



I Summoned A Demon For A Date?!

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Category: Fantasy

Description: "She needed a plus-one. He wanted her soul. Love was definitely not in the contract."

Rosie Thompson is about to be evicted, single, and socially demolished at her stepsister's engagement party. Her solution? Summon a demon and make a deal she'll probably regret later.

But Aldaine, demon, dealmaker, and disturbingly hot in both suit and horns, is not what she expected.

The soul-selling contract was supposed to get her through a week of family events with a fake boyfriend on her arm. It wasn't supposed to come with unexpected kisses or a slowly unraveling bond she doesn't understand.

Between masquerading as madly in love and navigating snarky relatives, Rosie's starting to realize this fake relationship might be the most real thing in her life.

Which would be fine... if she hadn't already promised him her soul.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I stared at the circle of salt in confusion before looking at the spellbook in my hand. I'd set it up correctly. The lines were perfect and a portable scale weighed the materials I brought out this morning from where it hid in the back of the pantry.

If everything was correct, then why didn't the summoning spell work?

I scratched the back of my left arm, forgetting that I had chalk all over my hand. I'd been at this for over two hours and my eyes were straining. I decided to take a break after not seeing a solution after another twenty minutes of flipping through the book with no answer in sight.

"That bookseller pulled one over on me," I grumbled and went into the kitchen to grab a soda. "Summon a demon, my ass." I sighed. It was illegal to summon them, but it's not like that stopped people.

My own fault really, for being taken advantage of.

I was just desperate. Rent was due next week, I had a total of five dollars and three cents left to my name, and I still had yet to get a call back on any of the interviews I'd done over the past month.

If something didn't happen soon, I'd be living in my car.

There was no way I would call my family for help. Not after the last time.

I sat on the couch to try to relax a little but my cell phone rang. I winced, the ringtone letting me know it was my step-sister. Just what I needed. I debated on ignoring the

call yet I knew it was inevitable that she'd keep calling until I answered.

"Hi, Stephany. What's up?"

"Hello, Rosie. You didn't respond to my text yesterday, so I thought I would give you a call."

Her sickly sweet voice made me want to punch something. It always had.

"Do you need a ride to my engagement party?"

You have to come! Mother was just talking to Denis and mentioned we hadn't seen you in ages.

" We'd been stepsisters for over twenty years but had never gotten along.

She always had to be the center of attention, and honestly, I never had an issue with it, but she wanted to make sure I knew I was always second best.

"Yes, Stephany." If my eyes could roll further into the back of my head, I'd probably see my brain. "I'll be there." I didn't know how I'd afford the gas, but I would get there to avoid the further judgment that would occur otherwise.

"Perfect! Should I put down a plus one?" The bitch paused.

"Oh, wait!" The smugness wrapped around me like a coiling snake.

"That's right, how could I be so insensitive?"

You and Greg broke up months ago. You poor thing.

Being single at the biggest party of the year will be rough.

" The glee in her tone did not match her words.

What a bitch.

I don't know what came over me next, but I ended up regretting it almost immediately.

"I'm seeing someone new, actually. Put down a plus one for me. See you soon, dear sister." The screen should have cracked with how hard I pressed the end call button.

Fuck.

Now I had to find a date for a week-long engagement party.

I went back to the summoning circle with determination.

"How in the nine hells did you manage to summon me?

!" The outraged demon inside the circle glared at me with promises of dismemberment and death in his eyes.

They were an impossible shade of amber-gold and I found myself staring longer than was probably wise when faced with an enraged supernatural being.

"This should be impossible." He attempted to step out of the summoning circle and cursed up a storm when the magic zapped his expensive-looking shoes, Italian leather if I had to guess because demons shopped at high-end boutiques apparently.

The demon looked like he'd stepped out of Vogue magazine instead of the bowels of

hell, all tailored suit and perfectly styled dark hair that made my secondhand clothes feel even shabbier in comparison.

He also wanted my head. Not that I could blame him, considering I'd yanked him here without so much as a please and thank you.

It?

I didn't know much about demons beyond what I'd frantically googled in the last twenty-four hours, and somehow 'proper pronouns for addressing hellspawn' hadn't made it into my rushed research.

"That's a great question?" I looked down at the spellbook, holding it upside down to see if I missed anything. "I can't believe it worked."

It worked! Holy shit.

"You didn't even think it would? Why bother? Gods, humans are annoying." The demon scoffed and rubbed his temples with a hand with some sharp-looking talons before turning to look at me murderously. "Why did you summon me? Let's get this over with."

"Oh.Um. Right. Next steps." I wasn't usually this unprepared for things, but my life was in the shithole lately. "What's the next step? Do you know?"

If the demon's eyes could get any bigger, I think they'd pop out of his sculpted face and roll across my dingy apartment floor.

Now that I had a second to look at him properly, and I was going with 'him' since everything from his stance to the way he carried himself screamed masculine energy, I had to admit he was a good-looking specimen.

My best friend Tammy would say he was hot as shepherd's pie and just as delicious, probably while fanning herself dramatically.

His coloring was fascinating, an interesting shade of dark magenta that reminded me of twilight just before full dark, and even the elegant curved horns on top of his head were magenta, just brighter, like neon signs in the rain.

The whole package was intimidating and alluring at once, which I supposed was the point of demon aesthetics.

Draw you in before they went for the kill kinda thing.

"You don't know what the next steps are? Why did you summon me?" His roar could probably be heard by my downstairs neighbor if he had been home. "Release me, human, before I disembowel your innards and grill them on a hellstone!"

Shaking my head, I crossed my arms in fake bravado that I did not feel inside. "No way. I know the basics." I was semi-sure of it, at least. "I want to make a deal, and until we finalize the deal, you're stuck in that circle."

"Fine. Why did you summon me? Do I need to keep asking?" If the demon could kill me, he would.

"I need a date." That was the first thing, but most important at this point. "To start with." Rent and having a place to live could wait if it meant rubbing something in Stephany's face for once.

"A date?" He crossed his arms, an incredulous look on his face. "That's why you dragged me here?"

I ran my fingers through my tangled hair, a nervous habit I'd never managed to break.

"Well, it wasn't, to begin with, but when I took a break from setting up the summoning circle, I got a call from my step-sister and she's such a bitch and always trying to make my life miserable that I now need a date to her engagement party to show her and all my judgy family that I'm fine and not a screw-up!

" I stomped my right foot in frustration, the thud echoing off the cheap floor.

Just thinking about Stephany's smug voice on the phone made my blood boil.

"What I need is a job so I don't get evicted soon and end up on the street, but the engagement party comes first." Pride was a hell of a motivator and I'd eaten enough of Stephany's shit over the years.

I glanced at the demon, suddenly aware of how unhinged I must sound.

"I'm sorry, I've been rude. What's your name? "

He blinked those otherworldly eyes, and his perfectly sculpted mouth dropped slightly. His magenta skin seemed to lose some of its rich color, fading to something closer to a dusty rose.

Could demons do that? Add that to the growing list of things I should have researched before attempting this whole summoning business.

"What do you mean, what's my name?" His voice dripped with disdain as perfectly manicured talons gestured in disgust at the salt circle surrounding him. "You couldn't have summoned me otherwise." Each word was precisely enunciated as if he were speaking to a particularly dim-witted simpleton.

I flicked open the worn book, its pages crinkled and dog-eared from my obsessive studying over the last few days.

Running my finger down the spell I'd used, I double-checked every detail before turning it to show him.

Years of Stephany snatching things from my hands had taught me caution, so I maintained a careful distance from the salt circle.

Getting murdered by an angry demon wasn't on my to-do list today.

"There was no mention of a demon's name here.

" I tapped on the yellowed page next to the intricate image of the circle that I'd painstakingly copied onto my floor using table salt from the dollar store.

The memory of how long it took to get those curves just right made my knees ache.

"What the fuck is this shit?" He reached for the book with those elegant talons, only to jerk back with a string of curses that would make a sailor blush when the circle's energy crackled against his skin.

The acrid stench of scorched flesh filled my tiny apartment, making me wince with unexpected sympathy.

I hadn't meant to hurt him. "That's not an actual spellbook.

Are you telling me you managed to summon me with a fake spell?

" He shook out his hand like someone who'd touched a hot stove, those otherworldly eyes wide with disbelief.

"This is ridiculous." His deep laugh started low in his chest before he threw his head back, the sound bouncing off my water-stained ceiling.

Uh oh.

Did I break him somehow?

I lowered the book to my side as I watched him.

I think I broke him. I scratched the back of my head with my free hand as I looked around my room in despair.

The way his throat moved when he laughed was oddly mesmerizing, and I found myself staring before I caught myself. Great, now I was ogling a demon. This night couldn't get any weirder.

"Look, regardless of how you were summoned, can we make a deal? Please?" I rubbed my forehead as I started to pace in front of him. "What do you want in return for being my date?"

"You were serious." He gave a dramatic sigh. "Fine. A date to this engagement party to show up your step-sister and family." He crossed his arms again. "Your soul is standard practice."

I stopped pacing and turned toward him. "When would you take my soul?" If he took it, I wouldn't have to worry about being evicted at that point. "What does that entail exactly?"

The demon crossed his arms, his tail flicked behind him. "You'll essentially be my servant for all of eternity, while you're alive and after you die." His grin was wicked. "I take care of my souls, don't worry. I can go more into it after you agree."

Fuck. Was I going to waste my deal on one-upping Stephany?

Why wasn't I terrified that I would be giving up my soul for this? Was I just that desperate?

Yes.

Yes, but maybe I could wrangle a better deal.

"You will go as my date, convince the family we're happy, and after you'll pay my rent so I'm not homeless while I serve you. Whatever that means."

The demon's eyes glowed bright red. "I will be your date to this and you shall sign your soul over to me. I agree to make sure you're housed and fed as well as a modest salary. Do we have a deal?" He held out his hand, careful not to go further than he needed to.

I was going to do this. It seemed almost too good to be true.

I reached through the circle and shook his hand.

No going back now.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

One moment I was in my town car heading to close a multi-billion dollar deal, the next I was yanked through space into a fucking summoning circle. A summoning circle that shouldn't have worked. No one had my true name, I'd made damn sure of that over the millennia.

Yet here I was, staring at a curvaceous redhead who'd somehow managed to do the impossible with what looked like a bargain bin spell book. The audacity of this human to summon me with a fake spell had my demon form rippling with rage beneath my skin.

But I'd played it cool. Made the deal. Because that's what demons do. We make deals.

As the deal snapped in place between us as we shook hands, I gripped her hand tighter than necessary and pulled her abruptly into the summoning circle.

Her other hand smacked against my chest as she attempted to not fall forward any further.

Her eyes widened as she stared up at me, fear perfuming the air and making me hard at its sweetness .

Fuck me. She was my mate.

The realization slammed into me with the force of a hellhound to the chest, making my demon form surge beneath my skin with possessive need.

This impossible, infuriating human who'd dragged me from my climate-controlled car

with a fake spell from what looked like a dollar store grimoire was my destined mate.

In all my thousands of years, through countless summoning circles and deals with desperate mortals, the universe decided to bind me to this one. The cosmic forces had a twisted sense of humor, and for the first time in centuries, I wasn't the one laughing.

The scent of her fear mixed with something deeper, something that called to the darkest parts of my being, and I knew with absolute certainty that I was thoroughly, completely fucked.

"Your name." I demanded, my voice rougher than intended. My hand was still gripping hers, and I could feel her pulse racing beneath my fingers. "Now."

"R-Rosie," she stammered, trying to pull back. I didn't let her. "Rosalind technically, but nobody calls me that except my stepmother when she's being particularly bitchy."

Rosie. My mate's name was Rosie. The irony wasn't lost on me. A flower name for a demon's mate. Her scent was intoxicating, a mixture of fear and something else. Something sweeter. Arousal maybe?

Interesting.

I forced myself to release her hand, though every instinct screamed to keep her close.

"Well, Rosie, you've managed to royally fuck up my afternoon.

" I shifted into my human form, watching her eyes widen as my magenta skin smoothed into a rich chestnut tone.

"I was in the middle of something rather important. "

"I'm sorry?" She didn't sound particularly sorry. "I didn't think it would actually work. I mean, who succeeds at summoning a demon their first try?"

"No one," I growled, running a hand through my hair in frustration. "It's literally impossible without a demon's true name. Yet here we are."

She bit her lower lip, drawing my attention to her mouth. Fuck, I wanted to bite that lip myself. "So, what happens now?"

What happens now is I figure out how to handle having a human mate while maintaining my reputation as a ruthless demon lord.

What happens now is I protect what's mine while pretending this is just another soul deal.

What happens now is I try not to bend you over the nearest surface and claim you properly.

I had to try to figure this out. A human.

It was ridiculous. Even if she was tempting.

Instead of saying any of that, I straightened my jacket. "Now, we discuss the details of our arrangement. When is this engagement party?"

"This weekend," she wrung her hands together. "Saturday night. It's at my family's estate outside the city."

Perfect. A weekend at an estate with my new mate, pretending we're dating while being magically bound together for eternity. What could possibly go wrong?

"Wonderful," my smile was all teeth. "Now, about that modest salary I promised."

I was preparing to leave, satisfied with how the deal had worked out when my new mate dropped what felt like a boulder on my head.

"So, I'll see you Thursday morning then? For the week-long engagement party?" Rosie casually twirled a strand of that enchanting red hair around her finger looking nervous.

I froze mid-step, my tail going rigid. "I'm sorry, the what now?"

"Oh, didn't I mention? It's a whole week of celebrations at the family estate. Stephany always has to do everything over the top." She shrugged those delicious curves, and I couldn't tell if she was being deliberately coy or genuinely didn't think it was important to mention earlier.

Part of me wanted to be furious. The demon lord part that had spent millennia crafting airtight contracts and ferreting out every possible loophole.

That ancient, calculating side of me bristled at being outmaneuvered so neatly.

But deeper inside, where instinct ruled over logic, my inner demon was practically purring with delight at how cleverly our mate had played this little game.

Such cunning deserved appreciation, even admiration.

Wait. When had I started thinking of her as my mate?

Oh right, the moment I'd touched her hand and felt that snap of connection.

Like a key sliding home into a lock I hadn't known existed.

That instant of perfect recognition I was deliberately not mentioning because she already had a mountain of family drama to deal with.

Adding "destined to be bound to a demon lord" to her list of concerns seemed cruel, especially when she was focused on surviving her stepsister's social warfare.

No, that particular revelation could wait until she wasn't quite so overwhelmed.

For now, I could be patient. I wasn't even sure how to deal with it myself.

"A week." I turned to face her fully, crossing my arms. "You negotiated for a 'date to the engagement party' knowing full well it was a week-long affair?"

Her green eyes widened innocently. Too innocently. "Is that a problem? I mean, technically, it is one party. Just annoyingly spread out. Over seven days. At my family's estate. Outside the city. "

I shouldn't find this amusing. I really shouldn't.

But watching Rosie try to justify her clever little manipulation was oddly endearing.

A small, shameful part of me wanted to chuckle at how neatly she'd maneuvered me into this week-long engagement party.

The demon lord in me should be bristling at being outmaneuvered so expertly.

Rosie's wide, innocent green eyes were doing their best to appear guileless, but I knew better.

Beneath that sweet facade lurked a cunning mind that could give even the most seasoned demon a run for their money.

The way she'd casually mentioned the "date to the engagement party," conveniently omitting the week-long affair, spoke volumes.

My mate was no meek, trembling human. She was a force to be reckoned with.

And I found that utterly captivating. After centuries of dealing with timid, simpering mortals, Rosie's bold spirit and sharp intellect were a breath of fresh air.

The thought of being the object of her cunning machinations sent a thrill down my spine.

Perhaps I would even let her win a few rounds, just to see what other delightful surprises she had in store.

"You do realize you've tricked a demon lord?" I raised an eyebrow at her, letting my human glamour slip just enough to show my true form's magenta coloring. "Most would consider that unwise."

Rosie bit her lower lip and I had to forcibly remind myself that ravishing her minutes after making a deal would be unseemly. Even if she was my mate. Even if that lip bite was doing things to my centuries-old control.

"Are you going to void the contract?" Worry finally crept into her voice.

I chuckled, the sound rumbling deep in my chest. "No, little minx. A deal's a deal. You were creative with the truth, but the contract stands." I stepped closer, enjoying how her breath caught. "I'm impressed. It's been a long time since anyone got one over on me. "

The relief on her face was palpable. "So you'll still come?"

"I'll pick you up Thursday morning. Pack for a week." I glanced around her modest apartment. "Do you have suitable clothing for whatever events your stepsister has planned?"

Her silence was answer enough.

"We'll need to fix that before Thursday." I pulled a business card from thin air and handed it to her. "Go to this address tomorrow. They'll take care of everything you need. Put it on my account."

"I can't do that!"

"You can and you will." I cut her off smoothly. "If I'm playing the devoted boyfriend, you need to look the part. Consider it an investment in our arrangement."

She clutched the card, staring at it like it might bite her. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. You still owe me your soul." I winked at her, enjoying how her cheeks flushed. "I'll see you Thursday morning, Rosie. Eight AM sharp."

As I prepared to teleport away, she called out, "Wait! I never got your name!"

I paused, realizing she was right. She'd summoned me without it, after all. "Aldaine."

"Aldaine," she repeated, and hearing my name on her lips sent a shiver down my spine. "I'll see you Thursday."

I vanished before I could do something foolish, like ravish her right then and there. One week pretending to be her boyfriend while hiding the fact that we were mates? Delightful torture was what it would be.

My inner demon was giddy at the thought of having Rosie on my arm, even if it was all an act. To the world, she would be mine, even if I couldn't claim her fully. Not yet, at least. I'd bide my time, let her get used to my presence, my touch. In time, she would come to crave it as much as I did.

As for Timothy, my second-in-command, the bastard was going to have a field day with this development.

No doubt he'd tease me mercilessly about my "human pet" and try to convince me to just take her soul and be done with it.

But I had other plans. Rosie was mine, and I had no intention of letting her go, not even for the entirety of my demonic existence.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, still trying to process everything that had happened yesterday. The dark circles under my eyes were a testament to my restless night, spent tossing and turning as I replayed every moment with Aldaine.

"You summoned a demon," I told my reflection. "An actual demon. With a dollar store spell book." A hysterical laugh bubbled up from my chest. "And then you sold him your soul for a date to Stephany's engagement party. Way to go, Rosie."

The platinum credit card on my bathroom counter gleamed mockingly. Aldaine had pressed it into my hand before leaving, telling me to "dress appropriately" for the week ahead. I hadn't even looked at the credit limit, too scared of what I might find.

My phone buzzed on the counter, making me jump. Charlie's face lit up my screen, and guilt immediately twisted my stomach. She'd been offering to let me move in with her for months now but my pride kept getting in the way.

"Hey Charlie," I answered, trying to sound more normal than I felt.

"Rosie Marie Thompson," Charlie's voice cracked through the speaker. "I just drove by your apartment building and saw the eviction notice on the door. Why didn't you tell me it had gotten this bad?"

I winced. "It's not that bad." Crap. The eviction notice? I hadn't even seen that yet.

"Not that bad? Rosie, you're about to be homeless! That's pretty fucking bad in my book. Pack your shit, you're moving in with me. No arguments."

"Actually," I picked up the credit card, running my thumb over the raised numbers. "I got a new job. And an advance on my salary."

The silence on the other end was deafening.

"What kind of job?" Charlie asked slowly. "Because if this is another sketchy Craig's List posting, I swear to all that is holy I will come and smack you."

"It's not!" I protested, then paused. Was selling my soul to a demon lord better or worse than that time I almost fell for a pyramid scheme? "It's complicated. But legitimate. Very legitimate." Right?

"Uh-huh." I could practically hear her brow raising. "And does this legitimate job have anything to do with the mysterious date you're bringing to Stephany's engagement party?"

Oh god. How was I going to explain Aldaine to Charlie? 'Hey, remember that demon-summoning spell we joked about last month? Well, funny story..'

"Sort of?" I squeaked. "He's, uh, my boss."

"Rosie!" Charlie screeched. "You're dating your boss? After what happened at your last job? "

"No! Well, not exactly. We're not really dating. He's just pretending. For the engagement party. It's complicated."

"Everything with you is complicated," Charlie sighed. "At least tell me he's hot."

The memory of Aldaine's demon form sent a shiver down my spine.

His skin, an unusual shade of dark magenta, was a stark contrast to the bright horns that adorned his head.

His sharp angles and fierce expression were enough to make anyone cower in fear, yet there was something oddly captivating about him.

His human form also left me breathless. With skin that seemed to soak in the light around him and eyes that were a deep, mesmerizing brown, he looked like he'd been sculpted to perfection. Just thinking about him made my mouth go dry and my heart race.

I shook my head, trying to clear the image from my mind. This wasn't the time to be daydreaming about a demon, no matter how attractive he might be.

"Rosie, are you still there?" Charlie's voice snapped me back to reality.

"Yeah, sorry," I felt my cheeks flush. "I was just thinking." I managed to clear my throat. "He's hot." Sizzle baby, sizzle.

"Good. You deserve some eye candy after dealing with Stephany's bullshit. But this doesn't get you out of explaining everything to me. Dinner tonight?"

I looked at the credit card again. "I need to go shopping for the engagement party. Want to help me spend my boss's money?"

Charlie's squeal nearly deafened me. "I'll pick you up in twenty minutes. And you're telling me everything over lunch."

After hanging up, I leaned against the bathroom counter and closed my eyes. How the hell was I going to explain any of this to Charlie? 'Sorry bestie, can't tell you about my new job because my boss is literally from hell' ?

At least I wouldn't have to lie about one thing. Aldaine was definitely hot as hell. Pun absolutely intended.

I had just finished getting dressed when Charlie's signature horn blast, three quick honks, echoed from the parking lot.

"Coming!" I yelled out my window, though I knew she couldn't hear me. I grabbed my purse, the credit card burning a hole in my wallet, and took a deep breath. Charlie was my best friend. If anyone would understand summoning a demon out of desperation, it would be her.

Right?

Right.

I locked my apartment door, wincing at the bright orange eviction notice that was indeed plastered across it. Wonderful. Nothing says "I've got my life together" quite like being kicked out of my home.

Charlie was leaning against her old Volkswagen Beetle, her blue-streaked black hair pulled into a messy bun. She took one look at my face and crossed her arms.

"Spill it, Thompson. What's really going on?"

I grabbed her arm and pulled her back toward my apartment. "Inside. You need to be sitting down for this."

"Okay, now I'm worried," Charlie followed me up the stairs. "Did you join a cult? Because I love you, but I am not wearing a robe and dancing under the moon."

"No cult," I unlocked my door again. "But you have to swear on your entire hair

products that what I'm about to tell you stays between us."

Charlie's eyes widened. We both knew her hair products were her most prized possession. "Holy shit, this is serious."

"Swear it, Charlie." I closed the door behind us and faced her. "To the grave."

"I swear that whatever you're about to tell me dies with me." She plopped down on my worn couch. "Now tell me before I explode."

I paced in front of her, wringing my hands. "Remember that spell book we found at the dollar book store last month? The one about summoning demons?"

"Yeah, we joked about it. " Charlie's jaw dropped. "No. Fucking. Way."

"I was desperate!" I threw my hands up. "The eviction notice was coming, I couldn't find a job, and Stephany called about this stupid engagement party!"

"You tried to summon a demon?" Charlie interrupted, leaning forward. "Did it work?"

I stopped pacing and faced her. "That's the crazy part. It shouldn't have worked. He said it was impossible without knowing his true name, but somehow I managed to drag him here anyway and got a job out of it."

"He?" Charlie's brows shot up. "Your mysterious hot boss is a demon? An actual demon from hell?"

I nodded, sinking into the armchair across from her. "His name is Aldaine. He's some kinda demon lord? And I may have sold him my soul in exchange for being my date to Stephany's engagement party and helping me with my financial situation."

Charlie stared at me in silence for a full minute. I started to worry.

Then she burst out laughing.

"Only you," she wheezed between laughs, "would accidentally summon a demon lord and convince him to be your fake boyfriend."

"It's not funny!" But I was fighting back a smile. When she put it that way, it did sound ridiculous. "I sold my soul, Charlie!"

"To a hot demon who's going to help you show up Stephany at her own engagement party," Charlie wiped tears from her eyes. "Honestly? Worth it."

"You believe me?" I asked softly. "You don't think I'm crazy?"

Charlie reached over and squeezed my hand. "Rosie, I've known you were crazy since freshman year when you put purple dye in Stephany's shampoo for stealing your boyfriend. But this?" She gestured around. "This is a whole new level of crazy, even for you. And I'm here for it."

Relief flooded through me. "So you'll help me shop for appropriate 'demon lord's fake girlfriend' clothing?"

"Are you kidding?" Charlie jumped up, pulling me with her. "This is the best thing that's ever happened! We're going to make you look so hot, your demon boy won't know what hit him."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I arrived at Rosie's apartment complex just as the sun was beginning to peek over the horizon.

The early morning light cast long shadows across the parking lot, but my eyes had no trouble spotting the offensive orange paper stuck to my mate's door.

An eviction notice. My jaw clenched as I read the details, anger building in my chest.

"This won't do at all," I pulled out my phone. Tim answered on the fourth ring, his voice rough with sleep.

"Someone better be dead," he growled.

"Good morning to you too, sunshine." I smirked, knowing how much he hated early morning calls. "I need you to handle something immediately."

A grunt was his only response.

"Pay off the remainder of Rosie Thompson's lease at Cedar Grove Apartments. Unit 3B." I glanced at the notice again. "And make sure all late fees are covered."

"The human you're pretending to date?" Tim's voice dripped with disdain. "Why don't you just move her into the compound if she's your mate?"

"Tim." My voice dropped an octave, letting a hint of my demon nature seep through. "Just handle it."

He sighed dramatically. "Fine. But don't forget you have that meeting next Saturday evening. The vamp situation needs to be addressed, and you can't skip this one."

"I'll be there." I'd forgotten about the meeting, but it was a week after the party so it wouldn't be a big deal. "Just take care of this."

"Already on it, boss." Keys clicked in the background. "But you owe me coffee. The good stuff from that place in Milan."

"Done." I hung up, satisfied that at least one problem was handled.

I straightened my suit jacket, a habit I'd developed over centuries of dealing with humans, and knocked on Rosie's door. The sound of stumbling and a muffled curse made my lips twitch.

"Just a second!" Her voice called out, followed by more shuffling.

When the door opened, all the carefully crafted words I'd prepared vanished.

Rosie stood before me in a blue sundress that hugged her curves perfectly.

The morning light caught her red hair, making it look like living flame.

Her green eyes widened as she took me in, a blush creeping across her cheeks.

My demon stirred, wanting to reach out and trace that blush with our fingers, to see how far down it went. I forced my hands to stay at my sides.

"Good morning," she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear shyly. "You're early."

"I am." Words. I needed words. I was a demon lord who had negotiated countless

contracts, and this tiny human had rendered me nearly speechless. "You look," Beautiful. Stunning. Mine. "...appropriate for travel. "

Smooth, Aldaine. Very smooth.

She glanced down at her dress, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles. "Charlie helped me pick it out yesterday. Is it okay? I wasn't sure what to wear for the drive."

"It's perfect." The words came out rougher than I intended, betraying the sudden surge of possessiveness that flared within me at the thought of another claiming her attention.

I cleared my throat, forcing myself to maintain an air of casual indifference.

"Are your bags ready?" My gaze drifted over her form appreciatively.

The morning light caressed her skin, making the fabric of her sundress cling to the gentle curves that I yearned to explore with my own hands.

Who the fuck was this Charlie character, and why did the mere thought of them helping Rosie provoke such a visceral reaction from me?

I pushed the irrational jealousy aside, reminding myself that Rosie was mine.

My mate, my responsibility. She would want for nothing as long as I was here.

"Yes!" She turned, giving me a view that made my demon purr in appreciation. The dress swished around her thighs as she moved to grab her luggage. "I wasn't sure how much to pack, so I might have gone a little overboard."

Two large suitcases and a garment bag sat by her couch. I moved past her to grab

them, letting my arm brush against hers. The contact sent a jolt through my body and the mating bond hummed with satisfaction.

"This is fine." I needed to get us moving before I did something foolish, like push her against the wall and show her exactly what that sundress was doing to me. "The car is waiting."

"Right." She grabbed her purse and then paused. "Oh! Let me just grab the, um, eviction notice off the door. Don't want to leave that up there."

"No need." I opened the door for her. "It's been handled. "

Her steps faltered. "Handled? What do you mean handled?"

I gave her my best mysterious demon lord smile. "Part of our arrangement is taking care of your housing situation, remember? Your lease has been paid in full."

The shock on Rosie's face was delightful to watch. I preened internally at providing for my mate, even as she stammered protests.

"But...that's...you can't just..." Her hands fluttered in front of her. "That must have cost thousands!"

"Shall we?" I gestured toward the stairs, ignoring her protests as I gathered her bags. The weight was nothing to me, though I made a show of adjusting them for human appearances. "The car is waiting."

"Aldaine!" She hurried after me, her sundress swishing with each step. The sound made me want to purr. "We need to talk about this. You can't just throw money around like that!"

I paused at the bottom of the stairs, turning to face her. She nearly collided with my chest, catching herself at the last moment. The scent of her, vanilla, berry, and something uniquely Rosie, filled my nose. My free hand reached out to steady her before I could stop myself.

"I can, and I will." The feel of her warm skin under my palm was intoxicating. I forced myself to let go. "It's part of our arrangement."

The town car waited exactly where I'd left it, Marcus already moving to open the trunk. Good man. I handed him the bags while Rosie continued to sputter behind me.

"But—"

"Into the car, little minx." I opened the back door, gesturing for her to enter. She crossed her arms instead, a defiant look crossing her face. I found her adorable.

"I feel like I'm taking advantage of you," her voice small. "First the credit card, now this? "

A laugh burst from my chest before I could contain it. The sound seemed to startle her, her eyes going wide. "My dear," I leaned down, letting my voice drop to a whisper, "I'm a demon. We're the ones who take advantage, remember?"

Her cheeks flushed that delightful shade of pink again. "Still!"

"Get in the car, Rosie." I softened my voice, though I kept my expression stern. "Let yourself be spoiled for once. Something tells me you're not used to it."

She bit her lower lip, drawing my attention to the plump flesh. I held back a growl, wanting to do that for her. "I'm really not," she admitted.

"Then consider this practice." I placed my hand on the small of her back, guiding her into the car. "After all, you'll need to be convincing as my partner this week. What kind of demon would I be if I didn't lavish attention on what's mine?"

The words slipped out before I could catch them. Rosie's head snapped up, her green eyes meeting mine. But instead of fear or anger, I saw something else flash across her face. Interest? Desire?

"Yours?" She whispered.

I cleared my throat, covering my slip. "For the week, of course. The contract."

"Right." Was that disappointment in her voice? Oh, I hoped it was. "The contract."

I closed her door perhaps a bit harder than necessary, cursing myself. This was going to be a long week if I couldn't keep my possessive nature in check. I moved around to the other side of the car, noting that Marcus had finished with the luggage and was already in the driver's seat.

As I slid in next to Rosie, she was staring out the window, chewing on her bottom lip again. My fingers itched to touch her, to turn her face toward mine.

"To the estate?" Marcus's voice interrupted my dangerous thoughts.

"Yes." I forced myself to look forward. "And Marcus? Take the scenic route."

Rosie had sent me all the information earlier.

The longer I had Rosie to myself before facing her family, the better.

After all, we had details to discuss. That's what I told myself, anyway.

It had nothing to do with how the morning light made her hair glow like fire, or how the soft leather seats had her pressed closer to me than strictly necessary.

Nothing at all.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

The car purred along the winding road as Rosie fidgeted with the hem of her dress. My fingers twitched with the urge to still her hands, to feel her soft skin against mine again.

"We should discuss our story," I focused my attention to the task at hand. "Your family will have questions about how we met."

She turned those mesmerizing green eyes on me. "Oh! Right. I hadn't thought about that." Her nose scrunched up adorably. "We probably shouldn't tell them I summoned you in my living room."

A laugh rumbled from my chest. "While that would certainly be memorable, perhaps we should aim for something more conventional."

"We could say we met at work?" She suggested, then immediately shook her head. "No, that won't work. They know I was let go from my last job. "

My jaw clenched at that. I'd have to look into that situation later. Nobody mistreated what was mine.

"What about a coffee shop?" I offered, watching her expression. "It's cliché enough to be believable. I spilled my drink on you, insisted on paying for your dry cleaning, and wouldn't take no for an answer when I asked you to dinner."

Rosie burst into laughter, the sound making me hold back a purr of satisfaction. "You? Clumsy enough to spill coffee? Somehow I can't picture that."

I raised a brow at her. "I'll have you know I can be very clumsy when a beautiful woman catches my eye."

The blush that spread across her cheeks was worth the slight hit to my dignity. "Smooth talker," she accused but she was smiling. "Okay, coffee shop works. When did this supposedly happen?"

"Three months ago," I decided. "Long enough to be serious, recent enough to explain why your family hasn't met me yet."

"And what do you do for a living? I can't exactly tell them you're a demon lord who collects souls."

I smirked. "Investment banking." At her questioning look, I elaborated, "It's essentially the same thing and what I do with my business."

Her laughter filled the car again and I found myself chuckling with her. She was dangerous, this mate of mine, making me feel things I hadn't in centuries.

"You know," she managed after her giggles subsided, "you're not what I expected."

"Oh?" I turned slightly in my seat to face her better. "And what did you expect?"

She gestured vaguely with her hands. "I don't know. More evil? Like, fire and brimstone, threatening to torture souls, that sort of thing. You're actually kind of.." she trailed off, biting her lip.

"Kind of what?" I leaned closer, catching the slight hitch in her breath.

"Nice," she finished lamely, though her eyes suggested she'd been thinking something else entirely.

I let my glamour slip just enough for her to see the glow of my true eyes, watching as her pupils dilated in response.

"Make no mistake, little minx," my voice dropped lower, letting some of my power seep through, "I am very much evil.

I've corrupted souls, started wars, and brought empires to their knees.

" I reached out, trailing one finger along her jaw.

"I simply choose to be selective about who sees that side of me. "

"And me?" She didn't pull away from my touch.

"You," I pulled back, restoring my human appearance, "I like. Which makes me even more dangerous, wouldn't you say?"

She swallowed hard and I watched the movement of her throat with perhaps too much interest. "Because you're trying to trick me?"

"Because I have no reason to trick you at all." I settled back in my seat, pleased with how affected she was by my proximity. "Everything I show you is exactly what I want you to see."

"That's not very reassuring," but she was smiling again.

"It wasn't meant to be." I winked at her. "Now, shall we discuss how madly in love with me you are? We'll need to be convincing for your family."

Her groan of embarrassment was music to my ears.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

The car ride had been filled with laughter and easy conversation, and I found myself enjoying Aldaine's company more than I ever thought possible. He was charming, witty, and had a way of making me feel like I was the only person in the world that mattered.

As we pulled into a fast food restaurant for a late breakfast, I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement. I had never been on a road trip with someone before, and the idea of spending the day with Aldaine was thrilling.

We ordered our food and found a picnic table outside to sit at. The sun was shining and it was perfect.

As I bit into my hamburger, I let out a happy sigh. The food was delicious, and I couldn't help but make little noises of pleasure as I ate.

Aldaine watched me with a smirk on his face, and I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment. I tried to play it off by avoiding his gaze and focusing on my food, but his eyes seemed to follow my every movement .

"What?" I tried to keep my voice light and casual.

"Nothing," his eyes were amused. "It's just that if you keep making those noises, I might have to amend our contract."

I raised my brow at him, feigning confusion. "An amendment? What kind of amendment?"

He leaned in closer, his voice low and seductive. The scent of him wrapped around me, making my heart race. "An amendment that includes taking you over this table right here and now," he whispered, his breath warm against my ear.

I felt a shiver run down my spine, and my cheeks flushed even deeper. I tried to push the thought away, reminding myself that this was just a deal, a way to get back at my stepsister. But there was something about Aldaine that made it difficult to remember that.

I swallowed hard and took a deep breath, trying to compose myself. "I think we should stick to the original terms of the contract," my voice shook slightly.

Aldaine chuckled and leaned back in his seat, his smirk never leaving his face. "As you wish."

Aldaine chuckled and winked. I couldn't help but feel a little relieved. I didn't want things to get too serious too quickly, and I was glad that he seemed to be on the same page.

As we finished our lunch, Aldaine began telling me stories from his past. He had lived for centuries and seen and done things that I could only dream of.

He told me about the time he had met a famous artist in Paris and how they had spent the night drinking wine and discussing art. He told me about the time he had traveled to Japan and learned how to meditate with a group of monks.

I was fascinated by his stories. I found myself hanging on his every word. I had never met anyone like him before and I couldn't help but feel drawn to him.

Aldaine glanced over at me, a smile on his face. "What are you thinking about?" he asked .

I smiled back at him. "I'm just thinking about how lucky I am to be here with you. A few days ago I was about to be evicted and no job prospects. Now, you're here." Even if it cost my soul.

He reached over and took my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I feel the same way."

The winding driveway seemed to go on forever, perfectly manicured trees lining both sides.

My stomach twisted into knots as we got closer to the main house.

The pristine landscaping always made me feel inadequate, like I didn't belong here.

Perfectly trimmed hedges created natural walls between different garden areas, and flower beds exploded with color everywhere you looked.

"Well shit," Aldaine muttered as we rounded the final curve. "This is where you grew up?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "Sort of. I mean, after Dad married Jan when I was fourteen."

The mansion loomed ahead of us, its stone facade gleaming in the afternoon sun.

Three stories of architectural perfection with floor-to-ceiling windows and wrap around porches on each level.

The pool house, which was bigger than my apartment, sat off to the right.

Between them stretched the massive pool area with its rock formations creating multiple waterfalls that cascaded into both the main pool and the attached hot tub.

A twisting water slide wound through the rocks, ending in the deep end.

Aldaine let out a low whistle. "And you were facing eviction from a tiny apartment because why?" His voice held genuine confusion as Marcus guided the car toward the circular driveway in front of the main entrance.

My cheeks burned with embarrassment. "It's not my money," I felt like hiding. "Jan comes from old money. Really old money. And she, well, she tolerates me because of Dad, but that's about it."

"Your father?" Aldaine's voice had taken on an edge I couldn't quite identify.

"He travels a lot for work. Jan convinced him it would be better if I learned to be independent." I tried to keep the bitterness out of my voice. "I didn't tell them about losing my job. Or almost being evicted. They wouldn't understand." I shrugged. "I would have left anyway. It's not my money."

Aldaine's hand covered mine. The warmth of his touch sent tingles up my arm. "You mean they wouldn't care."

It wasn't a question, but I nodded anyway.

"Stephany is the perfect daughter Jan always wanted.

I'm just the awkward stepdaughter who doesn't quite fit in with their world.

"I forced a laugh that sounded hollow even to my ears.

"I mean, look at this place. Everything has to be perfect. Including the people."

The car slowed to a stop at the base of the wide stone steps leading to the front door. I

could see movement behind the windows and my anxiety kicked up another notch.

"Well then," Aldaine's voice dropped to that dangerous purr that made my insides melt. "Won't they be surprised when they meet your perfect, wealthy, completely devoted boyfriend?"

I turned to look at him, caught off guard by the wicked glint in his eyes. "What are you planning?"

He lifted my hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to my knuckles that sent heat flooding through my body.

"Nothing too terrible, little minx. Just going to show them exactly what they've been overlooking.

" His smile promised trouble. "After all, what kind of demon would I be if I didn't exceed expectations? "

Before I could respond, Aldaine was already out and around the car, offering his hand to help me out. As I stood, smoothing my sundress, I caught sight of the front door opening .

"Game time," Aldaine whispered in my ear, his arm sliding around my waist. "Ready to show them what perfect really looks like?"

Despite my nerves, I found myself smiling. Maybe this week wouldn't be so bad after all.

My stomach was doing somersaults as I took in the familiar sprawling Victorian mansion. Before I could spiral into full panic mode, the front door burst open.

"Rosie!" My dad came bounding down the steps, his face lit up with genuine joy. Despite my nerves, seeing my father brought an immediate smile to my face.

I barely had time to get out of the car before he wrapped me in one of his signature bear hugs, lifting me off my feet. "God, I missed you, my girl!"

"Put me down, dad!" I laughed, but squeezed him back just as tight.

He set me down and immediately turned his attention to Aldaine, who had materialized at my side. Denis's eyes widened slightly as he took in my "boyfriend's" appearance, and I couldn't blame him. Even in casual designer clothes, Aldaine looked like he'd stepped off a magazine cover.

"Dad, this is Aldaine." I grabbed Aldaine's hand, trying to ignore the spark of electricity that shot through me at the contact. "Aldaine, this is my father, Denis."

Dad looked him over for a moment before he stuck out his hand. "Welcome, Aldaine."

Before Aldaine could respond, the temperature seemed to drop several degrees. I looked up to see Stephany and Jan emerging from the house.

"Rosie, darling!" Jan's voice carried across the driveway, sweet as artificial sweetener. She descended the steps with perfect posture, her designer outfit probably worth more than my monthly rent. But her smile for Denis was genuine as she passed him, touching his shoulder affectionately.

Then there was Stephany.

My stepsister glided down the steps like she was on a runway, her blonde hair catching the sunlight. She was reed-thin in her white sundress, looking every bit the

blushing bride-to-be. But her eyes, when they landed on Aldaine, they lit up with predatory interest.

"Oh. My. God." Stephany's voice dripped with fake enthusiasm. "Rosie! You didn't tell us your boyfriend was so," she let her eyes drag over Aldaine's form in a way that made me want to step in front of him. "Sophisticated."

I felt Aldaine's hand tighten around mine. "Aldaine, this is my stepmother Jan, and my stepsister Stephany."

"Charmed." Aldaine's voice was smooth as silk as he executed a small bow that somehow managed to be both polite and slightly mocking. "I've heard so much about you both."

"All good things, I hope!" Stephany giggled, but her eyes narrowed slightly. I recognized that look. It was the same one she'd given me right before she'd stolen my high school boyfriend.

"Rosie's descriptions were," Aldaine paused perfectly, "quite accurate."

I bit my lip to hold back a laugh as Stephany's perfectly made-up eye twitched.

"Well!" Jan clapped her hands together. "Let's get you both settled. Denis, help with their bags, darling. Stephany, why don't you show them to the blue room?"

"The blue room?" Stephany's voice went up an octave. "But Mother, that's the nicest guest room! I thought we were saving it for-"

"Nonsense." Jan cut her off with a sharp look. "It's perfect for them."

I watched in fascination as Stephany's face went through several micro-expressions

before settling on a plastic smile. "Of course! Follow me!"

It wasn't like I didn't know the house like the back of my palm or anything.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

As we moved toward the house, Aldaine leaned down to whisper in my ear, "Your stepsister's soul is practically gift-wrapped with spite." His warm breath sent shivers down my spine. "Are you sure I can't add it to my collection?"

I shouldn't have found that funny. I really shouldn't have. But I had to disguise my laugh as a cough when Stephany whirled around to glare at us suspiciously.

"Behave." I bumped his shoulder with mine.

Stephany led us up the grand staircase, her heels clicking against the hardwood in what I was sure was meant to be an intimidating strut.

I'd forgotten how everything in this house was designed to scream old money, from the crystal chandelier overhead to the oil paintings of random landscapes and scenes lining the walls.

The blue room was at the end of the east wing and as Stephany threw open the double doors with a flourish, I had to bite back a snort at how forceful she'd been. The room was exactly as I remembered it, but somehow even more extravagant than in my memories.

Pale blue wallpaper caught the light streaming in from floor-to-ceiling windows.

The king-sized four-poster bed dominated the space, draped in deeper blue velvet with white threading that probably cost more than my car.

A sitting area near the fireplace featured antique Victorian furniture that Jan loved to

brag about acquiring at some exclusive auction.

"The en-suite bathroom is through there," Stephany gestured to a door on the right, her voice clipped.

"There are fresh towels, of course, and the shower has six different pressure settings.

" She said this like it was a personal accomplishment as she eyed Aldaine in a way a soon-to-be bride shouldn't be looking at someone other than her groom.

My father squeezed past us with our bags, setting them near an ornate armoire that looked like it belonged in a museum. "Need anything else, sweetheart?"

"We're fine, Dad. Thanks."

Stephany cleared her throat. "Lunch will be served on the back patio in an hour. More guests will be arriving after that." Her smile was so forced it looked painful. "I'm so happy you made it, Rosie." The words practically dripped with insincerity as she air-kissed near my cheek.

Dad gave me one more quick hug before following Stephany out, closing the doors behind them.

That's when I noticed it, the very obvious, huge, very singular bed.

Aldaine's low chuckle in my ear made me jump. "Something wrong, little minx?"

I spun to face him, finding him wearing the wickedest grin I'd ever seen. Heat flooded my cheeks. "I'll take the couch!" The words tumbled out in a rush. "I mean I should take the couch. It looks comfortable enough, and you're so tall, and a guest!"

"Rosie." His voice cut through my rambling. "I will take the couch."

"But—"

"I don't require as much sleep as humans do," Aldaine explained, his voice a low rumble that seemed to reverberate through me.

He moved past me, his shoulder brushing mine in a way that felt deliberate, sending a shiver down my spine.

I watched as he inspected the sitting area, his movements fluid and graceful, like a predator stalking its prey.

The thought sent a strange thrill through me.

"Besides," he continued, turning to face me with a wicked grin, "what kind of gentleman would I be if I let my 'girlfriend' sleep on the couch?"

The way he said 'girlfriend' made my stomach do a little flip. It was strange, hearing him refer to me like that. We were far from being in a real relationship, but for some reason, the idea of it didn't seem so far-fetched when he said it.

"You don't have to pretend when we're alone," I reminded him, though my voice came out breathier than I intended. I could feel my cheeks growing warm, and I hoped he wouldn't notice.

He turned to face me fully, and for a moment, I saw something flash in his eyes, something hungry and decidedly inhuman. It was gone as quickly as it appeared and I wondered if I had imagined it. But then he blinked, his usual composed expression returned.

"Consider it practice," he walked around the room like a cat as if to inspect it further. "We wouldn't want to slip up in front of your family, would we?"

"No, I suppose not," I replied, my heartbeat quickening as I watched him move. I couldn't help but feel a little nervous, being alone in a bedroom with him. Not that I thought he would do anything to hurt me, but there was something about him that was both intimidating and intoxicating.

And I didn't know if I could trust myself with him.

I was suddenly very aware of how alone we were, and how large the bed was.

It seemed to loom over us, a constant reminder of the arrangement we had made.

I tried to push the thought out of my mind, focusing instead on the task at hand.

We were here to fool my family, after all, and I couldn't afford to get distracted.

"You should freshen up before lunch," he suggested, mercifully breaking the tension. "I have a feeling your stepsister is going to do her best to make this an interesting week."

I groaned. "You have no idea."

His lips curved into that dangerous smile again. "Oh, I think I'm going to enjoy watching you prove her wrong about everything she thinks she knows about you."

Why did that sound like both a promise and a threat? With what I knew from him so far, it was.

Aldaine and I sat on the plush couch in the blue room, our surroundings almost

suffocating. He leaned back, his posture relaxed, but I could sense the tension coiled within him after Stephany left. His dark eyes watched me intently as I fidgeted before sighing.

"So, what should I expect from this engagement party?" His voice smooth and deep.

I sighed again, rubbing my temples. "It's going to be an extravagant affair, the whole week. Stephany and Jan love to show off their wealth."

Aldaine raised an eyebrow. "And your father allows this?"

"Dad tries to keep them grounded, but Jan has a way of getting what she wants." I shook my head, remembering the countless arguments I'd witnessed between my father and stepmother. "He's just happy that Stephany is finally settling down."

"And what about you?" Aldaine's gaze softened. "Are you happy for your stepsister?"

I hesitated, then shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't seen her in years, and we were never close. But I guess it's good that she's found someone she loves." I actually didn't care anymore it was my ex-boyfriend.

Aldaine nodded, his expression thoughtful. "What kind of events are planned for this week?"

"Well, today is lunch, and it's going to be over the top since it's when everyone is together for the first time.

They'll probably have a pool day, a game day where they set up games in the field behind the house, a formal night with dancing, and shopping trips.

"I listed the events off, my exhaustion growing with each one.

Aldaine's hand reached out, covering mine. "You seem tired, little minx. Are you sure you're up for this?"

His touch sent a jolt of electricity through me and I looked up to meet his gaze. "I'll be fine. I just need to get through this week, and then I can go back to my normal life. Well, kind of. I'm working for a demon now."

He squeezed my hand gently. "I'm here to help you, remember? We're in this together."

I smiled weakly, grateful for his support. "I know. It's just this is all so overwhelming. I've never been good at pretending to be someone I'm not."

Aldaine's thumb traced circles on the back of my hand. "You don't have to pretend with me. I see you for who you are, Rosie. You're strong, brave, and kind. Don't let anyone make you feel otherwise."

His words warmed me from the inside out, and I felt a sudden urge to lean into him, to let him wrap his arms around me and protect me from the world. But I knew that wasn't part of our deal. He was here to help me, not to be my knight in shining armor.

"Thank you," my voice thick with emotion. "I don't know what I would do without your help."

Aldaine's eyes darkened, and for a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. But then he cleared his throat and stood up, releasing my hand. "We should get ready for lunch. I'm sure your family is eager to see us."

I nodded, standing up as well. "You're right. Let's do this."

As we made our way downstairs, I couldn't help but feel a sense of dread settling in

my stomach. I knew that this week was going to be a challenge, but with Aldaine by my side, I felt a little more confident.

When we entered the dining room, I was immediately struck by the sheer lavishness of it all.

They weren't holding back it seemed. The table was set with fine china and crystal glasses and a massive floral arrangement dominated the center.

My father and Jan were already seated, along with a few other guests I didn't recognize.

Stephany, however, was nowhere to be seen.

"Ah, there you are!" Jan's voice was like nails on a chalkboard. "We were starting to wonder if you were going to join us." She was annoyed.

I forced a smile, taking the seat next to my father. "Sorry, we got caught up talking."

Aldaine's hand found mine under the table, squeezing it reassuringly. "I apologize. I wanted to have a little more time with Rosie."

Jan's expression softened slightly. "Well, I'm sure Rosie has told you all about our little family."

"She has," Aldaine replied smoothly. "And I'm looking forward to getting to know everyone better."

Jan's gaze lingered on Aldaine for a moment longer before she turned her attention to the other guests. "Well, let's eat, shall we?"

As the meal progressed, I found myself growing more and more uncomfortable. The other guests were all wealthy and pretentious, and I felt like an outsider among them. Aldaine, however, seemed to fit right in. He charmed everyone with his wit and charm and I couldn't help but feel a little jealous.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

But then I caught him watching me, his dark eyes filled with concern. He squeezed my hand again and I felt a surge of gratitude. He was here for me, not for them.

Just as I was starting to relax, Stephany made her entrance. She swept into the room like a queen, her white sundress billowing behind her. Her eyes locked on Aldaine, and I could see the hunger in them .

"Well, well, well," she purred, taking the seat next to him. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?"

Aldaine's smile didn't falter, but I could see the tension in his jaw. "I'm sure you meant that for your fiance'."

Stephany's laugh was like a tinkling bell. "No, I meant you. Really, Rosie, what have you told him about me? You always did have a way of exaggerating."

I felt my cheeks burning with embarrassment, but Aldaine's hand tightened around mine. "I think Rosie has been quite modest. She's an amazing woman."

Stephany's eyes narrowed, but before she could respond, Jan stood up. "Well, it's time for dessert. I hope you all saved room!"

As the servers brought out the elaborate desserts, I couldn't help but feel a sense of relief. The meal was almost over, and I had survived.

Aldaine leaned in, his breath warm against my ear. "You're doing great, little minx. Just remember, I'm here for you."

I smiled, feeling a surge of affection for him.

I scanned the table again, realizing that Roger was conspicuously absent.

My high school boyfriend, now Stephany's fiancé', hadn't made an appearance yet.

The thought of him brought back memories of stolen kisses behind the bleachers and that devastating moment when I caught him with Stephany in his car.

I smoothed my napkin across my lap, trying to appear nonchalant as I addressed my stepsister.

"Where is Roger? I would have thought he'd be here for such an intimate family dinner. "

Stephany's perfectly manicured hand waved dismissively in the air.

"Oh, Roger's just picking up some of his college friends from the airport.

They're flying in for the celebration." Her eyes never left Aldaine as she spoke, her lips curved in what I assumed was meant to be an alluring smile. "He'll be here later tonight. "

I felt Aldaine's arm slide around my shoulders, pulling me closer to his side. The warmth of his touch helped ground me, even as Stephany's sharp gaze made my stomach churn.

"So, Aldaine," Stephany practically hummed his name. Stephany was good at making sure dad and Jan were busy chatting with others and her voice low. "What made you fall for my dear stepsister? I mean, you're clearly," she gestured vaguely at all of him, "and she's so.."

I stiffened, waiting for the inevitable insult, but Aldaine's fingers squeezed my shoulder gently.

"Perfect?" he finished for her, his voice carrying a dangerous edge that made Stephany's smile falter. "I knew the moment I saw her that she was special. Though I must admit, spilling my coffee on her wasn't my smoothest move."

"You spilled coffee on her?" Stephany's laugh was sharp. "How quaint."

"Best mistake I ever made," Aldaine replied smoothly, pressing a kiss to my temple that sent shivers down my spine. "Though I'm sure you understand making mistakes that turn out to be blessings, don't you?"

Stephany's face flushed, clearly catching his reference to her stealing Roger. "And what exactly do you do for work?" She tried changing tactics.

"Investment banking," Aldaine answered, his thumb now tracing circles on my shoulder. "Though I prefer not to discuss business at social gatherings."

The dessert seemed to last forever as Stephany continued her attempts to draw Aldaine into conversation, each question more personal than the last. But he deflected them all while keeping me tucked against his side, his presence both comforting and increasingly distracting.

When the last plate was finally cleared, I practically jumped to my feet. "Thank you for lunch," I managed to say, proud that my voice didn't shake. "But we should probably rest after the long drive."

I didn't wait for responses before heading for the stairs, hearing Aldaine's measured steps behind me. The moment we reached our room, I bolted for the bathroom, my hands shaking as I turned on the faucet.

The cool water felt good against my heated skin as I splashed my face, trying to calm my racing heart.

I hadn't expected Stephany's obvious interest in Aldaine to affect me so much.

It wasn't like this was real, right? This was just a contract, a deal with a demon.

So why did my chest ache every time she looked at him like that?

"Here."

I jumped at Aldaine's voice, not having heard him enter. He held out a soft hand towel, his expression unreadable in the bathroom mirror. I took it with trembling fingers, patting my face dry.

"Thank you, I'm sorry, I just needed a moment."

The rest of my words were lost as Aldaine suddenly spun me around, one hand cupping my face while the other settled on my waist. His eyes, now glowing with that otherworldly light, searched mine for a moment before he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine.

The kiss was gentle at first, almost questioning, but when I gasped in surprise, it changed.

His grip tightened, pulling me flush against him as his mouth claimed mine with a possessiveness that made my knees weak.

I found myself clutching his shoulders, responding with an eagerness that should have embarrassed me but somehow felt right.

When he finally pulled back, his eyes were almost completely golden, barely a ring of brown visible. "She can try all she wants," he growled softly, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip. "But you're mine, little minx. Even if you don't know it yet."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

In the dim light of the bathroom, I pressed Rosie against the cool marble of the countertop, my hands gripping her soft curves as I claimed her mouth with mine.

The taste of her was intoxicating, the sweetness was uniquely Rosie, and I found myself craving more.

Her lips parted beneath mine, allowing me to deepen the kiss, my tongue exploring her mouth as if she already knew she was mine and mine alone.

She gasped softly, her fingers digging into my shoulders, and I took advantage of her surprise to lift her onto the counter.

Her eyes widened as I stepped between her thighs, the skirt of her sundress riding up to accommodate me.

The sight of her, flushed and breathless, was almost enough to make me lose control.

"Aldaine," her voice was barely audible.

I could see the questions in her eyes, the uncertainty warring with desire.

I didn't give her time to overthink it. I captured her mouth again, my hands sliding up her thighs, pushing her dress higher.

Her skin was soft and warm, inviting my touch, and I couldn't resist trailing my fingers along the edge of her panties.

I wanted to dig my fingers into her skin and make sure others could see my marks on her skin.

She moaned into my mouth, her hips arching slightly, seeking more contact.

It was a sound that sent a surge of heat straight to my cock and I had to fight to keep my demonic nature in check.

I wanted to take her right there, to claim her in the most primal way possible, but I knew I had to be gentle.

She was human, fragile, and she didn't yet understand the depth of the bond between us.

I broke the kiss, only to trail my lips down her neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive skin.

She let out a soft cry, her head falling back to give me better access.

Her hands were in my hair, tugging gently, urging me on.

I could feel her heart racing, her breath coming in quick gasps, and it was music to my ears.

My hands continued their exploration, sliding up her sides, just teasing the edges of her breasts.

She shivered at the touch, her nipples hardening beneath the thin fabric of her dress.

I couldn't resist. I cupped her breast, my thumb rubbing over the taut peak, and she let out a moan that was pure torture.

"Rosie," I growled, my voice barely recognizable. "You're driving me mad."

She looked at me, her eyes glazed with desire, her lips swollen from my kisses. "Aldaine," her voice a plea. "Please."

I didn't need to be told twice. I captured her mouth again, my hands roaming over her body, touching, teasing, claiming.

Her legs wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer and I could feel the heat of her through the thin fabric of her panties.

It was maddening, intoxicating, and I knew I was dangerously close to not being able to stop.

My fingers found the edge of her panties again, and this time, I didn't hesitate. I slipped my hand inside, my fingers finding her hot and wet and ready. She cried out, her hips bucking against my hand.

"Aldaine," she gasped, her nails digging into my skin. "Please, I can't. I need-!"

I knew what she needed. I could feel it in the way her body responded to mine, in the way her heart raced in time with my own. I slipped a finger inside her, my thumb finding her clit, and she let out a cry that was pure ecstasy.

Her body clenched around me, her hips moving in time with my hand, and I knew she was close. I could feel it in the way her muscles tensed, in the way her breath hitched in her throat. I wanted to see her come undone, to watch her as she gave in to the pleasure I was giving her.

But just as she was about to go over the edge, a loud knock sounded at the door of the room. We both froze, our breaths coming in ragged gasps, our hearts pounding in

sync.

"Rosie?" a voice called from the other side of the door. It was her father, and the concern in his voice was like a bucket of cold water. "Are you alright in there?"

Rosie looked at me, her eyes wide with panic. I pressed a finger to her lips, signaling for her to be quiet. I could feel her heart racing, her body trembling with unspent desire, and I knew I had to do something to calm her down.

I slipped my hand out of her panties, my fingers still slick with her arousal. I brought them to my mouth, tasting her, and her eyes widened in shock. I winked at her, a slow smile spreading across my face, and I could see the blush spreading across her cheeks.

"Just a moment, Dad," she called out, her voice surprisingly steady. "I'll be right out."

I helped her down from the counter, smoothing her dress back into place. She looked up at me, her eyes still filled with desire, but also with something else. Gratitude, perhaps, or maybe even a hint of affection. I pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, my hands cupping her face.

"We'll continue this later," I promised, my voice low and husky. "For now, let's go face the music."

She nodded, her hand reaching up to touch my cheek. "Thank you, Aldaine. For everything."

I captured her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. "Always, little minx. Always."

As we stepped out of the bathroom, I could feel the weight of the world settling back onto my shoulders.

Because she was mine, I would do anything to protect her. Even if it meant playing the part of the perfect boyfriend, the charming investor, the man who had fallen head over heels for the beautiful, brave, and kind-hearted Rosie Thompson. Which wasn't far from the truth.

As Rosie opened the door, her father glanced at me before looking back at her.

"You left the lunch so fast, I was worried. Are you alright?" Her father seemed to genuinely care for her, even if he was blind to the way his wife and stepdaughter treated her.

I kept my arm wrapped securely around Rosie's waist, feeling the way she subtly leaned into my touch. Her body was still warm, still slightly shaking with the remnants of our interrupted moment, and it took considerable control not to drag her back into the bedroom and finish what we'd started.

"I'm fine, Dad," Rosie assured him, her voice steadier than I expected given the circumstances. "The drive was just longer than I remembered. I needed a moment to freshen up."

Denis nodded but I could see the concern hadn't entirely left his eyes. He was worried about her, which earned him a few points in my book. Though not enough to make up for his obvious blindness to how his wife and stepdaughter treated his daughter.

"Why don't you both join me in my study?" he offered, gesturing down the hallway. "We could have a drink, or perhaps some coffee? It would give us a chance to talk properly, get to know each other better."

I felt Rosie tense slightly against me. The invitation seemed innocent enough, but I could sense her hesitation.

Whether it was because she was still affected by our intimate moment or because she wasn't ready for an interrogation from her father, I couldn't be sure. Either way, I decided to step in.

"I apologize, sir," I brought my free hand up to massage my temple for effect.

"I'm afraid I'm developing one of my migraines.

Rosie just promised to help me deal with it.

" I glanced down at her with what I hoped was an appropriately apologetic expression.

"She's discovered that her particular brand of TLC works wonders. "

Rosie's cheeks flushed beautifully at my words and I had to resist the urge to kiss her again. The way she bit her lower lip wasn't helping matters.

"Oh," Denis looked concerned. "Of course, I understand completely. Migraines can be terrible things."

"We'll join you for dinner later though, Dad," Rosie jumped in. "Maybe we could catch up properly then?"

Her father's face brightened at that. "Yes, that would be wonderful. Dinner's usually served at seven in the dining room." He hesitated for a moment before adding, "Though I should warn you, Jan has invited some of the wedding party to join us."

I felt Rosie tense again, but I squeezed her waist gently in reassurance. Whatever her stepmother had planned, I would be there to handle it. No one would make my mate feel uncomfortable, not while I was around.

"We'll be there," I assured him, already planning how to make the evening work in our favor. "For now, though, I think I need to take advantage of your daughter's healing touch."

Denis nodded, though I noticed his cheeks color slightly at my suggestive tone. Good. Let him think what he wanted. The more convinced everyone was of our relationship, the better.

"Feel better," he started to turn away. "And Rosie? I'm glad you're here, sweetheart."

I waited until Denis had disappeared down the hallway before turning to Rosie. Her green eyes were wide as they met mine, a mix of relief and lingering desire swirling in their depths.

"Migraine?" her lips twitching with amusement.

I leaned down, brushing my lips against her ear. "Would you rather I told him the truth? That I needed to get you alone so I could finish what we started in the bathroom?"

Her sharp intake of breath was all the answer I needed. Without another word, I guided her toward our room, already anticipating the pleasure of having her all to myself again. We had a few hours until dinner, and I intended to make the most of them.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

My heart was pounding in my chest as Aldaine stalked towards me, his eyes dark with desire. I backed up until I hit the edge of the bed, and he didn't stop until I was lying on my back, looking up at him as his demon form came to the surface again.

"So, you're going to help me with my migraine?" His voice was low and husky.

I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry. "I, uh, I don't know what you mean."

He raised an eyebrow at me, a smirk playing on his lips. "Oh, I think you do."

I bit my lower lip, trying to steady my breathing. "But is this really what you want? Or is it just an act?"

He didn't answer right away, instead, he reached down and took my hand, placing it on his groin. I could feel the hardness beneath his pants and my breath hitched in my throat.

"Is that answer enough for you?" His face was serious.

I nodded, unable to speak. I could feel my body responding to his touch, my nipples hardening beneath my dress, my panties growing even more damp.

He leaned down, his lips brushing against mine in a soft kiss. "Good," he murmured. "Because I want you, Rosie."

"This doesn't change anything, right?"

Aldaine's expression was sad briefly before he shook his head. "This is just a way to make both of us feel good and get some street worked out."

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer to kiss. He deepened the kiss, his tongue exploring my mouth as his hands roamed over my body. I moaned softly, my hips arching up to meet his.

He broke the kiss, his breathing ragged. "I need you, Rosie. Now."

I nodded, my heart racing. I reached up and started to unbutton his shirt, revealing his chest. He was sculpted to perfection, his muscles defined and toned. I ran my hands over his skin, feeling the heat radiating off of him.

He groaned, his hands moving to my dress. He pulled it up over my head, leaving me in just my bra and panties. He took a moment to look at me, his eyes roaming over my body.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered.

I blushed, feeling self-conscious. I had always been a little insecure about my body, but the way Aldaine was looking at me made me feel like the most desirable woman in the world.

He reached behind me and unclasped my bra, letting it fall to the floor. He cupped my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my nipples. I moaned, my back arching as pleasure shot through me.

He leaned down and took one of my nipples into his mouth, sucking and teasing it with his tongue. I gasped, my hands tangling in his hair before gripping his horns. He moved to the other nipple, giving it the same attention as he groaned.

I could feel my body growing more and more aroused, my hips moving restlessly against him. He slid his hand down my stomach, his fingers slipping inside my panties. I moaned as he found my clit, rubbing it in slow circles.

"Aldaine," I gasped, my hips bucking against his hand.

He looked up at me, his eyes dark with desire. "Do you want me to stop?"

I shook my head, my breath coming in short gasps. "No, please don't stop."

He smiled, his fingers moving faster. I could feel my orgasm building, my body tensing as I got closer and closer.

"Cum for me, Rosie," his voice rough.

I cried out as my orgasm hit me, my body shaking with pleasure. He continued to rub my clit, prolonging my orgasm until I was a trembling mess beneath him.

He pulled my panties off, his fingers sliding inside me. I moaned, my hips moving against his hand. He added another finger, stretching me as he moved them in and out.

"You're so tight," he murmured, his voice filled with desire.

I could feel myself growing even more aroused, my body aching for him. He pulled his fingers out and I whimpered at the loss.

He stood up, quickly undoing his pants and pulling them off. He was already hard, his cock standing at attention. I bit my lower lip, feeling a mix of nerves and excitement.

He climbed onto the bed, settling between my legs. He leaned down and kissed me,

his tongue exploring my mouth as he positioned himself at my entrance.

"Are you ready?"

I nodded, my heart racing. He pushed inside me, slowly at first, giving me time to adjust to his size. I moaned, my body stretching to accommodate him.

He started to move, his hips thrusting in and out in a slow, steady rhythm that sent waves of pleasure coursing through me.

I could feel every inch of him, filling me, completing me in a way I'd never experienced before.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him closer, wanting to feel all of him.

His skin was hot against mine, our bodies slick with sweat. His tail raised over our heads.

He groaned again, a deep, primal sound that resonated within me, his movements becoming more urgent. His hands gripped my hips, his fingers digging into my soft flesh as if he couldn't get enough of me. I could see the muscles in his arms flexing, his body coiling and releasing with each thrust.

His eyes locked onto mine, and I could see the raw desire there, mixed with something deeper and more profound. It sent a shiver down my spine, a sense of connection beyond the physical. I could feel his heart pounding against my chest, echoing my own.

I could feel my orgasm building again, my body tensing as I got closer and closer. He reached down and started to rub my clit, sending me over the edge. I cried out, my body shaking as I came.

He followed shortly after, his body tensing as he came inside me. He collapsed on top of me, his breathing ragged.

We lay there for a few moments, our bodies entwined as we caught our breath. He rolled off of me, pulling me into his arms.

"That was amazing," he whispered, his lips brushing against my forehead.

I smiled, feeling a warmth spread through me. "It was," I agreed but paused. "Wait. We didn't use protection!"

Aldaine chuckled and he tapped his right horn. "Demon, love. We don't need protection."

"Oh. Um. Ok then."

We lay there for a while longer, our bodies pressed together as we drifted off to sleep. I felt safe and secure in Aldaine's arms, my worries and fears melting away.

I woke up feeling warm and content, my body pleasantly sore. Aldaine's arm was still wrapped around my waist, his breath tickling my neck. I shifted slightly, and he tightened his hold on me.

"Where do you think you're going?" he murmured against my skin.

"Shower," I replied, turning to face him. "We need to get ready for dinner, remember?"

His eyes darkened at the mention of a shower, and a slow smirk spread across his face. "Need help washing your back?"

I laughed, but my breath caught as his hand trailed down my spine. "If you promise to behave."

"I never promise what I can't deliver, little minx."

The shower ended up taking longer than planned, mainly because Aldaine's definition of "helping" involved pressing me against the cool tile wall and making me cry out his name again.

His hands had wandered everywhere except where the soap was supposed to go, and the way the water cascaded down his muscled chest had been far too distracting for my own good.

The steam had fogged up the glass doors, giving us privacy we didn't need, and the contrast between the cool tiles at my back and his burning hot skin against my front had sent delicious shivers through my body.

By the time we finally got dressed, my skin was flushed from more than just the hot water, and my legs felt like jelly.

I couldn't help but notice the satisfied smirk on his face as he watched me try to style my thoroughly mussed hair.

The demon was definitely living up to his reputation of being sinfully tempting, and I was beginning to wonder if I'd survive the week with my sanity intact.

"Come on," I took his hand as we left our room. "I'll show you around the house before dinner."

His fingers intertwined with mine felt natural like they belonged there. "Lead the way."

I guided him through the mansion, showing him the library with its floor-to-ceiling windows, the conservatory where I used to hide and read for hours, and the various sitting rooms that seemed excessive even now.

"This place is," Aldaine started, hesitating looking for a word.

"Pretentious?" I offered with a grin.

He chuckled. "I was going to say impressive, but pretentious works too."

As we rounded the corner to the main sitting room, I heard familiar voices and tensed. Aldaine squeezed my hand reassuringly as we walked in to find several of Stephany's friends from high school lounging on the expensive furniture.

"Oh my God, Rosie?" Madison Wheeler's voice was syrupy sweet as she stood up. "Is that really you?"

I forced a smile. "Hi Madison. Brittany, Jessica." I nodded to the other women who were eyeing Aldaine like he was a piece of meat.

"We heard you were coming but," Madison's eyes traveled over my body in that calculating way I remembered from high school. "You look different."

"She looks beautiful," Aldaine's voice was smooth but had an edge to it that made Madison take a small step back. "I'm Aldaine, Rosie's partner."

The women practically tripped over themselves introducing themselves to him, their voices taking on that flirtatious tone that made me want to roll my eyes. But Aldaine's hand never left mine, and he kept me pulled close to his side.

"Rosie?" A quieter voice caught my attention, and I turned to see Rita Collins

standing slightly apart from the group. Unlike the others, her smile seemed genuine. "It's really good to see you."

"Rita!" My smile was real this time. Rita had always been kind to me, even when Stephany had turned everyone else against me. "I didn't know you'd be here. "

She came over and gave me a quick hug. "I just got in. I'm staying at a hotel in town. This place is a bit too.." she glanced around.

"Pretentious?" Aldaine offered, making Rita laugh.

"Exactly!" She grinned at him. "You must be the guy making Stephany foam at the mouth with jealousy. I've only been here an hour and I've already heard about the 'gorgeous man' Rosie brought."

I felt my cheeks heat up, but Aldaine just smirked. "I do my best," he pressed a kiss to my temple.

Rita's eyes softened as she watched us. "Well, I'm glad you're here, Rosie. Maybe we could catch up properly tomorrow? Away from all this?" She gestured vaguely at the other women who were still hovering nearby.

"I'd like that."

Aldaine pulled me out of the room to continue the tour before dinner.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I followed Rita and Aldaine into the formal dining room, relieved to see Dad had arranged the seating. He'd placed me between himself and Aldaine, with Rita across from me. Stephany and her friends were at the other end of the long table with Jan, which was perfect.

The first course was served, some fancy soup that I couldn't pronounce, and Dad turned to me with a warm smile. "So, sweetheart, how's the job hunt going?"

I felt Aldaine's hand squeeze my thigh under the table. "I just started a new position," I remembered our cover story. "That's how Aldaine and I met."

"At the coffee shop," Aldaine added smoothly, his thumb making small circles on my leg that were very distracting. "Best coffee I ever spilled."

Dad laughed, and I felt some of the tension leave my shoulders. I'd forgotten how much I missed his laugh. He traveled so much for work that I rarely got to hear it anymore.

"Rita," I turned to my friend who was watching us with an amused expression. "Tell me what you've been up to. Last I heard, you were taking over your dad's business?"

Rita's face lit up. "Yeah! The Silver Spur and Horse is doing great."

Dad officially retired last year, but he still comes in to critique my bourbon selection.

"She rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "You two should come by while you're in town."

We've got live music most nights, and the dance floor is always packed. "

"That sounds fun," I glanced at Aldaine. "What do you think?"

He smiled and my heart did a little flip. "I'm free any night except Saturday. Have to take a business call that evening."

"Perfect!" Rita beamed. "How about Tuesday? It's usually our best night for dancing."

"You dance?" Dad asked Aldaine, looking impressed.

"When properly motivated," Aldaine replied, his hand sliding a bit higher on my thigh. I nearly choked on my wine.

Dad didn't notice my reaction, already launching into a conversation about his other passion. "You know what else is great for unwinding? Golf. Do you play?"

"When I can find the time," Aldaine shrugged. "Though I admit it's been a while."

"You should join me Monday morning," Dad looked like a kid as he spoke enthusiastically. "The country club here has an excellent course. What do you say?"

I held my breath, wondering how Aldaine would handle this. But he just smiled that charming smile of his. "I'd be honored, sir."

The main course arrived, roasted duck that looked amazing, and Rita leaned forward. "So, Rosie, remember that time in high school when we snuck into the Silver Spur and Horse through the back door?"

I laughed, the memory coming back clearly. "And your dad caught us trying to steal a

bottle of his best whiskey! "

"He made us work as dishwashers for a month," Rita grinned. "But hey, that's how I learned the business from the ground up."

"I always wondered why you skipped college," I took a bite of the duck.

Rita shrugged. "Didn't see the point when I already knew what I wanted to do. Dad had been training me since I was old enough to reach the bar. Besides," she winked, "now I get to be my own boss and make my own rules."

I felt a wave of admiration for Rita. She'd always known exactly what she wanted and gone after it. Unlike me, who'd spent years trying to figure out what I was supposed to do with my life.

Aldaine's hand found mine under the table and he squeezed it gently as if he could read my thoughts. I squeezed back, grateful for his silent support.

The rest of dinner passed pleasantly, with conversation flowing easily between the four of us while we successfully ignored the occasional loud burst of laughter from Stephany's end of the table.

After dinner, I wasn't ready to go back to our room.

I followed Aldaine into the backyard, the night air cool against my skin. The pool lights cast a soft blue glow across the water, making it look magical in the darkness.

"I needed this," I admitted, taking a deep breath. "Being inside that house too long makes me feel like I'm suffocating sometimes."

Aldaine's hand found mine as we walked toward the pool. "Tell me about growing up

here."

"I didn't, for the most part, until I was older." I squeezed his fingers. "Before Dad married Jan, I stayed with my grandparents when he traveled. Their house was about twenty minutes from here, this old Victorian with a wrap-around porch and the most amazing garden. "

We reached the pool's edge and Aldaine sat down, pulling me with him. I kicked off my shoes and dipped my feet into the water, watching the ripples spread out across the surface.

"My grandmother used to make these incredible cinnamon rolls," I smiled at the memory.

"She'd let me help knead the dough, even though I probably made more of a mess than anything else.

And Grandpa would take me fishing at this little pond behind their house.

He'd tell the most outrageous stories about the 'one that got away' — each time the fish got bigger and bigger. "

Aldaine chuckled, rolling up his pants legs before joining his feet with mine in the water. "They sound wonderful."

"They were." I leaned against his shoulder, feeling the warmth of him seep into me.

"Grandpa taught me how to play chess. He never let me win.

Said it wouldn't help me learn. But the day I finally beat him fairly, he was so proud he took us all out for ice cream, even though it was nearly midnight. "

"Where are they now?" Aldaine's voice was soft and gentle.

I swallowed hard, fighting back the sudden sting of tears. "They passed away a few years after Dad married Jan. Car accident. They were coming back from their weekly date night. They never stopped dating, even after fifty years of marriage. It was raining, and.." I trailed off, unable to continue.

Aldaine wrapped his arm around me, pulling me closer. "I'm sorry, little minx."

We sat in comfortable silence, just watching the water ripple around our feet. The crickets chirped softly in the background, and somewhere in the distance, an owl called.

"Can I ask you something?" I finally broke the silence, turning to look at him.

"Anything."

"What's this business meeting next Saturday that's so important?" I was curious about what kind of demon business he conducted .

He tensed slightly beside me, but his voice remained casual. "It's a family meeting of sorts? It's a little complicated. I'm required to be there as the elder."

"Your family?" I sat up straighter, staring at him.

I stared at him, my eyes widening in surprise. Aldaine, the powerful demon I had summoned, was an elder of his own family? I couldn't help the curiosity that bubbled up inside me. What exactly did that entail?

He held my gaze steadily, a hint of a smirk playing on his lips, but I could see the seriousness lurking in the depths of his gorgeous brown eyes. "You're the head of

your family?" I repeated slowly, trying to wrap my mind around this new information. "What does that even mean?"

Aldaine chuckled softly again, the sound sending a pleasant shiver down my spine.

"It's a bit complicated, little minx. We're a tight-knit group, my people, and I'm responsible for making sure we stay on the right side of things.

Even if that means bending a few human rules now and then.

"His expression turned wry. "Can't have illegal demons getting into too much trouble, after all.

I try to keep us ethical in our dealings with humans and others. "

I couldn't help but be intrigued. The idea of Aldaine overseeing some sort of demonic family, making sure they behaved themselves, was both fascinating and a little unnerving. What kind of things did they get up to that required his intervention?

"Ethical demon," I snorted. "That's an oxymoron if I ever heard one."

"Hey now," he splashed water at me with his foot. "I'll have you know I'm very ethical. All my contracts are clearly worded, no hidden clauses, and I always fulfill my end of the bargain. My people are required to have the same."

I laughed, but then sobered as I remembered our contract. "Speaking of contracts. "

"Don't." His finger pressed against my lips, silencing me. "Let's not talk about that right now. Just enjoy the night with me."

The way he was looking at me made my heart skip a beat, and I found myself

nodding. He replaced his finger with his lips, kissing me softly under the starlit sky, and for a moment, I almost forgot that this was all temporary, that my soul wasn't part of some supernatural business transaction.

Aldaine's lips were on mine, and I could feel the heat building between us, threatening to consume me whole.

His hands roamed over my body, leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

I moaned as his tongue slipped into my mouth, tangling with mine.

He tasted like smoke and sin, and I couldn't get enough.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer as if trying to meld our bodies into one. His touch was electric, sending jolts of pleasure throughout my body. I could feel myself growing wetter with every passing second, my body aching for him.

I moaned again as his fingers found their way under my dress, teasing the sensitive flesh of my thighs. I could feel myself growing closer and closer to the edge, my body trembling with anticipation.

Just as I was about to reach the peak, Aldaine pulled away, leaving me gasping for breath. He gazed down at me with a wicked grin, his eyes dark with desire.

"Not yet, little minx," he murmured huskily. "I want to savor this moment."

And with that, he leaned in for another kiss, his lips claiming mine once again as he continued his slow, torturous exploration of my body.

But suddenly, he pulled away, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "I need to cool off," he

stood up.

I watched in amusement as he slipped into the water, fully clothed. The water darkened around him as his clothes soaked up the liquid, and he let out a satisfied sigh.

"Come join me, little minx," he called out, beckoning me with a crook of a finger.

I hesitated for a moment.

Aldaine must have sensed my hesitation because suddenly, he reached out and grabbed my ankle, yanking me into the water with him. I sputtered and splashed, trying to regain my footing as he laughed.

"You ass!" I shouted, smacking his shoulder playfully.

He grinned at me, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "You love it," he pulled me closer and wrapped his arms around me.

The water swirled around us as we moved, our soaked clothes creating interesting patterns in the pool.

My sundress billowed out like some exotic sea creature, then clung to my curves as I twisted through the cool liquid.

The fabric felt oddly sensual against my skin and watching Aldaine's white shirt turn nearly transparent wasn't helping my concentration.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd done something this spontaneous, this playful. Maybe it was back when Denis would take me to the community pool. Those summer afternoons seemed like another lifetime ago.

Now here I was, fully clothed in a luxury pool with a demon, of all things.

The absurdity of it made me giggle, the sound echoing off the water's surface.

Each movement felt simultaneously awkward and liberating.

Like breaking some unspoken rule and loving every second of it.

The weight of my waterlogged clothes tried to drag me down, but Aldaine's presence kept me buoyant, both physically and emotionally.

Aldaine and I stole kisses as we swam, our laughter echoing through the night air.

His lips were soft and demanding, sending jolts of pleasure down my spine.

I could feel his hands roaming over my body.

It was a perfect moment. The cool water lapped at my skin, providing a delicious contrast to the heat that was building between us.

If Jan or Stephany saw us, they'd be scandalized. But I didn't care. For once, I was doing something for myself, something that made me happy.

I gazed up at Aldaine, his dark eyes making me feel like drowning. He looked ethereal in the moonlight, his wet hair slicked back and his white shirt clinging to his muscular chest. At that moment, I felt like I could see the real him, the demon beneath the human facade. And I was okay with that.

"You know," I murmured, leaning in for another kiss. "I never pictured myself doing the naughty tango with a demon."

Aldaine chuckled, his breath warm against my cheek. "And I never pictured myself enjoying the company so much with a human," he replied. "But here we are."

Eventually, we grew tired and climbed out of the pool, dripping wet and shivering slightly. We made our way back to our room, hand in hand, and collapsed onto the bed, exhausted after stripping and getting into pajamas.

I snuggled up against Aldaine, feeling the warmth of his body seeping into mine. His arms wrapped around me, holding me close, and I felt safe and protected.

I fell asleep with a smile on my face, feeling happier than I had in a long time.

When I woke up the next morning, I was alone in bed. I sat up and rubbed my eyes, looking around the room. Aldaine was nowhere to be seen.

I got up and stretched, feeling the soreness in my muscles from our swim last night. I made my way to the bathroom and turned on the shower, letting the hot water wash away the remnants of sleep.

As I stood under the spray, I couldn't help but think about Aldaine and our arrangement.

I knew that it wasn't sustainable in the long term, but for now, it was working.

I had a roof over my head, a job, and a man who made me feel desired and cherished, even if that part was just temporary for the week.

I knew that I couldn't keep him forever, but I was determined to enjoy every moment that we had together.

When I emerged from the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, I found Aldaine sitting on

the edge of the bed, looking at his phone. He looked up when he heard me and smiled.

"Good morning, little minx," he stood up and sauntered over to me.

He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me deeply, making my towel fall to the floor. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer as our bodies pressed together.

For a moment, I forgot about everything else and just lost myself in the feel of him. But then he pulled away, a mischievously evil glint in his eyes.

"We have a busy day ahead of us," he picked up my towel and handed it to me. "We need to get dressed and head downstairs for breakfast. We can have hanky panky later."

I sighed, reluctantly letting go of him and wrapping the towel around myself. "Fine," I rolled my eyes. "But only because I'm starving."

Aldaine chuckled and gave me a quick kiss on the forehead before heading to the bathroom to get ready. I watched him go, feeling a warmth spread through me.

I knew that our time together was limited, but for now, I was going to enjoy every moment of it.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I followed Aldaine down to breakfast, already dreading what awaited us. The dining room was significantly more crowded than dinner last night, filled with faces I recognized from high school and others I assumed were Roger's friends and family.

Roger stood near the head of the table, looking exactly like the trust fund baby he was.

Time had been kind to him, unfortunately.

His muscles were more defined than they'd been in high school, clearly the result of having nothing better to do than spend hours at the gym.

His perfectly styled hair and designer clothes screamed "old money," but his smirk was the same one he'd worn when he'd dumped me for Stephany all those years ago.

What surprised me most was how little I felt looking at him now.

An eerie emotional flatline where once had been mountains and valleys of feeling.

No lingering attraction tugging at my core, no echoing hurt reverberating through old wounds, just mild annoyance at his existence.

Ten years ago, seeing that smile would have sent my heart into gymnastics.

Today, I might as well have been looking at wallpaper.

An expensive, pretentious wallpaper that thought too highly of itself, but wallpaper

nonetheless.

The realization was oddly liberating, like discovering you've finally outgrown clothes that never quite fit right anyway.

"Well, well, if it isn't little Rosie," Roger's voice carried across the room, making several heads turn our way. "Steph said you might show up, but I didn't believe it."

I felt Aldaine's hand press against my lower back, grounding me.

"Roger," I nodded coolly. "This is my boyfriend, Aldaine."

Roger's eyebrows shot up as he gave Aldaine an obvious once-over. "Boyfriend? Really?" He laughed, the sound grating on my nerves. "That's surprising, considering Stephany told everyone you were such a wreck last week she wasn't sure you'd even come."

Several people snickered, and I saw my father's face turn an alarming shade of red as he started to rise from his seat. But before he could say anything, Aldaine's smooth voice cut through the tension like a knife through butter.

"Interesting," Aldaine's tone was deadly pleasant, the kind that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

"I find it fascinating when people feel the need to spread rumors about others to make themselves feel more secure in their own, well, questionable life choices.

" He looked at Stephany with a raised brow and a small smirk.

The room went dead silent. Stephany's face turned an ugly shade of purple, while Roger's mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water.

"Come on, little minx," Aldaine's hand slid to my waist, guiding me away from the awkward situation. "I see Rita saved us seats."

As we moved down the table, I caught sight of my father having what appeared to be a very heated whispered discussion with Jan.

His hands were clenched into fists on the table, and Jan looked both defensive and alarmed.

Meanwhile, Stephany was trying to soothe an obviously rattled Roger, but her concerned girlfriend act wasn't quite covering up her own embarrassment.

Rita grinned as we sat down beside her. "That was beautiful," she whispered, passing me a plate of fresh fruit. "I haven't seen anyone put those two in their place since high school."

"Yes, well," Aldaine's hand found mine under the table, "some people need reminding that their actions have consequences."

I squeezed his hand, grateful for his intervention. "Thank you," I murmured.

He turned to me with a wicked gleam in his eye. "Don't thank me yet, little minx. The day's just getting started."

Looking at the way Roger and Stephany were whispering and shooting us dark looks, I had a feeling he was right.

I followed the crowd outside after breakfast with Rita at my side, and had to admit that Jan had outdone herself.

The front lawn had been transformed into something straight out of Alice in

Wonderland.

Professional-looking white tents housed vendors offering everything from champagne to fancy finger foods.

But the centerpiece was an elaborate croquet setup that sprawled across the manicured grass.

Flamingo-shaped mallets leaned against white wooden stands, and the wickets had been painted gold and adorned with tiny roses.

String lights were already strung between the trees, waiting for dusk to transform the space into a twinkling wonderland.

I couldn't help but feel a pang of reluctant admiration.

My stepmother might be cold to me, but she certainly knew how to throw an event that would make people talk for months.

"Ladies versus gentlemen!" Jan announced, clapping her hands together like an overexcited kindergarten teacher. "Won't this be fun?"

I barely had time to register what was happening before Aldaine tugged me against the solid warmth of his chest. His fingers traced a delicate path along my jaw, tilting my face up to his.

When his lips captured mine, the world dissolved into a haze of sensation, soft yet demanding, sweet yet wicked.

The kiss deepened until I forgot we were standing in the middle of my stepmother's perfectly manicured lawn, surrounded by a bunch of hostile people.

My fingers curled into the crisp fabric of his shirt, clinging to him like an anchor in a storm.

Someone let out a wolf whistle, probably Rita, followed by scattered whoops and calls that made me want to sink into the perfectly trimmed grass and disappear.

When Aldaine finally drew back, the look in his eyes sent electricity dancing down my spine.

Dark and possessive with just a hint of mischief, like he knew exactly what he was doing to me and was thoroughly enjoying himself.

My legs felt about as stable as melted butter, and I had to resist the urge to fan my burning face.

The satisfied smirk playing at the corners of his mouth told me that was precisely the reaction he'd been aiming for.

"For luck," he whispered against my ear before sauntering away.

"Girl," Rita grabbed my arm, fanning herself dramatically. "That man is something else."

I watched Aldaine join the other men, noting how even Roger seemed to unconsciously step back to give him space. "He certainly is."

We lined up for the game, and I quickly realized this wasn't going to be the casual backyard croquet I remembered from childhood. Jan had hired professional referees, and there were scoring cards being passed around.

"So," I followed Rita to the start of the game. "What kind of gossip have I missed

these last few years?"

"Oh, you've come to the right person for the gossip, girl," Rita whispered as we waited our turn. "Do you see that one there? Jessie Martinez."

I followed her gaze to a statuesque woman in designer workout wear. "Wasn't she the president of the student council?"

"Yeah," Rita confirmed with a nod. "It's the first time she's been in public since moving home. Apparently, she married some tech billionaire, but he caught her sleeping with their pool boy AND their driver."

I winced. "At the same time?"

"Different days, same pool house." Rita took her shot, sending the ball through two wickets. "And see that redhead over there? That's Michelle Peterson. Remember how she was always bragging about how she was going to Harvard?"

"Yeah?"

"Turns out she's working as a stripper in Boston. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but she kept posting fake pictures of herself 'studying' at Harvard on Instagram. Got caught when one of her regular customers recognized her when she was with Stephany."

I tried to focus on my shot but couldn't help laughing. "You're kidding!"

"Nope. Oh! And Kevin Matthous? The one who used to give you grief about your art in Mrs. Henderson's class?"

I looked over at the men's side where Kevin was attempting to show Aldaine how to

hold his mallet. Aldaine's expression suggested he was reconsidering his promise to behave.

"He's actually doing really well," Rita continued. "Opened up an art gallery in Denver. Specializes in promoting local artists." She paused. "He asked about you before you came down for breakfast. He was worried about what Stephany had already started to do to you."

I missed my shot completely, the mallet swooshing through empty air. "He what?"

"Mmhmm. Said he would be back up if we accidentally-on-purpose ran her over with a golf cart."

I laughed again. "That's kinda fun to imagine, actually."

Rita grinned at me. "Wanna try to find a golf cart later?"

Before I could respond, shouting erupted from the men's side of the lawn, drawing our attention away from our gossip session.

Somehow, Roger had managed to hit his own ball with such force that it sailed straight into Jan's prized rose bushes, sending a shower of pristine white petals floating to the ground.

I couldn't help but notice the barely concealed smirk on Aldaine's face as he positioned himself next to my former boyfriend, demonstrating proper mallet form with an elegant grace that made Roger look like a fumbling amateur.

Each perfectly delivered suggestion from Aldaine - "Perhaps if you didn't grip it quite so desperately" and "The goal is to hit the ball, not assault it" - caused Roger's face to cycle through increasingly vibrant shades of red.

With each comment, his complexion darkened until I swore he resembled one of Jan's prized tomatoes from her garden.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

The sight of my ex being slowly and methodically taken apart by my demon date's razor-sharp commentary was oddly satisfying, especially given how many times Roger had bragged about his athletic prowess back in high school.

I bit my lip to suppress a smile, remembering all those insufferable Saturday afternoons I'd spent on metal bleachers, watching him preen and flex after every minor accomplishment on the field.

Now here he was, being schooled in the genteel art of croquet by someone who probably played the game when it was first invented centuries ago.

Rita snorted. "I like him. He's exactly what you need."

I watched Aldaine demonstrate a perfect shot, his ball sailing through three wickets in succession. He caught my eye and winked.

"Yeah, he kind of is." That was the problem, wasn't it?

I lined up my next shot, trying to focus on the game when Stephany's voice rang out behind me.

"Oh Rosie, I've been meaning to ask." Her sugary-sweet tone made my teeth ache. "Is it true what I heard about you and Aldaine? That you were so desperate to keep your apartment you agreed to, well, you know." She gestured vaguely, making sure everyone within earshot could hear.

My cheeks burned as several women turned to stare. Rita stepped closer to me, her

presence supportive.

"I mean, it wouldn't be the first time, right?

" Stephany continued, her smile sharpening like a knife.

"Isn't that why you lost your last job? Because you wouldn't sleep with your boss?

You just decided to give in this time. Desperate times call for desperate measures, I suppose.

" She tossed her perfect hair over her shoulder, clearly enjoying the whispers spreading around us like wildfire.

My pool cue nearly snapped in my grip. Months of unemployment, dwindling savings, and endless rejection letters had been humiliating enough.

Now Stephany was dragging my professional nightmare into public view, twisting it into something even more degrading.

The worst part was how easily everyone seemed ready to believe her version of events.

Before I could respond, movement from the men's side caught my eye.

Aldaine had removed his suit jacket, rolling up his sleeves to reveal tanned forearms. He caught my gaze and slowly loosened his tie, a knowing smirk playing on his lips.

The simple act somehow managed to be the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

Stephany's face contorted into an ugly sneer, her perfectly glossed lips pulling back

from her teeth like a predator revealing its weapons. The flawless makeup she'd spent hundreds on couldn't mask the cruelty beneath.

"Remember prom night, Rosie? When Roger realized what a mistake you were?

" Her voice took on that familiar razor's edge that had sliced through my confidence so many times before, the same tone she'd used when commenting on my dress size at family dinners or "helpfully" suggesting diet plans during Christmas.

"He made quite the statement, didn't he? Leaving you crying in the middle of the dance floor while we had sex in front of everyone with clothes on." She emphasized each word like pressing thumbtacks into a bulletin board, making sure they stuck deep.

The memory flashed before my eyes. My emerald green dress I'd saved six months to buy, mascara streaming down my face while the lights cast shifting patterns over everything, including Roger's hands traveling down Stephany's back to places that should have been off-limits in public.

The whispers that followed me for the rest of senior year echoed in my ears: "poor Rosie," "did you see her face," "what did she expect? "

I deliberately kept my gaze fixed on Aldaine as his elegant fingers worked that top button loose, the simple action drawing my attention like a magnet.

His dark eyes held mine with an intensity that made Stephany's presence fade to meaningless background noise.

That old memory of standing alone in my powder blue dress, mascara tracking down my cheeks, seemed to belong to someone else now, some other girl from a lifetime ago.

"Are you even listening to me?" Stephany's voice climbed to that shrill pitch that used to make me flinch.

Her perfectly manicured hands gestured wildly in my peripheral vision.

"I'm talking about how Roger dumped you in front of everyone and kissed me right there!

You ran out crying like the pathetic little shit you are! "

The words that once would have sent me spiraling now bounced off harmlessly, like rain against a window.

Something had shifted inside me, a realignment that even Stephany's poison couldn't penetrate.

I found myself fascinated instead by the way Aldaine's throat moved as he swallowed, the defined line of his Adam's apple sliding beneath smooth chestnut skin.

The slight quirk of his lips suggested he was thoroughly enjoying the show—not as a spectator but as someone appreciating a performer coming into their own.

The demon's presence felt like armor, turning my stepsister's best barbs into nothing more than desperate attempts to wound someone who'd finally outgrown her reach.

Four months of unemployment had taught me what true humiliation felt like; Stephany's playground tactics seemed almost quaint by comparison.

"So?" I shrugged, turning back to my shot with a deliberate casualness that made Stephany's mouth twitch.

I leaned over, measuring the angle with newfound confidence.

The ball rolled smoothly through the wicket with a satisfying click, and I couldn't help but smile at Rita's enthusiastic high five, her fingers warm against mine.

For the first time since arriving at the estate, I felt relaxed.

The sound that came from Stephany's throat was somewhere between a scream and a growl. I glanced over just in time to see her designer sandal stomping into the perfectly manicured grass.

"You little bitch!" She shrieked, her face turning an alarming shade of red. "You think you're so much better now with your fancy boyfriend? He probably feels sorry for you! That's the only reason anyone would date someone like you! "

I lined up another shot, purposefully taking my time. "Rita, what do you think about trying that chocolate fountain I saw under the blue tent after this?"

"Oh my god, yes!" Rita clapped her hands. "Did you see they have fresh strawberries too?"

Stephany's mallet went sailing through the air, landing with a satisfying crash in Jan's already damaged rose bush. White petals exploded into the air like confetti at a particularly angry party.

"Stephany Marie!" Jan's voice cut through the air like a whip. She appeared seemingly out of nowhere, her perfectly coordinated outfit almost vibrating with contained fury. "What do you think you're doing?"

"But Mom!" Stephany's voice hit that pitch that used to make dogs howl in high school. "She's ruining everything! She's supposed to be miserable! And that boyfriend

of hers!"

"Not. Another. Word." Jan's fingers wrapped around Stephany's upper arm in what looked like an iron grip. "You are making a scene."

I watched with barely concealed amusement as Jan practically dragged my stepsister across the lawn, Stephany's protests becoming increasingly childish with each step. Several of the guests were failing to hide their own entertainment behind raised champagne glasses.

"Well," Rita drawled, twirling her mallet like a baton. "That was worth the price of admission alone."

I snorted, covering my mouth to hold in the laughter that threatened to bubble up. "I can't believe she threw the mallet."

"I can. Remember when she threw her phone in the pool because Roger liked someone else's Instagram post?"

"God, how could I forget? She made the pool guy drain the whole thing to get it back."

We finished our game in much better spirits, though I noticed several of the other women seemed more willing to chat with us now. Funny how Stephany's meltdown had broken some invisible social barrier.

"Okay, food time!" Rita linked her arm through mine as we made our way to the vendor tents. "I saw these amazing little pastry things earlier that we need to try."

The setup was impressive. Various stations offered everything from elegant finger sandwiches to elaborate desserts. We started at one end, determined to try at least one

thing from each vendor.

"Oh my god," I moaned around a chocolate-covered strawberry. "This is amazing."

"Right?" Rita popped a tiny éclair into her mouth. "Jan may be, well, Jan, but she knows how to throw a party."

I glanced over at the men's side of the lawn where their game was wrapping up. Aldaine caught my eye and slowly licked his bottom lip, making my breath catch. Even from this distance, I could see the heat in his gaze.

"Your man is looking at you like you're the dessert," Rita nudged me with her elbow.

I felt my cheeks warm but couldn't look away from him. The intensity in his dark eyes made something flutter low in my abdomen, a sensation I was becoming dangerously accustomed to whenever he looked at me like that.

"Yeah, he does that," I was trying for casual but heard the breathless quality in my own voice. Rita's knowing smirk didn't help matters.

But beneath the heat and the attraction, I felt my heart tug slightly.

A small voice whispered doubts I couldn't quite silence.

Was any of it real? Or was this all just an elaborate performance for Stephany's benefit?

The contract between us had clear terms, but nowhere in our agreement had it specified the way my pulse should race when he was near, or how I should crave his touch even when no one was watching.

"Lucky girl." Rita grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, handing one to me. "To your incredibly hot, obviously loaded, definitely into you boyfriend. And to Stephany's epic tantrum that I will treasure forever in my memory."

I clinked my glass against hers, laughing. "I'll drink to that."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

After the game, Aldaine and I retreated to our room, both of us still buzzing from the day's events. I could feel the tension between us, a palpable energy that seemed to crackle in the air. As soon as the door closed behind us, I turned to face him, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Aldaine," my voice barely above a whisper. "I want you."

He looked at me, surprise flickering in his dark eyes. "Rosie," his voice low and husky. "Are you sure?"

I nodded, taking a step towards him. "I want you," I repeated, my hands reaching for the buttons on his shirt. "All of you."

He hesitated for a moment, his gaze searching mine. Then, with a slow nod, he began to undress, his movements deliberate and controlled. I watched as he revealed his true form, my breath catching in my throat at the sight of his beautiful, magenta-colored skin.

I reached out, my fingers tracing the lines of his chest and abs, marveling at the feel of his smooth, hard muscles beneath my touch. He shuddered at my touch, his eyes closing briefly as he let out a low growl.

"Rosie," he murmured, his voice thick with desire. "You don't know what you're doing to me."

I smiled, my fingers continuing their exploration as I slowly helped undress him. When he was finally naked, I knelt in front of him, my eyes never leaving his. I could

see the desire in his gaze, the hunger that matched my own.

I took his cock in my mouth, my tongue swirling around the head as I sucked gently. He let out a low moan, his hands tangling in my hair as I worked him with my mouth. I could feel him growing harder, his cock swelling in my mouth as I teased and tormented him.

When I felt him nearing the edge, I pulled back, my eyes meeting his. He looked at me, his gaze filled with lust and frustration.

"Rosie," his voice low and dangerous. "You're playing with fire."

I smiled, my hands reaching up to cup his face as I stood. "I know, but I want that burn."

With that, he grabbed me, lifting me with startling ease before tossing me onto the bed.

The mattress dipped beneath his weight as he climbed over me, his magenta skin gleaming in the dim light.

His tail smooth and powerful, snaked around my waist in a possessive grip, holding me exactly where he wanted me.

I glimpsed the raw hunger in his dark eyes just before he entered me with one swift, powerful thrust.

I cried out his name, my fingers digging into his shoulders as my body arched beneath him.

Every nerve ending sparked to life as he began to move.

He was gloriously relentless, his strong hands gripping my hips, lifting me to meet each powerful drive.

His tail tightened around me, the tip finding my most sensitive spot with unerring precision, circling and teasing until I couldn't tell where one sensation ended and another began.

I could feel myself spiraling higher with each passing moment, tension coiling tighter within me as my vision blurred at the edges.

The building pressure was exquisite torture, each thrust bringing me closer to shattering completely.

When I finally came, it was with a scream that tore from the depths of my soul, reverberating through the room like thunder.

My entire body convulsed, muscles clenching and unclenching as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me, leaving me gasping and trembling in their wake.

I clung to Aldaine, my nails leaving crescent moons across his vibrant skin.

"Aldaine," I sobbed his name, overwhelmed by the intensity of my release. "Oh god, Aldaine."

His rhythm faltered as he watched me come undone beneath him.

His dark eyes, black with desire, locked with mine as his movements grew erratic.

Then with a deep, primal growl that seemed to vibrate through every cell in my body, he followed me over the edge.

His powerful form shuddered violently against mine, his tail constricting around my waist as he surrendered completely to his release inside me.

The sensation of his warmth filling me triggered another cascade of aftershocks that left me whimpering his name.

We lay there for a moment, our bodies entwined as we caught our breath. Then, with a low growl, Aldaine rolled us over, his tail still wrapped around my waist as he began to move again.

This time, he was slower, more deliberate in his movements.

Each touch felt like a declaration, his fingers tracing patterns across my skin as if memorizing every curve and hollow.

I arched into his touch, my body responding with a sensitivity that surprised even me.

His mouth followed where his hands led, leaving a trail of warmth that lingered after he moved on.

"I want to remember every part of you," he murmured against the hollow of my throat, his voice vibrating through me like distant thunder.

I tangled my fingers in his hair as he continued his unhurried exploration.

The weight of him above me was grounding, comforting, even as my mind threatened to float away on waves of sensation.

The contrast between this tender attentiveness and our earlier frenzied passion made my heart swell with emotion I couldn't name.

My breath hitched as he found a particularly sensitive spot.

"Aldaine," my voice barely audible even to my own ears.

I could feel myself building toward another peak, a different kind of tension gathering deep within me, less urgent but somehow more profound.

My limbs trembled with anticipation, tiny tremors I couldn't control radiating outward from my core as he continued his measured, deliberate rhythm.

The promise of release hovered just beyond reach, tantalizing and inevitable.

When it finally hit, it was like a tidal wave, crashing over me and sweeping me away. I cried out, my nails digging into Aldaine's back as I clung to him, my body shaking with the force of my release.

We lay there for hours, our bodies tangled together as we explored each other. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before, a connection that went beyond the physical. I could feel our souls intertwining, our energies merging as we became one.

I awoke to early morning light filtering through the curtains, momentarily disoriented by the unfamiliar weight of an arm draped over my midsection.

My body ached pleasantly, every muscle bearing the sweet soreness of the previous night's activities.

Memories flooded back in vivid detail with Aldaine's hands on my skin, his mouth against mine, our bodies moving together in perfect rhythm.

I'd never experienced that kind of connection before. It had been more than physical.

Carefully, I turned to face him, my breath catching at the sight of him in the light.

In sleep, Aldaine's demon form had a soft vulnerability to it.

His magenta skin glowed softly in the dim light, the color deeper and richer than any human shade could ever be.

The sharp angles of his face were relaxed, his expression peaceful.

His chest rose and fell with steady breaths, each one stirring something tender and dangerous in my chest.

I reached out hesitantly, my fingertips hovering just above his skin before making contact.

I traced the sharp line of his jaw, feeling the subtle texture differences between human and demon.

His skin was warm, almost fever-hot beneath my touch, and impossibly smooth.

I followed the elegant curve of his cheekbone, the straight line of his nose, the fullness of his bottom lip.

Was I falling in love with him? The question slipped unbidden into my mind, making my heart stutter in my chest. How ridiculous could that be?

Falling in love with a demon who owned my soul.

What kind of cosmic joke was that? I barely knew him, yet there was an undeniable connection between us, something that transcended our arrangement, something that felt terrifyingly like fate.

My fingers stilled against his skin as panic began to bloom in my chest. What was I doing?

This was a business transaction, nothing more.

I'd summoned him out of desperation, offering my soul in exchange for his help.

He was fulfilling his end of the bargain, playing the part of my doting boyfriend to perfection, helping me save face in front of Stephany and Roger.

The sex had been, well, earth-shattering, but that was probably just a perk of sleeping with a supernatural being who'd had centuries to perfect his technique.

He couldn't possibly have genuine feelings for me. Why would he? He was an ancient, powerful demon, and I was just me. Unemployed, broke, desperate enough to trade my eternal soul for a weekend of petty revenge and a job with a good salary.

God, I was an idiot. Setting myself up for heartbreak with a being who probably viewed human emotions as quaint curiosities. When this weekend was over, he'd go back to wherever demons went when they weren't tormenting desperate humans, and I'd be left with nothing but memories and a soul-debt.

That was what I'd asked for, wasn't it? I'd wanted a fake boyfriend to show up my stepsister, and I was getting exactly that.

It wasn't Aldaine's fault that I was developing inconvenient feelings.

I couldn't get hurt if I remembered the parameters of our arrangement.

We'd just met, for crying out loud. People didn't fall in love in a matter of days, that was fairy tale nonsense.

And this was most definitely not a fairy tale.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

With a sigh, I carefully extracted myself from his embrace, wincing slightly at the pleasant soreness between my thighs as I padded to the bathroom.

The cool tiles were a shock against my bare feet as I turned on the shower, steam quickly filling the luxurious space.

I stepped under the spray, letting the hot water slide over my body, washing away the evidence of our night together, if not the memories.

As I shampooed my hair, I forced myself to be practical.

After this weekend, I'd need to focus on rebuilding my life.

I couldn't afford to be mooning over a demon, no matter how incredible he was in bed.

I'd enjoy what time I had with him, then file it away as the strangest, most erotic chapter of my life.

I would worry about seeing him every day at work later.

By the time I stepped out of the shower, my resolve had strengthened.

I wrapped a fluffy towel around my body and wiped the condensation from the mirror, meeting my own eyes.

"Get it together, Rosie," I whispered to my reflection.

"Eyes on the prize, girl. Getting through this weekend with your dignity intact.

Save the existential crisis for Monday."

Back in the bedroom, I dropped my towel and began dressing, selecting comfortable clothes for what promised to be another day of forced socialization. I'd just pulled on my jeans when I felt it. The weight of eyes on my bare back, the prickling awareness of being watched.

I turned to find Aldaine awake, propped up on one elbow, his dark eyes tracking my every movement.

The lush magenta of his skin contrasted beautifully with the white sheets pooled around his waist. His tail moved slowly behind him in a hypnotic pattern, like a predator considering its next move.

The intensity of his stare raised goosebumps across my skin.

"Good morning," I was suddenly shy despite the intimacies we'd shared the night before.

His lips curved into a slow, dangerous smile that made my stomach flip and do weird things. "Morning, little minx."

I walked to the bed, leaning down to place a chaste kiss on his lips. "Sleep well?"

Instead of answering, his hand shot out, fingers wrapping around my wrist as he yanked me down onto the bed. I landed with a surprised yelp against his chest, my still-damp hair scattering droplets across his skin.

"Aldaine!" I laughed, pushing ineffectually against his chest. "I just got dressed!"

He rolled us until I was beneath him, his powerful body caging mine against the mattress. His tail wrapped possessively around my thigh, the tip teasing the sensitive skin behind my knee.

"I can help you get dressed again," his voice a low rumble that I felt more than heard. His eyes glinted with mischief and desire. "After."

"After what?" I tried to act surprised, though the heat pooling low in my abdomen suggested I already knew the answer.

Instead of responding, he began moving down my body, his mouth leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

He unbuttoned my jeans with deft fingers, tugging them down along with my underwear in one smooth motion.

My protest died in my throat as he settled between my thighs, his hot breath teasing my already sensitive flesh.

The first touch of his tongue had me arching off the bed with a gasp.

He chuckled, the vibration sending shockwaves through my core as he set about dismantling me with ruthless precision.

His hands gripped my thighs, holding me open to his ministrations as his tongue explored, teased, and tormented.

"Aldaine," I gasped, my fingers tangling in his hair as pleasure built within me, swift and overwhelming.

He intensified his efforts with deliberate precision, his tongue creating slow,

purposeful circles that had me clutching at the sheets.

The contrast between the warmth of his mouth and the cool morning air heightened every sensation.

My breathing fractured into desperate gasps as tension built within me like a gathering storm.

When he drew me between his lips with gentle suction, applying just the perfect pressure, something inside me shattered gloriously.

"Aldaine!" I cried out, my voice unrecognizable even to my own ears.

My world dissolved into pure sensation as pleasure radiated outward from my core in pulsing waves.

My fingers twisted in his hair, my thighs trembling uncontrollably around his head as he expertly guided me through every crest and fall of my release.

He was relentless in his devotion, refusing to relent until I collapsed back against the mattress, overwhelmed and quivering, my skin hypersensitive to even the whisper of his breath.

"Mmm. Delicious." Aldaine grinned, his fangs catching the golden morning light as he looked up at me from between my trembling thighs, eyes dancing with wicked satisfaction. "This is the perfect breakfast, but I'm still hungry."

I yelped in surprise as his tail suddenly unwound from around my thigh, the smooth appendage sliding against my oversensitive skin with deliberate slowness.

My breath caught at the first vibrating touch against me, nerve endings already raw

from his earlier attention.

Aldaine gave me no time to recover, diving back down with renewed purpose, his skilled tongue creating patterns that made coherent thought impossible.

I clutched desperately at his shoulders, my fingernails leaving crescent marks on his magenta skin as another wave of pleasure began building impossibly fast.

My world shattered around me as I came again. My heart ached as a thought flitted across my mind about how I needed him now but I shut it down as I pulled him up to kiss him roughly, the taste of myself on his lips.

"Aldaine." I pushed him on his back. "My turn."

We were late to breakfast and I didn't care at all.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I took one last look in the mirror, smoothing down the fabric of my emerald cocktail dress.

The color made my eyes pop and complemented my copper hair, which I'd styled in loose waves that cascaded down my back.

My makeup was still intact from when I'd finally gotten around to applying it after Aldaine and I had spent most of the day wrapped up in each other.

My cheeks flushed at the memory. I could still feel the echo of his hands on my skin, the demanding press of his mouth against mine. Hours lost to pleasure that had left me boneless and giddy.

"Ready?" Aldaine appeared behind me in the reflection, his human form impeccably dressed in a tailored charcoal suit that accentuated his broad shoulders. The rich chestnut of his skin seemed to glow in the soft lighting of our room, and his dark eyes never left mine as he stepped closer.

"As I'll ever be," I sighed, leaning back against his solid chest. "Can't we just stay here? Order food from the kitchen? "

His large hands settled on my hips, warm and possessive through the silky fabric of my dress. "Tempting," he murmured against my ear, his breath sending a delicious shiver down my spine. "But you've got family obligations."

"Don't remind me," I groaned, tilting my head to give him better access as he pressed a kiss to my neck. "Haven't we satisfied our social quota already? Two more days of

this is going to kill me."

"I won't let that happen," Aldaine promised, his lips curving into that devastating smile that made my knees weak. "After all, I have a vested interest in keeping you alive and well."

"My soul, you mean," I remarked, trying to sound casual even as my heart gave a painful twinge.

Something flickered across his face, too quickly for me to interpret, before he stepped back, offering me his arm. "Shall we?"

We made our way downstairs and out onto the sprawling grounds of the estate.

The late afternoon sun cast everything in a golden haze, transforming the ordinary into something magical.

Fairy lights had been strung through the trees, waiting for darkness to fall when they would illuminate the space like earthbound stars.

Crystal champagne towers glittered in the fading light, servers in crisp uniforms weaving through the growing crowd with trays of hors d'oeuvres and flutes of bubbling champagne.

"This is ridiculous," I muttered to Aldaine as we walked toward where my father and Jan stood greeting guests. "Who needs this many events for an engagement? It's not like Stephany's marrying royalty, just my high school ex-boyfriend."

Aldaine's warm hand pressed reassuringly against the small of my back. "Think of it as a theatrical production," he suggested, his voice low and intimate despite the crowd around us. "And we're giving an Oscar-worthy performance."

Before I could respond, my father spotted us and waved us over, his face lighting up with a genuine smile that warmed something inside me. At least someone was happy to see me.

"Rosie!" Dad enfolded me in a tight hug, then held me at arm's length, examining me with concerned eyes. "How are you holding up, sweetheart? After yesterday..."

I forced a smile, grateful for his concern but unwilling to make a scene. "I'm fine, Dad. Really."

To my shock, Jan stepped forward and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. Her pale blue eyes, so like Stephany's yet somehow warmer, held genuine remorse.

"Rosalind, I want to apologize sincerely for my daughter's behavior yesterday," her voice quiet but steady. "There's no excuse for how she spoke to you. It was cruel and completely unnecessary."

I blinked, momentarily stunned into silence. In all the years Jan had been married to my father, she had never once taken my side against Stephany. Not once.

"I, um, thank you," I managed, unconsciously leaning into Aldaine's solid presence beside me. His arm slipped around my waist, supporting me effortlessly. "I appreciate that."

"We're just glad you stayed," Dad added, glancing approvingly at Aldaine. "Both of you. It wouldn't be the same without you here, Rosie."

I swallowed past the unexpected lump in my throat. "Thanks, Dad."

Jan offered me a tentative smile. "You look lovely, Rosalind. That color is perfect on you."

Another first, a genuine compliment from my stepmother. I was beginning to wonder if I'd stepped into some alternate dimension.

"Thank you," I repeated, feeling oddly off- balance. "Everything looks beautiful out here." I gestured to the elaborate setup, the twinkling lights, the elegant landscaping.

"Stephany wanted fairy tale perfect," Jan replied with a small shrug, though there was something in her expression I couldn't quite read. "You know how she gets."

Oh, I certainly did. My stepsister had always needed everything to be the biggest, the best, the most impressive. Nothing was ever enough.

"Well, she certainly got it," I commented, keeping my tone carefully neutral.

A server passed with a tray of champagne, and Aldaine smoothly snagged two flutes, handing one to me. His fingers brushed against mine, lingering just a moment longer than necessary, sending a shiver of awareness through me.

"To family gatherings," he toasted with a hint of irony only I could detect.

I clinked my glass against his, taking a sip of the crisp, bubbly liquid. "And to surviving them."

I almost choked on the champagne.

Dad chuckled, clapping Aldaine on the shoulder. "I like this one, Rosie. He's good for you."

If only he knew just how unusual my relationship with Aldaine truly was. The contract, the soul debt, the mind-blowing sex that was definitely not part of our original agreement. I hid my flush behind another sip of champagne.

"He certainly is," I glanced up at Aldaine's perfect profile, the warm chestnut skin glowing in the golden hour light.

Jan and my father were soon pulled away by other guests arriving, leaving Aldaine and me to wander through the party. The string quartet played softly in the background, the music weaving through the gentle hum of conversation and occasional bursts of laughter.

We found a relatively quiet spot near a beautifully sculpted topiary of some animals, and I let out a long, slow breath, some of the tension finally leaving my shoulders. Aldaine's hand found the small of my back again, his touch grounding me.

"See? Not so terrible," he murmured, his breath warm against my ear.

I looked up at him, taking in the way the dying sunlight caught in his dark eyes, turning them almost amber. My heart gave a traitorous flutter. "The day's still young. Plenty of time for disaster."

His laugh was rich and deep, the sound wrapping around me like velvet. "Such optimism, little minx."

"I prefer to call it realism," I countered, but I couldn't help smiling in response. "Whenever Stephany's involved, there's always a catch."

"Yet here you stand, looking delectable, and... eatable," his gaze sweeping over me in a way that made heat pool low in my belly. "The most beautiful woman at this entire event."

"Now you're just earning your contract fee," I teased, though the words sent a pang through me. Because that's what this was, wasn't it? A business arrangement. No matter how real it felt when we were alone together, when his hands were on my

body and his lips were claiming mine.

"Am I?" His voice dropped lower, taking on that rumbling quality that never failed to make my pulse quicken. "Perhaps I simply speak the truth."

Before I could respond, he continued, "Though I must admit, the benefits of this particular contract have far exceeded my expectations." The heat in his gaze left no doubt as to exactly which benefits he was referring to.

I laughed, the sound bubbling up from somewhere genuine and unguarded. "Exceeded mine, too, if I'm being honest."

His answering smile was slow and devastatingly sensual. "Always be honest with me, Rosie. I can smell a lie, remember?"

"How could I forget?" I rolled my eyes, though there was no real annoyance behind the gesture. "Demon senses and all that."

"Indeed." He leaned closer, his lips nearly brushing my ear as he whispered, "And right now, my senses are telling me exactly how much you enjoyed our morning activities."

A flush spread across my cheeks, down my neck, as memories flooded back with his mouth between my thighs, my hands in his hair, the way he'd looked up at me with those dark, hungry eyes.

"Aldaine!" I hissed, glancing around to make sure no one had overheard. "We're in public!"

His chuckle rumbled through me. "And yet your heartbeat just quickened, your pupils dilated, and there's a very particular scent.."

"Okay! I get it!" I cut him off, my entire body now feeling like it was on fire. "You're impossible." I slapped my hands over his mouth.

"I'm exactly what you summoned," he countered, his expression smug as he pulled my hands down, kissing them.

I couldn't help but laugh again, the tension in my body transforming into something lighter, almost giddy.

It struck me then how comfortable I felt with him, how natural it was to lean into his side, to share these small, intimate moments.

For someone I'd known only a matter of days, he felt surprisingly right.

The thought should have terrified me. Instead, I found myself relaxing further into his embrace, letting the warmth of his body and the rumble of his voice wash over me.

"Tell me something. Something real. Something about you that isn't part of this," I waved my hand vaguely, not wanting to say 'contract' out loud again .

Aldaine considered me for a moment, his eyes thoughtful. "I've lived on Earth for centuries, yet I've never seen a sunset quite like the one reflecting in your eyes right now."

My breath caught. It wasn't what I'd expected, something so tender, so personal. "That's, wow. Smooth."

"I don't do smooth, little minx," his face serious. "I do truth. And the truth is, you're unlike any human I've encountered in my very long existence."

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

The intensity in his gaze made something flutter in my chest, something dangerous and hopeful that I immediately tried to squash. This wasn't real. It couldn't be. He was a demon, I was his contract holder, and when this weekend was over we went back to the real world.

The thought lodged painfully in my chest, and I took another sip of champagne to wash it down. This was getting too complicated, too confusing. I needed to remember the parameters of our arrangement.

"Rosie!" A familiar, overly cheerful voice broke through my thoughts. Stephany appeared beside us, resplendent in a blush-pink gown that probably cost more than three months of my rent. "There you are! I've been looking all over for you."

I seriously doubted that, but I plastered on a smile anyway. "Stephany. Congratulations again. The party is beautiful."

She preened, tossing her perfectly highlighted hair over one shoulder. "Isn't it? Roger's family spared no expense." She turned to Aldaine, her smile becoming noticeably more genuine. "And Aldaine, you look absolutely dashing tonight. That suit is Armani, isn't it?"

"Good eye," he replied smoothly, his arm tightening almost imperceptibly around my waist.

"I know my designers," Stephany gave a little laugh that set my teeth on edge. "Actually, Rosie, I was hoping to introduce you to some old family friends. They just arrived and were asking about you. "

I frowned slightly. "Old family friends? Who?"

"The Harringtons," she raised a brow as she spoke, as if that should mean something to me. "They're dying to see you again. It's been years, apparently."

I searched my memory but came up blank. Then again, there had been so many society functions over the years, so many introductions that had blended together.

"Oh, um, sure," I hesitantly glanced up at Aldaine.

"I'll come with you," he offered immediately, his expression neutral but his eyes watchful.

"Oh, no need!" Stephany's hand shot out, grabbing my arm with surprising force. "It'll just take a moment, and I'm sure Aldaine doesn't want to be bored with old family stories." She turned to Aldaine with a dazzling smile. "I promise I'll bring her right back."

Before either of us could protest further, she was pulling me away from Aldaine's side, her grip on my arm just shy of painful.

I looked back over my shoulder to see a tall, distinguished-looking man approach Aldaine, clapping him on the shoulder with the familiarity of an old acquaintance.

Aldaine's expression shifted subtly—recognition, followed by what appeared to be resignation.

"Who is that?" I asked as Stephany led me through the crowd.

"Hmm? Oh, that's Mr. Blackwood. Some finance type. I think he and Aldaine have done business together." She waved dismissively. "The Harringtons are just over here

by the fountain."

We wove through clusters of elegantly dressed guests, the fairy lights beginning to glow more brightly as the golden hour deepened toward dusk. Stephany's pace was brisk, purposeful, and I had to hurry to keep up with her in my heels.

"Steph, slow down a bit," I protested as we reached the far edge of the party where a long table had been set up with elaborate desserts. "I don't see anyone waiting here."

She released my arm and glanced around, her brow furrowing. "Huh. They were right here a minute ago." She smoothed down her dress, avoiding my eyes. "Let me just go find them. Wait right here, okay? I'll be right back with them."

Something about her tone made me uneasy. "Stephany.."

"Just wait here," she was already backing away. "I'll be right back."

And then she was gone, disappeared into the crowd, leaving me alone at the edge of the party.

I shifted uncomfortably, suddenly very aware of how far I was from the main gathering.

The table beside me was laden with exquisite pastries and chocolates, but my appetite had vanished, replaced by a gnawing sense of unease.

I glanced back toward where I'd left Aldaine, but couldn't spot him through the sea of guests.

Mr. Blackwood must have pulled him into some intense conversation.

I debated going back, but what if the Harringtons really were looking for me?

And after Jan had been so unexpectedly kind earlier, maybe Stephany was genuinely trying to be nicer too?

The rational part of my brain scoffed at that idea. When had Stephany ever done anything that wasn't ultimately self-serving?

I checked my watch. Five minutes passed. Then ten. The sun dipped lower on the horizon, painting the sky in dramatic strokes of orange and purple. The fairy lights twinkled more prominently now, casting a soft, ethereal glow over the party.

No sign of Stephany. No sign of these mysterious Harringtons. And a sinking feeling in my stomach that I'd been played, yet again.

But for what purpose? What could Stephany possibly gain by isolating me at the edge of her own engagement party ?

Had Stephany just wanted to separate me from Aldaine? Why? What was she planning?

The worst part was, I didn't want to cause a scene. Not after Jan had actually apologized to me, not when things with my father were finally feeling somewhat normal again. Creating drama would only confirm every negative thing Stephany had ever said about me.

So I waited, nursing my champagne, trying to look casual and unbothered instead of increasingly anxious. I could handle whatever Stephany was planning. I wasn't the same insecure teenager she'd hurt all those years ago.

But as the minutes ticked by and the sky darkened further, that uneasy feeling only

grew stronger.

I felt a presence behind me before I heard his voice, that same arrogant tone that used to make my teenage heart flutter but now just made my skin crawl.

"Well, well. If it isn't little Rosie, all grown up." Roger's cologne was overpowering as he stepped closer, invading my personal space. "Though I guess 'little' isn't quite the right word, is it?" He was drunk based on the way his words slurred together.

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to maintain composure. "Roger. Shouldn't you be with your fiancée?"

"Oh, Steph's busy with the guests." His smile was all teeth, predatory. "Thought I'd come check on you. Make sure you weren't feeling too lonely out here by yourself after she left you here like a little lost lamb."

His hand brushed against my arm and I jerked away, my skin crawling. "I'm fine. Aldaine will be here any minute."

Roger's laugh was ugly. "Right. Your new boyfriend. Got to say, I'm impressed. How'd a girl like you land someone like him? Must be using the same tricks you tried on me back in high school. "

"Excuse me?" My voice came out sharper than intended, anger finally overtaking discomfort.

"Come on, Rosie." His fingers wrapped around my wrist, tight enough that it hurt. "We both know you were always eager to please. Spreading your legs for any guy who gave you a second glance. Trying to make up for," his eyes raked over my body with deliberate cruelty, "other shortcomings."

I yanked my arm free, fury and hurt warring in my chest. "You're disgusting. And still the same insecure little boy who needs to tear others down to feel important." Not to mention the lies he was spewing. He was the only boy I'd slept with in high school.

His expression darkened. "Careful, Rosie. You're not as special as you think you are. I mean, look at you." He stepped closer, backing me against the hedge. "Still the same fat bitch who just craves attention."

"Get your hands off me!" I shoved him back, my voice rising. "You're pathetic, you know that? And Stephany deserves better than you even if she's a bitch!"

His hand shot out, grabbing my upper arm with bruising force. "Listen here, you little, —"

"I believe," a low, dangerous voice interrupted, "that the lady told you to remove your hands."

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

The conversation with Blackwood had dragged on interminably. The old demon was always fishing for information, trying to uncover my plans, my territorial claims. Behind his polite facade lurked the mind of a schemer who'd been playing demonic politics since the Dark Ages.

"Just a friendly warning," he'd swirled his bourbon. "The Council has taken notice of your recent activities."

I kept my expression neutral, though inside, my jaw clenched. "Is that so?"

"Indeed. First, you vanish from your usual haunts for months, letting Timothy handle your businesses, then suddenly you reappear here with a human woman?" His eyes gleamed with predatory interest. "One might wonder if she's more than she appears."

I merely smiled, revealing nothing. "One might wonder many things, old friend."

But even as I maintained this tedious chess match of words, something tugged at me, a sensation like a thread pulled taut in my chest. I'd felt this connection growing stronger since the moment I'd touched Rosie, a mating bond I still hadn't revealed to her.

At first, it was just awareness, a gentle hum of her presence at the edge of my consciousness.

Now that awareness flared violently with a sharp stab of panic that wasn't mine.

Fear. Her fear.

Something inside me snapped.

All pretense of civility evaporated. Blackwood's voice faded to meaningless noise as every cell in my body screamed one word: Mine.

I didn't excuse myself. Didn't explain. One moment I was standing beside Blackwood, the next I was simply gone, moving across the party at a speed no human could track, half-teleporting through the gaps between guests who would only register a sudden cold rush of air.

With each step, my control fractured further. Glass cracked in nearby champagne glasses. The fairy lights strung overhead flickered and dimmed. A cold wind swept across the lawn from nowhere, sending napkins flying and causing confused murmurs to ripple through the crowd.

I felt my glamour slipping, the carefully constructed human facade crumbling at the edges. Heat spread across my skin as patches of magenta began to show through. My teeth sharpened, my vision narrowed to predatory focus, and I sensed the shadow of my horns beginning to manifest.

And then I saw them.

Roger's hand on Rosie's arm, his fingers digging cruelly into her flesh. Her back against the hedge, cornered. The fear in her eyes mingled with defiance.

My vision went red.

"I believe," I barely recognized the sound that emerged, my voice had dropped two octaves, layered with harmonics no human vocal cords could produce, "that the lady told you to remove your hands."

Roger turned, his drunk belligerence faltering when he saw me. Whatever he saw in my face drained the color from his. His hand dropped from Rosie's arm.

"We were just talking," he slurred, taking a step back.

I moved closer, aware that the ground under my feet was scorching, the grass turning black with each step. The air around me crackled with energy that wasn't remotely human.

"Touch her again," I promised, letting just enough of my true nature bleed through that he would taste the sulfurous truth of it, "and you will wish you had never been born."

Roger stumbled backward, his eyes wide with instinctive terror, the fear prey recognizes in the presence of an apex predator. Some primitive part of his brain understood what his conscious mind could not. He was standing before something ancient and lethal.

I felt my control slipping further. Centuries of discipline evaporated with the need to protect what was mine. To punish the one who dared threaten her. My fingernails lengthened into claws. The air around me darkened, as if light itself shrank away.

Then warm fingers wrapped around my wrist. Rosie's touch, anchoring me.

"Aldaine," her voice soft, and my name in her voice was like a lifeline thrown to a drowning man. "I'm fine. Please."

I looked down, seeing the concern in her green eyes—concern not for herself, but for me. Her hand squeezed mine, grounding me, pulling me back from the precipice of transformation.

The fog of rage began to dissipate. I became aware of our surroundings once more.

Stunned silence had fallen over this corner of the party.

Nearby guests stood frozen, drinks halfway to their lips, eyes wide with shock and unease.

Some had backed away. Others were pulling out phones, no doubt recording.

Jan stood near the dessert table, her hand covering her mouth. And Stephany had emerged from wherever she'd been hiding, her face a complex study in emotions: fear, yes, but also calculation, fascination, as if she were mentally reassessing everything she thought she knew.

"Rosalind?" My father's concerned voice cut through the tension as he pushed his way through the gathering crowd. "What's happening here?"

I felt Rosie's fingers tighten around mine. I listened to the murmurs spreading through the crowd like ripples in a pond:

"Did you see that? He looked ready to pummel Roger."

"His eyes, what was wrong with his eyes?"

"It was just the light, right?"

Full awareness crashed back, and with it, horror. What had I done? In my rage, I'd nearly exposed everything, what I was, worse, it could have exposed Rosie for summoning a demon. I'd risked not just my position but potentially triggered a conflict that would reverberate through both worlds.

All because I couldn't control my reaction to a mating bond I hadn't even acknowledged.

But worse than exposing myself, I'd frightened her. I saw it in the split second before she masked it, that momentary flash of shock when she'd witnessed something not human emerging from beneath my carefully crafted exterior.

I had scared Rosie.

I dropped her hand as if burned, taking a deliberate step back from her.

The cold logic I'd honed over centuries reasserted itself, dropping like a wall between us.

I could feel her confusion, her hurt at my sudden withdrawal, but I blocked it out.

This was necessary. This was safer, safer for both of us .

"I told you before," my voice now perfectly controlled, perfectly human, perfectly empty. "I'm not good."

I turned and walked away, not looking back at her hurt expression, not acknowledging the stares and whispers that followed me through the crowd.

The fairy lights swayed gently overhead in the evening breeze, casting ever-shifting shadows across the manicured lawn.

Behind me, I heard the sound of a champagne glass toppling, liquid splashing onto the grass.

I kept walking.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

"Rosie?" My father approached cautiously, concern etched deep across his features. "Are you alright, sweetheart? What was that about?"

"I," I started, then stopped, unsure how to explain.

How could I tell my father that my date had almost transformed into his true demonic form in the middle of Stephany's engagement party?

That Roger had been seconds away from experiencing whatever supernatural punishment Aldaine had been about to unleash?

I settled for a half-truth. "Roger was being inappropriate. Aldaine stepped in." I rubbed my arm where Roger's fingers had dug in, sure there would be bruises tomorrow because it was bright red.

Dad's expression hardened. "Inappropriate how?"

Before I could answer, Stephany pushed her way forward, her face flushed with anger and something else, excitement, almost. As if she'd just discovered a particularly juicy piece of gossip.

"What the hell was that?" she demanded, eyes darting between me and the direction Aldaine had disappeared. "Your boyfriend just threatened my fiancé! And did you see, did anyone else see?"

"See what?" I challenged, lifting my chin defiantly.

Stephany faltered, clearly struggling to articulate what she thought she'd witnessed without sounding insane. "There was something wrong with his eyes. And how did he get over here so fast? He was clear across the lawn with Mr. Blackwood!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," coolly, looking at her though my heart hammered in my chest. "Maybe you've had too much champagne."

"Don't gaslight me, Rosie," Stephany hissed. "Something isn't right about him."

Jan appeared at her daughter's side, placing a restraining hand on her arm. "Stephany, that's enough. Where's Roger?"

"He went back to the house," someone in the crowd offered. "He looked pretty shaken up and drunk as hell."

Jan's eyes narrowed as she studied me. "What happened here?"

I took a deep breath. "Your future son-in-law cornered me, grabbed me hard enough to leave bruises, and said some pretty disgusting things. Aldaine intervened. That's all."

Dad's face darkened with anger. "He put his hands on you?"

"Dad, please," I pleaded, suddenly exhausted. The last thing I wanted was for this to escalate further. "I just, please, I need to find Aldaine."

The crowd was still watching, still murmuring, some guests not even bothering to hide their fascination with the unfolding drama.

Phones were still out, probably capturing my humiliation for posterity.

This was exactly what I'd hoped to avoid by coming with Aldaine in the first place, becoming the center of unwanted attention, the family disappointment, and causing scenes.

"Of course," Dad his voice gentled. "Go. We'll talk later."

Jan looked like she wanted to object but held her tongue. Stephany just stared, her expression calculating as I pushed past them and headed in the direction Aldaine had gone.

The fairy lights overhead seemed to mock me with their cheerful glow as I searched through the crowd, ignoring the curious glances and hushed comments that followed in my wake.

Where would he have gone? Back to our room?

Out to the car? Or somewhere else entirely, using whatever demonic abilities he possessed to simply vanish from the estate?

The thought sent a fresh wave of panic through me. He wouldn't just leave me here, would he? After everything we'd shared?

But his final words echoed in my mind: "I'm not good."

It wasn't just what he'd said, but how he'd said it with such finality, such conviction. As if he'd been trying to convince himself as much as me.

I'd seen the moment he shut down, built those walls back up, and retreated behind that cold, untouchable facade. I recognized it because I'd done the same thing countless times in my life, pulling away before someone else could hurt me, protecting myself by being the one to end things first.

But Aldaine hadn't been protecting himself. He'd been protecting me. From himself.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

The sound of Rosie's heartbeat thundered in my ears, each beat a staccato reminder of how fragile humans were.

How breakable. Even as she ran after me, calling my name with desperation in her voice, all I could focus on was the echo of her pulse, the lingering scent of fear that had rolled off her when Roger touched her.

When he dared to put his hands on what was mine .

The mating bond thrummed violently beneath my skin, demanding retribution.

My demon form pushed against the carefully constructed walls of my human disguise, wanting to break free, to show that pathetic excuse for a man what true terror felt like.

The urge to shift, to let my true nature emerge, was almost overwhelming.

I strode faster toward the edge of the property, my fingers clenched into fists so tight I could feel my nails cutting into my palms. The pain helped ground me, gave me something to focus on besides the rage still coursing through my veins.

"Aldaine!" Rosie's voice came closer. "Aldaine, wait! "

I didn't slow down. I couldn't. Not when I was this close to losing control. The manicured lawn gave way to wild forest ahead, offering darkness, solitude, a place where I could safely let my demonic nature surface without witnesses.

But she caught up to me near the old stone wall, her breathing labored from the chase. I stood rigid, unwilling to turn and face her, knowing my eyes would betray me. The mating bond pulsed between us, desperate for contact, begging me to take her in my arms and claim her properly.

"Aldaine," her voice soft, reaching for my shoulder.

I flinched away from her touch, though every fiber of my being screamed in protest. When I finally turned to face her, I kept my expression cold, distant.

But seeing her there in the moonlight, her red hair gleaming like liquid fire, her green eyes bright with concern, made maintaining that distance nearly impossible.

"You shouldn't have followed me," I growled, my voice rougher than intended.

She lifted her chin defiantly. "You shouldn't have run away."

"I wasn't running," I snapped, then closed my eyes, fighting for control as my demon form tried to surface again. When I opened them, I forced my voice to be calmer. "I was removing myself from a situation before I did something I'd regret."

"Like what? Turning Roger into a pile of ash? Because honestly, I don't think anyone would have minded."

A spark of amusement tried to break through my carefully constructed walls. She had no idea how close I'd come to doing exactly that. The memory of his hands on her, his alcohol-laden breath against her skin as he cornered her, sent another wave of possessive rage through me.

"You don't understand what happened back there, Rosie."

"Then explain it to me. "

I ran a hand through my hair, disrupting its careful styling. How could I explain that the mating bond had nearly driven me to murder? That seeing another man touch my mate had awakened something primal and vicious inside me?

"I lost control. Me. A demon who's lived for centuries, who prides himself on his control." The admission tasted bitter on my tongue. "You saw what happened. What almost happened."

"I saw you protecting me," she insisted.

"No." I cut her off sharply. "What you saw was the tip of the iceberg.

If I hadn't pulled back when I did.," I looked out into the darkness, unable to meet her trusting gaze.

"I've spent decades, no, centuries, perfecting my restraint.

One touch, one insignificant human touching what's mine, and it all unraveled. "

The possessive words slipped out before I could stop them. The mating bond hummed in approval, even as I cursed my lack of control.

"You can't scare me away that easily," she stepped closer. "I know what you are, Aldaine. I've seen your true form. I'm still here."

I laughed, but there was no humor in it. "You have no idea what I am, Rosie. What I'm capable of. The things I've done." I turned back to her, letting her see the coldness in my eyes. "I'm not good. I meant that. I'm dangerous, especially to you."

"Why especially to me?" she asked, her heart rate picking up.

The mating bond surged, urging me to tell her the truth. To explain why I'd reacted so violently to another man touching her, why I couldn't seem to maintain my carefully crafted control around her. For a moment, I almost did.

Instead, I locked everything down, retreating behind centuries of practiced indifference.

"I need space," my voice flat. "Go back to the party. Or to our room. I'll return when I've regained my composure."

"Aldaine, I.."

"Please." The word felt like broken glass in my throat. "Just go, Rosie."

I watched the hurt flash across her face before she masked it with dignity. "Fine. Take all the space you need."

She turned and walked away, her head high, shoulders back. Every step she took away from me felt like physical pain, the mating bond stretching thin and taut between us. But I remained still, watching her disappear into the darkness, knowing this distance was necessary.

Because the alternative was claiming her completely, binding her to me for eternity. And I couldn't do that to her. Not when she had no idea what being mated to a demon truly meant.

Not when I knew I would eventually destroy everything good in her.

The pain in my chest was excruciating as I watched Rosie's form disappear into the

darkness.

Each step she took away from me felt like someone was driving a burning blade between my ribs.

The hurt I'd seen flash in those green eyes, hurt that I had caused, made me want to tear my own heart out.

If I still possessed such a human organ.

I had come dangerously close to revealing everything.

The mating bond that had snapped into place that first moment of contact.

The possessive rage that threatened to consume me whenever another man so much as looked in her direction.

The terrifying realization that after centuries of existence, I had finally found the one being in all the realms who could bring me to my knees.

The one who could destroy me completely.

"Fascinating," a cultured voice drawled from behind me. "I've lived a long time, friend, but I don't believe I've ever seen a demon in love before."

Every muscle in my body tensed as I turned to find Blackwood leaning against a nearby oak tree, a champagne flute dangling elegantly from his manicured fingers. His eyes twinkled with amusement in the darkness, like he was privy to some private joke.

"Blackwood," I acknowledged stiffly. "I didn't hear you approach."

"No, you were rather distracted." He took a deliberate sip of his champagne. "I must say, your little display back there was quite impressive. And careless."

My fingers twitched with the urge to wrap around his throat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think you do." He pushed himself away from the tree and strolled closer.

"The way you materialized across the lawn in the blink of an eye.

The way your eyes flashed that rather distinctive shade of magenta.

The way the temperature dropped ten degrees in your immediate vicinity. " He waved his free hand dismissively.

I remained silent, calculating my options. Killing him would be simplest but that would bring unwanted attention.

As if reading my thoughts, he chuckled. "Don't worry, I've taken care of it. A simple memory charm. The guests will remember a misunderstanding, nothing more. Your secret is safe."

"Why would you do that?" I was suspicious of this unexpected assistance.

"Let's call it professional courtesy," Blackwood gave a cryptic smile. "Besides, I like Miss Thompson. She deserves better than that drunken lout Roger pawing at her. "

My jaw clenched at the mention of the human who had dared touch Rosie. "You know what this means to her."

"That she's your mate?" His eyebrows rose. "Oh yes, that was quite obvious from the

moment you two walked in. The way you look at her is rather touching, actually. Like she's the sun and moon and stars all rolled into one deliciously curved package."

"Don't speak about her that way," I growled, feeling my control slip again.

"See? That's exactly what I mean." Blackwood finished his champagne with a flourish. "Protective. Possessive. Willing to risk exposure to keep her safe." He paused, studying me with suddenly serious eyes. "Does she know?"

I looked away, unable to meet his knowing gaze. "No."

"And why is that, I wonder?" he mused. "Afraid she might reject you? Or afraid she might accept you, demon and all?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," my voice was cold.

"Don't I?" Blackwood set his empty glass down on the stone wall. "I did you a favor tonight, clearing up that little mess. The least you could do is be honest with yourself, if not with me."

I remained silent, staring at the path Rosie had taken back to the house. The lights in our room window had just come on. She was there now, probably hurt and confused.

"She deserves better than me," the words dragged from some hidden place deep inside me.

"Perhaps," Blackwood agreed. "But fate rarely concerns itself with what we deserve." He turned to leave, then paused. "One more thing, those memory spells are effective but easily broken. I'd suggest you get your story straight."

With that, the man walked away, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the ache in

my chest.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I slammed the door to our shared bedroom with enough force to make the antique wood frame shudder.

My hands were still trembling from anger, from hurt, from the hundred conflicting emotions crashing through me like waves against a rocky shore.

The elegant guest room that had seemed so romantic just hours ago now felt stifling, a golden cage.

"Take all the space you need," I muttered, mimicking my own words back to myself as I kicked off my heels. "God, I'm such an idiot."

I paced across the plush carpet, my stockinged feet silent as I moved. The gown that had made me feel like a princess now felt constricting, too tight across my chest where something painful was expanding, pressing against my ribs, making it hard to breathe.

"I know what you are, Aldaine," I whispered to the empty room, repeating what I'd said to him in the garden. "I've seen your true form. I'm still here. "

But that wasn't enough. Whatever connection I thought we'd been building these past days with the heated glances, the protective touches, the way his eyes followed me like I was something precious, had clearly meant something different to him than it had to me.

My reflection caught my eye in the ornate full-length mirror beside the wardrobe.

I barely recognized the woman staring back.

Her makeup was smudged at the corners, red hair tumbling from what had been an elegant updo, cheeks flushed with emotion.

She looked lost. Vulnerable. Nothing like the confident woman who had walked into the engagement party on a demon's arm.

"He's dangerous, especially to you," I echoed his warning, watching my reflection's lips move with the words.

What had he meant by that? Why especially to me? The question had hung between us, heavy and significant, before he'd shut down completely, his beautiful face closing like a door being slammed in my face.

With shaking fingers, I reached behind to unzip my dress, needing to be free of the constriction. I struggled with the zipper, my frustration mounting until tears pricked at my eyes.

"Damn it!" I hissed, arms contorted awkwardly behind my back.

A soft knock at the door made me freeze.

"Rosie?" Rita's voice called through the wood. "You in there?"

Relief washed through me. "Come in," I called, quickly wiping at my eyes.

Rita slipped in, already changed into yoga pants and an oversized t-shirt, her face scrubbed clean of makeup. One look at me and her expression shifted from casual to concerned.

"Whoa," she crossed the room in quick strides. "Turn around, I'll get that for you."

I obeyed silently, turning to present my back to her. I felt the gentle tug as she worked the zipper down, her fingers efficient but careful.

"There," her voice kind. "Now, you want to tell me why you're up here crying instead of downstairs wrapped around that walking sex god of yours?"

A laugh escaped me, but it sounded hollow even to my own ears. "I'm not crying."

"Uh-huh. And I'm not nosy." Rita flopped onto the bed, patting the space beside her. "Spill it, girl. What happened?"

I sank down beside her, holding my dress up with one hand across my chest. "Nothing happened. We just needed some space."

"Space," She repeated, eyebrow arched skeptically. "It's complicated," I murmured, staring down at the intricate pattern in the carpet.

"Complicated how? Like he's your boss complicated?"

Despite everything, a smile tugged at my lips. "Something like that."

Rita watched me for a long moment, her usually animated face serious. "You've fallen for him, haven't you? Like, for real."

The question hit with the precision of an arrow finding its mark. I couldn't lie to her, not when she was looking at me like that, not when the truth was probably written all over my face.

"Maybe," I whispered. "But it doesn't matter. Whatever this is between us, it's not

what I thought."

Rita reached over and took my hand, squeezing gently. "Did he say that?"

"Not in so many words. He just," The memory of Aldaine's face, cold and distant, flashed before me. "He pulled away. Said he was dangerous to me. That I don't know what he's capable of."

"So what's the problem?"

I stood up abruptly, needing to move. "The problem is that I don't actually know him. Not really. And he won't let me in. Every time I think we're getting closer, he pulls away."

"And that hurts," It wasn't a question.

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

"Oh, honey." Rita stood and wrapped her arms around me, hugging me tightly. "I'm sorry. For what it's worth, I've seen the way he looks at you when you're not watching."

I pulled back slightly, studying her face. "What do you mean?"

"Like you're water and he's been wandering the desert for a thousand years. Whatever's going on in that head of his, I don't think it's lack of interest."

I wanted to believe her. Desperately wanted to believe that the connection I felt with Aldaine wasn't one-sided. That his protective instincts, the heat in his eyes when we touched, meant something more than just the terms of our contract.

"It doesn't matter," I pulled away. "He made his feelings clear tonight."

"Did he, though?" Rita persisted. "Or did he just freak out after almost murdering Roger into pulp?"

I remembered the look in Aldaine's eyes when he'd found Roger cornering me. The way the air had crackled with energy, the sudden drop in temperature. How quickly he'd moved, faster than humanly possible, his hands around Roger's throat before I could even process what was happening.

"Maybe," I conceded. "But that doesn't change anything. He still pushed me away."

Charlie studied me for a moment, then sighed. "Look, I can see you're not ready to talk about this. And that's okay. Just know that I'm here when you are, alright? Whatever happens with Tall, Dark, and Lickable, I've got your back."

Gratitude washed through me. "Thanks, Rita."

She squeezed my shoulder. "That's what friends are for. Even if we just reunited. Now, do you want me to stay? We could raid the fridge, talk shit about Stephany's bridesmaids' dresses?"

A genuine smile pulled at my lips. "Tempting, but I'm exhausted. I think I just need to sleep."

"Okay," She nodded. "But my room's just down the hall if you change your mind. Or if you need help hiding any bodies."

"I'll keep that in mind," I laughed weakly.

After Rita left, the room felt even emptier than before.

I changed mechanically, hanging up my gown and slipping into my oversized sleep shirt.

The bed seemed too large without Aldaine's solid presence beside me.

It was ridiculous how quickly I'd gotten used to sharing a bed with him, even though it had only been a few nights.

I went through my nighttime routine on autopilot, washing away my makeup, brushing out my hair until it fell in waves down my back. In the bathroom mirror, I looked more like myself again. Just Rosie, without the glamour of the evening.

Just Rosie. The woman who'd been desperate enough to summon a demon. The woman who'd somehow, against all odds and common fucking sense, fallen for that demon.

"It doesn't hurt that much," I told my reflection firmly. "It's not like this was ever going to be real."

My reflection didn't look convinced.

Back in the bedroom, I crawled under the covers, pulling them tight around me despite the warmth of the summer night. Without Aldaine, the bed felt too soft, too empty. I found myself listening for his return, straining to hear footsteps in the hallway, the sound of the door opening.

But the minutes stretched into an hour, and still I was alone.

What was he doing out there? Was he still in the woods, trying to regain the control he said he'd lost? Or had he gone somewhere else entirely? The thought that he might not come back at all opened a yawning pit in my stomach.

I rolled onto my side, staring at the empty space where he should be.

The pillow still held the faint imprint of his head from our nap earlier in the day.

On impulse, I reached out and pulled it closer, burying my face in it.

His scent lingered there, something dark and spicy that I couldn't name, distinctly Aldaine.

"Why won't you let me in?" I whispered to the empty pillow. "What are you so afraid of?"

There was more to Aldaine than the powerful demon who'd appeared in my apartment that first night.

More than the charming, mysterious man he presented to the world.

I'd seen glimpses of it, the tenderness when he thought I wasn't looking, vulnerability quickly masked, a loneliness that matched my own.

I wanted to know him. All of him. The demon and the man, the darkness and the light. I wanted to understand what made him pull away when we got too close, what haunted him through his centuries of existence.

But how could I when he kept shutting me out?

My eyes grew heavy as exhaustion finally won out over my racing thoughts. As I drifted toward sleep, I imagined I could feel the ghost of Aldaine's presence beside me, the phantom warmth of his body next to mine.

"Come back," I murmured, the words slurring as sleep pulled me under. "Whatever it

is, we can figure it out together."

But there was no answer, only the soft sound of my breathing in the empty room as I fell into dreams filled with magenta eyes and the memory of a touch that felt like coming home.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I prowled the perimeter of the estate, a shadow among shadows, drawn inexorably back to the wing where her room lay.

The scent of Rosie still clung to me, vanilla and that intoxicating undertone that was uniquely hers.

The beast within me clawed at my insides, demanding I return to her, claim what was mine.

Mine. The word echoed through me, both truth and torment.

I paused beneath our window, hidden within the darkness where the garden met the woods.

The soft glow from her room spilled out into the night, a beacon calling me to her.

In all my centuries, I had never felt this relentless pull, this desperate need to be near another being. It was excruciating. Maddening.

Necessary.

Her silhouette moved past the window, a fleeting glimpse that sent a jolt through my entire body. I closed my eyes, remembering the weight of her in my arms, the softness of her skin beneath my fingertips. The memory alone was enough to make my fangs lengthen, my claws extend.

"Get control of yourself," I snarled beneath my breath.

The mating bond pulsed between us, a living thing that strained and stretched the farther I tried to pull away.

It had been instantaneous, that connection, the moment my skin had touched hers in her shabby little apartment.

I had known then what she was to me, and I had done the unthinkable.

I had bound myself to her without her knowledge or consent with a fake deal to keep her close to me.

I was no better than those I despised.

My fist connected with the trunk of a nearby oak, the bark splintering beneath the impact. Pain shot through my knuckles, a welcome distraction from the ache in my chest.

From her window came the soft sound of her voice, muffled words I couldn't quite make out. Was she speaking to someone? I scented the air, picking through the night smells until I found it. Rita had been in the room, but was gone now. Rosie was alone.

Alone and hurt because of me.

I had seen the pain in her eyes when I pushed her away. The confusion when I told her I was dangerous. If only she knew how dangerous. How close I had come to taking Roger's miserable life right there on the manicured lawn. How close I had come to revealing my true nature to the entire party.

How close I had come to binding her to me forever, without her knowledge or choice.

That was the real reason I had fled. Not because I had almost killed the worthless human who dared touch her, but because for a single, terrifying moment, I had almost completed our bond. Had almost taken what wasn't freely offered.

I watched as her light finally went out, plunging the room into darkness. Even then, I could sense her, her heartbeat, her breathing, the restless way she moved beneath the covers. The bond allowed me this much, at least. The knowledge that she was safe, if not peaceful.

She wouldn't sleep well tonight. Neither would I.

From my pocket, I withdrew the small object I had crafted earlier.

It gleamed faintly in my palm, catching what little moonlight filtered through the trees.

A delicate charm in the shape of a rose, formed from a metal not found in the human realm.

Its petals were intricately detailed, the curves and edges impossibly fine.

At its center, a tiny drop of my own essence, solidified and crystallized into something that resembled a ruby but held infinitely more power.

It would protect her, even when I couldn't. Even when I shouldn't .

Moving silently across the lawn, I approached the side entrance nearest to her room. The door was locked, of course, but such barriers meant nothing to me. With barely a thought, the mechanism clicked open, allowing me to slip inside.

The house was quiet, the humans asleep save for a few servants still moving about the

distant kitchen. I made my way through the darkened hallways, following the invisible thread that connected me to Rosie. Our door was just ahead, closed against the world. Against me.

As I stood before it, I could hear her soft breathing beyond the wood. The temptation to enter, to lay beside her, to wrap myself around her and never let go, was nearly overwhelming. My hand rose of its own accord, reaching for the doorknob.

I snatched it back as if burned.

"No," I whispered harshly to myself. "You made your choice."

The choice to protect her from myself. From what I was. From what I would inevitably do to her.

Demons weren't capable of love. We were creatures of possession, of obsession.

The mating bond was no romantic fairy tale.

It was a claim, a mark of ownership. It would bind her soul to mine for eternity, denying her any chance at an afterlife.

Whatever she might feel for me now was nothing compared to the prison I would create for her if I allowed this to continue.

I placed the charm on the floor before her door, just to the side where she would see it when she emerged in the morning.

My fingers lingered on the metal, infusing it with one final surge of protection.

It would alert me if she was in danger. It would shield her from minor hexes and

curses.

It would connect her to me, even when I forced myself to keep my distance.

It was the most I could give her without damning us both.

"Sleep well, little minx," I murmured, my voice barely audible even to my own ears.

"Dream of better things than demons."

I backed away from the door, forcing each step when every instinct screamed at me to go to her.

The bond between us thrummed in protest, a physical ache that intensified with each foot of distance.

By the time I reached the garden again, the pain was excruciating, a burning throughout my entire being.

I deserved it. I deserved far worse for what I had done. For making a deal for her soul when I knew she was my mate, for allowing myself to touch her, to taste her, to make her care for me. For almost revealing my true self to her tonight.

The memory of her face when she'd seen my eyes change, when the air had crackled with my power as I'd held Roger by the throat – there had been no fear there. Only wonder. Acceptance. As if she could look upon the monster I truly was and still see something worthy.

She was wrong.

I sank down onto a stone bench, my eyes fixed on her window. I wouldn't sleep tonight. I couldn't, not when the need to be near her clawed at me with vicious

intensity. Not when I could feel her restlessness, her sadness, through the bond I had no right to forge.

So I would watch. I would protect from a distance. I would suffer this self-imposed exile as penance for my sins against her.

And tomorrow, when she emerged into the light of day, I would continue the charade. I would play the devoted lover for the humans, keep her safe from her wretched family, and fulfill our bargain to the letter.

But I would not, could not, allow myself to give in to what I truly wanted. What the bond demanded.

What my blackened soul yearned for with unprecedented desperation.

Her.

Morning arrived with brutal efficiency, yanking me from my vigil. I had kept my post beneath her window all night, a silent sentinel with nothing but my thoughts and regrets for company. Now, as the first rays of dawn painted the sky, I finally retreated to prepare for the day ahead.

The charm remained where I had left it, untouched outside her door. She hadn't emerged yet.

After a quick shower and change of clothes without waking her, I made my way to the dining room where breakfast was to be served.

I would need to face her soon, to maintain our facade of a relationship while keeping the true distance I knew was necessary.

The thought alone made my chest constrict painfully.

I arrived early, hoping to compose myself before Rosie appeared. A few early risers were already seated. Rosie's father at the head of the table, buried behind a newspaper; two elderly aunts conversing quietly over tea; and at the far end, the insipid Roger nursing what appeared to be a hangover.

Good. I hoped his head pounded with the force of a thousand hammers.

I took a seat midway down the table, positioning myself so I would see Rosie the moment she entered.

A server approached with coffee, which I accepted with a nod.

The rich aroma did nothing to distract me from the constant awareness of Rosie's movements upstairs.

She was awake now, moving about the room. Getting dressed. Coming closer.

More guests filtered in, the room gradually filling with morning conversation and the clinking of silverware against fine china. And then, like a shift in the atmosphere itself, I felt her presence before I saw her. My head snapped up, eyes finding her instantly as she hesitated in the doorway.

She looked exhausted, dark circles beneath her eyes testifying to a restless night.

Her hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail, her face clean of makeup.

The summer dress she wore hugged her curves in a way that made my mouth go dry.

But it was the small object clutched in her hand that caught my attention – my charm.

She had found it.

Our eyes met across the room, and the bond between us surged with such ferocity that I had to grip the edge of the table to steady myself. Her expression was guarded, uncertain. Hurt still lingered there, along with something that might have been longing.

Or perhaps that was merely my own wishful thinking.

Rita appeared behind her, saying something that made Rosie force a small smile. They made their way to the table, and I felt my body tense as Rosie approached. Would she sit beside me? Would she avoid me altogether?

She paused beside the chair next to mine, her fingers tight around the charm.

"You left this at the door," her voice soft for my ears alone.

I nodded once, not trusting myself to speak.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

After a moment's hesitation, she slipped the charm into her pocket and took the seat beside me. The relief that flooded through me was embarrassingly intense. Rita sat across from us, her shrewd eyes missing nothing as they darted between Rosie and me.

"Sleep well?" Rita asked Rosie with pointed concern.

"Like a baby," Rosie lied. I could hear the falsehood in her heartbeat, smell the fatigue on her skin.

"And you?" Rita turned her interrogation to me.

"Adequately," I replied smoothly, though I hadn't slept at all. How could I, when every instinct I possessed demanded I be at Rosie's side?

The tension between us was interrupted by a commotion at the entrance. Stephany had arrived. Roger stood and made his way to her side. Her eyes scanned the room until they found Rosie, a malicious smile spreading across her too-perfect face.

"Well, look who decided to join us after ruining my engagement celebration," she announced loudly enough for the entire room to hear.

Conversations halted. All eyes turned toward our end of the table. Rosie stiffened beside me, her hands clenching into fists on her lap. I fought the urge to cover them with my own, to protect her from this petty human's barbs.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Rosie replied, her voice admirably steady

despite the anxiety I could smell rolling off her in waves.

Stephany and Roger made their way to the table, taking seats directly across from us. Roger's face still bore the faint marks of my grip from the previous night, his neck bruised where I had nearly crushed his windpipe. Good .

"Oh, come on," Stephany drawled, serving herself from a platter of pastries. "Everyone's talking about your boyfriend's little episode. Attacking the groom-to-be? Really classy."

Whispers erupted around the table. I heard Rosie's name mentioned several times, along with mine. The speculation was rampant. Who was I really? Why had I attacked Roger?

If they only knew the truth, that I had nearly killed the man for daring to touch what was mine.

"I didn't attack anyone," my tone could have frozen hell. "I merely removed an unwelcome hand from my girlfriend's person."

Roger snorted, wincing as the movement clearly aggravated his headache. "Overreaction much? I was just talking to an old friend."

"By pinning her against a wall?" I inquired, my voice dangerously soft. The crystal water glass began to crack beneath my grip.

"It's not Rosie's fault her date has anger management issues," Stephany interjected with false sympathy. "Though I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. She always did have terrible taste in men."

The glass shattered in my hand. Water and tiny shards spilled across the tablecloth as

conversations around us died completely. I felt my control slipping, the rage building within me. My vision began to blur at the edges, and I knew my eyes were starting to change.

But before I could respond, before I could do something I would regret, Rosie pushed back her chair and stood.

"That's enough," her voice rang clear through the dining room.

Stephany's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"I said that's enough." Rosie's hands were steady now, her chin raised in defiance.

"Let's get a few things straight. First, your little prank last night?

You telling me you needed me in the garden, just so you could laugh about me standing alone like an idiot?

Real mature, Steph. Really showing your wedding guests what a class act you are. "

Stephany's mouth fell open. "I didn't-"

"Save it," Rosie cut her off. "And second, Roger, you weren't 'just talking' to me.

You were drunk, you were disgusting, and you were trying to feel me up against a wall while telling me how I was 'the one that got away.

' Which is hilarious considering you were the one who cheated on me with my stepsister. "

A collective gasp went around the table. Roger's face purpled with rage and

embarrassment.

"You little bitch-!" he started, half-rising from his chair.

"Sit down," I growled, allowing just enough of my true nature to surface that the command carried supernatural weight. Roger dropped back into his seat as if physically pushed.

But Rosie wasn't finished. She turned to address the table at large, her green eyes flashing with righteous anger.

"I came here as a courtesy to my father, despite knowing exactly what kind of welcome I'd receive.

I've put up with the snide comments, the fake smiles, and the petty jealousies because I'm an adult.

But I'm done being your punching bag, Stephany.

I'm done pretending that what you and Roger did wasn't cruel.

And I'm especially done apologizing for having someone in my life who actually respects me enough to step in when your fiancé gets handsy. "

The dining room had fallen completely silent. Every eye was on Rosie, standing tall and magnificent in her fury. Pride swelled within me, fierce and unexpected. This was my mate. Strong, defiant, unwilling to be cowed by these insignificant creatures.

And then, from the other side of the table, a slow clapping began. Rita was on her feet, applauding with a wide grin on her face .

"Bravo," she grinned. "About damn time someone said it."

To my surprise, Rosie's father lowered his newspaper and joined in the applause, followed by several others around the table. The elderly aunts were nodding in approval. Even a few of Stephany's bridesmaids looked impressed, hiding smiles behind their napkins.

Stephany's face had gone chalk-white with fury and embarrassment. Roger looked like he wanted to crawl under the table and disappear.

Rosie remained standing for a moment longer, her chest rising and falling with quick breaths. I could smell the adrenaline coursing through her, hear the rapid beating of her heart. But beneath it all was something new. A confidence, satisfaction, and relief.

She had defended herself. She hadn't needed me to do it for her.

And as she slowly sank back into her chair beside me, I felt something shift inside my chest. A realization, slow but inevitable, I could push her away, could deny the bond, could tell myself it was for her protection, but the truth was, Rosie Thompson didn't need my protection.

She was perfectly capable of standing on her own.

What she needed and what she deserved was someone who stood beside her, not in front of her.

Whether that could be me remained to be seen.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I sank back into my chair as the applause rippled through the dining room, my heart hammering so hard I could feel my pulse in my fingertips. A strange buzzing filled my ears, like I was underwater. Had I really just done that? Had I actually stood up to Stephany and Roger in front of everyone?

The weight of the charm in my pocket seemed to grow heavier, like it was sending waves of warmth up through my dress. I snuck a glance at Aldaine beside me. His profile was sharp and focused, jaw tense, but something in his eyes, maybe pride? Surprise? I couldn't tell.

Rita winked at me from across the table, and for a moment, the dining room felt like an alternate reality where I wasn't the family disappointment. Where I was someone who deserved to be applauded.

The sensation was foreign but not unwelcome.

But as the applause died down, reality crashed back. Whispers immediately erupted around the table .

A server hurried forward to clean up the shattered glass beside Aldaine's plate. I noticed how carefully he avoided touching Aldaine's hand as he mopped up the water, eyes darting nervously to his face and away again.

My momentary triumph curdled in my stomach. I'd stood up for myself, yes, but at what cost? Now everyone was whispering about my "boyfriend" like he was some kind of monster. And wasn't that exactly what I'd been trying to avoid? Drawing attention to us, making people suspicious?

I touched the charm in my pocket again. What was I even doing here? Playing pretend with a demon who kept yanking me close and pushing me away, who left magical gifts at my door but couldn't explain why he'd abandoned me last night when I'd needed him most.

A fork clinked sharply against crystal, drawing everyone's attention. Stephany had stood up, her posture rigid, face composed into a mask of wounded dignity.

"Well," her voice carrying perfectly, "I suppose we've all been treated to quite the performance this morning."

Her eyes locked on me, cold and calculating. I knew that look. It was the same one she'd worn right before telling everyone at junior prom that I'd stuffed my bra with toilet paper.

My stomach dropped.

"I've always admired your ability to make yourself the center of attention, Rosie," Stephany continued, her tone dripping with false sweetness.

"Even at my engagement breakfast." She placed a delicate hand over her heart.

"I invited you here as family, despite our complicated history.

I wanted to make amends. To show everyone that I held no grudges. "

I bit the inside of my cheek so hard I tasted blood. This was Stephany's special talent, twisting the knife while making herself look like the victim.

"But I see now that was naive of me." Her bottom lip trembled perfectly. "Because some people can't let go of the past. Some people will always be bitter, always need

to create drama."

Roger reached up to squeeze her hand, his face a mask of concern. The bruises on his neck stood out, dark purple against his skin.

"See?" Stephany's voice cracked with what anyone who didn't know her would think was genuine emotion. "She always ruins everything. Always has to make it about herself. She's nothing but a mistake."

The words struck like physical blows. Mistake. How many times had I heard that word whispered about me in this house? Always when they thought I couldn't hear, but always loud enough that I did.

Something hot and painful lodged in my throat. I'd spent my entire life believing it, arranging myself smaller and smaller, apologizing for taking up space that wasn't meant for me.

I felt Aldaine tense beside me, felt the air around him seem to crackle with barely contained energy. His fingertips, resting on the table edge, had darkened to that strange magenta hue I'd glimpsed last night.

Before he could move, before I could process what was happening, a new sound cut through the tension – the crisp, deliberate fold of newspaper.

My father, seated at the head of the table, slowly lowered the Wall Street Journal he'd been hiding behind. His face was unreadable as he placed it precisely next to his plate, smoothing it with one hand.

Dad never got involved in "women's drama," as he called it. He was the perpetual neutral party, the Switzerland of family conflict. It was easier that way. Safer.

But now he was standing up, his chair scraping across the hardwood floor. His movements were stiff, deliberate, as if each one required extraordinary focus.

I held my breath. Everyone did.

"Enough, Stephany," Dad practically growled, and I almost didn't recognize his voice. It wasn't the distracted mumble he usually employed during family disagreements, nor the placating tone he used when trying to smooth things over. It was clear. Firm. Unshakable.

"That's my daughter you're talking about." The words rang out in the silence, and I felt them reverberate through my chest like a physical touch. "And for far too long, I let this family treat her like she didn't belong."

My mouth fell open. Was this really happening? Was my father—of all people—actually defending me? I loved him to death but he was never one for confrontation.

"I was wrong," he continued, his voice growing stronger with each word. "I should have defended her years ago. I'm defending her now."

The dining room went so quiet I could hear the grandfather clock ticking in the hallway. My chest felt too tight, like I'd forgotten how to breathe.

Jan sat frozen beside him, her face a mask of shock. In all the years since she'd married my father, I'd never once heard him contradict her or Stephany. Not once.

I waited for the explosion. For Jan to stand up and remind everyone who really ran this household. For the carefully cultivated facade of family harmony to shatter completely.

But instead, Jan's face underwent a complex series of expressions - surprise, anger, calculation, and finally, something that looked almost like shame?

Her mouth tightened into a thin line. And then, to my absolute astonishment, she nodded. Slightly. Almost imperceptibly. But a nod nonetheless.

"Rosie's right," the words seemed physically difficult for Jan to form. "We all failed her. And we won't do it again."

The world tilted on its axis. I gripped the edge of the table, certain I must be hallucinating. Jan had never, not once in all the years I'd known her, admitted to being wrong about anything. And now she was acknowledging she'd failed me?

Across the table, Stephany's face contorted with shock and betrayal, color draining from her cheeks. "Mom?" The word came out small, uncertain, a child's voice.

Jan didn't look at her. Instead, her eyes found mine, and for the first time since I was thirteen years old, I saw her clearly, not as the villain in my story, but as a woman who had made choices, some of them terrible. A woman capable of recognizing, even belatedly, those mistakes.

Roger cleared his throat, his laugh too loud, too forced. "Come on, everyone. This is getting a little heavy for breakfast, don't you think? It's just some old high school drama." He slung an arm around Stephany's rigid shoulders. "Water under the bridge, right babe?"

No one laughed with him. The elderly aunts were whispering furiously to each other. Rita was grinning openly. One of the bridesmaids was staring at Roger with unconcealed disgust.

"I think," my father said, still in that unfamiliar, authoritative voice, "that we've all

had enough for this morning. Stephany, Roger, perhaps you should take some time to compose yourselves."

It was a dismissal. From my father. To Stephany.

I couldn't process what was happening. My entire worldview was rearranging itself, tectonic plates shifting beneath my feet. For so long I'd seen myself through their eyes as unwanted, inconvenient, not quite good enough. But now?

I became aware of a warm weight covering my hand. Aldaine had placed his palm over mine where it clutched the table edge. The touch anchored me, drew me back into my body. My fingers were tingling from gripping the table so hard.

"Breathe," he murmured, so softly only I could hear.

I drew in a shuddering breath, only then realizing I'd been holding it. The oxygen made me dizzy.

Stephany recovered first, yanking herself free of Roger's arm. "Fine," she hissed, her face twisted with genuine fury now. "If that's how you want to play it, fine. But don't think for a second this changes anything."

She directed the last part at me, naked hatred in her eyes. It should have frightened me, but instead, I felt oddly calm. Whatever power Stephany had held over me, the power to make me feel small, to make me doubt myself, seemed to have evaporated in the sun of my father's unexpected defense.

She turned on her heel and stalked from the room, Roger scrambling after her like an oversized, confused puppy.

In their wake, the tension in the dining room broke. Conversations resumed, though

in hushed, excited tones. I caught fragments:

"—never seen Denis stand up to any of them?—"

"—about time someone called out that Roger fellow?—"

"—going to be a very interesting wedding?—"

My father remained standing for a moment longer, looking oddly lost now that the confrontation was over. Then he picked up his newspaper, tucked it under his arm, and walked around the table toward me.

Everyone watched, barely pretending not to. When he reached my chair, he paused, looking down at me with an expression I couldn't quite read.

"Rosie," he seemed at a loss for words.

Instead of speaking, he placed his hand briefly, awkwardly, on my shoulder. Then he nodded once, as if confirming something to himself, and continued out of the dining room.

Jan followed him, pausing as she passed my chair. "We should talk. Later."

I could only nod, still too stunned to form words.

As they left, I became aware of Aldaine's hand still covering mine, warm and solid. The weight of it drew my attention back to him. His eyes, when I met them, were dark and intent, studying my face with such focus I felt my cheeks heat.

"Are you alright?" His voice pitched for my ears alone.

Was I? I had no idea. It felt like I'd walked through a door into a different reality, one where my father defended me and Jan admitted wrongdoing and Stephany didn't always win.

"I don't know," I admitted. My voice came out hoarse, as if I'd been screaming instead of sitting in shocked silence.

The charm in my pocket seemed to pulse warmly against my thigh. I reached down to touch it through the fabric of my dress, finding its solid outline reassuring somehow.

"I've never seen my dad stand up to them before," I whispered. "Not once, in all these years."

Aldaine's expression softened, though something fierce still burned in the depths of his eyes. "People can surprise you."

"Yes," I agreed, looking down at where his hand still covered mine. At the strange, undeniable connection I felt to him, despite everything. "They certainly can."

A server approached, offering more coffee. I accepted gratefully, wrapping my hands around the warm cup. The normalcy of the action helped ground me.

Rita slid into the chair next to me, her eyes bright with excitement. "Well," she leaned forward conspiratorially, "that was certainly more entertaining than the usual family breakfast. Are you okay, honey?"

I nodded, still not trusting my voice completely. The reality of what had just happened was still sinking in.

I felt Aldaine shift beside me, a subtle movement that somehow communicated his intent to give Rita and me space to talk. But before he could stand, I found myself

reaching out, catching his wrist.

"Stay. Please."

His eyes widened slightly, surprise flickering across his features. Then he nodded and settled back into his chair, his presence solid and reassuring beside me.

Whatever complicated thing existed between us, whatever had made him pull away last night, I'd sort it out later. Right now, in this strange new reality where my father had stood up for me, where Jan had acknowledged her failings, I needed him near.

I needed to believe, just for this moment, that impossible things could happen.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

Stay.

The word hung in the room, a simple command that struck me with the force of a physical blow. My wrist burned beneath her touch, her fingers pressing against my pulse point where no doubt she could feel the sudden spike in my heartbeat.

I had planned to give her space, to retreat as I'd done last night. To maintain the careful distance I'd been trying, and failing, to establish since the moment I'd felt the bond snap into place between us.

But she'd asked me to stay.

Demons are creatures of possession and dominance. We take. We claim. We mark. But to be invited? To be wanted rather than feared or obeyed? The sensation was unfamiliar enough to leave me momentarily speechless.

"Of course," I managed, my voice rougher than I intended.

I settled back into my seat beside her, hyperaware of every place our bodies nearly touched, her elbow almost grazing mine, the edge of her knee centimeters from my thigh under the table.

The breakfast continued around us, but I registered little beyond the burning awareness of her proximity and the lingering echo of that single word.

Stay.

More intimate, somehow, than if she'd pulled me into a kiss. More dangerous too. A kiss I could have resisted, could have filed away as mere physical attraction. But this reaching for me not in passion but in need, in trust, was a weakness I hadn't anticipated.

Rita leaned across the table, pulling Rosie into conversation, something about Jan's sudden change of heart and speculation about what had triggered my mate's father to finally grow a spine.

I nodded at appropriate intervals, offering bland responses when directly addressed, but my attention remained fixed on Rosie.

The warm morning light caught in her hair, illuminating strands of copper and gold amid the deeper red.

Her pulse fluttered visibly at the base of her throat, a delicate rhythm that stirred ancient instincts.

I wanted to press my lips there, to feel her lifeblood rushing beneath my touch.

I wanted to sink my teeth into that soft flesh and mark her as mine for all to see.

Mine. The word reverberated through me, a primal claim I had no right to make. Not yet. Not when she still didn't know what she truly was to me.

I'd run last night because I'd come too close to telling her everything.

I'd run because I was a coward.

Because if I told her the truth, that fate had bound us irrevocably together, that she was meant to be mine for eternity, she'd think it was just another trick. Another

demonic contract. Another way to take away her choice .

And I couldn't bear to see fear or revulsion replace the warmth in her eyes when she looked at me now.

"..Don't you think, Aldaine?"

I blinked, realizing Rita had addressed me directly. "I'm sorry?"

The woman's eyes twinkled knowingly. "I was just saying that you and Rosie make quite the striking couple. I've never seen her so radiant."

"Rita!" Rosie protested, a blush spreading across her cheeks. The color was enchanting, making the constellation of freckles across her nose stand out in sharp relief.

"What? It's true. He looks at you like you hung the moon. Don't think I haven't noticed." She winked at me conspiratorially. "You hold onto this one, Rosie. Men who look at women that way are rare creatures indeed."

I should have denied it. Should have played it off with a casual joke or deflection. Instead, I found myself meeting Rita's gaze steadily. "She makes it easy," my voice quiet.

Rosie's sharp intake of breath was audible only to me. From the corner of my eye, I saw her fingers tighten around her coffee cup.

Breakfast concluded shortly after, with most guests dispersing to prepare for the day's activities. Some mentioned planned excursions into town, others discussed the bridal shower the next day. Through it all, Rosie remained at my side, her presence a constant, burning awareness.

When the dining room had emptied save for a few lingering guests, she turned to me, eyes bright with a mixture of emotions I couldn't fully decipher.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" she asked. "There's a beautiful garden path that leads down to the edge of the forest. It's quiet." The last word carried weight, an unspoken acknowledgment that we needed privacy for whatever would come next .

"Lead the way," I rose from my seat and offered her my hand.

She hesitated only briefly before placing her palm against mine. The simple contact sent a jolt of electricity up my arm, the mating bond humming with approval. I curled my fingers around hers, savoring the softness of her skin, the delicate bones beneath.

We slipped out through a side door onto a stone terrace bathed in late morning sunlight.

The air was crisp with autumn's approach, carrying the scent of fallen leaves and distant woodsmoke.

Rosie guided me down a set of shallow steps to a gravel path bordered by late-blooming roses and carefully pruned hedges.

"I used to hide out here as a teenager," her voice soft with remembrance. "The gardener, Mr. Finch, would pretend not to notice me curled up with a book in one of the alcoves when Jan was on the warpath."

I tried to picture her younger self, seeking refuge among the flowers, and found my chest tightening with an unfamiliar ache.

"It sounds like you found allies where you could," I squeezed her hand.

She nodded, a small smile playing at her lips. "Mr. Finch and Cook. The staff saw more than my father ever did. Or at least, they saw and weren't afraid to acknowledge it."

The path wound deeper into the gardens, through an arbor heavy with purple wisteria, past a small ornamental pond. I could feel Rosie gradually relaxing beside me, some of the tension from the breakfast confrontation easing from her shoulders.

Finally, the manicured gardens gave way to a wilder space. A small clearing at the forest's edge where a bench had been placed beneath the spreading branches of an ancient oak. The bench faced away from the house, offering a view of the woods and the rolling hills beyond.

Rosie led me to it, dropping my hand as she settled onto the weathered wood. I sat beside her, careful to maintain a sliver of space between us despite every instinct screaming to pull her closer.

For several minutes, we sat in silence. I could sense her gathering her thoughts, working up to whatever it was she needed to say, and I waited, forcing myself to be patient despite the restless energy coursing through me.

"Why did you really run last night?"

The question, when it finally came, was direct but gentle. Without accusation. Just a simple query that deserved an honest answer I wasn't sure I could give.

I stared out at the tree line, watching a red-tailed hawk circle lazily overhead.

"It's complicated," I finally answered.

"Try me."

I turned to look at her then, really look at her.

The morning light filtered through the oak leaves, dappled her skin with shifting patterns of gold.

Her green eyes were clear and direct, holding mine without fear or artifice.

In that moment, she was so beautiful it was almost painful to behold her.

"There are things about me, about what I am, that you don't know," I carefully chose my words. "Things that might change how you see me."

She laughed, a soft, rueful sound. "Aldaine, you're a demon I summoned from a book I bought at a old bookstore. I don't think there's much that could shock me at this point."

If only she knew.

"It's not that simple." I ran a hand through my hair, frustration mounting. "What happened between us, what's happening, it's not just the contract."

Her expression sobered. "I know that. "

"Do you?" I was suddenly desperate for her to understand, even if I couldn't bring myself to speak the full truth. "Do you understand what it means to be involved with someone like me? The danger of it? The permanence?"

She shifted toward me on the bench, eliminating the careful space I'd maintained between us. Her knee pressed against mine, and she reached out, her warm fingers coming to rest on my forearm.

"I don't," she admitted quietly. "Not completely. But I want to."

The simple honesty in her voice threatened to undo me.

"Last night," I began, the words feeling torn from somewhere deep within me, "I almost told you everything. Almost showed you what you truly are to me. But I was afraid."

Her eyebrows rose in genuine surprise. "You? Afraid?"

"Even demons know fear, Rosie." I covered her hand with mine, unable to resist the contact any longer. "Especially when we stand to lose something precious."

Her pulse jumped under my fingers, her breath catching audibly. "And what would that be?"

"You," It was simple. "Your trust. Your choice in all this."

She was quiet for a long moment, her gaze searching mine.

"Whatever it is you're not telling me, I can wait until you're ready."

I just," She paused, swallowing visibly.

"I need you not to shut me out. Not to run away again."

Because whatever this is between us, it's not just the contract for me either.

I know it's fast, maybe insane, but I've started having feelings for you, Aldaine. "

The admission hung in the air between us, honest and vulnerable and more powerful

than any summoning spell could ever be.

"I've only known you a little while," she continued, voice growing stronger, "but I feel like I've been waiting for you my entire life. And that terrifies me, but not enough to stop. "

Something inside me, the last thread of restraint, snapped cleanly in two.

In one fluid motion, I pulled her to me, one hand tangling in her hair, the other gripping her waist. Her gasp was swallowed by my mouth as I claimed her lips in a kiss that was nothing like the gentle exploration we'd shared before.

This was hunger, raw and unfiltered, the full force of a demon's desire no longer held in check.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

She responded instantly, arms twining around my neck, body melting against mine. I growled deep in my throat as her lips parted, inviting me deeper. She tasted of coffee and something sweeter, something essentially Rosie, and I devoured her as a starving man might devour his first meal.

I stood, lifting her with me, her legs instinctively wrapping around my waist. Never breaking the kiss, I carried her the few steps to the nearest tree, pressing her back against the rough bark. She gasped as I pinned her there, the sound sending a fresh surge of desire coursing through my veins.

"Tell me to stop," I rasped against her lips, offering one final chance for retreat, one last opportunity to save herself from what was coming.

Her answer was to roll her hips against mine, drawing a groan from deep in my chest. "Don't you dare," she demanded.

The last tether of my control severed completely.

My hands moved over her body with desperate urgency, tracing the generous curves I'd been admiring since the moment she'd summoned me. I tore my mouth from hers to trail hungry kisses down her throat, savoring the salt of her skin, the thunder of her pulse beneath my lips.

"Aldaine," she moaned, fingers digging into my shoulders, head falling back against the tree to give me better access.

I bunched the fabric of her dress in my fists, dragging it up her thighs, revealing the

creamy skin that drove me crazy. She helped me, fumbling with the fastenings of my pants as I pushed her underwear aside, finding her already slick and ready for me.

"Fuck," I hissed against her throat as my fingers explored her wet heat. "So perfect. So ready for me."

"Yes," she gasped, arching into my touch. "Please, Aldaine. I need you now."

I didn't need further invitation. In one powerful thrust, I buried myself inside her, the tight heat of her body nearly bringing me to my knees.

She cried out, a sound of pure pleasure that echoed through the clearing.

I stilled for a moment, giving her time to adjust to the intrusion, fighting against the primal urge to claim, to take, to mark.

"Don't stop," she pleaded, rolling her hips against mine. "Please don't stop."

The last thread of hesitation dissolved.

I began to move, each motion deliberate and consuming.

The ancient oak cradled her back as I pressed forward, my body trembling with barely contained fervor.

Her fingers dug crescents into my shoulders, anchoring herself as we moved together in a rhythm as old as magic itself.

"Mine," I growled, the word erupting from someplace ancient and untamed within me, a truth I'd denied too long.

My forehead pressed against hers, our breath mingling in the narrow space between us.

"You're mine, Rosie," I whispered fiercely, watching her eyes dilate as the words washed over her, feeling her respond with a full-body shudder that echoed through my very core.

"Yes," she agreed breathlessly, her nails digging crescents into my shoulders through my shirt. "Yours, Aldaine. All yours."

The submission in her voice, the willing surrender, pushed me past reason into something primal and possessive.

I felt her body responding to every touch, every motion, a perfect counterpoint to my own.

My entire being focused on this connection between us, this moment where nothing existed beyond Rosie and the ancient magic binding us together.

"I can feel you," I whispered raggedly against her flushed skin. "Feel how close you are."

Her fingers twisted in my hair, pulling almost painfully as she held my gaze. The vulnerability in her eyes stole my breath, trust so complete it humbled me.

"Only with you," she gasped, her confession striking something profound within me. "Never felt this, never wanted like this!"

My rhythm faltered at her words, emotion threatening to overwhelm physical sensation.

I pressed my forehead against hers, breathing her in, feeling her tremble against me.

My teeth ached with the need to mark her, to complete the bond that had begun the moment I'd first touched her, a compulsion as old as my kind.

As her inner muscles tightened around me, as her voice broke into desperate, pleading sounds that echoed through the clearing, I surrendered to the instinct I'd been fighting since I first saw her.

With a reverence that belied my savage need, my teeth found the soft curve where her neck met her shoulder.

I hesitated for just a heartbeat, giving her one last chance to deny me this final claim.

"Yes," she breathed, tilting her head in ancient invitation. "Make me yours. All of me."

My teeth sank into her tender flesh, breaking the skin, the copper-sweet essence of her filling my mouth as the bond between us flared into blinding completion.

The mating bond flared between us, white-hot and overwhelming.

A flash of magic binding us. Rosie screamed, not in pain but in ecstasy, her orgasm crashing through her with a force that triggered my own.

I spilled inside her with a primal roar that tore from the deepest part of my being, my release pulsing in hot waves that seemed endless.

The ancient magic between us intensified every sensation as my essence flooded her womb, marking her from within just as my bite had claimed her from without.

My vision blurred, overwhelmed by the intensity of completion, not just physical, but something far more significant, a binding of souls across lifetimes.

My fingers dug into the soft flesh of her hips, holding her against me as if she might disappear if I loosened my grip. Every muscle in my body trembled with the force of claiming what had always been mine, what would be mine for eternity.

For long moments afterward, we remained locked together, my forehead pressed against the tree beside her head, her legs still wrapped tightly around my waist. Our ragged breathing slowly calmed, though my heart continued to race beneath my ribs.

Gradually, I became aware of the world around us again, the rustle of leaves overhead, the distant call of birds, the warmth of the sun on my back. And Rosie, trembling slightly in my arms, her fingers now gentle as they stroked through my hair.

I pulled back enough to see her face, suddenly terrified of what I might find there. Regret? Fear? Horror at what I'd done?

Instead, her eyes were luminous with wonder, her lips curved in a smile of such open joy that something within me shattered and reformed.

"That was," She trailed off, seemingly unable to find adequate words.

"I hurt you," my gaze dropped to the bite mark on her neck. It was already darkening, the perfect imprint of my teeth stark against her pale skin. A tiny trickle of blood still welled from the deepest punctures.

She touched the mark, wonder blooming across her features as her fingers came away with a smear of red. "No," she contradicted softly. "You marked me."

The simple truth of her statement stunned me into silence.

"I don't know exactly what this means," she continued, eyes searching mine, "but I know it's important. I could feel it, Aldaine. When you bit me, it was like something locked into place. Something that feels right."

I swallowed hard, overcome by the instinct to explain, to confess everything now that the first step had been taken. "Rosie, there's something I need to tell you about demons and.."

Her fingers pressed gently against my lips, stopping the words. "Later. Tell me later. Right now, I just want to feel this. Whatever this is."

I hesitated, uncertainty warring with relief. "You're not afraid?"

Her smile widened, transforming her face into something so beautiful it made my chest ache. "Of you? Never." She leaned forward, pressing a kiss to the corner of my mouth. "Whatever this is between us, I want it. I choose it."

I choose it.

Three simple words that changed everything. That made what I'd done not a claiming but an exchange. A mutual surrender.

I kissed her then, softly, reverently, my hands cradling her face as if she were made of the most precious substance in any realm. Because she was. Against her lips, I whispered the truth I could no longer contain.

"I'm yours as much as you're mine, Rosie. Always." I'd tell her after tomorrow's bridal shower before we left this place.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I could barely feel my legs as we made our way back toward the house. Aldaine's hand in mine was the only thing keeping me tethered to earth, the warmth of his palm a constant reminder that what had just happened under the oak tree wasn't some fevered dream.

We walked in comfortable silence, both of us seemingly lost in our own thoughts.

I kept stealing glances at him, marveling at the shift I saw there.

The tension that had been a constant thing in his posture had eased.

He looked peaceful. When he caught me looking, the corner of his mouth would lift in a private smile that sent heat rushing through my body all over again.

My free hand kept drifting up to the mark on my neck, fingertips tracing the indentations his teeth had left.

Each time I touched it, a pleasant shiver ran through me, an echo of the overwhelming sensation when he'd first bitten me.

It should have hurt. It should have terrified me.

Instead, it felt like completion, like something I'd been waiting for my entire life without knowing it.

"Does it hurt?" Aldaine asked softly, his eyes following the movement of my hand.

I shook my head. "No. It feels right." The words sounded ridiculous to my own ears, but they were true. "I can't explain it."

His expression softened. "I can," his voice low and intimate. "And I will. Later."

There was a weight to his words that suggested whatever explanation was coming would be significant. I nodded, content for now to exist in this bubble of aftermath, where the world consisted only of us and the way our bodies had joined so perfectly beneath the ancient oak.

My legs still trembled slightly from the intensity of what we'd shared.

Not just the physical release, though that had been unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

No, it was what had happened when his teeth broke my skin, that flash of white-hot connection, the sense of something ancient and powerful locking into place between us.

As we neared the house, reality began to intrude.

I became suddenly, acutely aware of my appearance with my dress rumpled, hair wild from Aldaine's fingers, the unmistakable evidence of what we'd done visible in my flushed cheeks and swollen lips.

And most tellingly, the vivid bite mark on my neck, which I had no hope of hiding without assistance.

"We should probably," I gestured vaguely at myself, heat rising in my cheeks.

Aldaine's eyes darkened as they swept over me, appreciation evident in his gaze.

"You look perfect to me," he murmured, voice pitched low enough to send another shiver racing down my spine. "But perhaps not for public consumption. "

We slipped in through a side entrance, thankfully encountering no one as we made our way back to our room. Once inside with the door safely closed behind us, I caught sight of myself in the mirror and gasped.

"Oh my god." The woman staring back at me was a strange.

Wild-eyed, mouth swollen from Aldaine's kisses, skin glowing that I hardly recognized.

And there, stark against the pale column of my throat, was his mark, a perfect crescent of teeth impressions, the skin around it already darkening to purple.

Aldaine appeared behind me in the mirror, his eyes meeting mine in our reflection. The possessive heat in his gaze as he looked at the mark sent a fresh wave of desire coursing through me.

"You're magnificent," his hands coming to rest on my hips.

I leaned back against him, savoring the solid warmth of his chest against my back. "I look thoroughly fucked," I countered, though I couldn't keep the smile from my voice.

His lips brushed the shell of my ear. "Yes," he agreed, sounding entirely too pleased with himself. "You do."

I turned in his arms, rising on tiptoe to press a light kiss to his mouth. "Smug isn't a good look on you," I lied. In truth, the satisfied glint in his eyes was devastatingly attractive.

He caught my bottom lip between his teeth, tugging gently before releasing it. "Liar."

We stood there for a long moment, foreheads touching, breathing each other's air. I felt drunk on his nearness, on the strange new bond humming between us.

"I should clean up," I murmured eventually, reluctant to break the bubble of intimacy but aware that we couldn't stay locked in our room forever.

Aldaine nodded, releasing me with obvious reluctance. "I'll do the same. "

I headed for the bathroom, conscious of his eyes tracking my every movement.

Under the warm spray of the shower, I let my fingers explore the mark he'd left, the sensation sending echoes of pleasure through me.

It wasn't just the physical evidence of our passion that moved me, it was the commitment behind it.

Something in me recognized the significance of what he'd done, even if my conscious mind didn't yet understand what it meant.

By the time I emerged, wrapped in a fluffy towel, Aldaine had already showered in the bathroom across the way in an empty room and changed into fresh clothes.

The sight of him in crisp dark jeans and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to expose his forearms momentarily robbed me of breath.

"You look," I trailed off, unable to find words to express how he affected me.

His slow smile showed he understood perfectly. "So do you."

I dressed simply in a flowing skirt and soft sweater, but paused when it came to my neck. The mark was too vivid, too unmistakably what it was, to leave exposed among family.

"I need something to cover this," I gestured at my neck with a shy smile.

Aldaine's expression darkened briefly, and I could read the conflict there, pride in his mark warring with practicality.

"Here," finally, he reluctantly pulled a silk scarf from my suitcase.

The deep brown color complemented my sweater perfectly as he arranged it around my neck with careful fingers.

His knuckles brushed against the mark as he adjusted the fabric, sending a spark of awareness through me. Our eyes met, and for a heartbeat, I thought we might end up back in bed. Then a sharp knock at the door broke the moment.

We both jumped slightly, then exchanged sheepish smiles at our reaction. Aldaine moved to answer while I made a final adjustment to the scarf, ensuring the mark was completely covered.

A young man in the estate's staff uniform stood in the hallway. "Miss Thompson? Mr. and Mrs. Thompson request your presence in the library as soon as possible. Your companion is welcome as well," he added with a polite nod toward Aldaine.

Something in his tone set off alarm bells. This wasn't a casual summons to tea.

"Did they say what this is about?" Anxiety began to curl in my stomach.

The young man shook his head. "No, miss. Just that it's important."

After he left, I turned to Aldaine, worry creasing my brow. "That's not normal. Dad and Jan don't usually do joint meetings unless something's wrong."

Aldaine's hand found mine, his thumb rubbing soothing circles against my palm. "Whatever it is, we'll face it together."

The simple promise steadied me more than I cared to admit. This was new territory, having someone firmly in my corner, ready to stand with me against whatever was coming. I squeezed his hand in silent thanks.

We had gone far beyond our contract.

The walk to the library felt both too short and interminable. My mind raced with possibilities, none of them good. Had Stephany complained about me? Had someone seen Aldaine and me in the garden? Was I about to be lectured on proper behavior while a guest in their home?

By the time we reached the heavy oak door of the library, my heart was pounding uncomfortably in my chest. Aldaine squeezed my hand once more before I knocked.

"Come in," my father's voice called from inside.

I pushed the door open, Aldaine a reassuring presence at my back as we stepped into the book-lined room. The library had always been my favorite place in the house, a sanctuary of sorts, but now it felt charged with an uncomfortable energy that made the hair on my arms stand up.

Dad and Jan stood near the massive stone fireplace where a small fire crackled, despite the mild day.

They turned as we entered, and I was immediately struck by how united they

appeared, standing close together, a unified front.

But not, I realized with surprise, against me.

There was no hostility in their postures, no disapproval in their expressions.

Instead, they both looked nervous? Uncertain?

Especially Jan. I'd never seen her look quite so unsettled. She was fidgeting with her wedding ring, twisting it around her finger in an uncharacteristic display of anxiety. Her usual perfect composure was nowhere to be seen.

"Rosie," Dad stepped forward slightly before hugging me tightly. "Thank you for coming. And Aldaine," he added with a nod of acknowledgment.

"Is everything alright?" I asked, unable to keep the wariness from my voice. Too many years of experience had taught me to be on guard in situations like this.

Dad and Jan exchanged a look that I couldn't quite interpret. Then, to my complete shock, Jan stepped forward.

"Rosie," she began, and I was struck by how careful her voice sounded. Unsteady, even. Nothing like her usual confident tone. "I owe you an apology. A real one."

I blinked, certain I must have misheard. Jan had never apologized to me for anything in all the years I'd known her. She'd never even acknowledged that there might be something to apologize for.

She took a deep breath, her hands still working restlessly at her wedding ring. "For years, I let Stephany set the tone. I let her jealousy, her spite, shape how I treated you. Because it was easier to side with her than admit my mistakes. Easier to believe you

were the problem, not her. "

I stood frozen, hardly daring to breathe, waiting for the other shoe to drop. This couldn't be real. Jan didn't show emotional honesty. She didn't do vulnerability. And she certainly didn't admit failure. Yet here she was, her voice growing increasingly unsteady as she continued.

"But this week, seeing the way she treated you, the way she treated everyone," She shook her head, something like shame crossing her features. "I see it clearly now. And I'm sorry. For all of it."

Her voice cracked on the last word, and I was stunned to see the glint of tears in her eyes. This was not the Jan I knew. Not the polished, perfect woman who had never shown a genuine emotion in all the time I'd known her.

I felt Aldaine's hand at the small of my back, a silent reminder of his presence, his support. I needed it. My legs felt unsteady beneath me as I tried to process what was happening.

Part of me wanted to be suspicious. To look for the trap, the hidden agenda. But as I searched Jan's face, all I could see was raw, genuine emotion. This wasn't a performance. It wasn't a manipulation.

It was real.

"It doesn't erase everything," I admitted finally, my voice quiet but steady. "But..it matters. More than you know."

I was surprised to feel tears pricking at my own eyes. How long had I waited for some acknowledgment from her? Some recognition that the favoritism, the coldness, the subtle cruelties hadn't been my imagination? I'd given up hope of ever hearing

anything like this years ago.

Dad stepped closer then, wrapping an arm around Jan's shoulders. His eyes, when they met mine, held a warmth and regret I hadn't seen in a while..

"It's time we act like the family you deserve, not the one you grew up with," he voiced simply.

The words landed like physical blows. I'd spent so many years convincing myself I didn't care what they thought, didn't need their approval or love. That I was fine on my own. The lie of it all crashed down around me as tears spilled over onto my cheeks.

Dad continued, his voice gentle but firm. "Whatever happens next, Rosie, you're not alone. Not anymore."

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I stared at my father and Jan, barely able to process the seismic shift that had just occurred. The library felt too warm suddenly, the crackling fire and sun conspiring to make the air thick and heavy. Or maybe that was just the weight of decades of hurt and hope warring in my chest.

Dad must have seen something in my expression because he took a half step forward, hands raised slightly as if to steady me. "We don't expect you to forgive everything overnight. We just want you to know you're wanted here. God knows I have so much to make up for being so absent in your life."

The simple statement hit harder than any of Jan's tearful apologies. Wanted. How long had I ached to hear that word from them?

"I..thank you," I managed, my voice catching. "Both of you. I just need a minute."

They nodded, understanding in their faces that made my throat tighten further. This new version of them, caring and patient, was almost harder to handle than their previous coldness. At least I'd known how to armor myself against that.

"Of course," Jan voice was vulnerable. "Take all the time you need."

Aldaine's hand found the small of my back, steadying and warm. I leaned into his touch, grateful for the anchor.

"Would you excuse us?" I asked, already turning toward the door. "I need some air."

We made it into the hallway before my legs gave out. Aldaine caught me as I sagged,

drawing me against his chest. The solid warmth of him was the only thing keeping me upright as emotions I'd bottled up for years came crashing through my carefully constructed walls.

A sound escaped me, half laugh, half sob. "Oh god," I pressed my face into his shirt, shoulders shaking. "I can't believe after all this time, they apologized."

His arms tightened around me, one hand stroking soothingly down my back. He didn't try to shush me or offer empty platitudes. He just held me, letting me fall apart in the safety of his embrace.

"They actually see me," my voice was muffled against his chest. "They finally see me."

Another watery laugh bubbled up, mixing with my tears that wouldn't stop falling. "And I don't know what to do with that. How do you trust something you stopped hoping for years ago?"

Aldaine's chest rumbled as he spoke, his voice gentle but firm. "Then we'll learn together."

I pulled back enough to look up at him, finding nothing but steady warmth in his dark eyes. No judgment, no impatience. Just quiet support and something deeper that made my heart skip.

"Together?" I echoed softly .

His thumb brushed away a tear from my cheek. "Together."

This demon. This man. He would be my undoing, and it didn't scare me.

The sun gleamed off the pool's surface, turning the water into a mesmerizing sight. I slipped off my shoes and rolled up the hem of my skirt before dipping my feet into the cool water. The sensation was grounding after the emotional whirlwind I'd just experienced.

Aldaine sat beside me, his pants rolled carefully above his ankles, our shoulders almost touching. Neither of us had spoken much since leaving the library. What was there to say after witnessing what felt like my family's complete personality transplant?

"Do you think it will last?" I finally asked my fear, breaking the companionable silence. "Jan's change of heart?"

Aldaine considered the question, his legs making slow circles in the water. "I believe she was sincere, if that's what you're asking. Whether she has the strength to maintain it when Stephany inevitably pushes back," He shrugged. "That remains to be seen."

I nodded, appreciating his honesty. False reassurance would have felt patronizing.

"She looked almost afraid when she apologized," I mused. "Like she expected me to reject her completely."

"Wouldn't you have had every right to?"

"Maybe." I trailed my fingers through the water, watching the ripples spread outward. "But that wouldn't help anyone, least of all me. Holding onto anger is exhausting." I'd felt it for too long, weighing my soul down.

Aldaine's gaze was warm when I looked up at him. "You continue to surprise me, Rosie Thompson."

Something about the way he said my name sent a pleasant shiver down my spine. It wasn't just the words, but the reverence with which he spoke them, as if my ordinary name were something precious.

The bite mark on my neck tingled beneath the silk scarf. I resisted the urge to touch it, knowing that even the lightest brush of my fingers would send heat racing through my body.

"Can I ask you something?"

Aldaine nodded, his expression open. "Anything."

I hesitated, unsure how to put my jumbled thoughts into coherent words. "Our contract.."

His shoulders tensed almost imperceptibly, but I felt it in the slight shift of his body next to mine.

"What about it?" His voice remained steady, but something flickered in his eyes.

The words felt stuck in my throat. How did I ask what our deal meant now that everything had changed between us? Now that he'd claimed me in the most primal way possible, now that I'd invited him to.

"I summoned you to pretend to be my boyfriend," I began slowly. "To make me look less pathetic at my ex's engagement. That was the deal." A weak laugh escaped me. "But this," I gestured vaguely between us, "doesn't feel like pretend anymore."

Aldaine was silent for a long moment, his gaze fixed on the rippling water. The sunlight caught the edges of his profile, gilding him in gold, and I was struck again by how beautiful he was, how otherworldly even in his human form.

"It's not," he finally spoke.

My heart stuttered in my chest. "Then what is it?"

He turned to face me then, something raw and vulnerable in his expression that stole my breath. "I don't know if I have the right words. Not ones you'd understand without context that I haven't given you yet."

"Try," I urged gently. "Please."

Aldaine ran a hand through his hair, a surprisingly human gesture of frustration. "The contract was," he paused, seeming to search for the right words. "It was my excuse to stay close to you. To be near you when every instinct told me to claim you from the moment you summoned me."

The confession sent heat rushing to my face. "Why me?"

A rueful smile curved his lips. "Why indeed? A human woman with fire in her eyes and defiance in her spine, summoning me not for power or vengeance or wealth, but to spite a girl who hurt her feelings in high school."

I opened my mouth to protest, then shut it again. Put that way, it did sound rather small and a little pathetic.

"You were like nothing I'd encountered in centuries," he continued, his voice dropping lower. "Fearless, even when you should have been terrified. Compassionate, even to a demon who could have taken everything from you."

My chest ached with emotions I couldn't name. "And the contract?"

"A piece of paper. Words and promises that meant nothing compared to what was

happening between us." His fingers found mine where they rested on the pool's edge. "What is still happening."

I swallowed hard, gathering my courage. "And what exactly is that?"

Aldaine's expression grew troubled. "That's where words fail me, Rosie. What exists between us has no perfect human equivalent. It's more binding than any contract, more permanent than any human commitment."

"Because of the bite?" My free hand rose unconsciously to touch the scarf covering his mark.

"The bite sealed it, it wasn't the beginning." His fingers tightened around mine. "I should have explained before. Should have given you a choice with full knowledge of what it meant."

Fear flickered through me, not of Aldaine himself, but of the weight behind his words. "Am I different now? Because of what happened?"

His expression softened. "You're still you, Rosie. Still human, still free to make your own choices." A shadow crossed his features. "But you're also more. Connected to me in ways that transcend physical bonds."

I should have been frightened. Should have demanded clearer answers, should have pulled away until I understood exactly what I'd gotten myself into. But the remorse in his eyes, the obvious struggle as he tried to explain something beyond human understanding, touched something deep within me.

"I still don't completely understand," I admitted softly. "But I trust you, Aldaine. Whatever this is between us, whatever it means," I squeezed his hand. "I'm not sorry it happened."

The tension in his shoulders eased slightly. "You should be. You should demand explanations, should rage at me for binding you without full disclosure."

I laughed then, unable to help myself. "Maybe that would be the sensible reaction. But when has anything about this," I gestured between us again, "been sensible?"

A reluctant smile tugged at his lips. "I've existed for millennia, Rosie. I've seen empires rise and fall, witnessed the best and worst of humanity. And yet nothing has ever unsettled me quite like you."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should." His expression grew serious again. "I promise you'll understand everything soon. There are things about the bond, about what it means for us, that I need to explain properly. Not here, not rushed."

I nodded, satisfied for now. "Okay. I can wait."

The relief in his eyes made my heart twist. Had he expected me to reject him? To recoil from whatever supernatural connection now existed between us?

"You're remarkable," he murmured, lifting our joined hands to press a kiss to my knuckles. "In all my existence, I've never met anyone like you."

Heat bloomed in my chest at the simple gesture. It felt more intimate, somehow, than the passionate encounter beneath the oak tree. That had been primal, instinctive. This was gentle, deliberate choice.

We sat in comfortable silence after that, watching the sunlight dance across the water's surface, our legs gently swaying beneath the surface. The world felt simpler here, suspended in this quiet moment where nothing existed beyond the two of us and

the warmth of the sun on our skin.

"Do you regret it?" I asked suddenly, needing to know. "Any of it?"

Aldaine's gaze when he turned to me was steady and sure. "Not for a moment. Whatever complications arise, whatever explanations I owe you, the only thing I regret is not being honest from the beginning."

I leaned against his shoulder, the solid warmth of him reassuring. "We'll figure it out."

His arm slipped around my waist, drawing me closer. "Together," he promised.

For the first time since I'd summoned him from that dusty old book, I felt truly at peace.

Whatever supernatural bond existed between us, whatever it meant for my future, I wasn't facing it alone.

And after a lifetime of feeling like an outsider in my own family, that certainty was more precious than any guarantee.

He was my home.

The moment of contentment was shattered at the sound of heels clicking sharply against the concrete pool deck.

"Well, isn't this cozy? "

I tensed, recognizing Stephany's voice before I even looked up. She stood a few yards away, arms crossed over her chest, her expression a mixture of contempt and

something darker, more calculated.

"What do you want, Stephany?" I asked, not bothering to hide the weariness in my tone. After the emotional roller coaster of the morning, I had zero patience for whatever barbs she'd come to throw.

Her perfectly painted lips curved into a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Just checking on my dear stepsister. Making sure you're not causing trouble before my big day."

Aldaine's arm tightened almost imperceptibly around my waist. "I believe the only one looking for trouble is you," he spoke mildly, though I felt the tension radiating through him.

Stephany's gaze shifted to him, her eyes narrowing. "Yes, about you," Her smile widened, turning predatory. "I know what you did, Rosie."

My stomach dropped. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, please." She waved a dismissive hand. "Drop the innocent act. I know exactly what you did. How desperate do you have to be to actually summon a demon just to make me jealous?"

The blood drained from my face. How could she possibly know? I'd been careful, had kept the book hidden, had performed the ritual in private.

Beside me, Aldaine stood in one fluid motion, water droplets cascading from his feet as he positioned himself slightly in front of me. His posture was casual, but I recognized the coiled tension in his body, a predator ready to strike.

"I don't know what fantasy you've concocted, but it sounds like you might need

professional help if you're seeing demons where there are none."

Stephany's laugh was sharp, cutting. "Nice try. But I have proof. "

"And what proof would that be?" Aldaine's voice remained calm, but I could hear the dangerous edge beneath the words.

Instead of answering, Stephany smiled and snapped her fingers, the sound cracking like a whip in the still air.

The space beside her shimmered, reality seeming to bend and warp before my eyes. Then, with a sound like fabric tearing, a figure materialized at her side.

I gasped, my hand flying to my mouth. Where moments before there had been empty space, now stood a creature from nightmares.

Taller than any human, with skin the color of midnight and eyes that glowed like embers.

Two massive horns curved from its forehead, and when it smiled, rows of needle-sharp teeth gleamed in the sunlight.

"Rosie Thompson," the demon rumbled, its voice like stones grinding together, "what a pleasure to finally show you my true form. Aldaine has been keeping you all to himself."

Aldaine's posture changed instantly, his casual stance giving way to something predatory and unmistakably inhuman despite his human appearance. The temperature around us seemed to drop several degrees.

"Blackwood," he snarled, and the name sounded like a curse. "What are you doing

here?"

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

My feet were still dripping pool water as I scrambled to stand beside Aldaine, my heart hammering against my ribs.

The demon, Blackwood, towered over us both, his midnight skin seeming to absorb the sunlight around him.

Unlike Aldaine's magenta coloring in his demon form, Blackwood was like a void given shape, darkness made flesh.

"Rosie, stay behind me," Aldaine murmured, his voice low and commanding. The gentle man who'd held me moments ago had vanished, replaced by something ancient and dangerous.

I obeyed without thinking, my legs trembling as I moved behind his protective stance. The air around us felt electric, charged with power that made the hair on my arms stand on end.

"Really, Aldaine?" Blackwood's voice rumbled like distant thunder.

"Still playing the gallant protector? How quaint.

" His burning gaze shifted to me, and I felt it like a physical touch, invasive and cold.

"Though I must admit, I see the appeal. She's always been delicious, I always thought it was a shame that my contract wouldn't be going to her instead of Stephany. "

Aldaine snarled, the sound so inhuman it sent shivers down my spine. "Touch her and

it will be the last thing you ever do."

"So territorial," Blackwood laughed, the sound like breaking glass. "And over a human, no less. How the mighty have fallen."

Stephany watched our exchange with obvious delight, her eyes gleaming with malicious satisfaction. "He's right, you know. It's pathetic." Her gaze raked over me dismissively. "Using magic to get a man, or should I say a demon, because you couldn't manage it on your own merits."

Blackwood's massive hand came to rest on Stephany's shoulder, possessive and familiar. "Now, now, sweet one. Let's not be hypocritical." His razor-toothed smile widened. "After all, your family has been enjoying my services for generations."

"What is he talking about?" I demanded, finding my voice at last. I directed the question at both Stephany and Aldaine, my mind racing to make sense of what was happening.

Aldaine's shoulders tensed further. "He's a contract demon, like me. But his methods are different."

"Different?" Blackwood scoffed. "More efficient, you mean. More profitable." He gestured to the sprawling estate around us. "Your precious human family didn't build all this through hard work and honest means, did they, Stephany dear?"

Stephany's expression hardened. "That's none of her business."

"Oh, but it is now," Blackwood countered, his burning eyes fixed on me. "Since she's gone and tied herself to my old friend Aldaine. Practically family now, aren't we all?"
"

Aldaine took a step forward, and though he remained in his human form, something about him seemed to grow larger, more imposing. The air around him shimmered with heat.

"Enough games, Blackwood. State your business and be gone. You have no claim here."

"No claim?" Blackwood's laughter boomed across the pool area, echoing unnaturally. "I've had a contract with the women of this family for seven generations. I'm practically a Thompson myself."

I looked at Stephany, who was watching the exchange with a mixture of smugness and something else, fear, maybe? "Is that true?"

Before she could answer, Aldaine cut in. "His contract isn't with Stephany. It would be with Jan."

"Smart boy," Blackwood purred. "Always were the clever one."

Yes, the delightful Jan was my benefactor.

"He leaned down, his massive face coming uncomfortably close to mine despite Aldaine's protective stance."

"Passed down from mother to daughter, a family tradition."

Jan received me from her mother, who received me from hers, and so on.

All very touching, truly. Now the contract has moved to Stephany once she marries a man worthy of the estate. "

"And what exactly do you offer them?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady despite the fear coursing through my body.

"Wealth. Influence. Success." Blackwood straightened to his full, imposing height. "Everything humans crave. Everything they aren't worthy of but desire anyway."

"And in exchange?" I pressed, though I suspected I already knew the answer.

"I feed," his reply simple. "Their greed, their ambition, their petty hatreds, such delicious sustenance." He inhaled deeply, as if savoring a fine aroma. "This family's capacity for spite and malice has kept me well-fed for generations. "

The pieces clicked into place. "So that's why," I looked at Stephany, understanding dawning. "That's why you've always hated me. Why Jan did too, until recently. He's been feeding on your negative emotions, encouraging them."

"Don't be ridiculous," Stephany snapped, but her voice lacked conviction. "I dislike you because you've always been an embarrassment. The fat, awkward barnacle clinging to our family."

Aldaine growled, a sound so predatory it made both Stephany and Blackwood pause. "Watch your tongue when you speak to her."

"Why?" Stephany challenged, stepping forward despite Blackwood's restraining hand on her shoulder. "Because you've got some supernatural claim on her now? That's the only way she'd ever get someone like you to look at her twice."

I felt Aldaine's rage building like a physical force, the air around us growing hotter.

"What contract do you have with her, anyway?" Stephany pressed, her voice dripping venom. "Did she sell her soul for a week of decent sex? Seems like a poor bargain."

"That's enough!" Aldaine's voice thundered, deep and resonant with power. Though he remained in human form, his eyes flashed with inhuman light.

I placed my hand on his arm, feeling the coiled tension in his muscles. "It's okay," my voice steady. "She can't hurt me."

His gaze flickered to mine, fierce and protective, before returning to our adversaries.

I stepped out from behind him, not completely, but enough to face Stephany directly. "Why do you hate me so much?" I asked quietly. "What did I ever do to you that was so terrible it justifies years of cruelty?"

Stephany's perfectly made-up face twisted with disdain. "You existed. You were always there, a constant reminder that Dad had a life before Mom. A reminder that she wasn't his first choice. So you needed to pay for her suffering."

"I was a child," I reminded her, feeling a surge of anger override my fear. "I had no control over any of that."

"You were loved," she spat. "Dad adored you before you drove him away with your neediness after your mother died."

The accusation hit like a physical blow. "Is that what you think happened? That I drove him away?"

"Oh, I know you did. Mom told me all about it, how you clung to him, demanded all his attention, made him resent having to be your parent instead of just living his life."

I felt sick, hearing Jan's old lies spilling from Stephany's mouth. Lies that even Jan herself had apparently abandoned, given our earlier conversation in the library.

"And that wasn't enough for you," Stephany continued, building steam. "You had to come back here, insinuate yourself back into his life right when everything was perfect. When I'm finally getting everything I deserve."

"Everything you deserve," I repeated, the pieces falling into place. "That's what this is really about, isn't it? You're afraid I'll take something away from you, inheritance, attention, love. That there won't be enough for you if I'm in the picture."

I felt pity for Stephany. Sure, I was angry with her confession after years of torture for something so minuscule, but I also pitied her because it seemed underneath it all, she wanted my father's love and Jan's approval.

Blackwood's smile widened, his burning gaze flicking between us with obvious relish. "Delicious," he murmured. "The fear, the anger, the envy, simply exquisite."

Stephany shot him an annoyed glance before refocusing on me. "I want you gone from our lives," her voice was flat and devoid of emotion. "Back to whatever sad little existence you were living before you decided to crash my engagement and ruin everything. "

"With a demon on your arm, no less," Blackwood added, almost conversationally. "Quite the desperation move, little human."

Aldaine remained tense beside me, his presence an anchor in the storm of emotions. "Rosie made a fair contract. Unlike what you've done with this family, Blackwood."

"Fair?" Blackwood laughed. "Since when do you care about fair? We're demons, Aldaine. We take what we want."

"Not anymore," Aldaine replied, cold and final.

I gathered my courage, bolstered by Aldaine's unwavering support.

"Stephany, I never wanted to take anything from you.

I just wanted to belong somewhere, to have family.

" I took a step toward her, ignoring Aldaine's subtle attempt to keep me behind him.

"But I'm done apologizing for existing. I'm done being the family scapegoat.

Whatever twisted deal your mother made with Blackwood, that's between them. It has nothing to do with me."

Stephany's eyes narrowed. "It has everything to do with you. You're the threat. You're the one who could ruin everything."

"How? By having a relationship with my father?

By having him realize that he worked too much and pushed me away?

By being treated with basic decency?" I shook my head, a strange calm settled over me.

"That's what's bothering you, isn't it? That suddenly, I'm not being treated as less-than. That I might be accepted."

"You don't deserve it," she hissed. "You've done nothing to earn any of it."

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

"And what exactly have you done to earn it?"

"I countered. "Besides exist as Jan's biological daughter?"

Besides feeding Blackwood's appetite with your hatred and bitterness toward me?"

"I gestured toward the demon, who was watching our exchange with obvious enjoyment.

"Look at him, Stephany. He's feeding on this right now.

On your anger, your fear, your spite. This is what's been happening all these years, he's been nurturing your worst impulses, making you believe that hating me was justified. "

The tension between us crackled like electricity, a standoff with no clear resolution in sight. Stephany's words hung in the air between us, sharp and poisonous. I held my ground, refusing to shrink or apologize for simply wanting to be part of my own family.

"Stephany! That's enough!"

Jan's voice cut through the heated atmosphere like a blade. I turned to see her striding toward us across the pool deck, my father at her side. Their expressions were identical masks of concern and determination.

"Mom?" Stephany's voice held a note of surprise and uncertainty.

But Jan wasn't looking at her daughter. Her gaze was fixed on Blackwood, recognition and old familiarity evident in her eyes. There was no shock at his demonic appearance, no horror at the supernatural creature towering over her daughter. Only a weary sort of resignation.

"I see you've decided to show your true self," Jan's voice was steady. "After all these years in the shadows."

Blackwood inclined his massive horned head, a mockery of respect. "Circumstances demanded it. Your daughter has been entertaining herself by exposing secrets not hers to reveal."

Jan's gaze shifted to me, then to Aldaine who remained protectively at my side. "And you. You're like him."

It wasn't a question. Aldaine nodded once, not bothering to deny it.

Jan turned to me then, her expression softening in a way I'd never seen before. "Rosie, do you know what you're getting into with him? With a demon contract? "

I felt Aldaine tense beside me, but I squeezed his hand reassuringly. "I know enough."

"These contracts," Jan continued, her voice taking on an urgency that surprised me. "They drain you, Rosie. Your energy, your essence. Your soul. I've lived with one for decades. It's like a slow bleed you don't even notice until you're nearly empty."

"My contract with Rosie is not like that," Aldaine interjected, steady and sure.

"They all say that," Jan countered, but without hostility. "They promise you everything you want, but the cost is always higher than you expect."

Dad stepped forward then, putting his arm around Jan's shoulders. The gesture was protective, supportive. A united front I'd never seen from them before.

"I had no idea about any of this," he looked between Blackwood and Aldaine with wide eyes. "No idea what was happening in my own home."

"That was by design," Blackwood rumbled. "Jan's contract specifically included keeping you in the dark."

"Which I now regret," Jan sighed. "Among many things."

Stephany made a sound of disgust. "Mom, what are you doing? Why are you treating her like she deserves an explanation? She's the intruder here, not us!"

"Enough, Stephany," Jan's voice was sharper than I'd ever heard it. "Your sister deserves more than explanations. She deserves an apology from all of us, me most of all."

The word "sister" sent a jolt through me. Not "your stepsister" or "Denis's daughter" but simply "sister." It felt like a gift, unexpected and precious.

I stood straighter, emboldened by Jan's words. I looked directly at Aldaine, at the demon who had become so much more than a contract to me. His eyes held mine, warm and steady despite the tension surrounding us. I reached for his hand, twining my fingers through his.

"I know exactly what I'm getting into," I addressed Jan but kept my gaze on Aldaine. "I've made my choice with open eyes."

Jan studied us for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "I believe you." She turned to Blackwood, her expression hardening. "As for you."

Blackwood's burning eyes narrowed. "Careful, Jan. Remember who holds your contract."

"No," Jan shook her head. "You don't. Not anymore."

For the first time, Blackwood looked uncertain. "What are you talking about? Our agreement.."

"I know you transferred our contract to Stephany on her last birthday," Jan cut him off. "I felt it happen. The weight lifting from me, settling onto her."

Stephany paled visibly. "Mom? You shouldn't have known."

Jan ignored her, keeping her focus on Blackwood. "I wanted to thank you, actually. For everything you've done for my family over the generations. And to tell you that I want to release you from your contract with the Thompsons."

"Release me?" Blackwood's voice was suddenly very quiet.

"Yes. I know it's what you've wanted for decades now. To be free of us. Of this arrangement that's bound you for too long."

Something flashed across Blackwood's face then, an emotion so complex and unexpected that it took me a moment to recognize it. Vulnerability. Perhaps even gratitude.

He turned to look at Stephany, who was watching the exchange with dawning horror. The smirk that had played on her lips throughout our confrontation began to fade as Blackwood's burning gaze settled on her .

"It's too late for that, Jan," his rumbling voice oddly gentle. "Stephany broke the

contract a while ago."

"What?" Stephany's voice rose an octave. "That's not possible! I did everything you asked!"

Blackwood shook his massive head. "Not everything, child. The terms were clear. The firstborn female of each generation must honor the binding. Must feed me with their stronger emotions and, most importantly, must remain true to the bloodline."

"I am true to the bloodline!" Stephany protested. "I'm Jan's daughter!"

"Yes," Blackwood agreed. "But our contract specifies that you must marry within certain parameters to ensure the continuation of my sustenance. Parameters you've ignored."

"That's ridiculous! I'm marrying Roger in three months!"

"Roger," something in Blackwood's tone made my blood run cold. "Your soon-to-be husband. He's a pathetic excuse of a human being. He has no ambition to grow the family's fortune. All he does is drink, drain his family's bank account, and cheat on you with random women."

Stephany's eyes widened and her mouth dropped. "What...?"

"Your precious Roger," Blackwood continued, his voice like gravel sliding over steel, "makes our contract void. A man with no drive, no ambition beyond his next drink and his next conquest? This is who you've chosen to bring into the bloodline?"

I watched Stephany's face drain of color. Her perfectly manicured hands trembled at her sides.

"That's not..he wouldn't!" she stammered, but the protest died on her lips. Something like recognition flickered across her features. She knew. Deep down, she'd always known what Roger was.

"A man who services the housemaid in your bed while you're shopping.

Who transferred half a million dollars to his personal account last month alone.

Who has no intention of ever working a day in his life.

" Blackwood's burning eyes seemed to look straight through her.

"This is the man you would make the patriarch of this family? "

Stephany's shoulders hunched forward slightly, making her look smaller than I'd ever seen her. "I can find someone else," her voice tight with desperation. "We can renegotiate."

Blackwood considered her for a long moment, his massive form towering over her. "We could," he agreed, surprising everyone. "If I wished to continue our arrangement."

"And you don't?" Stephany's voice cracked.

"I have served your family for generations," Blackwood said, something like weariness entering his voice. "I have fed on your emotions, guided your decisions, watched you live and die in this house. And I find myself tired." He spread his clawed hands. "It is time for me to return to my realm."

I felt Aldaine shift beside me, a subtle movement of recognition. Whatever Blackwood was saying, it meant something significant to him.

"But," Stephany looked stricken. "What about us? What about the house, the money?"

"Ah," Blackwood's mouth stretched into what might have been a smile on a human face. "I am not without mercy. I will offer you a parting gift, Stephany Thompson."

Jan took a step forward, her face tight with anxiety. "Blackwood."

He held up a hand, silencing her. "You may keep your status, your wealth. You need not lose everything." His burning gaze fixed on Stephany once more. "But you must leave this estate. Take your useless fiancé and go. Never return to this place."

"Leave?" Stephany's voice rose to a near-shriek. "This is my home! You can't just.."

"I can," Blackwood cut her off, his voice reverberating with power. "And I will. These are my terms. Accept them, or I take your soul with me when I depart this realm. Your choice."

Stephany's mouth snapped shut, her face a mask of fury and fear.

Jan moved closer, placing a tentative hand on Blackwood's massive arm. "What about me?" she asked quietly. "Our agreement?"

"Is concluded," he finished for her, but his tone softened almost imperceptibly. "You may remain here. The house is yours, as it always was."

Relief washed over Jan's features, but uncertainty quickly replaced it. "And Stephany?"

"She will make her own way, as humans do." Blackwood looked down at Jan with something almost like tenderness. "You may maintain contact, of course. But never

again will you provide financial support. She must stand on her own, or fall."

Jan nodded slowly, understanding and acceptance in her eyes.

My father moved to stand beside her, his arm around her shoulders. He looked overwhelmed but determined. "This is all a lot to take in," his voice unsteady. "But thank you for watching over my wife for all these years."

I felt a rush of warmth at his words. For all his faults, all his absences, he was choosing to stay and fight for his wife. Maybe there was hope for him yet.

Stephany's face had gone through a kaleidoscope of emotions as she listened to her fate being decided. Now it settled into a cold mask of resignation.

"Fine," she spat, arms crossed tightly across her chest. "I accept your terms. Roger and I will leave." Her gaze flicked to me, hatred burning in her eyes. "I hope you're happy now."

"This isn't about me," I shrugged. "It never was."

Blackwood nodded, apparently satisfied with Stephany's acceptance. "The contract is severed, then. You have three days to remove yourselves from the premises."

"My engagement party ends in three days," Stephany protested.

"Then I suggest you make alternative arrangements," Blackwood replied without sympathy.

He turned away from her dismissively, his attention shifting to Jan. The transformation in his demeanor was striking. The harshness, the cold authority melted away, replaced by something almost gentle.

"Jan," he spoke her name softly, with a familiarity that spoke of decades of connection. "You have been unexpected."

Jan's smile was sad but genuine. "As have you. All these years."

Blackwood reached out one massive clawed hand and, with surprising delicacy, brushed a strand of hair from Jan's face. "Most humans fear me. Resent me. You never did."

"I understood the bargain," she replied simply. "And you kept your word."

"As did you."

I watched this exchange with growing bewilderment. There was history here, deep and complex, that I couldn't begin to understand. Jan and Blackwood weren't just bound by a contract; they had developed something like respect, maybe even affection, across the decades.

Blackwood leaned down, his towering form bending until his face was level with Jan's. With a gentleness that seemed impossible from such a fearsome creature, he pressed his lips to her cheek.

"You were my favorite," he whispered, the words clearly meant for her alone, though the stillness of the moment carried them to all of us.

Jan's eyes glistened with unshed tears. She reached up and placed her palm against the side of his face, a gesture of farewell between old friends, or perhaps something that could have been more in the past.

"Be well, in whatever realm you choose," her shoulders bowed as she held in a snuffle.

Blackwood straightened and turned, his burning gaze sweeping across all of us before settling on Aldaine. A silent communication seemed to pass between the demons, culminating in a slight nod from Blackwood.

Aldaine returned the gesture, his hand tightening around mine.

For a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of surprise in Blackwood's eyes as he observed our linked hands.

Then, without another word, the massive demon began to fade from view, his form dissolving into mist and shadow until nothing remained but a lingering scent of smoke and spice.

The silence that followed was absolute. We all stood frozen, processing what had just happened, the monumental shift that had occurred in all our lives in the span of minutes.

Stephany was the first to break. With a strangled sound that was half-sob, half-scream, she whirled and stalked back toward the house, her heels clicking furiously against the pool deck.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I guided Rosie through the hallway toward our room, her weight leaning against me in a way that made my chest tighten with unfamiliar emotions.

The events at the pool had taken their toll on her, on all of us really, but Rosie most of all.

Her family's world had been turned upside down in the span of minutes, revelations spilling forth like water from a broken dam.

Yet she walked with her head held high, her fingers intertwined with mine, occasionally squeezing as if to reassure herself that I was still there. That I was real.

As if I could be anywhere else. As if my entire existence hadn't narrowed to this slip of a human woman who'd summoned me on a whim and changed everything.

"Almost there," I murmured, supporting her with an arm around her waist as we approached the door to our shared bedroom. She smelled like sunshine and chlorine from the pool, with an undertone of uniquely Rosie, sweet and earthy and alive in a way that made my ancient heart stutter .

"I can walk, you know," she protested weakly, even as she leaned more heavily against me. "I'm just.."

"Overwhelmed," I finished for her, pushing the door open. "You don't need to pretend with me."

Her smile was small but genuine. "I know."

Those two simple words sent a rush of warmth through me that rivaled the heat of my home realm. That she knew she could be vulnerable with me, that she trusted me enough to let her guard down, it was a gift I hadn't known to ask for.

All of these emotions within such a short timeframe should terrify me but it just made me want to be with her more.

The bedroom welcomed us with its quiet luxury, afternoon sunlight filtering through gauzy curtains to paint golden patterns across the plush carpet. I guided Rosie to the edge of the bed, where she sank down with a sigh that spoke volumes of her exhaustion.

"What a day," she breathed, running a hand through her disheveled hair. "And it's not even over yet."

I sat beside her, close enough to feel the warmth radiating from her but giving her space to breathe. "We can stay here as long as you need. Your family can wait."

The word "family" made her wince slightly, but she nodded. "Thank you." Her gaze drifted around the room before landing on her luggage in the corner. "Oh! I almost forgot."

She pushed herself up from the bed with renewed energy and crossed to her suitcase, rummaging through its contents until she found what she was looking for. When she turned back to me, she held the protection charm I'd crafted for her in her palm, the carved metal gleaming in the sunlight.

My breath caught. She'd held it to her chest as if it were precious to her .

"You like it," I was unable to keep the wonder from my voice.

Rosie returned to the bed, sinking down beside me with the charm cradled in her hands like something sacred. "Of course I do." Her green eyes, so luminous in the afternoon light, met mine with an intensity that made my ancient heart race. "I want to have it with me all the time."

She held it up, the intricate carvings catching the light. "Could I have it made into a necklace or something? So I can wear it?"

The request stunned me into momentary silence. In all my long existence, no human had ever wanted to keep something of mine close to them, to wear my magic against their skin by choice rather than coercion.

"Aldaine?" Uncertainty crept into her voice at my silence. "Is that not allowed or something?"

I reached out, covering her hands with mine, feeling the warm pulse of her life beneath my fingers. "It's allowed," I assured her, my voice rougher than I intended. "It's more than allowed. It's perfect."

Relief washed over her features. "Good. Because I don't want to be without it." Her fingers traced the carvings. "What exactly is it, though? You never really explained."

I took a steady breath. This was a moment for honesty, for peeling back one more layer of the barriers between us.

"It's a protection charm," I began, choosing my words carefully. "But not the kind humans typically make. This comes from my realm, carved from a metal that isn't available on your world."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

A chuckle escaped me. "These markings channel that protection, focus it."

"What does it protect against?"

"Other demons, primarily," I admitted. "It marks you as under my protection. Most would respect that claim and leave you be."

"Most?" There was no fear in her voice, only curiosity.

"There are always those who see rules as challenges rather than boundaries," I shrugged. "But they would think twice before crossing me." The words came out with a growl that surprised even me.

Her fingers closed around the charm, holding it tightly. "Thank you," she whispered, then leaned forward to press her lips to mine in a kiss so soft and sweet it made my chest ache.

I returned the kiss with restrained hunger, letting her set the pace, drinking in the warmth of her gratitude. When she pulled back, her eyes were bright with emotion.

"I keep thinking about what Blackwood said," she murmured, her free hand coming up to cup my cheek. "About contracts and demons. About what you said by the pool."

A flicker of uncertainty passed through me. "Rosie.."

"No, let me finish," she interrupted gently. "I know we need to talk about all of it. About what's happening between us, about this bond you mentioned." Her thumb stroked along my jawline, sending shivers down my spine. "And we will. Tomorrow."

I blinked, momentarily thrown by the unexpected reprieve. "Tomorrow?"

A small smile played at the corners of her mouth. "Tomorrow," she confirmed. "Tonight, I just want to be with you."

The simplicity of the request, the quiet certainty in her voice, undid me completely. This human woman, who had every right to demand explanations, who could justifiably fear the supernatural bond forming between us, instead chose trust. Chose me.

"Rosie," her name was a prayer on my lips as I leaned forward to capture her mouth with mine.

She responded immediately, the protection charm forgotten as she wound her arms around my neck, pressing herself against me with an eagerness that set my blood on fire.

I eased her back onto the bed, bracing myself above her, careful not to crush her with my weight. Her red hair fanned out across the comforter, a flame against the white fabric. She was breathtaking, her green eyes dark with desire, her lips parted in invitation.

"You are magnificent," I breathed, unable to keep the reverence from my voice. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

Her hands slid beneath my shirt, palms flat against my skin, exploring with a boldness that made me groan. "Show me," she challenged, a smile curving her lips.

I obeyed, lowering my head to kiss her again, pouring centuries of loneliness and decades of waiting into the press of my lips against hers. She arched up into me, a soft moan escaping her as my tongue traced the seam of her mouth, seeking entry.

Our previous encounters had been frantic, primal, driven by instinct and need. This

was different. Each touch deliberate, each kiss measured and deep, as if we had all the time in the ages to learn each other's bodies.

I stripped her slowly, reverently, peeling away layers of clothing to reveal the creamy expanse of her skin, flushed pink with desire. Her body was lush curves and soft valleys, generous in a way that made my hands seem designed specifically to cup and caress her.

"So beautiful," I murmured against her collarbone, trailing kisses down to the generous swell of her breast. "Perfect."

She laughed breathlessly, her hands tangled in my hair. "I'm hardly perfect."

I raised my head to meet her gaze, suddenly fierce with the need for her to understand. "You are to me." My hand traced the curve of her waist, the flare of her hip. "Every inch of you was made to drive me mad."

The uncertainty in her eyes melted into something warm and wondering. "Then we're even," she whispered, pulling me down for another kiss, before her hands dropped to tug at my shirt. "You're wearing too many clothes."

I chuckled against her lips, pulling back just enough to strip away my own clothing, baring myself to her eager gaze. The appreciative sound she made as her eyes raked over my chest sent heat pooling low in my belly.

"Better?" I asked, my voice rough with need.

Her answer was to reach for me, hands splaying across my chest, exploring the planes and angles of my body with undisguised delight. When her fingers dipped lower, tracing the line of hair that disappeared beneath the waistband of my pants, I caught her wrist gently.

"Slowly," I murmured, pressing a kiss to her palm. "I want to savor you."

A flush spread across her cheeks and down her neck, but she nodded, relaxing back against the pillows. "I'm all yours."

The simple statement hit me like a physical blow. Mine. Yes, she was mine in ways she couldn't yet fully comprehend, bound to me by forces beyond human understanding. But hearing her say it, seeing the trust in her eyes as she offered herself to me, it was a gift beyond measure.

I worshipped her body with lips and tongue and gentle hands, mapping every curve, learning what made her gasp and what drew those delicious little moans from her throat.

I discovered the sensitive spot just below her ear that made her shiver, the way her breath hitched when I dragged my teeth lightly across her nipple.

Licking my mark on her neck made her legs shake and she gave a small cry when I bit it gently.

By the time I settled between her thighs, she was trembling, her skin flushed and damp with perspiration. "Aldaine," my name a plea on her lips, her hands fisted in the sheets.

I looked up the length of her body, taking in the sight of her, flushed and wanting, completely undone by my touch. "Tell me what you need," I urged, pressing a kiss to the soft skin of her inner thigh.

"You," she gasped, her hips lifting in invitation. "Please, I need you."

The desperation in her voice broke the last threads of my restraint. I rose up over her,

capturing her mouth in a searing kiss as I positioned myself at her entrance. She was wet and ready, her body welcoming me as I pushed inside in one slow, careful thrust.

We both froze, overwhelmed by the sensation. This joining felt different from our previous times, deeper somehow, not just physically but on some fundamental level that resonated through my very being.

"Oh," Rosie breathed, her eyes wide with wonder as she looked up at me. "I feel.."

"I know," I murmured, understanding what she couldn't articulate. The bond between us was strengthening, solidifying with each joining of our bodies. I could feel her, not just the physical warmth of her wrapped around me, but something of her essence, bright and fierce and so very human.

I began to move within her, setting a rhythm that was gentle but insistent, each thrust measured and deep. Her legs wrapped around my waist, urging me closer, deeper, as if she couldn't bear any space between us.

"Rosie," I groaned, burying my face in the curve of her neck, inhaling the intoxicating scent of her skin. "My Rosie."

"Yours," she agreed breathlessly, her nails scoring down my back as pleasure built between us. "And you're mine."

The claim sent a surge of possessive satisfaction through me. Yes, I was hers as surely as she was mine, bound together in ways that transcended the physical realm. Ancient and eternal as I was, I had found my match in this fierce, compassionate human woman who faced demons without flinching.

I shifted my angle, driving deeper, and was rewarded with a cry of pleasure as I hit the spot inside her that made her see stars. Her inner walls clenched around me, her

body arching beneath mine as she chased her release.

"That's it," I encouraged, pressing open-mouthed kisses along her jaw, her throat.
"Let go for me. Be such a good girl."

She came with my name on her lips, her body shuddering beneath mine, inner muscles clenching rhythmically around my length in a way that nearly drove me over the edge. The sight of her lost in pleasure, knowing I had brought her there, was the most beautiful thing I'd ever witnessed.

I continued to move within her, drawing out her climax, watching in fascination as waves of pleasure washed over her face. When she finally went limp beneath me, her eyes found mine, dazed and satisfied.

"Don't stop," she whispered, her hands sliding up to cup my face. "I want to feel you."

The tenderness in her voice undid me completely. I surged forward, claiming her mouth as my hips snapped against hers with increasing urgency. My release built at the base of my spine, tension coiling tight as centuries of loneliness shattered beneath the weight of this single perfect moment.

When I finally came, it was with a guttural groan against her lips, my body shuddering as pleasure crashed through me in waves that seemed endless. In that moment, I felt more vulnerable, more exposed than I had in millennia, and yet safer than I'd ever been, held in the circle of her arms.

We lay tangled together afterward, her head pillowed on my chest, my fingers tracing lazy patterns along her spine. Neither of us spoke, wrapped in a comfortable silence that felt like its own form of intimacy .

"Aldaine?" Rosie's voice was soft, drowsy with satisfaction.

"Hmm?" I pressed a kiss to the top of her head, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair.

"Tomorrow, we'll talk about everything?"

I tightened my arms around her, knowing she was referring to our contract, to the supernatural bond forming between us, to the future that stretched before us with all its complications and uncertainties.

"Tomorrow," I promised. "I'll tell you everything."

She nodded against my chest, her breathing already slowing as she drifted toward sleep. "Good."

I held her close, marveling at the trust implicit in her ability to fall asleep in my arms, to put off difficult conversations until morning in favor of rest and connection. In all my long existence, I'd never known such peace as I found in the steady rhythm of her heartbeat against mine.

Tomorrow would bring its challenges. There were truths to be told, decisions to be made. But tonight, in this quiet room with Rosie curled trustingly against me, I allowed myself to simply be.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I awoke to warmth surrounding me, the solid press of Aldaine's chest against my back, his arm draped possessively over my waist. This was how the last several mornings had begun, wrapped in his embrace, safe and wanted.

I'd never been a morning person, but waking up next to him made me reconsider my stance.

The faintest hint of sunlight filtered through the curtains, casting the room in a gentle golden glow. I stretched carefully, trying not to disturb him, but his arm tightened around me.

"Good morning," he murmured against my hair, his voice rough with sleep. The sound sent a pleasant shiver down my spine.

"Morning," I replied, turning in his arms to face him.

No matter how many times I saw him like this, hair tousled, eyes soft with sleep, guard completely down, it still took my breath away.

This powerful demon, who'd literally crashed into my life through an ancient book, now looked at me like I was his entire world .

His fingers traced the curve of my jaw, so achingly gentle it made my chest tighten. "Did you sleep well?"

"Better than I have in years," I confessed, pressing a kiss to his palm. "Though I'm not sure how much sleeping we actually did."

A slow smile spread across his face, sending heat pooling low in my belly.
"Complaints?"

"Not a single one."

His hand slid down my neck, fingers brushing over his mark.

Even that light touch sent sparks of pleasure through my body, making me gasp.

The connection between us was unlike anything I'd ever experienced, physical, emotional, maybe even spiritual.

And today, finally, I would understand exactly what it meant.

"Shower?" I suggested, needing to clear my head before our promised conversation.

Aldaine's eyes darkened. "Together?"

"That was the idea," I replied, already slipping out of bed. I felt his gaze following me as I walked naked to the bathroom, and couldn't resist throwing a glance over my shoulder. "Coming?"

His answering growl was all the response I needed.

I turned the temperature to just shy of scalding, the way I liked it, and stepped under the spray. Aldaine followed a moment later, his imposing frame making the large shower suddenly feel much smaller.

Water cascaded down his body, following the defined lines of his chest and abdomen. I couldn't help but stare. He was beautiful in a way that defied human standards, perfect, yet with an otherworldliness that reminded me he wasn't human at all.

"See something you like?" he teased, reaching for the shampoo .

"Maybe," I answered, trying to sound casual despite the heat rising to my face. "Turn around, let me wash your hair."

He raised an eyebrow but complied, turning to present his broad back to me. I squeezed a generous amount of shampoo into my palm and reached up to work it through his dark hair. He was tall enough that I had to stretch, my breasts pressing against his back as I massaged his scalp.

Aldaine made a sound low in his throat, somewhere between a purr and a growl, that vibrated through his chest and into mine. "Your hands should be classified as weapons," he murmured.

I laughed, continuing my ministrations. "That good, huh?"

"You have no idea."

I worked my fingers deeper into his scalp, enjoying the way his muscles relaxed beneath my touch. There was something profoundly satisfying about caring for him this way, something intimate that went beyond sex.

When I finished, he turned and returned the favor, his large hands gentle as they worked the shampoo through my hair. I closed my eyes, surrendering to the sensation. No one had ever taken care of me like this, with such tender attention to detail.

"You're thinking too hard," Aldaine observed, tilting my head back to rinse the soap away.

"I thought that was supposed to be my line."

His hands slid down to my shoulders, thumbs working at the tension there. "What's on your mind, Rosie?"

I opened my eyes, meeting his concerned gaze. "Today's the day you tell me everything, right? About what's happening between us, what it means."

A shadow passed over his expression, so brief I almost missed it. "Yes," he confirmed. "No more secrets."

"Good," I reached for the soap, determined to finish our shower before diving into what promised to be a serious conversation. "Because I have questions."

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't." His smile was gentle, but I could sense his apprehension. He was nervous about this conversation, which only made me more certain we needed to have it.

We finished washing in comfortable silence, though the air between us was charged with anticipation. When we stepped out, Aldaine wrapped me in a towel before securing one around his own hips. The domestic simplicity of the gesture made my heart squeeze.

I dressed in comfortable clothes, soft leggings and an oversized sweater that slipped off one shoulder. Aldaine opted for his usual dark jeans and a navy button-down that made his warm brown skin look even richer in contrast. The sight of him, casual yet somehow regal, still made my breath catch.

"Ready?" he asked, holding out his hand to me.

I nodded, threading my fingers through his. We made our way to the sitting area of our suite, settling onto the plush couch. I tucked my feet underneath me, angling my body toward him.

"So," I began, trying to sound more confident than I felt. "Tell me about this." I touched the mark on my neck, the one he'd left during our passionate encounter beneath the oak tree.

Aldaine's expression turned serious, his posture straightening as if bracing for impact. "What do you want to know first?"

"Everything," I gestured wildly. "Start at the beginning. Why me? What does this mark mean? What's happening between us?"

He took a deep breath, his gaze dropping briefly before meeting mine again. "The beginning, then." His voice took on a different quality, deeper and somehow older. "When you summoned me, I expected a typical human contract. Wealth, power, vengeance, the usual requests."

I nodded, remembering how desperate I'd been, how ridiculous my request must have seemed to an ancient being like him.

"What I didn't expect," he continued, "was you." His expression softened, something like wonder crossing his features. "When our hands touched to seal the contract, I felt it, like lightning striking, like worlds colliding."

"Felt what?" I prompted when he paused, my heart racing.

"The mate bond." His eyes never left mine as he spoke the words that would change everything. "In that instant, I knew you were my mate. The one being across all realms created for me, as I was created for you."

I stared at him, trying to process what he was saying. "Your mate? Like, cosmically ordained soulmates?"

A small smile tugged at his lips. "That's one way to put it, yes. In demon culture, it's called the eternal bond. It's extremely rare, many live their entire existence without finding their true mate."

"And I'm yours?" The concept was both terrifying and exhilarating.

"Yes," he confirmed, his voice dropping to nearly a whisper. "From that first touch, I knew. Everything in me recognized you, called to you."

I recalled the instant attraction, the inexplicable trust I'd felt toward him despite knowing what he was. Had some part of me recognized him too?

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, not accusatory but genuinely curious.

Aldaine's expression turned rueful. "Would you have believed me? A demon appears in your living room and immediately declares you're destined to be together? You'd have sent me back before I could blink. "

He had a point. I would have assumed it was some kind of manipulation tactic.

"Besides," he added, "the mate bond doesn't force anything. It's a possibility, not a certainty. You had, or have, every right to reject it, to reject me."

The thought of rejecting him made my chest ache, which told me more about my own feelings than any supernatural bond could.

"The contract," I realized suddenly. "Was that even real?"

Aldaine shook his head, looking slightly ashamed. "No. I had no intention of claiming your soul, Rosie. I never did. The contract was my excuse to stay near you, to have time with you."

I should have been angry at the deception, but all I felt was relief. "So I'm free to walk away? No supernatural consequences?"

"Completely free," he confirmed, though I could see the fear in his eyes at the mere suggestion. "You owe me nothing."

I let that sink in for a moment. Every choice I'd made, every step toward him, had been my own. No magical coercion, no binding contract, just me, choosing him, again and again.

"And this?" I touched my neck again, where his mark still tingled pleasantly under my fingers.

His expression grew more intense. "That is the physical manifestation of the mate bond beginning to form. It marked you as mine in the most primal sense."

I remembered the moment he'd bitten me, the overwhelming pleasure, the sense of rightness that had washed over me. "Will it fade?"

"Never," he nodded with certainty. "It's not an ordinary mark, Rosie. It's part of the bond itself, etched into your very essence."

My fingers lingered on the mark, tracing its edges. Permanently marked by a demon. It should have terrified me. Instead, I felt an odd sense of pride.

"You said the bond was beginning to form," I noted. "It's not complete?"

Aldaine shifted slightly, the first sign of real nervousness I'd seen from him. "No. To complete the mate bond, it must go both ways. You would need to mark me as I've marked you."

"Mark you?" I echoed, my pulse quickening at the thought.

"Yes," he confirmed. "A blood bond, created through intent. Your mark on my body would complete the circuit, so to speak."

I swallowed hard. "And if we complete this bond? What happens then?"

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

This was clearly the part he was most anxious about. He took another deep breath before answering. "Several things. Our essences would begin to merge in certain ways. You would become more durable. Less susceptible to illness, to injury."

"And?" I prompted, sensing there was more.

"And you would stop aging," he watched my reaction carefully. "Not immediately, but eventually. Your lifespan would align with mine."

The implications hit me like a physical blow. "You mean I'd become immortal?"

"Not precisely immortal," he clarified. "You could still be killed. But natural death from age or disease? No."

My mind reeled with the possibilities, the implications. Living for centuries, perhaps millennia. Watching the world change, watching everyone I knew grow old and die while I remained.

"This is a lot," I admitted, running a hand through my still-damp hair.

"I know." His voice was gentle, understanding.

"And if it's too much, if you want no part of it, I would understand."

The mark I've given you would remain, but the bond would never fully form.

You would live a normal human lifespan, and when your time came," He paled

visibly at the thought. "I would feel it, wherever I was."

The pain in his voice was unmistakable. For an eternal being, the prospect of finding his one true mate only to lose her to mortality in what would feel like an eyeblink to him must be agonizing.

I studied his face, this being who had crashed into my life so unexpectedly and changed everything. Despite his power, despite his agelessness, in this moment he looked vulnerable, almost fragile with fear of my rejection.

Decision made, I slid off the couch and knelt between his knees, looking up at him. His eyes widened in surprise.

"Remove your pants," I instructed, my voice steady despite the hammering of my heart.

"Rosie." My name was a question, hope, and uncertainty warring in his expression.

"Remove your pants," I repeated, more firmly this time. "Please."

With slightly shaking hands, he undid his belt, then the button and zipper of his jeans. I helped him slide them down his powerful legs, leaving him in just his boxer briefs. The hard line of his arousal was evident beneath the fabric, but this wasn't about sex. Not entirely.

"These too," I murmured, hooking my fingers in the waistband of his underwear.

He lifted his hips, allowing me to pull them down, freeing him completely. I placed my hands on his thighs, feeling the muscle tense beneath my touch.

"Rosie," he breathed, his voice strained. "Are you sure? Once done, this cannot be

undone."

I looked up at him, at the face that had become so dear to me in such a short time. "I'm sure." And I was. Terrified, but sure. "The left thigh?"

He nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. "It doesn't matter where. It's a vulnerable place, a gesture of absolute trust between us."

I stroked my hands along his inner thighs, feeling him tremble beneath my touch. It was heady, having this powerful being at my mercy, watching him come undone with anticipation.

Without further hesitation, I leaned forward and sank my teeth into the soft flesh of his inner left thigh, biting down hard enough to break the skin. The taste of his blood hit my tongue, copper and something else, something otherworldly that fizzed like electricity.

Aldaine's reaction was immediate and powerful. His entire body went rigid, a primal sound tearing from his throat as his head fell back. His hands gripped the couch cushions so hard I heard the fabric tear.

And then I felt it. A surge of energy that started where my mouth met his flesh and expanded outward, engulfing us both in a whirlwind of light and sensation.

It was like being struck by lightning while diving into the ocean, overwhelming and all-consuming.

Colors I had no names for flashed behind my eyelids, and every nerve in my body sang with pleasure so intense it bordered on pain.

I could feel him, not just physically, but in my mind, my soul.

Glimpses of memories not my own flashed through my consciousness: ancient forests, medieval cities, modern skylines, all seen through his eyes.

Emotions washed over me in waves: loneliness so profound it ached, curiosity about the ever-changing human world, and above all else, a fierce, protective love directed solely at me.

The energy between us built to a crescendo, a blinding flash that seemed to rewrite reality itself before settling into a warm, steady pulse that connected us heart to heart, soul to soul.

When I finally pulled back, blood on my lips and wonder in my eyes, I knew with absolute certainty that nothing would ever be the same again.

"Aldaine," I whispered, my voice sounding strange to my own ears.

His eyes opened, and I gasped. They had shifted to their demon form—glowing embers in a field of black, but I could see myself reflected in them, and my own eyes glowed with the same unearthly light.

"It's done," his voice reverberated with power. "We are one, Rosie. Now and for all time."

We spent the day in our room exploring each other.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I stretched languidly, every muscle pleasantly sore again from our night together. Beside me, Aldaine's warm body shifted, his arm tightening around my waist.

"Good morning," he murmured, voice still rough with sleep.

I smiled, turning to face him. "Is it morning already?"

"Unfortunately." He pressed a kiss to my forehead. "We should probably start packing soon if we want to get on the road at a decent hour."

The thought of leaving brought a surprising pang. Not because I would miss this place, the Thompson estate had never truly felt like home, but because leaving meant facing what came next. Whatever that was.

As if sensing my thoughts, Aldaine's fingers traced gentle patterns on my bare shoulder. "Second thoughts?"

"No," I answered without hesitation. "Just processing everything."

I sat up, letting the sheets pool around my waist, no longer self-conscious about my nakedness around him. The mark on my neck tingled pleasantly, a constant reminder of what we'd shared, what we'd become to each other.

"I can feel you," I pressed my palm to my chest where a warm pulse that wasn't quite my heartbeat thrummed steadily. "Inside, like an echo."

Aldaine's smile was gentle, reverent. "The bond. It will grow stronger with time."

I leaned down to kiss him, meaning it to be quick, but his hand slid into my hair, deepening the contact until I was breathless. When I finally pulled away, my pulse was racing.

"You're insatiable," I accused without heat.

"Only for you," he replied, his eyes darkening. "And only forever."

A laugh bubbled up inside me, born from something that felt suspiciously like joy. "Forever is a very long time."

"Not long enough," he murmured against my lips.

An hour later, we'd finally managed to extricate ourselves from bed and start packing.

I moved around the guest room folding clothes with methodical precision, trying to reconcile the strange sense of peace that had settled over me.

By all rights, I should be freaking out.

I'd been marked by a demon, had committed myself to what amounted to an eternal bond, and yet. .

I felt right. Centered in a way I'd never experienced before.

"You're smiling," Aldaine observed, pausing with a shirt half-folded in his hands.

"Am I?"

"Like you know a secret no one else does." He set the shirt in his suitcase and crossed to where I stood by the dresser. "Care to share?"

I turned to face him, tilting my head to study the beautiful contradiction that was this man, this demon who had crashed into my life and changed everything. "I'm happy. It's been so long since I felt that, I almost didn't recognize it."

Something soft and vulnerable crossed his features. "Rosie." Just my name, but the way he said it was like a prayer.

His phone chimed with a message, breaking the moment. He glanced at it with a frown.

"Everything okay?" I asked, zipping my suitcase closed.

"Fine. Just a reminder about a meeting next week." He slipped the phone into his pocket. "Nothing that can't wait."

"Speaking of waiting," I glanced at the clock on the nightstand. "We should probably head downstairs. Dad mentioned wanting to see us before we left."

Aldaine nodded, lifting both our bags with ease. "Ready when you are."

I took one last look around the room, the tangled sheets, the indentation of our bodies still visible on the mattress, the memories we'd made, and followed him out.

My father and Jan were waiting in the foyer, looking like they hadn't slept much. Jan's eyes were red-rimmed, her usually perfect posture slightly slumped. Dad stood close to her.

"Rosie," Dad stepped forward, arms outstretched.

I moved into his embrace without hesitation. He smelled the same as he had when I was little, aftershave and coffee.

"Don't be a stranger, kiddo," he murmured into my hair. "I know we've got a lot to make up for, but I'd like the chance to try."

"I'd like that too," I replied, meaning it. The anger I'd carried for so long felt less sharp-edged now, softened by understanding and the profound shift in my own life.

When we pulled apart, Jan approached cautiously, looking smaller somehow than she had yesterday. She'd always been this intimidating presence in my life, perfectly put together, untouchable. Now she just looked human and vulnerable .

"Rosie," she began, her voice wavering slightly. "I wish we had more time. There's so much I want to say."

"We'll have time," I assured her, surprising myself with the certainty in my voice. "This isn't goodbye forever."

Her eyes filled with tears, and for the first time in my memory, she didn't try to hide them. "You were always stronger than we gave you credit for," she practically whispered. "I'm so sorry for that. For all of it."

I nodded, not quite ready to offer absolute forgiveness, but open to the possibility of it one day. "Thank you."

She wiped at her cheeks, offering a watery smile. "Come visit, if you want. It would mean a lot."

"I will," I promised. And I meant it.

Dad cleared his throat, turning his attention to Aldaine. "Take care of her," he offered his hand.

Aldaine shook it firmly. "Always."

"The guests have started leaving," Jan noted, gathering her composure somewhat. "Stephany and Roger left last night. I think it's for the best, given everything that's happened."

I nodded, relieved I wouldn't have to face another confrontation with my stepsister. Whatever Stephany's future held, it would be of her own making now.

"Rosie!"

I turned to see Rita hurrying down the grand staircase, still in pajamas and a robe. She'd always been the kindest of Stephany's 'friends', the only one who ever bothered to learn my name.

"I heard you were leaving," she was slightly out of breath. "I wanted to catch you before you did."

"Rita," I smiled, surprised but pleased. "I thought you'd be sleeping in after last night's party."

She waved away the comment. "Sleep is overrated. Besides, I wanted to get your number. We should stay in touch more. "

"I'd like that," I replied honestly, pulling out my phone to exchange contact information.

"And maybe bring this gorgeous man with you when we meet up," she added with a wink towards Aldaine. "Seriously, how did you keep him a secret all this time?"

I laughed, feeling lighter than I had in years. "It's a long story."

"The best ones always are," she grinned, giving me a quick hug. "Text me when you get home safe, okay?"

"Will do."

With final goodbyes and promises to call soon, Aldaine and I made our way out to his car. The estate looked different in the morning light, less imposing, less perfect. Just a house, albeit a very large one.

Aldaine stowed our bags in the trunk while I settled into the back seat, watching him through the window. Every movement was graceful, efficient, the contained power of his body was evident even in these mundane tasks. And he was mine, in a way that went beyond human understanding.

He slid into the seat next to me, casting a glance my way. "Ready?"

I reached over to lace my fingers with his. "Ready."

The drive was peaceful, the countryside gradually giving way to suburbs and then the familiar landmarks of the city. We talked about everything and nothing, favorite books, childhood memories (his stretching back centuries), plans for the coming week.

About halfway back to my apartment, Aldaine fell silent, his hands tightening slightly on the steering wheel. I could feel his nervousness through our bond, a fluttering sensation in my chest that wasn't my own.

"Everything okay?" I prompted when the silence stretched too long.

He cleared his throat, eyes fixed determinedly on the road ahead. "I've been thinking."

"Always dangerous," I teased gently.

A small smile tugged at his lips before his expression grew serious again. "Your lease isn't up for what, four more months?"

"About that, yeah. Why?"

He shifted in his seat, a gesture so endearingly human it made my heart clench. "I know it might be too soon, and you may not want to decide anything yet, but," He paused, took a deep breath, and plunged ahead. "I'd like you to stay with me. Permanently."

My pulse quickened. "You mean move in with you?"

"Yes." He glanced at me quickly before returning his attention to the road. "My home is yours now, Rosie. It has been since the moment you summoned me."

The sincerity in his voice made my throat tight with emotion. I swallowed hard, trying to form a coherent response that wouldn't reveal just how deeply his words had affected me.

"Hmm, I don't know," I kept my tone deliberately light. "Do demon lords leave wet towels on the bathroom floor? Because that could be a deal-breaker."

His laugh was surprised and delighted, the tension in his shoulders easing visibly. "I assure you, I'm very tidy for a creature."

"And what about closet space? A girl needs room for her shoes."

"Our entire home is yours to rearrange as you see fit," he promised solemnly, though his eyes danced with humor. "Including every closet, cabinet, and drawer."

I pretended to consider this, tapping my chin thoughtfully. "And will there be breakfast in bed? "

"Whenever you desire it." His voice dropped lower, intimate. "Among other things."

Heat flooded my cheeks at his tone, at the memories it evoked of the night we'd shared. "Well, in that case, how could I possibly refuse?"

Aldaine pulled the car abruptly to the shoulder of the road, threw it into park, and turned to me in one fluid motion. His eyes had darkened, hunger plain in his expression.

"Say it properly," he demanded, voice rough with emotion. "I need to hear you say it."

I met his gaze steadily, all teasing forgotten. "Yes, Aldaine. I'll move in with you. I want to be with you, every day, for as long as you'll have me."

"Forever," he growled, leaning across the console to capture my mouth in a kiss that stole my breath.

His hand tangled in my hair, holding me steady as his tongue swept inside, claiming me with a possession that made my entire body tremble. I moaned into his mouth, heat pooling low in my belly, desire sharp and immediate.

Just when I thought I might combust from the intensity of it, he pulled back, his breathing as ragged as my own. His eyes glittered with wicked promise as he straightened in his seat and put the car back in drive.

"That's not fair," I complained, pressing my thighs together against the ache he'd awakened. "You can't just stop!"

"Can't I?" he asked innocently, though the smile playing at the corner of his mouth was anything but. "We'll have plenty of time for that later. At home."

Home. The word sent a warm glow through me that had nothing to do with frustrated desire and everything to do with belonging.

We drove in comfortable silence for a few more miles, my hand resting on his thigh, his occasional glances warming me from the inside out. Then, almost casually, "There's that family meeting next week."

"Family meeting?" I echoed.

"Not blood relations," he clarified, his posture tensing slightly. "Other demons. My clan. The ones under my protection and authority."

"I remember you telling me about that." I hadn't considered that aspect of his life, the responsibilities and connections he must have built over centuries of existence. "And you want me to come with you?"

"Yes." The word was simple but weighted. "They're all complicated. Powerful, intimidating. A little dangerous. And very, very nosy."

I raised an eyebrow. "So basically like meeting any new in-laws?"

That startled another laugh from him. "In a sense, yes. But with more capacity for destruction and significantly less social grace."

His grip on the steering wheel had tightened again, betraying his anxiety. "There's that gathering scheduled next week. I want you there." He glanced at me, his expression softening. "They're complicated, but you're already part of my life. Part of me. I want them to see that."

The vulnerability in his admission touched me deeply. This powerful being, anxious about introducing me to his family. It was so achingly human.

"Well," I drawled, deliberately casual. "I don't know if I'm interested in meeting a bunch of stuffy old demons who probably just want to interrogate me about my intentions."

"Rosie," he began, then caught the twitch of my lips. "You're teasing me again."

"Payback," I informed him primly, "for that little stunt you pulled with the kiss-and-drive routine. "

His laugh was rich and full, filling the car and warming me from the inside out. "Fair enough."

I leaned over and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Of course I'll come to your family meeting. I can't promise not to embarrass you with tales of how you begged me to move in with you, though."

"I did not beg," he protested with mock indignation. "Demons of my rank do not beg."

"Mm-hmm," I nodded solemnly. "If you say so."

His hand found mine, twining our fingers together. "Impertinent human."

"Your impertinent human," I corrected softly. "Always."

The smile he gave me then was worth everything. Every fear, every doubt, every moment of uncertainty.

Whatever came next, we would face it together.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

I smoothed down the front of my dress for what must have been the hundredth time, nervously checking my reflection in the restaurant's gilt-framed mirror.

The black cocktail dress Aldaine had insisted on buying me "It's not every day you meet my clan, Rosie" hugged every curve of my body in a way that felt both empowering and slightly terrifying.

"Stop fidgeting," Aldaine murmured, his hand settling possessively at the small of my back. "You look ravishing."

"Easy for you to say," I whispered back. "You're not the human about to walk into a room full of demons."

His lips quirked into that half-smile that never failed to make my heart skip. "No, I'm just the demon bringing his human mate to meet the family. Believe me, I'm the one they'll judge more harshly."

I took a deep breath, drawing strength from his steady presence beside me. Through our bond, I could feel his confidence, his pride, and beneath it all, a thin current of nervousness that matched my own. Somehow, knowing that even he wasn't completely unflappable made me feel better.

"Okay," I nodded, squaring my shoulders. "Let's do this."

The private dining room of Cendrillon was exactly what you'd expect from a restaurant where the menu didn't list prices, because if you had to ask, you couldn't afford it.

Crystal chandeliers cast prismatic light over walls paneled in dark wood, while plush crimson carpet muffled our footsteps.

The long table dominating the center of the room gleamed like obsidian, set with china so delicate it looked like it might shatter if you breathed too hard.

I still couldn't wrap my head around how Aldaine had casually signed the check for a glass of sparkling water that probably cost more than my monthly grocery budget. Back before I'd lost my job, anyway.

The room fell silent as we entered, a dozen pairs of eyes swiveling to assess us. No, to assess me. I resisted the urge to hide behind Aldaine's broad shoulders.

"You're late," drawled a willowy blonde woman whose perfect features were almost painful to look at. Her eyes, an unnatural shade of violet, narrowed as they swept over me.

"Fashionably so," Aldaine replied smoothly, his hand never leaving my back. "Everyone, this is Rosie Thompson."

He paused, and I felt a ripple of power emanate from him, not the gentle warmth I was used to through our bond, but something ancient and dangerous that made the air in the room feel suddenly heavy.

"She is my mate," he continued, his voice dropping to a register that sent shivers down my spine. "Treat her with respect and I won't tear out your innards."

I blinked at the casual violence of the threat, but around the table, several beings actually nodded as if this was a perfectly reasonable introduction. The blonde rolled her eyes, but there was new wariness in her expression as she looked at me again.

"Charming as always, Aldaine," said a man, at least, I thought it was a man, with skin the color of burnished copper and eyes like liquid gold. "Perhaps introductions are in order for the lady's benefit as well?"

Aldaine inclined his head. "Of course. Rosie, let me tell you who's who."

He guided me around the table, pointing out each member of his "family" with brief explanations that left me reeling.

"Selene," he indicated the blonde, "has been with the clan for three centuries. She specializes in illusion magic and has a temper to match her power."

Selene's perfect lips curved into what might generously be called a smile. "Charmed."

"Vex," Aldaine continued, nodding toward a young-looking man with spiked blue hair and more piercings than I could count, "joined us in the 1980s. He's our technology expert and can manipulate electricity."

Vex flashed me a grin that was surprisingly warm. "The boss man never brings dates to these things. You must be special."

"More than you know," Aldaine replied, a possessive edge to his voice that made heat bloom in my cheeks.

We continued around the table, each introduction more fantastical than the last. Mal, the copper-skinned being with golden eyes, was apparently over five thousand years old and had once been worshipped as a minor deity in ancient Mesopotamia.

Twins Era and Era (both male, both answering to the same name) could manipulate shadows and had been assassins for various royal courts throughout history.

There was Lutha, who appeared human except for the iridescent scales that glimmered along her temples and down her neck; Dominic, whose eyes occasionally flashed to solid black when he laughed; and several others whose names and abilities blurred together in my overwhelmed mind.

"And this," Aldaine finally gestured to a petite woman with raven-black hair and eyes like polished onyx, "is Nyx. My third-in-command."

Nyx didn't smile, but her nod was respectful. "The bond is visible," she seemed impressed. "Strong."

"Yes," Aldaine agreed, his fingers intertwining with mine. "It is."

With introductions complete, everyone took their seats. I found myself between Aldaine and Vex, the blue-haired demon immediately launching into questions about how Aldaine and I had met.

"So he answered your summoning?" Vex grinned, looking positively delighted. "Classic. Old school. I love it."

"It wasn't exactly planned," I admitted, relaxing slightly at his friendly demeanor. "I was desperate, out of a job, and found this book.."

"And captured the heart of the most eligible bachelor in the supernatural world," interrupted a silky voice from across the table. It belonged to a striking man with features so perfect they seemed carved rather than born. "Impressive, for a human."

Something in his tone made my hackles rise, though his smile was pleasant enough.

"Rosie didn't capture anything," Aldaine answered mildly, though I could feel tension coiling through our bond. "The mating bond forms of its own accord, as you well

know, Cassius."

Cassius's smile didn't waver, but his eyes, a startling shade of amber, flicked to me with renewed interest. "Indeed."

The conversation shifted as servers (human ones, I noted with relief) entered with the first course, something delicate involving seafood that I couldn't identify, but tasted divine. Aldaine kept his hand on my knee beneath the table, a comforting presence as talk turned to clan business.

I let my eyes wander, studying each being more carefully.

Now that the initial shock had worn off, I could see subtle signs of their inhuman nature—the way Litha's pupils contracted vertically when the light hit them a certain way, how the shadows around the twins Ira and Ira seemed deeper than they should be, the unnatural stillness with which Malachai held himself between movements.

And yet they bickered and bantered like any family gathering I'd ever attended.

Selene complained about a rival encroaching on her territory in Paris.

Vex detailed his plans to upgrade their communications network with technology that sounded decades ahead of anything commercially available.

The twins finished each other's sentences as they reported on some kind of surveillance operation.

It was surreal and strangely domestic all at once.

"You're taking it all rather well," murmured Nyx from across the table, her dark eyes assessing me. "Most humans would be incoherent with terror by now."

I swallowed a bite of whatever exquisite dish had been placed before me. "I'm dating, or mated, to a demon. I think my baseline for 'normal' has shifted significantly."

That earned me a chorus of appreciative chuckles from around the table.

"She has spirit," Mal observed, his voice like distant thunder. "The bond chose wisely."

"She does indeed," Aldaine agreed, his thumb tracing circles on my knee that were becoming increasingly distracting. Through our bond, I could feel a growing heat, a possessiveness that had little to do with the business discussion around us.

The meeting portion concluded after dessert with a cake involving chocolate and gold leaf that probably cost as much as a car payment. As waiters cleared the table, the demons broke into smaller conversational groups, drinks appearing as if by magic (and for all I knew, they might have been).

Vex cornered me first, eager to show me something on his phone. "I've been designing a security system for your new place," he explained enthusiastically. "Nothing on earth will be able to get within a hundred yards without Aldaine knowing about it."

"That's thoughtful," I managed, not sure whether to be touched or alarmed.

"Vex takes protection seriously," Aldaine appeared at my side with two crystal tumblers of amber liquid. He handed one to me. "As do I."

"The boss has never looked happier," Vex confided to me with a theatrical whisper. "It's freaking everyone out."

"Good," Aldaine replied, not bothering to lower his voice. "Perhaps they'll be so

disconcerted they'll forget to argue with my directives."

Vex snorted. "Dream on, boss man."

Over the next hour, I was approached by nearly every member of the clan.

Mal told me stories of civilizations long forgotten, his golden eyes distant with memory.

The twins, who insisted I call them both Era, which was confusing as hell, demonstrated their shadow manipulation by creating intricate silhouettes on the wall.

Even Selene eventually sauntered over, examining me like a curious specimen before grudgingly admitting that "perhaps Aldaine's taste hasn't completely deserted him. "

Coming from her, Aldaine later assured me, this was practically a declaration of undying friendship.

Through it all, Aldaine remained close, his hand finding mine between greetings, his eyes tracking me across the room when we were separated.

I could feel his impatience building through our bond, a restless energy that matched the heat simmering in my own veins.

Every casual touch, every possessive glance stoked that fire higher.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm

Finally, during a lull in the socializing, he grabbed my hand and pulled me toward a discreet door at the rear of the private room.

"Where are we going?" I laughed as he practically dragged me through it.

"Away," he growled, leading me down a service corridor. "I've shared you enough for one evening."

"Shared me?" I teased, breathless as we hurried through the restaurant's back areas. "I thought I was being quite the charming companion."

"Too charming," he muttered, pushing open a heavy metal door that led to an alley behind the restaurant. The night air was cool against my flushed skin. "Everyone was looking at you. Wanting you."

"Pretty sure it was just polite interest in the human who snagged their boss," I started, but his expression made the words die in my throat.

His eyes had darkened, pupils blown wide with desire, and the possessive hunger on his face made my knees weak.

"No," he backed me against the brick wall. "They see what I see. How beautiful you are. How perfect." His hands framed my face, thumbs caressing my cheekbones. "Mine," he growled, his voice dropping to that register that made me instantly wet. "My mate."

"Yours," I agreed, my heart pounding as one of his hands slid down to grip my hip.

"I need you," he confessed, his lips finding my neck, teeth scraping over the mark he'd left there. "Right now. Can't wait."

"Here?" I gasped, even as my body arched into his touch. "In an alley? "

"Yes." It wasn't a question. The raw need in his voice sent liquid heat pooling between my thighs. "Tell me you want this too."

In answer, I grabbed his silk tie and pulled his mouth down to mine. The kiss was savage, all teeth and tongue and desperate hunger. He groaned into my mouth, pressing me harder against the wall, one muscular thigh sliding between my legs.

"The things you do to me," he rasped against my lips. "Centuries of control, and you undo me with a single look."

His hands were everywhere, sliding up my thighs, bunching the fabric of my dress around my waist, fingers finding the lace edge of my panties. I moaned as he stroked me through the damp fabric, my hips bucking against his hand.

"So wet already," he murmured, satisfaction rumbling in his chest. "Is this for me, Rosie? All for me?"

"Yes," I panted, fumbling with his belt. "Always for you."

He growled his approval, capturing my mouth in another bruising kiss as he tore my panties away with an impatient jerk. The cool night air against my exposed heat made me gasp, but his fingers were there immediately, stroking and circling until my legs trembled.

"Aldaine," I moaned, finally freeing him from his trousers, wrapping my hand around his hard length. "Please."

In one swift movement, he hoisted me up, my back pressed against the rough brick, my legs wrapping around his waist. The head of his cock teased at my entrance, and through our bond I could feel his savage satisfaction, his primal need to claim and possess.

"Mine," he growled again, and thrust inside me in one powerful stroke.

I cried out, the sound echoing in the empty alley as he filled me completely.

There was nothing gentle about this sex, it was raw, wild, a claiming as ancient as time itself.

He pounded into me relentlessly, his hands gripping my thighs hard enough to leave marks, his mouth hot and demanding against mine.

"This is what you do to me," he panted against my neck. "Make me forget myself. Make me burn."

Through our bond, I could feel his pleasure mingling with mine, a feedback loop of sensation that heightened every thrust, every touch. My head fell back against the wall, stars exploding behind my eyelids as he angled his hips to hit that perfect spot inside me.

"Everyone in there knows," he rasped, his rhythm never faltering. "Knows you're mine. Knows I would destroy worlds for you."

"Yes," I gasped, my nails digging into his shoulders through his expensive suit jacket. "Yours. Always yours."

I could feel my climax building, a tightening coil of pleasure that wound higher with each thrust. Aldaine sensed it through our bond, his movements becoming more urgent, more demanding.

"Come for me," he commanded, his voice rough with desire. "Let me feel you."

His fingers found where we were joined, circling my clit with perfect pressure, and I shattered around him, crying out his name as waves of pleasure crashed through me.

He followed an instant later, his body tensing against mine as he growled out his release, his power flaring around us in a tangible wave of heat.

For long moments we stayed like that, trembling and breathless, his forehead pressed against mine as our heartbeats gradually slowed. Through our bond, I could feel his satisfaction, his contentment, and beneath it all, a love so profound it made my throat tight with emotion.

"I think," when I could finally speak, "we may have scandalized your family."

He laughed, the sound rumbling through his chest and into mine. "Let them be scandalized. I've waited centuries for you, Rosie. I'm done with patience."

Gently, he lowered me back to my feet, though his arms remained around me, supporting me until my wobbly legs remembered how to function. With tender care that contrasted sharply with our frenzied coupling, he helped straighten my dress, his fingers lingering on my skin.

I reached up to touch his face, tracing the sharp line of his jaw. "I promise you don't have to be patient anymore. I'm yours, Aldaine. Forever."

His eyes, dark with lingering desire, softened at my words. "Forever," he echoed, sealing the promise with a kiss that contained all the passion of before, but gentled now with something deeper. "And that, my beautiful mate, is just the beginning."