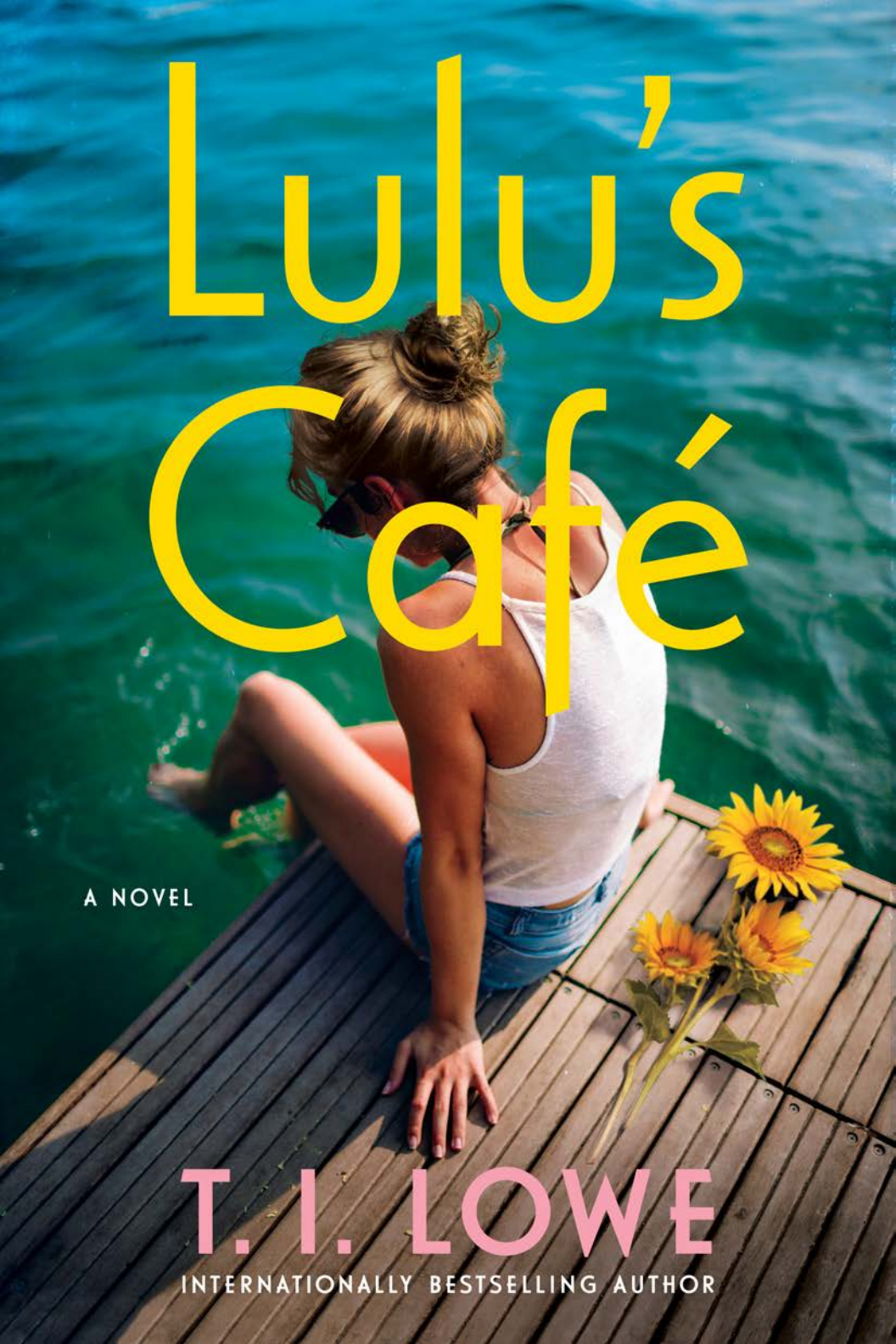


A woman with blonde hair in a bun, wearing a white tank top and blue shorts, sits on a wooden dock. She is looking back over her shoulder towards the camera. The dock is made of dark wooden planks. To her right, three bright yellow sunflowers are lying on the planks. The background is a body of water with a greenish-blue hue and gentle ripples.

Lulu's Café

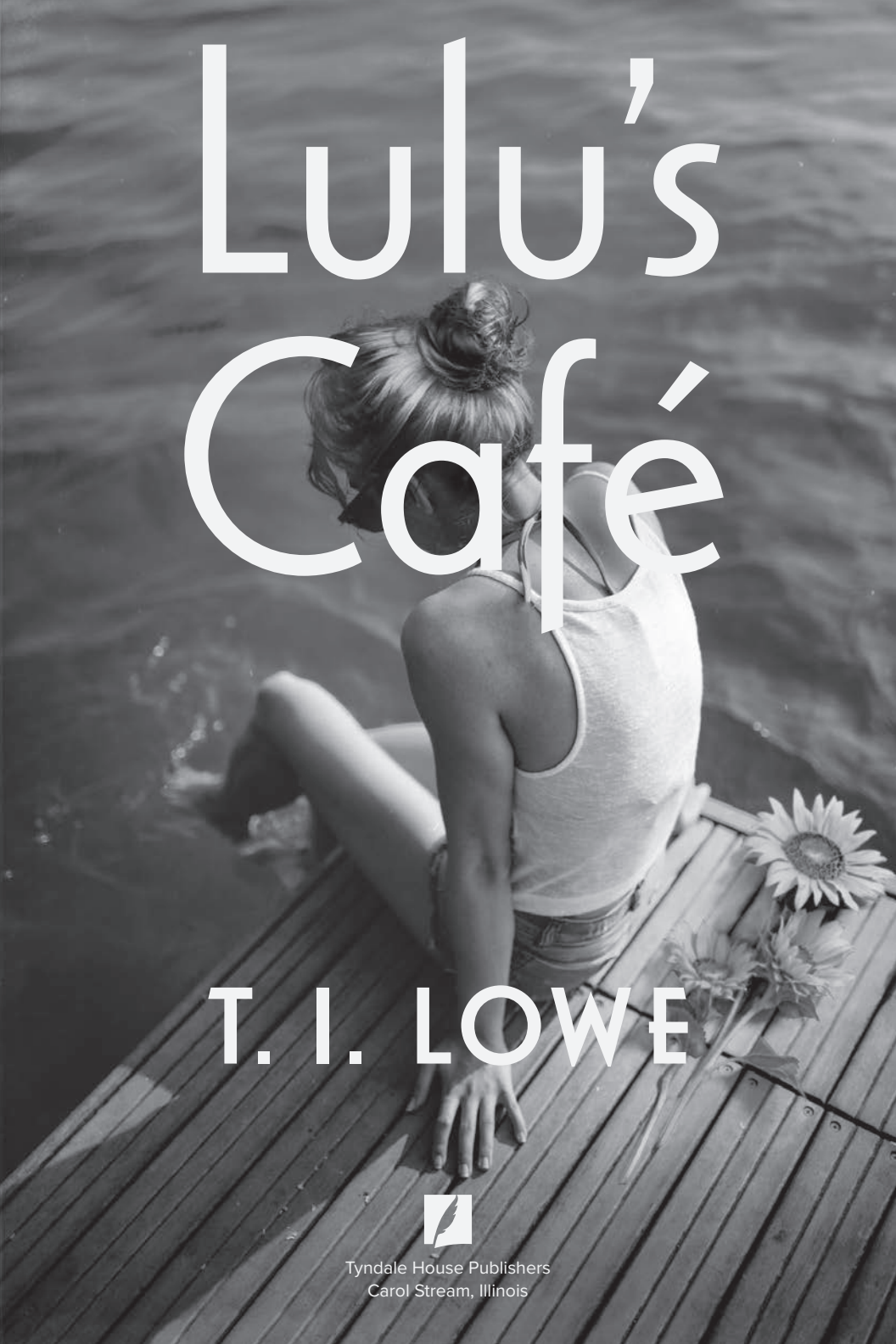
A NOVEL

T. I. LOWE

INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Lulu's Café

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Prologue

MOONLIGHT WASHED OVER the couple as they swayed in each other's arms in the cool water of the lavish pool. The humid country night air enveloped them in their own intimate world.

He gently kissed behind her right ear and then traced his fingertips along the thin scar tucked there. "I want to know about this," he whispered as he skimmed his lips over the scar.

Saying nothing, she shook her head.

He surprised her then by tapping the jagged scar she thought was hidden on her hip. "I want to know about this," he murmured into her ear.

How had he learned about that one? He looked up and gazed at her intensely. She detected a deep sadness in his ocean-colored eyes. She didn't want him to carry any part of the burden of her pain, but he had obviously taken it on anyway.

He pressed his lips to the faint scar tucked in her left eyebrow. "I want to know about this." He worked his way to the scar barely visible on her chin, which had been in the process of healing when she had arrived in town last fall. "I want to know about this."

He remembered.

He looked into her eyes as they swayed. He released her hip and pulled her scarred palm to his lips and brushed kisses over it. "I want to know about this." He pressed it to his pounding heart. "I *need* to know about this." The deep timbre of his voice was strained with emotion. Her body trembled from the longing in his voice.

Lastly, he traced the long scar across her bottom lip with his thumb. "I need to know about this," he said again.

Her breath hitched at the passion in his voice. Tears pricked her eyes. He was too observant and too persuasive. She laid her head on his shoulder to hide the tears. "Why do you need to know about some old ugly scars?" she mumbled against his shoulder.

He dipped into slightly deeper water so that she would have to raise her head and meet his eyes. "I need to know so I can help them heal." He brushed his hand over her cheek to wipe away her tears.

"Some scars don't ever heal," she whispered. "No matter how awfully bad you want them to. They're just too deep." She let him dance her to a gentle rhythm in the water for a while longer as she buried her face in the comforting crook of his neck.

As she held tight to him, his words began to resonate. It was time to take care of the past, even if it meant losing the future she would do anything to have.

1

DONUTS . . . Donuts make everything better!

“It’s a perfect morning for a perfect donut. Welcome to the Donut Diner. May I take your order?” asked the perky drive-thru attendant.

“Yes, I would like one dozen donuts and two small cappuccinos.”

“That’ll be \$15.76. Please drive around.”

Gabriella Sadler had been buying donuts from Shayna every week for the past year, ever since Shayna’s parents had added the drive-thru to their shop. By now the young woman knew Gabby’s favorites: Bavarian cream filled with chocolate ganache icing, lemon curd–filled powdered, and apple fritters.

“Oh . . . ,” Shayna said on a gasp as she opened the window. “Wow, those are some really hot wheels you’re sporting, Gabby.” The young woman couldn’t stop gawking at the shiny new Range Rover.

“Thank you.” Nervous, Gabriella tried to hand the girl the money.

Instead of taking the cash, the young woman studied Gabriella as if seeing something she wasn’t supposed to.

“Hmm, I get it. This is one of those make-up gifts, isn’t it?”

“I guess you could call it that,” Gabriella said. She gathered her scarf closer around her neck. *Stop asking questions and just give me the donuts.* “I’m in a bit of a hurry, Shayna.”

"I knew it was a make-up gift. I need to find me a honey who can afford a new Range Rover. You are *so* lucky." Shayna giggled.

"You have *no* idea," Gabriella said under her breath and tried once again to pay for her order.

Shayna finally took the money and handed over the fresh treats and coffees. "I hope you and Mr. Sadler enjoy breakfast."

"Okay. Thanks." Gabriella carefully set the box on the luxurious leather passenger seat. After placing the coffees in the cup holders, she steered the SUV away without another word. All she wanted was to be alone to enjoy her donuts.

As she pulled out of the lot, she fished out a Bavarian cream. She scarfed down the fresh fried dough in three bites and washed it down with some of the sweet coffee. Feeling a bit better, she headed toward the market. Today was Thursday, and Thursday was designated as grocery shopping day.

As she parked at the far end of the lot, her phone rang. She reluctantly pulled the phone from her purse and cringed at the name on the display.

"Hello?"

"Where are you?" Brent asked in his cool, controlling voice.

"I'm almost at the market." Her stomach knotted as she sat there staring at the building in question. Her mouth watered as her fingers worked the donut box lid off. One of the apple fritters screamed her name. It was all she could do not to dig in at that moment, but he would know what she was doing. She didn't feel up to the tongue-lashing that would surely follow.

"You have one hour to be back home." Brent hung up.

"I hate you," she whispered into the phone before throwing it back in her purse.

She moved her seat back to make room for the donut box on her lap and then indulged in the remaining treats. She loved the privacy of the tinted windows on the silver Range Rover. It made her feel like

she was in her own bubble. She refrained from inhaling the apple fritter in three bites. She savored each bite and then continued on to the homemade strawberry jam-filled one. It practically melted in her mouth. She washed the lemon curd-filled donut down with the rest of the first cup of coffee. Trying to fill the void in her life, she moved through the donuts until the box was empty and both coffees were drained. Then the dread of what she had just done pointed its disapproving finger at her.

After taking a few difficult breaths, Gabriella checked for donut crumbs and reapplied her lip gloss. Easing out of her vehicle, she gathered her trash and placed it in the receptacle she had purposely parked beside.

Just as she entered the sliding doors of the market, a wave of nausea and dizziness from the donut binge rushed over her. As she worked to regain her composure, she glanced at her surroundings. Standing at the produce area near the entrance was a group of local hens, clucking away. She couldn't avoid them. They had already spotted her, and there was no escape.

"Look who just waddled through the door." The tall brunette named Junie smirked.

"What in the world does Brent see in Gabby? I mean—really. Look at her." Sara wrinkled her nose.

"What?" asked their clueless friend, Hannah. "I think she looks like a porcelain doll with that creamy skin and beautiful hair." She shrugged as the other two laughed.

"More like a fat porcelain doll," Junie said.

"Hello, Gabby. Honey, I just love that scarf. It really makes that big ole trench coat pop," Junie said in her sweetest voice as she watched Gabriella grab a cart.

Gabriella barely glanced at them as she walked over to the tomato section. She tried to force the tears to stay at bay. "Thank you," she mumbled. She wasn't stupid, but she didn't feel up to being sassy

back. She heard them snicker as she moved on to the fruit section. Sweat beaded on her top lip and the wooziness grew more intense. She knew better than to eat all those donuts in one sitting, but she just couldn't bring herself to toss any of them. Next time, she would only order a half dozen.

The hens moved to the checkout line, so Gabriella tried to focus on the task at hand. A wave of nausea slammed into her so forcefully she had to abandon her cart and rush to the restroom. She barely made it into a stall before vomiting up the donuts and cappuccinos. Severe pain radiated from her sore neck, causing another sudden bout of retching. She braced both sides of her neck and held her hair back at the same time. After the heaving passed, she flushed the toilet. *What a waste.*

Snapping out of the fuzz of the sugar overdose, Gabriella slowly moved to the sink to wash out her mouth. She glanced at herself in the mirror with disgust. She knew this qualified as an eating disorder. She gingerly rubbed her throbbing neck, feeling hopeless as to how to escape any of it.

Knowing that time was rapidly ticking away, she made her way back to the produce section to retrieve her cart. She placed everything on the list—yogurt, fresh fish, lean steak, fruits and vegetables, gourmet coffee, and skim milk—in the buggy. Brent was very specific as to what brands Gabriella could purchase and was adamant she keep to his precise list. She also gathered items on a mental list consisting of Oreos, Fudge Rounds, Snickers bars, Twinkies, and canned soda.

Trying to pick a new cashier, Gabriella made her way to the cash register. She separated the two orders, paying with a credit card for the things on Brent's list and paying cash for her own. As the cashier bagged the junk food, Gabby looked around; she was relieved not to recognize any faces. Taking a deep breath, she made her way to the Range Rover, loaded the groceries, and headed home.

Home was an ultra-sleek loft in downtown Olympia, Washington. It probably had once been a nice rustic space with exposed brick and worn wood floors, but there was no evidence of that now. Everything was modern with crisp, straight lines and a monochromatic color scheme of grays and whites. The only other color that was sparsely placed throughout the loft was a deep orange. To Gabriella, nothing looked inviting. The furniture was more for design than function; there was no give to the surface when you sat on the couch or on the linear chairs. It was a space that rarely had any visitors.

As Gabriella pushed through the doorway, her phone began to ring. Sheer terror shot through her, knowing it was only rings away from going to voice mail, so she dropped the bags and rummaged through her purse for the phone. Fumbling to hit Answer, she spoke before the phone was even to her ear. "I'm here."

"You're late."

"No!" She rushed to explain, "I was in the bathroom."

"What's wrong with your voice?" Brent's voice rose with impatience.

Well, let's see . . . you nearly choked me to death this week, you sick monster. I tried to forget it by downing a dozen donuts and two cappuccinos. I got violently sick, and now I'm worse for the wear because of it. Gabriella pulled herself together.

"My throat and neck are pretty sore," she said quietly. "Brent, I think I need to go to the doctor." She knew he wouldn't allow it, but she hoped this would get him off her back.

"Just give it a few days. You'll be fine." He almost sounded remorseful. *Almost*. "Did you pick up the fish like I asked?"

Gabriella rolled her eyes. "Yes."

"Good. My flight is scheduled to land a little after five. I want fish and sautéed vegetables served at seven."

"Okay," she said, but he had already hung up. "I hate you," she whispered into the phone as she stared at her reflection in the shiny black-lacquered cabinet in the kitchen.

Gabriella considered how her life had been a nightmare from the very beginning. *After surviving the foster care system, aren't I due some goodness in my life? Instead, I've moved out of hell and taken up residence with the devil himself in his fancy loft.*

After putting away the regular groceries, she grabbed her junk food bags and headed for the guest bedroom closet that served as a storage closet. It was also Gabriella's holding cell when Brent couldn't take the sight of her anymore. She poured the individually wrapped snack cakes into empty shoe boxes and hid the other treats and soda in the far corner where extra water bottles were stashed. She gathered all of the packaging, carried it outside, and stuffed it into her neighbor's trash bin.

Once she made her way back inside, she glanced at the clock. She had about seven hours before beginning supper. She popped a couple of Tylenol PMs and headed to bed, hoping to escape the world for a while. She set her alarm clock and wiped away a tear. Her neck ached and her soul felt broken. She slipped off the scarf that concealed the deep-purple bruises and gently rubbed her neck as she stretched out on the bed. She mentally began to sing her theme song, "Fly Away" by Lenny Kravitz, as she waited for the medicine to kick in.