

SOUL DEPENDENTS



BY PF CASE
SISTERS OF THE SOUL

SOUL DEPENDENTS

SISTERS OF THE SOUL BOOK THREE

BY PF CASE

Soul Dependents

PF Case

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Books by Author

Sisters of the Soul Series

Soul Responsibility

Soul Loyalty

Soul Dependents

Contents

CHAPTER One 5
Chapter Two..... 12
Chapter Three..... 20
Chapter Four 26

CHAPTER One

I opened one eye and stared at my alarm clock. It was way too early to be awake. Another crash of thunder rattled the windows in my bedroom. Three a.m., I moaned, pulling the pillow over my head and closing my eyes. I willed myself to go back to sleep. I had a busy day ahead of me. I'd invited my parents over tonight to meet Colm and Tavis. It seemed the logical thing to do as they had become a regular fixture in my life since I'd agreed to date Colm a few months ago. On one level, dating Colm was the most normal thing I'd done in months. But on a very deep level, it was a mirror of all of the abnormality that my life had spiraled into since surviving the attack on my life.

I was a necromancer, one of the few of my kind as it turned out. I shared my home with Nora, a corporeal ghost. Nora had been a necromancer in life as well. I had been her sister, Neala, in my previous life. She had decided not to reincarnate in this lifetime, but rather haunted me instead. Nora had explained that God had created all of the souls as an interconnected web. We were destined to spend our various incarnations working through our relationships with those souls that were closest to us in that web. She also explained that when the souls were separated to begin their journey, the force of the rending had torn each soul in half. Humans spent their lives searching for their soul mates, the other half of themselves.

That's where Colm came in. Colm was the alpha of the local Panther Pride. He was also my soul mate, the other half of my being. I had very few memories of my past lives, only the ones that were triggered by necessity or by emotion. One of these memories had been triggered accidentally by Colm's son, Tavis. Tavis was also the son of Tabitha, one of my previous incarnations. While Colm remembered numerous lives that we had shared, I didn't. This made dating complex. He was convinced that we belonged together. I wasn't ready to concede that. He had avoided my soul for 150 years, punishing me for my inevitable death. That told me that we were not fated to spend our days together, no matter what he believed. The jury was still out for me on whether he would be a more significant part of my life.

Another crash of thunder shook the windows. So much for grilling outside when my guests arrived, I thought. That meant I'd have to rethink my menu and go grocery shopping. The room lit up as lightening followed the thunder. I looked at the alarm clock again. Frustrated, I threw

the pillow off my head and sat up. I wasn't going to be sleeping anymore tonight so I might as well get up. I sat up in the bed, listening to the crashes of thunder and watching the shadows play across the wall with each lightning strike. Branches cast eerie shadows that looked like moving arms as the tree outside swayed in the heavy wind. For an instant, I saw the shadow of a person, but when I turned, startled, I was alone. I laughed a little at myself as I turned on the light by my bed and straightened my covers. I used to scare myself silly playing a shadow game as a child. The room I shared with my sister faced the street which meant that headlights from passing cars would throw the shadows of the tree on the bedroom wall. I'd entertain myself by seeking images in the shadows and it never failed that the childhood game would send shivers through me when I'd imagine faces looking back at me. I left my room and went downstairs.

I was beginning to adjust to Nora not being a fixture in the living room at all hours of day and night. Colm had helped me fashion a space for her in the attic. He'd built a small closet in one of the dormer spaces and covered one long wall with bookshelves. I'd replaced the single hanging bulb with a more efficient ceiling fan and added a futon-sofa and a few chairs, a bright area rug and two floor lamps. The lamps and fan were for me. Nora could read without light, but I found that even the new ceiling fixture couldn't chase away the shadows. The attic was still too hot in summer and too cold in winter, but since Nora couldn't sense the temperature even when corporeal, it was the perfect space for her.

The thunder clapped loudly again and the lightening illuminated the entire downstairs. I hit the living room light switch as I passed it, expecting to see Boo in her crate. She didn't like storms and one this bad would usually have her scratching at my bedroom door. She wasn't there so I assumed that she was in the attic with Nora. I walked down the hall to the kitchen and turned on the light. Since I was wide awake, I might as well have coffee. I felt the atmosphere in the kitchen change as I added the grounds to the filter. The only way to describe the change when another presence has entered the room is to say that it grows heavy. I turned, expecting to see Nora. Instead, I found myself looking into the face of child. She stood at the end of the long hallway that led to my front door. She may have been three or four. Her dark hair fell in soft curls around her face. She wore a dress that hung down to just above knees still chubby with baby fat. I stared at her for a minute, waiting to see if she would speak. When she didn't I said "Hello, sweetie. What can I do for you tonight?" She looked at me as if she would answer, then

her eyes grew wide and she stared quickly over her shoulder. She turned back to me, her features a mask of pure terror. Without warning she was standing so close that we would have been nose to nose had she been taller. She opened her mouth and screamed silently before disappearing. I dropped the can of coffee on the floor and called for Nora.

“Did she say anything at all before she screamed?” Nora asked. I was hurrying to sweep up the spilled coffee before Boo could lick it all off the floor. The last thing I needed was for my energetic lab puppy to have a heavy dose of caffeine on a day like today. As it was, I’d be dying by the end of the day if the storm didn’t let up enough to take her on a long walk. As it was, I’d had to shove her out the door to get to her into the yard to save my rugs.

“I told you” I said, dumping the coffee into the trash bin. “She just looked at me. I thought she was going to speak but something seemed to scare her. The next thing I knew she was screaming in my face.”

“I didn’t hear anything” Nora said.

“Neither did I” I told her. “I knew she was screaming but she didn’t make a sound.”

“Well, that’s odd. But ghosts can’t hurt you, you know.”

“I know. But it was creepy as hell” I said.

“Why are you out of bed so early?” Nora asked.

“Storm woke me up. Then I started thinking about the day and that kept me awake.”

“Still nervous about Colm and Tavis meeting your parents?” she asked, smiling.

“Not exactly” I told her. “It’s more that I’m nervous about letting my new life mix with my old one. All it takes is one slip and my parents will think we’re all nuts.”

“The Weres have been hiding themselves from humanity for ages” she assured me. “You don’t have to worry that they’ll slip up.”

“I know” I told her. “I’m worried I’ll slip up. Maybe I should cancel due to bad weather.”

“I don’t see your parents or Colm letting that happen” she told me.

“I don’t either” I agreed. “But it looks like we won’t be grilling so that means I have to plan a menu.”

By mid-afternoon, I’d all but forgotten the early morning visit. The rain showed no signs of letting up. I made a quick trip to the neighborhood grocery and was astonished to see that many of the side streets were flooded. Several streets were partially blocked by fallen tree branches and city crews worked quickly to clean them up. The rain fell in sheets. Despite the rain and high winds, this was just a typical late summer storm for Michigan. It paled in comparison to the supernatural storm that a demented witch had used against me last spring.

Colm had called to tell me that they would be by earlier than planned since the weather kept them from their building site. My mom had also called to confirm that they would arrive by four and offered to bring dessert. She didn’t raise any children foolish enough to turn down her desserts, so of course I said yes. She wouldn’t tell me what she planned to bring, but it didn’t matter. I had no doubt that both calls had been to assure me that there was no going back. They would meet tonight, with or without my blessing.

When I’d told my parents that I wanted them to meet the man I was dating, they’d been intrigued. I hadn’t taken a boy home to meet my parents since high school, my mom reminded me. I’d answered all of her questions patiently. Yes, he’s very handsome. No, he isn’t a professor. He was a widower with a grown son. Some of the answers required a few white lies. For instance, I said that I had met him through friends of Jeannie and Michael and that was mostly true. It implied that they’d introduced us though, which was not true at all. I’d met them during a family meeting at Dominic’s house when he’d asked the alphas to help us catch a serial killer. I told them that he was thirty eight and had a twenty-one year old son. This was not true at all. I had no idea how old Colm really was, but he had been turned when he was thirty eight so it was a believable lie. Tavis was about 156 years old, but he’d stopped aging physically at eighteen due to his Were genetics. I didn’t feel guilty for the lies though. I couldn’t very well tell them the truth.

I parked in the grocery parking lot and got out of my car, grimacing as cold rain water washed over the top of my shoes. I squished into the store, grabbed a cart on my way in and tried to ignore the sucking noises that my feet made as they first built and then broke tension with the

water. I had planned to shop quickly but ended up filling my cart. The lines were long so I grabbed a magazine from the bin by the register and read the latest celebrity gossip to pass the time. Thunder clapped loud enough to shake the windows in the store. I looked up as the lights flickered off and back on several times, worried that the registers would lose power and I'd be stuck with canned soup for dinner. I took an involuntary step back, bumping the woman who waited in line behind me when I saw a row of faces staring through the window at me. The window was lined with the dead.

"Sorry" I said, turning to face the woman I'd stepped on.

"You need to watch it" she snapped at me.

I looked at her, debating whether I should engage her or just turn away. She glared at me, no doubt in a bad mood since she looked drenched and had only a gallon of milk and a bag of disposable diapers in her cart and my cart was full. Maturity won out and I smiled and let her move in front of me in the line. She gave me a relieved smile and nodded. Another crash of thunder boomed overhead and the lights flickered off again just as I turned and found myself nose to nose with the silently screaming little girl.

"That was the creepiest thing I've ever seen" I told Nora and the Weres. Colm and Tavis had arrived while I was driving home from the store. That was kind of nice actually since it meant I didn't have to trudge the bags in through the rain. "Any ideas Nora?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Did any of them seem threatening?" she asked.

"No. They just stood at the window staring. There were at least twenty of them. By the time I got outside, they were gone."

"They're just ghosts" Colm said. "And they can't hurt you." I had him busy making a salad to serve with the beef tenderloin that I had marinating in red wine. Tavis leaned against the counter near Nora sipping a beer.

"Maybe they want your help with something." Tavis said. "Why not just ask them?"

“I say we shouldn’t worry about it tonight” Colm said, setting aside the bowl of salad greens. He grabbed my hand and squeezed it gently. “But then again, it has gotten you to stop worrying about your parents.”

“I hope they don’t do one of their creepy little drop-ins while my parents are here” I said, squeezing his hand back. “And this weather doesn’t help.”

“Why don’t we light a fire” Colm said, putting his arm around my shoulder and nudging me towards the front room. “It will take the dampness out of the air and make it feel cozy and relaxed.”

“That’s a good idea” I said, letting him lead me towards the fireplace. I called over my shoulder “Bring more beer Tavis. That will make me cozy and relaxed.”

After I was comfortably seated beside Colm on the sofa, his arm encircling my shoulders as I leaned into him, I asked “Nora, are you sure you don’t want to join us for dinner tonight? I could tell my parents that I invited you to keep Tavis company.”

“I prefer to be the fly on the wall tonight” she told me. “I’ll just keep hovering around you when your mom or dad follows you out of the room to tell you what they think of Colm. Then I can come back and repeat it to him so he can stay ahead of the game.”

“Thanks Nora” Colm said. “I haven’t had to impress a parent for a very long time.” He tapped his ear. “Were hearing though. I won’t miss much.”

“Just be on your best behavior” I told him, smiling and dropping a kiss on his forehead as I got up to answer the door.

As it turned out, I worried for nothing. Colm and Tavis charmed even my dad who was nothing if not over protective of his girls. Mom told me more than once that she thought he was ‘devilishly handsome’. Nora true to her word repeated it to him in the next room, for no other reason than the pleasure of annoying me. I knew they’d been concerned that I would date someone with a son as old as Tavis, and they didn’t know the half of it. But they found him to be charming too. After dinner, we carried our drinks back to the living room. I grinned when my

parents sat on the sofa, forcing me to take one of the recliners close to the fire and Colm to take the other. It wasn't to keep distance between us. It was so they could watch us while they talked.

"This weather is really awful, isn't it?" my mom said, shivering as another heavy clap of thunder boomed above the house.

"The weatherman says the storm cell should move out of here by midnight" I told her. "I hope so too. The storm woke me up before dawn today."

"Me too" my dad said. "Alarm clock said three a.m. and I couldn't get back to sleep."

"That's the same time I woke up" I said. "We must have had a huge thunderclap hit at that time."

"We lost a full day's work" Tavis said, grinning. "I wouldn't have minded that so much if it hadn't been raining so hard. Not much to do but watch TV." He was mindful of appearing to act the age he looked.

"Are you going to school?" Dad asked.

Tavis gave Colm a look and answered "We've been discussing that possibility." That was news to me. I raised an eyebrow at Colm, realizing that the only reason to send Tavis to school was to provide me with a bodyguard on campus. He smiled unapologetically. I jumped as another heavy thunder clap shook the windows in my house. The lights went out and stayed out. The glow from the fireplace kept us from being in total darkness, but it didn't do much to illuminate the entire house. "I'll get the flashlights" I said, jumping up and tripping over Boo as I moved in the darkness. A lightning bolt lit up the room and I stopped in my tracks. The dining room was full of the dead, including the creepy little girl. The lights flickered as I stood there and then came back on.

"Nate! Nate!" I heard my mother say, at first confused and then near panic. "Ceara, your dad!" she called. I turned to see what was happening and heard Colm tell Tavis "Call 911."

Chapter Two

Meeting my family can be daunting under the best of circumstances. That isn't because they are rude or obnoxious but because there are just so many of us. Meeting them in crisis mode made the situation worse. Colm and Tavis were managing it well. I watched as they passed around the coffees they'd fetched from the hospital cafeteria. If they felt awkward, they didn't show it. My siblings and their spouses also seemed to accept them as belonging here, despite not meeting them before tonight. That would have to be a plus one in Colm's pro column. Anyone that had any hopes of being a permanent part of my life had to pass the Fennessy acceptability test and it looked like he was doing that.

I stood near the consultation room door. The nursing staff had moved us to a private area since we were overwhelming the public waiting area. I could still hear the sounds of the storm outside, even though we were in an interior corridor off of the main emergency room. We'd been here an hour and still hadn't heard from the doctor that was seeing our dad. He wasn't dead. I'd realized that within seconds. He wasn't amongst the dead who crowded my dining room, staring at me in silence. He was unconscious. Nothing we did revived him. Now we waited to hear what the doctors could tell us about his condition. The word stroke was bandied about along with aneurysm. He was so healthy though that I couldn't believe either thing could be true. It was terrifying not knowing and I realized that I was getting a little taste of what my family had gone through after my brutal attack. A wave of panic swept over me as I realized that I could lose my father tonight. The pain and fear swept through me with a force that nearly bent me double. I stepped into the hallway, trying to catch my breath as I gripped my stomach to fight off the fear. "Dominic" I whispered, choking painfully on the sound of his name. I felt him materialize beside me and looked around in a panic. "They'll see you" I whispered, gripping his arm and looking frantically around me. "You shouldn't be here."

"Ceara, love, what's wrong?" Dominic said. He pulled me into an embrace and held me next to his chest while I trembled. I couldn't answer him. I just clung to him, gripped in the depth of my panic.

"Her father had some sort of attack" I heard Colm explain through the haze of my panic. He had stepped into the hallway when they saw me leave.

“She’s having a panic attack” Dominic said. “Help me get her to a chair.” He released me to Colm, who lifted me into his arms and carried me a short distance away from the room where my family waited. He lowered me gently into a chair and then the men took seats on either side of me. “Breathe Ceara” Dominic whispered softly. “It will be okay.” He held one of my hands in his, gently stroking my arm as he spoke comforting words.

I slowly regained control and brought my breathing back to normal. “I’m sorry I called you” I finally told Dominic, smiling weakly. “I just got so scared. I think it was a reflex triggered by the panic.

“No apology necessary” he told me softly. “I will always come when you call so you should never hesitate. Do you want me to stay with you?” he asked.

“No” I told him, suddenly embarrassed. “I know you’re busy and I’m fine really. Colm and Tavis are here.” I glanced down the hall towards the waiting room. “Tavis is likely wondering why we abandoned him to my family.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he said, standing and giving Colm a worried look.

I nodded. “Colm is here. He’ll get in touch with you if I need you. Thanks for coming to me.”

“Very well” he said. “Call me if you need me.” He lifted my hand to his lips and disappeared and I felt a twinge of the panic start to return as he left.

Nora stood beside me when we returned to the room, invisible to all but the Weres and me and the occasional ghost who wandered by to ask for our help. Hospitals are full of ghosts, it seems. Those that just needed encouragement moved on as I watched. Those that needed something more substantial either agreed willingly to back off for a while or got to listen to a stream of profanity laced directions in a feminine Irish lilt that was more suited for lullabies than telling a persistent ghost what they could stick and where they could stick it. “Are you okay?” she asked me.

I nodded, turning to take a cup of coffee from Tavis as he walked over to where I stood.

“Are you really okay?” he asked gently as he put his arm around me and led me to an empty chair.

“I’m as okay as I can be right now, unless someone asks me one more time if I’m okay. Then I might lose it” I said, taking the seat and relaxing into Colm’s shoulder when he moved to sit next to me.

“He’ll be fine” Colm reassured, dropping a kiss on the top of my head.

“You guys don’t have to stay here all night” I told them. “I can call you when I know something.”

“We’re not leaving you yet” Tavis said, sipping on his coffee as he took the chair on my other side. “At some point I’ll probably have to leave but I think you’re stuck with Dad for a while.”

“At least until you know something” Colm said.

“I appreciate it” I said. The door opened and the doctor walked in with my mom. Her eyes were red rimmed from crying. She dropped into the chair closest to the door and the twins moved quickly to flank her. My heart thudded painfully in my chest. She looked defeated. Did that mean my dad had not survived?

“We’ve run several tests on your father” the doctor explained, sitting near Kyla. “We can’t find anything to explain why he’s unconscious. He appears to be in a deep REM sleep and no stimulus is enough to wake him up.”

“I don’t understand” Cinnia said. She was the oldest of us and usually took charge when my parents weren’t able to do so. “Are you telling us he’s just asleep?”

“Yes and no” the doctor explained. “This isn’t sleep like anything we know. His brain waves show that he is in a deep dream state, but we can’t wake him up. He’s in a coma. We can’t find any medical cause for the coma. He didn’t have a stroke or an aneurysm. We can’t find any signs of trauma.”

“So what does this mean for his prognosis?” Cinnia’s husband Aiden asked.

“We’re admitting him and we’ll keep him under observation. If this persists we’ll start an IV to keep him hydrated and nourished. Other than that, there’s nothing we can do.”

“Colm” I said, leaning in to whisper in his ear. “Can you call Jonathon?” Jonathon arrived a half hour later. We were all waiting for our dad to be moved to a room before leaving. My mom would stay with him in the hopes that he would wake up soon. I introduced Jonathon to my siblings as a friend who was going to give us a second opinion.

“Tell me everything you can about what happened” Jonathon said, taking me aside. I told him about the loss of power and the ghosts that lined the dining room, knowing that he meant he needed to know about any unusual events. Jonathon was an Eclectic Healer, a witch with the ability to heal. He was also the chair of the local Council, the governing group of the witches in the area.

“I didn’t see any ghosts” Nora said.

“Neither did I” Colm said and Tavis agreed.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “The dining room was crowded with them, including that screaming little girl.” They shook their heads. “Is there any reason I would see them if you can’t Nora?” I asked.

“None that I can think of” Nora said, frowning. “Unless they weren’t ghosts.”

“I thought they were ghosts” I told Jonathon. “Then the lights came back on and Dad was out of it.”

“Okay” Jonathon said. “Let me take a look. Maybe I can wake him up.”

“Isn’t he that miracle guy that’s always on TV?” Kyna asked, after Jonathon left.

“Yes” I said. “He’s also a close friend. I figured a second opinion couldn’t hurt, right?” I looked at my siblings. They all looked tired and worried. I imagined I did as well, maybe more so since I was starting to suspect that my dad needed a supernatural diagnosis. We were all standing, having gotten up when my mom left and not bothering to sit back down. Kieran’s jaw twitched, and I knew he was chewing the inside of his cheek, a nervous habit that we both had. Cinnia, Brianna and Deirdre leaned into their husbands. The twins, Kyla and Kyna, stood with their arms wrapped tightly around the other’s waist. I stood next to Colm, not leaning on him, but comforted by the weight of his hand resting on my shoulder.

“Maybe we should sit down and wait for Jonathon to return” I suggested, knowing instinctively that everyone would agree but no one would sit. I shrugged and turned to my friends. “What do you think I saw?” I asked in barely more than a whisper.

“It could have been a lot of things” Nora said. “Any of the fae could have shown up to you alone. So could demons or angels. Anything really.”

“But why?” I asked. “They don’t say anything. They watch me. Except for the little girl who screams” I amended. “Why wouldn’t they communicate?”

“Maybe they don’t want to communicate” Tavis said, frowning. “Maybe they’re just there to intimidate.”

“Or maybe they believe that their presence is the only communication you need” Colm suggested. “Without knowing what they are its kind of hard to figure out what they want.”

“Or maybe they weren’t there at all” I said. “Maybe my mind is playing tricks on me.”

“That’s a possibility too” Nora agreed.

“It would be easier to believe if your dad hadn’t chosen that moment to pull the Sleeping Beauty impersonation” Colm told me. We changed the subject as Kieran walked up, flanked by my brothers in law. He put out his hand and grasped first Colm’s and then Tavis’ hand in a warm handshake.

“We wanted to thank you for staying with Ceara” he said. “It can’t have been easy being thrown into the mix with the family like this.” He echoed my own thoughts so well that I smiled and punched him affectionately on the shoulder.

“How serious are you?” Aiden asked. The punch I gave him was less than affectionate.

“Even Dad didn’t ask that!” I complained as Aiden rubbed his shoulder.

“He was probably just working up to it” Aiden said, grinning.

“You can’t blame us for being interested” Colin chimed in. “Every time she gets in trouble Nate calls us in as backup” he explains. “Then we get caught between Nate and Ceara, the two hardest heads on the face of the planet.”

“Here, here” Dillon agreed.

Colm laughed, neither put off nor offended by the teasing. “She is stubborn, isn’t she?” he said. “And I have every intention of keeping her safe for a while.”

I frowned. “You’re all getting dangerously close to male chauvinist territory” I said. “I don’t put myself in danger. Other people have, but I haven’t. And I don’t need a babysitter.”

They all laughed and Kieran gave me a quick one armed hug. “So predictable” he said, shaking his head with a grin. Then to Colm “If you want to get under her skin, say something sexist or tell her you’ll take care of her.”

Colm grinned back “I’m starting to figure that out” he said.

Jonathon returned then and told the family that he couldn’t add anything to the original prognosis. He told us that my dad had been moved to a room and gave us directions on where to find him. I hung back and watched my siblings file out. When they were gone I turned to Jonathon expecting him to say more. He walked over and sat down, which I didn’t take as a good sign. We sat across from him. “Your dad is not asleep” he told me. “He is in some sort of trance. I don’t know how or why this happened and I can’t break it. It’s like there’s a barrier between him and the rest of the world right now.”

I frowned. “What do you mean by a barrier?” I asked.

“It’s like he’s metaphysically encased in a box” Jonathon said. “I can’t touch him with magic. It bounces back like it’s hitting something that the eye can’t see.”

“And you don’t know what can cause this?” Tavis asked.

“No idea” he said. “I’m going to call Rochelle when I get up to my office. She and Stephen can look into it with Jeannie. Maybe between the four of us, we’ll be able to figure something out. For now, I can tell you that he is experiencing this like sleep. He isn’t in any pain or danger right

now. His health is fine.” He patted me on the knee and stood up. “Get your family to go home and get some rest” he said. “You should see if your mom will go home with you too.” I smirked and he added “I figured as much so I told the floor staff to expect her to stay.”

“Thanks” I said. “I appreciate your help Jonathon and thank the others for me too.”

I looked at my watch. It was nearly two o’clock in the morning. “Colm, would you mind calling Dominic for me while I go up to say good-bye to my parents? Will you ask him if he knows anything that might explain this?”

“I’ll call” Tavis said. “You can go up with Ceara, Dad.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” Colm asked. Plus two to him, I thought. He wasn’t just insinuating himself into my family.

“Actually, yes” I told him. “That is if you don’t need a break.”

“No” he told me. “You have a nice family. I don’t mind.”

When I got upstairs, my siblings and Mom were in the waiting room. “They’re settling him in” Mom told me. She squeezed Colm’s arm “This isn’t exactly what we had in mind for our first meeting” she said, giving him a tired smile.

He smiled back and said “The first of many, I’m sure, so we’ll get other chances to chat.”

“That will be nice.” She looked around “Where’s Tavis?” she said.

“We left him downstairs to make a few phone calls” I told her. “He’ll be up soon unless we finish before he does.”

“He’s a nice young man” she told Colm. “It must have been challenging raising him alone.”

“I think he turned out well too” Colm agreed. “And we had a few rough patches here and there, but weathered them.”

She nodded, turning towards the room as Jonathon and the other doctor came out. Jonathon walked over and joined us. “Mrs. Fennessy” he said to my mother. “I’ve arranged to have your husband moved to my direct care. I’m not sure that I can do anything differently than any of the

others on staff” he said smiling reassuringly at her. “But Ceara says that she will feel better if I’m overseeing him. Is this okay with you?”

She looked at me for confirmation. “They call him the Miracle Man, Mom” I said. “I don’t think we can do better.”

“Ceara’s right” Kyna added. “Dr. Jordan is well known as an excellent physician.”

“Then I guess that settles it” Mom said. “Thank you, Doctor.” She shook his hand.

“I’ll check in with you in a few hours” he said, nodding goodbye before he left.

I stood outside the door, waiting for my turn to visit with Dad before I left. I waited until last to see him because I lived the closest to the hospital. I only half listened as my sisters quizzed Colm for details about his life. They did it subtly. I wondered if he would realize that he had been grilled when it was through. Finally it was my turn. It was odd seeing my dad in a hospital bed. He really did look like he was just sleeping. His chest rose and fell in rhythmic movements. The only indication that everything was not as it seemed was the IV pole and the hospital gown.

“I don’t suppose I can talk you into coming home with me for a few hours?” I asked my mother.

She shook her head and patted my arm. “No. He might wake up and I should be here.”

“I figured you’d say that. I’ll come back with a few of your things later this morning. Anything specific you would like to have?”

“I have a couple of new novels on my bedside table” she told me.

“Okay” I said. “I’ll pick them up and be back by eight or so. I’ll take you down to the cafeteria for breakfast and you won’t argue.” She smiled and I kissed her good-bye before leaning over Dad to kiss his cheek. I turned to leave, stopping fast enough to cause Colm to run into me when I saw the girl standing in the door to the room. She turned and walked down the corridor and I hurried to follow her with Colm at my heels. The girl disappeared through the door to the stairway and I followed. I stepped through the door and exited into a moonlit meadow.

Chapter Three

I stood in the moonlight. Something had called me out here in the middle of the night. I looked around cautiously. I thought I saw movement in the line of trees to the north. I squinted to see in the dark. Whatever it was, it stayed just out of my line of vision. Thunder clapped and the sky lit up with a flash of lightening. The wind picked up and the light in the meadow diminished. I looked up at the sky. Clouds were gathering, beginning to block the moon. Shivering, I pulled my nightgown closer around me against the wind.

I caught movement again through the trees. I could see them now. Dark shapes moved towards me from the shelter of the trees. I counted twenty. I wasn't afraid. These were the dead and I controlled the dead. I watched as they came closer. Fat drops of rain began to fall and the thunder clapped again, so loud and close that I jumped with the noise. My hair was drenched before they reached me. My nightgown clung to my legs and water dripped in rivulets across my face and feet.

"What do you want?" I asked them. "Why have you called me out here in the fekkin' rain?" When they reached me, they stopped, staring at me silently. "What do you want?" I asked again. If they didn't answer soon, I would leave them here and return to the warmth of my bed. The thunder clapped and a flash of lightening illuminated the field. Now there were more of them, at least fifty. They began to part and a young girl moved out of the throng to stand in front of them. She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could, they turned in unison to look behind them. The girl looked back at me, her mouth working as if she was trying to speak. "What is it?" I asked. "What do you need from me?" She opened her mouth in a wordless scream before they all disappeared and I was in the meadow alone.

"Mama!" I heard his voice behind me and I turned. My son stood in the open doorway of our home. "Mama! You're getting wet."

I turned again to stare at the woods. Something was out there but I couldn't see it. My heart began to pound with fear. "Coming Tavis" I called, beginning to run towards the house. Now I saw my man standing behind him. He bent and picked the boy up, moving aside to let me into the house.

“What were you doing out there?” he asked, putting the boy down and grabbing a soft blue throw that I kept on the chair in front of the fireplace. “Tavis add a log to the fire!” he said, wrapping me in the throw and using it to dry some of the water from my hair. “Sit!” he ordered me, moving me closer to the fire. He was gone and a moment later returned with a dry nightgown. He helped me strip and dropped it over my shoulders. He rubbed my hands to bring the warmth to them as the fire sparked to life with the new wood. “Tabitha, talk to me. Why were you out there?”

I stared into his eyes, the fear still burning hotly in my chest. “I don’t know” I lied. “I think I was walking in my sleep.” I didn’t know what was outside our door but I felt the need to protect them. He looked at me for a moment, maybe sensing my deception and then he put on the pot for tea.

“It’s okay Tavis” he said. “Go back to bed.”

Colm walked back to me, lifting me from the chair and drawing me onto his lap, folding me into his arms for warmth. “You’re freezing” he said. “Are you sure you’re okay now?”

“Yes” I told him. “I’m fine. I’ll talk to the Healers about it in the morning. Maybe it’s the changes from the baby.”

“You didn’t do this with Tavis” he said. His concern was evident and I burrowed into his chest. The smell of him calmed me finally and I stopped shivering.

“This is a girl” I told him. “Maybe it’s different with girls.”

“Are you so sure it’s a girl?” he teased. “It could be another boy.”

“The Diviner told me it was a girl” I said. “I believe him.”

He chuckled, smoothing my wet hair back from my face and kissing me softly. “Then it’s a girl” he said. He stood again, easing me back into the chair. “Don’t move” he warned me. “I’m getting your tea.”

“Ceara!” Colm was shaking me. I opened my eyes, looking off toward the direction of the trees and found that I was sitting on the stairwell floor in a puddle of cold water. I shivered and

realized that the water was coming from me. I was drenched. I looked up at him, confused, not certain where I was for a moment. The door behind him opened and Tavis came through with Jonathon and Nora. I stared at them, not speaking. I was disoriented from the memory.

“Bring her up a floor” Jonathon said, starting to climb the stairs. Colm scooped me up in his arms and I burrowed my face in his chest, drawing comfort from his closeness as Tabitha had done. Jonathon led us through a deserted administrative wing, finally stopping at a door and leading us into his office. He motioned for Colm to put me on the sofa. As Colm set me down and turned to move away, I grabbed his arm and pulled him back. He gave me a worried look but moved to the end of the couch and knelt beside it, letting me grip his hand.

Jonathon turned and handed Tavis a key. “There’s a utility closet at the end of the hall. Grab a pair of scrubs and a couple of towels. She’s freezing.” Tavis took the keys and hurried out while Jonathon lifted my wrist to take my pulse. “Can you talk?” he asked.

“Yes” I said, finally regaining a sense of who I was and where I was.

“Tell us what happened” he encouraged as he pulled out a stethoscope and listened to my heart.

“I went back” I told him. “I thought it was a memory, but it was raining. How did I get wet?”

Jonathon looked at Colm for an explanation. “I don’t know, love” he said. “I tried to follow you into the staircase, but I couldn’t force the door open. You were alone for a minute and when I found you, you were on the floor, dripping wet and staring into space. You wouldn’t answer me.” Tavis returned with the dry clothes and put them on Jonathon’s desk.

“You seem to be okay, other than being wet. You can change in there.” He pointed to a door on the other side of the room. “We can talk when you’re in warmer clothes.”

I stood up and started for the door. I stopped with my hand on the knob and turned back to them.

“Colm, come with me” I said. “I don’t want to be alone.” He followed me. The door led to a private bath. I stripped off my clothes, tossing them in the shower to keep the floor dry. Colm used one of the towels to dry me off, rubbing hard to build up warmth in the friction. When I was dressed, he used the second towel to dry as much of the water from my hair as he could.

Satisfied that I was as dry as I could be, he tossed the towels in the shower with my clothes. He

turned to open the door, but I stopped him, putting my arms around his waist and holding him tight, my face resting against his chest. “Give me a minute” I said.

“It will be okay” he murmured, holding me tight. “Whatever you remembered, you’re safe with me, Ceara.”

“I know” I told him. “I just need to get my bearings.” After a moment, I relaxed my hold on him. “I’m okay now” I said. I looked up at him and gave him a shaky smile. He bent to me and kissed me, a deep warm kiss that was meant to reassure. Then he opened the door and led me out to join the others.

“She lied to you” I told Colm, when I was sitting on the couch. Jonathon had pressed a cup of hot coffee into my hands and I held it without drinking, letting the warmth of the cup sink into my fingers. “She went out in the meadow because she was called there by the dead. But when they came up to her, they wouldn’t speak. The little girl was there. She tried to speak, but then something scared them. There was something in the woods. I was on the verge of going to investigate when Tavis came to the door and called my name. I mean she heard him.” I shook my head. “No, that isn’t right. I was there. It was me. I’m sorry. It’s hard to keep it straight.”

“I don’t remember” Tavis said.

Colm shared a worried look with Nora. “You woke me up one night” he told Tavis. I heard you calling for your mother. She was outside in a rain storm. You called her several times before she heard you.”

Tavis shook his head, looking upset that he couldn’t remember. “You were barely six” I told him. “It was the middle of the night. It isn’t surprising that you don’t remember.”

“She told me it was nothing, sleepwalking” Colm said. “Why would she lie?”

“She was afraid” I whispered, trembling with Tabitha’s fear. “She was afraid that it was there for you and Tavis and that you would go out looking for it.”

“She lied to me too” Nora said. She spoke to me but she looked at Colm. “She told me she was sleepwalking and that she thought it was the baby.”

“That’s what she told Colm too. She didn’t tell anyone the truth. She was afraid.”

“Jonathon, is it possible that she was there tonight?” Colm asked. “Do you know any way that could happen?”

Jonathon shook his head. “It does seem odd that she saw the same thing in that life that she is seeing now. Ceara, why did you go to the stairs tonight?” he asked.

“We were following the little girl” I said, looking to Colm for confirmation.

He shook his head. “I was following you” he told me. “I didn’t see a little girl. Did you remember anything else?”

“You took her into the house. You sat by the fire and you wrapped her up in a blue throw that she kept on a chair. Tavis put a log on the fire before you sent him back to bed. You made her a cup of tea. You teased her about wanting a girl and she told you she would see a Healer the next day.” I moved my hand to my abdomen that had never held new life. “I could feel her” I said, choking on the memory of it. “What happened? Did she find out what it was?”

Colm shook his head. “She never told me. She kept getting worse and she never told me. I had to watch her...” he broke off and looked away.

“You had to watch her die” I filled in. “It ended with her death. How did she die?”

Colm and Nora exchanged a glance with Jonathon. “Don’t try to protect me” I told them. “Just tell me how she died.”

“I don’t know if it will hurt her” Jonathon told them.

“What if it happens again?” Colm said. He gave me a worried look. “What if I can’t help you this time?”

“It’s already different” I told him. “Tabitha lied to you about what she saw. I haven’t done that. Did anyone around Tabitha fall asleep like my dad?” I asked. Colm shook his head and looked at Tavis.

“No” he told me.

“He took...” Tavis started but was cut off by Colm.

“Enough” he told him. “I don’t want her to be taken back there again.”

“You have to tell me” I told him. “I know this is important. I think I went back to remember that she lied. We have to talk about this. All of us. Whatever is going on we can’t solve it alone.” Colm covered his face with his hands and I moved to kneel in front of him, pulling his hands away and forcing him to meet my gaze. There was so much pain there that it took my breath away. “I know it’s hard” I told him. “But I also think that whatever it was then is back now. We have to talk about it if we want to win this.”

“He took me” Tavis said. “He stole me from my bed and told her he’d kill me if she didn’t meet him alone. I changed. That doesn’t usually happen until puberty but I was so angry and scared. I thought my Panther could hurt him. But he was a kitten. He just laughed at me and knocked me to the ground. When I woke up, it was too late.”

“Who took you?” I asked, feeling my terror starting to climb again for the boy that he had been, imagining a forced change and a Panther kitten lying unconscious on the ground.

“The demon that killed her” Colm said.

Chapter Four

“I have to get her toothbrush and I’ll be all set” I told Colm. He had driven me to my parents’ house, unwilling to leave me alone for even a moment. He’d called Dominic as soon as we left the hospital and filled him in on the events of the night. The vampires would be at my house at sundown since there wasn’t enough night left by the time Jonathon decided that I was okay.

“You’re not going to be left alone” he told me forcefully, expecting an argument.

“No” I agreed. “I’m not.”

He looked at me in surprise. “You’re agreeing to round the clock bodyguards?” he asked incredulously. “I was prepared to have Dominic move you in to one of his attic cells.”

“I’m pretty scared, Colm, in case you hadn’t noticed. And I think that memory was so that I would know that whatever happened then was happening again and that I had to work with you if I wanted to change the outcome.”

“Then I’m glad you remembered” he told me, smiling. “Maybe Ceara isn’t as stubborn as some of your past lives have been.”

“Nora keeps telling me that if I don’t learn from my mistakes I’m doomed to repeat them” I told him. I went into the bathroom and grabbed my mom’s toothbrush and cosmetic bag from the counter. I dropped them into the bag with her clothes and added her hairbrush. “There. I think that’s all she needs but I can come back if I forgot something.” I turned and looked at him. He leaned against the bathroom door, watching me. “We have to work out the logistics of this” I told him. “I have to go to the hospital every day. And if Dad doesn’t wake up soon, I guess that my mom will eventually move into my spare room for a while. I can’t have the house crawling with giant cats and vampires if that happens. And my classes start next week and you have work.”

He grinned, straightening and coming over to where I stood. He wrapped his arms around me and lifted me off my feet, kissing me soundly and spinning me in a circle. “It doesn’t matter” he said. “We’ll figure it out. But I do have some news about today that you might not like.”

“What is it?” I said, pushing against him and struggling to be put down. “And why does this make you so happy?”

“Because in all these lives, this is the first one that you’ve let me take care of you” he said, grinning. “And Vivian is staying with you today.”

“No” I said. “Not gonna happen.” Vivian was a young Panther who hated me. She was jealous, assuming that she would eventually become Colm’s mate and complete the alpha pair. I had avoided her like the plague since we’d attended the Witches’ Council meeting last spring.

“I’m afraid it is” he told me. “We have to finish a job today and she’s the only one available.”

“You better make sure she behaves” I told him.

“She will” he assured me. “Or she’ll answer to me.”

Vivian was at my house, sitting on the back deck when we arrived. She gave me a quick look and then glanced away. “I have to go” Colm told me, moving across the seat of his truck to kiss me goodbye. “Don’t go off following any apparitions. And if you need anything, get Nora to us. We aren’t working far from here and can get here in a half hour.”

“Okay” I agreed. “But I’m sure I’ll be fine.” I started to climb out of the car when he stopped me with a hand on my arm.

“Don’t ditch Vivian” he warned. “I don’t want you to be alone.”

“I won’t” I told him, smiling. “I have every intention of doing what I’m told when it comes to protecting myself. I’ll see you tonight.” I gave him another quick kiss and climbed out, turning to wave as he backed out of the drive. Then I turned to face Vivian. “Hello” I told her. She said hello without meeting my gaze. “We need to have a few ground rules” I said and nearly keeled over in shock when she replied.

“I owe you an apology” she told me, still not meeting my gaze. Her cheeks glowed red from her blush so I knew that this was not easy for her. “I thought...” she stopped and looked at me miserably. “I was very rude to you. I would have apologized sooner but you’ve avoided me. I just thought...”

“Apology accepted. You thought what?” I asked her, giving her an odd look, wondering if I could trust her apology.

“I thought you wanted him. The others always talked about how things would change when the Necromancer showed up. But I thought it was because you would be with him and take over the Pride.”

“With who?” I asked, curiosity getting the better of me. She blushed again, staring at me for a moment before looking away. Then I had it. There was only one unattached male old enough to be eligible for Vivian’s interest. “Oh my God” I said. “You’re in love with Tavis!” I grinned and shook my head. I was pretty sure he was in love with her too but I wasn’t going to tell her that.

“Now this is interesting” Nora said. Vivian jumped and spun around. She hadn’t heard Nora approaching since she was in spirit form. “Does he know?”

“No” Vivian answered quickly. “And please don’t tell him. He thinks I’m in love with Colm and he could care less about me. Sarah turned me just before you died, Nora. She’s my aunt and she knew I was in love with Tavis, but I wouldn’t let her tell. She told everyone that she thought I’d help Colm get over...well you.” She turned back to me. “But it’s always been Tavis. He liked you so much that I was afraid he was falling in love with you. I didn’t know you’d also been his mother and were destined for Colm. Colm wouldn’t let us talk about you.”

“Relax Vivian” I said. “We won’t tell him. But maybe you should. And I don’t believe in destiny.”

She shook her head, beginning to relax a little. “No. He isn’t interested and I am going to be with them way too long to have that between us.”

“That’s your choice” I told her. “I won’t interfere and neither will Nora. Will you?” I asked the ghost.

“No” Nora said, smiling. “I won’t say a word. But I agree that you should tell him, Vivian.” The girl shook her head again.

“Great. I have to take these things to the hospital in an hour” I told Vivian. “I’m going to introduce you to my parents as a friend of Tavis’. It’s a perfect cover.”

She nodded. “Do you have coffee?” she asked.

“Always” I told her. I showed her where I kept the supplies and left her to make the coffee while I showered. Nora lingered in the bathroom with me, taking the “don’t leave Ceara alone” imperative to the extreme.

“So Tabitha didn’t talk to you at all?” I asked her as I shampooed my hair.

“Not about this” Nora said. “She talked to me about everything so I don’t know why she kept this to herself. She tried to handle it alone.”

“She was terrified” I said, turning my head to rinse the shampoo out of my hair and choking when I swallowed some of the sudsy water.

“Don’t drown in the shower” Nora said, laughing. “I knew she was afraid, but we believed she was sick. We thought she worried for the baby.”

My hand went to my abdomen again and I was filled with a painful longing for the child that had not been born and had not been mine. “It’s hard to remember her” I said. “You were right to worry. It’s hard to know where she ends and I begin sometimes.” I stepped out of the shower and grabbed a large towel and began to dry.

“You told me it was like remembering yourself as a child” Nora said. “Do you try to determine where the child ends and the adult begins?”

“No” I told her. “I guess I should just accept it. But it’s strange to look at Tavis and see my son when I didn’t give birth to him. It hurts to remember carrying a baby when I’ve never been pregnant.”

She smiled at me sadly. “I feel that way when I see Kyna, you know.” When I’d had memories of my life as Neala, I’d discovered that my sister Kyna was the reincarnation of Nora’s daughter Myrna. “I look at her and remember my child. She knows me only as your friend Fiona. At least Tavis knows who you are and remembers you as you were. Once you’ve accepted that, you’ll have him back.”

“I’m sorry Nora” I said, slipping into my robe and moving to the sink to brush my teeth. “I hadn’t thought about it like that. You’re right. I feel displaced, but at the heart of it, I do have that bond with Tavis.”

“And with Colm” she said. “Things are going well, aren’t they?”

“I suppose” I said. “But I know I’m holding back with him. I’m not sure why. I feel so comfortable with him, like everything will be just fine. But something warns me to keep my distance. Part of me worries that he’ll hurt me if I let him get too close.”

“Is that why you haven’t slept with him?” she asked.

I gave her a shocked look. “How did you know I haven’t slept with him?” I asked.

“I didn’t” she grinned. “But I do now.”

I frowned at her. “Not fair” I said. “But if you must know, then yes, that’s why.”

I started when Vivian knocked on the bathroom door. “Are you going to be in there all day?” she said.

“How long have you been here?” I asked, throwing the door wide and giving her a suspicious look.

“Just got here” she said innocently. “But there is this Were hearing, you know.” I glared at her but she didn’t turn away. Instead, she grinned at me. She was a very pretty girl, I thought since she wasn’t scowling at me like she wished me dead.

“I’m getting dressed and I’ll be down” I told her, staring at her coffee cup. “Don’t drink all the coffee.”

“Remember” I told Vivian as I parked the car in the hospital lot. “Don’t talk to Nora. My mom won’t be able to see her. And don’t mention anything about Weres or vampires or witches.”

Vivian rolled her eyes. “I know, I know” she said. “You’ve told me that a hundred times since we left the house. Can we get this show on the road? I’m starving.”

I was pretty hungry too. I hoped Mom would be ready to go to the cafeteria for breakfast when we arrived. When I got to the room, Jonathon was there. “How is he?” I asked, walking over to the bed and kissing my dad gently on the forehead.

“No change” Jonathon said. “But this also means he isn’t worse. I’ve put in a call to a few of my colleagues to see what they know about sleep disorders, but they haven’t found anything yet” he said. This was code to let me know that the Council was still working on it but didn’t have any answers for me.

“How are you Mom?” I asked, giving her a hug.

“Worried and tired” she said, giving me a little smile.

“I hope you’re hungry” I told her. “I’m starving. Can I get you to come to the cafeteria for breakfast?”

“Yes” she said. “I’m hungry too.” She looked at my dad.

“Go and eat” Jonathon told her, putting his hand on her arm to reassure her. “I’ll be at the desk and if he wakes up I’ll come and get you.” He pulled a prescription pad out of his pocket and wrote a note. “Take this to the doctors’ dining room” he told me, handing me the note. “They’ll let you in.”

“You have your own dining room” I asked. “Must be nice.”

“Don’t get too excited” he told me. “The food’s the same. They just serve you instead of making you stand in line.” He turned to Vivian and said “Hello Vivian. Nice to see you again.”

“Hi Jonathon” she said and then turned to my mom. “I’m one of Tavis’ friends. I’m keeping Ceara company today.”

“I’m sorry” I said sincerely. “I should have introduced you right away. I was just distracted with Jonathon being here.”

“No problem” Vivian said, smiling. I was going to need time to get used to this new and improved version of the Were. We followed Jonathon’s directions to the doctors’ cafeteria, which was one floor up from the general one. I showed the note to the woman at the door and

she led us in and seated us at a booth with menus. Several minutes later, a waiter came and took our order and we settled back with coffee.

“I brought what I could think of” I told my mom. “If you need something else just let me know and I’ll get it too.”

“I’m sure you brought all I need” she told me. “They’re being very accommodating of me here. Did you know that the chair in the room folds out to a bed? They brought me linens and a pillow last night.”

“I’m glad” I told her. “Did you get much sleep?”

“No” she admitted. “I was too worried. I dozed a little but I kept waking up to check on him. He hasn’t moved since this happened.” Her eyes filled with tears and she wiped at them with the back of her hand.

“Oh Mom” I said, reaching across the table and squeezing her hand. “He’s going to wake up. You heard Jonathon. It’s like he’s taking a long nap. They’ll figure it out and he’ll be fine.”

“Jonathon’s a very good doctor” Vivian said. “He took care of me a few years ago when I fell off of a building.”

“You fell off of a building?” my mom asked shocked. “Why were you on a building?”

She grinned. “Tavis dared me. He knows I don’t like heights. I lost my balance and fell.” She laughed at my mom’s horrified look. “I wasn’t hurt that bad. And Tavis felt horrible. He waited on me hand and foot until I recovered.” That must have taken all of five minutes, I thought.

“He’s a nice young man” my mother said. “Even if he did make you fall off of a roof.”

“He said I needed to face my fears” she said, grinning at the memory.

“Did that help?” I asked leaning back to make room as the waiter arrived with our food.

“No” she admitted. “I haven’t been on a building since. Hard to do when you work for a contractor, but I just do the paperwork now.”

Vivian was good for my mom and I was happy that I'd brought her along. She chatted about growing up in Detroit and being raised by her aunt. I figured she meant Sarah. She told funny stories about Colm and Tavis that made us both chuckle. I had worried that my mom wouldn't be able to eat due to worrying about my dad, but Vivian's constant chatter kept her distracted and she finished her food. When we returned to Dad's room she looked less drawn than she had when we'd arrived. Nora, who had stayed by Dad's bedside, shook her head when I gave her a questioning look. There'd been no change while we were away. I sat with them for a while, and then told my mom I had to leave. The twins were coming in to take her to lunch and my other sisters were coming by for dinner. I promised I'd be back the next day for breakfast and made her promise to call me if she needed anything or if he woke up. I leaned over my dad's bed to give him a kiss goodbye. "I'll see you tomorrow, Dad" I whispered. "Please wake up."

His eyes shot open and I jumped back in surprise as he grabbed my arm in a tight grip. "Tabitha" he said in a voice that didn't sound like his own "have you lost your faith?" Then he released me and fell back on the pillow, sound asleep. Vivian sprinted out of the room and returned a second later with Jonathon. We stepped into the hallway while Jonathon lingered over him.

"Who is Tabitha?" Mom asked, looking at me, her face etched with fear.

"I don't know Mom" I said, hearing the same fear in my voice. "Maybe he's dreaming."