

# chapter 1

## ROUGH START

*A scream pierced the air, sharp and narrow like a claw raking my eardrums.*

*“David! Help me!”*

*I spun around in panic, recognizing the voice of my niece, Ginger. But all I could see was smoky Darkness. I jumped at the sound of gravelly breathing to my left, and I could hear the drool of some creature slowly ooze and drip to the floor. A familiar dread filled the pit of my stomach, rooting me in place. Flashes of nightmares threatened to steal my focus, but I shoved them from my mind.*

*“Don’t touch her!” I yelled, panic making my voice higher. “Just leave her alone.”*

*The jagged breathing caught in a laugh that sounded more like a choke.*

*“Ginny!” I called. “Wherever you are, cover your ears and run! Don’t listen to anything he says!”*

## GREETINGS FROM ROCK BOTTOM

*The creature laughed louder, this time sounding more like thunder. The Darkness thinned as it was slowly sucked into a man standing in the middle of my sister's kitchen. He had a deceptively unobtrusive face that you wouldn't look twice at if you passed him on the street. I couldn't place his race, hair color, eye color . . . all his features were dull and forgettable. It was the most ambiguous face I'd ever seen. Apart from the fact that he was oozing Darkness. It dripped and steamed from his nose, ears, eyes, and mouth. Looking at that face, my heart skipped a beat, and I unintentionally took a step back. But I had no time for a panic attack. With a lurch of my heart I saw what he held in his hand. He had Ginny by the throat and used his free hand to stroke her face, smudging her tears across her cheeks.*

*"Let go of her!" I yelled, unable to move.*

*Malum shrugged. "As you wish."*

*He tossed her aside and suddenly we weren't in my sister's kitchen, but at the top of a cliff. I gasped and leaned over seeing Ginny flailing to her death with her whistle-like scream.*

*A grin tugged at the corner of Malum's mouth. "Are you going to save her, or let her die?"*

*I stood at the edge of the cliff, contemplating the jump with trepidation. I remembered falling to my own death. The air sucking the breath from my lungs. The ground rushing up to me. The crunch of my body breaking. The pain and confusion and fear. It swallowed me up, rooting me in place, until Ginny's continued scream cut through my nightmarish musings.*

*I shook my head to clear it and took a breath. I was being*

**ANNI SEZATE**

*stupid. I was an angel now, I could fly.*

*“I’m coming, Ginny!”*

*Then I stepped off the edge of the cliff.*

Reality slapped me in the face as blinding pain coursed up my body. I opened my eyes and lifted my face from a bush, swearing at my incomprehensible stupidity. Above the sticks and leaves that filled my vision, the dull glow from the streetlights barely illuminated the parking lot outside Sandra’s apartment complex. I looked up at the balcony I’d jumped from and groaned. What was *wrong* with me?

I sucked in air through my teeth as I tried to push myself up from the bush. The branches stuck to my borrowed flowery pajamas. My left leg flared with pain, and I fell back, landing on the small wall surrounding a bed of flowers. The wall must have caught my leg on my way down. I tried to stand but fell back again, the pain painting black spots across my vision.

“Hey, uh, Bill?” I called, hoping he was near enough to hear me. He was one of the wanderers that haunted Sandra’s apartment. Though wanderers tend to live in their own little world, Bill was the most lucid. “Bill!” I called. “Can you get Sandra?” My face flamed in embarrassment. I would never live this down.

He must have heard me because the next moment

## GREETINGS FROM ROCK BOTTOM

Sandra's door slammed open. Her face appeared over the balcony, a coil of hair poking through the sleep cap she used to protect her curls at night. Her hands slapped her face. "David! What the hell happened?"

"I was dreaming about flying again . . ." I admitted, heat flooding my face.

"Did you *jump*?"

I gritted my teeth. "Yeah. I think my leg is broken."

Sandra's bare feet slapped down the cement staircase until she reached the bottom, her robe billowing out behind her. "Dammit, David, what are we going to do with you?"

"I don't know," I mumbled, trying not to throw up. Wouldn't that have just been the icing on the cake if I threw up on her? I didn't think I had any dignity left to lose.

"Can you stand?" She crawled around the bushes and put my arm around her shoulder, then heaved. I gasped and winced. "Come on, we need to get you to a hospital." We awkwardly hobbled around the bushes toward the parking lot. I sagged and almost blacked out when I tried to put weight on the leg, but hopping on my good leg just jostled it even more.

"We can't go to the hospital," I said weakly. "I don't have insurance. Or money. I'm not even legally alive."

"It's okay, I'll take care of it," she said, grunting under my weight.

## ANNI SEZATE

I bit my lip as I was flooded with guilt. Could she afford my hospital bill? This wasn't fair to ask of her. But I had no one else to turn to.

"I'll pay you back. Somehow."

"Don't worry about it." She leaned me up against her car. "I'm just gonna grab my keys, so hang tight."

Shame flooded through me. Sandra shouldn't have to be responsible for me. That thought had niggled away at me for the past week. She's been the only one I could turn to since I'd been miraculously brought back to life. For eleven years I'd been a guardian angel, saving, helping, and inspiring mortals. Since my fall to mortality, I'd become nothing more than an overgrown toddler, having accidents all over the place. It's hard to adjust to a mortal body when you're used to just floating through everything.

Our hospital visit lasted for hours, and I had a feeling my mom was nearby being a total worrywart because Sandra kept shooting nervous glances across the room and saying things like, "It's fine" and "He'll be okay." Every time she did that, I shot her an annoyed look. Except for the conversation where she'd translated for me and Jake right after I became mortal, she refused to tell me when angels were nearby. I found this completely unfair, but she just kept saying that she'd been told not to say anything. Something about me being mortal and having to live by faith or something. It was totally rude.

## GREETINGS FROM ROCK BOTTOM

I wanted to stay near Sandra to have at least some connection to the other side, but I kept getting this sinking feeling that I couldn't stay with her for much longer. I'd become a burden to her. Also, I was supposed to be a guardian angel. How was I supposed to help my family if I kept hiding away at Sandra's?

When we got back to the apartment, I wanted to just flop on the couch and sleep, but instead, I sat at the table and propped my crutches against the wall. "We need to talk."

Sandra sighed and pulled up a chair.

"I need to move out. You shouldn't have to take care of me. I'm a grown man. I think. Also," I squirmed in my seat uncomfortably, "I'm not sure it's right, morally, for me to be living with you."

Sandra snorted. "You are *such* an angel. It's fine! It's not like we're doing anything 'inappropriate.' You sleep on the couch. We aren't even in the same room. Plus, you're not seventeen anymore. Even if this wasn't platonic and we were sleeping together, as an adult you have the right to sleep with whoever you want. It's nobody's business but your own."

"Well . . . I don't feel right about it. And it's not just that," I said, my face burning with embarrassment. "I'm supposed to be a guardian angel. Or guardian mortal now, I guess. How can I help my family if I never go near them?"

## ANNI SEZATE

“But how can you go near them without them recognizing you and having a total heart attack seeing their dead brother and son alive?” she countered. “I see dead people all the time and it still freaks me out.”

“They might not recognize me,” I said. I still didn’t really know how old I was supposed to be. I looked pretty much the same as I did as an angel which was somewhere between seventeen and twenty-seven, but it was hard to tell. I did have to start shaving though, so that was new. I understood the basic concept, but after cutting myself twice with one of Sandra’s pink razors the first time, Bill floated in to give me some pointers, which Sandra deigned to translate because she felt bad for me. So, a ghost taught me how to shave with a woman’s razor. My life is so normal.

“You don’t look that different,” Sandra argued. “You still look like David. How are you going to explain that?”

“I don’t know. But I think . . .” I closed my eyes and tried to focus on what felt right. “No, I know that I won’t be able to help them from behind the scenes like I used to. I don’t have the ability to spy on them and magically send feelings of comfort or advice. I think . . .” I closed my eyes again, trying not to let my own worries cloud my judgment, “I think what they need right now is *me*. For some reason.”

“What, so you just show up at your dad’s house and say, ‘Hey pops! Guess what? I’m alive again!’”

## GREETINGS FROM ROCK BOTTOM

I frowned and shook my head. “I get the feeling I need to start with Elena. I think she’d be the quickest to believe me. If she lets me stay with her, I can be a much better guardian angel from within her own home.”

Sandra gave me a nervous look.

“What?” I asked.

“I just worry about you. You need time to adjust. I mean, look at what just happened!” she gestured to my busted leg. “I don’t mean this as an insult, but you’re like a little kid. You need to get used to your body.”

Oh, how my pride was stinging. A flush of anger coursed through me as I thought of my predicament. I was a good guardian angel, and, surprisingly, not a terrible demon hunter! I was the one that got the closest to catching Malum. Then I made one mistake and now I was this pathetic mortal with no control over his body.

In a rush of frustration, I got up and booked it to the front door, crutching as fast as I could. My instinct to get away quickly was to just float through the door, so I forgot to open it and smashed into it with surprising force. My eyes watered as I felt a snap, disturbingly reminiscent of someone biting into a carrot.

*Great. Just great. First I try to fly off a balcony and break my leg, and then I break my nose running into a door.*

“DAVID, YOU IDIOT!” Sandra shouted. “Mortals can’t float through doors!”

I dropped a crutch to clutch my rapidly swelling nose.



## ANNI SEZATE

Sandra growled and tried to pull my hand from my face. “Let me see it.”

“Doh . . . ibe fide.” I was trying to say, “No, I’m fine,” but my busted nose made it difficult to talk.

Sandra yanked my hand away, gasped, and made a gagging noise. “Oh, that’s bad. How did you hit the door that hard? You’re on crutches!”

“I doh doh!”

“Yeah, you are a Dodo!

“Doh, I doh *dob!*”

Sandra burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation and my complete inability to speak. I couldn’t blame her; we were both exhausted and sleep-deprived. I started laughing too, but that hurt my face.

After her laughing fit, she sighed and said, “All right, let’s go back to the hospital. Or maybe an Urgent Care.”

“Doh, ibe fide. Doh mo hospital.”

“Dude, if you don’t get that looked at, it could heal wrong and cause serious breathing issues.”

“Doh hospital,” I repeated, trying to bend down to grab my fallen crutch. My other crutch slid out from under me, and I fell on my butt, jostling both my broken leg and nose. I fell back against the door, laughing and crying.

I had officially hit rock bottom.