



Rescued By the Vexed Vampire

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Description: One bite of temptation, and now I'm navigating a world of candy, curses, and second chances...

Slipping after getting out of the bathtub and hitting my head on the toilet seat wasn't exactly the way I'd imagined ascending to the pearly gates, but nevertheless, there I was, Bethany Snow, knocking on heaven's door.

Looking back, I should have suspected something when I spied the freshly baked devil's food cake next to the manna on the buffet. I would have blamed my choice to go for the devil's chocolate on PMS if I'd still been alive; however, after one bite of sweet temptation, I was stripped of my angel wings and kicked back to the land of the living with a warning that I had one more chance to get things right; otherwise, I may as well kiss chocolate goodbye for eternity.

Talk about incentive.

Now, I'm working at a candy shop and assigned to cater a Halloween party. When one of the merrymakers gets a little too merry, I'm rescued by none other than Count Dracula. A night of passion follows, but the next morning, I'm shocked to find my new boss is Mr. Hot Fangs himself. Who apparently hadn't been wearing a costume after all.

Can I set things right by making a deal to help the vexed vampire, or am I doomed to be wingless forever?

Dive into this steamy, laugh-out-loud enemies-to-lovers Halloween workplace romance. With a fallen angel and a cursed vampire, this paranormal rom-com will tickle your funny bone and warm your heart. Grab your candy corn and treat yourself today!

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Prologue

Bethany

I always thought my life would flash before my eyes in a moment of triumph. You know, the whole “I did it!” scenario. But as I lay sprawled naked on my bathroom floor, staring up at the ceiling that had witnessed way too many of my questionable decisions, I realized I was experiencing a far less glamorous version.

“Why did I think drinking an entire bottle of wine after adding CBD bath salts to the tub was a good idea?” I mumbled to myself, my voice echoing in the empty room. To be fair, I was fresh off being fired from my job as a secretary, so it was a pretty solid excuse for a bender.

My former boss, Mr. Thompson, had the charm of a wet sock and the emotional range of a brick wall. His parting words still echoed in my ears: “You lack focus, Bethany. Maybe find a job that better suits your...unique skill set.”

Unique skill set? What did that even mean? I was just trying to keep my head above water in a sea of spreadsheets and office gossip.

But here I was, 25 years old, alone and now jobless, lying on the cold tiles of my bathroom, my head pounding like a marching band practicing for a parade. It was kind of poetic, really—getting fired and ending up in a world of pain over a stupid fall. One minute I was blissfully soaking in the warm water, contemplating whether to binge-watch another series on Netflix or finally start that book gathering dust on my nightstand; the next, I was auditioning for a role as a human bowling pin after my

head somehow came in contact with the toilet seat as I was reaching for a towel. If only I could find my way to the pearly gates after such a spectacular tumble.

Ah...Heaven. Wouldn't that be something?

My parents were already there, and it sure would be nice to see them again. I still remembered the scent of my father's aftershave after he'd given me one of his bear hugs, and the feel of my mother's lips on my forehead kissing me goodnight. Not that Gran hadn't done a good job raising me after the crash that had taken my parents too soon. She'd certainly tried her best anyway. Maybe I was just too broken for this life.

I barely graduated from high school, dropped out of college my sophomore year, and had jumped from one job to the next ever since, never able to hold one down for long...and let's not talk about my track record of failed relationships. Maybe it would be best for everyone if I went to be with the angels like Mom and Dad after all.

Suddenly, the room around me began to shimmer. A warm light enveloped me, and I felt myself rising, as if my spirit was floating upward. Suddenly, I was standing in front of a set of majestic gold and pearl-encrusted gates.

"Welcome to Heaven!" I could hear a chorus of cherubim singing, their voices as sweet as sugar. It was like stepping into a Pinterest board for celestial beings—fluffy white clouds, rainbows, and sparkles everywhere. I felt a breeze waft through my long blonde hair. Was that a flying unicorn that soared past me just now? I stepped forward and put my hand on Heaven's gate; to my surprise, it swung open, just wide enough that I was able to squeeze myself through. Right as I was about to bask in the glory of eternal bliss, I caught a whiff of something delicious wafting through the air.

Was that...cake?

"Oh, sweet nectar of the gods," I whispered, my mouth watering. I turned my head,

and there it was—a buffet table covered in all sorts of delectable treats. A devil’s food cake sat proudly in the center, its rich chocolate icing glistening under the heavenly glow. My heart raced. Cake was my weakness...my Achilles’ heel. Who could resist the siren call of chocolate?

Without a second thought, I strolled over, my heart pounding with excitement. Just as I was about to sink my fork into that luscious cake, I heard a voice behind me, clear and commanding.

“Stop right there!”

I froze, a forkful of delectable chocolate hovering inches from my lips. I turned slowly to face the source of the voice. A tall, blonde, and very buff angel stood there, wings gleaming and an expression that suggested he was not impressed.

“Gabriel?” I whispered, astonished.

“In the flesh,” he said, crossing his arms. “Well, not really, but at least you recognized me. And you, my dear, have some serious explaining to do.”

“Uh, explain?” I stammered, trying to look innocent while holding a fork full of divine decadence.

“That's the problem, Bethany.” His voice was firm but not unkind. “You snuck in here, and now you think you can indulge in forbidden treats? Do you have any idea how serious this is? That’s devil’s food, not angel food, you know.”

I frowned and slowly set my bite of dessert back on the cake platter, staring at it longingly. “Oops.”

Gabriel’s blue eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. “It wasn’t just cake, I’m afraid.

It was a test. Unfortunately, you failed it.”

I felt a wave of shame wash over me. My mind raced back to all my life’s poor choices—showing up late for work, the impulse buys, and yes, the countless times I’d eaten my feelings in various forms of sugar.

“Okay, fine! I get it!” I cried, throwing my hands up. “I’ll do better, I promise!”

“Too late for promises,” he said firmly. “You had your chance, and you squandered it. You’re going back.”

“Back where?” I gulped, dread creeping in.

“To Earth,” he declared. “Try again.” And, with a wave of his hand, the shimmering gates swung open. The warm light around me morphed into the cold, hard reality of my bathroom.

Suddenly, I was back on the floor, staring at the ceiling tiles once again. I groaned in frustration. “Great! Back to the grind and zero cake. Just my luck.”

I climbed to my feet and glanced in the mirror, gingerly touching my fingertips to the giant black-and-blue shiner forming over my left eye socket.

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“Ow,” I said to no one, wincing. “Okay, Bethany,” I continued, squaring my shoulders as I spoke to my reflection. “If what just happened wasn’t some sort of drunken dream, you’ve got another shot to get yourself together.”

After dressing in my comfiest pair of flannel pj’s, I headed to the kitchen and grabbed a packet of frozen peas from my freezer since my icemaker was on the fritz. I pressed it tenderly to my forehead and gazed through the window. The world outside was filled with the colors of late afternoon fall in my small town of Sweetberry Hollow. Red and gold leaves swirled in the wind as they made their way from the tall tree branches to the sidewalks below. Pumpkins carved with silly faces lined the streets, and autumn wreathes hung on doors. It was beautiful, and I felt a flicker of hope. I could do this.

I had learned a few things in my short time as a mortal, primarily that I wasn’t going to succeed at everything I attempted—okay, I hadn’t succeeded at much of anything yet—but at least I was willing to try again. I poured myself a tall glass of water, and as I drank, I started to map out a plan for how I would regain my footing.

I could practically see the images of angelic approval dancing in my head. “Look at Bethany! She’s finally making good choices!” I envisioned them cheering me on from the pearly gates. They were probably actually rolling their eyes, but I chose to assume they were cheering.

It was time to start searching for another job—something that didn’t involve spreadsheets or Mr. Thompson’s disapproving gaze. I needed a fresh start, and that meant embracing my strengths. If only partaking of carbs and sugar could be counted as a strength. I snapped my fingers. That was it! I should work at a candy shop! I’d

surely be a natural in that environment, since I'd never met a dessert I didn't like.

I picked up my phone, searching for local shops. It didn't take long before I stumbled across Sugar Rush. Why hadn't I ever heard of it before now? Maybe it was a relatively new business in Sweetberry Hollow.

I hadn't been back in town that long since my disaster attempting life behind a desk in the big city and had only had one or two opportunities to visit the square downtown where my phone indicated the shop was located.

I clapped my hands together, imagining myself surrounded by sugary delights, wearing an apron and serving sweets to smiling customers. Sure, I had no formal experience in a candy shop, but how hard could it be? I vowed to pay a visit to Sugar Rush first thing in the morning to fill out an application. Tonight—food and rest were in order.

Carrying the phone with me to the living room, I settled myself onto the couch and clicked on the food delivery app. Pizza sounded like the only fitting remedy for this disaster of a day.

"Let's see....," I muttered, scrolling through my options.

A greasy pepperoni pizza topped with extra cheese seemed like a plan. After placing the order, I took a moment to breathe, savoring the thought of my future. With enough determination and chutzpah, I still had a chance to turn things around. I wondered how many good choices it would take to earn back my angel wings. It would help if Gabriel had been more specific.

The doorbell chimed, and I got up to retrieve my dinner from the pimply teenage delivery driver.

After setting the box on the kitchen counter, I pulled a couple of gooey slices onto a plate, returned to the couch, and flipped on the TV.

The Hallmark Channel greeted me with its typical charm and predictable plots. I sighed happily, wrapping myself in a blanket. Tonight, I would relish the simple pleasures of life: pizza, cozy pajamas, and the sweet predictability of cheesy romantic films.

And like Scarlet O'Hara famously said, "Tomorrow is a new day."

Who knew? Maybe I could still turn my life around after all.

Chapter One

Bethany

I rolled down the window of my old Honda Civic and let the crisp autumn air sweep through the car. The scents of cinnamon, apples, and freshly fallen leaves filled the air, carried on the light breeze that rustled the orange and red foliage lining the quaint streets of Sweetberry Hollow. I couldn't help but grin at the decorations scattered throughout the town square—fake cobwebs stretched across storefronts, pumpkin displays stood guard on every porch, and lampposts wore orange bows like they were competing to see which could be the most festive. Halloween was just around the corner, and no one did Halloween quite like Sweetberry Hollow.

"Home sweet home," I murmured to myself, glancing fondly at the tricked-out displays in the shop windows. Skeletons, witches, and black cats all peered out at me with spooky glee, and the realization dawned that I'd been so consumed with trying to get ahead in life lately that I'd forgotten to stop and smell the roses, or the pumpkins so to speak. A sense of community like we had here in Sweetberry Hollow really was something to be treasured. Maybe it had been good for me to spend a little

time away in the city just to remember that now. I'd missed the way my small town got into the spirit of things, and my heart warmed just looking at the effort everyone had put into the seasonal decorations.

Flicking on my blinker, I turned into the small parking lot off Main Street. My stomach growled as I thought of the candy shop. I needed a job, and working at Sugar Rush during the fall season definitely sounded like the perfect gig. I crossed my fingers they'd be able to use an extra hand as I looked for an empty spot to park, making a mental note to stop by Gran's house afterward. She'd love to hear all about my plans, and no visit was ever complete without being greeted by her two cats, Twilight and Moonbeam. Moonbeam, a sleek white Siamese, would of course pretend she didn't care whether I was there or not, while Twilight, a gray tabby of generous size, would practically launch himself into my lap the second I'd set foot in the door.

Shaking myself from thoughts of cuddly cats, I parked and stepped out of the car, pulling my jacket tighter against the cool air. The square was bustling with people darting between the various coffee shops and boutiques, but when I reached Sugar Rush, I paused.

The candy shop's window display was...well, sad. A few scattered pumpkins and a single half-hearted skeleton leaned awkwardly in the corner. The selection of treats behind the glass looked tired—outdated, even. There was barely any variation, and definitely not enough festive flair for Halloween. I frowned as I took it all in. The building itself was showing its age too, with paint peeling around the edges. At least the sign was new, but it looked like someone had slapped it up without much thought.

"Yikes," I muttered under my breath. "This is rough."

Still, I pushed open the door, setting off a tired-sounding bell overhead. The inside wasn't much better. The shop was almost deserted, except for a frazzled mom trying

to console a crying infant while her toddler whined about not finding her favorite candy. In the far corner, two high school kids huddled around steaming mugs—probably hot chocolate—chatting but clearly not indulging in the candy that should have been the main attraction.

I took a deep breath and walked up to the counter where a woman stood, looking just as worn out as the shop. Her graying hair was escaping from a loose braid, and the dark circles under her eyes told me she hadn't slept well in a while. Still, she managed a faint smile when she noticed me approaching.

"Can I help you, dear?" she asked, though her voice sounded like she wasn't entirely sure anyone needed anything from this place.

"Uh, yeah," I said, offering her my most polite smile. "I was hoping to ask for an application. Are you hiring right now?"

Her eyes widened in shock. "A job application? Oh my goodness, are you serious?" Without warning, she rushed around the counter and grabbed my arm like I was some kind of miracle. "Whoever you are, you're a blessing! We need help so bad in here, I can't even tell you."

I laughed, a little taken aback by her sudden enthusiasm. "Well, happy to be a blessing," I said, trying to hide how startled I was. "But, uh, is everything okay? You seem...stressed?"

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“Stressed isn’t the half of it, honey,” she replied, finally letting go of my arm but gesturing for me to sit down at one of the small tables. “Sit, sit! Want coffee? Chocolate? Anything you want. We don’t get many new faces around here these days. I’m Alice, by the way. Alice Henderson.”

“I’m Bethany Snow,” I replied, sliding into the chair she’d pointed to. “And coffee sounds great, thanks. I...have kind of a complicated relationship with chocolate at the moment.” I winced at the memory of yesterday’s regrettable encounter with a forbidden chocolate cake. “It’s a long story.”

Alice nodded like she’d been there. “Chocolate has a way of doing that to people. Anyway, Bethany, let me give you the scoop. I’ve been working here for over twenty years—since before I got married. It’s the classic age-old tale. After giving my husband three beautiful children, he opted to run off with his dental hygienist—guess she was cleaning more than just his teeth.” She gave me a sly wink.

I snorted, not expecting that level of humor from someone who looked like they hadn’t slept in a week. “Oh, wow. That’s...something.”

“Isn’t it, though? So, I’ve been raising our three kids on this salary ever since. The old owners of this place treated me like family, but when they retired and moved to Florida, a corporate franchise, Sugar Rush, bought the shop. Things started going downhill after that.” Alice poured two mugs of coffee, setting one in front of me. “The new manager they hired, River Moss, well...let’s just say he’s not your average candy store manager.”

I raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“Oh, you’ll meet him soon enough,” Alice said, taking a long sip of her coffee. “He’s into all that new age, self-discovery stuff. One day he went on a hike—one of his many ‘spiritual journeys’—and claims he had a transcendental experience after eating a mushroom he found in the forest.”

I almost spat out my coffee, holding back a laugh. “A mushroom?”

“Yep, a mushroom. It must have been a pretty magical one too, because he says he saw an angel. From that moment on, he decided to get healthy and went keto. Without telling anyone, he replaced all the sugar in our candies with prune juice. Guess he thought the town needed a cleanse.”

I couldn’t help it...I laughed out loud. “No!”

“Oh yeah. Of course, corporate found out and gave him the boot. He was already planning to resign anyway—something about living off the grid and starting a goat farm. The company’s sending in a new manager, but until then, we’re just trying to keep the place running.”

Just as Alice finished speaking, the door to the back swung open, and a man who could only be River stepped into the store. He wore a faded Grateful Dead T-shirt, Birkenstocks, and his long hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail. He looked like he had walked straight out of a 1970s time capsule.

“Alice! Who’s this?” he asked, clapping his hands like he’d just walked into the best news of the day.

“This is Bethany,” Alice said. “She’s here for a job.”

“Groovy! You’re hired!” River declared without hesitation, flashing me a huge grin.

I blinked, surprised by how fast this was all happening. “Just like that?”

“The universe has spoken! Why mess with the flow?” River said cheerfully. “I’m out of here in a couple of days anyway, so the more, the merrier.”

“Well...okay, then,” I said, still processing the fact that I’d apparently just landed a job. “Nice to meet you...I guess?”

River beamed and gestured toward the back. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to Noah. He’s our onsite candy maker.”

I shot Alice a glance, and she rolled her eyes. Following River to the back, I entered a small kitchen where a man in a brightly colored apron was hunched over, carefully sculpting what looked like tiny sugar pumpkins. I had to admit, they were adorable and hoped they didn’t contain any prune juice. Noah was a larger guy with an expertly coiffed blonde bouffant, and his hands worked with precision as he shaped the candy.

“Noah, this is Bethany. She’s going to help us out,” River said.

Noah’s face lit up like he’d just heard the best news of the century. “Oh, thank goodness! I’ve been dying for some fresh creative input around here. Corporate has me making all their bland recipes but take a look at these.” He whipped out his phone and flipped through photos of elaborate desserts, sugar sculptures, and chocolate creations.

I stared at the pictures, genuinely impressed. “You made all of these?”

“Every last one,” Noah said proudly. “Corporate won’t allow me to experiment like I used to, but once they do, watch out—this place will be a whole new world of sweet art.”

I smiled, warming to his enthusiasm. “I believe it. First things first, though. We need to spruce this place up.”

“That,” Noah said, nodding seriously, “is music to my ears.”

After my whirlwind introduction to Sugar Rush, I stepped out of the shop feeling a weird mix of excitement and exhaustion. There was so much work to be done, but for the first time in a long while, I was genuinely excited about something. I could see the potential, even if the shop looked like it hadn’t seen a broom in months.

My next stop was Gran’s house, a cozy little cottage at the edge of town. Her garden was still in full fall bloom, bursting with colorful mums and marigolds. I knocked on the door and was greeted by the sight of Twilight, Gran’s big gray storm cloud of a cat, peeking at me through the window. A second later, the door swung open, and Gran pulled me into a warm hug.

“Bethany! It’s so good to see you, sweetheart. How was your morning? Have you eaten yet? I just put on some tomato soup and was about to fix grilled cheese to go with it. Want to join me for an early lunch?”

“Busy, no, and yes,” I said, laughing as Twilight looked up at me and gave me a plaintive meow as if desperate for attention. I bent down and lifted him into my arms while Moonbeam, as expected, made a show of ignoring me. “Lunch sounds great, as I missed breakfast. I’ll help you prepare the sandwiches. And guess what? I got a job at Sugar Rush, the candy shop downtown.”

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Gran's face lit up. "Oh, how wonderful! That place could sure use a bit of your flair to drum up business again after the prune juice fiasco last summer."

I smiled, loving how supportive she always was. "I think so too. Plus, the manager asked me to help cater a Halloween party on Saturday night at that old Victorian mansion..."

Gran raised an eyebrow. "You mean the one everything thinks is haunted?"

"Yep, that's the one. And I have to go in costume."

She chuckled. "And what are you going to dress as, pray tell?"

"An angel, maybe," I said, half-joking. At least that way I could pretend I'd have my wings back.

Gran's eyes twinkled mischievously. "An angel? That's an interesting choice."

I laughed, but as I thought about the party, a shiver ran down my spine. Something about this Halloween felt different—like it might just be a turning point somehow. The problem was, my spidey-sense couldn't tell if that was a good or bad thing.

As we made our way through the living room to the kitchen, I viewed the familiar furnishings—Gran's favorite armchair, the soft couch with the worn-out springs that brought back memories of all the times I'd sat there, wrapped in one of her hand-knit blankets, sipping tea or hot cocoa while we talked about anything and everything. I stopped to put Twilight, purring like a motorboat now, down on the Oriental rug, and

gave him a scratch behind his ears. Moonbeam, ever the aloof diva, strutted by, flicking her tail in disinterest but still keeping a watchful eye on me from the corner of the room.

Gran bustled ahead of me to the kitchen, her gait a little slower than it used to be, but still full of purpose. The tomato soup was just coming to a boil, and we set about making the grilled cheese sandwiches. A few minutes later, we settled ourselves at the dining room table with our lunches and dug in to the meal, pausing between bites to continue catching up.

“Now, tell me more about this new job of yours,” Gran said, shaking a bit of pepper over her bowl of soup.

I grinned, swallowing my bite of sandwich. “I think it’s going to be fun, but the place really is in pretty rough shape. The current manager, River, is on his way out. Apparently, the corporate office is sending someone to replace him, but in the meantime, I’m just happy to help however I can. It could be a really charming place, you know? It’s got potential.”

“Oh, I have no doubt about that,” Gran said, patting my hand. “You’ve always had a knack for adding a little magic to whatever you touch. That shop’s lucky to have you.”

I felt my cheeks flush with warmth at her words. Gran had always believed in me, even when I didn’t believe in myself. “Thanks, Gran. I just hope I don’t mess it up.”

“Mess it up?” Gran scoffed, leaning back in her chair with a dramatic sigh. “Oh, child, you could never mess up anything. And even if you did, what’s the worst that could happen? You pick yourself back up and try again. That’s how life works. Besides, you’ve got that spark, Bethany. You just need to see it for yourself.”

I smiled, feeling a knot of tension loosen in my chest. Gran always had a way of making everything seem so simple. “I’m trying, Gran. Really, I am.”

“And you’re doing just fine,” she said firmly, her tone leaving no room for argument. “You know, I always knew you’d make your way back here and find your footing. Sweetberry Hollow is in your blood. It’s where you belong.”

There was a truth to her words that I couldn’t deny. As much as I’d wanted to prove myself by going off to college and trying to fit myself into the same box as everyone else, maybe I didn’t have to do that after all. Was it possible I could find a way to belong just by being me? Doubt niggled my insides.

Gran took a bite of the steaming soup, savoring it for a moment before speaking again. “So, you said something about a Halloween party at the old Monroe mansion. Tell me more about that. Who’s throwing the event? I didn’t think anyone lived there anymore.”

I shrugged, still a little unsure of the details myself. “I’m not really sure. Someone’s hired Sugar Rush to handle the catering, in any case. It sounds like it’s going to be a big deal though.”

Gran raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “Interesting,” she mused thoughtfully as she munched her grilled cheese.

There was something in her tone that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Gran always had a way of knowing things before they happened, like she was tuned into some cosmic radio frequency the rest of us couldn’t hear. I tried to shrug it off, but the unease lingered.

“Well, I hope it turns out okay,” I said, trying to change the subject. “It should be fun, at least. I just hope the mansion isn’t actually haunted.”

Gran chuckled. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry too much about that. If there are any ghosts, they’re probably just as excited for a good party as the rest of us. Besides, Halloween is the perfect time for a little mystery and mayhem, don’t you think?”

“I guess so,” I said, giving a half-hearted laugh, not sure any more mayhem was quite what I needed.

Gran reached out and squeezed my hand, her expression softening. “Whatever happens, Bethany, just trust yourself. You’ve got more strength and courage in you than you realize. And if that haunted mansion has any surprises in store, well... I have a feeling you’ll handle it just fine.”

I smiled, feeling a swell of affection for her. Gran always knew how to say exactly what I needed to hear. “Thanks, Gran. I’ll try not to let any ghosts spook me too much.”

She winked at me, then leaned back in her chair, a satisfied smile on her face. “That’s my girl.”

As we finished our lunches, I couldn’t help but feel a little lighter, the weight of my uncertainties lifting with every word of encouragement from Gran. No matter what happened—whether the candy shop turned out to be a disaster or the Halloween party was filled with ghosts—everything would be okay. Because, as Gran had reminded me, I had a second chance at a future, and I wasn’t facing it alone. Maybe this Halloween would be the start of a whole new adventure I’d been waiting for all along.

Chapter Two

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Drake

I sat behind the sleek mahogany desk, high up in my corner office, the kind with floor-to-ceiling windows that boasted a panoramic view of the Manhattan skyline. It was a view that screamed power, wealth, and control. From up here, I could see the city stretch out beneath me, a sea of glittering lights, chaotic streets, and people who had no idea who I really was or what lurked behind my cold, polished exterior.

But even the view couldn't save me from the tedium of this moment.

I looked across my desk at Cynthia, a mid-level marketing exec whose face was contorted in desperation. Her voice wobbled as she tried to explain her way out of another failed campaign, but I had long since tuned her out. Her excuses were pathetic, and more importantly...Irrelevant. The decision had already been made.

"I've been with the company for ten years, Mr. Youngblood," she said, her voice cracking. "I just need another chance. Please."

I sighed dramatically, steepling my fingers and giving her my coldest stare. "Loyalty is commendable, Cynthia, but it's not enough. We don't reward mediocrity here."

Her face fell, and I could see the fear in her eyes. She was starting to understand what was coming.

"I'm sorry, but your services are no longer required. Consider this your last day," I said, my tone flat and dismissive.

The moment the words left my mouth, her face crumpled like a house of cards. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she let out a small sob, covering her mouth with her hand as if that could somehow hold back the flood of emotions.

“Please, I need this job. I can fix it. I can do better...just give me one more chance.”

The pleading was always the worst part. Humans, with their fragile emotions, never seemed to understand that there was no room for second chances in the world I inhabited. I had no patience for weakness, finding it frankly disgusting.

“Enough,” I snapped, my voice slicing through her like a whip. “You have five minutes to collect your things. Security will escort you out.”

Her shoulders slumped in defeat, and she shuffled toward the door, still sniffing, as if her tears could change anything. She opened the door and nearly ran into someone—someone I’d hoped to avoid today. And every day, for that matter.

Delilah Montgomery stood in the doorway, her dark, glossy hair framing her face like an oil-slick halo, her blood-red lips curled into a smile that sent an immediate chill through me. Her crimson nails, long and perfectly manicured, clicked against the doorframe as she leaned in, clearly enjoying the show.

Cynthia took one look at Delilah and scurried out of the office, offering a mumbled apology as she fled like a mouse from a cat. And well she should if she knew what was good for her.

I groaned internally. The CEO’s wife was not what I needed right now.

“What the hell do you want now, Delilah?” I asked, my voice dripping with irritation. I leaned back in my chair, trying to mask the unease she always brought out in me.

She sauntered into my office like she owned it—like she owned me. Which she technically did. After all, she was the one who had turned me into what I was, the one who had given me power and wealth beyond my wildest dreams, in exchange for a part of my soul. I'd made a deal with the devil; one I'd regret until the end of time.

“Oh, Drake,” she purred, running her long nails across the edge of my desk as she approached. “Is that any way to greet the woman who made you what you are?”

I clenched my jaw, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. “I'd be fine without you, Delilah. Now get to the point. I'm busy.”

Her smile widened, revealing a hint of the sharp teeth that had ruined my life in more ways than one. “Busy firing incompetent employees, I see. Such a cold touch. I'm proud.”

I huffed, barely holding onto my patience. “What do you want?”

Delilah perched herself on the edge of my desk, crossing one spidery leg over the other. “I've got a new assignment for you, darling.”

I raised an eyebrow. “An assignment? I don't take assignments from you anymore. I practically run Montgomery Enterprises in this city.”

“Oh, but you do,” she replied, her eyes gleaming with mischief. “And this one is different. I'm sending you to Sweetberry Hollow.”

I blinked, certain I had misheard her. “Sweetberry what?”

She shrugged, clearly amused by my confusion. “Sweetberry Hollow. It's a quaint little town in the middle of nowhere, population: cute, sweet, and probably home to a pie-baking contest or two.”

I stared at her, trying to make sense of this absurd conversation. “Why the hell would you send me there? I run an empire here, Delilah. Find someone else to deal with...whatever nonsense this is.”

Her smile never faltered, but her eyes darkened, becoming even more predatory. “I have my reasons, Drake. And this isn’t a request. You’re going to Sweetberry Hollow to oversee one of the Sugar Rush branches. It’s failing miserably, and we need someone to whip it back into shape.”

“Sugar Rush?” I said with open disdain. “A candy store? You’re sending me to manage a candy store in the middle of nowhere?”

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“Precisely.”

I rubbed my temples, feeling the beginnings of a headache forming. “Why not send one of the junior executives? This isn’t my level of responsibility.”

“Oh, darling, you’re perfect for the job,” she cooed. “I just know you’ll thrive in that charming little town.”

I could hear the sarcasm dripping from her words, and it took everything in me not to snap. “Cut the crap, Delilah. Why me?”

Her smile faltered just slightly, but only for a second. “Like I said, I have my reasons. Don’t question me. You don’t want to make me get my husband involved.”

I hated the way she said that, the way she always spoke as if she held all the cards. And maybe she did. The price of eternal life had been more than just blood; it had been my freedom, my autonomy. The deal I’d made with her years ago was binding, and I was trapped in it, whether I liked it or not. I’d never met her husband, but one Montgomery was more than enough.

“Fine,” I spat, glaring up at her. “I’ll go. But this had better be quick.”

“Oh, it will be,” she said, her wicked smile returning. “Enjoy Sweetberry Hollow, Drake. It’ll be...life-changing.”

With that, she turned and sauntered out of my office, her heels clicking on the floor, leaving me simmering in frustration.

A week later, I found myself standing in front of a quaint, furnished apartment in Sweetberry Hollow, wondering what I had done to deserve this fresh hell. The air was crisp and cool, the kind of autumn weather that normal people probably found refreshing. To me, it was just another reminder that I was far from home—my nice, dark, cold home full of no names.

The apartment itself looked like it had been ripped straight out of a country lifestyle magazine. Flower boxes sat under the windows, overflowing with autumn blooms, and there was a porch swing that looked like it belonged in a Hallmark movie. The entire building reeked of charm and comfort, two things I absolutely despised.

“This place is a nightmare,” I muttered under my breath, surveying the surroundings. There wasn’t even private access or a concierge. I was used to luxury, privacy, not this small-town, ridiculous nonsense.

I climbed the stairs to the front door with my suitcase, the wood creaking under the weight, and fumbled for the keys. When I finally stepped inside, I was greeted by the scent of cinnamon and fresh linen—no doubt part of the “welcoming” aesthetic that made my skin crawl. The furniture was all rustic chic, with plaid throws and cushioned armchairs, and there was a basket of complimentary apples sitting on the dining room table. Apples.

“Great,” I muttered. “I’m in farm country.”

The worst part? I had to drive myself everywhere now. Me. I hadn’t driven a car in fifty years, not since the days when cars were mostly deathtraps and human life had been slightly more amusing. Navigating the streets of Sweetberry Hollow in a modern vehicle was not only tedious but a constant reminder that I was in exile, banished to a place where nothing ever happened.

The sun was low on the horizon and after I’d settled my things inside the apartment, I

drove toward the town square, narrowly avoiding hitting a mailbox—again. My driving was rusty, to say the least. By the time I reached the stop sign at the corner, I was ready to explode. And of course, the guy in the car next to me leaned on his horn, yelling at me through his open window.

“Move it, buddy!” he shouted.

Without thinking, I snarled back at him, my voice low and menacing. “Keep yelling Jack, and I’ll drink your blood.”

The guy blinked, then gave me a sarcastic smirk. “Get a life, pal.”

I gritted my teeth, resisting the urge to roll down the window and really make him regret his existence. A life? I thought bitterly. I’m dead, you idiot.

After what felt like an eternity of navigating the sleepy streets of Sweetberry Hollow, I finally arrived at my destination: Sugar Rush. The candy shop was nestled in the heart of the town square, and I could already tell from the outside that the place was a disaster. The paint was peeling, the sign was cartoonish, and the window display was laughable. Halloween decorations had been thrown together with about as much enthusiasm as a funeral.

I stepped out of the car and walked up to the shop, my fine leather shoes crunching on the gravel path. The dim lights inside flickered weakly, and the whole place had a stale, forgotten smell. I pushed open the door, and a sad little bell jingled, announcing my presence to absolutely no one. The shop was deserted. Were they closed this early? In New York, retail businesses—especially food chains—remained open until close to midnight, if not 24/7.

Inside, things were even worse. The shelves were sparsely stocked with generic candy, none of which looked remotely appealing. The few Halloween decorations

scattered around were half-hearted at best—plastic pumpkins, a cobweb that looked like it had been slapped onto the corner of the counter as an afterthought, and a skeleton that was missing its arm.

I let out a low sigh. This place was a disaster. How did Montgomery Enterprises ever think investing here was a good idea? Sweetberry Hollow was the epitome of a small town—quiet, boring, and devoid of the hustle and energy I thrived on. It was no Boston, no Philly, and certainly no New York.

As I walked through the establishment, taking in the sorry state of things, my eyes fell on a flyer pinned to the wall. It was advertising a Halloween party at some old Victorian mansion on the outskirts of town. Costumes required, it said. Catered by Sugar Rush.

Ah, the former manager—I couldn't recall the fool's name—must have set this up before he skipped town with his tail between his legs. A wicked idea started to form in my mind. What better way to scope out this town and its people than by blending in? I could attend the party in costume, slip in unnoticed, and observe the members of my staff without them knowing I was their new boss sent to clean up their mess. It would be the perfect way to assess my underlings, gauge the town, and figure out what, exactly, I was dealing with.

I pulled the flyer off the wall, folding it and slipping it into my jacket pocket. I was going to this party, and I was going in style. After all, if I had to suffer through this miserable assignment, I might as well have a little fun along the way.

As I turned to leave the shop, the bell above the door jingled again, and I stepped out into the cool night air. The street was quiet, the only sound being the distant rustle of leaves in the wind. Sweetberry Hollow might be a charming little town during the day, but at night, there was a strange stillness to it. I couldn't help but wonder what secrets this place was hiding—and whether Delilah had sent me here for more than

just a failing candy shop.

But I would find out soon enough. And when I did, Sweetberry Hollow would never be the same.

Chapter Three

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Bethany

The Halloween party was in full swing by the time I arrived, and I couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement as I stepped through the ornate iron gates of the old Victorian mansion. The entire place was draped in fog, the dim glow of jack-o'-lanterns flickering eerily along the winding pathway leading to the front door. I was already feeling alive—well, maybe too alive, considering I was dressed as an angel. I had the wings, even if they were fake for the time being at least, and the halo, even if it was slightly crooked. What could I say? Perfection continued to evade me.

I adjusted the feathered wings on my back, which were a little too big for me and kept brushing up against people as I walked. But tonight, none of that mattered. Tonight, I was part of something larger, something festive, something spooky and magical. The excitement in the air was contagious, and the partygoers were all dressed to the nines in their costumes.

It was like stepping into another world. Fake torches lined the walls, casting flickering shadows that made the whole place look like a haunted castle. Skeletons leered from the corners, spiders hung from cobwebs that were so well-placed it made me wonder if they were fake at all, and eerie portraits seemed to follow me with their eyes as I moved. Whoever had decorated this place had gone all out, and the effect was breathtaking. Almost...too real.

“Bethany!” Noah's voice cut through the foggy air, and I spotted him standing by the candy table, waving me over with one of his glittering, fake-nailed hands.

I couldn't help but grin when I saw him. Noah had really outdone himself tonight. He

was in full drag, his alter ego, Miss Scrumptious, making a grand appearance in a hot pink sequin-covered gown that sparkled under the dim lights. His makeup was flawless, his wig styled to perfection, and his presence commanded attention as he twirled for the guests. The best part was the energy he exuded—like he was born for this kind of party.

I hurried over to join him at the candy display, which I had helped design with his and Alice's encouragement. I beamed with pride as I looked at our handiwork. The table was a dazzling spectacle, filled with every kind of sweet imaginable. We had towering jars of candy corn, caramel-dipped apples with chocolate drizzle, and perfectly frosted cookies shaped like ghosts and witches. But the *pièce de résistance* was Noah's secret addition—his own handcrafted chocolates and sugar sculptures, hidden among the corporate-approved sweets. Each one was a miniature masterpiece, glistening under the party lights, and I couldn't believe how lucky we were to have him.

"I see you've smuggled in your creations," I teased, nudging him lightly.

Noah winked. "You know me. I couldn't resist showing off a little. Corporate recipes be damned."

He tossed his head back, letting out a theatrical laugh as his partner, Gary, arrived at the table, dressed as Sherlock Holmes. Gary was a small, bald man, but his energy was boundless. He sidled up to Noah, wrapping an arm around him, and together, they made quite the pair.

Gary gave me a playful grin. "You look amazing, Bethany! If I didn't know better, I'd say you really were an angel."

I laughed, giving a twirl so my wings flared out behind me. "Thanks! I feel pretty angelic tonight, except for this thing." I tugged at the crooked halo on my head, trying

to straighten it to no avail. “It’s got a mind of its own.”

Noah shook his head, smiling fondly at me. “Leave it. It adds character. Besides, no one’s looking at your halo—they’re too busy admiring your candy table, girl.”

I glanced down, unsure whether he meant the actual candy table or my very prominent cleavage—a little too prominent for my liking as I discovered only after I’d donned the costume an hour before the party was scheduled to start. However, it had been too late to exchange it for a different size so instead I threw on a pearl choker, hoping it would draw people’s gazes upward, and prayed that my girls would stay put.

“I’m just glad it turned out so well,” I said, stepping back to admire the display one more time. “But Alice should get the credit, too. She worked so hard on the setup.”

“She’s the unsung hero of the shop,” Noah agreed. “Too bad she couldn’t make it tonight. But mom duty calls, and those kids of hers need her more than we do. Maybe you could help me convince her though to let me give her a makeover. Can’t you just see her as a strawberry blonde?”

“Well,” I said, grabbing one of the candy apples, “here’s to, wherever she is.”

Noah raised his bubbling drink in salute, and I clinked my apple against his glass before taking a big, satisfying bite. The combination of caramel and chocolate melted in my mouth, and I nearly swooned.

“Bethany,” Gary said, pulling me from my candy-induced bliss. “You should go mingle. We can man the table. It’s not every day we get a party like this. Maybe you’ll meet someone special.”

I rolled my eyes but smiled. “Maybe. Or maybe I’ll just eat all the snacks and enjoy

the decorations.”

Gary chuckled and gave Noah a playful nudge. “She’s playing it cool, but I have a feeling something exciting is going to happen tonight. Mark my words.”

With that, Noah and Gary turned to pass out more treats, leaving me to wander the party on my own. I drifted through the crowd, feeling lighter than I had in months. The music was infectious, a mix of eerie, haunting melodies and upbeat tunes that made my feet itch to move. I danced for a while, twirling under the dim lights, my wings brushing against other dancers, but I didn’t care. I felt...free.

The mansion was huge, and the further I wandered, the more elaborate the decorations became. The severed hand on the dining table caught my eye—until it twitched, crawling a few inches before settling back into place. I blinked, shaking my head. “Just a really good prop,” I whispered to myself.

The portraits on the walls seemed to follow me with their eyes, which was definitely unnerving, but the atmosphere was so perfect that I couldn’t help but appreciate the effort. Whoever had designed this haunted house knew what they were doing. As I passed a statue of a ghoul holding a bloody knife, I shivered. It almost seemed to breathe.

Get a grip, Bethany, I told myself, wiping my slightly damp palms on my dress. This place was just playing tricks on me, that was all. I kept telling myself that as I grabbed another drink from the bar, this one swirling with smoke and glowing an unnatural shade of green.

As I sipped, I wandered back to the candy table to see how Noah and Gary were doing, only to find Noah had brought out the *pièce de résistance*—chocolate brownies. He winked at me as I approached, cutting me a generous slice.

“You deserve this,” he said with a grin. “For all your hard work.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” I said, taking the brownie and savoring the first bite. Rich, decadent, and oh so satisfying.

With the taste of chocolate still lingering on my tongue, I spun back out onto the dance floor, joining the crowd. For a moment, everything felt perfect—like I was floating on a cloud. The combination of music, dancing, and just enough alcohol had me buzzing with energy. I felt...alive...Happy.

That’s when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to find a man in a mask standing behind me, his eyes shadowed beneath a sleek black disguise. He didn’t say a word, just smiled and pulled me into the rhythm of the dance.

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I wasn't sure why, but something about the way he moved felt...off. The music thumped in the background, but his grip on me tightened as we danced, his movements too insistent, too sharp. Before I knew what was happening, he grabbed my arm and yanked me toward a dark hallway at the edge of the room.

"Hey!" I protested, trying to pull away. My heart raced, and for the first time that night, the playful spookiness of the party felt dangerous. "Let go!"

But he didn't. He dragged me further into the shadows, his grip like iron. Panic welled up inside me as I realized how far we'd moved from the crowd. The hallway was empty, the walls lined with flickering torches that cast eerie shadows. I was cornered.

"Let me go!" I shouted, struggling harder, but his hold only tightened.

Just as fear threatened to overwhelm me, a shadow emerged from the darkness.

"Is there a problem here?" a deep, smooth voice cut through the tension like a knife.

The man holding me froze, and I turned to see a figure stepping out of the shadows. He was tall, lean, and dressed in a black cape with a high collar, his dark eyes glittering. He looked every bit the part of Count Dracula, and something about his presence sent a shiver down my spine—not of fear, but of something else. Something I couldn't quite name.

The man holding me let go instantly, backing away without a word, and before I knew it, he had vanished into the shadows. I stood there, my heart still pounding, as

the dark-haired stranger in the cape stepped closer, his eyes locking onto mine.

“You alright?” he asked, his voice calm but laced with something dangerous.

I nodded, trying to steady my breathing. “Yeah. Thanks to you.”

He smiled, a slow, almost predatory smile that made my pulse quicken for reasons I couldn’t explain. “He won’t bother you again.”

I swallowed hard, feeling suddenly aware of how close he was standing. “I, uh, didn’t catch your name.”

He tilted his head slightly, his gaze never leaving mine. “Drake.”

“Bethany,” I replied, my voice coming out a little softer than I intended. There was something about him that made me feel...off-balance, like he was both familiar and completely foreign at the same time.

We stood there in silence for a moment, the sound of the party distant behind us, the air between us charged with something electric. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from his. I didn’t know if it was the costume, his penetrating gaze, or the way he had appeared out of nowhere, but there was something about him that drew me in.

“Would you like to dance?” he asked, offering his arm and breaking the silence.

I laughed, the sound a little shaky, but I slipped my arm through his and allowed him to lead me back toward the dance floor. The music seemed to shift around us, slower, more intimate, as we moved together in perfect rhythm. His hand on my waist was steady, guiding me effortlessly, and for a moment, I forgot everything else—the creepy hallway, the man who had grabbed me, the fact that I was at a party full of strangers. All I could focus on was the way he moved, the way his presence seemed to

wrap around me like a shadow.

As we danced, I glanced up at him, trying to figure out what it was about him that made me feel so...alive. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

He smirked, his dark eyes glinting. “Is it that obvious?”

“More than a little,” I said with a grin. “You’ve got that big-city vibe. So, what brings you to Sweetberry Hollow?”

His expression shifted slightly, a flicker of something unreadable crossing his face. “Business.”

“Oh?” I raised an eyebrow. “What kind of business?”

Before he could answer, the music faded, replaced by the sounds of laughter and chatter as the party continued. The air between us felt suddenly too warm, too close, and I found myself pulling away slightly, needing a moment to catch my breath.

“How about some fresh air?” he suggested, his voice low.

I nodded, grateful for the excuse to step outside. The mansion’s grand patio was just as elaborately decorated as the inside, with twinkling lights and fog rolling across the ground. The night air was crisp and cool, a welcome relief from the heat of the party.

We stood in silence for a moment, the tension between us still palpable. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, though I wasn’t sure if it was from the adrenaline of earlier or something else entirely.

“This might sound weird,” I said, finally breaking the silence, “but I feel like I’ve known you before. Have we met?”

Drake chuckled softly, shaking his head. “No. Trust me, you’d remember.”

There was something in his tone that made me shiver, but not in a bad way. I wasn’t sure if it was the night, the drinks, or the fact that I was standing outside with a mysterious stranger who had just saved me from a very creepy situation, but there was a pull between us that I couldn’t ignore.

I knew, somewhere deep down, that this was probably a bad idea. But I’d never been great at listening to that voice of reason, especially when the night felt this magical.

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“Do you want to come back to my place?” I asked before I could stop myself.

Drake raised an eyebrow, his eyes gleaming with amusement. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Nope,” I said with a tremulous laugh. “But I’m inviting you anyway.”

He smiled again, that slow, almost dangerous smile, and nodded. “Lead the way.”

The walk back to my place was a blur—half giggles, half flirtation—our steps quick as if we were both being pulled toward the same inevitable conclusion. Every glance, every touch, felt charged with electricity, and by the time we stumbled through the door, I had forgotten every reason why this was a bad idea.

I barely had time to close the door before Drake’s lips were on mine, his kiss hungry and urgent, the warmth of his body pressing against mine. My back hit the wall, and I gasped, the sound muffled as his mouth claimed mine again. His hands roamed, tracing over my curves, pulling me closer. The world around us disappeared. There was only him—his touch, his heat, and the way my body responded to him as though we were two magnets drawn together by some invisible force.

I couldn’t think. Couldn’t breathe. I didn’t want it to stop. All I wanted was more.

We stumbled into the kitchen, my heart pounding in my chest as we crashed into the counter, his lips trailing down my neck, igniting fire everywhere he touched. My skin was alive with sensation, every nerve ending buzzing with the anticipation of what was to come. His fingers brushed the small of my back, sending shivers down my

spine as he lifted me onto the counter.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him closer as he leaned into me, his lips never leaving mine. There was a sense of urgency between us, like neither of us could wait a second longer. I tangled my fingers in his hair, feeling the smooth strands between my fingers, and pulled him closer, deepening the kiss.

"Bethany," he murmured against my lips, his voice low and rough, sending a thrill down my spine.

I didn't respond with words. Instead, I let my actions speak, pulling him even closer, my hands roaming over his back as I drank him in. He tasted like danger, like temptation, like everything I knew I shouldn't want but couldn't resist.

Before I knew it, we were tangled up in the sheets of my bedroom, our clothing discarded on the floor. His touch was like fire, burning me up from the inside, and I couldn't get enough of him. When he entered me, I groaned with pleasure. There was something primal about the way we moved, something that felt so right and yet so dangerously out of control.

I could feel the intensity building between us, the tension rising with every breath, every kiss, every touch. His lips found my neck, teasing the sensitive skin there, sending sparks through me. My heart raced, my breath quickened, and I felt like I was on the edge of something far beyond what I'd ever experienced before.

And then, in the midst of it all, I felt the sharp sting.

His teeth grazed my neck, just as the intensity of the moment peaked, and for a split second, I felt a jolt of pain. But almost immediately, it morphed into something else—something intoxicating. The pain faded, replaced by a strange, overwhelming warmth that flooded through my body, making me feel light, weightless, like I was

floating above the bed, wrapped in a cloud of pure ecstasy.

I gasped, my fingers tightening on the sheets as the sensation rolled over me. It was unlike anything I'd ever felt before. I should have been afraid, should have pushed him away, but instead, I found myself leaning into him, my breath coming in shallow gasps as the warmth spread through me, making everything feel brighter, sharper, more vivid.

His lips pressed against the spot where his teeth had grazed, and a small shiver ran down my spine. I felt an odd sense of completion, like we had crossed some invisible line together, something I couldn't quite explain but felt deep within me.

I opened my eyes, my vision hazy, and saw him watching me, his eyes dark and filled with something intense, something that made my heart skip a beat.

But instead of fear, all I felt was peace, a deep, overwhelming sense of peace that settled over me like a warm blanket. My eyelids grew heavy, my body sinking deeper into the bed as the warmth wrapped around me, pulling me into a soft, dreamlike state.

I could still feel his presence beside me, could feel his lips brushing against my skin one last time before everything faded into darkness, the sensation of his bite lingering like a sweet, intoxicating memory.

When I woke up, everything felt...wrong. My head was pounding, my body heavy, and my mouth dry. I groaned as I rolled over, blinking blearily at the grey autumn light streaming through the curtains.

How much had I had to drink last night? I remembered the party, the dancing, the man in the mask...and then Drake. And the bedroom. But after that, everything was a blur.

I sat up slowly, wincing as my head protested. I hadn't had that much to drink, had I? This wasn't just a hangover—something was different. Off. I felt...strange. Like I was weighed down by something.

Frowning, I reached for my phone on the bedside table, blinking as the screen lit up.

And then my stomach dropped.

I had been asleep for over 24 hours. It was Monday morning, and I was seriously late for work.

“Crap!” I bolted out of bed, my heart racing as I scrambled to make sense of the time. I'd never overslept this badly in my life. What the hell had happened?

Just as I was about to call Alice to explain, a message popped up from her.

New boss is here. You missed the meeting.

I cursed under my breath, typing a quick apology and telling her I'd be there as fast as I could.

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I jumped into the shower, trying to scrub the exhaustion from my skin. But as I stepped out and reached for the mirror to fix my hair, I froze.

I couldn't see my reflection.

Panic surged through me as I wiped frantically at the fog on the mirror, but no matter how hard I rubbed, I saw...nothing. My reflection simply wasn't there.

"What the hell?" I whispered, my heart pounding. I didn't have time to figure this out—not right now. I shoved the thought aside, throwing on some clothes and rushing to the kitchen for a quick bite before heading to work.

But as soon as I opened the fridge, my stomach churned. The bagel I had been planning to grab suddenly looked revolting, the mere thought of eating it making my insides twist.

Instead, there was an enticing smell coming from the bottom drawer. I opened it to find the steak I had planned to cook later in the week, and my mouth watered at the sight of it, raw and bloody.

I froze, my hand trembling as I reached for my neck, touching the spot where there should have been a little scab from my lover's bite—but there was nothing.

Vampires weren't real.

Right?

I gulped, slamming the fridge shut and rushing out the door. I didn't have time for this. I'd figure it out later. Right now, I had a job to get to, and a new boss to meet.

I arrived at Sugar Rush, my heart still racing as I hurried inside, hoping my hair wasn't some mess of a beehive since I had no idea what I looked like. Alice gave me a sympathetic look from behind the counter, but before I could say anything, I felt a presence behind me.

I turned slowly, and nearly fell over from shock when my eyes locked onto the man standing in the doorway.

It was Drake.

He was dressed in a sleek black suit, his dark eyes glinting with recognition, the same dangerous smile playing on his lips.

And in that moment, I knew two things for sure:

One, I had just slept with my new boss.

And two, my life was about to get a hell of a lot more complicated.

Chapter Four

Drake

"Well, well, well...Bethany Snow, I presume?"

The words rolled off my tongue before I could stop myself. My voice carried a hint of amusement, but the irony wasn't lost on me either. There she was, standing in front of me in the doorway of this dilapidated candy shop that I was supposed to somehow

fix, her face a picture of shock, disbelief, and something close to horror. Of all the towns, of all the employees I could have inherited, it had to be her.

Bethany Snow. The same woman I'd spent the night with at that ridiculous Halloween party. And now, she was standing there, my employee, looking flustered, late, and absolutely mortified.

Her lips parted, but no sound came out for a moment. She was clearly at a loss for words, her expression cycling between realization and disbelief. Her cheeks flushed that familiar shade of pink that I remembered all too well from Saturday night, the same pink that had spread across her skin when she was pressed against me, breathless and vulnerable.

"You?" she finally managed to stammer, her voice almost a whisper. "You're...the new boss?"

I couldn't help the smirk that tugged at the corners of my mouth. "Yes, and you're over an hour late." I let the words sink in, watching her eyes widen even more. "You also missed the morning meeting where I introduced myself and explained my vision for this...place."

Bethany blinked rapidly, as if trying to clear her head and make sense of what she was seeing. "This is a joke, right? It has to be."

I shook my head slowly, pinching the bridge of my nose as though that might somehow alleviate the absurdity of this situation. "No joke, Bethany. I'm the new manager. And you're the employee who couldn't bother to show up on time for her new boss."

I kept my voice steady, but there was no denying the tension in the air. The memory of the night of the party flashed in my mind—her body warm against mine, the way

her laughter had bubbled out like she didn't have a care in the world. And now, standing here in this disaster of a candy shop, the contrast between then and now couldn't have been starker.

I caught a glimpse of Alice and Noah out of the corner of my eye. They were exchanging looks—Alice holding her breath, while Noah wore a look of pity, the kind of expression people wear when they know someone's about to be ripped to shreds. Neither of them had any clue what had transpired between Bethany and me, but I knew they assumed I was going to tear into her for being late.

Which I was.

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Bethany's expression shifted, though. Her initial shock was fading, replaced by something else—defiance. Her shoulders squared, and she met my gaze head-on, as if silently telling me she wasn't going to go down without a fight.

“Let's talk,” I said, keeping my tone cool. “Privately.”

Without a word, Bethany turned on her heel and marched toward the back office. The makeshift office I'd been assigned was nothing short of an insult, crammed with broken filing cabinets and dusty old ledgers. I hated that space, just like I hated this whole situation. If there was a hell for vampires, it wasn't made of fire and brimstone; it was managing a failing candy shop in the middle of a horribly delightful small town.

I followed her, catching Alice and Noah exchanging another glance—one that clearly said, Poor Bethany. They assumed this was going to be a professional reprimand, nothing more. If only they knew.

As soon as the door clicked shut behind us, Bethany spun around, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. Her big blue eyes, now flashing with anger, met mine, and her fury hit me like a gust of wind.

“What the hell did you do to me?” she demanded, her voice shaking but fierce.

I frowned, taken aback by the sheer force of her words. “Excuse me?”

She yanked down the collar of her shirt, exposing the pale skin of her neck. My eyes immediately zeroed in on the two small puncture marks that marred her otherwise

perfect skin. My stomach dropped. The bite marks. My bite marks.

Shit.

“I woke up after what felt like the worst hangover of my life,” she spat, her voice rising in volume with every word. “I’ve got these,” she pointed at the bite marks, her voice thick with accusation, “and worse—I can’t see myself in the mirror anymore. What did you do to me?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but no words came out. Before I could respond, Bethany grabbed the small mirror off the wall—a dusty old relic that had probably been there for years—and angled it toward us. Her movements were frantic, desperate, and when the light hit the mirror, it showed exactly what I had feared.

Nothing. No reflection.

Neither of us appeared in the glass.

Double shit.

Bethany’s frantic breathing filled the small office as she stared at the empty reflection, then back at me. Her eyes blazed with fury, and I could practically feel the heat radiating off her. “Well?” she demanded, her voice trembling with rage. “Explain this.”

I stared at the mirror for a long moment, the weight of what I’d done settling over me like a lead blanket. I had bitten her. I had turned her. I had made a colossal mistake.

“Bethany,” I said, my voice low, almost apologetic. “This is...complicated.”

“Complicated?” she shrieked, her fists shaking as she took a step closer. “You’ve

turned me into a...a..."

"Vampire," I finished for her, my voice barely above a whisper.

She recoiled, her eyes wide with disbelief, and her hands dropped to her sides as if the weight of what I'd said had knocked the wind out of her. She stood there, chest heaving, her mind struggling to process the truth.

"No," she said, shaking her head violently. "No way. This isn't happening. You don't get to just do this and then expect me to accept it."

I couldn't blame her for her anger. Hell, I would have been just as furious. But as much as I wanted to downplay it, there was no undoing what had been done. I'd been careful for so long, centuries of control and discipline, never letting a single bite go too far. But with Bethany...something had changed.

"I didn't mean to," I said, the words spilling out before I could stop them. "I've had plenty of women before...more than I can count, but I've never done this. I've never turned anyone."

She froze, her breathing still heavy, but her anger seemed to waver, replaced by something softer, more vulnerable. "Then why me?" she demanded, her voice quieter now, laced with hurt rather than fury. "Why would you bite me if you've never done this before?"

I hesitated, the memory of being in bed together flooding back into my mind. The way she had tasted, the way her skin had felt under my hands, the way I had been drawn to her like a moth to a flame. I had wanted her in a way that was completely foreign to me, something deeper than just hunger. Something primal.

"There's something about you," I admitted, my voice rough. "I don't know what it is,

but you're...different. Enticing. Sweet. I couldn't resist."

Bethany stared at me, her eyes narrowing, as if she didn't quite believe me. "So that's it? I was just a snack you couldn't resist, and now I'm stuck being a vampire for eternity because you have no self-control?"

I winced at her words, knowing there was truth in them. "I made a mistake," I said, my voice softening. "I admit that. And I'm sorry."

She stamped her foot, her anger flaring up again like a match struck against stone. "Oh no, you don't get off that easily! I'm not just going to accept this. There has to be a way to fix it."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair, frustration mounting in my chest. "There isn't," I said quietly. "It's too late. You're a vampire now. Like me."

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Her eyes darkened, and she crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at me with fire that told me she wasn't backing down. "No," she said, her voice steady. "I refuse to accept that. There has to be a way out of this. And you're going to help me find it."

I shook my head, trying to keep my temper in check. "Bethany, I'm telling you, there's no way to undo it. I've been a vampire for over two hundred years. If there was a way to reverse the curse, I would've found it by now."

Her defiance only seemed to grow, her eyes blazing with determination. "Well, that's not good enough. I've already died once, and I'm not about to let this ruin my second chance."

I blinked, caught off guard. "You...died once?"

She nodded, her arms still crossed protectively over her chest. "Yeah. I had a freak accident which led to a brief stint as an angel, which didn't exactly go as planned. So I was sent back to Earth to give life another shot. And I'm not letting you take that from me."

I couldn't help it. I laughed, the absurdity of the situation hitting me all at once. "Wait a minute—let me get this straight. You were dressed as an angel at the party because you're actually a fallen angel?" I shook my head in disbelief. "That explains a lot."

Bethany shot me a withering glare. "Explains what?"

"Why I was drawn to you," I replied with a shrug, smirking slightly. "I mean, a fallen

angel and a vampire? Sounds like the setup for a cosmic joke.”

She rolled her eyes, clearly not amused. “This isn’t funny, Drake. I’m serious. I was given another chance at life, and I intend to make the most of it. You’re not going to screw this up for me.”

“Right,” I said, still chuckling. “And how exactly do you plan to fix this?”

She paused, her eyes narrowing as she considered her answer. “I don’t know yet. But there has to be a way.”

For a long moment, we stood there in tense silence, the weight of our situation hanging in the air between us. She was determined, and I had to admit, there was something admirable about that. Most people would have crumbled under the weight of it all, but not Bethany. She was stronger than I had given her credit for.

“Alright,” I said finally, relenting. “I’ll help you figure out how to break the vampire curse. But in return, you help me get this candy shop in order. Deal?”

Bethany raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised by my offer. “You think there’s a way to break the curse?”

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Maybe. But it’s a long shot. I’ve been looking for answers for two centuries and found nothing. But if you’re willing to try, I’ll help.”

She studied me for a moment, her expression unreadable. Then, slowly, she nodded. “Deal. But I’m not giving up. I’m getting my wings back, no matter what it takes.”

I chuckled softly. “Fair enough. I’ll trust you to pay a visit to the library and see what you can find out. In the meantime, I’ve got more pressing issues—like getting Sugar

Rush out of the red.”

Bethany groaned dramatically, rubbing her temples. “Great. Just what I wanted—more research.”

I grinned. “Oh, don’t worry. My task is equally as fun—figuring out how to make this sad excuse for a candy shop profitable. Halloween’s just a few days away, and it’s the perfect opportunity to capitalize on all the interest from that party. I just have to figure out the right angle.”

Her stomach growled audibly, and she winced. “Speaking of tasks...I’m starving. Do I have to...you know, suck someone’s blood or something?”

I smirked, shaking my head. “No. Just stock up on raw meat. That’ll hold you over for now.”

Her eyes brightened suddenly, and she snapped her fingers. “Wait! What if we sponsor a blood drive for Halloween? Give blood, get free treats, and a tour of the newly refurbished shop. We’d be killing two birds with one stone, as they say. Or maybe three, since if we mooch a little of the good stuff for ourselves, no one will know.”

I stared at her, impressed by her quick thinking. “That’s...actually a good idea.”

Bethany grinned triumphantly. “Thanks. I have my moments.”

“We’ve got a lot of work to do to get this place ready in time, but where there’s a will, there’s a way.” I couldn’t help but admire her determination. There was something about her, something different from anyone I’d ever met before. She was tough, resilient, and I was beginning to realize that I admired that about her. When had I admired anyone but myself before? I couldn’t remember a time.

As she turned to leave the office, I reached out, catching her wrist gently. She stopped, looking back at me with a raised eyebrow.

“Do you think this deal could involve a little...sexy time, too?” I asked, my voice dropping to a low murmur. “I promise I won’t bite next time.”

Bethany’s lips curled into a slow, teasing smile, and she revealed her new, sharp cuspids. “Well, that’s a shame,” she said, her voice soft and sultry. “Because I just might.”

She winked and sauntered out of the office, leaving me standing there, bemused and more than a little smitten. This beautiful, fiery angel had suddenly fallen into my life, and I had a feeling things were about to get even more interesting.

Chapter Five

Bethany

I wanted to be furious with him. Every rational part of me screamed that I should be storming out of Sugar Rush, slamming the door behind me, and swearing to never speak to Drake again. After all, the man had turned me into a vampire—he'd taken my shot at a second life and turned it into something I could never have imagined. I'd died once, been sent back to Earth to give life another go, and now here I was, neither alive nor dead, courtesy of one very tempting vampire.

But there was the problem...He was tempting. No matter how hard I tried to muster up the anger, every time I looked at Drake, it melted into something else. Something far more dangerous. Something I wasn't sure I could afford to indulge in right now, but it was there all the same.

I sighed, pushing the thought away for the hundredth time that day as I stood in the middle of the shop. Everyone was bustling around, getting things ready for Halloween and the blood drive. The place looked nothing like the rundown candy shop I had first walked into. It was alive with energy and excitement. Even the air smelled better, filled with the sugary sweetness of freshly made treats and a hint of something spicy, like cinnamon.

The tagline for the event, Give blood, get a treat and tour the new shop!, was catching on quickly. Alice had outdone herself with the flyers, which she was currently distributing around town with a couple of her kids. The whole community was buzzing about it, and I couldn't help but feel a swell of pride as I looked around at what we had accomplished.

And then, there was Drake, right in the middle of it all.

For a man who had probably spent the last century sitting in a sleek office in New York, sipping expensive blood (or whatever vampires of his status drank), seeing him roll up his designer, custom-tailored sleeves and help us paint walls and assemble candy displays was...unexpected, to say the least. I had half-expected him to stand around barking orders, but no, he was right there with the rest of us, doing whatever needed to be done. It was hard to reconcile the sharp-dressed, brooding vampire with the guy who was currently covered in paint and hauling boxes of supplies like he belonged in a hardware store ad.

The thing was...I found it impressive. Drake wasn't just the kind of person to sit back and watch things fall apart—he was the kind of person who got his hands dirty to make sure things worked. And the more I watched him work, the more I realized that maybe—just maybe—there was more to him than the arrogant, sarcastic vampire I'd spent the past few days bickering with. He had layers. As well as muscles and a way too-sexy smile. All of which intrigued me.

But then again, I reminded myself, this was the guy who had turned me into a vampire. I couldn't forget that. No matter how attractive he was, no matter how much I appreciated his work ethic, he had still crossed a line.

“Hey, Bethany, can you pass me those window decals?” Alice's voice snapped me back to reality, and I turned to see her standing by the front display, holding up a tangle of fake cobwebs.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, grabbing the box of Halloween-themed window clings and handing them over.

As Alice started adhering the spooky decals on the glass, I glanced around at the rest of the crew. Noah was practically buzzing with excitement as he meticulously

arranged the candy displays, his hands moving with an artist's precision as he placed each piece just so. He was in his element, and it was impossible not to get caught up in his enthusiasm. His partner, Gary, stood nearby, hanging strings of tiny orange lights along the shelves, his bald head gleaming beneath the fluorescent lights.

"Bethany, come check this out!" Noah called, waving me over. "I've got a new display for the candy corn popcorn balls, and it's going to blow your mind."

I made my way over to the candy counter, where Noah had set up an elaborate pyramid of the scrumptious treats, each one wrapped in cellophane and tied with curling ribbon. They looked almost too perfect to eat.

"Noah, these look amazing," I said, admiring his handiwork.

"I know, right?" Noah beamed. "But I could honestly do so much more. I'm dying to let loose, and I was wondering if..." He glanced nervously toward Drake, who was busy adjusting a display of pumpkins near the door. "Do you think he'll let me experiment a little?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You mean you want to go rogue with the candy?"

Noah nodded, his eyes wide with excitement. "I've got some killer ideas. You've seen my Insta page. But, you know, corporate is all about sticking to the script. I need Drake to sign off on anything new."

I glanced over at our boss, who was currently inspecting a bag of plastic bats with far more seriousness than the task warranted. "Why don't you ask him?" I suggested, nudging Noah toward Drake.

Noah hesitated for a moment, then squared his shoulders and marched over to where Drake was standing. I followed at a distance, curious to see how this would play out.

“Hey, boss,” Noah said, clearing his throat.

Drake looked up from the bats, raising an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“So, I was thinking...we’ve got this big blood drive coming up, and it’s a perfect opportunity to show off some new candy designs. I’ve been working on a few things, and I was hoping you’d let me, you know, unleash my creative genius. Wait until you taste my monster bark and candied orange peel! I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

Drake’s expression was unreadable as he listened to Noah’s pitch. For a moment, I thought he might shoot it down, but then he surprised me by nodding slowly.

“All right, you convinced me. Go wild,” Drake said, his tone even. “If your recipes are a success, I’ll talk to corporate about adding them to the official lineup.”

Noah’s face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. “You mean it?”

Drake nodded. “You’ve got talent, Noah. I’d be an idiot not to let you show it off.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Noah practically danced back to his workstation, his excitement palpable.

Gary, who had been watching the exchange from the sidelines, gave Drake an approving nod. “You won’t regret it, sir. Noah’s desserts are not only delicious, but he is truly a genius when it comes to sugar work. He has a find hand, just wait until you see what he can do.”

I couldn’t help but smile as I watched Noah wipe a happy tear from the corner of his eye. It was nice to see everyone so excited, and I had to admit, I was impressed that Drake had relented. Maybe he wasn’t as rigid and by-the-book as I’d thought.

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“Feeling generous today?” I asked as I wandered over to where he stood, leaning casually against the counter.

He shot me a sideways glance, a smirk playing at the corner of his lips. “Maybe I just like to keep people on their toes.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, crossing my arms and giving him a knowing look. “Admit it—you’ve got a soft spot for the underdog.”

Drake shrugged, but the smirk remained. “I like to win. And sometimes, that means trusting the right people.”

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t help the smile that tugged at my lips. “You know, I never would have guessed you’d be the type to get your hands dirty.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Trust me, this is not my usual scene.”

“No kidding,” I said, eyeing the paint splatters on his shirt and the dirt under his fingernails. “You look like you’re about to audition for a DIY reality show.”

He glanced down at himself, then back at me with a mock-serious expression. “Is that a compliment?”

“Take it however you want,” I replied with sass.

He stepped closer, his gaze locking onto mine with that intensity that always made my heart skip a beat. “You know,” he said quietly so that only I could hear, “for

someone who's new to this whole vampire thing, you're doing pretty well."

I swallowed, trying to ignore the heat that flared between us every time he got too close. "Yeah, well, I've always been a quick learner."

"Good," he said softly, his voice dropping even lower to that teasing tone that sent shivers down my spine. "Because we've got a lot of work to do, and I'm not about to let you slack off."

Before I could respond, Noah called out from across the room, waving a tray of chocolates in the air. "Bethany! Drake! Come try these!"

Grateful for the distraction, I turned and made my way over to the candy counter, where Noah had arranged an assortment of chocolates shaped like miniature pumpkins, ghosts, and bats. They were intricately detailed, each one a tiny masterpiece.

"Wow, Noah," I said, genuinely impressed. "These are incredible."

Noah grinned, clearly pleased with himself. "I told you I had some ideas. I just couldn't help myself."

Drake picked up one of the chocolates, inspecting it closely before popping it into his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully, then nodded. "These are good. Really good."

As Noah basked in the glow of Drake's approval, I glanced over at the clock on the wall. It was getting late, and we still had a few more things to finish before the shop was ready for the blood drive. But despite the long hours, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was exactly where I was supposed to be.

Later that night as the group's energy waned and we prepared to stop work for the

day, Drake and I made plans to meet at my place. We still hadn't cracked the puzzle of reversing the vampire curse, and with Halloween fast approaching, I was starting to feel the pressure. But if I was going to spend eternity as one of the undead, I figured I'd at least exhaust all my options first.

"I don't cook," I told him honestly, leaning against the counter as we cleaned up the shop for the night. "But I'll supply the spells and ingredients if you bring dinner."

Drake raised an eyebrow, a slow smile spreading across his face. "You drive a hard bargain, Snow."

I couldn't help but return his grin. "Consider it a fair exchange."

"Deal," he said, his eyes lingering on mine for just a moment longer than necessary before turning to leave. "See you at eight."

By the time eight o'clock rolled around, I was a bundle of nerves. I wasn't exactly sure why—this wasn't a date, after all. But it felt like more than just a casual dinner. Maybe it was the fact that we'd already crossed some serious boundaries, or maybe it was because there was this undeniable pull between us that I couldn't shake. Either way, I was more flustered than I wanted to admit.

When Drake arrived, I wasn't entirely prepared for the sight of him standing in my doorway, holding a large paper bag filled with what smelled like heaven. His sleeves were rolled up, his dark hair slightly mussed, and there was something almost casual about him that I hadn't seen before. It was...disarming.

"Dinner is served," he said, flashing that annoyingly sexy smile as he stepped inside.

I eyed the bag suspiciously as I shut the door behind him. "What did you bring? And please don't tell me it's blood. I'm not sure I could live with myself, even though I'm

undead.”

He chuckled, setting the bag down on my kitchen counter and pulling out a couple of plates. “No blood tonight. I figured we’d stick to something a little more...traditional.” He pulled out several covered platters and a bottle of red wine. “I hope crab-stuffed, bacon-wrapped filet mignon with whiskey peppercorn sauce, roasted red potatoes, and grilled asparagus sounds good to you.”

I stared at him open-mouthed as I watched him unpack the meal. I wasn’t expecting this. I had figured he’d bring some takeout or, at best, something reheated from a restaurant. But this? A gourmet dinner? That was not what I had imagined.

“You...cooked all this?” I asked, trying to hide my surprise.

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Drake glanced up from where he was arranging the food on the plates. “What... You think vampires don’t cook?”

“I just didn’t peg you for the ‘chef’ type,” I admitted, sliding into a chair at the small dining table.

“I find it relaxing,” he said simply, pouring us each a glass of wine. “It’s one of the few things in life where I can control the outcome.”

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Control freak, huh?”

He flashed me a grin as he sat down across from me. “You could say that.”

We ate in companionable silence for a few minutes, the sound of clinking silverware and soft music playing in the background. The food was incredible—tender, flavorful, and cooked to perfection. I had to admit, I was impressed.

“This is really good,” I said, taking another bite. “I wasn’t expecting you to be so amazing in the kitchen.”

Drake leaned back in his chair, swirling his wine in the glass. “I’ve had a lot of time to perfect my skills—and in more places than the kitchen, I might add.”

I took a gulp of wine in response as I felt heat rising in my cheeks.

He chuckled, and I spied that familiar gleam in his eye. He was usually so guarded, only offering pieces of himself when he wanted to. It was part of what made him so

infuriating—and so intriguing.

“So,” I said after a few more bites, “are you ready for this?”

“Ready for what?” Drake asked, raising an eyebrow.

“For the spellcasting,” I replied, trying to keep the smile out of my voice. “I’ve got everything we need. I even made a trip to a metaphysical shop in the next town over. And let me tell you, it was an experience.”

Drake chuckled, setting down his wine glass. “Now you’ve got me curious. What exactly did you pick up?”

I grinned, pushing away from the table and heading over to the living room, where I had a stack of library books and a large bag of supplies. “Oh, just the essentials,” I said, pulling out a bundle of smudge sticks, a few crystals, and—drumroll—a plastic wand that I was pretty sure had been part of a child’s costume at some point.

Drake raised an eyebrow as I laid out the assortment of items on the coffee table. “I’m not sure if I should be concerned or impressed.”

“Go with impressed,” I said, plopping down on the couch and flipping open one of the books. “I checked out everything I could find on reversing spells, breaking curses, and undoing dark magic. I’m not saying any of it will work, but it’s better than nothing.”

Drake sat down beside me, glancing at the pile of books with a bemused expression. “You really went all out, didn’t you?”

“Well, I figure if we’re going to be cursed for all eternity, we might as well give it our best shot,” I said, handing him one of the books.

We spent the next hour flipping through the books, lighting smudge sticks (one of which nearly set my hair on fire), waving the plastic wand around like a couple of kids, and mixing up some concoction with hair of toad and other questionable ingredients. I wasn't holding out much hope for any of it, but I would have given us an A for effort.

At one point, Drake leaned over the coffee table, squinting at the bubbling mixture in a small cauldron I'd found at the metaphysical store. "Are you sure this is supposed to smell like... burnt socks?"

I laughed, shaking my head. "No idea. The book said to add hair of toad, but I'm pretty sure that's just some weird grass they sold me."

Drake wrinkled his nose, poking at the mixture with a spoon. "Remind me to never let you cook."

"Hey!" I protested, swatting at his arm. "I told you, cooking is not my forte. But I definitely appreciate a good meal."

He chuckled, leaning back on the couch and stretching his arm across the backrest. "Fair enough."

Despite our best efforts, nothing worked. The spells were a complete bust. No matter how many crystals we waved around or how many questionable herbs we mixed into potions, nothing seemed to do a thing to undo the curse. By the time we finally gave up, the apartment was filled with the smoky scent of smudge sticks, and the coffee table was littered with half-burnt candles, open books, and remnants of soggy herbs.

"Well," I said with a sigh, flopping back onto the couch beside Drake. "That was a waste."

He leaned back, his eyes watching me closely, the playful expression fading into something more serious. “We’ll figure it out.”

I glanced at him, raising an eyebrow. “You sound confident.”

He shrugged, his gaze still locked on mine. “Because I know you. And I know you’re not the type to give up.”

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There was something in the way he said it—something that made my heart skip a beat. I swallowed, suddenly very aware of the closeness between us, the heat from his body radiating against mine. The air felt heavy, thick with unspoken tension, and I realized just how close we were sitting.

Before I could stop myself, I looked up at him, and our eyes locked. His gaze was intense, searching, and I felt that familiar pull between us, the same magnetic energy I'd felt the night we'd first met. My breath caught in my throat, and I found myself leaning just a little closer.

Drake's hand moved, his fingers brushing lightly against mine on the couch cushion. The touch was electric, sending a spark of heat straight through me. And then, before I could think twice, we were kissing.

It started slow, tentative, as if we were both testing the waters, but it quickly escalated. His hands moved to my waist, pulling me closer, and I melted into him, my fingers tangling in his hair. The world around us seemed to disappear, the failed spells, the books, the candles—all of it fading into the background as I lost myself in the sensation of his lips on mine.

It wasn't just a kiss—it was everything. The pent-up tension, the unspoken attraction, the complicated emotions we'd both been dancing around for days. It all came crashing together in that moment, and for a while, I forgot about everything else. I forgot that I was technically undead, forgot about the curse, forgot about trying to get into heaven again.

It was just me and Drake, together on my couch, the heat between us burning brighter

with every touch.

His hands slid up my back, his fingers leaving a trail of fire in their wake, and I found myself pressing closer, needing more, craving more. My heart raced, and for the first time since all of this started, I felt alive. Really alive.

We broke apart, both of us breathing heavily, our foreheads resting against each other as we tried to catch our breath.

“Bethany,” Drake whispered, his voice rough and low, sending a shiver down my spine. His forehead was pressed against mine, our breath mingling in the small space between us. I could still feel the imprint of his hands on my body, the warmth of his touch lingering like a brand on my skin.

I didn’t answer right away, still trying to steady my own breathing, my heart pounding in my chest like it was trying to remind me that, technically, I shouldn’t even have a heartbeat anymore. I shouldn’t be feeling this way—this alive—and yet, here I was, wrapped up in Drake’s arms.

“What are we doing?” I finally whispered, my voice barely audible as I pulled back slightly, just enough to look him in the eyes.

Drake didn’t answer immediately. His dark eyes searched mine, and there was a flicker of something there—something vulnerable, something raw—that made my stomach twist in knots. “I don’t know,” he admitted quietly, his voice uncharacteristically soft. “But I know I don’t want to stop.”

His confession hung between us, heavy and real, and for a moment, I didn’t know what to say. I should want to stop. I should want to push him away and remind him—remind myself—of everything that was wrong with this situation. I was supposed to be angry at him for turning me into a vampire, for throwing my life into

even more chaos than it was already in, for making everything so... complicated. But how could I be angry when every time he touched me, it felt like fire coursing through my veins? How could I be angry when, in his arms, I felt more connected to this world than I had in ages?

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I whispered, my fingers still laced around his neck, even though every logical part of me screamed at me to let go.

He leaned in closer, his lips brushing my temple in a soft, barely-there kiss. “Do what?”

“Be...whatever this is,” I said, my voice trembling slightly. “With you. I mean, you turned me into this...this vampire. I’m supposed to hate you for that.”

Drake pulled back just enough to look me in the eyes again, his expression serious but not cold. There was something almost... tender about the way he looked at me. “I never wanted to hurt you, Bethany. You have to believe that.”

I swallowed hard, my throat tight. “Then why did you?”

He hesitated, the words lingering on his lips before he finally spoke. “Because I was weak. You...you’re not like anyone I’ve ever met. And that night, I lost control. I don’t know what it is about you, but I couldn’t stop myself.”

His admission hit me like a punch to the gut. Part of me wanted to be flattered—he had lost control because of me, because there was something about me that he couldn’t resist. But another part of me felt conflicted, knowing that his moment of weakness had changed my life forever. Except, hadn’t I done the same thing myself? How could I blame him when the truth was staring me right in the face?

For a moment, we just sat there in silence, the tension between us thick and palpable.

The room was dimly lit and the candles had burned down to little more than stubs, casting a warm, flickering glow that softened the edges of everything around us, making the night feel almost surreal. Tears began to fill my eyes before I could stop them.

“You don’t have to forgive me,” Drake said, gently cupping my cheek with his hand and meeting my gazes with his own. “But I’ll do whatever it takes to make this right.”

There was an earnestness in his voice that caught me off guard, and for the first time, I believed him. I believed that he truly regretted what had happened, that he wasn’t just saying the words to placate me.

I shifted slightly on the couch, pulling away from him just enough to create a little distance. “What if we can’t fix it?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. “What if this is it? What if we’re stuck like this forever?”

Drake didn’t answer right away, his eyes searching mine. “Then I’ll help you live with it,” he said simply. “I’ll help you figure out how to make the best of it. I owe you that much.”

I looked at him, studying his face—the sharp lines of his jaw, the intensity in his dark eyes, the way his lips pressed into a thin line as he spoke. He was dangerous, yes. Complicated. But there was also something else. Something that made me trust him, even when I didn’t want to.

“Okay,” I whispered, the word slipping out before I could second-guess it.

Drake nodded, and the tension between us shifted, softening into something different—something that felt less like desperation and more like understanding. I wasn’t alone in this, and neither was he.

Without another word, he leaned in again, his lips brushing mine in a slow, lingering kiss. It was different this time—less urgent, more careful. Like we were both acknowledging the weight of everything that had happened between us, but choosing to let it go, just for a moment.

I sighed into the kiss, my body relaxing against his as his arms wrapped around me, pulling me closer. The heat between us flared again, and I lost myself in the sensation of his handson my skin, the way his touch made me forget about everything else.

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It didn't matter that we hadn't broken the curse. It didn't matter that we were stuck in this strange, new reality where blood cravings and immortality were the new normal. Right now, all that mattered was this—this moment, this connection, this fire that seemed to burn brighter with every passing second.

We stayed like that for what felt like hours, lost in each other, the world outside my apartment fading into nothingness.

“Maybe we don't have all the answers yet,” Drake said softly, his fingers gently tracing patterns on my back. “But we'll get there. Together.”

I smiled, closing my eyes as I let his words wash over me. Together. It wasn't a promise I had expected to hear, but somehow, it felt like the one I needed.

“Together,” I echoed, my voice barely above a whisper.

Maybe this new life wasn't the end of everything I'd hoped for. Maybe it was just the beginning of something new. Something I hadn't planned for, but something that could still be mine. Whatever happened next, at least I wouldn't be facing it alone.

Chapter Six

Drake

The phone rang just as I was finishing up the books in the back office at Sugar Rush, the glow of the desk lamp casting a faint circle of light over the mess of papers. I didn't even have to look at the screen to know who it was. Delilah. Her timing was,

as always, impeccable—just when I thought I could get a moment to think.

I let out a slow breath before answering, already bracing for the conversation that was about to unfold.

“Delilah,” I greeted her, forcing a calmness into my voice that I didn’t feel.

“Drake, darling,” her voice purred through the receiver, soft and dangerous, like a serpent coiled in silk. “I’ve been looking at the reports, and I have to say, things aren’t turning around fast enough for my liking.”

There it was. The subtle accusation wrapped in faux concern. I could practically picture her lounging in her Manhattan penthouse, draped in designer silk, her long red nails tapping rhythmically against the glass of her wine. She never did like getting her hands dirty, but she loved watching others squirm.

I leaned back in the chair, rubbing a hand across my jaw as I stared at the stack of invoices in front of me. “It’s only been a few weeks since I got here, Delilah. You can’t expect a full turnaround overnight.”

“I can,” she countered smoothly, her voice hardening just enough to make her point. “And I do. We don’t have time to waste on sentimentality. Fire the staff. All of them. You know that’s what needs to happen. Start fresh, and then come back to New York where you belong.”

Her words felt like a slap, sharp and deliberate. Fire the staff? After everything they’d put into this place? After the progress we were starting to make? The thought of letting them go—Alice, who’d practically poured her life into the candy store, or Noah, whose talent was undeniable—made my stomach twist.

“No,” I said firmly, keeping my tone steady. “That’s not the solution. Alice

Henderson has been with this shop for years. She doesn't know anything else. And Noah Bennett... Noah has real talent as a pastry chef. He's already working on new candy designs that could turn things around. We don't need to start over. What we need is to invest more in the people who are already here."

"Invest in them?" she echoed, her voice dripping with disdain. "Are you going soft on me, Drake? Since when did you care about these...humans and their pathetic little lives?"

I gritted my teeth, holding back the retort that threatened to slip out. She was pushing me, poking at the cracks she knew were there. "I'm not going soft," I said slowly, deliberately. "I'm thinking about what's best for the business. Raise their salaries, give Noah the creative freedom to show what he can do. If morale improves, sales will follow."

There was a beat of silence on the other end of the line, and I could almost hear the gears turning in her mind, calculating whether or not my argument had any merit. But I knew Delilah too well. She didn't care about merit. She cared about control. Power. The same things I did. Right? My forehead furrowed.

"Interesting," she mused finally, her voice low and dangerous. "But I have to wonder, Drake...is this sudden bout of compassion really about the shop? Or is it about your new little employee? The pretty one? What's her name again? Bethany?"

I stiffened, a chill running down my spine. "What do you know about Bethany?"

Delilah laughed, the sound dark and amused, like she was savoring the crackle of tension over the phone line. "I have eyes everywhere, darling. Or did you forget? Part of your soul belongs to me. I feel everything you do. I see everything you do."

Her words hit me like ice water, a cold reminder of the deal I'd made all those years

ago. I had given up part of my soul for power, for immortality, for the chance to be more than the nothing I'd been before. And in return, I was bound to her whims, her control. Even now, hundreds of miles away, she had a hold on me.

"Bethany Snow isn't the problem," I said through gritted teeth. "The problem is that you're too focused on short-term results. This place has potential, but you have to give it time. Let me work with them. Let me fix it."

"Fix it?" Delilah repeated, her tone mocking. "Darling, you've already wasted too much time in Sweetberry Hollow with nothing to show for it. Frankly, you should be packing your bags to get yourself the hell back to New York."

I closed my eyes, feeling the weight of her words settle over me like a suffocating blanket. I'd spent centuries working for power, wealth, freedom—everything I'd wanted when I made my deal with her. And yet, as I sat here in this small town, surrounded by people who actually cared about this place, I realized something I hadn't expected.

I didn't want to leave.

"Give me until after Halloween," I said finally, my voice low but resolute. "We're hosting a blood drive, and the shop's already getting more attention. If things don't improve after that, I'll do whatever needs to be done. But not before."

Delilah was silent for a long moment, and I could feel her calculating her next move, deciding whether or not to allow me this small reprieve.

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“Fine,” she said at last, her voice clipped. “But if you fail, I’ll send someone else to clean up the mess. And there will be repercussions.”

The line went dead, and I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding, slamming the phone down on the desk. The anger simmered beneath the surface, frustration curling in my chest like a tightening knot.

Soft? She thinks I’m going soft?

Maybe she was right. Maybe I was softening. I couldn’t deny that I cared about Alice and Noah, that I didn’t want to see them lose their livelihoods over something that wasn’t their fault. And then there was Bethany...

Bethany. The mere thought of her was enough to send my mind spiraling into chaos. She was supposed to be just another employee, someone I could dismiss or ignore, but she wasn’t. It was impossible for me to keep her at arm’s length. And the more time I spent with her, the harder it was to ignore the fact that I didn’t want to.

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration boiling over. Was this what it felt like to have a heart again? To feel things, to care about people, about places? I hadn’t felt this way in centuries, and now it was all crashing down on me at once. It hurt. It hurt more than I was willing to admit.

I needed to clear my head. I needed to remember who I was—what I was. Something dead. Something cold. A monster. Not someone who got tangled up in the lives of small towns and humans.

Grabbing my coat, I stepped outside into the cold evening air. The wind bit at my skin as I walked down the street, the sharp chill helping to clear the fog in my mind. Twilight had settled over Sweetberry Hollow, casting long shadows across the cobblestone streets. The moon was high in the sky, half-obscured by racing clouds, and the wind sent leaves swirling through the air in erratic patterns, echoing the chaos of my thoughts.

I walked aimlessly, letting the rhythm of my steps drown out the cacophony in my head. The streets were alive with the sound of laughter and chatter, families walking hand in hand down the sidewalks, couples sipping hot cider and cocoa from steaming mugs. The storefronts were lined with decorations—jack-o'-lanterns, fake cobwebs, glowing ghosts—and the whole town buzzed with the energy of the holiday season.

I watched as an elderly couple strolled past, their hands clasped together as they smiled and whispered to each other, completely at ease in each other's presence. It was such a simple, human thing, but it tugged at something deep inside me.

What is happening to me?

I wasn't supposed to care about this. I wasn't supposed to care about any of it. But as I walked through the square, past the twinkling lights and the laughter of the people around me, I couldn't help but feel, the emotions tumbling over me like ocean waves. It wasn't just the town itself, though it was beautiful in its own way. It was the people. Alice, with her quiet strength and motherly warmth. Noah, with his unrelenting optimism and boundless creativity. Even Gary, with his quirky sense of humor and steadfast support.

And then there was Bethany.

Bethany was the reason everything was coming apart at the seams. She was the reason I couldn't focus, the reason I couldn't just do what Delilah wanted and walk

away. Every time I thought about her—about her laugh, her determination, the way she made me feel like maybe I wasn't completely lost to the eons—I felt something stir inside me. Something I'd never allowed myself to feel.

The thought made my chest tighten, a painful reminder of everything I had tried to leave behind when I became what I was. I had built walls around myself, around my heart, and I had kept those walls up for centuries. I wasn't supposed to feel anything. I wasn't supposed to care.

But now, here I was, standing in the middle of nowhere, watching the nobodies live their lives, and all I could think about was how much I didn't want to leave. How much I wanted to stay. How much I wanted to belong.

I stopped in front of a small shop window, staring at where my reflection would have been in the glass. I touched my fingertips to it and felt my eyes growing wet.

This was what I had given up when I made my deal with Delilah. This was what I had traded for power, for immortality, for the chance to escape the pain of being human. And now, after all these years, I wanted it back.

I turned away from the window, my heart heavy as I started walking again. The laughter and warmth of the town seemed to press in around me, suffocating in its beauty. I didn't know how to deal with this. I didn't know how to deal with her.

But one thing was clear. I wasn't going to leave Sweetberry Hollow. At least, not yet. Not while I could still hold out, while there was still something here worth holding on to.

By the time I reached my apartment, the sky had darkened completely, and the cold had settled deep into my bones. I stood at the door for a moment, staring up at the moonlit sky, the wind howling around me. And then I walked inside and back to

nothingness.

Chapter Seven

Bethany

Halloween had always been my favorite holiday, but this year was different. There was something in the air, a mix of excitement and nervous energy, as if the universe was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. Maybe it was the fact that I was technically undead now, which threw a fun twist on the whole costume idea, or maybe it was because so much was riding on this blood drive. Either way, I was jittery in a way that had nothing to do with the three cups of coffee I'd downed before heading to Sugar Rush.

I tugged at my angel costume for what felt like the hundredth time, adjusting the halo on my head, which, no surprise, had tilted to the side again. The white dress I'd worn to the Halloween party a few days ago still bore the faint remnants of the drink I'd spilled on it, but it was the only thing I had that fit the theme. A stained angel—how fitting for someone who had technically fallen from grace.

“Not perfect, but it'll do,” I muttered to myself, giving the halo one last tweak before turning to the mirror. It was still off-kilter. Figures.

I sighed, then shrugged. “Let's get the show on the road.”

The blood drive was in full swing by the time I arrived at the shop. The community had shown up in droves—people of all ages lined up to donate blood and tour the newly revamped Sugar Rush. It seemed like the whole town had come out to support the cause, and the energy was electric. Parents and kids milled around in adorable costumes, from tiny pirates and princesses to superheroes and even a few miniature zombies. The air was filled with laughter and the sweet, sugary smell of candy.

I stood back for a moment, taking it all in. The shop looked incredible, transformed from the tired, peeling-paint candy store I'd walked into not too long ago into something magical. The decorations we'd painstakingly put together—cobwebs, jack-o'-lanterns, flickering electric candles—set the perfect mood. The windows were draped in glowing orange lights, and the candy displays were nothing short of spectacular. Noah's hard work was paying off, and even Alice, who had been so stressed in the beginning, was dressed in a Mrs. Claus outfit, beaming from ear to ear as she handed out treats. The counter was lined with Noah's creations—chocolates shaped like ghosts, bats, and pumpkins. He'd even made a series of "vampire bites," little chocolates with a surprise red raspberry filling.

"Bethany, these are flying off the shelves!" He called to me from behind the counter, his voice barely audible over the excited chatter of customers. He was dressed as Miss Scrumptious again, this time with a huge orange feathered boa wrapped around his neck and a bejeweled crown perched on his head. His partner, Gary, was there too, dressed this time as Robin, Batman's sidekick, complete with shiny red costume, yellow cape, and green tights. The two of them made quite the pair, as always.

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I smiled, waving at him before turning my attention back to the crowd. The decorations, the costumes, the candy—it all blended together in a kaleidoscope of Halloween magic.

“Looks amazing, doesn’t it?” Drake’s voice sounded from behind me, smooth and low, and I turned to find him standing next to me, his eyes scanning the crowd.

He was back in his Dracula costume from the party, and even though I knew he didn’t need the fake fangs or the black cape, he somehow managed to make the whole thing look effortlessly cool. The dark velvet of his cloak seemed to blend into the shadows of the shop, his black eyes gleaming as he watched the bustle around us.

“It really does,” I said, a little breathless. “I think we actually pulled this off.”

Drake smirked, his eyes flicking to me. “You sound surprised.”

“I mean, considering where we started? Yeah, I’m a little surprised.” I grinned back at him. “It’s a miracle we’re even still standing.”

Drake chuckled, and for a moment, everything felt...easy. Normal, even. The tension that had been hanging between us ever since our futile attempts to break the curse seemed to dissipate, replaced by the shared triumph of what we’d managed to accomplish together.

And honestly, for the first time in a while, I wasn’t thinking about how to get into heaven. I wasn’t thinking about the fact that I was now technically undead or that I hadn’t figured out a way out to free us from this mess. I was just... happy. Here, in

this moment, surrounded by the smiling faces of my small-town community that had welcomed me back with open arms, it felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

People continued to stream in and out of Sugar Rush all day, donating blood, grabbing treats, and marveling at the new look of the shop.

By the time evening rolled around, the event was winding down, but the excitement in the air hadn't faded. I watched as the last few families left, their kids bouncing with energy, clutching bags of candy and plastic fangs. Halloween was officially a success.

"Think we can finally call it a night?" I asked Drake as the last customer waved goodbye.

"Almost," he replied, glancing around the shop. "Just a little cleanup left."

I sighed, leaning against the counter. "I'm so tired I could pass out. Literally."

He gave me a sideways smile. "You can't pass out, remember? Undead and all that."

"Oh, right," I said with a laugh, giving him a playful shove. "I forgot."

We moved around the shop, tidying up the displays and sweeping the floors, both of us too worn out to even banter much. The shop had a cozy, warm glow about it now that the crowds had gone, and we said goodnight to Noah, Gary, and Alice as they left for home. After they had gone, and it was just the two of us, I paused for a moment, appreciating the peace and quiet.

"Hey, Bethany," Drake called suddenly from the front door. "I think we've got one last customer."

I frowned, glancing up from where I was wiping down the counter. “What do you mean?”

Drake motioned for me to come over, and as I approached, my eyes widened in shock.

There, just outside the front door, was a small bassinet. And inside it, wrapped in a fluffy blanket, was a baby.

“A baby?” I gasped, hurrying over to get a closer look. “What the...”

Drake bent down, carefully lifting the bundle from the bassinet, and I could see the tiny face peeking out from the layers of fabric. The baby was dressed in a little yellow chick costume, complete with a soft yellow onesie and tiny wings. She blinked up at us with wide eyes, her tiny hands clutching the edge of the blanket.

“She’s adorable,” I whispered, my heart clenching in my chest as I reached out to touch her tiny fingers. The baby grasped onto my finger, her grip surprisingly strong for someone so small.

“A girl,” Drake murmured, his voice soft as he looked down at the baby in his arms. “And look, her blanket’s monogrammed.”

I squinted at the edge of the blanket, where a name had been stitched into the fabric in delicate script. Lily.

“Lily,” I repeated, my voice barely above a whisper. “But...where are her parents? Who would leave a baby out here like this?”

We both glanced around, but the street was completely deserted. The families that had been milling around earlier had all gone home, and the town square was eerily

quiet now, the only sound the rustle of leaves in the cool evening breeze.

“There’s no one,” Drake said, his voice tight with concern. “What do we do?”

I bit my lip, my mind racing. We couldn’t just leave her here, and it didn’t look like anyone was coming back for her anytime soon.

“I guess we take her home with us,” I said, already reaching for my phone. “I’ll call the police, and...Gran. Gran will know what to do.”

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Drake nodded, cradling the baby gently in his arms as I dialed the station. I explained the situation, but there wasn't much they could do at the moment. Social services wouldn't be available until the next day, and in the meantime, someone had to take care of Lily. That someone was apparently going to be me and Drake.

After calling on Gran and getting her advice (which mostly consisted of her cooing over the baby and telling me to stock up on formula), we bundled Lily up and headed back to my apartment. The streets were quiet, the lamp posts casting orbs of golden light along the square.

Back at my apartment, I laid a blanket out on the couch and set Lily down while Drake headed out to the store to pick up everything we'd need for the night—formula, diapers, bottles, and anything else that might come in handy when caring for a baby. I watched as Lily wriggled in her sleep, her tiny hands curling and uncurling as she let out a soft sigh.

My heart ached as I sat, staring down at this tiny, innocent life. Who would leave a baby like this? What kind of person could walk away from something so precious? I didn't understand it. I didn't think I ever could.

Drake returned a short while later, bags in hand, and we spent the next hour fumbling our way through feeding Lily, changing her diaper, and trying to figure out how to make her comfortable. It was a learning experience for both of us—neither of us had ever taken care of a baby before, and our fumbling made it obvious.

But despite the chaos, there was something...comforting about it. Something that felt right. Like this was exactly where we were meant to be.

As the night wore on, and Lily finally settled into a peaceful sleep, I found myself sitting on the couch with her cradled in my arms, her soft breaths warm against my chest.

Drake sat beside me, his arm resting on the back of the couch as he watched us with a look I couldn't quite place.

I glanced up at him, my heart swelling with something I couldn't quite name. "What do you think is going to happen to her?"

Drake shook his head slowly. "I don't know. But we'll figure it out."

I looked down at Lily, brushing a lock of soft hair away from her face. She was so small, so vulnerable. And yet, as I held her, I felt a strange sense of peace wash over me. For the first time in a long time, I wasn't thinking about the future, about how to undo the curse that had been placed on me, or even about how to get back into heaven.

Right now, in this moment, with Lily in my arms and Drake by my side, everything felt... perfect.

Maybe this was what life was supposed to be about. Not grand gestures or eternal quests for redemption. But the small, quiet moments. The moments of connection, of love, of finding family in the most unexpected places.

I looked up at Drake again, and for the first time, I realized that I was falling for him. For both of them. This tiny, unexpected life in my arms, and the man sitting beside me, who had somehow become the one thing I hadn't seen coming.

"Drake," I whispered, my voice soft. "I think I'm falling in love."

He didn't respond right away, but when he did, his voice was just as soft, just as sure.

"Me too."

Chapter Eight

Drake

What the hell was happening to me?

I was sitting on Bethany's couch in the middle of the night with a sleeping baby in my arms and a fallen angel dozing at my side. This wasn't just unusual—it was surreal. I'd seen a lot in my long, complicated existence, but nothing quite like this.

Lily had woken up, her tiny cries shattering the stillness of the apartment, and I'd automatically picked her up, bouncing her gently until she settled against my chest. Bethany, exhausted from the day and everything that had happened, was fast asleep next to me, her head resting against the arm of the couch. She looked peaceful, her bent halo sitting on the coffee table, and I couldn't help but smile at the sight.

As Lily continued to fuss quietly, I went in search of the bottle of formula that Bethany had prepared earlier. After taking it from the fridge, I returned to sitting on the couch. I positioned the bottle and hesitated, taking a moment to wonder if I was holding it correctly. It wasn't as if I'd ever done this before, but Lily's tiny mouth latched on almost instinctively, and she began to drink.

The apartment was silent except for her soft sucking noises and Bethany's gentle breathing. The smoky scent of the extinguished candles lingered in the air, mingling with the faintly sweet smell of Lily's baby lotion. It was such a simple, quiet moment, yet it held more weight than anything I'd experienced in centuries.

I looked down at Lily's small face, her little hand resting against my fingers, and something inside me broke open. A flood of emotions that I had long since locked away, or perhaps forgotten, came rushing back. Regret. Longing. And—of all things—joy. Real, bone-deep joy.

And then I realized I was crying.

It was absurd. I hadn't cried in over two hundred years, not even when I thought I'd lost all that was left of my humanity. But now, here I was, with tears streaming down my face, dripping onto Lily's tiny fingers. She cooed softly, as if sensing my turmoil, and I couldn't help but smile through the tears.

"I'm a mess," I whispered, my voice barely audible in the quiet apartment.

I looked over at Bethany, her face soft and relaxed in sleep, and I knew then, with a certainty that shook me to my core, that I loved her. I loved everything about her—her determination, her kindness, her humor, her imperfections that made her who she was. And somehow, she had become the most important person in my world.

Nothing meant anything to me anymore but this—right now—Taking care of these two people. I didn't care about power or wealth, not anymore. I cared about them—about Bethany and Lily. And the thought of being a father, of creating a life with Bethany, was more appealing than any amount of power or immortality could ever be.

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“I love you,” I murmured softly in the stillness, my voice breaking. I looked down at Lily, her eyes fluttering closed as she drifted back to sleep. “And God help me, I love you, too.”

What was I supposed to do with that?

Before I could spiral any further, there was a knock on the door. A soft, tentative knock that broke the silence like a ripple on still water. Bethany stirred beside me, her eyes fluttering open as she blinked sleepily.

“Did I fall asleep?” she asked, her voice thick with exhaustion.

“Yeah,” I replied, my voice still hoarse. “There’s someone at the door.”

She frowned, glancing at the clock on the wall. It was nearly three in the morning. “Who could it be?”

“Only one way to find out,” I said, shifting Lily gently so she was cradled in one arm. I didn’t want to put her down. Not yet.

Bethany stood, stretching before heading toward the door. She opened it cautiously, and I heard her sharp intake of breath as she recognized the visitors.

Standing on the doorstep were two police officers, their uniforms crisp against the backdrop of the dimly lit hallway. Beside them was an older woman with silver hair pulled back in a neat bun. Her face was lined with age and weariness, but there was a warmth in her eyes that made her seem familiar, even though I was certain I’d never

met her before.

“Are you Miss Bethany Snow?” one of the officers asked.

“Yes,” Bethany replied, her voice tinged with worry. “Is everything all right?”

The older woman stepped forward, her eyes softening as she looked at Bethany and then at me, holding Lily in my arms. “My name is Rose-Marie Chamberlain,” she said, her voice gentle but firm. “I’m Lily’s grandmother.”

The relief that washed over me was almost overwhelming, and I felt Bethany relax slightly beside me. But Rose-Marie’s expression was still heavy, and I knew there was more to the story.

“Please, come in,” Bethany said, stepping aside, allowing them to enter.

The police officers stayed in the hallway, but Rose-Marie walked in slowly, her eyes fixed on Lily. I could see the emotion welling up in her eyes, and I knew without a doubt that she was telling the truth.

“I...I can’t thank you both enough for taking care of her,” Rose-Marie said, her voice trembling slightly. “My daughter, Lily’s mother, has been struggling with her mental health ever since her husband was killed in the service. He never got to meet Lily, and it’s been...so hard on her.”

I glanced at Bethany, seeing the tears already gathering in her eyes. I struggled to keep my own emotions in check as I listened to Rose-Marie’s story.

“She had a moment of crisis,” Rose-Marie continued, her voice breaking. “She made a poor choice leaving Lily the way she did, but she’s agreed to get help, and we’re doing everything we can to support her. My husband and I will be caring for Lily and

her older brother Liam until my daughter is ready to take them back.”

Bethany couldn't hold back her tears any longer. She let out a quiet sob, covering her mouth with her hand as she tried to regain control. I felt my own throat tighten, the weight of everything pressing down on me.

“We've fallen in love with her,” Bethany said, her voice barely audible through her tears. “In just a few hours...she's precious. She's...”

Rose-Marie nodded, her own eyes shining. “I know...She is. And I promise you, she's in good hands now.”

Bethany wiped at her tears, sniffing softly. “Can we...would it be all right if we came to visit her? Maybe...babysit sometimes?”

Rose-Marie's face softened into a genuine smile. “Of course. Lily's brother, Liam, just turned four. He could use a positive male role model in his life. If you're willing, Mr. Youngblood, I know he'd love to spend time with you. Maybe playing ball at the park?”

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of her words settle over me. I knew I shouldn't promise something like that, not when I was supposed to return to New York. But as I stood there, with Bethany by my side and Lily in my arms, I couldn't imagine leaving. Not now. Not ever.

“Call me Drake,” I said quietly, meeting Rose-Marie's eyes. “And I'd like that. I'd like that very much.”

The older woman smiled warmly, reaching out to take Lily from my arms. I hesitated for just a moment before letting go, feeling an unexpected sense of loss as the child's warmth left my chest. Rose-Marie held her close, whispering softly to her as she

rocked her gently.

“Thank you,” Rose-Marie said, her voice full of gratitude. “Thank you both.”

Bethany managed a watery smile, nodding as Rose-Marie and Lily turned to leave with the officers. I watched as the door closed behind them, the weight of the goodbye settling over the apartment like a heavy fog.

And then, without warning, Bethany burst into tears. She collapsed against me, her body shaking with sobs, and I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close as she cried into my chest. I pressed my lips to the top of her head, whispering words of comfort that felt inadequate against the depth of her pain.

“I love you,” I murmured, my voice rough with emotion. “Bethany, I love you.”

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She looked up at me, her eyes red and swollen, but there was a light in them that hadn't been there before. "You do?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"If I can find a way," I continued, my voice steady despite the chaos in my heart, "I want to stay here. In Sweetberry Hollow. I want to make a life with you, curse or no curse. If you'll have me. Even though I am what I am."

Bethany let out a soft laugh, her tears still streaming down her cheeks. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes, I'll have you. And I love you too...just as you are."

I leaned down, capturing her lips in a kiss that was soft and full of unspoken promises. It was a moment of clarity in the midst of all the uncertainty, a moment that made everything else fade away.

But then, there was another knock on the door.

Bethany frowned, pulling back slightly. "Who else could it be?" she asked, wiping at her eyes.

"Maybe Rose-Marie forgot something," I suggested, though there was a sinking feeling in my gut that told me this was something else entirely.

Bethany crossed the room, opening the door cautiously. And there, standing on the threshold, was Delilah.

The evil witch grinned wickedly, her crimson lips curling into a smile that sent a chill down my spine. My heart plummeted as I took in the sight of her, standing there in all

her elegant, wicked glory.

“Who—?” Bethany started, her voice laced with confusion.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for what was about to happen. “Bethany,” I said slowly, “this is Delilah Montgomery. My...boss.”

“Delilah Montgomery?” Bethany repeated, her eyes narrowing. “The devil?”

Delilah laughed, the sound sharp and full of dark amusement. “Close enough, darling,” she purred. “I followed Drake here because I couldn’t trust him to follow orders. And now that the shop is doing well—congratulations on the blood drive, by the way—it’s time for Drake to come back to New York where he belongs. Back to work for Montgomery Enterprises.”

I felt my anger flare, the heat of it pushing back against the icy fear in my chest. “No,” I said firmly, stepping forward. “I’m not going back. I’ve decided to quit and stay here, in Sweetberry Hollow. This is where I belong.”

Delilah’s smile faded, her eyes narrowing dangerously. “You’re defying me?” she asked, her voice deceptively calm. “Even though I own part of your soul? You gave it to me quite willingly, as I recall. We had a deal.”

“That’s right,” I said, meeting her gaze head-on. “And I’m taking it back now.”

For a moment, there was silence. And then, to my utter confusion, Delilah’s lips curled into a genuine smile.

“Good,” she said, her voice soft with approval.

I blinked, completely taken aback. “What?”

Delilah turned slightly, gesturing to someone behind her. “I didn’t come to town alone,” she said, her voice laced with anticipation. “I brought my husband with me. This seems like the perfect time to introduce you—and Bethany—to him.”

A figure stepped out from around the corner, and as he came into view, I felt my heart stop.

He was tall and imposing, with golden hair and piercing blue eyes that seemed to see straight through me. There was an ethereal glow about him, a light that was both blinding and comforting at the same time. And as he stepped forward, I recognized him immediately.

“Gabriel,” I whispered, my voice barely audible.

Bethany’s eyes widened, recognition dawning on her face. “Gabriel! You’re here!”

Delilah laughed, the sound light and joyful as Gabriel smiled, bent his head to hers and planted a light kiss on her red lips.

“Haven’t you heard?” She continued as she and the archangel circled their arms around each other’s waists. “Opposites attract. We’re two sides of the same coin.”

Gabriel’s expression was warm and reassuring as he gazed at us. “Delilah was hoping you’d reclaim your soul all along, Drake,” he said, his voice deep and resonant.

“Yep,” nodded Delilah. “It only took you two hundred years.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but no words came out. I was too stunned to process what was happening.

“Are you sure you want to be human again?” Delilah asked, her voice gentle in a way

I'd never heard before.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:52 am

I looked at Bethany, the woman who had changed everything, and I knew there was only one answer. “More sure than ever,” I said, my voice steady.

Delilah nodded, and with a simple gesture, I felt the weight of the curse lift from my shoulders. It was as if a chain I hadn’t known was binding me had finally been broken, and for the first time in centuries, I felt...free.

Gabriel turned to Bethany, his eyes kind. “Now it’s your turn,” he said softly. “You’ve earned your wings back, Bethany. You helped Drake and Lily find their ways home by opening your heart. Would you like to come with me now to your heavenly home?”

Bethany looked at me, her eyes searching mine, and in that moment, I saw her make her choice.

“I don’t want to go to heaven,” she said, her voice steady. “At least, not yet. I’m in love with Drake, and I’ve realized that I don’t need to be perfect to be happy. All I need is love. I want to make the most of my time here, instead of hurrying to what comes next. My parents can wait a little longer.”

Gabriel nodded, his smile widening. “Indeed. Your wish is granted,” he said, squeezing Delilah to his side. “We wish you both well.”

And with that, they lifted their hands in a wave and disappeared, leaving behind nothing but a faint shimmer in the air.

I turned to Bethany, my heart pounding in my chest, and without another word, I

pulled her into my arms, holding her close as we both tried to process everything that had just happened.

“It’s over,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion. “And I’m staying. For good.”

Bethany smiled up at me, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “You mean, it’s just beginning.”

And as I pressed my lips to hers, I knew that no matter what challenges lay ahead, we would face them together. This was the end of one story, but the beginning of something new. Something beautiful. Something real. And at last, I was ready.

Epilogue

Bethany

One year later, life in Sweetberry Hollow had settled into a rhythm so beautiful, it was hard to believe it was real. Looking back, the past twelve months felt like something out of a fairytale—a twisted, chaotic, absolutely wonderful fairytale. The small town was thriving, and the little candy shop at its heart, Sugar Rush, had blossomed into a community hub. Not just a place to buy candy, but a place to share stories, to create memories, and to enjoy the small, sweet moments that made life special.

Drake and I had taken over the shop together. After everything that happened, he decided to buy out the franchise and make it ours. He’d told me that he couldn’t imagine being anywhere else, and I felt the same. We raised wages, hired more staff, and gave our little corner of the world a new purpose. Sugar Rush had become a place where people came to feel like they were part of something bigger—a place where smiles were plentiful, and candy was never in short supply.

I took on the official role of Head of Human Resources. It was a title that meant more than just managing people's paychecks; it was about making sure everyone felt valued and seen. I loved it. Drake handled the business operations and kept an eye on growth and strategy, with the occasional brooding glare at spreadsheets when he thought no one was looking.

Noah was thriving as the lead pastry chef, creating masterpieces that had customers flocking to the shop from all over. His "Miss Scrumptious Originals" line of candies was a huge hit. From chocolate sculptures to intricately designed truffles, every piece had his flair, his heart, and a little bit of his trademark sparkle.

Alice was now our marketing executive, and she had turned out to be a natural. Her flyers and social media campaigns were whimsical and heartfelt, perfectly capturing the spirit of Sugar Rush. And she had a new beau, a lovely man named Ed who owned the cozy bookstore down the street. I'd never seen Alice so happy, and it warmed my heart to see her laugh and blush whenever she talked about him.

But it was really when I introduced Drake to Gran that I knew he was a keeper. The two of them took to each other like peanut butter and jelly, and Drake even enjoyed taking Gran for walks, and window-shopping along the square, trading jokes all along the way. Even Moonbeam deigned to grace him with her majestic feline presence.

And now, Halloween was rolling around again, and the town was buzzing with anticipation. We had outdone ourselves with the shop decorations—glowing jack-o'-lanterns, strands of twinkling autumn leaves, and displays filled with seasonal candies that Noah had crafted with painstaking care. The windows were full of caramel-dipped apples, marshmallow ghost pops, and tiny chocolate coffins filled with sweet surprises. Kids in costumes pressed their noses against the glass, their eyes wide with wonder, while parents held their little hands and pointed out their favorite treats.

It was perfect.

And yet, there was something more in the air this year—a feeling of excitement that had nothing to do with candy or decorations. It was something else, something that sent a shiver of anticipation down my spine whenever I thought about the future.

The day before Halloween, Drake was acting a little...strange. He'd been disappearing at odd intervals, leaving Noah and Alice to handle the shop while he ran mysterious errands. I didn't think much of it, assuming he was probably just preparing for the Halloween rush. I was used to his mysterious ways by now.

But I wasn't prepared for what he had planned.

It was late in the afternoon when he came back, his coat dusted with leaves and his eyes bright with excitement. He walked over to where I was helping a customer decide between two bags of chocolate-covered popcorn, and he flashed me a grin that made my heart skip a beat.

"Hey," he said, his voice holding a hint of amusement. "Got a minute?"

"Always," I replied, handing the customer the popcorn they'd chosen and excusing myself. "What's up?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, wrapped candy. It was an intricate chocolate rose, the petals delicate and gleaming with a hint of edible shimmer. I immediately knew it was one of Noah's creations—one of the specialties he reserved for special occasions.

"For you, my angel," Drake said, holding it out to me with an almost boyish grin.

I raised an eyebrow, taking the candy cautiously. "What's the occasion?"

Drake's grin widened. "Just try it."

I rolled my eyes but unwrapped the chocolate rose carefully. As I took a bite, I expected to taste the usual blend of rich chocolate and sweet raspberry filling, but instead, I felt something hard against my teeth. I pulled back, frowning, and carefully retrieved the object.

It was a ring. A diamond ring.

For a moment, I just stared at it, my breath catching in my throat. And then, I looked up at Drake, who was watching me with an expression of nervous excitement.

"Bethany," he began, his voice steady but full of emotion as he got down on one knee, "I've been thinking about this for a while now. You've changed everything for me. You've given me something I didn't think was possible—a life. I used to think I was just a dead thing, some sort of monster walking through life. But you made me feel alive again."

Tears welled up in my eyes as I listened to him, my heart swelling with love and gratitude. He took a deep breath, his eyes never leaving mine.

"I've fallen madly in love with you, and I want to spend all the days I have left on this earth with you," he continued, his voice trembling slightly. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes," I whispered, my voice thick with emotion as I collapsed into his arms, "Yes!"

The customers and staff who were nearby erupted in applause, and I barely had time to react before Drake pulled me into a kiss, right there, in the middle of the community we treasured. Autumn leaves fluttered outside the window, and the soft glow of the Halloween decorations surrounded us, casting the moment in a warm, golden light.

When we finally pulled apart, Drake was grinning like a kid on Christmas morning. “You’ve made me the happiest man in the world,” he murmured, his forehead resting against mine.

“And you’ve made me the happiest woman,” I replied, my voice full of joy.

That night, as I lay in bed with the ring glinting on my finger, I couldn’t help but reflect on everything that had led us here. A year ago, I was lost, searching for redemption and a way back to heaven. I thought I needed to prove myself worthy, to earn my wings, to make up for the mistakes I’d made. But now, I realized that heaven wasn’t somewhere up in the clouds, waiting for me to earn my place.

Heaven was here, on earth, in the small, sweet moments of everyday life. It was in the laughter of a child holding a lollipop in the shop, in the warm embrace of the community that had welcomed me back with open arms. It was in the joy of working side-by-side with Drake and seeing the way he opened his heart to the people around him. And it was in the love we shared—a love that was unexpected and unconventional, but perfect in its own way.

I used to be obsessed with getting back to heaven, with proving that I deserved to be there. But now, I knew that my wings could wait until it was truly my time. There was so much life left to live, so many moments to savor. And I wanted to spend every one of them with Drake, building a life and a future that we could be proud of.

Who knew that I would find my heaven on earth in the arms of a vampire?