

# Second Chance at Sunshine Inn

AMY CLIPSTON



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*Second Chance at Sunshine Inn*

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



## CHAPTER 1

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

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

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

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

Her phone buzzed with a text message:

Mom: Are you close?

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The traffic picked up speed, rolling closer to twenty-five miles per hour now as the Welcome to Coral Cove sign came into view. They were making progress. Everything was going to be just fine!

Everleigh: Getting closer. A few more blocks.

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

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

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

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

But now Alana was gone.

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

Why couldn't she remember?

Their last conversation came into focus in her mind: a discussion about the nonprofit they wanted to start together. As a traveling neonatal intensive care unit nurse, Everleigh had met plenty of parents who struggled to make ends meet while their children stayed in the NICU. For a long time, she'd dreamed of starting a charity to help parents of critically ill children. Some of those children needed care for several months, and the parents needed

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assistance with not only the cost of care but also their household expenses.

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

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

And Everleigh had let her down.

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

She held her breath to choke back a sob.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seconds ticked by.

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

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

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

*Just in time!*

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

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

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

“You gettin’ out?” the driver barked.

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

Nothing happened.

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

Everleigh spotted the driver’s reflection in the side mirror. His head was bent as if studying his phone. She huffed out a frustrated

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noise and hit the tailgate button again. She'd taken many Ubers since she started working as a traveling nurse, but this was the first driver she'd encountered who hadn't bothered to open the trunk for her.

"Need some help?"

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

*Oh, hello, blue eyes!*

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

Relief slid through her. "Yes!"

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

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

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

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

"I got it."

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

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

“But how did you—” she started.

“It’s pouring,” he said, interrupting her. Now he *pointed* toward the office. “Go,” he repeated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Everleigh took in her own soaked attire and felt like a drowned rat, especially since she was certain her drenched red hair was molded

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to her head. *It's okay*, she told herself. *Everyone will understand that I traveled all day from Texas to be here.*

Mom turned at the sound of her name. "Yes?"

But the woman focused on Everleigh. "Are you Everleigh Hartnett?"

She nodded.

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

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

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

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

Mom shook her head. "Alana apparently didn't include them in her will."

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

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

He replied with a stoic nod.

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

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

But Everleigh didn't move. Instead, she traced her fingers over the handle of her suitcase and tried to make sense of the chaos.

Nothing had made sense since Mom told her nearly two weeks ago that Alana had passed. The news had knocked the wind out of her, but when Mr. Buford had called her last week and told her she was in the will, she'd been shocked. Never had she expected Alana to—

The man cleared his throat.

Everleigh realized the handsome stranger was now staring at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She recalled dancing in the kitchen of Alana's bed-and-breakfast, the Sunshine Inn, where Everleigh had worked part-time until she

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graduated from high school and went to college to study nursing. Alana had helped her with her college expenses, always sending her care packages full of snacks and supplies with an envelope of cash strategically placed at the bottom of each box.

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

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

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

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

*Oh no.*

Then the tears poured from her eyes.

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

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

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

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

Everleigh blinked and tried to comprehend what the lawyer had

said. She listened intently while he continued reciting the document, but her mind was buzzing with confusion. What did it all mean?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Or could they?

Had she found a long-lost cousin during the eighteen months since Everleigh had been home? And if so, why hadn’t Alana mentioned him when they’d spoken? Everleigh always told Alana

everything about her life—even secrets she hadn't shared with her mother. So, wouldn't Alana have done the same?

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

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

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

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

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

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

*My, my—that five o'clock shadow!*

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

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

"Absolutely."

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

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she turned her focus back to Everleigh. “Let’s go.” Mom pushed open the office door and headed toward the car.

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

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

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

## CHAPTER 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Could you be a bit more specific?"

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

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

"Almost two years."

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

"Her goddaughter."

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

"Yup."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The cat continued to sing his song and weave between his feet. Cade set the bowl down and stowed the can before sitting on the sofa and opening his laptop. As he found the inn’s webpage and studied it, his last conversation with Alana echoed in his mind. She’d been admitted to the hospital, and while he sat beside her, she’d managed to say, “Make me a promise, Cade.”

Cade took her hand in his. “Anything.”

“Promise me you’ll find your sunshine. Don’t keep your heart closed forever.”

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

“Promise me.” Her voice was a weak whisper.

“I promise.”

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

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

He glowered.

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

The cat continued licking between his toes.

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

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

♦ ♦ ♦

Everleigh breathed in the warm, salty air and scanned the neighborhood where she’d grown up. The sky was dark and showed no sign of

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

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

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

“Everleigh?”

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

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

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

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

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

“But we’re her family—her *only* family. That’s what she always told me.”

“I know.” Mom sniffed. “I imagine she didn’t want us to worry.”

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

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

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

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

“Why didn’t you tell me she hired someone?”

She shrugged. “I thought you knew.”

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

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

Everleigh nodded.

“She really admired him and said he did good work.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s right.”

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

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

“Rock collection?” Mom asked.

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

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

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

remembered—a worn but comfortable brown sofa and two matching recliners, along with a dark wooden coffee table and end tables.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She finally came to what was now the guest room at the end of the hallway. It seemed like only yesterday that she and her older sister, Harlowe, had shared this bedroom, until Harlowe also went

## SECOND CHANCE AT SUNSHINE INN

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

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

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

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

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