

*"The Sea Keeper's
Daughters is a keeper!"*

MARY ALICE
MONROE

New York Times bestselling author
of *The Summer's End*

*THE
SEA KEEPER'S
DAUGHTERS*

LISA
WINGATE

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

P R A I S E F O R

Lisa Wingate

T H E S E A K E E P E R ' S D A U G H T E R S

“Readers will delight in this compelling saga that sweeps from past to present, coastline to mountains. Compassion and forgiveness pave the road to redemption in this gem of a book. *The Sea Keeper’s Daughter* is a keeper!”

MARY ALICE MONROE, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Summer’s End*

T H E S T O R Y K E E P E R

“Lisa Wingate’s latest novel, *The Story Keeper*, pays homage to all young women who dared to rise above the life into which they were born, to find the life they were destined to live.”

CATHERINE HOSMAN, *Killeen Daily Herald*

“Wingate is, quite simply, a master storyteller. Her story-within-a-story, penned with a fine, expressive style, will captivate writers and non-writers alike.”

BOOKLIST

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ROMANTIC TIMES

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COLLEEN COBLE, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Seagrass Pier*

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T H E P R A Y E R B O X

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STARRED *BOOKLIST*

“Journeys begin with one single step . . . in Wingate’s masterful exploration of the road to redemption. Relatable characters and vivid portrayals of events both current and historical create an enchanting, memorable pilgrimage into the fullness of faith and love.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

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USA TODAY

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DEBBIE MACOMBER, *New York Times* bestselling author

“*The Prayer Box* is Lisa Wingate’s best work so far! 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.”

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“Gripping . . . compassionate and lyrical . . . reminds us that it is love that changes our world.”

PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY, *New York Times* bestselling author

THE SEA KEEPER'S DAUGHTERS



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LISA
WINGATE



*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois*

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Designed by Dean H. Renninger

Edited by Sarah Mason

Published in association with Folio Literary Management, LLC, 630 9th Avenue, Suite 1101, New York, NY 10036.

The Sea Keeper's Daughters 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.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wingate, Lisa.

The sea keeper's daughters / Lisa Wingate.

pages ; cm

ISBN 978-1-4143-8690-4 (softcover) — ISBN 978-1-4143-8827-4 (hardcover)

1. Restaurateurs—North Carolina—Fiction. 2. Inheritance and succession—Fiction. 3. Hotels—North Carolina—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3573.L53165S43 2015

813'.54—dc23

2015014930

Printed in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 15
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgments

Writing fiction is the strangest of professions. Here is a job in which your task each day is to listen to the voices of people who don't exist and describe events that never were. It's the adult version of Let's Pretend.

Yet even games of Let's Pretend are better when friends are involved—real friends, not the type you conjure up in your head. Many kind people contributed to the making of this book, so I'd like to take a moment to offer my undying thanks.

First and foremost, I'm grateful to the Federal Writers, whose work was far-reaching, revolutionary, fascinating, and sometimes dangerous. They probed the corners of a hidden America, knowing that even when we have little else, our stories still have value. I am so very grateful for all the stories they saved from extinction.

As always, I am incredibly thankful for my family. Thank you to my husband and my sweet boys for supporting me through late nights and crazy schedules, and to my mother for being my official assistant and helper, but also my mama. Not everyone is lucky enough to have a helper who will honestly tell you when your hair looks bad . . . or when a manuscript needs work. Thank you to my sweet mother-in-law for helping with address lists and for loving my grown-too-soon boys and to Paw-paw for making sure the next generation knows the family stories. Thanks also to relatives and friends far and near for loving me and helping me and hosting me as I travel. You're the best.

I'm grateful to my favorite digital designer, Teresa Loman, for beautiful graphics work, to Ed Stevens for constant encouragement and help with all things technical, and to my wonderful Aunt Sandy (also known as Sandy of Sandy's Seashell Shop) for help with early readings and for contributing beautiful sea glass jewelry for book giveaways and gifts. Thanks to Duane Davis for book tour help and for incredible proofreading. Thanks to Virginia Rush for lending an eye to the manuscript. Enormous gratitude to talented author friend Julie Cantrell for being an amazing critique partner.

To the people of the Outer Banks, thank you for not only a warm welcome each time we visit, but for your patience in answering questions. A special thanks to Jamie at Duck's Cottage Downtown Books in Manteo for always making our visits there a joy and for help with the research on the history of Roanoke Island. A more charming town than Manteo can't be found anywhere. Everyone should come for a short stay . . . or a long one.

In terms of print and paper, deep gratitude goes out to the talented folks at Tyndale House Publishers. To Karen Watson, Jan Stob, Sarah Mason, Maggie Rowe, and Cheryl Kerwin, thank you for being a fabulous publishing team. To the crew in marketing, publicity, art, and sales, thank you for using your talents so well. You are the ones who help these stories fly to the hands of readers.

Lastly, I am grateful to reader friends everywhere. I love the connection we share across the miles. Thank you for recommending the books to friends, suggesting them to book clubs, and taking time to send little notes of encouragement my way via e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter. I'm indebted to all of you who read these stories and to the booksellers who sell them with such devotion. Thank you for joining in my games of Let's Pretend.

May this journey bring you as much joy as you have given me.

CHAPTER 1

Perhaps denial is the mind's way of protecting the heart from a sucker punch it can't handle. Or maybe it's simpler than that. Maybe denial in the face of overwhelming evidence is a mere byproduct of stubbornness.

Whatever the reason, all I could think standing in the doorway, one hand on the latch and the other trembling on the keys, was, *This can't be happening. This can't be how it ends. It's so . . . quiet.* A dream should make noise when it's dying. It deserves to go out in a tragic blaze of glory. There should be a dramatic death scene, a gasping for breath . . . something.

Denise laid a hand on my shoulder, whispered, "Are you all right?" Her voice faded at the end, cracking into jagged pieces.

"No." A hard, bitter tone sharpened the cutting edge on the word. It wasn't aimed at Denise. She knew that. "Nothing about this is *all right*. Not one single thing."

"Yeah." Resting against the doorframe, she let her neck go slack until her cheek touched the wood. "I'm not sure if it's better or worse to stand here looking at it, though. For the last time, I mean."

"We've put our hearts into this place. . . ." Denial reared its

unreasonable head again. I would've called it *hope*, but if it was hope, it was the false and paper-thin kind. The kind that only teases you.

Denise's hair fell like a pale, silky curtain, dividing the two of us. We'd always been at opposite ends of the cousin spectrum—Denise strawberry blonde, pale, and freckled, me dark-haired, blue-eyed, and olive-skinned. Denise a homebody and me a wanderer.

"Whitney, we have to let it go. If we don't, we'll end up losing both places."

"I know. I know you're right." But still a part of me rebelled. *All* of me rebelled. I couldn't stand the thought of being bullied one more time. "I understand that you're being logical. And on top of that, you have Mattie to think about. And your grandmother. We've got to cut the losses while we can still keep the first restaurant going."

"I'm sorry," Denise choked out. With dependents, she couldn't afford any more risk. We'd already gone too far in this skirmish-by-skirmish war against crooked county commissioners, building inspectors taking backroom payoffs, deceptive construction contractors, and a fire marshal who was a notorious good ol' boy. They were all in cahoots with local business owners who didn't want any competition in this backwater town.

Denise and I should've been more careful to check out the environment before we'd fallen in love with the vintage mill building and decided it would be perfect for our second Bella Tazza location and our first really high-end eatery. Positioned along a busy thoroughfare for tourists headed north to ski or to spend summer vacations in the Upper Peninsula, Bella Tazza 2, with its high, lighted granary tower, was a beacon for passersby.

But in eleven months, we'd been closed more than we'd been

open. Every time we thought we'd won the battle to get and keep our occupancy permit, some new and expensive edict came down and we were closed until we could comply. Then the local contractors did their part to slow the process and raise the bills even more.

You're not the one who needs to apologize, I wanted to say to Denise, but I didn't. Instead, I sank onto one of the benches and surveyed the murals Denise and I had painted after spending long days at Bella Tazza 1, in the next county over.

I felt sick all over again.

"The minute we have to give up the lease, they'll move in here." Denise echoed my thoughts the way only a cousin who's more like a big sister can. "Vultures."

"That's the worst part." But it wasn't, really. The worst part was that it was *my* fault we'd gone this far in trying to preserve Tazza 2. Denise would've surrendered to Tagg Harper and his hometown henchmen long ago. Denise would've played it safe if only I'd let her.

Yet even now, after transferring the remaining food inventory to the other restaurant and listing the equipment and fixtures we could sell at auction, I still couldn't accept what was happening. Somehow, somehow, Tagg and his cronies had managed to cause another month's postponement of our case with the state code commission. We couldn't hang on that long with Tazza 2 closed but still racking up monthly bills. This was death, at least for Tazza 2, and if we weren't careful, the financial drain would swallow Tazza 1, leaving our remaining employees jobless.

"Let's just go." Denise flipped the light switch, casting our blood, sweat, and tears into shadow. "I can't look at it anymore."

The click of the latch held a finality, but my mind was churning, my heart still groping for a loophole . . . wishing a

white knight would ride in at the eleventh hour, brandishing sword and shield.

Instead, there was Tagg Harper's four-wheel-drive truck, sitting in the ditch down by the road. Stalker. He was probably scratching his belly while sipping a brewski and smiling at himself.

"Oh, I hate that man." Denise's teeth clenched over the words. "I'd like to . . ."

I couldn't help myself—I took a step in Tagg's direction.

"Whitney, don't get into it with him. There's no telling what he's capable of."

My despair morphed into a feverish anger. I'd never hated anyone the way I hated Tagg Harper.

Denise's hand snaked out and grabbed my jacket. "Don't give him any more satisfaction. It's bad enough that he'll see our equipment on eBay as soon as we post the listings. Jerk. Honest competition with his restaurant, I can handle, but this . . ."

"I'd just like to . . . walk down there and nail him with a kick to that great big gut of his." The past few months' drama had driven me to think about refresher courses in Tang Soo Do karate, a pastime I'd given up after leaving the high school bullies behind, twenty years ago. I hadn't told Denise, but someone had been prowling around my cabin at night.

As usual, my cousin was focused on the practical, on achieving *containment*. "We need to concentrate on digging out financially and keeping the first store alive."

"I know." The problem was, I'd been adding things up in my head as we'd made our auction list in the mill building. What we'd get for the supplies and equipment wouldn't even take care of the final utility costs here, much less the legal bills we'd amassed. With the flagging economy and the need to absorb as

many Tazza 2 employees as possible into the other restaurant, I wasn't even sure we could make payroll. And we *had* to make payroll. Our employees were counting on it. They needed to pay their bills too.

Guilt fell hard and heavy, settling stone by stone as we crossed the parking lot. If I hadn't moved back to Michigan five years ago and convinced Denise to start a restaurant with me, she would've still been in a nice, safe teaching job. But I'd been sailing off a big win after quitting an upper management job, opening my own bistro in Dallas, proving it out, and selling it for a nice chunk of change. With four hundred thousand dollars in my pocket, I'd been so sure I had the perfect formula for success. I'd told myself I was doing a good thing for my cousin, helping her escape the constant struggle to single-handedly finance a household, take care of her aging grandmother, and pay for Mattie's asthma care on a teacher's salary.

Denise, I had a feeling, had been hoping that our starting a business together would somehow defeat the wanderlust that had taken me from culinary school to the far corners of the world, opening top-of-the-line kitchens for a multinational restaurant conglomerate.

"See you in the morning, Whit." A quick shoulder-hug and she disappeared into her vehicle, cranking the engine, then crunching across the leftover ice runoff of a polar-vortex winter. Rather than disappearing down the driveway, she stopped at the curb, near Tagg's truck. Through the cold-smoke, I could feel her watching, waiting to be sure I made it to the road without spiraling into a confrontation.

It was so like Denise to look after me. Since her long-ago days as my after-school babysitter, she'd always been fiercely protective. Like the rest of Mom's family, she'd worried that I

was stuffing down the aftereffects of my father's death, and that Mom was making a mistake by exposing me to my grandmother on far-away Roanoke Island. It was no secret that Ziltha Benoit held my mother responsible for the untimely loss of her son.

Denise had silently understood all the things I couldn't tell my mom, or anyone—the painful inadequacy that had haunted my childhood, the sense that I could never be good enough, the ridicule in the exclusive private school across town, where Mom's music teaching job came with free tuition for me. The awkwardness of not fitting in with the silver-spoon kids there, even though my last name was Benoit. Denise had always been my oasis of kindness and sage advice—the big sister I never had.

Passing by her car on the way out, I couldn't even look at her. I just bumped down the winter-rutted drive, turned onto the road, and headed toward home, checking once in the mirror to make sure Denise was out of the parking lot too.

Tagg Harper's taillights came on just after her vehicle pulled onto the road. My anger flared with tidal force, and I was starting a U-turn before I even knew what was happening. By the time I made it back to the restaurant, Tagg was positioning his truck in the middle of the parking lot. *Our* parking lot. The driver's-side door was just swinging open.

I wheeled around and pulled close enough to prevent him from wallowing out. Cold air rushed in my window, a quick, hard, bracing force.

"You even set *one foot* on this parking lot, Tagg Harper, I'll call the police." Not that the county sheriff wasn't in Tagg's pocket too. Tagg's dumpy pizza joint was the spot where all the local boys gathered for coffee breaks . . . if they knew what was good for them.

Lowering his window, he rested a bulky arm on the frame,

drawing the door inward a bit. The hinges groaned. “Public parking lot.” An index finger whirled lazily in the air. “Heard a little rattle in my engine just now. Thought I’d stop and check it out.”

“I’ll bet.” Of course he wouldn’t admit that he wanted to get his meat hooks on this place. He was probably afraid I’d be recording on my cell phone, trying to secure proof of the threats, the bribes to officials and contractors, the constant harassment.

Which was why he was smiling and blinking at me like a ninny now.

“It’s *my* parking lot, until this is all settled. We reserve the right to refuse service to *anyone*. You’re not welcome here.” *Don’t back down. Not this time. Don’t let him bully you.* Gripping the steering wheel tighter, I swallowed hard.

“Heard you were moving out early to save on the rent.” His breath drew smoke curls in the frosted air. I smelled beer, as usual. “Expensive to keep a building for no reason.”

“Well, you heard wrong, because we’ve got a hearing with the state code commission in six weeks, and with that little bit of extra time to prepare, there’s no way in the world we won’t win our case.”

His chin receded into wind-reddened rolls of neck fat before he relaxed in his seat, self-assured and smiling. He knew a bluff when he heard one. “It’d be a shame to drag yourself any deeper under . . . what with your *other* business to think about and all.”

What did *that* mean? Bella Tazza 1 was outside the county. There wasn’t anything Tagg could do to affect it, other than posting derogatory food reviews online, which he and his peeps had already done.

But he was thinking of *something* right now. That was clear enough. His tongue snaked out and wet his lips, and then he

had the gall to give the mill building a leisurely assessment before turning his attention to me again. "Guess I'll wait until the carcass cools a little more."

Pulling the door closed, he rolled up his window, and then he was gone.

I sat alone in the moon shadow of my dying dream, once again feeling like the little girl who would never be worthy of dreams, the Benoit name, or anything else.

No matter how far I traveled, no matter what I achieved, that girl remained just a few inches beneath the skin.

Right now, she was telling me this was exactly what I deserved.

Rounding icy curves as the headlights glinted against dirty mounds of leftover snow, I had the urge to let go of the wheel, close my eyes, and just stay wherever the car came to rest . . . until the cold or carbon monoxide put an end to all of this. In some logical part of my brain, I knew that was an overreaction, but the idea of going broke and taking my cousin with me was unbearable.

There has to be a way out. There has to be something I can do. . . .

Yet no miraculous possibilities came to mind during the thirty-minute drive home. Finally, the surface of Lake Michigan glinted through the trees, and I looked toward it seeking the comfort it usually provided. This time, all I could see was a vision of myself, floating cold and silent beneath the surface.

Stop. That. The words in my head were a reprimand, strong and determined like my mother's voice. *You are not your father.*

But occasionally over the years, I had wondered—was there, inside me, the same demon that had taken him from us before I was six years old, leaving me to remember him as a feeling, a snatch of sound, a mist of memory?

Could I, without seeing it ahead of time, come to a place where giving up seemed the best option?

How was the thought even possible for me, knowing first-hand the pain a decision like that leaves behind? Knowing what happens in the aftermath when a person you love enters the cold waters and swims out to sea with no intention of returning to shore?

Someone should tell the dead that saving the living isn't as simple as leaving a note to say, *It's no one's fault*. For the living, it's always someone's fault.

Turning onto the cabin road, I cleared my head and felt the tears beginning to come, seeking to cleanse. Tears seemed like the only thing I had left. They swelled and pounded in my throat as I drew closer to the little lake cabin that had been home since I'd moved back to Michigan. Fortunately, Mrs. Doyne, who lived in the house out front, kept her cabin rentals at 1950s prices. She was more interested in having responsible, long-term tenants than in making money off the property.

Dressed in her nightgown and probably ready to turn in, she waved from behind a picture window as I passed by the house. One of her ever-present crossword puzzles dangled in her hand.

I had the random realization that even Mrs. Doyne would be hurt if I lost myself beneath the lake's quiet surface. *Get your act together, Whitney Monroe*, she'd probably say. *Life goes on*. Mrs. Doyne had survived the death of her husband of fifty years, her one true love. She worked in her gardens, volunteered all over the area, and mentored a Girl Scout troop. She had the best attitude of any person I'd ever met and it went all the way through to the core. She was fearless, always up for a new adventure.

There had been a time when I'd thought that if I kept up the facade long enough on the outside, I'd become that on the

inside, too. I'd opened world-class kitchens, driven others to maintain the pace, never let myself get rattled when a newbie on a hot line scorched a sauce or a waiter dropped a tray. I'd dealt with corporate higher-ups who weren't much different from Tagg Harper—bloated, self-important personalities bent on showing the world how special they were. I handled things well. I had things under control.

But what I'd never been faced with, what I'd avoided my entire adult life, was the very thing that had been squeezing me dry these past months. I'd never allowed someone else's well-being to depend on my own. Even during a short marriage that had both begun and ended with disaster, I'd maintained my own finances, kept my own life, and so had David. Both of us seemed to prefer it that way. I'd never been faced with the knowledge that my choices, my actions, my *failure* would destroy another person's life.

Turning off the car, I rested my head against the steering wheel as the cold needled through the windows and the engine's chugs settled to dull metallic pings. A sob wrenched the air and I heard it before I felt it.

A breath heaved inward, stung my throat. Another sob pressed out. I lifted my head, let it bump against the steering wheel, thought, *Stop, stop, stop!*

The knock on the window struck me like an electrical pulse, catapulting me upright. Beyond the blurry haze, I made out Mrs. Doyne's silhouette against the security lamps, the fur-lined hood of her coat catching the light and giving her a fluffy halo.

My emotions scattered like rabbits, leaving behind only two that I could identify—horror and embarrassment. I didn't want *anyone* to see me like this, least of all Mrs. Doyne. It would only

worry her. She'd been a godsend to me these past few years, and even though I'd tried to keep my financial situation under wraps as Bella Tazza 2 imploded, she'd figured out that things were bad. She'd started bringing me casseroles and offering to wait for the rent if I needed her to.

Like everyone else in town, she wasn't aware of the whole story. All she knew was that we'd had some trouble with the inspections on the new restaurant. I was careful not to reveal more. The truth about Tagg Harper's underhanded dealings would only hurt her. Mrs. Doyne's deceased husband had been one of Tagg's favorite uncles and ice-fishing buddies.

Pretending to reach for my keys in the ignition, I wiped my eyes and then rolled down the window, hoping she wouldn't notice what a mess I was. Apparently it was obvious, even in the dark.

"Oh, honey." She touched my shoulder, and I clenched against another rush of tears. "I guess you heard. I'm so sorry . . ." She seemed to leave the sentence unfinished, its meaning a mystery. What was she *sorry* for? Did she know about the postponement of the code commission hearing? Had she been in it with the rest of the Harpers all along?

Even the question hurt. I'd come to think of Mrs. Doyne almost as a substitute for my mother. They enjoyed all the same things. They both loved music. They both played the violin. They had the same Upper Peninsula accent. Being around Mrs. Doyne was like having my mom back again. Mrs. Doyne was even a cancer survivor. Someone strong enough to defeat the disease that had taken Mom five years ago. It was after her funeral that Denise and I had reconnected and spent a long night talking about life, dreams, and Denise's struggle to pay Mattie's

medical bills after her ex-husband refused to keep up the child support. Suddenly, the unexpected offer on my restaurant in Dallas had made sense. All of it seemed meant to be.

“Come on inside.” Mrs. Doyne’s hand circled my arm as if she meant to forcibly lift me out the window. “You look like you need a spot of hot tea.”

I didn’t argue. I didn’t have the energy. I just went along.

Inside, the house smelled of cats, baseboard heat, and plants in fresh pots. When this year’s rebellious spring weather finally warmed up, Mrs. Doyne’s garden would be half-grown in the sunroom. How could anyone who lovingly nursed the tender shoots of new life be in on Tagg Harper’s dirty dealings? The bullies were getting the best of me again, making me paranoid. I couldn’t let someone like Tagg make me lose hope in other people. Good people like Mrs. Doyne.

“Sit,” she said, leading me to a sofa space between three curled-up cats. “Let me put the water on.”

Sinking down with my cold fingers tucked between my knees, I let my head fall back, closed my eyes, tried to think. A cat crawled into my lap, nestled there, and toyed with the zipper on my coat, its soft purr a lull of comfort.

“I tried to call you earlier when I got the message.” Mrs. Doyne’s voice seemed far away.

Another month . . . can we hang on another month? There has to be some way to get the money. . . .

Options and options and options cycled through my mind, ending in brick wall after brick wall after brick wall, and then the biggest one of all—the fact that if we went any further with all of this, we risked losing everything.

You can’t do that to Denise. You can’t do that to Denise and Mattie and Grandma Daisy.

You never should've come back here. You never should've involved them in all of this. It's your fault. It's all your fault.

"I say . . . I tried to call you on your cell phone when the message came."

Mrs. Doyne's words pressed for a response.

"Message?"

The teapot whistled, the high, shrill sound causing the cats to stir.

A spoon clinked, the refrigerator door opened and closed. Cream and sugar. Mrs. Doyne knew. We'd shared more than a few cups of tea these past few years.

"It sounded as if the man had no idea who else to call. He left a message on the recorder while I was at the market. I suppose he found your cell number and reached you directly?"

Her slippers shuffled against the wood floor as she reentered the living room and handed over my tea. The cup was warm, comforting, its chamomile scent sinking in. "I left my phone in the car all afternoon." I didn't tell her I'd done that to avoid the constant flurry of bill collectors.

Mrs. Doyne delivered a perplexed look, settling into her recliner. "I know it isn't the sort of news you need right now, what with your restaurant struggles." Her head inclined sympathetically, her eyes compassionate behind thick glasses. "Are you close?"

"Close?"

"To your stepfather." Frowning, she looked into her teacup, as if she might find the answers there. "I assumed not, given that the neighbor had so much trouble contacting you."

"My *stepfather*?" The words struck like a ricochet baseball, drilling some unsuspecting fan in the head. I hadn't seen my mother's late-in-life husband since her funeral.

It was no accident that my stepfather's neighbor had trouble finding my number among his belongings. The man wanted nothing to do with me.

"Mrs. Doyne, I'm completely lost here. I haven't heard from my stepfather in almost five years. There's no reason he'd be getting in touch, believe me."

"Oh . . ." A hand-to-chest look of surprise. "When I saw you crying in the car, I just assumed the message had gotten through to you. I'm sorry to be the deliverer of such news. The call was from your stepfather's neighbor on the Outer Banks of North Carolina . . . Roanoke Island, I believe he said. He thought you should know of the situation. Apparently your stepfather is in the hospital. He took a fall in the bathroom . . . and he laid there for nearly four days before anyone found him."

Note to Readers

Dear Reader,

It's my hope that, at this point, *The Sea Keeper's Daughters* has taken you on a journey and that now, at the journey's end, you are returning with moments of adventure, romance, and discovery that are yours to keep. The best stories are the ones that become part of our own personal histories.

Speaking of history, I hope Alice's letters have stirred an interest in the true tales of the Federal Writers and the stories they gathered. Never before in American history had such a thing been attempted. Yet through the work of thousands of field interviewers, who were out-of-work writers, secretaries, housewives, professors, and so forth, a struggling America was preserved for all to revisit.

Those involved in "Federal One" were far ahead of their time. They were the beginning of the Civil Rights movement before there was a Civil Rights movement. They pushed toward equality for women before anyone was openly discussing equal opportunity. Their mandate was to be all-inclusive, to break down hard and fast societal boundaries, much like Kathryn

Stockett's main character does in *The Help*, when she interviews black maids in the South. The Federal Writers not only documented the natural wonders of the country, but the hidden lives of minorities, working women, immigrant laborers, sharecroppers, and others typically ignored by the history books. Their writings helped to inspire Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, among other classics. Sadly, much of the Federal Writers' work was stored away as the Red Scare heated up, congressional committees held hearings to search for communist infiltrators on American soil, and World War II gripped the nation.

Now, many of the field interviewers' original works are available via Internet. Lives long gone and places long past can be yours at the touch of a button. I hope you'll spend a bit of time with them. (See below for some links to get you started.) You may even find names you recognize and places you know. Most certainly, you'll realize that so many of the things we struggle with as human beings are not unique to our generation. There are lessons to be learned from those who've wandered these paths before us.

I doubt that writers like Alice could have ever imagined their stories would fly through the air, spanning the globe in an instant. I can't help believing that, eighty years after they traveled the hills and dales and back roads, the Federal Writers would be happy to know that many long-silenced voices can now be heard.

May your journey be filled with great stories,

Lisa

Links:

Library of Congress Federal Writers' Project information:

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/newdeal/fwp.html>

Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project:

<http://www.loc.gov/collection/federal-writers-project>

WPA Depression-era photographs:

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/>

Slave narratives transcriptions and recordings:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>

WPA posters and advertisements:

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?st=grid&co=wpapos>