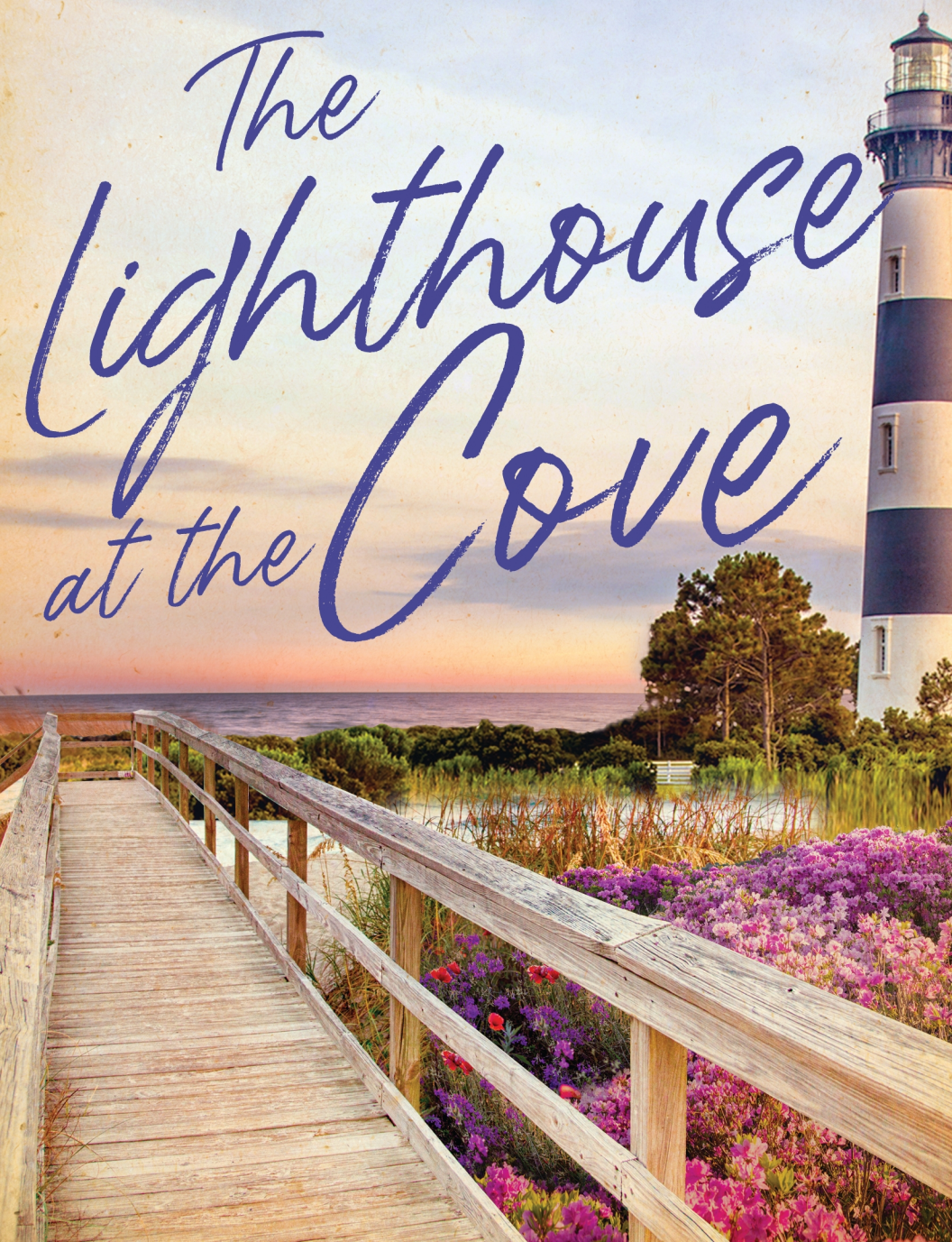


BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AMY CLIPSTON

*The  
Lighthouse  
at the Cove*



## ENDORSEMENTS

“Clipston (*With This Ring*) sets this charming romance against the idyllic backdrop of Coral Cove, N.C. . . . Clipston builds the chemistry between gruff Cade and chipper, can-do Everleigh through a satisfying mix of flirty exchanges and revealing conversations as the two work to untangle their problems and, with the aid of their faith, find their way to one another. Readers won’t be able to resist this.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Amy Clipston’s *Second Chance at Sunshine Inn* is like a warm hug on a rainy day. With relatable characters, tender emotions, and a charming seaside setting, this story of two strangers brought together by an unexpected inheritance will tug at your heartstrings. It’s a beautiful reminder that love and second chances often appear when you least expect them.”

—Rachel Hanna, *USA TODAY* bestseller of *The Inn at Seagrove*

“Amy Clipston masterfully weaves the grumpy-sunshine trope with a setting so charming you’ll want to book a stay yourself. Readers will fall for Cade and Everleigh’s undeniable chemistry, their emotional journey, and the delightful nod to Sweet Home Alabama. *Second Chance at Sunshine Inn* is a feel-good, swoonworthy story that will leave you smiling long after the last page.”

—Heidi McCahan, Bestselling author of *Her Alaskan Family*

“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.”

—Pepper Basham, author of *Authentically, Izzy*, on *The View from Coral Cove*

“Grieving and brokenhearted, novelist Maya Reynolds moves to Coral Cove, the place where she felt happiest as a child. An old family secret upends Maya’s plan for a fresh start, as does her longing to love and be loved. *The View from Coral Cove* is Amy Clipston at her best—a tender story of hope, healing, and a love that’s meant to be.”

—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*



*Other Books by Amy Clipston*

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

*The Heart of Splendid Lake*  
*The View from Coral Cove*  
*Something Old, Something New*  
*Starstruck*  
*Finding You*  
*Second Chance at Sunshine Inn*

THE AMISH LEGACY SERIES

*Foundation of Love*  
*Building a Future*  
*Breaking New Ground*  
*The Heart's Shelter*

THE AMISH MARKETPLACE SERIES

*The Bake Shop*  
*The Farm Stand*  
*The Coffee Corner*  
*The Jam and Jelly Nook*

THE AMISH HOMESTEAD SERIES

*A Place at Our Table*  
*Room on the Porch Swing*  
*A Seat by the Hearth*  
*A Welcome at Our Door*

THE AMISH HEIRLOOM SERIES

*The Forgotten Recipe*  
*The Courtship Basket*  
*The Cherished Quilt*  
*The Beloved Hope Chest*

THE HEARTS OF THE LANCASTER GRAND HOTEL SERIES

*A Hopeful Heart*  
*A Mother's Secret*  
*A Dream of Home*  
*A Simple Prayer*

THE KAUFFMAN AMISH BAKERY SERIES

*A Gift of Grace*

*A Promise of Hope*  
*A Place of Peace*  
*A Life of Joy*  
*A Season of Love*

YOUNG ADULT  
*Roadside Assistance*  
*Reckless Heart*  
*Destination Unknown*  
*Miles from Nowhere*

STORY COLLECTIONS  
*Amish Sweethearts*  
*Seasons of an Amish Garden*  
*An Amish Singing*

STORIES  
*A Plain and Simple Christmas*  
*Naomi's Gift* included in *An Amish Christmas Gift*  
*A Spoonful of Love* included in *An Amish Kitchen*  
*Love Birds* included in *An Amish Market*  
*Love and Buggy Rides* included in *An Amish Harvest*  
*Summer Storms* included in *An Amish Summer*  
*The Christmas Cat* included in *An Amish Christmas Love*  
*Home Sweet Home* included in *An Amish Winter*  
*A Son for Always* included in *An Amish Spring*  
*A Legacy of Love* included in *An Amish Heirloom*  
*No Place Like Home* included in *An Amish Homecoming*  
*Their True Home* included in *An Amish Reunion*  
*Cookies and Cheer* included in *An Amish Christmas Bakery*  
*Baskets of Sunshine* included in *An Amish Picnic*  
*Evergreen Love* included in *An Amish Christmas Wedding*  
*Bundles of Blessings* included in *Amish Midwives*  
*Building a Dream* included in *An Amish Barn Raising*  
*A Class for Laurel* included in *An Amish Schoolroom*  
*Patchwork Promises* included in *An Amish Quilting Bee*  
*A Perfectly Splendid Christmas* included in *On the Way to Christmas*

NONFICTION  
*The Gift of Love*

The  
Lighthouse  
at the Cove

AMY CLIPSTON



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

*Lighthouse at the Cove*

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*In loving memory of Delia "Dee" Halpin.*

*Thank you for being a special friend to me and  
an honorary grandmother to my sons.*

*We love you and we miss you.*



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

## Chapter 1

A WARM SUN WAS shining as Kaiah Ross rolled down the windows of her Land Rover Discovery to breathe in the salty air that held a fresh hint of early spring. She curved her hands around the wheel of her SUV as she studied the open road hugging the coast that stretched ahead, a ribbon of possibilities that made her heart flutter with excitement. On the radio Taylor Swift began to softly sing about a Romeo and Juliet who were blessed with a much better ending than the original pair had, and Kaiah tapped the Volume Up button a few notches so the promise of the song could fill her ears and perhaps drown out her doubts that a love story could have such a happy ending, even for her.

*Hey, Ky, knock it off. The vibes are immaculate right now. Just soak in this glorious day!*

And glorious it was. As a native New Yorker, Kaiah had never visited coastal North Carolina, but she could tell from the sparkling blue water that matched the cerulean sky that perhaps this visit wouldn't be her last. She was on her way to Edisto Beach in South

Carolina, the subject of an article in a series she'd been writing about hidden gems where people should spend time on the East Coast. From Maryland to Florida, she was documenting places off the beaten path for *The Traveler*, an online magazine. The assignment was one many travel journalists would snatch up in a heartbeat—a fun series of articles to write on someone else's dime, and . . .

*Uh-oh.*

Small, flashing lights dotted her peripheral vision. Her gaze locked on her SUV's dashboard where two red lights illuminated. She was sure they weren't there earlier. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a light glowing there—not since before her last tune-up.

But there they were, two red symbols glowing ominously in front of her. Wait, was one of them a thermometer? Kaiah shifted her attention to her temperature gauge and felt a jolt run through her chest. The needle had entered the red zone and was rising—quickly. She looked back at the dash and saw the dreaded Check Engine light shining like a big, scary warning beacon.

*Oh no. No, no, no.*

Her sister Kamryn had warned her about trusting the fifteen-year-old SUV on another long trip, and she'd tried to convince Kaiah to buy a newer vehicle. But Kaiah just shook her head at the warning. She had faith in Daisy, her trusty four-wheeled companion. Besides that, a new car wasn't in her budget.

*Well, Kam, looks like you win. I should've listened earlier.*

The muscles in Kaiah's shoulders felt like boulders as she guided the car to the shoulder and turned off the radio to assess her situation. She was alone on a road trip in an unfamiliar state, driving an overheating vehicle. What should she do? She could call Kam, but what did her sister know about fixing a car? And her brother-in-law was an accountant, not a mechanic, so he probably couldn't help

much either.

“Okay, Ky,” she whispered. “You’ve got this. You just have to find an auto shop. We’ll take it easy until we get back into civilization.”

She turned her key and shifted into Drive as she pulled back onto the road. Surely someone could fix her SUV in a jiffy, and then she’d be on her way. She still had five more hours to drive before reaching her destination in South Carolina.

But all she saw was an endless two-lane highway—blacktop and nothing else. She was somewhere in North Carolina, but where?

Before she could pull out her phone and check Google Maps, she spotted a sign up ahead, and hope surged through her.

“Come on, Daisy,” she whispered to her car, gently patting the dashboard. “You can do this, girl. Just a little bit more, and then you get to rest.”

The temperature gauge continued to rise.

Oh no. If the needle kept moving forward, the engine would burn up, right? Hadn’t she read that somewhere? There was no way she could afford to replace the engine in this car. She’d opted for a used Land Rover, thinking the trusted name brand would yield a more reliable car. But the tune-ups on the foreign car were pricey enough, let alone replacing an engine. And as a freelance writer, her budget was *tight*.

The sign came into view—*Coral Cove, next exit*.

Yes! A town! All was not lost!

“Coral Cove,” she muttered. “Let’s hope they have a mechanic close by.”

She merged onto the off ramp and held her breath, praying the sign for a repair shop would appear right in front of her, like a mirage in the desert.

Instead, an adorable Welcome to Coral Cove! sign featuring a

sandy beach and colorful umbrellas filled her vision.

“Nice,” she whispered to herself. *So there’s a gorgeous beach. What else do they have? Any mechanics?*

And then a postcard-perfect little town came into view. Kaiah slowly drove down Main Street and spied several small shops, a town hall, an elementary school. Everything looked like it belonged in a coffee table book of Americana. In the distance near the shoreline, she spotted a tall column wrapped in black-and-white stripes. It took her a second to realize she was staring at a real-life lighthouse.

She’d found civilization! And not only that, a storybook beach town. Surely she’d end up okay in this place, right?

She felt the boulders begin to melt from her shoulders . . . until she noticed steam beginning to drift out from under Daisy’s hood.

“Seriously?” she groaned. “This can’t be good.”

Although a new car wasn’t an option, she should’ve at least taken Daisy into the shop before she’d left New York, just to be sure she was ready for another long trip. But she’d been in a rush to get on the road. And look what that got her.

“In a town this small, there’s *got* to be a mechanic nearby,” she muttered, trying to ignore the lights glowing on the dashboard and the steam pouring from the hood.

She gripped the wheel tight. Surely Daisy could make it a few more miles so that Kaiah wouldn’t have to call a tow truck, which would be out of her price range, or ask someone to help her push the car.

And then the oasis she’d been hoping for appeared: a sign for Coral Cove Car Care. This time a surge of hope coursed through her body.

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “We’ve got this, Daisy. They’re going to make you brand-new. Maybe we’ll be out of here in a couple hours.”

She steered the car into the right lane, and as soon as the parking

lot came into view, she drove in and pulled into the very last spot.

Shouldering her backpack purse, Kaiah climbed out of the vehicle and hurried past the line of cars in the parking lot. Hopefully they weren't all waiting for service. If they were, she'd be stuck here until Christmas.

She jogged up to the one-story cinderblock building with six garage bays and a glass front boasting the business's name and logo. When she pulled open the front door, a bell rang as she inhaled the scent of rubber tires mixed with weak coffee wafting from the ancient coffee maker in the lobby. Several tire displays led to a long counter, where a middle-aged man with a name tag that read *Bill, manager* stood talking on the phone. He nodded at her and then finished his conversation about air filters before hanging up.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

She pointed toward the door. "I'm on my way from New York to South Carolina, and my car is overheating. Could you possibly fix it today?" She folded her hands as if saying a prayer. *And do you take credit cards too?*

"Oh." He rubbed the gray scruff on his neck. "I can get the mechanic to try and diagnose the issue, but I'm not sure we can fix it today." He came around the counter. "Let's take a look."

They walked to the parking lot together, and Kaiah popped the hood.

"The temperature gauge and Check Engine light came on, and by the time I got here, steam was pouring out from under the hood," she explained.

"Hmm." His brow furrowed.

"Do you have Wi-Fi?" she asked.

He lifted a bushy eyebrow.

"So I can work while you figure out what's going on," she explained. "I noticed a little sitting area."

“We do, ma’am,” he said. “But how about this? I doubt we’ll be able to fix this problem today, so let’s fill out some paperwork and you can leave the key with me. I’ll be in touch after we take a look.” He pointed toward the road. “If you want to find a place to work, there’s a coffee shop a couple of blocks from here. I promise it has more comfortable chairs and much better coffee than we can offer.”

Ten minutes later, Kaiah found herself strolling down the heart of Coral Cove’s Main Street. She pushed her sunglasses farther up on her nose as she took in the quaint shops lining the street. Customers walked in the double doors of Beach Reads and came out of Crafty Creations carrying shopping bags full of yarn and knitting needles. The scent of freshly baked pizza dough drifted out of A Slice of Heaven as she hurried past, and a small smile played on her lips. Everything in this oceanside town reminded her of the summer trips to New England she’d taken with her family when she was a kid. Kaiah had loved perusing the stores with her parents and sisters, looking for something special to spend her allowance on. Warmth began to bloom in her chest as images of those sun-dappled days filled her mind.

The sign for a coffee shop called The Roast Shack came into view, and she crossed the street. The rich aroma of roasted coffee beans saturated her senses when she walked in. Her eyes roved around the shop as she saw tables of customers enjoying their brew, some chatting with a friend, some pecking away at their laptops. One wall featured a mural of the beach at sunrise, while the opposite wall featured the water at dusk. Her fingers itched to pull her camera from her bag and snap a photo. She could almost see the image sitting atop a story she’d write about this enchanting little town. But if her plans worked out, her car would be fixed soon and she wouldn’t be here long enough to write a story about it.

At the counter, Kaiah spotted a woman with silver roots and

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bright hazel eyes serving a tall man with closely cropped dark hair and broad shoulders. There was a gap between the woman's two front teeth, but it didn't mar her beauty. The imperfection added to her charm and made her grin even more endearing. The man seemed to think so too, judging by the way he was laughing along with her. He rolled his head back slightly as he laughed, the sound casting a glow around him. Then he turned around.

And he was . . . drop-dead gorgeous.

Kaiah's cheeks flooded with warmth as she watched the man, probably in his late twenties or early thirties, make his way to the end of the counter to wait for his order. Only when he lifted his eyes to meet hers did Kaiah realize she'd rested her gaze on him a beat too long. She looked away quickly, chiding herself.

*Good job, Ky. Creeping on a stranger in a coffee shop—classy. Oh well, at least he doesn't know your name. Even if you didn't just make a fool of yourself, it's not like you want to race back into a relationship anyway.*

Pulling her attention away from the hot guy, Kaiah pulled her phone from the pocket of her jeans and scrolled through her social accounts until she moved to the front of the line.

"What can I get ya?" the woman with the silver roots asked.

"A vanilla latte, please."

"Sure thing, sugar." The woman grabbed an empty paper cup and pulled out a marker. "What's your name?"

"Kaiah."

The woman's eyes rounded, and Kaiah almost laughed. She was used to people not knowing how to spell her name.

"It's K-a-i-a-h."

"Uh . . ." The woman blinked. "Sure thing, honey."

The woman wrote on a cup, and Kaiah moved to the side of the counter and leaned against the wall. Her eyes darted back to the hot guy, who was now talking on his phone. Judging by his T-shirt and

gym shorts, he'd just come from a workout. She noticed the way his dark blue shirt hugged his biceps, and clearly he didn't skip leg day at the gym. Good grief, were those things carved from granite?

*Stop it, Ky!*

She didn't have time to obsess over this guy. Instead, she had to worry about how much these car repairs were going to set her back and how on earth she was going to pay for them. She'd sublet her apartment to a former coworker for a couple of months while she was on the road, but this year her income as a freelancer hadn't been stellar. The assignments seemed to be drying up, thanks to a rise in social media travel accounts that people could access for free instead of paying for an online magazine. And now this reporting trip could end up *costing* Kaiah money? A dull ache began to throb behind her eyes.

She knew if she ever got a staff writer job at a world-renowned magazine like *Travel and Culture*, one of the most respected lifestyle and travel media companies, then she could finally count on a real salary and maybe even some benefits. But that seemed like a pipe dream.

"Reid," a young woman called from behind the counter, jolting Kaiah out of her low-grade misery. "Jamie, Laura, Mark, and . . . um, Cayenne?"

Kaiah resisted the urge to roll her eyes. It wasn't the first time she'd been referred to as the spice. If only her parents weren't obsessed with names beginning with *K*, then she could've been named something more normal, like Olivia or Madison. Those were names people could spell without an explanation.

Kaiah swiped the cup off the counter and started toward the cluster of tables. She took a whiff of the brew the way she always did, so she could enjoy the rich scent of vanilla before devouring the drink. But she only smelled regular black coffee. The vanilla was

missing.

“Excuse me, miss?”

She spun and found herself face-to-face with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome.

*Oh, bello!*

“I think I took your coffee by mistake. And judging by your cup, I think you have my Americano.” His voice was warm, deep, and smooth. “Did you order a vanilla latte?”

“Y-yeah,” she managed to say.

“Here you go.” He held out his cup, and they made the exchange. “Sorry about that.” And when his very symmetrical face broke out in a sheepish grin, she thought she might melt right into the Roast Shack’s floor. “I promise I didn’t take a sip.”

“I didn’t either.”

“Great.” He nodded as she silently admired his chiseled jaw lined with a hint of dark scruff.

“Thanks,” she said before he gave her another friendly nod and then sat at a table with a woman and a couple of men who seemed to be around his age.

She found an empty table and pulled out her laptop before connecting to the internet and checking her email. A message from her editor was waiting, asking how her trip was going and how soon she could expect the South Carolina story. Kaiah also read messages from both the Airbnb host and her tour guide in South Carolina, confirming her stay and her plans to check out Edisto Beach.

Kaiah took a sip of her vanilla latte and tried to allow the warm drink to calm her frayed nerves. The auto shop was busy, but maybe she could ask Bill if the mechanic could fix her car first thing on Monday. And since she was only five hours away from Edisto Beach, she could get there in the evening and not have to rearrange her schedule too much. But she couldn’t modify her Airbnb reservation

until she knew for sure . . .

Her phone began to ring, and she found her favorite sister's name on the display. "Hey, Kam," she began, "you'll never guess where I am."

"Hmm," Kamryn said. "Well, I hear voices, so not in the car."

"Nope. I'm in a coffee shop in Nowheresville."

"Well, that sounds cute. How'd you end up there?"

Kaiah told her sister how she limped Daisy to the mechanic's garage before retreating to the coffee shop.

"Coral Cove, huh? It sounds pretty."

"From what I've seen, it is. Reminds me of those trips we used to take to Maine when we were kids."

"Oh . . . oh wow." Kam sighed, her voice thick with emotion. "That feels like a million years ago, huh?"

A vision of their mother, young and healthy and beautiful, floated in Kaiah's mind. She felt a tug in her chest and was sure her sister was remembering her too.

Pushing the memories away, Kaiah pulled up her map app and looked at the route from Coral Cove to the Airbnb. Yup, almost five hours.

"You know, Ky," Kamryn began, "I'm not going to say I told you so, but . . . you have entirely too much faith in ol' Daisy. She's pretty, but she's also high maintenance. Devon said the same thing."

Kaiah sighed. "I know, I know. I hate to say it, but you and my brilliant brother-in-law may be right." Her gaze wandered from her laptop, and she paused when she found Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome watching *her*. He smiled, and she returned the greeting before his eyes shifted to the woman beside him.

*Um, wooooow, okay.*

"Hey, sis, did you hear a word I just said?" Kam asked.

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“Sorry,” she whispered. “Just got distracted by some super-hot guy looking at me!”

“Oooh,” Kam sang. “Do tell!”

Kaiah tried her best to keep her voice down while she shared how she and Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome had wound up with each other’s drinks.

“It’s fate,” Kam insisted. “You were meant to meet him. That’s why Daisy chose to break down right outside of Nowheresville. It was all a grand plan for you to meet your future husband.”

Kaiah laughed. “Yeah *right*.”

“Did you introduce yourself to him?”

“No. Since ‘Cayenne’ was written on my coffee cup, he probably thinks Mom and Dad were hippies who named me after a spice.”

Kam chuckled. “It wouldn’t be the first time. But seriously, you should go introduce yourself! Tell him your real name and that you’re a super successful journalist on her way to cover the next big story.”

“Uh-huh. Which is why my car is broken down and I’m worried about how I’m going to pay for the repairs.”

“Oh shoot,” Kam said, her teasing tone evaporating. “Do you need money?”

Kaiah’s smile faltered. “No, but thanks.” She decided to shift the conversation back to the pressing topic at hand. “I’m not going to meet this guy. Besides, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome is probably married.”

“Is he wearing a ring?”

“I don’t think so. But let’s get real: I’m twenty-six. All of the good ones are taken by now.” Though she was glad her younger sister had managed to find a good one. She and Devon had been married almost three years.

“C’mon, Kaiah. No, they aren’t. It’s time for you to get back out there. Once you do, you’ll find someone too. And maybe Mr. TDH is one of the good ones.”

“He might be, but I’m not going to be here long enough to find out. I’m putting this town in the rearview in the next couple of hours. So what’s up with you? How’s work?”

“Ugh, tax season,” Kam said with a sigh. “It’s been crazy. Talking to you is always a nice break, though.”

Kaiah spent the next hour catching up with her sister and answering a few emails. Then she finished her drink and walked outside to Main Street, where people moved up and down the sidewalk and in and out of the shops. The afternoon air smelled like seawater mixed with coconut sunblock, and for a moment she considered wandering out to the boardwalk, if there was one.

She turned just as Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome exited the coffee shop. He held the door open for two young women who both eyed him appreciatively. A phone started to ring, and he yanked his cell from the pocket of his shorts before holding it to his ear and grinning. He sauntered over to a black SUV and opened the door. And when his dark eyes met Kaiah’s, he grinned and nodded before climbing in.

A smile tugged the corners of her mouth as she let out a sigh. *Goodbye, Mr. TDH. It’s a shame I never learned your name.*

She shook off the thought and turned her attention to stores lining the street. She wandered over to a gift shop, and in the window she spied a suncatcher featuring a black-and-white lighthouse, similar to the one she’d seen as she rolled into town. Instantly she found herself gripped by a memory of her mother. Mom had purchased a similar suncatcher during their last visit to Maine, the summer before she died. Back in New York, Mom had hung the suncatcher

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in the dining room window. It had remained there, sparkling in the sunlight, until Dad sold the house and moved to Arizona with his new wife.

Kaiah tilted her head and wondered what could have happened to the trinket. Had one of her sisters snagged it when they were packing up the house? She rested her hand on the window as more memories of her mother flowed through her mind—her mother's bright smile, quirky sense of humor, contagious laugh, warm hugs.

*I miss you, Mom.*

She hugged her arms to her middle and turned toward the majestic lighthouse standing against the bright blue sky. As if it were a beacon drawing her in, Kaiah started to walk toward it, thankful she'd worn her comfortable sandals.

She traveled three blocks and finally arrived at the lighthouse. Disappointment swirled in her chest when she found a chain-link fence surrounding the structure, the ancient-looking lightkeeper's quarters off to the right. Standing there took her back a couple of decades, when she was surrounded by her family and gazing up at a similar lighthouse in Maine. That, too, was a beautiful old structure that filled her with awe. And it was the moment she'd realized she wanted to tell other people about amazing things she'd seen on her travels. She wanted to journey to all the corners of the world, sharing stories about people and their lives in exotic places. Kaiah was still sure this is what she'd been born to do.

She fished her camera from her backpack and began shooting photos of the lighthouse through the fence. The wind blew strands of blonde hair away from her face while she captured photos of the coastal blue water sparkling in the sunlight. Boats with colorful sails moved out in the cove while seagulls sang in the cool April air.

Glancing around, Kaiah searched for a plaque detailing the his-

tory of the structure but couldn't find one. She yearned to know the gorgeous lighthouse's history. Why was it locked behind a fence instead of open for locals and visitors to enjoy?

Her phone dinged with a text message from an unknown number, and she opened it and read the message:

Ms. Ross, This is Bill at Coral Cove Car Care. Please come by the shop. We have an estimate for you.

Finally! Maybe she'd be out of this place soon.

She responded with: On my way.

Kaiah hurried up the four blocks to the shop, pushed open the door, and approached the counter, where Bill set a computer printout in front of her.

"My mechanic took a look at your SUV," Bill began, "and a few pieces in your coolant system cracked and need to be replaced."

"Okay," she said. Sounded simple enough.

"I've checked around, but I haven't found the parts to fix it."

She swallowed. "What does that mean?"

"Tomorrow's Sunday, and nothing is open, including our shop," he said. "My suggestion is to leave the car here, and I'll let you know how fast I can get the parts to fix it."

"Do you think you can get them by Monday?" she asked.

He shook his head.

So much for not rearranging her plans. "When do you think you can get them?"

"I'll make some calls and then give you an update sometime on Monday."

Her hope deflated like a balloon. She was stuck in Nowheresville until at least Tuesday. She gazed down at the estimate and her

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stomach bottomed out. It would cost thousands—*thousands!*—to fix her precious Daisy.

This day had quickly gone from bad to worse.

Now she had to find a place to stay—which meant a hotel bill, since the magazine didn't cover travel expenses anymore—as well as figure out how to pay this repair bill. Her head started to throb. Her entire travel piece, which she had pitched to her editor, was now in the toilet. And instead of making money, she was *losing* it, hand over fist!

Her sister's offer of money echoed in her mind, but she didn't want to have to lean on Kam. Kaiah would find a way out of this debacle herself.

She pulled in a deep breath through her nose. Kam would tell her to calm down and think this through, and that was exactly what she was going to do.

"Do you want to fix the car?" Bill's question pulled her from her worry.

"Yes," she said, meeting his curious gaze. "I don't have a choice."

He nodded. "I'll do my best to get the parts as quickly as possible."

"Could you recommend a place to stay?"

He rubbed his chin. "There's the Sunshine Inn and the Rosewood Inn. Would you like their numbers?"

"Yes, please."

He typed on his computer and wrote on a notepad, then handed her the piece of paper. "These places are a bit far to walk. Can I get you an Uber?" he asked.

"That's more than generous," she said.

"It's the least I could do for an out-of-towner." He typed on his phone. "A ride is on the way."

“Thank you so much.” She spotted a sign for the restrooms beyond the counter and hurried toward it. She needed a moment alone to gather herself.

After using the facilities and washing her hands, she rested her hands on the sink and studied her reflection. She looked as messy as her life felt. She pushed her long, wavy blonde hair behind her ears, stood up straight, and lifted her chin. She was going to get through this, no matter what.

When she reentered the shop, she spotted Bill leaning on the counter talking to someone. She couldn't see the man, but his deep, smooth voice seemed so familiar. If only she could place it.

“I bet Piper's getting big, huh?” Bill asked.

“Yup. Growing like a weed.” The man chuckled, and what a great laugh it was. “She's six going on eighteen.”

Bill turned around and smiled at her. “Ms. Ross, your ride is here.” He made a sweeping gesture toward the man. “Kaiah Ross, meet Reid Turner.”

Kaiah crossed to the counter and found herself face-to-face with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome once again.

Maybe this day wasn't so bad after all.

## Chapter 2

KAIAH,” THE HANDSOME STRANGER said as he held out his hand. “I didn’t *think* your name was Cayenne.”

She shook his hand. “I may be a little spicy, but no, I’m just Kaiah,” she joked, and he laughed again. “So you’re Reid?”

“Reid Turner, at your service.”

“Actually,” Bill began, “Reid’s real job is at Coral Cove’s Fire Station Number 1. He’s one of the lieutenants.”

Impressive. That explained why his biceps were straining the sleeves of that blue T-shirt. Now she pictured Reid in his uniform, those biceps picking her up and cradling her against his brawny chest, and she was almost certain someone had turned up the thermostat in the shop.

*Stop it, Kaiah!*

Reid pointed to her laptop bag at her feet. “Can I carry that for you?”

Kaiah shook away the thought and painted on a smile. “Thanks, that’s so nice.”

AMY CLIPSTON

After retrieving her suitcase from Daisy, Kaiah and Reid headed to his black Chevy Suburban, where he loaded her luggage into the back. Bill stepped out of the shop.

“Ms. Ross, I’ll be in touch after I check in with a few parts dealers.” He shook Reid’s hand. “Good to see you.”

“You too, Bill.” Reid opened the rear passenger side door and held out his hand to Kaiah. “Climb on in.”

She took his hand and stepped up on the running board before settling into her seat. Her phone dinged with a text, and she pulled it from her pocket.

Kam: Update on Daisy?

Kaiah: Car’s dead. I’m stuck in Nowheresville.

Kam: What???

Kaiah: I’ll call you when I get settled. And by the way . . . my Uber driver is Mr. TDH.

Kam: Get out! You HAVE to sneak a photo for me.

Kaiah snickered to herself while Reid buckled into the driver’s seat.

His dark eyes focused on her in the rearview mirror. “You still headed to the Sunshine Inn?”

“I’m actually not sure. Bill recommended to stay there while I was in town, and I guess he plugged that into the address. I don’t even know if they have room for me.”

He swiped a hand over his five o’clock shadow, thinking. “I know the owners. Want me to call them for you?”

“Yes, please.” She held out the piece of paper with the phone numbers on it. “Bill gave me their number.”

“I got it.” He pulled out his phone, and when he touched the screen, she spotted a photo of an adorable little girl with dark brown hair and a cheesy grin serving as his screensaver. Could she be his little girl? Or maybe his niece? Maybe he was married. And if he was, Kaiah imagined that his lucky wife cherished both him and that cute little girl.

Reid dialed and held the phone to his ear. “Hey, Cade,” he said. “It’s Reid Turner. How’s it going? Is there any chance you’ve got a room for the weekend? I have a passenger who needs a place to stay until at least Monday.” His handsome face clouded with disappointment while he listened, and Kaiah slumped back on the seat. “I understand. Thanks so much. Tell Everleigh I said hi. Bye.”

Reid angled his body toward her. “They’re full at the Sunshine Inn. Hosting a wedding. There’s also the Rosewood Inn. I’ll try them.”

“Thanks,” she said.

He dialed a number, listened for a moment, and then frowned. “I forgot. They’re close for refurbishing.” He rattled off the names of a few other hotels, along with their locations. Most of them were at the beach or the sound, which sounded way out of her price range. “I can call them if you’d like.”

He must have read her hesitation on her face for he paused and appeared to be working through something in his mind. “I have another option for you.”

She leaned toward him. “Okay.”

“I know this might seem a little forward, so please feel free to say no. But I have a garage apartment you can stay in.”

“Oh.” She moved her hands over the thighs of her jeans, making a swishing sound. Sure, this guy was handsome and friendly, but she

didn't really know him. Just because he was a firefighter and had a photo of a cute girl on his phone didn't mean he was trustworthy. "Um . . ."

"It's not extravagant," Reid continued, "but you'll have your own entrance. One of the guys from my station stayed there while he was having some work done at his house. He liked it. I was thinking about turning it into an Airbnb, but I haven't gotten around to it."

She bit her lower lip and debated what to do. Reid didn't seem like a total weirdo. But what if he was? And what would Kam say about staying with a stranger? Then again, Kam wasn't stuck in the middle of Nowheresville, nearly broke with nowhere to stay. It seemed like the choice was made for her. "How much?" she asked him.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Free?"

She lifted an eyebrow. Nothing was free. Everything had a price.

"Okay, okay. How about you pay whatever you can afford?"

She hesitated. Reid *seemed* harmless. But was this a good idea? Would Kam tell her she was crazy for trusting this handsome stranger?

"I can take you by the motels if you'd like," Reid said quickly. "And if you'd rather find an Airbnb, I can look on my phone and then—"

"Your garage apartment sounds perfect," she said, shutting down the debate in her brain. For some crazy reason, she trusted Reid, and she decided to go with her intuition. She hoped that wasn't a grave mistake.

"Great," he said. "What are you comfortable paying?"

"Well, the repairs on my car are going to be a little over two thousand, so . . ."

"Yikes." He grimaced. "Don't worry about it. We can work it out after you get your car back."

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“Really?” This guy sounded too good to be true.

“Yeah, really.” He started the big SUV, and it rumbled to life.

While Reid drove through town, Kaiah made a mental note of everyone she had to tell about her change of plans—her editor, her tour guide in South Carolina, and the owner of the Airbnb where she planned to stay.

And Kam. She needed to give her sister the address of where she was staying just in case . . .

“Where are you from?” he asked, looking at her in the mirror again while they were stopped at a redlight.

“New York.”

“Oh wow.”

“You?”

“Here. A Coral Cove native.”

“Seriously?” she asked. “It’s really . . . nice here.”

He laughed. “A bit smaller than New York, that’s for sure. How’d you wind up here?”

“My car brought me here. I was on my way to South Carolina and eventually to Florida, but my car had other ideas.” She explained how it overheated. “Now I’m stranded—at least until Monday. Hopefully Bill will find the parts and I’ll be on my way.”

“What are you planning in South Carolina and Florida—if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’m working on a series about hidden travel gems. I started in Maryland.”

“Hidden travel gems?” he asked. “Like cool places no one knows about?”

“Exactly.”

“So you’re a journalist?” he asked. And he actually sounded impressed.

*Score.*

“Yup.”

“That’s pretty cool. I bet you’ve been to some interesting places.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, I’ve traveled a bit and done some fun stories, but my dream is to write for a big magazine like *Travel and Culture*. I want to go to remote areas and write about interesting people and stories that matter. Not just fluff pieces, you know? I don’t want to stick to beach towns. I want to update the world on the state of the rainforest and write about traditions in the Indigenous communities of Alaska. I want to change people’s minds, not just tell them where to find the best corn dog on vacation.”

Reid chuckled. “That sounds like a real adventure.”

He steered into a residential area as she cracked the window and basked in the cool, salty air. She scanned the brightly colored beach homes sitting quietly along the street. 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 for a moment she wondered what it would’ve been like to grow up here.

Reid motored slowly down the road before pulling into the driveway leading to a bright blue, one-story clapboard house with *Beachy Keen* written on a driftwood sign in a fun script font. A detached garage with an apartment above sat beside the home.

“What a cute place!” she exclaimed.

“Thanks,” he said. “My wife picked it out. We got this place for a song after we were married. Our folks helped us with the offer, and the house needed a lot of work. We actually lived in the apartment above the garage while we fixed it up.”

So he *was* married. She nodded slowly, trying to make her voice sound as normal as possible. “That’s great.”

He checked his watch. “My daughter should be home any minute now.” He faced her and seemed almost apologetic. “I have to

warn you—she’s a chatterbox.”

“No problem.” Kaiah chuckled. “I love chatterboxes.”

“Good.” He pushed his door open. “Let’s get you settled.”

Reid carried her suitcase up the outside staircase leading to the apartment and punched in a code to the lock. He pushed the door open and made a sweeping gesture. “It’s not much, but it’s clean. I’ll get you some linens.”

Kaiah stood in the middle of the spacious den and turned, taking in the sofa, flat-screen television, and galley kitchen complete with a breakfast bar. Through an open door she spotted a large bedroom. “This place is actually bigger than my apartment back home.”

He laughed and then stopped when he saw her expression. “Oh, you’re serious?”

She nodded. “This is perfect.”

He smiled. “Make yourself comfortable.” He found a notepad and pen on the kitchen counter. “I’ll write down the code for the door. Are you hungry? I can see if I have any food in the house.”

“I can order something in. Just give me the address, and I’ll be all set.”

“Sure,” he said before writing on the notepad again.

The rumble of an engine announced a vehicle pulling into the driveway, and Reid crossed to the window. “She’s home.”

Kaiah inclined her head to the side. He’d said, “She’s home,” not “They’re home.” So, where was his wife?

He pointed to the door. “You can come with me if you want, and I can get your linens. Or you can get unpacked, and I’ll bring them up later.”

“I don’t have much to unpack,” she said.

She followed him down the stairs to where a gray Toyota 4Runner sat in the driveway behind the Suburban. A tall brunette with long, thick hair and an athletic figure climbed out of the driver’s seat

while two little girls clamored out of the back. One resembled the girl in the photo on Reid's phone, and the other seemed to be about the same age and had light brown hair and hazel eyes.

"Dad! Dad! Dad!" The little girl with dark hair and chocolate-brown eyes bounced over to Reid.

He scooped her up into his arms. "How was the birthday party?"

"Sooo fun!" She wiggled. "Put me down. I need to show you our dance."

Reid grinned and set her on the ground.

"We're learning hip-hop!" She turned to the other girl. "Let's show 'em, Astrid." The two girls began dancing around the driveway, shaking their hips and waving their arms.

Reid and the woman exchanged a glance and shared a grin, but Kaiah didn't seem to pick up any romantic vibes between them. Hmm.

"They're wound up," the woman said.

Reid waved a hand toward the two girls. "I see that."

Suddenly the first girl stopped dancing and made a beeline to Kaiah. "I'm Piper Elizabeth Turner. Who are you?"

Kaiah bent at her waist to make herself eye level with the girl and held out her hand. "I'm Kaiah Ross. Nice to meet you."

"Ky-ya?" Piper asked, and Kaiah nodded. Then the girl scrunched her nose. "How do you spell that?"

"K-a-i-a-h."

"Huh." Piper considered this, and then she pointed to the other little girl, who had also stopped dancing and watched them. "This is my cousin, Astrid Griffin, and her mom, my auntie Becca. Auntie Becca and my dad are twins. Me and Astrid pretend we're twins too. Right, Astrid?"

The other little girl nodded. "Uh-huh!"

"Really?" Kaiah asked, and Reid grinned. Mr. TDH was a twin.

Intriguing! And where was his wife? In the house already? Away on business? Working on a Saturday?

“Why are you at my house?” Piper asked. “Did you come to visit us?”

“Actually, my car broke down, and I’m staying in the apartment over the garage until my car is fixed. Is that okay?”

Piper nodded. “Sure.” Then she took Kaiah’s hand. “Want to meet my cat? Her name is Ariel, and she’s a calico. And she’s two.” Then she dropped Kaiah’s hand. “I’m six, and Astrid is six. How old are you?”

A chuckle escaped Kaiah’s lips, but she couldn’t help it. This kid *was* a chatterbox.

“Piper . . .” Reid’s voice interjected, a hint of reprimand in his tone. “It’s rude to ask someone how old she is.”

“Really?” Piper’s eyes widened with genuine surprise, turning her gaze toward Reid. “Is it because saying a huge number makes you sound really, really old?”

Kaiah bent over in a belly laugh. This child, with her unabashed curiosity and adorable bluntness, was super endearing.

“Piper, what am I going to do with you?” Reid shook his head. “I’m sorry, Kaiah.”

“It’s okay.” She leaned down with a conspiratorial look and whispered, “How old do you think I am?”

Piper tapped her chin. “Well, my daddy is thirty-two, and my auntie is thirty-two, but my uncle Cash is thirty-five. Are you thirty-two?”

“Nope.” Kaiah shook her head, and out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Reid cupping his hand to his forehead. “Guess again.”

“Hmm . . . thirty-five?”

Astrid jumped up and down and announced, “Forty!”

“Not quite,” Kaiah said with a laugh. “I’m twenty-six.”

“Woow,” Piper and Astrid both exclaimed. Then Piper pointed at Kaiah. “You should stay for supper.” She looked at Reid. “Can we order pizza?”

“Yeah!” Astrid clapped her hands and jumped up and down. “Pizza! Pizza!”

Piper joined in with the jumping and chanting. “Please, Daddy? Pretty please with sugar on top?”

Becca shook her head and then took Astrid by the hand. “Not tonight, honey. We need to get home. Your dad will be there soon.” She smiled at Kaiah. “Enjoy your time in Coral Cove.”

“Thanks.”

Becca turned to her twin brother. “Can we come by for supper tomorrow?”

“You bet.”

“Good, because we need to talk about the festival. The mayor’s talking about pulling the plug on the whole thing, but I’m trying to figure out how to get her to keep it.”

“Chad Morris mentioned something about that at the Roast Shack today. Glad you’re on it, though. It’d be a shame to shut it down.”

“My thoughts exactly. We’ll talk more tomorrow. See you then.”

Becca waved to her niece and then loaded Astrid into the 4Runner and pulled out of the driveway.

Piper took Kaiah’s hand and steered her toward the house. “Let’s go see Ariel. She’s a really nice cat. She sleeps with me every night. She likes my feet. Do you have a cat?”

Kaiah flicked her eyes over her shoulder at Reid, who gave her an apologetic look. “Not a cat, but I used to have a dog.”

“Oh no.” Piper stopped and frowned. “Did your dog go to heaven?”

“No. My friend took him.”

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“Like *stole* him?” she squeaked. “My friend Jasmine stole her friend Emma’s favorite eraser at school, and she had to give it back and say she was sorry.” Her expression became very somber. “It’s not nice to steal.”

“You’re right,” Kaiah said, trying her best not to smile. “It isn’t nice to steal.”

“Did you call the police?” Piper asked.

“No.” Kaiah shook her head. “I just let my friend keep him.”  
*Though I should’ve fought more for you, sweet friend.*

Piper patted her hand. “I bet you miss your dog.”

Kaiah nodded. She did. In fact, she missed him so much that her heart hurt.

“What’s your dog’s name?”

“George.”

Piper’s wide smile was back. “That’s a great name.” Then she took Kaiah’s hand and yanked her. “Come meet Ariel.”

Piper led Kaiah around the house—through the foyer to the kitchen and breakfast nook, past a large den, and into the laundry room—in search of the cat.

“She has to be around her somewhere,” Piper muttered, her hands on her little waist while they stood in the doorway leading to the laundry room.

“Piper.” Reid rested on the doorway, and at that moment Kaiah realized just how tall he was. He had to be at least six inches taller than her own height of five-foot-eight. “I think Miss Kaiah is tired of searching for the cat.”

Kaiah waved him off. “It’s okay. Really.”

He rubbed a spot on his neck. “You’re very patient.”

“Oh!” Piper took Kaiah’s hand in hers again. “Maybe she’s in my room.” She started toward the doorway, which was blocked by her father. “Excuse us, Daddy.”

Reid's lips twitched. "You're going to scare Miss Kaiah away on her first day."

"Nope. She'll stay if you get us pizza." Then Piper full-on grinned, and Kaiah spotted Reid's smile reflected in his daughter's.

Kaiah couldn't stop her laugh.

Reid's lips curled up in a smile. "You're encouraging my daughter's bad behavior."

"The kid's got a point." Kaiah shrugged. "Who doesn't like pizza?"

Reid laughed. "Fine. I'll order it."

"Yay!" Piper exclaimed, and when Reid stepped out of the doorway, Piper yanked Kaiah along.

"See ya!" Kaiah sang while they moved down the hallway.

"Do you like pepperoni?" Reid called down the hallway.

"Yes!" Piper and Kaiah responded at the same time.

Piper led Kaiah into a bright pink room decorated with copious pictures of mermaids, along with piles of dolls, books, stuffed animals, and other toys. It was the perfect girl's room with a cool beachy vibe.

"What a great room," Kaiah said, stepping over piles of toys. She pointed to a fluffy calico cat curled up in the middle of Piper's pink comforter. "And this must be the famous Ariel."

Piper flopped onto the bed beside the cat and began petting her. "Ariel, this is my new friend, Kaiah."

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance." Kaiah also stroked the cat. "I assume she's named after Ariel the mermaid?"

Piper seemed impressed. "How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess." Kaiah gestured around at the mermaid murals, posters, dolls, and bedding.

Piper picked up a photo beside her bed and handed it to Kaiah. "This is my mommy and me. She went to heaven when I was two.

I'm six now."

Kaiah pushed against the anguish threading through her as she studied the photo of a beautiful young woman with golden-brown hair and sparkling brown eyes holding a baby in her arms. "Oh Piper, I'm so sorry," she whispered as she took in the girl's sweet expression. She gave her small hand a gentle squeeze. "I'm sure you miss her."

"Her name is Brynn Elizabeth Turner," Piper said. "I'm named after her. My name is Piper Elizabeth Turner."

"That's so special, sweetheart." Kaiah studied the photo, and her throat felt thick. "I lost my mom when I was eleven." She met Piper's surprised expression.

Piper gasped. "You did?" she asked, and Kaiah nodded. "What happened to her?"

"She was sick."

"You miss your mom too," Piper said.

Kaiah nodded. "Every day." She set the framed photo down and took Piper's hand in hers as she sat on the edge of the bed. "But I keep her here." She touched her chest. "She's always in my heart." She gave Piper's hand a gentle squeeze. "Your mom is always in your heart too."

"Right," the little girl whispered while nodding.

Just then, the cat stood up, yawned, squeaked, stretched, shook her head, and then sat back down.

Kaiah and Piper's eyes met before they both started laughing at the silly feline. Shaking her head, Kaiah relaxed on the bed. Today had been an emotional ride, and she was grateful for the relief provided by her two new friends.

## Chapter 3

REID HAD DEFINITELY LOST his mind. That was the only way to explain why he'd invited a stranger to stay in the garage apartment and why he was letting Piper drag her around the house to look for the cat.

Though, if he were being honest with himself, the *real* reason he was in this predicament was obvious. He'd found his gaze drifting toward Kaiah as she waited in line at the coffee shop. Her golden hair fell in waves past her shoulders, catching the morning light in a way that cast a glow around her. He liked the way the corners of her mouth curved up slightly as she pondered her order. He had even taken note of the way she'd walked around the shop, her vibrant blue eyes full of curiosity and warmth as she studied the art on the walls. It seemed he found everything about this woman captivating. His pulse quickened as he felt an unfamiliar spike of adrenaline. He'd been out of the dating game for too long to get back in now. Plus, as a single father with a demanding job, his life was already a careful balancing act.

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But when his hand had closed around the wrong coffee cup—and he'd found himself standing before the beautiful stranger, stumbling over his own words as he tried to correct his mistake—he couldn't deny he'd felt like he'd won the lottery.

And when he got the call for a ride from his part-time Uber job, he'd never in a million years expected Kaiah to be his passenger. Then, when she shared she needed a temporary place to stay? Well, once again he felt like someone was handing him a gift—a reason to talk to this woman and maybe get to know her.

*But what are you doing?* a quiet voice whispered inside his head. *And what would Brynn say if she knew you'd invited a stranger to stay in your home? With your daughter here?* They'd always put their child's safety first, and he was committed to continue doing so. Piper was the center of Reid's life.

*But Brynn did have a thing for helping those in need,* the voice whispered.

He couldn't deny it. When Brynn was alive, she'd organized volunteer committees at their church to serve in the community. Each Thanksgiving she and Reid would hand out pieces of pumpkin pie at the Coral Cove soup kitchen. They'd helped out at shelters for the homeless and even built homes through Habitat for Humanity.

Reid smiled as he thought of his late wife. Then he sighed. His feelings were always so complicated when it came to starting a new chapter without Brynn. In many ways, she still felt so close to him, like she could walk through the front door at any moment. They'd never talked about what would happen if one of them lost the other so young. Imagining a life without each other seemed like a problem that was decades away. But Reid knew that Brynn wouldn't have wanted him to be alone forever. After all, he'd want the same for her if the roles were reversed.

And for the first time since his wife had passed away, Reid was

interested in someone. It had to mean something, right?

*What would Brynn think of all this?* he wondered. *Honestly, she'd probably be happy you're finally getting back out there after four years.*

He could almost hear her say, *It's about time, Reid!*

He shook his head. Maybe he was making too much out of this attraction. After all, Kaiah would be back on the road working on her story, and he'd never see her again. And that would be that.

*Just chill, man. She'll only be here for a few days. Just be kind and courteous to a stranger in need, and leave it at that.*

After ordering a pepperoni pizza and garlic knots through A Slice of Heaven's app, Reid moved to the doorway of Piper's room and rested his shoulder on the doorframe. Kaiah sat on the corner of his daughter's bed with a mermaid doll on her lap while Piper talked on and on about mermaids and swimming in the waves. Kaiah's lovely face was fixated with a serious expression, her brows furrowed while she nodded along with Piper's story. She appeared completely fascinated with his daughter. He tried to ignore the warmth blooming in his chest.

Then Kaiah turned and grinned at him.

He returned the smile before focusing on his daughter, who had stopped talking about mermaids and started showing Kaiah her best dance moves.

"Piper?" he asked.

His daughter stopped flailing about and spun to face him.

"Yeah, Daddy?"

"The pizza will be here in thirty minutes."

"Yay!" Piper whirled around again, her dark hair fanning around

her.

“Need some help in the kitchen?” Kaiah offered. “I can set the table.”

“No, thanks,” he told her. “I got it handled. Paper plates are my friend.”

She grinned at him again, a twinkle in those bright, intelligent blue eyes that seemed to keep drawing him in.

“Miss Kaiah!” Piper rushed over with a book. “Have you ever read *The Mermaid Sisters*?” She pushed the book into Kaiah’s hands.

“No, I haven’t.” Kaiah beamed at his daughter. “Should we read it together?”

“Yes, please!” Piper snuggled up next to Kaiah while the cat beside her began to quietly give herself a bath.

Before the scene warmed his soul too much, Reid backed out of the doorway and moved to the linen closet. He retrieved a set of sheets and stack of towels, then set the pile on the end of the kitchen counter before grabbing the paper plates and setting the table for three.

He stood by the counter and peered at the table. Memories of the last time the table was set for three brought a familiar stitch in his chest.

His phone dinged with a text, and he peered down and grinned at his twin’s name on his screen.

Becca: Who’s the pretty blonde? Do you have something to tell me?

Reid shook his head. He should’ve known his sister would want all the details.

AMY CLIPSTON

Reid: Damsel in distress. Needed a place to stay.

Becca: Um, tell me everything. NOW.

Reid: Can't talk now. Piper invited her for supper,  
and pizza's coming soon.

Becca: A pizza date? Hmm! I'll let you off the  
hook for now, but I want details at supper  
tomorrow.

Reid swallowed a groan. He could already hear his mother and  
his sister ganging up on him, demanding to know about the myster-  
ious blonde staying in the apartment.

He replied with: Will do. And we'll talk about the festival too.

Becca: Yep, that's priority number one. We've  
got to raise the rest of the money for those  
renovations. That wing HAS to be open again.  
The kids deserve better.

Reid: Trust me, I know. I can't imagine how  
cramped those classrooms are, now that half the  
elementary school is closed. We'll get it figured  
out. Night, Becks.

Becca: Night.

He busied himself with putting away the clean dishes waiting  
in the dishwasher since last night, and soon the doorbell rang, an-  
nouncing their supper.

“Pizza!” he called toward Piper’s room, and immediately Piper romped into the kitchen.

“Everyone, take a seat,” he said while pouring three glasses of sweet tea.

Piper patted the seat beside hers. “Sit by me, Miss Kaiah.”

Reid distributed the glasses and then sat across the table from the ladies.

Kaiah took a huge bite of pizza, the steam still rising from the slice as the melty mozzarella oozed down the side. “Okay, this is delicious,” she declared. “And I’m a New Yorker. I *know* my pizza.”

Piper nodded. “It’s the best pizza ever. Me and Daddy eat pizza at least once a week. Auntie Becca and Nana like it too. What’s your favorite food?”

“I like all kinds of food. It would be easier to tell you which kind of food I *don’t* like.”

Reid swallowed a bite of garlic knot. “Like what?”

“Hmm.” Kaiah tapped her chin. “I’m not a big fan of Brussels sprouts.”

Piper scrunched up her face. “Me neither.”

Reid held up his hand. “They’re actually delicious if you prepare them correctly.”

“Really?” Kaiah leaned forward. “And how do you prepare them ‘correctly’?” she asked, making air quotes with her fingers.

“Roast them in kung pao sauce.”

“Huh. I’d actually try them that way.” She seemed impressed. “You like to cook?”

“I have to take a turn at the firehouse,” he told her.

“So you’ve actually made Brussels sprouts for your coworkers, and they didn’t run you off?”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

“Well, color me surprised. Roasted Brussels sprouts in kung pao sauce sounds pretty fancy.”

Piper made a face. “And yucky.”

“I agree.” Kaiah gave his daughter a high-five, and he laughed.

Piper continued to pepper Kaiah with questions about her favorite foods, movies, books, toys, cartoons, and colors while they ate pizza and garlic knots and then ice cream for dessert.

When Kaiah covered her mouth to shield a yawn, Reid stood and collected their empty bowls from their ice cream. “I think we need to let Miss Kaiah rest. She’s had a long day.”

“Awww,” Piper moaned. “Will I see you tomorrow, Miss Kaiah?”

Kaiah froze like a deer in headlights, looking unsure of how to respond. “Maybe.”

Reid touched his daughter’s head. “Say good night to Miss Kaiah and then get ready for your bath.”

Piper hugged her. “Good night.” Then she scampered off toward her bedroom.

Reid turned to Kaiah. “She’s a lot. Thanks for being so patient.”

“She’s great,” Kaiah said, and she looked like she was telling the truth. “Talking to her made me realize how much I miss my nieces and nephew.” Reid caught an emotion he couldn’t quite detect flash across her face before she righted herself again.

“How many do you have?”

“Four. Two from each of my older sisters.” Then she hesitated. “And a few more if I count my stepsiblings’ children too.”

He cocked his head. “How many siblings do you have?”

She held up four fingers. “I’m the middle of five girls. Can you imagine *five* girls?”

“Um, no.” He shook his head, and she laughed.

“My poor dad, right?” She chuckled.

“And you have stepsiblings too?”

THE LIGHTHOUSE AT THE COVE

She nodded. “Four stepbrothers. My dad used to say we were like *The Brady Bunch*, where Carol brought three girls into the marriage and Mike brought three boys. But in our family, my dad brought five girls, and my stepmom had four boys. My older sisters and two of the older brothers were already gone from the house when Dad and Veronica married, but becoming a blended family was still . . . challenging.”

She gave him a stiff smile, and he could almost feel the anxiety radiating off her in waves. But before he could ask her about the family, she picked up the stack of bowls, carried them to the dishwasher, and opened the door.

He came up behind her and touched her hand. “Don’t worry about it, I got it.”

“You fed me, and you’re not even going to let me help clean up?” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a twenty. “At least let me help pay for supper.”

“Put that away.”

She made a face and stuffed the money back into her pocket. “You’re too generous.” Then she brightened. “I’ll add it to the cost of the room after I get my car back.”

“Deal.” He patted the pile of linens. “Here are sheets and towels. There are blankets in the closet, along with some other supplies. Let me give you my number in case you need anything or want a ride somewhere.” He rattled off his number while she programmed it into her phone. Then his phone dinged with a text. He glanced at the screen and found a message: Hi! This is Kaiah.

She pushed her phone into a back pocket on her jeans and then picked up the pile of linens. “Thanks for everything.”

“You’re welcome.” He walked her to the door and opened it. “If you need anything, don’t be shy.”

“I won’t. Good night.”

He waited until she disappeared up the stairs toward the apartment, and then he headed into the bathroom, where Piper sat on the edge of the tub while it filled with water.

“Miss Kaiah is so nice,” Piper announced as she climbed in. “I really like her.”

Reid soaped up a facecloth and began washing her back. “You two seem to get along well.”

“Uh-huh.” Piper splashed her purple rubber duck in the water. “I hope she lives on top of the garage forever.”

“She’s only staying until her car is fixed, sweetie.” He washed her arms and her neck.

“But I want her to stay forever and ever,” Piper whined. “Why can’t she?”

“Because she has a home and a job.”

Piper’s frown transformed into a bright smile. “I’ll ask her to stay, and she will.” She splashed her duck again. “I wonder what happened to her dog. Why would someone take George?”

“I don’t know.”

Piper continued to discuss Kaiah for the remainder of her bath. After Reid read his daughter a story and settled her in bed for the night, he returned to the den, found his laptop, and searched the internet for Kaiah Ross. He quickly found articles Kaiah had written detailing vacation destinations throughout the United States, along with a few articles about the best cruise lines and Caribbean resorts. He was swept away by her talent. The pictures she painted with her words were so vivid, he could see the destinations as if he were already there.

After reading her articles, he was even more curious about Kaiah. He found her Instagram profile and clicked on a few photos of Kaiah with a golden retriever wearing a happy expression. If dogs

could smile, this one had the brightest smile Reid had ever seen. Surely that had to be George. A few other photos included a good-looking guy with light brown hair.

*Could he be the guy who took George? But she didn't say the culprit was a dude.*

The guy could be someone else—perhaps her boyfriend or her husband. But Reid had noticed there weren't any rings on her left hand. So, maybe she wasn't married. Maybe she was single.

Or maybe it was none of Reid's business.

*Bro, seriously. She'll be gone in a few days, and you'll never see her again. Just let it go.*

Kaiah drew in a long breath and then released it as she eased into the warm bubble bath. She was grateful she'd remembered to pack her favorite bubbles. For her, a bath was the best way to relax after a long and stressful day, whether the words refused to flow as she tried to write, or while grief surged through her veins as she thought of her golden retriever, George. She missed her best buddy so much. He'd been her constant companion, going out on stories with her, taking daily walks, watching television with her, and sleeping at her feet at night. In fact, she'd had to sleep with a pillow at the bottom of the bed ever since her ex had taken George. And that was on top of shattering her heart and her trust.

Now she was stuck in Nowheresville, but at least she had a warm bubble bath and some entertaining neighbors. She was still smiling after her supper with Reid and his precocious daughter. Piper had her in stitches with her nonstop questions and her funny anecdotes. It pained Kaiah to know that sweet little girl had lost her mother when she was only two. She knew what it was like to walk around

with a permanent hole in her heart without her mother. Piper and Reid had been through so much. Yet she could see that Piper and Reid had persevered. She was struck by the love in Reid's eyes when he looked at his daughter. He seemed like a good man and a doting father.

She focused on the white ceiling and relaxed. She would somehow enjoy this unexpected detour until she hit the road again.

Once the bathwater cooled, Kaiah dried off and pulled on a pair of yoga pants and a T-shirt. She settled on the sofa and flipped through channels before settling on a Hallmark movie. Her phone rang, and she smiled at her sister's name on the screen.

"Hey, Kam," Kaiah sang.

"Last I heard, Mr. TDH was your Uber driver. Did you drive off into the sunset or what?"

Kaiah grinned. "Well, I'm staying in his apartment."

"*What?*" Kam exclaimed. "You're at his *place*? Kaiah, did you actually go home with him? What are you thinking? I mean, talk about dangerous—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Kaiah held her hand up while interrupting her. "Calm down, Kammie. I'm staying in an apartment on his property. I'm not staying *in* his house." Then she shared how he offered the empty apartment and planned to settle up after her car was ready. "For some reason I trust him. I met his six-year-old, and she's adorable. Kam, you'd love her."

"Oh!" Kam sounded relieved. "It's not exactly the hotel arrangement I would've expected, but I trust your judgment, Ky. So, he's married."

"Actually, he's a widower."

Her sister clucked her tongue. "Oh no. I'm sorry to hear that. That little girl is younger than we were when we lost Mom."

"I know." Glancing around the apartment, Kaiah cleared her

throat. She needed to change the subject. “Anyway, this apartment is perfect. It’s bigger than my place back in New York.”

“For real?”

“And guess what? Mr. TDH is a firefighter too.”

“Woo! A man in a uniform?” Kam exclaimed. “Ky, you’ve got to send me photos of this guy.”

Kaiah laughed and then cupped her hand to her mouth to cover a yawn. “It’s been a long day, so I’ll let you go.”

“Okay, but I want photos of Reid in his firefighter uniform. Promise me you’ll send some.” A voice sounded in the background, and then Kam laughed. “Uh oh, Devon’s getting jealous. Honey, you have nothing to worry about. You’re the handsomest accountant I know,” she told him before laughing again. Then all Kaiah could hear were muffled voices that sounded as if Kamryn had covered the phone with her hand.

She shook her head. She could envision her sister and her husband joking around and pretending to bicker. Those two had the best relationship. There was a time she’d hoped to find a love like that. But she’d given up on those dreams six months ago when her last relationship fell apart. That was when she’d accepted that she was better off alone so she could concentrate on her career without any distractions.

“Okay, I’m back. I told him he has nothing to worry about.” Kaiah could hear the smile in her sister’s voice. “Since I’ll never get to see my handsome husband in a uniform, you’ll have to get me a photo of Mr. TDH.”

Kaiah rolled her eyes. “I’ll do my best, but I doubt I’ll get to see him in his uniform before I get back on the road.”

“Such a shame,” Kam sang with a dramatic sigh. “Get some rest, Ky. And I want a full report on your fireman after you’re back on the road.”

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“I’m sure there will be nothing to report, Kamryn,” Kaiah told her. “Tell your husband good night for me.”

“Will do. Bye!”

Kaiah disconnected the call and then chuckled to herself. She didn’t know what she’d do without her favorite sister.



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## 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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