

ANGEL OF DEATH

CHAPTER 1

Death chose the perfect weather. He always did.

What I didn't know then was that he'd also chosen me.

The storms had passed, leaving a steady flow of pitter-patter against the soft earth.

Umbrellas lined the cemetery as water filled the shoes of mourners.

"It's going to be okay, Elizabeth." Someone squeezed my hand tighter than I liked.

I ignored her and stared straight ahead at six men as they marched up the subtle slope.

The men were unsteady as the weight of the casket seemed to shift from one side to the other. I certainly didn't have the stomach to see them drop it and watch her body splatter against the mud.

No, she needed to rest peacefully, six feet below.

The cold rain hid the salty tears that ran down my face.

I wanted it that way.

"Here, sweetie." Someone else whispered. "Take this umbrella. You'll catch your death sitting out here, soaking like a sponge." One look and she realized her poor choice of words. She struggled for an apology, "I'm so...I don't know what I was thinking."

The rolling of my eyes clued her in to the fact that I didn't care. My soaked clothes clung to my cold skin. What good would an umbrella do now?

The men managed to set the coffin down on the metal contraption used to lower her.

They sloshed away from the coffin and took their places among the crowd of people gathered under the tent.

All eyes were on me as we took our places, and I sat in the front row, shielded from the spitting rain. The priest stood at the head of the casket and droned on about this and that. *Didn't he say enough at the service?* I tuned him out immediately.

My mind wandered to another place and time. A time where I was happy. Vibrant and alive.

It was my eleventh birthday. Life was good. Our yearly vacation to the beach. The last one we'd ever take together, before mom and dad divorced. I splashed through the waves as they smacked against my shins, only a few steps in and pleaded with mom to join us. Mom simply smiled and shook her head. I begged and begged like a petulant child for her to join me, but she wouldn't. She'd already carved out a spot on the oversized blue towel so she could tan.

"Elizabeth." A woman's voice brought me back to reality. "Are you ready for this?"

Still basking in the sunlight of my memory, it was clear they wanted me to show my final respects. My aunt pressed a freshly cut rose into my palm and it pricked my skin. "Here you go, Lizzie." I watched a trickle of red blood drop to the ground. "I'll be right behind you."

Rising to my feet, I nodded. The firm but loving hand of Aunt Vickie wrapped itself around my elbow, probably to make sure I didn't collapse on the way to the coffin.

"Let's get it over with." I wormed my way to the side of the coffin and dropped the delicate flower on top. The first of many that would be dropped that day.

On the other side of the crowd stood my father. My body tensed as our eyes met. It had been four years since I'd seen him. Now I had to go live with him. A virtual stranger.

He moved toward me.

"Hey, Lizzie," he whispered. "It's been a long time."

“What are you doing here?” I knew that I’d have to go live with him, but I didn’t know that he’d come get me now.

“Despite what your mother may have told you, I cared for her. It was the least I could do.”

The very least. “How did you even know? We haven’t heard from you in years.”

“I just knew. I have my sources. I’ve kept up with nearly every aspect of your life.”

“Then how come this is the first I’ve seen you since you left us?”

“Lizzie,” my dad huffed, “this is not the time to discuss all of that. You’ll have plenty of time to ask me everything when you come live with me.”

“Yeah, I can ask.” I crossed my arms. “The question is whether or not you will answer me. Truthfully.”

“Yeah, Damian.” Vickie slid in next to me. “Will you answer her questions truthfully?”

“Ahh...Vickie.” Dad eyed her closely. “Good to see you again.” I could tell by his body language that it was a lie. “It hasn’t been nearly long enough, I guess. Seems you still hate me.”

“It’s Victoria,” she insisted. “What do you expect? You left my sister and niece without so much as a word. Nobody’s heard from you since. How do you expect me to feel?”

“I suppose that’s a pretty normal reaction.” Dad stepped backward. “I know you don’t believe me, but I had my reasons. It wasn’t anything that could be avoided. Doesn’t change the fact that I still loved Rachel.”

“You leave Mom out of this,” I demanded. “She’s not here to defend herself anymore.”

“It’s okay, Lizzie. Everything will be fine.” Vickie gently squeezed my shoulder and positioned herself between me and Dad. “Damian, what’s the plan now?”

“Plan? What plan?”

“Don’t play games, Damian. We both know that should anything happen to Rachel you’d get full custody.”

And something happened. She was killed.

“That’s true.” His eyes focused on me. “But I’ll let you have a bit more time with her. Let’s say a week.”

“A week?” I blurted out. A few stragglers were caught off-guard by my outburst. I didn’t care. “I have a week to pack up my life and move all the way to Atlanta? My whole life is here in Colorado. My family is here.”

“I’m afraid this is the way it has to be, dear. You’ll understand in time.”

“No, I *won’t* understand in time. I’ll never understand.” I’ll never understand why Dad left us without saying goodbye. Why Mom was killed? Why I have to go live with him on the other side of the country.

“Lizzie.” Aunt Vickie knew I didn’t want to go. “Let’s just make the most of the week we have left. We will worry about all the other details later.”

“Listen to your aunt, Elizabeth. Enjoy the time you have left. I’ll be by to get you in a week.”

He moved to give me a hug, or a kiss, something, but I pulled back. He took the hint and relented. “See you in a week, *angel*.” He gave a quick wink before turning to leave. I stood frozen in the mud. The rain had ceased but tears continued to run down my cheeks. It all felt so wrong.

“Let’s go,” I stammered.

“They’ll figure out what happened to her, Lizzie.” My aunt tried to make me feel better as we sped along the highway.

“I hope so, Aunt Vickie,” I replied. “I hope they find out who killed her.”

“Lizzie, it could have been an accident. Don’t go jumping to conclusions.”

“I don’t think it was an accident,” I said. “I don’t think she did it to herself, either.”

The fire raged in my eyes as I stared out the window because I felt like *he* had something to do with my mom’s death. Even if it was from a broken heart.

“Turn here.” The driver did what she told him. “Are you hungry?”

The flames of rage cooled.

“Driver, take us to that restaurant up ahead.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Before we hit our seats, Vickie ordered a glass of wine for herself. A Sprite for me.

“Vic, what’s going to happen to me now?” I already knew the answer, though I hoped it could be avoided.

“You *know* what?”

“Do I have to?” I whined. “Can’t I say no?”

“You know that’s not possible.” She took a big gulp.

“Why not?”

“You know why not? We talked about this the other day. The papers were very specific about who gets custody of you. The lawyers said there was nothing we could do.”

“There’s got to be some way around it. Can’t I *choose* who I want to live with? Can’t I choose to live with you?”

“It’s not that simple. You’re only fifteen.”

“I’ll be sixteen in a few months,” I protested. “I should be old enough to choose who to live with.”

“That would be true if it were a choice between him and your mom. Now,” she whispered, finally shedding one small tear. “Now, there isn’t that option.” My aunt has been incredibly strong. She hasn’t cried yet and I imagine it will all hit her all at once when I’m gone, and she’ll cry like a baby for weeks.

“It’s not fair. Besides, he probably had something to do with it.”

“Come on, Lizzie, that’s not fair. We don’t know anything at all about that being true. The police said it was a freak accident. That’s all.”

“I don’t believe them. I think he did it. What if I could prove he did kill her, what would happen then? Would I still have to live with him?”

“If you could prove it, and that’s a big if, then he’d go to jail and we’d have a shot of keeping you. But that’s a big *if* considering you’re moving in a week.”

“If?” I asked. “He killed her.”

“I’m sorry, Liz.” She pressed her hand to mine and squeezed. “I just can’t believe it myself. I know this is all so crazy, but I think you’re going to have to let this crazy notion of yours go. We just have to accept it as it is.”

“I might have to accept it, but I don’t have to like it. I don’t have to like him, either.”

“He really isn’t a bad guy.” My mouth dropped open when Vickie defended my dad.

“Are you kidding me?” I yelled, startling the ladies at a nearby table. Vickie nearly drained what was left of the red wine in one gulp.

“Another, please.” She tapped her glass and tossed back the remainder of wine.

“Are you okay?” One of the gray-haired old women asked my aunt.

“No, I’m not.” She slammed her fist against the table. “What are you looking at?” Her eyes flashed red again, the group of ladies turned their heads and huffed, cackling like the hens they were. “I can’t believe she’s dead. Gone!” Vickie’s words escaped through gritted teeth. Finally, she was starting to show a little emotion.

After taking a moment to compose herself, she continued. “The only thing he ever did wrong was leave you and your mom. He was a good husband and father. Don’t you remember?”

Honesty held me and forced me to confess. “Yeah,” I said. “I remember him. I loved him more than anything in this world.” Though I hated to admit it, I missed him.

“I don’t know why he left you, but there has to be a reason. Give him a chance and see what happens.”

“I’m sure he still loves you and I’ll bet deep down inside you love him too.”

“Don’t remind me.”

CHAPTER 2

It had been six days since I'd been to my house. When Mom died, I'd stayed with my aunt while she made arrangements for the funeral. I stayed in her guest bedroom for most of the time leading up to the funeral. The funeral was the first time I'd been outside since my mom's death.

Walking through the front door, the silence was deafening. Our once vibrant house had become a drab shell, void of life and joy. Without Mom, life didn't seem to be worth living.

I looked over my shoulder to my aunt, who was waiting in the car because I'd told her I wanted to do this alone. To gather my things before moving to Atlanta. My dad would take me away in a couple of days. Reconciliation and closure was necessary if I was going to be able to move away from this house. Away from my memories. Away from my life.

Once inside my bedroom, I sat on the bed and grabbed the fuzzy brown teddy bear lying on the pillow. I fingered his sweater and adjusted his pants while deciding what I wanted to take with me. My teddy, Wesley, was given to me when I turned six. Actually, Dad and I made him at the mall. I even put in his heart. He was part of me in a strange kind of way, even though I was too old to have a teddy bear. I suppose it was because he reminded me of Dad when Dad wasn't around.

Dad had called Aunt Vick and told her he would have my things shipped if I wanted, but I'd have to box them up. There wasn't much that I wanted to bring with me that Dad didn't already have. A diary, some of my clothes, my pillow, my yearbook from last year, and of course, Wesley.

After packing a suitcase and my backpack full of clothes and a few other miscellaneous items, I walked out back to the pool one last time. It was as if Mom still floated lifeless in the water.

I had come home from a friend of mine's house after I'd spent a few days with her and her family on vacation in Aspen. It was the first time I'd visited Aspen. Living in the suburbs of Denver, we were hours from Aspen. It may as well have been on the other side of the country, because it'd been years since we'd taken a vacation. Ashley and her parents had a timeshare in Aspen that they used twice a year. Most people visit Aspen in the winter when they can ski or snowboard, but her family went during the warmer months. It was beautiful, but had I known what I'd come back to, I would never have left.

"Mom, I'm home," I had yelled as I sprang through the door.

Nothing. Silence. Even more deafening than today. I dropped my bag by the steps and went to the kitchen. After popping open a soda and rummaging the pantry before settling on a

handful of almonds, I yelled again. This time much louder. “Mom,” I yelled. “I’m home. Where are you?”

Still, complete and utter silence. Panic set in as I plopped my snack onto the counter top. I scurried to the garage to make sure her car was there. It was. I ran upstairs to make sure she wasn’t napping. Nothing.

I dialed Mom’s cell phone, but no answer. After it rang for what seemed like forever, I hung up and called my aunt.

“Hey, Vick.” My voice trembled in my cell phone.

“Are you back, Liz?” she asked.

“Where’s mom? Is she with you?” I ignored her question.

“I haven’t talked to her in a couple of days. Is everything alright?”

“I guess so,” I continued. “It’s just that mom isn’t here. She was supposed to be here when I got home.”

“When was the last time you spoke to her?”

“Two days ago. I told her I’d be home today.”

“That is strange. Have you tried calling her?”

“Yes, but she didn’t answer.”

“I’ll be over in a few minutes.” Aunt Vickie lived a few blocks from us. She and Mom grew up in this area and didn’t want to move far from their mother. I never knew my grandmother, because she died when I was young, so everything I knew of her was through stories and photographs.

There wasn’t any explanation for my sense of dread, but somehow, some way, I just knew something was wrong. Mom had been acting strangely the past few months. She said it

was because I was going to be turning sixteen soon, but I didn't believe her. She seemed more depressed than someone who'd be upset about their kid turning sixteen.

Weighing my choices and trying to narrow down where my mom would be, it occurred to me to check the backyard. Maybe she was tanning or swimming.

"Mom." My words were almost inaudible as I slid the backdoor open. "Mom, are you out here?"

Still no sound. Creeping closer and closer to the edge of the pool, I caught a wisp of her black hair floating in the water. Relief swept over me as I hurried toward the deep end of the pool, hoping to surprise her. Instead, I was the one that was in for a surprise.

Her body was bloated and pale as paper. Even with the sun beating down on her back, there was little color left in her.

"Noooo!!!" I screamed as I jumped into the pool. I clutched her loose skin and pulled her to me, flipping her over to see lifeless eyes. *It couldn't be. This can't be happening.* I struggled to get her to the shallow end and up on the side of the pool to give her CPR. I knew she was dead in my mind, but something in my heart forced me to try to blow life back into her. To be her guardian angel, her miracle, and bring her back to me. To have her breathe again.

"What's going on, Liz?" Aunt Vickie screamed as I pushed on her chest and blew into her mouth, forcing her cold lips apart. "What's wrong?" She screamed again as she plopped down beside me. I ignored her and kept pounding on her chest. "911," she said.

"It's too late for that." I finally conceded. I knew Mom was dead. I knew it when I saw her floating in the deep end. "She's dead," I said as I began to cry. A trickle of tears ebbed and soon flooded like a river. "She's...she's... dead," I said through violent sobs.

"She can't be dead." Aunt Vickie pushed on Mom's chest. "We have to keep trying."

We both knew it was hopeless.

Aunt Vickie told the 911 operator everything they needed to know and within minutes, paramedics arrived at our house. Several minutes after that, the police and fire trucks showed up. Ultimately, the coroner came and put my mom in a zip-up bag and drove her away.

Today would be the last time I'd see the pool that claimed my mother's life. I was happy about that.

I pulled the door to and turned the key in the deadbolt for the last time. My aunt remained firmly planted in her car. I don't know if she'd been back over since we watched Mom get carted away or not, and I don't know if she'll ever return, but for me, it was something that I had to do. I had to see it once more.

"You alright?" she asked.

"I'm fine." It lied, and she knew it was a lie. Neither of us would ever be *fine* again. The worst part about it was that I had to leave in two days. We'd gone through this tragic, traumatic, life-changing event together and now I was being ripped from the only real family I had left. Ripped from her to be uprooted and transplanted on what might as well be the other side of the world. If I'd lived in Denver for almost sixteen years and only made it across the state once, then there was no way in hell I'd ever be back to Denver once I got to Atlanta.

"What do you want to do?"

"I'd like to go see Ashley before I leave if I could."

"Did you ask her if it would be okay for you to drop by?"

"No, but I know she won't mind." Ashley lived right around the corner from my house, so we walked back and forth to see each other. She never bothered knocking anymore when she came over. It was like Mom had two daughters.

“Okay, I’ll drop you off. You can call me when you’re ready for me to get you.”

“That’s fine.”

I rang the doorbell as I waved to my aunt. She waited to see if anyone was home, even though I told her they were. I knew they were because both cars were in the driveway. Plus, her parents never did anything or went anywhere once they got home from work. They were workaholics. Her mom was a lawyer and dad was a doctor.

“Hey, Lizzie.” Ashley’s mom greeted me as she opened the door. “I didn’t expect...um...come on in. Ashley’s upstairs in her room.”

“Thanks, Mrs. H.”

“Is there anything I can do for you, sweetie?”

“I’m fine. Thanks for the flowers and for coming to Mom’s funeral,” I said. “I’m sure she would have appreciated it.” As soon as the words escaped my lips, I realized how stupid it was to say something like that. *Would anyone appreciate people coming to their funeral?* Most people, including mom, would want to still be alive.

“It’s the least we could do.”

“So she’s in her room?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’m going to head on up now.”

“Well, if you need anything...anything at all...don’t hesitate to ask. We are all here for you whenever you need us.”

“That’s nice, but I won’t be around for you to be there for me by this weekend.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m moving to my dad’s.”

“What? Where? When did this happen?”

“I found out just before the funeral. He lives in Atlanta.”

“How did this happen? When was the last time you saw him?”

“When I was eleven.”

“That can’t be right. Can’t you live with your aunt?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Divorce papers leave me to him if anything ever happened to Mom.”

“There must be something I can do. Maybe I can look over the divorce settlement.”

“Thanks, but my aunt’s lawyer has already combed through it. ‘Iron-clad’ case is what he told us.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that Lizzie,” she continued. “Ash is going to be devastated when she finds out.”

“I know she will be. I’m devastated. That’s why I’m here. I want to tell her in person.”

“Sounds like you girls have some crying to get to. Better get on up there. And, seriously, Lizzie, if you need anything, please don’t hesitate to call...day or night.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I trudged up the steps to Ashley’s room.

She must’ve heard me coming because she barreled through the door just about the time I reached for the door knob.

“Hey, girl,” she blurted. “I hoped you’d be over soon. Didn’t want to call and interrupt you and your family.” She was as bubbly as always, which was good because I was sick of everyone walking around on eggshells afraid I might break down in tears at the very mention of Mom.

“You could never interrupt me.” In fact, I would have preferred an interruption. A distraction from thinking about Mom.

“What do you want to do?” She didn’t skip a beat. Just like old times.

“Well...umm...that’s kinda,” I paused. “It’s what I need to talk to you about.”

She obviously sensed something was wrong as she took my hand and sat beside me on the edge of her bed. “What’s wrong, girl?”

“It’s just that...I don’t know how to tell you this.” I wanted to tell her, but the words seemed to get stuck in my throat.

“It’s okay, take your time.” Ashley was so patient. Always. That’s probably one of the things I appreciated most about her. I was the opposite. Impulsive.

“Okay...here it is.” I fought to push the words out of my mouth. “I’m moving.” There. It was out. I’d done it.

“I figured you would.” She relaxed her shoulders. Her reaction confused me completely.

“You knew I was moving? How did you know?”

“I didn’t know, exactly.” She let go of my hand. “I didn’t think you’d live in that house all by yourself. It made sense that you’d go live with you aunt.”

And there it was. The reason she was acting so nonchalant about the move. About my leaving. She assumed I’d be moving in with my aunt. Not that I blame her. After all, that would seem to be the most logical thing in the world, since she’s never seen my dad nor ever heard me mention him.

“Not so fast,” I added. “It’s not that simple.”

“Sure it is. You’ll be a little farther away, but it doesn’t matter because we’ll both be driving soon. I get my license next week, silly.”

“Ash...I don’t know how to tell you this, but I’m not moving in with my aunt. I’m moving in with my dad.”

“Your dad.” Confusion registered on her face. “What part of town does he live in? I don’t think you ever told me.”

“That’s because I haven’t. And he doesn’t live *in town*.”

“Which city does he live in? It must be close. Right?”

“I wish. He may as well live on Mars.”

“What do you mean?”

“He lives in Atlanta.”

“Atlanta? As in Georgia? As in down south?”

“The very same.”

“You can’t,” she barked. “I’ll never get to see you. Ever.” She stood and moved across the room and stared out the window.

“That’s not true,” I argued. “There will be holidays and summer break. Even I didn’t believe my own words. Ashley’s dejected expression bounced off the window glass and let me know she didn’t believe them either.

“You and I both know that’ll never happen.”

“Don’t say that,” I scolded. “We have to *make* it happen. I’ll make sure my dad will let me, and I’ll get a job to pay for the plane ticket. It’ll work. It has to.”

“I hope you’re right.” She turned toward me and a glistening teardrop streaked her cheek.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do without you. I’ll go crazy.”

“You’ll be fine. You’ve got lots of friends to replace me with.”

“I have lots of friends, but I only have one bestie. And you just told me she’s moving to Atlanta.” She reached out both arms and clutched them around me. Her single tear multiplied as we cried.

“You can always call or Skype me,” I told her. “It’s not like we’ll never see each other again, right?” She must’ve sensed doubt in my words because she leaned back and sulked.

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “I really hope you are.”

“I know I am. What do you want to do before I have to leave?” I tried to keep things light, considering that this could be the last time I get to hang out with my best friend in the whole world.

“You want to go down to The Shack?” The Shack was a burger joint that most of the school hung out at on the weekends. There wasn’t much for us to do in our little town, much less for those of us without cars.

“Sounds perfect. See if your mom will take us. I’ll call my aunt to let her know to pick us up.”

Ten minutes later, we pulled into The Shack. “Thanks, Mom,” Ashley said. Her mom seemed to be still in shock about my leaving. I think we all were. Of course, my aunt didn’t care if I went. She even said I could stay out a bit later than my normal curfew, but it didn’t matter because I ended up leaving earlier than I thought I would.

We spent the evening catching up with some of our friends from school that we hadn’t seen in a few weeks. I told them I would be leaving soon, like in two days, and this was the last time I’d see them. Of course the waterworks started all over again. It seemed like I’d done nothing but cry for the past week and a half.

“I’ll talk to you soon,” Ashley said. “It’ll all be okay.”

“I know, Ash. It won’t be that bad, and you can always come check out Atlanta once I get settled in.”

We hugged each other goodbye, and I plopped into the front seat of the car.

“You okay?” Aunt Vickie asked.

“I will be.” I knew I wasn’t but looked for the day when I was. I knew I wouldn’t be for a long time. “Why does he have to make me come with him?”

“That’s what the divorce papers say.”

“Screw the papers,” I said. “We haven’t been around each other in years. We don’t even know each other anymore. Why would he even want me?”

“Because he’s your dad. He loves you.”

“If he loved me, he wouldn’t have left us. He wouldn’t have left me.”

“Just give him a chance and see what happens. Besides, you’ll probably love living in Atlanta. It’s a much bigger city than our little town.”

“I guess.” We didn’t speak again for the rest of the car ride. When we got back to her house, I went to the guest room and wrote in my journal until I fell asleep.