

## WEEK 1

Daniel dragged his feet as he climbed the staircase toward the pediatric ward at the old, brick hospice building downtown. On each landing was a bank of windows overlooking the empty, wooded lot out back, and he paused in between the second and third floor to look out through the grimy, thin glass panes. A bit of movement caught his eye—someone or something in the scraggly brush—and he shivered. This place gave him the heebie-jeebies. Not only did the building have to be something like a hundred years old, but the surroundings were depressing—broken asphalt, overflowing dumpsters, and those untended, overgrown woods, where God-only-knew-what hid in the shadows.

Daniel would rather be anywhere else but there, he thought, as he continued his upward climb, moving super-slowly to kill some of the time he'd be forced to spend inside these dreary walls. Well, *almost* anywhere else. There *was* one other place he dreaded more, and coincidentally enough, his desire to avoid going back to that other place was exactly why he found himself at the hospice today...

Once Daniel reached the third floor, he pushed the bar across the door and entered an empty hallway. His tennis shoes squeaked on the linoleum as he took a left and headed down toward a room at the far end of the corridor, hoping he'd remembered the nurse's instructions on how to reach the little girl's room correctly.

312. The numbers were etched into a little black plaque on the wall outside the open door to the room. Daniel peeked inside, squinting at the small yet bright-eyed and big haired child sitting in the bed.

“What are you looking at? You look scared...like you just saw a ghost or something.” The little girl in the bed giggled. “Maybe I do look a bit like a ghost, but I’m a friendly spirit, so please, come on in.”

“Sorry,” Daniel told her, embarrassed at being caught staring. He took a couple steps and came to a stop just inside the door. “I didn’t mean to stare. I just didn’t know if I had the right room. I’m looking for Angela, and I thought the nurse said room number 312.”

The child giggled again. “You have the right room, but you might have the wrong girl. My name is Angel, but sometimes, the doctors and nurses call me Angela by mistake.” She sighed and lay back against a mound of pillows that seemed to swallow her up, she was so tiny and thin. “So maybe you do have the right room after all. Who were you expecting to visit?”

“I don’t know. I was ordered—I mean *asked* to pay a visit to a sick kid. They told me she was very, very sick. You don’t look too ill, although you are very small; I mean, you’re not what I was expecting. They said she would be in room 312, and I should be prepared for a shocking sight.” Daniel snapped his mouth shut, wondering if he was saying too much. If this was the girl he was supposed to spend some time with, she might be offended or embarrassed by the description he’d been given.

“Well, sorry to disappoint you. I’m sorry I don’t look shockingly sick enough for you. Here, maybe it’ll help if I remove my wig.” Angel reached up and pulled a mass of hair off her head. “Now do I look like a sick kid or a ghost perhaps?”

Daniel stared at her bald head, and his heart sank. He *had* hurt her feelings. “Oh, no, no I didn’t mean to offend you. Please, put your hair—I mean your wig—back on.”

“Why? Do I scare you? Don’t you think I’m pretty?” She sat up again, turning her head this way and that, as if modeling her new look.

Daniel was silent for a moment while he studied her. To his surprise, he actually found her quite cute, with her big eyes and dimpled cheeks. “No,” he told her, speaking the truth. “You don’t scare me, and in fact, I think you’re very pretty.”

Angel threw back her head and laughed. The sound reminded Daniel of tiny, tinkling bells.

“Don’t worry; it wasn’t a test. I scared myself the first time I peeked in the mirror after... Seeing a kid staring back at me with no hair was weird

at first, but it's kind of nice being bald." She laughed again. "I can wash my hair—I mean, my bald head—with just warm, soapy water and a cloth. Didn't they tell you I was a hairless kid?"

Daniel shook his head and leaned back against the block wall. "No, they didn't say anything about your hair—or your head. They just said you were very sick and that I should be prepared."

The little girl frowned, her brow lowering over those big blue eyes of hers. "Prepared for what? I don't bite, you know. Oh, except when they try sticking needles in my arm. Sometimes, I freak out, and I try to pinch and bite the nurses."

"Well, Angela, I would probably try pinching or biting a nurse, too, if they kept sticking needles in my arm." His gaze moved to her skinny limbs, and he could imagine how badly that would hurt her, with barely any flesh on her bones to add any cushion to a pinprick. The thought made his heart ache.

"Angel," she told him with a nod. "You should call me Angel. Why don't you come all the way inside my room, instead of standing like a guard at my door? You can sit in that chair, and maybe we can talk. I don't get many strangers visiting me, but I do get lots of family and friends stopping in. My mom and dad just left, and visiting hours are almost over. So, let's chat. What's your name?"

Daniel did as she requested, and as he settled into the vinyl-covered chair beside her bed, he said, "Daniel, my name is Daniel."

"Well, nice to meet you, Daniel."

She held out her hand as if to shake, but before he could respond, she pulled back.

"No, wait, can I call you Danny? You look like a Danny, and my hamster is called Danny-Boy, so I won't forget your name." She let loose another peel of her tinkling laughter.

Daniel couldn't help but smile, despite her silly suggestion. "Yeah, you can call me Danny. Heck, you can call me Danny-Boy, if you want."

The kid was sick, after all; if it made her happy to call him by the same name she used for her hamster...well, why not?

"Okay, Danny-Boy, it is!" She moved on the bed to face him, settling with her legs crisscrossed and watching him with an earnest expression.

“So...why are you here visiting a ‘very sick kid’?” she asked, using the description he’d given her earlier.

Daniel had trouble meeting her intense gaze. Instead, he looked past her, over her shoulder to the pair of windows in the back wall. Did she have the same view he’d seen when he’d climbed the staircase to reach her floor? If so, he felt doubly sorry for her. Finally, he glanced at her face, and then looked down at his hands in his lap. “Well, it’s a long story, but I just started volunteering at the hospice, and, well, they said I should come and visit you.”

She was silent for a moment, almost as if she sensed he wasn’t telling her the entire truth, but then she nodded. “I’m glad you did, Danny-Boy, and it’s really nice to meet you. I’m seven years old, but I’m not supposed to make it to eight. How old are you?”

Daniel’s mouth dropped open. Had he heard her correctly? “What did you just say?”

“I asked how old you are,” she said, her tone patient, as if she were the young adult, and he was a small child.

“Sorry.” Daniel shook his head. “I meant the other part. Did you just say you’re not supposed to make it to eight?”

Angel nodded. “Yup. But that’s okay. Don’t look so sad. Eight is over-rated, anyways, and I like being seven. So...how old are you?”

“I’m twenty-one,” he told her, “but I don’t understand. Why did you say you’re not going to make it to eight?”

Angel lowered her gaze and fiddled with the tube of an IV that was taped to the inside of her arm. After a moment, she looked back up at him. “Because I’m a very sick kid, remember? My mom didn’t want me to know, but I overheard my parents talking to the doctors. My mom and dad started to cry when the doc said I only have three months left to live. I guess the cancer is more serious than they told me.” She paused, then added softly, “But that’s okay.”

“I’m sorry.” Daniel cringed inwardly. Talk about lame. The kid had less than ninety days to live, and all he could think to say was “I’m sorry”?

“Why are you sorry? We just met, and you have nothing to be sorry about. Besides, there are younger kids than me who are very, very sick. At least, *I* can get up and walk around, and I have this pretty blonde wig to wear. Aren’t I beautiful?”

Daniel nodded and forced a smile. “You are beautiful, and you are a very brave, young girl.” Suddenly, his eyes started stinging, and he had a strong urge to run away. He got to his feet. “I have to go now, Angel.”

“Wait, you can’t leave yet.” She stuck out her lower lip in an exaggerated pout. “You don’t even know what my favorite color is.”

But Daniel was already backing toward the door. “I really am sorry; I do have to go, but I can come back.”

Her frown disappeared, and her eyes lit up. “When?” she asked him. “When can you visit me next?”

Daniel stuffed both hands into his pants pockets and shrugged. “They said I have to come... I mean, I can visit you once a week. I’ll be back next Friday at about the same time. Is that okay?”

She nodded enthusiastically, obviously happy with his statement. “Yes, Danny-Boy, I look forward to our next visit. But do me a favor and please, try to come earlier. And I hope you look happier next time! If you bring me a big smile, I might let you try on my wig!” She giggled again.

“Thanks, Angela—oops! I mean *Angel*.” He backed out into the hallway. “Good night, sweetie.”

“Did you just call me sweetie?”

This time, she laughed hard, a true belly laugh that had Daniel blushing.

“I-I’m sorry...” he mumbled.

“That’s okay. I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I like it because I am a sweet, little Angel!” She waved at him from her spot in the middle of the bed. “Good night, Danny-Boy. Oh, I almost forgot to tell you what my favorite color is.”

Daniel released a sigh. Would he ever get out of there? “What is it?” he asked, forcing himself to remain patient.

“It’s red because red stands for love. Remember that, okay?”

“Okay, I will.” He ran a hand through his hair then quickly dropped his hand to his side. “Thanks, Angel.”

“If you need a reminder, wear something red, and see how you feel. You could pretend you’re wearing your love!”

Wearing my love? Um... Daniel frowned. He didn’t really understand this peculiar little girl, but he supposed if he had just three months to live, he might be a little odd, too. “Okay. Night, night. Sleep tight, and don’t let the nurses bite!”

He turned and fled back down the linoleum-tiled hallway toward the steps, followed by the tinkling sound of Angel's laughter.

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As Daniel made his way down the cracked sidewalk toward the bus stop, his thoughts went to the events that had led him to that hospital room on the third floor of the old hospice building, where he'd met little Angel.

Daniel recalled the look on the judge's face as he'd stared down from the bench at Daniel and pronounced sentence. He'd felt as if the man had been peering into Daniel's soul as he'd listened to the price he'd have to pay for his criminal actions. Two years of incarceration, a year of probation, and two months of community service... At the time, Daniel had felt torn. While the verdict had sounded incredibly scary to him—especially the part about serving two years in prison!—on the other hand, as he'd listened to his mother cry and to the sobs from his victim's family members, Daniel had thought the punishment not nearly severe enough. How many lives had he screwed up with his stupid, thoughtless, negligent actions? As the bailiff had placed him in handcuffs and led him through a back door in the courtroom to take him to begin serving his sentence, Daniel had hung his head in shame, unable to look any of the people he'd harmed in the eye.

The two years he'd spent behind bars had been by far the scariest time in his young-adult life. The only things that had kept him sane were the weekly visits from his distraught mother. He'd tried to wear a brave face each time she'd come to see him, and his heart had ached, as he'd listened to her pour out her apologies for being a struggling, single mom. She had even apologized for Daniel's absent, deadbeat dad. Daniel hated hearing her talk that way. As far as he was concerned, he had the best mom on the planet, and she'd done the best she could to raise him up right. He felt her pain, he'd heard her disappointment, but he'd also sensed her unwavering love and support. For that, he could never repay her or thank her enough... But if it was the last thing he did, he'd make her proud of him.

Upon his release from prison, Daniel had tried to prepare himself emotionally for the court-ordered community service. The veteran judge must have had a sound reason for sending Daniel to work with a sick little

girl who had just three months to live, but as the city bus came to a stop on the corner, and Daniel and two other passengers climbed on board, he hadn't a clue what that reason might be. The child—Angel—was around the same age as—

Daniel shook his head, dismissing that thought. The last thing he needed was to break down crying on a bus full of other passengers...

Bad enough he'd carried his guilt and shame into the hospice the other day when he'd gone to sign up for service. The hospice staff had eyed him suspiciously, and they'd questioned the judge's motive for assigning this particular line of the community service. Sending Daniel to the sick children's hospital had not seemed like the appropriate punishment for his crime. But Daniel hadn't been able to answer their questions about the judge's motives, and in the end, they'd assigned him to visit a child they called "Angela," whom he'd have to visit every day for the next seven weeks.

Angela—aka Angel—had come as a surprise to Daniel. He hadn't expected to meet such an energetic and spunky kid. He was still surprised by how...*healthy* she seemed, considering she didn't have long to live. He'd also assumed his punishment would be uncomfortable and boring. But after meeting Angel, he could tell this experience was going to be anything but boring. He had made it through the first visit with his emotions in check—barely—and without revealing any of the sordid details of his past. Daniel had seven weeks to go, and he was determined to make it through with his emotions intact.