

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*.”

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 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 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.