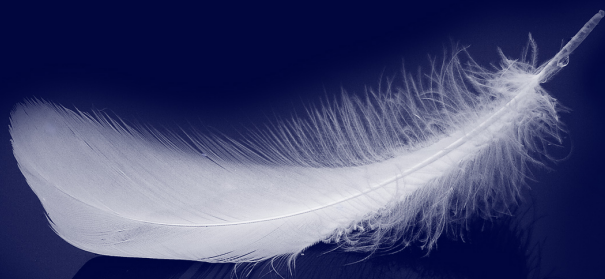




Gregory Campisi

Angel

A NOVEL & GUIDE



BELIEVE

Angel

A Novel & Guide

Gregory Campisi



Published by
AWAKEN Center for Human Evolution
a 501(c)(3) Charitable Organization
Quakertown, PA

www.AwakenCHE.org

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Cover design and book layout by Gregory Campisi

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GregCampisi.com

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ISBN: 978-1-7342299-8-1 (Paperback)

ISBN: 979-8-9871425-0-9 (Hardcover)

*“Simply believe,
and the gates of Heaven themselves
open before you.”*

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Author's Note

Thank you for choosing *Angel: A Novel & Guide*.

Like so many others who have chosen to read this book, simply by picking it up, you are opening a doorway and closing to strengthen your connection with these heavenly beings of light we call Angels.

While I have included a short *Guide to Connecting with Your Angels* at the end of this book, the story itself really is the guide. In addition to being a beautiful meta-fictional drama, the wisdom within was channeled to serve as a tool for understanding and connecting with the divine.

Allow this story to entertain as well as inspire, teach, and guide you to learn about, and connect with, your own Guardian Angel.

As you read this book, your connection to your own Angel (or Angels) will grow, and new and amazing experiences, synchronicities, and signs will manifest. Know that your Angel is always with you, loving you through every choice you make in this life. And, as is often the case, the times you feel most alone are the times your Angel is closest to you, watching you, unconditionally loving you, and waiting for you to intentionally acknowledge its presence and ask for its help.

Take note of any angelic experiences you have before, during, and after you've read this book. If you feel called to, please share your experiences with me, the Angel novel community, or with anyone you feel will believe and benefit from your own *Angel* story.

Thank you for believing.

Prologue

Bad things can happen to all of us—some worse than others—but so do the good things. I thought it was just God’s way of balancing life, but as it turns out, I was wrong. Sometimes it’s the bad experiences that truly shift our lives and open the doorway to better, even miraculous, experiences. So while the bad things in life may leave you asking, “Why me?”, and might seem random or unfair, they seldom are.

We had a wonderful life, filled with a lot of good moments. But as “fate” would have it, that all changed because of the move. We ended up in our own personal hell, and it seemed like things would never get better. Tragedy can befall any of us ... but so can miracles. Sometimes they are subtle, and sometimes they are life-altering. What I didn’t know at the time, was that we all have a hand in drawing the miracles to us. The more faith we have in ourselves and our Angels, the bigger the miracles can become.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, through the darkness that surrounded our family, something miraculous happened. And while it seems so long ago, the memories are just as strong today as they were when it occurred. If I told you what we saw and experienced, you’d probably think we made it up. But if you knew our story and the events leading up to that miraculous night—maybe, just maybe—you will believe ...

Chapter 1:

Seeds of Doubt



*“Frustration grows from seeds of doubt
that we plant in our own gardens.”*

~ o ~

“Goddamn it!” Wendi shouted.

Her left hand emerged from behind the foyer table, revealing a fresh tear in her delicate skin. She pivoted her wrist to observe the wound. Expecting to see gushing blood, she was bewildered to be met with a shallow scrape—such a superficial wound causing so much pain.

“Wendi, language!” came a voice from the other end of the hall.

“Seriously, Pete?” *How about, ‘are you okay?’* she thought, tired of being reprimanded for her less than delicate expressions. “I just scraped my hand for nothing,” she hollered. “The key isn’t back there, so worry more about where my car key is and less about my language.” She pressed her right hand against the smooth tabletop, rising to her feet. *This is a hell of a way to start the week.*

“I worry about how your language influences the kids. It hasn’t been the best, you know.”

“You want to talk about influencing the kids? Okay. Maybe we should talk about how your decisions have influenced this family.”

“No, we shouldn’t,” he said with a sincere tone. “That horse is long since dead and beaten. No need to go there again for the four hundred and forty-fourth time.”

“Then don’t. Don’t go there.” She grabbed her purse, rummaging through it a third time. “Four hundred and forty-fourth time. Who picks a number like that?” she mumbled. “DAMN IT! It’s not here. It’s not anywhere. How am I supposed to get to work? And why the hell would you pick *that* number?”

“I know you’re frustrated about the key, but please mind your language. And the number just popped into my mind. What does it matter? It’s just a number. Why are you so on edge this morning?”

“Jesus, you really don’t pay attention to anything I tell you, do you? 4:44? It happened again last night? I have the same bad dream, I’m startled awake at exactly 4:44, and then I can’t fall back asleep.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.”

“Of course not, because you’re sound asleep without a care in the world that your wife is sleepless right next to you.”

“Wait a minute, that’s not fair, I—”

“Don’t start with me about fair. I told you yesterday about it, and again today, and it doesn’t even ring a goddamn bell.”

“Wendi, enough with the cursing! Faith isn’t talking, but she hears just fine. Imagine she’s ready to finally speak again, and the first words outta her mouth are ‘goddamn’.” He leaned over, prepping for an imaginary conversation. “Faith, do you have something you want to tell Mommy and Daddy? What? You do? What is it?” He raised the pitch of his voice, looked up at Wendi, and whispered, “Goddamn us, everyone.”

“Real nice, Tiny Tim. Your timing is shit. This is not the time for jokes. If you’re going to piss me off, at least say something that’s actually funny. Luckily, I didn’t marry you for your sense of humor.”

“No? Then what *did* you marry me for?”

“I wish I knew,” she snapped, slamming down her bag. “Jesus Christ, just help me find the car key so I can get out of this place.”

“Jesus has better things to do than find your keys. Try Saint Anthony, or better yet, let’s call in an angelic locksmith. Hello? Car key Angels, we can use some help down here!”

“Goddamn it!” she snapped again, her face flush with anger. “I’m serious. This is *not* the time.”

“It never is with you anymore. Fine, let’s ask for help from something real. Misty, where’s the key?” Perched on the table next to Wendi, the cat was looking back and forth at them, observing the tennis match of emotions. Acknowledging her name, she tilted her head, looking at Pete.

“Just stop with all your stupid jokes. Read the room and learn when to take things seriously. The cat does not know where my goddamn key is!”

“Things around here are serious enough.” He paused, wondering if the daily torture would ever end. *You don’t always have to be so mean*, he silently commented to himself. “Just retrace your steps and we’ll find the keys.”

“Key, not keys. Don’t you ever pay attention? The car key is on one of those cheap rings with the stupid yellow tag on it. We picked it up from the oil change. He also mentioned my brakes being low, and you didn’t want to spend the money unless it was absolutely necessary. I mean, why would brakes be necessary? But why worry? You can just call on the auto Angels to stop my car.”

“Who’s got bad jokes now? We’ll fix them before winter. It’s not just an expense we—”

“I know. We already discussed it. Not the point right now.” Wendi interrupted as she took a breath. “Okay, we got my car back last night, and I got out to grab the mail since you hadn’t. I came in the front door. I put my bag down. I put the mail down, *right here*,” she emphasized smacking the pile of mail on the table, “and put the key on top of it. I know it.”

“Check your keyring again. Maybe it’s on there and you missed it.”

She reached into her purse. “We already covered that, Sherlock. My other keys are right here,” she said, rattling them, “and it’s not on there.”

A small white paw stretched out toward the jingling keys. “Look at that,” teased Pete, “Maybe Misty *did* steal it. We have a real cat burglar on the loose,” he chuckled, amusing himself. “Misty, did you take the key? Where is it? Where did you put it?” Misty kept her gaze locked on the keys for a moment, then averted her attention to an empty space above Wendi’s right shoulder.

Wendi glanced behind her, then back at the cat, whose gaze remained fixated on the empty space. “Great. All fluff and no brains.”

A tug on her dress drew Wendi’s attention away from Misty. She looked down to meet the sad soft gaze of her daughter. “Oh, Faith. I’m sorry you heard that, Angel. Mommy’s just frustrated and needs to get to work. Have you seen Mommy’s car key?”

Faith smiled, shifted her eyes to Misty, then followed her gaze past Wendi’s shoulder. Pete, feeling like he was missing something, stared into the same vacant space.

“Can someone tell me what the hell everyone is looking at?” Wendi demanded.

Pete threw up his hands. *Again with the language.*

Without warning, Misty leapt past Wendi. Startled, she stammered backward, tripped on the entryway rug, and fell back against the front door. Catching her balance, she peered down at her woven assailant, now crooked and rippled from the mishap. Misty's paw delved into the small opening caused by the bent rug. As she feverishly pawed at it, the corner of a small, yellow tag appeared. Wendi bent down, reached in, and victoriously emerged with her car key.

She looked at her husband. "I don't understand how it got under that heavy rug," she commented in a bewildered voice. "If I hadn't tripped, we would have never found it."

"Huh ... I guess Misty and our locksmith Angel *did* know where the key was."

"Well, I'm chalking this up to dumb luck," Wendi admitted. "But you can go ahead and give credit to the cat and invisible beings with bird wings."

"You can denounce God all you want, but there's no need to take your lack of faith out on innocent Angels ... or discredit Misty," he added, stroking the cat's head.

"Speaking of which," Wendi said, turning to Faith. "This little Angel needs to get to school. Are you ready?"

Faith didn't respond. In a daze, she stared off into space. "Faith, what are looking at?" Wendi asked. "Bobby took the bus. No one else is here. Let's go," she insisted, tugging her daughter's delicate hand and scurrying out the door.

~~~ ○ ~~~

*oomph!*

Scraping along the asphalt, Bobby's palms burned as they slid on its abrasive surface. His hands failed to break the fall, and his face followed. Someone's foot had deliberately caught his leg as

he ran by. The pain hesitated, then slowly pulsed throughout his hands and cheek. Still lying on the blacktop, he felt a presence hovering above him.

A thick shadow fell across his body, blocking out the sun. Although no details of his assailant could be seen, he knew who it was. Laughter rang out around him as several other boys encircled him so the teachers couldn't see. He didn't care about the others. His ears were attuned to only one voice—that of Seth Baynes.

A genetic brute, Seth towered over kids his own age. Having already failed a grade, he also had the advantage of being a year older, making the other Sixth Graders look minuscule next to him.

“Have a nice trip, Boob-y?” Seth mocked. He turned to his cronies for praise, and they all laughed again. Seth was rarely alone. His crew loved to follow him around, helping him cause trouble.

Bobby pressed his palms against the blacktop, raising himself onto his knees. He looked down at his scraped palms wondering if the abrasions were deep enough to bleed. “Yeah, I had a great trip. Your mom was there and said she isn't comin' home.”

A large foot swiftly pressed into Bobby's spine, knocking him back to the ground. Red began to seep through the scrapes of his skin. “You think you're smart, Booby?” They all cackled some more. “You're the dumb-ass kissing the ground. It's the only action you're going to get.”

The laughing and insults faded as a single word echoed in his mind. *Enough*. The burning of his face and hands conceded to the burning inside his being. Determination and anger held back the tears swelling in his eyes. Since the move, he no longer enjoyed childhood; he endured it.

“You gonna cry like your little sister does,” Seth taunted. “Or maybe she can't cry, 'cause she can't talk. Or maybe she can, and she's just faking. I wouldn't talk if I had you for a brother, either. Maybe I'll call her Fake from now on. Hahaha.”

He clenched his teeth. Bobby was used to the insults. They rolled off him like droplets of water on a windshield, but words about his sister triggered the monster inside. “Shut up or I'll shut

you up!” Bobby shouted. He didn’t blame Faith for not speaking. He often thought his life would be better if he didn’t speak either.

Seth turned to his friends and laughed, then looked at Bobby and sneered. “Awe, you gettin’ mad? You gonna shut me up? You oughta take a hint from your sister and stop talking, too.” The words were followed up by a foot, slamming into Bobby’s ribs.

“Go to hell, loser!” Bobby yelled with what little air was left in his lungs. As he lay there, his mind flooded with uncontrollable thoughts of anger, hate, and detest—thoughts no eleven-year-old should have to bear.

A myriad of scenes ran through his head in an instant. In one, a swift kick to the groin brings Seth crippling to the ground. In another, Bobby sweeps Seth’s leg, quickly rolls on top, and pummels him until he bleeds. In every scenario, Bobby’s the hero, but the thoughts dancing in his mind never materialize the way he imagines. Real life tended to manifest in much harsher ways.

Bobby hated that they moved here. He hated leaving his friends. He hated being the new kid at school. And most of all, he hated Seth. He envisioned himself jumping to his feet, swinging wildly, and spinning around, knocking them to the ground one by one before they knew what hit them. “Say one more thing about my sister, and it’s the last word outta your stupid mouth!”

Pushing himself to his feet, Bobby ignored the pain in his hands and lunged forward with all his might. He clenched his hand as hard as he could and flung it toward Seth’s nose. It was met with a fleshy thud. To Bobby’s surprise, it was not Seth’s face his fist impacted. Someone else caught his punch.

The palm was too large to be Seth’s or any of his friends. It was the hand of Mr. Wachter. “You’re becoming a regular friend of trouble. Aren’t you, Bobby Farfalla? Please come with me.”

As Bobby looked up at his teacher, tears began to fall.

Pete's day was going the same as every other: slow and boring. He took the job for the money. He thought it would make life easier for his family, but things felt worse, not better. *It is good money*, he would tell himself each day, trying to ease the pain and guilt.

*ring ring*

He snapped out of his afternoon funk and reached over, picking up the phone.

"Hello? ... Yes, this is he .... What? ... *AGAIN!* I'm going to kick that boy's butt myself if he doesn't stop getting into trouble ... Yes, I'm sorry, I don't mean that literally. Wait, you're saying Faith was part of this? ... Now? No ... No, I can't leave right now. I'm at work. Did you call my wife? My job's a bit more important, so it's easier for her to ... You couldn't get a hold of her? ... Did you call again? ... I see. And why do they have to be picked up? We can discuss whatever disciplinary actions you advise, but I don't see a reason ... Is this a joke? This is absurd. I don't care what your policies about fighting are. You are seriously asking me to leave my job because you don't want them on the same bus? Tell the other boy's parents to get him and send my kids home on ... Oh, of course not. Of course, you can't get a hold of his parents. They're probably delinquents, too, or just too smart to answer the phone when you call. ... Well, I'm sorry if you don't appreciate my tone or accusations, but I'm not the one telling you to leave your job because someone else isn't doing theirs ... Well, I'm sorry that you don't appreciate my tone. I don't appreciate being interrupted at work."

Pete took a breath and continued. "I could lose my job if I have to keep leaving every time something happens at school ... Well, as far as I'm concerned, this is a matter the school should handle. This is a serious inconvenience ... No, I don't mean my children are an inconvenience. I mean leaving work to get them ... Fine ... Okay ... I'll come get them. Yes, they are still having a

difficult time adjusting. I am *very* aware. It's been hard on all of us ... Okay. I'll leave as soon as I can ... Yes. I need about 20 minutes. Goodbye."

*click*

"And where exactly are you going?"

Pete flinched at the unexpected presence looming in his doorway. Pete didn't care much for his boss, Mr. Marshall, and his boss didn't seem to care much for Pete—or all the family problems he brought to the office every day.

"I'm sorry, sir. There's a problem at school. I have to go pick up the kids."

"I thought that was your wife's job?"

"She normally handles this, but they couldn't get a hold of her. I really do apologize. I'll stay later tomorrow to make up for missed time."

"And come in early while you're at it just in case there's another problem. You know, Pete, I pride myself on keeping my work in order, and not mixing it up with personal issues. That's how you get to be a productive employee, and that's how you get to be a manager. You can choose to climb the corporate ladder, or you can be the one at the bottom holding it for everyone else, letting them step on your fingers while you watch them ascend."

"Yes, sir. I'll be the first one in. Thank you for your inspiring words. I really do have to go, so please excuse me." The Marshal, which Pete liked to refer to him as, consistently found creative ways to voice his disappointment in Pete. Pete quickly learned to choose his words carefully when answering back. His boss made it very clear how expendable Pete was. He choked back his real sentiments. *I'll hold that ladder all right, and ascend it up your—*

"And one more thing ..."

"Yes, sir?"

"We need to take another look at those reports you submitted last week. There were a few discrepancies." He nodded at Pete with a concerned look.

Pete swallowed his anger, feeling the burning inside his chest. He took a breath and nodded back. *This place is going to give me a heart attack. God help me.*

“Well, hop to it, Pete. You don’t want to keep the school waiting,” Mr. Marshall insisted with a touch of sarcasm.

“No, sir. I mean, yes, they are waiting for me. Apologies again. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“First thing.”

Pete grabbed his coat and swallowed his pride. “Of course, first thing. Bright and early.” Heading out the door, he mustered up a smile as he brushed past his boss. The Marshal stood there, eyeing Pete as he squeezed past.

It was days like this that made Pete lose a little more hope in returning to happiness. He couldn’t risk losing his job. It would tear everything back down. As bad as things were, they were the best they had been since the move—since the accident. His job was the reason they were there, the reason they moved, the reason it all fell apart. What would be left if he lost it? *Please, God, let some light in, not just for me, but for my family.*

Pete rushed down the hall, rounded the corner, and abruptly stopped as a welcome face crossed his path.

“Is The Marshal after you again, Pete?”

“Don’t I know it, Allen! That guy must have a sixth sense for always showing up at the worst time. I tell you, he has it in for me.”

“The inmates get no respect around here,” joked Allen.

Pete laughed. Allen was a true friend and one of the only friends Pete had made since the move. He was one of the few consolations of the job, aside from the generous pay. He had a special way of cheering up Pete and shining light on his dark times. Their conversations made the job bearable. It was Allen who started referring to Mr. Marshall as The Marshal; a little inside joke between the two of them. That alone diffused the tension.

“I don’t blame ya for fleeing this place as fast as you can, but I’m guessing something’s up. More trouble on the homefront?”

“Yeah, the school called. Bobby’s at it again; started a fight or something. The school couldn’t get a hold of Wendi, so now I

gotta run over and pick up the kids. I don't know what to do with that boy, Allen. You ever hear of an eleven-year-old getting into so much trouble?"

"Give him a break, Pete. If things are still tense at home, he's coping the best he can. My guess is he misses the family life as it were, and his anger is a cry for love and attention. After all, when was the last time you really spent some father and son time together?"

"I don't know. I'm always busting my ass here. Seems like there's always some report I have to stay late for or bring home and work on over the weekend."

"Well, trust me, Pete. It's not worth trading your soul, or your family, for any amount of money."

"So, I just leave? Or risk getting fired? I need this job. I need the money. Who's going to take care of my family if I can't?"

"God, Peter. God takes care of us all. And I hear ya about the money, believe me, I do. But what good is the money if you don't have a family left to support?" He laid a hand on Pete's shoulder, pausing for a moment, then chuckled. "Glory be, what in the world am I doin' standing here holding you up when your kids are waitin' for ya? You take care of yourself first, Pete. Get your head and your heart straight and the rest will fall into place, God willing."

"You're a miracle, Allen, and a blessing. Thank you, my friend. See you tomorrow ... God willing."

~~~ ○ ~~~

The door flung open and with it, a sigh of relief. Wendi shuffled out of the meeting and back to her desk. *Well, that was a waste of time. Imagine how much more work would get done if we didn't keep meeting about work.* There were meetings about too much work, meetings about not enough work, and even meetings to schedule meetings.

She flopped down at her desk and a red flashing light caught her attention. “Why is it I don’t get a call all day, and every time I have a meeting, there are messages waiting?” she mumbled to herself. Wendi lifted the receiver and dialed her voicemail ...

“You have four new messages. First message, received at 2:22 p.m.”

Imagine that. 2:22. That’s when I walked into the meeting room and Bob commented I was eight minutes too early. She brushed it off as a coincidence and shifted her attention back to the voicemail. It was the school calling. She pressed the phone to her ear, listening intently. Another issue with Bobby. They needed to speak with her immediately. Second message ... silence, followed by a click. Third message ... same voice as the first ...

“It’s Sandy over at the school, calling about your son again. We don’t feel it’s prudent to send him home on the bus with the boy he had the confrontation with, and we need him picked up, plus the principal would like a word about the incident. Now, I understand I’m not to bother Mr. Farfalla at work, but this is the third time I’ve called and can’t get a hold of you. I’m going to ring him and ask that he handles this situation.” Wendi glanced at the time. 3:33. *Damn it. Pete’s probably at the school by now.* “We’ll call back if we can’t reach him. Thank you. Goodbye.”

Wendi hung up and swiftly dialed the school. *Just great. I can hear him now. Wendi, how many times do I have to tell you I can’t be interrupted at work? My job’s too important ... Well, too bad. He has to learn that being a good father is occasionally more important than being a good employee.*

No one picked up. *Uh, voicemail ...* “Hello, this is Wendi Farfalla. I’m assuming you got a hold of my husband since I didn’t hear back from you. Just wanted to confirm. Thank you.” *God forbid she makes an extra call to let me know.* Wendi planted the receiver.

“Why can’t the school just send him home on the goddamn bus? Christ almighty,” she blurted aloud.

“Well, I’ll be,” came a voice from the next cubicle. “Don’t go having yourself a hissy fit,” insisted Patty, as her big, red, curly hair popped up over the cubicle wall faster than a curious meerkat.

Patty never missed a beat or a single note of gossip; she lived and breathed it. If there was drama to be uncovered, Patty would find it, or she’d make it. “Now I know things still aren’t well at home, and Lord knows you were in a tizzy when you started here, but you never used to cuss or use the Lord’s name in vain like this before. So tell me, how bad is it?”

“I swear your ears are radars, Patty. I’m sorry to tell you, but the only difference between then and now is that I don’t hold it in anymore. I—” Wendi paused as the small, red blinking light seized her attention. “Hold on, Patty. I missed the last message.” She swiftly lifted the receiver and dialed back into voicemail. *Maybe the school didn’t get a hold of Pete.*

“Wendi, where the hell are you? The school called me.” *No such luck.* “I have to pick up the kids. Something about Bobby in a fight. They said they tried you three times and you’re still MIA, so I’m heading over. How many times do I have to tell you? I can’t be interrupted at work, not unless it’s an emergency. No one is bleeding, nothing is broken, and no one is dead. That school doesn’t seem to understand. I can’t just leave work every time Bobby has an attitude problem. You know how much stress and pressure I’m under as-is. We’ll talk about this when you get home.”

She let out a grunt and put down the phone with just enough force to satisfy her urge to slam it. Feeling a lingering presence, Wendi looked to her right, expecting to see Patty still eavesdropping, but she had popped back into her hole. An unfamiliar voice from over her shoulder caught her off-guard.

“Now, now, Deary. Don’t get yourself in a tizzy. Can’t be all that bad.”

Wendi flinched, embarrassed to see who else caught her vexing. Standing behind her was the new temp, Angie. She was a short, adorably pudgy woman. Curvy, but not quite large, as Patty and her catty girls would describe some of the other co-workers. Angie had youthful skin, and wonderfully round, rosy cheeks. She

could easily pass herself off as Mrs. Claus, and just as well, as no one was sure exactly how old she was.

“Sorry,” Wendi responded. “I didn’t even ... How long ... I didn’t notice you were—”

“Don’t worry ‘bout that. Most people ‘round here don’t pay me any mind, especially being a temp and all,” Angie responded in her subtle Southern twang. She leaned in and whispered, “Oddly enough, though, they seem to have plenty to say behind my back. But that don’t bother me none. If someone ever has somethin’ to say behind your back, Deary, that’s just their own insecurity talkin’,” she added with a chuckle. “Oh, my goodness. I’m already gettin’ sidetracked. But don’t you worry. If you ever need an ear, I can listen just as well as I can talk. Oh, and I know we were chattin’ the other day, but in case you forgot, the name is Angie, Dear.” She reached her hand out, giving Wendi a gentle, yet firm handshake.

“I was passin’ by and felt all that frustration pouring out of you, and I just *had* to stop and check in.” She leaned in, lowering her voice again. “But to be honest, I would’ve felt you from across the room, Dear, with the aura you were givin’ off. Everything okay?”

Lost in a fog of Angie’s quick and mesmerizing tone, Wendi mumbled a quick reply. “Uh, yes. Just a little issue with my son at school.”

“Well, I hope it all works out. But you be careful, now. Frustration grows from seeds of doubt that we plant in our own gardens. If you let it flourish into fear and anger, you eventually forget what the root of it all was. And then you’re left in the dark with only your anger,” Angie blurted out in her typical sweet tone. “And mind that nasty scrape on the back of your hand, Deary. The longer your wounds go without proper healin’, the deeper they’ll get.”

Planting seeds? Deeper wounds? What in the world is this woman talking about? Wendi barely knew Angie, but already felt like she needed an interpreter to decipher her mysterious anecdotes. “Um, Okay. Thank you so much, Angie.” *Where’s*

Patty when you need her? Wendi turned her head, hoping Patty would jump in to save her, but no such luck. She turned back, and Angie had disappeared. Wendi peered down the aisle, but there was no sign of her.

“What was that about?” Patty’s head popped up over the cubicle like a whack-a-mole. “Weeds of doubt? Plantin’ gardens? That woman is sooo odd.”

“She sure is. I never know what she’s trying to say. Hopefully, she won’t be here long.”

“So, what happened with Bobby this time that has you slammin’ down the phone? You plantin’ your anger garden, hun?”

“I got an anger tree, Patty,” Wendi said sarcastically. “They called Pete to pick up the kids. Now, I know it doesn’t sound like a big deal. But God forbid he got laid off because of leaving work early. I’d never hear the end of it. They say happiness doesn’t come from money. But let me tell you, we’re sure as hell not living off what I make around here,” Wendi jeered as they both laughed.

“Amen to that, sister! Well, alrighty, then. I guess we know what you’re afraid of ... not payin’ the bills!” They chuckled again.

“Yeah,” Wendi sighed. “I never used to get angry like this. Neither of us did. We never even fought,” she paused as tears began to swell in the corner of her eyes. “That was our thing, you know. We were that couple who never fights. Finishes each other’s sentences. And now look at us. I don’t know how—” Losing her voice, Wendi closed her eyes and let the world fade out for a moment, then wiped her tears. “Well, shit, Patty. I guess Angie was right. I’m angry and miserable, and I’m afraid of staying this way.”

“Well, if you’re so unhappy, just leave him already. I got a list of half a dozen eligible bachelors right here in this office,” she announced with a wink.

Wendi allowed a smile to break through. “This may sound crazy, but as unhappy as I am, I just can’t leave. I can’t tear my family apart like that. It doesn’t feel right. Something’s still holding us together ... just barely.”

“Well, if you’re not going to be leavin’, then ya better stop using the Lord’s name in vain and start prayin’ to him instead,” Patty insisted.

“God doesn’t want to hear my prayers,” Wendi mournfully replied. “Not anymore.”

“Now, why would ya say a thing like that?”

“I ... I’d rather not talk about it. I can’t believe I’m standing here crying about my life because the office whackadoo came out of nowhere and blurted out some cryptic message that I need a decoder ring to understand. Then she disappears like a damn magician. And how does she know how I feel?”

“Magician? More like a witch! You’ve been victim to a fly-by bewitchin’! She does ‘em all the time. I tell ya, that woman is odd, with a capital O. I just avoid her. That way she can’t be brainwashin’ me with her crazy spells,” Patty laughed, waving her arms over her head.

“Come on. She’s not that bad. I feel bad for judging her myself.”

“Uh-oh, It’s too late! She’s already brainwashed ya. Ya didn’t drink her Kool-Aid, did ya? I mean, have ya seen her desk? She’s a witch, I tell ya. Probably has a voodoo doll of me in her drawer. I think I’m feelin’ a pain in my neck right now!” She plucked an invisible needle from her neck, cracking herself up. “So anyhow, enough about office witchcraft. All those messages for ya ... Bobby gettin’ in trouble at school again?”

“Yes, he got into some kind of a fight again. Not sure of the details, but I gotta get home to do some damage control. Pete was not happy about leaving work early. I’ll see you tomorrow, Patty.”

“Sure as sugar, sweetness. And you can fill me in on all the details in the mornin’.”

“Glad to know you’re looking forward to the drama,” Wendi nudged, “because I’m certainly not.”

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“What the hell is it this time, Bobby?” Pete felt his chest tighten as his gaze fixated on the reflection of his son in the rearview mirror, ignoring the road. *This kid’s going to be the death of me.* As much as Pete was afraid of losing his family, he allowed the fear of losing his job to overrule the consequences of his words. Negative thoughts had marinated in his mind the entire ride, and he was ready to burst. “Why can’t you manage to make it through *one day* without trouble? Is that so difficult?”

Bobby sat, arms crossed, staring out the window, avoiding his father’s eyes. “I got through yesterday just fine,” he mumbled.

“Real nice response, smart ass. Yesterday was Sunday.”

“I didn’t start any trouble. It wasn’t my fault.”

Pete held his stare on Bobby’s reflection a moment longer before replying. “Of course, it’s not your fault. You had nothing to do with it. Things are hard enough on this family right now and on me. How am I supposed to get my work done if I’m driving to school to pick you up? Do you want me to lose my job?”

“I don’t care.”

“Of course, you don’t care. Well, you better start caring. You think you have such a rough life? See how rough it is when we don’t have money to live on!”

Bobby’s eyes stayed fixed on the passing landscape, but he felt his father’s stare. “I hope you lose your stupid job,” he breathed, still mumbling, “Then I never have to see this dumb place again, and we can move back home.”

Sadness overwhelmed Pete’s anger. Even if he lost his job, they couldn’t afford to move back up north. One way or another, even if it killed him, they were staying. His tone drastically shifted. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Bud. This *is* our home, and it’s going to be for a while. I need you to understand that and stop all this fighting. Stop fighting me, stop fighting at school, stop fighting whatever it is you think you’re fighting. I need to be at work right now, but I’m here, driving you. So go ahead and tell me. What happened this time that apparently wasn’t your fault?”

*silence*

“HEY,” Pete yelled, as anger flooded back into his veins like a bursting dam. Bobby snapped out of his trance, connecting eyes with his dad for the first time since he got in the car. “Answer me when I speak to you! Why did I have to pick you up from school?”

“I don’t know. Why did you? Where’s mom?”

“Great question. I don’t know why she couldn’t get you, but she couldn’t. So now I’m the one you need to answer to. What happened?”

“It wasn’t my fault.”

“Of course, it wasn’t. It never is. The other kid made you mouth off, and he asked you to hit him, right?”

“They started it. I was jus—”

“Let me guess. You were an innocent bystander? You’re a little Angel, and everyone starts fights with you for no reason?”

“YES! Seth start—”

“NO!” Pete shouted, cutting off Bobby’s words again. “Whoever it was, I’m sure you did your share to provoke things and keep it going. The school told me you were fighting with this boy. Luckily, they stopped you before anyone got hurt, or worse.”

“I got hurt!” yelled Bobby. “But it wasn’t until he ... I was going to bash his face—” His throat clenched up, forcing him to pause as tears welled up in his eyes. “Forget it.” He took an unsteady breath of air, fighting back the emotion. “You don’t care who started it. You don’t care about me. You don’t care about our family. You only care about your stupid work.” Bobby turned his head back to the window, watching the trees glide by.

Sadness engulfed Peter’s heart again. “That’s not true, Bud. Do you hear me? That’s not true. I care about you and this family very much. More than you know. I work so much because I care. But we’re talking about you right now, not me. No action goes without reaction. What if you get kicked out of school? Then what? Do we have to send you to a private school? Do you know how much that costs? It’s time you started taking responsibility

for your actions.” Pete took in a long breath. “Jesus, how many times do I have to pray to end to all this?”

“If we didn’t move to stupid North Carolina for your stupid job, everything would be fine. Mom wouldn’t have gotten hurt, Faith would be talking, and I’d have—”

“You watch yourself, young man,” he interjected with a stern voice, flopping between anger and regret like a fish out of water. “Don’t blame everything else for your bad attitude. You control your own reactions. You’re the only one getting yourself in trouble.”

“I’m not! It’s those stupid kids. And that stupid school. And this stupid place. I wish we never moved here! I wish none of this ever happened! NONE OF IT!”

Silence filled the car. Pete wished for the same thing. Hopelessness weighed down his heart. “We all wish we never moved, Bud, especially me. Believe me, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything. I’m sorry your sister won’t talk. I’m sorry you’re having a tough time at school. I’m sorry you’re not happy here. None of us are happy here.” Pete paused and took a breath. “I’ve been praying every day for things to change. I’m even looking for a new job, but there aren’t any good opportunities without a big pay cut. We need the money right now.”

Pete looked into the rearview mirror again, focusing on Faith. “And how many times do I have to pray for you, Little Angel? How many prayers before you’ll speak to us again?”

*silence*

“We know you can talk, Angel. We’ve heard you whispering to your invisible friend. Do you think it’s time to break your silence? Maybe tell us how you feel about all this?”

*silence*

“Why should she talk? You don’t listen,” muttered Bobby.

Faith looked over at Bobby, smiled, then returned to her typical peaceful trance, staring into space. Sullenness filled the remainder of the ride. Pete and Bobby sat quietly, their hearts longing for peace, while their minds filled with cries of anguish. Only Faith seemed content. Nothing bothered her as long as she remained in her own world.

Pete rounded the corner of their street. *Home at last. Thank God.* He sped into the driveway, clicked the garage door opener, and abruptly stopped. The door remained shut. He impatiently clicked it again and again. *I just changed these batteries!* The door began to open, stopped, then slowly shut. *I can open the damn thing faster myself.* He cautiously clicked the button one more time and waited for the door to re-open.

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As Wendi raced home, her mind raced with her. *It's going to be one of those nights. Not like it's my fault. I have a job, too. He's not the only one supporting this family. It doesn't pay as much, but I'm still important to the business.* Her grip tightened around the steering wheel. The world around her phased into nothingness as her thoughts suffocated her mind. *Ugh, who am I kidding? They would replace me in an instant. Pete needs his job. He'll say he'll get canned, but he'll be fine. But then again, he works for a real asshole who would fire him over any stupid issue. What if he really does get fired? Jesus, what the hell would we do then? Tell me that, God. What the hell would we do then?* She shook her head, tightening her grip on the wheel. *Why am I asking you? It's not like you're listening. Not when we really need you.*

Her mind continued, oblivious to her foot weighing down the gas pedal. Trees and signs whizzed past her as she gained momentum. *Jesus, what a mess we are. Pete's angry. Bobby's angry. I'm angry. And my little Angel, my Faith, is still silent. Maybe we should all stop talking. Just live like ghosts.* Tears

started flowing. *How did we get here? This can't be my life. This isn't me. This isn't—*

The bright red glow of taillights in front of her snapped her back to reality. “Shit!” Her foot reacted, thrusting hard on the brake. The car wailed to an abrupt stop, jerking her body forward. The seat belt locked, restraining her torso, whipping her head forward, then back. Her heart pounded. *I need to pay more attention to the road or it's going to get me killed.* As she surveyed her surroundings, her eyes focused on the rearview mirror, witnessing the vehicle behind skidding toward her. She tensed up, bracing herself. The driver reacted, stomping on the brakes and halting inches from her bumper.

A jolt of adrenaline triggered her dark memories. The storm. The plane rocking back and forth. Faith's crying. The flight attendant yelling. Feeling so overwhelmed. Her whole body began to relive it. The pounding of her heart reverberated throughout her being. The stress. The rage. The sudden jolt—

honk! honk!

Wendi snapped back to the present. The light was green and the three cars in front of her were already through the intersection. Her foot shifted off the brake and she hit the gas. She continued her journey home on autopilot, allowing happy memories of the past to creep in. She thought about all the adorable things Faith used to say and what a kind, gentle soul her boy used to be—before it all changed. Time has a way of playing tricks when caught in the spider webs of the mind. Hours seem like minutes and minutes seem like hours. It wasn't until she turned the corner of the neighborhood that she noticed the time. 4:44.

She glanced at the clock again. 4:44. *Triple digits again? How's this possible? I got to the meeting at 2:22 and the first voicemail was also left at 2:22, which alone is nuts.* She turned down the first street.

Then it was 3:33 when I listened to them. I heard the message exactly an hour and eleven minutes later. She turned another corner, onto her street.

And now I'm home at 4:44, the same time I've woken up the past three nights. This can't be real. A streak of white whisked overhead, pulling her out of her mind.

Is that a dove? Barely watching the road, she dodged her head back and forth, trying not to lose sight of it in the late afternoon sun. It looked like it had landed on her house, but the hedges were in the way. *There are no doves around here. And it's not a seagull. I'm losing my mind.* The glare of the sun dazzled her eyes. She flinched as she turned into the driveway.

At the same time as Pete waited for the garage door to open, he peered back at the children in the rearview mirror. Bobby was still ignoring him and Faith's eyes were looking upward, out the window. Her head pivoted as she followed something overhead. He followed her gaze, tracking a pair of white wings soaring through the air. As it flew out of his field of view, something in the rearview mirror caught his eye—a familiar car whipping into the driveway behind him.

The only reaction he could muster was bracing himself while yelling out, “Whoa! WHOA!”

screeeech!

The seat belts locked as the car jolted forward. Everyone's wide eyes stared at each other in shock.

“OH, COME ON!” Pete yelled, throwing his arms up toward the sky. “This is quite the icing on my afternoon cake!” He shook his head. “Kids, you okay?”

Bobby looked over at his little sister who was nodding her head. “Yeah, it was just a bump. We're fine.”

Each respective car door opened, and Pete and Wendi jumped out onto the driveway. Pete swiftly approached her, jerking his arms up in his infamous “what the hell” expression.

“I ... I didn’t see you,” she stammered, knowing the day was already bad enough. “I didn’t expect you to be sitting in the driveway. Luckily, it was just a tap.”

“A tap? A second longer on the gas and you would have rammed me and the kids right through.”

The kids are okay, right?”

“Yeah, Mom,” Bobby replied as he grabbed Faith’s hand, gently escorting her out of the car. His other hand held tight to the strap of his backpack, hiding his scraped palm from his mother’s keen eyes. Pete hadn’t noticed the abrasions on his hands, but physical marks seldom get past Wendi. He swiftly led Faith into the house before the yelling started.

Outside, Pete continued his rant. “Where the hell was your mind? How can you turn into a driveway and not see my car sitting right here?”

“It’s those damn hedges. I told you before. They’re too tall. I can’t see the driveway until I turn into it. Plus, I was ... I was following a dove, I think. I came around the corner, and there was this pure white bird that came out of nowhere, flying toward the house, but disappeared into the sun.”

“Seriously? I mean that’s really what you’re going with? You almost smashed into your children because you were watching a bird?”

“I can’t explain it. The dove seemed important, and I saw the numbers and—”

“There are no doves around here, and no bird, dove or not, is that important,” he interrupted. “We are your family. We’re important. Stop daydreaming, pay attention to the road, and you won’t run us over. Got it? Great.” He sighed. “You’re going to end up in a serious accident if you don’t pay more attention when you drive. I saw a bird, too, but that didn’t mean I stepped on the gas and rammed into the garage, now did it?”

“Jesus. Don’t be so dramatic. Always overreacting.”

“Jesus, indeed. It’s funny how often you say the name of someone you have no faith in. And I’m not overreacting. This time was just a tap, but what if Faith was playing in the driveway and you hit her instead? What then?”

Wendi’s eyes welled up. “*That* is not fair. Why would you say that? Why the hell would you say something like that, Pete?”

Pete’s expression, along with his entire body, went catatonic, like a deer in headlights. He knew he had gone too far.

Wendi didn’t let up. “I told you before to cut those damn hedges so I can see the damn driveway before I pull into it! God forbid the horrific scene you just painted for us were to actually happen. That would be on you! What a family we would be then. You’d have two dead children to blame me for.”

Her words cut deep into his heart. Pete softened his voice. He had already lost the fight. “I keep them that way so we have some privacy from our nosey neighbor, who, by the way, is listening to this whole fight. And I don’t blame you. I never have. It was an accident ... And please stop saying ‘damn’.” He shook his head again. “You damn everything you hate. Maybe try blessing a few things instead.”

“A blessing isn’t going to change the hedges,” Wendi mumbled as she reached into the car, grabbing her purse. She stood up and looked her husband dead in the eye. “Just cut the DAMN things down and I won’t have to worry about running over my own daughter.” She slammed her car door.

Without another word, she walked away, retreating from the daylight into the shadow of the garage. She left her car right where it was, along with her husband, alone in the chill of the dimming sunlight.

Solemnly, Pete pulled each car into their respective spots and closed the garage door. He sat there for a moment in the darkness of his thoughts. The cold, dim loneliness of the garage felt more welcoming than his own home.

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