*Till Death Do We Start*

My heart beats fast as I hear the melody of the organ breaking the silence of the once quiet church. This is it. Today is the day my new life begins. As I get into position, my mind begins to wander. I glance around the familiar hall, examining all the paintings. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a stray candle on the floor, under one of the paintings. A candle, like many others, that will be forever etched into my memory.

Five years ago, on Christmas Eve, we stood here, underneath this painting. Your family had just moved into our small town a few days prior. The whole town was gathered in the church for the festivities which had been a highly anticipated tradition, like most things in our small town. I was asked to get the candles and hand them out before the singing of the carols; yet another tradition. After I found the candles, I rushed into the hall. That’s when I bumped into you. Dropping all the candles on the floor, I scrambled to pick them up, apologizing profusely. I looked up at you, noticing your unfamiliar face. You smiled at me reassuringly, telling me it was okay. As you helped me pick up the candles, you asked me for my name.

*“Angelica Harp,”* I replied.

*“It’s nice to meet you, Angel. I'm Damon Blake.”*

*“It’s Angelica, not Angel.”*

You smiled. “*Could’ve fooled me.”*

My face flushed immediately. I avoided your eyes, and asked you where you were from, since everyone in town was talking about your family moving in. We stood there talking until the carols were about to start. You helped me hand out the candles as everyone made their way into the lecture hall. We entered last and found a spot in the back where we stood and waited for the carols to begin. As the music started playing, I reached into my pockets, trying to find a lighter to light my candle. I felt your gaze as you stared at me, lighter in hand. You lit your candle and took mine. I watched as the fire licked the wick of the candle, setting it ablaze. You handed me my candle back, and joined the singing. Your voice was mesmerizing. When you sang, your voice was soft and full of life. In that single moment, I knew you were the one I wanted to be with for the rest of my life.

 As the carols came to a close, we all filed into the hallway. People began to leave. My mother spotted me and pointed towards the door, indicating that we were leaving. I turned to you, apologizing for not being able to stay longer. We said our goodbyes and exchanged numbers so we could message each other. I left the church and made my way to the back parking lot, where my family was waiting.

 That night as I lay in my bed, all I could think about was you. Your dark hair, your stunning smile and your beautiful dark eyes. My phone buzzed, snapping me out of my day dream. I smiled as I read the message on my screen.

 *Have a good night Angel*

That year, we became best friends; the next, we became more. We had been dating for three years when you proposed. You brought me to our favourite café. I sat in our usual spot as you went to get our coffee. I stared out the window, watching the rain flood the streets. You sat down across from me and handed me my coffee. You gave me a nervous smile as a waitress brought over two slices of cake. I raised an eyebrow at you as the waitress set down the cake. Our usual: angel’s food cake for me, devil’s food cake for you. I was watching the waitress as she left when something strange caught my eye.

Looking down at my cake, I noticed something sparkly sticking out of it. A diamond ring. I gasped, pulling the ring off the cake. I looked up at you as a smile crept across your face. Thoughts racing, I managed to get out one word,

*“Yes*!”

We started planning our wedding immediately. Months flew by and the wedding was fast approaching. The closer the wedding was, the more distant you became. You weren’t answering any of my calls and anytime we discussed the wedding, there was a look of dread on your face. I just assumed that it was the stress of the wedding that kept you away. Back then, I should’ve sensed that something was wrong.

The bridesmaids and groomsmen begin to walk down the aisle as my father stands by my side. I see tears forming in his eyes. He promised me he wouldn’t cry. All eyes are on us as we make our way down the aisle. With each step comes a stronger feeling of anticipation. Feeling as light as air, I take every step cautiously.

I scan the crowd, looking for my mother. She’s at the front, hugging my younger sister in her arms, tears streaming down their faces. My sister’s tear streaked face reminds me of my own on the day of our wedding.

A few days ago, our lives were supposed to begin; our lives together anyway. I should’ve known that something was off. You didn’t answer your phone all morning but I assumed that was because you were busy getting ready for our big day. I brushed it off but I still texted you every 15 minutes. With every passing hour, my worry began to grow. With every text message sent, I had to make up a reason why you weren’t answering. You had to get your hair done, or you were busy making sure the church was ready. By the time I made it to the church, I had run out of reasons why you weren’t answering. Then, I saw you. It was brief, but I saw you heading towards the back parking lot. Little did I know that was the last time I would see you.

Our wedding began promptly. Like all major events in town, everyone showed up; everyone except for you, that is. The candles were passed out, lit and everyone was seated and the organ began to play. After the bridal party, I was next to walk down the aisle; another one of our town’s customary traditions. With my father by my side, we made our way down the aisle. I was so nervous and excited that I had already started getting teary eyed. As my father left my side, I stood at the altar, waiting. That’s when I knew something had happened. From the altar, I saw your mother talking to our wedding coordinator. A worried expression was on her face. I wasn’t the only one who noticed. I heard the whispers of the crowd,

        “*Where is he?”*

*“Is he late?”*

*“Maybe he’s not coming.”*

I ignored what they said. I had faith in you. I knew you loved me. So I stood there, at the altar, hoping and waiting that you’d walk down. But, you never did. I don’t know how long I stood there. How long I waited for you. My mother begged me to leave, but I was sure that you were coming.  Reality finally hit me when the church was dark and empty, only the light of the bright sky was shining through. All the candles in the church were out but one. I sat alone by the altar, crying and waiting for you to meet me at the altar.

Something is different this time, standing at the altar, waiting for you. I feel happier, more hopeful. Like this is the way things are meant to be. I didn’t expect you to show up this time. But here you are. You stare at me through the doors that lead to the hallway. I know it’s you. I see your cold, dead eyes peering through, staring at me. The eyes that I use to love, now despise. The eyes that haunted me, until my future was decided.

The sky was dark when I woke up.  The church was so silent that I could only hear the sound of my own breathing. Within the darkness and emptiness of the church, I let my thoughts overwhelm me. He never loved you, it was all an act. He left you for someone else, someone better. He left you because you aren’t good enough. I was on the ground, trying to block out all the thoughts, each one another blow to the heart. Each thought sounding truer; each one sounding more like you. Crouched on the ground, a flicker of light caught my eye; a candle, still burning but almost out.

Walking towards the flame, the thoughts once again had begun to devour me. Those thoughts turned into your voice, then into you. You were telling me all the reasons why you left, all the reasons why you never loved me. In that moment, I knew what I had to do. I took a deep breath, and extinguished the flame of the candle between my fingers.

 I notice you quietly slip into the room as the minister begins to speak.

        “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in loving memory of Angelica Harp,” he says in a somber tone.

As he continues the ceremony, I see a faint light at the back of the room. The light comes from the candle that you’re holding. You nudge the person next to you and spread your candle’s flame to his. I pay no attention to the minister’s words as I watch the flame make its way around the room. I don’t tear away my gaze as the flame reaches my family. My mother, father and sister walk up to the altar and light the candles around me.

The candles that had once burned out at our wedding are now being relit. As the ceremony is close to its end, the world around me begins to fade into darkness. The only light is the light of the candles. Just like the day of my wedding, I feel reborn, I feel anew. Today is the day my new life begins. Today is the day I marry death. As the light grows stronger and begins to consume me, I think about the words that the minister would’ve spoken. The vows we would’ve said. I feel my existence beginning to fade away; fading away to start my new life, wherever that may be. My time in this life is up. With my last breath, I manage to utter one last thought,

        “I do.”

Word count: 1782