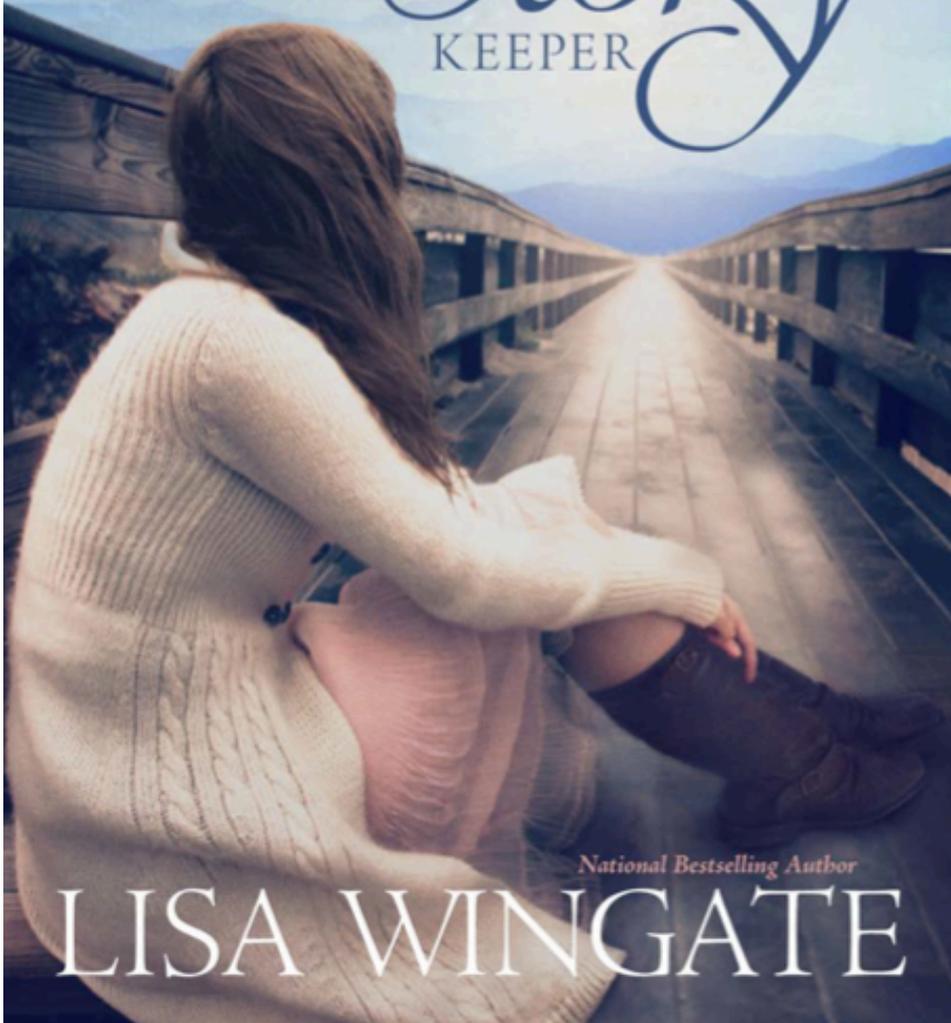


"A novel of remarkable depth and power. Not since To Kill a Mockingbird has a story impacted me like this."

- COLLEEN COBLE, USA Today
bestselling author of Seagrass Pier

the Story KEEPER



National Bestselling Author

LISA WINGATE

Praise for 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, USA Today bestselling 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, Hatteras Island, NC

“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, best-selling 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*

“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. ~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*

The Story Keeper

By

Lisa Wingate

The Story Keeper is **available for preorder** now!
In stores everywhere **September 2014**

The Carolina chronicles:

The Sea Glass Sisters (e-novella #1)

The Prayer Box (novel #1)

The Tidewater Sisters (e-novella #2, July 2014)

The Story Keeper (novel #2, Sept 2014)

Untitled (e-novella, 2015)

Untitled (novel 2015)

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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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Dedication

*To the readers,
Who take these journeys with me.
Thank you for inspiring me to seek
yet another story
That will connect us to one another.*

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 *The 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 box. 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 Vida 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 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 couldn’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 enraptured 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.

Chapter 2

From my first day in New York, when I'd arrived to a graduate-school fellowship, a part-time editorial assistant's job, and no place to live, I'd loved the feel of early morning. There's something special about the city as the night people fade into their lairs and the streets wake to a new day. Shopkeepers open storefronts and breakfast bars roll to sidewalks, smoothie stands offering cornucopias of fresh fruit, yogurt, and protein powders.

Jamie eyed me suspiciously as we walked together from the subway and emerged onto the street, then ducked into a bagelry to grab the usual.

"You look ridiculously happy," she assessed on the way out, taking a sip of the protein smoothie she would drink exactly one-fourth of before dropping it into a trash can—her form of calorie counting. As fashion editor for an upscale glossy, she had to look good. Today, her mid-thigh dress, trendy boots, and swing coat formed a perfect autumn-in-New-York ensemble. She'd managed a cross between Audrey Hepburn and a Paris runway model.

"Sorry," I said, but I wasn't really. So far, other than the pub board cell phone gaffe, my first week at Vida House had gone phenomenally well. I'd worked like a banshee, catching up on reading for next Monday's meeting, and I had disseminated my updated contact information to various literary agents who consistently brought good projects my way. New proposals were beginning to come in. George Vida might have been both an enigma and a dinosaur in the industry, but the house had a reputation for finding manuscripts that had been flying under the radar, then developing those properties into the next big thing. My contacts were excited about the move.

“Well stop it, okay? You’re making me depressed about my own life.” Only a best friend can be that honest and get away with it. Jamie and I had been close since the NYU years. I knew all about the disintegrating conditions at her workplace. With the rise of e-publishing and fashion blogging, her future at the magazine was a massive question mark.

“Sorry. I’ll try to look appropriately glum. But it is Friday.” I heard something in the last word of the sentence. The faintest stretching of the *i* in *Friday*. The hint of an Appalachian twang I thought I’d expunged years ago.

I’d been listening since George Vida’s startling observation. It bothered me that he’d picked up on it so quickly. Had anyone else over the years? Maybe just not said anything?

I could’ve asked Jamie, but that would have opened the door between the two worlds that I had worked all my adult life to separate. Between *before* and *after*.

The great thing about moving far from the place that began you is that it’s a chance to rewrite your own history, wrinkle up and throw away entire pages of the past and pretend that they never were.

“I’m happy for you,” she promised, tossing the rest of her smoothie in a trash can as we stopped in front of her building. “I am, really, Jen. I can’t wait for you to discover the next book that goes crazy-wild. When it debuts on the *Times* list, I’m going to buy a hundred copies of the newspaper and send them to that wicked ex-boss of yours. Along with a hundred copies of the book. I will *never* forgive her for taking so much of the credit on the Tom Brandon thing after you brought it in.”

I hugged her, still clinging to my smoothie, which I intended to consume to the

fullest before finally slurping the bottom dry. I'd learned early in life not to waste food.

"You're such a brute, but I love you. Try to have a great day, okay?"

"Do my best. Catch a show this weekend?"

"I've got a date with a pile of proposals and manuscripts. You wouldn't believe how much paper they still shuffle around that place. George Vida doesn't think you can really get the feel from e-material. It's primeval, but in a nice way. My desk came with a stapler that looks like it's been knocking around the building since about 1920. I've never even seen one like it. It bends the staples outward like wings, not inward."

Jamie rolled her eyes. "Okay, okay. Now, you're just making me jealous. Once you learn the lay of the land there, you have *got* to sneak me in and show me the famous slush pile. Is it true that Vida found the stuff stuck in the corner of the basement and had it moved to the board room?"

"That's what Roger tells me. And it's *George Vida*, sort of like all one name—just so you'll have it right when you come to visit."

Jamie walked backward up the steps of her building, her bottom lip pooching into a frown. "I'd stay away from Roger, if I were you. He's always had a thing for you, you know?"

"*Pppfff!* Roger's got a thing for anyone under fifty in a skirt."

We shared the look of rueful understanding that passes between single girls in the city, equally unlucky in love. All of a sudden, Jamie was deeply bothered by that. Maybe it was crossing the big *three-oh* mark, or maybe it was all the magazine stories about wedding fashions, or perhaps her sister's recent engagement, but she had it in mind lately. When Jamie finally did plan a wedding, it would be a gorgeous, lavish affair filled

with loved ones and paid for by the bride's family. That kind of thing was as far from possible for me as the Earth from the moon. If you know something isn't going to happen, it's easier to just arrange your life so there's no need for it. The secret to happiness is to love where you are, and it's hard not to love autumn in New York, especially when you've finally landed your dream job.

I was floating about six inches off the ground when I walked into Vida House. So far, I'd felt that way every day as I scanned my key card at the front door and circumvented the reception desk, still empty this early in the morning. Beyond the lobby, I walked down the marble entry hall past rows of office doors and oodles of cover art from books that had made careers and started hot trends that were quickly chased by a horde of scrambling copycats. Rounding the corner, humming under my breath and in full stride, I slid across the tile like an ice skater, did a YouTube-worthy scramble, and caught myself on a half-height partition in the customer service area, barely saving my smoothie.

"That's wet, sha." Russell, the cleaning guy, emerged from a nearby office, pushing a mop bucket. Russell and I had become acquainted over the past few days. He was at least six and a half feet tall, lamppost thin, and not entirely pleased to have someone disturbing his usual morning routine by coming in so early. He'd been cleaning the building since the sixties and had an apartment in the basement, so it was definitely his domain.

"Sorry." I backtracked across the freshly mopped floor, my pumps leaving little tracks in the sheen of water. "You'd think I would've learned to watch by now."

He lifted the mop from the dingy bucket and plopped it into the ringer. "I got it. Boss

man don' like his flo' track up at the beginnin' a the day. Like a clean start." His slow Southern drawl ran in direct contrast to the three quick, efficient swipes that cleared the floor. Russell was a hard person to read. I hadn't quite decided if he liked his job here or liked me, or if he was simply resigned to both as a reality of life.

I wanted Russell to like me. He seemed like a guy with a story, and I'd always been fascinated by stories. That was the first thing Wilda Culp had noticed about me all those years ago, after she caught me pilfering from her orchard. To pay back the damage, I became her Wednesday help around the old family farm she'd moved home to after retiring from Clemson and taking up writing full-time. She'd noticed immediately that I understood the lure of a good story. Sometimes a world that doesn't exist is the only escape from the one that does.

Russell's silvery eyes narrowed, age wrinkles squeezing in. He was an interesting man to look at, his skin a warm brown, his cheeks burnished to a lighter color with an almost unnatural shine, like the face of a carving, lovingly touched many times by the hand of its maker.

"Guess you betta get'a work, sha." Leaning on his mop handle, he sidestepped to let me by, his gaze ricocheting across the open area toward the semicircle of soft light shining from George Vida's office. No matter how late I stayed at work, or how early I came in, George Vida was always there, occupying his space. Amazingly, nothing went out of Vida House that hadn't traveled through his hands.

That scared me a little, as I contemplated acquiring new manuscripts here. What if I got it wrong? What if my instincts ran counter to the big boss's liking?

A woman must be confident! Wilda's gruff reminder was the snap of a rubber band.

A quick, sharp rebuke. *When the negative comes against her, she must B-E-A-T. Be, arise, expand, triumph. Be all that she was designed to be. Expand her vision of what is possible. Arise from every challenge stronger than before. Triumph over her own insecurity. This is what I always told my students.*

You, Jennia Beth Gibbs, have greatness in you if you want it.

I felt Russell watching me as I continued down the hall and slipped into my office at the end, where new editors began their careers, no matter how many years of prior experience they brought to the job. At Vida House, you started at the bottom and worked your way up. It wasn't so bad, really. Being at the fringe of the nonfiction hall meant having a corner space. My office took in a three-sided turret, which made it quirky and interesting. Even though the skyscraper next door blocked both the sunshine and the view, I liked the place.

The fluorescent light flickered stubbornly overhead when I flipped the switch, the room bright, then dark, then bright, then dark.

“Oh, come *on*.” I slipped off the burnt-orange silk coat I loved during the fall months. It would've been an indulgence, given the designer label, but it had been a gift from Jamie, a bribe to get me to stand in for a last-minute magazine shoot, in which she promised I would be carrying an umbrella, and no one would know who I was. *Please, please, please, I need mid-length dark hair, and skinny legs, and you can have the coat afterward.* My short modeling career was worth it. I treasured the coat, partially because the color called up memories of my favorite sugar maple tree growing up, the one I often climbed as a hiding place. The coat was a secret reminder of the Blue Ridge, a small piece that wasn't painful to relive.

The overhead fixture clicked softly, teasing me. I tried the switch again. Up. Down. Up. Down. No luck. Finally, there was no choice but to surrender and use the ancient gooseneck lamp that had come with the desk. The lamp's cast iron base was rusty, and the built-in inkwell was of no use, but I liked it all the same. It hovered like an all-seeing eye and gave the place a feeling of journalistic authenticity. I imagined it hunched above a reporter, monitoring the progress of stories about the spread of Hitler's forces or the first words spoken on the moon or the sad sight of little John-John Kennedy saluting his father's coffin.

Someone's been messing with things on my desk.

The thought wound past my momentary romance with the gooseneck lamp. I squinted at the arrangement of things. The next three reads in my queue, which I always stacked and placed just left of center at the end of the day, were dead center now. The pencil I had left lying atop them had rolled onto the desk.

Who would've come in here overnight? Russell, maybe . . . cleaning?

Nothing else seemed out of place.

And then I noticed it. Another detail that hadn't been the same yesterday. A brown craft-paper envelope, the crease along its edge sun-washed white, as if it had been sitting long near a window. It rested on the corner of my desk, slightly cockeyed. The department admin hadn't put any fresh material in my inbox or on the credenza by the door. Had someone left the packet here accidentally while passing through my office? Who? And passing through my office for what reason? My little cubby wasn't on the way to anywhere.

The envelope was crisp to the touch. The upper corner had been torn off at some

time in the past. No return address. Dust clung along the feathered edge, so that it drew a jagged brown line against the paper peeking through from beneath. The underlying sheet was aquamarine, a vibrant color beside the brown. The juxtaposition made me stop, admire the random art of everyday life.

Inside, the small stack of pages had yellowed around the edges, but the aquamarine cover sheet was bright. A handwritten swirl of ink lay just beyond my thumb.

An odd sixth sense tightened the corridors of curiosity in my brain, brought a wariness that warned me to leave the papers inside. The postmark—what remained of it—read *June 7, 1993*.

Was this thing from George Vida's famous slush pile? The one *nobody* was supposed to touch?

Outside my door, the building was silent, yet I had the eerie feeling of being watched. Leaving the envelope on the desk, I walked down the hall, checking for signs of life in the other offices—a coat hanging over a chair, a fresh cup of coffee, a pair of comfortable tennis shoes tucked in a corner after a coworker changed into heels.

Nothing.

Who would take part of Slush Mountain and leave it in my office? Why?

A mistake? Hazing the new girl? Or was someone trying to—I hated to even think it—set me up? Had I made an enemy here without even realizing it? Maybe a colleague was insecure about the new addition to the team? Publishing could be a cutthroat business. . . .

Was this was a test . . . to see if I could be trusted? To see if I'd return the envelope to its place or look at the contents?

Not this girl. I had plenty to do without toying with a loaded weapon. Whatever this was, it belonged in the war room, and the time to take it there was now, while the office was empty. No one would be the wiser. In the future, I'd watch my back, just in case. If this was a joke, the joke would be on someone else once the package was quietly returned to its original resting place.

In under a minute, I was out the door with the forbidden fruit innocuously tucked in a folder. Unfortunately, Roger was just around the corner at the coffee credenza, preparing his morning mug of brew.

"At it early again?" He smiled, toasting me with his cup and seeming amiable enough. "You're making the rest of us look bad, you know."

"You're here too." I tried to sound casual, but I felt like I had a package bomb squeezed to my chest. I just wanted to get rid of it before it blew.

Yet, in the back of my mind, there was that bit of aquamarine paper, the swirl of ink, the niggle of curiosity . . .

"I have an author and an agent coming in for an early meeting in the boardroom," Roger offered.

Was it my imagination, or was he casting an eye toward the folder in my double-armed embrace? Maybe I looked guilty. Or maybe he knew what was inside. Maybe he'd put it on my desk.

"Well, have a good meeting, then." I turned on my heel and headed back to my office. My trip to Slush Mountain would have to wait.

The folder seemed to grow heavier and hotter as I walked down the hall. A part of me was saying, *Just tuck it in the desk drawer where no one will see it, then return it*

after they all leave this evening. But another part of me, the part that had led me around more than one blind corner in my life, was saying, *Well, if you're stuck with the thing for a while, why not take a peek?*

That whisper of mischief, the one my father and the men of Lane's Hill Church of the Brethren Saints had so vehemently tried to beat out of me as a child, always brought about one of two things: incredible adventure or unmitigated disaster.

I was sliding my fingers over the forbidden treasure before I rounded the corner into my office and shut the door. The glue on the bottom flap clung for a moment, seeming determined to keep whatever secrets lay hidden inside, then the tension released, and the contents, perhaps fifty sheets in total, came loose in my hand, the blue-green piece on top. A pen-and-ink drawing inched into view—a sketch of what looked like a thick cord holding six oval-shaped beads, and a rectangular pendant of some sort, all ornately carved.

The artwork was nicely done.

Below the drawing, three words had been hand-inscribed in graceful, curving script that seemed fit for an ancient scroll in some long-hidden chest.

The Story Keeper...

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