

MAX AND THE PLAN TO CATCH A GUARDIAN ANGEL

The December sky was a beautiful blue as Maximilian Talley walked up the driveway to his house. The air was brisk, the sun was shining, and winter vacation was just around the corner! Life was good.

Max carried his school pack over his right shoulder and held a bag of empty juice cans in his left hand. He grasped the door handle and pulled the door open a few inches. Max whirled around and his eyes narrowed as he looked up and down the road in front of his house. No one was there. Nothing moved but

the tips of the trees and the shadows they cast on the road.

Missed him again, thought Max, and he opened his front door—all the way this time—and disappeared inside.

Once inside, Max tiptoed quietly up the stairs and paused in front of his bedroom door.

Maybe, just maybe, if he wasn't trailing behind me, then he could be in my room—behind the curtains or in the closet, hiding.

He carefully laid down his school pack and his bag of empty juice cans, then took a deep breath.

I'll be quick enough this time. This time I'll catch him.

In one swift motion he pushed his bedroom door open and leapt inside, throwing himself at a figure reclining on the rug.

“Got you!” Max yelled, but whoever was underneath him yelled louder, “Wha—! Get off!”

Max rolled off and found himself staring at his best friend, AJ.

“How did you know I was here?” AJ demanded.

“I didn’t. I ... er ... was sort of expecting someone else. Sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“Just squashed all my insides together, nothing serious.” said AJ, pretending to knead his stomach back into shape. “What’s with the yelling and pouncing if you didn’t know it was me?”

Max hesitated. AJ said, “I triple-promise-with-my-eyes-crossed that I won’t tell anyone else.”

“You’ll laugh.”

“I won’t.”

“Do you believe in guardian angels?” asked Max.



“What? With the fluffy wings and the glowing white dresses?”

“Never mind. Forget I said anything,” Max mumbled as he brought out his box of Telecopter-Roboray soldiers. “Here. Let’s play.”

“Max, what do guardian angels have to do with you ambushing and jumping on people?” AJ asked fifteen minutes later while his Roboray red squad laid siege to Max’s Roboray blue squad. AJ had maneuvered his red squad to trap the blue squad on three sides. Now, the only danger was if Max had a black-hole bolt generator and sucked AJ’s men into it.

“Weeeeell,” said Max, “what if my guardian angel doesn’t have fluffy white wings and a dress? What if instead he could change shape and be something super cool, like...”

“Like a Telecopter-Roboray soldier?” finished AJ.

“Yes, like that,” said Max, and unleashed the black-hole bolt generator on AJ’s red squad.

AJ looked in dismay at his routed troops, “I should have known!” he said with disgust. And then, picking up a handful of red soldiers, he began tossing them

at Max. Soon the air was full of shouts, yells, and blue and red plastic soldiers.

“Really, though,” said AJ after they had run out of soldiers to throw at each other. “I still don’t see what your jumping on me has to do with guardian angels, in gowns or Roboray outfits.”

“You won’t laugh?” asked Max.

“I already triple promised, didn’t I?”

“Well, all right then. I’ve been trying to catch my guardian angel because I want to see him.”

AJ didn’t laugh; he scratched his nose and looked interested. “Why?” he asked.

“Why do I want to see him? Why shouldn’t I want to see him? Don’t you want to see your guardian angel?” said Max.

“I don’t know if I have one,” said AJ.

“Of course you do. Everyone does. Mine...” Max lowered his voice, “Mine talks to me sometimes. At least I think he does.”

“What does he say?” whispered AJ.

“He says things in my mind like, ‘Look both ways before you cross the street—not when you’re already in the middle. Goodness, boy, don’t you think at all?’”

“Oh,” said AJ, his forehead wrinkling. “Who would want a grouchy guardian angel?”

“That’s why I think he must be real, not something made up. Because, if he was just like I expected, then I could



be imagining it; but he says the most unexpected things to me sometimes. Anyway, I want to see him.”

“Dinner’s ready!” The call came wafting up the stairs along with the smell of hamburgers.

“Did your mom say you could stay for dinner?” Max asked his friend.

“Yup!” said AJ.

“I have a plan that you can help with. I’ll tell you about it after dinner.”

The evening was spent gathering supplies: pebbles from the backyard and tinsel temporarily borrowed from their Christmas tree. AJ went home with the promise to help in any other angel-trapping activities the next day.

Sometime near midnight, a loud crash sounded in Max’s room. Max jumped out of bed clutching a flashlight, switched it on with a trembling finger, and found his father sprawled on the floor just inside his door.

“Good heavens!” yelled Max’s father. “What on earth is this?”

“Dad! What are you doing here? And, um ... this is a tripwire, with a burglar

alarm,” stammered Max, while trying to untangle his father from the reinforced tinsel threaded through empty juice cans filled with pebbles.

“As for what I’m doing here,” said Max’s father with a huff, “your mother and I always check on you, Noah, and Sophie at night. You’re usually asleep by this time.” Mr. Talley straightened his pajamas and folded his arms across his chest. “What’s this trap about?”

“I’m trying to catch something. C-can I tell you tomorrow?” Max pleaded.

His father sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Fine, but don’t think I’ll forget it. I’ll expect an explanation tomorrow.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Goodnight. And, son? That’s not a bad burglar alarm.”

Max returned to bed, hid his flashlight under his pillow again, and lay back down and thought and thought, and somewhere in the middle of a thought, drifted back to sleep.



The next morning, Father had an urgent call and had to leave early for work, so the discussion regarding the burglar alarm was delayed till dinnertime. Max sighed in relief and went to school. AJ met him on the way and asked, “So, did you catch anything?”

“I caught my dad.” Max replied, “I didn’t know he and my mom looked in on me at night. Now I do. He said it was a great burglar alarm, though. Where else would you look to find an angel?” asked Max.

“Maybe try your window? Your angel might be going through that instead. Or they might like high places. The tops of trees.... Oh! Maybe they sit and wait on people’s roofs. The tricky thing is to catch



them when they're not invisible. I think you'd have to sneak up on them."

"Maybe it's useless."

"Don't say that! Winter vacation starts tomorrow. We'll have a few weeks to look for your angel. I'll help all I can."

"Don't you have plans for vacation?" asked Max.

"Sure. Some cousins are coming over for Christmas week, but until then, we'll search together." The friends solemnly shook hands and continued on to school.



That afternoon, weighed down with the last bits of this and that cleared out of lockers, the children of Winston Elementary School streamed out its doors and into the bliss of winter vacation.

"School's out!"

"I'll race you home!"

Max and AJ charged through the school gates and down the sidewalk toward an intersection. Max was in the lead and had a foot in the air to step over the curb when he froze in mid-stride.

AJ came to a screeching halt as well, not a centimeter away from sending them both sprawling into the middle of the road.

Look both ways before you cross the street—not when you're already in the middle! Goodness, boys, don't you think at all?

They turned to each other in surprise.

"Did you hear that?" asked AJ.

"You heard it too? So, it's true!" said Max with glee.

"I heard it. I really did. He really does sound grumpy."

"Yes, he does."

"Why didn't I hear it before?" asked AJ,

"You weren't trying to listen," answered Max.



"Now I've got to find mine too," said AJ determinedly. "Where shall we look first?"



From Monday to Thursday, Max and AJ could be found scrambling up trees, sneaking about in their own houses, bursting unexpectedly into their own rooms, and turning broom cupboards inside out.

"It's no good," AJ said, as Friday was drawing to a close, "I'm through with

my list of places to look and so are you. On top of that, my cousins are coming tomorrow. The search will have to be put on hold.”

Max looked out the window to the yard. Long strings of tinsel with cans filled with pebbles festooned the trees, fences, and bushes surrounding the Talley home. “Maybe they just don’t want to be seen.”

“Yeah, maybe. But I have a plan. ... How about I stay here tonight, and we can sit at the window till dawn? Maybe angels only become visible at night!”
“Why didn’t we think of that before?”

“This may be our last chance, ’cause your mom didn’t seem too happy about you stringing those cans around the yard. She’ll probably make you take them down soon.”

“Right. Tonight we stay up...”

“...with a flashlight.”

“And night vision goggles.”

“And chips.”

“Right.”

At nine o’clock that night, both boys munched quietly on their snacks, their eyes scanning the dark backyard.

At ten o’clock they whispered stories to each other.

At eleven o’clock, the moon rose and shone its soft light through the window on two boys huddled in blankets resting on pillows—fast asleep on the floor.

At twelve o’clock, a tremendous crash and rattling made Max and AJ jump from their nests of bedding and reach for their flashlights.

“Oh. My. Goodness!” whispered Max, his nose pressed against the glass. “It’s a giant robot!”

“We’ve got to get out there,” said AJ, tumbling out of his nest of bedding.



They went.

Max, still in his bedroom slippers, made it out first—but only just. Hot on his heels was AJ, and to both their surprise, they saw Max’s father wielding a hammer, Sophie carrying younger brother Noah, and their mother in a bathrobe outside as well.

“Dad!” exclaimed Max. “Did you see the giant robot, too?”

Max’s father grabbed hold of the two boys and pulled them away from the trees and bushes, looking bleary and half asleep.

“Someone wearing a ski mask was tangled in your burglar alarm. I saw him. He looked dangerous. ... What are you all doing out here?” he asked, waking up enough to realize his wife and children were outside with him.

“I saw the burglar—” exclaimed Sophie, “—outside Noah’s window!”

“It wasn’t a burglar, Sophie! It was a giant robot. It looked just like the soldiers in my game,” said Max adamantly, and AJ nodded his head vigorously in agreement.

“No, no,” Mother said, shaking her head, “It wasn’t a robot, or a man in a ski mask. What I saw was my second-best dress. It must have blown off the clothesline and



gotten caught in your burglar alarm. We're taking that whole thing down tomorrow, and no arguments! It's just *too* loud. No one can sleep with all that racket."

Among the rattling of the cans in the yard, another kind of noise began to make itself known: a high strident wail.

"Huh," said AJ, "a fire alarm's gone off in someone's house. I guess not many people will sleep tonight."

The group stood in silence for half a second before they yelled in unison, "That's our house!"

Smoke curled through the kitchen window along with eerie orange shades.

"I'll go to AJ's house and call the fire department," called Dad over his shoulder as he sprinted away from the group huddled in the front yard.

Within minutes, the road around their house was full of fire engines and neighbors, who, more often than not, tripped over Max and AJ's angel alarm.

The Talley household, along with a growing group of onlookers, watched the orange glow fade from the kitchen window and become black, then gray, then white smoke.

At dawn, the two boys were in AJ's house, drinking mugs of hot cocoa in the kitchen when Max's dad came in and wearily sat at the table.

"Well," he sighed, "the damage isn't as bad as it could be. Some of the kitchen will have to be replaced." Max handed him a cup of cocoa, Dad nodded thanks and continued. "And the whole ground floor will have to be cleaned of soot. But there's little damage to the house itself and nobody was hurt. Thank God we were all out of the house when the alarm sounded."

"Dad, how did the fire start?" Max asked.

His father looked down at his mug, took a deep breath and said: "It was my fault. I threw some rags that had been soaked

in paint into the kitchen garbage. On top of it, your mother threw away hardened grease. It ignited sometime late last night."

Max and AJ were thrilled. "Spontaneous combustion!" they chorused.

"I've heard about that," AJ enthused. "It happens with the oddest things: linseed oil, paint, cotton, and large containers of pistachio nuts!"

"How cool is that?" said Max.

"It's *not* cool that the house nearly burned down!" Dad said with lowering brows. "I'm afraid a good deal of our winter vacation is going to be taken up with wiping soot off the walls."

Max groaned and AJ patted his shoulder in comfort.

"There's just one thing..." Dad said, "When we all left the house to go to the back yard last night, are you sure you saw a..." Dad smiled, "giant robot?"

"Well," said Max slowly, "it was very dark. It could have been a man in a ski mask or mom's second-best dress." Dad nodded, satisfied, and went out again.

AJ leaned back in his chair, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked.

“Hmm, about chocolate mint ice cream?”
said Max with a grin. “With colorful
sprinkles on top..”

AJ thumped his chair back and leaned
forward, his expression earnest, “Don’t
you get it?”

Max laughed and said, “Of course, I ‘get
it’—our angels are pretty smart.”

“They get you to string up traps for them
to rattle at night so that the whole family
leaves the house. For us it’s giant robots. For
Dad, it’s a man in a ski mask. For Mom it’s
her second-best dress. Then, no one’s in the
house when the garbage bursts into flames.”

“How cool is that?”

“Pretty awesome.”

“But I’m also thinking about those
chocolate mint ice creams with the
sprinkles on top.”

“I’ll race you to the store.”

“You’re on!”

The boys barreled down the road but
stopped a few centimeters from the curb.
Max looked at AJ with a sheepish grin.
AJ looked left; Max looked right. They



crossed the road at a walk. As soon as
they reached the other side, they dashed
off again.

It was winter, the air was brisk, the sun
was shining, garbage was spontaneously
combusting, but their angels were also
watching. Life was good.

THE END

For He will command
His angels concerning
you to guard you in all your
ways; they will lift you up
in their hands, so that you
will not strike your foot
against a stone
(Psalm 91:11–12 NIV).