

11 Birthdays

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TO ZOE AND SAGE, WITH LOVE

Chapter One

11 YEARS AGO — WILLOW FALLS
BIRTHING CENTER

The oddest thing about Angelina D'Angelo was that no one could remember a time when she didn't live in Willow Falls. The oldest man in town, Bucky Whitehead, swears Angelina was an old lady when HE was a boy. But when questioned, Angelina just smiled. The person asking would get so distracted by watching the duck-shaped birthmark wiggle on her cheek, they would forget their question altogether.

Angelina, small and swift, was moving even faster than usual because today was the day she had been waiting for. She had been waiting a LONG time. Her volunteer badge securely fastened to her hip pocket, she whooshed down the hall of the Willow Falls Birthing Center and stopped short in front of the nursery window. Pressing her hands

against the cool glass, she searched the faces of the newborn babies until she found the two she was looking for.

First, the boy. Pink cheeks, a mop of black hair, clenched fists. And then, in the next bassinet, the girl. A thin coating of blond fuzz on her head, a sweet smile on her lips. Angelina knew it was just gas, but that smile told her a lot. It told her all she needed to know. She stepped back and waited. A few minutes later, the two mothers appeared from different directions, wheeled up to the window by their happily exhausted husbands. The younger of the two women had her dark curly hair pulled into a loose ponytail. The other, a blonde with a fashionable bob, had already changed out of her hospital gown into a running suit. The men nodded a polite hello to each other.

No one noticed Angelina. She had perfected the art of blending into the background.

“Which one’s yours?” the dark-haired woman asked.

“That one,” the blonde said, pointing to the little girl who was rubbing her closed eyes. “She’s our second. We have a two-year-old at home.”

The other woman smiled. “She’s precious.” Then she pointed to the boy who was now happily sucking his fist. “That one’s ours. He’s our first. But we want lots more

kids, right, honey?” She reached up for her husband’s hand and squeezed it.

“Let’s see how this one goes,” he said, laughing kindly.

A soft, strong voice from behind them asked, “What have you decided to name them?”

The four craned their necks around, surprised to see Angelina. They had thought they were alone in the hallway.

The boy’s mother replied, “Leo. After my husband’s great-grandfather, Leonard Fitzpatrick.”

The girl’s mother said, “That’s funny, we’re naming Amanda after my husband’s great-grand*mother*, Amanda Ellerby.”

The men were suddenly struck with an uneasy feeling, like they were remembering something out of a storybook someone read to them when they were children. But the old woman was talking again, so they shook off the feeling.

“Being born on the same day is very special. I believe Amanda and Leo will be the best of friends.” She said this very confidently. “You will be sure to celebrate this day together every year, no? The day of their birth?”

“Um, sure,” the mothers promised, smiling graciously at each other. Neither really meant it.

“A very wise decision,” Angelina said with a quick nod. “Blessings to all of you.”

A moment later she whooshed back down the hall and out of sight.

“That was strange,” said Amanda’s father.

“Angelina’s an odd one,” said Leo’s father. “But I’m sure you know that. She’s lived in Willow Falls forever.”

Amanda’s parents shook their heads. “We just moved to town a few months ago,” her mom said.

“My family used to live here,” Amanda’s dad added, “but my parents moved away before I was born. We really don’t know anyone.”

So Leo’s parents told them the important things, like where to find the best pizza, who offered the best prices on diapers. And when they parted, neither expected to see the other again.

They were wrong.