

A ChicagoLand Vampires Novel

FRIDAY NIGHT BITES

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CHAPTER ONE



MOVIN' OUT

*Late May
Chicago, Illinois*

“Higher, Merit. Bring up that kick. Mmm-hmm. Better.”
I kicked again, this time higher, trying to remember to point my toes, squeeze my core, and flutter my fingers in the “jazz hands” our instructor ceaselessly demanded.

Next to me, and considerably less enthused, my best friend and soon-to-be-ex-roommate, Mallory, growled and executed another kick. The growl was an odd accompaniment to the bob of blue hair and classically pretty face, but she was irritated enough to carry it off.

“Remind me why you dragged me into this?” she asked.

Our instructor, a busty blonde with bright pink nails and impossibly sharp cheekbones, clapped her hands together. Her breasts joggled in syncopation. It was impossible to look away.

“Fiercer, ladies! We want every eye in the club on our bodies! Let’s *work* it!”

Mallory glared daggers at the instructor we’d named Aerobics Barbie. Mal’s fists curled and she took a menacing step forward, but I wrapped an arm around her waist before she could

pummel the woman we'd paid to grapevine us into skinny jeans.

"Ixnay on the ighting-fay," I warned, using a little of my two-month-old vampire strength to keep her in place despite her bobbing fists. Mallory grumbled, but finally stopped struggling.

Score one for the newbie vampire, I thought.

"How about a little civilized beat-down?" she asked, blowing a lock of sweaty blue hair from her forehead.

I shook my head, but let her go. "Beating down the teacher's gonna get you more attention than you need, Mal. Remember what Catcher said."

Catcher was Mallory's gruff boyfriend. And while my comment didn't merit a growl, I got a nasty, narrow-eyed snarl. Catcher loved Mallory, and Mallory loved Catcher. But that didn't mean she liked him all the time, especially since she was dealing with a supernatural perfect storm centered over our Chicago brownstone. In the span of a week, I'd been unwillingly made a vampire, and we'd learned that Mallory was a still-developing sorceress. As in, magical powers, black cats and the major and minor Keys—the divisions of magic.

So, yeah. My first few weeks as a vampire had been inordinately busy. Like *The Young and the Restless*, but with slightly dead people.

Mal was still getting used to the idea that she had paranormal drama of her own, and Catcher, already in trouble with the Order (the sorcerers' governing union), was keeping a pretty tight lid on her magical demonstrations. So Mallory was supernaturally frustrated.

Hell, we were both supernaturally frustrated, and Mallory didn't have fangs or a pretentious Master vampire to deal with.

So, given that unfortunate state of affairs, why were we letting Aerobics Barbie guilt us into using jazz hands?

Simply put, this was supposed to be quality time, bonding time, for me and Mallory.

Because I was moving out.

“Okay,” Barbie continued, “let’s add that combination we learned last week. One, two and three and four, and five, six and seven and eight.” The music reached a pounding crescendo as she pivoted and thrust to the bass-heavy beat. We followed as best we could, Mallory having a little harder time of not stepping on her own feet. My years of ballet classes—and the quick-step speed that vampirism gave me—were actually serving me pretty well, the humiliation of a twenty-eight-year-old vampire doing jazz hands notwithstanding.

Barbie’s enthusiasm aside, the fact that we were doing jazz hands in a hip-hop dance class didn’t say much for her credentials. But the class was still an improvement over my usual training. My workouts were usually *très* intense, because only a couple of months ago I’d been named Sentinel for my House.

To make a long story slightly shorter, American vampires were divided into Houses. Chicago had three, and I’d been initiated into the second oldest of those—Cadogan. Much to everyone’s surprise given my background (think grad school and medieval romantic literature), I’d been named Sentinel. Although I was still learning the ropes, being Sentinel meant I was supposed to act as a kind of vampire guard. (Turns out that while I was a pretty geeky human, I was a pretty strong vampire.) Being Sentinel also meant training, and while American vampires had traded in the black velvet and lace for Armani and iPhones, they were pretty old school on a lot of issues—feudal on a lot of issues—including weapons. Put all that together, and it meant I was learning to wield the antique katana I’d been given to defend Cadogan and its vampires.

Coincidentally enough, Catcher was an expert in the Second of the Four Keys—weapons—so he’d been tasked with prepping

me for vampire combat. As a newbie vampire, having Catcher as a sparring partner wasn't exactly great for the confidence.

Aerobics Barbie whipped herself into a hip-hop frenzy, leading the class in a final multistep combination that ended with the lot of us staring sassily at the mirrors that lined the dance studio. Session concluded, she applauded and made some announcements about future classes that Mallory and I would have to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to attend.

"Never again, Merit," she said, walking to the corner of the room where she'd deposited her bag and water bottle before class started. I couldn't have agreed more. Although I loved to dance, hip thrusting under Barbie's bubbly instruction and ever-bouncing bosom involved too little actual dance and too much cleavage. I needed to respect my dance master. Respect wasn't exactly the emotion Barbie inspired.

We sat down on the floor to prep for our return to the real world.

"So, Ms. Vampire," Mallory asked me, "are you nervous about moving into the House?"

I glanced around, not entirely sure how much chatting I should be doing about my vampire business. The Chicagoland Vampires had announced their existence to Chicago roughly ten months ago, and as you might guess, humans weren't thrilled to learn that we existed. Riots. Panic. Congressional investigations. And then Chicago's three Houses became wrapped up in the investigation of two murders—murders supposedly perpetrated by vampires from Cadogan and Grey, the youngest Chicago House. The Masters of those Houses, Ethan Sullivan and Scott Grey, dreaded the attention.

But the Master of the third House (that was Navarre) was conniving, manipulative, and the one that actually planned the murders. She was also drop-dead gorgeous, no pun intended. She might as well have leaped from an editorial spread in *Vogue*.

Dark hair and blue eyes (just like me), but with an arrogance that put celebrities and cult leaders to shame.

Humans were entranced, *fascinated*, by Celina Desaulniers.

Her beauty, her style, and her ability to psychically manipulate those around her were an irresistible combination. Humans wanted to learn more about her, to see more, to hear more.

That she'd been responsible for the deaths of two humans—murders she'd planned and confessed to—hadn't minimized their fascination. Nor had the fact that she'd been captured (BTW, by Ethan and me) and extradited to London for incarceration by the Greenwich Presidium, the council that ruled Western European and North American vampires. And in her place, the rest of us—the exonerated majority who hadn't helped her commit those heinous crimes—became that much more interesting. Celina got her wish—she got to play the bad little martyred vampire—and we got an early Christmas present: We got to step into the vacuum of her celebrity.

T-shirts, caps, and pennants for Grey and Cadogan (and for the more morbid, Navarre) were available for sale in shops around Chicago. There were House fan sites, “I ♥ Cadogan” bumper stickers, and news updates on the city's vampires.

Still, notorious or not, I tried not to spread too many deets about the Houses around town. As Sentinel, I was part of the House's security corps, after all. So I took a look around the gym and made sure we were alone, that prying human ears weren't slipping a listen.

“If you're debating how much you can say,” Mallory said, unscrewing the top of her water bottle, “I've sent out a magical pulse so that none of our little human friends can hear this conversation.”

“Really?” I turned my head to look at her so quickly my neck popped, the shock of pain squinting my eyes.

She snorted. “Right. Like he'd let me use M-A-G-I-C around people,” she muttered, then took a big gulp of her water.

I ignored the shot at Catcher—we'd never have a decent conversation if I took the time to react to all of them—and answered her question about the Big Move.

"I'm a little nervous. Ethan and I, you know, tend to grate on each other's nerves."

Mallory swallowed her water, then wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "Oh, whatever. You two are BFFs."

"Just because we've managed to play Master and Sentinel for two weeks without tearing each other's throat out doesn't mean we're BFFs."

As a matter of fact, I'd had minimum contact with Cadogan's Master—and the vampire who made me—during those last two weeks, by design. I kept my head down and my fangs to the grindstone as I watched and learned how things worked in the House. The truth was, I'd had trouble with Ethan at first—I'd been made a vampire without my consent, my human life taken away because Celina planned on me being her second victim. Her minions weren't successful in killing me, but Ethan had been successful at changing me—in order to save my life.

Frankly, the transition sucked. The adjustment from human grad student to vampire guard was, to say the least, awkward. As a result, I'd pushed a lot of vitriol in Ethan's direction. I'd eventually made the decision to accept my new life as a member of Chicago's fanged community. Although I still wasn't sure I had fully come to terms with being a vampire, I was dealing.

Ethan, though, was more complicated. We shared some kind of connection, some pretty strong chemistry, and some mutual irritation toward each other. He acted like he thought I was beneath him; I generally thought he was a pretentious stick-in-the-mud. That "generally" should clue you in to my mixed feelings—Ethan was ridiculously handsome and a grade-A kisser. While I hadn't completely reconciled my feelings for him, I didn't think I hated him anymore.

Avoidance helped settle the emotions. Considerably.

“No,” Mallory agreed, “but the fact that the room heats up by ten degrees every time you two get near each other says something.”

“Shut up,” I said, extending my legs in front of me and lowering my nose to my knees to stretch out. “I admit nothing.”

“You don’t have to. I’ve seen your eyes silver just being around him. There’s your admission.”

“Not necessarily,” I said, pulling one foot toward me and bending into another stretch. Vampires’ eyes silvered when they experienced strong emotions—hunger, anger, or, in my case, proximity to the blond cupcake that was Ethan Sullivan. “But I’ll admit that he’s kind of offensively delicious.”

“Like salt-and-vinegar potato chips.”

“Exactly,” I said, then sat up again. “Here I am, an uptight vampire who owes my allegiance to a liege lord I can’t stand. And it turns out you’re some kind of latent sorceress who can make things happen just by wishing them. We’re the free-will outliers—I have none, and you have too much.”

She looked at me, then blinked and put her hand over her heart. “You, and I’m saying this with love, Mer, are really a geek.” She rose and pulled the strap of her bag across one shoulder. I followed suit, and we walked to the door.

“You know,” she said, “you and Ethan should get one of those necklaces, where half the heart says ‘best’ and the other half says ‘friend.’ You could wear them as a sign of your eternal devotion to each other.”

I threw my sweaty towel at her. She made a yakking sound beneath it, then threw it off, her features screwed into an expression of abject girly horror. “You’re so immature.”

“Blue hair. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Bite me, dead girl.”

I showed fang and winked at her. “Don’t tempt me, witch.”

* * *

An hour later, I'd showered and changed back into my Cadogan House uniform—a fitted black suit jacket, black tank, and black slim-fit pants—and was in my soon-to-be-former Wicker Park bedroom, stuffing clothes into a duffel bag. A glass of blood from one of the medical-grade plastic bags in our refrigerator—promptly delivered by Blood4You, the fanged equivalent of milkmen—sat on the nightstand beside my bed, my post-workout snack. Mallory stood in the doorway behind me, blue hair framing her face, the rest of her body covered by boxers and an oversized T-shirt, probably *Catcher's*, that read *ONE KEY AT A TIME*.

"You don't have to do this," she said. "You don't have to leave."

I shook my head. "I do have to do this. I need to do it to be Sentinel. And you two need room." To be precise, *Catcher* and Mallory needed *rooms*. Lots of them. Frequently, with lots of noise, and usually naked, although that wasn't a requirement. They hadn't known each other long and were smitten within days of meeting. But what they lacked in time they made up for in unmitigated, bare-assed enthusiasm. Like rabbits. Ridiculously energetic, completely unself-conscious, supernatural rabbits.

Mallory grabbed a second empty bag from the chair next to my bedroom door, dropped it onto the bed, and pulled three pair of cherished shoes—Mihara Pumas (sneakers that I adored, much to Ethan's chagrin), red ballet-style flats, and a pair of black Mary Janes she'd given me—from my closet. She raised them for my approval and, at my nod, stuffed them in. Two more pairs followed before she settled on the bed next to the bag and crossed her legs, one foot swinging impatiently.

"I can't believe you're leaving me here with him. What am I going to do without you?"

I gave her a flat stare.

She rolled her eyes. "You only caught us the one time."

"I only caught you in the *kitchen* the one time, Mallory. I eat in there. I drink in there. I could have lived a contented, happy eternity without ever catching a glimpse of *Catcher's* bare ass on the kitchen floor." I faked a dramatic shiver. Faked, because the boy was gorgeous—a broad-shouldered, perfectly muscled, shaved-headed, green-eyed, tattooed, bad-boy magician who'd swept my roommate off her feet (and onto her back, as it turned out).

"Not that it isn't a fine ass," she said.

I folded a pair of pants and put them into my bag. "It's a great ass, and I'm very happy for you. I just didn't need to see it naked again. Ever. For real."

She chuckled. "For realsies, even?"

"For realsies, even." My stomach twinged with hunger. I glanced at Mallory, then lifted brows toward the glass of blood on my nightstand. She rolled her eyes, then waved her hands at it.

"Drink, drink," she said. "Pretend I'm some *Buffy* fan with a wicked attraction to the paranormal."

I managed to both lift the glass and give her a sardonic look. "That's exactly what you are."

"I didn't say you had to pretend very *hard*," she pointed out.

I smiled, then sipped from my glass of slightly microwaved blood, which I'd seasoned up with Tabasco and tomato juice. I mean, it was still blood, with the weird iron tang and plastic aftertaste, but the extras perked it up. I licked an errant drop from my upper lip, then returned the glass to the nightstand.

Empty.

I must have been hungrier than I thought. I blamed Aerobics Barbie. Regardless, in order to make sure that I had future snacks (thinking a stash of actual food would increase the odds that my fangs and Ethan's neck stayed unacquainted), I stuffed a dozen granola bars into my bag.

“And speaking of Catcher,” I began, since I’d cut the edge off my hunger, “where is Mr. Romance this evening?”

“Work,” she said. “Your grandfather is quite the taskmaster.”

Did I mention that Catcher worked for my grandfather? During that one big week when all the supernatural drama went down, I also discovered that my grandfather, Chuck Merit, the man who’d practically raised me, wasn’t retired from his service with the Chicago Police Department as we’d been led to believe. Instead, four years ago he’d been asked to serve as an Ombudsman, a liaison, between the city administration—led by darkly handsome Mayor Seth Tate—and the city’s supernatural population. Sups of every kind—vampires, sorcerers, shapeshifters, water nymphs, fairies, and demons—all depended on my grandfather for help. Well, him and his trio of assistants, including one Catcher Bell. I’d visited my grandfather’s South Side office shortly after becoming a vamp; I’d met Catcher, then Mallory met Catcher, and the rest was naked history.

Mallory was quiet for a moment, and when I looked up, I caught her brushing a tear from her cheek. “You know I’ll miss you, right?”

“Please. You’ll miss the fact that I can afford to pay rent now. You were getting used to spending Ethan’s money.” The Cadogan stipend was one of the upshots of having been made a vampire.

“The blood money, such as it was, was a perk. It was nice not to be the only one slaving away for the man.” Given her glassy office overlooking Michigan Avenue, she was exaggerating by a large degree. While I’d been in grad school reading medieval texts, Mallory had been working as an ad executive. We’d only recently discovered that her job had been her first success as an adolescent sorceress: She’d actually *willed* herself into it, which wasn’t the salve to her ego that a hire based on her creativity and skills might have been. She was taking a break from the job now,

using up weeks of saved vacation time to figure out how she was going to deal with her newfound magic.

I added some journals and pens to the duffel. “Think about it this way—no more bags of blood in the refrigerator, and you’ll have a muscley, sexy guy to cuddle with at night. Much better deal for you.”

“He’s still a narcissistic ass.”

“Who you’re crazy about,” I pointed out while scanning my bookshelf. I grabbed a couple of reference books, a worn, leather-bound book of fairy tales I’d had since childhood, and the most important recent addition to my collection, the *Canon of the North American Houses, Desk Reference*. It had been given to me by Helen, the Cadogan Liaison burdened with the task of escorting me home after my change, and was required reading for newbie vampires. I’d read a lot of the four solid inches of text, and skimmed a good chunk of the rest. The bookmark was stuck somewhere in chapter eight: “Going All Night.” (The chapter titles had apparently been drafted by a seventeen-year-old boy.)

“And he’s your narcissistic ass,” I reminded her.

“Yay, me!” she dryly replied, spinning a finger in the air like a party favor.

“You two will be fine. I’m sure you can manage to keep each other entertained,” I said, plucking a bobble-headed Ryne Sandberg figurine from the shelf and placing it carefully in my bag. Although my new sunlight allergy kept me from enjoying sunny days at Wrigley Field, even vampirism wouldn’t diminish my love for the Cubs.

I scanned my room, thinking about all the things—Cubs-related or otherwise—I’d be leaving behind. I wasn’t taking everything with me to Cadogan, partly out of concern that I’d strangle Ethan and be banished from the House, and partly because leaving some of my stuff here meant that I still had a home base, a place to crash if living amongst vampires—living

near Ethan—became too much to bear. Besides, it's not like her new roommate was going to need the space; Catcher had already stashed his boy stuff in Mal's bedroom.

I zipped up the bags and, hands on my hips, looked over at Mallory. "I think I'm ready."

She offered me a supportive smile, and I managed to keep the tears that suddenly brimmed at my lashes from spilling over. Silently, she stood up and wrapped her arms around me. I hugged her back—my best friend, my sister.

"I love you, you know," she said.

"I love you, too."

She released me, and we both swiped at tears. "You'll call me, right? Let me know you're okay?"

"Of course I will. And I'm only moving across town. It's not like I'm leaving for Miami." I hefted one of the bags onto my shoulder. "You know, I always figured if I moved out it would be because I got a kick-ass teaching job in some small town where everyone is super smart and quirky."

"Eureka?" she asked.

"Or Stars Hollow."

Mallory made a sound of agreement and picked up the second bag. "I assumed you'd leave after you got knocked up by a twenty-one-year-old classics major and the two of you ran away to Bora-Bora to raise your baby in the islands."

I stopped halfway to the door and glanced back at her. "That's pretty specific, Mal."

"You studied a lot," she said, edging past me into the hallway. "I had the time."

I heard her trot down the stairs, but paused in the doorway of the bedroom that had been mine since I'd returned to Chicago three years ago. I took a last look around at the old furniture, the faded comforter, the cabbage rose wallpaper, and flipped off the light.