



the
tidewater
sisters



NOVELLA

LISA WINGATE

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR



The Tidewater Sisters

By Lisa Wingate

The Tidewater Sisters is **available for order** now! E-book release **July 2014**

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

The Story Keeper (novel #2, Sept 2014)

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The Tidewater Sisters

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Designed by Stephen Vosloo

Edited by Sarah Mason

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

The Tidewater Sisters 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.

Chapter 1

He comes in summer, when the air is still and the bullfrogs sing in the sedges and the nightjars wail their quick, haunting calls: *Chuck Will's widow, Chuck Will's widow . . .*

He dances over the fog with the birdsong, feather-light. He is young and strong like a warrior crossing the Scottish moors, but the mist smells of Pamlico Sound and saltmeadow cordgrass and Spanish moss hanging like endless veils of torn lace.

He carries the scents of all these things—of the Carolina Tidewater and the earthy spaces beneath the willow trees and the high places atop barn roofs. He wears the melted asphalt of old country roads on the bottoms of his long, slim feet, and on the pads of his fingers there are mulberry stains.

That is the way I remember him. Always and forever in mulberry season.

The stains are the reason I know he isn't real. The reason I know he's only something conjured from old wishing aches, things left unsaid, and hopes that went unrealized. There are no sun-melted roads in heaven, no mulberry stains. He's come here again in a dream.

Part of me still believes there must be a way to change everything that happened. Part of me, the part that's well over thirty years old, knows how foolish and childish that is.

But you never forget your first love, no matter how much time passes. You never completely stop wondering, *what if*.

He smiles, and for a moment he seems more boy than vapor, sixteen years old, arrogant, silly, sweet, indestructible. He whispers my name, and I hear his voice.

Tandi . . . Hey, Tandi Jo Tandi Jo from Kokomo . . . He tips his head back a

little, his eyes a bright sparkling blue, his body long and loosely muscled. Not quite a boy. Not quite a man. Newly licensed to drive and feeling his oats this year. Everything has changed since our last summertime visit to my grandparents' farm. The boy down the road has changed and so have I.

I reach out to him. I want to say, *I thought you were gone. I thought you died a long time ago.*

Suddenly, I am once again the thirteen-year-old girl who fell hopelessly in love, hidden amid the mulberry trees and muscadine vines. Hopelessly, innocently, unbreakably. *It's real*, my mind whispers. *All the rest was only a dream. A long, strange dream.*

Tandi, he says again, his voice deeper. The laughter is still there, but he no longer sounds the same.

I reach out to grab him by that old, sloppy T-shirt he loves. I want to hang on the way I would have while climbing the creek bank in the mud, taking advantage of his strength, his agility, using him as a towrope.

I feel his hand close over mine. He kisses it, says, "Well, hello to you too. I guess you missed me."

I jerk awake, look up, and the eyes aren't blue but soft brown. The hair not silky golden curls, but strawberry blond. The skin not suntanned ruddy, but freckled, with a little burn on the end of the nose.

"Paul." I gasp his name like it's a surprise.

A wrinkle crosses his forehead, one eyebrow rising, the other lowering. "You were expecting someone else?"

Sitting up, I blink and look around, find myself in a rocking chair on the porch of Iola Anne Poole's big white house—the house where she left decades' worth of mementos from the Benoit shipping empire, along with eighty-one prayer boxes that contained the story of her long life here on Hatteras Island. The letters in those boxes changed everything. They're the reason I'm here on this porch.

“An electrician,” I say, with one foot still in the dream. It feels odd, waking in this grown-up skin. Luke Townley has been dead for over twenty years. My grandparents' old farm across the Pamlico Sound in the Carolina Tidewater is long gone. The gummy asphalt road has probably been paved over with something better by now. Yet all of a sudden, I can feel its sticky warmth on my feet. “I was waiting for an electrician.”

“And you didn't want to wait in the cottage?” Paul glances next door to the caretaker's cottage that has been home to the kids and me for over a year now while I've supervised renovations on the big house. The cottage will be an office and gift shop soon, and the main house a museum and a genealogy center for those with ties to the long and colorful history of the Outer Banks and its families.

“Listen, the electrical guy has stood me up three times already.” I rise stiffly to my feet, bracing my hands on my hips and looking down the driveway. “This time, I'm staying right here in plain sight until five o'clock, so he can't claim that he stopped by and knocked on the door and nobody answered.”

Paul leans close, threads his fingers into my hair in a way that momentarily distracts me, then kisses the little pout lip that's forming on my face. The Benoit House Museum is so close to being ready to open, much of the renovation done by volunteers. This snafu with work we're actually *paying* for is killing me. I need to be finished with all of this

before the wedding, before Paul and I head off on the sort of dream honeymoon I never, ever thought I'd have.

"I can't imagine anybody standing you up," he whispers against my ear before pulling back to look at me.

"I know, right?" I hold up my paint-covered hands and display my gorgeous self. I can imagine what Paul is looking at—a stressed-out woman with bloodshot blue eyes and brown hair falling from a messy bun that's covered in sheetrock dust. His future bride. If he weren't such an amazing guy, he'd be running for the hills. *I* wouldn't marry me right now. "I'm seriously about to commit mayhem today."

"Not on me, 'kay?" He backs away a step, grinning playfully, his mismatched Hawaiian shirt and camp shorts making him look like one of the Beach Boys on laundry day. His crazy fashion sense is a hit with his students. They wonder what the science guy will show up in next. "I've seen your mayhem. It scares me."

A laugh presses through and loosens the jaw muscles that are seizing up as I watch the empty driveway. Paul can always make me laugh. He's phenomenally unruffled, as if he has nothing—not one thing—to prove to the world.

I wish I could master that skill.

Through the windows of the rental cottage, I see Zoey and J.T. rummaging for food. They're probably worn out after a day of marking turtle nests on the National Seashore with Paul and the other Summer Sea Camp kids. It's not every activity that can occupy a fifteen-year-old and a ten-year-old equally well. They'll be ready to tell me all about it when we finally sit down to dinner later.

I remind myself that there are worse problems to have than an absentee electrician.

Just over a year ago, a life like this one was hopelessly out of reach. Just over a year ago, we were on the run from a man I was terrified could find us anywhere. Just over a year ago, I couldn't have imagined someone like Paul, and a love that doesn't hurt, and plans for a beach wedding and a dream honeymoon with the one person who makes me feel perfect, just the way I am.

But I can't leave on that honeymoon until I've seen the Benoit House Museum project through. I owe Iola Poole's memory that much and more. I owe the people of Hatteras Island that much. After two devastating hurricanes, they're counting on the revenues Benoit House will bring in—tourist dollars, plus the business from weddings, parties, and meetings in Benoit House's grand ballroom. The place is already booked solid for six months.

I have to make sure it's ready, but time is running out. We're opening in eight days.

A week after that, Paul and I are supposed to be high atop a ridge in a remote Smoky Mountain cliff house—part romantic getaway, part research trip for Paul, who's doing a study on native and invasive plants. We're looking forward to cool, crisp air and not another person for miles. During the hot, crowded, crazy-busy summer months on the Outer Banks, our secluded honeymoon destination sounds like heaven.

The renovations on Benoit House *will* be finished on time, if I have to crawl up in that big, third-story attic and run the wires myself. Unlike some of the volunteers here, I'm not afraid of the attic. This house is like an old friend—the kind who wraps arms around you in your worst moments and never lets go. Despite the house's difficult and tragic beginnings, Iola Poole's kindly spirit seeps from the wood and warms every quiet corner and hidden space.

Right now, I have a feeling she'd like to wring the electrician's neck too.

"Can I do anything to help?" Paul asks, and knee-jerk resistance rises inside me. With Paul paying for most of the wedding and the honeymoon, and the girls from my part-time job at Sandy's Seashell Shop pitching in with planning, decorations, and supplies, I'm leaning on people far too much already.

I still feel like I don't deserve all of it. That's the truth. If I can see to it that the Benoit House Museum is finished and open on time, maybe it will make me worthy of all this . . . love. That's how I feel. Even though I know better.

Real love isn't a payment. It isn't a response to your accomplishments or anything else. It's a gift without strings.

I've learned this from the letters in Iola Poole's prayer boxes, but it's still slowly converting from head knowledge to heart knowledge. I'm not quite *there* yet.

"You do too much already." I bite my lip and smile at Paul apologetically.

"There's no such thing as too much." He comes close, takes me in his arms, and a gush of love washes over me, honey-sweet and warm. "Tell you what—why don't the kids and I drive over to Buxton and forage for food? That way if the electrician runs late, we won't have to worry about supper."

"You think of everything."

"Yeah, I know. I'm good" He takes the time to kiss me for real, then, and once again I find that I'm looking forward to the honeymoon. Maybe I'll just abandon the museum project altogether and run away with Paul

"And humble," I add, teasing him. I watch as he strides off toward the cottage, stopping at the truck to snag his ever-present fishing hat and drop it on his head. An over-

the-shoulder wink comes my way. He's proud of the hat.

I wave, cross my arms over my chest, squeeze them tight, and wonder why, as he walks away, all of a sudden, it's Luke Townley I see, crossing the patchy afternoon sunlight. Why is he on my mind today?

Why, when everything seems just short of perfect, has Luke come back to haunt me?

Is it pre-wedding jitters? Just me wondering how I could possibly be good enough for someone like Paul? Questioning whether, after so many bad choices and failed relationships, I should save Paul by just . . . running away? There's a demon in my head, and it sounds a lot like my daddy, and it's telling me there's nothing in me worth having.

Luke Townley hated my daddy. Maybe he's come to help me fight the demon. A battle against our common enemy.

I close my eyes and pray for the strength to let the past be the past. *You are not your mama or your daddy or your sister. You are you.* That's what Sandy says down at the Seashell Shop. She's been sensing the jitters when I'm there working my three afternoons a week.

A car pulls in and Paul hesitates on the cottage porch, then glances my way and yells across the lawn, "Hey, maybe that's your guy?"

I shade my eyes, watch the dark-colored vehicle turn into the drive. It doesn't look like an electrician's truck, but I hold out hope. *Borrowed his wife's car for the day, maybe? As long as he has tools in there, I don't care if he arrives by mule train.*

He hurries past the caretaker's house, as if he knows he's late, and that gives me hope, but there's only one person in the car. How does he plan to pull wires without a helper? It's a two-person job, at least. Someone has to shinny through the crawlspaces

and climb around the attic while the other person feeds the wire.

My stomach turns as he exits the car. The sense of dread that has been nagging me since I woke roars like a dragon. He's wearing a white shirt and a tie, with some sort of official-looking nylon vest over the top. I hope he's not from the county, here to throw another monkey wrench in the plans. We've jumped through so many legal hoops already.

Paul leaves the cottage and starts my way.

I descend the mansion steps and meet the stranger at the bottom. He's carrying papers. The patch on his vest reads, *Action Process Service*.

Maybe he's here trying to sell something? Or arrange a booking for a company banquet? Or put in a bid on the landscaping?

"Are you Tandi Jo Reese?" His manner is businesslike in a way that demands a quick answer. He's a big guy, with the air of a retired drill sergeant or a police officer.

"Yes, I am." The part of me that remembers a life of running from Child Protective Services, debt collectors, and drug dealers shrinks instinctively. But I have nothing to hide now.

"I've got some papers for you." He shoves them at me with enough force that I grab them out of reflex. I have a feeling that's all part of the plan.

"What . . . I . . .," I stammer, blindsided. Paul reaches us and steps in beside me, resting his hands on his pockets as he cocks his head to get a look at the documents now dangling in my hand.

"You are the Tandi Jo Reese who lives next door in the cottage?" the stranger confirms, backing away a step, intimidated by Paul.

“Yes, I am.”

“Then those are for you. No signature required.”

What’s going on here? He’s leaving the scene before I can even get the question out of my mouth. The dark car makes a hurried three-point turn in front of Iola’s beautiful old house and speeds off down the oyster-shell driveway.

“What was that all about?” Paul watches the car disappear.

I stare at the papers, flip through them. Over the past year of supervising the museum project, I’ve practically earned my honorary paralegal degree. I can read through the official mumbo-jumbo well enough to know what this document is saying. The problem is, it still doesn’t make any sense.

“That was a process server.” I look at Paul, and I’m relieved to the core of my being when I don’t see suspicion or accusation, only bafflement. “Someone’s taking me to court over a . . . breach of contract, statutory fraud, and some other stuff I don’t understand on a real estate sale. But I don’t even own any real estate.”

Chapter 2

“Well, it looks like there was a contract to sell your land, earnest money and a down payment were exchanged, and then problems were found regarding a tax lien, some easements, and most importantly a breach of the covenant to convey. The seller—that would be you—then promised to remedy these things and provide clear title within thirty days. The seller—you again—has failed to do so. The buyers don’t just want their money back; they’re filing a complaint for breach of contract, promissory estoppel, and specific performance, meaning they intend to force you to comply with your end of the deal, clear your title, and sell them the land,” Vince says, sipping a tall frappe from the Sandy’s Seashell Shop coffee bar. Kicked back with an ankle cocked over his knee and a flip-flop dangling, he looks as sure of himself here as he does in his ambulance-chasing legal commercials. Since moving to the Outer Banks, he’s become one of Sandy’s best customers, and I honestly can’t think of anyone else to call. I definitely can’t afford to hire a lawyer.

“Vince, I don’t *own* any property,” I insist again. “And I *didn’t* steal anyone’s earnest money. I have no idea what this is about.”

Sandy frowns, her short, spiky blonde hair standing on end, and she leans over the document. The fan of crow’s feet around her eyes deepens ominously in the shadowy after-hours shop light. “This is obviously a case of mistaken identity. How do we get these people off our backs? How do we straighten it out?”

Suddenly *I* has become *we*. Seashell Sandy is ready for a fight and apparently so is her little shop dog, Chum. His tiny paws brace on the table, and he shows Vince some Boston bulldog teeth.

Vince lifts both hands, the evening breeze pressing through the screen doors and fluffing his comb-over. “Hey, don’t shoot the messenger.”

“So . . . what’s the next step here?” As usual, Paul is the voice of reason. Steady, smart, unruffled. Completely certain that I haven’t done anything wrong, and I *haven’t*. Even so, I feel like there must be something I’m overlooking. I think of the man I was running from when I came to Hatteras, Trammel Clarke. Shady deals were his specialty. Could this have something to do with him?

“You have any enemies?” Vince seems to be reading my mind.

“It’s a *case* of mistaken *identity*,” Sandy insists again. “You tell us what we need to do, Vince, and I’ll keep you in frappes for the next twenty years. You and Natalie”

Vince’s smile turns a bit more tender. He appreciates the Seashell Shop girls for taking his much younger wife under wing rather than giving her the reception a twentysomething woman with a middle-aged husband often gets.

“Washington County . . .” Vince reaches for his iPad. “Not much out that way, as far as I can remember. Sued a gas company there once when their pipeline blew up next to some lady’s house. Good lawsuit. Brought the hammer down on ’em.” The last part is a direct quote from one of his commercials. “Let’s see if we can find out where this place is.” He turns the pages and reads the property description again. “Sure you don’t know anyone in Washington County?”

“I’m sure.” But my mind is turning now. *Washington County . . . Washington County . . .* It rings a bell, but I can’t quite figure out why. “Where is that?”

Vince homes in with his iPad. “Hang on a minute, I’ll have it for you. Let me get the coordinates for this land entered.”

Washington County Fair—that’s what my mind was reaching for.

“Here we go. It’s coming . . . ,” Vince says.

I remember an old black-and-white picture . . . a shot of a prize-winning show steer posed in the victory circle.

“Wait for it . . .”

Vince’s voice fades as the image in my mind clarifies and expands. There’s a ribbon hanging beside the steer’s photo. Once blue, now faded to pale lilac. *Beaufort-Washington Livestock Show, 1968*, the ribbon reads. *Grand Champion Steer*.

“Man, the Internet is slow tonight,” I hear Vince complaining. “Okay, there it is. Let’s zoom in on the Google satellite view and see what’s down there. So . . . looks like a house . . . and some other buildings . . .”

I turn to the iPad, but in some way I already know what I’ll find. Vince’s short, stubby fingers glide across the screen, stretching the sky view of an old house and barn. My mind tumbles down and down and down, into the tiny world on the screen.

I feel the old shingles of the barn roof, know their scratchy surface and the network of pinpoint and scalloped imprints they’ll leave on my skin when I rise . . . when Luke Townley takes my hand to pull me to my feet and we climb down the silo ladder, then hide in its thick moon shadow where we’re invisible, even to each other.

Someone yells my name from the house, and Luke just chuckles, tugs my hand, and whispers, *Come on, I’ve got an idea*.

I hesitate, he pulls harder, and the invisible roots holding my feet in place fall away, and we fly through the night dew into the cornfield where no one can find us. I realize it’s my sister yelling after me, not Mama or Daddy, and all fear leaves me. Gina can’t hurt

me.

Gina . . .

A gasp rushes from my lips, and Sandy, Vince, and Paul all look my way in unison.

My stomach clenches in a full-fisted grasp. I do, I realize, have an enemy.

“Gina,” I whisper, rubbing my temples and squeezing hard, as if I can work her out like a charley horse. If only it were that simple. Anytime my life is stable, the cataclysmic downfall will in some way involve my sister. It’s like she’s radar-equipped for this sort of thing. Capable of knowing, from wherever she hangs out in the meantime, when to show up and do the most damage. Somehow or other, she’s probably heard about the wedding. And given the way Gina and I left things the last time we saw each other, she’s undoubtedly out for blood...

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