

Chapter One

The first time Anna died, her arrival in the Hereafter lacked the festive elements promised by the priest at St. Peter of the Foothills. No throng of angels, no heavenly choir, no pearly gates or outstretched arms of loved ones celebrated her arrival. Only her mother's sister, bossy Aunt Ethel, her dotted Swiss dress uncharacteristically fashionable, her gloves so white they stung Anna's eyes.

She would later regret that her first words were so blunt, but new situations made Anna uncomfortable. "Aren't you dead?" she asked. Ethel only stared at her brightly, as if they shared a secret.

"And why does it feel like a boulder is sitting on my chest?" She scanned the room, no bigger than a cubicle. A bed, a chair, bare walls.

"That's just the bereavement, dear. Take three breaths and you'll feel better." Ethel shifted in the perilous chair, her girdled thighs spilling over its edges. "You've left the old life behind and your new self is fit as a fiddle. I'll get you through the intake process, since your father's relatives couldn't be bothered."

"What's intake and where's Uncle Wilbur?" Anna asked. While Ethel stuck in a honey here and a dearie there to soften her bull-moose approach, her husband's pockets were stuffed with treats, caramels on the right, chewing gum on the left. Never a bad word for anyone.

"You'll see hon, come along." Her aunt's bony fingers clamped down on the tender flesh of her upper arm and pried her from the bed. They walked down a narrow hallway with rustling sounds behind closed doors but encountered no one. "You'll get a change of clothes soon--- never you worry."

She hadn't been worried, but now she was. She looked down at herself, mortified to be wearing the sweater she'd 'borrowed' from her sister and would never return. It was torn and stained and smelled of lilacs.

"Where are the angels and those cute little cherubs? And where's my heavenly reward?" Anna asked.

"Angels are just cheap entertainment," Ethel said dismissively. They'd entered a vacant parlor with a loveseat and two side tables. "We're spirit guides---you're fifth generation, very fortunate. You'll assist the living, not only from the Hereafter, but also in the Here and Now. Isn't that exciting?"

Anna felt lost but tried to feign interest in her aunt's explanations of her choices: gatekeeper guides as heaven's bodyguards, teaching guides with life lessons, messenger guides to ferry information between realms, healing guides for the ill and injured.

"Ow!" She screeched, startled by a pinch.

"I'm not explaining this twice dear. Pay attention."

Anna scooted out of pinching distance. "I heard you---you said that my heavenly reward must be earned, that it's not automatic."

"That's right. Nothing in the Hereafter is free—we earn our keep here at Resurrection, Inc. Otherwise our profit margins narrow, and we lose our lead in the post-mortem marketplace. Our annual bonuses shrink and, well, never mind. Today's only for happy news."

"Which brings me to our powers. Our senses are heightened so that we see for long distances and through solid objects, we hear not only what's said but what is thought. Because

you're no longer a physical presence, no one in the Here and Now will see, hear, or feel you. You're one hundred percent spirit now."

Anna thought of her fiancée Vander, their plans. Surely her aunt was mistaken. She only vaguely recalled her last moments, the spike of pain as she was struck and fell, the warren of branches pinning her to the dirt, the dampness seeping into her clothes. Nothing worse—that meant she couldn't be dead, didn't it? Her aunt droned on.

"You won't eat, sleep, cry, get tired or cranky anymore," she said, though Anna found her aunt as cranky as ever. "You'll never be hungry or thirsty, no tears, upset stomachs, sore throats, indigestion or gas. It's heavenly!"

By now Anna couldn't distinguish the good news from the bad. She squinted, her eyes stinging. "Why is it so bright? Can someone dim the lights?"

"You'll get used to it. Our light comes from within. Colors are more vibrant, life more joyful here." Aunt Ethel shifted and reached for her handbag as if she had somewhere more important to be. "Let's go see if your welcome packet has arrived, your registration for the employee orientation. The materials should be in your room by now."

Unexpectedly, her aunt bent to kiss her, and Anna realized she was saying good-bye. She breathed in the familiar face powder and felt the slide of lipstick on her cheek---even without looking she knew it was Revlon's Island Coral. Her breath caught as she realized she'd smelled her last familiar scent, felt her last familiar kiss. Once Aunt Ethel left, she'd not just be alone in a new place. She'd be dead.

Trembling at her cubicle door, Anna clung to Ethel's hand until her aunt pried her fingers loose one by one and scurried away with a fluttery wave. "You're a fifth-generation spirit guide now, dear, try to act like one."

The unmistakable ding of an elevator announced Ethel's departure. Anna was alone.

She stood frozen, glaring at her empty walls and bed. She grabbed a pillow and let herself fall, smushing her face into the smell of laundry dried on the line. Just like Vander's shirts. She could picture him holding her now, his hands taut at her waist. Her leg would slide over his hip, his warm breath caress her neck and lift strands of her hair to remind her she was beautiful. She felt desperate for the thrum of his pulse, for its current shooting through his veins. She was starved for the taste of him, famished for his touch, her every nerve hungry for his fingers, hands and mouth. She arched against him, flattening her toes on the tops of his feet and jabbing against the cold iron bedstead.

"No!" she cried, scrabbling to her knees and lurching for the pillow. She hurled it against the wall until it smashed open, feathers exploding upwards like silent screams.

When she opened her eyes later, clothes, shoes and a handbag were stacked on the chair by her bed and the room was clear of feathers. She dressed and flipped through the welcome packet and the folder for employee orientation. A laminated card with directions brought her to a busy city street where a skyscraper's marquee flashed the name Resurrection, Inc.

Anna pushed through a revolving door and entered a vaulted lobby, looking for a mirror to check her appearance, a clock to tell her the time, but she found only a large yellow arrow with WELCOME NEW EMPLOYEES! in green, directing her down the hall to her left. The

lecture hall was easy to find; she just followed the construction-paper stars to an open door. A woman with her hair arranged in a complicated twist handed her a seating chart in alphabetical order and she took a seat beside Dottie Carmichael. On her desk lay a notebook entitled *A Spirit Guide's Manual to the Hereafter*, and she opened it to a syllabus that read like a topographical map of her own emotions: anger, resentment, disbelief, frustration, hopelessness. Anna observed Dottie from under her lashes and found her oddly optimistic.

The first class covered advice from bestsellers like Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and *The Power of Positive Thinking* by the revered clergyman Norman Vincent Peale. The approach infuriated Anna--she'd been doing just fine thinking positively, winning friends and influencing others WHEN SHE WAS ALIVE!

Dottie, who nodded along to the uplifting examples, scribbled notes with a long purple pen whose pink feather fluttered as she drew daisies around the book titles. Although her neighbor struck her as a tad off kilter, her laugh was uplifting. She probably needed a friend as much as Anna did, and besides, opposites were supposed to attract.

As the orientation progressed, her classmates adjusted to their new environment. Only Anna stood out as uncompromising and pouty. Her instructors labeled her hard-headed and uncooperative, her classmates claimed she was ill-spirited. But no one could dismiss her natural talent, her gift. She absorbed lessons easily, even the ones she called horse pucky. Despite her lousy attitude, more than one lecturer singled her out for praise.

When the course ended, Dottie was named a joyful spirit guide and would train new mothers to avert disasters through distraction and play. A teaching guide, Anna would deliver life lessons to people in crisis or at a crossroad. Momentarily swept up in her friend's slipstream

of optimism, Anna accepted her certificate of completion with a grin and posed for a polaroid photograph, proudly displaying her thumbs-up lapel pin. Dottie laughed her beautiful laugh and flitted around Anna like a pixie, chattering about the lives they would change for the better.