

*Miniature  
Rose*

# Christmas Angel

*Faery Rose*

**Johanna  
Riley**



Christmas Angel  
*by Johanna Riley*

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Christmas Angel

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Contact Information: [info@thewildrosepress.com](mailto:info@thewildrosepress.com)

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 706

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at [www.thewildrosepress.com](http://www.thewildrosepress.com)

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Dedication

To Joe, the love of my life and my very own hero.

## Chapter One

*I know up here in Heaven you're not supposed to cry.* A tear slipped down Jonathan Leary's cheek. *But how can you help it when your only child is hurting, and there's nothing you can do to help?* But as he watched his daughter Kate hunch over his gravesite, the tears fell, rolling off his chin, dripping through the clouds and emerging as raindrops that quickly turned into snowflakes.

Kate stepped back and stood at the foot of his grave, her long brown hair whipping in the cold December wind. He ached to brush her tears away. He'd been dead four months, and everyday she came to visit. Sometimes she'd talk, other times she'd stand there and cry. He gave up trying to answer her a long time ago; she just couldn't hear him.

She looked so much like her mother. His darling Rose usually came with him to see Kate, but not today. Today was his birthday and Rose knew he wanted to spend the time alone with his little girl.

"I love you, baby," he whispered, willing her to feel his presence.

"I love you, Daddy. Happy birthday." She wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I miss you so much." She placed a bouquet of pink roses at the base of his headstone and walked away.

His heart broke in a million pieces. He was not going to sit idly by while his child grieved her life away. Jonathan blinked himself to the chamber of the Elders, the earth fading from his view. Head held high, he strode to the judge-like podium.

With its dark, polished mahogany, the room reminded him of a courtroom.

Behind the podium sat three Elders. Their auras glowed with radiant white light, a serene air surrounding them. Their beauty and peace took his breath away.

"You requested a viewing with us, Jonathan?" Michael, the highest Elder, asked. His melodious voice washed over Jonathan, soothing his nerves.

In awe of the robed figures, he nodded. "I did, Your Graces. I have a request."

Matthew—his dark hair creating a reverse Oreo effect between the two fair-haired Elders—held up his hand. "We know what you ask."

"You do?" *Of course they do.*

"You know you can't be seen by a mortal," Michael reminded him gently.

"But *I* am a mortal."

"You *were* a mortal. And, as such, you cannot be seen by a living person," Barrymore said. His baby-face belied the wisdom in his eyes.

"It's just ... she's all alone." Shoulders slumped, Jonathan lowered his head and stared at his sandals. "She spent most of her life looking after me. I can't bear the thought of her being alone, especially with Christmas only three days away." He raised his head and met Barrymore's stare. "Isn't there something we can do? Some way to help my Kate get through the holidays?"

The Elders leaned in and whispered amongst each other. A few minutes later, they turned back to him.

"Jonathan, you were a good father and husband," Michael said. "Your heart and compassion for your fellow mortals has shown us your true character in the four months you've been with us."

His heart lodged itself in his throat. "But?"

Matthew's eyebrows rose a notch. "*But*, we still cannot allow you to become visible to her."

Barrymore waved a hand in the air and a door appeared. Clouds swirled through the opening as a tall figure strode into the room.

"Zacharius," Barrymore addressed the blond newcomer. "Your services are needed."

Jonathan could tell by the way he carried himself, chin jutted forward, shoulders back, that this man was proud and confident. Curiosity apparent in his green eyes, Zacharius glanced at Jonathan then back to the Elders.

"What is your request?"

"Katelyn Leary."

Jonathan saw understanding and a slight frown cross over Zacharius's face.

"Ah, Kate. She was a precocious child. I cushioned many of her falls from various trees and other youthful ventures."

Jonathan muffled his laughter as Zacharius turned to look at him. Kindness in his eyes, in the set of his mouth, put Jonathan at ease. In fact, he immediately liked the angel and couldn't help but think of how perfect he'd be for Kate. Too bad he wasn't mortal.

"Jonathan believes his daughter needs help," Michael continued.

Zacharius's brow furrowed and his head cocked to the side. "I don't sense any danger to her."

"No," Jonathan corrected. "I'm worried about her being alone."

"She's an adult, she can look after herself."

*She can look after herself? What kind of guardian angel are you?* Jonathan silently fumed. So much for Zacharius being perfect for Kate.

"Zacharius," Matthew said before Jonathan could break in. "As Katelyn's guardian angel, you are required to care for the girl. We decree that you help her through the holidays."

The angel's mouth worked up and down trying to form a protest.

Jonathan took a step toward Zacharius, his hands held out, pleading. "Kate has always had me around to fuss over. Since I've died she hasn't been herself."

"She's grieving, what do you expect?" Zacharius crossed his arms over his expansive chest.

"Please, Zacharius." He took a step toward him. "It's just for three days."

"And what do you wish me to do?" Zacharius directed this question to the Elders.

"Keep her out of harm's way," Barrymore answered.

Michael nodded in agreement. "Do what you always do with your charges."

Jonathan placed his hand on Zacharius's arm. "Be her friend," he said, looking straight into the angel's eyes. "Help her to be happy, to find love."



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Zacharius lifted his lips in a wry grin. "If love is what your daughter wants, you need to call Cupid, not her guardian angel."

Jonathan sighed deeply. "But you're perfect *because* you are her guardian. Don't you see? Who else knows her as well as you?"

"I know when she's in physical danger. Her emotions aren't my concern."

"You have them, don't you? Can't you find some empathy for her?" Jonathan challenged.

Zacharius frowned and switched his gaze to the Elders. "And what of you? Do you expect me to play Cupid as well?"

The Elders exchanged a look, all three expressions unreadable except, apparently, to each other. Finally Matthew turned back to them.

"We expect you to do what you do best. Guard her, Zacharius."

After a brief hesitation, Zacharius gave a curt nod. "I'll take care of her."

Jonathan put an appreciative hand on the angel's shoulder. Seconds later the muscles beneath his palm twitched and tensed.

"I've got to go." In the blink of an eye Zacharius vanished.

## Chapter Two

Tears fell like rivets of ice down Kate's cheeks. Sorrow tightened her chest making each breath painful. "I love you, Daddy. Happy birthday."

Her father would have been sixty today if not for a stroke which stole him from her two weeks before her own thirtieth birthday. With a shuddering sigh, she turned and walked away, all the while looking over her shoulder, hating to let the gravestone leave her sight.

Though hard, she survived Thanksgiving, but Dad's birthday broke her heart. She wasn't sure she could handle the pain of a lonely Christmas, which was only three days away. Holidays had always been joyous occasions. And Christmas, well, that was the most special.

An older model station wagon drove by, a fresh cut pine tree strapped to the roof. Just another happy family on their way home to partake in holiday traditions. She looked away from the sight. It seemed as if the world was rubbing her pain in her face.

Together she and Dad had decorated, putting up a tree, hanging lights around the front of the house and going all out. She didn't want to do it this year. What was the point? But, as much as she hated doing it alone, she was determined to go home and put up the decorations—to honor his memory, if nothing else.

Kate walked through the snow covered cemetery, sinking into the soft powder with each step. She stomped her feet on the bare sidewalk to rid her boots of snow. The leather did

very little to protect her feet from the icy wetness. She wrapped her arms around her middle to ward off the chill in the air, and sniffled in an attempt to unstick her now-frozen nostrils.

Traffic was light on the Huron, Ohio, streets as she made the two-block trek home. Chimneys expelled smoke from fireplaces, and cars buried in white suggested most people were keeping out of the cold.

Having grown up in the Northwest she was used to the frigid temperatures. Normally, she loved winter, seeing the world covered in a blanket of white, the flakes falling lazily to the ground. But this year, with Dad not being around, she didn't care one way or the other about the changing of the seasons.

Tires squealed and she whipped her head around to see a dark car sliding across the ice covered street. In surreal slow motion, the vehicle loomed closer but Kate's feet remained frozen in their spot on the pavement.

*Oh my god, I'm going to die.*

The impact knocked her backwards, gliding weightless through the air. The heavens shimmered invitingly above her.

*So this is what it feels like to fly.*

The serene thought was stolen by the hard ground meeting her back and sending her breath out of her chest with a whoosh. Her brain registered the cold spray of snow across her face and a heavy weight on her torso.

Her head throbbed, pounded really, from colliding with the ground. Kate moaned and rolled her head side to side, testing her neck.

"Are you okay?"

The low male voice sounded in her ear, the fanning of exerted breath making a rhythm on her cheek.

Slowly, Kate opened her eyes and found herself looking into a pair of startling green headlights filled with concern.

*Wait. Headlights aren't green, nor do they talk.*

"Am I dead?" That would explain the two-hundred pound eyes pinning her in the snowdrift.

The green eyes receded. "No. The car missed you."

She looked from the left to the right taking in the car perched in the snow bank just feet from where she lay. She recognized her neighbor's house and realized she must be in her front yard, or not too far from it. And the weight on top of her ... well, the eyes had to be connected to a person, right? But then again...

The weight eased from her chest replaced by icy wind. She gasped at the chill invading her body.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, rising to a stand.

Gingerly, she sat up and tested her limbs. "Nothing's broken." *Bruised, yes. Broken, no.* "The snow must have cushioned my fall."

It was then she noticed the rest of the man belonging to the eyes. He stood at least six feet tall, with wavy blond hair. The cable knit sweater and black leather jacket did nothing to hide broad shoulders and strong arms. He smiled and offered a hand to help her up. Her heart gave a funny little flutter and she put her hand in his. He gave a tug, steadying her as she got her bearings.

"Thank you." She cringed at the unsteady sound in her voice. *Must be due to the near miss.*

"Oh my, are you all right? I'm so sorry."

Kate turned to the hysterical voice. The driver of the out of control car, an elderly woman, pulled herself from the snow banked vehicle and ran toward them as fast as her spindly legs would carry her.

Kate offered a shaky smile. "I think so. Are you okay?"

The man left them to examine the damages to the car and the woman offered a nervous smile, wringing her hand anxiously.

"Yes. I-I just don't remember that curve being so sharp. We were lucky that young man was nearby." Horror of what could have been invaded her faded blue eyes. "I don't know what I would have done if I'd hit you. Oh, my dear—" Her bony fingers clutched at Kate's arm. "I'm so terribly sorry."

"It was an accident. I'm fine, really."

'That young man' was currently bent over, looking at the car's undercarriage. Kate and the driver walked over to him.

"What's the prognosis, doc?" Kate asked her hero. Though her words were light she couldn't stop her hands from shaking. She didn't think she'd hit her head that hard, but judging from the two blond men blurring and merging before her, the impact must have been a doozy. *Then why am I not hurt worse?* The thought flittered away as green eyes smiled up at her.

"No damage to the car." He gave a light shove on the front of the vehicle. "And it doesn't look like you're stuck. You should be able to back right out, ma'am."

"Irma," the older woman insisted.

"Kate," she volunteered. She turned expectantly toward the green eyed stranger. There was nothing Kate wanted more at that moment than to know the name of her rescuer.

"Zach."

*Zach.* The name suited him, Kate decided. His large hand swallowed hers. Tingles of awareness shot up her arm and down her spine.

The shiver knocked her equilibrium for a loop and brought her to her knees. Kate planted a hand in the snow, hoping the shock of cold would help focus her mind.

"Kate? Are you okay? Look at me." Worry laced Zach's voice. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Kate swatted at his hand. "I'm fine. Just got a little dizzy."

"Oh, dear," Irma twittered. "Maybe we should call an ambulance."

"No," Kate protested. "I don't need an ambulance. I just need to go home."

She placed her hands on Zach's arms and pushed to a stand. He cupped her elbows until she was once again steady and then rose next to her.

"Would you like me to drive you home?" Irma offered.

"I actually live right here," Kate said, gesturing to a two-story brick house behind them. "Really, I'm fine." She forced a smile to her lips. "We've all had enough excitement, why don't you go on home?"

"Are you sure?"

"I'll make sure Kate gets home safely," Zach added.

Irma looked from Kate to Zach and back again, worry and uncertainty warring in her expression. "O-okay. I'm really sorry." She turned to go, looking briefly back over her shoulder. "Merry Christmas."

Kate watched her go before turning to study Zach. He also stared after Irma, his head tilted to the side as if deep in thought. The tilt accented his strong chin. And she couldn't help but notice his wide mouth adorned with full lips.

He looked back.

*Uh oh, caught staring again.*

He flashed a knowing grin. Heat crawled up her neck, infusing her cheeks. *Just blame it on the noggin knock. You wouldn't stare at him otherwise.* She bit back a laugh. *Right. You wouldn't look at that man and drool?*

"Are you always this helpful?" Kate asked, desperate to pull her thoughts from his sex appeal.

"You could say it's my job."

"What are you, like a fireman or something?"

"Or something," he responded with a mysterious smile. He took hold of her arm. "Come on, let me walk you home."

Walking beside him, holding onto his tight bicep, nothing felt more natural. There was also something familiar in his wide smile, in the way he stayed right by her side.

"I know I don't know you," Kate began. "But I feel I owe you, well, *my life*. It's not much, but would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?" The moment the invitation was out, she knew there was nothing more she wanted than to spend a few minutes longer with him. She felt she'd known him her whole life.

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"I'd love to."

Zach's smile broadened, sending her stomach  
somersaulting.



### Chapter Three

Zach followed Kate through her front door. The decor of the two-story brick home hadn't changed since his last visit almost a year ago when Kate fell down the stairs. The family photo of Kate and her parents, taken when she was a young child, hung just above the stone fireplace giving the place a warm and inviting feeling. The home held no pretenses at all.

"I'm going to start our coffee," Kate told him.

Zach turned to find Kate was no longer behind him, and only then did it register that she'd spoken and brushed past him. He followed the noise of clanging dishes to the back of the house where the kitchen was located. From years of guarding her, he knew it was one of her favorite rooms in the house.

He rounded the corner to see her staring at the coffee pot. The corners of her lips drooped as a finger gently traced the contours of the carafe.

"Kate?"

She blinked and fixed those brown eyes on him. "My dad loved coffee."

Zach knew that, though he couldn't let on. "He doesn't anymore?"

Her eyes welled. "He died four months ago."

As a guardian angel, he was used to tears, even blood and broken bones, but he couldn't stop his heart from constricting painfully in his chest at the sheer anguish in her eyes. An uncontrollable need to pull her into his arms and offer comfort washed over him.

Zach frowned. This wouldn't do. He couldn't allow mortal emotions to get the best of him.

He placed a hand on her slender shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze, allowing his energy to flow through the contact and soothe some of her pain. "How about a cup of cocoa instead?"

She responded with a grateful, albeit watery, smile. "Cocoa sounds great."

"Can I lend a hand?"

Kate shook her head, so he watched in silence as she moved around the cheery kitchen, grace echoing in each step. She stood on tip toes reaching for two mugs, her t-shirt stretching taut over her flat belly. He tore his gaze away, and focused his attention outside on the falling snow.

A few moments later, she held a steaming cup in front of him.

"Why don't we go into the living room? We can light a fire in the fireplace."

The idea held great appeal for Zach. He couldn't remember the last time he smelled burning wood. Kate led the way back to the living room, setting her mug on the coffee table. She crossed to the fireplace and picked up a cedar log.

"You do that like a pro," Zach commented, enjoying the view of her derriere bouncing around as she worked. He groaned inwardly. He'd spent time on earth helping mortals, and what did he get for it? Blasted hormones. How did mortals get anything accomplished when their libidos kept flaring?

She smiled over her shoulder. "Dad and I used to do this all the time." She closed the protective grate and took her seat on the couch. "It's funny. Sitting in front of the fireplace, I feel at peace. It's almost like Dad is sitting with me again." Her gaze strayed to the family photo. "Sorry, I don't mean to be so depressing. It's just, today would have been his birthday, and I guess he's been on my mind a lot lately. When that car ... when Irma ... if you hadn't been there..." She drew a shuddering breath.

"It's okay, Kate. I understand." Zach watched the shimmer that was Jonathan rest a hand on her shoulder. The older man turned and met Zach's frown with one of his own and blinked out. "I'm sure he's still with you, Kate."

"Yeah, me too," she said softly, lifting a hand to cradle her shoulder absently.

As she took a sip of her cocoa, his eyes took in every detail of the action: the way her lips embraced the edge of the mug, her tiny pink tongue capturing the drip on the side of the ceramic. He drew in a deep breath and sipped from his own mug. *What's the matter with you, man?*

She shifted in her seat to better face him. "Did I thank you for saving me today?"

The intensity in her eyes made him wary for reasons he didn't understand.

"I'm not afraid of dying. It's just ... I miss my dad, I really do, but until today I didn't realize how bad of a mental state I've been in. The accident was a real wake up call for me."

Zach regarded her silently. The sorrow in her expressive eyes showed just how much she still mourned for her father.

He wondered if the Elders truly sent him down to play matchmaker, or if what they really wanted was for him to be a therapist.

*Not that I'd do much good as either. Protection from bodily harm, I'm your guy. Heal a broken heart, not so much.*

"I'm glad I was there to help."

Kate rolled her shoulders and a strained smile touched her lips. "Tell me about yourself, Zach. Where are you from? Do you have family in town? Are you married?"

The questions didn't really surprise him. Obviously she'd be curious about a stranger who saved her life. Still, he hadn't been prepared.

Zach rubbed his jaw, the scratching of new grow reaching his ear—another curse from being earthbound too long. He was an angel. Celestial beings didn't come from anywhere, didn't have families. Was this something he ever wanted? At one time, did he long to have a family of his own, a wife, babies?

His gaze flickered back to her. She stared back, curious eyes wide, waiting patiently for him to answer. "I don't have any family and I'm not married. I moved here a few weeks ago from Montana." *Please don't ask where.*

"Where in Montana?"

And there it was.

*Montana, Montana. Think quickly.* "Billings." His last charge lived in Billings. He took a long swallow of cocoa, hoping she wouldn't demand further information.

"You said you don't have any family."

*Only a celestial one.* "That's right."

"Does that mean you're alone for the holidays?"

He allowed a small grin to brush his lips. *No, I'm with you for the holidays. You just don't know it yet.* "Just me and the house mice."

The muscles of her throat worked, and she ducked her head with a bashful smile. A moment later, she raised her chin and met his gaze dead on.

"Not anymore," Kate stated firmly. "My friend Jenna is having a Christmas party tomorrow night. Would you like to accompany me?"

It would give him an opportunity to find her a date. His eyes fell on plastic containers stacked next to the fireplace. His heart twisted at the thought of her dating someone else. Why? His only tie to her was as her guardian angel ... right?

But if he could help her get through the first Christmas without her father *and* help her find love, he was going to do everything in his power to do so. "Christmas decorations?"

Her brow crinkled in confusion. "I'm sorry?"

He jerked his head in the direction of the boxes. "It looks like you brought out your Christmas decorations but haven't done any decorating."

"Are you politely trying to refuse me?" She cocked her head to the side and lifted a perfectly groomed eyebrow. An amused twinkle lit her eyes.

"It all depends on you," he said with a wink.

Her frown was full of distrust. "Why?"

"I'll make you a deal. I'll go to the party with you, if you let me help put up your decorations." *I haven't decorated for Christmas in at least a hundred years. Do I even remember*

*how? But then, how hard could it be? Might even be fun.* He was surprised to find he actually looked forward to helping her decorate.

She toyed with the ends of her long brown hair, twirling it around her thumb, as if contemplating an answer. His fingers itched to reach out and touch it. He stood abruptly and walked over to the containers.

"Okay."

Her voice was so soft he almost didn't hear it. He knew Christmas was a special time for Kate and Jonathan, an occasion they cherished and celebrated. For years, Zach had watched hearth as Jonathan and Kate trimmed the tree with ornaments and popcorn garland. The decision to share those memories with anyone but Jonathan must have been a hard. He was honored she agreed to share it with him.

He turned back to the couch, his hand extended in silence. *Come on, Kate, trust me. Listen to your heart.* Her touch was tentative when she placed her slim hand in his and allowed him to draw her up from the sofa.

Her toe caught on the leg of the coffee table throwing Kate off balance, tumbling her into his chest. Heat blasted through his sweater, imprinting Kate's form on his soul. His arms encircled her—to steady her footing, he told himself—at the same time, she grasped his biceps. Chocolate brown eyes shot up to meet his. They widened and her mouth parted softly.

Before reason could take over, his head dipped to capture her lips.

## Chapter Four

Kate's knees weakened as his head descended. She tried to squeak out a protest when his mouth closed over hers, but the sound came out as more of a sigh, bringing her traitorous body closer to Zach's solid strength. His lips were warm and sweet on hers. The tender caress was a balm for her tired soul, transporting her on a soft and wispy cloud.

As much as she knew she should pull away, she found herself powerless to do so. He was a virtual stranger. Yet, being held in his arms felt so right, so safe, as if they had been made for each other. For the first time in a long time she felt alive—and it was all because of Zach.

Her hands snaked higher up his biceps to bury themselves in his thick blond hair. She tilted her head, giving Zach better access to her lips. Desire curled in the pit of her belly with each tantalizing kiss. Hot chocolate mingled with pure male danced across her taste buds as their tongues caressed each other in a lazy tango.

His hands stroked her back. The action sent tingles coursing through her body and she arched into his touch silently asking for more.

Zach was the first to break contact. Disappointment flooded her. She didn't want the kiss to end. If it'd been her decision, she'd have dragged him over to the couch.

Breathing ragged, Kate placed her head against his chest, her hand over his wildly thumping heart, and closed her eyes.

He stirred, his hands dropping to rest at the curve of her hips, pressing her back slightly and she reluctantly stepped away.

*Please don't let him apologize.*

He tilted his head to the side and fixed his gaze on the door frame. "Kate, I ... uh..." He ran a shaky hand through already tousled hair. "I know this will sound stupid but—"

"Please don't apologize."

His head moved side to side. "No. I mean, I do. Apologize that is. It's just..."

She laid her palm flat against his chest. "We just met, and we shouldn't be kissing. Yes, I know," she said dryly, running a hand over her face. She closed her eyes against the memory of the kiss, and turned away from him. What was she thinking? She knew nothing about the man other than he was from Montana and was insanely sexy. In his arms she felt alive, vibrant. Out of them she felt ... cold.

"Can I use your bathroom?"

She whirled to face him. "What?"

He met her eyes again and gave a sheepish grin. "I need to use the bathroom."

Her eyes darted down to his crotch. "You're kidding right?"

Those green eyes widened to the size of saucers. "Kate, no. I'm not a pervert, for Pete's sake. I just have to go to the bathroom."

Heat scrambled up her neck and infused her cheeks. "Sorry. Of course you can use it." She sank on the couch and waved in the direction of the hall. "Last door on the left before the kitchen."



He flashed a grateful smile and disappeared around the corner.

Her head dropped into her hands. She truly was an idiot.

*Not only did you bring a strange man into your home, you had to go and throw yourself at him like a desperate person. Are you insane? God only knows what he's doing in the bathroom.*

She groaned. *Do not go there.*

Too late.

Not only was she starved for family, she was apparently sex starved as well.

\* \* \* \*

Zach barely made it into the bathroom before Jonathan blinked in.

"What the hell are you doing with my daughter?" The older man's expression was one of true fatherly mortification—his eyes narrowed, his lips pinched together. Jonathan was not a happy man.

Zach took a slow, deep breath. "Jonathan, relax. It was just an innocent kiss. Besides, you sent me down here to help your daughter through the holidays, right?"

"You're supposed to find her a man, not put the moves on her yourself!"

Zach drew on every ounce of angel patience he could. "I was sent here to do a job, and you've got to trust that I will do it. If you keep calling me like this you're bound to blow the cover."

"And finding out you're an angel couldn't?"

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"She won't know I'm an angel unless I tell her."

Jonathan pointed a finger into Zach's chest. "I'm warning you, Zacharius. Guardian angel or not, I'm watching you, so *you* better watch what you do with my daughter." With a final glare, Jonathan blinked out.

Zach leaned against the closed door and blew out a harsh breath. *Mortals!*

## Chapter Five

Kate thought of little else in the twenty-four hours after Zach's kiss. She realized she hadn't wanted the kiss to end because the instant his lips touched hers she felt as though she'd known him her entire life. There was no fear or confusion in her heart, only a certainty the kiss changed everything in her world as she knew it.

When he finally came back from the bathroom, his open smile put her instantly at ease, and as promised he helped her decorate the house. The work was done in comfortable silence. Zach seemed to know she needed the quiet if she had any chance of keeping her composure.

Now, here they stood, ready to embark on their first date.  
Date?

*Did I really ask the man out?*

"You look beautiful. Red suits you."

Kate looked over her shoulder at him, her hand hovering over her friend's doorbell. Dressed in a black suit with a bright red scarf tucked in the pocket, he took her breath away.

"Thank you. So do you."

He brought her hand to his lips, brushing them across her knuckles. Goosebumps danced up her arm, down her spine and right to her knees, making them quake with awareness.

"Merry Christmas Eve, Kate."

Kate's chest tightened with overwhelming happiness, her throat constricted and she barely whispered, "Merry Christmas Eve."

With a twinkle in his green eyes, he slipped her arm through his. "Shall we go in?"

The Michaels' lived in a large two story brick mansion on the lake. Every year they went all out on decorations and parties, opening their home to any and all who needed somewhere to go. This was the first year Kate attended the party without family. Thanks to Zach, she wouldn't have to face it alone.

Jenna, Kate's best friend, met them with a hug in the foyer.

"Kate, you look gorgeous. Turn around, let me see."

She obliged, giving her a view of the startling low-cut back. It was Kate's way of showing her playful sexy side, while the high neckline and full sleeves kept her demure from the front. She'd been on the way home from the grocery store and saw the dress hanging in the window of the boutique. She couldn't resist buying it, and judging from the appreciative glances Zach kept sending her, she'd made the right choice.

"Kate, you made it." Todd, Jenna's husband, came to join them. Glancing curiously at Zach, he hugged Kate. "Are you going to introduce your friend?"

"Are you going to be nice?" Kate teased.

Todd smirked. "Depends."

Kate admired Jenna and Todd. They actually reminded her of the Ken and Barbie dolls with their perfect good looks, but the way he toyed with her hair and kissed her temple while she leaned against him, showed there was nothing superficial about their love for each other.

She drew Zach to her side, taking strength from his presence. "Jenna, Todd, this is Zach, uh..." *Zach what?* She had never asked his last name.

"Zach Angelo," he offered, as if reading her thoughts, and the two men shook hands.

"You're the man who saved our Kate, aren't you?" Jenna questioned.

"I was in the right place at the right time, that's all."

He was so modest. Kate loved that.

*Loved modesty in men in general, not Zach exclusively ... right?*

"Well, thank God you were," Jenna responded. "Anyone who saves our Kate is a friend for life. Now, come eat, both of you."

The food was set up buffet style in the dining room. Jenna had gone all out with baked ham, stuffed shells, meat, cheese and vegetable platters, fruit, crackers, and dips—nothing had been missed.

"Oh, try this," Kate told Zach, offering him a tortilla chip covered in Jenna's famous bean dip. With a shrug, he took the chip and popped it into his mouth.

Her eyes remained riveted to Zach's mouth as he chewed the morsel. His tongue slipped out to wet his lips and Kate thought she'd die from the torture. She had an irrational urge to drag him to the coat closet and kiss him senseless.

Zach stared at her long enough for Kate to start squirming. His eyes darkened and he stepped back. "That was good," he said, before scooping some of the brown dip on his own plate.

They found a quiet corner in the family room. Zach waited for Kate to sit before joining her.

*Handsome, considerate and well-mannered to boot. He's too good to be true.* She gave herself a mental shake and watched the crowd in a vain attempt to change her train of thought.

Like every year, the party was overflowing with people. Most Kate knew, but there were a few new faces. She slowly lowered an uneaten chip to the plate, her appetite suddenly gone. She and her dad would dance one slow dance together at the end of the evening. Then they'd go home, open presents and drink cocoa in front of the fire.

She closed her eyes to fight the tears. No crying. Not tonight. Tonight she wanted to enjoy being with Zach. Maybe tonight they could start their own traditions.

*Whoa, slow down, Kate. You've known him barely twenty-four hours and you're already starting traditions with him?*

"You okay?"

Concern filled the green eyes peering closely at her. She patted his knees and offered a smile. "I'm fine."

"Excuse me, would you like to dance?"

Kate looked up to see a man with the looks of a Greek god standing before them. She started to shake her head, but Zach took the plate off her lap. She clamped her jaw shut, biting back any protest.

"Go ahead, Kate. Have some fun," Zach encouraged.

She didn't want to argue in front of a stranger, so she gave in to the dance request. Her partner was tall, incredibly

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handsome, and he knew it. There was a cockiness about him that didn't agree with Kate.

He glided them across the floor, masterfully taking her through each step of a waltz. But Greek's thin arms lacked the security of Zach's. His pungent cologne turned Kate's stomach, and she wanted nothing more than to return to Zach's side in the corner.

## Chapter Six

Zach leaned against the doorjamb, his arms crossed over his chest, and watched from the sidelines as Kate and the man danced around the floor. He kept his pose relaxed to conceal the emotional turmoil coursing through his veins. He had to admit they made a striking couple. He admitted it, but he didn't like it. The guy seemed so cold. Kate wasn't a cold type of person. She was more like the sun, bright and warm.

He scanned the crowd looking for someone who might be a bit more suitable for her. The majority of the men were married, or with dates—his sights landed on two men dancing in the center of the floor—or gay. The single ones were too young, or not the right body type. He found reasons to dismiss every single male at the party. If there wasn't a valid reason, he created one—their nose was too big, ears too hairy, pants too tight. He just couldn't see his Kate with anyone.

He straightened. *His Kate*. No wonder he couldn't find a man right for Kate. He had already claimed her.

He found her again in the crowd and zeroed in on her face. Looking at her sent his pulse into erratic beats.

Zach had known Kate all her life. He didn't have to stop in to watch her every Christmas, but he did—every one—drawn to her even if she wasn't in danger. He'd always thought the overwhelming desire to be near her was just an affinity for one of his charges ... he never fathomed it might be so much more than that.

He messed up royally. The Elders sent him down here to find true love for Kate, not to fall in love with her himself.



The dark haired stranger caressed Kate's cheek and pulled her closer. Zach's stomach burned with jealousy. Never before had he wanted to harm a mortal as much as he did this one. He cut through the couples on the floor reaching her as the next slow song began.

"Excuse me, but I believe this dance is mine," he stated, laying a possessive hand on her shoulder. Zach schooled his expression into a dangerous scowl, daring the dark haired man to challenge him. Paling, the man released Kate and, with a bow, backed off gracefully.

Kate nestled in his arms contentedly, her head resting against his heart, and both arms around his back. He felt an overwhelming surge of protectiveness for her. Not the kind of protective feeling that came with being a guardian angel, more like that of a person in...

He tightened his hold and rested a cheek on the top of her head. No, he couldn't be. Could he? Guardian angels weren't supposed to fall in love. The room closed in on him and he felt a sudden urge to escape. "Zach?"

"Hmm."

"Do you think we could go now?"

It was as if she'd read his mind.

He looked down into her chocolate gaze and felt his heart melt a little more. "Sure."

Never releasing his hold on Kate, Zach led her off the dance floor and made their good byes to Jenna and Todd.

The drive was torture for Zach. The intimacy of the quiet, close proximity wreaked havoc on his hormones. He wasn't mortal, why did he keep getting cursed with their hormonal

afflictions? Kate drove in silence, completely unaware of the effect her perfume was having on his senses.

In light of this personal revelation, he didn't have a choice. He had to tell her the truth.

Back at the house, he walked her to the door all the while dreading what he needed to say. He hated that he was about to break her heart, but he couldn't keep lying to her.

The Elders were not going to be happy.

*First things first.*

She turned to face him, a soft smile hovering on her lips. She caressed his cheek, her touch like the wings of a butterfly across his skin.

"Will you come in?"

Zach leaned into her palm and closed his eyes. He just hoped she would understand.

He allowed Kate to pull him into the foyer, but kept his back ramrod straight as she closed the door behind them. This was not going to be easy.

Kate sashayed toward him, slipped a hand up his bicep and trailed it over his shoulder. Her crooked smile tugged his heart. He captured her hand and brought it to his lips.

"We need to talk."

"I agree."

Kate rose on tiptoes and planted a kiss on his chin, sending his heart into frenzied jigs.

Her fingers stole into his hair and logic went out the window. His mouth covered hers hungrily, savoring the feel of her pressed tightly against him. He nibbled down her neck

and shoulder. His long fingers splayed on her bare back, one finger slipping just beneath the silky material of her dress.

Kate moaned and his hand dipped lower to cup her hips bringing her more fully against him. She felt so sweet, so perfect. He ached to touch her more intimately.

With a frustrated growl, he tore away from her and stalked into the living room.

"I really have something I need to tell you." He dropped to the cushions and she sank down beside him. She snuggled under his arm sending his concentration out the window.

Her hand landed on his thigh. Zac jumped off the couch, ran his fingers through his hair and paced around the living room. He was a guardian angel. Telling someone who he was should come easily.

He should just come right out and say it. "Kate, I—" A chime went off in his ear.

*Not now!*

What a time for the Elders to call him.

"What is it, Zach?" His eyes followed the movement of her tucking a silky strand of brown hair behind a delicate ear.

He didn't have much time. If he didn't respond to the Elders' call, they could blink him home and ruin everything. "I'm a guardian angel."

She barked out a laugh. "I'm sorry, what?"

Zach blew a hard breath and took a seat across from her. "Your father was concerned about you, so he sent me down to help you through the holidays."

Her beautiful face contorted into anger. "This isn't funny, Zach." She pushed off the sofa and stalked to the doorway. "If you want to stop seeing me all you have to do is say so."

"Kate, I'm sorry, but I'm telling you the truth."

"Why, Zach?" She rubbed a hand over her face. "Why would you do this? You know how hard my father's death was. Why would you bring him into this?"

Pain etched her features.

"Just listen to me for a minute, okay?"

Her expression was stone, unreadable even to him. "No. I don't want to hear anymore."

He started toward her. "Kate, please."

"Get out."

"But—"

"I know we've only known each other a few days, but still, I didn't think you were the type of person who could be so cruel."

He threw his hands in the air. "Stop being so stubborn and listen to me."

"Out. *Get out of my house!*" She flung the door open and no sooner was he out of the house before it slammed shut.

He sank to the steps and dropped his head into his hands. Could he have any less tact? He meant to calmly explain about his mission, and Jonathan's request. Instead, he blurted it out like a novice.

The chime sounded again in his ear. This time he couldn't ignore the summons and blinked out.

\* \* \* \*

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by Johanna Riley

Kate sank to the hallway floor, her heart broken in a million pieces.

*You're an idiot.* She knew better than to get attached to someone so quickly. Zach was a stranger. So then how could it have taken only a matter of days, hours really, for her to fall in love with him?

*He took your pain and used it for his escape.*

A guardian angel? He might as well have said he was God.  
*And to bring my father into his lie?*

Tears fell hot and fast, soaking the material of her dress, but she hardly noticed them.

*Merry Christmas, Kate.*

## Chapter Seven

"That could have been handled better, Zacharius," Barrymore scolded.

"Don't you think I know that? I never intended to hurt Kate."

He knew they were disappointed in him, but no one could be more disappointed than him. By breaking the rules, he made a giant mess and ended up hurting the one person he was supposed to protect.

Jonathan strode into the room. "Maybe if you hadn't been so busy molesting my daughter, you'd have been able to concentrate on your job of finding her true love."

Zach glared at Jonathan. "I wasn't *molesting* her. I'm an angel for Pete's sake."

"Are you denying you've developed feelings for Katelyn Leary, Zacharius?" Michael demanded.

"Of course I have feelings for Kate. I've watched over her her entire life. How could you know someone that long and not develop feelings for them?"

"Protecting a mortal and falling in love with one are two different things, Zacharius. But then, I'm sure I don't have to tell you that." This being said, Michael pulled Barrymore and Matthew into a huddle and commenced with whispered conversation.

Jonathan, ever the mortal, released his anger. "You fell in love with *my* Kate? How could you?" He paced around the chamber rubbing his hands over his face. "You were supposed

to go down there and help her find a *mortal* to love. Did you even look, even try to find someone suitable?"

The Elders broke apart and Barrymore interrupted Jonathan's tirade. "You never specified Katelyn had to fall in love with a mortal. You asked for Katelyn to have someone to love, and to be with through the holidays. Is Zacharius not a perfect specimen?"

Zach's mouth dropped open in shock. *What in the world?*

"Of course I *meant* for a mortal. Do you think I want my daughter to fall in love with an angel so she can get her heart broken?"

Zach threw his hands up in the air. "I don't believe we're having this conversation." He faced the Elders. "Yes, I screwed up. I fell in love with a mortal. I know it's forbidden. Can't you just give me my punishment and get it over with?" *Not that anything they did could be worse than watching the light fade from Kate's eyes.*

He walked over to Jonathan and laid a hand on the man's shoulder.

"I had no intention of falling in love with Kate. Yet, to be honest, if I had to do it over again, I wouldn't change a thing. Your daughter is an amazing woman. My only regret is the hurt I caused her. For that I will never forgive myself."

He stood in the center of the room, back straight, head held high, and faced the Elders for his punishment.

"Wait a minute," Jonathan said to the Elders, the anger gone from his voice. "Maybe he shouldn't be punished. After all, his was not a planned offense."

Matthew drew himself to his full height and haughtily stared down his nose at Jonathan. "He broke the Cardinal rule in the Guardian handbook. Guardians are not to get emotionally involved with their charges."

"I—"

"Zacharius," Michael broke in. "May we have a moment alone with Jonathan?"

Zach looked from one Elder to the next. He didn't like being excluded from a conversation that could very well decide his fate. Unfortunately he wasn't being given a choice. "Very well."

He left the chamber and stood out in the hallway. He slumped against the wall and covered his face with his hands. He knew he'd be stripped of his Guardian duties, at the very least. They wouldn't put him on cupid duty, that's for sure. He'd already botched that assignment as well. They'd probably make him do pet collecting, carrying the souls of deceased pets to their heavenly resting place.

Maybe, just maybe, he'd be permitted to check on Kate every now and again.

*No, I don't think that would go over so well.*

The thought of seeing her in the arms of another man would be his undoing.

The chamber door opened and Jonathan walked out. The older man stopped next to Zach and touched him gently on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, Zacharius. I hope you can handle the repercussions of your actions."



Zach couldn't decipher the look in Jonathan's eyes and it made him nervous. He was going to be a doggie collector, he just knew it.

He entered the chamber and faced the firing squad. "I'm ready to hear my sentence."

"Zacharius, Guardian Angel," Michael boomed. "You are forthwith stripped of your Guardian title."

Zach's eyes closed and his stomach dropped. He knew this would happen, he just didn't know how badly it would hurt. It didn't matter. Kate was worth any judgment they doled out.

"Furthermore, you are sentenced to a life on earth."

Zach's eyes snapped open and he stared in shock at the Elders.

"You are ordered to protect Katelyn Leary. To guard her heart and stay with her for the rest of her mortal life."

"I don't understand." Doggie soul collecting he could and would do happily, but having to watch Kate fall in love and be with another man for the rest of his mortal life? *This* was a punishment worse than any he could dole out.

Michael's expression softened. "Zacharius, you are our best guardian angel. You've done every job ever asked without as much as a peep of discontent. Yet, you have been among the mortals for so long they have rubbed off on you, I fear."

Barrymore's nose crinkled in disgust. "You've been infected with the messy emotions of mortals."

Zach laughed, then sobered. "But Kate wants nothing to do with me."

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"Therein lies the biggest part of your problem, son," Matthew said. "You must convince Katelyn of the truth. You must get her to accept who you really are."

"And if I fail?"

"You will lose her forever, and your life on earth will be wrought with heartbreak and indescribable pain."

Zach bowed his head in acceptance. Somehow, he had to get Kate to believe in him. "Will I be stripped of all my powers?"

"You have twenty-four hours. *And* the same to make Katelyn believe."

## Chapter Eight

"Daddy, what am I going to do?" Kate stood at the foot of her father's grave. She spent the night sitting in front of the fireplace, crying, thinking and crying some more. This morning she had wanted nothing more than to stay in bed, buried beneath the covers and hidden from the world. All she felt was drained ... and alone.

The leaves on the flowers at the foot of the headstone reminded her of the green in Zach's eyes. She snorted and looked away. The last thing she wanted to do was think about Zach.

Snowflakes danced merrily in the Christmas wind, decorating Kate in white. She didn't feel the cold, perhaps because she was still numb from the pain.

Her heart wanted to believe Zach, believe *in* him but angels weren't real. Then again, couldn't the same be said for Santa Clause or the Easter Bunny? Not everyone believed in them but it didn't stop people from thinking they really existed.

She thought back to the accident of three days prior. She wouldn't be alive right now if her guardian angel hadn't stepped in to save her. *Correction, if Zach hadn't ...* Kate's eyes widened in dawning realization.

Her Guardian Angel.

Could he have been telling the truth? But what if he wasn't?

Confusion muddled her thoughts as her mind flashed back to the night before. She'd opened the door not long after

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she's slammed it, and found nothing. No Zach, no footprints in the snow. It was like he'd vanished in thin air.

Tears blurred her vision as she sank to her knees. "Oh, Daddy, what am I going to do? I love him so much. If what he said is true, I may never see him again."

\* \* \* \*

For the longest time Zach watched Kate at Jonathan's grave. He felt her pain and it brought him to tears. He brushed away the wetness on his cheeks. A flicker of motion told him Kate was leaving. He took his place and waited.

*Please let this work. I can't lose her again.*

## Chapter Nine

Kate trudged through the fresh snow covering the cemetery. This time last year she and her father had been together and happy. This time yesterday, she thought Christmas would be spent with Zach.

Today she was all alone again.

She would give anything to turn back the clock to last night. If time could rewind she would listen, really listen to Zach. Kate wanted to give them that chance.

She wasn't five feet from the sidewalk when she spotted him.

Zach was standing in the middle of the street staring at her. In jeans and a cable knit sweater he looked amazing and didn't look anymore like an angel than she did.

A flash of motion caught her eye. A black SUV barreled down on Zach yet he didn't seem to notice the vehicle.

*Oh my God, Zach!*

Kate broke into a run, screaming his name, but her feet were like bricks of cement weighing her down.

The SUV raced toward Zach. His face didn't show fear, or even concern, as the vehicle connected with his side.

*"No!"*

Kate stopped dead in her tracks as the SUV drove on, unaware they'd just killed a man.

*"Zach!"* She frantically scanned the area.

Horror turned to disbelief. He wasn't lying in a broken heap on the side of the road. Zach stood in the middle of the road, unmoved and unhurt.

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Literally, in the blink of an eye he was in front of her.

"But how? I saw ... I saw..." nothing more as blackness overtook her.

## Chapter Ten

"Is she going to be okay," Jonathan asked, worry lacing his words as Zach placed Kate on the couch.

"She'll be fine. She just fainted."

"Couldn't you have done this a better way?"

"She had to see with her own eyes. She's *your* daughter. You know words don't always convince her."

Jonathan smoothed a hand over her hair. "I miss her so much." He swiped at a wayward tear. "You take care of her, do you understand me?" Infinite tenderness crossed his face as he gazed at his daughter.

"They'll let you come back, you know?" Zach said, touching Jonathan's arm. "She may not be able to see you but she feels you. I promise she'll know, when she dreams of you, that you've come to check on her."

Jonathan nodded. "Good luck."

"Jonathan."

The older man paused in mid-blink and smiled sadly at Zach.

"I won't let you down."

Just as Jonathan blinked out, Kate stirred.

Zach knelt and took hold of her hand. "Kate, honey, wake up. That's it, baby," he coaxed. "Open your eyes. Look at me, Kate."

\* \* \* \*

Kate laid in silence listening to the conversation of the two men. Her father was here? She wanted to jump up and hold on to him but instinct kept her still.

Her father pleaded with Zach to take care of her. Did that mean Zach had been telling the truth all along? And her father gave his blessing? Contented peace filled her soul.

The room grew colder and Kate knew her beloved father was gone. *Listen to Zach, Daddy. Come back and see me again.* She felt the heat from Zach's body radiating over her, her skin tingling from his closeness. For a moment she lay still, soaking up his energy.

At his prompting, she slowly opened her eyes, trying to appear as if waking from a dream, and looked up into his beloved face. "Hi."

The anxiety in his green eyes softened a bit and he placed a kiss on her knuckle. "Hi."

Kate struggled to sit up, leaning against him for support.

"I-I heard my father. I heard his voice. Here in this room." Memories of Zach getting hit by a SUV rushed back, flooding her brain. She searched his face. "I wasn't dreaming, was I?"

He shook his head slowly.

"How can I *not* believe you?" She candidly met his gaze, not caring if he saw her true feelings burning in the depths of her eyes. "Who but an angel could bring Daddy to me? And who else could be hit by a car—have it pass right through them no less—and not suffer a scratch?" She looked down at their entwined hands, and then back into his eyes. "And who but an angel could make me fall in love with him in a matter of days?"



"Kate, I'm sorry I hurt you," Zach whispered.

She memorized every curve, every line of his face. "I saw that car hit you and my life ended." Her chin wobbled as tears welled in her eyes. "I could handle you being alive and us never speaking, but if you died today..." Tears slipped down her cheeks and she bowed her head.

"Oh, Kate." Zach gathered her in his arms and rocked her gently. "I botched things so badly last night. I should have told you how much I love you before the truth of who I really was."

She snorted against his chest. "*I love you. By the way, baby, I'm an angel.* Yeah, I would have really taken that well." She stared him straight in the eye. "Do you?"

"Do I what?"

His face conveyed confusion and, if possible, Kate fell in love with him a little bit more. "Do you love me?"

His green eyes went misty and he rested his forehead on hers. "I do. With all my being."

Kate sighed and briefly touched her lips to his, her heart bursting with love. "I'm ready to listen now."

She settled more comfortable on the couch and pulled him down next to her.

For the next twenty minutes, she listened avidly as he told her about his life as a guardian and her father's request.

By the time he was finished, hot tears streamed down her face. "Are you sure you want to give it all up for me?"

He trailed a finger through the wetness on her cheek. "I already have. And I'd do it again in a heartbeat if it meant spending the rest of our mortal lives together."

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"I love you, Zach."

Her heart sang when he lifted her into his lap and captured her mouth in a slow, lingering kiss. Her father couldn't have given her a better gift than her very own Christmas Angel.

Christmas Angel  
*by Johanna Riley*

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