

Soul Loyalty

Sisters of the Soul Book Two

By PF Case

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Sisters of the Soul Series

Soul Responsibility

Soul Loyalty

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Chapter One

“Damn it, Ceara” Tatiana said as I released my hold on her and the other vampires. “You need to focus or we’ll be here all night and I have things to do.”

“I’m trying” I told her “and yelling at me doesn’t help.”

“Nothing helps” she sneered. “Power is useless if you can’t control it.”

“You’re really pissing me off” I said.

Tatiana was a petite Hispanic woman who looked like she’d been eighteen or nineteen when she’d become a vampire. I had no way of knowing how long ago that had been. I wanted to ask, but Nora and my friend Jeannie had warned me that this was considered very rude in the supernatural community. Normally, being rude didn’t bother me much, but I liked Tatiana. She had long jet black hair that she tended to pull into a ponytail and dark chocolate eyes. She was cute, but I pitied anyone who mistook that for weak. She was relatively new, I assumed, or she would not have so easily succumbed to my control. Tatiana had all of the promise of becoming a future Master in her own right. Dominic recognized this as well and groomed her, much as Michael had groomed me to become tenured.

There was no hard and fast rule for what distinguished a “new” vampire in terms of years, I learned. It was based on a combination of vampire years and development of power. Only the strongest vampires went on to become Masters, wielding the power that allowed them to control a vampire family. To lead, you had to be able to defend the vampires under your political control. Vampires were territorial and I had learned that they had as many conflicts between them as organized crime groups. Past generations had often had bloody conflicts until one Master was defeated and the other assumed control of his or her underlings. The new master, often as not, would stake the strongest vampires remaining alive to prevent their mutiny and discourage the weaker survivors to rebel. Now they were more likely to settle their conflicts with political means and had a complex system of rules that guided their interactions.

My kind, the necromancers, had also been involved in this bloody conflict. Dominic had explained that, given our ability to control and command the actions of all but the Master vampires, we were viewed as threats that were too dangerous to let live. Each side had its advantages in this war. Necromancers are as vulnerable as humans. We could be killed by the physically stronger Master vampires. But necromancy is a quality of the soul and, once killed, the necromancer would reincarnate, mature into his or her power and rejoin the fight. In human terms, this would seem like a slow process that would disadvantage our side in the war. But Dominic had also explained that vampirism was not a quality of the soul. When a vampire died, they would reincarnate as a human. Creating new vampires could not replace the Master who fell in battle because they would be vulnerable to the necromancer’s power. Many of the

Masters who died in the battle were those who had been overpowered by their own forces that were being controlled by the necromancer and used as a weapon.

Eventually, the necromancers and vampires had agreed to a treaty, or an alliance. Necromancers aligned themselves with a vampire family and this alliance transcended their inevitable death. In every life, the reborn necromancer would return to their vampire family. In return for this protection, the necromancer did not use their power to ensnare the lesser vampires except upon the request of the Master vampire. This was why it was important for me to learn to control my power.

“Tatiana” Dominic said, from the sidelines. “It is never wise to yell at someone who can wield power over you.”

“She’s right though” I told him, glancing over to where he sat. Boo, my six month old chocolate lab sat next to him, her head resting on his knee while he scratched behind her ears. “We’ve been at it for hours. Why don’t we just call it quits and try again tomorrow?”

“A little longer” Nora said. “You always want to give up too soon. Release the ghosts and try again.”

“Fine” I grumbled, sending out a wave of power and releasing the ghosts. “Let’s try again.” I sent my power out again only to see all of the vampires and ghosts revert back to their zombie status. I released the vampires and sighed.

I glared at Dominic when he laughed. “Focus” he said. “You need focus. Try again.”

I closed my eyes, trying to clear my mind. I had been practicing like this in Dominic’s basement twice a week since the New Year. I was tired. I was a college professor damn it, an expert in the field of criminology. My interest in domestic abuse had gotten me involved with an underground that helped abused women escape from dangerous situations. My life had changed forever when Roger, the ex-boyfriend of one of these women decided to hold me responsible for everything that was wrong with his life. He’d waited for me outside the library one night and left me for dead with a bullet in my brain. When I awoke from the resulting coma I discovered that I’d served as a spiritual taxi for a ghost named Harvey who haunted me until I agreed to find his killer. As if that wasn’t enough for my rational mind to accept, I discovered that my childhood imaginary friend Nora was the ghost of my sister from my previous life. After a failed attempt to rid myself of what I thought were seizure induced hallucinations, I had to face the truth. Harvey and Nora were real.

Nora had been killed by her abusive husband Henry. While I had chosen to reincarnate, she had not, believing that she could break the cycle that she and Henry repeated in every lifetime. That had been an absolute failure because when Roger, the man who tried to kill me, committed suicide by cop, we realized that he was the reincarnation of Henry. Harvey’s killer had also tried

to kill me using supernatural means. But I am a necromancer. When the killer left his body behind and became a living ghost, capable of killing with his will, I'd discovered that I had the ability to send out a spectral distress call.

I had called a dozen of Dominic's vampires to me along with forty ghosts. Dominic explained my violation of the long ago truce between our species. He also reminded me that I belonged to his family. Necromancers have a lot of control over the reincarnation process, but we have adapted to selectively forget our past lives. Memories tended to resurface as needed and usually under stress. Nora explained that it would be difficult to manage in life if you remembered every detail of former lives. I knew she was right. It would be like walking around in a constant state of *déjà vu*. So now I trained twice a week with an assortment of ghosts and vampires, attempting to relearn to control my ability so that the weaker vampires could hear my call but have the free will to resist.

I took a deep breath and tried to focus my power. Okay, I thought. I'm doing it wrong. Maybe I can distinguish a difference between the ghosts and vampires before I call if I try. I focused my power and began to release it. I had tried to describe the process to Nora, who had been a necromancer in life as well. The energy would begin to pulse inside me, in the core of my being. It gathered, and when I released it, it went out in what felt like a series of thin tethers of power that would seek out the dead. When it found someone, it attached and pulled them to me. There were no visible tethers between me and the dead, but I could sense psychic ones. I could release the vampire or ghost that I chose without releasing them all by severing the single connection. That meant there must be a way to keep the tether from attaching.

The vampires and ghosts all stood about six feet in front of me, the vampires on the left. I released my power slowly, visualizing the strands reaching out for each of my targets. As I sensed them getting near the vampires, I visualized stopping the tethers just before they touched them. I let the ones near the ghosts continue on. I opened my eyes. The ghosts stared at me, waiting for my command. The vampires clapped. It had worked.

"Finally!" Tatiana said "It's about fucking time!"

With a malicious grin, I released the tether that was poised an inch from her chest and she fell silent, eyes glowing. I held her for only a second and then released my hold.

"Damn in Ceara" she said.

"I did warn you" Dominic said, laughing. "Very good, Ceara! What did you do differently?"

"Slowed down" I said. "I don't know that I could do that in a state of panic though or if I couldn't see them. It was like pulling a leash with my right hand and letting it fall from my left."

"What did it feel like before I zapped you?" I asked Tatiana.

She scowled at me, still not seeing the humor in what I had done, and then she said “It was like I could hear you asking me to come to you. I had a strong desire to respond, but I could still choose to say no. When you ‘zapped’ me, as you say, I could not say no.”

“Very good” Dominic said. “Let’s try mixing the group and see if you can do it again.”

We practiced like that for another hour, Dominic directing the ghosts and vampires to become a mingled group rather than standing apart. By the time we finished, I was frustrated. I had lacked the ability to only ensnare the ghosts when the group mingled. I would either capture them all, or capture everyone on one side of the room, ghost and vampire alike.

“Why don’t you just tell me how to do it?” I asked Nora after I failed my tenth attempt and released the group for the evening.

“You have to learn this on your own” she told me. “You will eventually.”

“You always do” Dominic reminded me. Neither of them would tell me how many lives we’d spent with Dominic’s family, only that we had been united since the treaty. They both believed that too much information learned too quickly would hurt my development in this life. Nora insisted that I would remember what I needed to remember, when I needed to remember it.

“Come on Ceara” Tatiana said. “I’ll buy you a beer.” She was the only vampire besides Dominic that had stayed behind. The evening was still young and the others were off to find, well, I didn’t want to think too long about what they were off to find. They were vampires, after all, predators of the night. She walked over to the fully stocked wet bar at the end of the basement and pulled two pint glasses from a shelf that was hidden from view, looked at Dominic and Nora and held the glasses up in a silent offer.

“Yes, thank you Tatiana” Dominic said.

“I’d love one” Nora agreed. As the ghost of a necromancer, Nora had the ability to become corporeal at will. If she held this state for more than twelve hours, she became nearly transparent. But she often became corporeal for social outings, like my training sessions with Dominic’s people or shopping. Nora loved to shop and read, in that order. I had no idea what happened to the beer after she drank it. Her body was not living tissue. She had taken two bullets for me not long ago and when she reverted to her spirit form, the bullets were gone. I assumed that they were somewhere in the universe swimming in an ocean of beer and tea, her preferred beverages.

Dominic’s basement was the perfect location to practice. Dominic lived in an old mansion in Ardmore Park, one of Detroit’s historical neighborhoods in the Boston-Edison area that was just north of Midtown, where the university’s campus was located. I didn’t let myself ponder on how many of Dominic’s vampires had filtered in and out of my classes there, or sat next to me in the coffee shop or library in the evening hours. Many of Dominic’s family were taking classes

though. I imagined I would do so too if I had an eternity to pass. I wondered if there would be a way for Nora to do this to pass her time. At some point I would suggest that she discuss it with Dominic if she was interested. I had already introduced her to my family as a student in my program.

The mansion was enormous. I had yet to count the bedrooms and bathrooms though I promised myself I would. I could ask of course, but this seemed ruder than asking Dominic's age. He had completely modernized the home, including the basement. Tatiana had explained that they often held family meetings here so he had added a bar and had several stacks of those chairs that fit together for easy storage in a closet at one end. He had contracted with my friend Jeannie to sound and spell proof the basement for this reason. Another quality of the basement that made it ideal for our practices is that my "call" did not extend beyond the basement walls and ceiling due to Jeannie's work. Jeannie was a very powerful witch. Vampires that weren't part of the evening practice could go happily about their business in the community or upstairs as their brethren stood fixed and waiting for my commands in the basement.

In my life BR, or before Roger, I had been happily oblivious to the existence of the supernatural world. I divided my life into two segments, BR, when I was a rational college professor with no belief in a world that did not follow the rules of physics as I knew them, and AR, a necromancer who finally understood that not everything is explainable with natural means. I assumed that my friend and mentor, Michael viewed the world as rationally as I did. However, two years into their marriage Jeannie had informed him of her gifts. Rather than becoming horrified and asking for a divorce, or having her committed, he embraced all things supernatural. Unbeknownst to me, they had both been attempting to document the existence of ghosts when my AR talent surfaced. They knew that ghosts existed, but the scientist in Michael drove him to find proof. Neither of them had the ability to see ghosts. I reluctantly told them about my talents when an obnoxious pre-teen ghost that was haunting Jeannie insisted that I give her a message to clear up a childhood misunderstanding. Rather than cart me off to the loony bin, Jeannie confessed her own place in the supernatural world.

I carried two of the beers over to Dominic and Nora while Tatiana trailed behind with ours. She handed me one and sat next to Dominic on the large overstuffed leather sofa. I took one of the matching chairs on his other side. I was pleased to see that Boo left him and came to sit with me. She climbed up on the chair and moved behind me, using her weight to push me forward until she ringed my waist like one of those neck pillows. She put her head in my lap as her wagging tail thumped along on the opposite side of my body. I buried my left hand in the fur of her neck and scratched her, stopping when her hind leg started to jerk hard enough to make my beer slosh up the side of my glass.

"I have a problem that you must help me with" Dominic said as he watched Boo settle in and get comfortable at my expense.

“Oh, must I, now?” I said sipping the foam that Boo’s jostling had left on the top of my beer.

“Of course” he said. “That’s what families are for after all, mutual support.”

“Okay, got me there” I said. “What do you need our help with?”

“You have heard about the recent murders in the area?” he asked.

I nodded. This had been the opening discussion on every news channel and front page headlines in the papers for weeks. We had a serial killer that was leaving bodies all over the place. The police had no leads. This serial killer didn’t appear to follow a pattern like most did. For example, of the three victims, two were white and one was African American. Two were males and one was female. Their ages ranged from 22 to 67. They were not restricted to any one Detroit neighborhood, but they all fell within Dominic’s geographical territory. “I don’t know how I can help” I said. “The killer doesn’t have an established pattern.”

“Yes, he does” Dominic explained. “It is just being withheld from the public.” I raised my eyebrows, not at the notion that information was being withheld, but wondering how Dominic had the information. “I have people at the medical examiner’s office” he explained. “Each of the three victims was found exsanguinated, two small punctures in their carotid.”

“A vampire?” I asked.

“No” Tatiana continued. “The punctures are made with a blade of some type and not with fangs.”

“Also” Dominic added “the vampire has no need to drain a human. Even a new vampire could stop drinking before that point. There is not enough blood at the scene to implicate a vampire. If a vampire killed these people, the bodies would not have been left in public. These bodies are drained and relocated.”

“Couldn’t a vampire be doing that?” I asked.

“We would not kill in private and leave the body where the public could easily find it” Tatiana said. “We would dispose of the body in a more private way. We wouldn’t risk exposure of our species like that.”

Dominic nodded. “I believe that the killer may be misguided, a…” he looked at Tatiana to fill in the word he was looking for.

“Wanna-be” she supplied. “Perhaps someone from the Goth community” she added.

“So why would this be your problem?” I asked Dominic.

“We live in relative peace because the majority of the human world believes that we exist only in legend and myth. Something like this could lead the authorities to our proverbial door. The Midwest Organization has asked me to deal with this to protect our secrecy.”

The Organization was the title of the vampire governing body that included every Master vampire in the world. It was very similar to the division of human government. Just as we have national, state and local governments, the Organization had sub-divisions that were based on geography. Dominic's family was in the Midwest region, because it was located in Michigan. That this request came from the region and not the state meant that the news of the Detroit killings was fast filtering through the vampire community.

"And how do you think we can help?" I asked. I did not relish heading up the supernatural detective agency for the city.

"That remains to be seen" he admitted. "But I am calling on all of my resources. I need answers before our next meeting in three weeks. This could have strong political consequences for the family."

I took another sip of my beer and grimaced. Suddenly it tasted bitter.

Chapter Two

I loved spring. Sometimes we didn't see much of the seasons in Michigan. It had been known to be cold until June and then bounce up the thermostat to stifling heat with no ease into warmer temperatures. But the early days of spring were exhilarating. Sunshine after months of gloom and snow was wonderful. Dawn came early the next morning and by eight the temperature was already nudging into the 40s. The forecast called for low 60s. One thing that Boo had done for me was keep me off the treadmill. Anyone that has ever owned a lab puppy knows that if you want to keep your sanity and your belongings intact, you have to burn off their excess energy by exhausting them. As soon as Boo adjusted to the leash, she'd become my running partner. Today, I was working on teaching her to let me set the pace of our run. At six months, she was already faster than I could ever hope to be. She trotted along beside me, occasionally looking over at me as if she was thinking "you call this running?" before turning her attention to the street ahead of us.

Along with burning off her energy, she would be good for a long nap when we finished our miles this morning, running with her gave me much needed time to de-stress. It had been months since I'd had a real day off, I thought. I taught less in the spring semester than in the fall, but I was still in class two nights a week. Assorted committees ate up three of my afternoons with another twenty hours spent on grading papers and dealing with students. Added to that were my two nights a week spent training in Dominic's basement. The only bright side to that was that I went there straight after class on the nights I taught. Saturdays, of which today was one, were Jeannie's. And I still had to make time for research if I ever hoped to get promoted.

Jeannie was educating me on the politics of the supernatural world. Well, she was educating me as much as I would let her. I was adamant that I would learn about things on a "need to know" basis. That meant that at the moment we were only discussing ghosts, witches and vampires. You would think that this would buy me freedom, but no such luck. I was learning that the supernatural world had as much or more political intrigue and rules of conduct than the human world. I had not been to a family meeting at Dominic's yet. Unless there was an emergency he held them quarterly. Yes, that's right ladies and gentlemen, quarterly like a corporate stakeholders meeting. If he ran the meeting with Robert's Rules, I was sure to violate a dozen rules of conduct when I rolled around the floor laughing hysterically and peeing my pants.

I added a few miles up Kercheval to my run, taking Kirby Road down to Jefferson before swinging back. This time of year the track at the high school was usually in use for team meets. Even if it was empty, I didn't think they'd take it kindly if Boo was on the track. There were several strategically spaced signs on the fence that said "No Dogs Allowed". It was funny that I'd never noticed them until I had a dog. Boo had been a surprise Christmas gift from my parents who thought a big dog would give me an extra layer of protection. After three attempts on my life over the holidays, and they only knew about two, they wanted me to have the extra security. I wondered what they'd think when I told them that Boo was afraid of squirrels.

Seriously. The first time she saw one she almost tripped me on her leash as she ran circles around my legs to put distance between them. It was funny but also annoying since I would swear that Grosse Pointe was the squirrel hotspot in Michigan. We had brown, gray, red and black squirrels in abundance. She needed to toughen up before the bunnies started showing in volume within the month.

We ran down Jefferson, crossing to the opposite side so that we could run by the lake. When the weather was warm I promised myself to bring her here to play in the water. That was assuming of course that she was not afraid of the water. I rehearsed my last week's lesson as I ran. Jeannie was not above giving me a pop quiz. I learned that witches were as highly organized as the vampires. Their equivalent of the Organization was the High Council. They differed in the geographical organization though. While each country had a National High Council, they did not divide by region, but by state and then by county within the state. So the US had a National High Council, as did Michigan and Wayne County. The vampires were organized by family but the witches were organized by talent.

There were witches, like Jeannie, that drew from the power that resided in and surrounded objects. I had seen her float a book across the room, pull energy out of nowhere and use it to immobilize a man and read the residual emotions that clung to objects or hung in the air. She could use the remnants of past actions and emotions to create a supernatural recreation of an event or conjure the image of a face. This group was called The Magi. They were the most powerful of the groups and had the combined powers of the remaining groups. The second most powerful group of witches was called The Elementals. An Elemental witch could control only one element. You might control fire for example, but not water. Jeannie had not appreciated my humor when I told her that it seemed like they would have limited usefulness, perhaps when you needed a fire pit lit or your shower was broken. Apparently Elementals could do a lot more than that. For example, water Elementals could make it rain or cause a draught. An earth Elemental could cause an earthquake or make a patch of land infertile. I pointed out that most of the things she listed about the Elementals mirrored the suspicions that caused the witch hunts in the 1600s and she was curiously silent on the subject. The third and final group was The Eclectics. The Eclectics were not classified by any one particular brand of magic. Their talents were numerous and varied, but lacked the overt power of The Magi and The Elementals. Kitchen witches, Garden witches, Diviners and Healers were a few examples of witches that would be included in The Eclectics. They were often considered the gentle side of the witching world and the scholars.

Each group self-governed within the Council but shared equally in any decision that would affect the entire group. Like the vampires, there was a lot of political intrigue within the Council, although they didn't share the same bloody history that the vampires and necromancers shared. In fact, the witches often served as mediators between other species within the supernatural world. I learned from Jeannie that the witches had mediated the truce between the vampires and the necromancers in fact.

I turned the corner onto my street and jogged the last few blocks to the house. Jeannie was early. Her car was parked in the driveway. I slowed to a walk for the last quarter block, letting my heart rate recover. Boo danced along beside me, no doubt anxious to get a drink and take a nap. I stopped at the door and bent down to untie my shoe. I tied a house key through the laces when I ran so that I didn't have to worry about pockets or losing them. Boo took advantage of having me at eye level and licked my face before nipping affectionately at my ear. I pushed her away laughing as the door opened and Jeannie looked out.

"Sorry, I know I'm early" she said. "Michael took the kids to Mikey's little league practice and I figured I may as well just come on over." She caught Boo's front paws as she jumped up. "Hi Boo, I thought we weren't going to jump anymore?" she said, dropping her paws and blocking her next jump with her knee. Boo fell off balance, looked at Jeannie confused, and then satisfied herself with licking Jeannie's hand.

"No problem" I said. "I do need to leave you to amuse yourself while I clean up though. You'll thank me later."

"I'm chatting with Nora so take your time" she called over her shoulder, either leading or being led by Boo to the kitchen for water. With Boo you could never tell who was in charge. I took the stairs two at a time after waving to Nora who was sitting in her chair, her feet tucked under her. She always stayed corporeal when Jeannie came over on Saturdays since it saved me the effort of repeating everything she said. Jeannie could not see ghosts.

I grabbed my robe and started the shower. I wouldn't remodel my bathroom because it had an odd design, with stepped shelves covering the pipes at the end of an enormous cast iron claw footed tub. I loved that tub. But I did finally concede that showers took less time and my days were so busy that I'd caved and installed one of the showers that attached to the faucet. Curtains hung on an oval shaped ring that was attached to the shower pipe in front of the tub and from a thin metal bar in the rear. Once it was installed, I wasn't sure how I'd managed so long without one. I really needed the extra time it provided too because I was letting my hair grow to cover the two inch scar above my right ear. My hair was still short, but now framed my face in layers of varying lengths, the longest hung just below my ear lobes. I now needed to blow dry it before leaving the house. Today, I let it air dry since I wouldn't be out of Jeannie's control for hours. Thirty minutes later, I was downstairs, dressed in jeans and a university sweat shirt. Nora had brewed a pot of tea and had it sitting on a tea warmer in the middle of the coffee table. I poured a cup and sat down.

"So what's the lesson plan today?" I asked Jeannie. I was momentarily confused by a strange noise under my chair until I realized it was Boo snoring.

"The politics of necromancers" she said.

“We have politics?” I asked, looking at Nora. “Does that mean I have to get a union card? I’ve never met another necromancer. Are there enough of us to organize?”

“Do you realize you tend to ask multiple questions at once?” Jeannie said. Then she answered me. “No. There aren’t enough necromancers to organize” she explained. “So you don’t have to get a union card. Your politics govern your interactions with other species.”

“Why aren’t there enough?” I asked.

“We don’t reproduce the way that other species reproduce” Nora said. “Remember, our power is a quality of the soul. That means that there is only the potential of a new necromancer if God creates new souls. Some believe that God created all of the souls at the beginning of creation and so our number is finite.”

“Witches are born” Jeannie added. “It is a quality of genetics passed from parent to child. As you know, both of my children have inherited my gifts.” I nodded and she continued. “Our numbers are exponential, limited only by the number of children we have.”

“And vampires can create new vampires” I said following the discussion to its logical conclusion. “So how many necromancers are there?” I asked.

“Hard to say. Less than 10% of the vampire families have formed an alliance and there are about 4000 of them right now worldwide. If we assume that all necromancers have formed an alliance that would put your number at just under 400. I think there are a few hundred more that are not allied which means about 600” Jeannie said.

“But we were organized enough at some point to agree to wage war and agree to a treaty” I said. “What happened?”

“The war divided us” Nora explained. “Many of us believed that we could eliminate the vampires if we continued to fight because time and power were on our sides. Some worried that if the conflict continued the vampires would ally with the Werens. Others were tired of the never ending cycle of one violent life after another.” She shrugged. “We are a self-reliant group” she said. “When there is no co-dependence, a group falls apart.”

“Should I be sad about this?” I asked Nora.

“Wait until you’ve dealt with the politics of the other species for a few years and then tell me what you think.”

“Good point” I said. “So what do I need to know about necromancer politics?” I asked Jeannie, sitting back with my tea and pulling my feet up to tuck under me.

“We have to start with the hierarchy in the supernatural world” she said. “I know you don’t want to hear about all of the species, so I will stick to just the three that we’ve agreed on and one

other. I have to discuss the Weres. Do you mind if I use your whiteboard? Is it still in closet?" I nodded and she jumped up to get it. Jeannie had washed it clean for me after I'd dispatched Richard Newton, an arrogant sociopath, into the hereafter. She sat it up on the easel and drew a large black circle, putting a V in the center. She drew a second circle in green that overlapped the first so they shared about a third of their area. Finally, she finished her Venn diagram by adding a third circle in red and adding a W. She stood back and looked at her work. Satisfied, she sat down and picked up her tea, taking a sip before she began to explain.

"Hierarchies in our world are defined by power" she said. "Vampires, Weres and witches all claim the top spot in the hierarchy" she said.

"So do necromancers" I told her, grinning and holding my tea cup up in a mock toast.

She smiled. "Why am I not surprised by that? Vampires can't turn Weres or witches" she explained "but they can drink us. They can leave a witch dead if they want to. Weres can't turn witches or vampires, but they can also leave us dead" she went on. "And of course witches can kill vampires and Weres, but only in a physical challenge for which we are less well equipped. So the overlapping areas on my diagram represent the shared governance between the species. Together, we assure that our world remains secret."

"What about necromancers?" I asked looking at Nora. "Can Weres turn necromancers?"

She gave me a look that I couldn't decipher before answering. "Theoretically, yes, but I don't know of any case where it has been attempted. Vampires can't turn us because we are poison to them. They are death and we are death magic. Weres can also kill us, but they fear our power so they leave us alone."

"Which brings me to my next part of the hierarchy" Jeannie said. "Witches use life magic, drawing power from the living universe. Necromancers use death magic. Your magic would cancel out my magic."

"Really?" I said this drawing out the word until it had three long syllables.

"Really" she confirmed. "I couldn't bind you as you've seen me do. I couldn't conjure an image of your face or recreate your actions. Likewise, your magic has no effect on me as long as I am breathing. If I don't cross over when I die and you lived on, you could command me to cross or to do your bidding."

"Kind of creepy, Jeannie" I said.

"It is what it is" she said, but she smiled.

"Why are Weres afraid of us?" I asked.

“Not us” Nora corrected “our power. Weres and vampires are virtually immortal. Since vampires are dead, we have a more symbiotic relationship with them. Weres are living and are superstitious about our power over them in death. They are huge control freaks, more so than the vampires. They don’t like the idea of something being able to control them, even in death.”

“Okay Jeannie” I asked. “Where do I fit into all of this?”

She got up and picked up a blue marker and drew a circle that was mostly independent of the other groups. A small fraction of this circle overlapped with the one that represented the vampires. “You are more or less independent” she explained. You share some political concerns with the vampires, but only because you are both of death magic and because of your alliance. You are part of Dominic’s family because it is mutually beneficial, but you don’t pay tribute. Dominic has no real power over you.”

“So I am at the top of the food chain” I said, looking at the board.

“You are vulnerable and you have a normal human life span” she said “so in that way you have less power than the Weres and the Vampires. But you are independent as Nora said, so in that way you are superior. Vampires have a tight social community that they rely on. Weres are pack animals, regardless of their form...”

I interrupted “What do you mean their form?”

“Their animal” she said. “There is a Were species of every major predator.” That was news to me. I assumed that all Weres were wolves. She continued “As I was saying, Weres are dependent on the pack. Without a pack, they spiral into madness. Witches are highly interdependent. We are stronger together than we are apart. You, on the other hand, have survived all of your life without connections to the supernatural world. You rejected this world. The rest of us could not do that. That puts you in a unique position.” I raised my eyebrows. I couldn’t think of what that position might be so she told me. “We need you but you don’t need us” she said. “It makes you the natural mediator when all species are involved in a dispute because you are viewed as neutral, despite your connections to Dominic’s family. It means you have a lot of political power.”

“Oh no, no, no” I said. “I have no political power because I’m not getting involved with all of this. I get a headache just thinking about it.”

“Sorry Ceara” she said, grinning. “You are involved already. In fact, the Council has asked me to arrange a meeting with you at your earliest possible convenience.”

Chapter Three

“I still don’t understand why the witches want to meet with me” I said to Nora. I was mixing together spices and flour to make Artichoke Chicken as we talked. Nora leaned against the counter, watching me cook.

“Jeannie explained it to you twice” she said.

“I know” I told her. “But that doesn’t mean I understand it.” Jeannie had told me that some of the Council was concerned that a necromancer had resurfaced. They wanted me as a political ally and worried that I was an unknown quality. Though Jeannie was well respected in the witching community, some worried about her close friendship with me. I was fairly certain that they worried about the potential power that Jeannie would have in their circles if I was really so important in supernatural politics, but she didn’t agree. She thought they were just worried that I would not be able to be impartial. Apparently, there was no history of any close friendships between a necromancer and a witch. I dusted the chicken with the flour and spices and put it into the pan of hot olive oil on the stove.

“You haven’t breaded that much” Nora said, looking at the chicken. “And there isn’t enough oil to really fry it.

“It isn’t fried chicken” I told her. “It’s a lot healthier than that. So what do you think will happen when we meet?” I had reluctantly agreed to meet with them the following Saturday, the only bonus being it meant no lessons with Jeannie.

“They will be curious about you” Nora said. “They’ll ask a lot of questions and of course there will be posturing. Some will try to intimidate or impress you with their power.”

“How can they intimidate me if it won’t work on me?”

“They may not realize that Jeannie has told you this. I would suggest not telling them that, by the way. They may be upset with her if they know she is telling their weaknesses.”

“Why do the three groups share power?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be easier if they just self-policed?”

“They share political power, not physical power” Nora said, and when I looked at her quizzically, she explained. “The witches could not punish a vampire. They could only appeal for punishment through diplomatic channels if they thought it was warranted. Also, there are many species in the supernatural world” she went on, waving her hand before I could protest that I didn’t want to know. “These groups share rule of the things that affect them all and they all have equal power. The three dominant groups do a good job of self-policing within the coven, pack or family. But not all species are as self-controlled. Since all groups have equal power, the three dominant groups must work together to prevent personal grudges and alliances from influencing

the outcome. It is a good system, as long as it stays balanced. When there is a conflict between the other species, the witches mediate. When there is a conflict between the three, they will turn to you.”

“There has to be someone else besides me” I complained.

“None that we know of in this area” she said. “I believe that one of the California families had an alliance with a necromancer, but I don’t know if that alliance is active right now.”

I started to ask what she meant, but then realized that I knew. Necromancers could be “between” power cycles, such as one newly born or a child that had not realized its power. Until recently I had been “between”. I moved the chicken from the pan to a plate and added the shallots and artichokes to the pan, along with the remaining spiced flour that I’d mixed into broth. I stirred the pan while the sauce began to bubble and thicken. After a few minutes, I returned the chicken to the pan, reduced the heat and moved to lean on the opposite counter and looked at Nora.

“How am I supposed to act at this meeting?” I asked. “I avoid university politics because I don’t have the patience for it.”

“Just be yourself” she said, thought better of it and added “but tone down the sarcasm if you can.”

My plans for the evening included dinner, which was delicious, and watching a DVD from Netflix. They did not include dealing with murder victims or supernatural politics. Unfortunately, as soon as I’d cleared my dinner plates to the dishwasher and set the kitchen to rights, my cell rang.

“Hello Ceara.” Dominic always made women’s names sound like a caress when he said them. I had accused him more than once of watching too many vampire movies.

“Hello Dominic” I said. He got straight to the point.

“There’s been another murder” he said. “I want you to go to scene and see if you can find out anything.”

“How would I be able to find out anything?” I asked.

“Perhaps the ghost will linger. Murder victims often do”.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea” I told him. “Won’t it seem odd if I just show up at a crime scene? Can’t one of your people go?”

“We don’t want to leave any evidence that a vampire has been at the scene if the Organization conducts its own investigation. And this one is in Corktown” he told me.

“Oh. Tell me where”. Corktown was the local historical community where I had grown up. It was named for the wave of Irish immigrants that had settled the area in the 1800s, many from County Cork. My family had settled there in the early 1900s and opened Fennessys, the pub that my dad still owned. My parents and brother still lived there. The neighborhood had become more diverse as other immigrant groups had followed the Irish and it was now a diverse working class community that felt more like a small village than a large city. I got the location from him. The body was found several blocks from the pub. I grabbed my coat, the day had been warm, but as the sun set the temperatures plummeted, and asked Nora if she would go along in her spirit form.

I called the pub from the car and Kieran answered after the third ring. It sounded busy.

“Fennessys” he said.

“Hey Kieran, its Ceara. You sound busy.”

“We are” he said. “What’s up?”

“Just thought I’d stop in for a beer and wondered if anyone else was there.”

“A lot of the regulars” he said. “There’s a game on so its standing room only. The twins were here earlier but left about an hour ago.” The twins were Kyla and Kyna, the babies of my family. We had three more sisters besides them. I was surprised to learn that Kyna had been my niece, Nora’s daughter Myrna, in my previous life.

“Okay” I said, trying to keep the fear out of my voice. “I’ll see you soon.” I hung up and looked at Nora. “Go ahead of me I asked. Come back and tell me if it’s Kyla or Kyna.” She disappeared and returned to the moving car within five minutes.

“It’s not them” she said. “It’s a young Hispanic man, maybe 20. His ghost is there.”

Relief flooded over me, and a twinge of guilt. Someone young had died tonight and all I could think was thank God it wasn’t one of my mine! It took about twenty minutes to get to Corktown. I navigated the neighborhood until I was a block away from the body. The street was blocked to traffic with police cars parked across the intersections at both ends. The officers were not in the cars though so people were walking in, standing back and watching the officers work. I walked in and joined the watching group. I looked over at the body. There was a yellow vinyl sheet on the ground next to him. A group of police technicians worked over the body. I could see the ghost standing off to the side, watching in disbelief.

“Dr. Fennessy” a voice said from my right, and I looked up.

“Detective Justus” I replied. Marion Justus had been one of the lead detectives on my shooting case. If he was here, it meant his partner, Phillip Ryan wouldn’t be far. “How have you been?”

“I’m surprised to see you here” he replied. “I trust you’ve been staying out of trouble.”

Nora believed that Detective Justus was suspicious of me. She thought he might be a little psychic and that he believed that my house was odd and so was I. He also had a habit of looking at you as if he could read you like a book. I often thought of him as a human lie detector. Detective Justus always wore a serious expression, unlike his partner who smiled often and had what my mom called “laugh lines”. I guessed he was in his late thirties. He was taller than I was by several inches. He had broad shoulders and a lean muscular frame that showed he was no stranger to the gym. His high cheek bones and steel gray eyes were the perfect complement to his brown skin. He was definitely eye-candy, but his personality was a huge turn off, I had to admit. He made me feel like a bug under a microscope every time I talked to him.

“I was in the neighborhood” I said. “The pub is just a few blocks from here. I saw the police cars and decided to take a look. What’s going on?”

“Hello Dr. Fennessy” Detective Ryan said, walking up to join us at that moment. “Didn’t expect to see you here?” He echoed his partner’s greeting and I wondered if that was a sign that they spent too much time together. Probably not, I figured, since Ryan’s perpetual smile hadn’t rubbed off on Gloomy Gus.

“Headed to the pub” I said. I looked over at the body again. I had never seen a dead body like this. I’d been to funerals of course, but bodies in caskets are displayed in a way that makes them appear asleep. This young man’s face was frozen in a grimace of fear and pain. I watched the ghost, pacing anxiously. I could hear him asking the officers “Am I dead? Am I dead?” He looked up and noticed that I was watching him. I had to quit making eye contact with the dead in public, I thought, as he came over to me and started repeating his questions to me. Detective Justus watched me closely. I had to agree with Nora, he definitely thought I was odd. Nora took the young man aside and talked to him quietly. I could see her pointing behind him and knew she was urging him to go into the light.

“Dr. Fennessy? Did you hear me?”

“What?” I said startled, turning my attention back to Detective Justus. In the moments I’d been distracted, officers were clearing the by-standers out of the area. They were ready to move the body. “I’m sorry. I’ve never seen a body like this. I guess I’m distracted.”

“I asked what you were looking at” he repeated, motioning towards where Nora stood with the young man. I watched as he disappeared and Nora headed back in my direction. “The body is over there.”

“Nothing, I guess” I told him, breaking eye contact and swearing inwardly to myself. No wonder he thought I was odd. My body language screamed that I was lying. “It was nice seeing you again, Detectives” I said and turned to walk back to my car.

“Did you find out anything?” I asked Nora.

“He said a vampire did it” Nora said. “He was walking home and someone pulled him into an abandoned warehouse. He didn’t see the person that attacked him. They stood behind him. He felt the bite and even though he struggled, he couldn’t break free. He wasn’t dead when they dropped him here. But he died soon after.”

“Dominic and Tatiana were right. He was attacked somewhere else and then the body was moved.” I didn’t know what to make about the report that he was bitten. “He crossed over?” I asked.

“Yes” she said.

We reached the car and opened the door. The car was parked facing the crime scene. When I turned, I could see Detective Justus standing in the middle of the street watching me. He’d seen me talking but he couldn’t see Nora. That was great. Now he’d think I was odd and crazy. I waved at him, got into my car and headed to the pub.

By the time I reached the pub, though it was only a few blocks, news of the crime had spread. The buzz of anxious voices speculating about the murder replaced the cheers and shouts that usually accompanied a game. The pub was crowded and there were no empty stools at the bar so I went behind it and pulled a draft for myself. I took a sip and sat it on the back counter to pitch in and help Kieran. He grinned at me as he moved around me to serve drinks at the far end of the bar.

“Glad to see you” he told me as he came back and pulled two drafts from the taps and took another two bottles from the cooler under the counter and headed back to the end of the bar. I went to the other end and began to fill orders for the night shift waitresses.

“Hey Ceara” Carmella said. “Haven’t seen you behind the bar for a while.”

“Yeah” I replied, setting two beers and two vodka tonics on her tray. “Keeping busy. Do you need me to help with the tables?” I asked.

“Nah, we’re good. Kieran needs the help more.” She picked up the tray and headed out into the crowd and I turned to help cash out tabs while Kieran filled drink orders.

“Thanks, sis” Kieran said when we had a momentary lull. He poured out my forgotten beer and refilled the glass for me. “Did you hear about the murder?” he asked.

I nodded. “I actually stopped by the scene” I told him. “I felt ghoulish though. It was a young Hispanic male. Just a kid really.”

“Do you think it was the same guy that’s been dropping bodies all over the city?” he asked.

I nodded. “I think so. Do you remember the detectives that worked my case? They’re on this one too. I’m sure they’ll figure it out.”

“Speak of the Devil” he said and nodded towards the door. The detectives had just walked in and were coming towards the bar. It just figured that two stools emptied just as they walked up and they sat there.

“Hello again. I didn’t expect to see you here” I said, mimicking their greeting to me. Kieran said hello too and then headed back down to the end of the bar to respond to a call for drinks. “Can I get you something?”

“We were in the neighborhood, just a few blocks from here” Detective Justus said drily. “And its dinner time so here we are.”

“I told you he suspects something about you” Nora said to me. She had been sitting on the back counter watching us work. I ignored her and took their order, glad for the distraction of tending to the waitresses so I didn’t have to talk to them for a few minutes.

When I served them their burgers and fries Detective Justus asked me “What can you tell us about this serial killer?”

“What makes you think I can tell you anything?” I asked, startled.

“Not specifically” Detective Ryan clarified. “You’re a criminologist. What do you think we’re dealing with?”

Detective Justus watched me. I had a feeling that he had definitely meant “specifically”. “Just the stuff you likely already know” I said. “Most likely it’s a white male between 20 and 40. If you want more than that, you’ll need to tell me details of the crime.” I already knew the details but I couldn’t tell them that.

“Maybe we can stop by and discuss it” Detective Justus said, glancing around the crowded bar.

“Sure” I said. “I’m in my office all day on Monday if you want to stop by there.”

“I think it would be better to stop by your home” he said. “We’ll call in a few days.”

“Sure” I said. Just what I needed! More chances to catch me staring at ghosts.

Chapter Four

It had been nearly a week since the police found the last victim of our serial killer. I had not heard from the detectives and had to admit, I was relieved. While it would be nice to learn more of the ‘inside scoop’ on the killings, I really didn’t like being investigated myself. I knew that Detective Justus didn’t suspect me of being involved in the killings. But he did suspect something. If I could get him alone, I might be able to determine if he could see ghosts. I wondered if he might be one of the necromancers that didn’t form an alliance with a family. Would I recognize another necromancer, I wondered?

I had spent the week grading papers, begging off on training at Dominic’s. I wasn’t getting any better at controlling only the ghosts and it was frustrating. Tatiana teased me relentlessly and Nora and Dominic constantly reminded me to “focus, Ceara, focus.” Finals week was a good reason to beg off for a break. There had to be something about the vampires that I could use to make this easier, but I hadn’t figured out what that might be. Nora had been out most nights, randomly patrolling the areas where bodies had been discovered, hoping to catch the killer in the act. She’d had no luck. I was actually happy for the solitude. It helped to be completely alone when I graded papers. I hated grading and would jump at the chance to procrastinate. But I also had the meeting with the Council coming up and spent a lot of time worrying about that. Jeannie assured me that there was nothing to worry about, it would be a friendly meeting, but it was an unknown. I liked to be in control and always got antsy when faced with a new situation.

It was almost ten when I finished grading. I grabbed a beer from the fridge and settled back to watch TV while I waited for Nora. I had just settled in, Boo at my feet gnawing a chew toy when the doorbell rang. I walked to the door and looked through the glass to find Detective Justus on the porch.

I opened the door. “Detective Justus” I said. “I thought you were going to call”.

“I needed to talk to you” he answered. He seemed distracted in a way I’d never seen him before. He kept looking around the street as if he expected to be followed. “Can I come in?” he asked.

I moved aside, opening the door wider. “Of course” I said. He relaxed, smiling a little as he stepped through and into the living room.

“What’s wrong?” I said, closing the door and turning to face him.

“Nothing” he replied, and before I realized what was happening, he pulled me into a strong embrace. I struggled to break free.

“Slow down, buddy” I said, pushing against his chest. His muscles were firm and hard beneath the cotton of his shirt and for a moment I wondered why I was trying to push him away. Then I remembered. Handsome he might be, but I really didn’t trust him. Or make that, he really didn’t trust me. His cheek was pressed against mine and I could feel his breath on the nape of my neck.

“Ceara!” Nora shouted. “Don’t let him bite you. It will kill him.”

Bite me, I wondered curiously and then I knew. Without hesitation, I ‘tethered’ him to my will and stepped back. “Go sit in the chair! I should have known there was something wrong when you smiled!” I told him, looking sadly into his yellow eyes. He obeyed. “Dominic, I need you” I thought, as I dug around in my bag for my cell phone. Before I could find it the front door opened and Dominic and Tatiana walked in.

“What’s wrong?” Dominic asked. They stopped short when they saw Detective Justus sitting, zombie like in my chair.

“This is Detective Justus” I said. I reached out mentally and untethered the Detective.

Dominic stared at the detective, surprised and a little angry. “Tatiana, get the one who did this and bring him to me.” Tatiana nodded, and was gone. The door closed with a snap before I’d seen her move. Dominic walked over and sat on the sofa across from the Detective, who was staring at me with a look that told me he was both hungry and miserable. “Detective” Dominic said calmly. “Do you know what happened to you?”

“Vampire” Detective Justus answered angrily. Then he looked at me. “What did you do to me?” he asked accusingly.

“Saved your life” I told him. “If I’d let you feed, you’d be dead.”

“I think I’m already dead” he said quietly. “You shouldn’t have stopped me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous” Dominic responded. The anger that he’d displayed was not directed at the Detective. “You’ll adjust. What’s your first name?” he asked.

“Marion”.

Dominic grinned. “Okay. I’ll call you Justus then. I am Dominic. I’m the Master vampire in this city. Do you know who turned you?”

“No” he answered. “I was working on a lead to track the serial killer and stopped a man who was acting suspicious. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in an empty house on the West Side.”

“Are you married or living with anyone?” Dominic asked. Justus shook his head.

A few minutes later Tatiana returned, opening the door and calling for me. I got up and walked over to her. She held a young vampire by the collar that I had not met. “Invite him in” she said. “His name is Jacob.”

“Please come in, Jacob” I told him. He looked more annoyed than worried as Tatiana drug him across the stoop and shut the door.

“That was fast” I told her, impressed.

She shrugged. “We knew who did it. We could smell him.” She shook Jacob like he was a puppy that had soiled the rug.

“What were you thinking, Jacob?” Dominic asked. He didn’t sound as angry as he had when he’d sent for him.

“I panicked” Jacob explained. “He’s a cop and I thought he’d figured out what we are. I guess I thought if he was one of us, then he wouldn’t rat us out.” I was struck suddenly by how familiar he looked.

“And you left him on his own?” Dominic said. “You aren’t so old are you that you’ve forgotten what it’s like to change.”

“No, Dominic” Jacob said. “It was irresponsible. I’m sorry.”

“You can’t shirk responsibility forever Jacob” Dominic said. “In fact, not at all now that you’re responsible for another.”

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed. “Tatiana, is Jacob your brother?”

Tatiana scowled at me for a moment and then nodded her head, giving Jacob another shake for good measure.

“Okay NaNa” he said. “Cut it out.”

“Oooh, NaNa” I teased. “I like that name. I’ll have to use it from now on.”

“Can we stay focused here” Dominic said, cutting us off before NaNa could retort. “Jacob, you may have acted with good intentions, but this can be a very big problem. Tatiana, he’s hungry.” She reached into the pocket of her coat and pulled out a bag of dark red liquid.

“Ick” I said. “Take him in the kitchen with that and use a paper coffee cup if he can’t drink from the bag.”

“Come on” Tatiana told him and he followed her into the kitchen.

“Tell me what happened” Dominic said.

“He showed up here” I said, feeling a little embarrassed now. “When he grabbed me I thought he was being frisky. If Nora hadn’t popped back when she did, he’d be dead....again”.

“You didn’t realize he’d been turned?”

“No” I answered. “Nora told me so I zapped him and made him sit. I was looking for my phone to call you when you showed up. Perfect timing by the way!”

“We heard your call” he said. Tatiana returned then with a decidedly less agitated Justus.

“How’d you manage that?” she asked. “We were with a group and everyone kept their free will.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I just thought that I needed to stop him and call Dominic.”

“Try to figure it out” she said. “I’m tired of being at your beck and call.”

“On topic” Dominic reminded us again and turned his attention back to Justus. “As unfortunate as you may find this” he said “you are a vampire. You are a part of my family. We’ll discuss what that means later.”

“I’m a detective” Justus said. “I’m trying to find the vampire that’s littering the city with dead bodies.”

“It isn’t a vampire” I told him. “It’s a human.”

He looked at me. “Are you a vampire too, Fennessy?”

“No. I’m a necromancer.” I motioned to Nora who was sitting in the opposite chair. “And this is Nora, the ghost that you kept catching me staring at.”

“I knew there was something off about you” he said, triumphantly.

“Yeah, well, there’s something off about you now too” I said, smiling sweetly.

“Jacob, when did you do this?” Dominic asked.

“Last night” he answered. “I’m sorry I left you” he said to Justus, giving him a guilty look. “That was irresponsible of me.”

“And dangerous” Dominic reminded him. “What if he’d gone after his partner instead of Ceara? Or if he’d actually bitten Ceara?”

“I know, I know” he said, stepping back as Tatiana stepped closer to him. “I swear NaNa, quit shaking me!”

“You’ll have to pay for this Jacob” Dominic told him.

“You aren’t going to kill him, are you?” I asked, worried for the young vampire.

“Don’t be ridiculous” Dominic said. “He’ll have to pay a fine to me and to Justus. And he will be responsible for training Justus. Of course, Jacob likes to be free and easy so he may see this responsibility as a fate worse than death.” He grinned before turning to Jacob and said “You can go now. I’ll figure out the details and we’ll discuss it later. This may actually work out in our favor.” Jacob nodded, grinned at his sister and then nodded to Justus. I caught a glimpse of a

look that told me Jacob had been well aware of what he had done when he turned the detective. He caught my scrutiny, grinned and winked at me, and left.

“I’m very sorry that this happened to you” Nora said. “I know you didn’t have a choice, but Dominic is right and you will adjust. And it could also be very useful to have a contact on the inside.”

“What do you mean on the inside?” Justus said. “I can’t go back to being a detective.”

“Yes you can” Dominic assured him. “But you need to call and take a few days off so that you can adjust and learn about your new way of life. You’ll come home with me until I’m sure you’ll be okay on your own.” Justus looked hesitant, as if he would protest, but instead nodded. “Now tell us what you know so far?” Dominic said.

Again, there was a short hesitation, as if he worried about violating a rule of law enforcement, but then he answered. “We don’t know much. Whoever is doing this is puncturing the carotid with something sharp. We know he kills them one place and dumps them somewhere else because they bleed out, but there isn’t a lot of blood at the scene. How can you be sure it isn’t a vampire?”

Dominic nodded before he answered. We already knew this. “Vampires leave signs that humans can’t scent. Tatiana and I knew that Jacob was responsible for turning you because you carry his scent. If these murders were done by a vampire, my contacts would have known immediately.”

Justus reached into his pocket and pulled out his notebook, flipping through it until he found the information he was looking for. “He hasn’t left much evidence behind. All but the last victim” he paused and looked at his notes “Hector Ramirez, also had fractured skulls. We think he sneaks up from behind and hits his victims so they don’t struggle. Mr. Ramirez was not stunned before the attack.”

“Hector told us he struggled” I said.

“He did” Justus said. “We found skin and hair under his nails. You talked to the victim?”

“No” I told him. “I was going to but you were giving me the googlie eye, so Nora talked to him.”

“The googlie eye?” Dominic asked.

“He always watches me like he thinks I’m lying or crazy.”

“I knew you weren’t telling the truth” he admitted. “I just didn’t know what you were hiding.”

“Hector told me that he was grabbed from behind and he struggled to get loose but couldn’t. He thought he was bitten, but whoever did this stood behind him so he didn’t see. He also died at the crime scene, not where he was attacked” Nora explained.

“Did he tell you where he was attacked?”

“An empty warehouse” she said. “It couldn’t have been far could it if he survived the transport?”

Justus jotted down notes in his notebook. He appeared to be getting back to as much of a normal state as was possible for him under the circumstances. I wondered if he took comfort from his work. “No, it would have to be close. We can check that out.” His cell phone rang and he patted his pockets until he found it, glanced at the caller ID and said “Ryan”.

“His partner” I explained to Dominic.

“Take the call and tell him you’re sick” Dominic said. A few minutes later, Justus hung up. He wouldn’t be expected back for a few days.

“I thought new vampires were uncontrollably hungry and driven by blood lust” I said to Dominic.

“And that’s what happens when you get all of your information from late night TV” Dominic said dryly. “You keep forgetting that we don’t lose our souls. We are not mindless eating machines. The danger of a new vampire rising alone is that the change can be confusing. He might not realize what he is until he gets hungry. If that happens, he might be careless in his attack.”

“Like attacking his partner” I said, looking at Justus.

“Yes, like attacking his partner. He did make a mistake actually, but it is within our control”.

“Mistake?” Justus asked his frown back in place.

“Yes” Dominic explained. “You tried to feed from our necromancer. Why did you choose her?”

“I knew she’d open the door. But I couldn’t come in”.

“I had to invite you” I told him. Then I said to Dominic “I was expecting to see him any day.”

“So you made a rational choice” Dominic said. “And when you got here?”

“I was hungry” Justus said. “I didn’t think about the consequences.”

“It’s a good thing for you that Ceara knew the consequences” he told the detective. “Her blood is poisonous to our kind.”

“I’m just full of surprises” I told him, smiling.

“We should be off” he told me. “I’m sorry for the intrusion tonight. Tatiana is right though. Whatever you did tonight worked. You need to figure that out.”

I nodded and then had a thought. “Hang around a few minutes” I said. “I want to study Justus.”

“Study me?” he asked.

“You’re always studying me” I told him. “Now it’s my turn.” I noticed the odd looks that Nora and Dominic were giving me. “Look” I said. “He is the first vampire that I knew as a human. I’ve been thinking that there must be something about vampires that will let me distinguish them from ghosts when I call. When I had them in separate groups, I didn’t have a problem. I want to study him to see if I can figure it out.”

As I walked around him, looking for a difference, Dominic explained my difficulty in controlling my power. He had to be different, I thought. Nora knew instantly that his embrace was not romantic. I just had to figure out what it was. It took me a few minutes before I realized that there was a subtle darkness to him that I hadn’t seen before. It wasn’t his appearance. That was paler than I was used to. It was a darkness that radiated from him. I looked at Dominic and saw the same shadow around him. Then I looked at Tatiana and noticed that she, too, had the shadow.

Focusing on this darkness, I closed my eyes and concentrated on calling. I sent the power out, willing it to stop short of tethering the darkness. When I opened my eyes, Tatiana was grinning at me and Justus was watching me, curious. The room was full of ghosts who were now attached and waiting for my orders. I released them and told them to leave me before they could ask for anything. They disappeared with a collective pop.

“Finally!” I exclaimed, as Tatiana gave me a high five.

Chapter Five

Saturday morning arrived too soon. I paced anxiously, watching Boo sleep off her morning run. She was in her crate. I felt guilty the first few times I'd left her crated until the Vet explained that she would feel safer in the confinement while I was away. Dogs, like infants, have no sense of how long their family is away. They are only aware that they are gone. A crate, when used appropriately, makes them less anxious when they are alone. It had the added benefit of saving my furniture. I fussed for an hour with my outfit. I even let Nora help me apply a little makeup, to her delight. She was going with me in her corporeal form. Many witches, like Jeannie, did not have the ability to see ghosts. I felt more comfortable having Nora along because she remembered her lifetimes of dealing with witches and I did not. Hopefully, she'd keep me from sticking my foot in my mouth. I finally decided on "business casual". I wore black, narrow legged slacks with a pair of black pumps that had a modest square two inch heel. I topped this off with a light blue sweater set. Nora was dressed similarly. Since Christmas, we'd made several more trips to clothing stores to let her expand her wardrobe. Today she wore a pair of gray slacks with a slightly flared leg and gray suede ankle boots. Her heel was quite a bit higher than mine, and though I still towered over her, she looked a formidable 5'4". She added a cream colored sweater and twisted her hair up and fastened it with a sequined comb. I figured we were as good as we could get for a first impression.

"How long do witches live?" I asked her as I paced and looked anxiously at my watch.

"They have human life spans" she said. "Why?"

"I just wondered if you would know anyone on the council."

"No" she replied. "The group that we worked with in my lifetime will all be gone. There may be some very old members who have vague memories of me from childhood, but they will be the children of the former Council if that's the case."

She watched for a minute and then said "Stop pacing. There is nothing to be nervous about. Think of this as a meet and greet".

"I hate meet and greets" I told her. Jeannie arrived and blew her horn. We grabbed our jackets and went out to meet her. In true Michigan fashion, a thin layer of snow covered the foliage of my daffodils.

"Hi" I said as I climbed into the car and shut the door.

"She's nervous" Nora said, taking the seat behind me and clicking her seatbelt. She'd finally accepted the "Click it or Ticket" billboards that peppered our freeways and no longer had to be prodded to play along.

"There's no reason to be worried" Jeannie said, but she didn't sound reassuring.

“You’re worried” I told her. “So why shouldn’t I be?”

“I’m not worried” she said. “Okay, maybe I am a little. But it’s just nerves” she said. “Some of the council is upset with me for not bringing you in as soon as I realized you were a necromancer. I explained that you were dealing with a lot, but they aren’t satisfied.”

“Are you in trouble?” I asked.

“No” she answered. “I didn’t break any rules. But like I said, you have an important position in the supernatural community. There are some who believe that I am positioning myself for political gain. They believe that I have biased you in my favor.”

“Of course I’m biased in your favor” I said. “But that was true before I knew what I was. Or what you were for that matter.”

“Don’t say that in public” Jeannie warned, but smiled and patted my hand.

The drive didn’t take long. In fact, it took only five minutes. Jeannie pulled into the driveway of one of the gated mansions on Windmill Pointe, a street that was less than a mile from where I lived. She stopped at the guard house and rolled down her window. “Hi Jeff” she said to a young blonde man who sat reading a chemistry text book.

He looked up and said “Hi Jeannie”. He pushed a button on a key board on the wall and the gates swung open. She waved at him as she drove through the gates and up the drive.

The house was gorgeous. It was an enormous brick building that had “wings” on the East and West ends. A long tree lined circular drive led up to the house. I couldn’t see around the house, it was large, but I knew the backyard would end at the lake’s shore. There were already several cars parked in a neat row. I noticed that they’d left a large space open directly in front of the door. Jeannie parked there and we got out. A man answered the door and invited us in.

“Hello Jeannie” he said, taking our coats.

“Hello Jonathon” she replied. “Let me introduce Ceara Fennessy and Nora O’Malley”.

“I know you” I told him, shaking his extended hand. “You’re that miracle working doctor that’s always in the papers.” Every few months the local paper would run a story on how he’d managed to pull someone back from the brink of death. The most recent story had been about two little boys that had fallen through the ice on Lakeshore. They were blue when they arrived at the hospital, but it was their lucky day because the miracle worker had been on call. I’d admired his humility whenever I’d seen him interviewed. Now I understood why he was humble.

He smiled. “It’s easy to work miracles when you’re a Healer” he said. “Welcome to my home”.

He moved aside and let us enter the great marble floored hallway, depositing our coats in the arms of a woman who'd appeared out of nowhere. She wore that official tone that let me know she was the housekeeper, and likely more in charge of his home than he was. I smiled and thanked her as he led us deeper into the house to a large living room. Or maybe it was a parlor. I couldn't really tell. It was lined with a rich dark red paneling that had to be cherry. Comfortable looking sofas and chairs were scattered about in what, at first glance, looked like a random pattern but on careful inspection proved to be organized in a fashion that created multiple small intimate sections that would encourage conversation. Several groups of people were arranged here and there and still more stood talking, holding drinks. It reminded me of my departmental holiday party.

"Let me get you a drink" he said. "What will you have?"

"I'd love a glass of wine" Jeannie said.

"Wine would be nice" I told him and Nora nodded as well. He moved away from us to the end of the room that had a nice bar complete with a bartender.

"Let me introduce you around" Jeannie said, and led us to a group of men and women that were sitting in one of the small areas.

"Ceara, Nora" she said as we approached. "This is Sylvia, Rochelle, Mark, Jerry and Harmony." I smiled, shaking hands with each of them as Jeannie introduced them.

"Jeannie tells us you just realized that you were not a true human" Harmony said, giving Nora a dismissive once over before turning her attention back to me.

I looked at Jeannie and then back to Harmony. "I'm a true human" I replied, trying to keep the edge out of my voice. I didn't think I liked Harmony. I was tempted to ask her if that was her real name, but bit my tongue. "I just have a little something extra, I suppose. And yes, I just discovered this."

"Hmmm" she said. Yep, I didn't like her. What did that mean? "We've wondered why Jeannie was keeping you to herself all this time."

"I was keeping me to myself" I said coolly. "I was recovering, adjusting and dealing with two attempts on my life. No offense, but I didn't give a rat's ass about meeting new people and that had nothing to do with Jeannie!"

"Ceara tends to speak her mind" Nora warned.

Harmony looked at her, but didn't respond. Nora looked at me and shrugged.

"Oh my God, Harmony" I said. "You're a racist too, aren't you?" Jeannie rolled her eyes at Nora, but didn't say anything. I looked her over. She was at least sixty, maybe older, but in good

physical shape. She wore a tailored designer label suit and had her hair cut in a flattering style. It fell in gentle gray waves around the nape of her neck.

“I most certainly am not” she said in an offended tone.

“Then stop treating my sister like a second class citizen. She’s using a lot of energy to be here so that you can see her when she could just as easily have tagged along and eavesdropped on you. Give her the courtesy she deserves. And what kind of name is Harmony anyway? Did your parents really saddle you with that?”

“I don’t deal with ghosts” she said.

“I prefer to think of myself as life-challenged” Nora said primly. I laughed, as did the rest of the group and Jeannie covered her mouth and coughed to stifle her own laugh. Harmony gave me a long look and I would swear she was sizing me up.

“Very politically correct, Nora” Jonathon said walking up to us carrying two classes of wine. He passed them to Jeannie and Nora. Then he turned and took one from another man who accompanied him and handed it to me. “Have you met Stephen?”

“No” I said, extending my hand. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise” he said. “Don’t mind Harmony. I think she’s afraid of ghosts.”

“Then necromancers must do wonders for you” I said to Harmony. She tilted her head in my direction, raised her glass in a mock salute, turned on her heel and walked away.

“Jeannie did say you’d had a pretty rough time recently” Jerry said. “It sounds like you’ve had a lot of excitement.”

I nodded. “Enough to last several lifetimes.”

We stood and chatted for several more minutes, mostly small talk. If Jeannie was angry with me, she didn’t let on. I learned that Harmony was a Magi and one of the senior members of the local Council. It figures that the one person I was rude to, though I wouldn’t say she didn’t have it coming, would be one of the more influential in the group. Jonathon was the chair of the local Council. Rochelle, a soft spoken woman with a gentle air about her was his second. If I had to guess about her class, I would have put her in the Eclectics. I was surprised to hear that she was a Magi and that she had been the witch that Jeannie had called on for advice when we’d dealt with the astral projection case.

The housekeeper entered the room and spoke silently to Jonathon. “Lunch is ready” he told the group. “Let’s move into the dining room.”

The dining room was a large room, almost as large as the room we'd just gathered in. It was dominated by an enormous antique table that was set for sixteen with fine china, silver and crystal. He guided me and Nora to the head of the table and pulled out the chairs on his left for us. Rochelle sat directly on his right next to Stephen. Jeannie sat several chairs down from me. Thankfully, Harmony was nearer to Jeannie than to me. After dessert dishes were cleared and coffee was served Jonathon cleared his throat. The conversations around the table came to an abrupt end and everyone turned their attention to us. "Part of the reason that we asked you to join us today was for introductions" Jonathon said to me. "The other reason was to determine where you stand on supernatural matters."

"I'm not sure where I stand" I told him. "I don't know enough about this world to have very strong opinions one way or the other."

"We are very good at record keeping Ceara" Jonathon said. "We know from our records that in the past, Neala McCourt and Nora O'Malley tended to favor the vampires and the Weres when we had disputes."

"I don't know anything about that" I told him. "I am not Neala McCourt."

"But you keep the counsel of Nora O'Malley" he said. "We would like some assurance that you intend to be unbiased in this life."

I looked at him and then at Nora. She just stared back, not giving me any indication of what I should say and not offering to speak for me. "Nora O'Malley" I said "is my friend and advisor." There were hushed whispers around the table and I heard a "harrumph" that I was sure had come from Harmony.

"However" I continued "she does not think for me or tell me how to think or act. If Neala and Nora agreed in matters in the past, I am sure that they had their reasons. It is my understanding that they were very different women. Beliefs and values are shaped by socialization" I said. "As far as I can see, all that remains of Neala is a practical nature and a smart mouth." Jonathon and Rochelle smiled and I thought I heard Stephen chuckle.

"And what of the vampires and Weres?" Jonathon asked.

"I don't know any Weres" I told him. "As for the vampires, I like the ones I know. But then again, I like the witches I've met too. Or most of them anyway" I added, turning to look pointedly at Harmony. "I consider myself to be very fair. If Neala was anything like me then it is very likely that the vampires and Weres were just simply right more often than the Council."

"All we can ask for is a fair assessment of our conflicts" Rochelle said.

"How many conflicts do you have?" I asked. "And how serious are they?"

She looked at Jonathon and after a moment said "We'll just leave that for another time."

“I don’t like the sounds of that” I said. “All you need is the ominous music.”

She smiled. “Three powerful groups that co-govern are bound to have conflicts” she said.

“Okay” I said. “But if I’m going to lead the United Nations for you, I prefer not to be ambushed with problems. I collect data before I make decisions, so don’t expect a quick turnaround”.

“I’m concerned about her friendship with Jeannie Russo” Harmony said. “Not only do we have to worry about her relationship with the Weres and vampires, but how do we know that she won’t make decisions that are more favorable for the advancement of Jeannie’s position in the Council?”

I sat silent, waiting for Jeannie to respond. She didn’t and everyone looked at me. “Were you asking me that question?” I asked Harmony. “We never make unfair decisions especially when we are called to mediate” I said.

“It will be you” Harmony replied. “Who are you including in that ‘we’?”

“I’m sorry” I told her, smiling. “I prefer using the royal ‘we’ to the impersonal third person when I discuss myself.” I turned to Jonathon. “Jeannie is my friend. She has been my friend for a long time, much longer than I have been aware of any of this world. She has saved my life. I won’t apologize for that. But I have no problem siding against my friends when they are clearly in the wrong.” I turned back to Harmony. “And remember, I didn’t ask for this job and frankly, I don’t want it.” I remembered what Jeannie had told me about them needing me more than I needed them. “Since everyone is so concerned that I can’t do it well or that I am untrustworthy, why don’t I just decline the offer and let you find another necromancer.”

“That won’t be necessary” Jonathon said, giving Harmony a look that silenced her. “I’m sure you’ll do your best to stay fair and impartial.”

I expected Jeannie to make me walk home, but she wasn’t even mad. “Harmony baits” she said. “She believes that getting someone upset causes them to speak more candidly.”

“So she played me?” I asked.

“No, not really” Jeannie answered. “She meant everything she said. She just lacks the social filters to get answers without being abrasive.”

“Well I don’t like her” I said. “And she doesn’t like you”.

“She’s afraid of Jeannie” Nora said.

Jeannie nodded her agreement. “She is fourth on the council and I am fifth. She thinks I want to climb over her and gain more power.”

“I know the type” I said. “Sometimes less productive tenured faculty members are snarly with the juniors because they feel threatened.”

“That’s a good comparison” Jeannie said. “Remember, this is political and not merit based on power or skill. Power is helpful, but personality will get you farther. I am well liked and she sees this as my developing a following. If I had sway with you, then this might convince others that it would be a good idea to support my advancement on the council.”

“Well she likely strengthened your chances of moving up today.” I said. “I don’t see how it helps her cause by pissing off the resident necromancer.”

Jeannie smiled. “My thoughts exactly” she said.

Chapter Six

Tatiana knocked on my door a few minutes after the sun went down. She was carrying two large bags with her. “You look like the Queen of the Damned” I told her. She was dressed head to toe in black leather. Her pants were pencil thin and tucked into knee high black leather boots with three inch spike heels. She wore a black leather vest that was cut deep and showed ample cleavage. It had chains draped across the front. She topped it off with a black leather duster that nearly swept the floor, fanning out around her as she moved. Heavy black liner accented her eyes and her lips were colored a deep shade of red that resembled blood. Every time I’d seen her thus far, she’d had her hair swept back in a ponytail. Tonight, it hung down her back, straightened to a crisp sharpness.

“Wait until you see what you’re wearing” she said, grinning and handing me the bags. “Get dressed, I’ll wait.”

I looked in the bags and frowned. “I am not wearing this!” I told her.

“Dominic wants us to check out The Abyss” she said. The Abyss was a popular Goth themed night club. The owners had renovated a dilapidated mansion near the New Center area and turned the main floor into a very successful venue. Hour Detroit, a local cultural magazine often ran stories on the club. “There’s clothes for Nora too if she wants to tag along.”

Nora loved one thing more than becoming corporeal and going out to socialize and that was wearing new clothes. She switched instantly and grabbed the bags from my hand, looked thorough them and tossed one of them more or less in my direction. I dived to catch it, but Tatiana moved quicker. She handed me the bag. I took it, scowling. How had I let my life get so out of control?

By the time we were dressed and Nora helped me with my makeup, we looked like the Gruesome Triplets. Tatiana carried off the look without a problem. She looked like a vampire. Okay, she was a vampire, but she looked like the Hollywood version of vampires. She looked like she’d stepped off the screen of an Underworld movie. While she still looked Latina and was darker than me, she was paler than she had been in life. Nora, with her light blonde hair, looked like Vampire Barbie, but she still managed to carry off the look. I reminded myself that she was also dead. Maybe that was the difference. I still had a pulse. I looked ridiculous, I thought. The leather clothes were surprisingly supple and soft, clearly expensive. The halter I wore fastened with chains that crisscrossed my back. At least it had a choker style collar so I wasn’t as exposed as Nora and Tatiana. Nora’s leather tank plunged in a deep V. She wore a studded leather collar around her neck. I would have sworn I wouldn’t be caught dead dressed like this. But I would have sworn a lot of things about my life wouldn’t end up where they were now.

“We’re going to look comical” I said, pulling on the leather duster that finished my ensemble. It was similar to Tatiana’s, and Nora also had one that was a slight variation on the style.

“Have you ever been to a Goth club?” Tatiana asked.

“No” I admitted.

“Trust me” she said. “We’ll fit in. We’d stand out more if we were dressed differently.”

I took her word for it, but when we arrived at The Abyss, I saw that she was right. Everyone was dressed in black, with an occasional red or white accent. Other than that, it seemed like an average bar; crowded, too loud music and overpriced drinks. Tatiana saw a table opening up near the dance floor and was at it before I realized she’d moved. That speed was about the only thing I envied the vampire. I wondered if she had changed by choice, especially since her brother had also been changed. Nora and I walked over to the table and sat down. Within a few minutes, a waitress made her way to our table and asked “What’ll it be, ladies?”

“A Bloody Mary” Tatiana said, grinning at me. Nora and I both snorted.

“That actually sounds good” I said. “I’ll have one too”.

“Make it three” Nora added.

“Look around, Ceara” Tatiana said. “Most of the people in here are drinking red drinks.” I looked around and saw she was right. Bloody Marys and red wine seemed to be the drinks of the evening.

“Care if we join you?” a young male voice said, and I turned to see who had approached the table.

“Oh shit” I said when I saw the three young men that had joined us. “Hello Dante” I grumbled.

“Professor Fennessy!” he said, recognizing me when I looked up. He swept his eyes over my body before looking up to my face again. “I didn’t know you came here.”

“I don’t usually” I said, feeling a sweep of embarrassment. Dante was one of my students, planning to use a degree in criminology to bolster his chances of getting into law school.

“Research for a project and I thought I should blend in” I added when I saw him look at my outfit again.

He turned to his friends for introductions. “This is Jamie and Tyrel” he said, sweeping a hand towards them so it was impossible to tell who was who.

He looked at me expectantly, so I filled in introductions “Nora” I said pointing to her, and then pointed to Tatiana and supplied her name.

“Mind if we join you?” he asked, and before we could answer, grabbed an empty chair from a nearby table and pulled it up, sitting down and leaving his friends to find their own chairs. Unfortunately, it didn’t take them long.

“What’s your project about?” the smaller of the three asked. “And I’m Jamie” He offered his hand and I shook it.

“Deviance in the Goth scene” I answered. “You guys get a bad rap.”

“Some of its deserved” he said grinning in what I assumed was a suggestive leer, but he had too many freckles and deep dimples so he couldn’t quite carry it off.

I looked up to see Tatiana giving me an amused grin. I scowled at her and said “So NaNa here is thinking about switching her major to criminology. Maybe you can fill her in on the program, Dante”.

“Happy to” he said, standing and offering her his hand. “Wanna’ dance, pretty lady?”

“As long as you don’t call me NaNa” she told him, glaring at me as she said it. She took his hand and walked away from the table to join him on the dance floor. I had a moment to wonder if she’d eaten tonight. I didn’t want Dante to be a lamb for the slaughter. I liked him.

Tyrel scooted into the seat she vacated so that he was closer to Nora. He chatted with her but a new song had started and I couldn’t hear him, even though he was less than two feet away. I hoped he hadn’t started the conversation with “Come here often?” I was sure that line was old when Nora was alive.

“So are you a student at the U too?” I asked, watching Nora and Tyrel move to the dance floor.

“Yes” he said. “Pre-med.”

“Really?” I looked him over. “I wouldn’t imagine many pre-med students are in the Goth scene.”

“Well, I hope to be the medical examiner one day” he grinned. “Maybe that’s the motivation.”

“Maybe” I agreed. “I don’t want to burst your bubble” I told him. “But if you’re looking to get laid tonight, you might want to find someone else to chat with. That’s not what I’m here for.”

“It might be worth your while to reconsider” he said, circling a finger over the back of my hand and attempting his weird little leer. He just looked like a little kid slobbering over a giant candy bar.

“Umm, I don’t think so” I told him, moving my hand from under his creepy little caress. “But if you insist on staying here, you can tell me about the Goth scene. Why does everyone dress up like a vampire from a really bad B rated movie?”

“For most of them, its role playing” he said, settling back in his chair with a look of disappointment. He’d been leaning closer before in a way that was way too intimate for my comfort. If he hadn’t moved soon, I was prepared to shove him backwards. “Some of them think

they are vampires though.” He looked around the bar and then pointed to a young man who was surrounded by a group of people. They looked at him like he was a rock star that they’d managed to catch at the backstage door.

“That’s Roman” he said. “He tells everyone he’s a real vampire and he seems to believe it.”

I looked closer at Roman for the tell-tale shadow that I’d finally identified as a sign of a true vampire. Nothing. Roman was either play acting or pitifully deluded. He was very pale with jet black hair, combed back from his forehead so that his widow’s peak was accentuated. He looked my way and smiled and I was surprised to notice that his eyes were red. He was using colored contacts to complete his image. Jamie looked around the bar again until his eyes stopped at a young woman sitting in a booth against the back wall. Where Roman looked like rock star, lapping up the attention from his adoring fans, this woman looked like a bored queen, forced to hold court with subjects who were failing to hold her attention. “That’s Mariette” he said. “She also says she’s a vampire and I think she believes it.”

Again, there was no dark shadow. Mariette, like Roman, was role playing. “Why do they carry on the pretense?” I asked.

“Trust me” Jamie answered. “He never leaves here alone. Mariette could have her pick of men and women too” he said. “But she seems more interested in making mere humans feel like they’re worthless than picking up anyone for a little fun.”

I looked at her again. She did have an aura of disdain about her. “They don’t seem to be paying attention to each other” I said.

“They hiss at each other every now and then for effect” Jamie said. “You know, competing predators and all. But Mariette treats Roman with the same disdain as everyone else. She says he’s only interested in finding a new Renfield and she has evolved beyond that.”

“Renfield?” I queried, turning my attention away from the pair and back to Jamie.

“Human slave” he said. “You know, after the character in Dracula?”

“Oh, got it” I said.

“Perhaps you should move on now” a new voice said behind me.

Jamie looked up as I turned around. Roman had walked over. “Just great” I thought. “This night keeps getting better.”

“No problem” Jamie said, grinning at me. “It was nice meeting you, but as you say, there are better options for tonight.”

I grinned back. “Good hunting” I told him. Then I turned my attention to Roman, wondering if he could be the killer we were looking for. He pulled back a chair, not waiting for an invite and sat down. I nodded towards his fan club and said “You left a lot of disappointed people over there.”

He glanced over at them dismissively. “Little piss ant” I thought. “They know I can’t resist meeting new...blood.” he said, pausing before he finished the sentence. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

“Yes, well” I replied “my friends drug me here against my will.”

“Look into my eyes” he said.

“Oh God, this was too funny”, I thought. My cheeks would be shredded if he kept up his Nosferatu act. “I bet he spells vampire with a ‘y’”. “I’ve heard it isn’t wise to make eye contact with a vampire” I told him, staring into his red contacts anyway.

“You know what I am then” he told me.

I said “The red eyes are a dead giveaway, pardon the pun”. I thought “Yes, pathetic.” But I was here to look for clues and someone who thought they were a vampire was as good a place to start as any.

“A side effect of being dead” he said. He grinned and I saw perfect fangs, which of course was what he wanted me to see. I wondered if they were the kind you bought at the costume shop or if he was one of the really dedicated role players that had a dentist put caps over his real teeth. I was betting on the latter.

“Must suck” I said, grinning at him. He smiled back.

“You don’t seem to be afraid of me, human” he said. “What’s your name?”

“Ceara” I said. “And should I be afraid of you, Vampire?”

He seemed to consider this for a moment before he answered, as if he wasn’t sure himself. “No” he finally told me. “Though you might make a suitable...long-term....consort.” Again the dramatic pause in his sentence was to make me think that he would turn me if I were willing. I chomped on the inside of my cheeks, thankful that Tatiana and Nora chose that moment to return from the dance floor without their partners.

“Who’s this?” Tatiana asked. Roman turned his gaze on her and she rolled her eyes.

“This is...hmmm. I don’t think he told me his name. But he’s a vampire and I think he just offered to turn me.” She narrowed her gaze and considered him, clearly appraising him as a potential suspect.

“I have it on good authority that her blood is to die for” Nora said glibly.

He turned his attention to Vampire Barbie and said “Irish. I haven’t been to Ireland for centuries. I hope it is as...lush as I remember it.” He gave her a once over and managed the leer that had just looked ridiculous on Jamie. I glanced around the bar and saw the trio talking to another group of young ladies. From their smiles, I figured they were having better luck with them. Dante saw me and raised his glass to me. I lifted mine to return the salute.

“I haven’t been there for a while myself” she said. “I suppose that you haven’t been back since St. Patrick chased out the snakes.” He paused for a moment and she clarified. “Everyone assumes that by snakes he meant evil. Is that not correct?”

He frowned. “Ah yes, Saint Patrick was a bit of a problem for my kind.”

Tatiana looked around the bar. “So who have you bitten?” she asked, watching him.

He grinned at her, again to give her the full effect of his fangs. She leaned in and examined his teeth and then sat back, picking up her Bloody Mary that had diluted with the melting ice while she danced. She looked around and got the attention of the waitress, held up her glass and three fingers and then turned her attention back to Roman.

“I wouldn’t be very much of a gentleman if I told you, would I?” he said.

“Are you a gentle man?” she asked. “I thought vampires were blood thirsty predators.”

“A myth” he said. “After the first year, we need only a few swallows of blood to survive.”

She nodded. “So you don’t drain people and leave them in alleys?”

“Hardly” he said reassuringly. “But I am hungry now. I wonder which one of you would be the tastier meal.” He turned his red eyed gaze on each of us for a moment, settling finally on me.

“Dance with me” he said, holding out his hand and standing. I looked at Tatiana and gave her a nearly imperceptible shake of my head before turning my attention to him.

“No thanks” I said. The waitress arrived with our drinks and I took mine and sipped it. “Not interested in being anyone’s midnight snack.”

He seemed shocked. Clearly he wasn’t used to rejection. “Maybe Vampire Barbie can dance with you”. I tipped my glass towards Nora who glared at me before shaking her head in his direction.

“No thanks” she said. “I’m all danced out.”

“Don’t even think of asking me” Tatiana said dismissively, standing with her drink in hand. “I’m going to see if the other resident vampire is more interesting.” She moved off in Mariette’s direction.

Roman stood there, hand still reaching towards me. “Humans don’t have the option of telling me no” he said.

“Funny, I just did” I told him. “I’m going to get a bit of fresh air” I told Nora and stood, turning my back to Roman and heading for the door, drink in hand. As expected, he followed me.

“Don’t turn your back on me” he growled as we both stepped into the cool spring evening.

I ignored him, walking a few steps from the door and leaning back against the building. I wasn’t worried about him. I didn’t think he was our killer, first of all. He seemed comical more than threatening and I had a feeling that this little fit of temper was motivated by embarrassment at being rejected in full view of his fan club. He had to follow me if he wanted to save face. But I could have misjudged him. He could be dangerous enough to let his role playing turn him in to a serial killer. If so, I could call and have an army of vampires at my side in a second. Either way he wasn’t a threat. He stood in front of me, putting one hand on the wall beside my head and leaning in. He was angry and working hard to look intimidating.

“You dare reject me?” he said in a low tone. The giggles I’d been stifling since he approached my table spilled out then.

“You are a walking cliché” I said. “I’m sorry if I’m not impressed by red contacts and expensive dentistry.” I was pretty sure he’d gone the dental implant route. “You’ve been out here long enough to save face” I told him. “Why don’t you be a good little creature of the night and run along?”

He reached out to grab my face in his hand, but stopped short of actually touching me. He stepped back, perhaps suddenly aware that I wasn’t afraid of him and not sure how to proceed in intimidating me. “You should be careful in the night” he told me, a weak attempt to continue the game. He turned on his heel, leather duster sweeping out around him, and went back into the bar.

The night was quiet and I enjoyed that. I had grown up in Fenessys and it got loud sometimes, to be sure. It was especially loud when a game was on and the regulars packed the place. I was used to bar noise. But the bars that typically attracted my peers were loud and dark with too many bodies pressing close and talking loud to be overheard. I could hear the thrum of the music through the closed door. I sipped at my drink, looking around the tree lined street as I did. The Abyss was on a short side street off of Woodward, Detroit’s main street that bisected the city into the East and West sides. I could see the heavy traffic that was customary on Woodward at all times of day and night. This street though was in a quiet tree-lined neighborhood that was mixed zoned for commercial and residential buildings. Several old mansions stood on large lots. Many of them had been converted to apartment buildings, the once lush backyards paved over to provide parking for residents. I caught a sudden movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned

in that direction and saw a dark shadowed form that appeared to be dragging another dark form. Without thinking, I dropped my glass, hearing it shatter on the ground, and ran in that direction.