

ELI SMITH

• Heart of the Team •



Eli Smith: Heart of the Team

By Marvin Mercer

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Chapter 1: The Quiet Hero

The sun hung low over the beach, painting the sky in streaks of orange and pink. The waves whispered secrets to the sand as Eli Smith trudged barefoot along the shoreline, his cleats slung over one shoulder. In his hand, he clutched a worn baseball glove, the leather soft and familiar from years of practice. Beside him, a blur of white and gray streaked across the sand, yipping excitedly. “Chill, Bolt!” Eli laughed, kneeling to scoop up his Siberian Husky puppy. Bolt’s icy blue eyes glimmered with mischief as he wriggled free and darted toward the water again, tail wagging like a metronome.

Eli smiled, the sight of his puppy always lifting the cloud of gloom that seemed to follow him. Life wasn’t exactly easy these days. His dad wasn’t around, never had been, and his mom—well, she tried, but she had her own tangled mess of problems. That left Eli feeling like he had to grow up faster than anyone else, especially for his grandma. “Come on, little man,” he said, scratching Bolt behind the ears. “Grandma’s waiting.” They trudged up the narrow path to the small, weathered house perched on a dune. The scent of salt and jasmine clung to the walls, and a faint light glowed from the kitchen window.

“Eli! You’re late again!” Grandma’s voice carried warmth and exasperation all at once. She shuffled toward the door with her cane, her silver hair pinned neatly, her eyes twinkling despite the lines etched by time. “Sorry, Grandma,” Eli said, smiling. “Bolt wanted to race the waves.” “You let him drag you into the sand again, didn’t you?” she said, wagging a finger. “You’re going to track that beach right into my kitchen.” “Maybe he’ll help me clean it,” Eli joked, though his smile faltered as he looked at her frail hands clutching the cane. He hated thinking about the day she

wouldn't be there anymore. She was the only one who made him feel like he could be brave.

Dinner was a quiet affair. Grandma hummed softly as she served the baked fish Eli loved. He told her about the puppy's antics, making her chuckle, but he didn't mention the way his stomach twisted at the thought of the baseball game tomorrow. He wasn't good enough. Not really. Not like Marcus, who seemed to hit everything with perfect timing, or the other kids who could run circles around him. Eli wanted so badly to be the hero of the team, to make his grandma proud, but the truth was, he felt invisible.

After dishes, he went to his room, tossing his glove on the bed. Bolt jumped up, curling beside him as he stared at the ceiling, watching the shadows dance from the evening light filtering through the blinds. "Tomorrow," he whispered to himself, "I'll try again. Maybe I'll do something right." Bolt nudged his hand, whining softly, as if to say, you can do it, Eli. The puppy's faith was the one thing Eli felt he could count on.

Outside, the wind carried the scent of the ocean, promising both freedom and challenge. Eli didn't know it yet, but the next game would test him in ways far beyond hitting a ball or running bases. And somewhere in the crowd, someone he hadn't noticed before was going to start watching—and slowly, ever so slowly, change everything. For now, Eli closed his eyes, letting the quiet crash of the waves lull him into a restless sleep. The journey was just beginning, and even heroes start small—sometimes with a puppy, a grandma, and a heart full of hope.

