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Opening extract from

Diabolical

Written by

Cynthia Leitch Smith

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❧ Miranda ❧

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What are you saying?" Zachary presses.

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

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

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

Then again, perhaps Zachary wouldn't have believed

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

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

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

HEAVEN
OR
BUST

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's archangels who are warriors born, not guardians. Guardians are sent to earth to care.

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

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