

"Sure to be one of the most compelling books you pick up this year . . .
Wingate is a master storyteller." —*Parade*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Before We Were Yours

A Novel



Lisa Wingate

PRAISE FOR

Before We Were Yours

“One of the year’s best books...It is almost a cliché to say a book is ‘lovingly written’ but that phrase applies clearly to Lisa Wingate’s latest novel, *Before We Were Yours*. This story about children taken from their parents through kidnapping or subterfuge and then placed for adoption, for a price, clearly pours out of Wingate’s heart....It is impossible not to get swept up in this near perfect novel. It invades your heart from the very first pages and stays there long after the book is finished. Few novelists could strike the balance this story requires but Wingate does it with assurance....Make sure this one is on your radar. It should not be missed.”

—*HuffPost*

“[An] affecting new novel.”

—*New York Post*

“Every now and then a novel comes along that sweeps me off my reading feet. *Before We Were Yours*, by Lisa Wingate, is such a book....It’s a great book-club read, one of those books that teaches you something, gives you lots to discuss and even more to think about....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—Wingate’s story reminds us how, no matter where our paths lead us, we know in our hearts where we belong....Take note: This may be the best book of the year.”

—*Shreveport Times*

“This story is heartfelt and genuine, especially as Wingate explores the idea of home and family from a youngster’s point of view.”

—Historical Novel Society

“An exciting read...Lisa Wingate puts you both in the place of the horrified spectator learning about this forgotten bit of history and the frightened but brave children to whom this happened....Wingate builds a perfect tension between the two stories and gives us something to cheer about as well as something to fear.”

—*Bookreporter*

“Lisa Wingate takes an almost unthinkable chapter in our nation’s history and weaves a tale of enduring power. That Georgia Tann and her Memphis Tennessee Children’s Home Society could actually exist, unraveling the lives of countless children, stealing their pasts and changing their futures, will give you chills. But the real feat of this stirring novel is how deeply Wingate plunges us into the heart and mind of twelve-year-old river gypsy Rill Foss. Rill’s utterly singular voice will stay with you long after the last page is turned, as will Wingate’s courage to follow her anywhere....Vivid and affecting.”

—Paula McLain, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Love and Ruin* and *Circling the Sun*

“An unforgettable read...This captivating novel will quite likely break your heart, but because it’s Lisa Wingate at the helm, you will not be left broken. She is a master storyteller and never fails to get to the heart of what makes us hold on to hope.”

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

“*Before We Were Yours*, Lisa Wingate’s heart-racing, heart-wrenching tale of a family ripped apart by the Tennessee Children’s Home Society scandal, rang so true I couldn’t sleep until I knew their fate. Days later, I’m still haunted by the diabolical plot to steal and sell the most vulnerable children

to high bidders, sanctioned by high-ranking officials who looked the other way.”

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




A N o v e l



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BEFORE
WE WERE
YOURS

Lisa Wingate



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“Did you know that in this land of the free and home of the brave there is a great baby market? And the securities which change hands...are not mere engraved slips of paper promising certain financial dividends, but live, kicking, flesh-and-blood babies.”

—FROM THE ARTICLE “THE BABY MARKET,” *THE SATURDAY EVENING POST*, FEBRUARY 1, 1930

“They are, [Georgia Tann] said repeatedly, blank slates. They are born untainted, and if you adopt them at an early age and surround them with beauty and culture, they will become anything you wish them to be.”

—BARBARA BISANTZ RAYMOND, *THE BABY THIEF*

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.

A man waits nearby, perhaps in the hallway just outside the door. He is stately, dignified. Unaccustomed to being so helpless. He was to become a grandfather today.

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 very 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....”

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 über-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 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 determination.

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 former 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 coldhearted 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 families. 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 descent 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 finally be found wandering at a business complex that was once her favorite shopping mall. How she managed 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 really it's there as a silent reminder that 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 to ask questions. We'll shake hands, tour the building, join the residents for the 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 minutemen militias, as well as any number of crackpots claiming to be snipers, bioterrorists, and kidnappers. 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 amps up the charm. He shakes hands, poses for photos, takes time to talk with people, bend close to wheelchairs, and thank nurses for the difficult and demanding job they pour themselves into each day.

I follow along and do the same. A debonair elderly 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 these 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 common 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 blooms 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 ghostlike, 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 talking 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 desperate, as if she needs something, but I can’t imagine what it is.

She searches my face, stretches upward.

“Fern?” she whispers.