

THE Z-TECH CHRONICLES

# ANGELS IN THE MIST

BOOK ONE



RYAN SOUTHWICK



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SAMPLE CHAPTER

# THE OPERA

**A**NNE AND CHARLIE EXITED THE THEATER, both gushing over their first opera experience.

High school prom was the most formal event Anne had attended before tonight. Dressed in a skirt and blouse, with her boyfriend at the time in a proper suit, they had afterward eaten hamburgers at the local diner, celebrated by splurging on milkshakes, and they both wondered if it got any better than that.

Tonight, she discovered it most certainly could.

Anne wore an elegant flowered dress she bought just for the occasion, cinched at the waist, which Doris said would show off her hourglass figure, and she was happy to see it had attracted Charlie's attention more than once. Charlie had swapped his signature brown leather jacket for a crisp black tuxedo that made her heart swoon every time she looked at him. He had treated her to a fancy French restaurant. Charlie had barely touched his food, which Anne found odd, but she made up for it by leaving not a scrap on either of their plates.

Then, of course, came the opera. Anne had never felt so excited and out of place at the same time. There the upper echelon

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mingled in the lobby with fine champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries that even Anne's full stomach couldn't refuse. Charlie had seemed remarkably comfortable among the city's finest and made conversation easily, though she noticed that he avoided giving his name during introductions, which Anne chalked up to nerves. The performance itself had been breath-taking; the powerful music filled her with such emotion that she thought her heart would burst. She was the first from her seat for the standing ovation and wiped tears from her eyes the entire way out.

In short, the evening had been a chapter from a fairy tale adventure, and Anne couldn't imagine being happier.

She smiled at Charlie, who returned it. He had been pleasant, but maintained his usual physical distance and, while it was fun at first because it felt properly upper class, now that they were alone, the small space between them felt like miles.

Anne wanted to be closer, to feel his touch, and she was tired of waiting. She felt guilty over her selfish need; she knew Charlie was skittish about physical contact, for some reason. Although this evening had drawn them closer together, it wasn't enough.

Anne sidled closer, slipped her arm through his, and held her breath.

Several tense seconds passed. Charlie hadn't bolted, and she felt no signs of a flashback.

*So far so good.*

She relaxed enough to look up at Charlie. His jaw was clenched, eyes fixed straight ahead, as if fighting some internal battle. Not wishing to cause him discomfort, Anne swallowed her disappointment and released him, but he caught her at the last moment and patted her hand. When she looked up again, he was smiling. Anne sighed in relief.

Feeling bold, she rested her head against his arm. Again he didn't flinch, and her demons stayed put. Her smile grew.

A block passed with only the sounds of the city and their breathing. She closed her eyes to enjoy the feel of his muscular arm, his pleasant warmth on this cold, misty night. When she opened her eyes, however, his smile was gone.

"What's wrong?"

“Nothing,” Charlie said, “I was thinking of something a friend told me earlier today.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mm.”

She drummed her fingers on his jacket. “Are you going to make me guess?”

“It was just some advice.”

“Ah. Something profound, like ‘don’t eat yellow snow’?” She nudged him playfully.

He chuckled and surprised her by slipping an arm around her shoulders. The demons stayed quiet. Anne wanted to sing.

“More like relax and enjoy yourself.”

*Good advice.*

She snuggled into his chest; his silky jacket was a pillow from heaven.

They walked in blissful silence. Parking in the City, even on a weeknight, was an Olympic event. Tonight they had lost, finally landing seven blocks away, but, nestled against him as she was now, a long walk back to the car sounded just fine.

“So, who is this sage friend of yours?” Anne said. It was the first time Charlie had mentioned someone else in his life.

“Oh ...” Charlie cleared his throat and looked away. “H-her name is Cappa.”

*Her?*

An unexpected flare of jealousy turned her mouth dry. “Is she pretty?” Anne snapped her mouth shut, but it was too late; the words had already escaped.

“Who, Cappa? No, she’s just —”

Charlie stumbled on something, though Anne couldn’t see what. “I mean yes! Yes, she’s pretty, but she’s a friend.”

“So she’s a ... pretty friend?” Her heart sank.

Charlie stopped and ran a hand through his thick brown hair. “Yes, she’s pretty, but she’s just a friend. Cappa’s helped me through some hard times. She’s been there for me ever since I ... I got started in the business.”

Anne took a calming breath.

*Down, girl. He’s allowed to have female friends.*

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It didn't help. Irrational as the feeling was, Anne needed validation that she was still in the running.

"Charlie ... this is our third date. Yes, third," she repeated when he grinned. "I still count your dashing rescue in the furniture store as a date. Do you like me?"

He gulped. "I do."

"Then show me."

Heart thundering, Anne tilted her chin up in bold invitation.

Charlie looked at her, confused, like a teenager alone with a girl for the first time. "I'm sorry," he said in a shaky voice, "I can't —"

He stumbled forward — drawing a surprised squeal from Anne — and their lips met.

There they stood, wide-eyed statues in the night. A car sped by, leaving swirls of mist in its wake, the roar of its engine lost in the sound of her pounding heart.

Anne checked for flashback warnings. Nothing.

*Okay, here goes.*

She parted her lips and kissed him in earnest. He tasted like the chocolate truffles they shared during the intermission, and there was something else — an earthy, sensual flavor that quickened her pulse and left her wanting for more. Anne wrapped her arms around him. Her fingers slipped under his jacket and kneaded his firm back, then pulled him tight against her. Charlie was slower to the game, but eventually folded her in his strong arms, which had carried her to safety after William's knife —

Anne's scream pierced the night, shrill even to her own ears. Charlie jumped back, looking even more terrified than she felt.

A few seconds later, when the flashback of William cutting her throat receded, Anne was left with a different horror.

*Oh no. No, no, no!*

"Charlie," she said in a hoarse whisper.

He stepped back.

Anne reached imploringly but didn't advance, afraid that if she did, he might run away for good. "Charlie, please, I-I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Please don't ..."

He took another step away. Anne was devastated.

"Please don't go," she said. "Don't leave me. I didn't mean to scream. I won't —"

“Of course you did!”

His harsh tone hit her like a slap. Anne covered her mouth, but an anguished sob burst through her fingers.

Charlie didn't seem to notice. He was instead staring at his hands. “Why wouldn't you scream,” he said softly. “That's what you do when someone hurts you.”

“What? N-no, Charlie, you didn't hurt me.”

He shook his head, brows furrowed. “You don't have to lie. I should have known better than to ...” He balled his fists and turned away. “I'll call you a cab, and ... if you want to press charges, I understand.”

“Charlie, what the hell are you talking about? You didn't hurt me! It was a flashback, that's all.”

His skeptical frown remained.

“Look, I'll prove it!” Anne shed her jacket and pulled her shoulder strap down, intent on baring herself to the world to show her unblemished skin, but Charlie held up a hand.

“All right! Just ... are you sure?”

She tugged her dress back into place and nodded. “Having post-traumatic stress disorder doesn't mean I'm made of glass. You did everything right, Charlie. I couldn't have asked for better.”

He stuffed his hands into his pockets, but she caught his arm.

“No! Please, I ... I want a do-over.”

“Anne, I know what a flashback is, and it's not pleasant. I don't want to put you through that again.”

“And I don't want to scare you again, so ...” She tugged his hands out and took them in her own. “Let's try just the kissing part and see how it goes.” Her spirits fell when he hesitated. “Please? I-I can't promise I won't scream again, but if you give me another chance, I —”

His kiss caught her by surprise. Tender, caring, passionate — it was everything she could have wished for. Anne drank him in, pressed her body to his, eager once more for his touch, but their hands remained joined; only their tongues danced the lovers' tango.

Minutes, hours, or years passed. She didn't know, and she didn't care. When they finally parted, her lips mourned his absence, and she could only stare into his eyes with unabashed yearning.

He brushed her auburn hair back with gentle fingers. “Anne Perrin, this last month with you has been my happiest in a long,

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long time. You're one of the kindest, funniest people I've ever met, and it's an honor to be your date."

Charlie might have said more, but Anne covered his mouth with hers, and for the next several minutes, she showed him the true meaning of passion.

• • •

Anne was in heaven. A few shivers were all it had taken for Charlie to enfold her in the warmth of his jacket under his comforting arm; even her demons knew better than to disturb her bubble of happiness. Head resting against his chest, she closed her eyes and absorbed his scent — a musty mix of cologne and an earthy smell that made Anne want to wrap herself around him and purr.

*Wouldn't it be terrible if we got lost? We'd have to stay like this for hours.*

She snuggled closer and smiled.

*Oh darn.*

A loud pop sounded from overhead. Anne looked up just in time to see the streetlight nearest to them go out. A second later, the same happened to the light ahead of them, then the one behind. Thick fog blotted out star and moonlight, leaving them in almost total darkness.

"That's odd," Anne said. She reluctantly withdrew from his warmth and fished around in her purse. "I've seen streetlights go out before and they're usually quiet. Maybe a transformer blew or something. Aha!"

She pulled out a small flashlight and clicked it on. Its broad beam lit the sidewalk but didn't penetrate very far into the mist.

"Oh well, at least we won't trip. Still think you can find the car, Charlie?"

Anne stepped forward, but a touch from Charlie made her pause.

"Stay close," he whispered.

"What's wrong?" His cautious tone put her on edge.

"The lights didn't go out by themselves. They were broken." He picked up a small object from the ground. Her flashlight glinted from a shard of clear glass between his fingers.

"Charlie, what's going on?" A sudden chill raised the hair on the back of her neck.

“I don’t know,” he said, eyes searching the darkness. He ran a hand through his hair. “Come on, the car’s just up ahead.”

Anne latched onto his arm and they set off at a brisk pace. Shadows danced in the mist, but disappeared when she tried to track them. Her demons stirred in response to her fear; phantom fingers groped at her wrists and ankles, making her want to scream.

“How much further?” she said, voice trembling.

The figures in the fog were becoming real, taunting her like specters. She clutched Charlie’s arm, swinging her flashlight this way and that.

Charlie pointed ahead. “It’s right up —”

Anne shrieked.

One of the shadow figures had taken form.

A wiry man jumped from the roof of a parked car. A blonde streak near his temple divided his dark hair. His pasty-white face split into a frightening grin.

Charlie darted between them. The wiry man grinned wider. He advanced, as if to walk right through her guardian. Charlie put a restraining hand on the wiry man’s chest.

In a blur of motion, he caught Charlie’s arm and hurled him into a parked car.

Like a scene from Anne’s worst nightmare, Charlie struck the car with the force of a wrecking ball. It crumpled around him in an explosion of glass and screeching metal.

Anne rubbed her eyes, hoping it was just a hallucination, but the gruesome scene remained. Charlie’s limbs protruded at sickening angles from the wreckage. She turned her shaking flashlight back to the wiry man, making his unusually large eyes glow.

He mouthed a single word.

“Run.”

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Southwick decided to dabble at writing late in life, and quickly became obsessed with the craft. He grew up in Pennsylvania and moved to a farming town on California's central coast during elementary school, but it was in junior high school where he had his first taste of storytelling with a small role-playing group and couldn't get enough.

In addition to half a lifetime in the software development industry, making everything from 3-D games to mission-critical business applications to help cure cancer, he was also a Radiation Therapist for many years. His technical experience, medical skills, and lifelong fascination for science fiction became the ingredients for his book series, *The Z-Tech Chronicles*, which combines elements of each into a fantastic contemporary tale of super-science, fantasy, and adventure, based in his Bay Area stomping grounds. Ryan's related short story "Once Upon a Nightwalker" was published in the *Corporate Catharsis* anthology, available from Paper Angel Press.

Ryan currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife and two children. You can get in touch with him and see more of his work by visiting his website *RyanSouthwickAuthor.com* or his Facebook page.



# ANCIENT EVIL MEETS MODERN-DAY WAITRESS - AND A MYSTERIOUS ORGANIZATION KNOWN AS Z-TECH.

Anne Perrin is resigned to a life driven by an adolescent trauma: a strict routine, no socializing (outside of the safety of her waitressing job), and no romantic relationships. When her cautious lifestyle lets the perfect partner slip through her fingers, Anne vows she won't let it happen again and ventures into San Francisco to find happiness.

Her first night out in a decade becomes a nightmare when her date turns on her with sadistic intent. But his nefarious plans for Anne are unexpectedly interrupted by a mysterious savior. Valiant, smart, compassionate ... Charlie is exactly the partner Anne has been looking for. And best of all, he likes her too.

Things go well between her and Charlie until an assailant with unexpected strength plunges Anne into a world she didn't know existed — nor could have imagined — where super-science and an eclectic group of extraordinary individuals may be the solution to Anne's lifelong loneliness ... and humanity's only hope against an ancient threat.

"Brimming with elements of practically every genre including exhilarating action-adventure, riveting sci-fi, urban fantasy and breathtaking romance, Angels in the Mist (Book #1) surprises and satisfies with every hairpin turn!"

-Judy Moreno, BookTrib