



**UNDER  
THE  
MAGNOLIAS**

*a novel*

**T. I. LOWE**

*Bestselling author of Lulu's Cafe*

## PRAISE FOR T. I. LOWE

“A family’s collapse under the weight of dysfunction and mental illness becomes a luminous testimony to the power of neighbors and the ability of a community’s love and faith to shelter its most vulnerable residents. Readers will close the cover with a smile and a long, satisfied sigh.”

### LISA WINGATE

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Before We Were Yours*  
and *The Book of Lost Friends*

“With lyrical prose and vivid description, T. I. Lowe masterfully weaves the story of a teenage girl’s quest to protect the ones she loves most in the wake of unthinkable tragedy. *Under the Magnolias* is a moving portrayal of the power of family—the one we’re born into and the one we create—and the resilience of the human spirit. In this memorable and moving story, T. I. Lowe has hit her stride.”

### KRISTY WOODSON HARVEY

*USA Today* bestselling author of *Feels Like Falling*

“T. I. Lowe has done it again! I loved *Lulu’s Café*, but I love *Under the Magnolias* even more. There is so much to admire about this book. T. I. writes with amazing grace and beautifully depicts the cost of keeping secrets when help might be available. This story is filled with rich, lovable characters, each rendered with profound compassion. Austin is an admirable young woman—flawed, but faithful to her family—and Vance Cumberland is another Michael Hosea, offering unconditional, lifelong love. *Under the Magnolias* is sure to delight and inspire.”

### FRANCINE RIVERS

*New York Times* bestselling author

“On a tobacco farm in 1980s South Carolina, we meet smart and spunky Austin as she struggles to keep the family farm together and raise her six siblings and mentally ill father. With a wide cast of fun, offbeat characters, a mix of heartbreak and humor, and a heaping handful of grit, *Under the Magnolias* will delight Lowe’s legion of fans!”

**LAUREN K. DENTON**

*USA Today* bestselling author of *The Summer House*

“What a voice! If you’re looking for your next Southern fiction fix, T. I. Lowe delivers. Readers of all ages will adore the spunky survivor Austin Foster, whose journey delivers both laughter and tears. Set smack-dab in the middle of South Carolina, this story will break your heart and put it back together again. A must-read.”

**JULIE CANTRELL**

*New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Perennials*

“Plain-speaking and gut-wrenching, T. I. Lowe leaves no detail unturned to deliver a powerful story about a family’s need for healing and their lifelong efforts to run from it. This is no ‘will they or won’t they’ romance. Rather, it’s a thorough exploration of the hidden depths of the heart.”

**ROBIN W. PEARSON**

Christy Award-winning author of *A Long Time Comin’* and *'Til I Want No More*

“I loved *Under the Magnolias*! . . . Austin Foster is one of the most memorable characters I have ever read.”

**SESSALEE HENSLEY**

Barnes & Noble fiction buyer, retired

*Under the Magnolias*



**UNDER  
THE  
MAGNOLIAS**

---

**T. I. LOWE**



Tyndale House Publishers  
Carol Stream, Illinois

Visit Tyndale online at [tyndale.com](http://tyndale.com).

Visit T. I. Lowe's website at [tilowe.com](http://tilowe.com).

*TYNDALE* and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries.

*Under the Magnolias*

Copyright © 2021 by T. I. Lowe. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of magnolia flower copyright © by Maria Vasilyeva/  
Depositphotos. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of woman copyright © by Anna Mutwil/Arcangel.com. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of sky and clouds by Clyde RS on Unsplash.com.

Cover photograph of texture copyright © by Flypaper Textures. All rights reserved.

Author photograph by Jordyn Strickland, copyright © 2019. All rights reserved.

Designed by Libby Dykstra

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

Published in association with the literary agency of Browne & Miller Literary Associates, LLC, 52 Village Place, Hinsdale, IL 60521

Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

*Under the Magnolias* 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.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at [csresponse@tyndale.com](mailto:csresponse@tyndale.com), or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-4964-5360-0 (HC)

ISBN 978-1-4964-5361-7 (SC)

Printed in the United States of America

27 26 25 24 23 22 21  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Teresa Moise*

*My dear friend, mentor, and running partner*

*Because of your unwavering confidence in me,*

*I felt confident enough to pour my soul into this story*





# PROLOGUE

*1987*

At eighty feet tall with a spread of forty feet, the southern magnolia tree was known to get out of hand in our part of South Carolina, which was nestled smack-dab in the middle of the heart-shaped state. The ornamental madam could get a wild leaf to lift her full skirt and take a squat in a yard if she wasn't made to mind. Owners had to be diligent with keeping the trees on a grooming routine or chance the entire yard becoming overrun by the Southern beauties.

The self-contained tree was a tidy guest though. Discarded limbs and leaves were kept hidden under her fluffy hem until the debris gradually returned to the very soil that gave it life.

Unlike most neighboring towns who were starting to plop

Bradford pear trees in the ground like they were the next great thing, our entire town was decorated with southern magnolias. Shoot, our trees had built-in storage, and Mother Nature wasn't the only one to take advantage of the unique hiding spots. High school students weren't as sly as they thought they were with hiding their cigarettes under the two fat twins flanking the bus lot so they could sneak a smoke between classes. The Truett Memorial Library didn't allow food or beverages past the door, so most folks used the limbs of a magnolia tree beside the building to hang grocery bags or set their cups just underneath to retrieve later on their way out. You just never knew what would be found under one of the trees. Diaries, love notes, a lost baseball . . .

The most notorious discovery had to be the skeletal remains of a runaway teen and the knife used to dismember her. As if that wasn't awful enough, her remains were found under a giant magnolia on the front lawn of the courthouse where the trial had been held and concluded years before, confirming later that an innocent man had been sent to prison.

But the folks of Magnolia didn't like to talk about that. No, they preferred to keep stuff like that hidden and shine up all the positives of the small town. Like the fact that our mayor had a direct connection to the Kennedy family—by way of a second cousin, once removed—making him and his family town royalty. And then there was the other family who were kin to the folks who made the Duke's Mayonnaise up the road in Greenville. Of course, they're considered town royalty, too. It *is* the best mayonnaise, so I get it.

The town was also big on bragging about its active church

community. With a church on every corner, it's no wonder there was always a lot to crow about. There was the First Baptist of Magnolia, the First Presbyterian, First Methodist . . . a lot of Firsts.

And just like the botched murder trial, Magnolia didn't like to talk about Dave Foster and his congregation out on Nolia Farms. Even though it wasn't the official name of my father's small country church, folks referred to it as the First Riffraff of Magnolia. Pa said they could call it whatever they wanted. People running their mouths was never something to bother him. No, he had much bigger issues than small-town gossip.

The one-room chapel could only hold thirty or so people. It was established back in the late 1800s by my great-grandfather, who was also a farmer with a passion to minister. Farm life didn't always allow much free time, so he built the chapel as a place of worship for any of the farm help and his family. My father was the third generation to pastor this church. Phoenix said it reminded him of the schoolhouse on *Little House on the Prairie* and was all about convincing Mama to teach us there instead of sending us to public school, but she wanted us to have time off the farm, so that never happened.

As the piano came to life, I sat a little straighter and scanned the small pews and felt certain the ragtag congregation near about represented any walk of life you could think of.

A fortune-teller accused of being a witch doctor. Check.

An ex-con with a glass eye. Check.

An atheist believer with a Polish accent. Check.

The town's undertaker whose sexual orientation was questionable. Check.

The town floozy with a penchant for neon-blue eye shadow. Check.

A poor farming family with way too many kids. Check.

A madman leading them. Check.

At the moment, said madman was going to town on the untuned piano like he was Jerry Lee Lewis. Shoulders shaking, long legs bouncing to the beat, singing an up-tempo version of “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” he had the rapt attention of the entire congregation.

Except me.

I was immune to his theatrics, so I turned my attention to the magnolia wreath hanging on the beam above the altar. Sunshine slipped through the filmy windowpanes and reflected off the waxy leaves. At least it made the worn plank floors and the chipped white paint look intentional, like the antique style was what we were going for. The wreath was one of Charlotte’s creations. I would often catch my sister looking at the giant monstrosity with a big smile on her young face. I looked beside me and caught her doing so now, thinking nothing but happy thoughts, quite the opposite of my own. Instead of seeing the wreath as decor, I couldn’t help viewing it as a monument to a bad memory. The bracket mending the beam was barely noticeable, but my eyes didn’t have to glimpse the tarnished metal to know it was there, holding more than the weight of the broken beam.

The awareness of what was hiding in plain sight had my eyes snapping away and focusing on a head full of blond curls, trimmed to a respectable length and neatly styled. It made me want to dishevel the curls until they resembled the unruliness

of better times we'd shared together. The mayor's son was the only one in this tiny sanctuary who was considered normal, but his being here amongst us misfits, sitting two pews up from me like he owned the place, made him the weirdest of us all.

Before I could look away, he glanced over his shoulder and caught me staring. Instead of offering me the typical dimpled, lopsided grin, Vance Archer Cumberland frowned. The ever-present sparkle in his grass-green eyes was absent.

I shook my head and glared a warning. *Not today.* He shook his head too, but with resignation. He was too handsome to look so sad and I wanted to live in a world where I was allowed to make him happy, yet his unhappiness was solely my fault. It didn't matter anymore. There was no point in wasting his or my time on what could never be.

I broke our gaze first when a flash of hot pink got caught in my peripheral vision. Charlotte had started swinging her legs at a rate that was sure to launch her slap off the pew if she kept it up. She was short still, but at age thirteen that would probably soon change. The inevitable growth spurt that accompanied puberty, if it was anything like my experience.

"Get still," I muttered out the side of my mouth and tapped my Birkenstock to her jelly shoe.

Charlotte huffed but did as she was told, stilling her legs. She picked up the end of her dark braid and began fiddling with it. My sister was my opposite. Prissy, loved dresses and silly shoes that were good for nothing but producing sweaty blisters. Today she'd paired the lacy plastic sandals with a floral sundress.

I'd carried the label of tomboy as far back as I could

remember, hated dresses, and chose shoe wear for practicality. Today's church attire was bell-bottom corduroys I'd lifted from Mama's side of the closet and a plain white V-neck T-shirt I'd lifted from Pa's side. It was as dressy as I was going to get. Charlotte liked to sass about me being stuck in the seventies, but she had no idea just how deeply I was stuck there and that I would do anything to go back.

You'd have thought with us being the only two girls out of the seven siblings that we would have had a tighter bond. Maybe if there had been less than the six years' age difference, or if I had been more agreeable . . .

Pixy bumped into my leg, grunted, and then plopped down on the worn pine floor at my feet. Her earthy scent mingled with the lemon oil I'd used yesterday to wipe down the pews. I moved over to give her more sprawling room, but that only made her scoot until she'd eliminated the space between us and was right back to nuzzling my foot. Pixy had issues. Namely her identity crisis. She thought she was a five-pound poodle. She wasn't. Pixy was actually a thirty-six-pound potbelly pig.

With the town viewing us as riffraff, it wasn't surprising to find animals dropped off near the front of our 850-acre farm. I'd found Pixy tied to the mailbox a few years back. Another time, we discovered a billy goat had wandered up to the house and was gnawing on the porch rail one morning. We named him Woody, for obvious reasons.

Animals weren't the only surprises people left for us. One time it was a stolen car left in the west field. Pa called the cops on that one. And he should have called about another surprise gift but chose to handle it in his own special Dave Foster way.

The guesthouse tucked in the western part of the farm was considered to have an open door to anyone needing a place to stay for a while. A Native American couple from the Lumbee Tribe found their way to Nolia Farms one spring. Some didn't care for that, namely grown men parading around like ghosts, and so a cross was erected in our yard and set afire. Pa, being Pa, rushed into the house, and we all prepared ourselves for him returning with the shotgun. Instead, he came outside with a bag of marshmallows and skewers fashioned from wire hangers.

As those fools in white robes and pointy hats watched on, we roasted marshmallows and sang "The Old Rugged Cross."

Their ringleader accused Pa of blasphemy, but Pa shut that down with a confidence Dave Foster wore better than his denim shirt. Mama said that shirt made her swoon, so there's that.

Pa jabbed a finger at the flaming cross. "No. You setting fire to this sacrificial symbol of freedom and love for *all* is the actual crime of blasphemy. Now how 'bout we set aside our differences. Y'all welcome to take those hoods off and enjoy a marshmallow with us."

Not having the desired effect of running off our guests, the Klan skulked off into the night and never bothered us again with their hate. I asked Pa why he didn't fight back or yell or something, thinking that's more like what they deserved instead of an invite for marshmallows. His answer has always stuck with me.

*"Fighting hate with hate will only produce more hate."*

"Whew-ee, is the Lord good!"



I snapped out of my thoughts and realized Pa had abandoned the piano and was now towering behind the small podium.

Shoulders as broad as the side of a barn, about six and a half feet tall, the man was a giant. The bushy black beard and matching thick hair helped to earn him his nickname: Paul Bunyan. I was his sidekick, always following him around. In my younger years it was so I could bask in the sunshine he seemed to carry, but now that I was older, it was to keep a closer eye on him for when the shadows seeped through.

Paul Bunyan, of course, was always seen with his big blue ox. So I didn't take offense to being saddled with the nickname Ox as my pa's constant companion. My five-foot-ten-inch frame was quite muscular and it was no secret that I was as strong-minded as an ox, even a fictional one.

A chorus of *amens* and *praise bes* rang out as Pa dabbed at the tears streaking the tops of his cheeks. The only time he cried was when he was happy, but I wasn't judging him about it since my tears had abandoned me long ago in the good times or bad. I'd gone as far as hiding in the packhouse to pinch the fire out of my arm to the point of bruising just to see if I could find my tears, but nothing. They were gone. Like a lot of things in my life.

"The Spirit is calling for us to testify!" Pa's voice boomed around the small building. The windowpanes rattled from his enthusiasm as the small congregation agreed with their own shouts.

Phoenix groaned from the pew behind me where he sat with Boston and Raleigh. "We gonna be here *forever*."

I cut him a look over my shoulder and shushed him. He was just two years younger than me, and even though he liked to act big and bad, often running off at the mouth, my brother showed some respect by sealing his lips.

The sermon began in Genesis, leapt forward to Philippians, zigzagged through the Gospels, and rewound to Isaiah. An hour in, Pa was washed down in sweat with his denim shirt displaying the evidence of his vigor. And a chorus of growls were coming from the younger twins sitting to my left. At age six, I was impressed they were both still awake.

Knox tugged on my shirtsleeve. “Ox, I’m starving.”

I looked down at him, his freckled nose wrinkled and his lips parted just enough to see the space missing a front tooth. He was identical to Nash with big blue eyes and a mop of dark-brown hair. Even their missing teeth were in identical spots. Having come prepared, I pulled a pack of Nabs out my back pocket, rousing Pixy from her nap long enough to snatch one before leaving the rest for the boys.

Without missing a beat, Pa went from preaching to singing and then returned to preaching. Don’t get me wrong—he was magnificent and could capture anyone’s attention when he had the right wits about him. But those times were getting fewer and further between.

*How did we get here? Is there a route away from it?*

Those questions haunted me more and more these days with things spinning out of control, and I wished we could just turn back the pages to a simpler, happier time.

Nights spent frolicking in the swimming hole just past a patch of woods at the back of the farm. The moon and

stars the only light, making the entire experience even more mischievous.

Tobacco-worm grenade attacks, leaving us covered in neon-green goo and needing another swim.

Lazy Sunday afternoons on the front porch with each of us taking turns cranking the ice cream maker, churning out the best peach ice cream in the world.

One of Mama's laughing spells that wouldn't quench until the entire Foster house was infected. Laughing until fat tears rolled down our faces and we had deep aches in our bellies that only righted with some of that peach ice cream or a pack of the Hostess snack cakes that Mama always snuck in the buggy at the Piggly Wiggly.

Looking through the innocent lens of adolescence, those happier days were perfection. Sadly, they had an expiration date just like those snack cakes. Happiness staled and nothing was pleasing after that. But just like the expired cakes in a meager season, we had no other choice but to stomach whatever life tossed our way next.

*Chapter 1*

**THE FORTUNE-TELLER**

*October 1980*

Edith Foster was the poster child for hippie living. Her golden-brown eyes held a glassy appearance most of the time, but she was never high on anything other than life. Free-spirited, she didn't care that a new decade had arrived that was adamant about more being more. Bigger, brighter everything. Not Mama. Nope. She continued parting her long blonde hair down the middle, forgoing the thickly applied makeup and big bangs that were trending. She always tuned the radio to the easy listening songs from the sixties and seventies instead of the hip-hop and new wave sounds taking over the airways.

She and Pa said I was the spitting image of her, minus that dreamy expression and contented smile. On the cusp of

teenage-hood, my only expressive setting seemed to be stuck on a guarded pout. I was full-on pouting at the moment as she spoke in that delicate voice laced with whimsy. She was propped up in her and Pa's bed, looking like a flower-child queen as she adjusted the daisy behind her ear that Charlotte had given her earlier.

"Austin, it's a beautiful rite of passage as a woman." Mama wrapped her hand around my wrist, trying to pull me into a conversation I wanted no part of. My gaze dropped to the mood ring on her index finger and I saw that the stone was blue. It was always blue. I recalled teasing her once that the thing was a joke and held no other color besides blue, so she insisted I put it on. I did and the color instantly turned as black as coal.

"Mama—"

"It's your body's natural process of preparing to—"

"Mama!" I tried pulling away from her, but there was no give to getting away from my spot on the edge of her bed.

"I'm serious. Any day now your flower—"

"Why do we gotta talk about something that ain't even happened yet?"

"To be prepared." She finally let go and resettled on the bed, nestling in a pile of fluffy blankets and pillows. It looked like the bed was swallowing her up, except for the giant ball that was her belly.

"Please, Mama. I'm so grossed out right now." My shoulders shuddered.

She giggled, finding way too much amusement in my discomfort. "I can't wait to see you with your own young'uns. You

know that saying about your children being ten times worse than you were as a child.”

An obnoxious snort slipped out as I scanned the dresser top. It held enough picture frames to cause an avalanche if someone stomped by it hard enough. “Well, I ain’t having no young’uns, so there’s nothing to worry about.” I glanced at her just in time to see the smile slip slightly from her face.

“Why not?”

I waved toward the pictures, evidence for my conviction. “You done had enough for the both of us.” I aimed a finger at her ginormous belly that held babies six and seven. “And you keep spittin’ them out every time I turn around. Seriously, you and Pa need to apply that part about controlling your urges that you shared with me in the birds and bees talk. Time to slow down on some things, missy.”

Her smile returned as she set into having one of her laughing spells. Holding her belly with both hands, she managed to say, “You keep getting me tickled like this and these two will be arriving early.”

“Only two more weeks. They got to be about ready anyway.”

“I’m ready to be out of this bed.” She readjusted, lying more on her side, but the grimace that flashed on her face gave away the fact that she was miserable.

When the doctor had diagnosed Mama with preeclampsia—a word I’d never heard before—I’d ridden my bike into town and had Miss Jones at the library help me find a book about it. I ended up with a book about pregnancy that covered conception to birth to complications. Reading it from cover to cover, I learned things I wished I could unlearn. I also knew

that calling that entire natural process *beautiful* was a crock of bull. Nothing floral about it. Mama could shine that mess up, sprinkling flowers and pretty words on it all day long, but I wasn't falling for it.

"You'll change your mind." She pulled her waist-length hair, the color of sand and sunshine, over her shoulder and began braiding it. The only times I'd ever seen her wearing it in any style other than down and free was when she was sewing tobacco or cooking. Seemed the last stages of pregnancy was the other exception. "I predict you'll have at least three children of your own one day."

"What? You a fortune-teller or something?" I rolled my eyes.

"No, sassy-pants. But I heard there's one at the fair. Perhaps you should pay her a visit. See what she says." Mama giggled, the real sassy-pants in the room.

I stood, sending out a creak from the brass bedframe, and pulled the piece of mail from my back pocket. "This came today."

Mama took it and opened what I already knew to be a map and began unfolding it. "It's Tennessee!"

I peeped over the edge of the giant rectangle she held with both arms spread wide. "Have you thought about backup names just in case you're wrong like last time?"

Mama had been sure the last set of twins would both be girls, so the towns of Charlotte and Elizabeth had been circled on the North Carolina map. Well, "Elizabeth" came out three minutes after Charlotte and had everyone gasping when it was quite obvious she was really a he. Poor baby boy went a week nameless until Mama decided on Raleigh. It's kinda funny, but we're forbidden to tease him about it. Mama said it

could cause him identity issues if we did. He had big ears, and she didn't forbid that topic, so there's that.

Grunting, Mama reached to the side table and plucked a pen from its tiny front drawer. "These two are boys. I think they'll even turn out to be identical. There won't be any surprises with Nashville and Knoxville." I wasn't so sure. After all we got a mixed set last time when she predicted two girls.

She bit her lip while drawing careful circles around the city names, and I bit my tongue to keep from spewing a protest on those awful name choices.

Edith Foster was not only a hippie but also a homebody with a weird wanderlust that took her no farther than the library. She had a vast collection of maps and *National Geographic* magazines but had never stepped foot out of the state of South Carolina. And for some other weird notion, she decided to name each one of us after a city she took interest in.

Ruckus from downstairs echoed through the floorboards, reminding me I had other things to do besides chatting with Mama. But our one-on-one time was all but nonexistent and I was selfish, craving every second I could have her to myself.

Carrying twins back-to-back seemed to have taken a toll on her, but by golly, the woman loved being a mother. She adored us and was a natural at sensing what we needed. Boston needed frequent hugs and a listening ear. Phoenix needed a more stern approach, and she was quick not to baby him over his handicap nor would she let him by with his mouthy ways. I suppose she joked and teased with me more often than not, knowing I was too serious and needed loosening up. Charlotte and Raleigh were the soon-to-be-dethroned



babies, a coveted place they'd had all to themselves for the past seven years, so they were spoiled rotten. I wondered how she planned on changing that, but I knew she'd figure it out. Shoot, she even babied Pa and he was a grown man.

I definitely did not inherit my mother's mothering instincts. That whole idea interested me about as much as getting a tooth pulled or talking about my period—both of which made me nauseous. I'd much rather be out plowing a field or sitting at the dining table with Pa, studying the *Farmers' Almanac*.

"I wish you were going with us," I mumbled, hearing heavy footsteps landing on the stairs.

Mama grinned over the edge of the map. "Me too. I bet those fair workers are from all over the country, if not the world." Her eyes went dreamy again. "Be sure to ask some of them where they are from." That was another one of her little quirks. At a chance encounter with someone new, her first question was always wanting to know where the person was from.

"Okay . . ." I brushed my hair out of my face and sighed. "You sure I need to tend to the twins tonight?"

"Yes. Your daddy needs some Boston time. That always cheers him up. Will you please do it for me?"

I wanted to ask what in the world did Pa have to be down about. It was Mama who deserved some fun time. But I kept that to myself, just like the weird name choices, and mumbled, "Yes, ma'am." The heavy steps turned into a fast-paced bumping sound, sending whoever was on the stairs bouncing down on his backside. "Ugh. I better go help Pa." Before I made a step away, Mama gathered my hand in hers.

"Sweetie, I know you don't like talking about certain things,

but you still need to be prepared. I've stocked up on supplies. They're in the top of the linen closet."

I knew she was just looking out for me, so I chose to forgo my grumbling and be agreeable for a change. "Thank you." I kissed her cheek and made my way to the door, pausing there for a moment to give her one last tease. "You need to promise that these two babies are the last two!"

She rubbed her belly and giggled. "I'm making no such promise." She stuck her tongue out.

I stuck mine out too before dashing down the stairs to help herd the wild animals. Ages ranged from fourteen to seven. With one mentally challenged and another physically challenged, I had my hands full. Phoenix sat in the front of the truck with Pa and the twins, while Boss and I climbed in the back. It was a warm fall night and even though Boss liked to babble about nonsense, it was much more peaceful than sitting in the cab.

As Pa pulled into the fairgrounds, melodious music from the carousel filled the air as thickly sweet as the aroma of cotton candy and caramel apples. The wind carried over to us, along with squeals of delight from the roller coaster. Each plunge could be distinguished by the roar from the riders, wave after wave confirming that thing had one too many dips for my likings.

For all my grumbling with Mama earlier, I was excited to do something out of the routine of everyday farm life, which consisted of feeding the small flock of chickens and other critters before catching the school bus, a mundane school day, after-school chores, making sure the others did their homework and their own chores, helping with supper and then bath-time

routines. With Mama on bed rest, I felt more like a warden than a preteen girl.

At the ticket booth, Pa divvied out tokens for rides and games along with three dollars apiece. “That should get ya a soda and at least two snacks. I’m gonna ride some rides with Boss, so if you run out of money, come find me or Ox. If you act like you got good sense, then I’ll let you pick out a souvenir before we leave.” He handed me another bundle of dollars. “Your ma said you wanted to take the twins on rides?”

*Wanted* was a strong word, but I nodded anyway. “Yes, sir.” Even though fourteen-year-old Boston had the mind of probably a four-year-old, he was tall enough and adventurous enough to ride anything. I sure wished he was my fair companion for the evening.

“Peg, you good to go? You’re welcome to hang out with us two.” Pa hitched a thumb toward Boston.

“I’m good. I want to see about winning me a goldfish. It’ll take concentration and y’all just be distracting.” Phoenix turned and limped off toward the game section, the thick crowd immediately sweeping him away.

“Meet us right back here in two hours,” Pa called, his deep voice skipping over the heads of people to reach a determined boy on a goldfish mission.

“Yes, sir!” Phoenix’s voice somehow made its way to us even though he was out of sight.

Phoenix had more spirit and vinegar than anyone I’d ever met. He should have been born a redhead, but he was just as dark-headed as the rest of my siblings. They all favored Pa, with varying shades of brown hair and blue eyes. An unfortunate

accident at age three when he'd tripped while chasing after the tractor left Phoenix minus a leg. His right leg had gotten caught in the discs before Pa realized he'd fallen. After months and months of surgeries and rehab, Phoenix returned with his leg gone from the knee down but having gained a cynical disposition even at such a young age. Now at age eleven, he mostly kept his smile to himself and was growing more and more argumentative about every little thing.

Boston was quick to let Phoenix know he looked like a pirate and renamed him Peg. No one, not even our newly ornery brother, ever disagreed with the Boss, as Pa had nicknamed him, after Boston's favorite singer, Bruce Springsteen. So the name Peg stuck better than the first prosthetics he had to wear. Thankfully, the doctors finally got that right with the help of the Shriners.

"We want to ride the carousel," Charlotte spoke up for both her and Raleigh as she always did.

I looked over at my little brother. He was nodding his head in agreement. "The carousel it is." Holding their hands, I moved through the crowd and started my night at the fair with most of the other tiny tots and mamas.

After riding the carousel twice, we took a moment to watch the bumper cars. Each time a car crashed into another, the impact sent the twins into a tizzy of gasps and giggles. Right in the middle of the action was the mayor's son, Vance Cumberland, steering his car into others as Malorie Fitzgerald sat beside him, clinging to his arm. Her father owned one of the only two law firms in Magnolia and was also kin to the Duke's Mayonnaise makers, so of course the town had Vance and Malorie betrothed

before they could crawl. I didn't get it. A political family joining forces with a condiment empire? No. How about Duke's Mayo and the Merita bread folks? Add a tomato farmer in the mix. Now that would be a union made in heaven.

Even though Vance was a grade ahead of me, I knew more about him than any boy in my own grade, and it was Malorie's fault. She and I were in the same grade. With our last names beginning with the same letter, we were destined to always have lockers beside each other. Well, *doomed* was more like it, because I'd already had my fill of all things Vance Cumberland. It was Vance this and Vance that.

Vance just completed his Eagle Scout.

Vance was the best first baseman this county has ever seen.

Vance did volunteer work at the Y.

Vance, Vance, Vance . . . Yuck, yuck, yuck . . .

Malorie squealed and playfully popped Vance in the arm when he rammed two other cars head-on. I rolled my eyes and began leading the twins away from the perfect couple's obnoxiousness and toward the snack vendors.

Time passed quickly with me helping the twins on and off all the kiddie rides, buying more sweets and then popcorn to tamp down the sugar. We shared a grape slushy while I stealthily watched my classmates run around in freedom from one wild ride to the next. The ring-toss game became the highlight of my night, using the rest of our money to ring three of those crazy-tall soda bottles with the curvy necks.

By the end of the two hours, the twins were tired and whiny, my back hurt from lugging three oddly shaped soda bottles around, and Phoenix was missing. When he didn't turn up at

the ticket booth as instructed, Pa led us on a hunt that took us to all of Phoenix's favorite places. When those were a bust, we followed Pa around to the edge of the fairgrounds, where the haunted house, the mirror maze, and other oddities were set up. It was darker in that area too, except for one attraction.

A sparkly purple tent strung with a million twinkling lights drew us to it like moths to a flame. Two flaps were rolled back to reveal a round table dressed in black velvet with a crystal ball perched in the center. The glow of it caught my eye first, but then I noticed the two people occupying the table. Plain ordinary Peg sat in a chair across from a dazzling fortune-teller.

"Look, Pa." I pointed. "Peg's at the fortune-teller's tent."

"That boy," Pa muttered while leading the group over to the table where Peg seemed to be in deep conversation with the woman. "Peg, what in tarnation are you doing?" Pa tipped his head at the fortune-teller, who was draped in glittery robes and wearing a fantastic beaded head wrap I couldn't wait to tell Mama about. "Sorry for any trouble my son has caused you, ma'am. How much do I owe you?" He began to pull out his wallet.

"A lot," Peg spoke up. "I want Foxy to be my souvenir. I ain't even gonna be mad no more 'bout not winnin' a fish so long as I get to have her."

All eyes turned to the stunning woman. Her dark face glowed from the twinkling lights and her iridescent makeup, but her expression remained neutral. The air shifted, taking the scent of popcorn and earth with it, revealing a heady spice that swirled around us. It was exotic and new compared to the plainness of

country living we were familiar with, so I knew it was a part of this woman as much as the silk material wrapping her head.

Pa apologized to her again before giving Peg a stern look. “Son, a souvenir is like those bottles Ox has or a stuffed animal or something. Not a human. And it’s rude to even suggest that. You owe—” Pa read the sign leaning against the table—“Mrs. Deveraux an apology.”

The fortune-teller waved a hand dismissively. “Phoenix has been perfectly fine. And please call me Foxy.” Her voice was hypnotic with a different drawl than our Carolina twang. It was deep with a confident authority yet feminine enough to be alluring, and it made me wonder if it was part of her act. The twins seemed to be just as entranced as the rest of us and took several steps to get closer to her.

“Dave Foster.” Pa extended his hand and she shook it.

“You sure are a purty Black woman,” Boss commented, his grin spreading.

“Thank you, young man.” Foxy’s lips curled into a slight smile.

“Boss!” Pa nudged him on the shoulder. “Mrs. Foxy, he didn’t mean no harm by that. Land’s sake. You probably thinking I’m raising a bunch of heathens with no manners.”

“No, I think you’re raising truth speakers. I am Black. A woman. And my Jinx says I’m beautiful, too.” Foxy discreetly tucked a stack of cards inside a wooden box when Boston reached for them. She handed him a beaded necklace and he instantly forgot about the cards. The rest of us were given necklaces as well. “Phoenix was trying to talk me into coming home with him. Said his mother can’t even get out the bed and that Ox

doesn't cook as good." There was a little bit of tease tingeing her tone, but her sparkling face remained neutral as her onyx eyes found me. She winked. "I told him I'm not a good cook either."

I expected Pa to scold Phoenix, gather us up, and move on. Instead, he grabbed a chair and struck up a conversation with the fortune-teller. "My wife is due soon with twins. We run a farm and Edie works enough for two grown men, but she's going to have her hands full with the babies. You wouldn't happen to be looking for a change from this, would ya?" Pa gestured toward the tent.

"Change is a part of life. I'm always looking for it." She tapped a long purple nail against her dark-red lips. "But my Jinx isn't one for change."

When Foxy shared with Pa that her husband worked the petting zoo and livestock exhibit, he left the young'uns with me and took off like a shot. I couldn't understand what kind of wild hair came across him to suddenly be looking for farm help. He was known for wild hairs, though, and it wasn't out of character for him to offer up the guesthouse out on the farm to folks.

Later, Pa returned with a frowning man. Average height but skinny as a rail, Jinx Deveraux was opposite of his flashy wife. He smoothed the thick mustache above his lips while Pa tried selling him on the idea of farm living.

"My granddaddy and my daddy done an' worked for the man. I ain't gonna let my queen live oppressed." Jinx bent and placed a kiss on Foxy's cheek, then went back to rejecting Pa's offer of food and board in exchange for helping out at the farm.

"But this can't have much freedom." Pa spread his arms



wide and we all took in the flashing lights and chaos of the fair. “Don’t ya wanna plant some roots with your queen? You’d even have your own house and a piece of land to do it with. Us meeting is a divine appointment, my friend. Don’t ya see that?”

They kept right on going round and round until the fair was shutting down for the night. After the Deverauxs agreed to think about it and Pa left them directions out to the farm, Pa bowed his head and prayed for God to lead Foxy and Jinx to us. When I lifted my eyes, I caught a glimpse of a smile tugging at Foxy’s lips. It looked like she was in agreement but she didn’t put any words to it. Only time would tell.

We began walking off, but I whirled around and asked, “Where are you from, Mrs. Foxy?”

“New Orleans,” Foxy answered, and I knew Mama was going to love that answer.

I waved, almost losing one of those darn bottles, and turned to catch up with my family. It was a little chilly on the ride home, but I was too hyped up for it to bother me. Life was so routine that something as ordinary as meeting someone new was extraordinary to not only me but the rest of the Foster clan. We were all chatty, Boss and I leaning through the open back glass of the truck to talk about it with the others, all the way to the farm.

As soon as Pa pulled up to the house, I cradled the awkward bottles to my chest and jogged straight up to tell Mama about Foxy and her rad costume. Each hurried step made the bottles clang together, ringing out a warning of my imminent arrival. I collected all the details to share with her, hoping not

to forget anything. I knew how easy it was for a moment to get tangled up, some parts shifting while other parts faded like sneakers left in the sun too long, until a memory was only a muddled reflection of the truth.

I barreled through the door to share one memory only to collect another one I would spend years distorting, reshaping, and wanting to forget. My arms went limp, glass shattered, liquid soaked my feet, and my throat burned from the scream ripping through me.

One blue baby on the bed, strangling on a whimper.

The other baby weakly crying where he was nestled in my mother's lifeless arms.

The daisy wilted and tangled in her sweaty hair.

A stream of crimson leading away from my mother's still body.

The Tennessee map on the floor, dotted with blood.

I instantly collected the details only to remember things we should have thought about before leaving for the fair.

We never should have left her completely alone. Upstairs, with the only phone in the house way down in the kitchen. I should have done something besides sassing and sticking my tongue out at her for our last memory together . . .

"Peg! Peg, get help!" I screamed, trying to unstick my feet to get to the blue baby.

---

"Bless your heart."

"Sweetheart, we praying for y'all."

"The First Methodist is bringing supper in a bit."

“Let us know if y’all need anything, dear.”

Each awkward half hug accompanied some line of condolence as people filed past me, yet I sat on the back pew, stiffer than the wood bench, giving no reply or hug in return. I couldn’t. Finding Mama dead had stolen my voice, my heart, my hope, my—

“Honey, don’t you want to join your family?” Morty Lawson whispered in his soft voice. He was directing the funeral, trying to keep it on track, I supposed. Pa had led my siblings out behind the casket and pallbearers moments before without even realizing he was missing me. It had been four days since Mama’s passing and he had been sleepwalking ever since. We all were, to various degrees.

I shook my head and kept my eyes down, staring at his shiny penny loafers. The prissy man wrapped his arms around me, pressing my face against the coolness of his silk shirt. I wanted to experience the luxurious fabric with my palms, but I kept my hands fisted in my lap.

Morty patted my shoulder before letting go and disappearing out with the others. A few more folks tried engaging me into a mournful moment, but I wanted to share my grief with no one but Mama, so I kept my head down and let my long hair drape as a shield around my face.

The hushed chatter began to fade outside when a throat cleared in front of me. Through a small crack in my hair curtain, I could see he was facing me, one knee resting on the pew as he sort of leaned toward me. I lowered my head more, hoping he’d get the hint.

He cleared his throat again. “I’m Vance Cumberland.”

I swallowed before muttering, “Okay.” The one word felt prickly leaving my throat.

When I offered nothing else, he spoke again. “And you’re Austin?”

Even though he was asking me to confirm, I only repeated a scratchy “Okay.”

Behind me, a stern hand squeezed my shoulder. Nothing else followed, not even placating words, before the person stomped off. And then a familiar sound reached me from outside the door. One I’d begun to expect over the last several years.

Vance gasped. “That old lady just spit on the steps of the church.”

“Yes.” I confirmed what I already knew.

“Yes? But why?”

Sighing, I kept my head down but tucked the hair curtain behind my ears. “That’s Miss Wise. It’s okay.”

I’m sure he wanted to ask more about Miss Wise and her odd behavior, but I was thankful when he didn’t. I had no energy or desire to explain that woman, especially when I didn’t understand her myself.

The chapel finished emptying, leaving just the two of us. The quiet was sweeter than the cakes and pies lining the counters and any other free space found back at the house. The past three nights had been spent tending to the newborns with my other siblings camping out in my room to find some semblance of comfort, which had me running on very little sleep. Seemed there was always someone crying who needed me to hold them. Or someone thirsty and needing me to get

them a glass of water. Or someone hungry and needing me to get them a plate of food.

As soon as Morty drove away from the house that night with Mama in the back of his funeral home van, Pa had checked out. And he'd yet to return. With no grandparents, I was on my own. Pa's parents had passed away within months of each other when I was in kindergarten and Mama never knew hers because she was raised in a group home.

Some friend of Mama's had come in from Nebraska to pay her respects and had volunteered to watch the newborns during the funeral, so my plan was to sit here alone for as long as I could get away with it. Vance made no move to leave, so my alone-time window was closing rapidly.

"Listen, Austin . . ." His warm hand pressed my knee briefly before retreating to the other side of the pew. "I . . . I never want to know how you feel right now."

I had expected another regurgitated line of condolence, so his blunt words had my eyes snapping up to meet his. Green as a grassy meadow on a summer day, they weren't looking *at* me but *inside* me, taking on a portion of the pain I was struggling to carry on my own.

"Vance, Son, we need to head out." His mother spoke from behind me, breaking the moment and sending my head to lower once more.

"Yes, ma'am." The pew creaked as Vance stood. He walked away.

It would be the last time we would exchange words for many years. It was only a handful of words, but they comforted me when it seemed nothing else would.

I learned some hard truths during that terrible fall. One truth was that a person could be dead even with a pulse. The stench seeping from my parents' bedroom was proof. I'd let it go on for a week after the funeral, but today there was no other choice but to put a stop to it.

Steeling myself after getting everyone off to school, I shoved open the door and nearly threw up. The room looked and smelled like a crime scene. Pungent body odor; picture frames toppled like dominoes, a few scattered and broken on the floor; clothing strung and strewed; a limp body on the bed.

I hurried over to the window and yanked it open to let in some fresh air and hopefully push out some of the staleness. My stomach twisted when I caught sight of the bloody bedding crumpled in the corner. Turning my back to it, I faced the bed and the unmoving giant. He still wore the suit from the funeral. Shoes untied yet they remained on his feet. One arm slung over his face.

"How have you been able to stand wearing these all this time?" I pulled his shoes off and the new stench that action released sent me into a bout of gagging. I tossed them across the room before realizing the noise could wake the babies down the hall. Cringing, I perked an ear and held my breath. Thankfully, the house remained silent.

"Pa, you gotta get up." My request was met with no response, so I shook his leg. Finally he moved a little. "Please, Pa. I really need you to get up. The babies are low on formula and diapers."

No response.

No matter how much I pleaded with him, he remained unresponsive, and eventually I got good and mad. I marched to the bathroom and collected a glass of water. Returning, I emptied it over his greasy head. He barely blinked in acknowledgment. Didn't even turn his head to dodge the water. I'd have rather he'd jumped up and got ahold of me for that.

As I swallowed my tears, another hard truth became clear.

Mama wasn't there to protect us from Pa's dark seasons anymore. A hard question followed that hard truth: Would I be able to step into her role and protect my siblings from them?

Whatever was going on with Pa went beyond normal grief, but I was too young to understand what exactly it was. With Mama's shield no longer in place, I fully experienced the shadows that fell from Pa's presence for the first time. It was a murky place, dim with very little understanding.

But Mama had never let him hide this long, so I knew I couldn't walk away and allow him to continue rotting in this room.

With the time ticking down to the newborns' next feeding, I began to panic. Fear crawled up my neck and tightened my shoulders as I treated my father in a way I'd never done before. My pa wasn't a mean man, but I didn't know the hollow man unmoving on the bed. There was no choice but to push and face whatever repercussions arose.

I talked hard, whisper-yelling, "You need to stop acting like a baby!" When that didn't work, I tried talking even meaner. "You should be ashamed of yourself. Mama would be so disappointed in you for doing this to us young'uns." Tears burned

my eyes, but I refused to release them. “So suck it up and get your sorry tail out of this bed.”

Pushing and pulling and shoving at his deadweight, I was finally able to coerce him up and into the bathroom. “And you stink. Like really, really bad. Like that time Boss got sprayed by the skunk and then thought the mud in the pigpen would mask it . . .” I grunted while depositing him onto the closed toilet lid. His big ole form slouched in such a defeated manner that pity tapped my anger on the arm, but I held tight to the fury in order to get through this moment. Pity would do nothing but shove me inside his shadows, and that wouldn’t do either one of us any good. “Yeah. No. You stink worse. So you better use the whole bar of Irish Spring.” I jabbed a finger toward the shower after I set the water to warm and stomped out. I wanted to slam the door for good measure but remembered the babies in time to squelch the notion.

While he washed, I stripped the sour sheets off the bed and collected the stiff bloody ones from the corner. After setting the sour ones to washing and tossing the stained set, I gathered clean clothes for Pa and placed them just inside the bathroom door and waited for him to dress. I stood there and gave him instructions on brushing his teeth as if he’d never done these small tasks once in his life. When I had to open the tube of toothpaste and squeeze some onto his toothbrush for him, I began to wonder.

By the time I had Pa settled at the dining table and was force-feeding him grits, exhaustion hit me hard, but the soft cries coming from my room let me know there was no time to be exhausted. Staring into my father’s hollow, bloodshot



eyes that held no acknowledgment of his newborn sons' cries, another hard truth twisted my insides.

I had become a mother before I'd even become a woman.

Mama's talk that night before she died came to mind, and I knew for certain she was no fortune-teller. She'd predicted I would have three children, but there was no way that was ever going to happen. I already had seven to take care of, and one of them was a grown man.