

## Guardian Angel

Matthew tried to force himself to fall asleep. He failed. He told himself he needed to sleep, as he had to get up early in the morning to drive to Tennessee. His body didn't listen. He worried that if he didn't fall asleep, he'd be dead tired all day. He'd been looking forward to this trip for a year, ever since the last time he met his old college buddies for the homecoming game. They were going to meet the Friday before the game, in time to have dinner and hit a few of their favorite bars near the campus. Then they'd have all day Saturday for tailgating, the game, and celebrating after the game.

Ironically, one of the reasons he couldn't fall asleep was because he was worrying about not getting enough sleep. That wasn't the only reason, though. This was one of those nights when his brain decided he needed to relive all the times he's screwed up over the years. Embarrassing moments. Awkward conversations. Times he'd lied to his parents when he was a kid. Breaking up with girlfriends. Tests he'd bombed. The job interview he wasn't prepared for. Bad decisions. He'd look at the clock, toss and turn, look at the clock again, and remember another failure. One o'clock. Two o'clock. Three o'clock. He really needed to fall asleep . . .

The rain splattering against his windshield made the gray morning light look even more dismal. The news on the radio was boring. The wipers made an almost hypnotic noise as they swept back and forth. RRRRUH rrrruh RRRRUH rrrruh. He drank two cups of coffee with breakfast and a third was getting cold in his travel mug. It left a sour taste in his mouth. He was dead tired, and he hadn't even been on the road an hour. RRRRUH rrrruh RRRRUH rrrruh. He was vaguely aware of passing a truck pulled off to the side of the road. RRRRUH rrrruh RRRRUH rrrruh. Eight more hours to go. RRRRUH rrrruh RRRRUH rrrruh. He wished he'd gotten some sleep last night. RRRRUH rrrruh RRRRUH rrrruh.

"You need to perk up before you have an accident."

"WHAT THE . . .??" The car swerved as Matthew stared in shock at the strange man who had just appeared in the passenger seat. The man calmly reached his left arm out and steadied the steering wheel.

"Whoa," the man said. "I didn't mean for that to be a self-fulfilling prophesy."

"Who the hell are you?" Matthew asked. "And how did you get into my car?"

“Call me Fred,” the man said. “And I’ve been here all along. Actually, I’ve been with you for years. I just thought this was a good time to let you see me.” He kept his eyes on the road ahead as he spoke, gently nudging the steering wheel as necessary.

“I’ve never seen you before in my life!” Matthew declared, still in shock, and still staring at the man instead of the road. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m your guardian angel,” Fred said. “And at the moment, I’m trying to keep your car on the road since you don’t seem to be doing it.”

Matthew turned his attention back to the road. Fred let go of the wheel and sat back with a sigh of relief.

“You don’t look like an angel,” Matthew said.

“What do angels look like?” Fred asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. White robes. Feathered wings. A halo, and maybe a harp?”

“Those are picture book angels,” Fred said. “I could look like that if you’d like. I thought you’d be more comfortable if I looked like this.”

“I never expected an angel to look like a balding, slightly pudgy old man. Actually, you look a little like my grandfather. Or my Uncle Pete.”

“I used them as models,” Fred said. “You have fond memories of them, so I thought this would put you at ease. I chose the name ‘Fred’ for the same reason.”

“What’s your real name?”

“You couldn’t pronounce it,” Fred said. “And that would make you uncomfortable. ‘Fred’ works just fine.”

Matthew thought a bit about what Fred had said. “You said I had fond memories of my uncle and my grandfather. Does that mean you can read my memories? And my thoughts?”

“Oh, yes,” Fred said matter-of-factly. “I can read your thoughts, and I was there when you made those memories. You didn’t need much protection then, though. Your world was pretty safe.”

“Are you saying my world isn’t safe now?” Matthew asked with concern.

“Not the way you’ve been driving,” Fred answered.

“I’m a little tired this morning,” Matthew confessed. “I didn’t sleep well last night. But, if you can read my thoughts, I guess you already knew that.”

Fred nodded. “I think it would be good if you told me about it anyway. I’m just here to help you, after all, and sometimes talking about problems helps resolve them. Besides, I’m a big fan of the Socratic Method.”

“The what?” Matthew asked.

“Never mind that,” Fred backtracked. “Just tell me why you couldn’t sleep.”

“It was just one of those nights when my motor was running. You know, when you tell yourself you need to go to sleep but your brain won’t stop thinking about things. Last night I was thinking about all the times I screwed up.”

“Like what, for example?” Fred asked.

“Like the time I had to read a poem I wrote to the entire school.”

“How was that a screw-up?”

“I thought you said you were there with me. That you remembered what I remembered.”

“I was, and I remember,” Fred insisted. “But I probably don’t remember it the same way you do. And anyway, I want you to tell me about it.”

Matthew resigned himself to telling the story. “I think I was in second grade. Maybe it was third grade, but I think it was second. Anyway, Mrs. King made everyone in the class write a poem about what they wanted to be when they grew up. For some reason she really liked my poem, and the next time we had a school assembly she made me read it to the entire school.”

“What was wrong with that?” Fred asked.

“I was scared to death!” Matthew replied. “I thought poetry was dumb and I thought my poem was dumb. I was afraid all the kids would laugh at me. So, I decided to act funny, so

they'd have a reason to laugh. I'd seen some guy on TV act like he was drunk when he read a speech, so I tried to copy him."

"Did the kids laugh?" Fred asked.

"Nobody laughed. They didn't know what was going on. The teacher asked me if I felt OK. I wanted to run away and never come back."

"As screw-ups go, that's pretty minor," Fred assured him. "Nobody got hurt, you weren't in danger, you just tried something that didn't work. That's how we learn. Childhood is all about trying new things. If we like the results, we've learned what to do. If we don't like the results, we've learned what not to do."

"It was humiliating," Matthew said.

"Do you remember when you were three years old and you touched a bee you saw in the garden?"

"I'll never forget *that*," Matthew said. "It stung me!"

"And do you lie awake at night now and wish you hadn't done that?"

"No, but until then I didn't know anything about bees," Matthew said. "I thought they were like butterflies. Or lightning bugs. I didn't know it was a stupid thing to do."

"And until you acted like you were drunk, you didn't know that was a stupid thing to do. But you learned from your mistake. You never did that again, just like you never touched a bee again. Painful memories tend to stick with us. That's nature's way of making sure we don't make the same mistake again. But there's no point in kicking yourself over and over for making the mistake in the first place. You learn from it and move on. You're not the same person now that you were when you made the mistake."

"I'm pretty sure everyone in that school still knows who I am," Matthew insisted.

"You said the poem was about what you wanted to be when you grew up," Fred said. "What *did* you want to be?"

"A cowboy," Matthew confessed.

"And do you still want to be a cowboy?" Fred asked.

"No, I outgrew that idea a long time ago," Matthew answered.

"And that's just one of many ways in which you're not the same person you were back then," Fred reassured him. "And if it's any consolation, the only other person who even remembers that incident is Jacob Kingman, and he remembers it as being funny."

"Really?" Matthew asked. "You can read everyone else's thoughts, too?"

"No," Fred assured him, "but I talk to my peers. I knew that was one of the memories that kept you awake, so I checked around."

"Do you know what happened to Tyler Bunski?" Matthew asked.

"The Valentine incident?"

"Yeah," Matthew said shamefully. "I didn't give him one."

"Sins of omission," Fred explained. "The things we wish we'd done but didn't. Sometimes those are the hardest ones to put behind us."

"He was the kid nobody liked," Matthew said. "I don't know why. He seemed like a nice enough kid, but I didn't really know him. Everybody just said he was weird. We made Valentine boxes in school and glued paper hearts and stuff on them. The teacher said we needed to make certain we gave every kid in the class a Valentine, but somebody said it would be funny if nobody gave one to Tyler. It seemed like a great idea at the time, but when we opened our boxes it wasn't funny at all. I could see it was all Tyler could do to keep from crying. I wished I had given him a Valentine, but it was too late. He wasn't in my class the next year, and we went to different middle schools, and I lost track of him."

"I can't lie to you about that one," Fred said. "That really hurt Tyler. Even before that incident the teacher noticed Tyler had become an outcast. That's one of the reasons he was moved to a different class. He did OK in the other class. And, while he never forgot about the Valentines, he got over it. He almost never thinks about it anymore."

"I still feel terrible about it," Matthew said. "I really wish I'd given him a Valentine."

"It's good that you feel that way," Fred assured him. "You learned several lessons from that. You learned how bad it is to deliberately be mean to another person, and you learned that sometimes you have to stand up to peer pressure. You need to remember those lessons, but you also need to forgive yourself for making the mistake. You're a different person now."

"I guess," Matthew said.

"Actually," Fred added, "not everyone refused to give him a Valentine. Samantha Newburg met him after class and gave him a special Valentine she'd made for him. That really cheered him up, and it started a lifelong friendship. They're married now."

"Things didn't work out that well for Emily," Matthew said with sadness.

"She hasn't found the right person to marry, if that's what you mean," Fred responded. "But that doesn't mean she isn't happy."

"She definitely wasn't happy the night we broke up," Matthew said. "I'll never forget the way she cried."

"She was your high school sweetheart," Fred said.

Matthew nodded. "We dated off and on at first, and we started going steady our senior year. We went to different colleges, but we promised each other we'd remain true. We planned to get married after we got our degrees."

"And did you stay true to her?" Fred asked.

"I did my freshman year," Matthew said. "Of course, I was so busy with my classes and homework I really didn't have time to date anybody. I was really looking forward to seeing her when I went home for the summer."

"What happened then?" Fred asked.

"It was great at first. She was excited to see me, we told each other all the things that had happened since we last saw each other, but as the summer went on it seemed like we had less and less in common."

"You'd both changed," Fred said. "People change a lot when they leave home, make new friends, and start focusing on a career. There's nothing wrong with that. It's how we mature."

"I didn't feel like I'd changed," Matthew said. "I thought maybe she had changed. It seemed like she wasn't as interested in me, or in us, as she had been. I know I wasn't as excited to spend time with her as I had been. I thought I was doing the right thing when I suggested we see other people. But when she started crying, I realized how much I'd hurt her."

“Do you wish you hadn’t broken up with her?” Fred asked.

“I don’t know. I wish I hadn’t hurt her. I guess if I hadn’t broken up with Emily I never would have met Alyssa. I really love her, but maybe if I’d tried harder with Emily . . .”

“You can’t love someone by trying harder,” Fred said gently. “And if you stay with someone you don’t love you both wind up feeling miserable. Growing up is hard. Some people find the right person on their first try, but most people don’t. People change as they become adults, and sometimes the person who was right when you were younger is no longer the one for you. You said you sensed that Emily didn’t feel the same about you as she did in high school, and you were right. She just wasn’t ready to admit it.”

They drove in silence for a while. Then Matthew spoke up.

“Do you believe in God?” he asked.

“I’d be a pretty poor angel if I didn’t,” Fred answered.

“Sorry. I forgot who I was talking to. Do you think God can forgive me for hurting Emily, and for all the bad things I’ve done in my life?”

“I think He has already forgiven you. You made mistakes. Everyone does. You admitted to yourself that they were mistakes. Not everyone does that. You learned from your mistakes. Not everyone does that, either. You feel bad about them, which means you repent. How could He not forgive you?”

“I never went to church and confessed or anything,” Matthew admitted.

“God doesn’t stand on ceremony. He knows what’s in your heart,” Fred explained. “Ceremonies and rituals help some people feel closer to God, and that’s great. Some people feel closer to God when they’re alone, just thinking about him. That works too. In the Old Testament people insisted on elaborate ceremonies where they sacrificed lambs and fatted calves to God. God appreciated the sentiment, but He would have been just as happy without the sacrifices. He loves animals, too. There is no ‘right’ way to approach God, and there is no wrong way either.”

“That’s good to know,” Matthew said.

“So, if God has forgiven your sins, why haven’t you forgiven yourself?”

“You said I should remember what I had done wrong and learn from it,” Matthew protested.

“Remember your mistakes, yes.” Fred answered. “Learn from them, yes. Lie awake at night fretting about them, no. Oh, I know a lot of people do it. People used to pray ‘The remembrance of our sins is grievous onto us, the burden of them is intolerable,’ but they were praying for God to forgive their sins so they could stop fretting about them. God has forgiven your sins, but you won’t let go of them. And let’s face it. None of your sins is particularly noteworthy. They’re not exactly on God’s top ten list.”

“I guess you’re right,” Matthew said.

“I know I’m right,” Fred replied. “My job is to protect you from things that might do you harm, and at the moment your biggest threat is you.”

And as Fred said that, he disappeared.

Matthew was almost as startled by Fred’s disappearance as he had been by his appearance. Had Fred really been there? Was this whole thing a hallucination? He thought about what Fred had said. Or at least, he tried to think about it. He was still really tired from lack of sleep. The rain was still beating against the windshield, blurring his vision. The windshield wipers were still going RRRRUH rrrruh RRRRUH rrrruh . . .

Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, there was a stop sign. A car was right in front of him. He slammed on his brakes, but the tires slid on the wet pavement. He wasn’t going to stop in time. He saw the terrified face of a little girl in the back seat of the other car, staring straight at him . . .

Matthew woke up with a start. He was trembling. What a horrible dream! He could hear the rain drumming on the roof. He looked at the clock. The alarm was set to go off in ten minutes. “The hell with that,” he thought as he turned off the alarm. “I need my sleep. I’ll call the guys and tell them I’ll catch up with them after dinner.” Alyssa was still sound asleep beside him. He snuggled up to her, untroubled by thoughts of Emily, Tyler, or any of the mistakes he’d made as a kid. “Thank you, Fred,” he thought as he fell asleep.