

Soul Responsibility
Sisters of the Soul Book One
By PF Case

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Chapter One

I leaned back in my chair and covered my face with my hands. I was exhausted. “I had the longest day” I whined to Michael, my colleague and closest friend in our department.

“Yeah” he gave me a sympathetic look as he poured a cup of coffee from the pot I kept on the console by the door. “This job would be fantastic if we didn’t have to deal with students and administration.” It was an old joke in the academy and it had more than a little truth built in. We were always at our best and happiest when left to our research. But we were also excellent professors and we got along well with our students. Michael turned to the little fridge that I kept near the door and took out the coffee cream. “You’re really all set in here you know.” He said this at least once a week. He was referring to my mini fridge, coffee pot and microwave. “Just wait.” I nodded in agreement. “Futon is being delivered next week. Then I’ll be all set. I’ll never have to leave here if I don’t want to.”

“Sweet!” Michael said, sitting in one of the chairs across the desk from me. “So, what happened today that was so out of the ordinary to put you in a funk?”

“Oh you know...it’s the same thing every time I give my domestic abuse lecture in the Family and Crime class. I say that some women are drawn to domineering men so repeat the cycle of abuse in every one of their relationships, and the women accuse me of blaming the victim. I say that the abuser is often frustrated that he can’t deal with authority figures in his life, especially other men, and that he plays kick the dog with his partner. That makes some of the men upset because they want to blame the women. One young man told me today that his girlfriend asked to be hit because it was the only way she would listen.”

“Heard anything more from Sally Hastings?” he asked. Sally had been one of our undergrads a year ago that had become empowered with her education. She took her diploma and left for graduate school, leaving an abusive boyfriend behind. I had put her in touch with a woman that I know who managed an organization called “The Underground” that helped abused men, women and children disappear.

“Nope...she was told not to keep in touch. I imagine I will hear from her one day but not until she feels confident that she is not going to be hurt.”

“Well, shake it off!” Michael encouraged me. “The ’weekend’ is upon us which means no students for a few days.” He used air quotes to emphasize the exaggeration of the weekend. We both taught on Mondays and Wednesdays, so our weekend from students began Wednesday night. “

I took Michael’s advice and changed the subject. “Speaking of weekends, I’ll be spending my days in the library microfilm department. I need to access the Detroit newspapers from the

1900s to the 1930s and they've only been digitized from the early 40s on so far. "I finished my coffee and set my cup off to the side to rinse it out before I left for the day. "What's on for you this weekend?"

"This and that" Michael answered. "My grant proposal deadline is Friday, so that will eat up the next couple of days. Then Mikey has soccer on Saturday at noon and dinner at the in laws on Sunday. You should take a break on Saturday and come and watch the game with us."

"That sounds like fun...really." I said. I liked Michael's family. Mikey, his 10 year old son looked more like his clone than his offspring. They both had bright blue eyes and dark, nearly black hair. Long noses with the "Roman bump" that clued you in that they had an Italian heritage even if you didn't know their last name was Russo, the Italian equivalent of Smith. His daughter, Emily, was 8 years old and looked more like mom than dad. Jeannie and Emily had the same blue eyes, but had pale blond hair and fair skin that was dusted lightly with freckles. They had small features and slightly upturned noses and wide friendly grins. They were the perfect family....attractive, friendly and completely committed to each other. He grinned.

"After a few days looking at old articles it will sound like heaven. Still looking at domestic abuse during prohibition?"

"Yep." I replied. "Makes sense doesn't it? Man gets drunk, comes home, beats the wife and maybe smacks the kids a bit for good measure?" I had been considering this theory for a while now. "How else do we explain how a law gets passed so close to women's suffrage that leads immediately to widespread deviance and police corruption? Vote it into law to protect the other women while you secretly imbibe with your hubby because he isn't abusive. So I want to see how many women were arrested for drinking and if abuse went down. That will be harder to do since people kept abuse secret, but I figure I can look at old news reports of injuries and try to find hospital and police records if I can. "

"It's a good theory" he agreed. "I don't envy you spending the weekend in the stacks though...or in this case the digital room."

"Less dusty though" I said. "Last time you camped out in the morgue, you came back with red eyes and cobwebs in your hair." The morgue was the nickname for the basement of the medical campus library. It was the area where the out of circulation medical journals were stored.

"Very true" he agreed. He settled back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. He was getting comfortable which meant he had something on his mind. I glanced at the clock...nearly five. I had planned to hit the library for a few hours before grabbing take out on the way home. I sighed inwardly and asked "What's on your mind?"

"The departmental Christmas party..." He grinned as I groaned. "...you're it again" he said.

“I’m it every year” I complained. It wasn’t a real complaint. My dad owned a pub in Corktown, a small community on the West Side of Detroit. Corktown had originally been settled by the Irish and was still home to a large Irish American community, but had diversified over the years to include the German, Maltese, Mexican and African American transplants to the area. Now the community was smaller, due to revitalization and development in the area, much more diverse, but still stable and friendly with a small town feel in the midst of a large urban area. The pub had done well and had been passed from father to son since it opened its doors in 1911. It was the perfect place for the Departmental Christmas party... a stone’s throw from campus that was just north of downtown Detroit, and steeped in the history of Detroit that appealed to my Criminal Justice colleagues. It also meant a nice bit of business for my dad which didn’t hurt. The department would cover the price of the meal but the bar was open. The only folks, in my opinion, who could outdrink the stereotypical Irishman, were the stereotypical professors, of which the department had many.

My parents, Nathaniel and Grace, lived nearby in a five bedroom renovated Victorian that had also been passed from father to son. My dad had grown up there as had my granddad. Now that we were grown and on our own all those empty rooms meant a safe place to crash for my colleagues who over indulged. Every year at least two of the rooms were claimed for the night. “Who’s going to help plan the menu?” I asked. “Or am I just giving my parents the budget and telling them to have at it?” The last few years the practice had been to plan the menu with our newest chair, Alice. Most people thought this was her need to control but I knew better. Every year she was on a new diet. She was short and slender, so the diets were based on whatever the latest health advice happened to be. Last year she had switched to a Vegan lifestyle and only ate organic so my bet was that she’d be planning the menu with me. I would’ve won that bet.

“Talk to Alice. She mentioned that she would like to meet with you and your mom sooner rather than later.”

“I really don’t know why I have to be in the middle of this” I said. “She could just as easily contact mom without me.”

“She wants you to stay on top of the plans to make sure your mom follows through” he replied.

“As if I ever do that” I smirked. “I say I do, but you know my mom. She isn’t managed.”

“Our little secret” he agreed. “But the theme for the decorations and the secret Santa is on you.”

“Yeah, yeah” I said. This shouldn’t be a difficult task, but it always managed to be. I had planned the party for four years...since I let it slip in a meeting that my parents owned a pub. The first year I had found myself in the middle of an argument over spouses and families. The younger faculty, who argued they still liked their spouses, wanted the affair to be family friendly. The older faculty wanted it to be staff, students and faculty only. I negotiated a “spouses optional” adult only compromise which satisfied everyone. Parents got babysitters and couples

decided if they would invite their spouses instead of having the group decide it for us. I was single with no kids and didn't really care. But I knew that Michael wanted to bring Jeannie and looked forward to the party as an annual date night.

Then there was always the Secret Santa argument. How much should we spend? Could we trade names? Should the grad students go into the same pool with the staff and faculty or have their own pool? Did it have to stay anonymous if we couldn't think of anything to buy? Every year, planning the holiday party succeeded in making me think I worked with a department of spoiled eight year olds.

"Well alright then" Michael said standing up. "That was less painful than I anticipated."

"Like there was a chance I'd say no." I smirked at him. "If Alice weren't the chair, I wouldn't even be formally asked, it would just be assumed." Alice wrote the book on manners.

"Well, I'm off. Jeannie threatened me with divorce if I didn't make it home for dinner tonight."

I rolled my eyes. "As if that would ever happen, but it's in your best interests to keep her happy anyway. Tell Mikey I'll try to make it to his game if I don't lose track of time."

After Michael left, I pulled back the shade that covered my window and looked outside. It was snowing. Not the kind of snow that meant business, thank God. It was the weak November snow that we often got before Thanksgiving in Michigan. Tiny little flakes that looked like confetti fell in haphazard patterns. My mom would say that it was too cold to snow. The temperature was already into the 30s...not a good sign for the rest of the winter. I pulled on my hat and gloves and twisted my scarf around my neck before slipping my arms into my long black overcoat. Having a CYA (cover your ass!) coat was essential in Michigan and this one hung just below my knees. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror I had hung on the wall by my door. Dressed all in black...my hat and gloves had to match my coat...I looked like a Goth 'wannabe'. Ironically, I had even worn black today...black dress, tights and boots. If I were as pale as my sisters, I would have looked like a vampire I mused. I wasn't exactly dark, but I did have a bit more color than my sisters who resembled antebellum debutantes who avoided the sun. My face was oval shaped and my nose was straight and narrow with a high bridge. My mouth wasn't too full and it wasn't too thin. I didn't think that I was beautiful but I was pretty.

Both of my parents were Irish American and their great-grandparents had arrived in the US via Ellis Island in 1910. Not long after, their respective families ended up in Corktown along with a lot of other newly immigrated Irish families. I used to lament the dark hair and blue eyes that my dad bestowed on me. My coloring even inspired my name, Ceara...pronounced Kee-ra with a slight roll to the r...meant dark in Irish Gaelic. Like most teens, I wanted the opposite of what I had growing up. My sisters, I had five of them, all had my mom's curly red hair and bright green eyes. I would have traded with any of them in a heartbeat at 16, but I had grown to like my features over time. My only brother looked more like me and our dad. The resemblance was

emphasized more by the fact that I kept my dark straight chestnut brown hair cut in a very short “pixie” style. My dad hated my haircut and my mom told me that my thick healthy hair was too beautiful to keep cropped so short. I would remind them that I wasn’t vain and that this way I could finger comb it after a shower and be good to go, unlike my sisters who fussed for hours to get out of the house. Add to that the fact that I had never gotten in the habit of doing more than adding a bit of mascara to my long dark lashes, and I could get ready to go as quickly as my dad and brother.

I really hadn’t spent a lot of time thinking about my appearance. I went right from high school to college going to class all day and working part time in dad’s pub at nights. I finished my undergrad in three years by taking more than a full time load every semester including summers and that didn’t leave anytime for boys, dates or worrying about my appearance. This was the motivation for the short hair...I didn’t have time to dry it before class and wet hair as you run to classes in a Michigan winter is not a good plan. I went straight to graduate school after finishing my undergrad. I rented a small off campus apartment in Ann Arbor while I finished my Masters and Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. Again, not much time for a social life as I fast tracked to finish classes and writing. At 26, I returned home to Detroit with a tenure track appointment at the university. That was 7 years ago and at 32 I was recently tenured and finally felt like I had the ability to slow down enough to breathe.

I didn’t know that I wanted a relationship even now that I had more time. I wasn’t a nun, mind you. There had been men here and there in my life, just none that I wanted to make a commitment to. I had of course gotten the reputation for being an ice queen, to the more refined in my life, and a bitch to the more honest ones. I guessed that the real issue was that I had not met a man I couldn’t live without, and until I did, I was going to stay single. Why settle, right?

I shut off my light and locked the office door behind me, taking the one flight of stairs to the ground floor slowly. I was anxious to get to my research, but not looking forward to heading outside for the short walk across campus to the Purdy-Kresge library. The wind had picked up and it was already getting dark. It was only five, but it looked much later. I put my head down a bit to block the wind from my face and plunged into the early evening.

Chapter Two

I had lived in the Detroit area for my entire life. My years in Ann Arbor were the only time that I had not lived in the area, and even then I drove the 45 miles at least once a month to visit home. I had purchased a small home in Grosse Pointe Park my first year at the university, which was as far as any of us has ventured from our Corktown roots. Despite this, I was unaware of the full history of the prohibition-era in Detroit.

My great-grandparents had opened Fennessys in 1911, just a few years before prohibition went into effect. I knew from family history that we had continued to sell alcohol in the pub to the regulars that we knew and trusted. I'm not sure if the pub qualified as a speakeasy really, but we did a good business during those years serving lunch and dinner along with select beverages to not only the locals but also the reporters who worked for the Detroit Newspapers and local businessmen who made the pub a regular spot for meals before the Volstead act was passed in 1919 and the law went into effect in 1920. So the pub, and likewise, the family had survived during the span of the 13 years that alcohol was illegal in Detroit.

What I learned from my research was that the law passed with a majority in Michigan, likely influenced by a campaign run by Billy Sunday, a charismatic evangelist and ardent Prohibitionist who made the rounds just before the vote. Despite the majority vote, the law was mostly disregarded in the area. The night before the law went into effect places that sold liquor stayed open to the minute that Prohibition became law and quickly sold out of all of their supplies.

Organized crime got involved with supplying alcohol to the Detroit area. Much of the alcohol found its way to the population through the Oakland Sugar House or through the legal brewing of "near beer" by local breweries like Strohs, since near beer could only be made by removing the alcohol from actual beer. The Purple Gang, a group of childhood friends that had organized in the school yard, quickly dominated Detroit's illegal alcohol trade. A pipeline of alcohol was supplied to Detroit from manufacturers in Toledo that flourished despite roadblocks that included poles and trees stretched out across the infamous Dixie Highway route.

When Toledo became dry, the trade moved to the Detroit-Windsor, Canada border. Every night, boats sped across the one mile distance between the shorelines of the Detroit River smuggling in alcohol. Tunnels were maintained between private boathouses and homes to aid in the smuggling effort. Alcohol consumption was so widespread in the area that residents scheduled deliveries of the contraband to their homes. Even the mayor, the police chief and other elected officials were arrested when raids were made on organizations that supplied alcohol.

I was pleased to note that women were also arrested, not only for drinking in illegal speakeasies but also for smuggling alcohol along the Toledo-Detroit route. They padded their bodies with slings that held a row of bottles around their waists, hidden by the generous coats that were in

style at the time. Some even hid the contraband in a way that made them appear pregnant. Small, delicately designed flasks were concealed in garters for personal consumption.

I scribbled notes furiously in my notebook. I could hear the constant clicking of laptops around me, but I preferred to take notes on paper. It just seemed easier at the end of the day to have the notebook open beside me as I worked than to switch back and forth between active documents. I added the articles that I would need to print into a queue so that I could pay for them all at once by inserting my One Card, the multipurpose ID system that the university used, into the nearby printer. It was actually a very convenient system. I could access the parking structures, the copiers and printers and buy a coffee at the campus Starbucks with one card, as long as I remembered to load it with cash.

As was typically the case, I didn't realize the hour until I leaned back in my chair to stretch my back and arms and finally noticed the rumble of hunger that I had managed to block. I looked at my watch. It was 10:30. I'd been sitting here for just over four hours. The library would close in 30 minutes. I closed out of my files after making a note of the year and date where I finished and took the cassette of film out of the machine. Gathering the microfiche cassettes and my notebooks, I packed up and dropped the films off at the reference desk.

As I pulled on my gloves, I was happy to note that the snow had stopped. An empty chip bag blew along the sidewalk though so I knew that the wind was still high. I sighed, once again stepping out into the cold. I picked up my pace on the way to the structure. It was likely the pace that saved my life. Campus was nearly deserted, and while the walks were well lit, the buildings and trees that lined them created lots of places with shadows where people could hide. I didn't see the person hiding in the breezeway between the Student Union and dorms. I also didn't hear the shot that rang out. I only felt a heavy thud as the bullet hit me above my right ear. There was no pain as I was unconscious by the time my body slammed into the pavement. This too was fortunate. The lack of movement must have convinced the shooter that I was dead because he didn't walk over for a kill shot.

The events that followed were a blur of activity as I drifted in and out. I heard snatches of conversations. First a scream, I would learn later that this was the student who had followed a short pace behind me and had the good fortune of finding me slumped and bleeding. This was followed by a feeling of being lifted as I was placed on a stretcher and the shadows of red and blue flashing lights against my closed lids. The last thing I remembered was a bright light over my head that was broken by the images of heads leaning over me in the emergency room. Then there was nothing but quiet darkness.

A lot of people in comas describe the experience of waking up as if they are fighting their way out of a multileveled or layered hallway. They wake up one level at a time. That wasn't what I experienced. I experienced waking up as an auditory sensation. I heard a buzz of noise around me that sounded like a swarm of bees, mulling lazily around a clover field. As I came closer to

consciousness, the buzzing was replaced by a multitude of disembodied voices, a whispering crowd where the occasional word was crystal clear. The number of voices blended together into a pleasant hum of humanity that was too confused to hear any distinct conversations.

Little by little the whispering became less cacophonous and distinct voices stood out in sharp relief. Not that the conversations made any sense to me. I could identify about 10 distinct voices and each seemed to be asking a question or trying to assign a task. Odd, was all I thought in response. Who could they all be talking to? I tried to force my eyes to focus and found I couldn't. I think this is the moment that I realized that I wasn't awake, although I didn't know that I was in a coma.

The world around me was in complete darkness. I could hear clearly enough but I couldn't see. "Hello?? Hello??" I responded. "Is anyone here? Who's talking?" Suddenly, a masculine voice spoke louder to drown the others out. "Damn it woman" he snapped impatiently "are you paying any attention to me at all?" I turned towards the voice. The male voice chuckled sarcastically. "That's a stupid question isn't it? Who the hell do you think you're listening to if no one else is here?" He had a point.

"Yeah well.... Where the hell are we? I can't see a thing." Another sarcastic chuckle. "God save me if I have to depend on you" he said. "You're not "special" are you? Open your eyes". And I did.

And that was it. Straight from unconscious with unknown voices for company to the steady and somewhat reassuring beep of a heart monitor. And the worst headache I'd ever had. I looked around me and knew I was in the hospital. The monitor and the IV pole gave it away....I'm just smart like that. And what was that....eeewww...a catheter bag. Along with the headache, I was thirsty. My lips felt parched and my teeth and tongue felt furry. I moved my head too quickly as I looked for a call button for the nurse and a sharp stab of pain made me cry out a little. My hands flew to my head. The right side was covered in a bandage. I had a moment to be happy that I wore my hair short because I had a feeling there was little hair left under that bandage. Thin wires attached to little sticky buttons were scattered around my head in what seemed to be random placement. What on earth happened to me, I thought. I strained to remember all that I could. The last thing I remembered was leaving the library and thinking that we would have a cold winter this year and then a loud noise beside me. That was it. No feeling of alarm or worry. Had I been distracted and stepped off the curb in front of a car? Make that a bus, given how bad I felt. I remembered the thud, the scream and the lights, but other than that I had no clue what had happened.

The call button, one of the newer ones that was an all in one intercom, TV remote and call button, was on the table next to the bed and just out of my reach. My door was open and I tried to yell, but my voice was barely a whisper. Inwardly sighing, I shifted slowly in the bed, trying not to move my head around too much. Every slight movement accentuated the already sharp

and painful throbbing of my injury with a lightning strike of hot intensity. It felt like a marathon of effort, but I twisted enough to snag the wire attached to the call button and drug it slowly off the table and up the side of the bed. Collapsing back into my pillows, I closed my eyes and was unconscious again.

I don't know how long I was out before I could open my eyes again. I figured it wasn't long since I didn't fall back in the coma. When I opened my eyes again, the call button was still lightly clutched in my right hand. It took several tries to put enough pressure on the button to call the nurse, but I finally managed it. I relaxed back into my pillows, with closed eyes.

In what felt like a seconds, my room was buzzing with activity. Had the nurses been paying more attention to the brain wave monitor, I would have been saved the trouble of snagging that blasted button, I thought. "You're awake!" This was from an older oriental woman who turned out to be my doctor. Despite her need to state the obvious she turned out to be a well-qualified specialist in brain injuries. I grunted in agreement. "Thirsty" I said. Keeping words to the minimum seemed to be the way to go since forming them took such monumental effort. Dr. Shinapatra turned to one of the nurses and asked him to bring me some ice chips. "You've been out for a week" she said. "Let's take the fluids slow. You aren't dehydrated so this should help."

Just a week, I thought. That's good. It would have sucked to find out I'd slept away my 30s. As it was, I had hadn't even missed Thanksgiving. She busied herself looking at the long strips of paper that had been continuously spewing out of the various monitors that I was hooked up to. "What year were you born?" she asked conversationally. "1979" I replied. I turned and smiled, at least I hoped it was a smile and not a grimace, at the nurse who offered me a spoon of ice chips. I tried to take the cup but he shook his head. "Let me hold it for you" he offered. "You're likely more weak than you realize". That was okay with me, I realized. It beat trying to move my head to the spoon and getting more of those stabs of pain.

"What's your name?"

"Ceara Fennessy"

"Where do you work?"

"Faculty at the university".

"Who's the President?" Dr. Shinapatra continued questioning me in an easy conversational tone.

"U.S. or university?" I asked. "If you mean the U.S., Obama." My voice still sounded odd and weak, but it was easier to talk now that several of the ice chips had melted down my throat and eased the thirst. I imagined this was how Dorothy's Tin Man felt when she oiled his jaw and he could finally talk again.

“What happened?” I asked. “Was I hit by a car?”

Dr. Shinapatra looked at me. “No, Dr. Fennessy, you were shot. Do you remember anything at all about that night?”

I stared at her dumbfounded. “Shot? How can that be?”

“What do you remember?”

I focused on remembering that night. “Leaving the library. Pulling my jacket closer because it was cold. And a noise beside me.” The noise. A pop that made me jump. Go figure. “I thought someone stepped on a stick of something. But then I felt a big thud and the next thing was a scream. Maybe the lights and the ER.”

“It was a clean entry wound” she explained. “You didn’t need bone grafts, which is good. We made a small incision around the wound to remove the bullet. You will have a rectangular scar with a dent in the middle as the bone heals. This is why you have pain.”

Dr. Shinapatra motioned to the nurse and gestured towards the lighted box on the wall that had a series of x-rays on display. He moved over and switched on the lights. I was looking at my head. On the right hand side the bullet was completely visible. I turned to her with a shocked look on my face. “Don’t worry she said, we removed it. As bad as it looks, the damage was minimal. It was a small caliber and the police think it may have been defective. It should have done more damage than it did. And you were lucky too that it seems to have done little damage to the areas of the brain that we know affect cognitive and language functions. I wasn’t sure you’d be able to think clearly and communicate. You can so this is good. The problem is that there is brain damage and we will only know with time what this will cost you. Otherwise, you appear to be doing better than expected.”

“Great” I muttered. I closed my eyes overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation.

“You have family and friends that are waiting to see you.” Dr. Shinapatra said gently. “I can let your parents in for a moment if you feel up to it. I need to go and tell them that you’re awake and how you are doing. The police also need to be notified that you are awake and able to speak. But I won’t let them come in until tomorrow.”

“Yes...parents...please.” I opened my eyes and looked up at her. She was quite a bit shorter than I was and older. Her black hair, shot through with strands of silvery gray, was cut short and framed her face. The skin around her eyes crinkled when she smiled warmly and patted my hand. “It is a lot to take in” she said sympathetically. “Let me go and tell your parent’s you’re awake”.

My nurse was about forty years old and moved around the room quietly and efficiently. He had taken my temperature and blood pressure and made notes in the chart that hung over the foot of

my bed. He moved a large vase of bright and cheery flowers to the nightstand that was close enough to the bed to allow me to smell the roses that were tucked here and there in the bouquet. He plucked the card out of the vase and handed it to me. I nearly wept when the card swam into focus. The note, written in the neat script of the department secretary urged me to get well soon. It wasn't the sentiment that made me teary eyed, it was the fact that I could focus and read the note. So far so good, I told myself. The bullet hadn't taken away my ability to read. He moved to the window and pulled back the curtain and opened the blinds. The tree outside my window whipped about in the wind. The sky was darkened and fat raindrops splashed on the window. "Sorry it's not a more cheerful scene" he said "but it's better than staring at the walls."

"I love the rain." I replied. I leaned back and closed my eyes again. I was in shock. Who would want to shoot me? What would I lose? Would the injury interfere with my ability to work? And once again, who would shoot me? These questions bounced around in my thoughts and among them, the realization that I could just as easily be dead or in a vegetative state. I was lucky, even if at the moment it didn't really feel like it. I opened my eyes when the nurse came back over to my bed. "How's the pain?" he asked.

"Pretty bad" I said.

"Okay...I can give you a shot of morphine. I'll be right back". The door started to swing closed behind him as he left but a large hand caught it mid swing and slowly, cautiously pushed it open. My dad stepped quietly into the room with my mom at his heels. I forced a smile for them but the looks on their faces brought the tears that I didn't want to let fall. They both looked like they'd aged a decade since I'd seen them, which had only been the day before the accident. They looked tired and mom's eyes were red and swollen from crying.

My parents flanked me, mom on the left and dad on the right. Dad picked up my hand and gently held it between his giant ones, being careful not to put pressure on my I.V. as he held it. Mom leaned in to lay her cheek against mine, murmuring "sweet baby" as she kissed me repeatedly. I pressed my cheek against her lips and inhaled deeply. My mom smelled like apples and cinnamon to me. She didn't wear perfume, never had due to my dad's allergies. Her scent carried with it the memories of comfort and care from childhood. I felt better just knowing she was here. "It's okay mom" I said.

"We thought we'd lost you" dad said his voice raspy with emotion. He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it before moving our joined hands to cover his eyes. After a moment, he moved them to look at the bandage on my head. "It's a good thing you have such a hard head" he teased. "I knew the Fennessy genes would pay off eventually."

"It's okay dad." I said through my own tears. "And I'm going to be fine as soon as you smuggle in a Guinness for me."

He smiled a little and said "that's my girl".

“Are you in much pain?” my mother asked. She too had shifted position to look at the bandage.

“I’m okay” I assured them again. I seemed like okay was the only word I could manage. “It just hurts a bit when I move my head too much. It’s no worse than a hangover. It will get better. The doctor says that I’m lucky that I can talk and think.” I closed my eyes. I may be able to do both, but the energy it took was exhausting. The pain pulsed through my head with every beat of my heart, which made it worse. I needed to rest, but I didn’t want to. I’d been out of it for a week and I wanted to reassure my parents. I forced my eyes open just as the nurse returned with a syringe of morphine.

“This will make her sleepy” he told my parents. “You should say good-bye for now and come back in a few hours when she is awake again.” He pushed the needle into my IV and plunged the medication into the line. “My name is Dennis and I work the night shift for the next four days. If you need anything, just buzz for me.”

I quietly blessed him for voicing my own thoughts to my parents. “Go home.” I told them. I knew they’d been camped here all week. “I’ll have them call you when I wake up. I’m going to be alright now.” I closed my eyes. I was expanding my vocabulary from OK to alright. That was a good sign, right? I felt the light pressure of their lips on either cheek and heard my mom sniffle back tears before the darkness claimed me again.

Chapter Three

When I woke up, it was dark and the corridor outside my room was as quiet as a hospital ever gets. As my eyes focused, I recognized the outline of a man standing near the foot of my bed. His back was to me. He was staring out the window and seemed to be focused on something beyond my line of sight.

Before I could say anything he turned to me and spoke “Well, you’re awake. You do like to sleep, don’t you?”

“You would too” I said “if you’d been shot in the head and filled up with morphine.” He was about 50 with gray hair at his temples. His wrinkled suit strained at the buttons over a stomach that had seen too many cocktail hours or take out dinners at a desk and not enough exercise. His skin had a pasty, unhealthy sheen to it that made it obvious that he didn’t spend much time outdoors. It took a minute for me to realize that he wasn’t dressed right for hospital staff and the realization made my heart speed up and jump to my throat. “Who are you? What do you want?” I asked, reaching too quickly for the call button and wincing at the sudden stab of pain that accompanied the motion.

He reached across the space and lifted the device, dropping it into my hand. “My name is Harvey Jamison” he said. “And I want you to help me.” His voice was familiar, but I couldn’t quite place where I’d heard it before.

“Help you how?” I asked, pushing the call button. “As you can see, I’m not really able to help myself at the moment.”

“You’ll recover. And when you do, I want you to help me find out who killed me.”

Okay, a crazy man, I thought. I said “Oh sure, no problem. Just call me Nancy Drew.” I hit the call button again, knowing it wouldn’t do any good since the light was already on over my bed. As if on command, Dennis walked in, carrying a syringe in his hand.

“Good evening, Dr. Fennessy” he said. “Are you in much pain tonight?”

“A bit. But I’m concerned about this crazy man here. Don’t you have security?”

Dennis gave me a calm look and gazed around the room. “There’s no one here” he said.

“Of course there is” I retorted. “He’s right there!” I pointed at Crazy Harvey, who at the moment was rocking on his heels, his hands clasped behind his back, smiling patiently at me. “He can’t see me” he announced.

“No one’s here” Dennis said. He was looking at me patiently too, but not enough to hide his concern. “Maybe you were dreaming?” he asked.

I wanted to argue with him that I wasn’t dreaming and insist that there was someone else in the room. But head injury or not, I wasn’t born yesterday. I knew it would make me sound crazy. Instead, I gave Crazy Harvey a dirty look and forced myself to relax back into my pillows. “Maybe” I agreed. “Maybe it’s the morphine. Is that what you have in the syringe?”

“Yes. You can have another shot now.”

“I don’t think I want it.” I said. “If I don’t move my head it doesn’t hurt that bad. Can I just get aspirin or Tylenol?”

“I don’t have an order for that. I’ll have to ask the on call doc.” He moved around the room checking gauges and monitors. “Do you need me to help you up to the bathroom?” The catheter had come out that morning, can we say hallelujah? Now I just needed the bed pan to go.

“No, I’m okay. Could I have more water?”

“Sure thing, sweetie” he said as he jotted something in the chart clipped to the foot of my bed. “Let me find out about the meds and I’ll be right back.”

In the time he was gone, I squeezed my eyes closed and opened them quickly several times. Each time I did Crazy Harvey was still standing by my bed. By the time Nurse Dennis returned with the “on call doc” he had moved to sit on the window sill, watching the action with obvious interest.

“Hi there” the doctor said. “I’m Doctor Kubitz. Dennis tells me you had an uninvited guest tonight?” He posed it like a question.

“I thought I saw someone, a crazy man named Harvey. I guess it was just a dream.”

He was at least 15 years younger than Nurse Dennis. He looked too young to be a doctor, I thought. This was ironic since I was constantly told I looked too young to be a professor. He was a tall skinny blonde who looked tired and I would bet that his energy at this hour was fueled by coffee or Red Bull. He took a little flashlight out of the pocket of his white coat and flashed it first in one of my eyes, and then the other. I guessed he was a resident given his age and that he had the graveyard shift.

“Hmmm” he said, replacing the flashlight and putting the stethoscope around his neck against my chest. “Sounds good” he said, scribbling his own notes in the chart before turning to talk to me again. “Is he still here?”

“No” I lied, glancing at the window and glaring at Harvey who was grinning from ear to ear.

“Hmm” he said again. “Can you tell me where you are?”

“In the hospital. And before you ask, I know my name, where I work and who the president is right now. Can I just switch to non-narcotic pain killers now? I don’t want any more waking dreams.”

“If that’s what you want, that’s fine. We can always give you something stronger if you change your mind.”

“I’m sure I won’t” I grumbled. Harvey was standing behind them, staring at me through the gap between their shoulders.

“Well okay then.” To Dennis, he said “give her two Tylenol, but if she wants the morphine later you don’t have to call me. Just give it to her.” He patted my foot through the covers on the bed. “Try to get some more sleep” he said. They left the room together. I stared at Harvey until Nurse Dennis returned with two Tylenol in one of those little plastic cups and a large Styrofoam cup of water with a bendy straw. He watched as I took the medicine and then took the cup from my hand and put it within my reach on my table. “Do you want me to sit with you until you go to sleep?” he asked.

“No, I’m okay. I was just a little disoriented. I’ll be able to go back to sleep.”

“Just call if you need anything.” I assured him I would and he left. Harvey moved to sit in the chair by my bed. He sat quietly, staring at me. “Figment of my imagination” I muttered and closed my eyes. I forced myself to ignore the feeling of being stared at and eventually drifted off to a fitful sleep with dreams of Crazy Harvey, sitting slumped behind a cluttered desk as if he’d put his head down to rest his eyes.

I awoke a few hours later to a nurse moving quietly around the room. I opened my eyes and looked cautiously around. No Harvey. I sighed, but couldn’t shake the feeling that I was being watched. The shift had changed as I slept so Dennis was gone. Ramona was my morning nurse. She was young, maybe a bit younger than me, and cheery. She was a stunningly beautiful African American woman. She had dark skin and wore her hair in a short Afro. Her hair style meant that the first thing you noticed was her large brown eyes, the color of a chocolate bar, and her regally high cheekbones.

“Heard you had a rough moment last night.” She made small talk as she moved around the room. “Snow today!” she announced. I looked out the window. “Oh not yet” she said. “In the forecast. They’re predicting 3 inches.”

“You say that like it’s a good thing” I said.

“Oh it is!” she exclaimed. “If we get enough snow I’m going to Shanty Creek for the weekend to snowboard.” She moved efficiently, clearing away used water cups from my table and

straightening the vases that held flowers and cards from well-wishers before returning to my bedside.

“Never understood the appeal of that sport” I said. “Skiing either for that matter. Seems insane to strap waxed wood to your feet and slide down a hill.”

She chuckled. “It’s exhilarating and keeps your butt and thighs perfectly toned.” She patted her butt for emphasis. “How about we get you up to the bathroom? You can shower too if you’d like. Now that you’re off the morphine and drinking lots of fluids, we can get this IV out too.”

“I’d definitely like that” I agreed. I only winced a little as she pulled the needle out of my hand and held pressure on the tiny hole to stop the light flow of blood that escaped. She used a Band Aid to hold a cotton ball in place, which would no doubt end up in the shower floor.

“Okay” she said. “You have to take it very slow and lean on me when you stand up. I’ll help you into the shower. You’ll need to use the seat for a while until we know you won’t fall over. Ready?”

She put one hand on my back to support me as I slowly moved to a sitting position. My head still hurt, but not nearly as bad as it had. I supposed that was to be expected. It had been more than a week since the attack. The skin was starting to itch under the bandage too. “Sit for a minute” she said. “I’m sorry if this hurts a bit.” She took the bandage off my wound in a quick movement. It did hurt a bit, but only where the tape was stuck in my hair and I said “ouch”.

“That wasn’t too bad.” She bent to slip my feet into the ugly hospital slipper socks with rubber soles. “I know these are ugly, but they’re good for your first trip to the shower.”

“How would you know? We could put some tape in your hair and yank it out to see what you think.” I grumbled. “But no, it wasn’t too bad.” She laughed.

Still leaning on her for support, I stood. As we walked toward the bathroom, each step felt like twenty, I gazed over my shoulder. Ramona followed my gaze. I could have sworn I’d caught a movement out of the corner of my eye, but there was no one there. I didn’t say anything as Ramona guided me into the bathroom and fixed the bath chair for me, moving the shower head to a lower hook on the wall so that I could easily reach it without standing up. She turned the water on, testing the heat with her hand until it was perfect. Then she handed me a small bottle of a shampoo-conditioner mix, a small bar of soap and a wash cloth. “Do you need help undressing?” she asked.

“No, I think I’m good.” The hospital “johnnie” was standard issue. The only update to the design was Velcro closures at the shoulder and neck. It still tied at the waist. I was naked underneath. I slid onto the chair and pulled the curtain closed, slipping my arms out of the gown and tossing it onto the floor by the shower. I could hear Ramona moving to pick it up.

“I’ll have to help you out, so don’t try it by yourself” she said. She chatted on about snowboarding and how everyone should do it. Then she added that she really didn’t want everyone to get into it because that would make the slopes too crowded. I barely listened though. I was in heaven with the warm water spilling over my body. I squeezed shampoo onto my hands and worked it into lather before carefully massaging it into my scalp. I ignored the red tinged bubbles that washed over my breasts. Blood in my hair, of course. They’d washed me up, but only shampoo would take care of it all. I lathered, rinsed, repeated until the bubbles ran white. I played my fingers over the wound and let them step count 22 staples. They were arranged in a slim rectangular shape as the doctor had told me to expect. The entry wound was stitched closed. As I’d thought, a small area around them had been shaved but I could feel new growth coming in. My hair grew fast. I had to cut it every 6 weeks to keep the short style I preferred.

Satisfied that my hair was clean when I felt it squeak in my fingers, I turned my attention to my body. I had lost weight. I was thin to begin with so it didn’t take much for me to notice. My hand was bruised from the IV and there were bruises on the inside of my right elbow too, most likely from IVs that had come and gone since the attack. They were beginning to turn that sick shade of yellow and didn’t hurt. I was reluctant to get out of the shower. The act of cleaning up was the first normal thing I’d done since I left the library. But I reached over and turned off the water. I knew Ramona was right outside the curtain.

“Done” I said. She handed me a towel, busying herself with the curtain. I was sure she was protecting my modesty. I wasn’t the first person she’d helped in the shower and wouldn’t be the last.

“Your mom brought you a bag when you were admitted. She knew you’d want your things when you woke up.” She handed me my toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste. “She also brought you clothes and pajamas. How about we put those on after you finish in here?”

“Oh yes” I sighed. Real clothes and a toothbrush! Another step towards normalcy. I leaned on the little sink for support as I squeezed toothpaste onto the brush. Ramona stood by my elbow, but she didn’t help me. She must have recognized my need to be normal or maybe she was just encouraging independence. I studied my reflection in the bathroom mirror as I brushed my teeth. The right side of my head had indeed been shaved bald. The skin around the staples was puckered and had patches of flaking white skin over the wound. There were traces of what I guessed was iodine that didn’t hide the dark black and purple bruises that extended up under the hair that I had left on that side. I had dark blue circles under my eyes.

“I need to pee” I said. I didn’t. I just needed a moment alone. Knowing something is there and seeing it for yourself are two different things. I had felt detached as the doctor discussed my injury. Seeing it for the first time had left me shaking inside from a wave of panic. I didn’t want to give them any reason to suspect that I wasn’t recovering.

“Okay. I’ll wait just outside the door. Don’t stand up without my help. Standing up can be a challenge when you haven’t been mobile for a while.”

After I finished, she helped me into the room. My bed had been changed while I was in the shower. My robe was lying across the foot of the bed with a pair of pajamas I didn’t recognize. Mom had been shopping. I sat on the edge of the bed, overcome by a wave of dizziness.

“Just relax a minute” Ramona said. “It will be easier next time you’re up.” Embarrassed, I had to ask her to help me slip my underwear over my feet and up to my knees and then she supported me while I pulled them on the rest of the way. She did the same with the soft blue pajama pants. She held my shirt as I slid my arms in, but only watched as I managed to button it.

I felt like I had run a marathon, but it felt great. “Can I sit in the chair for a while before I get back into bed?” I asked.

“Absolutely” Ramona said. “You get a breakfast tray today. Real food too! Hospital food, of course, so I won’t promise its good, but at least it isn’t Jell-O and broth. Tomorrow you can order what you want.”

She helped me into my robe and slippers, my fuzzy blue ones from home and not the ugly brown hospital issue with rubber tracks on the soles, and over to the chair. Once I was settled, she moved the table over in front of me and lowered it to a comfortable level. I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes.

“How’s the pain?” Ramona asked. “Do you want me to bring you Tylenol before your food gets here?”

“Yes, that would be great. It isn’t so bad now, just a little headache.”

“I’ll be right back” she said and disappeared out the door.

I looked around the room. I still felt like I was being watched, but there was no one there. I supposed it was just left over from my dream. It had seemed so real, but in the light of day it was hard to believe that Harvey had been more than a dream. Ramona returned with the Tylenol in its little cup sitting on my food tray.

“Perfect timing” she said. “Food service was in the hall so I snatched your tray too.”

I swallowed the pills and examined the tray. A thick brown bowl held an unopened box of cheerios. A larger tray, covered with the same thick brown plastic as the bowl, held scrambled eggs, bacon and two slices of toast. A little dish on the side had butter pats and jelly packets. I had a cup of coffee, with a creamer packet, a small plastic container of orange juice and a carton of milk. I thought I might eat it all.

I had just sprinkled the little packets of salt and pepper on my eggs and taken my first sip of coffee when my parents came into my room.

“You’re up!” my mom said. She leaned over to kiss me on the cheek before pulling the other chair in the room over beside me and sitting down. My dad leaned over and kissed me too. They both spent a few minutes examining my head.

“Oh it doesn’t look too bad.” my mom lied. My dad harrumphed.

“How’re the eggs?” he asked.

“Don’t know yet.” I shoveled a bite in my mouth. “Not as good as Mom’s but they’ll do”.

“Your sisters and brother will be in tonight” mom said, fussing with the collar of my robe.

“We’ll have to be at the pub” she added. “Kieran has been handling it alone since you’ve been here.”

Kieran and I were Irish Twins. His birthday was January 1, 1979. Mine was December 31, 1979. And wasn’t I a nice surprise for mom and dad when they discovered I was on the way. My mom laughed about it now, but she said she punished dad the entire nine months she was pregnant for his bionic sperm. She only forgave him, she said, when the doctor put me in her arms. My brother tended bar at Fennessys now and would one day take over the pub when my dad retired. He started tending bar as soon as he was of age, but still managed to make the Dean’s list as he worked his way through a business degree at my dad’s insistence. Dad wanted him to have options, but in the end the family tie to the business was all that really mattered to Kieran. Right at that moment I couldn’t think of anything that I wanted more than to be sitting on one of the high stools at the bar, nursing a beer and watching the locals play darts. The regulars at the pub were like my extended family.

“The pub has been hopping since this happened” dad said, as if reading my mind. “Everyone stops in for a beer and an update. All I can say is when they catch the bastard that did this they better make sure they keep him locked up tight and out of Corktown.”

“I heard from Alice.” Mom said, changing the subject. “We’re meeting this weekend to go over the party menu. She said to tell you that Michael was taking over the rest of the planning. She also said to tell you that they’re covering the rest of the term and your finals so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“If I’d known that this was what it took to get off the hook I might have shot myself!” I said. I’d completely forgotten finals. Today was November 19th and there were only two weeks left until the fall classes ended.

“Don’t joke about that” Mom warned. “You gave us the scare of our life!”

I smiled and patted her hand. "I showered today..." I changed the subject. "...and thanks for the clothes. I love the PJs. I feel more like myself now."

"I knew you'd feel better if you were in real clothes."

"She went to three stores to find them" Dad pretended to complain. "She went through your clothes and said all you had at home were old sweats and ratty t-shirts."

"They're comfy" I whined. "And who knew I'd be wearing them in public." I put the slice of toast I'd been nibbling on back on the tray. I had managed the bacon and eggs and one slice of the toast before the fatigue kicked in. Without saying a word, my mom stood and moved the table away from my chair and my dad lifted me into his arms, swinging me easily towards the bed. He held me while my mom folded back the blankets and then he gently laid me back on the pillows while mom slipped my slippers off my feet and pulled the blankets over me.

"You guys make me feel like a baby" I said, but I smiled warmly at them.

"We'll get going and let you get some rest" dad said.

"No, stay" I replied. "I don't need to sleep. I just got tired of sitting. Please don't go yet." Now I was acting like a baby. But they pulled the chairs up close to the bed and sat down. My voice sounded whiny and it was difficult to talk over the hard lump that had formed in my throat. "I'm sorry" I said. "I guess I'm just a little overwhelmed."

"Oh baby" Dad said, leaning over and kissing my forehead. "Of course you are! How could you not be?"

Mom fussed with my blankets, struggling with her own emotions. We Fennessys were not criers as a rule.

"I wonder if I'll be home for Thanksgiving. If not, you'll have to bring me a plate of food. I won't be forced into eating turkey loaf and instant mashed potatoes here."

"If you're not, we'll wait for you. We'll make it your welcome home party." Mom patted my hand. "We couldn't well have it while you are here after all."

"And I'm looking forward to it too" Dad said. "I'm even closing the pub for business that night". Dad only closed on Christmas and Easter so this was a big deal.

"I feel special" I said. "But don't wait for me. Just bring me a plate. Did you tape the Michigan game for me?"

"Of course. No fun watching them lose if you aren't there to get pissed about it."

"They lost?"

“I didn’t say that. I just said it was no fun seeing it without seeing you swear a blue streak about it.” He grinned.

We chatted for a while longer. Mom told me stories about my nieces and nephews as she remembered the hand drawn get well cards they’d sent with her and set them up on my bedside table. Dad told me stories about the Killen twins, well into their 90s and regulars at the pub. They’d been schoolmates and friends of my granddad in their youth and knew where all the neighborhood skeletons were buried.

We were still chatting when Dr. Shinapatra came in to make her rounds.

“I see you’re doing well today” she said.

“Must be the clean hair” I agreed. “Or maybe the fact I brushed my teeth?”

She smiled and looked through my chart before coming over to examine my head. “I think we can get these staples and stitches out tomorrow. I want to keep you for a little while longer to make sure you don’t have any unforeseen setbacks but then we can think about getting you home.”

“That’s wonderful” my mom said, leaning into my dad and squeezing his hand. He put his arm around her and pulled her against his side, dropping a quick kiss on the top of her head. “She’ll be staying with us for a while.”

“I am?” I asked. This was news to me.

“Just until you’re fully well” Mom said. Dad gave me a look that said don’t argue, this was as much for them as it was for me.

“That’s good.” Dr. Shinapatra said. “You’ll need a week or so to get your strength back. I see you had some excitement last night” she added. I knew she would already be aware of the episode, but she said it as she flipped through my chart, as if it was nothing to be concerned about. I appreciated this because it didn’t overly concern my parents, though they were giving me identically curious looks as they waited for an explanation.

“It was nothing” I said. I glanced at my parents. “Really! It was just a dream. I think it was the morphine.” My parents stared holes through me, still waiting for an explanation. “I thought there was a man in my room named Harvey Jamison. He said he wanted me to solve his murder. But there was no one there.” Twin worried looks passed over my parents faces. “I’m sure it was the morphine” I said again.

“Your temporal lobe was damaged by the bullet” Dr. Shinapatra said. “Research suggests that people who claim to have supernatural experiences are having little seizures in this region. You need to let me know if you experience anything like this again.”

“Does feeling like I’m being watched count?” I asked.

“Yes, that is also one of the symptoms associated with this type of injury. I’ll run some tests today to see if anything unexpected shows up. And if it gets worse or you see people that aren’t there again, we can put you on a mild anti-seizure medication and see if that helps.”

“Okay” I said. So there was a possible medical explanation for what I’d experienced last night. I felt better even though I hoped the drugs would not be necessary.

By the end of the day, I was exhausted. My parents had left with the doctor. I was sure they wanted to discuss me without me listening in. The police showed up at noon and asked me lots of questions but didn’t have any answers for me. They had no clue who had shot me or why. They were able to tell me that it was one person who waited between the buildings but they didn’t know if it was random or if I had been a target. The lead detective, Phillip Ryan, left his card and told me we’d be in touch. My siblings showed up in pairs at dinner time. My sisters moaned about my hair. My brother joked about not being able to tell if I was brain damaged. He delivered dinner from home, roast beef with little potatoes and carrots, my favorite. By the time they were gone, all I wanted to do was sleep.

I was just settling in when the sound of the chair pulling away from the bed caused me to open my eyes. Crazy Harvey had taken a seat. He put his finger to his lips and made the universal sign for silence before he vanished. I pulled the covers up to my neck and closed my eyes again. “Seizures. A small price to pay” was the last thought I had before I fell asleep.

Chapter Four

I sat in the back seat of my dad's car, smiling a little as he swore at traffic. Another week had gone by before I was discharged. Ramona had gotten the snow she'd hoped for and then some. It had snowed at least an inch every day over the past week. And as it was the 23rd, I was home in time for Thanksgiving. Every few minutes my mom turned around to make sure I was alright. Or maybe she was just making sure I was still there. I'd catch her giving me terrified looks every now and then when she thought I wasn't noticing. I imagine it is hard seeing your child have such a close brush with death.

I had been in the Medical Center hospital that was part of the university so home was a short drive across town. I watched the familiar landmarks out the window as Dad took the necessary turns to deliver us home. Home was a large blue and white Victorian that had never looked so welcoming. A porch wrapped around the front of the house. In the summer it would be home to several large comfortable loveseats and chairs and blooming baskets would hang at regular intervals. It was bare now for the winter but still managed to look inviting. Dad pulled into the drive and opened my door while Mom grabbed my bag from the trunk. He would have carried me, but I shook my head. "I can walk" I said. The walks were cleared and salted, but the snow piled up on the lawn. Several snowmen welcomed me home with waving arms made from twigs from the two huge maples that stood between the sidewalk and the street. My house had a tree just like this that had factored into my deciding to buy it. What was home without a huge tree?

I did take my dad's arm as I navigated my way up the walk to the front steps and leaned a little heavier as I took the six steps up to the porch. The weeks in the hospital had taken their toll and I felt like a weak kitten. The door opened and I could see my family inside waiting for me. "Get out of the way" my sister Cinnia yelled at her six year old twins, Molly and Kate. Cinnia, 38, was six years older than me, and could be our mother's clone. Molly also came from the clone batch with the curly red hair and bright green eyes. Kate had darker hair and blue eyes like me and our dad. Of course she also looked like her dad, Aiden, but we Fennessys took genetic credit for everyone born into our clan. Brianna, my next older sister stood behind them holding baby Davin. He was almost one and was squirming to get down.

They moved aside to let me in and I walked into the living room and sat on the sofa. All of my sisters were there. The only person missing was Kieran and he would be at the pub. After Brianna, who was 35, came Kieran and then me. Deirdre was just after me, 27 and swollen with the last term of her first pregnancy. The twins, Kyla and Kyna (pronounced Kee-la and Kee-na) were the babies at 24. They had just finished college and were starting careers in nursing and finance. Added to the mix were Aiden and Colin, Brianna's husband and Dillon, Deirdre's husband. The room was crowded and noisy and the controlled chaos was wonderful. Molly and Kate climbed up on the sofa beside me the moment I pulled off my hat, mesmerized by my head.

Molly reached out to touch the puckered scar which scandalized Cinnia. “Molly, don’t do that!” she yelled.

“I just want to touch it” she said, ignoring her mother and stroking her finger over the bumpy surface of the scar. “Does it hurt Auntie Ceara” she asked.

“No” I told her. “It’s all better now.”

“Will your hair grow back?” Kate asked.

“I don’t know. I kind of like it like this. What do you think?” I teased. She tilted her head and gave my question serious thought.

“No. Grow it back” she said.

Curiosity satisfied, they jumped off the couch and ran into the kitchen, following my mom to beg for cookies. I could hear “Granny please...” before the kitchen door swung closed behind them.

“How are you feeling” Kyla asked, coming to sit beside me. She held my hand in hers and gave it a quick squeeze.

“Better” I said. “Just a little weak. But that will pass.”

“Good. As soon as this baby is born” Kyna, standing next to Brianna reached over and patted her tummy “we’re having a sister’s night out. So you have about 3 weeks to get your act in gear.”

“Three weeks?” Brianna snorted. “Are you planning to pull me out of the birthing room then? Not saying I won’t go, but Colin needs to know if he gets baby duty the first night!”

“I’ll be up for it if you are” Colin chimed in. “I know better to get in the way of the sisters.”

They talked a mile a minute, bringing me up to date on all the family drama I’d missed while I was in the hospital. Kyna was dating a doctor. I was pretty sure that’s why she went into nursing in the first place. Either that or it was the secret thrill she got from sticking people with needles. He was Columbian and “to die for” according to the unanimous opinion of the Fennessy women. Davin had taken his first steps, but he refused to perform when Colin sat him on the floor and encouraged him to walk to me. Molly and Kate had gotten in trouble at school for repeating a mildly off color joke they’d overheard Uncle Kieran telling their dad. Everyone talked at once. I had missed this.

Dad came into the room and kissed me goodbye. “Off to the pub to help Kieran and let the gang know you’re home” he said. “Don’t tire her out” he said to the others as he left.

“You really scared the shit out of us, sis” Kyna said, pushing between me and Kyla to give me a hug. “Don’t ever do that again!” Cinnia glared at her for the use of the mild profanity. She had

been one to swear like a sailor in the past, but motherhood had made her more aware of the use of language, especially since Molly and Kate would repeat everything they heard. Kyna stuck her tongue out at her and grinned. Unable to hold the glare, Cinnia grinned back and shook her head.

“Still no idea who did it?” Aiden asked.

“Not a clue and the cops don’t have one either.” I said. “I’ve been trying to think of anyone that would have it out for me. Maybe a student who didn’t like a grade? But that doesn’t make sense to me either.”

“They’ll figure it out” Colin said.

“I’m not so sure” Dillon added. “The more time that passes the less likely they are to catch them.”

“That’s a comforting thought” Deirdre said. “How do they know he won’t try again?”

“I guess they don’t” I agreed. “But I’m not going to think about that today. I’m just glad to be home right now.”

“And we’re glad to have you home” Mom said as she came into the room. “And I’ve got lunch ready if some of you will help me get it to the table.”

I started to stand out of habit, but she waved me back to the sofa with a red dish towel she still clutched in one hand. “Not you” she scolded. “You’ll get waited on for a while.”

“It keeps getting better” I said nudging Kyna who hated dish duty. “I’ll just have fun watching you all serve me for a while.”

“Don’t get too used to it” she said. “We’re only giving you a week.”

With everyone pitching in, lunch was on the table in minutes. A large tray of chicken salad sandwiches on mini croissants dominated the table. It was mixed with pecans and dried cherries, exactly the way I liked it. Several bowls of chips were on either end as well as a large tray of cut veggies. Mom was an excellent cook who never allowed us to help with the food. She always set the table for meals and made it look attractive and appetizing. She had no trouble letting us clean, but made no apologies for the fact that the kitchen was hers. She got no complaints from me, even though I also enjoyed cooking.

I ate two of the little sandwiches and my fair share of the chips and veggies and washed it all down with two cups of fresh brewed tea. I insisted on carrying my dishes back to the kitchen when I’d finished eating, even though my mom and my sisters motioned me back to my chair. “I can’t be an invalid forever” I complained. “You have to let me do for myself.” I rinsed my dishes in the sink and stacked them in the dishwasher. As I turned to leave, my peripheral vision

caught a movement. I looked over at the refrigerator door just as the 'E' in the twins magnetic letter set slid into place. I stared at them, stunned to see they were arranged into words.

HELP ME

I left the kitchen in a hurry and didn't say anything to my family about it. Clearly, my symptoms were getting worse. I had no doubt that the girls had done this when they were in the kitchen earlier and that it was the injury that made me think that I saw the magnet move. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I heard a quiet whisper. "You will help me" Harvey said. My mom chose that precise moment to look up and saw the color drain from my face as I felt my heart drop into my stomach and a wave of fear induced nausea and dizziness overtake me.

"Colin!" she called my brother in law who was seated closest to where I stood. He glanced up and saw the direction that she was looking in and jumped to his feet and scooped me into his arms before I could hit the floor. He carried me back to the living room, following my mom who was busy arranging pillows to support my head and shoulders. He placed me gently on the sofa and Mom covered me with an afghan. I looked over at the door to the room and all of my family stood there, matching worried expressions. I burst into tears, not a good thing to do since Molly and Kate started to cry too. Their tears got Davin in on the act. Cinnia and Aiden began doing their best to soothe the girls and Dillon scooped Davin up and was murmuring soothingly in his ear. He plopped a thumb in his mouth and quieted down. It took Molly and Kate a little longer and by the time they were calm, so was I. "I feel like such an idiot" I said, wiping my eyes on the edge of the afghan.

"Don't be ridiculous" Cinnia said in her most mom-like voice. As the oldest, she was also the bossiest. "We've just overwhelmed you on your first day home. We'll all leave now and let you rest." On command, they hustled to coats and boots and bid me hasty goodbyes. Kyna came over and kissed my cheek before she left. I could tell she'd been crying too.

"Are you really okay?" she asked in a low whisper.

"As well as to be expected" I replied, giving her a quick hug. "Don't worry. I'm sure Cinnia is right. I just overdid it."

"At least you won't be carrying any dishes to the kitchen for a while" she grinned and winked at me.

"So I see my plan worked." I grinned back, gave her another quick hug and relaxed back into the pillows. I was stuffed and needed a nap. I fell asleep right away and slept for several hours. I woke with a start when I realized that someone was sitting across the room from me. It had grown dark and my mom had not turned on any lights to disturb my sleep.

"It's only me, Ceara". Kieran. "Sorry if I scared you."

“No, just startled me a bit. How long have you been here?”

“Not long. Came home to check in. Mom called the pub and Dad sent me so that I could have a break.”

“Busy tonight?” I asked.

“Oh yeah...everyone’s drinking to your health and happy to know you’re home.”

“Then there’ll be lot of hangovers tomorrow and people cursing my health, I suppose”.

“Most likely” he agreed. “Want to talk about it?”

“The hangovers?” I pretended to misunderstand his meaning.

“We don’t have to.” He wasn’t offended.

“No, it’s okay. I’m doing okay physically, just a little weak, but the psychological stuff is tough.”

“Mom and Dad told us. We had a lot of family meetings while you were in the hospital. Anything specific?”

“Just hearing voices, seeing people that aren’t there and feeling like I’m being watched. It’s just a little creepy. Caught me off guard earlier. I should have been able to control it.”

He watched me for a moment, concern playing over his features before he could get his response under control. He’d turned on a light after he knew I was awake. “Don’t beat yourself, Ceara!” he said. “You always expect so much of yourself. Face the facts! You were shot in the head and you know it did damage. Dealing with that alone would be enough to cause a meltdown. Add to that the fact that you were attacked where you felt safe, without warning or provocation on your part, by God only knows who. How do you think you should be responding to all of this?”

He had a point. “You’re right” I agreed. “It’s just really hard to deal with the hallucinations. I can’t predict them and they scare the bejesus out of me.”

“You’ll adapt until you can control it” he said. “Have you ever had a challenge you couldn’t conquer?”

“There’s always a first time” I said. “Thanks Kieran. I went to sleep feeling pretty sorry for myself. I feel better now.” He had a knack for making me feel better. It was one of his most endearing qualities.

“Anytime” he said, smiling. “But I am charging you \$100 an hour for the therapy.”

“Bill me” I said.

Mom walked into the living room carrying a bed tray covered with food. “Hungry?” she asked.

“I can eat at the table” I said. We never ate in the living room.

“Not tonight” she said it sternly so that I didn’t argue. “I don’t think you realize that you need to take it easy for a couple of days” then added over her shoulder to Kieran “Will you grab our trays and bring them in too? They’re on the counter.”

She sat the tray in front of me. “We decided to have dinner with Cinnia and Aiden tomorrow” she said.

“But we always have it here” I whined.

“This way, Dad and I can bring you home before you get too tired. It’s all settled. Cinnia took the turkey home with her and I’ll make the pies tonight.” I pushed the food around my plate with the tines of my fork. It was gingered pork, stir fried with red and yellow pepper strips and served over rice. She read my mind. “Don’t pout! Eat!”

I lifted a forkful to my mouth and chewed. It was delicious. Kieran inhaled his, made his apologies and said he had to get back to the pub. He left carrying a bag of leftovers for himself and Dad, who would be working late to cover the crowds at the bar. The Wednesday before Thanksgiving tended to be busy since everyone had the next day off work.

After dinner, we sat in the living room and chatted for a while. I loved my parents of course, but I also genuinely liked them. My parents had met when my mom applied for a waitressing job at the pub at 18. Dad, a couple of years older, tended bar much as Kieran was now. They both claimed it was love at first sight and within six months they were married. Like all good Irish Catholics, a year later Cinnia came along. Mom had never worked away from home after that. They both believed that parenting was a full time job and should be treated like one. She’d pitch in at the pub every now and then, usually when someone called in sick unexpectedly and Dad couldn’t find a replacement. She managed to find time for herself even when we were young. As Cinnia, Kieran and I got older we were able to help out with the little ones so that she could get a break. She took classes at the university, usually one a semester, and finished her degree in Business, figuring it would come in handy with the pub. She had also expanded the pub’s business to include catering once Kyla and Kyna started college and was always taking specialty cooking classes when they came available. She was amazing.

We chatted about her catering jobs. She was booked solid doing holiday parties the first 3 weeks in December, mostly corporate but a few private parties too. We chatted about my classes and my work too and discussed the movies we had and hadn’t liked this year. Neither one of us could figure out if Leonardo was dreaming, crazy or awake in Inception and hated the American remakes of movies like The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo and Let the Right One In. We were convinced that the average American had a phobia against sub-titles.

Before I knew it, I was tired again. I was starting to feel like I would never be back to a regular sleep schedule. Maybe Cinnia was right after all and I had overdone it today. Perhaps moving the Thanksgiving plans was a good thing. Mom insisted on walking me up to my room. I thought I was well enough to take the two flights on my own, but she didn't think so. The room at the top of the stairs on the right was mine. Well, not really mine any more but it had been. With six girls in a five bedroom house, we all doubled up. Kieran was the only one who roomed alone by virtue of his being the only boy. I had shared this room with Deirdre when we were growing up. After we'd all moved out, mom had replaced the twin beds and bunks with full sized beds. The bunks, two sets, had been moved into the larger room at the end of the hall for the grandkids' sleepovers.

My room was nicely decorated in pinks and yellows. A hand tied "rag rug" covered the hard wood. This rug was one of my mom's favorites, passed down from her grandmother. The bed was covered with a light yellow spread that was decorated with little roses and stacked high with pillows. Even though it was rarely used, there was no dust to be found. My mom prided herself on her home and family and kept everything tidy like she expected us all to move back any day.

I opened the bag that my dad had brought over from my house before I came home. It was empty, which should have come as no surprise. Mom had folded my clothes into the dresser drawers. I opened the top left drawer to see my socks, neatly matched and stacked in rows. The top right drawer would hold underwear and bras. I smiled and opened the bottom drawer and pulled out a pair of sweats, slipping them on before I climbed into bed. It had been an exhausting afternoon, but I was glad to be home. The blankets smelled like the dryer sheets mom used, which meant she likely washed the bed linens before I came home. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. I hadn't heard her come into the room, but I felt the bed sink on the end as she sat down. "You didn't have to go to this much fuss" I said. I opened my eyes and gasped when I saw Crazy Harvey sitting on the side of my bed.

"No fuss from me" he said. "But I'm getting tired of waiting for you to figure out who killed me."

"Not there" I whispered, squeezing my eyes closed again.

"Oh, I am here" he said. "And I'll stay here until you figure this out. "

My eyes flew open again. He was frowning at me, his lips pulled down at the ends in a way that accentuated his chubby face. Sitting this close, I saw that he had the shadow of a beard growing in with deep bags under his eyes. Little red veins on the side of his nose hinted that he enjoyed a drink or two. When he spoke again, I noticed that his right front tooth had a large chip, worn at the edges in a way that suggested it was a childhood mishap.

"Find out who killed me soon or I'll lose patience with you."

I jumped out of bed and flew to the door. “Mom!” I called like a child frightened awake with a nightmare. “Mom!”

She came flying up the stairs. “What is it? Are you hurt?”

“My room.” I pointed behind me. She moved around me and into the room.

“What is it?” she said. “Spider?” she asked, remembering my childhood fear of the creepy crawlers.

“Do you see anything?” I asked. I was staring at Harvey, still sitting on the bed watching us.

“No, honey. There’s no one there.” She ran her hands along my arms. “Who do you see?”

“I thought I saw...it doesn’t matter.” Harvey had vanished again but I could still feel him in the room. The air had a weight to it that would only come from a presence in the room.

She looked at me, worry etched across her features. “Lay down honey” she said. “I’ll sit with you until you sleep. We’ll call the doctor tomorrow.”

I did as she said and scooted into the bed. I could see a light indentation in the bed where Harvey had been sitting. I smoothed it over with my hand as I pulled the blankets up to my chin. Mom sat on the bed, much like he had, and smoothed my hair back to kiss my forehead lightly. I felt foolish. “You don’t have to stay” I said. “I’m okay now.”

“Don’t be silly. Of course I’m staying. Now sleep.”

I closed my eyes and it didn’t take long to drift off. Sleep was not restful though. It was as if I’d stepped directly from the security of my room into the dark, endless space of my coma. I strained to see in the dark, but had no luck. I felt a crowd around me, whispering voices that sounded lost or frantic. Suddenly, a masculine voice spoke louder to drown the others out.

“Damn it woman” he snapped impatiently “are you paying any attention to me at all?”

I turned towards the voice. “Hello?? Hello??” I responded. “Is anyone here?”

The male voice chuckled sarcastically. “That’s a stupid question isn’t it? Who the hell do you think you’re talking to if no one else is here?” He had a point.

“Yeah well.... Where the hell are we? I can’t see a thing”.

“I didn’t mean to end up here, you know” Harvey said in the dark. I recognized the voice now. “It’s like they say... ‘go into the light’. I saw the light and walked right into it before I gave it much thought. Pissed me off when I got here too, let me tell you. Not only am I murdered in my prime, but then I end up here in what I assume is limbo or purgatory.”

“Then I must be dead too” I said “So I suppose that means I’ve been murdered too. But I don’t remember any light.” I strained to remember what had happened. “I do remember flashing lights, red and blue. Is that what it looks like?”

“No, you aren’t dead” Harvey replied confidently. “You likely saw the police or an ambulance. I’m guessing you’re in a coma, which makes you a temporary resident.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“To start with, as you say no light. And you can’t see us, can you? Pipe down, damn it!” he yelled this at the voices that whispered around us. “Too damn many people die without being ready for it and they all want something when a living soul shows up. But you’re the first one that has responded to us at all. No one else seems to notice. When you called out who’s here, everyone figured it was their chance.”

“You can see in here? “And what do you mean by chance?”

“Yes, I can see in here. This is a place for the dead. It isn’t half bad, like a little city really. But you are a ride out of here.” He said this nonchalantly; as if I was a cabbie he had flagged down on the street.” I felt his hand close over mine. “When you wake up, you’re taking me back. I’ll just be a quiet little hitchhiker.”

“Why do you want to go back? And why do you think that will work?”

“I’ve seen it happen. And I intend to find out who killed me. And when you wake up, you’re going to help me.”

I had a sense of déjà vu in the dream. I remembered some of this from waking up, though the dream had filled in a lot of missing conversation, as if my dream memory was clearer than my waking one.

“God save me if I have to depend on you” he said. “You’re not “special” are you? Open your eyes”.

And I did, again. I was in my bed, the weak light from the early morning sun doing its best to stream through the window. I rubbed my eyes to focus them in the light. The first thing I noticed was that all of the drawers in the dresser were opened and the clothes that my mother had neatly folded away were scattered around the room. My mind grappled for an explanation. I was rational, a scientist. I certainly didn’t believe in ghosts. The only explanation I could come up with was that I had done this in my sleep. I got up and quickly tidied before my mother realized I was awake and came to make sure I was okay. Once the room was tidied, I put on my robe against the chill. Homes as big and old as this one were drafty by nature and hard to heat. I ignored the feeling of being watched by someone who stood just behind me and went down to join my parents for breakfast. I could smell coffee and bacon. I was determined to call Doctor

Shinapatra and make an appointment for the next morning. I was clearly having the seizures she'd warned about, even though the tests she'd run had been negative. I would need medication to fix this problem. I got her answering service. I'd forgotten it was a holiday weekend. I was surprised when she called back within an hour though and made an appointment with me for Monday morning.

Hours later, when I returned to my room, exhausted from trying to appear casually normal in the face of my family so there would be no repeat of the lunch fiasco, I turned on the bedroom light to see my clothes scattered all over the room again. I was in serious trouble.

Chapter Five

Dr. Shinapatra had listened to my story with interest. Now she leaned back slightly on the stool by the examination table and considered me thoughtfully. “You’re a scientist” she said. “So I’m sure you’re not considering that any of what you’re experiencing is real in any truly supernatural sense.”

“No” I agreed. “That’s why I’m here. I figure you have a pill that will work like a ‘magic bullet’ to get this under control before I have to be back at work in a few weeks.”

“Okay. I suspect that the scattered clothes are actually a subconscious attempt to produce evidence of what you’re experiencing. I’m not a psychologist obviously, but I imagine that you are experiencing some anxiety and concern about your conversations with this Harvey. Brugger and Graves found that people who are rational need a lot of physical evidence to accept a hallucination as real”.

“So you think I may be manufacturing data to satisfy my rational side?”

“It is possible. You are showing classic symptoms of those who report paranormal experiences. You’re sensing presences and you’re getting information from an informant that is beyond the physical realm. Persinger found that this is linked to damage to the temporal lobe.

“So as strange as this feels, it is really to be expected?”

“Yes. You may also experience more symptoms at night. We aren’t sure why but it may be linked to circadian rhythms influencing the timing of seizures in the temporal lobe.”

“I don’t know how I could experience more” I sighed. “I feel like someone is standing near me all the time as it is.”

“Well, let’s get you hooked up to an EEG and see if we can catch the seizures on tape” she said. She stood and pulled the familiar machine from the corner of the room to the side of the bed and motioned for me to lay back. She took a tube of lubricant...that would do wonders for my hair that was starting to grow in. I would leave her with short spiky wisps over my right ear. She attached the lubricated electrodes to my head, pushing my remaining hair apart in what seemed like random places to get the sticky little taped ends of the wires to my skin and then hooked up the blood pressure and heart rate monitors on the other side of the bed. Once she was finished she turned on the machines, pulled the stool closer to it and picked up the ends of the paper that began to spill out into folds, examining the little wavy lines with interest.

“What are you working on right now?” she asked conversationally, not taking her eyes from the paper as she spoke. I assumed she would watch for changes as I formulated my answers and replied.

“I’ve always been interested in the link between prohibition and domestic abuse” I said. “It is fairly accepted that women drove the vote for just that reason. I’m trying to see if it was successful. I’m looking for pre, during and post reports of abuse to see if I can find a pattern.”

“That’s an interesting topic” she said. “What sparked your interest in that?”

“My sister was abused, murdered actually. The abuse usually happened when her husband was drunk” I replied quickly. I gasped audibly and the steady beep of the heart rate monitor machine increased as the numbers jumped quickly to record the rapid change in pace. Dr. Shinapatra looked up quizzically from the tape. “No she wasn’t I said. I have no clue where that came from. I have five sisters, three of them married to wonderful men. None have ever been abused.”

She frowned a little and turned back to the tape in her hand. “How are you feeling right now?” she asked.

“Scared” I admitted. “Is that a normal side effect of these seizures?”

“Not that I’m aware of” she replied. “And the machine isn’t picking up any seizure activity”.

“So I’m just going crazy?” I asked.

“No, you aren’t going crazy. You’ve suffered a traumatic brain injury. Also, we can’t rule out that you aren’t suffering from PTSD as well.” With a look that told me she was satisfied as she was going to be with the data she’d collected, she unhooked the machines, folded the tape from the EEG and clipped it to my chart. Then she took a minute to jot a few notes before pulling a prescription pad from her pocket and scribbling a few illegible lines. “I’m giving you a small dose of Ativan” she explained. “It is addictive, so don’t take more than recommended even if you feel like it isn’t helping. Also, try not to drink alcohol since this can interact with the medicine. If this doesn’t help we can try other things, but I think it should work for you.”

I took the slip of paper she handed me and stared at it. “Control but not cure, right?” I asked. I could feel myself getting depressed and knew I couldn’t give in to this.

“Yes. Control, not cure” she answered. “There is no way to undo the damage.” She patted my arm sympathetically. “You have to focus on the bright side” she said. “You don’t appear to have any cognitive damage so you can still work and teach without a problem.”

“I know. My mom would say to count my blessings. But I still think I’m going to wallow in pity for a while.”

She smiled. “At least twenty-four hours. After that it is just a pity party and that would be irrational.”

I filled my parents in on my prognosis on the car ride to my home. My small bag of things was in the trunk. They had agreed to wait in the waiting room for me while I saw the doctor but not to letting me go alone. As I suspected it served to renew the argument that we’d had over breakfast. They didn’t want me to return home so quickly. I lied to them, something I rarely did, and told them that the doctor had given this her blessing. In truth, I hadn’t asked, fearing that she would side with my parents on this one. I had been with them for nearly a week now. We’d had our belated Thanksgiving and of course all of my siblings knew that I was ‘seeing dead people’. They teased me relentlessly because that is what we did, but I knew they were all worried about me. I’d regained my strength and felt as normal as I supposed I could, given the circumstances. It was time to get back to my life.

Dad pulled the car into my driveway and turned off the engine. He grabbed my bag from the trunk as I searched through my purse for my keys. Mom carried my work bag, a black leather messenger bag that was big enough to accommodate my laptop and several stacks of papers. I didn’t argue that I was able to carry my things on my own. They were like grizzlies when we were hurt and all we could do was play the wounded cubs. This entire experience had been as hard on them, on my whole family really, as it had been on me.

“It’s freezing in here” my mom said as soon as we stepped in the front door. My dad went into the dining room and fiddled with the thermostat before announcing he was going down to the basement to check the pilot on the furnace. Mom continued in the living room and struck a match to the firewood and kindling that I got ready in the fireplace before going to work the last day I’d been here. Within minutes the blaze was picking up. A few choice words and clanging later and my dad joined us.

“Pilot light was out” he said. “Furnace is going again now.”

I went into the kitchen and put on the electric water pot for tea. I felt immensely satisfied as I pulled one of my ceramic teapots off the shelf over the sink. I collected teapots in bright colors and designs and several clustered in a cheery display on a small shelf that I’d installed for just that reason. I took down the ceramic pot warmer and dropped a tea light into in, striking one of matches that I kept in a drawer in the counter and touching it to the wick. I filled up the tea ball with Earl Grey tea leaves and dropped it into the pot before adding the boiling water. Had to love that electric pot, a Christmas gift from Kyna the year before! I hated waiting for the proverbial pot to boil the old fashioned way. My mom came into the kitchen to help me.

“Let me finish this” she said. “You go and talk to your father.” I started to protest before she gave me a look that said “let your father talk to you.” My dad with a mission was formidable. I went back to the living room where dad stood in front of the fire. He was staring at his feet as if his shoes had just become the most fascinating thing in the room.

“What’s up dad?” I asked.

“We know you want to be home now” he began. “But we’re worried about you. Not only are you having these little seizures but someone tried to kill you. Maybe it was random, but if it wasn’t they may try again. We wouldn’t survive if the next time he was successful.” I sighed, a lump forming in my throat.

“I can’t live afraid of everything, Dad, and you know that! I can’t hide from maybe killers and I can’t hide from the seizures. They won’t ever go away so am I supposed to just move back home and live with you forever?”

He didn’t miss a beat as if he suspected this would be my response. “Okay, that makes sense. So our other suggestion is that you agree to have Kieran live here for a while. At least until we know that someone isn’t out there still gunning for you.”

“Kieran would never agree to that” I said.

“He already has, if you’re willing.”

I turned over the possibility in my head for a moment before responding. On the one hand, Kieran and I got along very well and he would not disrupt my daily routines. His being here would go a long way to making my family feel more secure. On the other, I needed to be independent. Also, if there was an unknown threat out there, then having him here could potentially put two of the Fennessy brood in danger. Finally, in the con column, no one knew that I was subconsciously trashing my space to create data for my experiences and I didn’t want them to know. That would add another layer of worry for them. My parents were in their early sixties but they had been aging well. Mom’s red hair was just starting to show signs of gray and Dad’s was just graying at the temples in that distinguished gentleman way of graying. They were both physically and socially active and it showed. Added to my con list was the certainty that being nursemaids to me would curtail their own life choices. But I had seen how tired they had looked, as if they’d aged a decade over a night, when they first saw me at the hospital.

“I’ll make a deal with you” I decided. “If the seizures get worse or I feel afraid or have any reason to suspect that I’m not safe here, I’ll either move home for a while or let Kieran move in. Remember, this is Grosse Pointe Park. I see a police car on my street at least once every half hour”. This was true. I’d counted one day as I sat on my front porch last spring. We had a well-paid and adequately staffed police force in our small community, one of the selling points to new homeowners; especially those who chose the neighborhood for its excellent schools.

“She said no”. He turned to take a tray from my mother who had just entered the room with the three cups of tea and a plate of Oreos. Oreos and Cheetos, the puffy ones, not the little hard fried ones, were my not so secret indulgences.

“I said not yet” I corrected.

“I’m not surprised, but I am disappointed” she said, sitting beside me on the sofa as Dad dropped into a recliner near the fireplace. She smoothed my hair back, scrutinizing the bristly new growth over my scar. “Are you going to see about a new style while this grows in?” she asked, deliberately changing the subject to signal my dad that we weren’t going to argue about it.

“I’d have to buzz it to make it work” I said. “It grows fast so I should be able to go just a little shorter than I would normally before my next semester starts. Until then I have lots of hats.” This was certainly true. Each one of my siblings had brought a new hat to our turkey dinner. Kieran had given me a pink Detroit Tiger baseball hat but all the sisters had given me knitted caps in a variety of outrageous colors and designs. I would be a fashion statement whenever I left the house. My parents reluctantly left me to my homecoming after tea and cookies were finished and the cups cleared and washed the last little motherly touch that my mom could do for me.

I loved my house. I lived in the Park, one of the five small independent cities that made up the ‘Pointes’, a group of suburbs of the city. My house was built in the early 1900s in the part of the Pointes that was affectionately called the “cabbage patch”. The Pointes were primarily affluent with streets lined with mansions or mini-mansions. The cabbage patch name was given to an area in the Park by one of the wealthy residents of the City. It was a term that was taken from a once popular book, Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch, that was used to describe the few streets of rentals and smaller homes that housed a primarily working class population. Despite the fact that the name had been given as a classist slur, it had lost that affectation and most of my neighbors embraced it. That might be due to the fact that rents and mortgages in the Cabbage Patch required a hefty check book to manage, even if one couldn’t afford one of the mansions along Windmill Pointe, the street that bordered the shore where Lake St. Clair met the Detroit River.

My house was three stories but it wasn’t so big that it seemed wasteful to live there alone. The house was covered in a soft gray vinyl siding, regular “slats” on the bottom two floors and a matching faux wood shingle pattern on the top floor. This was topped with a black tile roof. The front was graced with an L shaped covered porch. In summer this would be decorated with hanging baskets of bright pink flowers and white wicker furniture. The front door opened into a vestibule that faced a long hallway that led to the kitchen. The hallway also had two doors on the left, the first to a huge closet that for some strange reason had two long wide shelves that were arranged like steps and the second leading to the basement. The vestibule opened into the living room. An archway in the living room led to the dining room and another in that room led to the kitchen. My nieces loved to visit but they drove us crazy running laps between the rooms. I liked the arrangement though. A door in the kitchen led to the back deck as did sliding glass doors in the dining room.

I liked bright and cheerful colors and my house reflected this. The walls in the living room and dining room were painted pumpkin orange and the brick of the fireplace was painted a dark

shade of eggplant. I'd replaced the lighting fixtures when I'd moved in. Sconces with a modern twist that looked like frosted glass lilies beginning to open lit the wall above the fireplace and framed an abstract painting that I picked up at starving artist sale. The kitchen was white but the cabinets were red, topped with white marble counters. The counters had been a splurge that set me back a penny but they were worth it.

Stairs off the vestibule and directly in front of the front door led to the second floor. You turned on a landing half way up the stairs to reach the upper hallway. The pumpkin orange from the downstairs extended the length of the hallway. To the left of the stairs was the smallest of three bedrooms that I had converted into my home office. It was lined with book shelves and had a large antique cherry desk in the center. This had been a graduation gift from my parents when I'd finished my Ph.D. My computer sat on top of that. The one flaw in the desk had been that it wasn't designed to hide a computer tower. I am strictly a PC type of gal, so I was in heaven when Dell copied the Mac design and developed a system with the hard drive concealed in the monitor so that I could eliminate the need for the tower. I'd lost count of the number of times that I'd banged my shin on the old system and how often I'd had to vacuum the dust out of the back to keep it from overheating. Old houses are very dusty. The walls were a deep blue and the center of the floor was covered with a room size rug of varying shades of blues and browns.

Across from the stairs was the second bedroom which I'd left as a bedroom for company, usually my nieces when they wheedled an invite from me and approval from Mom and Dad. This room was decorated in greens and browns and held a large dollhouse that I had built from a kit and decorated with miniature furniture. This was the appeal for my nieces. I breathed easier now that they were six. The first set of porcelain bath fixtures hadn't survived their terrible twos. I loved this doll house. Obsessed over it was likely a better description of how I felt. I had miniature holiday decorations for every season stored in shoe boxes in the closet. I even went as far as to drive the hour to Port Huron when I discovered a hobby shop that had historically accurate miniature reproductions of wallpaper and tiny hand knotted wool rugs. I had hand-stained every individual floor board and wood roof shingle. It had taken me months but it was a masterpiece and the only hobby that I really had.

My room was at the end of the hall, directly across from the bathroom. It was large and had several windows on two walls, since it was the corner of the house. This room had the most muted color scheme in the house. The walls were painted 'Wood Rose' or mauve as Cinnia would point out since "there is no such color as wood rose". But that was the name on the paint sample at the hardware store so that's what I called it. My favorite part of the room was that it had two large closets, one on either end. One stored cold weather clothes and the other stored warm weather apparel. It saved me shifting my belongings to storage every other season.

The only down side to the house was that I had one bathroom and no shower. The house was built before showers were the norm and I was loathe to remodel and face relinquishing the old cast iron claw foot tub, especially when I considered the cost of having it cut to pieces and

hauled away. So I made due with painting the outside in a spinach green to match the celery colored walls and white and green tiles. It also had odd step like shelves at the foot of the tub, the widest top shelf included a hatch to access the pipes. The very end of the hall, between the bathroom and my room had a huge built in linen closet. Three drawers on the bottom held extra sheets and blankets. Two doors opened at the top to conceal my 'junk', the stuff you have nowhere else to store. There were four deep shelves here that held board games, holiday decorations, which I supposed would have to be sorted through soon if I planned to put up a tree this year, and lots of other miscellany that I half feared needing to sort through. I was convinced that these shelves and the prospect of packing them would keep me rooted here for life.

The final door in the hallway led to the attic. The attic was the only room that I had not decorated. It was a large empty space, lit by one bulb that dangled on a wire. It was too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter. One day I would deal with it, but not today. The basement rounded out my living space and it was like any other basement. I did my laundry there and kept a treadmill, a spinning bike and a set of weights there.

With my parents gone, I decided to make the short trip to the Village, the shopping area in the City. I would visit the local drug store and drop off my prescription and then drop into the grocers to pick up food for the house. Thank God my family had had the forethought to clean the leftovers, milk and half and half out of the fridge when I was in the hospital or I'd have a mess to deal with! But that meant that my cupboards were bare. I opened my bag and pulled out a pen and a small spiral note book to jot down a quick list. Engrossed in this task, it took a few minutes for me to realize that I wasn't alone.

Chapter Six

I was getting used to ignoring the feeling that I was being watched. Well really, I was forcing myself to pretend I was getting used to it. I caught a small movement out of the corner of my eye and felt a wave of chills run up my spine and settle into the back of my neck. I looked up expecting to see Harvey and was further shocked to see a petite blonde woman smiling at me. Her hair was cut in a short bob, ending just even with her earlobes. She was wearing a pale blue sheath dress with spaghetti strap sleeves that was definitely too cold for a Michigan winter. The dress plunged into a deep V that stopped just short of her cleavage. The tail of the dress fell to knee length over the right knee but swept across her body at an angle that let the left side fall to nearly her ankle. The dress was fuller at the bottom so the fabric hung in folds around the edge.

I sat there speechless, only able to watch as she walked farther into the living room from the dining room and arranged her skirts carefully before taking a seat in one of the recliners that sat on either side of the fireplace. She watched me for a moment, still smiling, before she said “Welcome home, Neala. No, I mean Ceara. That’s what you go by these days, no?” Her voice had a pronounced Irish accent. She said Knee-la, with emphasis on the first syllable and it sent shivers through me. She sounded familiar but I couldn’t place where I knew the voice from.

“Who are you?” I finally managed to gasp out. “And how did you get in here?”

“Well, I’m Nora of course, though you always called me Norie.” Again her accent put the emphasis on the first syllable and it sounded like No-raa and No-ree. “And I’ve always been with you so I came in when you did. Mind you now, I don’t spend all of my time with you, I do have my own life after all.” She laughed as if this struck her as uproariously funny. “But I drop in most days to see how you’re doing.”

I realized then that this was another of my spells, like Harvey. “Well okay No-ree” I said, trying to mimic her accent as I spoke to myself. “I’m going to pick up my little pills and that will be the end of you.” I added the drug store to the top of my shopping list and underlined it twice.

“Not likely” she quipped happily “but if you feel better trying that’s fine with me. I am just so happy that you are finally willing to see me again!” She practically lilted that last bit out.

“Not for long” I said, equally cheerfully. “I have a date with an Ativan prescription”.

I wasn’t sure that I was finished with my list, but I had lost the ability to concentrate on it so I stood up, shoved it into my pocket and retrieved my keys from my purse. I grabbed my coat out of the hall closet where my mother had thoughtfully hung it up and pulled one of my new hats down over my ears. This one was black and white and long flaps that covered my ears. Each flap had a shoulder length braid dangling from it that ended in a tassel. I ignored the fact that Nora had stood as well and was following me, still smiling, as I went out the kitchen door and down

the deck steps to my garage. I pushed the door remote that hung from my key ring and prayed that the car would start. It should, but it had been sitting here for a few weeks since my brother drove it home from campus and parked it for me. I got in and turned the key. The engine purred. My happiness at this vanished when I looked in the rear view mirror and saw that I had another unwelcome guest. Harvey. His face blocked the mirror so I couldn't see the driveway behind me.

Nora turned around in response to the look on my face. "I told you to bugger off you fekkin' gack" she said. He scowled, but disappeared. She smiled at me and said "Let's go. I do love shopping."

I rested my forehead on the steering wheel for a moment, my hands gripping it so tight that my knuckles ached and were no doubt red ringed with white inside my gloves. She did not respond to Harvey, I thought to myself. She is a figment of my mind. She responded to me responding to another figment of my mind. I took a few deep breaths and willed her to be gone when I sat back up. No such luck. I apparently would be taking at least one of the hallucinations shopping with me.

I drove the mile to the Village and parked my car in the lot behind the grocers and fed the meter. I would buy groceries last, but didn't want to hassle with moving the car. Nora chattered on about how much the Village had changed over the years. I wasn't sure how many years she was talking about but she was dressed in a 1920s style, so ninety years was a good bet. Again, I was basing this on the workings of my own brain. I had been studying the prohibition era which began in the twenties so it made sense that this new blip on my mental health horizon, being female, would reflect that era. I ignored her as I got out of the car and walked the two blocks to the drug store. Too bad it was so cold, I lamented. I planned to get extra spicy Pad Thai at the Thai restaurant to take home and it would be cold which meant I'd need to nuke it before I ate it. I wondered for a moment if I could tolerate Nora for another 12 hours if I bought a six pack and washed the food down with a couple of beers. I glanced at her. Chatty and friendly but seemed benign enough. And she was able to control Harvey. The only downside would be a need to tidy my belongings when I got up if my sleeping brain decided I needed more data to support the delusions. The drug likely didn't work immediately anyway. It would probably take a few days, maybe a week, to get into my system enough to work. That decided it for me. Beer it would be, Ativan in the morning.

Nora smiled at me expectantly. I smiled back, not really at her, but at the decision to have a beer and relax and at my assurance that the Ativan would get me back on the road to health. I ducked into the drug store, grabbed a basket by the door and hung it over my wrist. I dropped off my prescription at the pharmacy and winced at the thirty minutes the overworked pharmacist said it would likely take. I responded that I would wait, glancing over at the chairs that were full of coughing and sniffing adults and children. Flu and cold season was just another Michigan winter joy.

While I waited, I continued to ignore Nora as I roamed the aisle. In the makeup section where I grabbed a new tube of mascara, she told me that I should really wear more make up. Now I was channeling my sisters. She pointed out a few eye shadows in blues and greens and a lip stain that she said would work well with my complexion. In the bath aisle she waxed on about all of the different selections of body washes, soaps and bubble baths that were available. She recommended that I grow my hair longer in the shampoo aisle and nearly rejoiced over the selections of women's razors when I stopped to buy new blades for mine. Great, I thought, now I was channeling all of my sisters and mom wrapped in one petite blonde package. The only real difference was that if I had ignored family the way that I was ignoring this phantom girl, a few would be crying and the others would grab me by the hair I had left and throw me on the floor for a thumping. By the time my prescription was ready, I had a basket full of toiletries and the December issues of Runner's World and Shape to add to the checkout tally.

Nora continued to persist as I sat in the Thai restaurant for the twenty minutes it took to cook the Pad Thai. "We didn't know any Thai people in the day" she said, watching the mostly Thai staff bustle about the busy restaurant.

Without thinking I said aloud "It was Siam until 1939".

"Oh" she replied as if this explained everything.

"Excuse me?" the woman sitting on my right asked. I flushed, embarrassed that I had spoken aloud and to my hallucination to boot.

"Sorry" I said. "I was thinking out loud. Thailand was called Siam until 1939. Just a bit of trivia that I let slip out". I smiled warmly, or I hoped it was a warm smile so she wouldn't scoot down a few chairs or call the men in white coats to come and get me.

"I did not know that" was all she said to which I shrugged, smiled again and pulled a magazine out of my bag and pretended to read an article on the newest running shoe technology. I went back to ignoring Nora as she chuckled beside me.

Food in hand...Nora informed me it smelled wonderful, that it was a shame it would be cold when I got home and how much she wished she could taste some too...I walked back the two blocks to the grocery store. The sidewalks were crowded this afternoon. It was less than a month before Christmas and the little shopping area was bustling. We had several clothing stores, two bagel shops, a sandwich and bread shop, two coffee shops and a few of those shops that cater to outdoor sports. Along with the Thai restaurant we had two diners, an ice cream parlor and a more upscale restaurant ...the kind with white table clothes and wait staff in black pants and tuxedo shirts who weren't allowed to write your order down. Two grocery stores, one general and one specializing in organic foods, a hardware store and a huge Barnes and Noble completed the shopping opportunities. Like Corktown, the neighborhood had a small town feel to it. Every year on Black Friday, residents crowded the Village's streets to see the Christmas parade. The

parade included all of the neighborhood kids who rode on floats or walked in unison representing their soccer and softball teams or their Scout troops. The cheerleaders and marching bands from the high schools, those in the Pointes and from other local high schools entertained. The last float was Santa on a huge sleigh “pulled” by his reindeer. This was durable with several rows of seats. After the parade, it was left on the main intersection so that the kids could play on it until after the Christmas holiday. I loved it.

The air was cold and crisp but the late afternoon sun was bright. There was no trace of more snow to accompany what we’d had earlier in the week. This was piled in little hills around the tree in front of my house and in the yard beside my driveway in the back. My brother-in-law had come over and used the snow blower and put down salt to prevent ice for me before I came home. But snow removal in the city was a production. Huge plows cleared the streets and little plows attached to golf carts cleared the heavy stuff off the sidewalks. Then sections of the streets would get blocked off temporarily so that larger plows could scoop and lift the snow into the backs of huge dump trucks to be carted off.

Nora kept up her litany of comments and suggestions as I loaded a cart with food. Milk, eggs, yogurt, bread, half and half, tea and coffee didn’t get many comments from her. Neither did the meat. But she was in awe of the organic and vegetarian aisles. She couldn’t figure out why I bought the organic strawberries since they were half the size and nearly twice the price of the non-organic. Now I was channeling my dad who’d never met a chemical fertilizer he didn’t like. She was equally amazed by the snack aisle and went on about how much she missed ‘crisps’ when I dropped a bag of Lays in the cart. She had a few things to say about how orange my fingers got when I ate my coveted Cheetos too when I added that bag to the cart. The section that got the most reaction though was the beer and wine aisle. She looked like a kid in a candy store as she took in all the varieties of beverages. Now I was just channeling my own psyche. I loved beer. I hated being drunk, but a beer in the evening was a good finish to the day and it was a necessity for Thai and Mexican food or pizza. It was also required if I went to The Big House in Ann Arbor to watch a Michigan football game with my dad and brother or to a family outing to Comerica Park for a Tiger’s game. My dad had refused to give into my whining for a Guinness when I’d stayed with them so it had been weeks since I’d had a beer. After thinking things over, I added my final purchase to the cart, a six pack of Corona, and headed to the front checkout lanes.

Ignoring her took a lot of energy I decided. When I loaded my trunk with my bags, I realized that I was exhausted from listening to the constant chatter as I shopped. I got in behind the wheel and started my car. She had taken the front passenger seat, just appearing there of course and not opening the door. She was after all, my new imaginary friend. I faced her for a moment. “Will you ever stop talking?” I wondered aloud.

“Oh I suppose I might” she said, still smiling. “As I’ve said, it’s nice that you will finally listen to me. I have a lot to talk to you about of course. I’ve only been trying to do so for the past 25 years or so.”

“Twenty-five years” I mused aloud. “Why twenty five years?” That would have meant that this particular psychosis was embedded in my brain since I was about 7, just waiting for brain damage to bring it to fruition.

“That’s how long it’s been, give or take, since you stopped listening to me.”

In an instance I made the connection. Nora really was my imaginary friend. She’d been my constant companion when I was young until my conversations with her had finally worried my parents enough to take me to a child psychologist. They’d worried that I was lonely or that the extra dose of IQ had also given me a big dose of crazy. They were reassured that this was normal behavior for creative children and I had understood then that imaginary friends were not acceptable for older children. I’d begun to ignore her until finally one day she was just gone.

“So you really are my imaginary friend” I chuckled out loud.

“If you say so” she said. I pulled out of the parking lot and made the left turn on Kercheval, the main street in the Village, and drove toward the post office. My dad had arranged to have my mail held when I was in the hospital. There was a long line of people waiting to mail packages and Christmas cards, a reminder that I had not shopped for anyone yet. I tended to shop late anyway, but I pretended every year that I was going to finish before anyone else. It never happened. When it was my turn, I showed my license to the smiling woman behind the counter, thinking she was way too cheery for a postal worker this close to Christmas. She disappeared into the back and returned a moment later carrying a large white tub. She held it away from her body with her head tipped back, her nose wrinkled in disgust. I smelled the tub before she got to the counter and passed it over.

“I think you got a perishable” she said “and it smells like it perished. Please don’t toss it out in here.”

I looked in the tub. There were about thirty letters, assorted junk mail, a few Christmas cards and small boxes with publisher’s labels on them. There was one white package with no return address that was about the size of a shoe box. My name was on a typed label.

“I won’t” I said, stepping aside for the next person in line. I scooped my mail out, returned the tub, wished her happy holidays and went out to the parking lot. I tossed all but the white box in my car. I wouldn’t toss it out inside, but I wasn’t taking it home either. There was an industrial dumpster at the back of the lot that would be its new home. I turned it over and slid my finger under the tape. It was a shoe box, women’s Nikes, size 7. I lifted off the lid and peered inside. Someone had sent me a dead rat. It had a typed note stuck to it with a straight pin that read “This

will be you, just another dead rat.” I put the lid back on and slid the box under my car behind the front tire and climbed behind the wheel. I was disgusted and frankly terrified. I fumbled in my bag until I found the business card for the detective that had talked to me at the hospital. Hands shaking, I called his number. He answered on the first ring. “Detective Ryan”

“Hello Detective Ryan” I said. “This is Ceara Fennessy. “

“Dr. Fennessy” he said. “You sound shaken. Did something happen?”

“Yes” I answered. “Someone sent me a dead rat with a threatening note. I just picked it up from the post office.”

“Are you still there?” he asked.

“Yes” I told him. “I suppose you need to see it and I don’t really want to take it home.” I took a deep breath to steady myself. My hands were shaking and I could hear my voice wavering as I spoke.

“I’ll meet you there” he said. “Which post office?” I told him and he said “Okay....it will take me about fifteen minutes to get to you. Just sit tight.”

Nora looked at me for an explanation and I told her. “That’s just disgusting” she said. “Was it from the person who shot you?”

“Probably” I said. “I guess we can rule out random now.”

Detective Ryan was true to his word and arrived in just under fifteen minutes. He was tall and very fit, not what you would expect for the stereotypical detective. He was in his late fifties, I guessed, and though he had a hat pulled over his head now, I knew that he was bald underneath. He had a salt and pepper mustache that was neatly trimmed and laugh lines beside his green eyes. His partner, Detective Marion Justus, yes that was his real name, was about ten to fifteen years younger. He was also in very good shape. I had teased them about staying so trim on a donut diet when they’d been to my hospital room. Detective Justus was the more serious of the two. Where Ryan had smile lines, Justus had a perpetual frown line between his eyes and the resulting wrinkles beginning to form on his forehead. He was African American and had high cheekbones and gray eyes that could stop traffic.

I rolled my window down as they got out of their car and approached me. “I put it behind the tire” I said. “It stinks not to mention it’s disgusting.” Ryan squatted beside the car and pulled the package towards him. Justus leaned in to get a better look before lifting the end of his neck scarf and covering his nose as his partner used a pencil to lift the top of the box.

Detective Justus looked at me. “I think that we can say this was personal” he said to me.

“Looks like it” Ryan said without standing. He continued to examine the box. After a moment he stood up with the box in his hands, removing the paper and putting it under one arm as he carried the box over to put in the trunk of their car.

“Inside first?” he asked his partner.

“Yes” Detective Justus answered. “Why don’t you go home and we’ll meet you there after we talk to the folks inside.”

“Okay” I agreed. I watched in my rearview mirror as they pulled away. So much for a relaxing evening at home.