

# THE MESSENGER



BETH WISEMAN

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Note: This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

*To Walter*

## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

*The Messenger* is a work of fiction, but I have yet to speak to an author who didn't incorporate life events into his or her books. I've penned over fifty books, and each one of my stories contains at least one element that represents an event in my life. *The Messenger* is no exception, and it is inspired by a true story.

My main character—Walter, his real name—was a man I met at a speaking event. He approached me after I had finished talking and told me he had a message for me from God. I was speaking at an assisted living facility, and Walter was up in age, so I was skeptical that God had sent him to deliver any words of wisdom for me. Then he said something profound, about an issue that was heavy on my heart, and he provided me with an answer from God. There was no way that this kind elderly man could have known what was at the core of my discomfort at that time in my life, and it brought me to tears.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I honestly don't know what happened to Walter, or if he is still alive, since this happened years ago. *The Messenger* has been percolating in my mind for a long time, and I'm happy to finally have the story available for readers. Keep an open mind. Be alert to the many ways our lives intersect to do God's will. Isn't that what life is about? Making a positive difference during our time here?

I hope you enjoy *The Messenger* and what it represents, even though it is a fictional project. God always works toward our best interests . . . and sometimes we have no way of knowing His plan until it falls into our lap in the form of good news . . . or maybe even a miracle.

Blessings to all of you,

Beth

## PROLOGUE



Dying is a beautiful thing, especially at my age when the body no longer functions the way it should. I suffered through decades of arthritis that made me want to take a jackhammer to my knees. Then, a heart attack, two bypasses, esophageal cancer, and a life-threatening case of pneumonia almost took me down, but in the end, it was a bee sting. Yep, that's right—a wicked case of anaphylactic shock, which left me gasping for air on my living room floor until my granddaughter found me and rushed me to the emergency room. I was more than ready to go at age eighty-two when I heard that monitor flatline, knowing I'd soon see my beloved Mary Grace and my daughter, Lydia, who had passed away much too young. Cancer plagued our family, and I always assumed that's how I would go. Or maybe heart failure. My ticker wasn't what it should be, either. A bee sting wouldn't have been in my top one hundred causes of death.

Leaving my earthly existence happened as I had imag-

ined, although the white light was a mixture of brilliant hues that I believe must have included every color in the rainbow, heavy on golden shades of yellow. I saw Mary Grace as my soul left my worn-out body on the hospital bed. She looked the same as the day I married her—tight blonde curls, a dimply smile, and sapphire eyes that lit up a room. Her presence immediately left me wondering what I looked like. Was I now the handsome young lad she'd married fifty-eight years ago? Or had I ascended into the next life as my slumped-over gray-haired self who walked with a limp?

Lydia was a beautiful woman in her twenties, cancer-free and glowing with good health. I was filled with a love I'd never felt as I glided along the well-lit path. It was like levitating barely off the ground toward a destiny that would forever fill me with contentment and peace.

If there was a downside to exiting my earthly existence, it was my granddaughter—Amelia—whom I was leaving behind. A woman in her early forties raising a troubled son. Amelia was good to me right up until the end, and I worried for her and Michael, her only child. The boy had been in and out of juvenile detention centers and had already caused his mother a lifetime of heartache by the age of seventeen.

But even my anxiety about leaving them wasn't enough to pull me from the euphoric state of mind that lured me toward my departed loved ones. I had waited for this moment to lay eyes on my family, to glide toward them without having any pain. Mary Grace was the first to greet me, wrapping her arms around me, no words

necessary, as I could feel her every emotion radiate through my being. I was home.

Lydia was the next person to welcome me, and again, no words were needed. In the distance, I saw my parents, my brother Edwin, coworkers I remembered warmly, friends and neighbors who had come home before me, and other folks I hadn't seen in decades but of whom I had fond recollections. They'd all been waiting for me, and it was a reunion like no other. Again, it was everything I had imagined, short of one thing. I was hungry. Famished. I searched for a glorious spread of food that might be laid out by my welcoming party, but all I saw in front of me was the rainbow of lights and my family and friends.

My stomach growled, which seemed odd. I was in Heaven, but apparently there was food in Heaven, or I wouldn't be feeling this mild annoyance. I wondered if I would eventually be offered a juicy red steak complemented by a fully loaded baked potato. Perhaps even a slice of red velvet cake loaded with cream cheese icing and a side of vanilla ice cream. My favorites, but the food I'd steered away from since Amelia had insisted that I partake in a heart-healthy diet.

Flanked by family and friends, I kept floating toward the golden gates, and as I neared, they opened with ease, and a new sort of light met me on the other side. I knew immediately what—and who—the light was, and I dropped to my knees and lowered my head, unworthy to face the Son of God or even be in His presence. I wept with feelings of gratitude and remorse over things I'd



done in my life, but I mostly absorbed His love like a sponge that had been dry until this moment in time.

My family and friends dispersed before I was ready for them to go, but I suppose this was the point when I faced all my wrongdoings head-on, begged to be absolved of my sins, and embraced my Lord and Savior with all the love in my heart. But my stomach wouldn't stop growling, which was a distraction at the very least.

When a hand cupped my chin and eased me to my feet, I stood and gazed upon Jesus. I instinctively embraced Him. Every sin I'd ever committed slapped me in the face like a wet rag, unpleasant but not hurtful. I wanted to stay in His arms forever, but when my stomach grumbled even louder, I knew something was amiss. Jesus asked me to walk with Him, although it wasn't really walking. It was like skating without skates, not gliding or floating. It was different than earlier.

Jesus communicated to me without speaking, and I knew that ahead of me was God. Nothing in my life could have prepared me for this moment, and the peaceful calm I'd always envisioned wrapped around me like a blanket of bliss, perfect in every way. Except for my hunger pains, which continued to confuse me.

As I took a seat next to my Heavenly Father, I couldn't remember the last time I'd sat without my knees throbbing with pain. I was especially grateful for the Lord's mercy and my pain-free new existence.

God began to communicate with me using words. His voice was deep, which might have sounded threatening if He hadn't been who He was. Or perhaps I had been wrong in my assumptions. Maybe I should have felt

threatened. I hadn't done anything awful, like kill anyone or intentionally cause harm to another person, but I'd committed my fair share of sins. Despite the love I felt, I braced myself for what was to come. All the while, visions of steak and baked potatoes filled my senses with guilt, knowing I shouldn't be thinking of such things right now.

"Walter, I've been waiting for you," God said in His deep voice. "You're very special to me."

I swallowed hard, surprised that, despite my painless existence, I had a lump in my throat. It was accompanied by the guilt I felt as I wondered if He said that to everyone. Or was I really special? God smiled. I think.

"But you can't stay." God spoke firmly, and tears welled at the corners of my eyes. Had I miscalculated my misdeeds? Was I going to the other place instead?

"Why?" My voice sounded like that of a child pleading with his mother about why he couldn't go to the playground or something equally as unmatched as this conversation.

"There are things I need you to do before you take permanent residence here." God spoke firmly, but I'd never been so relieved in my life. At least I would be returning. But I stiffened and said the first thing that came to mind.

"I don't want to go back. I want to stay here." Was this going to be a debate? Was I expected to plead my case? I felt sure I would lose for all the obvious reasons.

"I know you don't want to leave, but it is necessary." God placed a soothing hand on my shoulder. "You will return to your earthly home with renewed health, and

you will hear My voice in your mind, directing you to do My will.”

“Huh?” I tried to swallow that lump in my throat again as I blinked back tears. *Why me?*

“There are those who cannot—or choose not to—hear My voice. They have blocked My guidance in their lives out of fear, worry, anxiety, or disbelief. But I love all My children, and I want to save as many as I can.”

I wanted to ask God how I factored into what He was saying, but I knew right away that He knew what I was thinking.

“When you return in the grandest of health, you will meet people who need to hear what I have to say in order to find their way to Me. I will guide you in this endeavor. Just listen for My voice the way you always have.”

How many times had I felt the Lord guiding me? Is that what He meant?

“Yes,” He said right away. “You will find yourself in situations, often with strangers, that will require you to spread My messages in an effort to help that person shed the suffering he or she is feeling, to forgo their fears, and to seek Me with all their heart.”

My stomach growled loudly, and I was sure the Lord heard it rumbling. “How long do I get to stay here?” A tear trickled down my cheek as I wondered how much time I would have with Mary Grace and Lydia.

“No time at all. You will go back right away.”

My heart sank to my tormented stomach, which clenched as I fought the urge to openly sob.

“I will see you again, My son.” God spoke softer this

time, His voice still deep and filled with love, but He felt my pain. I was sure of it.

There was no point in arguing, begging to stay. I knew I was going back.

And it happened instantly. I was back in the hospital bed when I opened my eyes, but all was quiet. No monitors beeping, noisy oxygen machine, or doctors scrambling to bring me back to life. Only Amelia. My granddaughter had her back to me as her shoulders shook from crying. I'd been pronounced dead, and presumably, Amelia had been given some time alone with me to grieve.

It occurred to me that I had encountered some sort of near-death experience. Had it all been a dream? I took a deep breath—a deep, full breath like I hadn't taken in years, as if my lungs were that of a healthy twenty-year-old. The aches and pains that consumed most of my body seemed to have fled as I moved slightly in the bed. But it was my knees that spoke to me in an unfamiliar language. They moved and shifted with ease, and I chuckled.

Amelia spun around so fast she backed into a tray filled with medical supplies that went toppling to the floor. As her jaw dropped, my granddaughter looked like she'd seen a ghost before she bolted from the room, screaming for a doctor.

Moments later, three doctors and a nurse came rushing into the room. Amelia stood in the background yelling, "Grandpa, can you hear me? Grandpa?" I'd also been hard of hearing for over a decade.

I waved my arms around so everyone would stop hovering over me and checking my vitals and poking and prodding me. I'd had enough of all that. "Stop! Just stop!" I

said with more anger than I had intended. But would all that touching by mere mortals cause my pain to return? I couldn't chance it.

A young doctor, although probably the oldest person in the room, leaned down close to me and said loudly, "Walter, can you hear me?"

"Yes." Frustration fueled the taut strain in my voice. "And there is something I *need*."

"What's that?" The doctor asked, still much too loud for my liking. I glanced back and forth between me and the machine by the bed that was now beeping in a steady rhythm.

"I need a steak, preferably ribeye, medium rare, and a fully loaded baked potato with extra sour cream. A salad would be nice, too, and I'd like blue cheese dressing." I paused, my mouth watering as I envisioned the meal. "And a slice of red velvet cake topped with vanilla ice cream, please."

Amelia was quickly by my side, inching the doctors out of the way. "Grandpa, I love you so much. I thought we'd lost you." She kissed me on the forehead.

I opened my mouth to tell her that she had lost me for a while, but I knew my story would sound crazy.

My granddaughter turned to the doctor and said, "Maybe we should get him some pudding or yogurt or something easy on his stomach."

I growled. "Amelia, I love you. But if someone doesn't round me up a steak, I'm going to rip all these tubes from my arms and get it myself." And I was pretty sure I could.

I regretted my harsh outburst right away, but people started moving quickly after that, checking my vitals and

visibly scanning me from head to toe. Amelia promised to take me to my favorite steakhouse, so I practiced patience, which was difficult. My stomach was grumbling, but even more so . . . my life had changed. Something was on the horizon, which felt exhilarating and terrifying at the same time.

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