

the
prayer
box

A NOVEL

LISA WINGATE

Advance Praise for *The Prayer Box*

“I am in awe of Lisa Wingate’s talent. She strikes the heart and turns my gaze toward heaven’s door. *The Prayer Box* is a masterpiece of story and skill.”

DEBBIE MACOMBER, *New York Times* bestselling author

“*The Prayer Box* is Lisa Wingate’s best work so far! It’s a charming book that transcends simple hope and healing while capturing the heart of the reader. Tandi’s story is an enchanting take on family ties, redemption, and allowing oneself to be swept up into a river of grace regardless of one’s past. And in the end, perhaps it’s also a testament to the fact that maybe, sometimes, you really can go home again.”

KAREN WHITE, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Time Between*

“Lisa Wingate writes with grace, beauty, and so much heart.”

SARAH JIO, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Last Camellia*

“*The Prayer Box* is a beautiful and compelling story about the gentle waters of grace that ripple through our lives, bubbling up in the most unexpected places and bringing a sense of calm and purpose where once there was fear and anguish.”

GLENN DROMGOOLE, *Abilene Reporter-News* and *Texas Reads*

“Tenderly woven. Skillfully threaded. A grab-your-heart story about faith, the healing power of love, and how both are often found in unlikely places.”

CHARLES MARTIN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Unwritten*

“Lisa Wingate is a remarkably gifted storyteller. Her novels both captivate and cradle you, and *The Prayer Box* is Lisa at her finest. Tandi’s extraordinary journey of healing and hope on Hatteras Island is a mesmerizing thrill and a joy you’ll want to savor. However, beware—you will not be able to put this story down!”

BETH WEBB HART, bestselling author of *Moon Over Edisto*

“Secrets from the past unfold in surprising and transformative ways. *The Prayer Box* is a beautifully written story that will be remembered and cherished long after the last page is turned.”

AMY HILL HEARTH, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years*

“Lisa Wingate has a gift with words—her vivid prose brings each page to life.”

DARIEN GEE, nationwide bestselling author of *The Avalon Ladies Scrapbooking Society*

“*The Prayer Box* is a beautiful, lyrical story of two women looking for peace, wholeness, and purpose. Wingate weaves hope and truth amid their brokenness and pain. The story is a reminder we are not alone and God is always with us.”

RACHEL HAUCK, author of *Once Upon a Prince* and *The Wedding Dress*

“*The Prayer Box* is classic Lisa Wingate fiction—on steroids! Old prayers live again and a flawed main character steals into our hearts and makes us care.”

SHELLIE RUSHING TOMLINSON, belle of all things southern and author of *Sue Ellen’s Girl Ain’t Fat, She Just Weighs Heavy!*

“*The Prayer Box* had me caught up from beginning to the final page. Readers will be transported into the story through Lisa’s visceral storytelling talents. I couldn’t put it down, but hated for it to end.”

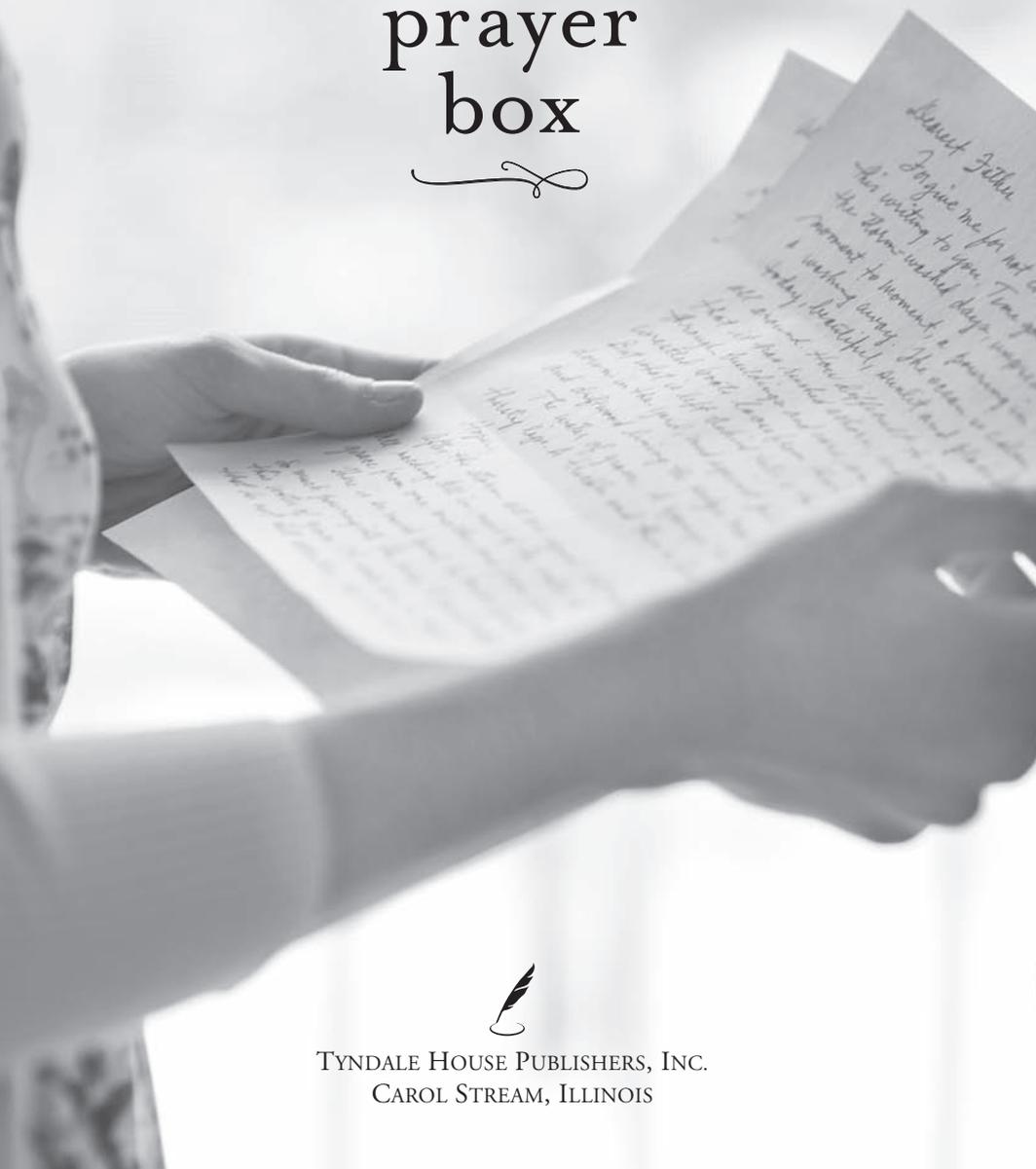
BONNIE MULLENS, *The McGregor Mirror* (McGregor, Texas)

“Lisa Wingate knows how to hold our interest and uplift our hearts with words. This novel will inspire you to pray with pen in hand.”

RACHEL OLSEN, author of *It’s No Secret*, coauthor of *My One Word: Change Your Life With Just One Word*

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The Prayer Box is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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CHAPTER I

WHEN TROUBLE BLOWS IN, my mind always reaches for a single, perfect day in Rodanthe. The memory falls over me like a blanket, a worn quilt of sand and sky, the fibers washed soft with time. I wrap it around myself, picture the house along the shore, its bones bare to the wind and the sun, the wooden shingles clinging loosely, sliding to the ground now and then, like scales from some mythical sea creature washed ashore. Overhead, a hurricane shutter dangles by one nail, rocking back and forth in the breeze, protecting an intact window on the third story. Gulls swoop in and out, landing on the salt-sprayed rafters—scavengers come to pick at the carcass left behind by the storm.

Years later, after the place was repaired, a production company filmed a movie there. A love story.

But to me, the story of that house, of Rodanthe, will always be the story of a day with my grandfather. A safe day.

When I squint long into the sun off the water, I can see him yet. He is a shadow, stooped and crooked in his overalls and the old plaid shirt with the pearl snaps. The heels of his worn work boots hang in the air as he balances on the third-floor joists, assessing the damage. Calculating everything it will take to fix the house for its owners.

He's searching for something on his belt. In a minute, he'll call down to me and ask for whatever he can't find. *Tandi, bring me that blue tape measure*, or *Tandi Jo, I need the green level, out in the truck*. . . . I'll fish objects from the toolbox and scamper upstairs, a little brown-haired girl anxious to please, hoping that while I'm up there, he'll tell me some bit of a story. Here in this place where he was raised, he is filled with them. He wants me to know these islands of the Outer Banks, and I yearn to know them. Every inch. Every story. Every piece of the family my mother has both depended on and waged war with.

Despite the wreckage left behind by the storm, this place is heaven. Here, my father talks, my mother sings, and everything is, for once, calm. Day after day, for weeks. Here, we are all together in a decaying sixties-vintage trailer court while my father works construction jobs that my grandfather has sent his way. No one is slamming doors or walking out them. This place is magic—I know it.

We walked in Rodanthe after assessing the house on the shore that day, Pap-pap's hand rough-hewn against mine, his knobby driftwood fingers promising that everything broken can be fixed. We passed homes under repair, piles of soggy furniture and debris, the old Chicamacomico Life-Saving Station, where the Salvation Army was handing out hot lunches in the parking lot.

Outside a boarded-up shop in the village, a shirtless guitar player with long blond dreadlocks winked and smiled at me. At twelve years old, I fluttered my gaze away and blushed, then braved another glance, a peculiar new electricity shivering through my body. Strumming his guitar, he tapped one ragged tennis shoe against a surfboard, reciting words more than singing them.

*Ring the bells bold and strong
Let all the broken add their song
Inside the perfect shells is dim
It's through the cracks, the light comes in. . . .*

I'd forgotten those lines from the guitar player, until now.

The memory of them, of my grandfather's strong hand holding mine, circled me as I stood on Iola Anne Poole's porch. It was my first indication of a knowing, an undeniable sense that something inside the house had gone very wrong.

I pushed the door inward cautiously, admitting a slice of early sun and a whiff of breeze off Pamlico Sound. The entryway was old, tall, the walls white with heavy gold-leafed trim around rectangular panels. A fresh breeze skirted the shadows on mouse feet, too slight to displace the stale, musty smell of the house. The scent of a forgotten place. Instinct told me what I would find inside. You don't forget the feeling of stepping through a door and understanding in some unexplainable way that death has walked in before you.

I hesitated on the threshold, options running through my mind and then giving way to a racing kind of craziness. *Close the door. Call the police or . . . somebody. Let someone else take care of it.*

You shouldn't have touched the doorknob—now your fingerprints will be on it. What if the police think you did something to her?

Innocent people are accused all the time, especially strangers in town. Strangers like you, who show up out of the blue and try to blend in . . .

What if people thought I was after the old woman's money, trying to steal her valuables or find a hidden stash of cash? What if someone really *had* broken in to rob the place? It happened, even in idyllic locations like Hatteras Island. Massive vacation homes sat empty, and local boys with bad habits were looking for easy income. What if a thief had broken into the house thinking it was unoccupied, then realized too late that it wasn't? Right now I could be contaminating the evidence.

Tandi Jo, sometimes I swear you haven't got half a brain. The voice in my head sounded like my aunt Marney's—harsh, irritated, thick with the Texas accent of my father's family, impatient with flights of fancy, especially mine.

"Mrs. Poole?" I leaned close to the opening, trying to get a better view without touching anything else. "Iola Anne Poole? Are you in there? This is Tandi Reese. From the little rental cottage out front. . . . Can you hear me?"

Again, silence.

A whirlwind spun along the porch, sweeping up last year's pine straw and dried live oak leaves. Loose strands of hair swirled over my eyes, and my thoughts tangled with it, my reflection melting against the waves of leaded glass—flyaway brown hair, nervous blue eyes, lips hanging slightly parted, uncertain.

What now? How in the world would I explain to people that it'd taken me days to notice there were no lights turning on and off in Iola Poole's big Victorian house, no window heat-and-air units running at night when the spring chill gathered? I was living less than forty yards away. How could I not have noticed?

Maybe she was sleeping—having a midday nap—and by going

inside, I'd scare her half to death. From what I could tell, my new landlady kept to herself. Other than groceries being delivered and the UPS and FedEx trucks coming with packages, the only signs of Iola Poole were the lights and the window units going off and on as she moved through the rooms at different times of day. I'd only caught sight of her a time or two since the kids and I had rolled into town with no more gas and no place else to go. We'd reached the last strip of land before you'd drive off into the Atlantic Ocean, which was just about as far as we could get from Dallas, Texas, and Trammel Clarke. I hadn't even realized, until we'd crossed the North Carolina border, where I was headed or why. I was looking for a hiding place.

By our fourth day on Hatteras, I knew we wouldn't get by with sleeping in the SUV at a campground much longer. People on an island notice things. When a real estate lady offered an off-season rental, cheap, I figured it was meant to be. We needed a good place more than anything.

Considering that we were into April now, and six weeks had passed since we'd moved into the cottage, and the rent was two weeks overdue, the last person I wanted to contact about Iola was the real estate agent who'd brought us here, Alice Faye Tucker.

Touching the door, I called into the entry hall again. "Iola Poole? Mrs. Poole? Are you in there?" Another gust of wind danced across the porch, scratching crape myrtle branches against gingerbread trim that seemed to be clinging by Confederate jasmine vines and dried paint rather than nails. The opening in the doorway widened on its own. Fear shimmied over my shoulders, tickling like the trace of a fingernail.

"I'm coming in, okay?" Maybe the feeling of death was nothing more than my imagination. Maybe the poor woman had fallen

and trapped herself in some tight spot she couldn't get out of. I could help her up and bring her some water or food or whatever, and there wouldn't be any need to call 911. First responders would take a while, anyway. There was no police presence here. Fairhope wasn't much more than a fish market, a small marina, a village store, a few dozen houses, and a church. Tucked in the live oaks along Mosey Creek, it was the sort of place that seemed to make no apologies for itself, a scabby little burg where fishermen docked storm-weary boats and raised families in salt-weathered houses. First responders would have to come from someplace larger, maybe Buxton or Hatteras Village.

The best thing I could do for Iola Anne Poole, and for myself, was to go into the house, find out what had happened, and see if there was any way I could keep it quiet.

The door was ajar just enough for me to slip through. I slid past, not touching anything, and left it open behind me. If I had to run out of the place in a hurry, I didn't want any obstacles between me and the front porch.

Something shifted in the corner of my eye as I moved deeper into the entry hall. I jumped, then realized I was passing by an arrangement of fading photographs, my reflection melting ghost-like over the cloudy glass. In sepia tones, the images stared back at me—a soldier in uniform with the inscription *Avery 1917* engraved on a brass plate. A little girl with pipe curls on a white pony. A group of people posed under an oak tree, the women wearing big sun hats like the one Kate Winslet donned in *Titanic*. A wedding photo from the thirties or forties, the happy couple in the center, surrounded by several dozen adults and two rows of cross-legged children. Was Iola the bride in the picture? Had a big family lived in this house at one time? What had happened to

them? As far as I could tell, Iola Poole didn't have any family now, at least none who visited.

"Hello . . . hello? Anyone up there?" I peered toward the graceful curve of the long stairway. Shadows melted rich and thick over the dark wood, giving the stairs a foreboding look that made me turn to the right instead and cross through a wide archway into a large, open room. It would have been sunny but for the heavy brocade curtains. The grand piano and a grouping of antique chairs and settees looked like they'd been plucked from a tourist brochure or a history book. Above the fireplace, an oil portrait of a young woman in a peach-colored satin gown hung in an ornate oval frame. She was sitting at the piano, posed in a position that appeared uncomfortable. Perhaps this was the girl on the pony from the hallway photo, but I wasn't sure.

The shadows seemed to follow me as I hurried out of the room. The deeper I traveled into the house, the less the place resembled the open area by the stairway. The inner sections were cluttered with what seemed to be several lifetimes of belongings, most looking as if they'd been piled in the same place for years, as if someone had started spring-cleaning multiple times, then abruptly stopped. In the kitchen, dishes had been washed and stacked neatly in a draining rack, but the edges of the room were heaped with stored food, much of it contained in big plastic bins. I stood in awe, taking in a multicolored waterfall of canned vegetables that tumbled haphazardly from an open pantry door.

Bristle tips of apprehension tickled my arms as I checked the rest of the lower floor. Maybe Iola wasn't here, after all. The downstairs bedroom with the window air unit was empty, the single bed fully made. Maybe she'd gone away somewhere days ago or been checked into a nursing home, and right now I was actually

breaking into a vacant house. Alice Faye Tucker had mentioned that Iola was ninety-one years old. She probably couldn't even climb the stairs to the second story.

I didn't want to go up there, but I moved toward the second floor one reluctant step at a time, stopping on the landing to call her name once, twice, again. The old balusters and treads creaked and groaned, making enough noise to wake the dead, but no one stirred.

Upstairs, the hallway smelled of drying wallpaper, mold, old fabric, water damage, and the kind of stillness that said the rooms hadn't been lived in for years. The tables and lamps in the wood-paneled hallway were gray with dust, as was the furniture in five bedrooms, two bathrooms, a sewing room with a quilt frame in the middle, and a nursery with white furniture and an iron cradle. Odd-shaped water stains dotted the ceilings, the damage recent enough that the plaster had bowed and cracked but only begun to fall through. An assortment of buckets sat here and there on the nursery floor, the remnants of dirty water and plaster slowly drying to a paste inside. No doubt shingles had been ripped from the roof during last fall's hurricane. It was a shame to let a beautiful old house go to rot like this. My grandfather would have hated it. When he inspected historic houses for the insurance company, he was always bent on saving them.

A thin watermark traced a line down the hallway ceiling to a small sitting area surrounded by bookshelves. The door on the opposite side, the last one at the end of the hall, was closed, a small stream of light reflecting off the wooden floor beneath it. Someone had passed through recently, clearing a trail in the silty layer of dust on the floor.

"Mrs. Poole? Iola? I didn't mean to scare—"

A rustle in the faded velvet curtains by the bookshelves made me jump, breath hitching in my chest as I drew closer.

A black streak bolted from behind the curtain and raced away. A cat. Mrs. Poole had a cat. Probably the wild, one-eared tom that J.T. had been trying to lure to our porch with bowls of milk. I'd told him to quit—we couldn't afford the milk—but a nine-year-old boy can't resist a stray. Ross had offered to bring over a live trap and catch the cat. Good thing I'd told him not to worry about it. Letting your new boyfriend haul off your landlady's pet is a good way to get kicked out of your happy little home, especially when the rent's overdue.

The glass doorknob felt cool against my fingers when I touched it, the facets surprisingly sharp. "I'm coming in . . . okay?" Every muscle in my body tightened, preparing for fight or flight. "It's just Tandi Reese . . . from the cottage. I hope I'm not scaring you, but I was wor—" The rest of *worried* never passed my lips. I turned the handle. The lock assembly clicked, and the heavy wooden door fell open with such force that it felt like someone had pulled it from the other side. The doorknob struck the wall, vibrating the floor beneath my feet. Behind me, the cat hissed, then scrambled off down the stairs.

Picture frames inside the room shivered on the pale-blue walls, reflecting orbs of light over the furniture. Beyond the jog created by the hallway nook, the footboard of an ornate bed pulled at me as the shuddering frames settled into place and the light stopped dancing. By the bedpost, a neatly cornered blue quilt grazed the floor, and a pair of shoes—the sensible, rubber-soled kind that Zoey, with her fourteen-year-old fashion sense, referred to as *grandma shoes*—were tucked along the edge of a faded Persian rug, the heels and toes exactly even.

The feet that belonged in the shoes had not traveled far away. Covered in thin black stockings, they rested atop the bed near the footboard, the folded, crooked toes pointing outward slightly, in a position that seemed natural enough for someone taking a mid-day nap.

But the feet didn't move, despite the explosion of the door hitting the wall. I tasted the bile of my last meal. No one could sleep through that.

The bedroom lay in perfect silence as I stepped inside, my footfalls seeming loud, out of place. I didn't speak again or call out or say her name to warn her that I was coming. Without even seeing her face, I knew there was no need.

Gruesome scenes from Zoey's favorite horror movies flashed through my mind, but when I crept past the corner, forced myself to turn her way, Iola Anne Poole looked peaceful, like she'd just stopped for a quick nap and forgotten to get up again. She was flat on her back atop the bed, a pressed cotton dress—white with tiny blue flower baskets—falling over her long, thin legs and seeming to disappear into a wedding ring quilt sewn in all the colors of sky and sea. Her leathery, wrinkled arms lay folded neatly across her stomach, the gnarled fingers intertwined in a posture that looked both contented and confident. Prepared. The chalky-gray hue of her skin told me it would be cold if I touched it.

I didn't. I turned away instead, pressed a hand over my mouth and nose. As much as the body looked like someone had carefully laid it out to give a peaceful appearance, there were no signs that anyone else had been in the room. The only trails on the dusty floor led from the door to the bed, from the bed to what appeared to be a closet tucked behind the hallway nook, and

past the foot of the bed to a small writing desk by the window. Whatever she was doing up here, she didn't come often. What was the lure of this turret room at the end of the upstairs hall, with its gold-trimmed walls painted in faded shades of cream and milky blue? Did she know she was approaching her last hours? Was this where she wanted to die? Where she wanted to be found?

Could I have helped if I'd checked on her sooner?

The questions drove me from the room, sent me into the hall, gasping for air. I didn't want to think about how long she'd been there or whether she'd known death was coming for her, whether she'd been afraid when it happened or completely at peace.

Truthfully, I didn't want anything more to do with the situation.

But an hour later, I was back in the house, watching two sheriff's deputies walk into the blue room. The deputy in back was more interested in getting a look inside the house than in the fact that a woman had died. For some reason, it seemed wrong to leave them alone with her body. I felt responsible for making sure they gave what was left of her some respect.

I waited in the doorway of the blue room, letting the wall hide all but the view of her stocking-clad feet as the men stood over the bed. They'd already asked me at least a dozen questions I couldn't answer: How long did I think she'd been dead? When was the last time I'd talked to her? Had she been ill that I knew of?

All I could tell them was that I was staying in her cottage out front. I'd used the term *renting* to make it sound good. The lead deputy was a thin, matter-of-fact man with an accordion of permanent frown lines around his mouth. He didn't seem to care much one way or the other. He checked his watch several times like he had somewhere to go.

“Well,” he said finally, the floor creaking under his weight in a way that told me he was leaning over the bed near her face, “looks like natural causes to me.”

The younger man answered with a snarky laugh. “Shoot, Jim, she had to be somewhere up around a hundred. I remember when my granddad retired, Mama wanted to buy the altar flowers for church, to get his name in the bulletin, but she couldn’t. The pastor had already ordered the altar flowers that week, on account of Iola Poole’s birthday. She was turning eighty then, and that was back when I was in middle school. Mama was mighty hot about it all, I’ll tell ya. Granddaddy’d been a deacon at Fairhope Fellowship for forty years, and Mama wasn’t about to be having him share altar flowers with the likes of Iola Anne Poole. Our family helped move that old chapel here to start the church. Iola was just there to play the organ, and they paid her for that, anyway. It’s not like she was a member, even. Mama figured, if Iola wanted altar flowers for her birthday, she could put some at a church down in New Orleans, where her people come from.”

Deputy Jim clicked his tongue against his teeth. “Women.”

His partner laughed again. “You haven’t been down here long enough to know how things are. Stuff like that might not matter much up in Boston, but it sure enough matters in Fairhope. Believe me, if they could’ve found anybody—and I mean *anybody* else who knew how to play that old pipe organ over to the church, they would’ve. That’s half the reason my mama pushed for that new band director at the high school in Buxton a few years ago; he said he could play a pipe organ. I never saw the church ladies so happy as the week the band director took over at Sunday services and they sent Iola Poole packing.”

“Okay, Selmer, we might as well get the right people out here

to wrap this up.” Deputy Jim ended the discussion. “Looks pretty cut-and-dried. She have any family we should call?”

“None that I’d know how to find. And that’s a can of worms you don’t wanna open either, by the way, Jim.”

“No next of kin. . . .” The older man drew the words out, probably writing them down at the same time.

Sadness slid over me like a heavy wool blanket, making the air too stale and thick. I stood gazing through the blue room to the tall bay windows of the turret. Outside, a rock dove flitted along the veranda railing. What had Iola Poole done, I wondered, to have ended up this way, alone in this big house, laid out in her flowered dress, dead for who knew how long, and nobody cared? Did she realize this was how things would turn out? Was this what she’d pictured when she placed herself there on the bed, closed her eyes, and let the life seep out of her?

The dove fluttered to the windowsill, then hopped back and forth, its shadow sliding over the gray marble top of the writing desk. A yellowed Thom McAn shoe box sat on the edge, the lid ajar, a piece of gold rickrack trailing from the corner. On the windowsill, half a dozen scraps of ribbon lay strewn about. As the dove’s shadow passed again, I noticed something else. Little specks of gold shimmered in the dust on the sill. I wanted to walk into the room and look closer, but there wasn’t time. The deputies were headed to the door.

Hugging my arms tightly, I followed the men downstairs and onto the front porch. It wasn’t until we’d reached the driveway that I looked at the cottage and my stomach began churning for a different reason. With Iola gone, it would only be a matter of time before Alice Faye Tucker came to evict us. I had less than fifty dollars left, and that was from the last thing I could find to

pawn—a sterling watch that Trammel had given me. The watch was only in my suitcase by accident—left behind after a trip to a horse event somewhere, undoubtedly in better times. If Trammel knew I still had it, he would have taken it away, along with everything else of value. He made sure I never had access to enough money to get out.

What were the kids and I going to do now?

The question gained weight and muscle as the afternoon passed. The coroner's van had just left when Zoey and J.T. came in from school. I didn't even tell them our new landlady had died. They'd find out soon enough. At nine years old, J.T. might not make the connections, but at fourteen-going-on-thirty, Zoey would know that the loss of the cottage spelled disaster for us. The minute we reemerged on the grid—credit card payment at a motel, job application with actual references provided, visit to a bank for cash—Trammel Clarke would find us.

I slipped into bed at twelve thirty, boneless and weary, guilt ridden for not being honest with the kids, even though it was nothing new. Outside, the water teased the shores of the sedges, and a slow-rising Hatteras moon climbed the roof of Iola's house, hanging above the turret like a scoop of vanilla ice cream on an upside-down cone.

How could someone who owned an estate like this one end up alone in her room, gone from this world without a soul to cry at her bedside?

The image of Iola as a young woman taunted my thoughts. I imagined her walking the veranda in a milky-white dress. The moon shadows shifted and danced among the live oaks and the loblolly pines, and I felt the old house calling to me, whispering the secrets of the long and mysterious life of Iola Anne Poole.