

“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.