

THE ALMADA FAMILY BOOK 5

ELLA MORGAN

SANDPIPER
COVE ★
Romances

Christmas

at
Sandpiper
Inn



CHRISTMAS AT SANDPIPER
INN

THE ALMADA FAMILY BOOK 5

ELLA MORGAN



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CHAPTER 1

HEATHER

There was nothing like the holiday season in Sandpiper Cove. Everyone's mood instantly improved. Starting November 1st, you almost couldn't look at someone passing you by on Main Street without them smiling and saying Happy Holidays.

Heather knew there were other places in the United States that had great holiday celebrations, but she still thought nothing could beat the joy and traditions that occurred in her quaint little town. Although, she'd always wanted to see New York City decorated with the giant Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree. The town square on Main Street in Sandpiper Cove decorated the big Christmas tree every year, but she could at least admit that New York might do that one better.

Heather walked towards the bookstore with her gift list in hand. The leaves crunched under her knee-high brown boots, and a crisp wind whispered in her ear as it passed through her curly blonde hair. Her mother had always teased that if Heather had been a redhead, they would have had to name her Shirley Temple. Her perfectly tight curls were always a topic of conversation when she was little; the old ladies at church could hardly get enough of her.

All the Pearle siblings were complimented constantly for their good looks and perfect behavior. Heather's mom, Candace, always stressed the importance of putting your best foot forward for the world to see. All her mom's "life lessons" were instilled from being raised in the South. Her mom was the definition of a Southern belle and expected her children to act that way too.

Heather arrived at the bookstore and walked in, taking a deep breath to fully capture the comforting smell of fresh book pages and coffee. Sitting with a good book and drinking a cup of coffee, any time of the year, was Heather's favorite activity. She prioritized that above most daily activities.

One of Heather's dream goals was to start her own library one day, but right now, she'd stick to shaping the minds of her kindergarten class. She encouraged her students to read every chance she could get and loved to set up the reading corner in her classroom at the start of every year. She would put out books of all topics and genres for the students to look at, and she even designed a checkout system for the students who wanted to take them home.

She knew some of the kids weren't as fortunate to have many books at home, so she wanted to do everything she could to provide that opportunity for them to continue to grow in their imagination and skills.

Being a teacher had always been Heather's dream, and her students made her life feel so full. Their curious minds, their rich imaginations and their wonder about the world continued to bring a youthfulness out of her that she never wanted to lose. Their dreams of doing the impossible always made her want to dream big too.

Heather started to browse through the aisles at the store. She waved to the bookstore owner, who probably thought Heather was just there for her weekly book browsing session, which then reminded Heather why she was really there.

"Oh yeah, the list," she mumbled to herself.

Heather had a feeling this school year was going to be a busy one and wanted to get a head start on her Christmas gift shopping. Shopping at the beginning of November felt silly at first, but every year she fell victim to a last-minute shopping spree right before the presents needed to be wrapped and under the tree. She vowed this year would be different and she would get ahead of the game.

Her sisters also had a love for reading and books, not as much as she did, of course, but it was still present. She loved whenever someone put a book idea on their list; she wondered if they did that just for her. That meant it gave her an excuse to go to the bookstore.

She looked around trying to find the options her older sister, Cassidy, had asked for. Cassidy had more of a secret "twisty" side, as her mom tried to politely call it. Really, that meant Cassidy was more edgy and had a louder and sometimes more disagreeable personality than her mom would like. Cassidy always told it like it was and never shied away from pushing the boundaries if she felt they needed to be pushed. She was respectful, kind, and one of the more generous of the family members, but she wanted to do what was right in every situation, even if that meant ruffling some feathers.

Not surprisingly, Cassidy's favorite books were mysteries or science fiction dramas. Heather didn't really care for them personally; her favorites were history books or romance novels. She loved American history, but she also had a guilty pleasure of indulging in British history. She had to keep that one a secret; her dad was the biggest American Patriot around. Heather always poked fun at him because he acted like he was present for the

American Revolution by the way he talked.

She wasn't sure if it was because he was born and raised in Maine on the East Coast or where the passion came from, but it was one of her favorite quirks about her dad. They had always bonded over history, and she enjoyed going to museums and other trips together. She wondered if she had ever seen her dad more excited than on the opening night of the new Sandpiper Cove Historical Society Museum a couple of months ago. He could have lived in the American history section.

Heather found a few of Cassidy's options and moved on to one of her other sister's lists, Grace. Grace was basically Heather's mini-me. She was the youngest of the five daughters and wanted to grow up to be just like Heather. When Heather was younger, she would get so annoyed by her sister's constant shadow wherever Heather wanted to go, but her mom always told her it was a phase and eventually, Grace would break out of it. She never did.

But over time, the annoyance became an honor to Heather that clearly, her sister thought highly enough of her that the adoration wasn't going to stop. Heather found it humbling and used it as a personal goal to try her hardest to be worthy enough of her sister's admiration.

The two spent many Saturday mornings curled up with a blanket and coffee reading on the sofa in the four-season front porch at their house. It was Heather's favorite spot in the house. The sun peeked in right at the perfect time and caused everything to feel warm and cozy.

Heather picked out the books on her sisters' lists and headed to check out.

Patty smiled as Heather approached the desk. "How are you today, Miss Pearle?"

Heather loved that no matter how old you were, Patty always called you Mister or Miss.

"I'm doing well, Patty. How are you? Is business picking up around here yet for the holidays?"

"Not yet, but it's only November, honey. Are you buying your Christmas gifts this early?" Patty took the books from Heather and started to ring them up. She pushed her glasses up on her nose, the beads to hold them onto her head swishing at the motion.

Heather nodded at her question. "Yes, ma'am. With the school year activities, I always end up running out of time to get gifts every year, so I'm trying to be more planful."

“Well, good for you. I’m sure those adorable kiddos keep you busy all year. Most parents have to keep track of two kids during the day, but you have thirteen!” Patty finished ringing up the book and the amount popped up on the screen.

Heather inserted her credit card and smiled. “It is a lot to manage them, but they are the sweetest. It’s so fun to see their minds grow every year.”

Heather really loved her job. The kids made each day an adventure and she felt it was an honor to pour into their lives every day.

“Well, you’re the sweetest. They’re all lucky to have such an incredible woman as their teacher.” Patty smiled and handed Heather the bag of books. “When are you going to start having kids of your own?” Patty asked Heather with a twinkle in her eye.

Heather blushed. “Well, I would have to find a man first, wouldn’t I, Patty?” she joked.

Patty laughed. “Oh, there are plenty of young eligible men here in Sandpiper Cove, don’t you think?”

Heather shrugged. “None that have interested me. I feel like every guy that has expressed interest has been too old, or just not serious enough and more so wanted a fling. Honestly, the best offers I’ve received are from my kindergarteners.” She laughed. The little boys in her class loved picking flowers for Miss Pearle and asking if she would be their girlfriend. It was adorable.

“Oh, I’m sure someone is bound to come along soon. You’re a beautiful, smart, and kind young woman; you’re like a fairy-tale princess. Any man would be blessed to have you.”

“Ah, thank you, Patty. That’s very kind. I look forward to the day my Prince Charming comes to find me.” Heather smiled and gently took the bag from Patty. “I hope you have a great rest of your day.” She waved and headed out the door.

Everyone in Sandpiper Cove always asked about her dating status when they saw her; it was a regular conversation. She was always kind and answered with jokes and a smile, but inside she grew tired of never having an update. At twenty-five years old, she knew she had plenty of time to find a man in her life, but with most of her friends starting to get married, she felt the pressure.

Heather had tried dating men from town, and at one point, she even tried online dating, but quickly realized the awkward first blind dates, or finally

saying a reluctant “yes” to her coworkers trying to set her up, were no longer working. She knew eventually she would find someone, and hoped that when the right guy came along, God would make it obvious.

Heather couldn't help the smile that appeared on her face as she walked out into the beautiful weather. She felt accomplished having some of her presents already purchased. All of her gift ideas for others were planned, except for her dad. It was always hard to decide what to get him, and he always refused to make a gift list. She would most likely get him a history book.

As she walked to her car, the phone rang in her purse. She paused to dig it out of her pocket. Penny's name appeared on the screen.

“Hey, Penny, what's up?” she answered.

Penny Almada had been her best friend since second grade. They had spent almost every day in the summer together before they went into third grade, and then almost every day of that school year too. They joined all the same sports, fought to have the same teachers, and had way too many sleepovers. Heather had been devastated when the Almadas moved out of Sandpiper Cove when Penny's mom got a new long-term job in California. She was too young to understand at the time the traveling life of a professional dancer; all she knew was her best friend was being taken away.

The two were able to stay in touch as pen pals over the years, and it got easier when they each had a cell phone. It felt like the best news when Penny shared that her mom retired and wanted to open the Sandpiper Inn—her best friend was finally coming home.

Since then, the two saw each other frequently and Heather did a lot of her out-of-the-classroom work at the Bluebird Café where Penny worked. It made it easier to catch up and spend time together.

“Hey, I'm just finishing up at the café. What are you doing tonight? It's Friday, so I thought maybe we could buy some Thai food and watch a movie at my place?” Penny almost yelled into the phone. Heather could hear the espresso machine loudly running in the background of the phone call. No wonder Penny could never hear what Heather was saying. She was probably slowly losing her hearing with how loud the coffee house always was.

“That sounds great. I don't have anything planned. I just finished at the bookstore buying some presents for the family for Christmas.”

“Oh, trying to stay ahead of the game this year, huh?” Penny laughed. Penny knew Heather's undesirable last-minute shopping trait.

“You know it.” Heather got to her car and unlocked the doors. “I’m going to head home to grab a couple of things and then I can pick up the Thai food before I come over. Do you want your usual?” Heather plopped down into the driver’s seat and turned on the car.

Penny’s voice switched from her phone to Bluetooth, coming over the car speakers, which made Heather jump every time. She quickly turned down the volume.

“Yes, the usual will be great. Text me when you’re on your way—I’ll think about a movie.”

“Will do. See you later.” Heather hung up the phone. She started her quick drive back to the Pearle family home to hide her gifts and grab some things for a much-needed girls’ night. The school year was fun, but Heather always appreciated the weekends.

As Heather drove, she admired the trees’ vibrant coloring and how still everything looked. One of her favorite aspects about the fall season is it felt like a big deep breath, perfectly tucked between the busyness and excitement of summer and the chaos and gatherings of the holidays. At the beginning of November, everything was still peaceful. It was the perfect time to take a big, deep breath and anticipate the magic of what the holiday season had in store.

CHAPTER 2

RYAN

The windows of Ryan's office were open as far as they possibly could be. After weeks of not having the air conditioning working at the office, combined with a cheap boss who didn't want to buy a new one with only two weeks left of summer, the cool fall air had never felt so good as it rushed against Ryan's face.

The heat of summer was never Ryan's favorite. He was definitely more of a fall and winter guy, so the second the weather app on his phone said sixties, he almost cheered. Most of his family were warm-weather people, but he and his sister, Penny, preferred all activities around the cold. Skiing, snowboarding, and drinking a lot of warm coffee by the fire—perfection.

Although Ryan had a lot of built-in best friends with his brothers, he always gravitated more towards his sister as a playmate growing up. Penny had been a delightful surprise, as his mom called her when she became pregnant only six months after Ryan was born. With the two of them being so close in age, they typically were in the same activities and sometimes the same classes, depending on how small of a school they were in at the time. When the family had the opportunity to live close to any type of arts or magnet school, their parents always wanted them to attend. That meant the class structure was different. They loved it when that happened; there was something fun to them about having a sibling in the same class as you.

Even though Ryan and Penny were close growing up, they couldn't have become more different as they aged. Penny was chatty and very opinionated, while Ryan became a listener instead of a talker. But as many people told him, he still had a charismatic and magnetic charm about him that attracted people towards him. He could hold a conversation and had positive energy, as some would say, but he never wanted to get deep into a conversation about much.

His dad had always called him a deep intellect, which was absolutely true. He could read a room and spot hidden details that no one else even saw. It was no wonder that he became an attorney—and a successful one at that.

Ryan glanced at the bookshelf in his office and gazed at his graduation certifications and the many awards he received during his time at law school. He had graduated top in his class. He remembered college fondly and had the incredible ability to network with anyone. By the time he graduated, he could

have started working at any law firm in the country. It was no wonder his friends thought he was crazy for deciding to work at a small-town attorney office in Maine. But one of the perks Ryan knew about working in a small town would be he could make partner a lot quicker than any high-end New York job. And if he was honest, he didn't care for all the noise that New York City would bring, or the lying, betrayal or uncomfortable behavior that he had already started to witness that could go on at some of those companies. The small-town life sounded peaceful to him.

Even though he wasn't in Sandpiper Cove like the rest of his family, he was still only a twenty-minute drive from what felt like the real heart of the town—the Sandpiper Inn. Especially with being on the Sandpiper Cove Historical Society board, he found himself over there visiting a lot this year as they opened their new museum. He typically tried to make it out there once a month to have lunch with his mom and brothers, but the life of an attorney was not a slow one. He was busy, constantly.

Ryan rubbed his temples and pushed back his blond hair so it wouldn't fall over his eyes. This was the longest his hair had been in a while. He had become so busy over the summer he hardly had a moment to get a haircut. He knew he would need to get it cut before he saw his mom next week; she never liked long hair on the boys.

He leaned back in his chair and tried to stretch his arms. After a day of strictly typing, he was surprised how worn out he was. Ryan tried to plan for Fridays and Tuesdays to be his notes and documents days. But after a long week, it was hard to stay awake so close to the weekend.

A knock on the door brought his attention back to the room. His legal assistant, Brooke, stood in the doorway. Brooke joined the firm five years ago, and Ryan wouldn't know what to do without her. She was sharp, witty, intelligent, and she could hold her own against the intensity of the law field. Brooke was similar to Ryan in that she would be qualified to work in any law office she wanted. She knew the laws, she worked hard, and she was quick on her feet. But she was a horrible test taker. Brooke said she could never pass the Maine Bar Exam and would rather stay on the sidelines anyway in a supportive role. Plus, her husband ran a yacht club in town, so it worked well to stay by the ocean in Maine.

Additionally, Brooke and her husband, Teddy, were two of Ryan's closest friends, so he enjoyed seeing her at work all the time.

“What's up, Brooke?” He sighed. He knew when Brooke actually came

into his office it was never for a good reason, or else she'd just use the phone.

"How's the filing going for the Stanford case? Charles called and wanted an update. Do you think it will be ready for court next week?" She leaned against the doorframe with her arms crossed and her high ponytail swinging to the side.

Ryan gestured to his computer. "It should be. I'm on the last ten pages. If only I had some help with it?" He smirked back at her with a pleading look in his eyes.

Brooke rolled her eyes. "I told you I'd help weeks ago, but you had me on the Pilmer case. You lost your chance."

Ryan grinned, pretty sure that Brooke was trying not to laugh. It was fun having one of your best friends working with you. She always told him as it was, and although they worked hard, they got to goof around a lot too.

"Yeah, yeah. When does Tim get back? He should be the one doing this."

"Tim's on paternity leave until December. He's only been gone for two weeks, Ryan."

"It feels like an eternity." Tim was the paralegal at the firm who was the fastest at document writing. It was always a bummer when he was out of town. "It will be done, I promise. I won't finish today, but I'll clear my schedule on Monday and finish it then. Do I have anything important on Monday?"

Brooke shook her head. "Just a meeting that's not vital, so I can reschedule for a different time next week."

Ryan nodded. "Sounds good. Thanks, Brooke."

Right as Brooke turned to head out the door, she said, "Oh, and Tessa is on line one for you."

Ryan gave a surprised grunt. "What?"

Brooke laughed. "She keeps calling and I can't put her off any longer. You need to take the call and deal with this, Ryan. It's driving me crazy, and when one of your women starts to call me, that's where I draw the line." Brooke gave one final sassy smirk and walked out the door.

Ryan groaned and looked at the now blinking light on his desk phone. He had purposefully avoided Tessa's phone calls for the last two days. He didn't think she would actually start calling his office to get ahold of him.

Some girls just can't take no for an answer, he thought to himself before he took a deep breath and picked up the phone. Might as well bite the bullet.

"Hello?" he said, trying to sound casual.

“Ryan, it’s Tessa.” The voice on the other end held a tone familiar to Ryan: frustrated, angry, but also a little bit of desperation.

“Hey, Tessa. Sorry I’ve been missing your calls.” He could almost hear the eye roll from the other side of the line. And maybe a bit from Brooke on the other side of the wall. He knew she’d be listening in on his conversation.

“Missing my calls? More like avoiding them.” Her tone was sharp, but he could still hear the sadness in her voice. “I just wanted to talk after what happened on Tuesday, that’s all. I felt like I didn’t get to fully say my piece. You rushed out of the restaurant so quickly.”

Ryan quietly sighed. This was always how it went—every breakup. It’s either that they felt completely off guard, or they saw it coming. But there was always an argument after he broke it off. Then came the tears and *how dare you* speech. Then, eventually, they needed more closure, which led to the final call or text of the *I don’t understand* stage. It always ended with anger and then the finality of the breakup. Only a few times had the breakup gone well and become an amicable decision.

That conversation never went well, which was why Ryan actively avoided it. But some women were more determined than others.

Ryan knew the effect he had on women. He was good-looking, charming, smart and successful, but he had a hard time in the dating world.

“You absolutely get to say your piece. Go ahead.” One of the things he learned from Penny was that no matter if the woman said the same thing over and over again, let her speak. She needed to process. Ryan always took that into account in these conversations.

“I just—I just don’t understand. How can you say this wasn’t working out? I feel like I don’t have all the answers here.”

“There is nothing else from what I told you, Tessa. I respect you enough to not want to lead you on anymore when I know that this relationship isn’t going to go anywhere. It wasn’t you. You are smart, beautiful and funny, but I just don’t see it working between us. My job keeps me so busy and you want adventure. I don’t see much of that in my future.” Ryan found himself on autopilot.

“But we’ve had so much fun together, and it’s only been four weeks. You think you can make your mind up already in that time?” The desperation came out in Tessa’s voice, which only meant one thing; the tears were coming soon.

Ryan hated that part. He truly cared about the women he dated. He never

just dated to date, but he never understood how they could be so distraught and devastated only after a couple of weeks. They hardly knew each other. When they cried, he felt bad, but he also didn't get it. He wasn't sure what to say at that point.

"We're both at ages where every person we date we should be serious about if they are going to be our spouse. I don't want to waste your time if I don't see that being us. You deserve better than that. I really am sorry, Tessa. We truly did have a good time together and I wish you the best." He tried his best to convey his empathy but wasn't sure how it came across.

Tessa scoffed. "Well, if that's how it's going to be, then so be it. My sister was right about you. I should have never dated you. You can't commit to save your life." With that, she hung up.

Ryan sighed and put the phone down. That's usually how it ended.

Ryan knew that he had dated a lot of women across the neighboring towns. Although he was softer-spoken and not as boisterous as others, he enjoyed meeting people when he was out with his friends and at other community events. He tried not to be too arrogant, but he was well aware of how he physically attracted women. It was normal for them to come up to him and talk.

He really liked the women that he dated and enjoyed getting to know them, but whenever they wanted to become more serious or talk about the future, he bowed out.

Brooke's voice broke Ryan out of his thoughts. "*We're both at ages where every person we date we should be serious about if they are going to be our spouse.*" Her voice mocked him as she stood at the door again. "What was that nonsense? I've never heard you talk like that."

Ryan groaned. "I don't know, just something I felt like saying in the moment. It's true though. She wanted forever with someone, and I knew that wasn't going to be me."

Brooke shook her head. "Ryan, I love you like a brother, but when are you ever going to get serious about a girl?"

Ryan chuckled. "I don't know. When the right one comes along, I guess."

"You've had plenty of 'right ones'!" she challenged him. "I think it's a you thing."

"Maybe." He shrugged. He really wasn't sure.

"The longest girlfriend you've had was six months, and that's because one month of that she was out of state for work. But then she came back

home and you guys broke up like the next day. Why?” Brooke questioned.

“She came back and wanted to get serious and started talking about marriage. I was only twenty-six years old at the time; I wasn’t really ready for that. I had just started getting important clients here and my time was full. It had nothing to do with her.”

“At some point you’re going to have to put a woman over this job. Work isn’t everything you know. You won’t be able to use that as an excuse forever.” She raised her eyebrows with one final challenge and walked back out the door.

Ryan shook his head. He knew that Brooke knew the ins and outs of his relationships probably better than he did himself, but he wasn’t sure what to make of it. He just knew that he’d dated some incredible women, but none of them were the one. If he found the right one, he was sure he would know right away.

CHAPTER 3

HEATHER

Heather lay flat on the couch with her hand resting on her stomach, trying to digest the abnormal amount of Thai food she had just consumed. She always had good intentions for only eating half and saving some for later, but that never panned out.

“How do you still have room for more food, Penny? You’ve always been too thin to be able to eat like that.” Heather groaned.

Penny sat on the floor eating off her chest-level coffee table that sat in front of the two couches. She had already finished her main course and was currently working on consuming the egg rolls.

“It’s a superpower, I guess.” Penny bit off another chunk of egg roll.

The sound of the movie played in front of them, drawing Heather’s attention back to the scene. It was the final scene where the girl finally gets the guy. The couple was pouring their hearts out to each other, and the stereotypical rain had started falling heavily all around them.

While the two usually chose an action or comedy genre movie, they decided tonight to change it up and chose a Casey Sky featured film. It was too fun to watch Casey’s films and know that she was Penny’s sister-in-law. What a story. Heather couldn’t believe it when Penny finally told her the news. She had followed Casey Sky almost all of her life.

“Explain to me how these romantic comedy movies are still so popular? It’s the same thing over and over again. The two meet, they like each other, there’s a problem or big fight, but then they always find their way back together. But for some reason, it’s so addictive.” Penny snorted a laugh.

Heather sat up on the couch. “To be fair, they at least have different storylines to make them interesting. And I like to think that it’s because people can see their love journey within the story. It gives people hope that it could happen to them. Or helps them reminisce about when they fell in love with their person.” Heather swooned, laying back down on the couch in dramatic fashion.

Penny smirked at Heather. “You are such a hopeless romantic.”

Heather laughed. “Or I’m just not a pessimist when it comes to love.” She gave a sassy look back at Penny.

“I wouldn’t say that’s what I am. I just have a lot of questions about it. And my mom always said to love means to sacrifice, and I think I’m still a

little too selfish for that yet.”

“Yeah, that would mean you might have to share some of your egg rolls with someone, and we know you’re never willing to do that,” Heather teased.

“Absolutely not. That’s where I draw the line. See, I’m clearly not ready yet.” Penny shrugged and took another bite.

Heather smiled and shook her head, turning her attention back to the movie. She’d always loved romantic movies and stories. Getting lost in the characters and their story warmed her heart and made her smile. She had always had the biggest imagination growing up. She would play in the yard and pretend her prince was on his way on his white horse to sweep her off her feet. Heather would make her little sister, Grace, play the role of the prince; she was always willing.

As Heather got older, she started to wonder if fairy tales were really just that, a fairy tale. That maybe it was all just make-believe and a prince wasn’t actually coming for her like she had always dreamed he would be. Because, if she were being honest with herself, she had spent too much time with the frogs of the story.

“Serious question,” Penny asked as she straightened herself at the table. “You obviously love the idea of love so much and have spent your life in fantasy land about this incredible relationship and this amazing man, but do you think you’ve actually given *real* love a chance?”

Heather was surprised by the question, feeling like it came out of nowhere. She wondered how long Penny had been holding onto that. But she really shouldn’t have been surprised; Penny was always bold with her questions. Shock must have shown on her face because Penny quickly chimed in again.

“Sorry. I know that might sound rude. I wasn’t trying to, but you’ve had plenty of guys knock at your door and want to be with you. Why hasn’t one landed yet?” Her question was genuine, and Heather was curious about where it came from.

“Uh—I guess, I’m not sure. I wouldn’t say I’ve had plenty of guys interested—”

“Oh, you have,” Penny interrupted. “I think sometimes you just ignore it though.” She laughed, though not in a mean way.

Heather nodded; she couldn’t argue with that. Sometimes it was better to just pretend it wasn’t happening.

“I just haven’t found the right one. And I don’t know if it’s me putting

too many expectations on someone or if it's fear... Trust me, I've thought a lot about it. But I also really don't feel like I've met the one, and it seems like when you know, you know. Right? That's how it's happened for most people I've known."

"I feel like it's the opposite with my family. It's more, when you're annoyed with someone, then you're probably going to end up marrying them."

Heather laughed. "That is true."

"I want you to be happy, Heather, and I know you're ready. I don't want you to miss out on someone incredible because of something you've built up so much in your head." Penny's voice sounded more sincere. She really was a great friend who did care, but at the same time, she could tell it to you straight. Heather had always appreciated that about her.

After a couple of minutes of silence, Heather asked, "Do you think that's what I've done? Made up a relationship and this guy in my mind and now it feels too much out of reach?"

Penny paused for a moment to think. "I wouldn't say it that certainly, but maybe a little bit. I've seen relationships and know it's not all butterflies and rainbows, or perfect relationships like your parents have. I want you to be prepared for that and not run away the second things get hard."

Heather chuckled. "My parents do not have a perfect relationship, I'll tell you that."

"Yes, they do! Your dad lives to make your mom happy, and I've never seen them fight, or even bicker."

Heather rolled her eyes. "That's because my dad doesn't want to make my mom unhappy or else she'll complain about it until she dies."

They both laughed. "But yes, I get what you mean. They do love each other very much. I'm grateful for that. I would say they've set a good example, but maybe instead it has set false expectations." Heather smiled.

"Who knows, but I just worry you actually think a man is going to ride up on a white horse and be a real-life Prince Charming."

Heather laughed. "Well, I'm not ready to count that out yet." She winked.

Penny's phone rang and she turned it over on the table to look at it. "Oh hey, it's my mom." She pushed the answer button and then clicked to put the call on speaker.

"Hey, Mom, you're on speaker with me and Heather."

"Ah, and what are we having tonight, girls? Thai or noodles?" Even

though Natasha wasn't physically in the room, her voice and energy filled the space in just one sentence. She had a presence about her wherever she went that captivated everyone in the room.

Natasha had always been like a second mom to Heather, one who cared a little less how dirty Heather got playing in the yard or would talk about all the things Heather's mom claimed were too inappropriate for young girls to talk about. Heather loved when she was around.

"Thai tonight, and way too much of it," Heather shouted from the couch.

Natasha laughed. "I believe it. Well, Heather, I'm actually glad that you're there too. I was calling about the museum because we finally got the shipment in today."

Heather's ears perked up and she willed herself to sit up on the couch. "Oh! That's early!" she said, her voice squeaking.

"Yes, I was excited too. Do you want to stop by and take a look? I know you were hoping to get something for your dad."

"Yes, that would be great. I could stop by tomorrow morning if that works?"

"Okay. I'll meet you there around nine," Natasha said.

"Perfect. Thank you, Natasha."

"Have a good night, ladies, but don't have too much fun," her voice teased over the phone. She likely knew they would finish their movie, and then Heather would leave and call it an early night.

"Remind me what this museum thing is about again?" Penny asked.

"My dad has been looking for this specific trinket from World War I that he saw online. I was talking to Natasha about it, and she thought there was a way we could order it through the museum—since it wasn't something you could just buy individually online—without paying an arm and a leg for it. Well, it sounds like she found it!"

"You are such a thoughtful gift giver. How can we all compare to you?" Penny shook her head.

Heather laughed. "You can give your presents on time, and that alone will one-up me."

Now it was Penny's turn to laugh. "You're not wrong there." And she took another bite of egg roll.

The drive to the museum felt almost like a habit with how often Heather and her dad had been going. It was his new favorite place in Sandpiper Cove and he could almost live there.

The drive would feel long as they wrapped around the windy roads, but the trees and the fall colors made it worth it.

“Okay, so first we’ll go to the museum and then coffee, right?” her sister Cassidy asked from the passenger seat. She had her feet resting on the dashboard and the seat leaning almost all the way back. She looked as if Heather had pulled her out of bed at six that morning for a long cross-country road trip.

“Yes, museum and then coffee,” Heather confirmed.

“Why couldn’t coffee be first? And why am I coming along again?” Cassidy complained with a groan.

“Because, the coffee house is past the museum and I don’t want to backtrack. If you wanted to do coffee first, you should have gotten up earlier.” Heather shrugged. Her sister always wanted to sleep in. Heather and the rest of the girls were early birds. But Cassidy had always been more like her dad, and that man could sleep until noon if you let him.

“And I wanted you to come to see if this is actually something Dad would want or if I’m over my head a bit,” Heather reminded her. She was really excited about this gift but didn’t want it to be more about her than what her dad actually wanted.

“Okay, I guess.” Cassidy sighed. “Thank goodness we’re here.”

The two pulled into the museum parking lot and Heather was slightly surprised at how busy it was already.

They got out of the car and went inside the building. Heather loved how it felt to first walk into a museum. She scanned the group in search of Natasha and it didn’t take long to find her. As usual Natasha looked upbeat and stunning, sporting a long fall dress with a cardigan. She was laughing about something the person she was talking with said.

She grabbed Cassidy’s arm and walked her over to Natasha. Natasha spotted them and politely left the conversation with whomever she was talking with.

“Good morning, ladies. Cassidy, I’m surprised to see you out and about this early.”

“You and me both,” Cassidy grumbled.

“I love how busy the place still is, Natasha. You guys are doing such a

great job,” Heather gushed. Anything Natasha had her hands on would be successful.

“Oh, thank you, but I haven’t done it on my own. It’s been a whole team effort. Now, let me show you what I have. I’ll run into the back and get it.” Natasha squeezed Heather’s arm quickly and then headed towards the back room.

Cassidy and Heather stood there in front of a painting and quietly looked around.

“Ugh,” she heard Cassidy scoff under her breath.

“What is it?” Heather asked.

“Nothing, just someone I wish I didn’t have to look at.” Cassidy scrunched up her face, her lip curling.

Heather looked around, confused. “Who?”

“Stop looking around like that. My goodness, you’re so obvious,” Cassidy quickly whispered.

Heather tried to be more subtle as she looked around the room. She didn’t see anyone specifically that stood out as someone Cassidy wouldn’t like.

“I’m so confused,” she whispered.

“It’s Ryan Almada,” Cassidy whispered back with a subtle eye roll.

Heather looked behind her again and saw Ryan Almada talking with someone at the front desk. “Ryan? What’s wrong with him?” Heather asked. She didn’t know Ryan all too much, just from family events that Penny had invited her to. She knew he and Penny were close, but she didn’t spend too much time around him. He was busy these days, anyway, being a successful attorney. Penny talked about that a lot.

“Why don’t you like him?” Heather asked again, not willing to let this go.

“He’s a tool.” Cassidy shook her head.

“Ryan? Are we talking about the same Ryan? He’s an Almada. I thought it was impossible for there to be a bad one.” Heather was teasing but also serious. Everyone knew the Almadas were quality people. They were responsible, helpful, kind and respectful. She knew she was biased, but she had never heard a bad thing said about the family.

“Yes, that Ryan. I know from being a witness to the results of his shenanigans that he isn’t all that he’s cracked up to be.” Her voice was serious and Heather desperately wanted to ask more, but Natasha was walking towards them. She secured the note in her mind to ask more about this later.

“Okay, dear, here it is. What do you think?” Natasha showed Heather the artifact, and Heather nodded and smiled. Cassidy surprisingly started to ask Natasha some questions about it, probably just trying to keep the conversation away from Ryan. But Heather’s mind was somewhere else now.

She found herself distracted and continued to peek over in Ryan’s direction. He had always been attractive to her. She liked that he had blond hair, whereas most of the Almada boys had darker hair. And he was always put together so nicely; she couldn’t remember a time when she had ever seen him in sweatpants. Maybe when they were younger, but she couldn’t remember his attire back then.

Ryan brushed his hair off his eyes and looked in her direction. The two made eye contact and Heather quickly turned her head away back to Natasha and Cassidy. Trying to not be obvious that she had just been busted for staring.

“I think it works. Heather, are you happy with it?” Cassidy asked.

Heather nodded quickly and smiled. “Yes, I am. Thank you again for all your help with finding it, Natasha. I think Dad is going to love it.” She was now trying to get out of there as quickly as possible.

“Oh, I’m glad. It was no problem at all. Here, let me get some help wrapping it up for you to make sure it stays extra safe in transport.” Natasha looked around the room. “Ryan!” she called out.

Heather’s heart sank. As she heard footsteps come up behind her, embarrassment took over. Hopefully he didn’t ask about her staring at him. At least she could come up with the excuse that they were looking to see if he could help them.

“Hey, Mom. What’s up?” he asked as he joined the circle.

Heather could feel her sister tense up next to her. She glanced in her direction to see what she was doing. Cassidy continued to make eye contact with Natasha and wouldn’t even acknowledge Ryan. Heather was so perplexed.

“I’m wondering if you could package this up for the Pearle girls here. They are buying it for their dad for Christmas this year, isn’t that thoughtful?” Natasha gently handed Ryan the artifact.

“That’s a great Christmas gift idea. I’ll have to keep that in mind when I’m looking for yours.” Ryan smiled at his mom. He looked over in Heather’s direction and politely smiled at her.

She tried to control the adrenaline that pulsed through her body at his

glance. She couldn't tell what the feeling was. Embarrassment, confusion, or anxiety over what her sister could possibly know about him that she didn't. The thought also came to her mind that it could be from how good his cologne smelled; it made his blue eyes appear a little more dreamy.

"I still can't believe you let your hair grow out that long," Natasha said in a warm, motherly tone as she swiped Ryan's long hair off his eyebrows.

Ryan tried to dodge her fingers. "Well, I had planned to get it cut before I saw you next, but you needed help last-minute today. Time just got the best of me this fall. Would you have preferred that I not come and disgust you with my long hair?" he exaggerated, the edges of his mouth quirking upward.

"I'm still thinking about it," Natasha replied.

Ryan shook his head at her with a smile. "I'll go in the back where I'm out of your sight and get this packed for you," he teased and headed towards the back.

Heather tried not to peek as he walked towards the back room. She was surprised with her reaction today and wasn't sure where it came from. But she knew for a fact she was going to find out what her sister knew—and was hiding—about Ryan Almada.

CHAPTER 4

RYAN

One would assume that the coffee in the breakroom at an attorney's office would be smooth, rich and delicious. The caffeinated liquid was basically their source of survival during late-night case preparations, but that was not the case for Ryan's firm. Ryan's boss had extremely frugal tendencies that trickled into many different areas of the office, and unfortunately, the coffee supply was one of them.

Because Ryan had to live his life fueled by caffeine, he often found himself working at a table at the Bluebird Café in Sandpiper Cove. On the days he didn't have any meetings or phone calls, he always tried to work somewhere away from the office. Ironically, it was less distracting than being in his office since people weren't coming in all the time to talk about cases or how overwhelming their workload was. Even Brooke would come in and talk about the latest celebrity gossip, which he never cared about.

Another perk at the coffee shop was the calm atmosphere and the discounted coffee from his sister. He looked around the room again for Penny but was surprised she wasn't anywhere to be seen; he thought that she always worked on Thursday mornings. It felt slightly weird to have to pay for a coffee at full price.

Ryan tried to get back into the groove of work but couldn't decide from his long list of to-do items what should be next. The Stanford Case had its first day in court tomorrow, and Ryan knew he needed to be ready for it.

Charles Stanford was a man on a mission, and as a long-term client of Ryan's firm, he wanted to impress him and "make him happy no matter what," as his boss said. Although, at the time, it sounded more like a threat.

Even within the multiple small-town communities off the coast of Maine, there were still high-end real-estate tycoons that all attorney firms wanted for clients. And Charles Stanford was one of them. He had the means to get almost anything he wanted, and he was one of the top investors and developers in the area. He had landed at Itzner & Cooper, to the whole firm's initial surprise, but apparently, Ryan's boss, Herald, had a connection. And he made sure to let everyone know it.

Ryan almost didn't want to take the case when Herald presented it to him, knowing what it could cost him if he lost. But he understood that as one of the best attorneys in the area, he was the obvious choice.

Tomorrow, they had the initial court case to pressure the defendant to settle the lawsuit, but Ryan already knew the outcome; he wouldn't. Even during the depositions, the old man who sat in front of him didn't show an ounce of budging on his terms.

Ryan looked down at his watch to see he was getting a phone call—Charles Standford. It was almost as if Charles could tell Ryan wanted to be doing anything but work on or talk about the case. But he also shouldn't be surprised. Charles called almost every other day to get a status update as if somehow the case was just going to randomly resolve itself; and that Ryan would keep that information to himself.

He reached for his phone and put on his professional attorney voice. "Hi, Charles. How are you doing today?"

"I'm hoping to learn that from you. How are we feeling about court tomorrow?" Charles always spoke with such authority, certainty, and a little bit of sarcasm. Ryan usually had a hard time figuring out what he was thinking, but thankfully, Charles was also the most direct person Ryan had ever met, besides Penny and his mom. But he knew he shouldn't be surprised. Someone doesn't become a multimillionaire by being coy and passive.

"I haven't heard of any changes. We're still on track for tomorrow's hearing. I have everything set. Do you have any questions about what to expect?" Ryan asked, using his most professional and confident voice.

"Yeah, how do we get this guy to settle? It's unreal to me that small-town Francis Glendall thinks he could pull this on me. After everything I tried to work out with him to get that property and keep some of its historic charm, as he called it," Charles scoffed. "To sign the contracts and then back out at the last minute because *he has a feeling*, it's absurd. I want the Lakeville Farm land, and I'm going to get it."

Ryan had to stop himself from rolling his eyes at Charles. Every time he talked, it was as if he was monologuing some deep pain or trying to inspire a whole army to victory. It never felt like the two could just have a short conversation.

"I understand, sir, and we definitely have the upper hand here; like you said, he signed all the contracts already. And he can't plead that he was misled or it was fraud, as he's claiming. Just because you later find out you don't like something about a company doesn't mean anyone outright lied. It just means someone didn't do their homework beforehand."

Ryan heard Charles huff in agreement on the phone. “You’re a smart kid, Ryan. Now let’s get this over with in court tomorrow, huh?”

“I will do my best, sir, but I’m going to be honest; I’m not expecting it to be a monumental day. Mr. Glendall is pretty set in his decision. It most likely will go to trial,” Ryan said. Rule number one in law: never promise your client anything.

“We’ll see.” Charles hung up the phone and Ryan set his back down on the table. He rubbed his eyes and rolled his neck around, trying to loosen up the stress knots already starting to form on his shoulders and neck.

Ryan opened his eyes and looked around. He desperately wanted to tell Penny about his phone call and process the case tomorrow. She was his go-to work talk person. He loved to tell her the ridiculous things clients would say or ask. But his favorite part was her nicknames for all the clients.

He still didn’t see her anywhere, but someone else caught his attention.

A young woman with blonde curly hair that lay perfectly on her shoulders walked into the coffee house and up to the register. Ryan was initially taken aback by how attractive she was. There was a natural beauty that radiated from her; he couldn’t take his eyes away.

After she had placed her order, she turned so Ryan could see her more clearly. His heart dropped to his stomach when he realized who it was: Heather Pearle.

Embarrassment swept across Ryan’s face, and he quickly looked down at his computer before she could catch him staring. He couldn’t believe, for one, that he hadn’t recognized Heather right away, and two, that he was that attracted to his sister’s best friend. He had been around Heather for a long time, ever since she was in grade school with Penny—and he had just seen her this weekend at the museum. How did he not notice it was her?

Ryan’s cheeks burned red as he tried to continue to look down and pretend to keep working. But he couldn’t resist the pull to look at Heather again. He slowly glanced up and looked around the room as he pretended to look for something else. And then, his eyes landed on her again.

He hadn’t fooled himself the first time; she was beautiful. How had he never noticed it before? Maybe it was always seeing her as Penny’s friend. He had seen her go through the awkward braces stage, and then when they came back to Sandpiper Cove, their time together was limited. They were almost adults, and being at home with their families wasn’t as interesting.

He had never seen her out of that context until today, a beautiful woman

walking into a coffee shop. It took him off guard.

Heather grabbed her coffee from the counter and thanked the barista. She turned to walk out the door and her eyes locked directly onto his.

Ryan shot his head down but then felt embarrassed, and a little immature, and found the courage to look back up. She stood there still staring in his direction, with a soft smile on her face. But also a look of question in her eyes.

At this point, the two just sat there staring at each other from across the coffee shop, both clearly wondering what the next appropriate social interaction would be. Finally, Heather started to walk in his direction. He was only two tables away from where she was, but it felt like it took her an eternity to get to him. He could feel his heart start to beat faster in his chest. What would he say?

It felt unusual for Ryan to be this frazzled about a woman. He was normally so relaxed and suave in these situations.

“Hey, Ryan, how’s it going?” she asked casually as she finally stopped in front of the chair on the other side of the table.

“Hey, Heather, um, it’s pretty good. I’m just working, the usual,” he said with a smile. He tried to switch his mindset to professional mode; maybe that would make these weird nerves he was experiencing lessen.

“How’s business been? Is there ever a busy season in the world of law?”

Ryan chuckled. “Not really. It comes and goes, honestly. Sometimes I think the winter months are busier because people are just bored.” He playfully shrugged.

“Huh, interesting. But I guess it makes sense.” She took a sip of her coffee.

“How has teaching been this year? Wait, aren’t you supposed to be doing that right now?” He looked at his watch and realized it was nine o’clock in the morning.

“We have a teacher’s workshop day. Which basically means we have one meeting in the afternoon as a staff, but the rest of the day is playing catch up. Thankfully, I don’t have too much to catch up on, so I took a slow morning.”

“How responsible of you, I think.” He said jokingly.

The two awkwardly stared at each other for a moment, both trying to find something to say.

Ryan finally remembered about Penny and figured Heather would be the perfect person to ask where she was. “Have you seen Penny at all today? I

thought she normally worked on Thursday mornings. She isn't answering my text messages."

Heather nodded. "She went on a ski trip this weekend with some friends from high school. They left yesterday afternoon. It was somewhere up north, not sure specifically where."

"Ah, that makes sense now. I can't believe she didn't invite me," he teased. "Wait, why didn't you go? Aren't you a part of the high school friend group?"

Heather chuckled. "Yes, I am, but it's hard for me to take any time off during the week with school. I need to save my substitute days for when I'm sick or something really important. My students get really dysregulated when I'm gone, and then they're even worse when I get back, so it doesn't always seem worth it."

Ryan was surprised. "So you don't go on vacations because you don't like disappointing your students?" He raised his eyebrows.

"I guess you could say that, but I also just want to save up my time off for really useful things. Plus, I get a whole summer for vacations." She smiled.

"Well, that sounds very selfless of you. Your students must be lucky."

Ryan could see Heather's cheeks slowly infuse with a soft pink blush. "Thank you, that's very kind."

Ryan quickly remembered this was Heather, Penny's best friend, and figured he needed to lay off the charm. But he couldn't help himself; she was very easy to talk to.

"I better get going and capitalize on a workday without kids. It was nice to see you, Ryan. Enjoy the rest of your day." She waved and walked towards the door, the soft curls of her hair bouncing with every step.

"It was nice to see you too, Heather." Ryan smiled as Heather walked away and out of the coffee house door. He tried not to glance at her as she walked past the windows close to his table, but he again failed.

Ryan tried to get back into work mode now that the mystery of where Penny was had been solved. He opened up a case file and read the opening statements for tomorrow, but he found his mind too distracted. He couldn't figure out what it was. He wanted to be doing anything but sitting there working.

After an hour of trying to get back into the mindset of work, he was about ready to throw in the towel and go into the office to see if that would be better. His phone rang again, but this time it was an unknown caller.

Although he never liked to answer those numbers, it could always be a client whose number he didn't have saved, so he typically answered.

"Hello?" he said in his confident attorney voice.

"Hello, is this Mr. Ryan Almada?" a voice he didn't recognize asked on the other line. There was a lot of commotion and noise in the background. Ryan tried to make out what it was.

"Yes, this is he," he said.

"Hi, Ryan, this is Kevin, the manager at Treetops Ski Lodge. I'm calling to inform you that, unfortunately, your sister, Penny, was in a ski accident this morning at our resort and is being sent to the hospital."

Ryan's heart sunk into his stomach. "A ski accident? What kind of accident? Is she okay?"

"There was an accident with the chair lift, and she ended up injuring her legs in the process. She was conscious and asked that I call you to inform you of what happened. I'm not sure of the extent of her injuries, but she was taken by ambulance to the local hospital here. I'd be happy to give you that information."

"Yes, please do," Ryan said as he grabbed his notebook and pen to write down the information.

The manager continued to provide the details of the hospital and then ended the call. Ryan quickly looked up where it was located—only two hours away, not that bad. He closed his computer and quickly packed up the rest of his items.

As he raced out the door to his car, he audio messaged Brooke to let her know he had a family emergency and would be out the rest of the day, and then he called his mom. No answer. He left a voicemail explaining everything he knew and told her to call him as soon as possible.

He got into his car and plugged the hospital's address into the GPS. Two hours and ten minutes. Not horrible, but still two hours of not knowing what happened and what shape Penny would be in when he got there.

CHAPTER 5

HEATHER

Heather raced through the hospital, almost tripping over her feet a couple of times, as she frantically tried to find the front info desk. Of course, no one was at the desk. She bent over the countertop, looking into the rooms and windows behind to see if anyone was there.

“Hello?” she called out. She tried to sound kind, but she heard the hint of irritation in her voice.

A nurse peeked her head around a doorframe and came out to the front.

“Hi, can I help you?” she asked.

“I’m here to see Penny Almada. She’s in room 204. I was told I had to check in first to get a visitor badge.” She tried not to be too pushy, but she was in a hurry.

The nurse sat down and pulled her glasses over her eyes to look at the computer screen. She slowly started to click and scroll; Heather had to bite her tongue.

“I don’t see a Penny Almada here. Do you think she went by a different name?”

Confusion crossed Heather’s mind and then she remembered. “Sorry, it’s probably under Penelope. That’s her legal name.” Heather had never called Penny by her real name. It always threw her off when she heard someone call her Penelope. The teachers in school even knew not to call her that.

“Ah yes, I see her here in room 204. It looks like she was admitted yesterday morning, correct?” The nurse looked at Heather.

Heather gave her an annoyed and confused look. Wasn’t it the hospital’s job to know that? She was just here to visit.

“Yes.” She gave a short answer. Anything to get this over with and provide her with the chance to go and see her best friend.

“Down the hall to the left.” The nurse nodded in the direction of Penny’s room and handed her a visitor’s badge.

Heather headed down the hallway without a goodbye. She was anxious to see Penny.

Yesterday evening, she had started to get worried after not hearing from Penny all day. Normally, she received a ton of text messages and pictures while Penny was on her adventures, outlining the crazy stories that happened or the ridiculous stunts the boys would do. But at eight o’clock in the

evening, after not hearing anything all day, she started to wonder what was going on.

At first, she thought it was Ryan's concern from earlier that day that got in her head. But she shook that off. He just didn't realize Penny was on a trip, and it had nothing to do with her current physical condition. Heather had also tried to shake off the memory because of the way she felt after leaving the coffee shop.

It had felt strange being alone with Ryan. She wasn't sure if that had ever happened before. Penny or someone else had always been with her when he was around. But when she saw him sitting there by himself, staring right at her, it felt different. She felt somewhat shy and intimidated.

She wasn't sure if it was because of what her sister had told her the weekend before; there was clearly a mystery about him that Cassidy didn't like but wasn't willing to share. Heather felt skeptical, questioning. But she didn't want to seem rude. He was clearly staring right at her, and it would have been awkward to just walk away. Heather thought he might tell Penny about it, and then Penny would call her out on it. She felt like she had to say hi to be kind. At least, that's what she told herself.

It wasn't until that morning, when Heather woke up and still hadn't heard anything, that she felt panicky. She texted their friends, who she knew would be on the ski trip with Penny, to ask if everything was okay. She didn't want to seem overly paranoid or like she needed Penny to text her; they could just be having a fun time, but she felt something was off.

One of the friends quickly responded and told her that Penny had been in an accident and seriously injured herself. The group wasn't quite sure what officially happened or how she was doing. One of their friends had traveled with Penny to the hospital, but after her family arrived, they left to go back to the resort. No updates had been given to them since.

Heather asked for the hospital information and made the decision to go herself to see how Penny was doing. It was only a couple of hours away. Plus, it was another teacher's workshop day, so it wasn't too big of a deal if she missed.

She grabbed her keys and headed out the door, not sure of what she was going to do or how to help, but she needed to see her best friend.

Heather continued down the hall, watching the numbers on the doors decrease. She finally got to room 204. The door was shut, but she could see a light on through the blinds in the window. She knocked softly and then

opened the door. She peeked her head inside and heard someone say, “Come in.”

She walked in, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear that had fallen out of her high ponytail. She moved past the curtain that blocked off the hospital bed and sitting area. She stopped when she saw Penny—asleep on the bed with bruises on her face and a cast on her arm. The bed sheet covered her body, so Heather wasn’t able to see the rest of her.

Next to the bed in a chair was Natasha, and over at the table with a computer in front of him, was Ryan.

“Heather? What are you doing here?” Ryan asked.

Heather tried not to cringe at the tone of his voice. She wasn’t sure if he meant to sound sharp, but it came off that way. She instantly became insecure about her presence there and if she should have just called instead of stopping by unannounced.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude. I just heard what happened and that she was here. I had to come and see if everything was okay. My imagination was running wild.” She tried to sound apologetic for the intrusion.

“Of course, it’s okay that you’re here, Heather. You’re Penny’s best friend. I don’t know why I didn’t think to call you,” Natasha said as she stood up and gave Heather a hug. “You are more than welcome to stay.”

Natasha ushered Heather into the room and towards another chair that was close to the bed. Heather sat down, trying to avoid eye contact with Ryan. For some reason being in the room with him felt awkward.

“So what happened?” Heather asked Natasha.

“Sounds like the ski chair lift malfunctioned right when Penny was about to jump from it. As she slid off of it, it sped up and whipped around the corner quickly, causing her to do a combination of fall and fly off,” Natasha explained. She stood on the other side of the bed from Heather and lightly stroked her daughter’s messy hair.

Natasha had always had a more sensitive heart for her only daughter. Penny had been everything that Natasha had wanted in a girl. She was smart, beautiful, kind, and sassy, just like her mom. Penny had always wanted to do all the girly things with Natasha that the boys didn’t want to do. They’d go on shopping sprees, host spa nights for Penny and her friends, and decorate for every holiday. The two were inseparable in so many ways.

Penny was very protected in her family; she had so many brothers to look out for her. Heather had always been a little envious of it. Growing up with

all sisters seemed boring whenever she was over at the Almada's house. There was roughhousing, sports, and their parents didn't care if they played muddy football in the yard.

One time, Heather came home after spending a rainy day at the Almada's house and was covered head to toe in dirt. She had participated in a spontaneous game of tackle football with the boys, and although she was only in first grade, she felt she held her own. It was one of the most fun times she had ever had. Her mom took one glance at her and almost fainted when she walked in through the door. She was instantly de-clothed and forced to take a shower in the downstairs shower so she wouldn't track any mud in the house. Heather thought she would never hear the end of it.

It was at that moment she realized she and Penny were from very different worlds. Heather loved her family and the glitz and glam that her mother brought to it, but she definitely had an ache for adventure and mess. Not everything could be planned out or perfectly done. She knew that, and some of her sisters knew that, but it would be impossible to convince her mom of it.

"That sounds horrible. I'm so sorry that happened. Poor Penny. How is she doing now? What did the doctors say?" Heather asked.

This time it was Ryan who answered. "She fractured her arm and broke both her legs. She has a cracked rib and probably has a concussion. She's been asleep for most of the time, but she was awake when they brought her in. We haven't been able to talk with her. After surgery yesterday on her legs, she needed to rest so they gave her a sleeping aid. She's been out ever since."

Heather nodded but didn't say anything. She was slightly surprised that Ryan was there. She knew he and Penny were close, but she also knew that he was really busy. Although it looked like he was still getting work done during the lull. Penny wasn't awake anyway.

"Is she going to be okay? How long does she have to stay here?" Heather didn't want to ask too many questions and be annoying, but this felt so serious.

"She will be just fine, dear. She's a strong girl. The doctors said that she's lucky she didn't have any internal bleeding after the fall she suffered, but unfortunately and fortunately, her legs broke the landing. She will need a long time to recover, but she will turn out to be just fine," Natasha reassured Heather.

Heather nodded again. She felt a welling of tears in her eyes as she

looked down at her friend. “I’ll help in any way I can. I know it’s hard with teaching, but I can stop by in the evenings and make her dinner, clean, or do anything that needs to be done.”

“That’s very helpful, thank you. We decided that she’s going to come stay at the Sandpiper Inn with me for a while until she’s back on her feet. She wouldn’t be able to get into her apartment anyway with the stairs, and it’s not like she’ll be able to work for a while.” Natasha looked down at her daughter’s injuries, clearly heartbroken for Penny.

“That makes sense. The first floor will be helpful, and all the meals at the inn, I’m sure. Although she’s going to be so upset she won’t be able to work. She is going to get really bored.” Heather softly laughed.

Natasha smiled. “Yes, she is, but we’ll keep her company. She has an incredible support system that will be there for her and make everything better.” She winked at Heather.

“We’ll have to do something nice for her as a welcome home when she gets out of here. Did they say when that will be?” Heather looked to Natasha and then to Ryan. She didn’t want to completely tune him out.

He stared right at her with intensity in his eyes, almost as if he clung to every word she was saying. He really did have a certain charisma about him—even if he wasn’t talking—that could make any girl blush. She realized she’d never seen him dressed so casually before. And also, how could he look so good still in jeans and a hoodie? It didn’t seem fair.

She quickly looked away, hoping to stop her train of thought.

“They want to keep her here for at least a week to monitor her legs after the surgery. But then she should be able to go home and rest. I’m working to find the materials we’ll need to set up a room for her at the inn. A week should be plenty of time,” Natasha said confidently.

“I’m sorry you have to go through this, Natasha and Ryan. It feels like you guys always have someone with a medical emergency. Brent a couple of years ago, and now this. I bet it keeps you on your toes.” Heather did feel sorry for how much the family had experienced. After their dad died, it felt like any time someone in the Almada family got remotely sick or had an injury, they all held their breath, traumatized from what they endured.

“It’s a blessing that everyone has been able to overcome it. No one can outrun sickness and accidents, but we can sure pray through it,” Natasha said with a smile.

Heather got comfortable in the chair, and Natasha found a cooking show

they could watch while they waited for the doctors to come in for their rounds. Heather so desperately wanted Penny to wake up so she could talk with her and know that she was doing okay, but after a couple more hours, it was clear she wouldn't be waking up any time soon. Although she was disappointed, Heather knew Penny needed her rest.

When it was time to leave, she asked that the family make sure they keep her updated on if there was anything she could do or bring. A week was a long time to be there, so she was happy to provide some home-cooked meals or make a clothing run if anyone planned to stay there for a while.

Ryan nodded and said he appreciated the offer. Heather again felt that pull to glance at him one more time before she left the hospital room. As she walked down the hallway, she still wasn't sure where that was coming from, and it made her nervous to think about it too much.

CHAPTER 6

RYAN

Ryan could hardly take one more day of hospital food. He was so grateful that Penny was potentially being discharged from the hospital that day. After a week of sitting in the same room, with the same TV shows and the same food, he was about to go crazy.

Penny had reminded him constantly that he didn't have to stay with her the whole time. She wasn't going anywhere, she would say as she sarcastically rolled her eyes. But it didn't feel right to leave. She was his sister, and in some ways, she felt like his responsibility.

When his dad got sick, Ryan knew that there were plenty of older brothers ahead of him who would take the role of guardian and man of the family. He was happy to step aside and let Drew or Brent claim their new role. But when it came to Penny, he knew she was his to take care of. They were best friends, and his dad knew the bond the two had.

The last week of his dad's life, Ryan and he sat together in his parents' suite at the Sandpiper Inn to have what Ryan didn't realize at the time would be their last conversation. Ryan could distinctly recall the smell and temperature of the room they sat in. He remembered it was a rainy day, which perfectly matched the emotions and vibe of the room.

Ryan sat alone with his dad, who was resting in the bed in front of him. Ryan was at his laptop, working as always. His dad looked over towards him and opened his eyes; Ryan could see there was something on his mind.

"What's up, Dad?" he asked and shut his computer.

"You have a lot of brothers that are going to step up and help your mom once I'm gone. They'll also be there for you when you need them." His dad spoke with such certainty.

"Of course, I know I can turn to them when I need it." Ryan nodded. He was so young at the time that he couldn't possibly understand how much he would need his brothers in the future.

"And your sister, Penny, she has plenty of brothers to look out for her too, but I want to ask you to take care of her, specifically."

Ryan scrunched his face and gave his dad a puzzled look. "Why is that?" he asked.

"I know you and Penny have a special bond and are probably the closest of all my kids. You two have grown up together and have not only a sibling

relationship but also a friendship. You understand each other. There will be times in Penny's life where she'll need someone to talk to, or challenge her strong-willed way of thinking, just like her mother." He chuckled.

He continued, "But she'll need you, Ryan. Keep her safe and protected. Can you promise me that?"

Ryan looked at his dad with confidence and nodded his head. "Of course."

That conversation played on repeat in Ryan's mind every time Penny was in a predicament or had a big life decision to make. Ryan tried to support her and guide her down the right path. To keep her safe and protected, just like his dad had asked.

He looked over at his sister as she lay asleep on the hospital bed and felt a twinge of guilt. Had he failed?

"Stop looking at me like that." Penny's flat-toned voice caused Ryan to jump in his chair.

"Like what?" he asked.

"As if I'm over here dying." She opened her eyes and stared in Ryan's direction with her nose scrunched.

"How could you even tell I was looking at you? You were asleep," he sassed back to her.

"Because I can literally feel you worrying over there, even with my eyes closed."

Ryan shook his head. "I'm not worrying."

"Well, you're giving me that look that you always give me when you think I'm weak and damaged. I'm going to be fine, Ryan. I'm leaving the hospital today."

"I don't think you're weak, Penny. Far from it, you wouldn't be in a hospital from a skiing accident if you were weak." Ryan tried to come up with excuses for his worry. He had never told Penny about that conversation with his dad years ago. He knew if he told her, she would have felt the pressure Ryan was under and not want to tell him things. She would say that it wasn't his responsibility to take care of her and that she was a big girl who could handle herself. A line she always used whenever someone tried to help since she was seven years old.

"Thank goodness I'm getting out of here. Although, it just means I have to go to the next level of restricted boredom." She threw her head back against the pillow and sighed.

Penny had never been a “lay around and do nothing” girl. She was always active in activities and sports or coming up with a new project for the family to work on. Ryan knew the next couple of months would be brutal as she was forced to rest and recover.

“It will go by fast. You can help us plan for all the family holidays, and you’ll still be able to go around a little bit in the wheelchair. So it’s not like you’re restricted to your bed *completely*.” Ryan tried to be reassuring, but he wasn’t sure how helpful it was.

“I know. At least the dance studio is close by and I can go down the path to that. I’ll watch other people move around and try and live vicariously through them.”

Ryan tried not to laugh, but a small smirk slipped out anyway. Penny was always amusing when she was moody and dramatic. Everything became the end of the world to her. Ryan always thought it was funny.

The doctors came into the room with Natasha close behind. He knew that his mom was coming to help with discharge day. She hadn’t been able to stay the whole time due to her responsibilities at the Sandpiper Inn, but she tried to come up when she could. Although it wasn’t ideal for Ryan to be away from the office for a week, he thankfully had some coverage that allowed him to.

Like clockwork, his phone started to vibrate on the table, and he saw Brooke had texted him.

Call me ASAP. Stanford.

Ryan tried not to roll his eyes. He was already annoyed by this case, and it was just beginning. Thankfully, Ryan was able to get to court last Friday since Penny was settled into her room after hours of surgery. His mom promised to stay by her side in case she woke up; he didn’t want her to wake up alone.

During court he wanted to be at the hospital desperately, and it took everything for him to focus. Court went just like he thought it would. The defendant said they weren’t going to budge or settle and claimed to have evidence that would assist them in the trial to avoid the lawsuit. Ryan felt like it had been a waste of time because, as predicted, they’d be going to trial.

Of course, Charles wasn’t happy about it, but there wasn’t anything they could do. At this point, they had to focus on preparing for trial.

Ryan turned his phone screen off so it wouldn’t distract him and tried to focus on what the doctors were going to say. He knew they had one more

round to do and hoped this would be the final go-ahead for Penny to head home.

He started to stand up and then quickly sat back down in his chair. Heather walked into the room right behind his mom. He was surprised to see her and then confused by his own reaction. What was she doing here?

“Hi, honey, how are you doing today?” Natasha said as she leaned over the bed and gave her daughter a hug.

“Oh, you know, same old, same old. Laying in a bed.” Penny sighed loudly.

Ryan saw Heather roll her eyes at her best friend’s response; another smirk escaped from him.

“Hey, Heather, glad you could make it.” Penny smiled at her friend. Heather walked over to the other side of the bed and sat in the chair next to it.

“Of course, happy to be here for your hopeful discharge day.” Heather patted Penny’s hand.

Ryan had always admired Heather and Penny’s friendship. He had never had a friend like that—together for so long. Even through all the moves and life changes, the two had stayed connected, unwavering. It was admirable.

Heather had offered to bring Ryan clothes or anything that he needed while he stayed with Penny, but he quickly declined. The thought of Heather going into his house and going through his items made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. But he ended up going home for a night to regroup anyway; Heather was coming to stay the night with Penny, so he figured that was a good time to leave the two of them alone.

“What’s the verdict, doc? Am I cleared to go?” Penny asked.

The doctor smiled at Penny. At least the whole team at the hospital were used to her humor and directness. Ryan could tell she had become a favorite patient.

“It looks good, Penny. You’ve done your part and rested just like we asked.” The doctor smiled.

“Well, it was a hard task, but I managed.” Penny smiled back.

“I would say you are set to go, as long as you promise me that you’re going to actually rest and follow directions. No walking around, no using your right arm, and you need to take it easy.” The doctor looked sternly at her, clearly already aware of who she was.

She nodded. “If it means that I get to leave here and hopefully not come back, I will rest. Not that I haven’t loved your hospitality,” she joked back.

Heather shook her head and laughed. Natasha rolled her eyes and lightly swatted Penny's arm.

"I'm never offended that people don't want to come back and see me. I don't want to see them back here either." He smiled and shut his binder. "Monica here is going to run through your discharge plan and then you're free to pack up and go. Take care of yourself, Penny."

The doctor and his team left the room, and the nurse walked over to start removing Penny's IV tubing.

Ryan felt relieved that she was leaving today. Finally they got to go back to a little bit of reality.

"Let's talk about a plan for your care, Penny. You're on bedrest a little longer, so who is going to be taking care of you?" the nurse asked.

"She is going to be staying at the inn that I run. On the first floor. That way it's easy for family to help out. I live there, and one of my sons works there. A lot of us go in and out. Plus, there's food available onsite and lots of easy things for her to have access to," Natasha shared.

"That sounds like a great plan. When you're not able to care for her, are there others who can help you?" Monica looked around the room.

"I plan to help whenever I can. I have a flexible job where I don't have to work in the office all the time, so I can be around as needed," Ryan said.

"And I can help too as much as needed." Heather smiled at Penny.

"That's not necessary, Heather. I know you're busy with your job and teaching. That's a lot of late nights," Ryan quickly chimed in.

"No, it's okay. I'm happy to help. She's my best friend. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. And besides, you're busy with your job too, so we can tag team it." Heather shrugged as if it was no big deal.

Ryan squirmed in his chair. Hopefully, it would be at different times. He tried not to notice the weird look Penny gave him from across the room.

"Wonderful, let's get you out of here, girl," the nurse said and flipped to the discharge paperwork.

The group started to assist Penny in gathering her items and getting her dressed for home. Ryan tried to stay distracted and go on a snack run before the car ride. He wanted to give Penny some space to get everything gathered anyway.

He was committed to helping Penny in any way she needed, but for some reason, he couldn't get the idea of Heather helping too out of his head. He felt nervous about them being together, but he knew he shouldn't be. He felt

ridiculous even thinking about it.

Ryan was used to hanging out with women, and it didn't always have to turn romantic. He and Brooke were a perfect example of that. He needed to treat her as a friend and everything would be fine. Besides, he and Heather hardly knew each other. He wasn't sure why he was even spending any time thinking about it at all.

The image of Heather walking into the coffee shop came to his mind. Her beautiful hair bouncing with every step. Her perfect smile lighting up the room around her. He shook his head to erase his thoughts and continued forward towards the vending machine.

Heather was his sister's best friend. They had been friends for years. What did he think was going to happen?

CHAPTER 7

HEATHER

The room at the Sandpiper Inn that Penny was staying in was warm and cozy. Heather was placing the final touches on the fall decorations she was setting up for Penny. She knew how important décor was to her, so she had offered to pick up a couple of pieces on her way for a visit today. It was the perfect day for the decorating spirit; the warm sun was shining through the window, but the crisp fall breeze kept the room cool.

Heather was grateful Natasha had made an exception and allowed the girls to set up a candle in the room. Normally they weren't allowed to have open flames in the rooms. But since Penny couldn't knock it over while being stationary, and Heather was adamant that the sweet smell of pumpkin and chai would keep Penny calm over the next couple of months, the two were successful in convincing Natasha.

"Do you want the little pumpkins here on the table or on the nightstand?" Heather asked as she held up two little pumpkins for Penny to see.

Penny sat in the wheelchair over by the patio door, quietly staring out at the waves crashing on the beach. It was hard for Heather to see her best friend like this. She normally was thrilled to decorate for any holiday or occasion. But this year, she was beyond bummed to be missing out on all her favorite holiday activities.

"Penny?" Heather asked again, trying to regain her attention.

"What?" Penny turned towards Heather. "Oh sorry, um, the table is fine. Next to the candle would create a nice vibe." Heather smiled and placed the pumpkins down. She knew that Penny was still in there somewhere.

"I found these at the pumpkin patch this weekend. Considering it's Thanksgiving next week, it's a miracle I was able to salvage these little ones. Slim pickings out there." Heather tried her best to distract Penny, but she knew she was having a hard time.

"I love that place. I'm glad I was able to go in October. Did you get those at your grandpa's apple orchard this year?" Penny asked, finally turning her attention away from the window.

Heather nodded. "Yes, and it was beautiful as always. Although I noticed some of the regulars weren't back this year to work the orchard. I thought that was weird. But they still had all the hayrides, pumpkin patch, apple picking and other activities going. My grandma's pie was the best it's ever

been.”

Heather checked the time and saw that it was already five o'clock. She'd only been there for about an hour, arriving after she was done in the classroom to optimize their time together. She tried to come at least every other day for the last week and a half since Penny was home.

“Are you hungry, Penny? Should we grab some dinner?” she asked.

Penny nodded. “That sounds good, although can we eat outside? I know it's kind of chilly, but it's just so awkward eating in the dining room. Everyone stares at me and wants to know what happened. I'm getting exhausted having to repeat myself over and over again.”

“See, now I thought you liked the attention.” Heather winked at Penny.

“Normally I do, but riding along with two legs and an arm in a cast sticking out banging into everything is not the attention I hope for.”

Heather laughed. Penny could light up any room she was in, easily. But Heather understood what she meant. When you're injured and everyone looks at you like you're a giant elephant taking up the whole room, it's easier just to avoid it.

Heather grabbed their two coats and got the bag ready to go out to dinner. She pushed them down the short hallway to the dining area. Thankfully, it wasn't too busy yet. The Sandpiper Inn usually had a slowdown in the middle of November between the Harvest Festival and people traveling for the holidays. It was honestly the perfect time and place for Penny to be to get her rest.

Heather pushed the wheelchair over to the food line and helped Penny fill up her plate. It was biscuits and gravy tonight, one of Penny's favorites. She always said there was only one reason for breakfast food at dinner, and that was if it was biscuits and gravy. Her dad used to make it all the time, so Heather figured it had some sentimental value to it.

Penny held the tray of food while Heather pushed them towards the back patio. It was a brisk evening but not too bad. The sun had slowly started to go down, so they needed to eat fast. But they had become accustomed to the cool winds being so close to the water and the fleeting daylight. Heather was just thankful there hadn't been any snow yet. She knew it was coming, fast. Her rule was it had to be after Thanksgiving and then she would be fine with it.

She slid Penny up to the table and then got their food ready. The two ate in silence for a moment and watched the waves rapidly hit the shore.

“Do you think it’s going to storm soon? I’ve felt like it’s been more windy than usual for this time of year,” Penny asked before she put a spoonful of biscuits in her mouth.

Heather shrugged. “I don’t even try to understand the weather anymore. It always confuses me. But I am excited for the holidays this year. I’m not sure why, but I just feel like they’re going to be incredible. Do you ever have that gut feeling? That something is going to be different this year?”

Penny nodded. “I’ve felt that a few times. But it makes sense for my family this year. Casey just had her baby, and now Scarlett and Brent are engaged. Oliver and Macy are married, and Oliver’s *finally* coming to Thanksgiving after years of not attending. It’s a busy year for us Almadass.” She chuckled.

“Geez, that is a big year. It seems like your family is matching up like crazy. What is that now? Two weddings in three years and two other serious relationships?”

Penny thought about it. “Huh, yeah, you’re right.” She took another bite.

“Watch out, Penny, the love bug might come for you next,” Heather teased.

“Ha!” Penny laughed out loud. “You’re funny and delusional.”

Heather laughed. “Well, it seems like it’s going down the line of your siblings, so it’s close to your turn.” Heather raised her eyes at Penny.

“Then it would have to bite Ryan first, and we know that’s never going to happen.” She snorted.

Curiosity filled Heather at the mention of Ryan’s dating life. “What do you mean? I thought Ryan was always dating women?” She knew she was starting to pry, but she was still puzzled by what her sister had said the other day. She thought maybe Penny knew more.

“Oh yeah, my brother knows how to date, and he does it very well; the whole town knows that. But he’s not a settle down with the right girl kind of guy. I don’t think he’s ever had an actual long-term serious relationship his whole life. His average is like two months and then they’re gone. I stopped asking about them or being interested, honestly. They come and go like a revolving door.”

“Doesn’t that feel really weird to you? Like super not Almada like.”

“Oh, it’s very unlike us,” Penny responded matter-of-factly. “You’ve met my older brothers. They are all so serious about life and relationships and take everything so seriously. Most of them have never had a long-term

relationship with someone who didn't turn out to be their significant other. Except Oliver, but we didn't even know that he was engaged until they were broken up." Penny rolled her eyes.

"Why do you think Ryan is like that then?" Heather hoped Penny wouldn't catch on to her game of twenty questions.

Penny shrugged. "To be honest with you, I know my brother really well, probably better than anyone else. But I still haven't been able to figure out what his deal is. He's super attractive, smart and athletic, obviously, so it's hard to keep the women away, but my other brothers haven't had a problem with it. They took the tactic of just avoid-avoid-avoid. Ryan, I think he likes the attention, and I know he has good intentions. It's not like he dates them just to fool around or hurt anyone. I would never let him get away with that." Penny took another mouthful of food but kept talking.

"He goes into every relationship with good intentions and a genuine care for the woman and desire to get to know them, but it just doesn't last. He said that either he realizes that they just aren't a good match, or the girl breaks up with him because he can't commit or he's too busy with his job. All super valid things." Penny finally swallowed and took a drink of water.

Heather ruminated on what Penny had said. She started to wonder the same thing. Why couldn't he commit?

Thankfully, Penny was a talker and really had no filter. "Maybe he's scared? Maybe he just doesn't like the idea of marriage? I'm not sure. He won't tell me when I try and bug him about it. He just says, 'It didn't work out.' But I will say that the woman who finally does lock him down is going to be insanely lucky. He's the best guy I know. He just needs to get his act together and actually commit."

Heather smiled. She admired how close of a relationship Ryan and Penny had. They were two peas in a pod. They even dressed up like that for Halloween one year.

The patio door opened up and Heather's face almost turned red. Ryan walked out in his nice suit with a coat on. It would have been awkward if he walked in on that conversation.

"Hey, we were just talking about you," Penny said with a sassy smile towards Ryan.

Now Heather's face turned red. "Penny!" she whispered under her breath.

Ryan looked at Heather and made a face that Heather wasn't quite sure what it meant, but then turned to Penny again. "Of course, you were. I'm a

likable guy.” He smiled his big, charming smile.

The patio door opened again and out walked Scarlett and Brent, Penny’s brother and almost sister-in-law.

“Hey guys!” Penny said with a smile. Her face always lit up when she had visitors.

“What are you doing out here? It’s freezing,” Brent complained as he made his way over to their table holding plates of food for both he and Scarlett. He set the food down and zipped up his coat. He pulled out a chair for Scarlett to sit down on.

“It’s not that bad. I’m trying to enjoy the last couple of days of a somewhat decent fall before it gets actually freezing,” Penny responded.

“Don’t let her fool you,” Ryan chimed in as he pulled a chair over to the table. Heather noticed he almost placed it right between her and Penny but then, at the last minute, put it on Penny’s other side.

For some reason the move left Heather bothered. The last week since Penny had been back, it seemed like Ryan was trying to do everything he could to avoid being right next to Heather. Whether it was sly comments about her not needing to help or leaving the room when she walked in. She had tried not to take it personally; they really didn’t know each other that well and maybe he was just uncomfortable being around her so much, but it had started to feel intentional.

Ryan continued, “She’s just avoiding all the undesirable attention from the guests at the inn.” He popped a grape into his mouth and chewed while looking towards Penny, waiting for her response.

She looked at him and shook her head as if the big secret had just been found out. Heather smiled, knowing it had. She then looked at Ryan, and he looked at her and gave a smile. It made Heather involuntarily smile a little bigger.

Even though she was slightly annoyed with him, there was still this intrigue about him she couldn’t shake. She still wasn’t sure if it was the mystery of him and his romantic life, or something else.

“It’s not too bad, and that’s coming from a girl raised in the South,” Scarlett said as she started to eat her food. She placed her hand on Brent’s arm and smiled.

Heather spotted her beautiful, shiny, and surprisingly very big engagement ring resting on her finger. The two had been engaged since the beginning of summer when Brent finally proposed after more than a year of

being together. Everyone knew they would eventually get married. Scarlett had stayed in Sandpiper Cove basically for Brent, after all. But they were both so content with each other that they were in no rush. Plus, Scarlett had her work cut out for her preparing for the dance studio's opening and basically running the place. She was living her best life, as she always said.

Penny must have been thinking about the same thing. "That ring is seriously blinding in this sunshine. Brent, how did you do it?"

"What? Find the best ring or the perfect girl?" He gave a soft smile and winked towards Scarlett, who blushed. The two looked so in love that it made Heather's heart swoon. Her romance novel mind went crazy whenever they were around. They were truly a match made in heaven.

Heather had gotten to know Scarlett better from attending Natasha's book club. Heather was thankful that more younger women who were in her age range were starting to attend. She loved the multi-generational feel of the group, and she learned so much from the ladies who had lived a lot of life before her, but it was nice having some people who related to some of the current life battles and stresses she was going through. Such as her singleness.

"Have you guys talked more about when you want to get married?" Heather asked.

Scarlett nodded. "We haven't officially decided, but we're thinking sometime this winter. We don't want to have a super big wedding. There aren't a lot of additional family and friends that we know outside of Sandpiper Cove to invite anyway. It's just my mom and probably my therapist, Sheila, although that might be a little weird." Scarlett laughed. "She was the one who suggested I come to Sandpiper Cove in the first place, so I suppose we have her to thank for meeting each other." She looked over at Brent with the look Heather thought of as "true love."

Scarlett continued, "Overall, we're planning to keep it small and simple. Not a lot of preparation time needed."

"Scarlett wants it to be more sentimental than anything else," Brent chimed in. "I offered to build her a place if that's what she wanted, but then she said she would never see me as we prepared for our own wedding, so what's the point." He rolled his eyes.

"I mean, she has a point. Have you thought about having it at the dance studio? It's so pretty there, and that's what technically brought you guys together. Designing that building, right? You've already built her a building."

Penny shrugged.

Heather knew that Penny loved planning and decorating for any events, but weddings were her favorite. If the two decided to get married sooner rather than later, maybe she could help be a part of it. That is exactly what she would need to cheer her up. Heather's mind started to scheme and she thought maybe she could push a little bit to get the ball rolling. Anything for her best friend, right?

Scarlett looked to Penny. "I thought about the dance studio. It really is a beautiful space, but that's where Casey and Drew got married, and I selfishly want the venue to be special for just us. Does that sound too high maintenance?" Scarlett bit her lip, a bit embarrassed.

"Yes," Penny quickly responded.

Brent shot her a look of disapproval, and Heather slapped her un-casted arm. "Penny!" she scolded.

"What? People get married in the same place all the time, and there's not that many wedding-worthy buildings in Sandpiper Cove, unfortunately," she explained.

Ryan laughed at his sister. Heather knew that Penny probably brought the same level of entertainment to him that she did for her.

"She can get married wherever she wants, Penny," Brent sassed back to her. "It's our special day, and I want it to be special for her. Whatever makes her happy. She's waited this long for me to finally ask." Brent winked.

"I was happy to wait," Scarlett said. "I mean, when we met in the hallway of the inn when you caught me from falling on my face, I never dreamed we'd end up falling in love." She laughed.

Heather could feel a surge of energy radiate from Penny sitting next to her. Penny's eyes lit up, and it looked like her face turned four shades brighter.

"You could have the wedding at the inn! The front lobby could be decked out in beautiful Christmas decorations, lights, a big, decorated tree, plates and flowers everywhere. I've done it before for lesser events. And no one has ever gotten married at the inn before. It would be so special! Like you said, Scarlett, it's where you first met! Everything is centered around the Sandpiper Inn." Penny's joy radiated from her as her mind went wild with ideas. It was the happiest Heather had seen her friend in a couple of weeks.

Heather peeked at Ryan and could tell he was thinking the same thing.

Heather looked towards Brent and Scarlett, who were glancing at each

other, also trying to read the other's mind. It didn't seem like a bad idea; the inn was gorgeous and exactly the type of place that would hold sentimental value for any Almada relationship at this point. It had really been the center of so much love. Heather tried her hardest to will Brent and Scarlett from across the table to say yes.

She was surprised when Ryan was the first to respond. "It's not a bad idea, guys. It definitely holds sentimental value, and I have seen Penny make the place more beautiful than some of the shops in town do for the Christmas light show."

Heather gave Ryan a big smile from across the table. She was thrilled he was also on board. He looked towards her and smiled back. It felt like they were the secret Penny support team.

Scarlett nodded at Brent. "I don't think it's a bad idea either. It actually sounds really cozy and romantic. The thought had flitted through my mind at one point, but I didn't want to be presumptuous. And your mom is so busy all the time that I didn't even mention it. What do you think, babe?"

Brent smiled at her and reached out to hold her hand. "I love it."

Heather let out a deep breath. She hadn't realized she was holding her breath that whole time.

"Oh my gosh, really? I'm so excited! That will be so perfect!" Penny almost yelled. "I know mom will say yes right away."

Heather was happy to see Penny so excited again about something. If anything would get Penny out of a funk, it would be decorating and event planning.

The smile had dropped from Scarlett's face. "But the thing is, we really have no time to help decorate and plan this. I'm so busy with work, and I know Brent is too. I can sit down and figure out ideas initially, but I'm not quite sure how much hands-on help we could be with decorating and getting everything ready. That's why we've been so slow to take the next steps." Scarlett looked worried, like she didn't want to disappoint anyone.

"That's okay. I have these two who can help me." Penny pointed at Heather and Ryan. Both of them looked surprised.

"What's that now?" Ryan asked Penny.

"Hey, you always say you're available to help me with anything I need. This is something I need—for my sanity. And I know Heather is helpful, but we need some height and muscle if we're going to get this done. Sorry, Heather," Penny apologized for her subtle insult.

“No, you’re right,” she affirmed. She wasn’t sure how she felt about spending all that extra time with Ryan; every time he was around, his perfect hair and smile distracted her and left her with lingering eyes. But she always said she would do anything for Penny. And this would fall under the lines of anything.

Ryan avoided eye contact with Heather as he thought about his answer, but eventually he sighed. “Okay, I’ll help.”

Penny tried to clap her hands together but winced as she hit her cast. It didn’t stop her from almost jumping out of her wheelchair in excitement. “Yay! A Christmas wedding! Can you think of anything more beautiful than that? This hits right in the old Hallmark Christmas wheelhouse over here,” Penny said as she nudged Heather.

Heather smiled. “Yes, it does. I’m excited to help.”

Penny started to go off on her ideas and everything they needed to do to the inn to get it ready. She was already brainstorming table placements with the happy couple when Heather peeked over and saw Ryan staring at her again. She tried not to be too obvious that she noticed, but she could feel the heat of the soft pink tint coming back to her cheeks. She put her hair up into a ponytail as a distraction but couldn’t stop the urge to look at him again.

His cheeks were also red but probably from the windchill. His navy-blue shirt collar highlighted his perfect jawline as he finished chewing his dinner. Heather looked away.

She wasn’t sure how planning a dreamy Christmas wedding would go with her best friend’s charming, attractive brother in the mix, but she couldn’t back out now. She really would do anything to bring joy back to Penny again during her favorite season. No matter how awkward it could potentially be.

CHAPTER 8

RYAN

The rain pelted the windshield as Ryan drove down the long, windy road on his way to the Sandpiper Inn. It had been a long day at the office and every ounce of him wanted to go home, get into some sweatpants, relax with his favorite bubbly water and eat some pizza. The bubbly waters were his guilty pleasures. Penny always called him frou-frou when he drank them.

But it was only yesterday he had promised Penny that he would help with decorating for Brent and Scarlett's wedding that was now happening at the inn, a little over a month away, so he couldn't back out now. He was happy to help his sister with anything, but decorating was absolutely not his thing.

After their dinner conversation, Penny immediately filled in their mom about her plan, and of course, Natasha was all for it. Nothing made Natasha happier than the family all being together and celebrating something. So a wedding, at her inn, filled her excitement tank to the max.

The rest of the evening was brainstorming with Scarlett—and Brent whenever he had an opinion—about what they would like for a dream wedding. Ryan was a bit surprised at how simple they wanted it to be; Penny was the one who kept pushing for more. But he knew that everyone had the same secret mission inside: help Penny get back to her fun, loveable, and crazy self.

A big boom of thunder came from above, so loud it almost made Ryan swerve off the road. The storm that everyone thought was coming soon finally arrived early that morning and had not let up. Roads had started to flood, and Ryan had heard reports that shop owners on Main Street were even putting sandbags up by their doors to avoid any flooding or water damage to the buildings. After the big storm a couple of years ago that wrecked the church basement, the townspeople tried to be more prepared.

Ryan finally arrived at the inn and threw his raincoat on to try and protect his hair. He had brought a change of clothes since he knew his nice pants and shirt wouldn't hold up well in the pouring rain. Right when he was about to get out of the car, his phone rang.

It was Herold, his boss. He figured if Herold was calling at five o'clock in the evening, it was something important. The man had a strict "clock out of the office at four o'clock" rule for himself.

"Hi, Herold, what's going on? Are you in a different time zone today?"

You know it's five o'clock, right?" he teased.

Herold chuckled softly. "Yeah, I know. Just one of those days that snuck up on me and I fell behind. Do you have a minute? I'm trying to get caught up on the Standford case."

If it meant being a little delayed to help decorate and wedding plan, Ryan figured he could spare a couple of minutes.

"Yes, I have some time." He got settled back in the driver's seat. He turned up the volume on his phone to try and hear Herold over the loud rain.

"I ran into Brooke a couple of minutes ago and she filled me in a bit on court last week, but I wanted to run it by you just so I'm clear on the outline of events. I've got a similar case that I keep mixing up. So Charles Standford and Francis Glendall made an agreement early this year that Charles was going to buy the Glendall farmland. It took a while for Charles to initially convince Mr. Glendall because of the family history and ties to the land, but he eventually agreed—of his own free will. Which I'm realizing is important here."

Ryan nodded. That was the whole issue with the lawsuit.

Herold cleared his voice and continued. "They drafted up a contract that has proof of the agreement and intent to sell, and Charles is claiming they signed and dated, which Mr. Glendall agrees, but now Mr. Glendall is saying he no longer wants to sell. And he claims it's because he learned additional information about the values of the Standford Company he does not agree with, and he claims to have been manipulated and lied to in order to sign the contract in the first place."

"Basically, fraud," Ryan reiterated.

"Exactly. Now, Charles is suing him because he signed the contract and backed out. Mr. Glendall is refusing to settle, which was the basis of the court hearing last week, correct?"

"Yes. Mr. Glendall is claiming he has evidence against Charles, and I'm waiting to get that evidence sent to me. I petitioned the court, but *apparently*, everyone got sick, so they're behind on getting me that documentation. But once I have it, I'll be able to see what Mr. Glendall's team has up their sleeves. I'm not sure how much ground they really have for fraud, to be honest. It's a weird fight."

"Agreed," Herold said. "It does make me nervous, but we'll win this thing. Does Charles still want the land after all of this? Or is he just trying to win the lawsuit?"

“At first he didn’t want the land anymore and just wanted to take all Mr. Glendall’s money.” Which Ryan thought was a bit much, and pretty cruel. “But then he realized that Mr. Glendall would have to sell the land anyway to be able to pay for the lawsuit. Our offer for a settlement, what he had originally told me he would be fine with, is instead of Mr. Glendall having to pay the suit, he could just sell Charles the land as agreed upon.”

“Wow,” Herold sounded surprised. “That doesn’t sound like something Charles would agree to. He is usually a go-getter and ‘bleed them dry’ kind of guy.”

“He is. I came up with that plan and convinced him to agree to it,” Ryan said.

He didn’t feel right about Charles’s plan and his lack of mercy for an old man who already felt guilty and sad about selling his family’s farm after so many generations. He resented Charles for what his company wanted to do to this family, so he was able to talk him down and get him to come up with a settlement. This was actually one of the reasons Ryan didn’t want to work in some big law firm in New York City; he didn’t like working for guys like Standford. There was no mercy or grace. It was all about how much they could get and wiping out all the little guys under them. That wasn’t who Ryan was.

“Well, you must be a good lawyer if you talked him into that,” Herold chuckled.

“It’s why you hired me,” Ryan said with a smile on his face.

“Very true. Well, it sounds like you have everything under control. I just wanted to check in. Let me know if you need anything from here, okay?”

Ryan nodded into the phone. “Will do, Herold. Thanks for checking in.” Ryan hung up and readjusted his raincoat before he headed into the Sandpiper Inn. He ran as fast as he could in the pouring rain, but it still wasn’t enough to keep him dry. He was soaking wet.

He raced through the front door, almost blinded by the rain and wind coming down. As he plowed through the front door, he ran right into someone. He reached his hands out to steady the woman he almost tackled.

“I’m so sorry! Are you okay?” Ryan threw his hood off his head and realized it was Heather standing in front of him. She had grabbed onto one of Ryan’s arms for balance as well. She looked up at him with surprise on her face, as one would do after almost being taken out.

“Ryan—sorry, I didn’t see you coming into the building. I was just

walking by.”

“No, it’s my fault. I was just trying to get in as soon as possible. It’s like a monsoon out there.” He tried to catch his breath from his sprint.

“It’s okay. I would have done the same thing. It’s almost a hurricane out there.” She softly laughed. Ryan chuckled too.

The two stood there for a moment and then Ryan realized he was still holding onto Heather, and her hand was still resting on his arm. He awkwardly adjusted and released her from his hands. She stepped back a little bit to create some distance between them.

Her hair was up in a ponytail again. Her curls were tighter than usual, probably due to the rain. She wore a brown turtleneck sweater and jeans with some tennis shoes on.

“Finally, you’re here!” a voice rang from the distance. Ryan looked up, thankful for the distraction. Penny was seated by the fireplace on the couch, her wheelchair right next to her. Natasha was close by with a notepad, and it looked like printed-out pictures were displayed all around the coffee table.

Penny looked towards them with the same look she gave Ryan from her bed in the hospital room. “Ryan, you’re literally soaking wet.”

Ryan recalled he brought a change of clothes and held up the bag for Penny to see. “It’s a storm, Penny. Things are bound to get wet. I’m going to go change quick.” He smiled politely and nodded to Heather before heading towards the back office. He quickly changed into his jeans and a sweater and walked back out.

Once he got back to the couches, he realized he and Heather almost matched.

“Oh cute, look at that, you’re both wearing jeans and a brown sweater,” Natasha said as she stood to give her son a kiss on the cheek.

Ryan slightly blushed and took a seat on the opposite couch by himself, with Heather in the chair next to him. “Tis the season for neutral colors,” he joked, trying to redirect the attention.

Heather laughed.

Penny looked at Ryan. “Well, I’m glad you could make it. I’m ready to dive into this,” Penny said, taking charge as usual whenever decorating was involved.

“I came up with some ideas today as I laid in bed and did my usual nothing.” Penny organized the paper in front of her as she talked. Ryan shook his head and smirked at her tone.

“What do you think about a Christmas Eve wedding?” Penny asked. She looked as if she would burst from excitement about the idea but was thoroughly reading the room to see if others would hate the plan.

“A wedding actually on Christmas Eve?” Natasha asked. “Would anyone be able to come to it?”

“Of course! The only people that Brent and Scarlett really want to invite are family and some friends, of whom most will be in town anyway. Plus, I checked with Pastor Dave, and their Christmas Eve service is going to be during the day, so it wouldn’t interfere with the wedding, and he can still officiate. I picture candle lights everywhere, some sparkling Christmas lights, and garland hanging with red roses. It could look so beautiful! The bridesmaids would have black dresses on, and it would all look so elegant! But simple, just how they wanted it,” Penny said proudly.

Ryan could see Penny’s mind going into fairy tale land, which was interesting since she was so uninterested in having a relationship for herself right now. He smiled watching her dream and it was good to see joy in her face again; just like he saw yesterday, which made him say yes to helping in the first place. He just wanted her to be happy and to be Penny again.

The group was silent and looking at Penny and each other, waiting for someone to speak. Penny’s eyes widened in anticipation.

“I love it, Penny,” Heather said with a smile.

“It’s a beautiful idea, dear. I’m sure they are going to love it. We have our Christmas celebration on Christmas Day anyway, so it doesn’t interfere with our plans at all.” Natasha patted her daughter’s arm.

Penny looked at Ryan with excitement and waited for him to speak. Ryan smiled. “Let’s do it.”

Penny clapped her hands together and squealed. “Yay! Okay, this is what I’m thinking for design.” Penny started to show them the pictures and ideas. She really had it all figured out; Ryan was impressed.

When Penny started to wiggle in her seat more, she turned to Natasha. “I have to go to the bathroom. Mom, can you help?”

Natasha nodded and got up to help her daughter into the wheelchair. Penny’s casted legs bumped into the couch and tables around them.

“Ugh, I’m already so ready to be out of these.” She rolled her eyes as Natasha started to push her away. “Be right back. Don’t go anywhere,” she sternly instructed Heather and Ryan.

Heather glanced down at the pictures. Ryan was completely unsure of

what to say. Again, alone with Heather.

“This looks like it will be absolutely beautiful. But I shouldn’t be surprised. Penny doesn’t do anything without excellence.” She chuckled.

Heather sounded so casual; it helped Ryan relax more into his chair. “Yeah, she’s really something. I’m so glad that she has this wedding to look forward to. I’m not sure what she would have done. The holidays are her favorite time of year.”

Heather nodded and looked up at Ryan with her big, beautiful eyes. Ryan realized they were a light sea blue color. “I know, right. I’m so grateful. And I know it might be weird to say this, but thank you for all your help with her. I know you’re her brother and all, and I’m just the best friend, but it’s really nice to have someone else tag-teaming this for Penny. I care about her and want her to be taken care of.”

There was such sincerity in Heather’s voice. If Ryan hadn’t already known her, he would have been able to tell just from that that she was a compassionate, kind and beautiful person.

For a moment, he got distracted as he stared at her, and then he quickly tried to snap out of it. This experience with Heather felt brand new to him. If he normally had experienced these feelings and thoughts about a woman, he would have asked her out—right then and there. But this was Heather, and he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do. He was usually a very direct person. He never tried to hide his interest in someone; holding back felt odd.

His own thoughts surprised him. Is that what was happening here? Was he interested in her? He then recognized those looks that he had been receiving from Penny; those were her “I’m on to you” looks. She typically looked at him that way when she saw him flirting with someone. If she was giving him those looks, did that mean that he had feelings for Heather?

He wasn’t sure about the word “feelings,” but he was definitely interested, and obviously attracted to her. He felt the pressure start to boil up inside of him. He started to sweat a bit at the thought of it all.

“Of course. She’s my sister and I’m happy to be there for her,” he replied, short and direct.

Heather squinted her eyes at him and gave him a puzzled look. “Why do you always do that?” she asked.

Ryan was taken aback by her direct tone.

“Do what?” he asked.

“We have a nice moment, and then all of a sudden, you shut down. It’s

like you flip this switch after being the nice Ryan that I know you have always been and get short.”

“No, I don’t,” Ryan responded defensively.

“Yes, you do. I mean, at least, you have been. Since I saw you at the museum the other day. It’s like we’ve known each other for a long time, but only recently have you started to act weird around me. And honestly—I can’t believe I’m saying this—” Heather whispered to herself. “It has felt like you’re trying to ignore me or get rid of me. Every time I try and help with something, you try to shut me out. Like you’re purposefully going out of your way not to be around me. Did I do something to you? Or say something to offend you?” Her tone was sincere as she questioned. Ryan could tell she had been ruminating on that for a while.

He didn’t know how to respond. He had been trying to ignore her, at least be on the other side of the room from her, but it wasn’t until this moment that he realized what it was. He was interested in her, obviously attracted to not only her physical appearance, but also her kindness, friendship, and compassion for those around her.

He wasn’t sure if he should tell her. Otherwise, it could get insanely awkward, and Penny could be back any minute. But he was also a direct guy who didn’t like to be dishonest or misleading. He wasn’t sure what to do.

“I—uh, I’m sorry if you have felt that way.” Was all he could think of saying. He was never this frazzled around women.

That clearly wasn’t a good enough reason because Heather sat there with her eyebrows raised, waiting for more. Yes, she was sweet and kind, but she apparently had a direct side of her that Ryan had never experienced before. And he kind of liked it.

He took a deep breath—here goes nothing.

“Okay, you’re right. I haven’t been ignoring you necessarily, but I’ve just been—trying to figure out how to be around you.” His voice trailed off as he tried to read her face. “It’s just you’re my sister’s best friend and you’ve been around our lives since we were kids. But if we’re being completely honest, something has switched. And the other day, in the coffee shop...” Ryan could see Heather’s face recall the day and wondered if something about that experience resonated with her too.

“At the coffee shop, I saw you from across the room and realized how beautiful you are. And ever since then, being around you has felt weird. You haven’t done anything wrong. I’m just very aware of your presence and what

you're doing. I can't stop the urge to steal a glance when you walk by."

The look on her face went from questioning to complete shock. Now he was sure that he was freaking her out.

"I'm sorry if that's overwhelming. I'm not saying I feel a certain way..." He knew he was lying there. "But I'm very aware of you, and I don't know what to do about it. I'm just trying to be honest. I prefer to be direct and didn't want to lie to you since you asked."

He waited for her to respond, but it took a couple of seconds for Heather to regain her thoughts.

"Sorry, I'm just a little shocked. Um, thanks for sharing that. I didn't mean to come out swinging. I think it just built up in me this confusion about what was happening. And I did notice something, so I figured if we were going to be working so closely with this project, we might as well address it in case you were trying to get rid of me or something," she light-heartily joked.

Ryan smiled. "Not at all. The opposite, unfortunately. I'm trying to figure out how I can focus on anything else but you when you're around."

Heather's face turned bright red at his comment, and she smiled and looked down at the ground. At that moment, Penny and Natasha came around the corner.

"Ugh, sorry," Penny said as she started to transfer from her wheelchair to the couch. "Hopefully, that wasn't too boring."

"Nope, not at all," Heather replied with a subtle smirk.

"Alright, where were we?" Penny jumped right back into it.

Now it really took everything for Ryan to focus on the conversation and not on Heather. He kept subtly looking over in her direction to try and guess what she was thinking about. But she had the best poker face around; she listened intently to Penny's plans and chimed in when needed.

As Ryan packed up his stuff at the end of their meeting, he watched Heather and Penny, who had made their way to the coffee bar and were talking away. He felt anxious to know what she was thinking. Was she overwhelmed by his comments? Could she possibly have felt the same way? Curiosity consumed him.

He flung his duffle bag over his shoulder and made his way towards the front door of the inn. He quickly turned around for one last glance and caught Heather's eyes. He stared for a moment and saw a small smile flash across her face.

He smiled back and turned to head outside, completely unsure of what would happen next.

CHAPTER 9

HEATHER

If the Christmas season had a specific smell, it would smell like the Sandy Cove Boutique. The quaint little shop on Main Street had become a new favorite in the town since it opened last fall. The shop had a variety of items like beautiful home décor, flower arrangements, candles, and even a section of homemade jams and soups made by women in the town. It had become Heather's go-to place when she needed some self-care or a small gift for someone. She especially enjoyed the store the weekend after Thanksgiving when all the Christmas decorations and lights came out.

All the stores on Main Street went all out during Christmas as they geared up for the Christmas Lights Show. There were contests to see who had the best decorations outside, and this year, there were extra prizes for how the stores were internally decorated. Heather was thrilled to spend the morning with her mom walking through the shops admiring the hard work from their long night of decorating. Going shopping on the Saturday after Thanksgiving was one of her favorite traditions of the year. Typically, her sister Lemon joined them, but she was out with a cold today.

Heather browsed the boutique as she hummed along to the Christmas music playing in the background. She took a sip of the hot chocolate that she got from the store when they arrived. Hot chocolate and cookies were served fresh daily; that's something you wouldn't get in a big city store.

Heather loved supporting small businesses, which made living in Sandpiper Cove so much fun. There really wasn't a big corporate business anywhere in sight. She enjoyed meeting all the business owners and hearing their stories of why they wanted to open their shop. Everyone had a story to tell, and she loved learning all about it.

The candle section called her name since most of the fall décor was fifty percent off now that the season had passed. Heather was so excited for Christmas but couldn't believe the year was almost over. She simultaneously wanted time to slow down and go faster.

She peeked outside and saw the wind picking up and the clouds were looking grayer by the day. The snow was coming soon.

If the Christmas spirit alone wasn't enough to make Heather more joyful, she was really excited to help plan the wedding for Brent and Scarlett; everything Penny had in mind sounded absolutely gorgeous and so dreamy.

A Christmas Eve wedding—it sounded almost as beautiful as a New Year’s Eve wedding. If she didn’t already know she wanted to get married in a barn during the fall, then she would want a New Year’s Eve wedding. The black-and-white vibe with sparklers and New Year’s celebrations—it sounded so fun.

But Heather’s eyes were already set on the barn at her grandpa’s farm. It was rustic, beautiful, and had a gorgeous view of the apple orchard in the background. Her grandma promised her a wedding there ever since she was a little girl, and she was holding them to it.

She might have to have Penny be her wedding planner after seeing how well the Almada wedding was coming along. It had been a really fun couple of weeks as they worked together almost every other day on the wedding.

As Heather continued to browse the store, with no specific end goal in sight, she heard her mom’s voice talking away at whoever was behind the counter.

Her mom was a social butterfly wherever they went. She knew everyone in town and always spent at least ten minutes catching up with someone on every outing.

Heather picked up a bag of homemade brownie mix that she thought she could bake and bring to Penny next week. She would probably love that.

She put it in her little shopping basket and started to head towards the counter to meet with her mom.

As she turned the corner, her basket slammed against someone. “Oh, I’m sorry—” she started to say and then stopped when she saw Ryan standing in front of her.

“We need to stop meeting like this,” he said with a smile.

Heather slightly blushed. Of course, they’d run into each other here. “Apparently, it’s our new thing.” She smiled.

“Well, hopefully, it doesn’t get more aggressive and someone gets hurt,” he teased.

Heather laughed. “What are you doing here?” She looked around to see if he had come with anyone, maybe Natasha. But she didn’t recognize anyone else in the store.

“I’m here picking up some things for my house,” he admitted, almost sheepishly.

Heather gave him a surprised look. “Really? Shopping for home décor?”

“What? A guy can’t like a nicely decorated and smelling house?” He

flashed her a cheeky smile.

“Oh—that’s not what I meant. You totally can. I guess I just wasn’t expecting it.” Heather tried to frantically make up for her comment. She didn’t want to offend him.

Ryan laughed. “I’m just messing with you, Heather. It’s fine. Although I don’t like decorating. I clearly didn’t inherit the same gene as Penny. She loves to decorate my house and make it look nice. So I have somewhat of a good vibe going, and it must be the impulsiveness in me, but I have to keep up with it.” He shrugged.

“It makes sense. You now have an image to keep up with. So what are you on the hunt for today?” She wasn’t sure if she should be acting so casually with him. The last time she saw him a couple of days ago, he basically told her he was attracted to her, and it was hard to stay away. Her heart still fluttered when she thought about his comment of having to keep distracted from her.

What did he mean by all of that? She almost felt like she was in a weird dream. She would have never thought in a million years that she would be irresistible to Ryan Almada. It was always the other way around. Everyone always wanted to be with the Almada boys.

She had replayed that conversation over and over again in her mind, wondering if it really happened. And now, here he was, standing in front of her in a casual pair of jeans and a nice V-neck polo, shopping at a boutique.

“Well, I’m not sure if you’ve heard, but this boutique has the best signage in town,” he said with a teasing tone. “And Brent just remodeled my front entryway, so I figured I needed something to complete the look. Plus, I needed some of their famous hot chocolate mix; you can’t enjoy the Christmas season without it.” He shrugged.

Heather smiled in surprise. Although she shouldn’t have been surprised with the way Ryan looked and always seemed like he had his life together, it made sense that his house would look that way too.

“That makes complete sense. Good for you for supporting the small businesses.”

“Oh, of course, I love it here. I think half of my home décor is from this place.” He chuckled.

Heather smiled at Ryan. Her mind worked to think of what to say next; all she could do was stare at him. But at least he was doing the same back.

Heather wondered if now a good time would be to bring up what

happened the other day. She had never had an opportunity to respond to his comments and kept wondering if he thought maybe she didn't feel the same way, or if she was freaked out by what he said.

She definitely wasn't she was just shocked. Everything Ryan said to her made her heart flutter. She couldn't even comprehend that Ryan Almada, her best friend's brother, would be saying those beautiful things to her.

But it all felt wrong at the same time. Because, again, he was her best friend's brother. And she knew that nothing could ever come from his thoughts, even if he looked incredibly dreamy today at the décor store.

A part of her thought it might be best to keep her comments to herself and not tell him that the feelings he had were mutual. She couldn't stop her wandering eyes from landing on him though.

But if she did bring it up, would that make it more real? What would he say back? That he just had an attraction to her, but he couldn't imagine anything more. Did she want anything more? She wasn't sure. She'd played the pros and cons in her mind over the last two days, and again as she stared at him standing right in front of her.

Ryan finally interrupted her thoughts. "What are you looking for today in the Sandy Cove Boutique?" he asked.

Heather looked into her basket to remember what she had even put in there. "Oh, just a couple of candles, some brownies I'm going to make for Penny, and a few other things. I really love fall decorations, and when there's a sale, I can't help myself."

"I bet Penny will appreciate the brownies," he said with a smile. Ryan shifted in his stance and Heather wondered what he was still doing there talking to her. The conversation was slowly fading, and there wasn't a reason for him to keep talking to her. Was he waiting to say something?

"So, Heather, I—" he started to say but was interrupted by a loud woman's voice coming behind them.

"Well, if it isn't Ryan Almada!" Her mother's voice let out a chipper squeal as she rounded the corner to be next to them.

Heather almost groaned. Ryan was just about to say something and she was desperate to know what it was.

Ryan politely smiled at Heather's mom. "Hello, Mrs. Pearle. You look as radiant as ever." He really knew how to lay on the charm.

Heather's mom blushed. "You are the sweetest. It has been too long. How have you been? How is attorney life?"

“It’s been good, nothing to complain about. Hoping to get some cases won here soon so I can take a break for the holidays, but we’ll see.”

“How exciting. The life of an attorney,” she said with a dreamy tone to her voice. “I bet your mother is so proud of you. And loves that you’re so close to home! You truly could have gone anywhere.”

“Oh, I know. I’m reminded of that every time I talk with my college friends.” Ryan laughed. Heather could tell he was sick of hearing about that. “But it’s good to be near family, and I wasn’t made for big city life. I like it here. I can shop local.” He smiled and raised his basket to signify what he was currently doing.

“You truly are such a gentleman. Any woman would be lucky to have you. Have you locked down that special someone yet?”

Heather’s eyes almost bulged out of her head. “Mom!” she whispered.

“What?” Candace asked innocently. “It’s just a question. He’s one of the most eligible men in the area, and I’ve got daughters.” She winked at Heather.

Ryan laughed, and Heather was mortified. “Oh my gosh, Mom!” she replied again, her face beet red. If her mom only knew, she thought to herself.

“It’s okay, Heather. Moms have to do what moms have to do.” He laughed, then turned back to Candace. “Not yet, ma’am, but one day. I always appreciate people keeping an eye out for me.” He took a deep breath and softly sighed. “Well, I better keep shopping, but it was nice to run into you both. I hope you have a great rest of your day.”

“It was great to see you. Please tell your mom I said hello.” Candace smiled.

“Will do.” Ryan turned to Heather and looked her right in the eyes. “Goodbye, Heather. I’ll see you around.” Just the way he said it brought a chill to her body. All she could do was smile and nod back.

Ryan moved towards another aisle, and Heather quickly set the basket down on the aisle and headed towards the exit of the store.

“Heather, aren’t you going to buy those?” her mom asked from behind her.

“No, I changed my mind,” she yelled back as she ran out the door. She couldn’t take accidentally running into Ryan again after that interaction. She couldn’t believe her mother would say those things. But she actually shouldn’t be surprised. Her mom had no filter and was determined to marry

her daughters off to the best bachelors in town.

She raced out the door with her mom close behind.

“Oh, Heather, don’t get so embarrassed,” Candace teased as she finally caught up to her daughter. The two walked side by side down the sidewalk, passing by the shops of Main Street. Even though Heather was frazzled, she still had enough time to gaze at the lights shining extra bright through the cloudy day.

“Don’t you know Ryan well? He is Penny’s brother. He should be able to take my pandering.”

“It’s not that, Mom. It’s just—I don’t know.” Heather walked in silence, hoping her mom would change the subject.

“Heather, you have to get more comfortable with men if you’re ever going to find a husband. You’re getting close to thirty years old. Your prospects in a small town start to dwindle by then.” Her mom spoke with such confidence.

“I am comfortable around men. I just haven’t found the right one,” she rebutted back.

“It’s because you’re so picky. You have such high expectations. How can any man ever meet that? Think about your dad for a moment—”

“Dad? I would rather not think about Dad when I’m thinking about my future husband.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Her mom rolled her eyes. “I meant that your dad is the perfect man for me, but he is in no way perfect. There are things about him that drive me crazy, like I’m going to pull my hair out crazy, but I love him deeply.”

Heather used to love listening to her parents talk about why they loved each other. She would secretly watch them from the stairwell when she was supposed to be in bed. They would laugh at the coffee table while they drank their decaf coffee before bed. And sometimes, her parents would pull out the record player and play old Frank Sinatra records while they danced in the living room. No wonder she had such a taste for dreamy romance.

“I know, Mom, but I at least want to be in love with someone. Is that okay? I haven’t found that yet.” Heather had a curiosity in her tone. She couldn’t tell herself, but the image of Ryan laughing in the store, and also catching her as he almost plowed into her running into the inn, came to mind. She tried to shake off the memories.

As she walked and listened to her mom give life lessons about men, she

realized she was in big trouble. Her mind couldn't stop going back to Ryan Almada.

CHAPTER 10

RYAN

The sun had finally peeked its way through the darkness after days of snowy weather and clouds. Ryan was thankful that at least yesterday, he was able to be outside without getting soaking wet, although the snow had already started to melt everywhere on Main Street.

After work yesterday, Ryan desperately needed to do something fun after days of dreary weather. He had put off buying items for his front newly remodeled entryway, and it felt like a good day to shop around on the Sandpiper Cove Main Street.

Although he was a social guy, he also enjoyed having some alone time besides just being at his house. Shopping was one of those activities that he loved doing by himself. He could take as long as he wanted at the grocery store, and he could read a couple of pages of the books he was interested in at the bookstore without anyone complaining they were bored and wanted him to hurry up. It was one of those adult tasks he thought would be boring as a kid but ended up being more enjoyable than he thought.

He was glad he decided to go out because he was able to run into Heather.

He had wondered after his moment of confession at the Sandpiper Inn what she had thought of everything. Had she been freaked out by his admission of his attraction to her? She didn't seem bothered by it, but maybe she had a good poker face.

Her smile towards him as he walked out of the inn that night seemed genuine. He had spent the evening on an emotional rollercoaster of feeling ridiculous that he put himself out there like that, but also a relief that he finally admitted it.

He hoped the feelings would subside now that he verbalized them. Maybe it had been one of those secret crushes because it feels forbidden, but then once you move from entertaining the thought to actually pursuing it, the attraction leaves.

He convinced himself that would be the case. He was wrong.

The moment he saw Heather in the boutique, his heart fluttered. After he crashed into her, again, she looked unphased. He had almost expected her to run away or make up an excuse not to be around him, but she seemed comfortable talking with him; it was almost like she was happy to see him

too.

He went back and forth in his mind as they talked at the boutique, wondering if he should say something about the other night. Penny's interruption could have been for the better, but he felt a lot of uncertainty. How did Heather feel?

Ryan mentally begged her to say something as they talked, but when she seemed at a loss for words, he decided he would bring it up.

Although he was bummed by Heather's mom's interruption, he wondered if it was a sign. Maybe they shouldn't talk about what happened? Was God directing him a different way? Was he blocking the possibilities for a reason?

He knew nothing could happen with Heather; Penny would probably lose her mind at the thought of it. But he wasn't quite sure what to do with the emotions that he was feeling.

Now, Ryan sat in his office as he drank his third cup of low-quality coffee for the day and wondered.

A knock on the door brought his attention back to reality. Brooke stood in the doorway, examining Ryan intensely.

"What?" Ryan asked innocently. He was aware that she had something to say by the look on her face and assumed it would be accusatory.

"What are you thinking about right now?" she asked. "I know it's not work, so don't try and say that it is."

That was the downfall of working every day with one of your best friends. They could read you like a book. She would know if something was off.

"Nothing." He knew he wouldn't be able to hide anything from her if he told the truth about what he was really thinking about, or more like *who* he was really thinking about. She'd be able to read right through him.

Brooke scoffed. She walked into Ryan's office and sat down in front of his desk. She slowly moved a little Santa Claus figurine he had placed on his desk. "Don't offend me," she replied. "We've been friends longer than that. And don't forget, I can read through your lawyer poker face." She raised her eyebrows at him almost as a threat.

Ryan sighed. "It's really nothing. I'm just processing through something and trying to decide what the best course of action is going to be." He thought if he made it sound boring, she would lose interest. He should have known better.

"Let's talk about it. I'm great at coming up with solutions," she said with

a perk in her tone.

Ryan stared at her for a moment. He never liked to lie, especially to Brooke. And he always told her about the women in his life; she was great at providing insight. But this felt different, and for some reason, he was more nervous to share it.

“Okay, there’s this girl…” he started out.

“There always is,” she teased back.

Ryan gave her a stern look that meant if she kept this up, he wouldn’t say any more. She got the hint and ran her fingers across her lips in the zip-the-lips motion.

He continued, “There’s this girl that I have known for a long time, but we haven’t really had any type of relationship. But now, all of a sudden, she’s caught my attention. And she seems to be everywhere I turn. It doesn’t matter what I do, I can’t stop thinking about her. I don’t *think* I have feelings for her. I honestly hope that I don’t. But I can’t seem to deny it anymore, and it’s annoying me. I’m not sure what to do from here.”

“Oh man, are you in love with me?” Brooke gasped, fake surprised.

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Can you be serious for a moment?”

Brooke laughed. “Sorry, yes. I’ve never seen you like this. It’s interesting.” She leaned back in her chair and examined Ryan further. “You are normally quick to ask a girl out if you’re interested. What’s the holdup? Why can’t you do that with this girl?”

“It’s just the nature of the relationship that has me questioning it. It’s one where if I did do something, and it didn’t work out—which we know it normally doesn’t—” He tried to catch Brooke’s witty comment before she could get to it.

“If it doesn’t work out, it would be a bigger mess than it normally is,” he finished and looked at Brooke.

She stared at him for a moment longer than he expected without saying anything. “Who is it?” was all she could say.

Ryan took a deep breath and faltered a bit, trying to decide what to say.

“Who is it?” Brooke asked again. “You are never this shy about who you’re interested in. Is it bad? Is it a married woman?” Brooke’s eyes got big at the thought.

“No! Of course not!” Ryan almost yelled.

“Well, then tell me who it is or else I’m going to keep assuming the worst.”

“It’s Heather, Penny’s best friend,” he finally blurted out.

Brooke’s mouth slightly dropped and then she pursed her lips together tightly, trying not to laugh.

“I know, I know.” Ryan shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair.

“That’s an issue.” She giggled. “I mean, that’s your sister’s best friend. Don’t get me wrong, I know of Heather slightly from just crossing paths at Almada gatherings. She’s stunning. And super kind—she’s got that ‘little kid schoolteacher’ vibe going for her. But I have to say, I’m surprised. She didn’t really seem like the type you normally go for.”

“I guess that’s true,” Ryan admitted. He hadn’t really thought about that.

“She actually has a level head on her shoulders and is doing something with her life,” Brooke teased.

Ryan rolled his eyes again. He wasn’t going to fight that though. “There’s just something about her I can’t shake. And I’ve tried to keep myself distracted around her so I don’t do anything impulsive that I’ll regret, but it’s getting harder to do that.”

“I’ve really never seen you like this before. Have you told Penny?” she asked.

“Ha!” Ryan laughed. “Yeah, there’s no way that’s happening any time soon. She’s been through enough. The last thing she needs to know is that I have a thing for her friend.”

“Do you think that’s true, that you actually have feelings for Heather?”

Ryan thought about it for a moment. “I’ve tried to deny it and say that I don’t, but I can’t get her out of my head. The more I talk about it, the more I realize it’s not just attraction like I thought. For example, I ran into her at the store yesterday and we talked for a bit. And after she left, I kept looking for her around every corner and secretly hoped that I would run into her again as I continued to shop. If it were any other girl, I would have gotten over it right after I saw her. But it carried with me. It was weird.”

Brooke had a soft smirk appear on her face as Ryan talked.

“What?” he asked sheepishly.

“You like this girl,” she said confidently.

Ryan felt himself initially become defensive; he wanted to argue and say that he didn’t. But that gut clench he always felt when he was about to lie happened. Instead, he sat there quietly, accepting the truth in front of him.

He did have feelings for Heather, and there was nothing he could do

about it now.

“Does she like you?” Brooke asked next, filling the silence.

“I don’t know.” Ryan shook his head. “I told her that I was attracted to her, because she accused me of acting weird around her.” Ryan chuckled a bit as he recalled the memory. It was a fiery and bold side of Heather he hadn’t seen before.

“And I have no idea how she felt about that, because we keep getting interrupted every time we’re about to talk about it more.” A hint of annoyance came from Ryan’s voice.

“So you *are* secretly trying to do something about it,” Brooke identified.

“I don’t know,” Ryan responded. “I don’t feel like I can ask her out, not without Penny’s permission. But I think I really want to... It has started to bother me a lot, if I’m honest.”

“I can tell,” Brooke said. “I think you should first figure out how Heather feels about you ‘half’ coming onto her...”

Ryan laughed.

“And then go from there. Because if she doesn’t feel that same attraction to you or reciprocate how you’re feeling, then you have your answer. You won’t have to worry about it anymore.” Brooke shrugged as if it was all no big deal.

“But what if she does feel the same way? And we both have these slight feelings for each other. What are we supposed to do then?” He genuinely wanted an answer. He was lost.

“Then you *talk with Heather* and figure out the next step. You don’t have to decide all of this on your own. She might have some opinions about it too, you know.”

Ryan nodded. That was true. What if she wanted to go to Penny right away? There was nothing he could do to stop that. And maybe if it came from Heather, it would be less stressful for Penny? He wasn’t sure. He just knew that if Penny wasn’t on board with the possibility of the two of them, then he couldn’t go through with it. They could try and hide their dating, if that’s what Heather wanted, and wait until they knew for sure if there was anything actually happening between the two of them. But would Penny be livid when she found out later? Probably. And he couldn’t lie to her. But what if she never asked? The possibilities seemed endless.

Ryan’s head started to hurt with so many scenarios running around in his mind. “Thanks for talking. I’m not sure if it helped or made me more

stressed, but at least I know what I have to do next.”

Brooke slapped her hands on the arms of the chair and stood up. “That’s why I’m here. To give you more headaches but at least give you some action steps.”

Ryan laughed. That was the most accurate thing she had ever said and perfectly described their relationship.

Brooke left him alone with his thoughts. He stared out the window and wondered what the best course of action would be next. Should he try and call her? He felt like he’d rather talk with her in person about it. He was a lawyer, so he thought he could at least read people pretty well.

He looked at the time and saw it was three o’clock in the afternoon. She would be done with school right now, but she usually didn’t leave her classroom until around four thirty; that gave her time to work on paperwork while the kids weren’t there. He couldn’t believe he knew that.

He decided to be impulsive and just go for it. He stood up, grabbed his jacket and keys, and headed for the door.

CHAPTER 11

HEATHER

The students' Santa Claus handprints hung on the drawstring around the classroom. Heather admired them as she hung the last picture up so they could all dry. The students loved being creative, and Heather used every excuse she could to make holiday-themed projects. They were the perfect combination.

Heather loved decorating her classroom for the holidays, especially Christmas. She had a small Christmas tree in the corner that the kids were able to help decorate, paper snowflakes hanging from the ceiling in the reading corner, and even Christmas lights wrapped around her desk.

She made her way over to her desk to work on the final preparations for tomorrow's class. The school put on a holiday program every year for the parents, and her students were so excited to participate. Heather always helped on the committee to run the program. Tomorrow they were rehearsing her students' parts as the elves.

She was so excited to see them in their little costumes acting out the story. She always loved it when the kids got super excited to see their loved ones in the audience and couldn't stop themselves from waving to them.

Heather looked over the schedule and checked her watch. It was three forty-five, almost time to check out for the day.

Heather saw a shadow out of the corner of her eye and realized she wasn't alone. She looked over and saw one of the second-grade teachers and her friend, Mr. Thomas, standing in the doorway.

"Hey, Greg, how are you?" She smiled politely.

Greg was only a couple of years older than her and one of her good friends at the school. Although Heather got along with basically everyone, she did have a small group of friends that she ate lunch with, and occasionally, they grabbed dinner together after school. Greg was a part of that group.

"Just another day in paradise," he said with a smirk.

"Oh no, another bad day?" Heather sympathized.

Greg walked into the room and lounged at one of the desks in front of Heather's desk. "That same kid is just putting me through it. I feel bad for the kid. He's clearly got a lot going on in life, but I'm exhausted." He sighed. "How am I going to get through the rest of the year?"

Heather scrunched her nose as she thought. She had experienced a challenging kid in class the last couple of years, but thankfully had a great group this year. She knew how tough and mentally draining that could be.

“A lot of caffeine and empathy.” She kindly smiled.

Greg huffed and nodded. “Seriously, though.” He looked down at what Heather was working on. “Are you getting excited for the play next week?”

Heather eagerly nodded. “You know it’s always one of my favorite parts of the year. The kids in their little costumes are so cute. Especially the little snowmen. I can hardly stand it.”

Greg laughed. “It’s always something, that’s for sure.” He paused for a moment and looked as if he was contemplating something.

“What’s on your mind, Greg?” she asked.

Greg took a deep breath. “I was wondering if you would want to go get a bite to eat or something tonight? Are you free? I know you’ve been helping your friend Penny out a lot in the evenings.”

“Uh, yeah, I actually did have plans to go over there this evening. Did I tell you we’re planning a wedding in only a little over a month? It’s insane. So much to do and prepare. Tonight, we’re talking about food options. My favorite, of course.” She smiled. “But thanks for the offer. Maybe we can grab the others and go a different night. Does that work?”

Greg looked slightly disappointed. “Yeah, dinner with others a different time would be fine.” The smile on his face seemed forced as he stood up.

Heather couldn’t tell what was wrong and then suddenly realized what just happened. She instantly felt embarrassed that she completely misunderstood what he was saying. He wanted to get dinner with *her*.

She had always assumed maybe Greg was interested in her, but it had been two years without him doing anything about it, so she thought maybe her radar was off.

She felt bad saying no, but she really didn’t feel that way about him; he was just a friend. Her mom’s voice echoed in her thoughts; was she being too picky? Greg was a nice guy and all, but she didn’t have that butterfly attraction to him.

Greg looked like he was about to leave, and Heather felt bad, like she needed to say something.

“Greg, I—” She stopped as she noticed another shadow enter her classroom doorway. She turned and her heart leapt from her chest.

“Ryan? What are you doing here?” she asked. She hoped that didn’t

sound too rude.

Ryan looked between Greg and Heather. “Hi, sorry. I hope I’m not interrupting anything.” He had a fake naive smirk on his face, which made Heather wonder if maybe he had heard what just happened.

“Nope, not at all,” Greg said as he cleared his throat and looked between the two of them.

Heather felt flustered and she quickly tried to find something to say. “Uh—Greg, this is Ryan Almada. I’m not sure if you guys have met.”

Ryan reached his hand out towards Greg. “I think we have, but just in case we haven’t.” He flashed his business smile in Greg’s direction. Greg shook his hand with slight intimidation on his face.

“Nice to meet you. I think we met at the museum’s opening. But only briefly.”

“Ah yes, that sounds about right.”

They all stood in silence for a moment. Heather’s insides felt like they were going to explode.

“Well, I’m headed out for the day. I’ll talk to you later, Heather.” Greg nodded in her direction and then Ryan’s before he walked out the door.

Heather smiled politely and watched him leave. She turned to Ryan, beyond confused about what he was doing there.

Ryan looked towards her. “Hi,” was all he said.

“Hi?” she asked, confused.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to drop in unexpectedly and interrupt.” That smirk came back again.

She gave him a slightly annoyed and sassy look. “Did you hear that conversation?” she asked.

“I mean, maybe a little bit. I was going to turn into the room, and I heard voices so I wanted to wait. But then I figured I better save you from whatever was about to happen next.” His voice broke slightly as he tried to hold back a laugh.

Heather shook her head and tried not to laugh herself. “I’m glad my embarrassment could provide you some entertainment today.”

Ryan laughed out loud this time. “We’ve all been there, it’s fine. You let him down very easy, even if you didn’t know you were doing it.”

Heather shook her head, embarrassed. This was not a good look for her.

“But really, what are you doing here?” she asked. He still hadn’t explained himself.

Ryan's face turned a little more serious as he looked intensely into Heather's eyes. "I came to talk with you. We keep getting interrupted."

Heather's heart started to beat fast in her chest. There was only one thing they kept getting interrupted about, and that was talking about what happened at the Sandpiper Inn a couple of nights ago. She was instantly hyper-aware of how loud her breaths were.

"Oh, okay." She wasn't sure if he needed her to say something, but it just slipped out. She was nervous.

"That night, when I said everything I did, I was just being direct and honest. I didn't want to lie to you or make you believe there was something wrong with you or something I was upset with. I figured I would just share about this attraction I was feeling, and maybe that would clear the air between us."

Heather noticed how he emphasized attraction when he spoke. Even hearing him say that again gave her butterflies.

"But then I found myself even more distracted the last few days wondering what you were thinking. And I almost brought it up the other day ___"

"But my mom," Heather said and rolled her eyes.

Ryan softly chuckled. "Yes, your mom. But that's okay. Maybe that wasn't the public place to talk about this. There's just... something about you, Heather, that I can't shake. I've dated women before, but nothing has felt like this. And, what I thought was just an attraction has seemed to grow into something else. There's a deeper interest here."

Heather couldn't believe what was happening. What was he saying? Did he like her? As in, wanted to date her? She could not believe that.

Ryan continued. This time, Heather should have probably chimed in, but she was too frazzled.

"I understand if you aren't feeling the same way. I'm your best friend's brother, and that's a lot. Trust me, I've pondered that problem for a while and if I'm honest, it's the main reason I've tried to keep myself away from you. If Penny wasn't a factor, I would have asked you out already."

He spoke so confidently. Heather thought she was going to pass out. *Ask her out?? Her? Heather Pearle?*

Heather had thought of Penny, too. She was happy to at least hear Ryan cared about that aspect. What would Penny say? Would she love the idea or completely hate it? She felt like she knew her friend well, but she wasn't sure

what would happen there.

“So, all that to say, in my long monologue...” Ryan rubbed his hand through his hair, clearly a little nervous. Heather had never seen him nervous. “I’m wondering what you’re thinking. Is this just a one-way street? And if so, and you have no interest in me whatsoever, I will leave here and never mention it again. I’ll pretend that it didn’t happen and you don’t have to worry about things being awkward as we work together for this wedding, or any other family function you come to. I promise it will be fine.”

Now he waited and stared at her, forcing her to talk. Heather hesitated, not quite sure how honest to be. She stared at Ryan, standing completely vulnerable and real in front of her; it gave her the courage to be authentic too.

She took a deep breath and stared into his eyes. They looked perfect. “You’re not alone in how you’re feeling. I really appreciate what you said at the inn and how honest you’ve been. I’m sorry I never got a chance to respond. That probably would have driven me crazy too if the roles were reversed.” She giggled.

Ryan smiled and his face slowly relaxed.

“You’ve always seemed like this perfect guy that had it all together. You had beautiful girlfriends, a nice job, and, from what it sounds like, a very nicely decorated house,” she teased.

Ryan laughed.

“And I couldn’t believe you would ever be interested in me. I’m—I’m just Heather.”

Ryan quickly shook his head. “There is no *just* about you, Heather. You are an incredibly beautiful woman, inside and out.”

Heather blushed. He really did know how to charm a woman.

“That’s kind of you. But yes, I have noticed you more lately too. And I’m glad it’s not just me feeling these things. I’m also not quite sure where they are leading, or what to do about them. Penny is absolutely a huge factor. I don’t want to lie to her, but what if she’s mad about it? I don’t want to stress her out.”

“I agree,” Ryan said. “So what if, just hear me out—” Heather was intrigued.

“What if we just go on a few dates, just to see if there really is anything happening here before we tell Penny. It’s not lying to her if she doesn’t ask, and I would rather not tell her and make a big deal about it if we don’t feel this is going to go anywhere. What do you think?” He looked sincere.

Heather thought about it for a moment. She really wanted to see where this went. The idea of hanging out with Ryan, just the two of them, sent shivers down her body. She enjoyed spending time with him, and there was still this mysterious charm about him that she wanted to know more about.

“One question before I agree... Do you think this will actually go somewhere?” She knew it was a broad question and there was no way to know. But if she was going to do this, she didn’t want it to be just because Ryan was like twenty percent interested.

Ryan slowly walked towards Heather and grabbed her hand into his. The move made Heather feel like she was going to have a heart attack. She took a breath, relaxed her hand, and let it settle into his.

“If I’m honest, I do think it will go somewhere. I’ve never felt this interested and excited about the possibility of something before.”

Heather nodded her head, the heat of a blush on her face. “One date, and then we’ll tell Penny. I know we both love her and want to be truthful. Plus, she’d kill us if we were together for a long time without her knowing.”

Ryan nodded and smiled. “Yes, you’re right. One date.”

Heather smiled back. She would never tell him how unbelievably excited she was. And beyond nervous.

“What are you doing tomorrow night?” he asked.

“It looks like I’ll be seeing you.” She smiled.

“I’ll pick you up from the school here at four-thirty tomorrow. Does that work? We’ll grab an early dinner?” he asked.

Heather nodded. Ryan slightly rubbed his finger on her hand and backed away. “Sounds perfect. I’ll see you tomorrow, Heather.”

He turned and left the room. Heather had to grab the side of the desk to catch her breath. What just happened? She was completely enamored with Ryan and prayed that tomorrow would get here as soon as it could.

CHAPTER 12

RYAN

It was as if the universe knew that today was a big day for Ryan. The sun was shining bright and clear, with the only clouds in the sky being white and fluffy. It was forty degrees, which felt incredible for a beginning of December day in Maine—the perfect winter day.

Ryan drove on his way to the school to pick up Heather for their date. He checked the clock on his car; he was still going to be about fifteen minutes early. He had tried to delay himself as long as he could, but he found himself filled with too much anticipation for tonight.

All day long he kept checking his watch, desperately trying to keep himself preoccupied with meetings and paperwork, hoping to make the time go faster. Brooke finally stopped by his office to yell at him to just go because he was driving her crazy with the noise of his desk rattling because he was shaking his leg so much.

Ryan stopped and got some coffee on the way, trying to pass the time. It clearly still wasn't enough. He had never been this excited about a date before. And if he was honest, he was a little nervous.

Heather wasn't like any of the girls he'd dated before. Most of the girls he dated were used to going out all the time with guys. They were obsessed with their image and social media presence, so they wanted to take pictures all night, which got annoying. And the worst part for him, as a busy attorney, was that they tended to be more needy for his attention.

They would call all the time and get mad at him if he didn't respond to a text within an hour. It became more about their insecurities impacting the relationship than the two of them slowly being able to enjoy time together and get to know each other. He just wanted to have fun with someone, for it to be casual and not to be so serious all the time.

One of the things he liked about Heather was that she was so secure in herself already. She didn't seem like the needy type who was going to obsess about what he was doing at all times; she had a busy life of her own. She had her own passions and interests and seemed content if she was going to spend a night by herself. She was also kind, sweet, joyful, and had a relaxed sense about her.

She also knew what she wanted to do in life and didn't seem like she was going to settle for anyone; he witnessed that yesterday in her classroom. Ryan

smiled at the memory. There was a maturity about her that drew him in, even though she was a year younger than him. His mom always said that women matured faster than men, so maybe she was two steps ahead of him already.

Ryan pulled into a parking spot in front of the school and figured he'd sit and wait for a while. When they had texted last night, she had planned to come out and meet him there in the parking lot. Now, he just had to wait.

One of his tricks to avoid the awkwardness of small talk on dates, and meetings, was to come up with questions and topic points ahead of time. That way, if there was a long moment of silence, he had something up his sleeve to ask about to avoid him becoming too frazzled.

He ran through some questions that he could ask.

Who's in her family?

Did she always want to be a teacher?

What's her favorite piece of history? He remembered that she and her dad loved learning about history together.

Does she want to stay in Sandpiper Cove for the rest of her life?

He continued thinking through the questions and keeping an eye on the door he was sure Heather would eventually come out of.

Ryan's phone rang and he looked to see his brother, Brent, calling.

"Hey, Brent, how's it going?" he asked.

"Hey, it's good. I just wanted to check in and see if you were going to be at the inn tonight?" Ryan could hear a ton of loud noises in the background. It sounded like a construction site. Brent must have been finishing up at a job site.

"No, I wasn't planning on it today. Why, what's up?"

"It's not a big deal, but Mom wanted some of the outdoor furniture brought into the shed for the season since they have already started to collect a good amount of snow. I didn't get to it fast enough this year. Drew isn't going to be around. He needs to get home early to help Casey with the baby. So, I figured with all the wedding planning and such, you might be around and could help me real quick."

It was still weird to hear anyone in the family reference a baby; it seemed unreal that now Casey and Drew were parents. "It's going to take some getting used to, hearing Drew and baby in the same sentence." Ryan laughed.

Brent chuckled. "I know. A couple weeks in and I'm still not used to it."

"Sorry I won't be around to help. I've got something right now, but if you're going to be around later, I might be able to stop by and help real

quick. If you think it won't take long." Ryan never wanted to not help out his family, and he would be able to stop by and see Penny too. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized it might not be a good idea to see Penny right after his date with Heather. Would she be able to tell?

"Text me when you're done, and I'll let you know if I'm still around," Brent said. "What do you have going on tonight anyway?"

Ryan panicked for a moment and then realized he didn't necessarily have to lie. "I uh—actually have a date tonight. We're going out to dinner."

He could almost tell Brent's ears perked up right over the phone. "Oh really? A date? Anyone I know?"

Ryan swallowed. "Um, not really," was all he decided to say.

Brent chuckled. "Okay, Mr. Secretive. You have a nice time on your *date*, and I'll talk with you later."

Ryan assumed Brent wouldn't think twice about him being on a date. Ironically, it wasn't Brent's first time calling right when Ryan was about to meet a girl for dinner. But if he only knew who Ryan was actually meeting.

Just then the door to the school swung open and Heather walked out. She glanced around the parking lot, searching for Ryan's car. She wrapped her coat a little tighter around herself as she walked towards the parking lot.

"Sounds good, I'll talk to you later, Brent." Ryan quickly hung up the phone. He didn't want to give Brent any clues that Heather was about to get into his vehicle.

Ryan knew that the two could have just met somewhere for dinner, but he liked to be a gentleman and pick up the lady whenever he could; something his dad always taught him. Obviously if they weren't comfortable with it and wanted to drive themselves, or if he was coming from a meeting, then it would be fine. But he always liked to offer.

Heather caught his eye and started to walk to his car. She could hardly make eye contact and kept looking down or around outside, anything but to look directly at him. She was nervous; it made Ryan smile.

The long walk gave Ryan a moment to admire how beautiful she was. She wore leggings with short fashion boots, and a tank top with a beautiful fall cardigan over it. Her hair was down and curly, and he could tell she hardly had any makeup on. She was so naturally beautiful.

As she got closer to the car, he jumped out and walked to the other side, opening the door for her right before she got to it.

"Hi, may I?" he asked with a smile on his face, holding the door open

before her.

“Wow, five-star treatment, I’m impressed,” she said with a wide grin on her face. She nodded a thank-you as she got into the car, and Ryan softly shut the door behind her.

He quickly, almost running, went back to his door and got into the car. Heather had already fastened her seatbelt and situated her purse and belongings on the floor in front of her.

“How’s it going?” he asked, trying to sound casual, but a little squeak in his voice came out. He cleared his throat to try and cover it up. These nerves were not like him.

“It’s good.” She grinned back, pretending not to notice. “It was a long day at work today.”

He understood that. He wondered if it was for the same reason as his long day. “I hear ya. Wednesdays are always hard. It’s the middle of the week where usually nothing exciting happens.”

“*Usually*,” Heather teased. “But I guess today was a good exception.”

Ryan smiled as he backed the car out of the spot and headed towards the main road. He was excited for a little bit of a road trip to go to dinner, the reason why they left so early. Heather had brought up her nervousness about getting dinner somewhere in Sandpiper Cove just in case anyone they knew saw them. They still wanted to keep it a secret until they decided if it was going to progress into something more.

There was always that tagline that both of them ended with. “If everything went well, or if they wanted to move forward in their relationship.” He couldn’t tell where it came from and if it was just a protective factor, or what.

They decided on dinner at a French bistro that was close to Ryan’s work, only about twenty minutes out of the city, which gave them plenty of time to talk on the way. Ryan quickly went through his questions again, worried that maybe he hadn’t thought of enough.

“How was work today?” Heather asked. Ryan wondered if maybe she had thought of questions ahead of time too.

“It was decent. Like I said, slow, but I had something to look forward to, so that made it better.” He could see Heather look down and try to hide her blush from the corner of his eye. “There have been a lot of court preparations for trial the last couple of days, so I’m just tired of all the paperwork. It’s my least favorite part of my job.” That’s what he had paralegals for, is what he

wanted to say.

“Agreed. I wish I could just hang out with the kids all day and not have to assign any homework or things I actually have to grade and keep track of. Let’s just do the fun things. That’s what I wish I could say.”

“What made you want to be a teacher?” he asked.

“That’s a good question. I really enjoy kids. But also, I love watching them learn and try new things. I like watching them fail, which might sound weird.” She giggled. “But I like it when things don’t go the way they thought they should, but they get back up and try again. It honestly inspires me. They are more resilient than we give them credit for. And when they finally get something that they’ve been working towards, the joy and excitement they feel is contagious. It’s such an honor to be a part of that journey with them,” Heather said with a smile.

She continued talking about some of the areas in her job she loved, and disliked, the most. Ryan watched her and couldn’t help but admire the kindness in her voice as she talked about the kids. Her heart was so genuine. It was adorable. She was thrilled about the Holiday program coming up; she spent almost five minutes talking about it and explaining all the different parts and roles the kids had.

He might have gotten bored if anyone else was talking about it, but she made it exciting. He thought maybe he should check it out, even though he had no students there.

“What’s your favorite part of your job?” her voice interrupted his thoughts.

“What?” He tried to come back to reality.

“You said your least favorite part of your job was the paperwork, so what’s your favorite part?” she asked again.

Ryan thought about that for a moment. “Well, I think that most of my colleagues would say that winning a case is their favorite part,” he teased.

“Understandable.” Heather laughed.

“But for me, okay, this might sound really lame—but I love the personal growth that happens in the courtroom.”

Heather made a surprised face at that answer. “What do you mean?”

Ryan thought about how to articulate what he was thinking. “In every case, you could argue that there is always someone that’s right and someone that’s wrong. There is a winner and a loser. And while I can agree with that, I think there is more that happens deeper within court cases. Because yes, you

might win your case and get justice for something, or against someone, who wronged you, but I love to see the empathy that was hopefully gained from the situation.”

Heather looked more confused, but like she was trying to track what he was saying.

He continued, “For example, I have a court case right now where someone I think is pretty prideful and arrogant is going after this older guy for a contract breach. He wants to take this guy for all his money because he thinks he got screwed over. Well, I’m really praying and hoping that during the trial, he can see this man as someone who just wants to do right by his family and, honestly, seems scared and sad.”

Ryan paused for a moment, wondering if he was boring Heather yet. Instead, she was looking intensely at him, soaking in every word. Ryan continued.

“Because there is always more going on in a story than what we say. People make bad decisions that stem from pain, sadness, love, anger, and such. There’s always more going on, and I love it when everyone can see what the root of that decision was, and it hopefully makes them a kinder and more empathetic person.

“Now, I understand that bad guys do bad things and sometimes the situation just feels heavy and sad. There can’t always be a learned lesson or happy ending. But when I do get one of these cases where there’s a learning and growth moment for someone, those are my favorites.”

Ryan stopped talking and waited for Heather to respond. He started to feel self-conscious as he waited. “I know that might sound lame—” he started to say, but Heather quickly interrupted.

“Not at all! That was beautiful, Ryan. Sorry, I was just at a loss for words. I think that’s a really mature and wonderful way to look at it. I’m sure trials and cases are not easy to walk through.”

Ryan shook his head. “No, it’s definitely not. But hey, I’m not taking ridiculous cases in New York and defending people that I can’t stand all the time, so I’ve got that going for me.” He laughed.

Heather laughed too. “That is true.”

The two pulled into the parking lot of the French bistro restaurant. Everything was lit with sparkling Christmas lights and holiday décor; he could tell the holidays were right around the corner.

Ryan parked in a spot and took a deep breath. He wasn’t sure why

parking made it feel more real. They had been talking just fine the whole way there. He looked over at Heather and she sat and stared at him. “Ready?” she asked with a softness to her voice.

“Ready,” he said with a smile.

CHAPTER 13

HEATHER

The fireplaces inside of the restaurant felt wonderful. She and Ryan couldn't have picked a better spot for their first date on such a perfect winter evening. The Christmas lights from outside made their way inside and lit up the whole restaurant. They had Christmas music playing in the background, and all the staff had little holiday-themed stickers on their nametags.

Heather looked over the menu for a fourth time, still trying to decide what to get. One of the worst parts of dates was deciding what to eat. Should she get something cheap in case the date offered to pay? She wouldn't want them to think she was high maintenance and liked all these expensive bougie foods. She really was very happy with a hamburger and fries.

But she also didn't want something that was too fancy and difficult to eat and made conversation tough. She once splurged and ordered a lobster, and that felt impossible to eat while having small talk.

It was as if Ryan was reading her mind from the other side of the table. He peeked over his menu and smiled. "You can get whatever you would like; I'm paying."

Heather blushed. "Thank you. Everything looks so good I'm having a hard time deciding."

"What's your usual go-to?" he asked as he set his menu on the table. "Mine is usually a steak with potatoes, but I love some well-done tacos if they have them. Not like cheaper tacos, but actual carne asada with cabbage, fancy cheese and sauce type of tacos."

"Wow, you really have that all thought out," she said and giggled. "Um, I would say for me I usually like a rice dish, like Thai food or something, or a burger and fries will hit the spot." Heather looked down at the menu.

"I think I'm going to go with a French dip sandwich. That sounds fantastic. And it has French in the name so that feels right." She shrugged.

"I actually thought the same thing." He closed his menu.

A young woman came over to their table holding two water glasses. Her dark hair was in a short bob cut and she had a ton of eye makeup on. Heather thought she looked like she could be French. She checked her name tag, Anastasia. Maybe, she thought.

"Hi there, my name is Anastasia. I'll be helping you out tonight." She placed the glasses down carefully and gave a smile. "Is there anything I can

get you guys to start?”

“I’ll stick with my water, and I think we’re both ready to order.” He turned to Heather for confirmation, and she nodded in approval.

“Awesome, lay it on me.” Anastasia pulled out her notepad.

“I’ll have a French dip sandwich, fries are great, and a side of ranch. Plus, can we order the breadbasket for an appetizer?”

Heather’s heart swooned; the way to get to her heart was definitely through an appetizer. First, it was picking her up for their date that got him some brownie points, with the addition of opening her door, and now, ordering an appetizer? He was off to a good start.

“And what can I get for you?” The waitress looked at Heather.

“I will also have the French dip sandwich with fries, but can I have honey mustard for my dipping sauce?” she asked.

“You sure can.” Anastasia nodded. “I will get these orders in and be back in a bit with your breadbasket.”

“Thank you.” Ryan nodded. He looked toward Heather. “Honey mustard, huh? I haven’t seen anyone get that for dipping sauce in a long time.”

Heather smiled. “It’s a family thing. My dad is obsessed with honey mustard and puts it on anything. It was the one dressing my mom could get him to eat a salad with.” She laughed. “It eventually made its way into everything. You haven’t lived until you have my mom’s honey mustard fried chicken. Yum, it’s so good. She puts seasoning in the fried chicken batter and then makes homemade dipping sauce.”

“Okay. I’m starting to salivate over here,” Ryan teased.

Heather laughed. “It’s just that great. She doesn’t make it as often as she should, maybe only once a month. I’ll have her make it for you sometime. I’m sure she’d be thrilled to have you over for dinner.” Heather rolled her eyes dramatically, recalling her embarrassing interaction in the boutique the other day.

Ryan laughed. “I’d love that. I’m sure she’s an incredible cook. And she’s pretty great entertainment too.” He winked.

Heather shook her head. “She’s so ridiculous sometimes. That southern charm of hers gets her into trouble. She thinks it means she shouldn’t need a filter.”

“I mean, if you’ve got an accent like that, you usually can get away with anything.” Ryan laughed.

Heather knew it was true. Her mom’s southern accent made everyone

smile for some reason. She could say wildly inappropriate things and people didn't care because she sounded sweet saying it.

"So remind me, how many siblings do you have?" Ryan asked.

"I have four sisters. Cassidy, then myself, Rachel, Lemon and Grace."

"Four sisters? So there's five of you total? Wow, your poor dad," he teased.

"Hey now, we do pretty well," she teased back. "I know that my dad definitely wished he had a boy, but it just wasn't in the cards for them. They kept trying and thought eventually there would be a boy, but no luck. But he'll tell you now that he's happy being a girl dad. It keeps things interesting."

"Are you close with all your sisters? I'm sure the age range is wide, like my family."

"I sometimes forget that you also come from a big family. All your siblings are so spread out across the country, whereas all my sisters are here still," Heather processed out loud.

Heather grew up knowing all the Almada family members, but when the family moved back to Sandpiper Cove after Natasha retired, not all of them came with.

The oldest boys had graduated high school and were off to college all across the nation; Drew was already established in his career at that point. It was Casey and Drew's wedding last year when they were all together that reminded Heather of their size.

"I would say we are a pretty close family. Some of us are naturally closer than others, depending on age, of course. Except my sister, Grace. She's the youngest, but she's truly my mini-me. She used to be my shadow when I was still in school, and it drove me crazy. Even at school she would follow me around everywhere and it was so embarrassing. But now, I kind of embrace it. I see it more as an honor."

Ryan leaned toward her. "That is a good way to look at it. That's like my brother, Isaac. He's the youngest and there's a bit more of an age gap between him and Penny, so with all the older brothers out of the house as he aged, he clung to me," Ryan explained. "Who would you say you're closest with?"

Heather thought about it for a moment. "I would say that I spend a lot of time with Cassidy, just because of our ages, but we are pretty different. She has more angst to her than I do, so sometimes we butt heads."

Heather noticed that Ryan made a face when she talked about Cassidy's edgy behavior. She wondered if he knew that already. It went back to the mystery of how the two knew each other. She had a faint question in the back of her mind: did those two date before? Is that why Cassidy didn't want to talk about it?

Her mind started to swirl in different directions as she thought of the possibilities—but that couldn't be. Ryan would have definitely told her if that was the case. Wouldn't it be too weird to date someone's sister that you already dated? Heather sure thought so.

She tried to stay on topic, "I think Rachel might be who I am the closest with on a passions and interest perspective. We have a lot in common when it comes to our activities, like playing volleyball, watching cooking shows, and decorating for holidays. But she's so busy with college right now that I don't get to talk with her as much as I used to."

"I'm not sure if I've ever met her before."

"You would remember if you did. She is stunning. She's hard to miss." Heather flinched a little at her own comment. Was that a weird thing to say to the guy you were on a date with? Thankfully, the server was on her way back with their appetizer.

"Sorry about the wait, guys. It just came out of the oven, so it's hot." She placed the breadbasket with assorted breads in front of them and then a slab of butter on a plate. This was heaven, Heather thought.

"And your food should be out shortly." Anastasia nodded and walked away.

"Don't be shy," Ryan instructed. "Dig in."

"Oh, I plan to." Heather laughed and picked out some bread. Everything was so moist and delicious. She loved a breadbasket.

"Have you ever made bread before?" Ryan asked her.

Heather raised an eyebrow. "Do I look like a girl who would do that?" She genuinely wanted to know.

"Yeah, you do," Ryan responded honestly.

"Well, yes, I have. I love making sourdough bread. It's so much work, but when you make it just right, it's heavenly. Have you ever made bread?" Heather asked, trying to be sassy.

"Yes, I have." Ryan smiled with a little shake of his head and with a face that only meant he hoped she would ask that so he could surprise her.

"Really? I did not peg you as a baker."

Ryan popped some bread into his mouth and chewed. “It’s one of my secret talents that not a lot of people know about. I’m very good at making breads.”

“So not just one bread, but multiple kinds? I have to admit, I am impressed.”

Ryan laughed. “Understandably so. I don’t really seem like a bread guy, so I’ve been told. But I love it. It’s something my mom and I would do together when I was little, and she’d be home from tour or something. She taught me all these different ways to bake, and it just became a coping mechanism when I was overwhelmed or just missed her when she was away. It transferred to adulthood too.”

“Well, you’re going to have to teach me sometime. I’ve always wanted to grow in it more and have homemade bread, but it just takes a while and I need to actually set aside time for it.”

“I get that. I’d be happy to show you how to do it.”

The two sat and talked more about various hobbies and interests that might seem unexpected. Heather laughed in disbelief at some of the things Ryan liked to do that she would have never guessed. It seemed like he had a lot of mysteries about him.

While she assumed he was this smooth guy who was always out on dates, working, or focused on his image, he was really down-to-earth and relatable. He did say his favorite activity was a day at home baking, watching sports, and eating pizza.

She didn’t say this to him, but that also sounded like the perfect day to her. But she would add in reading, of course. Probably while the sports games were on. She wasn’t really a sporty girl, except for volleyball, but she could tolerate it on in the background.

Their food came and it looked absolutely delicious. They both dived in and tried their best to not get too messy with the dipping sauces, but it failed. But at least they were both able to laugh about it—he made everything seem more relaxed and comfortable. That was something she was not expecting going on this date.

Ryan had always made her feel nervous and on edge before; like she had to be perfect when he was around. He seemed to always have it all together, but Heather was quickly realizing, especially when he spilled au ju sauce all over his work shirt, that he was just a regular guy. She smiled as he quickly tried to wipe it off and rolled his eyes at himself. He didn’t need everything

to be so serious.

Heather looked at her watch; it was already seven o'clock. They had sat at the restaurant for two hours. The time had flown by. They walked to the car and took a few minutes to warm up as Ryan blasted the heat.

"That was a great find, good suggestion," Heather said.

"Of course, I haven't been to that location before, but I had always wanted to. I'd say it was a success for many reasons." He smiled as he looked forward.

Heather rubbed her hands together and looked out the front window too.

Now what? She thought to herself. She thought that date went really well, and they said they would go on one date and decide what to do next.

Did he have a good time? Would he want to go on another date? She was anxious to know but didn't want to pry right away. They had just gotten into the car.

Ryan headed onto the road. The two sat in silence for a moment while they listened to music. Ryan had a pre-programmed Christmas station on, one that she would have never expected from Ryan. She didn't know what type of music she assumed he would listen to, but she didn't think it would be something this festive.

"Not to seem too forward, but did you have a good time tonight?" Ryan asked.

Heather felt herself take a deep breath; she was so glad he was the first to ask.

"I did. I really did. It was more relaxed than I thought it would be, if I'm being honest." She blushed.

"Were you really nervous?" Ryan asked, a bit of amusement in his voice.

"I was. I feel like there were the first date nerves, but then also, 'I'm going on a date with my best friend's brother' nerves on top of it. And, just the idea of going on a date with an Almada boy can make you nervous. I'm sure you know that. You guys are kind of notorious around here." She grinned.

Ryan loudly laughed. "Oh my gosh, notorious for what?" he asked.

"You know, you guys are just like this perfect family. You're all well-behaved, helpful, the perfect gentlemen, and attractive. It's like a big deal when you get to go on a date with one of the Almada boys." Heather wasn't sure why she was telling him all of this, but he sure thought it was hysterical.

Ryan laughed again. "Are you serious? That's funny. We are not perfect;

I'll tell you that. But I appreciate the compliment." He paused for a moment. "Do *you* think I'm attractive?" he asked.

Heather's eyes widened; she had set herself up for that one. "Uh, I mean, yes. You are very good-looking." She wasn't sure why that made her so flustered.

"You mentioned something else, dating your best friend's brother. I know the date isn't technically over yet, but we did say one date and then we'd decide what to do. What are you thinking?"

Heather felt her heart beat faster, not sure what to say. She had a great time, no doubt about that. She felt like she saw a side of Ryan that she really enjoyed and was attracted to. She definitely wanted to see him again. Did that mean that they should tell Penny?

She was just about to answer when Ryan's car phone rang, making them both jump in their seats.

Penny's name came up on the screen in front of them. They both looked at each other, unsure of what to do next.

CHAPTER 14

RYAN

Ryan stared at the screen in his car as it showed Penny's number and blared a loud ringtone. He had no idea if he should answer it or let it go to voicemail.

He was anxious to hear Heather's thoughts from the evening and then ask the burning question: did she want to do it again? The anticipation made him squirm in his seat as they drove in silence from the restaurant. He was unsure when he should say something. He didn't want to seem too forward and ask right away; she could be one of those people who needed time to internally process before she made a decision. But he knew how he felt. Now it was up to her.

He looked towards Heather with a question in his eyes. What did she want him to do? After what felt like an eternity, Heather reached over and sent the call to voicemail.

Ryan was surprised by the bold move, but slightly relieved.

"I'm sorry, I just think we need to decide for ourselves, and I'm not ready for her to find out over the phone. We need to talk about this first," she said, almost apologetic.

"It's totally fine, I agree. I think talking is a good idea." His grip tightened on the steering wheel.

Why did this feel so weird? It was only the first date and it felt like they were making a big life decision. He wasn't sure how he felt about it. He could start to feel this weird pull inside of him. His left leg started to shake a bit.

"What I was about to say was that I had a really nice time tonight. It felt more comfortable and natural than I thought it would. I was just worried it would feel forced or something, that we had these expectations that I was afraid we weren't going to meet. But that didn't happen. I really enjoyed our time together, and although we obviously don't know the future or what would happen if we did start to see each other more, I would feel open to trying." She sounded confident, with a hint of excitement in her tone.

Ryan's heart fluttered, but he tried to keep it cool. "I felt the same way. I had a fun time tonight."

Heather smiled. "Great. So... what now?"

They were silent for another moment. "Well, I plan to drive you back to the school, and then, I'm going to go tell Penny."

Heather whipped her head towards him. “Tonight? Why so suddenly?”

Ryan shrugged. “I was going to go to the inn anyway and help Brent move some furniture, so I might as well tell her when I’m there. That is, if she’s up for it and in a good mood.” He chuckled. “But I don’t want this to loom over us, so I’d like to tell her sooner rather than later. That makes it less of a big deal anyway.”

Heather nodded. “That makes sense. Are you sure you don’t want me to do it?”

Ryan shook his head. “No, it’s my responsibility. She’s my sister and I’m the one infringing on the girl code and your friendship. If something happened between us, and it impacted your friendship, that’s on me.”

Ryan knew he and Heather were both adults, and hopefully, if something didn’t work out, they would be able to stay mature about it, and it wouldn’t impact her friendship with Penny. But he didn’t know Heather really well. He could hope everything would be fine, but he didn’t know.

He knew that his relationship with Penny would survive anything. They were family, after all. But he never wanted something detrimental to happen to Heather and Penny’s friendship.

“Well, that’s very kind of you. Thank you. I really hope it goes well. I’m sure it will be fine. It’s not that big of a deal, right?” Heather was clearly talking to try to convince herself.

“It will be fine, Heather. I promise.” He tried to give a reassuring smile. “And I will let you know what she says.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m *sure* I’ll get a call.”

He wasn’t sure how Penny was going to respond, but she was his best friend, and Heather was hers, so why wouldn’t she be happy they were together—Right?

Ryan walked the halls of the Sandpiper Inn, tempted to grab another cup of coffee, but at eight o’clock, he knew that would mean a long night of no sleep. But his body craved the extra energy from such an exhausting day.

He could tell he was going to be sore tomorrow from heavy lifting the furniture with Brent. He thankfully made it in time to help Brent while he was still there for the night. Brent only bothered Ryan twice about who he

was on a date with and how it went, but thankfully Ryan was able to avoid the questions and change the topic. Brent finally gave up when he realized Ryan wasn't going to share anything.

There were moments when he wanted to tell him, especially since they wouldn't be hiding it anymore, but he knew in his gut he had to tell Penny first.

Penny hadn't left a voicemail or sent him a text message after he denied her call. While he was slightly relieved by that, he also became nervous about why she had called in the first place. Was she doing okay? If there was an emergency, he would hope that his mom would have told him.

He finally got to Penny's door and knocked. He listened quietly for her voice. He knew she couldn't get out of bed by herself very quickly, so she used the "come in" yelling method to her advantage.

"Come in!" he heard Penny yell. Ryan took a deep breath and then entered the room.

He still wasn't sure what he planned to say to her, but he knew he wanted to be as honest as possible. She was his sister, who would want the best for him; he had to continue to keep that in mind.

He walked in and found the room dimly lit with the TV on in the background. Normally, TVs weren't in the rooms at the inn for guests, but Natasha set one up for Penny so she wouldn't become too bored during her bed rest. Ryan looked and she was watching *A Christmas Carol*.

The room was now decorated for Christmas with multi-colored lights, a small fake tree on the table, and a nativity scene on the dresser. Natasha loved nativity scenes and placed a small one in every room of the inn during the holidays.

Penny sat on the bed eating a bowl of ice cream—mint chocolate chip, her favorite. It was one of the flavors that Ryan detested the most.

"Hey brother, what are you doing here?" She looked pleasantly surprised. Ryan was relieved to see she was in good condition and didn't seem like she was mad about his missed phone call. It had rung so long that she probably thought it just went straight to voicemail anyway.

"I would offer you some ice cream, but I wouldn't want you to throw up," she teased.

Ryan smiled and walked over, taking his coat and shoes off. He sat in one of the armchairs by her bed and got comfortable.

"I was helping Brent move some of the furniture off of the patio for Mom

and then wanted to stop by.” He wasn’t sure how to naturally bring this up. How does one casually say, so I have a thing for your best friend, and we went on a date tonight. He had no idea.

“Oh, glad you were able to do that. Mom wanted it put away weeks ago.” She went back to eating more ice cream as she was clearly into whatever show she was watching.

That was one of the factors of their relationship that Ryan always appreciated; they could be in the same room and hang out without the need to talk the whole time.

But tonight, he had a different agenda.

“So how’s it going? Have you started to feel any better now? I know it’s still early,” he said. Weaning her into conversation.

“I guess so. My rib has felt a lot better, so I’m hoping that it will stop hurting so much when I move. My legs are the same, still broken. But it’s become more manageable as I adjust to it.” She took another bite of ice cream.

“Well, that’s good to hear. I’m proud of you for actually listening to the doctors and following their rest rule.”

“I don’t really have a choice. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m pretty much at the mercy of whoever wants to wheel me around.” She twirled her spoon up in the air in a wheeling circle. Ryan always loved dramatic Penny.

Ryan laughed. “That’s a good point. Who knew that’s all that was needed to get you to listen to instructions?” He smiled again, not sure if his joke crossed the line.

Penny smiled back. “Who knew.”

She took another bite of ice cream. “What were you up to tonight? I asked Brent where you were when he came to visit and he said you were busy but made this weird face.”

Ryan started to heat up a bit. He was surprised Brent didn’t say anything about being on a date.

“Um—I was actually on a date tonight.” He figured he would start the conversation off slowly.

The news didn’t even faze Penny. She was so used to Ryan being on dates.

“Cool, was this a repeat date or a new contender?” she asked, still chewing her ice cream and looking at the TV.

“A new woman, actually. It was our first date,” he said slowly, watching

her to try and pick up on any signs of being interested.

“I see. Who is the lucky lady this time that has grabbed your attention?”

Ryan’s adrenaline started to pump faster. He gave himself a pep talk. He tried to remind himself that it wasn’t a big deal. It was just a first date. It wasn’t like they were engaged and hadn’t told her.

“Um, Heather,” he said. Hoping she’d catch on.

“Heather who?” Penny asked, still unfazed.

“Heather Pearle.” Ryan held his breath.

Penny stopped chewing her ice cream and slowly pulled the spoon out of her mouth as she turned her head towards Ryan. Her eyes didn’t blink as she stared at him. She finished swallowing her ice cream and sat in silence. Ryan held her gaze, too afraid to look away.

“Say that again?” Penny asked calmly.

“Heather Pearle. I was out on a date with Heather.”

“Like my Heather Pearle? My best friend since second grade? That Heather?” The tone in Penny’s voice intensified. Ryan remembered his desire for his sister to be happy for him. He wasn’t sure if he was going to see that Penny tonight.

“Yes, that Heather,” was all he could say. He wanted Penny to have all her emotions and then be fine. He tried to put himself in her shoes to see how upset he would be.

“What are you doing?” she asked, still sporting a very blank and expressionless face.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Why are you taking my best friend on a date?”

Ryan sighed. “Because I like her, Penny. She’s so kind, intelligent, funny, beautiful—”

“Stop,” she interrupted. “No, Ryan. What are *you doing*? You are not going to be dating my best friend.”

Ryan had never seen her so serious before. The only other times that had come close were when they were grieving over their dad or talking through deep insecurities or life doubts. This felt new to him.

“Well, I *did* go on a date with your friend. And it went really well.” He tried to stay positive and emphasized the fact that they had already gone on a date. He wanted her to see that this didn’t have to just be a fling, but it could be something more.

“Ryan, she’s my best friend.”

Now Ryan was starting to get annoyed with the questions he felt like he had already answered. “Penny, I am aware that she is your best friend. That’s why we decided to go on a date before we decided if we wanted to tell you. We wanted to see if this could actually be something before we made you possibly upset. And it looks like we were right.” He tried not to sound sassy, but it just came out.

“So you two, my brother and my best friend, just to make sure we’re on the same page here—start to develop feelings for each other and then go on this secret date behind my back and tell me afterwards?”

“Penny, I don’t think you’re being fair here. It’s not like we went and eloped. We literally just went out to dinner. We have no idea where this is going to go, but both of us are interested in seeing what happens. She could end things just as easily as I could.” He tried to control his voice to not sound too annoyed.

“How long have you guys been talking? Is this a new thing or something that’s been going on for a while? You and Heather *both* tell me everything, so why didn’t you tell me this?” Her voice started to get higher, which only happened when she was getting upset.

“Because of this reaction right here. We haven’t been talking for a while, but we knew you were in a vulnerable space, and we didn’t want to make anything worse.”

“Well, the fact that you both thought that this would make me upset maybe shows that you shouldn’t be together in the first place.”

“Why? What’s so wrong about two people who you love dating? I thought maybe you would be happy for us.” Ryan could feel himself start to get defensive. He thought she might be surprised and upset she didn’t know, but to say that they shouldn’t be together after just finding out about it seemed beyond him.

“Because you’re *you*, Ryan.” Penny’s words were sharp.

They hit Ryan in surprise. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, be serious. You don’t date girls for longer than two months. There have been plenty of great girls that have come along that you’ve brushed to the side because you get tired of them or they don’t meet your ridiculous standards. And not only that, but you don’t seem to have any desire to be with someone long-term. You don’t take relationships seriously, so tell me why I would be okay with you doing that to my best friend?” Penny’s words were harsh, and Ryan now realized maybe the real reason

Penny never asked about his dating life anymore had nothing to do with just being uninterested.

“So, you think less of me? You think I’m a bad guy that doesn’t deserve the chance at real love?” he asked.

“Of course I don’t think *less* of you, but I don’t think you are the right person to date. At least right now, and especially someone as sweet and vulnerable as Heather. That woman is like a princess walking around waiting for her prince to come on a white horse and save her. She loves romance, and she dreams of fairy tale weddings. She doesn’t deserve someone who is going to get sick of her in a couple of months and brush her to the side. It would destroy her.”

Ryan felt hurt that this was how Penny really felt about him, like he could do something like that.

“What I’m hearing is, I’m not good enough for Heather,” he said calmly, trying to let some of the tension out of the room.

Penny looked at him with both anger and empathy in her eyes. She took a deep breath and said in a calmer voice, “Ryan, you are incredible, and I love you as a brother and a friend. I want all the happiness in the world for you, but when it comes to dating, Heather *is* too good for you. And it’s going to break her heart if you hurt her, and I’m the one that has to pick up the pieces when the fairy tale comes crashing down.”

The words stabbed him like a knife. He wasn’t sure whether to be angry or sad. He knew that she had truth to her words. He had dated a lot of women; that was a known fact. But to be seen as someone who was incapable of being a committed person? That felt rough.

“What if I didn’t hurt her?” Ryan said.

“Sure, there’s a chance that you both amicably decide to end the relationship and that it’s not going to work out. Or in some weird universe, she decides to end it and it breaks your heart, but I don’t see that happening because yeah, you are an incredible guy and there is a lot to love about you.”

That was the nicest thing she had said to him all night.

“But I just can’t see you committing—but please, prove me wrong. When have you been super committed to someone in the past? You haven’t.”

“I know that I don’t have a good track record, Penny. I know I’ve dated a lot of women and haven’t always been able to end things on good terms. But there is something different about Heather. She’s beautiful not just on the outside, but there is something so unique and special about who she really is.

And I just—I can't get her out of my head. I think about her all the time, ever since the day of your accident and I ran into her at the coffee house that morning.”

Penny gave him a puzzled look. Apparently, neither he nor Heather told her about that.

He explained. “She walked into the coffee shop, and before I knew who she was, I was completely mesmerized by her. And we talked, and I was embarrassed when I realized who she was, but since then, I can't get her out of my head. And I have tried. Please believe me, Penny, when I say that. But there's something about her. And we had the best time tonight at dinner, and I felt like I could actually be myself. Not this suave ‘always has it together’ guy that apparently people think I am, but I could be Ryan.”

Penny's eyes softened as she listened to Ryan. It felt almost as if he was pleading. He spoke almost to himself as well, reaffirming why he was interested in Heather after a couple of hours of wondering if this was the right thing.

“Heather feels this same way?” Penny asked.

Ryan nodded his head. “As far as I'm aware, but you could ask her about it yourself.”

“Oh, I plan to.” Penny raised her eyebrows.

“Be kind to her, Penny. She was more anxious about this than I was. You're her best friend and she doesn't want anything to happen to your relationship. And she definitely didn't want to keep this from you long.”

“Don't worry, I know my best friend.” It sounded like a subtle jab in his direction. He made a mental note not to speak for Heather around Penny. That wouldn't go well.

The two sat in silence staring at each other, not sure of what the other would say next. This was the biggest fight Ryan thought they'd ever had.

He knew he didn't want to leave until they made up. “I'm sorry I kept this evening from you, but I came over right after because I wanted to tell you as soon as we decided to pursue this relationship. I'm sorry if it upsets you.”

Penny looked at him and sighed. “I can't stop you from dating, because obviously you're a grownup and will make your own decisions. But I'm not going to lie to you. I'm not happy about it. And I don't think it's going to end well.”

Ryan nodded his head, not sure of what to say to that. It wasn't the answer he wanted, but he now understood more of where she was coming

from. She was protecting her friend from the town playboy, apparently. At least, that's what she saw in him.

"I understand. And I hope I can change your mind and prove you wrong. You know it's not in my heart to hurt anyone. Especially not you or someone you care so deeply about."

Penny nodded. "I know that. But I also know that you need to work through what it is that blocks you from being in a serious relationship, because it's not just that you don't line up with her or she's not the girl for you. There's something else there, and I need you to figure it out—for Heather's sake."

Ryan didn't think there was anything wrong with him, but he just nodded if that meant he could make Penny slightly happier than she currently was.

He stood up from his chair, realizing it was better to end on that note than fight anymore. He lightly put his hand on her leg cast and gave it a gentle pat. "Love you, Penny."

He started to walk to the door.

"I love you too, Ryan. I really do." He turned around to look at her. "I meant what I said about how I believe you are an incredible guy and I do want all the happiness for you." She smiled from her bed.

Ryan gave a soft smile back and turned towards the door. He placed his hand on the handle and was about to open it. "But Ryan, if you hurt my best friend, I might never forgive you." Penny's tone went serious again, and Ryan could tell she meant it.

With his head staying faced forward, he opened the door and walked out.

CHAPTER 15

HEATHER

Heather could hardly take the anticipation. It was already nine thirty in the evening and she still had not heard from Ryan, or Penny.

She figured she would have heard something by now. Ryan dropped her off at seven thirty and she knew he didn't have that much furniture to move with Brent. Did something happen? Her mind started to go crazy with the possibilities.

Heather started to pace around her room. She thought maybe she would try to organize, but she just couldn't sit still. Heather looked out her bay window overlooking the forest that surrounded her house. She had, of course, made the bench in front of the window into a cushioned reading area to sit.

Heather loved her room. It was a mix of her adult items that she enjoyed, but also treasured childhood memories. She had a new bed, desk, and dresser, but she kept her antique toy chest that held some of her favorite toys and stuffed animals from when she was young. She liked having those items out in the open as little reminders.

She knew most people thought that at her age, it was odd to still be living at home with her parents. She was in her late twenties. But after she moved back home from college, she wanted to save money until she found a job and a reasonable place to live. She always secretly wondered if she would find a man, get married and just move in with him. But that obviously hadn't happened yet, so there she stayed, living in her parents' home.

Earlier that year she realized it was time to move out soon and started to save for an apartment on her own. But the idea made her sad. She had always lived with either her sisters or college roommates, so she really didn't want to live alone. If only Penny had a two-bedroom apartment, that would have fixed everything. She understood why Penny didn't want to move; her apartment was right above the coffee shop where she worked. What could be better than that?

Heather planned to start looking at the beginning of the year, but for now, she wanted to stay put. She liked spending so much time with her family. Cassidy and her always teased that if her parents wanted them to move out, then they shouldn't make the house so cozy and homey anyway.

The stress as she waited for a phone call or even a text almost consumed her. She desperately wanted to go to bed, but she wouldn't be able to sleep if

she didn't know how the conversation went. Heather walked towards her phone on the dresser, which had its volume up to max, and looked at it one more time. Still nothing. She groaned in frustration.

She opened her text messages and figured going that route would be a safe bet. That way, if on the off-chance Ryan was still talking with Penny, she wouldn't interrupt. She didn't want to seem needy or pushy, but what would be taking so long?

She pulled up Ryan's number and started a message.

Hey, just checking in. I haven't heard from you or Penny yet, so I just wanted to see how the conversation went?

The sound of the clock in her room ticked as she sat in silence.

"This is ridiculous," Heather said out loud as she placed her phone on the dresser. She walked away to get her pajamas on. She needed some space.

Her phone dinged in response to getting a message. She almost ran back to her phone. Thankfully, it was a text from Ryan.

Hey. Sorry I didn't fill you in. I honestly figured Penny would call you. The conversation happened and she's aware. A lot was said, but I'm sure it will be okay.

Heather gazed at the vaguest text message ever. He was sure it will be okay? That wasn't very reassuring and didn't tell her any information about what was said. She instantly dialed the phone to call him. The phone rang a couple of times and then he answered.

"Hey, Heather," he said.

"Hey, sorry to call, but I just need to know more. What happened? What did she say?"

"Uh, it was okay. She was definitely surprised. We talked about it and she just wanted to understand more of my intentions, I think." Ryan didn't sound too enthusiastic.

His tone was different than usual. It seemed like something was really bothering him. "Oh, did she say anything else? Was she supportive?" Heather hadn't been a nail-biter in years, but the coping mechanism was coming back in full force.

Ryan sighed. "I'm not going to lie to you, Heather. It was not the best conversation. It definitely could have gone better. She's not necessarily on board with us dating, but she understands that we are going to make our own decisions."

Heather's heart squeezed in her chest. "She doesn't want us to date?"

Ryan paused. “Well, I don’t know. She had a lot of strong reactions to it, but I know that she wants both of us to be happy. She’s nervous that one of us is going to get hurt, and she really doesn’t want it to be you.”

Heather nodded; she could understand that. She didn’t want one of them to get hurt either, and it made sense that Penny felt the same way.

“I mean, that’s all valid. I’m sorry it didn’t go as well as you wanted it to. I should have been there with you.”

“No, that would probably have made it a lot worse.” He let out a half chuckle and scoffed. She wasn’t sure what that meant, but she didn’t want to pry anymore.

There was a long pause as Heather tried to figure out what to say next. “Are you still feeling okay about it all? I know it’s all new, but if your sister isn’t okay with it, I understand if maybe you don’t want to go out again.” She was scared of the answer, but she felt like she had to ask.

Ryan paused again. With every second that passed, Heather felt less secure about the future of this relationship. She felt so excited about the possibilities of them together, but what if it just wasn’t in their future?

“Ryan, you still there?” she asked.

“Yeah, sorry, I’m really distracted and tired. Yes, I want to get together again. I think Penny will warm up to the idea. She just needs to see that we’re not just dating to date but actually open to it going somewhere.” He did sound distracted and tired.

“Of course. It’s getting late and I’m sure you’re tired. We can talk another time. I just wanted to check in.” She tried to find reassurance from his words, but something still felt off.

“Sorry I didn’t connect with you earlier. I thought Penny would reach out. But I’ll talk to you later. Goodnight, Heather. Thank you for a great night. I had a lot of fun. I hope you did too.” He sounded sincere—enough to make Heather smile.

“Goodnight, Ryan. I had a wonderful night too. Thank you for dinner and talking with Penny.” She hung up the phone and took a deep breath.

That didn’t necessarily go as she’d hoped, but at least it’s over with. Now she wondered why Penny hadn’t reached out like Ryan thought she would. Was she mad at Heather?

Heather figured she should go to bed now before her mind went wild. This had been a big day and she needed to sleep.

Heather got ready for bed and tried to control her mind racing. She

slipped into her silk Christmas pajamas and crawled under her covers. Her favorite part of the day was getting into bed at night. There was nothing more relaxing and comforting than being in her own bed.

Heather stared at the ceiling and watched the fan go round and round as she went over her date with Ryan in her mind. She smiled to herself as she thought of all the funny things Ryan had said and how much fun she had. She recalled him spilling all over himself and the story he shared about the time he completely biffed it in front of his classmates during a speech. She giggled to herself.

She loved seeing that side of Ryan; this carefree, fun, and relatable guy. She wasn't sure what was going to happen next with their relationship, especially with this Penny situation, but she was confident that if it was supposed to be, it would happen. That's what Natasha always said during book club.

Heather tried to remember that glimmer of hope as she slowly drifted to sleep. In the back of her mind was the niggling thought that her relationship with Penny would never be the same. She really didn't want to have to choose between her best friend and a relationship that might make her dreams come true.

CHAPTER 16

RYAN

The breeze from the ocean felt different as Ryan walked down Main Street. The snow had started to pile higher on the walkway, making a crunch every time he took a step. He wasn't sure if he was fully ready for the intense Maine cold that would be here for the next couple of months, but it was inevitable. He had to remind himself often that he chose to live on the East Coast when he could have gone anywhere.

Ryan was grateful it was the weekend after a very long and draining week. Not only had all of his cases started to intensify, but he also experienced the emotional rollercoaster of his incredible first date with Heather and then his disappointing conversation with Penny.

Ryan spent the rest of the week processing all that happened within a crazy forty-eight-hour period. He had tried to pour into his work to keep himself distracted from spiraling and avoid having any conversations with Brooke, but it was difficult to do.

His thoughts kept going back to Heather. He thought of her smile, her laugh, the way she always looked down and blushed when she was embarrassed or after she'd been complimented. It made him want to compliment her more; it was cute.

He felt terrible about how the conversation with Penny went and knew it was a sore spot for Heather. He didn't want to tell her the reality of all that Penny had said to him; he was honestly still processing it himself.

There was truth to what Penny had said. Ryan knew that he went through a lot of dates and hadn't really been a long-term relationship kind of guy in the past, but the things Penny said cut deep. It made him ponder—was he never going to be someone who could commit? It awakened a slight fear inside of him that he wasn't quite sure what to do with.

He tried to categorize Penny's comment about never forgiving him if something happened to Heather as something a friend says to protect another friend, but Penny's tone had no joking within it. She was serious, and Ryan wasn't sure if he could handle that outcome.

The thought of "Is this worth it?" continued to sneak its way into his mind whenever he thought of Heather. He tried his best to dismiss it, but its presence was there.

Heather didn't reach out to him after his update about Penny until the

next night. He wondered if she was trying to give him space. When she did talk with him over the phone, she tried to sound casual and act like she was just checking in to see how his day was, but he could sense the worry in her tone. He felt bad and tried his best to reassure her that he was doing okay with it all.

It sounded like she finally did talk with Penny, and they had a good conversation. Heather didn't give a lot of details, but he hoped Penny didn't share too much about Ryan that would turn her away. Although he had hesitations about the relationship, he still wanted to keep seeing her.

Heather and Ryan decided to get together on Saturday morning for their next date at the Bluebird Café. Heather suggested it, and it would be easier to have a coffee date without Penny there.

As Ryan walked down the brightly lit and holiday-decked-out Main Street to meet Heather, he found himself with those familiar feelings of excitement, just like before their first date. He convinced himself that he could push aside his worries for the day and just have a fun time with Heather. This was still supposed to be the fun stage of the relationship, and he didn't want to freak himself, or her, out with so much intensity. Just because they were off to a bumpy start, they could make this work.

Ryan walked into the coffee house and took a deep breath; he loved the smell of a coffee shop. Penny was always in charge of decorating the shop for the holidays, so there was definitely a lack of décor this year. But the staff at least had a Christmas tree in the corner, holiday-themed beverages available, and Christmas music playing, so it felt good enough.

He looked around and saw Heather sitting by herself in one of the comfy lounge chairs. She held a book laid on her lap and sipped her coffee in the other hand. A smile appeared on Ryan's face as he stood and watched her for a moment.

She looked so peaceful and content, truly in her happy place.

If he stared any longer it would be creepy, so he slowly made his way over in her direction. Once she noticed someone coming, she looked up and smiled at him.

"Hey," she said and closed her book, placing her coffee mug on the side table next to her.

"Good morning," he said with a smile back. "What are you reading this morning?" He sat in the chair next to her.

"Oh." She looked at her book with a little embarrassment in her eyes.

“Uh, it’s actually a romance novel. It’s this series I’m going through. A cowboy love story—you can call me cheesy.”

Ryan smiled. “Penny said you loved the romance books.”

Heather shrugged. “Yeah, it’s my guilty pleasure. I mean, it’s not baking or anything, but it will do,” she teased.

Ryan leaned back in his chair. “I knew that would come back eventually.”

“I’m still waiting for my lesson.”

Ryan nodded. “One day, don’t you worry. Maybe the next snowy day when there’s nothing else to do.”

“I’ll take you up on that.” She pointed in his direction, solidifying the promise.

Ryan looked around; it was a busy morning at the coffee house. Thankfully, he didn’t see anyone he knew. He always had that internal worry about running into an ex-date when he was with someone else.

“I think I’ll run up and get my coffee. Do you want anything else?” he asked.

“I think I’m okay for now, but thank you. I came early to get out of the house and have some alone time. I’ll just finish up this chapter while you order.” She opened her book again and dove into the words.

Ryan went up to the register and ordered a large mint latte; he wasn’t sure how it would taste, but he thought he would try it in the holiday spirit. It felt sad without Penny badgering him about something from behind the counter.

He made his way back to Heather and sat down. She had finished her chapter and was waiting patiently.

“You’re a quick reader,” he noted. He took a sip of coffee, immediately comforted by the warmth of the drink.

“Once you do something a ridiculous number of times, you get pretty quick at it,” she joked.

“What is it about reading that you love so much?”

Heather thought for a moment. “That’s a great question. Um, I think to me it feels a lot like what most people think of movies. It transports you to a different place. But with books, I get to make up a lot of it in my mind. I get to create this world—what I think each character looks like, the setting of where they live, and all that. It makes time fly by. But I also like non-fiction books. I love soaking in knowledge, even though I’m not in school anymore.”

“I get it. That makes sense.”

Ryan tried to focus on the conversation, but his brain seemed so

distracted today. He kept looking around, and every noise or conversation tried to draw his attention away from Heather. He wasn't sure why he felt so off today.

"How was the rest of your week?" Heather asked.

"It was decent. My cases are getting busier, and I still don't have as much help around the office, so a lot of the grunt work is on me. Which isn't a big deal. It's just not what I'm used to."

"How many cases do you typically have at a time? And do all of them go to court? I'm not very familiar with law, truthfully," Heather admitted.

"That's okay. Not a lot of people are unless you're in it." Ryan chuckled. "And it's not what you necessarily see on TV shows and movies like a lot of people think."

"I believe that it usually never is," Heather agreed.

"It's hard to say how many cases I have at a time exactly, because we may get a new case from someone that's new to the firm, but it's usually a more intense case where we will go to trial with it. But other times, we have clients on retainers, and we serve them whenever they need us. It could be for reviewing or revising contracts, lawsuits, consulting on investments, for example."

"Which type of client do you prefer? The new active cases or the retainers?" Heather said.

"These are great questions," Ryan said, pleased, "I feel like no one has ever asked me these before." He slightly laughed.

"Oh, what a win for me. I just like to hear what people enjoy about their jobs."

"I would have to really think about it a lot to come up with a super confident answer—because there are pros and cons to both. I really enjoy the new cases because they're interesting and have a lot of substance to them. They can challenge me a lot too. But they can be more work and stressful, and depending on the case, they can be more disheartening if you don't win them.

"With the retainer clients, I like that I get to build a relationship with the client over time. You learn about their character, their family, and more about their business. It helps a lot when I advise them on business moves, since I can be more objective but supportive knowing their circumstances and want to root for them more as an individual."

Heather listened so intently to everything Ryan said, almost as if there

would be a quiz after class. He appreciated it. He felt like sometimes on dates, his date was too distracted with her phone or just tried to make the conversation all about them. But Heather had a genuine interest in learning more about him.

“I hope that answers your question. I know I didn’t necessarily pick *one*.”

Heather laughed. “That’s fine. It was a really good answer. It sounds like there are a lot of pros and cons to law.”

“Absolutely—how has work been for you the last week?” he asked, hoping to get the attention off him for a moment.

“It’s been good,” she said. “We have our holiday program on Monday, so there have been a lot of preparations for that. Which is fun but kind of exhausting.”

“You’re in charge of that, right?”

Heather nodded. “For the most part. I’m on the planning team, but I tend to take the lead role. Which I enjoy. It’s one of my favorite events of the year.”

“I hope it goes well. It sounds adorable,” he added.

“Oh my gosh, it really is. The kids are fantastic. Do you have any big plans for Christmas this year, besides you know, planning a wedding?” she laughed.

Ryan took a sip of coffee and nodded. “Yes, it is kind of a big year for my family. All of us are going to be there for Christmas this year, which I couldn’t tell you the last time that happened. Oliver, Macy, and Nick are flying in, and then we have Casey and Drew with their new baby.” There was a little bit of excitement in his voice.

“Wow, a full house.”

“A full crazy house,” he joked back. “Normally a few of us, including me, are busy with work or some other excuse, so it’s going to be interesting.”

“That should be so fun. I can’t even imagine all of you guys in one room. I bet it’s loud.” She laughed.

“You have no idea.” His eyes widened at the thought of it. “What about you? What does your family do for Christmas?”

“We keep it somewhat low-key. Normally my grandparents come in from out of town, but they aren’t able to this year. We’ll be celebrating a combined Thanksgiving/Christmas holiday gathering with them in a couple of weeks. So it will be just my family and me. I love it. I always enjoy helping my mom cook in the kitchen—when she lets me. There are Christmas movies playing

on a loop on the TV while we get everything ready, and I always have a cup of hot apple cider or hot chocolate in my hands.” She laughed. “It’s one of my favorite times. We had a lot of other traditions around that time too. It just feels special to keep those traditions alive, you know?”

“That sounds really nice,” he said with a smile. Ryan always enjoyed family traditions growing up. They became a little more painful after his dad passed away, no longer feeling quite the same.

The two both took a sip of their coffee. Ryan tried to quickly scroll through his prepared questions for what to ask next.

“I know you might not want to talk about it more, but I’d like to hear how the conversation with Penny went.” It had been on his mind for a while, and he figured why not ask.

Heather looked a little taken aback by the question. “I mean, it went fine. I ended up calling her during my lunch break the next day since I hadn’t heard from her yet and it started to stress me out. She was fine about it all and said similar things to what it sounded like you talked about.”

That made Ryan nervous. How similar?

She continued as if she heard his thoughts. “Penny said that she was nervous about it and wanted to make sure we both knew what we were doing. It’s not easy to date a relative of someone you know, and she didn’t want to see either of us get hurt.”

It felt like she was holding back some things, but Ryan wasn’t sure how much he wanted to push it.

“After that conversation, how do you feel about it all?” he asked.

“I showed up today, didn’t I?” She softly smiled.

Ryan nodded, that’s true. She still came for their date; she was in this.

His stomach started to turn into knots, and he felt that tug feeling again from the other night. Was he completely destroying his sister’s relationship with her best friend? What if he messed up? Penny’s words couldn’t get out of his head.

“Do you have any hesitation?” he asked.

“I mean, of course I do. But I have that in every dating relationship I’m in. If I was completely certain about someone we would just get married right away.” She tried to joke. “But that’s the point of dating, right? You learn more about each other and see how it goes along the way. We have the unfortunate situation where there are more people’s feelings on the line than just ours.”

Heather seemed so confident and mature about it all that it surprised Ryan. She had really thought this through. He was both impressed and intimidated. Had he thought this through all the way too?

And Heather threw the big word out there: marriage. It was clear that, in her mind, dating was for marriage. Which, obviously he knew that, and that was his intention too in relationships.

Is it? that small voice inside interrupted his thoughts.

“How are you feeling about it all?” Heather asked.

Ryan wasn’t sure how honest to be. “I’m feeling pretty good. The conversation with Penny was a little disappointing, if I’m being honest, but I think it will be fine. And to your point, with any relationship it could not work out. It’s not like we’re engaged or anything.”

Heather nodded as he spoke. He could tell he wasn’t reassuring her with his words at all.

“Be honest. Did her response freak you out?” Her tone had shifted to more serious. Ryan wasn’t quite sure what to say.

“What do you mean?” he tried to stall.

“Look, Ryan, I know that long-term relationships haven’t been your thing. And I signed up to still go on these dates and experience this, even if it doesn’t work out. But I just want to be honest too. If you’re not interested in this, or what Penny said freaked you out, then we don’t have to do this. I’m really hoping to find someone who wants to be in a relationship, and although it’s still early, I date for the possibility of marriage. If that’s not what you’re looking for, then let me know now.”

It was bold, but he knew it was coming from a good place. She deserved that. She had every right to want to know his intentions with her as she invested her time into this possibility.

“I hear you, and I agree with everything you’ve said. And I hope you can understand that the way I have felt about you is very new to me. I haven’t felt like this about anyone I’ve ever dated. And that alone freaks me out.” Heather blushed and looked down, trying to hide her small smirk. But Ryan noticed it.

Ryan continued, “But I’m not throwing in the towel just because my sister is nervous, or I’m nervous for that matter. I hope you can be okay with me being committed to something but also have hesitations.”

They both were speaking sincerely, which is something Ryan didn’t experience a lot in prior relationships. Those conversations usually came

from a place of frustration or ultimatums. He valued and appreciated this.

Heather thought for a moment and nodded. “Yes, I can accept that.”

“I appreciate it.”

For the rest of the date, the two were able to talk and move past all the seriousness, for the most part. Ryan still felt in his heart a distraction that he couldn't quite place. But until he figured that out, he would enjoy the moments with Heather.

CHAPTER 17

HEATHER

Heather and Grace made their way into the Sandpiper Inn and were greeted with an accord of “hi girls” and warm smiles and the smell of pine needles and cinnamon. It felt odd going to book club on a Sunday night, but this was the first week of the change of date.

With a new bunco game group starting at the Sandpiper Cove Community Center on the same night, Natasha was flexible and decided to switch the book club night so women didn’t have to choose between the two clubs. A lot of the older women wanted to go to bunco as well.

Heather was grateful for Natasha’s willingness to change the date. She would have been disappointed if the book club had been canceled or if not as many women showed up. It was one of her favorite times of the week. There was something so special about gathering with women from all different ages and walks of life to talk through a similar story but to hear so many different perspectives. They each brought their own piece to the story, and it made discussion time so fruitful.

Heather had already learned so much from the women in the group and many had become friends and mentors to her over the years. It was also a special time for her to spend with her little sister, Grace. She thought it was good for Grace to be around the older women as well—it helped to mold her brain at a younger age. Although, being in her senior year of high school meant Grace would be considered an adult soon.

Since it was so cold, Natasha announced they would keep the book club going throughout the winter, but they would move the get-together into the foyer of the Sandpiper Inn, right next to the fireplace and hot beverage stand. It was the perfect spot. Natasha had gone all out for Christmas, just like she always did. The lights and fake candles were lit all around with beautiful garland wrapped on the staircase banister. Christmas music played softly in the background, but you almost couldn’t hear it due to the large group of women talking and laughing.

Heather gave a few hugs to the members and then found her way over to where Penny was seated. She had her wheelchair next to her as she lounged on the couch. Penny gave a half smile towards Heather as she approached.

This was the first time that the two of them had seen each other in person since Penny was informed by Ryan of their dating relationship. The phone

call between her and Penny had gone well; Heather was happy that she decided to reach out before they went too long without talking.

Heather had taken the time to explain how she felt about Ryan but emphasized the importance of her and Penny's relationship. She didn't want anything to get between them, so if Penny was actually unhappy about the two of them dating, which it sounded like she was, then she would end things.

Penny was surprised by Heather's willingness and sacrifice to end things with Ryan if Penny wasn't okay with it, but what did she expect? They'd been best friends for years.

After some conversation, with Penny sharing where her completely valid concerns came from, she sighed and said she was fine with it.

"I don't love it, but I'll deal with it" were her exact words. Heather had smiled because she knew it took a lot for Penny to cave to anything, or anyone; she really was a good friend.

"Hey, can I sit by you?" Heather asked. Although they had texted a few times since Thursday, Heather still felt some awkwardness between the two of them. She didn't want it to linger and hoped that maybe tonight it would go back to the way it was between them.

Penny looked at her for a moment. "No," she said. Heather's heart dropped. Her eyebrows raised and she was about to protest when a small smirk appeared on Penny's face.

"You can only sit here if you pay the fee, and that would be getting me an apple cider."

Heather scrunched her nose in irritation and smacked Penny's non-broken arm. "Don't do that to me."

Penny laughed. "Sorry, I had to. Of course you can sit here. But I was serious about the apple cider."

Heather put her bag down on the couch. "I'll be back."

She walked over to the apple cider and grabbed herself and Penny a mug of cider. She made her way back over, working not to spill the hot beverages, and sat on the couch. She handed Penny her drink and leaned into the soft cushions to settle in for a while.

Grace joined them on the couch and started to make small talk with Penny about how she was feeling and how the healing process was going.

Heather looked around as the two talked over her and glanced at all the women in the room—about fifteen of them. They sure knew how to fill the

place. Heather's mind drifted to the wedding and how they would arrange the space to accommodate everyone. They only had about twenty people coming, including family and friends in the town, so she thought it would work.

She reminded herself there would be no need to worry. Penny was on the case. And whenever she planned something, it was guaranteed to be a hit.

"Okay, ladies, only a couple more minutes and we'll get started!" Natasha's voice sang out from somewhere in the group.

Ladies started to gather within the circle of couches, chairs, and folding chairs. The fireplace felt like the perfect addition to the cozy group, just like the bonfire they typically had outside.

Before Natasha could even start the group, the seashell chocolates were being passed around. Heather loved these chocolates and they felt like a staple item to any event Natasha had. She found herself actually craving them whenever Natasha was around, reminding her of the Pavlov dog effect. As the basket got closer, Heather realized that for today's meeting, the chocolates were shaped like little Christmas bells.

Heather grabbed a couple, unwrapped them, and popped them into her mouth. She was mid-chew when, all of a sudden, the front lobby door swung open and in walked Brent, with Ryan close behind him.

She wasn't sure why she was so surprised to see him there; it was his mom's inn, but she inhaled too quickly and started to cough, choking on her own spit. Grace looked at her with concern and started to pat on her sister's back.

"Oh my gosh, Heather, are you okay?" she asked.

Heather nodded quickly and tried to muffle her coughing so as not to draw attention to herself. She eventually stopped coughing, but not before Ryan noticed. He had a small smirk on his face as he and Brent walked towards the book club members.

"Hello, lovely ladies. How is book club tonight?" Ryan asked with a smile.

The ladies all cooed over Ryan and greeted him with the biggest grins on their faces. All of the older women tried to set their daughters or granddaughters up with him, and most of the younger single women wanted to be with him. His charm affected everyone.

Penny rolled her eyes at her brother. She was over the Ryan charm.

"Hi, boys. I love you both, but get out of here. We have our book club," Natasha said with a smile on her face and a wave, but she meant business.

Brent laughed. "I see we're not welcome here. Come on, Ryan, let's leave these ladies to their business," he teased.

The women said their goodbyes to the Almada brothers as they walked in the direction of the office. But Ryan only had eyes for Heather. He stared at her as he walked by and gave a wink before turning towards the office. Heather blushed.

How was it possible that she was currently dating the most irresistible bachelor in Sandpiper Cove? Not only in the town, but also in the larger community. She felt so lucky. It was almost like one of her romance novels.

"Okay, ladies, let's dive into the book tonight, shall we? Who wants to give a summary of this week's reading?" Natasha asked.

Heather tried to be engaged during the group, but she couldn't focus. All her attention was on Ryan. She felt on edge, willing for him to come back around the corner or something. She desperately wanted him to walk by, just for a glimpse of him again.

She almost rolled her eyes at herself. How could she have this much giddiness towards a man that she just started to see? Something about him she just couldn't shake. Her thoughts surrounded him, and only him. She wanted his full attention and presence all the time.

Someone else in the group had started talking now, and everyone else was listening well. Heather shifted in her seat and tried to take a couple of sips of cider, anything to stay focused.

Penny must have caught on because she subtly nudged her with her elbow. "Girl, you are beyond fidgety. What is up?"

Heather wasn't quite sure what to say. Were she and Penny at a place where she could tell her it was because of Ryan? That his presence alone made all of the hair on her body stand up? That her head spun whenever he walked into the room? She thought probably not.

"Sorry, I'm just feeling super antsy tonight," was all she could come up with.

Penny nodded, but Heather could see the look on her face. She knew what Heather was probably really thinking about.

Heather wondered if it would ever feel normal, dating her best friend's brother. Would Penny actually be okay with it one day? She hadn't tried to think about long-term as much since she assumed that was one of Ryan's triggers, but what if they did decide to get married? Would Penny ever be okay with that?

The thought left her feeling hopeful but also disheartened. She thought Penny could move past it. Heather herself had finally come to grips with it all. But who really knew. Only time would tell.

Heather tried to focus in again on the conversation, but now a buzz in her jacket pocket distracted her.

She finally caved and peeked at who it could be.

You look beautiful tonight.

The biggest, dorkiest grin quickly emerged on Heather's face. She tried to hide it by burying her head into her turtleneck sweater a bit.

The phone buzzed again.

I'm sorry I almost made you choke.

This time she hid her face so no one could see her blush in embarrassment. She had hoped he had missed that part.

*It's okay, you can just make it up to me—*she added a winky face at the end. *I wasn't expecting to see you here tonight. What are you and Brent up to?* She normally thought it would be rude to text during the book club. She tried to keep her phone away so she could stay undistracted, but it was just too tempting; he was too tempting.

We're working on wedding stuff actually. Brent asked me to be in the wedding party as one of his groomsmen, so we're planning a last-minute bachelor party for him.

Wow, crazy stuff. She wrote back, knowing very well if the Almada boys were having a bachelor party, it would be anything but crazy.

Oh, you know us, haha. More like a steak house and indoor driving range kind of night.

Heather thought that sounded like a great way to celebrate, maybe not the golf part as much, but a nice steakhouse she could deal with.

She waited for his next text to come through, but he must have gotten busy because none came. Finally, her phone started to buzz again. But this time, it was a phone call. She peeked at the caller ID and saw it was one of the teachers at the school calling her.

She squinted her eyes in confusion. What would she be calling about on Sunday night? She wondered if it had to do with the holiday program tomorrow. She figured it could wait and decided she would call her back after the book club. The call ended, but then she called again.

This time, curiosity won, and Heather quietly excused herself from the group to see what was going on.

“Hello,” she whispered, and she walked towards a hallway away from the conversation. “What’s going on?”

“Heather, I’m so glad you answered. Sorry to bug you on a Sunday night, but we’ve run into a situation.” Her voice sounded so frantic on the phone.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

“No, it’s not. I went to school tonight because I needed to do some last-minute planning for my class tomorrow and I noticed that your room door was open, which I thought was odd. I went to close it and it looked like the janitor had been in there...”

Heather couldn’t tell where this was going.

“All the bags with the props for tomorrow’s play are gone. I think he thought they were trash and threw them out!” Her voice was in full panic at this point.

Heather’s eyes widened and her voice dropped. “What!” she almost yelled. “Are you sure? Did you look around? Maybe he just moved them. Maybe they’re in the trash.”

“I’m sure. I looked, like three times.”

Heather’s mind went crazy. They needed those props for tomorrow or it would be the most boring holiday program they’d ever done. “Okay, let’s not panic.” Too late, she thought. “I’ll come to the school and make them.”

“Tonight? It’s getting so late already and there’s no way you can finish all of them in one night. We’ve been working on them for weeks.”

Heather was well aware. She had put a lot of time and energy into making those props. She couldn’t believe they were just gone. “It will be fine; I can get just the necessary ones done.”

“Okay, if you insist. Maybe you can call someone to help? I’m sorry I can’t be of help. I have to get home to my kids and relieve the babysitter.”

“That’s totally fine, don’t worry about it. I’ll be okay. Thanks again for letting me know. I’m headed there now.” Heather hung up the phone and took a deep breath. This is not what she wanted to be doing with her evening, and she knew it would be a very long night. But the kids had worked so hard on preparing for this play and she wanted it to be really special for them. The only person she thought would be free to help was Greg, and she didn’t want to go down that road tonight.

She ran back to the couch and gathered her things. She quietly filled in Penny and Grace on what had happened and made sure Grace could get a ride home from one of the other attendees.

After that, she raced out of the inn and tried to mentally prepare for the long night ahead of her. How she was going to get this done, she wasn't sure. It would take a miracle.

CHAPTER 18

RYAN

Ryan was busy typing away in the text message group that he and Brent had just created for Brent's bachelor party. "Okay. Let's go over this one more time to make sure I'm informing everyone correctly."

Brent nodded in response and leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his body.

"The plan is we start at the indoor golf driving range at three thirty in the afternoon, and then we make our way to Manny's Steakhouse for dinner reservations at five o'clock. Is that correct so far?" Ryan asked.

Brent nodded. "That sounded perfect. Man, I'm excited already." He smiled and moved his arms behind his head.

"Well, it's your night. You should be excited," Ryan joked. "And afterwards, we'll kind of see how late the evening goes, but we could go back to my place, or yours if you felt like hosting, and we can hang out some more. Maybe throw something on in the background to watch, play some cards; anything you want to do."

"Yeah, that sounds great. And you're sending that to everyone, right?" Brent asked.

Ryan nodded. "Yes. The guys I included in the text message were myself, you, Drew, Oliver, Nick, Isaac, and Caleb. That's all, right? Are you sure there isn't anyone else you want me to invite?"

Brent shook his head. "No, let's keep it small. It's like the day before Christmas Eve anyway, so I'm sure a lot of people will be busy with their families, as they should be. Thankfully, Caleb is my employee, so he just gets a paid day off basically." Brent chuckled.

Ryan put the finishing touches on the text message and hit send. "Okay. You are good to go. I'll make the reservations for both places tomorrow to get those officially booked."

"Thanks for doing all this, Ryan. I really appreciate it. With Drew having a new baby, it's nice having someone else help me who I don't feel like I'm bugging. It's not really fun planning your own bachelor party." He jokingly rolled his eyes.

"Not at all." Ryan smiled. "It's really not a problem. I'm looking forward to celebrating with you. It's a big deal: getting married." There was an unintentional shakiness in his voice when he said the word married. He hoped

Brent didn't notice.

Brent nodded in agreement. "It really is. But it also has felt like a long time coming. Which it has been. Everyone has given me grief for why it took so long for me to propose." Brent rolled his eyes for real this time.

"Why did it take you so long? Not to pour salt in the wound." He chuckled. "But I'm actually curious."

Brent slightly shrugged. "I guess it was a couple of reasons. For one, we were both not in any rush to get married. We were pretty content just being together as boyfriend and girlfriend. We saw each other almost every day, hung out with our friends together, went to church together... it just felt right. And plus, we were both so busy with our jobs that planning a wedding and moving seemed stressful."

Ryan almost forgot that Brent was planning to sacrifice living in his own designed home to move into Scarlett's house by the dance studio. Ryan knew how much Brent loved his house, but when it came down to where the two would live after they got married, they opted for what was easier for Scarlett. That way, she didn't have to travel so much in the car, and they could be closer to her job and the Sandpiper Inn. It was a selfless act, for sure. He knew Brent was slightly sad about it.

"So you don't have any fear about getting married? It has mainly just been the logistics and timing?" Ryan was curious. He enjoyed dating and getting to know women but didn't feel any pressure or rush to find "the one." Marriage wasn't something that was on his mind often, until lately.

It made him wonder what the big deal was about getting married. It seemed like his siblings were all getting into serious relationships and married at the drop of a hat these days. It wasn't as though he didn't value marriage. He absolutely understood and appreciated it. He had seen his parents happily married for years.

But, he had also seen the difficult side of marriage, the one that ends in heartbreak, grief, betrayal or anger. Being an attorney and going through the divorce process showed just how ugly it could get. And it didn't help that he watched his mom go through complete devastation and heartache after his dad passed away. How terrible to live your whole life completely in love and then in a moment that could all be taken from you. It sounded really painful to him.

"The thought of marriage hasn't really overwhelmed me in the past. It was more so not knowing *when* I would be ready for it," Brent said

confidently. “But, I believe that when you find that person, you just know. It’s this feeling that emerges that you won’t understand unless you are actually in it. You could think that you’ve found the one and genuinely be really happy and in love, but it’s not until that person comes into your life that makes you feel a certain way that you just know.”

Brent’s voice sounded like he was narrating the end of a romance movie as he watched the happy couple ride off into the sunset together.

Brent continued, “I don’t know. Sometimes I don’t think I can even describe that feeling accurately. But all that to say, it’s not until that person joins your life that you know for sure. And that doesn’t mean there aren’t doubts or fears. If you don’t have those, I would ask if you were taking the relationship seriously enough.” He scoffed. “Because it’s a lifelong commitment, and if you’re in it, you’re in it. But the most important part of all that is that you have to be willing to work through those fears and not just sit and wallow in them. Because that’s when you spiral. Trust me, I know.” Brent chuckled.

“Was there a specific moment when you knew that you were ready to marry Scarlett?” he asked.

Brent thought about it for a moment. “That’s a good question. I feel like Mom just asked me that the other day. I had known for a long time, really in the early months of us dating before the dance studio even opened, that I was going to marry her. As much as I wanted to fight it and say that I wasn’t ready and it was crazy to have felt that way about someone so early on, everything about her drew me in. I had seen her hurt, sad, happy, excited, focused, and mad. It was like I had seen every part of her, and I *loved* every part of her.” He smiled to himself, wrapped in some happy memory.

“When she looked at me, it felt like home. And I know that probably sounds really cheesy—this all does, I’m sure—but that’s what love does to you, I guess. Ask any of your older brothers who are currently wrapped up in it and they’ll tell you the same cheesy stuff.” He smiled and shrugged.

Ryan laughed. He was sure that was probably true. All his older brothers had turned into these completely in-love men just like that once their women came into their lives.

“But to answer your questions about when I knew it was time, it was this summer when we were out on the boat one day with Drew and Casey. I was driving and Scarlett was seated next to me. Drew and Casey were laughing about something Scarlett had just said, and I casually leaned over and

grabbed Scarlett's hand. I looked at her and she looked at me and smiled. I knew at that moment that I was ready. I wanted to put the ring on her finger and officially make her my wife. I wanted her around me every moment of the day possible. It wasn't this big romantic gesture or date, but just this simple moment of doing life together that made me realize I was ready."

Ryan just sat and nodded. "That's a lot of good wisdom, brother."

Brent laughed. "Hey, I try. I know that it's a lot to navigate adult feelings at your age, so anytime I can help, I will."

Ryan appreciated it. As much as he liked to pretend he had everything in life under control, he had an intense slap of reality every once in a while that reminded him he really didn't know that much.

"I should get back home. I've got a busy day in the office tomorrow." Ryan stood up and collected his things.

"Me too, another day, another week of work." He sighed and got up.

"I'll see you later, Brent." Ryan waved as he left the office. He was hoping that he might run into Heather before she left book club. They should have wrapped up right about now.

He walked out from behind the front desk and saw the sea of women chatting and drinking their last sips of apple cider before they headed on the road. It looked like it had finished, so he looked around for Heather.

He didn't see her anywhere but found Grace and Penny. He knew she wouldn't be without Grace, so where did she go?

"She's not here." Penny's voice broke his search.

Ryan walked close to Penny as she sat on the couch, watching him.

"Where she'd go?" He wasn't going to even clarify with her who he was searching for.

"There was an emergency at school and she had to go deal with it. Sounds like it's going to be a late night," Penny said.

Ryan's mind tried to figure out what could be an emergency on a Sunday night. "What happened?"

"Apparently, the props for the school holiday program tomorrow got thrown out. There's nothing left. Heather went to remake all of them before tomorrow."

"*All of them?*" Ryan's eyes bulged out of his head. Heather had said that was a project she had been working on for a long time. How was she going to do that all-in-one night?

"Does she have any help?" he asked.

Grace shook her head. “No, it sounded like there was no one that would be available. She’s probably going to be there all night. I would have gone with her, but I promised mom I’d help her out with something tonight.” She grimaced.

Ryan felt horrible. She would be so tired for the program tomorrow; he knew she would be stressed. He thought of an idea, but he debated if it would be worth it. He also had a big day tomorrow. He quickly made up his mind.

“Thanks for the info. Grace, do you have a ride home? I can drop you off on my way,” he offered.

Grace nodded. “Linda is going to give me a ride home, but thank you.”

“Okay. I’ll talk with you later. Have a good night.”

“Where are you going?” Penny asked with a squint in her eyes. It was clear she already knew the answer.

“You know where,” was all he said before he turned and walked away.

“What’s that about?” He could hear Grace ask Penny as he walked out the inn’s door.

CHAPTER 19

HEATHER

If Heather was going to make it through the night, she would need a lot more caffeine. It was only nine o'clock in the evening and she already felt tired; she was dreading the long night ahead of her.

Heather looked at the messy and unorganized table in her classroom completely covered in scissors, cardboard, tissue paper and all the other materials one might need to create show props. She was only just getting started after arriving two hours ago and trying to get her bearings. It felt like chaos, which was so unlike her.

Right when she arrived, she had made a list of everything that needed to be done, taken inventory of the materials she had, and made a plan of what to do. She didn't have as many materials as she knew she needed, but it was too late now. If she really needed to, she could make a last-ditch effort and run to the craft store in the morning before she headed back to school. But she thought it was unlikely. She knew she would most likely be in the same outfit tomorrow for school that she was in right now. There would be no time to make it home.

As she grabbed some construction paper and a pencil to work on the next item, she could feel tears emerge in her eyes. This was a complete nightmare. The reality of how big this project was going to be, and doing it all by herself, for that matter, felt devastating.

She had resorted to talking out loud to herself for pep talks at this point. "Power through it, Heather. It's just one night, you can do it. Ugh, where did those scissors go!" she grunted as she frantically looked around the table.

"I might be able to help with that," a voice said from the doorway.

Heather screamed and jumped in surprise. She looked over and saw Ryan standing in the doorway, also with a startled look on his face.

"Oh my gosh—Ryan! You scared the daylights out of me!" She held her hand on her chest and tried to catch her breath.

Ryan burst out laughing. "I'm—I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." He walked into the room and got closer to Heather.

"What are you doing here?" She looked at him in surprise. He stood with two huge bags of something, but the thing that caught her eye was the two big cups of coffee in a drink carrier.

"I ran into your sister and Penny after the book club and they told me

what happened.” He set the coffee and bags down on some of the kids’ desks. Heather couldn’t believe how much stuff he had. She finally recognized where the bags were from; they were from the craft store in town.

“So I quickly ran to the craft store, and the coffee shop, before they closed and grabbed some supplies. Hopefully it helps. Well, I know the caffeine will. But I slightly remembered some of the props you mentioned and tried to get supplies to make those.”

He seemed so casual as he talked, not like he had just gone completely out of the way to save the day. Heather’s heart soared.

“You did not have to do all of this. I—I literally am speechless.” She actually couldn’t think of what to say. “This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

Ryan grabbed the coffee and headed towards Heather. He held the coffee out to her and smiled. “It’s my pleasure. You need help. I’m here to help.”

“Wait, you’re going to stay? No, you can’t. You have a really big week this week and I would feel awful if you had to stay up all night to help me.” She held the warm coffee in her hands and felt a wave of relaxation wash over her at the touch. Coffee was so soothing.

“Don’t even think about it. It’s my choice. I want to be here. And you can’t change my mind.” He gave a sassy smirk.

“Ryan, I can’t thank you enough.” She stared into his eyes and was surrounded with kindness and compassion. Right now, he was her knight in shining armor.

“Well, what are we waiting for? It’s going to be a long night, so we might as well get started.”

Heather nodded. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

The two sprawled out all the materials and she filled in Ryan on her plan. She watched him go into business mode right before her eyes. He was focused on his cutting, gluing, and even stuck his tongue out just a bit when he was super focused. She had only seen her sister Rachel do that—it was adorable.

After an hour of hard work, he took off his sweater and revealed a simple plain, dusty blue T-shirt, perfectly complemented with his plain jeans. His hair wasn’t completely put together, a little messy from the long day, but it looked good. As she watched him work, she realized he looked really hot. Not sweaty, overheated hot. More like *I can’t believe I’m dating someone this handsome, charming, and physically fit* hot.

A small smile appeared on her face and then she quickly looked away. *Focus, Heather, focus*, she told herself.

She still couldn't believe his selfless act of being here to help. She couldn't imagine anyone else doing this for her; not even her own family was here. But he came, without her even asking. And he brought materials. Her mind just couldn't comprehend it.

Ryan was currently working on creating a giant snowman out of a cardboard cutout. He was trying to put the nose on carefully, but it fell off after sticking for a few seconds. "Ah, for Pete's sake," he said in frustration and put the snowman down.

Heather giggled. "Who knew arts and crafts could be so stressful, huh?"

"I have to give you props; this isn't easy. Anyone who thinks crafting is just for kids doesn't know what they're talking about." He ran his hands through his hair.

"Glad you finally understand the struggle us schoolteachers go through," she teased.

The two spent the rest of the night working, talking and laughing a lot. They both shared all their embarrassing work moments, and Heather almost peed her pants when Ryan accidentally knocked over a tube of glitter, sending it all over the ground and on his clothes.

Heather was oddly having so much fun that the next time she looked at the clock, it was already three in the morning.

"I can't believe it's so late already." Heather rubbed her eyes. "I think I need three more coffees."

"If there were more coffee available, I would get some for us. But look at how much we've accomplished," Ryan encouraged.

"Yeah, I am pretty impressed. We should be done around six o'clock in the morning. Does that sound about right?" She couldn't tell if she was kidding or serious at this point. She was starting to feel delusional.

"We've got this. I had to pull a lot of all-nighters in law school. It was just what everyone did when there was a big test, or we had mock trials the next day. It was kind of fun. We all slammed the caffeine and made the best of it. Kind of like right now." He grinned.

"That does sound fun. We didn't do a lot of all-nighters at my school." She worked on cutting out the pretend presents that would be under the tree.

"You seem like the go to bed at a decent time every day kind of person."

"I am definitely a go-to-bed early kind of girl. I have to deal with small

children all day. I need as much sleep and energy as I can get.” She laughed. “What about you?”

“I’m kind of in the middle. I like to sleep and don’t want to be up too late; if it’s midnight, it’s way too late. But nine o’clock feels too early. I typically have lights out at ten thirty.”

“That’s decent. Ugh, we need to stop talking about sleep. I’m starting to fade.” Heather threw her hair back in a ponytail, trying to switch something up to hopefully bring some energy. She noticed Ryan watching. She instantly felt insecure.

“I have an idea,” Ryan said. “We need some energy. I don’t know why I didn’t think of this earlier. Come with me.” He moved towards Heather’s direction and grabbed her hand.

The touch alone shot energy through her body. He started to gently lead her in the direction of her classroom door.

“Wait, what?” she asked. She followed along obediently as they made their way down the hall.

“Why are we headed towards the cafeteria?” she whispered. “And why am I whispering?” She giggled.

Ryan laughed. “Because you’re slowly getting more sleep deprived.”

They made their way into the cafeteria and walked towards the kitchen. Ryan opened the door and they walked in. “What are we doing?” Heather asked as they made their way to the freezer.

“Okay, promise you will never tell. But I once volunteered for a school event and one of the kitchen staff told me about the freezer. They constantly have loads of ice cream available, and the best part is…” They arrived at the freezer. “They don’t lock it,” he said with a mischievous smile on his face. He opened the freezer door and cold air rushed out.

Heather’s eyes popped open. “Yes!” The two went into the freezer and each grabbed one cup of ice cream. The cups even had a little wooden spoon attached. Ryan helped Heather onto one of the counters, and the two sat and ate their ice cream.

“This feels so wrong. Are we allowed to do this? Is this illegal?” Heather felt so bad. She had never done something against the rules before.

“It’s okay. The lunch lady said she gave me permission to eat some ice cream whenever I wanted, and she still works here, so that means it’s okay.” He smiled and took another spoonful.

“Of course, she said you could. You could honestly get away with

anything. No one can say no to you.” She jokingly rolled her eyes.

“I guess that goes back to the Almada charm you said we have.”

“I guess so. But hey, it’s working in my favor tonight.” She laughed and took another bite. “So I can’t be mad about it.” She mumbled with her mouth full.

Ryan smiled at her and the two stared at each other. Heather was so happy. Even though it was three in the morning, and she was beyond exhausted and stressed about tomorrow, being with Ryan right now, everything felt like it was going to be alright.

As he continued to look into her eyes, she realized he was starting to lean closer to her. Heather’s heart started to beat faster. Was he about to kiss her?

Oh my gosh, she thought as she realized that, yes, he was going to kiss her. She tried not to freak out in her mind. When she thought about it, this moment truly felt like the perfect moment; one that would be in one of her romance novels.

Excitement grew within her as she leaned in too. When his lips touched hers, fireworks went off in her heart. The perfect kiss that was gentle yet passionate. His hand reached up and cupped her cheek and more fireworks went off at his touch.

When she pulled away, a small smirk appeared on his face. Her cheeks turned red. “What?” she said.

“Your lips are so cold.” He chuckled.

Heather burst into laughter. “That’s what you’re going to say right now?” She playfully slapped his arm.

He leaned back and laughed too. “Come on, that’s enough sugar for us. Back to work.”

He helped her down and threw the empty ice cream cups away. Then the two walked hand in hand back to the classroom with more work to do.

The rest of the morning, Heather couldn’t stop looking over at Ryan. How was this her life right now? She was completely perplexed about how she could be with someone as wonderful as Ryan. Was this a dream? If it was, she never wanted to wake up.

As they worked together for what felt like a balance of eternity but a blink of an eye, she wondered if maybe, just maybe, she had found her Prince Charming.

CHAPTER 20

RYAN

Ryan never knew that his office desktop could feel as comfortable as a soft bed pillow. Ryan laid his head on his desk, trying his hardest to stay awake, but the heaviness of his eyelids was starting to win.

He turned his head and looked at the clock on his desk phone; it was only eleven in the morning. He let out a groan and closed his eyes again. This might be the longest day of his life.

“Uh, are you dying?” Brooke’s voice echoed in his head. He slowly lifted his head to look at her. She stood in the doorway leaning against the door frame, her signature stance when she had come to bother him about something.

“Is that coffee?” he quietly mumbled. He stared at the mug in her hand filled with fresh coffee which was steaming out the top. It wasn’t in one of the breakroom mugs, so he knew it was the good stuff.

“Yes, but what happened to you? Are you sick? You look awful,” she said, completely disregarding his attempt to ask for coffee. He couldn’t tell yet if she was seriously concerned or, more so, making fun of him. It was probably a little of both.

He slowly sat up in his chair and slumped back; at least he was upright. She should be grateful she got that.

“I’m not sick. I’m just completely exhausted. I was up all night, no sleep.” His voice trailed off in a slow response.

“Why would you do that?” She made her way into his office now that she knew he didn’t have anything contagious.

Ryan sighed. “Heather oversees the school holiday program, and someone threw out all the props by accident. She didn’t find out until last night, and the play is this morning. Well, was this morning. It was at nine o’clock. But she went to the school to make the props all by herself late last night, and I ended up going to help her. We didn’t get done until around six thirty this morning. It was just enough time for me to get home, shower and get ready to come here.” He ran his hands through his very untamed hair. He didn’t have enough time to do much about it.

Brooke looked genuinely surprised. “Did she ask you, or did you offer to help?”

“I just showed up. She didn’t know I was coming. Penny told me what

happened.”

“Wow, Ryan. I must admit I’m surprised, and a little impressed.”

“Why’s that?” he asked.

“I mean, don’t take this the wrong way, you’re a really helpful and compassionate guy, but I know the long days you have here this week with it being a short holiday week. So, for you to spend an all-nighter before that without even being asked, let alone begged, it’s very selfless of you. Normally, you’re all work, and if something is going to get in the way of that, you disregard it.”

He knew she had a point. That was his motto before last night. He was very mindful about his Sunday nights and making sure he had enough time to prepare for the week. He never liked being out late, and he would never voluntarily do something that would cause him to be this out of it during a workday.

“You’re right. It is very unlike me.” He slightly chuckled.

“You really like this girl, don’t you?” she asked with a mischievous smile on her face.

Ryan raised his eyebrows and nodded. “It would seem so, wouldn’t it.”

“I’m serious, Ryan. I’ve never seen you like this with a girl before. How do you feel about it?”

Ryan thought about it for a moment. “Take everything I say with a grain of salt because I am insanely exhausted and might be a bit delusional. But I’m crazy about her, Brooke. There’s something about her that makes me want to do insane things like build props for a school play all night and then go to work the next day. Or jeopardize my relationship with my sister in order to date her.

“And I just want to be with her all the time, which feels so wrong and unusual because we have only been together for a couple of weeks. It’s not like it’s been months. But I just felt this feeling last night when I was with her that I couldn’t shake. It felt like even though it all seemed crazy, it still made sense.”

His mind went back to his conversation with Brent. Ryan remembered what he said about that feeling you get when you find your person. That you would just know they’re the one for you. Is that the feeling he was experiencing now with Heather? He wasn’t sure.

Brooke sat and smiled in front of Ryan. “I love it. I’m not an expert in love, but I like to think I am an expert in you in some ways—” Ryan laughed;

she would think so.

“And I think you are falling in love with Heather, Mr. Almada.”

The word love sent chills all throughout his body. “But don’t you think it’s too early for that? Don’t you have to be with someone for months before you can experience love?”

Brooke laughed, but not in a patronizing tone. “No, Ryan. Love happens whenever it happens. It’s different for everyone. I mean, I knew I was going to marry my husband before we even started dating. We were initially just friends, but I knew we were meant to be. But you continue to build on your feelings for each other, and your friendship, as time passes.”

Ryan realized he and Brooke had never really talked about love to this depth before. It was helpful to hear her perspective.

“I guess that makes sense. Every relationship is different, so why wouldn’t that be the same too?”

“Do you know how she feels?”

Ryan shook his head. “Not really. We try not to talk about the future or big feelings a lot right now. We’re trying to keep it casual.”

“Well, that doesn’t seem to be going so well.” Brooke laughed.

Ryan shrugged. “I honestly don’t know what I’m doing, Brooke. I am usually way more confident and in control in these situations, but for some reason I’m just a confused mess. It’s really not like me.” If he was honest with himself, he truly wasn’t sure if he liked feeling this way. He felt frustrated and a little bit scared. He wasn’t sure what was happening to him, and if he thought about it too hard and how he felt about Heather, it made him anxious.

“Don’t freak out.” Brooke looked sternly at him as if she could read his mind. “It’s okay to be nervous in serious relationships, but don’t let it completely push you away. Embrace the confusion and the mess; that’s my biggest advice.”

Ryan took a deep breath and nodded. He knew he couldn’t read too much into his thoughts right now. He was completely sleep-deprived.

Brooke stood up. “I need to get back to work, but this was so fun.” Her sassy Brooke smile was back.

“I’m glad you could enjoy my misery today.” He tried to force a smile.

She started making her way out of the room and Ryan put his head back down on his desk, even though he had about twenty emails to answer and three urgent phone calls to return.

“Oh, and let me know if you go get some better coffee today. I’m desperate!” he called out to Brooke.

“Maybe I could help with that,” a soft voice said from his doorway, which was definitely not Brooke.

Ryan shot his head up, almost making him dizzy, and saw Heather now standing in the doorway. Only this time, she was the one with coffee in hand.

“Heather, what are you doing here?” He looked at his clock again to make sure he hadn’t been dreaming and the day was over. No, it was still not even lunch. “Shouldn’t you be at school? What about the holiday program?”

Heather walked in and set the coffee on the desk in front of him. He couldn’t avoid thinking about how adorable she looked in her outfit. She wore a neutral fall-colored dress with her fashionable tan boots and her hair nicely in a high ponytail. Thankfully, she’d had a chance to run home and get ready before the school day started.

“The holiday program was earlier and only an hour long. It went phenomenal, all thanks to you and your help with the props. They looked great and the kids had no idea about the fiasco.” She handed Ryan his extra-large coffee and he very gratefully accepted it.

“I had told the principal about what happened and how we spent the whole night working, and he found a substitute for me so I could go home for the rest of the day. It was very kind of him.”

“Wow! That is really nice of him. So you got to leave right after the show?” He took a long chug of coffee—perfect. It was his favorite drink from the Bluebird Café. He was surprised she remembered it.

She nodded and took a sip of hers. “Yes. Then I went straight to the coffee house and then came here. I hope it’s okay that I stopped by. I didn’t know your schedule and didn’t want to interrupt any meetings or something, but I remember how bad you said the coffee was here. I figured you’d be desperate.” She winked.

Ryan smiled. “You were right, clearly, since I was yelling about it when you got here.” He felt slightly embarrassed.

Heather laughed. “I’m just so sorry you have to work all day to day and be this tired. Is there any way you can go home early? Or anything I can do to help so you can?”

He couldn’t help the smile beaming on his face. She was truly one of the kindest and most genuine women he’d ever met.

“I appreciate the offer, but no, there’s nothing you can do. There’s a

chance that I can leave around three o'clock, which would be really nice. One of my clients hasn't messaged me back about our meeting, which typically means it's canceled."

"I'll pray for that," she teased. "You need a good night of rest. I still—I just still can't believe you did that for me last night. I wouldn't have gotten all those props done if it hadn't been for you."

"Oh, you definitely wouldn't have. I saw your cutting skills firsthand," he teased.

"Hey!" Heather looked jokingly offended. "It was like four in the morning. Everyone would have bad cutting skills at that time of morning," she said, trying to defend herself.

Ryan laughed. "In all seriousness, I'm glad I could do it. It's a night I will always remember." He stared at her with the goofy grin still on his face. For many reasons.

The two sat in silence for a moment. "Okay, well, I'll get out of your hair then. And honestly, if I stay seated long enough, I might fall asleep." She stood up slowly.

"I get that." He watched her gather her bag and coffee. At her pace, it seemed like she was trying to decide whether or not to say something else.

"Hey, Heather—" he quickly said. She looked up, almost thankful he had something else to say.

"Once I finally get myself recovered, would you like to go Christmas tree hunting with me?" He wasn't sure where that invitation came from. He hadn't even decided if he was going to get a tree this year or not, with how busy and late in the season it already was.

Heather beamed. "Really? Like go into the store and find one?"

Ryan laughed. "No, like go to the forest and find one."

Heather's eyes brightened. "I've never done that before. That sounds so fun."

Ryan wanted to be surprised that she had never gone and chopped a tree down, but there was a part of him that wasn't surprised.

"Maybe Wednesday night? Then we could go back to my place and warm up with some hot chocolate. I've got this specialty kind that is incredible."

Heather nodded. "Sounds perfect. Just text me the details, but no rush. You need your rest."

"Will do, get some rest."

Heather left and Ryan exhaled and put his head back on his desk.

CHAPTER 21

HEATHER

Heather was thrilled about her Christmas tree hunt date with Ryan. She had never gone and cut down her own tree before, so it felt like this brand-new adventure. Her mom never liked the idea that there could be bugs living in the tree, or how sappy and high maintenance real trees were, so her family always had the reusable one that they put into a box every year.

It was a really cold day, what you could expect in Maine in the middle of December, so Heather had bundled up with leggings, furry hiking boots, a sweater and her biggest coat. Her gloves and hat were shoved in her pockets as she stepped out of the car where Ryan told her to meet him. It didn't help that the sun was already going down at four thirty. She really hated how dark it got so early in the winter.

She looked around the parking lot and didn't see him yet. She regretted getting out of her car; the cold wind made her shiver. Ryan had promised it wouldn't take too long and that they would go back to his place afterwards for some hot chocolate to warm up. Plus, he had a surprise for her.

Heather couldn't wait to see what the surprise was; she loved the anticipation.

Ryan had borrowed Brent's truck for the day so she almost missed it as he pulled into the parking lot. He quickly jumped out of the truck when he saw her standing there. Heather couldn't stop the big grin that appeared on her face when she saw him.

"What's so funny?" he asked as he went towards the bed of the truck to pull out his equipment for tree chopping.

"You look like a lumberjack." She giggled.

Ryan stood there in his jeans, plaid shirt underneath his coat, which of course was unzipped, and he held an ax and rope in his hand.

Ryan looked down at his attire and chuckled to himself. "I guess I do. What do you think?" He spun around like he was in a fashion show.

"I'm not going to lie. It's not a bad look." She laughed. He did look really good in this more rugged vibe he had going on, but he always looked good.

"Are you ready for your first Christmas tree hunt?" His smile went from ear to ear.

"As ready as I'll ever be, I have no idea what to expect." Heather pulled her hat and gloves out of her pockets and put them on.

“Let’s do this.” He grabbed her hand in his free one that wasn’t holding the ax and rope, and off they went into the forest of trees.

“Do you want me to carry something?” Heather asked.

Ryan muffled a laugh. “No, I’m good. You just enjoy the journey.”

They walked through the crunchy snow. Thankfully it hadn’t gotten too deep yet, only about five inches so far. They both looked around at the trees, all various heights, shades of green, and fluff volume as Heather called it; Ryan called it width.

As they walked, he explained what they were looking for, and how he specifically needed one that was only six feet tall. He didn’t like it to be so tall that it was unmanageable, but it had to be taller than him.

Heather kept an eye out, trying to figure out how to determine the height of a tree without a tape measure.

“Has chopping down a Christmas tree been something your family has always done?” Heather asked.

Ryan nodded, still gazing around at the different trees. “It was something us guys did with our dad every year; at least those who were around and wanted to go. With all our age gaps it was rare that all of us would be there at one time. But there was usually at least three of us each year, plus my dad.”

“What, Penny didn’t want to go?” Heather asked.

Ryan shook his head and laughed. “Oh no, she was not a fan of just walking around and looking at trees, as she called it. She thought it was insanely boring.”

“That’s funny. I feel like it’s something she would totally do.”

“Maybe, but she’s too impatient for it. She would just see one that looked decent enough and pick it. She doesn’t have the eye and the craft for it.” Ryan gave a sassy look.

“Well you’ve got me intrigued to see what this *craft* looks like,” she teased.

The two walked in silence for a while, taking in the beautiful view of hills full of tree after tree. They passed a couple of families that were looking for trees too. Some had already found their special one, and others were still on the hunt. Kids laughed and cheered as the tree came crashing down. It made Heather smile.

She looked at Ryan and wondered if seeing all the families made him miss his dad and remember the old times. She was about to ask when Ryan suddenly stopped.

“There she is,” he said quickly with a smile.

Heather looked around expecting to see a woman that he knew standing somewhere. “Who? Where?” she asked.

Ryan pointed to the tree two rows away from them on the left. Heather sighed when she realized he was talking about a tree and not an actual person. What was it with men titling their items as feminine?

Ryan walked towards a tree that actually did look pretty perfect. It had the fluff and height that they were looking for. She didn’t see any imperfections—it looked like the textbook picture of a Christmas tree.

“It looks great! What a good find!” Heather tried to be encouraging. She wasn’t sure what moral support she was supposed to give during this. She just knew that her toes were starting to freeze, so she was thrilled they found the tree so soon.

Ryan walked over and checked out the tree close-up. He examined the stump and then laid the rope down on the ground on one side of the tree. Heather watched very curiously to see what his plan was.

“You better come stand by me or way far back,” he instructed her. Heather decided to stand right behind him, which seemed like the safest option. Who knew where this tree would go? Thankfully, it wasn’t incredibly big.

Ryan grabbed his ax and took a couple of deep breaths. Then he started to swing at the stump. The contact with the ax and stump was loud, and it reminded her of what it looked like in the movies. Ryan kept swinging, making a deeper cut each time.

Heather watched, really impressed. Plus, he looked really manly and hot as he cut it down. Her cheeks got red at the thought.

Finally, Ryan gave one last chop and the tree slowly started to fall. It landed right on the rope. Heather clapped at the success.

“Wow, that was impressive!”

Ryan laid the ax down and took some breaths to regain his strength. He smiled at her. “Thank you. I’ve never done it with an audience before. It’s a little intimidating.”

“You’re doing great,” she reassured him.

Ryan walked over and assessed the tree on the rope. He walked around it and then took the rope and tied the tree up.

“Alright, you ready to help me pull?” he asked Heather. She was surprised, she didn’t expect to help, but she felt excited to.

“Sure!” she exclaimed and walked over to the rope.

Ryan had made one big loop so they both could hold onto one end and pull together. Heather loved being able to help.

“Let me know if you need a break at all. Thankfully, we’re not too far away from the truck. Use your legs to pull and not your back, okay?” he instructed. She nodded.

The two started to pull the tree, and it was easier than she thought. Again, she was thankful for a smaller tree.

They hiked through the snow and all the way to the truck, not talking that much as they focused on pulling. Once they made it to the truck, they worked together to lift the tree into the back of the truck. Ryan threw the ax and the rope into the truck bed.

“Well, that’s it.” Ryan wiped the tree thistles off his gloves. “Sorry, you might have gotten a little sticky from the tree.”

Heather looked down at her coat and realized she was also covered. “It’s not a big deal. I can wash it,” she said.

“We can throw our stuff in the wash at my place. Are you ready to head over there?” he asked.

She nodded. “I’ll head over there now.” She was giddy to spend some time with Ryan tonight at his place. She had made up in her mind an idea of what it would look like, and she was anxious to see for herself. Was it a complete bachelor pad? Did it have some feminine charm from Penny’s influence?

She waved and headed back to her car and blasted the heat as she tried to warm up. She entered his address into the GPS and went on her way, following the truck with the Christmas tree.

Heather walked into Ryan’s place and let out a soft gasp. His place was beautiful—if you could say that about a man’s house.

From the outside, it looked like a simple cottage-style home. It looked charming and homey, which is exactly the vibe she got from the inside. The house featured a soft beige color with a black accent wall where the entertainment center was.

He had bookshelves and a desk also located in the living room, with

every surface featuring artwork, pictures in frames of his friends and family, and even some fake plants.

The kitchen was separated from the living room area with an island—everything was incredibly clean, open, and organized.

“You look surprised,” Ryan said as he pulled the tree the rest of the way into the house so he could shut the door.

Heather took off her winter gear and placed it on the ground, as previously instructed, in the nice and newly remodeled entryway. “I guess I am a little surprised.”

“Why’s that?” Ryan started to take off his gear as well, keeping on his gloves for the sticky tree.

“It’s just so nice. And well decorated.”

Ryan smiled. “You have to remember that Penny wanted to decorate the minute I moved in. I really have no style, but I do like a clean and organized house, so that part is me. It stresses me out if it’s too messy.”

“I totally agree. Where is your washer? I can put our clothes in it.”

Ryan pointed in the direction of the laundry room and Heather went to do the wash. She looked around and explored on her way. She still couldn’t comprehend how nice Ryan’s place was. There was a guest room that was fully furnished, a full laundry room, bathroom, and then a master suite. She awkwardly peeked in there, not wanting to be caught in Ryan’s room, but curiosity got the better of her. It had a large, spacious area with a walk-in closet and his own bathroom.

She couldn’t fathom having that much space to herself.

Heather headed back to the main area after starting the washer. Ryan had already put the tree up in the corner and had it placed in a water basin. The tree really did look good there, and it started to smell like a pine tree in the room already.

This was Christmas.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“It looks incredible. I can now see the appeal of having a real tree.”

“Good, my mission is complete then. Now, that hot chocolate.” He made his way to the kitchen to start the drinks. “I turned on the TV. I figured we could put on a Christmas movie in the background or something while we work.”

Heather looked at him funny. “Work on what?” She grabbed the remote as instructed and opened up his movies app as she waited for a response. The

first movie that popped up under the Christmas tab was *White Christmas*. She didn't even need to look at any other movie and quickly selected it. That was one of her family's favorites; that was their tradition every Christmas Eve.

"I have a promise to fulfill today, which also leads to our surprise." He had a smirk on his face. "We are going to make a Christmas Wreath Bread Loaf, from scratch."

Heather's eyes widened. "Really? That sounds amazing!" She was truly excited to learn how to make the bread ever since he told her about it.

"I'm glad you're excited about it. That could have been a really lame surprise if you weren't up for it," he admitted. "But, I did already make the dough part because that needed a while to prove and sit before we could actually work it into a loaf."

"Wow, look at all this bread terminology," she teased.

Ryan rolled his eyes. He finished the hot chocolate and poured the steaming beverage into little snowman mugs.

"You really do love Christmas, don't you?" she asked. Everything in his house was already decorated, and the snowman mugs were the cherry on top.

"I do. I won't be ashamed of that. It's my favorite holiday, hands down. But I think that's because growing up we had so many traditions that made it special. My parents went all out—the Christmas Eve candlelight service, the massive holiday ham, stockings in the morning and presents for all of us. We would do cookie making and gingerbread house contests; they're my favorite times as a family."

"That sounds so nice." Heather smiled. "Do you still do some of those traditions?"

"A few. It's changed since my family spread out across the states. It's harder for everyone to get together at the same time. If we do, it's usually only for like a day, so it's hard to fit it all in. But my mom still tries to make it special and decorates like crazy. She and my sister love the nativity scenes and the little snow winter birds. They put them everywhere. I just think they look like little fat birds. I don't know what they have to do with Christmas." He gave a confused face.

Heather laughed as she grabbed her mug and took a sip. It tasted perfect, and the mini marshmallows were the best touch. In the background, Bing Crosby sang *White Christmas* and set the mood for Christmas baking.

Ryan took a sip of his hot chocolate and then went over to where the bread was proving. He unwrapped it and poked at it a bit to make sure it was

ready. He then started to work in the kitchen, taking out the equipment and materials they would need.

“What are we making, specifically?” she asked.

“We are making a Christmas wreath bread. It’s basically sweet bread that we braid to look like a wreath and then glaze and add some fruit on top.”

“That sounds incredible. My mouth is watering. Can we eat it today?”

Ryan shook his head. “Unfortunately, it’s for my family’s Christmas celebration, which I meant to ask you. Would you like to come to that with me?”

Heather couldn’t stop the surprised look that appeared on her face. She wasn’t expecting that. “Um, sure, when is it?”

“Sorry to put you on the spot. You don’t have to if you’re not ready for that. I just thought it would be the perfect time to spend time with my family all together, before the wedding, that is. We were originally going to celebrate on Christmas Day, but we figured everyone was going to be so tired from the wedding the night before, and then Brent and Scarlett will be off on their honeymoon so they wouldn’t be there. Oliver and Nick both agreed to fly in a week early for an early Christmas celebration and for some quality time together.”

“That totally makes sense. I would love to. I mean, I know everyone basically already, so it wouldn’t be too weird. As long as they’re okay with me crashing your celebration.” She felt a little giddy thinking about going and being there with everyone. It would feel so official of them as a couple.

“You would be more than welcome. My mom will lose her mind she’ll be so happy.” He chuckled. “Oh, it’s on Saturday, so in a couple of days. Sorry for the last-minute notice.”

Heather thought for a moment. “I have that day free, and I’ll come on one condition.”

Ryan stopped kneading the dough out on the cutting board and looked. “What’s the condition?”

“Will you come with me to my family’s Christmas gathering on Sunday? My parents, younger sisters, and I are driving an hour out of town to my grandparents. We could drive separately. It will be a low-key event, just some food and gifts. But I would love for you to come to meet everyone. I’ll only tell my mom about it the day of. That way she can’t ask me a hundred questions the few days beforehand and drive me crazy.”

Ryan thought about it for a moment, and every second of silence made

her nervous. Was that too bold to ask him to come with her? Would that be too much for one weekend?"

Ryan finally replied. "That sounds like a lot of fun. I'm in. That will be one crazy weekend," he warned.

Heather nodded. "But a good one, right?" she asked.

"Right." He smiled. "Now, come over here so I can teach you how to do this."

Heather washed her hands and then stood in front of the cutting board with the bread.

"I want you to push down hard and then out on the bread. It's going to be tough, so you have to use a lot of muscle," he instructed.

Heather tried her best, but it was harder than it looked. Ryan must have sensed her struggle. He moved to stand behind her and wrapped his arms around her, then helped her knead the bread.

His touch and the closeness of his body made her heart race. For just cutting a tree down, he smelt so good, a little like pine tree cologne.

She tried to stay focused on kneading the bread and felt like she was finally getting the hang of it. "I feel like I'm doing it. Am I doing it right?" She tried to distract herself from his closeness.

"You're doing a great job." He leaned back and slowly took his hands away from the bread and backed away.

Heather was disappointed at his retreat. She turned to ask what she needed to do next and lost her breath as she realized he was still standing so close, their faces just inches apart. They stared into each other's eyes for a moment as she silently begged for him to kiss her again.

She turned a little closer to him, giving him permission. He took the hint and wrapped his one arm around her back and the other hand made its way towards her face. He kissed her again in another perfect kiss, surrounded by the sound of Christmas music playing from the movie, and the smell of sweet bread and pine tree.

Heather couldn't stop thinking about how romantic it was.

When he finally pulled away, it was Heather's turn to let out a giggle.

"What?" he asked.

"I don't know how, but I think I got flour on your face." He had a little smudge on his nose.

"Oh really?" he asked. He pretended to try and wipe it off, but instead, quickly touched the cutting board that was layered in flour and then wiped

some on Heather's face.

"Hey!" she laughed.

This turned into a flour battle that thankfully didn't get too messy but ended in another kiss and a long moment just standing in each other's arms.

They spent the rest of their baking time braiding the dough and preparing it for the oven. Heather loved learning how to make the bread, but her favorite part was afterwards when they sat on the couch with their hot chocolate, cuddled under a blanket together, and watched the rest of *White Christmas* while the bread was in the oven.

If home had a feeling, she determined this is what it felt like.

CHAPTER 22

RYAN

It was all about beautiful baby Ivy this year at the Almada early Christmas party. The sweet baby coos followed by the squeals from the women whenever Ivy made a sound were almost all you heard throughout the whole day.

Ryan had to admit, Casey and Drew's baby girl was super cute, but what should he have expected when she was the baby of two good-looking people? Everyone wanted a chance to hold Ivy and get some baby snuggles, but you had to fight Natasha for your turn.

Ryan hadn't seen his mom this happy in a while. She was absolutely loving the Nana life. She had instructed everyone that she would not be called Grandma; it made her feel too old. But she wanted to be the cool Nana that all the grandkids wanted to hang out with all the time. What a Nana thing to say, Drew had teased.

The day so far had been a great time with family. He couldn't believe how many people fit into Drew and Casey's cottage house on the ocean. They didn't have a lot of space, but the Almada family knew how to make themselves comfortable and squeeze into a place.

The girls had completely decked out the house in Christmas décor—it was almost unrecognizable. The Christmas tree was decorated with a mix of same-colored ornaments and ones that Natasha had kept from the kids' younger years. Handprints, little reindeer, and ornaments that had been hand-painted by the kids. It was always fun every year to look at them and talk about the memories from each.

There were Christmas lights all over the house and a beautiful nativity scene by the fireplace. Christmas music played constantly the whole day, and it always smelled like cinnamon for some reason.

The food Natasha and the rest of the family made was delicious. They tried to do a potluck style so Casey didn't need to prepare as much, just provide the meeting space, but with so many family members coming in from out of town and Penny still on bedrest, Natasha and Scarlett took a lot of the load. Although Brent and Isaac sure knew their way around a kitchen and showed off some great turkey and honey-glazed ham cooking skills.

Ryan was able to bring the Christmas wreath bread loaf he and Heather made together. It turned out really well and looked beautiful with the glaze

and berries on top of it.

The conversation was always lively when the whole family got together, and this year included two new additions—Macy and Claire. As they sat down to eat, Natasha had an ornament for each of them at their place with a bell-shaped chocolate and a slip of scripture to read. They took turns reading their scripture verses that told the Christmas story, after which Brent said grace. As food was being passed and dished out, Natasha made them go around the table and say what they were thankful for.

There were some funny answers, and some serious ones. This year, the one that made everyone reach for the tissues came from Claire, the most unlikely person. She mentioned that it was her first Christmas with what felt like a family in a long time. It didn't take much for the waterworks to start.

Ryan realized he often took his family for granted. Growing up with them always around, he forgot that there were people out there with no one, or people who have family, but it's too strained of a relationship to be with on the holidays. It felt devastating to him; his family truly was the backbone of his life and were some of his best friends. He couldn't imagine life without them.

The loss of his dad felt like the first realization of this unawareness of gratitude. He would have never imagined what it was like to lose a parent, but when it happened, it felt like he was living in a false reality. He was heartbroken, like a piece of him actually disappeared. But the worst part was seeing his mom go through that pain.

He couldn't fathom what it would feel like to love someone so deeply and then, in a moment, they were gone. Never to talk to, or hug, or see them look you in the eyes and whisper I love you ever again. If he thought about it too long, it brought tears to his eyes all over again.

He couldn't imagine ever going through that pain and making it out alive. He didn't know how his mom did it. She was truly the strongest person he knew.

The family now sat around the couch and sprawled across the floor as they tried to digest the enormous amount of food they had just eaten. Because there were so many of them, they decided not to exchange presents this year and only received the ornament from Natasha. Soon enough, there would be little Almadras running around who would be thrilled about opening presents.

"I actually think if I put one more piece of food into my body, I would combust," Penny said as she sunk deeper into the couch.

“Don’t forget we still have the pies and desserts to eat,” Nick reminded her.

“I guess I could make a little more room.” She sighed as if she was taking one for the team. The room laughed.

“Nick and Claire, how has work been for you two? Now that Nick isn’t working under you, Claire, do you guys still like being together?” Drew teased.

Nick chuckled. “I think she likes it even more now; she doesn’t have to hear me try and crack jokes all day.” He smiled towards Claire, who sat above him on the couch. She nudged him with her foot and smiled.

“It’s true. My team does get a lot more done now that he’s busy bugging someone else.” She winked.

He laughed and reached his hand up and reassuringly squeezed her knee. Ryan smiled. It didn’t matter about what he thought of love. He truly loved seeing his brothers so happy.

“So Ryan, when is Heather arriving?” Natasha shouted from the kitchen. She was busy cleaning dishes with Casey and Drew to prepare for the next round of food.

Ryan became frazzled by the immediate attention he got. He knew he was subjecting himself to a lot of teasing and jokes, but he felt ready to take it.

“She said she was on her way now, so any minute.” That reminded him he should listen for the doorbell so he could be the one to answer the door.

“Won’t this be the most exciting Christmas celebration yet—a new baby, new sister-in-law, and Ryan finally bringing home a girl for the holidays?” Isaac joked.

“I still can’t believe it’s Heather Pearle. That girl has been around this family for a long time. Wasn’t it like second grade, Penny, when you guys became friends?” Brent asked.

Penny nodded. “First grade. Don’t worry, it freaks me out too.”

When Ryan had texted the family that Heather was coming, he made sure to go into detail to not poke fun about it or make Heather uncomfortable while she was with them. They obviously knew her, so it could feel awkward now seeing her as a date, instead of a friend of Penny’s. They promised to get all their jokes out before she arrived; they were keeping that end of the bargain.

“Good for you, Penny, for being okay with it. It’s not easy dating friend’s siblings—it’s an adjustment for sure. But it can turn out okay!” Casey tried to

encourage Penny from the kitchen.

Drew looked at her funny. “What do you mean ‘it can turn out okay’? Did you end up with a friend’s sibling?” He gave her a sassy look.

She rolled her eyes at him. “No, but I have other friends in my life who have, and it worked out just fine for them. Happily married.” She smiled. “And I *have* dated a friend’s sibling before, and *although* I didn’t end up with them, I’m still glad she allowed us to date. Otherwise, it would have felt like forbidden love and made it even more tempting.” She giggled.

“You literally have your head in movies all the time,” Drew poked fun.

The doorbell rang, thankfully interrupting the conversation. Ryan bounded up, almost smacking Penny’s leg, and she made sure to give him a dirty look.

“Okay, guys. Remember what you promised! Don’t make a big deal about it.” He tried to give them his stern lawyer look. Some of them nodded and others gave annoyed looks like they were being treated like children; they definitely were.

Ryan quickly walked to the door and took a deep breath before he opened it. He was about to head into uncharted territory.

He opened the door and there stood Heather, looking gorgeous as always. She truly embodied the southern belle look, just like her mother.

“Hi,” he said, unable to keep the huge grin off his face.

“Hey,” she said back.

“Come on in.” He ushered her inside and grabbed her coat, avoiding the large bouquet of flowers. “What’s that for?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s a family tradition of mine every Christmas to make a bouquet of flowers, so this year I thought I would bring them as a gift for Casey for hosting; and for, ya know, making and birthing a baby.” She smiled.

Ryan chuckled. “I bet she’ll love them. Come on in.”

“I do love them!” Casey shouted, making Ryan jump. He didn’t know she had been listening.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,” she said as she came around the corner.

Yeah right, Ryan thought, knowing she couldn’t help but innocently eavesdrop on their conversation.

“That is so thoughtful, Heather,” Casey said as she took the vase and gave Heather a hug. “I’m so happy you’re here! Welcome to our home. Make yourself comfy!” She took the vase and headed towards the living room.

Ryan almost forgot that Heather was friends with Casey and Scarlett from the book club, and that she knew Macy briefly from her time in Sandpiper Cove too. That made him feel even better about her being here tonight. It wasn't like the only person she knew was him. He took another deep breath and slowly let it out. He needed to calm his nerves.

The two walked down the hall into the living room area with the rest of the family. He placed his hand gently on her back to help guide her in, just in case she was a little nervous. He looked around his family and the group suddenly felt a lot bigger than before.

"Everyone, I'm sure most of you know Heather, but just in case you didn't, this is Heather," he said to the group.

"Hey guys," she said with a smile. She sounded so calm and confident; it made him insecure about why he was making such a big deal about this.

"I'm pretty sure I've met everyone here at least once; Claire I remember from Casey's baby shower." Claire nodded and gave a soft smile.

"The only person I haven't met is that sweet girl over there." She pointed to baby Ivy and made her way over to the bassinet, where she was asleep. She gushed over Ivy with Natasha for a couple of minutes and started to ask Casey how she was doing. Ryan figured that was his clue to go back to the group circle. She seemed comfortable.

"Smooth," Penny whispered, and Ryan now sat on the couch next to her.

"What?" he asked.

"You are the most nervous I have ever seen you. And that includes when you were preparing for your first official trial. Take a deep breath. Everything is fine. She knows everyone here; it will be great. Just try and have a fun time," she encouraged him.

"Thanks—wait, why are you being so nice to me?" He squinted at her.

Penny made an annoyed face. "Don't read into it. But I may have started to actually be happy for you guys and less cranky about it. It seems different than your other relationships—a good different. You kind of seem like you actually really like her. She told me about what you did for the school program. And even just the fact that you brought her here. It says a lot. I haven't seen this side of you before."

There was a genuine tone to Penny's voice that Ryan didn't hear too often; it was typically masked with humor and sarcasm.

"Thanks, Penny, that means a lot."

While suggestions for the first game to play were being thrown out, Ryan

was wrapped up in his mind about everything Penny had said. He did feel like this was different than other relationships, but he wasn't sure why. How could he be so happy with someone when it had only been about a month of them participating in this back-and-forth flirtation?

He didn't want to read too much into it because that would give him a headache.

"Okay. The rules for salad bowl are simple," Macy started explaining. Apparently, this was a game that she had learned in college that she was obsessed with. She had forced Oliver to start playing it with her and their friends in Arizona, and he even admitted to enjoying it.

Heather, Casey, and Drew had made their way back over and filled in the circle. Natasha said she wanted to be on baby duty, of course. Ryan knew it was just because she couldn't keep up with the competition anymore. Heather came and sat next to Ryan on the couch. He knew she had only just arrived, but he was so happy she had come.

"Everyone has to come up with three nouns and write them each on an individual piece of paper. Keep it a secret; it's going into the bowl. Then, there are three rounds. The first is just like the game Catch Phrase, where you can say anything to try and give hints to what the word is without saying any of the words on the paper. Second round is charades—so no words at all. And for round three, you can only say one word to try and describe what's on the piece of paper.

"There will be two teams, and one person at a time gets to read the words off, and their team tries to guess the word. It's timed, so each team only gets thirty seconds. When the bowl runs out, we count and see how many slips of paper teams got right, and then move on to the next round. The team that has the most points at the end wins." Macy smiled. "Does that make sense?"

Everyone nodded. "This is going to get wild." Penny laughed.

Macy continued, "And because it's Christmastime, each word has to have something to do with the holiday."

Oliver started to pass out some slips of paper and some pens. "Okay. Write down some Christmas-related nouns, people. And then fold them up and put them into the bowl."

Everyone started to write and giggle at the choices they were putting on the paper.

"Wait, what's a noun again?" Isaac loudly whispered to Nick.

"Oh gosh." Heather giggled.

“Isaac, don’t say that in front of the teacher,” Nick teased, pointing towards Heather.

The room laughed.

“A noun is a person, place or thing,” Heather answered.

“Oh, that’s right. I always get that and an adjective messed up.” He shook his head. More giggles erupted.

“Not something to admit, dear,” Natasha yelled from the kitchen.

Once everyone had finished their words and placed them into the bowl, they divided into two teams. Macy led the first round so everyone could see how it was done.

Ryan was floored by how good she was at this; she gave the best clues. He was slightly bummed he wasn’t on her team. Then it was Oliver’s turn. He was on Ryan’s team. Ryan tried to focus as best he could, ready.

“Okay, go!” Macy yelled, starting the timer.

“Uh, this is something that travels on the snow—”

“Snowmobile! ATV! Sled!” words erupted all around him.

“More specific!” Oliver yelled, starting to wave his hands around. “A fancy sled! One that only Casey could afford!”

“A sleigh!” all of his team yelled.

“Hey!” Casey looked mock offended. The group laughed.

Oliver moved on to the next word and the team got into a good groove. After the first round was over, there had already been multiple fights about whether someone said the word in time before the timer went off, and a drink spilled on the rug from Nick jumping around too much during his turn.

The family was having a blast and Ryan hadn’t laughed that hard in a while. He kept looking over at Heather and she looked like she was having a good time. She rocked it during her turn at charades. Ryan was sure it was the schoolteacher in her coming out.

Ryan thought that if she could handle the competitive family game night, then she could handle anything. He loved watching her strategize with the other girls and authentically laugh when something funny happened.

The game finally ended, and Ryan was on the winning team. They really pulled it together in the last round, but the score was close.

“Well, relationships might have been broken up tonight, but at least there’s still pie,” Drew joked. The family laughed.

“I just finished getting all the desserts ready, so come on over and get some,” Natasha instructed.

“I feel like I burned enough calories during the charades round that I deserve it,” Nick said. He saw Nick smile at Claire. Claire just smiled and shook her head at him as they made their way towards the kitchen with everyone else.

Heather made her way back over to Ryan. “That was a blast—I guess congratulations on your big win are in order.” She sighed.

Ryan laughed. “That’s what you get when you’re not on a team with me. I’m a winner.”

“Well, let’s get you some pie, winner.” She jokingly nudged him in the direction of the kitchen. “What can I get you, Penny?” she asked before she followed behind Ryan.

“If there’s an apple pie, I want that. Otherwise some French silk pie, please,” Penny said.

The family got their desserts and dug in. Side conversations started, so it was a good chance for him and Heather to catch up.

“What did your family think about you coming over here for the Almada Christmas celebration?” Ryan asked Heather.

Heather took a bite. “They didn’t mind,” she said nonchalantly.

“Did they ask any questions about us? I figured your mom would have freaked out when you told her.”

Heather chuckled. “Oh, I’m sure she will. When I tell her,” she sheepishly admitted.

Ryan looked confused. “Wait, what do you mean?” He had just assumed she would tell them since she was coming over tonight.

“I actually haven’t told them yet. I told them I was coming to be with you guys, but my mom automatically started talking and assuming it was because I was going to help Penny, and I didn’t correct her. I chickened out and decided to still wait for tomorrow morning. She won’t mind your last-minute invite, and I already told my grandparents you’re coming, so they’re aware. If my mom found out tonight, let’s just say I wouldn’t be here right now. I’d still be at home answering a thousand questions about us.” She rolled her eyes.

Ryan chuckled. “You’re probably right about that.”

“It’s not because I don’t want them to know, truly. I just wanted to make sure that everything was certain with us before I did tell them, or else that could get really messy quickly. And I don’t want everyone in our business unless there’s something actually there to talk about... if that makes sense?”

She looked reserved, as if she was worried he would get mad at her secrecy.

“Heather, I totally get it. I was just surprised since we’re seeing them tomorrow. But that makes sense and I respect that decision. The holiday brings enough stress as it is.” He smiled as he looked into her eyes.

The two started to eat their pie in silence, but a question came to Ryan’s mind.

“So, what do you think about us then? Do you think we are in a place where we’re ready to be more open? We are getting together with your family tomorrow, so everyone’s going to know after that.” He was hesitant to ask, but curious to know what she was feeling. Did she feel the same way he did? Was she getting that weird, knotted butterfly effect in her stomach when she looked at him the way he did with her?

Heather thought for a moment. “I—I do, honestly. I’m feeling good about it, and ready to make it official and not try and hide it anymore. It has felt really good being with you, and I’m excited to see where it goes. I don’t have any looming reservations at this point.”

Ryan gave a relieved look. “Thank goodness for no looming reservations.”

Heather laughed. “Does that sound okay to you? What do you think?”

Ryan smiled and nodded. “I feel the same way. I’m happy.” It was all he wanted to give away at this point without possibly freaking her out with his feelings.

Heather’s big grin came back on her face as she blushed a little bit. He really loved it when she did that.

After dessert, they started to vote on the next game to play. While the guys argued about which game they should play first, Heather made her way back over to where Scarlett, Penny and Macy were seated. The girls started to talk about the wedding—there were plenty of giggles and ohs and ahs coming from that direction. Penny shared ideas and visions, and the others were soaking it all up.

It was different for Ryan to see a girl he liked be so secure and confident in who she was. Heather wasn’t clinging to him the whole time or being needy because she felt uncomfortable. She really did make herself at home, just like Casey said to do. He loved it. He didn’t want the night to end.

She was just being Heather, and it was perfect. He kept smiling at her, and at one point she caught his gaze. She smiled back. That same feeling he got when he was with her the other night at the school came back again—that

knotted butterfly effect. He still wasn't sure what it meant, but he didn't hate feeling it.

CHAPTER 23

HEATHER

Heather normally wasn't one to obsess about her appearance, but today was different. She had changed her hairstyle five times, fixed her makeup twice, and spent thirty minutes trying to find the perfect outfit combination. Everything felt wrong.

After about an hour total, she realized how ridiculous she was being. She was just going to see her extended family, not like she was meeting anyone new for the first time. But why had she felt so nervous? The celebration with the Almadás went perfectly the night before, and she and Ryan had both admitted to being committed to this relationship and *happy* in it.

Even those simple words, "I'm happy," that he whispered last night made her heart soar.

If she really thought about it, today made her more nervous than going to the Almadás Christmas party. Probably because it was her family, and she desperately wanted it to go well and for them to like Ryan. She was crazy about him, but more deeply, she was falling for him, and it was obvious.

She had finally landed on a long red dress with yellow flowers at the hem. It felt very Christmassy, and it reminded her of a vintage design that felt simple yet beautiful. It was perfect for Christmas at the farm.

She sent a photo to Penny to get her approval. They usually sent each other their outfits for important events to make sure they weren't way off in what they chose. Penny quickly sent back a thumbs-up emoji.

Heather was so grateful things had gotten back to normal with Penny. Last night it felt like they could completely be themselves again. They laughed, caught up, and continued to talk all things Brent and Scarlett's wedding. It was only a week and a half away, and they were running out of time to get everything done.

Ryan and Heather had planned to go to the store this week to pick up all the decorations, and then they would set them up the day before the wedding. They were worried they couldn't take over the inn's lobby too much before the big day because that would be hard for the guests to navigate around.

Everything was going as planned and the closer the wedding got, the more excited Heather became. Even though it wasn't her wedding day, she loved celebrating love, and she still couldn't get over how dreamy the whole event sounded. It felt like a Hallmark Christmas movie at this point.

Heather's phone buzzed and she looked down and saw Ryan had texted her.

You on your way soon? I'm so excited to see you.

Her cheeks blushed and she squealed a little bit. How was she so lucky? Ryan was excited to see *her*. Even after having seen her less than twelve hours ago, he wanted to see her again.

Soon. Just finished getting ready and have to go down and talk to my parents. Then I'm going to run out of the house as soon as possible before my mom starts asking a ton of questions.

I still can't believe you haven't told her... My mom would lose her mind if I did that to her.

Your mom isn't my mom... Trust me, it's for the best. She added a crazy face emoji.

Heather packed up her items for the day and went downstairs. Her mom was instructing one of her sisters about packing the final items in the car so they could leave. Her dad was already in his winter gear, clearly the one doing the packing.

It would thankfully be a small group of the Pearles going today, so at least it wouldn't be too overwhelming for Ryan to be there, although he didn't seem like the worry type. He thrived in situations like this.

Cassidy had to work, and Rachel was still at college and didn't plan to come back until the actual holiday. It would just be Lemon, Heather, Grace and her parents from their family.

Grace had asked a lot of questions after the book club night. Heather filled her in on everything but made her promise not to tell their parents. Grace agreed immediately. She also understood how her mom was.

It was nice having Grace to talk to about Ryan. She felt horrible having to keep it all in when she just wanted to shout from the rooftops how much she liked him. She wasn't at that place with Penny yet, so Grace worked perfectly for the girly love talk.

Heather got downstairs and started to put her winter coat on to help her dad load the cars.

Her mom, Candace, came around the corner with another load. "Heather, your dad just told us you're not driving with us today. Why?"

Heather's pulse increased; now was the time. She had to tell her mom.

"Well, Mom, I'm actually going to pick someone up on the way to Grandpa's farm."

Her mom made a weird face. “What? Who are you bringing? Penny?”

“Um, no, not Penny.” Heather saw Grace creep up behind Candace to watch the interaction.

“I’m picking up Ryan Almada.”

Candace gasped. “Grace, please take this casserole out of my hands before I drop it in shock.”

Grace quickly grabbed the dish with a smile on her face.

“Why is Ryan Almada coming to our Christmas celebration? Are you guys seeing each other? How long? Have you been hiding this from me—”

“Mom, take a breath,” Heather instructed. She was very relieved she had waited to tell her mom until now. “Yes, we are seeing each other. It’s been about a month and a half. I like him very much, and the only reason I didn’t tell you is because we were trying to figure out what we were before we made it public.” She waited for the next round of questions. But for the first time, her mom stood speechless.

“Did you break her?” Heather’s dad asked from behind her. Heather was unaware that he had been listening.

“I’m not sure... Mom, are you okay?” she asked.

“I have never been happier in my entire life!” Candace exclaimed. “Oh my goodness, my daughter is dating Ryan Almada! This is a Christmas miracle!”

“Let’s not get too dramatic now, honey.” Heather’s dad grabbed the next load and headed back out to the car.

“I can’t believe this. You two make a perfect couple. Both so smart, successful, and attractive. I can’t wait to see him today!”

Heather smiled and nodded and thought this was the perfect time to make her escape. “Great, me too. I should actually head out now so I’m not late to pick him up.” She slowly backed away towards the door.

“Of course, don’t be late to get him. We’ll see you there.”

Heather raced out the door and heard her mom still talking in excitement inside. She got to her car and exhaled. The hard part was over.

She texted Ryan that the deed was done and she was on her way. Hopefully, this day would be as perfect as yesterday was.

The drive to Heather's grandparents' farm was beautiful no matter what time of year it was. The tree line hugged the highway and was beautifully covered with a fresh layer of snow that had fallen overnight.

The smell of Ryan's cologne filled the car and brought a peaceful feeling to Heather's body. His presence comforted her like nothing else had before. He had made some fresh coffee at his house for the both of them, so the two drove with their coffee mugs, listened to Christmas music, and talked.

The drive had started with Ryan asking how Heather thought it went last night with his family. She had raved about how much fun she had and how it felt really natural to be there. She was dying to know what everyone said about her once she finally left at ten o'clock, even though the family was deep into another game. She could hardly keep her eyes open but didn't want to be the first one to go. She finally couldn't take anymore and decided to call it a night.

"Everyone loved you, Heather. You were so confident and comfortable there. I'm sure it helps that you know a lot of my family already, but it just seemed like you fit right in."

He interlocked his free hand into hers as they talked. His touch still gave her butterflies.

"I'm so glad. I just didn't want to seem too awkward and out of place. I was actually really nervous," she admitted.

"Well, you didn't show it."

All I Want for Christmas played on the radio and Heather hummed along.

"Oh, I realized I never asked you something the other day when we were making bread at my house. You asked me what my family's Christmas traditions were growing up, but I never got a chance to hear yours," Ryan said.

Heather was surprised that he realized that and then brought it up again later. She didn't think most guys would do that.

"Oh, hm, we have a lot of traditions actually. We always make Christmas cookies and flower bouquets like the one I brought to Casey's. The day after Thanksgiving, we spend the whole day listening to Christmas music and take the tree out of storage, along with the decorations. We decorate the tree and the whole house. On Christmas Eve we have our special meal and then watch *White Christmas*. That's why I turned it on the other day. It's one of my favorites." She smiled.

Heather continued, "We didn't really do a lot on Christmas Day growing

up. We went to church and then opened stockings and some presents. We typically ate leftovers from the night before. But it was fun to play with our presents all day and enjoy time together.”

Ryan nodded. “That does sound nice. Do you feel like there are some traditions you’ll carry on when you have a family?”

Heather was surprised again at the question. “I think so. Not all of them, but for sure the movies, Christmas cookie making and the day after Thanksgiving festivities. I feel like when you have a full day set aside for something, it makes it feel more legit and exciting.”

Ryan nodded. “Agreed. Although, in *my* family, we’ll be getting a real tree.” He winked.

Heather couldn’t tell how to respond. The way he said *my* family made it seem like he was implying she would be a part of it. Or was she overthinking that and he was just being sassy? She couldn’t tell. She just smiled and looked ahead at the road.

She took the exit from the highway and started down the road that led to the farm. It wasn’t too far away at this point. Her mom had already texted her ten times to say how excited she was to see Ryan and that they had already arrived. They must have left right after she did.

Ryan had laughed so hard when Heather told him about her mom’s response. He finally understood why she waited for as long as she did.

“Okay, we’re getting close. I’m so nervous!” she almost yelled.

Ryan laughed. “Why? I know most of your family from around town and church. It’s not like they’re all new to me.”

“I know, it’s not them I’m necessarily worried about. I’m very close to my grandparents and I just want it to go well. You do such a great job, though, with people. Just use that Ryan Almada charm and everything will be fine.” She smiled at him.

He looked extra good today, so she knew that her grandma would like him no matter what.

They turned down the road and Heather could see the iron gate up ahead. “We’re here.” She smiled.

Ryan looked around and stared at the gate. “Heather, what’s the name of your grandparents’ farm?” he asked. She noticed his voice sounded different.

“It’s Lakeville Farm. It has been in my family for generations.”

Ryan’s face went flush as Heather pulled up towards the house.

“What’s your grandpa’s name?” his tone was flat.

“Francis Glendall—why? Ryan, are you okay?”

Ryan turned to her with a pale, apologetic face. “I’m so sorry, Heather, I can’t be here. I need to go.”

Heather couldn’t comprehend what he was saying. “What? You can’t leave. We just got here. What do you mean?”

“Heather, I can’t be here. My client is suing your grandpa.”

Now it was Heather’s face that turned pale.

CHAPTER 24

RYAN

Ryan watched the vibrant color in Heather's face drain.

"What? Did you just say you're suing my grandpa?" she asked in a slow, monotone voice.

Guilt, panic and embarrassment filled Ryan instantly. How could this have happened? What were the odds that the Standford case would interfere with his relationship with Heather? It felt like a sick joke from the world; he finally found someone that he liked—maybe even loved—and now this happened.

He kept going into the worst-case scenario; would this ruin everything? Would she be livid at him? It didn't seem like she even knew there was a lawsuit with her grandparents. She hadn't mentioned it before, and it sounded like they were close. Were they ashamed and embarrassed, which caused them to hide it?

He had tried to convince himself it wasn't true, that it wasn't the farm, but when he saw the sign and she said his name, his stomach dropped.

"I'm not suing your grandparents, but my client that I represent is. He's on a retainer and a big client. I can't share a lot of the situation due to confidentiality, but I actually can't go into that house. I'm not allowed to be with him without a lawyer present. I'm so sorry, Heather. I can't say that enough. I know I'm ruining everything. I really wanted this to be a good day." He tried to plead with his eyes how sorry he was.

He still couldn't believe this was reality.

Heather just sat there, completely dumbfounded. "I can't believe this is happening. Why is he in a lawsuit? I have so many questions."

The two sat in silence for a moment, unsure of what to say next.

"Well, what do we do now? I need to go in there, but you can't come." She looked at him, still clearly processing what happened.

"You said your parents drove. Can I take your car and you ride back with them? I hate to even ask that, but it seems like the only way." He was so embarrassed and, honestly, ashamed.

How must he look right now to her? Her big hot-shot boyfriend was suing her precious old grandparents; little did she know, it was about the farm that she loved so much.

His heart broke for her. She would be devastated by the news if they lost

the farm, and he couldn't even be the one to tell her.

"Yeah, that would be fine. I'm not sure what to say to them."

"You can tell them the truth. I'm sure he already knows if your mom is there. She would have told him, and he definitely knows my name. Didn't you tell them I was coming?" He realized they should have known from that.

"I didn't tell them who it was that I was bringing. I just said my boyfriend." Heather gathered her items, then took her key out of her purse and put it in the cupholder. "I'll just connect with you to pick the car up sometime tonight."

"I can drive it to your house and have my brother pick me up." He was trying to be accommodating, but he hoped it didn't come across as not wanting to see her. Her face, unfortunately, looked like that wasn't the case.

Heather nodded. "Oh, Okay. I'll just talk to you a different time then."

She got out of the car and shut the door. Ryan flinched at the sound. No goodbye or anything.

He leaned his head back against the seat and sighed. He was so frustrated and, more importantly, worried about what would happen to their relationship.

When Ryan got his bearings, he crawled over into the driver's seat and started down the road. He had never felt his heart more torn in his life.

He desperately wanted to break all the rules and walk into the house and meet everyone, smile and have a great time with Heather. He had wanted to hold her hand and watch her beautiful face light up as she spent time with her family. He had hoped to hear all those embarrassing stories he knew there would be from her childhood. And all of that was gone now.

Instead, he drove away, alone, as she walked by herself into the house with explanations to give. But she didn't even know the details, so how was she going to answer? He felt like he had just ruined one of her favorite days, and he would never forgive himself for that.

He tried to plan out what he would do to get around this. Maybe he could plead a conflict of interest now and the case could be reassigned. He would talk with Herold tomorrow and see what could be done. He wanted no part in this lawsuit anymore since he had a better picture of who was on the other end, and he already had a full picture of the person he was supposed to be defending.

Ryan dropped his coat and bag off in his office and instantly left to go find Herold. It was Monday morning and he had spent the rest of the day on Sunday planning out what he would say to him.

Whenever Ryan was going into a discussion, he liked to come up with options and different outcomes that he would be comfortable with.

The ideal scenario would be that Herold would understand the situation and agree to take Ryan off the case due to the conflict of interest. He thought that might be a long shot because of Herold's relationship with Charles, and the case was almost over. The trial was next week, right after the holiday, and it would be the deciding factor in the case. Ryan assumed they were going to win; Heather's grandpa really didn't have enough to claim Charles was fraudulent in his offer or contract.

But he knew it was all wrong. How this multi-millionaire was so comfortable taking this man's life savings and everything he had was beyond him. It had always bothered him, and more so now. It was chump change to Charles. It was more the antics of it, as Charles would say.

His second option would be for Ryan to continue to do the work on the case but have a different lawyer as Charles' representative in court. Ryan could see Herold going with this option, but he still wasn't sure. Herold could be a loose cannon.

The last option, and what Ryan really prayed wouldn't happen, would be that Herold would say Ryan needed to get over it and continue to do his job. That this relationship wasn't grounds enough for the conflict of interest.

Ryan hoped some of the holiday spirit rubbed off on Herold today as he walked closer and closer to his office. He turned the corner and saw that he was in there, working at his computer. The door was cracked open, and he lightly knocked to try and get his attention.

Herold looked up. "Hello, Ryan, come on in."

Ryan took a deep breath and then walked into Herold's office, shutting the door behind him. A look of curiosity came across Herold's face, and he pushed away from his computer. The door shut was lawyer code for something was up.

"What's going on, Ryan?" He leaned back in his chair. "I'm really hoping it's not bad news."

Ryan sighed. "I'm not quite sure what kind of news it is, to be honest with you. I'm just going to be direct with you. I've run into a snag in the Standford case. I just found out this weekend that my girlfriend is actually

Mr. Glendall's granddaughter, who our lawsuit is against."

Herold's eyebrows went up at the news and he nodded his head a bit as he processed.

Ryan continued, "I'm not sure what to do at this point. Full disclosure, I don't feel good about the case in general because of the nature of Charles Stanford, and I've always been honest with you about that."

"You have," Herold agreed.

"So for me, I'm wondering if this falls under a conflict of interest. It truthfully would be hard for me to move forward in this and continue to try and take the man for everything he has, knowing what it will do to my girlfriend and her family." He was trying his best to be transparent with Herold. He knew they had that type of relationship. He waited to see what he would say.

"So what are you saying, Ryan? You want off the case?"

Ryan nodded. "I truthfully think that would be best. And it's not because I don't want to do it. It's a done case. The plaintiff doesn't have grounds for fraud, and I would make a lot of money off it, but it doesn't feel right to me. And I don't want my relationship to impact how I'm advising." He sat back in his chair and tried to look as professional as he could.

Herold thought for a moment. Ryan always appreciated that Herold put a lot of thought into his decisions and didn't make them based on feelings.

"I can appreciate you bringing this to me. I know you take your work seriously and you don't make decisions lightly. But here's the thing, Ryan—" Herold leaned forward onto his desk. Ryan didn't like where this was going.

"This is your job. And it's a big case. You said it yourself. It's not about making any decisions at this point. It's just tying a bow on a situation that has already solved itself. So, while I can understand that it may be uncomfortable for you to continue forward with your girlfriend's feelings on the line, you need to do it anyway."

Herold's words cut like a knife; that was not the outcome he wanted.

"And, not to be a jerk, but my attorneys' private lives are their own. But I do know your dating style, and it would be different if it was your wife or something. But it's a girlfriend, and she could be gone tomorrow. How unnecessary would it be for you to leave a good case because of something that's possibly temporary?"

Ryan could tell Herold was trying to be sincere and the good guy, but Ryan was deeply offended. Heather was anything but temporary to him. She

was one of the most important people in his life right now. There was something different about her, about them. He was realizing that more and more every day.

“With all due respect, sir, you don’t know my personal life, or my relationships. And I can understand how, to an outsider, it might seem like an odd request, but it’s serious to me.” He tried to be stern but still respectful.

Herold nodded. “And I can respect that. But it’s your job, Ryan. I need you to do it.”

Ryan could tell there would be no moving forward from this. Herold had made his decision and now Ryan had to make his.

He nodded. “I appreciate your time.” And he walked out of the room.

He made his way to his office and sat at his desk, stewing about the conversation. He wasn’t sure what to do next. He in no way wanted to move forward in this case; it felt unethical to do so. But he loved his job. It had been his entire career.

But he also had to make it right with Heather somehow, no matter what. He needed to prove to her that this wasn’t who he was. But at the moment he had no idea how to do that.

CHAPTER 25

HEATHER

Heather found herself in her comfort zone on a Tuesday evening—snuggled in a blanket on the indoor porch, listening to the *White Christmas* movie soundtrack with some hot tea by her side and, of course, a book.

The porch was Heather's favorite place in the house to decorate for the Christmas season. She hung up multi-colored twinkle lights with interwoven garland strung around the windows. And this year, in honor of Ryan, she bought a mini-real Christmas tree and placed it in the corner of the room. She only slightly decorated it, but it was the pine smell that made her smile. The smell reminded her of Ryan every time.

Since Heather has basically claimed the porch space as her own, she hung up some of the paper snowflakes that her kids in class made for a craft day. Every time she looked at them, it brought her joy and reminded her to have child-like faith during the Christmas season.

It had been a long couple of days, and Heather came home from work that day and knew she needed some peaceful recharge time. Her mom had checked on her every couple of hours for the last few days asking if she had heard from Ryan. Heather could tell her mom was worried about the situation and wondered if they would break up.

Heather didn't have much to update her on. She hadn't heard from Ryan since Sunday in the car, so if she was honest, she was nervous about it all too.

When Heather walked into her grandparents' house on Sunday, all eyes were on her. They had clearly connected the dots about who Heather was bringing when her parents arrived, as her mom couldn't keep her excitement in for Heather and Ryan to get there.

Heather found herself surprisingly more direct than she had been in the past with her grandparents, but she felt fired up and wanted to know what was going on.

She bypassed the pleasant greetings and met everyone in the living room. "Grandpa, are you being sued?" She stood there with an unsettled curiosity in her eyes.

Her grandpa sighed and looked around the room. Her parents had already tried to pry and figure out how he knew Ryan and what was going on, so it was time to tell the truth.

"Yes." He sat on the big recliner chair. Heather's grandma stood behind

him and rested her reassuring hand on his shoulder. Heather could tell there was clearly a lot of stress around this. She tried to soften her approach a bit.

“What’s going on, Dad?” Heather’s father asked. He looked very concerned.

“I know you will all be upset when you hear this, which is why I didn’t tell anyone initially until the deal was over. But I decided to sell the farm.” There was defeat and concern in his voice.

A chorus of “whats” and gasps erupted from the room. This farm had been in the family for generations, and the idea that it would be gone felt like a betrayal. Especially to Heather, who had dreamed of getting married at the farm.

“Dad, why?” Heather’s dad asked.

“I’m getting older. We’re getting older.” He rubbed his wife’s hand that still rested on his shoulder. “It’s hard to manage the land, especially with the fall activities. We love running the place. It’s been one of the biggest joys for the last couple of decades, and we’re grateful for the hired help that we have, but it’s becoming too much to manage.”

“Why didn’t you tell us? Why the secrecy?” Heather’s mom asked.

“I knew this was the best decision for us, but I worried if I told everyone they would convince me otherwise. I didn’t want it to sway my decision. I had a certain company reach out to me annually for the last three years wanting to buy the land to develop it, and I finally accepted.”

Everyone was silent as they listened, clearly an atmosphere of loss in the room. The farm felt like a member of the family.

“So why the lawsuit?” Heather asked, wanting to bring the conversation back to the reason Ryan couldn’t be with them celebrating right now.

Her grandpa sighed. “We were in the final stages of the paperwork, and I technically signed a contract with my intent to sell the property to the builder. But one of the deals I made with Charles Standford, the owner, was that he would keep the old oak tree that’s in the center of the field. It’s hundreds of years old and tearing it down would be a crime.”

Heather agreed. The old oak tree had all their names from generations carved onto the trunk. It was a massive, beautiful old tree with so much character and memories. If that tree could only tell stories...

“He agreed to the deal, and that’s why I signed. Everything was good to go until I was approached, in person, by one of his employees who recently quit. He was upset about the ethics of the company, which is why he left, and

wanted to tell me that he knew Mr. Stanford was planning to demolish the tree once they purchased the property. The tree is in the contract, so if he did that, he would be going against not only his word, but also the legally binding contract we signed. The issue I'm facing is that I have no proof. This was a verbal conversation that the former employee had with Mr. Stanford in private. He has no evidence."

"Did you try to get out of the contract then?" Heather asked.

Her grandpa nodded. "Yes. But he refused. He said that I was lying and that he had no intention of removing the tree. I just didn't feel good about it, so I said I wouldn't sell any more or move forward with the rest of the paperwork. He was obviously livid; this is a very egotistical man who clearly doesn't hear no a lot." He shook his head.

He straightened up in his chair. "But I'm standing my ground. It doesn't feel right and I don't want to do business with a man like that. So he took the next step and filed a lawsuit against me. He basically wants to take the farm and all our life savings in the process. It would completely wipe us out."

Heather stood in shock. She wasn't sure what to say. This was clearly a bigger deal than she thought. "I'm sorry, Grandpa. That sounds horrible." She shook her head as she tried to wrap her mind around it all.

"Is there anything we can do?" Heather's mom asked. "Heather, can't Ryan do something?"

Heather felt her face go red; she knew there would be nothing he could do. He was defending the bad guy in this all. It made her stomach turn.

Her grandpa answered for her. "He's on the other team. There isn't much he can do to help," her grandpa said. "But my lawyer is trying to find something to prove it, but he hasn't been able to come up with anything concrete. Mr. Stanford offered to settle and just take the farm like originally offered. I'm sure that generous offer was Ryan's doing, but I'm just not sure I can do that."

The family tried to reassure him that this was obviously a hard situation, but was just one tree worth losing everything they had? All their life savings?

Heather couldn't figure out how to advise him. She couldn't fathom the farm being gone, let alone her boyfriend being a part of the team to take it from them.

Her heart ached the next couple of days, and it didn't help that she hadn't heard from Ryan. She could tell in his eyes when she left him in the car that he was apologetic and truly felt terrible for what transpired, but would he

actually try and do anything? Or was that all talk?

It was clear that his job was his life, and it was obvious that this would be a big case. Probably a lot of good money in the bank if he won it.

What was she compared to a big career win?

Heather tried not to think about it, but every chime of her phone made her jump with the thought it could be him. Her mind wondered if he would ghost her now, and then she'd just be another one of those girls around town who dated Ryan Almada.

Heather took another sip of tea and almost choked on it at the sound of the doorbell. She wasn't expecting anyone. Who could be there? She looked outside but couldn't see any cars in the driveway due to the heavily falling snow.

She heard her mom walk towards the door and then squeal with excitement. "Well, Ryan Almada, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Heather's heart started to race. What was he doing here? She slammed her book shut and crept towards the living room to hear what was happening.

"Hi, Mrs. Pearle. I'm so sorry to intrude on your evening. I hope I'm not interrupting anything." That was his voice for sure. It sent shivers down Heather's spine.

"Nonsense, just an average night at our home. Please come in. What beautiful flowers you have." Her mom was gushing over him. Heather knew she was probably beyond relieved that he was here.

"These are for you. I felt horrible for Sunday and not being able to spend the day with you all. And for all the tough conversations I'm sure I caused with my absence. So I deeply apologize for it and hope you can forgive me." His voice seemed confident and genuine. Heather internally aahed at his comment. How very sweet of him to bring her mom flowers. He knew how to play the game, that was for sure.

"You are so sweet—they're beautiful. You were greatly missed, but it sounds like a lot of things are happening that are out of all of our control. I'm just thankful you're here. Can I grab Heather for you?"

"That would be great, thank you."

"I'm just over here," Heather announced as she walked around the corner in sight.

Ryan looked at her and gave a soft smile in her direction. His smile towards her still took her breath away.

"Take off your wet coat and make yourself comfortable," Heather's mom

ordered. "I'm going to put these in some water." She took the flowers and walked towards the kitchen. Ryan started to take off his boots and coat. The snow must have really been coming down.

"Hi," he said when he was done. "Can we talk?"

Heather's stomach dropped. She hated those words. They always made everything sound so serious. "Yes, you can join me in the front room." She led the way to the porch, where she sat back down and bundled herself in the blanket again. Ryan came in behind and found a chair slightly across from her.

There was a part of Heather that wanted to keep her distance, like a protective factor. But there was another part of her that wanted him to sit right next to her, cuddle in the blanket, and tell her everything would be okay.

"I'm normally really good at these types of conversations, but I find myself struggling with how to present this," he started out.

Heather wasn't sure what that meant. Would it be good or bad?

"That's my disclaimer. Now I'm just going to go for it. Heather, I don't have enough words to say how sorry I am for Sunday. And even more so, the fact that I have played even the smallest part in putting your grandparents through what I know they're going through. I've never liked the situation from the beginning, but this has just been the cherry on top. I'm sorry I have to speak in such vague terms. I can't share much—"

"My grandpa told me what happened, so I know everything." Heather would prefer he knew so he didn't have to be so vague about everything.

Ryan nodded. "I'm glad you know. I'm sure that wasn't a great conversation to have. I know how much you love that farm."

Heather nodded. "It has definitely been difficult."

"But I didn't lie to you in the car when I said I would figure something out. I'm sorry I have been a ghost the last couple of days. I've been talking things out and really thinking about what I wanted to do about it all. And I did take some steps that I wanted to share with you."

Heather's heart dropped in her stomach again. This is what she had been waiting for. He was probably going to stop seeing her.

"On Monday morning, I went into the office and talked with my boss. I told him the situation and explained that this felt like a conflict of interest to me and I wanted to be off the case."

Heather's eyes widened; she didn't have a great poker face. The fact that he did that, and right away, was a shock to her. He wanted to be off a big

case? The fact he was willing to do that for her felt special.

“The conversation didn’t go great.” He made a frustrated face as he said it, clearly remembering the content of that conversation. “He basically told me I needed to get over it. That the case was won, and I just needed to dot the I’s and cross the T’s. But that didn’t feel good enough for me.” His eyes locked on Heather and had this deep intensity to them that made the hairs on Heather’s arm rise.

“I took the night to think about it more, and that’s why I didn’t reach out, because I really needed to be isolated. I knew if I talked with you, it might sway my decision one way or the other and I needed a clear mind. You have this effect on me that would cause me to do anything just to make you happy.”

Heather smiled and blushed. She didn’t know he felt that way.

“Although my boss didn’t say it out loud, I knew if I backed out of this case, I would be out of a job. And I had to weigh everything while I understood the severity of it all. Ultimately, I decided. I walked into my boss’s office again this morning and told him that I chose this firm because I wanted to practice law and help people; I wanted to do what was right. And I didn’t take multiple better-paying job offers in the cities with high-end firms because I didn’t want to deal with the unethical behaviors of hotshot clients who don’t care about the little guys out there. And that was exactly what was happening now. He knew that, and I knew that. I told him I understood that we needed to represent our clients well, and I didn’t think I could do that with Charles Standford. So he would either take me off the case, or I would leave the firm that day.”

Heather couldn’t stop her mouth from dropping open. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She had every expectation that he would stay at the job and watch while Heather’s grandparents lost everything. But this? Her eyes started to mist.

“You what?” was all she could say. “Ryan, I—”

“Hold on.” He raised his hands to ask for another moment and smiled. “Almost done.”

Heather nodded, completely taken aback by this conversation. What more could there be?

“One of the things I have appreciated about my relationship with my boss is that we’ve always been able to be honest with each other. He appreciated what I said and even said he respected my decision and that I was standing

my ground for what I thought was best. But he informed me there was no need because he heard that Mr. Glendall, your grandpa, wanted to settle.” Ryan looked at Heather, his eyebrows raised in question.

Heather felt surprised again. She had no idea. There was a part of her that grieved, knowing the farm was gone. But there was another part of her that was relieved. It meant her grandparents would be okay. It was a weird teeter-totter of emotions.

“I wasn’t sure if you would know about that or not—”

“I didn’t, but it’s okay. I’m actually kind of glad.”

Now it was Ryan’s turn to look surprised. “Really?”

Heather nodded. “Yes. My grandparents were going to lose everything. Not just the farm but all their life savings to pay for the lawsuit if they lost, which sounded like they were going to. I just couldn’t imagine that for them. As much as I love that farm, with all my heart, I couldn’t watch them suffer.”

“That’s all very true—and a selfless perspective. I’m sorry that it had to happen this way in the first place. And again, for my part in it all.”

“I appreciate that. It’s been something...” She trailed off, not quite sure where to go from there. “What did your boss say after that?”

“He let me know that the settlement was accepted and that the case would be closed, and he offered to handle the final paperwork and interactions so I wouldn’t have to, which was very nice of him. He said that he respected me and what I stood for, even if he didn’t like being put in an ultimatum.” He chuckled softly. “So I still have my job, and a little more respect from my boss, but I know I can’t pull anything like that again.”

The two sat in silence for a moment. “I don’t expect you to give me praise or think I’m this incredible guy from any of this. I just wanted to be honest and tell you what happened and where I’m at now. Not hearing from you for the last couple of days killed me. I couldn’t tell if you needed time and space, or you were mad, or waiting for me to reach out. It was a lot of mind scrabble.” He looked exhausted at the thought of it again.

“I appreciate you telling me all of this. It is helpful, and I honestly don’t have a lot of words. I—I was mad and hurt about the whole situation, not necessarily at you, well maybe a little bit at you.”

Ryan grimaced. “That’s fair.”

“I did need some time to process, and I was almost waiting for you to reach out, but I don’t know. I’m very grateful that you’re here now. It means a lot.”

“Of course.”

“I’m honestly humbled, shocked, and just in awe that you would do that for me, Ryan. I can’t believe that you would risk your job because of me, and I know it was a lot of the ethics of it all, too, and not just for me. But I can’t comprehend someone doing that for me, especially someone like you, who loves his job so much.”

As she spoke, it felt like all her bitterness, frustration or hurt towards Ryan over the last couple of days slowly faded. Instead, she saw a kind, compassionate and loving man in front of her who proved he would put his career and whole life on the line, for her.

Ryan looked into her eyes. “I never want you to think for a moment that you aren’t worth more than my job. You are an incredible, beautiful, kind, and impressive woman who anyone would be lucky to call theirs, and I just so happen to be that lucky guy. And I don’t want to take that for granted for a second.” His voice was so genuine Heather almost gasped.

His words soaked straight into her heart, and she couldn’t stop the tears from emerging from her eyes. It felt so automatic as she stood up and walked over to him. She bent down slightly and kissed him with every ounce of love and appreciation she could muster. When he kissed her back, it felt like days of tension and worry completely washed away. And she wondered if everyone’s worries and fear about their relationship were wrong; maybe this one was going to last.

CHAPTER 26

RYAN

The last few days had been a perfect bliss of joy, Christmas spirit, and all things wedding preparations. Ryan was so grateful to have the Standford lawsuit behind him and not have to deal with any of it anymore. Especially all the phone calls from Charles Standford.

After he talked with Heather and shared the news about his job, it felt like a new layer was pulled back in their relationship. A new level of closeness and dedication was established. He had never felt this way about any woman before. The intensity of his feelings scared him. He wasn't sure what to do with all of them at times. He tried to force the insecurities and worries away and just focus on the good aspects of Heather and their relationship. He thought that would be enough.

He enjoyed telling Heather how much he cared for her and how beautiful she was; it always made her blush and get frazzled, just the way he liked. She looked so cute when she was complimented.

Since that night, they had tried to spend as much time as they could together. He had a desire to be with her every second he could. Whenever she was around, everything felt complete. He found himself revealing his authentic self and could tell her his true feelings about everything. Plus, he could be goofy and embarrassing without fear of judgment. Something that was really new to him.

The two had to do a lot of wedding shopping and planning with Penny that week. Those little shopping adventures were just an excuse to flirt in the stores and get the stink eye from the other customers for too much obnoxious laughing.

Ryan was so glad that Penny was over her nervous and uncomfortable feelings about the two of them. When the three of them were together, it was fun and casual. They could laugh, be serious and have fun together. Ryan loved the new dynamic and tried his best to keep the PDA to a minimum when Penny was around, although it was tough; he really liked kissing Heather.

With less than a week to go before the wedding, the Almada family was spending their Saturday night at the Sandpiper Inn holding a rehearsal practice. There was so much to do before the wedding, between the decorations and the bachelor and bachelorette parties, they realized they

wouldn't have much time to practice before the big day, especially with everyone's busy schedules.

They decided to practice early and planned for a couple of hours. Penny said if she had the task of orchestrating a room full of loud, unfocused Almadras, she would need at least a couple of hours to do so. She had clearly started to feel more like herself lately.

Ryan now sat in the very full front lobby area of the Sandpiper Inn with all the Almadras, Pastor Dave, and Heather. Scarlett's mom was the only one absent from the evening who would be in the wedding, but she wasn't able to come into town until the day before the wedding.

Heather said she would stand in for Scarlett's mom for the practice. Ryan was just excited because that meant that she would be there with them, although she also played the role of Penny's assistant.

"Okay, everyone, let's try and get this done as soon as possible. I know you all have some crazy Saturday night plans for this evening," Penny sarcastically yelled. Ryan smiled. No one in this room would be doing anything extraordinarily fun that night, unless that included food and watching college football.

"I believe everyone has an idea of where they'll be and what the plan is, but let's walk through it quickly. We don't have a lot of space here, so it can't get too complicated." Heather pushed Penny a little closer in her wheelchair to the makeshift wedding aisle they had created with rows of couches. They had the altar be a high-top table at the moment.

Ryan knew that the day would be more beautiful than they could imagine. The decorations he and Heather had been buying, per Penny's request, would cover the room with beautiful greenery and roses with white baby's breath. It looked like Christmas in flower form. They would also be wrapped with Christmas lights to make them sparkle.

He had to admit Penny really knew what she was doing. He was proud of all the work she had put into this to make sure Brent and Scarlett had a special day.

"The music is going to start, and then first up we have Pastor Dave, who will walk down our tiny aisle to the front. So, cue Pastor." She looked at her clipboard to see the rest of her game plan.

Pastor Dave started to make his way down the aisle, playing the part perfectly.

"Then we will have Brent walk Mom and Scarlett's mom down the aisle

together, with Scarlett's mom currently being played by Heather," Penny instructed. Ryan gave a little cheer and the group laughed. Heather blushed and shook her head, embarrassed. It only made Ryan smile more.

As Brent led his mom and Heather down the aisle, Ryan had this unusual thought flash through his mind. He pictured the two of those women walking down the aisle, but instead of him sitting on the sidelines watching, he was the one standing at the front of the altar.

It was a vision he had never experienced before, and he quickly tried to push the thought away. It freaked him out.

"Now, Scarlett will walk down the aisle, accompanied by Drew." The two started down the aisle, Scarlett beaming already. Ryan smiled watching his future sister-in-law be led down the aisle by Drew. She looked beautiful and the happiest he had ever seen her. He wondered what it would be like to prepare for one of the biggest days of your life.

"Okay, that's it for the walking. Pastor Dave will seat everyone and then it will just be Scarlett, Brent and Pastor Dave at the front. Pastor, do you want to walk us through what you'll be talking about?" Penny instructed.

Pastor Dave started to share a brief outline of his message, but Ryan couldn't stop staring at Heather. She sat in the front row with the biggest goofy smile on her face. That woman truly loved love. He had realized quickly that she was quite the romantic. She had probably planned out her whole dream wedding three times by now.

As if his brother could read his thoughts, Nick leaned over. "Hey, one day that could be you," he said with a wink.

Ryan's heart started to beat fast as he tried to push down the anxiety that raced through him. "What? What are you talking about? That could be *you* up there." It wasn't a great comeback, but it was all he had.

Nick laughed. "Jeez, someone's touchy about the love topic." He leaned back and wrapped his arm around Claire, who sat next to him.

Love? Ryan jumped at the word. He didn't love Heather, right? His mind tried to push off the comment from Nick as just his older brother teasing him, but he started to think.

Did he love Heather? Had he ever loved before? What did love really mean?

He knew he loved his sister and his family. They were family; you automatically loved them at birth. But he wondered if he had ever loved someone that wasn't family.

He really enjoyed his friends and loved spending time with them, but he wasn't sure if he would say *love*.

His mind went through all the girls he had dated in the past. Some of them he had a lot of admiration for and deep care, but he wouldn't say he loved them.

Penny's comments from the night he told her about Heather came to mind. She had challenged him to think about why he couldn't stay with anyone. Why it was that he couldn't commit.

Ryan didn't think he had a commitment problem. He was loyal to his job and others in his life. But why not women? If he thought about it for too long, it frustrated him a bit. It didn't seem to make sense. Nothing had happened in a romantic relationship before that had broken his heart and forced him to say he would never love again.

Right as he thought the words, a memory went through his mind, one that he had tried to repress. He sat with his mom, holding another tissue in his hand for her as she cried. It was the day after his dad had died and he had never seen her so broken and alone before. He looked at the pain that took residence on her face and would for months. He decided at that moment that he never wanted to go through that.

"Okay, everyone, that's a wrap!" Penny's loud voice broke through Ryan's memory and brought him back to reality. The group had started to disperse and talk amongst themselves.

Heather made her way slowly over to Ryan. "Wasn't that fun?" she asked.

Ryan laughed and tried to push aside the emotional roller coaster he had just mentally been on. "It was only the practice."

She sat down next to him. "I know, but aren't you so excited? The decorations aren't even up yet, but I still almost cried during it. Ugh—I just love love." She beamed as she continued to gush about it all.

Ryan tried to grin and nod his head as she talked, but his mind was distracted.

"Are you okay?" She had finally caught on to his silence.

"Yeah, I'm okay. To be honest, I'm exhausted from the week and I think I'm going to call it an early night. Is that okay? Were you wanting to do anything after this?" He felt bad leaving early, but he didn't want to wallow in front of her.

"That's totally understandable. I'm going to spend some time with Penny

for a bit anyway. You're good." She tried to give a reassuring smile.

"Sounds good. I'll see you later." He gave her a kiss and stood up, headed for the door.

Ryan walked out of the inn and was oddly comforted by the blast of cold that hit his face. He trudged through the snow and, for this first time, appreciated the chilly bite it had to break him from his thoughts. He wasn't sure where these thoughts were coming from, but he hoped they would leave soon.

CHAPTER 27

HEATHER

Heather pulled into the driveway of her family house, admiring the beautiful freshly fallen snow that lay across the yard. They had one of the largest yards in her neighborhood; it was one of her dad's prized possessions.

Her dad could spend hours out in the yard working. He loved putting on the latest episode of the history podcast he listened to and riding the lawn mower around. Or he busted out the snow blower to clear off the long, winding driveway.

Heather's mom loved the idea of a perfect yard but never wanted to do the work. She loved flowers but didn't like getting dirty, so her dad would spend hours tending to flower bushes around the yard. The sacrifice and work that her dad constantly did to make her mom happy did not go unnoticed; two of them were truly relationship goals to Heather.

Church had been great this morning as the pastor talked all about the gift we've received through Jesus' birth with the upcoming holiday approaching. Heather felt that in this season of gifts, blessings and gratitude, she had so much to be thankful for. She had a loving family, great friends, a fantastic job that gave her so much joy—and now, a kind, funny, and incredibly good-looking man. It seemed as if her dreams were all coming together; she smiled just thinking of it all.

One of Heather's favorite parts of the Christmas season at church was singing all the Christmas songs. *Joy to the World* and *Silent Night* were her favorites.

During church, she kept sneaking a peek over in the direction of where the Almada family sat. Ryan was seated next to Drew and Casey at the end of the aisle. He occasionally peeked in her direction as well. The two played eye tag throughout the whole service, looking over and smiling at each other when they were caught. Heather couldn't stop the red blush that emerged on her cheeks every time.

At one point, Heather had to mouth "pay attention" and give him a playful, stern look but tried to not giggle. Ryan rolled his eyes with a smile and looked away.

Cassidy sat right next to her and gave her the side eye every once in a while for not paying attention. She could tell Cassidy was trying to figure out what Heather was doing, but Heather tried to ignore it. She knew Cassidy

would bring it up later.

After church, Heather bumped into Ryan as they grabbed their coats from the coat rack.

“Well, hello there,” Ryan said as he smiled his staple Ryan charming smile in her direction. He reached into the coat rack and grabbed Heather’s coat for her. As he handed it to her, his hand lingered on hers. The touch made her blush. Another thing to make Ryan smile.

“Hi, fancy seeing you here,” she joked.

“That’s what happens when there’s only like two churches in town,” he snarked.

Heather laughed. “Touché.” She nodded.

“It was nice to see you yesterday. I’m sorry I left so abruptly. I was super out of it and wanted to chill at home.”

“No worries, I completely get it. I had a great night with Penny, so it was a win-win.” She smiled.

“Heather, are you coming?” Cassidy called from across the room. She and Heather’s family were waiting by the door.

“Go on without me! I’ll see you at home!” Heather yelled back. She noticed Cassidy’s glare in their direction, but she ignored it. She drove herself, so she had the flexibility to leave when she wanted to.

“I know it’s a busy week with wedding prep, but when do you think we could sneak away for some time together?” She knew that might have sounded slightly needy, but she didn’t care. She knew what she wanted.

“I’m not sure. I’m only in the office for a couple of days and have a lot to get done. I wish we could, but it would be tight. I know we’re decorating on Tuesday, so I’ll at least see you once before the wedding on Thursday.” He sounded apologetic.

Heather nodded. “Yeah, I know I’ll see you there, but it would just be fun to have some alone time. But it’s okay. We’ll make the best of it.” She tried to give a sincere smile, and Ryan quickly tucked a loose hair behind her ear. Her cheek burned where she felt his touch. He always had that effect on her.

“I totally get it, but I’ll let you know. If I have a surprisingly free moment, I’ll call.” He gave a reassuring smile.

“Sounds good.”

“Ryan!” Drew yelled from across the room. He motioned for him to come over.

“I better go, that’s my ride. It was good to see you, beautiful.” He

grabbed his coat from the rack behind him, then leaned in and kissed her cheek before he walked away.

Heather's heart raced faster than ever before.

She could still feel the kiss as she walked towards her house up the porch steps an hour later. Her mind thinking of Ryan. It felt so weird to be so consumed by someone. His presence, his touch, his eyes and his smile, everything about him was intoxicating. She was completely in love, and she knew it.

Heather walked through the front door that opened into a foyer. There was the staircase straight ahead that led upstairs with a beautiful open banister, currently covered in Christmas lights. A large opening led to the dining room on the left, and an opening on the right led to one of the living rooms.

Heather took her boots off and tried to keep the snow off the floor. After she hung up her coat, she turned to head into the kitchen to heat up some hot chocolate but jumped in surprise. Her sister, Cassidy, sat on one of the chairs in the living room, pointing towards Heather. She sat in silence, just staring.

"Oh my gosh, Cassidy, you scared me." Heather's hand rested on her chest, and she tried to control her beating heart.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I was just waiting for you to come home." Her tone sounded very monotone, not like her normal spunky self.

"It's okay. I'm just a little jumpy. Why are you waiting for me? Am I late for something?" Heather tried to rack her mind about any events they had scheduled today and couldn't think of anything.

"No, you're not late. I just want to know what's going on with you and Ryan Almada?" Her tone was accusatory and cold.

Heather knew this conversation would come eventually. It was clear that Cassidy was not a fan of Ryan from her comments at the museum, but she never said anything after that, even when Heather had asked. She was the one who chose not to tell Heather why she didn't like him in the first place.

Heather scoffed at Cassidy's tone. "Well, if you ask like that..."

"I'm serious, Heather. I saw the two of you flirting today. Are you still seeing each other?"

Heather stood her ground and crossed her arms as she leaned against the wall beam. "Yes, we are seeing each other." She tried to act confident and tough, but she was nervous about what her sister would say. She never liked fighting with her family members.

Her sister stared at her as if she had just told her she had robbed a bank. “Is this because of what I said at the museum when we ran into him? Did you get so intrigued that you had to find out for yourself why I couldn’t stand him?”

Heather was surprised her sister brought up the museum. “No, it’s not because of that. You know about Penny’s accident; well, she and her brother are really close. The two of us started out helping her, and then that turned into helping to plan the wedding. And with all that time spent together, the feelings just emerged. But I’m glad you brought up the museum, because to remind you, I had asked you what you meant that day and why you didn’t like him, and you refused to tell me.”

“Yeah, I refused to tell you because, for one, it really wasn’t your business, and two, I know that you are close with the Almada family and I didn’t want to say anything that might jeopardize your friendship with them.”

“My goodness, Cassidy, what did he do, kill someone? Why is there so much secrecy?” Heather was frustrated at this point. Her sister tended to be extra dramatic about some things when they actually weren’t that big of a deal. She could never tell if it was one of her dramatic moments or if it was really something important.

“No. He didn’t kill someone.” Cassidy rolled her eyes. “He’s just such a player, Heather.”

“A player?” Heather raised her eyebrows at her sister.

“Yes, has he told you how many women he’s dated?”

Heather lightly chuckled, which she knew would only make her sister madder. “Yes, we’ve talked about it in great detail. Because we try and be open and honest with each other. But just because someone has dated a lot of people doesn’t make them a player, Cassidy.”

“But he is! He only dates women until he gets sick of them and then tosses them to the curb. Or, he dates them until they want something more and then he bows out. That’s his reputation, and everyone in town knows it. He breaks girl’s hearts; he doesn’t care about the women he dates.” There was so much anger and bitterness in Cassidy’s voice.

“How do you know that? Those are some pretty big accusations to speak to someone’s character like that. Did he do that to you? Are you trying to tell me that you’ve dated him?” Now it was Heather’s turn to accuse.

“No, I didn’t date him. But my friend did, and I watched him completely shatter her heart.”

Heather stopped arguing and listened. So it was personal for her. She waited for Cassidy to speak more. She wasn't going to let her get away with not saying anything further. If she was going to make these big claims and think so poorly about him, she needed to back it up.

Cassidy finally got the hint from the silence and continued talking. "One of my closest friends dated Ryan a couple of years ago. She was head over heels for him. She fell for the charming smile and the gentlemanly demeanor that he plays so well. And then, she left for a couple of months for an internship. They talked while she was gone, and she fell in love. She didn't tell him her feelings while she was away because she wanted to wait until she got back."

Heather was surprised at the emotion in Cassidy's story. This was clearly one of her best friends. She tried to guess which one, but it was clear that she didn't want her to know, or else she would have said something.

Heather moved towards the living room and sat down on the couch across from Cassidy while she continued her story.

"When she came back, they had been together for almost half a year, which is apparently the longest relationship he'd had with a girl, so she thought there was really something there. And just like you, she thought she could be the one to change him."

Heather wanted to argue that she wasn't trying to change anyone, but she could tell it wasn't the time.

"When she saw him and told him how she felt, he freaked out. He said it was too soon and that they clearly wanted different things. It shattered her heart. She thought maybe they were just at different places in their relationship and was willing to wait, but he was already gone. He broke up with her the next day. And the worst part, he was already on to his next girl two weeks later." Her tone was sharp.

Heather's heart felt terrible for Cassidy's friend, whoever she was. That was definitely a horrible way to end things, but it sounded like it was years ago. Ryan had turned into a different guy since then. He'd matured a lot.

"My friend was in love and ready to marry this man, and he was already on to the next glamorous woman he could find before she could even stop crying at the sight of him. Who does that? And that's someone you want to be with?" Now her tone became more accusatory again.

Heather was done staying quiet. "I'm so sorry that happened to your friend. That truly is heartbreaking, and I can understand where your anger

comes from Cass, but that sounds like it was a while ago. And I think he's grown from then. I mean, he's not perfect and he definitely owns that he'd dated a lot of women and might not have ended things the best way, but he's matured a lot. And he says he can see that long-term future with me."

Cassidy scoffed. "You sound just like her. Heather, once a player, always a player. He is never going to change, and I guarantee you if you tell him that you want to get married, or even that you love him if you haven't done that already, he's gone."

Her words hurt. "How can you say that to me? You don't know our conversations or our relationship at all. I purposefully didn't tell you because of this. Don't you want me to be happy? And if Ryan makes me happy, shouldn't that excite you?"

"It should, you're right, but I'm never going to get over what happened. And I challenge you to really think about if that is the man you want to spend the rest of your life with. And more importantly, if he's really committed to being with you, or if it's all another game to him."

With that, Cassidy got up from her chair and almost stomped her way upstairs.

Heather sat there on the couch with too many emotions running through her mind. She wanted to be angry and brush it off like everything Cassidy said was false and would never happen. But the seed of doubt was planted.

Heather did sound a lot like that friend at times; she had experienced the thoughts that he must really love her and maybe she was different. But he hadn't told her he loved her yet. Is that a conversation they should have soon? She knew how she felt about him; she was hopelessly in love with him, but was the feeling mutual?

Her mind started to spiral, and she held her head in her hands trying to control it all. She took a deep breath and realized that these concerns were not going to go away on their own. Sure, her sister might have shared all of this from a bitter place, but she had some valid points. And if Heather was honest with herself, she had wondered about some of them herself throughout her relationship with Ryan.

Heather figured she should know what she was getting into before she ended up with a broken heart.

CHAPTER 28

RYAN

It felt surreal that the day was already here. They had talked and planned for what the decorations would look like and where they would go so many times, but now they were actually setting it all up. The wedding was in two days, and Ryan found himself oddly giddy about it all.

Everything was going according to plan at the moment; his fingers were crossed that it stayed that way.

He heard Heather's laugh from across the room as she tried to move a heavy flowerpot all by herself. Brent leaned down to help her and by the look on his face, he was teasing her. Ryan hadn't talked with Heather that much after his miniature freak-out at the wedding rehearsal on Saturday. Once he got home, he tried to wind down with some bubbly water and catch up on some football for the day; that normally did the trick.

He tried to focus on the game, but his mind had continued to wander to thoughts of Heather. It felt like he couldn't answer the simple question: did he love Heather? Every time he thought of it, his stomach went into knots and he felt panicky.

He decided to call it an early night and head to bed. Once he woke up the next morning, he felt ridiculous about the night before. He took a deep breath and decided attending church would be a great refresher from the intensity.

The week was so busy they weren't able to see each other much, but Ryan had tried his best to connect with her when he could. He noticed she didn't seem present when they spoke, and it took her a while to get back to him. She said her work week ended up being really busy before the holidays, so she was distracted and very tired. He could understand that. He felt the same way.

He had been looking forward to setting up the décor with her, Penny, Natasha, Scarlett and Brent that night. He hoped that he and Heather could get back to their usual selves and leave these awkward couple of days behind them.

But as they worked to put out flowers, build the arch, and hang lights just about in every inch of the place, he still felt there was some tension between them. Heather was pleasant and happy, but something felt off. He couldn't shake the feeling there was something there. Something he was missing.

"Okay, what do you think about moving the arch a bit more in that

direction? The painting on the wall is going to stand out a lot in photos.” Penny stared at the wall as Brent tried to drag it more towards the direction of Penny’s liking.

“What about now?” he asked.

“I like that a lot better. Scarlett, what do you think?” Penny asked.

Scarlett sat there and beamed. Ryan was pretty sure she looked that way all the time these days. “I think that does look better. Good eye, Penny.”

“That’s why we pay her the big bucks,” Ryan teased.

Heather giggled. The noise made him happier than it should have.

“Penny, where are the rest of the flowers? I want to get them all out here so we can truly see what we’re working with,” Natasha said as she dropped another flowerpot on the floor. Penny wheeled herself over to instruct her mom.

The room had already taken on a whole new level of Christmas. Natasha had done her part and decked it out with a big Christmas tree, ornaments, and nativity scenes, and played Christmas music all day. But Penny came in, and she took it to a whole new level. The lights, the flowers, the rose petals placed around the room. It was actually very dreamy—as Heather would say.

They were just wrapping up the final pieces and ready to call it a night. Ryan looked around the room and couldn’t find anything wrong with it.

“I think you really did it, Penny. It’s beautiful,” he tried to encourage his sister.

She smiled up at him. “It’s exactly how I imagined it. Thank you for all your help in making it come true.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Penny. It’s going to be the perfect day. Now we just need to keep it somewhat contained for two days without it getting messed up,” Scarlett said.

“Don’t worry.” Natasha came back in and put the last of the flowers down. “We don’t have many guests right now. A majority of them check in on Christmas Day, so there shouldn’t be much traffic. Everyone knows that the lobby will be closed on Christmas Eve for the wedding, so they won’t be in the way at all. They are all so excited for Brent and Scarlett that the idea of disturbing their day would devastate them.”

Brent helped his mom put out the last flowers while Scarlett, Penny and Heather finished up the final touches. Ryan sat and took a much-needed break as he waited for his next assignment.

Finally, Scarlett and Brent waved their goodbyes and headed out the door.

Penny and Natasha continued to talk over by the arch while Heather walked over to Ryan. She smiled as she sat next to him in the chair. He casually draped his arm around her.

“Are you happy with it?” he asked.

She nodded. “It’s incredible. I’m so excited to see it in action in just two days. I feel like we were just yesterday freezing our butts off outside listening to Penny come up with the crazy idea of having the wedding here.” Heather laughed.

Ryan smiled. “Time has flown by since then, hasn’t it? A lot has changed.” He sat and recalled how different his life seemed only a month and a half ago. A lot *had* changed, but it seemed like it had all changed for the better.

All because of Heather.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked her. They had a moment alone, so he thought they might as well talk about what had been bothering her.

Heather looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“I know it’s been a busy week for both of us, but I’m wondering if you’re okay. You seem a little off.” Ryan hoped he wouldn’t offend her in any way. Maybe it had been all made up in his mind. He couldn’t tell if he was just reading into things and she was acting normal, or if his hunch was correct.

Heather sat for a moment, clearly contemplating something in her mind. “I’ve been a little off, I’ll admit.”

Surprising relief washed over him. At least he hadn’t made it all up in his mind. “What’s been going on?” he asked.

Heather sighed. “I wasn’t sure when to bring this up, but I guess why not now. It’s not going to get easier anytime later.”

Confusion came across his face. What was she going to say next?

“I know it hasn’t been that long and I’ve been trying to be really patient and understanding by not freaking you out and talking too much about the future. But I’ve had some doubts come into my mind lately and I feel like it’s worth processing through together.”

“Doubts about what?” he asked. This didn’t sound like Heather normally sounded. His stomach tied up in knots.

“To be honest, doubts about where this is going. Doubts about if you’re really committed or if I’m going to be just another girl on the ‘Ryan dated her’ list.” Heather’s tone sounded like she was already defeated before he had even answered.

“Heather, you would never be just one of the girls on my dated list. You know you mean more to me than that. And where is all this coming from? It doesn’t sound like you.”

“I talked with my sister, Cassidy. You apparently dated a friend of hers.”

Ryan groaned before she could say any more. He shouldn’t have been surprised this conversation was happening. He wondered when Cassidy would spill about that past relationship and try and make him seem like the bad guy. She had clearly gotten into Heather’s head.

“So you know where I’m going with this?” she asked.

He nodded. “Please let me give my side of the story, because I’m sure you got a more edited version. I dated Cassidy’s friend for a while, and she was great. We had a good relationship, but most of the time she was overseas. She wasn’t here for a lot of it, and while she was gone, I started to lose feelings. It was hard to maintain a long-distance relationship. We didn’t get to talk that much, but when she came back, she started to express all these feelings of love and marriage and it took me by surprise. I was nowhere near that with her and I felt terrible. I know she was willing to wait for me to be ready, but I didn’t think we were on the same timeframe. I wasn’t ready at that moment in my life to settle down and get married, and she clearly was. I didn’t want to hold her back.”

He wasn’t sure how much Heather would believe of his version of the story or what Cassidy told her specifically.

“I’m not sure what you’ve been told, but that’s my side of it. I have known that Cassidy hasn’t liked me for a while now and was afraid that she would tell you some story that wasn’t completely true and paint me like the bad guy.”

“The stories line up for the most part, but that’s not really the part that got to me. Really, the situation made me worry about if you are ever going to be at that place where you’re ready to settle down and get married. I know that you care for me deeply. You’ve proven that in many ways, and I’m so grateful for that. But Ryan, I am in that place now where I am thinking of marriage. And I don’t want to be that girl that falls for you and gets my heart broken. Because I am in love with you, and I do want that future for us.”

Heather spoke with such certainty and confidence that Ryan now understood where her mind had been the last couple of days. She had clearly thought a lot about this. And she loved him! Those words echoed in his mind repeatedly at sonic speed.

His heart started to beat faster. He felt so many emotions all at once. Happiness, gratitude, relief, but then also anxiety.

“Thank you for saying all that, Heather.” He was so nervous. “I—I can understand all those feelings. They’re so valid based on knowing about my previous relationships. And I can promise you that this relationship is different than any I’ve been in, and it feels like new territory for me. I’m so happy with you, Heather. I care about you so much—”

Heather raised her eyebrows. “Do you love me? Or at least, do you think you could ever love me?” Her eyes looked deep into his, almost pleading for him to say it back. They were filled with such love and hope.

“I—I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. I’m feeling really overwhelmed and taken off guard.” He instantly regretted his choice of words.

The reaction on Heather’s face looked like he had just slapped her.

“You don’t know what to say to that? Okay, we’ll try a different question.” Her tone had more snark to it. He could tell she was holding back tears. “Do you ever see yourself getting married one day? More importantly, getting married to me? Because I don’t want to waste my time in a situation where I’m just going to get hurt and it doesn’t go anywhere.”

Ryan started to breathe faster. He felt like he was currently experiencing the flight and freeze response in moments of stress at the same time. “Maybe.” It was the only word that came to mind.

Heather pursed her lips and nodded her head.

“Well, I’m sorry, but I can’t fall for *maybe*, Ryan.” Her voice shook as she spoke, almost in a whisper. There was so much hurt in her eyes.

Her words cut his heart like a knife. He hated this. Why was this happening?

Heather stood up slowly and gathered her things.

“Heather, where are you going?” He didn’t want this conversation to end, not like this. He was just confused and needed more time to think.

“I’m going home. It looks like there’s nothing left for me here.” She turned and walked towards the door, giving a quick goodbye hug to Natasha and Penny on her way out.

Ryan sat there speechless as the adrenaline rushed through his body. He had no idea what to do, but he had a feeling he just let the best thing in his life walk out the door.

CHAPTER 29

HEATHER

Heather sat in her room at her desk working on her makeup in the large mirror. She had just finished applying her foundation and had done her best to cover up her puffy eyes as much as possible. She figured that with some added mascara and eye shadow, it should hide it completely.

Her eyes had a permanent redness to them for the last thirty-six hours. After her conversation with Ryan, she hadn't stopped crying for longer than an hour. She was grateful she didn't have any school for the holiday and could stay at home and be alone.

Her mom knew something was wrong when she walked into the house in tears on Tuesday night, but Heather hadn't been in the mood to talk. She could hardly say words through the sobs and couldn't stand disappointing her mom with the news that she and Ryan were probably never going to happen. It might set her mom off too, which Heather didn't need to deal with right now.

She silenced her phone that night after she got the first missed call from Ryan and didn't turn it back on until ten o'clock the next morning. She didn't want to talk with him. She got his message, loud and clear.

She didn't understand how he would risk everything at his job for her but then couldn't admit to her that he loved her, or that there was even the *possibility* of marriage. Hadn't he said he was over that fear now? Where was the block still coming from? Habit?

All Heather could think of was that everyone was right; when it came to commitment, he couldn't face it. It left him running for the hills. All Heather could feel right now was sadness and stupidity. She had been so naïve to think that she could be the one that made Ryan change his ways. She had hoped that maybe she would be enough to fight for.

Everything he ever told her felt like a lie. Flashbacks of conversations they'd had and sincere moments felt tainted. She wasn't sure if he had just played her really well, or if he was just so messed up when it came to commitment that he couldn't help himself but run away.

Tears started to emerge in her eyes again and she willed them not to fall; she didn't need her wedding look to have any trace of sadness. She wouldn't want to take anything away from Scarlett and Brent's big day.

When she had finally turned her phone back on, she had five missed calls

from Ryan and many missed text messages begging her to call him back. None of them said the things that she wanted to see the most. They were filled with *I care about you* and other empty words she didn't know if they were real anymore.

A knock on the door made Heather jump in her chair. She knew it was her mom again. She had been hiding from her all day yesterday and most of today, but she knew she couldn't do it anymore. They lived together, and she had to tell her sometime.

"Come in," she called. Candace slowly walked into the room and got a glimpse at her daughter.

"Your hair looks beautiful, Heather. Do you want any help finishing it up? I could straighten the back pieces for you. I know how hard those are to get." Her mom's tone was filled with compassion and kindness. She was definitely treading water.

Heather nodded, and her mom smiled. Heather knew she teased and picked on her mom a lot because of her craziness, but she was truly a wonderful mom who cared deeply for her family and knew when she was needed the most. She could rein it in when she needed to.

Candace walked over to the desk and lightly brushed Heather's hair while Heather continued applying her makeup, both in silence.

Heather knew it must have been killing her mom to not know what happened. She should take her out of her misery. She put her makeup brush down and sighed but tried not to move to mess up her hair being styled.

"I don't know what's going to happen with me and Ryan, Mom. I don't know if he's ever going to be able to commit."

Her mom slightly nodded and grabbed the straightening iron as she continued to work on Heather's hair.

"I see. Did something happen? I thought everything worked out with the lawsuit?" She wasn't pushy, but acted as if they were just casually talking. It was a trait Heather loved about her mom. She knew what her daughters needed and how to communicate with them best.

Heather needed to process as though they were only looking at facts. She had a hard time when so much emotion was brought into it; she would get too worked up and teary.

"Everything after the lawsuit was perfect. It felt like we were so in love and happy. I really thought this would be the relationship that would change him from his commitment issues. But I guess I was wrong. I brought up the

idea of love and marriage to him on Tuesday. Long story short, he doesn't even know if he could love me or if he would ever want to get married." Her voice broke again as she said it out loud. The memory of how he said it came painfully back.

"Well, that seems silly to me," her mom said.

Heather looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"That boy is clearly madly in love with you. Everyone in a five-mile radius can see that. When you two are together, it's like magic, and light just radiates from you both. You two could be the Christmas tree topper you shine so bright."

Heather chuckled. "I'm serious, Mom."

"And so am I, Heather. Sometimes, our men need a little push and a realization of what love is because they might not even know when they are in it."

"What do you mean 'our boys'?" the words sparked curiosity.

"Your dad. Did you know that he was deemed the player of Sandpiper Cove years ago too?" Candace didn't even break a stride as she straightened and talked.

"Dad?" Heather was truly surprised.

"Mm-hm. That man dated just about any woman that had two legs and could spell." She shook her head and chuckled. "But then when we met, he said something was different. He said I made him feel a certain way that he hadn't felt before. And I fought it for a while because it sounded like a bunch of hooey to me."

Heather could relate. She felt that deeply right now too.

"But then over time, I saw little things that made me realize that it wasn't that he couldn't love or didn't know how—because that man loved me so well without him even knowing he was doing it. But he just didn't even know what love really was. And there was a fear that had crept in from a past relationship that had caused him to see love as not a beautiful experience, but a source of pain. Those were two negatives confusing him. He was just lost."

Heather couldn't believe she was hearing all of this for the first time. She thought her parents fell madly in love from day one and had been their perfect selves ever since.

"I had no idea that was your story," she said.

"We don't talk about it much because it feels like ancient history. It got to the point where I eventually just let it go and realized that my worry or fear

wasn't going to solve anything, but if I truly loved him like I said I did, I needed to give him the time and space to get there on his own. But let me tell you, it took a whole lot of patience on my end, and ice cream sundaes on my bad days." She laughed.

Heather smiled. "That's really helpful, Mom, thank you."

She wasn't sure how much of it really applied to her scenario because she didn't know what Ryan was going through or where the block came from. But the encouragement it did give was that she needed to decide ultimately what she wanted.

She could be done with this now and not have to sit in the worry and what-ifs. Or if she was willing to see this through with Ryan, which could lead to happiness or heartbreak, then she had to weather the storm of uncertainty.

Later, Heather drove to the wedding in her long, elegant black gown, with her hair straightened and pulled to the back in a barrette. She thought more about what her mom had said and smiled as she thought about the grit her mom needed to endure during those hard days in their early relationship but the reward she had now. She had a beautiful family with a loving marriage, still years down the road.

Heather pulled into the parking lot and saw a few others walking into the Sandpiper Inn. Light snow had started to fall, creating the perfect environment for a magical Christmas Eve wedding.

She looked in the mirror one last time and was grateful the swelling in her eyes had gone down and she looked normal again. She knew she would see Ryan and wasn't quite sure what to say yet. She was ready to witness a night of Christmas love at the Sandpiper Inn, even if it wasn't her own relationship.

CHAPTER 30

RYAN

Ryan stared in the mirror and worked on buttoning his shirt and finishing up his tie. It had been calmer of a day than he would have anticipated it being, the day of a wedding. He was grateful for his easy-going brother who didn't require that much of his family. Ryan was still trying to wake up from the late-night bachelor party the night before.

Everything about the party went off perfectly and Brent looked like he was having a great time. Dinner was incredible, and everyone filed back to Ryan's house to relax and play some games. Ryan was thankful for some quality brother time; he realized all his brothers hadn't had much time without their significant others around, or his mom and Penny, in a long time. It was nice to be able to talk, joke and celebrate Brent on his big night.

Ryan tried his best to engage in the evening but often felt distracted by thoughts of Heather. She had refused all his attempts to get ahold of her and he was close to just showing up at her house again. He opted out of that, worried that her dad or Cassidy would be the one to answer. He wouldn't want to explain himself to them.

Ryan felt a crippling weight that wouldn't leave him alone. All he wanted to do was talk with Heather to try and make up for what he said, or at least explain himself more. He realized that he does very poorly under pressure when asked about relationships and deep emotions—clearly, he gets too frazzled.

If he were to re-do that conversation, he would tell her that, of course, he could see a future with her. That was all he saw in his life right now that seemed constant. But he couldn't confidently give an answer of when or what that looked like.

He could at least acknowledge to himself right now that he did have a block; something stopped him from committing. He wondered if it had to do with that memory that came up with his mom after his dad died, but he was too scared to go back to that. He tried to push it down further into his subconscious. It was safer there.

There was a knock on the door and his mom peeked in. "Hi honey, is there room for one more to get ready in here?"

Ryan nodded. "It's your room, of course." He smiled.

The guys were using Natasha's suite at the inn to get ready for the day,

and the girls were with Penny. That way she could participate without it being too much work. At this point, Penny's healing was moving along well, and she only had a couple of more weeks in the cast. With her rib doing better, she at least was more self-sufficient; thankfully, it made her way less grumpy.

Ryan was standing in his mom's room looking in the full-length mirror. He had the door shut for some time by himself but could hear his brothers laughing and talking in the living room area of her suite.

Ryan hadn't told his mom—or Penny—about what happened with Heather yet. He figured he didn't want to draw any attention away from the bride and groom on their special day. He continued to get ready as Natasha ran into the bathroom and did another round of hairspray.

“Ryan, do you think this dress is too flashy for the wedding? I wanted to go with the black and white theme, but the only black dress I have has rhinestones.” His mom looked at him from the bathroom entrance and lifted her arms for him to get the full effect.

Ryan shook his head. “Not at all. You look beautiful, Mom. It's your third wedding in like three years. You tired of it yet?” he teased.

“Oh, not at all. I'm ready for the next four.” She winked.

Ryan laughed. “Ha, we'll see about that.”

“Speaking of it, how are you and Heather doing?” she asked as she turned to touch up her makeup.

Ryan debated what to say. He didn't want to lie to his mom. And there was no point anyway because she always read right through him. “It's fine. We'll see.” He wasn't lying, but he hoped his vague answer would keep her at a distance and not ask too many more questions.

He was wrong; he clearly didn't know his mom at all.

“What does that mean?” she asked. She stopped her makeup touchups and turned to face his direction, leaning against the bathroom counter.

Ryan looked at her and tried to adjust his tie more. “Well, she isn't returning my calls, so that can't be a good sign.” He was surprised to hear the emotion come out of his voice.

The concern on his mom's face made him talk more. He explained everything that happened with the lawsuit and how he almost quit his job because of it. He talked about the conversation the other night and the story that Cassidy had told Heather. His mom listened intently and nodded when appropriate, soaking it all in. His mom had always been a good listener.

“So do you think it’s true then? What you told Heather? That you don’t love her and aren’t sure about ever loving her?” she asked in a non-accusatory tone, but just as a question.

Ryan shook his head. “Of course I see my future with her—”

“That’s not what I asked. Do you *love* her? You can be with someone for a while and still not completely love them.”

Ryan started to feel that frazzled feeling again. He just wasn’t sure how to answer it.

“Ryan, what stops you from saying yes? You could even lie to me right now and say that you could love her, but you can’t even say the word. Why?” Natasha asked in a calm tone as she stared at her son, trying to help him get to the root of this.

Ryan felt a wave of emotion he’d never felt before spring up inside of him; it was like a volcano that finally erupted after years of being dormant. “Because what’s the point of loving someone? What’s the point of loving someone when all it does is end in sadness? Or hurt and betrayal?”

Natasha’s eyes looked surprised at the outburst. “Now where did you get that from?” she asked.

Tears started to involuntarily emerge from Ryan’s eyes. “It’s all I see, constantly. Divorce ends in such deep anger, or grief or hurt. People have their lives and their forever ripped from them; why would I want that? Or, someone dies. And then what’s left? A person that is completely devastated and broken. It doesn’t matter which way love ends—there’s pain. Why would someone voluntarily want to be a part of that?”

Ryan was surprised at his own emotions. He had never put words to these feelings before, and it felt like his subconscious, which had felt all of these things for years, just burst open.

“Is that about your dad?” she asked.

Ryan thought for a moment and the memory of his mom came back. He couldn’t fight it anymore. “I sat with you when Dad died. He was the love of your life, the man you spent years loving and planning your forever with. And he was gone, just like that. Leaving you all alone. And the devastation and the heartbreak you experienced; I couldn’t handle the thought of myself ever having to go through that. It broke my heart, and I think I vowed to myself that I would never do that to myself. I just couldn’t.”

Ryan sat in front of his mom with tears running down his face. The pain of his dad’s death, the heartbreak from having to watch his mom slowly put

herself back together again over the years, it felt like too much to handle sometimes.

“Oh, Ryan,” Natasha said as she slowly moved across the room and gave him a hug. He cried more in her arms, and the two sat there for a moment together.

When he finally broke loose, he wiped his tears and stared at his mom’s always comforting and loving face.

“You are wrong about one thing—love doesn’t always end in loss. The pain and grief I experienced when your dad died is something I would never wish on anyone. He was the foundation of this family and I miss him every day. Especially as we are in this season of you kids starting families of your own and achieving such incredible things. He would be so proud of all of you and would be the best grandfather.”

Ryan nodded his head and wiped another tear away. “He would have.”

“But here’s the thing dear, our story may have ended when he passed, but our *love* didn’t die then. I will carry that love for as long as I live, and I get to relive and cherish the memories we made, the beautiful children he gave me, for my whole life. And the years I spent with him, I wouldn’t change for the world. And if I had to do it all over again and say yes to that man who stole my heart in high school, knowing that he would leave the earth too soon, I would. And that is why it is worth it.”

Ryan cried again and hugged his mom. “I miss him and wish he was here to tell me what to do.”

Natasha nodded. “Me too, honey. But I already know what he would say to you.”

Ryan leaned back. “What would he say?”

“He would say that to not risk everything for love is the most foolish thing a man can do. And that you would be insane to let a woman like Heather Pearle go—but that might have my influence in there, too.” She winked.

Ryan laughed. “Well, you and Dad are pretty smart.” He took a deep breath and wiped his eyes—he hadn’t cried like that in forever. “Okay, I better get it together. We’ve got a wedding to get to.” He smiled.

“Yes, we do.” Natasha gave him another hug and quickly adjusted his tie before they went to join the others.

Ryan made his way to his seat with only a couple of minutes to spare before the wedding started. He felt oddly anxious at the idea of seeing Heather tonight. He had so many emotions and thoughts in his mind from his conversation with his mom; it felt slightly overwhelming.

When he did enter the room, the sight of Heather took his breath away. He had never seen her hair straight like that, and she wore a beautiful dress. She was the most stunning woman in the room. He stared at her for a moment, thankful she was in the middle of talking with Penny and didn't notice him.

He longed to go stand with her, to wrap his arms around her and pull her in for a kiss. He missed the smell of her perfume, the way she leaned into him when he sat next to her with his arm around her; he just missed her.

The music started, which was the cue to have everyone sit down. With not many people in the room and his late arrival, he quickly found a spot closer to the back and sat down. Heather sat towards the front on the end by Penny. She still hadn't noticed him. He wondered if she was nervous to see him too.

Pastor Dave started walking down the aisle, along with the moms and Brent. Ryan smiled at his brother's big grin on his face; he was so happy for him.

Ryan looked outside and it had slowly started to snow again. Beautiful thick snowflakes made their way down and softly landed on a bed of snow. It was the perfect addition to the black and white Christmas Eve vibe they were going for. The candles were lit, the flowers were radiant, and the lights made everything twinkle a little more.

Next, Drew and Scarlett came around the corner. Scarlett looked breathtaking in her elegant white satin gown. The guests in the room stood as she walked down the aisle. Ryan was sure he saw a tear come from Brent's eyes.

He started to think about what he would want for his wedding day. Would he like a lot of guests or a more intimate setting like this? He then tried to shake the thought away. Why did he keep thinking of his own wedding day? What was happening to him?

He looked towards Heather; she was listening to Pastor Dave start to share his message.

As he stared, another vision came to mind and he imagined what Heather would look like walking down the wedding aisle; would he cry? He couldn't

deny that she would be the most beautiful bride. As much as he liked this new straightened hair look, he would want her blonde curly hair, only a natural look about her, and she would most likely want to have a long veil on her head, for sure with lace.

He smiled at the thought of it. This time, instead of trying to push away the fear that started to emerge, he took a deep breath and remembered what his mom had said. For a moment he allowed himself to embrace the possibilities, to embrace the risk.

He visualized her walking down the aisle, smiling with tears in her eyes as her dad gave her a kiss on the cheek before placing her hand in Ryan's.

Ryan imagined looking out into the audience to see his brothers and family members smiling back at him, making jokes that he had finally settled down and snagged the perfect woman.

Ivy's soft baby cry started from the other side of the room, causing Ryan's thoughts to temporarily come back to reality. But then again, they drifted back to this fantasy. He moved down the timeline to imagine what it would be like to have kids. He and Heather both came from big families. Did she want a lot of kids? It seemed like they probably both would.

He could see Heather snuggling a baby in her arms as she read her latest bookstore find. He imagined them with their family going to cut down the Christmas tree together; maybe he had a son on his shoulders who was too small to trudge through the snow. He could see them kneading some bread while watching *White Christmas* in the background for Heather. He actually smiled at the thought of it all.

A deep feeling of desire emerged from Ryan, something he had never experienced before. Was this the feeling that Brent talked about? The moment when he had looked over at Scarlett and knew she was the one?

He glanced at Heather as she sat in the front, completely oblivious to the breakthrough Ryan was having behind her.

He realized, in that moment, that she was his future. Everything that he wanted in life, he wanted to do that with her. He didn't want to let the fear of the future or the what-ifs stop him from living in the now and experiencing a happy life. His mother's words rang in his ears again; even knowing that his dad would die, she would still marry him again.

That was love. And Ryan realized that he had fallen in love with Heather. He was completely head over heels for her, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

He was willing to risk all his fear and knock down the protective walls that he had built up for years, to be with her. He felt like such a fool for having any doubt in his mind that she was the woman for him. He felt embarrassed that he couldn't verbalize that to her the other night.

But he knew now that he didn't want to waste another moment not being with her. Next, he had to figure out how he was going to tell her just that.

CHAPTER 31

HEATHER

The lights on Main Street were better this year than any year before—they had to have added at least seven more shops in the Christmas Lights Show. Heather adjusted her scarf to snuggle in a little closer to her neck as she tightened her coat around her. It was a cold night, but thankfully the shops created a wind barrier from the ocean.

The town square was packed with people for New Year's Eve, all laughing while they walked around with their hot beverages or eating some of the delicious food from the vendors that had their carts parked on the road. Main Street did a final farewell party to close out Christmas and the end of the year. It was one of Heather's favorite traditions in the town; she usually went with Penny and her high school friends, but this year, she wanted to keep it low-key and just go with her family.

Cassidy never liked to be out in the cold for that long, so she stayed home, but Lemon, Grace, and her mom and dad joined her for the stroll. She was having a good time overall, but every couple she saw holding hands or sharing a churro felt like a dagger to the heart.

Seeing Ryan at the wedding was more painful than she thought it would be. She tried her best to keep her distance, but she knew it would draw attention if they weren't together, so she tried to engage in small talk at one point.

They both ended up at the hot beverage bar at the same time during the social hour. While Heather's every instinct told her to run away, she forced a smile and said hello. He had told her she looked beautiful, and she mentioned he looked nice as well.

Thankfully, Penny had rolled up and said she needed Heather's help with something, so Heather had an escape before he asked any questions. Penny only mentioned once that it didn't seem like Ryan was acting like himself—Heather just jokingly played it off. "You know Ryan with weddings." That seemed to work.

Now, it had only been a couple of days since the wedding, but she was surprised she hadn't heard from him yet. He tried so hard to get a hold of her after they talked, but maybe seeing her at the wedding solidified that wasn't the future he wanted with her. Of course, that brought along another round of tears and sad days, but Heather was grateful to have all her family around for

the holidays to distract her.

She eventually told them about her and Ryan and her assumption that it wasn't going to work. She could tell Cassidy was slightly relieved, so Heather chose to keep her distance from her; she didn't want to hear the "I told you so" speech right now. Although, she hoped her sister would have more empathy than that.

As the family walked around the big gathering, her mom snuggled into her dad's arm trying to keep warm, and he was teasing her about her boots. Heather rolled her eyes; they did this every year. Her mom always bought boots that were more fashionable than useful, and then she always complained she had cold and wet feet.

Heather smiled to herself as she listened to them bicker and joke, truly in love.

The town tried to soak in every moment of the Christmas season before the New Year started in only twenty minutes. At midnight, the city council building lit off a fireworks show over the ocean that was bigger than their Fourth of July celebrations. The music played loudly, people cheered and blew into their noise machines, and everyone gave their loved ones a kiss. Heather dreaded that one this year, another reminder that she was again without her person.

As they got closer to the Townsquare, it started to snow. This looked like fairytale snow to Heather, big, thick snowflakes slowly and peacefully falling towards the ground. Heather reached her hand out and caught one in her glove; it looked beautiful.

The family stopped and bought some Christmas cookies from a vendor and wished them a Happy New Year. Heather didn't feel like socializing much, so she excused herself to find a bench to sit and eat. Most of the benches were taken, but she was relieved to see there were some lights on and benches in the flower garden.

She walked towards the garden, which was a little bit away from the large crowd of people, so it wasn't as noisy. She almost gasped when she saw how beautiful the garden looked all decorated for Christmas, with the light snow falling all around it. Multi-colored flowers made of lights were everywhere, and every foundation, bench and fence post was covered.

She could see the perfect silhouette of the moon as it reflected over the ocean. Although she couldn't hear the waves over the Christmas music playing through the speakers, she could imagine the calmness as it softly

lapped onto the shore.

She sat on a bench and ate her cookie, completely mesmerized as she admired the beauty all around her.

As Heather took her last bite, she had to choke back a sob as she so desperately wished she could be sitting snuggled with Ryan on the bench right now, enjoying this perfect scene together. She rubbed her eyes, thankful she hadn't put any makeup on the last couple of days, and looked over towards the Townsquare to see if her family had moved on yet.

She jumped in her seat when she saw someone standing a few feet away. As she tried to get her breathing back to normal, she realized who it was.

"Ryan?" she asked. Not completely sure due to the bright lights and heavy falling snow.

He walked a little closer to her and nodded. Her heart fluttered in her chest; she couldn't believe he was here right now. How had he found her? What was he doing here? And why did he still look so good just in a coat and hat?

"What are you doing here?" was the only question she decided to ask. It pained her to see him right now in this way, in this ideal romantic scenario.

"I'm sorry to scare you, as always." He lightly chuckled. "I just needed to come and find you."

Heather wasn't sure whether to be angry, sad, confused, or any other emotion at him right now. She just sat there in silence instead. He came to find her, so he clearly had something to say. He was probably there to finally bring closure to their breakup. At least get it done before the start of the new year.

"Heather, the last week has been one of the worst weeks in my entire life; it comes second to the week after my dad died. I have missed you with this depth of emotion I had never experienced before. I have almost felt lost without you." He started to slowly walk towards her, now only leaving about two feet in between them as she stayed seated on the bench in front of him.

"In such a short amount of time, you have done something to my heart that I didn't think was possible. You have turned me in the opposite direction from a man who used to run far away from commitment, even though I lied to myself and said that it was just not finding the right person. But I've been told that when you know that you've found the person you are supposed to be with, your soul mate, your best friend for life, you get this feeling that you can't avoid." He talked with his usual Ryan charm and calmness.

As he spoke, Heather became more confused by the second of where this conversation was going. It didn't feel like a normal break-up speech, but maybe he had some twist at the end.

"I started to feel this new feeling ever since you walked into the coffee house the day of Penny's accident. Something in my stomach tightened and weirdly fluttered, and I couldn't place what it was. Then I felt it again the day you ran into me with your shopping basket at the boutique—"

Heather tried to stifle a laugh at that one.

"And I felt it again as we ate ice cream in the school kitchen, and made bread at my house... the list goes on. But instead of letting myself experience this feeling and embrace it as I wish I would have, I let fear and past hurts block me from letting myself experience you. And I am sorrier that I could ever fully explain to you about that. When you told me you loved me, and I couldn't even find the words to tell you how I felt, it was immature and foolish of me, and I hope one day you will forgive me for that. I know my words hurt you deeply and I don't know if I'll ever forgive myself." Heather was surprised at the sincerity of his words, and it sounded like he was fighting back tears.

Her heart started to race now, feeling less confident she knew where this conversation was going.

"Heather, you deserve to experience the dreamy romantic things I know you love. All the kind words in the dictionary wouldn't be enough to describe how incredible you are. Being with you is the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I would be a fool to let you slip away. And I don't like to think I'm a fool."

Now Heather's body started to shake—either from the cold or from the intensity of his words. This was not a breakup like she thought. Did he want to get back together?

"I know I haven't reached out since the wedding, but I needed time to think and come to this conclusion. And I know it might be hard to believe me since I messed up big time, but it took me losing you to realize that I never want to be without you. I never want to go even a day without looking into your eyes and seeing your beautiful face smiling back at me. I don't want to have to say goodbye to you at the end of the night or miss seeing you for days because of busy schedules. *You* are my future Heather Pearle, and I swear I will do everything in my ability to show you every day that I can be your Prince Charming and make your life the dreamy romance story that you

deserve.”

Heather’s mouth fell open at the beauty and authenticity of his words—she believed every second of the words he said. Tears started to fall, and she gasped as she watched Ryan take the next couple of steps closer to her and get down on one knee in front of her.

“Heather Pearle, I love you so much and I have for some time. I just couldn’t find the words to say it. Would you please allow me the honor—an honor I know I don’t deserve—but the honor of allowing me to be your husband?” He pulled out a small box from his coat pocket and opened it—revealing the most beautiful, sparkling diamond ring Heather had ever seen.

She couldn’t contain her emotions anymore as she let out a sob and smiled. She threw her hand over her mouth trying to control herself, but the tears wouldn’t stop streaming down her face.

“Yes, yes!” was all she could say; she was filled with such joy. Ryan smiled and placed the ring on her finger. The lights from around them danced on the ring, making it the brightest light in the garden.

She bent down and placed her hands on Ryan’s face, pulling him into a kiss. Feeling him so close to her brought a rush and peace to her body and soul, and everything felt right in the world again. He stood up and wrapped his arms around her as he kissed her again, only stopping at the loud boom of the first firework blasting overhead.

Dozens more fireworks started around them over the ocean as the lights glistened around them.

He looked down at her, and with a smile that only came from pure love, he finally whispered the words she had waited to hear for so long—“I love you, Heather.”

She smiled back, wrapped in his arms, in complete joy. “I love you too, Ryan Almada. Happy New Year.”

“Let’s make this one the best year yet.” He smiled again.

The two stood there in each other’s arms as they watched the fireworks overhead, ready for their next year. As long as they were together.

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER

HEATHER

Heather thanked God for the most beautiful wedding location she could have ever imagined. The flowers had just bloomed and were open to their fullest as they soaked in the warmth of the bright spring sun.

She stood looking out the window of the second story of the Sandpiper Cove Church. She was right above the church flower garden, gazing at the sea of beauty beneath her. She smiled as the guests slowly made their way into the wedding ceremony area, laughing and talking in anticipation of the wedding ahead.

Heather was so grateful Pastor Dave agreed to the wedding taking place in the church garden instead of the sanctuary. She and Ryan had thought for a while about where they wanted their special day to be, and Ryan was the one who ended up suggesting the flower garden where he proposed. It was so romantic, so obviously Heather was on board.

Heather made him tell her he loved her a hundred more times the night he proposed, just to make sure she heard it correctly. She had never been happier and more in love than she was in this season right now—this was the love story she had always dreamed of.

Everyone was understandingly shocked when they announced their engagement, except Heather's mom and Natasha, who seemed to both smile in satisfaction like they knew it all along. Of course, later, Heather's mom cried her eyes out in excitement and instantly started to call everyone she knew to tell them the happy news.

Penny had a thousand questions, as Penny usually does, but Ryan answered confidently and explained his side of the story. A story he would end up having to explain to a lot of people who were curious about this new committed Ryan Almada.

Cassidy was skeptical at first, but Ryan asked if he could be the one to tell Cassidy the news. He wanted to explain himself and walk her through his revelation to hopefully bury the hatchet between them. Heather admired that and was thankful Cassidy eventually came around.

Now, Cassidy was right beside her, putting the finishing touches on her

makeup before they headed down for the ceremony. Heather looked out again at the sea of people and smiled when she saw Penny walking around in her bridesmaid's dress looking as gorgeous as ever. You could have never known that she had been in a ski accident a little more than six months before. She walked around like she had never had two broken legs.

There was a hesitancy about her today as she walked around introducing her plus one to her brothers and other family members. Heather smirked at how uncomfortable she looked; this would be good for her.

Heather had met Penny's friend Winston once before, and although Penny had introduced him as a friend, she knew there was something more going on there. She had been in the denial stage herself not too long ago. She chuckled at the memory.

Heather had convinced Penny to bring Winston to the wedding so he could meet others in the town since he was newer to the area. And being a single dad, Winston didn't have as much opportunity to socialize. Plus, Heather just wanted him around more; his British accent was so pleasant to listen to. She couldn't wait to see what happened there.

When Heather got engaged, she knew without a doubt that Penny would be her maid of honor. At first, she felt guilty not asking one of her sisters, but she knew none of them had the capacity to take on the role of a maid of honor; Penny was more than willing.

It was an answer to prayer that Penny eventually felt excited about the idea of her brother and best friend getting married. She could tell Ryan was different now. He had truly grown into a committed and dedicated man. He got over his "I love you" issues fast, to the point Penny joked she was annoyed by hearing him say it so much. But she always said it with a smile.

Heather loved having her best friend back and not having to deal with the constant worry or insecurity that she was secretly mad at Heather. And now, her best friend got to be her *actual* sister—every girl's dream.

A knock sounded on the door. "Is the bride ready for her big day?" Natasha asked as she peeked in.

Heather smiled and nodded. "I'm ready if everyone else is."

Natasha walked in and gushed at Heather. "Dear, you look absolutely stunning. Your mother's wedding dress suits you perfectly."

Heather had always dreamed of wearing her mom's wedding dress since she was a little girl and would put it on whenever her mom wasn't home. It was an elegant lacey dress with a slight poof to it. She'd practice walking

down the aisle in it and twirling around on the dance floor. Now, it felt like a full-circle moment. Her mom was honored when she asked her if she could wear it.

Heather took a deep breath and started down the hall to the stairwell. Everyone made sure the guests were seated in the garden, and she stood hiding behind the back door. The music started, and the bridesmaids and groomsmen lined up and started out the door.

Heather shook her leg in nervousness as she stood arm in arm with her dad, waiting.

“You look beautiful, Heather,” he said as he glanced down at his first daughter to be married.

“Thanks, Dad.” She gave his arm a squeeze.

When it was her turn to go, she took a deep breath and remembered all the moments that she cried into her pillow at night wondering when her Prince Charming was going to show up, or if he ever would. She remembered all the frogs she had to kiss before she found the one.

As she walked out of the door and followed her gaze at the row of guests that led to her man, she knew it was well worth the wait.

She smiled and held back the tears as she looked into Ryan’s eyes as he stood at the end of the aisle with his brothers right next to him. She couldn’t believe she was so lucky. He looked perfect.

As she walked closer, her heart started to beat faster and faster—this was the moment she had dreamed of over and over again. She tried her best to look around and take it all in.

Heather and her dad arrived at the front of the aisle, and she noticed a small tear escape Ryan’s eye, but he quickly wiped it away. When she stood in front of him, with her dad at her side, all she wanted to do was reach out and touch him. She was so ready to officially start her life with him.

Her dad gave her a hug and a kiss on her cheek, then placed her hand into Ryan’s hand. When their hands touched, she knew her happily ever after was just beginning.

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