

Wedding **Bell Hell**

Paige Catherine Winterbourne
and

Lucas Diego Cortez

invite you to join them on their special day...

The Snitch of
LOVE



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Wedding Bell Hell

Countdown: 3 weeks

Cross-legged on the bed, I stared at the white blanket of papers around us.

I leafed through the stack in my hand. “Roses, carnations or orchids? Chicken, fish or beef? A play-list, guest requests or a mix of both? Photos inside, out or off-site? Rent a limo, car or use our own.”

I threw the papers up and letting them drift down around me. “We rented the hall, reserved the chapel, picked caterers and florists and photographers and DJs . . . and still the work never stops. Isn’t that what we hired all these people for?”

I looked over at the page Lucas was studying. “What’s that one for? Valet parking, self-serve or minibuses?”

“Matchbooks.”

“Match—? What do we need matchbooks for? To light the centerpieces?”

“No, as I recall, we have yet to reach the critical ‘table arrangement’ decision.”

“Candles. Just stick some candles . . . or maybe the goldfish bowls Savannah wants. Or your mom’s disposable camera idea, to get some candid shots—”

I slapped my palms to my temples and thumped back onto the bed. Lucas rubbed my bare feet. After a moment, I peeked through my fingers.

“Do I even want to know about the matchbooks?”

“Probably not.”

“Procrastinate, and we’ll only have more work later. Let’s get it over with.”

“Well, it appears that commemorative matchbooks were included in the cost of our wedding invitation package.”

“Oh? Bonus. Okay, then, now onto the next order of—”

He lifted his hand from my foot, finger rose. “Not so quickly, I’m afraid. We need to decide what we want the matchbooks to say.”

“Oh, I don’t care. Paige and Lucas. Lucas and Paige. Whichever. Then the date. There, on to—”

“Color.”

“Color of—?”

“The matchbook and the text. We also need to select a typeface. And artwork. Plus, they’d like to know if, for an extra hundred dollars—”

“—we can cancel the damned matchbooks altogether?”

He chuckled and resumed my foot massage. I let myself enjoy it before pushing onto my elbows.

“You realize there’s only one answer.”

“To which question?”

“All of them.”

He arched his brows.

“Elopement,” I said.

He shifted closer to me, carefully moving the papers aside as he did. “If you really want—”

“We can’t. Your mother—”

“Has already said it’s our choice. Yes, she’d like a church wedding but, having found someone actually willing to marry me, she’s not about to quibble over the specifics.”

“But she’d be disappointed. And your father wouldn’t forgive us.”

“Which, one could argue, is all the reason we need to elope.”

I play-punched his leg. “You don’t mean that. Things are going very well with your father—far better than I even expected. He wants us to get married and, while that does cause me moments of heart-pounding ‘there’s gotta be a catch’ dread, at this point, I don’t care. If a church wedding makes him happy, it’s a small price to pay.” I lifted the ledger where we were tracking our wedding budget. “Well, not a *small* price, but worthwhile.”

Still holding the ledger, I glanced over at Lucas. “He still letting us run the show, right? Hasn’t insisted on paying again?”

Lucas shook his head. “Just general ‘if the costs get to be too much . . .’ reminders that he—and his checkbook—are available.”

“And . . . nothing else, right? No advice, no suggestions . . .?”

“None.”

“Which worries you.”

“Terrifies me.” He forced a small smile. “But perhaps he realizes this is one area where his interference wouldn’t be welcome.” He paused. “And, in the more likely event that he’s simply lying low, plotting his mode of attack, we have the backup plan.”

I grinned. “We do, indeed. Now, onto the next life-or-death matter.” I flourished a page.
“Rubber chicken, dried-out beef or fish that hasn’t seen water in weeks . . .”

Countdown: 1 week

Savannah and I were out front planting mums for fall. I wasn’t much of a gardener, but I figured, as a homeowner in a neighborhood with magazine-ready gardens, I should at least make some effort.

“I wouldn’t,” Savannah said, as I explained why we were out here. “If you can’t compete, don’t join the race, my mom always said. Better a spectator than a loser.”

“Dig,” I said, pointing.

“And like you have time for this crap. What’s more important? Saving the world from evil or having a pretty garden? It’s stupid.”

“No, it’s ‘fitting in.’ Now dig.”

A horn honked, and I looked up to see a sporty little black car pulling to the curb, passenger window sliding late forties, her dark hair short and stylishly tousled, broad grin lighting up an unexceptional face.

“You girls look busy,” she called.

“Maria.”

I smiled, and stripped off my dirty gloves. Savannah tossed her trowel onto the sidewalk, and bounded over, arms wide.

“Gra—” she began.

“Don’t you dare,” Maria said, raising a warning finger.

“One more week, and you’re a grandmother. Do you prefer Gran or Granny?”

She hip-checked me out of the way, then opened the passenger door and climbed in.

As Maria eased the car into the driveway, I grabbed my trowel, and gloves and followed, catching up as they were getting out of the car. When Savannah headed for the back door, I stepped into her path.

“Maria’s suitcases are still in the car,” I said.

Savannah sighed and gestured for Maria to pop the trunk.

Maria hesitated, key fob raised. “Are you sure about this Paige? I can’t imagine a bride-to-be wanting her future mother-in-law moving in for the week before her wedding. I can stay at a hotel—just drive in to help and—”

“And waste precious time traveling? We have a lot to do. Stay here. Please.”

She smiled and gave me a one-armed hug as she popped open the trunk.

As we headed inside, Savannah was still razzing Maria about becoming a grandmother. It was a dubious connection—her son marrying Savannah’s guardian—but Maria never pointed that out, just emphatically declared that she was far too young to be the grandmother to a teenager.

“But I’ve never had a grandmother,” Savannah said, making sad puppy eyes at Maria as we cut through the kitchen. “You wouldn’t deprive me of that, would you? My one chance for a grandparent?”

“Tell you what, if you call Benicio grandpa, we have a deal.”

Savannah paused. “Maybe I will . . .”

Maria laughed as we walked into the living room. “Now *that*, I have to see. Oh, and if we’re to be grandparents, you also have to start calling our son Dad.”

“Certainly not,” Lucas said from the couch, not lifting his gaze from his notebook. “I intend to insist on Father, spoken with the proper degree of respect.”

Savannah made a rude noise. Maria crossed over and bent to kiss Lucas’s cheek, then glanced down at his notes.

“What are you working on?” she asked.

“A list,” Savannah and I said in unison.

Lucas lifted his eyes, fixing us with a baleful glare. “I’m taking note of everything we still need to do for the wedding, organized by date, priority and probability of enlisting help to complete it.”

“It’s a list,” I said, sliding onto the sofa beside him.

“Watch it, or you’ll find your name beside every item.” He looked up at Maria. “How was your trip, Mamá?”

Maria sat down and regaled us with tales of late summer construction horror, as crews worked feverishly to finish before winter blew in. She’d driven down from Seattle. When Lucas and I bought the house, deciding to settle in Portland, Maria had moved from Illinois to Washington state, declaring it was “close enough to pester her son, but not close enough to drive him crazy.”

It was a joke, of course—few mothers meddled less in their child’s life than Maria. She and Lucas were close, but she had her own life—her career as a high-school teacher, several boyfriends, a wide social circle and a string of causes that she championed.

Lucas was telling her about some damage my car had sustained in a crater-deep pothole, when the doorbell rang.

“Probably the neighborhood beautification council,” Savannah muttered. “Come to complain because we left gardening tools unattended on the lawn for ten minutes.”

“If so, they’re *your* tools,” I said, getting up. “Before you clean them up, though, practice your hostess skills on Maria while I answer the door.”

While I doubted it really was the beautification council at my door, it wasn’t impossible. When I’d first seen our house, I’d fallen in love with the neighborhood, which had reminded me of the one where I’d grown up in Boston—quiet streets of modest, immaculately tended older homes. As I’d learned, most of the residents were either retirees or urban professional couples, one with the spare time to landscape and the other with the cash to hire someone to maintain that picture-perfect look. We had neither.

When I swung open the door and saw a fortyish woman in a suit, designer clipboard at the ready, impatience oozing from every pore, I thought my time had come. Maybe it was the small mess of Savannah’s gardening tools. Or maybe my bright sunny mums were flashier than the neighborhood code allowed.

“Miss Winterbourne?” she said. A forced smile. “You won’t be hearing that much longer, will you? By next week, it’ll be Mrs. Cortez. Or will that be Winterbourne-Cortez?”

“It will be Winterbourne,” Lucas said from behind me. “This week or next. May I ask—?”

“Winterbourne-Cortez,” the woman murmured, marking it onto her pad. “Lovely.” She proffered her hand in a shake as brief and light as an air-kiss. “Margory Mills, wedding planner, at your service.” Another tight smile. “At least for a week.”

“Wedding planner . . .?” I glanced over my shoulder at Lucas, who gave an abrupt “Not me” shake of his head, then winced, pushing up his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. “My father hired you, I presume?”

“He did indeed. A very generous man.”

“Yes, well, while we appreciate my father’s gesture, and apologize for any inconvenience the misunderstanding might cause—”

“You want to plan your own wedding,” she said, stepping inside and brushing past us. “I completely understand, and so does your father. But you already *have* planned it. All that’s left is coordinating the affair so your special day is as perfect as you imagined it.”

“Yes, but—” Lucas began.

I caught his attention and cast a privacy spell, so we could speak without Ms Mills overhearing. “If it makes your dad happy, it is not such a bad idea. There *is* a lot of work still.”

He nodded, then turned to accept Ms Mill’s proposition . . . but she was already in the living room, introducing herself to Maria and Savannah.

“The troops are rallying already, I see,” Ms Mill said as we walked in. “Splendid. Many hands make light work. Now let’s see these wedding plans.”

I retrieved the overstuffed file folder while Savannah—after two meaningful looks and a nudge—offered refreshments. Once the coffee and cookie tray were delivered, Savannah retreated to her room while we went over the plans.

“Amazing,” Maria said when we finished. “I don’t know how you kids did it. All that work. Makes me glad I’d never—” She stopped with a sidelong glance at Ms Mills. “*Planned* a wedding. This certainly will be lovely, though.”

“Of course it will,” Ms Mills said, patting my hand. “All that’s needed now is to launch this ship. First, you’ll need to complete the wedding party list for me. I don’t see a maid of honor or a best man.”

“We’re just having bridesmaids and ushers,” I said.

“Oh . . .” She looked ready to comment, then snapped her mouth shut. “Well, I presume you have a third usher, to even out the party.”

I shook my head. “Savannah’s more of a junior bridesmaid and flower girl combined. We wanted to keep the wedding party small.”

“I see. Well, onto the dinner then.” She perused the menu. “I see you have red wine. I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of that brand . . .”

“It’s a local winery. They also have a great nonalcoholic sparkling strawberry, so we’re all set there—”

“What about white?”

“Well, we’re serving beef, to support the beef farmers.”

“Some people will still prefer white, and you must cater to all your guests. I’ll add a case of that, at Mr. Cortez’s expense, of course.”

Lucas glanced my way, ready to argue, but I gave a small shake of my head. I could live with Benicio paying for a case of white wine.

“Now, about dinner.” She pored over the menu, frowning. “I only see beef . . .”

“That’s the primary dinner option, but we also have a vegetarian entree, for one of my college friends.”

“What about kosher? Lactose-free? Gluten-free? Nut-free?”

Lucas shook his head. “There is one lactose-intolerant guest, but he simply avoids dairy products. While we would love to offer meals for every conceivable personal choice and food allergy, it isn’t feasible, with a guest list of only forty. We’ve hired the local women’s shelter to cater and, while they will provide ingredient lists for concerned guests, the menu must understandably be limited.”

“Women’s shelter? Oh, dear.” A brisk note in her book. “No matter. I know an excellent four-star restaurant in Portland that will cater on short notice. We’ll have a choice of beef medallions, sea scallops—”

“We’ve already hired the shelter group,” I said.

“And Mr. Cortez will compensate them with a sizable donation, I’m sure. Now, about the DJ. Your father would prefer a live band, and he’s told me you both like jazz, so we’re flying a lovely quartet from—”

Lucas held up a finger, asking her to wait. Then he took out his phone, and dialed.

“Papá? It’s Lucas. Your wedding planner is here.” Pause. “Yes, the gesture was—” Pause. “Yes, we are quite busy—” Pause. “Yes, it was very thoughtful of you. However . . .”

Countdown: 3 days

“Okay,” I said, rounding the bottom of the stairs, cordless phone still in hand. “I’ve straightened out the hotel. Seems the desk clerk was looking at next month’s reservations. The

block we reserved for our guests *is* still booked. Crisis twenty-nine averted. Oh, and twenty-seven, too—I’ve spoken to Petulia’s Petunias and convinced them that, having lived for three years without a website feedback form, they don’t absolutely need one done this week.”

Lucas nodded, and put his cell-phone into his satchel. “And I believe potential crisis twenty-eight is resolved as well. I’ve cleared up the misunderstanding with that necromancer, assuring him that, while I’m happy to investigate his legal case, I cannot represent him, not being a member of the bar in Utah . . . and I cannot begin *any* investigation in the next ten days.”

“Good.” I collapsed against him. “All bullets dodged so far.”

Savannah walked around the corner, shaking her head. “You guys don’t need wedding planners; you need life planners.”

“Are you volunteering?”

She snorted and headed past us for the stairs.

“While you’re up there, get changed for dinner, assuming you’re joining us . . .” I backed away from Lucas. “Elena’s plane. It’s after five, and they said they’d call when—”

“She called your cell,” Savannah called back. “The house line and Lucas’s line were busy. They’re on their way. Oh, and they invited Maria to dinner as well. And yes, I reminded them that means no supernatural talk at the table.”

“Thank y—”

“Hey, someone’s here,” Savannah called from upstairs. “It’s a big black SUV.”

I stiffened, and Lucas’s arm tightened around me, chin jerking up.

“Just kidding,” Savannah said, grinning as she hurried past us down the stairs. “It’s only Adam.”

“Ask him—”

Too late. She was already in the kitchen, making a beeline for the back door.

Countdown: 2 days

Lucas had asked Benicio to come no sooner than Thursday, which we'd figured was too close to the wedding for him to interfere, yet early enough that he didn't feel like "just another guest."

He was there right after breakfast.

Lucas had said his parents got along fine, but I'd still been nervous, wondering if—like many estranged couples—they only put on a good show for their child. If that was the case, though, Benicio and Maria were both excellent actors. They exchanged hugs and "how's teaching?" and "how are your grandsons?" chatter . . . and seemed genuinely interested in the answers.

While they were talking, I sent Savannah out to offer refreshments to Troy and Griffin, Benicio's bodyguards, stuck out in the SUV. Benicio hadn't brought them inside—according to Lucas, that would be rude, suggesting Benicio thought he needed protection in our house. I wanted to invite them in, but wasn't sure that was allowed. Emily Post doesn't cover etiquette for dealing with a guest's bodyguards.

"They'll take coffee," Savannah said as she came back in. "And muffins."

"You're becoming quite the little hostess," Maria said as Savannah set about preparing the tray.

"I feel like I'm stuck in a Jane Austen novel," Savannah grumbled.

“The lowly ward,” I said. “Consigned to servitude. When you’re done that, you can report to Maria for your next orders. We’ll be showing Benicio the house.”

“And this bedroom we turned into an office,” I said, walking from the master room into the adjoining area. “It’s too small for a second desk, so we’re thinking of finishing the basement for a large office, making this room a sitting area or library.”

“There’s only the three bedrooms?” Benicio said.

“Yes, Papá.” Lucas met his father’s gaze, keeping his voice soft but words emphatic. “We don’t need any more. Not for quite some time.”

Benicio only smiled. “So you think now, but things may change once you’re married . . .”

He stepped into the hall before we could answer. “I noticed a lovely new subdivision going up just outside the city. It has excellent estate-sized lots, and the builder assured me their zoning would allow a second, smaller residence on the property for hired help.” He lifted his hands against our protests. “I know you don’t want a battalion of employees, but you’re both very busy. I’m sure a housekeeper—”

“We have a woman who comes in every week,” I said.

“Perhaps, but that must hardly make a dent in your workload, Paige. A housekeeper could do the laundry, cooking, day-to-day tidying.” He looked at Lucas. “I’m sure it isn’t easy for Paige, especially with you gone so much.”

“It’s just fine,” I said, clipping my words.

“Perhaps, but I have someone in mind. A young witch, recently emigrated and in a rather difficult position.”

“Father,” Lucas said sharply. “That is—”

“I—I’ll be downstairs,” I said quickly. “Helping Maria and Sav—”

Benicio caught my arm. “My apologies, Paige. That was underhanded of me. Yes, there is a witch, but I’ll find her other work. I simply want to make things easier for you, for both of you. Your time is so much better spent on the work you love. We’ll speak no more of housekeepers, though.”

“Or new houses,” Lucas said.

Benicio nodded and let us lead him down the hall toward Savannah’s room.

“I did want to ask about your honeymoon, though.”

“It’s looked after,” I said.

“But how are you getting there? The last thing you need is airport delays on your honeymoon. I’m not using the jet this week—”

“No, Papá.”

“The wedding, then. Is there any last minute—?”

“No, Papá.”

“Have you decided how you’re getting to the reception? I hope it’s not a limousine. Weddings should be special. Romantic. Perhaps a horse-drawn coach—”

“Benicio?” Maria looked up as she climbed the stair. “If you want to help, I have something you could do. I know Paige and Lucas wouldn’t want to impose by asking but—”

“Anything,” Benicio said.

“It’s the reception favors. Savannah and I are down here getting ready to start making them—putting the candies into the little pillows and tying on the ribbons. They’re cute, but it’s going to take us all morning. Do you think you could give us a hand?”

“Er, yes, I suppose—”

Maria put her hand on Benicio’s arm and started leading him away. “And could you ask the boys to come in and join us? Yes, hardly bodyguard duties, I know, but I know they’ll be good sports. We can make a production line of it . . .”

Countdown: 19 hours

“Black and white,” I said, staring down at the brandy snifters stuffed with matchbooks.

“Black and white. Could it be any simpler?”

Savannah plucked out a fuchsia matchbook. “Maybe they thought they were doing you a favor. Livening up a seriously boring wedding color scheme.”

Elena took a book and turned it over. “Maybe we could bleach them. The matches won’t work, but it’s a nonsmoking reception anyway. Who’ll notice?”

“I know,” Jaime said. “I’ll buy some flowers to match. Just a few scattered in with the white ones, so it’ll look like an intentional accent color.”

“It’s not that bad,” Elena said. “At least everything else is—” She stopped and crammed the matchbook back into the snifter. “Savannah? Jaime? Grab a couple glasses and we’ll set them out for the rehearsal party.”

I snatched one before they could whisk the glasses away. “Lucas with a K? Who spells Lucas with a K? I don’t believe it. They’re ruined. Where’s my phone. Maybe a rush order—”

“I thought you didn’t even want matchbooks,” Savannah said.

“Well, no but—” I took a deep breath. “Oh God, I can’t believe I’m panicking over the matchbooks.”

Jaime grabbed my arm and motioned for Elena to take the other one. “Savannah, hon? See if you can scare up a bottle of champagne. If anyone complains, tell them it’s an emergency.”

Countdown: 15 hours

Three glasses of champagne later, and the minister could have called to announce he’d double-booked, and I would have just said “No problem.”

We held the rehearsal party in the hotel meeting lounge. Just finger foods and drinks, decompressing and enjoying the company of friends before the insanity to come.

“—walking around the corner,” I was saying. “And Lucas is madly waving me back, but, nope, I’m not retreating because I have this spell.”

“Which she’d only mastered the week before,” Lucas said, casting a quick glance around to make sure his mother wasn’t nearby. “But, naturally, she’s eager to use it.”

Elena grinned. “Naturally.”

“Completely understandable,” Lucas said. “Though, perhaps, in hindsight, testing it against a Ferratus half-demon may not have been the most . . . judicious choice.”

“So he’s barreling around the corner, and I’m standing there, as calmly as can be, reciting my spell. I cast it and— Pfft. Nothing. Here comes this half-demon, high on god-knows what, me planted in his path like a moron going ‘Hmm, that’s odd. The spell should have worked . . .’”

Someone tapped Lucas’s shoulder. I turned to see Troy.

“Fair warning,” Troy murmured to Lucas. “Your dad’s going to be making his way over here. He wants to talk to you about the wedding.”

“Wedding’s tomorrow,” Clay said. “Tell him it’s too late to tinker. Better yet, I can.”

Jeremy laid his hand on Clay’s shoulder and shook his head. “Let me run interference this time. He wanted to speak to me on another matter.”

As Jeremy slipped away, Jaime shook her head. “Is it just a control thing with Benicio or what?”

“I think he just wants to be involved,” I said. “Problem is, his idea of involvement *is* control. But if it gets worse, we have a backup plan.”

“In the meantime, why don’t you guys call it a night,” Elena said. “It’s getting late. Slip out now and get a good night’s sleep. I’ll call you a cab.”

“Better yet, take your Dad’s ride.” Troy grinned. “He can’t complain about that . . . and he can’t follow you without his wheels. Come on. I’ll talk to the driver.”

“Here,” Troy said as we crawled into the SUV’s leather rear seat. He handed us a bottle of champagne and two glasses. “I’ve told the driver to take the scenic route. Oh, and—”

He leaned in and pressed the button to raise the black glass divider between the front and rear seats.

“How . . . private is that?” I asked.

He grinned. “One-way glass and completely soundproof. Enjoy.”

Countdown: 8 hours

Lucas reached over and brushed a curl off my cheek. I slid across the six inches of mattress between us, and snuggled under his arm, head on his chest.

“How long have you been awake?” he asked.

“A while.”

“Worrying?”

“A bit.”

He adjusted his arm under me, hand dropping to my bare hip. “About the wedding particulars . . . or the generality?”

I tilted back my head to look up at him. “The particulars. You know that. I’m definitely getting married today, and I’ve been practicing my binding spell, so don’t even think of running.”

A soft chuckle. “I won’t. So, I presume, then that a wedding gift, given now, would not be unreasonably premature.”

I jumped up, and swung over-top of him, crouching on all fours and grinning down. “A gift? For me?”

He blew strands of my hair off his face. “No, for my other wife-to-be.”

I scrambled off him and hopped from the bed.

“It’s in—” he began.

I grabbed a bag from under the bed and handed it to him. “Yours first.”

His brows arched, then he pulled himself up until he was sitting, his back against the headboard. He reached into the bag and pulled out an old, leather bound grimoire

His brows arched higher. “Wherever did you find—? I’ve been looking for this for—”

“Years,” I said, plunking down beside him. “But you didn’t have Robert Vasic to dig it up for you. Now, where’s mine?”

He opened the book, and began leafing through it.

“My gift, Cortez,” I said, reaching for the book.

He snatched it away at the last second. As I fell forward, he grabbed me, and pulled me to him in a laughing kiss that turned slow and delicious, and all thoughts of my present slid from my brain until I felt something poke my shoulder.

I turned to see him nudging my back with a manilla envelope. I took it, opened it and pulled out . . .

“A list?” I said, staring down at the handwritten page.

“A to-do list.” As I frowned, he plucked it from my fingers. “Step one: pick a suitable date. Step two: confirm with all parties. Step three: select a destination from the choices provided.” Still reading, he took three glossy brochures from the envelope and passed them to me. “Step four: book flights. Step five: plan itinerary. Step six: enjoy seven days of hell chaperoning five teenage girls.” He laid the paper down. “I thought it was time the Sabrina School had a class outing.”

“You mean—” My throat dried up. “A get-together? With the girls? That’d be amazing. Some of them might not be able to afford it, but if I can scrape together—”

“Would I give you a gift you need to pay for yourself? It’s been scraped. Or, I should say, reallocated from the fund formerly designated for a suitably ostentatious engagement ring, which the recipient refused to allow her fiancé to purchase.”

I kissed him so hard he pulled back, laughing and gasping for breath. Then he lowered me onto the bed and we kissed, bodies entwining—

The alarm sounded.

Lucas glanced over at it. “When is your first appointment?”

“Eleven.”

He shut off the alarm, then leaned over me again. “Then I propose we take advantage of the respite—and the empty house—and allow ourselves a well-earned lazy morning.” A pause, looking thoughtful. “No, not a proposal. As your soon-to-be husband, I *insist*.” He tickled his fingers up my side. “I’ll finish what I began. Then, when you’re properly woken, I’ll whisk you away to a leisurely breakfast at Angelo’s.”

“I think I’m going to like being married.”

His mouth lowered to mine. I slid my hands down to his—

The doorbell rang.

“Didn’t hear it,” I murmured against his lips.

“Hear what?” he said, resuming the kiss.

It rang again. I let out a curse. Lucas lifted his head, hesitated, then motioned for me to wait. He crawled from bed, pulled on pants, grabbed a shirt and padded into the hall as the bell rang again.

I waited two minutes, then pulled on my robe and crept in the hall to hear him arguing with someone at the door, his civility quickly fraying. Yes, the breakfast tray was a thoughtful gesture, and please, thank his father for that. Yes, while the morning at a spa sounded quite nice, we’d already booked our appointments. No, Lucas did not need to consult with his wife-to-be on that. No, we did not need lunch catered for the wedding party. No, we had not changed our mind about the jazz trio . . .

Finally, after physically edging his father's messenger out, Lucas sighed, forehead resting against the closed door. I crept up behind him and put my arms around his waist.

"Time to enact the backup plan?" I murmured.

"I believe so."

Now that Lucas *wanted* to meet with his father, though, Benicio was nowhere to be found. So we enjoyed our breakfast at Angelo's, then headed to the hotel to gather our respective halves of the wedding party and get ready.

Before we parted, I squeezed Lucas's hand. "So I guess the next time I see you will be at the altar."

A small smile as he leaned down to kiss my forehead. "It's a date."

Countdown: 5 hours, 30 minutes

I found Savannah with Elena, Jaime, and Talia, in a corner table at the hotel restaurant.

Talia pulled out a seat for me. "I was just telling Savannah how much I loved the invitations. She did such a great job with them."

"The invitations?" I laughed. "Believe me, Savannah didn't pick those. She said they were the most boring things she'd ever—"

I stopped, gaze crossing over three confused faces and settling on the fourth person, who was studiously picking apart a chocolate croissant. I turned to Talia, who had her wedding invitation in hand.

"May I see that?" I said, taking it before she could answer.

On the front of my invitation—my very formal, very simple wedding invitation—someone had sketched a cartoon of Samantha from Bewitched and Harry Potter. I stared at it, then burst out laughing.

“Did you do that on all of—?” I paused, sobering. “Tell me you didn’t—”

“Only ours,” Savannah said. “The humans got the boring plain ones. Well, except Talia.”

Talia’s brows arched. “Humans? Is that what we are to you? *Humans?*”

“Okay, supernaturally-challenged. Better?” Savannah ducked Talia’s swat, then looked over at me. “So I’m not in trouble?”

“Only if you don’t make us one for our keepsake box. Now, we have hair appointments—”

My cell-phone rang. It was Lucas, still looking for Benicio.

“Is my mother there?” he asked.

“Not yet. We were just going to swing by and grab her for the salon.”

A pause. “Ah. Well, if you see my father . . . anywhere, could you please tell him I’m looking for him?”

Maria was up, but not quite ready. She popped into the bathroom. I could hear low voices from inside, like she’d turned on a radio. Was she going to be a while? Maybe I should tell her to meet us . . .

As I turned, my gaze snagged on a pair of leather loafers half-hidden under the bed. Men’s leather loafers, brand new and very expensive.

The bathroom door opened and Maria hurried out, closing it behind her.

“Oh,” I said. “Lucas is looking for Benicio. He wants to speak to him. If you see him . . . anywhere, could you relay the message? I’ll just . . . I’ll wait in the hall. Let you finish getting ready.

I called Lucas back from the hotel.

“Found him, I presume?” he said.

“Umm-hmm.”

A soft sigh, then he started to say something, but stopped mid-syllable. “Ah, I have a call waiting. That was prompt.”

Countdown: 15 minutes

I watched my reflection in the mirror, tugging a curl over my shoulder, then brushing it back. Over, back. Over, back. Hands trembling. The noise from the tiny chapel a distant rumble, like the far-off roar of the ocean. All alone. Asking for a few minutes to practice my vows. But I didn’t need the practice. Knew them by heart. Felt them by heart.

The door creaked open and a face appeared above mine in the mirror. For a second, Adam just stood there, staring.

“Now that, is a sight I never thought I’d see,” he said finally. “Paige Winterbourne in a wedding gown.”

I turned and grinned, and he faltered in mid-step.

“Looks that bad?” I said.

“Awful. Doesn’t suit you at all. Take it off and burn it while you still can.” He walked over and handed me my bouquet. “You left this in the front room. Lucas found it, and I think the poor guy had visions of a runaway bride, dropping her bouquet and bolting.”

“How is he?”

“Happy.” Adam swung around me, getting a full-view of my dress. “His dad’s pretty pleased, too. That was a smart idea Lucas had.”

“It was my idea.”

Adam rolled his eyes. “Naturally.”

The door swung open. Savannah popped her head in, then let out a dramatic sigh.

“There you are. You’re supposed to be at the front of the church, loser.”

“Yeah,” Adam said. “Move it, Paige.”

“Not her.” Savannah grabbed Adam’s arm and dragged him out. At the door, she looked at me. “I’ll be back for you in a minute.”

I walked into the church to the tune of popping flashes. Elena and Talia led the procession. Savannah was ahead of me, her “bridesmaid” role having been upgraded to maid of honor. If you have a best man, you need a maid of honor. And we now had one, standing beside Adam and Clay at the front of the room. Benicio, beaming brighter than any of the flash bulbs.

And to Benicio's right, Lucas. My destination.

“I think I have rice in my bra,” Savannah hissed as we posed on the front step for pictures.

“Join the club,” I murmured teeth clenched in a jaw-aching smile.

Lucas leaned into my ear. “I’ll help you with that in the car.”

“I bet you will.”

Another blinding round of flashes. Then the crowd parted, path opening to the limousine that would whisk us to the reception hall.

As the last of the people moved out of the way, and the opening cleared, I stopped in my tracks, jaw dropping.

“Oh my God,” Lucas murmured.

Savannah started to snicker.

“That’s very . . . fancy,” Elena said.

“Not my idea,” I muttered between my teeth.

“Oh, I didn’t think it was.”

Talia let out a small laugh. “Last time I saw something like that was on TV. Lady Di’s wedding, I think.”

Lucas and I both turned to see Benicio smiling.

“You never did actually say no to *that* idea,” he said.

I looked at Lucas. He shrugged, then swooped me up and carried me down the red carpet to the coach-and-four waiting at the end.