

T. I. LOWE

INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE CAROLINA COAST SERIES

DRIFTWOOD DREAMS

a novel



PRAISE FOR T. I. LOWE

Lowe provides enjoyably quirky characters and Carolina charm in this inspirational summer read.

BOOKLIST on *Driftwood Dreams*

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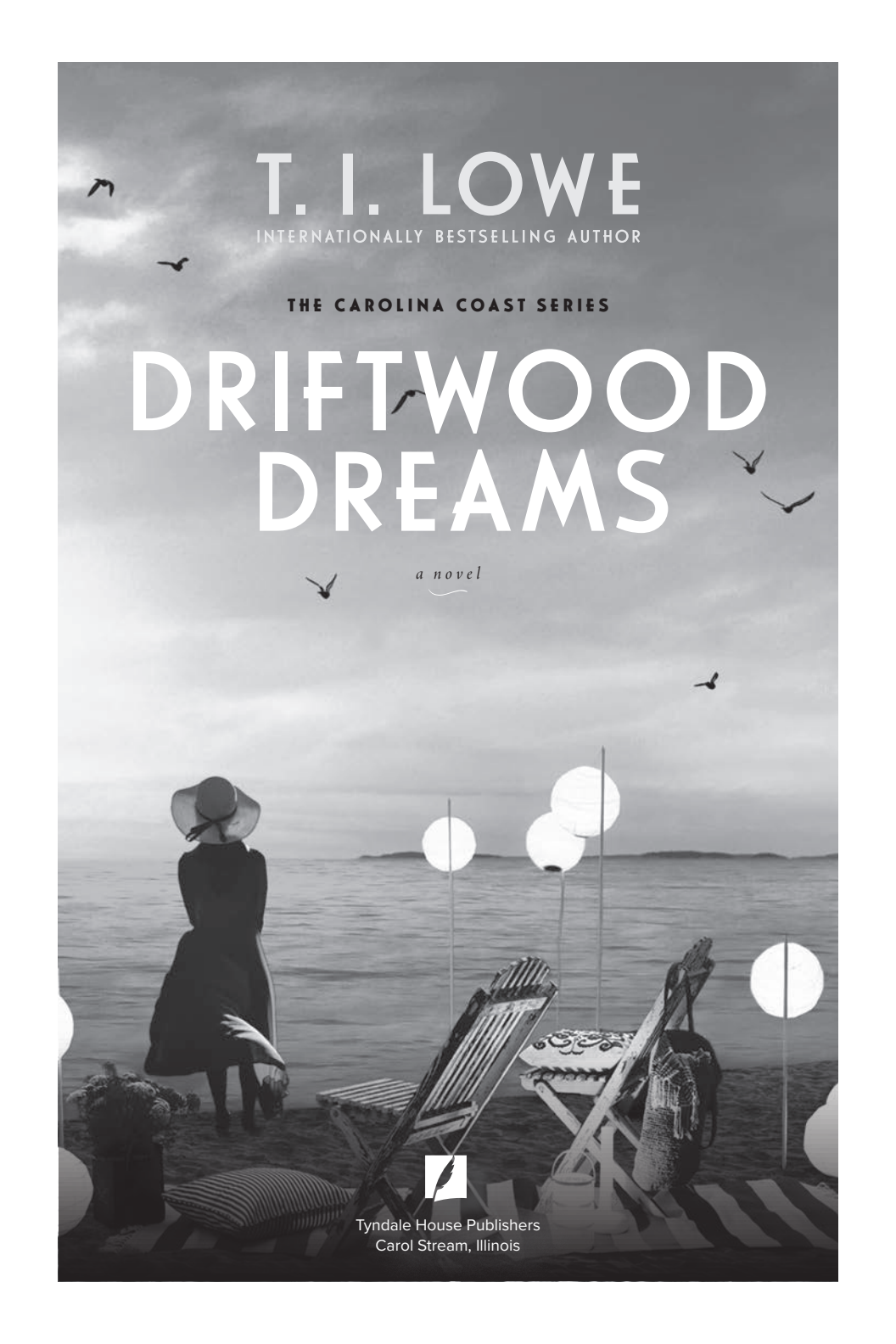
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A luminous testimony to the power of neighbors and the ability of a community's love and faith to shelter its most vulnerable residents.

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Driftwood Dreams

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To my daughter, Lydia Lu.

Dare to dream.

No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

MATTHEW 5:15-16

1

Standing in the midst of the ebb and flow of her daily chaos always gave Josie Slater the same feeling as standing in the surf—it was ever-changing, yet she felt trapped in the same spot with her feet slowly sinking in the sand. She absently handed an order slip to a passing waitress while ringing up the couple sitting at the counter in front of her.

“This place is amazing.” The middle-aged man handed over a couple of bills.

“Why, thank you.” Josie offered a polite smile along with his change. She didn’t even have to be present in the moment anymore to serve up generous portions of Southern hospitality to tourists.

“The candied pecan waffles were delicious,” the wife added as her husband helped her off the stool.

The couple had been sitting there chatting Josie up for the better part of the last hour about their thirtieth wedding anniversary trip to the Grand Strand. They were both dressed in brand-new swimwear

and were pasty white, except for the fresh streaks of sunburn across their noses. Even if they hadn't told her, they were broadcasting their tourist status. Josie often wondered why vacationers couldn't figure out how to properly apply sunblock. Over the years she'd seen various red-and-white stripes, Rudolph noses, hairline sunburns, and handprints.

Even with their neon noses, Josie thought they were the cutest and wondered if such happiness was ever going to be in the cards for her. Seemed the only card she owned was the one that kept her rooted behind this counter, parroting courteous responses to customer accolades.

The man wrapped his arm around his wife's shoulders. "And just think, we were about to walk on by, but the people piling in and out of this old building made us curious enough to step inside."

"A hidden gem is what Driftwood Diner is." The wife added a generous tip to the old-fashioned milk can that served as the tip jar for counter service. "It's the best meal we've had since arriving."

Josie couldn't agree more. She was right proud of the establishment created at the hands of her parents. The timeworn, rusted shanty sat proudly, even with its arthritic lean to the left, on the sand of coastal South Carolina and had been a prominent fixture in the Sunset Cove community for nearly four decades. Its breakfast fare was legendary, and it usually took just one taste of the biscuits and gravy to have a newbie hooked for life. Josie's father replaced the traditionally used ground sausage with chopped shrimp, taking the already-decadent dish over the top.

"Y'all have a good time at the beach, and be sure to come back for lunch." She waved goodbye to the couple.

"Oh, we will. I have to try the shrimp burgers." The husband waved one last time before guiding his wife out the screen door.

Josie continued on autopilot, gathering dirty dishes and wiping

down the counter while her mind wandered toward happier thoughts of the upcoming weekend meeting with the Sand Queens.

Just as the aged shack had held its ground against passing storms over the years, so had Josie and her two closest friends, Opal Gilbert and Sophia Prescott. The Sand Queens of Sunset Cove had affectionately earned their moniker from their mothers, who practically raised them on the very sand in front of the diner. Their bond was as solid as the galvanized screws that secured the tin roof to the graying clapboard structure.

Josie had witnessed a similar bond with the motley crew of geriatric ladies who were making their way into the diner at the moment. Well . . . her dad said *ladies* was too generous a word for the Knitting Club, considering they were a thorn in many a Sunset Cove resident's side. *Busybodies* was the term most folks used for the half-dozen or so old ladies of various shapes, sizes, and races.

"Josephine, this gout is killing me. Get us to our table 'fore I fall out," Ethel grouched, limping into the dining area, carrying her walking cane like a purse strap in the crook of her arm. She was dressed in her blue uniform, so Josie knew the ole grouser would be making customers miserable at the post office later in the morning. How the woman had kept her position as head postmaster for over forty years was an unsolved mystery. She also seemed to make it her mission to call everyone by the wrong name.

Case in point, Josie's name was not Josephine, but she chose to ignore it just as she did anything that could be considered confrontational. Instead, she pointed to Ethel's arm. "The cane would be more helpful if you'd actually use it, Miss Ethel."

"Oh, hush up." Ethel plopped into her chair as several other women followed suit, each one groaning and grunting while settling in at the long wooden table.

Josie gravitated to her favorite of the bunch with her order pad in hand. “Good morning, Miss Dalma. What can I get you?”

Dalma Jean Burgess grinned up at Josie, showing off the fact that she had forgotten her teeth. Who knew where they would turn up? Josie made a mental note to look for them later when she stopped by Dalma’s house.

“I’m fine, dear. I had a bowl of cereal earlier.” Dalma plucked a sugar packet out of the small mason jar on the table, tore it open, and dumped the contents into her mouth.

Josie’s eyes narrowed and scanned the tiny lady who didn’t even make it past five feet in height nor one hundred pounds in weight. Dalma wore a pair of worn brown corduroy overalls with a fine silk blouse in a blush shade. A straw hat sat lopsided on top of a head full of long, wavy white hair. With the eighty-nine-year-old’s ever-present smile and quirky wardrobe, she reminded Josie of a friendly scarecrow one would find in the corn patch out at Pickering Farms. Except for the pink bedroom slippers on her feet, that was.

“Miss Dalma, you’re out of milk,” Josie stated after refocusing on the woman’s comment. Milk was on the shopping list she needed to knock out after her shift. “How’d you manage eating cereal?” She reached into the back pocket of her jean shorts to make sure the list was still there.

Dalma waved off Josie’s concern, the overhead lights glinting off the giant ruby ring on her index finger. “I had vanilla ice cream. Works just as good as milk.” She shrugged her thin shoulder and winked one of her cloudy-blue eyes. “Tastes better than milk, as a matter of fact. Will you add another pint to the shopping list?”

Even though Dalma had retired more than ten years ago, she would always be considered the town’s librarian. Josie recalled Saturdays spent sitting on a rug in the children’s room while Dalma

acted out whatever book she was reading for story time. No one could tell a humorous story like Miss Dalma, and yet her own story seemed quite tragic in Josie's opinion. She'd lived long enough to bury her husband and only child, leaving her alone except for her church family and the Knitting Club. And, well, Josie too. Five years ago, Dalma's mind seemed to start slipping, so Josie stepped in and designated herself as caregiver.

Josie scribbled *two fried eggs, coffee* on the order pad before moving her attention to Bertie, who was unofficially the ringleader of what should have been named the Busybody Gossip Club.

"I heard a certain someone has moved back to town," Bertie drawled while keeping her eyes focused on a menu she probably had memorized. She patted down the side of her freshly teased gray hair with her free hand, going for casual but failing.

A name, followed by an image, skirted through Josie's mind regarding who that certain someone could be, but she quickly shut down those thoughts and chose not to take Bertie's bait. Besides, there was no way he would ever return to the small town of Sunset Cove for good, not when the world was his oyster.

"Would you like the Sea Traveler's Special today, Miss Bertie?" It was her usual and Josie was trying to hurry things along, but when Bertie used the menu as a fan and grinned wide, she knew there would be no hurrying along whatever was going on.

"Ah . . . traveling the world . . ." Bertie sighed. "Such a romantic idea. Don't ya think, Josie?"

Josie's chest began to burn. It was the same reaction produced each time he drifted into town for a quick visit with his family. She always made herself scarce during those times, not wanting a reminder of all the dreams that one man represented that would never be hers. It was no one's fault but life itself, and Josie would willingly lay down those

dreams all over again to be there for her father. Some folks declared her too shy, while others outright claimed she was too passive. Maybe she was a little more of both than she should be, but more importantly, Josie was loyal to a fault. And sometimes that loyalty needed her to put herself aside for the betterment of others.

“Did you hear me, honey?” Bertie’s question dripped with false sickly sweetness, but Josie saw past it to the pot the old lady was working on stirring.

“Excuse me, ladies.” Josie waved over one of her waitresses. “Tracy, please take these ladies’ orders.” She shoved the pad into Tracy’s hands and hurried to the counter to find something, anything, to do to tamp down her emotions. She took a minute to shoot Opal a text, asking if she was planning on stopping by. When an answer didn’t come in after a few beats, she slid the phone back into her pocket and rang up a customer with a take-out order.

After a small rush of customers passed through, Josie felt somewhat settled. She scanned the Knitting Club’s table and caught Dalma pouring maple syrup into her cup of coffee. She was just a wisp of a woman but had filled a giant void in Josie’s life. A smile pulled at her lips as she thought about helping Dalma plant tomato bushes the week before even though the lady adamantly declared they were strawberry plants.

Josie’s reverie came to a screeching halt as the screen door squeaked open and ushered in not only a briny breeze, but also a vision from her past.

With a pronounced air of confidence, August Bradford walked over to the counter and halted in front of a dazed Josie. Her heart jolted at the sight of him, something only this man could elicit. He spoke—or at least his lips moved—but she couldn’t hear anything over the roar suddenly residing in her eardrums.

The Knitting Club's table kicked up in volume, sounding like a bunch of hens clucking away, but there was no focusing on what they were clucking about either. She knew the answer anyway and had a feeling their timing wasn't coincidental. All Josie could do was just stand there and stare, as if looking into his silvery-blue eyes had turned her to stone. With a hint of purple near the center, those uniquely hued eyes were made to belong to an artist such as August Bradford. The thick fringe of black eyelashes only emphasized their beauty. It was enough to spawn jealousy in Josie, her own fair lashes barely visible, but it didn't. It only tempted her to stand there and stare unabashedly. Mouth agape, that's exactly what she did.

"Are you okay?" A throaty voice penetrated the roar in her ears as a hand waved in front of her face.

Oh, my . . . that voice . . .

The words simply wouldn't come—only pitiful squeaks of breaths escaped—so Josie did the only thing to come to mind. She hightailed it into the kitchen.

As the swinging door flapped a few times before shutting behind her, she knelt behind the workstation and tried working some oxygen into her seized-up lungs. The normal comforting scents of fried seafood and sizzling breakfast meats did very little to calm her as she slowly inhaled and exhaled.

"What in the world's ailing you, Jo-Jo?" Her dad turned his back to the grill, wiped his hands on his apron, and ambled over to check on her.

She shook her head when her tongue remained frozen.

The burly man glanced out the small circular window in the door and grumbled under his breath. "We got two girls out sick today and customers lining up. Whatever this is, you need to get over it."

"I just n-n-need . . . a minute," she managed to stammer out

while wiping away the sheen of perspiration that had broken out on her forehead.

With another grumble under his breath, her dad pushed through the door and then let out a guffaw boisterous enough to have Josie scooting over to the door. She cracked it open just enough to catch sight of the dark-haired man at the counter. Seeing him was so exhilarating it was nearly devastating.

“August Bradford! All the way back from New York City! How are ya, boy?” Jasper moved around and grabbed the *boy*, who was close to a foot taller than him, into a bear hug.

“Good to see you, Jasper.” August returned the hug with as much exuberance while chuckling in such a deep baritone it seemed to rumble throughout the building.

“Are you just passing through?” Jasper gave August’s shoulder a firm clap before moving behind the counter.

“No. I’m home to stay.” August settled onto one of the stools.

“Really? I figured those hoity-toity galleries up north wouldn’t give you back to us.”

“Nah. I have a few of my pieces on display in a couple different galleries there, but my uncle offered me the front space in his music studio here.” August shared the impressive information with as much humbleness as if he had merely said his art would be on display at the run-down flea market up the road. It was a charming characteristic Josie had always admired about him.

Dishes clanged from behind her and drowned out whatever August was saying. She glanced over her shoulder and gave the guy on dish duty a stern glare, which he returned with a confused shrug as he dropped another pan into the giant stainless steel sink. She turned back to the cracked door and leaned her head out a little farther.

“Well, ain’t that great. Sure is good to have you home.” Jasper nodded his head, agreeing with his own statement.

August returned the nod. “It’s great to be back. I was right homesick.”

“I bet that uncle is gonna have you busy with the camp, too.”

August let out another throaty chuckle. “Oh yeah. The list is a mile long, but I’m pretty stoked to be helping.”

“What’s the name of it again?”

“Palmetto Fine Arts Camp. We’re scheduled to open the second week in June.”

“You boys only got two months to get it together then.”

Josie watched as August’s eyes shifted from the chatty man and caught her peeping out the door. He bit the corner of his lip before looking back to her dad. “The camp construction is complete. All we have to do is go in and put our stamp on the place.”

The two men talked a few more minutes with Josie catching only snippets of their conversation until a few groups cleared out and were quickly replaced by new customers. She knew her reprieve was about to come to an end.

“I know you ain’t in here just to see my purty mug. You want biscuits and gravy and apple-stuffed pancakes.”

August grinned. “Yes, sir. I’m hanging out with my kid brothers this morning, so I’ll need three orders, please.”

“I better make it four, then. Those boys know how to eat. I’ll get it going.” Jasper turned his head in the direction Josie thought she was hiding. “Jo-Jo, get on out here and serve August a cup of coffee.”

Josie nearly jumped out of her skin at the mention of her own name, making the door bang against the side of her forehead.

“She all right?” Josie heard August ask as she worked on rubbing the sting away.

“Who knows with that girl? Probably just hormonal or something.” Jasper waved off August’s concern and shuffled into the kitchen.

“Kill me dead now,” she mumbled to herself, mortified.

“You ain’t got time to be dead.” Jasper gave his daughter a stern look, leaving no room for argument as he pointed to the door. “Get out there. Now.”

Embarrassed and flustered as she was, Josie somehow managed to make her way out of the kitchen and over to the coffeepot. She poured a cup and placed it on the distressed-wood countertop in front of August without spilling a drop.

“Thanks.” August lifted the cup in her direction before taking a sip.

“Thank you,” she replied, feeling foolish. *Thank you?* She followed it up by blurting out more idiocy. “I’m welcome.” After all these years, how could August Bradford still make her so tongue-tied and rattled? She was a grown woman, for crying out loud.

August was decent enough not to call her out on her jumbled response. The only reaction he offered to her word folly and twitchy behavior was a wry smile, which he covered graciously with the coffee cup.

His free hand smoothed over one of the planks. “I’ve always loved these countertops.”

He seemed to be waiting for her to respond, but her eyes were fastened on the planks with her mouth pressed in a tight line. Some of the boards were naturally grayed, while others had light washes of white or teal. It was one of the last projects she had completed with her mom. Of course, her dad had grumbled at first but relented when they hauled in all of the reclaimed wood and set out to renovate the entire counter space, lengthening it enough

to accommodate ten mismatched wooden barstools Opal helped them find.

Josie's eyes unlatched from the counter and flickered around the dining hall, where a collection of rustic pieces of art—mostly fashioned from driftwood, seashells, and anything else that had washed up on shore—hung on the weathered shiplap walls. Several weathered signs hung precariously about as well. One of Josie's favorites stated, *Time near the coast doesn't move by the hour; it moves by the currents, plans by the tides, and follows the sun.*

The diner was a relaxed space, inviting people to come on in whether they had shoes or not, but it no longer held that comfort for Josie. Not one new piece of art had been added since that awful life storm turned her and her dad's life upside down.

Blinking the memory away as best she could before it blinded her, she managed a somber nod before moving to the other end of the counter to refill another patron's cup of coffee.

She kept busy with taking orders, ringing customers up, and checking on Dalma. At one point, from the corner of her eye, she caught August swiping a postcard from the stand beside the register. On the front of the card, intended for tourists, was a picture of the diner with blue skies and ocean waves in the background. After grabbing a stray pen from the counter, he began doodling something. As curious as Josie was, she willed herself not to look over and inspect it.

Thankfully, August's take-out order came up shortly. Before she could key it in the register, her dad interrupted.

"It's on the house."

August shook his head and fished out the wallet from the side pocket of his blue board shorts. "No, no. Let me pay."

"Nonsense. This is my welcome-home gift." Jasper made a show

of pushing the bag containing the foam carryout containers into August's reluctant hands. "Don't you dare be rude like that, boy."

Admitting defeat, August put away his wallet and accepted the bag. "Yes, sir. I appreciate it."

"You hitting the surf today?" Jasper asked, wiping his hand along the grease-stained apron.

"That was the plan, but the water is like glass." August stood up from the stool. "You gotta go surfing with me sometime."

Jasper cackled at the idea and slapped the pronounced O of his belly. "It's been too many years and way too many shrimp burgers for that."

"Nah, man. It's never too *anything* to pursue what you love." August fixed Josie with a meaningful look. "It was good seeing y'all."

"You too." Jasper easily sent the polite remark back while Josie stood beside him in her mute state. She had not uttered an intelligible word directly to him the entire time. "And tell your folks I said hey."

"Will do." August spoke to Jasper, but his eyes remained on Josie, like he was waiting for something. When she remained silent, he appeared to give up whatever he'd hoped for and turned to leave. The Knitting Club began calling out to him, but he was smart enough to only give them a gentlemanly nod and brief wave. Before he made it completely out the door, Opal blocked his path. The shimmering halo of blonde-tipped auburn curls floated every which way as she did her little clap-and-hop dance at the sight of August.

Josie tried not to stare as August and Opal exchanged what looked like pleasantries. The friendly pair laughed at one point with Opal patting his arm.

Opal was an artist in her own right, who took what most people considered junk and restored it into newer, more unique pieces that she sold from her downtown store, Bless This Mess. Back in their

youth, Josie and Opal had taken art classes with August at school as well as a few at the community center. Opal was social enough to befriend him, and Josie had been too awkward to do anything but admire him from afar.

Evidently time hadn't changed some things.

"I'll be by sometime this week," August's deep voice rang out as he headed outside, much to Josie's relief.

Opal nodded and waved before skipping over to the counter with a sweet smile on her fairylike face. Dressed in a peasant blouse, long skirt, and thick Birkenstocks, she was the epitome of cool and calm in the middle of the stuffy restaurant.

Even with several ceiling fans rotating overhead, sweat dewed along Josie's brow. She brushed away a damp lock of blonde hair that was beginning to stick there and mumbled, "Hey."

"Isn't it wonderful August has finally made his way home?" Opal's green eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

"Umm . . ." Josie busied herself with wiping down the already-clean counter until Opal snickered. "What?"

"You still don't know how to come to terms with your crush on that man, do you?" Opal snickered again.

"I'm too old to have a crush on anyone. And who says I ever had one on him?" Josie's cheeks lit with knowing she'd just told two fibs. By the smirk on her friend's face, she could tell Opal knew it too.

"You're twenty-five years old. . . . Keep telling yourself that," Opal said as she scooted behind the counter and helped herself to a glass of sweet tea as she had been doing for as long as Josie could remember. She then moved over and settled on the stool in front of the cash register. Her first sip almost sputtered all over the clean counter as she picked up the postcard and turned it for Josie to see. "Seems you're not the only one!"

Eyes wide in shock, Josie took in the simple yet astonishingly accurate sketch of her silhouette. She was amazed that a plain ink pen was used to create such a rendering and that a fifty-cent postcard served as the canvas.

“Oh, my goodness . . .” The wild beating of her heart started up again, and the oxygen to her lungs was so sparse she grew pure dizzy.

“Are you also too old for love letters?” Opal pointed to the scribbling underneath the drawing. *Untie your tongue and give me a call sometime.* Along with the simple one-line note, August included his number.

“Humph . . .” Josie paced behind the counter while Opal sat on the stool in all her coolness.

Suddenly the Sand Queens’ upcoming get-together felt foreboding. Opal and Sophia would have quite a fun time at her expense. They were like sisters, which meant they were loyal but loved to rib one another.

Exasperated, Josie left her friend at the counter, marched straight outside, and plunged herself into the ocean. No, not really, but she sure did consider it.



An hour slipped by after August’s grand reappearing and departure, followed by the Knitting Club and Opal departing as well. With them gone and the morning rush winding down, Josie could finally take a breath.

“Finally, some peace and quiet,” Josie spoke too soon as the screen door swung open to produce another thorn. “Could this day get any worse?”

As the newly arrived thorn made it to the counter, he produced

a gun from the pocket of his baggy basketball shorts. A loose tank top and a black ski mask completed his outfit.

Josie held out a hand, palm side up, and wiggled her fingers. "Give me that thing right now!"

"You need me to call the cops?" a customer asked as others began gasping and muttering.

Josie snatched the gun out of the reluctant thief's hand. "No thank you. This young man is just pulling our leg. No harm done." Josie smiled, trying to apply a good serving of Southern charm, but by the befuddled look on the woman's face, she wasn't buying it.

"But he had a gun," another customer pointed out, eyes wide.

Josie tsked. "It's only a water gun. See?" She aimed the gun toward the ceiling and pulled the trigger, producing a stream of water.

The thief's shoulders slumped. He released an exasperated huff and plopped down on a stool. "But I really need to rob you this time. I'm being for real."

"I'm not in the mood for this today, Theo Williams," Josie spoke quietly as she tossed the gun underneath the counter. It certainly looked like a real gun. Thinking better of it, she hid it underneath a stack of bags.

Jasper barreled out of the kitchen. "What in the sam hill is going on out here?"

"Theo's here to rob us again," Josie answered.

Jasper grumbled and shook his head. "Son, you need to stop causing a ruckus."

"He's your son?" a woman asked, edging closer to witness the little incident at the counter with several others following suit.

Josie exchanged a smirk with her father because Theo looked nothing like them, and not only because his skin tone was several

shades darker than theirs. Josie was tall, and her father was built sturdy. Poor Theo was short and scrawny.

“No, ma’am, but we claim him. How ’bout y’all go back to your breakfast and I’ll have some sweet glazed biscuits brought out—on the house—for the disturbance.” Jasper motioned for them to return to their tables, and after a few more moments of rubbernecking, they left the scene of the crime behind the counter.

Josie moved her attention to Theo. His ski mask was rucked up, making his face look like it was melting. “Why don’t you take that thing off? You’ve got to be burning up in it.”

“Someone might be able to ID me if I take it off.”

“Really, Theo?” Josie leaned over the counter and snatched it off, revealing a sweaty mess of a young man. “What did I tell you last time about trying to rob us?”

Theo shrugged. “That you’d wring my neck next time.”

Josie dismissed the threat with a flick of her wrist. “After that.”

Theo sighed. “If I needed money, to ask nicely for it.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“It makes me look needy.”

Josie scoffed. “I think you just enjoy the theatrics of the robbery.” She knew it was more on the lines of pride, and it didn’t help matters that Theo was a little on the slow side.

A few years ago, she’d taken Theo to the doctor’s office after he fell off the deck outside and was unable to get in touch with his mother, Deandrea. Doc Nelson, the town’s longtime pediatrician—known for his overuse of unusual expressions—explained that basically Theo’s light bulb was on, but it wasn’t screwed all the way into the socket. After that, Josie began helping out Theo and Deandrea when she could. He was nineteen now and thought he was the man

of the house, trying to help his mother make ends meet, but that usually ended up causing more of a problem than anything.

"How much is the electric bill?" Josie asked, knowing it was due.

"One hundred eight dollars and twelve cents. That's all I was gonna take." His big brown eyes began to water, and then his stomach rumbled loudly.

Josie patted his hand, resting on top of the counter. "I know, Theo. You hungry?"

"I could eat."

"I'll grab you a plate of food. After you finish, I need the garbage taken out and they could use some help washing the dishes in the kitchen. Once you're done with that, I'll pay you one hundred and thirty dollars." She fixed a glass of tea and placed it in front of him. "That sound like a deal?"

"But I only need one hundred eight dollars and twelve cents." Theo looked a little confused but relieved.

Josie's heart ached a little, knowing her thief was honest and sincere, even if he went about things in the wrong manner. She also knew he and his mother had fallen on hard times, so she would do what she could to make this difficult season a little easier for them. "You work hard until closing and you'll earn a bonus."

"I can do that," Theo responded with a good measure of enthusiasm. He smiled wide enough to show off the endearing gap between his front teeth.

Josie couldn't help but chuckle while heading into the kitchen to get Theo some food. "What a day," she mumbled to herself and was actually a little thankful for the bogus robbery. At least it helped to get her mind off a certain other man who made her heart do other peculiar things besides ache.