



T. I. LOWE

INDIGO
ISLE

a novel ♥

PRAISE FOR T. I. LOWE

“T. I. Lowe mixes serious issues with her own unique sense of humor and style, and her Sonny Bates is a force to reckon with. . . . A terrific read!”

FRANCINE RIVERS, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Redeeming Love* and *The Lady's Mine*, on *Indigo Isle*

“Lowe delivers a powerful coming-of-age story set on a Magnolia, S.C., tobacco farm in the 1980s. . . . The many colorful Magnolia characters, particularly the eccentrics of First Riffraff, rise to support Austin and nicely round out the slow-burning romance. Lowe’s fans will be thrilled.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Under the Magnolias*

“*Under the Magnolias* is a beautifully told tale about loss, mental illness, connection, and finding both yourself and your capacity to heal.”

GRAND STRAND MAGAZINE

“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*, on *Under the Magnolias*

“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*, on *Under the Magnolias*

“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*, on *Under the Magnolias*

“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

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Indigo Isle

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CHAPTER ONE



SO THIS IS HOW IT FEELS to be near death and utterly alone.

I turned this idea around in my head while sequestered inside the cavernous space. The cold cement slab underneath my limp body held a cool comfort compared to the sultry heat seeping through the opening in thick vapors. A heat unique to the Lowcountry, disguising itself as a body of water without having enough clout to pull it off. Oh, but it had no problem pulling off misery.

A haughty huff interrupted my train of thought. “Come on, Sonny. How much longer do you plan on lying in that crypt?”

I peeped an eye open and addressed the mermaid mane flaring out from behind my Canon EOS camera. “This isn’t a crypt. It’s a receiving tomb.”

The camera inched down, revealing a pouty, confused face. “A what?”

“It’s where undertakers used to place a corpse until the grave or mausoleum was complete. I believe this one held up to four bodies

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at once. Sometimes they would have to lie up in here for months if the ground was frozen in the winter. Can you imagine?”

“You’re, like, lying where dead bodies have been.” Lyrica’s tattooed shoulders shuddered.

“They aren’t here anymore.” I crossed my arms over my chest, striking another deathly pose. “Get a few more photos of me.”

Lyrica sucked her teeth, sounding more like a sulky teen instead of a grown woman in her midtwenties, and waved a glittery clawed hand in my direction. “This is seriously creepy. I’m ready to go.”

“Then capture an Instagram-worthy shot and we’ll be done.” My eyes drifted shut and I went slack-jawed.

She bellyached about this *so not being her life*, but then the clicking sound of the camera went off several times in quick succession. “Doesn’t it stink in there?”

“Not too bad, really.” I pulled in a deep sniff, trying to detect exactly what the odd scent held. “The smell kinda reminds me of a damp fall day. Ya know? Decaying leaves and ammonia maybe . . .”

“Eww.” Lyrica made a gagging sound. “I’m so over this already. And I’m melting in this heat.”

I slid over and patted the cement shelf. “It’s cooler in here. Want to join me?”

Lyrica rolled her fake-blue eyes that were the same shade as one of the teal streaks in her hair, letting me know she wasn’t into my brand of humor. “I want air-conditioning. And a fruity cocktail on one of those islands we’re supposed to be scouting. Not hanging out in a freaking cemetery. Daddy promised islands.”

Watching her tug on the hem of her too-short shorts, I could almost hear my mom say, “*If you have to tug, it’s too tiny.*” I wondered if there was anything potentially pleasant underneath all the hair dye, makeup, and attitude. The five-hour flight from

California to South Carolina only revealed a spoiled brat thinking she wanted to give location scouting a whirl. Of course, Famous Director Daddy made that happen for his Technicolor princess. We'd only landed in Charleston less than two hours ago and I was ready to haul her back to the airport. About as round as she was tall, Lyrica was loud and refused to be ignored. I planned to make it my mission in life to ignore her theatrics as much as possible during this project.

Giving up on the idea of capturing the perfect picture, I scooted off the shelf and exited the tomb. Lyrica handed me the camera as we walked up the dirt path, dodging fresh mudholes from a recent rain shower. I paused underneath a lemony fragrant magnolia tree and took a picture of myself with my phone.

"Selfie much?" Lyrica sassed, fanning herself with a flyer she'd grabbed at the front gate that advertised a nighttime grave tour.

"Gotta keep my followers engaged," I mumbled while applying a filter and captioning it with #underthemagnolias. I added Magnolia Cemetery's location and sent it off into the social media universe before we moved along. "Let's take a few more pictures of that mausoleum shaped like a pyramid before heading to the islands."

Lyrica swatted at a fly, walking heavy-footed beside me. "I don't recall a cemetery scene in *Beyond the Waves*."

"There isn't. This is some preliminary work for my next project." The very project that got pushed back by the king of movie production Whit Kessler, who made sure it fell on me to step in and clean up the mess made by his latest dalliance. The former teenage heartthrob-turned-producer couldn't keep it in his pants for the life of him.

"Aren't all cemeteries the same?" Lyrica scrunched her nose,

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looking unimpressed and perhaps offended by the low tide stench surrounding us.

“No. The script calls for a vastly large cemetery with deep Southern elements, such as the salt marsh and moss-draped oak trees.” I waved a hand toward the graves stretching out well past what the eye could see while explaining the concept for a kidnapping scene in the psychological thriller.

Lyrice yawned. “Can we move this along? I’m so thirsty.”

Trying to smother my snide retort was about as easy as smothering a biscuit with congealed gravy, but I somehow managed it by focusing on something more pleasant than my current work predicament. The dead.

After getting a few more angles of the pyramid tomb, we retraced our steps through one of the largest cemeteries in South Carolina, pausing at the entrance so I could drop a fifty in the donation box.

We walked across the street and loaded up in the rental car, a white Chevrolet Impala. Most things from my past were kept firmly in the past, but my dad’s loyalty to Chevrolet stayed with me.

Not wanting to get tangled in the memory of my dad that always led to ruminating on the crime I committed against him, I cranked the air conditioner control to arctic at Lyrice’s whiny demand. While she moaned as if she were dying, I made quick work of loading the photos to my laptop and then sending them to the production team.

With the graveyard research marked off the list, I switched film gears and put the car in gear as well to begin the short trek across the Ravenel Bridge, which straddled the Cooper River and connected downtown Charleston with Mount Pleasant.

“I’ve chartered a boat to take us out and around the barrier

islands. Also . . .” I started to launch into a list of must-haves I had jotted down on the plane while reading through the script for the first time, but Lyrica turned the radio up and started belting out a Chris Stapleton song. Her voice was a robust mix of Elvis and Adele. Not bad, but not appreciated when it cut me off midthought.

Her father, *the* Academy Award–winning Les Morgan, had actually called me, *the* nobody Sonny Bates, this morning on my way to LAX. “*Bates, teach my kid all you know. Make it happen.*” Then he ended the call as abruptly as he’d started it.

I cut my eyes over to Lyrica as she played her air guitar and concluded it *ain’t* happening. What had to happen, however, was for the perfect island location to magically appear within the next few days. Today, preferably.

The art director’s description came to mind as I tapped my fingers against the steering wheel. *Think Lowcountry charm meets island affairs.* The moment I sat down in the production meeting in our LA office and heard the words “coastal South Carolina” and “barrier islands,” I had a foreboding sense that this location could very well lead to a day of reckoning. Maybe not right away, but it was coming. The dread to face it all was thicker than the pluff mud I smelled from the nearby marshland as the car crossed the second mile of the cable-stayed bridge.

Knowing there was a line of location manager wannabes behind me who would jump at the chance to take my job, I had no other choice but to agree to go to Charleston and find a last-minute replacement location for the one that had fallen through with filming scheduled to begin in only two weeks. Of course, that meant putting up with Whit in close proximity for at least eight weeks, but I had no choice in that matter either. Funny how I ran

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away a little over fifteen years ago to spread my wings and fly, yet I'd never felt so caged as I did currently.

Fifteen minutes later, I'd snagged a parking spot and bought Lyrica a Gatorade just before she wilted completely under the Southern June sky. *Bless her heart.*

"This marina would be ideal for some charming B-roll footage," I mumbled to myself while taking it all in. Quaint shops and restaurants lined the congested area, and an assortment of boats bobbed languidly by the docks. Tourists in every shape and color carried cooler bags and cameras.

I raised my camera and captured a few photos. "Let's make a note of this spot. I could see it being a part of a montage after the rescue scene."

"M'kay." Lyrica sighed. "This is taking forever. Are we ever going to get to the islands?"

"There's a whole lot more to this than an island." A rant began bubbling to the surface, which would be a total waste of my time, so I took a deep inhale, catching whiffs of frying seafood and salt air. Those familiar scents mixed together and summoned childhood memories before I could stop it. I didn't have time to let any of that loose today, so I slid my sunglasses over my eyes and joined the ebb and flow of foot traffic, hoping it would eventually wash me and my lagging assistant up on the shore of a certain boat tour shop.

Shop was being generous, I discovered, as we sidled up to a structure that looked more like a ticket booth. No matter, they had my reservation and that was all that mattered.

Our guide, Tom, who was also the owner, brought us around the chain of barrier islands that were separated by meandering inlets and backed by salt marshes. The water wasn't aggressive but

not quite calm either. I feared Lyrica's next dilemma would be seasickness, but a glance in her direction only found her sprawled across the bench seat at the stern, sunbathing. She lived in Malibu and probably owned her own yacht, so she was definitely in her element. Seriously, her hair remained in perfectly glossy teal-and-purple waves, and whatever makeup brand she used had to be made of fairy dust. Even after a day of flights, car rides, and the Southern humidity, Lyrica remained looking fresh as a rainbow-colored daisy. Me? I didn't have a gazillion-dollar budget for beauty products, so I resembled a wilted rose that had been stepped on and then deep-fried.

"You good over there, Lyrica?" I asked, just to be sure.

She gave me a thumbs-up and then readjusted her rose-gold Cartier sunglasses.

Relieved that she was pacified for the time being, I pulled out a map of the barrier islands and scooted closer to Tom to discuss where we needed to visit.

Being a visual thinker and having a good sense of place came in handy when needing to take words on a page and find those images in real life. But there were also practical requirements for this film location. Something I had to remind Lyrica about when she insisted we pick the island with the luxury resort.

I motioned for Tom to keep going while shaking my head. "We need a property with very little development and a large, secluded beach." We would also need certain necessities such as easily accessed bathroom facilities and dependable power sources, but I didn't waste my breath trying to explain that to my *assistant*.

After visiting a few potential islands and taking hundreds of pictures, Lyrica hit a wall. Not literally, but if one had been near, I'd have found a corner in it to put her nose.

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“My sugar is low. I gotta eat!” A fat tear rolled down her plump cheek in perfect sync with her hissy fit.

Deciding to cut the excursion short, I instructed Tom to head back to the marina, but something in the distance on the next island caught my eye.

“Can we stop at that small island for just a quick look?” I asked as Lyrica let out a groan of protest. I really wanted to pinch her.

Tom shook his head but slowed the boat. “Indigo Isle is private property.”

“Indigo Isle? What an intriguing name.” I pointed toward the small beach. “I’ll only be a minute or two.”

“But, ma’am, it’s off-limits. Some even say it’s haunted. You don’t want to go foolin’ with that place.”

With no patience for a debate, I nipped it in the bud by pulling out a hundred-dollar bill, and that’s all it took for the boat to find its way onto shore.

At first glance, Indigo Isle looked forsaken. The beach was more like a graveyard of petrified tree limbs that had become casualties of weather and time. Just past the beach, a fortress of salt-incrusted trees stood shoulder to shoulder, each adorned heavily with strings of oyster and clamshells that sounded like the tinkling applause of a million fairies in the breeze.

“Now that would be a unique backdrop for a scene.” I pointed toward the shell-dressed trees.

Lyrica shrugged, not even trying to see the vision of it.

Well, I certainly had vision and wanted to explore this peculiar island a little closer, so I hopped out and started toward the forest.

“Hold up!” Lyrica hollered, staggering from the boat and stumbling onto the sand.

I held up my palms to ward her off. “Just wait in the boat. I’ll hurry.”

Seemingly over the low-sugar meltdown, she kept stomping up the small beach, dodging chunks of driftwood. “No. I want to see too.”

A sigh pushed past my frowning lips. “Fine.”

We ventured through the dimly lit canopy of centuries-old oaks and skinny palmetto trees. The alluring perfume from yellow blossoms of jasmine, entwined throughout the underbrush, beckoned us along a well-worn path. Before long, the landscape opened up to a hidden homestead that looked more fitting for a Lowcountry farm than an island.

“Whoa,” Lyrica whispered as we craned our necks in every direction to take it all in.

In the center of the clearing stood an aging manor. Redbrick, three stories, and fronted with graying white columns, the Georgian-style house reminded me of an elderly man worn heavily around the edges from hard living. I veered around a bountiful vegetable garden, taking note of another field to the right filled with unfamiliar plants that resembled weeds.

The entire time we explored the homestead, checking out an old building filled with farming equipment and such, I had an eerie feeling of being watched. When no one appeared, I headed to the house, climbed the wide porch steps, and knocked on the dark-blue front door. After several failed attempts to produce an answer, I gave up and looked around for a bit longer, taking note of the solar panels, an outdoor shower, and rain barrels.

“I’m digging the wild beauty of this place, but there’s no way it could accommodate a fairly large movie production.”

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“It’s a movie about a group of shipwrecked teens.” Lyrica turned in a circle. “This place is too country for that.”

“Yep.” I held my damp hair off my neck, relishing the slight breeze that fanned my hot skin. Dropping my hair, I pulled out my phone and read aloud the small movie description that I’d saved in my notes. “A group of runaway teens set off in a stolen boat only to end up shipwrecked on an island somewhere off the eastern coast. At first, all is well and the group basks in their newfound freedom on the island, but soon the tides change when their food supply runs out and tempers flare. As the situation becomes harrowing, survival of the fittest and smartest will be tested. Alliances will form with jealousy tearing them apart. The group will battle the elements, themselves, and each other.”

“Welp. That settles it. Let’s bounce.” Lyrica took a pronounced step as if coercing me to agree.

“You should have just stayed in the boat.” I wandered toward the garden. Ripe tomatoes gave off a sweet aroma and vines hung heavy with vibrant green cucumbers. I tried appreciating the feast for the eyes, but the grumbling behind me ruined it. “Why are you in such a hurry?”

“Because it’s spookier than the cemetery.” She faked a shiver.

I didn’t find the cemetery spooky but peaceful. This place, though? Yeah. There was an undeniable eeriness about it, and I suspected we were being spied on. I gazed up at the looming house, but there were no signs of humans or ghosts staring out of any of the windows.

A rustling noise drew our attention to a rickety woodshed and then suddenly a metal bucket clattered to the ground. We both screamed as Lyrica wrapped her arms around me, knocking me off-balance and nearly to the ground.

“It’s a chicken! Let go! You’re choking me!” Wrestling out of her grasp, I shook a finger in the direction of the reddish-brown hen where she pecked the ground beside the overturned bucket. “See? A chicken!”

“I about peed myself. Like, seriously, I really need to go.” She did a little dance to emphasize her need.

“Fine. Let’s go.”

“Yes. *Let’s.*” Lyrica turned on a dime and hurried through the thicket of trees, making enough racket to stir up several birds overhead. Surprisingly, she could move quite fast when the situation provoked it.

Before following after her, I scanned the front of the house one more time and could have sworn a curtain fluttered from a second-floor window. Blinking and then squinting, I concentrated on the window but didn’t catch the curtain move again.

“Sonny!” Lyrica’s screeching echoed through the trees. “Come on!”

I lifted my hand and waved goodbye at the sad, lonely house. Reluctantly I left my curiosity in the secluded yard, but I had a foreboding feeling I’d be back to collect it soon enough.