

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.