

I

“Come on,” Savannah whispered, tugging the young man’s hand.

She climbed a wooden fence into the backyard of an old three-story row house.

“Watch out for the roses,” she said as his feet threatened to land in the border. “We gotta come this way or the old bugger next door will bitch about me having friends over when no one’s home.”

“Yeah,” the boy said. “I get shit from my folks about that, too.”

“Oh, Paige and Lucas don’t care, as long as I clean up and don’t have any monster parties. Well, they might care if they found out I was bringing a guy over. But if that old man sees me having friends over? He starts telling people that Paige and Lucas are crappy guardians, shit like that. Make me want to—” She swallowed her next words and shrugged. “Throw quicklime on his roses or something.”

I was less than a half-dozen paces behind, but they never turned around, never even peered over their shoulders. Sometimes that really pisses me off. Sure, all teenagers ignore their mothers. And, sure, Savannah had a good excuse, since I’d been dead for three years. Still you’d think we’d have a deeper connection, that she’d somehow hear me, if only as a voice in her head that said “Don’t listen to that girl” or “That boy’s not worth the trouble.” Never happened, though. In life, I’d been one of the most powerful women in the supernatural world,

an Aspicio half-demon and witch master of the black arts. Now I was a third-rate ghost who couldn't even contact her own daughter. My afterlife sucked.

Savannah took the boy through the lean-to, dragged him away from Lucas's latest motorcycle restoration project, and into the house. The back door swung shut in my face. I walked through it.

They shed their shoes, then climbed the small set of stairs from the landing to the kitchen. Savannah headed straight for the fridge and started grabbing sandwich fixings. I walked past them, through the dining room, into the living room, and settled into my favorite spot, a butter-yellow leather armchair.

I'd done the right thing, sending Savannah to Paige. Quite possibly the smartest thing I'd ever done. Of course, if I'd been really smart, Savannah wouldn't have needed anyone to take her in. I wouldn't have been in such a hellfire rush to escape that compound, wouldn't have gotten myself killed, wouldn't have endangered my little girl—

Yes, I'd screwed up, but I was going to fix that now. I'd promised to look after my daughter, and I would . . . just as soon as I figured out how.

Savannah and her friend took their sandwiches into the dining room. I leaned forward to peer around the corner, just a quick check in case . . . In case what, Eve? In case she chokes on a pickle? I silenced the too-familiar inner voice and started to settle back into my chair when I noticed a third person in the dining room. In a chair pulled up to the front window, sat a gray-haired woman, her head bent, shoulders racked with silent sobs.

Savannah brushed past the woman, and took a seat on the opposite side of the table. "Did you hear Ms. Lenke might not be back before the city finals? She'd better be. Callahan doesn't know the difference between a dead ball and a free ball."

The boy snorted. “I’d be surprised if that moron could tell a basketball from a football. At last week’s practice . . .”

I tuned them out and focused on the woman. As I drew near, I could hear her muted sobs. I sighed and leaned against the dining room doorway.

“Look,” I said. “Whatever happened to you, I’m sure it was bad, but you have to move on. Go into the light or click your heels three times or whatever. Get thee to the other side, ghost.”

The woman didn’t even look up. Only thing worse than a stubborn spirit was a rude one. I’d seen her here at least a dozen times since the kids had moved in, and not once had she so much as acknowledged my presence. Never spoke. Never left that chair. Never stopped crying. And I thought I had a lousy afterlife.

I softened my tone. “You have to get over it. You’re wasting your time—”

She faded, and was gone. Really. Some people.

“Where’s that new stereo you got for Easter?” the boy asked through a mouthful of multigrain bread.

“In my room.” Savannah hesitated. “You wanna go up and see it?”

The boy jumped to his feet so fast his chair tumbled over backward. Savannah laughed and helped him right it. Then she grabbed his hand and led him to the stairs.

I stayed at the bottom.

A moment later, music rocked the rafters. Nothing I recognized. Dead three years, and I was already a pop culture has-been. No, wait. I did recognize the song. (Don’t Fear) the Reaper . . . but with a techno-beat. Who the hell was this? Not Blue Oyster Cult that’s for sure. What kind of crap—? Oh God, I was turning into my mother. I’d avoided it all my life and now—

A man walked through the wall. Two inches taller than me. A decade older. Broad shoulders. Thickening middle. Thinning blond hair. Gorgeous bright blue eyes, which followed my gaze to the stairs.

“And what does our daughter desperately need your help with today?” he asked.

Kristof Nast’s contribution to “our daughter” had been purely biological, having not entered her life until just days before the end of his. My choice, not his. After I’d become pregnant, I’d skedaddled. Took him thirteen years and a mortal blow to the head, but he’d finally caught up with me.

He cocked his head, listened to the music and pulled a face. “Well, at least she’s out of the boy band stage. And it could be worse. Bryce went through heavy metal, then rap, then hip-hop, and at each phase I swore the next one couldn’t be any worse, but he always found something—” Kristof stopped and waved a hand in front of my eyes.

“Come on, Eve,” he said. “Savannah’s taste may be questionable, but she doesn’t require musical supervision.”

“Shhh. Can you hear anything?”

He arched his brows. “Besides a badly tuned bass guitar and vocals worthy of a castrated stray cat?”

“She has a boy up there.”

Another frown, deeper this time. “What kind of boy?”

“Human.”

“I meant what ‘sort’ of boy? This isn’t the same one—” He closed his mouth with an audible click of his teeth, then launched into a voice I knew only too well, one I heard in my head when he wasn’t around. “All right. Savannah has a boy in her room. She’s fifteen. We

both know they aren't up there on a study date. As for exactly what they're doing . . . is that really any of your business?"

"I'm not worried about sex, Kris. She's a smart girl. If she's ready—and I don't think she is—she'll take precautions. But what if he's ready? I barely know this guy. He could—"

"Force her to do something she doesn't want?" His laugh boomed through the foyer. "When's the last time anyone forced you to do something against your will? She's your daughter, Eve. First guy who puts a hand where she doesn't want it will be lucky if he doesn't lose it."

"I know, but—"

"What if they do turn that music down? Do you really want to hear what's going on?"

"Of course not. That's why I'm staying down here. I'm just making sure—"

"You can't make sure of anything, Eve. You're dead. That boy could pull a gun on her and there's not a damn thing you could do about it."

"I'm working on that!"

He sighed. "You've been working on it for three years. And you're no better off than when you started." He hesitated, then plowed forward. "You need to step back from it for a while. Take a break"

"And do what?"

"Well, funny you should ask. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I happen to have a temp job lined up for you. Full of adventure, mystery, maybe even a little danger . . ."

"Just a little?"

He grinned. "Depends on how you play it."

I paused, then glanced up the stairs. "We'll talk about it later."

Kristof threw up his hands and disappeared into the wall. I plunked down onto the step. Savannah and I had a special bond he couldn't possibly understand. I only wish that was true. Kris had single-parented both his sons after his wife had left them while his youngest was still in diapers. Soon after we'd met, his secretary had paged him because Sean had been hit in the head during a baseball game. For barely more than a bump, he'd blown off an important dinner meeting to catch the next plane home. And that's when my opinion of him had began the slow but steady shift that led to Savannah.

It had ended there, though. Once I'd realized I was a black witch carrying the bastard child of a Cabal heir, I hadn't been dumb enough to stick around and see what his family thought. As for what Kristof thought of that, me taking our daughter away . . . well, I'd spent twelve years trying not to think about that. I knew I'd made a mistake, an error in judgment overshadowed only by that final error in judgment I'd made in the compound.

Yet for twelve years I'd been able to coast on my guilt trip, telling myself maybe Kristof hadn't really cared that I'd taken Savannah. Bullshit, of course. But not having him there to say otherwise had made it easier . . . until six months after my death, I'd seen him fight for custody of her, die trying to protect her.

Upstairs, the music ended. Savannah popped in another CD . . . or switched MP3s . . . or whatever music came on these days. The next song began, something slow, and definitely soft enough for me to hear giggles and murmurs.

Damn it, Kris was right. Following my daughter to the mall was one thing. Listening to her make out with a boy was wrong. And creepy. But now I was stuck here. If Kristof found out I'd left right after him, he'd know I'd seen his point, and I wasn't ready to admit that. Maybe—

A sharp oath burst from the living room. I took a cautious step toward the corner. In life, I would have strode over there, defensive spell at the ready. But here? Well, here things were different.

Kristof stepped from behind the sofa, picking what looked like cobwebs from his rumpled shirt. The back of his hair stuck straight up, as if someone had run a static-charged hand through it. His tie was shredded.

He gave a fierce wet-dog shake. When he finished, he was immaculate again . . . except for his tie, which was tucked into his shirt. I plucked it out and straightened it.

“Let me guess,” I said. “Wrong turn . . . again?”

He gave a helpless shrug. “You know how I am with spells.”

“Uh-huh.”

I glanced back at the stairs. A sigh floated down.

I turned back to Kris. “Want a lift?”

“Please.”