



Mr. Hockey's Marry Christmas (Vegas Crush #10)

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Category: Sport

Description: The brooding captain of the Vegas Crush prepares to pop the question to his wedding planner girlfriend at Christmastime and asks Santa for some advice on how to make it perfect for her in this no third-act breakup, over-the-top-romantic, grumpy/sunshine, will you marry me? hockey love story.

Dear Santa,

Im planning to propose to my amazing girlfriend, who just happens to be a wedding planner. The problem is that shes seen it all, and I want to make our moment special and unique, something shell remember forever. Do you have some good advice for me?

Mr. H

******This novella is a companion story and extended epilogue to Mr. Hockey, Book 8 of VEGAS CRUSH. Of course, you really should read Mr. HOCKEY first so you can enjoy this Christmas engagement story to its fullest.

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prologue

REAGAN

Comic-Con

Los Angeles

“A re you sure anyone will know what I am?” I ask, running my hands down the green leather jumpsuit I’m wearing, then reaching up to touch the custom headpiece Mikhail had made, which he says makes my Mantis costume as realistic as possible.

“Yes, babe, for the tenth time, I promise people will get it.”

He’s dressed as Iron Man in an authentic metal-looking robot suit. My guy went all out on these costumes in a big way. And here we are, at Comic-Con in Los Angeles, dressed as superheroes. I have now watched every Marvel and DC movie made at least once. Some more than once.

“I haven’t dressed up like this since middle school,” Mikhail comments as we wander into the large convention center space. It’s filled with others who are, for the most part, dressed in costumes or character T-shirts. There are people of all ages, from babies to the elderly. Some costumes I recognize, most I don’t. “I feel kind of stupid,” Mikhail says under his breath.

“You feel stupid? But everyone here is dressed up. And no one will know it’s you anyway. You’re wearing a mask.”

“Humph,” he grunts at me in response.

We head over to a green screen where we wait in line to get our pictures taken. The photographer grins as we approach, commenting on our “sick” costumes. He has us choose a background and then takes a few photos. Just as we head to look at them on the screen, Mikhail taking off his helmet so he can see, we hear our names. “Mikhail? Reagan?”

We both look up, startled to be recognized, only to see Mikhail’s teammate Boris and his girlfriend, Talia. Talia is in full Hogwarts robes, gold and magenta accents for Gryffindor, her hair in frizzy curls, a time-turner hanging around her neck. Boris, I think, is dressed as a Fortnite character. He looks totally bizarre, and I can’t help laughing as they run up and hug us, telling us how great our costumes are.

Mikhail looks slightly horrified to be running into one of his teammates here, when we’re in full-on superhero nerd mode.

“What are you guys doing here?” Talia asks excitedly. “Who’s the geek?”

I hitch my thumb at Mikhail. “He’s been schooling me on all things superhero But it was my idea to come here.”

“We’ve come the past couple of years,” Talia says. “We love it.”

We end up walking around together, checking out all the amazing booths and sitting in on a few exclusive, star-studded, movie sneak-peek events. As it nears the dinner hour, Talia asks if we want to change and have dinner with them.

A couple of hours later, we’re at a swanky LA restaurant, finishing maybe the best meal I have ever eaten in my life. I’ve spoken to Talia a few times now, but we end up really hitting it off. Mikhail relaxes a bit, chatting with Boris about all things

sports, comics, and video games.

As the server comes out with dessert, a champagne bottle also arrives. I look quizzically at Mikhail, who lifts his shoulders and shakes his head. But then, our attention is shifted to Boris, who drops to one knee in front of Talia.

“Natalia,”—he pulls a small jewelry box from his jacket pocket— “we have gone through some wonderful times together, and some hard times too. You have taught me so much and I am such a better man for having you in my life. I really want to be your husband and for you to be my wife. I want this to be forever with you, my love, my Natalia. Will you marry me, krasotka ?”

Talia literally jumps out of her seat, squealing, and nearly tackles Boris to the floor. She’s kind of a klutz to be honest, and Boris has to steady them both to avoid total disaster.

He helps her back to her feet and, at this point, everyone in the restaurant is watching as he slips a massive ring on her finger, asking, “Is that a yes, krasotka ?”

“Yes. Yes. Of course, it’s a yes!”

There are claps from throughout the restaurant, and the server comes back to pop the champagne, pouring some into each of our glasses.

Boris is grinning ear to ear and Talia looks giddy enough to pass out as she holds out her hand, showing me the flawless diamond ring.

“Congratulations,” Mikhail says, a genuine smile on his face.

We raise a toast, and Boris says, “I don’t usually drink, so wish me luck.”

It's obvious that the two newly engaged have important things to accomplish, because they pay their bill in a hurry, telling us how much fun they've had before nearly running out of the restaurant. Talia turns back to tell me she'll be in touch to talk wedding planning with me soon.

Wow. That's two high-profile clients from the Crush I've brought to Silver & Golden since I started working there. A proposal and a new client were not what I was expecting when we were invited to dinner tonight. I can't wait to share the news with Veronique, who has turned out to not only be a very gracious and warm boss but also my loudest cheerleader. I've learned so much and know with absolute certainty that it's the job for me. I feel as though all the hard, tough years have made me stronger and more confident at my job.

Mikhail and I catch a cab back to our hotel, holding hands across the seat, both still smiling at the sight of being there for such a romantic moment.

"I can't believe he didn't tell us to fuck off tonight." Mikhail shakes his head. "Like, he probably didn't plan on having company for that."

"Maybe not, but Boris seems like an easy-going guy to me, and I barely know him. If he minded, I certainly didn't sense it."

He hums an affirmative response, squeezing my hand as we pull up to the hotel.

In our spacious suite, we both undress and put on our comfortable sleepwear, snuggling on the bed while we search Netflix for something to watch.

"All that romance gave you some big ideas about marriage, huh?"

My head is on his chest, so I can't see his expression. "Um, no, not really. But since you brought it up, Mr. Hockey, would it be so bad, to marry me?"

“Not at all , babe,” he says quickly. “I know it will be the opposite of bad, but we’re both still young.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that.” I let the topic drop since I was not the one to start us down the judgment road at his teammate’s decision to welcome us to witness his proposal.

Some moments pass, Mikhail’s fingertips running up and down my side, snaking my shirt up just a bit so he can touch my skin. “Besides, when I propose to you, it will be way more romantic than at a restaurant after attending some nerd convention.”

“Who’s the person with a thousand superhero books and movies and toys on his shelves? It’s not a nerd convention, it’s a Mikhail convention. And it seems like your teammate is totally in your corner about it.”

He chuckles. “Fair enough. But still, Mr. Hockey will do better.”

I look up, and his eyes are alight with amusement. I kiss him sloppily on the lips as he pulls me fully on top of him, an erection apparent as I settle onto him. “So, the vibe I’m getting here is this : Mr. Hockey sure likes talking about someday popping the question. A lot . He’s the one who keeps bringing it up.”

I wiggle my hips against him, and he smacks my ass playfully in response. “The future Mrs. Hockey has nothing to worry about. I’ll bring it up for her, all right.” He gives me a thrust of his hard cock, grinding it up against me for extra effect.

Aw. He’s telling me without telling me he wants to marry me. Nothing is cuter than Mikhail in a teasing mood like this. Which is something I enjoy seeing more and more of since he and his dad have figured out the boundaries for their relationship. Wiggling some more, I plant another array of wet, loud kisses on his neck and chest.

“I’ll bet he’s really vanilla in lots of ways,” Mikhail says, mischief in his voice.

“Oh yeah?” I stop kissing him and sit up.

“Yeah. Missionary all the way.”

“Poor Boris is getting dragged here. And you think you’re more creative?”

He just gives me a cocky, lopsided grin.

“Well then, Mr. Hockey, my love, you’ll have to show me what you’ve got someday.”

“Oh, I plan on it, future Mrs. Hockey.”

I smile and then hum, knowing my Mr. Hockey is always a man of his word.

But then, with the speed and stealth of the superhero he is, he has our positions reversed in an instant and proceeds to pounce on me, holding me captive beneath his hard body.

“The future Mrs. Hockey is curious about this ultra creative plan of yours.”

Still grinning and looking mighty proud of himself as he prepares to ravish me, he winks and says, “I don’t think you’ll have to wait all that long to find out, babe.”

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ONE

a terrible liar

MIKHAIL

A few months later.

Coach Brown has just announced that he plans to retire at the end of the season.

I can't say I'm shocked, and when he goes on to share that he's one of the oldest coaches in the NHL, retirement certainly makes sense. The guy has hustled hard, as hard as any player, and besides being one of the oldest, he's also one of the winningest, especially in the past decade or so. He'll go out as a legend, no doubt. I'm happy for the guy.

"I want to spend some time with my grandkids before I get too senile," he cracks, setting off laughter among the coaching and leadership staff. "I really wanted you guys to hear it first. Gossip travels fast around here. It was important you get the words from me, not from someone else."

"You're the best, Coach," Evan says. "We'll miss the hell out of you."

"Shut it, Kazmeirowicz," one of the offensive coaches says jovially. "You bailed early."

"Hey, just like Coach, I know how to go out on a high note," Evan says. "You blokes

will be dragging your walkers in here and Coach and I will be drinking beers on the beach. Don't hate."

Everyone laughs, but there are lots of questions. Is there a replacement coach in the wings? No. Does Coach have thoughts on who it might be? No. What will happen to team dynamics with a coaching change? He doesn't know.

Grant steps in and says he's working with the owner to identify a short list of potential head coaches. They'll start interviewing as soon as possible so they can get someone in place right as the season ends. They'll try to make it as seamless as possible. Blah, blah, blah. Talking head stuff. Grant is good, no doubt, and I know he played before he managed, but he's still a suit to me.

Coach jumps in, like he can tell that the front-office party-line doesn't sit well with those of us on the ice. "Look, I'll be honest. I don't think this is the end of changes for the team." He looks directly at me and says, "You are going to have to be your absolute best as a leader this year, and next year as well. There are going to be ups and downs, and this team will need A-plus leadership if it's going to weather the storm and come out the first-class operation it's been over the past decade."

No fucking pressure, I guess.

"We appreciate everything you've done, Coach," I say. "I'll try to make you proud."

The meeting ends and Evan claps me on the back as we walk out. "A man of few words, as usual."

"What's there to say? Guy's retiring. People retire."

Evan chuckles. "That is true. Well, have a good night."

“You too,” I say, wandering through the halls and out into the early evening.

Reagan and I are still in the same one-bedroom apartment I’ve been renting since I moved to Vegas. We talk, every once in a while, about buying a condo or a house, but I always have this weird feeling of impermanence. I don’t think I’m ever high on a trade list, not while I’m in the Captain’s role, but it still always seems vaguely possible that I’d be asked to pack it up and play somewhere else.

Reagan is at work still, so I start working on our dinner, prepping some lean steaks, broccoli, and baked potatoes for the both of us. I’ve got everything going when she walks in, immediately pulling off her heels before the door is even closed.

“Whoo,” she whistles. “Them dogs are hurtin’ today.”

“Lots of time on your feet?” I ask as she kicks the door shut and heads over to the kitchen.

“I had a bride who wanted to tour four locations in the same day. So, lots more walking than usual.”

“Bridezilla?”

She makes a noncommittal face. “Meh. That remains to be seen, I think. She’s a visual artist and she’s got a thing about aesthetics, plus a very specific idea in her head about décor and such. She wasn’t difficult; I think she just wants to pick the exact right space.”

“Mmm,” I grunt in response. Reagan and I haven’t really discussed the wedding planning stuff yet. We were both career driven when we met and I’ve never felt like we’re in any kind of hurry to rush to the altar. Committed, yes; in a hurry, no. At least, I’m not in a hurry. My mother would argue that I should be, but that’s another

story. She'd have us hitched and making her some grandchildren tomorrow, if we would agree to it.

"I know, I know," Reagan says, snaking her arms around my waist from behind as I peer into the refrigerator. "Weddings are boring."

I turn around, picking her up and spinning around so her back is against the refrigerator door. I kiss her mouth first. Her jaw. Her neck. "I never said that," I growl against her skin.

Her hands are on my cheeks; she pulls my attention to her face. There's a challenge in her expression. I grin in return.

"I love you, but you are a terrible liar," she says, planting a loud, wet kiss on my lips. "And don't try to do that boyish, sexy grin thing. Making me tingle in my panties doesn't absolve you from your absolute disinterest in anything having to do with wedding planning."

"Tingle in your panties?" My cock's getting hard at the thought. I push my hips toward hers, the hardness pinging her just where she likes it. "I like the sound of that. Maybe I should check it out."

She wiggles against me as my tongue pushes at her bottom lip, urging her to open for me. We kiss until all I can think of is what she's going to feel like when I'm inside her and we're both about to come.

That is, until I smell something burning.

"The steaks!" I yelp, setting her down and turning to the stove.

I pull the charred flank steaks from the broiler, smoke billowing out. Reagan shoves

the kitchen window open, then dances around with a dish towel, trying to avoid having the smoke alarm go off. Hands on my hips, surveying the black block of meat, Reagan peeks around my shoulder and starts to giggle.

“Whoops,” she says.

“Yeah,” I say, chuckling.

“What happened?”

I turn and look at her, an eyebrow raised. “Someone, uh, distracted me.”

“Sorry.” But she doesn’t look at all sorry. In fact, she looks pretty pleased with herself.

I shove a fork into one of the steaks, a knife in the other hand, slicing into the middle. Thankfully, the inside is still medium. The char is only on the outside.

“It looks salvageable so your evil plan to get pizza on the menu has been thwarted.”

“Damn. You totally caught me,” she says as she starts pulling plates out of the cabinet.

She tells me about the real bridezilla client she has as we get our dinner on the table.

“She’s forty-two and this is her third marriage,” Reagan says, rolling her eyes. “She dresses like a total stripper—and first let me say that I have a great deal of respect for dancers and sex workers because those are some hard-working ladies—but geesh. She’s over-tanned; she smokes; her clothes are two sizes too small. She picked out this ridiculous, gaudy wedding dress that cost more than it’s worth. The guy she’s marrying is, like, the biggest douchebag. It’s a shit show, and she acts like this is the

wedding of the century. It's so stupid."

"Sounds pretty stupid. Like, needs its own reality show kind of stupid."

"Right?" She shakes her head as she looks down at her plate to inspect the charred steak

"It amazes me that you can work with these people with a straight face."

"I love the work; you know that," she says. "But I'll tell you, it really makes me think fondly of flying to Hawaii and eloping on the beach. No frills."

"That would be cool but didn't you already decide on Detroit?"

"I did. But plans can change. And people do change their plans all the time. Also, people do get married on the beach instead of the church they grew up attending more often than you might think." She shrugs and attempts to divert the conversation. "Anyway, I don't want to annoy you with all this hypothetical wedding talk."

I look up from my dinner plate. "Do I look annoyed or something?"

Reagan's lips purse, pushing to one side as she assesses. "You don't. But you also kind of have the look of a guy who's talking about his next car payment."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She laughs. "I know how much you'd rather talk about literally anything else. And I plan them for a living, so you're probably tired of hearing me chatter on about other people's weddings all the time. And I get that, I really do."

"I do care, Reagan, about being with you. I care about making a commitment to you.

I already have, I guess. In my mind, marriage is the piece of paper. The wedding is the party or whatever. The commitment has already been made. I don't want anyone else."

Reagan brushes her short, dark bob out of her eyes, exposing more of her pretty face. She's so small; I used to worry about breaking her. But I know how tough this woman is. I know how hard she's worked to get to this place in her life. And I know she's not easy to break at all. I admire her so much.

"I just want you to be happy, babe, so whatever you choose is cool with me."

"I know you do, but will you promise to tell me if I ever start acting like crazy bridezilla lady?"

"I solemnly swear," I say, reaching out a pinky. She hooks it with her own and we shake.

"Good," she says. "How was your day?"

"Coach Brown is retiring."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I'm not sure. I like Coach Brown, of course, but maybe it'll be good to infuse some new ideas into the coaching style."

"That's very progressive of you, babe."

"Yeah, I mean, I know I was feeling some kind of way when Grant came and switched everything up. It was tough for a bit, but the guys finally embraced it—I finally embraced it—and it made the team stronger. The lesson here? Sometimes

change is good.”

“You’re incredibly sexy when you’re all introspective and leader-y, you know that?”

“Leader-y?”

She makes a noise and raises a shoulder, picking around the charred bits of her steak.

“Well, Princess, I think you’re sexy all the time. But especially when you say I make your panties tingle and you pretend I didn’t totally burn the shit out of this steak.”

She picks up her phone and toggles it back and forth, teasing me with a secret smile. “Well, we could ditch this meal and still order a pizza instead. We can totally do that if we want to. And as for my tingling panties, we’ll just have to find something to do for the forty-five minutes or so until the pizza comes?—”

I’m up from the table and pulling her with me to the bedroom before she can even finish her sentence.

“You always have the best ideas, Princess,” I say against her ear.

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TWO

but she plans weddings

MIKHAIL

The deafening roar of the jet engines gradually diminishes while we taxi to our gate. My teammates and I exchange triumphant cheers as per usual whenever we arrive home from a successful road trip. And this was a good one, adding five points to our already impressive season record.

A tie in Edmonton, a shutout in Calgary and a hard-fought win in Winnipeg at the end of a double overtime with my goal sealing the deal. Thank God. It was looking like we might go to a triple overtime round before we closed the damn thing out. Still, it was a nice wrap-up to five days on the road that has me more than ready to get back home to my own bed. More importantly to the person who shares that bed with me. I miss her badly when I'm away even though we text all the time and usually have a video call each night if I'm traveling.

Out the window I recognize the typical Vegas skyline stretching across a perfectly blue November sky.

Las Vegas.

It's hard to believe a homegrown Detroit boy like me now calls the desert my home. But that's exactly what happened. Even more so since I found Reagan.

Aiden leans across the aisle, chomping on his gum like he always does after a flight, yapping about our goalie's celebration-engagement-our-wedding-is-in-two-months-whatever the fuck kind of party it is, this upcoming weekend. Cal Lefleur is gettin' married. To Billie Hirsch. The literal Taylor Swift of drummers in the music industry. She's about that famous these days. They've been engaged for a while, but just now getting the chance to celebrate it officially. Most of the team will be going to their swank Hollywood engagement party at some big mansion in the hills of LA, including Reagan and me?—

“Dude, doesn't matter if she's a rockstar. No way I'm ever gettin' ball n' chained.” He laughs and waggles his eyebrows at me. “Too many tasty fish in the sea for that, you know what I'm sayin'? All I need is to hit the clubs and find me a pretty little thing to be my date for the weekend.”

I stare out the window and answer him with my typical grunt of a response. Aiden doesn't get it. He hasn't found the one yet. Not that he's going to find her among the puck bunnies he prefers to “date” if that's what he's calling it. More like a fumbling bathroom hookup in the latest club he landed after a few too many drinks.

Nope.

I'm not like that anymore. Not that I ever really was even when I was in my wildest pro athlete era of one-nighters with women I hoped to never see again. Aiden's just getting warmed up if his rookie season was any indication. He's a good kid, but his partying gossip wears me out. I've got more important things on my mind anyway because I did find the one a year ago.

Reagan Marlowe, my gorgeous Warrior Princess who is probably the bravest person I've ever met in my life.

And I love her even more today than when I first fell for her. Now, I just gotta figure

out how to propose so it'll be perfect for her.

Easier said than done when your girl plans weddings for a living. Lucky me. And I mean that only in the best way, of course. I have zero qualms about asking her to marry me—or her answer. That's the easy part. It's the actual proposal making me stress.

The how.

I just need to figure out how to propose to her. Reagan's not the type to be impressed by some flashy, over-the-top gesture. As a wedding planner, she's seen it all. But still, I want it to be special, and show her how much she means to me.

How to come up with something good enough?

That's the question.

And it's like trying to impress Van Gogh with a paint by numbers.

FML for real.

As we're waiting to get off the plane, my phone buzzes with a text. It's from Jerry, the realtor I've been working with. I try to angle the screen away from Aiden's prying eyes as I open the message. He's sent a picture of a sprawling house in a style the listing is calling "Pueblo Revival" set against the red rock hills of Summerlin, the upscale suburb in the greater Las Vegas area. It's the go-to place for family living where several of my teammates have homes already. Jerry's text reads: Thoughts on this one?

My heart starts thumping along with a little dip all the way down to the soles of my feet.

It really is fuckin' perfect.

There's a giant yard with a huge pool and a pool house that looks bigger than our whole apartment right now. I can just see Reagan sipping her morning coffee out on that deck by the pool with the view of those mountains behind her. There's even a guest house adjacent to the main one that our families could stay in when they come to Vegas. This could be our dream home.

Aiden's still going on about his latest hookup and if he should ask her to be his date for Cal and Billie's engagement party. Probably not since she's the one who flashed her tits on national television with AIDEN and KENNEDY written in black marker from left to right so it could be read from behind the bench while NHL On-Ice was going live with the coach . But all I can think about is Reagan walking barefoot across that deck towards me in a white dress with a glowing sunset and the striking mountains behind her.

"Hey there, Mik." Aiden nudges me on the shoulder. "You're too quiet, man. Don't tell me you're thinking about ball-n-chaining yourself, too," he asks with a horrified expression on his face.

"Leave him alone, Aiden," Viktor chimes in. "You won't get it until you meet someone who makes you want to be a better man."

Vik's one hundred percent right about that.

"Hey, guys, I've got to take this." I turn my attention back to Jerry's message as Aiden and others continue conversating about relationships and marriage.

Tuning them out as I study the listing, all I can think about is how much Reagan would love this place. I can imagine her setting up a home office in one of the spare rooms. There's even space to make an awesome home gym complete with boxing

equipment and mats for sparring. A huge gourmet kitchen to test out all the things I've learned in cooking class. A private spa off the master bedroom in a secluded walled courtyard where we could use it naked any time we want.

And I would feel like using it naked a LOT.

This is the kind of home I want for us. For her.

Because Reagan deserves it. She's had a rough life, especially the last several years, and she's such a good person. Always kind to people and such a hard worker. I'm so grateful I found her. Well, she is my superhero as much as I am hers. My Warrior Princess to her Mr. Hockey ever since she helped me rebuild my relationship with my father. And I want to give her the world. If I can make it happen I wi?—

“Earth to Mik!” Aiden snaps his fingers in front of my face as I'm jolted back to reality. “Man, you'd think Cal was royalty with this elaborate engagement party they're throwing,” he says, shaking his head.

“Weddings are a big deal,” I say with a shrug, my thoughts drifting to my wedding-planner girlfriend who happens to know everything there is to know about making such events special. “Hey, what do you think of this place?” I show Aiden the pictures on my phone.

“Wow, that's really nice. You thinkin' of buying it?” His eyes get big as realization dawns. “Wait, dude, are you proposing to Reagan?” He raises his eyebrows over wide eyes.

I don't answer, but the vision of Reagan walking towards me in a white dress across the deck of that beautiful house appears yet again so clearly in my mind. I'm more determined than ever to make it special for her.

“Earth to Mik, two-point-oh.” Aiden snaps his fingers in my face for a second time.

“Sorry. Thinking ’bout something important.”

“More important than discussing the pitfalls of marriage?” he quips back at me as the crew open the doors to let us out.

“Most. Fucking. Definitely.”

The dry Las Vegas air hits my face as I stand in front of our apartment building not far off the Strip. It’s a welcome change from the freezing rinks we’ve been playing in, but the constant buzz of the city streets not so much. It was perfect when I was single and traveling as much or more than I was home and focusing on establishing myself in the NHL.

Well, I did that.

Successfully, I might add, and no longer need to live so close to the arena for games or in walking distance to the practice arena for my workouts.

I’m not single anymore either.

And honestly, that’s the biggest reason my living situation has become far from ideal. Reagan and I have been living together for nearly a year now, and we’ve both just been crazy busy focusing on our careers to think that much about the living arrangements. But whenever I imagine our future, I do not picture us living here, in an apartment building a few blocks off the Strip with all the “colorful” characters and touristy traps that frame the famous street culture of Las Vegas.

Nope.

It's time to make some big changes.

I'm far past ready to take us away from here and out to the suburbs where all my teammates with wives and families are smart enough to live.

After dropping off my bag and checking my schedule to make sure I'm free for the rest of the afternoon, I send a single text to Jerry. Can you meet me there now?

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THREE

what future do you see with mikhail?

REAGAN

My knee bounces as I wait for Talia in her office. I've never had enough money to ever need my own investment manager. I mean, I didn't grow up with money and the crappy jobs I've had at restaurants and casinos certainly weren't going to make me rich. My bank account was pretty low most of the time, especially during and after college.

Now, though? I'm making good money and Mikhail pays for most things. He insists that I take my paychecks and invest them for the future. So here I am.

Talia's assistant told me she was late coming back from a lunch appointment. I stand up, just needing to do something other than feel awkward. She's got a ton of toys and pictures and trinkets lining the bookshelves in her office. There are bobbleheads and Funko pops for just about every comic book character ever written. A whole shelf is dedicated to Harry Potter fan gear. I'm not surprised by any of this, of course. Mikhail and I have been to Comic Con with Talia and Boris several times now and they both far outweigh even Mikhail's nerdiness when it comes to their love of superheroes.

Talia comes in and instantly pulls me into a hug. Something about Talia always makes me feel calm. It's not that she's this super-Zen person or anything. She's not. In fact, she's a little frantic, a little disheveled, and scary-smart in a way that can be

really intimidating. But she's also really authentic. She's totally real and she doesn't apologize for who she is. Today she's in six-inch black stilettos and a black pencil skirt, all professional on the bottom half. On the top half, though? A Ravenclaw cardigan and a time-turner necklace. Her black-framed glasses make her look like a professor at Hogwarts.

"I heard you wanted to talk about investing some money," she says, heading behind her desk.

I laugh and it sounds oddly shrill and nervous to my own ears. "Yeah, uh, Mikhail suggested it."

"Tell me," she says, putting her purse into a drawer in her desk, "what are your goals for the future? Like, your life goals, not your money goals."

I'm a little surprised. I expected to talk about money right off the bat. "Oh, um, I'm not sure?"

She narrows her eyes, focusing on a worksheet I had to fill out prior to the appointment. "You work as an event planner. Is that your long game? Or do you think you might want to venture out on your own? Start your own business someday?"

"I'm, uh, not sure? I've never really considered working just for myself."

"It takes hustle and it's not for the faint-of-heart. And you're young, so you may not decide to take that path for a long time. Do you think you'll ever go back for an advanced degree?"

"I have thought about that," I say. "But I struggled to get through my undergraduate and I never want to take that on if it means scraping financially."

Talia nods. "I get that." She writes some notes. "How do you view money?"

"I'm not sure I understand the question."

She looks up and pushes her lips to one side. "Do you have a good relationship with money and budgeting? Are you frugal? Or are you more liberal in your spending? And there's no right answer. Just trying to understand you and your goals."

"I'm pretty frugal, I guess," I answer. "I never had a lot of money and I've always had to work really hard for everything. I'm not likely to spend just to spend."

"And, as such, I would assume you're a little risk averse?"

"I would agree with that, yes."

She nods. "What kind of future do you see with Mikhail? Does he view money similarly to you? Once you're married, will you share finances? Will you want children? Do you think you'll want to buy a house?"

"He's not a big spender," I answer. "I mean, he grew up hockey royalty so of course his view of money is different from mine in a lot of ways."

"Like how?"

"Like, he's never had to worry if his phone broke. He'd just ask his parents to buy him a new one. They made sure he had training and equipment. He always had food on the table and fresh shoes on his feet, you know? He has never had to want for anything. And he never will, truly, because he had someone to teach him how to invest his earnings. He makes millions of dollars a year. So, for him, blowing a couple hundred bucks on a fancy dinner is no big deal. For me? It feels like an indulgence that should be dedicated to paying a bill or buying a necessity."

“I understand.” Talia pushes her glasses back up to the bridge of her nose and sits back in her chair, assessing me. “Do you feel like he understands where you’re coming from when it comes to money?”

“I do. We’ve talked about it a lot. We live together—and yes, I’m sure we’ll want to buy a house someday, just to answer your question—and he won’t let me pay rent or bills. He always pays when we go out to eat or if we travel. He told me I should bank my paychecks and let him take care of me.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

I slump in my seat a little. “A little diminished, I guess?” I let out a laugh. “I didn’t realize this would double as a psychotherapy session.”

She smiles. “Money has a funny hold on our emotions. Our views of money play into our lives in really deep ways sometimes.”

“I survived through some really crazy stuff, you know?” I ask, my voice breaking as I try to hold back an onslaught of unexpected tears. “And he was there for me as it all came to a head. He knows where I’m coming from and I think he thinks he’s doing this nice thing for me, taking care of me. But I feel like I worked really hard and I should have some, I don’t know...”

“Agency over your personal finances?”

“Yeah. Like, let me help pay for the home we share, right? Does that seem silly?”

“It doesn’t. You should talk with him about that. Financial issues are the top issues in relationships that fail. And here’s what I think. You’re young and you have time to ride out the market, so we’ll do like seventy-five percent in slow growth investments. Things that aren’t likely to have massive ups and downs, so you’ll see steady growth

over a long period of time. Twenty-five percent, we'll put into a little more risk. Like I said, you have time, and you can ride out any bumps in the market. And there will be bumps, so don't panic when they happen. But I don't think you need to put every penny into this. I think you should invest whatever you want up front, and then maybe put fifty percent in from each pay period after that. That leaves you half of your paycheck to negotiate with Mikhail."

"That sounds okay to me," I say. "But what if I need money for something? Like, can I pull from my investments?"

"There are ways to make that money liquid, sure, but there can be penalties, so we'd need to investigate options based on the situation."

"Okay, I mean, I guess this all sounds good."

"You don't sound totally convinced."

"I've just never lived in this world. It's hard to part with so much of the money I've earned."

"You're not parting with it, Reagan. You're making your money work for you, for the future. Making investments like this allows you to breathe more easily as you get older. You can start to divert some of it to retirement accounts. You can use it to make other investments in things like real estate. And I don't mean to toot my own horn, but I'm really good at this. I won't steer you in the wrong direction. I promise."

Something about all of this makes me feel much better. She's right. This will allow me to take control of my financial future. "Okay," I say. "I'm in then. What else do you need from me?"

"I'll draw up an investment contract and we can meet to go over it. I want you to do

something for me first, though.”

“Oh?”

“You have to talk to Mikhail about your desire to meaningfully contribute to your household finances. Work it out. You know what half of your paycheck looks like. How much can you contribute? Do you pay the electric and the groceries each month? Make him a proposal and don’t take no for an answer. I think, when you do that, you’ll feel things are slightly more equal between you and this investment will just build on your ability to be part of your collective future.”

I grin. “Okay. And Talia?”

“Yes?”

“I’m kind of crushing on your massive brain right now. And I kind of wish I’d recorded you so I could say those things in those words to Mikhail later.”

She stands. “You will say it exactly how it needs to be said. I have faith in you. Now, I don’t have any other appointments today and I could use a beer. Fancy a drink with a friend?”

We head out into the blazing, mid-afternoon sun and walk toward the arena, Talia steering me toward the arena pub. As we walk in, we see a table full of familiar women. Lila Marchmont-Terry holds court with Holly, Pam, Scarlett, and Devon.

“Wow, what a powerhouse of a table,” I say. “They might be plotting to take over the world.”

“I hope so,” Talia quips, just as Lila waves us both over. “Guess we’re about to find out.”

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FOUR

dear santa, i need your f#@kin' help!

MIKHAIL

I 'm standing just inside the doorway when Reagan comes home from her job at Silver it's about the love we share and the life we're building together.

“Dear Santa,” I whisper under my breath, my fingers itching to find the web address for typing in my request. I need your help proposing to the love of my life. Please guide me in showing my wedding-planner girlfriend just how much she means to me...

The aroma of fresh pancakes finds my nose as Reagan flips them from the stove. I watch her, still sipping my coffee and admiring her grace in the kitchen. Her dark hair is pulled back into a tie, and she hums softly to herself as she works. It's the weekend for her and a game day for me. On game days she likes to cook breakfast for me. I let her. I'm a nice guy like that.

“Those smell amazing.” I reach for a piece of bacon and savor it while I watch her work. I can't help thinking that mornings like this would be even better together in our own home.

“Thanks. I wanted to make something special for us before you head off to morning skate.” But just as she sets a plate of steaming hot pancakes on the table, her phone buzzes from the counter. The happy expression on her face quickly disappears as she

listens to the news coming from the other end.

“Mom, how did it happen?” Reagan's voice is worried, and my heart sinks with the realization something must be terribly wrong.

Audrey's in the hospital? With a fractured hip. Oh fuck, that's no good.

She hangs up, tears welling up in her eyes while she explains how her mom fell at work and fractured her left hip. “She's going to need surgery and a new hip along with significant physical therapy in a rehab hospital afterward.”

“Reagan, I'm so sorry.” I pull her into my arms, trying to calm her down. “What if we were to bring your mom to Las Vegas? She can have her hip replacement surgery here and recover in a rehab facility nearby. I'll cover any extra expenses. I know how much you want to help her when she needs it.”

“Are you sure?” She hesitates. “I don't want my mom to be a burden to you.”

“Reagan, I love you. Taking care of you means taking care of your family too. Your mother won't be a burden anyway; she's family. She'd do the same for you if you needed her to.”

“You're right, she would. Thank you. Your support means so much to me,” she whispers, her eyes filled with gratitude and more tears.

“Is there anything else bothering you?” I sense there's more behind her worried gaze.

“Well, that'll be a lot of money. I don't think her insurance will cover all of the costs. Plus, work has been so busy lately and I'm struggling to keep up with everything now, how will I manage my mom too?”

My hockey commitments make it difficult for me to always be here, but what I can do is support her financially and provide for the extra help Audrey will need to recover. “Listen, I admit I feel bad I can’t be home more than I am now to help you, but the money is totally a non-issue for me. I have plenty and I’m definitely not at all worried about it, so you shouldn’t either, okay? I can ask Pam for suggestions of surgery centers and rehabs in the area. As the team physical therapist, she would know. I’m sure she can help steer you in the right direction. Just make some calls and start setting up whatever you think your mom will need and don’t have another thought about the cost. That’s all I want you to do today, babe, until game time. Seriously.”

She hugs me tighter and even though she is squeezing me I can feel the relief in her body. “Having you by my side is everything, Mikhail,” she says softly, resting her head on my chest. “You’re amazing and so generous, and I just love you so much.”

As I hold her close, my determination to propose grows stronger. I want to be there for Reagan in every possible way—to protect and care for her, just like she does for me.

“Reagan,” I whisper against her hair, “I promise that no matter what life throws at us, we’ll face it together. You’ll never have to worry about facing things alone, because I’m not going anywhere.”

“Thank you,” she murmurs, snuggling closer. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

I know without a doubt that this is where I belong, with the love and the unwavering support of the woman I have in my arms.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 10:18 am

FIVE

mr. & mrs. hockey forever

MIKHAIL

While driving over to Misfit Inked in downtown Vegas with a plan in mind for my tattoo artist, I can't help but think back to yesterday when I came home from morning skate and found Reagan on a Zoom call with Zoya. The two of them were sharing pictures on a bridal website and chattering away like old friends when I overheard Zoya retell how Tyler rented an ice rink in Saint Petersburg at Christmastime, had her whole family there, and even arranged a bunch of other romantic shit of painted ice and bouquets of roses when he proposed to her.

Reagan agreed it looked magical when she watched the video Tyler asked Scarlett to make of the whole thing. I saw it too. I must admit it was pretty good for someone like Lockhardt to arrange. That dude has really grown emotionally in the last five years. Anxiety creeps in as I realize I have to come up with something just as good for Reagan. She deserves nothing less than what Tyler did for Zoya. I'm really starting to feel the pressure now.

Victorine, the tattoo artist who's been responsible for most of my ink, greets me with a grin when I step into the shop.

"Long time, no see, dude." She eyes me curiously with her lemon-yellow dyed hair and round, thick glasses. "What brings you in here to see me today?"

“Hey, Victorine, I need your artful hand with a special project.”

“Ooh, color me intrigued. What did you have in mind?”

I take a deep breath and explain my idea of the words “Mr. & Mrs. Hockey forever” over my heart in a superhero-looking font busting out in an explosion.

“Are you proposing to Reagan with this?”

“Well yeah, it’s part of my plan, yes, but I still have to find the right time and place to show it to her after you ink it on me though.”

“Wow, I am clearly touched, Mikhail. That’s so sweet. You look through the fonts for something that speaks to you, and I’ll start sketching out a rough design.”

As she sketches out my vision, we talk about different settings for the perfect time and place to ask Reagan to marry me. I trust Victorine because she’s always had a keen sense of what people will love.

“Have you thought about asking her at the top of the LINQ?” she suggests. “The view is incredible, and it’s such a quintessential Vegas spot.”

“Probably something a lot less public. Like maybe during one of our hikes in the hills.” I try to imagine taking Reagan to one of our favorite spots in nature.

“Or what about at Cal and Billie’s upcoming engagement party? That could be fun and unexpected.”

As much as I appreciate her input, none of them feel right. They’re great ideas, but they don’t seem good enough for Reagan.

“Thanks for talking me through it, Victorine, but I'll keep thinking.”

“Of course, Mikhail. Just remember that whatever you choose, it'll be perfect because it's coming from you. Reagan will love whatever you plan regardless.”

As I leave Misfit Inked with my next tat designed and an appointment in the books to have it done, I feel good about it even if the perfect proposal is still to be determined. Just like I'm equally determined to create a memorable moment for the love of my life, no matter what it takes.

Stepping off the ice after a particularly brutal practice, my muscles aching and sweat dripping down my face, my phone buzzes in my pocket as I trudge towards the locker room. I pull it out to see “Jerry Roy” displayed on the screen.

“Hey, Jerry,” I answer, trying to catch my breath.

“Good news. The owner will accept your offer, but there's a catch—they need to close escrow by the tenth of the month. Think you can swing that?”

I pause for a moment, considering the implications. That's an incredibly quick escrow, and I know I should probably talk to Reagan about it. But with everything going on with her mom right now, the upcoming surgery, and moving Audrey from Columbus to Vegas, I don't want to add more stress to her plate. Especially since she'll feel inadequate about not being able to contribute equally to the finances.

“Let's do it, Jerry. And both our names are going on the title.”

“Are you sure? That's a big step, especially if you haven't discussed it with Reagan yet.”

“Trust me, this is what we both want. We're in this together, and I know she loved the

house from the pictures I showed her. Let's make it happen.”

“I'll get the ball rolling then. Congratulations, Mikhail, you've just bought your first house.”

I lean against the wall, feeling a mix of excitement and anxiety after ending the call. If Reagan and I were married, this wouldn't even be an issue. Married people buy houses together all the time, with both of their names on the title deed. It just makes me even more impatient to propose to her and make our commitment to each other official and legal.

As I scroll through the photos of the house on my phone, I imagine how our life together will change there. In a good way of course. Waking up next to each other in that huge master suite to striking mountain views in the mornings, cooking dinner together in the evenings in that sleek, gourmet kitchen, and cuddling under a blanket in front of the outdoor fireplace while waiting for falling stars to make wishes on. It's a future I desperately want for us.

This marriage proposal can't come soon enough.

I head into the locker room to shower resolving to find the perfect way to propose to Reagan, whether it's at the top of the LINQ, during a hike out in the hills, or at Cal and Billie's engagement party. And once we're engaged, we can finally move forward with our future together, starting with a new home in Summerlin.

As I strip off my gear and step under the hot spray of the shower, I let the water wash away my lingering doubts and anxiety about purchasing a house in secret. Reagan is my everything, and I know that no matter how I ask her to marry me, she'll say yes. Because we're already strong enough to overcome any obstacle, and we'll build a future together that's even more beautiful than the house we're about to call home.

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SIX

stay with us. there's plenty of room.

MIKHAIL

S tanding at the window, watching the city all lit up for the holidays, the perfect proposal idea still eludes me, and time is running out. Christmas will be here soon, and I'll have the keys to the new house in two days.

The last few weeks have been busy with Reagan focused on work and helping her mom through a successful hip-replacement surgery and now the recovery process. She's been visiting Audrey at the rehab facility almost every day, unaware that it's only a short distance from the house I just bought. She senses something is going on, but she continues to be her supportive and loving self, making me want to ask her to marry me all the m?—

My phone rings and it's my father calling. I have no idea why since he usually only calls me after a game. No game today.

“Dad, what's up?”

“Son, good evening. I am calling to tell you your mother would like the family to spend Christmas in Las Vegas this year, your sisters and Roman as well. We are aware your game schedule will not allow you to travel to Detroit for Christmas and your mother will be unhappy if we can't all be together. She has also shared that Reagan is very busy helping her mother recovering from surgery. It will be easier this

way for all.” His words are carefully chosen, and I can't help but notice he said “your mother” would like to spend Christmas in Las Vegas this year instead of “your mother and I.” But hey, at least he’s calling and asking for an invite. This is like the polar opposite of how our phone calls used to go a year ago. It’s also the last thing I ever expected him to ask me. I’ve been hoping they would come out here to stay with me for more than just a game for years. Looks like it’ll finally happen. Shocker.

“Of course. I'd love to have you all here for Christmas. It'll be great.”

He proceeds to tell me they plan to stay in a hotel, but I quickly put an end to that idea.

“Well actually, I have some news to share with you. I just bought a house, and you can all stay there with us. There’s plenty of room. Tell Mom. I’ll send some pictures when we get off the phone.”

I can sense his surprise through his initial silence, but he recovers quickly. I’d pay money to see the look on his face right now. “Well, that's great news, Mikhail, congratulations. I look forward to seeing your pictures. We'll talk very soon about travel dates.”

“Lookin’ forward to it, Dad.”

I’m just hanging up with him when Reagan comes through the door from visiting her mom at rehab.

“Hey babe.” She smiles at me. “How are you? How was practice?”

“Good.” I smile back at her, trying to be casual. “How’s your mom?”

“She’s working hard exercising the new hip. Bound and determined to be sprung

from rehab by Christmas so she can be with us.”

“Good...good.” I nod.

“Is everything okay though? Who were you talking to on the phone?” She tilts her head at me, still smiling but I can see the concern in her eyes. Reagan is always sharp. She observes everything and knows when I’m preoccupied. Just a little fucking much at the moment.

“Yeah.” I try to keep my voice steady. “Umm, that was my dad. My family's coming out to spend Christmas with us this year.”

“Wow, that's a surprise. But a good one, right?” She hugs me tightly, her excitement genuine. “I can't wait to see them all. It’s gonna be so fun.”

“Me too.” I hold her in my arms and breathe in the flowery scent of her hair. It always soothes me when I’m anxious if I can smell her familiar scent. She grounds me and keeps me level. I’m glad about my family being here for the holidays, but there's still so much left to do—planning the perfect proposal and making sure the house is guest-ready for people to stay there. Which is empty at the moment. No beds, no furniture to sit on, no table to eat at.

I own a big ass empty house that needs to be furnished in like three weeks.

And I just invited my whole family to stay in it.

FML. How am I ever going to get it all done?

I’m gonna need some help if I have a snowball’s chance in hell of pulling this off while keeping it a secret from Reagan.

As I hold my girl and breathe in the soothing scent of her shampoo, an idea begins to form...and it all starts to come together...in an instant.

I finally know what to do.

How to propose to Reagan.

Where to do it.

When to do it.

Thank. Blessed. God.

And I know just who I need to call to ask for help.

The next day.

“Ma,” I say, as my mother’s face appears on the video call screen.

“Mikhail!” Her eyes sparkle with excitement. “The new house is just gorgeous. The pictures probably don’t even do it justice. Congratulations, son!”

“Thanks, Mom.” A surge of warmth fills me at her enthusiasm. “It’s really something special.”

“Your father said we will get to stay in your new house. It has a pool and everything! You must be so proud, Mikhail.” I’m happy she’s happy because I love making my mother happy.

“Yeah,” I chuckle, a bit embarrassed by her praise. “It’s pretty great. But there’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Of course, my love. What is it?”

“Mom, I'm going to ask Reagan to marry me.” As the words leave my lips, it becomes more real than ever before.

Mom gasps and her eyes fill with tears. “Oh, Mikhail, I love Reagan! She's perfect for you and you are perfect for her. This is the best news, my son. Oh, you've made your mama so happy today.”

“Thanks, Mom. I think she's pretty perfect too. And I have an idea for the perfect way to propose to her.”

“Tell me everything,” she says, leaning in closer to the screen.

I explain about the house being a secret and my plan to propose to Reagan on Christmas Eve out on the deck, surrounded by our families. I can see my mother's excitement growing, her eyes shining with anticipation with every new detail I share. “But Mom, I'm gonna need some help,” I admit. “Probably a lot of help. I want the house to be perfect for her, but with my road schedule this month, I'll never manage to get it furnished, decorated for Christmas, and stocked with food and supplies for people to be living in it, and still keep it a secret from Reagan. It's not possible for me to do it all by my?—”

“Say no more,” she cuts me off, her voice firm. “Your father and I will come to Vegas as soon as we can get a flight. We'll be there to help you set up the house, arrange for furniture deliveries, and you know I would love nothing more than to decorate for Christmas. We'll make it a magical place for your big moment.”

“Mom, you're a lifesaver. I don't know what I'd do without you.”

“Anything for you, son,” she assures me. “Now go! Start looking online for what you

want to order or send me the links and I will shop. Tell me colors and styles if that is easier for you. We can just do classic neutrals to start. You and Reagan can put your own touch on décor later. Oh my, Jozem!” she calls out to my father who has poked his head into the room. “Get to packing! We have a house to prepare and a beautiful girl to welcome into our family!”

My dad waves to me from behind my mom and says, “We will be happy to help you set up your new house. Congratulations on the engagement, son. I knew Reagan was the one for you when she came to tell me off,” he jokes, a real rarity coming from him.

“Ha! Yeah, she’s pretty ballsy that way. I think you said, ‘this one’s got balls, you should keep her,’” I remind him.

“And so you took my advice then,” he says cheerfully.

“Yes, I did. It was probably the best advice you’ve ever given me, Dad.”

Christmas Eve

I stand in awe of the transformation my parents have orchestrated at the house over the last three weeks. They’ve been staying here since the first beds were delivered. So, they’ve been able to get all the things one needs to live in a space when the ideas come to mind. My sisters and nephew arrived a few days ago. Roman has been christening the pool by day and my sisters have been using the spa by night. The whole family has been using the outdoor fireplace area and helping put up lights, lights, and more lights. My dad really worked some magic with the outdoor Christmas décor while Mom focused on the inside Christmas décor and trees, plural. She even brought out a big box of ornaments from my childhood to incorporate into all the new things she’s gathered for us.

The house looks incredibly good. It looks like a home filled with warmth and comforting spaces. Brand new furniture in place and bedrooms set up to accommodate everyone. A fully stocked pantry and kitchen with cookware, dishes and a fancy new coffee maker that does all kinds of extra shit. And a garage with a workbench lined with tools and yard equipment. My dad's particular contribution in getting me set up to care for landscaping and house maintenance. He's worked as hard on the house as Mom has.

Stepping out onto the deck, I admire the outdoor fireplace hearth draped with twinkling Christmas lights above a blazing fire. My mom has even organized a tree outside on the deck, its branches laden with weatherproof ornaments. Inside another more traditional tree stands tall, casting a festive glow over the great room.

I can't help but feel that everything is finally in place. The time has come to make Reagan mine forever.

My heart is pounding as I drive over to the rehab hospital to pick up Reagan and her mom to bring her "home" to spend Christmas with us. I won't have to hold onto the secret for longer than it takes to drive her back over to the house. Thank God because I can't take it a day longer. I'm so ready to reveal our new house to Reagan. It's been tough keeping it a surprise, especially when she's always so in tune with my emotions. Glancing at the dashboard clock, I feel my anxiety crank up a notch. There's no turning back now. I pat my jacket pocket for the ring. The box is there and safe. Viktor helped me pick out her engagement ring a few weeks ago. He knows diamonds from a jeweler cousin of his in Russia who has a well-known jewelry store in Saint Petersburg.

There was also the added challenge of hiding my new "Mr. & Mrs. Hockey" tattoo from her for the past week. It wasn't easy, especially when she started ripping my shirt off during reunion sex after my last road trip. I managed to hide it by distracting her with some special attention...with my tongue.

I know it'll all be worth it when I see her reaction tonight.

As I pull into the rehab parking lot, I can see her standing in the loading area waiting beside Audrey on a bench. She shows me every day just how much she loves me. Her constant support and unwavering loyalty made me realize that I didn't need an elaborate proposal to prove my love for her. All I need is to continue being by her side, as she has been by mine.

“You’re out here waiting for me, Princess.”

“Most definitely, Mr. Hockey.” She gives me that gorgeous smile I love to see. “Can't wait to spend Christmas Eve with your family. Are they already at our place?”

“They sure are,” I say cheerfully, happy that I’m not telling her a lie as I pull her in for a chaste kiss. Audrey gets a kiss to her cheek before helping her into the car.

“They can’t wait to see you either,” I tell them as I get back behind the wheel. The excitement in the car is contagious as we drive to what Reagan believes is our apartment, but when I turn onto the street where the new house stands, I am done with holding back the news. “There's something I've been keeping from you, babe,” I confess as I pull into the driveway. Our new house is literally draped in Christmas lights from the outside and glowing from the windows on the inside.

Reagan looks at me, puzzled, as I park and shut off the engine. “What's going on, Mikhail?” She steps out of the car and looks up to study the house. She tilts her head in recognition. “Is this the house you showed me pictures of?”

“Welcome home, babe.” I throw my arms out wide. “I bought it. For us. To start our life together.”

Her eyes widen with shock and then joy as she takes in the sight of our beautiful

home. Before she can say anything, my family emerges from the front door, pouring down the walkway, offering warm hugs and kisses to both Reagan and Audrey.

“Surprise!” they shout in unison before shifting the whole group back up the walkway and inside the house for a tour. It’s crazy and exciting and loud and chaotic, but it’s wonderful too, because I can tell how happy Reagan is about the house. She hasn’t stopped touching me or let go of my hand since I pulled her inside to walk through from room to room.

After the initial excitement dies down, and people start dispersing, I tug on her hand and lead her outside where a roaring fire and the Christmas tree and lights set the scene.

“Everything about this house is perfect,” she says, smiling up at me. “I love it. And I love you.”

Wrapping my arms around her, I rest my chin on her head—something I’ve always done with her to show my affection. “Reagan, since the day you gave me my nickname, ‘Mr. Hockey,’ I knew I couldn’t imagine a life without you. I want us to be Mr. and Mrs. Hockey forever and live here with you.”

Her eyes are glistening with tears as I start to unbutton my shirt. Then they widen as she realizes what I’m doing. “Mikhail, your parents and my mom are inside. They’ll see us. You know they’re probably watching us right now!”

“I know, babe.” With a reassuring smile, I open my shirt and reveal my tattoo to her. She gasps and brings a hand to her mouth as she sees it and realization dawns. I drop to one knee with the ring box in my hand, flip open the lid and hold it up. “Reagan Marlowe, my gorgeous Warrior Princess, will you make Mr. Hockey the happiest superhero alive and be my wife?”

Tears stream down her cheeks as she nods, unable to speak. “Yes,” she finally manages to whisper, as I slide the ring onto her finger. It’s a flawless diamond, just like she is. “Yes, a thousand times yes,” she repeats her answer.

Reagan takes a moment to admire her ring before pulling me up and then wrapping her arms around me, placing her cheek over my new tattoo after kissing it a few times first.

Holding my fiancée under the glow of the Christmas lights, surrounded by the love and support of our families, I know nothing but peace.

I have my future safe in my arms.

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MIKHAIL

The night only gets better when several of my teammates and their families join us for our Christmas-slash-engagement party. The adults are gathered around the fireplace out on the deck and their kids are inside doing crafts and playing games. The Vegas Crush game schedule this year has us playing on the front and back end of Christmas, so not many of my teammates were headed out of the area for the actual holiday. I put out the word for Tyler and Viktor to invite any of the team who could make it.

“Congratulations, man,” Aiden says, clapping me on the back with a grin. He stands next to his date—the same girl he brought to Cal and Billie's engagement party a few weeks ago. They met while grocery shopping, of all things. I sense that she's way different from Aiden's usual one-nighters. I'm happy for him. It's about time my wild-child buddy settled a bit.

“Thanks, Aiden.” I smile at them both. “Glad you could be here.” I glance around, taking in the warmth and friendship all around me. Former Captain Evan is here with his wife Holly and their three kids, along with Georg, Pam, and their two. Viktor, Scarlett, and their two small boys are here too, as well as the newly engaged Boris and Talia. Tyler, Zoya, and even her parents visiting from Russia have come to celebrate with us. My dad and Zoya's dad are overseeing a rousing game of hall hockey for my nephew Roman and Georg and Evan's older kids using the play equipment my dad bought at Dick's Sporting Goods yesterday.

It's a gathering of my Vegas Crush brothers and their families, all here to congratulate Reagan and me on our engagement and our new home. Zoya, who's studying to be an

art teacher, has organized games and crafts for the kids supervised by the grandmas, who look like they're having as much fun as the kiddos making treats to set out for Santa's reindeer tonight along with personal gingerbread houses they can eat now. They're even doing a pinata later and it's hilarious because it's a Santa pinata gonna get beat to death. Someone had a dark sense of humor at the pinata factory. But it's also awesome. I'm so lucky to have the support of all these wonderful people celebrating with us.

"Alright, everyone!" My sister, Daniella calls out, gesturing for us to gather around. "It's time for the white elephant gift exchange. Take a number from the basket if you brought a gift."

We all take a number and settle around on the outdoor loungers. I have Reagan cuddled between my legs with her back on my chest. She's admiring her ring, sparkling against the many lights outside and the flames in the fireplace. "That looks really fucking beautiful on your hand," I whisper in her ear.

She turns her head to kiss me. "I know."

The game proceeds as the stealing and swap negotiations start up. I'm utterly content with Reagan in my lap with my ring on her finger and couldn't care less what gift I end up with in this ridiculous game. I have the best gift in my arms already.

But one particular item does catch my attention—a toilet plunger. Surprisingly, it ends up being a hot item and gets stolen twice, eventually landing in Aiden's possession. He holds it up like a golden chalice, victorious in sealing the win.

Ha! If given the chance, I would've tried to steal it too. "Toilet plungers are necessary equipment to have around a new house," I say under my breath.

Viktor, standing nearby, overhears me and smirks. "Mikhail, don't worry. I brought two toilet plungers tonight—one for the game, and one as a housewarming gift for

you,” he says in his deadpan Russian accent. “You will need it for taking care of shit in your new house, you will see.”

The group roars with laughter, and I can't help but join in. “Thanks, Vik. I do appreciate such a thoughtful present.” My friends are truly awesome.

After the final white elephant gift has found an owner, we move inside for the festive spread laid out on the long dining table. I can only marvel at how seamlessly everything has come together tonight. I have to dream up something special for my parents and sisters for organizing all of this. Maybe I can send them on a holiday somewhere warm with a beach.

“Brother dear, did you see the Dear Santa column in the paper today?” Daniella asks with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

I shake my head but am instantly curious. Could my letter to Dear Santa have actually made it into the paper?

“Read it aloud, please,” Reagan says, her hand finding mine under the table and giving it a gentle squeeze.

The room goes silent as everyone prepares to listen. I squeeze Reagan's hand right back, pushing down the anxiety rushing in.

“Alright.” Daniella clears her throat dramatically before beginning to read.

Dear Santa. I'm planning to propose to my amazing girlfriend, who just happens to be a wedding planner. The problem is that she's seen it all, and I want to make our moment special and unique, something she'll remember forever. Do you have some good advice for me?

Mr. H.

Daniella rattles the paper for dramatic effect. “But listen to their response,” she says, her voice carrying over all the “awws” around the table.

Here at Dear Santa, we've never had a request even remotely as romantic as Mr. H's inquiry before. The fact that he was dedicated enough to write into this column and ask for advice on a romantic marriage proposal fitting enough for his wedding-planner love shows that Mr. H. already has enough game to get the job done right. Let us know when your wedding planner says yes, and we'd love to do a feature on your wedding story.

D.S.

Cheers break out around the table, and I feel an unexpected rush of pride flow through my veins. Glancing over at Reagan, her pretty eyes sparkle at me with so much love my heart might just bust outta my chest looking a lot like my new tattoo.

“My brother wrote into the Dear Santa column in desperation a few weeks back asking for advice on how to propose to Reagan.” Daniella beams at me. “Isn't he amazing?”

“Absolutely amazing,” Reagan agrees, her voice thick with emotion. “I can't believe you went to such lengths for me, Mr. Hockey.”

“Anything for my Warrior Princess.” I squeeze her hand again under the table and mean every word. But she knows that already.

“Raise a glass to Mikhail and Reagan, everyone!” Aiden gives the toast, lifting his glass high. As one, our family, friends, and teammates join him, their well-wishes and good cheer feel very warm and sincere.

I take a moment to commit the scene before me to memory—the twinkling lights and decorations strung up around the room, the comforting scents of Christmas in the air,

and the way Reagan's hand fits so perfectly in mine. This is what home feels like—surrounded by people who care about us, celebrating our love and happiness.

As the cheers die down and conversation resumes, I can't help but think of my father. Our relationship has been a rocky one, marred by expectations and the weight of his great legacy. But tonight, with Reagan by my side, I feel like I've finally found my footing. I'm not just the son of “The Great Zelenka” anymore but my own man, forging my own path with the woman I love.

“Hey babe,” Reagan whispers, her sweet voice grounding me back to the present. “You okay?”

“Better than okay,” I assure her, pulling her in for a kiss. “Everything is exactly how I want it to be.”

And I know that this is just the very beginning of our beautiful journey together.

And they lived happily ever after.

Thank you for reading

Mr. Hockey's Marry Christmas .

To find out how it all started for Mikhail and Reagan you must read Mr. Hockey, a Superhero Love Story if you haven't already.