

Feast of Fools

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

It was hard to imagine how Claire's day – even by Morganville standards – could get any worse... and then the vampires holding her hostage wanted breakfast.

'Breakfast?' Claire repeated blankly. She took a look at the living room window, just to prove to herself that, yes, it was still dark outside. Getting darker all the time.

The three vampires all looked at her. It was bad enough having that kind of attention from the two she hadn't properly met yet – man and woman, eerily pretty – but when the cold, old Mr Bishop's eyes focused her way, it made her want to curl up in a corner and hide.

She held his stare for a full five seconds, then looked down. She could almost feel him smiling.

‘Breakfast,’ he said softly, ‘is something to be eaten in the mornings. Mornings for vampires are not controlled by sunrise. And I like eggs.’

‘Scrambled or over easy?’ Claire asked, trying not to sound as nervous as she felt. *Don’t say over easy. I don’t know how to make eggs over easy. I don’t even know why I mentioned it. Don’t say over easy...*

‘Scrambled,’ he said, and Claire’s breath rushed out in relief. Mr Bishop was sitting in the comfortable chair in the living room that her housemate Michael normally occupied while he was playing his guitar. Unlike Michael, Mr Bishop made it look like a throne. Part of it was that everybody else stayed standing – Claire, with her boyfriend, Shane, hovering protectively by her side; Eve and Michael a little distance away, holding hands. Claire risked a glance at Michael. He looked...contained. Angry, sure, but under control, at least.

Claire was more scared about Shane. He had a pretty well-documented history of acting before thinking, at least when it came to the personal safety of those he cared about. She took his hand, and he sent her a quick, dark, unreadable glance.

No, she wasn’t sure about him at all.

Mr Bishop's voice pulled her attention back to him with a cold snap. 'Have you told Amelie that I've arrived, girl?'

That had been Bishop's first command – to let his daughter know he'd come to town. *His daughter?* Amelie – the head vampire of Morganville – didn't seem human enough to have family, not even family as scary as Mr Bishop. Ice and crystal, that was Amelie.

He was waiting for an answer, and Claire hastily got one together. 'I called. I got her voice mail,' Claire said. She tried not to sound defensive. Bishop's eyebrows drew together in a scowl.

'I suppose that means you left some sort of a message.' She nodded mutely. He drummed his fingers impatiently on the arm of the chair. 'Very well. We'll eat while we wait. Eggs, scrambled, as I said. We shall also have bacon, coffee—'

'Biscuits,' drawled the woman leaning on the arm of his chair. 'I love biscuits. And honey.' The vampire had a molasses-slow accent, something that wasn't quite Southern and wasn't quite not, either. Mr Bishop gave her a tolerant look, the kind a human would give a favourite pet. She had the icy glitter in her eyes, and moved so smoothly and quietly that there was no way she was regular-flavoured human. Not hiding it,

either, the way some of the vampires of Morganville tried to do.

The woman kept smiling, dark eyes fixed on Shane. Claire didn't like the way she was looking at him. It looked – greedy.

'Biscuits,' Mr Bishop agreed, with a quirk of a smile. 'And I'll indulge you further by agreeing to gravy, child.' The smile vanished when he turned back to the four standing in front of him. 'Go about your business, then. Now.'

Shane grabbed Claire's hand and practically dragged her toward the kitchen. However fast he was moving, Michael was there first, pushing Eve through the door. 'Hey!' Eve protested. 'I'm walking here!'

'And the faster, the better,' Michael said. His normally angelic face looked stark, all sharp edges, and he closed the kitchen door once they were safely inside. 'Right. We don't have a lot of choices. Let's do exactly what he says and hope Amelie can sort all this out when she gets here.'

'I thought *you* were all Big Bad Bloodsucker these days,' Shane said. 'It's your house. How come you can't just throw them out?' That was a reasonable question, and Shane managed to say it without making it seem like a challenge. Well, much of one. The kitchen felt cold, Claire noticed – as if the temperature of the

whole house was steadily dropping. She shivered.

‘It’s complicated,’ Michael said. He yanked open cabinets and began assembling the makings of fresh coffee. ‘Yeah, it’s our house’ – emphasis, Claire noted, on the *our* – ‘but if I revoke Bishop’s invitation, he will still kick our asses, I guarantee you.’

Shane leant his butt against the stove and crossed his arms. ‘I just thought you were supposed to be stronger than them on home ground—’

‘Supposed to be. I’m not.’ Michael spooned coffee into the filter. ‘Don’t be an asshole right now – we don’t have time for it.’

‘Dude, I wasn’t trying to be.’ And Claire could tell he actually meant it this time. Michael seemed to hear it, too, and sent Shane an apologetic glance. ‘I’m trying to figure out how big a pile of crap we’re in. Not blaming you, man.’ He hesitated a second, then continued. ‘How do you know? Whether or not you have a chance?’

‘Any other vampire I meet, I know where I stand with them. Who’s stronger, who’s weaker, whether or not I could take them in a straight-up fight if it came to that.’ Michael poured water into the machine and switched it on to brew. ‘These guys, I know I haven’t got a chance in hell. Not against one of them, much less all three, not even with the house itself backing

me up. They're badass, man. Truly black hat. It's going to take Amelie or Oliver to handle this.'

'So,' Shane said, 'landfill-sized pile of crap. Good to know.'

Eve pushed him out of the way and began getting pots and pans out of the cabinets, clattering everything noisily. 'Since we're not fighting, we'd better get breakfast ready,' she said. 'Claire, you get the eggs, since you volunteered us for short-order cooks.'

'Better than volunteering us for breakfast,' Shane pointed out, and Eve snorted.

'You,' she said, and pressed a finger into the centre of his well-worn T-shirt. 'You, mister. You're making gravy.'

'You do want us all to die, don't you?'

'Shut up. I'll do the biscuits and bacon. Michael—' She turned, looking at him with big dark eyes, made almost anime-wide by the Goth eyeliner. 'Coffee. And I think you have to be the private eye here. Sorry.'

He nodded. 'I'll go make sure I know what they're doing when I finish here.'

Assigning Michael the barista and spy duties made sense, but it left the three of them the majority of the work, and none of them were exactly future chefs in training. Claire struggled with the scrambled eggs. Eve cursed the bacon grease in a fierce whisper, and

whatever Shane was making, it didn't really look that much like gravy.

'Can I help?'

They all jumped at the voice, and Claire whirled toward the kitchen door. 'Mom!' She knew she sounded panicked. She *was* panicked. She'd forgotten all about her parents – they'd come in with Mr Bishop, and Bishop's friends had moved them into the not-much-used parlour at the front of the house. In the great scheme of scary things, Bishop had taken the forefront.

But there was her mother, standing in the kitchen doorway, smiling a fragile, confused smile and looking...vulnerable. Tired.

'Mrs Danvers!' Eve jumped in, hurried over, and guided her to the kitchen table. 'No, no, we're just – ah – making some food. You haven't eaten, right? What about Mr Danvers?'

Her mother – looking every year of the forty-two she claimed not to be – seemed tired, vague, kind of out of focus. Worried, too. There were lines around her eyes and mouth that Claire couldn't remember seeing before, and it scared her.

'He's—' Claire's mom frowned, then leant her forehead on the palm of her hand. 'Oh, my head hurts. I'm sorry. What did you say?'

‘Your husband, where is he?’

‘I’ll find him,’ Michael said quietly. He slipped out of the kitchen with the grace and quickness of a vampire – but at least he was *their* vampire. Eve settled Claire’s mom at the table, exchanged a helpless look with Claire, and chattered on nervously about what a long drive it must have been to Morganville, what a nice surprise it was that they were moving to town, how much Claire was going to enjoy having them here. Etc., etc., etc.

Claire numbly continued to rake eggs back and forth in the skillet. *This can’t happen. My parents can’t be here.* Not now. Not with Bishop. It was a nightmare, in every way.

‘I could help you cook,’ Mom said, and made a feeble effort to get up. Eve glared at Claire and mouthed, *Say something!* Claire swallowed a cold bubble of panic and tried to make her voice sound at least partly under control.

‘No, Mom,’ Claire said. ‘It’s fine. We’ve got it covered. Look, we’re making extra in case you and Dad are hungry. You just sit and relax.’

Her mom, who was usually a control freak deluxe in the kitchen, prone to take command of something as error free as boiling water, looked relieved. ‘All right, honey. You let me know if I can help.’

Michael opened the kitchen door, and ushered in Claire's father. If her mom looked tired, her dad just looked...blank. Puzzled. He frowned at Michael, like he was trying to work out exactly what was happening but couldn't put his finger on it.

'What's going on around here?' he barked at Michael. 'Those people out there—'

'Relatives,' Michael said. 'From Europe. Look, I'm sorry. I know you wanted to spend some time with Claire, but maybe you should just go on home, and we'll—'

He paused, then turned, because someone was standing in the kitchen door behind him. Following him.

'Nobody's going anywhere,' said the other one of Bishop's vampire companions – the guy. He was smiling. 'One big happy family, eh, Michael? It's Michael, isn't it?'

'What, we're on a first-name basis now?' Michael got Claire's dad inside the kitchen and closed the door in the other vampire's face.

'Right. Let's get you guys out of here,' he said to Claire's parents, and opened the back door, the one that led out into the backyard. 'Where's your car? Out on the street?'

Outside the night looked black and empty,

not even a moon showing. Claire's dad frowned at Michael again, then took a seat at the kitchen table with his wife.

'Close the door, son,' he said. 'We're not going anywhere.'

'Sir—'

Claire tried, too. 'Dad—'

'No, honey, there's something strange going on here, and I'm not leaving. Not until I know you're all OK.' Her father transferred the frown back to Michael again. 'Just who are these...relatives?'

'The kind nobody wants to claim,' Michael said. 'Every family's got them. But they're just here for a little while. They'll be leaving soon.'

'Then we'll stay until they do,' Dad said.

Claire tried to focus on the scrambled eggs she was making.

Her hands were shaking.

'Hey,' Shane whispered, leaning close. 'It's OK. We'll all be OK.' He was a big, solid, warm presence next to her, stirring what could not possibly *really* be gravy. She knew this mainly because Shane's sole culinary ability came in the genre of chilli. But at least he was trying, which was new and different, and probably showed just how seriously he was taking all this.