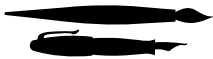


The Last Present

WENDY MASS



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“In every moment something sacred is at stake.”

— Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Prologue

Ten Years Ago

When you've drawn breath for nearly a hundred years, not much surprises you. So when Angelina D'Angelo stepped into the Willow Falls birthing center that hot July day, she didn't expect anything out of the ordinary. She figured she'd be in and out in ten minutes, tops.

But the elevator was broken and she had to take the stairs two flights up. Then a new guard kept asking to see the badge she'd forgotten to affix to her green nurse's outfit. She'd been coming here at least once a week for decades and had gotten used to no one stopping her. A bit rattled, she took a good five minutes to sort through all the badges in her pocket before she found the right one.

She quickened her pace toward the nursery. The clock above the door showed three till noon. She still had time. A quick scan of the room led her to the baby, bundled tight in pink. GRACE ALYSA KELLY, the note card on her bassinet read. GIRL. TIME OF BIRTH: 11 A.M. WEIGHT: 6 POUNDS, 4 OUNCES. A little thing she was. And yet so much depended on her.

With an ease that came from having done this many times before, she scooped the baby into her arms. Bending close, she began to murmur the words that would keep the baby safe.

They poured from her mouth like honey, making the air thick and sweet. The duck-shaped birthmark on Angelina's cheek wiggled as she spoke, but the baby's eyes were too unfocused to be entertained by it.

Knock! Knock!

Angelina looked up in surprise, the words tangling on her tongue. A boy no more than three years old stood at the nursery window, jumping up and down and rapping on the glass wall. She glanced at the clock. 11:59. She bent her head again to continue. Now where was she?

"Grace!" the boy shouted joyfully. "I'm your big brother!"

Angelina scowled. "Hush, Connor!" she scolded in as loud a voice as she dared. "You'll wake all the babies!"

The boy continued waving and stomping, not questioning why she would know his name. Where were his parents? She turned her back on him and resumed her benediction. But wait, had she said this part already? Her heart fluttered with an unfamiliar feeling. Fear.

Thirty seconds left.

Knock! Knock!

She didn't turn to look. A drop of sweat slid down her forehead. Angelina couldn't remember the last time anything had made her sweat. Couldn't someone make that boy go away?

The door to the nursery pushed open and one of the young nurses whose name she never bothered to learn strolled in. "Time to bring that one to her mother for feeding."

Angelina didn't have to check the clock to know she had run out of time.

“Do you want me to bring her?” the young nurse asked.
“You look like you could use a rest.”

Without a word, Angelina placed the baby in the woman’s waiting arms. Then she straightened up, threw a withering look at the boy still banging on the window, and left the nursery. She would have to wait a full year to try again. She couldn’t fail twice. Not with this baby. Grace was special.

And it was up to Angelina D’Angelo to keep everyone else in Willow Falls from knowing it.

Chapter One

Amanda

Two years ago I didn't believe in anything I couldn't see with my own eyes. Then Angelina D'Angelo, the oldest woman in Willow Falls, came into my life and turned it upside down. Now she's about to do it again. I'd be freaking out more if I didn't have Leo beside me. Well, behind me in the backseat of Ray's old car, but close enough.

Since Leo and I have each other, we've always tried to be there for anyone else who Angelina has decided to "help." For the past four weeks it's been Tara, who was sent here to live with her aunt and uncle and cousin for the summer as punishment for trying to steal her middle school principal's goat. She doesn't think we know the reason she was expelled from school, but this is a small town. People talk. Angelina assigned Tara to hunt down thirteen random objects that turned out not to be so random after all. It ended yesterday when Angelina tricked her into putting on a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* and we all had to be in it. I have three blisters on my feet from the boots I had to wear. I'm still not sure how this helped Tara, but when I saw her this morning she was happier than I'd ever seen her, so something big must have happened after the play.

Last year Angelina set her sights on Rory, who had made a list of everything she'd be able to do when she turned twelve. Angelina apparently decided there were no lessons to be learned by getting everything you thought you wanted. Poor Rory spent months dealing with one crazy situation after another, most of them caught on film by the movie crew at our school! She was a good sport about it all, though, much better than I would have been! The whole town will probably be at the premiere of the movie tonight, which is going to be awesome. I hope that whatever Angelina has planned for me and Leo, we'll still get to go.

Even though we've known for a full year that this day would come, I'm still sort of stunned that it's happening. I'm sure Rory and Tara are worried about us after we ran off and left them back at David's bar mitzvah without an explanation. Leo, Rory, Tara, and I are the only ones who know that Angelina has special powers. David doesn't know, even though he spent the last few weeks helping Tara with her list, and he starred in the play, too, all while practicing for his bar mitzvah. That's just how it is with Angelina: You keep her secrets and she keeps yours. Judging from the way David looks at Tara when he doesn't think anyone's watching, he'd do practically anything for her, whether or not he knows the reason why.

I glance over my shoulder at Leo, who is watching downtown disappear through his window. His face is calm, but I know his thoughts are on Grace, and on what we're going to find when we arrive at the hospital. Whatever is in store for us, we will handle it together. We're a good team. And if it wasn't for Angelina, we may never have become best friends again. Our experience two years ago bonded us together forever. In

appreciation, I'll do whatever she wants. I've definitely proved this by agreeing not to talk directly to Leo for the past year. Now *that's* dedication. It's one thing not talking to your best friend when you're in a fight and don't want to. It's another thing entirely when all you want to hear is his voice and you can't. This time we're more prepared. We're not only two years older, we're two years wiser. We know that sometimes the most important things are the ones you can't see.

"Seriously, Ray," Leo complains from the backseat, his calm broken. "If you were driving any slower, we'd be going backward." David's service had been at Apple Grove, where he chanted and sang surrounded by all the baby apple trees we planted last year in an effort to get the place back to its past glory. Unfortunately, Apple Grove is as far from the hospital as you can get and still be a part of Willow Falls.

"I know this car must be older than you are," Leo continues, "but have you suddenly turned into a little old lady? Pedal to the metal, dude."

"Don't crack a fruity, mate," Ray says in his twangy Australian accent. "I'm going as fast as I can."

Leo kicks the seat. "Are you? Are you really?"

"Aye, little mate. Don't grizzle. You could always ask someone else to drive you places, you know."

We really can't. Ray works for Tara's uncle at their house, so he's always around. And he doesn't ask too many questions. Usually I get shy in front of him because he's so cute. Like, Australian rock star cute with his tan and his long blond hair and his broad shoulders and that accent. But since I still can't talk directly to Leo until Angelina says it's okay, I need to say

something to someone or I just might burst from nerves. So I turn to Ray. “*Crack a fruity? Grizzle?* What does that even mean? And how come when you say things, it always sounds like you’re asking a question even when you’re not?”

Ray chuckles. “That’s an Aussie trait. We all sound like that. *Crack a fruity* means go crazy. To *grizzle* is to complain. Your boyfriend back there is doing both. Anyone want to tell me why you two are all worked up?”

My first instinct is to argue that Leo isn’t my boyfriend. But I’ve learned to let the comment pass. People have been whispering about us for years, and now that we’re thirteen it’s gotten worse. They’ll believe whatever they want anyway. “I told you already. Connor’s sister, Grace, was taken to the hospital this morning and we need to check on her. It happened right before David’s bar mitzvah started, but we didn’t find out until after the service.”

Ray finally speeds up as we leave the downtown shopping area behind. “Amanda, Amanda, Amanda,” he says, pronouncing it like *em-eye-ndeh*. “I like Grace, too. She’s a funny kid and was fab in our production of *Fiddler on the Roof* yesterday. But there’s more going on here than your concern over the well-being of a girl ya hardly know.” He points to the blackboard hanging around my neck, which Leo and I have used for the past year to communicate with each other. “A lot more going on.”

He’s right, of course. We barely know Grace. Her older brother, Connor, is David’s best friend, but even though we’ve gotten to know David very well this last year, all we know about Connor

is that he plays a lot of video games, smiles easily, wants to be an inventor like Tara’s uncle when he grows up, and is a really good friend to David. We still don’t know why or how we’re involved in whatever happened that sent Grace to the hospital. But Leo and I have the power to make something happen today that nobody else can — we just don’t know what that is. Stalling, I say, “Tara was right. You really *can* speak with normal words if you want to.”

He grunts in reply. I watch him drive out of the corner of my eye, debating what to say. I do kind of like the idea of an adult knowing what’s going on, in case something happens to us. And even though Ray’s car makes scary clanging noises and doesn’t go very fast, he’s always willing to drive us places. And he did direct a whole play with only two weeks’ notice just because we asked him to.

My phone dings with a text. I pull it out of my bag. It’s from Leo.

AFTER ALL HE DID FOR TARA THIS SUMMER, I THINK WE CAN TRUST HIM. HE DIDN'T HAVE TO HELP HER FIND THAT STUFF FOR HER LIST OR DIRECT THE PLAY, AND ONCE ANGELINA TELLS US WHAT'S GOING ON, WE MIGHT NEED SOMEONE WHO CAN DRIVE US PLACES. OUR PARENTS WOULD ASK WAY TOO MANY QUESTIONS.

Sometimes with Leo it’s like we share a brain.

Ray glances over at my phone. “Hope you got the unlimited plan. Tara told me you two haven’t spoken to each other face-to-face for almost a year.”

“Actually, as of today it’s *exactly* a year.” I take a deep breath. “If I answer your question from before, will you promise not to tell anyone?”

“Scout’s honor,” he promises.

“You were a Boy Scout?” Leo calls from the back.

“Made it all the way to Rover Scout,” Ray says proudly.

Leo chuckles. “Is that like an Eagle Scout? You must have been very popular in high school.”

“Spot on, mate.”

“Can we focus, please?” I ask, spitting out the nail I just bit off. It sticks to the dashboard.

Ray casts me a look. “Charming.”

I flick the nail off the dash. “Sorry, bad habit I just picked up.” I waffle for a second, unsure how much to tell him. I glance back at Leo, who tilts his head and nods, urging me on. Over the past year we’ve learned to read each other’s facial expressions so well that we can carry on full conversations that way. It’s amazing how much you can communicate using your eyes, mouth, neck, and shoulders.

I take a deep breath. “I know this is going to sound crazy, but Leo and I found out two years ago that time stops for us after a year of not talking. It’s too complicated to explain the whole story about why it happens, but it has something to do with our ancestors. We haven’t spoken to each other face-to-face since last July fourteenth. Exactly a year ago today.” Now that I’ve said it out loud, it feels right. It feels like he’s supposed to know.

Ray keeps his eyes on the road. He makes the final turn toward the hospital and says, “If you didn’t want to tell me, you could have just said so.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Leo says, leaning forward and grasping the back of Ray’s seat. “We’ve been waiting all year for this day. We have no idea what’s supposed to happen. First we thought it had to do with David because of his bar mitzvah. Like maybe something would go wrong that we needed to fix. But nothing went wrong. Then we thought maybe it had to do with Tara, but we could tell this morning that something big had happened to her after the play last night, and by this morning, she didn’t need us anymore. Then, after David’s bar mitzvah service, we found out that Grace’s parents had to rush her to the hospital. Once we heard that it’s her tenth birthday, we knew for sure that whatever it is we’re supposed to do, Grace is involved somehow. Birthdays are a really big deal with Angelina.”

Ray pulls to a stop in front of the main entrance to the hospital. He turns to face us. “Angelina, the short old lady who works all around town? The one in the front row at *Fiddler* yesterday?”

We both nod.

Ray pulls a wad of bills out of his front pocket. “She gave me a hundred bucks after the play ended. Said I’d need it for gas money this week. I figured she’d gone loony, but before I could give it back, someone else stopped to congratulate me on directing the play and when I turned around again, she’d split.”

Leo and I exchange a grin. His story confirms that we were definitely supposed to tell him. “Well, Ray, now you know the mystery that is Angelina D’Angelo.”

“We’ve got to get inside,” Leo says, opening his door with a loud creak.

I untangle the seat belt from my blackboard. I definitely won't miss having this thing around my neck every time Leo and I are together.

After one last stare at the money in his palm, Ray tucks it away and says, "I can't just leave you here."

"That's really nice of you," I tell him, "but we don't know how long we'll be."

"Or even if today will be today when we come back out," Leo says, sticking his head into my window. "Today could be today for us and tomorrow for you. Or next week!"

Ray scratches his head. "Huh?"

"Exactly," I say, pushing my door open.

"I'll take my chances that your today and my today will be the same when you come back." Ray starts the car. "I'll be in the parking lot when you come out."

If we come out. I thank him, take a deep breath, and run after Leo. Whether or not Ray fully believes us, I'm glad he's out there.

The first person I see when I step through the large sliding glass door is Connor's dad. I recognize him from the play last night. He was filming the whole thing with a camera he set up on a tripod in front of the stage. Now he's fighting with a coffee machine in the lobby of the Willow Falls Hospital. Judging by his mangled Styrofoam cup, I'd say the machine is winning.

"Mr. Kelly!" Leo says, hurrying over to him. "Is Grace all right? I'm Leo, and this is Amanda. We're friends of Connor's. We were all in the play together last night? We figured since David couldn't be here for Connor, that we'd come instead."

We hadn't actually discussed how to explain our visit. Guess his explanation is as good as any. Leo is good at lying while not really lying at the same time.

Mr. Kelly looks down at us from his considerable height. His bloodshot eyes are almost as red as his hair. "I remember you," he says, tossing his torn coffee cup into the trash. He looks back and forth between us. "What's with the blackboards? Some fashion trend I've missed?"

"Long story," I tell him.

"We'll be throwing them out very soon," Leo adds. "Hopefully."

Mr. Kelly tries in vain to get more coffee with another cup, but this time a chunk of Styrofoam comes off in his hands and it almost spills all over him. He grunts in frustration. "So you came here to see Connor? Grace is the one we brought in."

"Yes, of course we're here for Grace, too," I assure him. "She and I got pretty close during rehearsals." This isn't exactly true, but she did play my daughter. "In fact, this morning at the bar mitzvah she called me Mommy."

"That sounds like Grace." His mouth curves up a bit and twitches, as though it's currently unable to make a real smile.

"So what happened?" Leo presses. "Did she get sick?"

"Not exactly," he says. "She seems to be in shock. Or something like it. The doctors are afraid she's going catatonic." His voice breaks. "That means her brain can't send messages to her body. She's not talking or moving."

My stomach twists. Leo turns pale. I don't know what I'd expected, maybe a weird strain of the flu, or a stomach virus. But not this.

“Come,” he says, waving for us to follow. “See for yourself.”

As we wait for the elevator, Leo says, “She seemed perfectly fine at the play last night. Running around, having fun like normal.”

“It struck very suddenly,” Mr. Kelly says. “Just a few hours ago she was so excited to go to the bar mitzvah. She couldn’t wait to play with her brother’s friends.” He stops talking while a family exits the elevator and we step on. He presses the button for the third floor. An older couple carrying pink balloons and flowers slip in right before the door closes. The woman — who I quickly deduce is a new grandmother — uses her elbow to push the button for the floor marked BIRTHING CENTER. “Our daughter just had a baby,” they gush. We try to smile for them, but like Mr. Kelly before, it’s hard to make our mouths go that way.

The couple gets out on the second floor and Mr. Kelly continues his story. “So we arrived at Apple Grove early this morning. Connor needed to set up the video feed to allow David’s father to watch the service.” He pauses. “I hope that worked out all right?”

We nod. “It worked perfectly,” I tell him. “It was like David’s father was in the field with us.”

“It was Connor’s idea in the first place,” Leo adds. “He worked out the whole thing with the clinic where David’s dad lives.”

“He gets his technical skills from me,” Mr. Kelly says, pride evident in his voice. Then his expression saddens. “When Phil — that’s David’s dad — first got sick, Mrs. Kelly and I used to drive David and his mother up to see him at the clinic. Phil

could still crack jokes, and could even get around a bit on his own. But once his condition worsened, they stopped asking us to come.”

Neither of us says anything. David’s never spoken much about his dad, at least not to me. I know his condition is permanent, and hereditary, which means that David might get sick one day, too. Mr. Kelly shakes his head as though shaking off the sad memories before picking up his story. “So Connor finishes setting up and we’re about to take our seats when Grace starts breathing heavily, gasping almost. We thought maybe she was having an allergic reaction to a bee sting or something, but we couldn’t find any sign of it. At first she could still talk. In fact, all she was doing was talking. But it wasn’t making any sense. She kept talking about strings in the sky. She kept saying what sounded like ‘Willow Falls is a blanket.’”

“‘Willow Falls is a blanket?’” Leo repeats as we step out of the elevator and turn down a long hallway. “What does that mean?”

“We have no idea. Then, just as suddenly, she stopped speaking at all. She didn’t appear to hear us, either. I carried her back to the car and brought her straight here.” He doesn’t talk after that, just strides quickly past rows of closed doors. The halls have that cleaning solution smell to them, which I guess is better than a lot of other smells a hospital could have.

When we get to Grace’s room, all I can see at first is a metal bed completely surrounded by doctors with white coats and clipboards. In the absence of any chairs, Mrs. Kelly is sitting on a window seat that looks out onto the parking lot. Her face is white and she keeps clenching and unclenching her hands. I

don't see Connor. He's such a good brother, he's probably in the gift shop getting Grace some balloons.

Everyone is talking at once. From what I can make out, the doctors are debating various solutions. I hear words like *benzodiazepine treatment*, *intravenous fluids*, *shock therapy*. My heart beats faster. Those don't sound fun. Finally a gray-haired doctor tells everyone that the best thing to do right now is to make sure she's comfortable and not dehydrated. One by one, the doctors and nurses trail out into the hall. I hear one of the doctors mutter, "Never seen anything like it. Not in Willow Falls."

Mr. Kelly hurries in and we follow behind. I stop short when I see Grace. She is lying on top of the covers, her small body taking up very little space on the bed. She's still wearing the pretty striped dress she wore to the bar mitzvah. She should be on her way to the community center right now with the rest of David's guests to dance and celebrate, not stuck here with doctors poking and prodding her. Her mother had braided her long red hair for the party and the braids are now neatly draped over her shoulders. Her bright blue eyes are wide open. Almost *too* wide. She is unmoving, her face frozen in place like a Halloween mask. As someone who has become an expert in reading facial expressions, I can easily recognize the one on her face now.

It's *amazement*.