



*Count*  
the  
*Nights*  
by  
*Stars*

A NOVEL

MICHELLE SHOCKLEE

## Praise for Michelle Shocklee

“That is our mission, dear. To *see* people for who they are beneath the pain. Beneath the sin. To see them as God sees them: a beautiful creation, with plans and purposes only he knows.’ This is my favorite quote from *Count the Night by Stars*, a moving historical fiction that explores darkness as well as the beauty that can emerge from it when the right person takes on the purpose of seeing people for who they are beneath the pain.”

T. I. LOWE, author of *Under the Magnolias*

“In her latest compelling novel, Michelle Shocklee brings to light the long history and hidden forces of human trafficking as well as our country’s treatment of immigrants, the poor, and those we view as different from ourselves. *Count the Nights by Stars* is a timely reminder that caring for our neighbor is a privilege that requires our time, patience, and resources, as well as the courage to step outside our comfort zones, freeing our hearts to leap in faith.”

CATHY GOHLKE, Christy Award–winning author of *Night Bird Calling*

“Shocklee’s masterful descriptions thoroughly transport the reader to this unique time and place while bringing to light an issue both historically troubling and heartbreakingly current. *Count the Nights by Stars* is a beautifully written reminder of our need to see—and be seen—by both God and others.”

JENNIFER L. WRIGHT, author of *If It Rains*

“Experience Tennessee’s Centennial Exposition, presented by Michelle Shocklee as a sensuous feast in *Count the Nights by Stars*, then look deeper as two women, one in the late nineteenth century, the other in the 1960s, uncover the lavish celebration’s dark, disturbing secret. The story’s main setting, the Maxwell House Hotel, is a vivid character itself in its splendid heyday and decline, but it’s the heroines who call it home, Audrey and Priscilla, who give this story its true shine, as each seeks to forge a life of purpose, integrity, and love, despite the obstacles she faces. With a mystery that unfolds with irresistible suspense, I predict late nights of page-turning for fans of Michelle Shocklee’s books and new readers alike.”

LORI BENTON, Christy Award–winning author of *Mountain Laurel* and *Shiloh*

“Shocklee beautifully unveils Frankie’s past while developing Lorena’s awareness of inequality. Though set years ago, this title resonates today, and many struggle with the same issues and questions of racial reconciliation. With its haunting message of forgiveness, this is a must-buy for any Christian or historical fiction collection.”

*LIBRARY JOURNAL* on *Under the Tulip Tree*

“Shocklee elevates the redemptive power of remorse and the grace of forgiveness in this moving saga.”

*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* on *Under the Tulip Tree*

“*Under the Tulip Tree* . . . is an inspiring story of incredible courage in horrific circumstances, of faith, forgiveness, redemption, love, and friendship.”

CHRISTIAN NOVEL REVIEW

“Get ready to fall in love with characters who step from the pages of history straight into your heart. With exceptional skill, Michelle Shocklee weaves a tale of betrayal and redemption that will long reside in the reader’s memory. I cannot recommend [*Under the Tulip Tree*] highly enough!”

TAMERA ALEXANDER, *USA Today* bestselling author of  
*With This Pledge* and *A Note Yet Unsung*

“Michelle Shocklee’s latest novel, *Under the Tulip Tree*, takes readers into the heartache of the broken Leland family during and after the Great Depression. The story of Rena Leland captured me from the first page, and I loved reading about her journey as one of the writers for Roosevelt’s Federal Writers’ Project. *Under the Tulip Tree* moves seamlessly between two time periods, beautifully capturing the relationship between Rena and a former slave woman whose powerful story begins to heal the entire Leland family.”

MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *The Curator’s Daughter*  
and *The Winter Rose*

“As a fictional account of one of FDR’s slave narratives, *Under the Tulip Tree* gives testimony to not only the social injustices of a country fueled by slavery, but the wounds that would last well beyond the field hospitals of war. In some ways, Rena and Frankie’s conversation is one that

America should have with itself: one that faces the pain head-on and brings a true spirit of repentance. Then, and only then, will we see healing begin.”

ALLISON PITTMAN, author of *The Seamstress*

“*Under the Tulip Tree* is a brilliant and authentic look at the power of story to break through the complicated entanglement of racial tension. Brave, authentic, and moving, Michelle Shocklee takes readers on an adventure of historical significance that is sure to leave them with hope. A grace-filled and beautiful reminder that every story—and every person—matters.”

HEIDI CHIAVAROLI, Carol Award-winning author of *Freedom's Ring* and *The Tea Chest*

“*Under the Tulip Tree* left an indelible stamp on my heart. A story of pain, forgiveness, and restoration—Frankie and Rena’s story will forever remain a testament to the power of love . . . and God’s peace in the midst of heartache.”

TARA JOHNSON, author of *All Through the Night* and *Where Dandelions Bloom*

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*For my sister, Kim*  
*Sisters by birth,*  
*Sisters in Christ*

*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves;  
ensure justice for those being crushed.  
Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless,  
and see that they get justice.*

PROVERBS 31:8-9

# Prologue

*May 29, 1897*

*My darling,*

*No one could accuse Luca Moretti of being a coward.*

*I thought you brash and arrogant that day I saw you in the lobby of the Maxwell House Hotel. You stood taller than all the other men in their tailored suits, not caring that the elbows of your coat were worn or that one of the brass buttons was missing. Instead, you kept your shoulders back and your gaze steady, even when the men treated you as though they bettered you somehow. I'd never seen that kind of boldness before, and it intrigued me.*

*I know now you weren't brash or arrogant. You simply demanded to be seen as an equal in a world that said you weren't.*

*What if we all stood up for ourselves as you did?*

*What if I found even a hint of that kind of courage somewhere deep inside me?*

*They would have to listen, wouldn't they?*

*Peaches*



# Chapter One

**NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE**

**DECEMBER 9, 1961**

Elvis Presley's soulful voice echoed in the deserted lobby of the Maxwell House Hotel, bouncing off marble floors and wood paneling, both in need of a good cleaning.

*"Are you lonesome tonight? Do you miss me tonight? Are you sorry we drifted apart?"*

If the radio weren't so far away—at least six long steps—I'd tell Elvis to mind his own business and switch off the music. Silence was a better companion than the melancholy mood his words brought.

But I didn't rouse. I remained where I'd been the past hour, slumped behind the guest services desk at the far end of the cavernous entrance hall, bored out of my mind.

Such was the exciting life of the daughter of a hotel manager. A puff of frustration passed over my lips.

Dad shouldn't expect me to work the front desk on a Saturday. Just last week he'd promised to hire someone to

replace Bea Anderson now that she was a giddy newlywed, beginning a grand and exciting life with her new husband in Texas. Bea's whisper of "It'll be you next" when she hugged me goodbye still rang false. She and I both knew I hadn't had a date in over a year. Not since Mama's unexpected passing and Dad's near breakdown.

An issue of *Life* magazine, discarded by a guest, lay on the desk. With little enthusiasm, I picked it up. A picture of actress Sophia Loren stared back at me. No disrespect to Ms. Loren, but I had no interest in reading about the "tiger-eyed temptress." Hollywood and all its glamour seemed a million miles away from Nashville and the dull existence I endured these days.

With a groan, I tossed the magazine aside and stared out a tall window at the far end of the lobby. The front entrance to the Noel Hotel across Fourth Avenue filled the view, and downtown Nashville hummed with midafternoon activity. Automobiles, buses, and streetcars zipped past. Saturday shoppers jammed the sidewalks, heading to various department stores and shops. Life carried on outside the brick walls of the hotel, but for me, time seemed to stand still.

I planted my chin on the palm of my hand and stared at nothing in particular, my mind going where it often went these days.

Mama.

It's strange how one person's life could be so completely interconnected to another's without them actually being aware of it. Mama and I hadn't been like most mothers and daughters I knew. Her world had revolved not around me but around my brother, Emmett. The two were inseparable, or at least that's how it always seemed to me, an outsider looking in at their giggles, secrets, and shared joys. I didn't think Mama intentionally left me out. There simply wasn't room for me in her

all-consuming devotion to Emmett and his care. Even now, a year after her sudden death, Emmett talked to her as if she sat right next to him. Dad said Emmett's seventeen-year-old mind was actually that of a five-year-old child, and he couldn't process the full meaning and permanence of death. Maybe he never would, making me wonder if that was actually a better way to live rather than suffering under the heavy mantle of grief and guilt I carried every day.

I heaved a sigh and picked up the novel I'd laid down an hour ago. Maybe reading would get my mind off the sad state of my life. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was all the rage, but I'd had a difficult time becoming immersed in the story. I brought it with me today, determined to get past chapter five and see if Boo Radley really does come out of his house.

I'd just turned the first page of chapter six when the front door to the hotel opened, the afternoon sun causing such a terrific glare on the brass and glass, I couldn't make out the returning guest. Certain whomever it was would bypass me and head for the elevators, I continued reading. With the Maxwell House now a residential hotel rather than the center of Nashville's social and political life as it had once been, help from the front desk clerk was required only when a guest had a clogged commode or saw a mouse dart down the hallway.

Footsteps echoed in the foyer at the same time the telephone on the desk jangled. I reached for the receiver, the most exertion I'd expended since lunchtime.

"This is Audrey Whitfield. How may I help you?"

A female chuckled on the other end of the line. "Audrey, this is Lucille."

Lucille Clark, the hotel switchboard operator. "Sorry. I thought you were one of the guests."

"Get ready." Her voice lowered.

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"For what?"

"He's making a beeline right for you," she whispered; then the line went dead.

I glanced to Lucille's small office, located not far from the hotel's main entrance. I couldn't see her, but I could now see to whom she referred. A young man, suitcase in hand, walked slowly across the vast expanse of black-and-white marble toward the desk, his gaze not on me but on the second-floor mezzanine above us. Even with the hotel long past her glory days, I had to admit it was still breathtaking upon one's first visit. Salons and an elegant main lobby, mahogany cabinetry, gilded mirrors, and sparkling chandeliers all harkened back to days when belles in stylish hoopskirts peered down upon men dressed in their finery, preparing for a ball or the hotel's famous Christmas Day dinner.

With the stranger still a few steps from the desk, Patsy Cline began to belt out her latest hit on the radio, her sultry voice echoing through the lobby. I lunged for the knob and flicked her off before she completely fell to pieces in front of our new guest.

The stranger arrived at the desk.

I understood Lucille's brief message.

He was a dreamboat. Smartly dressed in a bright-white Ivy style tennis sweater-vest, crisp long-sleeved shirt, and slacks, he looked like he'd just stepped off the pages of Spiegel's catalog.

"Hello. May I help you?" I forced myself to speak with the same voice I always used, whether the guest was old Mr. Hanover and his dachshund, Copper, or Mrs. Ruth, who'd lived on the fifth floor since her husband passed away ten years ago.

"Hello. I'm Jason Sumner. I have a reservation."

I blinked. Then frowned. A new reservation? Why hadn't Dad mentioned it?

"Of course, Mr. Sumner." I acted as though his smiling presence on the opposite side of the long, polished desk hadn't caught me completely off guard. "If you'll give me a moment, I'll get you checked in."

I hurried down the narrow hallway behind the front desk to the manager's office. Dad had left the hotel after lunch to see the county tax assessor and haggle over some discrepancy. He wouldn't be back for ages, so I had to shuffle through the scatter of papers until I located what I sought. An invoice filled out in Dad's scrawling hand, dated three days prior, with Mr. Sumner's name and a surprising reservation for the next fourteen days. Even with Christmas just a few weeks away, we didn't get too many new guests. People much preferred the Hermitage Hotel on Sixth if they wanted to experience luxury and a bit of Nashville history during their stay.

I snatched up the paper and stalked back toward the front desk.

As manager of the hotel, Dad had every right to accept new reservations, but it would be rather helpful if he made me aware of them. Had he informed the maid to freshen one of the guest rooms for Mr. Sumner's arrival? Doubtful.

So many things had changed in the last fourteen months, with Dad's business acumen and passion for his job being among them. It didn't help that the hotel had been sold in the midst of our time of mourning. The new owner, Mr. Edwin, seemed like a nice man and allowed Dad to take some time off, but a few weeks ago he told Dad he planned to make major changes in the New Year. To modernize and breathe new life back into the hotel, he'd said. What exactly that meant, we didn't know, but I could tell Dad was concerned.

How would the changes affect the many long-term residents?  
How would they affect our family?

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I turned the corner and plastered a smile on my face. "I have your reservation here, Mr. Sumner."

A lopsided grin tipped his mouth. "Good. I thought there might be a problem. I've always wanted to stay at the Maxwell House."

"There's no problem. I just needed to locate the paperwork." I set about entering his name and address into the guest book, noting he lived in Charleston, South Carolina. I was rather curious about his extended stay in Nashville, especially so close to the holidays, but one of the first rules of hotel service Dad drilled into me as a teenager working the desk for the first time was *do not ask questions*. Let the guest share whatever they were inclined to share about their personal life and leave it at that.

With all the information recorded, I glanced up. "Would you like to pay by the day or weekly?"

"Weekly." He pulled out his wallet and laid down the necessary bills to cover seven days. "I'm here on business," he added.

I nodded, sorely tempted to break Dad's hard-and-fast rule and ask about his work, but the telephone buzzed again. I glanced toward Lucille's office, where she stood in the doorway and motioned for me to take the call.

"Please excuse me for a moment."

He nodded and focused his attention once again to the second floor above us, studying the intricately carved balusters that circled the wide opening and flowed down the marble staircase.

I made a grab for the telephone and turned my back. "This is Audrey," I said, my lips tight. "I'm with a guest."

"I know. I'm sorry to interrupt." The teasing tone Lucille had used earlier was gone. "Mrs. Ruth just called. Emmett is hysterical. He says there's something wrong with Miss Priscilla."

A chill of alarm swept through me. Miss Priscilla Nichols, our

resident recluse. I'd always been a little intimidated by the old spinster's oddness on the rare occasions I accompanied Dad to her suite. But Emmett, who never met a stranger, was one of the few people she willingly interacted with. I didn't know her exact age or health situation, but it didn't bode well if my brother was upset.

"Thank you. I'll take care of it."

I replaced the handset on its hook and met the curious gaze of our new guest. "My apologies. Let me get the key to your room."

I unlocked a cabinet on the wall behind me that held the room keys, each with an oval metal tag bearing the name of the hotel, a room number, and a *Postage paid* inscription. As in the days of the hotel's renown, if a guest mistakenly took the key home, they could simply deposit it in a mailbox and the post office would return it to the hotel. While we'd had our share of lost keys over the years, we'd had very few returned by mail.

Dad had reserved a room on the fifth floor for Mr. Sumner, but with all the commotion going on up there with Emmett and Miss Nichols, I thought it best to put him on the third floor instead.

He reached for the brass key. "Thank you, Miss . . . ?"

Heat flooded my face at the interest sparking in his blue eyes. "Whitfield. Audrey Whitfield."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." He extended his hand.

I'd shaken my share of hands before, but was it my imagination that mine seemed to fit inside his rather perfectly?

"My father is the hotel manager," I blurted, more as an explanation of why I worked in an old hotel that had lost its charm than information he required for his stay.

He smiled good-naturedly. "Good to know."

Just as he bent to retrieve his suitcase, the elevator doors

opened a short distance away. Emmett burst out, followed by elderly Ruth Simmons attempting to keep up.

"Audrey, Audrey." Emmett's wail echoed off the recessed ceiling of the second-floor mezzanine as he raced toward me. "Miss Priscilla won't wake up. Hurry, hurry, Audrey."

I shot a quick glance to Mr. Sumner, hoping he'd be the one to hurry and vacate the lobby before Emmett's hysteria was on full display. But the young man didn't move. His face bore a look of concern as he watched Emmett draw near.

I had no choice but to address my brother when he arrived on the opposite side of the desk. His fleshy face was mottled, with evidence of tears clinging to thick lashes, and my heart softened.

"It's okay, Emmett." I tried to soothe him the way Mama had always been able to do. "I'll check on Miss Nichols. I'm sure everything is fine. You go on to the apartment and wait for me there."

I stole a look at Mrs. Ruth, expecting her to wink or give some indication that all was well, but she shook her head and appeared as distressed as my brother.

Lucille joined the group, her headset still in place with a loose cord dangling down her back. "I'll watch the desk."

"Come with me, Emmett, dear." Mrs. Ruth gently took my brother by the arm. "You can show me the new comic book your father brought home yesterday."

Normally thrilled to show anyone the latest addition to his growing collection, Emmett shook his head. His woeful eyes sought mine.

"Mama wouldn't wake up either, Audrey," he whispered, his voice panicked. Tears sprang to his eyes, and I realized in that moment that Dad was wrong. Emmett understood more about death than we thought.

"You go with Mrs. Ruth to the apartment. I'll be there soon."

A wobbly smile touched his eyes. "I love you, Audrey."

"I love you, too."

I watched the odd twosome make their way down the hall toward the back of the hotel and our apartment. How I wished Dad were here. He'd know what to do. But I didn't expect him back for several hours. Too long to wait.

I turned to find Lucille's and Mr. Sumner's serious gazes on me.

"Do you think . . . ?" Lucille's eyes widened as her question trailed.

A shiver raced through me at the very thought. "I don't know. I guess I'll go find out."

I traded places with Lucille and headed for the elevator. Footsteps sounded behind me as I pushed the call button. The doors slid open.

"Miss Whitfield, I wonder if your father is available?"

I turned to find Mr. Sumner a few steps away, the look of concern on his face having deepened into a genuine frown.

"I don't believe a young woman should . . . well . . . you know. Be alone, in case . . ." He didn't finish his sentence either.

The elevator doors started to close, so I leaped inside the car. Surprisingly, Mr. Sumner did too. Although dread filled every inch of my being at the prospect of finding the worst scenario in Miss Nichols's room, I didn't like his insinuation that I couldn't see to the matter on my own because I was a woman.

"I appreciate your concern, Mr. Sumner, but I'm fully capable of handling this situation." My bravado rang false in my ears, but hopefully it fooled him.

His brief nod indicated he wasn't convinced, but he remained silent while the elevator chime rang at each floor as we inched ever higher.

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Finally the car stopped and the doors opened into the gloom of the fifth-floor hallway. Although the hotel boasted well over two hundred windows, the hallways did not benefit from the natural light.

Miss Nichols had occupied room 504 for more than twenty years. As far as I knew, she'd never had even one visitor and kept entirely to herself. Mrs. Ruth once told me that Miss Nichols—Priscilla, as she'd called her—wasn't odd. The woman simply desired privacy.

When we reached the door bearing the correct brass numbers, it stood slightly ajar. As annoyed as I'd been to find Mr. Sumner in the elevator with me moments ago, I suddenly felt grateful for the presence of a living, breathing person next to me, stranger and all.

I inched the door open.

The light scent of rose perfume greeted us, a reminder that Miss Nichols always wore the old-fashioned fragrance. Peering into the darkened room, I noted the thick drapes on the windows were closed against bright afternoon sunshine. Muted light from a single lamp on the bedside table, however, revealed what I'd feared we would find.

Miss Nichols lay in her eternal rest, just as Emmett said.

Mr. Sumner moved forward, but my feet stayed rooted to the carpet in the hallway. Was this how Dad felt when he'd found that Mama had slipped into heaven while she slept? I'd been away at school, but I would never forget the pain in his voice when he called to give me the most heartbreaking news of my life.

Mr. Sumner checked for a pulse, then leaned down to listen for a beat. Just when I expected him to say what I already knew to be true, he spun to face me.

"She's still breathing, but barely. We need to call an ambulance."

Air whooshed from my lungs. I'd thought for sure . . .

I hurried forward, grabbed the telephone handset, and dialed 0.

"Lucille, we need an ambulance. Hurry! And please try to track down Dad. He went to the tax office to meet with a Mr. James."

Ending the call, I peeked at Miss Nichols's pale face. With her translucent eyelids closed and bluish lips unmoving, I could detect no sign of life. But if Mr. Sumner said she was alive, I'd take his word for it.

He checked her pulse again, nodded, then looked at me. "We should notify her family."

"I don't think she has any," I whispered.

Concern filled his expression. "None?" When I shook my head, he frowned. "That's really sad."

The compassion in his voice touched something inside me, and tears filled my eyes.

I didn't know Miss Nichols well. She spent her days, weeks, years alone in her room. On the rare occasions when she left the hotel, Lucille and I giggled over jokes about her outdated clothes, long gray hair, and funny appearance. Jokes that felt shameful now.

While we waited for the ambulance, I glanced around the room. Miss Nichols had lived in this tiny space almost as long as I'd been alive. Every so often, Dad offered her one of the larger suites at the same monthly rate, but she declined every time.

Now I felt like I'd traveled back in time. Old-fashioned furnishings filled every available space. Bookshelves spilled over with dozens and dozens of worn volumes, and the walls were covered with framed posters of the Tennessee Centennial

Exposition. I recalled studying about the expo in my high school history class, but I couldn't remember the exact year it took place. Sometime in the late 1890s, if I had to guess.

Sirens soon echoed in the street below. I looked out the window to see two police cars and an ambulance pull up to the curb in front of the Fourth Street entrance to the hotel. Dad was right behind them and ran inside.

When I heard the elevator chime in the hallway a few minutes later, I hurried to meet him.

"I'm sorry, honey." He took me in his arms. "I should have been here."

Just being in his fatherly embrace bolstered my strength. I sniffled and stepped out of his arms. "It just reminded me of Mama. I'm okay now."

We moved aside as two white-clad ambulance attendants rushed down the hallway, pushing a gurney on wheels, with police officers trailing behind. They disappeared into Miss Nichols's room, and I heard Jason Sumner's voice, explaining what we'd found.

"Where's Emmett? Lucille said he found Priscilla unconscious."

"Mrs. Ruth took him to the apartment."

Dad glanced into the room. "I need to stay here. Would you please see to your brother? I imagine he's very confused."

After giving Dad one more hug, I made my way to the apartment. Mrs. Ruth sat on the couch with Emmett reading his new comic book aloud when I walked in. He jumped to his feet and hurried over.

"Is Miss Priscilla awake?"

His eager innocence hit my heart. I hated to tell him the truth, but lying, even to protect him, wasn't something Mama would ever tolerate.

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"No." I reached for his hand. "But we hope she will be soon. She needs to go to the hospital so the doctors can help her."

His shoulders fell and his eyes filled. "I'll miss her."

Although he outweighed me by many pounds, I took him in my arms, this brother of mine, suddenly wishing I could keep the world and all its pain and sadness at bay. Was this how Mama felt, raising a young man who would always be a little boy?

"I know you will, but everything is going to be okay."

Those words of assurance had often been on Mama's lips, no matter what was going on. She firmly believed God was in control despite how things might look or how we might feel. Her faith carried her through many hard times, right up until the moment she left this earth for her heavenly home.

Today, my brother needed me to be the strong one. The one who believed it would all be okay.

But somewhere deep inside, I knew I didn't.

I didn't believe that at all.