

Prologue

"Got another CSI question for you," Gloria said as Simon walked into the communication hub with an armload of papers. "If you're not busy."

"Perfect timing," Simon said. "I'm just about to start my coffee break." He started pulling a chair to Gloria's workstation, then hesitated. "Can I get you something?"

Gloria smiled and shook her head. Simon moved the chair beside hers, being careful not to block her view of the digital display city map on the side wall. That's what Gloria loved about shamans, they were so damned considerate. You want a nice guy, you get a shaman. You want a self-centered jerk, you get a half-demon.

Her shift partner, Erin, hated it when Gloria said that. Racial discrimination, she called it. Of course Gloria didn't really believe every half-demon was a jerk—she was a half-demon herself—but that didn't keep her from saying so to Erin. Night shift in the communication hub could get deathly dull, and there was nothing like a good political correctness debate to liven things up.

Gloria pushed her chair back, one eye still on her monitor. "Okay, so I'm watching CSI last week, and they trick this guy into giving them DNA. Then, like five minutes later, they tell him it's a match. Can you really analyze DNA that fast?"

"Can they? Or can we?" Simon said. "For a municipal crime lab, it's damn near impossible. With our lab, though, there's no political wrangling about overtime and budgets and case precedence. We can't analyze a DNA specimen in five minutes, but—"

Gloria's headset beeped twice: an incoming call on the emergency line. She lifted a finger to Simon, then swung around. Even before the call connected, data began flashing on her computer screen as the call tracer went to work. She glanced over her shoulder to see the map of Miami replaced by another city: Atlanta.

Gloria reached for the button to page Erin back from lunch, but Simon beat her to it, simultaneously grabbing Erin's headset to put it on.

The line clicked.

"Cortez emergency services," Gloria said.

A female voice came on, shrill and garbled with panic. "—help—park—man—"

Gloria soothed the caller with reassurances that help was on its way. She could barely make out a word the caller said, but it didn't matter. The computers had already pinpointed the location, a pay phone in an Atlanta park. The Cabal had an office in Atlanta, which meant they had an emergency crew there, and the computer automatically dispatched them the moment it located the call's origin. Gloria's only job was to keep the caller calm until the team arrived.

"Can you tell me your name, honey?"

"D —an M—ur."

Sobs punctuated the words, rendering them unintelligible. Gloria glanced at her monitor. The computer was analyzing the voice, trying to match what it heard against the roster of Cabal employees and employee families. A list of several dozen names appeared. Then the computer factored in gender, an age estimate, and the call location. It came back with a list of five names. Gloria focused on the top one, the computer's best guess.

"Dana?" she said. "Are you Dana MacArthur, honey?"

A muffled "yes".

"Okay, now, I want you to find someplace—"

The line went dead.

"Damn!" Gloria said.

"The Atlanta team just phoned in," Simon said. "Ten-minute ETA. Who is it?"

Gloria waved a hand at her screen. Simon leaned over to look at the photo. A teenage girl grinned back.

"Ah, shit," he said. "Not another one."

The driver swung the SUV into the park and dowsed the lights. Dennis Malone stared out the window into the overcast night. He turned to tell Simon they'd need good lighting, and saw that the crime-scene tech was already fiddling with his flashlight, replacing the batteries. Dennis nodded, stifled a yawn, and rolled down the window for some air. On the jet, he'd loaded up on

caffeine, but it wasn't kicking in. He was getting too old for this. Even as the thought flitted past, he dismissed it with a smile. The day he retired without a fight would be the day they found him cold and stiff in his bed.

He had the best damned job a cop could want. Head of the finest investigative unit in the country, with the kind of resources and funding his old buddies in the FBI could only dream about. And he didn't just get to solve crimes, he got to plan them. When the Cortezes needed to get rid of someone, they came to Dennis and, together with his team, he'd devise the perfect crime, one that would stump the authorities. That was the best part of his job. What he was doing tonight was the worst. Two in one week. Dennis told himself it was a coincidence, random attacks unconnected to the Cabal itself. The alternative . . . well, no one wanted to consider the alternative.

The SUV stopped.

"Over there," the driver said, pointing. "To the left, behind those trees."

Dennis swung open his door and stepped out. He rolled the kinks from his shoulders as he surveyed the site. There was nothing to see. No crime scene tape, no television crews, not even an ambulance. The Cabal EMTs had been and gone, arriving silently in an unmarked minivan, then speeding back into the night, headed for the airport where they'd load their passenger on the same jet that had brought Dennis and Simon to Atlanta.

Over by a stand of trees, a flashlight signaled with an on-off flicker.

"Malone," Dennis called. "Miami SD."

The light went on and a heavyset blond man stepped out. New guy, recently come over from the St. Cloud Cabal. Jim? John?

Greetings were a brief exchange of hellos. They only had a few hours until daybreak, and a lot of work to do before then. Both Jim and the driver who'd brought them from the airport were trained to assist Dennis and Simon, but it would still take every minute of those remaining hours to process the scene.

Simon moved up behind Dennis, camera in one hand, light source in the other. He handed the light source to the driver—Kyle, wasn't it?—and pointed out where he wanted Kyle to aim it.

Then he started snapping pictures. It took a moment for Dennis to see what Simon was photographing. That was one advantage to having shaman crime techs—lead them to a scene and they instinctively picked up the vibes of violence and knew where to start working.

Following the angle of Simon's camera lens, Dennis looked up to see a rope dangling from an overhead limb, the end hacked off. Another length lay on the ground, where the EMTs had removed it from the girl's throat.

"It took me a while to find her," Jim said. "If I'd been just a few minutes faster . . ."

"She's alive," Dennis said. "If you hadn't been that fast, she wouldn't be."

His cell-phone vibrated. He took it from his pocket. A text message.

"Have you updated Mr. Cortez?" he asked Jim. "He hasn't received a site report yet."

From Jim's expression, Dennis knew he hadn't sent one. With the St. Cloud Cabal you probably didn't phone anyone in the family at three A.M. unless the Tokyo stock market had just crashed. Not so when you worked for the Cortezes.

"You've filled out a preliminary report sheet, right?" Dennis said.

Jim nodded and fumbled to pull his modified PalmPilot from his jacket.

"Well, send it to Mr. Cortez immediately. He's waiting to notify Dana's father and he can't do that until he knows the details."

"Mr . . .? Which Mr. Cortez?"

"Benicio," Simon murmured as he continued snapping pictures. "You need to send it to Benicio."

"Oh? Uh, right."

As Jim transmitted the report, Simon moved back to photograph the rope on the ground. Blood streaked the underside of the coil and Dennis flinched, imagining his granddaughter lying there. This wasn't supposed to happen. Not to Cabal children. You worked for a Cabal, your kids were protected.

"Randy's girl, wasn't it?" Simon said softly behind him. "The older one?"

Dennis could barely picture Randy MacArthur, let alone know how many kids he had. Simon was almost certainly right, though. Lead the man once around a corporate picnic, and the next day he'd be sure to ask Joe Blow in Accounting whether his son's cold was improving.

"What is her father?" Jim asked.

"Half-demon," Simon said. "An Exaudio, I believe."

Both Jim and Dennis nodded. They were half-demon, as were most of the Cabal's policing force, and they knew what this meant. Dana would have inherited none of her father's powers.

"Poor kid never had a chance," Dennis said.

"Actually, I believe she is a supernatural," Simon said. "If I'm not mistaken, her mother is a witch, so she would be one as well."

Dennis shook his head. "Like I said, poor kid never had a chance."

That Cortez Boy

I sat in a hotel room, across from two thirty-something witches in business suits, listening as they said all the right things. All the polite things. How they'd heard such wonderful accounts of my mother. How horrified they'd been to learn of her murder. How delighted they were to see that I was doing well despite my break with the Coven.

All this they said, smiling with just the right mixture of sadness, commiseration and support. Wendy Aiken did most of the talking. While she did, her younger sister Julie's eyes darted to where Savannah, my thirteen-year-old ward, perched on the bed. I caught the looks Julie shot her, distaste mingled with fear. A black witch's daughter, in their hotel room.

As Wendy's lips moved in rehearsed platitudes, her gaze slipped past me to the clock. I knew then that I would fail . . . again. But I gave my spiel anyway. I told them my vision of a new Coven for the technological age, linked by sisterhood instead of proximity, each witch living where she chooses, but with a full Coven support system only a phone call or E-mail away.

When I finished, the sisters looked at each another.

I continued. "As I mentioned, there's also the grimoires. Third-level spells, lost for generations. I have them and I want to share them, to return witches to their former glory."

To me, these books were my trump card. Even if you didn't give a damn about sisterhood or support, surely you'd want this power. What witch wouldn't? Yet, as I looked at Wendy and Julie, I saw my words wash right over them, as if I was offering a free set of steak knives with the purchase of a complete living-room suite.

"You're a very compelling saleswoman," Wendy said with a smile.

"But . . ." Savannah muttered from the bed.

"But we must admit, we have a problem with the . . . present company you keep."

Julie's gaze slid toward Savannah. I tensed, ready to leap to her defense.

"That Cortez boy," Wendy said. "Well, young man, I should say. Yes, I know he's not involved with his family's Cabal, but we all know how things like that turn out. Youthful rebellion is all very well, but it doesn't pay the bills. And I hear he's not very successful in that regard."

"Lucas—"

"He's still young, I know, and he does a lot of pro bono work. That's very noble, Paige. I can see how a young woman would find it romantic—"

"But," Julie cut in, "like Wendy says, it doesn't pay the bills. And he is a Cortez."

Wendy nodded. "Yes, he is a Cortez."

"Hey," Savannah said, standing. "I have a question." She stepped toward the sisters. Julie shrank back. "When's the last time you saved a witch from being murdered by Cabal goons? Lucas did that just last month."

"Savannah . . ." I said.

She stepped closer to the two women. "What about defending a shaman set up by a Cabal? That's what Lucas is doing now. Oh, and Paige does charity work, too. In fact, she's doing it right now, offering two-faced bitches like you a spot in her Coven."

"Savannah!"

"I'll be in the hall," she said. "Something in here stinks."

She wheeled and marched out of the hotel room.

"My god," Wendy said. "She is her mother's daughter."

"And thank God for that," I said, and left.

As I drove out of the city core, Savannah broke the silence.

"I heard what you said. It was a good comeback."

The words "even if you didn't mean it" hung between us. I nodded and busied myself scanning traffic. I was still working on understanding Savannah's mother, Eve. It wasn't easy. My whole being rebelled at the thought of empathizing with a dark witch. But, even if I could never think of Eve as someone I could admire, I'd come to accept that she'd been a good mother. The proof of that was beside me. A thoroughly evil woman couldn't have produced a daughter like Savannah.

"You know I was right," she said. "About them. They're just like the Coven. You deserve—"

"Don't," I said quietly. "Please."

She looked at me. I could feel her gaze, but didn't turn. After a moment, she shifted to stare out the window.

I was in a funk, as my mother would have said. Feeling sorry for myself and knowing there was no good reason for it. I should be happy—ecstatic even. Sure my life had taken a nasty turn four months ago—if one can call "the end of life as I knew it" a nasty turn—but I survived. I was young. I was healthy. I was in love. Damn it, I should be happy. And when I wasn't that only added guilt to my blues, and left me berating myself for acting like a spoiled, selfish brat.

I was bored. The Web site design work that had once fired a passion in me now piled up on the desk—drudgery I had to complete if anyone in our house intended to eat. Did I say "house"? I meant apartment. Four months ago, my house near Boston had burned to cinders, along with everything I owned. I was now the proud renter of a lousy two-bedroom apartment in a lousier neighborhood in Portland, Oregon. Yes, I could afford better, but I hated digging into the insurance money, terrified I'd wake up one day with nothing in the bank and be forced to spend eternity living beneath a deaf old woman who watched blaring talk shows eighteen hours a day.

For the first two months, I'd been fine. Lucas, Savannah and I had spent the summer traveling. But then September came and Savannah had to go to school. So we set up house—apartment—in Portland, and carried on. Or, I should say, Savannah and Lucas carried on. They'd both lived nomadic lives before, so this was nothing new. Not so for me. I'd been born near Boston, grown up there, and never left—not even for school. Yet in my fight to protect Savannah last spring, my house hadn't been the only thing to burn. My entire life had gone up in smoke—my business, my private life, my reputation—all had been dragged through the tabloid cesspool, and I'd been forced to relocate clear across the country, someplace where no one had heard of Paige Winterbourne. The scandal had fizzled out quickly enough, but I couldn't go back. The Coven had exiled me, which meant I was forbidden to live within the state boundaries. Still I hadn't given up. I'd sucked in my grief, dried my tears and marched back into the fight. My Coven didn't want me? Fine, I'd

start my own. In the last eight weeks I'd met with nine witches. Each one said all the right things, then turned me down flat. With each rejection, the abyss widened.

We went out for dinner, followed by an early movie. My way of apologizing to Savannah for inflicting another witch-recruitment session on her.

Back at the apartment, I hustled Savannah off to bed, then zoomed into my room just as the clock-radio flipped to 10:59. I grabbed the cordless phone, jumped onto the bed, and watched the clock. Two seconds after it hit 11:00, the phone rang.

"Two seconds late," I said.

"Never. Your clock must be running fast."

I smiled and settled back onto the bed. Lucas was in Chicago, defending a shaman who'd been set up by the St. Cloud Cabal to take the fall for a corporate espionage scheme gone awry.

I asked Lucas how the case was going, and he filled me in. Then he asked how my afternoon had gone, specifically my meeting with the witches. For a second, I almost wished I had one of those boyfriends who didn't know or care about my life outside his sphere of influence. Lucas probably noted all my appointments in his Day-Timer, so he'd never do something as inconsiderate as fail to ask about them afterward.

"Shot down," I said.

A moment of silence. "I'm sorry."

"No big—"

"Yes, it is. I know it is. However, I'm equally certain that, given the right circumstances and timing, you'll eventually find yourself in a position where the number of witches clamoring to join your Coven will far exceed your requirements."

"In other words, give it time and I'll need to beat 'em off with a stick?"

A soft chuckle floated down the line. "I get even less coherent after a day in court, don't I?"

"If you didn't talk like that once in a while, I'd miss it. Kind of like I'm missing you. Got an ETA for me yet?"

"Three days at most. It's hardly a murder trial." He cleared his throat. "Speaking of which, another case was brought to my attention today. A half-demon killed in Nevada, apparently mistaken for another who was under Cabal warrant for execution."

"Whoops."

"Exactly. The Boyd Cabal isn't admitting their mistake, let alone conducting a proper investigation and procedural review. I thought perhaps you might be able to assist me. That is, if you aren't busy—"

"When can we leave?"

"Sunday. Savannah could spend the night at Michelle's, and we'd return Monday evening."

"Sounds—" I stopped. "Savannah has an orthodontic appointment Monday afternoon. I'd reschedule but . . ."

"It took six weeks to get it, I know. Yes, I have it marked right here. Three o'clock with Doctor Schwab. I should have checked before I asked." He paused. "Perhaps you could still come along and leave early Monday morning?"

"Sure. That sounds good."

The words came out empty, the elation that surged only a moment ago drained by this sudden glimpse of my future, calendar pages crammed with orthodontic appointments, Saturday morning art classes, and PTA meetings stretching into eternity.

On the heels of that thought came another. How dare I complain? I'd taken on this responsibility. I'd wanted it. I'd fought for it. Only a few months ago, I'd seen the same snapshot of my future and I'd been happy. Now, as much as I loved Savannah, I couldn't deny the occasional twinges of resentment.

"We'll work something out," Lucas said. "In the meantime, I should mention that I took advantage of a brief recess today to visit some of Chicago's lesser-known shopping venues, and found something that might cheer you up. A necklace."

I grinned. "An amulet?"

"No, I believe it's what they call a Celtic knot. Silver. A simple design, but quite elegant."

"Sure. Good . . . great."

"Liar."

"No really, I—" I paused. "It's not a necklace, is it?"

"I've been told, on good authority, that jewelry is the proper token of affection. I must admit I had my doubts. One could argue that you'd prefer a rare spell, but the jewelry store clerk assured me that all women prefer necklaces to musty scrolls."

I rolled onto my stomach and grinned. "You bought me a spell? What kind? Witch? Sorcerer?"

"It's a surprise."

"What?" I shot upright. "No way! Don't you dare—"

"It'll give you something to look forward to when I get home."

"Well, that's good, Cortez, 'cause God knows, I wasn't looking forward to anything else."

A soft laugh. "Liar."

I thumped back onto the bed. "How about a deal? You tell me what the spell does and I'll give you something to look forward to."

"Tempting."

"I'll make it more than tempting."

"That I don't doubt."

"Good. Now here's the deal. I give you a list of options. If you like one, then you can have it when you get home if you tell me about the spell tonight."

"Before you begin, I really should warn you, I'm quite resolved to secrecy. Breaking that resolve requires more than a laundry list of options, however creative. Detail will be the key."

I grinned. "You alone?"

"That goes without saying. If you're asking whether I'm in my hotel room, the answer is yes."

My grin broadened. "Good, then you'll get all the detail you can handle."

I never did find out what the spell was, probably because, five minutes into the conversation, we both forgot what had started it and, by the time we signed off, I crawled under the covers,

forgetting even the most basic nighttime toiletry routines, and promptly fell asleep, my curiosity the only thing left unsatisfied.

Death Before Dishonor

Come morning, I bounded out of bed, ready to take on the world. This would have been a positive sign had I not done the same thing every morning for the past two weeks. I awoke, refreshed, determined this would be the day I'd haul my ass out of the pit. I'd cook breakfast for Savannah. I'd leave a cheerful message of support on Lucas's cell-phone. I'd jog two miles. I'd dive into my Web site projects with renewed vigor and imagination. I'd take time out in the afternoon to hunt down season-end tomatoes at the market. I'd cook up a vat of spaghetti sauce that would fill our tiny freezer. The list went on. I usually derailed somewhere between leaving the message for Lucas and starting my workday . . . roughly around nine a.m.

That morning, I sailed into my jog still pumped. I knew I wouldn't hit two miles, considering I'd never exceeded one mile in my entire running career, which was now in its fifth week. Over the last eighteen months it had come to my attention, on multiple occasions, that my level of physical fitness was inadequate. Before now, a good game of pool was as active as I got. Ask me to flee for my life, and we could be talking imminent heart failure.

As long as I was reinventing myself, I might as well toss in a fitness routine. Since Lucas ran, that seemed the logical choice. I hadn't told him about it yet. Not until I reached the two-mile mark. Then I'd say "Oh, by the way, I took up running a few days ago." God forbid I should admit to not being instantly successful at anything.

That morning, I finally passed the one mile mark. Okay, it was only by about twenty yards, but it was still a personal best, so I treated myself to an iced chai for the walk home.

As I rounded the last corner, I noticed two suspicious figures standing in front of my building. Both wore suits, which in my neighborhood was extremely suspicious. I looked for Bibles or encyclopedias, but they were empty-handed. One stared up at the building, perhaps expecting it to morph into corporate headquarters.

I fished my keys from my pocket. As I glanced up, two girls walked past the men. I wondered why they weren't in school—dumb question in this neighborhood, but I was still adjusting—then

realized the "girls" were at least forty. My mistake arose from the size differential. The two men towered a foot above the women.

Both men had short, dark hair and clean-shaven, chiseled faces. Both wore Ray-Bans. Both were roughly the size of redwoods. If there hadn't been a one-inch height difference between them, I'd have sworn they were identical twins. Other than that, my only way of distinguishing them was by tie color. One had a dark red tie, the other jade green.

As I drew closer, both men turned my way.

"Paige Winterbourne?" Red Tie said.

I slowed and mentally readied a spell.

"We're looking for Lucas Cortez," Green Tie said. "His father sent us."

My heart thumped double-time, and I blinked to cover my surprise.

"Fath—?" I said. "Benicio?"

"That'd be the one," Red Tie said.

I pasted on a smile. "I'm sorry, but Lucas is in court today."

"Then Mr. Cortez would like to speak to you."

He half turned, directing my gaze to a king-size black SUV idling just around the corner, in the no-stopping zone. So these two weren't just messengers; they were Benicio's personal half-demon bodyguards.

"Benicio wants to talk to me?" I said. "I'm honored. Tell him to come on up. I'll put on the kettle."

Red Tie's mouth twisted. "He's not going up. You're going over there."

"Really? Wow, you must be one of those psychic half-demons. Never met one of those."

"Mr. Cortez wants you—"

I put up a hand to cut him off. My hand barely reached the height of his navel. Kind of scary if you thought about it. Luckily, I didn't.

"Here's how it works," I said. "Benicio wants to speak to me? Fine, but since I didn't request this audience, he's coming to me."

Green Tie's eyebrows lifted above his shades.

"That's not—" Red Tie began.

"You're messengers. I've given the message. Now deliver."

When neither moved, I cast under my breath and waved my fingers at them.

"You heard me. Shoo."

As my fingers flicked, they stumbled back. Green Tie's eyebrows arched higher. Red Tie recovered his balance and glowered, as if he'd like to launch a fireball at me, or whatever his demonic specialty might be. Before he could act, Green Tie caught his gaze and jerked his chin toward the car. Red Tie settled for a glare, then stomped off.

I reached for the door handle. As the door swung open, a hand appeared over my head and grabbed it. I looked up to see the green-tie-wearing bodyguard. I expected him to hold the door shut, so I couldn't escape, but instead he pulled it open and held it for me. I walked through. He followed.

At this point, any sane woman would have run for her life. At the very least, she would have turned around and walked back out onto the street, a public place. But I was bored and such boredom has a detrimental effect on my sanity.

I unlocked the inner door. This time, I held it open for him. We walked to the elevator in silence.

"Going up?" I asked.

He pushed the button. As the elevator wheels squealed, my resolve faltered. I was about to get into a small, enclosed place with a half-demon literally twice my size. I'd seen too many movies not to know how this could turn out.

Yet what were my options? If I ran, I'd be exactly what they expected: a timid witch-mouse. Nothing I did in the future would ever erase that. On the other hand, I could step on the elevator and never step off. Death or dishonor? For some people, there's really no choice.

When the elevator doors opened, I walked on.

The half-demon followed. As the doors closed, he took off his sunglasses. His eyes were a blue so cold they made the hairs on my arms rise. He pressed the Stop button. The elevator groaned to a halt.

"You ever seen this scene in a movie?" he asked.

I looked around. "Now that you mention it, I think I have."

"Know what happens next?"

I nodded. "The hulking bad guy attacks the defenseless young heroine, who suddenly reveals heretofore unimagined powers, which she uses to not only fend off his attack but beat him to a bloody pulp. Then she escapes—"I craned my head back—"out that handy escape hatch and shimmies up the cables. The bad guy recovers consciousness and attacks, whereupon she's forced, against her own moral code, to sever the cable with a fireball and send him plummeting to his death."

"Is that what happens?"

"Sure. Didn't you see that one?"

His lips curved in a grin, defrosting his icy gaze. "Yeah, maybe I did." He leaned back against the wall. "So, how's Robert Vasic?"

I blinked, startled. "Uh, fine . . . good."

"Still teaching at Stanford?"

"Uh, yes. Part-time."

"A half-demon professor of demonology. I always liked that." He grinned. "Though I did like it better when he was a half-demon priest. Not nearly enough of those around. Next time you see Robert, tell him Troy Morgan said hi."

"I—I'll do that."

"Last time I saw Robert, Adam was still a kid. Playing baseball in the backyard. When I heard who Lucas is dating, I thought, that's the Winterbourne girl. Adam's friend. Then I thought, whoa, how old is she, like, seventeen, eighteen . . .?"

"Twenty-three."

"Man, I'm getting old." Troy shook his head. Then he met my gaze. "Mr. Cortez isn't leaving until you talk to him, Paige."

"What does he want?"

Troy arched his brows. "You think he'd tell me? If Benicio Cortez wants to relay a message in person, then it's personal. Otherwise, he'd save himself the trip and send some sorcerer flunky. Either way, half-demon bodyguards are not in the know. The only thing I do know is that he really wants to talk to you, enough that if you insist on inviting him upstairs, he'll come. The question is: Are you okay with that? It's safe. Hell, I'll come up and stand guard if you want. But if you'd feel more comfortable in a public place, I can talk to him—"

"This is fine," I said. "I'll see him if he comes up to the apartment."

Troy nodded. "He will."

The moment I stepped into my apartment, I had to grip my fists tight to keep from slamming the door and throwing shut the deadbolt. I was about to meet Benicio Cortez. And to my shame, I was afraid.

Benicio Cortez headed the Cortez Cabal. The comparison between Cabals and the Mafia was as old as organized crime itself. But it was a bad analogy. Comparing the mob to a Cabal was like comparing a gang of teenage neo-Nazis to the Gestapo. Yet I feared meeting Benicio, not because he was the CEO of the world's most powerful Cabal, but because he was Lucas's father. Everything that Lucas was, and everything he feared becoming, was embodied in this man.

When I'd first learned who Lucas was, I'd assumed that, having dedicated his life to fighting the Cabals, Lucas wouldn't have any contact with his father. I soon realized it wasn't that simple. Benicio phoned. He sent birthday gifts. He invited Lucas to all family functions. He acted as if there was no estrangement. And even his son didn't seem to understand why. When the phone rang and Benicio's number appeared on the caller ID, Lucas would stand there and stare at it, and in his eyes I saw a war I couldn't imagine. Sometimes he answered. Sometimes he didn't. Either way, he seemed to regret the choice.

So now I was about to meet the man. What did I truly fear? That I wouldn't measure up. That Benicio would take one look at me and decide I wasn't good enough for his son. And the worst of it? Right now, I wasn't sure he'd be wrong.

A single rap at the door.

I took a deep breath, walked to the door and opened it. I saw the man standing there, and my heart jammed into my throat. For one second, I was certain I'd been tricked, that this was not Benicio but one of his sons—the son who'd ordered my death four months ago. I'd been drugged and, coming to, the first thing I'd seen were Lucas's eyes—a nightmare version of them, their deep brown somehow colder than the icy blue of Troy Morgan's stare. I hadn't known which of Lucas's half-brothers it had been. I still didn't know, having never told Lucas what happened. But now, as I stared into those eyes, the steel in my spine turned to mercury and I had to grip the door handle to steady myself.

"Ms. Winterbourne."

As he spoke, I heard my mistake. The voice I'd heard that day was riveted in my skull, words bitten off sharp, staccato and bitter. This one was velvet-soft, the voice of a man who never has to shout to get anyone's attention. As I invited him inside, a harder look confirmed my error. The son I'd met had been in his early forties, and this man was another twenty years older. It was an understandable mistake, though. Smooth some of the deeply etched lines on his face and Benicio would be a carbon copy of his son. Both men were wide-shouldered, stocky and no more than five nine, in contrast to Lucas's tall, rail-thin physique.

"I knew your mother," Benicio said as he crossed the room. No "she was a good woman" or "I'm sorry for your loss" tacked on. A statement as emotionless as his stare. His gaze swept the room, taking in the secondhand furniture and bare walls. Part of me wanted to explain, and another part of me was horrified by the impulse. I didn't owe this man an explanation.

Benicio stepped in front of the couch—part of a perfectly serviceable if threadbare set. He looked down at it as if debating whether it might soil his suit. At that, a small inkling of the old Paige bubbled to the surface.

"Don't bother sitting," I said. "This isn't a tea-and-crumpets kind of visit. Oh, and I'm fine, thank you for asking."

Benicio turned his empty stare on me and waited. For at least twenty seconds, we just looked at one another. I tried to hold out, but I broke first.

"As I told your men, Lucas is in court, out of town. If you didn't believe me—"

"I know where my son is."

A chill tickled the nape of my neck as I heard the unspoken qualifier: "I always know where my son is." I'd never thought of that, but hearing him now, there was no doubt in my mind that Benicio always knew exactly where Lucas was, and what he was doing.

"Well, that's funny," I said. "Because your men said you had a message for him. But if you know he's not here, then . . . Oh, I get it. That was only an excuse, right? You know Lucas is gone and you came here pretending to want to deliver a message, hoping for a chance to meet the new girlfriend. You wouldn't want to do that with Lucas around, because you might not be able to control your disappointment when you confirm that your son is indeed dating—whoops, living with—a witch."

"I do have a message," he said. "For both of you."

"I'm guessing it's not 'congratulations.'"

"I have a case that might interest Lucas," he said. "One that might be of particular interest to you as well." While we'd been talking, his eyes had never left mine, but now, for the first time, he truly seemed to be looking at me. "You're developing quite the reputation, both for fending off the Nast Cabal's attempt to take Savannah and for your role in ending that business with Tyrone Winsloe last year. This particular case would require someone with such expertise."

As he spoke, a thrill of gratification rippled through me. On its heels came a wave of shame. God, was I that transparent? Throw a few empty words of praise my way and I wriggled like a happy puppy? Our first meeting and Benicio already knew what buttons to press.

"When's the last time Lucas worked for you?" I asked.

"This isn't working for me. I'm simply passing along a case that I believe would interest my son—"

"And when's the last time you tried that one? August, wasn't it? Something about a Vodoun priest in Colorado? Lucas turned you down flat, as he always does."

Benicio's cheek twitched.

"What," I said, "you didn't think Lucas told me about that? Like he didn't tell me how you bring him a case every few months, either to piss off the other Cabals or to trick him into doing something at your request? He's not sure which it is. I'm guessing both."

He paused. Then he met my gaze. "This case is different."

"Oh, I'm sure it is."

"It involves the child of one of our employees," he said. "A fifteen-year-old girl named Dana MacArthur."

I opened my mouth to cut him off, but couldn't. The moment he said "fifteen-year-old girl," I needed to hear the rest.

Benicio continued, "Three nights ago, someone attacked her while she was walking through a park. She was strangled, hung from a tree, and left to die."

My gut clenched. "Is she . . .?" I tried to force out the last word, but couldn't.

"She's alive. Comatose, but alive." His voice softened and his eyes filled with the appropriate mix of sorrow and indignation. "Dana wasn't the first."

As he waited for me to ask the obvious question, I swallowed it and forced my brain to switch tracks.

"That's . . . too bad," I said, struggling to keep my voice steady. "I hope she recovers. And I hope you find the culprit. I can't help you, though, and I'm sure Lucas can't, either, but I'll pass along the message."

I walked toward the front hall.

Benicio didn't budge. "There's one more thing you should know."

I bit my lip. Don't ask. Don't fall for it. Don't—

"The girl," he said. "Dana MacArthur. She's a witch."

We locked gazes for a moment. Then I tore mine away, strode to the door, and flung it open.

"Get out," I said.

And, to my surprise, he did.