

BENEVOLENT

Erin A. Jensen

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To every reader out there who is struggling just to make it through the day; you are beautiful and you were put on this earth for a reason. Don't dim your light because others are too blind to see that.

To Chris for supporting this venture and believing in me from the beginning.

And to Misha Collins for inspiring this story with your portrayal of Castiel and your benevolent heart.

Angel of God,
my guardian dear,
to whom his love commits me here;
ever this day be at my side,
to light and guard,
to rule and guide.

—Baltimore Manual of Prayers (1888)

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“Dust in the Wind”

Kansas

They say your life flashes before your eyes when you're dying, but for me, it wasn't just a quick flash. As I lay in that cold sterile hospital bed—enduring the slow progression of cancer's inevitable victory over my body—the highlight reel of my life played out at an unhurried pace, allowing me to relive each moment over again.

Why did my final montage play out differently than most? I couldn't say for sure. Maybe a slow death allowed more time for reflection, or maybe my vivid imagination just refused to conform to the normal way of doing things. That wasn't for me to know. I was just grateful for the distraction from my pain.

As my mind drifted back to the past, I shut my eyes and gave myself over to it because this would be my last chance to see his face before I left this world...

...Mousy soft-spoken little creature that I was, I wasn't a particularly popular child. In fact, I didn't make my first true friend until the third grade. Danny Cobb was the kindest soul I had ever met. Fortunately for me, he was also the most clueless when it came to interacting with his fellow grade-schoolers. Social awkwardness was the common ground from which the seed of our friendship took root—fiercely and protectively—empowering us to weather the cruel storm of our formative years.

My cancer-riddled brain was a bit fuzzy on the details of exactly how our friendship had begun eighty-something years earlier. What had stuck with me through all those years were the moments that truly mattered: the day in fifth grade when Danny stood up to the bully who tormented me during recess and walked away with a black eye and a busted lip...the day in eighth grade when he confided that he was attracted to boys but he was too afraid of his Catholic parents' reaction to tell them...the day we skipped school and snuck back to his house to watch the all-day *Supernatural* marathon and drool over our television heart-throbs...the day in ninth grade when he collapsed during math class and they wheeled him out of school on a stretcher...the day my mother told me that Danny wasn't going to get better because the cancer was too far gone...and the day I said goodbye to my dear friend...

...I was curled up under a blanket on the living room couch, attempting to drown my sorrows in a fictional

world where angels and demons roamed the earth and beautifully flawed heroes battled monsters to protect the unsuspecting masses from harm. As much as I usually enjoyed mooning over my favorite trench-coat-wearing angel, I could only stare absently at the screen. My heart just wasn't in it that night because Danny's mother had called my house a few hours earlier to inform my mom that the doctors didn't expect my friend to live through the night. When my mom broke the news to me, I begged her to take me to the hospital so I could say goodbye, but she insisted it wouldn't be right to intrude because Danny's mother didn't want me to see him like that. Mrs. Cobb felt that it would be better for me to remember my best friend the way he was before the cancer ate away at his body. But who cared what *she* felt? It was Danny's life that was slipping away. His feelings were the only feelings that ought to matter, and I knew in my heart that he would want me to be there.

Adrift in a sea of grief, I sat and stared at the credits as they scrolled down the screen at the end of the episode. The fact that the show was over didn't even register until an obnoxiously loud car insurance commercial snapped me out of it enough to hunt for the remote and turn off the television. I stood up from the couch with a weary sigh. Then I headed down the hall at a snail's pace, locked myself in the bathroom and went through the motions of getting ready for bed on autopilot. All the while, I prayed that my mom would change her mind and

offer to take me to the hospital so I could say goodbye to Danny.

When I finished getting ready for bed, I headed straight to my room without bothering to say goodnight to the woman who refused to take me where I desperately needed to go. I shut my bedroom door a little louder than I needed to, slipped into my comfiest pajamas and grabbed my smartphone and earbuds off the top of my dresser. As I turned around, my eyes settled on the top drawer of my desk across the room and my heart sank inside my chest.

A few weeks after Danny had learned that his cancer was incurable, he gave me a letter in a sealed envelope and sent me a link to a playlist that he'd put together for me. He made me promise not to check either of them out until *after he was gone*. I had kept my word. The envelope still sat unopened in the top drawer of my desk, and I'd resisted the overwhelming urge to click on the link to the playlist. Every time I considered taking a peek at it, a sinking feeling had settled in the pit of my stomach. *Don't play it until after I'm gone, Abbie*. It almost felt like opening the envelope or clicking on the link would somehow be sealing his fate and sentencing him to death, *but now...* What harm could looking at the letter do? My friend was already on death's doorstep. After everything the two of us had been through together, I couldn't believe it was all going to end without me ever getting the chance to say goodbye to him. The least I could do was read the

goodbye that Danny had written to me, and hope to God that he knew I'd be there in a heartbeat if I had any say in the matter.

That painfully familiar sinking feeling settled in the pit of my stomach as I walked to my desk and pulled the drawer open. I reached in with a trembling hand, took the envelope out and clutched it to my chest as I dropped into an armchair beside the window. Then I drew my legs up onto the seat, and hugged them close to my body as I took a few deep breaths to calm my nerves; but my hands just wouldn't stop shaking. So, I propped the envelope up on my knees with a resolute sigh. *I'm so sorry I can't be there to say goodbye to you, Danny.*

Childish as it sounds, I mouthed a silent prayer that somehow Danny would get my mental message and know how much I wanted to be there for him. *This was all just so freaking unfair.* Danny had always been there for me when I needed him. I wanted to slap both our mothers for being too stupid and selfish to let me be there for him when he needed me the most. Keeping us apart wasn't better for me or Danny, it was easier for *them* because they wouldn't have to witness our tearful goodbye.

My unsteady hands fumbled with the seal on the envelope for a moment before it gave way. As I slipped the letter out, a stray tear slid down my cheek and dripped from my chin, but I was careful to keep the pages out of its path. A torrent of nausea rose up from deep inside me, crashing over me in a violent wave as I smoothed the

precious sheets of paper out. I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on breathing in and out until the queasiness subsided. Then I opened my eyes and read Danny's parting words to me.

Abbie,

I know you so well that it almost feels like the two of us are halves of the same whole. I can picture exactly what you look like while you're reading this. You're curled up on a comfy piece of furniture, hugging your legs to your chest with tears streaming down your cheeks. I wish to God that I could be there to dry those tears. If it's any consolation, I'm bawling like a baby as I write this letter to you. But you probably knew that already.

I want you to know that my life has been so much richer because of you. You filled the second half of my life with more joy than I would've guessed it was possible to squeeze into seven short years. My heart is bursting with love for you as I write this, almost as if all the love I meant to share with you over the next eighty years is pouring out onto this page.

It's funny. As much as I've always loved to write, I'm finding it almost impossible to express everything that I want to say to you. I've been trying to finish this letter for days now and I can't, because I don't want to say goodbye to you *ever*. I want to stay right here and share decades full of laughter and tears with you, Abbie. I want us to watch

each other get married (even though I know you'll never find a husband as awesome as me, and if fate had given me the chance, I doubt I could've found a husband as dear as you). I want us to celebrate all the milestones—birthdays, holidays, the turning of the seasons—side by side, and I want the two of us to grow old together. I just can't bring myself to say goodbye to you, so I'm not going to.

I've always felt that nothing stirs up more emotion than a song that speaks to the heart and expresses exactly what you're feeling when you listen to it. If a song is playing—during a special moment in your life—every time you hear that song, it will bring you right back to that moment and all the emotions you felt when you first heard it will come flooding back to you. So, that's what I've decided to give you, songs that speak to the heart, to make you feel like a part of me is still there with you. Whenever you need me, you can listen to a song from your playlist and know that I'm out there somewhere, listening to the same song and waiting for the day when I can pull you into a bear hug and tell you how much I've missed you.

Because I want to put a smile on your face, and hopefully even make you laugh after you've worked through the grief, I decided to load the playlist up with a bunch of rock-and-roll songs. Yeah, I know. You're a diehard indie music girl, but these songs are supposed to remind you of me. So there. I get the final say in our epic

debate because I know you'll give my type of music the chance you refused to give it when I was around, since these songs are my way of remaining a part of your life. Play them when you miss me, curse me a little for including so many rock songs; then admit that I was right all along after you fall in love with them. Wherever I am, just know that I'll be smiling down at you with a big *I told you so*.

In all seriousness, this playlist isn't something I slapped together quickly. I've spent the past few weeks choosing the perfect songs, songs that are sure to win you over once you give them a chance. In honor of my favorite *Supernatural* character, some of the songs are straight up Dean Winchester-approved classic rock songs. In fact, a couple songs on the list are sure to put a smile on your face because you'll associate them with *Supernatural* episodes. But I didn't torture you too much. Almost every subgenre of rock is represented on the list: progressive rock, folk rock, alternative rock, grunge rock, hard rock, psychedelic rock, indie rock, blues rock, roots rock, soft rock, pop rock. (Yeah, I did my homework.)

So, let me explain why I picked the songs that made it onto this list. I know you, Abbie. I know most of your favorite songs are on the slower side. I know you love a singer with a voice that you can identify after just a couple verses; and I know that a gorgeous harmony trumps pretty much everything else in your book. Even though you've always insisted I'm tone-deaf and I only love rock music

because I can sing along just by screaming the lyrics, I know a perfect harmony when I find one. Our friendship is the ultimate perfect harmony, and I've treasured it since the day it started.

Okay, now on to the playlist. I added a couple Sting songs because Sting's voice is about as unique as a fingerprint, and the songs of his that I picked are on the slower side. I included "Your Song" because it's also on the slow side and guaranteed to move you, but I went with the angelic-sounding Ellie Goulding version instead of the classic Elton John because I knew you'd love her voice. "Nights In White Satin" by The Moody Blues is a beautiful song with a dreamy tempo that's sure to win you over. Kansas's "Carry on Wayward Son" needs no explaining to a *Supernatural* fangirl like you, and "Dust in the Wind" will be one of your favorites for sure. It's got a slow tempo, beautiful harmony and lyrics that'll bring tears to your eyes. I threw in a Creedence Clearwater Revival song because I'm pretty sure at least one of their songs was in an episode of *Supernatural*, and I just love their music. The Beatles' "Hey Jude" is on the list because they're the freaking Beatles. You're the tone-deaf one if you can't appreciate their songs. Since it would be criminal to exclude the king from a rock-and-roll playlist, Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling in Love" made the final cut. The king's velvet voice and the lyrics to this song are sure to melt your heart. Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" made the list because they're the

masters of harmony, and although they're more folk-rock-ish, they're in the Rock-and-Roll Hall of Fame (told you I did my homework). There are a bunch more songs. Some of them are by indie bands and some aren't even rock music, just songs I knew you'd love. I know you hate country music, but I still included one Willie Nelson song. I figured you wouldn't be too mad at me for adding it because the song I chose is "Blue Eyes Crying In the Rain." Deny that you like the song all you want, but it was playing at the end of the *Supernatural* episode where Castiel said goodbye to Claire Novak and I saw the tears in your eyes as your favorite angel watched her taxi drive away. Okay, I'm not going to ramble on forever and list every song that made the final cut, but you're eventually going to fall in love with every song on the list. I'd bet my life on it. (Okay...sorry. Bad joke.)

Play these songs when you miss me, Abbie. Choose one that matches your mood, close your eyes and imagine me sitting there listening along with you. Until we meet again, please know that I love you more than anyone or anything, and I always will.

All my love,

Danny

I choked back a sob as I unlocked my phone and brought up the link to Danny's playlist. Then I plugged my earbuds into the phone, stuck them in my ears and

started the music. “Dust in the Wind” by Kansas was the first song on the list. I was only a few verses in when the tears started streaming down my cheeks. My heart physically ached as I listened to the lyrics that so perfectly fit the moment, but I didn’t have the heart to stop the song because Danny had chosen each one with such care. I waited it out with my heart throbbing in my chest and stopped the music the instant the first song ended, vowing to listen to all of them when I was a bit more prepared to handle it.

I tugged my earbuds out of my ears, closed the playlist and glanced at the time on my phone. It was forty-three minutes past midnight, way past my mom’s bedtime. It was pretty safe to assume that she wasn’t going to have a change of heart at this point. *Chalk that up as one more unanswered prayer to add to my list.* Praying seemed about as useful as tossing a coin in a wishing well or wishing on a falling star. I wasn’t sure why the hell I still bothered.

I stood up from the chair, squeezed my eyes shut and held the letter close to my heart while I whispered a teary goodbye to my friend. Then I opened my eyes and blinked back the tears as I sat my phone down on my desktop next to Danny’s letter.

I shuffled across the room with a heavy heart, crawled into bed and cried myself to sleep, aching in the knowledge that I’d most likely wake in a world that my friend no longer inhabited.

That was the first night that he ever came to me in a dream.

“Would you like to say your goodbyes now, Abigail?” a male voice inquired from the foot of my bed.

A deep male voice—rousing me from sleep in the middle of the night—probably should’ve terrified me, but it didn’t because this man’s voice was a familiar comfort.

I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes, which was pointless since I was obviously still dreaming. There at the foot of my bed, stood my favorite television angel, dressed in a button-down shirt, crooked necktie, and that iconic trench coat of his. He was beautiful, flawless bone structure, stylishly mussed-up hair, and piercing blue eyes that looked far too wise to belong to this man at the peak of physical perfection.

I blinked my eyes a few times to reboot my senses, but he still stood there waiting for an answer. “Castiel?” I muttered in a groggy whisper, “Am I dreaming?”

He smiled at me with more compassion than I’d ever witnessed in any human set of eyes. “Yes. You are, but that doesn’t make this any less real.”

“I’ve lost my mind,” I muttered as my eyes filled with tears. “My best friend is dying and I’m sitting on my bed, talking to a fictional angel.”

His brilliant blue eyes brimmed with sorrow as he shook his head. “You are talking to a real angel. I chose this form because the fictional angel is a comfort to you.”

I blinked my eyes a few more times, expecting him to be gone each time my eyelids lifted. “What?”

His apologetic frown did nothing to detract from his beauty. “There isn’t much time to explain, Abigail. Danny is not long for this world, and I know how much he means to you. His mother is wrong to deny you the opportunity to say goodbye.”

“How would we get there?” I muttered, ignoring the way my heart ached at the angel’s words. If I focused on that pain, I would fall apart, this dream would morph into something nightmarish, and I’d lose this imaginary chance to see my friend one last time. “I’m pretty sure I’m not allowed to leave the house with strange men who slip into my bedroom in the middle of the night.”

“I’m not a man,” he whispered as he touched a hand to my foot.

The instant he touched me, my room melted away and I found myself sitting on Danny’s hospital bed.

My eyes filled with tears at the sight of all the tubes and wires connected to my friend’s brittle body. I looked up and felt comforted by the angel’s presence.

“He can hear you,” the angel standing beside the bed whispered.

“Danny,” I croaked as I slid closer to him, “it’s me, Abigail.”

“Abbie...” It seemed to take a tremendous effort for Danny to lift his eyelids, but a smile spread across his ashen face as he looked up at me. “I was afraid I wouldn’t get to say goodbye.”

“I’ll tell her goodbye for you, Danny.” Until his mother spoke, I didn’t realize she was seated in the corner of the room. My heart hammered in my chest as I turned toward the woman who’d refused to let me say goodbye to my friend, but a pang of sorrow gripped me the instant I laid eyes on her. I couldn’t possibly be mad at this puffy-eyed woman who sat there, hunched in on herself, hugging her sides as she gripped a crumpled tissue for dear life. Grief loomed over the poor woman like a specter, poised and ready to swallow her the instant her child drew his last breath.

“She’s here now,” Danny muttered in a voice much too frail for a fifteen-year-old boy, “and there’s a man here with her.”

Tears spilled down Mrs. Cobb’s cheeks as her grief-stricken eyes looked straight through me. “There’s no one here but us, Danny.”

“She’s sitting right here on my bed.” Danny’s grin widened as he squinted up at the angel standing next to his bed. “Castiel. He always was your favorite...gorgeous and awkward, just like you and me.”

Mrs. Cobb muffled a sob as the angel nodded a hello to Danny.

“Watch out for her,” Danny whispered to the angel, “She’s too precious for this ugly world.”

A tear slid down my cheek as the angel took Danny’s hand in his and gave it a comforting squeeze. “I have watched over her since the day she was born, Danny. She is precious, and so are you.”

Danny’s eyes filled with tears at the angel’s words. “My church doesn’t think so. According to them, I’m an abomination. Am I...going to hell...for my sins?”

Castiel gave Danny’s hand another squeeze as he shook his head. “God created you just as you are, Danny. He doesn’t make mistakes. You are a pure soul and it pleases Him to call you home to spend eternity in His presence. Those who consider you an abomination are the souls who are destined for hell.”

Danny’s bottom lip quivered as the angel let go of his hand. “Are you...here to take me?”

“No,” Castiel whispered, “I am here for Abigail, but your guardian is near. You will see him when it is your time.” At that, the angel turned to me. “It’s time to say your goodbyes now.”

I leaned forward and hugged Danny as gently as I could while holding on for dear life. “I’ll always love you, Danny. No one will ever be more precious to me.”

“I’m sorry I can’t stay here with you, Abbie,” he sobbed in a broken whisper, as I sat back and took his hand in mine, “but I’ll...”

Danny’s gentle brown eyes had noticeably dulled. They used to shine with such kindness and joy. The agony that darkened them now broke my heart. It was obvious that he was in an excruciating amount of pain and yet, here he was apologizing to me for leaving. I couldn’t stand to see him suffer like that.

“It’s alright, Danny,” I whispered, forcing the words past the lump that was forming in my throat, “I know you don’t want to leave...but I can see how much you’re hurting...and I don’t want you to suffer anymore. It’s okay to let go.... I understand.”

I didn’t see Danny’s angel, but I saw the contented smile that lit up Danny’s face the instant the angel appeared. He looked so peaceful in that final moment, as he drew his last breath.

I felt something intangible break inside me at the sound of that breath, and I knew in my heart that it would haunt me for the rest of my life.

The next thing I knew, I was back in my bedroom. Tears were streaming down my cheeks, there was an unbearable ache in my chest and the fictional angel was gone...

...The voices of my loved ones were fainter now. I couldn't decipher the meaning of their words, but I recognized their voices and the rhythmic rise and fall as they joined together in prayer. I wanted so badly to tell them all how precious they were to me, but I was far beyond words.

A voice inside my head whispered, They know, Abigail. It was my voice, but the thought had come from someone else.

Too tired to question it, I let myself drift back to the past...

Every penny earned by this book's sales will be donated to Random Acts charitable organization.

If you'd like to learn more about me, check out my website — erinajensen.com

You can also find me on Twitter— @ErinAJensen, Facebook, and Goodreads.com

I enjoy connecting with readers to hear what you think about my stories; answer questions; or chat about books, *Supernatural*, or anything else we both happen to love!