



Big Pitch Energy (Carolina Waves)

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Category: Sport

Description: Sam

Fifteen months after Tommy John surgery, my elbows healed, but my fastball? Still MIA.

I've tried everything...rest, rehab, tweaking my mechanics. Nothing works.

So when my mom booked me a Reiki session, I agreed to go. Not because I believe in it, but because she does. I figured I'd show up, fake it, and get it over with. But I never expected to actually do anything.

And I certainly didn't expect Hope Keller.

Shes calm, centered, and grounded in a way that makes me feel like I'm spinning out of control. But when I'm around her, something shifts and everything starts falling back into place. Including my fastball.

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Chapter One

Sam

The ball hit the net with a pathetic thud instead of a sharp thwack.

Again.

Judging by the sound alone, I don't have to look at the radar gun to know my velocity isn't anywhere near where it should be.

"Shit."

I stormed across the backyard and onto the deck, tossed my glove on the table, and slumped into the chair. Grabbing my water, I downed it in one long gulp, but the cool liquid didn't do a damn thing to cool my temper.

After dragging my fingers through my hair, I locked them behind my head and leaned back, glaring up at the washed-out November sky. Dull blue and streaked with grey, it looked every bit as moody as I felt.

But I think I have a right to be moody.

I followed every damn thing the docs told me to do...

all the rehab, all the restrictions, everything.

Figured if I did it right, I'd come back stronger than ever.

Fifteen months later and I'm still throwing batting practice speed.

They don't call me Cherry Bomb for sitting at 85.

My fastball is supposed to be sitting mid-to-high nineties, so this garbage isn't gonna cut it.

Shifting forward, I studied the pink scar on the inside of my right elbow.

I'm not the first pitcher in MLB to have this surgery, and I won't be the last. Hell, the namesake for ulnar collateral ligament reconstruction, Tommy John, had it when he was just thirty years old. And he went on to pitch fourteen more seasons.

So when I felt that dreaded pop in my elbow after throwing a slider last year, and the MRI confirmed a torn UCL, I had hope.

Hope that I'd be back on the mound throwing smoke in no time.

But after all the rest, rehab, and bullpens, I'm still not able to throw the pitch that's defined my career.

If I don't get at least ten more on the gun, I'm done.

Shaking my head, I stood to collect the balls scattered around the net. But before I stepped off the deck, my phone buzzed.

My agent.

“Hey Ray.”

“How’s it going?” he asked.

Ray Mendoza’s been with me since my rookie season and he’s one of a handful of people I completely trust.

"It's going," I muttered.

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse.”

“What’s it feel like when you throw? Stiff? Weak? Does it hurt?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. We talked about this after Ray watched one of my train wreck bullpen sessions. The one where my fastball didn’t have any more life than it did today. And my answer is the same. I stood and walked off the deck into the yard, heading toward the bullpen.

“It feels fine. I feel fine. There’s no pain. No stiffness. No weakness.” I groaned. “I’ve been medically cleared, so I don’t understand what the problem is.”

The line stayed quiet for what seemed like forever, which is never a good sign. It means Ray is picking his words, so I’m probably not gonna like them.

“Being medically cleared doesn’t mean you’re mentally ready.

And you know what Yogi said, ‘Baseball is ninety percent mental. The other half is physical.’ You wouldn’t be the first player to get the yips after coming back from an injury.

Your arm might feel fine, but your head?

That's the part that'll get you every time. ”

“You honestly think my fastball's missing because my head's not in the right place?” I fought to keep the sarcasm out of my tone. Ray's been like a father to me and I don't want to be disrespectful. I shook my head. “No, there must be something wrong with my mechanics.”

“You've got three months until spring training.”

It's funny, time crawled after surgery, like I was stuck in reverse. Now it's racing toward opening day and I feel like I'm getting left behind.

“I'll figure it out,” I said. “I have to, because if I don't...”

I trailed off not wanting to say the words. Hell, I don't even want to think them.

“Don't get ahead of yourself. A lot can happen in three months.” he said. “Have you considered working with someone new? Maybe get a fresh perspective?”

“Like who? The Waves have specialists for every joint, muscle, and nerve in my arm. If it was physical, they'd have caught it.”

“Something outside the box.” After another stretch of silence, he added, “A sports psychologist, maybe?”

Ray is only trying to help, and I don't want to take my frustration out on him.

“I'll think about it.”

“That's all I can ask,” he said. “I'll touch base in a couple days. In the meantime, if you need anything, you know how to reach me.”

“Thanks Ray.”

We ended the call and I kicked at the dirt, filling in the hole where my plant foot kept landing.

I grabbed the bucket and started collecting the balls I'd pitched into the net, each one a reminder of my shitty velocity.

After putting everything away in the shed—bucket, radar gun, and display—I shut the door and turned around to find Mom standing on the deck with two glasses of iced tea.

“All done for the day?” she asked, assessing my mood with the precision that only mothers possess.

I nodded, kissed her cheek, and took the glass she offered. We both sat, and I took a long gulp of tea, avoiding her gaze.

“I was just talking to Ray.”

“And what did he have to say?”

“Same old, same old. Keep working, keep trying.”

Mom sipped her tea thoughtfully, watching as I picked up my glove and examined the laces.

“The doctors say there's no physical reason you can't throw like before, right?” I nodded. “That means the issue is elsewhere.”

“Yeah, Ray suggested talking to a sports psychologist.”

“That’s not what I’m thinking.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your energy is blocked.”

I barely contained my eye roll.

My mom is the strongest person I know. She had to be to get us through the tough years after my father left.

For most of my life, she worked two or three jobs to support us.

And as I got older, every extra penny went toward my baseball gear and travel teams. Hell, she’s the one who built my first backyard bullpen.

So once I got my first big contract, I paid off her house and gave her enough money so she could quit her jobs.

And that’s when she got all woo-woo . She’d always been spiritually curious, but with extra time on her hands, she went all in. Crystals on the windowsills, incense burning in the living room, books about chakras and energy healing stacked on her bedside table.

When she learned enough, she wanted to open a new age shop to teach others. Of course I helped her with that too, and now Moonlight and Marigolds is an integral part of the Starlight Shores community.

But just because she’s into all that stuff doesn’t mean I am.

“Mom, I don't think?—”

She cut me off and leaned forward to squeeze my hand.

“I’m sure Hope can help you. She does incredible work.”

I assume she’s talking about Hope Keller who owns the yoga studio next door to my mom’s shop. But I have no idea how that would help.

“What kind of work?”

“She’s a Reiki master,” she said. “She’ll heal your energy blockages and align your body’s natural flow. Your fastball will be back to normal in no time.”

I took another swig of tea to hide my grimace.

“Sounds...interesting.”

“She helped Mrs. Abernathy with her arthritis. And you remember Coach Wilson? The one with the bad back? He can play golf again now. Eighteen holes, with no pain medication.”

“That’s great Mom, but this is different.”

She fixed me with the look that had kept me in line through my teenage years.

“Sampson Robert Cherry, do you think I would suggest something if I didn’t believe it could help you?”

Uh oh, it’s never good when she uses my middle name.

“No, ma’am,” I said quietly.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and her fingers flew across the screen. A second later, it buzzed and she smiled. After typing something else, she set the phone on the table and smiled at me.

“Hope can see you tomorrow at three.”

“Mom—”

“Just try one session.” She reached out to pat my cheek, the way she used to when I was a child. “If it doesn't help, I won't mention it again.”

That little gesture sealed my fate.

“Fine. One session.”

“Excellent.”

She stood and kissed the top of my head, then went inside.

I looked at my backyard bullpen and shrugged.

One session. I can do that.

Hell, it's not the dumbest thing I've done in the name of baseball...or to make my mom happy.

It's not going to fix anything, but it can't make things any worse.

Hope

“Okay ladies, let's take it down to the mat,” I said, raising my voice just loud enough

to be heard over the soft music in the background.

“Draw your knees into your chest and give yourself a squeeze, then let them fall to the right. Open your arms out wide, gaze to the left and breathe into that twist.”

I walked slowly between the mats, checking their form and occasionally crouching down to press against a knee or shoulder to deepen the stretch.

This Tuesday afternoon gentle flow class is one of my favorites.

It's usually smaller than my other classes, which makes it easier to give individualized attention.

Most of today's attendees are women in their sixties and seventies who come each week to move gently, breathe deeply, and care for the bodies that have carried them through their lives.

I led them through the same thing on the other side, then softly guided them into happy baby.

“Breathe into your center. Feel the connection between your breath and the floor beneath you, and when you're ready, ease into Savasana. Legs long, arms heavy, palms open.”

The studio filled with the sound of collective exhales as the class settled into the restorative pose.

“There's nowhere else to be. Nothing else to do. Just let go.”

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I moved quietly to the front of the room, each step careful and light, so I wouldn't disturb the peaceful stillness.

Lowering to the floor, I crossed my legs and settled into an easy seat on my mat, letting my hands rest gently on my knees, palms up.

I closed my eyes and drew in a deep, steady inhale through my nose, letting it fill my belly and chest before releasing it slowly and taking another breath.

And another. I tuned into the energy of the room, then stayed still, breathing with my students, until it was time to guide them back.

“At your own pace, bring awareness back into your body, open your eyes, and move to a seated position.” I waited until everyone was sitting on their mat facing me.

“Bring your hands to heart center and thank yourself for showing up today.” Pressing my palms together, I moved them to my chest, closed my eyes, and dipped my head in a slight bow. “Namaste.”

Their voices came softly in return, a gentle chorus of namaste that floated through the room like a breath held and released.

I waited a few heartbeats before looking up at the class.

“Thanks ladies. You were amazing today.”

Ten minutes later, the last of my students offered a soft smile and a wave as they

slipped out the door, mats tucked under their arms. Then it was just me, alone in the studio. Silence settled in around me like a blanket, the warm scent of incense lingering in the air.

I slid the curtains open, letting the sunlight spill into the room, casting a golden wash across the honey-toned wood floors.

The light warmed the sage-colored walls, giving them a gentle glow.

I took a few moments to appreciate the space before heading back to my Reiki room.

Liz's son would be arriving soon, and I needed to prepare.

The moment I stepped inside the small space, my shoulders softened. The yoga studio has my heart, but this room owns my soul.

Sunlight streamed through the stained glass window, bathing the room in a soft, colorful glow.

Emerald greens, ruby reds, and sapphire blues mingled together, casting a kaleidoscope of hues across the walls and floor.

In the far corner, a small wooden table held a simple circle of healing crystals—amethyst, rose quartz, and clear quartz—their soft glow catching the light and shimmering like a quiet promise.

A low, padded Reiki table sat in the center, dressed in fresh linen and a cozy throw.

I reached for the palo santo stick resting in a small ceramic dish on the shelf, its smooth, light wood familiar in my hand. With a quiet breath, I struck a match and held the flame to the end, letting it catch before gently blowing it out, watching as a

thin ribbon of smoke began to curl upward.

It trailed behind me like a whisper, and as I walked, the scent filled the space, tracing the air around the Reiki table, past the window, and across the floor. Clearing. Grounding. Inviting in calm and settling in the room like a protective aura.

Closing my eyes, I centered myself, calming my thoughts as I prepared for the session. By the time I heard the front door open, both the room and I were ready.

He'd just closed the door as I walked out into the studio. When he turned around to face me, I immediately noticed two things:

One: His energy was a mess—chaotic, buzzing, and restless. It prickled against mine like static caught in a silk sheet.

Two: He had the most perfect jawline I'd ever seen in my life. Sharp enough to cut glass and break hearts. His pictures definitely don't do him justice.

He looked around, then zeroed in on me.

“Hope?”

His voice snapped me out of the trance that jawline had lured me into. I blinked and forced myself to stop gawking.

“Uh...yeah. That's me,” I said. “You must be Sam. Come on in. Shoes off, please.”

After stepping out of his sneakers, he folded his arms across his chest. Liz mentioned she'd had to convince him to come. I mentally shrugged. He's not the first skeptic to walk through that door, and I'm sure he won't be the last. Still, I'll do my best to help him.

“So, how is this supposed to work? You wave your hands over me and I get my fastball back?”

“Not quite. But we’ll see what we can do.” I smiled. “Right this way.”

He followed me back and when we stepped into the Reiki room, I caught the way his shoulders filled the doorframe. The space had never felt small before, but with him in it...broad, tall, and coiled tight like a spring...the room seemed more intimate than serene.

I crossed to the loveseat in the corner and sat, patting the cushion beside me.

“Come sit for a minute.”

He hesitated, then lowered himself onto the opposite end, sinking in slowly like he wasn't sure he trusted the furniture. I turned toward him, keeping my voice gentle.

“Tell me about your injury.”

He gave a quick summary and when he finished, I asked more specific questions.

I’d done my homework on ulnar collateral ligament reconstruction, the tendon graft, and the rehab timeline.

I asked how long he'd been throwing again, how it felt day to day, and whether he’d noticed any changes in his pitching style since the surgery.

As he spoke, I watched his hands, the way his thumb brushed along the scar near his elbow like he didn’t even realize he was doing it. When he paused, I reached out, asking silently to see, and he offered his arm.

I let my fingertips brush along the inside of his elbow, tracing the faded scar that still stood out against his skin. It had fully healed, smooth in some places and textured in others, but the way he stilled under my touch told me the wound wasn't just physical. Not entirely.

After a few more questions, I nodded toward the table.

“Okay, you can go ahead and lie down now.”

He hesitated, but did as I asked. I placed a yoga bolster under his knees to make him more comfortable, then pulled the soft gray blanket up over his chest. His wary eyes met mine and I smiled.

“Just close your eyes and relax,” I said.

He didn't look entirely convinced that he should, but after a beat, he exhaled and let his eyes drift shut anyway. I took a slow, grounding breath, letting the outside world fade away as I settled into the quiet hum of the room, reminding myself of my role in his healing journey.

I'm not here to mend what's broken. I'm here to create the stillness where healing becomes possible, a quiet space where the body can remember what balance feels like.

I ran my hands just above his body, scanning for shifts, anything that pulled at my attention. The heat and congestion around his elbow and solar plexus chakras were intense. Blocked. Guarded. But not hopeless. I closed my eyes and began to work.

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Chapter Two

Sam

“Take a deep breath in through your nose and let it out slowly through your mouth.”

Her voice is low and steady, almost hypnotic.

I’m still not sure I buy into all of this, but something about the rhythm of her words makes it hard to resist. So I do what she says.

I inhale, counting to four, hold it, then exhale just as slow.

Her voice is the only thing I focus on. It anchors me, pulling me out of my head.

I’m still tense, still skeptical, but with each breath, something starts to loosen.

“I’m going to begin now,” she said quietly. “You may feel warmth, tingling, or nothing at all. There’s no right or wrong way to experience this.”

I felt her presence near my head. Her hands didn’t touch me, but I still felt them.

A subtle heat hovering just above my skin, like sunlight filtered through clouds.

She moved in silence, and I tried to stay still, to be open, whatever that meant.

I’ve done rehab, ice baths, stim, dry needling.

This was not that. This was...something else.

Little by little, the tension in my shoulders melted away and my jaw unclenched. I stopped trying to analyze what was happening and just let it be. And that's when the sensation changed.

A weightlessness settled over me, like I was floating, untethered. My muscles twitched, a reflex to anchor myself, but her soft words of comfort made me feel safe enough to relax again.

She slowly circled the table, her hands hovering just above me. Sometimes I felt that gentle warmth, sometimes just the quiet hum of her presence.

I slipped into something close to sleep, my body so relaxed it was like I wasn't even fully conscious.

But I could still feel her presence, and as she moved to my right shoulder there was something else.

Not pain. Not pressure. Just a slow unraveling in my chest, like something I'd been holding tight was loosening.

Instead of feeling jarred, my breath went deeper, slower.

As if my body finally realized it didn't need to hold on anymore.

At first there was nothing but darkness. Then the familiar swirl of colors flickered behind my closed eyes. I tried to concentrate, watching the colors twist and blend, searching for some kind of pattern. Red bled into blue, then shifted to a soft yellow, before swirling back to a deep violet.

And then I saw it.

A baseball field. Empty. Fog curling over the grass like smoke. I'm on the mound, ball in hand, but the stands are silent. There's no catcher. No batter. Just me and a heavy, aching stillness.

The ball rested against my palm like it always has and I drew it back, ready to throw.

But as I lifted my arm to go through the motion, the ball vanished.

Confused, I glanced down, and the ball was somehow in my hand again like it never left.

I gripped it tight in my fingers, certain this time it'd stay.

But as I went to throw, it slipped away again.

I found the ball over and over, and each time, it disappeared just before release, like it was never really there.

I kept trying, desperate to hold onto it, to finish the motion, to feel that snap at the end.

But all I got was the ghost of it...weightless and unfinished...

leaving my arm hanging midair and my chest tight with failure.

My chest tightened. My legs wanted to move, run, do something , but I was frozen. Not because of pain, but because I was afraid. Afraid I've lost it. Afraid I'd never get it back. That the version of me, the one who used to throw heat without thinking, was gone forever.

Before I could make sense of it, Hope's voice drifted in, soft and steady, like a rope pulling me gently back to the surface.

"Take a deep breath in and slowly let it out. Wiggle your fingers and toes."

I wasn't ready to move, but I did what she asked. My fingers gave a small twitch. My toes curled against the blanket, grounding me. The table felt more solid beneath me, like I was easing back into my body, one breath at a time.

She placed her hands lightly on my shoulders.

"Start to bring your awareness back to the room, and when you're ready, slowly open your eyes."

I blinked against the dim light, feeling oddly disoriented. My body felt heavy, relaxed in a way it hadn't been since before the injury. If ever.

"How do you feel?"

"I'm not sure."

I sat and shifted until my legs hung off the edge of the table. Rubbing the back of my neck, I tried to process what had just happened.

She handed me a glass of water, and I took it with a nod. Its coolness steadied me, each sip drawing me a little more back into myself. She didn't rush me, just stood nearby, calm and quiet. I finished the water and rested the empty glass against my thigh.

"I didn't think I'd feel anything," I said. "But it was like...I don't know. Like I could feel my fastball again. Not in my arm, not physically." I shook my head. "I know I'm

not making sense.”

“You’re actually making total sense.” She took the glass from me and set it on the table before settling onto the couch. “There’s significant congestion in your elbow.”

“Congestion?”

“Energy blockage,” she said. “It’s quite dense. Like a knot in the flow.”

I wasn't sure what to make of her words. Part of me wanted to dismiss the whole experience as woo-woo bullshit, but I couldn't deny that something had happened during the session, even if I didn't understand what.

“So, what now?”

“Now you let yourself believe that rehab doesn’t only happen in a gym. And that you’re not broken, just recalibrating.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, soft and calm as ever. “I think with a few more sessions, we’ll be able to loosen up that block and get the energy flowing again.”

I’m not sure it’s that simple, but honestly, I have nothing to lose. At the very least, I feel more relaxed.

“Okay.”

“Are you available Friday, same time?” I nodded. “Great, I’ll see you then.”

I hopped off the table, suddenly eager to be out of the small, intimate room.

She must have sensed my unease, because she stood and opened the door. I followed her through the studio, toward the front door.

After slipping into my sneakers, I stood and faced her.

“Thank you for the session,” I said.

“My pleasure.” Her professional demeanor matched my formal tone. “I hope you found it beneficial.”

“It was...interesting.”

The bell over the door chimed as I stepped out, the sound following me into the crisp November air. I pulled the door shut behind me and headed toward my car, the chill settling in around me.

As I drove home, I found myself replaying the session in my mind.

The odd sensations. The moment of emotional tightness.

The way my body had relaxed so completely under her care.

And beneath it all, the unexpected awareness of her as a woman.

Her graceful movements, delicate hands that somehow radiated heat, and the subtle floral scent that surrounded her.

I shook my head to clear those last thoughts. Right now, the most important thing is getting my fastball back. I can't get distracted by a pretty new age healer.

Hope

I stared at the spreadsheet on my laptop screen, the numbers blurring together as my mind drifted for the third time in as many minutes. The studio's quarterly finances

needed my attention, but all I could think about was yesterday's Reiki session with Sam.

The way his energy responded to mine still lingered in my fingertips.

In my five years as a Reiki master, I'd never experienced anything like it.

Usually, when I hover my hands over someone's body, I sense their energy as distinct patterns, sometimes jagged and chaotic when they're stressed, or sluggish and heavy when they're depressed.

With most clients, I feel their essence as something separate from mine, like distinct musical notes that I can hear and influence but that remain fundamentally different from my own sound.

With Sam, it had been different. The moment my hands had positioned above his chest, I felt like our energies were harmonizing frequencies that recognized each other.

His chakras had been surprisingly open for someone who supposedly didn't believe in "this kind of stuff." After wading through his protective layers, I'd felt such warmth, particularly in his heart chakra.

A quick knock sounded at my office door, and as I looked up, Ava stepped inside and closed it behind her.

"Still crunching numbers?" she asked.

I crinkled my nose.

"Yeah."

“Need any help?”

“I’m good. Just working on the quarterly report.”

She dropped into the chair across from my desk, kicking her feet up on the corner. Nearly fifteen years of friendship has eliminated any need for formality.

“I love how you do a quarterly report just for yourself,” she said, nodding at my laptop.

I knew going in that if I wanted this studio to succeed, I had to treat it like more than just a passion project.

A lot of people skip the business side and end up burning out or going under.

Not me. I’m sticking to my budget, tracking my expenses, and checking in on the numbers like it actually matters. Because it does.

“It helps me keep on top of things.” I closed the laptop and leaned back in my chair. “I’m guessing everyone from class has cleared out.”

She nodded.

“And the door is locked so no one can sneak back in.”

“How was class?”

“Good.” she said, then smirked. “How’d your session with Sam Cherry go?”

“It went well. He’s coming back on Friday.”

Her jaw dropped.

“Sam Cherry is coming back? For more Reiki? Voluntarily ?”

I chuckled at her expression.

“Why do you look so shocked?”

“Because Sam doesn't believe in any of this,” she said, gesturing around at the crystals on my windowsill and the chakra chart on my wall. “He just humors his mom and her ‘woo-woo ways,’ as he calls them.”

Ava grew up in Starlight Shores, so she’s known Sam most of her life.

They’d graduated high school together. Same small class, same tight-knit community, so it’s safe to say she knows him pretty well.

Not that what she said is a surprise to me.

It wasn’t difficult to figure out what Sam thought about Reiki.

Still, he was polite and cooperated even if he was just humoring me at first.

I shrugged, remembering the way Sam's energy had seemed to reach for mine.

“Well, Liz is the one who set up the appointment, but he agreed to come back on his own. So I’ll take it as a win.”

“Interesting,” Ava drawled, tapping her chin with her index finger. “Very interesting.”

“What?”

My tone must have been too defensive because Ava held up her hands in a “no offense” gesture.

“I know how powerful Reiki can be. I’m just surprised it took you to make Sam finally believe.

He’s been around this stuff his whole life thanks to Liz, and he’s always brushed it off.

One session with you and suddenly he’s open to it?

It’s just strange.” Her right brow raised like it does when she’s proving a point.

“Maybe it’s not the energy work that’s pulling him in.

Maybe he’s just interested in seeing the hot blonde Reiki master again. ”

My heart skipped a beat before I could stop it, but I kept my expression neutral. I was trying to figure out how to respond when Ava spoke again.

“Actually, I might be wrong about that last sentence. Not that you aren’t hot and blonde,” she clarified. “Liz said Sam came here because of a pitching issue, so maybe he really is just coming back for the Reiki.”

By the time our session ended, something had definitely shifted in him.

He didn’t jump up and leave or refuse another session.

He just sat there quietly for a moment, like he wasn’t quite ready to step back into the

world.

Maybe he wasn't a full-on believer yet, but he wasn't a total non-believer anymore.

And in my book, that's something. But Ava doesn't know any of that.

"I agree with what you're saying, I'm just curious why you changed your tune from one sentence to the next."

"He's always been laser-focused on baseball, like obsessively." She dropped her feet to the floor and sat back in the chair. "Even back in high school when girls were practically climbing over each other to get his attention, baseball was his main focus."

"Were you one of those girls?"

"I plead the fifth," she said with a smirk. "But honestly, I wasn't as bad as the other girls. We were friends so I mostly kept my crush to myself."

I probably shouldn't, but I had to ask at least one question.

"Was he always so..." I searched for the right word.

"Brooding?" Ava supplied with a laugh.

"Yes," I said. "Exactly that."

"He was always quiet and like I said, super focused on baseball. He could have taken advantage of all the attention he got, but as far as I know, he never did." She smiled. "And he's never tried to hide the fact that he's a total mama's boy."

Which explains the protective energy I'd felt around his heart chakra. You can't fake something like that.

"That's really sweet."

I'd just finished speaking when my stomach growled, loudly.

Ava chuckled.

"Come on. Let's go get something to eat. I'm starving too."

I stood and shoved the computer into my bag, my mind already racing ahead. As we walked out the door and headed to The Starlight Tavern, so many questions popped into my head about Sam. But I don't want to interrogate Ava. Or give her any reason to believe I'm interested in him.

But I am.

And it's not just because of his broad shoulders, strong jawline, or his intense eyes. It's something deeper, quieter. Like he's carrying around a weight no one else sees, and some irrational part of me wants to help him set it down.

I made a mental note to Google Sam when I got home. I told myself it was all in the name of research for his next reiki session. The better I understood his background, the more effectively I could work with his energy.

But deep down, I knew this was more than just professional curiosity. It was the start of something I couldn't ignore.

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Chapter Three

Sam

I walked into the house and kicked the door shut behind me. My thoughts were bouncing around with nowhere to land, and the quiet only made it worse.

When I agreed to go to the Reiki session, I did it just to appease my mom. I never thought I'd feel so off balance afterward. So restless. Like my skin didn't quite fit right.

Mom wouldn't be home for at least an hour, and the silence seemed to stretch out around me. I needed to do something or I'd crawl out of my own skin.

I thought about working out. Throwing, maybe. But I pushed myself yesterday, and I know better than to risk my recovery by messing around with it.

Still, I needed movement. Focus. Something that would settle me.

I wandered into the kitchen and decided to make dinner. I've always enjoyed cooking, and maybe the rhythm of it would help me regroup.

The freezer was packed—leftover chili, frozen pizza, some mystery container I wasn't brave enough to open—but I grabbed a pack of chicken cutlets. They'd cook the fastest, and I wasn't in the mood to wait around.

I put them in the microwave to defrost, then started hunting for a clue of what to

make. The bell peppers, onion, mushrooms, and half-empty bottle of wine made the decision obvious. Chicken cacciatore it is.

I've made the dish with my mom more times than I can count. On Sunday afternoons, quiet holidays, and even random weeknights when wanting comfort food was reason enough. At this point, I can make it on autopilot.

I set the Dutch oven on the stove and poured in a slick of oil then pressed in two cloves of garlic. Once they started to sizzle, I laid the chicken in. While that browned, I grabbed the cutting board and got to work on the onions.

The bell peppers came next, then the mushrooms. Each cut precise, deliberate.

My hands moved without thinking, muscle memory taking over.

This was something I could control, something that made sense.

No radar gun, no disappointed looks from coaches.

Just me, a knife, and ingredients that would actually cooperate and do what I wanted.

I moved the browned chicken to a platter, then tipped the cutting board and let the veggies slide into the pan. The sharp, satisfying sizzle cut through the silence like music.

My mom always makes polenta with chicken cacciatore, but I'm not in the mood to stand around stirring tonight. Pasta will work just as well, so I grabbed a pot, filled it with water, and set it on the stove to boil.

Once the onions turned translucent, the peppers softened, and the mushrooms started to give up their moisture, I reached for the wine.

It hit the pan with a sharp hiss, steam rising as I gave it a quick stir.

While it simmered down, I grabbed a can of crushed tomatoes from the cupboard, popped the lid, and poured it in, then added spices by instinct, just like mom taught me.

She always told me that cooking isn't about precision, it's about comfort and the love you put into it.

I nestled the chicken into the sauce, lowered the heat, and covered the pot to let it all come together. Soon the kitchen filled with the familiar smells of comfort food, warm and rich, and I let myself breathe. Really breathe.

My mind drifted back to lying on Hope's Reiki table, her hands hovering inches above me. I hadn't expected much, and definitely not what happened. The heat that built inside me, the weird floaty feeling, the colors.

Shaking the memory away, I washed my hands and wiped them dry on a towel.

"Did I imagine all of it?" I muttered to the empty kitchen.

I focused on opening the box of rigatoni and pouring it into the boiling water instead of obsessing over the answer to that question. Unfortunately, that only took a second, and just like that, I was back to thinking about my session with Hope.

Over and over, I had felt myself winding up and moving through the mechanics of pitching...knee lift, hip drive, arm over the top. But every time I went to release the ball, it vanished.

As if that wasn't strange enough, when Hope pulled me out of the session, my fingertips ached in that familiar way.

That faint, raw burn that comes after you've thrown deep into a game.

Not injured, just worked. Spent. Like every ounce of effort had poured out through my grip, even though I hadn't thrown a single real pitch.

I glanced down at my fingertips and rubbed them together. I'm still not sold on all the woo-woo stuff my mom swears by, but whatever happened in Hope's Reiki room got under my skin enough that I booked another session.

Hoping to distract myself from the thoughts swirling in my head, I grabbed my phone and queued up an 80s playlist. As much as I complained about my mom's music when I was a pain-in-the-ass teen, now it's my go-to when I need to unwind.

The opening beats of Down Under by Men at Work started, and I smirked.

The song was a staple in the pregame playlist at my high school field.

It blared through the speakers while we stretched and tossed the ball around.

That flute riff had a way of getting stuck in your head.

I swear, the whole team used to hum it on repeat, all of us singing do-do-do-do-do like idiots while we warmed up as if we could mimic the sound.

But still, what happened on Hope's table lingered, an indelible mark I couldn't erase. It wasn't just the connection I'd felt, but the way my body had reacted, the way it all seemed so real. Too real. The feeling that she started to unlock something inside me I'm not sure I'm ready to dig into.

"Sammy, it smells amazing in here."

I'd been so lost in my thoughts, I didn't even hear my mom come home.

She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek as she passed, then lifted the lid of the Dutch oven.

"Mmm," she said. "It smells perfect."

"Thanks."

We moved through the kitchen together, grabbing plates, forks, and two glasses from the cabinet. The kind of easy flow you get when you've done something a hundred times with the same person.

She took her first bite once we sat down.

"I think this might be better than mine."

"You're only saying that because you didn't have to cook it."

She laughed.

"Not true. You're starting to outdo me."

Nothing will ever be better than my mom's cooking, but still, the compliment made me smile.

"So," she said, her tone casual but way too pointed to actually be casual, "how was it?"

"How was what?"

“Reiki.”

“It was okay.”

She frowned like that answer physically pained her.

“Just okay? Did you feel anything? Do you feel any different?”

I kept my eyes on my plate.

“I’m not sure. I didn’t throw today.”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” she said. “Did you feel anything? Maybe a little warmth? Some tingling?”

I hesitated, then said, “I guess I felt more relaxed afterward.”

She didn’t buy it, not really, but she let it hang there.

“Did Hope say anything about your chakras being blocked? Or your energy?”

I stabbed a piece of chicken.

“No.”

My answer came out too quick, too sharp. It was just too much, especially with how confused I still felt about what I did experience. Talking about energy blockages over chicken cacciatore with my mom? No thanks.

She looked disappointed again, so I threw her a bone.

“I have another appointment Friday. Maybe more will happen then.”

Her whole face lit up with her smile.

“That tells me all I need to know.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you felt something. You’re just not ready to talk about it yet. And that’s okay, as long as you stay open to it.”

I shook my head.

“It doesn’t mean anything. Aren’t follow-ups standard?”

“Maybe they are, but not for someone who went just to make his mom happy.”

I didn’t have a comeback to that, so I just kept eating. I’d just cleared my plate when she reached across the table and squeezed my hand. I looked up and met her serious gaze.

“Energy work opens doors, Sammy. Sometimes to rooms we didn’t know were there.”

I wanted to dismiss what she said, maybe make a joke about new age nonsense, but the words stuck in my throat. Because whatever I experienced on that table felt real. And so did the moment of strange, instant connection with Hope.

Hope

I have no idea how long I’ve been glued to my screen, but my eyes burned from the

strain. What started as a harmless search had spiraled into a deep dive of all things Sam Cherry.

Typing his name into the search engine had pulled up pages of articles, stats, and video highlights. He's a pitcher, right-handed, six-foot-four, with a "cannon for an arm" and a reputation for "lighting up the radar gun."

His fastball consistently clocks in the high 90s and occasionally breaks triple digits. When he was in the minor leagues, an announcer called him Cherry Bomb for the way the pitch exploded out of his hand, and the name stuck.

Article after article praised him for his velocity, his presence on the mound, and his signature pitch...a four-seam fastball with a late rise that batters had a hard time catching up to.

And then there were the photos. Sam at charity events, with various women at premieres and restaurants. He seemed to be living a charmed life. Until the injury.

YouTube had several videos showing the moment it all went wrong. In game footage, you could see it happen in real time, Sam on the mound, winding up like usual, and then something just snapped.

He grabbed his elbow mid-pitch, face twisted in pain, and dropped into a crouch like the air had been knocked out of him. The announcers went quiet. Even without knowing exactly what had happened, it was obvious something serious had gone down.

According to the articles published in the following days, Sam's expected recovery time was twelve to eighteen months. They all used words like standard and routine. But nothing I felt in his Reiki session yesterday felt routine.

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I closed my laptop with more force than necessary and pressed my palms against my eyes. What was I doing? This isn't me. I don't cyber-stalk my clients, even if they happen to be the town's golden boy.

To avoid falling down another rabbit hole, I stalked out of my office, grabbed the broom, and started sweeping the studio floor with excess vigor. Eventually, the repetitive motion helped calm my racing thoughts.

I'd just finished when the bell above the door jingled. I looked up to see Liz walking into the studio, carrying a small glass container.

"I'm so glad you're here." She smiled, warm and bright. "I brought you some chicken cacciatore Sam made last night. He might be struggling with his fastball, but his cooking is still major league."

I felt heat creep into my cheeks. Did she somehow know I'd just spent hours researching her son?

"That's so sweet, Liz. Thank you."

"You're very welcome."

I took the container from her. She looked at me expectantly, like she was waiting for me to eat it right now. I hesitated for a second before propping the broom against the wall.

"I could use a break," I said.

We walked to the small break room at the back of the studio. I popped it into the microwave while Liz settled at the table.

“Can I get you a drink?” I opened the small refrigerator in the corner. “I have water, peach tea, or orange juice.”

“Peach tea sounds perfect.”

I grabbed one for her and a bottle of water for myself.

“So,” she began as I handed it to her, “Sam's been awfully quiet about his session with you.”

The microwave beeped, and I welcomed the excuse to ignore her comment. I opened the door and carefully pulled out the container, the bottom warm against my palms. As I fully peeled off the lid, a rush of steam escaped, carrying the mouthwatering scent through the room.

I grabbed a fork from the drawer, then crossed the room and settled into the chair across from Liz, the comforting scent curling around us like a warm hug.

“This smells amazing,” I said, taking a bite. The flavors burst on my tongue...perfectly seasoned chicken, tangy tomato sauce, and a nice hint of garlic and wine. “Oh my God, Liz! This is incredible.”

She smiled, looking pleased.

“I taught him the basics, but he's perfected his own version over the years.” I took another bite. “About the session...”

I twisted the cap off the water bottle and took a drink. More as a way to collect my

thoughts than because I was actually thirsty. The cool water gave me a second to steady myself, to decide what I was going to say next without letting too much show.

“I really can't discuss the details,” I said. “It wouldn't be professional.”

“But I'm his mother.” She gestured toward the Reiki room. “And he's coming back for another session on Friday, right? He must have gotten something out of it.”

I nodded, swallowing another delicious mouthful.

Obviously Sam told her that, so I felt comfortable confirming.

“He is coming back, yes.”

Liz leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table.

“He looked different last night.” I shoved the last forkful of chicken into my mouth to avoid having to answer. “That's normal, though, isn't it? When energy shifts?”

Her eyes were shrewd, studying my face. I focused on keeping my expression neutral as I finished chewing and swallowed.

“Everyone responds differently to energy work,” I said carefully, making sure to keep my answer general, steering clear of anything specific about Sam. “Some people feel immediate effects, others take time to process.”

“Hmm.” Liz sat back in her chair. “Well, I'm just glad he's trying something new. Sam's always been so traditional about his training. All weights and statistics and physical therapy. Nothing wrong with that, of course, but sometimes you need to heal more than just the body.”

I nodded, standing to wash the now-empty bowl. If she only knew how many of those statistics I'd memorized in the last two hours.

“He's always been so driven,” she continued. “Even as a little boy. When he sets his mind to something, watch out world.”

I turned off the water and grabbed a towel to dry the container and set it on the table.

“How long is he in town for?” I asked, as I sat across from her again.

“Until the end of January, maybe the beginning of February,” she said. “Then he's off to spring training in mid-February.” She paused, her expression clouding slightly. “Hopefully. A lot depends on how his recovery goes.”

I nodded, absorbing this information. Six to seven weeks. That was how long Sam would be in Starlight Shores.

“Does he usually come home for that long?”

I’ve been living here four years and have never met Sam before yesterday. Chances are, if he was here for weeks at a time, I would have.

“No, not usually,” she said. “When Sam’s in between seasons, he takes me on a vacation, or I visit him in Myrtle Beach. He’ll come home for the holidays, but he doesn’t usually stay here like this. Not for this long anyway.”

I do remember Liz going away, often on extended trips. And of course, she travels to see Sam play.

“It’s nice you get to see each other so much.”

“I’m very fortunate. Sam is a good son. I just wish...” She trailed off and stared at me, her gaze sharper, more focused than it had been a moment ago.

“Wish what?”

“Oh nothing.” She waved her hand, as if to shoo the thought away. “But you know, Sam hasn’t gone out much since he came home. So many of his old friends have moved away, and the ones still here are married with small children.”

I lifted an eyebrow as I took a sip of water, letting the silence stretch just a beat longer.

“That’s too bad.”

“It would be nice if he had someone to show him around, maybe introduce him to the new spots that have opened up since he left.”

“Starlight Shores isn’t exactly a metropolis,” I said. “I doubt much has changed since he left.”

“Still,” she persisted, “it’s always better to explore with someone who knows their way around.”

“Liz.”

“What?” she asked innocently. “I’m just saying my son could use a friend while he’s home. Someone who understands the mind-body connection. Someone kind, intelligent, beautiful.”

“And I’m just saying that might not be appropriate, given that he’s my client,” I countered.

“You're not his doctor.”

I laughed despite myself.

“I still have professional ethics.”

“Well, think about it.” She shrugged, unrepentant. “That's all I'm saying.”

After that, she dropped both the topic of Sam's session and talk of me spending time with him outside the Reiki room.

We chatted for a bit longer, the conversation light and easy, filled with stories and laughter.

Eventually, she stood, stretching a little as she gathered her things, signaling it was time for her to go.

After she left, I grabbed a rag and polish to continue cleaning the studio, but my mind kept drifting to my conversation with Liz.

She made it pretty clear that she's trying to play matchmaker between her son and me.

What surprised me though was my own reaction.

It wasn't irritation or embarrassment, but a flutter that felt suspiciously like anticipation.

I know way too much about Sam Cherry now. His career highs and lows. The way his hands had trembled slightly during our session. How he cooked chicken cacciatore so good it made you want to close your eyes and savor every bite. And somehow, none

of it was enough. I wanted to know more.

I was in trouble, and I knew it.

Regardless, I couldn't help smiling.

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Chapter Four

Sam

I stood on the deck, staring out at the mound, glove in hand.

It's been a couple hours since my second Reiki session with Hope and four days since I'd so much as picked up a baseball.

But I felt a shift today. The same strange pull I'd noticed last time, only stronger, deeper.

Like something inside me had clicked into place.

It's time to see if it makes a difference.

I sat on the deck steps and laced up my cleats, the worn leather fitting like a second skin. Then I stood up and walked onto the grass, keeping my steps steady and sure.

The late afternoon sun warmed my shoulders as I stretched.

I started with my legs, lunging forward and back, loosening my hips and hamstrings.

I bent at the waist, fingers grazing the grass, and let my breath even out.

These stretches and movements were almost muscle memory now, but for months after my surgery, they'd been impossible.

I thought about those first few weeks post-op, when even lifting a water bottle felt like a test. I'd wake up in the middle of the night, elbow throbbing, sheets damp with sweat. I hated my body then. Hated it for betraying me.

Rehab was slow. Agonizingly slow. I kept waiting for some switch to flip, for the strength to return, for the pain to ease, but it didn't.

Not for months. And even when the pain finally faded, I still wasn't me.

My mechanics were off, my timing felt weird, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find my fastball.

Until now, maybe.

I shook the thought from my head, rolled my neck, and began rotating my arms in slow, controlled circles.

I didn't want to put pressure on this. That was part of the problem, I'd been so wrapped up in expectations and numbers, trying to force my way back to who I was, that I couldn't see straight.

Every bullpen felt like a performance review, every pitch like a verdict.

Maybe I hadn't lost my fastball physically.

Maybe I'd just been too locked up in my own head to find it.

I pulled my arm across my chest, then bent it carefully, the slight tightness in my elbow reminding me of everything I'd been through the past fifteen months...the surgery, the setbacks, the days I'd wondered if I'd ever throw again. But today, it feels different.

After setting the radar gun on its tripod, I walked to the mound and picked up a ball from the bucket. The leather felt right in my hand, familiar. I tossed a few easy ones at the net, letting my body ease back into the rhythm. Loose and relaxed. No pressure.

My arm felt good. Really good.

When I felt warm enough, I grabbed a ball and positioned my right foot along the rubber, feeling the slight ridge beneath my cleat. Taking a deep breath, I settled into my stance, glove held at chest level. For a heartbeat, I paused, finding my center the way I always had.

I rocked back, lifting my left leg in a smooth, controlled motion, hands coming together at the peak of my windup.

As I drove forward, everything kicked in.

The push off the rubber, the power winding through my core, my arm snapping overhead in that clean, practiced arc I'd honed over the years.

I let the ball go at just the right moment, feeling the seams drag across my fingertips as it left my hand.

The follow-through came naturally, my momentum carrying my body forward, right leg swinging around as I ended in fielding position. The ball smacked against the net.

I glanced at the radar gun display.

87.

I blinked hard, certain I'd misread it. Eighty-seven miles per hour? I hadn't topped 85 since before the surgery. My heart hammered against my ribs, as a rush of adrenaline

flooded my system.

“Okay,” I said. “Let's see if that was a fluke.”

I picked up another ball, settled back onto the rubber, and threw again. My body felt looser now, more confident.

88.

Again.

90.

I threw pitch after pitch, watching in disbelief as the numbers climbed. One fastball hit 91. My slider came in at 80, which wasn't great, but considering where it'd been, that felt like winning the lottery.

By the time I stopped, my shirt was soaked with sweat. I was tired, but it was the good kind, the fatigue of work well done. Not the aching, tight-chested exhaustion that came from anxiety. And I hadn't even realized how much that anxiety had been weighing me down until now, when it finally wasn't.

Whatever Hope had done, whatever had loosened during the session earlier today, had changed something fundamental.

After cleaning up the bullpen, I headed inside for a quick shower.

The hot water pounded against my skin, but it couldn't quiet my racing thoughts.

After all the doctors, endless rehab, and constant setbacks, could it really come down to this?

Some alternative treatment I laughed off, now fixing what nothing else could?

I towed off and stood in front of the mirror, water still dripping from my hair, steam curling around me. The scar on my elbow was pale now, a ghost of the surgery. I touched it gently, not because it hurt...because it didn't anymore...but with something closer to reverence.

For months, it had felt like a symbol of everything I'd lost. But maybe now it could mean something else. Survival. Recovery. The start of something new.

I pulled on a pair of jeans and a simple navy Henley, then headed downstairs.

With Mom in Wilmington having dinner with friends, I had the house to myself.

But I was still buzzing with too much energy from the bullpen session to just sit around.

A walk into town sounded like a good way to burn it off and grab a bite while I was at it. Two birds, one stone.

The Starlight Tavern wasn't anything special, just your typical small-town bar with decent food and a steady rotation of familiar faces.

The idea of grabbing a bite, sipping a cold beer, and catching up with my old high school teammate Denny Myers—who'd been bartending there since we graduated—actually sounded pretty good.

As I headed out the door, I made an impulsive decision. The yoga studio was on the way. Hope had specifically asked me to let her know if I noticed any changes. This definitely qualified.

A flicker of anticipation kicked up as I headed down the porch steps.

It wasn't just about my arm, though that miracle alone would've been reason enough to stop by.

There was something else pulling me toward Hope's studio.

Specifically, the way she looked at me, like she saw parts I didn't usually let anyone see.

Hope

I scanned my list again, double-checking the essential oils I should have reordered days ago. They're a regular part of the restorative yoga classes I hold twice a month, and I always rotate scents with the seasons. But somehow, winter snuck up while I wasn't looking.

A knock on my office door broke into my thoughts.

I looked up as Ava peeked her head inside.

"You have a visitor."

Something in her sing-song tone made me pause, check myself, and smooth my hair before following her out of the office.

My heart did an annoying little skip when I spotted Sam just inside the studio, chatting with Jeannie Evans and Mary Wallace.

Both women laughed at something he said, and I couldn't help noticing how easy he looked there, like he belonged.

But I guess he does. He was born and raised in Starlight Shores, after all.

As the ladies talked, Sam glanced up and looked straight at me. The corners of his eyes crinkled, and the faintest smile tugged at his mouth, just enough to make my stomach do a ridiculous flip. I managed to smile back, but my pulse had already kicked into a rhythm I wasn't proud of.

Professional. I need to be professional.

After chatting for a few more minutes, Jeannie and Mary said their goodbyes and slipped out. Ava turned to me with an apologetic smile.

“Can I take a rain check on dinner? I’ve got a headache.”

“Of course,” I said. “Feel better.”

Ava nodded and walked to the other side of the studio to grab her tote bag. She gave me a quick hug on her way back and whispered, “Have fun,” so quietly I almost thought I imagined it. Before I could even process her words, she said goodbye to Sam and slipped out the door.

He turned to me with that same quiet smile still playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“It’s better than okay. That’s why I’m here.” He let out a low laugh, almost disbelieving, and shook his head. “I did a bullpen and my fastball was consistently in the high 80s, even broke into the 90s a few times.”

“Oh Sam, that's incredible! Congratulations!”

“Thanks.” He continued, eyes bright. “Something felt different today when I was pitching,” he said slowly. “Not different, really. It actually felt like it used to, before I blew out my elbow.”

I thought back to our session, how his energy had shifted beneath my hands, the subtle way it began to move more freely. Some of the congestion I’d felt the first time, that heavy resistance, had started to clear, like something deep inside him was finally ready to let go.

“I’m sure your mom is thrilled. She’s been so worried about you.”

“She doesn’t know yet.”

“Why not?”

“She’s having dinner with friends in Wilmington. I figured I’d fill her in when she gets home.” His gaze shifted to the floor before meeting mine again. “Ava mentioned you two had dinner plans. I was on my way to The Tavern. Would you like to join me?”

I hesitated, thrown off for a second. Mixing business with...whatever this was probably wasn’t the smartest move. But hey, I had to eat. I shrugged to myself. Why not?

“Sure.”

Which is how I found myself sitting across from Sam Cherry in a booth at The Starlight Tavern, nursing a pint of Blue Moon while he told me exactly what it felt like when his ulnar collateral ligament tore.

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“I threw a slider and felt a pop, like a rubber band snapping.” He absently rubbed his elbow. “Then there was an intense burning, like a hot knife cutting through my elbow. After that, it was just...emptiness. Like my arm wasn’t even mine anymore.”

I realized the congestion I’d sensed in his energy must have been tied to that emptiness he described. His arm, disconnected from him in that moment, had left an imprint on his body’s energy. No wonder it had felt like something was stuck, as if his body hadn’t fully accepted what had happened.

“That must have been horrible.”

“The worst part was knowing what it meant,” he said. “Twelve to eighteen months of recovery, if I was lucky.”

“If you were lucky?”

Our waitress, Sarah, arrived with our orders, a double bacon burger and fries for him and a pulled pork sandwich and fries for me. When Ava and I come here, Sarah is usually chatty, but she’s not tonight. Aside from greeting us and taking our orders, she’s barely said a word.

“Thanks Sarah,” Sam said.

“Just flag me down if you need anything.”

As she walked away, she glanced over her shoulder and shot me a “you go, girl” grin, so I guessed she thought Sam and I were on a date. I was sure by tomorrow our

dinner together would be halfway to a love story. That's just how word traveled in a small town.

"Not everyone bounces back from surgery."

"I thought the success rate was high."

"Yeah, but it's not 100%." He popped a fry into his mouth and chewed. "But enough about me. Tell me about you? Where are you originally from?"

"Nowhere and everywhere," I said, then gestured to myself. "Army brat. I lived in seven states and three countries before I turned eighteen."

"That must have been fun." At my scrunched nose, he added, "Or at least interesting."

"It was lonely, mostly. I learned not to get too attached to people or places because it made it harder when we moved." I gave a half smile. "I got good at starting over, but it was exhausting."

"How'd you end up in Starlight Shores?"

"I went to college with Ava, and since my parents were stationed in Germany at the time, I came home with her for school breaks." I took a sip of my beer before continuing.

"After graduation, I landed a job in Wilmington, but it didn't take long to realize the corporate world wasn't for me.

Still, I stuck it out for six years and saved every penny I could.

Then one weekend while visiting Ava, I saw a ‘For Sale’ sign on the studio building, and I knew it was time to do what I really wanted. ”

Throughout dinner, a steady stream of people stopped by our table, offering greetings and stopping to chat.

Sam greeted each one with a warm smile and easy charm, never rushing the conversation.

It was obvious he liked talking to them, and his relaxed vibe showed just how much this town meant to him.

“Sorry about that,” he said once Mrs. Perkins, the school librarian, left.

“No need to apologize.”

“Although, you seem to know everyone too.”

“It’s a small town.” I shrugged. “And I may be on a few committees.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“I like to be involved.”

“You really love it here.”

It was more an observation than a question.

“I really do.” I traced my fingertip through the remaining condensation on my empty glass. “I’ve always wanted to plant roots somewhere. Build a life in a place where I truly belong.”

“I’m glad you found this place.”

“Do you miss living here?”

“Sometimes,” he said. “But I never saw myself staying forever. Even if baseball hadn’t worked out, I think I would have left eventually.”

His words lingered like a soft, steady rain, quietly dampening something inside me I hadn’t even noticed was starting to grow. It felt like a candle flickering out just as it was about to catch fire...potential fading before it could truly ignite.

When it was time for the check, Sam insisted on paying. Then we walked back to my car, chatting about everything and nothing.

“Thanks for having dinner with me,” he said. “It was much better than eating alone.”

I laughed softly.

“You wouldn’t have been alone. I’m sure someone would have joined you.”

“Maybe.” His voice dropped lower. “But sitting across from anyone else wouldn’t have been nearly as nice.”

Is he flirting with me?

The thought barely registered before I noticed how the streetlight caught the amber flecks in his eyes. Several heartbeats passed in silence.

I shook myself out of my Sam-induced trance.

“Do you want a ride home?”

“No, thanks. The walk will do me good.”

His eyes held mine for a long beat, as if he were looking for an answer only I could give.

Then he leaned in slowly and his lips brushed mine, gentle at first, then more sure, like he’d made up his mind.

The kiss was warm, with a spark of something new and undeniable, like a current running through me, electric and inevitable, as if I’d been waiting for this exact moment my entire life without knowing it.

When he pulled away, I felt weightless—light, floating, and not ready to come back down.

“I have another Reiki session scheduled for Monday,” he murmured.

“I know,” I whispered back.

“I’ll see you then.” He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead, then smiled and stepped back. “Good night, Hope.”

He took a few slow steps backward, like he didn’t want to turn away just yet. Then he pivoted and walked off, disappearing around the corner.

I stood there for a moment longer, fingers brushing my lips, the night pressing in soft and

still around me. That kiss hadn’t been flashy or dramatic. But something about it had

settled deep, like it had unlocked a door I hadn't realized I'd closed.

I'd told myself this was about helping him heal. About his arm, his energy, his balance. But now I wasn't so sure that was the only thing shifting.

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Chapter Five

Sam

I cut through Riverfront Park on my way to Hope's studio, enjoying the feel of the sun on my face. I'd enjoyed the two-mile walk Friday night and decided to do it again today, this time taking the more scenic route. I worked out earlier, but extra cardio is never a bad thing.

My phone buzzed in my pocket just as I was turning the corner past the bakery. I smiled as I answered.

"Hey Ray."

"I just saw your text from Friday night."

"Yeah, I knew you were off the grid, but figured you'd see it when you got home. And you did," I said. "How was the cabin?"

"Peaceful. Quiet," he said. "I live most of my life with this phone in my hand. It's nice to detach from it once in a while."

"You should do it more often."

"What would all my needy clients do without me?"

"Probably sign terrible contracts and cry themselves to sleep," I said.

“That’s the least of the damage some of them would do,” he said with a chuckle. “But enough of that. You’re still feeling good?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I feel like I turned a corner. Or something.”

“That’s good.” Ray's voice held the careful optimism he's mastered during my fifteen months of recovery. “It seems like whatever you're doing, it's working.”

“Even if that something is Reiki?”

He didn’t answer immediately.

“I've been in this business twenty-five years. I've seen players wear the same unwashed socks through a playoff series. Had a closer who wouldn't step on the mound without eating exactly three red Skittles. If this energy healing thing is giving you even one extra tick on the gun, keep doing it.”

“I know it sounds ridiculous, but...I don’t know. After the first session, something shifted. Then it happened again after the second one.” I shrugged. “Maybe it’s all in my head, maybe not. But I felt lighter. Stronger.”

“I won’t pretend to understand what Reiki or any of that woo-woo stuff your mom talks about does, but if it’s working, I’m all for it.”

“That's practically a testimonial.” I chuckled. “Mom will want to put it on her website.”

“She’s welcome to it,” he said, his voice softening in that way it always does when he refers to Mom. “Which reminds me, I was thinking about stopping down next week. If you're gonna be around.”

“Where else would I be?”

“Right,” he said. “I’ll text you my plans. Maybe we could grab dinner while I’m there? The three of us?”

I caught the subtle shift in his voice. The one that always made me wonder if he was including mom for more than professional reasons. I’ve never asked and didn’t plan to. If my mom had feelings for Ray, or vice versa, it’s none of my business. Probably.

“Subtle, Ray. Real subtle.”

“What? It’s just dinner. Why wouldn’t I invite her along? We’ve known each other since you were in college.”

I stopped outside her shop, tucked just off Main Street, with a front window full of crystals, wind chimes, and twinkle lights.

“I’m outside her shop now. I’ll mention dinner to her.”

“Sounds good,” he said.

“And I’ll let you know how my bullpen goes Wednesday.”

“That sounds even better.”

Windchimes tinkled as I pushed open the door to Moonlight and Marigolds.

The familiar scent hit me immediately. It’s something warm and earthy, like sandalwood and orange peel, layered over patchouli.

The afternoon sun filtered through the crystals displayed throughout the shop,

scattering rainbow prisms across the polished wooden floors.

I looked around at the shelves of polished stones, handmade jewelry, rows of essential oils, and dreamcatchers dangling from the ceiling beams. Then there were the endless racks of flowy skirts, harem pants, and ponchos. It should have felt cluttered and chaotic. But somehow, it felt calm.

“Sammy!” my mom said, emerging from the back room with a smile that stretched across her whole face. “I’m surprised to see you here. Don’t you have a session with Hope?”

I nodded.

“I’m a little early so I figured I’d pop in here for a few minutes.”

“That’s nice.”

She settled onto the chair behind the counter.

“I was just talking to Ray. He’s coming here next week and wants to take us out to dinner.”

Mom smiled softly when I mentioned Ray. There was a flicker in her eyes, but she covered it right away.

“That sounds nice.” She glanced away for a second, then looked back at me. “You’re in a better mood than usual.”

“Am I?”

“You’ve been in a better mood since Friday.”

I gave a small laugh and rubbed the back of my neck.

“Yeah, I guess I have. My arm felt solid on Friday, really solid. I had an awesome bullpen and for the first time in months feel optimistic.”

“Are you sure that’s all it is?” she asked with a raised brow.

“I think so.”

“I heard you were at The Starlight Tavern with Hope Friday night.”

“Of course you did.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was more focused on telling you about my improved velocity than dinner,” I said, trying to sound casual.

“Mmm Hmm.”

“Ava bailed on Hope,” I said. “I was already heading to The Tavern, so I invited her along. We ate dinner. I walked her to her car. I went home.”

What I didn't tell her was how Hope had stood on tiptoe when we kissed, or how that brief contact had sent electricity through me that had nothing to do with energy healing, or how I've replayed that moment in my mind at least a hundred times since Friday.

Some things you keep to yourself, especially from mothers with uncanny intuition.

“There's a lightness around you.” She gestured vaguely around my head. “A

brightness I haven't seen since before the surgery.”

“Must be the Reiki.”

“Don’t laugh. It helped you when nothing else could.”

“I’m not laughing,” I said.

“Finally he understands,” she said, raising her hands to the ceiling. As she lowered them, she pointed next door. “You better get going. It’s almost time for your next session.”

I stepped out of Mom’s shop, the bell above the door chiming softly behind me, and took the few steps across the sidewalk to Hope’s studio. A fresh Christmas wreath hung on the door with pine, cinnamon sticks, and a red plaid bow. Something that definitely hadn’t been there on Friday.

Hope’s studio smelled different than my mom’s store.

Brighter, cleaner, like eucalyptus and citrus.

I toed off my shoes and glanced around. Since Friday, Christmas has crept in here too.

Evergreens twined with fairy lights along the windows and a small tree sat on the front table adorned with wooden ornaments shaped like suns, moons, and stars.

It’s subtle and cozy, like the holidays tiptoed in instead of bursting through the door.

Hope emerged from the back in a soft gray sweater and leggings, her long blonde hair in its usual braid.

“I’m ready for you,” she said, the faintest blush rising in her cheeks as the words hung between us.

My brain immediately supplied a juvenile response, and for once, I kept it to myself.

“Mature,” I muttered under my breath, following her toward the back room.

The lights were low, the table waiting. I settled onto it and Hope’s voice guided me into slow, deep breaths. My body relaxed under her hands, but my brain didn’t get the memo.

It was only a week ago I’d walked in here convinced Reiki was a waste of time. Then I agreed to a second session, because I was trying to figure out what the hell happened at the first. But today I just wanted to see Hope.

Her hands hovered over me, not touching but close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating from her palms.

“Just breathe and let everything go,” she murmured. “Be present in this moment.”

Present. Right.

I kept breathing, deeper and deeper, feeling the air fill then leave my lungs.

There was something electric between Hope and me, a current I could feel pulsing through the room, through me.

It was like the space between us was charged with a force I’d never experienced, pulling me closer even when we weren’t touching.

In that quiet, steady rhythm of breath, I realized this connection wasn’t just physical,

it was something deeper, raw, and undeniable.

And maybe, it was the beginning of something neither of us saw coming.

Hope

I'd just finished folding the last of my laundry when Ava knocked on the front door once and let herself in, like she always does.

"Dinner has arrived!" she announced, stepping inside with a tote over her shoulder and a brown paper bag in her hand.

She looked every bit the corporate professional in her charcoal pencil skirt, cream silk blouse, and tailored blazer. Her dark auburn hair was tucked behind her ears, and the delicate pearl earrings that adorned them caught the light when she moved.

"Thanks for grabbing dinner."

"You are very welcome," she said as she set the bag on the kitchen table and flashed a snarky grin. "I'll be right back. I'm gonna change into something more comfortable."

While Ava disappeared down the hallway, I unpacked our dinner. The containers were still hot and steam escaped as I peeled back the lids. Chicken pad Thai for me, drunken noodles with extra basil for Ava, our standard orders since college.

She returned moments later in full lounge mode...black joggers, a sweatshirt with a faded graphic of Stevie Nicks on the front, and fuzzy purple socks that didn't match anything else but made her look ridiculously comfortable.

"Ahhh. So much better," she said. "Do you think Mayor Bigsbee would mind if I

started wearing this to work?”

“Probably. I’m guessing she’d rather her communications director wear something more professional.”

“It’s just so unfair. Those clothes aren’t as comfy as these.”

“Can’t argue with that,” I said as I opened the refrigerator. “What do you want to drink? I have wine, beer, sparkling or regular water, and soda.”

“Sparkling water sounds good.”

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I grabbed two bottles of San Pellegrino and set them on the table and after filling our plates, we headed to the living room.

I curled up in my usual corner of the sofa while Ava settled cross-legged on the other end.

Our standard positions for our regular protocol of dinner, girl talk, then a movie we'd both seen enough times to talk through.

“So,” Ava said, pointing her fork at me. “Tell me everything. You said dinner with Sam went well, and that you’d fill me in in person. It’s in-person time.”

I smiled, suddenly self-conscious. Just hearing his name tugged something inside me.

“Before I get to dinner, you should know that he came to the studio Friday to tell me his fastball was better after his second Reiki session.”

“Seriously?” Ava’s eyes widened. “That’s amazing, Hope. Your energy work is helping!”

“Yeah,” I said, “but Sam’s the one doing the work. I’m just helping clear the path.”

I didn’t tell her about the shift I felt in him during our last two sessions.

The way something deep inside him seemed to soften and let go.

That’s not my story to share. Energetic insight isn’t permission, it’s responsibility.

What comes through is sacred, and privacy lives in the silence.

I'll never break the trust I share with my clients, even with my best friend.

"You're being too modest, as usual." I shrugged in response and shoved a forkful of pad Thai into my mouth. "And obviously he credits you at least a little since he came to the studio to talk about his breakthrough."

"Yeah, I guess so. He was so sweet about it and genuinely thankful."

Ava nodded, chewing thoughtfully.

"He seems like he's really paying attention. To you, I mean."

I'm not sure what to say to that, so I decided to fill her in on dinner.

"At dinner, he asked questions about me, real questions."

"Like what?"

"Like where I'm from, and other getting-to-know-you stuff," I said. "It wasn't what I was expecting."

"Sam's always been a good guy. And trust me, he had plenty of chances not to be," Ava said, lifting an eyebrow for emphasis.

"Yeah?"

She nodded, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"Please. He had girls throwing themselves at him all through junior high and high

school. He's always been tall, athletic, charming, so he was basically a teenage rom-com lead.

But he was always respectful. Never cocky about it, never took advantage.

And as far as I know, he was faithful to every girl he ever dated. ”

I tried to play it cool, but inside, I felt the tiniest swoon ripple through me.

There was just something about a man who had every opportunity to be a jerk and still chose integrity.

It wasn't just attractive, it was rare. And now I had to sit here and pretend I wasn't already halfway gone for a guy I was supposed to be helping heal, not daydream about.

“Seems like Liz raised him right.”

“She did.” She speared a noodle and before placing it in her mouth said, “So that's it? You went to dinner and he asked about your background?”

“Then he walked me back to my car and...”

Ava leaned in, her eyes wide with anticipation.

“And what? Please tell me it's something good.”

“He kissed me.”

“ What?” she shrieked. “Hope! You didn't lead with the kiss?”

“I know, I’m sorry.” I set my empty plate on the coffee table then settled back into the corner of the couch. “But honestly, I was afraid talking about it might make it real in a way I’m not quite ready for yet.”

“That sounds intense.”

“It was. We were so connected. I’ve never felt energy like that with anyone.

Even during Reiki, it’s like there’s this thread between us I can’t explain.

Every time I put my hands over him, something sparks.

I’ve never experienced anything like it before.

It’s like our energies recognize each other.”

“Okay, now I’m officially jealous.”

“And I’m terrified.”

“Why?”

“He asked me out again.”

Ava’s eyes widened again.

“And?”

“He wants to take me to Wilmington on Saturday. Said it’d be easier to talk without small-town eyes watching us.”

“Smart man.” She smiled. “I love this for you.”

“I told him yes, but I’m not sure I should go.”

“Why not?”

I glanced down, my fingers absentmindedly tugging at the hem of my shirt as I hesitated.

The soft fabric bunched between my fingers, grounding me just enough to hold the words back a moment longer.

I looked up, meeting Ava’s expectant gaze and finally said what had been bouncing around in my head ever since I met Sam Cherry.

“There's such a strong connection between us, Ava. I could really see myself falling for him.”

“And that's bad because?”

“Because I've spent my entire life being dragged around the world by my dad's military career. New base, new school, new friends every few years. I hated it.”

The familiar knot of anxiety formed in my stomach and I focused on my breathing to calm it.

Ava’s expression softened.

“And you finally have roots here.”

I nodded.

“I built a life in Starlight Shores. My studio, my house, this community...it’s all I’ve ever wanted. And Sam’s life is not this. He moves with the season. He lives out of suitcases and in hotel rooms. What if being with him means I have to give this up?”

“Hope,” Ava said gently, “you’re getting way ahead of yourself. It’s one date.”

“I know, I’m overthinking.” I rubbed my temples. “It just feels so big already.”

“That’s usually a sign of something worth exploring.” She reached over and squeezed my hand. “You’re allowed to enjoy this. See where it goes.”

Ava’s known me long enough to know when I’ve hit my limit.

She didn’t push, didn’t ask anything else, just gave me a soft smile and let it go.

Without saying a word, we shifted gears, our silent agreement hanging in the air as she grabbed the remote and started flipping through options.

The Sam conversation was over for now, and it was time to lose ourselves in a movie instead.

I kept my eyes on the screen, but inside me, everything buzzed. Hope, fear, want, and beneath it all, the quiet thrill of maybe.

Chapter Six

Sam

I checked my reflection in the dresser mirror before heading out. My hair is in order, my beard freshly trimmed, and my khakis and blue button-down are wrinkle free for the moment, thanks to Mom. I slipped my feet into brown loafers and headed downstairs.

Mom was sitting on the couch, a book in her hands. She wasn't really reading it, more like using it as an excuse to look casual. When she saw me, her mouth curled into a small smile.

She rested the book in her lap.

"You look nice."

"Thanks," I said. "And thanks for ironing."

I can handle an iron, but she offered, and I'm not stupid enough to say no to that.

"You're welcome," she said. "I miss doing little things for you."

"You've done so much for me, Mom. More than I can ever repay."

I walked over, leaned down, and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

As I straightened she smiled at me, eyes glistening.

We've had that conversation more than once.

Usually every time I want to give her something.

But she worked and sacrificed to get me where I am.

Now that I've got the means, of course I'm going to take care of her. Why wouldn't I?

"I'm glad you're going out with Hope."

"It's just dinner, Mom."

"Dinner can be the start of a lot of things."

She gave me a knowing look, the kind only a mom can pull off—gentle, hopeful, and just a little smug.

"Have a good night."

"You too," she said. "And don't worry about getting home early."

I chuckled and headed out the door. As I climbed behind the wheel of my truck, the scent of the bouquet I bought for Hope surrounded me. Lavender, soft and sweet, mixed with the invigorating smell of eucalyptus. It reminded me of her Reiki room, calm, fresh, and kind of peaceful, just like her.

Starlight Shores isn't big, so even though Hope lives clear across town, I pulled up in front of her place in under ten minutes.

Hope's house was exactly what I'd pictured, small, cozy, and quietly charming. A white Cape Cod with soft gray shutters, tucked behind a line of holly bushes and a mailbox painted with faded sunflowers.

I made my way up the stone walkway, the soft glow of twinkle lights wrapped around the porch banister guiding my way. Two rocking chairs sat side by side on the porch, one with a folded knit blanket draped over the back like someone had just been sitting out there with a mug of tea.

As I stood in front of the door, I paused and let out a slow breath, trying to settle the nerves fluttering in my chest. It's been a long time since a first date made me feel like this—off balance in a good way, like something real might be waiting on the other side.

The wreath on her door caught my eye. It's classic, but still unmistakably Hope. A full circle of fresh evergreen, dotted with bright red berries and little pinecones, tied off with a simple cranberry velvet ribbon.

I finally rang the doorbell, the sound of it echoing faintly from inside while I shifted on my feet and tried not to overthink this. Like I said to Mom, it's just dinner.

The door swung open, and my carefully planned greeting, the mental note to stand up straight, and even the reminder to breathe evaporated from my mind.

Hope stood in the doorway, lit from behind by the warm glow of her entryway lights.

The sage green sweater slipped off one shoulder, revealing a scatter of freckles I suddenly wanted to trace with my fingertips.

A wide brown belt cinched the sweater at her waist, the soft knit flowing over a cream-colored skirt that swayed gently in the evening breeze.

Her cowboy boots peeked out beneath the hem, worn and well-loved.

But it was her hair that stopped me—soft blonde waves tumbling around her shoulders.

I've never seen it down before, and somehow, it makes her look even more like herself.

I cleared my throat, trying not to sound like a total idiot.

“You look amazing.”

Hope smiled with a quiet warmth that made the knot in my chest loosen just a bit.

“Thanks, Sam. You look pretty good yourself.”

I extended the flowers like an offering.

“These are for you.”

“Sam, they're beautiful.”

Her eyes lit up as she accepted them, and that's when I noticed her jewelry. She had silver rings adorning several fingers, each one unique. Delicate bracelets jingled softly as she moved, and around her neck hung a silver compass pendant that caught the light when she looked down at the flowers.

“Come in for a second while I put these in water,” she said, stepping aside.

I followed her in, watching as she moved through her house with an easy grace that reminded me of how she looked at her studio. The same fluid movement, but now in

cowboy boots and a skirt that swayed with every step.

“Ready?” she asked, returning with the flowers now arranged in a simple glass vase.

“Definitely.”

She set the vase in the middle of the coffee table and we headed out the door.

On the drive to the restaurant, we filled the space with the usual first-date stuff—favorite movies, music, the weirdest things we’ve ever eaten. It was easy and light. By the time we pulled into the parking lot, my nerves had settled into something calmer and more comfortable.

We headed across the street to the seafood restaurant and were seated at a window table with a great view of the river. Being right on the Riverwalk, the place has a great atmosphere. If it were just a few degrees warmer, we might’ve eaten outside, but honestly, this spot’s just as good.

The server handed us our menus and after reciting tonight’s specials, stepped away, giving us a few minutes to decide.

Hope scanned the options, her brow furrowed.

“I’m torn between the grilled shrimp and the crab cakes,” she said, glancing up at me. “What about you?”

“The blackened grouper special is calling my name,” I said. “But the surf and turf is making a pretty strong case.”

When the server returned, we were both ready to order. Hope went with the grilled shrimp over garlic parmesan risotto and a glass of sauvignon blanc. I ordered the

blackened grouper with roasted potatoes, a local IPA, and the fried calamari appetizer for us to share.

The server slipped away, but was quickly back before we could fully settle in, placing our drinks in front of us.

She took a slow sip, then glanced over at me with a curious smile.

“So,” she said. “You’re four Reiki sessions in now, how’s the pitching going?”

“As of yesterday, my fastball is routinely at ninety-two,” I said.

Hope nodded, her eyes softening.

“I can really feel things opening up,” she said. “The energy’s flowing a bit more freely than when we first met.”

I shook my head and chuckled.

“I still don’t understand how your hands hovering over me makes that happen, but I’m not questioning it.” I took a sip of beer and set the bottle down. “And I definitely can’t deny it’s helping.”

“Smart man,” she said around an adorable grin.

“I’ve been meaning to ask how you got into yoga and Reiki. It seems like a pretty unique path.”

“I told you about how I moved a lot when I was a kid.” I nodded.

“Constantly being in a new town and new school with no real friends gave me a lot of

anxiety. In college, my friend Tiffany dragged me to yoga, promising it would help.” She laughed softly.

“I went to shut her up, but ended up falling in love with the practice. Eventually, I got certified as an instructor, and that led me to Reiki. It felt natural, like I was helping others find that calm too.”

“That’s awesome,” I said. “And it’s great you’ve found a way to make a living doing what you love and helping people at the same time.”

“I was pretty lucky, honestly. I had a job in Wilmington that paid well, so I was able to save up a good chunk before making the move to Starlight Shores. It gave me money to fall back on and the time I needed for the yoga studio to start turning a profit.”

“That kind of cushion makes a big difference,” I said. “I imagine starting something new is a whole lot less stressful when you’re not worried about making rent.”

“Definitely.” I took a sip of wine. “What about you? Tell me how you ended up being the Cherry Bomb .”

She used quote marks on the nickname I was given back in the minor leagues.

Before I could answer, the server returned with a plate of calamari, setting it down between us with a smile. I reached for a lemon wedge, grateful for the moment to collect my thoughts before diving into the story.

“I played everything when I was younger—basketball, football, baseball. But baseball was always the one I loved the most. Once I hit fifteen, I started playing travel ball and really focused on pitching. I still played the other sports in high school, but baseball was the one I wanted.”

I dragged a piece of calamari through the remoulade sauce and popped it into my mouth.

Hope nodded, her compass necklace glinting in the candlelight.

“Your mom is amazing. She practically glows when she talks about you.”

“She really is, and I owe her everything. She busted her ass working two jobs to support us and picked up a third just to cover gear and travel ball costs,” I said. “And despite that, she never missed one of my games. It’s still weird when she’s not in the stands.”

We ate in comfortable silence until the appetizer was completely gone. She took a drink then looked at me with soft eyes as she set her glass down.

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure I wanted her to.

“Where’s your dad?”

Hope

Before he could answer, the server returned, balancing two steaming plates in his hands. He set them down gently, and my mouth watered as the warm scent of Old Bay, garlic, and parmesan rose from the plate, making my stomach growl in anticipation.

We both dug in, and for a while, the only sounds were clinking silverware and murmured appreciation for the food. After a few bites, Sam set his fork down and looked at me.

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“My dad was an alcoholic,” he said, his voice steady but low. “It got worse after I was born, and when I was four, he agreed to go to rehab. That was the last time we saw him.”

My chest ached for him and Liz. I reached across the table and took his hand, my fingers curling around his.

“Have you ever tried to find him?” I asked, not pushing, just curious.

He shook his head slowly.

“As far as I’m concerned, he’s the one who left, so he should be the one to come back. Besides, it’s no secret where I am a good chunk of the year. I’m not exactly hard to find if he was looking.”

I gave his hand a light squeeze, then let go. He didn’t say anything else, but I could tell it wasn’t the first time he’d told that story, just maybe the first time in a while.

We finished eating in a thoughtful kind of silence, not heavy exactly, but it lingered. The server came back to clear our plates and asked if we had room for dessert. I leaned back with a laugh and rested my hand on my stomach.

“I’m stuffed,” I said.

Sam handled the check, and when we stepped outside, the night air felt cool and fresh. He looked over at me and tilted his head toward the water.

“Want to walk a bit?”

I smiled.

“Yeah, that sounds perfect.”

Sam walked beside me, our shoulders occasionally brushing as we followed the curve of the riverwalk. The lampposts cast pools of amber light every twenty feet or so, just enough to guide our way without drowning out the stars above.

“So did you come down here a lot when you lived in Wilmington?” he asked.

“When I first moved here I did, but after that, not so much. Especially after I decided to move and wanted to save money, so it wasn’t in my budget.

” I shrugged, glancing out at the lights reflecting off the water.

“I lived here for almost six years. That’s actually the longest I’ve lived anywhere.

” I smiled a little, like I was letting him in on a secret.

“But somehow, Starlight Shores feels more like home. It just fits in a way nowhere else ever has.”

Sam nodded like he understood that too well. He let the silence stretch a beat before asking, “You mentioned that your parents lived in Germany while you were in college. Are they still there?”

“No, they’re in Alexandria, Virginia now. My dad got assigned to the Pentagon two years ago.”

“Do you see them often?”

“A few times a year, but I talk to them a couple times a week.”

We continued walking in silence. A breeze stirred my hair, and I tucked the strands behind my ear, sneaking a glance at Sam. He looked peaceful. Relaxed. Like maybe this was exactly what he’d needed.

We passed a few pubs, laughter and conversation spilling from open doors. One had a chalkboard sign out front boasting live music, and the sound of the band filtered into the night.

Sam glanced at me with a grin.

“Want to check it out?”

I nodded and we slipped inside. He placed his hand gently against the small of my back as we navigated through the crowded entrance. The band occupied a small stage in the corner and Sam guided me to a small table in the corner on the opposite side of the room.

The last notes of Take It Easy by The Eagles finished and I clapped as I settled into my chair.

“What would you like to drink?” Sam asked.

“A seltzer with lime.”

“I’ll be right back.”

He disappeared into the crowd toward the bar.

I watched him go, admiring how easily he moved through the space, confident but never pushy.

While he was gone, the band started playing American Girl by Tom Petty.

The song always reminds me of the beginning of The Silence of the Lambs , but regardless, I found myself tapping my fingers against the wooden table in time with the rhythm.

When Sam returned, he set a tall glass with bubbles and lime in front of me and kept what looked like a cola for himself.

“Thanks,” I said.

It was too loud to keep up a real conversation, so we just settled in and listened.

The band was really good, playing one crowd-pleaser after another from the 70s, 80s, and 90s.

Each song felt like a little trip down memory lane, and I couldn’t help but smile.

At some point, Sam moved a little closer, resting his arm gently on the back of my chair.

I felt a flutter of warmth, a quiet reassurance in the simple closeness between us.

When the lead singer announced they were taking a break, the spell broke a little. The house lights came up slightly, and recorded music filtered through the speakers at a much lower volume. I finished my drink and stifled a yawn.

“Want to head out?” he asked.

“Yeah, I guess we should.”

We walked back to the truck, and he opened the passenger-side door and held my hand as I stepped inside, just like he did when he picked me up. The drive back was quiet, easy. I felt settled. The kind of calm that comes after a good laugh, a good walk, and a good night.

When he pulled into my driveway and shifted into park, the truck suddenly felt very small. He turned to me, the dashboard lights casting soft shadows across his face.

“Thanks for a great night, Hope.” His voice was lower than usual. “I had a really good time.”

“Me too,” I said softly.

“I'd really like to do this again sometime.”

“I'd like that too,” I said, and meant it with every fiber of my being.

Our eyes locked, and the world seemed to slow around us. Then Sam leaned across the console, slowly enough that I could have pulled away if I wanted to. I didn't want to.

The kiss was soft, slow. Not rushed, not uncertain, just...

intentional. His hand slid up to cradle my cheek, his thumb brushing a lazy path along my skin.

The kiss deepened slowly, gaining confidence, his lips warm and tender.

I caught the subtle taste of cola and something else I couldn't name, something that

was all him.

When he finally pulled away, I blinked, dazed, suddenly aware I hadn't taken a breath in what felt like forever.

"I should walk you to your door," he murmured.

He stepped out of the truck, came around, and helped me out. The short walk up the path to my front porch felt electric. I fumbled with my keys, hyper-aware of his presence behind me. When I finally got the door unlocked, I turned to face him, my heart thudding in my chest.

"Would you like to come in for a drink?"

The words left my mouth before I could overthink them.

Sam's eyes darkened slightly.

"I'd love to, but it probably isn't a good idea."

"Probably not," I agreed, though part of me wanted to argue.

Then he stepped forward, closing the distance between us again.

This time when he kissed me, there was nothing tentative about it.

One of his hands slipped around my waist, pulling me against him while the other tangled in my hair.

My back pressed against the door frame as our bodies aligned perfectly, chest to chest, hip to hip, and I could feel every inch of him solid, warm, there.

My hands slid up his chest, anchoring myself as his mouth moved against mine. There was more pressure this time. More need. The rough edge of his beard brushed against my cheek and jaw, sending shivers through me. My heart hammered as our bodies pressed together.

When his tongue traced the seam of my lips, I opened to him with a small sound that would have embarrassed me if I'd been capable of feeling anything beyond the sensations he was creating.

Time disappeared. There was only the taste of him, the scent of his cologne mingled with something earthy and male, the feel of his body against mine. When he finally pulled away, it felt like surfacing from underwater.

We stood there breathing heavily, foreheads touching. His eyes were darker than I'd ever seen them, pupils expanded so that only a thin ring of color remained.

"I should go," he whispered. "Goodnight Hope."

He brushed one more feather-light kiss across my lips before stepping back, breaking the connection between us except for his hand, which had slid down to intertwine with mine.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow?"

The question in his voice made my heart flip.

"Sounds good."

That said, he nodded and as I watched him walk back to his truck, with the night air cooling my flushed skin, I knew something fundamental in my life had shifted. Whatever path I'd been on before tonight had just forked, and I'd chosen a direction

that led straight to him.

The thought should have terrified me, but as I touched my fingertips to my still-tingling lips, all I felt was impatience for tomorrow to arrive.

Chapter Seven

Sam

I went through my usual warm-up and stretching to get loose. Once I was ready, I grabbed my glove and the bucket of balls and headed toward the mound. I tossed one ball at a time toward the net, easy at first, then with a little more heat just to get my arm moving.

After twenty throws, I stepped back and rolled my shoulders.

“How's it feeling today?” Ray asked from the deck.

“Good. Solid.” I said.

“You look good.” He stood and walked toward me. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I reached into the bucket and grabbed a ball, rolling it between my fingers as I walked to the mound. Toeing the rubber, I shifted my foot slightly, searching for the perfect spot. I turned the ball with my fingertips until the grip felt just right, then settled into my windup and let it fly.

The ball slammed into the net with a thwack . I didn’t need to look at the radar gun to know that I was closer to where I wanted to be than I was during my last bullpen. The sound still wasn’t as sharp as it should be, but I felt confident it would get there.

“Ninety-three,” Ray said from his spot behind me on the lawn, his arms crossed over

his chest.

I threw a few more fastballs, each one a tick harder than the last, letting my body settle into the rhythm of the motion I've practiced since I was twelve. It felt good, like everything was in sync again.

Ray rattled off the speed after each pitch, his voice steady and precise. My last two fastballs were at 96 mph, and I didn't have to force them. They came out smooth and easy, like my body finally remembered exactly how to do this.

Then again, after the Reiki sessions, I'm not so sure anymore if my body had been the real problem or if it was my mind holding me back all along.

I moved through the rest of my bullpen, shifting into sliders next. After five of those, I transitioned to curveballs, watching each one break sharp and late. Then I finished with six pitches in sequence—fastball, slider, fastball, fastball, curveball, and a changeup to close it out.

Ray walked over and handed me my water. I drank half of it in one long gulp.

"You're pretty much there, Sam," he said. "You look a thousand times better than last time I saw you throw."

"I feel good. Like I did before."

"How's your elbow feeling?"

"Good. No pain or stiffness." I finished the rest of my water and set the bottle on the mound. "I feel like I could throw more."

"But you're not going to."

“I know.”

I grabbed the bucket and started picking up the balls, with Ray right there beside me. Before long, we had everything cleaned up and put away in the shed. I toed off my cleats before stepping onto the deck, setting them neatly in the corner.

Ray and I headed inside just as my mom came in the front door. She gave him a warm hello hug.

“It’s so nice to see you.” She pulled back and glanced over at me. “How’d the bullpen go?”

“I’ll let Ray fill you in while I take a quick shower.”

Upstairs, I peeled off my sweaty clothes and stepped into the shower, letting the hot water wash over me. I shifted my shoulders, extended my elbow, and flexed my fingers. Everything feels great. There’s nothing more than normal fatigue after throwing a bullpen.

My mind wandered to yesterday’s Reiki session. It was the first after our date Saturday night, and I’ll admit I was worried it might have been awkward, but it wasn’t. If anything, it felt easier. Like the space between us had relaxed more.

And for the first time since we started our “energy journey” together, when I envisioned myself pitching in the session, I actually threw the ball instead of having it disappear. Then I threw a kick-ass bullpen today. That can’t be a coincidence, can it?

I finished rinsing my hair, turned off the water, and stepped out of the shower.

After drying off, I got dressed, checked my phone and saw a text from Hope.

See you soon.

I smiled, ran a comb through my damp hair, and headed downstairs.

Mom and Ray were sitting on the couch, deep in quiet conversation, their eyes warm, bodies angled toward each other.

Ray jumped up when he saw me.

“All set?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But I’m gonna go pick up Hope and we’ll meet you at the restaurant.”

It might seem ridiculous to take two cars when Starlight Shores is the size of a postage stamp, but the last thing I want is to feel like a teenager being chauffeured on a date by his parents.

“Okay, we’ll see you there,” Ray said while Mom flashed a hopeful smile.

They look like an old married couple sending their son off to prom.

I walked out to my truck and slid behind the wheel. I’d just buckled my seatbelt when my phone buzzed. It was a text from Leo Marakis, my catcher.

Just checking in—how’s the arm?

I smiled and replied

Doing well. Fastball is almost where it needs to be.

That's awesome! If I don't talk to you, have a great holiday. See you at the wedding.

Leo and his longtime girlfriend, Anjannette, are getting married on New Year's Eve in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Yep, the Scranton from The Office. I pocketed my phone and made a mental note to ask Hope if she'd be my plus-one.

As I shifted into park, I saw Mom and Ray stepping onto the front porch. He held the door open for her, then placed his hand on the small of her back as they walked to his car. She was smiling in a way I've never seen before.

I headed to Hope's house, trying to pinpoint the moment things shifted between them, but I couldn't. Maybe it wasn't a moment. Maybe it was something that had been slowly unfolding for years.

As far as I know, Mom hasn't dated anyone since my dad left.

When I was younger, I never really thought about it.

It was just the way things were. But now I wonder if she ever gets lonely.

She's got her friends, her business, and she keeps busy, but that's different from having someone to share it all with at the end of the day.

If she and Ray are interested in each other, I'm all for it.

Hope

The doorbell rang, and my heart did that now-familiar little skip it seemed to save just for Sam. I opened the door to find him in dark jeans and a burgundy sweater that made his eyes look warmer and brighter, like they held secrets only I'd be lucky enough to learn.

“You look beautiful,” he said, his eyes taking me in.

“Thank you.”

He grinned and stepped back, giving me space to lock the door behind me.

The air was crisp, hinting at winter without fully committing.

We made our way to his truck, and he opened the passenger door for me.

I climbed in, my heart still fluttering in the best way.

Just before closing the door, he leaned in and pressed a quick kiss on my lips.

I watched him walk around the front of the truck, and once he was inside, we pulled onto the road. The quiet hum of the engine filled the space between us as we headed toward the restaurant.

“Ray's excited to meet you,” he said as we pulled into the parking lot a couple minutes later. “I may have talked about you a bit.”

“Oh? What exactly have you been saying?”

“Only good things,” he promised with a wink.

The restaurant was warm and inviting with soft lighting, wood beams, and the kind of atmosphere that made you want to linger over dinner.

Ray and Liz were already seated at a corner table.

Liz looked elegant and warm, and Ray stood to greet us with a smile that lit up his

whole face.

He was almost as tall as Sam but with a broader build, radiating a kind of easy confidence.

“So this is Hope,” he said, shaking my hand with a kind of sincere warmth that made me instantly like him. “It’s really great to finally meet the person behind Sam’s full recovery.”

I turned to Sam, eyebrows raised.

“Full recovery?”

Sam rubbed the back of his neck, looking almost shy, something I hadn’t seen from him before.

“I had a bullpen earlier, and it went really well.”

“He’s being modest,” Ray jumped in. “He was hitting 95 repeatedly, and got up to 96 a few times.”

“Is that where you need to be?” I asked, genuinely curious about where that put him in his comeback journey.

“The goal is to hit 98 or 99 when I want to, but it’s good enough for the moment.”

I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face.

“That’s amazing, Sam.”

I thought about our session the day before, how his energy had felt different, more

centered, flowing without all the blockages I'd sensed before.

Dinner was easy, the kind of effortless evening where laughter and stories bounce around the table without pause.

Liz shared tales from her new age shop, the quirky customers, the crystal healing workshops, and the steady buzz of energy that filled her space.

I talked about the ups and downs of getting my yoga studio off the ground, the long hours, and the quiet moments that made it all worth it.

Ray had us all cracking up with hilarious stories from Sam's rookie year, the kind of antics only a baseball newbie could get away with, and the moments that made the whole team shake their heads and smile.

The night felt warm and full, like a small family finding common ground over good food and shared memories.

After dinner, Sam drove me home, and at my door, I found myself not wanting the evening to end.

"Would you like to come in?" I asked.

"I'd like that," he said softly.

Inside, I offered him a drink.

"Just water is fine," he said, following me to the kitchen.

I poured us each a glass and we settled on the couch, closer than we needed to be, and he told me more about the bullpen session. How for the first time since the injury, he

felt himself really throwing the ball rather than pushing it.

“That makes sense,” I said. “Your energy is flowing so much better now. The congestion is almost completely gone.”

“If you’d told me that a month ago, I’d have thought you were crazy,” Sam said with a half-smile.

“I’m still not sure what to make of all the woo-woo stuff you and my mom are into.

But I can’t deny I feel different since our sessions.

Like something’s lighter, easier inside me. And I’m definitely throwing better.”

“I get that it can seem a little weird, but the mind and body are connected more deeply than we often realize. Your energy got all out of sync during the injury and surgery. It just needed a little help readjusting to catch up with your body’s healing.

That’s why you’re starting to feel lighter and throw better now. ”

“However it works, I’ll take it.” He took a drink then leaned forward and set his glass on the coffee table. His eyes held mine for a moment. “Do you have plans for New Year's Eve?”

“I usually just go to the party in the square.” I shrugged. “Nothing special.”

“My catcher Leo is getting married and I was wondering if you'd like to go with me.” Before I could respond, he added, “It’s in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and I’m flying up the day before and coming home the day after.”

The idea of traveling with him, meeting his teammates, and watching one of them get

married on a night people usually spend reflecting or celebrating with champagne and countdowns felt oddly intimate. Like a window into a part of his world he didn't offer just anyone.

Needing to touch him, I ran my hand over his chest, feeling the slow, steady beat of his heart beneath my palm.

"I close the studio that whole week, so I'm totally free," I said. "I'd love to go with you."

"That's perfect."

His gaze held mine as he gently took my hand from his chest and brought it to his lips, pressing slow, deliberate kisses to each of my fingers. I felt every single one deep in my core, like soft sparks that fluttered low in my stomach and spread warmth through my entire body.

He smiled then, slow, tender, and laced with a quiet promise that made my heart skip. Then he leaned in and kissed me.

It started slow, his lips warm and sure, the kind of kiss that made me melt into him.

I cupped his jaw, feeling the faint rasp of his beard beneath my fingers as he deepened the kiss, his hand slipping around my waist. We shifted, bodies angling closer, heat growing between us.

Every kiss, every touch felt like a promise, like something unfolding.

Our tongues met in a slow, heated rhythm that stirred something deep inside me.

The kiss was intense, full of want and unspoken promises.

I slid my hands into his hair, feeling the soft strands slip between my fingers as I tugged him closer.

He murmured something soft against my lips, his voice low and warm, sending a ripple of anticipation down my spine.

When we ended the kiss, the air between us crackled, charged with everything unspoken. I wasn't ready to let go. I stood and reached for his hand, lacing my fingers with his, gently tugging him toward the stairs. Each step pulsed with anticipation, my mind already lost in the promise of his touch.

Chapter Eight

Sam

We stepped into Hope's room, and I pressed my mouth to hers, kissing her long, slow, and deep.

When our tongues met and slid together, something inside me sparked, something electric and familiar.

It didn't make sense. How could someone I'd only known a few weeks already feel like she belonged in my life?

It's like she'd always been there—familiar and steady, as if some part of me had been waiting for her all along.

My hands tightened around her waist, pulling her closer until there was no space left between us.

The kiss deepened, growing urgent, and I backed her toward the bed.

My fingers trembled slightly as I reached for the hem of her shirt.

I paused just long enough to meet her eyes, silently asking if she was sure.

When she nodded, I pulled the shirt over her head.

Within seconds, she stood in front of me in nothing but a deep plum lace bra and matching underwear. She's a goddess. Tall and curvy in all the right places, and I couldn't wait to explore every swell and dip of her body.

The delicate scalloped edges and thin satin straps framed her perfectly. The way the bra lifted and shaped her, giving her breasts a subtle, tempting push, left me breathless. Her skin looked warmer, almost glowing in that rich color and I took in every detail, unable to look away.

I skimmed my fingers along the curve of her waist, up over her ribcage, and traced the edge of her bra, committing every inch of her to memory.

"You're beautiful," I murmured, my voice thick. "Perfect. Just like I imagined you'd be."

I backed her up until she stood against the bed, then guided her down gently.

Kneeling on the floor between her thighs, I pulled her closer and draped her legs over my shoulders.

My mouth found her, hot and hungry, right where she needed me most. She tangled her fingers in my hair, holding on tight as I licked and sucked through the lace.

Sliding her panties to the side, my tongue found her bare skin.

She gasped, sharp and electric. I slipped a finger inside her, moving with a steady, deliberate rhythm while circling her clit with my tongue.

Her hips arched instinctively toward me before falling back onto the mattress, her thighs parting wider like an open invitation.

I didn't hesitate, I took everything she gave me, and then some.

Hope's breathing hitched, turning into shallow pants as I slid one finger, then another, inside her, thrusting faster and faster while my tongue kept pace, licking and sucking to the same rhythm.

"Sam, I'm gonna..."

Whatever else she meant to say came out as a broken, breathless sound, more a gasp than a word.

When I curled my fingers and stroked that perfect spot inside her while my mouth stayed locked on her clit, she shattered.

The way her body arched, the way she gripped me like she never wanted me to stop, were the most addictive things I'd ever felt.

"Oh my God!" she cried out, as her body pulsed around my fingers. Each contraction—tight, hot, perfect—burned itself into me, tangled up in the sound of her coming undone.

I didn't stop right away. Both because I wanted to draw it out and because I couldn't.

Watching her come, hearing the catch in her throat, and feeling the way her body responded to mine knocked the air out of my lungs.

Every instinct in me screamed to keep giving, keep taking, until I knew she had nothing left but pleasure.

Her legs quivered against my shoulders and her fingers still tangled in my hair. I slowed the movement of my hand, gentling the rhythm as she came down, but I

didn't look away. I couldn't. Her face, flushed and open and radiant, was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

And as I watched her, it hit me that our connection went beyond chemistry, even though we clearly have that.

This was more. Deeper. It was in the way she looked at me, like she saw past the surface.

The way she let me in, unguarded and sure.

And the way I wanted to give her everything, not just my body, but my attention, my energy, my heart.

All that should've scared the shit out of me.

I'm not supposed to get attached. Not now. Not when I need to be focusing on my career.

But with Hope, it didn't feel like a mistake. It didn't feel like bad timing. It felt inevitable.

Hope

My body trembled with aftershocks as Sam slowly pulled his fingers from me.

He pressed a soft kiss to the inside of my thigh, sending another ripple of sensation through me, then slid my panties down my legs with deliberate care.

When he stood, my eyes followed him, my heart pounding and still aching for more.

He reached back and slipped off his T-shirt, letting it fall to the floor.

“Oh wow,” I breathed, sliding my fingertips over his chest and tracing the sharp lines of his six-pack. “You’re perfect.”

I sat up and kissed a trail down the center of his chest, pausing to flick my tongue inside his navel before moving along the waistband of his jeans.

My fingers found the button, undoing it slowly, then I slid the zipper down.

His erection peeked over the edge of his black boxer briefs, and I instinctively licked my lips.

“Hope, you're seriously killing me right now.”

“I’ve barely laid a finger on you.”

“Yeah, but you’re looking at me.”

I grinned.

“Then let me give you a real reason to lose control.”

I slipped my hands into his waistband and slowly pushed his jeans and briefs down in one motion. His cock sprang free, thick and heavy, and I caught it in my hand without missing a beat.

Lowering my head, I dragged the tip of my tongue slowly along the full length of his shaft, deliberate and unhurried, tasting the heat of him as he shuddered beneath my touch.

When I reached the top, I let my lips part and took just the tip into my mouth, holding still for three steady, aching heartbeats. Then I began to suck, slow and purposeful, swirling my tongue around the head, teasing him with every flick and pull.

“Shit.” His fingers curled into my hair. “Hope,” he groaned, his voice rough and low. “That feels...unreal.”

I lowered my mouth, taking in as much of him as I could, then pulled back and started all over again. Just as I was settling into a steady rhythm, Sam’s fingers tightened in my hair.

When I pulled back, I saw his face contorted with something that looked like pain. He breathed in slowly, eyes tightly shut, then exhaled. When he opened them again, he gave me a small, shaky smile.

“For a moment there, I thought it was all over.”

“Would that have been the worst thing?” I asked with what I hoped was a sassy smile.

He kicked off his jeans and briefs, never breaking eye contact. Then he flipped me onto my back, settling between my thighs. Dipping his head, he nibbled softly along my collarbone, tracing up to my neck.

“I want to be inside you,” he whispered in my ear, his warm breath trailing goosebumps across my skin.

“There’s condoms in the nightstand drawer.”

He kissed me, slow, deep, and impossible to resist, then pulled back.

I got a perfect view of his incredible ass as he leaned over the side of the bed.

Then he shifted back onto his knees, a victorious smile spreading across his face as he held up a condom like a trophy.

I couldn't look away as he carefully opened the foil packet and rolled it down his impressive length.

When he moved back over me, he settled on his forearms, his warm breath caressing my skin as he kissed my shoulder. Then his eyes met mine.

He reached down, aligning himself carefully before pushing forward. I bent my knees, letting them fall to the side, as he filled me inch by slow inch. I focused on relaxing every muscle, willing my body to make room for him.

"You okay?" he asked.

I nodded, swallowing a bit. It's been a long time and he's very large, so it's a tight fit.

"Just give me a second."

Sam stayed still for several heartbeats while I adjusted to every inch of him.

He pulled back slowly, then began to move in steady, deliberate strokes in and out. My body responded, clenching and relaxing with each thrust.

Sliding his hands down to cup my ass, he tilted my hips just right and held me steady as he thrust harder and faster. Every stroke, every grind of his pelvis against my clit, sent waves of electric pleasure crashing through me.

The tingling started deep and spread out, igniting every sensitive spot along the way.

My muscles clenched around him, then spasmed so hard I struggled to catch my breath. He slammed into me two more times, and a low growl rumbled from his throat before he collapsed onto me.

We lay there, tangled and still, until our breaths evened out and the heat between us faded into a comfortable warmth. He eased back just enough to press a gentle kiss to my forehead.

“I’ll be right back,” he whispered.

I slid under the covers and curled up against the pillow as he walked to the bathroom, my eyes shamelessly locked on his perfect ass. I’d imagined what it might be like between us, but nothing compared to the reality of what just happened in this bed.

When Sam returned, the view was just as spectacular. He slid under the covers beside me and wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me in until we fit together like two pieces of something whole.

I exhaled, my body soft and languid in the aftermath.

“Just so you know,” I murmured against his chest, “I’m a world-class cuddler.”

He chuckled, the sound low and sexy.

“Good, because I wasn’t planning on letting you go.”

I tipped my head back to look at him and he kissed me slow and deep, like he had something to say that didn’t need words. And maybe he didn’t. Maybe I already knew.

But I’m not naive. I know that in a few short weeks, he’ll leave for spring training,

and I'll go back to my own routine, my own quiet world without him in it.

Still, I wasn't going to waste a single second wishing things were different. Because this feeling, this connection, is worth it.

I tucked myself a little closer to his warmth, closed my eyes, and let myself have this moment.

Chapter Nine

Sam

Christmas in North Carolina didn't come with snow. Just soft blue skies and a cool breeze rolling in off the water. The kind of day where you could wear a sweatshirt and jeans and still end up warm from walking too fast.

Mom and I left early, heading into Wilmington, the truck bed full of non-perishable supplies she'd picked up to donate.

Volunteering at the community kitchen had become our Thanksgiving and Christmas morning tradition.

It started back when I was a teenager. We just showed up one year asking how we could help.

Now we're part of the regular holiday crew.

It's a great, hands-on way to start the day and give back beyond the money and supplies we usually donate. There'd been years when meals and care packages from places like this helped Mom stretch her paycheck far enough to cover the bills and still keep us fed. I'll never forget that.

By the time we got there, the place was already humming.

The rich scent of brewed coffee, sizzling bacon, and pancakes filled the air.

A few regulars waved as we walked in, and someone shoved a Santa hat on my head before I'd even taken off my coat.

The volunteer coordinator handed us both aprons with "Holiday Helper" embroidered across the front.

When the Waves' public relations team caught wind that I do this, they wanted to set up a photo op, but I wasn't comfortable with that.

I don't do it for the accolades or recognition.

Thankfully, they didn't push it, probably because Hannah Reagan, who leads PR, gets it.

Her husband Jack, the team's shortstop, supports a few non-profits quietly and prefers to keep it that way.

For breakfast, I worked the line, serving eggs and hash browns. Mom rotated between serving and sitting with people who looked like they needed more than a hot plate. She was good at that. She had this way of making anyone feel like they mattered. Like they weren't invisible.

We stayed through lunch doing more of the same, then helped clean up.

I washed dishes while Mom wiped down the tables.

Before we headed home, she spoke with the kitchen manager and got a list of their immediate needs.

We'll do some shopping during the week and drop off those items and whatever else we can fit in the truck.

I settled behind the wheel and started the truck. Pulling out my phone, I texted Hope.

We're leaving the kitchen now, heading home.

Before I shifted into drive, her reply came through.

I'll be there around 5pm.

I smiled, already looking forward to seeing her later.

By the time we got home, it was just past three o'clock.

"I prepped most things last night," Mom said as we entered the kitchen.

"Mom, did you sleep at all?"

She waved me off.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead."

The counter was covered with cooling racks of cookies.

More traditional Italian varieties—pepper, anise cookie, pizzelle, and almond biscotti.

As well as classic holiday staples—chocolate crinkle, raspberry thumbprints, chocolate chip, and festive sugar cookies.

A pan of peanut butter fudge sat off to the side waiting to be cut and plated.

She'd even made struffoli. My mouth watered at the thought of eating one of the tiny fried dough balls coated in honey and sprinkles.

But I know if I even try to take one and mess up her perfectly formed wreath, there will be hell to pay.

Instead, I reached for a biscotti.

“Hands off,” she said, pointing at me. “Dinner first.”

I broke off a piece and popped it in my mouth before she could stop me.

Mom rolled her eyes, but a smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

“You’re impossible.”

“I’m not impossible,” I said around a mouthful of crumbs. “I’m literally standing right here. Very real. Extremely possible.”

She shook her head.

“Go put on some Christmas carols.”

I went into the living room and turned on the stereo. When it comes to Christmas, she likes things the old-fashioned way, so no playlists are allowed. I grabbed a CD, popped it into the tray, and hit play.

With the smooth sound of Johnny Mathis filling the air, we moved around each other in a familiar dance, the way we have since I was tall enough to reach the counter.

While she seasoned the chicken with her usual blend of herbs, I assembled a small charcuterie board of prosciutto, salami, aged provolone, olives, and just enough effort to make it look like I knew what I was doing.

After Mom slid the chicken into the oven, she started layering the lasagna. I peeled and cubed the potatoes, dropped them into a pot of water, and set it on the stove. Most of the veggie prep was already done, so when I asked what she needed next, she handed off garlic bread duty.

I mixed up a batch of garlic butter, sliced the Italian loaf, and slathered it on before setting the bread aside to bake. By then, Mom was elbow-deep in ground meat, spices, parmesan, and eggs, that she'd magically transform into meatballs.

"You know only three of us are eating, right?"

She shrugged.

"We'll have leftovers for the week."

When the doorbell rang, I wiped my hands on a towel and opened the door to Hope, holding a bottle of wine, a small potted rosemary tree decorated with tiny red bows, and two gift bags dangling from her fingers.

"Merry Christmas," she said, stepping inside. "Mmm, it smells incredible in here."

She wore a deep red sweater that hugged her curves, paired with black leggings and ankle boots. Her hair was half-pulled up with a gold clip, the rest falling in loose waves around her shoulders.

"Merry Christmas. You look beautiful."

I gave her a quick kiss and she handed me the wine and plant.

"Thank you." She set the bags underneath the tree next to the other presents. "Mmm, it smells incredible in here."

Mom peeked around the kitchen door.

“Hope! I’m so glad you can join us.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” she said as we walked into the kitchen.

We hung out in the kitchen, chatting as we put together the rest of dinner. Hope took charge of setting the table, sneaking bites here and there between her tasks. The easy back-and-forth made the time fly, and before we knew it, the food was ready.

Dinner was perfect—rich, comforting, and way too much.

We passed dishes, poured wine, and laughed about nothing in particular.

Once we were all stuffed, we carried the dirty plates into the kitchen and set them in the sink.

I told Mom I’d do the dishes, but instead of relaxing in the living room, she and Hope settled at the island.

I loaded the dishwasher, popped in a soap pod, and hit start before settling at the sink to hand-wash the bigger items. As I scrubbed a stubborn pan, I glanced over my shoulder to see them leaning in close over Hope’s phone.

Based on what they were saying, I figured she was sharing pictures of her parents on their cruise.

Having Hope here for the holiday doesn’t just feel right, it feels inevitable, like every choice I’d ever made has led me to this. This connection doesn’t feel temporary. It feels real and exactly where I need to be. And as bizarre as it sounds since we just met a month ago, I’m all in.

Hope

“I was so happy to hear you’re going to Leo’s wedding with Sam.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Sam’s teammates and their families are really wonderful people. I’m sure you’re going to have a great time getting to know them.” Liz chuckled. “And make sure you get Sam out on the dance floor. He’s an amazing dancer.”

“I’ll remember that.”

Sam set the last pot on the drying rack. He shut off the faucet and dried his hands on the towel hanging by the sink. A big smile spread across his face as he glanced my way.

“Just be sure to wear closed-toe shoes in case I step on your feet,” he teased.

I grinned back.

“Since we’re heading up north and it’s December, you can be sure my toes will be covered.”

Once the dishes were done, Liz declared it was time for presents.

We moved to the living room where the tree stood in the corner, its colored lights blinking softly.

Sam had told me that he and his mom don’t spend a lot on Christmas presents, they give meaningful gifts tailored to the person. I love that. It fits my vibe perfectly.

“Since you’re our guest, you get to open the first gift,” Liz said, handing me a box.

“Ooh, this is heavy.”

I removed the bow and set it aside, then carefully unwrapped the festive paper.

A set of scented candles and essential oils were nestled into a wooden keepsake box.

I opened one of the candles and breathed in deeply.

The sweet musky scent of clary sage mingled perfectly with a bright, zesty burst of orange.

“This smells amazing. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. “I got the box at an auction in Wilmington. I know you love repurposing items and I think it will be nice to store things in.”

“It’s perfect,” I said, running my hand along the weathered edge.

“You’re next, Sammy,” Liz said as she handed him a box.

Sam opened the box and peeled back the green tissue paper to reveal a trinket bowl and coaster set.

“I made them in a pottery class I took,” Liz said with a laugh. “They were supposed to be matching, but the bowl had other ideas.”

“They’re awesome. Thank you.”

Sam handed Liz three packages. The first one held a custom puzzle depicting a

picture of the two of him after his first Major League start.

The next a personalized calendar filled with family photos and marked with all the important dates.

Liz was thrilled to see the Carolina Waves schedule listed as well.

And the third held a hand-sewn leather journal, its rich brown cover embossed with Liz's initials.

Her eyes softened as she ran her fingers over it, clearly touched by the thought behind each gift.

I gave Sam his gift from me next.

He reached into the bag and pulled out the afghan I crocheted. I watched him run his fingertips over the soft, mingled colors—blue, yellow, gray, and white—representing his high school, college, and the Carolina Waves.

He looked up at me and asked, “Did you make this for me?”

“I did.”

“I love it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Before I could get too emotional over the fact that instead of setting it aside, he rested it on his lap, I handed Liz her gift.

I’d made her a tote bag from an upcycled denim jacket and floral fabric I found in a

thrift store.

With the extra fabric, I was able to make her two matching eyeglass cases.

“This is lovely, Hope.” She slung it over her shoulder. “And so my style.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

When I opened Sam’s gift to me, I froze. Inside the small box was a delicate silver bracelet. Tiny compass points were spaced along the chain, each one echoing the design of the necklace I wear almost every day.

“Sam, it’s beautiful.” I whispered, brushing my fingers over the intricate metalwork. “Where did you get this? It matches my necklace perfectly.”

He gave me a small smile, then said, “I had it made.”

“You had this made?”

“I took a picture of your necklace to an artisan jeweler in Wilmington who does custom pieces. She sketched a few options, but this one felt the most like you.”

I turned the bracelet over in my hand, still stunned. The little compass charms glinted in the light, their details so precise they could’ve been plucked right off my necklace.

“It’s perfect,” I said, and I meant it.

Not just because it’s beautiful, but because it was him . Thoughtful. Steady. A little sentimental, even if he’d never admit it out loud.

I was still collecting myself when Liz stood.

“I’m going to go make coffee and bring in some desserts.”

“Do you want some help?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“No, you two sit. Relax.”

The twinkle in her eye made it clear that she was giving us a moment, and I was grateful for it.

“This is probably the most thoughtful gift I’ve ever received,” I said and ran my fingers over my necklace. “Besides this.”

“I never asked about the story behind that necklace,” Sam said gently, his eyes on the pendant. “But I can tell it means a lot to you.”

“My grandmother gave it to me for my thirteenth birthday,” I said softly.

“We’d been living with her in Maryland for a year while my dad was deployed.

When he came back, we were moving again, this time to New York, and I was dreading it.

She knew how much I hated always being the new kid, always starting over.

She gave me this necklace and told me it was a symbol of stability and grounding.

That no matter where life took me, I could carry a strong sense of self with me.

It was her way of reminding me that I’d always have a place in the world, even if the

address keeps changing. ”

His gaze softened as he said, “That’s more than beautiful, Hope. It’s like you carry your own anchor, no matter where life takes you.”

He gave a little “come here” gesture with his fingers, and I handed him the bracelet, then held out my arm. He took it carefully, wrapping the delicate chain around my wrist and fastening the clasp with a quiet focus that made my heart flutter.

Sam leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to my lips, sending a flutter straight to my heart.

If someone had told me at Thanksgiving that by Christmas I’d be falling head over heels for the town’s favorite son, I’d have laughed and called them crazy.

But there I was—heart racing, wrist adorned, and completely, utterly caught in the moment. Somehow, it all felt so right.

Chapter Ten

Sam

The Radisson Lackawanna Station Hotel came into view, and for a second, it honestly looked like something out of a storybook.

With all that carved stone and the big, old clock in the middle, it had a kind of quiet, grand presence that made you slow down and stare.

As I pulled into the parking lot, Hope leaned toward the window, practically pressing her face to the glass.

Her eyes were huge, totally caught up in it, like she couldn't quite believe it was real.

"Sam, this place is incredible," she said as we stepped out of the car.

I grabbed our bags from the trunk, grinning at her reaction.

"Wait until you see the inside."

We walked into the marble-tiled lobby and Hope tilted her head back to stare at the massive stained-glass ceiling.

"Holy hell," she whispered. "This is a hotel?"

"It used to be a train station." I chuckled, shifting our duffel bags higher on my

shoulder. “And this weekend it’s wedding central.”

She turned toward me.

“You didn’t tell me this place is so beautiful.”

“I figured I’d let it surprise you.”

“Well, it worked.” She smiled, slipping her hand into mine as we walked toward the front desk. “I can’t believe Leo rented out the entire hotel.”

“When you come from a Greek family with about two hundred relatives, plus everyone that’s invited, you need the space.”

I checked into our room and we headed toward the elevator.

“I feel like we’re about to get swept into a period drama.”

“With Leo’s family, you just might get your drama.”

Leo had booked the entire place, which might sound over-the-top, but between his gigantic Greek family, Anjannette’s people, and most of the Carolina Waves attending, the place will be full, and then some.

We got off the elevator on the fourth floor and walked to our room. I opened the door and stepped aside, motioning for Hope to go in first.

The room had all the basics covered, a mini fridge, coffee maker, and flat-screen TV. Afternoon sunlight poured in through the windows, making the king-sized bed look even more inviting, like it was just waiting for us to collapse onto it.

I set our bags down and wrapped my arms around Hope from behind, resting my chin on her shoulder.

She leaned back against me, and I felt that familiar warmth spread through my chest. Through my years with the Waves, I've watched my teammates fall in love, one after the other, and never quite understood it. Until now.

“So what's the plan?”

I pressed a kiss to her neck.

“Rehearsal's tonight for the wedding party, but everyone is planning on meeting up in the hotel bar later. So we've got the afternoon to ourselves.”

She turned slowly in my arms, a smile playing on her lips.

“I like the sound of that,” she said, trailing one finger down my chest, then lower. “I really like the sound of that.”

I backed her toward the bed without a word, our mouths meeting halfway there.

Her fingers slipped under the hem of my shirt as I lifted hers over her head, then reached behind her to unclasp and remove her bra.

I brushed my tongue along the edge of her lips, and she opened up, her tongue sliding against mine, mirroring every stroke.

Her fingers twisted into my hair as she pulled me closer, holding me tight.

She settled back onto the bed as I kissed down the line of her throat, tracing the curve of her shoulder and the soft skin just beneath her breast. Her body arched beneath me,

legs curling around my waist. I pulled away just enough to slide Hope's pants and underwear down, leaving her lying there gloriously naked beneath me.

I peeled off my jeans next, pulling a condom from my wallet before tossing them onto the floor, then set it on the bed between us.

My hands traced up her thighs in slow, deliberate strokes. When my thumbs met at their juncture, I hesitated just long enough to feed the heat and anticipation building between us. She thrust her hips up, begging for more. So I gave it to her.

I slid my middle finger between her slick folds, moving it slowly back and forth before resting it on her clit. I paused just long enough to give it a gentle pinch, then pushed deeper, thrusting my finger inside her.

She let out a long, low moan.

"Tell me what you want."

"Sam." Her voice was barely more than a breath.

I chuckled softly, leaning down to nibble at her nipple before soothing it with my tongue.

"Do you want more of this?" I circled her clit with my finger. "Or this?"

I slid my middle finger inside, curling it just enough to find her sweet spot.

Hope closed her eyes and moaned, the sound low and full of heat. When she opened them again, something fierce burned in her gaze. Before I could process it, she shifted, catching me completely off guard as she pushed me onto my back and swung a leg over to straddle my hips.

She grabbed the condom, tore it open, and rolled it down my length, her slow, deliberate touch driving me wild. Shifting onto her knees, she moved over me and sank back down, pulling me into her tight, slick heat.

“God, Hope,” I groaned. “You feel incredible.”

Her hips moved with a wild, perfect rhythm, every roll and grind pushing me closer to the edge. The way she clenched around me, the look in her eyes was all too much in the best possible way.

She threw her head back and let out a scream that was pure sin, her body gripping mine and pulling me right over the edge with her.

Hope shifted off me and I slipped out of bed to take care of the condom. When I returned and slid next to her beneath the covers, I pulled her against my chest and held her tight. With her breath steady against my skin and my arms around her, we both drifted off to sleep.

When we woke, the afternoon light was a memory. Hope stretched beside me, her hair a tangled halo against the pillow.

“We should shower,” I murmured, brushing a hand down her bare back.

“Mmm.”

Eventually we made our way to the bathroom. The water was hot, the shower spacious, so I figured we might as well make good use of it.

She laughed as I pulled her under the spray making her wet hair stick to her face. I pinned her against the tile with a kiss that turned greedy fast. After what seemed like forever I pulled back.

“Gotta grab a condom,” I said, reaching for the door.

Hope curled her leg around my hip and smiled.

“It’s okay. I’m on the pill.” Then she added, “And I know I’m clean.”

I met her gaze.

“I am too,” I said. “But are you sure?”

I’ve never had sex without a condom before, never trusted anyone enough. But with her, I didn’t even think twice. So when she nodded, I lifted her and slid inside.

I held her close as we moved together, savoring the feel of her skin on skin as water poured over us like a curtain shutting out the rest of the world.

Afterward, we toweled off and got dressed. Hope wore a soft green dress that clung in all the right places. I watched her do her hair, then apply makeup, and swipe on lipstick which somehow seemed more intimate than what we just did in the shower.

Once we were ready, we made our way down to Trax, the hotel bar nestled just off the main lobby. It was packed with people already, voices rising over clinking glasses and laughter.

Some of my teammates were gathered at one of the long tables near the back. Trey spotted us first, raising a glass.

“Look who finally made it down,” he called.

“Hey,” I said, slinging an arm around my date. “This is Hope.”

Introductions flew fast, but Hope handled it like a pro, laughing at the jokes, shaking hands, slipping right into the rhythm of the group like she'd always belonged. She caught my eye once, a quiet smile just for me.

At that moment, I realized this weekend wasn't just about showing her off, it was about discovering how much more there was to us. And whatever came next, I was ready to see where it would take us.

Hope

The last of the dinner plates were being cleared as I leaned back in my chair, my eyes drifting over to Anjannette and Leo at their sweetheart table.

They looked ridiculously happy and completely wrapped up in each other.

Her dress shimmered under the chandelier lights, and Leo had a goofy grin on his face as he whispered something in her ear that made her laugh.

Sam sat beside me, his hand resting casually on the back of my chair.

Liz had been right, his teammates really are some of the kindest people I've ever met.

Our table was a fun, easygoing mix of Sam's teammates and their partners—Trey and Nori, Rusty and Ivy, Jimmy and Abby, and Phil and Chloe.

The vibe was warm and relaxed, full of laughter and quick banter.

These people are genuinely kind, and welcomed me in a way that went beyond just being polite.

I'd felt it last night at the rehearsal dinner, again during the ceremony, and now.

Even surrounded by inside jokes, I felt like I belonged.

“Hope, I’d love to hear more about Reiki.” Nori leaned in, her eyes bright with curiosity. “It’s something I’ve always been interested in, but haven’t experienced yet.”

“It’s kind of hard to explain without sounding a little woo-woo, but Reiki is all about energy.

Tuning into the body’s natural flow and helping clear out anything that’s stuck or blocked,” I said.

“It’s super gentle, but honestly, it can be really powerful.

I’ve had clients fall asleep, cry, or walk away feeling a deep sense of peace.

It’s different for everyone.” I glanced around the table, half-laughing.

“I know it sounds a little out there, but I swear, it really does help.”

Sam shifted beside me, his voice easy but sure.

“I can vouch for that.”

“You’ve done Reiki?” Trey asked with a raised brow.

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“That’s actually how I met Hope.” He looked at me with a sweet smile that melted my insides.

“The doctors had cleared me and supposedly I was good to go, except my fastball was garbage. So my mom just went ahead and booked me a Reiki appointment. I only went to shut her up.” He shrugged, and everyone laughed.

“But I’m glad I did. Not just because I got to meet you,” he winked at me, “but because it helped. I don’t know how, but something just shifted and I got my rhythm back.”

Before anyone could ask more questions, the DJ’s voice crackled through the speakers.

“Alright folks, let’s get moving after that amazing dinner. We’ll start off with something slow. This one’s an oldie but a goodie.”

The first soft notes of Unforgettable by Nat King Cole floated through the ballroom, and Sam looked at me, his hand held out.

“Dance with me?”

I nodded and slid my hand into his. We both stood and he led me to the dance floor.

As soon as we reached the center, he pulled me gently into his arms, one hand at my waist, the other holding mine with quiet care.

I fit against him like we'd done this a hundred times before, even though it was our first.

His touch was confident, unhurried, and grounded in something that felt like more than just attraction.

And his mom hadn't been kidding, Sam could dance.

He moved with ease, like he was completely in tune with the music and with me.

As we swayed together under the soft lights, something settled in my chest. Being in his arms didn't just feel good, it felt right.

When that song faded into something faster, we got caught up in the moment, laughing, spinning, and getting breathless.

Some of his teammates made their way to the dance floor too, and were trying to one-up each other with the most over-the-top dance moves, which only made us laugh harder.

Honestly, I don't think I'd ever had that much fun dancing.

I Got a Feeling by The Black Eyed Peas ended and the DJ spoke again.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it's time for our happy couple to cut the cake!"

We headed back to our table and I grabbed my water and took a long sip, thankful for the excuse to sit for a minute. My cheeks were flushed, my feet slightly sore, but I couldn't stop smiling.

I watched the staff wheel out an elaborate cart with the wedding cake—a three-tier

masterpiece covered in cascading sugar flowers.

The room erupted in applause as Leo and Anjannette made their way to the cake, fingers intertwined.

The photographer circled them, capturing every angle as they picked up the silver cake server together and made the first cut.

They fed each other a bite, all smiles and no smooshing in the face, just pure joy.

Everyone clapped and cheered, and the newlyweds laughed as they made their way back to their seats, hands linked once again.

As we waited for the cake, servers brought out silver platters piled high with sweets and set one on each table.

Sam leaned over and said, “Leo’s family owns a deli in New Jersey. They make the most amazing food and even better desserts.”

He grabbed a piece of baklava, took a bite, and let out a low, appreciative moan. Once everyone had sampled something, the conversation picked back up.

Rusty leaned in, tipping his beer toward Sam.

“I’m just glad you’ll be back in the rotation. It wasn’t the same without you.”

The other guys agreed and started rattling off statistics that flew right over my head.

“Just think,” Trey said. “In just six more weeks, we’ll be heading down to St. Pete.”

The women had started their own conversation about the upcoming season, and I

found myself caught between both discussions.

“I always forget how fast the offseason goes,” Nori said, taking a bite of the cake that had just been set in front of her.

“I know,” Abby added. “Pretty soon it’ll feel like I’m living out of a suitcase again.”

“At least we get to go to some fun cities,” Nori added.

“Do you go on the road with them all the time?” I asked.

“No, my business keeps me pretty busy, so I can’t.” Nori acknowledged with a small shrug.

“And I have the bakery, so my time on the road is limited, too,” Chloe said.

“I can travel more because I work remotely,” Ivy chimed in, “but sometimes it gets to be too much and I stay home.”

“How do you manage it?” I asked, genuinely curious. “Being apart so much, I mean.”

“We all live in Myrtle Beach, so it’s not so bad since half their games are at home,” Nori said. “And the rest of the time, we just deal with it.”

Ivy added, “Yeah, it kind of goes with the territory.”

“True, but I do hate when they’re gone for those long West Coast trips,” Abby chimed in. “Two weeks feels like forever.”

“Spring training is the best though. I always make sure I don’t book a lot of commissions so I can go down as long as possible.

” Nori’s eyes lit up. “It’s so much more relaxed than the regular season.

The pressure isn’t as intense, and we get to spend weeks in St. Pete together. It’s like a vacation.”

Ivy smiled and said, “We meet for breakfast at least once a week at this amazing hole-in-the-wall spot that serves the best food. You’re officially invited, Hope.”

“Oh, I don’t know...” I trailed off, not sure how to answer her, but Sam had turned from his conversation with the guys.

“You should definitely come,” he said, his voice hopeful. “I’d love to have you there.”

“St. Pete is gorgeous in February and March,” Jimmy added.

Everyone started chiming in then, talking about their favorite beach bars. I smiled and nodded along, only half listening. The rest of my mind was somewhere else entirely.

I smiled and nodded, making noncommittal sounds of agreement, but inside, my stomach was tying itself in knots.

The conversation continued around me with talk of road trips and game schedules, of counting down days until the guys came home, of planning their lives around a baseball calendar that stretched from February to October if they were lucky enough to make the playoffs.

I knew this was Sam’s life when we got involved. I knew it came with travel, distance, unpredictability. But now that I was seeing it up close—the team, the schedule, the time apart—it made things feel more real. More complicated.

These women had made their lives fit around baseball season, but even they admitted how hard it was sometimes. At least they live in the Waves' home city, which meant they got to be together for home games and off days. But it still came with its own challenges.

I live in Starlight Shores, an entire state away. I have a life there, a business. Clients who depend on me. Friends. Roots.

How could I just give up everything I've wanted my whole life?

Chapter Eleven

Sam

The indoor bullpen at the Fayetteville Waves training facility is a mix of old-school grit and cutting-edge tech. The artificial turf underfoot is pristine, the kind that practically dared you to mess it up. To my right, a row of high-speed cameras blinked awake as I stepped onto the mound.

Ray stood a few feet away with his arms crossed, trying hard to look casual, but he wasn't fooling me.

Lenny Gill, the Waves' pitching coach, stood hunched over a clipboard with Max Rigsbee, the team trainer, their voices low and serious.

Kenny Hanover, the owner's son, hovered nearby talking on his phone.

Elmer Jarvis, our manager, watched it all with his usual unreadable expression that he wore like a uniform.

And then there were the doctors. A whole line of orthopedic specialists lined up at the back like a panel of judges. It was the most lab coats I'd seen outside of a hospital.

Since high school, I've pitched in front of scouts, coaches, and stadiums filled with fans.

But this was different. This felt like a final exam with my whole career hanging in the

balance.

One solid bullpen wouldn't erase the past year.

But a shaky one could undo months of rehab, hours of doubt, and every damn step it took to get back on this mound.

Rubbing the ball between my palms, I exhaled slowly, and stepped onto the rubber.

I gave a small nod to Jorge, my catcher for today. He plays for the Baby Waves as the Triple A team is called and happens to be a local.

"Alright, Sam," Lenny said, "Let's start easy. Eight warm-up fastballs, just to get loose."

I nodded, took a deep breath, then threw the first of eight four-seamers, easing my arm in, feeling the ball spin right out of my hand.

Jorge caught it clean, gave a short grunt of approval, and fired it back.

I settled back on the rubber, took a breath, and let the second pitch fly, this one sharper, snapping into Jorge's glove with a clean, solid pop.

By pitch eight, I was settling into a rhythm.

"Alright," Lenny said. "Let's mix ten, fastballs and changeups. Show me both sides of the plate."

I worked through the set, focusing on command. A couple fastballs hit the glove exactly where he set up. The changeups came out smooth, tailing off late.

“Nice arm speed on the change,” he said, still not smiling, but more engaged now. “Let’s go slider next. Give me eight.”

I adjusted my grip and got after it. The first one sailed a little. I tightened up the next throw and it had a sharp, late break.

Lenny didn’t interrupt, he just tracked velocity and location, checking boxes on the clipboard. When I finished the set, he finally spoke up.

“Give me ten heaters. Show me what you’ve got.”

I fired ten fastballs at Jorge, each one popping his mitt with a solid thwack. They sounded like the right velocity, but Lenny stayed quiet behind the radar gun, and I wasn’t about to lose focus just to chase a number.

“Last ten. Mix ’em. Add a couple curveballs. Throw what feels right.”

So I did. Fastball. Slider. Changeup. A curveball that arced in low and froze Jorge just long enough for a reaction.

He stood, lifted his mask, and tossed the ball back to me.

“That one was dirty.”

I smiled in response as he got back into position.

I threw the rest of the sequence with focus and fire, each pitch landing just where I wanted.

By the end of the session, sweat dripped down my back, but I didn’t feel drained. I felt electric. Like someone had plugged me back into who I used to be.

After the last pitch, I dropped the ball into Jorge's glove and gave him a nod.

"Thanks for catching."

He peeled off his gear.

"Good working with you, man. You're sharp."

I wiped the sweat from my neck and nodded.

"I appreciate it."

He gathered his things and gave me a nod before heading out.

I walked over to where Ray was having a conversation with my manager and coaches.

Lenny gave me a satisfied smile.

"That was impressive. Your arm looks healthy, and your mechanics are clean. The velocity and movement? Exactly where we need you. You topped off at 99 and the rest of your fastballs were between 95 and 97."

Elmer gave me a quick, approving nod.

"Welcome back. We're counting on you this season."

Kenny Hanover clapped me on the shoulder, his enthusiasm barely contained.

"Can't wait to see you back on the mound."

After wrapping things up, I headed to the locker room for a quick shower.

I towed off, threw on fresh sweats and a Waves hoodie, and laced up my sneakers, the hum of adrenaline still buzzing beneath my skin.

The bullpen session had gone even better than I expected.

The velocity was there, my command felt locked in, and every pitch came out of my hand like it knew exactly where to go.

When I stepped out of the locker room, Ray was waiting by the doors, phone in one hand.

He raised a brow when he saw me.

“Feel good?”

I grinned and nodded.

“Yeah, I feel like me again.”

We pushed through the double doors and stepped into the crisp Fayetteville afternoon. The sky was blue, the sun sharp but not punishing, and the air carried that strange mix of pine and potential.

“You looked sharp out there. It’s exactly what they wanted to see.”

We walked to his car in companionable silence, the kind that only comes after something big has settled in your chest. The kind that says yeah, you did it, but also, it’s only just beginning.

As we pulled out of the parking lot, I glanced back at the facility in the rearview mirror. It felt good to leave it on a high note.

“Think they’ll put me in the rotation right away?” I asked.

Ray smirked.

“After that? They’d be insane not to.”

I leaned my head against the seat, a slow grin tugging at my mouth.

Yeah. I’m back.

Hope

The last beginner class of the day was absolutely chaotic, and that was putting it mildly.

January always brought in the resolution crowd, but this year felt different, like every single person in town had decided that this would be the year they’d finally get their act together.

Bodies were packed into every corner of the studio standing on wall-to-wall yoga mats, all slightly askew like drunken dominos.

I weaved between sweaty beginners, adjusting postures and offering modifications.

“Remember to breathe,” I whispered to Janet Mills as she attempted warrior two like she was wrestling with an invisible opponent. “The pose should serve you, not the other way around.”

By the time we reached savasana, I think I was more exhausted than half the students. Ava usually leads this class solo, but with the overflow crowd, I'd jumped in to help.

As students rolled up their mats and filtered out with promises to “definitely come back next week,” I walked into my office and spotted my phone on the desk, screen glowing with a missed text from Sam.

Just finished. Heading home now

How did it go?

Better than expected. Velocity was solid, command felt good.

That's amazing!

Thanks. Still processing everything.

My last class just ended and I'm heading to The Tavern with Ava. I'll call you when I get home?

Perfect.

Drive safe

Ray is at the wheel. I'm just a passenger princess.

I slipped the phone into my leggings just as Ava walked through the door.

“Ready?” she asked, as she grabbed her tote bag.

“God, yes. I'm starving.”

The chilly air felt good after the heat of the studio as we walked the three blocks to The Starlight Tavern.

Early Saturday evenings here were predictable in the best way—locals unwinding from the week, college kids home for the weekend, and the comforting hum of conversation mixing with whatever game played on the mounted TVs.

We slid into our usual booth and within minutes, our server appeared with raised eyebrows.

“Let me guess,” she said. “Two burgers, medium, extra pickles for Hope, sub sweet potato fries for Ava, and a pitcher?”

“Perfect,” I said.

“You know us too well, Sarah,” Ava laughed.

We do order different things during the week, but for some reason, that’s our usual Saturday order.

Sarah stepped away to put our orders in and returned a minute later with our pitcher. Ava filled our mugs and once we each took a healthy sip, she leaned back and fixed me with a look that I knew meant business.

“Alright,” she said, setting her glass down with purpose. “Spill it.”

“Spill what?”

“Don't even try that with me. Something's been eating at you since you got back from that wedding with Sam, and I'm tired of pretending I don't notice. Clearly you're not going to spill unless I drag it out of you, so consider this me dragging.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I tried weakly, but even I could hear how unconvincing it sounded.

“You’ve got that little crease between your eyebrows that only shows up when you're overthinking something. Come on. What happened?”

Our food arrived, giving me a moment to gather my thoughts, but Ava wasn't letting me off the hook. She waited, patient but determined, until I finally caved.

“Sam’s friends and their partners were warm, funny, and totally welcoming. They really made me feel welcome, like I was part of the group.”

“That’s great, but I’m sure it’s not what’s been on your mind.”

I took a bite of my burger and chewed, collecting my thoughts.

“At one point, they started talking about how hard it is during the season. And I started thinking about what that would actually look like for Sam and me.” The words tumbled out faster.

“He’ll be gone between February to September, possibly October.

” I picked up a fry and gestured with it.

“And they all live in Myrtle Beach so they see their guys during home games and off days. I’m a state away, so I’d literally have to travel if I wanted to see him during the season. ”

“And you don’t know how you’ll make it work?”

“I don’t know if I can make it work. I’m not twenty-two with no roots. I can’t just up

and follow him around the country. I have the studio and all my other commitments.”

Ava nodded slowly then took another sip of beer as she studied me.

“What else?”

“What do you mean, what else? Isn’t that enough?”

“Hope, what you just talked about is logistics. Schedule conflicts. But I’m guessing there's something deeper.”

I met her eyes across the table, seeing the gentle challenge there. This is why I need Ava in my life. She pushes me to be honest, especially with myself.

“I don’t not trust him . It’s the situation.

I keep thinking about all those stories you hear about professional athletes on the road.

The temptation, the opportunities.” I swallowed a sip of beer.

It tasted sharp and bitter. “And we’re new.

We haven’t even defined what we are yet.

If I only get scraps of him, if we’re in different places more than half the time, how can we build something real?

What if I’m just someone who filled the off-season? ”

Ava didn’t speak right away. She studied me with those thoughtful eyes of hers,

completely unfazed by the emotional dump truck I'd just backed up and unloaded.

"You love him?" she finally asked.

I nodded, the answer loud in my heart even if my mouth couldn't form the word.

She reached across the table and squeezed my hand.

"Those are valid concerns, Hope. Anyone in your position would be thinking the same things."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do." She took in a breath and let it out. "But the real question is, do you trust him?"

"Yeah."

"Then trust him with this conversation. Trust him enough to tell him what you're worried about instead of building up these fears in your head."

I stared down at the scarred table, its jagged lines echoing the ones forming in my chest. Ava's right—I know it—but the thought of that conversation feels like walking into a storm I've been pretending isn't on the radar.

Saying it out loud to her cracks the surface.

Saying it to Sam? That's when the dam breaks.

"I know that look," Ava said. "You're catastrophizing again."

"I'm not?—"

“You are. You're sitting there imagining every way the conversation could go wrong instead of considering that it might actually help.” She leaned forward, her voice gentle but firm. “Hope, you have to talk to him. You can't build a relationship on assumptions and fears.”

The tavern noise faded around us as her words sank in.

She's right, of course. I'd been carrying this weight for weeks, letting it grow heavier with each day I didn't address it. The truth of it hit hard, loosening something that'd been knotted up inside me, but also stirring up a fresh wave of doubt.

“Is it ridiculous that I'm even this worked up? I mean, we haven't been together that long. Maybe I'm being crazy.”

“Hope. Stop.” She gave me a look that cut through all my second-guessing.

“It doesn't matter if it's been two months or two years, you're in it.

You fell, he fell, and it was mutual and fast and real.

Time doesn't determine whether your feelings count.

You do.” She reached over and squeezed my hand.

“You're not being ridiculous,” she added gently.

“You're being brave enough to care. That's never a bad thing. ”

I blinked at her, the lump in my throat catching me off guard.

“What if he thinks I don't believe in us?”

The words tumbled out before I could second-guess them.

“What if he thinks you don't believe in you ?” she countered. "Hope, you're not some helpless girlfriend who has to just accept whatever comes. You're a partner. You get a say in how this works."

I took a long drink of beer, letting the cold liquid calm my nerves.

“When did you get so wise?”

“I've always been this wise. You just haven't been listening.” She grinned, but then her expression grew serious again. “Promise me you'll talk to him. Soon.”

The weight of her expectation settled over me, but for the first time in weeks, it didn't feel crushing. It felt like possibility.

“Okay,” I said. “I promise.”

Ava raised her glass.

“To difficult conversations and the people brave enough to have them.”

As I clinked my glass against hers, I caught sight of my reflection in the tavern window. For a split second, I looked like someone who was ready for whatever came next. The question is, will I still feel that way when I'm having this conversation with Sam?

Chapter Twelve

Sam

The garlic sizzled when it hit the olive oil, filling the kitchen with that familiar warmth that always reminds me of Sunday dinners growing up.

I pushed the minced cloves around the pan with a wooden spoon, watching them turn golden while the smell wrapped around me like a comfortable blanket.

I added the boneless chicken breasts to brown.

They crackled, releasing the perfect combination of rosemary, thyme, and oregano I'd rubbed in earlier.

I was reaching for the bottle of white wine when Mom wandered into the kitchen, her shoes clicking against the hardwood. She perched on one of the stools at the island, crossed her legs and watched me with that expression I knew meant she had something on her mind.

"You look nice," I said, pouring wine into the pan. "Where are you headed tonight?"

"Dinner with the girls from book club." She picked up a piece of the prosciutto I'd been dicing and popped it into her mouth. "This smells amazing, by the way."

I couldn't help but smile at that. Mom always said cooking was how you told someone you cared without saying a word. And with Hope, there was plenty I wasn't

saying, but I was definitely trying to show it.

“Thanks. It’s inspired by Nonna’s Sunday chicken recipe,” I said. “She used bone-in thighs and laid the prosciutto over the top like a blanket. I’m using boneless breasts and mixing the prosciutto in.”

“Mmm.” Mom nodded approvingly, then tilted her head slightly. “So are you going to talk to Hope tonight?”

I glanced up from where I was sprinkling prosciutto over the chicken.

“About what?”

She let out a groan so dramatic it belongs on a stage.

“The season, Sammy. Baseball. You know, the thing that’s going to swallow your life again soon?”

The water I’d set on the back burner earlier started to boil and I dropped in a pound of linguine.

“I think we’re good.”

“Men,” she muttered under her breath. “Clueless.”

“I’m not clueless,” I said.

“If you had a clue, you’d know how much that girl values stability. Your schedule is anything but.”

“We talked about how hard the season is at Leo’s wedding. We haven’t talked about

specifics, sure, but I figured we'd just..." I searched for the words. "...make it work."

"It's not that simple, Sammy."

I thought back to the way the women had swapped stories about the grind of the season, and how somehow, it all worked out.

Hope had jumped into the conversation, listening intently and asking thoughtful questions.

She didn't seem overwhelmed or uneasy, so I assumed we were on the same page. But maybe I shouldn't assume.

The truth is, I've never had to think about this before. The only person I ever had to factor into my schedule was Mom, and she adapted to the rhythm of my life a long time ago.

I've never dated someone I actually wanted in the stands, on the road, in the day-to-day mess of it. Until Hope.

"I didn't realize..." I started, then shook my head. "I'll talk to her."

Her expression softened.

"You're a good man, Sammy." She stood and pressed a quick kiss to my cheek. "Just don't wait too long. You leave for spring training in a couple weeks."

That said, she turned and walked out the front door.

I stepped back to the stove and carefully lifted the chicken out of the pan, setting it onto a warm platter.

The skillet sizzled as I poured in a healthy dose of white wine.

I stirred, scraping up all the caramelized bits stuck to the bottom, then let it reduce until the aroma filled the kitchen.

Next, I added heavy cream and a handful of parmesan, mixing it all together into a silky sauce before lowering the heat.

Just as it started to thicken, the doorbell rang.

I wiped my hands on a towel and headed to the door.

Hope stood on my doorstep looking absolutely beautiful in a soft blue sweater that made her eyes look even more incredible than usual.

“Something smells good.” She stepped inside. “What did you make?”

I pulled her in for a quick kiss and shut the door behind us.

“My nonna called it Sunday chicken,” I said as we walked into the kitchen. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“Famished.”

After draining the pasta, I added it to the pan with the sauce and gave it a good toss until every noodle was coated. Then I grabbed a handful of parmesan and scattered it over the top, watching it melt into the sauce like the final layer of comfort on a dish that already felt like home.

I made up two plates, piling each high with pasta and topping it with chicken. Hope followed me into the dining room, and we settled next to each other at the table.

“This looks like something out of a restaurant.”

“Thanks. I hope you like it.”

Hope sliced into the chicken, then twirled pasta onto her fork, stacking it just right for a perfect bite. She slipped the bite into her mouth, and a low, satisfied moan followed almost instantly.

“This is so good,” she said, after swallowing.

Before I could even thank her, she was already going in for another bite, smaller this time, but just as enthusiastic. Watching her enjoy it lit something warm in my chest. My effort had landed exactly where I’d hoped it would.

As we ate, we settled into quiet conversation. But something felt different tonight. She was laughing at the right moments, asking the right questions, but there was a distance in her eyes.

“Hope,” I said. “Is everything okay?”

She looked up at me, and I saw something flicker across her face...uncertainty, maybe, or resolve. She set her own fork down, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

“There's something I want to talk to you about.”

Hope

“What's wrong?”

I took a sip of wine, buying myself a few seconds.

“I've been thinking about the season. About what happens when you leave in February.”

“Okay.”

He leaned back in his chair, waiting.

“Sam, you'll be gone for seven months, eight if you make the playoffs.” I forced myself to meet his eyes. “That's more than half the year.”

“Yeah, that's how baseball works,” he said with a lopsided grin, like he was waiting for me to catch up and tell him the real issue.

I continued before I lost my nerve.

“And I don't live in Myrtle Beach. I can't just drive over for home games or hang out with you on off days.”

“So you'll come visit when you can.”

It seemed so obvious to him, so simple.

“When I can?” I repeated, feeling that familiar knot tightening in my chest. “Sam, I own a business and have other commitments besides that. I can't just drop everything and fly to whatever city you're in.”

“Then we'll figure it out.” He reached across the table for my hand. “We'll make it work.”

I pulled my hand back as frustration bubbled up.

“How? How exactly are we going to make it work? Because I've been trying to figure that out for a week, and I can't.”

The easy confidence in his expression wavered.

“What are you saying?”

“I'm saying I don't know how to do this.” The words came out shakier than I intended. “I don't know how to be with someone who's gone more than they're here. I don't know how to build something real when we're living in different states for seven months out of the year.”

He was quiet for a long moment, his jaw working like he was choosing his words carefully.

“Are you asking me to choose?”

“No.” I said quickly.

The thought that he'd think I was asking him to give up his career for me had never once entered my mind.

“Because it sounds like you are.”

“I swear I'm not. I'm just trying to be realistic about what this looks like going forward.” I sat back in my chair. “You have a whole life that I can't be part of, a career that takes you away for months at a time. And I have a life here, one I can't just put on hold.”

“I never asked you to put your life on hold.”

“But that’s what it would take, isn’t it?”

” I said, the words tumbling out before I could soften them.

“I keep thinking about that conversation at Leo and Anjannette’s wedding, when all your teammates’ wives talked about how hard it is.

And they live in the team’s home city, Sam.

They’re already where you are. And even then, it sounded like a logistical nightmare.

” I shook my head, the pressure building behind my ribs.

“To make this work, I’d have to be the one making all the compromises.

I’d have to rearrange my schedule and squeeze into the margins of your life and hope that’s enough. ”

He dragged his fingers through his hair.

“So what do you want to do?”

“I don't know, Sam. That's the problem. I don't know.”

“You don't know, or you don't want to try?”

The question stung.

“That's not fair.”

“Isn't it?” His voice was getting harder now. “You're sitting here telling me all the

reasons this won't work instead of looking for ways it could.”

“I'm being practical.”

“Practical or scared.”

We stared at each other across his dining room table, the half-eaten dinner growing cold between us like a quiet reminder of everything we weren't saying. I could see the hurt in his eyes, the confusion. He genuinely didn't understand why I couldn't just trust that we'd figure it out.

“Maybe I am scared,” I admitted. “Maybe I'm scared that I'll end up being the girl who only gets phone calls and texts for seven months. Maybe I'm scared that you'll realize it's easier to be with someone who can follow you around, someone who doesn't have their own life that conflicts with yours.”

His expression softened, and he shifted his chair closer, inch by inch, until his knees bumped gently against mine.

“Hope, I love you.”

His words hit me like a punch to the chest, not because I didn't want to hear them, but because of the timing. Because of everything else we hadn't figured out yet, everything still hanging in the air between us.

“I know I should have said it sooner,” he continued, his voice quieter now. “But I've never said that to anyone before, didn't think I ever would. But I love you. I'm all in with this, with us. Whatever it takes, however we have to make it work, I want to try.”

I took a shaky breath and reached for his hand.

“I love you too, Sam. I really do. I just wish we had a way to fix this, some kind of solution. Because right now, it feels like we’re just hoping it’ll work, without knowing how.”

He nodded slowly.

“I can’t say I know how to make this work, I just know I don't want to lose you.”

“I don't want to lose you either. But I also don't want to spend the next however many years wondering if what I can offer is enough for you.”

“You think you're not enough?”

The disbelief in his voice was genuine.

“I think distance is hard. I think seven months apart is really hard. And I think we're kidding ourselves if we pretend it won't change things.”

“So what are you expecting?”

The question hung in the air between us. What was I expecting? For him to magically solve this? For baseball to become less demanding? For me to suddenly be okay with seeing my boyfriend a handful of times over seven months?

“I don't know,” I whispered.

“Hope, how do we make this work?”

He sounded almost panicked.

I looked at him and saw the love, frustration, and desperation written all over his face.

He'd just told me he loved me, words I'd been waiting to hear, words that should have made everything better. Instead, they made it worse, because now I knew exactly what we'd be losing.

“I don't know.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because I don't.” My voice cracked. “I've tried to figure it out, Sam. I've run through every scenario, every possibility, and I can't see how this doesn't end with one of us getting hurt.”

I didn't say the words again. But I met his eyes and let him see everything—the uncertainty that kept me awake at night, the fear that I was kidding myself, and the stubborn hope that refused to die. From the way he looked back at me, I knew he'd heard everything I hadn't said.

Chapter Thirteen

Sam

The last two weeks without Hope had been absolute hell. Not the dramatic, fiery kind of hell you see in movies, but the slow, suffocating kind that creeps into every quiet moment and reminds you what's missing.

I missed everything about her—the way she'd scrunch her nose when she concentrated, her bright smile, and the gentle warmth of her hands during our Reiki sessions when the whole world seemed to fade away except for the two of us.

After zipping my duffel bag closed, I gave the room a final once-over.

I have enough clothes that I don't have to worry if I forget to pack something, but I don't want to leave without my electronics and chargers.

All the surfaces were empty, so I stepped out of my room, closed the door behind me, and headed downstairs.

Mom sat on the couch, not even pretending she wasn't just waiting for me.

“So,” she said, the single word dripping with accusation. “You're really leaving without seeing Hope?”

I set my duffel on the floor and sat on the chair across from her.

“I left the ball in her court, Mom,” I said. “Maybe we just need some time apart.”

“You haven’t seen each other in two weeks,” she pointed out. Then she sighed and added, “I’ve stayed out of it, hoping you two would come to your senses on your own.”

“And I appreciate that.”

“But maybe I should talk to her.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

I didn’t have a good answer, so I didn’t give one at all.

What I do have is a letter. An honest-to-goodness handwritten letter on looseleaf paper I found in my desk.

I’d poured everything into it—how much she meant to me, how sorry I was for pushing too hard, how willing I was to wait while she figured things out.

And tucked in with those words was an open-ended ticket to Tampa with her name on it.

No pressure, no timeline—just an invitation to take a chance.

The envelope weighed down the front pocket of my hoodie, sealed with more hope than I cared to admit.

I didn’t know if it would change anything, but I had to try.

I stood, walked across the room, and stopped in front of Mom.

“Would you give this to Hope for me?” I pulled out the letter, trying to keep my voice casual.

Mom took it, studying my face with those sharp eyes that missed nothing.

“Of course, honey.”

“Thanks.”

She stood and followed me toward the door.

“You know you two are perfect for each other.”

“I do.” I picked up my duffel. “Now I just need Hope to know it too.”

“She does, she’s just scared.” She patted my back. “You’ll figure it out.”

We headed out to the truck and I opened the door and tossed my bag into the passenger seat. When I turned to say goodbye, Mom pulled me into one of her fierce hugs that reminded me I'd always be her little boy, no matter how tall I'd grown or how old I am.

“Call me when you get to Myrtle Beach,” she said, pressing a kiss to my cheek.

“I will.”

I should have taken the direct route to the highway and left the past two weeks behind me. Instead, I found myself driving past Hope's studio.

The lights were off, the front windows dark, and there wasn't a single car in the lot. I lingered in the street, staring at the reflection of my truck in the glass, until a car appeared behind me.

I pulled away telling myself I wasn't being a total weirdo. I just wanted to see her face before I leave, even if it's from a distance. My pulse picked up as her house came into view, but the driveway was empty.

Frustration twisted my gut and I gripped the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white. I eased back onto the road and headed toward the highway.

Mom has the letter, and I know she'll get it to Hope as soon as she can. If that doesn't do the trick, I'll come up with a Plan B. Maybe even a Plan C. Because walking away? That's not in my playbook. Not now, not ever.

Hope

I moved the yoga mats and blocks around for the third time, trying to find some configuration that felt right. But nothing did.

The space looked fine. It was clean, organized, and even peaceful I suppose, but something about it was off. Like the energy didn't know where to land, like the air was holding its breath no matter where I stood.

I'd even smudged the room, but it still felt off. Not wrong, exactly—just not mine. Or maybe not mine today.

I paused, barefoot on the hardwood, and let my arms fall to my sides. The diffuser puffed quietly in the corner, the scent of lavender and rosemary curled through the stillness. Everything was exactly where it should be.

And yet nothing was right.

I couldn't shake the sense that something inside me had shifted, just a little. Just enough to make everything familiar feel unfamiliar. A half-step out of sync.

No amount of rearranging could fix it.

Taking in a deep breath, I let it out slowly, hoping it would calm my thoughts.

Two weeks. I haven't seen him in two weeks, but that doesn't mean I haven't felt him everywhere.

He left town yesterday. Not that knowing he's not here helped anything. The only thin sliver of relief was knowing I wouldn't bump into him now. No unexpected heart punches. No faking a smile I didn't have.

A knock on the front door snapped me out of my mental spiral. I turned just in time to see it creak open. Liz stepped inside, her eyes soft and familiar. She didn't say a word, just walked straight over and pulled me into her arms.

Without hesitation I held on and buried my face in her shoulder. It was stupid, how much it helped. How badly I needed someone to say, Yeah, this hurts. Especially when that someone was his mother.

When I finally let go, I wiped the corner of my eyes with the sleeve of my shirt. Liz pulled back and gave me a look that said she saw right through me.

"You don't need to tell me how you're doing," she said gently. "It's written all over you."

I nodded, my throat too tight to form words.

“If it helps,” she added, “he’s looked just as wrecked these past couple of weeks.”

It didn’t help. Not really. Misery doesn’t cancel misery.

Liz lifted her hand, revealing an envelope I hadn’t noticed she was holding. She held it out to me.

“It’s from Sam.”

I took it carefully, like it might burn me. My name was written across the front in bold, script. I stared at it like it might tell me what was inside if I looked long enough.

Liz touched my arm.

“If you want to talk after you read it, you know where to find me.”

And just like that, she slipped out, leaving me alone with the echo of her words and a letter that felt too heavy in my hands.

I locked the studio door, switched off the main lights, and made my way back to the office. The comfy chair in the corner called to me, and I sank into it with a slow exhale.

My hands trembled as I opened the envelope and carefully unfolded a sheet of loose-leaf paper.

Hope,

I’ve started and stopped this letter a dozen times. Maybe a hundred. Nothing I say feels big enough. Not for this. Not for you.

I love you. So much. I'm not sure I ever understood what love could feel like until you cracked my heart open. You see me—like, really see me. Not just the pitcher or the rehab story or the guy trying to keep his shit together. You see the whole mess and somehow, you still love me.

It killed me to leave without talking to you again, but I thought it was best. I've had a lot of time to think in the last two weeks, and I know that I want you, I want this, I want us.

I know it won't be easy. You've got roots in Starlight Shores, deep ones.

The community is part of you and I'd never ask you to rip them out for me.

But I also know baseball won't last forever.

Ten years, maybe, if I'm lucky. And after that, we'd have the rest of our lives to build something together anywhere you want.

I don't need an answer right away. I just needed you to know I'm not giving up. Not on you. Not on us.

There's an open-ended ticket to Tampa in the envelope. You can use it on any flight whenever you can make it. If you can make it.

I hope you can make it.

Because I can't imagine going through all of spring training without seeing you.

I love you.

Sam

I read it again.

And again.

And again, until the paper was soft from my fingers and my tears had blurred the ink in one corner.

When I finally slid the letter back into its envelope, the ache lingered, stubborn and raw, but underneath it, something new was taking shape. A quiet clarity, steady and sure, pushing past the uncertainty.

Chapter Fourteen

Sam

I stepped out of the dugout and took my time walking across the field, like if I moved too fast this all might vanish. After blowing out my elbow eighteen months ago, I spent the better part of that time wondering if I'd ever take this walk again.

Looking around, I took in all the sights of Victory Park, wanting to savor the moment.

Chalk lines cut sharp as knives down the baselines, and the outfield grass was striped so perfectly it almost looked fake.

The air was thick with a mix of baked dirt and pine tar, and somewhere close, the smell of grilling burgers wove through the afternoon air.

As I reached the mound, I bent down and picked up the rosin bag, feeling its familiar weight in my palm. Dropping it behind me, I toed the rubber and spotted Leo standing behind home plate sixty feet six inches away. I held up my glove and he tossed me the ball.

I've thrown thousands of pitches during rehab and nailed an almost flawless bullpen session in front of the coaches, trainer, and doctors. But this is real.

I threw my eight warm-up pitches, each one snapping into Leo's glove with a solid pop. My fastball's feeling tight, and that curve's got a sharp eleven-to-five drop like I

want. The ball felt alive in my hand, as if it remembered me, just like I remembered it.

Leo jogged out to the mound and Jack and Monte joined us.

“You look sharp, Sam. Just like old times.”

Jack clapped me on the shoulder.

“Keep it simple and trust your stuff.”

“You got this,” Monte said.

We all bumped gloves and I settled onto the mound, alone with my thoughts.

I took the time to mentally give myself a little pep talk because this is what I’ve been working toward for eighteen months.

No matter what happens, I have to trust myself.

Trust the work, trust the rehab, trust that I’m ready.

The umpire gestured for play to start and the first batter stepped into the box.

The noise from the crowd faded into a dull roar, a distant hum beneath the pounding of my heart as I tuned them out to focus. Leo crouched behind the plate, signaling for a fastball.

With a quick nod, I started my windup, pulled my arm back, then brought it over the top and followed through, landing right at the edge of the grass. I watched the ball smack right into Leo’s glove. He didn’t have to move a muscle.

Strike one.

Next pitch was a curveball that made the batter jump out of the box, but it landed right on the outside corner.

Strike two.

After a slider in the dirt, Leo put down the sign for another fastball that I placed right on the inside corner for called strike three.

The crowd cheered. And even though it's a fraction of the size of First Allegiant Bank Park, it's no less enthusiastic.

The next batter stepped up to the plate, cracking his knuckles like he was ready to send one into orbit. Leo gave me the sign for a fastball low and away. I nodded, wound up, and put it right where it needed to be, sliding across the corner like it was on a string. Strike one.

The batter dug in, trying to time me better on the next pitch. I mixed in a changeup, slow and sneaky, and the batter swung early, missing by a mile. Strike two.

For the third pitch, Leo went back to a fastball, right down the middle this time. The guy swung hard, too hard, and sent a lazy grounder to second. Oskar Marquez scooped it up and fired to first for the second out.

The third batter went after the first pitch and lined it right into Jack Reagan's glove for the third out. Kicking off my first game back with a quick three up, three down inning felt pretty damn good.

I stepped into the dugout and dropped onto the bench, my heart pounding like I'd just sprinted a double.

Adrenaline still surged through me, and honestly, I didn't want it to fade.

The scars on my arm were a reminder that I was still here, still fighting—and I wasn't the same pitcher who'd blown out his arm.

I was sharper, smarter, and hungrier than ever.

And now that my career's finally moving in the right direction, it's time to figure things out with Hope and get my personal life on track too. No question, that's going to be tougher than coming back from surgery.

But I was ready for it.

Hope

I followed Hannah Reagan through the stadium corridors, my heart hammering against my ribs.

Two weeks. Ava had insisted I take two full weeks to visit Sam.

She's even using some of her vacation time from her day job to cover my classes.

And before I left, we'd already started planning how to revamp the studio schedule when I get back and maybe even hire another instructor so I'd have more flexibility during baseball season.

Hannah glanced back at me with a knowing smile.

"Nervous?"

"Terrified," I admitted, clutching my purse tighter.

Thankfully she'd given me her number at Leo and Anjanette's wedding and said to call if I ever needed anything. When I reached out about surprising Sam, she'd immediately offered to help pull it off.

“Here we are.” Hannah opened the door to a private suite. “Normally we sit in the regular seats, but we don't want Sam spotting you and getting thrown off his game. And with the sun reflecting off the glass, he won't be able to see you in here.”

Her caution made sense, considering this was his first game back after surgery.

“The other ladies will be up in a minute,” Hannah said.

The last word had barely left her mouth when Ivy, Chloe, and Abby filed in, all warm hugs and excited chatter about my surprise visit. They told me that Karen and Sabrina would arrive later, but Nori wasn't in St. Pete yet but would be here in two days.

“Oh, he's back on the mound,” Ivy said.

I found myself completely captivated despite knowing almost nothing about baseball. But even I know that the fact that no one reached base is a good thing.

“He looks good,” Abby said as the Waves headed off the field. “Like the old Sam. Totally locked in.”

“I take it that's a good thing.” They all laughed at my cluelessness. “Obviously I have a lot to learn about baseball.”

“You'll learn,” Ivy said. “I didn't know a thing when Rusty and I first started dating and now I can tell the difference between breaking balls.”

I watched the game, sometimes talking with the other women about everything and

nothing, sometimes falling completely silent as Sam faced challenging batters. I was completely invested in every pitch and totally disappointed when another pitcher walked out to the mound in the fifth inning.

“Why are they taking him out?” I asked. “I thought he was doing well.”

“Actually, I’m surprised they kept him for four full innings,” Hannah said. “It’s his first outing since surgery so they’ll be careful with his arm.”

With Sam off the mound, my attention drifted away from the game. Instead, I split my time between chatting with the ladies and searching the dugout for glimpses of Sam. Every time I spotted him, my heart skipped a beat.

Before I knew it, the game was over. The Waves won, 3-0.

“You ready?” Hannah asked, as she stood and adjusted her lanyard.

I nodded and followed her down the steps through the quiet interior of the stadium. She led me past security and down toward the dugout.

“Wait here,” she said, then slipped inside.

I stood alone for a moment, the noise of the world muffled around me. And then Sam appeared. He stopped short the moment he saw me then climbed the shallow steps like he couldn’t do it fast enough. I barely had time to breathe before his arms wrapped around me, and his lips pressed against mine.

“Hi,” I whispered, when he pulled back.

“You’re here,” he said, voice rough. “You’re really here.”

I nodded, tears springing to my eyes.

“Ava’s covering the studio, and when I get back, we’re reworking the schedule, and maybe even hiring another instructor. I want to be able to travel during the season. I want to be with you, Sam. I’m all in.”

“You really mean that?”

“Every word,” I said, laughing through my tears. “I loved your letter. I’ve read it dozens of times. It wrecked me in the best possible way.”

He exhaled slowly, like he’d been holding his breath for months.

“How long are you here for?” he asked.

“Two weeks.”

“Two weeks,” he repeated, seeming a little stunned, like he had to say it out loud just to believe it.

His eyes locked on mine, wide with something between disbelief and a grin he couldn’t quite hold back.

“You were amazing out there,” I said. “That was some serious big pitch energy.”

Sam chuckled, then pulled me close, and the sounds of the stadium melted into silence as we lost ourselves in the kiss. I had no idea how long we stayed that way before finally pulling back for air.

“We have so much to talk about,” I started, but he silenced me with another kiss.

“Later,” he murmured against my lips, his voice low and a little unsteady. “We’ll figure it all out later. Right now, I just need to hold you and prove to myself that you’re really here.”

And in that moment, wrapped in Sam’s arms, I knew I’d made the right choice.

The flight, the nerves, the waiting were all worth it for this. For the way he looked at me like I was the only thing that made sense in his whole world. For the way I felt in his arms, like maybe I could finally stop holding my breath.

And whatever came next—home or away, wins or losses, long nights or long-distance—I was all in.

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I walked into the living room and found Hope curled up on the couch reading a book she'd picked up at a little bookstore we'd discovered last week. The afternoon sun streamed through the windows, catching the highlights in her hair.

I settled in beside her and gently lifted her feet into my lap. She looked up with a soft smile.

“Give me two minutes to finish this chapter,” she said, already turning back to the page.

Now it's July, and somehow, in the middle of the chaos, the travel, and everything in between we've been making it work. Just like I knew we would.

Hope had hired Melissa, a newly certified yoga instructor, to help run the studio. During the season, Hope split her time between Starlight Shores and wherever I was playing. The studio was thriving, and somehow, we'd found a rhythm that worked for both our lives.

“There.” She closed the book and tucked herself against my side. “I'm all yours until you leave for Seattle.”

The doorbell rang, and I grinned.

“That'll be Mom and Ray.”

“I still can't get over how cute they are together.”

When I'd first suspected something might be brewing between my mom and my agent, I thought it would be weird.

Ray had been like a father figure to me for years, still the idea of him actually becoming family felt complicated.

But watching them together these past few months had been the opposite of awkward.

Ray just fit into our family dynamic like he'd always belonged there.

I opened the door to find them holding hands, Ray holding their bags and Mom practically glowing.

“There's my favorite son and daughter-in-law-to-be,” Mom said, immediately pulling us into a three-way hug.

“You know I'm your only son,” I said as we pulled back.

“And we're not even engaged,” Hope said.

“Yet,” Mom said with a pointed look in my direction.

We walked into the house, and Hope and Mom headed straight for the kitchen, already chatting. Ray set the bags down in the foyer, then followed me into the living room.

“How's the arm feeling?”

“Great. Tomorrow's start should be solid.” I glanced between him and Mom. “You two look disgustingly happy.”

“We are,” Ray said simply. “So do you and Hope.”

“Same”

We hung out for a bit before heading to a local seafood place. Nothing fancy, just good food and a quiet booth in the back.

Ray and I talked shop, while Mom and Hope planned a weekend trip to Asheville to hit the galleries and museums. It felt natural, like this had always been our family dinner table.

“Remember when you first told me about your Reiki sessions?” Ray asked. “I thought you'd lost your mind.”

“I thought it was crazy when Mom suggested it, but it worked.” I chuckled. “However it worked.”

Mom flashed a smug smile.

“Mom knows best.” She shifted her eyes toward Hope. “About everything.”

“I’ll never doubt that again.”

Later, we all headed back to the house. Ray and Mom headed straight to bed, leaving Hope and me to settle out on the deck. The night air was cool, and the steady rhythm of the ocean waves filled the silence between us.

Catching me looking at her, she smiled and said, “What are you thinking about?”

“Just this. Us. How we made it work when it seemed impossible.”

She snuggled closer and rested her head on my shoulder.

“You know what I realized? I spent so much time worrying about whether I could fit

into your world that I forgot you might want to fit into mine too.”

“Starlight Shores was the first place I ever really felt at home, and I can’t imagine living anywhere else full time,” she said. “But you’re my home, too. Traveling and spending time here in Myrtle Beach has definitely kept things interesting.”

“Speaking of keeping things interesting...”

I kissed her forehead and slid my hand into my pocket and pulled out a small velvet box.

It had been burning a hole in my pocket all night. I’d thought about doing this back at the restaurant, but I wanted the moment to be just ours.

Hope's eyes went wide as I settled onto my knee in front of her.

“Sam...”

“Before you say anything, just so you know, Mom has no idea about this,” I said, my voice catching a little.

“I was totally shocked when she called you her daughter-in-law earlier. Honestly, I’ve been carrying this around for two weeks, waiting for the right moment.

” I chuckled softly. “I’m still not sure if this is the moment, but here we are. ”

I reached out, took her hand gently, and looked deep into her eyes.

“Hope Keller, I love you. You fixed my arm, my head, and my heart. You showed me that love isn’t about finding someone who fits perfectly into your life. It’s about finding someone worth rebuilding your whole life around. Will you marry me?”

She was crying before I even finished the question.

“Yes,” she whispered, then said it again louder, “Yes, of course yes.”

I slipped the ring onto her finger—a simple solitaire with tiny compass points around the band, to match her necklace and bracelet—then stood and gently pulled her to her feet to kiss her properly.

“I love you,” she said against my lips.

“I love you too. We're going to have such an amazing life together.”

“Home and away games,” she said with a laugh.

“The perfect season,” I agreed.

We settled back onto the deck chairs, holding each other tight, with the sound of the ocean waves below us and moonlight glinting off the ring on her finger.

And I knew we'd figured out the most important thing of all—sometimes the best pitch you can throw is your whole heart, trusting the right person will be there to catch it.

The End