

France - 1666

Marie-Madeline lit the flame under the bowl. A draft through the empty fireplace blew it out. She adjusted the metal screen in front of the hearth, then moved the bowl and tried again. As the flame took hold, smoke swirled through the room, filling it with the acrid stink of burning hair and the sweet smell of rosemary.

“Entstehen, mein Nix,” she said, tongue tripping over the foreign words. She recited the rest of the incantation. The air rippled.

“You have failed . . . again,” a woman’s voice whispered.

Marie-Madeline’s fingers trembled around the bowl. A few red-hot cinders tumbled out, and scorched her hand. “It isn’t my fault. You aren’t giving me enough. This—it isn’t easy. I need more.”

“More?” the voice hissed, circling her head. “This is not one of your potions, witch. You cannot drink until you’ve had your fill. What I give you is the power of will, a finite quantity of that which you so sorely lack. Whether you choose to use it is your own decision.”

“But I want to use it. Gaudin must have his revenge, and I must have my freedom.”

The Nix’s voice sounded at her ear, words blasting on a stream of hot air. “You are a fool, Marquise. A mewling little worm of a woman who stumbled upon that spell to summon me,

then lied to me and wasted my time. You do not want resolve. You want deliverance. You want me to do this thing for you, to absolve you of the responsibility and guilt of patricide.”

“N—no. I’d never ask—”

“I will grant it.”

Marie-Madeline went still, certain she’d misheard. “You will . . . grant it?”

“You are not the only one to dabble in arcane magics, witch. I have a spell that I have been waiting to use, waiting for the right vessel—a worthy vessel. With it, you can allow me to possess your body, carry out this deed and have my reward. Then you may claim the credit to your lover.”

“What is the spell? Tell me now. Please. Gaudin grows impatient.”

The Nix’s chuckle wafted through the air. “As do I. Find a pen and some paper, my marquise, and we will be done this thing before daybreak.”

The Nix opened her eyes. She was lying on the floor, candles blazing all around her, their light so harsh it made her blink. The smoke filling her nostrils made her cough instinctively, and she jumped, startled by the sensation. She lifted her hands. Human hands, soft and bejeweled. The Marquise’s hands. She flexed, then clenched them. The long nails drove into her palms and she gasped. So that was pain. How . . . intriguing. She dug her nails in deeper, letting the pain course down her arms. Blood dripped onto her gown. She reached down and touched it, lifted her finger to her nose, inhaled the scent, then stuck out her tongue and tasted it.

The Nix pushed to her feet, wobbled, caught her balance. She'd taken on human form before, but never like this, never inhabiting a living being. It was very different. Awkward . . . and yet interesting.

She lifted her head and sniffed the air. Dawn was coming. Time to get to work.

She carried the soup to the Marquise's father, bearing it before her like an offering, luxuriating in the heat that radiated through the bowl. It was so cold here, the stone walls leaching drafts at every turn. She'd commanded the staff to light more fires, but they'd only mumbled something vaguely obeisant, then shuffled off and done nothing. Such insolence. If she was their master—but this was only a temporary inhabitation, to test the spell.

As she stepped into the room, she looked at the old man, seated with his back to her. Then she glanced down at the bowl of poisoned soup. The dose had better be right this time. Marie-Madeline had tested it on her maid, Francoise, but the girl hadn't died, so her lover, Gaudin Sainte-Croix had adjusted the dosage. But rather than try again on a fresh subject, they'd declared the mixture sufficient.

Lazy, imperfect humans, and their lazy, imperfect half-measures. Like the servants who didn't wish to venture outside the castle walls and chop more wood for the fire. What lessons she could teach them! Perhaps she would. As she crossed the floor, looking down at the bowl of soup, she realized, with a jolt of surprise, that the next move was hers. She could give the poison to Marie-Madeline's father or she could feed it to the lazy servants who had ignored her command. For once, she was the actor, not the spectator.

For three hundred years she'd had to sit by and hope humans used the resolve she gave them. Her reward was pain and suffering and chaos. But if they failed, she was left hungry—as helpless as a starving street urchin, begging for a crust of bread. That was what the humans had called the offspring of the Nixen—urchins—as if they knew, and laughed at the power they wielded over these mighty demi-demons. And yet, here she was, bearing in her hands the power of death, to deliver as she saw fit. She smiled. Perhaps she would stay a little longer than Marie-Madeline intended.

Hearing her footsteps, Marie-Madeline's father turned. "You didn't need to bring that yourself."

She curtseyed. "It is a daughter's duty, and privilege, to serve her father."

He beamed. "And it is a father's joy to have such a dutiful daughter. You see now that I was right about Gaudin Sainte-Croix. You belong with your husband, and with your father."

She bowed her head. "It was a passing fancy, one that shames me all the more for the shame it brought on my family."

"We will speak no more of it," he said, patting her arm. "Let us enjoy our holiday together."

"First, you should enjoy your soup, Father. Before it grows cold."

For the next four days, d'Aubrey suffered the agonies of a slow death. She stayed at his side, genuinely doing all she could for him, knowing it wouldn't save him, using the excuse to linger and drink in his suffering. At last, he lay in her arms, a hairsbreadth from death, and he used his last words to thank her for everything she'd done.

"It was my pleasure," she said, smiling as she closed his eyes.

It took six years for the Nix to grow bored of Marie-Madeline, and exhaust the possibilities of her silly little life. Time to move on, to find fresh opportunities . . . but not before she had wrung the last bit of merriment from this one.

First, she'd killed Sainte-Croix. Nothing personal in that. He'd been a fine lover and a useful partner, but she had no more need of him, except to play his part in the last act of the drama. He'd died in his laboratory, an apparent victim of his own poison, his glass mask having slipped off at an inopportune moment.

After anonymously alerting the police about Saint-Croix's death, she'd rushed to the commissary and demanded the return of a box from the sealed laboratory. The box was hers, and must be returned to her unopened. Naturally, that only guaranteed that the police would open it. Inside, they found the bond she'd given Sainte-Croix for the poison used to kill the Marquise's father, plus Sainte-Croix's legacy to her—an assortment of poisons the likes of which the French authorities had never seen. She'd fled Paris, and taken refuge in a convent. The trial came and Marie-Madeline, having not appeared to defend herself, was sentenced to death.

And so it was done.

The Nix returned to Paris, where she knew Marie-Madeline would be swiftly apprehended. Taking a quiet room in an inn, she lay down on the bed, closed her eyes and recited the incantation for ending the possession. After a few minutes, she opened her eyes and lifted her hand. Still human.

With a grunt, she closed her eyes and repeated the spell. Nothing happened. With a snarl, she gathered her spirit form into a ball and flung herself upward and, saying the words again, voice rising, filling with fury as her soul stayed lashed to this human form. For two hours, she battered herself against the flesh walls of her prison.

Then she began to scream.

Nicolette peered out across the crowd amassed in the courtyard, praying she'd see no one she recognized. If her mother found out she was here— She shuddered, feeling the sting of her mother's tongue. Death is not a spectacle, she'd say. Nicolette should know that better than anyone. Yet she wasn't here to see the Marquise de Brinvilliers die . . . not really. It was the spectacle surrounding the spectacle that drew her, the chance to be part of something that would be the talk of Paris for years.

A young man pushed through the crowd, hawking pamphlets describing the torture of the Marquise. When he saw Nicolette, he grinned as his eyes traveled over her.

"A pamphlet, my lady," he said, thrusting one at her. "With my compliments."

Nicolette glanced down at the paper he held out. Across the front was a crudely drawn sketch of a naked woman, her body arching as if to a lover, limbs bound to the table, a funnel stuffed into her mouth, face contorted with agony. Nicolette shuddered and looked away. To her left, an old woman cackled. The pamphleteer pressed closer to her, mouth opening, but a man cut him short, and sent him off with a few gruff words.

"You should not be out here, my lady," the man rumbled near her ear when the pamphleteer was gone. "This is no place for you."

No, her place was up in the balconies, where she could watch with an unobstructed view, dining on cakes and wine. Nicolette had tried to disguise herself, to blend in with the common folk, but they always knew.

She was about to move on when the prison doors opened. A small entourage emerged. At its center was a tiny woman, no more than five feet tall, her dirty face still showing signs of the beauty she must have possessed. Dressed in a plain shift and barefooted, she stumbled forward, tripping and straining at the ropes that bound her, one around her hands, one around her waist and the third around her neck.

As the guard yanked the Marquise back, her head rose and, for the first time, she saw the crowd. Her lips curled, face contorting in a snarl so awful that the old woman beside Nicolette fell back, hands clawing for her rosary. As the Marquise snarled, her face seemed to ripple, as if her very spirit was trying to break free. Nicolette had seen ghosts before, been seeing them since she was a child—as did her mother and great-uncle. Yet, when the Marquise’s spirit showed itself, everyone around her fell back with a collective gasp.

Nicolette snuck a glance around. They’d seen it, too?

The guard prodded the Marquise into a tumbrel. No horse-drawn gilt carriage for this voyage. Her conveyance was a dirty cart, barely big enough to hold her, filthy straw lining the bottom. She had to crouch in the cart like an animal, snarling and cursing as the cart disappeared.

Around Nicolette, the crowd began to move, heading for the Cathedral of Notre Dame. She hesitated, quite certain she didn’t want to see the final part of the Marquise’s journey, but the mob buoyed her along and, after a few weak struggles, she surrendered.

They'd erected the platform before Notre Dame. Nicolette watched as they dragged the Marquise up the steps, forced her down and began cutting her long hair.

Nicolette had a better vantage point than she liked, but the crowd behind her was so thick she had no chance of escaping. As she tried to divert her attention from the platform, a man stepped from the crowd. A foreigner, with olive-skin and dark wavy hair. That alone might have been enough to grab her attention, but what held it was his beauty. Nicolette, who considered herself above such things, found herself staring like a convent schoolgirl.

He looked like a soldier—not his clothing, which was everyday—but his bearing. A man who commanded attention . . . yet not one eye turned his way. To Nicolette, that could only mean one thing. He was a ghost.

The ghost climbed the platform. At the top, he stopped and stood at attention as the guard continued to hack at the Marquise's hair. Clearly the ghost wanted a front row seat. Had he been one of the Marquise's victims?

Finally, as the executioner withdrew his saber from the folds of his robe, the ghost held out his hands, palms up. An odd gesture, as if checking for rain. His lips moved. Something shimmered in his hands, then took form. A sword. A huge, glowing sword. As he slid his hand down to the hilt, Nicolette realized what he was, and dropped to her knees, crossing herself.

As dense as the crowd was, the angel noticed her gesture, his eyes meeting hers. In that moment, every misdeed she'd ever committed flashed through her head, and her gut went cold, certain she was being judged . . . and felt wanting. But the angel's lips curved in the barest smile, and he tipped his head, as casual as a passing neighbor. Then his gaze returned to the Marquise, expression hardening to stone.

As the executioner's saber sliced down, the angel raised his sword. A sigh rose from the crowd as the Marquise's head thumped onto the platform. Nicolette didn't see it fall. Instead, she stared, transfixed, as a yellow fog rose from the Marquise's body. The fog twisted and grew dense, taking on the form of a young woman.

The angel lifted his sword, and his voice rang out, as clear and melodious as the bells of Notre Dame. "Marie-Madeline d'Aubrey de Brinvilliers, for your crimes, you have been judged."

As he swung that huge sword, the spirit flowing from the Marquise's body threw back its head and laughed.

"I am not the Marquise, fool," it spat.

The angel's brows knitted, a look of confusion, as human as the nod he'd given Nicolette, on his handsome face. But the sword was already in flight, cleaving toward the ghost.

The spirit's lips twisted. "You have no jurisdiction over—"

As the sword struck the spirit, it let out a scream that made Nicolette double over, hands to her ears. All around her, people jostled and pushed, trying to get a closer look at the Marquise's body as they set it afire, oblivious to the screams.

Nicolette raised her head. There, on the platform, stood the angel, with the spirit skewered on his sword. The thing twisted and shrieked and cursed, but the angel only smiled. Then they were gone.

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.”

II

Transportation is my afterlife specialty—my quest to help Savannah meant I spent a lot of time tracking down sources. In other areas of ghost activity, I'm not so good, though I didn't think the Fates really needed to send me through that damned orientation course three times.

My afterlife world was a version of Earth, with some weird sub-dimensions that we really tried to avoid. Everyone here was a supernatural, but not every supernatural was here. When I'd died, my first thought on waking had been "Great, now I finally find out what comes next." Well, actually that had been my second thought, after "Hmmm, I thought it would have been hotter." Yes, I'd escaped the fiery hell my mother and many others had prophesied for me, but in dying, I hadn't found out what comes next, only what came next for me. Was there fire and brimstone somewhere else? Were there halos and heavenly harps? I have no idea. I only know that where I am is better than where I expected to be, so I'm not complaining.

I dropped Kristof off on the courthouse steps. Yes, we have courts here. The Fates take care of all major disciplinary issues, but they let us handle disputes between ghosts. Hence the courts, where Kristof. Not that he'd practiced law in real life. The day he'd passed the bar exam, he'd

gone into business with his family. But here he was, playing lawyer in the afterlife. Even Kris admitted this wasn't his first choice for a new career, yet until they started a ghost world NHL franchise, he was stuck with it.

Speaking of jobs . . . Kristof was right. I needed a break. I'd known that for a while now, but couldn't bring myself to admit it. I knew Kris's "odd jobs" wouldn't be the kind of employment the Fates would approve of, but that was more incentive than obstacle.

That thought had no more left my mind than a bluish fog blew in and swirled around my leg.

"Hey, I was just—"

The fog sucked me into the ground.

The Searchers deposited me in the Fate's throne room, a white-marble cavern with moving mosaics and tapestries on the walls. The Fates are the guardians of the supernatural layers of the ghost world, and just about the only time they call us in is when we've screwed up. So when the floor began to turn, I braced myself. When it didn't turn fast enough, I twisted around to face the Fates myself. A pretty girl threaded yarn onto a spinning wheel. She looked no more than five or six years old, with bright violet eyes that matched her dress.

"Okay," I said. "What did I do?"

The girl grinned. "Isn't the question: what did I do now?"

I sighed, and in less time than it takes to blink, the girl morphed into a middle-aged version of herself, with long graying dark hair, and light brown skin showing the first wrinkles and roughness of time.

"We have a problem, Eve."

“Look, I promised I wouldn’t use the codes for excessive unauthorized travel. I never said—”

“This isn’t about unauthorized travel.”

I thought for a moment. “Visiting Adena Milan for spell-swapping? Hey, that was an honest mistake. No one told me she was on the blacklist.”

The middle-aged Fate shook her head, eyes twinkling. “Admittedly, there might be some amusement to be had in making you recite the whole list of your infractions, but I’m afraid we don’t have that much time. Some time ago, you made a deal with us. If we returned Paige and Lucas to the living world, you’d owe us a favor.”

“Oh . . . that.”

Damn. In the last eighteen months, they hadn’t mentioned it again, so I’d hoped they’d forgotten. Like that’s going to happen. The Fates can remember what Noah ate for breakfast on the morning of the flood.

My first instinct, as always, was to weasel out of it. Hell, what’s the worst thing that could happen? Well, for starters, they could undo their end of the bargain and bring Paige and Lucas back to the ghost world. So no weaseling out of this one. Besides, I had been looking for a distraction. Which made this all seem very coincidental.

“Did Kristof put you up this? Finding me something to do?”

The Fate morphed into her oldest sister, a hunchbacked crone with a wizened face permanently set in a scowl . . . well, at least, whenever I was around.

“Kristof Nast does not ‘put us up’ to anything.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Nor are we going to be doing favors for the likes of him. We thought that lawyer job would keep him busy.” She snorted. “And it does. Keeps him busy getting into trouble.”

“If you mean the Agito case, that wasn’t Kris’s fault. The plaintiff started lying, so he had to do something. It wasn’t really witness tampering . . .”

“Just a means to an end,” she said, fixing me with that bright glare. “That’s how you two think. Doesn’t matter how you get there, as long as you do.”

The middle sister took over. “An interesting philosophy. Not one we share but, in some cases . . . useful. This particular job we need done may require some of those unique skills.”

I perked up. “Oh?”

“We have a spirit who’s escaped from the lower realms. We need you to bring her in.”

The lower realms are where they keep the ghosts who can’t be allowed to mingle with the rest of us—the seriously nasty criminals. Hmmm, interesting.

“So who is—”

“First, you need to do some research.” The middle-aged Fate reached into the air and pulled out a sheet of paper. “This is a list of books—”

“Books? Look, I’m sure you guys are in a hurry for me to get this job done, so why don’t we skip this part? I’m really more a hands-on kind of gal.”

The girl appeared, grinning mischievously. “Oh? Well, in that case, let’s do it the hands-on way.”

She waved a hand, and a ball of light whipped out and blinded me.