



Bitter Blood

The Morganville Vampires

BOOK THIRTEEN

RACHEL CAINE

INTRODUCTION

Morganville, Texas, isn't like other towns. Oh, it's small, dusty, and ordinary, in most ways, but the thing is, there are these – well, let's not be shy about it. *Vampires*. They own the town. They run it. And until recently, they were the unquestioned ruling class.

But the vampires' reputations for invulnerability have taken some hits lately. The troublesome underground human revolt, led by Captain Obvious, never seems to die; even though the Founder of Morganville and her vampire friends defeated their most dire enemies, the water-monster draug, they needed human help to do it.

Now Morganville is rebuilding, and it's a new day . . . but without the threat of the much-feared draug to hold them back, what's to keep Morganville's vampires from regaining their iron hold on the town?

One thing's for sure: there's going to be trouble.

And where there's trouble, there's Claire Danvers.

PROLOGUE

AMELIE

‘I have a surprise for you,’ Oliver said.

I – not without reason – expected him to perhaps present a velvet box cradling rare jewels, or even a new pet . . . but instead, he held out a piece of expensive, heavy paper, marked with the Morganville seal in the corner in thick, still-warm wax.

‘Read it.’

He collapsed in one of my brocaded armchairs across from my desk, crossed one leg over the other, and gave me a long, slow smile that made me shiver. Not in dread, oh no. In something far more complex, and far more terrifying. We had been enemies a long time, uncomfortable allies for the last few years, and now . . . now, I hesitated to put a name on what we were.

In more-ancient days, the word would have been *intimates*, which meant everything or nothing, as the situation required.

I lowered my gaze from that too-knowing expression and read the words inscribed in gorgeous, flowing script – the hand of a trained clerk, obviously, who’d been given proper education in a time when that truly mattered.

WHEREAS the Elders’ Council of Morganville, concerned for the safety and security of all within its borders of influence, has resolved to enact a law requiring the identification of all persons, whether mortal or immortal. Such identification shall further be carried upon the persons of residents at all times. Whereas such proof of identity is vital to the health of our community, we also are resolved that the violation of such requirements shall be considered a direct offence to the council, and as such may be punishable with the First, Second, and Final Actions as written within the codes formulated by the Founder from the earliest foundation of this great community.

In approval of these requirements, and of these punishments, the Founder of Morganville sets her signature hereupon.

I froze, pen at the ready, and frowned. ‘What’s this?’ ‘As we discussed,’ he said. ‘The requirement for citizens of Morganville to carry appropriate

identification. For the vampires, of course, the requirements are somewhat different, but they'll still carry a card. It wouldn't do to appear to be discriminatory.'

'Indeed not,' I said, a ripple of irritation gliding through my tone. 'I thought we discussed waiting a year to implement such identification measures, until they could be properly explained.'

'I would have believed it was possible to wait that long, had I not heard a rumour that Captain Obvious was once again among us, and agitating against us.' Oliver's voice carried a bitterly dark undertone now, and his distaste for the *nom de guerre* of our most bothersome human adversary showed in the expression of his sharp, angular face. Age is of no consequence to vampires, of course, save in what power it brings with it, but Oliver was a rarity – a vampire who had been turned in his later years, and retained that appearance in his immortality, with grey threading his brown hair and lines pinching his skin at the eyes and mouth. He could appear warm and friendly when he chose, but I had long ago learnt that Oliver was first, last, and always a warrior.

And this . . . *Captain Obvious*, as the humans of Morganville now named him, was cut from the same cloth. A fighter, determined to bring us harm. We had killed him a dozen times in the past hundred years, and, mortal lives being what they were, we'd

never expected at first for the problem to resurrect itself again, and again, and again; yet as soon as a new Captain Obvious fell, another stepped forward, masked and hidden, to take his place.

And now, it seemed, we were forced to endure yet another would-be avenger.

I felt Oliver's gaze on me, warm and yet challenging; for all the barriers that had fallen between us, his ambition wasn't one of them. He demanded more of himself, and thus more of me. It was a dangerous dance we had, and that was part – if not most – of the attraction.

'Yes,' I said. 'If they feel confident enough in their own power to openly follow yet another rabble-rouser, then I suppose we must have our own answer.' And I penned my elaborate signature, all loops and swirls and slashes, to the bottom of the formal document. In true modern-age fashion, this would be photographed, digitised, transferred to bland and simple words on a screen . . . but the effects were the same. The word of a ruler was law.

And I was now the uncontested ruler of Morganville. All my enemies had fallen: the sickness that had crippled vampires for so very long had been conquered at last, thanks to the intervention of humans, most notably that troublesome young Claire, apprentice to my oldest friend, Myrnin. We had likewise dispatched at last my father, Bishop, that blood-maddened beast.

And just in the past few months, the cool, cruel draug, who had hunted us to the edge of extinction, had been destroyed and were no more.

Now, nothing stood between my people – the last of the vampires – and the power and status that were rightly due us.

Nothing, that was, but the too-confident pride of the humans in this town – humans I had chosen, brought together, allowed to grow and flourish and prosper in cooperation and under strict conditions; humans who had repaid me, in large part, with fear, spite, and resistance that grew stronger each year.

No more.

‘No more,’ Oliver said aloud, and rose to take the decree from my hand. ‘No more will these vassals think they can slip away in secrecy from their crimes. It’s our time, my queen. Our time to ensure our final survival.’ And he captured my hand in his, bent, and touched his cool lips to my equally cool skin.

I shivered.

‘Yes,’ I said to him. ‘Yes, I believe it is.’

His lips travelled up my arm, in slow and gentle kisses, and found my neck; he unpinned my hair from its heavy crown and let it fall loose. His strong hands went around me and pulled me to him. He was as irresistible as Newton’s gravity, and I gave up politics and pride and status for the sheer, novel joy of being wanted.

And if there was a part of me, a small and hidden part,

that questioned all this and understood that the more power I took for the vampires, the more the humans would rebel . . . well, I buried it with ruthless efficiency. I was tired of being alone, and what Oliver drew from me was pleasant, and in some measure necessary.

The old ways of Morganville . . . they were my past.
Oliver was my future.