

PRAISE FOR AMY CLIPSTON

“*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!”

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“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.”

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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

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“[Clipston] will leave readers craving more.”

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THE HEART OF
Splendid
Lake



THE HEART OF
*Splendid
Lake*

AMY CLIPSTON



THOMAS NELSON

The Heart of Splendid Lake

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Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Thomas Nelson. Thomas Nelson is a registered trademark of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Clipston, Amy, author.

Title: The heart of Splendid Lake / Amy Clipston.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee : Thomas Nelson, [2021] | Summary:

"Bestselling author Amy Clipston transports readers to a picturesque lakeside town in this heartwarming contemporary romance"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021010577 (print) | LCCN 2021010578 (ebook) | ISBN 9780785252900 (paperback) | ISBN 9780785252917 (ebook) | ISBN 9780785252924 (downloadable audio)

Subjects: GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3603.L58 H42 2021 (print) | LCC PS3603.L58 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021010577>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021010578>

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*In loving memory of my father, Ludwig “Bob” Goebelbecker,
and our wonderful family vacations at Schroon Lake
in New York, the inspiration for this story*



PROLOGUE

*B*rianna couldn't help but smile as she nosed her prized '93 Mustang into a parking spot right in front of Bookends, just one of the inviting shops lining Main Street. The quaint little bookstore was one of the many reasons she loved her hometown. Splendid Lake, North Carolina, was everything she could ever want—even if she usually had to park a block away from this central thoroughfare.

Still happily singing along with a favorite hard-rock song blasting through the speakers, she turned off the engine. But once she stepped into the cold January air, she shivered and quickly buttoned her sherpa-lined jean jacket, stopping only a second to pluck a long blond hair off one sleeve. Why hadn't she grabbed her heavier coat? At least the bookstore would be warm.

Waiting a few moments as people hustled along the sidewalk in front of her, Brianna took in some of the welcoming signs on that side of the street. The Christmas Shop was open year-round, and the Warner—Splendid Lake's single-screen movie theater, Morningside Bakery, and the Flower Shoppe all sat between its festive façade and Scoops, the local ice cream parlor. Like all the shops, they were owned and operated by local residents.

Glancing to the north, she took in the town hall, library, fire

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station, and police station rimming the town square. Less than a block away stood the town's hardware store, grocery store, and her fiancé's store, Reese Farm Supply. An only child, Taylor had taken over from his parents when they retired. He had a small apartment nearby and worked hard to serve the farming community. She was proud of him.

That was about it for the town of Splendid Lake, but then there was the lake itself, just a short walk away. She smiled again as she breathed in its familiar smell mixed with the delicious aromas coming from the town's longtime family restaurant, the Splendid Kitchen, and all the shops that served treats and beverages.

She turned to look at the Coffee Bean across the street. She was still so pleased that the shop her best friend, Ava, and Ava's younger sister, Brooklyn, owned and operated had become such a hit. She'd see them both soon. Her plan was to purchase a book for her mother and then pop into the Coffee Bean to pick up three special coffees to take home.

She didn't have time to waste, though. She was meeting Dad in their workshop to determine everything they needed to do to get their family's small marina and lakeside cabin resort ready for its annual opening on Memorial Day weekend. That was a mere four months away, and they always started with a thorough to-do list.

When she yanked open the bookstore's door, a blast of warm air greeted her. She nodded hello to a few acquaintances as she made a beeline for the romance section, where she quickly found the novel her mother was so eager to add to her collection. Pulling her cell phone from a pocket to check the time, she found it was almost ten thirty. She'd promised Dad she'd be home by eleven, so that left just twenty minutes to finish her errands and then make the ten-minute drive home, just around the south end of the lake.

Her phone pinged with a text from Taylor, and she began reading

it as she moved through the mystery section on her way toward the cash register. Then she slammed right into someone, one of her purple western boots smashing down on a foot.

Gasping as she righted herself, she looked up at a tall man who stared down at her—with a pained expression. “I’m—I’m so sorry. That was totally my fault! I wasn’t paying attention . . .”

Her cheeks burned, and she was surprised to see his face light up with a smile. “No worries. Lucky for me, I decided it was too cold to wear my flip-flops today.”

After giving him a nervous laugh, she pocketed her phone. He didn’t look familiar, which was also surprising since she’d grown up in Splendid Lake. She either knew or would recognize all the locals, and it was rare for tourists to detour to Splendid Lake in winter.

This guy was certainly handsome, though. His baby-blue eyes presented a striking contrast to his thick, light-brown hair cut short on the sides. Longer locks on top of his head were windblown, which, coupled with the stubble on his chin, gave him a rugged look. He was maybe two or three inches taller than Taylor’s five eleven, making him a good eight or nine inches above her own height.

He nodded toward the paperback in her arms. “I’m looking for a good read. What have you got there?”

She held out the book. “This is the third novel in a series my mother is enjoying.”

“What’s it about?”

“Oh, you know, the typical romance. Boy meets girl, girl dislikes boy, then girl likes boy, and finally boy and girl fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after.”

“Huh. You said it’s a series. Should I start with the first book?” He grinned.

She returned the grin. “I suspect you’d like something in this

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section more.” She pivoted and searched the shelves behind her, then spotted a familiar series and pulled out the first volume. “Here you go. My dad just finished this one last week and loved it.”

He took the book from her, then briefly examined its cover front and back before once again meeting her gaze. “Thanks for the recommendation.”

“You’re welcome.” She looked to her right and then to her left in conspirator fashion. “I’ll even fill you in on a little secret my dad told me.”

“Oh?” His eyes danced with interest.

“You might think the butler did it, but he didn’t.”

The man laughed at her dramatic whisper, the sound warm and contagious.

“Enjoy.” She grinned again and gave him a wave before heading to the register, where only one customer was ahead of her, being waited on by a friend of her mother’s.

“Hey, Mrs. Lang,” she said when it was her turn.

“Good morning, *Miss Porter!*” Then she smiled. “Again, please call me Emma. If I remember correctly, you’re about twenty-six years old now. You’re allowed to call me by my first name.”

“I’ll try.” Brianna smiled as she handed her the book.

“Oh, this is a good one.”

“Great. Mom’s eager to keep going with this series.” She lifted her wallet from her purse.

After Emma handed Brianna’s credit card back to her, she placed her purchase and a receipt in a bag. “Tell your mom hello, and have a great day.”

“Thanks. You have a great one too.”

As Brianna pushed open the front door to leave, she glanced to her right and spotted the same handsome man looking at her with an

amused expression. He nodded, and she returned the gesture before exiting the store. He'd been fun to talk to, but she doubted she'd ever see him again.

A few snow flurries tickled her nose as she put the bag in her car's passenger seat, and she shivered again when she started toward a crosswalk on her way to the Coffee Bean. Thanks to her little mishap in Bookends, she'd really have to hurry now. But then her cell phone rang, and unwilling to step on anyone else's toes, she stepped aside to stand near a shop window. Pulling the phone from her pocket, she read *Mom* on the screen, then unlocked it and held the phone to her ear as she started down the sidewalk again.

"Hey, Mom. I got your book. I'm just running into the Coffee Bean and then—"

"Brianna." Mom's voice sounded strange. Throaty. "Come home. It's-it's your dad."

When her mother began to sob, Brianna froze in place, every plan forgotten.



CHAPTER 1

ONE WEEK LATER

*B*rianna leaned against a wall in the family room of the lake house she'd lived in her whole life, then shut her eyes and took a deep breath. If only she could stop her frayed nerves from practically vibrating. And the smell of strong coffee and multiple casseroles had overwhelmed her senses so much that she'd had to swallow bile back from her throat.

All the walls seemed to be closing in on her. Despite the murmur of their conversations, surely the crowd milling around could hear her heart hammering against her rib cage.

A warm hand caressed her shoulder, and a comforting voice sounded next to her ear. "Brie? Are you okay?"

She nodded as she opened her eyes and found Taylor staring right into her face. Leaning down like that, he was so close that the familiar musky aroma of his aftershave presented an unwelcome addition to her senses. But his deep-brown eyes were full of concern.

"I'm fine." She pushed a lock of her long straight hair behind one shoulder. "I'm just feeling a bit overwhelmed."

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He opened a bottle of water and handed it to her. "Here. Take this. You need to stay hydrated."

"Thank you." She took a long drink, enjoying the cold liquid on her parched throat. But that did little to help her nerves. Everything felt so wrong, so off-kilter, and it was. Her life had shattered a week ago, and she craved some time alone so she could begin to comprehend what happened. Today she'd sat in church and stared at the coffin that held her precious father, then watched it being lowered into the cold, hard ground. She needed to catch her breath.

It all seemed so surreal, like a nightmare. Just a week ago she and Dad had been about to make plans for readying their resort for its opening in May. But now he was gone. Forever. How was she supposed to go on without him?

"Brianna."

She turned as Dr. Sabella approached. Splendid Lake's pediatrician always wore a kind smile. She nodded at him and cleared her throat.

"I'm so sorry about your father." He shook his head. "Such a good, hardworking man."

"Thank you." Her voice sounded hoarse, but she wasn't surprised given how hard she'd fought all day to hold back fresh sobs. She had to be strong for her mother.

Taylor slipped his arm around her waist. "I still can't believe he's gone. We had so many great times with him. It seems like just yesterday we were out in a boat fishing with him, and if we weren't fishing, we were swimming or roasting marshmallows on the beach."

"I'm sure you all have many wonderful memories of Martin," Dr. Sabella said.

Finished with her water, Brianna set the empty bottle on the end table beside her.

Mrs. Sabella sidled up to her husband. She was a petite woman with short-cropped hair dyed such a bright red that it always reminded Brianna of the Raggedy Ann doll she'd had as a child. "Oh, Brianna, you poor dear. We are all so sorry. I saw your father at the post office the day before it happened." She patted Brianna's hand. "Had he been ill?"

Brianna shook her head, and Taylor rubbed his hand over her back as if to tell her he would handle this. "No, this came as a complete shock. He never said anything about feeling bad, and he saw Dr. Weissman for his annual physical and routine tests just a couple of months ago. The family was told massive heart attacks can just happen without any detection or warning."

While Taylor said more, Brianna looked across the room to where her two sisters, both older, sat on either side of her mother on the sofa. A long line of people had made their way there to express their condolences.

Her stomach constricted as she took in the grief etched on her mother's face, resembling a porcelain doll's. Her skin was white, making her graying blond hair appear darker than usual. Her beautiful face was gaunt, as if she'd lost at least ten pounds, and the lines around her mouth and dark shadows taking residence under her powder-blue eyes made her look closer to seventy than her true age of sixty. The constant stream of tears flowing down her face had made her cheeks puffy and her eyes bloodshot.

Cassie, the middle daughter, nodded as one of their neighbors spoke to her, and Brianna found herself thinking about the differences between them. At twenty-eight, Cassie was two years older than Brianna, and while all three sisters had inherited their mother's golden-blond hair, somehow Cassie had received their maternal grandmother's piercing green eyes. Brianna had always secretly coveted those

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eyes over her and Jenna's brown ones, but now she was glad she had her father's eyes.

At the moment, though, Cassie's beautiful eyes were red, and her high cheekbones were splotchy, evidence that she'd spent most of the day crying. Also thinking about how she envied her sisters' identical five-seven height, Brianna noted how Cassie's simple black, short-sleeved dress showcased her trim, fit body. Her sculpted arms were evidence of the hours she spent in the gym when she wasn't working as an editor at a publishing house in Los Angeles. But at least Brianna had managed to stay trim as well. After all, she got plenty of exercise working around the resort, even in winter.

Jenna, her oldest sister, was holding Mom's hand as they both listened to Olivia Hernandez, who with her husband, Eddie, owned the Lakeview Inn next door. Jenna's hair was styled in a flawless french twist, and her makeup accentuated her own high cheekbones. Also wearing a classic black dress—although certainly more expensive than Cassie's—Jenna was beautiful and sophisticated. She definitely looked like the high-class, New York City corporate lawyer she was. She always reminded Brianna of a runway model, ready to strut her stuff down the catwalk, and Brianna often wondered if she secretly used the most expensive age-reversing skin care products she could find. At thirty-two she appeared ten years younger.

Both sisters had been in more than one relationship, but none had lasted. Still, they'd been happy for her when she and Taylor announced their engagement.

As Mr. Hernandez took his turn speaking to Mom, his wife moved on to the kitchen, where a buffet with dishes like homemade lasagna, green bean casserole, and an array of desserts prepared by friends and neighbors covered the table and counters. Brianna was tempted to go with her. The family room felt too small and too crowded, and for

once she was glad both her parents had been only children like Taylor was. She had no aunts, uncles, or cousins to add to the confusion, and all four of her grandparents had died long ago.

She spotted George Wellington, the town's police chief, sitting in Dad's favorite recliner. That's where her father had watched the Motor Trend Network to enjoy his favorite car shows.

"Right, Brianna?" Taylor's voice crashed through her thoughts, slamming her back to the present. Taylor and the Sabellas were all staring at her with renewed concern in their eyes.

Heat crept up her neck. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear what you said."

"Dr. Sabella said your dad's absence will be a great loss when the resort opens this year." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

"Right."

Dr. Sabella raised his cup of coffee and took a sip, then said, "You and your dad ran this place together. How are you going to manage everything without him?"

Brianna opened her mouth to respond but then closed it. She was just trying to make it through this day, and she had no idea what she'd do tomorrow or the next week, let alone throughout the resort's season.

Taylor squeezed her hand again. "We'll take it one day at a time."

"Well, we're here if you need us," Mrs. Sabella said.

Dr. Sabella nodded. "That's right, Brianna. We all stick together in Splendid Lake."

"Thank you," she croaked as the couple stepped away to talk to her family. She turned to Taylor. "Would you please get me another bottle of water?"

"Of course." He kissed her cheek before turning toward the kitchen.

Brianna folded her arms as she watched him move through the crowd, then grasp her bottle of water while talking to Ava and her

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husband, Dylan Burns. When two more friends joined them, her pulse picked up speed. Now was her chance to get out of the house and breathe—*alone*.

She slipped away toward the hall, then once she'd made it past the laundry room, she took a right through the next doorway and sped past the large board where keys hung behind the desk where cabin guests checked in. Then she sprinted out the guest entrance door.

Met by a wall of chilly air, she breathed it in, allowing it to fill her lungs before she exhaled. Shivering, she rubbed her arms, wishing she'd thought to grab a coat to pull over her thin, long-sleeved blouse and skirt. At least she still wore the black sweater she'd put on before the service. Even as a child she'd learned the sanctuary was always cold no matter the time of year.

But the chill felt good as it seeped into her skin. It was a relief to feel *something* after spending the afternoon as a numb shell, listening to her mother and sisters sob first in a pew at the front of the church and then at the gravesite. She still didn't know how she'd kept her emotions in check, but she believed her father would want her to take care of the rest of his family. So she'd forced back her own sobs as tears streamed down her face. Taylor always said she needed no makeup, and today she was glad she'd worn none.

Brianna walked the length of the wraparound porch, past the row of rocking chairs and porch swing, until she came to the back steps of the large, two-story, cedar-shingled house she'd always loved. She loved everything about their property. Beautiful Splendid Lake glittered in the early evening light, and when she glanced to her right, she could see Paradise River and then Willard Mountain State Park in the distance.

When she felt a brush against her bare leg, she looked down to see her black-and-white tuxedo cat blinking up at her. Oh, how she

loved Bucky's adorable black face with its permanent white "baseball stitching" that stretched from his forehead to his little nose and complemented his "milk mustache" and white whiskers. She smiled. The cat's purr always reminded her of a car engine.

"Hey, Bucky." Brianna stroked the cat's head, and he closed his eyes as his purr grew louder. He was the resort's resident pet, a favorite among the regulars who enjoyed his visits to their cabins in search of treats and chin rubs. "Oh, sweetie. I need to fill your bowl." She glanced behind her and found both his food bowl and water dish half full. "Cassie must have already taken care of you. I'm sorry I forgot."

The cat gave Brianna's shin another rub and then trotted toward the front of the house. "See you later, buddy," Brianna called after him.

She began making her way down the porch steps, her uncomfortable four-inch wedges clomping on the wood. She'd always preferred jeans, T-shirts, and hoodies to dresses, and for sure western boots to heels, but she'd do anything to look good for Dad today.

A crisp breeze whipped over her, and Brianna hugged her arms to her chest as she tottered past the row of twelve cabins her family rented in summer and early fall, then toward the beach down the hill. Their little resort was the only one on Splendid Lake, and it was her grandfather's legacy, passed down to her father. Grandpa Porter purchased the land and built the resort while at the same time private homes popped up all around it. His dream was to offer cozy cabins for families to rent as an affordable and fun getaway. Now she thought about her father's dream: to keep the resort alive.

Dad, I'll work hard in your memory and make you proud. It was a promise she'd whispered even as his body was carried out of the house on a gurney.

The voices behind her faded away as she took in the whole of their property. To her left was the small convenience store and bait shop,

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which was next to the barn where Dad kept the lawn mower, ladder, and other large equipment and tools.

Once down the hill, she stopped to pull off her shoes, then held them by their straps as she continued. Gazing at the lake, she envisioned the floating raft they'd bring out for sunbathers when the water turned warm enough. Then her gaze moved to the marina and workshop, the latter next to a large pole barn where they kept their two dozen aluminum johnboats until it was time to put them in the water for guests and visitors to rent them. She and her father had spent hours working side by side there.

Tears stung her eyes, and her lower lip trembled. Dad had taught her everything he knew about fixing boats and small engine repair. He'd been her mentor, her business partner, her best friend, along with Ava. But now he was gone, and she would have to work in that shop alone without his guidance.

She picked up her pace as she approached the beach. The rocks at the edge of the water were cold and bit into the soles of her feet, but she ignored the pain and looked up at the cloudless, dark-blue sky. Without her father, how would she handle all the necessary work before opening the resort? Her mother would still help with things like cleaning, of course, but she and Dad had managed most of the business with minimal outside help.

Another crisp breeze drifted off the shoreline, bringing with it the smell of the lake. Up close, its scent wasn't quite as inviting and fresh in winter and spring as it was in the summer and fall, but she didn't mind. She loved the water all year long.

As the cold air seeped through her clothes, though, she shivered once more and headed toward the two Adirondack chairs where her parents had enjoyed watching the sunset nearly every night since she could remember, leaving her to tend to any needs their guests had. She

hadn't minded. And somehow the guests knew the chairs weren't for them. They belonged to their hosts, Martin and Lois Porter.

A lump of sorrow swelled in her throat as she sank into the chair on the left—Dad's chair—and tried in vain to block the vision of her parents holding hands as beautiful colors spread across the western horizon.

The quiet lapping of the tiny waves on the shoreline filled the silence, and in the distance, a dog barked. The aroma of a wood-burning fire from a nearby chimney floated over her as she lost herself in memories of her father teaching her how to swim, barbecuing on the Fourth of July, helping her and her sisters find just the right Christmas tree . . .

Tears swam in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks as twilight formed.

When she heard a rustling beside her, she turned and gasped as a tall man approached her.

"I'm sorry." He held up his hands as a hesitant expression crossed his face in the waning light. He jammed his thumb toward a copse of maple trees behind him. "I tripped on a fallen branch over there and nearly fell on my face. I thought for sure you'd heard me."

She blinked up at him and shook her head. "No. I didn't."

He wasn't one of the locals, yet something about him seemed so familiar. She felt as if she'd spoken to him somewhere, shared a conversation with him. Then it hit her. He was the man she'd smacked into at the bookstore the week before. They'd had a brief but delightful exchange about books, and now his warm laugh echoed in her mind. For a moment she considered asking him if he remembered her, but it would be awkward if he didn't, and she didn't have the energy to deal with that kind of embarrassment today. Clad in jeans and boots, he also looked as though he was just searching for a place to relax.

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He gave her a sheepish smile. “I suppose I could have kept the embarrassing details of my clumsiness to myself, then.”

“I guess so.” She swiped her palms down her face to ensure all evidence of her despondency was gone, then pushed herself up from the chair. “I was just leaving.”

“No. Wait. I was going to ask if I could join you, not run you off.” He pointed toward the sky. “I think the sunsets here at Splendid Lake are the best in all of North Carolina.”

Brianna glanced up toward the heavens, where the horizon seemed to mock her somber mood with its cheerful explosion of yellow, orange, and red hues, all chasing each other across the darkening sky.

“Don’t you agree?” His expression seemed to plead with her. Why did this stranger care if she enjoyed the sunset?

“Sure.” She shrugged, even though she did agree with him. Everything about Splendid Lake was the best of North Carolina, but now she’d have to try to enjoy it without her precious father. Another stab of grief pierced her heart.

The man pointed to the other chair. Mom’s chair. “Would it be all right if I sat quietly beside you and enjoyed the view?”

“Suit yourself.” She settled back as he folded his long torso into the seat beside her.

As they sat in silence for a few minutes, she again peered out over the lake. Her mind flashed with images of everything her father would miss, like walking her down the aisle someday—once she and Taylor got around to setting a date. And Dad would never meet his grandchildren or teach them how to fish or skip stones.

Her eyes stung again as she experienced another crush of heartache. *Don’t cry in front of this stranger! Be strong!*

“You look cold,” the man said. “The chill doesn’t bother me. Would you like my coat? I really don’t need it.”

Brianna faced him, astounded by his concern for her. “I’m okay. But thanks.”

She fished through the pockets of her sweater in search of the wad of tissues she’d stowed there before leaving for the church, but all she found was her cell phone, still powered off. She hadn’t expected any calls, but she also hadn’t felt the need to talk to anyone who reached out. She could use a tissue, though.

As if reading her mind, he held out a napkin. “Here. I stuck this in my pocket when I stopped for a snack on my way here. It’s clean.”

“Thanks.” She wiped her eyes and nose, then waited for him to ask what was wrong. But he remained silent, his eyes trained on the lake, and her body relaxed.

The sunset faded and darkness crept in, bringing with it another chilly breeze. Once again she regretted not grabbing her coat. A flashlight would have been good, too, but at least she had a light app on her phone.

“Have you ever seen a sunset on the Outer Banks?”

Brianna startled at his voice. For a moment she’d forgotten he was there. “I have.” The gravel in her throat came out in a rasp of words.

“They’re spectacular, but I still prefer the sunsets here.”

She nodded. She preferred everything here. After all, this was her home.

She angled her body toward him and studied his profile, a silhouette against the lights glowing on the marina’s pier behind him. Who was this stranger? And why had he chosen to sit next to her as if he knew what she’d just realized—she didn’t need to be alone as much as she just needed some quiet company.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the beam of a flashlight bouncing down the beach. Another silhouette trudged behind it, this one tall and lean. A man’s voice called her name.