

Angels Don't Get Tattoos

Chapter One

I Wonder if He Hears Voices Too

Last night was not a real good night. I'd give it a B- or even worse.

I just fell asleep, about two or three o'clock in the morning. Room 416, Oncology Unit, Highland Memorial Hospital. They wheeled in my new roommate on a gurney, slid her into the other bed, and yanked the curtain closed between us. But the stained, open-weave curtain didn't conceal much. The Privacy Act they're always blathering about is just that—a lot of act in these small rooms. One room jam-packed with two electric beds, two boxy nightstands, and two clunky, straight-backed chairs. We may as well be sleeping in the same bed.

Despite my sleep fog and med hangover, I heard the highlights.

“So you were vomiting all evening?” That was Kaci. Fulltime night nurse, one of my favorites. “Keep this barf pan close to you, Danielle,” she said to my new roommate. “I know they gave you some IV Zofran in the ER, but you still might need this.”

“Nothing helped at home,” said the faded voice in the other bed, smothering a heave. “I couldn't keep anything down.” She sounded petrified, maybe a few years out of high school.

Someone rolled in a scale to measure her weight. Mumbblings about an IV. Lab came in to draw blood. Somewhere in there, they took her for an x-ray.

I've been through dozens of roommate admissions since I've had bone cancer. Same-ol' same-ol' but miserable all the same. I faded away in my fog.

“Where is she?” It was Drake's truck-driving bellow exploding in the hospital hallway. “I came to say good-bye.”

I bolted up and leaned forward, peering around the curtain and out the door. When I jerked up, I knocked over the water pitcher on my overbed table and the stale bouquet of someone else's funeral flowers. Gasping white carnations holding up a trio of yellow drooping roses. When the pink volunteer lady delivered them two days ago, all I could manage was a tight-lipped smile. At least, she had enough smarts to take out the dead person's name card before she gave them to me.

The pitcher and the bouquet spilled water over the table. It soaked the Kleenex box at once, ran onto my bed, and dribbled a stream to the tile floor.

"Oh crap!" My voice shrilled in the muted, hospital darkness. I up-righted the pitcher but not the vase, and pulled myself to the foot of the bed. "I heard Drake. What's he doing out there?"

"It's OK." Kaci came around the curtain—quick and calm, stepping over the growing puddle. "Your dad left to go back on the road a couple of days ago. He's not here." She grabbed a towel from the windowsill and sopped up the water. "You must've been dreaming or maybe hallucinating."

"Yeah, maybe." My voice settled, but sweat gathered on the back of my neck.

"Geez, I'm sorry about the water mess." I said, swallowing hard to keep my dried, furry tongue away from the roof of my mouth. I inched myself up, away from the wet and cold. I can get around my bed with no trouble at all, even with only one leg.

"But it sounded exactly like Drake," I said. "I'm positive I saw him out there. His jeans and his truckers' silver belt buckle. Right outside the door."

"These kinds of hallucinations or dreams are horrible. You're probably sweating bullets," Kaci said. "But he's been gone since Monday evening. I remember, I worked that night."

I must have really spaced out because I forgot all that. When Drake left, I was sleeping so he wrote me a note. After he left I remember digging around the two-year-old *Seventeen* magazines that someone brought me from the visitors' lounge. I found his message scrawled on a used napkin: *I'll be truckin for you. Love, D.*

What was wrong with me that I couldn't remember the night Drake left? And whose voice did I just hear out in the hall? Is this a sign of more to come?

"I'll be in here a lot all night with your roommate," Kaci said to me. "I'll keep an extra eye out to make sure you're OK. I'll get you some dry linen in a couple minutes. Hang on." She returned to the trembling voice in the other bed.

I edged farther to the dry side of my bed and swiped my neck. Thankfully, my nightshirt stayed dry through the water slop. It was the last clean one I had with me, my Cougar volleyball team shirt from a couple years ago. After that, it's the hospital gown—ten sizes too big, crushed snaps that don't work, and covered with an old-man pajama pattern.

I stuffed the dying flowers and their rotting smell into a bath towel Kaci left on my bed. I rolled them up, stem bottom to top. Like knuckles cracking, the stalks broke with each of my twists.

I lay back down, folding the plastic-coated pillow slab under my head.

I've spent hours watching the ceiling in this place. You get really good at seeing patterns in the dots of the ceiling tiles, especially if you're horizontal, short on sleep, and long on pain meds. To be honest, sometimes I don't know if the crows and claws are glaring at me from the ceiling dots or if they're hammering in my head. When you're on the receiving end, the 24/7 blends together. Day, evening, and night shifts. Nursing, lab, x-ray, pharmacy, doctors, respiratory, housekeeping. Noise, bells, and chatter, but also empty, cemetery silence.

Maybe that's how Leandro feels. He's the new lion cub over at Vista Zoo. On the live Webcam, it's mostly cement floors, concrete walls, and wire fencing. In his cell, Leandro wanders back and forth, caged and clipped. Maybe he spots crows and claws on his ceiling. I wonder if he hears voices too.

"We have all your paperwork from the ER," Kaci said to my roommate. "It says you left here last week after your last round of chemo."

"Yeah. But today I couldn't stand up. I kept falling down in the bathroom. Went on all evening." I tuned out their hushed talking.

Then another suppressed gaggy retch erupted. I would've given anything to absorb Danielle's nausea and vomiting—to make it easier for her. Nothing's worse than trying not to, then really trying, and then finally turbo-puking. In waves, the retching and acidic stomach smell seeped through the curtain that was supposed to protect her privacy.

"I didn't want to pass out," Danielle said, "So I called my sister." Another short retch. "She brought me in. I didn't want to die there alone."

I don't want to die alone either. But I also don't want to die in the hospital, behind a stained, open-weave curtain on an oncology unit.

I'm K. It's short for Kennedy, Kennedy Rain Winger. I have a 10-year-old brother, Lincoln. I call him Linc and he dreams about playing for the NBA. We live with my mom—her name's Emmy and that's what I call her. And with Drake.

I'm dying. I have osteosarcoma—it's a crappy bone cancer. They gave me the cancer news on a Thursday morning in the middle of a blizzard. I was in seventh grade. The storm closed all the schools and almost everything else in the city. Emmy slept in the chair in the

hospital room with me that night—the first of probably a hundred overnights. For hours, the wind howled nonstop. In the morning, there were little piles of snow on the sill that blew in through the cracks around the windows.

“Emmy, I made you something,” I said, pulling at the thin hospital blanket she had tucked to her neck. “Look at the windowsill.” There stood a miniature snowman with M&M buttons, a puddle of water already forming around his base.

I’ve done it all since then. I’ve had the chemo, the surgery to take out the tumor, and the amputation to cut off my right leg a few months ago. “You have to lose a leg so that you can live,” one doctor told me with a fake smile and a near sneer.

For almost four years I’ve been hearing the same pity sympathy.

“Oh, K, I’m so sorry,” lots of people say to me. I want to kick and scream that I’m sorry too.

“K, this shouldn’t be happening to you.” But it is, and it’s crap.

“You’re just beginning your life and now this.” But this is all the life I’m going to get and it sucks.

“I’ll always hang with you, K . . . I’ll never walk out.” That was Jasmine, my BFF. She made the most sense.

Nothing is really helping now and the cancer’s spread all over. It’s in my head and probably my lungs too. Like the cancer doctor said a few days ago, “We’ve done about all we can do for you, Kennedy.”

He said it like the stiff-shirt, chrome-dome banker told Emmy this summer, looking over his wire glasses. “We can’t give you a loan, Mrs. Winger. Your credit score is too low.” That’s

what the bank told my mother when she tried to buy a used car. “You people are too much of a risk,” he said, his jowls jiggling.

“Just who is *you people*?” I asked Emmy when she told me what happened.

“Great question. It’s probably his way of talking to people with less money, looking down. But remember,” Emmy said, her laugh cracking, “he sits on the john the same way everybody else does.” Anyway, we’re still in our ’94 Saturn that’s almost 20 years old. You can’t open one of the back doors from the inside and only one windshield wiper works. Thank goodness it’s the driver’s wiper.

“All you can do?” I wanted to scream at the cancer doctor in his hot-shot white coat. “That’s what I’ve been expecting you to say,” I said, in my usual sandpaper-and-leather voice, without looking up. Am I done screaming too?

Tonight I decided, at last. I picked my lane. I called it quits. I can do that legally because I’m 16. No more chemo, no more surgeries, no more hospital ceilings clawing in my head. Tonight was an A-. My shorthand for keeping my food down, breathing OK, handling the pain, and staying away from nightmares: an A/B grade.

Emmy was right there with me. All along, one doctor and one of Emmy’s friends said I shouldn’t quit the cancer treatments. When he’s home, Drake’s also told me not to quit. But hey, it’s my life and I know what I’m doing.

After I decided, the social worker witnessed my signature on the advance directive papers. No more War on Cancer. Just things to keep me comfortable, like drugs to cut the pain, stop my puking, and help me rest. And oxygen, if I need it to help me breathe.

I'll never forget what Emmy said after I decided. "You've got more backbone than anyone I know. And I'll always love you for that." Then we doubled-up laughing, wondering how much backbone someone with bone cancer can still have. She walked out of my room and turned with a quiet giggle, "I got your back, K." Emmy says that a lot.

"Go home, for crying out loud," I said.

Home's a tired little house in a tired little neighborhood out on the north side, just this side of the backwater. When I say tired, I mean avocado green and pothole tired. Faded, plastic pink flamingos tired. Florida birds jabbing their rusty long leg into a dried August lawn. Now that's more than tired—that's out-and-out stupid.

The Winger address is definitely not in the jock-cheerleader-country club zip code. But it's not the belly of the beast or a fashion graveyard, either. My zip is mostly Whites, like me, with some Hispanics and some Hmong. Probably a mix of Goths, shredders, and suffering artists, and maybe a few savants.

Emmy was still hanging around my door. "Get out of here," I said. "Linc's waiting to beat you at a video game." Emmy loses all the time, except when Linc lets her win. I don't think she can tell when he does that. When she wins, Linc will say, "No way, Mom . . . maybe I should try again." And they go at it again.

Next to Linc, Jackson MacDougal's one of the coolest kids I know. He's our next-door-neighbor friend, lived there my whole life. Jackson's definitely not bound for the NBA. Maybe Harvard, the New York Times, or Pennsylvania Avenue or somewhere smart like that. But I know he'll never forget our block of Cranberry Road, between Rail Street and Military Avenue.

Things sometimes are downright crappy at Jackson's house. The latest is his Army father's leaving for Afghanistan and that's going to leave Jackson taking on more work for his mom.

I haven't slept since Emmy left. That's how I am—I usually don't go to sleep till about 3 or 4 o'clock, whether I'm horizontal here at Highland or at home. To be honest, after calling it quits, I don't feel horizontal anymore. And the cement, concrete, and wire fencing are fading.

I knew I wouldn't be back on the Oncology Unit—Onc, as I had come to know it. But I'll take some people with me, like Dr. Recki and Kaci.

I wish the doctors would have called me K, but they couldn't do it. Except Dr. Recki, our family doctor. He always calls me K, sits next to me, and asks what book I'm reading. He tells me what he's reading and good ones I might like. The last one was *The Art of Racing in the Rain*.

"You'll love Enzo," Dr. Recki said. "Enzo's a dog, the main character in the book. Enzo thinks and he tells the story like a person. After you read this book, I bet you'll never again look the same way at Madge."

"You remember Madge?" I glanced his way and then looked back up to the muted Animal Planet on the TV by the ceiling. Why do they bolt those TVs up so high anyway?

"How could I forget?" He laughed, stretched out his long legs, and crossed them at the ankles. Dr. Recki always wears bright colored socks. That day he had on green ones, a rowdy frog green. It had been over a year since I told him about Madge's latest stunt and still he remembered. That was when Madge kept hiding under my bed pretending she didn't hear me. It was only when I got down eye-to-eye with her that she came out with one of her tattered toys, saying all-sorry like, "Oh, K. I was so busy, I didn't hear you calling. Please excuse me." She's probably got fifty toys crammed under there.

Around two this morning, Kaci came in and plunked down on my bed. I muted the TV hours earlier and Danielle was long asleep. Kaci's 22 years old, with long, red hair that she keeps in a ponytail with a neon-yellow tie. Her boyfriend's a math student at the university and works nights for a funeral home picking up bodies. How'd you like that job?

Kaci has hands that wrap around you without a flinch and fingers that hear your feelings without a word. She always tells me if I want her hair, she will cut it off and give it to me. I would never ask but I know she'd do it. Can you see her long, red hair on my bald head? Now I have only a few thin black spears. Maybe I would've asked her a year ago, but not anymore.

Kaci began working on Onc right after she became an RN last winter. If I wasn't sleeping—which was most of the time—she asked me, “Want to come to the nurses' station and hang out with us?” I found a wheelchair in the utility room and a spot behind their desk. There I read a book, filled supply boxes, or put together admission packets. Sometimes, I would wheel down the hall with my IV and help the CNAs fill water pitchers for all the patients. I have to tell you, the aides at Highland are the world's best. When Kaci's working, I have a lot of night duty.

Anyway, last night . . . well, it was early this morning . . . Kaci and I talked a long time. She told me I inspired her to learn more about cancer in kids and now, because of me, she wants to go back for another nursing degree. She also told me I reminded her of how she was in high school. “I was smart and sassy. No syrupy crap,” she said. “That's who I was—they could take it or leave it.”

“You're really sick and close to dying,” Kaci said. “But you've given me some life.” She looked straight at me and says it like it is. “I know that sounds Hallmark-y . . . and I know you can't stand all that schmaltzy, pink-ribbon stuff. I hate that—”

“The pink ribbons are stupid,” I said. “They make it look like cancer is pinky and frilly. Teddy-bear-cutesy. Give me a break—what a bunch of BS.” I wanted to call it what it is, but thought I better go with the shorthand. “Maybe they could tie pink ribbons around a cancerous prostate gland.”

Kaci chuckled. Her heaviness jarred the mattress when she shifted in her place on my bed.

“Or put a lacey edge around testicular cancer on the x-ray reports,” I said. “Or they could glue pink hearts on the IV line that’s pouring chemo into you—a chemo that’ll rip your guts out.”

She lifted her ponytail and adjusted her stethoscope. “You know, you might be right about all the pink stuff.” No more chuckle.

Kaci had some numbers written on her palm. Someone else’s vital signs and urine output, I suspected. What did the person who belongs to those numbers think of the pink ribbon smokescreen?

“Plain and simple,” Kaci said, “I want to get better at what I do, because of you.”

Before Kaci left work around seven that morning, she brought me a gift. It was wrapped in metallic, dark blue paper with tons of silver ribbons curled and dangling in all directions. A box about the size of a volleyball. She told me not to open it until I got home. “I mean it, K . . . no cheating.” She gave me a quick hug and was gone.

I’m going home this afternoon after all the discharge paperwork is finished.

But this time, it’s different. Emmy and I just talked with a person from a hospice thing. You can go on hospice when you don’t have very long to live. The people working for the hospice help you die, the way you want. That sounds like a good thing to me.

No one could really help me live, even with losing a leg . . . not for very long anyway.

Now we'll see if they can help me die. That's their job.

My job will be to die peacefully. At home. Not alone.

And my job is to make sure Linc will be OK.

But that's not all.

I must figure out what to do with this secret I'm carrying. It's been more than three years of not telling. "Not telling" is a stone around my neck that's getting heavier. It's very close to home and it's beginning to choke me.

