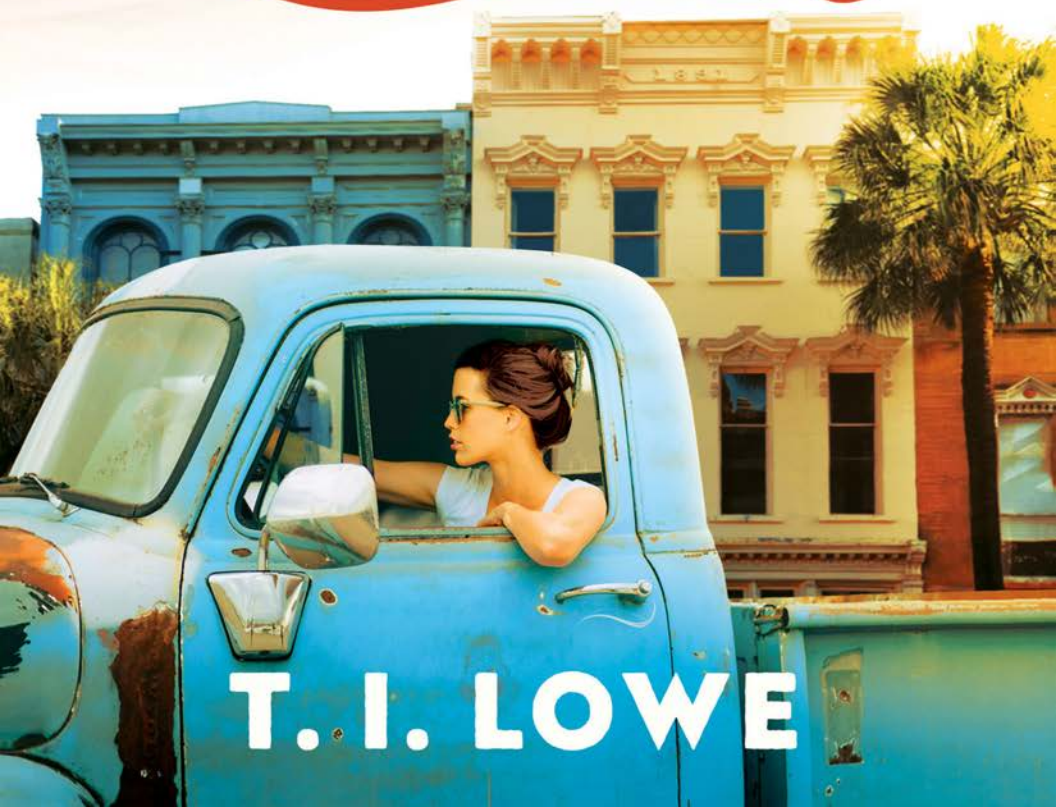


BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *Under the Magnolias*

LOWCOUNTRY

LOST

a novel



T. I. LOWE

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Lowcountry Lost

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PROLOGUE

A GHOST TOWN IS A ONCE-FLOURISHING TOWN wholly or nearly deserted, usually as a result of the exhaustion of some natural resource. The landscape of North America is riddled with such places of abandonment. Buildings, streets, furniture, sentiments, hopes, dreams . . . all left behind without so much as a backwards glance.

Can a person be a ghost town? I believe I am. Once-flourishing, yet now just so dang exhausted. Similar to an abandoned town, everyone and everything abandoned me but the trauma, the grief it produced, and the silence that followed. I could do nothing but accept the forsakenness while the passing years began to weather my soul. Rusting the hinges of my heart until the corrosion made it nearabout impossible to open to anything or anyone.

I wonder if the folks who deserted those towns ever grew homesick. Did they ever have the feeling they'd left something of value behind?

CHAPTER 1



JANUARY

“Cell phones carry ten times more bacteria than most toilet seats.”

Grunting, I focused on the gleaming white porcelain just past my nose. “Hello, Mr. Random.”

A smooth, masculine chuckle echoed around the restroom from behind me. “Your face is in a toilet. Not so random, my darlin’.”

“Good thing this one is brand new, so . . .” I grunted again, wrestling the hundred-pound thing into place. “No bacteria to worry about. Hand me the wrench.” I held out my hand and wiggled my fingers. Cool metal touched my palm, but it felt wrong. I looked at the screwdriver and then narrowed my eyes at the handsome scoundrel screwing with me. “Seriously, Des? We don’t have time for you to be actin’ cute.” I settled onto my haunches and rummaged around in the toolbox. Holding up the adjustable wrench, I gave him a pointed look before turning back to the toilet.

Desmond preferred to leave the dirty work to me, instead sticking close to the design aspects of a project. But I didn’t mind.

Demolition and restoration were my regularly scheduled therapy sessions. For the sake of my sanity, I tried my darnedest to never skip an appointment.

“Thirteen minutes,” he warned. “That ribbon cutting is waiting for no one.”

“I can’t believe the entire grand opening is hinging on a back-ordered commode. Seriously, why was a commode, of all things, on back order? In all my years working construction I’ve never . . .” I shook my head and placed a small level on the seat. When the bubble settled precisely in the middle, I turned on the water valve and waited impatiently for the tank to fill.

“It’s the world we live in nowadays. The only thing that makes sense is that nothing makes sense.”

Trying to wrap my mind around that hogwash, I tossed the tools in the toolbox and closed the lid. “That made no sense.”

“Exactly.” Desmond offered his hand and helped me to my feet. His brown eyes, nearly the same shade as his skin, swept over me and landed near my feet as a groan worked up his throat. “Darlin’, please tell me you have another pair of shoes to change into.”

I glanced at my scuffed work boots covered with paint splatters and huffed. “No way was I going to chance dropping a toilet on my foot without these.”

He planted his hands on his lean hips. “But they don’t go with your dress.”

“No one’s going to care about my footwear. Besides, the dress is long enough they barely show.” I did have a pair of sandals in my truck, but the chance to mess with Desmond was too fun to pass up.

He made a *tsking* sound. “You’re just shy of six-foot. Hate to break it to you, but your dress isn’t that long.”

“No worries.” I placed the lid on the tank and wiped my hands on the floral maxi dress. The vibrant pink flowers matched my fresh manicure. The name of the polish seemed perfect for this conversation: *Short Story*. “Go get the inspector, so he can see this baby flush and pass us.”

“Sure thing, but for the record *I* care about your footwear.” Desmond reached behind me and unraveled the band holding my hair out of the way. He tousled it until the long brown waves looked intentionally messy. “Better. Besides those hideous boots, you look like a proper lady.” He winked.

Stifling a laugh, I watched his lithe body saunter out of the public restroom. Dressed to the nines, as always, in a navy three-piece suit and shiny leather shoes, Desmond Grant could have been a world-renowned fashion model, jet-setting around Europe, instead of my fixer-upper partner in South Carolina. I’m glad he chose the latter. Certainly, the man had made life more tolerable these last five years. I had hoped maybe with time we could have become more than platonic, but it never happened. Toeing the threshold of turning forty, the idea of me finding anything past platonic with anyone seemed to be an idea fading faster than cheap wallpaper.

Ten minutes later, I quickly shook the inspector’s hand and sprinted out of the building just in time to clap as the new owner of the Library Café cut the ribbon.

Twenty minutes after that, I sat at a table with my other business partner Nita as she bounced her ten-month-old daughter on her lap. The baby giggled, but I paid her no mind. Instead, my gaze swept over the impressively long line of customers waiting to order from the selection of sandwiches, salads, pastries, and specialty drinks of their choosing.

“It still amazes me how perfectly good buildings like this old library are just abandoned.” I motioned around, admiring the original dark wood flooring, wall paneling freshly painted in a creamy caramel hue, and iron chandeliers. The space mingled perfectly with the rich aroma of coffee and cinnamon.

“Good thing we found this one before it sat for too long,” Nita said and then cooed at her daughter. Such a sweet moment. So sweet, in fact, that I had to look away.

“Yeah.” I took a sip of my honey latte, but it suddenly tasted bitter. I placed the paper cup on the shiny surface of the table and

studied one of the library catalog cards underneath the thick layer of clear resin.

Organized Crime—Fiction

Grisham, John

The Firm 1st ed. 1991

I'd hand-selected this one and other mystery suspense cards, but Desmond came behind me and sprinkled in romance titles. Each table in the café held a scattering of them and book checkout slips, some dating way back to the 1920s. Those slips of paper held too much history and nostalgia to toss, so we'd turned them into art instead.

Desmond helped me figure out how to incorporate many of the old treasures left behind in the library. It never ceased to amaze me what people cast off without thought. Okay, so maybe I could be classified as a low-key hoarder, but still.

"The long librarian's desk made a perfect order counter and those bookshelves lining the back of the café, holding mugs and supplies instead of books, great use of our resources." Nita smiled, looking and sounding every bit the salesperson she was. I'm glad we stumbled upon her a few years back at an estate sale where she actually talked me into buying a few things I had no use for. The woman could sell sawdust to a lumber mill.

I returned her smile. "This one turned out great. Unique enough to draw people in without being over-the-top kitschy."

Nita shifted Joyia to her other leg. The tiny human refused to sit in the high chair. "It's packed out, so clearly we nailed it. Once again."

I was the self-appointed ghost hunter, tracking down abandoned buildings to flip. Desmond did all the design plans and purchases. And Nita had an uncanny knack for finding the right person who would be a perfect fit for the newly revived place. We were a dang good team and Lowcountry Lost had already made a name for itself within five years of being in business. We began by flipping homes,

but quickly moved on to businesses, helping withering towns have a fighting chance with new revenue. But none of that compared to our next project.

“Where’d Des run off to?” Nita asked, no longer cooing. “I need to get this little lady home for a nap soon.”

I craned my neck, scanning the group, but no towering, sharply dressed man stood among them. “I have no idea. He’s probably in the media room, showing off his bougie couches.” We both laughed. Desmond had turned the old media and archives room into another seating area and dressed the room with two burgundy velvet settees, a wrought iron chandelier dripping with teardrop-shaped crystals, and a chunky coffee table he’d found at another estate sale. Cozy with a relaxed ambience, customers would definitely want to stay awhile.

“Well, I need a refill. I’ll see if I can round him up while I’m at it. Hold Joyia for me, will ya?” Nita began to rise while holding the baby toward me.

I held my palms up. “I can’t . . . I’m allergic.”

“Good grief, Avalee. Just hold her for a few minutes.” Nita tried again but I shook my head.

“I might break her.”

She laughed, rolling her eyes. “You’re ridiculous. Kids aren’t that fragile.”

Maybe not in Nita’s care, but in mine . . . Well, that was a different story and no way would I chance being responsible for another child’s well-being ever again.

Never. Ever. Again.

“I’ll get you a refill. My treat.” I shot to my feet and darted away before she could argue. While waiting in line, I sent Desmond a text, telling him to get his behind to our table so we could discuss our next project. Soon I returned with the coffee and Nita returned to the subject I wanted no part of.

“One of these days Mr. Right is going to sweep you off your feet, and you’ll change your mind about children.” Nita planted a kiss on

the side of Joyia's forehead as the baby made an absolute mess with a sugar cookie. Was she even getting any of it in her mouth?

I shifted in my chair, preparing to get on my soapbox. "Mr. Right is a myth the romance industry invented just to sell naive women movies, books, products . . . It's the same reason Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny exist."

Nita stared at me blankly. "Wow . . . Bitter much?"

More than I care to admit. I shook my head. "Just being realistic."

Truth be told, a man resembling Mr. Right had already put on the act of sweeping me off my feet, and boy did it leave a lasting mark when we both stumbled and fell. But Nita didn't need to know any of that. When I left Beaufort to start over, I left the delusions of romance behind too.

Thankfully, Desmond sidled up to the table, his leather portfolio tucked underneath his arm. Grimacing at the cookie chaos across from us, he chose the seat beside me and started shuffling through some papers. "Let's talk business."

I motioned for him to get on with it, but Nita spoke up. "The saloon passed inspection and the power was turned on yesterday, so it's all clear for you to move in." She wrinkled her nose. "Are you ready to go live among ghosts, Avalee? I still can't believe you're not creeped out about it."

I lived with ghosts on the daily, so a ghost town seemed like the perfect place for me to reside. And how cool would it be to live in a saloon? We'd been working on remodeling it since last fall in our spare time, converting it into our home base. With a little over three thousand square feet, we would be able to hold large group meetings downstairs and I could live upstairs comfortably.

I shrugged. "Work crews will be in and out, so I won't have much alone time with the ghosts."

"Even after what our research found out about this place?" Nita shivered and made the sign of the cross. "They say you can hear children's laughter, and the broken clock tower sometimes chimes even though the bell clapper is sitting on the ground."

“A ghost town can’t go by that title without some urban legends seasoning its history. South Carolina is known for such. We’ve all heard of the Lizard Man.”

Nita sat up a little straighter, her dark eyes widening. “I haven’t heard about a Lizard Man.”

Desmond chuckled quietly. “Over in Lee County. People say there’s a swamp thing damaging vehicles and generally terrorizing folks.”

Nita gasped, holding Joyia closer. The baby, thinking it a game, squeezed her mama in return.

I snorted. “It’s just a legend. We need to focus on the facts, not hearsay.”

Nita shook her head. “No way would I be able to stay out there until the town’s complete.”

Although the facts were sparse, it had been enough to capture my attention and hold it for the better part of my life. Norm, South Carolina, was founded way back in the 1800s, but after they built that new road in 1938 it pulled the plug right out of the poor town, slowly draining all the life from it. Now it sat in the middle of nowhere, but we had a solid plan on making it a somewhere. We’d even been given permission to rename the town Somewhere. Clever, right?

“Avalée won’t be on her own much. I’ll be staying with her off and on throughout the duration.” Desmond clasped my arm, his touch soothing as always. “But, honey, just so we are clear. The first time I hear any creepy kid’s laughing or that broke clock chimes in the middle of the night, I’m out.”

I nodded. “As long as you take me with you.”

Desmond released my arm and tapped the top sheet of paper. “We meet with the investors and some heads from the county on Monday. That’ll give Avalée the weekend to move in. We’ll do a walk-through of the town and present the plan of action.”

“How do you feel about the investors bringing in their own engineers and such?” Nita asked while going through what looked to be about an entire package of baby wipes to clean the cookie goo off Joyia’s chubby cheeks.

LOWCOUNTRY LOST

I moved my phone to my lap just as Joyia swiped a grubby hand toward it. “We’ve worked with subcontractors before. This will be no different. They’ve already approved my proposal, so I’m fine with having the extra help to get it accomplished.”

“Are y’all sure we haven’t bitten off more than we can chew? It has to be done by the end of September. Since we don’t officially start until the first of February, that only gives us *eight months*.” Nita was always the optimist of our team until we talked deadlines.

“We thought the Palms was too much to take on, but we managed it just fine and look how spectacular that turned out,” Desmond said, offering Nita a confident wink.

This one would be Lowcountry Lost’s largest project by far, with the abandoned vacation-resort-turned-retirement-community coming in second. The Palms gave me hope we could pull this off too. Sort of . . .

“Funny enough, the town’s footprint isn’t much bigger than the Palms,” I said, proud of myself for sounding like the optimist of the group for a change. “We got this.”

Six years ago, when my life collapsed, I picked up and moved away from Beaufort to get away from the ghosts. After I settled in Lexington, I purchased my first flip house, intending for it to be my starting-over home. Before the restoration was even completed, I received an offer for the house I couldn’t refuse. My Grandma Maudie didn’t raise no fool, so I sold it and hunted down another house to flip, and then another, thus spurring me to obtain my general contractor’s license and to form Lowcountry Lost. After my failed date with Desmond, I didn’t waste much time convincing him to partner with me.

It was hard to believe how my life had flipped during those years too. Sure, parts of me were still broken, unfixable repairs, but at least it was livable again. And that was saying something, because I sure as heck didn’t think that was possible. I could only hope the patch-ups held.