

Candy for Her Soul

Copyright © January 2005 by Sheri Gilmore

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Prologue

"Happy Valentine's Day, David," Natalie said, holding her breath as the handsome quarterback of Biloxi High School turned to her. Butterflies danced in her tummy when his blue eyes crinkled while his white teeth flashed into a big grin.

He walked over to her and reached for the Valentine's card she held out to him. Her hand shook and her heart beat faster. She'd had a crush on David Scott since kindergarten, but he never seemed to notice her.

"Hey, thanks, umm..."

"Natalie. Natalie Pasqua."

"Yeah, that's it." He snapped his fingers, then pointed at her.

He remembers! Her heart leapt into her throat at the brush of his fingers against her own. Then, she held her breath as he opened the envelope that contained all her pent-up teenage love.

She watched his pale fingers work under the seal. The sound of paper ripping made her stomach clench. She bit her lip. *Almost there.* He'd know of her love, then look at her and realize he felt the same.

"Whatcha got there, Dave?"

No! Not Nico Bui, high school bad-ass. Torn jeans, shaggy black hair, and an old black leather jacket covered his lean frame. This couldn't be happening. Natalie heard a distressed squeak escape her lips when he snatched the card from David's fingers.

"That's mine, Nico. Give it back."

She watched David try to take the card back, but Nico stood two inches taller and held the Valentine above his head. David was probably the only friend Nico had, but the taller boy insisted on tormenting him lately.

"Yeah, who's gonna make me? You?" His laugh echoed through the school yard.

David nodded his head. His hands clenched at his sides. "Yeah."

Tears welled up in Natalie's eyes at the sight of her *hero*, standing up to her nemesis. Nico had always been a loner and kept away from everyone, except when he taunted and teased her. She knew she stuttered, and her clothes were out-of-date. She pushed her glasses up. "Give it back, Nico!" She stamped her foot. No other boy could make her angry like him. Her rage vibrated through her body in small tremors, and each breath burned through her lungs. She couldn't believe she was standing up to him. She swallowed hard when his gaze landed on her.

He's a demon!

Nona Pasqua had told her tales about demons. How they would set their eye on a girl and tempt her to do acts no "good" girl would ever think of doing if not otherwise influenced. Like the dreams she'd had of Nico Bui. Dreams she didn't dare tell anyone about. The merest thought of the sexual acts she and Nico enacted in those dark fantasies caused her cheeks to flush.

His gaze narrowed on her, like he could read her mind. His scowl turned into the vilest smile she'd ever seen. *Evil and...sexy.*

Natalie fought the urge to cross herself. Her bottom lip quivered, but she refused to back down when he stepped toward her with his eyes never leaving hers.

"Getting brave, *Braces?*"

When he stood directly in front of her, he pulled the card free. Natalie watched the envelope drop to the ground. A tear of frustration eased down her cheek.

"Let's see." His eyebrows rose. "'To my *love*, my *life*. My love is forever. Happy Valentine's Day. Natalie.'" He snorted and shoved the card against David's chest without looking at him.

"How sweet."

Around them, several of the more popular girls laughed.

"All that devotion of yours is wasted on him."

Natalie's tears flowed freely. David's face grew red, and he glanced around with a nervous twitch of his head, shoving the card into his backpack without reading it.

"Uh, thanks, um..."

"Natalie." Her whisper caught on the breeze to float away like a fallen leaf.

"Yeah, that's it." He stepped around Nico and her. "Well, gotta go to practice. See ya later." He left with the usual football groupies close on his heels.

"Give it up, *Braces*. He's never gonna fall for someone like you."

"Shut up!"

"You're a brainiac and he's...a jock." He leaned close. So close Natalie felt his breath, hot against her cheek. "He can have his pick of whichever cheerleader he wants. It'll never work."

Rage and humiliation boiled over. Natalie balled her fists and struck out, coming in contact with Nico's chest. He didn't budge. He stood like a stone wall, always blocking her way. "I hate you!" She hit him again.

He grabbed her wrists to stop her assault. "Yeah, I know, but one day you'll understand why David Scott's not the one for you."

His fingers were warm against her skin, but Natalie refused to enjoy his touch. With a sob, she wrenched her hands away and ran toward home. She rounded the last curb and tripped over an uneven patch of concrete, stumbled, and fell.

Her knee scraped hard and she landed face-down in the grass. Her glasses clattered against the sidewalk, and she heard the lens shatter. She bit her lip, but

couldn't stop the sobs that burst forth. She laid her head on her arms. Her shoulders shook with the force of her tears.

Why didn't he leave her alone? What had she ever done to him? She knew she looked different, but so did he. While she tried to stay hidden in the shadows, Nico Bui stood out from everyone around him like a flashing neon light. She didn't want his attention. *Or did she?* She couldn't deny her fascination with him. Her latest dream of him surfaced and she moaned.

"I'll put a hex on his butt." Her head still down, she mumbled into the dirt, watching an ant crawl by through her fuzzy vision. She didn't hear the footsteps on the sidewalk approach.

"Hmm, that's not a very nice thing to do on Valentine's Day."

She jerked her head up, conscious her skirt had ridden up over her knees. She twisted to her side and pulled the material down, wincing at the sting of her skinned knees. She squinted.

A tall man with black hair stood over her. She felt she should know him, but knew she didn't. Natalie eased onto her bottom and glanced around, but no one was in sight, except for the stranger dressed in black.

He held a hand out as if to help her up, but she flinched away from him. Her eyes settled on the gold ring he wore engraved with the initial *L*.

When she refused to take his hand, he knelt beside her, his hands hanging loosely between his knees. "Who would you put a hex on?"

She looked into black-as-night eyes. The urge to tell him her darkest secrets rose within her. When he smiled, she couldn't resist. "I-I want to hex Nico Bui. He's determined to ruin my life. I hate him."

"Tsk, tsk. *Hate* is too strong a word for such a beautiful girl like yourself."

Natalie looked down. Her lip quivered. She didn't hate Nico, but he made her feel "things" – anger, lust, frustration.

"I'm not beautiful." Her voice sounded husky with tears, which threatened to spill again. "If I were, David would love me."

A black eyebrow arched. "Love you?" He took her chin in his long fingers and lifted her face. "You're but a baby. What do you know about love between a man and a woman?"

Natalie felt her cheeks flush. "I'm seventeen." She pulled away from the man's disturbing touch. It hadn't been creepy. Just the opposite. She'd...*liked*...him touching her. She swallowed on that acknowledgement and shook her head. She frowned and studied the man from beneath her lashes.

He knelt closer, and his face came into focus. He reminded her of Nico. Something about the way he carried himself. The eyebrow rose again, and she knew he found her scrutiny humorous.

"I have to go home." She pushed up, ignoring the throb in her knees. "My grandmother will be worried."

"Ah, yes." He nodded. When he stood, he dwarfed her by a good foot and a half. Another similarity to Nico – tall, lean, and...dangerous.

She shivered.

He bent and picked up the broken glasses. "I'm afraid these are no longer any good." He handed them to her.

Natalie sighed. She and her grandmother barely made ends meet. She hated to think what a new pair of glasses would cost them.

"Contacts are a lot cheaper than glasses these days, you know."

Natalie glanced at the man, sharply.

He gave a short nod of his head and placed his hands behind his back. "Before you go, may I offer you some Valentine's candy?" He pulled one hand in front of him and held it palm up to her. In the center lay two heart-shaped candies wrapped in bright red foil.

Her mouth watered. No one ever gave her Valentine treats. Nona couldn't afford the chocolate. She reached out, tempted to take what the man offered. "Which one can I have?"

"I offer you both." He worked the candies between his fingers to hold up one. "One is light and sweet." He worked his fingers again. "The other dark and bitter." The candies circled and twirled between his fingers, then rested in his palm. He held them out to her.

Her mouth watered at the prospect of tasting two such different but decadent flavors. She reached toward temptation, but snatched her hand back at the last minute. She wasn't sure, because his lips didn't move, but she thought he said, *Such a smart girl.*

"I can't accept candy from strangers, but thank you." She glanced up to see if he might be offended. He didn't look like the type to piss off.

He smiled. "I understand." He turned and walked a few feet away, then stopped.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Natalie. Try not to put any hexes on anyone." He laughed. "And may all your heart's desires come true."

"Thank—" Her glasses slipped and she bent to rescue them. "—you." When she looked back toward the stranger, he had disappeared. She frowned. After the initial shock, she picked up her bag and started home. Ten steps later, she stopped and turned back. *How had he known her name?*

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The lone figure moved within the shadows of the oak tree. He took a pull on a cigarette, then discarded it into the dewy grass with a flick of his fingers. He let the smoke filter through his nostrils into the crisp dark air as he watched the light in Natalie's room snap off.

Her body would shine like alabaster in the moon's light. The image of her firm muscles, rippling across her arms and legs as she danced, would be such an erotic sight with the silver beams caressing her throat and nipples like a lover.

He knew she would be perfect. He could teach her all the secrets of night magick. He sighed and looked into the darkness. Not yet. She was still too young. She needed a few more years of life's experiences to learn what a true sorceress she could really be. He'd have to wait. He turned to the narrow street, taking solace in the chill of the night.



Chapter One

"How long you back in town for, Natalie?"

"Don't know, Joe." She smiled at the man behind the bar. A dirty apron covered his round stomach and a dull white cap his head. "I'm in between jobs right now."

"You quit the fancy teaching job in New York?"

"Yeah, the *Big Apple* isn't all it's cracked up to be." *Neither are the fast city boys.* But she wasn't going to go there with the neighborhood gossip. Joe and his sons were worse than the local beauty parlor when it came to rumors. By this afternoon, the whole town would know she was back home and out of a job.

"You're just a small town girl. Stay down here on the coast with your grandmamma." Joe wiped an oyster knife on his apron and continued to shuck the day's catch to serve up fresh on the half-shell, or baked with seasonings and parmesan on top.

"Hmm." She'd heard the same advice over and over for the past two days she'd been home.

Home. She looked out the window at the sun-speckled waves of the Mississippi Sound. She had thought New York City home for the last eight years, until Rudy had ruined whatever security she had felt there with his harsh betrayal.

"Got a boyfriend, Nat?"

Natalie glanced back at Joe's youngest son. He hadn't changed much from high school. Black hair, brown eyes, and a gorgeous smile, like the majority of the boys she'd grown up with. *Except David.* The name sent a jolt of pain through her chest at the remembered unrequited love she'd carried around with her all those years ago.

With the thought of David came the even more painful thought of Nico. Over the years, she'd realized he had been the boy she had really loved. At seventeen, she hadn't known how to show him, or tell him, with his bristly nature. The image of a stray dog, snarling at anyone who tried to be nice to him after all the malice others had shown, entered her mind.

"No, not anymore."

"Ahh...left the boyfriend with the city, huh?"

Damn. That's what she got for daydreaming about Nico. Natalie smiled at Joe's all-knowing nod, hoping that little tidbit wouldn't be all over town, too.

"Probably best. You need a man who understands where you come from, my baby."

Joe Jr. nodded in agreement with his father.

Natalie sighed and resisted the urge to roll her gaze to the ceiling. She'd heard these words, too, over the last few days, like a broken record. She was only twenty-five, for Pete's sake, not forty-five. She still had several more good years before she needed to worry about settling down with one man. Rudy had taught her that.

Instead, she nodded and agreed. "That's what Nona says, too."

"She's a wise woman, is our Sophia." Joe handed Natalie the bucket of oysters, then crossed himself. "God bless she knows the *old* ways. Saved Joe Jr.'s life when he was a baby."

Natalie smiled, but cringed inside. *Not another story!*

"I remember, Joe." She cut him off before she had to stand here another hour listening to stories she'd heard a million times. "Thanks for the oysters."

She turned and headed out the door. The bells jingled and the outside glare blinded her on the way out. She missed the step and would've fallen flat on her face, except for the steely grip that saved her.

"Oh...God." She laughed. "Thanks, I forgot about that st—"

Brown eyes stared into hers and the strong fingers tightened around her biceps. Her heart did a flip-flop in her chest at the same time her clit twinged with excitement, like it always did.

"Hello, *Braces*." The exotic, brown-eyed gaze swept over her from head to toe. "All grown up, I see."

"N-Nico!" His name stuttered from her lips before she could stop herself. He was the last person she had expected to see. *Shit*. She hadn't stuttered in seven years, now listen to her.

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Want to know what happens next?

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