

THE ALMADA FAMILY BOOK 3

ELLA MORGAN

SANDPIPER  
COVE ★  
*Romances*

Trusting  
Again  
at  
Sandpiper  
Inn



# TRUSTING AGAIN AT SANDPIPER INN

# THE ALMADA FAMILY BOOK 3

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# CHAPTER 1

## *OLIVER*

Oliver saw the Sandpiper Inn coming back into view from the beach. Around mile two of his morning run, he regretted running on the beach; he forgot how strenuous it was to run in the sand.

Fall on the east coast in Maine was way different than in Arizona. The brisk breeze felt almost refreshing as his heart continued to beat fast and heat up his body. Even though he was away from home, he didn't consider himself to be on vacation, which meant sticking to his intensive workout routine. The last couple of months had been beyond stressful for him, and it seemed like working out was one of the only ways he could relax.

Thoughts of home flooded his mind. He had only been in Sandpiper Cove for a week, staying after Drew and Casey's wedding to fill in at his mom's bed and breakfast while Drew was on his honeymoon. After Oliver had made a quick trip home to Arizona from the wedding to pack more of his things, it confirmed he was making the right decision about going away for a while. There were too many painful memories right now to be back in Arizona.

He shook his head at the thought, trying not to relive any of it, and started to push harder for the rest of the way back to the inn.

Oliver had told his family that the heat was his reason to come work for his mom for a while, but he wondered if they would figure out the real reason. He assumed they would soon enough.

The sun began to appear on the edge of the ocean and make its journey up towards the sky.

Oliver always liked being up before the sun. There was something about joining it at the beginning of the day that made him feel at peace. He was thankful his mom let him stay at the Sandpiper Inn for free during his time in Sandpiper

Cove. He easily moved right into Drew's old room now that he had moved in with Casey. It felt odd that one of his brothers was officially married; to a famous movie star, no less.

He made it back to the inn and headed towards the lobby area, where there should be hot coffee available by now, another perk of staying at the inn. He politely nodded back at the inn guests who were already awake and walking around the lobby, filling up their mugs as well. Oliver was realizing that every guest seemed to be incredibly happy and over-the-top nice. He tried his best to smile and mirror some of that positivity, but he was running low on energy for that. Thankfully, most of his duties at the inn right now allowed him to be hidden away in the back office.

With experience in finance, Oliver didn't find it difficult to pick up right where Drew left off. It only took him a day or two to get adjusted to the system the inn used and figure out where everything was. His mom, Natasha, was very impressed and continued to make comments about it.

Oliver hadn't talked with his mom much since he arrived, besides getting situated with his temporary job, but he figured they'd have a month to talk. He noticed her trying a little too hard to make him feel comfortable and to figure out why he was really in town, but he just ignored it and kept the conversation simple and surface-level.

He would be the first to admit that he wasn't the closest to his mom amongst the sibling group, but he did still enjoy seeing her every once in a while. She was still his mom. Once he had graduated high school and went off to college, for him there was no going back, especially when she and his dad announced they were moving to Sandpiper Cove. He knew how special the town was for them and was happy that they were going to live their retirement years in their hometown, but unlike some of his other siblings, he had no desire to move back there with them. The small-town life was not for him.

After graduating from college, he knew he wanted to spend some time in a big city, and he instantly fell in love with Phoenix. He liked the weather, all the hiking paths, and didn't mind that there was a high volume of retired people, many of

whom wanted to build their dream home to live in for the rest of their lives. That's where he came in.

Becoming an architect was something he never thought he would do in his younger years, but once he went to college, he found an instant fascination with building and creating. He decided to minor in finance just to continue the family legacy. His dad and Drew were both so good at it, which ultimately came in handy with building and thinking of the financials.

He found a passion in helping people imagine their future home and then actually making it happen for them. He remembered the day he was hired at his first firm as one of the top five greatest moments in his life. He was so excited, and his dad couldn't have been prouder. His dad came to stay with him for a couple of days to get moved into his new place and celebrate his new big job.

Oliver knew that taking a month off to come to Sandpiper Cove was no easy task, but his current boss was open to it because of how much PTO Oliver needed to take. He wasn't one for traveling or going on vacation that often, so he already had a ton of time off he needed to use up before the end of the year.

Oliver walked into his room at the inn and started to get ready for the day. He was thankful he made it a priority to work out and clear his mind every morning, one of the things his buddies at home encouraged him to do. After a hot shower and coffee, he felt somewhat ready to take on the day; maybe seventy percent ready.

He grabbed some breakfast from the lobby dining area and quickly rushed to the back office before he could be stopped by anyone. He saw a note placed on his keyboard in the office.

*Don't forget, new front desk worker starting this afternoon*  
—Mom

Oliver groaned softly. He forgot that a new employee was starting today. His mom had asked if he would show her around since she had to be over at the dance studio for a meeting with Scarlett about their grand opening. He wasn't sure how comfortable he was showing someone around when

he hardly knew the place himself, but he said he would do it. Besides, he was somewhat relieved Josie's last day was last Friday and someone new would be coming in. Josie was a nice girl, but she always wanted to talk to him, which he assumed to be flirting, and he had no interest in the attention.

He threw the note in the trash and turned on his computer. He checked for any check-ins this morning or items that needed to be done at the front desk. Since they were short-staffed, he agreed to help out at the front desk when his mom wasn't available and until the new person arrived.

Oliver felt like he was starting to develop a daily routine he appreciated. He was a man of consistency; it helped him feel more centered and in control.

His phone buzzed on the desk and he looked down to see Brent calling him. It was only 7:30, so he was surprised at the early call.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Hey, man, how's it going?" Brent sounded fine, which reassured Oliver a little that there wasn't some big emergency.

"Just got to the office—is everything okay? It's a bit early for a casual phone call." He was never passive with his brother and always just said what was on his mind.

"Oh, really?" Oliver could almost see Brent pull his head away from his phone and check the time. "Oh wow. Yeah, sorry, I didn't realize it was so early. I'm all thrown off timewise. I was up for what felt like all night working on the blueprints for an upcoming build."

"No worries. I'm up and just got to the office."

"I was wondering if you wanted to get together this evening and hit a round of golf? That new golf course opened last week, and I haven't checked it out yet. Thought it might be nice to get you out of the inn for a bit."

That did sound like a fun idea. Oliver loved golf, or any sport, for that matter. He was quick to learn the sport once he arrived in Arizona when he realized most meetings with rich builders happened on the course. He had played a little bit

before then, but not as much as some of his siblings. His dad didn't get interested in golf until after Oliver had left for school.

"That sounds great. What time are you thinking?" Oliver enjoyed hanging out with his older brother. The two were the most similar with their more serious personalities and passion for their work. He admired how Brent started his own company and worked so hard at it. He hoped for himself that he would be able to start his own architecture firm one day, but knew he was currently in a good spot.

"Okay, great. Do you want me to pick you up around three? I have the afternoon open, so maybe we could grab a late dinner after."

Oliver nodded. "Sounds like a plan. I'll be ready."

"Okay, brother. Talk to you then." Brent hung up.

Oliver put his phone down and googled the new golf course. He didn't have his clubs, but he knew that Brent would have an extra set.

Oliver figured there would be more questions from Brent tonight on why he was back in town. His whole family knew Oliver enough to know that he wouldn't just come home for a month if there wasn't a good reason. He had felt like the black sheep of the family for a while. Once his dad died, then he really didn't come around as often anymore.

He was still processing the loss of his dad. It was harder to be all together when it felt like the most important person was missing.

His dad was a huge part of his childhood, being the primary caregiver. Even though to Oliver, it didn't seem like it was his dad's choice but because of his mom's strenuous work schedule. While everyone thought it was cool to have a famous mom because of her dancing career, Oliver wasn't convinced.

He had been told by his nosy ex-girlfriends, who almost seemed too interested in the relationship he had with his mom, that he was bitter and resentful towards her for being gone so

much, but he wasn't sure, nor did he want to feed into that over-analyzation. He just figured it had to do with their different personalities. Natasha was always so go-with-the-flow and focused on dreams and passions. It felt different than Oliver's desire for structure and control.

His dad understood him and tried to always provide a solid routine for him growing up, and he communicated whenever there was going to be a change. He never put too much on his plate to cause him to feel overwhelmed, unlike his mom who was fine being spontaneous at any moment she could.

Oliver loved his mom, as any child would, but just realized they weren't as close as she was to the rest of her children. And he was fine with that. He tried not to think about it that much; it just made him miss his dad.

He decided to hunker down and get some work done to make the day go faster so he could get out to the golf course. It would be nice to get some fresh air and time away from the inn. It also meant the sooner he got to golf, the sooner his new employee orientation would be over.

## CHAPTER 2



## MACY

Macy rolled her head around her neck as she enjoyed the final stretch of her cool down. Her morning yoga sessions were the only thing that woke her up these days. She had become a little too accustomed to sleeping in late the last couple of weeks, as her mom passively continued to remind her every day.

She had reminded her mom that taking a break from work meant trying to enjoy at least a little bit more rest, which to her meant sleeping in. Now that she had her new job lined up, she figured she should try to start her day earlier and feel a little more productive.

Going to work at the front desk at the Sandpiper Inn wasn't a dream job, but she figured it would be a good way to still make money but continue to take a pause from her profession. Being a social worker had its joys and rewards, but it was also one of the hardest jobs and took an emotional toll. After four years of working in the field, she needed a break.

Macy wasn't sure when she'd be ready to get back to it or what job she would even want at that point, but she figured she'd have plenty of time to decide during this break.

She sat still on her mat for a moment and listened to the ocean crash against the shore and the birds sing good morning to each other outside the window. Her parents had the best house on the beach, and she was thankful they let her come stay for a while. Macy had been living in a house with a friend in the city but thought it would be best to come home for a while to regroup. She packed up her things, knowing she wouldn't be coming back. She hadn't been able to visit her parents in a while; it had probably been close to two years now, so they were overjoyed to have her stay.

Her clients needed her too much for her to be able to take a long vacation in the past, and if she was going to make the trip to Maine from Minnesota, she wanted it to be longer than just a weekend.

Minnesota hadn't been her first pick when she had thought of where she wanted to live after college. But she had done what everyone had warned her not to do after college; she had followed a boy there.

Her ex-boyfriend had received an amazing job offer from a company in St. Paul, Minnesota, that he couldn't refuse. The couple had started to date their sophomore year, and their original plan after graduation had been to stay in California together and try and make it work in Santa Barbara. But instead, he wanted to leave to pursue this amazing job, and she reluctantly followed. She thought maybe it would be temporary.

Macy hadn't minded living in Minnesota for a while, but after four years she couldn't take the cold or the snow anymore. She remembered the day so clearly when she realized she was living in bitterness and resentment towards Dylan, and the anger was consuming her.

Why hadn't a proposal happened by now? She loved her roommate and coworkers, but this wasn't what she wanted after four years of being in a serious relationship that required her to move across the country. She was miserable at her job and never had any energy to drive to his place after work. Why couldn't they just get married and live together?

Dylan had promised her that a proposal would be coming, but he'd been saying that for two years. It didn't help that she was enduring the most emotional six months at her job she had ever faced—her tank was empty and she wanted out.

Being home wasn't something she had envisioned for herself at twenty-eight, but it seemed that life was full of surprises. It hadn't been too bad so far; the view from her parents' new house was gorgeous, and her mom had dragged her along to all her favorite weekly activities to keep the two of them busy. From book clubs, church events, and girls' night out at the Oceanside Grill, they were having a blast and some much-needed bonding time together.

Her mom walked into the living room as Macy turned off her workout video. She had her nice business suit on and a

travel mug full of coffee. If Macy had to guess, that was probably her second mug of the day.

“Are you headed off to work?” she asked her mom, then proceeded to gulp down some water.

“Yes. I have a big meeting about thirty minutes away so I have to head out early today.” She scrambled for the keys in her purse as she mumbled to herself about never being able to find anything. Macy cleared her throat and then pointed towards the side table where her mom’s keys lay.

Her mom sighed and reached for the keys. “I would lose my head if it wasn’t attached,” she joked as she put her light coat on.

Macy smiled. “I hope it goes well. When do you think you’ll be home? Did you want to have dinner somewhere to celebrate my first day?” she said with fake excitement—and a subtle reminder to her mom that she was starting her job today.

“I think I’ll be home around six. If that’s not too late for you, then we could absolutely grab a bite.”

Macy nodded. “That works for me. I know working the front desk at an inn isn’t this huge accomplishment to celebrate over, but it’ll be nice to make a little extra money while I’m here.”

It wasn’t that she felt embarrassed by leaving a decent-paying social work job to go work as a receptionist, but she did feel a little insecure about what her family would think. They hadn’t said anything but supportive comments, but she still wondered what they thought of this whole situation. Her mom claimed she was never the biggest fan of Dylan, but Macy wasn’t sure if she was just saying that to make her feel better.

Her mom finished putting together everything she needed and headed towards the door. “Oh, Macy. Working at the front desk of an inn is just fine. I’m glad Natasha offered you the job, and it seemed like you’ll be doing her a favor as well. I’m glad you’re starting today. I know this break was good for you, but hopefully getting back in the workforce will be a good step

in the right direction. You're in no rush to make any big decisions now."

Her mom gave a reassuring smile as she waved and headed out the door.

Macy knew her mom was right. Working the front desk at the Sandpiper Inn would be a nice transition job as she figured out what she wanted to do. The thought of going back to social work seemed overwhelming right now, but she tried to remember all the different jobs she could do within that career. She didn't have to go back to the same thing.

Macy had always liked helping people, which was one of the reasons social work had seemed appealing to her during her undergrad. Once she started taking courses, she almost couldn't stop, and she didn't until she graduated with her master's degree in social work. There was so much to learn and absorb; it was all so fascinating to her. She thought about moving from families and focusing more on individuals; maybe counseling would be a better option?

There were a lot of options to think about, and she was very thankful her parents were allowing her the time to do that; staying in the luxury beach house was a bonus too.

Macy got up and walked to her suite at the house. With her own private bedroom and bathroom, she almost wanted to just stay here for as long as she could; almost. The loud music broke her moment of serenity, and she rolled her eyes at the reminder of her younger brother's presence in the house.

Her brother, Timmy, was an "added bonus" to their family, although everyone knew that meant surprise pregnancy. Her parents had planned to just have one child, but eight years after Macy, Timmy arrived.

She had always had a good relationship with her brother and enjoyed having a sibling, even as he walked through his current "discovering himself stage," as he called it. As loud as that may be.

Timmy's new phase was all about music, and he even took the initiative to start a band with some of his high school

friends. Even though he decided not to go to college, which she couldn't really blame him considering he was living in luxury here, he was still being proactive in figuring out what he wanted to do with his life. Their parents made him get a job so he could pay rent, so he decided to work at the Bluebird Café in town, which had conveniently started offering live music on Friday nights; the perfect time for his band to play.

*To be twenty again,* Macy thought.

Macy heard her dad pound on her brother's door and yell for him to turn his music down. She smiled to herself and could picture the vein popping out of his forehead. It only happened when he was mad. He hated loud music and bands, so Timmy's new discovery was his personal nightmare.

Macy always said her dad was the balance beam of the family. He was the perfect personality that balanced out their craziness. From Macy's chill, more relaxed personality to her mom's type A business mindset 24/7, they needed a middleman to keep them centered. She loved her dad and knew he was the secure base that she could always run back to.

Macy got ready for the day and spent some time sipping coffee and staring at the ocean through her full wall of windows. The view was breathtaking. Something she would miss in a city.

She decided to journal, an activity she'd been doing since she received her first diary at ten years old. She reflected on how it felt to be starting over somewhere new, even though it wasn't permanent. She knew she would find somewhere else to go eventually. Although she loved Sandpiper Cove, the small-town life wasn't for her long term. But she could appreciate it for the moment. Even though this wasn't a vacation, she did have plenty of time to think and refocus on what she really wanted.

With a lot of uncertainty, she decided to write out everything in her life she knew for sure:

*I have an amazing and supportive family.*

*I like living in the city.*

*As much as I enjoy visiting a small town, I don't want to live in one.*

*I don't want to be with someone who isn't serious about me, even if that means staying single for a while.*

*I love people.*

*I love social work, even when it's challenging.*

*I enjoy working with families and kids, but that might be too much for my mental health right now.*

*I want to help others feel okay after going through hard life events or trauma.*

*I am going to get through this rough patch.*

She continued with her list and hoped that it would instill some confidence in her about who she was and what she wanted with her life. She knew that she loved social work and helping people; the list didn't lie about that. But what that was going to look like moving forward was a mystery to her.

The one thing she knew for sure was that the next big decision of her life would be one that she made and wanted for herself—not because of a man. She had done that before, and she vowed she would never do that again.

## CHAPTER 3

OLIVER

Oliver placed his coffee mug down on the desk and rubbed his forehead, trying to will his mind to stay awake. Was this his fourth cup today?

He wanted to get a head start on the end-of-the-year financial assessment for Drew to help set them up for tax season at the beginning of next year. He had severely underestimated the level of boredom when it came to just scrolling through data.

It was 1:30, which meant the new hire should be arriving at any moment. He got up and stretched his legs, already sore from his run this morning. He figured he'd better hang out around the front desk before she arrived. He quickly glanced at the information sheet that his mom had laid out for him regarding the new front desk employee to make sure he knew who he was expecting. He walked to the front desk area and started reading.

Macy Maverick. He liked the name.

Oliver browsed through her resume and was surprised to see her previous employment—full-time jobs working in Minnesota and a master's degree from a university in California. What was she doing here in Sandpiper Cove about to work part-time at the Sandpiper Inn? It felt odd.

He wondered if maybe her degree and experience were in hospitality. He scoffed when he saw the words *social work* written on the page.

“See something you don't like?”

The unexpected voice startled Oliver and he quickly pushed the paper away. “What? Uh... no. I was just looking at something.”

Completely frazzled, he stared at the woman standing in front of him. A young twenty-something petite redhead stared back at him with eyebrows raised, confident that his lie wasn't convincing.



“You must be the new hire. Macy, is it?”

She nodded with a continued amused look on her face. “Yes, the one whose resume appears to have something wrong on it.”

He blushed from getting caught. “I wouldn’t say wrong... I just saw you’re involved in social work, and I’ve just felt like I’ve dealt with a lot of the social worker type lately. Too many people in my business.”

Oliver couldn’t believe he just said that. For one, talk about oversharing, and two, was he trying to start a fight?

Now it was her turn to scoff. “Ah,” she said. “Yeah, we’re everywhere. You have to watch out for us. We say we’re here to help, but really that’s just a front.”

Oliver wasn’t sure what to say. He had clearly offended her and wasn’t sure how to get out of this rabbit hole.

“Uh—I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant—you know, I’m not really sure what I meant.”

The two sat in silence for a minute as Oliver tried to regain his focus. He didn’t usually get so flustered. He figured he should just move on and see if they could forget about the awkward encounter. He was a professional and could come back from this.

“I’m Oliver Almada.” He stuck out his hand to her over the counter, but she remained unmoved and just continued to stare at him.

“Natasha’s son?” she asked.

He slowly pulled his hand back. “Yes, one of them. She said to offer her apology about the fact that she couldn’t be here right away when you got here. She had a meeting to be at, but she’ll be back within the hour.”

Macy nodded. “And what do you do here, Oliver?”

“I currently help with the finances and front desk when needed. Although I’m not usually here. I’m just covering for my brother, Drew, who’s our CFO, while he’s away on his

honeymoon. But why don't you come back here to the office, and we'll go through some of the first-day paperwork?"

He walked towards the small half door that separated the lobby from behind the desk to open it for her. He couldn't help but hear her mumble quietly to herself, "Hopefully, it's a quick honeymoon."

Oliver almost rolled his eyes. If she was going to be so sensitive about him just looking over her resume, there was nothing he could do about that. Just a couple more hours and then he'd be free to go to the golf course.

Macy followed him and the two sat at the table in the back office. He sprawled out the papers in front of her and started to go through them. He couldn't help but notice soft freckles on her cheeks and nose.

"Even though you're part-time, you are still eligible for PTO, and that starts after your first ninety days of employment. It does float into the next year." Oliver never minded going through paperwork. One of his favorite parts of his job for some reason. He wondered if that was the administrative side of him.

"Hopefully, I won't be here for that long," she said.

Oliver gave her a confused look. Was she not serious about this job? Maybe she was newer in town, but his mom had made comments about knowing her already.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm not originally from here, which you probably saw from my resume."

Oliver had to stop his eyes from widening in annoyance; she was not going to let that go.

"But I don't know how long I will be here exactly, so I figured I should get a temporary job in the meantime."

That made a lot more sense to Oliver.

"I'm very grateful that Natasha said I could work here. She was kind in offering me the job in the first place, especially knowing I won't be around forever."

“How do you know my mom?” Oliver asked.

“I just started in her book club. My mom has been attending for a while, and once I arrived, she figured I needed to get out of the house more so she dragged me along. Although I’ve come to like it, except when the conversation gets too emotional or deep, then it just feels like I’m back at work.” She had an exhausted look on her face just thinking about it.

Oliver was nervous to respond. He didn’t want to say anything to upset her about his thoughts on social work. She must have misread his silence for boredom or other awkwardness, and now it was her turn to act flustered.

“I don’t know why I’m talking about that, sorry. Um—any more forms to fill out?”

Oliver shook his head. “Nope, that was it. I can give you a tour of the inn now if you’d like. Then my mom should be back soon for the rest of the orientation.”

Macy gave a fake smile and nodded. The two stood up, and Oliver ushered her towards the front lobby again. They were not off to a great start. Thank goodness he wasn’t going to be here for long. He knew any other encounter with her would probably be just as uncomfortable.

“This is the front lobby area where we have coffee from six a.m. to seven p.m. Meals are served in that dining area over there, and then to the left is the hallway to where the first-floor rooms are.” He pointed with his hands in all the directions.

“You will be responsible for checking guests in and out, keeping the coffee full, and assisting with meal set up and prep. We do have a cook that does most of it, but she always appreciates when she has help if the front desk person isn’t too busy.”

Macy nodded. “Makes sense.”

“Natasha will be able to provide you with more specifics of where everything is and when you’re supposed to do things, but just to give you an idea.”

They walked towards the first-floor rooms. Oliver continued with his tour. “We have rooms on two levels, and there’s an elevator over here. At any given time, over fifty percent of our guests are retirees, so the elevator is essential.”

“That must have been expensive to put in,” Macy commented.

“Yeah. I’m not sure how much it cost.”

“Were you here when they put it in?”

“No, this is really only my third time here.”

Macy looked surprised. “Oh, so when you said you’re not usually here, you mean you don’t live in Sandpiper Cove.”

“I live in Arizona. I’ve lived there since right after I graduated college. I never had a lot of time to come and visit, only when my dad was sick.”

“My mom told me about that. I’m sorry for your loss. It sounded like he was a really great man.”

Any reminder of his dad brought a tug to Oliver’s heart. “He was.”

They got onto the elevator and made their way to the second floor.

Once they got off the elevator, Macy had more questions for him. “What do you do in Arizona, then?”

“I’m an architect. I work for a firm that develops residential homes.” He wondered where the sudden inquiring interest came from. She seemed to be over the resume fiasco.

“Oh wow! That’s cool. I don’t know if I’ve met an architect before.”

“We’re around.” Oliver didn’t like talking about himself. He switched back to the inn.

“Housekeeping takes care of all the rooms, so you don’t have to worry about that. But it’s helpful if you can keep track of when the guests officially check out and leave so housekeeping can confidently go in and clean their rooms.”

They made their way to the end of the hall. “This is my mom’s suite, the largest room in the building. There’s only her suite and then my room, which is the more live-in long-term suite. Both are on the second floor. Otherwise, everywhere else is for guests. If any of my siblings come into town, feel free to give them a room on the first floor as far away from us as possible,” he said in an attempt to make a joke.

It must have worked because he heard Macy give a soft chuckle behind him. He felt himself relax slightly.

He walked towards one of the upstairs guest rooms and opened the door. “Here are what some of the rooms look like. Most of them are unique in some way, but we tried to keep the floor plan similar in most.” Oliver gestured for Macy to walk into the room.

She glanced through the doorway and then ventured in. “It’s nice that everyone has their own bathroom,” she observed. “I guess I’ve never really been in an inn or bed and breakfast to know what’s normal. They don’t have a lot of those in the city.”

She walked around the room and then glanced out the window towards the beach.

A city girl—Oliver started to become very curious about what brought Macy to Sandpiper Cove. But he didn’t really want to ask. He wasn’t about to become the nosy type.

“Such a great view,” she said.

“We can go downstairs and head out to the back patio area if you’re ready.”

The two walked down the steps this time and then headed out the back patio door. The sun had warmed outside, so thankfully he wasn’t too cold without his jacket. Macy wrapped her cardigan tightly around her.

“We won’t stay out here too long. It’s kind of cold,” he said more for her and less for him.

She laughed, with a little snort sound. “I’ve lived in Minnesota for three years. This is nothing. You must have gotten soft living in Arizona.”

Oliver wasn't sure if that was a jab at him or her attempt at a joke, so he said nothing.

“Here's the back area of the inn, which I am assuming you're more familiar with since you attend the book club. The firepit's over there, and hopefully there's always firewood available. If you ever see any not there, feel free to give Wyatt a call or put a note by his desk, and he can fill it. You don't have to do that.”

“Who's Wyatt?”

“He's our grounds and maintenance manager. You can let him know if you see anything amiss with the property,” Oliver replied.

“Good to know,” Macy said.

Oliver continued, “During the fall it's nice if you can sweep out on the patio about once a day to keep all the leaves off, as you can see these trees shed like crazy. But in the spring and summer, the bigger issue is keeping it clean from sand.”

He gestured for her to head back inside and walked her through the kitchen and then towards the back office again.

He sat back at the table. “Any questions from the tour?”

“I don't think so,” Macy said as she joined him at the table. “Like you said, Natasha will have more details for me on my specific tasks, but it was nice to get an overview of the place. It's a nice inn. I bet she's proud of it.”

Oliver nodded. “She and my dad definitely put a lot of work into it.” A small feeling of guilt reminded him that he wasn't really around to help with the work. His dad had asked if he could take a week off or something to come and help with the design of the place. Oliver tried to come up with excuses, saying that work was busy, but he figured his dad knew the truth—he just didn't want to. If he had only known then what little time left he would have with his dad, he would have been there.

He was thankful that Brent was able to help with the remodel. It had made him feel less guilty at the time.

The office door opened and in walked Natasha. She smiled as she looked at the two of them.

“Sorry to interrupt. Hi, Macy, welcome to your first day!” she exclaimed. His mom was always in a good mood. A never-ending vibe of positivity and energy.

Macy smiled at Natasha. “Hi, Natasha, thank you. It’s good to be here. We just finished up the tour, and I was saying how beautiful this place is. You have a really amazing thing going here.”

“Oh, you’re so kind. I couldn’t have done it all by myself, that’s for sure. I’m very grateful for all the help from my kids.” She smiled towards Oliver. He didn’t feel like he deserved that smile.

Sure, he was here helping his mom while Drew was away, but they didn’t know the real reason he decided to come to Sandpiper Cove. It was a lot more selfish.

He checked his watch. “Hey, Mom, are you able to take it from here? Brent’s coming at three to pick me up, and I’ve got something I need to get back to work on before I get ready.”

Natasha nodded. “Of course. I assume you went through the all the paperwork with Macy?”

“Yup, that’s all good to go.” He pointed to the stack next to him.

“Perfect, I’ll take it from here. You have a nice time with your brother. Macy, would you like to come with me? I need to get some coffee and then we can go chat in my suite. I have chocolates up there.”

“Oh, the seashell ones? I’m obsessed.” Macy stood up and headed for the door. She turned around and glanced at Oliver. “Thanks for the tour,” she said with a polite smile on her face.

He smiled back. “No problem. I’ll see you around.”

Macy and Natasha walked out the door, and Oliver breathed an audible sigh. That was a lot more painful than he thought it would be. He was glad that the awkward encounter was over. He made a mental note to try and avoid Macy for the

rest of his time there. He just wanted to work and clear his mind, and then eventually head back to Arizona when the time was right. Whenever that would be.



## CHAPTER 4

## MACY

Macy reached for the stapler across the front desk and pressed down on the welcome packets she had been working on. Natasha had to help a guest with something in their room and gave Macy some busy work while she was away.

She looked up as two older couples walked into the inn, laughing and talking. She smiled politely as they walked by and smiled at her. It was fun to see friendships being made at Sandpiper Inn. All the guests she'd met so far were really nice, and Natasha was a whole new level of kindness and hospitality.

*Maybe working here won't be so bad after all*, she thought to herself.

Of course she would have to work alongside Oliver most days; that would be interesting. She admitted that their first encounter did not go well. She had no idea what his problem was with social workers. *Always in his business*, what does that even mean? She had no desire to even get into his business, that was for sure.

After they were done with the paperwork, she realized that she might have come across too strong. This was the boss's son, so she tried to be kinder and more lighthearted the rest of the tour. She could acknowledge in herself that she was feeling extra sensitive and emotional with her situation, so she needed to take things less seriously.

If he had a negative experience with social workers, or "the social worker type" in the past, that didn't mean he would necessarily have a problem with her. Besides, he was only going to be there for a month or so. She could handle that.

Natasha came back around to the front desk. "Sorry about that, dear. There's this sliding door in one of the rooms on the first floor that always gets stuck. I'll have to have Wyatt look at that when he gets back. One of the realities of having an older building, I guess." She shrugged.

“How do you always stay so positive, Natasha? It feels like with anything that comes your way, you’ve got a handle on it and remain unfazed.”

Natasha laughed. “It’s the nature of the job, I guess. I learned a long time ago that you can get hung up and frustrated by everything, or instead, try and find the positive and the lesson to be learned. For me, there’s more benefit in trying to decipher what I can learn from an experience. It brings a lot more joy to my life. Instead of bitterness and regret.”

Macy nodded. “I love that. *What can I learn from this experience?* It’s a good perspective.”

Natasha joined her in organizing the welcome packets. “When my husband got sick, I spent too much time asking the why and feeling sorry for myself. Of course I was heartbroken. He had been my partner in life and best friend since high school. He raised my kids into amazing adults and always cheered me on in my goals and made my dreams come true.” Her voice cracked a little.

“But in becoming consumed in my sorrow when we knew he wouldn’t have much longer to live, I had forgotten to be there for my kids, who were also in a lot of pain. Once I figured that out, I was able to balance the focus on the kids while also being there for my husband in his last days. My *lesson*, if you think of it that way, was that I learned that you could hold both; the sorrow and the joy. I grieved for my husband, but the silver lining was I grew in a whole new way with my family. We became closer than I ever thought possible as we grieved together, but also as we remembered and honored Leo.”

“That’s beautiful, Natasha. I have always taught at my job that the stages of grief don’t have to be linear, and they don’t happen one at a time. You absolutely can experience two or more at the same time. You can be in acceptance but also still sad at the loss.”

“Exactly,” Natasha said, nodding her head.

“And I’m glad it brought you to a new level with your children. I know I’ve only been here for a little while, but you all seem to be so close. Has it always been that way?”

Macy had flashbacks to her home study sessions with her clients. A part of the steps to go through the adoption process was she had to interview families all about their lives—relationships, finances, parenting strategies, families of origin, etc. Sometimes in normal conversation, she felt like she went back into social worker mode when she was getting to know someone. She often had to remind herself to keep it casual.

“We’ve always been a close family, even though I was busy with my career, but I always made time for birthdays and holidays, and we did at least one big family vacation each year. But I’d be lying if I said that my kids weren’t more attached to their dad growing up since he was the primary caregiver. I’ve been very grateful over the last few years for my early retirement from dancing so that I can spend more time with them now. I do think that has helped.”

“Well, I’m impressed that you’ve been able to maintain such a positive relationship with all your kids. You definitely have a good amount to keep track of.” Macy laughed.

Natasha softly chuckled. “I wish I could say it’s always been easy with each of them, a young Penny really put me through the wringer, but it’s had its moments. And I wouldn’t say I’m equally as close to them all. Having a few of them living in Sandpiper Cove with me has truly been the biggest blessing. Ryan always traveling, and I guess Drew when he lived in New York, made it harder to connect with them. But Ryan has always been so good about visiting and calling me often.”

“What about Oliver?” Macy asked. She noticed Natasha subtly leave him out of that list.

Natasha sighed. Macy could tell she was onto something.

“My relationship with Oliver has always been a bit complicated. He wanted me around a lot when he was little, and I always felt terrible whenever I had to leave him. It was so early on in my career that I didn’t have the luxury to be

home for long periods of time. I couldn't pass up opportunities without possibly taking a step back. And at that specific moment, my husband wasn't working at all, so we really needed the income. Plus, it didn't help that I got pregnant with Nick way sooner than we had anticipated. A lot of my babies were happy surprises." Natasha laughed.

"So Oliver wasn't able to be the baby for very long," Macy stated.

"Correct. In his teenage years, he acted out a lot more than the others. I'm sure it was to get my attention. I tried and tried to reach him as he became more lost, but he just kept pushing me away. He didn't come back home to visit as much as the others when his father got sick, so he wasn't as much of a part of the bonding process as the rest of the family. I've always wondered if he felt more isolated again because of that." For the first time, Macy saw Natasha look sad.

"I've tried, even as he's been an adult, to understand what's happening in his life and to show him I'm here for him now that his dad is gone, but it's always been the same distant behavior. The fact that he's here with me every day, by choice, is remarkable to me."

"He said he came to help Drew, right?"

"Yes. That's what he said," Natasha said with a questioning tone.

"You think it's for a different reason?"

"He said it was because he needed a break from the weather in Arizona, but that doesn't make sense to me. And for him to want to come and stay for a whole month, that's even more suspicious. But I won't question it. I get to be with him for a month, so I'll take all I can get," she said as she lightly patted Macy's arm.

Natasha shook her head and the smile returned. "Look at me going on about my life!"

"I have a tendency to bring that out in people," Macy said. "My mom says it's the natural social worker in me."

“Well, I think the guests are going to love you,” Natasha said. “I know I already do.”

Macy felt the heat of a blush rise to her face. In her line of work, she wasn't used to compliments.

Natasha tapped the stack of welcome packets. “It looks like we got them all done. Why don't you head home for the day. I'll see you tomorrow?”

Macy smiled and nodded. “That sounds great. Thank you again for the opportunity, Natasha. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course. And tomorrow we'll go through *your* family history.” Natasha winked at Macy.

Macy laughed. “It's only fair.”

Macy packed up her stuff and headed towards the door. As she drove home, she continued to think about what Natasha had said. How difficult would it be to have to support all those kids while she also processed the loss of her husband? It sounded devastating. She was grateful that so many of Natasha's kids stayed in Sandpiper Cove to be close to her, Macy thought. Otherwise, that could have been a very lonely experience for Natasha.

She wondered about Oliver. Why was he here? It did seem suspicious that he just decided to come stay for so long without a good reason. Macy wondered why she cared so much. She didn't. She decided to chalk it up to pure curiosity and social work instincts. From now on, she'd make an effort to learn more about her new coworker because he was important to Natasha. Yeah, that sounded right. Her interest had nothing to do with his broad shoulders, tan skin, or the confident way he walked.

She drove the long windy road to her parents' house and enjoyed looking at the other new beach homes in the area. All of them looked so nice and high-end. She was thankful her parents got such a nice spot by the ocean. It definitely made this unpredictable and uncertain trip a little more bearable.

Macy remembered what Natasha said at the inn and wondered what lesson, or positive takeaway, she would gain

from this experience. There had to be something, or else the world was being very unfair to her. No matter what it was, she hoped she would discover it soon so she could get back to reality, whatever her new reality might look like in the future.

## CHAPTER 5



OLIVER

*Smack!* The golf ball went flying straight through the air, landing on the putting green and then slowly rolling off.

“Rats,” Oliver muttered.

“What do you mean, rats? That was an incredible shot!” Brent said in disbelief. “What is in that Arizona water?”

Oliver laughed. “It’s from a lot of time on the golf course, is all. Most of our high-end clients like to discuss business on the course, so I’ve gotten in a few games, I guess.”

Oliver wasn’t one to brag, but he knew he had grown in his golf skills over the last couple of years and was pretty good.

“Well, I guess I need to start hosting my business meetings on the course too. That’s pretty impressive, brother.”

Oliver walked back to the golf cart and waited for Brent’s turn. Brent timidly walked up and teed his ball up, doing a few practice swings.

“Not gonna lie, I don’t think I want to go after that,” he said.

Oliver rolled his eyes. “Oh, stop. I’ll look away if that helps.” He smirked.

While Brent continued with his warm-up swings, Oliver took in the new golf course. It wasn’t the expensive high-end Arizona course that he was used to, but it would do. He was thankful to get out of the inn for a while and be outside. He wasn’t used to being inside so often. He tried to be out at least once during the day, whether that was going for a run, walking to the coffee shop down the block from his place, or sitting out by his apartment complex’s pool.

On the weekends, he was always trying out a hiking path. He was committed to hiking all the State Parks before he was forty years old. It involved a lot of driving and traveling, but being outside in nature was one of the places he felt most like

himself. Sometimes he would have a friend join him, but most of the time he was solo.

He never really minded being alone. As an introvert, it gave him time to clear his mind and really take a moment to reflect on life, while also relaxing after a long week of talking with customers. The social interaction really drained him, and if he didn't have time to recharge, he never went into the week at his best.

He really had it made back in Arizona. Thinking about it made him miss home, but he was happy to be spending some time in Maine.

Brent finally lined up to take a shot. Oliver held his breath as his brother swung and sent the ball sailing. Although it went far, it spliced and went into the trees.

“Gah.” Brent groaned. Oliver chuckled softly so that his brother wouldn't hear him.

“That was a good shot. Next time, just keep your head down and don't follow the ball; it shifts your swing.” Oliver might have picked up on a few tricks during his private lessons as well.

Brent gave him a know-it-all look and then headed back to the cart.

They drove around looking for the balls. Eventually, Brent found a new spot to drop his ball after a failed search in the trees.

Spending the day golfing was exactly what Oliver needed. He hadn't been in Sandpiper Cove that long, but it felt like forever. He was thankful that Brent had taken such an interest in spending time with him while he visited, although he was sure that part of it was a secret scheme from his mom to find out why he was there. But he didn't mind—he got a free round of golf out of it.

He had always had a closer relationship with Brent than with the rest of his siblings. Not that the relationships with the others were necessarily bad, but he and Brent were close in age, and Oliver had always looked up to him. Their minds

worked similarly with building and design, so they had something to talk about when they got together. In sports growing up, they were usually on the same team, which meant a lot of time in the car together traveling for games and practice. They had tried to keep in touch over the years, but they both got busy in their careers.

“You brought extra balls, right?” Brent asked.

Oliver laughed. “Yes. I knew who I was playing with,” he teased.

The two grabbed their putters and headed towards the putting green.

“So when you meet with clients on the course, do you let them win to get their business? I’m just trying to figure out how to use your strategy so I can become as successful as you are.”

“Successful in the game, or in life?” Oliver clarified.

Brent thought for a moment. “Both, I guess.” He shrugged.

“I never let anyone win. These builders know when someone is taking it easy on them, and they’ll call you out on it.” Oliver lined up his putt. “They respect you more if you actually try, and then nine times out of ten give you their business if you win.” He knocked his ball lightly and it slowly eased its way into the hole.

“And in life, my key to success, and the golf game, I guess, is to learn how to read the other person. People think they’re a lot more coy and secretive than they actually are, but they’ll most likely tell you what you need to know if you read them right.” He walked over and picked his ball out of the hole.

“Sounds like a lot of work. I guess I’ll just stick to my strategy,” Brent said as he hit his ball and made it into the hole.

“Looks like it works.” Oliver winked.

The conversation went in and out as they continued to play. It was nine holes of a great game, and Oliver found

himself enjoying the conversation with his brother more than he thought he would. Some things were more serious, like how their jobs were going, but they still had that Almada family banter and competitive jabs at each other that he knew and loved.

The golf course clubhouse had a restaurant connected to it, and the two made their way to a table after they returned their golf cart key. After they sat down, Brent asked for an ice pack and put it on his arm.

Oliver forgot about Brent's injury from his car accident a little while ago.

"I forgot you had that accident. How is your arm? Should you even be golfing right now?"

"Probably not." Brent shrugged. "But the doctor said I could drive again, and he didn't specify what kind."

Oliver let out a boisterous laugh. "I guess so. Are you recovering okay otherwise?"

"Yeah. It's been fine," he answered nonchalantly. "The first few weeks were rough, but thankfully Scarlett was around and could help me. I was anxious to get back to work. We had a lot of projects at the time, so I probably got back into it a little quicker than I should have. But it all worked out. I'm thankful there wasn't any lasting damage." He paused for a moment as if he was debating something.

He continued, "I'm not sure if you know, but Scarlett actually got into a car accident last year and has some pretty serious damage to her leg. She had to go through a lot of physical and occupational therapy to get her leg even to what it's at right now."

"Oh wow," Oliver responded. "I didn't realize that. Sounds like you two have a lot in common. Isn't she a professional dancer or something? I remember hearing Mom talk about her, and apparently now she's running the dance studio, correct?" It was hard to keep track of all the new people involved with his family and all the major changes in their lives.

Brent nodded. “Yes, she was a professional dancer, but with her leg injury, she wouldn’t be able to keep up with the vigorous schedule like she used to. She decided to teach it instead so she could still be a part of dance but not hurt herself.”

“Well, that worked out nicely. I bet you like having her around more.”

Oliver saw Brent’s cheeks blush a little bit.

“It’s been nice. I really didn’t expect to find someone like her, ever. I wasn’t looking for a relationship, but that’s usually how it goes, right? She’s pretty amazing. I’m very thankful that she decided to stay. It was touch and go there for a while on what she planned to do, and I wasn’t interested in a long-distance relationship.”

“Are you guys pretty serious?” Oliver had found the more you ask other people about their lives, the less likely they’ll have a chance to ask you about yours. Even if you’re not really interested in what they have to say.

Brent hesitated for a moment. “I guess it depends on what you mean by serious. I love her, and she loves me, but our time together so far has felt like a crash course. We fell for each other pretty quickly, I’ll be the first to admit that, so we’re in no rush for anything more serious than just being together. Not like marriage or anything, although we’ve talked about it. We’re both not interested in dating someone we don’t see a future with.”

Oliver nodded. “Makes sense. Relationships can happen quickly like that.”

“What about you? You have a girl back in Arizona?”

*Shoot*, Oliver thought. He wasn’t fast enough with his next question.

“Uh—not at the moment.”

“So there have been some? I guess you and I have never really chatted much about relationships.”

Oliver shook his head. “Not much to say.”

Brent stared at him quietly for a while, and Oliver knew there was no getting out of not answering.

“I dated casually for a while when I first got to Phoenix. I was with this girl for a couple of years, but that didn’t work out.”

Brent’s eyes widened. “A couple of years? That’s a long time. Why didn’t I ever hear about her? Or meet her?”

This is what Oliver didn’t want to get into. “I don’t know. You know I’m not one to call with updates to talk about myself. And the timing of things just didn’t work out for you all to meet her. For the holidays, she always wanted to spend time with her family, so it never worked out for her to come to our family gatherings. Which I didn’t really mind. It’s sometimes awkward bringing someone to meet your family for the first time. To be honest, I just didn’t want to deal with all the questions.”

“I guess I can understand that. I never really wanted to bring girls around the family either, not with Mom and Penny’s game of one thousand questions.” He chuckled. “So, it wasn’t really serious then?”

“Uh—” Oliver was thankful when he was interrupted by the waitress coming over with their food.

“Here you go, gentlemen, a burger with fries and the steakhouse sandwich.” She set the food down in front of them. “Also, a woman over there offered to pay for your meal. She says she knows you?” The waitress nodded in the direction of a woman sitting at the bar.

“No way,” Brent said with a big smile on his face. He waved at the woman who looked like she was in her fifties, dressed in professional attire with light strawberry blonde hair. She got up and walked over to them.

Brent stood up and gave her a hug. “Rebecca, how are you? What are you doing out here at the golf course?”

The well-dressed woman smiled at both of them and rested her hand on the empty chair at the table. “I’m good—quite busy. I was in meetings all day today at the conference room

here and was just ordering a ginger ale to go before I headed home. I never drink enough during all-day meetings so I don't have to use the bathroom as much, but then I get the worst headache. Ginger ale always does the trick."

"Well, you didn't have to pay for our meals. That was very nice of you," Brent said.

"Nonsense, after all the work you did designing and building our dream beach house, it was the least I could do." She smiled. "And this will hopefully be a lucky guess, but you must be another one of the Almada boys?" she asked, looking towards Oliver.

"I'm sorry, how rude of me," Brent chimed in. "Rebecca, this is my brother, Oliver. He's in town for a month or so covering for Drew at the inn while he's on his honeymoon with Casey."

Oliver half stood up and offered a handshake to Rebecca, who firmly shook it before he sat back down. "Pleasure to meet you."

"I could spot you Almada kids anywhere. You all look so similar. You have your mother's eyes." She winked. "If you're working at the inn, then you'll probably be working with my daughter, Macy. It was her first day today!"

Oliver felt a lump quickly form in his throat. The memories of his awkward encounter with Macy that afternoon flooded his mind.

"Uh, yes, I did actually meet her today. We're happy to have her helping at the inn," he said politely but stumbled over his words a bit, frazzled. Did Macy tell her about their conversations today? Did she know how awkward it was?

Oliver wasn't sure why he answered so oddly. He wasn't the only one who noticed. Brent gave him a weird look from behind Rebecca so she couldn't see.

"I know she was looking forward to getting back to work after a couple weeks off. She's staying with us for a little bit after just coming from Minnesota. The frozen tundra to the

beach, a very different vibe.” She laughed. “But I’m excited to hear how her first day went!”

So she hadn’t heard. Well, at least she liked Oliver right now. He wasn’t sure if she would feel the same later.

“I’m actually planning to meet her for dinner tonight, so I better get on the road before it’s too late. It was nice to meet you, Oliver, and good to see you again, Brent.” Rebecca waved and headed out the door.

Brent smiled at Rebecca as she walked away. He sat back down and gave Oliver a questioning look.

“What’s with the ‘we’re happy to have her helping’ response? I felt like I was listening to an automated message,” he asked with a slight chuckle.

Oliver gave a flustered look. “I know, that was uncomfortable. I did meet her daughter Macy today and it didn’t really go well.”

Brent raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“She caught me reading her resume, and I happened to make a not-so-pleasant face when I saw that she was a social worker and she saw me. She was clearly offended, and I just kept digging a hole making it worse. The rest of the day was kind of awkward.”

Brent laughed. “I see. Not a great start. Hopefully, it gets smoothed over.” He took a big bite of his burger.

“I had just planned to completely ignore her for the next month and let that be the end of it.”

“At least you’re honest,” Brent said with a mouth full of food. “Don’t let Mom know, though.”

“Why not?” Oliver picked up his sandwich, ready to take a bite.

“If she hears about anything awkward like that, she’ll force you to spend time together to make it better. And you know Mom, she’s such a schemer. She’ll probably try to make you fall in love.” Brent rolled his eyes.



“But isn’t that exactly what happened to you and Scarlett?”  
Oliver joked.

“Hey, I didn’t say she wasn’t successful at it,” he said with a laugh.

The two continued to eat their sandwiches and talked about all the sports starting up this fall. Oliver was grateful for the interruption from Rebecca; Brent had completely forgotten about his question to Oliver about his dating history. He was thankful. That wasn’t a story he wanted to share.

## CHAPTER 6

MACY

Macy paced the living room floor, waiting for her mom to get back from work. Her stomach had started growling ten minutes ago, and she hoped her mom would be back before she got hangry. That was never an enjoyable Macy to be around.

“Oh my gosh, was that your stomach?” a loud voice echoed through the room.

Macy turned around to see her brother standing there with a disgusted look on his face.

“Yes, it was my stomach, Timmy. I’m starving, and Mom’s not back yet,” she said.

“Well, why can’t you make your own dinner? Why do you have to wait for Mom?”

Macy loved her brother dearly, but he had truly become a young punk kid since she’d been away. He reminded her of all the stereotypical younger brothers she would watch in her TV shows growing up. Although he could be an annoying, nosy pain, they still had plenty of good brother-sister moments.

“Because we’re going out to dinner to celebrate my first day at my new job. Did you eat yet?” she asked, although she already knew the answer.

“No. I’m waiting for Dad to make me something,” Timmy said with a light shrug.

“Ha!” Macy couldn’t hold back her laugh at the irony.

Timmy walked out of the room towards the kitchen right as her mom hurried through the front door.

“Hi, dear. I’m sorry I’m so late!” She flew through the room, throwing down her work bag and taking off her coat and shoes. “The meeting went longer than I thought, and then there was an accident, so I was really delayed—just one of those days.” She walked by and gave Macy a pat on her shoulder as she ran off to the bathroom.

Macy knew her mom's ritual whenever she came home—she flung everything around, went to the bathroom, changed, and then she would be ready. There was no interrupting or trying to get her to just head out the door. The family learned it was faster if they just let the routine play out. Then she could quickly get her mom out of the door to dinner.

Her mom had so much happening at once that it was easy for her to forget things, but she was a woman of strict routine for sure. It was always comical to Macy growing up watching her mom run the house, especially since her dad was so go-with-the-flow. Ron was never in a hurry for anything and would be content to sit in his recliner watching sports all day if he was allowed to.

Although her dad was relaxed about a lot of things, he still didn't care for big changes. Which was why Macy was shocked that after working for twenty-five years as a project manager, he randomly decided a couple months ago to switch careers and was now a boat salesman down at the marina.

When Macy called him to talk about it, he gave very short answers, which was predictable for him.

"I don't know, Macy. I just got tired of the same old and wanted to try something new," was the reason he gave her.

"But Dad, you love your job, and you don't necessarily like change. I'm just surprised." Her social worker mind was racing. "Is this a mid-life crisis? Are you and Mom okay? You know you can kick Timmy out of the house if he's causing strain in your marriage."

Her dad had chuckled lightly. "Yes, we're fine, and no, it's not a mid-life crisis. I have too much to deal with between your mom and your brother to have time for one of those."

She smiled. "If you say so, Dad. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine, Macy. Don't you worry about me."

She usually didn't. He always had everything together and never seemed to need help from anybody. She admired that, but she also tried to remind him that everyone needed help

eventually. A comment that usually rendered a scoff and a reassuring pat on the shoulder from him.

Her mom must have been hungry as well since she was faster than usual coming back to the living room. “All right, shall we? I want to hear all about your first day!”

Macy eagerly nodded, and the two rushed out the door.

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Macy looked out the window of the Oceanside Grill as the waves slowly lapped against the shore. She missed being able to sit out on the patio to eat, but with the temperature slowly dropping, they decided to close the patio. She realized that she had developed a thicker skin when she lived in Minnesota, and now the cold air didn't bother her as much.

She loved being able to soak up the sun and enjoy the ocean breeze, but she wouldn't fight it. And she knew her mom wouldn't be able to take the cold anyway.

Macy realized her mom was trying to get her attention, holding a menu in her hand and staring at Macy with a questioning look on her face. The waiter also stared blankly at Macy as well.

“I'm sorry, what?” Macy quickly said, coming back to reality.

“Did you want to share the fried pickle appetizer with me to start? I figured it would be a nice treat since we're celebrating,” her mom said.

“That sounds great,” Macy responded with a smile.

“Oh, what are we celebrating?” the waiter asked as he took their menus.

“Nothing crazy—” Macy tried to say, but Rebecca quickly interrupted.

“My daughter had her first day of work at her new job.” Macy loved how even though it was something so small, her

mom was still excited about it, like it was the job of Macy's dreams.

"It's really not a big deal," she tried to play it off to the waiter.

"Congratulations on your first day," he said with a smile and then walked away.

Macy blushed, and then blushed even more at the act of blushing. She always got so embarrassed when she blushed because of how red her cheeks got—a side effect of being a redhead. Her brother used to tease her when they were little and called it her "fire hydrant mode" because, apparently, it made her whole head look red like a fire hydrant. It was a comment that always ended in a fight.

Her mom noticed the "redhead effect" and quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to embarrass you. It's just fun to have you starting something new!"

She took a sip of her lemonade and then reached over and grabbed Macy's hand across the table. "I'm happy you're home and taking a much-deserved break. Your father and I are in no rush to kick you out, so you just stay as long as you need."

"You might want to stop offering that, you know. Timmy will take you up on it and stay with you forever."

Rebecca laughed. "Yeah, we'll see about that one. I know your father is hoping this band thing is just a phase, or else I'm pretty sure he's going to lose his mind—or kick your brother out. We'll see which comes first." She winked and then went back to drinking her lemonade.

"I've been thinking a lot about what I want to do next. I just haven't quite locked in the where part. "

Her mom's eyes got wide with interest. "Oh, tell me more."

"Well, today at the inn, I really enjoyed talking with the older guests and helping them out. Sure, there wasn't a whole lot I could do because I was going through training, but any chance I had the opportunity to help, I did. I liked it. It made

me think about looking for jobs in elder care, moving away from some of the family work that I had been doing.”

“That’s definitely a shift and very different.”

“I think that’s what I need. I got so burnt out at my job that I’m worried about going back into it too quickly. I think I need a little time, and with my degree, I can do a lot of different things. I want to see what all is out there.” She shrugged.

“I think that’s a great idea. And how fun that you get to work with some elderly people at your current job to really see if that’s what you want to do. That’s good practice! Although I’m sure the work would be very different, those guests are there for vacation.” Rebecca laughed.

“Yes, very true.”

“Where do you think you’d want to go next? You really have so many options—maybe somewhere closer to home?”

Macy gave a sympathetic half-smile. She knew her mom had missed her. It had been a long time since she’d lived at home or really even had the option for a visit. They had such a good relationship, but it still wasn’t enough for Macy to stay in Sandpiper Cove full-time.

“I wish, Mom, I truly do. The idea of being with you and Dad more often and not going so long without seeing you would be nice, but I just can’t do the weather. Especially after being in California for so long and then spending time in Minnesota—polar opposites. I need the sun, and fresh air, and the option to be outside as much as possible.”

A disappointed look came across her mom’s face. “I know, I know. I just wish I could see you more. These last few weeks have been such a blessing for your dad and me. It takes us back to when you and Timmy were younger and we had all four of us together at all times. I miss those years.”

Macy nodded.

“But I am so glad that you are off living your dreams and doing exactly what you want to do. I’m so proud of you. It just means that I’ll have to come and visit you more. Especially

when you have grandbabies for me,” Rebecca said with a wink.

“Oh my gosh, Mom.” Macy rolled her eyes. “That is not even remotely happening anytime soon. Especially now that I’m single again.”

Her mom smirked. “I can still be excited for the future, can’t I?”

The waiter brought over the fried pickles, and it took everything in Macy not to devour them all immediately. She was so hungry, and they looked delicious. Good thing they were hot, so it forced her to slow down and share with her mom.

“How was your first day? Did you get to spend some time with Natasha? She has *got* to be the best boss.”

Macy smiled. She loved it when her mom was super interested in something because it brought out this young girl energy and excitement in her. She acted as though Macy had all the fresh gossip about the new girl or something. It always cracked her up.

“Natasha is great. I was able to work with her for the second part of my shift. We worked on a couple of projects, and she explained in more detail about my specific tasks. It’s a lot of guest services, making sure the lobby and dining area are cleaned, working on projects, filing, and helping wherever needed. A lot of administrative tasks, but a good amount of guest interaction too, which is a nice balance.”

“Will she be around most of the time on the days you’ll be at work?”

“I’m not sure. She’s really busy, especially with the dance studio opening up next door. She and Scarlett have been busy designing classes and getting everything ready. That’s what she was doing for the first part of my shift.”

“What did you do for the first part of your shift, then?”

Macy wasn’t sure why the mention of spending time with Oliver made her blush. He was so irritating to her, and she could tell he already didn’t like her.



“I was with her son, Oliver. He’s covering for Drew right now while he’s on his honeymoon.” She tried to say it nonchalantly to not bring any attention to it.

“Oh, that’s right! I met him today and he mentioned you.”

Now Macy really couldn’t stop the heat from blazing to her cheeks. “You met him? He mentioned me? Why?”

Now she’d really done it.

“Woah. What’s with the interrogation?” her mom said and laughed. “And why are you blushing so much? Do you like this boy? I shouldn’t say boy—he’s definitely a man. I can’t believe how in shape all those Almada men are!”

“No, I don’t like him—quite the opposite, actually. He’s incredibly irritating to me.” Macy avoided the part about how much he looked like a man; she definitely noticed how in shape and good-looking he was, too. But would never let her mom know that.

Her mom looked shocked. “What? Why? He seemed like such a pleasant young man. All Natasha’s boys are. Have you met Isaac? Her youngest? He’s practically a saint.”

Her mom was always so dramatic.

“We just got off on the wrong foot. He had some problem with me because I’m a social worker.”

Her mom looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“It’s not a big deal, Mom. When I got there, he was looking at my info and had a disgusted look on his face, and I caught him. I asked what his issue was, and he basically said he didn’t like the social worker type because we’re nosy and always in everyone’s business.”

Rebecca laughed. “You are pretty nosy.”

“Mom!”

“I’m kidding. Well, I’m sorry you got off on the wrong foot. Was the rest of the day super awkward then?”

Macy tried to remember the rest of her time with Oliver. The tour was fine after they got past the initial awkwardness,

and then things did lighten up when they were going through some of the paperwork. “I guess it wasn’t too horrible afterward. We did a tour and then some paperwork. I could tell he was trying to make up for his comment and probably didn’t want me complaining to his mom or something. But I just don’t see a great friendship blossoming. He’ll only be here for a month anyway, then he goes home once Drew comes back. So I only have to deal with him for a little while.”

“I know how you can be, Macy, so don’t hold a grudge against the nice man just because he doesn’t like what you do for a living.” Rebecca gave her a stern look. “And who knows, maybe you guys can even become friends. Especially if you’ll be working together.”

“I doubt it, but I love your optimism.” Macy popped another fried pickle in her mouth. Her mom was always so optimistic about situations and people, something that Macy had overall learned from her. But her mom was also right about another thing—Macy could hold a grudge.

## CHAPTER 7

## OLIVER

Oliver groaned as he poured the coffee from the large canteen in the lobby. He should not be this sore from his one round of golf yesterday; clearly, he needed to get back to it more regularly. He even had to miss his run this morning because of it. He made a mental note to call Brent and request they go at least once a week while he was in Sandpiper Cove so he didn't lose his swing.

"Oliver, dear!" He looked up to see one of the newer guests, Mrs. Peterson, walking towards him with her hand waving to try and get his attention. He tried not to laugh; retired people were so funny to him. Their mannerisms and interactions with the younger generations were so unique. Of course, he could hear her; she didn't also need the gestures.

"Yes, Mrs. Peterson? Is there something I can help you with?"

"Young man, this morning I accidentally tripped and knocked off a knob on one of those nice antique dressers in my room. I feel absolutely awful about it. But I looked at it and I think it's salvageable. Would you be able to come and look at it? Do you mind?"

"Of course I can come look. I'm sorry you tripped. Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine. My eye doctor just prescribed me new glasses and my depth perception is all off. I am running into things and tripping all over the place. My husband was terrified to let me come on this trip by myself because he thinks I'm such a mess these days!" She laughed.

"But I'm just worried about this dresser. If we can't fix it, I'm happy to pay for it to get repaired or replaced."

"Let's see what we can do. I'm sure it won't come to that." He lightly placed his hand on her shoulder and guided her towards the front desk. "Let me grab some tools, and then I'll meet you up there."

He went back into the main office and looked for a couple of tools he might need to fix the dresser. He heard someone come up behind him as he was looking through a bin.

“Hi, honey. What are you looking for?”

He turned to see his mom placing some small flowerpots on the table. “I had to bring these in now that it’s getting cold, except I left the shed key in here.”

She walked over and grabbed the key off the wall where they had all their keys hanging.

“I’m looking for some super glue and a couple of tools. Mrs. Peterson accidentally knocked a handle off one of the dressers and it needs to be put back on. I’m sure it’s nothing and easy to fix.”

Natasha nodded. “She ran into the buffet table last night too.” She chuckled. “I don’t know what the deal is.”

“She said she got new glasses that she’s trying to get used to.”

“Ah, that would do it. Luckily, you kids haven’t had to experience glasses. You got your dad’s genes when it comes to eyes.”

Oliver nodded. He looked through the drawer and found some glue that he thought might work. “All right. I better get up there. Mrs. Peterson is waiting for me.”

He started walking towards the door.

“Okay—um, actually, do you have any plans tonight? Would you like to join me for dinner? I can make something at my place or else we could go out?”

Oliver stopped. If he was honest, he didn’t really want to have dinner with his mom, but he knew he couldn’t tell her that. It wasn’t that he hated spending time with her; he just wasn’t interested in the one-on-one conversation. It just felt like they didn’t have anything in common, and there had always been a distance between them. He knew it was his fault and wasn’t a lack of effort on her end, but he still wasn’t really in the mood to change anything about that now.

“Uh, sure. I guess I don’t have anything going on tonight.” She was allowing him to stay for free at the inn, and paying him to work, so he probably did at least owe her a dinner.

Natasha’s face lit up at his acceptance. “Oh good! That will be so nice. We can eat at my suite. Should we say six o’clock? It’ll give us time to catch up. I’m hoping to hear all about Arizona.”

“That sounds good. I’ll see you then.” Oliver grinned politely and walked towards the door—spending time catching up was what he was afraid of.

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Oliver sat on the ground examining the knob on Mrs. Peterson’s dresser. The bottom drawer of the dresser looked pretty banged up, but Mrs. Peterson had insisted that it was not her.

“So you said that you tripped, and then your foot hit the knob and it came off?” he asked.

“Yes, it was one of those things that I couldn’t even reattempt if I tried! A silly accident.” She still seemed embarrassed by it.

“No problem, these things happen. I should be able to fix it with this glue I found. I’m just a little impressed, is all, that you were able to do this.”

She laughed. “Well, at least you’re impressed and not mad. I’m so clumsy these days.”

“Not mad at all,” Oliver said as he pulled out the glue and applied it to the knob. “This dresser looks like it’s way passed its prime anyway. Should be in an antique store or something.”

“But that’s where the character comes from. It’s a beautiful dresser. I love how your mom has decorated the place. I wouldn’t change a thing. It makes us old retirees feel at home whenever we come.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” Oliver said. He placed the knob onto the dresser and pressed it there for a while.

After a moment of silence, Mrs. Peterson quietly asked, “Oliver, do you have a woman in your life?”

The question caught him off guard. He didn’t expect to be having the “are you single” question right now, especially with an elderly woman.

“Uh—no, I don’t,” he responded.

“I should set you up with my granddaughter. She doesn’t live too far from here. That’s actually who I’m here visiting.”

Oliver didn’t really know what to say. He had experienced many attempts to be set up with a client’s kids or grandkids; it was always awkward.

“That’s very kind of you, but I’m actually not really interested in dating right now.”

“Oh, why? You’re at the prime age for getting married, right? You’d make any woman happy with how smart and handy you are. My granddaughter’s really beautiful, ya know.”

He gave a polite smile. He really didn’t want to talk about his dating life, especially with a guest at the inn. He pulled his hand away from the knob and said a quick prayer that it would stay on.

He stood up and breathed a sigh of relief when it stayed.

“Thanks for the offer, but again, I’m not interested. I’m sure she’s a wonderful girl.” He packed up his items and started towards the door. “Let me know if you need anything else, Mrs. Peterson.”

“Will do, thanks, dear. I promise I’ll try to be more careful.” She waved as he walked out the door.

Oliver couldn’t get out of there fast enough. He already reached his small talk limit for the day, and he actually had a lot of other work to get done. He closed the door behind him and turned quickly towards the stairs.

As he turned, he crashed into someone and watched as a giant pile of leaves fell to the floor.

“Ah!” he yelled. Somewhat in surprise but also annoyed at the giant mess that was now all around him on the floor.

“Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry. I didn’t see you there,” a familiar voice said as she put down the big box that used to hold the leaves.

He looked down to see Macy quickly starting to clean up the mess. She looked up at him and then froze.

“Oh—Oliver. Sorry. I didn’t see you there.”

“How could you not see me? You walked right into me,” he replied angrily. He rubbed his already sore shoulder where the box’s point had jabbed into him. This was just the cherry on top of his day.

An annoyed look crossed Macy’s face. “I said I was sorry. It was hard to see over the box, and you weren’t there two seconds ago when I peeked to see where I was going.” She started to fill the box with leaves a little more aggressively now.

“I was in Mrs. Peterson’s room helping her with something. I just came out. Why do you have a pile of leaves inside anyway?”

“I was helping your mom with a new fall decoration she’s working on for the lobby. I was bringing the leaves from outside to her room so we could work on it.” She collected the last of the leaves in the box and stood up. “Thanks for your help, by the way,” she said with a snarky tone.

“Sorry. I guess I reached my max capacity for helping people today,” he replied, matching her snark.

Macy scoffed. “Good to know. I’ll try to ask you at the beginning of the day if I need any assistance from now on, hopefully before you’ve reached your limit.” She grabbed the box and headed down the hall.

Oliver started towards the stairs scoffing and grunting in annoyance. He didn’t know why she had to be so rude; she



was the one that ran into him.

He sat at his desk and tried to calm down. He didn't understand why he was so bothered and upset. He leaned back in his chair and twirled his pen around. As he thought about it, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt for how he had acted. It was an accident; he shouldn't have talked to her that way. She was an employee.

He was just really tired, sore, stressed about the dinner with his mom, and annoyed from Mrs. Peterson trying to set him up on a date. He wished that stuff wouldn't affect him so much and that he wouldn't get upset so easily.

He sighed; he knew he was in the wrong. That was two for two bad run-ins with Macy now. It was probably better that they just stayed away from each other at this point.

## CHAPTER 8

## MACY

The heat of the fire started to burn the bottoms of Macy's bare feet as she wiggled her toes towards the flame. She had just snuck her feet out of her sneakers, desperate to feel the warmth. With every passing day, the fall weather continued to approach with the threat of the upcoming winter. She loved the idea of a summer at the beach with the cool sea breeze, but that reality was slowly fading.

Macy was beckoned back into her surroundings with the sound of a loud laugh from one of the women nearby. About ten women surrounded her on chairs around the bonfire outside the Sandpiper Inn. Natasha's book club had been one of her favorite parts of being in Sandpiper Cove. She had enjoyed the books they'd gone through so far, but she especially enjoyed the conversation and reflections from the other women.

Macy wasn't much of a reader, all her schooling had burned her out on it, but every once and a while she'd find a good book she felt was worth it. A lot of the books were fiction, which she enjoyed a lot more since she found her mind getting lost in the story.

She loved that the group was very multigenerational with so many unique perspectives and life-stories. She had gravitated towards Casey and Scarlett, the other younger women in the group, but found herself comfortable talking to anyone.

Tonight, she found herself not really in the mood to talk to others as much. She hadn't been as excited to go to book club, but she had originally planned to stay around after work and meet her mom there, so she didn't really have a choice. She was in a slump all afternoon that she couldn't break out of. Not even spending time with Natasha working on the decorations made her happy—which normally would be right up her alley.

Her mom picked up on it right away when she met her for dinner at the inn; no one could read her better. All Macy could describe it as was feeling irked.

All she could do was replay her interaction with Oliver over and over again in her mind. She couldn't believe how rude he was. What was his problem? It was a complete accident running into him, but he responded like she had purposefully thrown the box at him or something.

Just the thought of it again as she sat around the fire listening to the background noise of the ladies caused her to scrunch her nose in annoyance. She tried to just brush it off and chalk him up to the jerk she knew he was, but she couldn't shake it. She was frustrated, upset, and, if she was honest, a little hurt.

At the end of their last conversation, she felt that they were in a decent place. He had tried to crack a joke, and she was being polite, so what was the shift? She hadn't seen or done anything to him since, so he couldn't have been offended by something she'd done. Did her mom say something when she ran into him and Brent the night before? Her mind wondered with the possibilities all day.

She was frustrated at him and then annoyed with herself for continuing to think about it. She just wanted her mind to drop it.

Natasha thankfully stood up and tried to focus the group so they could start. Just like at the beginning of every book club, the seashell chocolates started to get passed around.

Macy always tried to refrain from the chocolates, but she never could. They were way too good. She grabbed a handful as the bowl passed by and started unwrapping the first one, anticipating its smooth and creamy delicious taste.

“All right, ladies, it's good to see such a big group tonight! I'm glad we could all make it on this beautiful fall evening. The bonfire is becoming more of a necessity, that's for sure,” Natasha joked.

The group all laughed and snuggled into their coats and blankets right on cue.

“I’m really excited about the new book that we started this week. Did everyone get a chance to read it?”

Most of the group nodded, while some showed their lack of completion from the embarrassed looks that crossed their faces. Macy happened to be one of those. With the new job, she found herself too nervous to read as her mind was always in other places.

“Hi! Sorry I’m late!” Scarlett said, walking into the circle. The group all gave her a warm greeting as she made her way towards the empty seat by Macy.

“No problem, dear. We’re happy you’re here,” Natasha said as she gave Scarlett a smile. “Anyway—” Natasha continued, but Macy was distracted by Scarlett getting situated in her seat.

“Hey, girl,” Scarlett leaned over and whispered to Macy. “How’s it going?”

Macy smiled and gave a nod. “It’s pretty good. I’m just so tired tonight.”

“I hear you. I’ve been working hard at the studio. I find myself staying there late almost every night. Thankfully, the inn’s just a short walk over.” Scarlett smiled.

Macy loved getting to know Scarlett more since she’d been there. She was so nice and sweet, and she was really breaking out of her shell. Ever since she and Brent officially started dating, she had this glow about her and a happiness that was almost contagious. Macy liked seeing her like that and was hopeful that they would continue to get to know each other better.

“Brent lets you stay busy all those nights?” Macy smirked.

Scarlett blushed, and she brushed her auburn hair back from her face. “He understands how excited I am about it all, but yes, he definitely protests my busyness.” She giggled.

Although Macy was still emotionally recovering from her relationship coming to an end, she still loved hearing about other people's dating stories. There was something about love that made her smile ear to ear. Especially stories like Brent and Scarlett, two people who weren't looking for each other but ended up being the perfect fit for what they needed. It was so beautiful, and Macy was a complete sucker for it.

Before Casey went out of town for her honeymoon, Casey, Scarlett, and Macy had gone out to dinner a few times, just the three of them, as the young women of the book club. Macy had asked all about the two's love stories. She couldn't believe how exciting they were and far from anything boring. She hoped that one day her story would be like that too.

She had wanted that with Dylan, but instead she got years of wasted wishing and dreaming. He had been good to her and they seemed to have good chemistry, but that wasn't enough for him to see the future she had envisioned together. Macy so desperately wanted a man that would go above and beyond for her. She didn't need to be spoiled, just admired and respected. She wanted someone that would be the first person to ask how her day was—and not ask only after she asked first and then made subtle comments hinting at what her day was like. It was the little daily things that mattered too.

She wasn't sure when it would happen for her, probably whenever she moved to her next location. She wasn't in a rush.

"Does anyone want to give a summary of what we've read so far?" Natasha asked.

"I can!" Linda chimed in.

"Okay, great—thank you, Linda." Natasha sat down.

"Basically, it's the story of a broken-hearted woman who decides she needs a vacation, so she goes across the world to Thailand to recharge. At this point, we don't know much about the male lead in the story, but we're realizing how lonely she is and how important this trip is going to be for her." Linda looked to Natasha. "Does that about do it?"

“Yes, that’s a great summary, Linda. Thank you. We haven’t learned too much, but the fight with her boss, and the conversation with her disappointed mom, showed us that she’s really being pushed towards the edge.”

Natasha paused and looked around the group. “That’s something a lot of us can probably relate to, huh?”

The group hmm’d and mm-hm’d in agreement. Macy nodded too. Was that her right now? Was she running away from discontentment? Her mind started to wonder what she was really hoping to find here at Sandpiper Cove. She went back to her conversation with Natasha. If there was a reason for everything, and you learned something from each season you were in, what was she supposed to take away from this season?

The rest of the book club went as it normally did; women opened up and shared what they took away from the text, their own stories of wandering. Many had experienced heartbreak from divorce and identity crises. Macy enjoyed listening to their reflections and stories of finding themselves again.

Macy didn’t feel lost. She knew who she was and knew what she wanted to do with her life. If she reflected enough, she realized she just didn’t understand what she was doing at home.

Although she was interested and focused on what the group was sharing, she couldn’t help her mind wandering back to Oliver. She even audibly groaned at one point of frustration that she couldn’t get the interaction out of her mind—even with all the distractions.

The group finished up and started saying their goodbyes. She was relieved to be talking again to continue the distractions.

“So, did you get a chance to read the book yet?” Scarlett asked Macy as she took a drink of her hot tea.

“Honestly, no, not yet. I had every intention of starting it. I bought it, so that’s a start.” Macy shrugged.

Scarlett laughed. “I guess so. I actually started on time with this one, so that’s a win in my book. How was your first couple of days at the new job?” she asked excitedly.

Macy took a deep breath. “They were pretty good. I love working with Natasha. I mean, it’s only been two days, but still, I think I’m kind of getting the hang of it. I have tomorrow off because it’s just part-time, but it will still be nice. I’m actually kind of excited to get to know the guests more.”

“That’s the spirit! I love staying here. The inn feels like home to me at this point. I’m sorry I didn’t pop over and see you working. It’s just been so busy.”

“No problem at all. I’ve been busy too. There’s a lot to learning a new job.”

“Have you been able to work with Oliver yet?” Scarlett asked.

Macy paused for a moment. “Not very much. He just gave me a tour and did some intro paperwork, but otherwise, it’s been me and Natasha.”

“I see. I was hoping that you’d be around him more.”

Macy shot her a confused look. “What—why is that?”

Scarlett casually shrugged. “He just seems like such a mystery to me. No one really knows why he’s here; it doesn’t sound like he’s been that close to the family the last couple of years. Brent is closer to him, but still not even that close. He has no idea what’s going on in Oliver’s life. But I’m glad they’ve been hanging out a bit.”

Macy felt slightly affirmed in her own questioning of Oliver. He did kind of seem like a mystery; she couldn’t put her finger on it.

Scarlett continued, “I don’t know. I’m sure it’s nothing. We’ve just all been talking about it, wondering. I wasn’t sure if he said anything to you.”

Macy shook her head. “No, we really haven’t had much interaction.” Again, Macy’s mind went back to an angry Oliver in the hallway.



Scarlett stood up. “Well, he’ll be gone soon enough. I’m definitely excited to have Drew and Casey back. I can’t wait to hear all about their elaborate honeymoon.”

“Same.” Macy smiled. Now she stood up and made eye contact with her mom as her signal she was ready to go. “But it was good to see you. I’m glad you were able to come last minute.”

“Me too. I’ll see you around, okay?” Scarlett waved as she walked over to Natasha to give her a hug before she went back to the inn.

Macy headed towards her mom and the two walked to the car. The crickets chirped as they walked past the inn towards the parking lot. Most of the lights were on in the inn since the sun had already started to go down.

She remembered that Oliver was on the second floor, and she wondered what room was his. Her conversation with Scarlett played in her mind. Was there some sort of mystery about him? It felt weird that he was here and no one really knew why, not even his family.

She tried not to look at the rooms to see which one was his, but she felt her eyes slowly look up and wander around. Her eyes quickly shot down when she saw the figure of a man standing on his porch looking down towards them from the second floor. She picked up the pace. She wasn’t sure if that was Oliver or not, but she wasn’t about to chance it and look again to find out.

## CHAPTER 9

## OLIVER

Oliver shouldn't have been surprised by the number of emails he'd received while he'd been away from work.; he had already been gone for almost two weeks. He decided to take the morning and stay in his room to get caught up on his actual job before he headed into the office at the Sandpiper Inn.

Although he had taken time off from his regular job in Arizona, he knew how brutal it was to come back into the office with a full inbox after even just a couple of days away, let alone a month. He sat with his cup of coffee and opened the window to listen to the sounds of the ocean. That would at least calm him a little bit while he searched through all he needed to do.

All the emails were everything he expected, so at least there weren't any surprises. Quotes needed by customers, upcoming deadlines he needed to be aware of for when he got back, questions from his boss on the status of projects—everything he knew about.

He knew his supervisors were annoyed when he had asked to take so much time off, but he reassured them that all his projects were up to date and he would respond to any pressing matters from Maine. He worked with a group of workaholics, so they didn't understand the concept of “time away.”

*Hey Oliver—I hope you're enjoying your bubble baths and chocolates on your luxury vacation. Don't forget we have that meeting with the Andersons next month that I'll need you back for. – Tanner*

Oliver smiled to himself at the cheekiness of his friend from work. Tanner was always giving him a hard time whenever he told him he would read or go for hikes to clear his mind. Tanner thought all the self-care stuff was for people who couldn't handle life, so Oliver really got an earful when he told him he was going away. Oliver tried to reassure him he wasn't leaving to go to a spa, even if it was a bed and

breakfast, but to work for his mom at the inn while his brother was away. It still didn't stop the teasing.

Oliver was starting to miss his friends and the guys from work, but he knew nothing would have changed since he left. He would see them soon enough.

As he continued to search through his emails, he suddenly stopped scrolling as one immediately caught his attention.

An email from Kendra Thompson caused a cold shiver down his spine and made his heart beat faster than it should.

He quickly slammed his computer shut and stared at the table for a minute as his mind went wild. What was in that email? What could she possibly want to say to him?

His mind went all over the place with possibilities but was interrupted by a knock on his door. He sat confused for a moment, trying to figure out who it could be, hopefully not a guest that needed something.

“Oliver? Are you in there?” his mom's voice called out, muffled through the heavy door.

*Shoot.* He forgot that he rescheduled their dinner to breakfast this morning.

After his meltdown in front of Macy yesterday, he was so thrown off the rest of the day that he'd asked his mom if they could reschedule. The second he got back to the office after helping Mrs. Peterson, he paced around the room for minutes as he tried to calm down but was instead swarmed with guilt. He knew he shouldn't have taken out his frustration on Macy. It was just an accident; he realistically knew that. But he was just so frazzled and upset that he couldn't help himself. He had always had a defensive and impulsive response to things.

Their interaction bothered him for the rest of the day, and he knew he wouldn't be in the headspace to have dinner with his mom. She would want to ask him all sorts of questions about Arizona and how he was doing in life, and he just didn't have the energy to talk with her about it, or more so, lie to her.

He asked if they could have breakfast in the morning instead because he knew if he didn't give her a different time

right away, she would be upset. She was happy to accommodate the change, especially because he said he had a bad headache and needed rest. Even though her kids were older, she was still the caring, nurturing mom that wanted them to get better soon if they weren't feeling well.

He ultimately really enjoyed the time to himself last night cooped up in his room. After dinner, he read a bit, did some research for a project he had at work, and set a date for his next golf match with Brent.

He only got distracted when he heard laughing and talking outside on the back patio area and ventured towards the window to take a look.

He had forgotten it was his mom's book club night. His mom must have really wanted dinner with him because she normally wouldn't have planned a dinner on a book club night. She usually took most of the evening to prepare.

He watched the women as they sat together talking and saying their final goodbyes. Oliver found himself instantly drawn to Macy. Her red hair was hard to miss. She sat with Scarlett talking about something. He found himself curious to know what they were discussing.

Were they talking about him? Was she telling Scarlett what happened that day?

Oliver scowled to himself at the thought. Why in the world would she be talking about him? He leaned against the railing and watched longer than he probably should have until he saw Macy and her mom walk away. At one point, he worried that she saw him staring, but he quickly ducked away and went back to his evening.

Another knock on the door from Natasha reminded him that she was still waiting for a reply.

"Yes, I'm here—coming!" he yelled as he quickly tidied up his work equipment and any loose items around the room. He had forgotten that she was coming but didn't want her to know that.

He rushed towards the door and welcomed his mom into the room.

“Good morning, dear. How are you feeling this morning?” she asked as she walked into the room with a bag of food and two coffees. It looked like she’d gone to the Bluebird Café.

Natasha saw him eyeing the food in her hands. “I went to the café as a treat. I hope I got your order right. A Vanilla Latte with a southwestern bagel, correct?”

Oliver smiled. “Yes, that’s right. I’m surprised you remembered.”

“Oh, I try to never forget my children’s favorite coffee orders. You never know when they could come in handy.” She set breakfast down on the table and looked back at Oliver.

“I’m feeling better today. The evening of rest did me good. Thanks for rescheduling to this morning.” He walked over, grabbed the latte and took a sip. So good. His sister Penny did a great job running the café and making sure all the drinks were always perfect.

“I’m glad to hear you’re feeling better. Sometimes our bodies force us to rest when we really need it.” Natasha started to unpack the food from the bag and set it on the table.

Oliver sat down and slowly started eating, staring at the table. The two sat in silence for a moment; Oliver was unsure what to say. He never spent one-on-one time with his mom. It was a good thing she was used to small talk from all her years running the inn and interviews when she was traveling for work.

“It’s been so nice to have you here for a while, Oliver. Have you been enjoying yourself? I know it’s not really a vacation, with you working still and all, but maybe a nice break?”

Oliver nodded. “Yeah, it’s definitely been nice to get out of the sun and enjoy the actual fall season for once. Arizona doesn’t really have much of that. I’ve liked seeing Brent and everyone else for a little bit. I know it’s only been a couple of weeks, but it’s been quite a long time since I’ve been home.”

It was Natasha's turn to nod. She took a big bite of her breakfast bagel and gave an apologetic look as she quickly tried to chew so she could say something.

"It sure has been, but I know you're busy. How has business been? Are you staying active at your company?"

"Yes, they keep me busy. A lot of meetings and projects." He took a couple sips of his coffee.

Natasha started talking about his dad and how it was for him when he was working at a corporation like Oliver's. She could go on and on about her late husband, Leo, and all that he did to help the family and others in the community. Oliver couldn't help but notice the way she still talked about him—full of love and appreciation. It was like he wasn't actually gone.

Oliver missed his dad terribly; he was a sturdy rock for Oliver for so long. Even when Oliver would distance himself and go off on his own, more than the other siblings, his dad always found a way to convince him to come home for family gatherings and holidays.

His dad was the one person he connected to more than anyone else. He could ask him about anything in life and Leo would approach it with kindness, honesty, and without judgment. Sure, he'd tell Oliver when he was making a mistake and going down the wrong path, but he always did it in love. And Oliver made a lot of mistakes.

"Do you miss Dad?" Oliver was surprised at the question that exploded from his mouth. He never talked about serious things with anyone, especially his mom, but as they talked about his dad, he couldn't help but wonder if his mom was in the same boat as him.

Natasha looked surprised by the question. It probably felt out of the blue to her as well.

"Why, of course. I think of your dad every morning when I wake up. And then I say thank you to God every night before I go to sleep for the amazing years I had with him." She took a deep breath. "He was the most amazing thing that ever

happened to me, besides you kids, of course. I've never been more supported, cherished, and loved by anyone else in my life. Not even my parents, and they loved me very much." She chuckled.

Oliver could see the love in her eyes as she spoke about him. He wondered if he would ever experience that kind of love with someone. To be with a person that completely supported you and cheered you on. Who was committed and faithful to you until the end.

"Did you ever want to be with anyone else?" he asked.

Natasha looked a bit confused, but Oliver could tell she was trying to keep a poker face on until she could figure out why he was asking these questions. Oliver himself was trying to figure it out too.

She paused for a moment and then spoke, "Not really. You know that your dad and I were high school sweethearts. We had been together for so long. We only experienced one time in our lives where I wasn't sure if it was going to work out—"

"The time when he proposed, and you said no?" he asked with a slight grin as he remembered the story. His dad always brought it up on their anniversary every year to give his mom a hard time. They would all laugh because, of course, he dramatized the story.

Natasha rolled her eyes. "He always loved reminding me of that, didn't he? But yes, that was the only time. I was so young and trying to get established in my career, but I had no idea what that meant at the time. Thankfully, it was an awakening for both of us to realize how much we loved each other and that we wanted to spend forever together. I'm so glad that he asked again and that he and I started this incredible family. He gave me the best gift of all."

"Your ability to still pursue your career?"

"No, you kids." Natasha looked slightly hurt at his question. "You kids were the best thing that ever happened in my life. I would have given up my career if that meant losing you."



The comment brought up a familiar sting of anger in Oliver. “Then why were you gone so much?”

He immediately regretted saying it, but it slipped out before he could stop it. He didn’t want to get into this again today. They had already had this conversation so many times in his life, especially when he was a teenager.

“I had to work, and at the time you were born and little, I was the only one making money between your dad and me. I know it wasn’t easy for you kids all the time, which is why we tried to have you join me on the road sometimes, but we did the best we could.”

“But it still didn’t feel like enough. You weren’t there for so many things.”

Natasha sighed. “I know, but your dad said that he could handle it and that everything would be okay. I do regret missing so much. I wished there were jobs closer to where we were living so I could see you every night before bed; that was always such a special treat for me. But I did my best and what I thought was right at the time.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before.” His tone was sharp, but he couldn’t help himself.

“I know I’ve told you this many times, and I know it was harder for you than any of the other kids. But I’m trying to make up for it now, and I’m really glad to have you here so we can make up for some of our lost time together.” She reached across the table to grab his hand in comfort, but his hand stayed stiff under her touch.

He stayed quiet as she stared at him, trying to find the words to say to make it better, but it felt like nothing would. He still grew up with a mom that was never around. He recalled how he would always look across the crowd during his performances and sporting events to hopefully spot a woman who wasn’t there.

He never fully told her the effect it had on him to have her travel on the road so much, but their fights had always been

similar. She wasn't there, and there was nothing she could do to take that back.

"I should get downstairs. With Macy not here today, I planned to help at the front desk." Oliver stood and cleaned up his garbage. Natasha quietly followed suit.

"Okay, thanks again for having breakfast with me. Hopefully, we can do it again while you're still here."

Even when it didn't go as planned, his mom still wanted to spend time with him. Something he never quite figured out why. He was always short with her, not very friendly, and accused her of not caring. Why did she still care so much about him?

Questions for another day.

They both walked out the door, and Oliver participated in an awkward hug from his mom before she walked down the hall.

He went downstairs and headed towards the office, smiling politely at guests that were trickling into the inn, already done with their morning activities.

He stopped in his tracks as he walked into the office and saw Macy standing there. It was her day off. Why was she here?

"What are you doing here?" He didn't mean to sound defensive and rude; he was just surprised. He tried to cover it up with "I thought it was your day off" a bit more kindly, but her eyes said that he failed.

She definitely wasn't dressed to be working. She was wearing leggings, a tight workout top with her hair in a messy bun. He wished he didn't notice how good she looked in casual wear, but he'd be lying if he said that.

"It is my day off, but I just realized I left my water bottle here yesterday and needed it before my run. I figured I would stop by and look for it." She was trying to not make eye contact with him and pretended to look around the room, although it was clear there was no water bottle in sight. "Have you seen it?" she asked with an annoyed tone.

“Sorry, no. Did you check the lost and found?” He was trying to sound nicer. He did feel bad for how he acted yesterday. Should he apologize? He had thought of what he would say but didn’t want to make it a bigger deal than it needed to be. Besides, he would be gone in a couple weeks—he kept reminding himself of that.

“No, I haven’t looked there yet. I was worried I wouldn’t be able to move the box around because, apparently, I’m incapable of moving boxes correctly.”

So, she was clearly still mad about yesterday, he thought to himself. He couldn’t help but chuckle softly at her comment.

“Oh, I’m sorry, is something funny?” she asked. Clearly peeved by his humor in the situation.

He wasn’t laughing at her; he could just appreciate her witty response. “Look, Macy, I—”

Just then, a loud thud interrupted them from above. They both stopped and looked up, trying to examine what that noise could have been. They sat in silence as they looked at each other with concerned yet questioning looks on their faces.

They heard a soft and muffled cry, and Oliver’s eyes widened as he realized what the noise was.

“Mrs. Peterson,” he said as he rushed towards the door.

## CHAPTER 10

## MACY

Macy saw the look of terror and concern in Oliver's eyes as he raced out the office door. She didn't understand what was happening. What did that noise have to do with Mrs. Peterson? She tried to recall her past conversations with Oliver and Natasha to see if that rang a bell.

She had met Mrs. Peterson briefly, a kind yet chatty older woman who was staying here by herself. Was her room above the office? Macy couldn't remember. She was still so new.

Although she didn't know what was happening, she still found herself racing after Oliver as he rushed out of the office and towards the stairs. She followed him to Mrs. Peterson's room and stood back as he knocked on the door.

"Mrs. Peterson, are you all right? It's Oliver from downstairs. We heard a loud noise."

He listened intently, almost with his ear pressed against the door. Macy tried to be as quiet as possible, almost holding her breath so she wouldn't make a sound.

Oliver knocked again, this time a bit louder and with more force. "Mrs. Peterson, I just want to make sure you're okay. Can you say something or come to the door?"

Macy could hear the concern in his voice. "What do we do?" she whispered.

Oliver jumped, clearly unaware that she had followed him.

He looked back at the door and knocked one more time. "Go get the key to her room," he said to her and then went back to the door. "I'm going to come in, Mrs. Peterson, if you don't answer. I just want to make sure you're okay."

He looked back at Macy. "Go!" he yelled.

Macy got it together and raced downstairs. She wasn't sure what to do. In all her years of social work, she had been in a lot of crazy situations, but right now her heart was racing. Was Mrs. Peterson okay?

She went behind the desk and looked through the keys. She ran her hands through all the room keys and then found the one for Mrs. Peterson's room. She grabbed it and raced back towards the stairs. Oliver was still by the door. By this time, he had his ear pressed to the door to see if he could hear her.

"I've got it," she said as she approached.

Oliver quickly popped up and moved away from the door so Macy could open it. She was so overwhelmed she couldn't stop her hand from shaking. She fiddled with the key, trying to get it into the lock. "Come on," she mumbled to herself.

Without notice, Oliver's big strong hand wrapped completely around hers as he steadily guided the key into the lock and turned it. Macy's breath escaped her at the touch.

The door opened and the two rushed inside. Macy gasped as she saw Mrs. Peterson lying on the floor, not moving. Oliver raced towards her and quickly examined her. "Macy, call nine-one-one. It looks like she hit her head. There's blood."

Mrs. Peterson was really hurt. Macy felt herself switch into social work mode and felt a calmness take over her body.

She pulled out her phone and called 911. As she gave them the information, she watched Oliver intensely. He ran to the bathroom and came back with what looked like a wet washcloth. He gently dabbed the cloth on Mrs. Peterson's forehead where she was bleeding. He looked concerned but completely in control.

He continued to say her name, trying to get her to wake up. Checking her pulse and listening to her breathing.

Macy hung up the phone. "They're on their way," she said in a quiet voice. "How is she doing?"

"She's breathing. Her pulse is a bit slow, and she has a pretty bad head wound. I'm trying to stop the bleeding, but it's a lot. Can you grab me another towel?"

Macy ran to the bathroom and grabbed a towel. She looked into the mirror as she passed by and stared into her own eyes.

*What is happening?*

She raced back and handed Oliver the towel.

“What’s happening?” Natasha’s voice came from the doorway. She frantically ran into the room, trying to assess the situation.

“It looks like she fell and hit her head. She told me yesterday she’d been clumsier lately due to her new glasses. It looks like she hit her head on the bedpost.” Oliver nodded towards the bed.

Macy was impressed he had figured all that out so quickly. She looked at him, and for some reason her heart started to soften towards him. He was so calm, compassionate, and completely in control. He looked like such a man right now, taking care of this poor woman.

“Oh my goodness, have you called an ambulance?” Natasha asked.

“Yes, I did. They’ll probably be here soon,” Macy replied, breaking her train of thought.

“I’ll go down and meet them.” Natasha quickly turned to leave but stopped. “Is she okay, Oliver?”

Oliver looked at his mom but didn’t say anything. Macy could see the deep concern in his eyes.

Natasha nodded as though she understood and rushed out the door. Macy thought she could hear the sirens of the ambulance off in the distance but wasn’t sure if that was just wishful thinking.

Macy knelt on the floor next to Mrs. Peterson and gently placed her hand on her slowly rising and falling back. “Please be okay,” she whispered quietly.

She looked up and saw Oliver staring at her. His eyes were softer than they’d been in the past. She felt like she saw a new level of empathy and compassion radiating from him in that moment. She didn’t want to look away.

Their eye contact was broken by the sound of people rushing into the room. The paramedics had arrived.

Macy quickly got out of the way so they could get to Mrs. Peterson.

“What happened?” one of the paramedics asked as they got beside Mrs. Peterson.

“I’m assuming she tripped and fell into that bedpost there.” Oliver pointed towards the bed. “She claimed that her new glasses made her depth perception off. This isn’t the first incident like this since she’s been here. I heard a noise downstairs in the office, which is directly below her room. It sounded like a big thud. We came rushing up here. When she wasn’t responding to my knocks on her door, we used the extra key we have for the room to get in. This is how she was when we found her.”

“Was she awake when you first got up here?” The paramedics started wrapping a bandage around her head to help with the bleeding from her head.

“No sir. I’ve tried talking with her and waking her up with a cold washcloth, but there’s been no response.”

“Okay, thank you. We appreciate the work you guys did before we got here.” The paramedics looked towards Oliver and Macy.

“Oh, I hardly did anything. He’s the one that’s been amazing,” Macy quickly replied. She didn’t want to get any credit; she only called the paramedics.

Oliver gave her a look that almost looked like a smirk. She realized she just called him amazing. The unexpected compliment set off her red cheeks.

The stretcher came in, and the paramedics loaded Mrs. Peterson onto it. “Do any of you have an emergency contact information?”

Natasha spoke up, “Yes, her husband will want to know what happened. I can get that information. I’d like to come to the hospital with you if that’s okay. She shouldn’t be alone,” Natasha added.

The paramedics wheeled out the stretcher, and Natasha looked towards Oliver and Macy. “I’m going to head to the



hospital after I gather her husband's information. Do you two need anything before I go?"

They both shook their heads no.

"Are you sure you're both okay?"

"Don't worry about us, Natasha. We'll be fine. Go be with Mrs. Peterson," Macy said with a slight smile. Although she realized maybe she shouldn't speak for Oliver.

Natasha nodded and then quickly hugged Oliver. "Good job, son. You did great work and were a huge help. It may have saved her life."

Oliver nodded, and then Natasha ran out the door. The two sat in silence as they tried to fully grasp what had just happened.

Macy looked at Oliver, who was staring out the door. "I probably shouldn't have spoken for you. Are you okay?"

Oliver broke free from whatever trance he was in and looked towards Macy. "Yeah, I'm okay. I just feel bad for Mrs. Peterson. She was so excited to spend time with her family while she was here. She usually doesn't travel alone, and then the one time she does..." His voice trailed off. "I just hope she's okay. That was a pretty bad hit."

Macy instinctually grabbed his hand into hers; Oliver looked into her eyes. "Hey, she's going to be okay. You were so responsive, and all the pressure you applied to her wound... that had to have helped. She's lucky you were here, even though she doesn't know it yet." Macy gave him a soft smile.

Oliver gave her one back.

Macy realized she was still holding his hand and slowly released it, slightly embarrassed at the touch. She brushed her hair back and pressed her lips together, trying to figure out what to do next.

"So. What do you do after you've encountered a traumatic experience?" Oliver asked.

Macy couldn't help but let out a laugh. "I'm sorry, that's not funny." She laughed again, covering her mouth. Oliver

laughed with her.

“I just don’t know what to do now,” he said.

“I was thinking the same thing.”

“I thought maybe your social work experience might have prepared you for this.”

Macy couldn’t tell if that was a subtle wink back to their first encounter, but she thought it was funny.

“While I have experienced a lot of hard things in my job, never once has that included finding someone that could possibly be dead,” she said. Saying the words made the situation more real, and she sent up a silent prayer for Mrs. Peterson. She really hoped she would be okay.

“I’m sure she’ll be okay,” Oliver said. “The paramedics didn’t seem outrageously concerned, so that’s good news. It just looked like a bad head injury. But sometimes heads bleed pretty bad and end up being okay.”

Macy took a deep breath. It was nice having someone reassure *her* for once. So often she had to be the voice of reason—at her job or to her highly overreactive mother.

Oliver looked around. “I guess we should get out of here. I’ll send a note to housekeeping about what happened. We’ll want to get some stain remover in here to get the blood stain off the carpet, but other than that, there isn’t too much damage, thankfully.”

They took one final inventory of the room to make sure they weren’t missing anything vital that the hospital would need to know, then locked up. They walked back to the office in silence. Macy stopped at the bathroom, and when she got back to the office, she was alone. She wondered where Oliver went off to. She looked around, and there on the table in the office sat her water bottle with a note next to it.

*My mom called and needed me to bring some of Mrs. Peterson’s items to the hospital. Thank you for being there today. I went through the lost and found for you—all boxes remained upright in the search.*

Macy laughed out loud and shook her head. She grabbed her water bottle and headed towards the parking lot. She figured she had every excuse to not go on her run this morning—her heart rate had been up enough today already, for more than one reason.

## CHAPTER 11

## OLIVER

Every time someone walked by the office door, the hair on Oliver's body perked up. His heart rate would increase, and he would try everything he could not look up to see who it was.

He was annoyed with himself that he was so interested in someone walking by. A specific someone.

Goodness. This *wasn't* a good sign.

It had been two days since Mrs. Peterson's accident, and he hadn't seen Macy since. Natasha gave her the next day off to recover from the traumatic experience. He was glad that Macy was able to get some time, but he found himself wanting to see her. A desire that surprised him.

All the two of them had done up to that point was fight and misunderstand each other. Their relationship was complicated. In the past, he couldn't wait to not see her anymore to avoid more of the awkward tension between them.

But for some reason, finding Mrs. Peterson together and working to save her life made this weird connection between them. He saw something different in her that day; he couldn't put his finger on what it was. But walking back to the office, it felt different between them.

He kept looking at her trying to find the words to make her feel better or just check to see how she was actually doing. He had been stern with her when he was focused on Mrs. Peterson—hopefully, it didn't come across as mean. He was confident she already had him labeled as that anyway.

He was thankful that his mom needed him at the hospital, so he had an excuse to get out of there. His mind was going to confusing places, and he needed to separate himself from the situation.

Oliver was relieved that Mrs. Peterson was okay. He was right that it was a somewhat serious head injury, but she would likely make a full recovery, though it may take several months. The doctor had given him kudos for everything Oliver did

initially to save her life, and he wasn't sure how to handle the compliments.

"I was just doing what anyone else would do," was all he kept saying. He didn't like getting the credit.

Oliver sensed another person coming towards the office door, but as the voice got closer, he could tell it was a man. He kept working. Macy would be in sometime today; he needed to stop being so jumpy.

A female voice broke through the silence, "Well, I'll make sure to try that out. Thanks, Robert."

"No problem, dear. It was my wife's favorite recipe. I'm sure you'll love it," the man's voice responded.

Oliver turned around and saw Macy walking into the office. She smiled and waved at Robert walking past. She turned and saw Oliver sitting there, and she almost looked as if she was a deer caught in headlights.

"Oh, hi," she managed to say.

Oliver gave her a soft smile back. He had been anticipating her arrival all day, but now he didn't know what to say.

"How was your day off?" he eventually said. He tried to sound a little more chipper than usual.

"It was good." She walked into the office and set her stuff down on the table. She sat down and took a sip of her iced coffee. "My mom had the day off too, so we went to the city and went shopping. It was a good distraction from all the craziness that happened the day before. I'm just so glad she's okay."

Oliver nodded. "Agreed."

Macy leaned toward him. "You went to the hospital; how did she seem? I just heard from Natasha that she was going to be okay."

"She seemed fine. She was asleep when I got there and they didn't want anyone to interrupt her so she could get her rest. But she woke up a couple hours later and was aware of what's been going on, so that's great."

“Good to hear. I guess we just get back to it, huh?”

“I guess so,” Oliver responded. “My mom said that we needed to put up some decorations. Is that right?”

Oliver thought he’d get back to business to hopefully distract himself from how distracting she was. He had never noticed how beautiful her fiery red hair was before. He wondered if she’d been in the sun a little more the past few days because her freckles were looking more prominent, which of course made her eyes stand out more.

She moved out of her relaxed position and stood up. “Yeah, Natasha was hoping we could put up the fall decorations today that we worked on earlier this week. They’re all ready and just up in her suite. She gave me some instructions on where she wanted them, mainly in the front lobby area.”

Oliver now stood up. “Great, let’s get to it,” he said and clapped his hands together. He saw a pleasantly confused look on Macy’s face.

The two started walking, and he followed Macy to his mom’s suite. It felt different being with her today. There was a relaxed energy between the two of them, whereas before, all their interactions were tense and full of misunderstandings. Oliver was desperate to know what Macy was thinking. She seemed more comfortable around him today, so maybe she was feeling the same way? But he hadn’t even decided what he was really feeling.

They got to Natasha’s suite and the door was unlocked; it usually was. Natasha was such a trusting person that she hardly ever locked her door.

Oliver walked in and was surprised by the amount of nature that was in his mother’s suite. Leaf and flower arrangements, fake potted plants, and home décor signs filled the living room.

“You guys did all of this?” he asked.

Macy chuckled. “Yes. We were busy last week. Your mom said that she’s really into the fall season this year and wanted

to do a bit more to set the tone at the inn. I don't mind decorating, so I was on board. It's one of those creative outlets I've never really had the opportunity to do, so it was nice giving it a try."

Macy walked over and started to organize the decorations to make them easier to bring down. Oliver saw a cart in the corner of the room and walked over to help load.

"Were you pretty busy at your job then?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"If you didn't have a lot of time to flex your creative outlet muscles, was it because you were busy?"

Macy lifted a box and set it on the cart. "Yeah, I was pretty busy. Social worker hours are all over the place. I was working with families, and a lot of clients preferred to meet as late in the day as possible for our meetings so they didn't have to take off work, which was understandable. But then that meant I didn't get to work normal business hours. So that was hard. I could always say no, but I just felt bad."

That didn't surprise Oliver. Macy seemed like the type of person that would want to make things easier for other people, even if it complicated things for herself.

"So there was that aspect, but then also I never really found a lot of 'me time' to do creative things." She paused for a moment, almost like she was deciding if she wanted to continue. "My boyfriend at the time wasn't really the 'have a chill morning reading a book or going for a walk around the lake with your coffee' kind of guy. He was always taking us to events or going out to happy hours—a lot of his job was networking and building relationships with other people, so I get why it was important to do. It just made a really busy schedule for us."

She grunted as she put the final box on the cart. "It looks like we'll have to bring the other ones down without the cart. They're big and awkward."

"That's fine. I've got them," Oliver said as he helped move some things out of the way to get the cart through.



So she had a boyfriend. Did that mean she was single now?

“What made you decide to leave your job and come here? You clearly plan to stay since you got a job here.” Oliver wasn’t sure if he was being too nosy, but he was all of a sudden very curious about Macy’s story. He also realized the hypocrisy of him saying that social workers were the nosy ones; he hoped that she wouldn’t catch on to that.

Macy gave a light laugh. “It’s kind of a long story. I mean—I guess not. It’s pretty simple, actually. My boyfriend and I had been together for a long time, and I always thought that marriage would be coming soon, at least within the next year. We met at school in California and wanted to live somewhere warm when we graduated, not at all like Minnesota. But he got a really good job offer, and I wanted to be supportive, so I went with him. It’s easy for me to find work anywhere with a social work degree. But after years went by, I finally brought it up to him and found out he had no intention of getting engaged any time soon.” Her lips puckered and her nose scrunched, which Oliver took as Macy’s annoyed face.

“We weren’t living together, so it felt like all our time together was just centered around what social gathering we had. And we started to feel more distant from each other. But he had no awareness of that, and I wasn’t going to be able to show it to him. So I broke up with him. I needed a break from my job anyway, so I quit, left Minnesota and came here.”

Everything she said was very matter-of-fact. She had either told this story many times or had processed it enough.

“Do you plan to go back?”

Macy shook her head. “No. I don’t like the cold. I was never a fan but just tolerated it for Dylan. So I’m not sure what I’m going to do. I’ll save you the next questions—no, I don’t want to stay here in Sandpiper Cove. It gets too cold, and I really don’t want to stay in the town I grew up in. There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s just not for me.”

Now it was Oliver’s turn to laugh. He could understand that. “I understand. That’s quite the story.”

Macy's cheeks turned red. "Sorry, I really don't have a filter."

"No, no, it's totally fine—I asked." Oliver gave a half smile. "Ready?"

Macy nodded, and Oliver picked up a large potted plant while she started pushing the cart. They brought it downstairs. Macy stared at the lobby area, clearly examining what she wanted to do.

Oliver just stood back and watched. He was the muscle in this project. He wasn't going to interfere with her creative time, and he also didn't have any opinions on décor.

"Okay, I think I'm going to have you put that plant over here by the front door, and these I'll drape around the lobby desk." Macy continued to share her vision for the lobby.

Oliver just did what he was told. He was surprised by how much he was trying to be helpful and keep things civil between the two of them. How did he go from counting down the days until they would no longer interact, to trying to get to know her?

There was something about her that suddenly piqued his interest.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he quickly checked it. He saw Macy notice his glance. "Sorry, I promise I'm super into this home renovation show we have going on here—" he said, and Macy laughed. Oliver continued, "I'm just waiting on a call from my office in Arizona about something that I don't want to miss."

He looked down and saw it was just Brent calling. He could call him back later. Oliver set his phone down on the arm of one of the couches and continued moving the décor around.

"How long do you think you'll be here?" he asked.

"Huh?" Macy turned towards him, eyebrows raised.

"Sorry, if you don't want to stay here in Sandpiper Cove, how long do you plan to stay here before you move on to the

next place?”

Macy sighed. “That’s the million-dollar question. I really don’t know. I like it here. I love staying at my parents’ beautiful beach home, so it’s not like I’m slumming it. I’m content and actually having a fun time making friends and spending time with my parents. I didn’t get to see them a lot with my busy schedule and living so far away, so the time together has been refreshing.”

“Are you close with your parents?”

“Yes, I guess you could say that. My parents are incredible and have always been super supportive of everything I’ve done. Although, they were devastated when I moved to Minnesota because my mom never wanted to visit in winter.” She laughed. “But they’re happy I’m home, and I’m excited to be here for a bit to spend time with them. And my brother, too, I guess. But you’re just here for a short time, too, so I bet you understand that. It’s nice being around family again.”

Oliver wasn’t quite sure how to respond. He didn’t necessarily feel the same way. He wasn’t as close with his family, but he didn’t want her to know that, so he let her keep talking.

“Okay. This last piece can go over by the dining area. Could you bring that for me?” Macy asked.

Oliver walked over, grabbed the décor, and headed towards the dining area. As he was about to set it down, he heard his phone start ringing. He knew if it was the office, it would be Karen, his boss’s assistant, calling first. He yelled back to Macy, “Hey, can you grab that? If it’s my office, tell them I’ll be right there.”

He finished putting down the box and stretched out his sore hands. He looked up to see Macy talking on the phone with someone and realized that maybe having her answer his phone wasn’t a great idea.

## CHAPTER 12

## MACY

Macy brushed her hands off from the dirt that covered one of the displays she was working on and reached for Oliver's phone. It felt odd that he trusted her enough to answer his phone. It must be an important call.

The day was going better than she had expected. The last two days, her thoughts had continued to be entangled with Oliver. She would wonder what he was doing, if he was thinking of her, and her mind replayed the events that happened with Mrs. Peterson.

Macy told her mom all about what happened that day and found herself leaving out subtle details she had observed of Oliver. Like how when he leaned down to check Mrs. Peterson's breathing, his biceps almost popped out of his shirt.

She figured her mom didn't need to know those details and would probably take their conversation in a whole other direction if she knew that Macy noticed.

During her reflection journaling time, Macy had tried to avoid writing about Oliver, but she couldn't help the natural progression of her mind. She then got frustrated with herself about thinking about him in the first place, and furthermore, writing about him in her journal. But then she thought, *so what, she thought about him, it didn't mean anything. Did it?*

Frustration built inside of her as she fought with her own thoughts.

She wasn't sure if things would be back to normal when she came to work; maybe he would be back to his old cranky self. But she remembered that he was about to say something before they heard Mrs. Peterson fall. He had seemed serious, and she was incredibly curious to know what he was going to say.

Their conversation had felt natural today, and she actually enjoyed telling him more about herself. He seemed interested

in her, which was nothing like how he'd acted the last couple of interactions.

Macy reached for his phone and saw the name Kendra across the screen; he did say it would probably be an assistant calling, so it might not be the company's name.

She answered, "Hello, Oliver's phone."

There were a few seconds of silence before she could hear someone on the other line. "Uh—hi—uh. I'm looking to talk to Oliver. Is he there?"

"Yes, he's here, but he's just stepped away from his phone and asked me to answer. Are you from his company? He was expecting a call from them."

"No, I'm not. I'll just call back later." The voice seemed short and a little bit irritated. The line went dead, and Macy looked at the phone to see the caller had hung up.

Macy thought that was super odd. Who was Kendra? And why did she seem so irritated that Macy had picked up the phone instead of Oliver?

A thought crossed Macy's mind—was that his girlfriend? Or some woman he had been dating? That seemed logical why she would be upset if another girl answered instead of just asking for Oliver to call her back.

An unexpected pit formed in Macy's stomach. Then instant embarrassment filled her heart. Of course Oliver would be seeing someone. He was a handsome, successful, and on a good day, funny and kind guy. She could see the appeal he would have in the dating world.

It wasn't like Oliver owed it to her to mention that he was seeing someone; they were just coworkers. Besides, what did she think would happen? They were living in different states, and he was only there for a month before going back to Arizona—where he had a whole life.

Macy continued to feel the embarrassment from where her mind had wandered the last couple of days. She felt silly thinking so much about Oliver, and now the reality of the situation started to become clearer. She must have just gotten

wrapped up in his heroic event the other day and started to possibly envision something that was never going to happen.

The last thing she wanted for her life was to repeat the same mistakes. She wasn't going to chase after something—or another guy. That would never happen and would just leave her disappointed.

She set the phone back down on the couch right when Oliver walked over. “I’m assuming it wasn’t my office?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, it was the wrong number. Sorry.”

She wasn't sure why she lied, but she didn't want to admit that she had talked to his girlfriend, or whoever Kendra was to him. For some reason, that seemed too awkward.

“Oh, okay.” He grabbed his phone and put it back in his pocket. “Anything else we need to do?” he asked, looking around.

Macy shook her head. “Nope. That covers it. Thank you for your help. I’m sure that’s not how you wanted to spend your morning.”

“It was totally fine. I’m happy to help. It was either this or paperwork, so it was a nice break.” He smiled.

Macy couldn't help but wonder if his smile had always been that radiant or if she was just noticing that now.

“Well, thank you. I should probably get back to the front desk. I’ve hardly started on any of my daily to-dos yet.”

Oliver nodded. “I was thinking of ordering lunch today. Would you like something?”

Macy was surprised at his request. Was he asking her to have lunch with him? Or just that he was ordering lunch? She wasn't sure, but again, she didn't feel like asking and making it awkward.

“Uh, that’s okay. My mom made some tacos last night, so I have leftovers to eat. But thanks.” She couldn't help but notice the slight look of disappointment that crossed his face. Or was she making that up? Her head hurt from all this back and forth.

“Okay, no problem. I’ll catch up with you later then.” He walked swiftly back to the office.

Macy headed towards the front desk and got acclimated for the day. She followed the checklist she made for herself for all the things she needed to get done every shift—check-ins/check-outs, refill the coffee pot, look through inn emails, etc.

She started looking through the emails but couldn’t ignore the twinge of guilt that crept up. Was that mean of her to say no to lunch? She didn’t want to portray any false intentions if he was a committed man in a relationship. And after thinking through it more, she didn’t want to give herself any false hope either.

But she didn’t want to come off as rude; they were finally in a good spot. He seemed fine with her saying no. She had a good excuse. And it wasn’t that he was officially asking her on a date, and she denied him. It was just ordering lunch.

Macy was thankful for the interruption as a guest came down to check out of their room. It was her first check-out by herself, and she thought it went well. After they left, her mind felt refreshed and swiped clean. She felt confident she could focus on her work while she was here and just appreciate being in Sandpiper Cove, spending time with her family and new friends like Scarlett and Casey.

And besides, there was nothing about her current situation of being recently single, jobless, and homeless that made it a good time to get involved with a guy.



## CHAPTER 13

## *OLIVER*

The root beer soda fizzed against his mouth as Oliver took a long drink. Soda was one of his guilty pleasures that he knew he shouldn't drink for his health, but it was so good he couldn't resist.

Oliver sat comfortably on Brent's couch with his soda in hand, watching the football game. There was nothing better than when fall came around and he could spend his Sundays watching football, eating good food, and cheering on his favorite teams with his buddies. Today, he had plans to spend the entire day with Brent and their nacho bar.

Scarlett wasn't really a football fan, although she tolerated it so she could spend time with Brent. But apparently, Brent said she was happy to give up the Sunday ritual so he could spend time with Oliver. She didn't seem too broken up by it.

"Are you kidding me!" Brent yelled at the television, bringing Oliver's focus to the screen. The Raiders had just scored a touchdown on the Cowboys, causing them to take the lead.

"I don't know what the defense is doing this game, but it's not football," he muttered to himself.

Oliver smiled. He loved when Brent got really passionate about a game. He was typically such an easygoing guy, but football sure brought it out of him.

After church, they had spent their morning at the store buying enough food to last them all day in front of the TV. Pre-season had just ended, so now they actually cared what happened during the games.

Oliver was looking forward to a chill day with his brother after such a weird week. He wasn't sure how it went from awkward run-ins with the new girl at work and a tense breakfast with his mom, to saving a woman's life and constantly thinking about the previously annoying new employee. He was still trying to process it all.

He was completely confused about what to do about Macy. Their time together decorating the lobby was pleasant and actually enjoyable, but then something shifted. For some reason after they were done, Macy seemed distant and uninterested in talking. He had thought they had made great progress. He would be lying if he said he hadn't let his mind wander a bit about her. He kept thinking about how she was single; would it hurt to ask her out for coffee?

He was definitely interested in getting to know her more. There was something about her that caused him to smile, laugh and want to find out everything about her.

After she said no to lunch, which he still wasn't completely sure if he was asking her on a date or not, he had just followed his instincts. He hadn't seen her for the rest of the day. She kept herself busy and then left without saying goodbye. He had wondered if she intentionally snuck out when he was busy doing something, not wanting to bug him, but he was surprised.

He thought maybe the next day they'd go back to talking, but it felt like she was keeping him at a distance. She had been pleasant when they shared some small talk, but it didn't seem like she was interested in talking. He was trying not to take it personally; she could have been processing what happened to Mrs. Peterson still. But something felt off.

He kept racking his brain for any comment he might have made to offend her, but he came up short.

"What's on your mind over there?" Brent asked.

"What?" Oliver refocused on where he was. "Oh, sorry, just thinking. Did something happen?"

"Nothing on the screen, but it seems like there's a lot happening over there in that brain of yours." Brent chuckled. "You've been really quiet today."

Oliver lightly pressed his lips together, unsure of how much he wanted to share with Brent. He respected Brent a lot—he was the sibling he was closest to—but he wasn't sure what he was ready to talk about.

“I don’t know what there really is to say, honestly.”

That sparked Brent’s interest. He angled himself on the couch to face Oliver. “Now I’m curious.”

Oliver sighed. “So, you know that new employee at the inn, Macy?”

Brent’s eyebrows raised. “Yeah? The redhead, right?”

Oliver nodded.

“You guys talking or something?” Brent asked.

“I’m not sure what’s happening. That’s the confusing part. Our first interaction didn’t go well, and every other conversation after. All we’ve really done is bicker and disagree. She’s passionate but stubborn, but then she also has this compassionate and funny side.”

“This is not where I thought you were going with this,” Brent said, sounding less interested. Oliver was sure he had wanted gossip about a new love interest. He knew that Brent was desperate to figure out what Oliver was up to in life, but he was trying to keep that inconspicuous.

Oliver chuckled. “Well, that’s how it all started, but for some reason, even though there was constant tension between us and I felt like I had to walk on eggshells around her, I kept thinking about her. Whenever I saw her, I felt this deep emotion emerge, and I thought it was dislike, honestly, but I don’t know. It feels like it’s turning into something else.”

Oliver was never this open about his emotions with anyone. That’s how he knew how desperate he was to get out of this confused state. Maybe Brent would have the answer to help him break free of this vicious cycle.

“So the heated tension is just turning into... heat?” Brent said with a smirk.

Oliver rolled his eyes, although his brother wasn’t technically wrong. “I mean, I guess? It’s confusing. We had an accident at the inn with one of the guests, and she had to be rushed to the hospital. Macy and I found her together. We were in the middle of fighting, actually, and then we heard the thud.

There was something about that interaction that changed the vibe between us. It wasn't tense after that, but actually way more friendly. I don't know. I could have been reading into it. But then the next day, she just switched again and became distant. She'd hardly said two sentences to me by the end of the day yesterday."

He scratched his head, feeling even more confused as he spelled it out for Brent.

"I just don't know what to think. I don't know what happened that caused her to all of a sudden flip back to ignoring me. I thought there was something happening. Maybe I misread everything." He shook his head in confusion.

Brent widened his eyes. "That does sound confusing. Have you tried talking with her? Or ask her out? Is that what you want?"

"That's the thing. I don't even know if that's what I want. It doesn't seem like we have a lot in common, and neither of us are staying here permanently. We're both just passing through Sandpiper Cove, so why would we ever start something? It doesn't logically make sense!"

"Where is she from?" Brent asked.

"She's from Minnesota, but she didn't want to stay there after she broke up with her ex-boyfriend. So she's here with her parents, kind of in limbo."

"Aw, so there's an ex in the picture." Brent sighed. "That's probably what it is. Maybe she's not over him yet." He shrugged casually.

Could that be it? They had just been talking about her ex-boyfriend before she shut down. Maybe she realized that she wasn't over him and wanted to make that message clear to Oliver.

"That could be. I'm not sure. She seemed pretty over him when we were talking about it. But who knows. I don't understand women! I can't figure out what's going on. And I shouldn't care!" he cried out and placed his hands over his face in frustration.

Brent laughed. “Yeah, you definitely have a crush. You don’t see men get this frustrated over trying to understand a woman unless they have one.”

“I guess I’m just trying to figure out what I even think before I care about what she thinks. I don’t understand why I can’t get her out of my head when there’s hardly anything to have in my head in the first place. She’s not from here, she works in a career that I can’t stand, and we’re different people.” As he said it, he recalled all the things Macy talked about that she enjoyed doing. Walking, reading, and having creative outlets. She desired time at home more than being out with friends. All things that he also enjoyed doing. Maybe they did have more in common than he thought.

Brent chuckled and shook his head. “I don’t know what to tell you. I agree that the timing of things seems off, but who am I to talk? Look at Scarlett and me. She wasn’t from here either and only came to have a relaxing trip. We both didn’t want to be in a relationship but couldn’t help it.”

That was true. He did have a love story that also went against the odds.

“So how did you decide it was worth it? That you wanted to pursue it?”

Brent thought for a moment. “There was something about her that I couldn’t shake. Every time I was with her, I felt like I could be me. She made me beyond happy, and I also couldn’t stop thinking about her. It got to the point where I realized that I didn’t want to *not* have her in my life, so it was worth at least trying and seeing where it went. And what was the harm in that? If it didn’t work out, she would head back to New York in the end.”

Oliver could understand that. “That makes sense. Something to think about, I guess.”

“Hey, man. I know it’s hard. Women bring out something in us that we don’t always recognize, but it’s worth investigating if it brings out the right stuff.” Brent got up and patted his brother’s knee before he headed towards the kitchen.

Oliver sat and thought about Brent's words. What did Macy bring out of him? All they did was argue, so would he say they even brought out the best in each other? If someone would have asked him that after one of the first few times, he would say no. But he couldn't get over their day decorating the lobby. He hadn't smiled that much in a long time.

Maybe it was too soon to be able to answer that question, but was his brother right? The real question was, was it worth investigating?

## CHAPTER 14



MACY

“I’ll have a medium hot pumpkin spice latte, please.” Macy pulled out her credit card and handed it to the barista behind the counter. The Bluebird Café was busy this morning. She looked around and saw half of the customers at their tables talking with friends, while the other half were busy on their computers and looked like they had no intention of going anywhere soon.

Macy waited at the counter for her drink and then found an open lounge chair to sit in. It was eight o’clock in the morning on Monday, and she had just dropped her dad off at the clinic close by. She had become dependent on her parents since she sold her car as soon as she’d arrived in Sandpiper Cove. She needed the extra money since she’d be without work for a while. In the meantime, she’d been able to use one of her parent’s cars when needed, but today her dad had a doctor’s appointment, so he agreed she would go with and wait until he could drive her to work.

Macy felt nostalgic carpooling with her dad again after so many years. He had been the one to drop her off at school when she was younger, and some of her favorite childhood conversations with her dad came from those moments. They would talk about her hopes for her career, friendship drama, and of course, boys. Although her dad didn’t like hearing about boys, Macy had always been a verbal processor, and since her dad was there, he got to hear about it.

She felt blessed to have such incredible parents. They were present, thoughtful, encouraging, and never made her feel like she was unequipped to do anything. She had seen a lot of difficult parent-child relationships in her time as a social worker, which only made her appreciate her parents even more.

The Bluebird Café was only a couple of stores down from the clinic in downtown Sandpiper Cove which made for an easy walk. With the fall weather in full swing, a pumpkin

spice latte sounded perfect. She sipped her latte slowly and let the sweet pumpkin taste delight her tastebuds. She audibly sighed—relaxed and comfy.

She checked her social media for a while on her phone as she waited for her dad to text that he was done. He said it wouldn't be too long; he wasn't one to find a lot of concerns to talk about with his doctors. Macy knew that he went to his annual exams to appease Macy's mom. She guessed that was one of the ways that he showed his love and respect for his wife.

Her thumb stopped scrolling when she saw a post from her ex, Dylan, come across her screen. It was a picture of him out with friends at a football game; it looked like they were in a nice company suite.

She tried to control the scowl that came across her face. It might have been petty to be annoyed that he looked so happy, but she currently didn't care. She had secretly hoped he would be miserable and miss her, desperate for her to come back to him. But after months without a phone call or even a text to check in on how she was doing, she realized it was truly over.

It's what she had wanted, but it still hurt.

Macy wondered if he would move on quickly. Were any of the girls in the photo his new girlfriend? Not that she cared.

She put her phone down and decided that maybe social media wasn't the best idea right now. She made a mental note to unfollow Dylan the next time she was on it. She didn't need that in her life right now.

Macy looked around the café and analyzed everyone there. Over time she felt she had developed a good "people reader," as her mom called it, and could get a sense of what they were talking about or what emotion they were experiencing just by observing them for a few minutes.

She saw a couple that clearly looked like they were on a first date. Macy smiled as she watched the guy awkwardly fiddle with his coffee cup and look down at the table a lot as the beautiful woman that sat in front of him talked.

Maybe it was because she just saw a picture of Dylan, but the moment brought her back to all those years ago when they first started dating. The coffee dates walking by the ocean, the drives along the coast, and trying all the local restaurants by the pier; they were fond memories.

Even though she was thankful to be out of her relationship, she did miss the excitement of a new romance. She missed the companionship and the attunement that came from years of learning about each other and understanding what the other person needed.

Her phone buzzed on the armchair; her dad was done. She packed up her purse and headed out the door. It was about fifty degrees and she breathed in the fresh ocean air around her. The Harvest Festival would be starting soon, one of the most attended events the town hosted. It had really expanded over the years to the incredible event it was now. Vendors, food stands, live music and a ton of performances kept the four days busy and exciting.

She made it to the clinic and saw her dad sitting on a bench outside the front door.

“You couldn’t even stand to be in there an extra two minutes, could you?” she joked.

Her dad stood up. “You know I can’t. They might want me to take another test while I wait.”

Macy rolled her eyes. Her dad was a stereotype when it came to his dislike of doctors and medicine. He never trusted anyone.

“How did it go?” she asked as they walked towards the side of the building where their car was parked.

“Fine. The usual intrusive exam, blood work, a lot of paperwork and unnecessary questions about what I eat and how much I exercise, all to be expected,” he said with a smile.

Macy laughed and shook her head. “Well, I’m glad you at least go. It chills Mom out for at least a year. You know you’re not getting any younger,” she teased.

They got into the car, and her dad started driving towards the Sandpiper Inn.

“How are you liking your new job, Macy?”

“It’s been good. I really enjoy working with Natasha. The job is nothing fancy, but I’ve found it surprisingly satisfying and, honestly, exactly what I needed. I needed something that was more mundane to give my brain a break from all the stress from my other job.”

“I get that.”

“Is that why you left your job, Dad? Did it become too much?”

Her dad shifted in his seat. “No, I just wanted a change. I woke up one day and realized that I had been doing the same thing every day for so long, and I wondered what else there was. I enjoyed my job, and I tolerated the people I worked with, but sometimes you have to stretch yourself.”

Macy nodded. She felt like she was doing a lot of stretching right now.

“Do you have any co-workers there, or do you work by yourself all the time?” he asked.

Macy felt a pit of nervousness quickly grow in her stomach. “Uh, I usually work alone, but sometimes Natasha’s son is there.”

“Is that the Drew fella?”

Macy shook her head. “No, another son, Oliver. Drew usually works there, but he’s the one that just got married and is off on his honeymoon. Oliver lives in Arizona but is here to cover for Drew while he’s gone. Natasha needed help.”

“I don’t think I’ve met that one yet. That’s a good group of kids, though. Natasha and Leo sure knew what they were doing when they raised them.”

Macy raised her eyebrows in acknowledgment but didn’t have much to say. She wasn’t sure how she felt about Oliver at the moment. She knew that a lot of what she was feeling was speculation about him.

She had tried to avoid him the day before and was thankful it was a busy five-hour shift to keep herself preoccupied. He was a mystery to her—and really confusing. She figured it was safe to keep her distance until he was gone. Then hopefully, whatever it was that drew him to her would go away.

They pulled up to the Sandpiper Inn, and Macy got out of the car. She turned towards her dad. “Thanks for the ride. Love you, Dad.” Macy closed the door and headed inside.

She was only scheduled to work for four hours, but she was so tired already that it felt like it was going to be a long shift. It was an adjustment to go back to working again after having so much time off, even though it was part-time.

She walked to the front desk and put her purse and coffee down. She looked over the to-do list for the day and got acclimated to everything that was happening at the inn. She saw a note placed on the guest calendar—

*Mrs. Peterson is coming back today. She will be staying for a few days and then checking out.*

Her heart beat faster at the reminder of Mrs. Peterson. She was so glad that the older lady was okay. What a terrifying experience! She wondered if she was feeling one hundred percent or if she'd be tamer than she usually was.

Macy began checking the inn's email when she suddenly felt like someone was behind her. She slowly turned her head and then jumped at the sight of Oliver standing between the entryway to the office and the front desk.

“Oh my gosh, you scared me.” Her hand flew up to her chest to calm her wildly beating heart.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to. I just walked over here because I thought I heard someone up here. I was hoping it was you.”

*Hoping it was me?* Macy had just restored her heart rate back to normal but here it went again, about to flutter right out of her chest.

“Listen, I know things have been really weird between us. I'm just going to call it as it is. We got off on the wrong foot, and it has been tense and awkward since then.”

Macy couldn't hide the surprised look that appeared on her face. They had never said much to each other about their many difficult interactions; she had just thought it to herself. Apparently, he had been feeling the same way.

Oliver continued, "But something changed the day we found Mrs. Peterson. I'm not sure if you felt it too, but it was different."

She had felt it too. There definitely was a shift.

"I would be lying if I said that I hadn't thought about that day, and then thought about you since then. I'm not sure where you are at with me, but I'm slightly annoyed with how much I think about you."

Macy's jaw dropped. What was happening? What was he saying? He thought about her? But more importantly, he thought about her enough to let it bother him.

"I know this might seem forward, and it could either work or just be another instance added to our running list of awkward interactions that don't seem to go very well. But just like when you have a song stuck in your head, the best thing to do to get it out of your head is listen to it."

Macy's face went from surprised to confused and then ended with slightly amused. Watching Oliver squirm over whatever he was trying to say was kind of adorable. She had no idea where he was going with this.

He breathed a sigh of frustration before he mustered up the confidence to say, "I mean—what I'm saying is—more like asking—would you like to grab dinner with me sometime?"

There it was.

## CHAPTER 15

## OLIVER

Oliver stood next to the doorway, waiting anxiously for Macy to say something. He was so nervous to hear what her answer would be. It had felt like a solid minute since he'd asked her to dinner, and she hadn't said anything yet. Instead, her mouth sat slightly open, and her eyes looked dazed; *she may be in shock*, he thought.

After he talked with Brent about just going for it, he knew that he would never be able to get Macy out of his head unless he pursued getting to know her better and saw what happened. He wasn't quite sure what the end goal was, but he was curious to find out what she would say. He felt that something switched after Mrs. Peterson's accident, he told her that, and he desperately wanted to know if she felt it too.

The possibilities had circled in his mind for days until he finally couldn't take it anymore and decided to see what would happen. He told himself the worst that could happen would be she said no, and then they just ignored each other the rest of his time in Sandpiper Cove—that was his initial plan anyway. But what if she said yes? Who knew what could happen.

He liked spending time with her. It seemed like the more they talked, the easier it became, and the more he realized they had in common. Hiking, reading, and spending cozy days at home. Sounded like the perfect mix of relaxation and adventure.

Macy finally looked like she was going to say something. Oliver held his breath.

“Sorry, I know I'm awkwardly standing here not saying anything. I'm just trying to process everything you just said. That was a lot.”

It wasn't the response he was looking for, but at least it wasn't a no.

Macy continued, “I agree with you that we haven't necessarily gotten along this whole time, but yes, something



did seem to change after the accident. I didn't know if it was just me who thought it—but I guess that answers my question. I think I'm just surprised that you would want to date me. I mean, if that's what going to dinner means." She sounded kind of nervous herself.

"Yes, that's what it means—to avoid any further confusion." Oliver could hardly stand how awkward this was, but of course, knowing their track record, he shouldn't have expected it to go any other way.

She still hadn't answered his question yet.

"Then uh—yes, I would like that," Macy said softly. Oliver could see it wasn't her normal confidence, but he had taken her off guard. And at least it was a yes!

"Great, would tonight possibly work?" He originally wasn't sure how soon he wanted to go on their date, but he didn't have much time in Sandpiper Cove before he went back to Arizona.

He couldn't get over how distracted Macy looked and could tell she had a lot going through her mind.

"Yes, tonight would be great." She smiled and nodded.

Oliver felt a sense of relief travel through his body; there was her smile.

"Okay, I can pick you up at your place if you'd like, or I could meet you somewhere? There's a barbeque place in the next town over that I've been wanting to try."

"I can meet you there. You don't have to worry about picking me up. Would six o'clock be okay?"

Oliver nodded. "That sounds great. I'll send you the address."

Macy smiled. "Sounds good."

An inn guest walked up to the front desk with a question, so Macy directed her attention to her. Oliver welcomed the interruption as he wasn't sure how to get out of that conversation without things becoming more awkward.

He slipped away, went back into the office, and shut the door. After what felt like an eternity of holding his breath, he took in a big inhale of air. He had been confident in his decision and knew he wanted to be forward and to the point, but it still didn't take away how nerve-racking it was to ask a girl out on a date.

He quickly called the restaurant and made a reservation for that evening. It was only 9:15 a.m. There was still so much time left before their date. *A date, with Macy*, he thought.

He shook his head in bewilderment. If anyone had told him last week he'd be going on a date with Macy, he would have thought they were crazy. But something changed, and he wasn't sure what it was, but he was anxious to find out.

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Oliver got out of his car and headed into the barbeque restaurant. He had spent the hour before dinner pacing his room and sitting in every possible position, too overwhelmed to sit still, counting down the minutes. He had questioned if he should cancel three times already and had to talk himself out of making a beeline for the airport.

He was excited to talk with Macy more, but he forgot how nerve-racking it was to go on a first date. There was always so much small talk. He thought that maybe because they had already gotten some of the small talk get-to-know-you questions out of the way, tonight would be easier.

He had to force himself to stay at the inn. If he got there too early, then he would feel ridiculous. After it became a socially acceptable time to arrive for a date, even still a little early, he left. He didn't want her to get there and feel uncomfortable waiting for him, so he wanted to be first. Maybe he should have been more insistent on picking her up so he could have avoided all of this.

He walked into the restaurant and was glad he hadn't seen Macy yet.

Oliver checked in at the host stand and then took a seat. It wasn't too busy for a Monday night; he was thankful there wouldn't be too many distractions.

Right as Oliver checked his watch to see it switch to six o'clock, Macy walked in. He wasn't sure if it was because he typically saw her in work clothes or because his mindset had now shifted from coworker to date, but she looked stunning.

As she walked over, her long fall colored maxi dress flowed around her legs. Her hair was pulled in a low bun, with only a few short hairs escaping. He couldn't tell if she was wearing any makeup, but there was a natural look to her that he loved.

She gave a nervous smile as she neared him. "Sorry, am I late?"

Oliver shook his head, maybe faster than he normally did. "No, not at all. Right on time, actually." He smiled back.

"Oliver, your table is ready," the hostess called from the stand, holding two menus.

Oliver ushered Macy to go ahead, and Macy started towards the retreating hostess. She guided them to a booth in the corner of the restaurant, and the two quickly slid into their spots. Thankfully, it wasn't cold enough yet that they had to wear coats and all their winter gear.

"Kathy will be your waitress tonight, and she'll be right with you." The hostess smiled and walked away.

"Okay, not going to lie. I am starving, and this place smells amazing." Macy flung open her menu and dived into the contents.

Oliver laughed. He breathed another silent sigh of relief to see how relaxed she was. Unless it was a nervous coping mechanism, he tried not to think that way.

"I wasn't sure if you like barbeque. It's hit or miss for some people, but it's one of my favorites." Oliver also skimmed the menu. He already knew what he wanted. He always got a pulled pork sandwich with extra pickles and onions, no matter what barbeque place he went to.

“Do they have good barbeque in Arizona?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty good. I mean, it’s not Texas. I’ve had some amazing food there, but it holds up to my standards,” he joked.

“I always like to get something different every time. I think I’m going to try the spicy sausage platter. That sounds really good.” Macy bit her lip in anticipation of the food.

Oliver laughed.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing—it’s just funny how you try something different every time, and I get the same thing every barbeque place I go to.”

“Oh really?” her eyebrows raised. “And what’s your go-to meal?”

“I love a classic pulled pork sandwich. It’s the perfect barbeque cuisine. You can’t go wrong. Plus, extra pickles and onions. Ugh, it’s so good.” He heard his stomach growl as he thought about it.

Their server appeared at their table. “Hi, folks. My name’s Kathy, and I’ll be your waitress this evening. Do ya’ll know what you’re having tonight?” Kathy was a perky woman in her early thirties. She passed out the water and napkins as she talked.

“Actually, I think we’re ready,” Macy chimed in. “I’ll have the spicy sausage platter with cornbread and mashed potatoes, please.” She handed Kathy her menu.

Kathy took it and looked at Oliver.

“I’ll have the pulled pork sandwich with extra pickles and onions, and coleslaw for my side, please.” He handed his menu to Kathy.

“Sounds easy enough. Anything else to drink but water?”

They both shook their heads no.

“Okay. I’ll put that in for ya. Holler if you need anything.” She smiled and almost skipped away.

“Wow, even on the east coast, they can find someone southern and chipper to work at a barbeque place,” Macy said.

Oliver laughed again. “You read my mind,” he said.

The two sat in silence for a moment. He could tell Macy had something she wanted to say, so he patiently waited.

“So, if I’m being honest, I’m still a bit surprised that this is happening.” She spoke slowly and in a whisper, almost as though she didn’t want to spook him away with her honesty.

“Well, then, I have a question for you,” he said.

She looked surprised. “Oh? What’s that?”

“You mentioned that you also felt that things were awkward and tense with us at the beginning. So what made you say yes to tonight’s date?”

He could tell the question took her off guard, but he had been thinking about that *all* day. She paused for a moment to collect her thoughts.

“Since you were so honest and upfront with me, I guess I will be too. There’s something about you that I can’t shake. Even after we met for the first time and it didn’t go well, and then all the times after that, you were in my head for some reason. Although it wasn’t always pleasant thoughts, you were still there,” she said.

Oliver smiled.

“But even in my frustration, I still couldn’t stop thinking about you. More so, thoughts of when I would see you next, wondering if you were thinking about me, and it just felt like you were consuming my mind at random times. I also felt that after the accident, something shifted. I was actually a little excited to see you the next day. And I really enjoyed how natural it felt hanging out with you when we were decorating the lobby together.”

So she did enjoy that day as much as he did. But then why did she avoid him again? He would have to ask when she was done talking, since they were being honest with each other.

“But I was trying to be realistic about this all and talk myself down from reading into it too much. I just got out of a relationship and wasn’t sure if I was just overanalyzing things and perceiving you a certain way when it wasn’t how you actually felt. I’m not trying to get too deep into this. I know this is just a first date, but I just wasn’t sure what could actually happen here. I hope that doesn’t sound too harsh?” She crinkled her nose and blushed as she spoke.

“I can completely understand that. It’s all valid thinking.”

“But to answer your questions, when you asked me to dinner, all I could think about was ‘why not?’ Why not just see what happens? There’s no harm in going on a date and getting to know each other more. So that’s why I said yes. Similar to what you said, you’ve been a song stuck in my head for a couple weeks now, so I might as well listen to it and see if it goes away.” She smirked.

Oliver laughed. He knew his lame analogy would come back to haunt him at some point.

“Yeah, that wasn’t my best line. But hey, I was trying to be confident in a nervous moment.”

“Wow, Oliver Almada gets nervous? Who would have thought?” Macy said. “You always seem so confident and sure of yourself.”

“Ha, well, not all the time. And in my line of work, you better sound confident and sure of yourself, or else they will walk all over you. It’s the nature of the game. A trait I learned to pick up on quickly.” He took a sip of water.

“You must be good at your job. Although I did sense a little crack in the hard lining.” She winked.

Oliver loved how easy this was. He had no reason to be nervous. They were talking and laughing, and most importantly, just being honest with each other. Honesty was so important to him. He didn’t want any relationship without it.

He remembered his question and figured he would keep the honesty streak going.

“So I have to ask. If you were enjoying our time together in the lobby, as I was, what happened that made you shut down at the end of the day?”

Macy’s smile went away, and she stared blankly at Oliver.

“Did I say something to offend you, or did you get nervous? It just seemed like things were going so well, and it felt so natural hanging out together, but then I hardly saw you the next couple of days, like you were avoiding me.”

Macy stared at him like she was contemplating saying something. He wanted her to be honest. If there was something he needed to apologize for, he would. He knew he had a tendency to put his foot in his mouth a lot, especially with her.

Macy looked into his eyes and, with a straight face, asked, “Who’s Kendra?”

His heart sank.

## CHAPTER 16



## MACY

The silence that filled the air spoke volumes. Macy had not planned to bring up the strange phone call from Kendra the other day this soon in their date, but he had asked. She had been hesitant to say yes to the date because she wasn't sure what Oliver's angle was. If he was seeing someone, why would he also want to see her? She had to know.

She was honest when she told him that she was curious about where this date would go. She had hoped that their time together tonight would give her the answers she needed. Depending on what Oliver said next, that would be her answer.

"How do you know that name?" Oliver asked. His tone sounded less like a question and more like an accusation. So this Kendra girl clearly did mean something to him, or else he wouldn't have this type of reaction.

Macy suddenly felt guilty as she remembered the reason she knew about Kendra in the first place; she had lied to him about the phone call. But even worse, he had clearly trusted her enough that he didn't look at his phone log to see if Macy had been telling the truth. Macy realized she was actually in the wrong.

"The day in the lobby, when you asked me to pick up your phone when you thought your job was calling, it was Kendra."

His eyes widened as she talked. "But you said it was the wrong number."

"I—I know. And I'm sorry. I don't know why I felt I had to lie. It was just kind of awkward."

"What did she say?" His voice was filled with curiosity but also a bit of anger.

"She was taken off guard that it was me who answered. She wanted to speak with you, obviously. She hardly stayed on the phone longer than thirty seconds, though. She hung up on me."

Oliver rubbed his eyes and temple in frustration as Macy shared.

“Who is she, Oliver?” Now it was Macy’s turn to sound more demanding. “Is she your girlfriend or something? Because I’m not here to mess around or get caught up in some weird love triangle. Please just tell me the truth.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Oliver responded defensively. “I would never be that kind of guy that would cheat or hurt anybody in that way.”

Macy felt a rush of relief wash over her. She could tell he was telling the truth. She clearly hit a nerve.

Oliver gave a heavy sigh. “She *used* to be my girlfriend. We dated for a while, and then it just didn’t work out. She’s been trying to get in contact with me lately, but I don’t want to talk with her. It didn’t end well.”

“I’m sorry,” was all Macy could say. She felt horrible. This was something that was clearly bothering him, and she’d brought it up as an accusation.

She should have known better. She was going through something similar, although her ex wasn’t constantly trying to get in contact with her. She could understand how that would be a whole other level of stress.

“Is that why you came to Sandpiper Cove? To get away from her?”

Oliver slowly nodded. “Yes, some of the reason. I needed a break—to get away from the situation. Being in Arizona just constantly reminded me of her; it just bothered me to be there. I’m not really an emotional guy, so I’m not good at sharing this type of stuff.”

Oliver could hardly make eye contact with Macy. She reached her hand across the table and placed it on his. His eyes met hers, and she stared at him, unable to look away. She tried everything to exude compassion and empathy.

“I understand breakups and how hard they are. Especially long-term ones. I mean, what are the odds we both ran away to Sandpiper Cove to get away from our breakups?” She smiled.

Oliver gave a chuckle. He flipped his hand upward so he could lightly grasp her hand. A tingle coursed through her body—a similar feeling from the last time his hand touched hers.

“I just didn’t want to talk about it while I was here. My family doesn’t know I even had a long-term relationship, and I don’t really share a lot with them about my dating life. They just ask questions and fuss about everything. It becomes a bigger thing than it needs to be. I’m a private guy.”

Macy nodded. She could respect that.

“But it makes sense now as to why you’ve been so distant the last couple of days,” he said.

“Yeah, and I’m sorry. I feel really bad now. I should have just told you the truth, and then we could have had a conversation about it right away instead of me allowing my mind to go all over the place.”

“What did you think was happening?” he asked. The curiosity was back but without the angered tone.

“I thought that she was your girlfriend or someone you were casually dating. I figured because she seemed so irritated when I answered the phone that she must have been annoyed you were with a different girl—and that led me to think, girlfriend.” She shrugged.

“I can understand that. I mean, you probably weren’t wrong. I assume she was annoyed that I would be with another girl, but she gave up the right to be mad at that anymore.”

Macy could sense there was bitterness and probably unforgiveness somewhere in that relationship, but she didn’t want to bring it up. This was still only just a first date. They didn’t need to go too deep into why all their previous relationships didn’t work out.

Macy audibly sighed. “I’m glad that came out when it did. Again, I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions about the kind of guy you were. It’s just hard when we’re still practically strangers. We don’t know that much about each other.”

“That’s very true. What would you like to know?” Oliver asked and gestured his hands outward. “I’m an open book today.”

She smiled. That seemed very unlike him. This goofy side of him was coming out that she had only seen glimpses of before, and she loved it.

Their waitress brought out the food. “All right. You guys hungry?”

They both nodded. It was a great moment to pause so she could figure out what she wanted to know about him. Although he said he was an open book, there was still a lot he didn’t talk about and avoided.

Kathy placed their food in front of them, and Macy’s mouth instantly started watering. It looked so good! They both dug into their meals and had at least five minutes of silence as they enjoyed their barbeque.

“Okay, I think I’ve got some questions in mind,” Macy said, wiping her mouth from the barbeque sauce. “What was it about Arizona that made you want to move there instead of going home to Sandpiper Cove?”

Now Oliver wiped his face while he thought of an answer. “Well, technically, Sandpiper Cove isn’t my home. At least I wouldn’t categorize it as that.”

“Oh?”

“I don’t know if I would say I really have a ‘home.’” He air-quoted home with his fingers for emphasis. “We moved around so much when I was little to try and be close to my mom’s jobs. It was hard to get settled anywhere we went, too. Because, in less than five years, we would move again. The longest place we stayed was in New York when my mom was performing regularly on Broadway and then had a studio she taught at when she was pregnant with my younger siblings.”

“Wow. That sounds exciting. I’ve always wanted to see a show on Broadway. I never traveled much growing up. My parents did okay at their jobs, but they weren’t wealthy enough to take us on many trips. Now that my mom has her new job,

they are doing much better for themselves, hence the beach house.” She laughed. She had always wondered what it would be like to see the world.

“It was cool for a minute, but I didn’t really care for it as a teenager. So because of that, after I graduated college, I didn’t really feel like I had a place I was desperate to go back to. My parents had decided to move to Sandpiper Cove to renovate and run the inn, so it seemed like a good time to try something new. I looked around and got a job in Arizona, so that’s where I ended up. I guess there wasn’t anything super specific that drew me there. It’s not super cold, so I guess that’s something.”

Macy felt that. “Do you think you’ll stay there a while?”

“I think so. There’s a part of me that is so tired of moving that I just want to live somewhere consistent for a while. Plus, my job pays me really well, and I have friends there and a whole routine established. It doesn’t make sense to go anywhere else right now.”

Macy suddenly realized the importance of the questions she was asking. They were on a date, and if it ended up going further, then she could be in a relationship with a guy living in Arizona. If he wasn’t leaving, then would she have to move there if it became more serious? How did she feel about Arizona?

She panicked at the thought of her again needing to decide where to live based off of a guy. She swore to herself that she would never do that again.

*It’s only the first date, Macy. Chill out,* she had to remind herself. All she was doing was asking questions about his life. It wasn’t a proposed plan for the future. She wasn’t in any contract here.

“I admire that you know what you want and stick to it. Finding somewhere to live is kind of terrifying. I should know.” She chuckled and popped some cornbread into her mouth. It was so delicious.

Oliver nodded and took another bite of his sandwich. She wondered if he was coming to the same realization she just had.

“What other questions do you have?” he asked.

“What was it like growing up with a somewhat famous mom?”

“Ha—not as cool as you probably think it was. We were able to get into some big events that had other famous people there, which was kind of fun, especially as a teenager when I actually knew who people were. But otherwise, she was always just mom to us. Not the famous Natasha Almada that everyone knew. When we lived in New York, it affected us more because every time we went out, especially around the Broadway area, people started to recognize her. That was weird. And stressful.” He crinkled his nose and furrowed his eyebrows; she could tell he didn’t really have fond memories of it.

“So you didn’t really care too much about her status. Did you get to spend time with her one on one? It seemed like she had a lot of kids to manage.”

Oliver shifted awkwardly in his chair. “I didn’t really spend that much time with her after I turned twelve years old.”

Macy waited for him to say more, but when he didn’t, she asked, “Why’s that?”

The waitress came back and asked about boxes and checks. Oliver eagerly responded to her; he seemed a bit relieved at the distraction. After he paid and Macy boxed up her leftovers, he switched the subject.

After more conversations about first jobs, awkward job interviews, and embarrassing childhood stories, they started toward their cars.

Macy still felt like Oliver was a mystery in a lot of ways. At least why he was back in Sandpiper Cove was more clear. She could completely understand and relate to needing to leave the state after a breakup. She told herself she would keep that information private, even when Scarlett asked later. Once

Scarlett found out Oliver and she went on a date, Macy knew she would get all the questions.

And although Macy was close with her family and liked to tell them everything, not everyone wanted to answer all their family's questions about why a relationship didn't work out. She would respect Oliver's privacy with that.

Oliver walked Macy to her car and turned to her with a nervous smile. Macy started to panic. Do people kiss on the first date now? She couldn't remember how this went.

"Thanks for agreeing to come with me tonight. I had a really good time, and I'm glad we could clear the air on some things."

Macy nodded. "I agree. I had a lot of fun. Thank you for having the courage to ask me, especially since you didn't have a clue how I felt." She giggled.

"Yes, it's been interesting between us, but I had to at least see what could come of it. I'm not really a guy that likes to sit in limbo."

"And what did you determine?" She immediately regretted asking that. What if he had a good time, but he realized he wasn't interested in going forward with anything? And how did she feel about it? She really enjoyed talking with him—and laughed a lot—but would she want to see him again?

"I determined that you are a pretty great woman, Macy. And I'm definitely happy that I met you." He took her hand in his and planted a soft kiss on it.

Macy's cheeks turned bright red at the touch of his lips on her skin.

"I'll see you tomorrow." Oliver gave her a soft smile and walked away towards his car.

Macy got into her car and couldn't stop the large grin that appeared on her face. She started her car and told herself she would definitely want to see Oliver Almada again.

## CHAPTER 17



## *OLIVER*

As Oliver drove home, light rain started to fall onto his windshield. He turned his windshield wipers on and drove in silence, listening to the rain hit the glass and the wipers swish back and forth.

His smile felt like a new permanent addition to his face; he couldn't stop it. This feeling felt foreign to him.

His mind processed through dinner and all the topics he and Macy discussed. Although it felt like a game of twenty questions towards him, he oddly enjoyed talking about himself and getting to know Macy more. It was uncharacteristic of him, but she had a tendency to do that to him.

He realized that he had smiled more in the last week than he had in almost a month, ever since leaving Arizona.

He was so thankful he had the courage to ask Macy out—and that she said yes. It felt good to be honest with each other about how they had both been feeling over the last couple of weeks. It was a relationship he had never seen coming, but now, he just wanted more of it.

His thoughts went back to her confession and hesitation after talking with Kendra. He couldn't believe that their chances of a date were almost ruined by her. Hadn't she done enough already? Why couldn't she just leave him alone?

This was her third time trying to contact him in less than three days. What did she want now? Nothing had changed.

Oliver had tried to avoid her, but curiosity started to get the better of him.

He took a deep breath and scrolled through his contacts on his car's screen. He paused when he got to her number, his finger hovering over the screen above her name. He pressed his lips together in a thin line, trying to decide if this was worth it.

He pressed it.

The phone only rang twice— “Hello? Oliver?” The voice sounded surprised with a hint of anticipation, as though she had been desperately waiting for him to call.

“Hi, Kendra. Why do you keep trying to contact me?” There was no kindness in his tone. It was straight and to the point.

“I need to talk with you. You can’t just run away and not talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to talk about, Kendra. You know that. You’ve known that for a couple months now. So why are you calling me?”

“Because I just want to talk to you, and I don’t want to do it over the phone. To be honest, I figured you’d be over this by now and we could work it out. I think you owe it to me after all we’ve been through to at least sit down in person with me.”

“Owe it to you?” Oliver almost yelled. “I don’t owe you anything. You gave up that right. Now I would like to get back to my life without your constant reminder. If there isn’t anything that’s desperate and pressing, then please leave me alone.”

“What, you’re too busy with your new girlfriend?” Her tone radiated annoyance and jealousy. It gave Oliver a little pleasure knowing how much possibly being in a relationship bothered her. A small smile twitched on his face.

“It’s none of your business what I’m doing anymore. Now, please stop calling me, and have a nice life.” He hung up the phone.

He let out a loud grunt and prayed that would be the last time he had to talk with her. The last thing he needed right now was her messing up something that might be good.

His thoughts went back to Macy. Of course, everything was too early on to know what would come of it, but he couldn’t stop his mind from wondering. The only thing he wasn’t sure about was how his plan to go back to Arizona in a couple of weeks would go. He could sense she was thinking

through his responses about Arizona during dinner, probably wondering how it was going to work, too.

He wasn't sure what the future held, but he thought he would just take it one day at a time.

Oliver pulled into the inn's parking lot and made his way back to his room. He had started to grow fond of his room at the inn. It was cozy, and the view of the ocean was perfect. He really had to hand it to his parents for the great work they did in renovating the place.

Just as he brushed his teeth to get ready for bed, his phone rang. He had no idea who would be calling him right now.

He looked and saw that his brother, Drew, was calling him. He must have been wanting to see how things were going at the inn, although he was surprised that he would call during his honeymoon.

"Hello?" he answered with a confused tone in his voice.

"Hey, Oliver, how's it going? I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, I'm just getting ready to call it a night."

"Ah, sorry. I forgot about the time difference," Drew said.

"No problem at all. I'm just surprised you're calling from your honeymoon."

Drew chuckled. "Yeah, don't tell Casey. She went down to soak in the hot tub, so I figured I could sneak a call in really quick."

"How's the honeymoon going otherwise?" Oliver wasn't incredibly close with Drew. He was the oldest, so they were further apart in age. But Drew was a good guy. He put in a lot of effort after their dad died to check in with Oliver to see how he was doing. He could tell he was trying to step into the new patriarch role, and he somewhat appreciated it. Although maybe not as much at the moment.

"It's been incredible. We've been to a few places now. My favorite has been this little private island we went to. Absolutely breathtaking."

“Wow, that’s awesome. Happy for you guys. Things are going well around here. Nothing too crazy to report.” Oliver wasn’t sure how much information Drew wanted to know.

“Glad to hear it. Any questions or problems come up? How has it been having to do some front desk work? I know that wasn’t originally part of the deal, but with Josie leaving, I’m sure Mom really appreciates the help.”

“I haven’t had any questions yet. You kept everything pretty organized and easy to find, so thanks for that. And Mom actually hired a replacement front desk employee, just part-time. I’m covering the other half when needed. But it’s been nice to have the help so she doesn’t have to take on any more work, or me, for that matter.”

“Oh, that’s great! Who did she hire?”

For some reason, Oliver was nervous talking about Macy. Was it weird that he was dating an employee? He hadn’t thought about it until now. Should he have asked his mom first?

“Do you remember Macy? She’s in Mom’s book group, Rebecca’s daughter? She’s been friends with Scarlett and Casey since she’s been in town for the last couple of months.”

“Oh yeah, I remember her. Well, that’s awesome that she was able to help out. She’s younger, isn’t she?”

“She’s in her late twenties. She’s around my age.”

“I’m glad you can have someone your age around that place. The median age tends to be in the sixties.” He laughed.

Oliver smiled. Drew was right. It was nice having someone younger around.

“Drew, what are you doing?” Oliver could hear Casey’s voice in the background.

“Whoops, busted. I better get going. Glad to hear everything’s going well, man. I’ll talk to you soon.” Drew quickly hung up the phone, and Oliver chuckled to himself as he placed his phone on the charger by his bed.

He slipped under the covers, turned off his lamp, and took a deep breath. It felt good to just quiet his body and mind after a long day—a strange day. He was so glad everything went well with Macy. Hopefully, she would want to see him again. If he asked her out again tomorrow, would that be too soon? He wasn't sure how dating worked anymore. What he did know is that he better talk with his mom tomorrow and fill her in.

## CHAPTER 18

## MACY

Macy started to count the number of raindrops that hit her bedroom window's glass. It was a rainy and dreary day in Sandpiper Cove, and she was tired of being at home, bored and alone. Both her parents had evening meetings, so they weren't going to be home until later. She wasn't sure if she could take the boredom of the day much longer, so she decided to resort to seeing what her brother was doing.

She walked over to his room and knocked on the bedroom door. She wondered if he would even be able to hear her over the loud music he was listening to. The music stopped and she heard footsteps walk towards her; Timmy opened the door suspiciously.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I'm so bored. Are you doing anything?"

"Yeah, I'm getting ready for a show tonight. It starts in two hours."

Macy groaned. "Literally everyone has plans but me."

"Maybe you need more friends." Timmy shrugged.

Macy hit his arm. "I have friends. They're just busy this evening or live thousands of miles away."

"That seems like a you issue," he said and then shut the door.

"You could try to not be such a stereotypical little brother!" she yelled before the music started back up again. She walked back to her room and shut the door, plopping onto her bed.

As much as she enjoyed being alone, if it went on for too long, she became antsy and started to overthink things too much. She grabbed her keys and decided she would go for a drive and just see where she ended up.

She thought about calling Oliver but chickened out before she left the house. Was it too soon after their date to get together again? It was only yesterday. She didn't want to seem too clingy.

As she drove and the rain pelted her car, the windshield wipers working double time, she thought to herself, what did it matter if they just saw each other yesterday? He had taken a chance on asking her out to dinner, so she could be bold and take a chance too. Besides, what was the worst that could happen? He says no? He could tell her he had a horrible time on their first date and didn't want to see her again.

Okay, that would be pretty terrible, but then she could just call in sick for the rest of the month until he left—maybe fake a case of mono?

*Okay, chill out, Macy,* she said to herself.

Macy pulled into the Sandpiper Inn and parked by the front door. She pulled out her phone from her purse and called Oliver.

With every ring, her heart beat faster and faster. What if he was busy? What if he didn't answer—then what?

“Hello?” he answered.

“Hey, it's Macy,” she said.

She rolled her eyes at herself. *Obviously he knows who it is.*

“I was—uh—wondering if you were doing anything tonight?” she asked, her voice rising and almost squeaking at the end.

“What?” he almost yelled on the other side of the phone. “I can't hear you. Where are you? A tunnel?”

Macy chuckled to herself. “I'm out in my car. The rain is super loud, sorry! I asked if you were doing anything tonight?” she yelled back.

“No, I just got done with work. I was trying to decide what to do for dinner.”



“Well—uh—would you want to get dinner with me? Or go and do something fun?” Her body almost shook as she waited for his answer; she was so nervous.

“Sure, that sounds good.”

She breathed a sigh of relief.

“What time and where?” he asked.

“How about right now? I’m kind of outside the inn. I didn’t know where to go, so I just drove around for a while and ended up here.”

“Oh—okay. Yeah, give me a second. I’ll be right out.”

She was so embarrassed. Did he think it was weird for her to show up like that? Was this considered stalking?

A couple of long minutes later, Oliver walked out of the inn doors. He looked around and then saw Macy wave from inside the car. He hurried over and jumped in.

“Oh my gosh, it’s unreal out there,” he said as he tried to wipe the water off his jacket.

“I know! I’m not sure how it goes from beautifully sunny to pouring rain in that short of time.” Macy shifted in her seat, unsure of what to do next. She subtly looked over at him as he dried off to check him out. His hair looked darker from being wet in the rain, and it didn’t have its normal “done” look. He was wearing a long-sleeved shirt, sports jacket, and jeans; he looked like he could be ready to head to the Friday night high school football game.

“So, what’s the plan?” he asked her.

“Well truthfully, I hadn’t gotten that far yet... Any ideas?” she asked.

“Hmm, it’s your turn to plan a date.” He smirked.

His lightheartedness released some tension off Macy. She knew they would have a good time wherever they went.

“Well, I know we need to eat, but I also want to do something fun... Oh, I have an idea.” Macy put the car in reverse and started to pull away from the inn.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“You’ll see.” She smiled. “You’re either going to love it or hate it.”

“That’s super reassuring,” he said sarcastically.

They drove in silence and listened to the rain falling on the car and the soft music that played over the radio in the background.

For some reason, Macy didn’t feel pressure to talk or “perform” in front of Oliver. It felt like they could just be together.

“How was your day off?” Oliver broke the silence.

“It was pretty boring, actually. Everyone was gone for most of the day except for my brother in the afternoon, but we don’t really do much together these days. He’s so moody and thinks he’s a big adult now.” She rolled her eyes. “So, I read a little bit, did some laundry and cleaned. You know, the normal things one does in adulthood on their day off.”

“I hear you. When did that become our sad reality?” he asked.

“When we craved independence and ran away from our parents’ homes to try and discover ourselves. Oh how naive were we,” Macy joked. “I remember when I was preparing to leave for college. My mom had written up this massive booklet of all these random things I would need to know how to do. Like laundry tips, the importance of handwashing dishes, how to apply for a credit card, and even how to change a tire. It was unbelievable. And I was so mortified and embarrassed that she thought so little of my intelligence that I threw it away!”

“Did you really?” Oliver laughed.

“Yes, and then the most humiliating part of it all was a couple of weeks into being on my own, I realized how desperately I actually needed that, so I called her to send me another one.” She laughed.

“Did she?”

“Yup, she didn’t even give me an ‘I told you so’ lecture, but it was her calmness that let me know that she had all the satisfaction in knowing she was right.”

Oliver laughed. “That’s amazing. My dad tried so hard to teach us all about changing a tire, buying a car, fixing a broken pipe, all those random things you need like maybe once a year. To each their own.”

Macy pulled into the parking lot that held her surprise idea and watched in satisfaction as Oliver reacted to the location.

“Bowling?” He chuckled. “That was your big date idea?” A huge smile appeared across his face.

“Yes! I love bowling, and I never find the time to do it, but today seemed like the perfect day. What do you think?” she asked with a tone of confidence but inside filled with uncertainty.

“I think that’s a great idea. I couldn’t tell you the last time I went bowling.”

Macy beamed at his answer. “Great! Let’s go!”

She almost jumped out of the car before she realized it was raining, and quickly put up the hood to her jacket. The two ran toward the entrance, and Oliver held the door open for her as she walked in.

The bowling alley was exactly what you would picture for a small-town source of entertainment. There was an area for food, arcade games, lots of outdated carpet, and the sound of crashing pins and bowling balls clunking on the floor. It was a busier night than she thought, but what else was there to do in town during a thunderstorm?

Macy and Oliver walked to the front desk to check in. After setting up their lane, getting their shoes, and picking out their balls, they were ready to bowl.

“Okay, so there are three types of bowlers in my mind,” Macy started.

Oliver listened intently, trying to hide a smile. “Tell me about them.” Macy could tell he was ready for something

amusing.

She started to put her bowling shoes on while she explained. “First, there are the people who are actually insanely good at bowling and take it super seriously.”

“And I’m guessing that’s you?” Oliver teased.

“You caught me,” she joked back. “No, but I *am* the second type of bowler. They are the ones who are decently good but try and play it off like it’s no big deal. But we’ll surprise you, so watch out.” She winked. “And lastly, there are the bowlers that are horrible at bowling but just come for the cheap food, loud music, and to have a good time. So the question is, what type of bowler are you, Oliver Almada?”

Oliver had a suspicious look on his face and walked over to the ball retrieval. He picked up his ball and raised his eyebrows at Macy to make sure she was paying attention.

Macy burst into laughter as Oliver walked towards the alley, rolled the ball, and watched in disbelief as it sailed right into the gutter.

He turned around, slightly embarrassed but still confident, with an amused look on his face. “That type of bowler.”

“So it’s bowler number three for you.” She laughed.

“Like I said, I can’t remember the last time I went bowling. It’s been a while. Plus, I wasn’t that great to begin with.” He shrugged.

Macy smiled; she had a feeling they were going to have a fun night.

The two ordered way too much food, but wings, mozzarella sticks, and pizza all sounded too good to pass up. They laughed at their outrageous bowling mistakes, ate food, and spent their evening talking about their favorite activities.

“Why do you seem so surprised that I like to hike too?” Macy asked.

“I’m not sure. You just don’t seem like the hiking type of girl to me. Maybe it’s because I fit the social worker type into a box where you’re all just sitting in a room with someone

talking about their feelings.” Oliver took another big bite of a mozzarella stick; he could eat one stick in two bites.

Macy gave him an offended look, furrowed eyebrows and everything. “You really have a thing against social workers, don’t you?”

Oliver laughed. “I’m just kidding, but I guess I really don’t know much about them, just that I didn’t think they are hikers.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. It’s *because* we’re social workers that we need as much hiking and outdoors time as we can get. Our jobs are so stressful that we have to find ways for self-care, or else we’ll actually lose our minds.” Macy took another bite of pizza. She was exhausted from bowling for an hour straight and was thankful when the food showed up.

She rubbed her shoulder. “I’m sort of embarrassed at how sore my arm is already from bowling.”

“You should try golfing. You’d be down for the count for days.”

“What else do you like to do? No, wait, I have a better question for you. What’s an odd thing that you like to do that no one else knows about?” She was very pleased with her question.

“That’s a good question.” Oliver thought for a moment. “Okay, this isn’t that weird, but no one knows about it. I’m actually a really good dancer.”

Macy almost spit out the sip of water she just took. “Really?” she almost yelled.

“Don’t act too surprised!”

“I’m sorry. I just would never have pegged you as the dancing type. But I guess that makes sense. You do have a famous mom who was a professional dancer.”

Oliver blushed. “She always wanted us to take dance classes when we were younger, understandably so, but all my brothers stopped after a couple of years because they thought

it was lame. I actually secretly enjoyed it, so I kept taking dance classes after I went to college.”

Macy’s mouth fell open again, shocked. “No way.”

“Yup,” Oliver said proudly. “I know there’s the stereotype about guys dancing, and my brothers would never let me hear the end of it if I told them, but it was something that actually became a stress reliever for me and somewhat made me feel closer to my mom when I couldn’t see her a lot. I loved it.”

“I mean, of course men can dance. That’s not the part I’m surprised about. It’s just... *you* dancing that I can’t wrap my head around,” she joked. “You know I’m going to have to see it sometime.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing about secret hobbies. They’re meant to stay a secret.” He winked.

“I’ll see it eventually... one day,” Macy teased.

“Okay, your turn. What’s your weird or secret activity you like to do?” Oliver changed the subject away from him.

Macy thought for a moment about what she wanted to share with Oliver. She was surprised that she had quite a few things come to mind.

“Okay, so I actually spend way more time than I should—or anyone should really—watching videos of people falling on ice.” She blushed at her admittance.

Olive burst into laughter. It was so loud that the group of bowlers next to them all jumped in surprise and glanced in their direction.

“The social worker loves watching people fall—what are the chances?”

Macy shook her head, embarrassed. “I know! It’s horrible, but there’s something about it that makes me belly laugh and cry! It’s so funny to me!”

“Wow, you win. That’s pretty amazing.” He couldn’t stop laughing.

As Oliver dived into another slice of pizza, Macy couldn't help the goofy smile that took residence on her face. She was having the best time. This was the most relaxed she'd felt while in Sandpiper Cove, and that was a lot for her to say, considering she was staying at her parents' house, which was basically an oasis.

But when she was with Oliver, time flew by. She didn't care about the time or who was around them. She didn't think about what the future held or where she would end up next. She just liked being with him. She was witnessing a different side of him tonight, one that was filled with humor, fun and adventure.

Their spontaneous date ended up being more than she had planned it to be; it became a glimpse into possibilities of a future together.

## CHAPTER 19



## MACY

Macy flipped through the guest book that Natasha had out at the front desk. Natasha had created a book that every guest could sign when they checked out. It was a slow day at the inn, so Macy thought she'd browse through it while she waited for her shift to be done. It was already six o'clock in the evening, and dinner was starting to wrap up.

There were so many names in the book from years of satisfied guests who enjoyed their stay at the Sandpiper Inn. She loved how many repeat names she saw from the many guests that made it an annual trip to come to the inn. It was especially busy around the Harvest Festival, which happened to be next week. Plus, the giant flea market that happened in the town at the beginning of summer drew in repeat guests too. Macy realized just how many traditions took place here.

She smiled when she saw Casey and Scarlett's names in the book. How amazing that two people who came to the Sandpiper Inn just to get a break, or reset as Scarlett called it, from life both ended up with an amazing love story. She wondered if there was a secret to the inn that had good luck for all the single people who stayed. Even though she wasn't staying at the inn, she hoped that maybe some of that would rub off on her.

She hadn't originally wanted to find anyone while in Sandpiper Cove. In fact, it was the exact opposite. But she thought about the last week that she'd had with Oliver and secretly hoped that it was the start of that special Sandpiper Inn magic.

The two of them had spent almost every day together lately. Every day Macy went to work giddy with anticipation to see Oliver, but she was also nervous; did he feel the same way she did? What if he realized one day that she was boring and didn't want to see her again? For her, she would wake up with more butterflies in her stomach at the thought of seeing him.

One day, she walked into the inn wondering if Oliver also felt excited at the anticipation of seeing her. He must have. Oliver was waiting for her at the front desk, showcasing his perfect smile. Macy felt her heart leap inside her chest at the sight of him, just like it normally did.

They spent all morning talking at the desk, and they hardly got any work done. They laughed as they cleaned the lobby together, talked through what their dream house would look like while they helped housekeeping fold the laundry, shared their most embarrassing college moments while they had lunch, and then planned out their next date.

Oliver had suggested they grab a coffee and walk along the beach next, and Macy was all for it. Any excuse to get another hot pumpkin latte.

They spent that evening walking on the cold sand, trying to stay warm in the cool ocean breeze. Neither of them seemed to mind the chill, or else Oliver was hiding it. It felt refreshing.

At different times throughout their walk, Macy thought she felt Oliver's hand casually bump into hers, but she didn't have the confidence to reach for it and hold it. But she wanted to.

Every day Macy felt like she experienced a different side of Oliver. His cold, calloused shell was slowly chipping away and revealing the true him. She realized that he was actually quite compassionate, especially to those that were more vulnerable. He had a dry, sarcastic humor about him that always made her laugh, and although he was still a bit closed off, she could tell he was a sensitive guy.

Whatever happened to him had altered his character; she knew that. She wasn't sure if it was due to his relationship with this Kendra girl, or if it was somehow related to the strained relationship with his mom that he never wanted to talk about. Every time she asked, he changed the subject or avoided the question.

He had clearly been hurt before—it affected his confidence to some extent. There were many times she would try to compliment him on his work or a characteristic about him, and he would get bashful and look away, muttering to himself. Or

try and deny it and say something insulting about himself. He was slowly getting better; he would show signs of defensiveness or frustration, and she could see him working to control or settle his thoughts.

Macy knew she didn't help all the time in those situations. The two of them were still very different people when it came to their personalities, so butting heads over a topic was not uncommon between them. After disagreeing on something, Macy had to fight the self-doubt that would sneak in.

Macy had started to realize that with Dylan, she would always try to make him happy and just go along with everything he said, even if she didn't agree. She didn't like conflict, which was odd in her career as a social worker. There was typically a lot she had to advocate for and conflict that came in her cases. For some reason, in her past relationships, she felt like a different person, like she couldn't be bold and express what she really wanted.

But it was different with Oliver. Even though it had only been a short time with him, in the last few weeks she felt more at peace to be herself than she had before. Even though they would disagree or have friendly debates on things, she still felt safe being her true self and speaking her mind.

A thump on the front desk made her jump. She looked up to see Oliver standing there with a big grin on his face.

"Hey," he said softly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"No, that's okay. I was just deep into this guest book." She closed the book. "I think it's so fun that your mom kept a record of all these visitors."

Oliver nodded. "When is your shift over?"

Macy guessed there was no small talk today. This was the first time she had seen him since yesterday. Oliver and Natasha had financial meetings all day related to the dance studio, so they weren't around at all.

It felt weird going almost a full day of no contact with him. She realized it was probably good for her. She wanted them to take it slow and continue to see where it went. At least, that

was what her mind kept trying to tell her. Her heart had something else in mind.

It took everything in Macy not to tell Scarlett about her and Oliver at book club the other night. The two had agreed they would keep the fact that they were dating between themselves for a while, at least until they decided what it was and if it was going anywhere. Oliver had originally suggested informing his mom since she was boss to both of them, but Macy had said she wasn't comfortable with that yet. She knew it would cause her to act weird and nervous around Natasha every time she saw her if she knew about them. Macy wasn't ready for that yet.

Oliver agreed to it. He wasn't super excited about talking with his mom about Macy, so anything to procrastinate on telling her was fine with him.

"I'm done at six-thirty. I told Natasha I would stay and make sure they didn't need any help with dinner clean up."

Oliver had a mischievous look on his face, like he was up to something. Macy squinted her eyes and tilted her head to the side, puzzled.

"What are you up to?" she asked. "You seem suspicious."

"Oh, nothing," he said with a facetious grin. "I'll be back at six-thirty." He walked away with one last wink.

Macy had never seen him so playful. Every day it was something new. She giggled and then spent the next thirty minutes trying to figure out what he had planned.

Once six-thirty came, Oliver was back just like he said he would be. Macy was gathering her things from the office when he met her at the office door.

"Do you have some time before you have to head home?" he asked.

"I would make time even if I didn't. I need to know what you've been up to! I've been so anxious the whole time you've been gone."

He ushered her towards the door. “Well then, come with me.”

The two of them walked towards the stairs and headed up to the second floor. She had no idea what was going on but figured it had to be interesting. The further they got down the hall, the more confused she got.

“Are we going to your mom’s suite?” she asked.

“Yep.” He stopped at her room and looked for the key.

Macy’s eyes widened in fear. “Wait, are we going to tell her about us?” She couldn’t contain the panic coming out of her voice.

Oliver laughed. “Absolutely not. She’s at Bible Study tonight at church. I just needed her suite.” He opened the door, and Macy’s jaw dropped.

Inside was the most beautiful and romantic-looking scene she had ever seen. There were candles lit everywhere, with a vase of roses on the table. A beautiful set of plates and silverware were set out, along with a full-course steak dinner already plated. There was soft music playing in the background, and his mom’s fireplace was lit.

Macy slowly walked in and couldn’t believe what she was seeing. No one had ever done anything like this for her before. “What in the world is happening?” She laughed. “Who are you?”

Oliver chuckled lightly and walked into the suite behind her, then shut the door. “Do you like it?” There was a tone of nervousness and insecurity in his voice.

“Like it? It’s stunning. I—I don’t really have the words right now. What is this all for? Did I miss a fiftieth wedding anniversary party invite or something?”

Oliver laughed harder this time. “No. I realized something this morning. The day that Mrs. Peterson fell, when we were in the middle of our... argument.”

Macy smiled.

“I was just about to say something, and I never got to it. And I realized it was important to say.”

Macy tried to recall the day and the conversation they were having. She did remember that he was in the middle of saying something that sounded like it would be sincere, but then they heard the thud from Mrs. Peterson falling and got interrupted. But she couldn't remember specifically what it was.

“I'm trying so hard to remember, but I can't recall.”

“I was just about to say that I was sorry. I was sorry for the way that I had treated you between making jabs at being a social worker, although I'm still not sold on you people.”

Macy playfully rolled her eyes.

“And then I was going to heavily apologize for how I spoke to you when you ran into me with that box of leaves.”

“*Accidentally* ran into you,” she corrected.

Now it was Oliver's turn to roll his eyes.

“I was a jerk, and although there is no excuse for how I acted, I just had a lot on my mind that I was working through when I got to Sandpiper Cove. I will admit that it gave me a really bad attitude. It's not easy for me to open up to people and trust them. I've spent a lot of my life blaming others for how cranky I am or how I constantly get disappointed. But I'm going to try and do better because, honestly, Macy, you make me want to be better. And no one has ever made me feel that way before.”

Macy couldn't hide the emotion on her face. That was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to her. She stared into Oliver's eyes and felt a wave course through her body. It only took one more moment before Oliver slipped his hands into hers and gently pulled her towards him for an electrifying kiss.

It was the perfect kiss that took away all the confusion and worry about what their future would look like. It was a kiss that left her realizing that, for once in her life, she didn't want to worry about the plan or what someone else thought. She was going to do what she wanted to do. She had no idea what

was going to happen between Oliver and herself, but she wanted to dive in and find out.

After he pulled away, they looked into each other's eyes for a moment in silence. Macy finally spoke, "So this was your way of making it up to me that you weren't able to say sorry?"

"I guess so." He shrugged.

"Well, I think I'm okay with you being a jerk every once in a while then, if it means I get this as an apology."

Oliver laughed. "Come on, let's eat." And he pulled her towards the table to enjoy a romantic dinner for two.

## CHAPTER 20



## *OLIVER*

Oliver sat in the Bluebird Café working away on his computer, hoping to get the financial reports done for the inn. He couldn't believe he was preparing the reports for the end of the month already; a new month's end had come up fast.

The café was pretty quiet for its usual Wednesday morning group—a lot of the usual customers seemed to be missing. Oliver had found that Wednesday mornings were his favorite time to work away from the office. He was surprised at how much he missed the noise and hustle of being in his office environment in Arizona with other coworkers. He was used to guys randomly dropping by his office asking how his weekend went, and Maggie asking for everyone's coffee orders for her usual mid-day Monday coffee run. Oliver had discovered even though he tended to lean more as an introvert, it was lonelier than he thought it would be working in an office by himself at the Sandpiper Inn.

He was grateful to at least have Macy close by at the front desk on the days she worked, but with the weather changing, the inn became increasingly busy with guests arriving to take in the beautiful autumn views of Maine. With the busy schedule, he saw her less as she ran around assisting guests and helping where she could. But it gave him an excuse to offer his help if needed and get away from staring at a computer all day.

Macy didn't work on Wednesdays, so it felt like the perfect day to get out of the office to be around people. He didn't necessarily want to interact with them, but having the background noise made him feel at home.

Being at the café also gave him an opportunity to talk more with his sister Penny. He felt like Penny was the sibling he knew the least. Their age gap had caused them to not interact as much as kids, with them being in completely different stages of life and activities. And then, after he left for college, they never really spoke. Even during holiday celebrations,

there were always so many people around with his parents, siblings, and extended family, that he sometimes never even said one word to her; one of the drawbacks of a large family, he guessed.

He now had a chance to talk with her more, even though it was all surface level, but it gave him a sense of who she was. He found it interesting that he had a desire to talk to her; that must be some of Macy rubbing off on him.

As Oliver typed, a streak of red caught his eye and he looked up to see Macy walk into the café, as if she felt him thinking about her. He smiled, surprised to see her. Although, it was a small town, so they were bound to run each other unannounced at some point.

He almost waved to get her attention but stopped when he saw Macy turn to hold the door open as her mom rushed in. He wasn't sure why he froze and instantly got nervous over seeing Rebecca. He had met her before when he had dinner with Brent; she had been incredibly nice.

But now it felt different. She wasn't just Rebecca, but his girlfriend's mom. Macy and Oliver hadn't really discussed when he would meet her parents, Macy had said she wanted Oliver to meet them before he left for Arizona, but she never put anything into action, which made him assume she wasn't ready yet.

Would it be weird if he talked with them now? It would be worse if Macy realized that he knew they were at the café and hadn't said anything. Anxiety started to kick in as he contemplated what to do. Before he had time to come up with a decision, Macy saw him and did a double take in his direction.

He smiled at her, and she reciprocated the smile until she quickly changed to a panicked look. Oliver chuckled to himself, realizing that she must also be having the same debate in her head as he.

Rebecca caught onto Macy quickly and looked around to see Oliver sitting there as well. She smiled and waved and then almost had to drag Macy over to where Oliver sat.

“Hi, Oliver! Fancy meeting you here,” Rebecca said with a chipper tone.

“Hi, Rebecca. It’s great to see you again.” Oliver stood up and offered a handshake. She shook his hand back. “Oh, stop. You don’t have to be so formal. Hugs are just fine.”

She paused for a moment as she waited for Macy to say something, but when she didn’t, Rebecca whispered to her silent daughter, “Macy, you’re being rude.”

Macy snapped out of whatever deep thought she was in. “Hi, sorry. I just wasn’t expecting this and am kind of frazzled.”

Oliver laughed. He sincerely loved how honest she was all the time.

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “My goodness. Are you here working today?” She turned her attention back to Oliver. He could tell she was used to leading meetings and taking charge; socializing and creating small talk didn’t seem to intimidate her at all.

“Yes, ma’am. On Wednesdays I like to get out of the office, one of the perks of only needing a computer to do my job. Although, it makes us really short-staffed at the inn. We have a front desk employee who’s really flaky at her job and hardly ever comes in,” Oliver joked, trying to get a smile out of Macy.

Rebecca laughed and poked Macy, who was already in mid eye roll; but Oliver still got his smile from her.

“What are you ladies up to today?” he asked.

“We decided to get our nails done. My mom has been bugging me about my dry feet every time I put my feet on the couch, so I said if she pays for it, I’ll do something about it.” It was now her mom’s turn to get the poke.

“I mean, that seems fair enough.” Oliver laughed.

He loved seeing the playful relationship between Macy and her mom. He knew how important Rebecca was to Macy, and it made him happy to see this side of her.

“Oliver, what are you doing tonight for dinner? Do you have any plans?” Rebecca inquired.

Oliver thought about it for a moment, although he wasn't sure why he bothered. He never had any plans except for golfing with Brent. “No, I don't. Just another evening at the inn.” He tried to say it with a confident smile. Although it came off more pathetic sounding than he wanted it to.

“Well then, you have to come over for dinner tonight. My husband is grilling some incredible steak, his last grill of the season before it gets too cold. It would be so much fun to have you join us!”

Macy's eyes widened as she shot a look at her mom. Rebecca was clearly going rogue.

“Oh, I couldn't intrude,” Oliver responded, clearing his throat awkwardly.

“Nonsense. It's not intruding if I invite you, I insist. Myself, and my husband, want to learn more about this man Macy keeps fawning over. It will be fun to get to know you more.”

“Mom!” Macy chastised, clearly embarrassed.

Oliver laughed. “I don't want you to feel like you have to, but I would be happy to come over for dinner if you'll have me.” Now it was his turn to get a frazzled look from Macy. He responded with a cheeky smile back at her.

“Perfect! Grills on at five, but come over any time after four-thirty. We like to eat early at our house. It saves more time in the evenings for dessert.” She winked.

“Now that's my type of family.” He laughed. All his years working with clients taught him how to match their energy and schmooze them too.

Rebecca looked towards her daughter and patted her on the shoulder. “I'm going to order my coffee, so now you can talk about how crazy I am behind my back.” She winked and turned to go. “See you tonight, Oliver!”

“You too, Rebecca,” he called after her.

Macy turned to Oliver. “Are you crazy?” she asked, yet her tone was filled with lightheartedness.

Oliver laughed. “Don’t worry about it. It’s going to be fine. Your mom seems like nice person.”

“The two of you,” Macy said, shaking her head. “I was not mentally prepared for this today.”

Oliver grabbed Macy’s hand. “Hey, it’s going to be fun. I’ll bring over some watermelon or something and will do my best to act like the biggest gentleman out there.”

Macy scoffed. “Yeah, my dad’s going to eat you alive.”

Oliver laughed louder than he anticipated. He quickly tried to quiet himself. “You’re funny.” He squeezed her hand in reassurance.

“How are you so calm?” she asked. “Aren’t you nervous?”

“Of course I’m nervous, but I see how much you love your parents, and I want to get to know them too. If you care about them, then I want to care about them.”

Macy gave a loving look. “That’s actually adorable.” She squeezed his hand back.

“Well, I better get back to my mom and get our coffees. The nail appointment is soon and we have to head over there.” Macy quickly lifted onto her tippy toes and planted a kiss on Oliver’s cheek. “I’ll see you tonight—don’t be late. My dad hates that.” She smirked and walked towards the front counter to join her mom.

Oliver smiled and sat back down at the table. Now that Macy was gone, he could internally panic without her knowing it; he was spending the evening with Macy’s family. He felt comfortable with Rebecca. She was an easy-going woman, but it sounded like Macy’s dad was opposite. He really hoped that he liked Oliver. He knew that if Macy’s dad didn’t care for him, then that would be stressful for Macy.

He told himself that he’d try to channel his “work mode.” He’d worked with a variety of different clients before and

always seemed to leave them happy. He hoped he could do the same with Ron and Rebecca.

## CHAPTER 21

MACY

“You’re going to burn a hole in the ground if you keep pacing like that,” Rebecca called out from the kitchen.

Macy continued to pace and stare out the window. It was four-thirty, which meant that Oliver would be there any second. She knew that he would try to get there on time, if not early, and she wanted to be the one to greet him at the door.

“I’m so nervous. You’re causing me to revert back to middle school. I’m biting my fingernails,” she called back to her mom.

Rebecca laughed and walked around the corner to the living room. “Mace, it’s all going to be fine. I just invited him to dinner, not to read an entry in your private diary! I already know him and like him. Your brother ended up being busy tonight, so it’s really just Dad that we have to convince.”

She came over by Macy and held out a spoon of brownie batter. “Eat this. It will help you chill out.”

Macy grabbed the spoon and started to lick. She would never reject an offer to lick the spoon. “Dad is the one I’m worried about. He’s so judgy when it comes to the guys that I date.”

“Can you blame him?” Rebecca scoffed. “Look at your track record.”

Macy made an offended grunt. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Just being honest.” She shrugged. “But Oliver seems different. He has this professionalism about him mixed with kindness that I didn’t get from Dylan. Sure, Dylan was in business and had that type of vibe, but he always seemed arrogant and egotistical to me. Oliver just seems... down to earth. And honest.”

Macy compared the two in her mind. “Yeah, I could see that. He really is different, Mom. I hope Dad gives him a chance.”



“Oh, he will, as long as I have something to say about it.” She raised her eyebrows and made a face that usually appeared when she was about to get her way with something.

“Is everything ready for dinner?” Macy’s dad said as he walked in from the kitchen. “I don’t see anything on the counter, so I’m not sure if I’m supposed to be prepping something.” He stared at the two women standing in front of the window. “Why are we all standing out here?”

Macy shook her head. “No reason. I’m just waiting for Oliver. There’s nothing else that needs to be prepped, Dad. It’s all set in the refrigerator.”

“She’s waiting for Oliver because she doesn’t trust us to be the ones to answer the door,” her mom said.

Macy rolled her eyes. “Can you blame me?”

Ron laughed. “She’s a smart lady.”

“Don’t entertain her, Dad. Mom is on a whole new level today with her bold and outrageous comments.”

Rebecca laughed and headed towards the kitchen. “You worry all you want, but I promise we’ll be good, right Ron?” She shot her husband that same I’ll-get-my-way look.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Ron mumbled. “I will say, I know those Almada boys, and they’re good kids. Their dad was a good man, so that gives Oliver a little bit of a starting advantage.”

For some reason Macy felt her body release a little bit of tension. She heard a car door slam shut and spun around to look out the window. Oliver had arrived and was walking in with a large bowl of something. Macy squinted to see what it was and then laughed out loud. “He actually brought the watermelon,” she said.

“Another step in the right direction,” Ron said. “I’ll get out of here so I don’t embarrass you quite yet.”

Macy walked to the door so she could open it before Oliver rang the doorbell. He smiled as he got to the top step. “Hello, beautiful,” he said.

A bashful smile appeared on her face. “Come on in.” She opened the door wider for him to come inside.

“You can leave your shoes on; we’re going to head out on the deck.” She took the giant bowl of watermelon from him and chuckled quietly to herself.

“I told you I’d bring some,” he said with a smirk.

Macy led the way towards the kitchen and took a deep breath as they turned the corner.

Rebecca was at work pouring the brownie batter into the pan. “Hi, Oliver! Glad you made it. Now Macy can stop burning a hole in my carpet out there waiting for you.”

Macy rolled her eyes; her mom was on a roll today.

“Could one of you open the oven door for me? My hands are covered in chocolate and I don’t want to get it dirty.”

“I got it,” Oliver said as he walked over and opened the oven door.

Rebecca placed the brownie pan inside and then closed it. “Whew! Thank you.”

“Glad I could help with the most essential part of dinner.” He laughed.

“Then you clearly haven’t had my steak yet. That’s the best part of the meal.” Ron walked through the patio door with an empty plate and tongs. He set the plate down and walked over to Oliver. He stuck out his hand. “Hi, son. Nice to meet you. Ron.”

Oliver shook his hand. “Hi, Ron. Thanks for having me for dinner. Your home is beautiful.”

“You can thank your brother for that one. He’s the brilliant mind that made it all happen,” Rebecca chimed in.

“Rebecca is being modest. She did the designing and made sure to organize it all every step of the way.” He dramatized that last part, teasing Rebecca.

Rebecca shook her head. “I only wanted to make sure the project stayed on track. Some of those boys liked to take in the

view of the ocean a little longer than they probably should have.”

Macy smiled. Her mom couldn't help herself. She had to have her hands in everything.

“Either way, it's a beautiful home. I'm sure it's nice having that view every morning to wake up to,” Oliver replied.

“I'm sure you have a similar one. The Sandpiper Inn isn't too far off. You've got a nice view, too,” Ron said.

Oliver nodded. “We sure do. It's been really relaxing staying there. I can't complain.”

“Well, we can all go outside for a bit while Ron gets the meat on the grill.” Rebecca ushered everyone to the patio door while Ron went towards the fridge.

Macy stepped outside and let the cool breeze refresh her. She realized she had been sweating because she was so nervous. The patio had a variety of options for them to sit. Her parents had joked that they probably spent the most money on the deck and backyard because they wanted it to feel like an oasis. They definitely succeeded.

There was a large sectional couch with a firepit in the middle, a long patio table, a grill, a smoker, and a pergola draped with lights and plants to add accent to the deck. Macy loved being out there for hours with a good book on her days off when she wasn't with Oliver or her mom. It was one of her favorite features of the house, except for her guest suite, of course.

“Wow, it's even better out here,” Oliver said as he made his way towards the couch to sit. He sat down so he could still maintain his view of the ocean.

“I splurged out here. I've never been an outdoors person, like going camping or something, but I sure love being outside where I can enjoy myself and the nice weather. This was my happy medium.” Rebecca walked over to clean off the table. “I need to get plates. I'll be back.”

“Do you need any help, Mom?” Macy asked.

Rebecca shook her head. “Oh, no. I’m okay. You guys just hang out.”

Rebecca went back inside, and Macy looked over to Oliver sitting comfortably on the couch.

He smiled and patted the spot next to him. “Would you like to join me? Or do you want to burn a hole in the deck boards as well?” he teased.

Macy tried to suppress her smile but was unsuccessful. “My mom’s out of control today,” she joked as she walked over and sat next to Oliver. He placed his arm around her and scooted a little closer.

“I could get used to waking up to this every day,” Oliver said with a happy sigh, looking out at the ocean.

“It really is gorgeous. Do they have any lakes in Arizona?” she asked.

Oliver shook his head. “Not really, at least not by me. It’s pretty dry in Arizona. It just means you have to travel to get the views, which I don’t mind.”

“Do you like relaxing vacations or busy ones where you’re exploring a lot?” Macy asked.

“I see those as two different things.”

“Oh? Explain.”

“A vacation in my mind is where I’m going somewhere comfortable. Maybe I’ve been there before and know my way around. But my plan is just to relax and enjoy. It’s not having a packed schedule or exploring too much of my surroundings, but the purpose is to unwind. Now a trip—that to me entails exploring, trying new things, and having adventures. That would be like the trip to Washington DC I want to take—that would be a lot of busy days, spending time in museums, and being exhausted by the end of most days. Both are fun, and I enjoy my time, but I need them for different reasons,” Oliver explained.

“Huh, I would have never thought of it like that, interesting. Is there one that you prefer over the other?”

“It’s hard to say, just because, again, I need them for different reasons. When I’m getting burnt out at work and just need a break, a vacation calls my name. I just want to head to the beach and lay in the sun to unwind. But if work has been dragging and I’m getting caught in the mundane day-to-day feeling, then I need an adventure. So if I had to pick, I’d say the vacation is what I typically want the most.”

“I feel like I just learned so much about you.” Macy laughed. “I’ve never seen someone put that much thought into vacations. I’m going to have to use that from now on,” she teased.

“Hey, using time off is a serious thing for me. I usually have to fight to get a lot of it. Even just being here felt unreal that I pulled it off.”

“I’m very thankful you did, even though it’s not for the reason you initially wanted it for.” Macy smiled and clutched Oliver’s hand that draped over her shoulder.

“No, but it worked out to be even better than I could have hoped.” He smiled down at her and gave her a quick kiss. Macy blushed, wondering if her parents saw that. She could almost feel her mom’s nosy eyes watching them from the kitchen window.

“What about you? What do you prefer for time away?” Oliver asked.

“According to your definition and standards, I’m a vacation girl. I used to be more adventurous and wanted to explore, but now, with the busyness of being an adult, I usually could go for a relaxing time away. But I still love a busy and exciting trip every once in a while. If I can learn something about history while I’m there, I tend to enjoy it more.”

“Me too,” Oliver chimed in. “That’s why I want to go to Washington DC. I think that would be so interesting.”

“It looks like we have our first trip whenever we want to take one,” Macy said. She quickly wondered if that was too bold.

“All right, here comes the meat,” Ron announced as he entered the patio, with Rebecca close behind him with some items for the table.

“I insist you let me help you set up,” Oliver said as he hoisted himself off the couch and grabbed the plates from Rebecca.

“Thank you. We can set it all up together.”

Macy’s dad worked on the grill while the rest of the group got the table and side dishes prepared. Oliver seemed like a natural with Macy’s parents. She couldn’t stop herself from smiling at how confident, funny, and charming he was. Although she knew him well enough to know after he left, he was going to crash tonight and need like an hour of alone time where he didn’t say anything.

While they ate at the patio table, she couldn’t help but glance at him over and over again with so much gratitude for the effort he made to get to know her parents. They did mean a lot to her, and her dad’s approval was crucial for any guy she dated moving forward.

She could tell before the night was over that her dad was a fan. He even pulled out the photos on his phone to show Oliver the fishing trip he and his brothers went on a few years ago. He only pulled those photos out for special occasions and the people he liked. When he asked if Oliver wanted to see it, Rebecca gave Macy a look acknowledging that she felt that too.

“That’s a lot of great looking fish you caught there—although I have to be honest, I don’t know much about fishing.” Oliver leaned back into his chair once Ron took the photos away.

“We had a blast that day. Did your dad ever take you fishing?” Ron asked.

Macy’s heart fluttered for a moment; she wasn’t sure how Oliver reacted when people asked about his dad.

“No, he didn’t. He had his hands full back then with all of us. Plus, he was more of a handyman type of guy than

outdoors. He knew how to fix everything.”

“It must be where all you Almada boys learned it from, then. If I remember correctly, Drew is pretty good with his hands too.”

Oliver nodded. “My dad did a good job of keeping us all aware of how to fix things. He said it’s the one way to get out of paying for outrageous service fees.”

The group laughed. Macy enjoyed hearing about Oliver’s dad. It wasn’t very often that he talked about him. Only when she asked a specific question, and then he provided the minimal amount of details needed to answer.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, and then Rebecca let out a loud yawn. “Well, I’m not sure about you all, but I’m exhausted. I think I’ll call it a night. Maybe I’ll sneak one more of those brownies on my way to bed,” she teased.

“Thank you again for having me. I had a wonderful time. It’s nice to finally meet the parents that Macy is always talking about.” Oliver smiled over at Macy. She blushed. She did love talking about her parents.

“It was our pleasure. You feel free to come around whenever—you’re most welcome here.” Macy’s dad nodded.

Macy couldn’t believe it. She made subtle eyes at her mom, who was also giving a less than subtle surprised look to Macy’s dad.

“I appreciate that, sir. I’ll have to take you up on that. This place sure is a nice place to spend your days,” he said.

Ron and Rebecca got up and made their way to the patio door. Macy and Oliver took their time slowly getting up.

“That went insanely better than I expected.” Macy laughed as she pretended to stretch to give them a little more time before going inside.

“Your parents are great. I see why you like them so much,” Oliver said.

“Yeah, they’re pretty cool. I’m not going to lie; I am beyond shocked at how nice my dad was to you. He is

normally a hardballer and suspicious of everyone.”

Oliver laughed. “You forget that I’m surrounded by those types of men all day. I know my way around a man that knows what he wants and is set in his ways. That felt like just another day at the office,” he teased.

Macy smirked. “Well, I’m impressed. I’ll try and give you more credit next time.”

The two walked inside and made their way to the front door. Her parents had already gone to their wing of the house and were nowhere in sight. Oliver stopped before he got to the door and turned around. He grabbed Macy by the waist and pulled her in for a tight hug; it completely caught Macy off guard.

She wrapped her arms around his strong waist and pressed her head against his chest. She closed her eyes as she listened to his heartbeat in his chest. It sounded just as strong as he looked.

He pulled her back to stare into her eyes, and he carefully tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. The touch sent shivers throughout her body. Macy stared up at him. She sure could get lost in those eyes.

“I love you, Macy,” he said softly.

She could hardly believe her ears. Tears emerged from her eyes as she stared up at this man who came into her life in a fleeting moment, but whom she wanted to stay with her forever. She couldn’t believe it, but she felt the same way too.

“I love you too, Oliver.”

A smile appeared on both their faces as Oliver leaned in to kiss her. It was another moment where Macy felt like the world stopped around her, and she truly had everything she needed right there.



## CHAPTER 22

## OLIVER

Oliver groaned as he realized he had just taken his last sip of coffee. It had been a crazy busy morning with numerous check-ins and check-outs, and he was already on his third cup.

The Harvest Festival was this week, so the inn was starting to fill with guests ready to celebrate a week of fun and tradition. Oliver was on his own covering the front desk today, and he felt way over his head. His mom was trying to help as much as she could, but with so many guests checking in and out, she needed to help housekeeping with turning the rooms over.

The first round of autumn sickness had started to make its way through Sandpiper Cove, and both the main housekeeper and Macy had caught it. It was a busy, and difficult, time for the inn to be short-staffed.

Oliver and Macy had spent all day Saturday together, and towards the end of the day, Macy had started to feel not well. Her head started to spin and her throat started to feel tight, so she ended up cutting their evening short so she could go home and rest.

Sunday, she had texted that she was “down for the count,” in her words, and there wasn’t an end in sight Monday morning. Oliver was happy to cover for her that day but had forgotten how busy today would be before he agreed.

He grabbed his coffee mug and walked over to the coffee station. He reluctantly poured his fourth cup, but he knew he needed it. He hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before; his mind was too busy trying to figure out what he was going to do about Macy. He didn’t have much time left in Sandpiper Cove.

He walked back to the front desk and saw that he had a text message. He smiled when he saw it was from Macy.

*How’s it going? I didn’t realize until a little bit ago what day it was... I forgot it was the big guest turnover day.*

He smiled at how thoughtful she was. Of course while she's beyond sick, she's worried about how he's doing.

*It's been busy. I'm covering the front desk, and my mom is helping with housekeeping. All the guests checked out already, and we aren't expecting anyone to check in until later this afternoon. We'll survive. You just try and get better.*

He pressed send and then grabbed his cup of coffee. The heat felt so good against his cold hands. The inn was an older building, so sometimes the heat circulation wasn't that great.

*Sorry it's been so busy. This is the worst time to get sick. If I have to miss the pie eating contest at the festival, I'll be devastated... also, don't drink too much coffee. I know you've probably already had like two cups.*

Oliver quickly put his mug back down as if he'd been caught, and then he laughed. It was crazy how in only a couple of weeks, they could already know each other so well. I guess that's what happens when you spend relatively every day together.

He reached back for his phone. *You're wrong... it's already been three.*

He waited in anticipation for her text message, but she never texted back. After about thirty minutes, he realized she probably fell asleep; she was so exhausted. He was glad she was getting her rest.

"So I see they just let anyone work here, huh?" a male voice said from the other side of the desk.

Oliver looked up with furrowed brows, ready to be offended by whoever was standing there. His eyes quickly shifted to surprise to see his brother, Nick, standing there.

"Nick? What are you doing here?"

Nick smiled. "I decided to come back for the Harvest Festival!" He dropped his bags to the ground in dramatic fashion.

Nick was next in line after Oliver of the Almada children, so the two had spent a good amount of time together growing

up. They weren't necessarily close, but they were the two that were off on their own adventures across the country.

"That's great. We're happy to have you," Oliver said with a smile. "Did you make a reservation?" Oliver looked at the guest check-in list to see if Nick's name was listed.

"No. It was already full when I decided last minute, so I'm crashing on Mom's couch."

That was one of the things that Oliver appreciated about Nick. He was so "go with the flow." He was probably the most relaxed and flexible of the siblings. Change didn't seem to faze him, and he loved adventure and trying something new.

"Well, that's awesome. It will be fun having you around."

"You doing anything tonight? I'm actually headed over to Brent's for some Monday night football if you want to come?"

Oliver nodded. "That sounds great. I'm going to be here until around five o'clock. Can I drive over with you around then?"

"Yeah, that'll work! I'm going to head upstairs and settle into Mom's, but I'll see you around." Nick smiled, grabbed his bags, and headed upstairs.

Oliver took another sip of coffee. He felt a little excited now for tonight. He found himself enjoying the time with his siblings while he was in Sandpiper Cove. That wasn't something he was expecting.

He had figured he would come to get away from Arizona for a while, keep his head down and work to cover for Drew, and then go home. But being at the inn for so long and seeing his family more frequently, he did feel like he was connecting with them more.

His younger siblings, like Isaac, were so little when Oliver was a teenager that he felt like he never got to really know them, especially after he went off to college and then Arizona.

A night with his brothers would help distract him from missing Macy too, and the added stress of trying to figure out what to do with their relationship.

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Oliver almost inhaled the buffalo wings that Brent made for the game—they were so good. He missed a home-cooked meal after so many weeks at the Sandpiper Inn. He could always go to dinner and breakfast that were provided at the inn, but after a while he got tired of the reoccurring menu and found himself at the Oceanside Grill or other restaurants for takeout.

“How are the wings, Oliver? I found a new recipe so I wasn’t sure how it would taste,” Brent asked from across the room. Brent was actually a really good host and had a nice place for having friends and family over.

“They’re amazing. I’ve missed having just a nice plate of wings.” He wiped some of the sauce off his face.

Brent laughed. “Glad they’re hitting the spot. Nick, what are you doing back there? The game’s about to start.”

Nick turned the corner. “Sorry. I was just realizing you have a guest room here, and I’m spending the week on Mom’s couch. Do you mind if I crash here instead?” He plopped down on the couch next to Oliver.

“Sure, that’s fine. I’ve got the space and would love the company.” He bit into one of the wings. “Oh yeah, that is super good,” Brent said with a mouth full of chicken.

“How often does Scarlett come out and visit?” Nick asked.

Brent finished chewing before he spoke. “Not that often. She doesn’t have a car so that makes it harder. Sometimes I’ll go and pick her up after I’m done with work and bring her here. There’s not a lot of space to hang out in her room at the inn. And then it’s easier for us to cook dinner.

“How’s the studio coming along? That worked out kind of nicely, huh? Scarlett staying here for work makes it much easier for you to continue dating.” Nick smirked.

Brent blushed. “Yeah, it worked out really well, actually. Almost too perfect of timing. But I guess that’s what happens when Mom has her hand in something.” He laughed. “The

studio is done, and they are just putting the final touches on the logistics for which classes they're going to offer. Scarlett is pretty excited to teach the younger kids. I'm excited for her. It's a good way to continue to have dance in her life without reinjuring herself."

"What is it with the brothers in this family dating famous people all of a sudden?" Nick laughed.

Oliver hadn't thought about that. It was weird. Macy wasn't famous, but they didn't know about her yet.

"Are you trying to tell us something, Nick? Are you dating someone famous?" Brent teased.

"Ah, you know me. I don't have time for a relationship. My job is still sending me all over the place, but it sounds like I'm going somewhere permanent, finally," Nick responded.

"Oh, where?" Brent asked.

"Seattle. I'm super excited. It's at their main headquarters with the upper management, so it's a great opportunity for me. The perfect stepping stone into a higher-up position. And it'll be nice to be living somewhere for more than one year." He scoffed.

"How long will you be there then? Seems crazy having you on the opposite side of the country."

"At least three years, so a decent amount of time."

"That's awesome, man. Excited for you. Maybe then you'll finally settle down and find someone." Brent winked.

Nick laughed. "We'll see. I'm in no rush. I just feel like if it's meant to be, then the girl will just appear, and everything will fall into place."

They sat in silence for a moment, watching the start of the game. "Oliver, what about you? Anyone in your life?" Nick asked.

Oliver panicked for a moment, unsure of what to say. He didn't want to tell anyone about Macy if she was uncomfortable with it, but they did seem far enough in their dating relationship to make it feel more official.

Macy had always said that family were the most important people in your life. They were there when you entered the world, so they should be there when you leave and for everything else in between. He saw how much her family meant to her, and a part of him secretly wondered what that would be like for himself.

Macy said it was easy to be open with your family. She'd suggested the first baby step could be trying to be honest with what you're feeling when it comes up and just answer questions truthfully when they're asked. "Easy enough," she had said.

"Maybe for a social worker," he'd joked.

He wondered if maybe this would be a good time to try it out.

"Uh, I'm kind of seeing someone right now. It's pretty early on, but it's been good."

"What? Really? We've played how many golf games in the last couple of weeks and you're just bringing it up now?" Brent asked.

"You never asked," Oliver said in a cheeky tone.

"Touché," Brent joked. "Is it anyone we know? Or someone back in Arizona?"

"Uh—it's actually Macy, from the inn."

Brent's eyes widened. "No way! Well, I guess that shouldn't surprise me. That inn has some secret mojo or something that brings everyone together."

"Wait. Who is Macy? Fill me in!" Nick asked. He never liked feeling left out.

"She's the new front desk associate since Josie left. She's been there for only a couple of weeks—Rebecca's daughter. Do you remember meeting her at the wedding?" Brent asked Nick.

"She's got red hair, right?"

Oliver smiled slightly. He loved her red hair. “Yeah. We started officially seeing each other a little over a week ago, and it’s going well. It feels like it’s been way longer than that, though.”

“I feel that. I remember being in the hospital with Scarlett after my accident. It was only a couple of days, but wow, it felt like we had been there for a couple of months with how much we learned about each other,” Brent said.

Oliver could understand that.

“But I’m glad it’s going well, man. I know this is kind of a long-term question, but aren’t you planning to go back to Arizona? Are you guys wanting to do long distance?” Oliver could hear that hesitation in Brent’s voice as he asked. He was probably unsure of how deep Oliver wanted to go in this question, knowing how private Oliver was.

“Ah, that’s what my current debate is, to be honest. I like her, more than I thought I would. She’s pretty amazing, but I don’t want to do long distance. I saw Mom and Dad be apart for so much of their marriage that I don’t want anything close to that. But she’s not sure where she wants to go. She left Minnesota and her job, so she’s staying with her parents here in Sandpiper Cove for now. It’s not permanent, but she’s not sure what the next plan is.”

As Oliver spoke, he continued to hear the reality of the situation. How was this ever going to work?

He could pretend that he didn’t know the answer, but he knew the truth. The only way it would work is if Macy moved to Arizona. A pit formed in his stomach. He couldn’t ask her to do that. But would she think of it on her own? Of course she would. She had probably been thinking about that as much as he had.

Even though it was the only way for their relationship to work, it was still too early for him to ask her to move to Arizona. He just hoped that she would decide on her own, if that’s what they both wanted.



## CHAPTER 23

## MACY

The thought of moving to get out of bed made Macy groan. She had been stuck in bed for days now, trying to survive a horrible case of the flu. She had no idea what day or time it was at this point. She had hardly been able to stay awake for longer than twenty minutes.

She started to feel better today and was hoping that meant she was on the up and up. Although it was nice to have a couple of days relaxing at home, she wished that hadn't entailed also having the worst body aches and fever.

It was nice being home while she was sick. Her mom was very attentive and cared for her. She felt spoiled having someone making her soup, bringing her water, and keeping track of medicine. She felt less alone.

Oliver had been very kind as well throughout Macy's sickness, even though Macy told him to keep his distance so he wouldn't get sick too. Natasha didn't need both of them out of commission during the busy Harvest Festival week. Plus, she didn't need him seeing her so pale and sweaty.

She hoped today was the last day she needed to be on bed rest. Then maybe she'd be able to enjoy some Harvest Festival activities by Thursday. That was always her favorite day of events anyway. She found herself a little giddy thinking of experiencing the festival with Oliver this year.

She always thought fall was an incredibly romantic time of year. Everyone thought it was Christmastime, but she loved the leaves changing, the warm cozy beverages, the cute apple orchard dates; those are what she looked forward to.

Macy willed herself to move her legs and stretch her body. She pulled herself out of bed and made her way towards the bathroom. She stared in the mirror for a while and tried to manage the nest on top of her head that was her hair. After a warm shower and some clean clothes, she was starting to feel like herself again.

Her stomach growled loudly. She realized she hadn't eaten since breakfast, and it was already six o'clock. She made her way towards the kitchen and paused at the top of the stairs when she heard hushed whispering. She squinted her eyes and quietly leaned over the railings to hear better.

She normally wasn't an eavesdropper, but there was something about the tone of the voices that made her curious. She could tell it was her parents.

"Are they sure? They checked again and again?" her mom asked in a hushed tone.

"Yes, they checked multiple times. Those are the results," her dad said in his usual matter-of-fact tone.

"Well, what are we supposed to do?" Her mom sounded quiet but frantic. Her voice trembled as she spoke.

Something was wrong. Macy's heart rate started to increase as her mind began to flood with possibilities.

"I don't know, Rebecca. He said he would call me tomorrow with the next steps. I don't want you to get too worked up."

"Too worked up? Come on, Ron. If there is anything to get worked up about, it's this. What are we going to do? I-I just don't know what to think." Her mom was definitely holding back tears.

"I know, dear. I'm sorry. But we keep doing what we have been doing. We take it one day at a time." Her dad always sounded so calm and confident about everything, even when he was stressed about something.

"When are we going to tell the kids? They should know now because it's more serious than before." Rebecca asked. That felt like Macy's cue. She couldn't handle not knowing anymore.

"When are you going to tell the kids what?" she asked as she quickly walked down the stairs.

Her parents jolted their heads up and stared at Macy as she walked down the stairs. She was so winded from moving so

fast after being sick that she had to lean against the wall once she came down. Her parents sat on the couches; her mom's eyes were red from crying. Her dad was hunched over on the edge with his hands clasped together, resting on his knees. The scene made Macy nervous—really nervous.

“How long have you been listening, Macy?” her mom asked.

“Just long enough to hear that something is wrong. What's going on?” she demanded.

Her parents looked at each other, and her mom gave a pleading look to her dad as if to encourage him to talk with Macy.

Ron took a deep breath of acceptance. “Sit down, Macy. We need to talk.”

Macy quietly obeyed and sat down. Her breathing increased as she tried to prepare for whatever her parents were about to tell her.

“The doctor called me today with some results from the testing they did at my appointment. It wasn't great news. I want to be honest with you and just tell it to you straight. You're old enough to be a part of this.”

Macy's mind went crazy. This wasn't good. She could hardly keep it together.

“I'm sick, sweetheart. They found cancer in my lungs.”

Macy softly gasped; cancer. Her world completely shattered right in front of her.

Her mom tried to choke back a sob. The tears flooded her eyes.

“Now I know this seems scary, but I don't want you to worry, okay?” her dad said as he placed his hand on Macy's leg.

“Not worry?” Now it was her turn to sound panicked. “How can I not worry? You have cancer, Dad! How bad is it? What are the treatment options? I need more information.”

“We don’t know a lot of the information yet, but it’s stage four cancer. And the doctor said I’ll most likely need surgery and some other treatment.”

“Well, treatment is good, right? That sounds hopeful!”

“But to be honest, I’m not sure how much I’m up for at this moment.”

Macy shot her eyes up from the couch towards her dad. “What are you talking about ‘up for’? You aren’t going to fight this? Stage four is the worst kind, Dad. That usually means it’s too late. And you’re just going to die?” She knew that sounded harsh, but she couldn’t hide it anymore. Tears came to her eyes, and she didn’t try to hold them back.

“Honey, we don’t know what the future holds. But treatment is really hard on the body, and sometimes it makes your final days even worse instead of just enjoying them. There is still a lot we need to process with the doctors, but I want to enjoy my days with my family and not feel sick and miserable. But nothing is decided, okay?” Her dad was trying to be comforting, but he was still too honest.

Not fight this? How could he be so certain? How could he do this to her? To her mom and brother? Was he really just ready to give up?

Macy couldn’t handle it anymore. She stood up and racked her brain with what to do.

“Macy, sit down and let’s talk,” her mom said.

“No, I can’t just sit here and listen to him say how fine he is with completely abandoning us, not wanting to do anything to fight this.” She grabbed her purse off the side table where it lay and walked towards the door.

“Macy, wait—” her mom cried, trying to follow her out, but it was too late. Macy shut the door and ran towards the car.

She quickly turned the car on and put it in reverse. She could hardly see through her tears as she sped down the driveway.

Macy started to drive, but she didn't know where she was going. She couldn't stop the deep sobs that escaped her throat. What was happening?

*Cancer.*

She had heard about moments like this from friends whose loved ones got sick. She read about this moment in books and had seen it in movies, but she never thought it would happen to her. It felt like a dream or some alternate universe.

As she drove, she couldn't stop thinking about her dad and all the amazing memories they had together. It felt like years flashed before her eyes of their time together since she was little, to the day her dad dropped her off at college. What if those were the only memories she would have with her dad? What if he was never there to create more memories with her in the future? She was spiraling.

Before she knew it, she was parked outside of the Sandpiper Inn. She wasn't sure how she got there or why, but she sat in her parking spot and rested her head on the steering wheel. This all felt so heavy. She clasped the steering wheel as if it was the only thing holding her up.

She wasn't sure what to do next, but she decided to continue following her instincts. She wiped her tears, even though more continued to fall, and got out of the car. She sat in this feeling of wanting to be with someone but being too emotional to talk.

She walked into the inn and was grateful for the distraction of dinner wrapping up so no one noticed her. She quickly climbed the stairs but realized that she was still weak from being sick.

She eventually found herself outside of Oliver's door. She hesitated before she knocked, unsure if she wanted to disturb him. Would he be freaked out by how emotional she was? Or be turned away by how serious the situation was?

Macy decided not to overthink it. She knocked on his door and waited, anxiety building inside of her.

The door opened, and Oliver stood there with a surprised look on his face. Macy was slightly annoyed at how he looked absolutely perfect. He was in a pair of jogger sweatpants and a plain T-shirt. His hair was a smidge messy, and he wore a pair of glasses. Macy had never seen him so casual; he looked really good.

“Macy, what are you doing here?” He gave her a once over and Macy suddenly became aware that she was still in her sweatpants and slippers.

He furrowed his brows and a concerned look came over his face. “Is everything okay?”

Macy started to cry again and shook her head. Oliver grabbed her hand into his and guided her into his room. He walked her over to his chairs and sat her down. He grabbed her a blanket and draped it over her legs. He sat across from her and placed his hands on hers.

“What’s going on? Are you hurt?”

Macy shook her head. “No—I—I’m sorry. I just needed to see you and be with someone.”

Oliver nodded, still looking concerned. “Take your time.”

He was so sweet and patient with her that it brought a whole new wave of emotions and tears. He sat holding her hands and waited until she could finally compose herself long enough to talk.

She took a couple of deep breaths. “I just found out that my dad has lung cancer.”

His face went from surprised to empathetic at her news. “Aw, Macy, I’m so sorry. That’s—that’s not something I would ever wish on anyone.”

Macy suddenly realized that he was not unfamiliar with a parent being sick. “Your dad, he died of cancer, right?”

Oliver slowly nodded.

“Oh gosh, I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t be here talking to you about this then.”

“No, no, it’s completely fine.” He rubbed her arm. “If anything, I guess I understand a lot of what it’s like. It’s horrible to see a parent go through something like that. To get weak and then not feel like your parent anymore.” His voice trailed off.

Macy placed her hand on his arm. “How did you get through it? All I feel right now is pain.” She tried to choke back more tears from falling.

Oliver sat for a moment looking at the ground, lost in thought. “After a while, it feels like you just accept the reality. You try and fight it and pretend that it’s different. I guess that’s the denial part, but then one day, you wake up and accept it. And I knew that he wouldn’t want me to mourn and be miserable for too long. Instead, he would want me to move on and be happy—to remember the good times we had together. So I try to do that, for him. It isn’t easy, but I do my best.”

Macy hadn’t asked much about Oliver’s relationship with his dad. But she could tell it was a positive one.

“Do you miss him?” she asked.

“Every day,” he said without hesitation.

“I don’t think I’m strong enough to go through this,” Macy whispered, trying to control the tremor in her voice.

Oliver leaned forward and cradled Macy in his arms as she cried. She let herself be consumed by his comfort and strength and hoped that some of it would rub off onto her. All she could do was cry, but she didn’t want to move. As she sat in Oliver’s arms, she felt safe, and for a couple of minutes, maybe she could forget about the rest of the world.



## CHAPTER 24

## *OLIVER*

Oliver shut the door as Macy walked out. He took a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair. He felt exhausted.

Macy had stayed for two hours processing the news of her dad, and she also just cried in his arms. It felt like they moved to a new level in their relationship tonight. They'd seen each other in crisis with Mrs. Peterson, through excitement and joy on their dates and, of course, anger and frustration in their arguments. But tonight, they experienced what it was like to comfort in distress and grief.

Oliver had no idea how to really be there for Macy. He wanted to tell her everything was going to be okay, but he knew the reality of that—it wasn't always true. She tried to ask a few times about his dad and what it was like when Oliver found out about Leo's diagnosis. But Oliver wasn't sure how to respond; it felt different somehow. Although maybe that was still just the denial he was working through. Just like Macy, he never thought he'd be the person to hear the news that his dad was dying.

The questions transported him back in time to the day he got the devastating phone call.

Oliver remembered he had just left a date with Kendra, and he was headed back to his place. He was on cloud nine. He was dating a girl he liked, he had just landed a new client that was going to put him on the next track upward in his career, and that day he bought his new dream car. It felt like the world was in his corner and like nothing could bring him down.

Or so he thought.

His car phone rang and burst him out of his bubble of happiness. He saw it was his dad and figured it was another attempt to get him to come to the upcoming holiday celebration in Maine. He had tried to get out of so many holidays and celebrations with the family already that he was running out of excuses. He could tell his dad could see right

through the lies, but he never tried to address it. At least, not at the moment.

He denied the call and decided he didn't want anything to ruin his perfect mood.

When the phone rang again, Oliver's interest was piqued, and he decided to answer. His dad wouldn't call twice unless it was something important; it really wasn't like him.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Hey, son, I'm glad I caught you. You busy?" Leo's voice cracked on the other line. His dad always had this deep and husky voice. He had commanded every room he went into, and along with his height, he truly was a presence anywhere he went.

"No, not too busy. Sorry I missed you the first time. I was on the other line." He winced at his own lie. He didn't understand why he always felt the need to lie to his dad; he was the one person that Oliver felt was always on his side.

"No worries, you're a busy guy. How is your job going?"

Oliver was confused—was his dad really persistently calling just to ask about his job? Something seemed off.

"Uh—it's fine. I actually landed a new client today, which is exciting. Things are moving up, that's for sure." The line was quiet. The car's engine purred in the background.

"So what's going on, Dad? Everything okay?"

His dad sighed on the phone. "I guess I should just come out with it. I like to be a direct guy."

Oliver's heart dropped at the ambiguity.

"I had some scans that came back from the doctor that didn't look great about a month ago. You know how your mom always makes me go in for my annual appointments."

Oliver smirked a bit. His mom was always strict with the whole family about following through on their medical and dental appointments every year.

“They did some follow-up tests, and it doesn’t look good, son.” His dad’s voice cracked when he said *son*.

Oliver was speechless. He knew it had to be bad if his dad was calling him about it.

“Oliver, are you there?”

Oliver didn’t realize he had been quiet for what must have been over a minute. “Yeah, sorry, Dad. Are you sure? Did they run more tests?” Oliver knew he was sure.

“Yes, they’re sure. They haven’t given me much time left to live, but you know I’m a fighter. We’re going to do the best we can here.”

*I’m a fighter.*

Ever since his dad had passed, those words rang through Oliver’s mind all the time.

Anytime he was faced with opposition or a challenge, he leaned on that phrase. It made it feel like his dad was still with him.

Oliver looked out the window at the sea, slowly slapping against the shore. He wondered what his dad would think of Macy. He always made jokes about red-headed women and their tempers; boy, would he be spot on with Macy. She was a bold and fiery woman. He loved it.

But it didn’t matter if she was a redhead or not. Oliver knew his dad would be happy because Oliver was happy. Leo thrived when any of his kids were pursuing their passions or anything that gave them joy. That’s how he felt about Macy; she gave him a lot of joy.

Anytime Oliver was with her, he felt like time stood still. Their ability to talk about anything, the way she could point things out about how Oliver was feeling without him even realizing it—or, as he called it, “social working.” It all made him happy. She was different than any girl he had ever been with. And seeing her completely broken tonight, in tears with a shattered heart, caused his own heart to break.

He realized in that moment that he would do anything to make her pain go away, that he wanted to comfort her in all her times of grief and be there for her whenever she needed his strength. He wanted her burdens to be his too and to fight through the obstacles with her, knowing full well their first obstacle was right around the corner—their long-distance relationship.

In such a short amount of time, he had completely fallen for Macy.

There was another knock on Oliver’s door right as he was doing his final stretch, thinking about getting into bed early.

He hoped it wasn’t anyone else that needed to talk for a while, but he realized he didn’t have that many people left in Sandpiper Cove that he knew who would need to talk to him.

He opened the door and was surprised by his mother; she wore a concerned look on her face.

“Hi, dear. I just saw Macy run out of here—is she okay? She had tears streaming down her face, but she went out too quickly before I had a chance to talk with her. Do you know what she was doing here?”

Oliver felt cornered. He knew they had planned to wait to tell Natasha about their relationship, but he wasn’t sure how he could avoid it if he told her about why Macy was actually crying. Natasha didn’t know how close they were; it would seem weird that she came all this way to find comfort in Oliver if they hardly knew each other.

“Ah—she’s having a hard time. Here, come in.” Oliver opened the door wider for his mom to enter. She walked in and made herself comfortable on a chair, still with a concerned look on her face.

Oliver shut the door and sat on the edge of the bed in front of her.

“Macy’s dad was just diagnosed with cancer, stage four.” He decided to be direct. It was the Almada way to do it.

Natasha gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh no, that can’t be true.” She clicked her tongue. “That is

unbelievable. Poor girl, she's so young." Natasha shook her head. She truly seemed devastated by the news.

Oliver looked down at the ground and nodded. "Yeah, she's, of course, having a really hard time with it. She's really close to her family."

Natasha nodded. "That family is very close-knit. I've loved having her and Rebecca at our book club. Oh, poor Rebecca. I should give her a call sometime, but I'll wait until the news is more public."

The two sat in silence for a moment. "Did you talk with her about how you processed it?" Natasha eventually asked.

Oliver was surprised by the question. His mom never really brought up their dad's diagnosis and how they all processed it, at least not to him. He had kept his distance after he found out, except when it came close to the end, and he saw his family at the funeral. He and his mom didn't talk much afterward.

"Kind of. She asked how I felt when I learned the news about Dad, and I shared what I remembered. It was hard and not something that I think anyone expects to happen to them—until it does. I also remember feeling like I was too young to have my dad gone. It seemed like a movie. One I didn't want to be a part of."

Oliver paused, then continued when his mom hadn't said anything right away, "It's not something that I would ever wish on anyone," he said.

"Yes, of course, especially to someone with such young children. I hope that he can get treatment right away, and maybe there will be a miracle that takes place," Natasha said with a twinge of hope in her voice.

"That's the thing, her dad isn't sure if he wants treatment. He was talking about how hard it is to go through the treatment plan, and he isn't sure if he wants to do that."

"Oh dear, really?" Natasha seemed shocked. "Well, I guess it's everyone's own decision. I just wouldn't expect that. Ron isn't that old. How is Macy doing with that?"

“Not well. She feels like he won’t fight for their family and she’s taking it hard. Which is understandable.”

Natasha nodded. “Well, she can have as much time off as she needs to really process this. I know we’ve been short-staffed with a couple of workers being sick this week, but we will manage. Family is more important, especially at a time like this.”

Her words felt like a small dagger towards him. He wasn’t there for his family when his dad got sick and died—when they needed him.

“So, not to change the subject,” Natasha interjected, “but it sounds like maybe the two of you are close if she’s coming here to process it? Especially on her day off, after she’s been sick...” She trailed off, waiting for him to jump in. The look in her eye was filled with curiosity and hope.

Oliver let out a noise that sounded like a soft chuckle. “Yeah, ah—we’re close, I guess you could say.” He wasn’t sure why he suddenly got so embarrassed. Macy was going to kill him. He’d told Nick, Brent and now his mom about them in less than a week. All without her knowledge.

“I guess?” Natasha mimicked in a teasing tone.

Now Oliver smiled. “We’ve been seeing each other for a couple weeks now.”

Natasha’s eyes lit up. “You must have been very secretive about it, or I’ve been extremely busy because normally, I catch on to these things right away.”

“It’s been a little of both, Mom.” He laughed.

“And how is it going?” she asked.

Oliver smiled. “It’s going well. Nothing too much to report. For the record, I wanted to tell you right away because of the whole ‘I’m dating a co-worker thing,’ but she was too nervous about it. So you can’t tell her you know yet because I told her I wouldn’t say anything. I guess she probably wouldn’t care now, though. She has other things to worry about.”

Natasha placed her index finger in front of her lips. “I won’t say a word. I’m happy for you, son. She’s an amazing young woman.”

Oliver blushed. “She really is.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what are your plans for when you head home? Drew will be back soon, and I believe you plan to head back to Arizona?”

“That’s the question everyone is wondering. Truthfully, I have no idea what’s going to happen. We both don’t want to do long-distance. I mean, who really does? But she hasn’t decided where she’s going to move to yet. If it’s not Arizona, then I’m not sure. But I don’t want to pressure her at all—we honestly haven’t really talked about it much. She needs to make the decision on her own.”

“Of course. Well, it’s getting late, and I’m sure you’re as exhausted as I am from this crazy day.” Natasha stood up and headed for the door. Oliver stood up with her and walked her out.

“Goodnight, dear. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She smiled and then left.

Oliver locked the door and finally got ready for bed. As he prepared, he realized that was the most casual conversation about life that he’d had with his mom in a long time. There weren’t any arguments or moments when he felt angry. It just felt like a normal conversation someone would have with his mom about a girl he liked.

He smiled softly. He kind of liked it.



## CHAPTER 25

## MACY

Macy pulled the car up to the house. Most of the lights were still on, and she wondered if her parents were still talking in the living room. She didn't really want to see them right now. She had too many thoughts she needed to process through before she could talk with her dad again.

She quietly opened the door and saw the coast was clear. She could hear her mom and dad's voices coming from somewhere, but not the living room. Their voices were slightly raised and tense; it sounded like they were fighting. She quickly dropped her purse on the front table, kicked off her shoes and headed upstairs.

She couldn't imagine how her mom felt right now. The sadness and fear that must be consuming her. She would also be there for her mom; would that mean she would need to stay in Sandpiper Cove? She really didn't want to, but could she leave her mom alone if her dad died? The thought seemed too overwhelming right now. Macy felt that tight feeling in her chest again.

As she neared the top of the stairs, she looked up and was startled by her brother. He sat next to the railing, cradling his knees against his chest. His head leaned back against the railing with his eyes closed. He opened his eyes at the sound of her soft gasp.

"Sorry. You startled me," she said. "What are you doing?"

Timmy gave a solemn look and jerked his head towards downstairs. "They've been fighting for like an hour now. Mom's been crying a lot."

Macy could still hear her parents talking in the background. She wondered how long her brother had been sitting out here. She wasn't sure if he knew about their dad's cancer or not. If he didn't know, she didn't really want to be the one to tell him.

As if he could read her mind, he said, “I know about Dad. I heard the commotion from your conversation and then when you left, I came downstairs to see what was going on. Mom was in tears, so I figured something was up. They couldn’t hide it from me.” He softly sniffled.

Macy’s heart broke for her brother. It was one thing to lose your dad as a daughter, but as a son, that felt different. She knelt down on the ground and joined him on the floor. It felt nice to sit and relax for a moment; she was still so tired from being sick.

Macy and Timmy’s arms touched as she, too, rested her head back against the railing. She wasn’t sure what to say; what could she even say?

Nothing was going to make this better.

“I’m sorry, Timmy,” was all she could think of.

Timmy scoffed. “Why are you sorry? You didn’t give our dad cancer,” he said with a snark to his tone.

She didn’t take it personally, but hearing the words again felt like another dagger to her heart. Tears started to well in her eyes; she really didn’t want to cry in front of her brother, but she also wasn’t sure if she had any crying left in her. She thought she got it all out at Oliver’s.

Macy was incredibly grateful for how supportive and comforting Oliver was. She knew it was probably awkward for him; it’s not normal to have to walk through a huge family crisis with a girl you just started dating. But he allowed her to talk, sit in silence, and cry—exactly what she needed.

She wasn’t sure how similar his experience was with his dad. Oliver didn’t seem like he wanted to talk about it much. Just that it was sudden and incredibly hard. It didn’t seem like he had fully accepted his dad’s death, but that was an issue for another day.

Now, Macy felt like it was her turn to be a comfort to her brother. She didn’t want him to feel all alone.

“I know I didn’t give our dad cancer, Timmy. But I’m just sorry that you have to go through this too. It’s not something

anybody should. And I want you to know that I'm here for you—in whatever you need. I'm here in whatever capacity you want me.” She was trying to be empathetic and supportive, but she still expected a sarcastic, witty comment to follow. That was her brother's way of communicating.

She was surprised when instead, she was met with a nod. Her brother choked back some tears and then rested his head on her shoulder. The act brought another round of tears to Macy's eyes.

Macy leaned her head against her brothers and took a deep breath, trying to keep her breathing normal.

“We'll get through this. I'm not sure what the end result will be, but we have each other, and that's what matters. And we'll be there for Mom, too.”

The two sat on the ledge for a while until the voices died down and they couldn't hear their mom and dad anymore. They must have gone to their side of the house.

Macy and Timmy both took it as their cue to go to bed. She was half asleep anyway. Macy went to her room and collapsed onto the bed. She didn't care that she was still in her day clothes; she just wanted to curl up into a ball and wrap herself in her covers. Maybe if she was lucky, she'd disappear into the odyssey of her fluffy comforter and be lost from the world.

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The bright morning sun came bursting through Macy's unclosed curtains. Before she moved, she took a moment to comprehend what happened last night. Was that all real? Did her dad really say that he had cancer?

She wanted to go back to sleep and forget all over again, to go to a place where everything, and everyone, in her life was okay. She sighed. That, unfortunately, wasn't her reality, and she knew she couldn't hide away forever. As much as she wanted to.

Macy found her phone and checked the time. It was already nine o'clock; she had slept in way later than normal. She was exhausted from all the crying and stress on her body. She saw she had a text from Oliver already—her heart fluttered at the sight of his name.

*Good morning. I hope you got some sleep last night. I'm sure your mind was all over the place. Just know I'm here for you. There's no need to come in today if you aren't feeling up to it, but I can understand wanting to stay distracted too. Let me know if you need anything.*

He was so sweet. She still couldn't believe the man that she despised for being rude and inconsiderate had transformed right in front of her eyes into this kind and loving guy. She had always said to herself to never judge a book by its cover—that was definitely true with Oliver.

She texted back:

*Last night was rough. Although I slept in way later than I planned. I think I'll come in today. I need the distraction. Thanks again for being there for me last night.*

Macy put her phone down but immediately heard the chime from another message. She looked.

*Okay—I really look forward to seeing you soon.*

Macy's heart fluttered. It bothered her slightly how much he made her smile.

Her planned shift started at eleven o'clock. She was going to help with the lunch rush today with so many guests. She had about two hours to get ready and get there, so she had better start.

She was so emotionally drained that it felt like it took ages to get her clothes on and do her hair. She figured she needed some good food in her system to prep for the busy day. She grabbed her items and headed towards the kitchen. Both her parents and Timmy should be at work so she would have the house to herself.

Macy stopped in her tracks when she saw her dad sitting at the table, casually drinking a cup of coffee. "What are you

doing here? Don't you have work?"

She didn't mean for her tone to sound so accusatory; she was just surprised. Her dad's raised eyebrows showed he was too.

"I'm enjoying a cup of coffee on this beautiful morning. Is that okay with you?"

Macy looked down and headed towards the fridge. She pretended to gaze at the contents while she contemplated what to eat, but really she was just trying to decide what to say.

"Macy, we need to talk." Her dad had a confident and direct tone to his voice.

Macy sighed and turned around. It must have been important to him; he normally didn't skip work for anything. She leaned against the kitchen island and waited for what would come next. She really didn't want to talk about this—she wasn't ready—but she knew it would be inevitable.

She stared at her dad and waited for him to say the first words; she didn't know where to start.

"I stayed home today because I wanted to talk with you. I—I understand that last night was a lot of information, hard information. But you left before we could finish."

"What else is there to say, Dad? You're sick, and you're not doing anything about it." Her tone was sharper than she thought it would be.

"That's not what I said."

"Yes, it is, Dad." Macy was surprised at the anger that built inside of her. "Most people fight this. Most people want to live to see their children grow up, get married and have children. Don't you want to be a grandpa? Don't you care about any of that?"

"Of course, I—"

Macy didn't let him finish. "And what about Mom? She is not emotionally ready to go through this. She'd be devastated, and I won't be here to help her after you're gone. You're okay

with just leaving the love of your life to be alone for the rest of \_\_\_”

“You don’t think I’ve thought about that?” Now it was her dad’s tone that rose with frustration. Macy stopped. She very rarely saw her dad get angry at her.

“You don’t think this diagnosis is all I’ve been able to think about since the doctor called? I love you, your brother, and your mom more than anything in the world. My whole life has been devoted to providing for you all and giving you the best life that I can. That’s been my role as dad. But Macy, how can I give you the best life if you are stuck for years caring for a sick dad and watching me slowly die?”

The tightness in Macy’s chest became too much. A soft cry came from her throat. “Dad, I—”

“It’s not an easy choice to decide when I want to die. Because that’s basically what I’m deciding. Do I want to let nature take its course? I can fight it, but stage four cancer isn’t something that goes away easily. It’s a brutal process. I watched your grandma go through it for years, and it almost broke my heart.”

Macy remembered her grandma’s cancer diagnosis only slightly. She was so little when her grandma got sick. But she could recall seeing very little of her dad as he helped take care of her. She never thought about how that had affected him; she’d never needed to until now.

“And I *might* go into remission, but for how long? And then we’d have to do this all over again? I don’t want that for you. All I can think about is you and your mom, and I don’t want the last years of my life miserable and making my family go through a nightmare.” His voice softened as he tried to make his daughter understand.

Macy couldn’t help the tears fall from her eyes, and she tried to wipe them away quickly. “I’m sorry, Dad. It’s just scary.”

“I know, honey.” Her dad got up and walked towards her.

He wrapped his arms around Macy and pulled her in for a big bear hug. It was a hug that Macy had received her whole life. She remembered this hug the day she fell off her bike when she was nine. She remembered this same hug the day she found out she didn't get the lead in her high school play. And she remembered this same hug when her parents dropped her off at college.

Macy sobbed as she embraced her dad, trying to memorize how it felt to be in his arms. Because one day, she wouldn't be able to get his bear hugs anymore. And she never wanted to forget them.



## CHAPTER 26

## *OLIVER*

Although the morning looked beautiful and sunny, there was a gloom to its energy as Oliver ran across the beach's sand. After an exhausting night, it felt like torture getting up early to greet the emerging sun for a run. He knew he needed the exercise; it had been a while since he'd ran, longer than he wanted to admit. But Macy had continued to preoccupy his mind and time, making his evenings late and mornings early, which caused too many opportunities for an excuse.

Today, he awoke with worry for her. He had been where she was and knew that the fear, worry and grief could consume you. He worked to come up with a plan on what he could do this week to make things better for Macy. Would there be something that he could use as a distraction? Or would she want to sit and process how she felt about it some more? He dreaded the idea of more conversations. Sitting and talking about feelings wasn't something he was used to—or good at—but if she needed it, he would do it.

Oliver felt as if one of those hourglasses had flipped over and the sand was now moving quickly down the funnel. He only had about a week left before Drew was back. He needed to get back to Arizona; there would be no way his bosses would let him extend his trip, but time was going too fast. Especially with Macy's dad's new diagnosis, it felt like their chances to make this relationship work were getting smaller and smaller.

He truly didn't know what to do. He knew they needed to have a conversation about it, but would now be the best time? He knew the answer to that, no.

He wondered if, due to the circumstances, he could go back to Arizona, and they could try to make it work for a while. Maybe after they were apart, they would have more clarity about what they wanted. Drew said that worked for him and Casey.

But his heart ached at the thought of being away from her at all. Macy brought out a part of him that he truly had never experienced before. His anger and bitterness toward the world and his circumstances seemed to sit on the back burner. He smiled more than he had in any relationship before. She understood him and made him feel important, even with his flaws. Plus, she didn't put up with any of his attitude or unfavorable traits. He smiled as he pictured her "unimpressed" look that he saw so often.

He loved that look.

After struggling for years to feel valued and seen by the important people in his life, he felt like he was finally under the spotlight of Macy's loving eyes.

There had to be a way to make this work. That small voice kept whispering in his mind that Macy should come to Arizona. He tried over and over again to dismiss the thought, knowing she had to make the decision on her own, but he felt like it was so obviously the answer to their problem. Why hadn't she brought it up yet? Was she unsure of their relationship?

He knew it was early still, but it wasn't as if she would be leaving anything to try a life in Arizona. She was ready to start anew anyway. He tried to not let it bug him.

Social work was so broad, and she had decided she wanted to try and work with senior citizens—maybe if he could find some jobs in Phoenix for her? If he could show her that there was a chance at this relationship, that they could both get what they wanted, she would be willing. And if it didn't work out, then she could still live in a great city, in the warmth like she wanted, but they wouldn't have to see each other. It's not like Phoenix was small.

Macy was going through a hard time. If he could just take the "job thing" off her plate and find her one, then that would take some of the pressure off of her.

Oliver started to feel more and more confident with his plan as he ran up to the Sandpiper Inn. The backyard patio was packed with people utilizing the patio furniture for their

morning cup of coffee. Although it was almost November, people still wanted to sit outside to take in the view of the ocean in the morning—bundled up at least. He couldn't blame them; the view was definitely growing on him too.

Oliver got back to his room, and after a shower and shave, he pulled open his computer and started looking at social work jobs with the elderly in Phoenix with a smile on his face. He spent the next hour searching and saving a few he thought she might be interested in.

He had saved five jobs before his phone rang and he saw his mom calling.

“Hey, Mom. What's up?”

“Hi, dear. I need to run to the store real quick. Would you be able to cover the front desk until Macy gets in? It's only about an hour, but with all the new guests, I don't want to leave the front desk empty in case someone needs something or has a question.”

“Yeah, that's fine. I'm ready anyway. I'll be down in a minute.”

“Thank you. I'm going to head out now. Please give Macy a hug for me when she comes in, okay?”

“Will do.” Oliver hung up. He was surprisingly slightly relieved that his mom knew about him and Macy. Even though he was a grown adult, he still felt nervous dating someone in secret. He would occasionally say to Macy, “When we get caught,” and she would laugh and make fun of him for acting like a high schooler.

Oliver closed his computer and headed downstairs, but not after he made another cup of coffee. He knew he was going to need it.

As he walked down the stairs, he realized how relaxed he felt at the Sandpiper Inn. It had been about a month since he'd arrived, and everything about the place made him feel comfortable. He was used to the smell of “old lady” perfume, as Drew called it, and the quiet, especially around the inn at nine o'clock when over half the guests were in bed already.

Although he was a city boy and enjoyed the constant noise, he could see why people would want to stay in a place like Sandpiper Cove. Especially people like Scarlett and Casey, who'd lived their whole lives with constant noise.

Oliver got situated behind the desk and tried to organize it before Macy came in. Yesterday was such a whirlwind that both he and his mom didn't have the energy to organize before they checked out for the day. He wanted it to be tidy for Macy.

He shuffled some papers into a folder when a shadow appeared over the desk. He looked and flinched; his brother Drew stood in front of him with a big smile on his face.

"Drew?" he asked.

"Hey, brother! You look pretty good standing back there!" It was evident from his tan skin and bright smile that Drew had just come back from a month-long honeymoon. He looked even more in shape than before he left, which seemed impossible. He always admired how even while having corporate desk jobs his whole life, Drew had always been able to stay healthy and in shape.

"It's good to see you, but I'm a bit confused. I thought you had another week left of your honeymoon?" Oliver tried to sound excited to see him, but he couldn't shake the anxiety that now currently raced through his body—this cut down his time with Macy, quickly. His visual of the hourglass went into overdrive as the sand rushed towards the bottom.

"Yeah, that was the plan, but Casey got really bad food poisoning a couple of days ago and was miserable. She just wanted to come home. So we got back last night, and while she rests today, I figured I'd come in and help. I know how crazy Harvest Festival week is," he said with a laugh.

"Well, that's awesome that you can help. Thanks, man. It's good to have you back. Sorry to hear Casey's sick. Did you know Nick's in town too?"

"No way! Well, look at that, a little brother reunion. We'll have to get together for dinner at the Grill or something with

all of us together—that is, if Ryan can sneak away from work for like a second.” Drew rolled his eyes.

Their brother Ryan was incredibly busy with his career, just like the stereotypical Almada boys always were.

“That would be great. I’ll have to let Brent know.”

Drew walked around to the other side of the desk, pulled out one of the high-top chairs and sat down.

“So, you going to fill me in on your honeymoon?” Oliver asked. Drew seemed pleasantly surprised by the question.

“The honeymoon was great! We traveled a lot, but thankfully, all the flights were on time and we didn’t have to deal with any issues there—that’s always my least favorite part about traveling. The resorts that Casey found were incredible. She really has expensive taste.” He laughed. “But everything was beautiful, and it felt like the perfect getaway that we’d been waiting for so long to take. It’s been a wild ride between the two of us to get to this point, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He truly seemed like a man in love.

Oliver remembered that they weren’t together for a couple of months before Casey ended up moving to New York City to be with Drew. He couldn’t help but relate it to his situation with Macy and had some questions.

“When Casey decided to leave Los Angeles and come live in New York City to be closer to you, what did that conversation look like?”

Again, Drew seemed surprised by the question. Oliver realized that did sound oddly specific to someone who had no idea what Oliver was contemplating.

“I didn’t really have a say in her moving, honestly,” Drew said. “She just showed up in New York and said that she wanted to leave California and was taking a job in New York City. She had one lined up already and said it was what she was doing. I hadn’t even agreed to get back together with her at that point. She is one determined lady.”

“So you didn’t ask her to move? She just decided on her own? Did you have any conversation about that beforehand?”

Drew nodded. “We had loads of conversations about it. When she was in Sandpiper Cove with me, and we started to get more serious, we talked a lot about where each of us individually wanted to live since I was debating between here and New York. It felt like a decision we were both individually making but at the same time as the other. And then, when she left to go back to California, I decided to take the job. But we both wanted to be in Sandpiper Cove. We just ran from the idea for a while. It was nice when we finally got it together and were able to move back.” He smiled.

Oliver nodded.

“Why do you ask?” Drew said, tilting his head. “What’s been going on here?”

“Oh—just been busy working and trying to figure out some things.”

Almost as if it were a cue, Oliver caught Macy’s red hair out of the corner of his eye as she walked through the front door. He stared at her as she walked in. She wore jeans with a tank top and cardigan, dressed for fall. He must have been staring for longer than he should have since he heard Drew say under his breath, “Ah, I think I understand what *some things* are.” He chuckled.

Oliver didn’t care. He just smiled at Macy as she timidly walked towards the front desk, aware that someone else sat with Oliver.

“Hey,” she said as she approached the desk. She looked towards Drew. “Hi, I’m Macy.” She extended her hand towards his across the counter.

Drew stood up and shook it. “Hi, Macy. I’m Drew Almada.”

Macy’s eyebrows raised and she looked at Oliver. “Oh, Drew. You’re early.”

Drew softly laughed. “Yes, we ended up cutting the honeymoon short due to a case of food poisoning, but I now understand why everyone is so caught off guard by my arrival.” He smirked.

Macy's face turned bright red. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I just meant we weren't expecting you—but what a nice surprise. Glad to have you back." Macy faked a smile that only Oliver would know was fake. He could tell her head was spinning as she calculated a timeline, just like his.

"No worries. I'm only teasing."

"Drew!" They all jumped as Natasha's voice boomed through the front lobby. Natasha hurried over to the front desk and almost threw the bag she carried on the ground. She ran to the back and gave her son a long hug. "Oh, it's so good to see you! What are you doing back here?"

Drew couldn't help himself; he rolled his eyes. "Wow. I'm realizing I should have just stayed home with Casey today."

Natasha looked confused. Drew shook his head, trying to brush off the comment, not wanting to elaborate.

"Long story short, Casey wasn't feeling well so we got home last night. Thought I would come offer some help. I know how crazy Harvest Festival week can be."

Still holding onto his arm, she gave it a squeeze. "I'm thrilled to have you back and can't wait to hear all about your trip. When Casey feels better, I'm going to take you to the Grill for dinner, yes?"

"Yes, ma'am," Drew responded with a smile.

"Well, I'm actually glad you're here. I'm wondering if you and Oliver can come to the office and help me out with something?" She picked up her bag and Drew quickly took it out of her hands.

"Of course," he said. Drew turned to Macy. "It was nice to meet you, Macy."

Macy smiled politely back and nodded. "You too, Drew."

Natasha ran around the desk and gave Macy a big hug. "It's good to see you, dear," she said in her motherly tone.

Natasha and Drew headed back to the office, with Natasha asking him questions about the trip.



Oliver looked at Macy with a soft smile. “Hi,” he said.

“Hey,” she said back.

“I have to get back there, but when I come back, I have something I want to talk with you about, okay?” he said as he lightly squeezed her hand that rested on the counter.

Macy nodded. “Sounds good.”

He stepped away to the office to join his mom and Drew, but he was giddy with excitement. He couldn’t wait to share his plan with Macy.

## CHAPTER 27

## MACY

Macy couldn't believe how red her face still was from her first interaction with Drew. She felt so embarrassed by her obvious disappointment at him being there early. When he introduced himself, all she heard was that her time with Oliver was being cut short. With Drew home and Oliver not needed at the inn, there wouldn't be a reason for him to stay; or would there be?

In such a short amount of time, she realized she had fallen for Oliver. In all the romantic movies that she'd watched over the years, she had always laughed at the main characters and their apparent ignorance. She would call them crazy and naive to believe that they could love someone so much that they just met. Yet here she was, in the same situation, falling head over heels for a man she'd only known for a month.

She now had a lot more empathy for those characters; she understood the dilemma and emotions that they faced. She would have to go back to watch them with a new lens. Maybe she'd enjoy them more.

There wasn't time to discuss it with Oliver since both his brother and, eventually, his mother joined their conversation, but she had some time now while they were in their meeting to think it through. She wasn't sure what he would say. Her mind raced with this big thing that Oliver wanted to discuss with her.

Was it about their relationship? Or about Drew coming back early?

She didn't think it had anything to do with that because he seemed slightly excited about whatever he wanted to share with her—like he had something planned he wanted to say to her before they saw each other today. It almost killed her to wait this long to find out.

Macy's stomach turned, and she realized that this added stress was not helping her already high anxiety level with everything else she was going through.

She was thankful that she had the chance to talk with her dad that morning, although it was very emotional. They needed that honesty on the topic, and she was so grateful that her dad opened up about how he was processing the news. It helped her to be less angry and see more of the internal battle and pain that he was going through. It wasn't something her dad openly shared with many.

What she needed to do was look at this situation as one of her social work crises, and advise herself just like she would advise any of her clients. Maybe that would help her get a clear mindset on how to process it all.

Macy decided it was time for a much-needed distraction and went to work on her to-do list. It was almost time for the lunch rush, so she helped put the dining area together and cleaned off any messy tables. She refilled the coffee maker and grabbed a cup for herself in the process. That was one of the big perks of working at the Sandpiper Inn, free coffee anytime she wanted. Plus, an endless supply of those delicious seashell chocolates Natasha always kept behind the front desk.

She tried to avoid the guests as much as possible because she really wasn't in the mood for small talk, but she gave polite smiles to everyone walking by. Oliver wasn't kidding when he said they had a busy day yesterday. It felt like it was a complete turnover of guests from when she worked the week before.

Macy walked back to the desk and sat down with her hot cup of coffee. The fresh coffee was so hot the warmth seeped through the cup and almost burned her hand, but it oddly felt good.

She turned to the computer and decided to check on some emails, but the computer was frozen and wouldn't turn on. She tried all the tricks to make it work, even the basics of plugging it back in, but nothing helped.

Macy sighed. She just wanted one thing to go well for her today. She looked around and saw Oliver's computer sitting in his bag on the floor. He must have forgotten it when he went to meet with his mom and Drew.

She figured it would be safe to use his computer instead for a while. He had let her do it plenty of times before, and she knew that passcode already. Macy reached down, grabbed the computer and logged in.

He had clearly been working on it this morning since he had a ton of tabs open. Macy was about to minimize the tabs when something caught her eye.

The words, *social work jobs*, were the title of some of the tabs. Her eyebrows furrowed as her curiosity piqued. As she started to browse, she saw keywords like social work, senior citizens, elderly and full-time across the page.

She smiled as she wondered what Oliver was up to. She thought maybe he had finally become more interested in her career in social work and wanted to see some of the possible jobs she could get into. How thoughtful of him to put in the effort to learn more about what she did. Maybe she should do the same thing for architecture.

She explored the jobs he had looked at and surprisingly found a few of them interesting.

But as she continued to search, she realized there was a similarity between all these possible jobs; they were all located in Phoenix, Arizona. A pit in her stomach formed as she went back and forth between the tabs looking through the jobs again just to be sure she was right in her assessment.

Yes, all the jobs were located in Arizona.

A mixed feeling of disbelief, confusion and anger coursed through her body. Why was he looking at jobs in Arizona for her? Her mind tried to reassure her that maybe he was just curious about jobs, but his search history was still set in Phoenix because that's where he had last looked. But another part of her wondered if he was trying to find a job for her there. When she saw that he had clicked, *I'm interested—request more information* on one of the jobs, it felt like the final dagger to her heart.

Did he just assume that she was going to move to Arizona to be with him? Anger took the center of her mixed bag of

emotions. Had Oliver learned nothing about her history with Dylan? She had said over and over again how much she didn't want to repeat history and just follow a boy blindly across the country just so she could be with him.

Macy felt disrespected and dumbfounded that Oliver would ignore her wishes so blatantly. She started to tear up as the betrayal kicked in.

All she wanted was to find someone that would let her put herself first and respect the fact that she needed to make her own decisions for once. And she thought Oliver was that guy.

Her mind wondered if this was the thing that he wanted to talk with her about. He was so proud that he had found her a job and she could now move with him, and everything would be great. He thought that she would be happy and he could get his way of going back to his normal reality with her tagging along.

Why did she have to be the one that moved anyway? What if she wanted to go to Texas instead? Would he be willing to move there to be with her? He had made his answer clear already on that. He wasn't moving anywhere.

Macy couldn't help but feel exhausted. Why was she always the one that had to sacrifice? Why did she have to constantly go out of her comfort zone while others sat contentedly in theirs?

Now, she was thankful that Oliver was in a meeting because she had no idea what to say to him. He could take all the time he needed. Scenarios ran through her mind of what she wanted to say to him, but she was working to cut down on the drama.

How could she be with someone who so obviously disregarded her desires and needs? She had thought he would be different. Just a few days ago she had told him she loved him. Now she was left feeling like one of those characters in the movies who felt duped when the reality of their ignorance came at them full force.

Macy fought back tears as the frustration continued to build inside of her. She closed the computer; unable to handle looking anymore. A group of guests came down the stairs, excitedly chatting away, so she quickly turned her chair away from them and stared at the back wall. She didn't want anyone to see her cry.

She was working to compose herself when she heard someone clear their voice behind her. Someone was at the front desk and clearly needed something. She wiped her eyes one last time, took a deep breath, and tried to put on her professional face.

She turned around with a fake smile to greet the young woman standing in front of her.

The young woman had dirty blonde long hair and wore a pair of fashionable reading glasses. She had on a gorgeous long fall dress with what looked like a matching purse. Macy felt slightly intimidated. This woman obviously had good style. Macy saw she had a small carry-on bag with her and figured she must be checking into the inn.

“Hi, welcome to the Sandpiper Inn. How can I help you? Are you checking in today?” She did her best to sound perky and joyful but then her voice cracked. The young woman didn't seem to notice or really care what Macy said. She just looked around the inn with a questioning look on her face.

Not even making eye contact with Macy, she answered, “Hi, yeah, I'm not checking in, actually. I'm looking for someone that I think is working here.”

Macy tried not to make a face at her and her rudeness but instead continued to try and be professional. “Okay. What is their name?” she asked.

“Oliver Almada. I'm not one hundred percent sure if he's here, but I think his mom owns the inn or something.”

Macy's eyebrows raised in surprise. Who was this woman, and why was she looking for Oliver? She tried to rack her brain and think of any gorgeous woman that Oliver had forgotten to mention was coming to visit; she knew it wasn't

his sister. She had seen Penny plenty of times at the Bluebird Café.

“Um yeah, he has been around here. He’s actually working right now covering for his brother. Although, his brother just got back today—” Macy realized she was rambling and giving out pointless information. “He’s currently in a meeting in the back office, but he should be coming back out shortly if you want to wait?”

The woman looked slightly annoyed, but Macy could tell she was also trying to put on her nice face towards Macy. Macy could not figure out how Oliver would know anyone as snotty as this.

“Yes, I can wait. I guess. It was a long flight, so can I just sit over on the couches and get some coffee?”

Macy nodded. “Absolutely, that would be fine. Can I get you anything else?”

“No, but could you possibly tell him I’m here or something? Maybe he can step out of his meeting?”

Macy was definitely not going to ask him to do that. She didn’t want to talk to Oliver for any reason at the moment, but she figured this woman wouldn’t know if she didn’t.

“Yes, I can do that,” she lied. “Who can I tell him is here to see him?”

“You can tell him his fiancée is here to see him,” she said with a slight smile.

Macy’s heart dropped. She couldn’t stop her mouth from slightly falling open.

“Fiancée?” was all she could think of saying.

“Kendra?” a low surprised voice said from behind Macy. She turned around to see Oliver standing there, with Natasha and Drew behind him.

Macy looked from Kendra to Oliver repeatedly, unable to wrap her mind around what was happening.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.



Macy wanted to know the same thing.

## CHAPTER 28

*OLIVER*

Oliver stood in disbelief as he stared at his worst nightmare. Kendra and Macy stood across from each other at the front desk, with his mom and brother behind him.

What was she doing here? And did she just say fiancée? He was beyond confused and starting to panic.

“Oliver, I’ve been calling and calling, and you wouldn’t answer. So, I hopped on a plane to come see you for myself. I called your boss, and he said that you would be here.”

He was going to have words with his boss, that was for sure.

“Did you ever think that there was a reason I wasn’t answering, or maybe you didn’t get the very direct hint from my phone call a couple weeks ago to leave me alone?” His voice was stern; he couldn’t hide the anger. By the look on Macy’s face, Kendra was already too close to ruining everything.

“Yes. I got your message loud and clear, but you can’t just leave without having a conversation. We need to talk about what happened and doing it in person is best. So I came to you.” For someone who Oliver thought was completely insane, she sounded incredibly calm and confident.

“I’m sorry. I’d like to jump back to the part where you said, fiancée?” Macy chimed in.

“Same,” he heard Drew whisper behind him to Natasha. Oliver ignored it.

“She’s not my fiancée,” he said quickly.

“Oliver, stop,” Kendra said. “We were engaged for a year after dating for two. You can’t just dismiss that history so quickly.”

Macy’s mouth dropped. “You were engaged for a year?” she asked directly to Oliver.

Kendra looked questioningly at Macy and then realized. “Ah, you must be the new girlfriend, huh?”

“Leave her out of this,” Oliver said sternly through his teeth towards Kendra. “This is between you and me. If you really want to talk, fine, we can talk. Meet me over there.” Oliver pointed towards the bottom of the stairs.

Kendra gave a satisfied smile. “Fine, I’ll meet you over there.” As if it was her idea. She turned towards Macy with a sarcastic smile. “Nice to meet you, Macy.” As she walked away, Oliver was so angry it felt like his blood could boil.

He turned to Macy. “Macy, you have to let me explain.” He took a step towards her but was greeted with a hand raised signaling him to stop.

“I gave you plenty of opportunities to tell me about this. You literally said you were in a long-term relationship with her, but oh wait, of course you tried to hide that part too. And it was only after I called you out on it that you even told me about it! But you could have told me you were *engaged*, Oliver. In what appears to be a very recent relationship. How could you not tell me?”

Oliver felt guilt sweep across his body. “Because I didn’t want anyone to know. It was a messy breakup, and I needed to get away from it, which meant I didn’t want to sit and talk about it all the time. In my mind, it’s done. I’ve moved on. She’s not a part of my life anymore.”

“Well, does she know that?” Macy almost yelled. “Because it seems to be that she still thinks you’re in a relationship.”

“Sorry to interrupt, but maybe you want to take this somewhere more private?” Drew whispered to Oliver.

“Don’t worry about it, Drew. It seems to me that this conversation is over. I think I will take that personal day today.” Macy bent down, grabbed her bag and walked away from the front desk.

“Macy—” Oliver tried to go after her but felt a strong hand on his shoulder holding him back. “Give her a minute, Oliver.

Nothing good can happen in a moment like this,” Natasha said.

Oliver yanked himself away from her touch. “No, I have to go after her. I can’t lose her. I need her to understand that it’s not what it seems like.”

“I understand, but you need to give her a minute to gather her thoughts. Going after her won’t help in this moment, trust me.”

“Trust you?” Now it was Oliver’s turn to be upset. “Why would I trust you, Mom? I don’t even know you. And what do you care about my life and what I lose? You never cared growing up, and I’m sure you couldn’t care less now.”

“Hey, man, don’t take it out on her,” Drew defended his mom.

“No, it’s okay, Drew,” Natasha said. “Oliver, I’m starting to understand how much you feel that way. I’m just trying to help you out with Macy and I think she could use some space, even if it’s just for a few hours.”

Oliver still didn’t feel reassured, and the anger he felt continued to rise. “Well, that *would* be something you would recommend, space. You’re pretty good at giving that yourself—too bad I was the one who got all of it.”

With that, Oliver raced out the door and tried to follow Macy. It looked like she went out the side door, and he wondered if he could catch her in the parking lot. He saw her just about to get into her vehicle.

“Macy!” he called and sprinted towards her.

She looked towards him but didn’t have enough time to escape before Oliver reached her.

“Macy,” Oliver huffed, trying to catch his breath. “Please, you have to let me explain.”

“What is there to say, Oliver? You clearly love keeping things from me, so why should I be surprised by this?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the extent of my relationship with Kendra. I promise I was going to eventually.

I just didn't want it to freak you out that I was in a serious relationship not that long ago. No one knew about it, and I just wanted to keep it that way. Plus, I was still processing the breakup and had a lot going on. I wasn't in a great place when I came here, and I hoped that coming to Sandpiper Cove would help me heal and move on; that I could forget about Kendra and what she did."

"What did she do?" Macy asked with no sympathy in her voice.

Oliver sighed. "She cheated on me."

Macy was silent. She just stared, a little more emphatically, at Oliver.

"We had been together for years and engaged for a year. She had started to complain a lot that we didn't have a wedding date set and that she really hadn't met any of my family. But I think it was because I always knew she wasn't the person I was supposed to end up with. She was amazing when we first started dating. We had so much in common and really enjoyed hanging out. But after we got engaged, she turned into a different person. She was discontent with everything and always complaining."

He never thought he'd be giving this much detail, out in a parking lot, to Macy about his relationship with Kendra, but she was right; she had the right to know.

"One night, I went through her phone to look for something and I saw the texts. It was apparent the relationship had been going on for a while. It wasn't just a one-time thing. I confronted her and said that I didn't want anything to do with her anymore. I asked her to leave and never come back. She could keep the ring if she wanted to and sell it. I never wanted to see it again."

Macy's face softened as she listened to Oliver share. He hoped his vulnerability was helping because it sure felt uncomfortable to tell her all the details.

"We hadn't talked since that night. I continued to ignore her phone calls and texts, and that's when I decided to come to

Sandpiper Cove to get away for a while. I figured some distance would give some time for her to get the hint. Apparently, she didn't. But I promise you, Macy, it's over between us. The night we talked about it on our first date, I called her that night and reiterated I wanted her to stop calling me. That I didn't want to see her anymore. I'm furious she had the audacity to come here." He shook his head, still in disbelief that Kendra was sitting in the Sandpiper Inn lobby waiting for him.

"Please believe me, Macy. The only reason I didn't want to tell you was because I have such a hard time opening up. This is on me. I realize that. Please don't give up on us because of my stupidity."

Macy sat there quietly for a moment and then said, "Why are you looking at jobs for me in Arizona?"

Now it was Oliver's turn to be quiet. "What? How do you know about that?"

"That's not an answer."

"That's what I was going to surprise you with. I—I looked for social worker jobs in Phoenix that you might like. I thought maybe you could look at them and see if you would be interested in any of them. Possibly want to interview for one or two of them. I know we haven't really talked about what was going to happen after I left Sandpiper Cove, but I thought, if you'd consider Phoenix, then maybe we could really make this relationship work."

Macy raised her eyebrows, and Oliver quickly realized she wasn't as excited about his search as he was.

"So you wanted to just apply to jobs for me so I can just move to Arizona and make your life easier?" Her tone was short and curt.

"That's not what I said. I said I was just looking at options, to see if there was something you'd even like. I wasn't going to act. I just wanted to show you some—take the pressure off you. I know it's been stressing you out, and I thought with

everything going on in your life, having something off your plate would help.”

“But why did you just assume I would move to Phoenix?”

Her comment hurt. “What do you expect me to do, Macy?” Now it was his turn to get mad. “I have an established career in Phoenix. A condo, a whole life. I’m happy there, and I can’t just pack up and leave to take a chance somewhere else. Maybe it would be different if you were established somewhere too, but you’re not. You’re actively looking for somewhere to go, and all of your criteria point to Phoenix—Phoenix with me. But you won’t even mention it. It seems so obvious to me that it’s the best choice for us.”

Macy continued to just stare at him.

He continued, “I’m crazy about you, and I’m desperately trying to make this relationship work. I thought you wanted to see where this relationship went too.” He laid it all out there.

“I do want to see where this goes. The feeling is mutual, Oliver. But I just wanted to make that decision for myself.”

“Well, have you? I mean, we’re getting close to the end of my time here, Macy, even before Drew got back here early. What’s your plan? Are you in this or not? Have you *considered* coming to be with me?”

“Of course I have,” she sounded offended. “But it’s not an easy decision for me. I don’t have the luxury like you do to not have to sacrifice anything.”

Oliver scoffed. He didn’t even want to dignify that statement with a response.

“I’m trying to figure out what’s best for me, Oliver. And I thought you understood that. I just spent years of my life wasted on someone whom I had no future with, and I don’t want to make the same mistake again.”

“Do you think we have no future?” After he asked the question, a part of him wished he could take it back. He wasn’t sure if he wanted the answer.



She responded quickly back, “I did think we had a future together, but now I’m just not sure.”

The two sat in silence for a moment, both staring intently at each other.

“Well, Macy, if you’re not in this, and you don’t see the future with me like I do with you, then I guess it’s better to know now so I’m not the one wasting my time.” He turned around and walked back to the inn without another glance back. He heard her get into her car and slam the door.

Now, he had someone else to confront.

## CHAPTER 29

## *OLIVER*

Oliver walked into the inn, furious. This day was far different than what he hoped it would be. He looked around the lobby and there was no one in sight except for Kendra. She sat with her legs crossed, scrolling through her phone. She looked so comfortable and relaxed there; it drove him mad.

How dare she come here and screw everything up.

She had taken so much from him already, a future life, happiness, a part of his dignity and respect. Although he was grateful to not be in a relationship with her anymore, especially after realizing more the type of person she was, he still acknowledged the pain that she caused.

Kendra looked up to see Oliver standing there, and a big smile appeared on her face. Oliver walked over.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to break up your little fling. Hopefully Macy wasn’t too upset,” she said with fake sympathy.

“Stop with the dramatics, Kendra. Why are you here? Just to ruin my life some more?”

Kendra’s face softened and she took a deep breath. “You’re right. I’m sorry. You know I only know how to cope through sarcasm and humor.”

He was well aware.

“I just—I miss you so much. And I hate that we haven’t fully talked. I know what I did was wrong, but I only did it because I was nervous about getting married. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I was just really scared and made some bad choices as a way to cope with that fear.”

Oliver looked at her bewildered. “So you cheated on me because you love me? Do you hear that logic?”

“I know it sounds complicated but—”

“See Kendra, that’s the thing. It’s not that complicated. I could have *maybe* thought about forgiving you if you had made one mistake. If it was a moral lapse of judgment out of fear. But that’s not what it was, like you claim. You were in a relationship with someone else. You actively, over and over again, decided to betray and hurt me. And although I never believed it when we were dating, I now realize that I deserve better than that. I deserve to be with someone who respects me and loves me for who I am.”

Kendra looked at him with raised eyebrows. “Wow. Where did that come from? You sound like a different person,” she scoffed.

A small smile crept across his face. “I’ve had someone help me realize all of that lately. And I found someone who respects me for me and would never do anything to hurt me. I’m sorry that couldn’t be you, truly. We had some great years together. But we aren’t meant to be Kendra. You need to move on.” He found his voice becoming less angry as he talked.

Although he was upset and hurt, what he said was true. They did have some good years together, and at one point, he did love her too.

Kendra stared at him blankly for a minute, unsure of what to say.

“Fine, if that’s what you really want. You don’t want to fight for me, then I’ll move on.” She turned around and grabbed her purse and bag. She looked at him, and for a split second, he saw the warmth of the woman he had loved at one point.

“Goodbye, Kendra.”

She nodded and headed towards the door. Oliver stood there and waited until the front door of the inn had slammed shut before he turned around to make sure she was gone.

Thankfully, he was completely alone in the inn lobby because tears unexpectedly started to emerge. And he couldn’t stop them from rapidly falling. He couldn’t remember the last

time he cried, and it felt like years of tension, pent-up anger and pain came rushing out.

He quickly climbed the stairs and headed towards his room. Just before he opened the door to go inside his room, he stopped. He felt a pull in a different direction. He hesitated for a moment and then decided to follow the nudge.

After walking a little further down the hallway, he knocked on a door. He tried to compose himself as he waited.

He looked up as the door opened and his mom stood there. She looked at Oliver, her broken and hurt son, and her face was instantly filled with compassion and concern.

“Oh, dear, come here.” Natasha held out her arms, and Oliver collapsed into her embrace. He sobbed in her arms as she held him standing in the entryway of her suite. She closed the door behind him and ushered him over to the couch.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s happening,” was all he could say as he sat on the couch and wiped his eyes.

“You’re experiencing emotions, honey. It’s not a bad thing. You’ve been keeping so much inside for so long.” Natasha grabbed a box of tissues and came back and sat on the couch with him. “Today was a lot for you, I’m sure.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. I shouldn’t have said those things to you. I just, I just have so much anger and bitterness towards my childhood and missed you in my life. I’ve been holding onto it for so long, but I don’t want to anymore.”

He finally composed himself and could look at his mom.

“I know I wasn’t there for you a lot Oliver, and I’m so sorry. But it didn’t take away from how much I loved you. And I would have dropped anything to be there for you when you needed me. But that’s the thing, you never needed me. You didn’t want me around. So I tried to give you space until you were ready. I’m sorry if I should have pushed harder, but I didn’t want to push you further away from the possibility of a relationship between us.”

Natasha gently placed her hand on Oliver’s arm.

“I’m so proud of the man that you’ve become, Oliver. And I know your dad was too. We have loved watching you start your career and build a life for yourself. And although I didn’t know, you were also trying to grow our family. That’s all amazing things to be proud of.”

Oliver felt a twinge of guilt. “I should have told you about Kendra. I just didn’t want to deal with the ‘meet the family’ drama, especially because it was right when Dad got sick.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me. It’s your life, and it’s whenever you’re ready. But I just want you to know that I want to be a bigger part of your life.”

Oliver nodded. “I would like that too.” He gave a soft smile.

Natasha patted his arm. “I’m very sorry about today. I’m sure that’s not how you wanted the day to go. How is Macy doing? I can’t believe how overwhelming the last two days must have been for her.” She shook her head.

“I’m honestly not sure what’s going to happen there, Mom. She’s incredibly hurt, which is understandable. And I know I messed up. I apologized. But I just didn’t want her to be consumed with the fact that I had been engaged. But I promise I would have told her. I just didn’t think right away in our relationship was the right time.”

Now that everything was out in the open, he realized more and more how in the wrong he had been by keeping his relationship with Kendra from her. He would do anything to make it up to her. But at this point, he wasn’t sure if their relationship would be moving forward.

“Well, I’m sure she just needs some time to process.”

“But that’s the issue. Time is what we don’t have. Now that Drew’s back, I’m not needed here anymore.”

“You can stay as long as you need. The room is yours for as long as you want it. Besides, your boss isn’t expecting you back for a while, right?”

Oliver nodded.

“So, they don’t have to know your brother is back.” She winked.

Oliver chuckled. “You’re right.” Then he blew out a breath of frustration.

“I just don’t know what to do. I want to do right by Macy. I want her to make the decision to be with me and, ideally, come to Phoenix on her own. But I think I ruined that too.”

“Hearing you talk, I can tell you really like her. Does it feel different than it did with Kendra?”

“Yeah. It feels very different. I love her differently. She sees me in a way that no one else has, and she believes in me and encourages me like no one has. I like myself better when she’s with me. Does that make sense?” he asked.

Natasha smiled and nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Am I crazy to feel this way about someone that I just met?”

Natasha shook her head. “No. Love surprises you sometimes. Even though I dated your dad for years before we eventually got married, I always knew he was the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. And I see your brothers who are in these beautiful relationships with women that they fell in love with in a couple of weeks too.” She smiled.

Then she added, “My favorite thing about love is that it has no timeline.”

Oliver nodded. “Thanks, Mom.”

He took a minute to catch his breath. “Well, I think I need a minute, so I’m going to head back to my room. I have to figure out what to do next.”

Natasha nodded again. “That sounds like a good plan. Thank you for coming by. I’ll see you later, dear.”

The two stood up and hugged before Oliver headed out the door. He got back to his room and thought that although this day was awful and he wasn’t sure what was going to happen with Macy, he at least was grateful for this opportunity to have his mom in his life.

## CHAPTER 30



## MACY

Macy yawned for what felt like the one-hundredth time that day. She was completely exhausted after another night of hardly any sleep. It had been two days since the unexpected arrival of Oliver's surprise ex-fiancée Kendra, which led to her and Oliver's biggest fight yet.

She called into work the next day to say she wasn't coming; she was not in the headspace or mood to see Oliver yet. His final comments ran through her mind all day—was he ready to throw in the towel on their relationship so easily?

Instead, she had taken the last two days to try and calm down from their heated conversation. Natasha was very understanding. She thought that a little break would be a good thing for them, too. They had a lot to process through.

Macy was slightly embarrassed as she talked with Natasha. It seemed like Oliver had talked with her about what the two discussed in the parking lot; she wondered if Natasha thought any less of her now. She was also slightly proud of him for opening up to his mom.

Macy had decided to skip the first day of the Harvest Festival activities yesterday because she was so worked up, but she promised her mom they'd go tonight to see all the vendors this year. Her mom never passed up a shopping opportunity, and Macy could really go for a cinnamon hot apple cider or something with caffeine.

She had tried to sleep, but her mind wouldn't turn off. She kept replaying her and Oliver's conversation in her mind. There was so much frustration and anger that came out between them. She was surprised at how upset Oliver was that she hadn't talked with him about Arizona as an option. He really hadn't mentioned it before. That wasn't like him; he normally was quick to speak his mind.

She had been very honest about her situation with Dylan, along with the fears of repeating history. He seemed to have

listened to that part, but what made him decide to go rogue and look at jobs for her?

Macy had questioned if she was too harsh on him when she confronted him. After she thought more about his answers, she could tell that his heart was in the right place with it. He wanted to be with her— that was clear—but she still couldn't get over why he would take that next step and actually look at places for her to apply to.

She didn't know what she wanted to do, and it drove her crazy too. Why couldn't she just make a decision about where she wanted to go? What was holding her back? Was it her dad having cancer?

Of course she wanted to be with Oliver; these had been some of the greatest weeks in her life. She felt free and herself when she was with him. He made her smile and allowed her to be her authentic self. She didn't have to fake being happy all the time or pretend that she was fine with all the social outings she had no desire to be a part of. He wasn't pushy, at least, until now.

Macy wanted to be reasonable in all of this, but she also needed to be realistic.

She'd sat alone thinking about it for most of the day yesterday, bundled up on her parents' deck looking over the ocean, snuggled in a blanket next to their fire pit. She needed peace and serenity to clear her mind, and she knew some outside time would do it.

If she thought honestly about Arizona, there was a part of her that got excited about the possibility. She didn't hate Arizona. She'd only been there once for a vacation to Phoenix, but they had a good time while they were there. She went on a girl's trip with some friends from college and they stayed in a cute Airbnb downtown. They enjoyed the city life but also drove out and explored some hiking trails and nature. It was a fun trip; the Arizona summer heat wasn't too unbearable.

The state met all her criteria for living, but what made her so hesitant? She could have the environment she wanted, find a job easily, and be with the guy she liked. She realized what

her issue was; it all seemed too good to be true. It seemed too easy. There had to be something that she wasn't thinking about or something she hadn't considered that could go wrong.

She knew there was also the obvious variable to moving: what if she and Oliver broke up? What if she repeated the same situation as Dylan? What if Oliver never committed? Oliver *apparently* just got out of a serious relationship where they almost got married. He wasn't going to want to repeat that again any time soon, would he?

Macy had no intention of being in a long-term relationship again without the promise of engagement. One thing she realized from this trip was that at this point in her life, she was ready to find the guy she wanted to marry and just jump in; but she knew that would be a red flag for most guys. Not a good first date talking point. But she was over Dylan and ready to find love again, this time, real love.

There was a moment where she thought that Oliver could really be that guy, and that's what made this fight with him hurt even more.

Just a couple of days ago, Macy had started to fantasize about what it would look like to be Macy Almada; to say "I do" and start a future with Oliver. She was crazy about him, and he slowly but surely started to check all her boxes. It wasn't like she wanted to marry him tomorrow, but she had hoped if things progressed, it might move faster.

But all of that felt like it came screeching to a stop. How could Oliver not tell her he was engaged? It felt like such a betrayal. She had provided so many opportunities for him to tell her; to just be honest. But instead, he kept it from her. His reasoning was he was going to tell her eventually, but why even keep the secret? It just made her wonder if there were more things he was keeping from her. Could she even trust him?

She hadn't come to a conclusion on that yet as she sat on her parents' deck, and she still hadn't today as she stared at the clock waiting for her shift to end.

Macy had been on the edge of her seat all day, wondering if she would run into Oliver while she was at the inn. She assumed she would; it's a small inn. She couldn't tell if she wanted to avoid him or if she secretly wanted to see him. She tried to tell herself she didn't want to see him, but she knew the truth.

To her subtle disappointment, she hadn't seen him. She wondered what he was doing today. Drew was back to work, so he technically didn't need to be in the office anymore. A panicked thought crossed her mind, did he go back home to Arizona?

No one said anything to her about him throughout the day, so she still didn't have an answer as it reached the last ten minutes of her shift. Even though she was angry and hurt by him and still not sure if she was ready to talk yet, there was a part of her that didn't want him to be gone. The idea of never seeing him again brought tears to her eyes.

*He would at least say goodbye, right?* she thought. Or had she truly ruined everything?

As she sat at the counter, a bright shiny object caught her eye, almost blinding her. She squinted and shielded her eyes. After trying to adjust her sight, she realized it was a light flickering of a reflection from a ring.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" a voice called. "That hit you right in the eye, didn't it?"

Macy looked up to see Casey walking over to her. Her beautiful diamond-studded wedding band and engagement ring became a small bright star once combined, apparently.

"I don't know how it could miss my eye. You basically have a small sun on your finger," Macy joked.

Casey laughed at Macy's comment. "Oh, it's nothing crazy, just new and shiny." She smiled. "It's so good to see you! I was hoping I'd run into you today."

Macy was surprised at how excited she was to see Casey. The two had just started to become casual friends before

Casey left for her honeymoon, but Macy wouldn't expect Casey to anticipate seeing her.

Macy could tell that Casey had become comfortable with the inn life. She walked past the door and jumped onto one of the high-top chairs behind the desk.

Sometimes it still floored Macy that she considered *the* Casey Sky a friend. Macy had seen a lot of Casey's movies and had been star-struck the first time she met her in person. She was just a normal woman that was smart, funny and, of course, gorgeous, but also really down-to-earth and a good friend. She had welcomed Macy into the friend group and encouraged her to come to book club every week.

"Same. I wondered with Drew being back when I'd see you—are you feeling better from your food poisoning?"

"I'm feeling so much better. That was brutal. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. My body was completely against me. And there's nothing worse than being sick when not at home. It felt so good to come back. Although it's definitely not the most exciting way to end a honeymoon, at least we got a month of incredible memories and experiences."

"I'm so excited to hear all about it, but also, jealous. I've been travel crazy for a while now."

"Where would you want to head to first if you could go anywhere?"

Something Macy learned quickly about Casey after spending time together was how good she was at asking questions. She had this way of asking the perfect thing that made someone open up about themselves without even realizing they were doing it.

"Hmm, that's tough—there are so many places I want to go. Some are more educational, like Boston, but others are more luxurious—like Hawaii. I think if I *had* to pick, it would be Hawaii. I am desperate for some relaxation and sun."

Casey nodded. "I'm a firm believer that everyone needs a relaxing vacation at least once a year—our *soul* needs it."

Maybe you, me, Penny, and Scarlett should plan a girl's trip somewhere soon! That would be so fun!"

Macy knew her face looked frazzled, but she was shocked that Casey would be so excited to hang out with her. She felt honored.

"Yeah—that would be a lot of fun," she said with a smile.

"So, fill me in on what's been going on around here." Casey swung her legs in anticipation of hearing about all the gossip.

Macy wondered what Casey knew. Drew obviously would have said something about the other day, with her and Oliver. How could he not say something after all the drama that occurred?

"Well, I'm assuming you know *something*, or else the whole married people don't keep secrets from each other hasn't come into effect yet," Macy joked.

Casey laughed. "Drew might have mentioned a crazy woman came into town and tried to blow up the new relationship his brother had with the new amazing receptionist, but that's just me paraphrasing."

"Yeah, it's been... interesting." She chuckled, not quite sure what word would accurately describe the last month.

"Well, start from the beginning." Casey grinned while she got herself comfortable.

Macy didn't care that her shift was almost over and that she was completely exhausted. This connection time with Casey was exactly what she needed. She had missed her friends back in Minnesota and hadn't found a practical time to connect with them since she'd arrived in Sandpiper Cove. She craved girl talk and having someone to process all her relationship drama and thoughts.

Macy filled Casey in on her journey with Oliver, from the first time she met him to their first date, all the amazing conversations they'd had, how deeply connected she felt to him, and then, of course, the big fight in the parking lot after Kendra showed up and the betrayal she felt.

Casey intently followed along with the story—gasping when they found Mrs. Peterson, awning when Oliver surprised Casey with the romantic dinner, and nodding intensely as Macy processed how she felt after the fight. She was so expressive. Macy guessed that’s what made her a good actress.

“So now that the dust has settled, what do you want to do? Are you at least going to talk with Oliver?” Casey said.

“I think we owe it to each other to talk about it for sure. I mean, we’re technically still together. But the problem is I don’t even know if he’s still here. I haven’t seen him all day, and he hasn’t reached out at all. I’m not sure if he left for Arizona and didn’t say goodbye.” Macy’s voice choked up as she finished talking. She was surprised by the emotion that escaped.

“Oh, he’s for sure still here,” Casey said confidently. “Drew’s back, so he doesn’t need to work anymore, but Drew said that he’s staying at least for another week and a half. That’s what he had told his boss. I’m not sure if he’s still at the inn, though. He might be staying with Brent and Nick.”

He stayed. Macy’s heart fluttered in her chest at the news.

“And I think you guys for sure need to talk. It’s not easy having a big fallout fight. Trust me, I know,” she scoffed. “But in my opinion, it’s more important to focus on what’s said at the reconciliation than what was said during the argument.”

Casey’s words were wise; Macy processed what that reconciliation might look like. What did she know definitively that she wanted to say to Oliver? That was the difficult part. She felt like she wouldn’t know until she saw him again. She made up her mind. She had to find him and talk as soon as possible. She wouldn’t have any answers until that happened, and she wasn’t sure if she could sit and assume what he thought for another day.

“Thanks, Casey. This was actually really helpful. Sometimes you just have to talk it out with a friend.” Macy smiled.

“Of course! That’s why I’m here. I just want both of you to be happy. And although I don’t know much about Oliver, he’s an Almada, and those are pretty great men.” She smiled.

Macy nodded. She gave Casey a hug and then headed on her way home. She was already running late and knew her mom would be upset thinking Macy had bailed on her for tonight’s activities.

As she walked out to her car, she reflected on Casey and Drew’s love story. How romantic, and bold, of Casey to just show up in New York City and confront Drew. Macy remembered the end of Casey’s toast at the wedding. She said, “I knew what I wanted and went after it.”

Those words resonated with Macy and floated around her mind. What did she want? Did she want to be with Oliver? Was he the one for her? Could she see a life in Arizona with him? That was what she planned to figure out, and she knew just how to do that.



## CHAPTER 31

## *OLIVER*

The bright bulb lights looked like stars as they hung above Main Street, strung between the buildings. It was a beautiful fall evening, and the air was filled with the sound of laughter and conversations, and the delicious smell of apple cider donuts.

Oliver tightened his jacket around his body as a gust of cool air came off the ocean. It was the perfect night for jeans and a jacket as he and his brothers walked through downtown Sandpiper Cove enjoying the Harvest Festival. It always surprised him how many people came into town for the events. It really was a highlight for the neighboring towns.

Oliver had spent the last couple of days with his brothers. After a brisk game of golf, a night of watching basketball, and plenty of good food, he had experienced some of the best times with Nick and Brent that he'd ever had.

They didn't talk much about Macy or what happened at the inn. He still wasn't that comfortable opening up yet, but he filled them in on the minor details. Oliver had decided to give Macy some space, just like his mom suggested. He knew she would need time to cool down, and he could stand to use a couple of days, too, to gather his thoughts. He stood confidently on what he said about her needing to decide on their future. He didn't want them to waste each other's time.

In some ways, he was grateful that this conversation happened, although it could have happened in a less dramatic fashion. He was glad they could get everything out in the open. That seemed to be the way they communicated best. She was finally aware of what he wanted, for her to come to Arizona with him. And he now understood that it had crossed her mind, but she just wasn't there yet. That was still what frustrated him the most.

How could he know if there was a future between the two of them if she wasn't willing to give it a try? He guessed that would be his answer then.

After a couple of days of not hearing from her, he wondered if that was her making up her mind. Her message was becoming loud and clear. Brent tried to talk her out of that thought and reiterated that she might just need more time, but Oliver worried.

His time in Sandpiper Cove was counting down faster than he would have liked, and he wasn't sure if he would see her before he left. He wanted to say something, at least goodbye, but he really didn't want to push it. He figured he would give it a week and then he would make a plan.

But tonight, he was enjoying drinking his hot apple cider and exploring with his brothers.

"Brent, how much would it take for you to join that pie-eating contest?" Nick joked.

Brent seriously considered it for a moment. "Fifty dollars."

Nick's eyes widened. "Seriously? That's it?"

Brent laughed. "You'd essentially be paying me to eat some pie, Nick. It wouldn't cost much."

Oliver laughed to himself.

"I could never win, though. Those contestants practice all year. They're very serious about pie."

"I don't know, Brent. I've seen you go after a cheesecake," Oliver chimed in.

Nick laughed.

The group walked over to watch the pie-eating contest. It always surprised Oliver how intense food-eating contestants looked when they competed. They were literally just eating food. Why were they so serious? He and Macy joked about that.

His thoughts drifted to Macy as he watched the five men slam their faces into the pies and start chewing away. The crowd cheered loudly, shouting the names of their favorite contestants, and he wondered if Macy's voice was within them.

She had looked forward to the pie-eating contest the most out of all the events. It would take a lot for her to miss it. He scanned the crowd, trying to find her signature red hair, an easy way to spot anyone in the crowd. But there were too many hats and scarves around, which made it challenging to get a good view.

“What are you looking for? Or should I say, *who* are you looking for?” Nick whispered to Oliver with a wink.

Oliver rolled his eyes. “I’m just looking. Macy said a while ago that she might be here, so I wondered if she came.”

“I see.” Nick nodded. “When are you going to talk to her?”

Oliver wasn’t sure how much he wanted to get into it with Nick. He was not the relationship advice kind of guy. Oliver wasn’t even sure if he’d been in a long-term relationship before.

He sighed. “I don’t know. Before I leave, if she hasn’t reached out to me by then, I’ll talk with her. I just want to give her space and time to process everything. Mom said that’s what girls need, I guess.”

Nick laughed. “She would know. I remember all the times she and Dad got into arguments, and she always said, ‘just give me some space,’ and walked away.” He laughed. “It feels weird looking back on those moments.” Nick became a bit solemn. Oliver assumed he was thinking about their dad.

“Maybe you’ll see the outcome of it before you leave. Or how long are you sticking around?” Oliver asked, trying to change the subject.

“Not much longer. My plan was to stay just until this weekend. I still have a lot of training to do at the company, especially with my new position. They want me to get fully trained in every department so I can manage a variety of the team. So that means eight months of training which sucks.” He laughed. “But, who knows, maybe it will be interesting. I’m just hoping something good comes out of it.”

“I think it’s great you like your company so much. Hopefully you can keep moving up. It sounds like they want

you around for a while.”

Nick nodded. “I guess the two of us will always be the two that Sandpiper Cove let get away,” he joked.

Oliver laughed. Nick was actually a really funny guy. He was sarcastic, witty, and smarter than you’d think.

The contest was over and the brothers continued to walk around Main Street. They ventured towards the town square where most of the food vendors were located. It was packed with families enjoying meals together, laughing and brainstorming what they wanted to do next.

It was loud and chaotic to an introvert like Oliver, with the only bit of peace coming from the empty gazebo that sat in the middle of the chaos, surrounded by lights, beckoning him.

“Okay. I can’t resist those donuts anymore; the smell is killing me. Anyone want some?” Nick asked.

“I’d love some,” Brent responded. “Oliver?”

“Nah, I’m okay. Go on without me.”

Nick and Brent nodded and headed toward the donut stand, and Oliver decided to make his way towards the gazebo. It might be nice to get out of the noise for a moment.

He climbed up the steps and smiled politely at the couple walking out. Once he got inside, he was alone. He looked up at the decorated ceiling and lights that surrounded the arches and rails. Oliver wasn’t one to get caught up in the beauty of decorations, but there was something about this moment that caused him to take a deep breath and soak it all in.

The peace and calmness that encapsulated him felt like the relaxation he needed. All the overwhelming feelings and pressure to figure things out with Macy spilled away, and he could just breathe. It all didn’t matter in that moment, and he knew God would work it all out eventually.

After a couple more minutes, he turned around to head back but stopped in his tracks as he realized he wasn’t alone in the gazebo.

Macy stood at the entrance staring at him with a soft smile on her face. As she stood under the lights, they cast a soft glow onto her that made her look as if she was radiating under the stars.

Her hair was in a loose braid resting on her cloth peacoat, her ears tucked under her winter hat. She looked unbelievably gorgeous.

Oliver realized they were just staring at each other for what felt like minutes, but at the same time, all the noise from the community around them faded away.

As he stared at her, he realized that he'd be lost without her. She had brought out this side of him that Oliver didn't even know existed. He was confident that he didn't want to move back home and not have her in his life.

But as she stood there, he realized that he had no idea how she felt. She had every right to be mad and disappointed in him. She had every reason to walk away from their relationship and decide it was too much, but he prayed she wouldn't.

Instead of continuing to assume what she would say, he tried to sum up the courage to just ask her.

He took what felt like his first breath in minutes. "Hi," he finally said.

"Hey," she said softly, keeping eye contact.

Just the sound of her voice sent electricity through Oliver's body. He had no idea what was going to happen, but he was ready to find out.

## CHAPTER 32

## MACY

Macy couldn't contain the smile that spread across her face as she heard Oliver's voice. Even though it had only been two days since she'd seen him, it felt much longer.

She had spotted Oliver as he walked up to the gazebo; she and her mom had just consumed a large number of donuts that she knew she would regret later. She watched him for a while, trying to decide if this moment would be the best time to talk. But as he walked around the gazebo, there was a look about him that drew her to him. He looked so peaceful. He looked content, and happy.

It almost felt like she was drawn to him as this beacon of comfort. Instead of seeing him and wanting to run away, she wanted to run towards him, full force. She asked her mom if it would be okay if she went and talked with him for a few minutes. "It depends on what you're going to say," Rebecca said with a mischievous smile.

Macy gave her a questioning look. "What do you want me to say?"

Rebecca gave her daughter a look that Macy knew meant some hard truth was coming. "I think you had a really difficult experience in Minnesota, and that has caused a thin layer of fear to wrap itself around you. And I don't want that for you, Mace. You are a brave and adventurous girl; you've always been my risk-taker. And I don't want one experience, one person, to have ruined that part of you for the rest of your life. Take chances, even if that means you might fail."

"But I don't want to get hurt again. I don't want to waste my time and have to start all over, *again*."

"Do you feel the same way about Oliver as you did with Dylan?"

That was an easy answer. "No." She knew that within the first three weeks of being with Oliver.



“Then you can’t assume that it’s going to be the same experience. And you can’t be so afraid and closed off because of it, or else you might miss something truly amazing in front of you... perhaps standing in a gray jacket and blue jeans.” Rebecca winked.

Macy laughed. She loved her mom so much and was grateful that she was always willing to tell the hard truth. She sighed as she pushed herself off the picnic table, having to use a little extra support from all those mini donuts.

And now she stood in front of Oliver, fully embracing his presence of strength and comfort, ready to hear whatever he had to say.

“I’m really glad I ran into you here. Actually, I’ve been trying to figure out the right words to say,” she said. She wasn’t sure when she walked over if she wanted to be the first to start talking about things, but since she approached him, she figured she had better start.

She continued, “And I know I haven’t reached out for a few days, but—”

“You just needed some space,” he filled in.

Macy nodded. She was glad he understood the need for space.

“Listen,” she continued. “I know a lot of things were said in the parking lot. Some came out more tense than how I would have wanted them to, on my part, that is—but I’m glad everything that was said got said because we did really need to talk about this. And I’m sorry I waited so long to bring it up, more so, avoided the conversation for so long. I was worried and, truthfully, scared about what would happen between us next. You have a whole life in Arizona, and it’s one that I do want to be a part of.”

Oliver’s eyes twinkled a bit at her comment.

“But, I need you to understand how terrifying it is for me to pack up and move somewhere, again, for a guy. I swore to myself that I wouldn’t do that, and the idea of going against my own words makes me feel like a failure.”

She could hear the emotion in her voice trying to escape, and she willed herself to keep calm. “I just desperately want to make the right decision and be happy, but I also am so deeply in love with you, Oliver, that it makes me want to throw everything out the window and just follow you anywhere.”

She felt like she was pouring her heart out to him, and he just stood there, listening. She got nervous as she spoke, wondering if he didn’t feel the same way anymore. Was she embarrassing herself? Just to be rejected?

She kept talking anyway. “I’ve thought a lot about it, and if you are serious about this and you want to make it work, I will give it a try. I’ll find a job in Phoenix and find a place to live. I know time isn’t on our side, and that’s been our biggest issue. So hopefully, if we eliminate that, then we can really make this work and give it a shot.”

Oliver continued to stay quiet. The anticipation was killing her. Why wasn’t he saying anything?

Macy shifted on her feet. “I feel like I just poured my heart out here. Can you say something? If you’ve decided that you don’t want to be with me, you can just say so.” Her voice shook as she spoke. She was realizing more and more how much she really didn’t want that to be the case.

“Macy,” he finally said. “Being with you, taking a chance on this relationship and the possibilities of what could be with us, is all I want in life right now. The second you walked out the inn door after meeting Kendra, I already saw myself revert back to the old me, the angry, selfish and defensive Oliver. You not only make me a better person, but when I’m with you, I feel like I can finally see clearly.

“I think if you moved to Arizona, that would be truly amazing for so many reasons—starting somewhere new, having a chance to decide for yourself where you want to go and what you want to do, and of course selfishly, you would be with me. But I just want you to be happy, so if that’s not coming to Arizona and finding somewhere different, I won’t hold that against you. I’ll understand, and we can just remember this month together as an incredible moment in time

where two people connected and fell in love, but who knew their lives were in different places.”

Tears came to Macy’s eyes. That was the most beautiful thing she had ever heard.

“You should put that one on a Hallmark card. You’d be a bestseller,” she said as she sniffled away some tears.

Oliver blushed and shook his head.

“Oliver, I don’t ever want you to doubt that I love you—because I do. You’ve captured my heart in a way I never thought was possible. But I just need you to understand that I need more than a ‘we’ll see if this works’ commitment before I pack up my life and move.”

Oliver nodded. Macy could see the wheels turn in his mind as he processed what to say next.

“That’s fair. I hope you know that I understand that it’s a lot to ask. I don’t take it lightly.”

Macy smiled a little. “I know you don’t, and I know that’s why you didn’t want to push me in the first place. You respected my need to make the decision on my own, and I really appreciate that.”

“Well, here’s an idea. You need a commitment, some sort of timeline so you don’t feel trapped in a relationship that might not be going anywhere, correct?”

Macy nodded. She was curious to hear where this was going.

“Give me six months. During that six months of living in Phoenix, I’ll help you find your own place and a job. Get you settled in and experience all that the city, and I, have to offer.”

“What happens after six months?” she wondered.

“We get engaged.”

Oliver said it so confidently that Macy’s jaw dropped.

“Like, to be married?” she asked.

Oliver chuckled. “Yes, Macy, to be married. Unless, at the end of six months things aren’t going well and you’re completely unhappy, and then we can break up and say that we really gave it a try. I will help you move anywhere you want in the country to start somewhere new again. But I’m confident and hopeful that getting engaged will be the outcome.”

Macy still couldn’t speak. She was so shocked. Her mind was racing.

“Are you ready for that? Are you sure?”

Oliver smiled. “Did you hear anything that I just said? Macy, the minute I met you in the Sandpiper Inn lobby and completely humiliated myself, I knew there was something about you. I was drawn to you; I couldn’t stop thinking about you. Even after the next three awkward encounters that we had, you were always on my mind.

“And then, you brought this fire into my life that I don’t ever want to extinguish. I know people might call me crazy since I was engaged recently, but sometimes it takes a bad apple to realize what you want and to finally see the most beautiful ones out there—and I believe wholeheartedly that you are the best apple for me.”

Oliver took a couple of slow steps towards Macy, and with every step, her heart fluttered faster. He stood in front of her and reached out to place her hands in his. He looked down into her eyes and smiled. She felt like she could get lost in his eyes as they glistened in the lights. Her breath increased as she felt his body heat radiate towards her on this chilly fall evening. She wanted to snuggle in.

“Macy, I’ve spent a lot of my life looking at the negatives, being bitter, and focusing too much on all the ways people have hurt me and let me down. That isn’t a life I want to live. When I’m with you, I realize there is joy, love, and a whole other way to do things. I want that kind of life, forever. Would you do me the honor and accept my pre-engagement, engagement?”

Macy burst out laughing. Oliver laughed too.

Macy took Oliver's face into her hands and looked deep into his eyes. "Yes, I accept your pre-engagement, engagement. I am willing to try because I believe in us. I believe in *you*."

She pulled her face towards his and kissed him with everything she had—all her hopes and dreams for their relationship and life together felt like they could burst from her.

She so desperately wanted Oliver to see himself the way so many others saw him; to see the reason he was so loved.

The two kissed under the lights of the gazebo and made a pact to try. Macy would move forward from the fear and the bitterness that held her back from her past and see her future full of possibilities.

When she looked at Oliver, she saw a future that excited her, not one that brought frustration or anxiety. And this decision was full of anticipation of what was to come.

## EPILOGUE

## EIGHT MONTHS LATER

### MACY

The sun beat against Macy's skin, heating it to what felt like 100 degrees. She opened her eyes to see the ocean breeze waving the palm trees above her head. She moved her hand to wipe the sweat pooling on her forehead but was met with unwanted sand instead.

She sat up from her beach towel and grabbed another towel to wipe off. She stopped and stared at the gorgeous view of the blue Hawaiian ocean, tall mountains, lush trees, and the birds flying all around her. She sighed in complete happiness. She reached for her phone after she heard a ding.

It was a text from Casey: *So glad you finally got your Hawaiian adventure!! I hope you're having an incredible time!*

Macy smiled. She was having an amazing time, although she still wanted to do a girl's trip in the future.

Someone's shadow loomed over her and she shielded her eyes to look up. Oliver stood over her holding two drinks in coconuts.

"I even got you an umbrella in your drink again, even though it's like your tenth one," he joked as he sat down on the towel next to Macy and handed her the drink.

"Hey, when in Hawaii, you drink as many drinks with umbrellas as you can." She took a sip of her pineapple strawberry smoothie and smiled. It was nothing like she'd ever had before. Fresh Hawaiian fruit was delicious.

She looked over at Oliver, who leaned back to rest on one arm while he drank his smoothie. With his sunglasses on, sporting his new beach swim trunks and wedding day haircut, he looked like a model.

Macy couldn't help but smile the biggest goofy smile at him while she held back the desire to burst into tears of

happiness. She couldn't believe she was sitting on the beach in Hawaii on vacation with her *husband*.

The last year had felt like a complete blur. She'd experienced some of the happiest moments of her life, and the hardest.

She had committed to Oliver that she would try to live in Arizona and see how it went—although she had a feeling everything would go perfectly. She wasn't far off.

Her mom was thrilled at the news that she was taking a risk and trying something new. Her dad was a little more hesitant, but he said it was just because he didn't want to see her hurt again. He would be busy with doctor appointments anyway to stay distracted, and Macy promised she'd come to visit often to check in on him.

A week after she decided to move, Oliver had to go back to Phoenix for work, but he said he would start the apartment search for her while he was there. Macy went to work looking for jobs and found a position at a nursing home that seemed perfect for her. They were so excited to have her on the team, and she was able to start the following month.

Of course, Natasha was more than happy to accept Macy's resignation at the inn. She was thrilled that Macy was following her heart to its next location, one that just so happened to include her son.

It felt like another transition to pack up the car and make the long trip to what she would call her new home, but this time, instead of driving in tears wondering what was to come, she drove with a smile on her face, ready for the next adventure.

Oliver came through and found her a place only a few blocks away from him which made it easy for them to see each other constantly. After months of settling into her new place and job, Macy truly started to feel like Arizona could be home.

Macy continued to fall more in love with Oliver every day they were together. It felt different being on his turf this time, instead of both in the neutral location of Sandpiper Cove. She



got nervous when they would go out with his friends or do the usual routine he liked to do. But Oliver constantly reminded her that he didn't want Macy to just be joining his life, but for them to be making a life together. That always made her feel better.

When six months of Macy living there came and went, her mind started to panic. What if Oliver had forgotten their deal? What if he was going to flake out? She had mustered up the courage to bring it up to him one night as she walked into his apartment. But as she walked in, instead of being greeted by an unaware boyfriend who she was sure would be blindsided by the memory, she stood in front of a circle of rose petals with candles lighting the room.

She stood in the doorway, unable to let go of the door handle, shocked.

Once she finally got her bearings, she closed the door behind her and walked very carefully into the center of the circle where a small box lay. She opened the small box, her heart beating so fast she thought she might be having a heart attack.

Inside the box, there was a little note. She opened it up and read: *let's change this pre-engagement engagement to just an engagement.*

Macy let out a soft gasp and looked around. Where was Oliver?

He must have sneaked into the room while she read the note, because he now stood right in front of her, looking as handsome as ever, with a huge smile on his face. Without a word, he pulled out another small box from his pocket and got down on one knee in front of Macy.

He opened the box that held the most beautiful ring she had ever seen. Tears came to her eyes as she stared at Oliver, a man she originally had no idea could be so perfect for her.

“Macy, you are the love of my life and, without a doubt, the woman of my dreams. Would you do me the honor and marry me?”

“Yes!” she yelled as she collapsed into his arms. He kissed her and placed the ring on her finger; she swore she would never take it off, at least for a full year. She loved it so much.

After their official engagement, the two debated about when they wanted to get married. They both didn’t want a long engagement; they were too excited to say, “I do.”

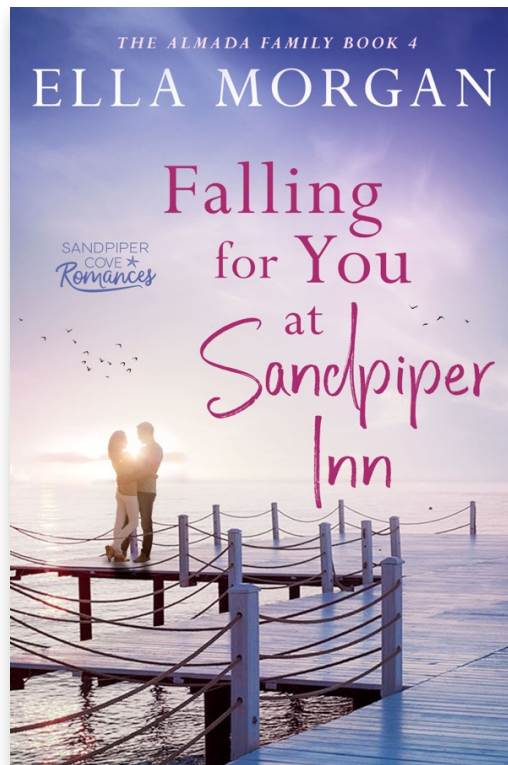
Oliver suggested they get married in one month, back at Sandpiper Cove so Macy’s dad would be there to walk her down the aisle. It was another moment that made her fall in love with Oliver all over again.

The two said “I do” on the summer beach in front of the Sandpiper Inn, the place where they first locked eyes, in a small ceremony just made up of family and friends. Macy would hold the memory of her dad walking her down the sandy aisle in her heart forever. It was so special to her.

And now, as she sat on her honeymoon, completely in love and happy, she knew it was all worth it. All the pain, confusion and healing that took place over the last year was worth it for her to be here in this moment. She said a prayer of gratitude for all she had, and as she reached out to grab Oliver’s hand, she took a deep breath. She was ready for anything else that would come their way.

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Okay readers! I sure hope you enjoyed reading Oliver and Macy's love story. Nick Almada and Claire are the next couple up! You can find their love story, [Falling for You at Sandpiper Inn, The Almada Family Book 4, here on Amazon.](#)

FREE BOOK!

Hello reader! I hope you enjoyed this *Sandpiper Cove Romance*.

I've got a free book offer for you when you join my newsletter. It's the story of Natasha and Leo Almada falling in love in their hometown of Sandpiper Cove. This is where *The Almada Family* gets their start. [Click here to get your copy of High School Sweethearts in Sandpiper Cove.](#) Enjoy!