

from the author of SWEEP

CATE TIERNAN

BALEFIRE



BOOK FOUR

NECKLACE OF WATER

BALEFIRE

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藏书章

A NECK
OF WATER

CATE TIERNAN



Balefire 4: A Necklace of Water

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No turning back...

"Someone killed my father," I got out, the words sounding harsh and bald in that quiet room. "I want revenge. He's a witch. I want to strip his powers away."

Suddenly this all seemed so impossible, so unbelievable. What was I doing? Who was I? This wasn't even *me*.

"You believe in witches, then?"

"I have to. I am one."

The woman walked slowly through the shop, as though thinking things over. Every once in a while I felt her dark eyes on me.

"A spell that would strip his powers away is dark magick." You'll bear a mark on your soul forever."

"He killed my father." I felt like tears were not far away.

"I will teach you a spell," the woman said. "If you are truly determined to do this. It won't be easy. Are you prepared for pain? For fear? For darkness?"

His or mine? "Yes," I said, quaking.

"You will need these supplies. Come back when you have them."

A slip of thick gray paper seemed to materialize out of the air.

I took it, my hand shaking. "Okay," I barely whispered.

"Go home, little girl," she said. "Do not come back until you're ready."

By Cate Tiernan

BALDFIRE

Book One: *A Chalice of Wind*

Book Two: *A Circle of Ashes*

Book Three: *A Feather of Stone*

Book Four: *A Necklace of Water*

SWEEP

Book One: *Book of Shadows*

Book Two: *The Coven*

Book Three: *Blood Witch*

Book Four: *Dark Magick*

Book Five: *Awakening*

Book Six: *Spellbound*

Book Seven: *The Calling*

Book Eight: *Changeling*

Book Nine: *Strife*

Book Ten: *Seeker*

Book Eleven: *Origins*

Book Twelve: *Eclipse*

Book Thirteen: *Reckoning*

Book Fourteen: *Full Circle*

Super Edition: *Night's Child*

To my friend Paul, through all the ups and downs.



Fire. It was creation and destruction at once. It made life possible, yet could so easily snatch it away. It was a beacon in the darkness, warmth in the coldest winter, an eternal symbol of hearth, home, and comfort.

And it could cook steaks.

I glanced beneath the half-moon kettle standing on rusted legs in our backyard. With one hand I felt around the back—

“Where’s the switch?”

My sister looked at me pityingly, then struck a match and laid it on top of the small pile of coals. Nothing happened, and she pulled out another match. Then I saw the barest disturbance—a wavering around the edge of a briquette, as if the air itself were bending.

“There,” said Clio, pointing. Sure enough, a timid flame was licking a coal, sliding over it like liquid light, and the next minute the other coals wore tiny frills of dancing orange heat.

The sun was sinking rapidly—though it was still daylight saving time, night was coming sooner every

day. Now it was twilight, and shadows and shapes in our yard were becoming less distinct.

"Huh," I said, lost in the way the flames consumed the coals. I looked up at Clio, who was as transfixed as I was. "On mine, we just pressed a switch."

"That's 'cause you're a Yankee," she said absently.

I kicked her shin with my bare foot, and she looked up with a faint grin. "The truth hurts," she said. "I understand." She sat down on our back steps and gathered up her long, straight black hair, using a big plastic clip to hold it off her neck. "Whew," she said. "Hot."

I sat next to her, my own straight black hair awkwardly growing out of a hairstyle I hadn't kept up. Back home in Welsford, Connecticut, I'd had it cut in precise layers every seven weeks. Now I hadn't had a trim in months, ever since my father had been killed and I'd been shuttled down here to New Orleans to live with strangers.

Clio and I let out heavy sighs at the exact same time, then met each other's eyes in a wry acknowledgment of our "twin thing."

I focused on the grill, trying to find words that wouldn't set off yet another argument between me and Clio. In the end, all I could come up with was, "Don't do it."

Clio frowned, not looking at me, and my chest tightened.

Ever since we'd taken part in the horrible, failed rite of the Treize two days ago, Clio and I had been

locked in a battle of wills, and we were both losing. It had been an incredibly powerful rite, a rite that could have—should have—been deadly, and Clio and I never should have witnessed it, much less participated.

But we had. And during the rite, at the climax of power and magick and energy, each person in the Treize had privately spoken their deepest wishes. Mine had been to know for sure what had happened to my father last summer. One minute he'd been standing in front of an ice cream shop, and the next he'd been under the front wheels of a Crown Victoria.

I'd been in France, on a class tour of Europe. I'd gotten a phone call from Mrs. Thompkins, our next-door neighbor and closest friend. My life had ended with that phone call, and the surreal existence I'd been living since then still seemed like it belonged to someone else most of the time.

I'd needed to know: How could it be a coincidence that Dad had died, I'd come to New Orleans, and that I'd found not only my identical twin sister but also a bizarre web of history and pain that had been going on for almost 250 years?

It wasn't a coincidence. In my vision I'd seen Daedalus performing the spell that had made old Mrs. Beadle have a stroke. I'd seen him magickally guiding her car onto the sidewalk. He'd smacked his hands together right as the car hit my dad. I'd seen him clench his fist as he ended my dad's life from hundreds of miles away.

Now I wanted to kill him.

Which was impossible, what with the immortality and all. Maybe there was some unknown way I could try to kill him, but I'd never be able to carry it out despite what he'd done. I wasn't a murderer like he was.

But I was planning to destroy him. I still knew barely anything about the *bonne magie*, my family's traditional religion, although I'd learned that what you put out into the world, you get back threefold. But if breaking Daedalus came back on me threefold, it would be worth it to avenge my father's death and my life being blown apart for Daedalus's dark purpose.

After the rite, when we were more coherent and less sick, I'd told Clio what I'd seen. Clio had never known Dad, but he was her father too. I was sure she'd feel the same way I did. And she *was* angry at Daedalus, but it was hard to grieve for something she'd never had.

I didn't know what spell she'd tossed into the tornado of magickal force that had knocked us all down at the rite. She told me she'd had a vision of herself drowned. Dead. Her skin pale and bloodless, her sightless eyes staring up at a sky black with storm clouds. It was haunting her.

Clio got up and stirred the glowing coals, edges rimmed with fine white ash, and spread them on the bottom of the kettle. She gauged their temperature with her hand, then set the metal grill in place. We'd marinated a steak, and when she dropped it onto the

grate, it sizzled and sent up sharp hisses of steam.

Petra, whom Clio had always thought was her grandmother, had been hit hard by the rite. Since then she'd hardly left her bed, and we were both worried about how frail she suddenly seemed. Maybe making her a steak would strengthen her, along with all the healing spells our friend Melysa was doing.

"I'm going to do it," Clio said, her back still to me. Anger bloomed fast inside my chest, like a scarlet carnation.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Clio turned to face me.

"I don't want to die," she said, for the hundredth time. "I saw myself *dead*. Dead *now*, at this age, not older, not as a grown-up."

"You aren't sure that's what the vision meant," I said carefully, keeping reins on my anger.

"Yes, I am!" she snapped, her green eyes flashing in the deepening night. The birthmark on her left cheek, identical to mine on my right, seemed to blaze brighter, like a splash of blood. "I saw myself *dead*, and it wasn't a dream; it was real. It was what's *about* to happen. And I won't die. Not *now*. Why are you so sure what you saw is real, but what I saw isn't? You're not even a witch!"

I jerked back as if slapped. Clio had grown up as a witch, with Petra and her coven. I'd only found out about the Craft a few months ago. Neither of us had passed the rite of ascension, which in the *bonne magie* would make us full members of a coven.

Compared to Clio, I was as stupid as a toddler with all the stuff I didn't know. But it was all too clear that I was a witch, as much a witch as any woman in my family, going back hundreds of years. It was clear that I was going to follow that course till the end of my life.

Clio's lips made an angry, hard line, and I knew she regretted saying that.

"All I'm saying," she went on tightly, "is that you seem to think what you saw is more real than what I saw."

"No, I don't," I insisted. But I'd seen details of something that *had* really happened, and *she'd* had a premonition at best. Who knew if it would ever come true? "I just don't see how you could bear to study with someone who killed our *father*."

Which brought us to the crux of it: Clio had seen herself dead, and it had terrified her. Now she was willing to ally herself with my father's murderer in order to cheat death—death that wasn't even certain.

"Daedalus knows the magick behind the rite better than any of them." Clio jabbed a long fork into the steak and turned it over. Blood dripped onto the blazing coals. "He can teach me what I need to know to make sure the rite works the next time."

"So you'll be immortal," I said tonelessly, and Clio shrugged.

And there you have it: Clio wanted immortality; I wanted to destroy the man who had so coldly ended my dad's life. My dad had been forty-one! Daedalus was, like, 270. Who deserved to live more?

"I know you don't want to die," I said, coming to stand next to her. "I don't *want* you to die. And I don't want to die myself. But you *don't* have to study with Daedalus."

"He knows the most; he's the one who got this together," she said stubbornly.

How could she be so *stupid*? How could she be so disloyal to Dad and to me? "How can you do this!" I shouted in frustration, and Clio wheeled on me, looking furious. Her mouth opened to blast me, but in the next second she froze, as if hearing something.

"Luc," she said, frowning. She glanced at the freshly painted back of our house. "Luc—and Richard."

"Here?"

"Yes." Clio picked up my hand, but only to read my watch. Turning, she stabbed the steak with the fork again, sliding it onto the platter. She headed up the steps with it.

I couldn't believe Clio wouldn't change her mind.

Which was why I could never tell her about my plan to destroy Daedalus.



Thais was really pissing me off. Of course I hated the fact that our dad was dead, that I would never know him, that he'd never known me. If Daedalus had done it, then I would have it out with him. Someday.

But in the meantime, I myself was going to be dead *any day*! In my vision, I'd looked exactly the same as I did now, not even a year older. I'd seen myself *dead*, drowned, gray, looking almost exactly like my ancestor Cerise had when she'd died.

Cerise. My jaw tightened as I set the steak platter down on the kitchen table. I heard Nan in the front room, talking to Luc and Richard. Great. Just who I needed to see now together with Thais. Luc, the man we had both loved and, I was guessing, both still loved, and Richard, another member of the Treize, Luc's roommate. Someone who set me off like gasoline on a fire. Someone who had tried to kill me and Thais. And had then made out with me.

I frowned, trying to get it together, as Thais came in from the backyard. Our small wooden table was set for dinner for three. Iced tea had been poured,

baked potatoes were ready, and a dish of sautéed okra sat in the middle of the table.

"Come in," I heard Nan say, and felt footsteps vibrating the floorboards. It was interesting how our house felt when a man entered it. We were three women, our footsteps light, our energy relatively smooth. Our house felt calm and strong around us. But when a man came into it, everything changed. The energy was charged and jagged, their footsteps so much heavier, voices louder—they took up more space than a woman.

"Oh, Clio," said Nan, her voice still weak. "We . . . have visitors."

The way she said it made me look up. She knew that I had felt them arrive. I wondered if she was still furious at Richard or if she'd forgiven him. And she knew that Luc, Richard, Thais, and I had all kinds of tensions between us—though she didn't know the complete picture about any of it. At least, I prayed she didn't.

"Well, dinner's ready," I said shortly, pulling out my chair and sitting down. Nan came into the kitchen, followed by two people I had rolled around with and now kind of hated. I took a big swig of iced tea, wishing it was Jack Daniels.

Then I saw Luc's face and almost spewed tea out my nose. I heard Thais's gasp behind me, and suddenly Nan's odd tone of voice made sense. I gulped, coughing, trying to get tea down before it blew all over the table.

Finally, holding my napkin to my mouth, I managed, "What happened to your face?"

I flicked a glance at Richard's dark eyes. The

expression on his face told me he'd definitely wanted to be here when I saw Luc for the first time.

"Sit down, Luc," Nan murmured, pulling out her chair. Our kitchen is small, our table smaller, big enough for only three people at one time. I looked at Thais, where she was leaning against the stove, her eyes big and startled. She met my eyes and mouthed, "Holy crap," at me, and I nodded.

Luc sat down across from me, looking miserable. Or at least, I thought he seemed miserable—it was actually hard to tell. I mean, it was hard to tell that he was *human*. Luc—one of the hottest, most handsome guys I'd ever seen in my life, with beautiful bones, beautiful dark blue eyes, a beautiful sculpted mouth that I had been unable to resist—now looked like the Thing.

His face was grossly swollen, his features obscured. His eyes seemed small and piggy, almost closed with extra flesh. His skin itself, usually gorgeous, perfect, and tan, was now waxen and pasty, covered with thousands of tiny pustules. Clearly he'd had trouble shaving: several days' worth of dark stubble mottled his cheeks and chin, and not in a sexy way.

He looked like a monster.

"Yep," Richard said, walking to the fridge and helping himself to one of Nan's beers. "I'm guessing someone at the rite wanted everyone's outsides to match their insides."

"Shut up," said Luc, his voice sounding like it had been put through a cheese grater. He sounded very subdued, very different from his usual world-weary, ironic self.

Richard grinned and toasted him with the beer, then tilted his head back and drank. I tried to put all images of kissing and biting that neck out of my mind.

"But what happened?" said Thais, sounding appalled. "Did someone do this? Or is this, like, from something you ate or touched? Poison ivy?"

Luc laughed wryly. "No, this is magickal. I don't know why or how or who. Someone wanted to teach me a lesson, I guess."

His gaze flicked past Thais to me, and I frowned. He knew Thais and I had every reason to despise him, but neither of us would ever do anything like this.

Tempting though it would be.

"It wasn't me," I said.

"It wasn't me," Thais echoed.

"It wasn't me," Richard put in. "Though God knows I'm enjoying the hell out of it."

Luc shot him an angry glance, and Richard grinned. It burned Richard up, how I felt about Luc—not that he wanted me himself. Or at least, not for more than twenty minutes at a time.

Nan took Luc's chin in her hand, tilting his face in the red-tinged twilight to see it better. "It would help if we knew who had done this," she murmured, and she suddenly looked so old that I almost drew in my breath. Nan had looked exactly the same for my entire life—seventeen years. Now, two days after the rite, she looked so much paler, weaker. Not as if she'd actually physically aged in any way, but had just . . . been drained.

So many spells had been cast at that rite, so