



SOUTH  
OF  
SOMEWHERE

T. I. LOWE

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*South of Somewhere*

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# 1

I died once, and I didn't find it all that unpleasant. Coming back, though . . . well, that's an entirely different story. Facing the aftermath of it seemed so much worse than death itself. Today, years in the making, I would have to start facing more of the aftermath head-on. No more hiding behind locked doors and security. I just had to get around this skunk first.

Not a real one, but her hair reminded me of a skunk. Two inches of white tracks zipping right down the middle on either side of her parted brassy-red hair. *I'm going natural*, the lead addiction counselor had said last week when she attended my exit plan meeting. It didn't look all that natural and, really, why did natural actually matter? Boring, if you asked me, but no one asked for my opinion.

"Just sign here, hon." Gail offered a pen, but the offer meant so much more than that. The offer also included my freedom. A freedom I wrestled with being ready for.

*Don't screw this up*, I thought, signing *Juniper Wilder* on the line at the bottom of the page that stated I was ready to reenter the real

world and act like I had some sense this time around. Heaven help me, I sure hoped I wasn't signing a lie.

"Your brother dropped off your car." Gail handed me the key chain with the mini picture frame still holding on for dear life.

I accepted the key chain and stared at the small photo. A set of green eyes, identical to mine, stared back. The picture of pure sweet innocence and a reminder of the worst mistake of my life. Blinking back tears, I mumbled, "Thanks."

"Oh, and here's the paperwork for your new license. Good job on finishing the course and getting it reinstated." Gail smiled encouragingly, as if I'd completed a college course and not an alcoholism and drug safety action program. "Be sure to go by the DMV as soon as possible."

"I will. Thanks again." I turned to leave.

"Junie," Gail called out, putting my escape on pause. "You're going to be okay."

I met her light-brown eyes that were *naturally* warm with compassion I didn't deserve. I only nodded before walking toward a life of unknowns. Did I believe her simple declaration, that I would be okay? Absolutely not.

My silver car sat in a spot in the visitors' section right out front. I pushed the button on the key fob and the trunk opened smoothly, but there wasn't any room for my luggage. Boxes of my belongings filled most of the space, telling me all I needed to know. *Stay away. Move on. Don't come back.* Next to the boxes, a case of sparkling waters was frosty with condensation, indicating it hadn't been there long, which also meant my brother could have waited for me. Did I blame my brother? Not at all. Did it hurt anyway? Much more than I cared to admit.

"Thanks, jerk." I stabbed the plastic wrapping with a house key that no longer welcomed me and pried an ice-cold can from the case. Chilling the waters had been considerate, I gave him that much.

I'd just cracked open the can and taken a deep drink from it when a shadow crept over me. Bracing myself, I lowered the can and met a set of heavy-lidded, bloodshot eyes.

"You breaking out today, Sassy?" Deaton licked his lips and moved closer.

I put my luggage between us. "Yep."

"Sweet." Deaton tucked his long blond hair behind his ear, the shade dark and dull. If I squinted my eyes, I could almost imagine him pre-drugs. He reminded me of Arlo, both handsome in a worn way and charismatic with a heavy dose of crazy. I considered myself crazy as well after making that terrible mistake the night we were both admitted. A mistake he hadn't once let me forget in the past six months. A mistake that haunted me as much as Arlo did.

I barely remembered the night I arrived here, but the next day remained crystal clear in my memory. I had to take my first of many drug tests. I straight-up admitted I wouldn't pass it—who knew how easily accessible drugs were in prison—but the woman administering the test laughed it off. *No one passes the first, but you better pass all the rest.* Despite Deaton's constant access to contraband which he constantly offered to me, I managed to stay clean.

"Whelp. I gotta go, so . . ." I maneuvered around Deaton and slung my suitcase and duffel bag in the backseat.

"Where are you off to? Sullivan's Island, right?"

I opened the car door, but he blocked me from getting in. "Yep." *Why on earth did I tell him about that?* I blamed it on being stuck in this facility, day in and day out. I had to admit Deaton helped me pass time with hours of card games and dumb jokes. Once he finally understood nothing more could happen between us, he settled for surface-level friendship. Sort of. Every now and then he'd try coming on to me, but I kept on shutting that down.

"Take me with you." His breath smelled of stale cigarettes and

coffee, two things I couldn't stand. I told him time and time again he should quit smoking, but, as with all things, no one told Deaton James what to do. We'd both made it through the program, but it was time for me to move on.

I huffed a laugh. "You get to go jet-setting or laze on a yacht somewhere, while I'm strapped with a year's worth of probation, AA meetings, and random drug tests." I thumped his shoulder, hoping the light banter helped get me out of this. "Trust me. You don't want to go with me."

"Deaton! We have paperwork to do before you can leave!" Standing at the entrance, Gail waved for him to get back inside.

He turned and I took the opportunity to slide inside the car. Before I could get the door shut, he grabbed it. "You got a number?"

"I don't own a phone anymore, remember?" He'd somehow snuck a phone in, like other things we weren't allowed to have, but I stuck to the rules. Prison and rehab will do that to a girl. Scared me straight into obeying everything, that's for dang sure.

"Well, when you get one, add my number first." Deaton placed a torn piece of paper in my hand. "Don't forget me, Sassy." He winked and then walked away.

Once Deaton disappeared inside, I tossed the paper on the ground and shut my door. I know some people formed lasting friendships in rehab, but I couldn't afford to do that with him. He hadn't learned a darn thing while we were stuck here, but I had. Mainly, I'd learned the life I'd been living wasn't living at all, but today I wanted a real shot at it.

My steady—something new to me—index finger pressed the start button, and the sedan came to life. Strapped for cash, I'd have to look into selling it, but I was too weary to even consider that daunting task at the moment. Driving away from this place of reckoning and toward more consequences took all the strength I had.

I put the car in reverse and looked into the rearview mirror. Flinching, I kept my foot on the brake and relived the last time I had looked into that mirror. The scene had been much different than an unassuming parking lot. No, last time the view had been lit with flashing blue lights as my life imploded.