

An Angel in the Night

by

Diana Johnson as told to Mary J. Yerkes

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With the long, dark winter finally behind us, a brisk March wind ushered in spring—and on its heels, an angel in the night.

Forrest carefully tucked Lauren, the last of our five children, into her car seat as a sudden gush of wind caught the bottom of his coat, causing it to flap wildly behind him. The wind was unusually bad, making the short drive to the airport difficult. From the passenger's seat, I watched Forrest's knuckles grip the top of the steering wheel as he fought to keep our minivan from drifting into the next lane. It seemed a fitting metaphor to describe the past year--it had been a real white-knuckle ride!

Our youngest twins, Lauren and Branden, had been born eight weeks early. Within minutes of her birth, Lauren, the smaller of the two, had stopped breathing. I watched in horror as her tiny pink lips turned a chalky white and then blue. She was quickly resuscitated and whisked off to the neonatal intensive care unit where she was placed on a ventilator. Branden didn't fare much better.

It was a month later when Lauren and Branden, both on apnea monitors, came home to meet their brother and sisters-- Brianna and little Forrest, the older twins, were three, and Taylor was two. Life was hectic. Nevertheless, a few months later, we were anxious to welcome Zeke. Our family just wouldn't be complete without a dog!

As we got settled in the airport waiting area, I leaned over to Forrest and whispered, "What if it doesn't work out? Zeke's two years old and probably set in his ways. What if he can't adjust?"

"The breeder was sure he would, Diana," Forrest gently reminded me.

I had searched long and hard for a responsible collie breeder and was thrilled to find Susan on the Internet. After I explained to Susan that we have five children--two with serious health problems--she wisely steered me away from a puppy.

"Diana, I have a two-year old Canadian champion, Zeke, that I think will be perfect for your family," she explained. "He's a beautiful tricolor and a true collie in every sense. He loves life and he especially loves children."

It wasn't what I had in mind, but I agreed to give it a try.

My thoughts were interrupted by a high-pitched squeal from across the room. "Zeke's here!" announced Brianna. An attendant ushered us through a door to a large crate. I could see a long nose pushed up against the wire on the door with a mass of ebony and white fur behind it. After speaking a few reassuring words to Zeke, I nodded to the attendant and said, "We're ready."

The attendant unlatched the crate door. Zeke inched his way out--cautious yet curious. Without a moment's hesitation, my animal lover Brianna threw her tiny arms around Zeke's neck, buried her face in his long fur and murmured, "I love you, Zeke."

Little Forrest added, "We're your new family. Welcome home!"

Zeke quickly settled in to his new life with us. I watched in amazement as Zeke positioned himself next to Lauren and Branden while they played on the floor. More than once, one of them took a tumble and landed on a bed of black and white fur instead of the hardwood floors.

We arranged Zeke's bed in the master bedroom. Right from the start, Zeke made it clear that he preferred sleeping in the nursery between the babies' cribs. There was barely room to breathe--or move--with five tall oxygen canisters, a suction machine, and all of the other medical equipment in the room!

The nurse who helped us care for the twins didn't mind, so I decided to let Zeke stay in the nursery at night. He seemed to sense the twins' ill health and became their self-appointed guardian.

During the middle of his third night with us, Zeke jumped up on my side of the bed and hit me with his foot. I looked at the clock and saw that it was 3:30 a.m.

"Go back to sleep, Zeke," I murmured as I rolled over and turned my back to him.

Zeke refused to take no for an answer. Instead, he began barking and running back and forth between my side of the bed and the door.

"Shhhhh...you'll wake the children," I chided as I pulled my bathrobe on over my nightgown, thinking he probably had to go out. I headed to the back door, but Zeke wouldn't follow me. He continued barking as he turned and ran in the opposite direction.

"Zeke, come," I called. Annoyed, I shuffled down the hall after him into the nursery. *Why isn't he listening*, I wondered. "Zeke, come," I called again from the doorway. *It's useless*, I thought and resigned myself to the fact that I would just need to lead him out by his collar. Zeke jumped up to Lauren's crib rail. As I placed two fingers under his leather collar, I glanced down at Lauren.

Oh my God! She's not breathing! I realized.

I yanked Lauren's lifeless body from the crib as I screamed, "Forrest, call 911!" She hung in my arms like a rag doll as I frantically blew the first rescue breath past her blue lips. Her saliva tasted salty as it mingled with the tears streaming down my face.

Suddenly, I heard a choking sound and realized that Lauren was starting to vomit. I quickly turned her over to keep her airway clear. When I turned her back towards me, she started to cry.

"She's breathing!" I exclaimed as relief flooded my body.

"Why didn't the monitor go off?" Forrest asked the nurse who seemed to hide in the shadows. After examining the monitor more closely, Forrest had his answer. He turned to the nurse and said, "The wires are crossed."

Furious, I punched the nursing agency number into the phone as we waited for the ambulance to arrive. Immediately, the nurse was dismissed, and a new one was on the way.

When the paramedics arrived, they checked Lauren over. "She looks like she's doing fine now," one of them said. "You must have got to her just in time. Good job."

At the hospital the next morning, Lauren was given a battery of tests. The CAT scan and MRI looked great, but her blood count was low. After a blood transfusion, she was given a clean bill of health. There was no permanent damage! Thank God!

It was a miracle.

Exhausted and relieved, we took Lauren home. Zeke greeted us at the front door, and I reached down to scratch behind his ear. "Zeke, what would we have done without you?" I asked. I carried Lauren, who had fallen asleep in the car, into the nursery. Zeke followed closely behind and watched as I laid Lauren in her crib. Satisfied that Lauren was fine, Zeke contentedly plopped down onto the rug in his usual spot next to Lauren's crib.

Forrest turned to me and asked, "Do you think she'll be alright?" I glanced at Zeke and replied, "She'll be fine."

