

# Sweet Tooth (MtF TG)

**By FoxFaceStories**

## **A Commission for AL**

*Benjamin is a twenty-year-old burglar desperately trying to make a living. But after breaking into an ice cream shop owned by a witch, he is subdued and punished by being turned into a sweet girl to help out in the store, one who couldn't hurt a fly. But as humiliated as the new Beverly is by her change, she starts to realise this could be a new chance at life for her, especially when she begins to fall for a handsome young man with his own connections to a magical family.*

## **Sweet Tooth**

### **The Break-In**

There were no cameras that Ben could see, and almost no one in view. It was two in the morning, after all, and while the store was in a semi-busy area not too far from a popular mall, it was a Wednesday night, so it wasn't exactly party time. The few people around were simply driving home from long shifts or ambling home on lonely sojourns. It was easy to melt into the shadows among them and act like he belonged, as by the time he'd reached his target the few vagrants around had scattered anyway. He waited for an SUV with annoyingly bright LED lights to pass before he got started.

*Fucking rich assholes with their Emotional Support Vehicles*, he thought to himself. Ben wasn't a fan of the upper class in general, not as a point of politics so much as personal grievement, but he was especially strong on the point of those big tanky vehicles that took up far too much space and made everyone's lives difficult. He pulled up his hood to hide his face as best as he could, just in case. It wasn't an unreasonable precaution: Benjamin Prosser had been blessed, or cursed if you were asking him, with bright ginger hair and a thick smattering of freckles across his nose and cheeks. His eyes were pale blue and icy with resentment, and that resentment was often cast across the rest of his features: his lip had a peculiar scowl to it that almost made him seem a little rat-like in the right light. This was fitting, since he had a lithe frame of corded muscle that added to the effect. Not the kind of body girls went for that was forged in the gym and then posted on social media, but not a weak body either. It was the figure of someone who had survived through life the tough way, that had been beaten down and even occasionally scarred, and knew how to scamper away

quickly or spring into violence, sometimes the choice between the two only being decided at the very last second.

So it was a good thing he kept his face hidden, because being noticed would get him in a bit of a trouble. He was about to perform a break-in, after all.

*Shouldn't be too hard, he thought. No security as far as I can tell, and lots of escape routes. Police take forever to respond here and the Securiguards types from the mall are the laziest slobbs around. They've already done their pass besides, so I've got nearly an hour.*

The place he was robbing tonight was an ice cream store called *Sweet Tooth*. It was an alarmingly bubbly-looking place, almost rustic in nature, with an old-fashioned mural depicting a giant smiling tooth scooping ice cream into its mouth, like some kind of anti-dentist propaganda. There was a front entrance and a side one, and it was the latter he was preparing to jimmy. He tried to avoid crowbars generally, but it seemed the most elegant solution here, and so he got ready to quickly pry the side door open and make his entrance. Ben knew how to be quick and certain: he'd done more than a few jobs for himself in the last few years. He was only twenty years old, but he'd started when he was barely fourteen after he'd done a runner from the Shettletons, some of the most piss-poor excuses of a pair of foster parents he could have imagined . . . until the Harry's just a year later. People often said he had a chip on his shoulder since his mother abandoned him at birth, but he considered that chip quite damn understandable. Besides, there was one benefit to being bounced around from one foster care nightmare to the next: it taught him a lot about self-reliance, survival, and how to ignore the rules when they didn't favour you. The system didn't give a shit about him, after all, so why should he give a shit about the rules the system made?

*Especially when it comes to a fucking ice cream store, he thought, smirking. Besides, I need the money. Goddamn I need the money.*

Sometimes the system needed rent, too, and that was one rule that was fucking hard to break effectively. Which was to say nothing of the fact that even the most rules-breaking young man needed his cereal in the morning, and toast for dinner. He placed the crowbar in and pulled, wedging the door open.

It gave easily, even more easily than he would have expected.

"The fuck . . . was that unlocked?"

He stopped talking to himself. It was a bad habit: always being alone also meant that you were often your own best friend. He kept a hush on himself, and stepped into the waiting darkness of *Sweet Tooth*. It was the first time he'd been inside an ice cream store, at least the back end of one. The Harry family had purchased ice creams for all their fat kids constantly, but never him. He had to 'earn it.' Earning it fucking hurt from all the chores they heaped on him, and he still didn't get an ice cream for 'taking so long.' So yeah, he was

happy to rob this place. He was pretty sure the ice creams came from here anyway: the best ones in town, apparently. Not that he'd know.

The back was cold, and the entrance to the various freezers were locked much tighter than anything else. He didn't care - Ben wasn't even sure if ice creams got *made* here or just delivered. Judging from the machinery, it looked to be a genuine ice creamery. The back of the place was certainly larger than he'd expected.

But it was the office he wanted. That would be where the money was. If there was a safe he could just grab it, but he'd prefer to just jam open some drawers and take what he could get. There was no such thing as a 'Big Score' as some of his fellow delinquents put it. They all ended up in juvie - or now that they were adults, prison - and he had no intention of joining them. Just surviving to the next day was enough.

*Even if it's a shit kind of enough.*

The door to the office was locked, but he was able to pry into it, though a bit more loudly. Part of the glass cracked, though it didn't shatter. He looked around, heart beating a little nervously, but there was no one present. He stepped inside and began tossing things about quietly but efficiently, looking for anything valuable. He certainly found more than a few things.

A phone and charger.

Spare electronics.

Three laptops. *Why three?*

A couple of smaller monitors, as well as a number of USBs.

A spare watch.

Some jewellery from a personal draw.

Even some painkillers, the kind that would sell pretty well on the side if he could be bothered: this was prescription stuff.

And, of course, there was the cash. Not as much as he would have hoped, but several hundred dollars' worth would be enough to get him over the line when it came to his rent and have money for food to spare. He grabbed the spare wadded amounts, having pried open the metal filing cabinet and levered the small safe in the bottom. It was well-hidden, likely just for spare cash.

*But there'd be more, and I've still got a bit of time. They wouldn't deposit everything to the armoured van or whatever. They need the trays for the morning, and this place gets busy with the kiddies.*

He left the office, moving silently and leaving the bag of stolen goodies near the door. The place smelled surprisingly nice; just as sweet as its name, and the interior of the main store had a similarly peppy aesthetic: multi-coloured with lots of emphasis on pinks and whites, with swirls of blueberry and raspberry and other popular flavoured coloured along the

walls, given life in the form of little mascots and characters. The menu looked deeply impressive: there were flavours that were classic, but also others that Ben wasn't even sure were possible, such as *Hint of Favourite Holiday* and *Your Favourite Starburst Memory*. Others were even stranger: *Romantic First Kiss* and *Taste of Laughter*. Ben just rolled his eyes, more annoyed by the forced whimsy than confused by it.

"Think I'll just go with the raspberry sorbet, personally," he said to himself, before catching his tongue. He proceeded to the counter, which had space for what looked like two servers at a time, maybe three on a busy day. The buckets had been emptied for the day, but sure enough there was a money processing machine located under the counter, the kind that processed the physical transactions. That was where the big pay day would be.

*Not that I believe in a big pay day. If I can't jimmy this, I'm cutting quick.*

Still, he gave it a try. The crowbar may have been annoying to carry around, but it was short and strong enough that he could leverage the edge of the machine and pry at its thick metal plating. Ben wasn't the strongest man, but he was damn determined, and like a dog who wouldn't let go of his prey he grit his teeth and wrenched, wrenched, *wrenched*, until finally-

**CLANG!**

The front came free, and there was space enough to grab several more wads of cash, these ones in stacks of fifties, hundreds, and twenties.

*Fuck yes, this'll sort me for a spell. Might even be able to go legitimate for a bit. Crank out some money at the meat farm if I have to while I lie low.*

He began stashing the money as quickly as he could. It was impossible to get it all: the front had cracked in a way that ruined the machine and its insertion slot, so it wasn't a clean break. He couldn't reach the fifties, but at least the hundreds and twenties were available. The coins were out of the question: not only were they in a different chamber, but they'd be too loud and heavy on his person besides.

*Fuck yeah! I should have come to this place way earlier. Who would have thought that a fucking ice cream store in the middle of Branton would be such a score?*

It was a moment of self-confidence and victory for the young man, in a life where such moments were few and far between. Which made it all the more shocking when suddenly the lights turned on, and a woman's voice rang out through the silence.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing in my shop!?"

Ben didn't freeze. He *never* froze. Fight or flight but *never* freeze. He didn't even turn - turning might reveal his face to the viewer. Instead, he *pelted* in the other direction, dashing for the exit, grabbing the bag of stolen goods as he went in a motion that was near-fluid. The voice called out again.

"Hey! Get back here! This is your last warning, thief! I *will* take extreme measures!"

But Benjamin was already at the side entrance, the door unlocked. He collided into it . . . and bounced back, gripping his shoulder in agony. It had been like hitting a brick wall.

“Fuck!” he gasped, but he was quick to spring back to his feet. The woman must have been a security guard, or perhaps even the owner - he cursed himself for not realising that the second story might have actually been a live-in, in which case even the near-silent racket to the outside world he’d started would have been a racket of some sort to those already *in* the building. He pushed the door open using the handle, and it swung easily despite the earlier resistance. He had no time to contemplate this, because the exit was right there and he needed to be going. So he barged ahead into the outside world . . . only to be thrown right back.

*What the fu-!?”*

A blue barrier of light, like some kind of magic spell from a work of fiction, manifested right in his face. It grasped him as if it were a giant hand and flung him back into the building where the lights were now coming on everywhere. He jumped outside again, believing he had just seen something, but the glowing barrier appeared again, taking the shape of an actual hand this time, and it *flicked* him back inside.

By this point Ben’s heart was beating like a hummingbird’s, and he could scarcely believe what was happening. He ran back the other way, refusing to face the giant floating hand, only to find the store brightly lit. A woman was standing in the centre of where the customers would wait, hands on her hips. He barely had time to take her in, but her hair was a mess and she looked very much out of sorts and puffed with red-cheeked anger.

“Stop right now!” she shouted. “I’m handing you over to the police, literally! If you don’t stop, I’ll be forced to go further! Don’t fight against a witch, thief!”

He ignored her, running right past her to try the front entrance. He nearly made it when he was wrenched back by something and fell to the ground. He turned and screamed at the sight that awaited him: somehow the mural of the living ice cream cones and sweet teeth along the walls had *come alive* and were stretching their two-dimensional limbs into the world of three dimensions, grabbing onto the bag and preventing him from absconding with it.

“Shit! Fuck! What the hell?”

He released the backpack and scrambled back, pulling away from the living cartoons that were suddenly expanding across the walls. How was this even possible? Was something in the air laced? The woman was still standing in the lit store, arms folded, face red with anger.

“Give up,” she said. “Come quietly. You do *not* want to make a witch angry, young man. I demand an explanation.”

“Fuck you!” he cried in response. He managed to get to his feet, nearly falling over, and ran for the front entrance. And this time he actually managed to get out. The dark streets outside were entirely empty, and there were no cars or police or witnesses or authorities anywhere in sight. Ben took only a moment to gather himself before turning to flee away from the building.

Only for a horrible groaning to sound behind and above him. Ordinarily, he would have paid it no heed at all’ he had seen weird shit and needed to get away from it. But curiosity got the better of him, and he faltered just for a moment to turn and look up.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The large carbon-fibre figure of the Sweet Tooth mascot that stuck out from the second story of the building was reaching down towards him like a terrible yet comical monster from a *Ghostbusters* movie, its face joyous as it quite literally scooped him up in an ice cream cone. Ben barely had time to scream before he was smothered, and then everything went black.

## **The Deal**

Ben woke dazed, confused, and worried that he’d accidentally ingested some drugs. It only took a moment for his wiry senses to pick up that he was back in the store - one that looked completely ordinary once more. He was in a booth by the wall, one that was surprisingly comfortable, and opposite him was a tired-looking woman in a set of pyjamas. She had rings under her eyes that spoke to the fact that she clearly didn’t appreciate being woken up so early, though it was daytime now judging from the sun pouring in from the uncurtained windows.

“Had a nice sleep?” she asked in a soft spoken voice. “I certainly didn’t.”

Ben tried to scramble to his feet, only to find he couldn’t: his lower half was somehow paralysed, though he could still feel his limbs.

“Don’t try to escape, I’ve put a binding spell on you.”

Ben looked about, trying to find the catch. It was at that point that he saw one of the ice cream mascots on the wall, now a two-dimensional print again, nevertheless wag its finger and wink at him. He squeaked in an embarrassingly high tone.

“That - that just moved!”

The woman rolled her eyes. “I told you, I’m a witch. Not a fact I advertise, though I like to think my sweet little ice cream store leaves all of its customers feeling a bit more

enriched and magical after their visit. It's why I do quite well for myself . . . normally. As you can see, I won't be opening today: *someone* broke in and fucked up my stuff."

*Holy shit, an actual witch. What the hell! This can't be real.*

"Look, I'm sorry," he said, trying to put on a calm face. "I didn't realise you were . . . a witch. I've been poor and starving, and I'm so hungry I could die. If you let me go and don't report me to the police I'll—"

"I don't believe a word you say," she replied calmly, folding her hands on the table. Her accent was clearly British, almost charming.

Ben regarded her appearance for the first time. The woman wasn't that old: she had to be in her mid-thirties or so. She had olive skin of an ambiguous ethnic tone, and black hair that was quite curly, though a bit of a mess at that moment. In another context, he would have found her attractive, if a bit too slim and severe in expression, though said expression may have been purely because he'd caused her no end of fuss.

"The problem with breaking into a witch's business and *home*," she said, emphasising the 'home' part, "is that the witch gets to set the punishment. I don't feel the need to bring the law into this, because magic has its own laws, and chief among them is karma. My magic is in transformation and creation, by the way, not in fixing bloody messes like ripped electronics, damaged safes, and pried-open filing cabinets. You even wrecked my bloody office door, and that was a bitch to get installed. Do you have any idea that amount of costs that accrues?"

Ben was still coming to grips with the whole 'magic' thing that barely any of this took. "Just - just magic it away," he said. "Look, I obviously stepped in shit I shouldn't have here. Whatever. But you also used those monsters against me, so by all rights I can complain about—"

"Magic can't just fix bills and repairs!" she said with a sneer. "And as for my 'monsters', they're my security. Good luck trying to get the police to believe you. No, I think we both know you're up shit creek without a paddle, Mr . . . ?"

"Harry," he lied easily. "Harry Taske."

"Well, Harry, I think we both know that's a bullshit name. Just like your excuse to raid my shop is bullshit: you tried to steal everything that wasn't tied down. I'm half surprised you didn't try to steal my ice cream while you were at it. Not much of a sweet tooth, huh?"

"Never got much opportunity," he replied. He was still trying to wriggle away, using his hands under the table to try and pry it from the bolts on the floor. He was making slow progress. "But I won't deny I like a good ice cream and a sweet or two. Shouldn't have come here, sure. I won't come here again. I'm really sorry, seriously."

But the witch just shook her head. "And again, I don't believe you. You're sorry you got caught, and that you got tangled up in magic. Which means I get to punish you according

to the laws of magic. I suppose you should know the name of the person punishing you, 'Harry' - I am Susanna Harp, originally of Manchester, and now a proud member of the local Branton community. Now, would you like to introduce your *actual* name for me, or shall I compel your tongue to sing?"

She raised a hand, and Ben flinched in terror: it was glowing a sickly green.

"B-Ben. Benjamin Prosser."

She smirked. "Was that so hard? Now, you've really ruined my day, and my profit, and frankly my sense of security, Ben. You leave one side door unlatched and all the vermin come crawling in. Is that what I should make you, hmm? A rodent who skulks in the dark and chews away at what doesn't belong to it? That would be a fitting punishment, wouldn't it, *vermin.*"

*Vermin.*

The word was already seared into his mind, and not just from the Harry family, but from the Shutters too, and even Mrs. Crisp. *Vermin. Rodent. Thing.* He'd been mocked for his ginger hair and wiry looks, for his habit of fleeing from trouble or lashing out against the slightest provocation, or for obvious jealousies aimed at bio-children who were always given more love than him. Even the workers for the state had whispered the description: *that scowling kid looks like a rat. What are the chances he ends up on the street or dead from an overdose in a few years?*

His desire to escape boiled over into anger, and he pushed at the table in a way that clearly alarmed Susanna, because she was momentarily unbalanced as she retracted her chair. Two bolts on the floor came loose, but the rest would not budge, yet still Ben grunted from the effort, his face turning even redder with anger.

"Fuck you! *FUCK YOU!*" he shouted, uncaring if the now-busy street outside heard the echo. "I am not a fucking rodent! I'm not a fucking rat! You don't know me! You don't know my story: I've been pushed around all my life by powerful shits like you - maybe not magical ones, but assholes all the same who love to pick on me and treat me like I'm destined to be some terrible shit or whatever. Every goddamn foster family I've ever had called me that, even the better ones looked at me like I was nothing, and I'm not gonna let you do the same, even if you do have all this black magic shit!

"You know, it's funny. When I came in here, for just a moment, I actually thought this place was pretty alright. I was still gonna rob it, because fuck me for trying to get by after living on literal shit, right? But then it turns out it's run by a crazy woman who'd rather punish a burglar who didn't hurt a fly with magic rather than just call the police! You think *I'm* the one in the wrong, lady? Try living a life that's just been one fucking disappointment after another, then get back to me. So fine, turn me into a fucking rat if that makes you feel better. I've been called a rodent my entire life, and it's people like *you* who turned me into that, not *me*.

I'm just a victim of this, and when people treat you like garbage they shouldn't be surprised when you just give up after a while and embrace it. So go ahead. I don't even give a shit anymore."

He stopped talking, if only to catch his breath. He hadn't even realised it while he was ranting, but tears had bubbled up in his eyes, an emotional response that had followed from his clenched gut and swirling anger. He felt dizzy from the release of it all, almost like he was going to pass out from the pain of simply venting that life of anguish out loud. Susanna Harp looked at him with something approaching shock, or perhaps re-evaluation, because instead of casting some dreaded spell, she sat back down and stared at him for several long seconds, her olive fingers steepled together.

"What?" he finally spat.

"Now you're telling the truth," she replied. "And it's an ugly truth. And I'm sorry to have heard it."

"Everyone's sorry to hear that people have shit lives. They don't ever do anything about it."

She tapped her fingers together. "Maybe I can. I wasn't going to actually turn you into a rodent, by the way, at least not for long. I'm not cruel, just . . . karmic. But I think karma has already been bent unfairly against you: I could see it radiate out from your aura, that seething red. That chaos. I'm not thaumaturgical witch, but even I know that speaks to a life of trauma."

*You know nothing of trauma*, he thought to himself, but her words had the effect of leaving him silent. He wasn't sure where this was going, and part of him was nervous.

She clapped her hands together, standing with a bit more excitement.

"Well, a punishment is still in order, but perhaps a second chance of sorts as well! I have an idea, and a rather bold one too: you become my new assistant at Sweet Tooth."

*What.*

"What?"

She smiled, the tiredness leaving her face as her excitement dawned. "It's simple community service, Benjamin. You caused damage to my store, so you work it off, and I'll even pay you a regular wage as befitting one of my employees. How about that?"

It sounded too damn good to be true, that was for sure.

"What's the catch?" he said, looking around warily.

"Ah, you are quite the clever one, aren't you? The catch is . . . stand over there, and I'll show you. I'm unleashing the binding spell, but can reactivate it - don't make me, I'm not great at them so it could hurt by accident. My deal is in transformation and creation, after all. Stand in the centre of the store for me - oh, better yet, behind the counter as if you were already working here."

Ben followed her instructions, though he kept a wary eye on the exits. He could try and make a dash again, though that was likely to end in failure. He wiped his eyes of the remaining tears, reasserting his male pride.

“You won’t go to the police?” he said.

“No charges, no convictions. Provided you work off your debt.”

“How long for?”

She smirked. “Let’s say a year.”

“Fuck that noise. No way.”

“It’s that or prison, I’m afraid. Or rodent-hood for a while. Let’s go six months for now, and then a mid-year review to see if further work is warranted, hmm?”

He said nothing, simply glowering. He took up position behind the empty counter. From the windows at the front, he could see some people gathering only to move away: they were disappointed the place wasn’t open. When they dispersed, Susanna flicked a wrist and the curtains fell again, signalling more obviously that the store was closed.

“Better not have anyone see this next bit,” she said. “Do you agree to become my employee, then?”

Ben had no intention of that whatsoever, but the best lies had an element of truth to them, and perhaps that would be enough to fool Susanna.

“Sure, long as I have to,” he said, aware of his own double-meaning.

His words seemed to satisfy her, because the witch closed her eyes, raised her hands, and let them glow a soft pink much like the Sweet Tooth mascot itself.

“Hold very still, Ben. We’re going to get you *fitted*,” she said.

*Wait, is she just talking about clothes or - NGHH!!!*

Without warning, she clapped her hands together, and suddenly a stream of glowing pink energy shot forth and embedded right into Ben, striking into his heart. For a moment he thought it had actually pierced it, but instead it was more like something was flowing into the pores of his skin and spreading through his body. He wanted to scream, but instead something even stranger happened: he *laughed*.

“Wh-what are you doing? Hee! Ha! Why is this s-so ticklish!?”

Susanna chuckled. “It’s a very ‘sweet’ energy I’m dealing with. Don’t be alarmed, you’ll feel it even more soon, once you change.”

He cackled again as the feeling went under his arms and along his ribs, but her sentence gave him pause. “Ch-change? What the hell are you - OHHHH!!!”

And then it began. The first of the changes. Ben chuckled and laughed despite his growing horror as his body began to shift and transform unnaturally. His hair slid down his face, extending in an itchy manner from his scalp, leaving him to scratch it with nails that were similarly growing out. Years of chewing them had left those nails looking blunted and

cracked, but now they took on a neat and feminine length, even gaining pink nail polish upon them.

“What the - what the f-fuck are you - hee! Hee! - doing!? Stop thisssss!”

“Sorry, it can’t stop once begun. Besides, the deal is already made - I told you there’d be a punishment part.”

“But what are you - ha! - doing? Ahhhhh, my w-waist!”

It pulled in, as if an invisible compression band had wrapped around his midsection and tightened. It wasn’t painful, though. Instead, it was strangely pleasurable, the energy coursing through his system giving him something approaching a high as this all occurred. It mixed strangely with his fear and shock, leaving two sides at war with each other: a status quo that would soon become even more inflamed as the sensations raced around to his backside.

“Ohhhhhh, it f-feels wrong! S-stop it! It’s like a - haha! - sugar rush!”

“I’m so glad, Sugar Rush Slammer is my latest flavour experiment, and I’ve infused your change with it so it’s a bit more . . . enjoyable.”

It was enjoyable indeed, and that was not a feature in Ben’s mind. *Oh God, my waist is g-getting tiny. And my ass is growing! What the fuck is happening with my hair?*

It had reached his shoulders by that point, and was showing no signs of all at stopping. As it grew, it began even brighter orange, flame red in colour, and became even frizzier and curly than ever until it was practically *bouncing* down his shoulder blades. It had a defined weight to it that pulled on his head, and he had to part the curtain before his eyes to take in the other changes as they extended from his fingers, leaving his hands smaller and daintier, and lacking most of the cuts and bruises of his early life.

“You can’t do this! Ohhhhh! Hehehe! Stop making this f-feel funny!”

Susanna actually laughed back. “What’s wrong? Isn’t it good to feel a little silly? I know I like a bit of whimsy in my life, when people aren’t breaking into my store and all. Of course, you’re a lot more *light-fingered* now!”

Ben cringed, watching as his digits slimmed further, the skin softening. He still had the freckles, but there were no longer the coarse marks pebbling his palms, just some small callouses that denoted hard work in a kitchen or freezer, or unstacking things by routine.

“S-stop this! I - ahh! Mmhmm!!”

He gave a whole-body shiver as his waist contracted yet again. It was matched by an inverted feeling in his hips, where the bones jolted with electric sensitivity, sort of like hitting one’s funny bone. They began to spread, stretched like taffy or one of the other soft candies that lined the shelves that could be added to one’s ice cream.

“F-fuck . . . oh God! Nnghhh!!”

It was wrong and right, pleasure and discomfort, sweet and sour all at once. Ben's voice rose higher and higher as his neck slimmed, losing the jagged scar of a bad bike fall when he was sixteen. His Adam's apple practically evaporated, a childish tickle cascading down his neck and across his body. He writhed, unable to stop giggling in an unintentionally silly voice as his skin smoothed, gaining a soft layer of feminine fate over his whipcord muscle, which in turn shrank away. His chest hair fell away like downy fur, and the same was true of the hair on his arms and legs, which emerged from his skin and then burned into radiant nothingness courtesy of the magic.

"This is impossible!"

"Magic, remember?"

"But - haha, stop that! - but why the hell are you making me a softie?"

Susanna laughed. "It's part of the punishment, and your second chance. Besides, you need to be a bit of a softie to work at Sweet Tooth. It's the kind of server I need. Plus you'll bring in customers."

"I'm not some - ahhhh haha - some w-weak man!"

Susanna smirked. "Oh, I know. I know, Benjamin. But don't worry, it's not a *man* I'll need at all. You'll see what I mean any moment now."

*What does that m-mean? his mind cried. What the actual fuck does that mean!?*

He was about to get his answer. Ben was not particularly tall, but his five-foot nine height shrunk in unison with his limbs, leaving him even more vulnerable. Inch by inch he descended, his dark hoodie and black pants becoming overly large and baggy on his form. But then the clothes themselves began to change, remoulding and tightening to conform to his still changing dimensions. He wriggled and writhed as his sensitive body was revealed to be more changed than he had imagined: his clothing altered to become a tight white feminine button shirt with the Sweet Tooth logo, while the lower half became a raspberry pink *skirt* that cut off at the knee, a set of pastel pink stockings stretching over his bare legs.

Ben laughed at this, though his true feelings were ones of horror. "What haha-hell!? What is wrong with you? Get me out of this s-skirt!"

"But honey, skirts are for girls!"

"Exactly, and I'm no -"

He paused as the dreadful realisation finally washed over him. His hips spread wider, shoulders shrinking down to give him a more lithe figure. It was a strangely sugary sensation: there was no other way to describe it. It was as if the ice cream of the place itself, and all the many other sweets, were filling out his hips and his ass and making them far curvier, far more *womanly*. He squeaked again as his hair lowered to just above his butt, but the true set of changes that made him realise what was happening were centred on his chest and between his thighs. All at once, a series of pressures and pulls manifested,

starting at his nipples and then spreading outwards, with a tugging sensation overwhelming his manhood.

“No no no no no! Hahahahaha, this isn’t f-fucking funny! No! NO!!!”

He didn’t even have to name the fear, because it was obvious what he was referring to: his feminine shirt was now snug everywhere upon his thinner form *except* around his chest, where there was a strip of loose fabric. Beneath it, as if to playfully cement what was about to grow, a pasted pink bra blinked into place.

“You can’t d-do this! Take me to jail! Call the - hehehe - stop tickling me! Call the police! I won’t grow a pair of - of - oohhhhhh, mmmhhmm, ahhhh!!”

But that was exactly what he was growing. His nipples pushed forward first, budding like little pink flowers, expanding in sensitivity. He couldn’t help himself: Ben gripped them with his hands, trying to push them back in as if they were simply buttons that could be depressed. Instead, he was met with a shock as they grew yet more, a strange pulse of sweet excitement rushing from his chest to his core. By that point they were extending to form female areolas, and then growing tissue behind him. The pressure was intense, even *arousing*. To Benjamin’s humiliation, he actually felt himself grow sexually excited.

*Oh f-fuck. This can’t be turning me on. Why is this turning me on!?*

His new breasts expanded, blossoming into an undeniably female bustline that continued to surge in generosity. At first they were gentle A-cups, but they quickly budded to B-cups and finally into full C-cups. Not massive, but certainly a palmful each, with their own defined weight, wobble, and slightly teardrop shape. They filled the cups of Ben’s bra perfectly, lifted a little, compressed together so that a small hint of cleavage showed through the undone top buttons of his shirt. They were just large enough to block his toes from view. He gripped his soft breasts, almost salivating from the gooey sweet release of their growth. His mind warred against that feeling, but the sensation of his fingers tracing over his sensitive nipples through the shirt and bra was enough to make him give a sensual moan.

“Ohhhhhh, s-so big! Haha! Why do I have big tits?”

Susanna smirked. “They’re not *that* big, though certainly big enough for most boys I imagine! I’m a mere B-cup and happy for it, but I think certain customers won’t mind a girl who’s a bit more ‘forward’ at the counter, right?”

“What? N-no! Haha! Change me back! NGHH!!”

But then the tugging only increased between his thighs, taking up more of his attention. His face continued to alter, lips puffing up, nose becoming button cute, features growing naturally softer. These were less concerning than what was happening to his manhood, however, though the jaw shift did leave him with a heart-shaped face that was increasingly lovely to look at.

“M-my cock! Don’t take my - HAHAHAAAAHA!”

His laugh turned maniacal, rising ever higher and sweeter as the very magic of the ice creamery infected him. It was impossible for Ben not to give himself over to those wonderfully creamy sensations, both in his newly blossomed chest as well as to where his penis was pulling back into his body. His testicles followed, and there was just the briefest discomfort before they were literally swallowed back inside him. Like a scoop driving deep into soft sorbet to carve a path, his tunnel was opening, expanding until it reached the new womb that shifted aside his internal organs. In the span of less than thirty seconds, his biological gender had shifted. His figure finished developing, hair pulling back into an appropriate ponytail which was threaded through a sales cap that appeared on the new woman's head.

Benjamin Prosser was now female, though he would refuse to admit it. He looked down in awe at his body as those sweet feelings were finally allowed to become fully soured. His chest was surprisingly heavy, outlined nicely by his tight button shirt and bra, cleavage tastefully displayed just a little, tits looking much larger to his perspective. Everything looked a little bigger now that he had reduced to little more than five-foot-four or so in height, but the reduction in size to his limbs and overall body also aided this perspective. Even his breath came softly despite his panic, sounding squeaky, like it belonged to a damsel in distress.

"Fuck you!" he managed, already hating how weirdly passive his new voice was. "I didn't ask for this!"

Susanna crossed her arms, one eyebrow raised in amusement. "Well, I didn't ask to be burgled in the middle of the night and incur a bunch of unwanted costs to my business, all while feeling unsafe. So I feel that turnabout is fair play here."

"Why a girl? Why am I a fucking goddamned girl!?"

She shrugged. "Girls are more approachable, less prone to anger, more likely to invest in their appearance, and customers are happy to gravitate to them more - especially male ones that might not come here often. Besides, it's a sort of second chance at things for you. A new perspective may do you some good."

But Benjamin could only think about the 'anger' part she'd mentioned, and his was boiling over. Even in his little female body, with its reduced strength and more obvious softness, he was ready to be violent. It wasn't a rational approach, of course, but one born of humiliation and shame and outrage, and sometimes those feelings were stronger than any reason.

*I will fucking kill this bitch. Make me a girl? Give me a fucking pussy? As if!*

He snarled, and vaulted over the counter, moving straight to Susanna with a borderline-murderous intent.

"Change me back you fucking witch bitc--"

Only to stop when she snapped her fingers. A magic spell bound him once more, rooting him to the spot. Susanna Harp sighed.

“Well, in times like these, I guess I need to bring out the cotton candy as well.”

She twirled her hand, and sure enough a bucket on the wall unscrewed by magic, and a bright blue-and-pink tuft of cotton candy flew forth. Ben’s eyes went wide as it approached, whizzing in the air like a dandelion in the wind, before course correcting at the last moment and entering his ear.

*Oh God, what the fuck? What the actual fuck is this bitch . . . totally doing right now? It feels so funny!*

Ben gasped, breathing quickly as the cotton candy fused with his brain and sweetened it with new thoughts and mental pathways. He tried to hold onto his normal personality, but it was being infected, overwhelmed, redirected and changed. The anger and violence were still present, but it felt all wrong to have those emotions, and it made him practically emotional! A sense of demureness seeped into him, a sweet nature that simply desired people to get along. Even the knowledge that he had burgled this place made him shudder in guilt, shocked that anyone could do such a terrible thing!

But worse than the ever-sweetening personality, than the feelings of guilt and shame, than even the strangely bubbly optimism and desire for *everyone to just get along* - worse than even that naivete - was the changing sense of identity. Ben tried to fight it, but his will waned in the face of all that was occurring. The strange cotton candy clung to new synapses, forming new neural pathways and severing others. Try as *he* might, Ben was starting to think of himself as a *she*, and once that mental transition began, it flipped over in the span of seconds.

*Benjamin Prosser was a girl. I’m a woman. I’m a woman. I’m female. A she. A girl. And - oh God! - my name isn’t even Ben! It’s Beverly! Awww, it’s such a cute name, too! Wait, no it isn’t! But it is at the same time! What, like, is happening to my mind?*

It was growing less intelligent, or perhaps just more submissive and demure. Certainly, it was getting more emotional. The poor new woman literally burst into tears as she grabbed her head, trying to come to terms with it all.

“Aww, I’m sorry honey,” Susanna said. “I knew this would be hard for you, but I didn’t mean for it to be traumatic! It’s just a few little adjustments to dim that nasty attitude of yours - don’t worry, I’m not killing your former self. Just tucking it away a little, and promoting some, well, *sweeter* thinking. I’m only bringing to the fore what was always be there for you, even the male you, thought obviously it’s a bit more pronounced with a female brain.”

“It’s . . . it’s really weird!” Beverly said. “I shouldn’t think of myself as a girl - I don’t want to! But I am! Ohhhh, I think I’m gonna be f-f-f-freakin’ sick!”

*Great, even swearing it beyond me! I’m such a demure thing, God!*

Susanna worked quickly to unbind the spell, pointing out where the toilets were located. Beverly ran straight to them, feeling oddly uncomfortable now with the idea of running away: it wouldn't be fair, after all. She managed to make it to the sink just in time to cough up the remaining cotton candy, heaving up several times until she felt better. Little pink sugary bubbles floated from her mouth.

"Ohhhhhh, I f-feel like I've had t-too much sugar. This is crazy. This is f-f-freaky as!"

She gulped, managed to control her breathing if not her sanity, and looked up.

"Holy sh-sh-moly. I'm, like, really pretty."

She smiled before she could stop herself, and the expression only made her look all the cuter. Somehow, Benjamin Prosser had gone from being a wiry, angry-faced young man with scruffy ginger hair and an angry smattering of freckles, to a red-haired beauty with bright green eyes that seemed to almost sparkle with optimism. The new Beverly had lovely lips, a seriously cute button nose, little ears and incredibly frizzy orange hair that was pulled back into an equally frizzy ponytail that poofed out into something approaching a puffball of hair. Her freckles were just as dense, but now they matched her softer features and rosy cheeks, particularly since the scars and marks of a hard life were almost entirely gone, but for a single mark on her right cheek from playing rocks when she was a kid, when -

*What the heck? My memories have changed? I was always a girl?*

The memory was broadly the same - flinging rocks about when she'd been six and with one of the nicer foster families - and she'd accidentally struck a beehive. Only in this dream there wasn't an undercurrent of anger, but instead immediate embarrassing guilt when she'd done so, and when the bees flooded out she hadn't tried to whack them with a stick but instead squealed and ran, only to trip over and scar her cheek. It was a small scar, but noticeable, and it gave her face a kind of much-needed asymmetry. She even thought it looked a little adorable.

*Ugh, I'm not meant to be adorable! What has that witch done to my mind!? It's like I literally can't hurt a fly now. Wait, can I? Oh God . . .*

She couldn't. It wouldn't do to *hurt* things, after all. That would be too mean!

"This is ridiculous! Why would she do this? I don't deserve to be stuck as a total snack! And all these bubbly thoughts! It's like I'm high on sugar!"

She felt agitated. Excited. Like she'd downed three cokes and then eaten two bowls of ice cream *before* dinner. God, the thought alone made her stomach rumble and her tastebuds tingle.

"Oh, of course," she said, looking back in her reflection. "She's given me a total sweet tooth."

And then, despite herself, she had to giggle.

## The New Girl

It was embarrassing, facing Susanna again. Beverly's movements were all wrong: her hips swayed easily, and her breasts bounced a little in her top. She found it hard not to hum a silly tune to herself as she left the bathroom, as if she were a ridiculous Disney Princess. But then that made her *think* about how she'd look as a Disney Princess, and it took great effort to stop herself from giggling and smiling at the sheer thought of it.

*These thoughts totally suck! Ugh, I'm even moving like some bouncy, flighty girl! I grew up hard, darn it! This is a sick joke! I shouldn't be thinking about how perfectly matching this pink skirt is! Or my makeup!*

Indeed, the pastel pink on her lips just somehow *worked*, and it was hard not to at least feel a little good about that, despite the fact that she wasn't *meant* to have makeup at all. Or have a vagina and boobs. Or be a girl at all.

Susanna was waiting in her office, and the new Beverly Prosser went to her with an almost dutiful compulsion. She should have been running, but even her rules-breaking tendencies had been reduced to the point where meekly appearing and pleading came across as more natural.

"Sorry, not turning you back, at least not yet," Susanna said. "You're my new girl, and I aim to get my worth out of you. Here's the deal, sunshine-

"Beverly. I mean, Beverly. Shoot!"

Susanna chuckled. "Glad we washed the dirty language from that pretty mouth, at least. Anyway, Beverly, here's the deal: you are now my sweet and super cute new assistant working with me at the store. I've been understaffed the last week since my previous girl left, so this will work out well! You'll work full time hours, and be paid, though a portion of your wages will be garnished to pay for the repairs here. That sounds fair, right?"

"Right!" she beamed, before catching herself. "Wait, I didn't mean-

"Oh, but you did. I meant what I said - this is the you that could have been, and it's a you that feels a bit more shame. The red in those cute Irish cheeks of yours tell me everything."

"But I'm meant to be a guy! I don't want to have a - have a -"

God, she couldn't even say it. *A pussy. A vagina. A slit. A cooch. It's so embarrassing!*

"Well, it's not permanent," the witch assured. "When you've paid for all the damage you've done, then I'll change you back - *if* you even want to change back by that point."

*Oh, I will. There's no way I'm getting attached to this body, no matter how cute it is. Ugh, why is 'cute' my new word? Frick!*

"What do I have to do?" she said, swallowing what remained of her male pride for a moment.

"Oh, that's easy! You'll just need to be trained up as a good worker for Sweet Tooth, able to man - well, *woman* - the counter, learn how to use the refrigeration equipment and service them occasionally - nothing too techy, we have a guy for the complex parts - and manage some of the accounts while also being nice and bright and peppy for all our customers, including acting waitress to the small number of booths we have here."

Beverly felt a nerve in her temple twinge and give way. "Is that all?"

"Not even close! You'll also have to learn how to open and close the store, how to present yourself, as well as a lot of the womanly aspects of taking care of yourself, including feminine hygiene. Not to worry, I can help you there, but your new clothing will come out of your paycheck, I'm afraid. Part of doing business."

"But that's not fair! You can use magic to-"

"Yes, but inanimate objects take a lot out of me - I work with ice cream flavours infused with magic."

"That's, like, inanimate!"

"No, it's food. Consumptive. Trust me, the difference is clear with magic. And you'll have to learn a bit of that - not to use it, mind, don't get excited. You don't have the touch as far as I can see - but you'll need to be able to read the basic auras of the tubs and know my magical ice creams from my non-magical ones. And that's not even getting into my Side Effect Sorbets, ha! Oh, this could actually be very fun! My last assistant couldn't know about all this stuff."

Beverly didn't exactly feel excited. Glum would be more appropriate. She wanted to be *fuming*, but that was evidently an emotion that was much harder for her to generate now. Even looking around the store she was made aware of the effects of the mental change: the tacky pinkness and silly mascots actually seemed rather adorable and comforting now.

*Ugh. Even the pink frosting decorations in the corners look kinda cool now.*

"Cheer up," Susanna said, bringing forth a tub and scooping a bit of purple-coloured ice cream into a cone, "it's not a bad deal. Do you live alone?"

"Yeah. I rent."

"Not anymore. You can live here - board will be cheaper than anywhere else, I assure you. You'll have your own room with its own space, and you won't have to worry about a lot of usual expenses but for the meagre bit I charge."

"I don't have a choice, do I?"

Susanna grinned. "Nope! Now take a bite and feel a lot better."

"I am not eating your ice cream. I don't care how much of, like, a dumb valley girl you've made me!"

"Please, I didn't reduce your intelligence. I think the female you just likes to say 'like' a bit too much. It's easy for cynical people to think that optimistic ones are dumb, however. Trust me, you're just . . . more willing to see the nicer side of things, if you'll let yourself. Now eat. You know you want to."

Susanna wasn't wrong, Beverly desperately wanted to eat it. Some of her worst and best memories from her turbulent life were tied up with sweets and ice cream - being denied it, stealing it from the refrigerator, running away with some petty cash and buying some - but it had always been a luxury item for her. Even in her slightly rewired memories where she'd always been a girl, that remained the same: the dark moments of seeing other kids able to go to the musical ice cream van while she was told she hadn't 'earned it' was eerily similar to what had occurred to her as Ben. The same.

And now she was being offered an ice cream, and her own sweet tooth was absolutely raging.

*God, and I thought I liked sugar before. Maybe just one bite . . .*

She took the cone, trying to look like she didn't care even as her bright green eyes betrayed her, and then took a bite.

"Holy shit!" she said. "Oh my God. I can actually swear, this is so good!"

"I told you!"

"What flavour is this? Oh my God, it's super duper incredible!"

"Hint of Happy Change," Susanna said easily. "It gives a brief boost to endorphins and your pleasure centre after a momentous change, which you've just been through!"

"It's working! Holy moly!"

She ate more, uncaring if she got a brain freeze. It was like literally *tasting* possibility, change, and the hope that things might turn out better. Sweet, fruity, with just the slight nervous tang of a new situation, but with an aftertaste that lingered long and subtle, not too sugary to be artificial, but just enough to be reassuring. To Beverly's embarrassment, she had to wipe her eyes briefly. It was a lot to take in.

"This is crazy," she said, though she didn't stop eating.

"Well, it's been a crazy day for me too," Susanna said, smirking. "But given that you've clearly got such a sweet tooth, I think you'll do just fine here. Today you can get used to your new body and come to terms with it - the ice cream will help, I assure you - and then hopefully we can get you trained up and ready for the store's reopening in the coming days."

Beverly just continued to eat, savouring the ice cream and ignoring the witch's words. Far too much had changed in just the last half an hour of her life. She'd become female, had her mind altered, and been forced into a crazy magical ice cream server job in the hopes of

everything going back to normal. She wanted to be mad as hell but could only keep her smile suppressed as she ate the delicious cone to its end.

*I am gonna ride this darn sugar high as long as I can before I have to figure all this sh-sh-stuff out. Ugh.*

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To say the rest of the day passed like a dream would be inaccurate. It couldn't quite be called a nightmare though, either. Instead, Beverly experienced time and space as if she were floating: faintly dizzy, slightly nauseous, her body seeming to be utterly normal and simultaneously unconnected to who she was supposed to be. Susanna gave her space as promised, introducing her to her upstairs room with its pink walls and fluffy bed and throw-on, girly pillows, and allowed her some space to explore and get used to her body.

She more than needed it, because apart from that brief series of self-examinations at the sink, she had been ignoring herself. Her boobs. Her womanhood. Her incredibly frizzy, bouncy hair. Her softness. The little bits of her that bounced, including how she filled the back of her skirt rather . . . snugly.

*Time to rip off the bandaid. Just have a look naked. I'll be like this for a while, so I better get used to it or whatever. I wish I'd never robbed this place!*

She peeled off her clothing, unbuttoning her shirt and removing her bra - despite her memories accommodating her a little there, the ease of undoing the strap was not entirely natural to her. Then she took off the rest, grimacing a little at the way her full C-cups breasts bounced on her chest as she pulled off her stockings as carefully as she could.

"Should rip them off, except this stupid new brain would find that *rude!*"

She made her way to the little bathroom attached to the room. At least this one was hers - two bathrooms in one building, practically a luxury! Three if one included the customer bathroom downstairs. Witches must have had it easy.

"Frick! I'm still cute as hell naked!"

Even cuter, perhaps, but without an ounce of attraction to herself. Benjamin had been a red-blooded male, same as any other. He liked girls, had even had liaisons in the past, though less than he would admit or claim. A troubled life made for a troubled sex life. But he liked girls, especially girls with nice curves and pretty smiles, though he usually went for the more cynical, dangerous sort. This absolute cutie, with her sparkling emerald eyes and frizzy ginger hair and perky tits and nice ass, would still totally have caught his attention. Only since Beverly now was her, she found herself instead just hit with a sort of beaming pride over her body, despite all desire to the contrary.

"I really do look good. Don't feel a thing though, what's up with that? Am I not a lesbian now, or . . . Oh God! Oh GOD!"

She placed her hands over her tits for sheer modesty as it hit her: for just a moment she imagined who she *would* be attracted to, and the tall image of a man with nice firm muscles and a hairy chest came to mind.

"No, no, no, no, no! No way! I am ignoring that! I am not straight for cute boys! Or hot hunks! Or whatever! Stupid female brain!"

She practically *danced* in irritation, causing her various naked parts to wobble.

"I'm getting dressed again!"

She did so quickly as she could, though the bra was a struggle. She'd barely acknowledged her new vagina beyond a few little prods - it was still too alien and weird to her, and surprisingly sensitive. No, better to get used to this body in other ways, like practising movement and clothing and *thinking about how nice my boobs would look in the right top, especially if I serve a cute guy who - NO WAY!*

She gave an exasperated squeak and got to work distracting herself with organising her room. Susanna had promised that the new woman could move her stuff in as soon as she was ready, and so Beverly wore the only other set of clothes that had been arranged for her: a repulsively adorable yellow top that was perfect for summer wear, and a pair of jeans that at least covered her legs but had rips in them in that style girls apparently liked. As before, she looked cute as hell, though at least there was no pink.

"Ready to head out?" Susanna asked when she came down, "or do you need more time?"

"No, I'm ready," she said, skipping down the steps. She stopped herself, then walked normally as she could.

"Don't need a bit more time to, uh, explore your body? I'm given to understand many who change gender from magic like to do that, though you're my first experiment with this."

"Nope! Don't even suggest that!"

She turned bright red.

"Trust me, it's pretty nice. I'm a single lady by nature, but even I need to inspect the valves every so often, trust me."

"Haven't you humiliated me enough? I'm wearing *yellow* for crying out loud, and I'm liking it!"

The witch chuckled. "Fine, fine. But it'll happen!"

"No, it totally won't. You made me attracted to guys! That's sick!"

"Did I?" the witch said. She seemed mildly amused. "I definitely didn't intend that. It's probably just how the female you would have turned out."

"Well, the female me turned out to have really frizzy hair. It's way too much."

“Please, it’s gosh-darn adorable. I’m starting to think this whole thing was fated. Come, I’ll drive us in the Sweetmobile, and we can pick up your stuff.”

Beverly paused, torn halfway between the urge to giggle and total bemusement.

“Wait - the Sweetmobile?”

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The Sweetmobile was the mobile part of Susanna’s operation, though she hadn’t actually started it yet. A fully furnished ice cream truck to travel around Branton - something Beverly might even be trained up in if it ever became operational. Like the store, it was pink and colourful, and had a model of the Sweet Tooth on top of it, smirking as it held up an ice cream cone. It was ridiculous, and Beverly couldn’t help but laugh at it several times as they drove to her apartment.

“See? I said you’d come to like this new second chance.”

“Don’t foul my mood . . . please. My brain is all over the place. It’s melting like - like -”

“Like ice cream?”

Beverly giggled, stopping herself only when she bit her tongue. “Yeah, sure. Look, I’ll just run in. I don’t have loads of stuff, and it’s a pretty bad neighbourhood. I don’t want you-”

“I can take care of myself, remember?” the witch said. “It’s you that might need a bit more protection. You’re a cute, perky young woman now, remember?”

Beverly gulped, but assented for Susanna to come with her. Even the witch seemed a bit surprised by the area of Branton they were in: the low-income housing was generally decrepit and let down by the local council here, and Beverly’s apartment seemed barely liveable, especially now that her new feminine senses took in how mouldy and dirty the space was.

*How did I even live here? Gosh, it’s disgusting! Ewww, was that a roach?*

She’d never been afraid of bugs before - except for those bees - but now . . .

“I’ll be real quick,” she said. “Don’t judge, either. I’ve had a real hard life.”

“I know,” the witch said, serious. “I could tell you were telling the truth before, and I can see it now.”

Several men wandered by outside as they moved Benjamin’s still-male existence to the van. They threw creepy smiles, but Beverly found it impossible to tell them to fuck off. She just smiled sweetly and awkwardly moved around them, even when they leered at her.

“Cute thing,” one said. “Haven’t seen you around here. You bumping uglies with that ginger kid?”

“Nah,” the other said. “Looks like his hotter twin or something. Where are you going, precious? We just wanna talk.”

“P-please just let me pass,” she murmured.

Thankfully, they didn't escalate beyond that, though they continued to amuse themselves by watching her go. She could feel their gazes on her ass. It was only when Susanna snapped her fingers that the pair turned around and walked away.

“A simple redirection spell. Creeps.”

“Thanks. I mean, I shouldn't thank you. I would have beaten them up, before!”

“And would you have acted like that towards women yourself?”

“No way! Well, I might have looked. Maybe asked for a smile, but not . . .”

*But it would have felt the same to her.*

The witch nodded. “Like I said, a lot to learn. Let's get the rest of your things moved. I should be able to transform a few articles a week, but the main thing is altering your wallet and keys and the like. We'll build you a nice new identity by the time you're ready to start working, Beverly. And then, you can start paying off your debt and enjoying the life of a new girl!”

Beverly nodded, moving back to her old apartment. It smelled fairly rank. Boyish, and not in a good way.

*I can't believe this, but part of me is actually looking forward to living at Sweet Tooth. How did I live in such a boy's pigsty! It's gross!*

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Over the next three days, Beverly got a bit more used to her new skin, her new hair, and perhaps most of all, her new disposition. It was a difficult adjustment, particularly since her male anger and pride kept warring with her new femininity again and again, sometimes leaving her with headaches that only her intense craving for soothing lemon sorbet could fix: an addiction that Susanna was more than happy to provide.

“It's on the house,” she said with a grin. “Perks of the job!”

Beverly wasn't going to fight her on that. In fact, it was difficult to fight her on anything at all given how demure she now was. While her 'backstory' remained largely the same in her memories, her escapes from bad foster homes weren't brave striking outs but tearful fleeing, running away to safe spaces. Beverly was far more timid than Benjamin had ever been, but while his soul had been hardened by poor treatment, the sad experiences she'd gone through had only left the female version of her *more* empathetic. It was a curious fork in the road of destiny, a peek into the kind of person Ben could have been, and now the transformee found herself occasionally wandering and sifting through her slightly altered memories, and somehow focusing on the more positive ones instead. The ones that Benjamin never would have dwelled on. Even moments as sickly saccharine as chasing

butterflies in the Tydes' garden, or giggling with delight at her first boat ride, back when the Stevensons had cared for her; one of the few good families.

That inherent, almost *compelled* optimism carried forth into her present life, no matter how much she tried to maintain a cynical edge. She woke up with her soft body, smiled at how wonderfully cute and soft it was, and then got up to change into her new wardrobe: a wardrobe that had expanded considerably after the second day. Susanna had insisted on taking her to go clothes shopping with a line of credit extended, and Beverly had gone along, practically *skipping* in excitement, even as her pale cheeks turned bright red with embarrassment. A number of security services and workers had been hired to fix up what was busted in the store, but it meant that Sweet Tooth would be closed for a couple of days. As far as her new boss was concerned, this meant time to further acclimate Beverly into being a woman. They spent several hours at the nearby Branton Public Mall getting Beverly a number of cheap yet stylish summer dresses, women's shorts and shirts, bras and panties, socks and pyjamas, and even some crop tops and low-cut items that filled her with dread.

*Oh God, I bet I'll look amazing in that pink crop top too. What is happening to me? I'm meant to be a total street rat, and now I just want to show off!*

But not show off *too* much. She could at least be grateful that she hadn't turned into some vapid bimbo. In fact, when walking through the mall she even noticed a few men looking her way, and she had no idea how to react whatsoever. She blushed red - something that came easily to her now - and tried to look away, only checking back when they had passed.

"Handsome, were they?" Susanna teased.

"Please don't. Bad enough they look at me like that!"

"Worse that you like it?"

She didn't reply. She simply refused to even acknowledge that particular point. *I just have to make it through the months and months of being a cute, peppy girl, and then I can be me again. Who knows, maybe it'll turn out for the best! Wait, those are Beverly thoughts. Stupid Beverly thoughts always spitting sunshine out their butt!*

Still, it didn't stop her from accessorising more and more over the coming days, and even the urge to put some makeup on was impossible to resist. She was willing to touch and look at more of her body, though she kept her hands shy of her womanhood except when needed: bad enough that she had to sit down to pee, but dealing with having a freakin' vagina instead of a dick? That was still a lot to take in.

*Even if it seems much neater now. Oh, wait - BEVERLY THOUGHTS AGAIN!*

It almost came as a relief when Susanna finally got her into the actual training for the store. Benjamin had never held a job down in his life apart from the occasional go-between, and those he was almost always fired from eventually, or quit in a stark rage at being told

what to do. Beverly had been jobless most of her life for different reasons: she was a lot shyer, didn't like confrontations with customers, and struggled to find a place where she belonged.

Well, now she had it, or at least that's how it seemed. The uniform fit, the surroundings were pleasant to her new feminine sensibilities, and the pay . . . was actually pretty good, albeit garnished to pay for all the repairs and the general apology. Susanna quickly put her to work learning the various ins and outs of the job: there was nothing massively complicated, but there was the addition of magic, which had infused a variety of the ice creams for some rather special effects, though the public would never fully guess that they were magical.

"They think of me more as an eccentric artist, but they love the flavours!" Susanna boasted.

"You must work very hard on them, I suppose."

"Oh, I did. I haven't made a new flavour for a long while, actually. I guess I've fallen into a rut after a while: inventiveness doesn't come easy. Plus, I've had some failures: Saccharine Whimsy was just too much. I had to work quickly to erase the diabetes I accidentally gave a couple of customers. That was a calamity I nearly didn't come back from!"

"Gosh!" Beverly said, covering her mouth. "Wait, was one of those kids Jaxon Tyde?" Susanna blanched. "I fixed him up! How did you know?"

Beverly sulked. "You have no idea how much I wish I was still Ben right now. Then I'd be able to actually laugh at that misfortune. Instead, I just feel sorry for him now, even if he was, like, really rude to me!"

"Well, you sure are a sweet thing now. Let's show you how the serving system works, as well as the computer for when it comes to transactions."

The training went by with surprising speed, and the new woman picked it up surprisingly quickly. The easiest part, to her pride and chagrin, was in dealing with the various imaginary customers that Susanna was able to throw at her. Being a witch specialising in transformative magic, Susanna could make herself appear like an old crone, a kindly matron, an angry bald-headed man with a throbbing temple, or simply a crying child unused to being given choice. It was alarming, but at least it wasn't 'living mascots grabbing you' levels of weird, and it did give her a chance to practice her new approach to others, which was appropriately layered with sweet smiles and kind words pitched to a slightly higher octave than even her new register had for the norm. It wasn't the kind of job that she'd ever have taken on as Benjamin, but in many ways she was almost beginning to anticipate what it would be like to serve actual customers, especially since she was allowed to try samples of *every* ice cream flavour in order to get to know them all.

*Okay, so the rest of this is totally nuts, but this part here I can, like, really get used to. I can't believe I can eat all the ice cream I want, and Susanna says it won't even affect my figure! Not that I darn well care about that - that's just dumb Beverly thoughts.*

Susanna was impressed enough that she decided to bring forth Beverly's starting date on the job by a full day, something that made the new woman more than a little nervous.

"What?" she said as Susanna served up a rice dinner for the pair. "This isn't fair!"

"Neither is being robbed, Beverly."

"I know, and I'm really sorry. Actually sorry this time, since this dumb girl body is so submissive and apologetic and stuff! But I'm still getting used to being a girl, I'm still struggling with all this frizzy hair, and what if I make a mistake?"

"Then I'll garnish it from your wages appropriately but fairly. Please, Beverly, you've taken to this like a fish to water, you'll be fine. Besides, consider it just a little bit part of the punishment aspect. The sooner you can help out, the sooner you can start putting things right and eventually - if you want to - turn back as well."

"You just want more time to get the Sweetmobile running."

Susanna rolled her eyes. "The Sweetmobile has been in the works for years now, Beverly. It's a flight of fancy. One day, I'm sure, I'll get it working and running properly. There's just a lot of permits and tech stuff to sort out for it. No, I just want to get working in general again, and I'm sure you'd like to be a man again even a day sooner, right?"

Beverly bit her lip. She did want to be a man again. She had to. Of course, try telling that to her brain! It was relaxing in the miasma of womanhood, and too many parts of it felt natural just after a few days. Even putting on stockings and bras came so much easier already, and she often giggled at her own reflection, feeling oddly giddy about it until she pulled herself up.

"Of course I do," she said.

*I do. I really, really do. It's just the rest of me that sorta maybe kinda likes this . . . just a bit.*

## **The Reopening**

Sweet Tooth's primary focus was on ice cream, but as the name suggested, the store did indeed have numerous other sweet items for sale. Cookies, cakes, candies, British 'lollies', and various other sugary drinks and treats of all make and size were available, and there was an entire wall of dispensers where one could adorn one's ice creams with shavings of

chocolate, hundreds and thousands (“can you tell I’m British?”, Susanna had teased), peppermint, syrup, flakes, candies, and so on. It really did have it all, which also meant that there was a lot for Beverly to keep track of on the day of the reopening. She’d only been a woman for four days - if one included the day she was changed - and trained in the store for even less time, but Susanna had confidence in her.

*Besides*, she thought to herself. *It’s not like I’ve got a lot of choice in this!*

And so, at 10am in the morning on a Monday, the store was opened once more. It was good timing, really. Monday was their least busy day - even the mom groups bringing their kiddies usually were from Tuesday onwards - so in this way Beverly could have a quieter start and build her confidence. And she certainly needed a confidence boost: it was one major feature she was lacking in mental power when it came to Ben vs Beverly. She may have been more optimistic and bubbly, but that bubbiness was tempered by a nervousness in her own abilities.

“You’ll do well, you’re just a trainee, remember?” Susanna said. “I’ll be in the store, working alongside you the whole time.”

“Th-thanks,” Beverly said, nodding at the affirmation. She hated how lovely her mentor’s words felt. It was so easy to forget this woman had captured and transformed her. “That means a lot.”

“It better, because here’s our first customer!”

The door opened, and a woman seemingly in her twenties walked in by herself humming a pleasant tune. She had a number of bags on her person already, clearly having started early shopping. She was an incredibly gorgeous individual with brunette hair and an impressive bust, wearing a dress that was slightly revealing but devastatingly stylish. She grinned broadly, practically *bouncing* with excitement.

“Why hello there! You weren’t open on Saturday, and I was sooooo disappointed!”

“Hello Christina!” Susanna beamed. “So lovely to see you! Where are all the kids?”

“With Emile at the moment, and Olivia is looking after a couple at home while I’m, like, taking a few minutes shopping. Oh, my oldest is just totes wonderful!”

“Quite so. I look forward to having her as a customer again soon; I believe she’s a big fan of Chocolate Chip off the Old Block.”

“Well, she does take after me!” Christina giggled.

“I’m sorry about Saturday: we had a break-in.”

“Ohmigod!” the woman cried, in a way that sounded positively bimbo-ish to Beverly’s ears. Benjamin would have hated her on sight, but Beverly found it oddly endearing. She realised the woman was a little pregnant: her front had a tautness to it that pushed out her loose dress a little.

“That’s so horrible,” Christina continued. “Is everything alright?”

“It is now. Christina, meet my newest employee who’s helping me in the aftermath, Beverly Prosser. Beverly, this is Christina Halloway. You may have heard of her.”

The former man blinked. She certainly had heard of Christina ‘Chrissy’ Halloway. Most people had, though her influence wasn’t as strong in Branton, she was known as a massive local socialite involved in funding numerous low-income housing areas and homeless shelters. She had a reputation as quite the beauty and quite the babymaker, clinging to her husband’s arm and constantly pregnant, but sweet as anything despite having little but stuffing between her ears. At least, that was how she was described: Beverly was getting the sense that she wasn’t stupid so much as . . . nice. Sweet, like herself perhaps.

*Jeez Louise, she looks so young! How in the heck does she have teenage kids and still look in her twenties? I need to know her skincare routine . . . wait, NO I DON'T!*

**BEVERLY THOUGHTS!**

“Lovely to meet you,” Beverly said after an awkward moment. “I’m - I’m a big fan of your work, Mrs. Halloway. I’ve, um, used your shelters. More than once. And the best place I rented was thanks to you.”

Christina blushed, and her expression was not one of a rich philanthropist but rather someone positively giddy to have been of help. Beverly was shocked to be pulled into a hug across the counter. She didn’t fight the hug, however. It felt . . . really nice, actually.

“Oh, I’m so, so, sooooo glad! You seem to be doing well for yourself now, Beverly. I always believe everyone can totes better themselves. God knows I super did, ha!”

She giggled and rubbed her stomach. “But I’m also massively craving something. I always crave desserts when I’m preggers. Can I please have a double-choc and raspberry sorbet combination with chocolate dart frogs on top, a few of the lime sprinkles around the edge and marble-strawberry syrup down one side but not the other? In a cone please? I know that’s a massive lot! Gosh, you Brits always have such fun flavours!”

Beverly nearly coughed, but regained herself.

“Sorry, honey! I’ll repeat it slowly. That was super quick and manic, I know! What I want is -”

But then, to the surprise of everyone, most of all herself, Beverly began the order, and in no short pace either. The young Irish-looking beauty quickly snapped to, scooping up the ice cream, sprinkling on the requisite additions, applying the syrup, and then processing the order on the screen with shocking ease. She placed the cone up on the stand for the customer to grab.

“That’ll be ten-ninety-nine, please,” she said, beaming. “It looks delicious, by the way. Experimental, but really, like, delicious!”

The two women giggled as Christina paid eagerly. She sampled it before them, and let out a moan that was surprisingly sensuous.

“Mhmmmm, oh my God. This totally hits the spot! I totes feel bad for my Emile for, like, missing out; I’ll have to make it up to him later!”

Beverly giggled along with her. “Glad to be of service!”

Christina grinned. “Well, I’ll remember you, Beverly. This is just fantastic. You’ve chosen well with this one, Susanna.”

Susanna regarded her apprentice with some surprise. Beverly could tell in her eyes that the woman had been looking forward to a minor stumble for embarrassment’s sake. For the karma. But instead, she was amazed.

“It rather seems I have,” she said, bewildered.

“If I’m ever around, I’ll introduce her to my older sons! I bet they’d *love* to meet such a cute and wonderfully sweet girl, even if they’re a few years too young! Still, I know they’ll totes be real catches in a few years!”

*That* made Beverly start coughing.

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After that first positive interaction, the rest of the day went - appropriately, given the pun - like an absolute treat. Buoyed by the confidence of her initial skill, Beverly continued to interact with the customers as they came in, directing them towards not only the flavours they wanted, but even nervously suggesting other ones she sensed they might like. She rarely got this wrong, and soon Susanna was stepping back and not even talking much to the customers, allowing Beverly to take the initiative completely. It was astounding: Benjamin had hated dealing with customers, working for The Man, and being beholden to people who could treat him like shit. But Beverly faced customers with a splendid smile, a bouncy enthusiasm, and a keenness to chat with them as she served up what they wanted. Not everyone was chatty back, mind, but she was able to pry more words out than perhaps even the stickiest customer expected.

Of course, others were far more willing to talk for other reasons, ones she found a lot more embarrassing. Namely, these were the teen boys and young men, and even some in their thirties and forties that entered the store and immediately developed a crush upon the new woman. She couldn’t even blame them, much as her old male pride wanted to: she was, as she had described herself once, a ‘total snack.’ And for some, she looked to be the most delicious dessert in a store full of them. With her bright red hair, noticeably impressive bust, and slim, cute figure, she was a beauty to behold. Add on the cute freckles, her habit of smiling and blushing and bouncing a little on the spot, and she exuded a sort of impatient positivity that had once just been simply impatience.

“Hello sir, how can I help you?” she asked one man in his forties. He grinned back in a way that she certainly didn’t appreciate.

“Well, well, aren’t you the sweetest thing here?” he said.

*Smash your nose in if I was still a guy!*

But instead she simply laughed, pulling back just a little. “Oh, aren’t you funny!” she said, de-escalating as best as she could. “My boyfriend always makes jokes about that!”

His smile disappeared. “Ah, well. Lucky man. I’ll have a raspberry sorbet to go.”

She fetched it for him, humming as she did so, filtering him out. He paid and left, and Susanna gave a slow clap.

“Nicely done there. You’re a woman already.”

“I - what?”

“You mean that wasn’t planned? You pulled back, made the intimidating man feel like he’d made a joke without it being a genuine flirt, and then you mentioned a boyfriend before effectively ending the conversation. You just used a series of tricks that women the world over use every day to avoid creepy men, particularly creepy customers. Nicely done.”

Beverly bit her lip. “I - I didn’t realise I even mentioned a boyfriend. It just . . . it seemed like the kind of thing that would get me off the hook without making him upset. God, that’s so embarrassing.”

“It’s practical, honey. Not everyone can be a witch, though that was a kind of feminine sorcery, I suppose. But we’ll talk about this later: new customers coming, and this one looks cuter and more age appropriate.”

She blushed - they were, and he was, and he was. She thrust out her chest a little more subconsciously as she served the young man and his friends, all in their twenties, and all clearly interested in her. A few even made little comments about her ‘awesome hair’, which made her giggle happily.

*Put away the cleavage, you moron! You’re still a guy!*

Only, she didn’t feel like a guy. She made their ice creams much more slowly than she should have, asking them about their day, what they were doing, what flavours they liked, while they asked her name and how long she’d worked here.

“I’m just starting,” she said with a smile. “But I’ll be here for, like, a year at least!”

“Will you now?” Susanna remarked. “That’s good news to hear!”

Beverly cursed herself mentally for the rest of the day.

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By the end of the first day, Beverly felt exhausted. She’d sold a variety of flavours of ice cream, as well as numerous sweets, endeared herself to a multiplicity of customers, and

learned a lot about what it felt like to be a woman stuck behind a counter being flirted with by men. She hadn't loved that last part, especially since her more demure demeanour meant that it was a lot easier to smile and giggle and try to let down guys gently rather than be direct as Benjamin would have been. Susanna found it all very funny, and while Beverly knew she was justified in some of her behaviour, she couldn't help but find a cynical edge in the witch's tone.

"Is it really that funny?"

"Oh, just a little funny," the woman replied. "You're learning more life lessons than you can imagine, honey."

Beverly's smile dissipated from her face. She was almost glad for it. Almost. "You put me in this position! And I did a great job, thank you very much!"

Susanna nodded. "You have indeed. I won't lie, I'm actually quite annoyed about that. I was hoping you'd flounder a bit more, as part of your punishment. Almost makes me want to go with what you said earlier . . . a full year."

Beverly squeaked. *Actually squeaked.* "You wouldn't!"

"No, I wouldn't . . . unless things really go south. You did well today, kid. Take an ice cream of your choice and scram! The evening's yours to do with as you please."

Beverly was surprised by Susanna's sudden change of personality. The witch hadn't exactly seemed massively passionate about her store, but she was protective of it, and clearly it had been a big passion at some point. But after what had seemed like a successful day, there was little thanks or celebration whatsoever. Just . . . 'scram.'

It was kind of deflating.

*Almost like I feel sorta let down by her or something. God, this body and brain just freakin' crave approval, don't they? It's pathetic!*

She went to her room with a cup of Snickerdoodle Delight, and spent her time simply going over the day and thinking on what she could have done better, or worse. Occasionally, the thought of those cute boys around her age entered her mind, and she had to stop. She would grab a book from the shelf or spend some time online to distract herself, which was odd enough as she never read books as a guy or used social media. But always those little stirring thoughts returned, until finally she couldn't take it anymore.

*Fine, fine. Just once. It's what, like, any guy would do, right?*

Beverly retreated to her bed and removed her clothing, taking in her gorgeous body. She was so small now, which made her C-cup breasts look larger on her frame. They were perfect, nice teardrops that were matched by the gorgeous slope of her hips. She lowered a hand and rubbed her rear.

*I won't lie, it's a really nice butt, too! Wow, and more sensitive as well . . . maybe just a little bit more play.*

She began to stroke her nipples, pinching them slightly. It elicited a gasp from her - everything was more sensitive! God, it was miraculous!

“M-maybe just the t-tits as well then,” she said, drawing both hands up to cup her breasts. She savoured the wobble of them, then giggled like a little girl as she shook her shoulders to increase said wobble. “Mhmmm!”

*I could get used to this. Totally!*

She squeezed and groped, massaging her chest and licking her lips as she did so. Soon a new feeling was growing: a moistness between her thighs that was at once alien and strange and *needy*. She yearned for something there, and soon she felt slick. Laying down, she didn't hesitate: the new woman moved one hand down to probe her womanhood, and found the area already wet and ready to receive her fingers. She'd - as she crudely put it as a guy - 'fingerbanged' a girl a couple of times. Now she realised how naive and impatient she'd been as a reckless young man, because she needed to start gently and work her way up. The female body needed more time, more foreplay, and she gave herself that time, closing her eyes as she continued to caress her tits. She sighed softly, occasionally shivering as her fingers rubbed her clitoris.

“Ahhhh . . . s-so good! Mhmm!!”

Slowly, the feelings rose, the intensity and speed of them. She saw the smirk of a handsome man in her mind, a figure around her own age, and this time he was shirtless, extending a strong arm outwards and caressing her frizzy hair. With one motion she undid the band keeping her hair together, and it poofed out, spreading across the bed and adding to the simulation of sex.

“W-want you,” she murmured. “In m-me.”

She slid her fingers into her tunnel for the first time, penetrating deeper than she ever imagined she would. And to think that a cock would penetrate even deeper! She groaned at the mere thought, imagining her new walls parting further, clinging and gripping to a man's member as it thrust in and out of her, in and out.

“I-in and out. Oh G-God! Ohhhhh!!”

She was ravenous now, pinching her sensitive nipples which were now throbbing with desire. Her womanhood was wet, her thighs slightly damp from arousal, and still she pleased herself, lost in her sexual thoughts. She imagined the strong man on top of her, clambering upon her, ramming his cock into her, his balls slapping against her skin as she milked him for all he was worth. It was heaven, it was wrong, it was right beyond all measure. She wanted to be his sweet, gorgeous, happy, peppy girl! She wanted -

“OHHHHHHH!!!”

She had to cover her mouth before she kept squealing in pleasure, but it was difficult to stop entirely, as the orgasm hit her like a freight train. She wasn't prepared for the

intensity of it: it was stronger than the one-and-done release of a man's climax, and better yet, Beverly was hit by a second orgasm mere seconds later. For a moment, she almost felt like she was about to go unconscious, until she recovered. She simply lay there, breathing heavily, savouring the post-pleasure afterglow, lost in bliss.

*Oh frick, I just imagined wanting to get banged by a dude. And it was . . . amazing. What the hell is wrong with me?*

But despite herself, she couldn't help but smile so wide that her cheeks hurt.

*M-maybe this won't be all bad. Maybe I could get used to this.*

When she was ready, she leapt from the bed, got dressed, and went and grabbed another ice cream. She'd earned it, as far as she was concerned.

## **The Months After**

Beverly continued to earn her keep and then some. Despite her past, and the repeated humiliations of being reminded of her former self, when she was actually 'womanning' the counter she was truly another person. The customers loved her, and soon Sweet Tooth's business was booming more than it ever had been. Susanna was shocked almost as much as Beverly herself, but while the former male assumed that she would be highly appreciative, Susanna could be strangely aloof about it all, sometimes dismissing her efforts or downplaying them, but most of the time simply refusing to talk about work once it was done. Occasionally, Beverly caught Susanna looking at her strangely, the olive-skinned woman's eyes narrowing. And while Benjamin Prosser would have interpreted that as a threat, Beverly's heightened compassion and feminine intuition spotted something else: sadness. But Susanna always dismissed it out of hand, and the topic couldn't be discussed.

This was the status quo: Beverly increasingly became the perfect assistant and counter girl, while Susanna retreated ever more back to the office. This was apparently her pattern: a previous girl by the name of Kate who had worked there visited and got along with Beverly almost immediately.

"Oh, trust me, that's just Miss Harp's pattern," she said as they shared some ice cream for lunch after talking. "She gets all excited about having a new assistant, and then the magic wears off -"

"The magic?" Beverly asked, hoping that this woman knew, and that she'd finally have someone else to talk about her transformation with.

“You know, the ‘spark of newness’ or whatever you call it. The novelty. It’s like all those ice cream flavours down in the basement. She experiments for a bit, then gives up. Eventually, you’ll be doing all the hard work yourself and then you’ll quit.”

*This explains a lot, sorta. But why is she like that?*

Beverly was determined not to give up, however. Her maleness depended on it, even if it meant taking up more of a slack at work.

And more she did take on, as the weeks passed into early months. Beverly’s vestigial traces of cynicism were difficult to maintain a grip upon as she became increasingly invested in her job. She still had her days off, of course, and over time became more and more confident in presenting as a woman to the outside world, particularly since so many people loved her frizzy orange hair! But making actual friends was harder, and even Kate was just an occasional contact. Instead, she mainly spent her time alone, going to the mall or heading to old haunting spots and seeing them from a new perspective. She even walked past a number of old foster homes she used to belong to, and sampled the strange mix of new memories that mingled with the old. They weren’t any brighter or happier, but they were . . . different. And with her female perspective, she was able to process her emotions less through the lens of anger and more through compassion to herself. Some of the knives buried deep in her belly seemed to pry loose, and others that remained cut a little less.

It made the acceptance of her situation grow. Sure, she was stuck as a woman. Sure, she had to be as bubbly sweet as the very product she sold. And sure, she had to bite her lip occasionally when serving an attractive male customer. Sure, all of that, and the coercion and the magic and the fact that her wages were still being garnished and more, and yet . . .

And yet this was the first job she actually enjoyed. And yet it was the kind of place where she actually felt comfortable, even protected. And yet there was security, and normality, and regular pay without having to beg or steal or cheat or lie or demand.

Benjamin had never known that. His long history of being bounced from one uncaring foster family to the next had practically beaten the hope of such a situation out of him. Perhaps, if he’d remained male, he still wouldn’t have recognised it. But as Beverly, *she* could. She could get up excited to open the store, and to prep the flavours and pumps and check the machinery, and make sure all the cute little decorations were just so. It was wonderful, and sometimes she went to bed, her head spinning with the possibility of new flavours, ordinary and magical.

Of course, other times she simply had to ‘deal with the needs of the plumbing’ as Susanna put it. Her thoughts were utterly heterosexual - she was one hundred percent into boys, not that she’d ever admit it - and so several times a week or more she found herself lying back on her bed, imagining what sex as a woman with a man would be like, and making herself moan demurely, rocking her hips in motion to an imaginary lover. And always

afterward she'd indulge in her sweet tooth, feeling silly and light-headed and in need of a new kind of cookie, sorbet, sweet, or treat. They delighted her, though at times she found herself wanting for new flavours to sate her sweet-loving palette.

"You used to sell Mango Bonanza, why don't we sell it again?" she asked Susanna a month in over dinner. "I think it could be, like, a real big hit!"

Susanna sighed. "Maybe. I found it a whole fuss."

"But the records say -"

"You went through the records?"

Beverly couldn't help herself: she *beamed*. "Can you believe it? I actually read the financial reports! And I understood them! I may, like, be all bubbly and stuff now, but I think I'm even cannier sometimes, ha! Mango Bonanza was a real big seller three years ago in the Summer, and the Summer before that too. The Summer is just getting started; we should totes - I mean, totally - do it!"

To her surprise, Susanna just shrugged. "Maybe you're right. You've certainly got the zest for it. I'll think about it . . . but don't expect much."

*What the hell is this about? One minute she wants me to run the store and have a second chance, and now she doesn't care! It's just like Kate said!*

But instead of asking angrily, she did something that surprised herself: she extended a hand across the table and placed it on Susanna's. The older woman looked up, a little surprised.

"Hey," Beverly said. "Is everything, like, okay? You seem really up and down and all over the place lately. Am I not doing enough for the store? I'm really trying to live up to the deal, Susanna. I swear."

The witch was momentarily silent, until she blinked a couple of times and seemed to find her words. "It's not that, Beverly. It's . . . other things."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, so chalk it up to me being a total girl and having Beverly Thoughts now, but you should tell me. Talk about it. That's what women do, right?"

"I suppose you're right." She put away her utensils and stopped eating. "I've been a witch nearly twenty years, Beverly. Ever since I was a teenager. It's . . . fun. Joyous, at times. But it's not a cure all. It doesn't pay the bills, though it can help I suppose. I guess you could say that novelty is even harder to come by for a witch, and we have to be inventive. Truth be told, as much as I'm still annoyed that you broke into my store, going through that and changing you was one of the few interesting things to actually get my attention over the past decade.

"I started Sweet Tooth with such excitement. Such passion! And for a moment, once you got involved again, I started feeling that passion. Hell, I even started looking into getting the Sweetmobile running again. God, that's a venture that never stops or starts. But then -

and how pathetic is this? - you end up not being a young assistant in need of guidance and aid and direction, a fun little instrument to be remoulded and taught and - yes - punished. Instead, you turn out to be this magnetic, majestic presence who can run the store with two hands tied behind her back!"

Beverly cocked her head. "Are you angry with me?"

"No! Yes! Of course not! A little! Oh, it's not your fault, love. It's all mine. I'm a wee bit jealous, but I'm also just struggling to find passion in this work, I suppose. I thought if I could make you a project, it would bring it back for me. I haven't made a new bloody flavour of ice cream, magical or otherwise, since Sugar Rush Slammer."

She paused in the silence that followed.

"I'm proud of you, Beverly. I am. You've come far in just two months, and you're doing a damn fine job with this place. I just wish I had the same passion again." She sipped her glass of wine, sighed, and then stood. "I'm just blathering on now. I'm heading to bed. Saturday tomorrow: a busy day. You forget everything I said and just focus on being your sweet self. I reckon in just a few months you'll have paid your dues and you won't have to put up with me anymore. You've done damn well."

She left the table, and Beverly had to wipe her eyes when she was gone.

*She's actually proud of me?* she thought. *God, why does that mean so much? I just wish I could bring her passion back. I wish she could feel the same excitement she's given me . . .*

It was then that Beverly realised how grateful she was for this change. She still wanted to change back, of course. She simply had to. She couldn't stay a woman, right?

But she was grateful.

*So long as there are no more surprises.*

## **The Chance Meeting**

A surprise came, though it wasn't at Sweet Tooth. Which was, in a way, surprising in of itself. Beverly hadn't managed to crack the strange nut that was Susanna, but she did feel she understood the woman better. She wished she could hate her for what she'd done, but her sweet self just felt bad for her, and guilty that she couldn't stir the woman's passion back into her store. So instead, when Susanna was obviously feeling down or just wanting to be alone to watch the television upstairs, Beverly liked to duck out and walk around Branton and the outer suburbs surrounding it. She drifted, using her saved money to occasionally buy herself some nice meals or even clothing (she'd even bought herself some new bras the other day,

which had felt like a big step at the time). But this time she decided to go somewhere a bit different, walking for over an hour in the afternoon to see the neighbourhood of Waverwood.

It was not the nicest suburb, and she took mace, just in case. This was a place of some particularly bad memories for her, because it was where the Foster Care Hall used to sit, where Benjamin had been placed in between families. The staff had been uncaring at best, nasty at worst, and more than one worker had scoffed at him under their breath and spat something about him being 'a nasty little rodent' who 'had no future.'

*I proved them wrong*, she thought as she approached the now-condemned building. *Just not, like, in a way I imagined they ever expected.*

She'd decided to summon up some of her inner Benjamin. The rascal, the vandal. She'd even brought a few empty bottles in the hopes that she could toss them at the building. She hated the concrete monstrosity beyond the chain-link fence enough that she felt that even her more kindly self could do it. Hell, she'd even brought pliers to cut a hole through the fence.

Except a hole was already there, neatly cut. Curious, she pushed her way through it, and rounded the side of the building.

Someone was there, already vandalising the side of the building she had intended to smash the bottles against. She tucked herself against the corner of the construction and watched as the figure began spray painting a section of the grey, boring wall in bright, impressive colours. He worked like an artist, arcing his hands easily to make adjustments on the fly, then pausing to consider what he'd done before continuing. He looked to be about her age, with feathery brown hair and rather cute glasses that he continually adjusted. His build was ordinary, his height below average, and yet . . . there was something mesmerising about him. About the sheer focus on his gentle features as he continued to paint, forming a series of impressions upon the wall: jagged lines and gentle curves that were slowly formulating into what appeared to be an eclectic, yet angry crowd. She realised he was drawing anger, frustration, mapping out the history of this sordid place and the people who had been forgotten in it; red lines of rage zapping over the dark inky void of the abyss. And in the centre, spreading forth small and weak and yet hopeful, was a little seedling, pushing through the literal crack in the wall upon which it was painted.

*It's . . . how did he capture it so well?*

"Wow," she said, and suddenly the figure *leaped*, startled. He gave a slight yelp, dropping the spray paint can to the ground. His eyes met hers, and she realised she'd said that part out loud.

"Who - who are you?" he said. He was already moving to grab his things, but she came further out into the open.

"It's okay! I'm not, like, the cops or anything!"

"I have permission to be here," he said. It was an obvious lie: he was scrambling to put things in his bag and was already moving to race past her.

"Wait! Please don't - I'm not gonna get you in trouble. I went here, like you! I was one of the foster kids here years ago. I - I fucking hated it."

*Wow. This is, like, the one place that lets me swear. That bad.*

The young man regarded her curiously. "I didn't go here," he said.

"But - but your mural - how could you *not* have gone here?"

"My friend did. Fucked him up. He's in a better place now."

"Oh, shoot. I'm sorry."

He chuckled, though his posture still suggested wariness. "No, I meant that literally. He's in college across state. He's doing fine. Took the Hallway Prestige Program and everything, but he still hates this place."

"Is this revenge or something?"

"No. Well, sorta. It's art. I, uh, paint art around town. Occasionally. Wait, why am I telling you this?"

Beverly giggled. Without meaning too, she twirled one of her frizzy lengths of hair around her finger. "I have no idea! But I'm not telling anyone. I just came here to throw bottles, but you've done, like, way better than I could have. Seriously, that painting . . . it's exactly what it felt like to be here."

He looked a little chuffed at that, relaxing his posture a little. "Well, the job of any artist is to capture human experience. But thanks, that actually means a lot. I was going to send a photo to Jack and see his thoughts, but I think it means more coming from someone that went through this shithole."

"I like the seed the most."

"Really? I was worried that was the weakest element. Too cliché, maybe? I was almost thinking of erasing it and leaving it stark."

"No!" she cried, more passionately than she intended. "Leave it. It's . . . true. It's truth."

He smirked, and it was a pretty dang adorable smirk. He had a few whiskers that formed a faint goatee, the classical artist look, though he might want to grow it out a little thicker, but the thing that really caught her attention were his eyes. They were grey like stone, yet there was a softness there that matched his gentle features. It was born aloft by his smile at her compliment.

"I'm Beverly," she said, needing to fill the silence. "Beverly Prosser."

"Nice to meet you, Beverly," he said. "I'm Alan. Alan Kartz."

His wariness was gone, and he briefly subjected her to what she was increasingly used to: the male gaze. It was a brief glance, but she could tell he liked what he saw, even if

he realised what he was doing and quickly corrected himself. Unlike many other times, this actually flattered her.

*I'm glad I wore the nicer top. God, he looks like he'd get a nosebleed if I actually wore that crop top I bought. I don't even know if I'm brave enough to wear that!*

"Well," he said, looking over her one last time. "It was really nice to meet you, Beverly. I'll see you around."

He began to walk away, and perhaps she should have let him. But that little seed of change was still upon the mural, a sign of hope and growth. Of possibility.

"Wait," she said. "Please. Um, this is gonna sound crazy, but do you like ice cream perchance?"

Alan turned. "I love ice cream. I'm a bit out of pocket at the moment, though, and I've got to drive back to Branton. Damn, I'm sorry, I really wish-

"Perfect! I'm heading to Branton too and I can't be bothered walking back. If you give me a ride to Sweet Tooth, I'll sport you some free ice cream. How about that?"

He considered it for a moment. She 'sweetened' the deal by sticking her chest out a little subtly and giving him the puppydog eyes.

"Okay," he said. "That actually sounds amazing. Just a short chat though."

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The chat was not short. In fact, Susanna was in her office, and one of the other helper girls - Denise, who was always on her phone anyway - was on the counter for the last hour the store was open. Alan was initially hesitant to enter, but Beverly pushed him.

"Dude, just c'mon in. I'm not loaded either. I get it. I grew up in foster like I said. I'm happy to spot you."

He blushed, and followed her in, and then he immediately ingratiated himself to her by ordering the raspberry sorbet berry mix with a flake added, and *Confidence Boost Caramel* sauce. Little did he know that *that* particular magically-enhanced chemical combination would help get him talking.

"Wow, this is amazing. Seriously, this is the best sorbet I've ever had."

"Told you! Just wait till it kicks in!"

"Kicks in? Wait. Damn, that's good. Man, that's *really* good. I actually - woah, I feel great! I don't even feel too embarrassed that you saw the inside of my beaten-up Mitsubishi."

She giggled. "No judgement here. I don't even have a car! Besides, you treated me like a total lady with the car door and everything."

"Well, you are a lady."

*I am now, and for now*, she thought, though sitting across from him in the small corner booth as they shared a milkshake with their ice cream, she didn't really want to contemplate her manhood at all. She was too busy lost in Alan's eyes, and enjoying the way his confidence was surging temporarily with the ice cream, cracking him open so she could find out more about him.

"So, what do you do?" she asked. "Other than art? Or is that your thing?"

Alan waggled his eyebrows. "Art is always the main thing for any artist. But it doesn't pay bills, or help with the family. I work at Gus' Petrol Station on the overnights, and when I can I also bag groceries at the Charmelet General Store. You know, the one with-

"The creepy doll display in the window," she finished, laughing. "That used to scare me as a kid!"

"Oh, it still scares me now, though I appreciate the artistry of them. I'd love to steal one and repaint it. I think that'd be an interesting canvas to work with. But yeah, it's not very interesting, but it helps pay what bills I can. I'm not, er, exactly loaded. Not that there's a problem with that."

The confidence boost was definitely hitting him, but she just rolled her eyes.

"Alan, I work selling ice cream."

"Yeah, is it your mom's store?"

"What? No."

"Oh, yeah. That's stupid of me. You said you went through the foster system. I mean, is she your foster mom at the moment? I know the lady who owns it doesn't have any kids but apparently wanted them way back, so I just thought . . ."

*Susanna wanted kids? She couldn't, like, magic one up herself? Or make her body able to carry one? That's supes weird. Another piece of the puzzle . . . poor thing.* Her heart went out to the witch, but then her mind returned to the conversation.

"Well, sure, yeah. She's my current foster mom. Sorta. I mean, I'm twenty, so I don't need one, but I live with her. She's more like a crazy aunt who sorta takes care of me . . . but she's actually really nice, deep down. And sometimes sad, I don't always know why. I wish I could make her as sweet as this place!"

She grabbed a cookie and devoured it, causing Alan to smirk.

"Wha-?" she said through bitefuls.

"It's just . . . you're like the human embodiment of this place, Beverly. Seriously, I don't think I've ever met someone with your energy before. I expected after you talked about the foster facility that you'd be dark and brooding like my friend Jack. You seem to have landed well."

She blushed, brushing her frizzy hair back behind her ear. *God, I feel self-conscious right now. Why didn't I order the Confidence Boost?*

“Well, I had, like, this big life change recently, coming to work here. I’m waaaaay more optimistic and sunny and shiny and all that stuff. Seriously, you couldn’t get me to hurt a fly - I’d squeal.”

“No kidding? That’s actually really cute, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“I don’t mind.”

There was a moment where their gazes met, and both looked away, a bit embarrassed and clearly feeling a bit lost in puppy love.

“So, you mentioned your family? You help take care of them?”

Alan nodded. “Dad’s got some health problems, so he’s often stuck in bed. He does what he can, but he grew up in manual labour. Our family has proud union roots, but unions aren’t really in strength anymore, so when he lost out on his job his severance was shit. Sorry, bad language.”

“That’s okay.”

“Anyway, I’ve got a younger brother Eric and little sister Annie - we call her Little Annie, like the play - and I realise you two would get along like crazy. She’s super sweet and giggly and awesome too. Everyone dotes on her. We do what we can. I just take a few extra shifts to help keep the family going.”

*You’re only twenty years old and holding up an entire family. That’s . . . so tragic.*

“And your mom?”

He shrugged, took a sip of his milkshake. “She passed away seven years ago.”

She couldn’t help herself. Tears welled in her eyes. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Yeah, me too. But she’s always with me, y’know? She taught me her art. Like her, I don’t make much money off of it, but it makes me feel free. It’s important to me, and she used to be quite the spray painter as a teen too. So I guess there’s the spiritual side to art there for me as well.”

It was one of the most beautiful things Beverly had ever heard, and from that moment on, she found herself transfixed by this quiet, soft-spoken, yet unbelievably deep-natured young man. They chatted for over an hour, until Denise coughed several times loudly and Beverly had to volunteer to be the one to close up the store instead of her - Susanna was elsewhere on some business meeting due to tax season, so it gave them some privacy to continue talking and laughing, swapping stories of growing up and local Branton amusements. Alan spoke of his love of art, colour, and experimentation, and Beverly in turn discussed her recent discovery of the same when it came to desserts, ice cream, sweets, and new kinds of flavour. She even admitted to him that she wanted to create new ones, not just interesting combos, and how Susanna hadn’t made something new for a couple of years.

“Sounds like she needs an artist then,” he mused, “and not just an assistant.”

"Maybe so," she said. "But I don't know. Maybe it would just make her less happy."

"Hey, you never know unless you try, right? Besides, I have no doubt you'd make something amazing, Beverly."

"You can call me Bev," she said, grinning. She rather liked the nickname.

"Bev it is then," he said. "It's a pretty dang cute name."

"Well, what can I say? I'm totally cute!"

"You are," he said, but not even in a flirtatious way. He said it as if it were a concrete fact. A truth of the universe. And he said it so easily, as if it couldn't not be said.

Just like she couldn't *not* kiss him at that moment.

So she did.

She practically leapt across the table to plant a nervous kiss on his lips, and he was quick to kiss back. It was *delicious*. As good as any ice cream. Even better.

So much so that she went back for seconds, moaning a little into his mouth as she did so, before pulling back. She was still quite demure, after all.

"Wow," he said.

"Yeah," she replied, even more astonished. "Wow. Sorry, I just . . . really wanted to do that."

"Don't apologise. I really wanted to do it first, but you're on the home turf, so you had the advantage."

She giggled. "Um, I've got to close up now, or else I'll get an angry call from Susanna - Miss Harp - that the alarm hasn't been set. But . . . did you want to catch up again?"

Alan raised an eyebrow. "That depends, will there be more ice cream?"

"You betcha!"

"More pleasant company?"

"Only the sweetest! Me!"

"And maybe a little more kissing?"

She should have been ashamed of herself, she knew. Benjamin would have been. But at that moment, she felt more like Beverly than she ever had. Her heart was about to explode from excitement at the mere possibility of spending more time with this man.

"Absolutely," she replied.

"Then I'm definitely in. Shit, I've got to rush off now though; need to check in with everyone before my next shift starts."

"Take some ice cream," she said. "On the house! I bet Annie will love it, your brother Eric too."

"You're the best," he said. "I'm . . . really glad I met you, Beverly."

"Me too."

He stopped at the exit, tub in hand, and kissed her one last time. It was a shorter, chaste kiss, but it promised there could be more. He got her number, and she got his – her first number from a boy! – and when he was gone, she was unable to stop herself. She checked that no one was around and did a little dance to herself.

It was difficult to sleep that night, she was so excited. Even ‘seeing to the plumbing’ didn’t help her. She was on a sugar high from those kisses alone.

## **The Flavours of Family**

It didn’t take long for it all to become official, around about the time Beverly’s actual identity was formally officialised as well. Susanna, by her own admission, struggled with the ‘reality’ side of magic, so it had only been in drips and drabs that the actual new identity of Beverly Prosser replaced Benjamin in the minds of the world around them, and even then she apparently had to consult help from another local witch (“Can you believe her fee? A whole year’s supply of free ice cream! Still, apparently she did do something like this before, albeit by accident.”)

Beverly didn’t sweat the details too much. At least now she could properly be ‘Bev’, and that was important to her suddenly, because now she was not just catching up with Alan, or dating him, but was his full, official girlfriend. It hadn’t even taken much doing: the pair were just so smitten so easily. It didn’t hurt that Alan had that slightly ‘tortured, Bohemian artist’ look to him, albeit only at the age of twenty, while she was cute as a darn button and with a figure that easily drew his attention. But it wasn’t just physical attraction either: the pair both knew the hard life, had both grown up in the same neighbourhood, and both were very much attuned to having to make ends meet to support themselves.

It just made Beverly feel quite self-conscious that Alan was an obviously much better person than her. After all, *he’d* never resorted to stealing, nor let life beat him down into a cynical husk. Life wasn’t easy, but he endeavoured through, working to try and support his family. It only made her more determined to continue working hard at Sweet Tooth, not just to pay off her debt but to prove to herself that she could summon that same energy and spirit.

So she worked, and worked, and worked, putting her heart and soul into the job that she was increasingly coming to love. Where Susanna’s passion could be present some days and absent most others, her own only increased. After all, she wanted the place working beautifully and ever more popular for when Alan came around. They didn’t get to see each other often: with his insane work schedule and largely sleepless hours, he was often out of

energy. Besides, he occasionally needed his private space for art and self-reflection, and she couldn't blame him: she'd been much more of a lone wolf as a man and could remember that instinct well. It made those moments when he was able to drop by all the better. She would make him up some new combination of ice cream and sweets with his favourite complimentary milkshake, and the two would grin at each other like lovesick puppies, trying to act cool and casual all while being totally gaga.

*I cannot believe I am a man's girlfriend. This is, like, soooo crazy! But I actually like it. I actually love it.*

And he seemed just as chuffed as her, even on his more tired days.

"I've brought you a present," he said on their tenth date, by which time they were full 'boyfriend-girlfriend' by all admission. "It's nothing huge, but I thought I'd try a different style, and, well, you were bit of a muse for me."

"Oohh!" she cooed, smiling so much it almost hurt her cheeks. "I'm intrigued! Can I see?"

"Of course," he said, rummaging through his pack. "Just don't be too harsh of a critic. I think it's actually not a bad piece. You lifted my spirits when we were texting about action movies."

"Well, I love a good action movie . . . and the romance bits in them."

*I used to hate the romance. Why did McClane and his wife have to divorce after the first one?*

He passed her a small bit of art paper, neatly folded. She unfurled it carefully on the desk, making sure there were no sweat marks that would leave it sticky.

"Oh my God," she squeaked. "It's - it's me!"

It was indeed, drawn in watercolour, her hair vibrant and made to look like living fire. Her face took up the majority, and he'd captured her smile perfectly: sweet-natured and beautiful, without a trace of malice. Her cheeks had an adorable glow to them where he'd put a splash of rosy red, and her emerald green eyes were looking to the viewer, gleaming with delight. She also couldn't help but notice that her shoulders were bare, and there was just the barest hint of cleavage present before the image cut off. It was good cleavage. She spent several long seconds simply taking in the image, marvelling at it.

"Is it alright?" Alan asked. "I know it's pretty crude, but -"

"It's beautiful," she said. Her voice was tinged with emotion, and she had to swallow to avoid small tears welling in the corners of her eyes. "It's - Alan, no one's ever done something like this for me before. Ever."

He put his hand on hers. "Well, you deserve it. Happy tenth date."

She kissed him, an act that came so easily now to her girlish instincts. She loved the brush of his slight facial hair against her smoother skin.

“Thank you,” she said. “I didn’t get you a present for our tenth date like this, but I have tried . . . an experiment.”

“Oh?”

She jumped to her feet, practically bouncing to the counter. The place was empty, as it was closing time once more. Denise wasn’t around to complain, and Susanna still didn’t know about Alan thanks to their careful choice of times. She didn’t know about this next part either.

“Close your eyes!” she warned, and her boyfriend did so. She gathered out the tub and bowl and prepared her little present, and placed it before him. “Now open them.”

He looked down. “Mhmm, ice cream! I can’t say I’m too surprised though, no offence, though I don’t recognise the flavour.”

“That’s the surprise, silly! It’s mine! I made it.”

“Wow, really? Does Susanna know?”

“Not at all,” she said, giving a sneaky grin. “But I couldn’t help myself! She hasn’t made a new flavour in ages, and won’t try new ones for long until she gives up. But I’ve been working the mixers and going down into the basement more often where a lot of the syrups are, and I thought I’d try my hand.”

“Well, it’s blue ice cream - blueberry? Bev Blueberry?”

Beverly bit her lip. “I’m not telling you. You’ll have to guess it. Try.”

He did so, cautiously at first, and then with great alacrity as the deliciousness of the flavour set in. “Woah! Okay, give me a moment, that’s stronger than I thought. But good. Damn good. I’m tasting blueberry, yes, but it’s sour too, with a kind of bubblegum aftertaste. And are there little pop rocks among the blueberry bits?”

She nodded like a schoolkid, eager for his words.

“Okay, I’m guessing *Beverly’s Sour Bubblegum Berry Explosion*. Am I right?”

“You got it!” she said, squeezing her hands together and shaking them with excitement. “Is it good?”

He shook his head, and for a moment she was deflating.

“It’s amazing. You should sell it. I think it would sell amazing.”

“Susanna wouldn’t let me. Or maybe she wouldn’t like it. I don’t know.”

He shrugged. “Well, you should keep experimenting, at least. This is art of its own kind, Bev. Seriously, this’ll give me the energy for tonight’s shift.”

“I thought you were watching your sis tonight?”

“Can’t, sadly. It’s overnight at the gas station again. Eric will have to look after Annie, and I trust Dad to call if anything comes up.”

“I’m so sorry you’ve got to do all this, Alan.”

He sagged for a moment. “Yeah, me too. But hey, I’ve got a free weekend coming up

for once. At least the Saturday afternoon and night. Would you like to meet my family? Eric doesn't believe me that I've got an amazingly gorgeous girlfriend."

She kissed him on the cheek. "I'd super love that. Seriously! I'll bring treats!"

"You're sweet enough," he joked.

*Sweet as diabetes*, she thought. *What am I even becoming? And why do I love it so much?*

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Susanna worked it out eventually, of course. There was no hiding a relationship from her, even as she let Beverly effectively run the store of her own accord. She was often in the office, or tinkering with plans for the Sweetmobile that always got canned in the end, and sometimes just preferred to let the younger women run the place while she sorted out the more boring aspects of the business (her words), but that didn't mean she was absent entirely. In fact, it was just as Beverly was saying goodbye to Alan one evening as he set out for his gas station work that she appeared from out back silently, almost like a predator. Beverly no longer hesitated when kissing her boyfriend. Yes, part of her was still weirded out by what she was doing, but she loved the taste and feel of him too much to resist, and there was almost something rebellious in the relationship; the breaking of a taboo that made a Benjamin kind of sense, in a very Beverly way.

"You have the best shift ever, okay?" she said after parting from him.

"Will do. I'll text you until you go to sleep if you want."

"Yes! Please do! We can talk about what flavours you want from me next time."

"I love it. I'll draw you again."

She cooed, hugged him again, and loved the feel of her full chest against his. Part of her was already fantasising of pressing her chest against him in a much more naked, much more sexual manner. It was a thought that was increasingly hard to get away from lately. They kissed again, and she was saddened when he had to finally extract himself, only for her lovelorn look to fade into 'deer in headlights' when she turned and saw Susanna on the other side of the room.

"Oh, shoot," she said.

Susanna leaned back against the counter. "Well, that was certainly surprising to see."

"He's . . . he's just a friend."

"Do you often kiss your friends? And hug them like that? And talk about texting late into the night?"

"How long were you, like, skulking there?"

“Long enough apparently!” the older woman laughed. “I can’t believe I missed this! When did this start? Who is he? It seems you’re adapting to girlhood much, much faster than I thought - you’re even wearing your uniform extra tight - very telling.”

Beverly blushed. She had tried to go down a shirt size just to surprise him: it emphasised her bust, and she knew he loved to look at them when he thought she wasn’t looking back. The fact that she’d really been working on her haircare lately hadn’t been lost on her either.

*This is humiliating. Why couldn’t this just be, like, anonymous a bit longer! I can’t even summon my Ben anger anymore, I just feel super embarrassed!*

“We met on one of my walks,” she admitted. “It’s just, like, a casual thing. You know, since you changed my brain and everything. His name is Alan.”

Susanna looked sceptical. “Uh-huh. And is this *Alan* just a normal boy then?”

“Yeah, of course!”

“Just a fling?”

“Um, I guess so.”

She crossed her arms. “Just someone to have a bit of fun with and then dump later?”

“I - I didn’t say that.”

“Because he’s just there for your libido, right? He’s nothing special.”

She took the bait. With her sunny, loving disposition, how could she not?

“He *is* special!” she cried, almost bouncing on the spot. “He’s an artist, and he works really, really hard for his family, and he’s really cute and sensitive and kind, and he treats me well knowing that I’ve had a hard life, and he understands what it’s like to struggle but he doesn’t let life get him down like I let it get for me! He draws pictures of me and I love them, and I’m going to meet his family who he cares so much for, and he’s, like, such a wonderful softy but so strong at the same time!”

She had to regain her breath. Susanna’s expression was one of a gleaming grin.

“Well, I’d say it’s *not* just a fling, then.”

Beverly pouted. “You tricked me. You used a spell.”

“No, I *revealed* you. Well, you did that. It’s clear this Alan is a special man.”

“Um . . . he is. Very special.” She bit her lip, looking every direction but at Susanna’s face. “And I didn’t want you to find out because I knew you’d make fun, and embarrass me, and hold it over me. All because I’m adapting to the life *you* gave me and trying to enjoy the second chance it’s given me.”

She continued to pout, looking at the floor, when Susanna did something very surprising: she walked right on over to Beverly and pulled her into a tight and surprisingly loving hug. For a moment, Beverly didn’t even know what to think, especially when Susanna stroked her hair.

“Hey,” she said, pulling back and lifting Bev’s chin up so that they were looking into each other’s eyes. “I’m proud of you, kid. Really proud. I know I set this whole punishment thing up, but you really have changed, haven’t you? I know I’ve got my own problems, and I do like to tease, but I promise I won’t tease about this, okay? You deserve to find happiness. We all do.”

Beverly was so overcome that she began to tear up, and she embraced Susanna back.

“Thank you,” she said. “I - I didn’t think you’d react that way.”

“Hey, I got my own problems, Beverly, but I’m always happy to see other people happy. It’s why I started Sweet Tooth. I’m glad someone’s passions haven’t waned like mine, or that . . . wait, have you been making new flavours?”

Susanna stopped hugging Beverly and walked over to the near-empty bowls.

“Um, yeah. Sorta. Sorry. I just thought I could make something mango again. I call this one Mango Delicious. It’s different from the old recipe, but he seemed to really like it.”

“It smells amazing.” She used a finger to eat some. “It tastes amazing. Holy moly, Beverly, you’ve made a new flavour I like.”

The former male lit up before her mentor. “Really? You like it?”

“I love it! This is great! You made this as a gift for lover boy?”

“You said you wouldn’t tease!”

“I’ll tease just a little bit, in an encouraging way. It’s a gift, right?”

“Yeah,” Beverly said. “I try to make him a new flavour for every date.”

Susanna smiled. Actually smiled. Like, a real genuine look of absolute joy spread across her features, which Beverly hadn’t truly seen on the woman, not even in her happier moments.

“Would you like to teach me?” she asked.

Beverly couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Yes, absolutely!”

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Beverly was incredibly nervous. Not only was she meeting Alan’s family - the Kartz family - but she was meeting them as *his girlfriend*. First of all, she had never imagined she’d be anyone’s girlfriend, even after she’d been turned into an actual girl. Second of all, thanks to her personality changes, she couldn’t even summon a kind of obstinate ‘come at me’ approach mixed with the casual; the dare to others to make comments about her. Ben could have pulled it off, but Beverly had turned into a real people-pleaser, which was why the store was doing so well with her at the counter: the customers loved how she went the extra mile for them.

She was going the extra mile now, with Susanna's tutelage.

"Trust me, the jewellery will work. Refined, but not rich, and cute. Besides, you can always cover them with the ginger mop if you need to."

"It's not a mop . . . Alan calls it a 'forest of fire.'"

"Oh, the artist type. Of course! Well, he's not wrong about 'fiery.' You're certainly managing all those cute curls a lot better these days. Now, let's get you out of that dress and into something that will look a lot better for a first family meeting!"

Beverly looked down at her summer dress. "Is there something wrong with this one?"

"Not at all, but trust me, you want to dazzle the family a little, while still being down to earth. Let's get you in that vibrant green one - it will match your eyes - and the flower patterns will look great while not being all hoity toity."

"I don't even, like, know how to do hoity toity."

Susanna smiled. "And that's why, even though you burgled me, I've rather come to like you, honey. C'mon, if there's one thing I do know about, it's making an impression, and sales tactics. I do run a successful business even when you're not around boosting my profits, after all."

Beverly relented, and let Susanna steer her. It was actually quite the bonding moment between the pair, another in a series of quite a few they'd had lately. Certainly, Susanna's spark was slowly being reignited again as Beverly enthusiastically shared her ideas for future sweet treats, dessert combos, and ice cream flavours with her, and the witch was even starting to consider the possibility of trying to infuse her magic back into the flavours in new combinations and ideas, instead of simply relying on ones from years ago. She helped Beverly with her dress, adjusted her necklace so that it fell between her tasteful cleavage, and then applied some light makeup finishes so that she looked cute as a damn button.

"What do you think?" Susanna asked, holding up a mirror.

Beverly actually *gasp*ed. She knew that she'd gone from a scraggly, scrappy looking lean man to an adorably sexy lass, but this was one of the first times she hadn't felt like a girl, and felt more like a *woman*. All the touches Susanna had added maintained her perky adorableness, but she also looked more mature, beautiful and yet not overdoing it, the kind of approachability and impressiveness that you would want when introducing yourself to your boyfriend's family.

"It's perfect!" she cried. "Oh Sussana, thank you! I never had a Mom to teach me stuff like this before, and all my foster moms were so sh-sh-bad! This is amazing, I can't thank you enough!"

She embraced the older woman, who hugged her back.

"I'm glad, Beverly. You more than deserve it. You really do look beautiful."

*It almost feels like hugging a real mom*, Beverly thought, as Susanna stroked her hair idly. *At least, is this how it's supposed to feel?*

She felt a connection in that moment. A warm little glow towards the woman she had once hated, come to like, and now felt genuine affection for.

"Thank you, Susanna," she repeated. She was no longer talking about just the makeup.

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"Don't be nervous," Alan said. "They'll love you."

"I am nervous, just not for the reasons you think."

"You look gorgeous. Seriously, you look so beautiful, Bev."

She blushed as Alan walked her to the door of his family house. "That's just what has me nervous. You can't really understand. I just really, really want to leave a good impression."

"You will. Plus, you brought sweets. Trust me, that will win over Annie straight away, and Eric won't be too far behind. Come on in."

The Kartz family home was modest, a low-income dwelling among many other identical ones massed together. It was, apparently, a Halloway housing project spearheaded by Emile Halloway, the husband of the remarkably youthful looking Christina Halloway who had been Beverly's first customer. Evidently, Alan had a high opinion of her, though he still thought Bev was a whole lot cuter. He opened the door, and there on the other side was a man who was Alan's spitting image, if he were over twenty years older and a lot thinner around the face. He looked a little sickly, and it was clear that his muscles had wasted away from his former strength, but he smiled brightly.

"You must be Beverly!" he exclaimed. "My God, my son wasn't lying when he said he was dating out of his league. I'm Pat. Patrick Kartz."

He extended a coarse hand and Beverly took it. His comments didn't feel weird to her at all. Instead, his blue-collar appearance and approach was comfortably familiar to the former male, who had always liked the battler types.

"Lovely to meet you, Mr. Kartz," she said, grinning widely. "I'm Beverly. But I guess you totally already knew that."

"Oh, trust me, Alan here can't shut up about you. He's been painting nonstop since he first started dating you as well - you're his muse, apparently."

She blushed, but not with embarrassment so much as rosy pride. "I brought some ice cream and sweets from the store as well! Alan tells me that-

“Oh, Annie is going to love you. Come on in! Come on in! It’s not a big place but it sure is cozy. You’ll have to excuse me, I can’t stay standing too long with my back issues - it’s put me right out of work in a lot of ways. But Alan can show you around. Eric! Come and say hi to Beverly, will you?”

He ushered them in. Pat wasn’t lying: the place was small and quaint, but Beverly was more than used to that. It was also fairly messy, though that too wasn’t a bad thing necessarily: the mess Benjamin had built up was from lack of hygiene and house care. This was the mess of a family; the kind of amusing chaos that muttered the fridge with photographs, bills, drawings, and little in-jokes and invites.

A young teenager emerged from a small room, one who could only be Eric. He had lighter hair than Alan, and no facial hair either. He must have been in high school, perhaps around fourteen or fifteen or so, but his face lit up when he saw Beverly.

“Holy shit, she’s real? I thought she was just ‘a girlfriend in Canada’ or something Alan!”

Alan scoffed. “Unlike you, Eric, I don’t constantly joke around.”

“Well, it’s a bit of a joke you’ve landed *her*.”

“*Her* has a name,” she said sweetly, extending a hand. “I’m Beverly.”

“And I’m *astonished*. Seriously, you can do better than my big brother. You know he’s a weird artist type, right?”

“Actually, I think of myself similarly! Only an artist with desserts.”

“Oh God, they’re multiplying already! Don’t have babies!”

*Holy moly, I haven’t even thought about that. I mean, I’m not having sex, but this body can make babies. It can get pregnant! What the heck, Beverly Thoughts? Stop thinking about cute babies!*

Thankfully, Eric paused. “Wait, did you say dessert?”

She nodded eagerly, and Eric guffawed like a cartoon villain rubbing his hands together. “Well, this is the kind of art I can get behind. Annie will seriously love you.”

Alan chuckled, and so did she.

“That’s what everyone tells me!” she replied. “I’ve got some tubs of new ice cream flavours with me.”

“ICE CREAM!!!!”

Alan and Eric exchanged a glance, and Patrick over on the couch laughed in a throaty voice. “That’ll be Annie!” he replied.

A young girl with dark brown hair *erupted* from down the small hall and *jumped* into Beverly’s arms. She nearly toppled backwards, having not expected any seven-year-old to be so up front.

“Oh my God you’re soooo beautiful! Alan, she’s super beautiful!”

“Thanks, Annie. She brought ice cream!”

The girl dropped down from Beverly’s hands and started bouncing. “I know, I know! I heard! I’ve been so excited to meet you, Beverly. Alan says you’re the best *and* you work in the ice cream store, which is the coolest thing ever. What’s it like? Do you get to eat all the flavours? Do you invent ice cream? Which one’s your favourite?”

Beverly barely had time to answer before Annie was already tugging her away to the table to talk and eat ice cream, until her father reminded her that they were having fish and fries *before* dessert, thank you very much! Alan and Eric waved her a phoney ‘goodbye’ as she was nevertheless dragged away for interrogation, but she didn’t mind at all.

*This kid is totally my kind of sweet, and with the tooth to match.*

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The lunch went well, cheap and easy and delicious, just how Beverly had always liked it. The ice cream and treats went over *really* well though, to the point where even Eric focused his attention away from teasing his older brother. It was clear to Beverly’s own female intuition that Eric was more than a little smitten by her. The poor guy was in the throes of teenagehood and desperately in need of some pointers. She reminded herself to maybe even give a few nice bits of advice for him down the line.

Of course, Annie dominated the conversations. As the kid of the family, it was clear she was doted on and loved by all, and it made Beverly unaccountably sad that she wouldn’t remember much of her mother - it explained why there were pictures of her everywhere in the house, and also so many pieces of her watercolour art. Alan wasn’t wrong: she must have been a talented woman.

“This really feels like such a lovely home and family,” she remarked as they all sat in the living room, the football on for Pat to watch as he rested his back.

“What do you mean?” Eric said, not quite paying attention.

She rested her hand on Alan’s, who regarded her curiously. Annie was already pressing up against her side, basically treating her like a sister after just two hours. She peppered Beverly with endless questions, and she was happy to answer most of them (the one about marriage got her babbling a bit). Eric remained a joker, finding different ways to tease Beverly’s profession, until Alan put a stop to it finally. It was cute really, how he came to her defence so ardently, though it was clear to her at least that Eric was still in the ‘tease the girl you’re crushing on’ stage.

*Maybe when you’re older you’ll find someone perfect, kid.*

Just the thought made her look a bit more dreamily into Alan’s eyes. He was doodling away on some paper while the game played and Annie and Bev talked. It was a more

abstract little piece, though not without interpretation: he was idly making a drawn pattern of numerous shapes and parts coming together in the vague shape of a home. She supposed there was a deeper meaning there, especially given the light touches of red he added that she'd come to associate with her own hair. She snuggled up against him a little more, and Pat threw her a smile.

"I think you've fit right in, Bev," he said. "That ice cream sure was a treat. Don't you mess this up, Alan."

"Dad . . ."

"I'm just joking! I might just nod off for a moment, you lovebirds. Need my rest. I've got some online jobs I'm taking up though, kids, so you should have more time off soon, Alan."

Alan nodded, serious. "Just don't push yourself, Dad."

"Always do. That's how I ended up so ill! Don't worry, I'm just trying to do my part. He's a good guy, Beverly. He looks after family."

"I know," she said, pecking her boyfriend on the cheek. "It's so lovely."

"We got more than just me helping," Alan explained. "The home is part of the Holloway housing project."

"Real good people," Pat said. "Even if they pop out way too many kids."

"Dad!"

"I'm just saying you three are a pack enough! I don't know how that Chrissy does it. She looks only a little older than Beverly here. But she's a damn sweet thing, and she seems to have trained her husband as well as your mom trained me, once. The fact that we're on the Weekend Food Order has been a big help with my illness."

Beverly was astonished as Alan explained further. It was clearly a source of pride and pressure to the eldest son that he was effectively the breadwinner of the family, but in the last year that weight had been lessened thanks to the philanthropic output of the Holloway family brood. She'd always assumed they were faking the whole deal - all the beautiful people with their staggering wealth and privilege - but it soon came out in the conversation that the prime mover of all that charity was Christina, who had actually come from nothing just like them. She'd been raised by a single mother and it was only through her and her mother's hard work and good attitude that they'd got the attention of the Holloways, who came to regard them as close friends, and later true family. It was the kind of story Benjamin would have rolled his eyes at, except Beverly found it utterly cute. Like a Hallmark channel movie, in all the best ways.

*I just realised I really want to watch Hallmark movies now. Alan better not judge these Beverly thoughts!*

For now though, she relaxed against her boyfriend, enjoying his warmth, and his quiet, kindly manner. He put an arm around her as they sat on the couch.

“You’re awesome,” he whispered in her ear. “They like you more than me already.”

“Well, I like you more than that,” she whispered back. “And your family are amazing. And you’re the most amazing because you take care of them.”

“Well, someone has to.”

“But it shouldn’t be you, and you know it. But you do it anyway. A girl could really, like, be into a guy who’s such a wonderful, caring softy.”

He clutched her a little tighter. “You’re pretty cool too, you know.”

She felt it.

*Man, it took me growing big C-cup boobs and cute dimples just to realise I can be pretty cool and, like, not angry all the time. I’ll take it. For now.*

Of course, it did remind her that in just a couple of months, her debt would be gone, and she could be a guy again. She didn’t want to think about that, not while she was here with her boyfriend and his lovely family.

“Are you going to make more ice cream?” Annie asked, bouncing suddenly on the couch.

“You know what? I think I will, Annie. I might make a flavour just for you.”

It turned out that seven-year-olds could squeal rather loudly.

## **The Visitor**

Life was flourishing, and Beverly was only falling more and more easily into her sweet, adorable, lively persona. Days passed like dreams sometimes, particularly when she was inventing new peppermint boysenberry flavours with Susanna, or working on new caramel-filled flake combos, or even generating ideas for magical syrup toppings such as ‘*Your Favourite Holiday Trip*’ or ‘*Sugar Rollercoaster*’ - the last one had a bit of an intensity warning. It made her joyful to see how happy things like ice cream made others, how it put smiles on kids’ faces (*such cute kids. God, I better not get baby crazy or something!*). More and more she and Susanna were developing big hits, including the chocolate raspberry mudcake surprise they made together.

The advertising was stepped up at Beverly’s insistence too. It embarrassed her to admit it to Susanna, but she’d been dipping her toes more and more into social media since her new reality had set in, and Alan had even encouraged her further by getting behind the camera. He wasn’t an art snob about it either: some photos were fantastically composed

images of her on a bicycle as they headed out for a date, while others were her doing a cute little heart pose with her hands while wearing a daring crop top that showed off her pale midriff. But it gave her the idea to advertise Sweet Tooth in a more modern way, and eventually Susanna had relented.

“Fine, fine! We’ll see what comes of it. I suppose you’ve brought a lot of life and energy back into this place. Hell, half our ice creams and homemade desserts are new now!”

She came to eat those sceptical words though, because it didn’t take long for the official Sweet Tooth media accounts to take off, with Alan helping more and more to put wonderfully delicious shots of new sundaes and sorbets together. It got to the point where Susanna actually paid him: “He’s certainly proved useful enough!” she said when Beverly hugged her, thanking her. “And he’s a lovely young man at that. When he’s around.”

“He just works really hard. I don’t get to see him as much as I want.”

The witch nodded, embracing Beverly back. “I know. Relationships like that can be hard. It’s why I prefer the single life. But something tells me this isn’t just a short-term fling, either. You’ve been together a couple of months. I’m surprised you haven’t climbed all over each other by now!”

Beverly looked away. “I . . . it makes me nervous.”

“I imagine so. Let me ask you, Beverly, and please be honest. I don’t want to be the villain, because I’ve really come to care for you. But do you actually *want* to turn back now? You seem happier as Beverly than you were as Benjamin. Your life is better. And . . . my life is better too. God knows Alan’s is!”

She took Beverly’s hand, and the former thief nearly pulled away she was trembling so much.

*You’re not supposed to, like, ask me this. Please don’t ask me this. I don’t want to think about the real answer. I don’t want to come up against that.*

“So tell me, Beverly, do you want to stay like this? Are you happier like this?”

It wasn’t from a place of suspicion or gossip or even idle interest. Beverly could see in Susanna’s eyes that the woman cared. Truly cared.

“I - I don’t know,” Beverly said, and it was the truth, as far as she can tell. “Please don’t ask me again.”

The witch nodded, and for a moment there was a deep vulnerability in her, like a mother trying to help her daughter but not knowing the true course of how to do that. Instead, she simply took Beverly by the shoulders and lowered herself a little.

“Then you take the time you need to find out who you are, young one,” she said. “You’ve put me on the same journey, even if I didn’t realise it at first.”

She kissed Beverly on the forehead, something she’d never done before, and walked away. It made the ginger-haired beauty feel all sorts of things, none of which she could

properly label as emotions. She went to bed with tears in her eyes, wishing Alan was there to hold her.

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Beverly was awoken in the middle of the night by a strange sound downstairs. She cursed herself, comfortable in her bed and loving how it felt to be topless and free of a bra - a wonderfully girlish feeling, she'd discovered - but knowing she needed to investigate. It was likely one of the fridges. She'd been trying more flavours without Susanna present, and one of the locks was always fiddly. So she quickly threw on a shirt just in case - though not a bra - and moved quickly and silently downstairs.

Only to come face to face with a burglar.

It took her a moment to realise what she was looking at, because it could have been a flashback to her own past. It was a young man in a dark hoodie and black jeans, and with a backpack near identical to Ben's old one. He had already stuffed it with several valuables, and - almost comically - was currently trying to pry open the money safe near the register for any remaining rolls, just as she had. For a long moment, the two exchanged glances.

"Don't," she said, seeing he was about to run with the goods. "Please. This is a nice place. We make ice cream. We make people happy. Please don't take that away from us."

The figure paused. She couldn't tell his age, but his build was young. And his eyes had that same scared, wavering, reckless qualities hers had once possessed.

"I've, like, been where you are," she said. "That exact spot. I felt like it was me against the world, and I had a right to take everything back because it was just. So. Sh-shit. But I got a second chance, and this was the place that gave it to me. Please . . . please don't do this. I won't call the police. I won't tell anybody. Please, just go. Go and find your second chance."

She swallowed, managing to hold back tears of fear and hope and a thousand other feelings in her heart.

The thief slowly emptied his backpack, slung it around his shoulder, and left without a word. She couldn't see how much her words had affected him, if at all. But she hoped. It was then that Susanna came down the stairs, eyes wide.

"I heard a commotion and my magical sensors went off!"

"There was a thief, but I talked him down."

The witch hugged her, checking her over. It was only then that Beverly realised she had been quaking in fear. *This female body isn't exactly built for scrapping, and my new personality would hate to be forced to anyway.*

Once Susanna had ensured she was alright she still held Bev a little longer.

"My brave girl," she said. "Me sweet, brave girl. Never do anything like that again."

"I hope I don't have to."

"I could have turned him into a girl, you know," Susanna said idly. "What? I could have."

"I know. But something tells me that he wasn't a girl deep down. He was just someone who was desperate, and needed help. I hope he finds it. I hope . . . I hope if we can cross paths again, I can do something to help him. I don't know how, but I'd like to try."

Susanna placed a hand on her shoulder. "That's very good of you, Beverly. You really are a sweet person, you know that, right? A good person."

Beverly smiled, and turned to face the woman that had changed her.

"Only thanks to you. I know you, like, wanted to punish me, but you also wanted me to have a second chance. And . . . I want that chance, Susanna. What you said earlier? About me wanting to stay a girl? You were right. I do want to stay as Beverly. It just took seeing an image of the old me to, like, realise that."

"I'm proud of you, Beverly."

"Me too," said, beaming.

*I am proud of me. And if I can change this much, maybe I can help other people, like, change too?*

## **The Flavours of the Heart**

*I am Beverly Prosser. I'm a cute, frizzy ginger-haired woman, and I am to stay that way.*

Just repeating that thought in her head made Beverly feel utterly giddy. After the confession to Susanna, she'd hardly been able to sleep, and it wasn't just from the adrenaline rush of confronting the robber. She wanted - no, *needed* - to meet up with Alan. Now that she was committed to staying a woman - even with the occasional embarrassment, the male gazes, and the dreaded periods - she could also commit herself a bit more fully too. She was as excited as she was nervous when she visited his family to pay him a visit and take him for a date. Patrick was having a hard time of it, but he was joyous to see her as he dealt with his physical therapy. Annie was ravenous for the newest ice cream flavours, as well as to show off her cute new dress for Beverly. It was indeed a damn cute dress. And Eric was a damned cheeky teenager as always, though an element of surliness had crept in for some reason. She took a moment to embrace Alan and let him see her in her cute new red dress.

"Holy cow, not that you look like a cow. You look -"

"Cute as a button?"

"I was going to say smoking hot, personally. I - I have a sudden desire to paint you. But I'm not sure a canvas can capture your beauty."

She awwed, kissing him so passionately on the lips that Eric had to cough in an exaggerated manner to get them to stop.

"Okay, you two are all lovey dovey, we get it! Go make a pink mural from ice frosting together or something!"

He stomped off, leaving her confused.

"What's wrong with your brother?"

Alan sighed, but it was Annie that answered.

"That's easy! He's got a huuuuge crush on Olivia Halloway after her mom hosted a big neighbourhood food thing. He made her laugh, like, seven times. And now he wants to be boyfriend-girlfriend!"

Beverly smirked, and turned to Alan. "Buuut . . ."

"But he missed his chance to ask her out," Alan said. "He was too nervous, and because it was a charity event she got called away by her mom before he could get his courage up again."

Beverly paused. She had a date, and a surprise, planned for her boyfriend. She was a woman for good now, and it was time to embrace that womanhood fully after months of agonising over how close to get to the man she cared for. But she couldn't deny her new nature either, nor the draw to do something charitable.

"I super promise tonight will be an awesome date, but do you mind if I help Eric out for a moment?"

Alan blanched. "Help my brother out? Really?"

"Look, this sounds serious, and I want him to be happy! But he clearly lacks, like, confidence talking to girls. I'll just give him a few pointers. That's all. Plus, I think I can give him another chance to be with Olivia. Plus, it would get him out of your Dad's hair so he can relax more!"

Alan had to admit it wasn't a half-bad idea: it was hard enough holding up the family, including his own father, without dealing with a moody younger brother.

"Just five minutes," he said. "Then we go. I'm keen to see this surprise."

She kissed him, and went to Eric's room, knocking politely on the door.

"Dude, go away."

"It's me, silly!"

Eric opened the door slightly, still looking quite broody, but uncertain at the same time. "Oh, yeah. Sorry about being rude."

"Alan told me things didn't go well with Olivia. Can I please come in?"

He blushed, but opened the door so she could enter. His room was a disorganised mess, though there was a semblance of order to it. He smiled sheepishly as she saw it.

"It's normally much better."

"No judgement! I only recently started getting super organised. Look, do you want to go out with this Olivia person?"

He scratched the back of his head. "Well, uh, yeah. I really do. Ever since we met at the animal shelter fundraiser."

"Then let's do it."

"Let's? Us?"

She giggled. His nervousness was obvious. "Well, it's clear you need help, and a bit of feminine advice to help prod you along, so Alan sent me to offer some advice."

*And it will get your brother in your good books too this way!*

"Um, what sort of advice?"

"Well, what did you two talk about to start with?"

"I guess our interests? Olivia's really into baking and stuff, and I dabble in cooking from time to time."

This was news to Beverly. "You do?"

It was cute how red Eric could get. "I said it was an interest, not like I do it a ton! Though I guess Annie was over the moon about that Bolognese I made a few nights ago... anyway, after a bit I tried to compliment her, so I said I really liked her hair, but then she asked me what I liked about it, and I found it hard to describe, just that I really liked it, and she was really pretty, but I couldn't tell her that."

Beverly 'awwwed' at this. "Look, if there's one thing I've learned about being a girl recently, it's that being complimented on your looks is nice, but it's much, much better to be complimented on the things you've *done* to enhance your looks - your dress sense, your hairstyle, your makeup, and how you come across. Not to mention compliments on your personality, your interests, and so on. So you were on the right track, really! Besides, it sounds like she wasn't avoiding you or anything."

He idly scuffed the carpet with his shoe. "That's good to hear, I guess. But then she got called away before I could get number, and I didn't see her for the rest of the night. I mean, if she wanted to see me again wouldn't she have come back? I really fucked things up."

"Language," she said, though she wasn't really a prude on such things. She just didn't like swearing much herself these days - it was almost impossible, in fact. "Eric, this hardly sounds like a disaster. I mean, she is, like, the oldest of the Hallway kids, so I'm sure she was just really busy that night. From the sound of things you didn't really make any mistakes; we just have to get you two to meet again, and keep on discussing baking and

cooking, and for you to compliment things she *does* and *likes* and not just her looks, and if she's truly interested, things will go from there - you can get her number."

"That's the thing, how do I see her again?"

*And this is my trump card*, she thought to herself.

"Well, that's super easy. Her mom always comes to Sweet Tooth, particularly since she's quite pregnant now and wants to try all of our new flavours! Olivia comes along sometimes too; I can see why you'd be interested in a sweetie like her, by the way! She's super into her mom's charity work, so if we talk with them about running a charity event in coordination with the Halloway Fund . . ."

Eric's eyes brightened. "Olivia will come."

"Oh, she'll totally come. She's a super sweetie like her mom, and like you said, she's already helping out at animal shelters at your age. No way she wouldn't be involved. And if you're involved . . ."

He realised. "She won't be pulled away again. We can spend time together."

"And eat some delicious dessert with her as you discuss the fine points of cuisine! How does that sound?"

For a moment it looked like he'd brighten, only for Eric to lower his eyes. "Do I really have a chance though? I mean, she's one of the Halloways! I know they aren't jerks about it, and they've done a ton for those less fortunate, but for a guy like me to end up with a girl like her?"

Beverly placed a comforting hand on the teen's shoulder as she made him meet her gaze. "I think you're forgetting something key: Christina herself came from a hard start in life, just like all of us, and now she's happily married to Emile Halloway and doing her best to help out people like us. Why do you think any of them would care about something like that?"

"I-I guess you're right."

"I totally am. So, what do you say?"

He grinned broadly, only to pause. "Why are you doing this, though?"

Beverly just shrugged. "Because I want people to be as happy as I am now. Speaking of, I've got to go. But keep in touch, Eric. I've got a good feeling about this!"

And from his expression, so did he.

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It was a deeply romantic date in many layers, almost ridiculous in how stereotypical it was. The pair went ice skating together, and Alan had to hold Beverly several times to stop her from falling over, as she'd never actually been. She giggled and laughed as he held her

hand, only occasionally toppling. Afterwards, they had dinner together at a much finer restaurant than either of them usually frequented. It wasn't fine dining - they weren't rich, and even with Sweet Tooth's success it wasn't like Beverly was suddenly some social ladder climber, but they had agreed to save up for a romantic dinner, candlelight and all. She scoffed down her pasta while Alan looked on in mock horror.

"You eat like a man!" he exclaimed.

This made her laugh. "Well, I guess we've all got a bit of the opposite gender in us, right? Maybe mine just comes out while I'm eating."

He would never know who she used to be, or at least not for a while. She was coming into her own as a woman, and perhaps one day she would reveal the nature of Susanna's magic, with the witch's permission, to him, and then her own past. But for now, she was happy to be with him, and to wear a cute red dress that showed more of her cleavage than normal, something he couldn't resist peaking at.

"Like the meal you see?" she teased.

"Oh, I was just inspecting," he replied easily, hiding his own blush. "You look like a painting. Seriously, you belong in the Louvre."

"I belong here," she replied, taking his hand. "With you."

"Even though I'm hardly ever around and always working and dog-tired?"

"Well, I don't want you dog-tired. But I do want you, Alan Kartz."

They held a loving gaze for a while, and she wanted to drop that very word: Love. She loved him. She knew she did. How could she not? She had bloomed into a caring, sweet, compassionate woman, and here was a man who saw art and meaning in everything - connections more than most - and yet still managed to work to keep his family afloat.

"You're the best, Beverly Prosser," he replied. "Did you want dessert?"

"Actually," she said. "I'd like to get out of here. Susanna's out of town at the moment, so I know a place with cheaper and better dessert than here. Interested?"

He was, and it was just a short drive in his car back to Sweet Tooth, where the surprise of the night was to be organised. She was struggling to confess her love, but then as an artist himself, he'd perhaps understand it better when it was delivered not with words, but with an act of *creation*.

"Tada!" she announced as she turned on the lights, after unlocking the new security door they had fitted. "Do you like the surprise!?"

Alan stopped for a moment inside the store, which was now lit up. On the counter was a series of pamphlets, flyers, docketts, giveaways, treats, and funding plans. It was immensely elaborate, and it had taken some time for her and Susanna to put together, but the aim was clear: a fundraising effort called 'Fill the Gaps' (there was a gap in the teeth of a Sweet Tooth logo for playful emphasis) which focused on raising money to help local families

with ongoing chronic injury issues. Patrick wasn't named, of course, but it was clear that he would be one of the recipients of this charitable aid. Alan was silent as he looked over the leaflets.

"In conjunction with the Halloway Heart Foundation," he said. "Proceeds will be matched by the Halloway Fund to Fill the Gap for our society's most vulnerable. Beverly, this is incredible. This is . . . how? When!?"

She put her hands behind her back and shifted a little, looking utterly innocent and adorable, though it also emphasised her lovely chest. "What can I say, I can be a schemer when I want to . . . I just like my schemes sugary."

"This will really help Dad, if it works. Hell, it'll help my whole family, and a lot of others!"

"Oh, it will totes work. I've already got the websites up and everything, and it'll be announced soon. Sweet Tooth is booming, so we're setting up a charity box. But a lot of giveaways will be supplied by us, so it makes good business sense too. Susanna was pretty insistent on that last part, but she's done a heap of the legwork recently. I think she might finally be getting past her slump."

"All thanks to you," Alan said. "And here I thought I was the artist."

"Well, you can always help with the graphic design and stuff. And you can get your art out there! Maybe even sell some items."

He smiled. "Well, art isn't all about making money, but that's not a terrible idea."

"You're right. It's not. Which is why I've got a surprise for you."

"That wasn't the surprise? Beverly, I - I can barely believe all this. What could possibly top this?"

But she was already moving to the freezer where her 'special surprise' was stored. The ice cream was luscious red, Alan's favourite flavour of raspberry, and with little nougats of chocolate strewn within, just how he liked them. The interior had been specially moulded in the shape of a heart. He chuckled at the sight of it as she placed it before him, complete with a bowl and spoon for the pair of them.

"Well, well, another flavour?"

"Trust me, this one is magical," she said. "It's called *Flavours of the Heart*."

"Well, I'm excited to try it. Full credit to the food artist."

It wasn't a joke: he genuinely saw her as such, and it made her giddy each time she knew he meant it. He took a scoop, placed it in his bowl, and then ate some. She wasn't lying about it being magical: Susanna had helped infuse it, tying the essence of the ice cream to Beverly's own innermost feelings towards her boyfriend. The witch wasn't sure it would succeed, but Beverly knew it would.

And it did.

Alan instantly lit up. He gave a soft, rather cute moan at the deliciousness of it, but there was something else in his eye. A recognition of the thought and care and . . . *love*, that had gone into this particular ice cream. Her love. Her actual, literal love for him that had been the final, all-important, all sweet secret ingredient.

“Wow,” he said. “Beverly . . . this is going to sound crazy, but I’ve never felt this way eating anything before. It’s like . . . it’s like I can somehow *taste* that you love me. Does that make sense? I don’t want to be forward here, but . . . I love you.”

“I know,” she said, cheeks hurting from how wide she was smiling. “And now you know I love you too.”

He ate another sample, and actually wiped a tear from his eye. “I can’t eat anymore. I need to kiss you. God, you’re incredible. I love you so fucking much.”

She squealed as he shot to his feet, picked her up easily, and kissed her on the lips. She yielded to him, feeling her nipples stiffen in her dress, her need for him growing by the second.

“Good,” she said, stroking the light whiskers on his face. “Because now I can finally show you the final surprise.”

“Wait – another surprise? How many more surprises are there?”

“Just the last one, my love, and the best one. Come with me. Susanna’s not home, and I want to show you with more than just ice cream how much I love you.”

Alan swallowed, then followed eagerly as she took his hand and led him upstairs to her room. There was a tension in the air, but it was a tension full of excitement, possibility, and deep, deep arousal. Both were high on love and hope, and she had never felt closer to Alan than this moment. She was finally ready to shed the last part of her male pride and fully become a woman, and so she drew him into her room, turned, and began to make out with him.

Hard.

She may have been a demure woman in many ways, but her passion drove her, just as fear and caution once had. But this was so much better, because his hands were all over her, his lips on hers, and then upon her neck and bare shoulder. She moaned softly, breathing faster as he traced his fingers all over her curves.

“You can touch them,” she said, thrusting her chest against him. “I know you, like, want to. I want you to f-feel them.”

He needed no more permission. Alan may have been quite good with words, but as a lover he was tender and quiet. He lowered his hands down to her full C-cup chest and began to massage her tits. They hadn’t even gone this far before, despite both of them feeling desperate for further touches, but now they were going all the way. Her pussy was wet and only getting wetter, her need for him rising dramatically. His fingers sunk into her soft flesh.

“Mhmmmm, yesss. D-don’t s-stop. Wait - stop. I want this dress off. And your shirt off. Please.”

They quickly got to work removing their clothes, but it was a slow process since they couldn’t resist groping and caressing one another. She squeaked as he gripped her ass, loving the way it felt. Soon she was in her lingerie, specially picked for this occasion: dark and slightly more expensive than usual, with a pushup bra that made her cleavage look *spectacular*.

“Holy shit,” Alan said. “Now you look like a painting. I’d draw you if I weren’t so fucking turned on by now.”

“Draw me after, then,” she teased. “After I’ve dealt with this.”

It filled her with a brief nervousness, but she reached out and stroked his cock, which was straining his underwear. He grunted, eyes rolling back a little. His balls must have been desperate for release. She remembered that feeling well, but had no desire to go back to it. Now, she wanted to be *filled*.

“The bed, please,” she whispered in his ear.

They withdrew to it. Alan removed her bra expertly, something which was surprising in how much it turned her on. Her breasts bounced free, and before she even had a chance to remove her underwear, he was on them again, this time with his mouth. She’d never imagined she would be having sex with a guy, let alone letting one suck her perfect pink nipples, but it was an incredible set of sensations.

“Ohhhhhh, j-just a moment! I want to be n-naked. Then you can, like, never stop!”

“I don’t intend to stop,” he said, and instead he pulled her panties off, allowing her to spread her legs. He quickly removed the last articles of his own clothing, and she marvelled at his body: he wasn’t immensely strong, but he did have a whipcord strength, and his dick was big. Bigger than she’d imagined.

*Oh my God, I’m actually doing this. I’m going to have that inside me! Actually inside me! I’m so nervous and excited and - MHHMM!*

He clambered on top of her and began licking and sucking on her nipples once more. She spread her legs automatically, wrapping them around him. She dared to begin stroking his cock as it slid against her belly, heightening her lover’s arousal.

“I c-can’t bear it anymore!” she whined. “I n-need you in me! I want you to c-cum inside me!”

“I love you,” he said. “I love you so damn much, Beverly.”

“I love you too, Alan,” she replied. “Please show me you love me! I want you so bad!”

He pulled himself back, and together they oriented his member against her entrance. It was the moment of truth, the final moment of transition. She was ready.

*I’m ready. Oh God, am I ready? I hope I - Ohhhhhh! YES! I’M READY!*

It was magnificent. Her wet walls clung to him as he slowly inserted his thick rod. It was penetration, it was being filled, it was like she was consuming him, taking in his essence and holding to it firmly. He slid further and further inside of her until she thought she could take no more. There was a brief pain, only for that pain to turn to sweetness. She groaned, unable to form words, and he too grunted. They kissed as he reached his apex, and then he used one hand to prop himself up while the other played with her right tit. Pleasure was soon coming from several locations, and that was before he began thrusting.

And the thrusting was the best part.

He worked his way in and out of her, far more expertly than Ben had ever done when he'd been a man. But now as Beverly, she knew what guys liked. She rocked her hips in perfect motion to him, allowing him to withdraw almost entirely before plunging back into her tight, moist depths. Her vaginal muscles clung to his cock perfectly, and she felt like she was milking him, draining him, forcing him to work up as much semen as possible before he was unable to stop himself from jizzing inside her. It was a fun game, in many ways, and soon she began to giggle with delirious delight, stirred on by the way her breasts bounced with each rock, each pump, each ram of his cock into her passage.

"S-so close! I'm so f-fucking close!" she cried, able to swear once more. "Oh God, I love you, Alan! I love you so much!"

"L-love you t-too," he stammered. They shared a kiss, and then he sucked on her right nipple more firmly, before gripping her wide hip and fucking her even faster. He was damn close too, and both of them were heading to a climax. She could feel it coming, and wanted to feel it entirely.

*Make me a woman, Alan. Make me never look back.* The thought filled her mind, and she welcomed it. This was her now, and she wanted to do this again and again with him.

It sent her over the edge: the orgasm hit and she cried out in a high, soft, joyous voice. It was unlike a male orgasm, but also unlike masturbation either. It was far more connected, far more powerful, and it hit her like a damn truck. Her entire body lost control, and then again as he orgasmed in her too. His cock throbbed within her, and he seized up. Then a warmth *exploded* within her. He gripped her, groaning, making such wonderful sounds as he came deep inside her. She hadn't even thought about contraception, but didn't care about that at that moment. The feelings were just too blissful.

"I love you," she moaned, feeling another orgasm hit. "I I-love all of this."

They held each other for a long time in the aftermath.

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It wasn't the last time they had sex, not even that night, though once Susanna caught on she had to be insistent that the 'pair of new rabbits used some damn contraception.' Beverly had to agree - she may have come far as a woman, but having babies was not on her plans . . . yet. Admittedly, they were seeming quite cute lately, especially since coming into contact with more of Christina Halloway's brood as they prepared their own Fill the Gaps event, but she didn't want to repeat a situation of her own upbringing. If she ever did decide to have a child - and that was a big step for a former man - then it would be a loved and wanted one.

For now, she was happy as could be. Her boyfriend was the first love of her life, and they were almost too saccharine together, to the point where Alan sometimes had to shoo her away so he could work on moodier art pieces, much to their shared amusement. Susanna was also brighter: she was experimenting with magical flavours and new innovations, and finally seemed to truly care and love her business again. She and Beverly were closer than ever, and Beverly found herself increasingly turning to the witch for advice on all sorts of matters, from relationship questions to dress sense to even financial advice, and Susanna was always there to help, even when things got emotional. Sometimes, Beverly wished that she had been raised by Susanna from the start. She may have stopped wanting kids at some point per her own admission, but she was a damn good mentor at the very least, and compassionate as any mother. Which was why what happened a week later came as a shock to her, as if her thoughts were being read.

Susanna had closed the store for the Sunday, allowing Beverly to sleep in and enjoy her dreams about Alan. When she woke though, she had a text from the witch to come meet her in the company garage when she'd showered and eaten. Curious, the former male did so. Once again, she took the time to take care of her frizzy hair, and smile at her looks.

*This is me!* she thought to herself.

It was an exciting revelation each day so far, and she kept it with her as she went to the garage by the store. Susanna was inside, working away on some documents, but it was clear from her bouncing foot on the concrete that she was becoming impatient. She looked up and leapt to her feet.

"Took you long enough, kid!" she exclaimed. "Ready for the surprise?"

"The surprise?" Beverly asked. She noticed that a huge tarp sheet had been placed over the Sweetmobile, the forever unfinished project of Susanna's.

"Well, you've surprised me enough lately, going the extra mile, and injecting me with all your passion. I figure it's time to repay the favour. Behold . . . THE SWEETMOBILE!"

She said it in an extra dramatic voice as she pulled the tarp away, leaving Beverly to gasp. The Sweetmobile was finished: its paintjob completed in bright pastels, the Sweet Tooth model adjusted on top. It had even been recently cleaned from the looks of it.

"Oh my gosh! Are you for real?"

“Uh-huh,” the other woman said, folding her arms with pride. “And what’s more, the refrigeration units are all installed, and the paperwork is just about done. We’ll have more than the store soon, Bev. We’ll have the streets! We’re going mobile, like all the trendy businesses these days!”

Beverly embraced Susanna. “I’m so happy! This is the best surprise ever!”

The witch chuckled. “Well, taking a page from your date with Alan - nothing escapes my notice, little one - I’ve got a surprise within a surprise. Look inside the Sweetmobile. Tell me what you think.”

She looked almost nervous, but Beverly paid no mind to that, she was so curious. She entered the Sweetmobile, loving the way it was all laid out.

“In the front seat!” Susanna called. “It’s a package. A letter.”

There was indeed a letter there, and Beverly opened it slowly, unsure of what it was. It looked official. Government official. She released an almost-curse under her breath as several documents fell out, a number of them needing to be filled out. There was a lot in there, and it took a moment for her to realise what she was looking at. When she did, her heart broke into a million tiny pieces, only to reform instantly into something so much stronger, and more joyous.

“Adoption papers,” she said. She stepped out of the front seat and back into the garage. “Susanna, these are adoption papers! And . . . you’ve already signed parts of them.”

The witch blushed, looking very nervous now. “I hope it’s not too much. And it’s all your choice. And you’re an adult now, so it doesn’t mean I can control you or anything. But . . . I’ve truly come to love and care for you Beverly. You’ve been a brightness in my life, and I’ve found myself mothering you as much as I can despite the fact that I gave up on the thought of having kids years ago. I know it sounds crazy, but I’ve been thinking of you like a daughter quite often, and I hope I’m not wrong, but I’ve gotten the sense that, well, you might see me as your mum. And if you truly would like it - and only if you want it - then perhaps we could be a -”

“FAMILY!” Beverly cried. She leapt towards Susanna, and the two made a far more tearful embrace. She couldn’t help it, but they were the happiest tears she’d ever shed.

She finally had a mother.

## **The Epilogue**

It was five years later, and Beverly had gone from Benjamin Prosser, to Beverly Prosser, to Beverly Harp, and finally to Beverly Kartz. Life had changed so much for her, and so much

for the better. Sweet Tooth continued to be not just her place of work, but also her home, and her hearth. Her sanctum.

But she had a new home now as well, one she'd founded with Alan, and for good reason too. The pair had not only remained together, but found their relationship growing in strength and passion, instead of waning. Sure, the honeymoon period was over, but the two had never stopped creating art of all kinds and, yes, flavours together.

And they had created other things too. A marriage, for one. Susanna had walked Beverly down the aisle, and both were teary eyed. With help from the Fill the Gaps initiative, Patrick was even able to attend fully, having received a great deal of help for his chronic injury. And, just to make things that little bit more perfect, Olivia was a bridesmaid, and Eric the best man, the two splendidly together just as Beverly had helped ensure (and it turned out that Christina Halloway, also present at the wedding, had done her darndest to get the two kids together as well). Naturally Annie was the flower girl, and almost overshadowed Beverly in just how darn adorable she was, not that she minded! Beverly and Alan wed, and moved out after the whirlwind honeymoon, and soon more than a marriage was created. After careful planning, the two conceived a child just around the time they'd hoped for.

Which was how Benjamin arrived into the world, a Benjamin that would be loved by two caring parents. Beverly was happy to be demure and carefree in many things, but she was insistent on his name. It was not just a way of letting go and moving on, but in healing from a past that still occasionally brought her pain, however brief.

It didn't bother her after her little Ben. And she never thought about it at all after the birth of her second child, Mary. If she had been spoiled sweet by life ever since becoming a woman, then her two babies were the cherries on top of the ice cream sundae. Or flakes. Or M&Ms, or the magical topping.

*Definitely the magical topping*, she often concluded. Certainly, Susanna spoiled them as a loving grandmother was want to. They were one happy family, and the witch who had once punished Beverly now heaped blessings upon them as much as she could. They were the kind of blessings that Beverly herself tried to always pay forward. Ever since the runaway success of her first charitable initiatives, she had continued to partner close with the Halloway family to improve the lives of people like her, former juvenile delinquents and foster kids who needed more support to find their way in life.

It was at just such a gala reception that she was mingling in exactly five years after she had been given the gift of those adoption papers. Her mother was present as one of the nominees for the Christina Galford Good Works Award (Galford being her maiden name prior to marrying the wealthy Emile). As a now-business *partner* in Sweet Tooth, this also meant that Beverly too was up for the award, something that had her beaming from ear to ear as she moved through the crowd, met and talked with other business and community

leaders, and helped her wonderful husband herd their two children. Mary was getting tired, being only three years old, but it was Alan that had to carry her at this point.

"I can hold her for a moment, sweetie," she said, "but not for too long! Not with how sore this darn bump has me."

Alan just kissed her on the cheek and rubbed her belly lovingly.

"Don't worry, you just mingle and enjoy yourself and the food, dear. I'll keep watch over our little artists in training . . . even if Ben just wants to use the tomato sauce on the plate as his canvas."

She giggled, and rubbed her stomach again. Their third - and final planned child (though getting to know Christina and her large family more over the past several years occasionally casted doubt on her original desires) - was only four months along, but with the elegant green dress she chose to wear for the evening, it was outlined rather noticeably. Beverly cared deeply for others, but even she'd learned to develop a bit of a vain side, if only a little. She loved looking cute and beautiful and even sexy, and loved even more hanging off her husband's arm at such events.

"Alan! Bev! There you both are! Geez, this place is packed." It was Eric who called out, and he moved through the crowd looking sharp in a suit, his hair just slightly ruffled. Physically he'd really matured over the past five years, the moody teenager now a handsome young man, albeit still a playful one. Oliva was looking even more splendid on his arm, the beauty who physically took so much after her mom wearing a shimmering blue sequined dress that fit her slim, hippy body perfectly. She had a bust that was equal in size to Beverly's, perhaps a little bit smaller.

*Don't be jealous, Beverly Thoughts! Just because yours only got bigger by breastfeeding!*

She hadn't lost her D's, and didn't plan to. But sometimes she got jealous of the Hallaway daughters naturally growing to that size all on their own; that Lydia in particular was always turning heads with her chest, and she was Olivia's younger sister!

"Olivia!" she squeaked, bringing the other woman in for a hug. "How've you been!?? You look, like, soooo beautiful!"

Olivia spun on the spot, showing off the dress.

Eric clapped a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Isn't she marvellous?"

"She is," Alan said, clearly eyeing Bev himself, and placing an arm around her waist. "I didn't think you guys were going to be able to make it - you weren't feeling well the other day, Olivia. We were all worried, well, sick about you! Are you feeling better?"

"Much better," she said, biting her lip in that adorable way she was want to when nervous. "And also not. But also absolutely. God, it's so hard to explain!"

The two had recently returned from a trip to Europe together, but since then they'd been out of commission for a bit. Olivia and Eric had followed their respective culinary passions over the years, Eric starting to take the thought of being a cook seriously while Olivia had declared her desire to be a pâtissier; judging by how popular the sweets she'd recently started supplying Sweet Tooth were, she'd have no trouble following her dream. And Eric was quite the wonderful cook too, even Alan getting a bit jealous of how good his brother's food was getting when they shared family meals together.

Just like Beverly and Alan, Eric and Olivia had quickly fallen head over heels when they'd had the opportunity to connect more. During her Sweet Sixteen Olivia had confessed to Eric (something Alan teased him about to this day), and the two had been dating ever since, even the thought of an early marriage on the horizon. No one doubted it was a relationship as strong as steel: for one, Olivia thought Eric's jokes were hilarious.

"Someone has to!" Alan occasionally zinged.

But something else was going on, and Beverly was starting to see the signs. There was a slight rosy glow in Olivia's cheeks, and her bust looked just a little more impressive than it usually did, and not just because of her gorgeous dress. Besides, after two pregnancies and one nearly halfway through, she knew how women who were expecting often rubbed their stomach that wasn't yet firm, as if in anticipation.

"Oh my God!" she said. "No way!"

Olivia grinned sheepishly, her cheeks going red. She nodded. "Yep."

"This is amazing! Are you keeping it a secret?"

"I wish; you wouldn't know it from looking at her tonight, but mom was crying like crazy last night when we told her. Gosh, it was so embarrassing."

"You were crying too."

"Oh, shut up," Olivia pouted, though her punch to Eric's shoulder clearly lacked any force as she blushed.

Alan looked left and right, and then the penny finally dropped. "No way! Congratulations, little bro! I'm so excited for - oh, shoot! Ben's done a runner! I'm so happy guys, I just need to intercept him before he gets to the dessert table; a sugar rush is the last thing he needs right now!"

He zipped off with Mary snoozing on his shoulder, and the remaining three laughed.

"He'll be fine," Beverly said, giggling at her sweet husband. Some of his paintings were up on display in that very hall, only heightening her love and admiration of the man. "Congratulations to both of you! Life is about to change so much! Trust me, I know a thing or two about change. But it's all for the better."

Olivia covertly rubbed her stomach, though it didn't escape Beverly's watchful eye. "I hope so, I'm nervous as hell. I mean, we aren't even married yet."

“Right? Guess you can’t tease your parents about that anymore, can you?”

“Please don’t remind me of that right now,” the blushing beauty said while Beverly giggled. “Twenty and pregnant; I can’t believe the Galford Gal Curse is a real thing! And it’s not like we knew each other for as long as my parents did before, well...”

Eric chuckled. “Well, at least you’ve got your mother as an example. She’s always pregnant, so I know she’ll be more than happy to help out.” “Seriously, how does she look so young? Please tell me it’s in the genes.”

“You cad!” Olivia said, slapping her husband on the shoulder again in a mocking fashion. “But maybe . . . maybe I’ll tell you about something magical soon.”

“As magical as that little tyke in your belly?”

“Shhh! Don’t tell everyone! And no, nowhere near as magical as that.”

“Trust me,” Beverly said. “In a world of magic, *nothing* is as magical as this.” She rubbed her own belly for emphasis.

For just a moment, she and Olivia shared a knowing glance. While she’d decided to keep Eric in the dark for now (not out of fear of not being accepted by the kind young man; she just wanted to brace herself for the inevitable teasing that would follow), she’d revealed to Olivia her origins as well. This in turn had led to Olivia, with a little help from her magic, making quite the discovery herself: whereas Benjamin had become Beverly as a result of Susanna, Christina Halloway - *the* Christina, in all her bright, bubbly, bimbo glory, and with all her compassion and good work - had also once been a man. It explained how she was magically still so young, and why she had so many blessed pregnancies that still continued to this day (“Honestly, I don’t think they ever plan to stop,” Olivia had confided, not that she seemed upset at the idea of having more loving little siblings). Both of them knew the secret, but didn’t often talk directly to Christina about it: the older woman was happy with her life and would never go back, just like Beverly.

In fact, the locally famous philanthropist was getting up on stage at that very second, three months pregnant herself with her umpteenth child - likely twins or even triplets from her size (Beverly was rooting for the latter, knowing how badly Christina had wanted a set) - and looking utterly maternal and gorgeous.

“Like, hello everyone!” she announced, and there were rounds of loud cheers. “Aww, you’re all the best! Thank you so, so, soooo much everyone for coming! From community leaders to business heads to other groups - and my very large and loving family! I bet they make up, like, half the room now, amirite?”

There was a series of laughter, and an embarrassed groan or two from her own clan. Emile was with them, looking handsome and suited, and chuckling as well. Alan had somehow found his way to them and gotten little Ben back, and the young boy was playing with some of Olivia’s younger siblings. Annie was there too, Beverly unsurprised to see the

preteen with a bowl of ice cream as she chatted with some of the similarly-aged girls. No doubt Patrick was happy to relax and drink a good beer not far away, Beverly hoping her father-in-law was enjoying the night as much as she was.

"I'll be the one to announce the award for tonight," Chrissy continued. "I mean, it is named after me, right? A big thanks to my absolute bestie Angie for, like, making this event possible. She's supes sorry she can't be here, but she herself donated a heap to the community townhouse restoration fund and stuff before she left to go shoot that film. I also want to thank everyone who's been involved in our Halloway projects - they may have the family name, but they're totes all you guys. That's what this award is about: making our city and communities, like, the best places on Earth!"

Another polite applause, though Beverly was more enthusiastic. She didn't care that some people found Chrissy's speech patterns too bubbly. As someone who was full of sweetness herself, it was great to hear. Even the easily-embarrassed Olivia was clapping along, pride in her mother showing in those bright eyes of hers.

"So anyway, I won't take up too long. We had so many great potential recipients tonight, and you're all winners in my eyes because you help other people win at life and pick themselves up. But this year, I'm super, super, incredibly happy to announce that it is our very own Susanna Harp and Beverly Kartz who are our winners, for the charitable work with their continuing Fill the Gaps initiative! Congratulations, guys!"

Beverly was shocked. *What? We won? WE WON!?*

She looked to Susanna, who was similarly surprised. Everyone knew that Christina Halloway certainly didn't play favourites: this was an honest competition. Besides, she didn't choose them - it was a panel of independent judges of the Community Board. It took a moment for Beverly to get control of herself, by which time her adoptive mother was practically *dragging* her up on stage. Both of them hugged Chrissy, who was bouncing with joy as much as anyone despite her. Beverly had to hold her own belly a little as she mounted the stairs, and she felt beautiful as Alan's eyes fell upon her. Christina passed over the microphone, and Susanna spoke first.

"I just want to give a big thank you to everyone in my life who brought passion back into it," she said. "I never expected to get this far with the business, or even to have a chain of them now! I certainly didn't expect to come to love my job so much when it seemed for a long time that my personal investment had dried up. But my wonderful daughter here came into my life and showed me that the best way to grow your passion is to put your passion elsewhere, preferably into people. Into your community. So thank you, Beverly. You've made this all possible."

Alan whistled, only to realise he was waking Mary and stopped. Beverly had to hold back her own laughter, but became a lot more nervous when the microphone was thrust into her face. She quickly wiped away her tears.

“Thanks Mom,” she whispered, before speaking directly into the mic. “I - I can’t believe I’m here. I’ve changed so much. We’ve all changed, and in more ways than most people know.” Christina winked in her direction, rubbing her belly happily.

“But it’s not a change I regret. I’m glad to be here. I’m glad to be a woman, a wife, a mother, and a business owner and partner. I’m glad to be part of Sweet Tooth, and Fill the Gaps, and part of this neighbourhood, this community, and this city. I’m happy to give back, and I’m so glad people have been so welcoming in my life to allow me to make that change. Thank you everybody. Let’s continue the work. And . . . enjoy some ice cream on the way!”

The crowd applauded, and she hugged her mother. She’d meant every word, and felt it too. Her life had come so far, but one thing definitely remained true.

*I could really go for some ice cream right now. This baby has her mother’s sweet tooth.*

**The End**