



Heart Checked By the Hockey Heartthrob

Author: *Josie Frost*

Category: Romance

Description: He walked away once. I won't make it easy for him to skate back into my heart.

I was the girl he left behind when the NHL came calling.

The one who loved him long before he wore the jersey.

Now Wes Archer is back in our small town, retired, regretful, and suddenly everywhere I turn.

He says he's changed. That he wants to make things right. But I'm not the same girl who waited by the phone.

He's playing for my forgiveness now.

But this time, I'm the one calling the shots.

I have a career, a life, and a heart that's still healing from the hit I never saw coming.

Still... when we're thrown together at a local youth hockey camp, old sparks begin to fly. I'm seeing some hope that a future together might be possible.

Maybe some second chances are worth the risk.

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Prologue - Wes

I used to think walking away was a kind of strength.

That if you loved someone, and knew you couldn't be what they needed, the right thing—the honorable thing—was to let them go before you ruined everything. Before the road games and media glare and bone-deep exhaustion bled into the things that mattered most.

Like Quinn Price's smile. Her stubborn, brilliant fire. The soft way she said my name when I didn't feel like I deserved it.

I left that behind six months ago. No goodbye. No closure. Just a short message on her voicemail, then silence. Coward's move, I know. But I'd convinced myself I was protecting her from the parts of me no one sees past the jersey.

Turns out, walking away doesn't make you strong. It just makes you empty.

I remember the last time I saw her. It was right after the final Ice Hawks win of the season. She was at the edge of the tunnel in her paramedic gear, trying to act like my girl and a professional at the same time. I loved that about her—how she could be both at once.

She called out my name. "Wes!"

I looked back. She smiled like she didn't know I was already planning to disappear.

That image burned behind my eyes all summer.

I tried to dive back into hockey. Focus on next season. But every city felt colder without her. Every win meant less. Even Griff and Beckett noticed I wasn't myself. Beck pulled me aside one night, handed me a whiskey, and said, "You're running from the wrong thing, brother."

Still, I kept running.

Until the night my knee gave out in a fluke practice accident. A snap, a fall, and a specialist confirming what my gut already knew—I wasn't going back to the ice.

I didn't call anyone. Didn't tell Quinn. Especially not Quinn.

What could I say? Hey, remember me—the guy who ghosted you because he thought he was doing you a favor? Turns out I was just scared of being loved too much.

But with my hockey career over, I finally stopped running.

And now I'm back in Sunset Cove.

Not for sympathy. Not even for redemption.

I came home because something deep down—something stubborn and loud—refused to let me believe that was the end of our story.

I'm not naïve. Quinn's probably moved on. She has every right to slam the door in my face. Maybe she already has. But I owe it to both of us to show her that this time, I'm not going anywhere.

I'm staying in this town. For my friends. For the youth hockey academy Beckett

started. For the part of myself I lost somewhere on the road.

And maybe, just maybe, for the chance to win her heart back.

Even if she never lets me. Even if I don't deserve it.

I'll earn every second of her forgiveness.

Because the truth is—I never stopped loving her.

Chapter one

Quinn

I don't hear the crowd. Not really.

When a player hits the ice like that—full speed, no brace, the crack of body on boards loud enough to hush the whole arena—my brain kicks into overdrive. I'm all muscle memory and clinical instinct. There's no room for nerves. No time for past heartbreak. It's just me, the ice, and the player on the ground.

I vault over the low gate with my med bag already unzipped, EMT vest catching wind as I sprint across the ice. The Irondale Ice Hawks logo blurs beneath my boots, but I barely register it. Number 27 is down, clutching his shoulder and trying not to cry. He's a rookie. I've seen him before. Barely out of college. The way he hit the boards—shoulder first, no twist to absorb impact—I'm betting dislocation. Maybe a torn ligament.

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“Quinn!” someone calls from the bench—Griff, I think—but I don’t have time to look. The kid on the ice is grimacing through clenched teeth, his face pale beneath the helmet, and it’s my job to keep him still and safe until we can get him to the hospital.

“Hey, I’m Quinn, one of the medical responders,” I say as I kneel at his side. “Can you tell me what hurts most?”

“Shoulder,” he gasps. “I heard something pop.”

I nod, already scanning his body for other trauma. I gently palpate the area around his clavicle, checking for any irregularity, swelling, or deformity. His breathing is fast, shallow—part pain, part panic.

“Okay,” I say calmly. “You’re doing great. We’re going to get you off the ice and into the ambulance. Just keep breathing for me, okay?”

He nods once, his eyes brimming with unshed tears. These moments always get to me—not because of the injury, but because of the dreams that flash behind the pain. These young guys, they want it so badly. And sometimes, one hit is all it takes to derail everything.

I signal for the stretcher and spine board, watching as the rest of the team shifts on their skates at the bench, eyes trained on their fallen teammate. There’s a hush over the arena, the kind that makes your ears ring.

And then I look up.

That's when I see him.

Wes Archer.

He's standing near the end of the bench, removed from the coaching staff and players. Just far enough back to avoid attention, but close enough that I can't miss him. His tall frame is unmistakable. Even in a plain black jacket and jeans, he commands the space like it still belongs to him.

My breath hitches before I can stop it.

He's staring straight at me. And he doesn't look away.

It's like my heart has a muscle memory too, because it squeezes hard in my chest. I want to turn, to focus on the player, on literally anything else, but my eyes betray me for a beat too long.

Wes's expression is unreadable. Not angry. Not smug. Just... full of something. Regret. Maybe longing. Maybe he's wondering if I'll speak to him. If I'll yell. If I'll ignore him.

He's not wearing his jersey. Not anymore. And I don't need a press release to tell me what that means. I already know he's not playing tonight—and not because of an injury. Wes Archer is done. Retired. Just like that.

But I can't think about that right now.

I'm still on the ice. I'm still on the job. And even though my heart just tried to leap out of my chest, I have to pretend that it didn't.

I break the stare. Force my gaze back to the kid. Focus.

We secure the player, strap him in, and begin the glide across the ice to the waiting gurney at the Zamboni entrance. The fans clap—a polite, hopeful kind of applause that doesn't really mean much, but feels necessary. I let the other medics take over as we reach the edge.

As I turn to walk back toward the tunnel, I feel it again.

That pull.

Wes hasn't moved. He's still watching me. I fight the instinct to look back, to hold his gaze just one second longer.

But I don't.

I do my job.

I return to my seat on the bench near the tunnel, pretending like none of it happened. Like the pit in my stomach doesn't exist. Like my lungs aren't on fire from trying not to feel anything.

But it did happen.

Of course it did.

Because heartbreak doesn't wait for convenient timing.

The game resumes. The crowd begins to buzz again, gradually building up volume like someone turning the dial on a radio. I watch without watching, charting vitals on a tablet and trying not to clench my jaw.

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“Hey.”

I glance up and see Beckett standing by the hallway, just beyond the tunnel, hands in the pockets of his fitted jacket. He’s not smiling, but there’s a softness in his eyes that tells me he’s already read my mind.

The jacket catches me off guard. Beckett’s usually in uniform—whether it’s game night or just practice, he never misses a chance to rep the team. Tonight, though, he’s in street clothes. It takes me a second to realize why.

He’s not playing either.

Of course. He’s been out with that rib injury from the last road game. I remember Abby mentioning it when she stopped by the clinic. Nothing serious, just enough to bench him for a few days. Still, it’s strange seeing him this way—watching from the sidelines instead of leading the charge.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Fine,” I say too fast. “Shoulder dislocation. We’ve seen worse.”

He raises a brow. “I meant you, Quinn.”

I press my lips together and tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “I’m always okay. You know that.”

He tilts his head slightly. “No one’s always okay.”

I let out a long breath, trying not to let my emotions show. Not here. Not at work. Not when Wes could still be watching.

Beckett leans against the wall, folding his arms across his chest. “Just figured I’d give you a heads-up. Wes is staying in town for a while.”

My heart lurches. “Great,” I say flatly. The word tastes like rust.

“He’ll be at the dinner tonight. Team’s doing a little welcome-back thing. Abby’s making her famous lasagna.”

Of course she is. Abby can’t resist playing matchmaker—even when it involves emotional wreckage and zero consent from the parties involved.

“I’m working late,” I say quickly, voice a little too sharp.

Beckett raises his eyebrows, all innocent. “Abby already asked the ER director. You’re off by six.”

I narrow my eyes. “You planned this.”

He holds up his hands. “Not me. Your sister. I’m just the messenger.”

“I don’t want to see him.”

“You don’t have to talk to him. Just... show up. Eat lasagna. Smile for the kids. No one’s asking for miracles.”

“I can’t do this again,” I murmur.

He’s quiet for a beat. “I know. But he came back. That has to mean something.”

I shoulder my med bag and start walking toward the hallway, boots echoing off the concrete floor. My steps slow as I pass under the fluorescent lights, the scent of popcorn and cherry ice still clinging to the corridor air. A couple of fans wave as I pass. I nod back, keeping my head down.

Beckett calls after me. “You can’t avoid him forever, Quinn.”

I don’t answer. My throat’s too tight.

But he’s right.

Because tonight, I’ll have to face the man who left me without a goodbye.

And whether I’m ready or not, Wes Archer just skated back into my life.

Chapter two

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Wes

I've faced screaming crowds, breakneck slapshots, and the crushing weight of playoff losses. But nothing—and I mean nothing—compares to the dread curling in my stomach as I pull into Beckett and Abby's driveway for dinner.

The house is glowing warm in the early dusk, fairy lights twinkling across the porch like it's Christmas instead of late March. I sit in the truck a few extra seconds, gripping the steering wheel like it can anchor me to anything steady. But it doesn't.

Because tonight, I'm walking into enemy territory. Not because anyone inside hates me—but because Quinn might.

I run a hand over my jaw, freshly shaved for the occasion, and glance in the mirror. I look decent. Presentable. Like a guy who hasn't totally screwed up his entire love life. Lie of the year.

I take a breath and open the door. The cold air helps—sort of. It's a distraction, at least, from the avalanche of memories that hit me as I reach the front steps.

This house used to feel like a second home. It still smells like home-cooked chili and baby lotion and cinnamon candles. But I'm walking in a stranger now.

My best friend since high school, Beck, greets me at the door with a clap on the shoulder. "Glad you came, man."

"Appreciate the invite," I say, trying to keep it casual.

He doesn't call out my stiff tone. Just steps aside so I can enter, then mutters, "Don't shoot the messenger later."

"Huh?"

But he's already moving toward the kitchen.

Abby appears from nowhere, swishing past with Violet in her arms and a teasing smile. "Oh, Wes." She pauses long enough to wink at me over the baby's head. "Let's just say I might've done a little creative seating. You're going to figure it out by dessert—right around the time you want to throw pie at me."

Before I can ask what that means, Quinn walks in from the opposite hallway.

Time slows.

She's wearing jeans and a soft gray sweater, hair twisted up in that effortless way that used to drive me mad. No makeup, no fuss—and still, she takes the air right out of the room.

Her eyes lock on mine. I brace for a glare, a turn away, anything cold.

But she just gives me a curt nod. "Wes."

"Hey," I croak out, sounding about as charming as a deflated hockey puck.

"Dinner's ready," Abby chimes in, smiling way too brightly. "Let's all sit down, shall we?"

I follow the group like a guy headed into overtime without a stick. The dining table is set for eight—Beckett, Abby, Violet in a highchair, Jake, me... and Quinn, whose

place card is suspiciously right next to mine.

The moment I sit down, I know I've been set up.

Abby plops the serving bowl in front of me with a wink. "Wes, would you mind passing this to Quinn?"

I nearly drop the spoon.

"Sure," I mumble, handing it over.

"Thanks," Quinn says. Our fingers brush for half a second. It's enough to spark electricity up my arm and short-circuit my brain.

She doesn't react. Just spoons out the chili like she didn't just touch a live wire. Maybe for her, it was nothing.

Conversation swirls around the table. Jake, now a motor-mouthed six-year-old, is in rare form. "Uncle Wes, did you know I scored TWO goals last week?"

"No way," I say, thankful for the distraction. "Tell me everything."

He launches into a dramatic retelling of his preschool hockey league triumphs, complete with sound effects. It's adorable. And it saves me from drowning in Quinn's silence.

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For a while.

The kids bring levity. Violet babbles with her mashed peas, her tiny fists smacking her tray like she's calling for a round of applause. At one point she lets out a victorious shout and flings a spoon. It lands in Beckett's lap.

"Violet!" Abby gasps.

"Just expressing her artistic side," Beckett says dryly, lifting the spoon with two fingers. "She's got a future in performance art. Or rebellion."

"I'm calling it now—Olympic shot put champion," I add.

Quinn chuckles under her breath.

Beckett leans back and says, "Okay, ready for tonight's mandatory dad joke?"

Jake groans. "Not again!"

Abby laughs. "You get one, Beck."

Beckett grins. "Why don't eggs tell jokes?"

Jake covers his face. "Dad, no—"

"Because they'd crack each other up."

The table erupts in groans. Even Quinn lets out a reluctant snort.

“Fine, one more,” Beckett says, clearly in his element. “What did the janitor say when he jumped out of the closet?”

“Supplies!” Jake yells with glee, then laughs like he’s just won the Cup.

I join in, feeling a surprising wave of warmth spread through my chest. It’s weird, how easy it is to laugh here. And how hard it is to look at Quinn and not think about everything we used to be.

At one point, Beckett cracks a joke about Quinn’s high school obsession with penguin socks, and without thinking, I add, “Don’t forget the flamingo ones. She wore those to our senior class trip.”

Quinn’s head whips toward me.

“You remembered that?”

I shrug, suddenly ten years younger and hopelessly in love again. “You made everyone sign your foot in Sharpie. Hard to forget.”

A flush rises in her cheeks. Not anger. Just surprise. Maybe a little something else.

“Jake, eat your vegetables,” she says, turning away, but her voice is gentler now.

Abby clears her throat. “So, Wes, how’s the youth academy going?”

I launch into a short explanation about our upcoming hockey clinics, trying to focus. But I feel Quinn’s eyes on me the whole time. It’s like we’re talking about safe things—kids, sports, food—while an entire universe of unfinished business churns

between us.

Eventually, dinner wraps up and Beckett starts clearing plates. I offer to help, and so does Quinn. Abby gives us a look, then scoops Violet up and says, “Oh no, you two go take a breather. Wes, can you grab that toolbox Beckett left in the hallway closet? The light’s out again.”

Quinn sighs, clearly catching on. “Subtle, Abs.”

But she goes. And so do I.

We end up walking side by side toward the narrow hallway where the closet is. The overhead light flickers.

“This feels like a trap,” I mutter.

“You think?”

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She opens the closet and grabs the toolbox just as the power snaps off entirely.

Everything plunges into darkness.

“What the—?”

Jake yells from the dining room, “Did the lights DIE?”

Abby reassures him while Beckett grumbles about the fuse box. But Quinn and I are now... alone. In the dark. Trapped.

“Guess the breaker’s in the basement,” Quinn says.

“Yeah, but Beckett keeps the key to the basement door in the garage,” I reply. “And the back door’s locked because of the baby gate. And we’ve got the toolbox wedged behind us.”

We both turn—and sure enough, the toolbox has fallen and jammed the door closed. I jiggle the handle, but it doesn’t budge.

“Seriously?”

“Perfect,” Quinn mutters. “Just perfect.”

We’re standing inches apart, barely able to see each other.

And now my heart’s racing faster than it ever did on the ice.

“You okay?” I ask quietly.

“Fine,” she says. “Unless you’re hiding a flashlight.”

I chuckle. “Sorry. Just hockey tape and a spare mouthguard.”

We both laugh. And it’s real this time.

For a beat, the tension eases. It feels like it used to. Comfortable. Close.

Then her voice softens. “You remembered the socks.”

I swallow. “I remember a lot of things.”

“Doesn’t mean they matter anymore.”

“I think they do,” I say before I can stop myself.

Silence.

Then a whisper: “Why now, Wes?”

I can barely see her, but I feel her looking at me. Not just at me—through me.

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “I’ve thought about that a thousand times. I didn’t come back just to mess things up more.”

“So why did you come back?”

I hesitate. “Because nothing else felt like home.”

Her breath catches. I hear it.

And that's when the hallway light flickers back on—harsh and sudden.

We both blink, caught like deer in headlights. Close. Too close.

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She steps back first. “I should check on Abby.”

“Quinn—”

“Don’t,” she says, but it’s not angry. Just fragile.

She walks away, and I’m left holding the toolbox.

I’m standing in the light but feeling like I’m still in the dark.

I take a breath, forcing my pulse to settle, and lean against the wall for a second. My hand tightens on the metal handle of the toolbox, but my mind’s still on her voice in the dark. The way it cracked, just slightly. The way she asked, “Why now?” as if she didn’t already know I’d been asking myself the same question since the day I left.

She’s not the kind of woman you forget. Not the kind you replace. And maybe I thought time and distance would blunt the edges of what we had—but it didn’t. It sharpened them. Made me realize how badly I messed up.

A clatter of laughter filters down the hallway, and I glance back toward the dining room. Jake’s giggling, probably at another badpun from his dad. Violet lets out one of her squealing giggles that echoes through the walls like a song.

I set the toolbox on the hallway bench and return to the kitchen just as Abby is rocking Violet on her hip, bouncing her rhythmically as the baby tugs on her necklace.

“She’s gotten big,” I say softly.

Abby brightens. “Isn’t she? She’s seven months now. Already wants to do everything Jake’s doing.”

“She looks like you,” I say.

Abby smirks. “Beckett’s convinced she has his eyebrows.”

Jake runs into the room with one sock missing and a crayon in his hand. “Uncle Wes! Did you see my drawing?”

He thrusts a wrinkled paper at me—it’s a stick figure with a hockey stick and flames coming out of his skates.

“That’s me?”

“Duh,” Jake says proudly. “You’re the fastest. And you shoot fire goals.”

I laugh and ruffle his hair. “I’ll hang it in my office.”

Quinn steps back in then, eyes falling on Jake and me. Her expression softens for a blink, but then shutters. She joins Abby by the sink, taking Violet, who immediately grabs a fistful of Quinn’s hair.

“Hey, Violet,” I say, keeping my voice light. “You don’t remember me, huh?”

She stares at me with enormous gray-blue eyes. Then she drools and offers me a fistful of mashed peas that she has somehow secreted since dinner.

“Well, that’s a start,” I murmur.

“She likes you,” Abby says, watching from the corner of her eye.

Quinn doesn’t say anything, but she doesn’t pull Violet away either. Just holds her, rocking gently, while Violet hums and chews her fingers.

“I should probably go,” I say, not really meaning it.

“You sure?” Beckett asks. “We’re about to break out the peach cobbler.”

I glance at Quinn. Her mouth twitches at the corner, but she says nothing. I take the maybe as a stay.

“Okay,” I say, grabbing a plate. “But only if I get the crispy corner.”

Jake cheers, and Beckett hands me a scoop big enough to fuel a Zamboni.

Whatever this night was supposed to be, it turned into something else. Not perfect. But maybe... a beginning.

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Or a second period. And this time, I'm not skating off the ice.

Chapter three

Quinn

It's ridiculous how fast the air shifts in a small, dark hallway. One minute, I'm sarcastically muttering about traps and toolboxes, and the next, I'm surrounded by silence and shadows—with Wes Archer inches from me, his eyes, his face, his lips so very close.

I can't stop thinking about what just happened. We should've walked away when the power went out. But neither of us did. Maybe we couldn't.

I contemplate. The hallway's narrow and awkward, made worse by the way the fallen toolbox wedged itself against the door we came through. I tried the knob. It's stuck. So here we are, jammed in the one part of Beckett and Abby's house that doesn't have a working outlet or an emergency light. There's no easy out. Just me, Wes, and years' worth of tension that refuses to die.

I can't see much more than a silhouette of him, but I can hear the quiet sound of his breathing. I can feel the heat coming off him in the close space. My heartbeat ratchets up, and I wish it didn't.

"Sorry about the toolbox," he murmurs, his voice low.

"Not your fault," I mutter. "Unless you planted it there on purpose. Very spy movie

of you.”

“Please. If I were planning it, there’d be wine. And backup lighting.”

That draws an involuntary huff from my nose. It’s annoying, how easy he still slips into charm mode. And worse, how easily part of me responds.

“Quinn...”

“No,” I say sharply, before I can stop myself. “You don’t get to ‘Quinn’ me. Not like that.”

He falls silent. The hallway holds its breath with him.

I don’t know what cracks first, my composure or my pride. But suddenly the words are flying out of my mouth before I can filter them.

“You left,” I snap. “No goodbye. No warning. One day we were talking about vacation plans, and the next, you were just... gone.”

“I thought—”

“Don’t. Don’t tell me what you thought. You thought it’d be easier for me? That walking away with zero closure would help me move on?”

“I didn’t think I was good for you,” he says, voice low. “That night at the hospital—after the road game in Chicago. I came in with a concussion, blood on my jersey, and you... you were in the locker room, sitting on the floor with your head in your hands. You thought no one saw you crying. But I did.”

My breath catches.

“You looked so tired. Like you were holding the whole world together with duct tape and caffeine. And I realized I was the one stretching you thin. I couldn’t be the reason you started resenting the life you loved.”

He swallows hard. “So, I left before you had to choose between the life you built and the mess I kept bringing to your door.”

“You were starting this whole new chapter. I was still getting benched some nights and icing bruises from away games. I didn’t want to hold you back.”

“So you disappeared.”

“I thought letting you go was the best thing I could do.”

I laugh bitterly. “And you think that makes you noble?”

“No,” he says quietly. “I think it makes me a coward.”

The honesty stings. Because it’s true. And because I wanted to hate him—want to hate him still—but I know what it costs him to say it.

I press my hand to the wall behind me, grounding myself. “You broke something in me, Wes.”

“You think I didn’t break, too?”

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I swallow, hard. I don't want to feel this. Don't want to remember the way he used to hold my hand when I was nervous, or the way he looked at me like I was the only thing holding his world together.

"I would've waited," I whisper. "If you'd just talked to me. You could've told me everything you just said right now, two years ago. We could've figured it out."

"I didn't think you'd want to wait."

"Then you didn't know me at all."

The silence that follows is heavy. I close my eyes, wishing I could erase this moment, but also knowing I'll remember it forever.

A low buzz kicks on above us. The emergency lights hum to life, flickering with a faint yellow glow. I blink against the sudden brightness.

And that's exactly how Beckett and Abby find us.

We're both standing still, faces flushed, breaths uneven. Not touching, but close. Too close.

"Everything okay?" Beckett asks, stepping into view with a flashlight in hand.

Wes takes a quick step back. My arms are already crossed.

"We're fine," I say tightly.

Abby raises her eyebrows. “Looks like something more than fine.”

“We were stuck,” I offer. “The toolbox jammed the door.”

Beckett bends down to check and gives a short nod. “Yeah, you weren’t getting out that way. Power’s back in some rooms. Fuse box tripped.”

“We’re good now,” Wes says.

I’m not so sure.

Just then, my phone buzzes in my back pocket bringing back from wherever my mind had taken me. I dig it out and glance at the screen.

“Ugh. Of course.”

Beckett tilts his head. “What’s up?”

“Hospital’s short-staffed. Emergency incoming. They need me to cover the late shift.”

“You want me to tell Jake that you can’t take him for the overnight?” Abby asks, instantly shifting to big-sister mode.

I nod. “Yes, please. You’re a lifesaver. I promised him an overnight at my place but tell him we will do it another day when I’m not called in to work.”

I find Jake curled on the couch with a blanket, one hand tucked beneath his cheek, the other gripping a plush hockey stick. My heart aches a little as I kneel beside him and gently brush the hair from his forehead.

“Hey, buddy,” I whisper.

He stirs, eyes fluttering open. “Aunt Abby?”

“I’ve got to go to the hospital, sweetie. Emergency. But you get to have a sleepover with me another night soon, okay?”

He yawns and nods, not even bothering to lift his head. “Can I have pancakes for breakfast?”

“You bet,” Abby says behind me. “Chocolate chips and whipped cream.”

That earns a sleepy smile from Jake before he drifts back off.

I stand slowly, and Abby squeezes my hand.

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“He’ll be fine. Go do what you do best.”

Wes is still standing off to the side, silent, hands tucked in his pockets. Violet is awake now, fussing in Abby’s arms, rubbing her eyes with tiny fists.

“She’s teething,” Abby murmurs, bouncing her gently. “Third night in a row.”

“Want me to grab the cooling ring?” Beckett offers.

I watch them for a moment—this little scene of cozy chaos. The kind of love that doesn’t leave. The kind that stays through teething and night shifts and power outages.

And I realize, painfully, that I thought Wes and I would have this too.

He finally moves closer, just enough to be within earshot. “Quinn...”

I hold up a hand. “Don’t. Not tonight.”

He nods, but there’s something in his expression, regret maybe. Or just resignation.

Abby touches my arm again. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I lie.

Wes opens his mouth. Then closes it again. I see the words trying to form—the apology, the regret, maybe even something closer to hope—but they never come.

I meet his gaze for one long second. Then I break it.

“Don’t wait on me,” I say to no one in particular. “I’ve got everything I need.”

I don’t mean the hospital shift.

And I don’t look back.

Outside, the wind has picked up. I walk to my car without a jacket, letting the cold sting my skin. It reminds me I’m still here. Still standing.

Inside the car, I sit for a second, gripping the steering wheel like it can hold me steady. My phone buzzes again—another update from the hospital.

Work is calling. Life is calling. The kind of chaos I know how to handle.

But Wes? Wes is a storm I never learned to weather. And right now, I’m not sure I want to try.

Chapter four

Wes

I watch Quinn walk out the front door like she’s closing a chapter she already burned. No hesitation. No backward glance. Just the scrape of her shoes on the porch steps and the slam of her car door.

I move to the window. Her taillights glow red as she pulls out of the driveway and disappears down the road. And I stand there—useless—wondering how I ever thought leaving her behind the first time was some kind of mercy.

“She didn’t want a ride?” Beckett asks from the doorway, carrying Violet in the crook of one arm. The baby has settled, her tiny fingers curled around the collar of his hoodie.

I shake my head. “She was clear.”

Beckett makes a face. “Oof.”

“She barely looked at me.”

“She looked, man,” he says. “You just didn’t see it.”

Abby appears beside him, rubbing her eyes. “You boys need to stop pretending this is a game. She’s not going to wait around forever while you figure out your strategy.”

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“I’m not trying to play games,” I say. “I just...” I trail off. Because I don’t know what the next words are.

“I just don’t know how to not mess it up,” I add quietly. “She deserves more than the chaos I dragged with me.”

Abby gives me a look that’s more sad than judgmental. “She wanted you. All of you. Even the messy parts. You’re the only one who thought you had to be perfect.”

The words hit harder than I expect.

A few minutes pass in awkward silence, filled only by the soft hiccup breaths of a sleepy Violet and the hum of the fridge. Then the front door opens again.

Griff strolls in, fresh from practice, still in track pants and a hoodie with the youth academy logo. His hair is still damp at the temples, and he smells faintly of sweat and antiseptic—classic locker room combo. “Got your text,” he says.

He drops his gear bag by the door, the zipper half-open and revealing a pair of scuffed skates and an extra whistle. Not his old pro gear—those days are behind him—but enough to keep up with drills on the ice. His hoodie’s sleeves are pushed to his elbows, a clipboard tucked under one arm.

“You’re not still suiting up with the team?” I ask, glancing at the casual getup.

“Nah,” he says, shaking his head as he toes off one shoe. “Not full-time. I’m mostly running skills and development. Practice design, off-ice conditioning, mental prep.”

He flops into the armchair and leans back. “Once in a while I’ll fill in if we’re short coaches, but the full body pads? I leave that to the teenagers who still think they’re indestructible.”

Beckett smirks. “Griff’s kind of a secret weapon. The kids don’t always know how lucky they are to have a current/former pro showing them the ropes.”

Griff shrugs. “They’ll figure it out when they’re older. Right now, they just want someone who doesn’t bark orders and understands what it’s like to bomb a tryout or tweak a shoulder mid-game and still push through a shift.”

He looks at me. “That’s why we need guys like you around, Wes. Not just guys who know how to skate, but guys who know how to get back up. You’ve got that edge—that ‘I’ve been there’ honesty. And that matters more than you think.”

“What’s going on?”

Beckett hands him a beer. “Intervention.”

Griff raises a brow. “Let me guess. Wes said something stupid.”

“Didn’t say enough,” Beckett mutters.

I drop onto the couch, elbows on knees. “I didn’t know how to explain it. Back then, I mean. When I left.”

“So explain it now,” Griff says simply, taking a seat on the armchair.

I exhale, staring down at the worn spot on the rug. “It wasn’t just the road schedule or the pressure. It was all the unknowns. One minute I was healthy, the next I was sidelined for three weeks because of a knee I didn’t even know I’d tweaked. I lived

on adrenaline and ibuprofen and whatever sleep I could catch on flights. And she was just starting her career. I didn't want her waiting around on someone whose life was basically a ticking time bomb."

Beckett leans against the wall, arms crossed. "So instead of trusting her to handle the truth, you disappeared."

"Yeah."

The room goes quiet. Even Violet, now dozing on Abby's chest, lets out a tiny sigh.

"I thought if I stayed, I'd mess up her life," I say. "So I left. I thought it would be cleaner."

"Newsflash," Griff says. "It wasn't."

"I know."

There's a pause before Griff speaks again. "You know, my sister dated a guy like that once. Thought she couldn't handle his job, the travel, the pressure. He left to 'protect' her. You know what happened?"

"What?" I ask.

"She handled it. She got over him. Married someone who stuck around."

I nod slowly. "That's fair."

Beckett leans forward. "You still love her?"

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I don't even hesitate. "Yes."

He and Griff exchange a glance.

Griff takes a swig of his beer. "Then prove it. Be better now."

"I don't even know where to start."

"You already started," Beckett says. "You came back."

I shift on the couch, restless. "What if I'm too late?"

Abby moves closer, Violet now fully asleep against her chest. "If she didn't still care, Wes, she wouldn't be this angry. It's not indifference that's got her slamming doors and giving you the cold shoulder. It's heartbreak."

"And hope," Beckett adds. "Maybe a tiny bit. Don't let that hope die."

He grabs a folder from the end table and tosses it onto the coffee table. I recognize the youth academy letterhead.

"What's this?"

"An offer," Beckett says. "Assistant coaching position. It's yours if you want it."

I blink. "Seriously?"

“We’re expanding. More kids signing up every week. We need more hands. And you’re good with the older kids. The one trying to decide if they want to make a run for college or the league.”

“I thought you had that covered.”

“I can’t be in two places at once,” Beckett says. “And I trust you. So does Abby.”

Abby nods, her voice soft but steady. “The younger kids need structure. The teens? They need someone they can relate to. Someone who’s been there. You don’t just have the experience, Wes—you have the empathy. The presence.”

Beckett chimes in, “You’ve got the patience, too. You know how to read a kid’s frustration and redirect it. The ones on the edge—the ones struggling between committing and giving up—they’ll listen to you. Even Jake looks up to you like you walk on water.”

I glance at the folder. “What would I be doing?”

“Weekday practices, helping run drills and strategy sessions, reviewing game film with the travel team. Saturday games with the juniors, mentoring some of the older high schoolers applying for college scholarships. We’ve got a few with raw talent but no one showing them what to do with it.”

Griff adds, “And there’s a new community outreach initiative. Hockey nights at the rec center. Clinics for low-income kids who can’t afford travel teams. We need someone to lead that program. You’d be perfect.”

That one hits home. I grew up on borrowed skates and secondhand pads. I know what it’s like to love the game but feel left out of the system.

“You’d be designing drills for kids who’ve never even laced skates properly,” Griff says, leaning forward. “Like, full starter-level intro—balance work, skating basics, maybe even games to keep it fun. Half of them just want a chance to feel like they belong.”

“And the other half?” I ask.

“They want a reason to believe they’re not stuck,” he replies. “You could be that reason.”

My throat tightens. I imagine standing on the blue line in the smaller rink at the rec center. Kids in mismatched helmets and gloves, wide-eyed and nervous. I’d hand them pucks and teach them how to shoot, how to pivot, how to trust themselves on ice.

It’s not a highlight reel on national TV. But it means something.

Abby smiles a little, rocking Violet in her arms. “She used to say you had two speeds: ‘full steam ahead’ or ‘completely avoidant.’”

Griff lets out a short laugh. “Yup. She said it like it was both a compliment and a threat.”

I roll my eyes. “Sounds about right.”

“She also said,” Abby continues, “that you had the softest hands of any hockey guy she ever met.”

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I blink. “She said that?”

“Yeah.” Abby shrugs with a smirk. “Then she’d go on a rant about how infuriatingly charming you could be when you actually tried.”

I rub the back of my neck, strangely warmed and gutted all at once. “Well... that guy clearly hasn’t made an appearance in a while.”

Griff raises his beer. “Might be time to bring him out of retirement.”

I pick up the folder and flip it open. The offer is real. The position, the pay, even a tentative schedule that wouldn’t require constant travel. For the first time in years, I feel the shape of something steady beneath my feet.

Something worth staying for.

“Think about it,” Beckett says again. “But not too long. You’ve already wasted enough time.”

Griff gets up and claps a hand on my shoulder. “This town may not be New York or Chicago or whatever city your agent calls from, but it’s real. The people, the families, the kids—they remember the ones who stick.”

I nod. A slow, sinking realization fills my chest. I’m tired. Tired of leaving, of uprooting, of pretending that the constant movement was something I enjoyed. It was a mask. A distraction.

“Thanks,” I say quietly.

Abby smiles softly. “We believe in you. Now you just have to believe in yourself.”

I close the folder and set it on my lap. The house is quiet again, but this time, the silence doesn’t press on my chest. It gives me room to think. And for the first time in a long time, I want to stay still.

Still enough to rebuild.

Still enough to heal.

Still enough for her to find me again, if she’s willing to look.

Chapter five

Quinn

I sit on the couch, legs tucked under me, the faint hum of the dishwasher filling the silence. My cup of tea's gone cold, but I cradle it anyway, letting the warmth from earlier linger against my palms. The glow of my phone lights up the coffee table again.

Text from Liv: Still thinking? Don’t make me come over there with your scrubs and a signed permission slip.

I groan. Liv, who also happens to be Griff’s wife and my best friend, never lets anything drop. Especially when she thinks she’s right—which is, unfortunately, most of the time.

Me: Still on the fence. Maybe.

Seconds later, the phone rings.

“You need to say yes,” she says without even a hello.

“Liv—”

“Nope. You promised you’d try to say yes more. Remember that? New Year’s resolution. I have it in writing.”

I laugh, despite myself. “That was before I knew Wes was back.”

She pauses. “Okay, fair. But this isn’t about him. This is about you. And the fact that the youth hockey camp is desperate for a licensed medical lead.”

“They’ll be fine. Beckett can probably tape an ankle.”

“Great. And when one of those middle school maniacs goes headfirst into the boards? You want Beckett holding the neck brace?”

I rub my forehead. “You’re really not going to let this go, are you?”

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“Nope. Look, it’s part-time. A week of afternoon shifts and some weekend coverage. Plus, you’re qualified, organized, and way better at calming down panicked parents than any of us.”

I sigh and stare at the ceiling like the answer might be hidden in the paint.

“Also,” she adds slyly, “we’re short one person on the camp staff schedule starting tomorrow. And I may have mentioned your name.”

“Liv!”

“You’re going to thank me later. Promise.”

Before I can answer, my phone buzzes again, this time a call from my cousin Molly.

“Hey,” I answer quickly. “Everything okay?”

Molly’s voice is tight. “Yeah. I just... I needed someone to talk to. Work's a mess, and Mom's being impossible about her meds again. I didn’t want to bug you.”

“You’re never bugging me.” I get up and pace the living room, grounding myself in the rhythm of her voice. We talk for twenty minutes, me listening mostly, offering what advice I can and reminding her to take a break and eat something.

When we finally hang up, I stare out the window, conflicted.

There are a thousand things I could be doing. Hospital shifts, check-ins with family,

just existing in peace. But Liv's right. I made a resolution to stop hiding in my routines.

And maybe facing Wes is part of that.

I grab my phone and text her: Fine. I'll do it. One week. No funny business.

Liv responds with a string of heart emojis and a gif of someone dancing with a first aid kit.

But before I can smile too long, her next message pops up:

Oh, did I mention? Your first shift starts tomorrow. You'll be working alongside Wes.

My stomach drops.

Of course I am.

I spend the rest of the evening half-heartedly prepping my emergency med bag and trying to distract myself by reorganizing the linen closet. Neither works. My brain won't shut up.

There was a time Wes could make me laugh with a single glance. A time when his hoodie smelled like eucalyptus shampoo and black coffee, and I felt safe just leaning against him after a shift. I didn't know what love was until I fell face-first into it with him.

And then he left like it was nothing. Like I was nothing.

The anger still flares up in moments, catching me off guard. But it's no match for the

ache that's buried beneath it—the ache of not knowing why.

I finish packing my supplies, double-checking for gauze, athletic tape, instant ice packs, and stethoscope. Then I reach into the drawer by the fridge and find the small photo booth strip that's somehow survived every purge. One of those carnival nights we swore we'd never forget.

In the last frame, he's kissing my cheek while I laugh like I don't have a care in the world.

I slam the drawer shut.

Sleep is a joke. I toss. I turn. I stare at the ceiling fan like it holds answers. When my alarm finally buzzes at six a.m., I feel like I never actually closed my eyes.

Liv texts before I even brush my teeth.

Don't overthink. Just be your brilliant, unshakeable self.

I want to respond with something witty, but I don't have the energy. So I send her a thumbs up and a sleepy-face emoji.

It's strange getting ready for camp instead of the hospital. My scrubs are swapped for black joggers, a soft gray T-shirt, and my Sunset Cove Medical jacket. I pull my hair back into a braid, grab a protein bar, and try not to feel like I'm walking into a minefield.

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The camp's held at the local rink complex. Pulling into the gravel lot, I sit in my car for a full minute before getting out. The sun's already climbing, warming the metal door handles. I square my shoulders and step out.

Inside, the place is a buzz of energy. Kids laugh and shout as they tug on gear, helmets bobbing as they sprint between locker rooms and ice.

“Quinn!”

I turn to see Liv jogging toward me with a clipboard and a walkie-talkie clipped to her waist. “You showed up!”

“Regretting it already,” I mutter.

She loops an arm through mine. “Come on. I’ll show you the med station.”

It's tucked into the corner near the team benches—an area outfitted with folding chairs, a stocked cabinet, and a first aid kit the size of a suitcase. Not bad, all things considered.

“You’ll do great,” Liv says. “Honestly, most of it’s just bumps and bruises. Ice packs and encouragement.”

I nod, trying to believe her.

She squeezes my hand. “You’ve got this. And hey—maybe Wes showing up is fate. Closure or... something more. You know I’m rooting for option B.”

I give her a look. “Not. Happening.”

Liv just hums under her breath like she knows better.

Then I hear it—his voice.

Low. Calm. Too familiar.

“Hey, guys, circle up by the blue line. Let’s go.”

I turn before I can stop myself.

And there he is.

Wes. On the ice in warmup gear, whistle around his neck, coaching like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Confident. In his element.

His laugh echoes off the boards when one of the kids falls doing crossovers. He helps him up, ruffles his hair through the helmet, and gestures him back into line. Easy. Affectionate. Like he was made for this.

I grip the edge of the table.

Liv follows my gaze. “You okay?”

I swallow hard. “Yeah. Totally fine.”

But I’m not. Not even close.

Because I just agreed to spend the next week watching the man who broke my heart lead drills in a hoodie that still fits too well.

And my first shift?

Starts now.

As I settle into the med station, a voice behind me says, “They give you the fun post, huh?”

I turn slowly, and of course it’s him.

Wes.

Closer now. Too close.

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His smile is easy. Disarming. He scratches the back of his neck, that familiar nervous tell. “Hey, Quinn.”

I cross my arms. “Don’t you have a drill to run?”

A flicker of surprise, maybe even amusement, crosses his face. “Missed that sharp tongue.”

I arch a brow. “Didn’t miss the ego.”

For a second, his smile falters. But he recovers. “Well, you’re here. That’s something.”

“Don’t read into it,” I say, turning back to my clipboard. “I’m here for the kids. Not you.”

His voice softens. “Still... thanks for being here.”

I expect him to turn and go, but he lingers. The silence stretches until it’s awkward. Or maybe it’s just me who feels like I’m vibrating under my skin.

“I meant it,” he says quietly. “It’s good to see you again. Even if you’re looking at me like you’d rather be anywhere else.”

“You’re not wrong,” I mutter, flipping a page on my clipboard that doesn’t need flipping.

Wes lets out a low chuckle, then takes a slow step closer, toeing the line of the taped-off med station. “Remember the camp scrimmage we worked together a few summers ago?”

I blink at him. “When Jimmy Cassidy tripped over the penalty box gate and knocked out his front tooth?”

He grins. “Exactly. You kept your cool while his mom fainted into my arms. Literally into my arms.”

I roll my eyes. “She didn’t faint. She swooned. Big difference.”

Wes laughs, and for a second it sounds so familiar, sous, it makes something tighten in my chest.

I hate that my body remembers him even when my brain’s screaming don’t you dare soften.

One of the kids skates over, tugging on his sleeve. “Coach Wes, can we do penalty shots today?”

Wes looks down and smiles at the kid. “We’ll see how drills go. If you hustle, maybe.”

The kid nods and skates off, shouting to his teammates like he just got a golden ticket.

Wes glances back at me. “They’re good kids. This group... they remind me why I fell in love with the game in the first place.”

I cross my arms tighter. “Just the game?”

He pauses, eyes on mine. “Not just.”

I look away, jaw tight. That’s not the conversation I’m ready to have. Not here. Not now.

“I should check the inventory,” I say, walking back to the cabinet.

Wes doesn’t stop me this time.

He walks away, quiet and unreadable.

Which is probably for the best.

Because suddenly, it’s harder to breathe. And a tiny, traitorous part of me remembers how much I used to love the way he said my name.

Chapter six

Wes

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I wake up before my alarm, not that I slept much anyway. My mind spent the entire night stuck on Quinn. Her expression yesterday was like a door slammed shut—and yet, she still showed up.

That counts for something. Right?

I get dressed in the youth academy hoodie Beckett left on my car hood like a silent challenge, throw a ball for the neighbor's very judgmental golden retriever, and head out.

The rink is buzzing by the time I arrive. Kids skidding around on and off the ice, Liv barking orders with a clipboard like she's running a Navy SEAL training camp, and someone trying to tape a shin guard with what looks like duct tape. Classic.

One kid shows up in rollerblades. Another's wearing two left skates. A third has decided—very confidently—that his stick works better upside down. I don't even ask.

“Coach Waffles!” a little voice shouts.

I turn. “What?”

“You brought waffles that one time. You're Waffles now.”

Great. A legacy is born.

I try to squash the nickname. “It was one time. One broken toaster and a minor fire

alarm incident—”

“Coach Waffles!” three more kids shout from across the ice.

I groan. Apparently, my hockey legacy is destined to be syrup flavored. I make a mental note to get Beckett back for assigning me kitchen duty that day. Still, there’s something about this kind of chaos—loud, messy, unscripted—that feels good. Familiar. Like I’m finally back in a world that makes sense. Even if it smells like sweat, tape, and whatever’s growing in the lost-and-found bin.

I check in, grab my whistle, and jog onto the ice to start warm-ups. The instant cold hits my cheeks, my brain clicks into focus. This—I know how to do.

“Skates on the line!” I call out. The kids scurry to their spots, sticks tapping impatiently.

Then I see her.

Quinn. In joggers and her Sunset Cove Medical jacket, eyes scanning the bench area like she’s regretting every decision that led her here. Her hair’s pulled back into a braid that looks like it was done in the car mirror. I grin. That used to be my job. Terrible, crooked braids and all.

She catches me looking and narrows her eyes.

I give a small nod. Nothing flashy. Just acknowledgment. Maybe she’ll accept that today.

By mid-morning, camp is in full swing. We rotate through stick-handling, defense drills, and a ridiculous team cheer Liv insists on ending every session with. (It involves jazz hands. The kids love it. I die inside every time.)

Quinn works quietly at the edge of the rink, checking bruises, handing out Band-Aids, and patiently listening to one girl insist she has a “cracked kneecap” when it’s clearly a mild scrape.

I sneak a glance as she reassures the kid with that same calm tone she used on me once when I blew out my shoulder and tried to pretend I was fine. She’d seen right through me then, too.

“Scrimmage in ten!” I shout, corralling chaos as best I can.

The whistle blows and the first puck drops. It’s going well—until it isn’t.

Two kids get tangled in a corner. One goes flying. Another one spins like a hockey pinwheel and crashes into the goal. Then the goalie—never one to miss a spotlight—throws himself backward like he’s been struck by lightning and yells, “I see the light!”

Quinn’s already up and running.

“I’ve got it!” she calls.

I’m there a split second later. We both kneel beside the real injury—the kid who took the brunt of the crash.

“I’m okay,” he says, blinking. “I think.”

Quinn checks his pupils and gives me a sharp nod. “Concussion’s unlikely. You okay to sit for a bit?”

The kid nods. She hands him a cold pack and stands up.

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That's when we both realize we're still crouched way too close.

And I'm looking straight into the eyes of the woman I let go.

We both stand at the same time. Her shoulder brushes mine. Electricity. Actual, scientific, undeniable electricity.

"Nice assist," I murmur.

"Don't push your luck," she replies, but there's no venom in it.

Later, Liv pulls me aside. "You two handled that like a dream team. Want to sign up for the couples' three-legged race on field day?"

I groan. "Absolutely not."

"You'd win," she sings, disappearing with her clipboard.

After lunch, the skies start to darken.

Lunch itself was a comedy of errors. Half the kids couldn't remember where they left their sandwiches, two insisted that the vending machine granola bars were part of their meal plan, and one poor goalie in oversized pads knocked over the water cooler trying to open a juice box.

Quinn and I both ended up sitting with our respective crews at opposite ends of the picnic tables under the covered pavilion. She was flanked by a circle of kids who

clearly already adored her—one girl braided Quinn’s hair while chattering nonstop about her cat’s Instagram account. Another boy kept asking her if his bruise qualified as an "epic hockey scar."

One tiny skater piped up mid-bite, “Coach Wes, are you and Miss Quinn married?”

I choked on my sandwich. “Nope. Definitely not.”

The kid shrugged. “You should be. She’s way cooler than you.”

I sat with the junior high boys, who mostly just compared mouthguard colors and debated whether I could still pull off a spin move at my age. (Rude. Also, yes, I can.) One of them offered me a half-eaten PB&J if I could name five TikTok hockey influencers. I failed miserably. Another kid leaned in and whispered, “If Coach Quinn gives relationship advice, will she tell me how to get Amanda to notice me in math class?”

I blinked. “Maybe ask her about skate injuries first.”

“Smart,” he said seriously.

A few tables away, I noticed one of the older kids sitting by himself, poking at his lunch. I made my way over, slid into the bench.

“You good?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I’m not fast like the other guys.”

“You don’t have to be fast to be smart on the ice,” I said. “The best defensemen see the game three moves ahead.”

He looked up, interested. I nodded toward the whiteboard propped near the benches.
“Want me to show you a few tricks after lunch?”

He smiled. “Yeah. Thanks, Coach Waffles.”

I sighed. “It’s never going away, is it?”

“Nope.”

Every so often, I caught Quinn glancing over.

Now the wind picks up, blowing hard enough to send empty chip bags skittering across the gravel. Liv rounds up the campers with military precision, ushering them inside to the dry-side locker rooms with promises of popsicles and board games.

I find Quinn under the canvas canopy where the med gear is half-packed.

“You might want to move that inside,” I say.

She glances up at the clouds. “Is it weird I like storms?”

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I smile. “Only if you say that while holding a metal pole.”

Thunder rumbles in the distance, low and lazy. The kind that’s not quite here yet but definitely coming. A moment later, the first drops splatter the pavement in slow, deliberate thuds.

Quinn watches them fall like she’s tracking constellations in the sky. “It’s not just the rain. I like the quiet before. Like the world pauses and says, ‘Buckle up.’”

I nod. “Yeah. The calm before the chaos.”

She meets my eyes for a second longer than necessary. Then the downpour starts in earnest.

“Quinn,” I say, already unzipping my hoodie.

She holds up a hand. “Don’t you dare do something noble—”

I hold it out anyway. “It’s just water.”

“It’s always ‘just’ something with you,” she mutters.

But she still takes it.

The jacket swallows her. It still smells like the old me. Hockey tape. Coffee. Maybe a little hope.

She zips it halfway and pulls the hood up. The wind tosses loose strands of her hair across her cheek.

She tucks one strand behind her ear. “You know I still have one of your hoodies, right? The one from the Flyers game. Smells like old popcorn and terrible decisions.”

I laugh. “I thought I lost that one during the bonfire night.”

“You did. I rescued it. It was half-soaked and covered in marshmallow, but it smelled like you. I wasn’t ready to let it go.”

The air between us tightens again. My chest constricts in a way that’s part hope, part ache.

She suddenly laughs. “Remember the time you got ambushed by the sprinklers at the outdoor rink?”

“Hey, I was trying to be a hero and save a stray puck!”

“You slipped and landed flat on your back. You tried to play it off like it was a new stretching technique.”

“It was highly advanced core training.”

She chuckles softly, and the sound hits me right in the ribs.

We duck under the overhang as thunder cracks louder overhead. Rain hits the rink’s metal roof like a drumline. Steady. Relentless.

Inside, the kids shout over each other, safe and rowdy and blessedly distracted.

Outside, it's just the two of us. And a storm that's more than just weather.

"It's funny," I say. "You used to wear my jackets all the time. Back then, I didn't think twice about it."

Quinn crosses her arms. "Back then, you didn't think twice about much."

I nod. "You're right. I didn't. And I should have."

She doesn't respond. But she doesn't leave either.

The silence stretches.

Rain pools around our shoes, and I'm suddenly aware of just how close we're standing. A breath away. One heartbeat. Maybe less.

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“I don’t want to fight,” I say.

“Then stop acting like this is easy.”

“I know it’s not.”

Her voice drops, quiet and sharp. “You don’t get to walk away, disappear, then come back and expect to pick up where we left off.”

“I don’t expect that.” I hesitate. “But I do want a chance to do something right. Even if it’s just being here.”

She lets out a soft, tired huff. “If this were a rom-com, this is where you’d say something dramatic in the rain, then kiss me like you mean it.”

I give her a sideways look. “I mean... should I be writing this down?”

She snorts. “Try surviving the next shift without sarcasm.”

The rain falls harder. A kid inside shouts about checkers. Someone else sings the wrong lyrics to Taylor Swift.

Quinn exhales. Not quite a sigh. Not quite forgiveness either.

If I were smarter, I’d stay quiet. If I were braver, I’d tell her I still remember every tiny thing about her—how she hums when she’s focused, how she always triple-checks the medical bag, how she used to fall asleep on my chest mid-hockey

documentary and claim she remembered all the stats. I'd tell her I never wanted to leave. That I hated myself the minute I did.

But I'm not that brave.

So I just stand there.

And when she leans just slightly into the wall beside me, not pulling away—

I call that progress.

Chapter seven

Quinn

It's too early for drama, and yet here we are.

The day starts off calm enough. Light drizzle. Hot coffee. A perfectly average protein bar. But then ten minutes into the morning skate drills, a kid named Tyler manages to fall backward while trying to wave at a girl across the rink. He collides with another kid and bangs his wrist on the boards.

Cue the whistle, a lot of yelling, and me sprinting from the med tent like it's an Olympic event.

Tyler's sitting on the bench, cradling his arm and trying very hard not to cry in front of his friends.

"Hey, it's okay," I tell him gently, kneeling beside the bench. "Let's take a look."

Wes appears a second later, crouching next to me with a cold pack already in hand.

“Need backup?”

“I’ve got it,” I say automatically.

He doesn’t move. Just stays beside me, quiet and steady while I palpate Tyler’s wrist and rotate it slowly. The kid winces, but no swelling yet. Probably just a bad sprain.

“You’re lucky,” I say to Tyler. “Nothing’s broken. But you’ll be icing it for the rest of the day, capisce?”

He nods. “Can I still do puck handling drills?”

Wes leans in with a smirk. “Only with your good hand.”

Tyler laughs, which makes me laugh, which makes Wes smile—and now it’s too much.

“Here,” I say, pushing the cold pack gently into Tyler’s hand. “Ten minutes on, ten off. And stay where I can see you.”

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“Thanks, Miss Q. Thanks, Coach Wes.”

Wes helps me stand. I dust off my knees, and we fall into step toward the med tent.

“Smooth assist,” he says.

“Don’t get used to it.”

The corners of his mouth twitch. “Noted.”

Inside the tent, I toss my gloves into the bin and grab a fresh pair. Wes stays just inside the flap, hands in his pockets, as if he’s not quite ready to leave.

“This brings back memories,” he says, glancing around.

I arch a brow. “Of emergency sprained wrists?”

“Of that first summer camp. You remember?”

Of course I remember. I was twenty, an advanced nursing student intern. He was twenty-two, already with one minor league season under his belt and a smile that had no business being legal.

“You nearly passed out in the heat during that first scrimmage,” I remind him. “Tried to play through dehydration.”

He winces. “Still can’t believe you made me drink that beet juice smoothie.”

“You were going to faint.”

“You could’ve just let me die with dignity.”

I laugh. “You’re such a drama queen.”

“Hey,” he says with a hand over his heart. “I’m reformed.”

It’s so easy, this back-and-forth. Too easy. Like no time passed at all. Like my heart didn’t get left behind.

I busy myself straightening the supply shelves.

“You were always good with the kids,” I say without turning.

He steps closer. “So were you. You still are.”

I shrug. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Coming from you, that feels like a declaration of love.”

I turn, giving him a look. “Don’t push it.”

He chuckles but doesn’t press.

Mid-morning brings more chaos—naturally. One of the little kids, Evan, shows up in rollerblades instead of skates. Another kid accidentally sprays a water bottle straight into Wes’s face and then screams, “Coach Wes is melting!” like it’s the end of the world. I pretend not to laugh. I fail.

While Wes towel-dries his hair, I catch a glimpse of something rare: the grin he used

to give me when we shared late-night fries after his away games. It's the kind of smile that makes your heart lean in before your brain can say stop.

The day stretches on with the rhythm of whistles, skate blades, and kids yelling over snack preferences. A kid named Mason insists he's allergic to raisins "on an emotional level." Another tells Wes he should be a model for goalie gear catalogs. Someone else declares Quinn "cooler than Gatorade on a power play."

By lunchtime, the air is sticky and loud. The kids gather under the big canopy outside, brown bag lunches and juice boxes scattered across the tables. Wes ends up sitting at the far end, boxed in by a group of ten-year-olds demanding to know his favorite cereal. (He says Lucky Charms. A lie. It's oatmeal. But I respect the hustle.)

I sit with the older kids, mostly listening while two girls argue whether I'd ever date Coach Wes. I nearly choke on my apple.

"He's kinda old," one girl says. "But in a hot way?"

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“Gross,” says her friend. “He’s like thirty.”

“Exactly.”

“I can hear you,” I tell them. They giggle and run off to steal cookies.

One kid leans over. “Miss Q, if you married Coach Wes, would we get a camp dog?”

Before I can respond, Wes calls from the other end, “Only if it’s named Puck.”

The entire table erupts in laughter.

By early afternoon, the sun returns, and the rink smells like melted rubber and leftover PB&Js. I’ve patched three scraped knees, handed out Advil to two teenage goalies who “definitely didn’t fall” but are mysteriously limping, and rescued a hamster-shaped ice pack from a toddler with surprisingly strong grip.

Wes keeps drifting by—checking on kids, cracking dumb jokes, offering me water bottles like it’s a peace offering.

And against my better judgment, I keep accepting them.

While reorganizing the med bag, I hear someone call my name from outside.

“Quinn?”

I peek through the tent flap and spot someone in navy scrubs and aviator sunglasses.

My heart sinks.

“Nina?”

She pulls down her glasses and beams. “I thought that was you! You’re working camp again?”

I force a smile. “Yeah. You too?”

“I’m shadowing Liv today. Got roped into helping because she’s short-staffed.” Nina steps closer and lowers her voice. “Didn’t expect to see him here though.”

She doesn’t have to say who she means.

Her eyes drift toward the rink, where Wes is helping a kid tighten his helmet strap.

Nina snorts softly. “Be careful, Q. These pro athlete types? They know how to smile and promise the world, but they’re never built for long-term.”

She should know. Once upon a time maybe four years back, Nina had a thing for Wes herself. She showed up to every local charity game wearing full fan gear and once baked him an entire pan of brownies shaped like hockey pucks. He thanked her and handed them off to Beckett like they were radioactive. And then there was the infamous ‘accidental’ Valentine’s Day text she meant for her best friend that somehow ended up on Wes’s phone. It included a heart emoji, a Taylor Swift lyric, and a highly detailed dream about sharing hot cocoa in Aspen. To his credit, Wes pretended it never happened. Nina did not.

I’d almost feel bad if she weren’t so smug now.

My chest tightens.

“He’s not—” I start, then stop. “It’s not like that.”

She raises a brow. “Just saying. Don’t let history repeat itself.”

She heads off to help Liv, leaving her words to hang like mist in the humid air.

I mutter, “Cupid’s worst intern,” under my breath.

The rest of the day drags. Or maybe it sprints—I can’t tell anymore. Every time Wes walks past, I feel that old tangle of nerves and longing tighten in my chest.

He’s good with the kids. Patient. Kind. Funny without being try-hard. I catch him giving a pep talk to a nervous goalie, showing a group how to improve their slapshots, and—of course—helping Mason fill his water bottle upside-down just to prove he can.

He glances toward the tent more than once but never pushes. Not until the end of the day, when the sun starts to dip and the campers get picked up by parents and siblings and carpool buddies.

I’m finishing up notes in the incident log when his shadow appears again.

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“Everything okay?” he asks, tone cautious.

I nod too quickly. “Yeah. Fine. Just tired.”

He doesn’t buy it, but he lets it go.

I turn to grab a bandage from the shelf behind me, and when I turn back around, Wes is right there, closer than I expected. We nearly collide. I catch myself on the table, blinking up at him. For a second, neither of us moves.

My heart stutters like it’s chasing something it shouldn’t.

He steps back, just enough to break the tension.

“Hey,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck like he always does when he’s unsure. “Would you want to talk after camp? Just for a bit.”

I hesitate.

“Not a big deal,” he adds quickly. “Just... as friends.”

Friends.

Right. The most dangerous label in the history of labels.

But his voice is careful. Hopeful. Not pushing, just asking.

I meet his eyes. And I know—there’s no such thing as ‘just friends’ when it comes to him.

But still, I nod.

“Sure,” I say. “After camp.”

It’s just a conversation, I tell myself. But the way he looked at me... the way he still says my name... I know better. Nothing with Wes was ever just anything.

And I don’t think my heart can afford another second chance.

Chapter eight

Wes

I tell myself this will be easy. Just a conversation. A simple no-pressure catch-up after camp. But standing outside the medical tent waiting for Quinn to finish her notes, my nerves are doing their best impression of a slapshot drill – fast, chaotic, and impossible to track.

I’ve rehearsed this moment all day. Said the words in my head so many times that sound like someone else’s.

Hey Quinn, sorry I broke your heart, but I thought I was noble. Nope

Can we talk? You know, about how I disappeared, and you cried into your scrubs for three weeks straight? Yeah, not that either.

Maybe I should have brought an apology pie. I hear that people forgive faster when carbs are involved.

She steps out, tucking her clipboard under her arm and gives me a wary nod. “Let’s walk.”

We head toward the quieter side of the campgrounds, the scent of pine trees stronger now that the breeze has picked up. Kids’ voices fade behind us, replaced by the sound of leaves rustling and distant traffic.

I glance at her – hair pulled back, cheeks still pink from the sun, that faint line between her brows that only appears when she’s tired or thinking too hard.

For a while we don’t say anything. It’s not exactly uncomfortable or tense. It’s just full of things unsaid.

“I owe you an explanation, “I begin. “About everything.”

She stops walking, arms crossed. “Then explain.”

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I take a breath trying to sort it all out in my head. “When I left last year, I thought I was doing the right thing. For you. For us. I didn’t want to drag you through the worst parts of my life ... the travel, the injuries, the pressure. I told myself that letting you go was noble.”

Her eyebrows lift. “And you didn’t think I deserved a say?”

“That’s the part I got wrong.” I meet her eyes. “I was scared. Scared you’d wait for me and regret it. Scared I’d mess up and take you down with me.”

Her expression softens, just a little. “You think I haven’t made peace with chaos? I work in medicine. Chaos is the job.”

I smile faintly. “Yeah, but I didn’t want to be the reason you burned out.”

She sighs. “You weren’t. Not exactly.”

We fall in step again, a few pinecones crunching beneath our feet.

The last time I walked beside her like this it was late fall last year. We were heading back from a charity event, arms bumping, her laugh tucked under my skin. That was the night I knew I loved her. The night I knew I’d leave.

“I missed you,” I say. The words come out too fast. Too raw.

She swallows. “I missed you too. But I learned to stop waiting.”

I nod, taking that in. It hurts. But I earned that.

“There was this night,” I say, surprising myself. “At Beck and Abby’s engagement party. Remember? We danced to that dumb Ed Sheeran song. You were wearing that blue dress with the sleeves that kept falling off your shoulders.”

She glances at me, wary. But she remembers. I can tell by the way her mouth twitches.

“That night I wanted to tell you everything. About how I didn’t know how to keep you and keep the life I had. But I didn’t say a word. I just held you and thought ‘I hope she knows.’”

“I didn’t,” she says quietly. “I really didn’t.”

Before I can speak again, her phone buzzes. She checks it and shows me the screen: a group text from her sister. Bonfire at our place tonight. Bring marshmallows or your emotional baggage. Preferably both.

I laugh despite myself. “Classic Abby,”

Quinn reminds me that the last time Abby invited us to a bonfire she had convinced two couples to elope and scared a raccoon out of a cooler with a ladle. She bites back a smile, saying that Abs “doesn’t believe it subtly.”

You thinking of going?” She shrugs, but there’s a flicker of something in her expression. Curiosity? Temptation? “I’ll think about it,” is all I get. Which, in Quinn-speak is somewhere between anoand amaybeif the wind is blowing north.

She turns and I take a second to watch her – tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, the breeze catching her sleeve. For a moment I think about saying more. About

begging. But that wouldn't be fair.

She turns back toward the rink, walking away before I can say more. I watch her go, my heart tight in my chest.

That evening, I drive around town with no real destination, the windows down and music low. I stop at the old outdoor rink, now used for community open skates and teen hangouts. I watch a couple of kids shoot pucks against a bent net. Their laughter echoes faintly in the cool air.

I used to be them. Hungry, full of fire, chasing a dream like it was the only thing that mattered. And it did, for a long time. Until I realized that dreams feel hollow without someone to share them with.

I ended up parked outside Quinn's favorite diner for half an hour, debating whether to go in and grab a coffee-to-go. I picture her in that corner booth, laughing with Abby, biting the end of her straw like she does when she's nervous. I don't go in. Coward.

Eventually I head back to Beckett's. He's out back setting up the bonfire, dragging logs into a circle. I offer to help and he tosses me a lighter. "You bringing that face to the fire tonight?" he asks.

"This is just my brooding hockey star face" I say. "Very on brand."

"Well, brood near the marshmallows so people won't get suspicious."

I watch the kindling slowly catch fire and flicker to life. It's tentative at first, then bold and loud. It's kind of like love, I think. Messy. Hungry. Worth the burn.

I stare into the fire as Beck cracks jokes and Abby threatens to micromanage the s'more production like she's planning a five-course meal. Jake is tossing little sticks into the flames while Violet snoozes against Abby's shoulder and Griff arrives and is somehow managing to toast five marshmallows at once without burning a single one.

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The air smells like woodsmoke and melted sugar and, for a second, it feels like home.

But I can't relax. Not really. Not when my thoughts are still so tangled up in Quinn's shrug and her maybe-I-will-maybe-I-won't expression. I scan the crowd every few minutes, pretending I'm just taking it all in. I'm not. I'm looking for her.

"Stop pacing with your eyes," Beckett mutters beside me, passing me a beer. "You'll burn a hole in the atmosphere."

"I'm not pacing."

"Your eyebrows are." I crack a smile. Sort of. "She said she'd think about coming."

"So let her. Don't crowd the storyline. Let the girl have a plot twist."

He walks away before I can respond, and I hate that he's right.

I settle on a log and lean forward, elbows on knees, watching the fire dance. The heat pricks at my skin, but I don't move back. I need to feel something, something that proves I'm not numb anymore.

Because the truth is, I spent a long time being numb, telling myself that chasing the next win was enough. That I didn't miss Quinn, didn't need her laugh or her sharp comebacks or the way she used to say my name like it meant something.

But I did. I do.

I hear the crunch of gravel behind me, and my heart kicks. I don't turn around. Not yet.

Because maybe it's not her. Maybe it is. Either way, I need to be the guy who shows up. Not the one who walks away.

I don't know what she'll decide. But for the first time in a long time, I'm ready to stay still. To stay hopeful. To stay open.

I'm ready to show up – marshmallows, baggage and all.

Chapter nine

Quinn

There's something about the smell of woodsmoke and cheap beer that makes it feel like everyone's letting their guard down. Everyone but me.

Beckett and Abby's backyard is full—neighbors, camp staff, parents with toddlers chasing fireflies. It's warm, the fire crackles, and someone's passing around a tray of s'mores that are half-melted and fully chaotic. And yet, I can't stop scanning the edges of the circle.

Wes is here. Of course he's here.

He's talking to Jake near the cooler, nodding along to some dramatic kid's tale about a goalie mask that flew off mid-game. Every once in a while, he glances toward me. Not enough to be obvious. Just enough to remind me he sees me.

I told myself I came for the community. For Abby, who texted me twice and then guilt-tripped me with a baby photo of Violet holding a marshmallow. But the truth? I

think I wanted to see him.

I sit on a picnic blanket beside Abby and Beck, knees hugged to my chest. "They're all watching us," I whisper.

Abby doesn't even look up from her marshmallow. "Who?"

"Everyone. Half the town. They're whispering. You know they are."

She shrugs. "Let them whisper. You're not a scandal. You're a comeback story waiting to happen."

I snort. "That sounds like something you'd put on a mug."

"Already did. Etsy bestseller."

Jake runs past us with two marshmallows stuck in his hair, shrieking with joy. Abby groans and gets up to chase him, leaving me alone with my racing thoughts, the smell of singed sugar, and sweet Violet thrust onto Beck's lap. Abs turns to give us the best grin I've gotten yet today. Makes me wonder why. It's then that I know exactly why. Her sweet Violet is not so sweet after all.

Their parent rule, so they've told me, is "First find, first do." So off to the house Beck trots holding his lovely babe a few inches away, shooting darts toward his wife who mysteriously is taking lots longer than usual to corner Jake with "mom's washcloth." I'm pretty torn up and taking notes on just how to do that for future reference.

"Hey," comes a voice beside me. I turn, and there he is.

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Wes lowers himself onto the blanket with the kind of ease that only comes from years on skates and charm. “Mind if I sit?”

I hesitate. “You already are.”

He gives a soft chuckle, eyes on the fire. “Right.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes, the hum of conversation swirling around us. He’s wearing that navy jacket again—the one he’s had forever—and his knee bumps mine lightly.

“So,” he says, finally. “Good turnout.”

“Abby threatened to egg every house that didn’t show.”

He smiles. “Sounds about right.”

A beat.

“You looked like you were having a good time earlier. Laughing with Abby. You’ve still got that spark.”

I shrug. “Doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means something to me.”

I glance at him. His expression is open, unguarded. That alone almost undoes me.

“You don’t get to just come back and say that,” I whisper. “You don’t get to remind me what it used to feel like.”

“I’m not trying to remind you.” He shifts closer. “I’m trying to find a new way forward.”

The noise around us fades. The fire pops loudly, sending a spark into the air.

Someone calls for music. Abby cues up an old playlist. That stupid Ed Sheeran song from their engagement party comes on, and I nearly choke.

Wes hears it too. “Remember that night?”

“Barely.”

“You were wearing that blue dress. I kept trying to hold your hand and you kept pretending not to notice.”

“I was nervous.”

“You were perfect.”

My heart thuds. And I hate that it still does.

He moves to stand, then extends a hand.

“Come on,” he says. “One dance. For old times’ sake.”

I should say no. I should absolutely, 100% say no.

Instead, I let him pull me up.

He holds me gently, one arm around my waist, the other cradling my hand like something fragile. We sway in slow, quiet steps. It's ridiculous. It's wonderful. It's heartbreak waiting to happen.

My throat tightens. "I never stopped wondering why you didn't fight for me."

"I thought walking away was the fight. I thought I was protecting you."

"And now?"

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“I think I was wrong.”

I close my eyes. My head dips toward his chest before I even realize it.

Then someone stumbles into the firepit circle, shouting for marshmallows, and I pull back too quickly.

I trip.

Wes catches me.

Arms strong. Eyes wide. The fire behind him casts gold across his face.

We’re close. Too close.

I look up—and he’s already looking at me.

And for a breathless moment, everything else falls away.

His hand lingers at my waist. My palm presses against his chest.

We don’t move.

His face tilts down. Mine lifts slightly.

A heartbeat away.

Then a cheer erupts from the other side of the fire. Someone yells, “Get a room!” and the spell snaps.

I step back, breath hitching.

Wes lets me go.

“Sorry,” he says, voice hoarse.

But I’m not sure I am.

Neither of us says anything else.

I walk away, heart in my throat.

And behind me, the fire crackles.

Still burning.

Still waiting.

Still wanting.

Chapter ten

Wes

The crackle of the fire is still in my ears, but the weight of her in my arms is what I can’t shake. She was soft and solid all at once. And warm and real in a way that made the rest of the world blur. Her breath had caught just slightly when I caught her, and mine hasn’t returned to normal since. Her hair brushed against my chin, and for a split

second, I swore I could feel her heartbeat through the thin layers of our clothes.

Holding her again felt like exhaling after years of holding my breath. It wasn't just muscle memory—it was emotional muscle too. Every laugh we shared, every silent fight, every near kiss that never happened, it all rushed back in one unbearable moment. I didn't want to let go. But I did. Because I'm trying to do this right this time. Even if it's killing me slowly.

Memories rush in—those late nights walking her home from shifts, the way she'd tease me for my terrible playlist choices, the way her hand used to find mine without thinking. I remember the first time she wore my hoodie and how I pretended not to care that she never gave it back.

The nervous energy in my chest feels like that night I sat outside her apartment with flowers, unsure if I was too late even then. The nerves now? Worse. Because this time I know exactly what I lost.

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I remember how she used to tuck her legs under her on the couch, completely absorbed in whatever show we were binging—usually something medical that she'd roll her eyes at while still being obsessed with the show's inaccuracies.

I remember Sunday mornings, coffee in hand, when she'd quiz me on anatomy terms just to see if I'd retained any of the ones she used during rotations. I remember her hands, always cold, always seeking warmth, slipping into the front pocket of my hoodie while we waited in line for hot chocolate after skating.

There are a thousand little snapshots in my head I didn't know I'd memorized until now—and they're all surfacing at once, leaving me raw and shaken. I'm not just missing her laugh or her touch. I'm missing our rhythm, the way we used to move through the world like two halves of the same plan.

It was nothing. It was everything.

She looked up at me like maybe—just maybe—there was something left between us worth fighting for. And then it was gone. A burst of laughter, a shouted joke, a dozen eyes too interested in our moment. The spark vanished into smoke.

But for that one instant, there had been something. Real and raw and maybe even redeemable. And I'd felt it—not just in my arms, but in the pit of my stomach, the ache in my chest, the sting behind my eyes. It was hope, and it terrified me.

What if that one look is the closest I'll ever get to making it right?

I wanted to grab the moment and stretch it out, to freeze time and ask her what she

was thinking, if her heart had skipped the same beat mine had. But the world kept moving, and I was left holding the memory like it meant more than it should.

Because for me, it did.

I don't cry. Not really. Not since the day I signed my first contract and learned that showing emotion was a weakness. But standing there, with the scent of her shampoo still lingering on my shirt and the weight of everything unsaid pressing against my ribs, I felt dangerously close to breaking that rule.

And part of me wants to let it happen. To stop pretending I'm fine. To finally admit how much losing her gutted me.

I'm still standing there like an idiot when Griff appears with two folding chairs and two sodas. "You looked like you were about to pass out. Sit down before someone adds you to the first aid report."

I collapse into the chair and take the drink. "Thanks."

He watches me a moment, then nudges me with his elbow. "So. That was a thing."

I don't answer.

Griff raises his eyebrows. "Are you gonna pretend you didn't almost kiss her? Because if you are, you might need an acting coach."

I groan. "Can we not do this right now?"

Griff grins. "Oh, we're doing this. This is prime older-brother material. I should be charging admission."

“I didn’t plan it.”

“Of course not. No one plans to fall face-first into a Hallmark moment. It just happens. You should’ve seen your face—like a golden retriever who just realized he’s holding a wedding ring in his mouth.”

“She stumbled.”

“Sure, she did. Into your arms. Like a rom-com extra with excellent timing.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You’re doing better than you think. You just need patience. And maybe a helmet.”

“She’s still angry.”

“She’s still here.”

I glance toward the spot where she disappeared into the crowd. “It’s not enough.”

“It’s more than nothing.”

Griff takes a sip of his soda and leans back, watching the fire with the kind of ease I envy. It’s the way he’s completely present—no second-guessing, no overthinking. He laughs when someone drops a marshmallow into the flames, tells a joke without weighing every word. He’s got Liz’s hand in his without needing to make a grand gesture out of it. That kind of peace—the kind where you know who you are and who you love—it’s something I never figured out how to hold on to.

And now, watching him so effortlessly rooted, I wonder if I ever really knew what stillness felt like until I lost her. “You’re doing what most guys can’t. Showing up.

Sticking around. Letting her see you try.”

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“It doesn’t feel like enough.”

“It won’t. Not for a while. But she smiled tonight. You made her laugh. That counts.”

Before I can answer, someone else laughs across the firepit. A bright, familiar sound.

I turn—Quinn. Laughing at something Abby said, hand over her mouth, eyes lit up. It hits me square in the chest.

I missed that sound.

That sound used to mean we were okay. That the world hadn’t gotten to her yet. That I hadn’t messed it all up.

Griff sees me looking. ““That laugh?” he says. “That’s your crack in the armor. Keep pushing.”

I shift toward him. “What do you mean by that? Keep pushing how?”

He shrugs like it’s obvious. “Be around. Keep showing her the version of you who isn’t running from everything. Ask her questions, really listen when she answers. Don’t try to bulldoze her with declarations or apologies. Just... make her laugh again. Make her remember why she let you in the first time.”

“And if she doesn’t want to remember?”

Griff gives me a look. “She showed up. She laughed. She let you catch her. Don’t

pretend those things don't matter. Just don't rush her. Let her meet you halfway—but give her something worth walking toward.”

I nod, but something catches my eye. A figure standing just outside the light. Tall, confident posture. Familiar.

He steps forward, a plate of s'mores in one hand.

Quinn's laugh fades when she spots him. Her body stiffens, shoulders drawn tight as if bracing for impact. The easy curve of her smile drops, replaced by something unreadable. Maybe it's shock, or wariness with a touch of disbelief. Her hand falls from her mouth to her lap, fingers curling slightly into a fist. I see her blink once, hard, like she's trying to reset her entire posture.

Whatever joy had been warming her features disappears, replaced by that guarded expression I remember all too well—the one she wore the night I left.

I hear her say his name. A name I haven't heard in years.

“Ryan?”

Her ex. The one from college. The one who used to visit every holiday with too-bright smiles and too-smooth compliments. The one who always seemed to know just how to make her laugh—and just how to make me feel like I didn't measure up. We never liked each other. Mutual, unspoken disdain. And now he's here, looking like a headline about to rewrite my entire comeback story.

He grins like he never left.

And just like that, the fire doesn't feel warm anymore.

Chapter eleven

Quinn

Ryan Jensen.

Of all the ghosts who could walk out of the smoke at a summer bonfire, it had to be him.

One second I'm laughing with Abby about the s'mores-to-marshmallow ratio and watching Jake try to toast one with a plastic fork, and the next—boom.

There he is. Like a glitch in time. Still tall, still annoyingly handsome in that clean-cut, polished way. Still wearing that cologne I used to think smelled expensive and now just smells like something bought on discount.

"Quinn," he says, smiling like this is the most casual thing in the world.

"Ryan?"

My voice comes out strangled.

He offers a little wave, like we're bumping into each other at a coffee shop and not... whatever this is. "Wow. It really is you."

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My heart is suddenly doing acrobatics in my chest, but not for the reasons it used to.

Behind me, I hear the laughter die down. I feel eyes.

"What... What are you doing here?"

Ryan shrugs, holding up a plate of s'mores like it's a peace offering. "I moved back. Temporarily. Long story. I ran into Liv at the clinic. She mentioned the bonfire. Thought I'd swing by."

He says it like we're still close. Like showing up here, unannounced, is totally fine.

I glance around. Wes is still near the fire, talking to Beck, but I know he sees this. I feel him seeing it. That crackle of tension, that invisible string that always pulls taut when he's near—it hums now with a deeper vibration.

Ryan follows my gaze. "Is that... your hockey player?"

I flinch.

He laughs, low and knowing. "Didn't peg you for the jock type."

I cross my arms. "You never really knew my type."

He holds up his hands in mock surrender. "Fair. Fair. No need to be prickly. Look, I was just hoping to catch up. No pressure. Coffee sometime?"

There it is.

The invitation. The old rhythm. Ryan always made things sound like harmless suggestions, just two friends catching up. Until you were five coffees deep and he was laying out a five-year plan that involved moving to Phoenix and living near his mother.

I hesitate. Not because I want to say yes. But because I'm realizing, in real time, how much I don't want to.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I say finally.

Ryan raises an eyebrow. "No?"

I manage a polite smile. "No. It's... it's good to see you, Ryan. Really. But I'm not in that place."

He tilts his head. "Still hung up on him?"

"It's not about that."

It is. And it isn't. It's about all of it.

Ryan reads it on my face and nods, but there's a flicker of something else there—regret? Amusement? It vanishes too quickly.

"Well, if you change your mind..."

He says it like we're still close. Like showing up here, unannounced, is totally fine.

Before I can respond, Griff steps into the scene like a buffer. "Ryan," he says flatly.

Ryan turns, smiling. “Griffin Shaw. Man, long time. You’re still around here?”

Griff doesn’t offer a hand. “Still here. Still don’t like surprises.”

Ryan chuckles like it’s nothing, shifting the plate of s’mores. “Didn’t mean to crash. Just thought I’d see who was still in town.”

“You saw,” Griff says, arms folded. “Now what?”

Ryan’s smile fades just a little. “Easy, man. I didn’t know Wes would be here.”

Griff doesn’t blink. “But you knew Quinn would.”

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The tension between them stretches so tight I could pluck it like a guitar string. Ryan's lips press into a line. "This was a mistake."

"Yup," Griff replies. "You got what you came for?"

Ryan glances at me, as if trying to figure out whether I'm flattered or furious. I manage neither. I just wait.

"I'll go," Ryan mutters.

"Good plan," Griff says. "Use the front gate."

Ryan brushes past, too proud to say goodbye.

He doesn't push. Just gives me a lazy two-fingered salute and saunters off toward the cider table.

Only then do I exhale.

Only then do I notice that Wes isn't by the fire anymore.

My gaze sweeps the backyard, past the picnic blankets, the sticky children with chocolate on their faces, the couples dancing barefoot in the grass. No sign of him.

I spot Beck, who catches my look and tilts his head discreetly toward the tree line.

He left.

No goodbye. No storm-out. Just... gone.

A lump rises in my throat.

"Everything okay?" Abby asks, returning from chasing Jake and dropping onto the blanket beside me. She looks at my face. "Oh. That was Ryan, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

And suddenly, I'm pulled backward in time. Ryan and I were never meant to last, but there was a time when I thought he might be the one. We met during my junior year when I was studying for my MS in nursing. He was in his third year of med school, with a confident stride and a smile that made half the hospital staff swoon. I was flattered, a little overwhelmed, and completely unprepared.

He sent flowers to the clinic after our first date. Made reservations at places I'd only seen on Instagram. Told me I had "potential," like I was some project he'd been assigned to mentor. At first, I mistook it for affection. I thought he saw something in me.

But over time, it became clear: Ryan didn't want a partner. He wanted a shadow. Someone who would nod at the right moments and look good at social events. He once told me not to laugh so loudly at a charity gala—it wasn't 'polished' enough.

On the night I ended it, he looked more offended than heartbroken. As if breaking up with him was a clerical error that would be corrected once I came to my senses.

With that thought, I turn to Abby and tell her that seeing him here tonight? It wasn't nostalgia. It was a reminder. A reminder of how far I've come—and how easy it would be to fall back into something that looks safe but feels like an erasure.

She nudges me. "And Wes?"

"Gone."

"Oh."

We sit in silence.

Jake flops dramatically into Abby's lap, half a marshmallow stuck to his elbow.

"What are the odds," I say, voice thin, "that the moment I feel like maybe, maybe, I'm ready to talk to Wes... Ryan shows up like a plot twist?"

"Well," Abby says, trying to scrape marshmallow off Jake's jeans, "I'd say that's how you know it matters. The universe doesn't test you with things that don't matter."

"That's very wise."

"I read it on a Pinterest graphic between diaper changes."

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We both laugh.

But the ache doesn't go away.

I wrap my arms around my knees again, watching the flames dance higher.

I should go after him.

But I don't. Not yet.

I sit there, wondering why my timing always feels like it's just one beat behind the music.

And somewhere beyond the firelight, Wes is walking away.

Again.

Chapter twelve

Quinn

The bonfire crowd has thinned. The kids are crashing, sticky with sugar and smoke, and the music's softened to a gentle playlist of folk covers and soft pop. But all I can hear is the pounding of my heart.

I should've known Ryan showing up would throw me off. What I didn't expect was the weight of Wes's absence after.

Because when I scan the backyard again, he's gone.

I rise from the blanket, peeling marshmallow fluff off my jeans. Abby gives me a questioning glance, but I shake my head. I'm not ready to talk about it. Not yet.

The light breeze carries the scent of cedarwood and burning sugar, and it should be comforting. Instead, it feels like static. Like something about tonight is off-kilter, and I can't quite fix it.

I start weaving through the crowd—past neighbors chatting about summer rec league sign-ups, past Liv holding court over the cider table, past Griff tossing glowsticks to a group of toddlers like he's a human vending machine.

No Wes.

A flicker of panic rises in my throat. Not because I think he left. Because I don't think he would—not without saying something. And the fact that he hasn't... scares me.

I keep walking. Past the string lights. Past the last circle of laughing adults into the softer quiet where lawn gives way to gravel.

And that's when I see him.

He's leaning against a post near the far side of the fence, his back to me, talking to a woman I don't recognize. She's tall, blonde, and dressed in a pale green sundress that practically glows under the moonlight. She's laughing in that effortless, flirty way that curls around your gut before you can stop it. She touches his arm, just lightly, and I freeze.

I know that laugh. I know that body language. It's not mine—but it used to be.

I'm too far to hear what they're saying. And maybe that's a gift. Because if I hear her call him "Wes" with that warm, intimate tone, I might combust.

My stomach twists.

This is stupid. He's allowed to talk to people. It's probably someone from the youth league board. Or a parent. Or a literal stranger asking for directions to the bathroom.

But the damage is already done.

I was going to talk to him. I was going to find him and finally stop running. I had rehearsed it, even—Hey, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pushed you away. I miss you. But now... now I feel like I showed up to a finish line only to realize the race ended without me.

The pit in my stomach grows cold. I turn back toward the fire, blinking hard.

Abby's laughing with Jake, who's trying to roast two marshmallows at once. Liv raises an eyebrow from across the lawn, but I look away before she can ask.

Whatever I thought was happening tonight, whatever flicker of maybe had started to warm inside me—is gone.

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I thought I was ready to face Wes. To start again.

But maybe... I was already too late.

I don't sleep.

I don't even try.

Instead, I spend half the night rearranging the med bag I already packed for camp. I organize the gauze by width. Count the instant ice packs. Alphabetize the over-the-counter meds. Anything to keep from thinking about Wes's face.

Or hers.

The woman from the bonfire—whoever she was—shouldn't matter. But she does. Because seeing her laugh with him was a reminder that time passed without me. That he might've hurt me, but he didn't freeze in place.

And maybe I did.

I kept living, sure. Kept working. Smiling. Saving lives. But it was all surface. I haven't felt anything real for months—not until Wes walked back into town and stirred everything back to life with a single look.

And now I hate that he still has that power.

By morning, I'm running on adrenaline and too much coffee. The camp is already buzzing. Kids shriek as they chase each other across the ice. Liv's barking instructions like a drill sergeant. Griff's running a puck-handling relay drill with so much enthusiasm he might burst a blood vessel.

I'm holding it together. On the outside.

Inside? I'm one badly aimed water bottle away from falling apart.

Wes is out on the ice, hoodie pushed up to his elbows, a whistle dangling from one hand. He looks good. Calm. Like someone who didn't spend the night pacing his kitchen and second-guessing everything.

Like someone who's moved on.

He glances my way once, early in the morning. I don't return it.

I'm angry.

Not about the mystery blonde. Not entirely.

I'm angry because he still doesn't understand what he did to me.

He thinks regret is enough. That showing up, smiling at Jake, and coaching these kids will somehow undo the fact that he watched me break and still chose to disappear.

He doesn't get to rewrite that history.

Not unless I let him.

It happens after lunch.

The kids are inside for a movie break. Liv is off dealing with a broken vending machine. I'm restocking the med kit in the empty supply room, the air is thick with Lysol and old hockey tape when Wes walks in, arms full of gear.

We lock eyes. Neither of us speaks.

He sets the gear down gently. "Hey."

"Hey," I reply flatly.

He hesitates. "Can we talk?"

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I don't answer. Just zip the kit and fold my arms.

"I saw Ryan show up last night," he says, carefully. "Didn't want to interrupt."

My laugh is bitter. "That why you vanished?"

He shrugs. "Felt like the smart play."

"Funny. You disappearing always seems to feel smart to you."

His jaw tightens. "That's not fair."

I step closer. "Isn't it? Because from where I stood last night, it felt familiar. You left. Again. Without a word. Like you always do."

He rubs the back of his neck. "I didn't want to make things harder."

I stare at him. "You already did."

He shifts his weight. "I told you—I thought I was protecting you."

"No," I snap. "You watched me fall apart and still left. You didn't protect me, Wes. You abandoned me."

He flinches.

Good.

I keep going.

“Remember the night you got hurt in Chicago? Concussion. Elbow to the temple. You don’t remember the locker room, but I do. I was there. I was on the floor of that ER locker room, crying like the world had ended. You walked past me. Yousawme. And then three days later, you left.”

His face pales. “You were there?”

“Yes,” I say, voice shaking. “And you didn’t even say goodbye.”

He swallows hard. “I didn’t know what to say. I thought... if I told you how bad it really was, you’d feel trapped.”

“I was already in it,” I whisper. “With you. I was already yours. You didn’t even give me the chance to decide if I wanted to stay.”

“I was scared.”

I nod slowly. “So was I. But I didn’t get to run.”

Silence stretches between us.

He steps closer. “Quinn. I’m not asking you to forgive me. Not yet. But I need you to know—I see it now. What I did. How much I hurt you.”

His voice cracks. “I thought disappearing would make it easier. For both of us. But all it did was make me realize how much I lost.”

I blink fast, but a tear still escapes. “I can’t go through that again.”

“You won’t have to,” he says softly.

“I don’t know if I believe that.”

“I’ll earn it,” he says. “Every day. Every word. Every second.”

I stare at him for a long moment, heart splintering under the weight of every emotion I’ve been holding back.

And then I walk past him.

Not because I don't believe him.

But because, for the first time, I think he means it.

And that terrifies me more than anything.

Chapter thirteen

Quinn

I don't know what I expected when I agreed to meet Wes halfway on this community skate day, but it wasn't... this.

This cautious calm. This steady, unexpected partnership.

He's not pushing. Not smirking. Not charming his way past my boundaries. He's just... there. Helping. Patient. Attentive with the kids. Kind to the parents. Doing the work without fanfare.

And me? I'm trying not to stare like an idiot every time he laughs. Or ties a skate. Or smiles at a five-year-old like they're the most important person in the world.

We're sorting cones when a volunteer coach knocks over a bin, scattering plastic pucks across the rink. Wes bends to help, and I kneel beside him instinctively.

Our foreheads bump.

“Sorry,” he mutters, the ghost of a grin on his lips.

“It’s fine.” I don’t look at him.

Not until he says, quietly, “You’re different here.”

I glance up. “Different how?”

“Lighter,” he says. “Happier. Like this place brings out the best in you.”

I straighten. “It’s not the place. It’s the people. The kids.”

He nods. “You’re good with them.”

“I’ve always liked the chaos. It’s honest.”

He chuckles. “That’s one word for it.”

We finish sorting the gear and scramble for all the wayward pucks. Then, to my surprise, he follows me to the breakroom where volunteers are unwinding with cocoa and leftover donuts. He lingers near the door until I wave him in.

Small steps. That’s all this is. Still... I don’t stop him when he sits beside me.

“Do you ever think about what it might’ve been like,” he says, voice low, “if I hadn’t left?”

It takes me a moment to answer. “All the time.”

His breath catches.

“But then I remember that you did leave,” I add quietly. “And whatever future I imagined got erased the second you walked away.”

He leans forward, elbows on his knees. “I regret it every day.”

We sit in silence. Not cold. Not hostile. Just tired. Like maybe we’ve both been carrying too much for too long.

One of the younger kids runs up with a thank-you card covered in crayon. “Miss Quinn! Coach Wes!”

We both blink.

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Wes reads it aloud: “Thank you for teaching me how to fall and get back up.”

My voice wavers. “That’s... actually kind of perfect.”

He looks at me. “Maybe we both need to learn that too.”

I stare at the card long after the kid runs off. My fingers trace the jagged lettering. There's something innocent about the message, something disarming in its simplicity. It sneaks past the defenses I've built and lodges right under my ribs.

After the event ends, I help stack the folding chairs. Wes lingers nearby, not quite ready to leave. Neither am I.

We drift into small talk—about the kids, the weather, a funny moment with Griff slipping on a rogue puck—and somehow, it's not awkward. It's easy. Comfortable. Familiar, like slipping on a favorite old hoodie you forgot you loved.

Then he glances toward the doorway. “Hey, want to see something?”

Curiosity nudges me forward. He leads me through the side door to the outdoor rink that hardly anyone uses this time of year. The snow's been cleared, but it's quiet, almost untouched.

“My first skating memory happened here,” he says, sliding his hands into his coat pockets. “I must've been five. My uncle brought me out. I fell so many times I had bruises for days. But I didn't stop. I wanted to impress him.”

He laughs softly, and the sound lingers in the air. “That was the day I knew hockey wasn’t just a game to me. It was... everything.”

“You were fearless then,” I say.

“Not fearless,” he corrects gently. “Just stubborn. I’ve been scared plenty. Especially when it comes to you.”

His words hang between us. I hug my arms across my chest, not to block him out—but to hold myself together.

We walk a lap in silence around the rink. I ask him about his work at the academy, and his eyes light up like they used to when he talked about playoff games.

“The kids are amazing,” he says. “They remind me what it’s like to love the sport without pressure. Just joy.”

“You’re good with them,” I say. “Better than you think.”

He smiles at that. Quiet, genuine. Like it matters what I think.

As the building empties out, he surprises me again. “Can I walk you to your car?”

I hesitate. Then nod.

The parking lot is quiet. Cold. A few cars remain under the dim glow of the overhead lights. Our footsteps crunch lightly across the pavement.

When we reach my car, I pause. “Thanks for helping today. The kids loved it.”

“I loved it too,” he says. “It felt like...”

“Like home?” I offer.

He looks at me, eyes full of something I can’t name. “Yeah. Exactly like that.”

We stand there for a beat too long. The air between us is brimming with all the things we’re not saying. Then he clears his throat.

“I meant what I said inside. About regretting it every day. I was scared. I made the wrong choice. But I’m trying to do better now.”

“I know,” I whisper. “I see it.”

The words slip out before I can stop them. And the truth is—I do.

Then, before I go, I do something unexpected. I reach out and tug his glove off, just enough to press my bare hand into his.

“Goodnight, Wes.”

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He stares down at our joined hands like he's memorizing the moment.

“Goodnight, Quinn.”

I slide into my car and close the door. He waits until I start the engine, gives me a small nod, and walks away.

I sit there a moment longer, staring at the steering wheel. The heat blowing across my face. My heart pounding a little too fast.

Maybe I'm still scared. But I don't feel quite so alone anymore.

And maybe—just maybe—that's the beginning of healing.

The beginning of something new.

Chapter fourteen

Wes

I'm still smiling when I get home.

Not the usual smirk. Not the practiced grin I throw on for interviews or charity events. This one's different. It's real. Quiet. Settled in my chest like the hum of a favorite song I forgot I knew.

Quinn let me walk her to her car. She touched my hand. And I didn't screw it up.

That shouldn't be a victory, but after everything? It feels like one.

I lean against the kitchen counter, still wearing my gloves and jacket, staring at nothing. My kitchen is dark except for the hall light I left on earlier. I peel off my coat and toss it over a chair, my movements slow, reluctant to break the spell of the evening.

Tonight wasn't flashy. There were no grand declarations or dramatic scenes. Just quiet moments—her laugh, her questions, the way she listened when I talked about the kids at the academy. The way she looked at me like I was someone she could maybe, just maybe, let back in.

I exhale hard, pushing away the fear that always follows nights like this. The one that whispers, *Don't get used to it.*

But I want to.

I want to believe we're finding our way back, even if it's inch by inch.

The next morning, I show up at the rink early. I've got youth practice at eight, but I want time alone on the ice first.

There's something about an empty rink that centers me. The cold. The echo. The silence that's broken only by the slice of my skates across frozen water. It's the closest thing I know to meditation.

I circle the ice in slow laps, working out the stiffness in my legs and the noise in my head. Every now and then, I catch myself thinking about Quinn—how she smiled yesterday when one of the girls offered her a donut with pink frosting, or how she'd

brushed snow off a kid's helmet without realizing she was still talking.

She belongs here. Not just in this town. In my world.

I skate until the kids start filing in, loud and excited, and then I switch gears. High-fives. Encouragement. Focused drills. I lose myself in the chaos, and it feels good.

Afterward, Beckett finds me in the locker room, already out of his gear. "You free tonight?"

I raise a brow. "Depends. Why?"

He smirks. "Abby's idea. She and Quinn are grabbing dinner at that new pasta place. She thought maybe you and I could casually show up around dessert."

I snort. "Subtle."

Beckett shrugs. "She's trying to help. Quinn's thawing. Slowly. It might not hurt to see you in a normal setting. Plus, Abby swears the tiramisu's life changing."

I rub the back of my neck, thinking. "Yeah. Okay. But no pressure. If she looks like she wants space, I'll back off."

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“You’ll know,” Beckett says. “She’s not great at hiding it when she’s pissed.”

“Trust me, I remember.”

The restaurant’s cozy. Warm lighting. Brick walls. More romantic than I was expecting for a casual double not-quite-date.

I spot Quinn the second I walk in. She’s laughing at something Abby said, her hands curled around a wine glass. Her hair’s down, soft and wavy. She’s wearing the earrings I gave her on the Christmas before I left.

That shouldn’t matter. But it does.

Beckett and I join them. There’s surprise in Quinn’s eyes, but not irritation. Just that quiet curiosity she’s had lately, like she’s trying to decide if I’m real or just a mirage.

Conversation flows. Nothing too deep. Just town gossip, funny stories from the rink, Abby teasing Beckett about leaving his socks in the dryer too long.

Eventually, the girls excuse themselves, heading to the bathroom together like women do. I take the chance to breathe.

“She’s wearing the earrings,” I murmur.

Beckett nods. “I noticed.”

“You think it means something?”

He gives me a look. “You’ve got eyes, don’t you?”

I shake my head, smiling. “Don’t get my hopes up.”

“They’re already up, man. Just don’t mess it up this time.”

I glance around the room, taking it in. A couple in the corner is holding hands over candlelight. A waitress laughs as she drops a breadbasket off at a booth of teenage hockey players in uniform. There’s a rhythm to this town, a heartbeat. I missed it more than I ever realized.

When Quinn and Abby return, I stand out of instinct. Quinn blinks but doesn’t say anything—just gives me a small nod as she slides into her seat.

Dessert comes. The tiramisu really is as good as promised. Quinn steals a bite from Abby’s plate, and I watch her smile stretch just a little wider. Her laugh lingers longer.

When the check comes, we fight over it. Quinn rolls her eyes when I slip my card to the waiter.

“Still the same Wes,” she mutters.

“Trying not to be,” I reply softly.

Something flickers in her gaze. She doesn’t respond.

Outside, we linger in the parking lot under the soft glow of the streetlamps. Quinn and I hang back while Abby and Beckett chat by their car.

“Thanks for not making it weird tonight,” she says.

“You’re welcome.” I smile. “But for the record, I never make things weird. That’s your job.”

She bumps her shoulder against mine. It’s light. Casual. But it shoots straight through me.

“I had fun,” she adds.

“Me too.”

We fall quiet. I should probably walk away now. Leave her with a good impression, no pressure.

But then she turns to me, her voice soft. “I still don’t know what this is.”

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“It’s whatever you want it to be,” I say. “No timeline. No expectations. Just... two people trying again.”

She studies me for a long beat. Then, finally, she nods.

“Okay.”

It’s just one word. But it feels like everything.

Before she gets in the car, I reach out and brush a curl behind her ear. Her breath hitches. Mine does too.

“Goodnight, Quinn.”

“Night, Wes.”

She gets in, drives off, and I stand there watching her taillights fade into the distance, heart hammering, hope blooming like spring after a long, frozen winter.

Yeah.

This is real.

And I’m not letting go.

Chapter fifteen

Quinn

It's been a long day, and I'm already running late when I swing by the community center for the youth gear drive.

I've just finished a twelve-hour shift in the ER, my scrubs are wrinkled, and there's probably half a granola bar stuck in my ponytail. But none of that matters when I walk in and see Wes laughing with two boys who are trying to wear hockey pads backward.

"Shoulder pads go on your shoulders, genius," the taller one says.

Wes chuckles. "To be fair, he's got them on his shoulders—just facing the wrong way."

I can't help but laugh, which earns me a grin from Wes that shoots straight to my knees.

"Hey, Nurse Q," he says, nudging the kid's helmet into place. "Looking heroic as ever."

I roll my eyes. "You're just lucky I'm too tired to respond properly."

He straightens and walks over, casually brushing his hand along my lower back like it's the most natural thing in the world. It lingers. So do my goosebumps.

"You made it."

"Barely."

We work side by side for the next hour, sorting gear donations, handing out pizza,

and giving encouragement to a parade of rowdy preteens who somehow have the energy of caffeinated squirrels. I'm exhausted, but something about being here with Wes—the way we click in moments like this—pulls me in deeper.

I can feel myself relaxing in his presence, which both comforts and unnerves me. There's something dangerous about letting down my guard around Wes again, like standing too close to the edge of a frozen lake and testing the ice.

At some point, I reach into a donation bag and pull out what can only be described as a vintage hockey jockstrap.

“Dear God,” I mutter, holding it out at arm’s length.

Wes peers over my shoulder, horrified and amused. “Is that... from the 1950s?”

“Maybe the Civil War,” I say. “Who donates this?”

He snatches it from my hands like it’s radioactive. “No kid needs that kind of trauma.”

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“Burn it,” I whisper.

“I’m burying it behind the rink.”

“Don’t forget the holy water.”

We’re both laughing like idiots when Abby walks in with Beck and a tray of brownies. She takes one look at the object in Wes’s hand and freezes.

“Is that a—?”

Wes holds it up triumphantly. “Relic of a bygone era.”

Beckett snorts. “Bet that thing saw more fights than I did.”

We’re still laughing when one of the kids grabs a brownie, turns to Wes, and says, “Coach Wes, is that your cup?”

Dead silence.

I lose it.

Wes turns bright red. “Kid, I am way too young to have fought in the Civil War.”

The kid shrugs. “You’re old enough.”

That sets everyone off again. Even Abby’s doubled over.

Later, once things calm down and the kids have been sent home with new gear and sugar highs, Wes and I stay behind to finish cleaning. The building is quiet. Peaceful. The kind of hush that invites honesty.

He stacks chairs. I fold jackets. And slowly, we drift into something deeper.

“You’re good with them,” I say. “The kids. The chaos.”

“So are you.”

I pause. “It scares me sometimes. Letting myself want something again. You. Us.”

He leans against the table, eyes steady on mine. “I’m scared too. But I’m here. And I’m not walking away this time.”

There’s a long pause. I stare down at my hands, tracing the edge of a folded sweater.

“I kept thinking it had to be perfect,” I admit. “That if I didn’t protect myself, I’d fall apart again.”

“You don’t have to be perfect,” he says. “You just have to let me in.”

I look up at him, and for once, I don’t try to run from the softness in his eyes.

“I’m trying.”

He walks closer. Gently takes the jacket from my hands. His fingers brush mine.

“I know.”

I open my mouth to say more, but it catches in my throat. I swallow it down. The

ache of the past still lingers, but it no longer holds me in a chokehold.

Then he adds, almost quietly, “Beckett told me about the hospital offer.”

My head jerks up. “You know?”

He nods. “He said you turned it down. That it would’ve meant relocating. Starting fresh somewhere else.”

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I shift, uncomfortable. Then I sigh. “It was a job in Charleston. A top hospital—pediatrics and ortho. Great salary. Research options. A fast-track to management roles. It was the kind of offer I should’ve jumped at.”

Wes whistles. “That’s big.”

“Yeah,” I say. “And I was flattered. I was. I even flew down to meet with the department. Toured the hospital. Walked the halls. Talked with their director of surgery. It was impressive. State-of-the-art. Everyone seemed smart and competent. But...”

“But it didn’t feel right?” he asks.

I nod. “Exactly. The whole time I was there, I kept waiting to feel excited. Or at least proud. Like I was stepping into this next level of my career. But mostly, I just felt... lonely.”

Wes leans against the table, arms folded. “You never told anyone?”

“Not really. Abby knew. And Meg. I didn’t want to make a big deal of it until I made a decision. But even after they offered, I stalled. I told them I needed time to think, but really—I was looking for a reason to say no.”

I let out a breath and sit on the edge of a table. “I spent the first night in the hotel room just staring out the window. Wondering if I’d ever really feel settled there. Wondering if moving on meant letting go of everything that still feels unfinished here. And I realized—maybe I wasn’t running toward something better. Maybe I was

just running away from the pain.”

His voice is quieter now. “From losing your dad. From me.”

Tears well, but I blink them back. “Yeah.”

“And now?”

I meet his gaze. “Now I want to stay. Not because it’s easier. But because I want to do hard things with the people I love. I want roots. I want peace. I want... possibility. And not in a sterile hospital miles from home, but here. With my people. With you.”

Wes’s throat moves like he’s trying to swallow a whole flood of emotions. “You have no idea what it means to hear that.”

I step forward. “It wasn’t just the job offer I turned down. It was the idea that I have to do this all alone. I don’t want to anymore.”

His voice is low, thick. “You don’t have to.”

We stand there, holding each other’s gaze like the truth is finally safe to say out loud. Maybe it’s not the perfect moment. But it’s honest. It’s real.

And even though there are still unanswered questions between us, it feels like a door finally cracked open.

She leans in and kisses me ever so softly. Something passes between us. A silent vow. A heartbeat shared.

Even if it started with a haunted jockstrap.

Chapter sixteen

Wes

Sunset Cove is quiet at dawn. Too quiet.

I walk the trail behind the youth center alone, coffee in hand, bundled in a hoodie that still smells faintly like the storage room cleaner. The same gear drive room where Quinn and I laughed like we hadn't in years. Like maybe we'd both stopped bracing for the next heartbreak.

I should feel lighter today. Encouraged. Hopeful. But instead, I keep replaying her words. It wasn't just the job offer I turned down. It was the idea that I have to do this all alone.

She's choosing to stay. Choosing the hard stuff. Choosing this town.

But is she choosing me?

That's the question that loops in my brain on repeat.

A seagull screeches above me, pulling my attention to the bay. A fishing boat motors slowly out to sea, leaving a rippling wake. It's early. Cold. Still. And I'm filled with this familiar restlessness I can't shake.

I promised her I wouldn't leave again. And I meant it. But old habits die hard.

Especially when you've mastered the art of running.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:08 pm

I think back to last night. To the way Quinn looked at me in the quiet after everyone else had left. The way she stood there, nerves exposed and heart wide open.

And then she kissed me.

I wasn't expecting it. One minute we were laughing about the haunted jockstrap, and the next, she was right there, so close I could feel the tremble in her breath.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

"Me too," I'd said.

Then she leaned in, and everything fell away—the fear, the past, the doubt.

It wasn't a fireworks-and-choirs kind of kiss. It was tentative. Careful. But full of something truer than anything I've felt in years. Her lips brushed mine, soft and warm, and I didn't move a muscle. I let her set the pace. Let her decide. And when she pulled back just enough to look at me, eyes wide and searching, I finally exhaled.

That moment is seared into me. Burned behind my eyelids.

But so is the uncertainty.

She didn't say what it meant. And I didn't ask. Because if I had, I'm not sure I'd like the answer.

Back at my truck, I find Beckett leaning against the driver's side, arms folded,

aviators hiding his expression.

I groan. “Do you people track me?”

“We know your haunts,” he says casually. “Besides, Abby said you were acting twitchy last night.”

“I was not twitchy.”

He shrugs. “You reorganized the snack bins. Alphabetically. That’s your version of twitchy.”

I mutter something under my breath and open the passenger side door, tossing in my thermos. Beckett doesn’t budge.

“So,” he says. “You going to tell me what’s spinning in that overcooked hockey brain of yours?”

I hesitate. “She’s staying. I should be thrilled. But I’m scared that... I don’t know. Maybe I’m still the risk. Still the guy she shouldn’t bet on.”

Beckett exhales. “Wes, she already bet on you once. She wouldn’t even be here if she wasn’t thinking about doing it again.”

I lean back against the truck, watching as a breeze rustles the early morning leaves. “It’s just—what if I mess it up again? What if I stay and still somehow lose her?”

Beckett slaps my shoulder. “Then you fight like hell not to. You show up. Every single day. You make her believe it’s different now—because it is.”

He pauses, then gives me a sidelong look. “You love her?”

“Yeah,” I say without hesitation. “I do.”

He nods like that settles something. “Then stop thinking about worst-case scenarios and start acting like a man who deserves her.”

I don’t answer right away. Because he’s right. And because I know I’ve still got some work to do.

Later that morning, I find myself in the rink lobby. The place is quiet except for the sound of skates being sharpened in the back and the hum of the soda machine.

Walking back inside I sit on the edge of the bleachers, tapping my fingers against my thigh.

She kissed me.

That kiss meant something. I know it did. But what comes next? Do I wait for her to make the next move? Do I show up at her clinic with flowers and a sign that says “Please Let Me Love You” like some kind of rom-com hero?

No. Quinn would hate that. She doesn’t want grand gestures. She wants truth. Steadiness. Presence.

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I think about how to show up—not just once, but over and over.

So I pull out my phone and text her:

Me:Got any lunch plans?

A beat passes.

Quinn:Maybe. Depends who's asking.

Me:The guy who reorganized the snack bins last night. Alphabetically.

Quinn:Sounds like a real catch.

Me:He's trying.

Quinn:Then he's halfway there.

I grin. Because maybe, just maybe, that kiss wasn't the end of a moment ... it was the beginning of something real.

By noon, we're sitting on a bench behind her clinic, sharing grilled cheese sandwiches from the food truck parked outside.

"I forgot how good grilled cheese tastes when you're starving," Quinn says, brushing

crumbs off her scrubs.

“You’re welcome,” I reply. “That was a highly strategic menu choice.”

She arches a brow. “A. Because it’s easy, or B. because you’re still scared I’ll throw hot soup at you?”

“I’ll take Option C. Comfort food is a gateway to forgiveness.”

She snorts. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Ridiculously charming.”

The corner of her mouth tugs up, and for a second, it’s easy. Familiar. Like we’ve rewound time and landed in some better, softer version of ourselves.

“I’m glad we’re doing this,” she says.

“Me too.”

We sit in companionable silence for a while, watching the slow pulse of traffic and the wind teasing the edge of her ponytail. Finally, I ask the question that’s been pressing on me all day.

“Last night... the kiss. Did it mean something to you?”

Her breath catches just slightly. Then she nods. “Yeah. It did.”

I exhale. Relief blooming in my chest.

“But it also scared me,” she adds. “Because once we cross that line again, it’s real.

And real means risk.”

“I know,” I say. “But I’m not running. Not this time.”

She looks at me then, eyes open and searching.

“I need you to prove that. Not with flowers or grand speeches. Just... by showing up.”

I nod. “Every day. I can do that. I WILL do that.”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:08 pm

She leans her shoulder into mine. Not a kiss. Not a confession. But a beginning.

And I'll take it.

Chapter seventeen

Quinn

I find myself staring at the bouquet of wildflowers in the clinic break room.

It's not a grand gesture. Nothing store-bought or fancy. Just a messy bundle of daisies, clover, and Queen Anne's lace—clearly picked by hand. There's no card, but I know it's from him.

Wes.

He's not trying to win me with roses or speeches. He's just showing up. Quietly. Steadily.

And I don't know what to do with that.

The flowers stir something deeper than I expected. When I was little, Mom used to take Abby and me out to the edge of the field behind our house to gather wildflowers. We'd each get a tin can full of water, and she'd show us how to pick the stems clean, how to trim at an angle. That same kind of bouquet was always waiting for us on the kitchen windowsill.

For years after she died, I couldn't look at Queen Anne's lace without crying.

I carry the bouquet back to the front desk and place it in the jar by the window, my fingers brushing the petals. It's simple. Thoughtful. Maddening.

"Someone's got a secret admirer," Megan teases as she drops a stack of files beside me.

I roll my eyes, but I can't help smiling. "It's not a secret."

She pauses. "Is that... a good thing or a bad thing?"

"I don't know yet."

That night, I head to the youth rink with Jake in tow. He's got a hockey stick in one hand and a bag of pucks in the other, practically vibrating with excitement.

"Aunt Quinn, you sure he said I could skate?" he asks for the third time.

"Yes," I say, laughing. "Coach Wes said it's fine."

Wes meets us at the side entrance. He's dressed in a Sunset Cove Youth Hockey hoodie and joggers, a whistle slung around his neck, and for a second, I forget to breathe.

"Hey," he says, and his smile is different now. Not performative. Not forced. Just... soft.

"Hey," I reply.

He kneels beside Jake. “Think you can teach me some of those slap shot tricks I’ve been hearing about?”

Jake beams. “Only if you teach me how to check people into the boards.”

Wes chuckles. “Deal.”

The rink smells like cold air, old sweat, and fresh possibilities. I take a seat in the stands and watch as Wes skates lazy laps around Jake, correcting his footwork with gentle taps and exaggerated gestures. Jake’s laughing. Wes is too.

I watch them and think about all the things Wes used to be afraid of. Staying in one place. Growing roots. Becoming someone a kid could look up to. And yet here he is, gliding across the ice like he belongs to it again.

It hits me how easily he fits into this world.

I close my eyes and imagine more nights like this. More Tuesdays and Thursdays at the rink. More laughter echoing off the walls. It’s a dangerous kind of hope, but it’s still hope.

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Later, after the rink empties and Jake is happily devouring a hot chocolate from the vending machine, Wes slides onto the bench beside me.

“I forgot how much I love this place,” he says, breath puffing in the cold air.

“You’re good with him.”

“I like him. He’s smart. Confident.”

“Stubborn,” I add.

He grins. “Wonder where he gets that.”

I nudge his shoulder. “It’s genetic. From his aunt.”

Wes laughs, but there’s a beat of silence that follows. One thick with unsaid things.

He stares out at the empty ice, then glances back at me. “Do you remember the night I taught you to skate backwards?”

I smile. “You mean the night I nearly dislocated your shoulder?”

He chuckles. “You were determined. And reckless.”

“And terrified.”

“But you did it. You always do.”

There's something so familiar about this moment. Like we've circled all the way back to the beginning and still found each other standing here.

"I want to be part of your life again, Quinn," he says. "Not just the easy parts."

My chest tightens. "It's not that simple."

"I know. But I'm here. And I'm staying. If you let me, I'll prove that every day."

I look at him. Really look. And for the first time, I believe him.

I slide my hand into his.

Not a promise.

But maybe the start of one.

Jake snores softly in the back seat as Wes and I drive him home. His hockey gear is a pile of crumpled effort beside him, and his cheeks are still pink from skating.

"You'd think he just played in the Stanley Cup," Wes murmurs with a grin, glancing at Jake in the rearview mirror.

"He'll be talking about this night for weeks," I say. "You made his whole month."

We pull into Abby and Beck's driveway, the porch light casting a soft glow across the front lawn. As soon as I open the back door, Jake stirs awake, mumbling something incoherent before suddenly perking up.

“Is Violet still up?” he asks.

“She might be. Want to check?”

Jake is out of the car like a shot, dragging his hockey stick with him as he bolts up the porch steps. I follow, Wes just behind me.

Inside, the warmth of home wraps around us—the soft hum of the baby monitor, the faint smell of lavender lotion, and the quiet lull of wind brushing against the windows.

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Jake hugs his mom and then tiptoes down the hall and peeks into the nursery. A moment later, I hear a whispered, “Hi, baby girl,” followed by the creak of the rocking chair.

Abby appears in the doorway, smiling. “He begged to see her. I didn’t have the heart to say no.”

Wes stands beside me, hands in his pockets, watching the gentle domestic scene like it’s something sacred. Like it’s something he’s never quite had but always wanted. “I think he’s more obsessed with that baby than with hockey,” Wes whispers.

I nod. “She has that effect.”

In the nursery, Jake gently rocks back and forth, his big hand wrapped around Violet’s tiny one. He hums under his breath—a quiet, off-key lullaby—and I feel my throat tighten.

The rocker creaks gently under his weight, a slow, steady rhythm like a heartbeat. Violet’s eyes flutter open, her tiny mouth forming a sleepy “o” as she stretches her fingers around Jake’s thumb. He stills, as if afraid to move, then smiles down at her with the reverence of someone who believes he’s just been given something sacred.

“Hey there, sweet girl,” he whispers, his voice as soft as the nursery nightlight. “Did you miss me? I scored, you know. I bet you’d be proud.”

Abby leans against the doorframe with a hand to her chest, her eyes shining. “He does this every time he sees her. Talks to her like she understands every word.”

“I bet she does,” I murmur.

It’s quiet in the hallway outside the nursery. I lean against the doorframe and watch as Jake continues to rock Violet, his focus entirely on her. Something about the way he looks at her—as if she’s the most precious, fragile treasure in the world—makes my chest ache in the best possible way.

And I wonder: what will they be like when they grow up?

Jake is already growing faster than I can keep up with. His voice has started to change, and he’s beginning to care more about things like his hair and whether his socks match. One day soon, he’ll be taller than me. He’ll trade his youth hockey jersey for high school tryouts and start using words like "college" and "future." And Violet... she’ll lose those baby rolls and start toddling around, then talking, then asking questions about everything under the sun.

Will they still be close when they’re teenagers? Will Jake be the fiercely protective big brother figure, chasing off any middle school crushes who look at her the wrong way? I can already imagine it. Him showing up to her school concerts in his letterman jacket, sitting in the front row and cheering louder than anyone else.

Maybe she’ll be the one who slips him handwritten notes when he’s nervous about a test or sits beside him in the bleachers while he stares too long at some girl he’s too shy to talk to. Maybe she’ll tease him about his skates always smelling like old socks and he’ll roll his eyes and call her a pest—but he’ll still tie her laces when no one’s looking.

I picture them as adults—Jake at a crossroads in his twenties, unsure of what’s next, and Violet calling him out of the blue just to say, “I believe in you.” Maybe she becomes a nurse like me, or an artist, or something wild and unexpected. Maybe Jake becomes a teacher, or maybe he follows his dad into pro hockey or Wes and becomes

a coach, pouring everything he's learned into the next generation of kids.

And me? I want to be there through all of it.

I want to be the aunt who always shows up. Who sends care packages to dorm rooms and lets them crash on my couch when life gets hard. The one who remembers their favorite ice cream flavors and listens to stories about breakups or new jobs or dreams that haven't yet taken root.

I want to be the place they turn to when the world feels too big, the person they know will always have a cup of hot cocoa ready, and a hand to hold.

Being their aunt isn't a consolation prize. It's one of the deepest honors of my life. I'm so grateful to Beckett and Abs for letting me be so involved.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm trying to hold on too tightly—if it's selfish to want to be so entwined in their lives. But watching Jake with Violet tonight, something settles in me. This connection isn't about control. It's about love. The kind that roots itself in small gestures and grows slowly, quietly, into something lasting.

And maybe... maybe that's what I want with Wes, too.

To grow something slowly. Steadily. Something built not on grand gestures or perfect timing but on quiet, steady presence. On showing up. Again and again.

Tonight, I watched Wes coach Jake with patience and ease. I saw the way Jake lit up under his attention, the way he instinctively looked to him for guidance. And I saw how Wes looked at me—not with apology or longing, but with a kind of gentle certainty that told me he wasn't going anywhere.

It makes me think about the future in a new way. Not just one filled with milestones

and plans, but with ordinary moments that string together into a life. Afternoons at the rink. Evenings filled with baby giggles. Shared silence that feels like home.

I want that.

And if I get to be part of Jake and Violet's future, if I get to cheer them on, support them, love them through all their versions, I will consider myself one of the luckiest people alive. Should my life one day include children of my own, even more wonderful.

Wes steps up beside me again, his arm brushing mine, his presence quiet and warm. Watching Jake with Violet feels like watching a secret unfold—something tender and unscripted. The kind of moment you don't plan but never forget.

"They're something, aren't they?" he whispers.

I nod, throat thick. "They really are."

Wes steps closer. "Quinn, you're good with him, you know. Steady. The kind of anchor he will always want and need." He studies my face for a beat, then says, "You're going to be part of every important moment in their lives. I can see it."

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I hope he's right.

I glance at him. "I try. But sometimes, I still feel like I can't let anything crack, even for a second. Jake looks up to me now, but will I be good enough as his aunt later when he's a teen, an adult?"

He nods, understanding softening his features. "That's not a burden you need to carry on your own. Especially when he has such loving, attentive parents."

My eyes linger on Jake rocking Violet with such care it makes my heart ache. "He's my nephew. I love him like my own. But there's always this quiet fear... that I'm not enough."

Wes's voice is low, firm. "You are. More than enough. And I want to be here. For you. For them. For all of it."

The way he says it—soft but certain—makes me want to believe him.

And maybe, just maybe, I already do.

Because down deep I know that I'll be enough for them both.

And maybe—for the first time—I'm starting to believe that I can be there for Wes in the same way.

Just then, Wes's phone buzzes in his pocket. He pulls it out, glances at the screen, and frowns slightly. "Sorry," he murmurs. "I need to take this."

He steps quietly down the hall, out of earshot, but I watch his posture stiffen as he listens. His back straightens, and he runs a hand through his hair—the kind of nervous habit I haven’t seen in a while.

When he returns, his expression is thoughtful, almost conflicted.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

He nods slowly, but there’s hesitation in his voice. “That was someone from the league. There’s a coaching position open. Not here—out of state. One of the teams I used to play for. They’re looking to rebuild, and apparently, my name came up.”

I blink, unsure what to say. “Wow. That’s... a big deal.”

“Yeah. It is.” He slips his phone back into his pocket. “But so is this. You. Our friends. The kids. This little town.”

His eyes search mine, and I know this isn’t just a passing call. It’s a moment. A fork in the road.

But for now, neither of us moves. The air is thick with possibility—and something dangerously close to hope.

Chapter eighteen

Wes

The morning after the call, the weight of it hangs in my chest like a puck to my gut. I barely slept. My brain keeps running the same mental drill, over and over. Do I take the job? What happens if I leave? What happens if I stay?

It all started last night, when Quinn and I were at Abby and Beckett's. Jake had fallen asleep in the back seat, his head leaning against his hockey bag. But as soon as we drove into his driveway, he was instantly alert and running to find his baby sister. We were watching the two of them – adorable as he rocked and hummed to her. That's when my phone rang.

I didn't recognize the number, but instinct told me to answer.

"Wes Archer? This is Coach Lanning, from the Avalanche organization."

The name brought back a flood of memories—tryout drills, locker room pep talks, cold early mornings with everything on the line.

"Coach," I said. "It's been a while."

"It has. I'll cut to the chase—we've been watching your transition into coaching. You've got a reputation for connecting with players, and we've got a development spot opening. Colorado's junior affiliate, assistant coaching position, and a fast track toward head coaching if all goes well."

My throat had gone dry. "That's... unexpected."

"Your name came up for a reason. We want you, Wes. Full benefits, relocation assistance, solid salary. You'd be building the next generation—and you'll have the resources to do it right."

He paused. "But we need a decision fast. We've got two other names, and training camp starts soon. Can you let me know by tomorrow?"

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I managed a professional-sounding goodbye and ended the call, but my brain didn't stop buzzing.

Now, by the time the sun cuts through my blinds, I'm already up, lacing my boots and grabbing coffee from the corner café. I don't know what I'm hoping for. Maybe clarity. Maybe Quinn. Maybe a sign from the universe that I'm not about to screw everything up again.

The girl behind the counter recognizes me. "You're Jake's coach, right?" she says, sliding a cinnamon muffin into a paper bag. "He's in here all the time. Talks about you like you're a superhero."

I blink, surprised. "Thanks. That means a lot."

She grins. "Don't screw it up."

Message received. What IS it in this town? Did everyone get the memo I'm a screw up?

On the walk back, I pause outside the bakery, phone in hand. I hesitate, then tap out a text to Quinn: I turned it down. Can I see you at lunch? I want to explain.

No dramatic fanfare. Just the truth.

The three dots appear. Disappear. Then reappear.

Yes. My place? Noon.

I tuck the phone in my pocket and let out a long breath.

I head to the rink early. The quiet, empty space calms me. There's something sacred about an empty sheet of ice. No fans. No pressure. Just possibility. Just me and the ghosts I'm still learning to forgive.

A young player named Caleb, maybe ten or eleven, arrives early too. "Coach Wes?"

I nod. "What's up, buddy?"

"My slapshot's weak. Can you help?"

I toss him a puck. "Let's see what you've got."

For twenty minutes, I help him line up, adjust his stance, and time his swing. Every time he connects better, he lights up. That smile—pure, proud, unfiltered joy—it reminds me why I came back.

Griff shows up not long after, eyebrows raised when he sees me sharpening skates. "You're early. Everything okay?"

I shrug. "Define 'okay.'"

He snorts, leans against the workbench. "That bad, huh?"

I tell him about the call. The offer. The money. The prestige. I even throw in the line they used—We want you to be the face of the next generation.

Griff lets out a low whistle. "That's not nothing."

"It's a lot. But..." I glance toward the far door, half-expecting Quinn to walk through

it. “So is everything here.”

He gives a short nod. “You love her.”

It’s not a question.

“Yeah,” I say. “I really do.”

Griff doesn’t give advice unless it matters. “Then tell her. But make sure you’re not deciding for her—or for you—based on fear. Don’t bail because it’s easier. And don’t stay just because you’re scared of messing up.”

Later that morning, I find Beckett and Abby at the diner, seated in their usual booth with Jake halfway through a stack of pancakes. The window beside them glows golden with morning light, and for a minute, it hits me how perfectly normal—and beautiful—this life could be.

Abby waves me over immediately. “Wes! Join us.”

Jake grins. “Coach Wes, guess what? I get to play wing next week!”

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“That’s awesome, buddy,” I say, tousling his hair. “You’re gonna crush it.”

Beckett eyes me over his coffee. “You look like a man with something on his mind.”

Abby tilts her head, reading me like a book. “This is about the call, isn’t it?”

I blink. “How did you—”

“Quinn told me,” she says gently. “She didn’t give details. Just that something came up.”

I glance at Jake, then back at them. “I don’t want to mess this up. Not just with Quinn, but with all of you. This town. This life.”

Beckett leans forward. “You think she wants you to sacrifice your career for her?”

“No.”

“Then why are you acting like it has to be one or the other?”

Abby adds, “You have options. Maybe it’s not that you’re stuck between two lives—maybe it’s about building one that actually fits.”

Jake spills a little syrup on the table and laughs. “Oops.”

Abby reaches over with a napkin. “You’re not going to miss this, are you?” She grins as she cleans up the sticky mess.

And just like that, something clicks.

Just before noon, I head to Quinn's house. She meets me at the door, apron dusted with flour, like she'd been baking to keep her mind off things.

"You came," she says, stepping aside.

"I said I would."

She nods and gestures toward the kitchen table. "I made chicken salad. And pie. Don't ask me why—I just needed to keep my hands busy."

I smile and sit down. "Smells amazing."

Once we've eaten a few bites in silence, I push my plate aside. "I turned it down."

Her fork stills midair.

"I called them this morning. Told them thanks but no thanks."

Her eyes search mine. "Why?"

"Because I finally figured out what I want. And it's not another big arena or a paycheck with more zeroes. It's this. You. My friends. Their kids. This messy, beautiful life. And I don't want to spend another minute away from it."

Her eyes shimmer. "You sure?"

I nod. "Completely."

She reaches across the table and takes my hand. "Then let's build it. Together."

We finish the meal and move to the kitchen to clean up. As we stand side by side at the sink, our hands brush in the water. She laughs when I splash water at her, and she retaliates by flicking a bit of soapy foam onto my cheek. We're both laughing now, relaxed in a way that feels natural.

Suddenly the laughter fades into quiet.

I turn toward her, reach up to tuck a damp strand of hair behind her ear. "I meant it. Every word."

She nods. "I know."

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Then, like it's the most natural thing in the world, I kiss her. Soft at first, then deeper as she presses closer. Her wet hands settle on my chest, mine at her waist. Everything else fades—the dishes, the clock, the entire town—until it's just the two of us, finally in sync.

When we part, she rests her forehead against mine. "I've wanted that for a long time."

"Me too."

That night, I head back to the rink for the evening session and see Griff already drilling the kids. He claps me on the shoulder so hard I nearly fall into the boards.

"Welcome home, buddy," he says.

Then I lace up my skates and see Jake in the group. We race the length of the ice, just the two of us, breath puffing into the air like smoke. I let him win. He crows like he's just won gold.

I don't think I've ever felt more like myself.

And I don't think I've ever wanted to stay right here anymore than I do right now.

Chapter nineteen

Quinn

The Sunset Cove Annual Charity Hockey Festival is one of those events that brings

the entire town to life. Kids run around in face paint, local vendors line the sidewalks with food carts and handmade crafts, and the scent of kettle corn and grilled sausage floats through the crisp afternoon air. The rink is transformed into a hub of laughter and music, with strings of fairy lights overhead and banners fluttering in the breeze.

Wes meets me at the community booth just before the festival's big youth game. He's wearing a Sunset Cove jersey with COACH in bold letters across the back and a backwards cap that somehow makes him look even more unfairly attractive.

"Coach Archer, reporting for duty," he says, mock saluting.

"Late, as usual," I tease, handing him a clipboard. "You're on roster check-in."

"I was busy charming the old ladies at the bake sale. Mrs. Randall gave me a whole tin of lemon bars."

"I'll allow it," I reply, grinning. "They're her secret weapon."

As Wes handles the player list, I spot familiar faces all around. Griff is running the puck shootout station, trying to stop a group of middle schoolers from pelting him with foam pucks. Abby and Beckett are managing the baby gear swap with Violet strapped to Abby's chest in a star-patterned baby carrier. Even Mayor Holt is there, posing for photos in front of the donation banner.

Jake zips past on rollerblades, wearing a handmade sign that reads "Ask me about raffle tickets!" He high-fives Wes mid-roll.

"You bribed him, didn't you?" I ask.

"Two candy bars and a promise to teach him a new slap shot trick."

We laugh, and for a moment, it's easy. Comfortable. We fit here, in this chaos of community and color.

Over near the hot cocoa booth, Mrs. O'Hara is giving out snickerdoodles and unsolicited love advice. I spot her wagging her finger at the teenage couple holding hands by the snow cone cart.

"Keep those elbows apart and that communication honest, young man. That's how you last past prom night!"

During the charity game's halftime, Wes takes his sister Liz to the mic for the raffle draw. "And the winner of the sunset kayak tour for two—generously donated by Cove Paddle Company—is... Ellie Atkinson!"

Cheers erupt as Ellie, a shy teenager from the clinic's front desk, blushes and waves from the bleachers. Her mom hugs her with such joy you'd think they had won the lottery.

"You're a natural," I tell Wes as he returns to my side. Then he hugs Liz as I tell her how much I admire her ability to tolerate Wes on the home front. I crack myself up.

"I'm just here for the lemon bars."

"Liar."

"Okay, fine. I like seeing you smile."

A sudden whistle breaks through the chatter—Mrs. O'Hara, the town's honorary MC, takes the mic next.

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“Time for the couples’ skate!” she announces. “Grab a partner, folks! Doesn’t matter if you’re married, dating, or still pretending you’re ‘just friends’—get out there and show us your moves!”

Wes turns to me, one eyebrow raised. “Still pretending?”

I laugh. “We’re not really a couple.”

“Yet,” he says, holding out his hand. “Come on. Let’s make the town gossip mill spin.”

I let him pull me onto the ice. Music swells—some oldies track from Mrs. O’Hara’s vinyl collection—and we fall into a slow, easy rhythm. Wes skates backward, guiding me with confident hands on my waist.

People cheer as we glide past. Jake wolf-whistles. Griff gives a mock swoon. Even Mayor Holt claps approvingly.

“You’re good at this,” I say.

“At what? Ice dancing?”

“At making me forget to be scared.”

He squeezes my hands gently. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.”

We skate for a while, the world narrowing to just the two of us. It doesn’t feel like a

performance. It feels like a beginning.

As the sun dips behind the trees and the sky fades into lavender, the community gathers for the final ceremony. The fundraising total is revealed—enough to support youth hockey scholarships and equipment for the entire year. The crowd erupts in applause.

Mrs. O'Hara corners Wes afterward. "You keep this up, young man, and we'll never let you leave."

Wes smiles. "I think I'm okay with that."

And I believe him.

Later, the town square transforms for the evening dance. Strings of lights crisscross overhead, and the local band sets up in front of the gazebo. Kids twirl in circles near the edge of the stage, and couples gather near the firepits sipping cider.

Wes and I grab two mugs of cider and settle on a bench just outside the main crowd. The night air is brisk, but the kind of crisp that makes you feel alive. I glance at him, this man who has shown up not just for me, but for the people I love. For this whole town.

"Tell me something real," I say.

He turns to face me fully. "I've never wanted a future with someone more than I want it with you."

I let the words sink in. There's no fear anymore. No walls. Just us.

I reach over and brush a flake of something sweet off his jaw. "I think Mrs. Randall's

lemon bars got the last word.”

He grins. “I’d kiss you right now, but there’s powdered sugar involved.”

I lean in anyway. “I’ll risk it.”

And then he kisses me.

It’s gentle and warm, but there’s fire in it too—like he’s been waiting for this moment as long as I have. The crowd fades. The lights blur. The music softens.

When we pull apart, we’re both smiling.

Back at the face-painting station, Jake wakes up groggy and blinking from a nap on a nearby bench. His face is painted not like an animal, but striped in the colors of the youth hockey league. Abby and Beckett return with Violet, who’s fast asleep against Beckett’s shoulder.

“We’re heading out,” Abby says softly. “Come on Jake.”

Jake yawns. “Coach Wes?”

“Yeah, buddy?”

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“Today was awesome.”

Wes ruffles his hair. “You were awesome.”

As they walk away, I stand quietly next to Wes.

He slips his hand into mine. “I know it’s early. But if I get to be part of this kind of day—even just some of the time—I’ll never need anything else.”

I squeeze his fingers. “You already are.”

And with that, we watch the town we love glow softly in the warm light of a community that, somehow, brought us back together.

Not with fanfare.

But with heart.

The next afternoon, we gather for an impromptu picnic near the lake. Liz and Griff bring a checkered blanket and a basket full of her famous chicken salad wraps. Beckett and Abby show up a little later, Violet bouncing on Abby’s hip while Jake insists on skipping rocks across the water.

The air smells like cut grass and grilled corn from a vendor cart down the hill. Someone has set up lawn games—cornhole, ring toss, and even an old-fashioned

potato sack race that Wes somehow gets roped into judging.

I sit with Liz under the shade of a birch tree, both of us sipping lemonade. "You know," she says, watching Wes run a three-legged race with Jake, "you two fit. Like, really fit."

I smile. "It's starting to feel that way."

Griff tosses a frisbee to Beckett, who pretends to miss and gets Violet giggling from Abby's lap. There's music playing softly from someone's Bluetooth speaker—a playlist full of country ballads and soft rock hits.

Wes returns with Jake in tow, both breathless and red-faced. "I maintain that he cheated," Wes says.

Jake beams. "You're just old."

We all laugh, and the moment feels timeless.

Later, Wes and I sneak away down a wooded trail that leads to a quiet overlook above the lake. We spread a blanket on the grass, the afternoon sun filtering through the trees.

"I used to think I didn't belong in places like this even though I grew up right here," Wes says softly. "Like I'd never be the kind of guy who could settle into a life like this one. After our folks died it was all out work to raise Liz and give her what she deserved for her childhood."

I rest my head on his shoulder. "You don't have to change who you are to fit here. You're enough—exactly as you are. It's hard for me to understand, Wes, because you were born and grew up here."

He kisses the top of my head. “You make me want to be here forever.”

We fall into a comfortable silence, listening to the chirping birds and to distant laughter echoing from the lake.

Back at the main picnic we’re pulled back into the crowd as Liz brings out a basket of fresh-baked cookies, and everyone gathers for a group photo. Abby tries to wrangle the kids, Beckett sets up his phone on a rock, and Griff pretends to photobomb just as the timer goes off.

We pile onto the blanket, a mess of limbs and laughter and half-eaten cupcakes.

Later, as the sun sets and fireflies begin to dance in the air, I find myself curled beside Wes under a shared blanket. He leans over and whispers, “Quinn, I want more days like this. With you. With them. Always.”

My heart swells. “Then let’s keep building them. One memory at a time.”

And in that golden, fading light, with our friends and family all around us, I know we already are.

Chapter twenty

Quinn

I’m still smiling from the other day. From the way Wes looked at me during the couples’ skate, the easy way he joked with Jake, the kiss that tasted like powdered sugar and promises. The kind that lingers even after the crowd fades.

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So, when I walk into the clinic on Monday morning, I'm feeling light. Light and full of something dangerously close to joy.

Megan is already at the desk, sipping from her ridiculous cat mug. "Your secret admirer at it again?" she asks, eyeing the small bouquet of fresh-picked wildflowers sitting in a mason jar beside my monitor.

I shake my head, trying to hide my smile. "No note. Just flowers."

Megan smirks. "That man is a walking swoon. You better lock that down."

Before I can answer, another nurse, Lauren, sweeps in, phone in hand. "Okay, don't shoot the messenger, but I just saw something on the Sunset Cove Bulletin board that... might interest you."

She glances between us, the air suddenly thick with the unspoken.

"What?" I ask.

"Someone posted that Wes Archer was offered a spot on the Avalanche's coaching staff. Like, a big-time league. It was tagged in some hockey forum and now it's making the rounds. The post didn't say if he accepted. Just that it was 'still in play.'"

My stomach drops.

Still in play?

I stare at her, then look at the bouquet. My heart thrums, confused.

He said he turned it down. That he wanted to stay. That he wanted me.

Megan raises an eyebrow. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I lie. "I just... need a second."

I retreat to the break room, the door clicking shut behind me. I lean against it, pressing my fingers to my temples.

This town thrives on gossip. And that post could mean nothing. But still—the ache in my chest blooms like a bruise.

Have I gotten too comfortable too soon?

I sit at the worn table and glance around the break room—mismatched mugs, a bulletin board with flyers, and the lingering smell of hazelnut coffee. I pull my knees up and rest my chin on them.

A memory surfaces—me sitting in this same room a year ago, just after Wes had left. My phone had just buzzed with a message I never saw coming: Quinn, I have to go. I'm sorry.

I remember staring at that text like it was written in a language I didn't understand. I came here and sat in this very chair, stunned. Megan had tried to distract me with ridiculous animal memes and bad vending machine hot chocolate. I'd pretended to laugh. But inside, I was hollow.

Worse than the heartbreak was the shame. I'd let myself believe in something, and it vanished without warning. I watched Wes walk away and convinced myself it meant

I wasn't enough. That I wasn't worth staying for.

And now... here I am again. Flowers in hand, kissed breathless, and still startled by the whisper of doubt.

The door cracks open. Megan peeks in, then steps inside and shuts it behind her.

"So... drama?"

I groan. "I overheard something stupid. And instead of brushing it off, I let it crawl inside my head."

She hands me a mini chocolate bar from her scrub pocket. "Eat this and remember: you're not the girl you were a year ago. You're the girl he picked now. That counts for something."

"Thanks, Meg."

"And if he did lie—which I highly doubt—I know where we keep the syringes."

I burst out laughing. "Please don't stab my boyfriend."

"Noted. But the option's there."

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Later that day, Abby drops by with Violet and two steaming cups of chai.

"I come bearing caffeine and moral support," she says, placing a cup in my hand.

I raise an eyebrow. "You heard."

"The rumor? Please. Mrs. O'Hara was practically shouting it from the produce aisle."

I sigh. "He said he turned it down."

Abby settles into the chair beside me. Violet gnaws on a giraffe teether, her big eyes blinking sleepily as I gather her up into my arms.

"He did. Beckett told me. Said Wes turned it down the morning after the offer came in. Didn't even hesitate. He didn't want to leave you guessing."

The tightness in my chest eases, but only slightly. "Then why is it still being talked about?"

Abby shrugs. "Because the internet never dies, and people love drama. But he picked you, Quinn. He didn't even flinch."

I stare into my cup and sleeping Violet. The warmth of both sinks into my hands and deeper into my heart.

"You really think he meant it? That he's staying for good?"

Abby smiles softly. "I think he's never been more sure of anything. And I think you know that."

I do. Deep down, I do.

That night, I head to the youth rink, not sure what I'll say. But Wes is already waiting near the entrance, leaning against the wall with that familiar crooked smile.

"Hey," he says, straightening. "Was hoping I'd see you."

"You got time to talk?"

He nods. "Always."

We walk toward the side bleachers where the Zamboni hums softly in the background.

"There's a rumor going around," I begin. "That you... might still be considering that coaching offer."

He lets out a breath. "I figured it would surface."

"You told me you turned it down."

"I did. Before our picnic. Before the skate. I turned it down because I want this."

He gestures around—the rink, the community, me.

"I believe you," I say quietly. "But hearing it this morning... it got to me."

Wes steps closer. "You have every right to doubt, after what I put you through. But I swear, Quinn. I'm here. I'm staying. I want to build something that lasts—with you."

My throat tightens.

"I want that too," I whisper.

His hand finds mine, warm and solid. Then he pulls me into his arms, into the safety of his embrace.

"I told Beckett and Griff today I definitely want to continue helping run the summer clinic full-time. And I asked Beck if he thought I deserved to keep my permanent role after all of this back-and-forth I've put them and everyone through."

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My eyes widen. "Really?"

"Beck said I am one hundred percent permanent in his book."

The weight of those words lands squarely in my heart. He's staying. He's rooted now. He chose this life. He chose me.

I sink deeper into his arms, burying my face against his chest. "You make it really hard not to fall in love with you again."

His laugh is soft against my hair. "Then stop trying."

I tilt my head back to meet his eyes. "Maybe I already have."

He kisses me then—not the sweet, careful kiss from the night before, but something deeper. Certain. Something that says we've made it through the fire and come out whole.

The echo of laughter from the locker room drifts through the hallway, but all I hear is the steady rhythm of his heart.

He pulls back just enough to murmur, "Let's go slow. But not distant."

I nod, tears stinging the corners of my eyes. "No more distance."

As we walk out, Wes pauses by the rink door. "Oh, I almost forgot. I wanted to give you something."

He hands me a folded piece of paper from his coat pocket. It's crumpled like it's been opened and reread a dozen times.

My name is scrawled across the front.

I open it. Inside is a handwritten note:

Quinn,

No more rumors. Just truth.

I'm not going anywhere.

—W

I look up, and he's watching me with that steady, earnest gaze that always undoes me.

I smile through the lump in my throat.

Together, we step out into the night.

Not afraid.

Not uncertain.

Together.

Chapter twenty-one

Quinn

The Sunset Cove Summer Bash is in full swing by the time Wes and I arrive. The waterfront park sparkles with string lights, picnic tables are covered in red-checkered cloths, and kids dart between booths, their cheeks sticky with cotton candy and lemonade. Music floats from the gazebo where a bluegrass band plays, and the scent of grilled corn and barbecue ribs hangs in the air.

Wes reaches for my hand as we stroll past the dunk tank, where Griff is heckling Beckett into volunteering. “I’ll donate a hundred bucks if Beckett gets dunked!” he shouts.

Beckett shoots him with a mock glare. “You just want to see me cold and wet.”

“And humbled,” Wes adds with a grin.

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Jake runs over and tugs on my shirt. “Can I try the ring toss, Aunt Quinn? Please?”

“Go for it,” I say, handing him a couple of tickets. He bolts, and Wes laughs.

We make our way toward the picnic tables where Abby and Beckett are setting up, baby Violet strapped to Abby’s chest in a sunflower-patterned carrier. Megan waves us over from a lemonade stand, and next to her, Savannah Jenkins—one of the newer clinic hires—hands out cups with a practiced grace that belies her occasional klutziness.

“Savannah!” I call.

She turns, nearly sloshing a pitcher of lemonade down her scrubs. “Hey, Quinn! I’m surviving. Barely. Megan’s got me in volunteer bootcamp.”

Megan snorts. “You dropped a pretzel stick in the cotton candy machine. You needed supervision.”

Savannah rolls her eyes, but her smile is bright. She’s only been in town a few months but is already a favorite—quirky, kind, and constantly baking treats she insists aren’t good enough even as people beg for more.

“You look cozy,” she says, giving me a sly grin as she eyes Wes.

“It’s been a good week,” I admit, my cheeks flushing.

Wes steps closer, offering his hand. “Wes Archer.”

“Savannah Jenkins. Nurse. Trouble. Professional lemonade wrangler.”

He laughs, and the two of them exchange a warm handshake. It means something to see him welcomed so easily by the people in my world.

“You sticking around, or is this just a romantic detour?” Savannah asks bluntly.

I blink.

Wes doesn't. “I'm staying.”

Savannah looks at me, then back at him, and nods. “Good. Quinn's too awesome for temporary.”

The honesty in her voice makes me want to hug her.

We sit down for the community picnic, wedged between Liz and Griff on one side and Savannah and a local firefighter on the other. The food is messy and perfect—baked beans, ribs, watermelon slices. Jake runs up every five minutes to show me another prize he's won.

“Wes,” Savannah says around a bite of cornbread, “don't take this the wrong way, but I expected you to be taller.”

He nearly chokes on his drink. “Not the first time I've heard that.”

She shrugs. “It's the vibe. Big-deal hockey star, emotional damage, mysteriously broody—you're supposed to be six foot five and glowering.”

I giggle into my lemonade.

“He’s six feet of reformed menace,” I say.

Wes grins. “Thanks?”

Savannah raises her glass. “To second chances, then.”

The sun dips lower, casting golden light across the lake. Somewhere nearby, a kid screams with glee from a potato sack race. The band strikes up a slower tune, and I lean against Wes.

“You know,” he murmurs, “I never imagined something like this.”

“Like what?”

“A small-town festival. Kids running wild. Friends who talk back. You, laughing.”

“You’re doing pretty well for a hot shot hockey heartthrob.”

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He glances over at Savannah, who's teasing Jake about whether he can win her a giant stuffed fish at the ring toss. "I like your people."

"They like you. Even Savannah—and she hates everyone for the first six months."

"She's blunt. I respect it."

"She's also fiercely loyal," I say. "And she can bake. So basically, she's perfect."

Wes laughs. "I'll keep that in mind." Heartthrob, huh? Quinn called me a heartthrob. Yikes. Guess I'd better step up my game.

We're mid-bite into our watermelon slices when Savannah leans toward me and whispers, "Hey, don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but I overheard Dr. Patel talking about the clinic's grant funding. Sounds like they're worried about renewal. You okay?"

I freeze. I heard the same thing last week in passing—something about a delay in processing. But hearing Savannah say it now makes the anxiety spike.

"We've had some issues," I admit. "We're understaffed, and if the grant falls through, we might need to cut hours or programs. I even thought about picking up more ER shifts to keep things stable until fall."

Savannah frowns. "That stinks. But if anyone can hold it together, it's you. And hey—if you need help baking bribes for the grant committee, I'm your girl."

Wes looks over from where he's chatting with Beckett and Abby. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I say, plastering on a smile. "Just talking shop."

But Wes's eyes linger. Later, when we take a quiet walk by the lake, he gently brings it up.

"Savannah mentioned something about the clinic. Is it in trouble?"

I hesitate. "We're tight on staffing, and there's a grant renewal up in the air. I didn't want to worry you."

"Quinn, you don't have to carry this alone. Let me help."

"You already do—"

"Let me help more," he insists. "I'll make a few calls. One of my old teammates from a few years back runs a youth foundation. He owes me a favor. If there's a way to support the clinic—donations, equipment—I want in."

I blink at him, stunned. "You'd do that?"

"Of course. I want to be part of your world, Quinn. That means all of it."

I take his hand, feeling overwhelmed and relieved all at once. Savannah might've delivered the bad news, but Wes hands me hope.

As the festival continues, a local announcer's voice booms over the loudspeaker. "All right, folks! It's time for the fundraiser finale—our annual bachelor auction and dunk tank combo event! Who wants to win a date and dunk a hero?"

Wes raises an eyebrow at me. “This sounds dangerous.”

Beckett and Griff are already laughing as they surround him. “We signed you up,” Beckett says. “For charity. And because it’s hilarious.”

“What?”

“You’re going up on the auction block,” Griff says. “And into the dunk tank. Double trouble.”

Savannah jogs over with a mischievous glint in her eye. “I put twenty bucks on you being dunked in the first five throws. Don’t disappoint me, Archer.”

Wes sighs dramatically. “This town is brutal. And you two GUYS are brutal. And my best friends that!”

Soon he’s perched above a water tank in a folding chair, wearing a donated Sunset Cove T-shirt and looking thoroughly resigned. A crowd gathers, cheering as kids and adults line up with baseballs.

Jake takes the first throw—and nails the target. First try!

Wes drops into the tank with a splash, sputtering as he surfaces. “Jake! Betrayal!”

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Jake pumps his fists. “Coach Wes, you owe me a slushie!”

When it’s time for the bachelor auction, the crowd whoops and hollers as Wes is introduced. “Former pro hockey star! Youth coach! All-around snack!”

“Starting bid?” the announcer asks.

Someone yells, “Ten dollars!”

“Fifteen!” Megan shouts.

Before I can stop myself, I blurt, “Twenty!”

Everyone turns. My face flames.

Wes looks stunned. Then he grins. “Sold!”

Later, we escape to the quiet of the dock. The moon glitters on the lake as Wes wraps a towel around his still-damp shoulders.

“I can’t believe you bid on me,” he teases.

“I panicked,” I say. “And you looked cold.”

He steps closer. “You saved me. Again.”

I smile. “Always.”

His hand cups my cheek. “Quinn...”

And then he kisses me. Slow and sure and sweet, under a sky full of stars and fireworks long since faded.

It’s not a grand gesture.

It’s better.

Real.

Chapter twenty-two

Wes

Sometimes I forget how loud happiness can be.

Laughter echoes from the beach as kids launch water balloons from behind a hay bale fort. The scent of grilled peaches and smoky barbecue lingers in the breeze. A sparkler crackles somewhere behind me as I stand just beyond the edge of the dock, towel draped around my neck, still damp from the dunk tank ambush.

Quinn’s laugh floats up from where she’s helping Jake carry his prize haul—cotton candy, a rubber frog, and a slightly terrifying clownfish plush. She looks like summer. Hair windblown, cheeks sun-kissed, eyes bright from too much lemonade and too many close calls with her heart.

I lean back against the wooden railing and breathe it all in.

This town. These people. Her.

I left Sunset Cove once thinking I had to. Thinking I needed the rush, the pressure, the roar of a crowd chanting my name. But under all that noise, I always carried the quiet weight of this place.

I was seventeen when the crash happened. One minute, I was packing for a weekend tournament with Beckett and Griff. The next, I was standing in a hospital hallway staring at a social worker mouthing the words “no survivors.”

Liz was ten. At a sleepover. No one had the heart to wake her until morning. I remember sitting on the porch steps, trying to figure out how I’d tell her.

And after that—well, I stopped being just a brother.

I became the adult. The one who packed lunches. Who burned toast. Who practiced fake smiles during school meetings so Liz wouldn’t feel different. I stayed up late helping with science projects I didn’t understand and worked weekends at the marina to cover her braces and soccer uniforms.

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Beckett and Griff never said anything dramatic—they just showed up. Every time. Whether it was bringing over takeout or dragging me out for pickup hockey when they knew I hadn't smiled in a week. And when Liz finally fell asleep on the couch one night after a brutal crying spell, it was Beck who looked over and said, "You're doing the hardest job, Wes—and you're doing it right."

Griff, of course, added, "We'll help you figure it out. All of it."

And they did.

All three of us made it to the big leagues—different teams, same dream. Beckett was the golden boy—fast hands, sharp instincts, smooth in front of a camera. Griff was the quiet enforcer, dependable and solid under pressure. And me? I was the grinder. The guy coaches loved because I did the work no one saw and never complained about it.

Those years were intense—road trips, injuries, spotlight pressure—but they bonded us in ways that nothing else could. Through all of it, we talked about the future constantly. Not just retirement, but legacy. Stability.

Beckett, underneath the charm and swagger, has a sharp financial brain. While we were still playing, he started investing—youth training programs, sports equipment startups, custom gear companies. He pulled Griff and me in early, made us partners, taught us how to turn short careers into long-term security.

That first six-figure deal we landed together? We celebrated by splitting a \$12 pizza and sleeping on a warehouse floor.

We were barely out of our twenties, but we weren't just hockey players anymore—we were building empires. Beckett negotiated licensing contracts like a lawyer. Griff ran logistics like he'd been born in a boardroom.

And me? I learned to trust the grind, to keep showing up and doing the work, even when it wasn't glamorous.

People don't realize it now, seeing the press features and “local boy makes good” stories—but our start was duct tape and desperation. The glamour came later. What we had from day one was trust.

Even when I burned out, even when I delayed my hockey career to raise Liz and figure out who I was without a number on my back, those two had my back.

Now Liz is a nurse. Married to Griff. Happy.

And I'm standing here wondering if I can finally stop holding my breath. If I can let someone like Quinn see all of it—not just the polished parts.

“Archer!” someone calls. I look over and see Mayor Kenner waving me toward the pavilion. “You're due on the microphone in five for the fundraising thank-yous.”

I raise a hand in acknowledgment. “Be right there.”

Beckett appears beside me, holding two lemonades. He hands me one without a word and follows my gaze toward Quinn.

“She fits, doesn't she?” he says quietly.

I nod. “Too well. It scares the hell out of me.”

He chuckles. “Only because you care.”

“I got used to holding everything together for Liz,” I murmur. “Forgot how to let someone hold me.”

Beckett gives me a rare look that says he gets it. “You don’t have to carry it all alone anymore.”

A voice behind us pipes in. “Nope. That’s what brothers-in-law are for.”

Griff’s leaning on a picnic table, sipping from a water bottle, eyebrows raised.

“You’re getting sappy in your old age,” I tell him.

“Parenthood,” he says. “Turns us all into mush.”

There’s a beat. Then, quieter: “Wes... Liz told me once that she never felt like she missed out on a dad because she had you. You gave her a life she never would’ve had otherwise. You didn’t just survive—you built something. Now let someone build with you.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and nod. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

I head toward the pavilion. As I pass the dunk tank, Jake runs up, face painted like a tiger and arms full of tickets.

“Coach Wes!”

“Hey, buddy.”

“You were awesome in the dunk tank. Way cooler than my old coach. He used to yell a lot.”

“Yelling doesn’t make people better,” I say. “But good aim does.”

Jake grins. “I’ve been practicing.”

“I noticed.” I reach over and rub the blue sugar from his cheek. “You sharing that cotton candy?”

“Nope. But I can give you my frog.”

He holds out the ridiculous rubber frog with solemn pride. My heart twists.

“I’ll keep him safe,” I say.

Jake’s eyes squint. “You’re not leaving again, are you?”

The question lands like a puck to the ribs. I kneel so I’m eye-level. “Not if I can help it.”

He nods, satisfied. “Good, ’cause Aunt Quinn smiles more now.”

I blink fast. “Thanks for telling me.”

He sprints off, yelling something about popcorn. I stay still for a beat longer, watching the light shift over the lake.

Later, just before my speech, I walk out to the edge of the dock alone. The sky's that deep blue purple that only happens this time of year. The water's calm. And for a second, I let myself be completely still.

I almost didn't come back. Almost convinced myself Quinn would be better off with someone steadier. Safer.

But she's not asking for perfect. She's asking for honest.

And I can do that.

I head up to the mic. Mayor Kenner gives me a quick thumbs up.

"Thanks for coming out, everyone," I begin, scanning the crowd. "Sunset Cove knows how to throw a party—and more importantly, how to take care of its own. I'm proud to call this place home. Always have. Always will."

There's a cheer, and I spot Quinn clapping, Abby next to her holding tight to Jake who's got blue cotton candy stuck to his cheek. My chest tightens in the best possible way.

"We're here tonight to raise funds for youth programs, including the hockey academy," I continue. "When I was a kid, this town showed up for me. After I lost my parents, after every setback, you were there. That's why I came back—to give these kids the same sense of safety and possibility I was lucky enough to have."

Applause rises again. I see Griff with his arm around Liz, Jake, and Abby bouncing Violet on her hip. Even Savannah is nodding from the lemonade stand like she's

pretending not to be tearing up.

“And yeah, I got dunked for charity,” I add. “No one told me Jake had a fastball.”

The crowd laughs. Jake fist-pumps again.

“But the truth is, getting dunked was the easy part. Choosing to stay? To plant roots? That’s harder. And worth it.”

I glance toward Quinn. She’s watching me with this look—soft, steady, a little surprised, like maybe she didn’t realize just how deep my roots go here.

“Thank you,” I say. “For welcoming me home. For reminding me that sometimes the biggest wins don’t happen on the ice. They happen right here.”

I step off the stage to a mix of cheers and clapping. As I hand the mic back, someone presses a folded envelope into my hand—an anonymous donation. I glance down and see a check with a note: For the clinic. We need Quinn to stay.

I don’t know who sent it, but I know exactly what to do with it.

When I find her again by the lake, she’s sitting on the edge of the dock, legs dangling over the side. I take the spot beside her and hand her the envelope.

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“What’s this?”

“An answer,” I say simply.

She opens it and gasps. “Wes...”

“No strings. Just support.”

Her eyes glisten, and she leans against my shoulder. “You’re full of surprises tonight.”

I press a kiss to her hair. “Only the good kind.”

She doesn’t say anything right away. But I feel her fingers slip into mine.

And that’s all the answer I need.

Chapter twenty-three

Quinn

The morning after the Summer Bash starts slow—thankfully. No alarms, no obligations except coffee and leftover blueberry muffins from Megan. I sit on the porch steps at Abby’s house, a mug warming my hands.

I’m watching the hummingbird Abby named Lenny zip around the hanging petunias. My legs ache in that deep, satisfied way that comes from a day spent on your feet and

a heart spent trying not to hope too hard.

But hope is there. It's creeping in like morning light.

Wes's words from the night before are still circling in my chest.

"Thank you... for reminding me that sometimes the biggest wins don't happen on the ice. They happen right here."

He meant it. Not in a charming, public-speaking kind of way—but the bone-deep, heart-settled kind.

And then the envelope.

He handed it to me like it was nothing. But I know what that donation means. For the clinic. For my team. For me.

Jake stumbles onto the porch, hair flattened on one side and still wearing his ninja turtle pajamas. He's clutching the purple frog from last night like it's a treasured heirloom.

"You're up early," I say.

"I dreamed I was in the dunk tank, but it was full of orange soda. Coach Wes cannonballed into it and splashed a gummy bear octopus."

I try not to laugh. "Well, that's... a lot."

"Do you think Coach Wes is coming to the barbecue tomorrow?"

"I think there's a good chance."

He leans his head against my arm. Just for a moment. Then Abby calls from the kitchen, and he's gone in a blur of bare feet and frog limbs.

I head to the clinic mid-morning, technically still off the clock. I just want to check on some notes and—okay, maybe I want to bask in the glow of yesterday a little longer as I deliver the envelop from Wes. Dr. Patel calls me into his office within five minutes. I hand him the envelope, and as he opens it his mouth drops open, I swear a foot.

He looks up at me, dumbfounded. I think it may be hard for him to actually speak at the moment. “I thought you were expecting this. Why do you look so shell-shocked?” I ask.

“Well yes, but Quinn, I also got a call this morning,” he says, handing me a folder. “From the Sunrise Youth Sports Fund. Apparently, your friend Mr. Archer pulled a few other strings as well.”

My breath catches. “Yes? So what are you saying?”

“Quinn, this envelop is from another source. We’ve got bridge funding from two places. It’s now enough to cover the renewal gap and more. We won’t have to reduce hours or cancel any outreach visits.” He looks at me over his glasses. “And it puts me in a solid place to submit your promotion packet this week.”

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“My—what?”

“You didn’t think I was reviewing your treatment audits for fun, did you?”

A laugh bubbles up before I can stop it. “I just thought you were being... thorough.”

He grins. “That too. But mostly because you’ve earned this.”

I thank him with something caught between a nod and a half-sob, then walk out into the hallway with legs that suddenly feel like cooked pasta. The hallway smells like lemon cleaner and printer toner, but for the first time in weeks, I feel like I can breathe.

It doesn’t last long.

That afternoon, I get a call from the ER nurse manager asking if I can fill in for a call-in for the night shift. I say yes before I can stop myself. I miss the adrenaline, sometimes. The clarity of it.

As a nurse practitioner I’m trained and licensed to do more extensive work than a registered nurse. I make medical assessments, prescribe medications and other therapies, and more. So a lot falls on me, both the good and the challenging, as I bridge the gap between nurses and physicians.

It’s a quiet start—ankle sprain, asthma flair-up—but then everything turns.

At 8:14 p.m., a teenager is wheeled in, pale and shaking, with a jagged gash down his thigh from an ATV accident. He's trying not to cry but losing that battle.

"I need a set of vitals, tetanus status, and irrigation now," I say, already donning gloves. "And someone page Dr. Hayashi."

"On it," the charge nurse says.

I kneel beside the boy's stretcher. "Tyler, right? I'm Quinn. I've got you."

He nods, jaw clenched. The blood is oozing steadily, soaking through the gauze a paramedic applied.

"Deep breath in. Good. Out. We're gonna clean this up, give you something to take the edge off, and get it stitched up."

Dr. Hayashi arrives, quick and calm. "Laceration looks deep but clean. Good catch on pressure, Quinn. Let's suture."

Tyler squeezes my wrist like it's the only thing keeping him anchored. I don't move.

He's medicated for pain, stable and stitched within thirty minutes. His mom cries when she sees him awake. I slip away quietly, just in time for the next storm.

9:42 p.m. — Code Blue.

A man in his fifties collapses in the waiting room. Chest pain, then nothing. His wife screams for help. We wheel him into Bay 2 while the team jumps into action.

I'm at the head, counting compressions.

“Charging to 200 joules,” someone calls.

“Clear!”

His body jolts on the table. Still no rhythm.

“Resume compressions!” I bark.

Minutes blur. Sweat runs down my neck. The wife is sobbing into a nurse’s shoulder outside the curtain.

Finally, after two more defibrillations, we get a rhythm. Weak. Slow. But there.

“Pulse is back,” Dr. Hayashi says, and it’s the first time anyone breathes.

I step out to the hallway, rip off my gloves, and press my back to the wall. My pulse is thudding in my ears. A nurse offers me water. I take it.

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“Nice work,” she says. “You kept us focused.”

I nod. My voice is gone.

I barely sit down when the next call comes in.

11:30 p.m. — Diabetic ketoacidosis. A college student. She’s disoriented. Eyes glassy. Her blood sugar is through the roof, ketones spilling into her system. Her hands shake as I start the IV. She’s mumbling about missing insulin doses because of a tight budget.

“It’s okay,” I tell her. “We’ve got you.”

By 2 a.m. we’d stabilized her. I call her older sister to come pick her up, and she starts crying as soon as she arrives. I don’t blame her. I’m barely holding it together myself. I think of how close I am to my sister, Abby, and I totally get it. I just cannot imagine almost losing her to anything like this.

At the end of my shift, I find a corner of the break room and sit. My scrubs are stiff with sweat and dried blood. My hands ache. My back is killing me. But my mind is clear in that way only crisis can create.

This work still matters. Even when it’s messy. Especially then.

I drive home with the windows down. The world is quiet. I’m grateful for it. My shower pounds me until the hot water runs out. I barely remember toweling off before I’m asleep face down on top of my bed covers.

Sunday arrives with sunshine and the smell of charcoal. Abby's backyard is already buzzing when I get there—lawn chairs everywhere, Griff trying to start the grill while Jake launches water balloons at his dad. Beckett doesn't take it sitting down and launches into a full out race around the yard to catch up and tickle Jake until he squeals.

Wes shows up ten minutes later, holding a store-bought pie with the label still half-attached.

"I made dessert," he says, deadpan.

"That is, you paid for with cash, right?"

"Exactly," he says, straight-faced. "Basically homemade."

Everyone laughs. Even Megan.

Wes still fits here, just like in his school days at Beck's parent's house. He laughs with ease, gives Jake a piggyback ride through the sprinkler, gets teased by Liz for overcooking one burger and being treated like furniture by Violet, who falls asleep against his shoulder mid tiny bites of potato salad.

I watch him. And I feel something new and fragile bloom in my chest.

Not fear.

Peace.

After dinner, I find him refilling drinks near the picnic table.

“This is the most relaxed I’ve seen my family in weeks,” I say. “They’re always open to having anyone and everyone at their house. It makes for a wonderful, caring place to be.”

“They’re also loud and competitive and secretly judge each other’s potato salad,” Wes interjects.

Then he grins. “Still good people.”

We step away from the group, toward the edge of the yard. The sky glows with the last rays of sun, everything cast in warm gold.

“Wes,” I say, “this thing between us—it’s not just a warm-weather phase.”

“I know.”

“It scares me sometimes. I worked so hard to build something steady after you left.”

“I don’t want to shake that,” he says. “I want to build on it.”

I study his face, the way he says it like a promise, not a pitch.

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“I think I’m ready to try,” I whisper.

He doesn’t kiss me.

He just laces our fingers together and gives my hand a small, grounding squeeze.

Last night, I helped bring a man back from the edge. Chest compressions, sweat in my eyes, a woman sobbing just outside the curtain—I was the calm in a room filled with panic. I didn’t have time to be afraid. I just acted. I did what needed to be done.

Tonight, someone’s holding my hand like I’m the one worth saving. No alarms. No adrenaline. Just steady warmth and the kind of silence that feels like peace.

And maybe—for the first time in longer than I’ll admit—I believe that’s allowed. That I can be more than the girl who shows up for everyone else.

Maybe I get to be the one someone shows up for.

Chapter twenty-four

Wes

I’ve never cared much about throw pillows. Or rugs. Or plants that don’t scream for help.

But now I’m standing in the middle of my beachside living room—twenty-foot windows, driftwood floors, and exactly one leather couch that looks like it was

purchased during a man cave fire sale. And I can't stop thinking about what this place says about me.

Not much. Not anything I want it to say, anyway.

The truth is, I bought this house two years ago. Quietly. During the off-season. It was supposed to be a retreat—somewhere to escape the cameras, the contract talk, the nonstop noise of being 'Wes Archer' instead of just Wes. I came here a handful of times, slept on the couch, used the gym in the garage, and left. It never felt like home.

Until now.

Now I want it to.

I text Quinn.

Wes:Can I kidnap you for the afternoon?

Quinn:Only if snacks are involved.

Wes:Done. Bring opinions. And maybe throw pillows.

Ten minutes later, I'm pacing the kitchen like a guy waiting for a job interview. I've cleaned—sort of. Dishes are put away, the fridge isn't embarrassing, and I lit a candle Abby left here months ago labeled "Coastal Rain," whatever that means.

The doorbell rings. I beat it there.

She steps in wearing jeans and a sleeveless top, hair pulled back, sunglasses perched on her head.

“Okay, this is already suspicious,” she says, scanning the entryway. “There are no shoes in the hallway and I don’t smell gym socks.”

“I’ve matured,” I tell her.

She arches a brow. “Is this a hostage situation or a makeover?”

“A little of both.”

I give her the grand tour—which takes about five minutes, because while the house is large, the furniture is not. There’s one couch, a coffee table that might be a repurposed shipping crate, and a kitchen with stainless steel everything and zero warmth.

“You live here?” she asks.

“Technically.”

She runs a hand along the back of the couch. “This place is gorgeous. And completely soulless.”

“Agreed. Hence, the kidnapping.”

She walks into the master bedroom and pauses. “Wow.”

I follow. The windows open onto the ocean. The bed is king-sized and clearly slept in exactly twice. The nightstands are bare. One sad lamp. No photos. No books. Just... air.

“I never really stayed long,” I admit. “It was supposed to be a hideout. Not a home.”

“But now?”

“Now I want it to be both.”

She turns to face me. “Why now?”

“Because I don’t want to hide anymore.”

I don’t say the rest—that I want her here. That every part of me wants to build something that doesn’t disappear when the season changes. I just watch her eyes soften as she takes it all in.

“Okay,” she says, stepping closer. “I’ll help. But you have to promise not to veto everything with the word 'decorative' in it.”

“I make no promises.”

We start in the living room, cataloging what's salvageable and what absolutely isn't.

She takes a photo of the couch and writes "burn?" under it in her notes app.

"Rude," I say.

"Not incorrect," she replies.

She pulls up images on her phone—linen curtains, reading lamps, oversized knit throws. It's like she has a direct line to some cozy universe I've never entered. I try to keep up, but mostly I like watching her move through the space like she's already imagined living here.

We find a box of paint swatches in one of the cabinets, and she spreads them out on the floor.

"Seafoam? Or gray mist?" she asks.

"They look the same."

"They are very different, Wes."

I glance down, then at her. "Whichever one makes you smile when you walk in."

She pauses, just for a moment. "That's dangerously romantic."

"I'm trying."

She grins. "You're succeeding."

At some point, she disappears into the guest room and reemerges with a dusty box.

“What’s this?”

I take it from her and blow off the top. Inside are old photos—me, Beck, and Griff in our rookie seasons. Liz at her nursing school graduation. A faded family Christmas card from the year before the crash.

“I forgot I packed this stuff,” I murmur.

She sifts through them gently. “You’ve lived a lot of life, Wes.”

“Yeah. Most of it running.”

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She looks up. “But you’re not running now.”

“No,” I say. “I’m standing still. On purpose.”

We hang one of the photos—a shot of me, Griff, and Beck covered in mud from some backyard football game. We’re all laughing, younger and stupider, and the frame she finds in a cabinet is a little crooked, but perfect.

I never thought anyone would help me hang memories on these walls.

We work side by side, occasionally bumping shoulders or exchanging dry commentary about my sad bachelor aesthetic.

I try to play it cool, but the truth is, having her here—barefoot, slightly paint-stained, hair in a messy twist—it makes the space feel more alive than it ever has.

And I can’t stop imagining what it would be like to come home to this every day.

Later, we collapse on the deck with takeout tacos and lime sodas. The ocean is calm. The sky’s a soft blue gray. The salt in the air is sharp but soothing. She’s curled sideways in her chair, legs tucked under her, and she steals my last tortilla chip like it’s a sacred ritual.

“I can’t believe you’ve had this house the whole time,” she says.

I shrug. “I didn’t think I deserved it. Or maybe I didn’t know what to do with it. It felt like too much... for a guy who didn’t know if he was coming or going.”

“And now?”

“I want it to be a home. One with color and warmth and maybe a ridiculous blanket ladder you made me buy.”

She smirks. “The blanket ladder stays.”

We’re quiet for a while. Not awkward—just full. Full of everything unsaid. Full of everything still coming.

“Why me?” she asks, voice soft.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... of all the places you could go, people you could have... why Sunset Cove? Why this house? Why me?”

I lean forward, elbows on my knees, and choose my words carefully.

“Because when I picture my future now, it’s not a hotel room or a press box. It’s this porch. It’s you stealing my chips and mocking my barstools. It’s the way you don’t let me pretend I’m okay when I’m not. It’s the way you showed up at my lowest and made it feel like a beginning, not an ending.”

She blinks fast, lips parting.

“And because,” I add, “you make this place feel like mine.”

She doesn’t answer, not right away. But the look in her eyes—steady, open, real—says everything I need to know.

After our quasi-dinner, we stack the takeout containers and carry a few old boxes to the curb. One box splits open halfway down the driveway, spilling a pile of broken coasters and a lava lamp I forgot I owned.

“Let it go,” she says, laughing.

“Wasn’t gonna fight you.”

After dinner, instead of heading back inside, I grab her hand and nod toward the French doors that lead out the side.

“You haven’t seen the best part yet.”

She steps onto the porch, eyes widening. “Whoa.”

The deck wraps around the back of the house like an embrace—wide planks weathered gray, railing lined with solar lanterns, and a view that stretches straight to the water. There’s a fire pit in the corner I’ve never used, two Adirondack chairs still with tags on them, and an outdoor shower I once thought would be fun but have never touched.

“I had big plans,” I say.

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She spins slowly in place, taking it all in. “Wes... this is incredible. Why haven’t you used any of this?”

I lean on the railing. “Honestly? I think I was waiting. For what, I didn’t know. Just... not ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“To let myself enjoy it.”

She doesn’t say anything right away. Just walks over and stands beside me, hands resting on the wood rail.

“There’s a whole life here,” she says quietly.

“Yeah,” I murmur. “There is.”

I lead her down the side steps to a short path that winds through dune grass to a strip of private shoreline. The sand is soft and cool under our shoes. The tide is low, and in the distance, a heron lifts off into the sky.

She turns to me, eyes bright in the fading light. “You have your own beach?”

“Well, I share it with two retired lawyers and a reclusive mystery novelist, but yeah. Basically mine.”

She laughs and tosses a pebble into the surf. “This is the dream, Wes. This is it.”

We walk back slowly, and I steer her toward the attached garage tucked under the house. I lift the door, and she lets out a low whistle.

Inside are all the things I thought I'd use one day: surfboards, beach chairs, a stand-up paddleboard still in plastic, an unopened badminton set, and a pair of kayaks with spiderwebs collecting in the corners.

“Planning to open a beach rental?” she teases.

“I bought all this after a summer in California. Thought maybe I'd pick up new hobbies.”

“And...?”

“And instead I went back and buried myself in meetings and press tours.”

She walks through the space, trailing her fingers over the dusty equipment.

“You didn't need new hobbies,” she says. “You needed a reason to stay.”

I look at her then, really look. The porch light behind her catches in her hair, and for a split second I see it—what this place could be.

What we could be.

“Yeah,” I say softly. “I think I finally found one.”

Back inside, we make a list on a whiteboard I find in the hall closet labeled “workout goals.” She draws a heart next to “buy pillows.”

“You're the only person I'd let deface my to-do list,” I tell her.

“I feel honored.”

We end the night in the doorway, leaning shoulder to shoulder, watching the last of the light fade over the water.

“You know what this place needs next?” she murmurs.

“Better lighting?”

“A party.”

“A party?”

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“A big one. Everyone we love. Sunset Cove deserves to know you’re not just visiting anymore.”

“Chaos in paradise?”

“Exactly.”

I shake my head, but I’m already picturing it.

And in my mind, the party ends with a question I’ve been carrying in my pocket for months.

She has no idea what’s coming.

But she will.

Chapter twenty-five

Quinn

The first thing I notice when I walk into Wes’s beach house—our beach house, I guess, if the last few weeks are anything to go by—is the scent.

It doesn’t smell like paint or empty walls anymore. It smells like lemon soap and fresh linen, and something else I can’t quite name that makes my heart flutter a little. The front hall has been transformed since the last time I saw it—woven runner down the center, a slim console table topped with a ceramic bowl for keys, and a glass vase

filled with sunflowers Wes claims he bought “completely unprompted.”

The bowl is new. The sunflowers? I may have sent a picture to Abby with a caption that read: Make him love plants. But the fact that he actually went and bought them?

It makes me smile all the way through.

“Back door’s open!” Wes’s voice calls from somewhere deeper in the house.

I step past the living room, and my breath catches again.

This isn’t the man cave I first walked into. The brown couch is gone—thankfully—and in its place is a pale gray sectional scattered with navy and cream pillows. The oversized armchair I picked out is angled toward the windows, a knit throw draped across the back like something out of a magazine. A woven jute rug grounds the space. There’s a new coffee table, rustic wood with an open shelf underneath stacked with hockey books and a photography collection of coastal towns.

I step closer and realize one of the framed photos on the end table is from the festival—me laughing, face turned up toward the sun, unaware someone was even holding a camera.

I swallow thickly.

“You okay?” Wes’s voice floats in again, closer this time.

“Just admiring,” I say, walking through the open archway that leads to the kitchen.

He’s in swim trunks and a navy linen shirt, barefoot, stacking paper plates on the counter with an energy that suggests he’s been pacing since sunrise.

“You went all in on this party,” I say, eyeing the spread of fruit trays, drinks, and an entire charcuterie board in the shape of a whale.

“Abby,” he says flatly. “I said ‘snacks,’ and she said, ‘do you want joy in your life or not?’ So. Whale meat-and-cheese board. DUH.”

I laugh, stepping into the kitchen to check on the lemonade pitcher. The space feels warmer now—hand towels in striped blue and white, a bowl of citrus on the counter, and two barstools I picked out because they reminded me of the diner we always ended up at back in the early days.

Even the back deck has changed. The Adirondack chairs are arranged in a semi-circle around the firepit, fresh cushions in place. The string lights Abby insisted on adding to the overhang, already glowing faintly in the late-afternoon sun.

And then there’s the view.

Sunlight dances across the surface of the ocean. A few kids are already wading in the water, shrieking with delight. The sand looks like it was swept by hand—which wouldn’t surprise me, knowing Wes—and there’s a folding table set up near the dune path, already covered in tubs of cold drinks, sunscreen, and extra towels.

He did all this.

Not for attention. Not because someone expected it.

But because he wanted to share it.

With me.

Wes appears beside me with two glasses of lemonade. He presses one into my hand and nods toward the porch steps. “Come on. You’ve got to see what I did with the garage.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You didn’t just put a lock on it and pretend it doesn’t exist?”

“You wound me.”

We step down to the side yard and around the back. The garage door is already rolled up, and I blink in surprise.

It’s... clean.

Organized, even.

Kayaks hang from overhead hooks. The surfboards are lined up neatly. The old box of unopened volleyballs and badminton gear is now shelved in labeled bins. There’s even a pegboard with beach towels rolled and labeled “kids” and “grown-ups,” because apparently his sister Liz got into his head about age-appropriate towel sizes.

“Wow,” I say.

He shoves his hands into his pockets and rocks back on his heels. “Told you I was reformed.”

“This is...” I turn in a slow circle. “Actually, kind of impressive.”

“You’re allowed to say it’s hot.”

I grin. “Fine. A man who labels bins voluntarily? That’s hot.”

We head back to the house just in time to hear the first guests arrive—Griff’s booming voice followed by Liz loudly announcing that the first person to throw sand in her drink gets dunked in the ocean.

I step onto the deck and look out at all of it—the porch, the path to the beach, the wind tousling the umbrella Wes set up by the grill.

This isn’t just a house anymore.

It’s a home.

Ours.

If I ever doubted Wes Archer was staying in Sunset Cove for real, that doubt dies the second I step onto his back deck and see an entire world scattered across his backyard like a scene from a very wholesome sitcom.

Children are chasing each other through a sprinkler shaped like a rainbow. Savannah is applying sunscreen to Megan’s husband’s bald head like it’s her patriotic duty. Abby is balancing a fruit tray on one hip and baby Violet on the other while directing Griff toward the grill. And in the distance—yes, that’s Beckett, absolutely dominating a paddleboard relay race against a group of overconfident teenagers.

Wes is in the middle of it all, barefoot and sun-kissed, manning a drink cooler like a seasoned bartender-slash-lifeguard. His T-shirt is damp, his hair is a little windswept,

and his smile is something I haven't seen this wide since we were just two barely-reconnected people on a hockey rink.

He catches my eye as I step down from the deck, barefoot in my navy sundress, beach bag slung over my shoulder.

"You made it," he calls, grinning.

"You bribed me with lemon bars, remember?"

"Technically, Abby bribed you with lemon bars. I just facilitated."

"Still counts."

He hands me a fizzy drink with lime and a tiny paper umbrella, and I take it without a word, soaking in the sun, the breeze, the scent of grilled pineapple, coconut sunscreen, and ocean air. The whole yard is alive.

"I'm impressed," I say.

"With the umbrella?"

"With the fact that you managed to coordinate a whole beach picnic without your head exploding."

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Wes shrugs, looking proud but casual. “Let’s just say Abby and Liz threatened to riot if I didn’t let them micromanage.”

“Smart man.”

He grins. “I realize how much I like it when my house is full.”

I glance around—colorful beach towels draped over railings, wet flip-flops lined up haphazardly, someone laughing so hard they’re wheezing over by the bocce set.

“Yeah,” I say. “Me too.”

The afternoon unfolds in a blur of sun and chaos. Savannah leads a group of small kids in a sandcastle contest. Griff tries to organize a beach volleyball game that devolves into everyone arguing about the rules and then giving up to swim. Jake ends up on Wes’s shoulders during a chicken fight that has absolutely no rules and an alarming amount of shouting.

There are burnt marshmallows. Slippery watermelon slices. At one point, Beckett tries to use a paddleboard as a buffet table. It tips. Liz gets a full plate of grilled shrimp dumped down her front and doesn’t even flinch. “Protein!” she announces. “I’m powered for the next round!”

And through it all, Wes is steady. Present. Happy in a way that feels real and earned.

I don’t even realize how much I’m watching him until Abby slides up beside me, sunglasses pushed onto her head.

“You look like someone who’s falling hard,” she says, nudging me gently.

I glance at her. “I already fell.”

She smiles. “Then brace yourself, because I think he’s about to knock you over again.”

“What—?”

Before I can finish the sentence, Wes climbs up onto the back deck. The crowd quiets automatically—probably thinking he’s about to announce the s’mores portion of the program. He clears his throat, and I catch the flicker of nerves in his smile.

“Hey, everyone,” he says. “Thanks for coming out today. I wanted this day to be full—of laughter, of sunburns, of way too many hot dogs. But I also had another reason for putting it together.”

Now the silence turns into stillness. My heart kicks.

“I bought this house a couple of years ago thinking it’d be a good place to hide. A place to disappear between seasons. But what I didn’t realize back then was... I didn’t want to disappear. I wanted to find something real.”

He looks at me then.

And only me.

“I found it.”

There’s a hush. My fingers press around the base of my drink. My heart forgets how to beat.

“Quinn,” he says, stepping down off the deck, barefoot and sure, and walking across the sand like he already knows I’ll meet him halfway. “You’ve been the bravest person I know since the day I met you. You show up for everyone—even when you’re hurting. You carry whole worlds on your shoulders and still make space for other people’s chaos. Including mine.”

He stops a few feet away, and his voice lowers just for me.

“You’re the reason this place feels like home. You’re the reason I stopped running.”

The breath catches in my throat.

He reaches into his pocket, and for one impossibly long second, I think he’s pulling out a seashell.

But it’s a box.

A simple velvet box.

I freeze. My hand flies to my chest. He drops to one knee in the sand.

And everything. Stops.

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“Will you marry me?”

No fanfare. No extra words.

Just that.

The question I didn’t expect today.

The one I haven’t stopped hoping for.

I drop to my knees in front of him, heart slamming into ribs, and cover his hand with mine.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Yes?”

“Yes,” I say again, louder now. “Of course, yes.”

The backyard erupts into whoops and applause. Abby shrieks. Jake throws his arms in the air and asks if he can call me Uncle Wes now instead of Coach Wes. Someone lets loose a beach ball that smacks Griff in the face mid-toast. Liz cries into her lemonade.

Wes slips the ring onto my finger—simple, perfect, sparkling—and then pulls me into his arms.

We don't kiss right away.

We just hold each other.

Like two people who finally stopped running. Who found something worth standing still for.

Later, after the sun dips behind the water and the firepit flickers to life, I rest my head on Wes's shoulder and trace the edge of the ring with my thumb.

"This wasn't the s'mores announcement I was expecting," I murmur.

"Better or worse?"

"Better," I say, lifting my face to meet his. "Infinitely better."

He presses a kiss to my temple, and I close my eyes.

It doesn't feel like the end of something.

It feels like the beginning.

Chapter twenty-six

Wes

The youth hockey rink smells like sweat, popcorn, and the faint metallic echo of sharpened skates gliding across the ice. I love it. Always have. But today feels different. Today, I'm not just a former player or a local coach.

Today, I feel like a man who belongs.

The Sunset Cove Youth Hockey Program is hosting its first ever Skills and Sportsmanship Showcase. There are shooting accuracy contests, puck relay races, a fastest skater track, and even a goalie dunk tank—the kids are going wild. Parents line the bleachers, phones out, cheering and laughing.

I'm manning the stickhandling station and coaching a nervous eleven-year-old named Cody, whose skates are slightly too big. He fumbles the puck, cheeks flaming.

“Hey,” I say, kneeling next to him. “You’re already doing better than I did my first year. Want to know a trick?”

He nods.

I guide his hands slightly closer together. “Right there. Less wrist strain. Now try again—smooth and slow.”

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He tries, and this time the puck slides cleanly between the cones.

He beams. “Thanks, Coach Wes!”

Moments like that? They mean more than goals ever did.

I spot Beckett at the faceoff circle running shooting drills and Griff helping kids line up for a timed lap around the rink. For a moment, I flash back to our own teenage years, racing each other until the custodian kicked us off the ice.

I think about Beckett getting his business sense early. He’s the one who helped me and Griff invest wisely during our early contracts. Most players blew through their rookie bonuses. Not us. Beck had us reading financial literacy books and talking with mentors. Before twenty-five, we each owned property and were on our way to building business portfolios.

And now, we’re here—still on the ice, still giving back.

A group of adults stands near the entrance, arms crossed. It’s not the first time I’ve seen them. They’re from a rival town's program, and they’ve been circling ever since we started pulling in better attendance and sponsorships.

One of them—tall, smug, wearing a too-tight polo—steps forward and makes a show of checking his clipboard.

"Still calling yourselves a nonprofit?" he asks, loud enough to turn heads.

I straighten up. “We are. We focus on access, not just wins.”

He smiles, tight and unfriendly. “Word is you’re poaching players.”

Before I can answer, a voice slices through the tension.

“Word is you’re threatened by a better program. Kids can join wherever they want.” Quinn says, stepping out from the sidelines, arms folded over her Sunset Cove medical hoodie. “And unless you’ve got proof of misconduct, maybe go check your own ethics before questioning ours.”

The man sputters, but she doesn’t flinch.

“We’ve got a clean record, medical staff on-site, and we turn no kid away. If that’s a threat to you, maybe you’re in the wrong business.”

The crowd goes still. A few parents exchange glances. Savannah, handing out orange slices, calls, “Boom! That’s my clinic boss!”

A dad near the blue line shouts, “Sunset Cove stands with Wes!”

The guy walks off in a huff, and a small cheer breaks out.

I look at Quinn and shake my head. “I was going to handle that.”

“You were being polite. I was being effective.”

Man, I love that woman.

As the day winds down, I help a few kids pick up gear while Beckett hoses off the benches. There’s a hum of joy under the fluorescent lights—the kind only community

can create.

Later that night, after the gear is packed and the rink is quiet, I linger to lock up. That's when I spot Liz waiting for me on the front bench.

She's wearing one of Griff's jackets and holding a cocoa, the same way she did when she was a kid and we'd sneak in early to practice.

"You always loved this place," she says.

"I still do," I reply.

She watches the Zamboni hum across the rink. "Remember the time you tied my skates so tight my toes went numb?"

I laugh. "Hey, better than falling on your face."

She grins. "Or the time I accidentally wore your elbow pads to practice and couldn't lift my arms?"

We both laugh harder at that. "You waddled like a penguin on skates," I say, wiping my eyes.

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“You still made me stay through the whole scrimmage,” she says.

“I was trying to teach you perseverance.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she murmurs. “But you always stayed close, Wes. Even when I fell. Even when I was mad. You were always there.”

Her smile fades. “You gave up a lot for me.”

I shake my head. “You were never a burden. After Mom and Dad’s accident, I didn’t even think. You were my sister. My responsibility. And more than that—you were my reason to keep going. I loved you then, and I love you even more now, Poopsie,” I say, tweaking her cheek. She basically ignores me and the old, hated moniker.

She swallows. “I never said thank you. Not really.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Well, I’m saying it now. For raising me. For choosing me. For showing up every single day even when it meant giving up the spotlight.”

I wrap an arm around her, and she leans into my side, just like she used to after games.

“There’s something else,” she says. “Griff and I were going to wait... but I want you to be the first to know.”

Liz reaches into her coat pocket and pulls out a small sonogram image.

My heart stutters. “You’re—”

“We’re having another boy.”

I blink fast, then look at the image again.

“We’re naming him Weston Griffin,” she adds. “After you. And Griff. But mostly you.”

I sit down hard on the bench.

She laughs through her tears. “Don’t you dare cry before I do.”

Too late.

We sit there, both crying, arms locked around each other like we did the night she had her first breakup, and I promised her she’d always have family.

This town. This rink. This family.

It’s not just where I started.

It’s where I belong.

Chapter twenty-seven

Quinn

By the time I reach the bridal suite at the quaint little bed-and-breakfast downtown,

it's overflowing with tulle, curling ribbons, and half a dozen women trying to out-chatter one another. My cheeks already ache from smiling—and we're still two days from the wedding.

Savannah is pinning place cards to a massive display board, Megan is organizing the emergency kit like she's planning a military operation, and Liz is chasing Violet around with a tiny flower crown. Someone hands me a mimosa the minute I walked in, and the playlist is full of nostalgic nineties bops.

"It's your one and only, Quinn," Abby says, looping an arm around me. "You'd better soak it in."

"I'm soaking," I say, letting myself be dragged to a chair covered in white satin and sparkles. "I'm positively drenched."

Bridesmaid prep starts with matching robes and a thousand selfies. Then someone brings out the box of custom-printed tanktops—"Team Quinn" on the front, everyone's name on the back—and suddenly I'm misty-eyed over cotton apparel.

Later, we're escorted out front for a "surprise errand." I'm suspicious until I spot the downtown storefronts all decorated with streamers and signs. The Sweet Bean has a sign that reads: "Love is Brewing – Quinn & Wes," and next door, the bookstore has stacked all the romance novels into a heart-shaped display. Every store has something.

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Then comes the bridal shower. Not just any shower—a full-on Sunset Cove community couples shower, complete with bingo, grilled cheese stations, lawn games, and one very excitable accordion player.

For the first hour, it's mostly the ladies mingling—trying lavender lemonade mocktails and laughing over bridal trivia. But just as Liz is lining everyone up for a highly competitive game of bridal charades, we hear cheering and whooping from the street.

That can only mean that the guys are here.

Wes, Griff, Beckett, and a few of the other rink regulars stroll in looking like they just stepped into enemy territory. Beckett's holding Jake's hand and glancing around like he's preparing to dodge flower petals, while Griff is eyeing the grilled cheese station like it might bite him.

“Oh boy,” Wes says as he reaches me. “Is that man... actually playing ABBA on the accordion?”

“Welcome to the party,” I say, handing him a cup of the lavender lemonade. “You're officially on Team Bride now.”

He raises his eyebrows. “I'm going to need a sash or something.”

Savannah hears that and disappears, only to reappear five minutes later with a glittery pink ribbon that says “Mr. Quinn.” She fastens it around his chest with a flourish.

Beckett laughs, pointing at the sash. “Never thought I’d see the day. The big bad hockey star felled by tulle and twinkle lights.”

“Bet he still hits the rink harder than you,” Griff adds.

“You guys are just jealous cause you didn’t get a sash,” Wes fires back.

Jake tugs on Beckett’s shirt. “Dad, can I wear a sash too?”

“Only if you win the bridal bingo,” Beckett says solemnly.

The guys, to their credit, jump into the spirit faster than expected. Griff ends up refereeing the lawn games like it's the Stanley Cup playoffs, Beckett is crowned Grilled Cheese Champion after a surprise grilled jalapeño combo, and Wes gets pulled into a couples trivia contest where he somehow remembers the exact date we first kissed, earning him a standing ovation.

Then the gifts start. Mixing bowls, matching towels, a scrapbook.

Then we’re handed a large pink box and something black and fluffy springs out.

I scream. Everyone screams.

It’s a puppy.

Savannah is already filming as Abby reads the card aloud. "To the best team we know—Quinn and Wes—because every hockey household needs a mascot. Love, the Sunset Cove crew."

Liz adds, “We voted on the name.”

“Unanimously,” Savannah says with a grin. “Meet Wag. As in... Wayne Gretzky.”

The puppy yips, wags furiously, and then promptly pees on my shoe. Nothing I haven’t had happen many times over at work, I think.

“I think he likes you,” Wes murmurs, appearing beside me with a paper plate of sliders.

I scoop up the wriggly fluff ball. “We have a puppy.”

He leans in close. “We have a life.”

And suddenly the tears are back.

The rest of the evening is chaos in the best way. There are sack races, someone sets up a spontaneous karaoke round, and Wes gets dragged into a three-legged race with Griff, which ends in grass stains and competitive grumbling. Jake somehow wins the egg toss with one of the bookstore clerks.

I sneak off for a few minutes just to breathe, watching the string lights twinkle between the trees and the moon rise over the water. When Wes finds me, he just stands there for a minute, hands in his pockets.

"You okay?"

"I think I'm too happy. Is that a thing?"

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He chuckles. "Only for people who deserve it."

I shake my head and pull him in for a kiss at which the entire gang whoops and yells for more.

Then our wedding day arrives. I'm a mixture of happiness, excitement, anxiety, and so much more.

There's chaos. Someone forgot the boutonnières. Violet refuses to wear her shoes. My curls won't hold.

The stylist, a sweet woman named Danielle from the local salon, tries everything—extra hold spray, thermal rollers, the curling iron magic trick she swears by—but the stubborn waves in my hair are determined to unravel. Megan suggests we pivot to a soft updo, but I shake my head.

"Let it go wild," I tell her. "It's still me."

Savannah grins from across the room. "That's the Quinn we know."

I glance in the mirror and take in the final result. The lace of my dress floats like a dream, the necklace from Abby sits perfectly above my collarbone, and even if my curls have a mind of their own, I feel like myself. Nervous, exhilarated, deeply in love—and about to walk down the aisle.

The girls circle me for one last toast. Abby lifts her glass. "To the most kick-butt bride Sunset Cove has ever seen. Dear sister, may your mascara stay waterproof and your husband stay whipped."

"Cheers to that!" Liz and Savannah echo.

We clink our glasses and laugh, but as the sound fades, a silence settles in. A good silence. The kind filled with history and hope. My hands tremble slightly as I smooth down the front of my dress.

"I can't believe this is happening," I whisper.

"You earned this," Abby says gently. "Every bit of it."

The door creaks open, and Beckett pokes his head in, shielding his eyes dramatically. "Are we decent in here, or am I about to get banned from family dinners?"

Abby tosses a pillow at him. "You're safe—for now."

He steps in fully, holding a bouquet of peonies in one hand and a small velvet box in the other. "From Wes," he says, handing me the box. "He didn't write a note. Just said you'd understand."

Inside is a silver charm bracelet, delicate and beautiful, with a single charm already attached—a tiny stethoscope. I blink back tears.

"He said it's for all the lives you've helped save," Beckett adds quietly. "And that more charms will come. One for every big chapter."

My throat tightens. "Thank you."

Beckett leans in and kisses my cheek. "See you out there, sis."

I watch him go, then turn to the mirror again. The wild curls, the stethoscope charm, the blush on my cheeks from laughter and tears—it all tells a story. And it's mine.

And then the music starts.

I walk down the aisle with Abby steadying me on one side and Liz on the other. Savannah and Megan follow, fluffing and tweaking as we move to the back of the church. The old church is packed. Beckett is watching Jake, who waves wildly from the front row. Griff gives me a thumbs up.

But it's Wes I see. Standing tall, heart in his eyes.

When it's time for our vows, the pastor jokes about checking for hockey metaphors. I turn to Wes and speak these promises.

Wes, I never expected my forever to show up wearing skates and carrying more baggage than a travel team bus—but then you walked back into my life and everything shifted. You taught me that love can be patient and stubborn and sometimes needs a second chance to get it right. You're the man who sees through my walls, matches my fire, and brings me peace. Today, I vow to love you with my whole heart—on the hard days, the hilarious days, and every ordinary one in between. You're my teammate, my home, and the love of my life.

Wes replies with deeply heartfelt words that bring tears to my eyes.

Quinn, from the moment I met you, you've challenged me, steadied me, and reminded me that I'm worth more than my past. I walked away once, thinking it

would protect you. But the truth is, I was always running toward this moment—toward you. I vow to show up every single day as the man who chooses you, who fights for us, and who never stops being grateful I get to call you mine. You're my compass, my courage, and the reason I believe in forever.

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And when it's done—when we're finally pronounced husband and wife—Wes dips me back into a kiss that makes the entire church erupt.

Later we dance under the stars, surrounded by everyone we love, while Wag tries to steal an entire roast chicken off the buffet table.

The night ends with sparklers and Wes whispering in my ear, "You're stuck with me now, Quinn Archer."

"Good," I whisper back. "Because I'm just getting started."

And for once, I don't worry about tomorrow.

Because tonight?

This is everything.

Chapter twenty-eight

Wes

The cruise ship is bigger than any arena I ever played in—shining decks, endless buffets, and staff who smile like they've been trained by angels. But even all the grandeur doesn't compare to Quinn's face when we board.

Her eyes go wide as she spins in a slow circle, taking it all in. "Wes," she breathes, clutching my arm, "this isn't a honeymoon. This is a floating palace."

"Six weeks, all over the world," I remind her. "No pagers. No rink. No emergencies. Just you and me."

She looks at me like I just gave her the moon. "You planned this?"

"Well, Abby helped. And Liz helped me pick out travel shoes. Oh, and Jake may have Googled 'best cruise adventures for newlyweds' and printed me an itinerary."

She laughs, then grabs my hand and drags me down the hallway. "Come on, Mr. Archer. Let's see our suite."

Our room is all ocean views and luxury linens. There's a welcome platter with chocolate-covered strawberries and a card that reads, "To Wes and Quinn—Bon Voyage!" in Abby's unmistakable swirly handwriting. Quinn flops backward onto the bed and lets out the happiest sigh I've ever heard.

"So, this is married life?"

"No," I say, climbing in beside her. "This is the honeymoon part where we pretend life is only room service and open seas."

We spend our first two days just unwinding. Naps. Poolside lounging. Late-night dancing. Quinn wears sunhats and laughs in foreign cities, and I keep thinking: this is the kind of peace I didn't know I needed.

Then karaoke night happens.

I'm not a singer. I've never been a singer. But Quinn? Oh, she throws herself onto the stage like she's auditioning for a pop star competition. She belts out "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" with so much enthusiasm that even the DJ forgets to cue the next track.

I think I'm safe until the crowd starts chanting my name.

"Wes! Wes! Wes!"

She grins at me like a devil in sequins. "Come on, Mr. Hockey Star. Time to show us your pipes."

Before I can escape, I'm pulled onto the stage and handed a mic. The next thing I know, we're butchering a duet of "Islands in the Stream," Quinn dramatically pointing at me during every line. I sound like a goat getting a haircut, but the applause afterward is thunderous. Quinn bows deeply. I salute like an army general. We laugh until we can't breathe.

The next night, we're roped into a limbo competition. Quinn makes it to the final round, doing a "cuchi-cuchi" shimmy that would make the amazing Charo proud.

I barely survived the first pass under the stick before crashing into a decorative palm tree.

"That's it," I wheeze, flat on my back. "I'm officially old."

"You're officially mine," she says, hauling me up. "And I love your dad moves."

The cruise becomes a string of hilarious memories: a conga line on Caribbean night, embarrassing poolside trivia wins, and one unforgettable dance-off where Quinn somehow convinces the ship's captain to join.

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Back in Sunset Cove, Jake is sending us daily updates. Abby reports he's feeding Wag way too many treats, and Beckett swears the dog has taken over their entire living room. Griff sent a photo of Wag curled up on the youth hockey jerseys in the locker room, with the caption: "Team mascot status: confirmed."

I show Quinn, and we both laugh until our sides hurt.

At every port, we dive into adventure. In Santorini, we rent scooters and zip along the cliffs, stopping for fresh olives and sunset selfies. In Venice, Quinn insists we get lost on purpose, winding through alleys and footbridges until we stumble on a courtyard filled with string lights and a man playing violin.

We hike a jungle trail in Costa Rica where a toucan steals our lunch. We snorkel in Belize and toast each other with pineapple drinks so strong we can barely walk back to the boat.

In Kyoto, we visit a temple and tie a blessing to a tree. Quinn writes hers carefully, tongue between her teeth, and when I peek, it says: "For love that lasts—and laughter that never stops."

Somewhere between Greece and Morocco, we fall into a rhythm that feels timeless. We try things we've never done—a cooking class in Barcelona where Quinn nearly sets a towel on fire. She scolds me for hoarding hotel soaps, and I tease her for packing eight novels and finishing them all in two weeks.

But there are quiet moments too. Ones where we sit on the balcony with coffee, watching the sun rise over turquoise water. No pressure. No pretense. Just... us.

One night, after a formal dinner and an overly dramatic violin performance, I take her hand as we walk the upper deck.

"You know," I say, "I used to think the best days of my life were behind me."

She gives me a side-eye. "You mean the hockey days?"

I nod. "Yeah. But I was wrong. They were good. But they weren't this."

She leans her head on my shoulder. "This is better."

I stop walking and face her, brushing windblown hair from her face. "It's more than better, Quinn. It's the life I never let myself believe I could have."

She takes my hand and presses it to her heart. "Then hold onto it. We're just getting started."

We stand there, swaying with the motion of the ship, under a sky full of stars. There's music in the background, waves below, and her fingers locked with mine. The world feels wide open and small at once.

And in that moment, I know for sure—

This isn't just a honeymoon.

This is our beginning.

When we finally dock back home, the surprises aren't over.

As we step off the cruise ship, a white stretch limo is waiting at the port terminal. And beside it? A whole crowd of familiar faces holding signs, balloons, and

welcome-back banners. Jake is jumping up and down with Wag in his arms, and Liz is holding a bouquet of daisies nearly as tall as she is.

Griff's yelling something about how he's reclaiming his grilled cheese crown, and Beckett's trying to herd everyone into a group for photos.

"Did you plan this?" Quinn whispers.

I shake my head, stunned. "Not a clue."

Abby waves us forward. "Sunset Cove missed its favorite newlyweds! Now get in the limo—there's a party waiting!"

The drive through town is like a slow parade. Horns honk, people wave, and someone even tosses confetti from the balcony of The Sweet Bean.

At the edge of the beach, we pull up to a full-blown backyard BBQ at our house—grills smoking, twinkle lights strung from the porch, picnic tables full of food, and a makeshift dance floor already in use.

It smells like home. Feels like magic.

Everyone's there—friends, family, neighbors, even the mayor in a Hawaiian shirt. Kids run with sparklers, the older ladies gossip in a corner with sweet tea, and the guys form a cornhole tournament on the lawn.

Quinn and I make the rounds, hugging everyone, swapping stories. We end the night barefoot on the beach, surrounded by people who love us.

And after the last guest leaves, we step inside our beach house—our home. It's cozy, decorated now with Quinn's flair, lived-in and full of joy. Wag races in ahead of us,

yipping at shadows.

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I glance at her, barefoot in the doorway, her hair still tousled from sea breezes and BBQ hugs.

“Home?” I ask.

She smiles, eyes shining. “Perfect.”

Epilogue – Quinn

Some months later, life in Sunset Cove has slipped into a rhythm so comforting I barely notice how different it all is from just a year ago. The clinic is thriving. We’ve added a part-time pediatrician, Savannah’s been promoted to head nurse, and our funding grants were not only renewed—they were doubled, thanks to Wes’s quiet behind-the-scenes efforts. The new wing opens next month, and I’ve already been asked to lead the expansion task force. It’s busy, challenging, sometimes chaotic... and I wouldn’t trade a minute of it.

Wes is part of everything now. He still coaches at the youth program, and when he’s not on the ice, he’s tinkering with gear donations, mentoring kids, or planning the next clinic fundraiser.

There’s a kind of grounded peace in him these days. He still grumbles about paperwork and burns toast with alarming frequency, but he’s also the guy who hands out team snacks and fixes leaky faucets at the rink like he owns the place. Which, technically, he kind of does now.

At home, we’ve built something neither of us ever really had before: steadiness. A

rhythm of shared grocery lists, mismatched mugs, and early morning beach walks. The beach house—his, then ours—has changed too. What was once a guy's mansion with gray furniture and zero personality is now full of color, cozy throws, local art, and plants I mostly keep alive.

The animals? Well, they rule the roost. Wag, the black fluffball from our bridal shower, has grown into a diva with her own Instagram account (Abby's doing, not mine). Wes brought home a senior rescue husky who sleeps by the front door like he's guarding a castle. And we somehow ended up with two rescue cats from the hardware store alley—Duke and Noodle—who act like they own the kitchen.

Our latest addition? A three-legged terrier named Maple, who follows Wes like a fuzzy shadow. He claims he only went to the shelter to "drop off a check." I rolled my eyes, then promptly knitted Maple a sweater.

I think about the next knitting project I'm about to begin. Too early to speak it out loud, but very soon my sweet Wes will find the newest joy in his life. And me too.

There are paw prints on the deck, fur in the laundry, and chewed slippers in the entryway. And it's perfect.

Tonight, we're hosting a small dinner on the porch with Beckett, Abby, Griff, Liz, and baby Weston Griffin. Jake's running up and down the stairs with Wag at his heels, trying to teach her how to not flop all the way down. Violet is sound asleep in her porta crib. Wes is flipping burgers while Liz rocks the baby in a hammock, humming a lullaby I haven't heard since we were kids.

And I stand in the doorway for a moment, just soaking it in.

This life. This love.

I think back to the young girl I was when I met Wes. Determined, guarded, always

trying to be strong. And then I remember the woman I became after he left. Wiser. Bruised. But not broken. And now? I'm both. I'm whole. Because of what we built, and what we chose to fight for.

Wes walks over and wraps an arm around me, pressing a kiss to my temple. "You okay?"

"I'm more than okay," I whisper.

He grins. "Then come eat before Jake tries to feed Wag another hot dog."

I laugh and follow him back out into the golden light of the evening.

This isn't a fairytale.

It's better.

Because we found our forever—and we're living it every single day.