

Home Sweet Home

“Cortez Winterbourne Investigations. How may I help you?”

I smiled as Savannah’s voice echoed down the hall. Even the fake-cheerful lilt was a welcome sound.

Cortez Winterbourne Investigations. Not the Lucas Cortez Agency. Not even Cortez and Associates. After three days of being treated like my husband’s assistant, it was good to come home and hear my own name.

When his father had phoned, Lucas had been away at a case. Benicio told me he was calling an emergency meeting at Cabal headquarters in Miami. Could Lucas attend? No? How about me, then? I’d gone with some trepidation, but Benicio had treated me as his son’s partner, soliciting my opinions and listening to them. Unfortunately, he was the only one who had, and as a result I was extra glad to be home.

“Paige!” Adam swung out from his office and slung his arm over my shoulders. “Damn, I’m glad to see you.”

“Laptop on the fritz again?”

“You got it. I put it in your office. When can I expect it back?”

I launched a knockback spell, but he ducked it, grinning, then followed me into the meeting room.

“How was Miami?” he asked.

“They asked me to serve coffee again.”

Savannah came in. “I hope you dumped it over their heads this time.”

“No, I simply suggested that it was a task better suited to the administrative staff. And on that note, a tea would be wonderful.”

She snorted and plunked into a chair. That was the problem with having an admin assistant who’d been your ward—a definite lack of decorum and respect. Adam was a little more cognizant of office etiquette, maybe because I’ve been bossing him around since we were kids. When I hinted that I’d like a tea right now, he poured me a cup of steaming water, passed it over and flipped me a tea bag.

I smiled. “It’s good to be in charge again.”

“Yeah?” Savannah said. “Well, don’t get too comfy, boss. You have a new client arriving in five minutes. Plus, I put a pile of paperwork on your desk.”

“As long as you don’t ask me to check with Lucas before I do any of it. For three days, I couldn’t go five minutes without hearing, ‘Shouldn’t you run that past your husband?’ and, ‘What’s his opinion?’ and, ‘Are you sure you’re authorized to speak for him?’”

“Condescending bastards,” Savannah said. “I’d have smoked ’em with an energy bolt.”

“Didn’t Benicio stand up for you?” Adam said.

“He did.” Which only made things worse. I didn’t want my father-in-law defending me. I wanted the Cabal board of directors to hear my opinions and say, “Hmm, she has a point.” It had been three years since a family crisis had forced Lucas to start playing a role in the Cabal. Three years of trying to prove myself. Yet nothing changed.

I kicked off my shoes and took a sip of tea. “So, there’s a client coming?”

“Er, right.” Savannah got to her feet. “Actually, I don’t know what I was thinking, telling her to come by as soon as your plane landed. You’re tired. Let me reschedule—”

“No. I’ve had my pity party. Getting back to work is the best thing for me.”

“Hello?” a woman’s voice called.

“She’s here?” I said.

“Apparently,” Savannah muttered. “She’s a Tripudio”—a low-level teleporting half-demon—“so I had to break the wards before she came by earlier.”

“And you forgot to reactivate them?” Adam said. “Nice one.”

She glared. “Hey, even *I* wouldn’t be rude enough to teleport through someone’s front door.”

“Hello?” the voice called again.

Savannah strode into the hall. “Oh, hello, Ms. Cookson. I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you ring the buzzer. I’d really suggest you do that next time. We have some seriously nasty security on this place, and I’d *hate* to see you—”

“Is he here?”

“Mr. Cortez isn’t available but—”

“I thought you said he’d be here.”

“No, I said you could come by for a case intake session. Ms. Winterbourne will be handling that.”

“Who?”

I stepped into the hall. The woman was younger than I’d have guessed by the sound of her voice. No more than a year or two older than Savannah. Tall, blond, slender and fashionably dressed. And, judging by the way she was squinting at me, in serious need of glasses. The scowl on her face didn’t do her any favors either. Without it, though, I’m sure she was very attractive.

“Paige Winterbourne,” I said, extending my hand.

She looked at it, then back at me. “Oh. The wife.”

“No, the *partner*,” Adam said, coming out of the meeting room.

“The *boss*,” Savannah said. “The woman who will decide whether we take your case or not.”

I stopped them both with a look, then said, “Lucas is away until later this afternoon, so—”

“I’ll wait.” She sailed past Adam and sat in a meeting room chair. “I take my coffee black.”

“And bitter, I’m sure,” Savannah muttered under her breath. She raised her voice so Ms. Cookson could hear. “There’s a coffee maker right behind you. It does a cup at a time. Very easy to use. You may want an espresso, though, to keep you awake. It’ll be a while before Lucas gets here and even longer before he’s ready to talk to you. He’s been away from his wife for a week, so he’ll want to . . . visit first.”

I shot Savannah another look. I got a look, too—from Ms. Cookson. A slow once-over that said, really, she couldn’t imagine why Lucas would bother. Now she was truly being a bitch. While I wasn’t tall or blond or slender, I didn’t need a paper bag over my head.

I walked to the coffee maker. “Mild, medium or dark roast? We have flavored, too. French vanilla and hazelnut cream.”

“His favorite,” Savannah said, shooting a thumb at Adam.

I waved them both out. Savannah went. Adam lingered, giving me a look that said I should be kicking this client out, not making her coffee. That was his way and Savannah’s. Yet when people insult and underestimate me, it only makes me all the more determined to prove myself.

It’s not as if being overshadowed by my husband is anything new. Even back when I was Coven leader and Lucas was an unemployed lawyer, he was still the one whose name made people sit up and take notice.

My father-in-law is the CEO of the most powerful Cabal in the country. Lucas is his illegitimate youngest son. He is also the one Benicio has named as heir, despite the fact that Lucas has devoted his adult life to fighting Cabal injustices. Pretty hard to compete with that reputation. So I don't try. I believe in his cause—helping supernaturals—and I join him in it, knowing that to most people I'd always be “that witch who married Lucas Cortez.”

“I want to speak to Lucas,” Ms. Cookson said as I handed her a coffee.

“You will. When he gets here. But we'll be working your case together—”

“I want Lucas.”

“You'll have him.” I forced a smile. “But it's a package—”

“*Only* Lucas.”

I sat down, opened her file and started to read it.

“Ava,” I said. “May I call you Ava?” I continued before she could protest. “Although Lucas and I are partners, there are tasks that only one of us handles. Legal work, for example. He's a lawyer; I'm not. Technical work is my forte. I'm a computer programmer; he's not. Beyond those obvious differences, there are tasks one of us does to reduce conflict and confusion. Such as case intake. While clients may—and often do—present a potential case to Lucas personally, I'm the one who decides which ones we take.”

“I bet you like that, don't you?”

“The power of choosing the cases? Hardly. We usually evaluate them together and—”

“I mean the power to get rid of clients you don't like. Ones who might pose a threat to your . . . position.”

It took me a moment to get her meaning. When I did, I laughed. I didn't mean to; I just couldn't help it. Her eyes slitted, her lips thinning to a scarlet line.

“Um, no,” I said. “Sorry, but no. I’m perfectly willing to consider your case, Ava. I need to know what that case is, though, so I can present it to Lucas when he returns and give him my recommendation.”

She continued to eye me, like a cat that suspects it’s being teased. She shifted in her chair. Then, slowly, she began to talk.

Hedging a Bet

Ava Cookson was twenty-two. Unmarried. High school education. Lived in Los Angeles.

Worked in a clothing store. Had a brother. She didn't tell me any of this—it came from the intake form, including a little notation Savannah had made by the name of the store Ava worked at—“overpriced crap made in sweathouses and marketed as designer.” All that was incidental . . . except the last fact. *Had a brother.*

One brother. Two years her junior. Attended San Francisco State. Or he did, until his body washed up on the shore near Santa Cruz.

“He was murdered,” Ava said. “And it's my fault.”

Ava was a half-demon, meaning her brother didn't share her demonic father or powers. He wouldn't have known what she was. That's the theory, anyway.

“He caught me teleporting once,” she said. “You can't explain away something like that.”

Which is why you have to be very, very careful.

“You think that's what got him killed,” I said.

Her eyes flashed. “Of course not. Don't accuse me—”

“I'm not accusing you of anything. We investigate cases involving the supernatural world, so if you're here, I presume his entry into that world—through you—somehow resulted in his death.”

“Maybe. But Brody was in other trouble, too. He made the wrong kind of friends in college. At first, it was just innocent stuff, like poker. But then it was serious gambling. He owed money.”

That would seem a more obvious cause of death, but I only nodded, encouraging her to continue.

“I told him I might know a way for him to make money fast. I’d heard of this fight club outside Santa Cruz. For supernaturals. They’re always looking for women, especially hot girls, so I figured I could fight and win some money to help Brody pay his debt. They don’t even ask what your power is. That’s part of the challenge. I can teleport—not far, but far enough to avoid getting hit. It seemed so easy.”

It always does.

“It would have been, too,” she continued. “Only they cheated. They set me up against this chick who actually knew how to fight.”

Imagine that.

“I did fine for the first few rounds, but then I started getting tired, and I couldn’t teleport as fast. So she won.”

I could never have seen that one coming.

“So I’m talking to Brody afterwards, and my mouth is bleeding and swelling up, and I’m telling him how sorry I am, and he’s saying it’s okay. Then this guy walks over, thumps him on the back and congratulates him. Says winning his first bet is always a good sign.”

Ava looked up, eyes blazing. “He bet *against* me. My *brother* bet against me. I stormed out. He came running after me . . . to hand me the car keys. Tells me he’s going to watch a few more rounds, and asks if I can drive the rental car back to the hotel. So I did. All the way back to L.A.

When I return the car, his credit card is being refused. I call to give him hell, and I can't get hold of him. I figure he's just avoiding me, so I pay for the rental. A month later, someone found his body."

I took her back to the beginning—when had she told him she was a half-demon? Could he have told anyone else? Had she introduced him to anyone?

We were going through this when I heard footsteps in the hall. Light ones, barely noticeable, but part of me had been listening for them since I sat down.

The steps stopped outside the meeting room door. I turned my chair, as if getting comfortable, and carefully slid my gaze to the partly open door. Lucas peeked around it, finger to his lips, then motioned me out before withdrawing silently.

I waited for a suitable break in Ava's narrative, then excused myself to "ask Savannah to compile information on fight clubs."

Lucas was in the hall, waiting. Silently, he backed into the stock room. I was barely through the door before he caught me up in a breath-stopping kiss.

I threw my arms around his neck, reveling in the familiar tug of his hands entwined in my hair, the taste of breath mints hastily chewed on his way up the stairs, the faint citrus scent of his shaving lotion. Whatever problems I had with my husband, they weren't problems *with* my husband. They were the issues that came with his world and the life he'd been thrust into. I was as crazy in love with the guy himself as I'd been when I married him.

When he began unbuttoning my blouse, though, I pulled back. "Client."

"Call Savannah." Lucas flicked open the top button. "She'll cover for you."

"Normally, yes, but this client is a teleporting half-demon. A very impatient one who's liable to jump in here any second now."

“We’ll move to our office, then.” He popped the front clasp on my bra. “It’s warded.”

“And involves sneaking past the meeting room’s open door.”

He cupped my breasts. “You’re arguing, but you’re not stopping me.”

“I’m enjoying it while I can. But maybe, there’s enough time to make *you* a little more presentable.” I pressed my hand to his crotch, then lowered myself to my knees. “You know I have a thing for storage rooms.”

He chuckled. I unzipped his pants.

“Where’d she go?” Ava’s voice rang down the hall. “Is that Lucas’s suitcase? Is he here?”

I sighed and zipped his pants as I stood.

“If he’s here, I want to talk to him,” Ava demanded.

I opened the door and stepped out. Lucas followed. Savannah walked up behind Ava, who stared at us, nose crinkling.

“What were you doing in there?” Ava said.

“Duh,” Savannah muttered. She passed me a file. “The information on fight clubs you asked for, boss.” The meeting room was wired to her office, and she eavesdropped at will. “Did you find a box of toner in there or are we out?”

“Out.”

“Told ya.”

While we’d been talking, Ava had managed to zip between Lucas and me, so fast she must have teleported.

“Ava Cookson, sir. Pleased to meet you. *So* pleased to meet you.”

She stared up at him with the kind of adoration usually reserved for rock stars. Behind me, Savannah snickered, and I had to admit, it looked very odd. I love my husband dearly, but the

word most often used to describe his is “geek.” I happen to think it’s completely unfair, but Lucas is comfortable with the term. He even propagates the image, refusing to wear contacts or more flattering suits, keeping his hair in a short, nondescript style any barber can manage. He likes to be unassuming, invisible even.

When Ava gazed up at him in adoration, he inched backward, gaze sliding to Savannah and me, as if begging for rescue.

“I was just taking Ava’s case history,” I said. “If you’d care to join us . . .”

“Oh, we don’t need you.” Ava waved me off, eyes never leaving Lucas. “He can take it from here.”

Lucas protested. When she insisted, he became visibly annoyed, which for Lucas meant she was seriously pissing him off.

Finally, I said, “Actually, that’s probably best. You go on. I’ll start a file.”

Lucas asked Ava to excuse us. Savannah practically had to drag her away, but finally she got her back in the meeting room.

“She’s a twit,” I said. “And she’s got a serious crusader-crush on you. But I think you can handle it.”

Spots of color warmed his cheeks. “Of course I can. It’s not that. It’s—”

“—that you don’t like her insulting me. I get that. But you arguing that I’m important doesn’t make me important.” I lifted onto my tiptoes and kissed his chin. “All things considered, I’m just as happy not dealing with her. I’ll listen in on Savannah’s line and, when she’s gone, we can go look for more toner. I’m sure there’s a box in there somewhere.”

He smiled, but it was a wistful smile. He kissed me, though, a long, delicious kiss that promised a very good night to come, and when we parted and I thought I caught a touch of

sadness in his eyes, I told myself I was imagining it. I had to be. Everything was fine. Well, *we* were fine, and that was all that mattered.