody here says hello, by the way. Ah, Michael's waving.'

Michael Glass, the second boy in the house, had settled down at the kitchen table and was reading a newspaper. He looked up and gave her a wide-eyed, *no-you-don't* shake of his head. He'd had a bad enough time of it with her parents the last time, and now…well, things were even worse, if that was possible. At least when he'd met them, Michael had been half-normal: fully human by night, an incorporeal ghost by day, and trapped in the house twenty-four/seven.

For Morganville, that *was* half-normal.

In order to help get Shane out of trouble, Michael had made a terrible choice – he'd gained

his freedom from the house and obtained physical form at the time, but now he was a vampire. Claire couldn't tell if it bothered him. It had to, right? But he seemed so…normal.

Maybe a little too normal.

Claire listened to her mother's voice, and then held out the phone to Michael. 'She wants to talk to you,' she said.

'No! I'm not here!' he stage-whispered, and made waving-off motions. Claire wiggled the phone insistently.

'You're the responsible one,' she reminded him. 'Just try not to talk about the—' She mimed fangs in the neck.

Michael shot her a dirty look, took the phone, and turned on the charm. He had a lot of it, Claire knew; it wasn't just parents who liked him, it was…well, everybody. Michael was smart, cute, hot, talented, respectful…nothing not to love, except the whole undead aspect. He assured her mother that everything was fine, that Claire was behaving herself – his eye roll made Claire snort cola up her nose – and that he was watching out for Mrs Danvers's little girl. That last part was true, at least. Michael was taking his self-appointed older-brother duties way too seriously. He hardly let Claire out of his sight, except when privacy was required or Claire slipped off to class without an escort – which was as often as possible.

'Yes ma'am,' Michael said. He was starting to look a little strained. 'No ma'am. I won't let her do that. Yes. Yes.'

Claire had pity on him, and reclaimed the phone. 'Mom, we've got to go. I love you both.'

Mom still sounded anxious. 'Claire, are you sure you don't want to come home? Maybe I was wrong about letting you go to MIT early. You could take the year off, study, and we'd love to have you back home again…'

Weird. Usually she calmed right down, especially when Michael talked to her. Claire had a bad flash of Shane telling her about his own mother, how her memories of Morganville had started to surface. How the vampires had come after her to kill her because the conditioning didn't stick.

Her parents were in the same boat now. They'd been to town, but she still wasn't sure just how much they really knew or understood about that visit – it could be enough to put them in mortal danger. She had to do everything she could to keep them safe. That meant not following her dreams to MIT, because if she left Morganville – assuming she could even get out of town – the vampires would follow her, and they'd either bring her back or kill her. And the rest of her family, too.

Besides, Claire *had* to stay now, because she'd signed a contract pledging herself directly to Amelie, the town's Founder. The biggest, scariest

vampire of them all, even if she rarely showed that side. At the time, she'd been Claire's only real hope to keep herself and her friends alive.

So far signing the contract hadn't meant a whole lot – no announcements in the local paper, and Amelie hadn't shown up to collect on her soul or anything. So maybe it would just pass by…quietly.

Mom was still talking about MIT, and Claire didn't want to think about it. She'd dreamt of going to a school like MIT or CalTech her whole life, and she'd been smart enough to do it. She'd even got early acceptance. It was drastically unfair that she was stuck in Morganville now, like a fly in a spider's web, and for a few seconds she let herself feel bitter and angry about that.

Nice, the brutally honest part of her mocked. *You'd sacrifice Shane's life for what you want, because you know that's what would happen. Eventually, the vampires would find an excuse to kill him. You're not any better than the vampires if you don't do everything you can to prevent that.*

The bitterness left, but regret wasn't following bitterness any time soon. She hoped Shane never knew how she felt about it, deep down.

'Mom, sorry, I've got to go; I have class. I love you… Tell Dad I love him, too, will you?'

Claire hung up on her mother's protests, heaved a sigh, and glanced at Michael, who was looking a little sympathetic.

'That's not easy, talking to the folks,' he offered. 'Sorry.'

'Don't you ever talk to your parents?' Claire asked, and slid into the chair at the small breakfast table across from him. Michael had a cup of something; she was afraid it was blood for a second, but then she smelt coffee. Hazelnut. Vampires could, and did, enjoy food; it just didn't sustain them.

Michael looked suspiciously good this morning – a little colour in his face, an energy to his movements that hadn't been there last night.

He'd had more than coffee this morning. How did that happen, exactly? Did he sneak off to the blood bank? Was there some kind of home delivery service?

Claire made a mental note to check into it. Quietly.

'Yeah, I call my folks sometimes,' Michael said. He folded the newspaper – the local rag, run by vampires – and picked up a smaller, rolled bundle of letter-sized pages secured by a rubber band. 'They're Morganville exiles, so they have a lot to forget. It's better if I don't keep in contact too much; it could make trouble. I mostly write. The mail and email get read before they're sent; you know that, right? And most of the phone calls get monitored, especially long-distance.'

He stripped off the rubber band and unfolded

the cheap pages of the second newspaper. Claire read the masthead upside down: *The Fang Report*. The logo was two stakes at right angles making up a cross. Wild.

'What's that?'

'This?' Michael rattled the paper and shrugged. 'Captain Obvious.'

'What?'

'Captain Obvious. That's his handle. He's been doing these papers every week for about two years now. It's an underground thing.'

Underground in Morganville had a lot of meanings. Claire raised her eyebrows. 'So…Captain Obvious is a vampire?'

'Not unless he's got a serious self-image problem,' Michael said. 'Captain Obvious hates vampires. If somebody steps out of line, he documents it—' Michael froze, reading the headline, and his mouth opened, then closed. His face set like stone, and his blue eyes looked stricken.

Claire reached over and took the newspaper from his hands, turned it, and read.

New Bloodsucker In Town

Michael Glass, once a rising musical star with too much talent for this twisted town, has fallen to the Dark Side. Details are sketchy, but Glass, who's

been keeping to himself for the past year, has definitely joined the Fang Gang.

Nobody knows how or where it happened, and I doubt Glass will be talking, but we should all be worried. Does this mean more vamps, fewer humans? After all, he is the first newly risen undead in generations.

Beware, boys and girls: Glass may look like an angel, but he's got a demon inside now. Memorise the face, kibbles. He's the newest addition to the Better-Off-Dead club!

'The *Better-Off-Dead* club?' Claire repeated aloud, horrified. 'He's kidding, right?' There was Michael's picture, probably directly out of the Morganville High yearbook, inset as a graphic into a tombstone.

With crudely drawn-in fangs.

'Captain Obvious never comes out and tells anyone to kill,' Michael said. 'He's pretty careful about how he phrases things.' Her friend was angry, Claire saw.

And scared. 'He's got our address listed. And all your names, too, though at least he points out none of you are vampires. Still. That's not good.' Michael was getting past the shock of seeing himself outed in the paper, and was getting worried. Claire was already there.

'Well…why don't the vampires do something about him? Stop him?'