

The Story Keeper

a novel

Lisa Wingate

New York Times bestselling author

P R A I S E F O R
The Story Keeper

“*The Story Keeper* is a novel of remarkable depth and power. Not since *To Kill a Mockingbird* has a story impacted me like this. You will want to read it and reread it, then pass it along to everyone you know.”

COLLEEN COBLE, AUTHOR OF *SEAGRASS PIER* AND
THE HOPE BEACH SERIES

“A kaleidoscope of past and present, *The Story Keeper* finds the soft spot of our souls where who we were stands face-to-face with who we are. Can we go home again? Faith, courage, and the power of story are the backbone of generations of the Appalachian women you’ll meet in these stories. I was captivated by this story and can’t wait to share it with my customers. Lisa Wingate, you rock!”

KAREN SCHWETTMAN, CO-OWNER, FOXTALE BOOK
SHOPPE, WOODSTOCK, GA.

“Moving to New York City doesn’t break the strong ties to her Appalachian heritage the way Jen Gibbs hopes it will. She finds her ancestors beckoning her when an anonymous manuscript mysteriously appears on her desk. *The Story Keeper* mixes soul-deep darkness with the possibility of redemption. Lisa’s writing is as lovely as the mountains, and as with all of Lisa’s books, at the end I want more!”

GEE GEE ROSELL, OWNER, BUXTON VILLAGE BOOKS,
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“Ideal for anyone who enjoys books by master storytellers such as Adriana Trigiani or Karen White. *The Story Keeper* is an inspirational tale about a complex heroine who has managed to survive by navigating around her scars. Set in the captivating world of rural Appalachia, the mountains play a powerful role in this lyrical tale that transports readers across time through a magical and beautiful journey.”

JULIE CANTRELL, *NEW YORK TIMES* AND *USA TODAY*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *INTO THE FREE*

“Fans of both historical and contemporary fiction will delight in Lisa Wingate’s latest tale. *The Story Keeper* is a modern-day quest that beckons readers into the Appalachian lore of yesteryear. The story threads wind and curl in unexpected directions, ultimately weaving an exquisite tapestry. Simply put, *The Story Keeper* is enchanting, inspiring, and beautifully told.”

DENISE HUNTER, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
DANCING WITH FIREFLIES

“Lisa Wingate is a master storyteller. *The Story Keeper* is just that—a keeper. A story of hope and redemption that will inspire your heart.”

RACHEL HAUCK, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
PRINCESS EVER AFTER

“I am a huge fan of Lisa Wingate. *The Story Keeper* is her best yet. This stunning narrative is exactly what a novel should be: beautifully written with real characters that come to life on the page, a captivating plot with a

behind-the-scenes peek into the world of book publishing, and an intriguing and emotional element of mystery to keep you hooked. I have once again fallen in love with this talented author's work."

KELLIE COATES GILBERT, AUTHOR OF *A WOMAN OF FORTUNE* AND *MOTHER OF PEARL*

"Wingate masterfully weaves a haunting tale with the story of a regretful past and sweeps readers along like a mountain stream. The secrets of the eastern hills will linger in your memory long after the last page."

LYNNE GENTRY, AUTHOR OF *HEALER OF CARTHAGE*

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The Story Keeper 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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*To the readers
who take these journeys with me:
thank you for inspiring me
always to seek another story
that will connect us
to one another.*

Acknowledgments

The Story Keeper began as a dream. I suppose all stories do, but in the case of this story, the description applies in the most basic sense. On a morning in September, I literally woke having dreamed this story. Scenes were still scrolling through my mind as I opened my eyes.

It was magical. An unexpected gift.

But even stories that begin in mysterious ways don't fall onto the page and travel to the hands of readers without hours of work and the contributions of many people. The final product becomes a communal effort. Many friends, neighbors, colleagues, and benevolent strangers have contributed to the creation of *The Story Keeper*, and now you, dear reader, are the golden clasp that binds the story circle.

As always, I am grateful for my loving, supportive family. Thank you to my mother for being an awesome assistant and first cheerleader, who can aptly critique a manuscript but will still tell me to eat my vegetables. Thank you to my sweet mother-in-law for helping with address lists and still feeding these big-boy children at the Nanny in Pajamas Café whenever they're home. Thanks also to relatives and friends far and near for everything you do to make me feel loved and nurtured, and for stopping people in the checkout line and at the doctor's office to talk about

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Chapter 1

This is the glory hour. This is the place the magic happens.

The thought fell quietly into place, like a photographer's backdrop unfurling behind the subject of a portrait. Its shimmering folds caught my attention, bringing to mind a bit of advice from Wilda Culp, the person without whom I would've ended up somewhere completely different. Someplace tragic.

It's strange how one person and a handful of stories can alter a life.

The trick, Jennia Beth Gibbs, is to turn your face to the glory hours as they come. I heard it again, her deep-raspy Carolina drawl playing the unexpected music of a bygone day. The saddest thing in life is to see them only as they flit away.

They're always a passing thing. . . .

My first afternoon in the war room at Vida House Publishing was a glory hour. I felt it, had an inexplicable knowing of it, even

before George Vida shuffled in the door and took his place at the head of the table to begin the weekly pub board meeting—my first at Vida House. This meeting would be different from all other such gatherings I'd attended over the past ten years at a half-dozen companies, in a half-dozen skyscrapers, in and about Manhattan.

There was magic in the air here.

George Vida braced his hands on the table before taking his seat, his gaze strafing the room with the discernment of a leathery old goat sniffing for something to nibble on. His survey paused momentarily on the pile of aging envelopes, manuscript boxes, and rubber band–wrapped papers at the far end of the conference room. The odd conglomeration, among so many other things, was Vida House's claim to fame—a curiosity I'd only heard about until today. One of the few remaining actual slush piles in all of New York City, perhaps in all of publishing. In the age of e-mail communication, paper-and-print slush piles had quietly gone the way of the dinosaurs. Digital slush is smaller, easier to manage, more efficient. Invisible. It gathers no dust, never achieves a patina like the slowly fading fragments in George Vida's relic.

Behold . . . Slush Mountain, the young intern who'd taken me on the new-employee tour had said, adding a grandiose hand flourish. *It's practically a tourist attraction.* He'd leaned closer then. *And FYI, don't call it that in front of the big boss. George Vida loves this thing. Nobody, but nobody, touches it. Nobody asks why it's still taking up space in the conference area. We all just pretend it's not there . . . like the elephant in the room.*

Slush Mountain was an impressive elephant. It consumed a remarkable amount of territory, considering that real estate in Manhattan is always at a premium. Its peak stretched almost to the antique tin ceiling. From there, the collection slowly fanned

outward toward the base, confining the conference table and chairs to the remaining three-quarters of the room.

The intern's information wasn't new. George Vida (I'd noticed that everyone here referred to him by both names, never one or the other) kept his mountain to remind the youngsters, hatched into an e-publishing generation, of two things: *one*, that unreturnable manuscripts are unreturnable because someone didn't mind their p's and q's in terms of submission guidelines, and *two*, that success in publishing is about leaving no page unturned and no envelope unopened. Slush Mountain stood as a reminder that publishing is a labor of love, emphasis on *labor*. It's no small struggle to climb to a level where you might discover the next great American bestseller . . . and actually get credit for it when you do.

"Is it everything you imagined?" Roger leaned in from the next chair, surreptitiously indicating Slush Mountain. Roger and I had been coworkers ten years ago, starting out at a publishing house that practically had its own zip code. He was straight out of Princeton, streetwise and sharp even back then, a Long Island golden boy who had publishing in his blood, while I was the doe-eyed, dark-haired newbie who looked more like an extra from *Coal Miner's Daughter* than a New Yorker in the making.

I nodded but focused on George Vida. I wasn't about to be lured into talking in pub board meeting on my very first day . . . or ogling Slush Mountain. I'd never been quite sure whether Roger was a friend or the competition. Maybe that was just me being jealous. I'd been pigeonholed in nonfiction and memoir for years, while Roger had managed to float from acquiring nonfiction to fiction, and back again, seemingly at will.

At thirty-one, I was starving for something . . . new. Some variety.

My cell phone chimed as a text came in, and I scrambled to silence it.

Not soon enough. Every eye turned my way. The moment seemed to last much longer than it probably did, my heart suddenly in my throat and beating at ten times the normal rate, my instinctive response to shrink, duck, back away before a hand could snake out and grab my arm, compress flesh into bone. Some habits die hard, even years after you've left the place and the people behind.

I turned the sound off under the table. "Sorry. I usually leave it in my office during meetings, but I haven't unpacked yet." The excuse felt woefully inadequate. Doubtless, George Vida's cell phone had never busted a meeting.

A sudden shuffling, rustling, and muffled groaning circled the table, everyone seeming to prepare for something. A horrifying thought raced past. *What if cell phones in a meeting are a firing offense?* Silly, no doubt, but I'd left my previous job, my apartment rent was due in a week, and over the past few years, I had sent my savings, what little there was of it, to a place where it would only prolong a bad situation.

"Box." George Vida pointed to the upturned lid of a printer-paper carton. Andrew, the intern who had given me the tour, snapped to his feet, grabbed the container, and sent it around the table. BlackBerrys, iPhones, and Droids were gently but reluctantly relinquished. No one complained, but body language speaks volumes. I was the class dunce.

Perfect way to meet the rest of the coworkers. Brilliant. They'll never forget you now. On the upside, they'd probably get a laugh out of it, and it never hurt to make people laugh.

Across the table, the intern swiveled his palms up when George Vida wasn't looking. He grinned ruefully, giving me

what was probably a twenty-two-year-old's idea of a flirtatious wink.

I sneered back at him in a way that hopefully said, *Forget it, buddy. You're just a baby, and aside from that, I won't date anybody I work with.*

Ever. Again.

The meeting got started then. The usual power play went on—editors with pull getting support for the bigger deals, the better deals, the deals with real potential. Various editorial team members stepped up in support of one another's projects, their alliances showing. The sales and marketing gurus leaned forward for some pitches, reclined in their chairs during others. I took note of all the dynamics, mapping the lay of the land at the foot of Slush Mountain and, quite wisely, keeping my mouth shut. Stacked in front of me, and in my office, were company catalogs, manuscripts, an iPad, and a laptop that would help bring me up to speed. I hadn't gotten that far yet, but I would. As quickly as possible. Once the day wound down and the building cleared out this evening, I could dig in uninterrupted, making serious headway before drowsy eyes and a growling stomach forced me to the subway, where I would read some more on the way home.

Short night, early morning. Lather. Rinse. Repeat. By the end of the week, I'd be functional. Mostly. In next Monday's pub board meeting, I could begin to contribute, a little at a time. Carefully. George Vida did not appreciate braggadocio—I'd done my homework. Buying projects and getting the support to make them fly off the shelves rather than *fall* off the shelves was a matter of gaining the favor of the old lion.

"Hollis, if you will introduce us to the newest member of the Vida House family, we'll adjourn this meeting," he requested, and suddenly I was the center of attention again.

George Vida's secretary, Hollis—picture Jane Hathaway from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, but a couple decades older—rose from her chair, behind her boss and slightly to the right, her close-cropped gray hair making her thin face more angular and imposing. I'd heard she had been with George Vida since 1967 when he took over the family newspaper business and began building it into the multimillion-dollar operation it was today.

Hollis's long, thin fingers braced in backward arcs on the tabletop, her expression as stoic and seemingly detached as it had been that morning when she'd looked over the folder of contracts and paperwork I'd signed.

Her gaze swept the room. "Jen Gibbs comes to us from the nonfiction arm of Stanislaus International. She brings ten years of experience in memoir and historical nonfiction. Her graduate work was completed at NYU, where she was the recipient of the Aberdeen Fellowship of Arts and Letters and the Steinbeck Fellowship. We are pleased to welcome her to the team." Her regard settled on me, though she looked neither pleased nor unhappy. "If you will share a few facts about yourself that are not on the dossier, Jen, we will begin the process of getting to know you."

"Thank you." I did a split-second mental debate on whether to sit or stand, then decided standing made more sense, as I could see the whole table that way, and making connections with coworkers is the first critical step to success in a new house.

I recapped my publishing history, all the while backhandedly thumbing for something else interesting to say—something that wouldn't make it sound like my life was all about work. It was, and I liked it that way. If you love what you do, you don't mind devoting yourself to it. But at times like this, I did wish I had something more colorful to share. Kids, house, a classy hobby

like antique rose gardening or something. A childhood anecdote about where my love of stories began. Something having to do with bedtime tales and that one treasured book received as a birthday present.

It was nice to imagine, but it didn't solve the problem. When your past is a locked box, introductions are . . . complicated.

I finally settled for a quick recounting of a wild trip to a mountaintop in Colorado to persuade Tom Brandon to sign his celebrity memoir deal with Stanislaus, during an auction between several publishing houses. It was one of the greatest coups of my career, but also the closest I had ever come to plummeting to my death.

"You haven't really lived until you've slid off a mountain on a snowmobile and spent twenty-four hours huddled against a blizzard," I added, knowing that my new coworkers would assume I'd been desperately out of my element that night in the mountains, which couldn't have been farther from the truth. After that experience, Tom Brandon knew things about me no one else in my adult life had ever known, but to his credit, he never revealed any of it during the interviews and hoopla surrounding the book. By mutual agreement, we'd kept one another's secrets. Action hero Tom Brandon was a babe in the woods. And I was a backwoods girl in hiding.

"The search and rescue made for great publicity for the project, though, even if that was one seriously bone-cold night in the woods," I finished, and my coworkers laughed—all except Roger. I'd forgotten until now that he was working for a competitor during that bidding war. I'd beaten him out.

He sidled close again as the meeting broke up. "I've never quite forgiven you for that Tom Brandon deal. That was sheer brilliance."

“Oh, come on, Roger. You know it’s not often that I actually win one of our little battles.” It was the usual love-hate interplay. In a competitive business, colleagues tend to be like siblings who can’t stand one another half the time and play nice the other half.

Roger pulled me into a momentary shoulder hug. “It all worked out. Losing that deal was what convinced me to pursue more fiction.”

Quick little stab-stab there. Oh, that hurt. He knew I’d always had stories in my blood—that fiction was my real dream—but when you’re successful in one arena and you’ve got bills to pay, it’s hard to take a chance on foreign territory.

Roger caught me stealing a glance at the slush pile. “Fascinating, isn’t it?” His breath brushed across my ear, minty fresh. Too close for comfort.

“Yes, it is.”

“Stay away from Slush Mountain. It’s the old man’s masterpiece.” A quick warning, and then he was gone.

I considered waiting around for a chance to casually tell the boss how thrilled I was to be here, but he and Hollis were enwrapped in conversation at the end of the table, so I gathered my things and started toward the door.

“North Carolina,” George Vida said just before I reached the exit. I stopped short, turned around.

The boss had paused to look at me, but Hollis was still sifting through papers, seeming slightly frustrated by the delay.

A thick, stubby, old-man finger crooked in my direction. “That’s what I was hearing.” He tapped the side of his face. “Reporter’s ear. I can usually pick up accents. I remember now. You’re a Clemson grad. It was somewhere in the paperwork, or Hollis may have mentioned it.”

“Must have been in the paperwork,” Hollis contributed dryly.

The boss smiled at me, his round cheeks lifting into an expression that reminded me of Vito Corleone in *The Godfather*. “You North Carolina girls should find some time to catch up. There are no memories like those of the old home place.” Still smiling, he returned to his paperwork, not noticing that neither Hollis nor I jumped on the home place conversation.

Somehow, I had a feeling we wouldn’t be sitting down for a sweet-tea-and-magnolia chat anytime soon.

