

chapter 1

THE SNEEZE

If I had known I was going to die at age seventeen, I wouldn't have been so obsessed with my ACT scores. Then again, if I hadn't been so obsessed with my ACT scores, I probably wouldn't have died.

Yes, you read that right. I'm very dead.

Go ahead. Fill yourself with sympathy for my untimely death. You should feel sympathy. Not because I'm dead, but because of how it happened. I wish I could say I died a hero, jumping in front of a bullet to save a beloved public figure. Or a skydiving accident. Or even something normal like a disease. But no. In true David fashion, my death was embarrassingly lame and totally avoidable.

It all started with a sneeze . . .

“David! Lunch break's over, *mijo*. Come down from that platform.”

“Just a sec, *tio*.”

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I barely glanced down at Uncle Richard. I worked two jobs back in high school to save up for college and one of them was working construction with my uncle. Not a super glamorous job, but if my second attempt at the ACT wasn't higher than my previous score, I was out of my scholarship, which meant no money for college. Dad paying for me was out of the question, since my big brother was nearing the end of his undergraduate at an ivy league that we really struggled to afford. I didn't resent him for it, but it was very *Sam* of him to take up all my college money.

"Come on, Baby Blues!" Uncle Richard called again. That's what he liked to call me because he thought it was *so* funny that his half-Mexican nephew had blue eyes.

I shook my head and blew the sawdust off my ACT prep book. That was a dumb move because the cloud of sawdust blew back into my face and I sneezed. My black, thick-rimmed glasses flew off my face and tumbled to the ground twenty feet below, shattering on impact.

"*Hijole,*" I muttered with a wince. Mom was gonna kill me.

I decided that was my cue to climb down from the metal platform my feet were dangling from. I'd found that the scaffolding platforms were ideal for studying because the higher up you are, the farther you are from the noise of hammers and saws and the radio blaring. I shook the sawdust from my hair and stood up, leaning against the

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guardrail. It creaked ominously. With a nervous grimace, I lifted my hands and shuffled back.

Unfortunately, I wasn't done sneezing yet, and as my body lurched forward with another one, I slipped on a nail left lying around and my feet rolled out from under me. I quickly grabbed hold of the creaky guardrail as my body slid through the gap between the bar and the platform. My legs scissored back and forth as I dangled twenty feet from the ground. I was momentarily grateful I wasn't wearing my glasses and couldn't see the details of whatever construction equipment lay below me on the ground.

"Holy crap . . ." I started hyperventilating as I dangled back and forth. My heart felt like it was going to hammer out of my chest. I tried to pull my legs up high enough to climb back onto the platform, but it was too high and I cursed my lack of flexibility.

"Help!" My voice barely squeaked out.

"DAVID!" Uncle Richard spotted me and sprinted to the bottom of the platform. "*No te muevas! Ya voy, David!*"

Of course my body chose that opportune moment to sneeze again. I managed to cling to the rail I was hanging from, but I guess the Big Man really wanted me to fall to my death, because then the rusty bolts holding the guardrail to the scaffolding snapped on one side. With a creak, the guardrail swung from horizontal to vertical in less than a second. The jolt loosened my sweaty hands from their death grip and slipped off the end. I was

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airborne long enough for a three second scream and my body joined my shattered glasses on the ground.

I remember the *crunch* sound the most.

Did it hurt? Um, yeah. A lot.

But only for a minute. Before I knew what was happening I was floating over my body in a panic and Nana Maria was squeezing the life out of me. She had died about a year prior. After calming me down, she guided me to The Resting Place all the while lamenting about how skinny I was and how I should have eaten more tamales. My dad's mom, Grandma Gertie, was there too and the first thing she said to me was, "I know just the girl for you! She's really cute, and she died just last week, isn't that wonderful?"

Yeah, I was dead all but three seconds, and already I was getting crap from my grandmas. I was happy to see them, though. Death is freaky, but it's not so terrible if you know people on the other side.

So that's how I died. But that happened a long time ago and that's really not what this story is about. This story is about how I screwed up my entire afterlife with one stupid mistake.

chapter 2

DIVINE PRANK-FLUENCE

“All right, now tie the rubber band around the sprayer faucet so it holds down the little lever,” I whispered.

My five-year-old niece, Ginger, teetered on the stool in front of the kitchen sink as she followed my directions. She couldn’t see me, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t put ideas in her head. Being dead did often have its perks.

“Wrap it around one more time.”

“What are you doing?”

Ginny and I froze, then looked around slowly. My sister, Elena, had my three-year-old nephew on her hip and a dirty pull-up in her hand.

“Quick, tell her to turn on the sink.”

Ginny hopped off the stool and smiled innocently. “I was trying to wash my hands, but the sink won’t turn on.”

I whistled at her quick lie. Elena frowned and set down the toddler and the pull-up. She looked closely at the faucet as she turned the handle. The results were dramatic

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and instantaneous. Water sprayed in all directions, drenching her face and shirt. Screaming, she tried to find the faucet through her own personal waterfall. Her children and I snickered.

When she finally shut off the waterfall, Elena spun around, trying to hide amusement behind annoyance as water dripped down her chin. “Your uncle David used to do that. It was annoying then and it’s annoying now.”

I took an elaborate bow.

DAVID, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

I bit my lip. Caught by Hermes. He’s the head angel, and he’s like telepathic Santa Claus. He always knows where we are and what we’re up to. Hermes isn’t his real name, by the way, that’s just what everyone calls him.

ARE YOU UTILIZING YOUR DIVINE INFLUENCE AS A GUARDIAN ANGEL TO TEACH YOUR NIECE AND NEPHEW HOW TO PULL A PRANK?

Maybe . . .

DO YOU REMEMBER THE CONTRACT YOU SIGNED WHEN YOU APPLIED TO BE A GUARDIAN ANGEL TO YOUR FAMILY? YOU PROMISED TO USE YOUR GIFTS TO INSPIRE, PROTECT, AND DEFEND.

I know, but they liked it. Look, they’re laughing.

WE’LL DISCUSS THIS LATER. YOU’RE NEEDED BACK AT HEADQUARTERS. YOU’RE ON FRONT DESK DUTY.

All right, beam me up, Scotty.

I could almost feel him rolling his eyes.

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Fine, I'm on my way.

I apparated over to The Resting Place. You may be more familiar with the word “teleport” but I like “apparate.” Because Harry Potter.

The Resting Place is where angels hang out. It's not up in the clouds like mortals tend to think. Condensed water doesn't make for a very solid foundation. Also, it would be really annoying to be interrupted by planes blowing through us in the middle of our meetings. The Resting Place is actually on Earth, but the location is a secret, so no, I won't tell you where it is.

I could tell when I passed the borders because the sounds of traffic and nature muffled until I couldn't hear them at all. Other than a few trees, benches, and fountains, the main feature of The Resting Place is headquarters. That's where angels work when we're not going around helping people. It's basically a fancy office, with a huge open lobby and a bunch of conference rooms down the hallways.

I floated through the glass doors of headquarters under the famous crystal chandelier. I stopped to file a report at the front desk before joining my Nana Maria behind it. Guardian angel reports are where we write down all the stuff we see our assigned mortals do — good and bad. Mind you, we also have to report everything we do, so I often tattle on myself.

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Nana Maria passed me a blank report and I grabbed a pen.

Let's see . . .

GUARDIAN ANGEL REPORT

Name of Guardian Angel: *David Garcia*

Family Members Visited/Relation to Angel: *Maria Elena Davis (sister), Ginger Davis (niece), Rocco Davis (nephew)*

What did you observe during your visit? *Ginger and Rocco played dino barbies with each other while their mom was on the phone with a friend from work who is going through a difficult divorce. Ginger and Rocco got into a fight, because Rocco's dinosaur "ate" the princess barbie who was supposed to get married to the stegosaurus.*

Elena walked in and took Rocco out to change his pull-up. Ginger decided to pull a prank on their mother by tying a rubber band around a faucet sprayer so that it would spray Elena the next time she used the sink.

What did you do during your visit? *I may have put her up to the prank . . .*

Reasoning for your actions: *It was funny and they liked it.*

Signature: *David Garcia*

I passed my report to Nana who glanced at it and gave me a shrewd look.

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“That’s confidential,” I said.

She tutted and shook her head as she filed it away. “Come help me with these papers, *mijo*. You can tell me all about what trouble my great-grandbabies have gotten into this time.”

I pasted on a fake smile, trying to hide my inward sigh. Paperwork was boring and I was getting tired of it. All I ever did anymore was visit my family and file reports. Some angels got messenger jobs. Some were warriors against evil demons. My job? File papers. Oh what joy and excitement it brought to my afterlife.

I should have been content with the boredom considering what was about to happen right there in the lobby.

chapter 3

ENTER THE BAD GUY

Grandma Gertrude took Nana Maria's place after an hour. She typically signs up to work the front desk when I'm doing it. She calls it family time. I don't always like "family time," because all Grandma does is call me out on how blaringly single I am and always have been and probably will be until I die.

Wait . . .

"David, you're such a nice young man. Why haven't you settled down yet?"

I sighed. "Because I'm dead?"

"That does not mean you can't still find yourself a companion. There are plenty of young girls here to choose from. Not as many as there were back when girls were always dying in childbirth, but age doesn't really matter here does it?"

I shrugged and continued filing, ignoring the fact that my grandmother was talking about young girls dying like

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it was a good thing. “Believe it or not, I don’t think anyone’s interested, and I’m fine with that.” I supposed I hadn’t put forth much of an effort; it just didn’t seem all that important. Also, I had a crippling fear of rejection, so dating sounded like a literal nightmare.

“You have to make eyes with the girls.”

I snorted and turned around. “What does that even mean?”

“You stare at them with your beautiful blue eyes.” She grinned and fluttered her lashes.

I laughed. “Grandma, you look like you’re having a seizure.”

She froze and her jaw dropped, her eyes widening in fear. A chilling scream flew from her mouth.

“What the—”

A darkness fell over the room, so quickly and so solidly that it went from day to night in an instant. My not-real blood ran cold and I found myself cowering behind the counter. I couldn’t see a thing. A deep laugh echoed around the room so you couldn’t pinpoint where it was coming from. I could feel a presence drawing nearer. I squeezed my eyes shut and held my breath.

“I was in a hurry,” the Darkness whispered in a breathy croak. “But your fear is *so* delicious.”

Something slithered toward me like a snake, then the sound of boots, then the click of claws against the tile. Either there were multiple creatures in the building, or this

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thing was shapeshifting. A wet snout sniffed my hair. “No abnormal trauma in your past. That’s disappointing. It’s the scarred ones that have the most delicious fear. We’ll just have to create our own little traumatic experience . . .”

Soft, creeping hands encircled my throat, and instead of struggling, I froze. I couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. The Darkness clawed itself inside me, incapacitating me with fear and hopelessness and the worst memories of my existence. It was like a dementor. I kept seeing my mom screaming as she approached my dead, broken body. That feeling of being yanked away. That pure confusion as people I knew to be dead were suddenly smiling and hugging me while my family mourned me below. Attending my funeral where people kept crying over the things I would never get to do because I died young: grow up, get married, have a family. How I would never make something of myself because I died before I had the chance. My life had been utterly useless and my death was completely avoidable. I ruined my family with my own stupidity. Of course I deserved to die.

Then the memories morphed into things so horrible, I’d never even considered fearing them. Things I knew would *never* happen, but seemed so real in the moment. A man broke into Elena’s house, shrouded in Darkness—definitely possessed. He took out a gun and shot Ginny and Rocco, then beat Elena and took advantage of her.

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Sam became so depressed he jumped off a building. Mom and Dad became so inconsolable at the loss of their children they lost the will to live. They deteriorated until there was nothing left of them but two wrinkled bodies staring out into nothing, unable to recognize anyone or anything. And it was all my fault! I wasn't there to save them!

I'm not sure how long I was trapped in the loop of sorrows and fears, things I'd actually experienced mixed with nightmares so dark I'd never known to be afraid of. I couldn't move. I couldn't see. I couldn't hear anything but those torturous thoughts tearing me apart from the inside.

The most terrifying thing about it was that as an angel, you don't usually feel negative emotions. We're too busy helping people to think about ourselves. I hadn't allowed myself to feel a truly negative emotion since I'd died, and the sudden blast of horror was all the more terrifying because of it.

Light flickered to my left. Grandma Gertie was trying to scare it off, but the *thing* swallowed up her Light, leaving us in darkness once again.

I couldn't help but think that we were going to die there.

Then I remembered we were already dead.

“DON'T MOVE!”

The voice echoed with a power that shook me to my

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core and a blinding light pierced the darkness. Hermes in all his glory slashed a golden whip of Light through the air. Before it could wind itself around the demon, he disappeared.

He'd gotten away, and I had done nothing to stop him.

I'm pretty sure I would have fainted if I were capable of it. I fell back against the counter and Grandma Gertie squeezed my guts out.

"What was *that*?" I asked in a shaky voice.

Pretty soon the room swarmed with angels flying this way and that, like a beehive a dumb kid threw a rock at.

"David?" Hermes said from behind me.

Grandma and I turned around and he put his hands on my shoulders. "Are you all right?"

I shrugged and nodded, too shaken to really say anything.

"It's going to be all right," he said. "I promise."

For a minute, I believed him. I felt total confidence and was completely reassured that everything would work out. I even smiled, which felt weird because my dead heart was still racing. Hermes can do that to ya. I'm not sure how he does it, but it's like he carries around a bag of warm fuzzies and just tosses them out like candy to whoever needs them. He left to go calm down the other angels who were freaking out. They were way more worked up than me and Grandma, which annoyed me, because they weren't even

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in the room when that *thing* came by. I was the one it attacked. I was the one that just let it go.

It had to have been a demon, but it was like no demon I'd ever met. Normal demons are pretty easy to get rid of, actually. You just throw some Light at them and they scatter. This was a demon of a completely different caliber. Also, how did it get in? Demons can't get into The Resting Place. You have to be "worthy" in order to find it.

It took about an hour for Hermes to round everyone up to the empty stadium he found. The Resting Place doesn't really have space big enough for all of the angels to gather at once, so we often use sports stadiums. Angels use mortals' space all the time. While you're sleeping, there could be some angels having a meeting around your coffee table. Or sitting in on your classes at school. Or even chilling behind your couch while you're watching *Stranger Things*. I have definitely never done that.

The annoying thing about this stadium was it had the kind of seats that folded up, so you had to sit on them to keep them down. Angels don't really have weight though. If we focus, we can move stuff mentally, but in the state we were in, none of us really could focus. Seats kept popping up with angels still in them and I had to hide a laugh with a cough. Eventually everyone just chose to stand. In this case, acting like mortals wasn't worth the

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trouble.

My moment of humor didn't last long. I could not shake from the feeling of being in that demon's clutches. That feeling of hopelessness and uselessness. What *was* that? How did he get into headquarters? I'd never felt that frightened in my life, not even when I died, because that was an accident and no one was trying to hurt me. This was pure evil. He literally had his hands around my throat! Not that it really hurt; I mean, I don't technically need to breathe, but as far as putting your hands on someone, that's one of the more threatening moves. It tends to imply that, you know, you want to kill them. As a dead guy, I wasn't exactly sure what that meant for me.

And what had I done when he'd attacked? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I just cowered and froze, unlike my grandma who at least tried something.

"I understand you are frightened," Hermes said from the center of the stadium. Hermes tends to speak in a calm, quiet voice, but he projected it loudly for all of us to hear. "I also understand that you have many questions. I will answer to the best of my ability."

He started telling us about how that thing was a very old and powerful demon they called Malum. According to Hermes, Malum was so bad, the Big Man ordered the angels to keep him under constant guard, because he was tempting people above what they were able to resist and hurting people beyond what they could endure. The last

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time he was captured, it took fifty angels working together. Hermes didn't elaborate on how they did it, but it sounded like it took immense effort.

"That is why we are creating a new demon hunting task force," he said. "These individuals will help capture The Son of Evil and put him back in his prison. If you are interested, you may pick up an application at the front desk. If you choose not to apply, I ask that you leave this stadium and put this matter from your mind. Continue to fulfill your duties and all will be well. You may now return to your regularly scheduled activities."

Everyone began speaking at once, creating that annoying white noise of a frazzled crowd. Order dissolved into chaos as angels flew from person to person, speculating and worrying before flying off to the next friend. They looked like bees pollinating flowers.

"Hey, you were on front desk duty weren't you?" a random dude asked me. "Did you see him? What was he like? What did you do?"

A crowd began to form as people started shooting questions at me faster than I could respond. I was overwhelmed and confused and embarrassed because the answer to "What did you do?" was nothing. Absolutely nothing. I froze and curled up like a rollie polly and left my *grandma* to attack the evil demon by herself.

"Hey look, it's . . . a thing!" I said, pointing toward the stage.

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Yeah, I couldn't come up with something specific on the spot, but it still worked. Anytime someone shouts "hey look" people do it.

Once everyone's back was turned I disappeared.