



Valentine for My Vampire

Author: *Honey Phillips*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: Her vampire is heating up the kitchen!

Wendy's first visit to a supposedly gourmet restaurant in the sleepy little town of Fairhaven Falls did not go well - especially her interaction with the arrogant and annoyingly attractive restaurant owner - and she didn't hesitate to tell her readers all about it. She has no intention of returning, but she never could resist a challenge.

Restaurant owner and vampire? It's an odd combination given Damian's very specific dietary requirements, but Midnight Manor means everything to him. He's not about to let one snippy and surprisingly succulent food critic destroy everything he's built, even if it means using his special gifts to convince her.

As a series of mysterious mishaps continue to plague the restaurant, Damian and Wendy are forced to work together to track down the culprit. But as the tension in the kitchen heats up, so does their attraction...

Total Pages (Source): 51

CHAPTER 1

Mid-November...

Sunny's Sunny Side Up Blog

One of the true joys of my culinary journey around the south is the discovery of the unexpected gem. Whether it's a gas station serving spectacular homemade donuts or a cafeteria which has elevated chicken and dumplings to a culinary masterpiece, it's always a delight.

This is perhaps why I had such high hopes for Midnight Manor. Several readers had written to me praising the charming atmosphere and the delectable food. And perhaps that is why I was so disappointed by the experience.

The first glance was promising—a Craftsman style bungalow which has been tastefully converted into a restaurant. The original rooms, woodwork intact, have been turned into an assortment of intimate dining rooms, the tables topped with crisp white linens and sparkling crystal. A charming blue-haired hostess greeted me warmly—not always true when dining alone—and escorted me to a table next to a big fireplace with a roaring fire.

Unfortunately, that is when the illusion began to fade. As I waited, and waited, for a server, I had time to notice signs that all was not as it seemed. The flowers in the center of the table were dead and drooping, smoke kept drifting from the fireplace into my face, and the napkin was stained with what appeared to be lipstick.

A harried server finally whizzed by to deposit a menu and a basket of stale bread. As I perused the elegantly handwritten menu of the day, I foolishly allowed myself to hope again. Midnight Manor serves a limited menu with only two selections for each course—a sensible option for a small restaurant—and they all sounded delicious. Unfortunately, when the server finally returned, clearly on the verge of tears, most of the already restricted menu was unavailable. I hoped that meant the remaining items would shine. They did not.

The amuse bouche was a limp slice of cucumber topped by too warm caviar. The consommé had an odd muddy consistency and taste. The quality of the steak was clear, but it was egregiously overcooked, and the accompanying vegetables were also limp and unappetizing. At that point I gave up.

When I asked for the bill, the owner appeared, demanding to know what was wrong. However, when I tried to express my concerns, he snarled—quite literally—tore up my bill and told me to leave. The South’s legendary reputation for good manners is not in evidence at Midnight Manor.

And so, dear readers, I am returning to the road to search for a true hidden gem.

Damian snarled again as he read the review, his fangs descending. It wasn’t the first time he’d read it, or even the tenth, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself. Some anonymous soul had been “kind” enough to go to the trouble of printing out the online review and mailing it to him and he’d been obsessing over it ever since.

Midnight Manor was his vision, his creation, and the review hurt more than a silver knife to his guts. The worst part was he was afraid that Sunny—what a ridiculous name—was not entirely wrong. Odd destructive events had been happening at random intervals over the past few months and they seemed to be escalating. He’d had to replace all of the flowers in the restaurant again last night, even though they’d been freshly delivered the day before.

And as for the food...

Jack was a well-trained, creative chef. How could so much be going so wrong with his dishes?

The bell over the door chimed, interrupting his worried thoughts.

“Go away. We’re not open,” he snapped, then winced.

He sounded every bit as rude as the reviewer claimed. Looking up, an apology on his lips, he barely suppressed a groan. Flora, one of the town elders, was standing in front of him giving him a withering look from piercing dark eyes. Those eyes and her pale green skin indicated her orc blood, but a fairy in her family tree meant that she was barely five feet tall. Her diminutive size, combined with the pink velour tracksuit she was wearing, made her look almost innocent, but he knew better.

“To what do I owe this honor?” he asked, sweeping a bow and taking refuge in the elaborate manners he’d been taught.

“You fucked up,” she said bluntly, waving a piece of paper that had an unfortunately familiar look. The anonymous letter writer had been busy. “The town doesn’t need this type of bad press.”

“I hardly think one malicious review by one obscure blogger is a cause for concern.”

“Not as obscure as you seem to think. And she’s not the only one who’s noticed that you’ve been having problems.”

“Which are my concern.”

“Not as long as your restaurant is here in town. You know what a struggle we’ve had

reviving the town's economy.”

Unfortunately, he did know. Fairhaven Falls had long been a peaceful haven for the Others, creatures of myth and legend, but to such an extent that the human population had begun to diminish, along with any interest from the human world. Over the past year, the town had been running holiday festivals that had drawn in an increasing number of tourists, with very positive results to the town's economy.

“But it's still?—”

“We don't need any negative publicity,” she said firmly. “So fix it.”

“And how do you propose I do that?”

“Solve your problems. Invite her back. For once your somewhat questionable charm might come in useful.”

“I don't even know who she is,” he snapped.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

Those dark eyes were suddenly uncommonly penetrating.

“Don’t you?”

“No.”

He crossed his arms and stared back. His gaze could be... intimidating, but Flora didn’t even flinch.

“Hmph. Have it your own way. But don’t blame me if you end up losing this place. These things tend to snowball.”

With one last withering look, she turned around and stomped back out the door, giving him a clear view of the pink sequin heart on the back of her top. Ridiculous. As ridiculous as kowtowing to some anonymous blogger.

But was she really anonymous?

Although he hadn’t wanted to admit it to Flora, he had a sneaking suspicion that he knew exactly who she was. A very pretty and very curvy female with the most delectable scent he’d ever encountered. His annoyance at his reaction to her scent, combined with his frustration over the number of things that had gone wrong that evening, had been partially responsible for his outburst. Under normal circumstances, he would have used his charm to smooth things over. However, charm had been beyond him that night and he’d very rudely sent her on her way—and then had to fight back the urge to go after her. Ridiculous.

But Flora's suggestion was not without merit, he decided reluctantly. If he could get this female to come back, he could use his particular skills to convince her that she'd made a mistake and retract her original review. It would have to be handled delicately, but he had no doubt it could be done. And the thought of seeing her again was undeniably appealing.

A slow smile curved his lips, his fangs appearing once again. Time to make plans.

CHAPTER 2

Two months later...

Wendy drove cautiously into Fairhaven Falls along the snow-covered road. The new snowfall was undoubtedly beautiful, but she was a Southern girl and she wasn't used to driving in it. Even though it had snowed during the years she'd spent in New York, she'd relied on bus drivers and the occasional taxi to get her around the city.

And New York snow was never like this, she thought with a smile as she made the turn onto Main Street. It tended to be brown and slushy rather than the white blanket currently frosting the town. Even though it was January, Main Street was still lined with carefully decorated storefronts, brightly colored lights adorning the facades of the old-fashioned buildings. Snowy mountains framed the town but the river at the bottom of the hill was still flowing, blue and icy looking.

She hadn't had time to explore on her previous visit and she wished she could linger, but the early winter dusk was already beginning to fall and she wanted to check into her hotel. The Fairhaven Falls Inn was a large Victorian mansion that had been converted into a charming bed and breakfast, and she was looking forward to her second stay. Even with snow obscuring the beautifully landscaped grounds, she felt at home as soon as she started to make her way cautiously down the long drive.

Alison, the pretty pregnant innkeeper, greeted her with a friendly smile and a welcome mug of hot spiced cider.

“It’s so nice to see you again. What brings you back our way?”

“Oh, I just wanted to take another look at the town in the snow,” she said vaguely, fighting back a feeling of guilt.

Although she did her best to keep her identity anonymous in order to protect the integrity of her reviews, she was a naturally honest person and sometimes it was hard to keep up the pretense. Which was one of the reasons she rarely returned to the same place twice outside of the larger cities.

But here I am, she thought with a sigh, still not entirely sure why she’d agreed to return.

“Is something wrong?” Alison asked.

“No, just a little tired. I’m not used to driving in snow.”

The other woman laughed.

“I know what you mean. It still makes me nervous?—”

“Which is why you are not going to do it, are you, sugar?”

A huge blue-skinned troll walked into the parlor and put his arm around Alison’s waist. Wendy had also met Alison’s fiancé Will on her last visit, but she’d forgotten the impact of his size and appearance. The Others were far more prevalent in Fairhaven Falls than in most of the places she’d visited.

“Not as long as you’re around,” Alison said cheerfully, winking at her.

Will apparently missed the implication because he gave a satisfied nod, then smiled at Wendy. He had a very charming smile—unlike the far too handsome for his own good owner of Midnight Manor. He only seemed capable of an intimidating scowl. Unfortunately, that scowl did nothing to detract from his brooding good looks. Not that those looks had anything to do with her decision to return, she assured herself. She was simply trying to be fair.

“Welcome back,” Will said. “Are you here for the Winter Festival?”

“I’m afraid not, although I do remember hearing something about it. I’m just here for a night or two.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“If you can stay until the weekend, the festival will be in full swing and it’s always a lot of fun.” Alison started to pick up Wendy’s bag, but Will growled and intercepted her. She shook her head and smiled at Wendy. “Would you like to go to your room? I put you in the same one, if that’s all right.”

“That’s perfect. Thank you.”

The pretty room on the second floor had two big windows looking down over the town towards the river, along with a small fireplace and a cozy seating area. It looked just the same as it had on her previous visit except the fall arrangement of gourds and colorful leaves had been replaced by an artful arrangement of evergreen and holly, accented with red ribbon and tiny silver bells.

“Your flowers are always so pretty,” she murmured as Will placed her bag on the rack by the door and Alison joined her by the windows.

“Thanks, but I can’t take credit. My friend Sylvie does them. She’s a dryad and has a natural gift for plants—or at least that’s what I tell myself as an excuse for my lack of talent.”

“It’s not one of my talents either, but I’ve seen enough arrangements to appreciate when they’re well done.” Alison gave her a slightly puzzled look, but Wendy hurried on before she could ask any questions. “Can you recommend somewhere for dinner? Just something simple—I was planning on an early night.”

“If you really mean simple, I have beef stew in the crockpot and there’s more than enough for the three of us.”

“That’s very sweet of you, but I don’t want to intrude on your dinner.”

“Nonsense, we’d be happy to have you join us.”

Will also smiled and nodded his agreement. She hesitated, but it was almost completely dark now and she really didn’t want to go back out in the cold.

“If you’re sure, I’d love to join you.”

“We’re sure. See you in an hour?”

“That would be perfect, thank you.”

After Alison and Will left, she unpacked and pulled out her laptop but for once had no desire to sit down to start writing. Instead, she wandered over to the windows and looked down at the twinkling lights of the town. Midnight Manor was only a short distance away, but she couldn’t see it from here. Yet it almost felt as if the handsome, brooding owner was out there in the dark looking at her.

Shaking her head at her fanciful imagination, she drew the curtains and went to join Alison. She found her alone in the kitchen, frowning into the crockpot.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s fine, just not as... interesting as I hoped.” Alison gave her a rueful smile. “I did warn you that it would be a simple meal.”

She couldn’t resist going to her side and breathing in the aroma of the stew. She automatically reached for a spoon, then hesitated.

“May I?”

“Go right ahead. I’m good at breakfasts and pastries, but I know my limitations.”

She tasted the stew, then thought for a moment.

“Do you have an orange? And some parsley.”

“I have both, but an orange?”

“Trust me.”

Alison watched curiously as she zested the orange and added the zest and juice to the stew along with a generous handful of parsley, reserving some for the garnish.

“Normally I would add some red wine as well, but it would need to cook for a while to mellow out. What do you think?”

The other woman took a cautious bite then grinned.

“That’s amazing. I thought it would be too sweet, but it’s just a hint of citrus. How did you know to do that?”

Pleased by her enthusiasm, Wendy smiled back.

“It’s based on a French beef stew recipe called daube Provençal.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

Alison took another spoonful with an appreciative moan, then gave her a curious look.

“Do you enjoy cooking?”

I used to. Pushing the memories aside, she shrugged.

“When I have time. My grandparents ran a restaurant and I used to hang out there. I picked up a lot.”

Will rejoined them and they sat down to eat. He was just as enthusiastic about the stew, and they lingered over the meal. Despite another wave of guilt over the need for secrecy, she managed to avoid going into any details about her current occupation, leaving the impression that she worked in IT. Since she ran her own website, it was technically true, but that didn't ease her guilty conscience.

As she was getting up to return to her room, she had the unsettling sense of being watched once again. They'd eaten their meal in the part of the kitchen that had once been a back porch. Now enclosed with windows and lush with greenery, it made a pleasant contrast to their snowy surroundings, but she found herself peering out into the darkness again.

“Is something wrong?” Will asked, but she shook her head.

“Just my overactive imagination. Thank you both for a lovely evening. I really enjoyed myself.”

“You should join us again tomorrow night if you don’t have other plans,” Alison suggested.

“I’m afraid I do, but perhaps we can do this again before I leave. Good night.”

When she got back to her room, she drew the curtains back. The moon had risen, glistening on the undisturbed snow, but she still couldn’t quite shake the feeling that someone was out there, staring at her. Don’t be silly, she told herself, firmly drawing the curtains closed again.

The last thing she needed was a sleepless night prior to her return visit to Midnight Manor. She picked up a book and went to run a bath, determined to forget all about hidden watchers in the night and brooding restaurant owners.

CHAPTER 3

Damian drew back into the shadows under the trees when the curtains opened, not that she would be able to see him. Most of the myths about vampiric abilities were just that—myths—but under the right conditions he could veil his presence from most onlookers. Right now he would have preferred to be able to turn into a bat instead so he could have flown up to perch on her windowsill and observe her more closely.

He’d been unable to restrain his curiosity about the mysterious food blogger, but it turned out his suspicions were right. She was indeed the curvy little human with the delectable scent. Although she had finally responded to one of his messages and agreed to give the restaurant a second chance, she’d continued to keep her identity a secret. She’d also been deliberately vague about when she would return, but Flora had alerted him that the woman who had visited in November was coming back today.

But even after he’d confirmed his suspicions, he continued to linger outside the inn,

watching. Observing her laughing and talking with Will and Alison over their meal had awoken the feeling of isolation that had driven him to open his restaurant in the first place.

Fuck, he thought as her curtains closed again and he finally began to drift back through the woods towards Midnight Manor. Although he'd tried to convince himself that his rudeness towards her had been due to her condescending comments, rather than his overall rage and embarrassment, he still felt an unusual sense of guilt about his lack of manners.

In his defense, he had never claimed to be a nice person. Charming, yes, but there were only a few people whose wellbeing actually interested him. So what was it about her that had upset him so much? Perhaps it was the earnest look in those big eyes as she'd attempted to tell him—him!—how he should run his restaurant. As if he hadn't dined at enough of the world's finest restaurants to know exactly what he wanted. It hadn't helped that her scent had made his mouth water with the urge to taste her and his eyes kept returning to her bare, tempting neck.

Not bothering to turn on the lights, he entered the back door of Midnight Manor and went upstairs to his private quarters, immediately going to the big gable window and gazing back in the direction of the inn. He couldn't see it from here but he had the momentary fancy that there was a soft pink glow coming from the direction.

Ridiculous, he told himself, and drew the long, heavy velvet curtains closed before hesitating indecisively. He was a creature of the night, partially because of his sensitivity to sunlight and partially because of the restaurant hours. Usually he had plans for the nights when the restaurant was closed, but he hadn't made any arrangements tonight.

He briefly considered strolling down to the Moonshine Tavern, but it would be crowded and noisy even on such a cold night, and it would be far too easy to take out

his conflicting emotions on one of the barbaric werewolves who frequented the place. Instead, he prepared a small plate of perfectly ripened triple creme, stone wheat crackers, and succulent grapes, poured himself a crystal goblet of blood, and settled in his chair by the fire with his latest book.

Despite the adventurous tale, he was unable to lose himself in the story as he usually did. The normal noises of an old house seemed particularly loud tonight and he finally abandoned the effort to read. He washed his dishes and retired to the enormous velvet draped bed that was one of his favorite places in the world. But even after he'd closed the curtains and reclined back against the silky Egyptian cotton sheets, the restlessness remained.

Not that it had anything to do with the woman at the inn, he assured himself. Wendy. Although she wrote her blog under the ridiculous name of Sunny, Flora had told him that she had registered as Wendy and he assumed that was her real name. No, his inability to settle must be due to the season. He appreciated the shorter winter days, but people preferred to remain inside when it was cold and it made it more difficult to feel as though he are actually a part of the town.

Fuck. Now he was turning maudlin. With an exasperated sigh, he threw back the covers and got up. After wrapping himself in the ornate brocade dressing gown that had been a Christmas present from his brother, he poured himself a glass of wine and took it out on the front balcony to look out over the town. The Christmas tree in the Town Square had come down, but strings of lights still adorned the streets, adding to the gold glow from the windows of the houses. He sat watching until the last house went dark, then took himself back to bed, finally falling into a restless sleep.

He was not in the best mood when he came downstairs the following morning—a mood that was not enhanced by finding Cody mopping the kitchen floor. Cody was his busboy, a lanky brownie with a scraggly fringe of beard and a large quantity of shaggy brown hair beneath the slouchy red cap he always wore.

“Why are you mopping the floor, Cody? You did that Saturday night and we’ve been closed since then.” He only opened four nights a week during the winter.

“Dude.” Cody gave him a reproachful look. “I keep telling you to call me Kai.”

Even though Fairhaven Falls was a five-hour drive from the ocean, Cody had decided that his true destiny was as a surfer. He was working at the restaurant to save up for a summer move to the beach and had adopted Kai as his surfer name. Damian bit back an impatient remark and forced himself to moderate his tone.

“Kai, why are you mopping the kitchen floor?”

“Well, duh. Because it was wet.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“Wet? Why would it be wet?”

Cody shrugged, focusing on his mop, and Damian sighed. Not another leak. They’d had four over the last three months. He went to look for the source but the area beneath the sink and dishwasher was dry. It wasn’t until he heard a faint drip that he found the source. Fuck. The freezer door was ajar. It wasn’t open far enough to be immediately noticeable, but it was far enough that the contents were defrosting and sending water dripping to the floor.

“How the hell did this door get left open?”

Cody abandoned his mopping long enough to come and stare at the soggy contents of the big industrial freezer.

“Dude, everything’s melted.”

“I noticed,” he snapped, then sighed. It wasn’t Cody’s fault—at least he didn’t think it was. Despite his laconic speech patterns and laid back demeanor, Cody was a true brownie, compulsively neat and tidy. It would be completely out of character for him to have left the door open.

But how could it have happened? The building had been locked since Saturday night. Even if someone could have managed to break in, his sensitive nose hadn’t detected the scent of an intruder. It must have been another accident—the latch just hadn’t caught properly.

Unfazed by his irritation, Cody returned with a box of garbage bags.

“I’ll clean it out,” the brownie said, then tugged on his scraggly beard. “Unless you wanna try and keep anything?”

He considered for a moment, then shook his head. Some of the items might be salvageable, but he wasn’t willing to take the risk. He’d just have to get more supplies.

More supplies...Fuck. Another one of the hundred and three things that had been going wrong lately was issues with getting deliveries. Trucks got lost or diverted or simply showed up with the wrong order.

Maybe I should just shut down tonight...

No. He had a number of reservations booked—including Wendy’s. That thought made him groan silently.

“Get it cleaned out and wiped down, then make sure the door is closed and the temperature is dropping,” he ordered.

“You got it, dude,” Cody said amiably as Damian stalked out of the room.

He was going to make sure everything went perfectly tonight if he had to go out and hunt down every last item himself.

CHAPTER 4

Wendy studied herself in the mirror, then gave an approving nod. She’d chosen one of her favorite vintage fifties cocktail dresses with an off-the-shoulder neckline and a full skirt. The cut flattered her curves and the green of the dress brought out the green in her eyes. The subtle butterfly pattern woven into the fabric made her smile before she turned to consider footwear.

Normally she would have worn a pair of vintage pumps with flirty little bows across her ankles, but they wouldn't stand up to the snow. She settled for a pair of tan booties with a low heel instead. After a final swipe of hot pink lipstick, she wrapped her white fake fur half-cape around her shoulders and headed downstairs.

Alison came out of the back just as she reached the main floor.

"Oh my goodness, I love your dress. Is it vintage?"

"It is. I love checking out used clothing stores wherever I go, and this was a great find."

"I'll say. You look like you belong in a Doris Day movie."

A sudden wave of doubt assailed her. She'd refused to look too closely at why she'd chosen the elegant outfit, but although she did love pretty clothes, perhaps she'd overdone it.

"I'm not overdressed, am I? I have reservations at Midnight Manor."

"Not at all," Alison said firmly. "You could wear almost anything in there, but most folks like to dress up at least a little. You might even give Damian a run for his money—he usually outshines everyone."

"Damian?"

She did her best to sound casual, despite the leap in her pulse.

"The owner. Did you meet him last time you were here?"

"Unfortunately," she sighed before she could stop herself, and Alison raised a curious

eyebrow.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“Was he rude to you? He can be a little arrogant sometimes, but he usually goes out of his way to be charming to guests at the restaurant.”

A little arrogant? Try conceited and overbearing. Remembering the need to keep her identity concealed, she forced herself to shrug.

“Maybe it was just a bad night. That’s why I decided to try again.”

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. The food is really good.” Alison patted her stomach, then laughed. “Of course right now everything tastes good. A little too good.”

“No morning sickness?”

“Not a bit. Flora says it’s because the troll half of my baby is always hungry. I’m not quite sure if she’s kidding.”

“If the baby is going to grow up to be Will’s size, it wouldn’t surprise me.”

Alison shuddered. “As long as he doesn’t have a major growth spurt until after he’s born.”

“He? You’re having a boy?”

“We decided not to find out so I don’t really know. Today he feels like a boy.”

Wendy laughed, pulled on her hat and gloves, and wished Alison a good night before heading out. Even though the air was cold enough to make her pull her cape tighter

around her shoulders, it was a beautiful night for a walk. The newly fallen snow was crisp and powdery, crunching beneath her feet. A full moon hung heavy and bright in the sky, and the stark contrast between the moonlit snow and the inky darkness of the trees made the street look like an antique woodcut. Even the flicker of old-fashioned gas street lights only added to the atmosphere.

The large bungalow housing the restaurant was as attractive as she remembered, with white lights wrapped around the porch columns and a tasteful wreath hung in each window. Taking a deep breath, she walked through the door, immediately aware of warmth and the delicious scent of food and... him.

Damian was standing at the host stand and he too was just as attractive as she remembered. Even more so, if she were honest. Thick shoulder-length dark hair surrounded a pale, far-too-handsome face. The white silk shirt with flowing sleeves would have looked ridiculous on anyone else; on him it appeared perfectly natural. A deep aubergine vest had subtle hints of goldembroidery and tight black pants were tucked into knee-high back boots. Very tight pants that clung to thickly muscled thighs and cupped what had to be an oversized bulge between his legs.

What the hell is wrong with me?She wasn't the type of woman who ogled a man's package. She snatched her gaze away, sure that her cheeks were turning pink, and managed to give him a polite smile.

"I'm Wendy Langdon. I have a reservation for tonight."

"Indeed."

He came to join her, dark eyes gleaming, then shocked her by taking her hand and bending over it. Cool lips brushed the back of her hand, sending a shiver of excitement down her spine, but she quickly pulled her hand away. He looked oddly surprised before he gestured at her wrap.

“May I take your cape?”

Despite an odd reluctance to remove the protective covering, she nodded and handed it to him. He took it, but his eyes were riveted to the expanse of bare neck and shoulder revealed by the dress, and red sparks burned in that dark gaze. She’d pulled her hair back into a low knot and she suddenly wished she’d left it loose.

Despite the heated gaze, he only added her cape to the closet beneath the stairs before motioning along the hallway.

“This way, please.”

She preceded him down the hallway, and cool fingers touched very lightly against her back to guide her into the second dining room, another shock of awareness radiating out from that brief contact. He seated her at the exact same table where she sat the last time. Was it a coincidence? He’d yet to show any signs of recognizing her.

He pulled back her chair with a courteous bow and seated her. For a moment those heated eyes rested on her neck again, then he handed her a menu and left. It was still early—the only other occupants of the dining room were a couple seated at the two-top on the other side of the fireplace. The big werewolf only had eyes for his pretty pink-haired date, and she couldn’t help a slight pang of envy.

How long had it been since she’d even been on a date? Her transitory existence made it difficult to connect with anyone long enough to even begin a relationship. Even with a werewolf, she thought with a smile. Or a vampire.

Pushing that thought aside, she took a quick professional survey of the room. The buttery gold of the walls accentuated the richness of the cherry wainscoting and wrapped the room in warmth. The linens were crisply ironed, and the crystal glassware sparkled. The evergreen garlands interspersed with tiny white lights draped

across the mantel and above the windows were a tasteful nod to the season.

Unlike before, the floral arrangement on her table was perfect—a single white rose floating in an elegant crystal bowl. Smoke was going up the chimney instead of blowing in her face, and her napkin was a pristine white. Perhaps it really had just been a bad night during her previous visit. She found herself hoping she'd be able to post a much more positive review this time.

Picking up the handwritten menu, she inspected the choices. As before, there were only two choices for each course and hopefully all of them would not only be available, but executed perfectly. A friendly pixie quickly arrived to take her order and brought her a glass of champagne, followed by a perfect amuse bouche—a mother of pearl spoon containing a tiny cone of smoked salmon filled with creme fraiche and topped with caviar and dill. Excellent.

The appetizer she'd selected—bruschetta topped with white beans and octopus—also looked delicious, but then she took a bite. Instead of a savory vinaigrette, the beans had been mixed with a horrifically sweet dressing. How could anyone have made such a culinary misstep? For an appalled moment she wondered if the owner had deliberately sent out the horrible dish to punish her, but then she noticed that the woman at the other table looked equally disgusted although her date devoured the entire appetizer in two quick bites.

As much as the inconsistency shocked her, she wasn't going to wait around for another assault on her taste buds. Tucking enough cash to cover the bill and the tip next to her plate, she rose and headed for the door. As she reached the hallway, the swinging door to the kitchen opened enough for her to hear an outraged voice.

“Who the fuck sent it back? My food is perfect.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

Typical chef, she thought, wincing at the unpleasant memories it brought back, and yet he seemed genuinely shocked as well as angry. Was his palate really that bad? Giving in to a sudden impulse, she entered the kitchen. Four pairs of eyes immediately focused on her—her server, a lanky teenage busboy with a red cap, a very human and very angry chef, and a sous chef who was... not human.

Blushing under the surveillance, she raised her chin.

“Did you actually taste your perfect food?”

He crossed his arms and glared at her.

“I created the recipe.”

Grabbing the plate the server had brought back, she thrust it at him.

“Try it again.”

Still glaring, he took a large, defiant bite and immediately gagged before rounding on the sous chef.

“What the hell did you do to my recipe, you idiot?”

She winced again, even as the sous mumbled an apology. Nothing that went wrong in the kitchen was ever the chef’s fault, she remembered bitterly. The sous chef’s mournful blue face only seemed resigned, but it was hard to believe that anyone with any level of skill could have made such an egregious mistake.

“Where did you prepare the vinaigrette?” she asked.

He gave her a frightened look but pointed to his station. Ignoring the chef’s outraged demand to know what she was doing, she inspected the station, then picked up the salt dish. A quick taste confirmed her suspicion.

“Someone has replaced the salt with sugar.”

The other four exchanged nervous glances, even the chef falling silent.

“I’m telling you, dude, we got ghosts,” the busboy said, grinning. “Ain’t that cool?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the chef snapped. “Which one of you is deliberately ruining my food?”

More nervous glances, but they looked scared rather than guilty. Before anyone could speak, another server bounced into the kitchen.

“Two bruschetta, two fish,” she announced cheerfully, then looked around. “Why the long faces?”

“The bruschetta is off the menu. Tell them they’ll have to have the salad with eggplant dressing.” The chef turned back to his stove with an impatient flick of his hand.

“But the woman is allergic to eggplant,” the server protested.

“Can’t you make some more dressing?” she asked, but the sous shook his head.

“No more octopus.”

“Maybe we could try rescuing the dressing?”

The chef ignored her, but the others gave her a hopeful look. Grabbing an apron from the stack on a nearby shelf, she wrapped it around her waist, washed her hands, and then forced herself to take another taste, considering her options.

“Do you have capers? And perhaps some soy sauce? Dill?”

“Those are not part of my recipe.”

The chef scowled at her as the sous nodded eagerly.

“Neither was the sugar. It’s a new recipe now. And you’d better check all the salt dishes,” she added as he reached for the salt on his station.

All of them had been filled with sugar instead, but she ignored the chef’s outraged swearing as she concentrated on correcting the dressing.

“What do you think?” she asked the sous.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

He took a cautious bite, then nodded, a long tendril of something that was definitely not hair slipping out from beneath his toque.

“Delicious. Even better than...” He broke off, darting a nervous look at the chef. “I mean, it’s very good.”

She smiled at him and started to untie her apron just as the door swung open and Damian stalked in.

“What the hell is going on here?”

CHAPTER 5

Damian was already in a foul mood. The evening was not working out as he had planned.

His curvy little reviewer was even more delectable than he remembered, but he was beginning to think she was deliberately taunting him. His fangs threatened to descend again at the memory of that deliciously bare neck, fully exposed by the design of her dress. His annoyance was compounded by the fact that she seemed impervious to his charms despite her pretty blushes and shy perusal.

Most females would have melted when he kissed their hand, especially when accompanied by a little encouragement from his special gifts. He couldn’t exactly enthrall a human, but he could usually... encourage their thoughts in the right direction. His little human had been only too eager to release him.

I must be out of practice, he thought crossly. It was a talent he rarely employed after all.

His initial frustration compounded when he overheard a customer muttering a complaint about the food. Then when he took a cautious look into the second dining room, his human was gone. Had she already given up?

No. It turned out she had invaded his kitchen instead.

“What the hell are you doing back here?”

“Saving your bacon, dude.” Cody was eating a spoonful of the bruschetta topping, a blissful expression on his face. “This is awesome.”

She flashed a smile at his busboy—which he did not appreciate one bit. Inserting himself between them, he scowled down at her.

“What makes you think you can cook?”

Her cheeks turned pink as she tried to return his glare, but she only succeeded in looking like an adorably outraged kitten.

“Perhaps because I can tell the difference between salt and sugar?”

She dropped her apron in the laundry bin, gave Cody another smile, and left, luscious ass swaying. He tore his eyes away from her departing figure to find that everyone other than his chef was giving him a reproachful look.

“You should have thanked her instead of yelling at her,” Shelly said as Cody handed her two plates of bruschetta.

“What the hell do you mean?”

Chef continued to ignore him, but Cody was only too happy to explain and Shelly silently handed him a spoonful of the corrected topping. He almost groaned as he tasted it. They were right, it was delicious—and he needed to apologize.

The thought did not make him happy, but he was even more unhappy when he realized that her seat was still empty and her cape was missing. Swearing under his breath, he ordered Shelly to keep an eye on the door and took off after her.

She'd only reached the end of the street, her shoulders drooping and her head down as she concentrated on her steps. She jumped when he appeared next to her and almost lost her footing. He caught hold of her just in time, and she ended up with her luscious curves pressed against his body as she gave him a startled look.

“What are you doing?”

“Saving you from falling.”

He knew he should release her, but he was enjoying the soft warmth of her body too much. Far too much, he realized as his shaft began to stiffen and his fangs tingled, threatening to descend. He took a hasty step back but kept his hands on her arms. Only to ensure that she didn't lose her balance, of course.

She bit her lip, her eyes drifting down over his body again, and he hoped she wouldn't notice the signs of his arousal, although it was difficult to disguise given his attire.

“Aren't you cold?” she asked, surprising him. She was concerned about him, even after his rudeness?

“The cold doesn’t bother me.”

“Oh. Then why are you here?”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“You didn’t finish your dinner.” He locked eyes with her and gave her his most charming smile. “At least come back and finish your meal.”

Once again his skills had no effect on her.

“No thank you,” she said firmly.

She started to pull away, and he quickly tightened his grip.

“Please. I... I owe you an apology.”

The words sounded stilted, but she tilted her head, considering him.

“Because you were rude?”

“And because you were trying to help. And because your dressing was delicious. It seems you do know how to cook.”

A shadow crossed her pretty face before she nodded.

“Thank you, but I still think I’d better?—”

“Please.”

He gently drew her closer and the wide-eyed look was back. Her pupils expanded, turning her eyes dark and mysterious, and the thought crossed his mind that perhaps she was enchanting him. The thought of tasting that lush pink mouth was beginning

to haunt him, not to mention that tempting neck. He brushed his thumb over her rapidly beating pulse, and he could have sworn she swayed towards him.

Then a burst of laughter came from over on Main Street. She tried to step back again, and this time he let her go.

“I... I guess I’m still hungry.”

Her gaze had dropped to the ground, but he reached out and took hold of a cold little hand.

“Good. Then come along.”

Although he tried to temper his voice, it was undoubtedly a command and her chin came up before she finally nodded. She tried to tug her hand away, but when he didn’t release it she didn’t protest, accompanying him silently back to the restaurant.

Shelly looked up as they entered, her gaze flying to their joined hands as she hurried over to greet them and take Wendy’s coat again.

“I’m so glad you came back. Can I tell Chef to prepare your fish now?”

“All right. Although maybe you’d better not tell him it’s for me,” Wendy said dryly.

He started to protest that his chef would never do anything unprofessional, but both females were laughing so he let it drop. He wanted to escort her to her table. No, he wanted to accompany her to her table and share a meal with her. Instead, he returned to the host stand.

“I will leave you in Shelly’s capable hands.” Before he could second guess the impulse, he added, “But perhaps I could join you after the meal to... talk?”

Her head tilted again, but she nodded. He wasn't sure he would have been able to resist reaching for her hand again, but then the front door opened and he was forced to return to his duties. More guests followed and he slipped into his usual role of charming host. When he escorted other guests to the second dining room, she didn't look up, but from the pretty color flushing her cheeks she was as aware of him as he was of her.

Fortunately, there were no more complaints about the food and everything proceeded smoothly until Shelly came to find him.

"Wendy's finished," she said cheerfully, but then Shelly was usually cheerful. The pixie's good nature was why he'd hired her, even if she didn't always remember to serve from the correct side.

"Did she enjoy the rest of her food?"

"She complimented the branzino." Shelly grinned. "And while she didn't specifically say anything about the cream puff, I think her moan gave it away."

He wished he'd been there to witness her enjoyment.

"Take her a small snifter of... Grand Marnier with my compliments, and tell her I'll join her shortly."

"Sure thing, boss."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

Boss. He sighed, but at least it was better than dude.

They only did one seating on weeknights, so after making sure everything was running smoothly he went to join Wendy. She smiled at him, raising her snifter in a silent toast.

“Thank you for this. How did you know it was my favorite?”

“Because it’s as sweet and strong as you are.”

The pretty color flooded her cheeks again even as she shook her head.

“You don’t know me well enough to assume either of those things.”

“Don’t I? You were sweet enough to want to help when you discovered the issue with the appetizer and strong enough not to let Chef run you out of the kitchen.”

He could tell she was preparing to argue, but she finally just raised her glass and took another sip.

“Now,” she said, leaning across the table towards him and lowering her voice. “Are you going to tell me what’s going wrong with your restaurant?”

CHAPTER 6

For a second the red gleam flashed in Damian’s eyes, but Wendy waited patiently and he finally sighed.

“Can we discuss this elsewhere? There are some very keen ears in this town.”

Since she knew many of the Others had enhanced senses, his request made sense, but...

“Where?”

“I don’t suppose you’d like to come upstairs to my rooms?”

His voice dropped to a low, seductive tone, those dark eyes fixed on her face again. For a moment she was tempted, but she had the feeling she would be playing with fire.

“No thank you.”

He seemed to have expected her answer because he only nodded, and picked up her glass.

“Then we’ll go to the office.”

Calling the small room tucked behind the kitchen an office was definitely an exaggeration. Although there was a desk under the window on the outside wall and file drawers beneath the glass-doored china cabinets on the other wall, there was barely room for two chairs between them.

Maybe I should have gone upstairs after all, she thought nervously as they sat and her knee brushed his. An electric shock coursed through her body from the brief contact, but she did her best to conceal it, demurely smoothing her dress down over her knees. He leaned back gracefully, considering her over his steeped fingers.

“What makes you think there’s a problem?”

“The inconsistencies. Everything else I ate was delicious and I suspect the appetizer would have been as well if someone hadn’t replaced salt with sugar.”

“Is that what happened?” he demanded.

He leaned forward, abandoning his relaxed posture, and she caught a brief terrifying glimpse of fangs.

“Yes. And I don’t think it was an accident. It seemed almost... malicious. Has it happened before?”

“Not that specifically, no, but there have been other incidents.”

“Like what?”

“Supplies getting diverted, plumbing issues, laundry issues, smoking chimneys.”

Did he give her a sardonic look with the last words? She did her best to keep her voice calm as she continued.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“Do you have any idea who’s behind it?”

“Don’t you think I would have put a stop to it if I had?” he snapped, the red gleam reappearing.

“I suppose so. Do you suspect it’s someone who works for you?”

“I honestly don’t. Not only have they all worked for me for some time, but they didn’t know anything when I... questioned them.”

There was a cool, slightly mocking expression on his face as he spoke, and she remembered uneasily that vampires had a reputation for influencing the minds of their victims. But that’s probably just a rumor, she told herself firmly.

“If you were in the city I’d suspect a rival restaurant, but there isn’t much competition in Fairhaven Falls, is there?”

“No. There are several other places that serve food, but I can’t imagine any of them trying to put me out of business.” For a moment the handsome facade cracked again and she glimpsed something truly dangerous. “And they know better than to try.”

“If it’s not your staff and it’s not a competitor, that doesn’t leave many options.”

“Agreed, especially since whoever it is seems to be able to come and go quite freely.”

“Maybe a disgruntled former employee?”

He gave her an arrogant look.

“I don’t have disgruntled employees. My staff are very loyal.”

“Really? Even if you snarl at them the way you snarled at me?”

She realized a little too late that she’d given herself away, but he didn’t look surprised, only annoyed.

“I didn’t snarl at you. I simply refused to take your payment.”

Crossing her arms, she glared at him.

“You most certainly did snarl at me, and you practically threw my money in my face.”

His eyes dropped to her cleavage, and she realized that her position had caused her already generous breasts to swell over the neckline of her dress. For a moment he looked... hungry, and she quickly let her arms drop, even though her nipples tingled beneath his regard.

“As you were only too happy to report,” he snapped, dragging his eyes back up to her face.

“I was not happy about it. I don’t like giving negative reviews.”

“Really? I thought you sounded rather gleeful.”

“I was nothing of the kind. Since you clearly know who I am, I suppose that explains why you were so charming earlier and why you came chasing after me.”

She couldn't quite keep the bitterness out of her voice, and he sat back again.

"I was determined that you would have a better experience this time," he said slowly. "But that wasn't why I came after you. I came after you because you did something... nice and I reacted badly."

"Fair enough. And don't worry, I'll update my review." She rose to her feet and shook out her skirt. "I hope you manage to resolve your problems."

He rose as well, and she was suddenly very conscious of how close they were in the limited space between the chairs. Her pulse started to race and as if he could hear it, he stroked his thumb over the throbbing point on her neck. She shivered as he stepped even closer, and then his lips descended and he was kissing her.

Caught up in the thrill of the moment, she parted her lips and his tongue slipped inside her mouth to tangle with hers. His mouth was surprisingly warm and he tasted of a spice she didn't recognize. Cool fingers threaded into her hair, holding her in place for his kiss, while she wrapped her arms around his neck.

She was dimly aware that his other arm was behind her back and his hand was on her bottom, pressing her against the throbbing bar of his erection, but she was lost in the kiss to care. His taste intoxicated her and when he pulled her even closer, his fingers digging into her ass, a moan escaped her throat.

He finally lifted his head, and now his fangs were very obvious. She couldn't help staring at his mouth, and he groaned.

"You shouldn't tempt me like this."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

His words brought her back to reality. Tempt?

“Me? You’re the one who kissed me.”

And now that it was over, she was wondering why. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks as she tried to step back, but he held her easily in place.

“I believe it is more accurate to say we kissed each other.”

The knowledge that he was right only added to her embarrassment.

“Call it a moment of madness,” she said lightly. “It was... nice meeting you, Damian.”

She stumbled over the word nice and his smile grew. The hand that was still on her ass flexed, kneading the soft flesh, but she did her best to ignore how good it felt.

“You can let go of me now.”

“Can I? You’re a very delectable female.” The hand that had been in her hair returned to her neck, feathering across her wildly beating pulse. “Almost edible.”

“Are you going to bite me?”

Her voice threatened to tremble, and he frowned before finally releasing her and stepping away. Why did she immediately miss the press of that strong, hard body?

“Of course not. I would never do such a thing.” His eyes glinted. “At least not without an invitation.”

He laughed when her lips parted but nothing emerged.

“Don’t worry, kitten. You’re safe from my dangerous wiles. For now.”

Then it’s just as well I’m leaving town, she thought, although she was oddly tempted to return to his arms.

“How long are you in town?” he asked, as if he read her mind.

But he couldn’t, could he? She clearly didn’t know enough about vampires.

“I was going to leave tomorrow.” She should have stopped there, but some foolish impulse compelled her to add, “Alison convinced me to stay for the Winter Festival.”

“Then perhaps I’ll see you there. Would you like me to escort you home?”

“That’s not necessary, thank you.”

They stared at each other for a moment, then he brushed cool lips across her mouth one more time, turned her towards the door, and sent her on her way with one last squeeze of her ass.

I should have told him not to do that, she thought belatedly, as she went to retrieve her cape. The other server helped her, then gave her hand a quick squeeze.

“Thank you for helping out earlier.”

“I was happy I could.”

The woman darted a nervous glance down the hall to the closed office door.

“Things have been kind of... difficult around here.”

“He mentioned that there have been some problems.”

“A lot of problems, but I swear it isn’t any of us.”

“He doesn’t blame any of you,” she said soothingly.

“I don’t suppose you have any suggestions?”

“Me? I’m a stranger here.”

“I know, that’s why I thought maybe you could help.” The server gave her a hopeful look. “Fresh eyes and all that.”

“I’m sorry but I’m leaving town again in a few days. And even if I were staying, I don’t think I could help.”

“I understand. I just thought it was worth a try. Thanks again for tonight.”

“You’re very welcome.”

She wrapped her cloak around her shoulders and headed back to the inn, once more lost in thought. From what she’d seen and tasted, Midnight Manor had the potential to be precisely the type of hidden gem she’d hoped to find, and she really wished she could help. But she couldn’t—could she?

CHAPTER 7

Damian waited until the front door closed behind Wendy, then slipped out the back door and followed her, keeping to the shadow of the trees. Fairhaven Falls was a very safe community, and would no doubt be even safer now that they’d elected a werewolf as the sheriff, but he still intended to make sure she arrived safely back at the inn.

The compulsion to protect her surprised him, but rather than dwell on it, he thought about Shelly’s suggestion. Was it possible that a new person could discover some

clue as to what was happening? Something that they might have overlooked because they were so familiar with it?

He wasn't entirely convinced, but the thought of having such a sweet little morsel under his roof definitely appealed to him. And once she was under his roof, he had every hope that he could entice her into more of those delicious kisses. She might be immune to his vampiric charm, but he didn't need that to woo her.

To tempt her, he amended quickly. He had no intention of forming a mate bond—should such a thing actually exist—but he certainly wouldn't mind a tasty little interlude. His fangs tingled again at the memory of their kiss and of the way her soft body had yielded to him.

All he had to do was convince her to agree to take a position at the restaurant. She clearly was the type of person who liked to help others, and he had no compunction about using her compassion to get her to accept. He was so busy considering the best way to approach her that he must have let his veil slip because she suddenly turned around as he followed her onto the inn grounds.

He slipped behind a large evergreen before she spotted him, and he found himself smiling. His little kitten might prove to be a more challenging prey than he assumed—which only added to his pleasure in the hunt. He lingered next to the tree, watching as she stepped up onto the porch and disappeared into the warm, golden interior of the inn.

He had a momentary impulse to follow her, but he didn't belong in there. Just as he didn't belong in any of the other cozy little houses in town. After a brief hesitation, he turned to go—and almost ran into Flora. She was standing right behind him in a fluffy white tracksuit looking like a slightly demented snow woman.

“Well?” she demanded.

“She said she was going to write a more favorable review.”

“Excellent,” she cackled. “I knew your... charm would work on her.”

“As a matter of fact it doesn’t,” he said stiffly, disliking the way she was leering at him. “She simply realized that we serve excellent food in a lovely location.”

“Hmm.” Those sharp black eyes studied his face. “And have you figured out the source of your problems?”

He desperately wanted to tell her that it wasn’t her concern. Instead, he found himself shaking his head.

“Young idiot.” She reached up and flicked his ear, which was surprisingly painful. “So what are you going to do?”

It suddenly occurred to him that she might make a good ally.

“I thought perhaps I’d invite her to work for me for a little while. To see if a new set of eyes might spot something.”

“Work for you? I’m not sure if that’s—” She broke off, tapping her lip thoughtfully before breaking into a big smile that he didn’t trust at all. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“She might not agree.”

“I’m sure you can use your charms to convince her.”

There was that leer again, but before he could object, she gave him a cheery wave and disappeared back behind the tree. He didn’t bother trying to follow her. As far as he

knew Flora didn't have any vampire blood, but she could vanish faster than he could.

He looked back at the inn and saw that the light was on in Wendy's room. Once again he wished he could fly up and perch on her windowsill, but since he was still Earthbound, he sighed and headed back to Midnight Manor instead.

After the last of the guests were gone and everything had been cleaned and prepped for the following day, he did a final inspection. He confirmed that all of the doors and windows were locked, the fireplaces damped, and the fridge and freezer doors firmly closed before heading upstairs.

The book he'd been reading still didn't appeal to him and he ended up searching the book cases that surrounded the fireplace instead. They contained a motley assortment of his books and ones that had been left behind when the previous owner left town. On a lower shelf he found an old set of the Fairhaven Falls Flier, the small local newspaper.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

The first paper he picked up fell open to a picture of a much younger Gladys Cravets wearing a toga and a crown of leaves and accompanied by Jeremiah, the town witch doctor. Gladys was one of Flora's closest friends, but she was also a witch with considerable healing ability and, from what he'd heard, despised Jeremiah. She certainly didn't look like she despised him in the picture.

Amused, he carried the stack of papers over to his chair. He'd just found an article about the previous owners of his house when he was overcome by a wave of tiredness. Yawning, he put the paper aside and retired to bed. Tonight he had no trouble falling asleep, but his dreams were haunted by a curvy little female who always hovered just out of reach.

When he went downstairs late the next morning, the back door was wide open and there was a trail of half-eaten rolls and pastries leading from the kitchen through the door and out across the patio to the woods.

A long, heartfelt curse escaped his lips as he went to examine the back door. The lock wasn't jammed or broken—the door was simply unlocked. How the hell was that possible?

He was sweeping up the crumbs when Cody arrived.

“Whoa, dude. Are you feeding the raccoons?”

His glare must have been answer enough because for once Cody shut up and simply went to get another broom.

Raccoons? Could they be the culprits? He knew they were smart little creatures with very clever hands, but clever enough to open a lock without damaging it, find their way to the kitchen, and open the pantry? It seemed highly unlikely, but he couldn't come up with any other rational explanation. Whatever the cause, they had decimated his supplies.

"I'm going to call Grondar and see if he has anything available to sell us," he told Cody and left the brownie to finish up.

The grumpy orc was one of Flora's grandsons and the best baker in town. Unfortunately he specialized in sweets. He told Damian that he could replace the pastries, but not the rolls.

"Not my area."

"I'd be willing to pay extra if you could make it your area, at least for today. I can't get any replacements from the bakery in Asheville until tomorrow."

"No. I have plans with my mate."

Grondar hung up before he could continue the argument. Fuck. Was he going to have to resort to grocery store rolls? Perhaps Jack could come up with an alternative. But when the chef arrived, he only looked down his long, thin nose at him—a difficult feat considering he was a foot shorter than Damian—and refused.

"I am not a baker."

He said it with as much disdain as if Damian had asked him to parade naked through the dining room. At least that would have suppressed everyone's appetite.

"Nereus? Do you think you could come up with something?"

The sous chef gave him a doubtful look but nodded.

“I can try.”

“Excellent. I’m sure the results will be delicious.”

Nonetheless he made a quick trip to the grocery store to find the least objectionable alternative. It was just as well he did. He returned to find Nereus staring at a tray of soggy blobs with a more than usually mournful expression.

“They didn’t rise,” he sighed.

Obviously. Damian bit back his instinctive response. At least Nereus had tried.

“Maybe I can help.”

Her scent reached him at the same time as her voice. His body immediately responded, but he did his best to ignore it as they all turned to see Wendy standing in the doorway. She was wearing a wide-legged yellow jumpsuit covered with tiny white flowers that flowed flatteringly around her curves, and she looked as bright and cheerful as her nom de plume. Not to mention good enough to eat. His fangs threatened to descend again.

“Help?” he asked, sounding almost as dazed as he felt.

“Flora said you had a problem with your bread?”

“Raccoons,” Cody said chewing on a carrot. “Sneaky little bastards.”

“You think you can bake?” Jack sneered, but she didn’t flinch.

“Yes. What did you have planned for tonight? I could do quick rolls, or flatbread, or perhaps focaccia?”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

Jack apparently had no intention of answering her, but Damian had recovered enough to respond.

“Cremini and sausage pasta and fish with buttered cabbage and potatoes for the mains. The choices for the appetizer are a salt cod salad or roasted carrots in herb butter.”

She nodded, already reaching for an apron.

“The quick rolls for the fish and carrots, then the flatbread for the other two dishes.” She flashed an entirely too appealing smile at a bemused Nereus, and he had the oddest urge to growl. “Are you free to help me?”

“No,” Jack snapped. “I need him to prepare the vegetables and make the pasta.”

“They’re already done.” Nereus was still staring at Wendy. “I can help you.”

Jack opened his mouth again, but Damian didn’t give him a chance to speak.

“Then that’s settled. Cody, you can fill in for Nereus if Jack needs something.”

“It’s Kai, dude, but that’s cool.” The brownie grinned at Jack. “Looks like we’re going to be partners, bro.”

Jack gave him an outraged glare before turning to his prep work and ignoring Cody as the brownie began peppering him with questions.

Damian wanted to linger in the warm kitchen and watch Wendy work. More accurately, he wanted to kick everyone else out and have her cook just for him. His mouth went dry when she bent over to retrieve a set of mixing bowls, her jumpsuit straining across her luscious ass. He could easily envision her in that exact position, only without the clothing. This time he couldn't prevent his fangs from descending.

All he could do was mutter a vague excuse and rush out of the kitchen before he disgraced himself.

CHAPTER 8

"What's up with him?" Wendy muttered, a little hurt that Damian hadn't thanked her for coming to help.

Then again, Flora had warned her that he was stressed over another disaster. The old lady hadn't exactly asked her to fill in, but it had definitely been implied. She didn't really mind. She enjoyed baking and she was at a loose end since the festival wasn't until Saturday. Her blog posts for the next two weeks were already prepped and ready to go and, as much as she didn't want to admit it, she wanted to see Damian again.

Well, she had seen him but he clearly hadn't wanted to see her, striding out of the room with his long, graceful strides. Not that I care. It was bad enough that she'd spent the whole night replaying their kiss in her dreams. But she was here to do a good deed, not lust after an arrogant vampire.

Pasting a determined smile on her face, she turned to the sous chef. His pale blue skin flushed a darker blue when she looked at him. His hair was still down around his shoulders, but as she'd thought the day before, it didn't look like hair. More like...seaweed? But as long as he was willing to help her, she didn't care if he had strings of fish hanging from his head.

“I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself yesterday. I’m Wendy.”

“I’m Nereus.”

“And I’m Kai,” the busboy said. “My partner here is Jack.”

“Not your partner,” the chef muttered, not looking up, but she ignored him.

“Pleased to meet you all. Let’s start with the rolls, Nereus, so they’ll have time to rise while we make the flatbreads.”

He gave her a shy nod and they set to work. Even after three years, it was surprisingly easy to fall back into the routine of a working kitchen. But other than Jack glowering on the other side of the kitchen, the atmosphere was far less tense than it had been in the high-end restaurant where she’d worked after culinary school. It reminded her of the happy time she spent hanging out in her grandparents’ restaurant as a child—times that had originally inspired her culinary ambitions.

When Kai mentioned the small herb garden they had growing on the enclosed back porch, she decided to pick some fresh rosemary to infuse the oil for the flatbreads. She only made it two steps down the hall before two strong, cool hands seized her waist, and pushed her against the wall. Damian stared down at her, the red sparks flaring in his eyes as he cupped her shoulder, his thumb caressing her pulse again.

“You are driving me crazy,” he growled.

“Me?” she asked indignantly, trying to ignore her rapidly beating heart. “I was just trying?—”

His mouth came down hard over hers and she forgot all about her protests. She whimpered and parted her lips, his spicy taste exploding across her senses as he

deepened the kiss. Her hands clenched on his shoulders as he pressed her against the wall, the soft curves of her body cradling his much harder one.

“Fuck, you’re sweet, kitten,” he muttered against her mouth when he finally broke the kiss.

He kissed along her jawline, then down to her neck, small sucking kisses that made her want to writhe against him. Her nipples were so tight they ached. Then he was gone, moving away as abruptly as he’d left her the previous night. Before she could demand an explanation, Kai wandered out of the kitchen. Was that why he’d moved?

“Chef told Nereus he can’t use any of the iron skillets to fry the flatbreads,” Kai announced cheerfully, either not noticing or not caring about her flushed face and rapid breathing.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“Tell Jack that if I have to come in there, he’s going to get one of those skillets cracked over his skull,” Damian said coldly, his eyes never leaving her face.

“Awesome, dude.”

As soon as Kai returned to the kitchen, Damian was back, but she quickly put her hand on his chest. The bare skin of his very nicely muscled chest, exposed by another one of his extravagant shirts. Don’t get distracted, she told herself, looking up at him.

“Wait a minute. What are you doing?”

A devastatingly attractive smile twisted his lips.

“If you can’t tell, kitten, then I’m doing something very wrong.”

“I mean, why are you doing it?”

“Because you are the sweetest woman I’ve ever tasted.” His thumb stroked seductively across her lower lip. “Sweet and ripe and delicious.”

“You sound like you’re describing a piece of fruit,” she said breathlessly.

“Hmm. A peach perhaps.” He bent his head, and this time his tongue feathered across her lips. “Definitely a peach. I bet you even have pretty little peach-colored nipples topping these delicious breasts.”

His thumb dipped lower, sweeping across those taut little peaks, and she squeaked. It

was more from shock than objection, but he stopped, drawing back far enough to look down at her face.

“You’re not scared of me.”

It wasn’t a question, but she shook her head anyway. Excited, intrigued—and occasionally annoyed—but not frightened.

“You should be.” He smiled again, and this time she caught the flash of his fangs. “Sweet little peaches just beg to be devoured.”

Her heart skipped a beat, but it was mostly from excitement. Mostly.

“Do you mean you want to...”

Not quite ready to say it aloud, she waved her hand helplessly.

“Devour you? Oh, yes. In every way possible. I want to feast on your mouth and drink your blood and lick all the juice from your sweet little cunt.”

She squeaked again. No one had ever said anything like that to her before. She should have been outraged, but her body clearly liked the blunt words, already quivering with anticipation.

Then he moved away again and Kai was back.

“Nereus wants to know if you found the rosemary. It’s not in the hallway,” he added helpfully, and this time he looked curiously from her face to Damian’s. “Something wrong?”

“N-no. We were just talking about the menu. I’ll get the rosemary now.”

She turned and fled without looking at Damian, closing the porch door behind her and pressing her hands to her hot cheeks. What was wrong with her? She never allowed a man to move this fast, especially when she knew she'd be leaving in a few days.

Maybe it's some kind of vampire magic, she thought as she cut the rosemary. Was that even possible? She really needed to find out. Maybe Flora would know. Resolving to ask her as soon as she returned to the inn, she went back to the kitchen.

Jack was ignoring all of them, but she could handle being ignored. It was being yelled at that she couldn't stand. By the time everything was ready, the doors were about to open. Shelly came in and gave her a friendly smile before snagging one of the quick rolls.

"Oh my God, this is delicious. You should do all our baking."

Jack muttered something derogatory that she chose to ignore as she thanked Shelly.

"I had fun doing it, but I'm sure your regular baker does just fine."

"Not this fine." Shelly popped the last bite in her mouth with an ecstatic expression. "Amazing."

Wendy thanked her again, then quickly slipped out of the kitchen. She half-hoped, half-dreaded seeing Damian in the hall, but a strange woman was standing at the host stand instead.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“You must be Wendy. I’m Rita. Flora just called and told me to tell you to skedaddle back to the inn—and you should always do what Flora says.”

The last sentence was delivered in a joking tone, but she had the sudden impression that Rita actually meant it. Was she really worried about a little old lady?

“Then I guess I’d better go,” she agreed cheerfully, taking her coat. “Thanks.”

She hesitated a moment longer, trying to decide if she should find Damian and tell him goodbye, but then the door opened and a big orc came in, his massive arm around a pretty woman who wasn’t even half his size. How did that even work?

“Evening, Trogar. Evening, Pippa,” Rita said cheerfully. “I’ve got a table for you in the front room. And Shelly knows you have to be back before the baby wakes up.”

“Thank you,” Pippa said in a soft voice, giving Wendy a quick, curious smile. “Alison still gets a little panicky if Daisy starts crying.”

“She’ll figure it out once hers is born,” Rita said comfortably. “This way.”

The trio disappeared into the front dining room and Wendy took the opportunity to escape. The cold air was a welcome relief on her heated face, and she paused to look around. The rest of the houses on the street were of a similar vintage to the restaurant, although they varied widely in size. At the far end of the street, she could see the festive lights adorning Main Street. They looked warm and inviting and she was tempted to explore, but that wasn’t skedaddling back to the inn.

Smiling at the old-fashioned expression, she was about to set off when the back of her neck prickled. Even before she turned around, she knew Damian was watching her. He was standing on the long balcony built into the second-story roof, still wearing a thin white shirt and apparently impervious to the cold. His eyes were fixed on her, and even from here she thought she could see the red sparks burning in their depths.

They stared at each other for an endless moment, then, impelled by a sudden wicked impulse, she raised her fingers to her lips and blew him a kiss before whirling around and hurrying down the street.

CHAPTER 9

By the time Wendy rushed breathlessly down the inn driveway she was convinced Damian was following her, but every time she turned around, she didn't see anything except an empty street. Something fluttered in a tree overhead and another vampire story floated through her mind. Weren't they supposed to be able to turn into bats?

Then she shook her head. The thought of someone Damian's size turning into a bat was just too ridiculous to be true. She was still smiling at the idea when she entered the inn.

"Wendy, is that you?" Alison called cheerfully. "We're in the kitchen."

She went to join her friend and found her smiling at her fiancé as he cradled an adorable baby girl against his massive chest.

"Just look at him," Alison sighed. "He's going to be a natural."

"Oh, sure. It's easy when they're asleep," Will laughed, but Alison was right. He did look very comfortable holding the baby.

“‘Bout time you got here,” Flora muttered, shooting her a dark look from where she was stirring a pot on the stove.

“You’re the one who sent me over to the restaurant!”

Flora ignored her protest.

“Now that you’re finally back, you can fix this soup.”

That was why the old lady had been in such a hurry for her to return? She laughed as she went to taste the soup.

“Everyone is after me for my cooking today.”

“Just your cooking?” Flora asked with an exaggerated wink.

Dammit. She was blushing again.

“And on that note, I’m going to take Daisy into the parlor to watch a game with me,” Will said firmly. “I have the distinct feeling that I don’t want to hear the rest of this conversation.”

Alison flashed him a quick smile, but joined her and Flora at the stove.

“What’s going on? You don’t mean you and Damian...”

“No! Well, not really. He just kissed me.”

“And you didn’t kiss him back?” Flora’s eyes sparkled. “Most vampires are extremely good kissers. They know just how to use their tongues. And their fangs. Why, I remember?”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“Let’s not scare Wendy off so quickly,” Alison interrupted. “I want to hear more about her and Damian.”

“It was nothing. I’m sure he was just grateful that I went over to help them out.”

“Oh?” Flora’s smile grew even wider. “Was he just being grateful last night as well?”

“How did you know?—”

She realized she’d fallen into Flora’s trap two seconds too late. Or was it a trap? The old lady had seemed so certain. Burying her head in the refrigerator to hide her embarrassment, she started pulling out ingredients to add to the soup. When she turned back, Alison was smiling at her but it was a warm, sympathetic smile, and she relaxed.

“Now,” Flora said as Wendy started chopping. “What do you want to know?”

“Know?”

“About vampires, of course. It’s only natural that you’d be curious,” Flora added innocently, but once again Wendy was sure the old lady already knew that she wanted to talk to her. She suddenly understood Rita’s caution about Flora, but she did have questions.

“They don’t really turn into bats, do they?”

Flora rolled her eyes. “Don’t be silly. They’re far too big for that. They don’t turn

into wolves either, even though they are closer in size.”

“And they don’t read minds either, right?”

“No. But humans give away a lot.”

Wendy and Alison exchanged a glance.

“We do? How?”

Flora shrugged.

“Your scent. The way you move. The way your skin reflects your emotions,” she added dryly, and Wendy fought to keep from blushing.

“So vampires don’t really have any special powers?”

“Oh, they have some.” Flora leaned over with a conspiratorial look and both she and Alison huddled closer. “The best one is their stamina, especially when they’re feeding.”

“Stamina?”

Flora cackled. “Of course. It’s blood flow that makes a male’s dick hard, so it only stands to reason?—”

“Stop telling my mate about other males,” Will snapped, stalking back into the room, the sleeping baby on his chest a striking contrast to his angry face.

“We also learn a lot by eavesdropping,” Flora said, giving Will a taunting smile.

“Surely you aren’t worried about how you compare?—”

“Stop teasing him, Flora,” Alison said, giving her a reproachful look as she went over and pulled Will’s free arm around her shoulders. “You both know he’s the only one for me.”

“If you say so, dear.”

Despite Flora’s resigned tone, Wendy could see the satisfaction in her eyes.

“Here,” she said quickly, offering Flora a spoonful of soup. “Try this.”

“Are you trying to change the subject? Wouldn’t you like to know more about vampire anatomy, especially when it comes to sex?—”

“No,” the three of them chorused in unison.

Flora grinned and took the spoon, then nodded approvingly.

“Excellent. You have a real talent, my dear. I’m surprised you aren’t running your own kitchen.”

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

She had the uneasy feeling that those dark eyes could see all of her secrets, but she managed a weak smile.

“It’s not for me,” she said quickly. “Shall we eat?”

Flora allowed herself to be diverted and they all sat down at the table. Wendy enjoyed herself thoroughly and even Flora behaved, limiting the number of her outrageous remarks. They were chatting over coffee when the couple she’d seen at the restaurant joined them. It turned out that they were Daisy’s parents and they lingered for a while, chatting. Or rather Pippa chatted and Trogar gave an occasional grunt. But despite his silence, he was clearly enthralled with both his mate and his child and seemed content to listen.

The cozy kitchen and the casual conversation reminded her again of her grandparents’ restaurant. She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed this over the months of traveling. The party was beginning to break up when she felt that odd prickle on her neck again and darted a glance towards the window. No one.

“There may be one or two things about vampires I forgot to mention,” Flora said, giving her an innocent look, but before Wendy could ask, the old lady whisked herself off behind the departing Trogar and Pippa and disappeared.

Infuriating old woman, she thought, and could have sworn she heard a distant laugh.

“Can Flora read minds?” she whispered to Alison.

“I don’t think so.”

Her friend didn't sound as certain as Wendy would have liked, but she accepted the answer, wished her and Will goodnight, and headed up to her room.

Her body felt pleasantly exhausted, but her mind refused to settle. She found herself pulling back the curtains again and looking out over the snow-covered gardens. Everything looked peaceful except... Did something move beneath that tree? She strained to see into the darkness, but she couldn't make out anything in the shadows. A part of her was still convinced that Damian was out there.

But why was he out there? Because he wanted to see her? Was it some sort of vampire game? She wasn't sure if the shiver that raced down her spine was alarm or excitement.

But even if he was outside the inn, she was safely tucked away in her room. She closed the drapes and climbed into bed. The thick mattress and crisp cotton sheets on the old-fashioned bed were deliciously comfortable. She was just about to drift off when she heard an odd noise from outside, like the snarl of a wild animal.

Her heart started to pound as she sat up, listening intently, but heard nothing else. Was she imagining things? Leaving the lights off, she crept to the window and pulled back the edge of the curtain. The full moon illuminated the trackless snow, but left pools of shadow beneath the trees. As she stared out at the garden, a long low branch on the oak tree next to the house swayed as if it had just been brushed by a body.

Pulse racing, she dropped the curtain and retreated to the bed, but it was a long time before she fell back to sleep.

CHAPTER 10

As soon as Wendy blew him a kiss and walked away, Damian slipped downstairs and went after her. His protective instincts towards her hadn't vanished, but it was more

than just that. She drew him like a moth to a flame.

And I'm just as likely to get burned.

He didn't like this feeling, this pull, but his attraction to her increased every time they touched. Every time she parted her pretty little lips and accepted him. But each touch also left him wanting more. He wanted to feast on her as he said earlier—and he'd felt her response to his words.

Once again he stood outside the inn in the dark, watching, and when she finally went upstairs to bed he fought the urge to join her. He might not be able to fly, but he was an excellent climber. For that matter, he could just walk through the front door of the inn and up the stairs—it was a public site and open to him. Instead, he remained hidden until she closed the curtains and disappeared.

And he still didn't want to leave. He wanted to stay here and keep watch. A frustrated growl escaped his lips, and a minute later her face peeped out into the night.

Enough. He was disturbing her and he wasn't doing himself any favors. He stalked back to Midnight Manor in a foul mood, only to find that everyone had left. He hadn't realized that he'd been gone that long, and a sense of guilt added to his frustration. Although he knew his staff could handle closing, he preferred to be there with them.

He took a quick pass through the restaurant—making the same checks that had been so useless the previous night—and climbed the stairs. The uneasy feeling returned as he walked into his living room. Nothing appeared to be disturbed, but he couldn't shake the feeling that someone had been in his rooms. After another check to make sure that everything was in its proper place, he went to bed.

Once again his dreams were disturbed by thoughts of Wendy, but tonight's dreams

were decidedly more explicit and he woke with an aching erection as well as an aching head. He didn't even bother with his usual espresso, downing a mug of blood instead before heading downstairs with a sense of dread. Despite his trepidation, the restaurant didn't seem to have been disturbed.

He was awake far earlier than usual, but he refused to go back to lurking around the inn. He was also far too restless to do nothing and an alternative finally occurred to him. Sighing, he headed for his car, then drove up into the mountains, swearing as the car threatened to skid on the winding mountain road. Why Nakor had to live in the middle of nowhere, he didn't know, but at last he pulled up in front of the spectacular contemporary house.

His first tug on the concealed bell yielded no response, but he simply tried again. And again. The third time his brother threw open the door and glared at him. Nakor was a dragon, and his gold scales gleamed in the morning sunlight, little puffs of smoke coming from his nostrils.

"Be quiet," he ordered. "My mate is sleeping."

"Good. Then you can keep me company." Ignoring Nakor's growl he stepped past him, then raised a mocking brow. "Surely you can spare a cup of your excellent coffee for your brother?"

"Stepbrother," Nakor grumbled, but he led the way into the kitchen and started adding fresh beans to his very expensive Italian espresso maker.

"Close enough."

His father and Nakor's father had encountered each other later in life, fallen in love, and were now living in Transylvania of all places. They were restoring a ruined castle in the most melodramatic way possible and enjoying themselves thoroughly. He and

Nakor had started off disliking each other, but they'd developed a bond over the years.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“Have you heard from your dad?” he asked as Nakor handed him a cup of espresso, and he took a deep, appreciative sip.

“He wanted us to fly over for Christmas, but Charlotte wanted to experience a smalltown Southern Christmas.” He shrugged. “We may visit in the summer. You?”

“No. You know my father isn’t a fan of unnecessary communication.”

Most of the time it didn’t bother him, but every now and then he thought it would be nice to have a closer relationship. Then again, vampires weren’t known for loving family ties.

They finished their coffee in silence, then Nakor fixed him with a glowing amber gaze.

“So why are you really here?”

“I don’t really know. I was restless. I’ve been having some issues at the restaurant.”

“Do you need money?”

“Of course not.” He wasn’t as wealthy as Nakor, but he was far from poor. Still, he knew the offer had been made out of kindness and he found himself smiling. “Although maybe I should get you to come and aim a few flames at the neighborhood raccoons.”

“Raccoons?”

He explained the previous day's events, then ended up mentioning more of the mishaps that had plagued the restaurant. He didn't think he'd mentioned Wendy at all, but Nakor finally frowned at him.

"Who is she?"

"Who is who?"

"The female who has you so restless."

"I never mentioned a female."

Nakor snorted.

"I recognize the signs."

"Just because you're newly mated doesn't mean that everyone around you feels the same way."

His brother only raised a brow and waited.

"She's human," he finally burst out. "Completely unsuitable, but very... tempting."

"Why is she unsuitable?"

"She's only in town for a short time."

"So was Charlotte," Nakor pointed out. His mate had been working for his publishing company and had been sent to prod him into finishing his latest book.

"But I'm not going to make Wendy give up a job."

Another puff of smoke trickled from his brother's nose.

"I didn't make Charlotte do anything. It was her choice," he snapped.

He acknowledged the correction, knowing he was being a little unfair.

"Do you want this female to stay?" his brother added.

Yes. "I'm not sure."

"Well, once you make up your mind, ask her."

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

It wasn't that simple, but before he could say anything, his brother's mate padded into the kitchen yawning sleepily. She was a pretty little human, her eyes widening behind her black-framed glasses when she saw him. Looking between the two of them, she raised a self-conscious hand to her sleep-tousled hair.

"Oh, hi, Damian. I didn't know you were here."

"He's just leaving," Nakor said firmly, but she frowned at him.

"Don't be so rude."

Damian let a heavy sigh escape, mainly just to annoy Nakor, and gave Charlotte a soulful look.

"I just wanted to spend some time with my family."

"I understand," she said immediately. "Why don't you stay for breakfast?"

He was tempted to say yes, but settled for another sigh.

"That's all right. I know when I'm not wanted."

"Of course you're wanted. Tell him, Nakor."

"No, you're not," his brother said bluntly, and Damian had to hide a smile at the annoyance on his face.

“Nakor!” Charlotte protested, but his brother simply reached out and tugged her against his side.

“Leave. I have plans for my mate.” Nakor hesitated, then reluctantly added, “Charlotte wants to go to the Winter Festival. If your female is there, you may introduce us.”

“Female? What female?” Charlotte’s eyes widened again. “Who is she?”

Since his brother was on the verge of exploding—and because he didn’t want to discuss Wendy—he smiled at Charlotte and headed for the door.

“Perhaps you’ll meet her,” he said vaguely.

“But—”

Charlotte’s protest ended abruptly, but he didn’t look back as he let himself out. Surprisingly, he actually felt a little better. If a reclusive loner like Nakor could find a mate...

I’m not looking for a mate, he reminded himself as he headed back to town, but he did want to spend more time with Wendy. A need that took on new urgency when he returned to Midnight Manor and found more damage. Every single bag of flour in the pantry seemed to have exploded, covering everything else with a haze of white dust.

“Maybe our ghost doesn’t like bread,” Cody suggested as he surveyed the chaos. “Hey! Maybe he’s gluten intolerant.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he snapped. “Go get something to clean up this mess.”

Cody did an excellent job of restoring the pantry to order—you couldn’t beat a

brownie when it came to cleaning—and Damian made the mistake of assuming that the disasters were over for the day. They weren't. Half an hour later, Nereus slipped and sprained his wrist. Jack was incandescent with rage and dinner service began in less than two hours. He did the only thing he could think of and called the inn.

CHAPTER 11

A pleasant sense of anticipation hummed through Wendy's veins as she headed for the restaurant. Although she'd enjoyed spending the day with Alison—and she'd taken over the kitchen long enough to create an array of baked goods—she'd also spent a good bit of that time fighting the urge to go see Damian. Just to make sure everything was okay with the restaurant, she told herself.

Despite her eagerness, she'd almost reluctantly taken the phone when he called. She'd had the sudden sinking feeling that it was bad news. It was and it wasn't. She felt sorry for Nereus, of course, but she had enjoyed her time in the kitchen the previous evening and really didn't mind going back. She promised him she'd be right over as soon as she changed.

Her anticipation lasted until she walked into the kitchen. Damian was nowhere in sight, Jack was yelling at a helpless-looking Kai, Shelly was biting her nails, and Nereus kept trying to apologize. Horrible memories flooded over her and she almost turned around and walked back out again, but she had promised to help. That didn't mean she couldn't do it on her terms.

"Enough," she snapped, and shockingly everyone shut up.

Jack scowled at her and opened his mouth, and she held up her hand.

"Stop right there. I'm here to help. I know how to work the line and I won't challenge your authority, but in return I expect you not to yell—at me or anyone else—and no

insults.”

He glared at her for a moment as she held her breath, but finally nodded.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“I need the vegetables peeled and prepped and the fish in the sous vide. Then sauces.”

“On it,” she said calmly.

He didn’t bother to say thank you as he bent back over his station, but she could work with that. The back of her neck tingled, and she knew without turning around that Damian had joined them.

“Wendy will be back in a minute,” he said, then took her hand and tugged her out into the hallway.

“Thank you for coming.”

“I’m happy to help.”

“I’m still grateful.”

His eyes had dropped to her mouth, and he suddenly groaned and pulled her into his arms. She went willingly, raising her face for his kiss even as his arms closed around her. He tasted as spicy and delicious as ever but before she could melt into him, there was a crash from the kitchen. She sighed and tried to step back. For a moment he didn’t release her, but then he echoed her sigh and his arms dropped.

“Later.”

The word was somewhere between an order and a question, but she nodded.

“Later,” she promised and returned to the kitchen.

By the time they finished cleaning the kitchen at the end of the evening, she was exhausted but also exhilarated. Jack had mostly remembered to keep a rein on his temper and everyone had pitched in to help. Even Nereus had done what he could with one working arm. She’d kept her promise about not challenging Jack, and he’d relented enough to let her take over the desserts without any intervention from him.

He even gave her a begrudging nod before he left.

“You’ll do,” he muttered, and she managed to thank him politely, holding her laughter until he was gone.

Kai was the last to leave, whistling cheerfully as he put the final polish on the already sparkling kitchen.

“Go home, Cody,” Damian said as he joined them. He sounded almost as tired as she felt.

“It’s Kai, and I’m not going home. There’s a band at the Tavern tonight.”

“Then go listen to them.”

Kai grinned, touched his fingers to his cap, and left. Damian came to join her where she was leaning against a prep table.

“Where did Kai come from?” she asked, and his eyes glinted with amusement.

“You see, when a male brownie and a female brownie love each other very much?—”

She laughed and elbowed him.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it. I meant why did he choose that name?”

“Apparently it’s Hawaiian for salt.”

“Really?” she laughed again. “I suppose that makes it a good surfer name.”

He gave her a skeptical look and she was suddenly conscious of how close they were.

“Come upstairs and have a drink.”

She really shouldn’t, but she nodded anyway.

“All right.”

He took her hand and led her up to the closed door at the top of the stairs. The door opened into a small hallway, and he pointed at the various doors.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“Two bedrooms over there, bathroom back here, and this is the living area.”

The space ran all the way from the front of the house to the back, the angled ceiling following the roofline. There was a compact kitchen on the back wall, a small dining table in the middle, and a long overstuffed couch in front of a fireplace surrounded by bookcases. The walls were a rich deep purple with matching velvet drapes at each window. All of the furniture was carved from dark wood, and the light fixtures were sculpted from wrought iron.

“It’s very... dramatic,” she managed at last, and he smiled.

“I enjoy playing the part. You should see what my father is doing to the castle in Transylvania.”

“Are you serious?”

“Absolutely. This place looked positively suburban by comparison. Would you like a drink?”

“Maybe just a small one.”

He opened a large, beautifully carved cabinet to reveal a fully equipped bar.

“Do you, err, entertain a lot up here?”

The look he shot her was a little too discerning, but he only shook his head.

“You’re the first person who’s been up here for quite a while.”

“Oh.” She tried desperately to think of something to say, but she suddenly felt tongue-tied and awkward. She stood there silently until he returned and handed her a glass. She took a sip, welcoming the sweet, fiery burn.

“Thank you,” he said again. “For coming to my—our—rescue.”

“You’re welcome.”

He took a sip of his own glass, giving her another thoughtful look.

“You’ve clearly worked in a kitchen before and you just as clearly have talent. What happened?”

CHAPTER 12

Wendy sighed and walked over to the French doors opening onto the balcony. Beyond it, the lights of the town cascaded down the hillside towards the river.

“My grandparents had a small family seafood restaurant. I spent a lot of time with them in the summers and I loved it, so much so that I ended up going to culinary school—much to my parents’ dismay.”

“They didn’t approve?” he asked as he came to join her.

“Not really. My mom also grew up helping out in the restaurant, but she hated it. My dad didn’t think I’d make enough money. But I went anyway, and after I graduated I ended up working at a high-end restaurant in New York.”

“And?”

“And I loved the food part, but I hated everything else. Fine dining is super competitive and super stressful. The head chef was an asshole, and most of the staff took their cue from him. He was always yelling and flinging insults.”

The memory made her shudder, and he put his arm around her shoulders as if to protect her from it.

“I only lasted two years and then I quit.”

“Couldn’t you have gone somewhere else?”

“I could, and it might have been a little better, but it would have been just as competitive. The staff in my grandparents’ restaurant were like family and that’s what I wanted. I knew I was never going to find it there. I think I was also just burned out.” She shrugged. “At least the pay wasn’t bad and I didn’t drink or smoke it away like a lot of chefs. I had enough money saved up that I could afford to take a little road trip. I started posting about the places I went and my blog just kind of grew from there. I’ve been doing it for almost three years now.”

“And you still enjoy it?”

“Most of the time. I have a lot of freedom, but sometimes I get tired of being on the road. I have an apartment in Greenville, but I’m hardly ever there.”

“You mean it doesn’t feel like your home?”

“Not really. Is this home for you?”

He looked around the room and then out across the town as she had.

“I’ve been here a while.”

That wasn’t exactly a yes.

“Why a restaurant?” she asked. “Isn’t that an odd choice for a vampire? Do you even drink blood, or is that a myth too?”

The red sparks gleamed in his eyes as his hand curved around her neck, his thumb unerringly finding her pulse. He stroked across it as he continued.

“Oh, I definitely drink blood. I have to in order to survive. But I also taught myself to enjoy food. Do you know how much human life revolves around food? Around communicating over a shared meal?”

She nodded, thinking about the meals she’d shared with the others at the inn—and remembered the feeling of being watched.

“You were outside the inn, weren’t you?”

He didn’t deny it, just continued his explanation.

“It’s not just humans who place this importance on shared food—most Others have similar rituals. But feeding is very different for vampires. More... intimate, but also

more isolated. I wanted to be part of those shared meals, rather than just watching from a distance.”

They stood there in silence for a minute before he looked down at her and the red in his eyes intensified.

“But I still have to feed like a vampire as well.”

He walked back across the room and opened the refrigerator, showing her the bottles of blood lining the top shelf. Her heart suddenly skipped a beat and she took a nervous step towards the bookcases, pretending to read the titles. When he stalked towards her, she instinctively backed away, but her ass bumped into the desk by the window and she couldn’t go any farther. He stopped right in front of her, bracing his arms on either side of her hips.

“I’ve been thinking about the way you kissed me all evening,” he murmured.

“You kissed me,” she corrected faintly, her eyes locked on his mouth.

“I did, didn’t I?” That tempting mouth curved into a slow smile. “And you enjoyed it, didn’t you?”

“Y-yes.”

“You’re a sweet little morsel, kitten, but that was only a taste. I want more.”

His cool fingers closed around the base of her neck as his other hand gripped her hip, hauling her up against his hard body. She could feel his arousal, the thick length throbbing against her belly and her mind went blank. She arched up to meet him as his mouth covered hers, her lips parting as his tongue slipped into her mouth. Warm and spicy and enticing. She clutched his shoulders, trying to pull him even closer as

his own fingers dug into her hip and her neck.

A low growl rumbled in his throat and he kissed her harder, lifting his hand to her breast, his thumb caressing her nipple and making her knees go weak. Then he bent her back over the desk, replacing his thumb with his mouth, hot and wet even through the fabric of her dress. He teased first one sensitive tip, then the other, sending little shocks of pleasure from her nipples to her clit, her panties growing damp as she writhed beneath him.

“Do you want more, kitten?”

She was so lost in the pleasure of his mouth that she didn’t respond at first. He nipped her earlobe sharply and she jumped.

“Do you want more?” His fangs scraped across the lobe he’d just nipped and she shivered. “Because I want to touch you. And taste you. All of you.”

She actually felt her pussy clench at his words.

“You—you mean with your tongue?”

He gave her a wicked smile, flashing his fangs as he reached beneath her skirt to stroke her thigh.

“What did you think I meant?”

He didn’t wait for her to reply before his mouth crashed back down on hers. He kissed her hard and deep, his tongue fucking into her mouth while his hand slid higher up her thigh until he reached the edge of her panties. She squirmed as he reached under the silky fabric, stroking lightly across her slick folds before circling her entrance.

“So soft,” he murmured. “Soft and warm and juicy. Like a peach.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

Another stroke and then his finger was sinking slowly into her channel.

“Open up, kitten.”

The command was accompanied by a little nudge, and she realized that he was urging her thighs apart. She widened her stance and his finger slid deeper as he growled his approval.

“Yes, just like that. You’re going to be so good for me, aren’t you?”

He pressed a kiss to her neck, a tiny sucking kiss, and then another, and then she felt the faint scrape of his fangs and tilted her head to allow him better access.

“So sweet and wet and eager for me.”

She started to respond, but then his finger sank deeper and she couldn’t think, let alone speak. All she could do was whimper, and he growled with satisfaction, his finger finding a spot that made her see stars. She rocked against his hand as his finger stroked that sweet spot again and again until she was gasping, her head thrown back, and her world narrowed to that one spot.

“That’s right, kitten. Show me how much you like it.”

His voice urged her on and she couldn’t resist, meeting each thrust of his finger until pleasure crashed through her body. He held her through the storm, whispering praise until her body finally settled back into her bones.

He gave her one last caress, sliding his finger through her drenched folds before he let her go and stepped back. She sagged against the desk, staring at him as he raised his hand, his finger still slick with her juices, and licked it clean.

“Delicious.”

She was still too stunned to speak and his face softened as he cupped her cheek.

“I think that’s enough for tonight.”

The red sparks still flickered in his eyes, and when she glanced down he was just as erect as he’d been earlier.

“B-but what about you?”

His face softened even further.

“Sweet little kitten. Not tonight. Come on. I’ll walk you back to the inn.”

She nodded mutely and followed him back downstairs. He buttoned her into her navy velvet coat, then took her hand. He held it until they reached the front porch of the inn.

“We’re closed tomorrow for the Winter Festival. Most of the town will be there.”

“That’s what Alison said.” Her voice sounded strange and rusty.

“I want to take you.”

Once again it was somewhere between a command and a question, and once again she nodded.

“All right.”

“I’ll come for you around two.”

She nodded again, and he stroked his thumb over her pulse.

“Go to bed, kitten. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He bent down and brushed cool lips across hers, then sent her into the inn with a pat on her ass. She walked up the stairs to her room, her head still reeling. She undressed automatically, pausing when she pulled off her damp panties.

“Shit,” she muttered weakly, collapsing onto the bed. “What am I doing?”

She didn’t have an answer. All she knew was that she couldn’t wait to do it again.

CHAPTER 13

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

Damian lingered outside the inn until the lights in Wendy's room came on. He still felt the urge to keep watch over her, but she was safe and his cock ached. He'd been tempted, so tempted, to slide off those silky little panties and bury himself in her sweet little cunt, but two things had held him back. One of them had been her dazed expression. How long had it been since anyone pleased her? Human males were such fools. But he didn't want her making decisions in the first rush of passion.

The other reason was more complicated. He was already enthralled, almost bewitched. If they were to... consummate their relationship, he wasn't sure he could let her go. Vampires were a possessive lot. So he'd kept his cock tucked away and simply walked her home. Everyone who was aware of his public persona would be shocked. For that matter, he suspected his friends would be shocked as well.

But for now he had a throbbing cock and a date for tomorrow.

After a perfunctory effort to relieve the ache, he fell asleep quickly, only to wake far too early in the same condition. A condition for which there was only one cure—Wendy.

Outside the sun was shining, the brilliant blue sky a striking contrast to the snow-covered ground, and he groaned. Ideal for the festival but not for him. While he wouldn't burst into flames if it hit him, he did burn quickly and viciously. He slathered the sun-blocking lotion Gladys had prepared for him everywhere, dressed, and sighed. Four more hours to go.

He worked on the restaurant books for a while, glad to note that the various incidents, while annoying, hadn't had too great an impact on his profit margin. By the time he

was finished, there was still more than an hour left, but he decided to hell with it. He'd just be early.

Wendy was coming down the stairs when he arrived, looking as delectable as usual. A red velvet dress with white fur trim around the hem, sleeves, and wide neckline emphasized her luscious curves, and his cock immediately responded. Color flooded her cheeks when she saw him waiting, but when he held out his hand, she took it immediately.

He gently tugged her against him, then kissed her until she was breathless before smiling down at her flushed face.

"Morning, kitten."

"Good morning," she said shyly. "I wasn't expecting you until later. Did I get the time wrong?"

"No, but I didn't want to wait any longer."

She bit her pretty lip.

"I wanted to see you too, but I told Alison I'd have lunch with her."

"I understand. I can come back."

Her hand tightened on his.

"Or you could stay?"

Before he could respond, she pulled him towards the kitchen and he let himself be pulled. Alison looked startled at his appearance but gave him a friendly smile. Flora

was also present, her expression far too gleeful for his peace of mind, but other than one embarrassingly accurate comment about vampire anatomy, she behaved herself.

The meal was as enjoyable as he'd imagined while watching from the dark, and very different to the meals he hosted in his restaurant. He didn't contribute much to the conversation unless Wendy or one of the others asked him a direct question, but he found himself watching her face as the three women chatted cheerfully. The food was delicious as well, and he thought he recognized Wendy's influence.

After lunch, she tied on an apron, refusing his offer of help, and went to assist Alison with the dishes. He sipped his coffee, watching her move cheerfully around the kitchen. Flora nudged him, her gleeful expression returning.

"Already smitten, aren't you?"

He wasn't sure why he bothered to be surprised any more, but he raised an eyebrow.

"Don't you have some old lady knitting group to spy on?"

Her eyes glinted with amusement.

"We have a standing arrangement for bingo on Sunday nights. And a sky clad ceremony for the full moon each month. Do they count?"

Sky clad meant naked, and he barely suppressed a shudder at the thought, sighing instead.

"Why don't you save us all a lot of trouble and just tell me what's going to happen."

"I can't tell the future," she insisted, giving him her innocent old lady look.

“Can you tell if Wendy feels the same way about me?”

He would have slapped a hand over his mouth if it weren't already too late, but for once Flora didn't tease him.

“That's something you're going to have to ask her.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“She’s leaving town,” he muttered, and she immediately reverted to normal, punching his shoulder hard enough to hurt.

“Vampires. So dramatic about everything. Plans can change.”

“Does that mean?—”

But she was already gone, skipping across the kitchen in her red and white striped tracksuit like a psychotic elf. She murmured something too softly for even his enhanced hearing to pick up. Whatever it was, it made Wendy blush and glance in his direction. She looked adorably confused when she saw him looking at her, and he hid a smile.

Once the kitchen had been cleaned, they left for the festival. Alison decided to wait for Will so they were alone in the hall when he fastened the white cape around her, letting his fingers linger on her neck.

“Have I told you that you look like a very sexy Mrs. Claus?” he murmured, finding the rapidly fluttering pulse.

“I guess I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should. I can’t imagine a better present to find in my stocking.”

“Christmas is over.” she pointed out breathlessly. “And you certainly don’t look like Mr. Claus in a black cape.”

He laughed. “Then maybe I’m the devil coming to steal Mrs. Claus away.”

“What if she already wants to go with you?”

“Is that what you want, kitten?”

Her lips parted but before she could answer him, the door opened and Will swept in with a blast of cold air.

“Chilly out there,” he said cheerfully, his sharp eyes taking in their closeness.

Wendy blushed again and tried to step back, but he kept his arm around her shoulders.

“We’re going down to the festival,” she said quickly. “Do you want us to wait for you?”

“No, thanks. We have... plans first.”

From the glint in the troll’s eye, Damian could guess what those plans entailed so he dropped a hand to Wendy’s waist and guided her towards the door as she called a goodbye.

“We’ll see you later.”

“A lot later, I’m sure,” he added and Will grinned again as they left.

CHAPTER 14

Outside the inn the sun was still shining, but the temperature had definitely dropped so Damian put his arm around Wendy’s shoulders again. It wasn’t until they were

almost at the Town Square that he realized he was about to make his interest in her very clear to everyone they saw. So much for my aloof reputation, he thought, then decided that having his curvy little kitten tucked against his side was far more important.

Some parts of the festival, like the skating rink, were simply carried over from the Christmas Festival, but they'd taken down the tree and added an ice carving display. Santa's village had been replaced by an Enchanted Winter Forest, the trees festooned with oversized glittering snowflakes and plastic icicles. Gaily striped stalls around the edge of the Town Square sold a variety of treats, including hot mulled wine, and another section of the square was set up as a winter market.

Wendy gave a delighted laugh and a little bounce—which did very tempting things to her luscious breasts.

“This is amazing. I have to do a blog post about it. If I'd known I'd also have done one in advance so people would know about it, but I'll be sure and do one next year.”

The innocent remark made him remember that she would be leaving soon, and the joy went out of the day. He followed silently as she rushed from stall to stall, sampling hot chocolate and roast chestnuts, gingerbread and apple cider donuts. She appeared genuinely delighted with everything she tried and asked several of the vendors about their recipes and techniques. It wasn't until they reached the fifth stall that she noticed his silence.

“Damian, is something wrong?”

“No,” he snapped. If she wasn't concerned about leaving him, why should he care? Except I do care, very much.

“Liar,” she said, ignoring his bad temper, and tried to pull him into a semi-secluded

spot between two evergreen bushes covered with twinkle lights. In spite of his irritation, he let her.

“Now don’t lie to me. Tell me what’s going on.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

She had her hands on her hips as she glared at him like an outraged kitten and an unwilling smile crossed his face before he shook his head.

“It’s nothing.”

“I don’t believe you. You were just fine until...” She hesitated, clearly thinking back. “Until we arrived here. But you must have known what it would be like.”

“I did.”

“If it’s not the festival... Are you upset because I mentioned the blog? I’m not planning on writing anything negative about Fairhaven Falls.”

“Unlike Midnight Manor.”

“I already told you I was going to do an update. And you did deserve the first one, even if it was partially due to circumstances beyond your control. Is that why you look like a black cloud?”

“No.”

“So if it’s not the blog, what is it?” Her momentary annoyance disappeared as she stepped closer and put her hand on his chest, giving him a hopeful look. “You can tell me.”

But he didn’t. Instead, he groaned and kissed her, delighting in her immediate and enthusiastic response. A response which spurred on his own. He was about to slip his

hand under her skirt when he heard a familiar voice.

“Hey, you two. Get a room.”

He reluctantly lifted his head and saw Cody grinning at them, his arms full of candy and other treats.

“I knew there was something going on with you two.”

He should deny it—but he didn’t want to, and Wendy was only blushing and clutching his hand. Cody wasn’t bothered by their lack of response.

“Have you tried the s’mores yet, dude? They’re making them at the bonfire and they are righteous.”

Wendy’s face immediately lit up. He bit back a sigh, did his best to paste a smile on his face, and swept her a bow.

“Then let us proceed to the bonfire.”

From the look she gave him, his smile wasn’t entirely successful, but she accepted it and after that he did his best just to enjoy the moment. Her obvious pleasure in the festival made it easier, and by the time night began to fall, his smiles were almost entirely genuine.

He was helping her off the skating rink, breathless and laughing, when they bumped into Nereus. The naiad immediately gave him an apologetic look and dipped his head.

“Sorry, boss.”

He waved away the apology as Wendy gave the little male a sympathetic smile.

“How are you feeling? Is your wrist any better?”

Nereus winced, looking guilty.

“A little bit, but the doc says I won’t have full use of it for another week. He said not to overdo it, but I’m sure if I’m careful...”

A brilliant plan suddenly sprang into his mind.

“Nonsense, you don’t want to risk any kind of permanent injury. You just take care of yourself.”

Nereus clearly hadn’t expected that reaction, but he thanked him and scurried away. Now to put his plan into action. He turned back to Wendy, only to be interrupted by another familiar voice.

“All you need is a scythe and anyone would think that Death were walking amongst us,” Nakor drawled, eyeing Damian’s long black cloak.

“Looking at you they’d think Chinese New Year came too early.”

Nakor laughed, and Damian took Wendy’s hand.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“Wendy, this is my brother Nakor and his mate Charlotte.”

“Brother?” That was as far as she got before Charlotte gave an excited squeal.

“Oh my God, I love your dress. Where did you get it?”

Wendy beamed at her.

“At a little vintage store in Blowing Rock. Do you really like it?”

“It’s absolutely perfect for the festival, and you look stunning in it.”

“Aw, thank you. I love your sweater too. Is it vintage?”

“Yes. I got it at a store here in town—the Whimsical Wonders Warehouse. Have you been there?”

Charlotte started raving about the store while Nakor stood next to him, scowling.

“I do not understand this obsession with used clothing. She even prefers them to the ones I purchased for her.”

He hid a smile at his brother’s affronted tone and shrugged.

“I don’t care where Wendy gets her clothes. She looks beautiful in all of them.”

“Of course Charlotte does too—” Nakor began in an annoyed voice, then broke off to

stare at him. “She’s your mate, isn’t she?”

“You know it doesn’t work like that for vampires.”

“I suspect our fathers would disagree,” his brother said dryly but let it drop when the women turned to them.

“Charlotte’s going to take me to the vintage shop,” Wendy said happily, then gave him an uncertain look. “If I have time before I leave, that is.”

It was the perfect opportunity. Bolstered by his brother’s presence, he turned to Wendy.

“About that. Since Nereus will be out of commission for another week, I was hoping I could persuade you to step in for him. I’ll compensate you for your time,” he added when she hesitated.

“I’m not going to take your money.”

He started to argue, and Charlotte shook her head at him from behind Wendy’s back.

“Please stay,” he said instead. “I—we—need you.”

In spite of his knowledge of humans, he couldn’t read her expression. But then she nodded slowly and triumph filled him. Forgetting their audience, he was about to sweep her back into his arms, when Nakor cleared his throat.

“Charlotte wants to see the fireworks. Shall we find a seat by the riverbank?”

Wendy’s face lit up.

“Fireworks? Oh, I love them.”

“Me too.” Charlotte shot a teasing glance at Nakor. “Especially certain kinds.”

The two women dashed away, and they followed.

“Not exactly what I meant when I suggested you ask her to stay,” Nakor said disapprovingly. “You intend to put her to work?”

“She says she enjoys it.”

“Ah, that’s different.” Nakor sighed and let out a puff of smoke. “My mate also enjoys working. She’s making great progress with her publishing company.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

Despite his disgruntled tone, his brother was obviously proud of his mate's accomplishments, but Damian gave Wendy a thoughtful look. She'd said she enjoyed being in the kitchen, and he believed her, but was that what she wanted to do?

When they reached the riverbank, they both drew their females onto their laps so they wouldn't be chilled by the icy bench. Wendy gave him a startled look, but snuggled against him readily enough. As they sat next to his brother watching the brilliant colors fill the sky, he felt as much a part of a family as any of the people surrounding them.

CHAPTER 15

The next morning, Wendy bustled around her room, packing her suitcase, butterflies swirling in her stomach. It usually didn't take her long to pack, but she'd stayed in Fairhaven Falls longer than she usually stayed anywhere and her things were scattered everywhere. She finally found her missing boot under the bed and added it to her duffel bag, then took one more look around. The white walls and golden oak furniture were a striking contrast to what she'd seen of Damian's house.

Damian's house. The butterflies swirled again.

After they'd finished watching the fireworks, they'd wandered around a little more with Nakor and Charlotte, but Nakor was clearly ready to leave. Charlotte finally laughed, gave her a hug, and told Nakor she was ready. He'd picked her up and launched them into the air almost before she'd finished talking.

"Wow," she said, following the golden figure until he disappeared from view. "He

can really fly. I was assuming his wings were just decorative.”

“He’s just a big bird,” Damian snapped, and she slanted a look at him under her lashes.

He almost sounded... jealous. He’d been giving off mixed signals all day, from affectionate to distant, and then back to affectionate. She still wasn’t quite sure what had bothered him so much when they first arrived. And then asking her to fill in for Nereus. Was it because he needed the help or because he wanted her around? It could even be both.

She wanted to ask more questions, but she decided they could wait, tucking her arm in his and giving him a tired smile.

“Are you ready to go back to the inn?”

The red sparks blossomed in his eyes.

“Or you could come to my place.”

Her cheeks flamed, but her clit gave a reminiscent throb at the memory of being stretched over his desk as he so expertly made her climax. Too expertly perhaps. Had he had a lot of experience with other women? That question, combined with her embarrassment, made her shake her head.

“I think we’d better just go back to the inn.”

She refused to admit she was disappointed when he didn’t argue, just escorting her back through the dark streets as the sound of the festival faded away behind them. He told her stories about the people who owned the houses they passed, and she finally gave him a curious look.

“How do you know so much about everyone?”

He shrugged. “I used to... wander at night and listen.”

From outside in the dark. She hugged his arm more tightly, her chest aching for him, but he made an odd noise and she gave him a puzzled look.

“Is something wrong?”

“Cradling my arm between your delightful breasts makes me wish they were surrounding another part of my anatomy.”

She quickly dropped his arm, and he laughed and put his arm around her shoulders instead.

“Not as pleasant, but definitely safer.”

No one was around when they reached the inn, and he offered to stay with her until Alison and Will returned. They sat down in the parlor to talk—or at least that was the plan. A few more of those heated glances, his cool fingers playing with the curls that had escaped her chignon, and the next thing she knew she was back in his arms while he kissed the life out of her. It escalated from there, and he was snarling at the fact that her tights prevented him from touching her when he suddenly froze and quickly returned her to a sitting position, rearranging her dress.

A few seconds later, Alison and Will entered laughing.

“Oh, I’m glad you’re still up. If you’re not completely stuffed full of festival food, I thought I’d make some hot cider—with brandy for all you non-pregnant people.”

“That sounds wonderful,” she said, hoping she didn’t look too disheveled. “And I

have some good news.”

“What’s that?” Alison asked as they headed for the kitchen.

“I’m not leaving tomorrow after all. I’m going to stay and help Damian for another week.”

“Oh no.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

Alison's lips quivered when Wendy gave her a shocked look.

"You don't want me to stay?"

"Of course I want you to stay. I love having you here. It's just that Flora told me this morning that the inn is fully booked from tomorrow through next weekend."

Her heart sank as she realized how much she'd looked forward to staying.

"Fully booked? Really? You said this was your slow time of year."

"It is, but Flora said something about a full moon festival."

"The full moon was two nights ago," Damian said, frowning, and Alison shrugged helplessly.

"I know, but that's what she said."

"The inn is beautiful and so convenient, but I suppose I could find somewhere else," she said reluctantly.

"There's a motel a few miles outside of town—" Alison began.

"Absolutely not," Damian snapped. "It's not suitable for a single female. However..." He rubbed his chin, then continued, his voice rather stilted. "You could stay with me. In my second bedroom, of course."

Did that mean he didn't want to sleep with her, or was he being polite? Considering how quickly things had escalated in the parlor, she was quite sure that if she took him up on his offer, they'd end up in bed together. Her body thoroughly approved of the idea. Her heart was a little less sure, but she still found herself nodding.

"That does sound more convenient," she agreed, trying to sound calm despite the color rising to her cheeks.

Will choked trying to turn a laugh into a cough, and she was sure they weren't fooling anyone but she decided she didn't care.

"Then I guess we have a plan."

"Do you want to come tonight?"

Once again her still humming body heartily approved, but she shook her head.

"I might as well enjoy my last night here."

"Then hot cider all around," Alison said cheerfully before she gave her a quick hug. "I'm so glad you're staying in town."

"Me too."

Once again they ended up sitting around the kitchen table talking. Two cups of cider left her with a pleasant glow, so pleasant that after looking at her flushed face and happy smile, Damian decided he'd better make sure she made it safely up the stairs.

"You just want to get into my bedroom," she accused, giggling.

"And on that note, I'm taking my mate home," Will said. "Good night, Wendy. Good

night, Damian.”

The cider didn’t seem to have affected either male.

“Don’t trolls and vampires get drunk?” she asked as Damian helped her up the stairs.

“We do, but it takes a lot more alcohol to have an effect.” He paused outside her door, his fingers curving around her neck. “In my case, drinking from an intoxicated human can also create the same effect.”

“Do you want a drink?”

She tilted her head to one side as his eyes flamed. He bent over her, sucking gently at her neck, and then a little harder as her nipples peaked. She even felt the scrape of his fangs and shivered with excitement, but then he drew back.

“You are a very naughty, very tempting little kitten,” he muttered, swiping his thumb across her lip.

“Thank you.” She tried to tug him closer but instead he opened her bedroom door and urged her inside with another pat on her butt.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“Why do you keep doing that?”

“Because you have an extremely delectable ass and I want to do much more than just pat it, but I don’t think you’re ready for that.”

“Yes, I am,” she said eagerly.

He groaned, laughed, and brushed a quick kiss across her lips, stepping away before she could reach for him again.

“Tomorrow, kitten. Good night.”

Remembering that moment now sent the butterflies swirling again, but she was smiling when she opened the door and found him waiting.

“You’re early. Checkout time isn’t until noon.” It was only just past nine.

“I didn’t want to wait. And you’re already packed.”

“Maybe I didn’t want to wait either.”

He took a half-step towards her, then sighed.

“If I kiss you now, we’ll still be in here at noon.”

Her eyes widened, remembering Flora’s comment about stamina.

“Really?”

“You don’t know how much I’d like to prove that to you, kitten, but first, home.”

He picked up her bags with effortless ease and she meekly followed him down the stairs. Alison and Will were waiting for them at the bottom.

“Would you like to stay for breakfast?”

“No. Thank you,” he added, muttering something under his breath when Will laughed. “Come along, kitten.”

“I’ll call you,” she told Alison as she followed him.

He walked so quickly that she was out of breath before they made it halfway down the driveway.

“Slow down,” she gasped, and he immediately stopped and gave her an apologetic look.

“Sorry. I’m just eager to have you under my roof.”

“In your second bedroom?”

The red flames sparked in his eyes.

“Is that where you want to be?”

Her mouth went dry but she shook her head. He looked at her, looked down at the bags he was carrying, then somehow managed to scoop her up into his arms without losing the bags. As soon as she was nestled against his chest, he set off, walking even

faster than before. The world seemed to blur around her until he was setting her gently on her feet. In his bedroom.

The room was as dark and ornate as the living room, and she cast a nervous glance at the huge canopy bed before looking back to find his eyes fixed on her, almost completely red.

“And now, kitten, you’re mine.”

CHAPTER 16

Wendy stared up at Damian, her expression an intoxicating mix of desire and trust with just a tinge of apprehension. Perfect.

“If you want to preserve that very pretty dress, I suggest you remove it.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

His voice came out hoarse and strained and she shivered, but then she turned her back to him and lifted her ponytail out of the way.

“Can you help me with the zipper?”

His fingers actually threatened to tremble as he slid the zipper slowly from the base of her neck to just above the delicious swell of her buttocks, teasing himself with the slow reveal of her pale, soft flesh. His fingers trailed behind the zipper, stroking her silky skin. The red lace bra strap made him impatient to see more, but he slowly pushed the dress down over her hips to reveal sheer matching panties.

He groaned, squeezing the succulent flesh that filled his hands.

“Is this for me, kitten?”

She peeped at him over her shoulder.

“I didn’t really think I was going to end up in the second bedroom.”

He squeezed again, fighting the urge to drop to his knees and sink his fangs into her delicious buttocks, but one step at a time. He slowly spun her around, groaning again at the sight of her bountiful breasts threatening to overflow the pretty lace bra.

“It’s a good thing I didn’t realize what you were concealing under your clothes before. I’m not sure I’d have been able to resist.”

A surprised giggle escaped her lips.

“I thought you’d prefer these to more tights.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. I would have ripped them off you the way I almost did last night. But I do prefer these.”

He stroked his thumb across a swollen nipple, the same soft peach as her pretty lips. The red lace that barely covered her breasts was no barrier to his touch, and he smiled when she arched her back, silently asking for more. His gaze traveled down across her luscious body to her lower lips, already damp and swollen beneath the lace. Gathering a handful of lace in his hand, he pulled it tight against her clit, loving the way the flush on her cheeks started to spread down across her chest. Would it go all the way to those pretty nipples?

He released his grip and slid his hand down over the damp fabric. She gasped and spread her thighs farther apart as the intoxicating scent of her arousal filled his head.

“Look at how wet you are,” he crooned as he tugged the panties lower to show the top of her curls. “So pretty and so wet for me.”

She made another soft noise of agreement.

“You’d let me do whatever I wanted to you, wouldn’t you?”

Her face flushed but she nodded, her eyes trusting, and his cock jerked against his pants. He was so hard it hurt.

“I want you in my bed.”

Her eyes darted over to the large bed with its high carved frame, and he gave her a wicked smile.

“Should I start by draping you across it like a feast and eating you for hours?”

Her lips parted when she gasped, and he brushed a thumb across the soft flesh.

“Or I could start with your mouth and work my way down, to see how many times I could make you come before I finally entered you.”

Her little whimper nearly brought him to his knees and he had to pause.

“Or I could bury my tongue in your sweet little cunt and fuck it deep and hard.”

He slid a finger through the dark blonde curls and then into her heated channel as she clenched around him with another whimper.

“Do you like the idea of that, kitten?”

She nodded frantically as he rocked his finger in and out, then gave a faint protest when he withdrew.

“But first...”

He quickly unclasped the bra and pushed it off her shoulders, letting her luscious breasts spill free. As he slid his finger back into her cunt, he bent her back over his arm and took a plump nipple into his mouth. Her eyes fluttered closed as she arched against him. He sucked hard, then harder still, driven by her cries of pleasure, until her nipple was throbbing against his tongue. His fangs descended and he was so close to biting the taut peak, knowing it would send her into an instant climax, but he forced himself to raise his head despite her muttered protest.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

Her nipple glistened, swollen and distended, and he brushed a quick kiss across it as he lifted her into his arms and carried her to his bed. Her pale body gleamed against the dark sheets, spread out like the feast he had envisioned.

“Do you trust me, kitten?”

She didn't even hesitate.

“Of course I do.”

Her trust was as intoxicating as her luscious body, and his cock throbbed so hard he was afraid he would disgrace himself. A deep breath didn't help, filling his lungs with her sweet scent, but he finally wrested his body under control and bent down over her, tracing her curves with the tips of his fingers as his fangs teased her neck. She tilted her head, exposing her neck even more, but he forced himself to move on.

Instead, he kissed his way down to the enticing curves of her breasts, lingering over her nipples before moving lower. Herbellybutton was surprisingly sensitive and he teased it until her hips began to move restlessly. Then he licked and nibbled his way across the sweet curve of her belly until he reached the top of her mound.

She gave a startled little gasp when he lifted one thigh and draped it over his shoulder.

“Damian?”

“Hush, kitten. I want to taste you.”

He stroked her with his tongue, sucking gently as he nudged her clit, then driving into her with his tongue. She came with a helpless moan, trembling as she coated his tongue with her sweetness, and he drank greedily, savoring each quiver until she went limp against his mouth. Only then did he raise his head to give her a satisfied smile.

“Delicious. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you.”

The words felt uncomfortably close to the truth, but he forced himself to focus on giving her pleasure. He flipped her over, placing her on her hands and knees.

“Hold on to the headboard, kitten.”

As soon as she grabbed the intricately carved wood, he lifted her hips even higher, exposing her completely to his greedy mouth. He drove his tongue deep into her silken folds and she cried out, but he kept a tight hold on her luscious hips as he lapped at her sweetness, swirling it up over her still sensitive clit. She jumped, her body already quivering, and he purred with satisfaction.

“You taste so sweet when you come. You can’t blame me for wanting more.”

He gently pressed a finger into her slick, swollen passage.

“Do you like that, kitten?”

She gave a gasping sob, rocking back against him as he worked his finger deeper.

“Do you like it even more when I rub your sweet little clit?”

“Y-yes,” she whimpered when he stroked the swollen bud.

He continued devouring her, one greedy mouthful at a time until she was thrusting

her hips desperately against him, and then he worked a second finger into her narrow channel. He scissored them, trying to open her further as he sucked on her clit.

“Damian! Please!”

He raised his head.

“What is it, kitten? Do you want me to stop?”

She shook her head wildly.

“God, no. I need you inside me. Now.”

He growled, ripping his pants away then kneeling behind her. He stroked his cock through her slick folds, pausing when the tip of his cock reached her entrance. Despite his efforts, her entrance still looked impossibly small compared to the throbbing ivory rod of his cock and he hesitated.

She made an impatient noise and thrust her hips back, surrounding the head of his cock in silken heat. His doubts vanished, and he growled and surged forward. She cried out and he tugged her back against him, stretching her to receive every inch of him. Her sweet little cunt gripped him like a tight glove as he rocked into her and his hand slipped beneath her and found her clit. The slick silken walls around his cock began to ripple as her climax swept over her and he could finally let go.

His hips slammed against her as his cock drove into her channel again and again. The sound of their bodies meeting mingled with her urgent cries, her tight passage clinging to him as if she were trying to suck him deeper into her body. His own release rose like a flood until he couldn't hold back any longer and he plunged balls deep, throwing his head back with a roar as he exploded inside of her.

He actually thought he blacked out for a second, gradually becoming aware that she had collapsed beneath him, his weight resting heavily on her smaller form, his cock still buried inside her.

Page 35

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

He quickly apologized and shifted to one side, but she only sighed happily.

“You can rest on top of me anytime.”

He stroked a hand down the graceful curve of her back to her ass and then leaned down to kiss the tempting flesh, letting his fangs scrape lightly across it as she squeaked. He had so many plans for her, but he had time.

Not enough time.

He gently rolled her over, and she blinked up at him, her eyes still heavy-lidded with pleasure. Her cheeks were flushed and her nipples swollen, the signs of his possession clear on her pale skin, and he only wanted her more. He was beginning to think he would never stop wanting her.

CHAPTER 17

Wendy lay in Damian’s arms, listening to him breathe.

“I guess you do need to breathe,” she murmured, and he laughed.

“I do, although I need less oxygen than humans, and can go for longer without it.”

She stroked his chest thoughtfully. That had been the most delicious, mind-blowing sex she’d ever experienced, but...

“You didn’t bite me.”

His chest tensed beneath her cheek.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I did not have your permission.”

It seemed reasonable, polite even, but there was something odd in his voice. She rolled over so she could see his face.

“I wouldn’t have refused you.”

His cock jerked against her stomach although his face remained neutral.

“It is not a decision to be made in a moment of passion.”

“We’re not having one now,” she pointed out. “I’m still saying yes.”

This time his cock jerked so hard it actually lifted her a little away from his body, but his eyes were fixed on her face.

“Why?”

It was a good question. Part of it was sheer curiosity. Another part was because she was convinced it was going to feel wonderful. But the biggest part was that it felt as if it would establish another connection between them, deeper than just their sexual attraction. But she wasn’t sure she was ready to tell him that, so she turned the question back to him.

“Why are you hesitating?”

He pulled her higher on his chest, settling her back in his arms as he stared at the ceiling.

“There are different kinds of feedings,” he said slowly. “One is just that, feeding for nourishment. It is usually transactional. There are vampires who prefer to feed from a person and people who are willing to donate for a price.”

“It sounds very clinical.”

“It is, but even under such conditions, there is an element of pleasure involved for both parties. Which leads to the second type, one which is part of and enhances a sexual encounter.”

Her nipples beaded against his chest.

“Is that what ours would be?”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

He didn't answer her directly.

“And then there's the third type. Vampires don't have fated mates like some species, but that type of feeding can establish a mate bond. Or so they say.”

“You don't believe it?”

“I don't know. My parents were supposed to be mates, but there was never any real closeness between them. Or me. My father was—is—fond of me. My mother less so. So no, I don't believe they had a mate bond. On the other hand when my father met Nakor's father, there was undoubtedly a bond. I don't know which side it came from.”

“Maybe both?”

“Maybe.”

Her heart pounding, she gathered her courage.

“If you were to feed off me, which type would it be?”

He hesitated for so long that her chest began to ache. She was just about to flee for the bathroom when he rolled her over again, coming down on top of her. God, she already loved the feel of that big hard body on top of her.

“I have no doubt that it would increase our sexual pleasure.”

He lowered his head, sucking gently at her neck until she started to squirm beneath him and he raised his head again.

“I don’t know if it would establish a mate bond.”

“Oh.” Her eyes started to sting but she couldn’t flee now with his weight holding her down.

He stroked his thumb gently across her cheek.

“And I am a coward. I want that. Very much. But what if it doesn’t occur?”

“You want it?” she whispered.

“Very much,” he corrected. “Even though my life is here and yours is not. I would offer you a permanent job in my kitchen if I thought that was what you wanted, but I’m not sure that it is, is it?”

“I don’t think so.” His eyes closed for a brief second when she answered him. “I loved working here Friday night and I’m sure I will enjoy this week, but every day? I don’t think that’s what I want any more.”

“And to maintain your blog, you must travel?”

She nodded reluctantly. She could explore the local area in more detail for a while, but eventually she would run out of places to visit.

He stroked her neck, his eyes solid black.

“Then I think I should not feed from you. I would be... unhappy if a bond were not made, but it would be even worse to create a bond that has no future.”

She understood his reluctance, but if they... loved each other, couldn't they find a way? And was this mating bond the same as love?

"I can see that busy little mind working, kitten, but there is one more thing you need to know. Vampires are possessive. If I werenot able to see you—to see my mate—every day, it would drive me insane."

He spoke almost lightly, but the darkness remained in his eyes. She did her best to match his tone.

"So no long-distance relationships?"

"Absolutely not," he growled, his hand tightening on her neck.

Excitement shivered through her body, and she reached up to thread her fingers through his hair.

"Then how about this? We spend this week together, share as much pleasure as we possibly can without you feeding, and see where we are at the end of the week? Maybe we can think of another alternative."

From the look on his face, he wasn't hopeful, but he nodded anyway, then slid his hand beneath her to squeeze her ass.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

“I’m afraid that I sadly neglected your luscious ass last time. I intend to correct that now.”

“All right,” she whispered as he flipped her over.

A very long time later, when she was still sticky and shaking and smiling, he bent down to kiss her shoulder.

“I’m going downstairs to forage for food, assuming our mysterious intruder hasn’t destroyed anything else. Just rest until I return.”

She mumbled an assent, but despite the satisfaction filling her body, her mind refused to settle. She climbed out of bed and washed quickly in the large, luxurious, and yes, dark bathroom before wrapping one of his shirts around her and wandering out into the living room. A big chair was placed in front of the fireplace, a stack of books and newspapers on the floor next to it. She picked up one of the papers and started to read through it, amused to realize that Flora’s name was mentioned several times.

When she went to return it, one of the papers in the bundle fluttered in the draft—except there was no draft. She cautiously pulled it free but it didn’t seem any different than the other one she’d read. She flicked through it curiously, pausing when she saw a picture of the bungalow.

“Didn’t I tell you to remain in bed?” Damian asked when he returned with a heavily laden tray.

“I was restless, but listen. Do you know anything about this house?”

“Not really. It was abandoned for years before I bought it.”

“You didn’t wonder why it was abandoned?”

He shrugged. “Not really. I was more concerned with whether or not the roof was intact—which it was. It’s a very well-built house.”

She waved the newspaper at him.

“It was abandoned because it was the scene of a murder!”

“Ah, you found it. I saw something about the house in one of the papers, but then I couldn’t find it again.”

“Did you hear me? A murder. In this house!”

He put the tray down on the coffee table, then scooped her up before sitting down again with her on his lap.

“It happens, kitten, especially in older houses. Houses have history.”

“And this one has a doozy.”

She could tell he wasn’t listening, his hand sliding into the open neck of the shirt to tease a swollen, sensitive nipple. She gasped and batted weakly at his hand.

“And what’s more, guess when it happened?”

“When?” he mumbled, his mouth working her neck. For someone who refused to bite her, he spent a lot of time on her neck.

“Fifty years ago next week! Maybe Kai is right. Maybe you do have a ghost.”

He finally raised his head to give her a skeptical look.

“Don’t tell me you believe in ghosts.”

“Why not? People didn’t believe vampires were real for a long time.”

“But we are and ghosts aren’t,” he said firmly and swung her around to face him.

She gasped again as the position brought her throbbing clit into direct contact with his erection.

“Flora said feeding gives vampires more stamina, because of the blood flow,” she whispered as he reached between them and freed his erection.

“Are you complaining about my stamina?”

“God, no.” She stroked her hand up and down the thick white shaft. “If you had any more stamina, I’m not sure I’d ever be able to walk again.”

Page 38

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:34 am

The red sparks appeared as he reached down again and discovered she was already slick with excitement.

“I believe you’re ready for me again, aren’t you, kitten?”

His teasing circles around her clit were starting to make her quiver again and she nodded frantically. He lifted her up and positioned his cock against her entrance.

“Here’s to stamina.”

He slammed her down hard, sending her into an instant climax, and she forgot about murders and ghosts, forgot about everything except the thick shaft filling her so perfectly and the climaxes that kept rolling on and on.

CHAPTER 18

Damian walked into Midnight Manor, frowning. It was Tuesday afternoon and the restaurant was set to reopen for normal business hours the following evening, but he was having serious doubts about the wisdom of proceeding. There hadn’t been any more malicious incidents, or any incidents as far as he was concerned. His stubborn little kitten disagreed. No matter how often he tried to change her mind, she was convinced the house was haunted.

He admitted there had been a few... odd occurrences, but he was sure there was a rational explanation for all of them. The bathroom window that kept flying open to let in a blast of cold air? A warped frame. And if his attempt to nail it shut had failed, it was simply due to the age of the wood.

The noises from beneath the floors? Just the normal expansion and contraction of old plumbing. It had been in good shape when he bought the property, but that had been ten years ago. It wasn't surprising that the pipes occasionally groaned, and that the pressure was low, making it difficult to rinse dishes.

And then there was the way that small items seemed to be moving around, but that was undoubtedly due to the fact that two people were living in the house now. They might not remember moving them, but it was easy to overlook an absent-minded gesture—and both of them had a lot on their minds.

He was sure that Wendy was his mate, but that made the possibility of a mate bond even more terrifying. What if it didn't have the same effect on her? What if she left him the way his mother had? The way his father had? He would be back on the outside in the cold. He knew he was being a coward, but they hadn't come up with a solution to the logistical issues.

If the mishaps ceased he could travel with her, at least occasionally, but he couldn't abandon everything he'd built for weeks at a time. Could I? He'd actually begun to consider it, asking Nakor to send out some queries to his contacts looking for a good restaurant manager. He didn't like the idea—like all vampires he was a homebody at heart—but if it meant he could keep his kitten, he'd do it.

But could he make the arrangements before the end of the week? Or persuade her to stay longer? He had the uneasy feeling they were running out of time. All of which made him even more reluctant to waste any of their time together by opening the restaurant. Perhaps it was that urgency that led to the frequency of their lovemaking. He would reach for her two or three times a night, and in the morning, and pretty much anytime their eyes met and she gave him that sweet, teasing smile.

She was just as eager. She'd even ambushed him in the shower that morning, kneeling in front of him while he had his eyes closed so the first sign of her presence

was that hot, sweet mouth closing over his cock. And when he'd looked down and seen her smiling up at him, he'd exploded almost immediately. He'd made up for it of course, carrying her back to bed and feasting on her delicious body until she was too limp to move.

His mouth watered at the memory, his fangs descending. It was something of a miracle that he hadn't bitten her. His fangs were almost always present and she enjoyed him using them as much as he did. Somehow he'd managed to avoid breaking the skin. He'd come close the previous night when he'd been nibbling on her ass, a finger in each of her sweet little holes, and she'd climaxed so hard she'd almost broken both digits.

Yes, it was definitely time to carry her off to bed again. He climbed the stairs, but their rooms were empty. And cold because the bathroom window was open again. He slammed it shut and went back downstairs.

"Wendy?"

No response. He tried calling her phone, but there was no answer. Where could she be? She hadn't mentioned going anywhere when he left, and he knew she wasn't at the inn because he'd just been there. He'd gone to enlist Flora's help in convincing Wendy that ghosts didn't exist, but she'd only raised a mocking eyebrow.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Of course I am. Are you trying to tell me I'm wrong?"

She shrugged, making the tiny bells on her yellow tracksuit tinkle merrily.

"I haven't encountered any personally, if that's what you mean, but there are more things in heaven and earth..."

“That’s not helpful,” he snapped.

“Then maybe you should consult an expert.”

“An expert in ghosts?”

“Worth a try.” She rose from the table and started to wander away, flicking his ear painfully in the process. “Stubborn boy. Won’t believe the evidence in front of your eyes.”

“What evidence?” he yelled, but she was already gone, leaving only silence behind.

Just as the house was now silent. He pulled out his phone and started making calls.

“What?” Nakor snapped. “We’re busy.”

“Wendy isn’t there, is she?”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:35 am

“Of course not. One woman is more than enough for me.”

“That’s not what I meant. I came home and she’s not here. She didn’t leave a note, and she’s not answering her phone.”

Nakor sighed, and he heard the faint rustle of material.

“I’m on my way. I’ll check with Trogar on the way. I know she’s talked to Pippa a few times.”

Panic was starting to seep into his gut, but he continued making calls. No sign of her at the coffee shop or the book store or the thrift shop. Cody hadn’t heard from her and he was even desperate enough to call Jack. By the time Nakor swooped down a short time later, a red haze had crept over his vision.

“Charlotte stayed at the house just in case she went up there. Is her car still here?”

“Yes,” he growled, fighting for control.

Nakor clasped his shoulder in a hard, oddly comforting grip.

“We’ll find her, but maybe you should call the new sheriff.”

“Eric? How can he help?”

“I don’t know, but it’s his job.”

Willing to clutch at any straw, he called the Sheriff's Office and Eric promised to come over immediately. Then Trogar arrived, sitting with him while Nakor took to the air to survey the town.

"I don't need a babysitter," he growled.

"Nope," the big orc agreed, calmly whittling a piece of wood.

"You'd be more use out there searching."

"I doubt it." Trogar looked up long enough to give him a quick, sympathetic glance. "If she doesn't show up soon, call my brother. He's in security."

Could someone have taken her? His stomach clenched so hard he felt sick.

Eric showed up a short time later, his hard, professional demeanor a far cry from the wild wolf he'd known as a teenager. He took down the information, then frowned.

"And no one's reported seeing her?"

"No," he snapped, fighting for control. "And you know how fast word spreads in this town."

Still frowning, Eric walked down the hallway to the back door, looking out over the patio and garden beyond as Damian followed him, unable to remain still.

"No tracks." Eric pointed out over the undisturbed snow. "Who's been here since you returned?"

"You, Nakor, and Trogar. No one else."

“That should be distinctive enough. Wait here.”

Damian stared through the front window as Eric walked to the sidewalk and back, then began to circle the house.

“What the hell is he doing?”

“Looking for tracks,” Trogar said calmly. “Your mantelpiece ornaments are not in order. Would you like me to correct them?”

“I don’t give a fuck!” he yelled, then started moving from room to room, trying to watch what Eric was doing from inside the house.

The sheriff made two circuits, then returned to the house, still frowning.

“I don’t think she left the house. The only tracks I can find are from the three of you. And they are of a uniform depth so no one was carrying her.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:35 am

“Of course they weren’t carrying her. They’re my friends. But if she hasn’t left the house, where is she?”

“Is there an attic?”

“No, the ceilings upstairs follow the line of the roof.”

“A cellar?”

“Just a small area below the stairs we use for wine.” He’d called down there before, but this time he actually descended the stairs and checked behind each rack of shelves.

Eric accompanied him, and returned to the main floor shaking his head.

“Her scent is here, but it’s spread throughout the building. The house was built after the Civil War so it’s unlikely that there were any hidden passageways.”

Hidden. A thought hovered just out of reach. Something he’d seen? Or something someone had said? Perhaps something he’d read.

“The murder!” he yelled and raced up the stairs, Eric on his heels.

“What murder?”

“It happened fifty years ago. A husband killed his wife and disappeared.”

Cold air swirled through the room as the bathroom window flew open again, but it disturbed the stack of papers and the one he'd been looking for landed on top. A chill that had nothing to do with the temperature shivered down his spine, but he ignored it as he snatched up the paper and turned to the story.

"Look, here it is. It says that her body was found in a hidden cellar beneath the house. I just assumed it was talking about the wine cellar, but look at this diagram. It must be half the size of the other one."

"But where is it?" Eric yelled after him as he flew back down the stairs.

He was ready to rip up every piece of flooring plank by plank if necessary, but he forced himself to stop and think. The HVAC company had been under the house when they installed the new system, but they hadn't been able to get under the kitchen because it had been placed on a solid foundation and they'd installed mini-splits instead.

"The kitchen!"

Eric followed him, but the room looked exactly the way it always did. The werewolf began to cross the room sniffing, searching for traces of her scent, while he started to inspect the walls. He was about to give up and start tearing up the floors when a cold draft crossed his neck. He whirled around and thought he caught a flicker of light beneath the pantry door. He tore it open but the space also looked just as it always did... except for the apple lying on the floor next to a basket of apples. He bent down next to it and saw a very faint mark outlining a square on the floor.

"Eric!" he yelled, trying to tear at the floor.

"Let me."

Eric reached past him, claws extended. He sank his claws deep into the wood and pulled. For a moment nothing happened, but then the square of wood flew up in the air.

“Damian!” Wendy sobbed.

Her face was framed in the opening, pale, tear-stained, and alive. There was a ladder on the wall, but he braced himself against the side of the pantry and reached down far enough to grab her upraised hands. He was vaguely aware that Eric had grabbed his legs, but all he cared about was Wendy’s cold little fingers wrapped around his as he pulled her up out of the ground and into his arms.

She was safe, and for now that was all that mattered.

CHAPTER 19

Four hours earlier...

Wendy prowled restlessly from one end of the living area to the other. Damian had gone off on some mysterious errand, leaving her at loose ends. If he’d been here, they would undoubtedly be back in bed by now. Or on the couch, or the chair, or the dining room table. They couldn’t seem to get enough of each other, and as much as she enjoyed it, she couldn’t help thinking that it was driven partially by desperation. Three days had ticked past and they were no closer to a solution than they had been originally.

I could work in the kitchen, she told herself. The future would be much easier if they were both living and working in the same place. But she couldn’t escape the nagging feeling that she would regret it.

Even though I love him? She had absolutely no doubt about her feelings, although she

had yet to voice them. It didn't seem fair to add that into the situation. He'd begun to hint that he was considering accompanying her on her travels, but she didn't want him to feel compelled to join her.

Hell, she wasn't even sure she wanted to travel as much. She loved Fairhaven Falls and it felt like home, but her blog was important to her too. It was important because of the people and food she discovered.

She made another circuit of the room then decided to seek comfort in her usual way—with cooking. She headed downstairs to the restaurant kitchen, but once she got there she couldn't decide what to make. If only there were a recipe that would help her solve all her problems. The thought made her smile, but it also triggered a memory. Sitting in the kitchen of a small Greek restaurant in Georgia while the grandmother explained to her in broken English about a wish cake.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:35 am

The unfrosted cake was typically made to celebrate the New Year, and like a British Christmas pudding it contained a coin that would bring luck to the person who found it. Not that she really thought it would help, but it was a nice idea and it would give her something to do.

As she turned towards the oven, something flickered in the corner of her eye. A chill ran down her spine, and she sighed. No matter what Damian believed, she was absolutely convinced that the house was haunted. She was equally convinced that the ghost was trying to communicate with them, although she had no idea what it was trying to say. Was there some hidden meaning in the perpetually open bathroom window? Or the way her brush kept popping up in unexpected places?

“I don’t suppose you could just leave me a message?” she asked the silent kitchen.

Of course there was no reply, but that didn’t change the fact that she felt as if someone were watching. The last time she’d felt like that, she’d been right, even if it turned out to be Damian. Why was he so convinced that ghosts didn’t exist?

Another flicker, but this time it seemed to be coming from the pantry. She cautiously opened the door and turned on the lights but nothing seemed out of place. At least while she was here she could gather the ingredients for her cake. She reached for the flour—and an apple fell to the floor, the thud echoing in the small space. Her heart started to race. How had that happened? Was the barrel overstocked?

Everything appeared perfectly normal, but that didn’t quiet her racing heart. She bent down to pick up the apple and as she did, she noticed a very faint square outline on the floor. Was this the cellar where the woman’s body had been found? She’d read

about it in the article, but she'd always assumed it had been filled in. Maybe it was just a trap door?

She ran her fingernails cautiously around the edge, trying to see if she could pry it open but it didn't move, which must mean there was a catch of some kind. If she could find it, she could surprise Damian when he returned. She stepped back, studying the floor. There had to be a handle or knob or lever somewhere.

Nothing. She kneeled next to the square and ran her fingers across the floor, then up the wall. Her heart started to beat faster when she found a small depression set in the wall that was only detectable by touch. Her breathing sounded loud and harsh in the silent pantry as she tentatively pushed against it.

There was a moment of resistance, then an eerie creaking sound filled the space and the square lifted slightly. Her head began to swim as she bent over to look. There was a ladder leading downwards, and the air coming from the gap was surprisingly chilly. She took a deep breath and told herself to calm down.

Nothing scary down there, just an old cellar. She fumbled her phone out of her pocket and turned on the flashlight app, aiming it down into the hole. All she could see was a rough dirt floor and part of an old brick wall. With trembling fingers, she grabbed the edge of the door and pulled it all the way open, so it leaned against the back wall of the pantry. Then she bent over again to see if she could observe more through the wider opening.

A small ice-cold hand pressed hard against her back, and she tumbled down into the cellar. Fortunately, she didn't have far to fall, but she landed hard enough to knock the breath out of her, her head hitting the wall as she landed. Her vision turned grey, but the last thing she saw before she passed out was the trap door closing.

She wakesome unknown time later to complete darkness, the blackness pushing

against her eyes in rolling waves. She bit her lip to stop herself from screaming as her memories came rushing back, then cautiously pushed herself into a sitting position. Her head throbbed and every inch of her body ached, but nothing seemed to be broken.

Damian will find me. She had absolutely no doubt he would never stop looking for her. But would he know to look here? Pushing aside the frightening thought she started patting the ground, looking for her phone. The ground was bone dry—she shuddered at the expression—but at least that was better than mud. The air was dry too, musty and unused.

A sob escaped her throat when her fingers encountered her phone and she snatched it up. The screen was cracked, but when she tapped it, it lit up and she bit back another sob. She tapped Damian's number but it only circled.

No bars.

I just need to get higher. She half-crawled over to the ladder, then very carefully began to pull herself up. The wood felt hard and smooth beneath her hands but she tested each rung. When she reached the very top, she pressed her phone against the trap door, but there still weren't any bars. Fuck. The tears were harder to fight back this time.

She tucked her phone back in her pocket and wedged herself against the ladder before trying to lift the door. It didn't move at all, but she kept trying until her back was aching and her legs were beginning to shake, then she climbed back down to the cellar floor.

Damian will find me, she told herself again and settled down to wait.

She kept her phone off for as long as she could stand it, until the weight of the

darkness made it hard to breathe, then flicked it on just long enough to see if by some miracle a bar had appeared. Time passed with excruciating slowness, but she forced herself to wait for an entire hour before she climbed the ladder to check again for a signal and to push uselessly against the door. Another hour, and then another.

Weariness started to creep over her, and she wondered vaguely if there was any source of oxygen. But maybe suffocation was better than dying from thirst or hunger. She was starting to drift off to sleep when she thought she heard a faint scratching noise.

Just an illusion, she decided, but then the trap door flew off, the rush of light almost blinding her as she finally took a deep breath. Damian's beloved face appeared above her and she threw herself at the ladder, climbing up until she could reach his hands, and then he pulled her up and out and she was safe in his arms as she sobbed her heart out.

She finally stopped crying long enough to realize that they were not alone. Nakor was there, and Trogar, and a big, scary-looking werewolf in a sheriff's uniform.

"The ambulance will be here in a minute," the werewolf said in a deep, oddly soothing voice.

"I don't need an ambulance," she protested.

"You are going to the hospital," Damian growled.

He looked so worried that she stopped arguing.

"Glad you're safe," Trogar said and left before she could thank him.

Nakor and the sheriff both waited until the ambulance arrived, which was probably

just as well since she thought Damian was going to attack the nice paramedic who tried to examine her. He finally consented to releasing her long enough for her to be examined, snatching her back into his arms the minute it was over.

“We’d like to take her in for a scan since she hit her head,” the paramedic said.

Damian gave a jerky nod and climbed into the ambulance with her.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:35 am

“Let me know if you remain in the hospital or come back here—” Nakor began.

“We will not be returning,” Damian growled. “But I will call you. And thank you.”

“That’s what brothers do.”

Nakor briefly clasped Damian’s shoulder, then took off.

“Thank you too,” Damian added to the sheriff. “If you hadn’t realized she was still in the house...”

He shuddered, his arms tightening almost painfully around her.

“All part of the job.” A surprisingly attractive grin flashed across the intimidating face. “I’ll follow you to the hospital and take the report.”

“Do you really think anyone will believe I was pushed into the cellar by a ghost?” she asked, and both males turned to look at her.

“Pushed?” Damian growled.

“By a ghost?” the sheriff asked doubtfully.

“That’s what it felt like—a small cold hand right between my shoulder blades.”

The two exchanged another glance.

“I assumed you’d accidentally discovered it and been trapped by mistake,” Damian said.

“I’m not stupid enough to have gone down there on purpose. I was pushed.”

“We should really get going,” the paramedic interjected.

The sheriff nodded and stepped back, the doors were closed, and the ambulance pulled away. She could feel the tension in Damian’s body but he didn’t say anything, and she decided to wait until he was ready. She nestled against him, taking comfort in his familiar scent, and was half-asleep when he finally spoke.

“I think you should leave town.”

CHAPTER 20

Once again Wendy found herself prowling around a room, but this time it was her old room at the inn. Damian had relented about making her leave town, probably because he couldn’t stand to let her out of his sight, but he’d categorically refused to let her return to Midnight Manor. It was closed for business until further notice.

“You know this is ridiculous,” she told him.

He didn’t respond, watching her with the same brooding stare that had been on his face ever since the incident two days ago. She had tried to get him to talk to her, but he seemed to be locked inside his own head. He never voluntarily touched her either, although she woke every morning to find him wrapped around her like a steel coil.

She sighed and went over to sit on his lap. He didn’t try to prevent her but neither did he respond, his hands clenching on the arms of his chair instead.

“Won’t you talk to me?” she whispered, deliberately brushing her lips against his ear.

His whole body shuddered, but at least that was progress. Usually he felt more like a statue than a living person.

“Please.”

She flicked her tongue very delicately along the shell of his ear. Then she was back on her feet and he was staring out the window, his breath coming in harsh pants.

“Do you want me to leave?”

“No!”

He whirled around at once, the red sparks flaring in his eyes, and she hoped that was another sign of progress. Anything was better than that awful dead blackness.

“Then you are going to have to talk to me.”

“I failed you.”

The words seemed dragged from the bottom of his soul, and her mouth fell open.

“What are you talking about? You found me, just like I knew you would. The whole time I was down there, that was the one thing I held on to—I knew you would never stop looking for me.”

“If it hadn’t been for me, you would never have been at Midnight Manor. And then I didn’t believe you about the ghost, and I left you alone.”

Once again the words seemed torn out of him, but at least he was finally talking.

“Stop that. If I hadn’t been curious enough to open the trap door, I would never have fallen in.”

“You didn’t fall. You were pushed.”

“But neither would have happened if it were closed. The whole thing doesn’t make any sense. Why show me the location of the cellar, then push me into it?”

An arrested look crossed his face.

“What do you mean, show you?”

“I’m sure something flickered beneath the pantry door. And then there was the apple.”

“The apple?”

“Yes, a single apple on top of the trap door. That’s why I spotted it.”

“It was there for me too—it’s also why I spotted the outline.”

“Do you think there are two ghosts? A good ghost and a bad ghost?”

For the first time in two days, a hint of a smile touched his mouth.

“I had a hard enough time believing in one.”

Emboldened by the almost smile, she walked over and wrapped her arms around his waist. He stiffened and she was afraid he was going to retreat again, but then he shuddered and hugged her back, clinging to her desperately.

“I thought I was going to lose you. It didn’t matter that I never fed from you—I already feel the mate bond between us.”

Reaching up, she tugged his head down towards her.

“Does that mean you love me? Because I love you so, so much.”

He shuddered again, his eyes closing in relief.

“That’s exactly what it means.”

And then he was kissing her, his mouth desperate, hungry.

“I do love you, kitten, my beautiful brave kitten. I’m sorry I haven’t said it sooner, but I was afraid. And now I’m even more afraid. I can’t let you go. I won’t let you go.

I will follow you wherever you want to go.”

A sob threatened to choke her as she smiled up at him.

“I don’t want to go anywhere. I was in trouble—we were in trouble—and everyone tried to help. We’re not going to find that on the road.”

“But your blog...”

“Thinking you’re going to die changes your priorities,” she said dryly, then hugged him again when he flinched. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know and I understand. Midnight Manor means nothing to me without you.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:35 am

She kissed him again, and then he was carrying her to the bed, pressing more sweet, desperate kisses to her neck and shoulders and any other part he could reach.

“I need you, kitten,” he rasped against her skin.

“I need you too.”

“I’m not sure I can be gentle.” His voice was a harsh growl, his hands already tugging at her clothes.

“I don’t want gentle. I want you—holding me, filling me, feeding from me.”

His eyes flared red as he tore the rest of her clothes from her body. He wasn’t gentle, but she didn’t care, she wanted every hot, demanding minute. His mouth clamped down over her nipple, sending a bolt of electricity to her swollen clit, and she cried out, digging her nails into his shoulders and urging him on. He moved to her other breast, sucking her deep into his mouth as he reached between her thighs.

He growled when he found her wet and ready, thrusting a thick finger into her willing body. She clutched his shoulders and he added a second finger, then a third, hard and fast and perfect, and she rose up to meet him, wanting more.

“Mine,” he rasped.

“Yours.” She could feel the prick of his fangs against her sensitive flesh as he buried his face in her neck. “Feed from me, Damian.”

He growled and plunged his fingers in deeper, the heel of his palm rubbing against her clit, and the sudden shock of pleasure sent her flying. She was still shuddering when he flipped her over onto her knees, fisted his cock, and drove into her throbbing channel, the sudden stretching almost painful in its intensity, but so, so good. His hands gripped her hips as he started to thrust, his big body covering hers as his mouth sought her neck again.

She was still shuddering from her first climax when the second one began, her body convulsing, and he sank his fangs into her neck, a brief spike of pain turning into a climax that rolled on and on, and his cock grew impossibly larger before flooding her with warmth. He clung to her, his body shuddering before flipping her over and examining her face with anxious eyes.

“Was that too much?”

“God, no. It was absolutely perfect.”

His eyes dropped to the bite mark on her neck, filled with satisfaction.

“My mate.”

“Your mate,” she agreed, reaching up and burying her fingers in his hair, even though her eyes were already growing heavy.

He gave a great, shuddering sigh and pulled her close as she drifted off to sleep. He woke her again during the night, licking gently at her bite mark, and she discovered it was almost as sensitive as her nipples. He took his time, sending her into climax after climax before he began thrusting wildly, his fangs once more in her neck as he sucked greedily.

Despite the interrupted night, she woke with the sunrise, feeling happy and energetic.

Damian was still asleep, his dark hair wild around his peaceful face. Since she was pretty sure it was the first time he'd really slept since the incident, she let him sleep, slipping quietly out of bed to take a peek at the snowy, sunlit day.

Her laptop was on the table next to the window, and she decided to post the last of her already prepared entries. She pressed publish, then scrolled idly through her feed until a familiar name caught her eye. Mystic Madam, otherwise known as Jessica. They'd met at a couple of conferences for small bloggers and she liked the friendly, slightly eccentric woman. She read through Jessica's latest post, then grinned and typed up a quick message. She'd just pressed send when Damian cried out her name and sat up, searching wildly for her.

"I'm right here."

She hurried back to his side and hugged him as he buried his face between her breasts.

"It's going to take some time before I stop panicking if I don't see you," he admitted, his voice muffled. "To believe you're real."

"Then I'll be sure to stay where you can see me," she said soothingly.

"Mmm."

He pulled back a little, but only far enough to draw her nipple into his mouth, sending a bolt of arousal through her body as she buried her fingers in his hair.

"I guess that's one way to be sure I'm real."

Her voice came out shaky, and he looked up at her and grinned, looking like his old self for a moment.

“Then I’d better make very, very sure.”

He did.

Two days later, Jessica arrived.

CHAPTER 21

“Absolutely not.”

Damian crossed his arms and glared at the two females on the other side of the table in the inn’s breakfast room. Last night his mate had simply introduced him to the woman sitting next to her as Jessica. She had waited until this morning to let him know that Jessica was also known as Mystic Madam, clairvoyant and ghost hunter. He supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised. Jessica dressed for the part, draping her slender body in multicolored layers of floating chiffon, wildly patterned scarves, and rows of jangling chains and charm bracelets.

He wanted to believe she was a fake, and yet until Wendy’s incident he’d been convinced that ghosts did not exist. And if ghosts did exist, it was certainly within the realm of possibility that there could be genuine ghost hunters as well.

“Don’t you want to get your restaurant back?” Wendy asked softly, putting a persuasive hand on his arm.

He did, actually. He missed it far more than he’d expected, and even though his mate was worth any price, he did sometimes wish he could have both. It would also be nice to have their own space. The inn was very comfortable and Alison and Will had been great hosts, but it wasn’t their own place.

“Yes, but it’s too dangerous.”

“No, it’s not. Jessica knows what she’s doing. She’s done hundreds of these types of

investigations, haven't you?"

"Well, perhaps not hundreds," Jessica said softly, "but a lot."

"And you'll be right there with us. Really it was just a foolish combination of circumstances last time. No one's ever been hurt before."

With his mate's pleading eyes on his face, he found himself weakening.

"If I should agree to this foolishness, what's your plan?"

"You know I think there are two ghosts, and Jessica agrees it's a possibility. We think the nice ghost is the woman who was murdered and the bad ghost is her husband."

"But didn't he disappear?" he asked, then shook his head. Why was he even debating this?

"Yes, but he could have been drawn back here after he died," Jessica said calmly. "That may even be what triggered the recent events, aside from the anniversary."

"I didn't realize ghosts were such dedicated timekeepers."

Wendy frowned at his cynical tone, but Jessica shrugged a small shoulder, making her jewelry chime.

"It's not time so much as events. Even if you don't have a calendar, you can tell when spring is coming or summer is ending. The events of their death have the same type of effect. Which means it's also the perfect time to encourage them to move on."

"What if they don't want to go?"

Jessica gave him a serene smile.

“Some methods of encouragement are more forceful than others.”

He had to admit that he was impressed by her confidence.

“I suppose I could take Jessica to the restaurant,” he said reluctantly. As long as he arranged for Nakor to watch over Wendy.

“I have to be there too, Damian.”

“Out of the question,” he snapped.

“Wendy is right. The fact that one of them manifested enough to touch her means that a bond was created between them. If that bond is strong enough, it could draw the spirit to her no matter where she was located.”

He gave her an appalled glance.

“It might follow her?”

“It is unlikely, but the possibility exists.”

So his two choices were to allow his mate into a situation which had proven dangerous in the past, or live in dread of it happening in a different location.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:35 am

“If I agree, I want someone else there to protect Wendy.”

She smiled at him. “I don’t need anyone else as long as you’re around.”

“Thank you, kitten, but I want someone focused entirely on you.”

Jessica nodded thoughtfully. “It would need to be someone who is already tuned to that location. A new person would disrupt the process.”

“What about someone who works for me? Like Cody or Nereus?”

Neither one of them was an ideal choice, but Nereus was still recovering from his sprained wrist. Cody didn’t exactly inspire confidence, but brownies were quick and clever, and he didn’t doubt the young male’s loyalty.

“I suppose I could ask Cody,” he said reluctantly when she nodded.

Both of them seemed to take his statement as agreement, and he supposed it was. He listened as they discussed various options with regard to specific times and locations and found his grip tightening on Wendy’s arm, just to measure himself that she was still next to him and still safe.

“I think a daylight ritual would be best,” he said. He had excellent night vision but most humans did not, and he didn’t want Wendy oblivious to her surroundings.

“I must admit I’d prefer that too. I’m not that... comfortable in the dark right now.”

“Then I suggest we use the period from daybreak to dawn,” Jessica offered. “There will be enough light to see by, and the rising of the sun is an excellent time to ease someone’s passage to the other side. Is tomorrow morning too soon?”

He fought back a wave of panic and looked at Wendy. She bit her lip but nodded.

“Good. Now there are three rites we should perform in preparation. A cedar log should be burned in each fireplace. All of the floors should be mopped with spring water, the purer the better. Once the floors are dry, a line of salt needs to be placed along every single windowsill and door threshold.”

“Do you want us to do that?” Wendy asked.

“Not you specifically, but it should be someone who is participating in the ritual.”

He sighed, and patted Wendy’s hand, already hating what was to come.

“If you will agree to remain in the same room with Will—and not leave it for any reason whatsoever—I’ll get Cody and we’ll take care of it.”

“I agree.”

“And I will remain at her side as well,” Jessica assured him. “She will be safe.”

He picked up his phone and dialed Cody. The brownie thought it was “awesome, dude” and didn’t seem concerned when he warned him that it might be dangerous. One of the advantages of youth, he supposed. They were all convinced they were invincible.

The supplies were not difficult to obtain and he very reluctantly left Wendy at the inn and went to meet Cody at Midnight Manor.

“I’ll start all of the fires and you can follow behind with a mop. Then we’ll both work on the salt.”

“You got it, dude.”

For once the cheerful expression didn’t annoy him.

“I appreciate your help, Cody, I mean, Kai.”

“No worries. This place is like my home away from home, y’know?”

“I know.”

As they walked through the front door, he half-expected to be assailed by psychic forces. Instead everything looked the same as it always did. Perhaps not quite the same, he amended as they set to work. He had the distinct feeling they were being watched. Jessica had warned him that their activity might disturb something and to ignore any attempts to communicate.

He kept thinking he saw something out of the corner of his eye, but he ignored it as he lit the fires. The bathroom window was open again, but he made no attempt to close it. The entire process took less than an hour, but even Cody seemed unusually subdued when they emerged.

“That was intense, dude.”

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:35 am

“Do you still want to come tomorrow? You don’t have to.”

“Course I do. Gotta look after your mate. I’ll be here.”

And he was, perched on the porch rail when they arrived back at the house at daybreak.

CHAPTER 22

Wendy clung to Damian’s hand as they stepped up onto the porch. She was convinced they were doing the right thing, but that didn’t prevent the nerves making her stomach churn. Taking a deep breath, she looked up at Damian and he raised a brow.

“Are you sure? We don’t have to do this.”

“I’m sure.”

“Very well.” He gave Cody a stern look. “Your only concern is to keep Wendy safe, understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

The brownie grinned when they both stared at him and shrugged.

“Didn’t seem like the right time for dude.”

She was still smiling as they followed Jessica over the threshold. Damian had told her that the place didn't look any different, and he was right, but the tiny hairs of the back of her neck stood up all the same.

Jessica smoothed the line of salt back in place, then led the way into the kitchen. Wendy hadn't been enthusiastic about performing the ritual in one of her favorite places, but she'd reluctantly agreed that it had the strongest connection to the hidden cellar.

Jessica drew a chalk design on the floor, then ringed it with salt as they all took their places at the four points of the compass. She wished she'd been close enough to Damian to hold his hand, but he was still a reassuring presence to her left. Even Cody's nonchalance helped calm her racing pulse.

Jessica arranged several items on the ground in front of her, and lit a candle. She began chanting something under her breath, her face serene, but for at least ten minutes nothing happened. Then icy fingers drifted across the back of Wendy's neck as the temperature in the room dropped significantly.

A figure began to form in the middle of the circle. A woman, perhaps her own age, but she was not what Wendy had expected. She had sharp features, her mouth pursed into a discontented bow—and small white hands. She was suddenly quite sure that this was the ghost who had pushed her into the cellar. From the malicious smile on the ghost's face when she looked over at her, she thought the ghost remembered it as well.

"It is time for you to move on," Jessica said calmly. "Your work here is done."

"No, it's not," the woman hissed. "I'm not leaving until he pays."

"Until who pays?"

“My bastard husband. This is his fault.”

Another figure began to manifest, a man this time. A big man with a kind, tired face. He looked sad. Jessica focused on him for a long moment before turning her attention back to the female ghost.

“It’s all his fault,” the woman repeated, pointing a long finger at him. “He was going to leave me.”

The sadness turned into a mixture of resignation and disgust.

“You can’t blame me for everything that went wrong in your life, Alexis. You were the one who had the affair with my brother. I warned you that he was dangerous, but you didn’t listen. You never listened.”

Wendy desperately wanted to know what had happened, but Jessica gave her an almost imperceptible head shake.

“You let him kill me!” Alexis shrieked, and an icy breeze swirled wildly through the room.

The man sighed. “I tried to stop him, and I paid the price. You have to accept some responsibility for your own actions.”

“I hate you!” Those malicious eyes traveled around the circle. “I will make all of you suffer.”

As she finished, she threw up her hands and the icy wind intensified, whipping Wendy’s hair into her face. The candle in front of Jessica flickered, but then Jessica began to speak. Wendy couldn’t understand the words, but the incantation was low, lyrical, and melodious. The candle flame grew stronger again. Alexis pressed her

hands against her ears, a horrified expression on her face, while the male ghost looked almost... hopeful.

Alexis began to transform, as if she were melting in the rain. Her body grew distorted, her face almost unrecognizable, and she shrieked in wordless rage. The screams escalated, her howls echoing around the room, but Jessica merely regarded her calmly as she finished her incantation.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:35 am

“It’s time to move on,” she said. “Everyone deserves peace. You are no longer of this world. There is nothing here for you.”

She reached down and tapped a bell, the clear note echoing through the room. The screaming intensified as the ghost began to swirl in a mad, terrifying cyclone, but Jessica didn’t flinch as she closed the book in front of her.

“You have been lost for too long, trapped between two worlds. It is time to find your way.”

The screaming stopped, and for a single heartbeat, the ghost was visible in the center of the swirling darkness. Then the darkness exploded outwards and the ghost vanished. Jessica blew out the candle and the kitchen door suddenly swung open to reveal a new, beautiful day.

They stared at each other, all of them stunned by what had just happened.

“Dude, that was awesome,” Cody exclaimed.

Jessica smiled at him, but she had a thoughtful expression on her face.

“Can we move now?” Damian asked.

“Yes, the circle is no longer needed.”

He immediately drew her into his arms, studying her face.

“Are you all right, kitten?”

“Better than all right.” Even the memory of her time in the cellar seemed muted somehow. “The house feels... lighter, doesn’t it? As if a weight has been lifted.”

He tilted his head, considering, then nodded.

“You’re right. This feels like home again.”

“Thank you, Jessica,” she said with a great sigh of relief.

Her friend was putting the items from the circle into her satchel, but she smiled over at her.

“You’re very welcome.”

“What happened to the male ghost? I didn’t see him vanish. He isn’t still here, is he?”

“The house is safe now.”

Which didn’t exactly answer her question, but she let it drop.

“I can’t help feeling sorry for him. All these years of being blamed for something someone else did—and his brother at that.”

For the first time Jessica’s composure broke.

“I agree it’s not right. The living can impose terrible burdens on the dead.”

Damian suddenly frowned.

“When we were at the inn, you said that sometimes when someone dies they’re drawn back to the place where something like this happened. You don’t think this brother is going to show up, do you?”

“I doubt it. He doesn’t sound like he has much of a conscience, and people like that rarely linger.”

“Alexis did,” she pointed out.

“Yes, but she was trapped by her anger. That was her unfinished business.”

Jessica rose to her feet, shaking out her layers of clothing and making her jewelry chime.

“You know, I think I may stay on in Fairhaven Falls for a little while.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:35 am

Her friend's voice was a little too casual, and she gave her an inquiring look.

"It's a wonderful town, but any particular reason why?"

Was that a hint of color on Jessica's pale cheeks as she shrugged?

"Not really. I've just been traveling a lot and I'm ready for a break. So you'll be seeing a lot more of me."

"That would be great," she said sincerely. "And I can introduce you to my friends here as well."

"Sounds good. I'll talk to you later."

"Much later," Damian muttered, and both women laughed.

"Can I clean up the witch stuff now?" Cody asked, and Jessica nodded. Cody went to get his broom, but reappeared again almost immediately. "Are we opening up tonight, boss?"

"No, I have plans for tonight."

From the heat in his eyes, she suspected she knew exactly what those plans entailed, and she had absolutely no objection.

"You got it, dude," Cody said cheerfully and vanished again.

“I guess he’s back to normal.”

“Apparently. But I’m not interested in Cody right now.” He rose to his feet, carrying her with him. “I’m far more interested in my beautiful mate.”

“Good.”

He carried her upstairs and into the bedroom. She couldn’t help stiffening a little as the dark walls surrounded her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Do you mind if we open the curtains a little? It’s kind of dark.”

He gave her a thoughtful look, but obeyed and she hid her best to hide her sigh of relief as the sunlight streamed into the room.

She was wearing her favorite yellow jumpsuit with a cropped white cardigan, and he slipped her cardigan down over her shoulders, his fingers skating lightly across her skin as he did.

“My sunny little kitten,” he murmured.

Something flashed across his face too fast for her to read, but she had a feeling she knew what it was—he’d just remembered the dilemma they’d faced prior to her encounter with the ghost.

“You know, I was thinking.”

She stroked her finger down his chest as he played with the wide straps of her jumpsuit.

“Yes?”

She could hear the suspicion in his voice and she laughed.

“Nothing bad, I promise. It’s just that the day of my encounter I was trying to decide on something to cook and I started running through all of the places I’d been and the meals I’d eaten and what made them special.” He was tensing beneath her hand again so she hurried on. “It occurred to me that it would be the perfect project—to assemble those experiences and those recipes into a cookbook.”

“And stop traveling?” he asked, his voice perfectly neutral.

“As much as possible. I might have to do some follow-up interviews, but they shouldn’t take more than a day or two so I wouldn’t be away for long.” She deliberately used the word *so* so he didn’t think she was planning on leaving him behind. “What do you think?”

His muscles relaxed beneath her hand as he let out a long sigh of relief.

“I think you are a very clever little kitten.” He slipped the straps of her jumpsuit down over her shoulders and started kissing her exposed flesh. She shivered when he sucked gently at her mating bite, sending a flare of excitement racing through her body. “In fact, I think such cleverness needs to be rewarded.”

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:35 am

He started tugging on her nipple as well, and her knees began to shake.

“What did you have in mind?”

Her question ended in a moan as he applied the perfect amount of pressure to the throbbing peak, right on the verge of being too much, and she tried to wiggle closer.

“Why don’t we start by seeing how many times I can make you come before I can’t wait any longer to sink my cock into your sweet little cunt. What do you think?”

“I think it sounds perfect,” she said, and it was.

EPILOGUE

Three weeks later...

Wendy walked into the restaurant kitchen and found Jessica perched on a stool talking to Cody. Her friend had been spending a lot of time with them, and while she was always happy to see her, she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something else behind the frequent visits.

“Hi,” Jessica said cheerfully. “You look very pretty.”

“I wanted to wear something appropriate for Valentine’s Day, even if Damian is working tonight.”

She’d chosen a pink dress with thin straps and built-in boning that did amazing things

for her cleavage. The nipped-in waist led to a full flirty skirt that danced around her knees.

“It’s definitely appropriate,” Jessica agreed. “The best I could do was pick up on the color scheme.”

“I noticed that you were all pinks and reds and whites.” She hesitated. “As far as I’m concerned you can wear whatever you want, but if you should ever decide to try something different, I’d be happy to go shopping with you.”

“I’ll think about it. I like my layers, but I may be making some changes in the near future and I might need some new clothes after all.”

“Anytime. One of the nice things about working on the book is how flexible I can be.”

Despite that, it was sometimes hard to tear herself away. She had already started assembling a list of recipes to consider, along with the stories behind them, and sketching out some ideas for the layout. Charlotte had also been happy to make suggestions based on her experience in the publishing industry.

She was a little surprised to find she didn’t miss traveling at all. She’d also cut her blog down to once a week and started moving it more into alignment with the book. All of which meant she had more free time to spend with her mate—when he was available.

He’d been very busy since the restaurant reopened, and it hadn’t seemed to slow down. Here it was Valentine’s Day and he was going to be busy in the restaurant all night. At that moment he strolled into the kitchen. Damn, he looked good. He’d traded his usual white shirt for a red silk shirt that showed off his pale muscular chest, and brought out hints of red in his dark hair.

“You look very delectable tonight, kitten,” he growled, his eyes tracing a heated path down her body.

“So do you. It’s a shame you’re going to have to work all night.”

He nodded solemnly, but she couldn’t help feeling that there was a smile lurking behind his serious expression. As a result she was thrilled but not entirely surprised when he came upstairs shortly after the first seating. She expected him to carry her off into the bedroom. Instead, he fastened her white cape around her throat and took her back downstairs.

“We’re going out somewhere? Really?”

“Not exactly.”

A smile still lurked behind those dark eyes as he led her outside and down the sidewalk - and then up to the bungalow next door. She gave him a puzzled look.

“Is someone giving a party here? I thought this house was empty.”

He didn’t knock, just opened the door and walked in so she followed him. The house was empty but in excellent shape. The walls had a fresh coat of pale cream paint, and the floors had been polished to bring out the rich patina of the old wood. It wasn’t a huge house, but the rooms were spacious and the high ceilings made them appear even more so. Even the kitchen had been recently remodeled with simple white shaker cabinets and marble counters.

“What do you think, kitten?” he asked as she inspected the kitchen, admiring the functional layout.

“I think it’s a great house.”

“Not too dark?”

“With all these windows and the pale walls? Of course not.”

He gave a sigh of relief.

“Good. In that case, what would you think about moving in here?”

“In here? But why?”

He lifted her up onto the counter so their faces were closer to the same height and put his hands on her waist.

“I’ve been thinking that maybe I could use a little separation from the restaurant. I know it’s still not very far,” he added quickly. “But I think this would feel more like our home.”

“I agree, but you’re there so much.”

“Maybe not as much going forward. I’ve decided to hire a manager.”

“Really? Who?”

“Jessica.” He grinned at her shocked face. “She has previous experience, and we already know she can remain calm under pressure. Plus she loves Midnight Manor. If we buy this house, I told her she could have the upstairs apartment. But only if you want to move. If you don’t, I’ll make other arrangements for her. What do you think? Would you like to move in here?”

“Is that why you asked me if it was too dark?”

“Yes. I know you’ve been struggling with the apartment. I was thinking about painting it—which we can still do if we stay there—but then I started thinking about a little more separation and I thought this might be a better option.”

“So you’re not just doing this for me?”

“No, I’m doing it for us.”

“In that case I’d love to move in over here.” She looked around and smiled, already envisioning where she would put furniture. “There’s the cutest pink velvet fainting couch at the thrift shop. It would look perfect?—”

She stopped talking because he was kissing her and he didn’t stop until she was too dazed to talk.

“You can furnish it however you want, kitten. But there is one room that is already furnished.”

He lifted her off the counter and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her through to the master bedroom. It was located at the back of the house and had French doors that led out to the garden, but the first thing she noticed was the huge four-poster bed draped with white linen curtains. Curtain color aside, it looked exactly like their bed.

“Is that our bed? The same one we slept in last night?”

“Yes, it is.”

“How in the world did you get it over here today without me noticing?”

“Magic.” He grinned down at her. “Happy Valentine’s Day, kitten.”

She threw her arms around his neck, kissing him as he carried her over to the bed, before a thought occurred to her.

“Oh no, your present is still back at the house.”

“No, it’s not. It’s right here, and I’m about to unwrap it.” He smiled down at her. “You’re everything I ever wanted.”

Happy tears threatened to blur her vision, but then he was kissing her again and that was all that mattered.

Flora strolled casually down the street, admiring the way the new fallen snow sparkled under the streetlights. She loved her town for many reasons, but the beauty of each season was certainly part of it, along with the variety of inhabitants. She paused outside Wendy and Damian’s house for a moment, smiling with satisfaction. An excellent match, and in the end, not a hard one. They’d just needed a little push. Her gaze drifted over to Midnight Manor and the lights glowing from the upper story. That represented a much more interesting problem, one she would have to consider carefully.

And then there was her other grandson. She sighed and resumed her walk. He was going to take more than a push. He might require a full stick of dynamite. But then she’d never hesitated to blow things up in a good cause. Whistling cheerfully, she rounded the corner and disappeared into the night.

Can Flora make a successful match for her very reluctant grandson?