

Chapter One  
New York, April 2010

All my nightmares end like this, no matter how they begin: I am at an airport, giving the slip to the person sent to meet and transport me to the place I am expected. I thwart the mission, subvert the rendezvous that will compromise me, but I wander down a dark corridor by mistake and find that I am lost, physically, metaphysically. Someone will find me, and find me wanting. I cower and wait to be discovered. The waiting is torture.

Thirteen years, and the script has deviated little: I elude handlers in Hong Kong, Melbourne, Caracas, and Rome, back myself into a corner, hide and run away. But not this time, this is no dream. Here in New York today, I capitulate. No more running. I've been summoned. I obey.

The driver is new to me, though he wears the uniform I always see. He is carrying the standard sign printed in block letters, drawn in blood-red ink. "*Mademoiselle* Clothilde de la Coeur," it reads.

God, I hate that name. I changed it to Chloe Hart years ago, one of my earliest insurrections. Naturally, even that suited the master of high drama who sired me: Stefan Herz, who reinvented himself as Sebastian de la Coeur before he cut his first LP with a progressive-rock band in the mid-Seventies. Sebastian got a kick out of my little rebellion, I think. It took him three months to track me down in Britain in the beginning. Lots of Harts in the UK, it turned out. Inconvenient, but the man likes a challenge.

*Ma mere* is Emilie, spelled the French way, of course, her mother was from Montreal, after all. Sebastian found Emilie waiting tables in a bar near Ohio State, gave her a piccolo, and put her in the band. She had no musical flair whatsoever, but she looked good in a Druid goddess sort of way, the Goth King's own white witch. She paints, too. Emilie would, wouldn't she? (She wouldn't if she realized how lacking in talent she was.) She is nothing if not decorative.

When Sebastian and Emilie aren't stalking me or slathering canvases in slop, they front an extravaganza known as Court of Cruelty. Life with them is an eternal Renaissance festival. I came to consider boarding school a gift, semesters abroad a delight. Anywhere but where they were.

Unfortunately, every friend I made at school eventually wanted to come home with me on holiday, eager to spend time with my rich, famous, weird parents. Theirs were so pedestrian, not hell-raisers like Sebastian and Emilie and the rest of the Cruel. Escape seemed impossible.

Until I turned eighteen. A week after high school graduation, I walked out and let them pay the bills: four years of college; four years of grad school; two years of post-doc work; thesis; dissertation; field study. They would track me down anyway. I just made it a little easier.

Three years ago, I stopped leaving a paper trail of tuition bills. I went out to make my way, my way. Our game of cat-and-mouse continued, just more globally.

Still, every peripatetic prodigal ultimately finds her way home. Clearly, I am no exception. I walk up to the driver. “I’m Chloe. I have two suitcases to collect in baggage claim.”

“My name is Sayid,” he says, and smiles pleasantly enough. He hoists my stuff off the carousel and carries it easily, stopping now and again to glance behind to make sure I haven’t vanished. My reputation has, no doubt, preceded me. I would reassure him, if I could. Even I won’t believe I’m actually doing this until we pull up to the gates of Castle de la Coeur itself. It’s a five-hour drive home from JFK, plenty of time to regret this decision, if I weren’t so jet-lagged, that is.

I left Barcelona what seems like a hundred hours ago. Leaning back for a nap would be heavenly. As if I could sleep. I am going, willingly, to the place I’ve been fleeing forever, and why?

Because Sebastian asked. Because he did not demand, did not command. Because he said in a letter that found its way to me between assignments conserving fifteenth-century Catalan textiles, “Chloe, please.”

I don’t know that word from Sebastian, or what to make of it, and it frightens me more than any other word he has written in a dozen years. It makes him seem so life-sized. Normal. Not words I have ever associated with my father.

His message – an actual piece of vellum inscribed with fine lettering (done by the Court of Cruelty staff calligrapher, perhaps?) – is brief and lacking in details, yet seems urgent, in a way almost needy: “*Come to the Castle. Take whatever vacation time you can. We must set some things straight. Emilie and I love you. Chloe, please.*”

I open the bar in the back of the limousine. It's well-stocked, of course, with too many choices. What suits existential angst and sudden fear for one's carefully crafted identity? I settle on some white wine. Better to start slowly. Best to approach with all my healthy inhibitions intact.

When we arrive, the Castle is quiet and dark. It is half-past eleven in the morning, the most peaceful time of the day in the de la Coeur family manse, when everyone is still sleeping off last night's debauchery, be it musical or sexual. When I was a little girl, I loved the morning. I rode my bike through these gloomy old halls and played hopscotch on the brick pavers. I danced my Barbies down the handrails of the big broad staircases and sang as loud as I could so I could hear my voice echo off the thick walls.

I sang the first song Sebastian taught me, or at least the first I remember his teaching me. "I'm Hennery the Eighth, I am, Hennery the Eighth, I am, I am." Over and over. No one ever shushed me to be quiet, not even the nannies, who, I realized at some point, were instructed not to discipline me, were told to indulge me as long as it made me happy and kept me busy.

That was me: busy, happy, undisciplined little Clothilde, all by herself in the big old house every morning, and most of the afternoon. When there's no one to yell at you when you run wild, running wild ceases to be fun. I started making rules for myself. Someone had to raise me, and I figured out pretty early on that person was me.

So I don't expect anyone to welcome me today, and thus am not disappointed when no one does. No one but the life-size images of my parents on the walls, staring out from the posters from their many tours, dressed in whatever iteration of excess they

had adopted for the moment. One summer, all seven members of the Cruel wore feathered hats at every show, like Dumas' Musketeers. At the end of every encore, the roadies and I went out on stage and reverently tipped identical hats to the band. I was maybe six years old, my feather was flamingo pink. I look for that tour's poster as we pass through the halls, but it's not here, like a happy memory I only imagined.

Sayid deposits me and the luggage at my old bedroom, which Emilie has redecorated in a sort of Shabby Chic style that seems overly cheerful for her. I unpack, shower. The bed beckons, but I am far too wired to overcome both jet lag and free-form anxiety, so I set off in search of food. There were always provisions aplenty for the hangers-on that flocked around Sebastian and Emilie and their Court.

Life here at the Castle was a circus, just without the acrobats. Sideshow freaks, we had, too many to count, mostly outside the gates. There were animals, for sure, mostly of the pierced and tattooed variety, but Sebastian had rules and violating them meant banishment. Rule Number One: Stay away from the kid unless invited to approach. The animals stayed tame. I never had to bite back.

The kitchen is oddly deserted, despite signs people are expected: coffee made and warming; scrambled eggs in a chafing dish. I grab a croissant and an apple from the counter, fill a mug, and walk out to the terrace. The day is warm but overcast, and there is a week's worth, at least, of old copies of the New York Times. I sip and scan and stretch out on a chaise, surrendering to the exhaustion.

I close my eyes and raise my face to the shrouded sun. I slow my breathing. I will myself to shut out the space around me. I feel something soft envelop me. I burrow beneath it.

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A chill passes over me, and I open my eyes. A crimson sun slips below the trees on the horizon. Can it be that late? Can I have slept since noon?

I lift my head to see an afghan across my legs and Sebastian sitting at the foot of the chaise, smiling. It's been thirteen years since I last saw that smile in person. Dazzling, this close.

"I used to watch you sleep, when we were on the road and you were little. There would be only an hour or so between the band settling down at the crack of dawn and your sweet head popping up off the pillow, wanting to play. That hour was so peaceful, I could lose myself in it. I would stroke your baby cheek and hum a silly song and doze until I felt you tug on my shirt and say, "Daddy Bastian, wakey."

He reaches out and strokes my adult cheek. "Wakey, Chloe, you're home."

I want to be that little girl again, the one whose Daddy remembered to love her, if only for an hour. The big girl remembers long stretches of loneliness and being sent away from that gypsy life so often, being away became what she preferred. What she had to prefer to survive, so she didn't just die of sadness, because coming back meant leaving again. Because rejecting them was easier than their rejecting me.

Why couldn't they keep me with them all the time? Why did I let him drag me back?

“Sebastian, tell me why I’m here.” Kicking off the afghan and swinging my legs across the chaise to the ground, I sit up and glare, like the stranger I have become.

He sighs, sensing that a moment has passed. Now supplants nostalgia, and whatever loving homecoming he has imagined is stymied.

“There’s a lot to talk about, but not without your mother. She’ll be down shortly, she’s dressing.”

“I only have four weeks’ vacation this year. Emilie’s wardrobe changes should eat up most of that.”

“Still hate your mother, do you?”

“I don’t hate her. I just don’t find her particularly noteworthy.” I admire my unpainted fingernails, hands before me, thumbs touching, digits dancing, in imitation of a classic Emilie routine. “No more noteworthy than she finds me, though I think an independent judge would give me points for at least being the smarter of the two. She gets points for pretty, I suppose.”

Sebastian throws back his head and laughs, his still-black hair gleaming as it whips around his shoulders. He looks like every medieval artist’s vision of Lucifer, the golden angel fallen from the sky and God’s graces, beautiful and frightening simultaneously.

“It’s not a competition. She’s the same as she’s always been, and you are who you are,” he says, sizing me up. “In a dozen years, you’ve evolved into someone Emilie and I don’t even know, but we want to.

“We *will* know you,” my father says calmly. He rises, turns his back on me, and walks away.

I wonder, panicked: What does he mean by that? So I follow him across the terrace and into the house, past the poolside laundry area and the back stairwell, around the butler’s pantry and back to the kitchen, where my mother awaits us. She is startlingly beautiful, as always, and I am startled as she holds out her arms and embraces me. My nose settles against her neck, her auburn hair cushioning me against her skin and a soft fragrance of lavender. *Mommy* is what I remember for an instant, until I remember otherwise.

“Chloe, sweetheart, it’s good to have you home,” she drawls, as if she had been raised in Charlotte instead of Cincinnati. “I’ve missed you so, as you would know if you ever read any of my letters.” She pats my back. “Sending them back in monthly bundles was a clever way to save on all that international postage. Deleting e-mails, of course, is even cheaper. Technology has worked to your advantage, hasn’t it?”

Thus shatters any illusion I might have had that this would be a warm family reunion. Emilie holds me at arm’s length, the distance she has effectively maintained since I reached puberty. I bite my tongue to keep from naming her the bitch she’s always been. Sebastian trains a glare in her direction, pulls out a chair and sits. He motions her to do the same, and she complies. I brace myself against a counter then hoist myself onto it. She can kiss my posterior, and so can her honed marble.

Sebastian looks from his wife to me and shakes his head, tsk-tsking. “So defensive, both of you. Alas, this house has no neutral corners. We’re going to be stuck

in the middle, together. You girls are just going to have to deal with it. Emilie, she's your daughter, not a new backup singer. Pull in the claws, now."

I laugh nervously and know I've transgressed, too. Sebastian stands, paces, never a good sign, as I recall. He is a man unafraid of confrontation, and suffers few fools. I know, too late, my return for the foolhardy act that it is. He will want me to submit to his will as long as I am here, and I can think of nothing I could want less.

"Chloe, you've spent a dozen years impressing us with what an adult you've become. Please behave like one. I have no intention of being a referee between the two of you. What we must do requires us all, and the three of us it shall be."

I hop down from the counter and reach for the kettle on the cooktop. I fill it and set it on a burner. "I spent five years in the UK making tea when nothing else made sense. Like now."

Emilie disappears into the butler's pantry. She returns, her waitressing skills still impressive, with a tin of biscotti and a box of Earl Grey tucked under her right arm, three stoneware mugs dangling from the fingers of her left hand, and a sugar bowl filled with pink sweetener packets.

I search drawers until I locate the silverware. I hand three spoons to my father, who smiles, satisfied. "There's a start. We can do this, which is fortunate, since we really have no choice."

He slides a chair in my direction. Emilie cringes as it scratches the stone of the floor, but she says nothing. I ignore them until the kettle whistles. I wrap a towel around the handle and pour boiling water over the teabag resting in each cup. I give each bag a

few dunks and hand a cup first to Sebastian, then to Emilie. I minister to my own and finally settle into the seat Sebastian has designated as mine, between him and my mother. Never was a cup of tea so carefully attended, as if to lift my eyes from it might bring me terrible harm. I hear dear, not-so-very-old-looking dad counting under his breath, trying to control his temper, trying not to lose control of the situation, what little he commands.

“Enough crap, ladies, time to get to the point. Chloe, Emilie and I need to die, and soon. We’ve asked you here to help us plan our exit.”

“Suicide?” I ask, and make a move to stand. A small hand wraps around my right wrist like a vise, pinning me to the spot.

Oh my God, they’re serious.