

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AMY CLIPSTON

SECOND  
CHANCE AT  
*Sunshine  
Inn*



## PRAISE FOR AMY CLIPSTON

“Say ‘I do’ to *With This Ring*, a warm and fuzzy second-chance romance filled with family, forgiveness, and fairy-tale wedding feels. I loved the charming town of Flowering Grove, especially Dakota’s bridal shop, and I was cheering for her and Hudson to make their own trip down the aisle from the very first chapter.”

—Teri Wilson, *New York Times* and *USA TODAY*  
bestselling author

“Once again, Amy Clipston delivers a heartwarming book about love and second chances. *With this Ring* is like a warm hug and a perfect feel-good read about the beauty of family, friends, and reconnecting with your first love.”

—Rachel Magee, author of *It's All Relative*

“Clipston’s latest is a sweet read of finding love and family.”

—Rachel Hauck, *New York Times* bestselling author, on  
*Finding You*

“Amy Clipston delivers swoon-worthy romance while addressing realistic issues of fame and long-distance relationships. Heather is a heroine to root for, and when she meets her opposite in Alex, humor and growth are the result. A thoroughly enjoyable love story.”

—Lee Tobin McClain, *New York Times* bestselling  
author, on *Starstruck*

“*Starstruck* is a lovely story filled with wonderfully drawn, fully relatable characters and a charming community. Amy Clipston writes with warmth and heart.”

—RaeAnne Thayne, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Music, love, and dreams all combine in perfect harmony in this sweet romance.”

—Sheila Roberts, *USA TODAY* bestselling author, on  
*Starstruck*

“A rockstar and his ‘Baker Girl’ will warm your heart in this sweet, small-town, slow-burn romance!”

—Jennifer Snow, *USA TODAY* bestselling author, on  
*Starstruck*

“Applause for *Starstruck*! Amy Clipston has masterfully crafted an endearing story of hope and taking chances. Readers will be instantly captivated by the charm of Bookish Brownies and Chocolate Chunk Novel cookies! A definite must-read for those looking for a feel-good romance.”

—Lacey Baker, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *Snow  
Place Like Home*

“Hometown charm and swoon-worthy second chances make this a must-read.”

—Kristen McKanagh, author of *Snowball’s Christmas*,  
on *Something Old, Something New*

“Amy Clipston writes a sweet and tender romance filled with a beautiful look at how love brings healing to broken hearts. This small-town romance, with an adorable little girl and cat to boot, is a great addition to your TBR list.”

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—Suzanne Woods Fisher, bestselling author of *On a  
Summer Tide*

“*The Heart of Splendid Lake* offers a welcome escape in the form of a sympathetic heroine and her struggling lakeside resort. Clipston proficiently explores love and loss, family and friendship in a touching, small-town romance that I devoured in a single day!”

—Denise Hunter, bestselling author of the Bluebell  
Inn series

“A touching story of grief, love, and life carrying on, *The Heart of Splendid Lake* engaged my heart from the very first page. Sometimes the feelings we run from lead us to the hope we can’t escape, and that’s a beautiful thing to see through the eyes of these winning characters. Amy Clipston deftly guides readers on an emotionally satisfying journey that will appeal to fans of Denise Hunter and Becky Wade.”

—Bethany Turner, award-winning author of *Plot Twist*

“Amy Clipston’s characters are always so endearing and well-developed.”

—Shelley Shepard Gray, *New York Times* and *USA  
TODAY* bestselling author

“Revealing the underbelly of main characters, a trademark talent of Amy Clipston, makes them relatable and endearing.”

—Suzanne Woods Fisher, bestselling author of *On a  
Summer Tide*

“Clipston’s heartfelt writing and engaging characters make her a fan favorite.”

—*Library Journal* on *The Cherished Quilt*

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*The View from Coral Cove*  
*Something Old, Something New*  
*Starstruck*  
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*The Gift of Love*

# Second Chance at Sunshine Inn

AMY CLIPSTON



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

*Second Chance at Sunshine Inn*

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ISBN 978- (epub)

ISBN 978- (HC)

ISBN 978- (TP)

ISBN 978- (IE)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[CIP TO COME]

*Printed in the United States of America*

\$PrintCode

*In loving memory of Trudy—my aunt, my godmother, my friend.  
You will always be remembered as a blessing to our family.  
We miss you every day.*



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

## CHAPTER 1

EVERLEIGH GRIPPED THE door handle in the back seat of the gray Tahoe and consulted her phone: 4:18 p.m. Thunder rumbled, then rain began pattering on the SUV's roof. Nineties alternative rock sang softly through the speakers while the wipers began their rhythmic humming.

She took in the line of traffic in front of her and forced a smile despite the tightening in her belly.

*It's okay. I'm only twenty minutes late. It's not like it's an hour. Surely the attorney will understand. And if not, Mom will explain it to him.*

Her flight from Atlanta had been delayed, and now there was a rush-hour rainstorm—but surely she'd be there soon. This Uber driver seemed experienced. She could trust him to get her there safely and promptly.

Her phone buzzed with a text message:

Mom: Are you close?

The traffic picked up speed, rolling closer to twenty-five miles

per hour now as the Welcome to Coral Cove sign came into view. They were making progress. Everything was going to be just fine!

Everleigh: Getting closer. A few more blocks.

Mom: The receptionist said they'll give you another ten minutes. If you don't make it, then we'll have to reschedule with the lawyer.

Everleigh's leg bounced as she typed: Be there in five.

Scenery that had been the backdrop of her childhood came into view—her elementary, middle, and high schools sat in a cluster not far from the library, main fire station, and town hall—and her head began to pound. It had been more than a year and a half since she'd been home. In fact, last Christmas was when she'd last seen her parents and her two siblings.

And it had been more than a year since she'd hugged Alana—her godmother, favorite “aunt,” and confidante.

But now Alana was gone.

Everleigh tried to swallow the lump of grief that expanded in her throat. She and Alana had spoken just two weeks ago. Or was it a month ago?

Why couldn't she remember?

Their last conversation came into focus in her mind: a discussion about the nonprofit they wanted to start together. As a traveling neonatal intensive care unit nurse, Everleigh had met plenty of parents who struggled to make ends meet while their children stayed in the NICU. For a long time, she'd dreamed of starting a charity to help parents of critically ill children. Some of those children needed care for several months, and the parents needed assistance with not only the cost of care but also their household expenses.

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When Everleigh first shared these stories with Alana, her godmother immediately volunteered to help, and they began putting together a business plan. They had named their nonprofit Helping Angels. Everleigh had spent the past three years searching for financial backers, and during her last conversation with Alana, she'd told her she wasn't giving up. Their dream, Everleigh insisted, *would* come to fruition.

But she'd run out of time. Alana was gone.

And Everleigh had let her down.

Her eyes felt wet, and she swiped the back of her hand over her face. Alana had shown up for every milestone—every birthday party, every dance recital, every graduation—all the way through nursing school. Everleigh couldn't think of a holiday or event that Alana hadn't attended.

She held her breath to choke back a sob.

What would her Uber driver think if she started bawling in the back seat?

*Keep it together, Everleigh! You have to be strong—especially for Mom.*

One of Alana's favorite sayings echoed through her mind: "Smile through your tears," she often said. Yes, Everleigh could smile through her tears. She *had* to.

The rain came down harder, and large drops dotted the windshield as the SUV splashed through puddles. The Tahoe motored to an intersection and stopped at a red light. She checked her phone: now 4:24.

She stared at the traffic light, willing it to change, and nibbled her lower lip. She even considered pretending to blow it out, just like the game her mom had taught her when she was little. But if she did that, then the driver would *really* think she was nuts!

*Come on. Come on! Turn green already! We can make it!*

Seconds ticked by.

At 4:26, she had four minutes before the lawyer would insist they reschedule. She rubbed her eyes. She was going to get there on time.

The light turned green, and the driver steered down the street before pulling up in front of a large glass window with Buford, Buford & Gallagher etched across the front in fancy script.

The middle-aged man slipped the SUV into park, then angled himself in the seat so his dark, deep-set eyes were focused on Everleigh. "Here we are."

*Just in time!*

"Thank you," Everleigh said, the sound of the rain permeating the vehicle.

The driver hit a button, and the locks popped. "Trunk's unlocked," he mumbled before turning his attention back to the windshield.

She turned toward the front of the lawyers' office, realizing she didn't have a jacket or an umbrella. Surely Mom had seen her pull up and would run out with an umbrella.

"You gettin' out?" the driver barked.

"Uh . . . Yeah." Everleigh slipped her crossbody purse over her head and shouldered her backpack, then pushed open the door and jumped out into the pouring rain. Her black Converse high-tops sloshed through the standing water as she pushed on the tailgate trunk lever. It didn't want to budge, so she yanked on it. Then smacked it.

Nothing happened.

"Ugh!" she yelled. The downpour was soaking her hair, along with her black T-shirt and jeans.

Everleigh spotted the driver's reflection in the side mirror. His head was bent as if studying his phone. She huffed out a frustrated noise and hit the tailgate button again. She'd taken many Ubers since she started working as a traveling nurse, but this was the first

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driver she'd encountered who hadn't bothered to open the trunk for her.

"Need some help?"

Everleigh jumped with a start and spun toward the deep voice: a man now holding a large umbrella over both of them.

*Oh, bello, blue eyes!*

The stranger was tall—at least five or six inches taller than her own five-foot-seven height—and his sandy-brown hair was cut short and had a natural wave. But those azure eyes . . . they were focused on *her*. She guessed he was in his late twenties or possibly early thirties, but no matter. The man was handsome, and he'd arrived just in time!

Relief slid through her. "Yes!"

"Here, hold this." The stranger handed her the umbrella before pushing the lever on the tailgate, which lifted with a *whoosh*, as if by magic.

"I guess there are some gentlemen left in this world," Everleigh declared as he grabbed the handle on her black-and-white houndstooth suitcase and yanked it from the trunk with a grunt.

"Brought your rock collection?" he grumbled, heaving the ginormous suitcase onto the sidewalk.

She gave him a sheepish expression and pointed to the lawyers' office across the sidewalk from them. "Thanks. I'll take it from here."

"I got it."

Confusion overtook her. How did this guy know where she was going?

He slammed the tailgate, then made a sweeping gesture toward the office. "Go."

"But how did you—" she started.

"It's pouring," he said, interrupting her. Now he *pointed* toward the office. "Go," he repeated.

Everleigh hustled through the rain, doing her best to hold the large umbrella over herself and the stranger. When they reached the door, she wrenched it open and held it for him.

“Everleigh!” Mom crossed the room and pulled her in for a hug. “You finally made it.”

Ignoring her own questions about the stranger, Everleigh leaned down and held on to her mother. Nearly a decade ago, Everleigh had sprouted up taller than both her mother and her older sister. She breathed in the comforting scent of Mom’s perfume—White Diamonds—an aroma that always took her back to her childhood. And thoughts of her childhood always brought with them memories of Alana.

“Oh, sweetie.” Mom pulled a wad of tissues from her pocket and placed it in her hand. The dark circles under Mom’s deep-brown eyes were signs she’d been struggling to sleep, just like Everleigh had since she’d gotten the news. Mom’s eyes welled with tears, and Everleigh touched her hand. “I can’t grasp that my best friend since college is gone.” Her voice was rough.

Everleigh sniffed. *Don’t cry! Be strong for Mom!*

Motion out of the corner of Everleigh’s eye drew her attention back to the stranger. He had set her suitcase and his umbrella beside her, then sat on a chair in the corner of the reception area before pulling out his phone and staring at it.

“Ms. Hartnett?” A young woman with flawless dark skin, tight curls, and bright-red lipstick held a clipboard. Her navy-blue pantsuit appeared expensive and appropriate for the office.

Everleigh took in her own soaked attire and felt like a drowned rat, especially since she was certain her drenched red hair was molded to her head. *It’s okay*, she told herself. *Everyone will understand that I traveled all day from Texas to be here.*

Mom turned at the sound of her name. “Yes?”

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But the woman focused on Everleigh. “Are you Everleigh Hartnett?”

She nodded.

“You’re just in time. I was afraid I was going to have to reschedule you for next week.” She scanned the room. “I believe we’re all here now.” She turned toward the handsome stranger. “Mr. Witherspoon.”

He stood and pocketed the phone in his jeans, which hugged him in all the right places.

“And Mrs. Caroline Hartnett,” the woman said, referring to Mom. “Mr. Buford is ready for you all.” The young woman backed through the doorway. “Please, follow me.” Then she started down the hallway, her heels clacking on the hardwoods.

“Wait.” Everleigh turned to her mother. “What about Harlowe and Landon?”

Mom shook her head. “Alana apparently didn’t include them in her will.”

“Why only us?” Everleigh turned to the stranger—Mr. Witherspoon?—who watched her with a hesitant expression. Who was he? And why was he here?

“I don’t know why she left your siblings out, but Alana included us and Cade, who worked for her.” She smiled at the man.

He replied with a stoic nod.

This guy worked for Alana? Her godmother had never mentioned him before. More questions swirled in Everleigh’s mind.

“We need to go in now,” Mom said. “Mr. Buford has another appointment at five, so we’re almost out of time.” She picked up the umbrella and then took off after the woman with the clipboard.

But Everleigh didn’t move. Instead, she traced her fingers over the handle of her suitcase and tried to make sense of the chaos. Nothing had made sense since Mom told her nearly two weeks ago

that Alana had passed. The news had knocked the wind out of her, but when Mr. Buford had called her last week and told her she was in the will, she'd been shocked. Never had she expected Alana to—

The man cleared his throat.

Everleigh realized the handsome stranger was now staring at her.

"You going?" Those striking blue eyes watched her, his expression grim.

Heat crawled up her neck. "Yeah." She shook her head. "Sorry."

The wheels on her suitcase scraped across the floor on her way to the large office at the end of the hallway. She left her bags at the back of the room and sat beside her mother in an armchair across from a large desk, where a tall man with a handlebar mustache and thinning gray hair sat with his hands folded atop a pile of paperwork.

The woman, whom Everleigh assumed was his assistant, sat in a chair adjacent to the desk. Then Mr. Witherspoon—Cade?—took a seat on the other side of Everleigh.

"We're here for the reading of Ms. Alana Elizabeth McFadden's will." The lawyer's beady eyes flicked over Mom, Everleigh, and Cade. "I see we're all here, so I'll proceed with the reading." He set his glasses on his large nose and began to read aloud. "I, Alana Elizabeth McFadden, a resident of Brunswick County, North Carolina, and a citizen of the United States of America, declare this to be my Last Will and Testament. I hereby revoke . . ."

Everleigh stared down at her wet jeans and lost herself in memories of Alana as the lawyer read the will. The memories played like a movie through her mind. Playing at the beach with Alana. Watching movies together and eating popcorn. Crying in Alana's arms after her first boyfriend dumped her.

She recalled dancing in the kitchen of Alana's bed-and-breakfast, the Sunshine Inn, where Everleigh had worked part-time until she graduated from high school and went to college to study nursing.

## SECOND CHANCE AT SUNSHINE INN

Alana had helped her with her college expenses, always sending her care packages full of snacks and supplies with an envelope of cash strategically placed at the bottom of each box.

And she'd never forget the night when Alana insisted on staying on the phone with her to make sure she didn't fall asleep while Everleigh drove from Colorado to Texas for her next nursing position. They had discussed everything from their favorite movies to Everleigh's nonexistent love life, to the nonprofit they'd dreamed of and the parents and children they hoped to help.

But now Alana was gone, and so were those late-night phone calls and hugs and . . . everything.

Suddenly, the tears she'd kept at bay during her trip from Texas to North Carolina welled up. She'd been trying all day to hold the tears back and stay strong.

She sucked in a breath, hoping to stop the display.

*Oh, no.*

Then the tears poured from her eyes.

She felt like a fool for losing it in the middle of a lawyer's office—especially in front of Mr. Buford and the mysterious Cade. She yanked a tissue from her pocket and wiped her eyes and nose.

A hand touched her arm. She turned toward Mom, who was staring at her. "Did you hear that, Everleigh?" she asked, pinning her with a serious expression.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I was lost in thought. What did I miss?"

Mr. Buford pressed his thin lips together. "I'll read it again, Ms. Hartnett." He gave his throat a dramatic clearing. "I hereby bequeath fifty percent each of my said property, real personal, or mixed, to Everleigh Alana Hartnett and Benjamin Cade Witherspoon III."

Everleigh blinked and tried to comprehend what the lawyer had said. She listened intently while he continued reciting the docu-

ment, but her mind was buzzing with confusion. What did it all mean?

When the lawyer stopped reading, Everleigh took a shuddering breath. “Mr. Buford, can you please explain what you just read?”

He took off his glasses and set them down on the desk before refolding his hands. “Ms. McFadden left you and Mr. Witherspoon fifty percent of everything—her bed-and-breakfast and the contents therein, as well as any funds. She’d also like you and your mother to go through her personal items and decide what to do with them.”

“Sh-she left me the bed-and-breakfast?” Everleigh whispered as her eyes brimmed with tears once again. Alana had left her everything—*everything*. Her shock spilled down her cheeks.

Her godmother’s generosity was too much to comprehend. She was so grateful. Alana had always been thoughtful and giving, but leaving Everleigh everything was above and beyond.

But wait—Alana *badn’t* left her everything.

Everleigh had to share the B&B with a *stranger*.

She turned to the man sitting next to her. He appeared just as stunned as she felt as he pushed his hand through his thick, golden-brown hair.

Who was he anyway? And why did Alana want her to share the B&B with him, a man she’d never heard of? Alana had lost her parents years ago and never had any siblings or children of her own. In fact, she’d never married. And her last name was McFadden, not Witherspoon, which meant they couldn’t be related.

Or could they?

Had she found a long-lost cousin during the eighteen months since Everleigh had been home? And if so, why hadn’t Alana mentioned him when they’d spoken? Everleigh always told Alana everything about her life—even secrets she hadn’t shared with her mother. So, wouldn’t Alana have done the same?

## SECOND CHANCE AT SUNSHINE INN

Everleigh knew the answer to that question: Alana *hadn't* told her everything. In fact, she hadn't even told her she was sick, which made Everleigh's heart hurt.

"Now, we have some documents you'll need to sign, and then you can be on your way," Mr. Buford announced, standing. "Rhiannon will help you with those since I need to get to my next appointment."

After the paperwork was complete, Everleigh and her mother walked out to the lobby. She felt as if she were walking in a dream. She was now half owner of the Sunshine Inn. How was any of this possible? Was she stuck in an alternate universe? Would she suddenly wake up and find everything back to normal?

"Oh, good," Mom announced, pulling her keys from her designer purse. "It stopped raining. I'm parked right out front."

Everleigh turned to Benjamin Cade Witherspoon III. Such a fancy name. She held her hand out and smiled. "Is it Cade or Ben?"

"Cade." He gave her hand a quick shake, but his expression remained glum.

*My, my—that five o'clock shadow!*

"I guess we're business partners now, huh?" She had so many questions for him, but it didn't seem like the appropriate place to delve into them.

"We should talk." His voice was distinct—deep and smooth, reminding her of butter. But his face was so serious.

"Absolutely."

Mom's cell phone started to ring, and she fished it out of her purse. "Hi, Dave." She rubbed her forehead. "Yeah, we just finished up. We're on our way now. See you there." She disconnected the phone and sighed. "Everleigh, your dad's going to meet us at the restaurant." She gave Cade a stiff smile. "Good to see you." Then she turned her focus back to Everleigh. "Let's go." Mom pushed open

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the office door and headed toward the car.

Everleigh waved to Cade. “We’ll get together soon.”

He nodded, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and pressed his lips into a flat line.

Everleigh headed out into the humid air, pulling her enormous, damp suitcase behind her.

THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798



## CHAPTER 2

THAT EVENING, CADE grabbed the handful of mail from the mailbox and then sauntered up the driveway toward the Sunshine Inn. The late-August air felt heavy from the earlier rain. The sky above him was a kaleidoscope of colors as the sun began to set, and the cicadas began their nightly song. He looked out toward Coral Cove Bay, where a chorus of frogs sang the day into night. Soon, the stars would be reflecting off the water. He breathed in the salty air.

Sighing, he faced the inn. The yellow two-story colonial stood before him in all its glory, haloed by the waning light. The sprawling inn featured eight bedrooms for guests—six upstairs and two downstairs, plus a suite where Alana had lived. This time of day, the golden hour, was when the Sunshine Inn looked its best.

Grief rained down on him as a vision of Alana McFadden filled his mind. She'd been gone for twelve days now, but it seemed like only a few days since their last conversation. He'd been grateful to Alana when she'd hired him eighteen months ago. Working as a handyman wasn't his forte, but he'd relied on YouTube, learning how to fix things while he settled into the job. The best part, though, was

how the position came with a studio apartment for him above the detached three-car garage.

He headed into the kitchen and dropped the stack of letters on the island. He grumbled as he sifted the bills and postcards from Realtors wanting to buy the place. As if he would sell. He'd promised Alana to keep the inn running, and that was what he intended to do.

His cell phone rang, and his best friend's name popped up on the screen. "Hey," he answered.

"How'd it go with the lawyer today?" Roger asked.

"Fine." Cade poured himself a glass of sweet tea, then leaned against the counter while he took a long draw.

"Could you be a bit more specific?"

"Alana left me half of everything." Cade set the glass down on the counter.

Silence permeated the line for a few beats. "How long have you worked for her?" Roger finally asked.

"Almost two years."

"And she left you half of *everything*? Wow," Roger said. "Who got the other half?"

"Her goddaughter."

"Was she at the reading of the will too?"

"Yup."

"Is she going to help you run the inn?"

"Not sure. We didn't get to talk." He'd hoped to set up a meeting to discuss everything with her after the reading of the will, but she'd flittered away, saying they'd get together. She hadn't even bothered to give him her number. Not a great start to their partnership.

He frowned. He was done with worthless business partners, and he wasn't about to allow another one to ruin his livelihood. He was responsible for this inn, and he refused to let an irresponsible person

run it into the ground.

“I’m sure she’ll be at the memorial service on Saturday,” Roger said. “You can talk to her then.”

“Right.” He’d do his best to get his new “partner” to set up a time to hash out how this partnership was going to work.

“It’s getting late,” said Roger. “I’ll let you go.”

Cade said good night, pushed his phone into the back pocket of his jeans, then slipped his empty glass into the dishwasher. He scanned the pile of mail and shook his head. Just another task he’d deal with later, he thought as he walked out to the path leading to the detached garage.

As he walked, a large fluffy gray cat brushed against his leg and meowed.

“Hey, Bryant.” Cade leaned down and scratched the cat’s head.

Bryant, the inn’s resident feline, blinked up at him, and his purr rumbled low.

“Hungry?” Cade asked, and the cat meowed again. “Come on, boy.”

Bryant trotted beside him on the path, chattering along the way.

When they reached the apartment, Cade unlocked the door with the noisy gray cat underfoot. Together they climbed the steep steps to Cade’s home. He appreciated the place with its large den, galley kitchen, bathroom, and moderate-sized bedroom. It was only a fraction of the size of the home he had rented in Tuscaloosa, but it was all he needed.

Cade opened a can of cat food. He got a whiff of fish and groaned. “You’ll love it.”

The cat continued to sing his song and weave between his feet. Cade set the bowl down and stowed the can before sitting on the sofa and opening his laptop. As he found the inn’s webpage and studied it, his last conversation with Alana echoed in his mind. She’d been

admitted to the hospital, and while he sat beside her, she'd managed to say, "Make me a promise, Cade."

Cade took her hand in his. "Anything."

"Promise me you'll find your sunshine. Don't keep your heart closed forever."

Cade's heart had seized. Such a big promise, but Alana had always seen the best in him. He owed it to Alana to look for the best in himself. He nodded.

"Promise me." Her voice was a weak whisper.

"I promise."

Tears stung his eyes, and he swiped them away while he perused the website. Alana had plenty of visitors who came to the Sunshine Inn every year, and he'd already received several emails asking if the inn would open soon so they could come back before the summer ended. Since Alana had made him promise to care for the inn, wasn't it his duty to open the reservations again? Cade held his finger over the button to set the reservations to open.

But he paused. Shouldn't he discuss it with his partner first? The one who couldn't be bothered to give him her phone number?

He glowered.

Bryant hopped up on the sofa beside him and began bathing himself, and Cade stroked the cat's fuzzy head. "Guess I need to consult my business partner before I reopen the place. Right, Bryant?"

The cat continued licking between his toes.

Alana had told Cade that Everleigh worked as a traveling nurse. Best-case scenario, she would allow Cade to run the inn while she returned to her job. If so, she'd be a silent business partner, only sharing in the profits instead of the day-to-day operations.

And that was the best kind of business partner to have.

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## SECOND CHANCE AT SUNSHINE INN

Everleigh breathed in the warm, salty air and scanned the neighborhood where she'd grown up. The sky was dark and showed no sign of the earlier rainstorm, and the stars twinkled above her. The brightly colored beach homes sat quietly along the street, illuminated by the golden streetlights lining the sidewalks. Each home was a different shape and style—no two were alike—and each house sported a cute and creative name like Rock 'N' Reel, Catch 'N' Relax, or Absolute Beach. The neighborhood felt warm and welcoming, and even though she'd been gone for nearly two years, everything looked the same.

She studied her parents' blue, clapboard home, taking in the name her mother had given it when her parents had purchased it years before she'd been born—The Endless Summer—and she hugged her arms to her middle. The day had been surreal, from her long trip from Houston to the North Carolina coast to the appointment with the lawyer. She felt as if she were stuck in a fog.

After leaving the meeting with the lawyer, she and her mother had met Dad at Little Italy, the Italian restaurant in Coral Cove. It had always been one of her favorites, and Everleigh welcomed the warm comfort of her favorite pasta dish. She'd let the zesty sauce and good company heal her heartache. Soon enough, she was sharing stories about her work in Houston, about her precious patients and her friends at the hospital, before catching up on how her father was enjoying his retirement from the Coral Cove Police Department.

“Everleigh?”

She spun to face her mother, who was standing on the small front porch. “Yeah?”

“Are you going to come inside or stay in the driveway all night?” she asked gently. “Your dad already took your suitcase to your room, sweetie. Let's get you settled.”

Instead of joining her mother on the porch, she leaned against

the front bumper of her mother's late-model Subaru Outback. The questions she'd been holding deep inside were starting to bubble up to the surface.

"Why didn't she tell us she was sick?" Everleigh said, her words shaking as she locked eyes with her mother.

Mom came down the steps and took her hand. "I wish I knew. I only just found out too. I didn't even have a chance to tell you before . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"But we're her family—her *only* family. That's what she always told me."

"I know." Mom sniffed. "I imagine she didn't want us to worry."

Mom wiped at her tears, and seeing her mom cry tore up Everleigh even more. She hadn't meant to make her cry. She pulled her in for a hug and tried to hold back her own emotion.

When Everleigh released her, Mom pulled a tissue from her pocket and mopped up her eyes.

"I'm so confused, Mom. She left me half of the inn, but she also gave half to that guy Cade. Who is he?"

"He's been working for her for a while now. Maybe two years?" Mom leaned against the bumper beside her.

"Why didn't you tell me she hired someone?"

She shrugged. "I thought you knew."

"She never told me." Everleigh considered the man. He was so quiet, and he had never smiled once they were in the attorney's office. Odd. "What do you know about him?"

"He's originally from here, but he was gone a long time. I think he joined the military after high school and then moved around a bit. He came home and needed a job, so Alana hired him. You know how she always wanted to help people."

Everleigh nodded.

"She really admired him and said he did good work."

## SECOND CHANCE AT SUNSHINE INN

Everleigh considered that. Alana *had* been a good judge of character.

But this man was a stranger. Why would Alana leave half of her inn to a *stranger*?

She felt her mother watching her. “I can tell when you’re really concentrating on something. Your brow wrinkles.” Mom touched her shoulder. “Talk to me, Evie. What’s on your mind?”

“I just can’t figure out why Alana would want a stranger to have half of her everything . . . including the business she worked so hard to build and preserve!”

“Because he wasn’t a stranger to her.”

The truth smacked Everleigh in the face. “And if I had come home last year instead of going straight to the job in Texas, I might have met him and possibly gotten to know him before she passed away.” Guilt burrowed deep in her gut at the thought.

The door opened, and Dad appeared on the porch. “Am I missing something out here?”

“Nope.” Everleigh stood up, smiled, and patted her mother’s back. “We were just coming in. Right, Mom?”

“That’s right.”

“I managed to maneuver your one-ton suitcase into your room,” Dad joked.

“With my rock collection, right?” Everleigh shook her head, recalling Cade’s snarky comment.

“Rock collection?” Mom asked.

“Never mind.” Everleigh joined her father on the porch, and he pulled her into his arms for a tight hug.

“I’m so glad you’re home.” His deep voice held a hint of grief.

“Thanks, Dad.” She stepped out of his arms and into the house, where she was greeted by the aroma of vanilla—her mother’s favorite scented plug-in, which she kept in each room of the house.

She wandered through the den, still decorated with the same furniture she remembered—a worn but comfortable brown sofa and two matching recliners, along with a dark wooden coffee table and end tables.

Once she reached the kitchen, she found a bottle of water in the refrigerator and took a long drink.

“You haven’t told us how long we’ll get to have you this time.” Dad’s expression was hopeful as he came to stand beside her. “Possibly longer than a few weeks?”

She nodded. “I finished my last contract, and I haven’t signed a new one yet. I thought I’d give it at least a month. Now I guess I should see what happens with Alana’s inn.”

“Good.” It had been almost two years since she’d last seen her parents, and more wrinkles outlined Dad’s hazel eyes. She noted more flecks of gray in his brown hair too. “Where’d you leave your car?”

Everleigh set the half-full bottle on the counter beside her. “I didn’t want to make the drive, so I paid a service to bring it here for me. And since they’re running behind, it will be a few weeks before I have it.”

“That was smart. No one should drive all that way after receiving such terrible news.” Dad started for the doorway. “It’s late, and you look worn out. You should get some sleep.”

Mom appeared behind him. “Your dad is right. Tomorrow I’ll need you to help me with the last-minute details for the memorial service on Saturday.”

“Okay.” Everleigh hugged each of them. “Good night.”

She padded past the bathroom, her parents’ room, and her older brother’s former room, which had been transformed into Mom’s craft room soon after Landon left for college.

She finally came to what was now the guest room at the end of the hallway. It seemed like only yesterday that she and her older

## SECOND CHANCE AT SUNSHINE INN

sister, Harlowe, had shared this bedroom until Harlowe also went to college. Their single beds positioned on either side of the room had been replaced with a double bed set in the center. Nine years ago, when Everleigh was eighteen, she had finally moved out herself.

She sighed and plopped down onto the edge of the bed. She scanned the room, taking in the clusters of family photos on the walls, along with the tall dresser and matching triple dresser. Exhaustion weighed heavily on her shoulders.

After reaching into her backpack, she pulled out her latest coloring book and a box of colored pencils. Then she kicked off her Converse high tops and scooted down the bed until her back hit the headboard. She turned to the next page and smiled—a sunset over a beach. Perfect. She'd found that enjoying a soothing coloring book was the best way to decompress after a long shift in the NICU.

Tomorrow she would help her mother finish planning Alana's memorial service. Then Saturday, she'd have to formally say goodbye to her godmother. She didn't know how she'd get through it all. She wanted so badly to be strong for Alana.

But right now, she'd lose herself in a colorful sunset—and hopefully get a break from her grief.

## CHAPTER 3

EVERLEIGH SMOOTHED HER hands down her plain black dress and pushed her long, thick red braid over her shoulder. As her parents made their way up the cobblestone path to the chapel Saturday morning, she trailed behind. She felt ridiculous sporting more makeup than usual and wearing black high heels, adding at least two inches to her height and making her almost the same height as her father. Although she was much more comfortable in jeans, a T-shirt, a hoodie, and her sneakers, or even scrubs, she felt she needed to dress up today for Alana.

The sky above them was Carolina blue, and the sun was bright. The late-August air was hot and humid, and the seagulls called to each other. A murmur of conversation and the sweet smell of flowers greeted Everleigh when she entered the chapel. Her eyes quickly adjusted to the low light, and she smiled as she took in the spray of flowers on the altar that included hyacinth, bluebells, and carnations, along with Alana's favorite, gerbera daisies.

"Evie!"

She spun at the sound of her nickname, the one her family mem-

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bers insisted on calling her, just as her brother pulled her in for a tight hug. “Landon!” she exclaimed.

“It’s been forever, baby sis.” When he gave her a glum smile, he reminded her so much of Dad with his medium-brown hair, bright hazel eyes, and fit stature. His hair was high and tight, typical for a police officer. He had followed in Dad’s footsteps and joined the Coral Cove Police Department right after college. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

She turned to Amber, his long-term girlfriend who stood beside him, and hugged her too.

Amber sniffed and pushed her short blond hair behind her ears. “It’s such a shock that Alana is gone.”

Everleigh nodded, and Landon looped his arm around his girlfriend’s shoulder.

A moment later, Mom joined them. “Let’s get a seat up front before the service begins.”

Everleigh sat between Landon and Dad at the front of the chapel as the pews behind them began to fill up. When Everleigh’s older sister and brother-in-law appeared at the back of the sanctuary, Mom stood and waved them to the front. Then she guided Harlowe and Branson to sit beside her, and Dad, Everleigh, Landon, and Amber scooted down to make room.

Mom whispered something to Harlowe, who gave Everleigh a half wave before returning her attention to Mom.

Everleigh smiled and waved back vigorously.

Although Harlowe rarely responded to her texts, Everleigh still reached out periodically, hoping her sister would reply. Harlowe looked just as she remembered, with her light-brown hair parted on the side and perfectly straightened. Everleigh had always longed to have beautiful light-brown hair like Harlowe and Mom, but she’d somehow managed to inherit Dad’s great-aunt Margaret’s red mane.

But Harlowe's beauty didn't end there. She also resembled Mom with her high cheekbones, thin nose, and tiny chin, while Everleigh resembled Dad's sister, Gina.

Branson, Harlowe's husband of six years, greeted Amber and shook Landon's hand before addressing Everleigh. Then he nodded to Dad and turned back toward Harlowe.

"Is Harlowe okay?" Everleigh whispered to her brother.

He lifted one shoulder in a half shrug. "You know how moody she is."

She wanted to ask if something was wrong, but she was cut off when the organ rang out the first chords of the opening hymn.

She turned to the corresponding page in her hymnal and tried to concentrate on the words to "Beautiful Savior," Alana's favorite hymn, but her mind continued to wander from her grief for Alana to her disappointment with Harlowe. Her older sister always seemed annoyed with her about something, no matter how hard Everleigh tried to have a relationship with her. Still, she was determined to be close to her older sister someday. She'd never give up on her.

She felt someone watching her, and she turned to her left and scanned the second pew. There, her eyes found Cade sitting with a middle-aged couple and another man who appeared to be around his age. Cade was handsome in a dark-blue suit with a light-blue shirt and tie, his face clean-shaven, boasting a strong jaw that could have been molded from fine granite. He looked completely different from when he'd attended the reading of the will clad in jeans and a plain T-shirt, and Everleigh couldn't help but think that, while attractive and properly somber for the occasion, he seemed less comfortable and less himself right now. Even if his facial features were the same.

Maybe she was starting to get a feel for Cade Witherspoon, and it'd only taken two meetings to get there.

Or maybe not.

## SECOND CHANCE AT SUNSHINE INN

Their eyes met, and he studied her with a grim expression. Her brow crinkled, and she tried to imagine what he would look like if he smiled. She tipped her lips up and nodded, but instead of responding, he studied his hymnal.

Huh. Maybe he'd never learned how to smile. Did he miss that day in kindergarten? She almost laughed at the thought.

Although she tried to focus on the pastor's words during the memorial service, her mind kept replaying her best memories of Alana. The sanctuary was packed, and the crowded room filled with Alana's friends and loved ones warmed Everleigh's heart. Alana had always participated in community events—sponsoring school functions and contributing to the local charities. She'd been loved by the Coral Cove community.

When the service was over, the Hartnett family filed out of the pew and started across the parking lot to the main church building and fellowship hall. When she felt a strong hand on her arm, she turned and found her father.

His face was full of concern. "I saw you fidgeting during the service. You okay, Everleigh?"

"Yeah." She tried her best to smile. "Just a tough day."

"You've always tried to smile through the toughest days, but I know you, sweetie. You can talk to me. I get the feeling that something else is bothering you."

*Well, my sister is blowing me off, and Alana left half of everything to a stranger, but I'm great, Dad.* "Everything's fine." She hooked her arm through her father's. "Let's go to the reception."

In the large reception hall, folks were filling plates with food provided by the church's women's group.

"Dave!" a middle-aged man called before sidling up to Dad. "What are you doing to keep yourself busy during retirement?"

Dad shook the man's hand. "Larry, you know how it is. Caroline

always has a honey-do list for me. How about you?"

Everleigh excused herself before continuing to the food tables. She picked up a plate and piled on macaroni and cheese, a piece of fried chicken, some kind of mystery casserole, pasta salad, a roll, and a piece of coconut cake. She moved past the cluster of tables and vaguely familiar faces until she found her siblings and their significant others. Her mother stood nearby, talking to a woman who had once been Mom's Sunday school co-teacher when Everleigh was little.

Everleigh set down her plate and then sat between Amber and Branson before turning her attention to her sister. "It's good to see you, Harlowe."

"I'm *so* glad you could join us, Evie." Her sister lifted her cup of lemonade, her smile bordering on surly.

Everleigh kept a pleasant expression on her face despite the barb. She wasn't going to allow Harlowe to get to her today. "I haven't heard from you in a while. How've you been?"

After swallowing a bite of cookie, Harlowe shrugged. "Fine."

"So, Everleigh," Branson began, "how's Texas?"

"Hot," Everleigh said, and everyone except for Harlowe chuckled. While she nibbled on her lunch, she shared stories about working in the NICU in Texas as Amber, Branson, and Landon asked questions. Harlowe, however, said nothing—and her reticence was eating away at Everleigh. She couldn't stand the distance between them. She suddenly felt like she was eleven again, fighting to get her fifteen-year-old sister's attention and acceptance.

When Harlowe stood, Everleigh turned toward her. "Are you leaving?"

"Just going to the restroom."

Everleigh popped up from her seat. "I'll come with you."

"Suit yourself," Harlowe muttered.

## SECOND CHANCE AT SUNSHINE INN

When they reached the hallway, Everleigh touched her sister's arm and tried to pull her in for a hug, but Harlowe stepped away from her. "I haven't heard from you in months," Everleigh said. "And when I text you, you either send one-word answers or don't respond at all. Is everything okay?"

"Why didn't you come home for Dad's sixtieth birthday party?" Harlowe asked, her eyes narrowing.

Everleigh looked as members of the congregation walked in and out of the reception hall. "You know the answer to that." Her stomach dropped as she took in the anger in her sister's face. "I sent you money for the party, and I made the video you asked me to make for Dad. Landon said he loved it. The party was in May, Harlowe. I thought you understood."

"You said you couldn't take off, but you're here now." She gestured around the hallway. "Why's that?"

"My contract ended yesterday, and I got on the first flight out. I needed to get here in time for the meeting with the lawyer and the memorial."

Harlowe studied her as if she were a pesky piece of gum stuck to the bottom of her shoe, and Everleigh's posture drooped. "How come only you and Mom were invited to the reading of the will?"

"Uh, well, um—" Everleigh stammered. *Things are about to get even more tense.* "We were in the will."

Her sister took a step toward her. "What do you mean?"

Everleigh peeked past her sister to where a few acquaintances she recognized from youth group milled around the hallway. "Alana named Mom as her executrix, and she wants Mom and me to go through her personal items."

"Is that all?" Harlowe's eyes locked on hers.

Everleigh hesitated. She didn't want to lie to her sister, but she also didn't want to cause more of a rift between them. Even if she

omitted the truth, though, Harlowe would eventually find out. “I got fifty percent of the inn. Isn’t that crazy?” She tried to laugh, but it sounded more like a squeak.

Harlowe’s mouth opened and then closed before her eyes bugged out. “What?” she exclaimed. “You got half of the B&B?”

“Yeah, I did.” Everleigh shifted her weight on her feet.

“Who got the other half?”

“Cade Witherspoon. He’s been working for Alana for a while, but I hadn’t met—”

“What about Landon and me?” Harlowe demanded, jamming her finger at her chest. “Why did you get it? Is it because Mom named you after her? How’s that even fair?”

Everleigh turned toward the end of the hallway, where a group of folks watched them. “Harlowe, can we calm down, please?” she said, her words measured. “People are staring.”

“I don’t care!” her sister exclaimed. “Why did you get the inn while Landon and I got nothing?”

Everleigh pulled a deep breath in through her nose. “I-I don’t know. Maybe because I worked there every summer from when I was eleven until I left for college?”

“Or maybe because you’ve always been her favorite for some ridiculous reason.” Harlowe nearly spat the words at her before marching toward the ladies’ room and leaving Everleigh standing alone.

Everleigh rested against the wall and rubbed her forehead. Why did she even bother trying to be closer to Harlowe, who snubbed her every chance she could? Why couldn’t they work out whatever continued to fester between them?

But Everleigh could change her sister’s mind. She’d keep working on her, and someday they’d have the close relationship she craved.

She glimpsed back down the hallway, and her gaze locked with Cade’s. He stood with the older couple and the man she’d seen be-

side him in the pew. His expression was closed off, even cold, and she bit back a groan as embarrassment seized her.

*Oh, no.* Had he witnessed her contentious exchange with her sister? She hoped not. Her lips formed a tight smile, and she waved as if Harlowe hadn't just ripped her apart in public.

Cade faced the woman who was talking.

"Everleigh!"

At the sound of her name, Everleigh turned. Quinn Evans had appeared and was reaching out to pull her into a tight hug. "I haven't seen you in a million years."

Relief flooded Everleigh. A friendly face was just what she needed, and Quinn Evans had been a dear friend to her when she was growing up.

"Quinn, you look amazing." She smiled. "Actually, you look exactly the same as you did in high school." Which was true—with her dark hair styled in the same pixie cut that had become her trademark, Everleigh's petite friend was still the five-foot-one dynamo she remembered. "What are you up to these days?"

"I'll have you know I'm the head librarian at the Coral Cove Library." She rested her hands on her small hips.

"Good for you."

"Thanks. I tried real estate for a while, but it didn't work out. I always loved libraries, so I decided to go back to school and make a career change." Her smile dipped downward. "I'm so sorry about Alana. I remember how close you were to her. You spent all of your free time with her, and I loved going with you and helping out at the inn." Her blue eyes studied Everleigh. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine," Everleigh said, hoping to shift gears. "Do you have a special guy in your life?"

"Nope. Still single. You?"

“Same. I’m going to be in town for a while. We should get together.”

“Yes! Give me your phone.” Quinn took Everleigh’s phone and sent herself a text.

Everleigh saved her number and then rubbed her hands together. “Now. Give me all of the juicy town updates I’ve missed since high school.”

Quinn lifted her eyebrows. “All of them?” she asked, and Everleigh nodded. “Well, did you know that the president of our senior class is now the president of a bank?”

“No way!” Everleigh laughed, relaxing a bit as Quinn began to fill her in on the latest gossip.

♦ ♦ ♦

“The service was lovely.” Cade’s mom sniffed and dabbed her eyes with a tissue while they stood in the hallway outside the reception hall. “Alana was such a sweet woman and only fifty-seven years old. I just can’t believe it.”

Cade swallowed the last sip from his cup of weak coffee. The pastor had done a good job of highlighting how special Alana had been and everything she’d done for the community. But Cade was done with the tears, sad looks, and expressions of condolence. He was itching to get back to the solitude of the inn as soon as possible, so he could spend the afternoon tinkering with his motorcycle.

He was grateful his best friend, Roger, had offered to come with him today. It was a relief to have his buddy to help deflect some of the idle conversation with people who’d barely known Alana.

“You just never know,” Mom continued. “Right, Ben?”

Dad massaged her shoulder. “That’s right. But we should get going, Trisha.” He nodded at Cade and Roger. “Take care.”

“See ya, Dad,” Cade said before hugging Mom.

## SECOND CHANCE AT SUNSHINE INN

Cade tossed his empty cup into a nearby trash can and then turned toward the end of the hallway, where Everleigh stood with a short woman who was vaguely familiar. He was almost certain he'd seen her at the library. The woman spoke animatedly, waving her arms around, and Everleigh's dark eyes sparkled as she listened.

He'd witnessed a different scene earlier involving a woman he recognized from Alana's multiple photos of the Hartnett family. It seemed Everleigh and her older sister, whose name escaped him—Harper? Hope? Hallie?—were having a bit of a tiff. After her sister had stomped away from her, Everleigh had nearly collapsed against the wall. When she saw Cade, she'd looked like she was trying to recover—but he could tell it was all for show. For a moment, he wondered what had gone on between the sisters. But it was none of his business.

"So the redhead's your new business partner, huh?" Roger commented.

Cade nodded.

"She's pretty." Roger lifted his eyebrows.

Cade shrugged. He'd noticed that her black dress made the most of her slim figure and long legs. But he wasn't interested. He was done with love and relationships and all of that garbage.

"What do you know about her?" Roger asked.

"She's a traveling nurse."

"Will she be an easy business partner?"

"Hopefully a silent one." He pulled on his cuffs to straighten his suit jacket. "But I need to talk to her to find out."

When Cade started toward her, Roger grinned and followed. "I'll join you. Her friend is cute too."

Cade squelched the urge to roll his eyes. Roger was always ready to flirt with an attractive woman, but he had yet to find a lasting relationship. Cade approached Everleigh, and when her eyes met

his, she stood up straight and brushed her hands down her dress. Her smile was bright.

“Cade, hi.” She turned to her friend. “Quinn Evans, this is Cade Witherspoon, and . . .”

“Roger Hale.” Roger held his hand out to her, and Everleigh shook it before he also shook Quinn’s.

Cade focused all of his attention on Everleigh.

“It was a nice service, right?” Everleigh clasped her hands in front of her.

He was so tired of small talk. He folded his arms over his chest.

They stared at each other, and an awkward moment ticked by.

“We need some time to talk about the inn,” he finally said. He had to get this conversation going.

“Oh, yes.” She nodded with enthusiasm. “Also, my mom and I have to go through Alana’s things. How about Monday?”

“Sure.”

“All right then. I’ll see you Monday.” Her smile seemed to shine even brighter, if that was humanly possible. Then she waved at Roger. “Nice to meet you.”

Cade and Roger headed for the exit, and Roger patted Cade’s shoulder. “Keep me posted on how your first meeting with your hot new partner goes.”

This time, Cade couldn’t have stopped the eyeroll if he’d tried.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dan Davis Photography

AMY CLIPSTON is an award-winning bestselling author and has been writing for as long as she can remember. She's sold more than one million books, and her fiction writing "career" began in elementary school when she and a close friend wrote and shared silly stories. She has a degree in communications from Virginia Wesleyan University and is a member of the Authors Guild, American Christian Fiction Writers, and Romance Writers of America. Amy works full-time for the City of Charlotte, NC, and lives in North Carolina with her husband, two sons, mother, and five spoiled rotten cats.

♦ ♦ ♦

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