

from the author of SWEEP

CATE TIERNAN

BALEFIRE

BOOK THREE

FEATHER OF STONE



BALDFIRE

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A FEATHER IN THE STONE

CATE TIERNAN



Balefire 3: A Feather of Stone

RAZORBILL

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A dangerous temptation . . .

I closed my eyes and murmured the words that would let me access the cats' power. Within seconds I felt their feline life forces. Without thinking, I coiled my muscles. I crouched and jumped easily to the top of our seven-foot brick wall. I landed on my toes, arms out for balance, but felt solid and secure.

Laughing aloud, I raised my face to the sky. I saw differently, heard differently, tasted the air more powerfully. I smelled other animals, damp brick, green leaves and decaying plants and dirt. I was giddy with sensation, thrilled, with fierce anticipation about exploring the whole new world opened to me. My night vision was amazing, and ~~I gazed at everything~~, seeing every dark leaf, every ~~swaying plant~~, every cricket in the grass, one crisp, clear snapshot at a time.

I was super ~~Clio~~ bursting with life and power, and a dark and terrible ~~power~~ rose up in me.

I sat down again ~~in my circle~~, trying to still my frantically beating heart. I didn't want to lose this feeling, this incredible, exhilarating extra-ness. It would be so easy to just take it, take it and keep it, and not care about the consequences.

By Cate Tiernan

BALDFIRE

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*With love to Fiona Morgan,
who supports me in so many ways.*



I heard a faint sound behind me and froze, my hands inside my canvas bag. I waited, sending my senses out more strongly, but felt nothing out of the ordinary: only sleeping birds, neighborhood dogs and cats, mice. Insects.

Ick.

I let out a deep breath. It was a new moon, which meant this cemetery was even blacker than usual. I was tucked into a remote corner, kneeling on the grass between two tall crypts. I was invisible from all directions, unless someone was right in front of me.

It was almost midnight. I had school tomorrow and knew I would feel like crap in the morning. Too bad. This was my chance, and I wasn't going to waste it.

Quickly and silently I drew a five-foot circle on the ground with sand. Inside the circle, I set four red candles at the four compass points. Red for blood, lineage, passion, fire. I was in the very center, with a small stone bowl filled with chunks of coal in front of me. I lit the candles and the coal, blowing on the coal until it was glowing red.

Then I sat back, gently rested my hands palms up on my knees, and tried to calm my nerves. If Nan woke up and found me gone, I would be dead meat. Or if anyone else found out what I was doing, again, there would be much of the brouhaha.

But two nights ago, at a circle for Récolte, I'd been blown to the ground by a huge surge of power. My own power had been taken and used by someone else. I was still pissed at Daedalus for doing it. So here I was, trying to find out how he'd done it.

I'd practiced magick, the *métier*, pretty much my whole life. I hadn't had my rite of ascension yet, but I'd had great teachers and knew I was pretty powerful for my age. I'd seen any number of grown-ups work magick, for years. But I'd never seen anything like what had happened at Récolte.

Where had Daedalus's power come from? Was it from being immortal? Tonight I was going to try to go to the source: my memory. For some reason, my sister, Thais, and I could tap into memories of our ancestors, the line of witches twelve generations long that led back to the rite, the first rite, the one where the Treize became immortal and Cerise Martin had died.

I'd *seen* what had happened that night. At the time I'd been too freaked to see the big picture. But now that I knew what it was, what had happened, I would find out *how*.

I stilled my whirling thoughts and focused on the burning coal. Fire was my element, and I concentrated on the glowing red heat, feeling it warming the heavy air. On the ground I drew different runes:

ôte, for birthright and inheritance, *rad*, for my journey, *lage*, for knowledge and psychic power. I slowed my breathing. The barriers between myself and the rest of the world slowly dissolved; our edges blurred. I took on an awareness of everything around me: the inhalation of a blade of grass, the microscopic release of old, weathered marble on a tomb. In my mind I chanted a spell, one that I'd spent the last two days crafting. It was in English, and I'd totally given up on trying to make it rhyme.

Chains of time, pull me back
Let me sink into memory
Follow the red thread of my blood
Back through the ages
Woman after woman, mother after mother
Giving birth, succumbing to death
Back to the first one, Cerise Martin
And the night of Melita's power.
Show me what I need to know.

I had never done anything like this before, never worked a spell this big. Also, I was deliberately invoking a memory of someone I knew to be evil—Melita Martin, my ancestor. In my earlier visions of that night, I'd been both terrified and horrified at what I'd seen. Now I was going there voluntarily. No one with any sense would think that was okay. But part of being a witch was having an ever-present thirst for knowledge, a desperate need to have questions answered, an overwhelming desire to understand as much as possible.

Of course, part of being a witch was also accepting the fact that there were many, many questions that could never be answered and many things that would never be known.

I began singing my song, my unique call for power. I sang it very, very softly—this cemetery was in the middle of an uptown neighborhood, not far from my house, and was bordered by four narrow residential streets. Anyone walking by might hear. A thin shell of awareness was distracting me—I still felt the damp grass I sat on, heard the faint drone of distant grasshoppers.

Maybe this wouldn't work. Maybe I wasn't strong enough. Maybe I had crafted the spell wrong. *Maybe I should ask Melita for help.*

That last thought startled me, and I blinked.

It was sunny, and I was standing in the middle of a small garden patch. I held my long apron up with one hand, and with the other I picked tomatoes, letting them slide into the pouchy sling my apron made. I saw that fat green tomato worms were eating some of the vines. So my anti-tomato-worm spell hadn't worked. *Maybe I should ask Melita for help.*

But now I had enough tomatoes for Maman's gumbo. I hitched up my apron so they wouldn't spill and headed back to the kitchen. My bare feet felt the warm earth, the slightly cooler grass, the rough, packed oyster shells of the path to the barn. My back hurt. My big belly stuck out so I could hardly see my feet. Two more months and the baby would be born. Maman said my back wouldn't hurt anymore then.

I'd heard the English looked down hard on a girl unwed but with child. Our village was more accepting. Maman did want me to choose Marcel, to make my own family with him. But I wanted to stay here, in this house, with Maman and my sister. Papa had left long ago, and since then, we were only women here. I liked it that way.

I climbed up the wooden steps to the back room. We cooked outside, everyone did, but we kept our kitchen things in the workroom. Maman and my sister were inside.

"Here." I lifted the tomatoes onto the table, then sat down in a wooden chair, feeling the relief of not carrying the extra weight.

"The *bébé* grows big, no?" my sister said, going to the pail of drinking water on the bench. She dipped me up some, filling a cup, and brought it to me. "Poor Cerise."

"Thanks." The water was warm but good.

Melita knelt in front of me and put her hands on the hard mound of my stomach. She soothed the tight muscles, and her movements calmed the baby, who was active and kicking. One big kick made me gasp, and Melita laughed and tapped the plain outline of a tiny foot.

"You're full of life," she murmured, and smiled up at me, her eyes as black as mine were green, her hair dark like Papa's.

I smiled at her, then caught a glimpse of Maman's face as she snapped green beans. She was worried, watching us. Worried about me and the

baby, about Melita and her magick. People said that she worked dark magick, that she risked her soul pursuing evil. I didn't believe them and didn't want to think about it. She was my sister.

"Are you ready for the special circle tonight?" Melita asked, starting to chop tomatoes.

I made a face. "I'm tired—maybe I'll stay home and sleep."

"Oh no, *cher*," she said, looking distressed. "I need you there. It's a special circle, one that will guarantee a time of plenty for the whole village. You must come. You're my good luck charm."

"Who else is going?" I bent down with difficulty and picked up some sewing from the basket. I'd begun making baby dresses, baby hats, baby socks. I carried a girl; I could feel her. Now I was working on a small blanket for the cradle.

"Well, Maman," said Melita.

I glanced at Maman to see her frowning. She, too, was unsure about this circle of Melita's.

"Ouida," Melita cajoled. "You like her. And cousin Sophie. Cousin Luc-Andre. Manon, the smith's daughter."

"That little girl?" Maman asked.

"She wants to take part in more circles," Melita answered. "Um . . ."

The way she hesitated made me look up. "Who else?"

"Marcel," she admitted.

I nodded and went back to sewing. Marcel was a dear. He was so anxious about the baby. Had asked

me to marry him a thousand times. I cared about him, truly, and knew he would make a good husband. I just didn't want a husband. He'd been so sure that I'd marry him when I knew I was going to have the baby. But why would I bother marrying when I had Maman and Melita to help me?

"Several others," Melita said, sweeping the chopped tomatoes into a bowl. "It will be perfect. I've been crafting this spell for a long time. I assure you it will bring a long and healthy life to everyone who participates."

"How can you know that?" Maman asked.

Melita laughed. "I've crafted it to be so. Trust me."

At sundown Maman and I walked from our little house to the place Melita had told us about, deep in the woods, not far from the river. I had rested and felt fine and healthy. I couldn't wait for two months to be past so I could meet my baby girl. Would she have light eyes or dark? Fair skin or warm tan? I looked forward to her fatness, her perfect baby skin. Maman had delivered many babies, and I knew it would be hard, but not horrible. And Melita would help.

"Through here," Maman murmured, holding back some trailing honeysuckles. Their strong sweetness perfumed the air, filling my lungs with scent. It was hot and humid and our clothes stuck to us, but everything felt fine.

We reached a small clearing, in front of what Melita had described as the biggest oak tree in Louisiana.

"Holy Mother," Maman breathed, looking at the tree.

I laughed when I saw it—it reached the sky, taller than any tree I'd ever seen. It was so big around that five people holding hands still could not encircle it. It was awe-inspiring, such a monument to how the Mother nourished life. I touched the bark with my palm, almost able to feel the life pulsing under its skin.

"How could I have not known this was here?" Maman said, still gazing at it.

"Petra," said a voice in greeting. "Cerise."

It was remarkable, how I felt chills down my back when I heard his voice or knew that he was near.

Maman turned to him with a smile. "Richard, *cher*. How are you? Melita didn't tell us you were coming."

I turned slowly, in time to see him take off his hat and brush it against one leg. "Melita is very persuasive," he said, not looking at me.

"Petra." Ouida called to her from across the clearing, and, smiling, Maman went to hug her.

I looked into Richard's dark eyes. "Did Melita tell you what this was about?"

"No. You?"

I shook my head and looked for a place to sit. Finally I just sat on the grass, smoothing out my skirts and arching my back to stretch my stomach muscles. "She said it was about ensuring a time of plenty for the village," I said. "Long lives for every-

one. I didn't want to come, but she said I was her good luck charm."

Richard sat next to me. His knee accidentally brushed mine, and a ripple of pleasure shot up my spine. My mind filled with other memories of pleasure with Richard, and I wriggled a bit and smiled at him. He got that very still, intent expression that always meant I was about to feel good.

Then he turned away, his jaw set, and I sighed. He was continuing to be upset about Marcel. Just like Marcel was very upset about him. Sometimes the two of them made me tired—why should it matter if I wanted both of them? Why should I have to choose? I wouldn't have cared if they'd also wanted to spark some other girl in the village.

I fanned myself with my straw hat and saw that others were arriving. M. Daedalus, the head of our village, was there, and his friend Jules, who'd lived here for ten years now. M. Daedalus had just gotten back from visiting his brother in New Orleans, I remembered hearing. I wondered if he had brought back any fabric for the Chevets' shop. I'd go look tomorrow.

Melita's best friend, Axelle, arrived, slim like a snake, even in her full skirts and sun hat. I smiled and waved at her, and she waved back.

"Greetings," said a voice, and I turned to see Claire Londine stepping through the honeysuckle. She saw me and came to sit down.

"You're as big as a house," she told me, shaking her head. "How do you feel?"

"Fine, mostly," I said.

"I don't see why you would—" she began, then looked at Richard and stopped.

"I'm going to talk to Daedalus," Richard said abruptly, and left.

Claire laughed. "He sensed woman talk coming on. I wanted to say, why did you let this happen? It's so easy to prevent it. Or to stop it, if it comes to that."

I shrugged. "I decided I'd like to have a baby. I'm going to call her Hélène."

"But babies are so much work," Claire said. "They scream all the time. They never go away."

"Maman and Melita will help me. And I like babies."

"Well, I hope you do," Claire said, stretching her legs out in the sun. Her bare feet and almost six inches of bare leg were visible below her hem, but Claire had always been scandalous. She was nice to me, though, and she'd been in my class at our tiny village school.

"Everyone," my sister called. "It's time. Let's form a circle."

I stood ungracefully, holding my belly with one hand. It was almost sunset, but at that moment the light winked out, like a snuffed candle. I looked up to see huge, plum-colored clouds sweeping in from the south.

"Storm coming in," I murmured to Maman. "Maybe we should do this another time."

Melita heard me. "No," she said. "Tonight is the

only time I can work this spell—everything is perfect: moon, season, people. I'm sure the storm won't bother us."

She quickly drew a large circle that almost filled the clearing, then lit thirteen candles—one for each of us. The wind picked up a bit, an oddly cool, damp wind, but though their flames whipped right and left, the candles stayed lit.

Melita drew the rune *borche* in the air, for new beginnings, birth. I frowned slightly, holding my big stomach. Was that safe? I glanced at Maman. She was watching Melita very solemnly. Maman would stop this or send me away if it wasn't safe. I tried to relax as we all joined hands.

Marcel couldn't take his eyes off me, which irritated me. His gaze was like a weight. Unlike that of Richard, who was across the circle, talking in a low voice with Claire. He laughed, and Claire giggled and swung his hand in hers.

We started to move *dalmonde*, and Melita began chanting. Again I glanced at Maman and again she had her eyes locked on my sister. I didn't recognize this song—I'd never heard it before, and it didn't match any of our usual forms. Melita's voice became stronger and stronger, seeming to fill my chest. It was very strange—not at all like other circles.

Rain began to fall, big, cool drops soaking my shoulders and the top of my stomach. I vaguely wanted to stop, wanted to let go, but as soon as I thought it, the idea was out of my mind, and Melita's song was filling me again.