

Tamara
Leigh

Nowhere
Carolina

a novel

Praise for
Nowhere, Carolina

“*Nowhere, Carolina* is a delightful tale that explores the beauty of truth and the freedom found in God’s plans for all of us. I always enjoy Tamara Leigh’s plucky and down-to-earth heroines, and Maggie Pickwick is no exception. This book was a pleasure to read, and I enjoyed it from beginning to end!”

—MARLO SCHALESKY, author of *If Tomorrow Never Comes* and the Christy award–winning *Beyond the Night*

“Tamara Leigh draws you in with a tale of small-town charm, the pursuit of love, and the life-changing power of letting go. The heart-gripping themes and delightful characters of *Nowhere, Carolina* will have you turning the pages.”

—JENNY B. JONES, award-winning author of *Just Between You and Me* and *So Not Happening*

“Tamara Leigh’s *Nowhere, Carolina* is just plain fun, Southern style. The characters are quirky and unusual without going overboard, and topping it all off is a sweet, genuine romance. I’m looking forward to reading more.”

—DEANNA JULIE DODSON, author of *In Honor Bound*, *By Love Redeemed*, and *To Grace Surrendered*

“Thanks to *Nowhere, Carolina*, I’m a Tamara Leigh fan for life! With the perfect blend of humor and heart, *Nowhere, Carolina* draws back the curtain on the mysterious mix of past mistakes, parental love, and the redemptive hand of God, showing that change is possible and hope is healing.”

—AMY WALLACE, author of *Enduring Justice*

ALSO BY TAMARA LEIGH

Leaving Carolina

Faking Grace

Splitting Harriet

Perfecting Kate

Stealing Adda

Nowhere Carolina

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*To Julee Schwarzburg, who beautifully redefines
what it means to be an editor.*

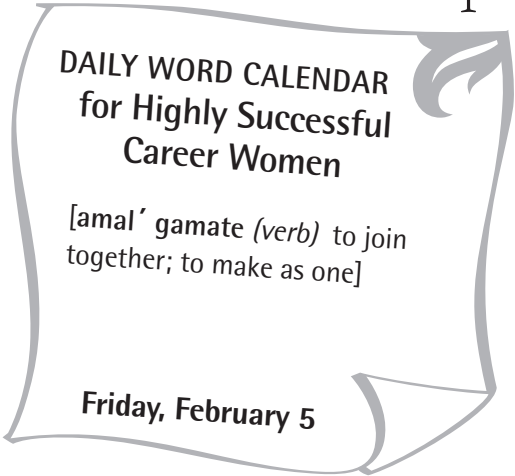
*Thank you for joining me on my writing journey.
And reminding me to buckle up.*

*Thank you for helping me to make my stories
more than just moments on paper.
And reminding me that, ultimately, the story is mine.*

*Thank you for your canny insight and suggestions.
And for not reminding me how many times
you've had to tell me to mind the "eyes."*

*Thank you for your encouragement and friendship.
And, above all, your prayers.*





**DAILY WORD CALENDAR
for Highly Successful
Career Women**

[*amal' gamate* (verb) to join together; to make as one]

Friday, February 5

Despite the occasional whisper, glower, and slight, I need no one to remind me of my high school days. I was the stereotypical cheerleader—self-centered, superior, and more concerned with hair and makeup than the state of the world. Let alone Nowhere, North Carolina.

Well, not really Nowhere, though that is what I called the town of Pickwick, certain my future lay in some exotic locale like Hollywood. Funny thing is, that's where my introverted cousin Piper went when she up and left Pickwick after high school. But that's another story.

Yes, I was the real deal—a pompom-pumping, short-skirt-wearing, belly-button-baring guy magnet. Not a bad thing. After all, Queen Esther, who in my teenage opinion was the only interesting character in the Bible, made the most of her beauty. And

look where it got her. Fortunately for the Israelites, not where it got me.

Once I started acting on the attraction that made guys shove their way to the head of my line, I was all in. Competition for my attention was exhilarating, and though I never planned to “go all the way,” things progressed until...

Well, they progressed. And not just the one time. Which is why, when I ascended the stage over twelve years ago to accept my high school diploma, I did so with a basketball-size bump that was further proof I was one girl whose vocabulary lacked a two-letter word my boyfriends said was overrated—“no.”

As for the bump, her name is Devyn, though it wasn't until I delivered my baby that I thought of her as much more than an inconvenience and a threat to my figure. But she soon became everything to me, and I thank God I didn't give her up as planned. Even when she's like this.

I glance at her where she practically melts—Hmm. Might my daily word fit here? Returning my gaze to the road, I mouth the four syllables: *amalgamate*, “to join together; to make as one.” This *is* the closest I've come to finding a fit for it today, and research shows that the sooner a person uses a new word, the more likely it will become part of her vocabulary.

Rewind. Devyn practically amalgamates with the passenger door. Uh...no. Makes her attempt to put space between her nemesis (that would be me) and herself sound a bit *Terminator 2*-ish. Okay, so she practically melts into the door.

Lips pressed together, finger tapping the window, she glares at the passing scenery.

I sigh, wishing she were all bouncy and beaming like when I picked her up from school yesterday. But today the forecast calls for mopey and morose. Now I know how my mother felt when I displayed teenage angst. Well, how she *should* have felt. Adele Pickwick was more focused on keeping up appearances that were fast slipping away than on how her children were handling the pangs of adolescence.

The good news is that despite the surge of hormones, Devyn isn't destined to be the barely C-average, promiscuous teen I was. For one thing, I won't allow it; for another, she's not bent that way. Practically all twelve-and-a-half years of her are focused on academics. With me as her mother, I don't know how that happened, but I'm grateful God is answering my prayers the way I want Him to, even though He hasn't always been so accommodating.

Please, God, don't let me be pregnant.

Request denied.

Please, God, don't let my mother find out.

Request denied.

Please, God, don't let anyone try to talk me out of going to the clinic.

Just whom do you think you're praying to?!

Please, God, help me figure out who fathered this baby.

Request denied.

And forgive me for there being any question about it...times three...

Actually, He was very accommodating with forgiveness, approving my request in the person of Skippy Baggett, who should have hated the teenage girl who made her awkward daughter's high school years uncomfortable but who chose to love her instead. The mother I didn't quite have.

This goes to prove that God does know what He's doing. I just wish I knew what *I* was doing. For more than a year now, Devyn has badgered me about the importance of a father in a girl's life, citing articles and psychology journals, but I refuse to marry just to give her a father. That's not to say I discount the importance of one. It's to say I believe it's better to have no father than a bad one.

Slowly, Devyn's chin comes around, and I feel her gaze.

Here it comes again. Three...two...one...

"Did you know that teenage girls deprived of a father are twice as likely to engage in sexual activity early?"

Know it by heart. Just as I know the research she's citing didn't use the word *deprive*.

"And research shows that these poor souls are seven times more likely to become pregnant compared to girls who have a father in their lives."

I'm one of those statistics, as she knows, my daddy having skedaddled when I was fifteen. Of course, it was that or prison. Still, even when he was present, he wasn't always there.

Going for levity, I say, "Why, I think I have heard that."

Her eyes grow big behind her glasses, and then—

Dear Lord! She rolled her eyes. Has she become a disrespectful, button-pushing, mother-hating teenager like the one I became?

I grip the steering wheel hard. Only when my vision wavers, causing the lines on the road to shift dangerously, do I remember to breathe. “Did you just roll—?” My voice breaks, giving me time to reconsider the idiotic question. I look at my daughter, who is definitely amalgamating with the door. “You rolled your eyes, Devyn. I won’t stand for that.”

Her expression wavers into remorse. “Sorry, Mom. It’s just that...” Though her voice is small, I sense a heavy presence behind it.

I brake at a light behind a soccer mom’s happily graffitied van, then lay a hand on my daughter’s knee. “What’s wrong, Dev?”

She exhales a breath larger than her small frame should be able to hold. “Do you even know who my father is?”

It’s all I can do to keep my head from snapping back. Not that being haunted by my past is anything new, but when it’s channeled through my daughter...

Times like this, I wonder why I didn’t leave Pickwick as Piper did. Of course, now she’s back, not only to aid our uncle with the liquidation of his estate, but also to lay claim to his godson and gardener, Axel Smith.

Ah, Axel, previously a top pick on Devyn’s list of potential fathers—a spreadsheet-styled sheet of paper I discovered tacked to the back of her closet last spring that identifies each candidate’s positive *and* negative attributes. If all I were looking for was a father for her, he would have been a good pick. But I’m selfish. I want someone for me too.

“Well, Mom?”

The light turns green, providing an excuse to avoid her gaze as I accelerate through the intersection. “I’m guessing somethin’ happened at school today.”

She sighs. “When a person answers a question with an observation, it’s often because she’s uncomfortable. She doesn’t want to answer the question, which answers it, doesn’t it?”

When we get home, I am canceling her subscription to that stupid psychology journal she had to have for Christmas. I glance at her, and she raises her eyebrows above her glasses.

Inwardly groaning, I pass the soccer mom’s van. “How about this? You spill on what happened at school, and I’ll answer your question.”

Devyn groans—nothing inward about that. “Parental prerogative?”

I probably invoke it too much, but some of the questions she asks... “That’s right.” I almost hope she won’t spill so I don’t have to answer her question, especially since I have no idea how to do it. Why didn’t I better prepare for this day?

Devyn pulls away—de-amalgamates?—from the door and crosses her arms over her chest. “All right, I’ll go first. Amanda Pigg and I got into it at the lockers today.”

Amanda Pigg. Again. That little—*Be Skippy. Be. Skippy.* Oh, but the temptation, especially with a last name like that and a penchant—Ha! Used one of my daily words!—for bullying my little girl. “What did the two of you get into?”

“She thinks just because her locker is above mine— And how did that happen? *Pickwick* comes before *Pigg*.”

And popular girls come before unpopular girls. That's the way it is in middle school. "Go on."

"She thinks that gives her the right to step on me and my books."

"So you...?"

She hooks a hank of straight brown hair behind an ear. "I told her it gave her no such right."

That's my girl. "And?"

"She put a foot on my books and told me to—I'll spare you the R-rated version. She told me to take my big nose and sorry rear and stick them where somebody cares."

Catching sight of my white knuckles on the steering wheel, I splay my fingers and look at her. I don't expect to see tears, and there aren't. She's that confident, even in the face of bullying. As for her nose, it is *not* big. Okay, a little, but only because the rest of her face is so fine featured. And there's nothing sorry about her rear. She's just small for her age—petite, especially beside me, as it only takes a pair of shoes with a slight heel for me to hit the six-foot mark.

"How did you respond, Dev?"

"I told her to stop bein' a stereotype, and she said, 'Stereotype?' So I spelled it for her, defined it, supplied a few synonyms, and said that just because pompoms are her life doesn't mean she has to be plastic like them. Or as skimpy in the brain department as her skirt."

Backlash alert! If someone had had the nerve to say that to me—and there were times I deserved it—I would have reduced her to a convulsing mass of embarrassment. "I'm sure she didn't like that."

Devyn looks ahead. “That’s when she said that at least she knows who her father is. That she isn’t a...”

A stone drops through me as she sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, doubtless searching for something less R-rated.

“That she isn’t the *illegitimate* child of a...”

Another stone.

Devyn’s gaze flicks to me, and I think there might be a sheen in her eyes. “...promiscuous, holier-than-thou Pickwick.”

Why, that little— *Be. Skippy*. I know, but if that *Pigg-g-g-g* makes my daughter cry...

“She said there were a half-dozen guys who could have fathered me—”

That’s a downright lie!

“—and you have no idea which one it is.”

Not a lie. Realizing I’ve exceeded the speed limit, I ease up on the gas and peer sidelong at my daughter. Definitely a sheen. I know God doesn’t make children pay for their parents’ sins, but it seems Devyn is paying for mine. And Amanda Pigg is the one collecting the back taxes. That...pig!

Oh, Lord, I shouldn’t even think it, but You gave me flesh, and this flesh is weak—especially when someone hurts my baby. Is there any mother capable of turning the other cheek when her child is being picked on? That is, other than Skippy?

Devyn once more presses herself against the door. “That’s what her uncle told her.”

Jake “the Bullet” Pigg, running back for the Pickwick Pan-

thers, one year ahead of me, and who had a difficult time comprehending that I no longer cared to date him. Even stalked me for a while.

As Devyn resumes her window tapping and I struggle to untangle my emotions, I nearly miss our turn.

“Is it true what Amanda said? Is that why you won’t tell me about my father?”

“No!” *Sorry, Lord, but surely I can be forgiven for a knee-jerk lie, it not being premeditated and all. Too, not all of it is a lie. There were only three who could have fathered Devyn.*

Only three? Goodness! You were one morally superior young lady.

“Then?”

I concentrate on the road. After all, it’s a rather circuitous route to get home.

“Mom?”

How I miss the days when she called me Mama and I was the answer to all she needed. The heart-tugging word still slips out occasionally, like when she’s joyous or sad and seeking comfort, but it’s going...going...just about gone.

“Mom?”

I take the next turn. “You know I don’t like to talk about your father.” True. “It didn’t work out between us, so we both moved on.” True again. “He is not going to come back into my life and sweep us off our feet.” The whole truth and nothing but the truth. No need to mention that last summer the possibility existed—the coming back into my life part—when Piper confided that my uncle

wanted to commission Reece Thorpe to sculpt the new statue for the town square.

I was frantic when Uncle Obe refused to budge, but God was watching out for me. Reece's artistic talent is in such high demand that he couldn't be bothered to fit a nowhere place like Pickwick into his schedule. Of course, he probably just didn't want to come back here. But no polish off my nails. It's true that of the three who could have fathered Devyn, I would prefer it was Reece, but the timing of her birth makes it unlikely, so why muddy the water? As for the statue, another sculptor was commissioned, and work is set to begin soon.

I turn one last time into a cul-de-sac and pull onto our cobblestone driveway that, for all its charm, is a bit hard on the well-endowed woman. Cutting the engine, I slip into a smile. "Have we cleared the air?"

Devyn peers at me through a thick fringe of lashes magnified by her lenses. "No."

Too much to hope for. "Let's do it, then."

She pushes back her narrow shoulders. "Setting aside the question of who my father is, the fact remains that I don't have one. And I need one. And you don't seem bothered by that."

She has no idea. I close a hand over her two. "Of course I'm bothered, but finding a father for you and a husband for me is not a mail-order matter."

Her gaze turns so intense it nearly shuts me down for fear of what's about to exit her mouth. "I know, but what if my father isn't married?"

Oh, Lord, this again...

“For the two of you to have... Well, there had to have been somethin’ strong between you, right? Some kind of bond?”

That would depend on which of the three we’re talking about.

“And what if you were to tell him about me?”

A question first raised a year ago when she asked why she had never met her father, and I had to tell her he didn’t know about her. This isn’t entirely true, as two of the three were aware of my pregnancy and neither stepped forward to ask if he was responsible. Becoming a teenage father was not in their plans. Thus, I told Devyn what was as close to the truth as I could come without making her feel unwanted. And it might be true—if Reece Thorpe fathered her.

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. “Maybe we could all be a family.”

My face feels as if it might crack. *Lord, I know I’m forgiven, and I will tell her the whole truth one day, but right now she’s too young. Please help me give her what she needs without hurting her.*

I sip air, afraid a deep breath will reveal the true state of my emotions. “I wish that were so, Devyn, but it isn’t.”

Sorrow and disappointment vie for the limited space on her face.

“I love you. You feel that, don’t you?”

She nods.

“You are too precious for me to rush into something as important as marriage. If I’m going to give you a father, he has to be the right one.” I raise my eyebrows. “Hmm?”

She sighs up her face, fogging her glasses, then turns her hands and squeezes my fingers.

Crisis averted. For now.

“Okay, but do you think you could try a little harder? The longer you wait, the slimmer the chance of giving me a brother or a sister.”

I break into a goofy smile. “If we get down to the wire, I could always accept Mr. Peterson’s offer of marriage.”

She makes a face. “He’s a nice guy but . . . needy.”

“Then I’ll have to keep looking, and *you’ll* have to be patient.”

The genuine smile that appears on her face transforms her from pretty to beyond pretty—even with that little gap between her front teeth. She may not have my fiery red hair, blue eyes, or prominent cheekbones, and it doesn’t appear she will have my height, but there is far more to my little girl than the “plain” label others slap on her.

Devyn shows a bit more teeth, proving she does have my smile. “You can count on me to help out however I can.”

Ugh. “You just worry about your schoolwork, young lady. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Shortly, huddled into our jackets against the chill February air, she precedes me up the walkway, and I smile at the bounce in her step.

As we reach the front door, the house phone rings. I turn the key in the lock, and as I push the door inward, the answering machine picks up, plays my snappy outgoing message, and beeps.

“Maggie, it’s Piper.”

I drop the keys in my purse and head for the kitchen.

"I just found out that Uncle Obe's sculptor pulled out last week."

I halt. What does that mean?

"And I'm only now hearing about it. Can you believe it?"

I feel for my formerly estranged cousin. She couldn't have realized the extent of her commitment to help our uncle put his affairs in order.

"The guy says he can't work with Uncle Obe."

"Miss Piper sounds upset," Devyn calls from the stairs. "Aren't you going to pick up?"

I should, but I'm still angry with Amanda Pigg, and right now I need a few minutes of quiet to put everything in perspective—with my Bible open, as Skippy would advise. "I'll call her back later."

The stairs creak as Devyn resumes her ascent, and a sigh heaves from the answering machine. *"He says Uncle Obe is crazy."*

I wince. Odd by nature, but most recently unbalanced by slowly advancing early dementia, our uncle definitely isn't "all there." And I wouldn't be surprised if Piper is questioning her decision to sell her partnership in one of the most successful PR firms in Los Angeles to move back to Pickwick.

"I'm still trying to figure out what happened, since Uncle Obe is pretending he doesn't remember the call that caused the guy to back out. I declare"—she groans as she does when the South creeps back into her speech—*"he's using his dementia to his advantage. So now we're in the market for a new sculptor."*

Reece? Surely not. He can't be bothered to fit Pickwick into his schedule, which is one more prayer answered the way I wanted. It's always a relief to discover that God and I are on the same page.

"I just wanted to put you on notice, as it occurs to me that Uncle Obe has someone up his sleeve, and I don't need to tell you who that is."

She's thinking Reece too, but she's wrong. *Right, God? We are on the same page, aren't we?*

"Call me when you get in."

I rush across the kitchen, but when I slap the phone to my ear, the dial tone is on the other end.

Since Southern belles no longer wear corsets, I can't blame my near swoon on a painfully cinched-in waist. It's all me. And my past that may be coming back to haunt me in person.

I place a steadying hand on the writing desk and close my eyes. "I know You know what You're doing, but just for the record, Reece's return to Pickwick would be a very bad idea. You agree, don't You?" I nod. "On the same page."

Oh, Lord, please let us be on the same page, especially where Devyn is concerned.