

## PRAISE FOR AMY CLIPSTON

“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 *THE MISTLETOE COUNTESS*  
AND THE MITCHELL’S CROSSROADS SERIES

“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*

“[Clipston] gives us all we could possibly want from a talented storyteller.”

—*RT BOOK REVIEWS*, 4½ STARS, TOP PICK! ON *A SIMPLE PRAYER*

“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*

“Clipston delivers another enchanting series starter with a tasty premise, family secrets, and sweet-as-pie romance, offering assurance that true love can happen more than once and second chances are worth fighting for.”

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“[Clipston] will leave readers craving more.”

—*RT BOOK REVIEWS*, 4½ STARS, TOP PICK! ON *A MOTHER’S SECRET*

# THE VIEW FROM CORAL COVE

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*Building a Future* (available

August 2022)

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*The Coffee Corner*

*The Jam and Jelly Nook*

### THE AMISH HOMESTEAD SERIES

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*Room on the Porch Swing*

*A Seat by the Hearth*

*A Welcome at Our Door*

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## NONFICTION

*The Gift of Love*



THE VIEW  
*from*  
CORAL COVE

AMY CLIPSTON



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*The View from Coral Cove*

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*For my super-awesome husband, Joe, with love and appreciation. Here's to the summer we met and our wonderful memories of driving around Sandbridge Beach and taking day trips to the Outer Banks. When I think of the beach, I remember some of our happiest times. I love you and this amazing life we've built together!*



## Prologue

Maya giggled as she raced down the beach to the ocean waves, breathing in the salty air and enjoying the feel of hot sand between her toes. Oh how she loved spending summers with her great-aunt in Coral Cove. This was her favorite time of year.

“Maya! Slow down!” Mom called from behind her.

But Maya simply threw her hands up into the air and ran faster. “Last one in is a rotten egg!”

When she reached the water, she jumped in with both feet and yelped with delight. Then, facing her mother and Aunt CeCe, she plopped onto her stomach and stared up at them. They were both standing where the sea barely touched their toes. What were they waiting for?

“Look! I’m a mermaid!” Maya announced as she splashed around. “My tail magically appears in salty water.”

Aunt CeCe chuckled as she turned toward Mom. “Don’t you love the imagination of an eight-year-old?”

“I wish I could bottle her energy,” Mom said, shaking her head.

Glad she had energy, Maya screeched as a wave rumbled toward her, then carried her toward the beach. She was floating! When she

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sank to the bottom again, she laughed, then popped to her feet, spun in the water, and pretended to be a pinwheel. Once she stopped spinning, she dizzily stumbled backward and dropped onto the sand, flat on her back.

Looking up at her two favorite people in the whole world, Maya grinned. Oh, she didn't have a father, and sometimes that made her feel bad, but Mom told her what really counted. *You have a wonderful family, Maya. That's because Aunt CeCe and I both love you so very much. We'll always want the best for you, and we'll always be here for you. No matter what.*

"Come into the water with me!" She bounced up, then took her aunt's hand in hers and gave it a gentle tug. "Let's go!"

"Okay, but I can't run and jump like you do." She touched Maya's nose. "I'm not so old for a great-aunt, but my knees are beginning to complain about *their* age."

"I promise I'll just walk, then."

Maya grasped her mother's hand next. "You come too, Mom."

Her mother smiled down at her. "Of course I will."

Maya guided them into the North Carolina-coast water, and another wave of happiness washed over her as though it were the summer-warmed ocean itself. When she looked up to see seagulls fluttering above them in the bright blue sky, the sun's rays kissed her cheeks. That's how Mom always said it—"Kissed."

Maya gave her mother's and Aunt CeCe's hands a squeeze. "Isn't this the best time?"

"Yes, it is, sweet girl." Her aunt smiled. "I love playing with you, honey."

"Can we visit the dolls in your store after we swim for a while?"

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“Of course.” Aunt CeCe looked at Mom. “What do you think about pizza tonight, Vickie? I’ll order it from our favorite place.”

Mom’s face lit up. She was so pretty! “Oh yes! That sounds delicious.”

“Yay!” Maya sang as she released their hands. “I love pizza! But for now, let’s swim like mermaids!”

*This is my special place, she thought as she dove under the water. I hope we come here forever—even when I’m a grown-up. I never ever want to stop spending summers in Coral Cove.*



## Chapter 1

TWENTY-ONE YEARS LATER

The June sunlight streaming in through the windshield seemed to mock Maya's somber mood as she steered her bright metallic blue Toyota 4Runner onto Fourth Avenue, then passed some of the quaint little stores lining the streets of her favorite place in the world. She'd never tire of Coral Cove. It was her favorite place in all of North Carolina.

She tried to concentrate on the pop music serenading her through the vehicle's speakers, but her mind kept spinning with the reality of what just happened—she'd buried her beloved great-aunt CeCe, her last living relative.

As Maya's eyes filled with tears again, she tried to dismiss them. She was strong. She would pick herself up and move on. Besides, what choice did she have?

When her phone rang through the speakers, she saw her best friend's number on the screen. She hit the answer button on the steering wheel as she slowed to a stop at a red light.

"Hi, Kiana." Maya peered out the window. Saturday shoppers

moved in and out of the flea market, clothing store, and gift shop in this section of the block.

“How’d it go, My?”

“The service at Aunt CeCe’s church was beautiful, and the words the pastor spoke at the gravesite were especially meaningful. Then a group of her church friends hosted a really nice potluck lunch. There was so much food, Key. You wouldn’t have believed it. Anyway, I got through it better than I expected.”

The light turned green, and Maya accelerated through the intersection, passing Coral Cove’s single movie theater and her favorite ice cream parlor. She loved this little town that had been her great-aunt’s home and Maya’s special place to visit every summer.

“I’m glad, My.” Kiana sighed. “But I’m also sorry. I wanted to drive down and be there for you. If only I could have switched with one of the other nurses today, but none of them were available. I would have rather been there to hold your hand than working here in Charlotte. You know that, right?”

“It’s okay. I already told you I didn’t expect you to come all the way down here for the funeral.”

“But I could’ve helped you finish unpacking and making sure the store is ready to reopen on Monday.”

Maya merged onto Laskin Road and then turned left onto Third Avenue. As she motored past the Best Friends Pet Shop, she spotted a big white tent near the store’s side parking lot. Quite the crowd had congregated there.

She focused her eyes out the windshield again as CeCe’s Toy Chest came into view across the street. A fresh wave of emotion pummeled her chest. Gayle, her great-aunt’s best friend, had called

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her just over a week ago to tell her CeCe had suffered a massive heart attack and passed away. Gayle found her when she arrived at the store for work that morning.

Not even waiting until after the funeral, Maya had immediately packed up everything she owned, found movers who fortunately had a slot in their schedule, and given the keys to her apartment to the landlord. Then she headed down to Coral Cove to run Aunt CeCe's store and start a new life. As she knew she would, she'd inherited not only the business but the whole building, which included her aunt's apartment on the second floor. Its rooms weren't especially large, but it did have three bedrooms and two bathrooms, more than enough space for one person.

"I promise you I'm fine, Key. And you're always there for me. In fact, you're the only person I can count on, especially after . . . well, you know." Maya couldn't bring herself to say her former fiancé's name. Today had been painful enough.

"Don't even mention He-Who-Shall-Remain-Nameless. He's not worth your breath. I'm glad he's in Europe and out of your life. You deserve so much better."

Maya frowned. If only she could get Kyle out of her mind!

She steered her SUV into the driveway that led to the small parking lot behind the two-story brick building that had housed the toy store since before Maya was born, nearly thirty years ago.

She parked by the back door. "Thanks, Key. I'm really tired. It's been a long day, and I'm finally home. I just want to get out of these clothes and put up my feet. I'm going to let you go, okay?"

"Of course. I just wanted to check on you. Love you."

"Love you too. Bye."

Maya disconnected the call and stared at the back door that led not only to the store but to the stairs up to the apartment her aunt CeCe had lived in for so long. Maya and her mother had lived there, too, until they'd moved to Charlotte when Maya was four. Then Maya had spent her summers there throughout most of her childhood.

But now this whole place was hers—the store, the apartment, the entire building plus a garage. Aunt CeCe had even left her some money. And with Kyle breaking their engagement and moving an ocean away, she'd quickly decided starting fresh in Coral Cove was the best thing to do. Kiana and a few other friends lived in Charlotte, but other than that, no ties kept her there.

If only she knew how to start fresh with no family.

She climbed out of the driver's seat, then found her purse and the huge shopping bag bulging with disposable containers of leftover food. She had no idea what she was supposed to do with it all.

Once inside, she mounted the steep steps up to the apartment, wondering how her seventy-six-year-old aunt had managed them, especially with an armload of groceries. But CeCe had been strong, hardworking, and independent, which she'd proved daily by running her own business with only Gayle's part-time help.

Maya walked through the family room to the kitchen and stowed the leftovers. Then she moved to the master bedroom and surveyed the boxes and bags she'd already filled with CeCe's clothes and most of her accessories. She'd donate them sometime next week.

She stripped off her short-sleeved black dress and black pumps before stepping into a pair of jean shorts, a yellow T-shirt, and her favorite pink Birkenstocks.

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Now that the funeral was over, she could ease into her new life in Coral Cove. But she couldn't shake this newest grief that followed her like a shadow. She'd always been close to her great-aunt, but after she'd lost her mother three years ago, CeCe had become even more important to her.

And now they were both gone.

Maya trudged back into the kitchen and found a can of Diet Coke in the refrigerator. Then she stood in the doorway to the second bedroom, always ready for guests. She hoped Kiana would visit often—and soon.

This room had been her and her mother's when they lived there. It was also where Maya had stayed as an adult when she visited her precious aunt every summer. They worked together in the store during the day, and Maya spent the evenings writing.

She moved to the smaller, third bedroom. Like CeCe had, she'd use it as an office, but it would take some work. Leaning on the doorjamb, she scanned the rolls of wrapping paper, containers of yarn and ribbon, piles of old quilts, and boxes of books, magazines, photo albums, and mementos Aunt CeCe had collected over the years. And then there were the books and office supplies Maya had brought with her. She'd never be able to concentrate with so much clutter staring at her!

She swallowed a groan as she considered the romance novel she'd yet to fully plot. Its deadline loomed over her like a dark cloud.

When Kyle told her he'd accepted the job of a lifetime overseas, he also said she couldn't go with him and not to wait for him. She was about to suggest they simply postpone their wedding if that

was what he needed when he asked for his ring back. That request relieved her of any notions of romance right then and there.

Thankfully, her editor agreed to extend her deadline to July. Since then, Maya had only tinkered with the general outline. She hadn't managed to come up with any ideas to flesh it out. At least not any good ideas.

Then when Aunt CeCe passed away a week ago, she'd been dragged into a new undertow of shock, grief, and confusion. Her patient editor agreed to extend the deadline again—until mid-September. That still didn't seem like enough time, but she had to make it work. After all, writing was a career she loved. At least she had loved it before her own love life was destroyed.

She'd decide what to donate, toss, or move to the attic, then bring in a bookcase from the garage and organize what was left. Surely that and a new start in Coral Cove would help.

Maya turned toward the family room. The truth was, she had her first case of writer's block, and she had no idea how to overcome it. Her novels had always come fairly easily. For one thing, Kyle had inspired a lot of the creativity she needed to fuel her sweet romances. But now where would she get inspiration?

She'd worry about finding it later. After burying her dear aunt today, she was too emotionally distraught to think about the office. She just wanted to lose herself in memories—joyful memories. And so many of them were made in her great-aunt's store.

As she walked through the family room, her eyes scanned the cluster of family photos on a large table behind the sofa. They featured CeCe, Maya's mother, the maternal grandparents she'd never known, and Maya herself. Then she moved past the wall of photos

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of her from kindergarten to braces to high school and college graduations. She was grinning in every one of them.

She sprinted down the stairs, then opened the back door, allowing the comforting scent of the ocean to calm her battered heart. Memories of playing on the beach with her aunt and mother filled her mind, making her smile.

The ocean breeze reminded her she much preferred the sticky summer humidity to the cold, unrelenting hum of central air. Since the store was closed until Monday morning, she could enjoy the quiet with the back door open and the air conditioning turned off.

Maya walked down the short hall, past the two storerooms, a breakroom with a kitchenette, and a small bathroom. Then she opened the door leading into the large, cheerful toy store where she'd played as a child. She slipped behind the counter and picked up the framed photo of Aunt CeCe, Mom, and her taken five years ago, two years before her mother succumbed to complications from kidney failure.

Maya ran her fingers over the glass, tracing her mother's beautiful face. Maya stood between the two women on the boardwalk, and as the waves rolled onto the shore behind them, their smiles were nearly as bright as the afternoon sun.

Maya desperately ached for her family, the only family she'd ever known.

"I miss you both," she whispered, her voice hoarse.

Maya set the photo back on the counter and then ambled up and down the aisles, running her fingers along the displays of baby dolls, doll clothes, board games, stuffed animals, trains, cars, and action figures.

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When she came to the aisle filled with Barbie dolls, she recalled the summers she and Aunt CeCe spent hours playing with Barbies and making up stories about them. That had inspired her love of writing.

Her eyes stung, and she sucked in a breath. She had to keep her mind busy to stop those pesky tears.

Maya snapped her fingers when she remembered the large box behind the counter. When she'd opened it yesterday, she'd found it full of Barbie clothes, shoes, purses, and other tiny items. Stocking the Barbie accessory display was exactly what she needed to keep her mind occupied on this quiet Saturday afternoon. Then before returning to the apartment, she'd look for anything else that needed to be done.

She pulled both a stool and the box from behind the counter and over to the display, then sat down and began hanging the accessory packs. She smiled as she took in one with a pink dress, matching pumps, and a purse. She hung another packet with a purple blouse, a coordinating skirt and headband, and fun shoes. She worked in silence for several minutes, then considered some musical company. Aunt CeCe had an old turntable on a wall shelf behind the counter so she could play some of her priceless vinyl records as she worked. Listening to some of her later Beatles music would certainly bring back memories.

But just as Maya reached into the box and lifted the last accessory packet, a strange noise sounded from nearby. She froze and listened, taking in a whining or squeaking that seemed to be coming closer.

She turned just as a calico kitten raced toward her and then

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jumped into her lap. Laughing as she dipped her chin, Maya said, “Why, hello there, little one.”

The kitten rubbed its nose on hers.

“Aww,” Maya cooed. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

The kitten meowed as it plopped down on her lap. Noting it was a girl, Maya touched her head and took in her pretty little face. Golden eyes sparkled in the light of the fluorescents above them, and her fur was an adorable combination of orange, brown, and white with some tabby stripes mixed in. Stripes also rimmed her eyes, reminding Maya of Cleopatra makeup. They made her gorgeous golden orbs even more prominent.

“Are you lost?” she asked the feline as she rubbed her head.

The kitten responded with a loud purr reminiscent of a small engine.

“Aren’t you the sweetest? I’m sorry, but I don’t sell kitty toys here. I think you meant to go to the pet store across the street.” Maya rubbed the cat’s chin, and the purring grew louder.

“Here, kitty, kitty!” a child’s voice suddenly called. “Hello? Is anyone here? I lost a kitten.” The voice sounded as if it were only an aisle or two away.

“I believe I found her,” Maya called. “We’re on aisle four—with the Barbie dolls.”

A little girl Maya guessed was about eight or nine years old—dressed in pink shorts, a pink shirt featuring a black cat and the words *Bea’s Cat Rescue*, pink socks, and a pair of pink Converse low-top sneakers—appeared at the end of the aisle. Her long, dark brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail adorned with a pink ribbon. Maya couldn’t decide who was cuter—the kitten or the kitten’s seeker.

The little girl pointed at the kitten. “She likes you.”

Maya opened her mouth to respond, but her words were cut off by a man’s hollering.

“Ashlyn!” He sounded frantic. “Ashlyn Beatrice Tanner! Where are you?”

“Over here, Dad! In the Barbie aisle.”

A tall man with short brown hair a shade darker than the girl’s came to the same end of the aisle. Maya guessed he was in his midthirties, and she couldn’t help but notice his striking pearl-blue eyes, perfectly proportioned nose, and strong jaw. His blue shirt, sporting a black-and-white cat and the same *Bea’s Cat Rescue*, fit him well over his wide chest, and his khaki shorts boasted muscular legs and a trim waist.

“Pardon the intrusion,” he told Maya before he looked at the girl. “You nearly scared the life out of me when you ran across the street. Didn’t you see those cars coming?”

The girl’s brow pinched. “I was trying to find the kitten.” Then she smiled and nodded toward Maya. “But look, Dad. I think she’s found her new owner.”

“What do you mean?” Maya asked.

The dad’s face lit up with a handsome smile, and a dimple appeared on his chin. “I see that. She seems to have adopted you, miss.”

“Me?” Maya shook her head. “Oh no, no, no. I’m not looking for a pet. I just moved in here, and I have so much to do. I can’t possibly add caring for a kitten to my list.”

The girl walked over to Maya and leaned down. When she rubbed the kitten’s chin, she purred louder in approval. “But cats

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are easy. You don't have to walk them like you do dogs. They pretty much take care of themselves. You just have to feed them, give them water, and scoop out their litter box. Right, Dad?"

"That's true." The man joined his daughter. He had to be at least six feet tall.

Considering their similar T-shirts, Maya recalled the tent and crowd outside the pet store, and the pieces came together for her. "Are you running a cat adoption day at the pet store?" she asked him.

"Yes, we are." He held out his hand. "I'm Brody Tanner, and this is my daughter, Ashlyn."

Maya shook his hand. "Maya Reynolds."

"My dad's a vet, and he runs the Coral Cove Veterinary Clinic and Bea's Cat Rescue." Ashlyn pointed to her shirt. "Bea was my nana, but she passed away four years ago. I was only four then."

Maya picked up the kitten, who continued to purr in her arms as if she belonged there, and stood. "It's nice to meet you both."

"Did you know Miss CeCe?" Ashlyn gestured around the aisle.

"She was my great-aunt."

Ashlyn's nose wrinkled. "What's a great-aunt?"

"She was my grandmother's sister. So if your nana had a sister, she would be your great-aunt."

"Oh." Ashlyn nodded.

"We heard Miss CeCe passed away. I'm sorry for your loss," Dr. Tanner said.

"Thank you."

Ashlyn turned toward the display of Barbie accessories and began sifting through them. "We come here all the time, don't we, Dad?"

“We do.” Dr. Tanner’s expression warmed as he watched his daughter.

Ashlyn spun to face Maya, her expression full of worry. “You’re going to keep the store open, aren’t you?”

“Yes. We’ll be open bright and early Monday morning. Miss Gayle and I will run it together.”

“That’s great,” Dr. Tanner said as he folded his arms over that wide chest.

Ashlyn pointed toward the ceiling. “So now you live in Miss CeCe’s apartment upstairs?”

“I do.”

“Where are you from?” Dr. Tanner asked.

“Charlotte.” The cat shifted in Maya’s arms, and she tried to readjust her without being sliced by her tiny claws. She held the cat out toward the little girl. “She’s obviously had enough of me. I think you should take her.”

Ashlyn took the cat with a frown. “But I really think she likes you. You should adopt her. She was found behind the supermarket with her mama and three brothers and sisters. The rest found homes, but she still needs one.”

“Like I said earlier, I really have too much going on right now. I’m trying to get a handle on running the store, and I have to get the apartment organized too.”

“She’ll help you. My kitties like to play with my pencil while I do my homework. Right, Dad?”

Dr. Tanner chuckled. “Yes. But you know it’s Miss Reynolds’s decision whether to adopt this cat. We never nag the people who come to the rescue shelter, and we won’t nag her either.”

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“I know, but this kitty loves her.”

Ashlyn’s voice held a hint of concern, and Maya found her resolve fading a bit. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had a pet. Is she already litter trained?”

“Yes,” Dr. Tanner said, chiming in.

Ashlyn nodded with emphasis. “All your customers will like her too.” She pointed toward the display window. “You could put up a big sign that says *Don’t let the cat out* so they won’t let her escape.”

Maya glanced at Dr. Tanner, and he grinned. He certainly was handsome, but she scolded herself for even thinking about that. He was a married man with a child! She ought to be ashamed.

“I bet you’ll even get more customers because of the cat,” Ashlyn continued. “Stores with cats are the best ones.”

Maya’s lips twisted as she considered the girl’s words. It would be nice to have a companion now, and Ashlyn was right. A cat was an easy pet. She took the kitten back, and when she rubbed her ear, a loud purr sounded once again. “Does she still need her shots and surgery?”

Ashlyn’s brown eyes twinkled. “No. My dad takes care of all the shots and the surgery before the cats are ready for adoption.”

“So I just need to pay the adoption fee and buy her supplies?”

“That’s right.”

“How much is the fee, Ashlyn?”

“It’s thirty dollars, and you can get cat supplies at the pet store. I’ll help you pick them out if you want.”

Maya hesitated. Was taking on a pet too much when she already felt so overwhelmed? She examined the kitten’s cute little face. “I don’t know . . . What would I even name her?”

Ashlyn turned to the Disney-inspired Barbies on the shelf behind her. Not even a second passed before she had an answer. “Tinker Bell!”

“Tinker Bell, huh?” Maya smiled as she lifted the kitten’s face to hers. “Does it suit you, little one?”

“Dad! There’s that Barbie camper I told you about!” Ashlyn scooted down the aisle and pointed to her find.

“I told you to save your allowance for that, Ashlyn.” Dr. Tanner shook his head as he took a step toward Maya, then lowered his voice. “Please don’t feel pressured to adopt the kitten. Ashlyn is passionate about animals, but I don’t want you to feel obligated to take on a pet if you’re not comfortable with it.”

Maya looked at Dr. Tanner’s daughter, who now stood on her tiptoes browsing the Barbie dolls and playsets. “She made some good points, though.”

“I always tell her she’ll make a great sales professional someday.”

Maya laughed as she met his gaze, and they shared a smile. But when she felt her cheeks warm, she cast her eyes down toward the kitten.

“Ooh, Dad! Look at this purple Barbie car. Isn’t it cool? The package says it’s ‘off-road.’ I think I saw it on a commercial at Tessie’s house.”

Dr. Tanner sighed. “Ash, we need to get back to the pet store to help with the adoptions.”

“Okay.” But Ashlyn still looked concerned.

Dr. Tanner reached for the wiggling kitten. “We should get going. It was nice meeting you, Miss Reynolds.”

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“Wait.” Maya took a step back. “I’ll adopt the cat, and I do think I’ll call her Tinker Bell.”

Ashlyn clapped her hands as she rushed down the aisle. “Yay! I just knew you’d take her.”

“You sure?” Dr. Tanner asked.

Maya nodded and then met Ashlyn’s eager gaze. “Let me get my purse and my aunt’s shopping cart, and then after I take care of the adoption and bring Tinker Bell back here, you *will* have to help me pick out supplies at the pet store. Deal?”

“Deal!”

## Chapter 2

Thank you for giving Oscar a good home, Mrs. Anderson.” Brody handed her a receipt. He’d heard she’d recently become a widow, and he suspected she was lonely. “I’m sure you two will get along just wonderfully.”

Mrs. Anderson looked into the pet carrier and beamed at the two-year-old tuxedo cat blinking at her. “I’m so excited. I haven’t had a cat for years, but when I drove by and saw your adoption event, I just knew I had to stop. We’re going to have so much fun, Oscar.” She looked at Brody again as she slipped the receipt into her purse. “Thank you, Dr. Tanner. I’ll be sure to bring him to your clinic whenever he needs care.”

“You’re welcome. And thank you for your confidence.” Brody waved goodbye as she lifted the carrier and walked away. Then he glanced around the tent, where volunteers from his cat rescue and a couple of the employees from his veterinary clinic milled around, talking to folks who’d stopped by to see what cats were ready for adoption. This was his second event in a year, and he was pleased to see so many potential adopters in attendance.

His heart lifted as he glanced at his volunteers’ Bea’s Cat Rescue shirts. He’d started the rescue in his mother’s memory, and he

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hoped she'd be proud. The charity meant so much to him, and he wanted it to be her family's legacy.

"So far we've adopted out four cats."

He turned as Kim Banks, his veterinary technician, sidled up to him. "Four? Already?"

"That's right." She pushed a lock of her long hair over her shoulder and smiled. "This event has already been more successful than the last. I'm sure the advertising campaign you ran in the paper and the local radio stations helped."

Kim lingered beside him. With her bright blue eyes, high cheekbones, trim figure, and long, golden hair, she was attractive. But even though he sometimes got the impression she wanted more, Brody wasn't interested in anything but a working relationship. He wasn't really interested in dating anyone after his horrendous breakup four years ago. It still haunted him. He'd been certain that Courtney was the love of his life, which was why he'd proposed.

But then she decided she didn't want an instant family. And ever since then, rather than worry about navigating a risky relationship, he'd focused on his daughter, his clinic, and the cat rescue.

"I saw Ashlyn go into the pet store with a dark-haired woman. Who is she?"

"She's the new owner of CeCe's Toy Chest, Maya Reynolds. That little calico that managed to wiggle out of Ashlyn's arms ran over to her store. When we found the kitten with her, Ashlyn convinced her to adopt it and then offered to help her pick out supplies."

Kim's smile widened, and she fluttered her long eyelashes. "Ashlyn is a great helper. She always offers to give me a hand around the clinic."

“I don’t know what I’d do without her.” Ashlyn was the light of his life.

A young couple, probably in their twenties, approached the table where Brody and Kim stood.

“Hi,” the woman said. “Do you have any white kittens? The one we have now is black.”

Kim slipped around the table. “We do. Follow me.”

Brody turned toward the entrance of the store just as Maya and Ashlyn emerged. They seemed engrossed in conversation as Maya pushed her shopping cart, packed full of supplies. When she reached the crosswalk, she said something to Ashlyn and then watched as his daughter made a beeline for him. Meeting his gaze, Maya waved.

He returned the smile and wave before she pushed the cart into the crosswalk. Maya Reynolds certainly was attractive with her long, dark hair, chestnut-colored eyes, and outgoing personality. Curiosity filled him as he considered their brief conversation. She hadn’t mentioned a man in her life—

“Dad!” Ashlyn called as she approached. “I helped Miss Maya pick out everything she needed for Tinker Bell.” She began counting the items on her fingers. “Toys, food, bowls, a litter box—”

Brody touched his daughter’s cute little nose. “I’m sure she appreciated that.”

“She did.” Ashlyn tilted her head. “Maybe I could visit her and Tinker Bell sometime.”

“We’ll see.” He turned his attention to a group that looked like a mom and a dad, a young son, and a slightly younger daughter about Ashlyn’s age. “Good afternoon. May we help you find a cat?”

“Yes,” the little girl said. “Do you have any orange ones?”

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Ashlyn beamed. “Yes! I’ll show you.”

Brody grinned as he watched his daughter lead the family to the two tabbies available for adoption. What would he do without her?



That evening Maya sat on the family room carpet and took what seemed like her hundredth photo of Tinker Bell. Then she opened her phone’s texting app, sent her favorite dozen photos to Kiana, and waited for her best friend to call. Just as she’d expected, her phone soon rang with Kiana’s name on the screen. “Hi, Key.”

“You got a kitten?” Kiana nearly screamed.

“I did.”

“She’s precious. Where did you find her?”

“Funny tale, no pun intended. She actually found me.” While Maya shared the story, she held up a stick with a bird hanging from a string. Tinker Bell ran and leaped, trying her best to capture the bird.

“So let me get this straight,” Kiana began. “This kitten ran into the store and jumped into your lap and then an adorable little girl and her super-hot veterinarian father appeared and became your new friends as you adopted the homeless kitten.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I think I made a mistake, though.” Maya smiled as she touched the kitten’s nose and then rubbed her little belly.

“Why?”

“Because I have so much to do around here—boxes to unpack,

items to donate, an office to set up, and a book to write. But I'm not getting any of it done because this little girl is too cute. I can't stop playing with her."

"That could be a good thing. You've been through so much lately. Maybe this little kitty is just what you need to find a muse again."

Tinker Bell smacked Maya's hand and then ran toward the kitchen before skidding, spinning, and scampering back to her.

Maya laughed. "Oh, Kiana, she's so cute! I wish you were here to see her. I'll probably be up all night playing with her."

"Enjoy her. You can always write tomorrow."

Maya frowned and turned toward the doorway that led to the disaster that would someday be a workable office. But perhaps Kiana was right. Maybe she did deserve a break.

Still, that deadline was looming. She just hoped this change of scenery and new life really would provide the inspiration she needed to get her career back on track.

"So did you get his phone number?" Kiana asked.

"Whose phone number?"

"The handsome vet, silly."

Maya snorted. "No, of course not. He has an eight-year-old daughter. That usually means a man's married."

"Not always," Kiana sang. "Did you see a ring on his finger?"

Maya considered that question as she waved the bird and Tinker Bell leaped and peeped, trying to catch it. "I honestly didn't notice, but when Ashlyn helped me pick out the supplies in the pet store, she mentioned her mom loves cats."

"So he probably is married. That's a shame."

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“I’m not interested. I’m still licking my wounds after losing Kyle. Right now I need to stay focused on running my aunt’s store and writing this novel before my publisher dumps me.”

“They aren’t going to dump you after five bestselling novels, My.”

“We’ll see.” She picked up the kitten and started toward the bedroom. “I’m going to try to get some sleep.”

Maya heard a yawn. “I didn’t realize it was after ten. My bed is calling me. Sleep well.”

“You too. Good night.”

“Night. Kiss Tinker Bell for me.”

“I will. Talk to you soon.” Maya disconnected the call and set the kitten on her bed. “Okay, Tink. Let’s see if we can get some sleep.”

Later, when Tinker Bell attacked her toes under the sheets, Maya shook her head and laughed. *I have a feeling this will be a long night.*



Monday morning Maya flipped the store’s front-door sign from Closed to Open and then turned to the kitten sitting on the pine wood floor behind her. “Now remember, Tink. You have to stay in the store, okay? No running outside.”

The cat blinked up at her.

“I made a sign asking the customers not to let you out.” She held up a large card featuring a photo of the kitten with the words *My name is Tinker Bell, and I live in the store. Please don’t let me out—no matter what I tell you. Thank you.* “Now, you need to promise me you’ll behave, or I’ll have to put you back upstairs.”

Before Maya could finish her sentence, Tinker Bell took off,

scuttling toward the back of the store where the baby doll strollers and high chairs, play kitchenette sets, bikes, skates, and skateboards were all on display.

With a sigh, Maya hung the two-sided sign where customers would see it in the window by the door, one side facing out and the other facing in. She taped up a few more of the notices around the store and then unlocked the register on the store's checkout counter.

The door leading to the back hallway opened, and Gayle entered holding a pink pastry box, a purse and tote bag slung over her slight shoulder. "Good morning," she called. "I brought fresh donuts for breakfast!"

"Hi, Miss Gayle." Maya came around the counter to meet her and breathed in the aroma of delicious treats. "They smell wonderful. Thank you."

Gayle frowned as she eyed Maya. "What have I told you about calling me Miss Gayle? You're almost thirty, Maya. It's time for you to—" She gasped when Tinker Bell scrambled over her black sneakers before bouncing toward the stuffed animal aisle. "What was that?" she nearly shrieked, her sky-blue eyes wide. "Did a chipmunk get into the store again?"

"That's my new kitten, Tinker Bell, and I've never heard the chipmunk story. You need to fill me in on that one." Maya walked to the stuffed animal aisle and found it empty. "Tinker Bell? Where are you?"

A teddy bear near the end of the aisle shifted, but the cat remained hidden. Perhaps bringing her into the store had been a bad idea.

"Please come here, Tink," Maya said, pleading. "You need to

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meet Miss—I mean, you need to meet Gayle.” She sighed and looked back toward the counter.

“When did you decide getting a cat would be a good idea?” Gayle set everything she’d carried in on the counter.

“Tinker Bell adopted me on Saturday.”

Gayle pushed a lock of hair back from her thin face and then opened the box. She chose a chocolate-iced donut. “Did you go over to the pet shop after the luncheon on Saturday? I heard another adoption event was coming.”

“No, I didn’t go over there. Tinker Bell came to me. I was working on a stool in here with the back door open. She ran in and decided to leap into my lap.”

“No kidding.” Gayle grinned before biting into the donut. She moaned and closed her eyes as she chewed, then swallowed. “You need to come get one of these. I’m sure you remember that Joe’s Donut Hut has the best in Coral Cove.”

Maya chose a vanilla-iced donut with sprinkles. “I do remember that. Aunt CeCe loved them.”

“So tell me about this new kitten I need to get used to. Who came up with the name Tinker Bell?”

Maya smiled. She’d always loved her aunt CeCe’s best friend. While her shoulder-length gray hair did nothing to hide that she was in her midseventies, it was still nice and thick, and her bright eyes, dry sense of humor, and nearly wrinkle-free skin made her seem decades younger.

They enjoyed their first donut and then a second while Maya once again shared how she came to adopt Tinker Bell—plus who named her.

“That Dr. Tanner is a looker, isn’t he?” Gayle quipped as she wiped her fingers with a paper napkin.

Maya nodded, then peered down the stuffed animal aisle. But her kitten was nowhere to be found. “He’s not hard to look at, and he seems like a good father too.” She peeked behind a row of teddy bears and then moved on to the stuffed cats and dogs. Tinker Bell sure knew how to hide.

After a few moments, Maya returned to the counter. “I have no idea where she is.”

“If that thing bites or scratches me, you can be sure I’ll file a workers’ comp claim,” Gayle snipped as she reached under the counter and pulled out a microfiber duster.

Maya shook her head. “She’s very sweet. I’m sure she won’t hurt you.”

“Famous last words.” Gayle began dusting the boxes of action figures.

Maya snickered as she put some cat treats in the food bowl behind the counter. The kitten came running, peeping and mewing, before sticking her little head into the bowl and practically inhaling one. Maya took the opportunity to pet her soft fur, and Tinker Bell purred.

“Did you get any writing done like you planned? Or did you play with your new kitten all weekend?”

Maya also appreciated how Gayle never minced words, which meant Maya never had to wonder what the woman was truly thinking or feeling. “I opened the document and stared at my cursor for a little bit yesterday afternoon, but no, I haven’t accomplished a thing since I got here.” She poured water from a bottle into the

water dish while Tinker Bell continued to noisily chomp on her treat.

“What’s your new book about?” Gayle asked from somewhere in the action figure aisle.

Maya straightened a stack of toy catalogs sitting beside the cash register. “It’s another romance novel.”

Gayle appeared at the end of the aisle, her expression incredulous. “Well, that doesn’t tell me much. What’s the story about? How does the couple meet? Do they like each other at first or hate each other? Do they live in a castle or on a ranch?”

“I haven’t figured that out yet.” Maya leaned forward on her elbows at the counter, resting her chin on one palm. “I had an idea back when I started plotting it in February, but then I lost my inspiration when, well, you know. I can’t write a romance when I don’t remember what it’s like to have romance in my life.”

Gayle’s pretty face clouded with a frown as she wagged the duster at Maya. “Don’t let that good-for-nothing poor excuse for a man ruin your ability to write amazing books and advance your career. He’s not worth it, sweetie. I’m sure he’s not across the ocean worrying about you.”

Maya nodded and sighed. Last night she’d almost emailed Kyle. She still had so many questions. Why couldn’t she have gone with him? They could have tried to work things out. But he said no. A flat-out no. And then he made it clear he didn’t want to marry her.

The only explanation was that he’d never loved her, at least not enough to marry her. In the following days, she’d realized he *had* seemed less interested in their wedding plans, but she’d chalked it up to his being a man, ready to just get on with it. And then when

he ended their relationship, he hadn't actually explained what his thought process had been, and she was too stunned to demand he tell her. He'd just insisted there was no one else, took the ring, and jetted off the next day!

Taking the job overseas was probably just an opportunity to get out of marrying her—although he had always cared a lot about advancing in his career, especially when a promotion included a big salary increase.

"It's just difficult, Gayle. When we lost Aunt CeCe, I was still reeling from the humiliating pain Kyle inflicted on me. It's all cut me to the bone, and now I've forgotten how to tell a story, let alone dream one up."

Setting the duster on a shelf stocked with boxes of candy, Gayle joined her at the counter. "I miss CeCe, too, but she would want you to keep writing. She was so proud of you. She encouraged all her customers to buy your books, and she always made sure Callie Lewis displayed your new releases in the front window over at Beach Reads. She wanted the whole world to know her niece was a successful author."

Maya sniffed, and her eyes stung. "Really?"

Gayle took Maya's hands in hers. "Yes, really. And she never liked that bozo Kyle. She told me he wasn't good enough for you, and she was right."

"She didn't like him?" Confused, Maya blinked. "She never said that. She was always positive and encouraging when I talked about him, and she sounded excited when I told her he'd proposed."

Gayle released Maya's hands and shook her head with emphasis. "She was fibbing, Maya. She didn't want to hurt your feelings."

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Besides, she was afraid if she admitted the truth to you, you'd cut her off and never tell her anything. But she told me she always prayed you'd find a nicer man, one who put you first, not his career."

Why had she never realized Kyle cared more about his career than he cared about her? Well, she did now.

"Maya, I dated plenty of frogs before I met my Rodney, and even though he drives me nuts when he fails to get out another roll of toilet paper or put his snack dishes in the dishwasher, I wouldn't trade him or our family for the world." She touched Maya's arm. "Don't give up. You'll find your prince. And maybe you'll even find a man who knows how to find toilet paper and actually use a dishwasher." Gayle threw up her arms. "Imagine that! What a concept!"

She picked up the duster and pointed it at Maya. "Don't give up on love because of Kyle." She made a sweeping flourish with the duster and then headed down the game and craft aisle. "Get back to writing and keep the faith. You'll find the right guy when you least expect it."

Maya shook her head as that familiar heartache hit her. Certain that she and Kyle would build a home and family together, she'd been blindsided when he dumped her. And now, no matter what Gayle said, she was afraid she'd never find a "prince" or any man who'd want to marry her. After all, she was almost thirty, and she'd always hoped to be married by now with the promise of motherhood on the horizon. But as her November birthday loomed, she was alone with no prospects.

She looked down at Tinker Bell and found her happily batting around a toy she'd pulled from the small basket Maya had brought

into the store. She took out a second duster and headed to the baby doll aisle.

“Are you going to participate in the Fourth of July parade this year?” Gayle’s question floated from a nearby aisle.

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Well, July 4 is only a month way. You know it’s a CeCe’s Toy Chest tradition to have a float.”

Memories of the Fourth spent with her aunt took over Maya’s mind—waving from the float, tossing candy to children, riding in the passenger seat of CeCe’s old 1955 Ford pickup truck painted purple. Those were some of her best memories. CeCe had been like her grandmother—or really, more like a second mother. For a moment, she couldn’t catch her breath because of the grief packed around her heart.

The bell above the door chimed, and a woman entered with two preteen boys in tow. Her hair was obviously dyed—Maya could see her black roots under the golden-blond.

“Welcome to CeCe’s Toy Chest,” Maya announced as she approached them.

The woman’s face darkened with a deep frown, and she suddenly looked vaguely familiar. Perhaps she’d been a frequent customer.

“Oh, Maya.” She clucked her tongue. “I was so sorry to hear about your sweet aunt. She was such a lovely lady. And she seemed so healthy! To just have a massive heart attack like that . . .”

Maya swallowed back a new wave of emotion. “Thank you.”

The two boys moved past her, mumbling, “Excuse me,” before disappearing into the action figure aisle. The woman, however, continued to look distraught, shaking her head as she studied Maya. “I

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know you two were close. I remember you helping her in the store from the time you could barely see over the counter. You were so cute following her around and helping her stock the shelves. You must be devastated.”

Maya’s lower lip trembled, and tears threatened. She opened her mouth to respond, but no words formed.

A hand on her shoulder caused her to jump. “Maya, dear,” Gayle began, her words measured, “a new box of sand toys needs to be unpacked. Our display is low. Why don’t you get it. I’ll handle things out here.”

Maya nodded. “Right.”

She headed down the back hall but then sprinted past the store-rooms before pushing open the heavy back door. Thick, humid air hit her like a wall, but she welcomed it. Glancing up at the cloudless sky, she crossed the gravel parking lot to the three-bay garage housing the old pickup truck, parade float, and furniture Maya wasn’t sure she would keep.

Realizing she might have to go back inside for the key, she turned the side door knob anyway and found it unlocked. She must have forgotten to secure it when she’d deposited a box in there yesterday afternoon.

After stepping inside, she flipped on the overhead lights and took in the purple pickup with *CeCe’s Toy Chest* stenciled in white on the doors. The long, flat parade float sat beside it, only a naked purple stage. The oversize flat wooden teddy bear, toy train, ball, and doll that had sat on it for years were stored in the rafters above her.

She climbed onto the float and then sat down on the end with her legs dangling over one side. Last year CeCe told her she wanted

a new theme for the float this year, and Maya tried to imagine creating one without her aunt, then running the store without her aunt and enjoying the boardwalk and beach without her aunt. It all seemed so wrong.

A few minutes later she pushed herself off the float and padded out of the garage. Once in the storeroom where they kept new deliveries, she searched until she found the sand toys. Then, squaring her shoulders, she lifted the box and made her way back into the store—her store. Again, she was strong, just like CeCe, and she would face this day with a smile and make her aunt and mother proud.



At closing time, Gayle flipped the sign in the front window from Open to Closed and locked the door. “What did you think of your first day as manager and owner?”

Maya set the contents of the register into a zippered bag for Gayle to take to the bank on her way home, an errand she insisted she didn’t mind. “It was good. I felt more confident as the day went on, and hearing people talk about my aunt was a little easier by the end of the day.”

Gayle swiftly gathered her belongings and the money bag. “Good. I went part-time so I could help my grandkids with their little ones, but if you need me to go back full-time temporarily, I can.”

“I’ll manage. See you Wednesday.”

“Okay. But remember, just because Tuesday is my day off, that

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doesn't mean you can't call me if you need me. I just might need to bring one of the kids with me."

Gayle started for the back door, then stopped when Tinker Bell scrambled over, slid to a stop, and blinked up at her. "I'll see you Wednesday, too, stinker." She craned her neck and looked back at Maya. "You might want to put a bell on this one. She startled an old lady looking at a water pistol, and I was afraid the woman was going to pass out."

Maya laughed. "That's a really great idea. I'll run over to the pet shop after I eat something. A few days ago I noticed they're open until eight."

When Gayle left out the back door, Maya picked up Tinker Bell, who wiggled in protest with the loudest mewing yet.

"I guess you like all the attention from customers down here, but it's time to go upstairs. I'll give you a snack in the bathroom so I can eat in peace without you getting into trouble, okay?" She shook her head. "Why am I negotiating with a kitten?"

Maya turned off the lights and climbed the steps to the apartment. After depositing Tinker Bell in the bathroom with treats and fresh water, she rummaged through the leftovers still in the refrigerator. When nothing appealed to her, she closed the door.

"That settles it," she muttered. "It's pizza night."