

# DANIEL



Marcin Lechna

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*To my daughter Martyna*



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## Chapter one

Daniel woke up in a room the size of a basketball court. It was a roofless hall with white walls and a white floor. He lay on the cold, smooth surface staring at the clear, bright blue sky. He saw such a sky in the Swiss Alps when the weather was fine, but here it didn't seem to fit in with the space. The air was still as if everything around him had stopped. There was a complete silence. Although the walls and floor seemed modern and sterile, this space felt like it was built centuries ago. And while the place didn't remind him of any particular style, it recalled the atmosphere of a temple.

Daniel remembered the previous day very well. His return from the hospital to the apartment in Santa Monica. His argument over the phone with Monica about the change of their evening plans due to the prolonged operation with him as the lead surgeon.

He remembered that clearly, but what did it matter now if he didn't know where he was and how the hell he ended up here.

He was wearing blue jeans, a white shirt, and—to his surprise—he was barefoot. Thoughts raced through his

mind as his brain tried to put the pieces of the puzzle together into a coherent whole. Alas, although he had a doctorate in science, he was failing miserably. None of the theories he reached for, while still recovering, brought him any closer to the solution of the mystery, leaving an unsettling black hole between yesterday and this weird today.

Daniel stopped pondering after a short while, concluding that he just had to get out of this place and walked up to one of the walls. Moving his hand along the wall, he walked around the room. The hall was empty except for a laptop on the floor—the only item in this place. He picked it up and continued walking, looking at the walls, searching for any sign of a hidden mechanism that would break the quiet, white surface, offering him a way out.

After circling the room several times, Daniel realized that he was trapped. He was rather reserved about the whole situation—maybe a bit curious—although the lack of any logical hint that could lead him toward the solution to the puzzle left him feeling concerned which was only intensified by a vague impression that he was being watched.

Finally, he sat against the wall and opened the little silver computer, hoping he would find some clues that would allow him to understand what had really happened.

The bright blue sky over his head turned gray while the temperature dropped slightly.

The computer displayed the interface. To his surprise, there was only one icon against a big blue question mark. The wallpaper looked like an image from some simple

computer game and Daniel thought it was remarkably appropriate for the situation. He smiled and thought that his friends must have played a prank on him for his birthday. The only problem was that Christmas was approaching, and his birthday was almost two months away.

Still counting on the host of the show to appear any second and congratulate him for keeping his cool until the end, Daniel clicked on the icon, and a website for an online store, featuring a few products, opened.

There was a special offer on a five-liter water bottle and a steak. It appeared as though the store sold everything. He then closed the search window and once again checked the computer for additional software.

He couldn't find anything, not even system tools, and none of the regular keyboard shortcuts worked, as if it wasn't a personal computer, so much as a closed-system shopping platform.

After an hour of messing around, he gave up and shut the laptop, realizing that the sun had disappeared behind the white walls, and the shadow fell towards the eastern wall, slowly drowning the room in darkness.

Daniel tried searching the room one more time, illuminating his way with the computer screen, but the light was too weak. So, he sat against the wall, thinking, and waiting for something to happen. Finally, he fell asleep, still seated, holding the laptop with his right hand.

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The next day he was woken up by the sun's rays which, reflecting off the white walls, blinded him.

Within a few seconds, his mind shifted into top gear again, and Daniel was ready to tackle another attempt to get out. His focus was disrupted by his full bladder and a strong desire for coffee, which accompanied him every morning. This desire triggered an urgent need to feel the taste of an espresso in his mouth and sense its aroma in the air. The first need he fulfilled at the opposite end of the hall. The second one became increasingly intrusive and stayed with him for quite a while. The thought of coffee became more and more unbearable, and the emptiness of his stomach intensified. He realized that the last meal he had was a sandwich from the hospital bistro.

The thought of it increased his appetite, but he pushed it aside. What he desired most was coffee which perhaps could help him find out what was going on. Again, he searched the white walls thoroughly, and checked once more the perfectly smooth surface of the floor. Moving his hand over it, he wondered why it wasn't getting warmer with the sun's rays. Although the sun shone brightly, the floor stayed cold, like an old church.

Daniel squinted at the sun, watching it move across part of the perfectly blue sky. Suspecting that someone had designed all of it, he began talking to himself. "I know you can hear me, and maybe you are having fun, but I'm not. If it was supposed to be a surprise, or some fun puzzle, you fucking failed." Raising his voice, he shouted, just to be sure, "What fun is it to solve a puzzle without a fucking coffee?!"

After a short while, he sat against the wall and opened the computer, thinking to himself, *the solution must be in this device*. Cursing under his breath, he began inspecting the computer in the same order as the day before.

But there were no inputs or outputs. The computer had to be charged remotely because the battery was always full. When he opened it, the interface appeared with its symbolic question mark and the single icon allowing him to enter the store, as it had the day before. No menu. No additional features. Daniel felt that he was going in circles, like in games he used to play as a child. He remembered how he would reach a moment in those games when he was supposed to find a hidden entrance, or press some button, or open a trapdoor. He recalled the anger evoked by his inability to find the solution, because the programmer thought of some sophisticated trick intended for older players.

Daniel clicked on the store icon again. Everything looked like it did the day before, with one slight difference: there was a special offer on coffee instead of water. The cup in the picture was decorated with a logo resembling Starbucks. Instead of a crowned woman, however, there was a winged angel, and the name *Whiteangel Coffee*.

“Well, now you’ve crossed the line,” he commented loudly, looking around as if he was counting on somebody to answer him. Meanwhile, just looking at the picture brought back the stubborn thirst. On impulse, he added the coffee to the basket and clicked *Order*.

“What now? The waiter will slide down on a rope and bring me a coffee?”

He closed the computer and threw it against the wall. A hollow sound echoed through the room. Daniel realized it was already midday, and hunger made him feel frustrated.

Racking his brain, he checked the walls once more. He opened the computer again, surprised that the device hadn't been affected by his attempt to destroy it. Stranger still, there wasn't even the slightest scratch where the computer struck the wall.

The desktop background had changed. The puzzle sign had disappeared, replaced by a picture of a sunset. Daniel nodded his head wondering if the system had changed the wallpaper automatically, or if someone was doing it on purpose. He spent the rest of the day looking at the white wall. He tried to remember the last weeks, and the events of the recent days; anything that could help him get some bearing on the situation.

Hours passed as he continued to suffer from his recurring thirst. After some time, it became so urgent, that he couldn't think straight. *We are so weak when we are thirsty or hungry*, he thought.

With this in mind, he watched the sun disappear behind the wall, and its shadow move across the room, turning it into a dark void.

On the third day, Daniel was woken up by hunger and the smell of coffee. He opened his eyes. Nothing had changed since the previous day except for one little detail. There was a cup of hot coffee in the middle of the room, its aroma filling the air. It teased him,

encouraged him, and cleared his head. He jumped to his feet and slowly approached the cup. He looked at it and wanted to grab it but restrained himself instead picking it up slowly. The coffee was still hot so it must have shown up just a moment earlier.

The coffee tasted unlike anything he'd tasted before. Its overwhelming aroma, combined with the feeling of fulfillment, relaxation, and warmth, was incredible. He wondered if the coffee was really this amazing, or if he was overreacting. He quickly realized that it was his thirst that made the drink seem so special. The coffee tasted like regular coffee. He looked at the cup, and the writing:

*Whenever you want it, I am close.* But what did it mean? And who wrote it?

He sat down calmly against the wall, at the same place where he had slept, like it was already marked. He drank the coffee slowly, savoring each sip.

The computer was next to him. Daniel wondered if the creators of this show were toying with him, or perhaps there was a deeper meaning to it all. He eventually arrived at two explanations: his friends were messing with him, or some twisted psychopath with lots of money was playing a game: *Daniel, the Lab Rat*.

The worst part of it was his complete lack of ideas for a good ending to this game. Because, if his friends were behind it, they overdid it a bit, and it would end in disaster. Of course, there could be some hidden camera, but he would have had to agree to such a game, and Daniel had no recollection of agreeing to participate in any test, experiment, or game.

It was quite unlikely that one could have arranged all of this legally. Locking him up in a white prison without food—it could not be done without legal consequences. He was certain that Monica would not have agreed to it. Daniel's parents were dead. He had no brothers or sisters. Nobody had the authority to enlist him in something like this.

Other possibilities remained.

He had agreed to it. He had signed some document, and his memory had been blocked while under hypnosis. It would explain a lot. The thought of agreeing to such an experiment after all was reassuring. He preferred the idea that it was done by some wannabe psycho-psychologist who wanted to check how long a person could survive on coffee alone.

After a coffee, he had more clarity and found it easier to think. He looked at the cup, turning it in his hand, and reached for the computer again. He opened it, and the screen glowed with bright light.

The wallpaper was different. Now it showed a woman running joyfully across a shopping mall, with a bunch of bags in her hand. At the desktop, there was still only the icon leading to the store. When he looked at it more closely, one thought changed everything.

The day before, in a wave of desperation, he had ordered a coffee from the store. This important observation led him to conclude that this was not a game imposed by some director of a show he was living in, but a response to his order. If the computer had just one function, and it was the only object left for him in the room, the solution seemed obvious.



Daniel opened the program again and checked his previous order. It still contained a coffee. The cup was of the same size as the one in the picture, which meant he had access to other items in the store too. He looked through them, and started clicking, adding everything he could to the cart.

“Let’s see how you deal with that,” he said, smiling to himself, and added a red English-style armchair to his shopping list.

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On the fourth day, Daniel was woken up by hunger. He opened his eyes, slowly realizing how hungry and thirsty he was. His shirt was sticking to his body, and he reeked of sweat. He leaned back on his arms and froze.

In the middle of his white prison, there was a red armchair wrapped in plastic wrap, and next to it someone had left a stack of packages. On top of the packages there was a cup of coffee. Most of the boxes had an advertising slogan: *Be yourself but consume with us—Silver Angel Co.*

Daniel climbed the stack part way to reach for the coffee, then took a few steps back with the cup, looking at the boxes. He pulled the red armchair away, and without taking the plastic off, sat back and made himself comfortable. Daniel sipped the coffee, but his mind seemed to be frozen. He felt peaceful and detached from reality. He felt weak and hungry, but the coffee brought back his clarity of mind, although he still felt sluggish. He took things in but didn’t analyze

them. Daniel looked at the parcels, and not sure what else to do, he began unpacking them, looking for the steak he had ordered.

The meal was still warm; the steak was rare, with beans and baked potatoes wrapped in foil on the side. Daniel enjoyed it, although in a strange, apathetic way. He realized that his reaction stemmed from the irrationality of the whole situation, and he promised himself that whatever the meaning of it all was, he would try to find it.

“I will find out what is going on, even if I have to spend the rest of my life here,” he muttered to himself. This thought comforted him and cleared his mind. Perhaps the meal was helping him think more clearly. It seemed that the latter theory was more probable. Being a doctor, he knew all too well how poorly the machine we call a body functioned if it didn’t get the right fuel.

“Even a Mustang with a 500-horsepower engine is worthless without fuel. Luckily, the basic fuel for the brain is oxygen, and it feels like we have a cool, fresh mountain climate here,” he said, setting the empty plate on the floor; the knife and fork neatly placed, as if waiting for a waiter to take it away. Daniel was immersed in thoughts and stopped only to take off the plastic wrap from the red, silver-studded armchair.

Stroking the chair, he examined its details. He sat there for several hours, analyzing everything, one thought at a time. The longer he pondered, the more convinced he became that he wouldn’t think of anything new, and the best thing to do was just wait. Luckily, one can wait in various ways, and Daniel was the kind

of guy who was never bored. He decided to get set up for a new start, so the fridge stayed full, and the bar was always stocked with the best whiskey.

\*\*\*

A month had passed since his imprisonment. Now, Daniel was certain someone was behind it. He was convinced he hadn't gone mad, although the construction of the place itself, with an open roof, where the sun always shone and the sky was never cloudy, filled him with concern about his own mental health.

Daniel preferred logical conclusions and simple solutions over fantastical theories and explanations. During this month, he considered all the possibilities of his imprisonment, while peacefully sipping whisky in his red studded chair. One day, after having a bit too much to drink, he shouted profanities at imagined aliens who he was sure had abducted him. Severely inebriated, this seemed like the most plausible explanation for everything that had happened to him.

When he sobered up, the alien abduction idea seemed unlikely, and his hangover from drinking an entire bottle of Jack Daniel's bothered him only for a moment.

He ordered many items through the store. The laptop had been an image of a rat moving around a maze for some time now. It was frustratingly meaningful, as it aptly summarized his situation. The room soon filled up with various items, and Daniel didn't even bother to take some of them out of their cardboard boxes. They

just stood there, in the middle of the hall, waiting for someone to take care of them. More and more, the white prison started to resemble a warehouse for some online store.

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It was the last day of January. Forty days had passed since Daniel had woken up in the prison. He felt a growing need to make himself comfortable enough here to work on solving the mystery in peace. He already had a toilet, a bathtub, a desk, some odds and ends, and a mattress. He slept on it for a month in a southern corner of the white prison. Every morning, Daniel was abruptly woken up by the intense sunlight reflecting off the western wall. The white surface blinded Daniel, kicking him into high gear.

Now, the backdrop of the online store changed to an oil painting. Daniel had seen it before. He couldn't remember where, but he felt that this piece of information was waiting just around the corner, in a nook of his subconscious.

The painting showed a vast landscape, a bay, and the sea. In the foreground, there was a farmer plowing a field, a flock of sheep grazing nearby, and a shepherd. In the background, there was a port town with boats in the harbor. Little details expressed a peaceful, everyday life. A man sitting on a rock. Sails billowing in the wind. A day from the life of a sixteenth century islander. Daniel racked his brain for a moment, wondering where he knew the painting from, but he pushed the

thought aside, reluctant to waste time. He felt he had missed something important.

Daniel returned to the store and searched through the climbing equipment, wondering if there was any gear that would allow him to climb over the glass-smooth walls. He had been climbing since he was a kid. He liked it, and maybe that was why he started his search here. He realized that it was hard to escape a prison with guards watching all the time, but he also knew that with each attempt he would gain more information about the situation he found himself in.

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Day forty-four. Daniel attached suction cups to his hands, and mounted rods to his elbows with leg supports at their ends. He hoped his latest idea would get him out of there. Before this new plan, he had ordered different kinds of drills in an attempt to pierce through the wall, but no drill could break the smooth surface of the barrier.

Foot by foot, Daniel climbed upwards, occasionally taking a suction cup out of his backpack, and mounting a safety rope in the carabiner. He was getting closer to the top edge. He turned his head in the hope of seeing more than the blue sky above the opposite wall. Unfortunately, there was only blue. Adrenaline gave him a boost of energy and he kept climbing higher. As Daniel was nearing forty feet, he lost consciousness and fell off the wall like a shirt taken away by wind. The

rope saved his life, or at least his bones. The dusk found him unconscious, as he dangled lifelessly.

The next day Daniel woke up hovering in the harness. He remembered everything up to the unlucky forty-foot mark. Although his whole body hurt, he didn't hesitate to start the climb over again. As he started to pull himself up, the world disappeared again, and he found himself in a vacuum, not knowing what was up or down. It wasn't a loss of consciousness. It was something different. He was conscious but it seemed like he was outside of time and reality.

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Day forty-six. Daniel, sore from the harness that dug into his side, leaving a huge bruise and pulled muscles, realized that a few days would pass before he would recover and try one last time to get out of his prison using this method.

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Day forty-nine. Daniel started to climb again, like a lizard. Slowly, step by step, he attached suction cups to the wall and mounted the safety rope in the carabiner. When he approached the *cut-off point*—as he called it—he started sweating and his steps became shorter. He was cut off, and in a split second fell again. The rope yanked violently at the first suction cup, tearing it off the wall. Maybe this innovative gear couldn't hold the nearly two-hundred-pound load, or maybe he had

touched the wall with a sweaty hand and the suction cup wasn't attached properly. As Daniel fell, unconscious, he tore the hooks off the wall. He nosedived towards the floor like a bag of sand. The suction cups absorbed some of the shock but failed to stop the fall as they came off the wall, one by one, like torn fabric. Daniel hit the floor with a thud. The helmet protected his head, but the fall was accompanied by the sound of his skull being cracked. This escape attempt should have ended tragically. But when he hit the rock-hard floor, he regained consciousness instead of losing it. At first, he couldn't move, and when he realized what had happened, he began writhing in pain. He cursed under his breath, and thought to himself,

*I can't believe they fucking dropped me from that height. Even if I don't die from the trauma, there's probably nothing left of me to put back together. I didn't think to order any meds. Fucking hell, everything hurts.*

Daniel screamed with pain and anger, trying to move. It took him a few minutes to undo the harness. He crawled to the studded chair where the laptop was. Every move was painful. He found comfort in the fact that he could still bend his arms and legs, which was promising. Even still, it felt like somebody had shoved a steel rod into his left side, and Daniel wondered how many bones were broken.

He grabbed the laptop and scrambled toward the mattress, pushing forward with one leg. The other one hurt with every movement. Daniel cried tears of fury against the mysterious directors, and his own stupidity. His optimism and nonchalance led to this tragedy. He

lifted himself with one hand and crawled, coughing. He tasted blood in his mouth and wondered if it was coming from his lungs, or just from his busted lips. The several feet toward the mattress felt like eternity, and Daniel started wondering if the eastern wall that he had tried to climb earlier was worth the trouble, but he finally reached the mattress. Daniel crawled onto it and felt relieved. He opened the laptop and, wiping the sweat off his eyes, typed in *surgical dressing*, in the hope it would direct him to a properly supplied section of the store. He clicked mindlessly: bandages, gauze, stabilizers. He put anything in the cart that could prove useful to his survival. He didn't know how badly he was wounded but, judging by the aching parts of his body, he realized he was in trouble. His right arm hung lifelessly, forcing him to operate the computer with his left hand, which made things more difficult. He scrolled through the tabs. He felt nauseous and his head was spinning.

He moved to medications and added morphine, Vicodin, and cocaine to the cart, not at all surprised by the kinds of drugs the store offered. He clicked automatically, filling up the cart, for fear that he might lose consciousness again before ordering all the necessary things. He moved to the *Medical Equipment* section and threw in various appliances, realizing, with surprise, that they even offered a CAT scanner. He felt that he was getting weaker, and when the weakness started to overwhelm him, he quickly went to the cart and clicked *Order*. The store window closed, and the desktop showed the wallpaper again. It was the same image as before, but now, as if a memory gate had opened



after his head hit the floor, he remembered where he'd seen it—at school, in Art History class. It was Pieter Bruegel's *The Fall of Icarus*.

Drifting away into unconsciousness, Daniel realized that he had seen the wallpaper in the store where he ordered the climbing gear. It was there before he started planning his escape. It struck him that somebody had predicted what would happen to him. The fact that none of the messages on the screen were random also surprised him. He felt like a puppet with the strings being yanked by some unknown forces. It filled him with dread; he was afraid of losing himself and his humanity. *This is crazy*, he thought, and with this conviction, he fell into dark oblivion.

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