



# Hard Bitten: A Chicagoland Vampires Novel

By Chloe Neill

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**“If you loved Nancy Drew but always wished she was an undead sword-wielding badass, Merit is your kind of girl.”—*Geek Monthly***

Times are hard for new vampire Merit. Since shapeshifters announced their presence to the world, humans have been rallying against supernaturals, and inside Cadogan House, things between Merit and her Master, Ethan Sullivan, are...tense. Worst of all, a violent vampire attack has left three women missing, and the mayor of Chicago has a simple demand for Merit and Ethan: Get your House in order. Or else.

Merit needs to get to the bottom of the crime, but, unable to tell who's on her side, she calls in a dangerous favor from a member of an underground vamp group that may have intel on the attack. Merit soon finds herself in the dark heart of Chicago's supernatural society—a world ready to fulfill the protesting humans' worst fears, and a place where she'll learn that being a vampire means getting a little blood on your hands....

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## **Hard Bitten: A Chicagoland Vampires Novel By Chloe Neill Bibliography**

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## Editorial Review

Review

***Hard Bitten* is...**

“A fast and exciting read.”—*Fresh Fiction*

“Enough action, plot twists, and fights to satisfy the most jaded urban fantasy reader.”—*Monsters and Critics*

“Roughly fantastic from beginning to end, with one of the best endings in urban fantasy history.”—*RT Book Reviews*

## Praise for Chloe Neill’s Chicagoland Vampires Novels

“The pages turn fast enough to satisfy vampire and romance fans alike.”—*Booklist*

“Neill creates a strong-minded, sharp-witted heroine who will appeal to fans of Charlaine Harris’s Sookie Stackhouse series and Laurell K. Hamilton’s Anita Blake.”—*Library Journal*

“With her wonderfully compelling reluctant vampire heroine, and her careful world building, I was drawn into *Some Girls Bite* from page one and kept reading far into the night.”—*USA Today* bestselling author Julie Kenner

“Smart, sexy, and delightful. A must read.”—Candace Havens, author of *Dragons Prefer Blondes*

“A fun cast of quirky characters and smoking-hot sexual tension...a stunning combination.”—Tate Hallaway, author of *Precinct 13*

## About the Author

**Chloe Neill** is the author of the Chicagoland Vampires Novels, including *Dark Debt*, *Blood Games*, and *Biting Bad*, and Dark Elite novels, including *Charmfall*, *Hexbound*, and *Firespell*. She was born and raised in the South but now makes her home in the Midwest—just close enough to Cadogan House and St. Sophia’s to keep an eye on things. When not transcribing Merit’s and Lily’s 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.)

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## Chapter One

### MAGIC IS AS MAGIC DOES

*Late August*

*Chicago, Illinois*

We worked beneath the shine of floodlights that punched holes in the darkness of Hyde Park—nearly one hundred vampires airing rugs, painting cabinet doors, and sanding trim.

A handful of severe-looking men in black—extra mercenary fairies we'd hired for protection—stood outside the fence that formed a barrier between the blocks-wide grounds of Cadogan House and the rest of the city.

In part, they were protecting us from a second attack by shape-shifters. That seemed unlikely, but so had the first onslaught, led by the youngest brother of the leader of the North American Central Pack. Unfortunately, that hadn't stopped Adam Keene.

They were also protecting us from a new threat.

Humans.

I glanced up from the elegant curve of wooden trim I was swabbing with stain. It was nearly midnight, but the golden glow of the protesters' candles was visible through the gap in the fence. Their flames flickered in the sticky summer breeze, three or four dozen humans making known their quiet objections to the vampires in their city.

Popularity was a fickle thing.

Chicagoans had rioted when we'd come out of the closet nearly a year ago. Fear had eventually given way to awe, complete with paparazzi and glossy magazine spreads, but the violence of the attack on the House—and the fact that we'd fought back and in doing so had thrown shifters out into the open—had turned the tides again. Humans hadn't been thrilled to learn we'd existed, and if werewolves were out there, too, what else lurked in the shadows? For the past couple of months we'd seen raw, ugly prejudice from humans who didn't want us in their neighborhood and camped outside the House to make sure we were aware of it.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket; I flipped it open and answered, "Merit's House of Carpentry."

Mallory Carmichael, my best friend in the world and a sorceress in her own right, snorted from the other end. "Kind of dangerous, isn't it, being a vampire around all those would-be aspen stakes?"

I looked over the trim on the sawhorse in front of me. "I'm not sure any of this is actually aspen, but I take your point."

"I assume from the intro that carpentry's on your agenda again this evening?"

"You would be correct. Since you asked, I'm applying stain to some lovely woodwork, after which I'll probably apply a little sealant—"

"Oh, my God, *yawn*," she interrupted. "Please spare me your hardware stories. I'd offer to come entertain you, but I'm heading to Schaumburg. Magic is as magic does, and all that."

That explained the rumbling of the car in the background on her end. "Actually, Mal, even if you could make it, we're a human-free abode right now."

"No shit," she said. "When did Darth Sullivan issue that dictate?"

"When Mayor Tate asked him to."

Mallory let out a low whistle, and her voice was equally concerned. "Seriously? Catcher didn't even say

anything about that."

Catcher was Mallory's current live-in boyfriend, the sorcerer who'd replaced me when I made the move to Cadogan House a few months ago. He also worked in the office of the city's supernatural Ombudsman—my grandfather—and was supposed to be in the know about all things supernatural. The Ombudsman's office was a kind of paranormal help desk.

"The Houses are keeping it on the down-low," I admitted. "Word gets out that Tate closed the Houses, and people panic."

"Because they think vampires pose a real threat to humans?"

"Exactly. And speaking of real threats, what are you learning tonight in Schaumburg?"

"Har-har, my little vampire friend. You will love and fear me in due time."

"I already do. Are you still doing potions?"

"Actually, no. We're doing some different stuff this week. How's the head honcho?"

The quick change of subject was a little weird. Mallory usually loved an interested audience when it came to the paranormal and her magic apprenticeship. Maybe the stuff she was learning now was actually as dull as carpentry, although that was hard to imagine.

"Ethan Sullivan is still Ethan Sullivan," I finally concluded.

She snorted in agreement. "And I assume he always will be, being immortal and all. But some things do change. Speaking of—and how's that for a segue?—guess who's now got a big ol' pair of spectacles perched on the end of his perfect little nose?"

"Joss Whedon?" Although it had taken her a little while to get used to the idea of having magic, Mal had always had a thing for the supernatural, fiction or otherwise. Buffy and Spike were particular objects of affection.

"Gad, no. Although wouldn't that totally give me an excuse to pop into the Whedonverse and, like, magically correct his eyesight or something? Anywho, no. Catcher."

I grinned. "Catcher got glasses? Mr. I'm-so-suave-I-shaved-my-head-even-though-I-wasn't-balding got *glasses*? Maybe this is going to be a good night after all."

"I know, right? To be fair, they actually look pretty good on him. I did offer to work a little abracadabra and hook him up with twenty-twenty, but he declined."

"Because?"

She deepened her voice into a pretty good imitation. "'Because that would be a selfish use of magic—expending the will of the universe on my retinas.'"

"That does sound like something he'd say."

"Yep. So glasses it is. And I'll tell you, they are little miracle workers. We have definitely turned a corner in the bedroom. It's like he's a new person. I mean, his sexual energy level is just off the—"

"Mallory. Enough. My ears are beginning to bleed."

"Prude." A piercing *honk* rang through the phone, followed by Mallory's voice. "Learn to merge, people! Come on! Okay, I've got Wisconsin drivers in front of me, and I have to get off the phone. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Night, Mal. Good luck with the drivers and the magic."

"Smooches," she said, and the line went dead. I tucked the phone back into my pocket. Thank God for besties.

Ten minutes later, I had a chance to test my "Ethan is still Ethan" theory.

I didn't even need to glance back to know that he'd stepped behind me. The rising chill along my spine was indication enough. Ethan Sullivan, Master of Cadogan House, the vampire who'd added me to its ranks.

After two months of wooing, Ethan and I had spent a pretty glorious night together. But "together" hadn't lasted; he'd reversed course after he'd decided dating me was an emotional risk he couldn't afford to take. He'd regretted that decision, too, and he'd spent the past two months attempting, or so he said, to make amends.

Ethan was tall, blond, and almost obscenely handsome, from the long, narrow nose to the sculpted cheekbones and emerald green eyes. He was also smart and dedicated to his vampires... and he'd broken my heart. Two months later, I could accept that he'd feared our relationship would put his House at risk. It would have been a lie to say I didn't feel the attraction, but that didn't make me any less eager for a rematch, so I was warily standing my ground.

"Sentinel," he said, using the title he'd given me. A House guard, of sorts. "They're surprisingly quiet tonight."

"They are," I agreed. We'd had a few days of loud chants, picket signs, and bongo drums until protesters realized we weren't aware of the noises they made during the day, and the denizens of Hyde Park would tolerate noise after nightfall for only so long.

Score one for Hyde Park.

"Makes for a nice change. How are things out here?"

"We're moving along," I said, wiping away an errant drip of stain. "But I'll be glad when we're done. I don't think construction is my bag."

"I'll keep that in mind for future projects." I could hear the amusement in his voice. After taking a second to check my willpower, I looked over at him. Tonight Ethan wore jeans and a paint-smeared T-shirt, and his shoulder-length golden hair was pulled back at the nape of his neck. His dress might have been casual, but there was no mistaking the air of power and unfailing confidence that marked this prince among vampires.

Hands on his hips, he surveyed his crew. Men and women worked at tables and sawhorses across the front lawn. His emerald gaze tracked from worker to worker as he gauged their progress, but his shoulders were tense, as if he was ever aware that danger lurked just outside the gate.

Ethan was no less handsome in jeans and running shoes while taking stock of his vampiric kin.

"How are things inside?" I asked.

"Moving along, albeit slowly. Things would go faster if we were allowed to bring in human construction workers."

"Not bringing them in does save us the risk of human sabotage," I pointed out.

"And the risk that a drywall contractor becomes a snack," he mused. But when he looked back at me again, a line of worry appeared between his eyes.

"What is it?" I prompted.

Ethan offered up his signature move—a single arched eyebrow.

"Well, obviously other than the protesters and constant threat of attack," I said.

"Tate called. He asked for a meeting with the two of us."

This time, I was the one who raised my eyebrows. Seth Tate, Chicago's second-term mayor, generally avoided mingling with the city's three Master vampires.

"What does he want to meet about?"

"This, I assume," he said, gesturing toward the protesters.

"Do you think he wants to meet with me because he and my father are friends, or because my grandfather works for him?"

"That, or because the mayor may, in fact, be smitten with you."

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't stop the warm blush that rose on my cheeks. "He isn't smitten with me. He just likes being reelected."

"He's smitten, not that I can't understand the emotion. And he hasn't even seen you fight yet." Ethan's voice was sweet. Hopeful.

Hard to ignore.

For weeks he'd been this attentive, this flattering.

That was not to say he didn't have his moments of snark. He was still Ethan, after all, still a Master vampire with a Houseful of Novitiates who didn't always please him, and to add insult to injury, he was nearing the end of a months-long rehab of that House. Construction didn't always go quickly in Chicago, and it moved even more slowly when the subject of the construction was a three-story den of vampires. An architectural gem of a den, sure, but still a den of night-walking bloodsuckers, blah blah blah. Our human suppliers were often reticent to help, and that didn't exactly thrill Ethan.

The construction notwithstanding, Ethan was doing all the right things, making all the right moves. Problem was, he'd shaken my trust. I hoped to find my own happily ever after, but I wasn't yet prepared to trust that this particular Prince Charming was ready to ride off into the sunset. Two months later, the hurt—and humiliation—was still too real, the wound too raw.

I wasn't naïve enough to deny what was between me and Ethan, or the possibility that fate would bring us together again. After all, Gabriel Keene, the head of the North American Central Pack, had somehow shared with me a vision about a pair of green eyes that looked like Ethan's... but weren't. (I know. "What the hell?" had been my reaction, too.)

I wanted to believe him. Just like every other girl in America, I'd read the books and seen the movies in which the boy realizes he made a horrible decision... and comes back again. I wanted to believe that Ethan mourned the loss of me, that his regret was real, and that his promises were earnest. But this wasn't a game. And as Mallory had pointed out, wouldn't it have been better if he'd wanted me from the beginning?

In the meantime, while I weighed the new Ethan against the old Ethan, I played the dutiful Sentinel. Keeping things professional gave me the space and boundaries I needed... and it had the added benefit of irritating him. Immature? Sure. But who didn't take the opportunity to tweak their boss when they had the chance?

Besides, most vampires were members of one House or another, and I was immortal. I couldn't exactly sidestep working with Ethan without damning myself to an eternity spent as an outcast. That meant I had to make the best of the situation.

Avoiding the intimacy in his voice, I smiled politely at him. "Hopefully he won't need to see me fight. If I'm brawling in front of the mayor, things have definitely gone south. When do we leave?"

Ethan was quiet long enough that I looked over at him, saw the earnestness in his expression. It plucked my heartstrings to see him look so decided about me. But whatever fate might have in store for us down the road, I wasn't taking that exit today.

"Sentinel."

There was gentle reprobation in his voice, but I was sticking to my plan. "Yes, Liege?"

"Be stubborn if you wish to, if you *need* to, but we know how this will end."

I kept my face blank. "It will end as it always does—with your being Master and my being Sentinel."

The reminder of our positions must have done it. As abruptly as he'd turned on the charm, Ethan turned it off again. "Be downstairs in twenty minutes. Wear your suit." And then he was gone, striding purposefully up the stairs and back into Cadogan House.

I swore quietly. That boy was going to be the death of me.

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