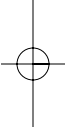
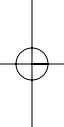
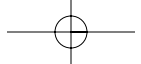


A Mango-
Shaped
Space





FINAL PAGES



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Shaped
Space



A Novel by Wendy Mass



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FINAL PAGES

For Joseph, who is new
For my grandparents, who are not
And in memory of Merlin

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First Edition

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Prologue

Freak. FREEEEEEEK.

I'll never forget the first time I heard the word, that day at the blackboard. It was five years ago, when I was eight. (For those who are mathematically challenged, like me, that means I'm thirteen now.) So there I was, dressed in my shepherd-girl costume for the Christmas play after school, struggling to complete the math problem on the board while my fellow third-graders watched. The one-size-fits-all costume didn't fit me, the shortest shepherd in the class, so I had to keep pushing up the sleeves. The chalk dust tickled my nose. My feet were freezing in the sandals that in my humble opinion no one should have to wear in northern Illinois in the middle of December. My mission was to multiply twenty-four times nine. I remember thinking that if I wrote slowly enough, the bell might ring before I could finish. Just five more minutes. Then no one would know that I couldn't solve the problem.

I rolled the smooth piece of chalk around my fingers and tried not to think about the whole class staring at my back. Glancing around in what I hoped looked like intense concentration, I noticed a few fragments of colored chalk on the ledge of the board. To use up some time, I put down the white piece and began rewriting each number on the board in its correct color.

“Mia!”

My teacher, Mrs. Lowe, startled me. As I turned, the chalk screeched on the board and a deep-red zigzag shape sped across my field of vision. My classmates groaned at the noise. “This isn’t art class,” she said, wagging her long, skinny finger at me as if I didn’t know that. “Just use the white chalk.”

“But isn’t it better to use the right colors?” I asked, confident that the other kids would agree.

The class giggled and I grinned, thinking they were laughing at her, not me.

“What do you mean, the right colors?” she asked, sounding genuinely confused and more than a little annoyed. Now *I* became confused. Wasn’t it obvious what I meant? I looked at my classmates for help, but now their expressions had changed. They gawked at me as if I had suddenly sprouted another head. My hands started to shake a little, and I rushed out my explanation.

“The colors. The colors of the numbers, you know, like the two is pink, well of course it’s not really *this* shade of pink, more like cotton-candy pink, and the four is this baby-blanket blue color, and I . . . I just figured it would be easier to do the math problem with the numbers in the correct colors. Right?” I pleaded with my classmates — my friends — to back me up.

This time when the class laughed it didn’t sound so friendly. I felt my cheeks burning. Then I heard it. In a loud whisper from the back row. *Freak*. Except it sounded like *FREEEEK*.

“What are you talking about, Mia?” demanded my now clearly

irate teacher. “Numbers don’t have *colors*, they simply have a shape and a numerical value, that’s all.”

“But they have all those things,” I whispered, my voice sounding far away.

Mrs. Lowe put her hands on her hips. “I’ve had enough of this. For the last time, numbers do not have colors. Now, are you going to complete the assignment?”

I stared at her and shook my head. I suddenly felt very small, as if my skin was tightening and I was actually shrinking. A whirring sound filled my head. How was this possible? Was everyone playing a trick on me? Of course numbers had colors. Were they also going to tell me that letters and sounds didn’t have colors? That the letter *a* wasn’t yellow like a faded sunflower and screeching chalk didn’t make red jagged lines in the air? I replaced the chalk on the ledge, aware for the first time that my hands shake when I’m nervous. I stood with my arms at my sides, sleeves hanging halfway to my knees. Was I the only one who lived in a world full of color? I waited to see if they were going to tell me the earth was flat.

A badly constructed paper airplane wobbled past my nose.

Mrs. Lowe sent me to Principal Dubner’s office, where I repeated my explanation for using the colored chalk. By the time my parents arrived an hour later, I’d run out of steam. I sat there and listened to them talk about my “uncharacteristic behavior.” I wanted to tell the principal that his name was the color of freshly piled hay. I quickly thought better of it. Even at eight years old, I

was smart enough to realize that something was very wrong and that until I figured out what it was, I'd better not get myself in deeper trouble.

So I pretended I made everything up. I sat there and said things like "It was stupid," "I was only playing around." And, at least twenty times, "I'm sorry."

The principal left me in the hands of my parents, who brought me home. I promptly kicked off the stupid sandals, threw on my sneakers, and took off running through the fields behind my house. The cold didn't bother me. I was too busy brooding over the unfairness of it all.

The Christmas play was short one shepherd girl.

Mrs. Lowe made me clean the erasers for a week and apologize in front of the whole class for taking up their time with my nonsense. Those were her words, not mine.

Pretty soon, everyone forgot about that day. Everyone but me. I learned to guard my secret well. But now I'm thirteen. Everything is about to change.

And there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Chapter One

"*A is for Amy who fell down the stairs,*" says my best friend, Jenna Davis, as we climb farther down into the steep, parched ravine. We've been inseparable since we were five and her mother brought her to my house to play. We bonded over the various ways we could contort my Barbie and Ken dolls without breaking them. Let's just say that Ken won't be having children anytime soon and leave it at that.

"*B is for Basil, assaulted by bears,*" I reply, continuing the morbid rhyme we memorized off the poster on my bedroom wall. Each letter of the alphabet has a rhyme about a little kid meeting some bizarre end. I like the poster because it is in black and white to everyone else, but inside my head, it's in color.

"Could it be any hotter out?" Jenna asks, panting with the effort to keep her footing on the slippery slope.

The sweat dripping down my face is enough of an answer. August has rolled around too soon, and we only have a few more weeks before eighth grade starts. If we lived a little farther south, a tumbleweed would tumble by. As we stumble down the familiar path of tall, sun-bleached grass and dry earth, I can feel the air thickening, preparing for a storm.

At thirteen, Jenna and I are much too old for day camp. We already live out in the country, with all the fresh air we could want.

We entertain ourselves by pretending there is still some square inch of countryside that we haven't discovered yet. Every day we explore the hills, the valley in between, the ravine, the woods. Last summer we found an arrowhead half buried under a bush. My father said it might have been from the Blackhawk War, the one that Abe Lincoln fought in when he was young. This year all we've found is the same old crabgrass, same old bugs, same old us. But still, exploring passes the time. The absence of wind today means we're spared the smell of manure from the Roth's farm across the valley. That's something to be thankful for.

When we were younger, we used to pretend that the ravine, always dry like this during the summer months, would lead us someplace else — somewhere magical, with adventures and swords and talking animals like in the Narnia books. Sometimes I still catch Jenna peeking behind bushes for hidden doorways. She's trying to find a way to reach her mother, who died three years ago from some kind of cancer that only women get. Mrs. Davis was so sweet and pretty, with red hair and freckles just like Jenna. Except Jenna is short like me, and Mrs. Davis was really tall. Before she died, Jenna's mom bought us the rope friendship bracelets that we have never taken off. She said that as long as we kept them on, nothing could come between us. I explain this to my own mother every time she begs me to cut off the bracelet, which is now too tight to slip over my hand. Who cares if it's gray and fraying and maybe even a little smelly?

The wind starts up slightly, and a big green leaf sticks to the sweat on my leg. I hold still and count to twelve before it flutters

and falls to the ground. The color of the leaf is exactly the same color as Jenna's name — a bright, shimmering shade of green with some yellow highlights. I think part of why I liked Jenna right away is that I like the color of her name. But I'd never tell her that, nor would I tell my older sister, Beth, that her name is the murky brown of swamp water. Beth is sixteen and in the process of wearing down our parents' patience. She changes her hair color the way normal people change their underwear. We used to be a lot closer, before she went to high school and dropped me like a piping-hot bag of microwave popcorn. Before she left for the summer, she told me the boys would pay more attention to me if I colored my hair blond. I told her I'd stick with my boring brown, thank you very much. The only natural blond in the family is Zack. He just turned eleven, and his name is the light blue of a robin's egg. Zack has a lot of strange ideas. He can tell you exactly how many McDonald's hamburgers he's eaten in his lifetime. He has a detailed chart on his wall. The local paper ran a story about it once.

Jenna stops walking and points at my feet. "Your sneakers are untied," she says. "For a change."

I kick my sneakers off, tie the laces together, and drape them over my shoulder. I prefer to be barefoot anyway. Every night, the water in the bottom of my shower turns brown for a minute as the dirt runs from between my toes. Beth refuses to shower after me.

Jenna starts to say something, but her words get drowned out by a helicopter flying overhead. The roaring sound instantly fills my vision with brown streaks and slashes, and I look up to see

the familiar markings of my father's chopper. He sells and repairs small farm equipment and uses the helicopter to get to out-of-the-way places. Jenna and I wave, long hair whipping around our faces, but I don't think he sees us. When Zack was little, he was scared Dad wouldn't be able to find his way home. Zack cried and cried every time the helicopter took off. Finally Dad took me and Beth and Zack up in the chopper with him to show us how easy it is to spot the landing site. Beth threw up the entire time and hasn't gone for a ride since.

"Are you ever scared to fly with him?" Jenna asks when we can hear each other again. "That thing looks like it's ready to fall apart."

"It's fun," I tell her, tucking my hair back in its ponytail. "It feels like you're a bird up there. Everything looks different. You're always welcome to come with us, you know."

A look of horror flits across Jenna's face. "No thanks."

In all these years, Jenna has never accepted my offer.

"So have you gone up to the cemetery yet?" she asks as we continue walking along the bottom of the ravine.

"No, not yet. I still have to finish the painting." It was Jenna's idea that I bring my grandfather a present on the one-year anniversary of his death. She brings her mother something each year, and her mother gives her gifts from the grave. Well, sort of. When Mrs. Davis knew she wasn't going to live much longer, she stocked up on presents and wrote long letters about her life. She gave them to my mother to keep, and each year on Jenna's birth-

day, my mother sends her one of the packages in the mail. One of these years, the gifts are going to run out and that will be a very sad birthday indeed.

“Can I see the painting?” Jenna asks, even though she knows better.

“You know it’s bad luck to show it before it’s done.”

“Why are you so superstitious?” she asks, wiping her sweaty brow and leaving a streak of dirt. “I thought your brother’s superstitions drove you crazy.”

“They do,” I insist. “I’m not half as bad as him. If a black cat crosses his path, he locks himself in his room for the rest of the day. And forget walking under ladders. If he sees our father do it, he makes him walk around the house backward. *Twice*. Zack says that if Dad really wanted to make sure he undid the bad luck, he would cross his fingers until he saw a dog.”

“But you don’t have a dog.”

“I know.”

“And what’s with the ladder thing anyway?”

I shrug. “I have no idea. But you definitely don’t want to walk under one.”

“There’s a lot of weirdness in your family,” Jenna says, picking at a scab on her elbow.

She doesn’t even know about my own personal brand of weirdness. Like everybody else, she seems to have forgotten about my third-grade incident. Which is just fine with me.

“You know,” Jenna says, stepping carefully over a gnarled branch,

“my father told me it could take a soul a whole year to reach heaven. Maybe that’s why it took you a year to finish the painting of your grandfather.”

I have my own theory on my grandfather’s soul, but I haven’t told anyone. After all, I am good at keeping secrets. “That could be it,” I respond. “C’mon, let’s get back so it doesn’t take me any longer. I want to bring the painting to the cemetery before dinner.”

“Do we have time for a quick PIC mission?” Jenna asks as we climb back up the slope.

I hated to skip out on the best part of the day, our PIC mission. Partners in Crime. The term was another gift from Jenna’s mom. She made it up after she caught me standing guard while Jenna stole quarters from the cow-shaped cookie jar in their kitchen. After that we learned to be more careful. In fifth grade, we hid in Beth’s closet when she had a slumber party. We heard lots of juicy gossip, as well as some stuff about how babies are made that cleared up a few lingering questions. To this day, Jenna and I count that as our most successful mission.

“I really can’t today,” I tell her.

“Oh, it’s okay. I can’t think of anything good anyway. This town is just too boring.” She kicks up a pile of dirt with the toe of her sneaker and sighs loudly.

It takes longer than it should to get home because we have to walk all the way around the Davises’ fields. Jenna’s father actually farms his land; he grows soybeans and the sweetest corn for miles around. My father plowed under our fields to make the landing

space for his helicopter. Jenna's father thinks my father is lazy since he only flies three times a week and is back by dinnertime. My father thinks Jenna's father should mind his own business.

"Is your dad ever going to stop working on your house?" Jenna asks as we come into view of it. Everyone in town, including the rest of my family, wants to know the answer to that question. The helicopter is now parked out back, and my father is already halfway up the ladder on his way to the roof.

"I don't think so," I reply honestly.

My sprawling house is famous in these parts and never fails to get a reaction. First, people stare. They look up; they look down. Sometimes they even do that twice. The house is almost like a living creature that keeps expanding and contracting and remaking itself. Every inch of it was built by my father and grandfather from all different kinds of wood — whatever they could borrow, barter, or beg for. They could never agree on how the house should be laid out, so they each did their own thing and eventually met up in the middle.

This technique resulted in a number of doors that lead nowhere and stairs that go inside walls like secret passageways. That is how Jenna and I managed to wind up in the back of Beth's closet, so I guess the spider web-filled tunnels are good for something. My father is usually on a ladder hammering away at the roof when he's not tinkering with the chopper. I call him Casper because we hardly ever see him at ground level. He calls me Wild Child because I'm always running around barefoot feeling the earth under my feet and predicting rain.

“Hi, Mr. Winchell,” Jenna shouts.

My father waves at us with his hammer, his mouth full of nails.

“Bye, Mr. Winchell,” Jenna shouts again as she heads toward her own smaller and much more normal house.

He tries to wave again, slips slightly, then quickly regains his balance.

“How long will you be up there?” I call out.

“Till your mother makes me come down.”

“Great,” I mutter. That means at least a few more hours of hammering until Mom brings Beth back from the airport. Beth’s been gone for six whole weeks at a summer college-prep program in California. She won a full scholarship by writing an essay on the pressure of writing an essay. It was Zack’s idea. Her return is all too soon if you ask me. It was nice not having anyone boss me around.

The hammering begins and the familiar mottled gray bursts of color appear about a foot away from my face. The color and shape of a hammer hitting a nail has become such a part of my existence that I barely notice it. I can see right through the color-bursts, but they still distract me from whatever I’m doing. If it was a nicer color, I might not mind as much.

I slip into my sneakers as I approach the back kitchen door, stepping cautiously around wooden planks, hammers, nails, and one very scary-looking chain saw. As always, the smell of sawdust is in the air and on my clothes and in my throat. It is inescapable around here, and it has long since mingled with the taste of multicolored chalk dust that still haunts me from third grade.

I go up to my room and look for Mango, whose official name is Mango the Magnificat. He usually sleeps at the foot of my bed on my old Winnie-the-Pooh baby blanket, completely covering the faded Pooh and Piglet walking into the sunset. He's not there now, but he left behind his favorite toy — a stuffed Tweety Bird that he likes to carry around in his mouth. I call out his name and hear a faraway, orange-soda-colored meow in response. I trace the sound to Beth's room and find the little gray-and-white traitor curled up on Beth's pillow. I swoop him up in my arms and glance at Beth's night table. By some huge oversight on her part, Beth left her diary right out in plain sight when she went to California. When I first noticed it, I thought maybe she *wanted* me to read it. Then I decided that she had probably booby-trapped it somehow and she'd know if I peeked.

I deposit Mango on my blanket, where he belongs. I start to shut the door behind me, when Zack sticks his foot in the way.

"Just a sec, Mia," Zack says, pushing the door back open. "I need to do something."

"You need to do something in my room?" I ask, instantly suspicious. Zack has only recently gotten over his destructive phase. For years, nothing in the house was safe. He was very good at taking things apart but much less skilled at the art of putting them back together.

"Don't worry," he insists. "It will only take a second."

"On one condition," I say, trapping him in the doorway. "You have to tell me why it's bad luck to walk under a ladder."

He rolls his eyes. "That's easy. It's because you're disrupting

the sacred triangle of life formed by the ladder, the ground, and the wall.”

“Huh?” I let my guard down, and he takes this opportunity to brush past me into my room. He heads directly over to my clock collection on the far wall. I follow him and notice he’s clutching several watches in his small hands. Two belong to my father, one is my mother’s, and one is Beth’s.

“What are you doing with all those wa —”

“Shh,” he says, cutting me off. “I have to get this exactly right.” He stares at the faces of my clocks as if they have a message for him.

“Get *what* exactly ri —”

“Shh!” His eyes dart from the wooden cuckoo clock to the fluorescent star-shaped one, over to the big digital one, down to the clock in the shape of a train, and across to the electronic one that speaks the time out loud. I’ve collected clocks since first grade. Every Christmas, I get to pick out another one.

“I have to set these watches exactly right,” Zack explains, busily twisting the watch dials to match the time on my synchronized clocks. “Otherwise, some of us will be living in the past and some in the future. In the very same house! Can’t have that. Very bad.”

“What difference could a minute or two make?”

“It has to do with folds in the space-time continuum, obviously,” he replies, as though I should clearly have known that.

“Where did you get that from? It sounds like something from *Star Trek*.”

He shakes his head adamantly. “I read it on the NASA Web site.”

I should have known. Zack is addicted to the Internet. “You can’t believe everything you read on the comput —”

I don’t get to finish my sentence because at that moment all the clocks strike five. The cuckoo pops out and cuckoos. Loudly. The train blows its whistle. *Really* loudly. All the alarms go off at the same time — buzzing and chiming and ringing and shrieking — all much louder than I’ve ever heard them. My father is still hammering. My mother honks in the driveway to let us know she is back from the airport with Beth. Beth slams the front door open and drops her suitcase on the floor. Mango runs under the bed. I put my hands over my ears and shut my eyes to stop all the colors that are bombarding me.

It doesn’t work. My sight is filled with blurry purple triangles and waves of green and floating black dots and balls of all sizes and shades of colors, spinning, swooping, swirling in front of me and across the room and in my mind’s eye. If I had been prepared, I would have been able to anticipate the onslaught, but now it is overwhelming and I feel like I’m suffocating.

“What’s wrong with you?” Zack shouts. I’m crouching on the floor now.

“Why is everything so loud?” I cry above the noise.

A second later the chimes stop. No more honking, no more doors slamming, just the usual hammering. The colors and shapes quickly fade away, and I feel like I can breathe again. I open my

eyes to find Zack staring at me with a combination of concern and surprise. I stand up and quickly turn one of the clocks around. The volume was turned all the way up. The same with the others. My hand shakes slightly as I pull them all off the wall and rest them on the bed.

“I don’t get it. I always keep the alarms turned off.”

Zack tries to slink out of the room, but I grab his sleeve. I hold him there until he confesses.

“Okay, I switched on the alarms and turned the volume up a little before you came home. I did it so I’d be able to hear them from my room.”

“You could have heard them from your room if your room was in Alaska!” I push him into the hall and lock my door.

“Hey,” he says, knocking hard. “I only did it so I wouldn’t be in your room without permission.”

“You were in here without permission to turn the alarms *on*, weren’t you?”

Silence. Then, “What’s your problem anyway?”

Ignoring him, I switch off the alarms and hang the clocks in their rightful spots. I watch them silently ticking and blink back the stinging tears. How could Zack be so unaffected by the noise? What if I’d been out in public when something like that happened? I’d look pretty ridiculous crouching in the hallway at school.

As I stand there feeling sorry for myself, Mango peeks out from his hiding place, looks around, then tentatively crawls out and winds himself around my legs. I pick him up and head over to the

closet, where I store my art supplies. I have a painting to finish and a grandfather to visit. I always put music on when I paint, but for the first time I can remember, I'm afraid that the colors will overwhelm me. I never want to feel so out of control again.

I try to finish the painting, but I can't concentrate. It's too quiet. Even the hammering has stopped. I choose a Mozart piece that Grandpa used to like, turn the volume way down, and press the Play button before I can chicken out. The colors immediately and gently flow over me, energizing me, reminding me that I can still enjoy them. The glossy red-barnlike color of the violin, the silvery-bluish white of the flute, the school-bus yellow of the French horn. All of them layering on top of one another, changing, shifting, belonging, at that minute, only to me.