

Escape

by

Kelley Armstrong

I concentrated on the mirrored wall. One-way glass—the good stuff, not the kind they have in cop shops, where you can press your face against it and see through. Seeing through this type required a special talent. A demonic talent. I slitted my eyes. The mirror blurred, then the other side came into focus, wobbly and distorted, like looking at it from underwater.

Straight across from me was another cell. Inside, a man watched television, his back to me. Dark-skinned and dread-locked. A supernatural of some kind. What kind didn't concern me. Not yet.

I peered down the hall. More cells. More people inside. At the end of the corridor was the exit door, complete with a flashing red light and some fancy fingerprint reading machine. Damn. Well, what did I expect? A wide-open door with a neon "escape here" sign?

"See anything, mom?" Savannah whispered behind me.

"Not yet. But don't you worry. I have a plan."

And I would. As soon as I thought of one. Savannah sat on the bed, legs crossed, reading a teen magazine given to her by the bitch whose flunkies had tossed us in here. What was her name? Baker? No, Bauer. Sondra Bauer. Perfect suit, perfect hair, perfectly phony smile. Oh dear, I'm so sorry we had to kidnap you, little girl, here's a nice magazine to make it better. When I got hold of her, that smile wouldn't be nearly so perfect.

Savannah returned to her reading, as carefree as if she'd been sitting on her bed at home. She knew I'd get her out. She trusted me.

If only I'd made Savannah go to school today . . .

She hadn't been sick. Any normal mom would have made her go. But I wasn't normal, never pretended to be. As a kid, I'd hated school—used to fake sick at least once a week to avoid it. The first time Savannah did this, I'd made a decision. I could do what my mother had done—draw up a list of sick day requirements: temperature over 101, vomiting, rash, broken bones, blah, blah, blah. Or I could toss the parenting books out the window and do things my way. So I made a deal with Savannah. She got three "home" days a year, and could use them whenever she wanted, without needing a reason. Today she'd decided to use her one. And at ten o'clock, a team of armed commandos posing as cops busted down our front door.

They'd come for me, and only me. If I'd made Savannah go to school today, she wouldn't be here. Hell, if I'd made her go to school, I wouldn't be here. First bastard that had come through that door caught an energy bolt in his gut. And the second one? He'd been smarter. He'd ducked past his dying partner, grabbed Savannah and stuck a gun to her head. End of fight.

As for blaming Savannah's home day for our being here, that was bullshit. Me and my life choices were the reason my twelve-year-old daughter was in an underground cell, held captive by psychos who wanted to conduct god-knows what kind of experiments on her.

If Savannah had a normal mother, she wouldn't have even been in school in August. But two unexpected relocations that spring had nearly made her fail seventh grade, so I'd enrolled her in a four-week "academic summer camp" to catch up. As for why we'd relocated, that was my fault. The fault of my life choices.

I'd always known my life wasn't kid-friendly. Never planned to have any. But plans and reality don't always mix. When I found out I was pregnant, I'd never considered ending it. Never thought of giving her away either. Adoption wasn't an option for a kid with witch, sorcerer and demon blood. She was mine, and from the moment I felt that first kick, I knew she was mine for good.

I'd known too that I'd needed a serious life-makeover. So I'd stopped making my living using the dark arts, and turned to teaching them. I'd kept Savannah out of that part of my life, and kept everyone in that part of my life out of hers. I thought that'd be good enough. Bullshit. I'd told myself that'd be good enough; I'd known it wasn't.

Everyone who knew me said my life revolved around my daughter, that I was the best damned parent they'd ever seen. I knew better. A real mother would have changed, really changed, become someone, if not good, then good enough. Instead of ducking into the shadows with my little girl, I'd marched onto the supernatural world center stage, building an unparalleled reputation as a teacher of the dark arts. I'd always thought that reputation would protect Savannah. And it had. Until someone decided they wanted to capture the best witch they could find. And whose name topped the list? Eve Levine, black witch and Aspicio half-demon.

So this was my fault, and all my learning and all my power hadn't been able to protect my daughter. But I'd fix that now.

"Savannah? You were awake when they brought us in, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Can you tell me what you saw?"

She tossed the magazine aside. "Sure."

Savannah told me everything she remembered, right down to descriptions of the

guards. That's my girl. Always watching, always learning. I'd been drugged, but no one had even bothered to blindfold Savannah. She was only a child. Defenseless and harmless.

Once she'd given me a layout from our cell to the front door, I came up with a plan. I told Savannah her part, but left out my own. Parent-child honesty is all very well in its place, but there are some things no kid needs to hear.

"So I run?" Savannah said. "That's it?"

"That's all you need to do, baby. When I give the sign, you run like hell."

"I'm not a little kid, mom. I can help. What about that confusion spell?"

"Any time you spend casting it is time you don't spend running. If something goes really wrong, use it. But if you're only stopped by one person, use the binding spell. Then keep running. Now, if you get out of this place and I'm not there—"

"But you will be there."

"Savannah . . ."

"Fine. If I get in trouble, I call Melissa, and she takes me to the Coven."

"And who do you contact in the Coven?"

"Mom, we've been through this a zillion times. Ever since I was in preschool. Nothing's ever going to happen to you, so I don't know why—"

"Humor me, baby. Please."

"I call Ruth Winterbourne, leader of the Coven. I don't know why you'd want me going to them anyway. You hate the Coven."

"Yes, but I trust Ruth. You call Ruth and only Ruth. Don't speak to anyone else until you've talked to Ruth. Not even your Aunt Margaret."

"I don't know my Aunt Margaret."

"Which is why you're not going to speak to her. She's not a bad person, just stupid, so forget her, and go straight to Ruth. If Ruth's not there . . ." I hesitated. "Paige. Yes, you could talk to Paige. She must be at least eighteen now. Shit, no, she'd be older than that. Perfect. If Ruth isn't there or you can't find her, then talk to her daughter, Paige."

Savannah shrugged and picked up her magazine.

"Savannah . . ."

"I got it," she muttered. "If Ruth isn't there, talk to Paige. Doesn't matter anyway. You're not going anywhere."

"It's just a precaution. I want—"

"Fine. I know what to do, okay?"

She paused, and looked away, shoulders tense.

"It's going to be okay, baby," I said softly.

She nodded, then after another moment, her shoulders relaxed and she turned back to me.

"Do you think we'll be out of here before tomorrow? I've got a math test tomorrow, and I haven't studied."

I laughed and ruffled her hair. "Can't imagine why not. Now there's a note for your teachers. 'Please excuse Savannah from today's test. She was kidnapped at gunpoint yesterday and was unable to study.'"

Savannah grinned. "Mr. Parks always says he's heard every excuse in the book, but I bet he hasn't heard that one."

"I bet you're right. We are getting out of here today, but I promise you don't need to go to school tomorrow. We'll go home and spend the day studying in our jammies, okay?"

"And order pizza?"

I smiled. "We'll order whatever you want."

I did need to get Savannah out that day, and it had nothing to do with math tests. I had no idea what these bastards had in mind for us. Some kind of science experiments, that's all I knew, and only because I'd overheard something like that before they'd knocked me out. I couldn't wait until a good escape opportunity jumped up and bit me in the ass. By then, they might have moved Savannah out of my cell . . . or worse.

I wanted to put my plan into action when the guard came with our dinner, but he was too short. Stupid excuse, huh? Not for this plan. When he mentioned something about the night shift guard bringing our bedtime snack, I decided to wait. At eight o'clock, the door lock clicked. I scooted Savannah into bed and tossed a blanket over her. She closed her eyes and faked sleep.

The guard stepped in. An inch or so over six feet tall. Yep, that'd do. When you're just a hair under six feet yourself, you need to consider these things more than any five-foot-five woman could ever imagine. I also lounged back against the table, which made me shorter. Hate doing that, but sometimes it helps.

As the guard laid the snack tray beside me, his gaze traveled up the length of my

jeans, paused at my chest, then continued up to my face and met my eyes with a barely concealed grin of admiration. I considered a coy smile and soft blush. Might have worked . . . if I had the faintest idea how to do either. Instead, I met his gaze full on, then gave him an equally thorough once-over, and smiled. His grin burst through.

"Settling in okay?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Well enough."

I let my gaze slide to Savannah. His followed.

"Cute kid," he said. "Seems to be doing pretty good herself, sleeping soundly and all."

Another shrug. "Scared, but holding up."

I walked to Savannah, bent over and tucked her in better. The guard's gaze planted itself on my ass and stayed there until I straightened. When I turned, I looked around the cell.

"Is this place bugged?" I whispered.

"Nah. Sometimes they'll sit in the hall and listen through the intercom, but that's it." He glanced out the open door, into the empty hall. "Look, I know this is tough and all, but you'll be okay. No one wants to hurt you. Just don't give them any reason to."

I crossed half the distance between us. "It's not me I'm worried about."

"The girl? Oh, I'm sure they'll treat her okay."

I took another two steps toward him then veered and circled behind him. "But how can I be sure? I want to be sure"

He turned and nearly bumped into me. I stood my ground, close enough to feel his clothes brushing mine. He didn't step back.

"We could . . . arrange something," he said.

I met his gaze. "I was hoping you'd say that."

His hand reached behind me and slid over my ass. I glanced at Savannah.

"Right," he said. "Maybe we should . . ." He looked toward the hall.

"Any video cameras out there?" I asked.

"Nah. Nothing like that."

"So where do you hang out when you're on duty?"

"Guard station, right outside the door."

"Got a partner?"

"Not on night shift."

"Let's go then."

He grinned and led me from the cell.

On the other side of the main exit, I peeked back. As Savannah had said, the door locked from the inside only. Beside the door was the skeleton of some kind of security panel, as if they'd thought about putting one in, and changed their minds, or hadn't got around to hooking it up yet. The guard station was on my right. To my left the hallway circled around. According to Savannah, the elevator—and the only way out—was down that hall.

I hooked my fingers through the guard's belt loops, swiveled around and backed into the guard station, tugging him in after me. He started to shut the door, then stopped.

"Better leave it open," he said. "You hear the elevator, you let me know."

"I will." I pressed myself against him, lips a quarter-inch from his. "Now, how do you want to do this? We can make out for a while, maybe chat a bit, get to know each other before we get down to business. Or—" I met his gaze. "—we can skip that, and I'll get on my knees and get to work."

A sharp intake of breath. Then a broad grin. "Hell, yes."

"Thought you might like that."

I flipped open his belt, and undid his button and zipper as he grinned like a kid who's been given dessert before dinner.

"Uh, not to spoil things, babe, but just so you know, this isn't a one shot deal. I don't mind helping you with your kid, but one blow job isn't going to do it."

"Didn't expect it would. Are you on night shift all the time?"

"For the next two weeks."

"Good, then for the next two weeks, after my daughter's asleep, you come get me and you tell me what you want."

His grin returned, broader than ever. "Anything I want?"

"Anything." I looked up at him. "I'll do anything to keep her safe."

"Works for me, babe."

I lowered my head, letting my long hair fall forward and mask my face. As I pretended to move in for the main attraction, I whispered an incantation. When I stopped, his cock wasn't the only part of him that was stiff.

I stood. Trapped in a binding spell, the guard could do nothing but stare at me, his eyes oozing panic.

"Didn't your mother ever warn you about things that sound too good to be true?" I said.

I looked down at the gun in his holster. Too loud. This required magic. My energy bolt was damned good—and fast—but not always immediately fatal. I didn't have time to screw around, or take the chance that he'd break the binding spell and call for help.

I cast another spell, this one aloud. An ice spell. His neck froze. His eyes rolled in agony. I grabbed a heavy-duty stapler from the desk, unfolded it and tested the heft in my hand. Then I swung the stapler and caught him in the jaw.

His frozen neck shattered, head lolling back. I dropped the stapler, grabbed the gun from his fallen body and ran into the corridor. Then I stopped, stepped backward, and closed the door to the guard station before I returned to the cell for Savannah.

I led Savannah past the closed guard station door. We were just about to round the corner when the elevator thudded down.

"Shit!" I wheeled and pushed Savannah aside. "Stay there, and don't move."

I cast a cover spell on her, then I hurried to the corner, and peered around it. The elevator doors opened. Two guards stepped off, one talking, the other laughing. I cast a energy bolt at the first and a quick knockback spell on the second. The second guard flew backward into the elevator as the first let out a yelp and thudded down, face first. Another cast, this time a binding spell on the second.

The elevator doors started to close. As I raced down the hall to stop them, the second guard stepped into the gap. The doors bounced off him and opened. I front-kicked the guard back into the elevator, then hit him with a binding spell.

I bent to check the first guard. Dead. Good. I pulled his legs into the doorway, so they'd keep the doors open. As I did, my binding spell snapped and the other guard jumped to his feet. He pulled his gun. I recast the binding spell. My heart was thumping like a racehorse's and I knew I couldn't concentrate hard enough to hold the binding spell for long. I wrapped my hands around the guard's.

"Mom?"

I glanced over my shoulder. Savannah peered around the corner. I released the guard's neck, kicked him back into the elevator car, then hit him with an energy bolt. His eyes went wide, like someone touching a live wire. But he didn't fall. I hit him with another, and down he went. Then I dragged him out of the elevator and ran back for Savannah. I took her by the arm, then invoked another of my Aspicio powers.

"Mom!" she hissed. "I can't see!"

"I know."

"I hate it when you do this. I'm not a little kid. I—"

"Less talking, more running," I whispered.

I led her to the elevator, steering her around the dead guards. Once inside, I pushed the first guard out of the doorway.

"First floor, right?" I said.

"Second. We came in the second."

I pressed the button and un-blinded her.

"Now, when the doors open, you stand here and keep pushing the 'open' button, while I—"

"Clear the way. I know."

The elevator stopped on the second floor. I ducked my head out, looked both ways, then stepped out. Savannah said the exit was to the left. I glanced back at her, making sure she was doing as I'd asked, then slipped down the hallway.

I got within a yard of the corner when a guard sauntered around it. He stopped, startled, then reached for his gun. I slammed a right-hook into his jaw. He staggered back. A knee jab to the gut sent him down. As I readied an energy bolt to finish him, footsteps sound behind me.

"Savannah!" I hissed. "Stay—"

I spun to see, not my daughter, but a guard, a dozen feet behind me, gun raised, finger already pulling the trigger. A crack and a flare. And a single thought screamed through my brain.

Oh, shit.