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Dark Debt: A Chicagoland Vampires Novel



Par Chloe Neill

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA vampire never gets old. But neither do his enemies. When a figure from Ethan's dark past makes a splashy debut in Chicago, Merit and her Master don't know whether he's friend or foe. But they'll have to figure out soon, because trouble is brewing in the Windy City.At an exclusive society soiree attended by the upper echelons of the human and supernatural worlds, Merit and Ethan barely stop the assassination of a guest. When the target turns out to be a shady businessman with a criminal edge, Merit suspects a human vendetta. But the assassins have fangs.The connections to Chicago's Houses go deeper than Merit knows, and even one wrong move could be her last...To find out more, visit:Facebook: authorchloeneillTwitter: @chloeneillExtraitPraise for Chloe NeillsOTHER NOVELS BY CHLOE

NEILL Chapter One Early April Chicago, Illinois There were two seasons in Chicago: winter and construction. If it wasn't snowing, orange cones narrowed the Dan Ryan, or lower Wacker was closed. Snow and traffic defined our lives as Chicagoans. Nested within those seasons were the other activities that defined life for many in Chicago. During baseball season, it was Cubs versus Sox. During tourist season, you served them, you screamed at them, or, if you worked at Billy Goats, both. During summer, the beaches were open.

And for a few spare weeks, the water of Lake Michigan was even warm enough for a dip. Not that I had much occasion to sunbathe or swim recently. They didn't make sunscreen strong enough for vampires. But when spring rolled around and construction cones popped onto asphalt like neon flowers, even vampires shook off winter. We exchanged quilted jackets, electric blankets, heavy boots, and balaclavas for tanks, sandals, and nights in the warm spring air. Tonight, we sat on a blanket on the grass at Milton Lee Olive Park, an expanse of green and fountains near Navy Pier honoring a soldier who'd given his life to save others,

and won a Medal of Honor for his sacrifice. A burst of spring air had warmed the city, and we'd taken advantage, finding a quiet spot for a picnic to celebrate the end of a long, cold winter. At two o'clock in the morning, the park was definitely quiet. Ethan Sullivan, Master of Cadogan House and now one of twelve members of the newly established Assembly of American Masters, sat beside me on a piecework quilt, one knee bent, one leg extended, his hand at the small of my back, rubbing small circles as we watched the lights of Chicago blink across the skyline in front of us. He had a tall and rangy body of hard planes and sculpted muscle, and golden blond hair that just reached his shoulders and surrounded honed cheekbones, a straight nose, deep-set green eyes, and imperious eyebrows. I was his Novitiate and the Cadogans Sentinel, and I was

utterly relieved that winter had finally weakened its grip on the city. This is not a bad way to spend an evening, said the girl on the blanket beside ours, her striking blue hair drawn in a complicated braid that lay across her shoulder. Her Cupid's bow mouth was drawn into a smile, her hand clasped in the long fingers of her boyfriend. He was well built and shaved-headed, with piercing green eyes and a generous mouth. And,

like her, he was a sorcerer. He had a thing for snarky T-shirts, and tonight's gem was black, with KEEP CALM AND FIREBALL in clean white text across the front. Mallory Carmichael was my oldest friend, and Catcher Bell was her live-in beau. Catcher worked for my grandfather Chuck Merit, the city's Supernatural

Ombudsman. No, it's not, I agreed. This was a very good idea. I sipped from a bottle of Sweet Summer Blood4You, a blend of blood and lemonade that I enjoyed against my own better judgment. The drink was good, and the air was sweet with spring and the scent of white flowers that drifted down from the trees like snow, forming constellations on the new grass. Ethan's hand warmed the skin on my back. This was as close to a day at the beach as I was ever likely to get. And it was a pretty good substitute. I thought some fresh air could do us good, Mallory said. It's been a long winter. That was the understatement of all understatements. There'd been murder, magic, mayhem, and too much mourning to go around, including episodes that had put Mallory in the hands of a serial killer and nearly cost Ethan his life. He was fine and she was recovering, and the incident had seemed to bring her and Catcher even closer together. Even the vacation Ethan and I had just taken a trip to the Rocky Mountains of Colorado that should have been filled with relaxation, elk watching,

and plenty of sex had been interrupted by a century-old feud between vampires and shape-shifters. We'd needed a break from our break, so we'd sipped and snacked with Mallory and Catcher on the goodies Margot, the House chef, had packed. Grapes, cheese (both regular and almost preternaturally stinky), thin crackers, and small cookies coated in lemony powdered sugar with just the right balance of sweet and pucker. You've been eyeing that last lemon cookie for seven minutes. I glanced back at Ethan, gave him a dour look. I have not. Seven minutes and forty-three seconds, Catcher said, glancing at his watch. I'd grab it for you, but I'm afraid I'd lose a finger. Stop torturing her, Mallory said, carefully picking up the cookie, handing it gingerly to me, then dusting powdered sugar from her hands. She can't help her obsession. I started to argue, but by then

my mouth was full of cookie. Not an obsession, I said when I was done. Fast metabolism and rigorous training schedule. Luc has us on two-a-days now that Ethan's been upgraded. Ooh, Ethan two-point-oh, Mallory said. I think technically we're now at Ethan four-point-oh, Catcher pointed out. Human, vampire, resurrected vampire, AAM member. Ethan snorted, but even he didn't argue with the timeline. I prefer to think of it as a promotion. You get a raise out of it? Catcher asked. In a manner of speaking. I'll nearly be able to afford to keep Merit in the culinary style to which she'd like to become accustomed. You're the one with the expensive taste. I gestured to the bottle of wine. Do I even want to know how much that cost? Ethan opened his mouth, closed it again. Likely not. And there you go. A vampire cannot survive on Italian hot beefs and Mallocakes alone. Speak for yourself, fancy pants. I'm not fancy, Ethan said imperiously. I'm particular. Which is actually a compliment to you. He did pick you after four hundred years of wild-oat sowing, Catcher said,

earning an elbow from Mallory. He grunted, but he was smiling when he lay back on the blanket, hands crossed behind his head. You make it sound like Ethan picked her up at a farmers market, Mallory complained. That would require Merit to eat vegetables, Ethan said, grinning at me. Could you differentiate between a rutabaga and rhubarb? Yes, but only because my grandmother made the best strawberry-rhubarb pie Ive ever tasted. I dont think that counts. Oh, it counts, I said with a nod. That pie was sublime. Ive got solid culinary chops. My culinarily chopped vampire missed a spot of powdered sugar, Ethan said, leaning forward, swiping his thumb across my lips just slowly enough to heat my blood. Get a room, Catcher grouched. He was grouchy but loyal, and had followed Mallory through her stint as a Maleficent wannabe and on to the other side. He was also unfailingly dedicated to my much-beloved grandfather, which gave him points in my book. But I still gave him the much-deserved stink eye. Do you know how many times Ive seen you naked? You and Mallory considered the entire house your personal love shack. Mallory and I had been roommates once upon a time, before Catcher had moved into the town house wed shared, and Id moved into Cadogan House to escape the nudity. YourI waved my hand at his bodyrod and tackle touched pretty much everything in the place. My body is a wonderland was his only response. Be that as it may, Ethan said, Merit is not your Alice. Ill thank you to keep your rod and tackle away from her. Nowhere near my agenda, Catcher assured him. Ethans phone beeped, and he pulled it out quickly, checked the screen. Just a media inquiry, he said, tucking it away again. Every phone call put us on high alert, because a ghostor someone pretending to be onehad staked a claim on our lives. That ghost was Balthasar, the vampire who, on a battlefield nearly four hundred years ago, had made Ethan immortal and nearly turned him into a monster in his own image. Ethan had escaped his maker, made a new life for himself, and believed Balthasar had died shortly after he had escaped. Ethan hadnt yet told me the details, but he hadnt indicated any doubts about Balthasars death. And yet, three weeks ago, a note had been left in our top-floor apartments in Cadogan House. A note purporting to be from Balthasar, who was alive and excited to see Ethan again. A note... and then nothing. Hed made no contact since then, and wed found no evidence he was alive, much less in Chicago and waiting for an opportunity to wreak havoc, to wage war, to exert control over Ethan once again. So we waited. Every phone call could be the call, the one that would change the life wed begun to make together. And there were so many more calls these days. The AAM was still working out the operational details, but that hadnt kept vampires from lining up outside Cadogan House like vassals, seeking protection, requesting Ethans intervention in some city dispute, or offering fealty. And vampires werent the only ones interested. Chicago was home to twenty-five percent of the countrys AAM members, and humans fascination with Ethan, Scott Grey, and Morgan Greer, who headed Grey House and Navarre House, had ballooned again. It was a strange new world. So, not to interrupt the mirth making, Mallory said, but theres actually a reason we asked you guys to come out tonight. Who says mirth making? Catcher asked. I do, Sarcastasaurus. She elbowed him, with a grin. And were here for a reason? Okay, okay, he said. But Im going to need that on a T-shirt. I was just thinking that, I said. And youre making me nervous. Whats going on? Catcher nodded. Well, as it turns outAs it turned out, Catcher was interrupted by an explosion of noise, our phones beeping wildly in obvious warning. I got to mine first, saw Lucs number, switched it to speaker. Merit. Lucs nose loomed on the screen. Sorry to interrupt date night. I grimaced at the image. Step back from the camera. We dont need to see your sinuses. Sorry, he said, leaning back so his nose moved back into proper perspective, right in the middle of his very charming face, which was surrounded by tousled blond-brown curls. Youre alone? Were with Catcher and Mallory, I said, then glanced around to ensure that no curious humans were eavesdropping. We can talk. Whats going on? Media vans at the House. Four of them. Mess of reporters, all gathered at the gate, ready and waiting. Lucs pause, matched with his drawn expression, made me nervous. Theyre asking questions about Balthasar. We went quiet enough to hear the strains of a lone saxophone being played near the pier, probably a song being sold for tourists cash. What questions? Ethan asked. Theyre asking about a supposed reunion, Luc said. The answer made T. S. Eliot echo alarmingly in my head. This is the way the world ends. Ethans reaction was as hot and fast as Lucs had been cautious. Double the guards on the gate, Ethan said. Were on our way. I wanted to argue with him, to tell him hed be safer staying put than running toward whatever reunion this Balthasar had planned. But Ethan was a stubborn and careful man. He wouldnt leave the House to face danger without him, and certainly not when the danger was a monster from Ethans own past. Ethan still hadnt forgotten the things hed done when he was with Balthasar, or forgiven himself for his own complicity. He was still looking for redemption. And hed meet that opportunity head-on. We said our good-byes, and I tucked the phone into my pocket again, tried to mentally prepare myself for what we might face what Ethan might have to face, and the emotional storm that might rip through both of us. And

then I looked at Mallory and Catcher, remembering theyd been on the verge of making their own announcement. Go, Catcher said, even as Mallory began stuffing food back into the picnic basket. She was playing the trouper, but I could see the frustration in her eyes. You want us with you? Ethan shook his head.

Theres no point in dragging you into this debacle. Balthasar is dead; this is someone elses ploy for attention. Catcher nodded. Ill tell Chuck, put him on alert just in case. Be careful, Mallory said, and squeezed me into a hug. I will, I said, searching her gaze for answers, and finding none. Youre okay? Im fine. We can talk about this later. Take care of your House first. Go, she said when I hadnt moved, and turned me toward the street. We went, jogging back toward Grand and the tall man with blond hair who waited for us in front of a glossy black Range Rover with a license plate that read CADOGAN. He wore a trim black suit and a sleek black tie, hands clasped in front of him. Sire, he said, bowing his head. Brody was a Cadogan House guard whod been appointed Ethans official driver. Luc had outfitted Ethan with all the necessary perks, including the car, which was equipped with a complete security system, a small arsenal, and a comm center. Luc called, Brody said, pivoting smoothly to open the door, one hand on his tie as he waited for Ethan and me to climb into the backseat. He closed the door with a solid thud, then rounded the car and slid inside onto the drivers seat. The car was comfortable, and I appreciated that Ethan had extra security, but I missed Moneypenny, my vintage Mercedes convertible. She was currently parked in the basement of Cadogan House, weeping from neglect. I missed the freedom, the quiet, the solitude of a good long drive as most drives anywhere in Chicago tended to be. Unless Brody was driving. May I? he asked, meeting Ethans gaze in the rearview mirror, not doing a very good job of fighting back a smile. Brody had been a new guard, and he was still pink around the edges. But he did have one particularly enviable skill. The boy could handle a car. He was Chicagos version of the Transporter master of the smooth ride, but equally adept at weaving and dodging through Chicagos gnarly traffic. Luc had given Brody a dressing-down the first time hed ridden with him. But when the time came to assign Ethan a driver, he turned to Brody first. If you can get us there in one piece, Ethan said, and managed not to flinch when Brody dashed into traffic like a cheetah in pursuit. Brody just avoided nicking a cab, then slipped smoothly into a gap in the other lane. Im not sure when Im going to get used to this, Ethan said silently, using the telepathic connection between us. Youre just irritated you arent the one driving. I have a Ferrari for just such occasions. And speaking of occasions, what was Mallorys and Catchers production about? Shed looked upset. Im not sure, I admitted. But if it was really bad news, I dont think shed have arranged a picnic. There were plenty of milestones that might merit a picnic, but I wasnt sure theyd put that look on her face. Ill call her, I promised, and ferret out the truth. But for now, lets deal with vampires. Chapter Two Fifteen minutes later, a miraculous amount of time for Chicago, Brody turned off Woodlawn, tires squealing as he veered toward the House, its white stone glowing beneath heavy moonlight. Media vans clustered outside the tall iron fence that bounded the Houses large grounds, their antennas extended, reporters and cameramen on the sidewalk with equipment in hand. The gate in the fence was closed something Id rarely seen the black-clad human guards we hired out to protect the House staring down the reporters with open malice that made me appreciate them even more. Our wealthy Hyde Park neighbors stood on their stoops or porches and stared grimly at the activity, probably already composing their letters to the editor or to Ethan protesting late-night vampiric shenanigans. I sent Luc a message, advising him wed reached our destination, as Brody pulled the car to a stop beside the nearest van. Ethan was out of the car before we could stop him. As I followed him, scabbarded katana in hand, a red bus with VAMPIRE TOURS OF CHICAGO in white letters across the side rolled slowly down the street, tourists gawking out of windows, the drivers narration ringing through the darkness.... Cadogan House, the citys second-oldest House, behind Navarre. And, ladies and gentlemen, grab your cameras, because thats Ethan Sullivan and Merit right there on the street! I waved politely for the camera flashes and shouts from tourists no point in making things worse but muttered a curse as soon as my back was turned. Keep the bus moving, I told Brody when he met me on the sidewalk. Lets not drag the tourists into whatever this is. Brody nodded, jogged toward the bus, and directed it down the street. The reporters ignored the onlookers they were too busy with Ethan. Like sharks in the water, theyd scented blood, begun to circle. Ethan! Ethan! Who is Balthasar? Whats he to you? Is he in Chicago to cause trouble? Is Cadogan House in danger? Or Hyde Park? Tell us about the reunion he has planned! Ethan, eyes silver with emotion, focused his dangerous gaze on the reporter closest to him. There was nothing kind in his expression, and very little that was human. What did you say? I had to give the reporter credit. The smell of his fear soured the air, but he kept his knees locked and his eyes on Ethan, and didnt step back even beneath Ethans withering glare. And whats worse, he must have seen something in Ethans eyes, some hint of dismay that triggered his own instincts. His lips

turned up in a hungry smile. Who is Balthasar? Why do you ask? Why are you avoiding the question? Ethan took another step forward, magic rising in an invisible cloud behind him. Dread settled low in my belly, both at the fiasco someone had arranged, and Ethans potentially explosive reaction to it. I positioned myself behind Ethan. I caught sight of movement to my left, found Brody, Luc, and Lindsey (Lucs girlfriend, one of the Houses guards, and my best House buddy) moving cautiously toward us. I am not avoiding the question, Ethan said quietly, every word bathed in rage. Im wondering why so many members of the media have come to my home and are disrupting the neighborhood with inquiries about a vampire whos been dead for centuries. Dead? the reporter asked, his gaze searching Ethans as if for weak spots. Thats not the information weve received. Ethans lip curled, and I took a careful step forward, just in case I needed to haul him back. Balthasar is dead. Any information you received to the contrary is mistaken. All heads turned when a sleek black limousine raced up the street and pulled to a stop outside the House. While the reporters redirected their cameras, a liveried driver climbed out and opened the back door. As I unsheathed my katana, a vampire stepped out. Ethan had kept a miniature portrait in a drawer in his office, an oval painting barely two inches across, its frame delicately gilded. The man in the frame had straight dark hair, pale skin, almost preternaturally symmetrical features. Straight, long nose, dark eyes, lips pulled into a near smirk. Then, the man in the portrait had worn a white cravat and a vest and coat in regal crimson, and his hair had been straight and dark, pulled into a queue at the back of his neck. Now his hair was different shorter around the sides and back, longer in front, so dark locks fell dramatically across his face. Hed exchanged the period clothing for black pants and a long coat, and there were scars across his neck, a web of crisscrossing lines that rose just above the coats mandarin collar and told of something harsh and ugly... but something hed clearly survived. He was attractive, undeniably so, with the look and bearing of a dark prince, a man used to having the attention of men and women, and reveling in it. And he was undeniably the same vampire as the one in Ethans portrait. The entire crowd around us reporters, cameramen, guards, vampires went eerily silent as he stepped onto the sidewalk in front of Ethan. A mourning dove cooed from a nearby rooftop once, twice, three times, as if calling a warning. A cold sweat inched down my spine, despite the chill in the new spring air. The vampire let his gaze drift from Luc, to me, before settling on Ethan. There was much in his expression anger, regret, fear. All of that tempered with hope. For a long moment, they stared at each other, evaluating, watching, preparing. I took cautious steps forward, one after another, until I stood beside Ethan with my katana extended, ready to strike. The vampires eyes suddenly changed. They narrowed, darkness peeking through them like a demon at the door. The color turned, blue, darkening and shifting to swimming quicksilver. And then his magic warm, heady, and spicy; whiskey spiked with cloves burst through the air like lightning. He bared his fangs, longer than any Id seen, thin and dangerous as needles, and that trickle of sweat became a cold slick that matched the wave that rolled through my abdomen. Ethans eyes widened with amazement, with horror. My first instinct was to move, to protect. But magic had thickened the air like molasses; merely lifting a hand through it brought beads of sweat to my brow. I glanced around, found the other vampires around us similarly still. Once upon a time, vampire glamour had been a crucial skill for luring and seducing humans. Master vampires also used the psychic skill to call the vampires theyd turned, to psychically pull them to the Masters side. By stroke of luck, or the unusual circumstances of my turning, I could feel glamour, but I was largely immune to the effects. So why was this magic affecting me? Hold, Ethan said silently, the word heavy and lumbering as if hed had to force it out through a syrup of magic. And then Ethan uttered one word aloud. A word that would change everything. Balthasar. Ethan said the name with utter conviction, equal to his previous certainty that Balthasar had been dead. I wanted to demand this vampire produce his bona fides. But Ethan seemed to need no further convincing. The word was like a charm, a key that unlocked the viscous magic. In the space of a blink, it dissipated, pouring across us like a northern wind. And just as quickly, now freed of our magical bonds, the world erupted with movement, with noise. Reporters, apparently unaware of the delay, rushed forward, shouted questions, microphones and cameras pointed like weapons. Ethan took a step backward, shock etched in his face, in his eyes. I lifted my sword, moved between them, putting my body and blade between Ethan and the vampire he now stared at. The vampire he apparently believed was the one who had made him. Luc, Brody, and Lindsey moved behind us, katanas drawn, a steel shield against the horde of reporters. Balthasar cast a mild glance at me and my sword before shifting his gaze to Ethan again. It has been a long time, he said, his accent faintly French, his words softly lyrical. But that demon still lurked behind his eyes. He was a Master from a different time, a man who demanded loyalty, who defined the world for his vampires. Ethans internal struggle was clear on his face he was torn between biological loyalty to the vampire whod made him and hatred of the monster hed

been and tried to make of Ethan. A very long time, Ethan cautiously agreed. There is much to say. So it appears, Ethan said. He gestured toward the reporters around him. You arranged all this? I believed it was the only way to secure an audience with you. For what purpose? To give voice to long-unspoken things. To make amends. There is Balthasar paused, obviously selecting his words carefully a void when one of your children is separated from you, as we have been for so long. At this time in my life, I find that void more painful. Ethan just watched him, as one predator might watch another, with careful consideration. We have been apart for a very long time. I believed you were dead. And there is a very long story to tell. He let his gaze slip back to the House. Perhaps we can discuss it? Another long moment passed as Ethan looked at Balthasar, his expression blank but his energy suddenly hot, as if centuries of anger and frustration had finally ignited. Step back, Merit. Ethans order was contrary to my mission. But before I could argue, he repeated it again. Step back, Sentinel. The second I moved, Ethans fist was up. With a sickening crunch of cartilage, he slammed it into Balthasars face, and the scent of blood filled the air. The crowd erupted again, magic flaring from the Cadogan vampires. I stepped closer to Ethan, and Luc did the same, both of us ready to move should Balthasar attempt a response. Slowly, he shifted his gaze back to Ethan, pressed the back of a hand to his nose. His eyes sparkled with obvious shock that someone would dare to challenge him, much less a vampire to whom hed gifted immortality. Comme tu as chang, mon ami. Oui, cest vrai. La vie ma chang, Ethan said, in perfect French I hadnt known he spoke. His voice was low and threatening, and utterly Masterly. Balthasar pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed genteelly at the cut. a va. Je comprends. And let us be clear, Ethan continued in English. I am no longer a human, nor a boy, nor the child you once knew. Dont ever call me again. Luc stepped forward, put a hand on Ethans arm. Perhaps we should take this inside, away from the paparazzi? I think weve given them enough for one night. Is it safe to let him in the House? I asked Ethan silently. And where else would we put him, Sentinel? Id rather have him under watch than roaming the city. Get everyone inside, Ethan said as camera shutters winked open and closed around us. Take him to my office. I knew Ethan was right, but couldnt help thinking of the fox in our proverbial henhouse. Luc nodded, gestured Balthasar toward the House. Balthasar nodded regally, as if he were being shown to the kings own chambers, and stepped forward as the guards opened the gate. I slid my katana back in its scabbard and stood quietly with Ethan in the rain of flashes. He sighed, ran his hands through his hair. Of all the gin joints in all the world. And he walks into yours, I finished for him. Ethan glanced back at me, and I saw the dread in his eyes. Hed confessed to me some of the things hed done, the way he and Balthasar had worked their way across Europe, the women and blood theyd taken, until Balthasar had finally gone too far. But it had taken time for him to tell me. Hed been concerned my feelings would change if I knew who hed been and what hed done. But didnt that make him more? The fact that he could have continued to follow Balthasar, to debauch his way across Europe, and hadnt. That hed worked to free himself from a vampire whose psychic powers were undeniably strong. That hed become a different kind of vampire, a true Master. I couldnt change the fact that Balthasar waited inside the House. But I could give him comfort. A reminder. So as cameras flashed around us, I took his hand. He is your past, I said silently, and nodded toward the House that glowed warmly beyond the gate. We are your present and future. Face him on your territory, and let the reckoning take place there. And if he gets out of line, use that right cross and lay him out. Ethan smiled with obvious reluctance. It may get ugly. Likely will before all is said and done. I squeezed his hand. Unfortunately, I think thats guaranteed. But if things get too ugly, Ill lay you both out. ***Ethans office was spacious and as beautifully decorated as the rest of the House. There was a desk on one side, a sitting area across from it, and a conference table that spanned the back wall. Balthasar stood in the middle of the room, taking in the furniture, dcor, mementos of Ethans life. Was he evaluating what hed lost in Ethans revolution, or what he stood to gain if he could bring Ethan into the fold once again? Luc stood in the sitting area, arms crossed and expression suspicious, beside Malik, Ethans second-in-command. Malik was tall and lean, with thoughtful pale green eyes that set off dark skin. His stance mirrored Lucs, and he was the only one in the room who wore the official Cadogan House uniformslim-cut black suit, white button-down shirt. A silver teardrop, the Cadogan House medal, was suspended at the base of his throat. Malik was protective of Ethan and the House, and his gaze drilled into Balthasar, eyes tracking across Balthasars face as if committing his visage to memory. All the better for Malik to double-check his bona fides later, I thought. As I closed the door, Malik shifted his attention to Ethan, to gauge his mood, his magic, and his emotion as only a confidant and colleague could do. When he was satisfied, he looked at me, a question in his eyes. Was this man who he seemed to be? I gave Malik a quick nod, shifting my gaze to Ethan. He seemed to believe, and that was the only thing that mattered now. But that only created more questions:

How had Ethan been wrong about Balthasars death? Where had he been in the intervening years? And, most important, what did he want from Ethan? Balthasar dabbed at his mouth and, when he was satisfied the wound had closed the benefits of vampire healing tucked the handkerchief away again. You have a lovely home, mon ami. Ethan ignored the compliment and the intimacy, walked to the sitting area, took a seat on the leather sofa, and spread his arms across the back, staking his position, his authority. I stood at attention beside him, ready to jump forward should the need arise. We enjoy it. You should begin. Balthasar quirked an eyebrow at the order. I wondered if Ethan had unconsciously picked up the affectation from him. I will tell you my story, and you will reach your own conclusions. Tell your tale, Ethan said. And well see what comes next. *** Balthasar took a seat across from Ethan, fingers steeped in his lap. I was in London, he began. Three men walked into the house with crosses and stakes. They were the relatives of some girl or other, convinced I was evil, the devil incarnate. Not just some girl, Ethan said to me, his irritation obvious even telepathically. Persephone. Ethan had loved her. Balthasar knew that, and had seduced and killed her in order to taunt Ethan. That selfish and violent act had been Balthasars final blow, prompting Ethans separation. These men had been members of her family? I asked. Yes was all Ethan said. I was the only one in the house, Balthasar continued. Youd just left, and Id sent Nicole, as you call her now, on an errand. To find me and bring me back, Ethan said flatly, and Balthasar lifted his gaze to Ethan again, amusement in his eyes. Alive, if that was an option, Balthasar agreed. And if it was not... Well, it was a different time. She did not find me, Ethan said. But I went back anyway. A shadow crossed his eyes, as if he watched a memory play back. After a moment, he refocused on Balthasar. I heard about the mob. I went back, and saw you through the window. Bloodied. Almost decapitated. That explained why Ethan had believed Balthasar dead. A vampire could heal most wounds, but once the head was severed, the game was up. That was too much for even vampire genetics to mend. And the fact that Balthasar hadnt contacted Ethan in the interim would only have reinforced what Ethan had seen. Still... there was doubt in Ethans voice now, put there by the vampire now sitting across from us. I inched closer to the sofa, just enough for my hip to brush Ethans shoulder, a quick brush of contact I hoped would remind him that I was there. Balthasar saw the gesture, his gaze snapping like a cobras hood to notice the intimacy. There was something old and icy in his eyes. The utter absence of empathy, as if I was nothing more than a few brushstrokes on the canvas of his very long life. I wanted to shrink away, but I forced my shoulders back, my chin up. I was Sentinel, and this was my House. Nearly decapitated, Balthasar clarified, shifting his gaze to Ethan again. The men initially decided to do away with me, and the gang of them, at least a dozen, made a very good first effort. That, I suspect, is what you saw. Theyd decided burning at the stake would serve as a proper warning to those who would dare defile their daughters, and they left to prepare the bonfire. But that was not to be. One of the men, who had his own peculiar interests, decided he could use me for his own purposes. He was a member of a cult; they called themselves the Memento Mori. Remember, you will die, I translated roughly, trying to remember my Latin. They believed vampires had the power to unlock the secrets of omnipotence and immortality, that we could traverse the gap between life and death. The man took me from the house before my torturers came back, bandaged me. Let me heal. And then began his work. Balthasar gestured to the scars along his neck. He believed having a piece of me, quite literally, would give him strength. They kept me alive, if one could call it that. Weakened, chained, and dosed with extract of aspen enough to keep me only just conscious. I felt the sharp flash of Ethans magic. Peter Cadogan had died from the same substance from his slow poisoning by a romantic rival. Balthasar must have sensed the magic, and he nodded. A small enough dose results in lethargy in the extreme. Docilit. It also impairs the ability to heal. I wasnt aware, Ethan said quietly. Nor was I, Balthasar said. But I learned quickly. They held me in Spitalfields, in London. Questions were not asked about screams, about blood, about midnight activities. Not when need was great, and happiness was in short supply. You escaped? Ethan asked. Balthasar laughed, the sound like rough whiskey. Nothing as romantic as that. The humans and their ancestors grew tired of caring for me, and they discarded me at an abbey in Walford. They either were gracious enough not to kill me, or believed I was nearly dead and the trouble would have been wasted. The abbey was a fortunate choice. The abbot was a kind man, and hed sheltered supernaturals before. He helped me heal, to begin to function. And when it became clear I wasnt aging, he helped me find new lodging to avoid the obvious questions. I moved from one safe house to another. I was in northern Europe. In Aberdeen for many years. The custodians didnt know who I was, only that I needed refuge. And when anyone became suspicious, they moved me again. I ended up in Chalet Rouge. The safe house in Geneva. I know it, Ethan said with a nod. I improved slowly, Balthasar continued. Recuperated as the extracts slowly too slowly left my system. It took decades before my memories began to return. And they

came one at a time, like cards being dealt. A memory of you, of Paris, of Nicole. I eventually remembered who you were. And I discovered who you'd become. Silence fell. Ethan watched Balthasar carefully. And you've not contacted us in all that time? Or the GP? A lesser vampire might have squirmed under Ethan's stare, but Balthasar seemed mildly amused by it. Our separation was less than pleasant. You had feelings toward me, as I did toward you. Strong feelings. You left without permission. You would not have granted it. You treated humans and vampires alike as if they were disposable. I grew tired of the depravity. Remy took over the group when you were gone, and his behavior was no better. I did not go back. Balthasar's eyebrows lifted. It seems we are being frank. But it was a different time. I'll not apologize for what I was, nor will I request your apology. Ethan's gaze darkened. I owe you no apologies. Perhaps you do, perhaps you do not. Hands still linked between his knees, Balthasar leaned forward. But do you owe me thanks? You owe your immortality, and all the benefits it has brought you, to me. I felt the quick rise in Ethan's magic. And why are you here now? I'd say to make amends, but that sounds equally naive and pretentious. Let's say I became... unassailably curious. Because I have power? Balthasar dipped his chin a bit, managed a wicked smile that edged toward creepy and malevolent. Because you've become so interesting. As have your... accoutrements. Careful, Ethan warned. Or you will quickly wear out your welcome. Balthasar made a vague sound of disagreement, then stood. He walked toward the bookshelf, long fingers lingering on the back of the chair. Before I could blink, he stood before the tall shelves, fingers now trailing across the mementos Ethan had collected over the centuries. I'd barely seen him move. God, but he was fast. Faster than any vampire I'd seen. He wasn't just a relic or an anachronism of an older age, but a powerful predator. And he was showing off. In consideration of the threat, I straightened beside Ethan, felt his answering attentiveness. Balthasar picked up a small crystal globe, let it glide across his fingers. I'll warn you again, Ethan said, and for the last time. Use care. Care? Balthasar asked. The same care that you would show me? The world began to vibrate beneath my feet, as if the House had been suddenly perched on the edge of a machine large enough to spin the world on its tilting axis. It tilted around me the entire room while I stayed upright. Me... and Balthasar. Chapter Three I gripped the back of the couch as the world shifted, saw Ethan's eyes go wide. Saw his mouth form my name Merit? but heard nothing but the pounding of blood in my ears. I glanced up, vertigo racking me as perspective shifted, caught Balthasar's intense glance. What are you doing to me? I demanded. Balthasar smiled venomously as the sound grew louder and faster, as if hornets buzzed through my head. I am demonstrating what it means to be one of my vampires. I became a marionette, pulled toward him as if gravity's axis had shifted, sucking me sideways. I fought back of course I fought back, tried to pinwheel my arms and legs to move. But the effort was useless. He dragged me stiffly forward, pulled me toward him by the sheer power of his will. Balthasar had called me. Balthasar, who stood smiling through hooded lids, had managed to draw me in despite my obvious reluctance, my palpable fear. This wasn't supposed to work on me. When Mallory had brought Ethan back to life, her power over him had briefly lingered. She'd been able to funnel her magic through him, and he'd detested the violation, her presence inside the sanctity of his mind. I understood that feeling now, because that's precisely what this was a violation. By compelling me forward, he'd stripped me of my right and will, my ability to say no. If this was glamour, the calling of a vampire to its Master, how did other vampires survive it? How did they live with the intrusion? The invasion? How was this different from what Mallory had done? I glanced back, intending to scream for help, wondering why Ethan, Malik, and Luc hadn't risen to stop him, to help me. But they looked frozen behind me. Not because Balthasar had stopped time, but because I was moving faster, at the same speed that Balthasar had demonstrated a moment before. I fought for control of my own body, of my own mind. I'd long ago learned to keep blocks in place to keep my keen vampire senses from overwhelming me with sounds, smells, and tastes. I tried to pull them down, imagined their working like heavy metal shutters, creating a seawall between my mind and the buffering waves of his magic. But it was like trying to hold back a hurricane with an umbrella. The magic spilled around it, over it, under it, and through it like a leviathan. And with the leviathan came a pulse of passion and arousal so keen it was nearly painful. My body felt suddenly electric, every nerve sensitive and attuned to Balthasar the line of his neck, the nimble fingers that twirled the globe, the beckoning eyes. All the while, Balthasar kept smiling. The psychic ropes he'd used to pull me forward tightened, each shuffling step bringing me closer to him. I couldn't find breath to speak, and pled with my eyes for him to stop, to release me. But the fear only seemed to excite him, his arousal perfuming the air with old magic and the nearly overpowering scents of orange and cinnamon. His eyes quicksilver with excitement, Balthasar bared his fangs with a hiss, needle-sharp tips gleaming as he prepared to bite, and extended a hand toward me. A kiss for a lovely woman, he said. The closer I drew, the more the rest of the

world faded, until he was the only thing I could see... and the only thing I cared to. The silver in his eyes spun like sugar, and he looked like the hero from a Gothic poem, with sable hair and fresh-cream skin, his lips flushed crimson with desire... for me, for only me, because he and I were the only ones in the world. He would bite me. He would pierce skin and vein, and he would take from me, and I would never want for anything else. I would never need anything else, because he would be everything... His hand gripped my arm and drew me closer, my eyes drifting shut as his bared fangs promised simultaneous pleasure and pain, the vampire's gift. His lips found mine, made contact. Arrrrr! Ethan's voice boomed through the room on a shock wave of fury. Suddenly, he was beside us, hauling me away. Balthasar dragged himself from my mind, the separation leaving me cold and empty. Without his bolstering magic, the floor rushed toward me like I'd been thrown against it. I landed on my knees with rattling force. Nausea welled as the world spun, and I squeezed my eyes closed until I felt the carousel slowing. Malik was suddenly at my side. I'm going to help you to your feet. I nodded, unsure I'd be able to form words, and Malik put an arm around my waist, drew me to my feet.

My knees wobbled but held. I won't let you go, he said quietly, and guided me toward the couch and away from the scuffle. Even still, there was a terrifying part of me that didn't want to go, that didn't want distance from Balthasar, from the pleasure he promised. Ethan grabbed him by the lapels, shoved him back against the bookshelves with enough force to snap wood and spill books and crystal to the floor. Balthasar's laughter was cold as ice. Perhaps you'll think twice the next time you lay hands on me, mon ami. Ethan's voice was cold and sharp as Balthasar's, and he pushed him again into broken wood and glass to punctuate the words. If you touch her again, come near her again, I will tear you apart with my own bare hands, Master or not. Balthasar raised his hands between Ethan's arms, attempted to break Ethan's hold. But Ethan was driven by fear, love, and fury, and he had the upper hand. Balthasar's voice was a cobra's hiss. You would do well to release me. You'd do well to remember where you are. In my House, in my city, surrounded by my people. Your people? Balthasar said. I made you, mon ami, and a continent will not sever the bond between us. They are mine as much as yours. You misunderstand the nature of things. Holding Balthasar back with one arm, Ethan pulled a small dagger from his jacket with his free hand, held it in front of Balthasar's face. They are my people, every one of them, blood and bone, mind and soul. I will warn you once, and only once, to stay away from them. I am not the child you once knew. My priorities have changed, as has my willingness to act. This was Ethan at his fiercest. If there'd been any doubts that vampires were alpha predators, the swirling fury in his eyes, the gleaming fangs would have erased them. Do yourself a favor, Ethan said. Leave Chicago tonight, and don't look back. The office door burst open. Lindsey, Brody, and Kelley another Cadogan guard walked inside, swords in hand. Ethan slammed the dagger into the wood beside Balthasar's temple, where it vibrated with force. And still Balthasar's expression didn't change. Bored contempt seemed the most accurate description. Ethan stepped back, kept his malevolent glare on his maker. Get him out of here.

Now. Balthasar stepped away from Ethan as the guards surrounded him. I will take my leave from your House tonight, he said. But I'm only just getting acquainted with your fair city. Luc gestured toward the door with his katana's curving blade, and Balthasar followed without comment. But he turned back in the doorway, found my gaze. Our reunion, so sweet, has only just begun. Until we meet again. And then he disappeared. *** Have him followed, Ethan told Malik. Find out where he's staying, who else knows he's here.

I want someone on him vampire and human at all times. Malik nodded, then rose and disappeared into the hallway to do a different kind of Master's bidding. Ethan, still across the room, the distance heavy between us, looked at me. You're all right? I swallowed, worked to collect my thoughts. He glamoured me. He called me. That wasn't supposed to happen. I was supposed to be immune. I was immune. A line of worry between his eyes, Ethan moved to the small refrigerator, grabbed a bottle of blood, uncapped it, and brought it back to me. Drink. I'm not thirsty. The blood will help eliminate the remaining magic. Take it from someone who knows you'll feel more yourself afterward. I don't want just drink the damn blood, Merit. His tone was sharp, his words quick and angry. Why him? Why now, when I've been immune to everyone else? Ethan sighed, sat down beside me. I'm not certain. He is powerful. A master manipulator. Perhaps his brush with death keened his abilities, or he practiced them in the intervening years. Or it could be the flavor of the magic. He paused. Or it could be my fault. I looked at him, saw the pinched fear and concern in his eyes. What he did isn't your fault. Not Balthasar per se, Ethan said. Your reaction. He pushed a lock of long, dark hair behind my ear, gaze tracking my face as if checking for injuries, evaluating my psyche. The drugs. Your change. My transition to vampire hadn't been easy or smooth. Ethan had made me a vampire to save me from an attack. A noble deed, I could recognize now, but at the time I hadn't been able to consent. Feeling guilty about that, Ethan had given me drugs to help me through the cruelly painful transition. For most vampires, it was three

days of bone-searing pain; for me, it was mostly a blur. Unfortunately, in addition to protecting me from pain, it also kept me from fully transitioning to vampire, so my psyche was still split between human and vampire. They were slammed back together eventually, but maybe, as Ethan feared, there were other lingering effects, such as my immunity to glamour. And maybe Balthasars magic had been the hammer that slammed that sensitivity back into place. Wed always thought youd just been stubborn, Ethan said. But perhaps the reasons were more fundamental than that. I heard the guilt in his voice. No. Balthasar did this because he wanted to prove a point. That he could get to you, and me, Ethan agreed. Glamour is a trait intended to entice and manipulate prey. That he used it against you, against both of us, was cruel. Drink, he said again. Youll feel better. And you dont want me to make you drink it. I glanced at him. You wouldnt dare. His expression didnt change, so it seemed wise not to argue. I sat up and, with my eyes on him above the rim, drank. He was right. It took the edge off, neutralized some of Balthasars discomfoting effect on me. When I drained the bottle, I handed it back to Ethan, and he put it aside. Good, he said. Your colors already coming back. I didnt mean to kiss him. The words burst out in a bubble of sound, and even I could hear the strain of guilt in my voice. I hadnt meant to kiss Balthasar, but in that moment, Id desired nothing less. I didnt want to. Not really. Id have done anything he asked. He had control over every part of me mentally, emotionally, physically. Ethan frowned at me. Do you think Id blame you for that? For what he did to you? He shook his head ruefully. Im sorry I couldnt get to you sooner. That he got as far as he did. His magic... Theres power in it. He was angry at himself, believing hed somehow failed to protect me. Since hed been the one who intervened, whod stopped Balthasar from drinking, he couldnt be further from the truth. His arms moved around me, pulled me close. Glamour is, and always will be, a weapon, no matter how prettily dressed. A frighteningly powerful weapon. Im not really sure how to feel. It felt like a violation. And it felt wonderful. And that makes me feel guilty. He gently tilted my chin so our eyes met. Glamour is intended to make you feel good, to make the idea of vampire feel wonderful. It wouldnt be very useful if it didnt. You are not to blame for your perfectly natural reaction. I nodded, but that didnt relieve the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I liked it better when I was immune. I wouldnt have had you discover it like this. He smiled a little. Not that you had any more interest in glamour at your lively Commendation than you did tonight. As hed intended, a corner of my mouth lifted. And I didnt like you very much then. No, you did not. Luc appeared at the doorway, Malik beside him. He surveyed the room, looked at me. Youre all right? I nodded. Im fine. Luc nodded. Lindsey and one of the human guards are on Balthasar. Theyll keep tabs, and well cover him in shifts. He glanced at Ethan. You believe his story? One arm across my shoulders, Ethan dropped his head back to stare at the coffered ceiling. His explanation was internally consistent, and explains his absence rationally. You should still verify, confirm what we can. He lifted his head again, glanced at broken bookshelves, the shattered mementos, appropriately metaphorical. But hes here now, so his explanation for his absence matters less than the reason for his presence. And what do you think that is? Luc asked. To best me? To lay claim to whatever throne he believes hes entitled to? So revenge and power, Luc said. Those are perennial vampire favorites. Of his as well, Ethan said, rubbing his temples with his free hand. We could call Nicole, Malik said wryly, and Ethan barked a laugh. To thank her for sending him our way? You think she knew? I asked. I think hes canny enough to have visited her first, confirmed he had an ally, before coming here. She could have arranged to have the note left in our apartment while she was here for the Testing, I guessed. Ethan nodded, and then his eyes narrowed. He glanced between me, Luc, and Malik. If she knew he was alive, and if she knew it during the Testing... Is he the reason she abolished the GP and created the AAM? Malik finished, crossing his arms over his chest. Luc sat on the arm of the chair across from us. And how much of her maneuvering was just to give Balthasar a second chance? Ethan sighed. We all knew she had ulterior motives that she didnt propose the AAM because shes magnanimous. Did she say anything about it last week? Malik asked. No, Ethan said. The countrys Masters had met in Atlanta, Nicoles home, for the AAMs first meeting and to discuss the organizations building blocks: its location, its procedures, its decision-making apparatus, its finances, the possibility of holding a formal ceremony to celebrate the organizations creation. Id missed that particular trip. Luc had accompanied Ethan as his body man. From the riveting discussions of parliamentary procedure Id had with Ethan afterward, I hadnt missed much. The meeting was just as youd expect a meeting of twelve egotistical and strategy-motivated vampires to be. If shes trying to maneuver us into some position to support Balthasar, she didnt show her hand. Next planning meeting is next week, Luc said. Maybe this is step one. I dont know if I buy that theory, I said, looking between them. To go through Testing, the election, the disbanding of the GP, setting up the AAM all the work youve done in the last few weeks to get the organization up and running there are easier ways to get

power to Balthasar. I shrugged. Hell, she could have just supported him as a candidate for Dariuss position. Thats a point, Luc agreed. Maybe you should call her, Malik said. Acknowledge he is here. Find out what you can. Get it out in the open. Thats what she said, I murmured, but loud enough for Luc to hear and grin approvingly. Nice, Sentinel. Ethan rolled his eyes. You two have clearly been spending too much time together. Two-a-days, we said simultaneously. You train more, you bond more, Luc said. Its part of my trademarked regimen: Luc90X. Thats not a thing, Malik said, and its not trademarked. Its probably a trademark violation. Details. Children, Ethan said, standing and glancing at his watch. Dawn is coming soon, and I think weve had plenty of excitement for one night. Yes, Luc said, rising at the obvious signal. Let that be a lesson to you about attempting to leave the House and have a private life. Well keep our relationship purely professional in the future, I promised, which earned scoffs from all three of them. Tell that to the man who defended your honor with French and a blade earlier this evening, Malik said. He had a valid point. Reminded of the blade, Ethan walked across the room, plucked it from the wall with a fist, slipped it into a nearby drawer. Lets reconvene at dusk to discuss what weve learned about Balthasar, what we may need to prepare for. On it, hoss, Luc said, then glanced at me. Assuming your purely professional schedule allows, youve got small blade practice tomorrow. Of course I did. Because God forbid I missed a night of Luc90X. Shell see you then, Ethan assured them. And the second they were gone, his arm was around my waist, and hed snugged me against the hard line of his body. Before I could react, his mouth was on mine, firm and possessive, passionate and insistent. He pushed me beyond thinking, into that sweet oblivion where there was only sensation, only the feel and smell and taste of him. When he pulled back, nipping my lip in a final tease, both of us were breathing heavily. Always remember, he said. Real lust beats old magic any day. There was applause from the doorway. I turned around, found Catcher and Mallory offering a slow clap at the sight of us. Chapter Four What was I saying about lust beating magic? Ethan asked quietly, and I patted his chest. Down, boy, I said, and waved them in. We heard youve had an evening, Catcher said. Malik called Chuck, gave him a heads-up. We were closer to the House, so we stopped by to check in on things. Balthasar, eh? So it seems. Magic? As youd expect, Ethan said, and slid his gaze to me. And glamour that managed to penetrate Merits defenses. Or destroy them, I feared. And I didnt like the thought of Balthasar penetrating anything of mine, psychic or otherwise. Catcher looked at me, head tilted and brow furrowed, as if I were a puzzle to decipher. He changed her immunity? Or slipped past it, yes, Ethan said. I waved a hand. Still in the room. But they were too involved in their analysis to care. Mallory walked over, rolled her eyes at their single-mindedness. She handed me a picnic basket. Thought wed return this, she said. Margot knocked it out of the park, as always. I nodded, put the basket on Ethans desk. She tends to do that. I thought of the announcement theyd wanted to make. Are you guys okay? Did you want to talk about something? Revue de presse Praise for the Chicagoland Vampire novels These books are wonderful entertainment. #1 New York Times Bestselling Author Charlaine Harris A strong-minded, sharp-witted heroine who will appeal to fans of Charlaine Harriss Sookie Stackhouse series and Laurell K. Hamiltons Anita Blake. Library Journal A refreshing take on urban fantasy. Publishers Weekly If you loved Nancy Drew but always wished she was an undead, sword-wielding badass, Merit is your kind of girl. Geek Monthly