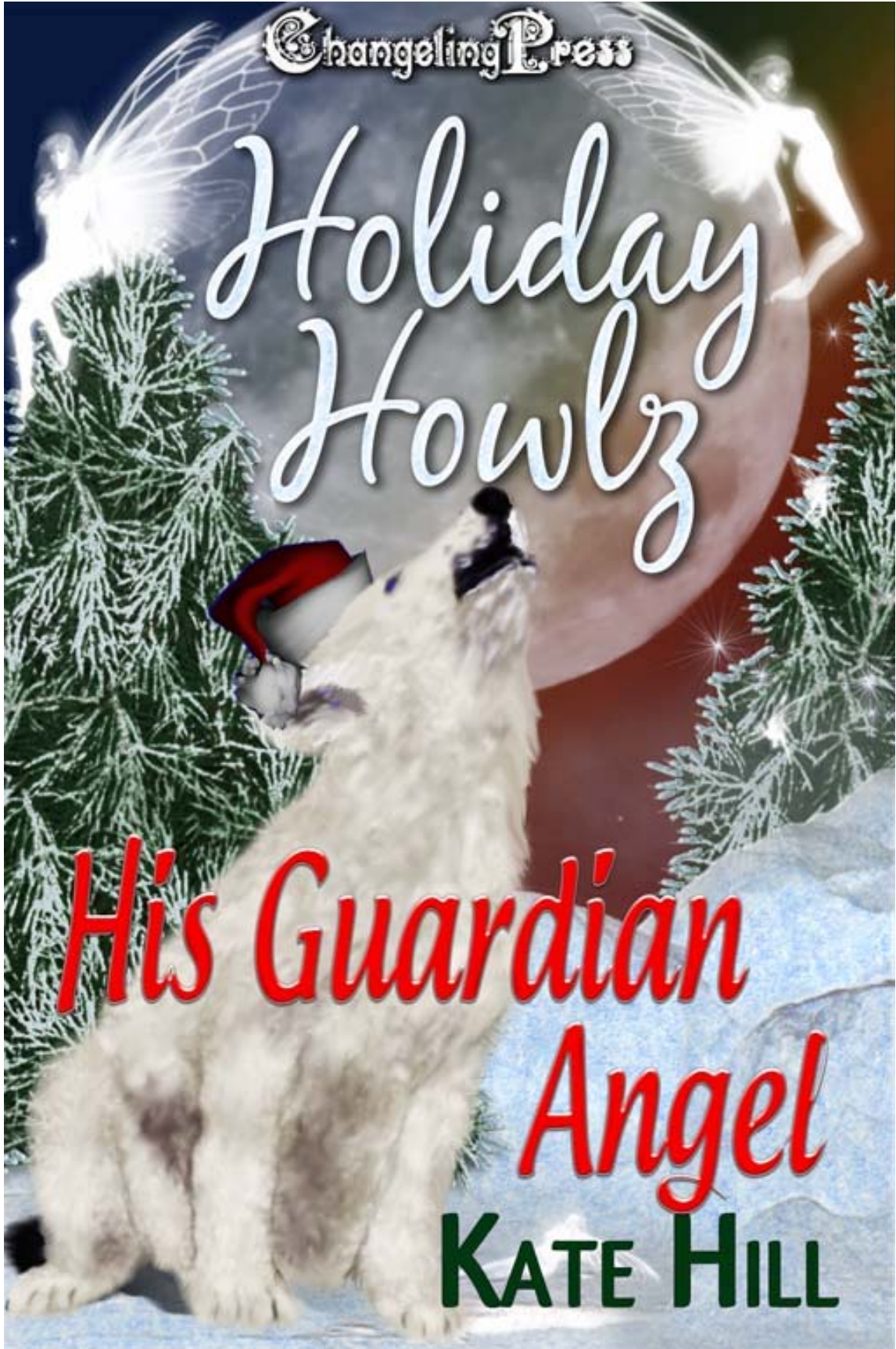


Changeling Press

Holiday Howlz

*His Guardian
Angel*

KATE HILL



Holiday Howlz: His Guardian Angel

Kate Hill

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Holiday Howlz: His Guardian Angel

Kate Hill

After a weird artist tattoos a werewolf on her arm, Angel gets lost in a snowstorm and stops at a remote house to ask for directions. She has no idea the house is owned by a once famous singer who disappeared from the public eye five years ago.

The last thing Gannon wants is a guest, especially not during the holiday season when he's reminded of his forced separation from the human race. He doesn't expect the explosive attraction between him and Angel, but how can he, a man cursed to be a shapeshifter, resist a woman with a werewolf tattooed on her arm?

Angel is the only one who can tame his beast, giving him the greatest Christmas gift of his life.

Holiday Howlz: His Guardian Angel

"I thought getting a tattoo is supposed to hurt," Angel said.

The artist, a dark-skinned woman with white teeth and hair like a cavewoman, grinned and asked, "Doesn't it?"

"It hasn't so far."

Of course Angel did have a little buzz. She'd just come from a neighbor's Christmas party at her apartment house across the street, where she'd had too much eggnog. The party had been just another night of watching happy couples grope each other and ask if Angel had met anyone special yet.

She'd spent most of the evening sitting in the kitchen instead of joining the rest of the party. Alone with her eggnog, she'd thought about what her life was missing. It had been a couple of years since her breakup with Brad. Not that she missed *him*. They'd grown so far apart that she'd been glad when the relationship ended.

Lately she'd considered trying to find someone new. Nothing serious, just someone who wanted to enjoy a few evenings out and maybe indulge in occasional no-strings sex. Then she recalled that it had started that way with Brad and had quickly turned into a smothering relationship, with everything going *his* way. Even now when she thought about their time together, she still felt like she'd just made parole. That put a damper on the idea of dating again.

After finishing her eggnog and saying good night to her neighbors, she had walked outside for some fresh air. Her gaze had riveted to the purple lights on the sign from the new tattoo studio across the street.

It was rumored that the artist who owned the place incorporated magic into her work. Angel didn't believe a word of it, but she'd always wanted a tattoo. She'd just never had the nerve to get one. Well tonight, was the night. Three times on the way

across the street she'd nearly changed her mind, but when she'd stepped into the purple room, empty except for a counter and the many designs on the walls, a strange feeling had come over her. Though part of her wanted to run, something compelled her to stay.

Now she sat while the artist worked on her right arm. Angel hadn't been sure what she wanted, except that it should be everything she wasn't, yet wished to be. Wild. Passionate. Rebellious.

The artist said she knew exactly what to do.

"Don't look until it's finished," the artist said when Angel tried to steal a peek.

"It's my arm," Angel muttered, still too tipsy to think clearly. Her eyes closed and her breathing deepened. Was it possible for her to fall asleep?

Before drifting off, she thought she heard the artist whisper, "Don't worry, Angel. The pain will come later."

* * *

On Christmas Eve, Angel had a long drive to her sister's new cottage in the mountains. It was a cool idea for her sister and brother-in-law to invite the family to the mountains for the holiday.

This was the first time since Angel opened her restaurant that she'd be leaving it for longer than a weekend, but she trusted her assistant manager and knew the place was in good hands. Still, it was later than expected when she finally left for her sister's. She wondered what the family would say when they saw her tattoo. It was rather unusual. She'd asked the tattoo artist for something wild, and the woman had certainly delivered.

Angel's skin now bore the image of a savage yet beautiful creature with blue eyes set in a face that was part human and part wolf. When the eggnog had worn off, Angel had been stunned by the tattoo, but also awed by it. Now she felt an attachment to it that she hadn't thought possible.

Her gaze flicked toward her arm, covered by the sleeve of her wool coat. The werewolf lurked beneath and she could scarcely wait to see him again. She was still

shocked that the process hadn't hurt, nor was there any irritation or side effects. She'd expected at least some discomfort and knew there should be a healing period.

Thinking about the tattoo gave her a rush. It felt like spring fever in the middle of winter. She had a gut feeling something big was about to happen but she couldn't imagine what.

Her gaze once again fixed on the road and her brow furrowed. The snow fell thicker and as she neared the side road leading to her sister's street, she cursed under her breath.

The road was closed.

Now which way should she go?

She pulled over and tugged out her cell phone so she could call her sister and get directions.

"No service. It figures. I thought these stupid cell phones were supposed to be for emergencies."

She shoved the phone back into her handbag and continued driving. Approaching another side road, she decided to try it. With any luck, it would take her toward her destination.

No sooner had she taken the turn than the storm became so thick that she could scarcely see the road ahead. Clutching the wheel, her stomach in knots, she strained to see through the swirls of snow.

Finally she noticed a light burning through the storm and felt a spark of hope. It was the first house she'd seen in miles. She slowed her car and turned down the driveway. Maybe someone here could give her directions.

An odd feeling came over her as she parked near the big old colonial. Glancing around, she noticed everything looked murky, almost like a nightmare, yet she was awake. She blinked then rubbed her eyes, thinking she'd just been driving for too long in bad weather.

She stepped out of the car and approached the house where she glanced in a window at a cozy-looking living room. It had a stone fireplace with embers glowing

inside. A tan couch and a dark wood coffee table rested on a brown carpet spread partially over the wooden floor. A piano stood across the room, the bench and floor around it covered in notebooks and loose sheets of paper.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" called a husky male voice.

Angel jumped, her heart pounding, and spun toward a man approaching from the side of the house. He carried an armful of wood and wore a flannel shirt, the hood mostly concealing his face, except for his lightly bearded jaw.

Her gaze riveted to his long, muscular legs encased in faded jeans. This guy had the most gorgeous legs she'd ever seen. She wished he'd turn around so she could check out his ass.

What was her problem? She was lost in a storm, staring in the window of a house belonging to a stranger, and all she could think about was his butt?

"What are you doing here?" he repeated.

"I'm lost. I was hoping you could give me directions. I'm looking for Blackberry Circle."

"There's no Blackberry Circle around here."

"There's got to be. I know I followed the directions correctly."

A great gust of wind blew snow into her face. She stumbled directly into the man, who used his free hand to steady her. A sexual thrill shot through her. For a few seconds she forgot about everything except the heat of his touch and the desperate ache in her pussy. Beneath her layers of clothes, her nipples tightened. These sensations were strong, yet dreamlike again.

What the hell was happening? She started to pull away from him, but due to the icy wind she couldn't see and could scarcely breathe.

"Come on," he shouted above the storm and guided her toward the door.

Moments later, she found herself standing in a dark foyer. He dumped the wood on the floor, then switched on the light. He tugged down his hood and Angel's heart skipped a beat.

He was as handsome as he was built. Wide-set blue eyes gazed at her calmly from beneath neatly trimmed eyebrows the same dark blond as his beard. His well-shaped but longish nose kept him from looking like a pretty boy despite his sharp cheekbones and chiseled lips. Angel curled her fists against the mad urge to stroke his face. She couldn't help thinking there was something familiar about him, but if she'd met him before she would have remembered.

"You'll have to stick around for a while," he said, pulling off his flannel shirt and revealing a tan, long-sleeved T-shirt beneath.

The snug cotton clung to his body, accentuating the breadth of his shoulders and the firmly developed muscles of his chest and arms. His lean waist tapered to narrow hips and those long, enticing legs. Now that he'd removed his outer shirt, she noticed that his low-slung belt rested just above the bulge of his cock.

Although she was covered in ice and snow, a hot flash shot through Angel.

Her host stared at her just as blatantly, his gaze lingering on her lips, which tingled from the snowflakes stuck on them. She licked them off.

Was it her imagination, or did she hear a low growl rumble in his chest?

No. It had to be the wind that still howled like mad outside.

"Come and sit down," he said and rested a hand lightly on her upper arm. On contact that same uncontrollable lust tore through her. This time it frightened her so much that she tugged away from him and stepped back.

"Thanks anyway, but I'll just wait in my car until the storm passes."

"It could last a while. If you go out there now, you'll probably get lost."

"I'm already lost."

"Then you might get stranded and freeze to death. This is the only house around for miles."

"I know my sister's cottage can't be far from here."

"You must have taken a wrong turn because there's nothing around. That's why I moved out here. Privacy."

If he'd intended to make her feel worse about her situation, he succeeded.

She stepped toward the door, but he held out his hand to keep it shut.

"I'm going to wait in my car," she repeated, holding his gaze.

Hopefully he wasn't some kind of nut. Walking into this house hadn't been a wise move, but she hadn't had much choice.

"The weather is too bad. Stick around for a while." He gestured toward the short hallway.

Angel glanced out a little side window through which nothing could be seen except swirls of snow and ice. Sighing, she said, "I know this is an imposition --"

"Don't worry about it." He picked up the wood and led the way to the living room she'd seen from outside. "Take off your coat and have a seat."

He walked to the fireplace and dropped the wood nearby, then rekindled the dying fire and added another log. Glancing over his shoulder he studied her as she removed her coat. Snow and ice had managed to find its way beneath. Her sweater and pants were thoroughly drenched.

"I have some sweats you can borrow, but I think they'll swim on you," he said.

"It's okay. I should have brought my bag with me. Then I could change." She walked to the window and shook her head. "I can't even see where the driveway is. This is quite a storm."

He approached and she spun, her heart pounding. Though he seemed safe enough, she had no way to be sure. Of course the way she was feeling, maybe *he* should be worried. She'd been attracted to men before, but she'd never wanted to tear off a guy's clothes and kiss him breathless like she wanted to do with him.

Sparks leapt in his eyes. His gaze lingered over her mouth.

"What are you doing out here all alone in this weather?" he asked.

"I'm spending Christmas at my sister's cottage." She walked past him, her arms folded across her chest. The snow-dampened clothes chilled her to the bone and she shivered.

"Want some hot chocolate?" he asked.

"Yes." She grinned at him over her shoulder. "Please."

A faint smile touched his lips and he nodded, then left the room. Sighing, Angel approached the piano and glanced at the papers strewn around it. Some looked like sheet music and others handwritten poems or song lyrics.

Glancing at a stack of CDs, she saw the one resting on top was by the band Gannon Balls. Then it struck her where she'd seen her host before.

"No way," she whispered, picking up the CD and staring at the three original band members posed on the front. There he was, though smooth-shaven and with his hair long and dyed black. The guy who had just rescued her from the storm had once been the lead singer of Gannon Balls.

Five years ago he'd quit the band and disappeared. It had been all over the news. The band had renamed themselves G Balls and the guitarist, Pete, had taken over as lead singer. Their first album after Gannon left had been a total flop, but all the ones after had matched the band's original level of popularity.

A moment later, he stepped into the room, this time carrying her overnight bag and purse. He offered them to her and she took them.

"Thanks, but you didn't have to get them," she said. "By the way it looks out there, you're lucky you found your way to the car, or has the weather improved? It's hard to tell from here."

"No. I think it's actually gotten worse."

She placed the bags on the floor and extended her hand toward him. "I'm Angel."

He hesitated, then shook her hand. Though cold from being outside, he had a nice firm grip. She noted his hands were long-fingered and graceful, the kind she'd like to feel on her body.

"Gannon," he said.

"From Gannon Balls?" she asked.

A look of surprise and annoyance crossed his face and he released her hand. "It's been a long time since someone recognized me."

"I'm sure, living out here." Angel squatted and searched through her overnight bag for the sweatshirt she'd packed.

His brow furrowed. "Aren't you going to ask me why?"

Glancing up, she asked innocently, "Why what?"

"Why I left the band and what I'm doing here."

She shrugged. "That's your business." In truth she was curious about what had made him quit, never to be heard from again.

Gannon continued studying her, a skeptical look in his eyes. "You're really out here looking for your sister's place?"

Rising to her feet, sweatshirt in hand, she met his gaze. "Yes. Wait a minute, do you think I was looking for you?"

"It's been a few years since anyone tried to find me, but --"

Angel laughed softly.

"What?" he demanded.

"Reality check. I didn't even recognize you until I saw the CD cover over there. All I want to do is find my sister's cottage. I'm not some half-crazed fan, in fact I was never a fan at all."

That wasn't the entire truth. No, she never exactly followed Gannon Balls, but knew their music. In fact, it was about the only rock music she could tolerate. Angel was more into country, but she had been familiar with some of his band's songs and thought he had a great voice.

"All right. I believe you," he said. "It's just that no one comes out here. Ever. You can't blame me for being a little suspicious. Privacy is important to me."

"Then why did you become a rock star?"

An annoyed look crossed his face and he headed for the door. "I'll get the hot chocolate."

No sooner had he stepped out of the room than Angel removed her boots to put on heavier socks. With the fire going, the room was now pleasantly warm. She pulled

off her sweater, leaving only her pink tank top. She walked toward the hearth to better enjoy the warmth on her bare arms before putting on her sweater.

Moments later, she jumped and spun around at a sound behind her. Gannon had placed two mugs on the coffee table. He moved so quietly that she hadn't even heard him come in.

"Didn't mean to scare you again," he said with an endearing grin. His gaze riveted to her stiff nipples poking against the tank top. Damn. His expression was so sexy that it made her nipples even harder. Oh well. There was no point trying to hide them. Not in this flimsy tank.

She smiled and approached. "I guess I have a habit of zoning out."

His brow furrowed and he stared at her tattooed arm. "What's that?"

"It's new. A little strange, but I love it." She turned so he could get a better look at her tattoo. To her surprise, he grasped her upper arm and tugged her closer, staring at the image with an almost angry look in his eyes. Unsure of how to react, she explained, "It's a werewolf."

He grasped her other arm and stared into her face. "Who sent you? Was it Pete?"

"What are you talking about?" she demanded, trying to pull away from him. His grip wasn't exactly painful, but it was unbreakable. She should have been afraid, but an even stronger emotion rushed through her at his touch. Her pussy ached and throbbed, as if she was on the verge of an intense climax. Again she felt as if she were in a dream rather than reality. What the hell was going on? "Let go of me. Now!"

He released her and scowled. "You don't care what I'm doing here, right? You're not a fan. Maybe that's true, but I know you're working for Pete and I know why. He's pissed off because I said I'm not writing any more songs for G Balls. This is his way of getting back at me."

"I don't know what you're talking about." She tried to pull on her sweatshirt, but he reached for her arm again.

"I suppose it's a coincidence, you showing up here with your sick tattoo!"

"I said hands off!" This time she balled her fist and punched him.

He grunted, but instead of releasing her, he pulled her even closer. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he buried his hand in her hair. Despite his anger, she felt his rock-hard cock pressing against her and knew the arousal she felt for him was mutual. His gaze, so calm earlier but blazing now, fixed on hers. Angel trembled with desire and fear.

He must have noticed because his hold on her loosened. A look of regret mingled with desperation in his eyes. Releasing her, he stepped way and rubbed a hand over his face. "When the storm clears I want you out of here."

"I didn't want to be here in the first place, and for your information I don't know any Pete!" She picked up her belongings and stomped out of the room.

Seconds later, he forced his way in front of her. "You can't go out there now."

Her jaw clenched, Angel kicked at his knee, but this time he noticed the attempted blow and avoided it. He grasped her shoulders and again lust crashed over her. It seemed every time they touched, her desire for him grew in intensity. "If you go out there you might get hurt."

"What do you care? You think I'm some kind of stalker, right? You're so full of yourself --"

He silenced her with an unexpected yet irresistible kiss.

Lost in the warmth of his firm, moist lips and the pleasant scrape of his beard against her face, Angel dropped her bags.

All reality seemed to fade. Her head spun and her heart pounded. Never before had she been in such state of raw desire. If they didn't tear off their clothes this instant and give her the gratification of skin against skin, she'd probably go insane.

Gannon broke their kiss only to run his lips along the side of her neck. He tugged down the straps on her tank top and kissed her shoulder, then ran his tongue across her collarbone.

"Oh, damn," she breathed, caressing his head and loving the texture of his short, thick hair against her fingers.

He pulled up her tank top and she raised her arms so he could easily discard it. She wasn't wearing a bra, so he had immediate access to her breasts. He cupped and kneaded them gently, then bent and swept his tongue over her nipples. He took one between his teeth and tugged on it lightly, making her moan.

Angel closed her eyes and arched against him. She couldn't believe she was so turned on by someone she'd just met, or that she was surrendering to these feelings so easily. The magnetism was too strong and his touches and kisses felt so good.

"You're gorgeous," he said in a husky whisper. No wonder why he sang so beautifully. Even his speaking voice was irresistible. He kissed her and their tongues met, tasting and teasing. When he finally tore his mouth from hers, they were breathless. He licked her ear and nibbled the lobe, panting, "Tell me you have a condom on you."

"Yeah," she gasped. Though she hadn't slept with anyone since Brad, she believed in being prepared for emergencies. This situation proved she was right. She reached for her bag, but he refused to release her and kissed her again. He unzipped her jeans and reached into the front of them, gently kneading her soft mound through her panties.

Closing her eyes, Angel clung to him, loving the way his powerful back muscles rippled beneath her hands. He felt like supple steel. His long fingers slid beneath her panties and teased her clit. They dipped into her pussy and she was so wet they slid in easily.

He groaned and covered her mouth in another heated kiss. Somewhere beyond the haze of passion, Angel remembered safety. She pushed against his powerful chest and panted, "Back off for a minute."

He released her and she grabbed her bag. While she searched for condoms with trembling hands, he pulled off his shirt, kicked off his boots and unzipped his jeans. Damn, his body was as gorgeous as she'd imaged, with broad shoulders, sinewy arms and a perfectly developed chest covered in a mat of dark blond hair.

Condom in hand, she crawled toward him and shoved his jeans down to his knees. Unable to resist, she licked his flat belly. The muscles tightened and quivered as she explored him with wet, lingering strokes. She dipped the tip of her tongue into his cute belly button, then sat back on her heels and curled her fist around his cock.

He was already thick and hard. The bulging head looked ready to explode. Licking her lips, she rolled the condom on, then grasped his shaft and took the head into her mouth. She licked and sucked, her eyes closed as she concentrated on learning his shape.

Gannon groaned with desire and wove his fingers through her hair. By his ragged breathing and the tension in his body, she knew he was close. So was she. Her heart pounded and her clit tingled. She squirmed, trying to appease the desperate ache between her legs.

"Enough!" he growled, stepping away and kicking off his jeans. He dropped to his knees, taking her in his arms and kissing her hard. It felt great being overpowered by him. He was so strong and forceful, but he didn't hurt her.

She'd expected him to shove her down and take what he wanted, but instead he kissed her again. One hand fondled her clit while the other stroked and kneaded her ass. Two long fingers slid inside her pussy and Angel gasped, clinging to him harder as his tender strokes nearly pushed her over the edge.

"Ready?" he panted against her lips.

"Can't you tell?" She smiled, her breathing harsh and her heart pounding. She thrust her pelvis against his hand and he slowly withdrew his fingers and slid them teasingly over her clit. A shiver of passion tore through her. When he guided her onto her back, she spread her legs for him, eager to feel his cock in her pussy.

Bracing his hands on either side of her head, he entered her carefully, his intense eyes staring into hers. He thrust slowly at first, withdrawing almost all the way before filling her again. Over and over he pumped while covering her face with kisses. His mouth claimed hers again, his tongue exploring with demanding strokes.

Angel moaned, clinging to him so hard that her arms and legs ached. Heavens, she was so close!

He thrust faster, the marvelous friction hurling her into an orgasm that made her scream with pleasure. His groans and growls of lust echoed in her head and he continued thrusting. Again her body caught fire. The next orgasm was so intense that she tumbled into blackness.

* * *

Angel awoke covered in a blanket on the couch. Gannon must have carried her there because she couldn't recall anything past the mind-blowing orgasm. The fire had died, but the storm had stopped and moonlight poured in through the window. When she sat up, the blanket fell from her and she shivered in the chilly room.

"Gannon?"

She reached for her bag and pulled out socks, underwear, a sweater and stretchy pants. She really needed to go, since her family was probably worried about her, but she didn't want to leave without at least saying goodbye to Gannon. Her entire body flushed when she recalled their lovemaking. Even now she wasn't sure what had come over her. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before.

A loud thump echoed through the house, then she heard what sounded like chains rattling and a muffled yet agonized groan.

"Gannon?" she called again.

Her heart pounding, she made her way through the dark house. Maybe he was hurt somewhere. Her head spun and she closed her eyes against dizziness. When she opened them, she glanced around and everything except the corridor in front of her looked murky, as if she were in a nightmare again.

She moved forward, hearing more of those grunts and groans. Something was terribly wrong.

"Gannon!"

She opened a door at the end of the corridor. It led down to the basement where a dim light burned. The thumping sounds grew louder and she heard heavy breathing interspersed with guttural moans.

She stepped into the basement and noticed a brick barrier ahead.

"Are you down here?" she called. "Are you all right?"

Though she sensed danger, something compelled her to move toward the barrier. When she stepped behind it, she gave a shout of surprise and terror.

Gannon stood chained to the wall. Despite the coldness of the basement, his naked body gleamed with sweat. His handsome face was contorted with pain and he glared at her through blazing eyes.

"Get out!" he bellowed.

"What the hell is wrong?" she shouted. The entire basement blurred, except for him. She stared in horror as he arched his neck and screamed. The scream turned to a primitive howl and a blondish pelt sprouted over his entire body. His nose and mouth elongated, giving him the look of a man and a beast, and his canine teeth lengthened to wolfish fangs.

"Good lord," she murmured, frozen and staring. Then she turned and ran.

He howled again and, with a grunt, tore the chains from the wall.

Angel had nearly reached the stairs when his powerful arms wrapped around her from behind. Screaming, she kicked and punched with all her strength. He grunted against the blows, but strangely, made no motion to hurt her.

He sank to his knees in front of her, his clawed hands snug on her waist.

Angel stopped struggling and stood, trembling in his clutches. On his knees before her, he tilted his savage yet beautiful face toward her and strangely much of her fear vanished. Those blue eyes were still human. Inside, he was still Gannon and something told her she was safe.

Leaning closer, he sniffed her pelvis, then brushed his cheek against it. His hold on her loosened and he stroked her hips and ass.

Desire shot through her and her pussy throbbed with need. When he hooked his claws into the sides of her pants and tugged them down, it crossed her mind that she should rebel, but she didn't want to. He shoved her pants down to her ankles, then used the very tips of his claws to slice off her panties, not so much as scratching her flesh.

He reached around and cupped her buttocks. His palms weren't hairy, but the skin was rough and she liked the feel of it. He kneaded her ass, then brushed his nose against the thatch of hair between her legs. His eyes closed and low, sexy growls rumbled in his chest as he rubbed his face against her soft mound, then lapped her clit.

"Oh, Gannon!" she breathed, swaying on her feet against the sensations. If he hadn't been holding her, she probably would have crashed to the floor. His warm, wet tongue licked and teased her clit. Over and over he lapped, devouring her as he groaned with desire.

This was the sexiest moment of Angel's life. She'd never imagined anything this wild and passionate happening to her. She was being eaten -- by a werewolf -- in the best possible way.

The orgasm struck her so hard that she cried out. Her eyes closed and her hands sank into his hard, furry shoulders.

Gannon grunted and guided her to the floor. Positioning her on her hands and knees, he knelt behind her. His rough hands tightened on her hips and she felt the tip of his thick, velvety cock pressing against her pussy.

He entered her slowly from behind, without any of the viciousness one might expect from a were-beast. Over and over he thrust until she once again trembled on the brink. This time when she came, he joined her, his howls of rapture mingling with her moans of fulfillment.

She sank onto the cold concrete floor, shivering but too spent to move. These had been the two fiercest climaxes of her life and the emotional stress of fucking a werewolf wiped her out.

Gannon lifted her in his arms and she snuggled against his warm, hairy body, letting him take total control.

He carried her up two flights of stairs and placed her on a big bed covered in rumpled sheets. She smiled, noting that the bedding carried his wonderful, musky scent.

The werewolf lay beside her and tugged her into his arms. Angel wasn't sure how long they lay there before she felt the hair recede from his body, leaving Gannon's smoother skin. When she turned to him, she saw he had completely returned to his human form. His eyes were calm again, but very sad.

"I'm sorry," he said in a husky whisper.

It took her a moment to find her voice. She still couldn't fully comprehend that she'd just fucked a werewolf and it had been the most fulfilling experience of her life. Finally, she asked, "How did this happen to you?"

He rolled onto his back and covered his eyes with his forearm. The manacles and broken chains were still attached to his wrists, but he didn't seem to care.

Though frightened, she sensed his loneliness and couldn't imagine how he must feel, suffering this curse. She edged closer to him and he curled his arm around her, stroking her hip absently, as if the motion soothed him as well.

"I guess it started back about ten years. My friend Pete and I were in the Army. We talked about getting a band together. After we got out, we decided to go for it. We were surprised when Gannon Balls made it so big. About five years ago, we were on tour in Eastern Europe. We had one night off and Pete and I decided to drive around the countryside, away from the cities and places where we might be recognized. We only wanted some downtime. I should have just stayed in the hotel room."

"What happened?"

"We got lost and the car broke down, so we started walking. It was getting late and we came across this kid with a herd of sheep. He pointed us in the direction of his village so we could call for help. We were about a quarter of a mile down the road when the kid started screaming. Pete and I ran back to him and saw a creature tearing

apart the sheep. Then it turned to the boy. I was ahead of Pete and I don't know what I thought I could do, but my training told me to help the kid."

Angel's brow furrowed. "You could have been killed."

"I jumped on the thing and we struggled. Its claws felt like razors on my skin. I blacked out. The next thing I remember is waking up in a house in the village. Pete was there. So was the kid, his family and a priest. My clothes were torn to shreds and according to Pete I'd been bleeding like crazy, but I only saw a few scratches."

"How long had you been unconscious?"

"Just a few hours. The child's family was very grateful."

"I'd think they would be," she said, unable to tear her gaze from him. If she hadn't seen him change before her eyes, she would have thought him crazy. Even now part of her wanted to run away and never look back, yet she felt compelled to stay.

Meeting him must have something to do with her tattoo. It couldn't possibly be a coincidence. The artist had done something to her. Maybe the weird bitch even had something to do with Gannon's situation. She'd worry about that later. Right now he was too involved in relaying his memories for her to interrupt.

"The priest and the boy's grandmother looked really worried. I tried telling them I felt fine, but they kept talking about the beast. I couldn't fully understand their language, but I picked up some of what they said. They kept repeating thirty days. Thirty days. Once Pete and I got out of there, I tried to forget the whole experience. About a month later, the tour was over. I went on vacation in the Caribbean to chill out and write some new songs. I'd rented a private house. One night I was alone on the beach and a strange feeling came over me. Even after five years I still can't really explain how it feels when the change comes on." He stared into space, as if completely lost in the memories. "It's... overpowering. I just thank God I've never killed anyone."

"Obviously this is why you quit the band?"

"Yeah. It was too risky. Pete's the only one who knows the real reason why I quit -- other than you now. I still write their music and it's worked out pretty well. The only

album they wrote without me bombed, so Pete asked if I'd still write for them and they changed the name of the band to G Balls. But last week I told Pete I'm done."

"You don't want to write music anymore?"

He closed his eyes again and sighed, tightening his grip on her.

A horrible sinking feeling came over her and she sat up, placing a hand on his chest and feeling the steady rhythm of his heart against her palm. "Wait a minute, you mean you're *done* as in --"

He met her gaze and the pain in his beautiful blue eyes tugged at her heart. "It's been five years, Angel. Five years of praying I won't break my bonds and hurt someone, like I did tonight."

"Gannon, you didn't hurt me."

"Five years of alienation, of not being able to get close to anybody because I might do damage. You're the first woman I've been with since it happened. Other than Pete, you're the only person who's set foot in this house."

"I'm glad I did," she replied. No matter how crazy it sounded, she meant it. Looking into his eyes, she knew Gannon was a good man who didn't deserve a life of loneliness.

"You shouldn't be." He rose to his feet.

Angel couldn't keep from staring at the sexy play of muscles in his legs and ass as he paced the room. He shook his head and turned to her, his eyes gleaming. "I could have killed you, Angel."

Yes, in his beast form he had all the tools to destroy savagely, yet he hadn't so much as scratched her.

Angel stood and approached him, unaffected by her nudity, not after all they'd shared. She rested a hand on his back and he flinched a bit, the muscles rippling. "You could have hurt me, Gannon, but you didn't. I don't know anything about this curse you're under, but for some reason I feel I know you. You were a soldier, trained to protect people. When you saw that child being attacked, your first instinct was to help

him. I don't think the beast will do anything you wouldn't. You control it, not the other way around. I know it. Somehow, I know *you*."

He met her gaze, his chest rising and falling with an inner struggle that made her heart ache for him.

"Crazy as it sounds, I think there's something between us too, Angel. Usually when I change, it lasts for hours, sometimes days, but tonight with you it was as if my human side couldn't stay buried."

"And I think it has to do with this." She pointed to the tattoo on her arm. "I think there's only one person who can tell us why we were drawn together. Are you interested in finding out?"

* * *

With the storm over, Angel and Gannon climbed into his truck and drove to the city. Though the sign on the front of the tattoo studio said "closed", the light shining from a back room signaled that the artist was in. They pounded on the door until she finally sauntered out, wearing a purple bra and panties that exposed the many tattoos on her wiry body.

No sooner had she opened the door than Angel demanded, "What the hell did you do to us?"

The artist's gaze riveted to Gannon and widened a bit. "It's been a long time since I've met one like you, but I'd know the scent anywhere. Wild. Magical power in its purest form. You're a lucky woman, Angel, but I knew that when I did your tattoo."

"You know what he is?" Angel demanded.

A smile spread across the artist's lips. "Of course. Come in. It's cold out here."

They stepped into the studio and followed the woman to a back room -- not the one where she created her wicked art, but another with a thick purple carpet, a black couch and a coffee table.

The artist sat on the couch and drew a black quilt over herself. She closed her eyes momentarily and snuggled deeper into the cushions.

Comfortable, she gazed at the couple and said, "Sit. Relax."

"We didn't come here to relax!" Gannon growled. "We want to know what you did."

"As the story goes, in a time before recorded history, some with otherworldly powers mastered a spell that guided destined mates to each other. Few wield this power now, but I am among them."

"You're trying to tell us we're soul mates?" Angel asked.

"Exactly. When I tattooed you, I initiated the magic that drew you together."

"Did you have anything to do with him becoming a werewolf?" Angel demanded.

"No. I only have the ability to introduce destined mates. Whatever power made him a wolf has nothing to do with me."

"You know someone like me can easily become a killer, yet you've made her a part of my life," Gannon raged.

"And you're grateful, aren't you?" purred the artist.

Gannon's hands clenched into fists and Angel sensed the tension in him. She placed a reassuring hand on his back and after a moment he relaxed the slightest bit.

"Those bound by mate marks cannot resist their magical pull, but the marks can only bind souls that are meant to be shared," the artist continued. "You belong together."

"Undo this," Gannon demanded, his eyes aflame.

"I can't. Now that your paths have crossed, you'll be drawn to each other. For all time, your souls will seek each other. She's the answer to your prayers, Gannon. The only person who can soothe the beast inside you. And you've been lonely, Angel, wanting a man to love you. Well, how can he not?"

"I won't drag her into my life," Gannon said.

Angel turned to him. "You didn't drag me. I asked for it."

"Yes." The artist smiled. "You wanted wild, passionate and rebellious. It seems he fits the description."

"Angel, I have to get out of here before I do damage without even changing into a wolf," Gannon said through clenched teeth, his blazing eyes locked on the tattoo artist.

Taking his hand, Angel led the way out of the studio. Outside they stood beneath the lightly falling snow.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's up to you. I'm the one under the curse. I wouldn't blame you if you turned away and never looked back."

"That's impossible," she admitted, staring into his eyes. "Tell me how you feel. Please. I need to know."

"I feel... it was the end of the line for me, until you walked into my house. In five years I've never felt so... *human*."

"And I've never felt so desirable."

"You have no idea how much I desire you."

"Then I think we should give it a try."

He narrowed his eyes. "You're sure?"

"I've ever been so sure about anything in my life."

Gannon drew her into his arms and covered her mouth in a passionate kiss. When it broke, she said, "I'd better call my sister before she thinks I got kidnapped or something. Do you want to meet my family, or is it too soon?"

He chuckled. "After what I put you through tonight, you could ask me to do just about anything and I'd be game."

They were about to get into the truck when the bells from a nearby church struck midnight.

Smiling, Angel slipped her arms around Gannon's neck and said, "Merry Christmas."

"This is the best one I've ever had," he whispered against her lips.

* * *

“What a fantastic idea. A tattoo for the new year,” the tattoo artist said to the rather nervous woman seated in her chair. “Now just relax. I’ve been told I’m very gentle.”

“Sorry I’m a little nervous, but this is my first time. I’m not exactly sure what I want.”

“Don’t worry.” The artist grinned, her white teeth gleaming against her painted lips. “I’m sure we’ll find the perfect design for you.”

Kate Hill

What do trips around the world, endless nights of breathtaking sex, and a muscular, 6-foot 3-inch, brown-haired, blue-eyed significant other have to do with Kate Hill? Absolutely nothing, but she can dream, can't she? In reality Kate is a single, thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who loves writing romantic fantasies. Visit her online at <http://www.kate-hill.com>, www.myspace.com/katehillromance, or join her newsgroup at groups.yahoo.com/group/katehill. Stop by Kate's Amazon blog at www.amazon.com.