

*Chapter One*

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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 suppliants

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.

I sit quietly, possibly because I can form no words. I want to believe that this isn’t happening, that I’m still sleeping out on the terrace, that my parents haven’t yet roused themselves from whatever post-binge nap they’re having. That I’m rewinding the last twenty-four hours and I’m back in my bed in Barcelona, my suitcases packed, my plane tickets on the dresser, and that none of what I think I heard actually was spoken. I sit quietly and breathe shallow little breaths, calming little breaths that will keep oxygen flowing to my threatening-to-shut-down-any-minute brain and help me focus. I sit quietly with my eyes closed to the people around me, the room around me, the world around me. I don’t recognize this world. I don’t know these people looking and acting so much like my parents but behaving oddly even for them. I don’t want to know what has led to this moment, and I don’t want to know what comes next.



I sit quietly but am aware of Emilie moving through the kitchen, picking up the whistling-once-again kettle, pouring more water, setting another cup and teabag before me, dunking the bag, blowing on the steaming cup, cooling it, tasting it to be sure it's not too hot for me. "Drink, sweetheart," she urges, wrapping my fingers around the handle, raising the cup to my lips. "Drink tea when nothing else makes sense," she reminds me, and so I take a sip. Too hot, but not hurting, or maybe I'm too numb to notice much more than her soft murmuring, her stroking my back, and the way she smells like the garden after it rains.

I sit quietly, conscious that Sebastian is leaning forward in his chair, his head in his hands, rocking and humming something that sounds vaguely like a mantra, though I have never known him to meditate. Syllables repeat and soothe somehow, bringing focus to that which is too distant to distinguish or too near to see clearly. I press the mug of tea to my cheek, suddenly chilled, or not so suddenly chilled but just now feeling it. I sense my breathing has normalized, though what is normal in this room, in this house, in this life?

I sit quietly, but the clock on the microwave changes as I stare forward, the digital minutes marching on. How much time has passed I cannot know, because grasping more than the visceral is impossible for me right now.

"Need to die, and soon. Explain that, please."

Reminded he is not alone, Sebastian jerks sharply, the black silk of his shirt rustling, as if rushing to keep up, and he glances first at my mother and then at me, performing some mental calculus to guide him through what must somehow be clarified, translated from the words he has uttered to the meaning he intends. He looks unsure how to proceed, where just a short time ago he was determined to drive some point home to me quickly.

"Not suicide, Chloe, not really. Well, not exactly."

He beckons Emilie to stand behind his chair. She puts her hands on his shoulders. He reaches back and covers them with his.

"Okay?" he asks her, not me.

“Just tell her. We have to begin somewhere.”

To me, not her, he says, “We’re vampires.”

The mug drops from my hands. My body shakes; my brain feels about to burst. I hear a squeak and recognize it as my voice.

“Vampires. Of course you are,” is all I can manage.

My father stares at his impeccably manicured fingers and asks, almost timidly, “You’re not like us, are you?”

The room closes in on me. The floor feels hard against my head, cold and final.

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I mend things. Fabrics worn through, weakened by the weight of years or weather, I examine to ascertain their original structure. I reweave, incorporating newer, stronger strands. What I can’t completely save, I manage to salvage something of. I build on that, or rather rebuild. Seldom is nothing left.

This type of unraveling is altogether new to me. I become aware of the kitchen floor, the stone rigid beneath me, solid in a place that no longer has substance. Minutes pass and I regain my bearings, intuiting that preservation of a different sort is being sought from me, and that my assistance, if not freely offered, is expected. In what I will be assisting, I can’t say. Three-plus decades of lies hang between my parents and my reality. Fundamental truths lie shattered around the three of us like so much crockery.

I ask, in a voice I barely recognize as my own: “How could you *not* know I’m not like you?”

My parents, as I see them now, look no less beautiful, but older suddenly, more weary. I no longer feel qualified to interpret accurately what my senses transmit. Perhaps it was always an illusion, their glorious vigor, shining through a veneer of superstar arrogance intimidating enough to drive off anyone who dared peer more closely.

Sebastian is lying on the floor, his head resting at my feet. At the sound of my voice, he sits up, wraps his arms around his knees, faces away from me.

“We’d been vampires for one hundred-plus years when

Emilie got pregnant. That wasn't supposed to happen; we knew of no one else it had happened to, ever. We consulted the oldest vampires, everyone anyone could lead us to. No one could explain how Emilie and I could have conceived you, let alone predict what would happen if a baby came to term and were born.

"There could be no doctor involved. There was no way beyond compulsion for Emilie to exhibit a heartbeat or blood pressure, no way a needle could effectively puncture her skin for the usual tests, the wounds would have closed right away, and God only knows what screening her blood would have revealed. Ultrasounds weren't that common back then, but would you have shown up on one? There was no way to know. Yet nine months went by, like it was the most normal thing in the world, and Emilie seemed healthy and her stomach was growing and you were kicking up a fuss, the way the books said you should. So we found a midwife and decided that if she started to question something, Emilie or I would compel her to forget whatever that thing was. As it turned out, we didn't have to do anything. After six hours of labor and screaming and pushing that must have seemed normal enough, you were born."

"You were perfect," my mother whispers, eyes lowered, "the most wondrous thing we had ever seen. Sarah, the midwife, wiped you clean and wrapped you in a blanket and placed you into my arms. You didn't cry, just looked up as if you were an old soul who knew it all and yawned. So we dived in and blundered along and hoped we didn't kill you in the process."

Emilie looks up, and I see tears. I know I've never seen her cry. Whatever deceit has preceded today, all this seems authentic to me and painful for them. Tears well in my eyes as well, sprung from this weird, terrible secret I now share.

"Yes," says Sebastian, "not killing you was the first priority. I guess other new parents worry about that too, but that first day, once Sarah left, was maybe the longest day of my life. Emilie sliced open a vein and dripped some blood into your little mouth. You immediately spit it back at her. She tried

again, and you vomited pink all over her and yourself. So we knew we had to try something else.

“I went out and killed a mouse, thinking maybe vampire blood was too rich for you and you needed something lighter. I dripped some of the mouse’s blood onto your lips, and you spit that out, too. It soon was clear that what we considered food and what you had in mind were two different things. So, like an idiot new father, I hustled to the nearest all-night drugstore.

“I had never been in one – in retrospect, sending someone else would have made perfect sense, but I went myself and bought baby formula and diapers and bottles and whatever else I thought we might need right away. I heated the baby milk and tested it on our drummer’s arm. I burned him, and he quit the Cruel the next day. Emilie gave you the bottle once it cooled. You drank a couple ounces right down, didn’t spit any of it back, and fell asleep. That was our first clue that maybe you weren’t a little vamp after all.

“Every few months, we’d try blood again, but you’d spit it out, or vomit it up if we mixed it into your cereal. When you were six months old, we took you to the pediatrician and assumed that human was what you were, perhaps what you would always be.”

It all rings true, so like my parents. The King and Queen of the Cruel are creative spirits, able to conjure magical spells to defeat those who would thwart them. Where there are no rules, they make them up, or adapt society’s rules to fit their world. It’s how they operate, how they’re wired.

“So,” I ask, more or less knowing, “human child, no problem?”

“I know you don’t believe it,” Emilie sighs, “but we have always loved you desperately. It’s just that, as you got older and were more obviously not like us, it seemed best not to expose you to what we were. When you were little, you were content to play all over this big pile of rock by yourself in the mornings, accepting that we needed to sleep late because we worked at night. When we took you on the road, you slept when we slept, but you were a smart one and asked all sorts of uncomfortable

questions: Why didn't we like to eat peanut butter and jelly like you did? Why couldn't we go swimming with you? Why didn't our hair get longer, or grayer?

"When you got older, we let you go on sleepovers. You wanted your friends to sleep here too, and that was a tough one. We could barely handle one curious preteen with the band around, let alone two or three. Puberty brought all the human changes we expected, so we decided boarding school was the best solution."

The words barely leave her lips when I hear growls at my feet. My father rises, stretching far taller than his real height, grabs a chair and heaves it across the kitchen at her. My mother darts swiftly out of its way. The chair smashes through a French door, but I cannot find her, do not see where she is, only where she is not.

"*You* decided, Emilie," he shouts. "*You* had the school picked out and the tuition paid and the car waiting to whisk Chloe away before I had anything to say about it.

"It wasn't my idea, baby. I'd have kept you with us and taken our chances. We could have just kept a closer eye on what happened with you, found ways to explain it all. Your mother had other ideas."

I hear Emilie hiss and follow the sound until she appears by the shattered door. Fangs descend, and she turns on my father.

"You've got nerve, Sebastian. You wanted to have this lovely little sitcom family – in *your* head, the only difference was that Mister and Mrs. Whitebread America were rock stars with purple streaks in their hair. On the other hand, I could see the potential for horror. This child, our precious Chloe, needed to be in a vampire-free zone. I was not going to have her blood on my hands, exposing her to every wacko you allowed to join the entourage because it fed your ego to have them around. I gave birth to her, and I was going to protect her."

Emilie is sweating blood, and heat is vibrating off her body. Her rage sears my skin, blocks my throat. I can't breathe.

She sees my distress and composes herself, breathing

deeply through her mouth, bloody perspiration running down her cheeks, onto her sleeves. Her fangs retract, and her mouth settles into less fearsome form.

“You weren’t like us,” she says, gathering me to my feet and into her arms, speaking almost inaudibly into my hair, smoothing it away from my ear. “It didn’t look as if you would ever be. We tried acting indifferent toward you, but you loved us and wanted to be with us, no matter what, and the more we pulled away, the more you clung to us. Finally, I knew *I* had to make you stay away. All teenage girls hate their mothers on some level, and if I had to be hateful, and vain, and mean-spirited, and treat you like just any other woman in my way, that’s how it had to be. By the time you graduated from high school, you got the message.

“We monitored you, of course, we had to. You might have turned vampire and hidden the fact from us, the way we hid it from you, and that could have been dangerous. You might have been ashamed, or hated yourself, or hated us even more than you did already. You might have become confused, or desperate. You might have hurt yourself or others, and exposed all of us in the process. There was no knowing and no turning back, only turning away while keeping a very close watch.”

I have never been anything like my parents, truly. Why does that now seem inconsequential? This reunion is a prelude to some elaborate farewell already devised. I look to be merely the means by which it is executed.

“Why do you have to go? Why do you have to tell me all this and make me love you again?” I hear a thin whine I recognize as my adolescent voice, the outsider clamoring to be let back in. I repeat the questions, as if they’re an incantation that will summon a genie to grant my desire for answers. I can barely see through my tears. I have not cried because of Sebastian and Emilie for at least a decade, but now I cannot stop. I rock in my mother’s embrace, and she whispers to me in French, endearments I remember from so long ago.

Sebastian’s cool fingers knead my shoulders, the pressure soothing, compelling me to calm, and my sobs grow less

violent, but only just. “We don’t have to go yet; we can have a bit of time together, but there’s no avoiding this, for all our sakes. We look no older than we did when you were born, as anyone who saw us together would notice. We infuriated an awful lot of powerful people when we took Court of Cruelty public. Hiding in plain sight is one thing; putting it out there for all to see was considered less than wise by those far older than we.

“Emilie and I have done the reclusive aging-rocker thing for a decade now, but fans still show up here with old Seventies vinyl for us to autograph. It’s been five years since the Cruel did a show – release some new music and all it means is more photographers stalking the grounds. Keeping the world at arm’s length isn’t an option anymore, technology put a crimp in our grand plan to just fade away. So we had to make a new plan or face the consequences.”

“It’s a good plan, sweetheart,” Emilie says softly. “We’re going to be all right. All Daddy and I have to do is make the world think we’re dead. That’s all you need to know.”

Through my convulsive weeping, those last syllables penetrate somehow: “all you need to know.”

What I don’t know can’t scare me? What I don’t know I can lie about more convincingly?