

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.