



sisters

*Experience three novellas
about the joys and trials
of sisterhood*

LISA
WINGATE

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

S I S T E R S

sisters



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WINGATE



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Sisters

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*To Aunt Sandy,
for being the talented, creative, sweet soul that you are,
and for being the brains behind Sandy's Seashell Shop.
Without you, the Sisterhood of the Seashell Shop
would not exist.*

*And to Sharon,
for being Sandy's sister . . . and my mom.
May the two of you walk the shore side by side
sharing sister stories for many years to come.*

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CHAPTER 1

The more time that passes before it happens, the better. Usually that isn't the case on any given day of any given week. Life is all about running break-neck, half-exhausted, from one thing to another—the kids, the job, the bills, the PTA, the school concession stand, the cheerleaders' fund-raiser garage sale, the marriage . . .

Sometimes I wonder if she's sleeping under there—the *old* Elizabeth Gallagher, the woman who seemed to have it all together. Or was she always just a fantasy? A figment of the hype she created eighteen years ago, when an unexpected pregnancy led to a hurried marriage between high school sweethearts? She was so determined to show all the naysayers that she could make a go of it, defy the statistics. Create the perfect family. A life to be proud of.

Pride is a steamroller. It'll clear the path for a while, but sooner or later it'll shift into reverse, and then . . . look out. Maybe everyone else saw it coming, and that's why they're backing away lately.

And now *this*.

I gaze out the bay window of the house that was supposed to be our dream home. Even the oak trees have grown up now, resolving our original objection to building on two acres of centennial family farmland deeded to us as a wedding gift. The trees, once they grew, were supposed to make life in this house picture-perfect.

Fall leaves blow across what we lovingly call *the family compound*, the bits of seasonal color dancing into the yards of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Unfortunately, a layer of pretty colors can't fix what's wrong here. Nor can it remove the For Sale sign across the street—the one that makes me feel like a drugstore mannequin in a 1950s government staging area, about to unwittingly take part in a nuclear test. I'm just waiting for the bomb to drop. I know it's coming.

It couldn't possibly hit the mark on a worse day.

I'd like to get the kids off to school before it happens. See if I can cajole a hug—one that doesn't feel like it's just me hanging on. But chances are, if they can slip by and get to Jessica's car, they'll be gone like bank robbers on the lam. They'll probably be rushing, in danger of getting a tardy, Micah complaining that his big sister has made them late by lining her deep-blue eyes and fluffing her golden curls. She reminds me so much of myself in high school, it almost hurts. Exchange the blonde hair for brown, and our cheer-leading photos would've been almost interchangeable side by side.

As they swerve out of the driveway, she'll give her brother a dirty look, just like I would have. She's frustrated with him for horning in on her senior year by choosing to take extra courses and graduate while he should still be a junior. She doesn't want him in her car, and he's only there because we force her to drive him. She saved her money for the car, but we pay for the gas and the insurance.

The kids most likely won't even notice the sign across the road. The one that will bring a blinding explosion and a mushroom cloud of family fallout as soon as Uncle Butch sees it. There's no way he'll sit still for his sister selling that property.

I let my head sink to the table, let my eyes close next to the bowl of steel-cut oatmeal that is both breakfast and supper after working a night shift. Something mild that won't make me throw up once it hits my stomach, which has been churning since 3 a.m., half-way through my work hours.

There's a little girl missing this morning, and if I'd only been quicker, if I hadn't screwed up, vapor-locked for the first time ever, my mind whirling in a pool of exhaustion and family issues when the call came into the 911 dispatch center, that girl might be home right now. Safe in her mother's arms.

Instead I'm petrified that the worst has happened, and it's my fault. If a child isn't found within the first three hours, the chances are immeasurably less.

I hear the call again as sleep mist floats over my

mind. I re-create the moment in my thoughts, try to alter events, to fix the damage.

The caller is sobbing, panicked, alone in the Cappie's Quick Mart parking lot, except for a kindly trucker who has seen her screaming hysterically and stopped to investigate the problem.

"Sh-sh-she was h—!" The word *here* disappears into a moaning howl, animal-like. "Jus-s-st you . . . Sh-sh-she . . . she was . . . sleeping . . . in the seat. In back, with . . . with the babyyyy. I only went . . . just one mm-minute . . . Mm-maybe two . . . in . . ."

I try to calm her down, to discern what has happened, exactly. She's been hysterical for several minutes, difficult to work with, though I've managed to get her name, the name of the store, and that this is a possible abduction, then send the information through Computer-Aided Dispatch. Response units are on the way, but the Cappie's Quick Mart is out on Old Collier Road, not close to anything. It'll take a while.

The caller is slurring her words. I'm beginning to suspect that she's drunk or on something. But she could just be emotional. I do the thing that 911 operators are trained to do. I use her name, Trista. She sounds incredibly young, and so much like my Jessica. I wonder if she is the missing girl's sister or babysitter or friend or mother. I'm still trying to establish what has taken place.

There's adrenaline rushing through me, but my mind hasn't kicked in the way it should. It's like a disk

drive spinning and spinning but not coming up with the correct response. I reach for the scripts on the shelf above the desk—the ones we use with new operators doing on-the-job training.

So many of these instances turn out to be nothing, I think. I've said it to trainees before. Often the child either has been picked up by another family member or has wandered off to play or is in trouble and is hiding to avoid punishment.

Please let this be nothing. The words in my head seem to drift into empty space. Even that seems wrong. I used to know those words were going somewhere. That someone was hearing them.

I read off the script instead of winging it. I know it's slower, but it feels safer tonight. There's something wrong with me, and the truth is, I've known it for a while. I've been afraid something like this would happen.

This is my nightmare, playing out.

I ask her if there's anyone else I can speak to. Anyone who was with her when the child disappeared. There is only the trucker, and he knows nothing, other than that he's found a crazed woman in a parking lot at three in the morning. In the background, traffic whizzes by. The trucker tells me that the people in the convenience store didn't see anything either—just a woman going hysterical in the parking lot a couple minutes after she left the store.

I ask him to give the phone back to Trista, then

please go check on the car and keep an eye on the baby, if there is one. Do we have two missing children here or one?

“Okay, Trista, I need you to take a breath, calm down, and talk to me. You’re not alone. We are going to do everything we can to bring this girl home safely.” My stomach turns over. I taste the 1 a.m. ham sandwich and the shot of energy drink. “Is she your sister or your daughter?”

“Mm-my girl . . . my little girl . . .,” she sobs.

The alarm meter ratchets upward inside me. I’m pretty sure I’m talking to a teenage mother with two babies on her hands. “What is her name?”

“Em . . . Emily.”

“And how old is Emily?”

“F-f-four . . . f-five. She just turned f-five.” Trista seems more lucid now, her speech clearer. “We w-were gonna have her birthday par-party this weeken-n-nd. . . .”

I note that she used the word *were*. I taste the bile again. It’s a bad sign when a parent uses past tense in reference to a missing child.

She breaks down sobbing, and it’s a couple minutes before I can get her to listen to me. I feel the burden of time ticking by, even as I’m sending information through dispatch. I need a description of this girl.

“Trista . . . *Trista!*” I’m harsh now, like a teacher demanding a student’s attention. “What is Emily’s hair and eye color?”

“B-blonde . . . b-blue.”

“I need to know what Emily was wearing the last time you saw her. Exactly. Everything.”

Instead, she repeats location details. She’s at Cappie’s Quick Mart. She came out to buy cigarettes.

At three in the morning? I wonder and glance at the screen.

The caller’s voice is far away for a moment. I hear her screaming the girl’s name. It echoes against the traffic and a blaring horn. I cringe.

“Trista!” My voice fills the dispatch center, echoes down the hall. “Don’t put down the phone. Don’t hang up. Keep talking to me.”

Carol comes running from the break room. She’s heard me yelling.

I cap the mike, quickly whisper, “Missing juvenile, female, five years old.” My heart is pumping wildly. I point to the dispatch screen.

Then I open the receiver again. “Trista! *Trista!* What was Emily wearing? I need you to tell me what she was wearing.”

“She’s go-o-one! She’s go-o-one!”

“What was Emily wearing?”

“A . . . tee . . . a tee . . . a T-shirt,” Trista hiccups out finally. “One of W-Wade’s wor-work shirts. He . . . he . . . I-it was his . . . his . . . last . . . c-clean . . . M-maybe she thought sh-she was in troub . . . troubl-l-le . . .”

I note several things at once, send them through dispatch in random bits. There’s a male involved,

possibly a domestic dispute, no known location on the male at this time.

“What color was the T-shirt?” If it was a man’s shirt, it was oversize for a five-year-old, probably worn as a nightgown.

“Re-red . . . or blue. I don . . . don’t know. He has . . . he has . . . I d-don’t . . . My *babyyyyy*. Where’s my *babyyyy*?”

“I need you to stay focused, Trista.” So much time is passing. How much longer until officers reach her? I glance at the screen. They’re still several miles away. “What else was Emily wearing? Pants? Shoes? Coat?”

“No!” Trista sobs, frustrated with my questions now. “Only the shirt! Only the shirt.”

A chill passes through me. It’s cold at night in central Michigan in mid-October. I picture the little girl wandering along some roadside, shivering, barefoot, her blonde hair tangled around her face, her eyes filled with fear.

And then I hope that’s all it is. I hope she’s wandering somewhere. Alone. Far from the traffic that’s whizzing by in the background.

Beside me, Carol has picked up a headset to listen in on the call. She leans over my shoulder toward the screen as I try to work more information out of Trista, who has collapsed into unintelligible sobs again.

Carol looks my way, squints, shakes her head. Her eyes meet mine, gray eyebrows lowered and drawn together. “The Cappie’s Quick Mart out on Old

Collier Road isn't open late. There's no highway traffic out there, either. She has to be at the new Super Cappie's—the one they just opened near the bypass."

I close my eyes, just for the flash of an instant, feeling sick, then hot, then dazed. Then I'm hit by the white-hot lightning of panic.

I've lived in this county all my life. I should've realized there wouldn't be traffic noise by the Cappie's on Old Collier Road. I should've realized she had to be somewhere else. . . .

The phone rings, and at first I'm still in the dispatch center, trying to answer the incoming call through my headset. But it won't work. It's just ringing and ringing and ringing.

It's about to roll over to voice mail when I jerk awake, lift my head off my own kitchen table, and scramble for my cell. The house is quiet, the full light of midmorning pressing through the window now.

A half-dozen thoughts strike me at once. The kids have slipped off, not bothering to wake me as they passed by on their way to the garage. Across the street, the real estate sign has caught the sun like a beacon. My car sits alone in the driveway, meaning that Robert has gone to the cabin in the north woods for the weekend instead of coming home after his business trip. Again.

The phone call is Carol from work.

I want to crawl to the nearest closet, curl into a ball, and cry. But instead, I answer the cell.

THE SEA GLASS SISTERS

“They found something in the ditch a couple miles from the new Cappie’s,” Carol informs me flatly. “An auto supply store T-shirt. Red.”