

THE CAROLINA COAST SERIES

Beach Haven

a novel

T. I. LOWE

BEACH HAVEN



Beach Haven

T. I. LOWE



*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois*

Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

Visit T. I. Lowe at www.tilowe.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Beach Haven

Copyright © 2019 by T. I. Lowe. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of dinner on the beach copyright © Oleg Kaplunov/EyeEm/Getty Images. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of sky copyright © VRstudio/Shutterstock. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of string lights copyright © Jellopy/Shutterstock. All rights reserved.

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

Designed by Faceout Studio, Jeff Miller

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*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Beach Haven 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, or call 1-800-323-9400.

ISBN 978-1-4964-4040-2

Printed in the United States of America

25 24 23 22 21 20 19

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”

JEREMIAH 29:11

1

Weaving through a jungle of the most outlandish antiques he'd ever come across, Lincoln Cole was dumbfounded and intrigued all at once. Surrounded by unusually dressed pieces of furniture, he did a three-sixty and scratched at the scruff on his cheek. The scruff indicated he was more than a few days past needing a shave, but the rebellion that had taken root in him since the injury he sustained in Syria had overruled grooming protocol that morning. Waking up from the recurring nightmare often left him too raw to focus on such mundane things. At least he had managed a shower and a fresh change of clothes.

Whimsical feminine humming somehow found its way to him as he suppressed the limp wanting to reside in his left leg while hobbling another few steps forward. Although it was a sunny day in late September, his leg was telling him the pleasant weather wouldn't last for very long.

Nothing good ever lasts long . . .

Lincoln huffed in frustration over his own thoughts and stood semihidden in a section of old desks. He cast his gaze upward and blinked a few times. Various tables and chairs were suspended from the ceiling. A few had

been converted into light fixtures, while the rest of them looked like they were being held hostage by thick cables.

“Good morning,” a cheery voice came from behind him. “Welcome to Bless This Mess.”

Keeping his focus on the ceiling, Lincoln spoke the first thing to flicker through his mind. “Is that even safe?” He pointed to the pieces of furniture that appeared to be floating above their heads.

“Oh yes. Code inspectors have deemed my mess safe.”

The woman’s teasing voice finally had Lincoln turning in her direction. Peering at him from the other side of a wooden hutch that had been transformed into a bath vanity was a sprite of a woman with the wildest head of golden-red curls he’d ever seen. The tips were lighter as if the sun had reached down and stolen the color. She closely resembled the mosaic fairy he’d seen on the outside of the building.

Clearing his throat, he offered a curt “Good.”

A smile began to blossom across the lively woman’s face as she smoothed some kind of flowy blouse with her petite hand, causing a gaudy collection of bracelets to clang against one another. Lincoln assessed her as he’d been trained to do in the military. He measured her no bigger than a minute and figured he could apprehend her with one hand tied behind his back, but he considered those big green eyes of hers and cataloged them as her secret weapon. They sparkled, but that wasn’t what set off the warning bells. No, those eyes were watching him way too closely and had already seen way more than they should. Assessment complete, he began to slowly back away.

“I have the perfect piece for you.” She held an index finger in the air, halting his attempted retreat. She skipped off in the opposite direction, sending the spirals of soft

red-and-blonde hair into a dance. "I'm Opal, by the way," she said quickly over her shoulder.

She disappeared from sight, but he could hear the banging and clattering from his two o'clock, giving away her location. "I didn't come here for furniture."

"Oh, that's okay. This piece was meant for you, nonetheless, so I insist on you taking it." Her grunts came from the back and sounded like she was struggling with something.

Sighing, Lincoln looked heavenward at the craziness on the ceiling one last time before walking through the maze to find her. He stopped cold in his tracks when he found her sitting on a soldier's footlocker.

"I found this on a junking trip last year." Opal smoothed her tiny hand over the thick gray cushion that had been fitted on the top. It reminded Lincoln of a military-issue wool coat. "For some reason, I just knew it needed to be transformed into a bench seat. Possibly for an entry piece where someone can sit and remove or put on their shoes. Or maybe at the foot of a bed." She swung her feet back and forth, looking like a little kid. Flip-flops peeked from the edges of her fraying bell-bottom jeans each time her legs swayed forward.

Not letting himself get caught in the confusing inquiry of where she found such an odd pair of jeans, Lincoln crossed his arms and regarded the piece suspiciously. "Why'd you make it so tall?" His eyes dropped to the thick wooden spindles she'd used for the legs. They were painted a neutral gray to coordinate with the creamy beige used on the trunk. It was obvious she'd put a lot of thought into the piece, even restenciling the ID number along the front side in the same gray as the legs.

"I had a feeling the owner would need the extra leg

space. What are you, six-four?" She gave him a swift once-over.

Six-five. "Close enough."

She smirked like she had a secret. "If you're not here for furniture, then what are you here for?"

Lincoln moved his eyes away from the peculiar woman and swept them over the menagerie of furniture pieces while rubbing a hand through his long brown hair. Haircuts were another ritual he'd allowed to die several months ago, right along with his military career.

After giving her question some thought, Lincoln answered honestly, "I'm not sure." He turned and began moving through the rows as quick as his achy leg would carry him.

"You forgot your bench!" Opal called from behind him. "And you didn't even introduce yourself!"

Her petitions did nothing to slow his already-sluggish getaway. He didn't stop until he was piled back into his Jeep and heading down the beachfront road.

"Smooth, Cole. Real smooth." He groaned and released one tight-fisted pound against the steering wheel. Between the throb in his knee and the unsettling encounter with the store's owner, all he wanted to do was go back to his beach cottage and hide from the feeling that he didn't fit anywhere anymore. The doctors had done the best they could with his knee, putting enough hardware in his leg for him to be considered part cyborg, but no bolt or pin could put his destroyed life back together.

The promise he'd made to meet his buddy Carter for a late breakfast trumped the desire to hide. No matter how many vicissitudes had occurred in his life, Lincoln Cole still remained a man of his word. So instead of doing what his bones ached to do, Lincoln pulled up at Driftwood

Diner and made his way inside, where he found Carter was already perched on a stool at the counter.

“You eating without me?” Lincoln gave Carter a manly slap on the shoulder while inspecting an untouched plate of delicious-looking fare—biscuits and gravy, bacon, French toast, and eggs.

Carter stood and gave him a bear hug. Lincoln cringed at the contact. The Cole family was not an affectionate bunch. Handshakes from the men and hugs from the women that were so brief they could hardly constitute as hugs were what he was used to receiving. Carter and his family were the complete opposite, offering long embraces and draping arms over each other’s shoulders without thought.

Carter finally released him and gestured for him to have a seat. “I was beginning to think you ditched me. Good to see you, man.”

“Sorry. This bum knee won’t let me get anything done fast. It’s good to see you too.” Lincoln stifled a grunt as he settled on the stool beside Carter. Moving in and unpacking the last few days had stiffened his leg considerably, making him feel more like a decrepit old geezer than the thirty-three-year-old he was. He pulled in a deep breath, stealing the enticing aroma of fried bacon and rich, robust coffee. “This place looks like it’s ready to collapse, but it sure does smell good.”

“The dilapidated shack is part of the charm, but wait until you taste the food.” Carter waved over a tall blonde. “Josie, you think you could bring my buddy Lincoln one of your Hungry Sailor’s Specials?”

“You got it.” She offered Lincoln a welcoming smile. “What can I get you to drink?”

Lincoln motioned to Carter’s cup. “Coffee would be great, please.”

Once the waitress disappeared into the kitchen, Lincoln angled himself on the stool to keep a better eye on the perimeter of the dining area. The place was busy considering it was well past Labor Day, but most of the clientele looked to be made up of fishermen. The telltale signs of fishing bibs and hats gave them away. He noticed a few tables in the back corner occupied by young mothers chatting it up over coffee while their little ones either slept in their carriers or made a gaum in their high chairs.

“You settled in at the cottage all right?” Carter asked as he studied his plate, looking as starved as Lincoln but being polite enough to wait.

“Yeah. It’s peaceful for sure.” And peace was exactly what he was looking for.

The blonde waitress was back in a flash and placed several plates before him. The savory scents of breakfast meats and a sweet vanilla perfume wafting from a thick stack of French toast had him turning to face the counter.

“Wow.” Lincoln picked up his fork and pointed it in the direction of one of Carter’s plates. “Why didn’t I get any biscuits and gravy?” he asked the waitress. “And is that shrimp in the gravy?”

“A batch of biscuits just came out the oven. I’ll bring you out a serving in a minute. We use shrimp instead of sausage.”

“It’s genius,” Carter commented.

Josie only added a timid smile as she placed a cup beside Lincoln’s plate and filled it with aromatic coffee.

“Thank you, ma’am.” Lincoln tipped his head before taking a sip. Still unable to shake off the bad night’s sleep, it was exactly what he needed.

“You’re welcome. I’ll go grab you some biscuits and gravy.” She backtracked to the kitchen.

Lincoln cut into the thick slices of toast and crammed a bite into his mouth. Before he could start chewing, Carter bowed his head and said grace, thanking God for the food and for Lincoln's safe return from overseas. Lincoln, feeling uneasy, waited to take another bite until his friend wrapped up the prayer.

He wasn't on good terms with God as of late. His gran and paps always said God wanted to answer his prayers and to see him prosper. Lincoln had wholeheartedly believed them until a rocket attack showed him just how naive he'd been.

Lincoln came from a long line of Marines. He was a Cole, and Coles were born to protect their country. His grandfather, great-uncle, uncle, and dad had all been career soldiers, and that was Lincoln's projected path. He'd managed almost two tours until an attack in Syria ended his plans, leaving him broken and uncertain of any future. The need for a little space to heal and overcome the shame of letting his family down was one of the reasons he finally accepted his friend August's advice to take a break from Beaufort, South Carolina, and headed up the coast to Sunset Cove.

"When's August going to grace us with his presence?" Lincoln asked between bites, trying to ignore his dismal thoughts.

Carter sopped up the creamy gravy with a chunk of biscuit and chuckled. "That one has been globe-trotting for so long, I think he sometimes forgets he's supposed to grace us with his appearance now and then."

August was Carter's nephew even though the two guys were fairly close in age and acted more like brothers. Lincoln had met them both at a summer ministry camp in Beaufort years ago when they were all teens, before Lincoln became a soldier and August a world-renowned

artist. They had instantly clicked and had remained in touch over the years. August was the type of guy to draw others to him, so it was no surprise when Lincoln formed a close-knit bond with him similar to that he would later find with his military brothers. Carter was also a great friend, but he was now in love and that kept the sucker too preoccupied.

“He’s back in the States now, though, right?” Lincoln shoved another bite of sweet toast in and followed it with a strip of bacon.

“Yeah. Wrapping up an inner-city art project in New York,” Carter explained around a mouthful of food.

Lincoln chewed thoughtfully while musing over August. The guy was an artistic genius with a penchant for hair dye and piercings, and he could create art out of just about anything. Lincoln was right proud of how his friend had used that incredible talent to share with others through an international art ministry that introduced fine arts to the less fortunate. August had also found his place in the world of art. His paintings hung in galleries from California to New York. “He’s really made a name for himself, hasn’t he?”

Carter’s face lit up with pride. “He sure has. He’s gone and gotten famous on us.”

Carter Bradford had made a name for himself in his own right. Until recently, he and his fiancée, Dominica, had been members of a praise and worship band that shared their talent at camps and conferences across the United States. Carter was the sound tech guy but knew his way around a piano and could pick about any song on a guitar. Dominica was the bass player. Lincoln didn’t know what all was behind their early retirement, but he figured Carter would share it if he wanted to. And if not, Lincoln deduced it was none of his business.

Carter reached over and grabbed the carafe and refilled both their cups with coffee. "August told me he set you up with a job at Bless This Mess. When do you start?" He took another sip of coffee.

Lincoln stared down at his plate. "I'm not working there."

"Why not?" Carter groaned. "August promised Opal you would, and he doesn't make a habit of promising something he can't deliver. Was she upset?"

Lincoln's back tensed up, knowing good and well he'd just made his friend do something he himself wouldn't do. But then again, August had no business making promises on his behalf in the first place. "She had no reason to be upset. I didn't even tell her who I was, so she's fine. That woman doesn't seem to be one for getting upset, anyway." Lincoln shrugged and chomped down on another crispy strip of bacon.

Carter gave him a shrewd look while slowly chewing. "You're selling it a little too hard there, buddy."

"What?" Lincoln shook his head. "Am not." He wiped his mouth with his wadded-up napkin and took a sip of coffee. "Look, I'll have August call her up and explain that his friend changed his mind about the job. No harm, no foul."

"She really needs the help, Linc. Don't leave her hanging."

"She's weird. Why would August even suggest me putting up with her? She some kind of hippie or something?" Lincoln asked just as the waitress placed a piping hot plate full of biscuits and gravy before him.

He was about to dive in when he noticed she wasn't wearing that pleasant smile any longer. "I overheard you, and can I just say that Opal may be weird but she's a good weird. The wisest weird woman you'll ever meet. And I

can guarantee you'd have a fun time working with her. No chance of boredom."

Lincoln shifted on the stool, aggravated and a little embarrassed. "I'm not looking for a good time." And he certainly didn't want to deal with Opal's intuitiveness, which he'd noticed even in their brief meeting. He grimaced.

"Clearly," the blonde muttered while walking off.

"Who does she think she is?" Lincoln glared at her retreating back.

"That's Josie. One of Opal's best friends. And you just got on her bad side. I'd leave a fat tip after how you just got caught talking about her friend—or find somewhere else to eat from now on." Carter waved a hand toward Lincoln. "And besides, look at you with all that long hair and your old Converse. *You* look like the hippie." He pushed an elbow into Lincoln's side and tsked. "Even got a rip in the knee of your jeans."

Lincoln suppressed the urge to tuck his shoulder-length hair behind his ear, knowing his friend would call him out on it. And he could razz Carter right back. With shaggy brown hair that the sun had faded quite a bit and wearing his own pair of tattered jeans with a surf logo T-shirt, Carter was a cross between country boy USA and SoCal surfer dude.

He let it go and muttered, "I'm not looking for complication, and that woman screams it."

Carter huffed a laugh. "It's just delivering furniture and helping Opal move stuff around. How's that complicated?"

The way she looked at me was complicated. Lincoln held that comment back and focused on enjoying every bite of breakfast just in case it was the last time he was allowed in. It was a mighty fine meal, so he hoped he wouldn't be banned from the premises.

“Your loss then.” Carter shook his head, but after another bite of food, he changed the subject and filled Lincoln in on the fine arts camp he was going to open next summer. The conversation remained on that topic until their plates were clean. After settling the bill, and Lincoln placing a twenty in the tip jar while making sure Josie saw him do it, the guys headed outside.

It was quite a nice, sunny day on the beach with a subtle breeze, but the stunning ocean view wasn't the cause of Lincoln coming to a halt. No, it had everything to do with the redhead sitting on the hood of his Jeep. He eyed her with as much annoyance as possible before sliding his focus to the bench wedged in the back of his vehicle. He knew he should have put the top on.

Crossing his arms, he glared at her. “How'd you manage that?” His head ticked in the direction of the bench. “And just how did you know this was my Jeep?”

Opal didn't make a move to get down as he'd expected. Instead, she lifted her legs from the bumper and crisscrossed them. “Honey, this Southern drawl may come out a little slow, but I ain't. I also move faster than you and saw you climb into this beast before peeling out of my parking lot. How *rude*.” Her dainty brows rose on that last word.

Lincoln ignored her reprimand and Carter's snort of laughter. “How'd your tiny self get that bench loaded up?”

She sent him a bored look. “I know how to work a dolly.”

In his periphery, Lincoln caught Carter trying to slink away. His hand darted out and fisted in the back of his buddy's T-shirt. “Where do you think you're going?”

Carter yanked free. “Taking the high road. You got your ornery butt into this mess. Now figure out how to get out of it.” He tipped his head at the young woman. “Opal.”

“See ya later, Carter,” she said in that breezy voice that was already raking Lincoln’s nerves.

Lincoln watched in disbelief as Carter left him high and dry. He turned back to the peculiar woman, knowing he had no other choice unless he was going to physically remove her, and that wasn’t an option. Clenching his fists, he waited for her next move.