

Bewitched, Bothered & Bewildered

I was in trouble with the Elders. Again.

I'd been a trial to them all my life and now, at twenty-three, no longer a precocious child or a rebellious youth, they were running out of excuses for me.

"Something must be done about Savannah." The speaker phone added a not-inappropriate whine to Victoria Alden's voice.

"Uh-huh." My fingers flew across the keyboard, hammering out the next line of code.

"I hear typing," Victoria said. "Are you typing, Paige?"

"Deadline," I said. "Enhancements to the Springfield Legal Services website. Due in two days. And counting. Look, can we discuss this later? I'll be at the Coven meeting next week and—"

"Next week?! I don't think you're taking this seriously, Paige. Pick up the telephone, stop working and talk to me. Where did you ever learn such manners? Not from your mother, rest her soul."

I lifted the receiver, gripped it between my shoulder and ear and tried to type quietly.

"It's about Savannah," Victoria said.

Wasn't it always? One of the few perks of having custody of thirteen-year-old Savannah Levine was that my rebellions paled in comparison.

"What's she done now?" I asked. I flipped to my file-list of JavaScript functions. I was sure I'd written a function for this last year. Damned it I could find it now.

"Well, I was talking to Grace last night and she expressed concern over something Savannah told Brittany. Now, Grace admits Brittany may have misunderstood the details, which I can certainly see. We don't expose Coven neophytes to this sort of thing, so I'd be shocked if Brittany did understand what Savannah was talking about. It seems—" Victoria paused and inhaled sharply, as if it pained her to go on. "It seems Brittany is having trouble with a few girls at school and Savannah offered to . . . to help her make a potion that would result in these girls being unable to attend the school dance."

"Uh-huh." Ah, there was that function. A half-day's coding saved. "Then what?"

"What do you mean 'then what'? Savannah offered to show Brittany how to make these girls sick!"

"She's thirteen. At her age, I would have liked to make a lot of people sick."

"But you didn't, did you?"

"Only because I didn't know the spells. Which was probably a good thing or there'd have been some serious epidemics going on."

"See?" Victoria said. "This is exactly what I've been talking about. This attitude of yours—"

"I thought we were talking about Savannah's attitude."

"There. That's it exactly. I'm trying to bring a serious matter to your attention and you brush it off with quips. This flippant attitude will never make you Coven Leader."

I stifled the urge to remind her that, as of my mother's death, I was Coven Leader. If I did, she'd 'remind' me that I was Leader in name only, and this discussion would turn from irritating to ugly in a heartbeat.

"Savannah is my responsibility," I said. "You Elders have made that very clear."

"For good reason."

"Because her mother practiced dark magic. Oooh. Scary. Well, you know what? The only scary thing about Savannah is how fast she's outgrowing her clothes. She's a kid. A normal, rebellious teenager. Not a black witch. She told Brit she could make her a potion. Big deal. Ten-to-one she can't even do it. Either she was showing off or trying to shock us. That's what adolescents do."

"You're defending her."

"Of course I'm defending her. No one else will. The poor kid went through hell last summer. Before my mother died, she asked me to take care of Savannah—"

"Or so that woman told you."

"That woman is a friend of mine. You don't think my mother would have asked me to take Savannah? Of course she would. That's our job. To protect our sisters."

"Not at the risk of endangering ourselves."

"Since when is it more important--"

"I don't have time to argue with you, Paige. Talk to Savannah or I will."

Click.

I slammed down the phone and stalked from my office, muttering everything I wished I'd said to Victoria. I knew when to hold my tongue, though sometimes knowing and doing were very different things. My mother was the political one. She'd spend years working to effect one small change to Coven Law, soothing every ruffled feather and arguing her point with a smile.

Now she was gone. Murdered nine months ago. Nine months, three weeks and two days. My mind performed the calculation unbidden, springing open the stoppered well of grief. I slammed it shut. She wouldn't have wanted that.

I was brought into this world for one reason. At fifty-two, after a life too busy for children, my mother looked around the Coven and saw no worthy successor, so she found a suitable 'genetic donor' and, using magic, conceived me. A daughter born and raised to lead the Coven. Now that she was gone, I had to honor her memory by fulfilling that purpose, and I would, whether the Elders wanted it or not.

I abandoned my computer. Victoria's call had chased all interest in programming from my brain. When I got like this, I needed to do something that reminded me of who I was, and what I wanted to accomplish. That meant practicing my spells--not Coven-sanctioned spells, but the magic they forbid.

In my bedroom, I pulled back the area rug, unlocked the crawlspace hatch and tugged out a knapsack. Then, bending down and reaching farther into the hole, I undid a secret latch, opened a second compartment and pulled out two books. My secret grimoires. After putting the books into my bag, I headed for the back door.

I was slipping on my sandals when the front door knob turned. I checked my watch. 3:00 P.M. Savannah didn't get out of school until 3:45, which is why I figured I had nearly an hour to practice before making her after-school snack. Yes, Savannah was too old for the milk-and-cookies routine, but I did it everyday without fail. Let's be honest, at twenty-three I was ill-equipped to parent a teenager. Being home for her after-school was one thing I could manage.

"What happened?" I asked, hurrying into the hall. "Is everything okay?"

Savannah backpedaled, as if fearing I might do something rash, like hug her. "Teacher's meeting today. Early dismissal. Remember?"

"Did you tell me?"

She rubbed her nose, trying to decide whether she could get away with a lie. "I forgot. But I would have called if I had a cell phone."

"You'll get a cell phone when you can pay for the airtime."

"But I'm too young to get a job!"

"Then you're too young for a cell phone."

Old argument. We knew our lines, never wavered from them. That's one advantage to being a mere decade older than Savannah—I remember pulling the same crap with my mom, so I knew how to handle it. Maintain the routine. Give no sign of wearing down. Eventually she'd give up . . . not that I ever did.

Savannah peered over my shoulder to look down at my backpack, a feat she can easily manage, being two inches taller than my 5'2". Two inches taller and about thirty pounds lighter. I could explain the weight difference by pointing out that Savannah is very slender, but to be truthful, I'm about fifteen pounds over what most women's magazines list as the ideal weight for my height.

Savannah, by contrast, was very tall for her age: tall, thin and coltish, all awkward angles and jutting limbs. I tell her she'll grow into her body, as she'll grow into her oversized blue eyes. She doesn't believe me. Like she didn't believe me when I'd advised her that cutting off her waist-length black hair would be a mistake. Now she had a straight, wispy bob that only made the angles of her face even more prominent. Naturally, she blamed me, because I didn't forbid her to cut her hair, instead of just cautioning against it.

"Heading out for spell practice?" she said, pointing at my knapsack. "What are you working on?"

"Making you a snack. White milk or chocolate?"

Dramatic sigh. "Come on, Paige. I know what kind of stuff you practice. I don't blame you. Those Coven spells are for five-year-olds."

"Five-year-olds don't cast spells."

"Neither does the Coven. Not real spells. Oh, come on. We can work together. Maybe I can get that wind spell working for you."

I turned to look at her.

"You wrote in your journal that you were having trouble with it," she said. "Sounds like a cool spell. My mom never had anything like that. Tell you what—you teach me that one and I'll show you some real magic."

"You read my journal?"

"Just the spell practice journal. Not your personal one."

"How do you know I have a personal one?"

"Do you? Hey, you know what happened at school today? Mr. Ellis told me he's sending two of my paintings to get framed. They're going to hang them at grad next week."

Savannah headed for the kitchen, still talking. Should I pursue the journal comment? I considered, then rejected it, hefted my knapsack and headed to my room to return the bag to its hiding spot.

If Savannah did read my personal journal, at least it meant she was taking an interest in me. Which was good. Well, unless she was snooping in hopes of finding something she could use to blackmail me into buying her a cell phone. Which wouldn't be so good. What exactly did I have in my journal anyway . . . ?

While I was locking away my bag, the doorbell rang. Savannah shouted 'Got it' and thundered into the hallway, making enough noise for someone three times her size. When I walked into the living room a few minutes later, she was standing in the hall doorway, lifting a letter to the light and squinting at it.

"Testing your psychic abilities?" I said. "A letter opener works much faster."

She jumped and jerked the letter down, hesitated, then held it out.

"Ah, for me. In that case, I'd advise steaming it open." I took the letter. "Registered mail? That bumps it up from simple mail fraud to mail fraud plus forgery. I hope you're not using that skill to sign my name to any notes at school."

"As if," she said, heading back toward the kitchen. "What would be the good of skipping school in this town? No mall, no Starbucks, not even a Mickey D's."

"You could hang around outside the hardware store with the rest of the kids."

She snorted and disappeared into the kitchen.

The envelope was standard letter-sized, no unusual markings, just my name and address handwritten in clean, exact strokes and a return address preprinted in the upper left corner. The sender? A California law firm.

I tore it open. My eyes went straight to the first line, which requested—no, demanded—my presence at a meeting tomorrow morning. The first thing I thought was: 'Oh, shit'. I suppose that's the normal reaction for anyone receiving an unexpected legal summons.

I assumed it had something to do with my business. I created and managed company websites for women tired of male web-designers who thought they'd want nothing more technically challenging than floral wallpaper. When it comes to the Internet, the issue of copyright is as murky and convoluted as a celebrity prenup so, seeing a letter filled with legal jargon, I assumed I'd done something like design a Flash sequence that inadvertently bore some passing similarity to one on a website in Zaire.

Then I read the next line.

'The purpose of this meeting is to discuss our client's petition for custody of the juvenile, Savannah Levine . . . '

I closed my eyes and inhaled. Okay, I'd known this could happen. Savannah's only living relative was one of the Coven Elders, but I always assumed Savannah's mother might have friends who would be wondering what became of Eve and her young daughter. When they discovered that a great-aunt had taken custody of Savannah and handed her over to me, they'd want answers. And they might want Savannah.

Naturally, I'd fight. The problem was that Savannah's Aunt Margaret was the weakest of the three Elders, and if Victoria insisted Margaret relinquish custody, she would. The Elders hated trouble, broke into collective hives at the mere prospect of drawing attention to the Coven. To secure their

support, I'd need to persuade them that they'd face graver personal danger by giving up Savannah than by keeping her. With the Elders, it always came down to that, what was best for them, safest for them.

I scanned the rest of the letter, sifting through the legal jargon to find the petitioner's name. When I found it, my stomach dropped to my shoes. I couldn't believe it. No, strike that. I believed it only too well. Cursed myself for not seeing it coming.

Did I mention how my mother died? Last year, a small group of humans learned about the supernatural world and wanted to harness our powers, so they'd kidnapped a sampling of powerful supernaturals. One of those had been Savannah's mother, Eve. Savannah had the misfortune to be home from school that day and was taken as well.

Eve, however, quickly proved more dangerous than her captors expected, so they killed her. As a replacement, they targeted my mother, the elderly leader of the Coven. My mother was taken, along with Elena Michaels, a werewolf. There they met another captive, a half-demon who would later kill my mother and blame Savannah, part of an intricate plot to take control of Savannah, and so gain access to a young, malleable, and extremely powerful neophyte witch.

That half-demon's name? Leah O'Donnell. The same name that now stared up at me from the custody petition.

Leah was a telekinetic half-demon of the highest order. That means she could move things with her mind. Only don't think sideshow spoon-bending. Think of a woman who can mentally hurl a steel desk into a wall—literally into a wall, with such force that the desk embeds itself in the plaster and obliterates anything in its path.

Not surprisingly, then, the first thing I did upon reading this letter was rush around securing the house. After fastening the door locks and pulling the blinds, I moved to less conventional security. At each door I cast a lock spell, which would hold them closed even if the dead-bolts failed. Next I used perimeter spells at all the doors and windows. Think of perimeter spells as supernatural security systems. No one could enter the house without me knowing it.

Savannah walked in as I was casting the perimeter spell across the bottom of our unused fireplace.

"Who are you trying to keep out?" she asked. "Santa Claus?"

"The letter. It's from Leah."

She blinked, surprised but not concerned. I envied her that.

"Okay," she said. "We expected this. We're ready for her, right?"

"Of course." Was it my imagination, or did my voice just tremble? Inhale, exhale . . . now once more, with confidence. "Absolutely." Oh yeah, that sounded about as confident as a cornered kitten with three broken legs. I turned and busied myself casting perimeter spells at the living room windows.

"So what was in the letter?" Savannah asked. "A threat?"

I hesitated. I can't lie. Well, I can, but I'm lousy at it. My nose might as well grow, my falsehoods are so obvious.

"Leah . . . wants custody of you."

"And?"

"There's no 'and'. She wants to take custody of you, legally."

"Yeah, and I want a cell phone. She's a bitch. Tell her I said so. And tell her to fuck--"

"Savannah."

"Hey, you allowed 'bitch'. Can't blame me for testing the boundaries." She shoved an Oreo in her mouth. "--go--gi--geen."

"The correct sequence is: chew, swallow, talk."

She rolled her eyes and swallowed. "I said: you know what I mean. 'Witch-slave' wasn't my choice at career day last week. Tell her I'm not interested in what she's selling."

"That's good, but it might take more than that to change her mind."

"And you can handle it, right? You sent her packing before. Do it again."

I should have pointed out that I'd 'sent her packing' with lots of help, but my ego resisted. If Savannah thought I'd played a significant role in beating Leah last time, there was no need to enlighten her now. She needed to feel secure. So, in the interest of ensuring that security, I returned to my perimeter spells.

The next morning, after dropping Savannah off at a Coven sister's house, I headed for the meeting in East Falls. Four hundred years ago, when the Coven first came to East Falls, it was a Massachusetts village steeped in religious prejudice, small-mindedness and self-righteous morality. Today, East Falls is a Massachusetts village steeped in religious prejudice, small-mindedness and self-righteous morality. They killed witches here during the New England witch trials. Five innocent women and three Coven witches, including one of my ancestors. So why is the Coven still here? I wish I knew.

Not all Coven witches lived in East Falls. Most, like my mother, had moved closer to Boston. When I was born, my mother bought a small two-story Victorian on a huge corner lot in an old Boston suburb, a wonderful tight-knit little community.

After she died, the Elders insisted I relocate to East Falls. As a condition of my taking custody of Savannah, they wanted me to move where they could keep an eye on us. At the time, blinkered by grief, I'd seen their condition as an excuse to flee painful memories. For twenty-two years, my mother and I had shared that house. After her death, every time I heard a footstep, a voice, the closing of a door I'd thought 'it's just mom', then realized it wasn't, and never would be again. So when they told me to sell, I did. Now I regretted my weakness, both in surrendering to their demand and in giving up a home that meant so much to me.

Leah's lawyer was holding the meeting at the Cary Law Office in East Falls. That wasn't unusual. The Carys were the only lawyers in town, and they made their meeting room available to visiting lawyers, for a reasonable fee--the Cary's typical blend of small-town hospitality and big-city business sense.

The Carys practiced law out of a monstrous three-story Colonial in the middle of Main Street. I arrived at the house at 9:50. Once inside, I noted the location of each employee. Grantham Jr.'s wife, Lacey, was at her main floor desk and a polite inquiry confirmed that both Granthams were upstairs in their respective offices. Good. Leah was unlikely to try anything supernatural with humans so near.

After engaging in the requisite two minutes of small-talk with Lacey, I took a seat by the front window. Ten minutes later, the meeting room door opened and a man in a tailored three-piece suit walked out. He was tall, dark-haired, late-thirties. Good-looking in a sleek, plastic Ken doll kind of way. Definitely a lawyer.

"Ms. Winterbourne?" he said as he approached, hand extended. "I'm Gabriel Sandford."

As I stood, I met Sandford's eyes and knew exactly why he'd taken Leah's case. Gabriel Sandford wasn't just an LA lawyer. No, it was worse than that.