

❧ Miranda ❧

UNTIL THE NIGHT I WAS TAKEN, demonically infected, the guardian angel Zachary watched over me. Now, I watch over him.

It's not your average long-distance relationship. Romantic entanglements between humans and angels are rare, archaic, and discussed only in hushed tones.

A romantic entanglement between a guardian and one of the murderous undead had been unprecedented. Then we fell in love.

One of the consequences of Zachary's "slipped" status is that, though *not* fallen, he's earthbound, limited to corporeal form, and banished from the ethereal plane.

Therefore, he's banished from me as well . . . at least for the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, Zachary will continue to devote himself to counseling neophyte eternal, those who might embrace redemption like I did.

Assuming the monster lying in wait for him around that thorny bush doesn't pluck out his eyes, claw out his throat, and rip his glorious muscled body to bloody pieces.

Zachary is immortal. He wears a gleaming holy sword with a gold hilt, a weapon forged in heaven. His blood is as toxic to an eternal as holy water. Yet he's no stronger or faster than a mortal man. He can still be brutally injured. He has been in the past.

Far, far, far above, I'm curled in a plush wing chair in a tropical lobby of the Penultimate, the way station for ascended souls immediately outside heaven. I'm one of hundreds of thousands, gazing down on loved ones, enemies, and the occasional celebrity of the day, trying to make our peace before passing through the famed pearly gates.

It's usually a comfort, watching over Zachary, a way to hold the loneliness at bay. Yet at moments like this, when he's in danger, I feel every inch the predator defanged.

I zero in on the nearest lakeside dock. Where did the

fiend go? I never should've taken my eyes off it. Not that I can warn my angel, not that I'm useful in any way.

Zachary scans the shadowy trees. In his matte black cowboy shirt over black jeans and boots, he makes a dashing, romantic figure. My fingertips twitch at the sight of his golden hair, lit by the moon.

He's come from working as a waiter at a vampire-themed Italian restaurant located a few blocks south. There, the danger is pretend.

It's past 3 A.M., a few hours before sunrise on New Year's Day, on the wide hike-and-bike trail surrounding Lady Bird Lake. It's a natural border, dividing downtown Austin, Texas, from its south side. *Lake* is something of a stretch. It looks more like what it is—a dammed section of the Colorado River, lined with trees, brush, and parkland—a playground for waterfowl and boaters, famous for its bats.

You can see across it, stroll from one side of the bridges to the other in only a few minutes. Perhaps I'm biased from having resided on the coast of Chicago's formidable Lake Michigan, but, to me, it's more of a water feature than a lake per se.

I slip in my earbuds and raise the volume on my palm-size monitor-com. Now I can hear Zachary's footsteps on the sandy path and the whiz of a stray bottle rocket, punctuated by a loud popping sound.

Last autumn this park was the scene of a handful of murders—the victims found punctured, nearly emptied of blood. Locals hoped that would be the last of it.

Zachary exudes caution. He carries a heavy flashlight, though it's not turned on. He's not emitting heaven's light or showing his wings either, though he regained those powers during our brief time together. My angel makes every effort to operate incognito.

"Reso, reso, resolution," begins a stocky figure, who's somehow doubled back to end up behind Zachary. "Resolved."

Turning, my angel draws his sword from the scabbard with one hand, clicks on his flashlight with the other, and shines it in the eternal's—I mean, vampire's—face.

"Happy New Year, Mitch," he replies. "I've been looking for you."

Mitch isn't displaying his fangs, and his cornflower-blue eyes look as cool as creation. He's dressed up, too. No pj bottoms or camouflage pants tonight. Instead, he's shaved and sporting jeans with a long-sleeved black T designed to mimic a tuxedo shirt, jacket, and tie. He's also holding a cardboard sign, though I can't see what it says.

"Hap, happy," Mitch says. "Happily ever after. The end is beginning. It's the beginning of the end."

Mitch has been homeless for as long as anyone can remember and is affectionately thought of as a local celebrity. Before he first rose undead, Mitch had been pure of

heart—so pure that he could identify Zachary, even in human form, as an angel. Typically, only quite young children possess that level of goodness, innocence, and faith.

Some say that Mitch used to build wells in Ecuador with the Peace Corps. Others claim he was wounded in Vietnam. What I know is that Mitch is young for our, or rather, *his* kind. He was infected only last September, and for months, he's been sustaining himself on pig's blood with the love and support of friends.

"We need to talk," Zachary begins. "About that kid you drained last night. . . ."

Mitch stares at his torn sneakers. "He was a druggie, drug dealer."

"He was fourteen. Desperate. Both of his parents lost their jobs last year. He has five younger siblings. They're struggling to make rent."

"Mean, you're mean. I mean, I didn't mean it that way. I was just saying—"

"What are you saying?" Zachary presses.

It's not like him to lose patience. My angel blames himself for the boy's death.

Painful as it is, he's not being unfairly self-flagellating. What happened was foreseeable. If Zachary had already struck Mitch down, the teen would still be alive.

I could've warned him that this would happen, that Mitch could only manage his bloodlust so well for so long.

Then again, perhaps Zachary wouldn't have believed

me. He's a confirmed optimist. He doesn't know the thick, sticky satisfaction of nursing from a savaged, leaking vein. He doesn't miss it like I do.

Mitch replies, "I, I, bye. Bye-bye, Zachary. It's time. Resolution. Resolved."

He holds up his hand-lettered sign. It reads:

HEAVEN
OR
BUST

"You're sure?" my angel asks, and I hear the catch in his voice. He may have set out tonight to remove Mitch as a threat. Yet now that the neophyte is willingly offering to end his existence, it's become a matter of resolve for both of them.

Mitch has taken lives—more than one. He's orchestrated violent, bloody deaths.

Yet I serve as proof that a killer may be forgiven. I was ten times the monster that Mitch is, a fiend to whom other fiends groveled and bowed.

At the same time, Zachary can't know whether he'll be sending his friend to the Penultimate en route to heaven or whether he's condemning a once-kind man to hell.

Zachary turns off the flashlight and tosses it aside. The blade of his sword bursts into flame. Raising the weapon, he begins, "What you're doing . . . Offering yourself to the

Big Boss, there's no better decision you could've made. You're going out a hero."

My angel said as much to me when I begged him to use his holy radiance to burn me to nothingness, when I surrendered my own demonic existence for *true* eternal life.

I can only imagine how painful tonight must be for Zachary, having to once again destroy someone he cares about. No doubt it must bring back memories.

It's archangels who are warriors born, not guardians.

Guardians are sent to earth to care.

"Good, good," Mitch replies. "Good for you. You're good, too. Hero."

Zachary's fiery blade falls on Mitch's last word.

~ Zachary ~

IF I SCREW UP AGAIN, I'm one toasted guardian angel (GA). We're talking hellfire and damnation. Hot. Searing hot. Chomp the serrano peppers. Chug the Tabasco.

In case there's any doubt, the archangel Michael himself materializes on the dock to tell me so. "That was unnecessarily costly and dramatic," he announces. "Zachary, how many times must we review this? Though the neophyte vampire's soul may have been temporarily salvageable—"

"He was still tainted by evil," I recite, returning my sword to its scabbard. "When he became an immediate threat to the living, I shouldn't have hesitated to destroy him."

I'm not inclined to argue. Michael is the Sword of Heaven, the Bringer of Souls, my supervisor. Besides, he's right.

I bend to pick up my flashlight and hook it to my belt.

"Once again, you have indulged your feelings at the expense of the greater good," Michael thunders. "Your friend's victim, fourteen-year-old Jorge Alvarez, didn't find out that his father got the janitorial position at Dell until after he recovered from the shock of dying. If Jorge had lived, that drug deal may have been his last."

I'm not sure about that, but it's not worth debating. The boy is dead. That's all that matters now. That and his grieving family.

I'd worried when Mitch didn't stop by over the holidays to pick up his latest supply of pig's blood. I should've assumed the worst and followed up then. But I wanted to give him the opportunity to choose salvation, and he did. Only too late for Jorge.

Sounding weary, Michael says, "You are a slipped angel, Zachary—granted, one who has shown promise. You earned back your wings and the power of heaven's light, and you have put them to good use. But that in no way should be interpreted to mean that your current status, let alone eventual full reinstatement, is guaranteed."

Another bottle rocket whizzes into the night with a bang. Michael adds, "Perhaps this assignment is too much for you."

These days, I'm only specifically assigned to watch over one vamp, a teenager named Quincie Morris. But the deal is that if I can help save every redeemable neophyte, I'll be allowed to return upstairs. I'll be welcomed home, reunited with Miranda.

The only problem? Fulfilling my mission is freaking impossible. Vamps grow in number with each passing night.

Then again, prior to me, the archangel had written off the neophyte undead completely. Devoting one GA to the cause is still better than devoting none.

"Another mistake of this magnitude," Michael adds, "and you'll have exhausted your second chance. I'll have no choice but to recommend that you be permanently exiled from Grace and that your assignment be given to a more capable guardian."

"But—"

"One more mistake, Zachary, and you'll eventually find yourself in hell."

~ Kieren ~

I HATE SECRETS. From day one, my parents made it clear that I couldn't tell anyone about our family. I can't talk about the fact that Mom's a werewolf, Dad's a human, and I'm a hybrid. Shifters are naturally born. But I can't speak out against humans who claim we're preternatural monsters. I can't fight back when bigots take away jobs. Even lives.

I have a lot at stake. Mom's wedding-planning business. Dad's professorship in engineering. Our middle-class life in the newly repaired McMansion. All that could be ripped away if our family's mixed heritage became public. When my kid sister, Meghan, was born, I had her to protect, too.

Now, I have secrets to keep from my family as well. Two biggies: (1) Quince is a vampire, and (2) Zach is her guardian angel. A secret is a burden. It's exhausting, a lie.

Zach hasn't told Quince what happened with Mitch.

I don't want to see her hurt. What's between me and Quince is more than puppy love. She may not need to breathe, but she's like air to me. If Zach doesn't tell her soon, I'll have to.

When the angel yawns, I push the issue. "So, Zach, when did you come in last night?"

The angel shoots me a reprimanding look.

"Yeah, you weren't here when I got home," Quince adds. She leans into her open refrigerator. She digs through plastic containers and aluminum-foil-covered plates of tamales and casseroles. Leftovers from the holidays. "I called your cell a couple of times. I was about to go looking when I heard you land on the roof."

"I had something to do." Zach disappears into Quince's dining room. He's carrying two glasses of iced tea. A mug of porcine blood is warming for Quince in the microwave.

"Aha!" Quince finally locates the Sanguini's take-out bag. She sets it on her kitchen counter. "I want you guys to try this proposed dish for the catering menu."

Sanguini's is the vampire-themed Italian restaurant that Quince inherited from her late parents. It's closed for

New Year's Day. Last night's party sold out at a thousand dollars a head (75 percent of which was donated to a local food kitchen). It attracted a country-and-western superstar, the latest Heisman Trophy winner, and several NASA astronauts.

Last night I walked her home at 3 A.M. (I don't normally get to stay out so late. We're out of school for winter break.) It's weird for Zach not to leave with her, too. It's his holy mission, watching over Quince.

I'm being too hard on him. It's not like he won't tell her about Mitch. He's just waiting for the right moment.

The microwave dings, and I take out her mug.

Not every guy would be as accepting of my girlfriend's liquid diet. But since I'm part Wolf, the smell of pig's blood makes my canines itch, too.

We join Zach in the dining room.

"Cold Italian pasta salad," Quince announces, setting down the bowl, "with prosciutto, chopped red pepper, chopped red onions, and cannellini beans. Nora let it sit in the fridge overnight."

Nora also left a pot of black-eyed peas on the stove. She's Sanguini's famed and acclaimed chef.

Nora, Zach, and their pal Freddy rent out rooms in Quince's 1930s home. It's not your typical household arrangement. Quince's mom and mine had been best friends since before we were born. My folks are Quince's

legal guardians. But last fall, Nora offered to pitch in as an extra supervisory grown-up.

It's better for everyone. It was a nightmare for Quince, trying to pass as human in front of my parents. Meanwhile, my folks didn't want two love-struck, hormonally charged teenagers living under the same roof.

I distribute dinner plates. Zach ducks into the kitchen for silverware and napkins. Tonight, it's just the three of us. Nora went out for sushi with her son, who's visiting from Boston. Freddy is on a date with some Australian guy he met through the rowing club.

They come and go, whereas Zach is a constant fixture. Not that I mind. Usually.

If he were a full-status angel, he'd be invisible. Watching over Quince 24/7. Being slipped, he's corporeal all the time. That makes the logistics of "watching over" more complicated. Among other things, it's seriously cramping my love life.

Don't get me wrong. Zach's a great guy. An angel—literally. Don't think that revelation didn't knock this good Catholic boy off his boots.

But Quince and I need our alone time.

We settle around the antique table. Quince says grace and announces, "We're taking down the Sanguini's holiday decorations before reopening tomorrow. Enough with the fangs and mistletoe. I've had it with *The Nightmare Before Christmas*—"

"Until next year?" I finish.

She blows me a kiss. I laugh. Quince adores the holidays.

She takes a tiny experimental bite of the pasta salad. "Delicious, but I don't know. It says to me, 'corporate picnic,' 'Tarrytown baby shower.' Not 'Sanguini's.'"

"What about taking out the prosciutto?" I suggest. "You could market it as a prey dish." Sanguini's menu is divided into two sections—one for customers who call themselves "predator" and one for those who call themselves "prey."

It's partly a matter of carnivore versus vegetarian. It's partly sexual posturing.

"You're quiet," Quince says to the angel. "You're not eating. Are you feeling okay? You're not sick, are you? Can you get sick?"

"It's my job to keep an eye on you," he replies, "not vice versa."

Waiting, I take a sip of sweet tea. Tonight, it's living up to the "friend" part of boyfriend that's my job. When she needs me, I'll be here.

"Zachary," she prompts, "would you mind picking out the prosciutto and letting me know how it tastes?" For my restaurateur girlfriend, one of the toughest things about being undead is that it's a struggle for her to keep food down. She's still building up her tolerance for

anything heartier than gelatin or whipped cauliflower.
“Zachary?”

He covers her hand with his own. “You heard about the boy found dead on the lakefront.” The angel takes a deep breath. “Well, I found Mitch on the hike-and-bike trail last night after work. It was him. I mean, he—”

“I know what you mean,” Quince says, pulling away.
“So you—”

“I didn’t strike him down against his will,” Zach assures her. “Mitch offered his soul up to the Big Boss. He said he was resolved.”

“Good.” Quince pushes her chair back and stands. “Good for him. We’re supposed to be happy for him, right? Isn’t that the drill?”

Zach winces. “There’s no one way that you’re supposed to feel. You—”

At preternatural speed, she bolts out of the room, upstairs and slams her bedroom door behind her. I’ll be surprised if the hinges held.

“Should we go after her?” he asks.

I shake my head. “After dinner, I’ll go up.”

We polish off the pasta salad. Then we head to the back porch to grill up a couple of T-bones. Split a six pack. Dissect U.T. football.

Zach and I have a lot in common. As an earthbound guardian angel and a hybrid werewolf, we’re both

different from everyone we know. He's been cast out of heaven. I'm no longer welcome at the training pack. We both have big appetites. And we both—or so we're constantly told—have great hair. Plus, we love Quince. In different ways, but she's as precious to him as my little sis is to me.

Then there are our vampire girlfriends.

Quince had her uncertain days. Her blood-starved nights. In the end, though, she became stronger. More confident. Even in undeath, the true Quince thrives.

"When Miranda was upset, she'd run and hide," says Zach. "Mostly in girls' bathrooms."

"Quince isn't hiding," I explain at the picnic table. "She just wants to be alone."

I wish Zach wouldn't compare Quince to Miranda. From what Freddy tells me, Miranda kept a stable of human victims in her castle dungeon. She left drained bodies strewn across the alleys of Chicago. She ordered the tongues cut out of gossiping servants.

Zach pops the tab of a beer. "I never understood my girl like you do Quincie."

I've had a lifetime to get to know Quince. But he'd watched over Miranda from day one. "You mentioned before that you're a young angel. What does that mean?"

He hesitates before answering. "We new angels were created after the first atomic blast in 1945."

"And Miranda was . . . not a senior citizen?"

He laughs. "No, she's not much older than you. She . . ." He pauses. "*What?*"

I'm not sure how to phrase this. Zach may be my buddy, but he's still a holy being. "Aren't you kind of old for her?"

I've traced Brad, the vamp who cursed Quince, to the early twentieth century. He'd hit the preternatural scene by at least the 1920s. He used his experience, his worldliness, to try to seduce her. Just thinking about it makes me want to snarl. So maybe I'm oversensitive about the subject. But I need to know where heaven stands on much older guys going after teenage girls. I want to hear that my faith is justified.

Zach puts down his knife and fork. "You know dog years?"

"Is this a werewolf joke?" I like a good werewolf joke. But I want my answer.

"No. I mean, you know how dogs—how different species—reach maturity at different rates? How they have different life expectancies?"

I nod. Werebirds, for example, mature much faster than weremammals. Life cycles vary. On average, Wolves die fifteen years earlier than humans.

It's unclear what that'll mean for me, a hybrid. But odds are, Quince and Zach will be here years, even centuries, after I'm gone. It makes his answer to my question

that much more important. I know that angels can slip, fall. So *how* good of a guy is he?

Zach yawns again. "In angel years, I'm about the age I look. I was born this way, fully grown. I'll look this way forever. But I'm the human equivalent of twenty or so."

Great to know. On the other hand . . . Suddenly, I can't help thinking that guardian angels start working awfully young. On-the-job training?

It's comforting that Zach's not a leech.

Except . . . how qualified is he to guard Quince? It's a dangerous world. With a more dangerous underworld. Given that Zach's slipped already, it's lucky that he hasn't stumbled across anyone more diabolical than his own girlfriend.