



A NOVEL

THE  
LUMBER  
BARON'S  
WIFE

LYNN  
AUSTIN

# PRAISE FOR LYNN AUSTIN

At once heartwarming and heartbreaking, *The Lumber Baron's Wife* transports readers to frontier Michigan through the lens of three remarkable women. With her signature skill for creating characters readers care deeply about, Lynn Austin captures the beauty of friendship, faith, and resilience across generations in a memorable story overflowing with hope.

**LAURA FRANTZ**, Christy Award–winning author of *The Indigo Heiress*

Lynn Austin, one of my favorite authors, skillfully weaves together the stories and secrets of three generations of women in this Gilded Age novel filled with forgiveness, love, and the enduring value of legacy.

**JULIE KLASSEN**, bestselling author of *Whispers at Painswick Court*, on *All My Secrets*

Defly intertwining legacies of faith, doubt, and love, Austin powerfully advocates for women's voices within their numerous unique callings. She is one of our great character-driven storytellers.

**RACHEL MCMILLAN**, author of *Operation Scarlet*, on *All My Secrets*

Engrossing. . . . Austin brings a complex tangle of family bonds to life with nuance, delivering an inspiring message.

**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY** on *All My Secrets*

A masterful, heartwarming, and heartbreaking historical novel, *Long Way Home* contains reminders of human beings' ability to do great evil—and their duty to do great good.

**FOREWORD REVIEWS**

Austin's latest novel has endearing characters with flaws that allow growth. . . . There's no putting down this nostalgic, appealing read.

**LIBRARY JOURNAL** on *The Wish Book Christmas*

[A] lovely standalone Christmas tale. . . . While fans of *If I Were You* will be eager to read the next chapter of Audrey and Eve's lives, this charming book will also be a delight for inspirational readers looking for a feel-good Christmas story.

**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**, starred review of *The Wish Book Christmas*

Austin has written a powerful tale of domestic heroism and faith, with all three women questioning and then turning to God for strength.

**BOOKLIST** on *Chasing Shadows*

As always, Austin has penned a moving, intricate, and lovely work of Christian fiction that is excellently researched with an underlying message of hope. Highly recommended.

**HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY** on *Chasing Shadows*

Austin shines in this excellent tale of three women who struggle to survive WWII in the Netherlands. . . . As the three women work to evade and break the Nazi grip on the Netherlands, Austin skillfully portrays the dangers they face as they struggle to survive. This is a must-read for fans of WWII inspirational.

**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**, starred review of *Chasing Shadows*

Lynn Austin is a master at exploring the depths of human relationships. Set against the backdrop of war and its aftermath, *If I Were You* is a beautifully woven page-turner.

**SUSAN MEISSNER**, bestselling author of *A Map to Paradise*

Lynn Austin has long been one of my favorite authors. With an intriguing premise and excellent writing, *If I Were You* is sure to garner accolades and appeal to fans of novels like *The Alice Network* and *The Nightingale*.

**JULIE KLASSEN**, author of *Lady Maybe*

Austin transports readers into the lives of her characters . . . giving them a unique take on the traditional World War II tale. Readers won't be able to turn the pages fast enough to find out how Eve and Audrey met and what could have gone so terribly wrong.

**LIBRARY JOURNAL**, starred review of *If I Were You*

[A] tantalizing domestic drama. . . . Its message familiar and its world nostalgic and fragile, *If I Were You* looks for answers in changing identities and finds that it's priceless to remain true to oneself.

**FOREWORD REVIEWS**



# THE LUMBER BARON'S WIFE

## ALSO BY LYNN AUSTIN

*Waiting for Christmas*

*All My Secrets*

*Long Way Home*

*The Wish Book Christmas*

*Chasing Shadows*

*If I Were You*

*Sightings: Discovering God's  
Presence in Our Everyday Moments*

*Legacy of Mercy*

*Where We Belong*

*Waves of Mercy*

*On This Foundation*

*Keepers of the Covenant*

*Return to Me*

*Pilgrimage: My Journey to  
a Deeper Faith in the Land*

*Where Jesus Walked*

*All Things New*

*Wonderland Creek*

*While We're Far Apart*

*Though Waters Roar*

*Until We Reach Home*

*A Proper Pursuit*

*A Woman's Place*

*All She Ever Wanted*

*Among the Gods*

*Faith of My Fathers*

*The Strength of His Hand*

*Song of Redemption*

*Gods and Kings*

*Candle in the Darkness*

*A Light to My Path*

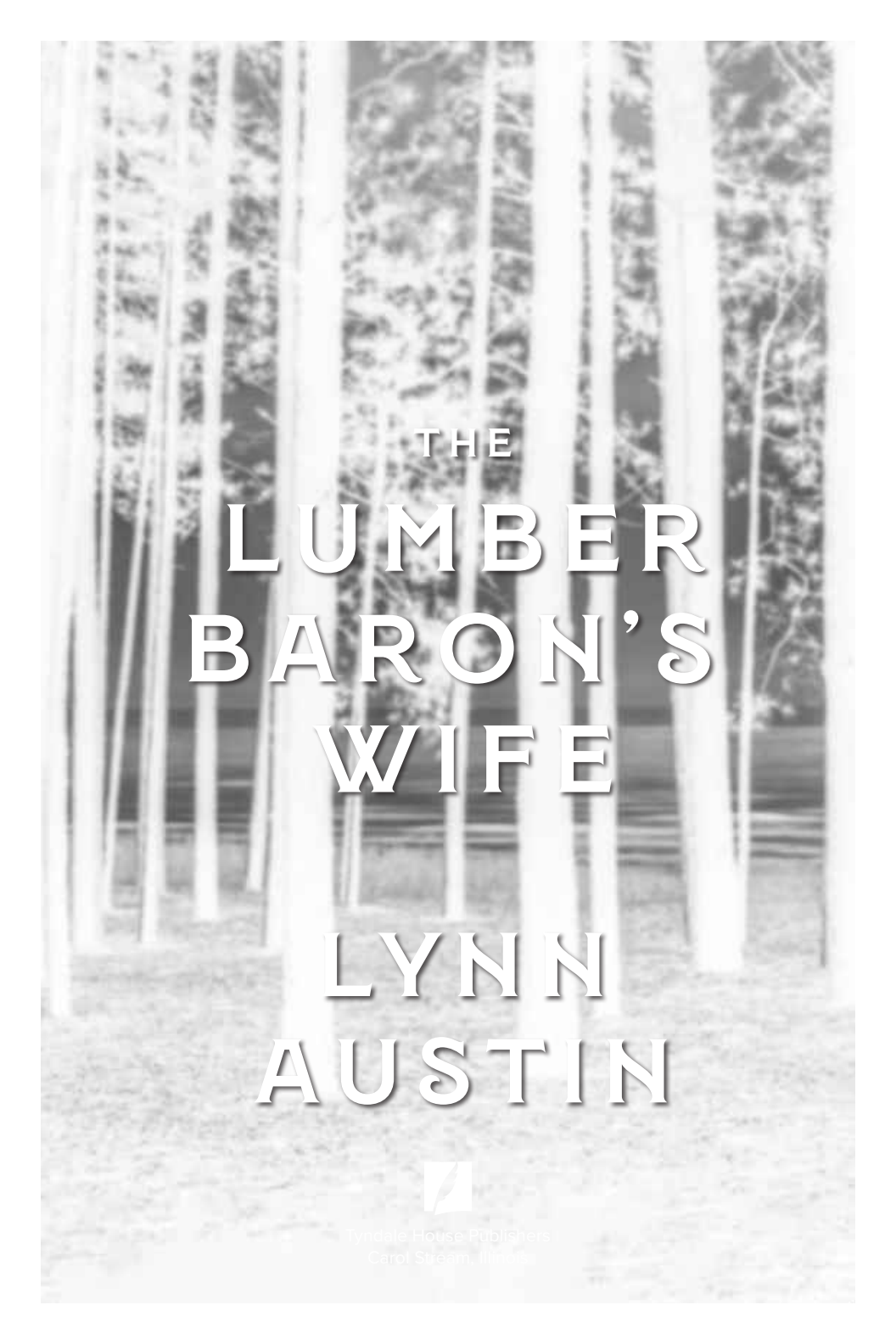
*Fire by Night*

*Hidden Places*

*Wings of Refuge*

*Eve's Daughters*

*Fly Away*



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*For my grandchildren*  
*Aiden, Lyla, Ayla, Refaya, and Orya*  
*With love*



PROLOGUE

*Hannah*

1875

It's long past midnight but I cannot sleep, consumed with worry for my friend. She disappeared without a trace two weeks ago, and I fear she has come to harm. Her husband, Henry, believes she was on board the schooner *Athena*, which sank in a storm en route to Chicago. I'm not as certain. She would have told me her plans. And she didn't take anything with her.

Kate Abernathy often vexed me and tried my patience. Trouble seemed to follow her like a stray dog. And yet I miss her. Indeed, more than I would have guessed. We've tried searching for her, looking in the places she favored, but with no success. I have neither the means nor the expertise to search for her more thoroughly. I don't know what to do. Should I have shared my suspicions in the past that Kate's husband was abusing her? At the time, she attributed her bruises and sprains to her own clumsiness and denied that Henry was at fault. I know how much she loved him, and indeed, he seems genuinely distraught at her disappearance.

It's useless to lie here wide awake, but I fear I will disturb John if I get out of bed. The fire has been dampened for the night, so the house will be chilly, the wooden floors cold beneath my feet. Besides, there's nothing I can do to find Kate in the middle of the night.

The wind rustles through the trees outside our home in the woods, scattering the rusty leaves. I allow my mind to wander through the past two years, searching for a clue I may have missed. Our friendship was an unlikely one from the very start. We had nothing in common, save our husbands' acquaintance, and the fact that moving to the wilds of Michigan had been their idea, not ours. Our differences were many. I would guess Kate to be no more than twenty or twenty-one—she never revealed her true age—and I'm nearing my fortieth birthday. She was wealthy beyond most people's dreams, wife of a millionaire lumber baron. I'm a simple doctor's wife. In truth, I know very little about Kate, aside from what she has told me, and sometimes I found it difficult to believe her stories. She told me she once killed a man.

When I first met Kate on a fall evening two years ago, I mistook her for Henry Abernathy's daughter, so great was the difference in their ages. I judged her to be a girl of eighteen—and indeed, she might have been. I must have betrayed my surprise when she held out her hand to show me her wedding ring, glittering with diamonds, because she gave a wry smile and tossed her head as if pleased by my shock. I didn't know it at the time, but that meeting would be a life-changing one, the dividing line between my grief-shaped past and this oddly shaped present.

I sigh and change positions in bed, burrowing deeper beneath the quilt. The wind causes the waves on Lake Michigan to roar in the distance like a locomotive. If the only thing I can do for my spirited, troubled friend is to pray, then that's what I shall do. I squeeze my eyes tightly shut against my tears.

*Keep her safe, Lord . . . Help us find her . . . Please, please, bring her home . . .*

# Hannah

TWO YEARS EARLIER

1873

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

John was late returning home from seeing his patient. He should have arrived at our town house hours earlier. I was beginning to think our supper would be ruined, but at last I heard his carriage outside. He didn't offer his usual apologies and excuses as he strode through the kitchen door. Indeed, he looked happier than he had for a long season. "You look pleased," I said. "Has Mrs. Webster improved?"

"Only slightly. That's not why I'm late." He set his medical bag on the table and planted a quick kiss on my cheek, his beard tickling my face. "I ran into an old friend, a man I knew well during the war."

"Oh? A fellow doctor?"

John laughed, a sound I hadn't heard in some time. "No, more of a rogue, I should say. But a highly intelligent, well-read rogue, who enjoyed cigars, and brandy, and philosophical discussions late into the night whenever there was a lull in fighting the Rebels."

"What's his name? Have you mentioned him before?"

"I don't believe so. It's Henry Abernathy. I hope you don't

mind, but I've invited him to come by for a drink this evening. He has a very interesting proposal for us."

I did mind. I would have preferred a quiet evening reading by the fire as the mantel clock ticked away the long hours in our deathly quiet house. But I held my tongue as I retrieved our supper from the warming oven. The roasted chicken looked dry, the potatoes overcooked.

"That smells delicious, Hannah. I didn't have time to eat lunch today." John pulled out his chair at the kitchen table, then paused before sitting down, gazing around for a moment as if appraising the room for the first time, or perhaps the last.

"So, what is this proposal he wants to discuss?" I asked.

"I think it's better if I let Henry explain. He knows more of the details than I do at this point." He sat, and his chair scraped as he pulled it closer to the table.

"I don't like surprises, John, you know that."

He tugged his earlobe, a habit he'd developed since an exploding artillery shell destroyed some of his hearing in that ear. "Very well, my dear. But let's pray first." He bowed his head and said a blessing over our food, then looked up again. "I hope you'll take time to think about his proposal and not reject it outright. I believe it has merits." I folded my arms, meeting his gaze, waiting. He was the first to look away. "It seems Henry has become a millionaire in the years since the war. He purchased some timberland in Michigan and now operates a sawmill. The demand for lumber is so great that he can scarcely keep up. The town on Lake Michigan where he has settled is growing rapidly, and is in need of a doctor. He wants us to join him there."

"You mean *move* there? To Michigan?"

"Well, yes."

I couldn't have been more surprised and dismayed if he had told me he wanted to move to darkest Africa. I doubt either of us

could find Michigan on a map. Wasn't it still a wilderness? I could tell that the idea excited John, but how could he even consider such an absurd proposal? We had both lived in Brooklyn our entire lives. It was my home. "I can't imagine moving to a place like that." I spooned potatoes onto my plate.

"Please think about it before you say no. It would be a fresh start for us."

My anger surged like a boiling pot. "In what way? Will I bear more children in the wilderness to replace the ones we lost?"

"Hannah . . . I didn't mean . . ." I could see he wanted to reach for my hand, so I hid them both on my lap. John lowered his head for a moment as if gathering his thoughts, and when he looked up again, tears glistened in his eyes. "There are so many reminders of them here, Hannah. I can't bear it any longer. I expect to see Lizzie running to greet me when I return home, or hear the boys' shouts as they come galloping down the stairs. Their empty beds—" He swallowed and paused to gather himself. "I grieve for our children as much as you do. I know you blame me for their deaths, and well you should. I blame myself for not being able to save them."

God forgive me, but I did blame him. He had taken our two boys with him to visit a sick child at the orphanage, thinking it would be good for them to befriend children who were less fortunate than themselves. But the sickness turned out to be diphtheria, and all three of our children quickly became sick and died. There was nothing John could do. I've forgiven him, as a good Christian should, but that doesn't bring back my children. Or lift the heavy stone of grief that leaves me trapped, unable to move.

"There's nothing for us here, Hannah." He wiped his tears with his fist. "My medical practice barely supports us. Who will trust a physician who couldn't heal his own children? This would be a fresh start, far from the nightmares."

"And far from their graves. That's all I have left of them!"

“Our children aren’t in that cemetery.”

“I know. I know they’re in heaven.” My faith promised me that I would be reunited with them one day, but that was little comfort when so many lonely years stretched ahead without them.

“How much longer can we go on this way, Hannah? We’re drowning in grief every day. I just thought . . . I mean, I hoped . . . that if we moved away from the memories, and got a fresh start . . . perhaps you might grow to love me again.”

“I do love you,” I murmured, but I wasn’t certain I spoke the truth.

“Then give my friend a fair hearing tonight. Please?”

I nodded. I would try.



John seemed as surprised as I was when Henry Abernathy arrived that windy fall evening with a young woman on his arm. “Henry! Welcome!” Dry leaves swirled on the doorstep as John ushered them inside. “I don’t believe you’ve ever met my wife, Hannah.”

“No, but I remember how you wrote endless letters to her during the war. Good to meet you at last, Hannah.”

“Yes, pleased to meet you, too.”

Mr. Abernathy towered over John and had the powerful shoulders and arms of a man accustomed to manual labor. His well-tailored suit didn’t seem to match a man with such a robust frame and hearty demeanor, as if he were a workingman playing dress-up. I guessed him to be in his mid-forties, like John. “How did a homely guy like the doc ever find a wife as pretty as you?” he asked.

“You’re kind to say so,” I said.

“And this,” he said, wrapping his arm around the girl, “is my wife, Kate.”

I was expecting him to say *daughter*, and it took a moment for

my mind to comprehend that this hefty, middle-aged man and this slip of a girl who looked no more than eighteen were husband and wife.

“Nice to meet you,” Kate said with a giggle. She gave a dramatic curtsy, lifting the skirt of her satin brocade gown. I could have bought five dresses for what hers must have cost. The low-cut neckline showed more of Kate’s bosom than I and the rest of polite society were usually comfortable with. She was petite but shapely, with wide blue eyes and mahogany curls that were escaping from their pins as if she’d just risen from a nap.

“Forgive me, Henry,” John said, “but I once met your wife after the war and she—”

“Quite right. Quite right. Hattie passed away a year ago.”

“I’m so sorry. My condolences.”

“We got married five days ago!” Kate held out her left hand to display a dazzling diamond ring. “Henry saw me onstage and came to my dressing room afterwards, saying he just had to meet me. Do you believe in love at first sight? Because that’s what it was like for us.”

I couldn’t find any words. Fortunately, John managed to sputter, “I-I wish you many long years of happiness together. Come, let’s all sit down.”

We led them into our parlor, which seemed cold and sterile to me without children to rumple the carpet or leave toys scattered about. John poured Henry a whiskey. “Would you like some tea or coffee?” I asked his wife. “Or perhaps a little elderberry wine?”

“I’ll have what they’re having,” she said, pointing.

“*Whiskey?*”

Henry laughed and draped his arm around her shoulder. “She’s quite a gal, my Katie! She can put away a whiskey like the best of us.” He pulled Kate down beside him onto the settee as John served their drinks, and I thought for a moment she was going

to sit on Henry's lap. She didn't, but there was very little space between them as they snuggled together. Henry took a generous sip and smacked his lips. "Good stuff, Doc. Let's raise a toast to our future!" He lifted his glass, then took another gulp. "Now, I hope you've been considering my offer, John, because I'm serious about bringing you to our growing town. Michigan is a great place to live, just wild enough to be interesting, yet civilized enough for a decent life. It just needs a few good men to finish taming it."

"Henry says native Indians still roam around in the woods. He says sometimes they come right into town!"

"It's true," Henry said, laughing. "But they're friendly folk. They don't mean any harm."

"Tell them about the town, Henry. I haven't seen it yet, but he says it's a real nice place."

"Yes, it's growing into quite a fine community. Good place to raise a family."

I winced at his words and gazed down at my lap.

"Of course, it gets a little rowdy every spring when the lumberjacks get paid and come flooding into town."

Kate gave a little shiver. "Doesn't that sound exciting? Lumberjacks! Henry says it's like the Wild West when they arrive, with saloons and ladies of the night and everything!"

Heat rushed to my face at such unseemly talk. Henry chuckled, as if Kate was a delightful child. "Fistfighting is quite a sport with the lumbermen. That's why they need a doctor to patch them up."

I glanced at John. He looked as uneasy as I was. He knew I disliked coarse talk.

"But the lumbermen only come into town once a year, in the spring. The rest of the time the place is peaceful. It's quite a sight to see hundreds of logs racing downriver when the ice breaks up each spring. They jam the river like a huge, floating raft. Some of those logs are so big it would take the four of us holding hands to

wrap our arms around them. Michigan has so much white pine we could chop trees for a hundred years and never run out. And the demand for it is fierce. Chicago is still rebuilding after the Great Fire, so we're sawing and selling lumber as fast as we can load the ships and sail them across the lake."

"Henry says we can take a schooner to Chicago and go shopping whenever we're bored." Kate kicked off her shoes as she spoke, a shocking thing to do in a stranger's parlor. Even more shocking, she wasn't wearing stockings! She curled her bare legs and feet beneath her on the settee. "You've got a nice place here, even if it isn't my taste," she said. "But you can have an even bigger house in Michigan. Henry's mansion has six bedrooms. *Six!* We'll have to make a lot of babies to fill all those rooms."

Once again, heat burned my cheeks at her coarse words. Making babies, indeed! Her husband didn't seem to notice or care.

"Katie's right about the house, Hannah. I mentioned it to John this afternoon, but I meant it when I said I'll have a house built for the two of you with the finest wood from my sawmill."

"That's a very generous offer," John said. "Do you think—?"

"Are these your kids?" Kate interrupted. She had set her empty whiskey glass on the end table without using a coaster and was lifting the silver picture frame that was perched there. My breath caught in my throat. One of John's patients owned a photography studio and had taken the portrait of our three children as a gift. They had died two months later. John had placed the photograph there. I still couldn't bear to look at it.

John rose and gently took the frame from her. "Yes, our three children, Johnny, Nicholas, and Lizzie. They passed away from a fever six months ago."

"Oh, golly. I'm so sorry." She gripped his arm in an overly familiar way. "How old were they?"

"Six, five, and three years old."

"I'm sorry to hear that, too, Doc. You folks have my sympathy." If this visit was meant to win me over to the idea of joining them in Michigan, it wasn't succeeding. Long before they finished their second whiskey, I stopped listening. I felt relieved when they finally left, and would have been content never to lay eyes on Henry Abernathy and his ill-mannered young wife again. John helped me carry the glasses to the kitchen and turn off the gaslights. When I looked at him, I sensed his excitement.

"You want to do it, don't you?" I said. "You like the idea of packing up and moving to the wilderness."

"It isn't a wilderness—"

"Are you certain of that?" I hurried up the stairs without waiting for him, and slipped into my nightgown. John didn't change out of his clothes but stood in the bedroom doorway, tugging his ear as I pulled the pins from my hair, brushed it, and braided it for the night. His sagging shoulders made him look like an old man.

"What?" I asked when he continued to stare.

"We're dying here, Hannah. We can't go on this way."

"So, your solution is to run away?"

"Either we start all over again, or stay here and slowly die."

He turned and walked out. I heard him descend the stairs, then the front door opened and closed behind him.