



Melt My Heart: Denver Warlords

Author: *Annee Jones*

Category: Sport

Description: Trusting him is her biggest risk. Falling for him might be her only chance...

STARLA:

I don't have time for distractions. Every moment of my life is choreographed for perfection on the ice, every jump and spin calculated to bring me closer to the Olympic gold. So when I'm paired with Gunnar "Blaze" Hayes for a charity skating routine, I'm furious. A reckless speed skater with no regard for rules? Hard pass. Except I can't ignore the fire he brings to the rink—or the way it sparks something in me I haven't felt in years.

But then the threats begin.

At first, I think it's just nerves or bad luck—skates misplaced, lights cutting out. But now I know better. Someone's targeting me, trying to sabotage my shot at the gold. Can I trust Gunnar to have my back when everything I've worked for is on the line? Or will his chaos cost me everything?

GUNNAR:

Skating fast is my escape. The rush of speed, the blur of the world around me—its pure freedom. Getting roped into some charity show is a joke, yet another PR stunt to clean up my bad-boy reputation. But then there's her. Starla McKenzie. Ice-cold perfection wrapped in grace and curves. She hates my guts, and I can't help but love pushing her buttons.

But when the threats against her turn serious, everything flips. I'll do whatever it takes to keep her safe, even if it means putting myself in the line of fire. The more I get to know her, the harder it is to let go. But can I protect her from the danger closing in—or from my own reckless past catching up to us both?

*This is a fast-paced short and steamy romance perfect for fans of romantic suspense, enemies to lovers, and sports romance novellas! It is the 3rd in Annee Jones' hockey romance series featuring the Denver Warlords team.

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STARLA

The world fell away as I launched into my triple axel. Three and a half rotations in the air, my body a tight pencil spinning through space. For that suspended moment, there was nothing but the whistle of cold air against my face, the perfect control of every muscle. Then my blade struck the ice with a satisfying slice, and I extended my free leg behind me in a flawless landing.

Perfection.

My lungs burned from exertion as I transitioned into a camel spin, my body parallel to the ice, one leg extended straight behind me. I held the position with practiced precision, counting silently in my head. One, two, three... The familiar rhythm of my routine was as comforting as it was demanding.

"Beautiful extension, Starla!" Coach Vivian called from the boards. "Now into the step sequence!"

I flowed into the intricate footwork that had taken months to master, each edge clean, each turn exact. The Denver Olympic Training Center's massive arena was empty except for Vivian and me, our early morning sessions a sacred ritual I'd maintained for years. The ice was freshly resurfaced, gleaming under the harsh lights, offering the perfect canvas for my art.

This was my sanctuary. My battlefield. My everything.

When I finally struck my ending pose—right arm extended toward the ceiling, left

arm wrapped around my waist, chin lifted in defiance—sweat trickled down my spine despite the frigid air.

"Time?" I called out, barely winded.

"Four minutes, twelve seconds," Vivian replied, checking her stopwatch. "Two seconds faster than yesterday."

I frowned, skating toward her. "That's too fast. The music won't match if I rush it."

Vivian Brandenburg, former Olympic silver medalist and the most demanding coach in the country, regarded me with narrowed eyes. At sixty-two, her salt-and-pepper hair pulled into a severe bun, she still carried herself with the posture of a champion. "Then control your tempo. Every element was technically perfect, but you're still skating like you're being chased."

"I am being chased," I replied. "By everyone who wants Olympic gold as badly as I do."

A rare smile tugged at her thin lips. "And that's why you'll win. But first..." She handed me a towel and my water bottle. "We need to discuss something."

I wiped the perspiration from my forehead, dreading her tone. Vivian only used that voice when she was about to throw a wrench into my meticulously planned schedule. "What is it?"

"The Colorado Sports Foundation is hosting a charity exhibition next month. It's for their youth sports programs."

I took a long sip of water. "And you volunteered me."

It wasn't a question. These charity events were part of the deal—good publicity, good for sponsors, good for the Olympic committee to see me supporting community initiatives. I'd done dozens before.

"Yes, but this one's different." Vivian tapped something on her tablet and turned it toward me. "It's a paired exhibition. They're matching figure skaters with different types of athletes for unique performances."

I skimmed the information, my heart sinking. "Paired? With whom? I don't have time to train with a hockey player who can barely skate backwards, Vivian. Olympic qualifiers are in six months."

"It's not a hockey player."

Something in her voice made me look up sharply. "Then who?"

"Gunnar Hayes."

The name hit me like a physical blow. I nearly dropped my water bottle. "The speed skater? Blaze Hayes? Are you kidding me?"

"He's exceptionally talented..."

"He's a disaster waiting to happen!" I cut her off, something I rarely did with Vivian. "I've seen him compete. He's reckless, impulsive, completely unpredictable. Half the time I think he's making up his strategy as he goes along."

"Which is why this pairing will be interesting," Vivian said calmly. "Your precision and his...energy...will create something unique."

I stared at her in disbelief. "This is a joke, right? Please tell me you're joking."

"The event organizers specifically requested you two as the headliners. Both your brothers support the foundation, so it makes sense."

My jaw clenched. Of course Logan was involved. My older brother, the golden boy of the McKenzie family, newly appointed head coach of the Denver Warlords, always managing to complicate my life even when he was trying to help.

"It's going to affect my training schedule," I protested.

"I've already worked it in. Two hours a day with Hayes, five with me. The exhibition is in four weeks. Barely a blip in your calendar."

Fifty-six hours of my life wasted on a publicity stunt with a man who'd once been penalized for skating so recklessly he'd crashed into a referee. Perfect.

"I don't have a choice, do I?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"No." Vivian's expression softened fractionally. "But this isn't just for show, Starla. The Olympic committee members will be attending. It's a chance to showcase your versatility, to prove you can adapt to different styles. That matters to them."

I sighed, knowing when I was beaten. "Fine. When do I meet him?"

"Tomorrow, 8 am, at the Denver Ice Arena. I've already booked the ice time."

Of course she had. Vivian never left anything to chance, a trait I'd inherited from years under her tutelage. I'd built my entire life around control, precision, and meticulous planning. Now I was supposed to share the ice with Gunnar "Blaze" Hayes, a man whose entire reputation was built on doing the exact opposite.

I'd seen him compete once, during last year's World Championships. While most

speed skaters calculated every move, conserving energy for strategic moments, Hayes skated like a force of nature—wild, untamed, pushing boundaries that shouldn't be pushed. He'd won gold, but his method was chaotic, almost violent. The antithesis of everything I stood for on the ice.

"It's one month," Vivian reminded me as I slipped my blade guards on. "Think of it as an exercise in adaptability."

I forced a tight smile. "Right... Adaptability ."

After gathering my things, I headed for the locker room to change. My phone buzzed in my bag just as I was pulling off my skates—Logan calling. Speak of the devil.

"Let me guess," I answered, "you already know about the charity event."

Logan's deep chuckle came through the speaker. "Good morning to you too, sis. And yes, I might have put in a good word for you with the organizers."

"Did you also suggest pairing me with Blaze Hayes?" I asked accusingly.

"Actually, no. That was their idea. But it's brilliant, isn't it? Fire and ice."

I rolled my eyes. "Spare me the marketing taglines."

"Come on, Star, it'll be good for you. Break up the monotony of your training a bit."

"I like monotony," I insisted. "Monotony means consistency. Consistency means gold medals."

"It also means you haven't had a social life since you were fifteen," he pointed out. "When was the last time you went on a date? Or even had a conversation with

someone who doesn't skate?"

I ignored the question. "Does Emberleigh know you're calling to lecture me about my social life?"

"She's actually the one who reminded me to call. She's covering the charity event for her network. Thought you might want a heads-up."

Great. Not only would I be forced to skate with a human tornado, but my brother's girlfriend would be documenting the whole disaster on camera. Emberleigh Quinn was one of the best sports reporters in Denver—professional, insightful, and unfortunately for me, dating my brother and therefore privy to all the McKenzie family drama.

"Remind her no backstage interviews," I said firmly.

"I'll try, but you know Em. When she's on the job, she's relentless." The pride in his voice was unmistakable. Logan had fallen hard for Emberleigh, and I had to admit, they were good together. She'd brought out a softer side of my brother I hadn't seen since before his injury had ended his hockey career.

"Fine. I'll deal with it." I sighed, standing to pull on my leggings. "But seriously, Logan, this Hayes guy isn't just unconventional. He's practically feral on the ice. How am I supposed to create a coherent program with someone who probably doesn't even know what a choreography plan is?"

"Maybe that's the point," Logan said thoughtfully. "You're all about control and precision. He's all instinct and power. You might learn something from each other."

"The only thing I'm going to learn is patience," I muttered. "Lots and lots of patience."

Logan laughed again. "That's the spirit. Listen, I've gotta run...team meeting in five. Just give him a chance, okay...For me?"

"For the Olympic committee," I corrected. "Not for you."

"Whatever works. Love you, sis."

"Love you too," I said automatically before hanging up.

Fifteen minutes later, I was dressed in my street clothes—slim black pants, a gray cashmere sweater, and ankle boots—with my hair released from its tight bun to fall in loose mousy-blond waves down my back. As I reached for my skate bag, I paused, frowning.

It wasn't where I'd left it. I always placed it on the bench to my right, zipped and ready to go. Now it sat on the floor, slightly open, as if someone had rummaged through it.

A flutter of unease passed through me. I checked inside—skates, guards, towel, extra laces, all there. Nothing missing. I must have been more distracted by Vivian's news than I'd realized.

I zipped it carefully and slung it over my shoulder, shaking off the strange feeling. I had bigger problems to worry about. Like how to survive four weeks of skating with Gunnar Hayes without strangling him—or worse, ruining my Olympic preparation in the process.

As I pushed through the exit doors into the crisp January air, I mentally recalculated my schedule. Two hours with Hayes every day meant less time for strength training. I'd have to condense my evening workouts, maybe cut fifteen minutes from my yoga routine. Every minute counted in an Olympic year, and I'd been planning this season

down to the second since I'd narrowly missed qualifying for the last Games.

No distractions, I reminded myself. Hayes was a temporary inconvenience, nothing more. I'd do the charity event, smile for the cameras, and get back to what really mattered.

What I didn't know then—couldn't have known—was that Gunnar 'Blaze' Hayes would prove to be far more than an inconvenience. He would become the most beautiful disruption my carefully controlled life had ever known.

And the most dangerous.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am

GUNNAR

I lived for this—the whisper of steel against ice, the rush of air slicing past my face, the raw speed that made the world blur at the edges. Early mornings at the Denver Ice Arena belonged to me, the wide oval empty except for my lone figure cutting through the silence.

With my legs burning pleasantly and my chest heaving, I leaned into the turn, dropping low enough that my fingertips grazed the ice. Perfectly balanced on the edge of control and chaos, just how I liked it. I raced into the straightaway, pushing harder, faster, chasing that sweet spot where my mind cleared and there was nothing but rhythm and velocity.

"Hayes! Dialing it back today?" Coach Hank Wells shouted from the boards, his stopwatch in hand.

I grinned, pushing harder. Hank knew exactly which buttons to push to get me to accelerate. Another lap, another turn, my body an arrow piercing the cold. When I finally slowed, skating lazy circles to cool down, Hank nodded once—his version of high praise.

"32.4 seconds," he said, showing me the time. "Not bad for a lazy Sunday skate."

I cocked an eyebrow, grabbing my water bottle from the boards. "Lazy? I was flying."

"You were holding back on the turns." Hank crossed both arms over his broad chest.

At forty-five, my coach still had the solid build of a former champion speed skater, though his full beard now showed streaks of gray. "Saving yourself for something?"

I took a long drink, avoiding his gaze. "Just pacing myself."

"Bullshit," he said, not unkindly. "You're distracted. Thinking about this charity thing?"

I rolled my shoulders, uncomfortable with how easily he read me. "It's a waste of my time. I should be training for World Cup qualifiers, not playing exhibition games."

Hank's expression turned shrewd. "You need this after that stunt with the reporter. Your sponsors weren't happy, kid."

I winced at the memory. Two months ago, a sports journalist had ambushed me after a disappointing race, asking if my 'unorthodox style' was finally catching up with me. I'd responded with a colorful suggestion about where he could shove his microphone, punctuated with a raised middle finger. The gesture had been caught on camera, turning into yet another viral moment in the ongoing saga of Blaze Hayes: Bad Boy of Speed Skating .

"It wasn't that bad," I muttered.

"It was worse," Hank countered. "The sport needs personalities, Gunnar, not assholes. This charity event is your chance to show the sponsors you can play nice."

"By skating with the ice princess?" I pulled off my gloves, tossing them into my bag. "She's going to hate every second of it, and honestly, so will I."

"Starla McKenzie?" Hank's eyebrows rose. "She's damn good...Certain Olympic material."

"She's a fucking robot," I countered. "Have you seen her skate? Like someone programmed a computer and stuck it on blades."

"I've seen her skate on many occasions. Her technique is almost perfection." There was a hint of admiration in his voice that annoyed me. "You could learn something from her discipline."

I scoffed. "And she could learn to actually feel something on the ice instead of just following the script."

"Maybe that's why they paired you two," Hank mused, a knowing glint in his eye. "Fire and ice...should make for a good show."

Before I could respond, the arena door opened. I turned, and everything inside me stilled.

She stood in the entrance, silhouetted for a moment before stepping into the light. Starla McKenzie wore simple black leggings and a fitted pale blue jacket, her mousy-blond hair pulled into a severe bun that emphasized her high cheekbones and delicate features. She moved with the fluid grace and confidence of someone who'd spent their life on the ice—and had the wins to show for it. Even in the way she carried her skate bag—balanced perfectly at her side—I could see the control that defined her.

Damn though, she was beautiful—in that untouchable, pristine way that made me instantly want to ruffle her feathers. Despite her petite frame, she carried herself with such authority that she seemed taller than her actual height. And those eyes—emerald-green, sharp, assessing everything in their path.

"You can still learn something from that discipline," Hank murmured beside me, too low for her to hear. Then louder: "Ms. McKenzie! Right on time."

She approached, her haughty gaze sweeping over me before settling on Hank. "Coach Wells," she greeted with a professional nod and polite smile. Then to me, coolly: "Hi, Gunnar."

Not really an enthusiastic introduction, more of a statement. I extended my hand, curious if she'd take it.

"The one and only," I replied with a deliberately casual smile. "Though you can call me Blaze...Everyone does."

She hesitated for a fraction of a second before shaking my hand. Her grip was surprisingly firm, her skin cool against mine.

"I'll stick with Gunnar," she said evenly, withdrawing her hand. "I'm not big on nicknames."

Of course she wasn't. I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

Hank, perhaps sensing the brewing tension, stepped in. "I'll leave you two to get acquainted. Gunnar, remember what we discussed...this matters." He gave me a pointed look before nodding to Starla and heading toward the exit. "I'll check back in an hour."

With Hank gone, an awkward silence fell between us. Starla set her bag down and unzipped to reveal a pair of pristine white figure skates nestled inside.

"So..." I began, leaning against the boards, "How do you want to approach this?"

"In an organized and efficient manner," she replied while concentrating on pulling out her skates. "How else? I've drafted some ideas for routines that might work for our...different styles."

Of course she had a draft ready. Probably color-coded and indexed too.

"You don't think we should, I don't know, maybe talk about our skating backgrounds first? Get to know each other a little?" I suggested.

She glanced up, those green eyes narrowing slightly. "I know who you are, Gunnar. Three-time national champion in short track. Gold at World Championships last year. Known for..." she paused, choosing her words carefully, "...unconventional racing tactics."

"You've done your homework," I acknowledged. "And I know you're Starla McKenzie, figure skating prodigy. Silver at Nationals. Sister of the famous Logan McKenzie. Nicknamed The Ice Queen not only for your skating."

A flicker of something—annoyance? hurt?—crossed her face before it settled back into its neutral porcelain-like mask. "I see my reputation precedes me."

"Just like mine," I countered. "So maybe we should forget what we think we know and start fresh."

"What I know is that we have four weeks to create a coherent routine," she snapped, sitting on the bench to lace her skates. Each loop and pull was strong and sure, the cords crossing in perfect symmetry. "And I'd prefer not to waste time on unnecessary socializing."

"Right...All business...Got it." I pushed off from the boards, skating a slow circle as she finished lacing her skates. "So what's this brilliant routine you've drafted?"

From a small bag, she pulled out a notebook and flipped it open. "I've outlined a four-minute program that incorporates elements from both disciplines. Classical music would be ideal...perhaps Tchaikovsky or..."

"Classical?" I interrupted. "Are you serious? Nobody wants to watch figure skating to classical music anymore."

She looked up sharply. "It's traditional."

"It's boring," I countered. "If we're doing this, we need something with energy. Something that actually makes people want to watch."

Her lips pursed. "The audience for this event includes Olympic Committee members and sponsors who appreciate technical proficiency and artistic interpretation. Not everything needs to be flashy to be impressive."

"And not everything needs to be a museum piece to be good," I shot back. "You figure skaters are all the same...stuck in the past, afraid to try anything new."

"That's not fair," she argued, her voice gaining an edge. "Figure skating has evolved tremendously. But there are standards of excellence that..."

"That...What? Keep it old school? Predictable?" I skated closer, deliberately invading her space. "No wonder they call you the Ice Queen. Have you ever broken a rule even once in your life?"

Her cheeks flushed. "Let's focus on the routine. I thought we could start with a side-by-side section to establish the contrast in our styles, then move into..."

"Side by side?" I shook my head. "That's not a pair routine. That's two people doing their own thing on the same ice. We need to interact."

"Fine." She flipped a page in her notebook. "We can incorporate some basic pairs elements. Synchronized jumps, perhaps a simple lift..."

"A lift?" I perked up at that. "Now we're talking."

She looked wary. "A choreographed, planned lift with proper technique."

"Show me."

"What?"

"Show me this lift you have in mind." I skated toward her.

She took a step back. "We need to work up to that. Practice the approach, the timing..."

"Or we could just try it and see what works," I suggested.

"That's not how this works," she insisted, frustration coloring her voice. "These elements require precision."

"Everything with you does," I muttered. "Do you ever just...you know, skate? Feel the ice, respond to the moment?"

"This isn't improv hour at the comedy club, Gunnar," she said stiffly. "This is a professionally choreographed exhibition."

I sighed dramatically and gave a curl of my arm as I bowed. "Alright, Your Highness. Show me your master plan."

Her eyes flashed. "Don't call me that."

"Then stop acting so high and mighty," I challenged.

The tension between us crackled as she stared at me, clutching her notebook like a shield. "Let's just try the opening sequence I've drafted."

"Fine."

She described a series of maneuvers—crossovers into a synchronized step sequence, followed by side-by-side spins. It all sounded terribly regimented, but I nodded along, determined to at least give it a shot.

"We'll start at opposite corners," she instructed, "then mirror each other as we approach center ice."

I took my position, waiting for her count. On "three," we pushed off simultaneously. I matched her pace, watching her movements from the corner of my eye. The problem wasn't that I couldn't follow her choreography—everything felt mechanical. There was no room for impulse, for creativity.

As we approached center ice, an idea struck me. Instead of turning right as she'd instructed, I veered left, cutting directly into her path.

She barely avoided a collision, her eyes widening in shock. "What are you doing? You were supposed to turn right!"

"I felt like turning left," I shrugged. "Let's try something different."

"We had a plan," she said, her voice tight with frustration.

"Your plan you mean. And it's boring." I circled her slowly. "This routine needs energy, Starla. Spontaneity."

"It needs structure," she countered. "Not chaos."

"Maybe it needs some of both." I stopped in front of her. "Let me show you what I mean."

Before she could protest, I took her hand and pulled her into motion. She stiffened but followed, her training too ingrained to let her falter. I increased our speed, guiding her through a series of turns that flowed naturally into one another.

"Feel that?" I asked. "No counting, no planned sequence. Just responding to the momentum."

"This isn't..." she started, but I cut her off by releasing her hand and accelerating into a series of crossovers.

"Just follow me," I called over my shoulder. "Stop thinking so much."

I heard her skates behind me, felt her presence as she kept pace. For a moment, it seemed like we might actually find a rhythm together. Then I spun around to face her, skating backwards, and extended my hands.

"Trust me," I said. "Let's try that lift."

Her eyes widened. "Absolutely not. We haven't practiced."

"We're practicing now."

"This is insane. We need to..."

I grabbed her waist before she could finish, attempting to lift her in a move I'd seen pairs skaters perform. Two things became immediately apparent: one, she was lighter than I expected, and two, she was not prepared. She gasped, her hands flying to my shoulders, her body rigid instead of flowing with the motion.

The result was disastrous. Instead of a graceful lift, we wobbled precariously. She overcompensated, throwing us off balance. I tried to correct, but it was too late. We tumbled to the ice in an undignified heap, her landing across my chest with a soft "oof."

For a moment, we just lay there, breathing hard. Then she scrambled away from me, her face flushed with anger and embarrassment.

"Are you out of your mind?" she demanded, brushing ice from her leggings. "You could have seriously injured us both!"

I sat up, wincing slightly. "That's a bit dramatic. It was just a stumble."

"Just a stumble?" She glared at me. "Pairs skaters train for years to perform lifts safely. You can't just decide on a whim to try one!"

"Fine, so it didn't work," I conceded, getting to my feet. "But at least it wasn't boring."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Is that what this is about? You're deliberately sabotaging this because you simply don't like my style?"

"I'm trying to inject some life into this routine," I corrected. "Something beyond your clinical, by-the-numbers approach."

"My clinical approach is what prevents injuries," she snapped. "What prevents embarrassment on the ice. What ensures the performance is actually worth watching."

"Does the Ice Queen ever actually smile?" I asked, deliberately goading her now. "Or are you afraid your face might crack if you show a real emotion?"

She stiffened, and I knew I'd hit a nerve. Her emerald eyes flashed with genuine anger. "This partnership is never going to work," she said, her voice cold. "We're too incompatible."

"Now who's being dramatic?" I challenged. "We had one fall. Not exactly the end of the world."

"It's not about the fall," she said, skating toward the exit. "It's about respect. For the craft, for the plan, for basic safety. Something you clearly lack."

"Starla, come on...I'm sorry."

"I'll speak to the organizers," she cut me off. "Perhaps they can find you a partner who doesn't mind your reckless approach. Someone more like you."

I watched, half-amused and half-concerned, as she stormed off the ice, grabbed her guards, and jammed them onto her blades.

"Running away from a challenge now?" I called after her. "Doesn't seem very professional."

She whirled to face me, her cheeks flushed. "I'm not running away. I'm protecting my Olympic prospects from your impulsive stupidity."

With that parting shot, she snatched up her bag and strode toward the door, her posture rigid with anger.

I should have been relieved. This charity nonsense was an inconvenience anyway, a PR stunt I'd been forced into. But as I watched her leave, all I felt was a strange disappointment and...intrigue.

Starla McKenzie wasn't what I expected. Underneath that perfect, controlled exterior was fire—real passion and determination. I'd caught a glimpse of it in her anger, and now I wanted to see more. There was something captivating about the way her eyes flashed, the way her voice gained an edge when challenged. I saw the color rise to her cheeks, and I liked knowing that I was the one who put it there.

And something told me she wouldn't actually quit. She had too much pride, too much determination. She'd be back, if only to prove she could handle anything I threw at her.

I skated lazy circles on the empty ice, replaying our disastrous first session. Fire and ice. Maybe Hank was right—the contrast could make for one hell of a show. If we didn't kill each other first.

A slow smile spread across my face. One thing was certain: working with Starla McKenzie wouldn't be boring. And if there was one thing I couldn't stand, it was boredom.

Tomorrow would be interesting. Now I just had to hope she showed up.

STARLA

I started my day as always: a quick yoga flow in my uncluttered living room, where every piece of furniture had a purpose and no stray items littered the pale bamboo floor. Normally, the steady cadence of controlled breathing kept my thoughts from spiraling. Not this morning, though. My mind kept drifting to Gunnar ‘Blaze’ Hayes and our disastrous first practice.

Exhaling slowly, I tried to push him out of my head. The last thing I needed in my mental space was that cocky grin he wore when he questioned whether I, the so-called, Ice Queen, ever smiled. He was too handsome for his own good, too confident, and definitely too chaotic for me.

I dropped from warrior pose into a gentle forward fold, letting tension flow from my shoulders. Today, I had to apologize for storming off the rink. I never let my emotions get the better of me like that, and it stung to admit I’d lost control. But the clock was ticking. Neither my coach, Vivian, nor the charity event’s organizers would accept me walking away from a partnership they deemed crucial. Four weeks to craft a seamless performance—four weeks to keep the Olympic Committee’s interest. Failure wasn’t an option.

My phone buzzed on the kitchen counter, jolting me. Balancing on one foot, I nearly toppled over. With a sigh, I abandoned the pose and crossed the open space to snatch up the device. Vivian’s name flashed on the screen. Of course it was her.

“Yes, Vivian?” I said, striving for a composed tone.

Her exasperation practically crackled through the line. “Starla, I’ve been leaving messages. The event managers want reassurance this pairing isn’t going to implode.”

“I know,” I replied, trying to clamp down my own frustration. “We clashed at first, but...”

“Fix it,” she cut me off in that no-nonsense voice. “The Committee expects you to prove you’re adaptable as well as technically flawless. Understand?”

I forced a breath. “I won’t let them down.”

When she ended the call, tension churned in my gut. I’d spent my entire life perfecting my discipline—now I had to show the skating world I could handle an unpredictable partner who seemed to court the limelight. Absolutely ideal. I scrolled through my notifications, grimacing at a text from an unknown number:

You deserve better partners.

A chill prickled my skin. My skate bag had been out of place lately, and once or twice I’d felt like someone was watching me at the rink. But I couldn’t jump to conclusions over a single cryptic message. Probably a misguided fan who hated the idea of me teaming with a ‘bad boy’ speed skater.

With a determined shake of my head, I blocked the number and changed into leggings and a hoodie. No time to dwell on random drama—I had a routine to salvage.

After a quick breakfast—egg whites, spinach, and perfectly measured oats—I hopped into my compact SUV and drove through brisk winter air to the Denver Ice Arena. The building rose up behind a row of leafless trees, its facade a blend of glass panels and steel beams that glinted in the pale morning sun. I inhaled the tang of crisp air as

I stepped outside, a reminder that I'd always thrived in the cold—both on the ice and off.

Inside the arena, my footsteps echoed across the polished floors. Light spilled onto the rink from overhead fluorescents. I paused behind the plexiglass, scanning the expanse of meticulously resurfaced ice. That's when I spotted Gunnar mid-sprint, carving a perfect arc with raw power in every stride. Even from afar, he radiated the kind of athleticism that turned heads.

He noticed me and let himself coast, breath fogging in the chilly air. "Morning," he called, voice echoing across the empty rows of seats. His dark hair was slightly damp, a sure sign he'd already pushed himself hard.

Forcing calm, I walked down the aisle, my skate bag hefted over one shoulder. "I'm not one to skip practice. About yesterday..." My stomach knotted around the word apology. "I shouldn't have walked out. We started off badly, and I let my frustration show."

"Apology accepted," he replied, leaning against the boards. The corners of his mouth quirked in an irrepressible smirk. "But come on, Starla...we're total opposites. We need to figure out how to make our differences a selling point."

I mustered a faint scowl. "Interesting or disastrous. We have four weeks to find out."

He clapped his hands, the sound reverberating around us. "So how about we figure out a plan that won't end in homicide?"

I tried not to let relief show on my face. "I...yes. That's exactly what I was thinking."

Gunnar joined me, watching as I laced my boots in the team bench area. His black speed skates had shorter, sharper blades than my figure skates, and I couldn't help

eyeing them warily. Could I trust someone who specialized in speed enough to do spins with me in his arms, let alone lift me up?

We stepped onto the ice together, which was a surreal moment—two different worlds colliding on the same slick surface. The overhead lights gleamed against the freshly resurfaced rink, almost mirror-like in its sheen.

“You color-code your daily schedule, too?” Gunnar teased, side-eying my meticulously arranged phone, water bottle, and choreo notes lined on the boards.

I snorted, pressing “record” on my phone’s voice memo app. “Don’t mock it. My method works.”

“Sure, if you like living in a perfect little box,” he teased back. “But hey, maybe I could use some structure...Not.”

I shot him a look, noticing how broad his shoulders were under that tight performance jacket. He radiated heat in the chilly arena, which was irritatingly distracting. “Focus, please. We only have the rink for a couple hours before the youth hockey team arrives.”

We began by mapping out a rough routine. I insisted on an opening spiral to showcase classical lines—the sort of thing the Olympic Committee appreciated. Gunnar demanded an explosive segment that emphasized speed and power. We agreed on weaving them together, creating a push-pull effect as we navigated from graceful to high-intensity.

“Think of it like a story,” I explained. “We start with elegance, then your wilder energy bursts in, eventually merging into a final demonstration of synergy.”

He arched a brow. “Synergy, huh? That’s a fancy word for ‘look, we’re not killing

each other.’ ”

“Synergy sounds better,” I said dryly.

We set up a portable speaker on the boards and loaded a track that started with mellow piano and built into a dynamic beat. I took my place at center ice, arms lifted into position, while Gunnar lingered at the far left, knees bent as if about to explode forward.

On my signal, the music began. I moved into a slow, extended spiral, left leg outstretched behind me, chest lifted. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Gunnar powering around me in a fluid arc that contrasted my precision with his unstoppable velocity. The combination felt jolting at first—like blending two entirely different routines. But just as I turned a pivot into a side-by-side spin, he matched me. Our timing wavered, but we didn’t crash.

When the music hit a deeper pulse, Gunnar shot off in a mini race around the perimeter, leaving me to transition into a spin sequence. Then I reached out for him, and we joined in a short side-by-side footwork pattern. By the time the track faded, we stood, breathing hard, with wide-eyed surprise.

“That was rough,” he admitted, running a hand through his hair. “But not a total train wreck.”

My cheeks heated. “We need to refine transitions...some spots felt jarring. But the concept...might actually impress people.”

We ran it twice more, recording each attempt on my phone to spot flaws. The second pass ended with me stumbling out of a spin, nearly colliding with Gunnar’s broad chest. His reflexes saved me—he braced my shoulders just in time.

“Easy there,” he murmured. “I know I’m irresistible, but no need to throw yourself at me.”

I scowled, stepping back. “You wish. My skate caught a rut in the ice.”

He smirked. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, Ice Queen.”

“Stop calling me that,” I grumbled. But the warmth in my cheeks betrayed me, and I hated how he seemed to notice.

We tried it again, this time nailing the side-by-side spin with fewer wobbles. When we finished, I halted near the boards, breath coming in quick bursts.

“How do you feel?” Gunnar asked, eyes scanning my face.

I shrugged. “Better than I expected. You actually can follow a plan.”

“Don’t act so shocked,” he teased. “I do more than fling myself around a track.”

After an hour of stops and starts, we decided to pause before tackling lifts. I was sweaty under my jacket, hair frizzing around my forehead, while Gunnar seemed merely warmed up. Our gaze locked for an awkward moment—just enough to make me hyperaware of his strong jawline and the way he managed to look unfairly good even peppered with spots of sweat.

I sidestepped, focusing on my phone. “We’ll keep building from here. The second half needs a big moment...maybe a quick lift or a synchronized jump.”

He cocked his head. “Alright, as long as you’re sure. You know I’m game. But let’s not break your neck on day two. My arms are strong, but we gotta train the technique properly like you said.”

“Agreed,” I said. “We’ll go step by step. No sense rushing a major stunt.”

“And here I thought you liked living dangerously,” he teased, eyes gleaming.

I almost snorted. “You have me pegged wrong. I like living safely and winning gold.”

He laughed, a surprisingly rich sound that made the empty arena feel warmer. “Whatever floats your boat, Tiger. Let’s watch our playback.”

We gathered by the bench, huddling around my phone as the video replayed. The overhead lights highlighted the fresh lines in the ice, and our uncertain dance came to life on the screen. Gunnar’s speed overshadowed my lines at times, while my measured grace kept him from spinning off into chaos.

“It’s...not terrible,” I observed. “We’re obviously out of sync in spots, but some transitions flow well.”

“Not terrible. High praise from you,” he said wryly. “I’ll take it.”

I eyed him. “Don’t get smug. We have a long way to go.”

He grinned. “You do realize you’re dangerously close to giving me a compliment, right?”

“Dangerously close,” I echoed, feigning seriousness. “I’d better stop before you get a big head. Oops, too late...you already have one.”

He opened his mouth to retort, but I grabbed my phone, swiftly ending the conversation. The banter with him was weirdly fun—definitely dangerous, but fun. I needed to keep my guard up, or I’d risk letting him distract me from my real goal—Winning Olympic gold. It was everything I ever wanted, what Mom and Dad

wanted for me. What they expected as the daughter of a professional hockey coach and Olympic medalist in downhill skiing, not to mention the younger sister of Logan McKenzie.

As we wrapped up, Gunnar headed to retrieve his duffel from the opposite side of the rink. I reached for my water bottle, the one with a pink top, a minor detail that helped me track it. My brow furrowed: it wasn't where I'd left it on the bench. Glancing around, I saw no sign of it. For a moment, annoyance flared.

"Lose something?" Gunnar asked, returning in time to see me checking under the bench.

"My water bottle," I muttered. "Second day it's vanished. I probably left it in the locker room."

He shrugged. "Check later. The kids' hockey team is about to roll in." Indeed, distant chatter and footsteps reached us from the hallway. "We can't hog the ice much longer."

I forced a neutral nod. A single missing bottle was no reason to panic, but two days in a row? Combined with that text...maybe it was coincidence. I had no proof otherwise. Let it go, Starla. Real sabotage would be bigger than some random pranks, right?

Outside the arena, morning had shifted to early afternoon. Sunlight gleamed against the freshly fallen snow on the sidewalks. I zipped my jacket, relishing the crisp air. Gunnar walked with me to the parking lot, matching my pace.

"You heading straight home or got more training?" he asked lightly.

"Home," I replied, adjusting my skate bag. "I have off-ice conditioning to squeeze in,

then a meeting with my coach.”

“Busy,” he noted, no judgment in his tone. “Well, same time tomorrow?”

“Same time,” I confirmed. “We’ll try to integrate that partial lift. And maybe refine the footwork for the midsection.”

He inclined his head, a hint of a smile curving his lips. “Looking forward to it, Ice Que...Starla.”

I rolled my eyes, but a tiny grin betrayed me. “Watch it. I might change my mind about working together if you keep pushing your luck.”

He merely chuckled and waved as he strode away, casual confidence in every step. I couldn’t help noticing how his broad shoulders moved under his coat, nor how a stray breeze teased a lock of dark hair across his brow. Why did a guy this annoying have to be so ridiculously attractive?

Once he disappeared behind a row of parked cars, I sighed. Despite my best intentions, Gunnar Hayes had wormed his way under my skin. We’d managed a day without hurling insults or stomping off. Instead, we found a tentative rhythm that might produce a show-stopping performance. The thought both excited and rattled me.

I glanced around the parking lot for my usual sense of security. A couple of parents ushered their kids inside, hockey sticks in tow. A maintenance worker swept the walkway near the main entrance. All normal, no shady figure lurking. Yet the memory of that text lurked in my mind. How had whoever sent it gotten my number? A chill that had nothing to do with the temperature prickled my skin.

But I wouldn’t let small mysteries consume me. So far, it was a single weird message

and a missing water bottle. Even if someone didn't approve of Gunnar, they'd have to do more than petty pranks to scare me off. I'd come too far to let minor inconveniences sabotage my shot at impressing the Committee.

I reached my car and slid behind the wheel, tossing my skate bag into the passenger seat. The tension in my shoulders loosened as I pulled out of the lot. Gunnar and I had found a fragile compromise—if we played it right, we might catch the eye of both sponsors and the Olympic Committee. We'd keep building on it, day by day, routine by routine, until it was perfect. I was determined. As long as we could avoid strangling each other, we might actually pull off something spectacular.

The drive home flew by in a blur of city streets and midday traffic. My mind churned with ideas for adding transitional footwork, refining the spin timing, and selecting just the right music. Despite the swirl of details, a small bubble of excitement found its way to the surface. Maybe I didn't have to dread working with Gunnar. Maybe I could relish the challenge of bringing order to his chaos—if only he didn't rattle me whenever he came close enough for me to smell his spicy aftershave.

I parked at my apartment complex, a modern high-rise with sleek glass balconies. As I trudged upstairs, the faint hum of city life offered me a comforting backdrop. Inside my unit, sunlight cascaded through floor-to-ceiling windows onto pale hardwood floors. It was minimalist, calm—my sanctuary.

Dropping my bag by the door, I paused to stretch my arms overhead, letting a slow grin ease across my face. Who would've thought I'd find a glimmer of anticipation about tomorrow's practice after the fiasco that was day one?

I took a quick shower, letting the hot water untangle my muscles. Images of our half-synchronized spins flickered behind my eyelids, reminding me we still had a long road ahead. But we'd started to shape something new, something that might stand out from any other routine I'd done.

By the time I'd dressed in comfy sweats and brewed a small pot of tea, late afternoon sunlight cast warm rectangles across the living room floor. I settled on my couch with my tablet, intending to re-watch the footage. But my thoughts kept drifting to Gunnar's crooked grin and the way his breath fogged in the icy rink air, the subtle brush of his torso against mine when we nearly collided.

I shook my head, swallowing down the flutter of heat in my belly. This was about the performance, I reminded myself. The routine, the Olympic Committee, the potential sponsors. Not some crazy flirtation with a speed skater who specialized in pushing boundaries. Right?

A soft sigh escaped me. Maybe he was a risk. But skating at this level had always been about taking calculated risks—leaps, spins, the pursuit of more perfect lines. In a strange way, letting Gunnar in might be my boldest move yet. If that turned into gold, then it would all be worth it.

My phone stayed mercifully silent—no more unknown texts. I'd count that as a win. Draining the last of my tea, I rose and turned on a lamp as dusk settled outside the window. Another day done, and I still had my sanity. The real test loomed ahead, though: refining this routine and surviving Gunnar's unstoppable energy. For all my love of order, a small thrill at that challenge danced through me.

And maybe that meant I was already thawing—if only a fraction—under his high-octane charm.

GUNNAR

I slid onto the ice at the Denver rink with my usual push of energy, enjoying the crisp air in my lungs and the smooth surface under my skates. Early morning light streamed through the high windows, illuminating the faint mist swirling at skate-level. Over the past two weeks, I had developed a routine I never anticipated: daily figure-skating practice with Starla McKenzie.

Starla arrived soon after, her hair pulled into a tight, low bun, a fitted training jacket showcasing her petite figure. For someone standing just over five feet, she carried herself with a regal air, her emerald eyes scanning the arena. She offered a curt nod in my direction. I noticed her lips relax a fraction, which seemed like her version of a warm greeting.

We began with a slow warm-up, each circling in our own patterns. She paused to stretch her calf muscles against the boards, maintaining faultless posture. I performed a few sprint laps around the perimeter, letting my thighs burn in that familiar rush I craved. We reconvened at center ice, standing a few feet apart on the freshly resurfaced surface.

“Let’s run the opening again,” she said as she brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. “I want to ensure we’ve maintained the improvements from yesterday.”

I nodded, flicking on the portable speaker she’d set up. A soft, classical tune swelled, piano notes rising over gentle violins. She glided forward, posture firm, arms unfolding in an elegant spiral. I hung back, letting her lines establish the tone before skating into my own segment of momentum-driven crossovers. The first few days we

tried this, we collided or lost balance, but two weeks of daily rehearsal worked wonders. Now, her spiral transitioned seamlessly into my burst of speed, and we flowed side by side.

We repeated this sequence multiple times, each run refining small details. I watched her analyze every edge, each angle of her blade. She corrected me on subtle positioning, pointing out that a slight angle shift in my knees might avoid clipping her path. I listened for once, adjusting my stance to incorporate her suggestions. By now, I appreciated that her sharp eye led to smoother collaboration.

After ten minutes of drilling the intro, we switched to the middle portion, which combined a side-by-side spin with a quick pivot into a partial lift. I found myself focusing on each movement of her tiny form, anticipating her shifts in weight. My usual approach was to rely on instinct, but with Starla, I needed to think a step ahead. She tossed occasional reminders or short commands, but I noticed the absence of her earlier scorn. Instead, she sounded cautious but almost... encouraging.

During one spin, I placed a hand lightly on her waist to catch her at the right angle, preventing a stumble. She rewarded me with a nod that might have been gratitude, and I felt a small thrill that we were actually functioning as a team. Her entire body hummed with tension and focus, yet she no longer recoiled from my help.

At the end of our run-through, she paused, panting faintly. "That's much better," she remarked, gaze sweeping over me. "Your pivot was more controlled."

I smirked. "All thanks to your brilliant guidance, right?"

She shrugged with a tiny upturn at the corner of her mouth, a reaction I rarely saw. "You do catch on quickly," she admitted.

We repeated the spin-lift transition and nailed it without wobble or missed timing.

That success made her face light up in a quick, radiant smile. My chest clenched at the sight of it. She rarely let her guard down, so glimpsing real excitement was a shock to the system. “You see that?” I teased, stepping aside so she could glide to a stop. “You actually smiled, McKenzie.”

Her lips pressed together, pink warming her cheeks. “Don’t read too much into it,” she said, voice brisk. But she didn’t deny her moment of joy.

I studied her petite build, the trim figure shaped by years of relentless discipline, and couldn’t resist a small grin of my own. “Too late. I’m reading it as a sign of progress.”

She blew out an exasperated breath, then motioned for us to try again. I let her have the last word for once, deciding not to push my luck.

We continued refining each segment until our allocated ice time drew near its end. She executed a final spin, arms extended elegantly, while I mirrored her motions in a less polished but serviceable manner. The music faded, leaving us on the ice, breathing heavily from the intensity. A flush colored her cheeks, and my pulse thudded from the exertion. When she straightened, I caught a flash of genuine satisfaction in her eyes, like a guarded curtain lifting momentarily.

When practice wrapped up, we lingered at the boards, removing skates. Her phone buzzed with a notification, but she dismissed it to focus on stowing her equipment. The overhead lights glowed on her hair, bringing out traces of gold. I wiped sweat from my forehead, deciding to act on an impulse that brewed in the back of my mind.

“You know,” I said, slipping my skates into my bag, “we’ve spent hours on the ice every day but I barely know you off the rink. What if we grabbed coffee...or tea, since I figure you’re not a caffeine fiend like me?”

She paused, one brow lifted. “I have to meet with Vivian soon.”

I leaned a forearm on the boards, trying a casual tone. “Then how about later? Even one cup would be good. We can skip practice talk unless you want it, and maybe warm up somewhere that’s not subzero.”

She appeared thoughtful, glanced at the time on her phone, and let out a small sigh. “I suppose I can spare an hour. Why not?”

I felt a sense of relief at her acceptance. She lifted her neatly packed bag onto one shoulder and headed toward the locker rooms. Our constant friction had melted into a measured civility, and I caught myself wanting to hear her discuss something besides jump sequences or foot placement.

“That’s long enough for me,” I added, shouldering my own gear. “Wherever you prefer.”

She paused at the door, glancing over her shoulder. “Fine. There’s a café near the training center that serves passable tea.” Then she slipped inside, leaving me unexpectedly eager for this brief escape from the rink.

I managed to keep my grin in check. “Lead the way, Your Highness,” I muttered under my breath. A few minutes later, we stepped out of the ice center into a crisp winter gust. The sidewalk bore a thin sheen of frost, and the chilly air prickled against my cheeks as we walked. Storefronts along this stretch ranged from yoga studios to organic groceries, with a few boutique gyms squeezed in between.

The café she mentioned occupied a narrow lot, fronted by a sage-painted wood trim and a couple of ceramic planters flanking the entrance. Inside, strings of fairy lights ran across the ceiling beams, giving the polished concrete floor a soft glow. The scent of freshly ground espresso mingled with a subtler note of herbal blends, welcoming

us into a cozy, if eclectic, refuge from the cold.

We placed our orders—black coffee for me, peppermint tea for her—and chose a corner table away from the bustle of laptop-toting customers. She removed her jacket, revealing a fitted black top that accentuated her toned arms, each muscle defined from years of skating and weight training. In normal lighting, I saw fine lines of fatigue near her eyes, though her posture remained upright.

I took a sip of my coffee. “You’ve made big progress, you know. We’re actually pulling off moves I never thought possible.”

She set her teacup down. “Thank you,” she said, voice subdued. “I’ll admit, our synergy has improved more than I expected.”

“I notice you keep track of every improvement,” I said with mild curiosity. “You’re constantly making tiny notes on your phone after practice. I’d love to see that level of organization in my own regimen, but I guess I’m more of a freestyle guy.”

She exhaled, cheeks warming. “I can’t switch off my methodical side. My family always pushed me to be thorough. If I’m going to do something, I have to do it fully. No shortcuts.”

“Sounds intense.” I traced my finger around the rim of my mug. “I guess that’s why you stand out on the ice. People see that discipline shining through.”

Her gaze flicked aside, considering. “To be honest, I’m not sure they even see me. They see a polished figure skater who rarely makes mistakes. Sometimes I wonder if I’m just going through the motions.”

I cocked my head. “You think you’re performing for them, rather than for yourself?”

A faint shrug lifted her shoulders. “I used to skate for myself, but the more success I had, the more it felt like a duty. My parents each had their own legacy in sports, so I inherited their expectations. I want the Olympic Committee’s validation, but some days I wonder whose dream I’m really chasing.”

I listened to her words, noticing the flicker of uncertainty in her beautiful green eyes. I set down my coffee, leaning forward. “Ever consider that your own dream might align with theirs, but in your own way? You’re too determined to settle for half measures, right?”

Her lips parted, then closed. “That’s how I’ve always lived, never half measure. It’s...complicated.”

I nodded, deciding not to pry further. My own upbringing was the opposite, but I understood how pressures could shape a person. “Well, from where I stand, your drive is a good thing. You keep me from screwing up with my spontaneous stunts.”

A glimmer of amusement tugged her mouth. “I guess you do benefit from structure. And I suppose I’ve learned something about letting go...just a little.”

We shared a brief, genuine smile. I liked hearing that I’d chipped away at her rigid approach. Was she chipping away at my walls, too? I didn’t know if I was ready for it if so, but at this point I still had enough of my guard up to keep things in check.

Starla sipped her tea, crossing her legs under the table. “You never told me how you got into speed skating. Not in detail.”

I set my coffee down, deciding I might as well return the favor by sharing the basics. “I found speed skating later than most. Moved through various foster homes after my parents died when I was eight. Some coach spotted me messing around on a rink, realized I had the right balance of muscle and stamina. At first, I just liked going fast.

Then I realized I could do it competitively. I guess my rebellious streak found a legit outlet.”

Her expression softened. “I remember hearing your story somewhere now...probably the news. I’m so sorry you lost your parents that young.”

“Made me independent earlier, I guess,” I said, shrugging as the usual ache surfaced. “Speed skating gave me direction. Otherwise, I might’ve ended up bouncing between random unskilled, low-paying jobs, never committing to anything. Instead, I latched onto the thrill of racing.”

She offered a quiet nod. “Hearing that helps me understand your approach: pushing boundaries, living in the moment. It suits you.”

I let out a small laugh. “And you? You prefer to measure each boundary before crossing it.”

Her mouth curved slightly. “Yes. That’s probably the difference in a nutshell.”

We spoke a bit more about personal histories, training regimens, her early attempts at landing triple jumps. I found myself oddly captivated by the details of her daily routine, from the macro counting of jump rotations to the micro attention to blade edges. It reminded me that speed skating and figure skating, while both on ice, demanded unique mindsets. She came across as a thorough scientist of the sport, while I was more like a test pilot.

The café door swung open mid-conversation, drawing my attention to a tall guy with dark blonde hair and a self-important stride. I sensed Starla’s demeanor sharpen the instant she saw him. Trevor Davis, a forward recently traded to the Denver Warlords—her brother Logan’s team—walked straight to our table, a grin on his face that didn’t mask the superiority in his gaze.

“Starla,” he greeted, ignoring my existence entirely. “Didn’t think you took time for coffee.”

She placed her teacup on the saucer, tone polite but unyielding. “We just finished practice. Did you need something, Trevor?”

He shrugged, broad shoulders flexing beneath a stylish athletic jacket. “Needed a drink between workouts. Didn’t realize you’d be here with... him .”

I gave him a nod, tilting my chair back slightly. “Gunnar Hayes. Her partner for the charity event.”

Trevor barely flicked a glance my way before zeroing in on Starla. “You never answered my texts. I asked about meeting up, yet you always dodge me.”

Her expression cooled. “I’ve told you before: I’m not interested.”

His jaw twitched, gaze sliding over me before returning to her. “Now you’re out with a speed skater? Thought you’d aim higher.”

I tensed. If the guy was looking for a fight, he was about to get one. However, Starla interjected first, exhaling pointedly. “We’re discussing our routine, and I’d appreciate some privacy.”

Trevor mustered a shrug, face souring. “Whatever. Have fun with your practice buddy. You’re missing out, Star.”

Then he spun on his heel and strode out. Starla watched his retreat, her fingers tightening around the teacup’s handle.

I studied her rigid posture. “He’s persistent.”

She blew out a frustrated breath. “I’ve told him no a hundred times. He doesn’t listen.”

I suppressed a spike of protectiveness, not wanting to overstep. “You need me to say anything, or is it better if I back off?”

Her shoulders eased. “I can handle him. He’s just annoying. Let’s forget it.” She eyed the door where Trevor had disappeared. “We should wrap up here soon. I have a meeting with my coach.”

“All right,” I agreed, finishing the last of my coffee. “Let me walk you back to your car.”

She nodded, though her gaze lingered on the spot where Trevor had stood. A taut energy surrounded her, and I recognized how much she disliked that intrusion.

We left the café and stepped back out to the wintry sidewalk. Cars lined the street, leaves drifted across the pavement, and the scent of fresh bread wafted from a nearby bakery. Starla led the way, pausing at her white SUV parked a block over. She rummaged in her purse for keys, her shoulders still tense.

Then she halted abruptly. I looked down, noticing the front tire sagging with a jagged slash near the rim. The rear tire on the same side showed an identical cut. My jaw tightened in anger. “That’s not a nail or broken glass.”

Her eyes widened, composure flickering. “Oh my God. Someone...did this?”

I crouched, running my hand over the ripped rubber. “No question. Both tires are trashed.”

She swallowed, color draining from her cheeks. “Unbelievable.”

I stood, scanning the empty sidewalk. “Could be random vandalism,” I said, mind spinning. “But...”

She inhaled, pressing her lips together. “I can’t deal with speculation right now. I just need my car fixed. I have a full schedule tomorrow. I’m supposed to meet with Vivian in 15 minutes.”

I pulled out my phone, flipping through my contact list. “I know a tow service that’s pretty quick. Let me call them.”

She nodded, arms wrapped around her petite frame as a gust of wind lifted the ends of her scarf.

“Why slash my tires?” she muttered, frustration lacing her words.

I didn’t answer, keeping my focus on the call. After a brief exchange, the tow service promised a forty-five to sixty-minute arrival window. It was the best they could do.

I took a step closer to her, lowering my voice. “Why don’t you call Vivian and explain what happened. Let me stick around until the tow arrives, and then I’ll drive you home, all right? Go back and wait in the café where it’s warm. I’ll text you when they show up.”

She nodded reluctantly. “Okay. Thank you.”

The tow truck came, the driver examined the tires with a concerned frown, and Starla signed the paperwork with a hasty scrawl. Once her car was secure for transport, I led her to my Range Rover, parked a short walk away. She slid into the passenger seat, hugging herself to fight the chill.

I started the engine, feeling unresolved anger twist in my gut at the idea of someone

targeting her property. She stared out the window, slender fingers tapping the door restlessly.

“You all right?” I asked quietly, pulling away from the curb.

Her voice came out stiff. “I hate not knowing why this happened. Hate that I have to scramble for a ride.”

I pressed my foot on the gas, merging into traffic. “We’ll figure out your transportation. The important part is you’re safe.”

She nodded but kept her gaze on the cityscape passing by in a blur of buildings and trees barren of leaves. I let her be. My thoughts churned with frustration at the sabotage, yet I tried not to let it show. The brief silence between us felt heavy, though not entirely uncomfortable—like we were both processing the situation in our own way.

When we reached her block, she pointed out the modern high-rise apartment building where she lived, and I pulled up to the curb. She unbuckled, exhaling before turning to me. “Thank you for the ride. And for not making this a bigger ordeal.”

I met her eyes, still seeing the worry swirling behind them. “Anytime, Starla. Let me know if you need help tomorrow.”

She gave a curt nod, then slipped from the car. Her small figure disappeared through the tinted glass doors, but I lingered a moment, adrenaline from the entire episode still coursing through me.

I left after a few minutes, navigating the traffic with my own blend of agitation and concern. The memory of Trevor’s snide remarks lingered, though I had no proof he or anyone else was behind the tire-slashing. All I could do was show up for practice,

keep nailing our moves, and watch her back if something else occurred. Over the past two weeks, Starla and I had grown into a reluctant team. Keeping her safe—no matter how small or strange the threat—had now become part of my priority.

Thoughts of perfect spins, crisp transitions, and the strange charge between Starla and me filled my mind. The routine had blossomed into something impressive, but our final steps together remained uncertain. I only knew I wasn't giving up on this improbable partnership, or on a figure skater who had unexpectedly stirred instincts in me I never expected to feel.

I parked at my loft, hauling my skate bag inside. The echo of quiet walls and the flicker of overhead lights greeted me. Memories of Starla's guarded half-smile after that perfect spin-lift clung to my thoughts, along with the unsettling sight of her ravaged tires, and I knew I'd do whatever it took not to let anyone to stand in her way—or mine.

STARLA

The ice beneath my blades felt like an old friend welcoming me back. Seven days had passed since the tire-slashing incident, and I'd forced myself to file it away as a random act of vandalism. Perhaps I'd unwittingly parked in someone's unofficial spot, incurring their wrath. The car repair shop had efficiently replaced the tires, and I'd moved on—externally at least.

I spiraled into a camel spin, extending my free leg parallel to the ice, feeling the familiar centrifugal pull as I rotated. The emptiness of the rink amplified the whispering sound of my blade carving the surface. Morning sunlight streamed through the high windows, casting long rectangles across the pristine ice.

Despite my attempts to dismiss the tire incident, something nagged at me. Coincidences rarely clustered like this—the missing water bottle, the strange text, and now the slashed tires. Still, obsessing would only derail my focus. I was slated to compete in a regional competition tomorrow, and then the charity event with Gunnar was scheduled for the following week.

Gunnar. His name brought an unexpected warmth to my chest. Our partnership had evolved from contentious to something actually approaching harmony. Yesterday's practice had been our best yet—the lift sequence flowed seamlessly, our timing aligned as if we'd skated together for years rather than weeks. His speed complemented my precision in ways I hadn't imagined possible.

I transitioned into a step sequence, mentally mapping my footwork for tomorrow's competition. The Tchaikovsky piece I'd selected demanded delicate edges and

nuanced expression—qualities I'd spent my life perfecting. With each glide and turn, I visualized the judges' scorecards, anticipating their critical assessment of every element.

After completing the sequence, I paused for breath, hands on hips. The arena's emptiness suddenly felt oppressive rather than liberating. I glanced at the clock mounted above the entrance—7:15 am. The maintenance staff wouldn't arrive for another forty-five minutes, giving me time for a final run-through of my long program.

Taking position at center ice, I struck my opening pose: right arm extended overhead, left curved gracefully at my waist. In my mind, the music swelled. I pushed off, gathering momentum for my first jump combination.

Suddenly, the rink plunged into total darkness.

I gasped, throwing my arms out for balance, my planned triple toe loop abandoned mid-preparation. Complete blackness enveloped me, disorienting my sense of position. My heart hammered against my ribs as I slowed to a cautious glide, unsure of my location on the ice.

"Hello?" My voice echoed in the cavernous space. "Is anyone there?"

Silence answered. Then, a distant metallic clang—like a door closing somewhere in the building.

The realization of what could have happened sent adrenaline coursing through me. Had I launched into that triple jump, I might have landed wrong in the darkness, potentially tearing a ligament or fracturing an ankle. A serious injury now would destroy everything I'd worked for—the Olympic qualifiers, my entire career.

I fumbled for my phone, tucked into my fitted training jacket's pocket. Its screen illuminated my immediate surroundings with a bluish glow. Using it as a makeshift flashlight, I navigated carefully toward the boards, moving with the utmost caution.

After what felt like an eternity, my outstretched hand met the familiar barrier. I exhaled shakily, following the boards until I reached the exit gate. Dread settled in my stomach as I slipped on my blade guards and used my phone's light to locate the emergency exit.

Outside, the morning sun felt unnervingly bright after the pitch darkness. I dialed the arena manager, explaining the situation in a voice I fought to keep steady. He sounded confused, insisting the lighting system had been inspected just last week. Nevertheless, he promised to send an electrician immediately.

I changed quickly in the locker room, my skin still prickling with unease. The lights flickered back on just as I zipped my bag—as suddenly and inexplicably as they had gone out. The timing felt deliberate, calculated to unsettle me.

During the drive home, I cycled through potential explanations. Electrical fault. Coincidence. Bad luck.

None convinced me.

My apartment building's familiar silhouette offered little comfort as I parked in my designated spot. The doorman nodded as I passed through the lobby, and I forced a polite smile in return. Inside the elevator, I leaned against the mirrored wall, suddenly exhausted despite the early hour.

When the doors opened on my floor, I proceeded to my unit, fishing for keys in my bag. Something white caught my attention—a folded piece of paper protruding from beneath my door. Frowning, I picked it up, assuming it contained a notice about

building maintenance or package delivery.

The typewritten message inside made my blood freeze:

You're making mistakes. I'm watching.

I dropped my skate bag, frantically scanning the empty hallway. Nothing seemed out of place. No strangers lurked in shadows, no security cameras had been tampered with. Yet someone had stood at my door, knowing I wouldn't be home.

With trembling fingers, I unlocked my apartment, checking each room before allowing myself to breathe. Everything appeared untouched—my minimalist furniture arranged precisely as I'd left it, kitchen counters immaculate, bedroom undisturbed.

I sank onto my sofa, note clutched in my hand. This wasn't random. Someone was targeting me specifically, escalating from minor annoyances to potentially dangerous sabotage. The timing—right before my competition and the charity event—couldn't be coincidental.

My first instinct was to call my brother, but my finger hovered over the call button. Logan would only worry, and he had enough to deal with right now with coaching the Warlords. Vivian would lecture me about focus and perseverance without addressing the actual threat. That left one person who had witnessed part of this strange pattern, someone who might actually believe me.

I pressed Gunnar's contact, surprised by how quickly he'd earned a spot in my phone's favorites list.

He answered on the second ring. "Morning, Highness. You summoned?"

The familiar teasing tone steadied me. "Someone cut the lights while I was practicing." The words tumbled out before I could manage a greeting. "And now there's a note under my door saying they're watching me."

His voice instantly sharpened. "Are you safe? Where are you now?"

"In my apartment. I'm fine, just..." I swallowed hard. "Unsettled."

"I'm coming over." Not a question, but a statement.

"You don't have to..."

"I'm already grabbing my keys, Starla." His tone brooked no argument.

Twenty minutes later, my doorbell rang. Through the peephole, I saw Gunnar shifting impatiently, his dark hair slightly tousled as if he'd run his hand through it repeatedly. When I opened the door, his gaze swept over me, assessing.

"Are you okay?" he asked, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation.

I nodded, suddenly self-conscious in my casual clothing—leggings and an oversized University of Denver sweatshirt that had once belonged to Logan. "I'm fine. Just...concerned."

He scanned my apartment, taking in the pristine white furniture, the uncluttered surfaces, the floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of downtown Denver. "Nice place. Very you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I crossed my arms defensively.

"Organized. Elegant. Controlled." His gaze softened. "It's not a criticism, Starla. I

mean that sincerely."

I led him to the kitchen island, where I'd placed the note in a plastic bag. "This was under my door when I got home."

He examined it without touching, eyes narrowing. "Generic printer paper. Generic font. Nothing distinguishing."

"Hardly amateur hour," I remarked dryly.

"And you said the lights went out while you were practicing?" He looked up, expression grim. "Were you alone in the building?"

"The security guard was at the front entrance, but otherwise, yes. The maintenance crew doesn't arrive until eight." I shivered involuntarily. "If I'd been mid-jump when the darkness hit..."

Gunnar's jaw tightened. "We need to check the security footage. Both at the rink and your building."

"My building has cameras in the lobby and elevators, but not the hallways," I explained. "Privacy policy for the residents."

"The rink should have better coverage." He pulled out his phone. "Let me make a call."

Two hours later, we sat in the small security office of the Denver Ice Arena, reviewing grainy footage with the security chief, a retired police officer named Pablo Santana. The camera covering the electrical room showed a figure in dark clothing and a ski mask accessing the area shortly after seven o'clock.

"Can you zoom in?" Gunnar asked, leaning forward.

Santana adjusted the controls, but the image only grew blurrier. "Sorry, that's as clear as it gets. Our system's due for an upgrade next quarter."

I studied the indistinct figure. "Height? Build? Anything helpful?"

"Medium height, slim build. Could be anyone," Santana admitted. "They knew how to avoid showing their face to the cameras. Probably familiar with the building layout too."

"What about my costume for tomorrow?" I asked suddenly. "It's in the locker reserved for competitors. Could someone have accessed it?"

Santana frowned. "Those lockers have combination locks. If someone knew your combination..."

"I need to check it," I insisted, rising from my chair.

The women's locker room smelled of chlorine and commercial cleaner. My assigned locker stood in the far corner, its metal surface unmarked. I spun the dial through the familiar sequence—my birthday, rearranged—and retrieved the garment bag containing my competition costume.

With Gunnar waiting outside, I unzipped the bag and carefully examined the crystal-studded blue costume I'd selected with Vivian for tomorrow's event. At first glance, nothing seemed amiss. I turned it inside out, checking each seam.

That's when I noticed it—a small, neat slice along the side seam, precisely where the fabric would strain during a spiral. Had I performed without noticing, the costume would have split open at the most inopportune moment.

I slumped onto the wooden bench, costume clutched to my chest. This was beyond mere harassment; it was intended to humiliate me publicly. To shake my confidence just when I needed it most.

After showing Santana the damaged costume and filing an incident report, Gunnar insisted on driving me home. We rode in silence for several minutes, the gravity of the situation settling between us.

"Have you considered withdrawing from tomorrow's competition?" he finally asked, his dark eyes fixed on the road.

"I can't do that," I replied automatically. "Regional standings matter for Olympic qualification points."

He glanced over, concern etched across his features. "Starla, someone is actively trying to sabotage you. This isn't just petty rivalry anymore."

"Which is exactly why I can't withdraw." I straightened in my seat. "I've spent my entire life working toward the Olympics. I won't let some coward in a ski mask derail that."

Gunnar sighed, fingers tightening on the steering wheel. "Then what's your plan?"

"I've safety-pinned the costume. I'll go back later with a needle and thread and stitch the seam back together. And I'll skate better than I ever have, just to spite whoever is doing this." Determination hardened my voice. "I won't give them the satisfaction of seeing me fall."

He nodded slowly. "Then I'll be there. Front row."

"You don't have to..."

"I want to." His tone left no room for argument. "Both as moral support and to keep an eye out for anything suspicious."

The intensity in his dark eyes made my chest tighten in a way that had nothing to do with fear. When had Gunnar Hayes begun to care so much about my wellbeing? And when had I started to welcome it?

The next morning dawned clear and cold. Despite having slept poorly, I felt a strange calm as I prepared for competition. My routine was so ingrained it required minimal conscious thought—hair secured in a perfect bun, makeup precise but understated, warm-up timed to the minute.

The Denver Invitational wasn't a major competition, but it attracted talented skaters from across the Rocky Mountain region. As I entered the arena, I spotted my primary rival, Irina Sokolov, stretching near the practice rink. Her sleek dark hair was pulled into a severe bun identical to mine, her lithe body clad in a crimson practice outfit that complemented her olive complexion.

Her gaze locked with mine momentarily, her expression unreadable. The press had manufactured a fierce rivalry between us, though in reality, we'd rarely exchanged more than perfunctory greetings. Whether her cold demeanor was genuine or fabricated for publicity, I couldn't say.

During warm-up, I executed each element flawlessly, blocking out all distractions. My repaired costume held together perfectly, the last-minute stitching holding up beneath crystalline embellishments. When my name was announced, I took center ice with absolute focus, channeling every uncertainty into the performance.

The world narrowed to music and movement. Each jump landed cleanly, each spin centered, each footwork sequence precise. As I struck my final pose, arm extended toward the ceiling in triumph, the audience erupted in applause. I allowed myself a

genuine smile, scanning the crowd instinctively.

Gunnar sat in the front row, exactly where he'd promised. His warm grin and subtle thumbs-up sent an unexpected flutter through my stomach. Several rows behind him, I noticed Trevor Davis. His gaze met mine and he lifted his hand in a wave, but I quickly averted my gaze, instead gliding toward the exit.

My score placed me firmly in first, ahead of Irina by a narrow margin. She accepted second place with a tight smile that didn't reach her eyes, her handshake brittle when we shared the podium. The photographers captured our strained congeniality, no doubt feeding tomorrow's headlines about our supposed bitter rivalry.

Afterward, I changed quickly, eager to escape the press and competitors. As I navigated the corridor toward the parking area, a familiar voice called my name.

"Starla! Wait up."

Gunnar jogged toward me, effortlessly weaving through the crowd, his dark hair curling slightly at the temples.

"You were amazing out there," he said, falling into step beside me. "Like you were born on ice."

"Thank you for coming," I replied, genuinely touched by his presence. "Did you notice anything suspicious?"

His expression sobered. "Nothing concrete. Trevor Davis was watching you like a hawk, but that could be his usual creepy interest. Irina seemed pretty intensely focused on you too, but that's normal for competitors."

I nodded, pondering the possibilities. "The timing of everything—right before

regionals and our charity event—can't be coincidental. Someone wants to throw me off my game."

"The question is, who benefits from that?" Gunnar mused. "And how far are they willing to go?"

We paused at the exit doors, snow visible through the glass panels.

"Have dinner with me," he said suddenly. "To celebrate your win."

The invitation caught me off guard. "I don't usually celebrate mid-season. There's always more work to do."

"All the more reason to take one night off." His smile held a challenge. "Live dangerously, McKenzie. Eat something that isn't pre-measured for optimal protein content."

A laugh escaped me, surprising us both. "When you put it like that, how can I refuse?"

His eyes brightened. "Is that a yes?"

I nodded, a strange lightness replacing the tension that had gripped me for days. "That's a yes."

As we stepped into the gentle snowfall, I realized that amidst the mystery and threat, something unexpected was emerging between us—and I was surprised to find that I welcomed it.

GUNNAR

The soft glow of candlelight danced across Starla's face as she studied the menu, her emerald eyes narrowed in concentration. Giordano's Trattoria—a small family-owned Italian restaurant nestled in downtown Denver—hummed with muted conversation and the occasional clink of silverware against fine china. Red brick walls adorned with black and white photos of Italy created an intimate atmosphere, while the scent of garlic, basil, and freshly baked bread wrapped around us like a warm embrace.

"You're staring," she said without looking up, a hint of amusement in her voice.

I grinned, caught. "Hard not to. You clean up nice, McKenzie."

That was an understatement. She'd traded her competition attire for a simple black dress that hugged her athletic figure in all the right places. Her blonde hair, freed from its severe competition bun, fell in soft waves around her shoulders. The candlelight caught golden highlights I'd never noticed before.

"You don't look terrible yourself," she replied, finally meeting my gaze with a small smile.

I'd made an effort—dark jeans, a charcoal button-down, and a blazer I rarely wore. Even ran a comb through my perpetually disheveled hair. The way her eyes had widened slightly when I'd picked her up suggested the effort hadn't gone unnoticed.

A server approached with the bottle of Barolo I'd ordered, presenting it with practiced elegance before pouring two glasses. Starla raised an eyebrow.

"Celebrating my win with wine? I usually avoid alcohol during competition season."

"One glass won't derail your Olympic dreams," I countered. "Besides, you earned it after dealing with slashed tires, sabotaged lighting, and costume vandalism."

Her expression sobered. "When you list it all like that..."

"Hey." I reached across the table, briefly touching her hand. "Tonight is about celebrating your victory, not dwelling on the weird stuff. Tomorrow we can play detective."

She nodded, lifting her glass. "What should we toast to?"

"To unexpected collaborations," I offered, raising my own.

The corner of her mouth quirked upward. "To fire and ice."

We clinked glasses, and I watched as she took a small sip, closing her eyes briefly to savor the rich flavor. Something stirred in my chest—a peculiar warmth that had nothing to do with the wine and everything to do with the gorgeous woman across from me.

The server returned to take our orders—tagliatelle with wild mushrooms for Starla, osso buco for me. After he departed, conversation flowed more easily than I'd expected, given her usually guarded nature.

"Your performance today was incredible," I said. "That triple-triple combination looked effortless."

"Years of practice," she replied, though I detected a hint of pride in her voice. "My body knows the movements so well I could probably land them in my sleep."

"That's the difference between a good athlete and a great one," I observed. "When technique becomes so ingrained it looks like instinct."

She tilted her head, studying me. "Yet you're known for skating by instinct rather than technique."

"Different approaches to the same goal," I shrugged. "You plan every movement. I feel the ice and respond in the moment. We both win medals."

"True." She swirled her wine thoughtfully. "Though your approach gives coaches heart attacks."

I laughed. "Hank's gone completely gray since taking me on. Claims it's genetics, but we both know better."

Our appetizers arrived—an artfully arranged plate of prosciutto, melon, and aged parmesan. Starla selected a piece of the salty ham, spearing it with the delicate silver tines of her fork.

"How did you end up with Hank as your coach?" she asked. "He has a reputation for being selective."

I chewed my bite of cheese slowly, considering how much to share. Something about the softly lit restaurant and her genuine interest made me want to lower my usual defenses.

"After my parents died, I bounced between foster homes, as you know. Some were okay, some..." I paused, memories of locked refrigerators and basement 'bedrooms' flashing through my mind. "Not so good. At one placement, there was this school field trip to an ice rink. First time I'd ever been on the ice."

"And you fell in love with it," she guessed.

"Not exactly." I smiled at the memory. "I was pissed off about being moved again, so I tried to race the other kids. Ended up faceplanting spectacularly in front of everyone."

Her eyes widened. "That doesn't sound like a love story."

"The humiliation should have ended it, but I couldn't let it go. Kept begging my foster parents to take me back. I wanted to prove I could do it." I took a sip of wine. "Eventually, this rec center coach noticed I had decent balance and a lot of stubbornness. He introduced me to Hank, who saw...something worth developing."

"Raw talent," she offered.

I shook my head. "Determination. Talent came later, after thousands of hours of training. Hank became the closest thing to family I had. Still is."

Our main courses arrived, steam rising from the perfectly plated dishes. Starla cut into her pasta with the same precision she applied to her skating, while I savored the tender veal that fell effortlessly from the bone.

"What about you?" I asked. "How does it feel to be following in the family footsteps?"

She tensed almost imperceptibly. "Well, I suppose that's true. My mother was a downhill skier, Olympic silver medalist. Dad coached hockey before joining the Olympic Committee. Logan was the hockey prodigy. I was just looking for my own niche, I guess."

"Just looking for your niche..." I repeated skeptically. "And ended up one of the top-

ranked figure skaters in the country...That's some niche."

She laughed softly. "Okay, fine. I was competitive from the start. My first coach said I had the most determined scowl she'd ever seen on a five-year-old."

I could picture it easily—tiny Starla, brow furrowed in concentration, refusing to leave the ice until she mastered a skill. Not so different from the woman before me now.

"Your parents must be proud," I said carefully, noting how she spoke of them with a mixture of reverence and tension.

"They are," she replied, though something in her voice suggested complication. "In their way. Dad charts my scores like stock market performance. Mom critiques my artistic expression. They mean well."

"But?" I prompted gently.

She hesitated. "Sometimes I wonder if they really know me. Or would care as much about me if I stopped skating."

The raw honesty in her admission struck a chord. Here was Starla McKenzie—poised, perfect, perpetually composed—revealing a vulnerability few were privileged to see.

"Their loss," I said simply. "Because you're pretty remarkable, medal or no medal."

Color brushed her cheeks as she looked down at her plate. "You barely know me."

"I know enough," I insisted. "I've seen how you push through fear after someone tried to sabotage you. How you've tolerated my chaos without strangling me, which shows

incredible restraint."

That earned a genuine laugh, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "The restraint part is definitely medal-worthy."

As we continued eating, conversation shifted to lighter topics—ridiculous superstitions we'd witnessed at competitions, worst travel disasters, favorite places we'd skated. I found myself talking more than usual, sharing stories I rarely told anyone. Something about Starla drew confidences from me like water from a well I thought had run dry years ago.

Between bites of the tiramisu we decided to share for dessert, I caught myself watching her animated gestures as she described a disastrous costume malfunction at her first international competition. The realization hit me with unexpected force: I was completely captivated by this woman who had initially driven me crazy with her rigid perfectionism.

More striking was how comfortable this felt—sitting across from her, trading stories, laughing together. For someone who lived for the adrenaline rush of competition and the freedom of never staying in one place too long, I found myself contemplating what it might be like to slow down. To build something lasting.

My gaze drifted to an elderly couple at a nearby table, their comfortable silence speaking of decades shared. Would I ever know that kind of permanence? Or would I keep running—from competition to competition, from fling to fling—in an endless pursuit of the next high?

Perhaps what I was really running from was the void left by my parents' death. The absence of family. The fear of building connections only to lose them again.

Starla tilted her head, catching my distant expression. "Where did you go just now?"

I shook my head, returning to the present. "Nowhere important. Just thinking about..."

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the famous Blaze Hayes."

The slurred voice cut through our conversation like a jagged blade. I looked up to find Cassidy Palmer swaying slightly beside our table, her red hair dramatically styled, her dress clearly chosen for maximum impact. The empty wine glass clutched in her manicured hand suggested it wasn't her first drink of the evening.

"Cassidy." I kept my voice neutral. "This isn't a good time."

Her gaze swiveled to Starla, narrowing with recognition. "The Ice Queen herself. Of course." She laughed bitterly. "I should have known he'd trade up to someone more prestigious."

Starla remained composed, though I noticed her spine straighten. "I don't think we've met formally. I'm..."

"I know exactly who you are," Cassidy interrupted, her words sliding together. "Little Miss Perfect with her perfect technique and her perfect scores. Does he know how frigid you are off the ice too?"

Heat flooded my face—not embarrassment, but anger. "That's enough, Cass. You're drunk. Let me call you a car."

"Don't you dare patronize me!" Her voice rose, drawing uncomfortable glances from nearby tables. "Six months together, and you just disappeared after Worlds. Wouldn't answer calls, wouldn't explain. And now I find you wining and dining her?"

Before I could respond, she lifted her glass and tossed the remaining wine directly at

me. The dark liquid splashed across my shirt and face, droplets scattering onto the white tablecloth.

"I knew you were leaving me for another woman," she continued, her voice rising to a screech. "And of course it would have to be Starla McKenzie. I knew it!" She turned her fury toward Starla. "You think you're so special? You're just another conquest to him, you little bitch!"

The restaurant fell silent. I rose slowly, using my napkin to wipe wine from my face, positioning myself slightly between Cassidy and Starla.

"That's enough," I said firmly. "You need to leave before you embarrass yourself further."

The restaurant manager appeared at Cassidy's elbow, his expression professionally concerned but firm. "Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to step outside. We can call a taxi for you."

"Don't touch me!" She jerked away from his outstretched hand. "I'm going. This place is overpriced garbage anyway." She shot me one last venomous glare. "You'll regret this, Blaze. Both of you will."

With that final threat, she stormed toward the exit, nearly colliding with a waiter before disappearing into the night. The manager turned to us, mortification evident in his expression.

"Mr. Hayes, Ms. McKenzie, please accept our sincerest apologies. Your meal is on the house tonight. Would you like us to contact the authorities? We can file a report about this incident."

I glanced at Starla, whose face remained impressively composed despite the scene.

She gave a slight shake of her head.

"No police," I confirmed. "But I think we're ready to leave."

The manager nodded, signaling for our coats. "Again, our deepest apologies. Please know you're always welcome at Giordano's."

Outside, the night air had turned colder, the earlier snowfall leaving a thin blanket of white on parked cars. I guided Starla to my Range Rover, painfully aware of the wine stain spreading across my shirt.

"I'm so sorry about that," I said once we were seated in the car. "Cassidy and I...it wasn't serious. At least, I didn't think it was. We had a brief thing after Worlds last year, but when she started talking about moving in together after just a few weeks..."

"You don't owe me an explanation," Starla said quietly.

"I feel like I do." I turned to face her. "What she said, about you being a conquest...that's not what this is. You and I...it's different."

Her eyes met mine, searching. "Different how?"

The question hung between us, laden with possibility. In that moment, with her face softly illuminated by the dashboard lights, I realized I didn't have the words to explain how she'd upended my carefully constructed world of temporary connections and constant motion.

Instead, I leaned across the console and kissed her.

For a heartbeat, she remained still, and I feared I'd misread everything. Then her hand came up to cup my jaw, her lips softening beneath mine. The kiss deepened, her

mouth tasting faintly of tiramisu and wine. My fingers threaded through her hair, marveling at its silken texture against my skin.

When we finally pulled apart, both slightly breathless, her eyes had darkened to a forest green. "Take me home," she whispered.

The drive to her apartment passed in charged silence, her hand resting on my thigh, my pulse thrumming at the contact. By the time we reached her building, the tension between us had built to an almost unbearable pitch.

In the elevator, she pressed herself against me, our lips meeting with newfound urgency. My hands spanned her waist, feeling the strength in her petite frame as she rose on tiptoes to deepen the kiss.

Inside her apartment, moonlight spilled through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting ethereal shadows across the minimalist space. I caught a glimpse of her expression—desire mingled with a shadow of vulnerability—before she led me toward her bedroom.

Our lips crashed together the moment her bedroom door closed behind us. I backed her against the wall, my hands sliding down her sides to grip her hips. She moaned softly into my mouth as I pressed against her, the thin fabric of her dress doing little to hide her body's response to my touch.

"I've wanted this since I first saw you on the ice," I confessed against her neck, trailing hot kisses down to her collarbone.

Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of my wine-stained shirt. "Too many clothes," she breathed, finally pushing the fabric from my shoulders.

I reached behind her, finding the zipper of her dress and slowly dragging it

downward. The black fabric fell away, pooling at her feet to reveal a matching set of lace underwear that made my breath catch. Her body was a testament to athletic perfection—toned from years of training, yet undeniably feminine in every curve.

"God, you're beautiful," I whispered, my hands skimming up her sides.

She stepped out of her heels and pulled me toward the bed, her confidence momentarily giving way to vulnerability. "It's been a while for me," she admitted.

I kissed her deeply in response, lowering her onto the crisp white sheets. "We'll go as slow as you need."

Her hands explored my chest, tracing the defined muscles before trailing lower to the waistband of my jeans. Her touch grew bolder as she unbuttoned them, pushing the denim down my hips along with my boxers. I kicked them aside, finally as naked as she deserved to see me.

I reached behind her to unhook her bra, revealing perfect breasts that fit perfectly in my palms. Her sharp intake of breath as I rolled her nipples between my fingers sent heat surging through me. I replaced my hands with my mouth, drawing one taut peak between my lips while my hand slid down her stomach and beneath the lace of her panties.

She was already wet for me, her body arching as I stroked her most sensitive spot. "Gunnar," she gasped, her thighs falling open as I circled and teased.

I kissed my way down her body, hooking my fingers in her panties and drawing them slowly down her legs. She watched me through half-lidded eyes as I positioned myself between her thighs, my intentions clear. At the first stroke of my tongue against her center, she cried out, her hands flying to my hair.

I took my time, learning what made her moan, what made her fingers tighten in my hair, what made her thighs tremble. When I slipped two fingers inside her while continuing my attention with my tongue, she began to unravel, her hips moving in rhythm with my strokes.

"I'm close," she warned, her voice tight with approaching release.

I doubled my efforts, curling my fingers to find that perfect spot inside her while my tongue circled relentlessly. She came with a sharp cry, her body tensing and then pulsing around my fingers as waves of pleasure washed over her.

Before she could fully recover, I moved up her body, claiming her mouth in a passionate kiss. She reached between us, wrapping her fingers around my hardness, stroking me with a confidence that belied her earlier hesitation.

Our eyes locked as I positioned myself at her entrance, then slowly pushed inside her, both of us gasping at the sensation of our bodies finally joining.

I stilled, giving her time to adjust, fighting the urge to move. "Okay?" I whispered.

Her answer came in the form of her legs wrapping around my waist, pulling me deeper. I began to move, finding a rhythm that made her gasp with each thrust. Her nails raked down my back, urging me on as our bodies found the same synchronicity we'd developed on the ice.

I shifted the angle, lifting one of her legs higher, and was rewarded with a sharp cry as I hit a spot that made her eyes flutter closed. "There," she breathed. "Right there."

I maintained the pace, watching her face as pleasure built within her again. When I felt her beginning to tighten around me, I reached between us, circling her sensitive bud with my thumb. She shattered for a second time, her inner muscles clenching

around me in waves that triggered my own release, my hips jerking against hers as ecstasy overtook me.

Afterward, Starla lay nestled against my chest, her breathing gradually slowing. I traced patterns on her shoulder, marveling at the contrast between her fierce competitive spirit and the tender warmth she revealed in private moments.

"What are you thinking?" she murmured against my skin.

I considered deflecting with humor, my usual defense. Instead, I found myself offering truth. "That I've spent my life seeking the next adrenaline rush—the next race, the next win, the next fleeting connection. Always moving, never still enough to feel the emptiness."

She propped herself up on one elbow, studying my face in the moonlight. "And now?"

"Now I'm wondering what it would be like to stop running." My fingers brushed a strand of hair from her face. "To build something that lasts."

Vulnerability flickered across her features. "That sounds suspiciously like a plan, Hayes. I thought you were all about improvisation."

"Maybe I'm learning the value of structure," I said softly. "From a very demanding teacher."

Her laugh vibrated against my chest, the sound more precious for its rarity. She settled back into my arms, her body warm against mine, and for the first time in years, I felt no urge to flee. No restless anxiety pushing me toward the next distraction.

Instead, I found myself hoping the night would stretch endlessly before us, giving me time to memorize every detail of this moment. The rhythm of her breathing. The weight of her head on my shoulder. The scent of her hair mingled with the lingering notes of her perfume.

Tonight, we were insulated from the world and its dangers. Tomorrow would bring new challenges—the charity exhibition, the ongoing mystery of who might be targeting Starla, the complications of merging our very different lives.

But for now, wrapped in moonlight and each other's arms, we had found a perfect harmony that neither of us had anticipated. And I, who had spent a lifetime in motion, found myself wanting nothing more than to remain exactly where I was.

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STARLA

Morning light spilled across the polished surface of the Denver Ice Arena, illuminating microscopic crystals that sparkled like diamond dust. I glided through my warm-up routine, feeling a lightness in my movements that had nothing to do with physical conditioning and everything to do with the dark-haired speed skater practicing power crossovers along the perimeter. Every few laps, Gunnar's eyes would find mine, his smile igniting a flutter beneath my ribs that I'd stopped trying to suppress.

Six weeks ago, I would have scoffed at the notion of developing feelings for someone like him—impulsive, boundary-pushing, deliberately provocative. Now I couldn't imagine my days without his challenging presence, his unexpected tenderness, the way he'd somehow slipped past defenses I'd spent a lifetime constructing.

"Focus, Starla," Vivian called from the sidelines, clipboard clutched to her chest. "Your free leg is dropping on the spiral sequence."

I corrected immediately, extending through my instep, chin lifted. The charity event loomed less than twenty-four hours away, our final dress rehearsal a culmination of weeks of relentless practice and gradual transformation. What had begun as a publicity obligation had evolved into something extraordinary—a routine that showcased both our strengths while transcending our individual styles.

Gunnar completed his circuit and slowed near me, spraying a fine mist of ice as he stopped. "Ready for the run-through? Luis wants to check the lighting cues with the full performance."

Luis Ruiz, the production's choreographer, stood with the technical director near the sound booth, gesturing animatedly about spotlight positioning. The arena had been transformed for tomorrow's gala—elegant banners suspended from the rafters, a specially constructed platform for the Olympic Committee members and sponsors, and professional lighting that would elevate our exhibition beyond typical practice conditions.

I nodded, taking a deep breath to center myself. "Let's show them what fire and ice can do together."

His grin widened, that familiar spark of mischief dancing in his eyes. "That's my girl."

My girl. The casual endearment sent a ridiculous thrill through me. After our night together following the restaurant disaster with Cassidy, something fundamental had shifted between us. We hadn't discussed labels or future plans—both of us were too focused on the immediate challenges of the exhibition and the mysterious threats—but the intimacy lingering in his touch, his gaze, spoke volumes.

We took our starting positions as Luis signaled the sound technician. The opening notes filled the arena—haunting piano giving way to a driving beat that somehow captured our contrasting energies. Muscle memory took over as I flowed through the choreography, each movement precise yet infused with newfound emotional depth.

Gunnar and I circled each other, our paths intertwining in a dance of approach and retreat, tension and release. When his hands clasped my waist for our first lift, I trusted him completely, surrendering to the momentum as he raised me overhead. My body arced into a perfect position, arms extended, before he lowered me in a controlled descent that transitioned seamlessly into side-by-side spins.

Throughout the routine, I remained acutely aware of him—his power, his presence,

the extraordinary way he'd adapted his speed skating techniques to complement my classically trained movements. The program built to a crescendo as we executed a death spiral, my body hovering inches above the ice as he anchored me, our joined hands the only connection preventing me from falling.

For our finale, we merged into a paired spin that evolved from cautious synchronicity to breathtaking speed, breaking apart at the last moment to strike mirror-image ending poses—his aggressive and powerful, mine elegant and precise, yet somehow creating perfect harmony together.

Silence hung in the air for three heartbeats before Luis erupted into enthusiastic applause, joined by the small crew of technicians and arena staff who'd paused their preparations to watch.

"Magnificent!" Luis exclaimed, hurrying onto the ice. "The technical complexity infused with the dance of the heart—it's exactly what I envisioned!"

Vivian's approval came in the form of a single nod, though I detected the slightest softening around her eyes. "The transitions in the middle section have improved significantly. The committee will be impressed."

Hank Wells, Gunnar's coach, offered a gruff thumbs-up from his position near the boards. I'd come to recognize this as his equivalent of ecstatic praise.

Gunnar skated to my side, his breathing slightly elevated from exertion. "Told you we'd nail it."

"We actually did," I admitted, unable to contain my smile. "It feels..."

"Magical?" he suggested, eyes crinkling at the corners.

"I was going to say 'cohesive,' but magical works too."

He laughed, draping an arm around my shoulders as we glided toward the exit. "Only you would use a word like 'cohesive' to describe what just happened. Admit it, McKenzie—we created something special."

The warmth of his body against mine, even through our training clothes, sent a pleasant shiver down my spine. "Fine. It's special. Remarkable. Transcendent. Does that satisfy your ego?"

"Almost." His voice dropped to a murmur meant only for me. "But I can think of other ways you could satisfy me later."

Heat bloomed across my cheeks. The memory of our night together after the restaurant flooded back—his hands exploring every inch of me, the exquisite pleasure of surrendering control to someone I trusted, the surprising tenderness in his touch despite his reputation for wildness.

"Behave," I whispered back. "We're in public."

His chuckle vibrated against me. "That hasn't stopped you from having very inappropriate thoughts right now. I can tell by that blush."

Before I could formulate a suitably cutting response, Luis approached with final notes about costume adjustments and timing cues. We spent another hour refining minute details, ensuring tomorrow's performance would be flawless. By the time we finished, late afternoon shadows stretched across the ice, the maintenance crew hovering impatiently with their resurfacing equipment.

In the locker room, I changed quickly, eager to finalize preparations for tomorrow. The exhibition had taken on heightened significance beyond mere publicity or

Olympic Committee approval. It represented something profound about transformation—Gunnar's, mine, and what we'd become together against all odds. Even I was at a loss to explain what had taken place—I only knew that I was grateful.

I zipped my skate bag, mentally cataloging the items I'd need to bring tomorrow. Reaching inside for my water bottle, my fingers brushed against something unfamiliar—a folded piece of paper tucked into the inner pocket where I kept spare laces. Frowning, I pulled it out, unfolding the plain white paper to reveal a message in the same generic computer font as the previous note:

YOU WON'T PERFORM TOMORROW.

Ice flooded my veins, the earlier euphoria evaporating instantly. I glanced around the empty locker room, suddenly feeling exposed despite the security measures we'd implemented after the previous incidents. Someone had accessed my belongings—again—despite my vigilance. Someone determined to derail everything I'd worked for.

I found Gunnar waiting in the lobby, scrolling through his phone. One look at my face and he straightened, instantly alert.

"What happened?" he asked, voice low as he moved toward me.

Wordlessly, I handed him the note. His expression darkened as he read the four ominous words, jaw tightening visibly.

"Where was this?"

"Inside my skate bag. In an inner pocket." I tried to keep my voice steady despite the chill of fear now coursing through me. "Gunnar, they're getting bolder. First it was missing items, then slashed tires and sabotaged lights. Now direct threats."

He scanned the lobby, though I knew he wouldn't spot anything suspicious. Our tormentor operated in shadows, striking when we least expected. "We need to talk to security. And make a list of everyone who might want to sabotage you...us."

In the security office, Santana reviewed the locker room footage, shaking his head in frustration. "Camera angle doesn't show the lockers themselves, just the entrance. Several people went in and out during your practice."

"Who?" Gunnar demanded.

Santana consulted his notes. "Other skaters with locker access, cleaning staff, a couple of event organizers checking space for tomorrow. Nothing unusual."

I leaned against the desk, mind racing. "Let's think systematically. Who benefits from disrupting the exhibition or my skating career in general?"

Gunnar grabbed a notepad, uncapping a pen with his teeth. "Trevor Davis," he began, writing the name with forceful strokes. "Hockey player with a fixation on you. Has money, connections, and an entitled attitude. Won't take no for an answer."

I nodded reluctantly. "He doesn't handle rejection well, and he's made multiple unwanted advances."

"Irina Sokolov," Gunnar continued, adding her to the list. "Your main competition. Benefits directly if you're rattled or injured before Olympic qualifiers."

"She's ambitious enough," I acknowledged. "Though sabotage seems extreme, even for her."

"Cassidy Palmer." His expression tightened as he wrote his ex's name. "Clearly unstable, definitely jealous, publicly threatened both of us at the restaurant."

The memory of that humiliating scene made me wince. "She specifically said we'd regret our being together."

"And finally, unknown obsessive fan." He tapped the pen against the paper. "Someone who may be deluded into thinking they have a relationship with you, and therefore feels unusually possessive, possibly threatened by your partnership with me."

Santana collected the list, promising to review security footage with these suspects in mind. "In the meantime, I'll assign additional security for tomorrow's event. And I strongly suggest you both use extreme caution."

Outside, twilight had descended, streetlights flickering on as we walked to Gunnar's Range Rover. Neither of us spoke until we were safely inside, doors locked.

"Please stay with me tonight?" I asked with urgency tingeing my tone. The words emerged before I could analyze them, pure instinct overriding my usual self-reliance.

His hand found mine across the console. "I was going to suggest the same thing. Besides, I have three days' worth of dirty dishes in my sink and hockey equipment drying in my bathtub."

A laugh escaped me despite the tension. "How romantic."

At my apartment, we ordered takeout from a nearby Thai restaurant, spreading containers across my usually pristine coffee table. As we ate, we discussed security measures for tomorrow, potential warning signs to watch for, contingency plans. The practical conversation helped calm my nerves, transforming abstract fear into manageable precautions.

After dinner, Gunnar insisted on checking the entire apartment—testing window

locks, examining the door frame for signs of tampering, confirming the balcony access was secure. His protectiveness might have felt stifling coming from anyone else, but from him, it felt like a natural extension of the bond forming between us.

"All clear," he announced, returning to the living room where I'd cleaned up our dinner remains. "Though I should probably sleep with one eye open, just in case."

I approached him slowly, sliding my arms around his waist. "Or you could stay awake doing something more enjoyable than security patrol."

His eyebrows rose, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Ms. McKenzie, are you propositioning me?"

"Absolutely." I rose on tiptoes, brushing my lips against his. "Any objections?"

His response came in the form of strong arms lifting me effortlessly, my legs wrapping around his waist as he carried me toward the bedroom. "Only that you're still wearing too many clothes."

What followed transcended our first night together, each touch deepened by growing familiarity yet exciting in its exploration. Gunnar laid me gently on the bed, his body covering mine as his mouth traced a burning path down my neck. I arched against him, fingers threading through his hair, guiding him lower.

He took his time undressing me, treating each newly exposed inch of skin to attention. When he finally slid inside me, our bodies joined in perfect synchronicity, I felt boundaries dissolving that went beyond the physical. The control I clung to in every other aspect of my life melted away under his touch, replaced by liberating surrender that heightened every sensation.

"Let go baby," he whispered against my ear, sensing my approaching climax. "I've

got you."

And I did—completely, utterly, gloriously—falling apart in his arms with an abandon I'd never allowed myself before. He followed moments later, my name on his lips, his body trembling against mine.

Afterward, we lay tangled in sheets and each other, his fingers tracing lazy patterns across my bare shoulder. The comfortable silence between us felt as intimate as our lovemaking, requiring no words to fill the space.

Eventually, however, Gunnar broke the quiet. "Starla." His voice had acquired a serious edge I rarely heard. "What's worth more...winning gold or your life?"

The question hung between us, weighted with implications. I propped myself up on one elbow, studying his troubled expression. "That's not a fair comparison."

"It is if someone's willing to hurt you to stop your performance." His hand stilled against my skin. "Maybe we should withdraw from tomorrow's exhibition. Give the cops more time to identify whoever's behind this."

Panic fluttered in my chest at the suggestion. "We can't quit now. Not when we've created something extraordinary, not when the Olympic Committee will be watching."

"The committee will have other opportunities to see you skate," he argued gently. "If you're alive and uninjured."

"And if we back out, whoever's doing this wins." I sat up, pulling the sheet around me. "They'll see it worked, that threats can make Starla McKenzie run scared."

"This isn't about fear. It's about sensible precaution." Frustration edged into his voice.

"I've watched you push through injuries, exhaustion, and setbacks. I admire your determination. But this is different."

I felt trapped between impossible choices—my lifelong Olympic dream, my parents' expectations, Vivian's investment in my career, and now this unexpected connection with Gunnar that had become precious to me. "I don't want to let anyone down," I whispered. "Not you, not my coaches, not my parents, not myself."

"You could never let me down." He sat up beside me, cupping my face in his hands. "But you need to consider what happens after tomorrow. If we haven't identified who's doing this..."

"I know." I leaned into his touch. "Please, Gunnar. Give me tomorrow. Let me...let us...show the world what we've created together. After that, if the authorities haven't caught whoever's responsible, I'll seriously consider withdrawing from competitions until they do."

He studied me for a long moment, conflict evident in his expression. "Promise me you'll be careful. That you won't take unnecessary risks."

"I promise." Relief flooded through me. "It's not just about medals anymore. I have something else worth protecting now."

His eyes softened at the unspoken declaration. "What's that?"

I touched his face, allowing myself rare vulnerability. "Our future. Whatever that might be."

He pulled me into a tender kiss that sealed our agreement. When we separated, he pressed his forehead against mine. "For the record, I'm falling for you too, McKenzie. Hard."

The simple statement unlocked something within me—permission to acknowledge what I'd been fighting for weeks. I'd constructed my entire life around independence, control, and solitary pursuit of perfection. Yet somehow, this chaos-embracing speed skater had become essential to my happiness, on and off the ice.

As we settled back into bed, his arms encircling me protectively, I allowed myself a moment of hope. Tomorrow we would dazzle the world with our performance. And perhaps the authorities would finally identify whoever threatened our fragile new beginning.

Sleep claimed me gradually, my last conscious thought a prayer that our intertwined bodies, breathing in perfect rhythm, symbolized a future neither of us had anticipated but both now desperately wanted to protect.

GUNNAR

Dawn broke in streaks of vermillion across the Denver skyline as I prowled the perimeter of Starla's living room, checking window latches for the third time. Sleep had evaded me most of the night, my body alert beside her peaceful form. The note's ominous message echoed through my mind, transforming what would have been the exhilaration of anticipation into wary vigilance.

Starla emerged from the bedroom. She was dressed in warm-ups, but her hair was already coiled in its performance-ready bun. Even with the weight of threats hanging over us, she projected composure. Only the slight tension around her eyes betrayed her anxiety.

"You've been up for hours," she observed, crossing to the kitchen where coffee brewed. Not a question.

I shrugged, accepting the mug she offered. "Thought I'd make sure our mystery admirer didn't pay a visit."

"Any sign of trouble?"

"Nothing." I took a sip, watching her over the rim." Santana confirmed he doubled security for today. Extra guards at all entrances, credential checks, the works."

She nodded, gathering her things methodically as she went through her checklist. Even in the face of potential danger, her organizational habits remained intact.

We arrived at the arena three hours before the event, well ahead of the other performers. The parking lot stood nearly empty. Our footsteps echoed across the asphalt still damp from overnight rain. At the staff entrance, a security guard inspected our credentials before waving us through with a nod.

Inside, the transformation was complete. What had been a standard ice arena now gleamed with theatrical lighting, the boards adorned with sponsor logos and charity insignia. Seating for Olympic Committee members had been arranged prominently, with plush chairs set where they could evaluate each nuance of our performance.

"Let's check the ice," Starla suggested, heading toward the locker rooms.

I followed, scanning each shadowy corner, each service access. Nothing seemed amiss, yet unease clung to me like a second skin. We changed quickly and claimed the freshly resurfaced rink for a brief practice run.

The ice felt different under exhibition conditions—harder, faster. We adapted instantly, our muscle memory compensating for the altered surface. Our bodies found their connection points, her delicate frame fitting against mine as if designed for these precise moments of contact.

"Perfect," she declared after we completed our final lift sequence. A rare, unguarded smile illuminated her features. "We're ready."

I wished I shared her confidence. My eyes continuously swept the perimeter, seeking movement in the shadows, unusual packages, anything that might signal danger.

We finished our abbreviated run-through as staff began filtering in—technicians adjusting spotlights, sound engineers testing levels, ushers preparing to distribute programs. Each unfamiliar face triggered my scrutiny until Santana approached, clipboard in hand.

"Perimeter secure," he reported. "We've checked all equipment, entrances restricted to authorized personnel only."

I nodded, though his assurances did little to ease my vigilance. "And the lighting rig?" The memory of darkened ice during Starla's practice remained vivid.

"Triple-checked. Everything's on separate circuits now, can't all go down at once."

We retreated to the preparation area where other performers had begun arriving—pairs skaters, hockey players performing precision drills, a troupe of synchronized skaters in matching warmups. Amid the growing bustle, I spotted two familiar figures approaching—Starla's brother Logan McKenzie and his reporter girlfriend Emberleigh Quinn, both looking polished for the cameras sure to follow them.

"Star!" Logan embraced his sister, his expression warm beneath professional composure. "The place is packed already. Half the Olympic Committee showed up early to claim their seats."

Starla returned his hug. "No pressure or anything."

Emberleigh stepped forward, microphone conspicuously absent. "I'm off-duty until after your performance," she assured us. "Just wanted to wish you both luck." She lowered her voice, leaning closer. "Though I should mention I saw Irina Sokolov acting a bit strangely backstage. Arguing with someone on her phone, then ducking into a staff area when she noticed me watching."

Starla and I exchanged glances.

"Thanks for the heads-up," I replied, filing the information away.

Logan seemed oblivious to the undercurrent. "You two have created quite a buzz. The promo footage leaked online has everyone talking."

"We should get back to warming up," Starla interjected, clearly wrestling with competing priorities—sibling connection versus performance preparation.

After they departed, tension visibly eased from her shoulders. "Logan means well, but his timing is terrible. Let's finish getting ready."

We separated to change into our costumes—Starla to the women's locker room, me to the men's. My outfit was simple—black pants with silver accents, a fitted dark blue top designed to complement Starla's crystalline costume. I changed quickly, eager to reestablish our safety perimeter.

When Starla didn't emerge after fifteen minutes, concern gnawed at me. I approached the women's locker room entrance, hovering until a young skater exited.

"Could you check on Starla McKenzie?" I asked. "Tell her Gunnar's waiting."

The girl nodded, disappearing inside. Moments later, Starla burst through the door, face drained of color.

"My skates are gone," she whispered, voice tight with controlled panic. "I left them right beside my bag when I changed, and now they're missing."

Cold dread crystallized in my chest. "You're certain they weren't moved?"

"Positive. I always place them exactly six inches from my bag. They're gone, Gunnar."

I grabbed her elbow, steering her toward the security office where Santana monitored

camera feeds. "When did you last see them?"

"Twenty minutes ago, tops. I set them down, hung up my costume, then stepped into the shower area to change. When I came back, they'd vanished."

Santana mobilized his team instantly, dispatching guards to all exits while reviewing locker room footage. "No one entered carrying skates," he confirmed, "so they must still be in the building."

A systematic search commenced—storage rooms, custodial closets, equipment bins. The event's starting time crept closer, heightening our urgency. Other performers began their final preparations while we frantically combed the arena's back areas.

"Found them!" A security guard's voice crackled over the radio. "Maintenance closet near the Zamboni bay."

We raced to the location, relief flooding me at the sight of white boots nestled between cleaning supplies. Starla snatched them up, examining each inch with growing horror.

"The blades," she whispered. "Look at the edges."

Where precision-honed steel should have gleamed, dull surfaces reflected the harsh fluorescent light. Someone had deliberately dulled the edges, rendering them dangerously unpredictable for jumps or spins.

"We need new blades. Now." Her voice remained steady despite the sabotage. "There's an equipment shop on-site."

The next forty minutes passed in controlled chaos. A technician from the pro shop worked frantically to mount and hone new blades while the event began, other

performers taking the ice to enthusiastic applause. Starla watched the blade mounting process with laser focus, testing the balance repeatedly.

"It'll have to do," she finally declared, lacing the boots forcefully. "We've got fifteen minutes until our slot."

We hurried toward the staging area, passing Irina Sokolov in her practice gear despite having no scheduled performance. Her icy gaze towards Starla raised hackles along my spine.

At the entrance to the performance area, I scanned the assembled crowd, immediately spotting Trevor Davis in the third row, his expression inscrutable as he tracked Starla's movements. Several sections away, Cassidy's distinctive red hair stood out against the sea of spectators, her attention also fixed on us with unsettling intensity.

"Both our prime suspects are here," I murmured to Starla, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

"So is Irina," she replied under her breath. "Coming this way."

The Russian skater approached, her smile not reaching her eyes. "Good luck, Starla. I hear the committee is very impressed already."

"Thank you," Starla responded with professional courtesy that revealed nothing of our suspicions.

As Irina moved away, I noticed her trajectory—not toward the stands, but toward the technical booth where lighting controls were housed. Santana's security team had stationed a guard there, but he'd turned to check credentials of another entrant.

"Keep an eye on her," I instructed Starla, then caught Santana's attention with a sharp

gesture. "Irina Sokolov is heading for the lighting controls. She's not authorized for that area."

Santana radioed his team immediately, but the announcer's voice boomed across the arena: "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the ice, speed skating champion Gunnar 'Blaze' Hayes and figure skating star Starla McKenzie!"

No time remained. Security would have to intercept Irina without our help.

"Ready?" I asked, taking Starla's hand.

Her fingers interlaced with mine, surprisingly warm despite everything. "Born ready."

We glided onto the ice to thunderous applause, taking our positions beneath spotlights that bathed the surface in ethereal blue. As the music's first notes filled the arena, we launched into our choreography, bodies syncing intuitively. The audience faded to background noise, my awareness narrowing to Starla's movements, the feeling of ice beneath my blades, the certainty of our synchronized elements.

The routine progressed flawlessly through its early stages. I could hear spectators gasping at our first lift, Starla's body extended overhead as I rotated, then lowered her in a controlled descent that showcased her beautiful flexibility and my strength.

We then entered the death spiral with Starla's body horizontal above the ice, my anchor point steady as she rotated. That's when I glimpsed movement in my peripheral vision—a spotlight housing detaching from its mounting above the ice surface, directly in Starla's trajectory.

No time for subtlety. I yanked her from position with brutal force, propelling us both toward the boards as the massive metal fixture crashed onto the exact spot where

she'd been suspended a heartbeat earlier. Gasps rippled through the crowd, followed by stunned silence.

Starla regained her balance instantly, her professional instincts overriding shock. Without missing a beat, she improvised a transition into our next element, eyes conveying a clear message: We finish this.

When the final notes sounded, we struck our ending pose—my arm protectively around her waist, her hand raised in triumph—to deafening applause that shook the rafters.

Backstage erupted into chaos. Security personnel swarmed the technical areas while medical staff insisted on examining us despite our protests. Through the confusion, I caught sight of Irina being escorted from the lighting booth, her face twisted in fury, hands secured behind her back.

"She tried to override the lighting system," Santana explained when he reached us. "The bolts on that spotlight had been deliberately loosened. If you hadn't moved when you did..."

He left the sentence unfinished, its implications hanging in the air.

Starla stared at her rival, comprehension dawning. "It was Irina all along? The notes, the sabotage?"

"She's confessed to everything," Santana confirmed. "Apparently she's been obsessed with eliminating you as competition. Claims you've always been given preferential treatment, that you don't deserve your ranking."

Irina's gaze locked with Starla's across the crowded area, hatred radiating from her posture. Rather than shrinking from the confrontation, Starla approached her former

competitor, stopping a cautious distance away.

"Why?" she asked simply. "We could have pushed each other to be better. Rivalry doesn't have to mean destruction."

Irina's laugh held no humor. "Easy for you to say—perfect Starla McKenzie with her perfect family connections and her perfect technique. Some of us had to fight for every opportunity." Her voice cracked slightly, revealing unexpected vulnerability beneath the venom. "You never even saw me as real competition."

"That's not true," Starla countered quietly. "I've always respected your artistry, your dedication. You could have been great without trying to destroy me."

"Save your pity," Irina spat as security began leading her away. "This changes nothing. You'll always have everything handed to you."

"No," Starla replied, her tone surprisingly gentle. "I work for everything I have. Just like you. That's what makes this so senseless."

As Irina disappeared through the exit, Starla's composure wavered. I moved to her side, my hand finding the small of her back, steadying her without words.

"You're showing her more compassion than she deserves," I murmured.

She leaned against me almost imperceptibly. "Hatred destroyed her career. I refuse to let it touch mine." Her gaze lifted to mine. "Besides, I have more important things to think about now."

Around us, the event continued—other performers taking their turns, audience buzzing with excitement over our dramatic performance and its aftermath. Olympic Committee members approached with congratulations, sponsors expressed interest,

reporters hovered at the perimeter waiting for statements.

But none of it mattered compared to the woman beside me, who had faced sabotage, threats, and literal falling spotlights without surrendering her dignity. I wanted to worship at her feet.

"Ready to get out of here?" I asked quietly. "I think we've given them enough of a show for one day."

Her smile held exhaustion, relief, and something that looked remarkably like happiness. "Take me home, Hayes."

As we left the arena, reporters shouting questions we weren't ready to answer, I kept her tucked against my side. The mystery had been solved, the danger neutralized, but my protective instincts remained fully engaged. Some things, once awakened, couldn't be switched off again.

And my need to be part of Starla's life—on and off the ice—had become as essential as breathing.

STARLA

Spring sunlight filtered through new leaves outside my apartment window, casting dancing patterns across the hardwood floor. Three months had passed since the charity event—three months of transformation more profound than anything I could have imagined.

I sipped my morning tea, scrolling through yet another news article about our death-defying performance . The video had gone viral within hours—our fluid routine, the dramatic spotlight crash, and our defiant completion capturing millions of views across social media platforms. Sponsors had flooded both our inboxes with partnership opportunities, while the press labeled us ice's most compelling couple , a moniker that made Gunnar laugh every time he heard it.

The Olympic Committee's response had exceeded my wildest expectations. Rather than seeing the disruption as a detraction, they'd praised our extraordinary composure under pressure and undeniable artistic connection . The representatives who approached us afterward spoke not of Irina's sabotage but of our seamless recovery, our ability to communicate without words, and the innovative way we'd melded figure skating precision with speed skating power.

The memory brought a smile to my face as I set down my phone. Outside, April sunshine warmed Denver's streets, coaxing crocuses and daffodils from winter-hardened soil. New beginnings seemed to be the theme of the season.

My phone buzzed with a text from Gunnar: Still on for 2 pm? Got the whole rink to ourselves.

I typed back: Wouldn't miss it. Meeting with the events company until 1:30, then heading straight there.

His response came instantly: Break a leg. Not literally. Already did that once this year saving yours.

The teasing reference to his heroic spotlight rescue made me smile. In the weeks following the event, as media attention intensified and Irina faced criminal charges, Gunnar had become my anchor. His support gave me the courage to make decisions I'd once considered unthinkable.

The hardest had been the phone call to my parents, explaining my decision to withdraw from Olympic qualifying competitions. I'd expected disappointment, arguments, perhaps even ultimatums. Instead, after a moment of stunned silence, my father had asked a question that revealed how little we'd truly communicated over the years:

"Is this what you want, Starla?"

The simple inquiry—so foreign from the man who'd charted my scores and proudly displayed my medals since childhood—had unlocked something within me. For the first time, I'd spoken honestly about my ambitions, my fears, and the realization that I'd been chasing their dream rather than identifying my own.

To my shock, they'd listened. Really listened. And while I couldn't undo decades of complex family dynamics with a single conversation, it felt like the first genuine exchange we'd had since I was a child, before skating became the center of our relationship.

I finished my tea and gathered my portfolio for today's meeting with Elevation Events, a company specializing in sports exhibitions and charitable initiatives. They'd approached me after the viral performance, intrigued by my background and fresh

perspective. The position they'd offered—creative director for ice shows and skating events—combined my organizational skills with newfound creativity Gunnar had helped me discover.

The meeting went even better than expected. By the time I arrived at the Denver Ice Arena, my steps felt buoyant with excitement about new possibilities. The familiar chill greeted me as I pushed through the double doors, the scent of refrigerated air and faint equipment cleaner triggering memories of countless hours spent pursuing the ever-elusive dream of perfection.

Gunnar sat on a bench near the boards, already laced into his speed skates. He looked up at my entrance, his face breaking into that crooked grin that still made my heart skip.

"There she is," he called, rising to his feet. "How'd it go?"

"They loved the proposal for the youth showcase," I replied, setting down my bag to retrieve my skates. "We're moving forward with the four-city tour, integrating skaters from different disciplines and backgrounds."

"Told you they would." He watched as I laced my boots with practiced precision. "You're a natural at this event planning stuff."

"Says the man who just accepted a coaching position for Denver's elite development program." I straightened, admiring how his athletic frame filled out his casual training clothes. "The next generation of speed skaters won't know what hit them."

He laughed, extending his hand to help me onto the ice. "Gotta put all this chaotic energy to constructive use, right? Besides, the schedule gives me afternoons for the community outreach program."

Pride warmed my chest as he mentioned his newest initiative—skating clinics for

foster children and at-risk youth. Using his platform to create opportunities for kids who reminded him of himself showed a depth of character that had nothing to do with his bad-boy public image.

We pushed off together, warming up with lazy circles around the empty rink. Without performance pressure or watchful eyes, our movements felt luxuriously free, guided by simple joy rather than technical requirements.

"Any word from Cassidy?" I asked, referencing his ex-girlfriend who'd been cleared of involvement in Irina's sabotage scheme but remained a complicated footnote in our story.

"She called to apologize for the restaurant scene," he replied, matching his pace to mine. "Apparently she's in some wellness retreat in Arizona, 'finding herself' or whatever."

"And Trevor?"

Gunnar's eyebrows rose. "Logan mentioned he's been traded to Seattle. Looks like your brother was able to pull some strings after learning about his unwanted advances."

I smiled, touched by this evidence of Logan's protective instincts, so similar to Gunnar's despite their different expressions. My relationship with my brother had grown stronger since the charity event as well, breaking through years of competitive tension. Looking back, I realized it was because both of us were striving for our parents' attention, to be seen as worthy in their eyes.

Gunnar and I skated side by side, comfortable silence stretching between us. This empty rink had become our sanctuary over recent months—a place where we could simply be without expectations or obligations.

"Remember that first death spiral?" Gunnar asked suddenly, slowing his pace. "When you were convinced I'd drop you?"

"I wasn't convinced," I protested, though my smile belied the objection. "Just reasonably concerned about trusting my safety to someone who thought 'careful planning' was a communicable disease."

He laughed, extending his hand in invitation. "Shall we see if we've still got it?"

Without hesitation, I placed my hand in his, our fingers interlocking as naturally as breathing. We gained momentum together, finding the perfect speed before transitioning into position—my body parallel to the ice, his strength anchoring me as I rotated in a perfect circle around him.

The position was technically demanding, requiring absolute trust between partners. As we executed it flawlessly, I marveled at how far we'd come—from reluctant collaborators to something profoundly more significant.

We transitioned out of the spiral into an impromptu dance, elements of our charity routine blending with new, spontaneous movements. Without judges or audience, we created something that was solely ours.

When we finally slowed, breathing hard from exertion, he pulled me into his arms at center ice. "I've been thinking," he said, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"Always dangerous," I teased.

His smile softened. "I've spent my life chasing the next rush, the next competition, the next achievement. Running from place to place, relationship to relationship, never stopping long enough to feel the emptiness I was trying to escape."

I rested my hands against his chest, feeling his heartbeat beneath my palms. "And

now?"

"Now I want roots," he said simply. "I'm tired of running from my past, from commitment, from the possibility of loss. I want to build something lasting—these youth programs, my coaching career, a life that matters beyond medals and rankings."

His hands framed my face with unexpected tenderness. "Most of all, I want to build it with you, Starla. If that's what you want too."

The vulnerability in his expression took my breath away. This man who lived for risk and adrenaline was offering the most courageous proposal of all—permanence, commitment, a shared future.

"It's funny," I whispered, covering his hands with mine. "I spent years believing Olympic gold would validate my existence. That winning was the only path to worth. But it was never really my dream, just one I inherited."

"And now?" he echoed my earlier question.

"Now I know what actually matters." I met his gaze directly, allowing him to see everything I felt. "Creating something meaningful. Helping others find their passion for skating without the crushing pressure I experienced. Building a life that's balanced, not just perfect by someone else's standards."

I rose on my toe picks, bringing our faces closer. "And doing it with someone who sees me...really sees me...beyond the ice."

His smile illuminated his entire face. "Is that a yes, McKenzie?"

"That's a yes, Hayes."

When our lips met, there was no audience to impress, no judges to evaluate our

technique. Just two people who had discovered something extraordinary in each other. And that something was love.

As we broke apart, laughing breathlessly, spring sunshine streamed through the arena's high windows, casting golden light across the ice. The symbolism wasn't lost on me—new growth, fresh beginnings, life emerging from winter's grip.

"So what's next for us?" I asked, my arms looped around his neck.

His eyes crinkled at the corners, that mischievous spark I'd grown to love dancing in their depths. "Something tells me our best performances are still ahead."

And as he pulled me into another kiss, I knew with absolute certainty that he was right. The path we'd create together—whether on the ice or beyond it—would be more fulfilling than any solo journey I could have imagined.

Sometimes the most unexpected partnerships created the most beautiful patterns. And ours was just beginning to unfold.