

SAMPLER



UNDER THE MAGNOLIAS

a novel

T. I. LOWE

Bestselling author of Lulu's Cafe

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Under the Magnolias

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To Teresa Moise

My dear friend, mentor, and running partner

Because of your unwavering confidence in me,

I felt confident enough to pour

my soul into this story

PROLOGUE

1987

At eighty feet tall with a spread of forty feet, the southern magnolia tree was known to get out of hand in our part of South Carolina, which was nestled smack-dab in the middle of the heart-shaped state. The ornamental madam could get a wild leaf to lift her full skirt and take a squat in a yard if she wasn't made to mind. Owners had to be diligent with keeping the trees on a grooming routine or chance the entire yard becoming overrun by the Southern beauties.

The self-contained tree was a tidy guest though. Discarded limbs and leaves were kept hidden under her fluffy hem until the debris gradually returned to the very soil that gave it life.

Unlike most neighboring towns who were starting to plop Bradford pear trees in the ground like they were the next great thing, our entire town was decorated with southern magnolias. Shoot, our trees had built-in storage, and Mother Nature wasn't the only one to take advantage of the unique hiding spots. High school students weren't as sly as they thought they were with hiding their cigarettes under the two fat twins flanking the bus lot so they could sneak a smoke between classes. The Truett Memorial Library didn't allow food or beverages past the door, so most folks used the limbs of a magnolia tree beside the building to hang grocery bags or set their cups just underneath to retrieve later on their way out. You just never knew what would be found under one of the trees. Diaries, love notes, a lost baseball . . .

The most notorious discovery had to be

the skeletal remains of a runaway teen and the knife used to dismember her. As if that wasn't awful enough, her remains were found under a giant magnolia on the front lawn of the courthouse where the trial had been held and concluded years before, confirming later that an innocent man had been sent to prison.

But the folks of Magnolia didn't like to talk about that. No, they preferred to keep stuff like that hidden and shine up all the positives of the small town. Like the fact that our mayor had a direct connection to the Kennedy family—by way of a second cousin, once removed—making him and his family town royalty. And then there was the other family who were kin to the folks who made the Duke's Mayonnaise up the road in Greenville. Of course, they're considered town royalty, too. It *is* the best mayonnaise, so I get it.

The town was also big on bragging about its active church community. With a church on every corner, it's no wonder there was always a lot to crow about. There was the First Baptist of Magnolia, the First Presbyterian, First Methodist . . . a lot of Firsts.

And just like the botched murder trial, Magnolia didn't like to talk about Dave Foster and his congregation out on Nolia Farms. Even though it wasn't the official name of my father's small country church, folks referred to it as the First Riffraff of Magnolia. Pa said they could call it whatever they wanted. People running their mouths was never something to bother him. No, he had much bigger issues than small-town gossip.

The one-room chapel could only hold thirty or so people. It was established back in the late 1800s by my great-grandfather, who was also a farmer with a passion to minister. Farm life didn't always allow much free time, so he built the chapel as a place of worship for any of the farm help and his family. My father was the third generation to pastor this church. Phoenix said it reminded him of the schoolhouse on *Little House on the Prairie* and was all about convincing Mama to teach us there instead of sending us to public school, but she wanted us to have time off the farm, so that never happened.

As the piano came to life, I sat a little

straighter and scanned the small pews and felt certain the ragtag congregation near about represented any walk of life you could think of.

A fortune-teller accused of being a witch doctor. Check.

An ex-con with a glass eye. Check.

An atheist believer with a Polish accent. Check.

The town's undertaker whose sexual orientation was questionable. Check.

The town floozy with a penchant for neon-blue eye shadow. Check.

A poor farming family with way too many kids. Check.

A madman leading them. Check.

At the moment, said madman was going to town on the untuned piano like he was Jerry Lee Lewis. Shoulders shaking, long legs bouncing to the beat, singing an up-tempo version of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," he had the rapt attention of the entire congregation.

Except me.

I was immune to his theatrics, so I turned my attention to the magnolia wreath hanging

on the beam above the altar. Sunshine slipped through the filmy windowpanes and reflected off the waxy leaves. At least it made the worn plank floors and the chipped white paint look intentional, like the antique style was what we were going for. The wreath was one of Charlotte's creations. I would often catch my sister looking at the giant monstrosity with a big smile on her young face. I looked beside me and caught her doing so now, thinking nothing but happy thoughts, quite the opposite of my own. Instead of seeing the wreath as decor, I couldn't help viewing it as a monument to a bad memory. The bracket mending the beam was barely noticeable, but my eyes didn't have to glimpse the tarnished metal to know it was there, holding more than the weight of the broken beam.

The awareness of what was hiding in plain sight had my eyes snapping away and focusing on a head full of blond curls, trimmed to a respectable length and neatly styled. It made me want to dishevel the curls until they resembled the unruliness of better times we'd shared together. The mayor's son was the only

one in this tiny sanctuary who was considered normal, but his being here amongst us misfits, sitting two pews up from me like he owned the place, made him the weirdest of us all.

Before I could look away, he glanced over his shoulder and caught me staring. Instead of offering me the typical dimpled, lopsided grin, Vance Archer Cumberland frowned. The ever-present sparkle in his grass-green eyes was absent.

I shook my head and glared a warning. *Not today.* He shook his head too, but with resignation. He was too handsome to look so sad and I wanted to live in a world where I was allowed to make him happy, yet his unhappiness was solely my fault. It didn't matter anymore. There was no point in wasting his or my time on what could never be.

I broke our gaze first when a flash of hot pink got caught in my peripheral vision. Charlotte had started swinging her legs at a rate that was sure to launch her slap off the pew if she kept it up. She was short still, but at age thirteen that would probably soon change.

The inevitable growth spurt that accompanied puberty, if it was anything like my experience.

“Get still,” I muttered out the side of my mouth and tapped my Birkenstock to her jelly shoe.

Charlotte huffed but did as she was told, stilling her legs. She picked up the end of her dark braid and began fiddling with it. My sister was my opposite. Prissy, loved dresses and silly shoes that were good for nothing but producing sweaty blisters. Today she’d paired the lacy plastic sandals with a floral sundress.

I’d carried the label of tomboy as far back as I could remember, hated dresses, and chose shoe wear for practicality. Today’s church attire was bell-bottom corduroys I’d lifted from Mama’s side of the closet and a plain white V-neck T-shirt I’d lifted from Pa’s side. It was as dressy as I was going to get. Charlotte liked to sass about me being stuck in the seventies, but she had no idea just how deeply I was stuck there and that I would do anything to go back.

You’d have thought with us being the only two girls out of the seven siblings that we would have had a tighter bond. Maybe if there

had been less than the six years' age difference, or if I had been more agreeable . . .

Pixy bumped into my leg, grunted, and then plopped down on the worn pine floor at my feet. Her earthy scent mingled with the lemon oil I'd used yesterday to wipe down the pews. I moved over to give her more sprawling room, but that only made her scoot until she'd eliminated the space between us and was right back to nuzzling my foot. Pixy had issues. Namely her identity crisis. She thought she was a five-pound poodle. She wasn't. Pixy was actually a thirty-six-pound potbelly pig.

With the town viewing us as riffraff, it wasn't surprising to find animals dropped off near the front of our 850-acre farm. I'd found Pixy tied to the mailbox a few years back. Another time, we discovered a billy goat had wandered up to the house and was gnawing on the porch rail one morning. We named him Woody, for obvious reasons.

Animals weren't the only surprises people left for us. One time it was a stolen car left in the west field. Pa called the cops on that one. And he should have called about another

surprise gift but chose to handle it in his own special Dave Foster way.

The guesthouse tucked in the western part of the farm was considered to have an open door to anyone needing a place to stay for a while. A Native American couple from the Lumbee Tribe found their way to Nolia Farms one spring. Some didn't care for that, namely grown men parading around like ghosts, and so a cross was erected in our yard and set afire. Pa, being Pa, rushed into the house, and we all prepared ourselves for him returning with the shotgun. Instead, he came outside with a bag of marshmallows and skewers fashioned from wire hangers.

As those fools in white robes and pointy hats watched on, we roasted marshmallows and sang "The Old Rugged Cross."

Their ringleader accused Pa of blasphemy, but Pa shut that down with a confidence Dave Foster wore better than his denim shirt. Mama said that shirt made her swoon, so there's that.

Pa jabbed a finger at the flaming cross. "No. You setting fire to this sacrificial symbol

of freedom and love for *all* is the actual crime of blasphemy. Now how 'bout we set aside our differences. Y'all welcome to take those hoods off and enjoy a marshmallow with us."

Not having the desired effect of running off our guests, the Klan skulked off into the night and never bothered us again with their hate. I asked Pa why he didn't fight back or yell or something, thinking that's more like what they deserved instead of an invite for marshmallows. His answer has always stuck with me.

"Fighting hate with hate will only produce more hate."

"Whew-ee, is the Lord good!"

I snapped out of my thoughts and realized Pa had abandoned the piano and was now towering behind the small podium.

Shoulders as broad as the side of a barn, about six and a half feet tall, the man was a giant. The bushy black beard and matching thick hair helped to earn him his nickname: Paul Bunyan. I was his sidekick, always following him around. In my younger years it was so I could bask in the sunshine he

seemed to carry, but now that I was older, it was to keep a closer eye on him for when the shadows seeped through.

Paul Bunyan, of course, was always seen with his big blue ox. So I didn't take offense to being saddled with the nickname Ox as my pa's constant companion. My five-foot-ten-inch frame was quite muscular and it was no secret that I was as strong-minded as an ox, even a fictional one.

A chorus of *amens* and *praise bes* rang out as Pa dabbed at the tears streaking the tops of his cheeks. The only time he cried was when he was happy, but I wasn't judging him about it since my tears had abandoned me long ago in the good times or bad. I'd gone as far as hiding in the packhouse to pinch the fire out of my arm to the point of bruising just to see if I could find my tears, but nothing. They were gone. Like a lot of things in my life.

"The Spirit is calling for us to testify!" Pa's voice boomed around the small building. The windowpanes rattled from his enthusiasm as the small congregation agreed with their own shouts.

Phoenix groaned from the pew behind me where he sat with Boston and Raleigh. “We gonna be here *forever*.”

I cut him a look over my shoulder and shushed him. He was just two years younger than me, and even though he liked to act big and bad, often running off at the mouth, my brother showed some respect by sealing his lips.

The sermon began in Genesis, leapt forward to Philippians, zigzagged through the Gospels, and rewound to Isaiah. An hour in, Pa was washed down in sweat with his denim shirt displaying the evidence of his vigor. And a chorus of growls were coming from the younger twins sitting to my left. At age six, I was impressed they were both still awake.

Knox tugged on my shirtsleeve. “Ox, I’m starving.”

I looked down at him, his freckled nose wrinkled and his lips parted just enough to see the space missing a front tooth. He was identical to Nash with big blue eyes and a mop of dark-brown hair. Even their missing teeth were in identical spots. Having come prepared,

I pulled a pack of Nabs out my back pocket, rousing Pixy from her nap long enough to snatch one before leaving the rest for the boys.

Without missing a beat, Pa went from preaching to singing and then returned to preaching. Don't get me wrong—he was magnificent and could capture anyone's attention when he had the right wits about him. But those times were getting fewer and further between.

How did we get here? Is there a route away from it?

Those questions haunted me more and more these days with things spinning out of control, and I wished we could just turn back the pages to a simpler, happier time.

Nights spent frolicking in the swimming hole just past a patch of woods at the back of the farm. The moon and stars the only light, making the entire experience even more mischievous.

Tobacco-worm grenade attacks, leaving us covered in neon-green goo and needing another swim.

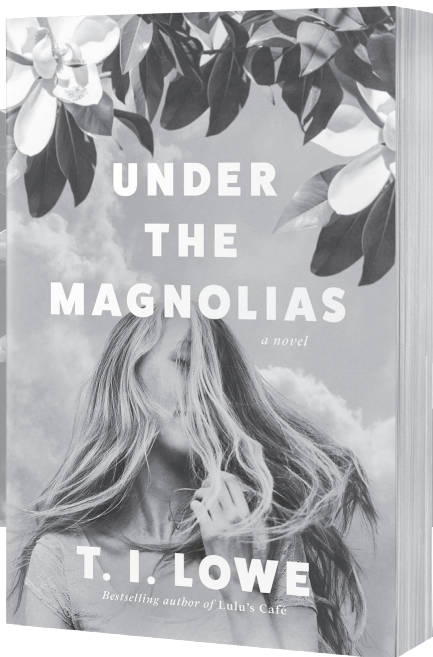
Lazy Sunday afternoons on the front porch

with each of us taking turns cranking the ice cream maker, churning out the best peach ice cream in the world.

One of Mama's laughing spells that wouldn't quench until the entire Foster house was infected. Laughing until fat tears rolled down our faces and we had deep aches in our bellies that only righted with some of that peach ice cream or a pack of the Hostess snack cakes that Mama always snuck in the buggy at the Piggly Wiggly.

Looking through the innocent lens of adolescence, those happier days were perfection. Sadly, they had an expiration date just like those snack cakes. Happiness staled and nothing was pleasing after that. But just like the expired cakes in a meager season, we had no other choice but to stomach whatever life tossed our way next.

*This night not only marked the end to
the drought, but also the end to the
long-held secret we'd kept hidden
under the magnolias.*



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



T. I. Lowe is an ordinary country girl who loves to tell extraordinary stories and is the author of nearly twenty published novels, including her debut, *Lulu's Café*, a number one best-seller. She lives with her husband and family in coastal South Carolina. Find her at tilowe.com or on Facebook (T.I.Lowe), Instagram (tilowe), and Twitter (@TiLowe).