

# Before We Were Yours (Thorndike Press Large Print Core)

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"Memphis, Tennessee, 1936. The five Foss children find their lives changed forever when their parents leave them alone ... one stormy night. Rill Foss ... must protect her four younger siblings as they are wrenched from their home on the Mississippi and thrown into the care of the infamous Georgia Tann, director of the Tennessee Children's Home Society. South Carolina, present day. Avery Stafford has lived a charmed life. Loving daughter to her father, a U.S. senator, she has a promising career as an assistant D.A. in Baltimore and is engaged to her best friend. But when Avery comes home to help her father weather a health crisis and a political attack, a chance encounter with a stranger leaves her deeply shaken"--

Lisa Wingate is a former journalist, an inspirational speaker, and the bestselling author of more than twenty novels. Her work has won or been nominated for many awards, including the Pat Conroy Southern Book Prize, the Oklahoma Book Award, the Carol Award, the Christy Award, and the RT Reviewers' Choice Award. Wingate lives in the Ouachita Mountains of southwest Arkansas.

P R E L U D E

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. . . ."

## Chapter 1

Avery Stafford

present day. Aiken, South Carolina

I take a breath, scoot to the edge of the seat, 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 tagalong 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 resting to one side. He's 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 magnetizes his thick, gray hair, so that it's sticking 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, like 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 M-R-S 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 federal DA'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 strived 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 again. 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 Talmage Stafford can.

There is not, anywhere, a stronger man or a 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 only a ghost of her former self. As painful as that is, Daddy can't talk to anyone about it. If the media clues into 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 will either point out that only those with

money can afford premium care, or they'll accuse my father of warehousing his mom because he is a cold-hearted lout who cares nothing for the elderly. They'll say that he'd happily turn a blind eye toward the needs of the helpless, if the profits of his friends and campaign contributors are involved.

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 in dementia might end. Before the nursing home, my grandmother escaped from her caretaker and her household staff. She called a cab and vanished for an entire day before she was found wandering at a business complex that was once her favorite shopping area. How she managed it 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 like 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 and security 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 the Ku Klux Klan and minutemen militia groups, as well as any number of crackpots claiming to be snipers, bio-terrorists and kidnapers. He seldom takes them 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 and bend close to wheelchairs, and to thank nurses for the difficult and demanding job they pour themselves into 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 seem content here. This isn't as luxurious as Grandma Judy's nursing home, but it's a far cry from the under-managed 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 money men behind the nursing home chains use networks of holding companies and shell corps they can easily send into bankruptcy to avoid paying claims. Which is why the uncovering of

ties to 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 wrath 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 open into 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, seemingly unaware of the party. Her hands rest over 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 back 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 sweet 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 as my father's name is mentioned.

The director tells the story of the sweet-looking couple perched at the center table. Luci was born in France when horse carriages still roamed the streets. It's hard to even imagine. She worked with the French resistance in the Second World War. Her husband, James, a fighter pilot, was shot down in combat. Their love 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 the only remaining building, a storage cellar.

The events these two have weathered cause me to 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 in 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 out of her chair, taking her beau's arm. They move along together, stooped ...

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