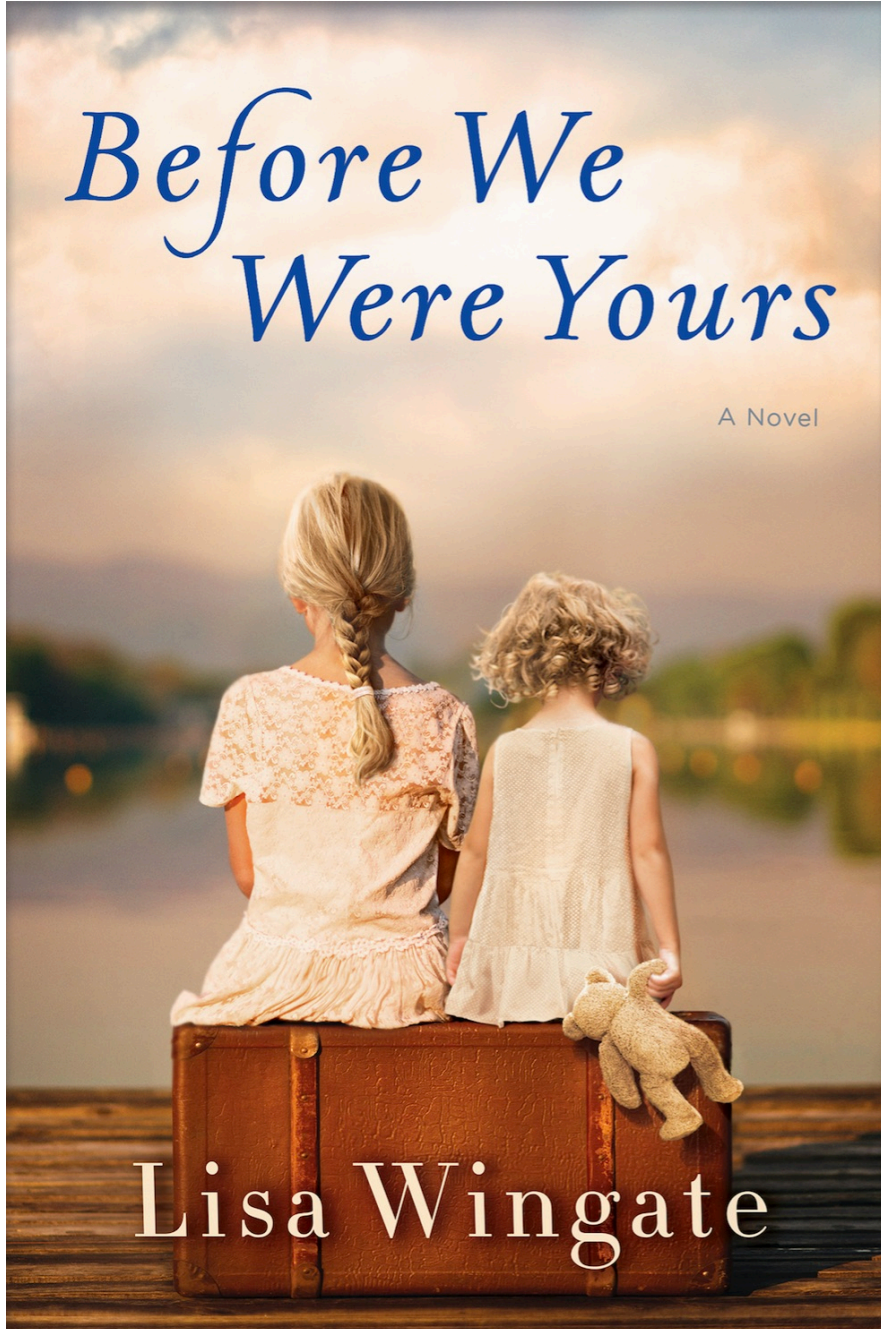


Before We Were Yours

A Novel



Lisa Wingate

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Ballantine Books

New York

Before We Were Yours is a work of historical fiction, using well-known historical and public figures. All incidents and dialogue are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical or public figures appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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For readers of *Orphan Train* and *The Nightingale*—an engrossing new novel, inspired by a true story, about two families, generations apart, that are forever changed by a heartbreaking injustice.

Memphis, 1939. Twelve-year-old Rill Foss and her four younger siblings live a magical life aboard their family's Mississippi River shantyboat. But when their father must rush their mother to the hospital one stormy night, Rill is left in charge—until strangers arrive in force. Wrenched from all that is familiar and thrown into a Tennessee Children's Home Society orphanage, the Foss children are assured that they will soon be returned to their parents—but they quickly realize that the truth is much darker. At the mercy of the facility's cruel director, Rill fights to keep her sisters and brother together—in a world of danger and uncertainty.

Aiken, South Carolina, present day. Born into wealth and privilege, Avery Stafford seems to have it all: a successful career as a federal prosecutor, a handsome fiancé, and a lavish wedding on the horizon. But when Avery returns home to help her father weather a health crisis, a chance encounter leaves her with uncomfortable questions—and compels her to take a journey through her family's long-hidden history, on a path that will ultimately lead either to devastation . . . or redemption.

Based on one of America's most notorious real-life scandals—in which Georgia Tann, director of a Memphis-based adoption organization, kidnapped and sold poor children to wealthy families all over the country—*Before We Were Yours* brilliantly fictionalizes and brings to life one of America's most notorious scandals.

Early praise for

Before We Were Yours

“I absolutely loved this book. I'm still basking in the afterglow, in shock at the true-crime elements, in awe at the journey of these characters who seem to have immortal souls.”

- **Jamie Ford, *NYT* bestselling author of *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* and *Songs of Willow Frost***

“An unforgettable read.”

- **Susan Meissner, author of *Secrets of a Charmed Life***

“Rang so true, I couldn't sleep until I knew their fate.”

- **Julie Kibler, bestselling author of *Calling Me Home***

Both heartbreaking and soul-affirming! **If you loved *Orphan Train*, be prepared to fall in love** with Rill and her siblings!

- **The Book Club Cheerleader**

PRELUDE

Baltimore, Maryland

AUGUST 3, 1939

My story begins on a sweltering August night in a place I will never set eyes upon. The room takes life only in my imaginings. It is large most days when I conjure it. The walls are white and clean, the bed linens crisp as a fallen leaf. The private suite has the very finest of everything. Outside, the breeze is weary, and the cicadas throb in the tall trees, their verdant hiding places just below the window frames. The screens sway inward as the attic fan rattles overhead, pulling at wet air that has no desire to be moved.

The scent of pine wafts in, and the woman's screams press out as the nurses hold her fast to the bed. Sweat pools on her skin and rushes down her face and arms and legs, She'd be horrified if she were aware of this.

She is pretty. A gentle, fragile soul. Not the sort who would intentionally bring about the catastrophic unraveling that is only, this moment, beginning. In my multifold years of life, I have learned that most people get along as best they can. They don't intend to hurt anyone. It is merely a terrible by-product of surviving.

It isn't her fault, all that comes to pass after that one final, merciless push. She produces the very last thing she could possibly want. Silent flesh comes forth—a tiny, fair-haired girl as pretty as a doll, yet blue and still.

The woman has no way of knowing her child's fate, or if she does know, the medications will cause the memory of it to be nothing but a blur by tomorrow. She ceases her thrashing and surrenders to the twilight sleep, lulled by the doses of morphine and scopolamine administered to help her defeat the pain.

To help her release everything, and she will.

Sympathetic conversation takes place as doctors stitch and nurses clean up what is left.

“So sad when it happens this way. So out of order when a life has not even one breath in this world.”

“You have to wonder sometimes...why...when a child is so very wanted....”

A veil is lowered. Tiny eyes are shrouded. They will never see.

The woman’s ears hear but cannot grasp. All slips in and slips away. It is as if she is attempting to catch the tide, and it drains through her clenched fingers, and finally she floats out along with it.

Glorious anticipation has melted into wrenching anguish.

“Sir, I am so terribly sorry,” the doctor says as he slips from the room. “Rest assured that everything humanly possible was done to ease your daughter’s labor and to save the baby. I understand how difficult this is. Please offer our condolences to the baby’s father when you are finally able to reach him overseas. After so many disappointments, your family must have held such great hope.”

“Will she be able to have more?”

“It isn’t advisable.”

“This will be the end of her. And her mother as well, when she learns of it. Christine is our only child, you know. The pitter-patter of little feet...the beginning of a new generation....”

“I understand, sir.”

“What are the risks should she....”

“Her life. And it’s extremely unlikely that your daughter would ever carry another pregnancy to term. If she were to try, the results could be....”

“I see.”

The doctor lays a comforting hand on the heartbroken man, or this is the way it happens in my imaginings. Their gazes tangle.

The physician looks over his shoulder to be certain that the nurses cannot hear. "Sir, might I suggest something?" he says quietly, gravely.

"I know of a woman in Memphis...."

Chapter 1

Avery Stafford

AIKEN, SOUTH CAROLINA, PRESENT DAY

I take a breath, scoot to the edge of the seat, and straighten my jacket as the limo rolls to a stop on the boiling-hot asphalt, News vans wait along the curb, accentuating the importance of this morning's seemingly innocuous meeting.

But, not one moment of this day will happen by accident. These past two months in South Carolina have been all about making sure the nuances are just right—shaping the inferences so as to *hint* but do no more.

Definitive statements are not to be made.

Not yet, anyway.

Not for a long time, if I have my way about it.

I wish I could forget why I've come home, but even the fact that my father isn't reading his notes or checking the briefing from Leslie, his uber-efficient press secretary, is an undeniable reminder. There's no escaping the enemy that rides silently in the car with us. It's here in the backseat, hiding beneath the gray tailored suit that hangs a hint too loose over my father's broad shoulders.

Daddy stares out the window, his head leaning to one side. He has relegated his aides and Leslie to another car.

"You feeling all right?" I reach across to brush a long blond hair—mine—off the seat so it won't cling to his trousers when he gets out. If my mother were here, she'd whip out a mini lint brush, but she's home, preparing for our second event of the day—a family Christmas photo that must be taken months early...just in case Daddy's prognosis worsens.

He sits a bit straighter, lifts his head. Static makes his thick gray hair stick straight out. I want to smooth it down for him, but I don't. It would be a breach of protocol.

If my mother is intimately involved in the micro aspects of our lives, such as fretting over lint and planning for the family Christmas photo in July, my father is the opposite. He is distant—an island of staunch maleness in a household of women. I know he cares deeply about my mother, my two sisters, and me, but he seldom voices the sentiment out loud. I also know that I'm his favorite but the one who confuses him the most. He is a product of an era when women went to college to secure the requisite MRS degree. He's not quite sure what to do with a thirty-year-old daughter who graduated top of her class from Columbia Law and actually enjoys the gritty world of a U.S. attorney's office.

Whatever the reason—perhaps just because the positions of *perfectionist daughter* and *sweet daughter* were already taken in our family—I have always been *brainiac daughter*. I loved school and it was the unspoken conclusion that I would be the family torchbearer, the son replacement, the one to succeed my father. Somehow, I always imagined that I'd be older when it happened and that I would be ready.

Now I look at my dad and think, *How can you not want it, Avery? This is what he's worked for all his life. What generations of Staffords have labored for since the Revolutionary War, for heaven's sake.* Our family has always held fast to the guiding rope of public service. Daddy is no exception. Since graduating from West Point and serving as an army aviator before I was born, he has upheld the family name with dignity and determinations.

Of course you want this, I tell myself. You've always wanted this. You just didn't expect it to happen yet, and not this way. That's all.

Secretly, I'm clinging by all ten fingernails to the best-case scenario. The enemies will be vanquished on both fronts—political and medical. My father will be cured by the combination of the surgery that brought him home from the summer congressional session early

and the chemo pump he must wear strapped to his leg every three weeks. My move home to Aiken will be temporary.

Cancer will no longer be a part of our lives.

It *can* be beaten. Other people have done it, and if anyone can, Senator Wells Stafford can.

There is not, anywhere, a stronger man or better man than my dad.

“Ready?” he asks, straightening his suit. It’s a relief when he swipes down the rooster tail in his hair. I’m not prepared to cross the line from daughter to caretaker.

“Right behind you.” I’d do anything for him, but I hope it’s many more years before we’re forced to reverse the roles of parent and child. I’ve learned how hard that is while watching my father struggle to make decisions for his mother.

My once quick-witted, fun-loving Grandma Judy is now a ghost of her favorite self. As painful as that is, Daddy can’t talk to anyone about it. If the media gets clued in to the fact that we’ve moved her to a *facility*, especially an upscale one on a lovely estate not ten miles from here, it’ll be a lose-lose situation, politically speaking. Given the burgeoning scandal over a series of wrongful death and abuse cases involving corporate-owned eldercare facilities in our state, Daddy’s political enemies would either point out that only those with money can afford premium care or they’d accuse my father of warehousing his mom because he is a cold-hearted lout who cares nothing for the elderly. They’d say that he’ll happily turn a blind eye toward the needs of the helpless if it profits his friends and campaign contributors.

The reality is that his decisions for Grandma Judy are in no way political. We’re just like other people. Every available avenue is paved with guilt, lined with pain, and pockmarked with shame. We’re embarrassed for Grandma Judy. We’re afraid for her. We’re heartsick about where this cruel decline into dementia might end. Before we moved her to the nursing home, my grandmother escaped from her caretaker *and* her household staff. She called a cab and vanished for an entire

day only to be found wandering in a business complex that was once her favorite shopping mall. How she managed to do this when she can't remember our names is a mystery.

I'm wearing one of her favorite pieces of jewelry this morning. I'm dimly aware of it on my wrist as I slide out the limo door. I pretend I've selected the dragonfly bracelet in her honor, but it's there as a silent reminder that the Stafford women do what must be done, even when they don't want to. The location of this morning's event makes me uncomfortable. I've never liked nursing homes.

It's just a meet and greet, I tell myself. The press is here to cover the event, not ask questions. We'll shake hands, tour the building, join the residents for a birthday celebration of a woman who is turning one hundred. Her husband is ninety-nine. Quite a feat.

Inside, the corridor smells as if someone has turned my sister's triplets loose with cans of spray sanitizer. The scent of artificial jasmine fills the air. Leslie sniffs, then offers a nod of approval as she, a photographer, and several interns and aides flank us. We're without bodyguards for this appearance. No doubt they've gone ahead to prepare for this afternoon's town hall forum. Over the years my father has received death threats from fringe groups and militias, as well as any number of crackpots claiming to be snipers, bioterrorists, and kidnapers. He seldom takes these threats seriously, but his security people do.

Turning the corner, we're greeted by the nursing home director and two news crews with cameras. We tour. They film. My father turns up the charm. He shakes hands, poses for photos, takes time to talk with the people, bend close to wheelchairs, and thank nurses for the difficult and demanding jobs they dedicate themselves to each day.

I follow along and do the same. A debonair gentleman in a tweed bowler hat flirts with me. In a delightful British accent, he tells me I have beautiful blue eyes. "If it were fifty years ago, I'd charm you into saying yes to a date," he teases.

"I think you already have," I answer, and we laugh together.

One of the nurses warns me that Mr. McMorris is a silver-haired Don Juan. He winks at the nurse just to prove it.

As we wander down the hall to the party for the hundredth birthday, I realize that I am actually having fun. The people here seem content. This isn't as luxurious as Grandma Judy's nursing home, but it's a far cry from the undermanaged facilities named by plaintiffs in the recent string of lawsuits. Odds are, none of those plaintiffs will ever see a dime, no matter what kind of damages they're awarded by the courts. The moneymen behind the nursing home chains use networks of holding companies and shell corporations they can easily send into bankruptcy to avoid paying claims. Which is why the uncovering of ties between one of those chains and one of my father's oldest friends and biggest contributors has been so potentially devastating. My father is a high-profile face upon which public anger and political finger-pointing can be focused.

Anger and blame are powerful weapons. The opposition knows that.

In the commons room, a small podium has been set up. I take a spot off to the side with the entourage, positioned by the glass doors that look out onto a shady garden where a kaleidoscope of flowers bloom despite the beastly summer heat.

A woman stands alone on one of the sheltered garden paths. Facing in the other direction she's seemingly unaware of the party as she gazes into the distance. Her hands rest on a cane. She wears a simple cream-colored cotton dress and a white sweater despite the warm day. Her thick gray hair is braided and twisted around her head, and that, combined with the colorless dress, makes her seem almost ghost-like, a remnant of some long-forgotten past. A breeze rustles the wisteria trellis but doesn't seem to touch her, adding to the illusion that she isn't really there.

I turn my attention to the nursing home director. She welcomes everyone, touts the reason for today's gathering—a full century of life is not achieved every day of the week, after all. To be married most of

that time and still have your beloved by your side is even more remarkable. It is, indeed, an event worthy of a senatorial visit.

Not to mention the fact that this couple has been among my father's supporters since his days in South Carolina's state government. Technically, they've known him longer than I have, and they're almost as devoted. Our honoree and her husband hold their thin hands high in the air and clap furiously when my father's name is mentioned.

The director tells the story of the sweet-looking lovers perched at the center table. Luci was born in France when horse-drawn carriages still roamed the streets. It's hard to even imagine. She worked with the French Resistance in the Second World War. Her husband, Frank, a fighter pilot was shot down in combat. Their story is like something from a film—a sweeping romance. Part of an escape chain, Luci helped to disguise him and smuggle him out of the country injured. After the war, he went back to find her. She was still living on the same farm with her family, holed up in a cellar, the only part of the house that remained.

The events these two have weathered make me marvel. This is what's possible when love is real and strong, when people are devoted to one another, when they'll sacrifice anything to be together. This is what I want for myself, but I sometimes wonder if it's possible for our modern generation we're so distracted, so...busy.

Glancing down at my engagement ring, I think, *Elliot and I have what it takes. We know each other so well. We've always been side by side...*

The birthday girl slowly pushes herself out of her chair, taking her beau's arm. They move along together, stooped and crooked and leaning. The sight is sweet and heart tugging. I hope my parents live to this ripe old stage of life. I hope they'll have a long retirement...someday...*years* in the future when my father finally decides to slow down. This disease can't take him at fifty-seven. He's too young. He's too desperately needed, both at home and in the world. He has

work to do yet, and after that, my parents deserve a retirement with quietly passing seasons and time to spend together.

A tender feeling settles in my chest, and I push away these thoughts. *No overwhelming displays of emotion in public*—Leslie's frequent reminder. *Women can't afford it in this arena. It's seen as incompetence, weakness.*

As if I didn't know that already. A courtroom isn't much different. Female lawyers are always on trial in more ways than one. We have to play by different rules.

My father salutes Frank as they meet near the podium. The man stops, straightens, and returns the gesture with military precision. Their gazes meet, and the moment is pure. It may look perfect on camera, but it's not for the camera. My father's lips press into a tight line. He's trying not to tear up.

It isn't like him to come so close to letting it show.

I swallow another swell of emotion. A breath shudders past my lips. I press my shoulders back, turn my eyes away, and focus on the window, studying the woman in the garden. She's still standing there, gazing off. Who is she? What is she looking for?

The boisterous chorus of "Happy Birthday" seeps through the glass and causes her to slowly turn toward the building. I feel the tug of the song. I know that the cameras are likely to sweep my way, and I'll look distracted, but I can't quite extricate myself from staring at the path outside. I want to see the woman's face, at least. Will it be as blank as the summer sky? Is she merely addled and wandering, or has she skipped the festivities on purpose?

Leslie yanks my jacket from behind and I snap to attention like a schoolgirl caught in line.

"Happy birth—*Focus,*" she sings close to my ear, and I nod as she moves off to gain a better angle for snapping cellphone photos that will go on my father's Instagram. The senator is up on all the latest social media, even though he doesn't know how to use any of it. His social media manager is a whiz.

The ceremony continues. Camera flashes erupt. Happy family members wipe tears and take videos as my father presents a framed congratulatory letter.

The cake is wheeled up, a hundred candles blazing.

Leslie is delighted. Happiness and emotion swell the room, stretching it like a helium balloon. Any more joy and we'll all float away.

Someone touches my hand and wrist, Fingers encircling me so unexpectedly that I jerk away, then stop myself so as not to cause a scene. The grip is cold and bony and trembling but surprisingly strong. I turn to see the woman from the garden. She straightens her humped back and gazes up at me through eyes the color of the hydrangeas back home at Drayden Hill—a soft, clear blue with a lighter mist around the edges. Her pleated lips tremble.

Before I can gather my wits, a nurse comes to collect her, taking a firm hold. “May,” she says, casting an apologetic look my way, “Come along. You’re not supposed to bother our guests.”

Rather than releasing my wrist, the old woman clings to it. She seems so desperate, as if she needs something, but I can’t imagine what it is.

She searches my face, stretches upward.

“Fern?” she whispers.

Chapter 2

May Crandall

AIKEN, SOUTH CAROLINA PRESENT DAY

On occasion, it is as if the latches in my mind have gone rusty and worn. The doors fall open and closed at will. A peek inside here. An empty space there. A dark place I'm afraid to peer into.

I never know what I will find.

There's no predicting when a barrier will swing wide, or why.

Triggers. That's what the psychologists call them on TV shows. Triggers...as if the strike ignites gunpowder and sends a projectile spinning down a rifle barrel. It's an appropriate metaphor.

Her face triggers something.

A door opens far into the past. I stumble through it unwittingly at first, wondering what might be locked inside this room. As soon as I call her *Fern*, I know it's not fern I'm thinking of. I've gone even farther back. It's Queenie I see.

Queenie, our strong mama, who marked all of us with her lovely golden curls. All but poor Camellia.

My mind skitters featherlight across treetops and along valley floors. I travel all the way to a low-slung Mississippi riverbank to the last time I saw Queenie. The warm, soft air of that Memphis summer night swirls over me, but the night is an imposter.

It is not soft. It does not forgive.

From this night, there will be no returning.

Twelve years old, still thin and knobby as a front porch post, I dangle my legs under the rail of our shantyboat, watching for a gator's eyes to catch the amber flicker of lantern light. Gators shouldn't stray this far upwater on the Mississippi, but there's been gossip about

sightings around here lately. This makes looking for them a game of sorts. Shantyboat kids take their entertainment where they can find it.

Right now, we need a distraction worse than usual.

Beside me, Fern climbs the rail and searches the woods for fireflies. At nearly four years old, she's learning to count them. She points a stubby finger and leans out, mindless of gators. "I see one, Rill! I seen 'im!" she cries.

I grab her dress to pull her back. "You go fallin' off, I ain't jumping in after ya this time."

Truth told, it probably wouldn't hurt her if she tumped over. It'd teach her a lesson. The boat's tied up in a nice little backwater across the river from Mud Island. The water is only hip deep on me off the Arcadia's stern. Fern might could touch the bottom on her tiptoes, but all five of us swim like pollywogs anyhow, even little Gabion, who can't talk a full sentence yet. When you're born on the river, you take to it as natural as drawing breath. You know its sounds and its way and its critters. For river rats like us, the water's a homeplace. A safe place.

But something's in the air just now... something that's not right. A spat of gooseflesh runs up my arms and needles my cheeks. There's always been a knowing in me. I'd never tell a living soul of it, but it's there just the same. A chill settles through me in the airless summer night. Overhead, the sky is thick, and the clouds are ripe as melons fair to bursting. There's a storm coming, but what I feel is something more than that.

Inside the shanty, Queenie's soft groans come faster now, mindless of the midwife woman's molasses-thick voice: "Now, Miz Foss, you gots to stop pushin', and you gots to stop now. This 'ere child come out wrong sided, he ain't gon' be long fo' this world, and you ain't neither. That's it now. You jus' quieten down. Be easy."

Queenie gives a low, wrenching sound that's like a boot sucking out of thick bayou mud. She's birthed the five of us with hardly more than a heavy breath, but it's taking so much longer this time. I rub the sweaty chill off my arms and feel like something's out there in the

woods. Something evil. It looks our way. Why is it here? Did it come for Queenie?

I want to scamper down the gangplank and run along the shore and yell, "You git on now! You git away! You can't have my mama!"

I'd do it. I'm not afraid there might be gators. But instead, I sit still as a killdeer bird on a nest. I listen to the midwife's words. She's loud enough, I might as well be in the shanty.

"Oh, lands! Oh mercy. She got more'n one inside. She do!"

My daddy mutters something I can't hear. His boot steps cross the floor, hesitate, cross again.

The midwife says, "Mista Foss, ain't nothin' I can do 'bout this. You don't git this woman to a doctor quick, them babies ain't gon' set eyes on this world, and this be their mama's dyin' day too."

Briny doesn't answer right off. He pounds both fists hard against the wall so that Queenie's picture frames rattle. Something slips loose, and there's the clink of metal against wood, and I know what it is by where it falls and how it sounds. In my mind, I see the tin cross with the sad-looking man on top, and I want to run inside and grab it and kneel by the bed and whisper mysterious Polish words, the way Queenie does on stormy nights when Briny is away from the shanty-boat, and the rainwater flows over the roof, and waves pound the hull.

But I don't know the strange, sharp language Queenie learned from the family she left behind when she ran off to the river with Briny. The few Polish words I have would be a mouthful of nonsense if I strung them together. Even so, if I could grab Queenie's cross in my hand just now, I'd say them to the tin man Queenie kisses when the storms come.

I'd try pretty near anything to help get the birthing over with and see Queenie smile again.

On the other side of the door, Briny's boot scrapes the planks, and I hear the cross clatter over the floor. Briny looks out the cloudy window that came from the farmhouse he tore down to build the boat before I was ever born. With Briny's mama on her deathbed and the

crops droughted out for another year, the banker was gonna get the house anyway. Briny figured the river was the place to be. He was right too. Time the Depression hit, him and Queenie were living just fine on the water. *Even the Depression can't starve the river*, he says every time he tells the story. *The river's got her own magic. She takes care of her people. Always will.*

But tonight, that magic's gone bad.

"Mista! You hear me talkin' at you?" The midwife turns mean now. "I ain't havin' they blood on my hands. You git yo' woman to the hospital. You do it now."

Behind the glass, Briny's face pulls tight. His eyes squeeze shut. He hammers a fist to his forehead, lets it fall against the wall. "The storm..."

"I don' care if the devil hisself is dancin' by, Mista Foss. Ain't nothin' I can do fo' this gal. Nothin'. I ain't gon' have it on my hands, no, suh."

"She's never...had trouble...not with the others. She...."

Queenie screams high and loud, the sound whirling off into the night like a wildcat's call.

"Less'n you fo'got to tell me somethin', she ain't never had two babies at once befo' neither."

I shift to my feet, and take Fern around, and put her on the shanty porch with Gabion, who's two, and Lark, who's six. Camellia looks my way from where she's staring in the front window. Closing the gate across the gangplank, I trap them all on the porch and tell Camellia not to let the little kids climb over.

Camellia answers with a frown. At ten years old, she's got Briny's muley streak along with his dark hair and eyes. She doesn't like being told what to do. She's stubborn as a cypress stump and twice as thick sometimes. If the little ones go to fussing, we'll be in a bigger fix than we already are.

"It's gonna be all right," I promise, and pat their soft, golden heads like they're puppies. "Queenie's just havin' a hard time is all. She

don't need nobody botherin' her. Y'all stay put now. Old rougarou, he's rootin' round tonight, I heard him breathin' minute ago. Ain't safe to be out." Now that I'm twelve, I don't believe in the rougarou and the buggerman and Mad Captain Jack of the river pirates. Not much anyhow. I doubt if Camellia ever did swallow Briny's wild tales.

She reaches for the door latch.

"Don't," I hiss. "I'll go."

We were told to keep out, which Briny never says unless he means it. But right now, Briny sounds like he's got no idea what to do, and I'm worried about Queenie and my new baby brother or sister. We've been, all of us, waiting to see which one it'd be. It wasn't supposed to come yet, though. This is early—even earlier than Gabion, who was such a little thing, he came sliding into the world before Briny could get the boat to shore and find a woman to help with the birthing.

This new baby don't seem much inclined to make things so easy. Maybe it'll look like Camellia when it comes out and be just as stubborn.

Babies, I remind myself. It sinks in that there's more than one, like puppies, and this ain't normal. Three lives lay half-hidden by the bed curtain Queenie sewed from pretty Golden Heart flour sacks. Three bodies try to pull themselves apart from each other, but they can't.

I open the door, and the midwife is on top of me before I can decide whether to go in or not. Her hand locks onto my arm. It feels like her fingers go around twice. I look down and see the circle of dark skin against pale. She could snap me in two if she'd a mind to. Why can't she save my baby brother or sister? Why can't she pull it from my mama's body and into the world?

Queenie's hand grips the curtain, and she screams and tugs, arching up off the bed. A half-dozen wire hooks rip loose. I see my mama's face, her long, corn-silk blond hair matted to her skin, her blue eyes, those beautiful, soft blue eyes that have marked all of us but Camellia,

bugging out. The skin on her cheek stretches so tight, it's crossed with lacy veins like a dragonfly's wings.

"Daddy"

My whisper comes on the end of Queenie's scream, but still it seems to upset the air in the room. I don't ever call Briny *Daddy* or Queenie *Mama* unless something's real wrong. They were so young when they had me, I don't think they even thought to teach me the words *Mama* and *Daddy*. It's always been like we were friends the same age. But every once in a while, I need them to be a daddy or a mama. The last time was weeks ago when we saw the man hung in the tree, dead, his body bloated up.

Will Queenie look like that if she dies? Will she go first and then the babies? Or will it be the other way around?

My stomach squeezes so tight I don't even feel that big hand around my arm anymore. Maybe I'm even glad it's there, holding me on my feet, keeping me anchored to the spot. I'm afraid to go any closer to Queenie.

"You tell him!" The midwife shakes me like a ragdoll, and it hurts. Her teeth glare white in the lantern light.

Thunder rumbles not far off, and a gust of wind hits the starboard wall, and the midwife stumbles forward, taking me with her. Queenie's eyes meet mine. She looks at me the way a little child would, like she thinks I can help her and she's begging me to do it.

I swallow hard and try to find my voice. "D-Daddy?" I stutter out again and he still stares straight ahead. He's froze up like a rabbit when it senses danger nearby.

Through the window, I see Camellia with her face mashed to the glass. The little kids have climbed up on the bench to look in. Lark's got big tears rolling down her fat cheeks. She hates to see any living creature hurting. She throws all the baitfish back in the river if she can get away with it. Whenever Briny shoots possums, or duck, or squirrels, or deer, she carries on like her best pal's been killed dead right there in front of her.

She's looking at me to save Queenie. They all are.

There's a spit of lightning someplace off in the distance. It pushes back the yellow coal oil glow, then goes dark. I try to count the seconds before I hear the thunder, so I'll know how far off the storm is, but I'm too rattled.

If Briny doesn't get Queenie to the doctor soon, it'll be too late. Like always, we're camped on the wild shore. Memphis is all the way on the other side of the wide, dark Mississippi River.

I cough a lump out of my throat and stiffen up my neck so the lump won't come back. "Briny, you gotta take her across water."

Slowly, he swivels my way. His face is still glassy, but he looks like he's been waiting for this—for somebody besides the midwife to tell him what to do.

"Briny, you gotta carry her off in the skiff now, before that storm comes in." It'd take too long to move the shantyboat, I know. Briny would realize that too if he could think straight.

"You tell him!" the midwife eggs me on. She starts toward Briny, shoving me ahead of her. "You don' get that woman offa this boat, this child's mama be dead befo' mornin'.

*** End of this free preview**



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