

*Chapter One*

**OUTSIDE PRAGUE, MAY 2012**

All across Europe and the Americas, in Czech and German, French and Italian, Spanish and English, the call went forth, summoning those loyal to the Court of Cruelty:

*Attention! Achtung! Pozor!*

*Hearken ye to the heralds' trumpets, heed the  
drummers' tattoo!*

*Torture is the bond that unites the vassals!*

*Assemble at noon Sunday, 13 May 2012, for a final  
tour of our monarchs' Eastern European palace.*

*See their home, listen to their music, purchase  
a piece of their lives, and pay tribute to their  
enduring legacy.*

*Ticket proceeds benefit local charities and the  
Sebastian and Emilie de la Coeur Foundation for  
Blood and Bone Marrow Cancer Research. See  
details at the Cruel website.*

The invitation was issued two weeks ago in the hope it would draw every fan with the money and means to travel, lured by the

chance to pay homage one last time to the departed king and queen. An irresistible voyeurs' paradise, right?

I can only hope. Right now, all is quiet here, and dark. All I see is the wan moonlight slipping through the wavy glass in the 300-year-old windows. All I hear is Jackson's breathing, a steady, reassuring cadence of intake and outflow. All I smell, aside from his special, spicy blend of beautiful male, are the sharp odors of the ammonia and vinegar and polish the cleaning crews have employed in their quest to displace dust and grime and mildew.

All I feel at this late hour is the skittering of my anxiety and apprehension, the beating of my heart inside my chest, the pounding of my vampire brain against my better still-human sense that I should rest from time to time.

All I can think of is ridding myself of this house, as though by relinquishing it I finally will be able throw off those vile final memories of Sebastian de la Coeur—or, rather, of Teppan Nilsson, the man my father was in the year before his death. Put out of my life once and for all this grand collection of rooms he acquired as a young husband, a large property close enough to his mean Bohemian birthplace that it mocked the family that loved him, and maybe I can forget the predator he became.

Of course, I know that's not true. I could rip down every beam, topple every stone that comprises this edifice, and the graves where my father's former lovers were found would still be cemented into my consciousness. Four women, four stillborn infants, eight reminders of my father's obsession with procreating, of again producing offspring as he and Emilie once somehow produced me, the unlikely child of two vampires.

Destroy this house, and the memories would still be with me, like scars that fade only slowly—like the scars Teppan inflicted on Jackson. But it's a pretty illusion, and so is not easily shaken: Wake up one day soon and it will all be in the past, and only the good memories of Sebastian will remain with his still-hopelessly-devoted only daughter. It's humiliating to admit how

much I miss him—not the murderous bastard he was at the end, but my Daddy Bastian, whom I adored then fled for so long. It’s humbling to acknowledge how little power my adult feelings have to overcome everything the child in me remembers.

Mere weeks now until we close on the sale of this impressive dwelling, and here I am again, lying in this bed my father bought as Stefan Herz, this bed he used as Sebastian de la Coeur, possibly even conceived me in. It’s just a bed, for the love of God, some sticks and nails joined together, not the muscle and sinew he was made from, though sometimes it feels that way.

It’s as if he is imbued in the wood’s every knot, as he is in my every cell.

*“Just close your eyes and be still, Chloe, you’ll soon be done with it,”* I command. It seems like I’ve been telling myself that forever.

Maybe I’ve said it out loud this time. Jackson grumbles sleepily, gathers me against the warmth of his chest, kisses my head, rests his wide palm on my stomach. The baby kicks against us.

“Now you’ve gone and roused her, too,” he says. “You may not need to sleep, love, but Avalon and I do. Please settle down, just for a little while. If we’re going to make this place look presentable for the vassals’ convocation you’ve planned—we have all the outbuildings to go through still—tomorrow will be another very long day, and so will the next, and the one after that. Unless you simply want to finish shuffling furniture around and leave the rest for the buyer to sort through.”

“No, I need to pick through it all, you know that. There has to be something that can tell us why Christoph Zwilling wants this house so badly. That’s why I’ve called the vassals in—he’ll have to show up to keep up the pretense that he is who he says he is.”

Jackson moves his hand higher, onto my pregnancy-swollen breast, and squeezes gently. “I know what you need, C.J. Hart, and it’s to concentrate on the fact that you’re eight months along instead of working your tail off to achieve some sort of

emotional exorcism. Zwilling says he's a Court of Cruelty fan, a vassal through and through, so of course he'll turn out for your gathering. He appreciated Sebastian and Emilie's music, and now he wants to own this old mansion of your parents' and replicate the architectural details. Why does there have to be any more to it than that?"

Because I *know* there has to be. Barcelona showed me that much.

"You mean it's enough that Zwilling is a vampire, the only other vampire I've ever seen besides my parents? And that my mother, who's usually pretty proper despite her stage persona, seduced and had sex with the man in a public place, in front of me and you and her lover and who knows how many more people less than three hours after meeting him? Or that none of us, apparently not even Zwilling if we can believe him, has heard from Katarina since that night last month when the inscrutable Mrs. Nilsson scrambled off his cock at Casa Cruella? Really, for a journalist, Jackson Fahey, sometimes you're remarkably non-curious."

He tugs me closer, nibbles my shoulder. "Oh, I'm curious about lots of things, like just what it is you think still might be discovered here in this old pile of mold and mortar, and just what you think your mother isn't making herself available to explain."

All hope of sleep evidently abandoned, Jackson swings his body over mine, traps me against the mattress with his much-longer arms and legs, stares at me with those dark-brown Irish eyes of his, strokes my cheeks lovingly. "You've said yourself that your mother will do what she will do. She doesn't want this house or anything in it, she's told you that; surely that means there's nothing here that will hurt you down the road. Let it be, and let Kat be. She won't miss the show. Matins and Vespers will do all the classic Cruel covers, and afterward you'll take Christoph Zwilling's money and we'll go home to have our baby."

Home? Which home? My barely habitable flat in London?

His barely habitable flat in Brussels? Or maybe back to upstate New York and Castle de la Coeur, which still looks like the equivalent of a war zone?

I need the money from the sale of this estate near Prague to cover the repairs to the Castle necessitated by my father's horrific death, as opposed to the phony double suicide Sebastian and Emilie concocted more than a year ago. This property is my only truly liquid asset right now, the only thing still not tied up in estate and contract issues. Inevitably, I must turn this place over to Zwilling and his band of architectural mimics to plunder. But for a few more days, we'll search the remaining structures and serve up the appropriately feudal decorating style needed to pull off the May 13 show, then we'll pack up whatever's worth taking and leave. Not until then; not before.

A kiss brushes my collarbone; lips work their way up my throat, suck at my earlobe. "I have to be sure I haven't overlooked anything, Jackson. Something that might come back to bite me. Something always does."

He blows into my ear, his breath sweet and soft and so distracting, just as he intends it to be. "Hush, love, no more worry for tonight, please." He raises himself onto his knees, inches back and presses his mouth against the swell of my stomach, inches back still more, moves his tongue along each thigh and everywhere in between until, finally, I sigh in surrender.

"You win," I murmur.

"If only for now," Jackson concedes.

He knows me too well. Leisurely, he kisses his way northward, caresses my every angle and curve, until at last his face hovers over mine. He leans in, rubs his neck against my mouth.

"Bite me," he invites, opening my legs with his knee, teasing me to attention with his hot, ready cock, entering me as I open his vein and sip.

"Persistent man," I say, gasping as he thrusts. He builds the pace, accelerates me to another climax.

"That I am." He surges deeply but gently, peering seductively

over my baby bump. “The one who loves you best of all, my sweet Juliette. For as long as I am, I am yours.”

As he comes, I bite down harder and imbibe the champagne that flows out of him, my delicious, delicious man.

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Avalon gives me a vicious kick, as though she wants out of me as badly as I want out of this house. “Patience, baby,” I whisper. “Trust Mommy, it’s nicer in there.” She’s lost a sister and a grandfather in the last few months; maybe she, too, has memories she’d just as soon shed. Hell, I’ve been lugging my emotional baggage through Europe with me since I graduated high school and left the name Clothilde de la Coeur behind for good, so I should know: Some things never change, they just get harder to carry.

After a while, Ava gets the message and quits the in utero gymnastics. But, of course, I’m all charged up again, like I’m on a triple-espresso buzz. I wriggle out of Jackson’s arms without waking him, poor exhausted love. He’s just back from three days of economic reporting in Croatia, for a series of radio and TV segments on the state of the non-eurozone nations. Heady stuff, as he would say, but he persuaded his BBC superiors that it would serve their purposes and his need to carve out time with me here until I close on my parents’ erstwhile Eastern Europe pied-a-terre with Gregor Zwilling GmbH, Christoph Zwilling’s architectural-fittings company. When Jackson wakes, he’ll have to go out to find us breakfast. Except for enough chargers and flagons, platters and chalices to serve up a faux medieval banquet, the cupboards are pretty bare, the appliances sold off. Best to let him sleep as long as he can.

The sun is at mid-morning strength when I leave the house armed with a ring of unlabeled keys and an industrial-grade flashlight, my head tucked into the hood of the sweatshirt I’ve thrown over my shoulders to protect me from solar assault. The barn I’m heading for has few windows; I’ll be all right to

rummage there until noon arrives and vampire safety outdoors with it, assuming I can ever get inside. It's not apparent which key will open the padlock on the barn door. No matter how many I've eliminated, there are always more mystery keys. Maybe that was a low-tech defense against Soviet-era intrusions: Dazzle lazy party functionaries with a very large haystack and they'll decide your needle isn't important after all.

My fingers, gloved this brilliant, warm spring day, are tingling long before the eleventh key proves to be the right one. I slide the padlock off, slide the barn door open, slip inside, slip the magic key off the ring and into the pocket of my sweatshirt, fire up the world's heaviest flashlight, and get my bearings. Stacked nearly to the ceiling along the four walls are shipping crates, steamer trunks, cardboard boxes, even a few plastic bins like the ones I used to move my gear from dormitory, to rented room in a host family's home, to tiny graduate-student quarters over the course of ten years. Crowded into the center of this space are six black file cabinets, some dented, all scratched 1960s Communist-bloc military surplus, by the looks of them. I pull on the nearest drawer. It's locked, naturally, which, I hope, explains the half-dozen little keys on the ring.

I awkwardly climb the ladder to the loft, my center of gravity thrown off by my advanced pregnancy, but I don't have to go all the way up to see more of the same. More stuff, packed away in more seemingly random containers, much of it possibly worthless, but who can say for sure, so I'll have to open every last one of them—none of the outbuildings came with inventories of their contents. I back my way down the steps, regain the lower level, grab for the nearest carton, and slash through its packing tape with one of the many keys. Old magazines tucked into individual plastic sleeves: *Paris Match*, *French Vogue*, *Cahiers du Cinema*. My mother's downtime diversions from the musical whirl, I suppose, mostly from the late seventies and eighties. Makes sense: That's when Court of Cruelty was at the peak of its popularity, and thus at the peak intensity of its performance

schedule. Probably some interesting articles here. I should pick through these before I consign them to the flea market or recycling bucket, but there's no time, on to the next carton.

Costume sketches, all done on acid-free paper, about three dozen binders full of them, dated and labeled by Cruel concert tour, with a corresponding number of transparent folders filled with the sewing patterns needed to create them. Gowns, chemises, corsets, stomachers, stockings for her; tunics, leggings, doublets, breeches, vests, cloaks for the guys in the band. At the bottom of each sketch: my mother's initials, *EdlC*, for the woman she became after she was Eugenie Juliette Roget Verlaine Herz.

Emilie's ephemera, more than I can sift through in two months, let alone the three weeks left to me before we close on the sale and/or I go into labor. Ava sticks a foot into my side. *"That's it, baby, put your feet up, relax. Mommy will do this all by herself."*

I spend about two hours eyeballing bits and pieces, then decide to move on.

Several of the shipping crates are bigger than I am; they must contain something more substantial than Emilie's wardrobe flights of fancy and old reading material. No keys needed here, but I don't have a crowbar either. What the hell, I kick through the plywood side of the crate closest to the door. Dressmaker's dummies, about a dozen of them, three about my height, the others more than six feet tall.

"Emilie just packed this stuff out of sight, out of mind, and now it falls to me to dispose of it," I complain aloud. "I can see the poster now: 'Designing Cruel: A new exhibition of de la Coeur whatnot at Aspect Ratio.'"

A throat clears behind me. "Surely, many will be interested in purchasing some of these memorabilia at your art gallery, Miss Hart. Your parents have amazing popularity more than a year after their deaths. A potentially lucrative afterlife, like Elvis Presley, yes? But in London instead of Tennessee, *und*,



*natürlich*, here for a few more weeks.”

That voice, like chalk dragged across a blackboard; cold, like the chill that washes over me as I recognize it. I wish I could say it doesn’t unnerve me, even with the books closed on Interpol’s investigation of my father’s murdered paramours, even though I no longer have anything to fear from Julian Gippel.

“What an unexpected pleasure, Detective Gippel,” I lie. “What brings you to my corner of exurban Prague today? It’s certainly not to consult on the rock-and-roll collectibles market.”

A smile curves his thin lips; my disdain always seems to amuse him.

“I have just finished with the Czech authorities identifying the bodies found in the mass grave nearby, just over your parents’ property line. You will be glad to know that the victims were Dubcek supporters known to have incurred the enmity of the Soviets during the Prague Spring. They left their homes in 1968 and did not return. Shot to death every one, all sixteen.”

I would be gladder if I knew where my parents had been in spring 1968, and whose side, if any, they had taken. Sebastian and Emilie left a secret under every rock around, why not with a few long-decomposed Cold War dissidents? Maybe it’s the rush of unfocused anxiety Gippel’s presence has created, added to my already quite-focused anxiety relating to this estate, but I feel faint suddenly, feel my legs go out from under me. Faster than he looks for a middle-aged man who smokes, Gippel catches me under the arms, eases me down onto one of the shorter crates.

“You are very pale, Miss Hart. Should I summon help?”

Then again, maybe it’s just that I’m so very pregnant—sitting helps. I breathe deeply for a few minutes. He hands me a water bottle retrieved from a pocket somewhere in his impeccably tailored trench coat, he’s like a film noir detective who keeps a valet on retainer.

“I just need a minute.” I sip the water slowly. “Too little sleep, too much dust, too much to do in too little time before the sale of this estate is finalized to the Gregor Zwilling company.”

Too strong a sense of *déjà vu*, as well, but he realizes that. Gippel and I have danced this *pas de deux* before; he nods in acknowledgment of our shared history. “Ah, yes,” he says. “Herr Zwilling seems quite entranced with this property, if the media are to be believed. He is an aficionado of all things Cruel, yes?”

“A vassal? Yes, so he claims. I have yet to meet the man.”

Gippel arches an eyebrow, an expression that all but calls me out as a liar though I’m telling the truth. “You did not meet Christoph Zwilling in Barcelona last month? Video of the Matins and Vespers concert shows you performed at the anniversary tribute to your late parents.”

Gippel seldom asks questions he doesn’t already know the answers to. He’s here to fish for information.

“There were about five hundred people crammed into Casa Cruella that night. I could hardly have met them all, though I did meet quite a few before the riot. And I know you’ll understand my reluctance to stick around once the flutes and the fists started flying,” I say, resting my hand protectively on my extremely round stomach.

“Your good friend, Katarina Nilsson, provoked the disturbance, according to the news accounts, taking, shall we say, great pains to lavish attention on Herr Zwilling. Her friend, Eric Bohlander, took exception to Zwilling’s overtures to Mrs. Nilsson, yes?”

He keeps up on his D-list celebrity gossip, I’ll give him that. “That seemed to be the case, yes. As I said, I was eager to get out of harm’s way.”

“So you say,” he nods. “You have seen Mrs. Nilsson since that night?”

As a matter of fact, I haven’t. “We share a common interest in my parents’ music, some mutual friends, and, of course, the

fact of her husband's suicide at Castle de la Coeur in December, but not much more, Detective. We are, if anything, business colleagues rather than friends. Kat does not keep me apprised of her whereabouts, though I expect to see her shortly, at my charity event here. I understand from Christoph Zwilling's staff that he has been trying to reach her, too. I can give you the number I gave his secretary, if you like."

He shakes his head, backs up toward the door. "That will not be necessary, *danke*. Should you hear from Katarina Nilsson in the interim, please pass along my regards."

Sure will. "Why do you want to talk to Kat Nilsson, Detective? It's been almost six months since her husband confessed to the murders you were investigating and then killed himself. What interest can you possibly have in Teppan Nilsson's widow now?"

Gippel knows I'm fishing too. He nods his farewell and makes haste to exit the barn. Is it my imagination, or was there a warning there somewhere? And where the hell is my mother anyway? I pull out my mobile, tap out yet another text to her that will probably go unanswered: K, please call. C.

A few minutes later, as I try to identify which small key will unlock the first of several file cabinets, the phone rings. The caller ID shows my mother's number.

"Kat?"

"She left this phone behind three weeks ago. I was hoping she might be with you," Eric says, worry evident in his voice. "She must be with that bastard Zwilling. Why would she do that, knowing what he is? He can't give her what she needs."

Whatever that might be at this point in her very long life. "She isn't with Zwilling, or at least she wasn't as of yesterday. If you hear from her, have her contact me, Eric, and I promise I'll do the same. Please tell her it's urgent."

I need to speak to her, to be sure she actually turns up for the show planned during this open house, an appearance also intended to amp up sales of *In Service to the Court of Cruelty*,

the album featuring Matins and Vespers' performances at a London nightclub last fall and the entire "Christmas at the Castle" benefit concert in December. We've already distributed CDs across the US via a certain humongous coffee company, and through the EU via some strategic partnerships with similar coffeehouse operations. The Castle repair bills are exorbitant enough, but I'm also still scrambling to pay for Jackson's medical expenses, the orthopedic and cosmetic surgeons, the burn specialist, the psychiatrist who treated his post-traumatic stress after my father took him hostage.

So much damage done all around. How will I ever make it right?

"Was that Gippel driving away just now? What did he want?" Jackson, awake earlier than I expected, sets a large decaf for me and a bag of croissants down atop one of the file cabinets, then takes a long drink from his own fully caffeinated, four-sugar brew. If not for the faint scar on his cheek and the stiffness in his limbs at the end of the day, the reminder of those gunshot wounds, you'd never know.

I kiss him gratefully, stroke along the scar with my fingertips. "Gippel, yes, it was. He says he was in the neighborhood to wrap up the final loose ends on the Soviet-era mass grave. All the bodies have been identified as belonging to 1960s dissidents. All shot, not a slashed throat in the bunch, vampire-free. *Dasvidaniya*, Detective."

Avalon lands a Beckham-worthy kick into my midsection. I grab a croissant, take a big bite in hopes of appeasing the baby diva within me. "Interesting thing, though," I say between chews, "Gippel was asking about Kat, whether I'd heard from her. So I called her number after he left, to give her a heads-up. Eric answered and said she'd left her phone behind three weeks ago. He thought she'd gone to Zwilling."

"But Zwilling's people are looking for her too." Jackson fishes a container of yogurt out of his jacket pocket, hands it to me with a plastic spoon and an unspoken order to eat. "Maybe

she's at the Castle? You could call your godmother."

Ah, but would Gloria Dennehy, my parents' longtime confidante, tell me if my mother had returned there, information she's withheld in the past? I shrug and drink my coffee. Jackson's brought his laptop. Time to start cataloging what I have been able to find today.

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Jackson decrees that I mustn't climb, the reality of my vampire invulnerability unable to dissuade him from his expectant-father fretting, so he's opening the boxes up in the loft while I go through the file cabinets down below. As if Sebastian and Emilie assumed a similar gender divide, it seems the stuff upstairs is my father's exclusively, the stuff downstairs my mother's. It's slow going for my darling, who is fascinated by photography in general and Sebastian's in particular, and thus is captivated by the box-loads of it he's discovering.

"We're never going to get through all this, C.J.," he calls down. "We're going to have to pack it up and ship it to London. There's at least two exhibitions' worth here, and that's just the cartons I've opened, all Sebastian's signature themes, stamped with his name: nighttime city scenes; families dining, as seen from the street on the other side of a window. Fabulous images, all of them. There must be contact sheets and negatives here too, somewhere."

As the owner of an art gallery whose stock in trade has become the non-musical creations of the Family de la Coeur, I am most grateful. As the daughter with fewer than three weeks to see this property emptied, I am weary. "There must be. Seems like Sebastian and Emilie never threw anything away. Keep opening—I'll get the movers in here tomorrow to re-close the boxes and ready them for transport."

We work silently for perhaps another half-hour, cutting through tape, burrowing through straw and rags, old newspapers and their modern-day equivalent, bubble wrap,

when Jackson shouts, “Holy Mary and the saints!” and scrambles halfway down the ladder. “I need you to come up and see this.”

He jumps down to the main barn floor, reaches out, and hands me up the rungs, scrambles down again to retrieve the enormous flashlight. “I can’t believe it.”

“What?” I wait at the top for him, though I can see perfectly well through the afternoon shadows.

He shines the light onto some daguerreotypes he’s positioned on an unopened crate, arrayed like three small soldiers. “Look at these. They’re just like the daguerreotype Sebastian kept in that locked barrister bookcase outside his darkroom at the Castle, the one with the old cameras. Do you know the image I mean?”

I’m thinking, trying to remember. Those cameras, that bookcase, anything made of glass was laid waste by my father’s cries of despair the night before he took his life; for months now, there’s been nothing to remind me of what they used to be. But the daguerreotype would have been imprinted on metal, so it must have survived. I must have seen it at some point during the cleanup. I close my eyes, to bring up the scene Jackson describes from my now near-eidetic memory. “Was it a young man, dressed in a dark suit, maybe mid-nineteenth century? He looked like Sebastian. Probably was Sebastian.”

“Yes, that’s the one.” Jackson takes my face in his hands and kisses me fiercely. “Now, Chloe mine, examine each of these closely and tell me what you see.”

The first image is of two boys, teenagers the same height, all arms and legs and elbows, standing very straight in front of a curtain; one has dark hair, one has hair a lighter shade. The second image: the same two young men, maybe ten years later, in virtually the same pose. The third depicts a family: a man, the lighter-haired one, but a bit older, with a woman seated before him and his hand on the shoulder of a boy about five or six years old, all dressed in their Sunday best.

“Wouldn’t it have been very expensive to have these made?” I ask the resident photography expert.

“Yes, so in all likelihood these represent special occasions, even if it was just a special market-fair day when the daguerreotypist visited. It’s hard to say exactly, but my guess from their clothing is that these people were members of the merchant class, and thus able to save some money to sit for a photographer. Either that or perhaps the daguerreotypist was a friend or family himself and offered his services gratis. But look, Chloe, especially at this middle image, down at the corner, can you see what’s there?”

Carved into the copper plate are four letters: SuGH.

“Stefan und Gregor Herz,” I whisper in German, surprised and yet not. My father and his twin brother, a man whose face looks remarkably familiar. I run a finger over the inscription, a bit jagged still, despite the passage of more than a century.

Jackson lifts the third image, turns it over, feels for a spot, grabs my right hand and runs it over more lettering. He trains the flashlight on the copper: G-B-C.

“Did Gregor Herz marry?” he asks. “Could these be his wife and son?”

“I don’t know, Sebastian didn’t talk about his family. There might be something in the Bible he left me, but that’s locked away in London in the safe at Aspect Ratio. It would take days to get it here.”

“Not if you ask someone to look through the Bible for you and text you a photo of anything that seems to apply—you know, entries of marriages or births.”

Benjamin Kwesi, my art gallery partner, doesn’t know about the de la Coeur secret, but his wife, Meredith Grainger-Todd, my oldest and dearest friend, does. Is she even in London, given all I’ve asked her to do to help set up the vassals confab here? She might have flown back to Ithaca to work with the printers and web designers.

Jackson spins his laptop around on the crate behind me so

he can type. After a few minutes, he motions me closer.

“According to a company history posted on the Gregor Zwilling GmbH website, Gregor’s wife was named Marie Beatrisa. Could the G-B-C on this daguerreotype stand for Gregor-Beatrisa-Christoph?”

The resemblance is undeniable. Jackson sees it too.

Is Christoph Zwilling my cousin?