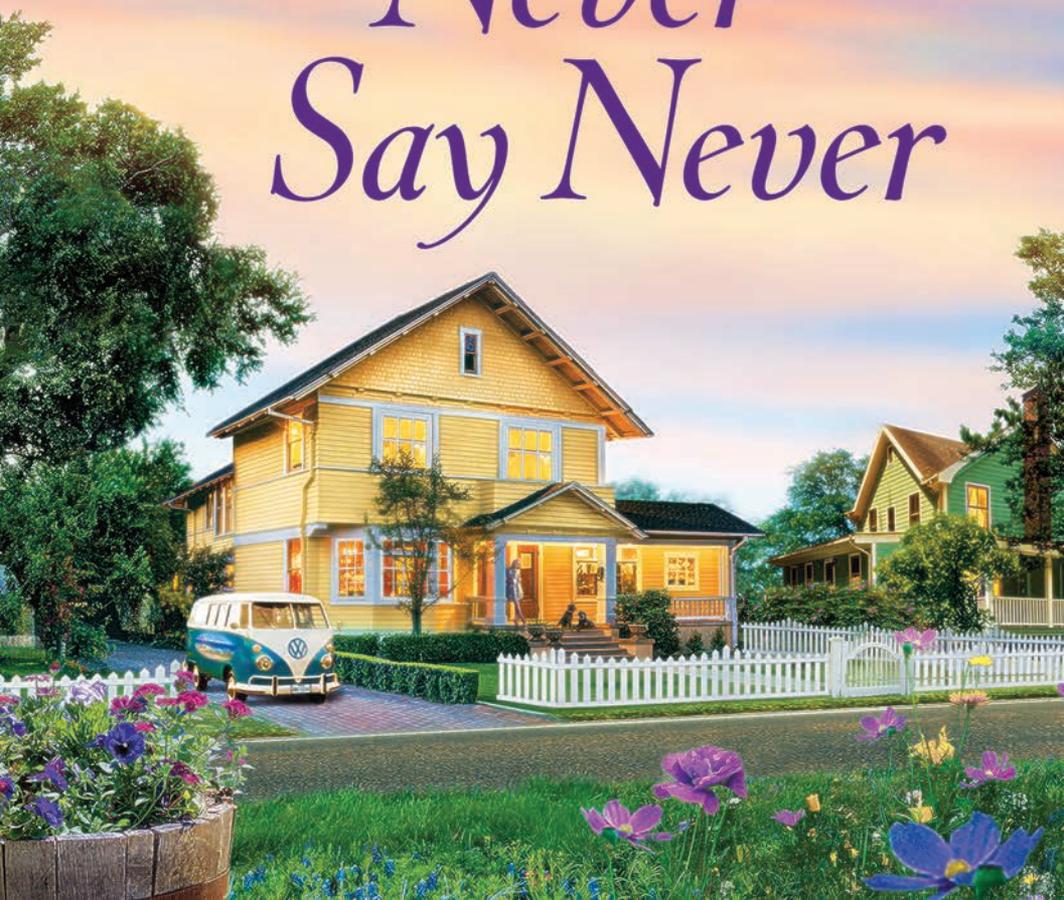


New York Times Bestselling Author

Lisa Wingate

Never Say Never



Bethany House Books by Lisa Wingate

DAILY, TEXAS

Talk of the Town
Word Gets Around
Never Say Never

MOSES LAKE

Larkspur Cove
Blue Moon Bay
Firefly Island
Wildwood Creek

Never Say Never



Lisa Wingate



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To the homefolks of Burrel-Wingate Road
and points beyond—
the Tullys, Hidalgos, Joostens, and Kikers . . .
Thank you for wonderful memories of
hours spent along the coast.

And to
The determined, resilient folks of the Texas Gulf Coast,
Still rebuilding after Rita, Dolly, and Ike . . .
I wish you fair skies and gentle winds.

Acknowledgments

When I'm out and about at book events, it never fails that someone with a particular favorite among my stories will ask me what inspired the book and how much of it is true. After that, the discussion is a little like one of those chats at a family reunion, in which a gaggle of aunts sits near the vittles, eyeballing passing children and trying to decide whom each one favors. "Why, he's the spittin' image of Uncle Clee," one will say, and another will argue, "Not either. Clee had them big ol' ears, remember? That child's cute as a bedbug. Looks just like his mama. Takes after the Lumleys, for sure." The arguments go on from there, and usually there are as many opinions as aunts at the table.

Stories are a little like children. None of them drop out of thin air. The DNA of *Never Say Never* was pieced together from shreds of family history, bits of personal experience, a few colorful real-life characters, and a hurricane tale or two shared by readers and relatives along the way. As always, I'd be remiss if I didn't thank the folks who so kindly contributed.

Thanks to our friends and family in southeast Texas for always hosting us on trips to the coast, for chatting and talking during the numerous “hurricanes” of the past few years, and for being willing to share hurricane experiences, even when it was painful to recall them. To Uncle Buck McAdams, thanks for sharing the long-ago hurricane story of floating mattresses and flooded farmland that inspired Mamee’s history. You never know when a chat over coffee will inspire a book. Thanks also to reader friends for sharing evacuation stories and tales of God’s little miracles along the way.

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Lisa Wingate

every time a mullygrub day comes along, a sweet note arrives. God does His best work through the people we meet on our journeys. Thank you, all of you, for being my peeps and for your little acts of kindness. What a blessing!

*When thou passest through the waters,
I will be with thee; and through the rivers,
they shall not overflow thee.*

Isaiah 43:2

Chapter 1

Donetta Bradford

You'd imagine, livin' high and dry in the middle of Texas, with the jackrabbits and the prickly pears, you wouldn't close your eyes at night and feel the water. In this country, people think of water like the narrow string that runs over the rocks in Caney Creek, or drifts long, and slow, and lazy down the Brazos or the Guadalupe. But when I close my eyes, I feel the kind of water that surrounds you and seeps into your mind and soul, until you breathe in and out with the tides.

Where, in heaven's name, would a person get a dream like that in Daily, Texas, where the caliche-rock ground's so hard the county's got no need to pave roads—they just clear a trail and let folks drive on it. It'll harden up quick enough and stay that way three quarters of the year while the farmers and the ranchers watch the sky and hope for rain. Life here hasn't got much to do with water, except in the waiting for it. But every night when I close my eyes, I feel a tide, rockin' back and forth under my body. I been feeling it for sixty-nine and a half years now, long as I can remember. I never did anything about it, nor

told anybody. They'd think I was nutty as a bullbat, and when you're a businesswoman in a small town, well, you got to protect your reputation. That goes double if you're the hairdresser, and a redhead. We all know what kind of reputation hairdressers and redheads got.

All that's even more important for someone whose people, historically speaking, ain't from Daily. In a little town, even if you been there all your life, you're not native unless you can trace your roots back generations. There's still folks that'll point out (in a backhanded way mostly, because they're all gonna need a haircut sooner or later) that I'm only a Daily girl by half, on my father's side. On the other side, there's a bit of scandal the biddies still cluck about.

My daddy was what you'd call a prodigal. After leaving behind his fine, upstandin' family and a half-dozen brokenhearted girls of marriageable age in Daily, he wandered the world for so long everyone thought he'd either landed in jail or got hisself killed in a barroom fight. Then one day, he showed up at my grandparents' hotel building on Main Street, as mysterious as he left. He wasn't alone, either. He was driving a 1937 Chevy folks thought he musta got in a bank robbery, and he had a girl in the passenger seat. When she stepped out, my grandma Eldridge fainted right there on the spot. The girl was pregnant, *and* she was Cajun, *and* a Catholic. She was thumbin' a rosary ninety-to-nothin'.

It's hard to say which one of them three things Grandma Eldridge fainted over, but it took her two full weeks to get over the shock and humiliation, and welcome my mama into the family. By then, I guess there wasn't much choice. My daddy was married to the girl, and I was on the way. Grandma Eldridge was happy as a boardin' house pup when I come out with the Eldridge bluish-gray eyes and light-colored skin.

When she'd tell me that story, years after my mama'd passed

on, I never understood it. My mama, with her hair the deep auburn of fall leaves, and her olive skin, and her eyes so dark you couldn't see the centers, was beautiful, exotic like a movie star. When she talked, the words fell from her mouth with a lilt that made her voice ebb and flow like the currents in the bayou. Mama's people knew the water. They lived on it, and farmed rice alongside it, and felt it in their very souls.

Every summer, Mama gathered me and my little brother, Frank, and carried us on the train to southeast Texas to see her people. I'd come back afterward and tell everyone in Daily that Mama's family lived on a plain old farm, just like folks in Daily. That was as far from true as the east is from the west. Those trips to see the Chiassons were like going to a whole other world.

After my mama passed on, there weren't any more lies to tell. Daddy never sent us back to her people, and I didn't hear from them, and the secrets from that final summer, when I turned fifteen on the bayou—the biggest secrets of all—never got told.

I thought I'd take the secrets to my grave. And maybe I would've if Imogene Doll, my best friend since we started school together at Daily Primary, hadn't got a wild hair to celebrate her seventieth birthday by catching a cruise ship out of the harbor near Perdida, Texas.

It's funny how from seventeen to seventy can be the blink of an eye, all of a sudden. Every time we talked about that cruise, I had a little shiver up my spine. I tried not to think too hard about it, but I had a strange feeling this trip was gonna change everything. That feeling hung on me like a polyester shirt straight out of the clothes dryer, all clingy and itchy.

The day we sat looking at the map, using a highlighter to draw the path we'd take to the coast, static crackled on my skin, popping up gooseflesh. I imagined them east-Texas roads, the piney woods growin' high and thick, towering over the lumber trucks as they crawled with their heavy loads. I followed the line

down to the bayou country, where the rice farmers worked their flooded fields and the gators came up on the levies to gather the noonday sun. Where the secret I'd kept all these years lay buried, even yet.

"Are we really gonna do this?" Imagene asked, tracing the road with her finger. A little shimmy ran across her shoulders. Imagene'd never got out in a boat on anything bigger than a farm pond in her life. Even though we'd already booked the trip and paid our money, she was trying to wriggle off like a worm on a hook. Sometimes what looks like a wild hair at first looks harebrained later on.

Across the table, Lucy, who came from Japan originally (so she ain't afraid of water), had her eyebrows up, like two big question marks in her forehead. Her mind was set on taking the cruise. After all these years away from the island country where she was born, she wanted to see the ocean again.

They were both looking at me, waiting to see what I'd say, since right now the vote was one *for* and one *against*. I knew they'd probably go for it if I told them, *Oh hang, let's just go to Six Flags instead. It'd be lots easier. We can ride the loop-de-loop and say we done somethin' adventuresome before we turned seventy.*

I sat there, staring out the window of my beauty shop, where the wavy old glass still read *DAILY HOTEL*—from back in the day when wool, cotton, and mohair kept the town hoppin'—and it come to my mind that I'd been staring at that same window almost every day of my whole, entire life. How many times over the years had Imagene and me hatched an idea to do something different, then sat there and talked ourselves right back into the same old chairs?

Imagene swished a fly away from her cup. Early September like this, the flies hung thick as molasses under the awnings on Main Street.

“You know, it’s maybe not the smartest thing to be headin’ down to the coast when there’s a hurricane coming in,” Imagene pointed out.

Lucy frowned, her eyebrows falling flat. “I hear it on TV the storm is head to Mec-i-co.” That was Lucy’s way of saying she thought we ought to go ahead with the cruise, but she wasn’t gonna be pushy. If Lucy had a disagreeable bone in her body, it hadn’t poked through the skin in the forty years she’d been in the beauty shop with me.

Imagene’s lips moved like she had something stuck in her teeth and couldn’t get it out. She did that when she was nervous. If I let her cogitate long enough, she’d spit out our adventure like a bone in the sausage. She’d decide it was safer for us to stay home, because that’s Imagene—careful as the day is long. She was already in a fret about packing all the right things, and asking my brother, Frank, to water her flowers and feed her cat. She was even worried about whether the cat (which was a stray she didn’t want to begin with) might get lonely and run off.

Last night, she’d sat down and wrote letters to all of her kids and grandkids. She left them on the kitchen table—just in case we, and the whole cruise boat, got shipwrecked on a desert island and never come back.

“We’re goin’ on this trip,” I told her, and Imagene sunk in her chair a little. She was hoping for Six Flags. “I checked on the intra-net this mornin’, and it said the boat was leavin’ at four p.m. tomorrow out of Perdida, right on schedule. I even called the toll-free number, and they told me once we get on the boat, it’ll sail right around the storm, and there’s not a thing to worry about.”

“That’s just what people say when there *is* somethin’ to worry about.” Imagene took a sip of her coffee, her lips working again. “Hurricane Glorietta’s somethin’ to worry about. She’s a whopper. A person hadn’t ought to be goin’ out on the

ocean when there's a storm like that around, Donetta. It's . . . silly . . . reckless, even."

Reckless. The word felt good in my mind. "We're near seventy years old, Imagene. If we're ever gonna get reckless, we better start now."

"I hadn't got any desire to turn reckless." Imagene tipped her nose up and squinted through her bifocals. She looked a hundred years old when she did that.

"The lady from the cruise line said boats sail around storms all the time. They got to durin' hurricane season."

Imagene's eyes went wide, and I knew right away *hurricane season* was the wrong thing to say. I got that All-timer's disease, I think, on account of I'm all the time saying things I didn't even know were in my brain yet. I don't lie much because mostly these days, there ain't time for it.

"We ought not to of *booked* a cruise durin' *hurricane season*." Imagene's voice was shaky, and she had worry lines big as corn furrows around her mouth. "Someone shoulda thought of that." By *someone*, she meant me. It was me that finally (after weeks of idle yappin' about how we were gonna do this big thing) got on the intra-net, looked at prices, and found us a cruise.

"They're cheaper right now. We saved almost half." I didn't mention it, but without the savings, Lucy never coulda come up with the money to go in the first place.

"Well, that right there oughta tell you somethin'." Imagene was headed into a nervous rigor now, for sure.

"What oughta?"

"That it's cheaper by half. Of course it's cheap when you might get sucked up in a hurricane and never come back."

"Like Gilligan I-lans," Lucy popped off, and grinned. It was hard to say whether the joke was helpful or not.

"Those ships hit things sometimes." Imagene stared hard

at the pecan pie she'd barely touched. "They hit a rock, or a iceberg, and next thing you know, you're in the drink."

I leveled a finger at her. "You turned on *Titanic* last night, didn't you?" The minute I saw that movie was on, I'd called Imogene's house and told her not to go to channel 136. She musta clicked it right away.

She tipped her chin up, like a kid turning away a spoonful of green peas. "I just saw a minute's worth."

"I watch it all," Lucy chimed in.

"For heaven's sake, you two! There's no icebergs in the Gulf a' Mexico." I stood up and started gathering coffee cups, because if we sat there any longer, our trip would be ruined. "If we don't go like we planned, every last soul in town's gonna know about it, and we'll be the laughingstock. Just think what Betty Prine and her snooty bunch'll say." I pictured the next meeting of the Daily Literary Society. They'd be happy as cows on clover, havin' us for lunch right along with the finger sandwiches. Betty'd been thumbing her nose at me and whispering for weeks about how three ladies *our age* didn't have any business driving all the way to the coast alone. "Come wild horses or high water, we're going on this cruise. We're getting up in the mornin' and we're headin' for the water, and that's it. I'll be over to your house at seven a.m. to help load the cooler, Imogene, then we go after Lucy and we're off."

"We're off, all right." Imogene looked like her dog'd just died, instead of like a gal headed on vacation. "Frank said he'd take my van tonight and gas it up, then check all the belts and hoses one more time, just to be sure. He thinks we hadn't ought to be driving to the coast by ourselves, though. And especially with a hurricane comin' in."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Imogene, you and my brother act like we're about to get the roll call up yonder. We're grown women. It's six hours' drive—if that. And Kemp's got me fixed

up with a special page on my new little laptop computer. It tells everything about the cruise. I've had the computer going all day long, and nothin's changed with the weather or the boardin' time. I tried to tell Frank that, but you know how he feels about computers."

"Frank's only looking after us." Imogene was defending Frank, of course.

Lately, when Frank and I had the kind of disagreements brothers and sisters have, Imogene took Frank's side. My brother'd been over at Imogene's even more than usual—mowing the lawn, helping her with her garden, stopping by to get a sample when she was baking pies for the Daily Café. Once or twice, I'd looked at the two of them and wondered . . . well . . . him being a widower, and her a widow, and all . . .

I slapped a hand on the table to knock Imogene out of her funk. "Come on, y'all. Take off them long faces. We're gonna have an adventure bigger than our wildest dreams. I can feel it in my bones!"

That night, what I felt in my bones was the water. Ronald was down the hall snoring in his easy chair, the sound rushing in and out like the tide. I closed my eyes and let the waves seep under my bed, lifting the mattress, floating me away to that secret place I'd never told anyone about. Imogene and Lucy didn't know it, but this trip to Perdida was gonna take us within a whisper of the mystery I'd been wondering about since my last summer on the bayou.