

# Hope

## Godfather

I checked for chaos vibes and felt nothing. Still, any time a hulking half-demon stranger sought me out hundreds of miles from my home, I had reason to be alarmed.

“Let’s head over there.”

He nodded to a quiet corner under an elm. When we stopped, he shivered and looked up into the dense branches.

“Not the warmest spot,” he said. “I guess that’s why it’s the one empty corner in the park. No sunshine.”

“But you could fix that.”

I braced myself for a denial. Instead I got a grin that thawed his ice-blue eyes.

“Now that’s a handy talent. I could use that in my line of work.”

“And that would be?”

“Troy Morgan,” he said, as if in answer. “My boss would like to talk to you.”

The name clicked—Benicio Cortez’s personal bodyguard.

I followed Troy's gaze to a vehicle idling fifty feet away. A white SUV with Cadillac emblems on the wheels. Beside it stood a dark haired man who could pass for Troy's twin. If both of Benicio Cortez's bodyguards were here, then there was no doubt who sat behind those tinted windows.

My hastily eaten breakfast sank into the pit of my stomach.

"If it's about this—" I waved at the crime scene. "—you can tell Mr. Cortez it wasn't a werewolf, so . . ." I trailed off, seeing his expression. "It isn't about the werewolf rumor, is it?"

Troy shook his head. Why else would Benicio Cortez fly from Miami to speak a half-demon nobody? Because I owed him. The bagel turned to lead.

"Okay," I said, lifting my notebook. "I'm in the middle of a story right now, but I could meet him in an hour, say . . ." I scanned the street for a coffee shop.

"His plane leaves in an hour. He needs to talk to you now."

His voice was soft, gentle even, but a steel edge in his tone told me I didn't have a choice. Benicio Cortez wanted to talk to me, and it was his job to make that happen.

I glanced at the crime scene. "Can I just get a few more minutes? If I can talk to one more witness, I'll have enough for a story—"

"Mr. Cortez will look after that."

He touched my elbow, gaze settling on mine, sympathetic but firm. When I still resisted, he leaned down, voice lowering. "He'd like to speak to you in the car, but if you'd be more comfortable in a public place, I can arrange it."

I shook my head, shoved my notebook into my pocket and motioned for him to lead the way.

As I moved toward the curb, a passing car hit a patch of melting snow, throwing up a sheet of slush. I scampered back, but it caught my legs, dappling my skirt and nylons, the icy pellets sliding down and coming to rest in my shoes. So much for looking presentable.

I rubbed my arms and told myself the goose-bumps were from the ice, not trepidation over meeting Benicio Cortez. I'm a society girl—meeting a CEO shouldn't be any cause for nerves. But Cortez Corporation was no ordinary Fortune 500 company.

A Cabal looked like regular multinational corporation, but it was owned and staffed by supernaturals and the “unique abilities” of its employees gave it a massive advantage over its competitors. It used that edge for everything from the legitimate (sorcerer spells to protect their vaults) to the unethical (astral projecting shamans conducting corporate espionage) to the despicable (a teleporting half-demon assassin murdering a business rival.)

I'd spent two years working for the Cortez Cabal. Unintentionally. Hired by Tristan Robard, whom I thought was a representative of the interracial council, I'd been placed with True News to keep an eye on supernatural stories, suppressing or downplaying the real ones and alerting them to potential trouble. My job soon expanded to helping them locate rogue supernaturals.

It had been the perfect way to guiltlessly indulge my hunger for chaos. The phrase “too good to be true” comes to mind, but I'd been in such a dark place—depressed, angry, confused. When you're that far down and someone offers you a hand back up, you grab it and you don't ask questions.

Then came my toughest assignment. Capturing a werewolf jewel thief during a museum gala. I'd been so pleased with myself . . . until that werewolf—Karl Marsten—ripped the

rose-colored glasses from my eyes and, proved that I was really working for the Cortez Cabal. When we escaped that mess, cleaning services came from an unexpected quarter: Benicio. My employment had been a secret operation of Tristan's, and his attack on Karl a personal matter, so in apology, Benicio had disposed of the bodies and provided medical assistance for Karl.

In return, we owed him. Until now, I'd never worried about that because I had a co-debtor—Karl. Karl was a professional thief—capable of guiding me through whatever underworld task Benicio set us.

But now Benicio had come to collect, and Karl wasn't around to do anything about it.

My skirt gave an obscene squeak as I slid onto the SUV's leather seat. If the man within noticed, he gave no sign, just put out a hand to help me.

As the door closed, the roar of morning traffic vanished, replaced by the murmur of calypso jazz, so soft I had to strain to recognize it. Gone too were the exhaust fumes, making way for the stench of stale smoke.

"Cigar," the man said, catching my nose wrinkling. "Cuban, though the expense doesn't make the smell any better. I requested a nonsmoking vehicle, but with high-end rentals, people think if they pay enough, they can do as they please."

Benicio Cortez. He bore little resemblance to the one I knew—his youngest son, Lucas. He was at least sixty, probably no more than five eight, broad-faced and stocky. Only his eyes reminded me of his son—nice eyes, big and dark. The kind of guy you'd let hold your purse or take your son into the bathroom. Bet that came in handy when he was telling you he understood

why you didn't want to sell your three-generation family business. . . while text-messaging a fire half-demon to torch the place before you got back from lunch.

“Do you mind if we drive?” he said. “If we sit here much longer, I'll be arguing my way out of a sizable ticket.”

I was sure Benicio Cortez had more than enough cash in his wallet to pay for any ticket. I could say no supernatural likes drawing undue attention to himself, but I suspected he was testing my nerve . . . and maybe my naiveté, seeing whether I'd let him take me on a ride to parts unknown.

“If you turn left at the lights, you'll hit construction, so you can make a very slow trip around the block.”

“Perfect. Thank you.”

A press of the button and the divider buzzed down. As he conveyed my directions to the driver, the passenger door opened, and Troy climbed in, leaving the other guard behind, as if guarding his boss's idling spot.

Benicio raised the divider, then reached between our seats, and pulled out a thermos.

“Another downside to rentals,” he said. “No in-car beverage service. I'm spoiled, I'm afraid. I had this brewed on the jet, and I assure you, it's excellent, though the container might be somewhat off-putting.” A rueful smile as he lifted the battered, army green thermos. “Ugly, but it does the job better than anything I've found.”

The vacuum seal popped, filling the cabin with rich steam.

“I apologize for interrupting your work.” He handed me a white china mug. “It wasn't a council concern, was it? My daughter-in-law would not be pleased.” Lucas's wife was Paige Winterbourne, witch delegate to the council.

“It’s not council work,” I said. “But they’ll expect a report from me—and my editor is expecting a story—so I need to get back before my sources wander off.”

He filled my mug, then topped up his.

“I still feel responsible for the trouble you and Karl experienced with Tristan,” he said finally. “I should have been aware of his activities. In recompense, I wanted to offer you and Karl a job—temporary, of course—and one particularly suited to your talents. You’d be paid, of course, and I believe it would help you gain valuable skills for your work with the council. I hoped to talk to Karl first, but I have no way of getting in touch with him.”

His gaze settled on me.

“I don’t have his number,” I lied, then added a truth. “Anyway, he’s in Europe. Indefinitely.”

“Indefinitely?”

“That’s what he said.”

“How unfortunate.” He took a long sip of his coffee. “Have you had any experience investigating street gangs, Hope?”

I shook my head.

“Still you understand the concept—youths banding together at a time when they feel the need to belong, when they’re eager to explore their power. As a young supernatural, you probably have some sense of what that’s like yourself.”

I didn’t reply, waiting for him to get to the point.

“We raise our children to hide their powers and fit into human society, and that doesn’t always sit well with them. Some form criminal gangs—mostly male, late teens to mid twenties,

when they're coming into their full powers. They're better organized than human gangs—more focused and less casually violent, though not above using violence to achieve their goals.”

Sounded like a youth version of a Cabal.

“These gangs tend to be most prevalent in Cabal cities, because there's a high concentration of supernaturals there and because they know we'll cover their indiscretions to protect ourselves. We could disband them, but we've decided it's wiser to let them have their fun, safely. They get the rebellion out of their system, and when they come looking for a job . . .”

“The Cabals are close by.”

He nodded. “The problem is that, every now and then, their tolerance for us wears thin. One of those gangs—a particularly well-organized one in Miami—has been the source of some . . . rumblings. I need to find out what they're up to.”

“So you want a ringer. A young supernatural with undercover experience who isn't well-known in the community. That's where I come in.”

Even as I spoke, my pulse quickened, thinking of how it could be done, how much I'd learn, how much fun I'd have. The last thought threw on the brakes. Fun? No. I was imagining what it would be like to lap up all that criminal chaos guilt-free because, hey, I was only fulfilling a debt, maybe even helping avoid a violent confrontation between this gang and the Cabal . . .

No, for guilt-free chaos, I had to stick to my council work. With them I always knew I was working on the right side.

“I've never done deep undercover,” I said. “I probably couldn't even play gang material. My background—”

“I know your background, Hope, and we'd work with that. You'd play a version of yourself. With Karl's help, you could pull this off easily.”

“I’m still not seeing how Karl fits in. He certainly can’t pass for college age.”

“No, but he can protect you.”

“I can read chaotic thoughts. I might not have werewolf strength, but if someone’s about to pull a gun on me, I’ll know it.”

“You may need to break into an office or apartment . . .”

“Karl’s taught me the basics.”

Benicio eased back into his seat. “Perhaps you wouldn’t need him, then. That would certainly be better. I’d rather not delay, tracking him down and jetting him back.”

“No, I—I didn’t mean I’d do it.”

Benicio arched his brows as if to say “What did you mean then?” Even as denials sprang to my lips, the demon in my blood whispered “Why not? You owe him. Get it over with.”

I set my mug in the holder. “No. I’m sorry. I’m flattered that you’d consider me for this, but you said you need it done right away and I have a training session next week—”

“You’d be home by then. We’ll fly to Miami right away, you’ll take the initiation test this afternoon and be in the gang tonight.”

In the gang tonight . . . I wet my lips, then swallowed and managed a laugh. “Today? That seals it, then. There’s no way I could leave today. I’m expected back in Philly tonight with—”

I glimpsed a transport passing on the left and shot over to the window. We were on a four-lane major road.

“Where are we? I said to circle the block—”

“My driver is taking a longer route, giving us more time to talk.”

I hesitated, but he’d left his other bodyguard at the park, meaning he wasn’t shanghaiing me.

“As for your story,” Benicio said. “I already have people investigating and they’ll give you everything you need to write it. Then you can call True News later and tell them you’re on the trail of a bigger, related story, the details of which I will also provide.”

I plucked at the sodden hem of my skirt, saying nothing.

“As for Karl,” he went on. “you’re free to do this job without him, but I will insist on personally notifying Lucas and Paige, and having you speak to them to air any concerns. I’m not going behind my son’s back. He’s even welcome to come to Miami and supervise the operation.”

I was out of excuses. I should have just said “Sorry, I don’t want it,” but I couldn’t force the lie to my lips.

No matter what Benicio said, I owed him—and even if he never called it a debt, it gave him an excuse to keep making “offers.” This would be an ideal way to get out from under the black cloud of this obligation. A week or less, starting immediately, all contingencies handled, with Lucas and Paige to ensure it was legitimate. I’d break not only the tie to Benicio, but my last one to Karl—the tie that bound us to this debt together.

It would also be the opportunity I needed to test myself. A year ago I’d had a scare that still gave me nightmares. Thrust into a situation surging with incredible chaos, I’d seen a friend in danger and had, if only for a moment, felt the urge to just sit back and lap up the vibes. I needed to explore my limits, push them, learn how to handle them.

I turned to Benicio. “I’ll do it.”