

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHLOE NEILL



SLAYING IT

A CHICAGOLAND VAMPIRES NOVELLA

Other Novels by Chloe Neill

The Heirs of Chicagoland Novels

Wild Hunger

The Chicagoland Vampires Novels

Some Girls Bite

Friday Night Bites

Twice Bitten

Hard Bitten

Drink Deep

Biting Cold

House Rules

Biting Bad

Wild Things

Blood Games

Dark Debt

Midnight Marked

Blade Bound

“High Stakes” novella in *Kicking It*

Howling for You (A Chicagoland Vampires Novella)

Lucky Break (A Chicagoland Vampires Novella)

Phantom Kiss (A Chicagoland Vampires Novella)

The Devil’s Isle Novels

The Veil

The Sight

The Hunt

The Dark Elite Novels

Firespell

Hexbound

Charmfall

Slaying It

A Chicagoland Vampires Novella

Chloe Neill

INTERMIX

NEW YORK

INTERMIX
Published by Berkley
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014



Copyright © 2018 by Chloe Neill

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

INTERMIX and the “IM” design are trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

ISBN: 9780440001249

First Edition: July 2018

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Version_1

Contents

[*Other Novels by Chloe Neill*](#)

[*Title Page*](#)

[*Copyright*](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

My belly was enormous.

That wasn't insecurity or ego or exaggeration. It was plain and simple fact.

I was thirty-seven weeks—or about eight months—into my pregnancy with the world's first vampire baby. I was lucky to be expecting and excited to see my daughter. But I was sick of being pregnant.

I missed seeing my feet. Drinking caffeine. Sleeping on my back. Fitting into my leather jacket. Snacking by choice, not necessity. And I was tired of having Baby Sullivan, the watermelon of attitude we called "Peanut," constantly kicking my bladder.

In just a few weeks—assuming a vampire gestation lasted as long as the human variety—we'd get to meet her.

I really couldn't complain. We were both healthy and, so far, growing a vampire had followed the typical stages of growing a human. Given we'd have had to guess how to fix any problems, I was doubly grateful there hadn't been any.

I waddled my way through the main hall of Chicago's Cadogan House, preparing for one of the routines I'd created for myself over the last few weeks. Those included an obscenely large breakfast, a nightly walk around Hyde Park, and a brief workout with my katana so I didn't completely lose my skills—although swinging a sword with a bun in the metaphorical oven wasn't exactly poetry in motion.

It was walk time, so I'd paired a stretchy black shirt with leggings, a light jacket with a pocket for my phone, and tennis shoes. I'd pulled my long dark hair in a ponytail to keep it out of my way. It was my exercise uniform.

I reached an open office door and looked inside.

He stood in the middle of the room, suit jacket and tie discarded, white button-down fitted over every bit of hard flesh and muscle. His hair, golden to his shoulders, was tucked behind his ears, his green eyes narrowed as he frowned at the papers he held.

Ethan Sullivan was the Master of Cadogan House, the vampire who'd made me, and the Liege to whom I owed my allegiance. And for nearly a year, my husband.

"Problem?" I asked, walking toward him.

His head lifted, the furrow between his brows relaxing as he smiled at me. Ethan's skills with a katana were deadly, and his gorgeous face was nearly as powerful. His nose was straight, his cheekbones honed, his mouth full and skilled, much to my delight. And like an exclamation, his wide emerald eyes were topped by sharp and decisive brows that signaled his mood better than nearly anything else.

"Hello," he said when I reached him, then dropped his gaze my belly. "And how's my girl today?"

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking." My tone was dry since I was well aware he wasn't talking to me. Ethan had taken to having conversations with my abdomen.

"Your mother appears to be in a mood," he said.

“Her mother’s face is up here.”

Ethan lifted his gaze. “I was talking to her face.”

“I realize that. What were you frowning about?”

He tapped the documents with a finger. “The first draft from the mayor for the proposed agreement with the city.”

I looked at the papers distastefully. Cadogan vampires had saved Chicago several times over, but those efforts hadn’t always been damage-free. The scratches and dents weren’t our fault—we didn’t manifest the dragon that nearly knocked over the Water Tower—but we were more involved than most of Chicago’s other supernaturals, so when the mayor wanted funds to repair the destruction, she looked to us. Given the most recent harm had been done by a millionaire whose estate had plenty of money for repairs, we had trouble feeling sympathetic. But we were good citizens, so we’d agreed to negotiate.

The final deal was probably going to involve our staying out of future adventures, which wasn’t proving to be a problem lately. Chicago had been mostly battle-free in the post-dragon era. I hadn’t taken the katana out of the training room in weeks, partly because I was taking early maternity leave as Cadogan’s Sentinel and partly because there hadn’t been a need for it. And while I was glad Chicago had found peace, it was weird to shift from monster fighting to diaper-brand debating.

“Jonah’s coming over to discuss?” I asked.

“He is.”

Jonah was the captain of the Grey House guards, one of the other two vampire Houses in Chicago. Navarre was the third. Neither Grey nor Navarre would sign the contract with the city, but since the terms could potentially affect all three Houses, Scott Grey, Master of his eponymous House, had requested an opportunity to discuss them before the documents were executed. Jonah would review on Scott’s behalf.

“While I engage in the torture that is municipal negotiations, you’re going for your nightly constitutional?”

“I am,” I said.

“You have your phone?”

“I do. Not that I need it. The only exciting thing that’s going to happen on this little walk is a little more gossip from Mrs. Plum.”

Many of the House’s human neighbors had become friendlier after vampires had saved the city from the dragon and the evil sorceress who’d manifested it. That included the Plums and their matriarchal grandmother. She walked her dog or watered her prized flower beds every night, and I was pretty sure she timed both so she could gossip with me on the sidewalk. Which was fine by me. The Newtons, who lived across the street, were debating whether to adopt a corgi or a doodle of unknown variety, and I needed a pupdate.

It was only mildly disappointing that the puppy debate was the most interesting thing that had happened in Hyde Park in months.

“You’re a brave soldier,” Ethan said, leaning forward to press a kiss to my forehead.

That’s when I saw the box on the conference table. It was wrapped in glossy paper of robin’s egg blue, and tied with a gleaming silver ribbon.

“What’s that?” I asked, and Ethan glanced back.

“A gift from your parents. It was messengered earlier this evening.”

“They’re in Palm Springs,” I said. Neither my mother nor my sister-in-law, Elizabeth, had made it to the family baby shower. My parents had other priorities. My sister-in-law had my brother, who incorrectly believed Cadogan’s meddling had ruined his business opportunities. At least my sister had managed to make it.

“The wrapping is lovely,” Ethan said.

“It’s probably from Trudeau’s.” The luxury department store was one of my mother’s favorites. Partly because they hand-delivered gifts.

I appreciated the gift. But the fact that my parents had left the city for three months while I was pregnant—historically pregnant—didn’t make me feel better about our already rocky relationship.

“I’ll deal with it later,” I said, and turned away. “I don’t need the stress.”

“We’ll open it together tonight,” Ethan said. “And if we don’t like it, we’ll donate it.”

“My mother would hate that,” I said with the grin he’d undoubtedly intended. “Let’s call it a plan.”

* * *

Spring weather was unpredictable in the Midwest. Any given night could be too hot, too cold, or too windy and keep even the most adventurous Chicagoans indoors. But tonight was absolutely beautiful. Clear and warm, with just enough breeze to put the scent of lilacs in the air.

I took the sidewalk across the stately House’s front lawn to the gate, waved at the security guards who let me through. Chicago might have been peaceful, but we’d learned our lesson where security was concerned, and we’d bumped up the House’s protections.

I turned right out of habit, waved at the few paparazzi stationed outside with cameras, and kept my gaze ahead as I took the sidewalk to the corner.

As I walked the next block, I was disappointed to find Mrs. Plum wasn’t waiting at her gate, and the family’s Queen Anne-style house was dark. I checked the time, realized it was nearly one in the morning. Little wonder a human family was asleep at this time of night.

I didn’t mind getting my exercise while humans were asleep. Chicago wasn’t a quiet city, but the early hours of the morning were quieter than most. Hyde Park had houses in a dozen different architectural styles, and I liked strolling among them. It was like a catalog of houses, from a giant gothic mansion with a tower and a turret, to a low and horizontal building that Frank Lloyd Wright might have designed.

I heard a vehicle behind me, and since I’d promised to take care, glanced back. A human in a red baseball cap climbed out of a small dark car with a red pyramidal pizza light affixed to the roof, then pulled out two pizza boxes.

My stomach growled audibly, and Peanut moved around.

“No,” I said quietly. “You already ate.”

In response, she kicked my bladder. It probably wasn’t supposed to be a personal attack, but since she was the only person who’d fought me from the inside, it felt that way.

The delivery guy walked toward the house, but his toe caught a dip in the concrete. Tripped by the divot, he lurched forward, boxes flying through the air before landing with a hop and sliding across the concrete like shuffleboard pucks.

He hit the ground on his hands and knees, grimaced in pain before turning to look morosely at the pizza boxes—and probably imagining the money he’d just lost by dropping them.

Hand on my belly, I walked back. “Hey, are you okay? That was a pretty tough fall.”

“I’m fine,” he said, checking his palms before climbing to his feet, then wiping his hands on his pants. “But the pies are probably a total loss. That’s like fifty bucks worth of pizza. Clive is going to kill me.”

Resigned, he took a step forward, but wobbled on his ankle and nearly pitched forward again. I instinctively reached out to steady him, putting a hand at his elbow to keep him upright.

And was surprised when he rotated his arm to dig narrow fingers into my wrist.

Instinctively, I looked back at his face. I couldn’t see his eyes beneath the bill of his cap, but I could see his fangs clearly enough. He wasn’t a human, but a vampire.

How had I missed that?

Because, I belatedly realized, there was no magic around him. None of the intangible buzz of power that differentiated us from humans.

He must have understood I’d seen the fangs, because his grip tightened, nails nearly piercing my skin. And that made my heart hammer harder.

“Don’t feel bad if you didn’t get it right away,” he said. “I’m a Very Strong Psych. Whether or not you know what I am is entirely within my control.”

Vampire strength was evaluated in three categories: psych, strength, and strategy. I guess genetics had put his eggs in the former basket. Still, I’d never seen this kind of power before. If I’d known it was possible, I might have been more suspicious.

Because I hadn’t known or looked, this unfamiliar vampire had a fierce grip on my arm.

I might have been physically awkward. But I was a vampire and a mother-to-be, and I wasn’t letting myself or the baby get hurt.

“If you want to keep that hand,” I said, “you’ll let go of me.”

There was something dark in his smile. A cruelty that lifted the hairs on my back of my neck and had me reaching for the katana I wasn’t wearing.

“Exactly,” he said. “You have no weapon, and you’re several blocks from home.” He reached behind him, pulled a gun from his waistband, pointed it at my belly.

I also hadn’t sensed the gun, and should have been able to, but any regret I might have felt was dwarfed by the rush of rage that heated my blood as my own eyes silvered—and the fear that was a vice around my throat.

I put my free hand on my stomach, offering what protection I could, and tried to think over the drumming of my heart. I wasn’t without defenses. I was a skilled fighter, fast, and immortal, but he had the muzzle pressed against my abdomen. I wanted to reach for the gun, twist it, and switch our positions. We’d see how *he* liked it. But I couldn’t risk that. Not yet. I needed a distraction. And in the meantime, I’d have to bluff.

I worked up an expression of fear, let my voice shake a little. “What do you want?”

“Well, that’s an open-ended question, isn’t it? What do any of us want? Fame? Fortune? Peace of mind? I’d like all three, actually, to start. But for the moment . . .” His head shifted toward my engagement ring. “I’ll take that for starters.”

“You need money?” I asked. “I can get you money. My husband—he’s wealthy.” I watched his eyes, saw the burst of excitement that followed my offer.

So this was about money? Or Ethan’s money in particular?

“Oh, I’m well aware. I know you who are, Merit. And I look forward to talking to your Liege.” He

said the word with disdain. “And, like I said, the ring makes a good start. But I’m going to need a little more than that.”

His head turned back to my belly, and fury burned through my veins like fire.

“You see, Merit, I have a plan. And that plan involves you, your kiddo, and a very large ransom.” He offered up a malevolent smile again. “Unfortunately, I owe some money to some very dangerous people. You’re going to help me out by making sure my pockets are full.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re a hot property. And you’re alone, away from home, without your weapon”—he leaned in and whispered—“and very, very predictable. You made this almost too easy.” He lifted a shoulder casually. “No one in your fancy House is going to miss the money. You’re the one percent, Merit, and I’m just going to skim a little off the top.”

A dog barked in the distance, and his fingers tightened around my wrist. “Let’s go,” he said, and turned toward the car.

Time for the distraction. “But what about the pizza?” I asked, with as much sincerity as I could muster.

“The—what?” He looked back at me, bafflement in his face.

His brief moment of confusion was all I needed.

I rotated the arm he held and jerked free, then used my other hand to strike upward against the wrist that held the gun.

Grunting, he kept his grip on it, but the strike had been enough to shift him. I grabbed his wrist, then pivoted so his weapon arm was between us and the muzzle was pointed away from the baby.

“I am *pregnant*, you asshole.”

He tried to pull away; he was strong, nearly pulling me over. But I’d gotten used to my new center of gravity, and I wasn’t going anywhere. I dropped one hand from the gun and slammed the flat of my hand into his back, just above his kidney. He jerked, and I wrenched the weapon away, stepped back and pointed it at him.

“Rich bitch,” he muttered, and with vampire quickspeed, shoved me backward to run past.

I stumbled, world spinning above me as I fell. When I reached out a hand to stop my fall, the gun popped away and skittered toward the bushes at the edge of the sidewalk.

Before I could lever myself back to my feet, his car was zooming away.

I muttered a curse as another car door slammed.

Afraid he'd circled around for round two, I glanced back. But this time, I found a friend.

Jonah was tall and lean, with shoulder-length auburn hair, pale skin, blue eyes, and features that perfectly straddled the line between chiseled and delicate.

He was captain of the Grey House guards and my partner in the Red Guard, an organization dedicated to keeping an eye on the country's Master vampires. Given the current peace, Chicago hadn't needed the Red Guard much lately. In the meantime, I'd been trying to fix Jonah up with Cadogan's brilliant and gorgeous chef, Margot. The matchmaking hadn't worked, for reasons I didn't yet understand.

"I'm okay," I said, but extended a hand so he could help me to my feet. I'd learned to ask for help.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I think a very poor kidnapping attempt."

"A—what?" He looked in the direction the car had disappeared. "By the pizza guy?"

"Apparently so." I glanced around, pointed to the butt of the gun still visible beneath the hedge.

"There's the weapon. It probably has prints on it."

"I'm sending a message to Cadogan," Jonah said, pulling out his phone.

"Tattletale," I muttered. Ethan was going to be very displeased.

"Yup," he said with a smile. "I have no interest in incurring your House's wrath—which will be enormous—when they find out what happened, especially if they believe I failed to help you." He typed a message, waited for the response, and smiled as he put it away again.

"Your husband is less than thrilled," he confirmed.

I growled. I probably couldn't have slunk back into the House with torn leggings and scraped palms without anyone noticing, but I would have liked the opportunity to try.

"Ethan's sending Luc and the others to sweep the area. I'm going to help you into my car, and then I'm going to stand out here and wait for them."

"I could walk back to the House," I muttered, but just for form. The adrenaline was starting to wear off, and residual fear was replacing the fury.

Jonah was too kind to make me confess that. Instead, he walked to his car, opened the door, and smiled. "Get off your feet for a few minutes. Then I'll get you home."

I found I couldn't argue with that.

* * *

When Luc and the others arrived, Jonah drove us back to the House.

Ethan met us on the sidewalk outside, a tempest of emotion in his eyes. Beside him was Malik, Ethan's second in command, and Lindsey, one of the House guards.

Malik had brown skin and pale green eyes, and wore a suit similar to Ethan's. They were colleagues and friends, and Malik would soon be one of the baby's godfathers.

Lindsey was my closest friend in the House. She was a sassy blond with pale skin and a biting wit.

"What happened?" Ethan asked, cupping my face in his hands as he searched my eyes.

"I'm fine," I said, putting a hand over his. "We're both fine."

"Liege," Lindsey said, glancing around, "let's get her inside and talk there, just in case."

"You're right, of course." He put an arm around my shoulders and let Malik guide us to the House.

Lindsey and Jonah followed us.

Ethan waited until we were in his office and I'd been levered down onto the sofa, then sat on the coffee table in front of me, hands clasped. "Report, Sentinel."

"I was going for a walk, and a car pulled up at the house I'd just passed. It had a pizza delivery light on top. A guy climbed out with pizza boxes, and he tripped on the sidewalk. The boxes flew and he hit the ground. I walked over to help him up. And then he grabbed my hand, pointed a gun at me."

Ethan's brows flew up. "You didn't know he was armed?"

"I didn't even know he was a *vampire*. He told me he was a Very Strong Psych, could hide his magic." I looked at Lindsey, who had her own variety of psychic skills. "I didn't know that was possible. Have you seen it?"

"Very rarely," she said with a considering frown. "It's a kind of joint psychic control. You control the magic you shed, the other person's perception of you. What did he look like?"

"Pale skin, probably five foot eleven or so. Short dark hair, but most of it was covered by a ballcap. So was most of his face. No facial hair, no scars, no tattoos, no unibrow, at least not that I could see. And he was strong," I added, and looked down at my wrist, saw the crescents his fingernails had dug into my skin.

"I don't recognize the description," she said. "I'm only aware of a handful of vampires with that level of psych ability. None fit your attacker."

Ethan nodded, looked back at me. "So he pulled a gun on you." Anger bit through each word.

"He said he was going to kidnap me, ransom me back to the House for money. He didn't say how much, but he said he owed powerful people."

"He admitted that?" Lindsey asked.

"Yeah. He wasn't shy. And he smiled a lot."

"He smiled?" Malik asked.

I closed my eyes, pictured the scene. "I couldn't see his eyes, but he seemed excited, like this was an adventure. Or a treasure hunt."

I opened my eyes, looked at Ethan again. "I got the sense he thought we owed him the money—I mean, not you specifically. But people who had money to spare. I waited until I could distract him, then got the gun away. He pushed me down, drove off. Jonah found me on the ground, rolling around like a turtle."

Ethan looked back at Jonah. He hadn't been entirely comfortable with my and Jonah's Red Guard partnership, because most RG partnerships were romantic, but Ethan had dealt with it. And there was gratitude in his eyes now. "I owe you a boon."

Jonah shook his head. "You don't. I helped a friend in trouble. There's no debt in that." He smiled at me. "And you didn't look like a turtle. Maybe a wounded kangaroo?"

Malik bit back a laugh.

“What about the vehicle?” Lindsey asked.

I frowned, trying to think back. “Compact car, four-door. I’m not sure of the make or model. The light on the roof just said ‘pizza.’ It didn’t name a company.”

“License plate?” she asked.

I thought back. “There wasn’t one,” I realized. “Just temporary tags.”

Lindsey looked at Jonah, who shook his head.

“Nothing to add. The vehicle was too far away by the time I pulled up.”

“He dropped two pizza boxes, but I didn’t smell anything.” And God knew I had a nose for crust and meat and sauce. “Maybe they didn’t really have pizza in them.”

My good mood had evaporated with the man’s threat against me and my child. And now I felt irritable and unreasonably angry about being tricked with pizza.

Ethan, who’d become very familiar with the seemingly random, hormonal oscillation of my moods, put a hand on my knee. Then he rose, walked to the refrigerator tucked into the bar, took out a bottle of Blood4You—the House’s preferred brand of bottled blood—and brought it back.

“Drink,” he said, his voice firm but kind. “You’ll feel better.”

I showed my fangs, but since I knew he was right, I uncapped the bottle and downed it.

“Pizza box logo?” Lindsey asked.

“I didn’t see anything,” I said. “Looked like plain white boxes.”

She nodded. “We’ll check that, too. Just in case there’s something we can use to trace.”

“What the hell?”

The words erupted from the doorway, and she came in like a tornado—a petite dervish of pale skin, blue hair, and magical energy. Mallory Carmichael Bell was my best friend and a powerful sorceress.

She sat down beside me on the couch, took my hand, squeezed. “Who hurt you?”

“No one. I’m not hurt, and neither is the baby. We’re both fine.”

“Apparent kidnapping attempt,” Ethan said. “Fake pizza delivery man falls down; she tries to help.”

Mallory’s eyes widened beneath her bangs. She was trying a long, shaggy bob with bangs she kept pushing out of her face. “Man, he knew how to pull you right in.”

“What?” Ethan asked.

“He knew how to get her. With pizza and a klutz who needed help.”

It wasn’t until then that I remembered his comment. “He said I was predictable.” I looked at Ethan. “You think he knew I liked pizza?”

“And where you walked,” Lindsey said. “He targeted you.”

That made sense—and didn’t make me feel any better. That he’d been watching me was as real a violation as the gun pressed into my abdomen had been. But somehow even more intimate and disturbing.

Mallory moved incrementally closer so our shoulders touched, a unified wall against the threat.

“Review the House’s exterior cam footage of Merit taking her nightly walk,” Ethan said. “Go back a week, and further if necessary. Look for anyone watching, common vehicles, common individuals.”

“Will do,” Lindsey agreed with a nod.

“We will find him,” Ethan said, shifting his gaze back to me. “That is our new goal.” He glanced

at Malik, then Jonah. "I'm on this until it's resolved. If you could take the lead on contract negotiations with the mayor, I'd appreciate it. They requested a response this week."

"Done," Malik said.

"Ditto," Jonah said, and clapped Malik affectionately on the back. "Let's look at that contract," he said.

As they walked out, Luc came in. He was pale, with tousled blond-brown hair and a cowboy's build, which he showed off in tight jeans and a plaid button-down he'd rolled nearly to his elbows. His boots were well-worn, his grin crooked.

He was followed by Catcher Bell, Mallory's husband and one of the men who worked for my grandfather, the city's supernatural Ombudsman. Pale skin, shaved head, well-built, and a handsome face that was usually scowling. Catcher had resting Grinch face.

Catcher, in turn, was followed by a woman I didn't know. She looked young, maybe twenty-three or twenty-four, with strong shoulders topping a slender body. Her skin was light brown, her hair short and dark. She wore a fitted short-sleeve button-down in dark gray, and slim black pants over black-and-white brogues. A tweedy gray messenger bag fit diagonally across her chest.

"Kat of Grey House," Catcher said. "Your sketch artist."

"I'd get up," I said with a smile, "but that would require levering myself onto my feet again."

"No problem," she said with a grin, and strode forward, offering a firm shake. "Nice to meet you."

"Same," I said, and introduced the others in the room.

"Kat's done some work for us before," Catcher said. "She's very skilled."

"I don't know how helpful I can be," I said. "He had a ballcap on, and the light wasn't great."

She took a seat on the couch across from me, pulled the bag over her shoulder, and took out a tablet and stylus from her bag. "People often see more than they remember. Getting to those details is my job."

"And her talent," Catcher said.

"It will just take me a minute to set up," she said, and began tapping the screen.

"Did you find anything outside?" Lindsey asked, while Kat got ready.

"We got the gun and pizza boxes," Catcher said. "They'll be reviewed by our forensic team."

"The vehicle's gone," Luc added, "and we made a few passes through the neighborhood to be sure he hadn't ditched it."

Catcher nodded. "The CPD will canvass tomorrow, talk to people in the neighborhood in the event they've seen him or the vehicle before."

"He may have been watching Merit," Ethan said. "Or at least was familiar enough with her to think she'd stop to help a human in distress." He looked at me fondly. "Especially one with pizzas."

"Am I really so predictable?"

There was a chorus of yeses around the room that made me feel both old and loved.

"Even Piper would agree," Luc put in.

"We aren't calling her Piper," I said flatly. Luc had been suggesting names since week one.

"Phoebe? Prue? Paige?"

"Those are characters from *Charmed*. I'm not naming my kid after television characters."

"It's a good show," he muttered, but let it go. No doubt temporarily.

"Double the guards," Ethan said. "It seems unlikely he'll try to breach the wall, but until we have him locked down, there will be no chances." He looked at me, a warning in his eyes. "No chances."

I just nodded. I wasn't even up for the argument. I shifted on the couch, the impact of my fall and the tiny kicking vampire in my abdomen making me achy and uncomfortable.

"I'll talk to Chuck," Catcher said, meaning my grandfather. "You'll also want to increase monitoring of communications coming in. Given he apparently needs money and his first attempt failed, he might try the direct extortion or blackmail route."

"We'll track," Luc said, then glanced at Ethan. "We'll also limit deliveries and visitors. No one gets inside the gate without confirmation and approval."

"Good," Ethan said, then glanced at Kat, who was poised on the edge of the table, tablet in hand.

"Ready?"

"I am," she said, then glanced at me. "How about you?"

"Sure," I said, but felt a little tug of fear that surprised me. I guess I wasn't thrilled about the possibility of seeing my would-be attacker again. But it was the next step, so I'd take it.

* * *

First, she walked me through the event. Getting a sense of the location, available light, and where the man and I had been positioned, before we got to the details of his build, his clothing, his face.

"The clothes will change," she said, eyes on the tablet. "But if he had watched you, he might have used the same disguise before. The context can be helpful in finding other witnesses."

Forty-five minutes later, we gathered around to look at the two sketches she'd prepared—a full-length portrait with the clothes he'd been wearing and a sketch of his face.

And even though I was safe inside the House and was flanked by Ethan and Mallory, seeing his face again—or what I'd remembered of it—still gave me a jolt.

"That's him?" Ethan asked.

"It's what I remember," I said. I didn't think the likeness was perfect—his ballcap and the darkness had obscured the details—but it was close. Unfortunately, I wasn't sure how much help it would be. He looked . . . average. Not especially handsome, not especially unattractive. No freckles or piercings or tattoos or facial hair. Just a guy.

"Does anyone recognize him?" Ethan asked, and there were head shakes and murmured noes.

"We'll use the sketch when we canvass the neighborhood," Catcher said. "If he really was watching Merit, there's a good chance someone saw him." He met my gaze. "We'll find him."

I nodded, looked around the room at the people who'd gathered to help me and felt ridiculously thankful they'd become my family. And then I got to the other business.

"Does anyone feel like pizza?"

It was two long hours before Jonah left Malik's office.

That had been just enough time to walk through the mayor's eighty-page proposal and outline a counter. They'd turn the actual drafting over to the House's attorneys. And given how unfavorable the city's demand had been, Jonah anticipated there'd be a lot of negotiating to come.

In the hallway, he rolled his shoulders. He was a guard captain, and he'd rather have spent the time training his people or keeping watch over his House instead of poring over a contract. He'd need a good run and a sweaty round with weights in the Grey House gym to clear his head. He'd do that as soon as he got back. But first, he wanted to check on Merit . . . and say hello to someone.

Because Jonah was pining.

Yeah, he'd had a crush before. He'd gotten a little too invested in Merit, and she hadn't caught the same feelings. The timing also hadn't been right.

This . . . was different. Not just interest. Not just attraction. It was bone-deep and visceral, and it called to something in the core of his being. In the core of his *vampire*, that ancient and animal urge. And it struck him as hard as a fist.

Margot was gorgeous—curvy in all the right places, with amber eyes that were a shocking contrast against her dark hair and generous lips. She was funny and kind and had a way with food that made him hungry in an entirely different manner. Margot also had darkness. She had pain. And he could admit those things attracted him.

Margot had declined a relationship, and the “no” was hers to offer, and his to respect. But he saw something in her eyes, the same yearning he felt in his gut. Which made the fact that she was holding back that much more frustrating.

She'd offered friendship. If he couldn't have her completely—every lush curve and sweep of pale skin—he'd take what he could get. If he was being honest, they made pretty damn good friends. They'd had coffee, gone on a few runs together, had even taken in a few of the old Hepburn and Tracy romcoms Margot loved.

Jonah knew he walked a fine line—making the most of his time with her while keeping his feelings in check. But he'd walk that line as long as he needed . . . and hoped it wouldn't take an eternity.

He didn't need to fake the smile that curved his lips when he pushed open the door to the Cadogan House kitchen and saw her.

Margot wore a crisp white apron over a red top with the sleeves rolled up, fitted black pants that ended at the ankle, and shoes in the same red as her shirt. She stood in front of an island topped by pale marble, rolling out an enormous rectangle of dough, and looking like the heroine from one of her movies.

“Can you hand me the cinnamon?” she asked, without looking up. “My hands are covered in flour.”

Jonah glanced around, saw the container on the counter, picked it up, and offered it to her.

“Thanks,” she said with an unguarded smile, fingers brushing as he handed over the bottle. And he

watched her stiffen as she realized who'd made the hand-off.

"Oh, sorry!" she said with a grin. "I thought you were Joe. I didn't mean to order you around."

"No problem," he said with a grin. "I was just here to talk about the deal with the mayor, thought I'd say hi. So, hi."

He knew he sounded awkward, but that awkwardness—and what he was sure was a goofy-ass expression on his face—made a corner of her mouth lift, so it was worth it.

"Hey," she said. "How's Merit?"

"Fine, I think. Shaken up. I was going to check again before I headed out."

Margot measured cinnamon for the batter, then turned the measuring spoon to drop it in. "I think she's upstairs with Mallory." She screwed the lid back on the cinnamon, looked up at Jonah.

"Was it really an attempted kidnapping? I was prepping for the predawn meal and only got third-party info."

"I didn't get there until after the perp left, but that's what she said, yeah."

"That's crazy," she said, and returned to her stirring.

"What are you making?"

"Chocolate pound cake. It's fantastic with Chantilly cream."

"I bet," he said. Just watching her stir a goddamn bowl of chocolate had sent a spike of lust through his gut so fierce he had to clench his hands to keep from reaching out and touching her.

She nodded at a container on the far counter. "Go try one of those."

"What are they?" Jonah asked, but he was already moving toward them. When it came to food, he trusted her implicitly.

"Profiteroles. Pâte à choux stuffed with pastry cream."

"Pâte à choux," he repeated. "That's the one you make on the stove, right?"

Margot grinned, and his heart pistoned in response. "You were paying attention."

Of course he'd been paying attention. Beyond the fact that it was interesting—he honestly hadn't known how much there was to learn about baking until he'd met Margot—he loved watching her eyes light with joy when she talked about ingredients or chemistry.

Jonah lifted the lid, found two dozen golden domes resting inside. "They're gorgeous."

"Have one," Margot said, cracking an egg into the mixing bowl. "And bring me one, too."

He had no choice but to obey. He plucked up two pastries, found they were heavier than they looked. "How much cream is in here?" he asked with a smile, carrying them back.

"Hit the gym tonight," she advised, and held out her free hand. He dropped one into it, and they bit in simultaneously, and even that small act was sensual.

The taste, he thought, was worth the longing. The pastry had just enough bite, and the cream was laced with vanilla. Together, they were powerful.

"Fantastic," he said.

She nodded, still chewing. "Recipe came from an antique French cookbook Ethan brought back from Paris. They're pretty amazing."

"No argument."

She finished her bite, then cracked another egg into the bowl. He watched the play of her slender fingers, the way she bit the edge of her lip when she was concentrating. And while he could have stood there for hours, they both had work to get back to.

"Well, I just wanted to say hi," he said. "I'll let you get back to it."

“Sure,” she said, and he could see the battle in her eyes. The war he’d have helped her wage if she’d let him. “Have a good night.”

He nodded and started for the door.

“Jonah.”

Hope rose, heat flaring when he turned around again. He saw sadness in her eyes, an apology he didn’t want or need. But he’d have sworn there was something beneath it. Want, if he was going to put a name to it.

“Thanks for helping Merit.”

“You’re welcome.” He gave her a nod, disappeared into the hallway, and decided he’d happily take her thanks any way he could get it.

* * *

He was gorgeous. Undeniably. Tall and lean and built, with a face that was almost obscenely perfect. Square jaw, straight nose, almond-shaped blue eyes topped by long brows the same auburn of his shoulder-skimming hair. His mouth—she couldn’t stop staring at his damn mouth—looked like it had been designed just to tempt a woman with fantasies about where and how he could use it.

She’d spent more than one day in sweaty dreams about that.

And he was kind. Funny. Loyal. So dedicated to his House it made her toes curl—even if that House wasn’t Cadogan.

But she’d fallen for the pretty boy before, a vampire named Rowan Cleary, who had a beautiful face and a body to die for and who’d wined and dined her . . . until he hadn’t anymore. Until his jokes changed from sarcastic to mean, his compliments to criticisms.

They’d dated for ten months. And then, one very snowy night in February, after they’d been stuck in traffic on the Dan Ryan for an hour, he’d slapped her.

It was fast—so quick she’d almost convinced herself that it hadn’t happened, that she’d imagined it. Then had come the excuses, from him and from her. He’d been stressed and tired, and she hadn’t helped by nagging him to drive more carefully.

The realization came last—that plenty of couples were stressed and tired and naggy. And they didn’t get violent.

She’d let the criticism go on for too long, even though she’d done some counseling as a human. It had taken three weeks after he’d hit her—after the apologies and excuses and promises to never do it again—before she acknowledged what was happening. She knew that he would absolutely do it again, because that’s who he was. And next time, it wouldn’t just be a quick slap.

So she’d gathered her friends and her resources, and she’d moved out of his place and back into Cadogan House.

That had been more than two years ago, and she’d been working on herself in the meantime. Seeing her own therapist helped, as did knowing she had the support of her House. And when Merit tried to set her up with Jonah, she was certain she was ready to give it a try.

Margot knew Jonah was a good guy. But as she began spending time with him, and her long-buried emotions began to stir that old, familiar anxiety and she’d stepped back. She realized she still wasn’t ready for a relationship, especially not to take a chance on someone she was pretty sure she could fall for.

If she and Rowan had stayed together, tonight would have been their anniversary. Maybe that's why she was feeling bluesy this evening, because this was a milestone. A marker in a relationship that had ended, even if ending it had been the right thing to do.

She wasn't ready to be vulnerable again. So she focused on her work, just like always. She added a pile of roughly chopped chocolate to the batter, folded it in, and poured the mix into the loaf pan she'd already buttered and floured. Then she put the pan in the oven, where time and heat and chemistry would work their magic, turn liquid to solid, intensify flavor.

"Time and heat and chemistry," she muttered, irritated with herself and tired of the struggle. "I've got those boxes checked."

Her phone rang. She reached into her pocket, answered it automatically. "Hello?"

"Hey, pretty girl."

Three words, softly spoken, and yet enough to make her stomach ice over. She fought back panic that tightened her throat, made herself speak.

"Rowan." She swallowed hard. "What do you want?" Not that she actually cared what he wanted, but she'd already answered the phone. He'd see hanging up as a challenge for him to overcome.

"It's been a long time," he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

"Not long enough. What do you want?" she asked again.

"It's our anniversary, Margie. I was thinking about you, wanted to tell you that I appreciated what we had, and that I'm really sorry I fucked it all up."

His voice was so sincere, the tone so apologetic, that she had to work to stay centered, to keep from slumping back into the person who'd accepted his excuses. It helped that he called her "Margie." She hated that, had told him a dozen times she didn't like the nickname. That he still used it said a lot about his character.

"I don't want your apologies or your thoughts, Rowan. I want you to lose my number and never contact me again."

"That's entirely fair, and I don't blame you for it. I just—I'm traveling, and I'm in a hotel room alone, and the mind begins to track back, to think, to look at the way things were. I'd have hated myself even more if I didn't take the time to tell you how amazing you are. You deserve that, Margie. And more."

He was good. She could admit that to herself, because it just confirmed what she believed—that he'd say pretty much anything to weasel his way back into her life. That was the game he played. He'd be charming as long as he was pursuing her, because he loved the thrill of the chase. But when that was done, he'd become—slowly or not—an asshole.

Rowan might have been a bully, but he was also a coward. "If you call me again, I'll hand the phone to Ethan, and I'll let him decide how to handle you."

Margot ended the call, put down the phone, and fisted her hands together to stop the shaking; she wasn't sure if it was from fury or fear. Then she blew out one breath, then another, until her heart was no longer racing.

She'd faced her fear, and she'd handled it. She'd hung up on him. She'd set a boundary.

She needed to keep doing that—setting appropriate boundaries. The courage it had required to threaten him with Ethan just confirmed to her that she wasn't ready for a relationship.

With no better options, Margot pushed the phone into her apron pocket and got back to work.

The pizza had been delicious. Mallory had stayed for dinner, not just for the food but also to help keep me calm while the others investigated.

I was tired, physically and emotionally. Mallory must have seen it, because when dinner was over, she stood up, offered me a hand.

“Let’s go upstairs,” she said. “I’m going to grab some brownies or ice cream or candy corn—whatever’s available—from Margot, and we’re going to your apartments, and you’re going to rest. We’ll watch a movie or play cards or something.”

I opened my mouth to object, thinking I needed to contribute to the search, but Ethan shook his head.

“We’ll handle this. The Ombudsman’s office is involved, and the House is secure. Have a break and relax with Mallory. You can . . . complain about men and our foibles.”

I stared at him. “Is that what you think women talk about?”

He leaned forward, kissed my forehead. “In addition to the important social and political events of the day, yes.”

He wasn’t entirely wrong.

* * *

I kicked off my shoes the second I stepped into the apartments, then headed for the bathroom and turned the shower’s silver taps.

The hot water helped soothe the aches from the fight—or at least from hitting the ground on my butt. I took my time, luxuriated in the hot water, steam, and scented soap.

By the time I was wrinkled and dry, I felt a little more myself. And because warm showers always soothed the baby, I felt much less like her personal dojo.

I climbed into a tank and pretty flowered pajama bottoms, turbaned my hair into a towel.

“Better?” Mallory asked, when I walked into the bedroom. She was sitting on the enormous bed with a bag of salt and vinegar chips, one of my favorite indulgences.

“Better,” I said, and sat down beside her. “Hand over the snacks.”

She poured out a handful of chips for herself, passed the bag to me. “Asshole wanted to kidnap you,” she said, gaze on the television across from the bed. A tall woman with platinum hair and four-inch stilettos appeared to be kicking some very serious ass.

“Yep,” I said. “He apparently did, and he was definitely an asshole.” I settled back against the mound of pillows, gestured with a chip to the screen. “Who’s she?”

“Assassin. Orphaned, trained by the British. She poses as this rich and helpless fundraising type. But she’s got mad skills.”

The woman used one of her heels to take out a bulky security guard, then slipped into the room

he'd guarded.

"She's good," I agreed, and crunched a chip. "And they'll find the guy."

"Of course they will," she agreed. "Here's something to take your mind off your troubles." She finished the last chip, dusted her hands. "I'm pregnant!"

"You're—what?" I turned to stare at her, saw the hopeful light in her eyes. "Mallory! Oh, my God!" I wrapped an arm around her shoulders, gave her a sideways squeeze. "Congratulations!"

"Thank you," she said. "We're very excited. Or as excited as Catcher gets about anything. And the baby's cooking right along. I'm at ten weeks, so we'll be sixish months behind you."

I looked down at her belly, scrutinized what might have been a tiny bump.

"Oh, that's not baby. That's just the pizza." She patted her belly. "But the baby's in there, probably enjoying the sausage and pepperoni."

"Morning sickness?"

"Not as bad as yours. Couple barfy moments when Catcher mentioned pork chops which"—she looked up at the ceiling, blew out a breath through pursed lips—"still makes me feel a little weird. And I'm eating salt like it's going out of style."

"Wait until everything starts to swell. And you can't reach anything. Or fit into anything. I am ready to evict this particular tenant."

Mallory grinned. "I'm hoping Baby Bell is a girl. Then I can use all your hand-me-downs."

"You can have whatever you want." I sat back, ate another chip. "You think they'll be friends?"

"Our being friends doesn't mean they'll be, but if they're anything near as cool as us, then obviously yes."

"Obviously yes," I said, and settled back to watch a movie with my bestie.

* * *

By the time Ethan returned, I was alone again, brushing my now-dry hair in the bathroom doorway, still watching television. A small, quirkily dressed woman was trying to convince two homeowners to hang a five-foot-high boat anchor on an empty kitchen wall.

Ethan gave an eyebrow to the show or the anchor, I wasn't sure which, then pressed his lips to my forehead. Then followed that tender gesture with a kiss hot enough to scald.

"What was that for?" I asked, when I opened slumberous eyes again.

"For coming back to me in one piece."

"Well, two if you count Peanut."

"I always count her," Ethan said. He gestured at the present sitting on the console. "Shall we open the gift from your parents?"

"Sure," I said, and put away the brush, walked to the console, and gave the box a gentle shake.

"Why shake when you could just open it?"

"It's part of the process."

I didn't see him roll his eyes, but I could feel the disturbance in the force. Mallory called him Darth Sullivan for a reason.

Ethan put his arms around me, or as far as they'd reach, and looked over my shoulder. "You can't fault the wrapping."

"Trudeau's does a good job," I agreed. "We got some wedding presents from there, too."

“I remember.”

Inside the thick paper was a lidded box in some sort of silvery tweed. I lifted off the lid, found layers of thick, white tissue paper sealed with a blue sticker. I peeled that off, unfolded the paper, and found a layer of crinkled, shredded paper.

“How many trees were murdered in the making of this gift?” Ethan asked.

“Entirely too many.” I brushed aside some of the paper, reached in, and pulled out another small box. “It’s giftception.” My patience waning, I flicked off the second lid, and found . . . a gleaming silver apple.

We looked at it in silence for a moment.

“It’s an apple. In what appears to be sterling silver.” There was puzzlement in his voice.

“It is.” And it was exactly the kind of thing they’d buy, because that’s who they were.

“I suppose it’s the thought that counts?” Ethan said, sounding not entirely sure.

“I guess so,” I said, then walked through the sitting room to the doorway that led to the newest part of our rooms. The wall between our apartments and the suite next door had been knocked down, the space turned into a bedroom and attached bath for the baby. There was thick carpet, a rocking chair, and a pretty crib topped by a mobile of spinning animals that Mallory had felted from wool. The colors were soothing, the fabrics soft.

I put the apple on the dresser, then walked to the crib, ran my fingers over the soft, brown bear that waited in a corner. I heard his footsteps behind me.

“Are we going to be able to pull this off?”

“Finding the attacker?” he asked.

“No,” I said with a chuckle, well aware he was being purposefully obtuse. “Raising this child, who now owns a sterling silver apple and lives in a mansion. Making sure she’s kind and empathetic and brave and can stand on her own two feet.”

“We will almost certainly screw some things up,” Ethan said, coming toward me. “But we both love her already, and I suspect our being guided by love will go a long way. And even if we are the worst parents imaginable, she’ll probably be smart enough to find a way around us.”

He put a hand on my belly, smiled at her responsive kick.

“She knows you’re there,” I said. “Oh, and while we’re discussing small parasitic creatures, Mallory’s pregnant!”

His eyes went wide, then narrowed. “Does Catcher know?”

“Ha ha. Yes, and she said he was excited. In his, you know, Catcher way.”

“I know they love each other, and I know she loves you. But I have a difficult time imagining them as parents.”

“She can use magic to warm the bottles, and he’ll get a snarky T-shirt,” I said. “And like us, they’ll probably figure it out.”

I wrapped my arms around him, although I had to turn to the side to do it. “I love you.”

“And I love my girls.” He dropped his head atop mine. “Until you both gang up against me. Which I assume is inevitable given I’m going to be outnumbered.”

“We’re going to paint Cadogan House pink and cover it in glitter.”

He snorted a laugh. “I doubt pink. But possibly yes on the glitter, especially if Aunt Mallory is involved.”

I couldn’t fault his logic.

“Now,” he said, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “Let’s go check Margot’s nighttime basket and find you a snack.”

I grabbed his tie, pulled him down. “I have something different in mind,” I said, and kissed him hard and lavishly, with plenty of promise of things to come.

His eyes silvered. “I’m yours, Sentinel. But be gentle.”

“No,” I said with a grin, and proceeded to show him just how ungentle I could be.

Dusk fell again, and I refused to give up my nightly walk. But I agreed to tone it down a little.

I told myself I was just trying to avoid a battle with Ethan, but as time passed, the more the Incident began to bother me—and scare me. I didn't scare easily, not anymore. But it wasn't just me I was protecting, it was her. And something about the way the attacker had looked at me, the way he'd looked at my belly, made me uncomfortable in retrospect. I didn't know if one failure would be enough for him. So I'd be careful.

I got dressed, confirmed with Luc there'd been no communication from him, and walked outside to the front portico. I stretched my calves along the edge of the bottom step and waited for Margot to switch from clogs to tennis shoes. Then we took the sidewalk to the trail that bobbed and weaved around the edge of the property just inside the fence. Not the most exciting walk, but likely a safer one.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Like I always have to pee.” And like my own personal rebellion, I took another drink of the chocolate banana “health” smoothie she'd made for me.

She grinned. “I mean about last night.”

“Nervous,” I admitted. And confessed I was feeling more uncomfortable about it tonight.

“That strikes me as an entirely logical reaction. The baby is your new House.”

“I think you have that backward?”

“No, I mean now you're protecting the baby, where before you were protecting the House. You may be on Sentinel hiatus, but you're still protecting something.”

Even as she said it, I was surveying the top of the wall that surrounded the lawn, checking that the security camera lights were green and ready. You could take the sword from the Sentinel, but you couldn't take the Sentinel from the girl.

“We'll find him,” I said, and that I believed one hundred percent. I just didn't know the how or when.

“How are you doing?” I asked. There'd been darkness in my friend's eyes this week, shadows that I thought originated from her heart, but I wasn't sure. Margot was bright and charming and thoughtful, but she was also guarded.

I still wasn't entirely sure why she and Jonah hadn't gotten together. He'd refused to talk to me about it given our past non-relationship, and Margot had been just as mum.

“Did Jonah find you last night?” she asked, trying to sound casual and not succeeding very well.

“You mean, on the street?”

She laughed, as I'd meant her to. “No, after that. After he'd talked to, I think, Malik about negotiations with the city. I told him you were in the apartments.”

“No, he didn't come by. But you saw him?” I asked, trying to hide my enthusiasm. We were both playing coy.

“Just for a second. He came by the kitchen to say hello.”

So he was interested, I deduced. I just wasn't sure where she was.

"Cool," I said, and then failed at being nonchalant. "And are you two . . . ?"

"We aren't."

"Okay. Are you not feeling it, or . . . ?"

She ducked to avoid a flowering limb that dipped over the trail. "It's just . . . I'm working through some stuff from a previous boyfriend."

I stopped short. "Oh, damn, Margot. I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize," she said. "I told you I was ready to start looking again. And I like Jonah. But when we went out, I wasn't as ready as I thought." She started walking again, and I let her set the pace.

"I'm sorry I shoved him at you when you weren't ready."

She arched a gorgeous, dark brow. "Shoved?"

I grinned. "Gently nudged. Trust me—those wheels were already greased. You're sexy and gorgeous and smart. And I think he likes food nearly as much as I do, so the fact that you're a chef is probably a plus."

She lifted a shoulder. "I'm just trying to figure some things out right now."

"Totally fair," I said. "And a good thing we're immortal."

"Preach."

* * *

We'd made our third loop around the property—and avoided any further talk about romance, even though I wanted to burrow into the subject like a honey badger—before my phone rang.

I pulled it out, smiled at the name on the screen.

"Hi, Grandpa."

"Hey, baby girl. How are you feeling tonight?"

"Very secure," I said, as we rounded the corner to the front of the House and the bevy of watchful guards. "And fine other than that."

"We've got a potential development."

I stopped, motioned Margot to do the same. "The gun? The pizza box?"

"Neither, unfortunately. The gun doesn't have a serial number. We found plenty of fingerprints, but they don't match anything in the human or supernatural databases. No DNA, presuming we'd be able to match it. But when we find him, they'll be nails in his proverbial coffin. Oh, goodness. No offense meant there."

He sounded horrified by perceived slight. "None taken. So what's the development?"

"I think we've found the getaway car."

* * *

"You aren't going."

I slipped into a pair of Pumas that didn't have laces, praise be, and wiggled my toes until my feet were in the correct position. "I absolutely am going."

I stood up, adjusted the jeans I'd paired with the wide elastic band to cover my belly and the Cadogan House T-shirt I wore over it. "Can you stick a dagger in my shoe?"

His expression remained flat. "Could you draw it even if I did?"

"Probably not. But that's why you'll be there—strong and sexy as hell—to help me out."

Still flat.

"I know you want to protect me, and I appreciate that. But I'll be with you and the Ombuddies, and none of you are going to let anything happen to me. That's as safe as it gets." I rose, walked to him. "He tried to make me a victim, Ethan, and he believed I was helpless. I need to be part of the team that brings him down."

"You aren't helpless," he said. "But you are worth more than money to me."

I put a hand on his cheek. "I know it. But I need to do this. And I don't want to have to do it on my own, behind your back."

"Blackmail, Sentinel? Really?"

"It's not blackmail. It's the truth. If you block me out, I'll have to find another way."

He was quiet for a moment. "All right," he said. "But you owe me one."

I wiggled my eyebrows. "Do I get to pick the one?"

* * *

We drove Ethan's other baby, a red Mercedes-AMG GT Roadster which he swore he wouldn't destroy (unlike the last Mercedes of his acquaintance) southwest across the city.

Beverly was a residential neighborhood with plenty of big trees and brick houses. The Ombuddies' gleaming white van, OMBUDSMAN painted on the side in bold black letters, was already there, parked on a side street in front of a CPD cruiser. Two women in uniforms guarded the squat sedan, the pizza sign still attached. A few curious humans looked out from windows, curtains pushed aside.

Ethan parked, and we walked over to greet them. My grandfather, who wore khakis, a long-sleeve plaid shirt, and shoes with thick soles, pressed a kiss to my cheek. His head was bald but for a crown of silver, his face lined, his eyes sharp.

"Good to see you, baby girl."

"Good to see you, too, Grandpa."

I waved to Jeff Christopher, the third of my grandfather's crew. He was tall and lanky, with floppy brown hair. Catcher preferred jeans and snarky T-shirts; tonight's shirt read MCSNARKY above an emoji with a flat expression. Jeff stuck to business casual khakis and a button-down.

"How'd you find it?" Ethan asked.

"APB," Catcher said. "Cruiser spotted it and alerted us. We figured you'd want to join us for the search."

"We appreciate it," I said, before Ethan could say something snarky about my tagging along.

"It's a 1993 Festival GVS," my grandfather said. "That particular brand didn't last very long, so there aren't many still on the road."

"I've never heard of it," I said, and circled the car, looked inside the dingy windows. An insulated pizza bag was on the front seat, along with plenty of detritus and garbage.

My grandfather gestured to Jeff and Catcher. "Let's take a look."

Both wearing disposable gloves, Jeff popped the trunk while Catcher opened the car doors. Scents wafted out: grease from fast food eaten on the road, the astringent smell of the green pine-tree air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror, and the must of old and dirty fabric.

“He’s not tidy,” I said. “Or much concerned with clean.”

“No, he isn’t,” Catcher agreed. He popped the glove box, which was empty but for a tire pressure gauge. Flipped down the visors, and found less than that. “No registration or insurance docs.”

“There’s bound to be DNA in here,” my grandfather said, his gaze skimming over a pile of discarded fast food cups, the lids and straws still attached. “Your criminal doesn’t seem especially savvy.”

“He didn’t succeed in grabbing me,” I pointed out. “And he said he owed someone big money. Maybe we aren’t the only ones who weren’t impressed by his skills.”

“Could be,” my grandfather said. “Given his fingerprints weren’t in the system, it’s likely his DNA won’t be either. On the other hand, it seems unlikely he started with kidnapping, so we’ll see what the forensics people can do.”

“Well, well,” Catcher said, climbing out of the front seat with a white disc of paper.

“What have you got?” my grandfather asked.

“Coaster from the Brown Mule,” Catcher said. The thick cardboard bore a cartoon of a kicking mule and an address.

“It’s down the road,” he said. “It’s a hard bar and a hangout for members of Chicago’s, shall we say, connected families. You don’t casually visit the Brown Mule.”

“You’re talking about the mob?” I asked.

“And several other varieties of organized crime,” Catcher said. “The bar doesn’t discriminate.”

“It’s a bad thing to owe money to the mob,” Ethan said.

“That it is,” Catcher agreed.

“It doesn’t mean that’s what’s happening here,” my grandfather said, frowning with concern as he looked at me, “but we’ll send some officers over to the bar to inquire.”

“Will patrons at a mob hangout talk to cops?” Ethan asked.

“Maybe, maybe not,” my grandfather said, but gestured to one of the uniforms standing nearby. “But we check the box anyway.”

Catcher looked back at the garbage. “Let’s dive into the rest of it.”

“Your job is very glamorous,” I told my grandfather with a smile.

“We occasionally have to get our capes dirty,” he said with a wink. “But it’s usually worth it.”

They picked through car garbage for more than an hour, looking for identifying information. Given the volume, it seemed likely there'd be a discarded bill or traffic ticket or receipt, something with the owner's name or contact information. But while he'd left plenty of paper behind, and probably a lot of DNA, none of it bore a name or address.

My grandfather looked at Ethan. "Anything from the House's surveillance video?"

"Nothing useful," Ethan said. "No frequent vehicle, no obvious stalker. Any luck on your end with the canvass?"

"Nothing," Catcher said. "There are a few houses we haven't gotten to yet—where no one answered the door on the first pass—but so far nobody has remembered an unbranded pizza delivery guy or anyone watching Merit."

"So we're at a dead end," I said, feeling more than a little unsettled.

"We'll find him," my grandfather said, peeling off a glove and putting an arm around me. "He won't lay a finger on you or . . ." He dropped his gaze to my abdomen, then up at me again, a questioning look in his eyes.

"We haven't decided on a name," I said with a smile. "But we'll let you know as soon as we do."

Hopefully, that would be before she decided to make an appearance.

* * *

"Are you all right?" Ethan asked, when we were in the car again and making our way north.

I shifted to get comfortable in the narrow seat. "I'm fine. Just . . . discombobulated."

"Because a madman tried to kidnap you, or shoot you, or both?"

"Both," I said with a smile. Ethan was so serious that it wasn't often that he made light of a threat. But he also wouldn't have wanted me to worry and stress the baby.

"He can't get to you," Ethan said. "And he won't get to you. The House is secure, and you'll stay in it unless you're with me."

I had to work not to bristle at the authoritative tone of voice, even though I knew he was trying to keep me safe. "And if we don't find him?"

"I'll be honest with you, Sentinel. And I'll tell you something that I believe you'd have concluded anyway if you were less emotional about this particular situation."

The look I gave him should have lowered the temp in the car a few degrees. "Less emotional? Because you're cool and collected?"

"I'm always cool and collected."

I snorted a laugh.

"I just mean it's difficult to be objective when you're the victim," he said gently. "But it's inevitable that we'll find him. He's not savvy, and he's leaving a very obvious and literal trail of

bread crumbs.”

But when would we find him? I wondered, leaning against the window, the glass cool against my forehead, and watching the city spin past us. *How long would this particular sword hang above our heads?*

I wasn't going to let him control us forever. And when we rolled through Hyde Park, I had an idea.

“Hey, pull over, will you? At the blue house?”

I pointed and Ethan pulled to the curb, and I climbed out, waddled toward Mrs. Plum, who stood at the gate.

She was sixty-four years old and shared the house with her grown daughter, her son-in-law, and their children. She was ten years a widow, still wore her wedding ring, and still preferred to be referred to as “Mrs.”

Her skin was dark, her hair a short crop of silver curls, the lines around her eyes the only suggestions of her age. She was slender and elegant, and wore jeans, a Northwestern T-shirt, and a gardening apron, as she watered the annuals near the fence. Mrs. Plum didn't sleep much, and she said she liked to give her plants—a bed nearly overflowing with pink and white petunias—a drink at the end of a long day.

I wasn't sure if my grandfather's canvass of the neighborhood had made it to Mrs. Plum, but it seemed worth the check. She knew my walking routine better than anyone else outside Cadogan House, and more importantly, she knew the neighborhood itself.

She looked up when we walked toward her. There was suspicion in her eyes until she recognized us, and the distrust faded to pleasure.

“Merit! I'm so glad you're here.” She reached over the low fence to offer a hand, and I squeezed it.

“Mrs. Plum, I don't think you've met my husband, Ethan Sullivan. Ethan, Mrs. Donna Plum.”

“A pleasure to meet you, dear.” That she called him dear, when he was more than three hundred years older than her, was one of the reasons I adored her.

“The pleasure is all mine,” he said, and pressed his lips to her hand. And even the unflappable Mrs. Plum looked a little flapped. Ethan's charms were pretty much universal.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“It's fine. But I heard about your incident, and I wanted to make sure you were all right. I was going to walk down to your school and check on you when I finished with the plants.”

Mrs. Plum had decided Cadogan House was essentially a vampire college. Since we had dorm rooms, a cafeteria, training sessions, and a sexy headmaster, she wasn't entirely wrong.

“I mean, I know you're immortal, but I think that would have scared the pee out of me.”

“It scared me plenty,” I said. “Mrs. Plum, the vehicle was a dark blue Festival—a small four-door sedan. The vampire was white with brown hair, probably five eleven or so. Medium build. Do either of those ring any bells for you?”

She frowned. “I don't know about the car model, but I've seen plenty of sedans and plenty of white guys.”

I bit back a grin. “Fair enough. What about pizza delivery men?”

“Every once in a while, sure. I'm out watering my plants nearly every morning, every evening, and—wait.” She looked back at me, and there was a gleam in her eyes. “Pizza delivery, you said?”

“I did say.”

She glanced down the street toward the corner. “Come to think of it, three or four nights ago”—she put her hands on her hips, frowned as she worked to remember—“No, four. Four nights ago, I was watering the plants and saw this little car pull up. Older car, four doors, and not very big. One of those lights on top that the delivery drivers use, but it just said pizza. Didn’t have a name, and I found that odd.

“He pulled up to the corner right here”—she pointed—“and I was a little suspicious, mind, because the Ewings are on vacation. They’re in Italy on one of those river cruises, and I’m so glad they finally managed to get away. Anyway, they wouldn’t have ordered a pizza, so he was either lost or had some sort of bad motivation. He got out of the car, walked over, and I kept my hose trained on him, just in case.” She held up her sprayer. “And I realized he didn’t have a pizza box, and that’s just odd. White man with brown hair. I said, ‘Can I help you find something?’ He looked surprised to see me. He said, ‘No, ma’am,’ then looked around a little bit like he was lost. And he looked down toward your school, got back in the car, and drove away.”

Scoping your route, Ethan silently suggested, using the telepathic link between us as he glanced at the streetlight at the corner, glowing orange, that spread a circle of light on the asphalt. *The location of the streetlights, the distance from the House, any barriers that might impede his escape.*

Yeah, I said, my discomfort inching up again. Had I passed this man on the street without knowing who he was or what he was planning? Maybe offered a nod or a smile? He hadn’t looked familiar, but without some reason to think he was a threat, I may not have paid much attention.

“Mrs. Plum,” I said, and pulled out my phone, showed her the sketch. “Does this look like him?”

She slid on the boxy glasses that hung around her neck. “Somewhat?” She tilted her head as she considered. “I believe his jaw was a little softer. His lips a little thinner, I think. He wasn’t this, I suppose, hard looking, if that makes sense.”

Given I hadn’t gotten a good look at him and had thought him a monster, it made perfect sense that I’d unconsciously hardened his features.

“Would you be willing to speak to Merit’s grandfather?” Ethan asked. “The sketch artist could use your information to improve this. That would help us identify him.”

“Of course I’ll help. Do I need to go see the police?”

“No, ma’am,” he said. “We’ll take care of everything. I know it’s late, but they may want to speak with you yet tonight.”

“I’m happy to help.” She slid her gaze to me. “You’ve snagged a very polite young man.”

I could practically hear Ethan’s sarcastic retort to the “young” comment. But he kept his gracious smile in place.

“He’s very mannerly,” I agreed.

She nodded. “I’ll just finish with their drink,” she said, and aimed the soft spray of water on the plants. “You all have a good night.”

“We will, Mrs. Plum,” I said. “And thank you for your help.”

She nodded. “Oh, and Merit,” she called out, when I’d reached Ethan’s car again.

I glanced back.

There was amusement in her eyes that I liked a lot better than the concern. “They adopted the corgi.”

We called my grandfather on the way back to the House and coordinated Mrs. Plum's meeting with Kat. Then we went to the House's Ops Room—the strategy room in the basement that served as the HQ for the Cadogan guards—and discussed what we knew.

The Ops Room was the most technologically intensive room in the House. There were wall monitors for reviewing information, a bank of surveillance cameras where guards kept an eye on the house, and, stretching nearly from end to end, an enormous conference table with built-in screens.

The guards sat at the table, Luc at its head, and were passing around trail mix. I dug out a handful of cashews before passing the bowl to Lindsey, who sat beside me.

“What is this nonsense?” she said, gaze narrowed at me.

“What? The baby doesn't like raisins.”

“The baby doesn't care about raisins,” she said flatly, pouring unadulterated trail mix into her hand. “You don't like them, or anything else, and you just pick out the cashews.”

“You should buy trail mix without raisins. And sunflower seeds. And those yogurt things.”

“So trail mix that only consists of cashews.” Kelley sat across from us, and her voice was just as dry.

“Yes,” I said.

“So just a bag of cashews.”

I ignored the tone. “Yes. And it would be delicious.” Unapologetically, I stuffed the rest of the cashews in my mouth, dusted the salt from my hands. “Sorry not sorry.”

“If we're done being childish,” Luc interjected, organizing his trail mix into tidy and organized rows on the conference table, “I have some more names—Christine, after Evans, Hemsworth, Pine, or Pratt. Take your pick.”

“No,” Ethan said, brow arched at the arrangement of nuts and raisins.

“I like order,” Luc said with a grin, then swept the row of raisins into his mouth. “And that's just more raisins for me.”

“We are surrounded by weirdos,” Kelley said to Lindsey. “Normals on the island of misfit vampires.”

“Vampires are misfits by definition,” Luc said. “And in case you weren't sure, we are, in fact, done with the funny business.” He glanced at me. “Sentinel, lay it out for us.”

“We have his car,” I said. “We have his fingerprints, but currently no matching identity. We have garbage from his car that may have DNA, and it's possible he may have mob friends, or at least visited a known mob hangout. He said he wanted money because he had a debt, so we're currently speculating he owes money to the mob and was hoping my ransom would pay that off.”

“Why you?” Luc asked, leaning back in his chair and crossing booted ankles on the conference table. “Not that I don't think you have your finer qualities, of course, but you aren't the only person in the city who could earn a ransom.”

“He's a vampire,” Ethan said. “And so are we, and relatively famous ones. He probably assumes

—and correctly—that I’d pay whatever ransom was necessary to get her back. Shortly before I hunted him down and ripped the limbs from his body.”

“Of course,” Luc said smoothly, crossing his arms and rocking as he considered. “And presuming Merit didn’t rip his limbs off first. But I still think we’re missing something. We think he did the grab, including the pizza delivery routine, because he knew her schedule. Because he knew she went for evening walks. How did he come by that knowledge? The vehicle didn’t show up on the surveillance video, and he’d have needed to be close to see her coming and going in the first place. Otherwise, why even consider the possibility that she’d take an evening walk by herself in the first place?”

The air began to pulse with angry magic. I glanced at Ethan, found his eyes cold and hard as steel. “You think he has a connection to the Houses.”

“I think if you’re a Housed vampire, it’s a perfectly natural thing to discuss the first vampire pregnancy with your friends. I think he talked with someone, got the information, and the brain cells started to fire, and he figured he’d found a way out of his current financial trials and tribulations.”

“He hasn’t tried again,” I said.

“He hasn’t had an opportunity,” Luc said. “You’ve been either on the grounds or surrounded by cops. Could be he’s laying low—both from us and from the folks to whom he owes money—waiting for an opportunity.”

Ethan’s phone buzzed, and he pulled it out, checked the screen. “That’s Malik. Catcher and Chuck are here,” he said, rising from his seat. “They’ve got an updated sketch.”

* * *

Catcher and my grandfather met me, Ethan, and Luc in Ethan’s office. We were joined by Malik and Jonah, who’d been working together on the proposal for the mayor when my grandfather arrived.

“You worked fast,” I said, glancing at the clock. Barely two hours had passed since we’d left Mrs. Plum.

“She makes a good witness,” my grandfather said.

“May we?” Catcher asked, gesturing to the monitor on Ethan’s wall.

“Please,” Ethan said, and Catcher sent the digital sketch to the overhead screen.

“That’s him,” I said immediately. Mrs. Plum and Kat had done good work. Just as Mrs. Plum had suggested, the first sketch had been a kind of vague outline. She’d filled in the blanks, including the shape and color of his eyes—hazel—and the set of his jaw.

“Have you seen him before?” Ethan asked.

“No,” I said. “Or not that I remember.” I looked at my grandfather. “You’ll use this to canvass the neighborhood again?”

“We will.”

“What about the Brown Mule?” Ethan asked.

“Not surprisingly, no one was willing to talk to the CPD about the vehicle or the owner. But we’ll try again with the sketch.”

There was a knock in the doorway before Margot rolled in a cart laden, if my nose was right, with delicious food. Ethan must have ordered refreshments. Given Peanut’s interested kick, that was fine by me.

Margot pushed it to the middle of the room, began removing silver domes and pulling out the

tray's extra leaves, which provided more serving space.

When she happened to glance up at the screen, her smile fell away. "What is this?"

I looked back. She'd gone sheet-pale, and there was something hot and angry in her tone and bafflement in the question. She looked from Jonah to me to Ethan, then back to me.

"What is this?" she asked again.

"That's the revised sketch of the perpetrator," Ethan said, putting down his cup and moving toward her. "Are you all right?"

"The perp—" She looked at me and seemed to go paler. "You think that's the man who attacked you? There's no way."

I joined Ethan at her side, put my hand on her arm. "Do you know him, Margot?"

She swallowed hard, seemed to firm her courage, then nodded.

"That's Rowan Cleary. My ex-boyfriend."

Angry magic buzzed in the air, spilled by all of us who cared for Margot. Jonah's expression, I noticed, had gone positively murderous.

"So that's the asshole," Luc said, gaze on the sketch. Then he looked back at Margot. "I didn't realize I never saw him."

"No," she said. "He wasn't there when you helped me move back in." She glanced at me. "This was before you came into the House." Then she looked back at the screen, and there was misery in her eyes. "I don't want to talk about the details, if that's okay."

"That's fine," my grandfather said, gesturing her to the sofa. "Let's sit down, and you can tell us what you can."

"In broad strokes," she said, taking a seat. "We lived together. He was emotionally abusive, although he couched it in cleverness, in constructive criticism." She paused. "He hit me, once. And I ended it."

I felt immediately guilty that I'd teased her about romance and relationships. That I hadn't realized—or respected—the boundary she'd tried to draw. And as if sensing my regret, Margot reached out and squeezed my hand, putting me at ease. That nearly brought tears to my eyes.

"He called me last night," she said.

"Did he?" Ethan asked.

"It was our anniversary—or would have been. He said he was out of town, but he was thinking about how wrong he'd done me, and he wanted to talk to me about it. He didn't mention Merit or anything else. Just said he wanted to talk. I told him not to contact me anymore." She lifted her chin, anger putting color in her cheeks. "He wasn't out of town."

"It doesn't appear so," my grandfather said. "When was the last time you'd talked to him before that?"

Margot's brows lifted. "I honestly don't remember. More than a year, I'd guess."

"Did he have any other friends in the House?" Catcher asked. "Or other Houses?"

"He's a Rogue, but he has vampire friends. A couple of people in Navarre, and a vampire or two in Grey, or at least he did while we dated."

Plenty of Cadogan vampires had friends in Navarre and Grey. It wasn't much of a stretch to assume they'd talked about my pregnancy and how I was dealing with it.

"I don't really know them specifically," she said. "We didn't go out much with other vampires, and I don't remember him naming names. Just general talk about a friend here or there."

"Did he ever mention a place called the Brown Mule?" my grandfather asked.

"Not that I remember."

"What about the mob?" my grandfather asked.

Margot's brows lifted. "You cannot be serious. Why would the mob be interested in him?"

"What did he do for a living?" my grandfather asked.

That angry flush rose again. "He called himself an entrepreneur. He kind of moved from project to

project. Always had a plan or idea, a business he wanted to start, some clever way he could invest money. When we first started dating, he said he'd had a run of bad luck. Once he told me he'd had this great idea for some kind of GPS widget, but his boss had stolen the concept and fired him. He had a lot of stories like that. In hindsight, it was obviously bullshit. I can't imagine the mob would be interested in him."

And how were you? I wanted to ask.

"He was charming," she said, as if answering my unspoken question. "Fun and engaging. Until he wasn't."

"It sounds like you figured out he was a bad guy, and you ended it," my grandfather said.

She nodded. "Yeah, but there was nothing like this. His plans were always financial. Not this violent. Not this . . . felonious."

"Perhaps he's escalated," Ethan said. "The pressure of owing money to dangerous people might have pushed him into something he wouldn't have ordinarily done."

While I knew he was trying to soothe Margot, and circumstances could certainly drive people to crimes they wouldn't have ordinarily committed, kidnapping a pregnant woman seemed to fall in a different orbit.

"Can you tell us where he lives?" my grandfather asked, and Margot provided an address and apartment number.

"It's in Beverly," she said, and my grandfather and Catcher shared a glance. Same neighborhood as the car and the Brown Mule.

"I don't know if he's still there," Margot added. "He moved around a lot—always had an excuse about the landlord not liking him, or someone being jealous and getting him kicked out. He had a lot of excuses, always something out of his control, or that wasn't his fault."

"You have his phone number," Ethan said. "If we don't find him at the address, we can use that. Either way, we'll get him, and he won't bother you anymore."

"I'm glad you kicked him," I said, angry and sad on her behalf, then squeezed her hand again.

She nodded, her irritation putting a buzz of magic into the room. "Mind if I step out for a minute? I need a little air."

"Take as much time as you need," Ethan said, and we watched as she walked to the cart and made a nervous adjustment to one of the serving trays before moving into the hallway. Jonah's gaze followed her intensely, anger and sympathy mixed in his expression.

"Sounds like this was a chapter she wanted to keep closed," my grandfather said.

"It's not her fault," Jonah said, but there was no heat in it. I had the sense he was less arguing with my grandfather than saying what he'd have liked to tell Margot.

I looked back at Ethan, found the same emotions in his silvered eyes.

"I take it you didn't meet Rowan, either?" I asked.

It took a moment for Ethan to shift his gaze back to me. Then he shook his head. "I found it odd that I hadn't, but I don't meet everyone's partner, so I didn't think much about it."

But he'd thought something about it. That was clear in his pained expression.

"I suppose that confirms one connection between Cleary and the House," Ethan said. He looked at my grandfather. "What's next?"

"We go to his house," my grandfather said, "just in case he's there. We'll get fingerprints and DNA, and we'll run those against the samples we found in the car."

“I want to go,” I said.

Ethan’s expression was dour.

He attacked me, I silently said, as this discussion was just for us. And he attacked her. Maybe I’m not sure how to be a good parent. But you’ve taught me about protecting people, and facing him down, showing her how to be brave, is part of that.

“I believe we’re all going,” Catcher said with a smug smile.

* * *

Rowan Cleary lived in a four-plex, a two-story brick building with four apartments separated in the middle by a central staircase. His was on the top floor, and the building was dark when the four of us—Catcher, my grandfather, Ethan, and I—squeezed onto the second floor landing.

The door across the hall opened, and a human in her early twenties looked out. She had tan skin and dark hair pulled into a messy bun, and wore leggings and a Cubs T-shirt.

“Hey, Ro, I wondered when you were—”

She stopped short when she realized we weren’t the vampire she was looking for.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, frowning as she looked us over. “I thought you were Ro. Rowan, I mean.”

“We’re actually looking for him,” I said, rubbing a hand over my belly to assure her that I wasn’t going to cause any trouble. Not for her, anyway. “Is he home?”

She shifted from socked foot to socked foot. “No, I haven’t seen him. I’m a nurse and I work nights, and sometimes we go for a run, but I haven’t seen him in two or three days.” Her eyes went wide. “He’s not in any trouble, is he?”

“He isn’t,” my grandfather said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “We just came by to say hello.”

“He’s getting a lot of that lately,” she said with a smile. “A guy and a girl came by last night to see him, too. He wasn’t home then, either.”

“A guy and a girl?” my grandfather asked, and the girl lifted a shoulder.

“I think they were maybe cops or security? They were big, had on weapons. Guns, I mean.” She chewed her bottom lip. “Maybe I wasn’t supposed to say that? I don’t want to get Ro into any trouble.”

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” my grandfather said. “We’ll just leave him a note and be on our way.”

“Okay,” she said, but still looked a little unsure. And I had a sneaking suspicion my grandfather didn’t intend to leave anyone a note—and might want a little privacy.

“Could I possibly bother you for a glass of water?” I asked. “I’m a little winded after climbing those stairs.”

“Of course, sure. I think I have a couple of bottles. I’ll be right back.”

“Very nice, Sentinel,” Ethan murmured behind me, as I heard Catcher and my grandfather fiddle with the lock.

It popped as the girl appeared in the doorway with the bottle, eyes widening at the half-open door across the hall.

“The door was actually open a little,” my grandfather said, with a concerned expression on his face that I’d certainly have believed. “We just want to make sure there’s no damage in the apartment.”

“Oh, okay,” she said, handing me the bottle and plainly not sure about what she should do. “Maybe

I should call the cops?"

"We are the cops," Catcher said, offering up his identification. "We're with the Ombudsman's office."

She blinked. "'Cause he's a vampire. Right, obviously." She smiled. "Listen, if you've got this, I'm going to just head back inside. I've got to get ready for work."

"Of course," Catcher said, and pulled a business card from his pocket, handed it to her. "If you need to get in touch with us, you can use this."

"Thanks. Later," she said, then closed and locked the door.

"All right," my grandfather said. "Let's go in."

* * *

There was no sign of Rowan Cleary. But there was plenty of evidence of him.

His apartment wasn't much different from his car: a little shabby and full of debris. The rooms were set up shotgun style—living room led to dining room, which led to kitchen, which led to bedroom and bath. The walls were pretty hardwood, the doorways arched, but the furniture, what little there was, was old, threadbare, and well-scarred. Horizontal surfaces were piled with boxes and papers and products.

It looked like he'd tried several direct sales businesses, as we found separate piles of makeup, cleaning products, and exercise DVDs. The refrigerator held blood, beer, and sports drinks, the cabinets only a few old cans of fruit. The walls were bare but for a motivational poster (EVERY BUSINESS STARTS AT THE BEGINNING) and some old-fashioned beer ads featuring 1940s pinup girls.

If Rowan Cleary was hoping to become a player, the décor, such as it was, said he hadn't quite managed it yet.

"If he owes money to the mob or anyone else," Catcher asked, hands on his hips as he surveyed the man's belongings, "what the hell did he do with it?"

"Bought his inventory," Ethan suggested, pointing to a six-foot-high stack of boxes that held nutritional products. "Maybe he figured this is how he'd make his first million."

"Or lost it gambling," I said, holding up a worn spiral notebook. "I think this might be some kind of bookkeeping?"

Eyes alight with interest, Catcher walked to me, and I offered him the notebook.

He scanned the pages quietly. "Gambling entries," he said. "And it looks like he prefers the sports book. He's been keeping track of his wins and losses, and there are a lot more of the latter than the former." He looked up, smiled at my grandfather. "Vice would probably find this very interesting."

"I imagine they would."

"So he's got a gambling problem and no obvious source of consistent income," Ethan said. "He borrowed money from the mob for some new venture, or perhaps owes them directly for his gambling losses. That would make a man hungry for cash. And an unethical man wouldn't much care how he got it."

"I wonder if we'll find him before the mob does," I said and met Ethan's angry stare. "Given we're likely to be gentler, I'm not really sure I have a preference."

Margot knew they meant to find Rowan. They'd confront him and arrest him—unless Ethan and his frigid anger got to Rowan first.

She walked outside, sat on the edge of the House's backyard brick patio. It was a gorgeous night, warm and breezy, and it made Margot think of June in some tropical port. Except she wasn't in a tropical port. She was in her home, where her previous relationship—and all the baggage that came with it—had just been spread across her House. The place that had been her respite from drama.

Her ex had attacked Merit. Her friend, her House's Sentinel, and her Master's beloved wife. And she knew damn well he hadn't called her to check in or apologize or because it had been their anniversary. He'd called after his mission had failed, probably because he hoped Margot could help him with some backup scheme.

"Bastard," she said, clenching her hands into fists. "I was trying to cut you out, not get dragged back into your nonsense."

She knew they wouldn't blame her, that neither Ethan nor Merit would think she had any responsibility for what he'd done. But she couldn't help thinking back—had there been something she'd said, some opinion she'd passed along that had set him on this course? Of deciding Cadogan House was a good target for his greed?

Typical Rowan, she thought ruefully. Just another scheme to get some quick cash. But this still was more desperate than anything he'd tried before, or at least that she knew about.

She sighed, blew out a breath, assured herself they'd find him before he hurt anyone else. Hopefully.

And maybe that would ease the ache in her chest.

* * *

This time, Jonah didn't bother hiding the fact that he wanted to check on Margot.

Hearing about her ex-boyfriend, putting a face to the apprehension he'd seen in her eyes, made Jonah a little too eager to find Rowan Cleary first and offer up a little revenge. He could use a good fight, a little hand-to-hand to work out his frustrations.

Margot had left Ethan's office, and he declined joining the rest of them on the trip to Cleary's house. They didn't need him for that, and he had other concerns.

She wasn't in the kitchen, so Jonah grabbed two bottles of blood and walked outside to the patio behind the House.

He saw the form at the edge of the steps, and it took only a moment—and the scent of her sweet perfume on the air—to confirm it was Margot. His heart galloped beneath his chest, and he wondered if he'd ever be able to be around her without feeling that rush of emotion.

"Hey," he said, and sat down on the same step, but gave her several feet of distance. He offered a

bottle of blood. “Thought you could use this.”

“Thanks,” she said. She took it but didn’t drink. Just rolled the bottle in her hands.

“That must have been quite a shock.”

“It wasn’t my favorite moment.”

“I’m sorry, Margot. Really.”

She just nodded. And he realized she still hadn’t looked at him.

“You’re working through your issues with him—with that relationship.”

This time, her head came up, and she met his gaze. “Yeah.”

Jonah nodded, had to fight back the urge to wrap his arms around her and comfort away the misery and shame in her eyes.

He wouldn’t touch her. Not unless and until she was ready. But maybe words would help. Maybe he could do that for her, little though it would be.

“You aren’t responsible for his bad acts,” he said quietly.

“I know. But he’s targeted Cadogan House. And I’m the one who first brought him here.”

“Years ago,” Jonah said. “And he only needed to watch the news to learn about their relationship. But either way, it hardly matters.”

Her gaze snapped to his. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning, he’s an adult, an immortal. He’s responsible for his own actions.” Jonah paused. “A man, a vampire, should have a code of honor. Even if you’d given him a minute by minute schedule of her evening routine—which you obviously didn’t—using that information to hurt her, to hurt Ethan, was his decision alone.”

She looked into the dark. “Yeah, but it doesn’t make me feel any better about dating an asshole.”

“I care about you, Margot. And so does everyone who was in that room. None of us, Merit included, want you to suffer because once upon a time you dated a jerk. He doesn’t deserve shame or guilt. And neither do you.”

He didn’t think he’d gotten through to her. But knew no one could, or would, until she felt right about it.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I’d like to be alone, okay?”

Jonah looked at her for a long moment, still torn between walking away and pushing her to work through it the way he sensed she needed to. But he wasn’t Rowan Cleary; Jonah could respect her boundaries as much as he wanted to push against them.

He rose and walked toward the door. And it was a hard-fought battle for a man trained to protect and fight.

Jonah paused at the threshold. “You deserve more than him. So much more.” And then he walked inside.

* * *

She wanted to call him back. She wanted so much for him to turn around and gather her up, to embrace her and chase back the demons—or the demon—at her heels.

But she couldn’t bring herself to stand up, to say his name. Not when anger and regret had sunk their claws in and held her in place.

She couldn’t say what she deserved—or what anyone else did. She just knew the darkness hadn’t

yet lifted. The concern she'd make another bad decision, accept things she shouldn't be willing to accept.

Someday, she'd be ready.

And until then?

She put down the bottle, wrapped her arms around her knees, and stared into the darkness.

Until then, she'd just have to manage.

Since they hadn't found Rowan at his house, they were using his phone number, offered by Margot, to track his location.

But as the sun prepared to rise, the Ombuddies told Margot that Rowan had called from an untraceable burner phone, so they hadn't been able to find him.

That meant the drama would continue.

The sun made its arc across the sky, and when it fell again, Margot looked for peace where she often did—in the kitchen. Baking was chemistry, and the careful processes of measuring, combining, heating, decorating were how she found flow, that sense of being completely absorbed in a task so there was no room for worry.

She was sliding a pan of macarons onto a cooling rack when the phone rang. She'd been in the zone—eyes and ears and nose attuned to the feel and scent and sight of the cookies—and she'd answered it automatically.

“Hello?”

“Hey, pretty girl.”

She nearly dropped the pan and sent macarons tumbling across the floor. She managed to get it on the rack but still ended up skimming her thumb against the edge of the pan.

“Damn it,” she said, and stuck her thumb under the tap as the knife-sharp pain throbbed beneath her skin.

“You all right?”

“I'm fine. What do you want, Rowan?”

“I know I'm not your favorite person right now. But I'm back in Chicago—just drove in, actually—and I'd really like the chance to see you.”

He was setting up his alibi, she thought. For his previous attack, and for whatever he planned to do next. The asshole was using her in case it all went wrong again.

Anger began to heat her skin, and she realized it was a lot more comfortable than anxiety or shame.

She also, for the first time, understood Jonah was right. This wasn't about her or what she'd said or what she'd done. There were dozens of vampires in the House with significant others who talked about Cadogan and its vampires, and precisely *none* of them had tried to kidnap Merit.

Rowan was just an asshole. And that wasn't her fault or her responsibility.

On the other hand . . .

They hadn't yet managed to find Rowan, and she had him, right now, on the phone. Maybe she could help put him away. And in doing so, close this particular chapter of her life.

“I just . . . I don't know, Rowan.” She tried to imagine how she'd have responded if she didn't know Rowan was the one who'd attacked her friend. Adrenaline made her voice flutter now, not fear or anger. But it sounded, she thought, pretty convincing. “The House is . . . pretty frazzled right now.”

“Frazzled?” He couldn't hide the excitement in his voice, probably figured she'd think it was just

concern.

“Someone attacked Merit the other night. So we’re all a little freaked out.”

“Oh, man. That’s rough. They know who did it?”

Anger built on anger, one hot block at a time.

“I don’t think so. The street was dark, and I guess he was covered up or something.”

“Crazy,” he said. “Crazy. So, maybe I could just come by with a coffee.”

She didn’t know whether to be furious he was using her to get into the House or thrilled that he was putting himself in her hands.

“I don’t know, Rowan. We haven’t talked in a long time, and everyone is pretty tense.” She put just enough hesitation in her voice to make him think a little more pushing would send her over the edge and get the answer he wanted.

“How about we’ll just talk in the foyer—that front living room or whatever? I’ll bring you a coffee, and we’ll talk. Nothing serious, nothing intense. Just a chance to catch up.”

She made herself count to ten, as if she was seriously debating how to answer. “All right,” she said. “But I’m working the breakfast rush. Can you give me a couple of hours?”

“Of course, Margie.” She could practically hear the smile in his voice. “Two hours.”

She hung up the phone, slipped it back into her pocket, and smiled like a cat who’d gotten the mouse. And that haze of regret began to melt away.

* * *

Margot pulled off the apron, turned off the oven, and walked to Ethan’s office.

He and Merit were in the seating area with Malik and Jonah talking, she assumed, about the deal with the mayor.

Jonah looked up first, and there was heat in his eyes before he banked it. And he banked it, she realized, for her. Because unlike Rowan, Jonah understood self-control.

“He’s coming here,” she said, shifting her gaze to Ethan.

Ethan’s brow furrowed as he turned to face her. “Who?”

She swallowed. “Rowan. He called and said he just got into town and he wanted to talk, and maybe we could just chat. He invited himself over here for coffee. So I let him. He’ll be here in two hours.”

Ethan rose and strode toward her. When he reached her, he put his hands on her cheeks. “You are absolutely brilliant.”

Margot grinned. “I did good?”

“You did *exceptional*.”

“Yay! My heart was racing,” she said, and pressed a hand against her chest. She looked at Merit. “And I didn’t mind. It’s no wonder you like to do this.”

“Adrenaline is a powerful thing,” Merit said, smiling as she joined them.

Ethan checked his watch. “So we have two hours, but I want a plan ready and underway in half that.” He looked back at Margot. “Do you think you can play along a little longer? Maybe meet him outside, ensure we can get near him?”

She made herself nod. She knew Rowan wasn’t above hurting her, and she didn’t want to spend any more time with him than was necessary. But she couldn’t say no. Not now. “Sure.”

Ethan glanced at Merit. “Sentinel, you’ll talk to Luc?”

“I’ll head downstairs right now,” she said, and brushed her fingers against his as she moved, with a slight waddle, toward the door.

Ethan nodded, then looked at Malik. “I apologize for dropping the negotiations on you again.”

“It’s my pleasure entirely,” Malik said. “You know I love a good contract.”

“That’s why you’re my Second. I’ll call your grandfather,” he said to Merit, “while you coordinate with the Ops Rooms.”

“I’ll head back to my office,” Malik said, giving Jonah an appraising look. “And you can meet me there when you’re ready.”

Margot wasn’t sure if Jonah had heard him, as he was staring at her.

“Just a minute, please,” Jonah said.

“Of course,” Malik said. Margot assumed he left the room, but didn’t see, because she couldn’t seem to tear her gaze away from Jonah’s. And when he walked toward her, stride as intense and purposefully as his expression, she couldn’t seem to move, either.

“Can we talk?”

“Okay,” she said, and headed back to the front of the House. The kitchen and dining room would be full of vampires, as would the front parlor. But there was a quiet spot near the back staircase where they could chat without being interrupted.

She moved to the spot, turned to face him. And he was close enough that she had to look up to meet his eyes.

“This could be dangerous,” he said. “He’ll probably get really pissed when he figures out he’s been set up. He could try to hurt you, and you aren’t trained—not at combat, anyway—to get out of that situation. I just want you to understand the risk. To be aware of it.”

Margot lifted her chin. This was her chance, and he wasn’t going to take that away from her. “I’m going to do this because he’s using me to get to my friends. And I won’t allow that. I need to do it. When he’s taken down, I need him to know that I was part of it. That I’m stronger than he thinks. And I know everyone will have my back.”

Jonah looked at her for a long, quiet moment that stretched like pulled candy, then nodded. “Okay, then.”

Margot blinked. “What do you mean ‘Okay, then’? That’s it? That’s all you’re going to say?”

His eyes went dark, and they focused on her with such precision she thought they might drill through to her soul. “What did you expect me to say?”

“I don’t know. That I’m being stupid and you’re going to tell Ethan not to let me help.”

In a flash, the heat in his eyes went cold, like deep and fractured ice. “You *aren’t* stupid, Margot. You’re anything but. You’re resilient and strong and creative and sexy, which is entirely off topic.” He shook his head as if to get himself back on track. “I don’t think you should do it because it’s dangerous, because I’d rather you not take the risk. But it’s your call, not mine. It’s your decision to make. And if that’s your decision, then I’ll support it. Because I know you can do it.”

For a full minute, she just stared at him, at a complete loss for words. He trusted her. He believed in her. And even though he thought it was dangerous, he accepted it was her choice and would support her.

He believed she could do it. That baffled and amazed and thrilled her. This wasn’t codependence. This wasn’t control. This was trust and respect. This was . . . sexy as hell.

“Okay,” she said again, and she found she had trouble pushing the word past the emotions that clogged her throat.

She wasn’t sure what he saw in her eyes, but there was something in his. Something a little bit victorious, that had her wondering what emotions were written on her face.

“Okay,” she said one more time, and gave him a nod. And wondered what she was agreeing to—and was thrilled by it.

“Okay,” he said, and there was a definite gleam in his eyes. “Let’s get to work.”

I could tell Margot was nervous. She kept clenching and unclenching her hands, wiping them on the apron we suggested she wear—it would look like she'd just taken a break from work to talk to Rowan, and she could keep a knife in the pocket. I doubted she'd need it and knew she wasn't trained, but I think we all felt better knowing she had the option.

And yet, for all that, there was something bright in her eyes. An excitement I hadn't seen in a long time.

Ethan, me, Catcher, and my grandfather were stationed in Ethan's office, watching the front lawn via the video surveillance feed. The Ombuddies' rather obvious white van was parked in the underground lot so it wouldn't give anyone away. Kelley and Lindsey were positioned outside, and we'd cleared all but a few vampires from the first floor so the House didn't seem suspiciously quiet. Jonah and Luc waited in the second parlor.

We were hoping to get Rowan into the second parlor, where he'd be physically contained. Margot would wait for him, and I'd walk through the foyer and say hello. If we were lucky, he'd make a move on me, and we'd make the case against him even stronger.

Rowan was five minutes late when Brock, another guard, sent the alert that Rowan was walking toward the gate. He wore slacks and a button-down shirt, and he carried a bouquet of flowers and a drink carrier with two cups. At least he hadn't lied about bringing the coffee.

And then all hell broke loose.

More than a dozen men swarmed through the gate, more than the guards posted there could handle, and they surrounded Rowan before he made it to the portico.

The beating began immediately.

"Shit!" Luc said, and we ran for the foyer, found Margot already opening the front door. I grabbed her arm before she could leave the portico. "Stay here," I said, and followed Ethan down the stairs.

Ethan drew his sword and strode forward, pointing it at the crowd of men who surrounded Rowan. "You're on Cadogan property!" he said. "Put the weapons down and step back."

"We ain't afraid of swords," said one of the men.

"Okay," Catcher said, stepping beside me, gun drawn. "How about nine millimeters?"

The man who held Rowan dropped him, took a step back. But their weapons stayed raised.

Another man walked through the gate. He had pale skin, short gray hair, and the chiseled good looks of a corporate manager. He was lean as a runner and wore a collared shirt with jeans and what I guessed were expensive running shoes. His smartwatch and wedding ring were his only accessories.

"Corbin." My grandfather's voice was clear, authoritative, and it echoed across the yard as he came down the sidewalk behind us, cane in hand.

"Corbin McClelland," Brock whispered through the comm earpiece. "He controls a lot of the racketeering on the South Side."

So the mob had found their man. And who had dibs?

"Mr. Merit, I presume." Corbin looked at my grandfather, then the rest of us.

“Do we have a problem here?” my grandfather asked.

“We have this rat bastard or what’s left of him. And he’s mine.”

My grandfather looked down at Rowan, bruises already blossoming on his face. My grandfather’s expression was perfectly bland. “I’ll agree on the rat bastard, but I can’t agree that he’s yours.”

“We have a business arrangement he hasn’t yet made good on,” Corbin said, voice tight with anger.

“I’m aware,” my grandfather said. “And I believe we can make a deal.”

Corbin’s gaze lifted, narrowed. “A deal for what?”

My grandfather pulled out the notebook. “He kept records of his debts. With names.” He flipped the notebook open to a seemingly random page, showed it to McClelland. “And this isn’t the only copy, of course. You forget his debt and your interest in him. And in return, I don’t give this notebook to Vice.”

I wasn’t the only one whose eyes widened at the offer. My grandfather was going to deal with these guys?

“You, a cop, are willing to lose evidence for this piece of garbage?”

“Oh, not for him,” my grandfather said. “For my granddaughter and her husband. It would be easier all around if this entire matter was put to bed. He has a certain connection to the House they’d rather forget about.”

McClelland’s advisor stepped forward, whispered in his ear. A long pause later, he looked at my grandfather. “I’m willing to, let’s say, push pause on the debt while he’s in prison. Once he’s out, the clock starts over.”

“Deal,” my grandfather said, and they shook on it. “Have a pleasant evening, Corbin.”

We waited in silence while they walked back through the gate again, and the cars rolled down the street.

“Is he worth the loss of the evidence?” Ethan asked. “The possibility of bringing down the mob?”

“Oh, definitely not,” my grandfather said. “But the notebook doesn’t actually name any names, just amounts.” He looked at us, grinned. “It wouldn’t be worth anything to Vice. McClelland doesn’t need to know that, of course, and I suspect Rowan will keep his mouth shut about it.”

Ethan’s grin spread slowly. “You just conned the mob.”

“I did. Sorry I didn’t mention it beforehand,” he said, giving me an apologetic look, then patting my hand for good measure. “I thought it would be easier if I was the only one who had to stretch the truth just a smidge.”

“We are in your debt,” Ethan said. “Margot will rest easier this way.”

“I hope so,” my grandfather said. “I believe she deserves a break.”

“She deserves more than that,” Jonah said. “Can I have a minute with him?”

Catcher and my grandfather shared a glance, and my grandfather nodded. “I imagine you have things to say.”

“I do,” Jonah agreed, and strode forward, crouched in front of Rowan Cleary.

It took every ounce of Jonah's impressive control to crouch beside the piece of garbage masquerading as a man and keep his hands to himself.

Rowan looked like shit. Eye bruised, lip cut, nose probably broken. Jonah didn't care much about that; Rowan was a vampire. He'd heal. But there were boundaries that needed to be set. And Jonah decided he'd make sure that happened.

"I'm a friend of Margot's," Jonah said, and Rowan's gaze flicked up to him, still full of arrogance.

"I don't know the complete story of what you did to her," Jonah continued, "but I can glean enough of the details to believe you deserve every inch of the beating these men obviously want to give you."

Jonah could see the challenge in Rowan's eyes, the desire to argue. Jonah *welcomed* it. A fight would have felt better. He'd have loved an opportunity to show this parasite how it felt to be bruised and defenseless, to give back some of the pain he'd no doubt inflicted on others during his miserable life. But Jonah was a man of honor, and he wouldn't stoop to beating a man who was already down.

But he wouldn't be down forever . . .

Jonah leaned over Rowan, tugged him up by his shirt. Rowan's eyes fluttered, went hard.

"Here's one last lesson for you, Cleary. If you so much as think about contacting her again, I'll know it. And I will put you in the sun myself and dance around your ashes."

He dropped Cleary again, enjoyed the *thud* his head made against the sidewalk, then stepped around him. "All yours," he said to Catcher, and walked into the grass.

* * *

Jonah looked like a warrior battling for control. He strode into the shadowed yard, and it took Margot only a moment to follow him.

She found him pacing back and forth, hands linked behind his head. The air was thick with magic.

He was working off his anger, she realized, because he hadn't used it on Rowan.

"Jonah." The word was barely a whisper. It was all she could manage.

But it had been loud enough. He stopped, his body obviously tensed, and glanced back over his shoulder.

"Thank you," she said.

He lowered his arms, turned to face her. "For what?"

Margot gathered her courage. "For helping me. And for whatever you said to him. You didn't have to do that, any of it, especially after I . . . Anyway, thank you."

He didn't speak, but nodded once, his eyes trained on hers.

He wouldn't move, she knew. She'd set a boundary, and he respected it, and he wouldn't be the one to breach that trust.

But she didn't want to hold back any longer. So she'd make the move herself. She strode toward

him, and because that wasn't fast enough, she ran the last few feet.

Jonah's eyes darkened, went hot and possessive as she launched herself toward him. And he met her with open arms, then wrapped his arms around her and held her body, warm and lush, against his.

Their bodies fit perfectly together. And when she lifted her mouth to his, when he met her kiss with passion and desire, they realized the rest of them fit, too.

* * *

They were holding hands when they walked back to the door, Margot marveling at the hope that was blossoming in her belly. Hope and excitement and a nice, healthy dose of lust that she hadn't felt in a very long time.

Rowan and the Ombuddies were gone, and the Cadogan vampires were debriefing about the operation.

Merit saw them first and smiled, and when Ethan did the same, she assumed Merit had given him a silent message. It was a sneaky way to gossip. And a good one.

"You're both all right?" Ethan asked, and there were warmth and amusement in his eyes.

Jonah looked at Margot, waited for her to answer. "We're fine," she said, and squeezed his hand. "More than fine."

"We're all glad to hear it," Ethan said, and glanced back at his wife.

Her eyes, Margot saw, had gone wide, and her lips were pursed in what looked like pain.

"Crap," Merit said. She put a hand to her belly, eyebrows furrowed, her face a mask of careful concentration. "It's time."

"For what?" Ethan asked.

"For the birth of your child."

Joy and fear shifted across his face like shadows and sunlight. "Now?"

"Now—*owwwwww*," she said, bending as she reached out to grab Ethan's arm, digging white-knuckled fingers into his skin. "I know we said no drugs, but maybe just a few drugs. *Oww, son of a filthy mongrel.*"

She looked up, managed a half smile at Margot. "Sorry to break up the . . . whatsit."

Margot was too excited for regret. She grinned at Merit, then smiled at Jonah. "We've got plenty of time for the whatsit. Let's go meet the baby."

Epilogue

“Drugs,” I said, when we were in the hospital suite we’d reserved, and I’d grabbed two fistfuls of Delia’s scrubs. “Please some drugs.”

“No drugs,” Delia said, voice as bland as it might have been if I’d asked about the weather.

A contraction rolled again, and it felt like my body would simply collapse in on itself like a neutron star.

“Drugs or I will stake you,” I said, squeezing my eyes shut against the onslaught.

“No, you won’t,” Delia said. “I’ll be back in an hour. But you can page me if you need me in the meantime.”

I waited until she was gone, then grabbed the mug from the table and threw it across the room. It hit the wall with a dull thud, then bounced to the floor, totally harmlessly.

“Goddamn plastic,” I huffed through gritted teeth. “It’s a conspiracy.”

“It’s not a conspiracy,” Ethan said, pressing a cold cloth to my forehead. “Just unsatisfying.”

The door burst open and Mallory walked in. “Merit! Are you all right? We came as soon as we heard you were here. And finished lunch, because we figured it would be a while.”

I growled at her, showing fang.

She glanced at Ethan. “So, as expected?”

“Labor appears to make her grouchy,” he said mildly.

“I hate everyone.”

“No, you don’t,” she said, and edged onto the side of the bed, offered her hand.

I took it, squeezed hard. “Drugs,” I said. “When it’s your turn in here, get the damn drugs.”

* * *

A dozen hours passed, and the parade of friends and family and supernaturals continued.

Gabriel Keene, head of the North American Central Pack of shape-shifters, came in with his wife, Tanya, and their son, Connor.

In his human form, Gabe was tall and broad-shouldered, with tawny, sun-kissed hair and eyes of gleaming amber. He was ruggedly handsome and quite a foil for Tanya’s delicacy. She carried Connor, who was nearly three and clutched a plastic giraffe tightly in his tiny fist. He was a beautiful little boy, with dark curls that must have come from Tanya’s side of the family and eyes as blue as the summer sky.

“How are you, Kitten?” Gabriel asked.

“In pain,” I said. “Really, really severe pain. Do you want to fight me? That might be less painful. I have a knife.” I gestured to the plastic utensil on the tray a nurse had brought in a few hours ago.

“No, Kitten,” he said with a smile. “I don’t want to fight, interesting as that offer is. We brought you a present. Well, we brought Baby Kitten a present.”

As my fingers were wrapped tightly around the bed's railing, he pulled the item out of the pink gift bag.

It was a tiny plastic katana, just the right size for a little girl to play with.

"It's really sweet," I said, tears suddenly streaming down my face for no apparent reason. Other than hormones, pain, and exhaustion. "Thank you."

"Until she's ready for the real thing," Gabe said, then reached over and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

"My 'tana?"

We looked back at Connor, whose gaze had narrowed at the sword.

"He means 'katana,'" Gabriel said, smiling at his son's focused stare.

"You might want to get him one of those, too," I said, and Gabriel just shrugged.

"He can borrow hers."

* * *

Thirty-eight hours. Nearly two full days of labor including many daylight hours without Ethan while he slept in a neighboring and sunlight-free room. My mind ached for sleep, but my body wouldn't allow it. I passed those hours in a daze, neither entirely awake nor asleep, but glad when the sun fell again.

Finally, Delia came in. "All right, Sentinel," she said, after taking a look. "It's time to push. Are you ready to meet your daughter?"

I was struck by a wave of terror so great I might have been facing down a mortal enemy. I looked up at Ethan, ready to launch into a manic dialogue. But he put a hand on my face.

You can do this, Merit. I'll be here with you, and we'll get through it together. Then he squeezed my hand. *Now buck up, and get it done.*

"*Together*" my ass, I thought. But we'd talk about that later. For now, I had one final job.

* * *

I'd like to say that I handled the rest of it with grace and a minimum of swearing. But that would be a lie. I curse like a sailor in the best of times, and childbirth, even if it has a happy ending, was not the best of times. It was painful, sweaty, messy, terrifying times.

But oh, that happy ending.

She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Tiny and delicate as a doll, with downy, golden hair and green eyes just like her father's. She had my mouth, but she was obviously Ethan's daughter.

She'd been swaddled and placed in my arms, and he sat beside me with an arm around my shoulders, both of us staring at the tiny vampire who blinked up at us.

"Look what we did, Sentinel."

I gave him a hard look.

"Admittedly, your part was harder than mine."

I made a quiet sound of agreement. I'd always found the idea that "we" were pregnant really weird. He didn't have to waddle or pee all the time or get punched from the inside. She was our child

—but it had been my pregnancy.

Anyway, that hardly mattered now.

“She is beautiful.”

“She is stunning,” he said, and pressed his lips to her forehead again. “And she smells so good.”

The smile on his face was dopey and utterly happy. And he pressed his lips to my cheek again. “I love you both endlessly.”

“Same here,” I said, and brushed the soft hair on her head. “We need to pick a name.”

Despite Luc’s best efforts, none of the names he’d come up with, or we’d thought of, had really appealed to us.

“Ethanette.”

“No,” I said with a chuckle. “You’ve offered that already. And not Meritina or Merit-Lite.”

“I’m out of ideas. Nothing seems quite good enough for her. Quite . . . wonderful enough.”

She burped.

“Well, she’s undoubtedly your child.”

I rubbed her tiny belly. “Yes, she is.” Then I looked up at him, the gorgeous man who’d given me love and laughter and a home and now my third kind of family. And I thought about the family he’d lost hundreds of years ago when he’d first been changed.

“Elisa,” I said. “Let’s name her Elisa. After your sister.”

His eyes warmed. “Building connections with our new family.”

“It seems appropriate,” I said, and closed my eyes. “And I think I need to sleep now.”

“Do that,” he said, and took the child in his arms. While my eyes closed, he rocked his daughter to sleep.

Chloe Neill—*New York Times* bestselling author of the Chicagoland Vampires novels (*Blade Bound*, *Midnight Marked*, *Dark Debt*), the Heirs of Chicagoland novels (*Wild Hunger*), the Dark Elite novels (*Charmfall*, *Hexbound*, *Firespell*), and the Devil’s Isle novels (*The Hunt*, *The Sight*, *The Veil*)—was born and raised in the South but now makes her home in the Midwest, just close enough to Cadogan House to keep an eye on things. When not transcribing her heroines’ adventures, she bakes, works, and scours the Internet for good recipes and great graphic design. Chloe also maintains her sanity by spending time with her boys—her favorite landscape photographer (her husband) and their dogs, Baxter and Scout. (Both she and the photographer understand the dogs are in charge.)



Penguin
Random House
PENGUIN PUBLISHING GROUP

*What's next on
your reading list?*

Discover your next
great read!

Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news about this author.

Sign up now.