



One Weekend in Vienna (One Weekend)

Author: *Darby Fox*

Category: Sport

Description: Spend the holidays with her brother's biggest rival?

Anna Jager would rather skate naked in sub-zero temperatures. But when her dream promotion depends on her playing tour guide for Max Walker – the NHL's golden boy – her holiday spirit takes a serious hit. Sure, Max's talent, charm, and movie-star looks might win him loads of adoring fans – including her boss; but Anna knows the truth: he's arrogant, stubborn, and as cold-hearted as the ice he skates on.

Max only cares about one thing—hockey. A Christmas campaign in Vienna? Not exactly his scene. But seeing Anna again sparks a fire he thought he'd put on ice. She's smart, gorgeous, and completely immune to his charm. That shouldn't be a turn-on, but Max has never backed down from a challenge—even if the last time he saw Anna, it earned him a bloody nose courtesy of her brother.

Forced together by a hotel room mix-up and an itinerary packed with holiday cheer, their simmering attraction starts to thaw their frosty grudge. But with sparks flying and old rivalries heating up, they may find that playing with fire just might melt their icy hearts.

******For fans of rivals-to-lovers, forced proximity, and forbidden romance, this steamy holiday novella satisfies all the cozy Christmas vibes you're craving!

Total Pages (Source): 13

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MAX

I don't want to be here. The thought creeps insidiously through all of the positive mindset junk I've been practicing for months, the words playing through my mind as soft and persistent as the snow falling outside the car window.

I want to be back on my home ice, not in Austria looking out at skaters winding their way around the skating paths, some zooming along, others meandering hand-in-hand as the car glides to a stop in front of a building that looks more like a palace than a hotel.

This certainly isn't Vegas, and it sure as hell isn't California, where I grew up. I step out of the car and breathe in the brisk air. Vienna even smells different, like snow and pine trees.

Ryan, Titanium's manager, told me to think of this as a quick break. In and out for a long weekend while there's an opening in our schedule. Some break. I've been dragged halfway across the world for a sponsorship deal I couldn't care less about.

I know I should, but people have been judging me my whole life based on how I look, where I'm from, who my father is. The only stick people should judge me by is my hockey stick. But it doesn't matter what I think. Ryan, my agent and the NHL think this opportunity is too good to pass up. So here I am, getting ready to turn on the charm, and rely on the fact that I won some genetic lottery instead of on the blood, sweat and tears I pour onto the ice every time I strap on my skates.

This weekend won't be easy though. Oh, the posing and the smiling will be easy enough – and let's face it: puck bunnies aren't exclusive to rinks. The hard part will be ignoring the fact that she's here.

I roll my head, loosening up the tight muscles in my neck. We played in Boston last night, and then I caught a red-eye to Montreal almost missing my connecting flight to Vienna and this “opportunity” my agent accepted before he even spoke to me.

Fuck. I'm at the prime of my career. We could have a shot at the Cup this year with Lebuchen and Gerrard as additions and my agent thinks I need to worry about sponsorship deals and preserving space for me once my career is over? I don't need to think about that shit for another five years at least.

I'm the best.

Unless I get injured. A breeze blows the snow down the back of my neck, and I tighten my scarf, smiling at the doorman. Positive thoughts. The scent of ginger and cinnamon brushes over me as I enter the lobby.

Holy shit, this is incredible.

I blink at the opulent decorations. I mean, Vegas does Christmas big too, and those displays are incredible, but the quiet elegance, the sense of tradition, cloaks the entire hotel.

I feel like I stepped into a fairytale.

Vienna is beautiful, like a Christmas movie come to life, but as pretty as the decorations are, I'm not in the mood for Christmas.

I'm not in the mood for anything other than getting this done, getting some sleep, and

getting back on the ice.

I can hold it together for one weekend. Positive thoughts.

She probably doesn't even remember me.

“Guten Tag, Mr. Walker,” the clerk at the desk smiles as he hands me back my passport with a room key. “Your bags will be taken to your room, and your party has been advised that you have arrived. Someone is on their way down to greet you now.”

My chest tightens. I thought that maybe with my flight being a little late, I could avoid this part. I'm here so they can dress me up and take my picture, I don't need the whole wine and dine aspect of this deal. I don't need?—

The sharp sound of stilettos on marble cuts through the ambient noise and my heart speeds up. There's a chance it's someone else. Some no-nonsense businesswoman named Brunhilda who will talk down to the dumb hockey player, secretly check out my ass during the photoshoot, and this weekend will be over before I know it.

Maybe I'll even get a chance to break out my skates on that rink I spotted outside.

“Mr. Walker?” That voice sends a chill down my spine. It sounds like a sharp blade across ice. Like the buzzer after a win.

Too bad I can't enjoy it.

I paint a lazy smile on my face and turn, taking in the stunning woman before me. Just like that night two years ago, I'm struck by her beauty. Her blonde hair is swept back in some fancy coil and her eyes are the color of my favorite scotch. A bright golden I could drown in. Get drunk on.

Anna J?ger.

The one woman who is completely off limits to me, given my history with her brother.

Felix J?ger – my biggest rival on the ice and the man whose made it his life mission to ruin me, both in and out of the rink.

“Anna,” I say, fighting to keep my gaze from drifting over her. Just my fucking luck that this woman who made me feel something... different , is the one I definitely can’t have.

And just like that night two years ago after discovering who I was, when she says my name, her beautiful, lush mouth twists with distaste. “Max Walker.” She folds her arms across her chest. “You actually showed up.”

I give her my best Prince Charming smile, the one that usually melts any resistance, but Anna doesn’t blink. She just stares at me, like she’s waiting for me to screw up.

Like she knows I will.

“I always show up,” I shrug a shoulder. “It’s kind of my thing.”

Her lips twitch, almost like she wants to smile, but then she looks away, her expression hardening again. “This isn’t like taking a cheap shot in front of the net.” Her gaze flashes back to mine. “This weekend isn’t about you. It’s about getting this deal done. All you have to do is smile pretty for the camera and then you’re out of my hair.”

Every single muscle in my body twitches at the challenge in her tone. I never met a challenge I didn’t want to conquer.

Is that what this obsession with this woman is? Two years of pining for a woman who obviously hates me – is it just that I finally found something I couldn't win?

I should just nod, keep my head down, and fucking leave it. By Monday night, she'll be in my rear view, and I'll be back on the ice.

I take a step towards her, intending to do just that, but she doesn't move. Instead, she bites her lip and those golden eyes flicker. A second of vulnerability I would have missed if I hadn't been watching her so closely.

I take another step, lowering my voice and deliberately brushing her arm with the wool of my coat. "Is that what you want, Anna? To watch me like you do from the sidelines?"

She freezes, lifting her chin to meet my gaze head-on. "I'm not one of your rink rats, you arrogant, delusional man. I can replace you tomorrow with any other attractive athlete and not blink twice."

"So, you admit you think I'm attractive." I smile at the frosty glare she gives me. She's the utmost professional, probably one of the classiest women I've ever met – which is saying something considering what an absolute brute her brother is – and I'd give anything to hear her internal thoughts out loud.

"I don't think about you at all," she says, her elegant accent clipping the words.

I know a lie when I hear one.

"It's good to see you again, Anna." I give up the fight and rudely let my eyes slide down her body because let's face it, she expects the worst from me anyway. Might as well live up to my reputation.

“Hmm. Wish I could say the same.” She paints on an obviously fake, bright smile. “But for some reason, Luxx thinks you’re the best person to showcase their brand so here I am.”

Another guest in line steps around Anna, throwing me a real smile as she walks past. “If she’s not happy to see you, I bet you won’t have any trouble finding some friendly company.” She crooks an eyebrow. “I’ll be in the bar in about two hours.”

I smile back and wink. “I’ve got a work thing, but I’m sure you won’t be lonely.”

When I turn back, Anna’s scowling. She turns on her heels, with a sigh. “You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

I jog to catch up to her. “What are you talking about? Most people find me charming.”

But not Anna. When we met that night, two years ago, I could tell right away she wasn’t some puck bunny I could charm and ignore in the morning. At first, she didn’t even seem to notice me, but I’m not a guy who gives up, and the only option for me is winning, no matter what it takes.

And I wanted to win her over. I remember it so vividly. The second she walked in the room it was like the lights twinkled more brightly. Anna held herself with a quiet confidence, not drawing attention to herself, but her cool beauty did that anyway. I remember her simple red dress, legs for days, and her sharp, dry wit. It was clear she was smart, certainly smart enough to see through my bullshit, but I wasn’t giving up.

Slowly, I pulled a one reluctant smile from her and followed by another. Then, we discovered we shared a mutual love for Disney movies, and after she grilled me on Disney trivia, I was well on my way to assuming I had met my future wife, despite us not having exchanged names.

Until Felix sat down at our table, leveled me with an icy stare and made the formal introductions.

As Anna repeated my name, her warmth slipped away, and I knew I didn't stand a chance a with her. Not then. Not ever.

Even knowing who she was, that weekend I couldn't help myself, seeking her out every chance I got. She wasn't immune to me either. Neither of us could deny the spark between us. The spark you only read about in fairytales. I felt it and it was real.

There was just something about her that hooked me hard. Something I couldn't ignore.

Something that's been eating at me ever since Felix made his feelings clear on the ice, with his fists and that goddamn trademark snarl every time he sees me. I'm used to his hits. Used to him chirping me. But when I waved at his sister during that exhibition game, I might as well have been waving a red flag in front of a demented bull.

I guess his message about Anna being off-limits was worth the double-minor that stuck him in the box for a full four.

The head butt should have knocked some sense into me. All it did was ratchet up our long-standing vendetta a thousand percent.

But Felix isn't here this weekend. And I'll be spending the next few days working very closely with Anna.

If I won her over once, maybe I can do it again.

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ANNA

I can feel Max behind me, his presence as bright as noon sunshine and just as overwhelming, like glancing up into the light without sunglasses. When my boss suggested this campaign, I had a dozen names ready, but they only wanted Max.

Of course. Everyone wants Max. Hockey's golden boy. His grandfather had been one of the league most renowned players. His parents are movie stars. Both of them. His birth was so celebrated I can find his baby pictures online.

Not that I've looked at them.

Very much.

I sigh. It's just a few days. I can put up with everyone gushing over Max for that long. I just have to remember his ego is so big I can't get too close or risk suffocating.

I step onto the elevator and press the button, keeping my eyes forward. I know his eyes are on me and the back of my neck prickles. I'm not going to engage. I'll just pretend to ignore him, even though it's always hard. He really is like the sun, and I'm drawn to the warmth.

The elevator dings and we step out onto an executive floor, the meeting room doors thrown open where my colleagues are eagerly awaiting the hockey superstar.

I hang back as Max strides in, like a prince ready to hold court. The members of Luxx's executive board trip over themselves to greet him, as if they've never seen a celebrity before. As I watch, Max shakes hands, turning on the charm like it's his own personal brand.

Which, considering how well he's doing at it, might as well be. I make a beeline for the coffee bar, reminding myself as Max's laughter fills the room that this is exactly why I moved heaven and earth to get him here this weekend. Max could sell ice to a penguin. Max can sell anything without even trying. A few years back, someone snapped a picture of him at a charity run stopping to switch out his sneakers and that particular brand sold out online in minutes.

His beer of choice, and inwardly I roll my eyes at this bit of marketing magic because I happen to know that Max Walker doesn't actually drink beer with his nutrition plan, has been an international bestseller ever since he did that ad campaign where someone hands him a cold one in the locker room after a divisional final and he pulls his shirt off, holds the bottle against a nasty bruise coloring his collarbone before opening and draining it. Somehow, he managed to get a drop to fall perfectly so that it tracks down his perfectly-sculpted chest.

He's a professional athlete. Of course it's sculpted, but to hear Sophie, our social media marketing VP talk about it, you'd think he invented muscles.

I take a bracing swig of rich, dark coffee, flinching at the burn. Speaking of Sophie, she's zeroed in on Max like a kid seeing Santa on Christmas Eve.

"Mr. Walker," she coos, with a smile so wide I experience a moment's alarm that she's about to bite him, "we can't thank you enough for interrupting your busy season for this ad campaign." She places a hand on his arm, looking up at him from beneath her lashes, "you must let us know if there's anything we can do to make your weekend here absolutely perfect. We're so thrilled to have you in Vienna."

Did she just flutter her lashes? I suppress the urge to snort. She's so petite, she looks like a little doll next to Max's large frame. I shift in my heels. Is that jealousy making my chest tight? No one can ever accuse me of looking small, even next to professional hockey players.

"It's my pleasure, really," Max says, in that smooth, low voice he probably perfected by filming himself and replaying it until he'd hit that fine balance between sex god and boy-next-door. "Vienna's a beautiful city. I'm just here to enjoy it and hopefully help promote Luxx in the process."

I definitely can't hold back the eye roll at his comment. Getting him here was a herculean effort according to his agent. Luxx paid through the roof to line him up for this weekend. I lean against the wall with my coffee and watch Sophie and the others fall over themselves to get Max to simply smile in their direction.

And he does—easily, effortlessly—as if it's no big deal to be the most magnetic person in the room, even though he must be exhausted. He grins, wide and dashing, giving each person a look that seems personal and genuine, from the hotel staff waiting to serve a light lunch, to the intern practically trembling in his presence, to each executive who made time in their busy schedules to come and meet him.

The man's practically sparkling.

Oh, please.

I take another mouthful of coffee to keep from saying it out loud. Instead, I focus on steadying my breathing, trying not to let his stupid smile and overly polite tone get to me.

But the truth is, it does get to me. Max gets to me. Each charismatic laugh, every casual joke and clever quip that has the whole group chuckling, slowly drives me

insane.

How does he do it? Am I the only one to see how he turns the charm on and off like a switch? He's the son of two very famous actors, do they not see that he's just playing a role?

I know the real Max. And it's not this golden-aww-shucks-hockey god who skates like he was born with a pair of blades on his feet and a magnetism that cons everyone who comes into contact with him.

Max Walker is ruthless. He'll do anything to win, no matter who gets hurt. It bothers me that no one can see beneath his carefully cultivated perfection.

But what bothers me more is that I can't look away. I hate the effortless way he pulls everyone under his spell – the way he knows he's got the entire room in the palm of his hand—including me, if I'm truly honest with myself. I swallow hard. I should know better.

I've been with Luxx for nearly five years. Four and a half years of dedication, late nights, and practically bending over backward to meet deadlines and product initiatives. All in hopes of finally snagging a promotion at the end of the season.

I'm so close, and I know Sophie's watching me, evaluating how well I can handle the company's biggest holiday campaign ever. This is my time to show I can be more than just another coordinator.

I negotiated for months to get Max here. A coup that no one thought I'd be able to deliver on. Then I planned an incredible itinerary for the photo shoots and events, all under the instruction of ensuring Max Walker barely has to lift a finger and has a wonderful time to boot. Thanks to Sophie, I've planned the perfect weekend for the man who's caused my brother endless grief.

As if I'd conjured her with my thoughts, Sophie's eagle eyes sweep the room, pinning me in place when she sees me, coffee cup in hand. She waves me over with a bright smile, and I steel myself, reluctantly forcing my feet to move. I pluck my file off a table where the intern and photographer are going over potential layouts from the pre-campaign and walk over to Sophie, determined to be as professional as I can. Even if that means standing directly in front of Max, who looks down at me with a spark of something almost amused in his gaze.

"There she is!" Sophie beams, patting me on the shoulder. "Anna, did you and Max have an opportunity to introduce yourselves downstairs?"

"No need," I say tightly, forcing a smile. "We've met before."

Max's eyebrows raise, and that infuriating little grin of his creeps back onto his face. "Good to see you again, Anya."

The way he uses my nickname, all casual and familiar, makes my skin prickle. I don't need reminding that he knows exactly who I am—and who my brother is. But he's going to pretend anyway, like we're close friends.

Fine. I can play that game too, but in reverse.

"Mr. Walker," I say, ignoring his smirk. "Willkommen in Wien."

Sophie's shoots me a narrow look, quickly changing it to a beaming smile when she turns to Max. "I know you said you didn't want to do any sightseeing, but Anna is our local expert here in Vienna. She's planned the perfect weekend for you and knows all the best spots to really take in the holiday spirit."

Max raises an eyebrow, and I resist the urge to roll my eyes again. Yes, I'm Austrian and I've lived in Vienna for a few years now, but that hardly makes me a tour guide.

And yet, there's something about the way Sophie says it that fills me with a sense of dread.

I hold out the file. "It's all in here, Mr. Walker."

Max flips through the pages, that smirk playing around the edges of his mouth. "This looks..." he trails a finger over the neat lists I created outlining everything anyone could possibly want to do in Vienna at Christmas. He raises an eyebrow at me. "Thorough."

Sophie nods. "Indeed. Anna is incredible with even the tiniest details. Anything you might be craving is on that list."

"Anything?" He snaps the file closed and zeroes in on me. My heart stutters at the heat in those famous blue eyes. I steel myself despite the butterflies in my tummy. I've felt the full force of his charm before, and I just have to remember that it's all an act. "I'm looking forward to experiencing that attention to detail first-hand."

A strange buzz starts in my head and the butterflies scatter. I suddenly want to run and hide, back to my cozy apartment lit by the glow of fairy lights and cocoon myself with soft Christmas pillows and my big fluffy red blanket. I take a step back, nearly colliding with Sophie.

"Well, that's wonderful," Sophie chirps, ignoring the panicked look I shoot her. "Luxx wants to ensure you have a memorable weekend, as thanks for fitting us into your schedule. Anna will take care of you all weekend." She presses her hand into my back, pushing me towards Max. "It's so lucky you already know each other. She's the perfect guide to all things Christmas in Vienna."

Max taps the folder. "It's like having my own personal elf."

Wait. What?

Sophie giggles. “Oh, Anna loves all things Christmas. She probably even has an elf costume.”

I want to die. Promotion or not, there isn’t enough snow in Austria to cool the heat in my cheeks.

“I’d pay to see that.”

I glare over at him. I bet he would. I bite the tip of my tongue to stop myself from suggesting that he probably already has paid for something like that. Instead, I take a deep breath and visualize my new office once I get that promotion. I force a smile. “Unfortunately, I don’t have an elf costume, so you get to save your millions, Mr. Walker.”

Max ignores my frosty tone and grins. “I guess I’ll just have to use my imagination.”

Even Sophie looks a little non-plussed at that comment and I slide my eyes to her, hopefully conveying that someone else should have to put up with Max Walker all weekend. I’m surprised Sophie didn’t volunteer, to be honest with the way she’s batting her eyelashes.

“I’d be much more helpful overseeing the campaign from the office,” I offer and for a split second I think she’s going to put me out of my misery before she shakes her head.

“You’re indispensable, Anna. We really need you out with Max and the photographer at the sites for the campaign.”

Her tone is firm and my heart sinks. I have no way out of this. My pulse hammers in

my ears as Sophie puts her hand on Max's arm. "We know how difficult it was to fit us into your busy schedule and we're so grateful. I know it's a working weekend, but Anna will try to make it as enjoyable as possible."

I can tell from the glint in his eyes that he's already enjoying this.

"I'm certain I'm in good hands."

"The best," Sophie trills pulling out her phone. She frowns at the screen. "Hmm. It looks like the photographer is pushing up the schedule."

"What?" I pull out my own phone, noting that a weather warning has been issued. Sure enough, the photographer has texted us to suggest that the weather might impact the lighting for the outdoor skating tomorrow and suggesting that we do it tonight while it's still clear.

"But the model won't be here until tomorrow afternoon," I say, pushing down the panic that bubbles in my chest. I need this campaign to go perfectly.

Sophie is tapping away at her phone. "The model is only for the skating, right?"

I nod. "Yes, the main feature is Max, but the photographer wanted the balance of a female model for the rink shots."

Sophie eyes me up. "You're the right height, Anna."

I blink. "I'm not a model."

"Ernst just needs a tall blonde in white Luxx gear. It's just to set up the shot. You probably won't even be facing the camera." Sophie throws an apologetic glance at Max. "Sorry, Max, a little snafu in scheduling. It looks like we'll be shooting skating

in the night market this evening.”

“Hey, you just tell me what to do.” He bumps my shoulder. “I’m sure Anna can make it work.”

I grit my teeth. “Oh, I’ll make it work.” I’ll make it work and I’ll be negotiating a bonus to boot. “The outfits have been delivered to your room and are hanging in individual bags. You’ll need to change into the one labelled “A”.” I fire off two texts, grateful for the foresight I had to book the service staff rooms at the hotel for today through to Monday. I wasn’t willing to risk a traffic delay. “Hair and make-up will be at your suite in an hour.” I glance up. “Does that give you enough time?” I feel a little bad, the man just landed, did the whole handshake thing and now we’re putting him to work. I’ve done that flight a few times and not after going a few periods in a grueling hockey game. He has to be tired.

Max nods. “I’ll be ready.”

“Good.” I bite my lip. My foresight didn’t extend to booking a room here for myself. I shake my head. It’s fine, I’ll change in the anteroom of the corporate suite we’re in. We have it as the headquarters for the campaign and because the model wasn’t arriving until tomorrow, her outfit is here. I swallow. We might be the same height but we’re probably not the same size.

I turn to leave, pausing at the warm hand that falls at the small of my back. I freeze when I realize Max has fallen into step next to me. He’s barely touching me, but a buzz travels up my spine anyway.

“You okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine, we’ll adapt.”

“Ah, a problem-solver. I always suspected we were kindred spirits.” His voice is low and the buzz intensifies in my body.

I freeze at my reaction. We’re in a room full of people, my boss, and her bosses. I feel like this weekend is my final test for the promotion I’ve been working my butt off for and the last thing I need is Max Walker making my belly quiver. My back stiffens and I arch away from his touch, glancing over my shoulder. “Trust me, we’re not,” I say.

It doesn’t matter that his touch is electric, or that his blue eyes make me feel like I could drown in them; I need to remember he’s just another smug, overconfident hockey player. And not just any smug, overconfident hockey player – he’s my brother’s nemesis.

His eyebrows lift in mild surprise, and I can’t tell if I’ve amused him or challenged him. Either way, I’m determined not to let him see how much he’s rattling me.

“This is just business, Max, please try to remember that.”

But as I walk away, I feel his gaze on my back, the heat of it no less than when he was touching me and my treacherous heart races. And I can’t help but think I might be the one needing the reminder.

MAX

If Anna tugs at her clothes one more time, I won't be held responsible for my actions. The white outfit looks incredible on her, and I can absolutely see why Sophie suggested she stand in for whatever model they hired. She looks like an ice queen with her hair down and styled in long, bouncy curls I want to wind around my hand. Her legs go on forever in whatever magic tights the Luxx brand created.

I heard her complaining about the fit to Ernst before he helped zip her into a coat that committed the outrageous crime of covering up her world-class ass. I'm somewhat a connoisseur of the female form and even I'm in awe when I look at Anna. She's what my father would call "statuesque", and I've never been quite sure what it meant until tonight. Anna is tall and looks like she could go a few rounds with me but the curves she keeps trying to cover with that coat look soft and welcoming. Here in the warm glow of the square, with Christmas music playing and trees dressed in twinkle lights and velvet bows . . . well, the whole scene is designed to make me want to unwrap Anna like the present she is.

It's far colder here than in Las Vegas, but the golden ambience of the lights strung around every pole and garland softens the chill of the night air. With every breath I take, the scents of the nearby market wrap around me like a warm scarf – chocolate, mulled wine, cinnamon, roasted chestnuts – the whole place smells like the best kitchen you could ever dream up. Even I have to admit there's something different about Christmas in Vienna. I see a couple of teenage boys walking, hockey sticks over their shoulders and a pang hits me. Now isn't the time for me to be focused on

anything other than my game.

It's not all bad, though.

Anna is next to me, leading me toward the rink with that tight-lipped, no-nonsense look she's perfected. She's trying hard not to meet my gaze, as she looks ahead to where Ernst has set up his camera. Her whole demeanor screams her annoyance, and I can't figure out how Ernst is going to magically make it appear as if she's enjoying my company. Well, that's his job. I know how to show up and do mine.

I sit and pull on my skates, watching out of the corner of my eye as Anna tries to sit on a different bench. Her coat bunches up and as she bends over, she can't get the fabric out of the way. She stands, pulls off her gloves and tugs at the zipper.

"Hey, what are you doing?" I move over to where she's struggling to unsnap the collar.

She frowns up at me. "I'm trying to get this thing off so I can do up my skates. It's a bit snug."

I put my hands over hers, noting the chill of her fingers. "It's freezing out here. You can't take off your coat."

"It's Vienna, of course it's freezing. And it's just for a minute. I need to get my skates done up."

I shake my head. "Sit down."

"What?"

Her whiskey-colored eyes reflect the twinkling lights above and I squeeze her hands

before grabbing her gloves. “Put these back on and sit down.” I point to the bench.

Her expression turns mutinous. “Max...”

I drop to one knee, waving my hand in a flourish. “I got this, Anna. Sit down.”

I hear a sigh before she drops to the bench. “I don’t need you to tie my skates. I just need to take off this marshmallow someone thought might make a good coat.”

I unzip one of her boots and my groin tightens. I didn’t think this through. Quickly, I pull it off and hold her ankle as she wiggles her foot into the skate. My hand circles her ankle and even though the arctic air should freeze any and all of my body parts, clearly my blood runs pretty hot because my cock seems to think we’re naked in a bed and I’m gripping her ankle for an entirely different activity than the one we’re presently engaged in.

I stand as she pushes her skate down to the mats in front of the benches and then lift her leg, holding it between my knees to lace.

“Too tight?” I ask and I could be asking about my lacing technique or my pants at the moment.

“No, although I’m surprised you’re comfortable with me holding a blade this close to your ...” A faint blush darkens the pink in her cheeks as if she’s just realized what she’s said. She waves vaguely at my thighs.

I huff out a laugh that’s somewhat strangled. I’m not in the least worried about the damage her skates could do to me, even though I’ve seen some pretty bad blade injuries. No, the deepest cut she can give me is a little higher up, if the way my heart skips at the wry twist of her lips is any indication. Don’t get me wrong, Anna is gorgeous and if this thing, whatever it is between us, was just physical I’d be able to

deal with it.

But being around Anna is like that feeling when you smash a one-in-a-million-goal at the top-left corner that no one saw coming. It's the game where your career hits a thousand points. It's getting so close to the Cup you can taste the champagne sprayed on your face – anticipation, victory and love all rolled into one.

I've never called it what it was because no one would believe me. No one would believe that I could fall instantly, deeply, obsessively in love with someone after ten minutes.

I didn't believe it for a long time. Lust, for sure. If it were that simple, I could have walked out the door that night with half a dozen beautiful women.

I didn't. And in the two years since we met, my mind always goes to Anna. Felix and I don't meet on the ice all that often, given that our teams are in different conference divisions, but whenever we do it adds an element to the game to see Anna behind the glass.

To see her watching me. I know she does. I feel it, just like I do right now, her eyes on me while I focus on tying her skates.

Touching her like this, closer than we've ever been since that first night is the sweetest torture anyone could dream up for me. Holding her ankle only makes me want to slide my hands further up her limbs, memorize the curve of her thighs and feel the sweet heat between her legs despite the deep chill in the air.

“Let's move please, the wind has shifted direction.”

Ernst's deep voice startles me, and I finish her laces off with a sharp bow, checking to make sure nothing hangs over her instep.

“Hockey skates?” I ask as she stands wiggling her ankles.

“What else would I be wearing?” She straightens her jacket and heads to the ice surface, stepping on perfectly with a practiced glide.

I follow her. “Just figured you for a toe-pick kind of girl.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Of course you did.” She does a neat pivot, the beautiful curve of her muscles looking strong as she faces me, skating backwards. “I’m not a figure skater.”

And because I’m a glutton for her kind of punishment I grin. “But you can skate?” I put enough doubt into my question to enjoy the way her shoulders snap back in offence.

“Just try to keep up, hockey boy.”

A primal spark explodes in my chest at the teasing look she throws my way while skating away. I speed up, admiring the sharp precision of her cross-overs and I wonder if she’s showing off because she wants to challenge me or impress me.

Either option is fine by me.

As we near where Ernst is positioned, he waves us over. I can’t help it, I flex my thighs, giving a power boost and twist my hips sending up an impressive spray of ice as I stop.

Ernst rolls his eyes. “This isn’t speed-skating Olympics, you two. You’re drawing a crowd. This is about the clothes and the ambience, so I need you to look less like you’re trying to race each other and more like you’re in love and having a fun time.”

“I am having fun,” I say, my chest lifting as Anna’s laughter echoes over the rink. It hits me harder than it should, her real laugh, and I spin quickly grabbing her red mitten and pulling her to me. My other hand drops to her waist and Ernst lifts the camera, nodding. The wind blows across the ice and tiny flakes of snow shimmer around us.

As we skate, I can’t help but watch her, the way she moves so in sync with me, we’re almost dancing. I know her smiles and soft touches are for the camera, but I can’t help tucking each one away with wonder, like a child trying to save an icicle.

The sounds of tourists and the excitement of children are part of the Christmas music playing in the background and Anna, with her blonde hair and red scarf floating in the breeze stands out against the lights and colors of the market behind her.

We skate in silence for a while, slipping into a rhythm that Ernst seems happy with and I’m not willing to break the moment with too many words. I should be focused on the rink, on my technique, on the fact that this is part of the job. But my eyes keep drifting to her, taking in the way her cheeks are pink from the cold, her breath visible in short clouds, her smile softer now than it was earlier.

Almost as if this is real.

As we glide past the market stalls, the scents intensify, cinnamon and vanilla, toasted almonds, and spices I can’t identify other than to say it smells like Christmas. The whole place feels like Christmas distilled, pure nostalgia and warmth, like being in a snow globe. Anna slows down arching an eyebrow.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing, just giving you a minute to catch your breath.”

I smirk, skating closer and taking her hand in mine. “You don’t need to worry about me, I can go all night.”

Her mouth opens the tiniest bit, and it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to kiss her. There’s something vulnerable in her eyes, something that pulls me in even though I know I shouldn’t let it. She doesn’t drop my hand and out of the corner of my eye I see Ernst taking rapid-fire shots. Our breath rises in soft puffs, curling together in the icy air, a visible reminder of just how close our lips are, and I wonder if maybe, just maybe, she’s letting down her guard.

“Careful, Anna,” I murmur, letting my voice drop low. “You keep looking at me like that, and I might think you actually don’t hate me.”

She blinks before narrowing her eyes, lips curving into a wry smile. “If you’re fooled, then I’m clearly doing my job.”

But the way her gaze lingers for just a second too long tells me she’d forgotten about this being a job, and I grin, feeling a distinct flicker of victory as we skate side by side into the glow of Christmas lights.

ANNA

The wind whips high enough to send the bells at the entrance gate to the market jangling. Max goes down on one knee in front of me again, tugging off his gloves. My heart stutters, as this pose is too reminiscent of another all-too-familiar pose from my favorite romantic Christmas movies. Stupid, soft heart. I press a hand to my chest as he makes quick work of my skates, his strong hands massaging warmth into my feet before he slides my boots back on, zipping them up for me.

No one has put my skates on for me in a long time. The last person I remember doing it was my dad, here at this very rink, when Felix and I were children and we'd come down to Vienna to visit our grandparents for the holidays. The sweet memory makes me swallow hard, my throat tight.

I love Christmas but sometimes the happiest of memories also make me sad. Max glances up at me. "All done," he says. He leans closer, a concerned look on his face. "Hey, what's wrong?"

I shake my head. "Nothing." I drag in a deep breath of icy air.

Max stares at me intently for a few seconds but to my relief he doesn't push and stands, tipping his head up. "Is it always this cold here?" He pulls his hat down over his dark waves.

"In the winter, for sure." The designer jacket might be a bit tight, but I'm grateful for

the warmth. The wind bites my cheeks, mixed with the ice pellets that are starting to fall faster. “Vienna doesn’t get much snow, so this weather is an unpleasant surprise.”

Ernst got what he needed and left some time ago, but Max wanted to keep skating. I can’t say I’m angry about it. I don’t skate all that often anymore, even though I love it. Gliding across the ice tonight was wonderful, even with Max at my side.

I bite my lip. Who am I kidding. I love skating, but I can’t remember a time when I’ve had more fun and that was because of Max. There’s something exhilarating about sparring with him, and he might be a notorious hockey playboy, but it must come easy for him, because even I can’t deny how gorgeous he is. He’s almost too much to look at.

The market is clearing out and closing early because of the weather and I sigh when I see my favorite dessert café is already closed. Hopefully, this poor weather is short-lived because Luxx really wanted some market shots in their portfolio – some potential collaboration with the city to promote tourism at this time of the year, but we’ll have to see how it works out tomorrow. I’m craving some Christmas treats to take the edge off this hunger that grows every time Max flashes that too-perfect-too-dangerous smile.

The short walk back to the hotel is really unpleasant, with the wind burning my cheeks and the ice making the sidewalks a total hazard. Snow vehicles are out, but an alert on my phone warns me to stay off the roads and I reluctantly realize I’m going to have to book a room at the hotel tonight.

As I slip my phone in my pocket, I skid, my heart jumping into my throat as I jerk, arms windmilling to try and regain my balance. Strong arms wrap around me, steadying me as if I weigh absolutely nothing.

Max is holding me, his blue eyes bright. “I’ve got you.”

You sure do. For a second I worry that I said it out loud and I release the death grip I've got on his arms. Thank goodness the evening is almost over. I need a break from the overwhelming magnetism of Max Walker. I thought for sure he was going to kiss me back at the rink and when he didn't, the pang of disappointment I felt shook me to my core.

My brain knows that Max Walker is like eating too much chocolate – it's never a good idea, but my body is like, girl, it's going to taste so good .

"Thanks," I say breathlessly, carefully checking my next step on the slick cobblestones.

"No problem." Max takes my hand and I stop, but he just grins. "For both our safety until we get to the hotel."

I don't shake him off because he's not wrong, it's pretty bad out here at the moment.

Finally, we reach the hotel, and the doorman rushes out to escort us in. "Poor weather, tonight, fraulein, " he says. "May we get you anything, sir?" he asks Max.

"I don't think California sunshine is on the menu, but thank you," Max squeezes my hand. "Which floor are you on?"

I realize we're still holding hands and I pull my free. "Oh, you go ahead, I'll have to book a room for the night."

The doorman frowns. "I believe the hotel is full, unfortunately."

"Doesn't Luxx have a block of rooms?" Max asks.

"We do, but they're full. I live close, but across the river and I'm not going to be able

to get home tonight, with transportation being taken off the roads.” I sigh and roll my shoulders. I’m cold, emotional, and tired. I really just want my little studio apartment, some hot chocolate, my favorite pajamas and a Christmas movie. “You must be exhausted, Max. I’ll just go to reception and see if I get lucky.”

Max trails behind me to the counter. The clerk smiles flirtatiously at him. “May I help you, Mr. Walker?”

God, this hotel is amazing. Sophie told me they have the staff memorize all the VIP guests, even if they’re only here for a single weekend.

“She’s looking for a room,” Max flashes his trademark slow smile and I tamp down my annoyance. If his flirting gets me a room tonight, I’ll take it.

The clerk taps away. “Oh, I’m so sorry, we’re full tonight.” Her mouth turns down in sympathy. “The weather, plus the holiday tourism makes us very busy.”

I glance out the long window next to the reception. The Christmas fairytale scene has disappeared. Instead, the window is coated in ice, and I can hear the freezing sleet tapping against the glass. It’s a miserable night.

Max slides closer to me. “I have a room.”

My heart pounds. “Max, no.”

“Come on, Anna. You can’t go out in this weather and it’s just for one night. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

He tilts his head, like a mischievous dark-haired puppy and my cold heart, which was already thawing when it comes to Max Walker sweats a little bit more from the heat of his charm.

Practiced charm. I just need to keep reminding myself of that.

“You need to be here in the morning, anyway, for work.” His lips tilt up in a grin and he spreads his hands. “And I’m work, aren’t I?”

I swear I hear the desk clerk swoon. I start to shake my head again, but somehow my lips move in direct contradiction to what my brain is screaming and the word “fine” falls out of my mouth before I can stop it.

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5

MAX

The door to my hotel room flashes green and I hold it wide open as Anna pauses. She's practically bristling, her arms wrapped around her middle like she can hold in all the words I know she wants to hurl at me. I don't want to spook her and have her change her mind. That said, I throw up a little prayer to the universe that Vienna is having a freak winter storm and there's no room at the inn. No room, that is except for my room.

The door snicks closed behind us and I follow her in, watching as she stops in front of the large king-sized bed dominating the room.

"Do you want the top bunk or the bottom bunk?" I say, lightly.

Her head swivels to me in disbelief, like I'm some kind of idiot. She surveys the room and I see it through her eyes. It's luxurious as far as hotels go, with a dark, wood-paneled wall behind the admittedly huge bed – always a plus when you're over six-two – and intricately patterned fabric wallpaper that is highlighted by the heavy pale gold satin drapes, drawn now by the turn-down service, but earlier framed an incredible view of the city. There's a small sitting area, with a desk, chair, and floor lamp but it's clear the room's main feature is the bed, piled high with crisp pillows and a comforter that looks like it could double as a cloud.

"There's no sofa bed?" she asks. I shake my head, even though it's clear there isn't one. "What about a cot?"

She wanders past the bed, over to the curtains and slides them open enough to peek behind them, as if maybe by some miracle there would be another bed hiding in there.

“There’s just one bed,” she mutters.

“Yep. Just one large, comfy looking bed.”

Her eyes track past me to the bed. “But don’t worry, Anna. I’m a gentleman and I’ll take the floor.”

Anna steps back and turns, crossing her arms again like she’s trying to shield herself. “You don’t have to sleep on the floor. We’re both adults. We can share.” She sighs, drawing my attention to how she’s hugging herself.

Is she shielding herself from... me? Or just this moment? The same buzz of attraction that crackled between us like electricity the first night we met fills the room. The only difference right now is Anna. When she didn’t know exactly who I was, the night was filled with possibilities. We were just two people caught up in some crazy instant attraction, chemistry making us feel like we’d known each other forever and that this was the start of something new and amazing.

Right now, her guard is up. She’s a fortress, all sharp edges and locked gates, but I’ve spent my entire career learning how to read defenses, and Anna’s body language tells me everything I need to know.

She’s fighting herself, not me.

I shrug off my coat and hang it up. I’m not about to do anything to make her feel uncomfortable, but I can’t let this opportunity go. If nothing happens, then maybe I’ve been wrong this whole time and I need to put my obsession with this incredible woman in my rear view.

I carefully move closer but lean back against the dresser and shove my hands in my pockets to keep them from reaching for her too soon. Outside, the wind howls against the window, rattling it like it might break. It's the only sound, apart from the uneven rhythm of her breathing.

"I can't believe I'm sharing a hotel room with you. I'm not even sure how this happened," she mutters, her voice just above a whisper. She avoids my eyes, studying the floor like it holds the answers.

"You're not?" I tease, keeping my tone light. Playful. God, I hope it works, because inside, I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, staring down at her, and hoping she'll take the leap with me. "Pretty sure it started with a storm, then a hotel capacity issue, and, oh yeah, I offered for you to stay here instead of sending you off into dangerous weather."

"Because you're a nice guy?"

It feels like a loaded question. And I know why she's asking it. I'm not a nice guy. If I were a nice guy, I wouldn't be able to do my job. But that doesn't make me a bad guy either. I like kittens and babies, as long as they aren't trying to take the puck from me.

I shrug. "This doesn't have to be a big deal. I'll take the chair."

She glances down at the overstuffed club chair. It looks comfortable enough to watch television, but I can already feel my back twinge at the thought of waking up there. I'd be better off on the floor. "It'll be fun."

"Fun?" Anna frowns. "Define fun."

"Fun as in seeing how long it takes for you to realize you actually like having me

around.”

She rolls her eyes “I don’t.”

“It seemed like you were having fun when we were skating,” I say mildly, taking a seat in the chair and bouncing on the cushion. “It’s got some give, and I can put my feet up on the coffee table.” I stand to face her. “I invited you to share a room with me so you would be safe. If that means I take the chair, it’s fine.”

Her eyes snap to mine, a hint of fire flickering there. “Fine? You weigh, like, two hundred pounds, not to mention those trees you have as legs. It will be torture.”

I grin, because there’s that spark I’m craving. “You think I weigh two hundred pounds? I don’t know whether I’m flattered or insulted.”

Her lips press together, but the corner of her mouth twitches. A win. “You’re being ridiculous. I didn’t mean?—”

“It’s fine,” I interrupt, stressing the word as I straighten and take one careful step toward her. “I’ll take it as a compliment. Most stats make me sound like a tank.” I do a little catwalk turn. “I guess Luxx wanted me for my model-esque svelteness.”

She laughs but tries to stifle it, and the sound is the cutest snort I’ve ever heard. Her arms drop to her sides, though her fists remain clenched. It’s progress as far as I’m concerned. “You’re impossible.”

“True,” I say, closing the distance between us in another slow step. I want to reach for her—more than I want my next breath—but I don’t.

Not yet.

I'm known for taking risks that pay off and my next gamble feels like it could change the outcome of the game. "This whole thing between us should be impossible, but somehow we're here, together."

She blinks up at me, her brow furrowed, and I can see the war she's waging with herself. It's written all over her face, in the way she chews on her bottom lip and shifts her weight from one foot to the other.

"Max..." she says softly, her voice trembling just enough to make my chest ache.

God, she's killing me. I run a hand through my hair, letting out a rough laugh. "You know, you've got this way of saying my name that makes it sound like both a compliment and a warning. I know where I stand with you, Anna." I take a deep breath. "But I want you anyway."

She frowns, her fingers now fidgeting with the ends of her hair. "I'm just trying to figure out?—"

"What you want?" I finish for her, taking another step that brings me close enough to feel the warmth radiating off her skin. Close enough to catch the faint scent of her shampoo, something that smells like summer and contradicts the storm clouds in her eyes.

She gives a hesitant little jerk of her head, the tiniest nod ever and the vulnerability I see there, in the most composed woman I've ever met, nearly undoes me.

"Come on, Anna" I say, my voice a hoarse whisper. "You don't have to keep fighting it."

She swallows and I can see the rapid flutter of her pulse at her collarbone. "Fighting what?"

“Whatever this is.” I gesture between us. Our eyes lock and the air practically crackles with tension.

“This is nothing.” Anna’s voice is barely a whisper, but she doesn’t move.

“Feels like something.” Her fair skin can’t hide the blush that spreads across her cheeks. “Feels like you’re just as curious as I am.”

“Curious?” Anna scoffs, but it’s a weak attempt and I can’t help but notice she still hasn’t moved. Hasn’t pushed past me or turned her back or told me to get out of her space.

“Yeah,” I say, taking the last step towards her. “Curious about what it would feel like to stop pretending you don’t want this. To stop pretending you don’t want me.”

My hand lifts, brushing a strand of hair away from her face. Her breath hitches, and my heart stutters, letting my fingers drop to her jaw in the lightest of touches.

This is it.

This is where she decides.

This is where my future is decided.

“Anna,” I say, my voice softer than I mean it to be. “If you don’t want this, just tell me. Say the word, and I’ll back off. No hard feelings.”

She doesn’t say anything. Instead, her gaze drops to my mouth, just for a second, but long enough to make my heart trip over itself. I still don’t dare to hope until her hand comes up to my chest, but instead of pushing me away she closes the space between our bodies and tilts her chin up.

That's all the permission I need.

I spread my hand over her jaw and pause, giving her one last chance to pull away. She doesn't. Her breath comes in short, shallow bursts, and her eyes are wide, flickering with uncertainty and something else. Something that makes hope bloom in my chest.

When my lips meet hers, it's tentative at first—a question, not an answer. Anna hesitates, one heartbeat, two, and I give her enough space to pull away. But then she sighs against my mouth, her hands finding their way around my neck, and the world tilts on its axis.

I deepen the kiss, my other hand sliding to her waist, pulling her closer, her breasts against my chest and she melts into me, leaning closer, her fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt like she's holding on for dear life.

I'm undone. Completely and utterly.

Her lips are plush and warm, her touch demanding, and I don't know if it's the storm outside or the one raging in my chest, but I feel like I've just won the biggest prize I could ever aspire to.

When we finally break apart, she's staring up at me, her cheeks flushed, her breathing uneven. I can feel my heart hammering in my chest, and I don't care if she hears it. I don't ever want to wear a mask around her ever again.

"Still unsure?" I ask, my voice hoarse, the teasing edge gone.

She doesn't answer. But the way she presses her forehead to mine, her hands still clutching my shirt, tells me everything I need to know.

And for the first time in a long time, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

6

ANNA

My heart hammers unsteadily and I'm afraid if I let go of Max's shirt, I'll melt to the floor in a puddle of need.

Of course he's an incredible kisser. Of course, he's tender and funny and the perfect mix of demanding and respectful. I knew all this when I met him two years ago.

The only thing I didn't know was his name.

Or that he was the man my brother hated.

But I'm not my brother and as much as I want to, as much as I know I should, I don't hate Max Walker.

This time when his lips meet mine, it isn't tentative. There's no gentle exploration that lets us turn back and pretend nothing has happened. This time is deliberately slow, soft, and utterly devastating.

His hand cups the back of my neck, pulling me closer, and all at once, the tension that's been simmering between us snaps, leaving nothing but heat in its place.

For a moment, I forget everything—who he is, who I am, the storm outside. There's only Max, his warmth, his touch, and the way he makes me feel like maybe, just maybe, letting go for one night isn't such a bad thing after all.

After all. No one has to know.

“Anna,” he murmurs, and my belly tightens at the rough need in his voice. His mouth trails down my neck, his hot breath teasing my bare skin. Tiny prickles of sensation ripple down my back and my sweater suddenly feels like a furnace.

“Take off my sweater, Max,” I plead, lifting my arms.

He releases me long enough to grin. “Yes ma’am.” I nearly giggle at his boyish eagerness, but then his hands are under the hem, gliding the soft fabric up over my heated flesh and the cool air of the hotel room makes me shiver. With far more gentleness than I expected, Max untangles my hair where it gets caught in the neck of my sweater and my heart swells again.

The featherlight sweep of his thumbs where my shoulder meets my neck has me biting back a moan and he’s done nothing except remove my shirt. I’m a bundle of nerves, my sense firing as I’m overwhelmed by the way Max feels, tastes and smells. He smells like snow, cedar and fresh air and I want to bury my face in his chest and inhale deeply.

“You have way too many clothes on,” I mutter, pulling his black shirt over his head with far less technique than he showed with me. He laughs and helps me yank his t-shirt out of his pants until his incredible chest is bare for my exploration. My fingers inch over his skin, marveling at the work of art that he is. I know he works at it. He’s like a finally honed machine, and for tonight, he’s all mine.

He grabs my hands and holds them over my head. “Stay there,” he says as his hand make quick work of my bra. It falls free and I do moan then when he takes a step back, his blue eyes darkening as he looks at me. “God, you’re so beautiful, like a painting.”

My heart skips at the tenderness in his words. But right now, I don't want tenderness, I want his hands on my body. I want him to drive all thoughts as to why this might be a terrible idea out of my mind.

"I'm not a painting, so feel free to touch me," I say when he's still admiring me a few seconds later.

"You like my hands on you?" he asks, arching one of those dark, perfect wings. When I nod, he takes another step backwards and I panic, my arms falling. "Wait, that's the wrong direction."

Max shakes his head. "Nope. I'm dying to put my hands on you, but if I do, then it'll be all over far too soon and I've waited too long to let this happen in the blink of an eye." His mouth tilts up in a devastating smirk. "I'm going to savor you."

My core clenches at the dark promise in his tone. He unbuckles his belt and the button below it, dragging the zipper down while I watch. But then he stops, holding up a finger and making a little circle. "Turn around, Anna."

My eyes lock with his. "Too modest to take off your pants while I watch, Max?" I drawl.

"Ooh, a brat. I like that a lot, baby. You're adorable when you're fiery." He makes the twirling motion again. "I want you to turn around so when you pull down your leggings, I get to see that ass that's been making my mouth water all fucking day."

The command in his tone is my undoing. If he wants a show, I'll give it to him. I hook my fingers into the thick fabric and slide it down over my bum, feeling the burn of his eyes on me. I bend slightly, shoving them down to my knees and jump when a warm hand falls on my back, pushing me over all the way. He hooks a foot into the bridge of fabric and tugs them the rest of the down, while bringing his big body into

contact with mine.

I can feel him, hot, hard, and heavy against my bare ass and when his hand slides down to cup my cheek I lean back, relishing the sound of his groan as he kneads my flesh, before pulling me back up and spinning me around. His eyes gleam in the low light of the room as he winds his hand around the length of my hair and drags me in for another kiss, sliding his thigh between mine.

He mirrors each stroke of his tongue with his thigh, sending a burst of molten heat through my belly. His grip on my hair holds me in place and my body moves of its own accord, grinding down on his leg, needing the pressure exactly where he's giving it. Max lifts his head, and watches me for a few seconds, his lids heavy. "That's it, gorgeous girl, show me what you need."

I'm panting and I can't get the leverage I want so I push against his chest. "Bed," I sputter, when he drops his free hand to my hip, tightening his hold and slowing the pace.

"We'll get there, Anna. Just let me enjoy how wild you are for me right now."

Before I can muster up any indignation to that statement, he loosens my hair, smoothing it away from my face. "Hey, it makes me feel good to know you want me as badly as I want you." His voice is husky. "To know it's me making you breathless and wet and aching."

I've never felt this out of control, this wild, as Max puts it. "Please, Max. I can't stand any longer."

Instantly, I'm swept into his arms and deposited on the bed, sinking into the heavy, cool fabric. Impatiently, I go up on my elbows and watch greedily as he kneels over me, his dark hair falling over his forehead. Max pins my hips to the mattress,

dropping a searing kiss on each hipbone before dragging his tongue across my belly.

“Delicious.” He nuzzles me and looks up at me from those lashes that should be illegal on any man. “You smell like peaches and cream.” He nips the sensitive skin below my belly button, and I squeak. “Oh, I like that noise, but let’s see if I can make you scream.”

Before I can react, he captures a nipple in his mouth, his tongue laving the hard peak and stealing the breath from my lungs. The ache between my legs grows and my belly pulses as he alternates teasing me with sharp nips that make my shoulders arch off the bed and long, drugging sucks that send spikes of pleasure rocketing through my body.

Max’s lips are everywhere, mapping my body with a precision that’s almost maddening. I’m on fire beneath him, every nerve ending lit up, and yet it’s never enough. His hands, his mouth—he keeps me teetering right on the edge, and I don’t know whether to beg him to stop or to never, ever stop.

“You’re stunning,” he murmurs, his voice a low rumble that vibrates against my skin. His lips trail over the curve of my breast, soft and deliberate, as if he’s savoring me. “Every inch of you is perfection.”

My body flushes. No one has ever made me feel this cherished, let alone a man who looks like he was carved by the heavens. I feel naked, and it has nothing to do with the fact that I’m not wearing any clothes. It’s too much and I almost want to stop because this should just be about sex. I’m about to find out exactly how good the hottest hockey player on the planet is in bed and then maybe I’ll get him out of my system.

But it’s not just sex. Not when he’s looking at me like I’m something precious, something worth worshipping.

I try to protest, my voice shaky to stop this haze of intimacy that's making me fall somewhere I know I shouldn't be. "You don't have to?"

"Shhh. Yes, I do." His eyes blaze as they meet mine. "You need to hear it, Anna. You deserve to hear it. And I'm going to make sure you feel it, too."

Before I can respond, his mouth closes around my nipple again, and I gasp, my hips jerking involuntarily. His tongue flicks against the sensitive peak, a wicked tease that has my fingers threading through his hair, tugging him closer.

"Max..." His name comes out on a breathless moan.

He pulls back just enough to grin at me and blows a cool stream of air against my wet nipple. "That's it. Say my name like that again."

I want to protest but then his hand slides up my side, fingers tracing over my ribs before cupping my other breast. His thumb brushes over the tight bud there, and my brain short-circuits.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, moving his mouth to the other side. "So responsive. You're killing me, Anna."

I don't think he's ever looked more serious, and that realization makes me ache. He means it. Every word.

And then his teeth graze my skin, a gentle scrape that sends a shockwave straight through me. I moan, my hips shifting against him, searching for friction, for anything to relieve the tension coiling low in my belly.

"Patience," he says, his tone infuriatingly smug as he kisses his way down my stomach. "I told you I'm going to take my time. I want to feel every single shiver and

ripple of your gorgeous body.” He licks my stomach. “I’m going to swallow every single scream and when I finally feel your sweet pussy clench around my cock, then I won’t be able to hold back, but right now, we don’t have to rush.”

I’m about to argue that yes, we absolutely are in a rush, but he’s already there, his stubble rough on the inside of my thigh, his hands urging my legs farther apart, and all coherent thought spirals out of my brain.

“Max—”

“Anna,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to the inside of my knee. “I’ve got you.”

The way he says it, so steady, so sure, makes my heart clench. And then his mouth is on me, and I can’t think about anything beyond how good this feels.

His tongue moves slowly, deliberately, like he’s got all the time in the world. He hums against me, the vibration sparking something molten in my core. My hips shift restlessly as his tongue licks up each side of my delicate crease, heat flashing inside me with each slow drag.

“Sweet,” he murmurs, his voice muffled but still wicked. “So sweet, Anna. Just like I knew you’d be.” His grip tightens on my hips, holding me in place for his wicked ministrations. He circles my clit, slow at first, as if learning exactly what speed and pressure made me tense under his hands, then light and fast when my thighs start to shake around his head.

“Are you going to come for me, like a good girl?” he asks, his teeth sharp on my inner thigh while his fingers slide inside, stretching me. My pussy clenches at the invasion and he growls, a low, intimate sound. “That’s so good, baby. Let me feel it again.” And then he lowers his mouth to me again, feasting while my body tightens, my back arching against the sheets. I’m pulling his hair, riding his face and he urges

me on like he knows my body better than I do.

Right now, he might.

My hands fist in the sheets, my hips lifting involuntarily, but he pins me down with a strong hand, holding me in place as he works me over with devastating precision.

“Let go,” he says, his voice like a command, rough and low. “I’ve got you.”

And God, does he. His tongue and fingers work in tandem, building me higher and higher until the world narrows to nothing but him. The scrape of his stubble against my thighs, the heat of his mouth, the quiet, filthy praise spilling from his lips—it’s all too much and not enough.

“I can’t,” I gasp, though I’m not sure what I mean. It’s almost too much.

“Yes, you can,” Max says, his voice dark and sure. “You will. You’re so close. I can feel it.”

I don’t even realize I’m begging until the words tumble out: “Please, Max, I?—”

And then I shatter into pieces, pleasure cresting like a wave, before it breaks and I scream his name as lightening streaks through my body.

His touch gentles, but he doesn’t stop, working me through every last tremor, murmuring quiet words of encouragement that sound like filthy poetry.

When I finally come back to myself, he’s there, leaning over me, his forehead pressed to mine. His smile is soft, his eyes shining with something I don’t want to examine too closely.

Because then I might have to admit that my expression reveals the same thing.

“See?” he whispers. “Told you I’d take care of you.”

I laugh breathlessly, my hands finding his shoulders, pulling him closer. “You’re awfully proud of yourself, aren’t you?”

“I never do anything by half measure,” he admits, his grin widening. “But I’m not done yet.”

Before I can respond, he kisses me, slow and deep and full of promises he won’t be around to keep. But right now, with his weight pressing me into the mattress and his hands framing my face like I’m something precious, I don’t care.

The rest of the world doesn’t exist. There’s only Max.

MAX

I pull back slightly, just to stare down at her beautiful face. Her body is sated, relaxed underneath me, while mine is pulsating with need. Having her in my arms, feeling her body tremble because of what I'm doing to her – hearing her scream my name... This is bliss. I could die happy right this second, never going any farther than this.

Anna's breathing slows from those soft little hitches that drove me crazy and I brush her cheek, unable to keep from touching her. She glances up at me from behind those long lashes and it's like she's peeling back every layer of my soul.

"Max," she says softly, her hands brushing over my back. Her legs open and while I want nothing more than to slide into her softness and release the fire burning inside me, I'm not risking anything.

I've stripped her body bare, but I want her to be all in.

"Tell me you want this," I say, hoarsely, needing the words.

She pulls me down for a kiss and I give in for a minute, letting my mouth plunder the softness of her lips. My heart is pounding, and my cock grazes her entrance as her hips slide upwards, seeking me. It's sweet torture and I indulge in the tease, slipping against her wetness, desperate thrust hard and fast, but I hold back.

I hold myself up, her mewl of frustration making my cock twitch. "Say it, Anna."

“I’m begging you...” she whimpers.

I shake my head. “Tell me what you want, beautiful girl.” I hold her in place, my fingers resting on her temples so there’s nowhere to look but directly at me. Her golden eyes are dazed with need. “Tell me who you want.” I nearly bite back the words, terrified she’ll hear the vulnerability in my voice, but I’ve wanted this – her – for so long and I need this commitment from her right now.

I’ll worry about the rest of the commitments I want later.

Her eyes darken to burnished copper and she licks her lips. “I want you, Max. I want you inside me.”

I groan, the words releasing something in my chest and drop my mouth to hers again. She whimpers, shifting against me so I can settle between her satin thighs. I press into her pussy, so hot and wet and slowly ease into her tightness. It’s a tease, and her nails scrape down my back as I thrust shallowly, with just enough friction to make both of us gasp, but not nearly enough to satisfy the driving ache building inside me.

“Harder,” she whispers, her nails digging into my muscles, an exquisite pleasure-pain that makes my cock surge, but I know my size and the last thing I want is to hurt her.

I still, even though I think I’m about to have a stroke. “You’re doing so good, sweetheart, taking my cock so easily. Just a little more patience.”

“I’m fresh out,” she wails, her pussy clenching around the tip of my cock.

Thank God, because if she does that again, I’m going to come before I get started.

I try to control my breathing, easing in another inch. “Good girl,” I murmur, noting the pretty pink flush on her chest that matches the dark pink of those succulent

nipples. “Because I don’t think I can wait anymore either.”

I shift again, reaching down between us, gently sliding my fingers through her wetness. I stroke her clit, feeling the rush of wetness that lets me slide in all the way and my head falls back at the heavenly way her pussy tightness around my cock, like hot, wet silk.

“Fuck, Anna, you feel so goddamn perfect.”

My fingers feel how stretched she is around me and I work her flesh until she’s shivering and arching beneath me. Right now, her pleasure is the only thing that matters to me. Every time she lies in bed, every time she touches herself, I want her to remember how I make her feel.

She claimed me two years ago, and now I’m claiming her.

“Are you okay?” I ask, even though just breathing is killing me.

Her breathing stutters and she wraps those long legs around me, pulling me closer. “More than okay. Let go, Max.”

Something breaks loose in my chest as she parrots my words back to me, and I thrust hard, feeling those ripples starting in her core. It’s all the encouragement I need. I try to move slowly at first, rolling my hips just to see the way her eyes flutter with the movement, but soon she’s clutching at me, desperate for more and I can’t hold back.

I piston in and out of her, pounding her into the mattress, but she meets me every single time with a flex of her hips. I pick up the pace, feeling the tightness build at the base of my spine. Anna matches the rhythm I’ve set like we’ve done this a thousand times before.

If I have my way, we'll be doing this for thousands of nights to come.

"Max," she breathes, her eyes wild, her blonde hair spread out over the pillow like starlight. "It's so good."

Her words wash over me, filling every little crevice in my heart with what she didn't say. We're so good. Something shifts inside me. Something terrifying and wonderful all at once.

"Say my name again," I murmurs, and I don't care that she can hear the need thick in my voice.

"Max."

"You're so good, baby." Her thighs tighten and I can feel the tension coiling in her body, the ripples in her pussy pulsing around my cock. I need her to come first. I slide a hand back between us, spreading her open, and angle my hips so every single thrust hits that sensitive bud. Deliberately, I focus on deep, direct thrusts until she's mindless, my name dropping from her lips in a litany that makes me feel like a god.

"Come for me," I growl, driving her up the bed as I pound into her softness.

Her scream echoes in my ear as her orgasm crashes through her, triggering mine, my strokes erratic now as she clenches around me, milking me until I'm gasping for breath, burying myself inside her as white-hot pleasure envelopes us both.

I catch myself before I crush her, lowering myself to my elbows and dropping a kiss on her nose. Her eyes are closed, and her shallow breaths match mine. "You okay?" I ask when she doesn't move for long seconds. I brush the long strands of her hair away from her face.

Her eyes drift open and she smiles softly, nodding. “Mmm-hmm. You?”

“More than okay.”

She laughs as I give her back her words from earlier and the sound is like bells. God, I have it bad.

But I wouldn't change a thing.

8

ANNA

I wake to the soft buzz of my phone on the nightstand. For a blissful second, I'm warm and cozy, wrapped in the perfect cocoon of blankets, my head resting against a firm, steady shoulder. Then I remember exactly where I am—and who I'm with.

My eyes snap open, and the sight of Max sprawled beside me steals what little air is left in the room. His arm is draped over me, heavy and protective, his face relaxed and utterly unguarded in sleep. His dark lashes fan against his cheekbones, his stubble catching the soft morning light. How is it possible for someone to look this good first thing in the morning? It's almost unfair.

The buzz comes again, and I jolt, fumbling for my phone.

Felix.

Panic grips me so hard I lose my breath.

I carefully slide out from under Max's arm, the sudden loss of his warmth making me shiver. My mind is racing, regret pounding through me—but not for the reasons I thought it would. Last night wasn't a mistake. Max was... amazing.

Sweet. Caring. Nothing like I imagined.

The guy I met two years ago was charming and wonderful, but that's before I knew

he was Max Walker. Max Walker, the guy people fell over. I figured when he got a woman – or let's face it, women given his reputation – alone he'd expect her to drop to her knees and worship him. I expected him to be selfish; the kind of guy to not concern himself with whether his partner had a good time.

But my expectations were dead wrong. All the way around.

Max was the kind of guy who took the time to lace up my skates, hold my hand and catch me when I fall.

And I'm afraid I could fall.

Being with Max felt good. Too good. Like my heart grew three sizes in the space of one night, and now I don't know what to do with it.

My phone buzzes again, pulling me back. I grab it and rush to the bathroom, closing the door softly behind me before answering. "Hey, Felix."

"Anna? Why do you sound so weird?" His voice is sharp, suspicious. I glance at myself in the mirror—my hair is a mess, my face flushed—and cringe.

"I'm fine, you just woke me up," I say quickly, faking a yawn.

"Are you okay? You're always up early."

Not when I've been up all night. "I'm fine, just busy on that work thing."

Felix snorts. "Right, the Max Carter show. Is Luxx treating him like a king?"

"Something like that," I say carefully, trying to keep my voice down.

“He’s not bothering you, is he? That guy will do anything to get under my skin. And he’ll fuck anything that smiles in his direction, so warn your friends. I don’t see the appeal, but women line up for that guy, just so he can take them down.”

Nausea rolls in my belly, and I lean a hip against the bathroom counter. “You’re not exactly celibate, Felix.” My voice is sharper than I intended, and I bite my lip.

“Anya? Why would you defend him?”

“I’m not... just, you’re all hockey players, right? It comes with the territory I guess.” I exhale, trying to shake off my discomfort. “Anyway, what’s up?”

“You tell me,” Felix says. “You haven’t answered my texts. I’ve been trying to figure out Christmas plans, but you’re impossible to pin down. Should I fly to Vienna, or are you coming here? You know we always do this together.”

Guilt twists in my chest. Since our parents died, Christmas has always been our thing—just the two of us, figuring it out together. And here I am, hiding in a hotel bathroom after spending the night with his worst enemy.

“I don’t know yet,” I say, trying to sound casual. “Work’s been crazy.”

“I imagine, but you only have to put up with that asshole for another couple of days. You’re so good at what you do—you’ll get the promotion. Just... breathe. And stay as far away from Max Walker as you can.”

I don’t know how I feel about the reminder that Max will be leaving in a couple of days. I definitely can’t say anything though – Felix lost his mind when he heard my company would be working with Max on this campaign. I deliberately steer the conversation back to him. “How are things with you?”

“Changing the subject, I see,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. “Look, you’re planning on moving back to the States when your promotion comes through, right?”

I tap my fingers on the counter. “Yeah, it’s with the North American branch of the company. So, I can base myself there.” I love Vienna, and I’ll miss Austria, but with our parents gone and Felix playing in the NHL, I’d prefer to be near him, even with his busy schedule.

“So why don’t you come here for Christmas? You get more time off than I do, and I’ll have a home game pretty close to Christmas Eve. Travel then is terrible, so if it’s not a big deal...”

“I don’t mind.” I make a mental note to book my flight. “I guess I can even look for an apartment while I’m there.”

“See, that’s the mindset you need to be in – pretend you’ve already got the job.” We chat for a few more minutes and he gives me a list of his favorite chocolate and biscuits to bring from Vienna for the kids’ hockey team he coaches.

“Alright, I’ve got to get to practice. Stay away from Max Walker.”

“I’ve barely seen him.” I force a laugh, the guilt in my chest threatening to crush me. “I’ll let you know as soon as I book my ticket.”

We say our goodbyes, and I hang up, staring at my reflection. My cheeks are flushed, my hair’s a mess, and my heart... my heart feels like it’s being pulled in two directions.

When I step back into the room, the sight of Max stops me cold. He’s sitting up against the headboard, the blankets pooled around his waist, his bare chest on full

display. He looks like he belongs in a magazine—broad shoulders, defined muscles, a few faint scars that only make him more ruggedly perfect. His hair is tousled, and his lips curve into a slow, lazy smile when he sees me.

“Morning,” he says, his voice rough with sleep.

My stomach does a flip, and I immediately hate myself for it. I hate how good he looks and how I want to crawl into those strong arms, despite the call I just had with my brother.

“Morning,” I mumble, avoiding his eyes.

He waves a hand at my wrinkled clothes from the night before and smirks. “You going to rock the runway look again today, or do you want something a little more comfortable?”

“I don’t have anything else,” I say, realizing that I’m going to be doing the walk of shame out of this room. Guilt and regret dig their claws a little deeper into my chest.

Max throws off the covers and swings his legs out of bed, crossing to his suitcase. My mouth goes dry at the sight of his naked body. The man honestly shouldn’t be real.

“Here,” he says, tossing me a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. “Try these. The pants have a drawstring inside.”

I catch them, the fabric soft and worn, and for some reason, the fact that he’s lending me his clothes makes my chest ache. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” he says, leaning against the dresser with an easy smile. “What’s the plan for today?”

“I don’t know,” I say quickly, pulling the t-shirt over my head. It smells like him, warm and clean, and I push that thought away. I’m getting far too comfortable with the way Max Walker looks, smells, and feels. “Depends on the weather.”

“Well, I’m up for some more ice skating,” he says, and his puppy dog grin triggers a smile of my own.

“I bet you are. And we will be at the market today, so maybe after you get in that part of the campaign, you can hit the ice.”

“You’ll be skating with me, right?” He folds his arms over his chest. “You promised to show me a good time.”

I glance at the bed as heat crawls up my face. He catches my look. “I’m happy to spend the rest of my time here in bed. The view is pretty incredible.” He wiggles his eyebrows, and I can’t help but giggle. “But if you’re forcing me outside, at least let me skate.”

My heart shouldn’t lift at the thought of spending more time with Max, especially after the call with my brother, but I feel like I’m floating as I take in his easy grin.

“My boss does want you to be happy,” I say.

His expression turns serious. “And what about you? Are you happy?”

I ignore the question and slide into his clothes. It feels normal and comfortable and so intimate to be wearing stuff that smells like him and I yank the drawstring tight, hearing Felix’s words in my head about Max’s reputation with women. Maybe he has so many one-night stands that he travels prepared, with extra clothes to hand out to all the women slinking out of his room the next morning. I swallow the sour taste in my mouth and turn to open the curtains.

“I have to head home to get fresh clothes for today,” I say, looking down at the trucks slowly spreading salt in the area.

He frowns, coming up behind me and placing his hands on my arms. “It’s still a sheet of ice out there.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say, resisting the urge to lean back into his warmth.

“Not happening,” he says, lightly squeezing me. “I’m coming with you.”

“You don’t have to?—”

He drops a kiss to my forehead. “I want to,” he cuts in, his voice gentle but unyielding. “Otherwise, I’ll be worried until you get back.”

His words hang in the air, and for a moment, I don’t know what to say. He’s infuriating, sweet, impossible, and the worst person in the world to let my guard down around.

“Max, this ...” I gesture between us, “thing that happened, it’s just a fling, right?”

I hold my breath, not entirely certain about the answer I want to hear.

Max stares at me for a minute. “Is that what you think?” he asks.

I nod, firmly. “Absolutely. It was fun, don’t get me wrong, but you leave tomorrow and it’s better if forget it ever happened.” The words taste bitter in my mouth as I watch the lines around his mouth deepen.

“Forget it happened.” His voice is flat

But part of me wonders if maybe, just maybe, letting him in wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

Still, I remind myself, he's Max Walker. And I can't afford to forget that.

ANNA

The ice is smooth under my skates, and I'm finally starting shake off the guilt that's consumed me since my call with Felix, to lose myself in the glide as Max spins around and fixes me with his easy grin, waving his hand in a 'come here' motion. There's a twinge between my legs and I can't help my body's response to him.

Once we arrived at my place, I felt kind of awkward about inviting him in. He had been quiet since we left the hotel, and I can't help but wonder if it had anything to do with me saying this was just a one-night stand.

Although I can't imagine that could be it. He's Max Walker. He's had to have lots of one-night stands. He should be happy I'm not chasing him.

Even though I said it was just a fling, I don't know that it'll ever feel like one in my heart. How can I possibly forget someone like Max? He's so big and his presence is so commanding, I know I'll never look around my cozy apartment without seeing him in it. After he marveled at my pink gingerbread décor scheme and smirked over the childhood photos of myself and Felix, he pulled my favorite cozy blanket off the couch and made my body his again underneath the glow of my Christmas tree.

While I supervised the afternoon shoot, Ernst complained that Max and the model didn't translate together as well as apparently Max and I had last night, and I couldn't stop the little twinge of satisfaction that spread through my chest.

To be honest, I could see what Ernst was saying – while they were polite to each other, they were like perfectly gorgeous cardboard cutouts. I can't say I was unhappy about it. Felix's words have been interrupting my thoughts all day and it felt like an ugly green monster was sitting on my shoulder when Camila showed up for the campaign. I expect Max to be his usual flirty self, but he was all business, announcing that Ernst better get the perfect shots quickly, so he could get in some ice time.

With me.

When Max sets his mind to something, he gets it done. Ernst declared him the perfect subject and asked if he'd ever consider shooting a calendar. I'm not even surprised at this point that Max managed to charm one of the grumpiest, egotistical photographers in the business.

I push off a little faster, brushing past his outstretched arm as I take the lead. I can't help smiling as Max's laugh sounds behind me while he catches up. He snags the back of my jacket, pulling me back gently so that we're hand-in-hand, when I hear an eager voice cut through the Christmas music. "Oh my gosh—are you... Max Carter from the Vegas Titanium?"

Surprised at the American accent, I glance over, spotting a man in his forties with a look of disbelief standing at the rink's edge, a young boy by his side, wide-eyed and clutching a hockey puck like it's gold. Max's name might as well have been shouted from a loudspeaker; heads are already turning, and some of the crowd has started murmuring. Just great.

Max pulls me over, flashing an effortless smile. He doesn't even blink in the direction of people lifting their phones. It's obvious he's done this a hundred times. The little boy's eyes light up like he's just seen Santa Claus.

"You're Max Carter?" he asks, his voice hopeful. "Like the hockey player?"

Max crouches down to the kid's level, grinning. "That's me. And what's your name?"

"Danny," the boy says, holding out his hand shyly when his father prompts him. Max takes it, giving it a gentle shake, then notices the puck in Danny's other hand.

"Are you a hockey player too?" Max asks, nodding at the puck.

Danny nods, his eyes bright. "Yeah, my dad and I are here to watch the world junior game and I brought it just in case I ever got to meet a real hockey player."

Max laughs, taking the puck and turning it over in his hand like it's a priceless artifact. "Danny, I'm going to let you in on a little secret." He leans forward, and the little boy's eyes go wide. "If you have a stick and would rather wear skates than a pair of boots, you're a real hockey player."

Danny grins. "I have a bunch of sticks. And I have a Titanium t-shirt!"

"Would you like me to sign your puck?"

The dad, starstruck himself, digs out a marker, and as Max chats with them, signing the puck and tossing in a few hockey tips, I watch him thinking how cynical I would have been, even just yesterday assuming Max is just an attention whore, needing to charm an audience.

He's definitely in his element, but there's a sincerity to him that I chose not to notice before. Danny is chatting away to Max like they're best friends, and Max is nodding sagely as Danny tells him about how he wanted a kitten, but he's allergic so he ended up getting a fish, which is cool, but not as cool as a kitten.

I shift on my skates, and then I notice Danny is wobbling on his skates, trying to glide with crossovers. Max spots it, too. Without a second's hesitation, he reaches out,

steadying Danny with a firm grip and a few quiet words of encouragement. Something in his expression softens as he looks at the kid, like he actually cares, and I realize that maybe this is why his fans love him. He treats them like he's just as excited about meeting them as they are to meet him.

Admiration, and something too delicate, too new to put a name to swell in my chest.

Max smiles over at me and offers his hand to Danny. "Tell you what—let's try skating over there together. You can show me what you got, yeah?"

Danny is practically jumping with excitement, and Max skates slowly, patiently, helping him balance with every careful step, showing him the proper technique so his feet don't trip over each other. I find myself watching, drawn to the way Max's easygoing charm melts into something genuine, something real. He's attentive, guiding Danny along the ice and keeping pace, his smile relaxed, his laughter unguarded.

I'm in big trouble.

The dad skates over to me. "Sorry to hijack your boyfriend," he says with an apologetic smile. "He's obviously really good with kids."

My heart thuds. "Oh, he's not—" I start, but before I can finish, Max skates back over with Danny still holding his hand.

"He's not what?" Max interrupts smoothly, his eyes twinkling. He obviously heard what the guy said. "Desperate to finish skating with the most beautiful woman here?" He winks at me, looking like he's enjoying every second of my discomfort. "I am, just so you know." He smiles down at Danny. "This lady here can outskate me, you know."

Danny turns to look me up and down, doubtfully. “Are you a hockey player?” he asks.

“No, I’m not, but I grew up skating.”

Danny looks disappointed for a second then tilts his head at me. “Are you guys married?”

“Not yet,” Max says, shooting me a grin.

I inhale a sharp breath and choke. When tears fill my eyes and I can’t catch my breath, Max looks alarmed and skates to my side. I hold up a hand while my coughing fit subsides. “I’m okay,” I wheeze.

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“He’s totally kidding,” I say to Danny.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Max says, putting an arm around me and it sets off a fresh coughing fit.

“I don’t think you should talk about it later,” Danny says seriously. “She’s obviously allergic to you.”

Max and Danny’s dad erupt into laughter and even I smile at that. But my mind keeps going back to Max saying, “not yet”, like what is that even supposed to mean?

“She’s not allergic to me, in fact, I think I’m growing on her,” he teases, throwing an arm around my shoulders, pulling me in close like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

I roll my eyes, trying to ignore the heat from where his arm rests around me. But his grin softens, and the moment lingers just long enough to remind me of how easily I fell under his spell the first night we met—before I knew who he was, before I learned what he'd done to my brother.

And then again last night, I went all in, knowing full well he's leaving in a day and my brother would absolutely kill him if he knew what happened.

Danny's dad beams. "Well, we'll let you get back to winning her over. I'm certain you're halfway there. Thanks for being so cool with Danny."

Max nods. "Anytime." He bends, giving Danny a fist pump before letting him skate off with his dad.

We watch them for a moment, standing in silence under the Christmas lights, and I can't help but think that arm around my shoulders felt more real than it should.

As we turn to skate away, Max leans down, his voice low. "Admit it, J?ger. I'm growing on you."

My whole body wants to nod enthusiastically but my brain is cautioning my heart big-time. But there's something magical here and I can't help but want to lean into it. "Maybe. But don't let it go to your head."

He pumps his fist skyward, in victory. "Too late." He leans in close to me, his lips brushing my ear and I shiver. "I'll win you over eventually."

I'm afraid he already has.

10

MAX

The market is like a living, breathing thing, full of traditional holiday cheer I expect is unique to Europe. Although we were here last night, I'm still struck by the magical atmosphere. Strings of golden lights twinkle overhead, their reflections glinting off the frosted stalls that line the wide stone paths. The scent of roasted chestnuts, spiced cider, and pine hangs heavy in the air, wrapping around us like a warm, invisible blanket. I should be soaking it all in, enjoying every last second of my time in Vienna.

Instead, I can't stop stealing glances at Anna. I realize it feels magical to me, not just because I'm here, but because of the woman I'm with.

She's walking beside me, close but not close enough. I want to hold her hand, but hers are tucked into the pockets of her coat, and her cheeks and the tip of her nose are tinged pink from the cold. I really want to kiss her, but I hold back. Something has shifted since we woke up this morning, and I can feel her pulling away.

She was so flustered when Danny and his dad assumed we were dating whereas I wanted to shout it from the rooftops that she was all mine.

Ever since we took off our skates, she's been quiet, distracted, like she's trying to shove the memory of last night into some box she can tuck away and pretend it never happened. It's killing me.

One night. That's all it took to wreck me for anyone else. I thought I knew what I wanted out of life – play hockey, win the Cup, enjoy everything my amazing career has to offer – but now?

Everything's different. She's different. And she's slipping through my fingers.

We pass a wooden stall displaying delicate glass ornaments, each one sparkling under the glitter of fairy lights. Anna slows, her gaze catching on a deep emerald bauble painted with a Christmas woodland scene. It's quite intricate, the tiny white snowflakes looking almost real. She doesn't touch it, just stares like it holds some secret she's not ready to share.

“See something you like?” I ask, keeping my tone light.

She startles slightly, as if she'd forgotten I was standing here. “They're beautiful,” she says softly, smiling at the artist who stands to assist her.

“Then you should get one.” I step closer. “A souvenir. Something to remember this weekend by.” Something to remember me by. I shake off the thought. I don't just want to be memory for her.

Her lips curve, but it's not a real smile. “I don't need a souvenir, Max.” She hesitates, her eyes flitting back to the ornament. “I love these, though. They remind me of the ones we had growing up. My parents used to bring back an ornament from every trip, even if it was just a weekend away.”

Her voice trails off, and there's a shadow in her eyes now, one I don't think she even realizes is there. “They don't collect them anymore?”

She glances at me her expression conflicted and clears her throat. “They died,” she says quietly. “Boating accident. I was fifteen.” She shrugs. “Felix was in his first year

with a junior team and training for the Olympics. My grandfather took care of me until Felix was drafted and was able to get a place for us.

Shit. My chest tightens, and the instinct to pull her into my arms is so strong it's like a physical ache. No wonder Felix is so overprotective. Of course he is, Anna is precious in a way I don't think even she realizes. To have to deal with taking care of a younger sibling on top of being in a farm team and he lost his parents too. I do a quick calculation. He must have only been seventeen when the accident happened.

"Anna..." I start, but I don't know what else to say. "I'm so very sorry."

She blinks, her eyes falling back to the ornament. "It was a long time ago, and in many ways, we were lucky, we at least had each other."

But the pain is still there, and I'd do anything to erase it. I can't obviously, and nothing can ever replace what she lost, but I can do this. "Wait here," I tell her, ducking into the stall before she can argue.

I point out the beautiful ornament and wait while the artist wraps the ornament carefully, placing it in a bag adorned with a little sprig of holly. When I hand it to Anna, she frowns, but I see the way her fingers stroke the velvet ribbon securing the holly. "You didn't have to do that." She holds the bag out to me. "This should be for you."

"It is for me," I say, my voice low. "I'll be happy knowing it's hanging on your tree. A little piece of Vienna... and of us."

Her breath catches, and for a moment, I think I've gotten through to her. But then she presses her lips together and looks away, slipping the bag into her tote.

"Thank you," she says, her voice polite but distant.

Damn it.

We continue walking, the hum of holiday music and the buzz of laughter and conversation all around us. The café comes into view, its glowing windows and rustic wooden sign promising warmth. I hold the door for her, and the smell of chocolate and cinnamon hits us like a hug.

We settle at the counter, and I lean over, scanning the glass display case. “What is that famous Viennese dessert?” I ask Anna. “You had something about it in the file.”

“Sachertorte?” At my nod, she shakes her head. “Sorry, you won’t find that in the market here. Back at the hotel, for sure, though if you want some.”

I don’t want to leave here just yet. There’s something special about this little wooden café and being here with Anna makes it even more special. If she’s determined to make me a memory, I’m going to ensure that every single time she sees twinkling lights, or smells the intoxicating scent of pine, ice and sugary treats, it’s me that comes to her mind.

I take another look at the display case. A server stands waiting, his eyes cheerful behind his small round glasses. “Guten abend ,” I try, noting Anna’s look of surprise. The server grins and responds in kind. The pastries look amazing, but there’s a slice of something, almost golden and homemade looking the pastry case. I’m hungry because my mouth waters just looking at it. I point it out to the server.

“Ah, Apfelstrudelkuchen ,” the man says enthusiastically, waving his hands. “Best in Vienna!”

“Then I’ll take it,” I say, “after all, I’m known for wanting the best.” Next to me, Anna gives a little snort.

“Gut, gut! Glühwein and Apfelstrudelkuchen. ”

“What was that?”

“ Glühwein is a traditional mulled wine served at the Christmas markets. It’s delicious and you should try it before you leave.”

Is it just me, or did Anna emphasize the words ‘before you leave’? I wish I could get a read on what she’s thinking. If I had a choice, I’d stay longer, make her realize that this thing between us is special.

“What do you want?” I ask.

She steps up to the counter and orders the same cake. The server’s face falls as he explains I’ve ordered the last piece. She bites her lip and there’s more than just disappointment in her expression.

“She can have mine,” I say, leaning in to point out something else. The server nods and rings up our order, waving us over to a small table.

“Max, it’s fine, you should have the cake,” Anna says as I pull out her chair.

“What and deny you the best cake in Vienna?”

“I can have some anytime – I live here, remember? At least for now.”

The server approaches with two ceramic mugs and our desserts. “What is this again?” I ask, sniffing the warm, red-colored drink. It smells like oranges, wine and spice.

“It’s mulled wine, but every recipe is a little different because the flavor depends on the wine and spices used. Try it.” She holds her mug up to mine and we clink.

I take a sip, the spicy sweetness a delicious surprise. “This is fantastic.”

Anna tilts her head in acknowledgement. “I told you. It’s a real treat.” Her eyes fall to my slice of cake.

“Hey,” I say, sliding the plate toward her. “We’ll share.”

“You don’t?—”

“No arguments,” I interrupt, cutting off a small piece and holding it out to her on a fork. “Come on. I’m told it’s the best in Vienna. You’re the expert.”

Her eyes narrow, but then she sighs and leans forward, her lips closing around the fork. For a moment, I forget how to breathe.

I take a bite of cake to stop myself from blurting out something that will make her run away. The flavor explodes on my tongue and my eyes roll back in my head.

Anna laughs. “It’s really good,” she says, waving for me to hand over the fork.

“Good?” I scoff, taking another bite for myself before I pass her the fork. “This is a religious experience.”

She smiles, a real smile and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve seen all afternoon. I hand her the fork and take the other plate, the one with something called a Kaiserschmarrn, which looks a shredded pancake with apricot jam, raisins and generous helping of powdered sugar.

“So,” I say, after a moment. “What did you mean earlier when you said you live in Vienna, for now?”

She hesitates, swirling her cup as if there were tea leaves in the bottom. “I’m up for a promotion with Luxx. If it goes through, I’ll be moving to the States.”

My chest tightens, hope flaring to life. “The States?” I echo. “Where?”

“New York, probably,” she says, her tone cautious. “It’s closest to Felix.”

“New York is nice,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “Luxx has offices in Vegas, you know.”

Her gaze snaps to mine, and I hold it, my heart hammering in my chest. “I know you said this is just a weekend thing,” I continue, keeping my tone light. “But I don’t think that’s true.”

She frowns, her defenses rising. “Max...”

“It’s not true for me, Anna. I don’t want a just a fling with you.” I lean closer. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since that first night, two years ago. And after last night...and then this morning.” I shake my head. “I don’t want to scare you off, but I need you to know that.”

Her lips part, and I see the conflict in her eyes. She doesn’t trust this, doesn’t trust me, but I can feel the thread of hope there too.

“I don’t know how it would work,” she says finally, her voice barely above a whisper. “You live in Vegas, and you got in a bar fight with my brother the last time you were in the same city.”

“I can’t promise that your brother will ever like me,” I say, reaching across the table to take her hand. “But you’re the one I want.”

She looks down at our joined hands, her fingers tightening around mine. “You make me feel...” She trails off, shaking her head. “I don’t know, Max.” She sighs, but she doesn’t let go and relief floods through me at that smallest of sign.

“Vegas isn’t that far from New York,” I say. “And I’d love to see you wearing my jersey.” God, it hits me hard, the thought of looking up and seeing Anna at a game, wearing my name on her back. I want it so bad, it steals my breath away.

Anna gives a short bark of laughter. “Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves, here. I tell you what, I’ll wear your jersey, when you wear a J?ger jersey.” Her phone buzzes and she releases my hand to pull out her phone, her face going pale.

“Anna? What’s wrong?”

Her phone jangles, the sound of a video call coming through, and she pushes her chair back. “I have to take this,” she says rushing out of the café.

11

MAX

I know I shouldn't, but I'm worried. Whatever it is, Anna's upset and that sits like a stone in my stomach. My fists clench as I look out the window, hoping to see her walk back with a smile on her face. When I count to sixty and there's still no sign of her, I push away from the table and head outside.

She's not in front, but there's a little path down the side of the café and I make my way, keeping my ears and eyes open for any sign of Anna.

The conversation drifts around the corner before I even realize I'm eavesdropping. Anna is huddled in a small gazebo, her back to me, the glow of her phone visible in the growing twilight. The music is muted back here, and her words drift in the icy air.

"Felix, you're overreacting," she says.

"Tell me you're joking," Felix's voice snaps, low but sharp enough to cut. I freeze mid-step, leaning against the café wall. My stomach tightens. Felix is pissed, and I have a feeling it's about me.

"I'm not joking," Anna says, and I can hear the frustration in her voice. "He's not a bad person. He's pretty amazing actually."

My shoulders ease. I knew we could make things work.

“Amazing?” he growls. “Did you hit your head out there while you were skating?”

I almost growl back. How dare he speak to Anna that way. I push off the wall, but Anna’s voice cuts in as I start towards her, and I slow my step. “Look, I’m sorry you had to see those photos but what’s the big deal, we were skating that’s all.”

What photos?

“You weren’t just skating. He was hugging you and you were smiling at him. Hockey News says it looks like Max ditched practice to spend the weekend with his girlfriend.”

I dig out my phone and head to the social site. Sure enough, someone took photos today and sent them in. There are photos of me and Anna definitely looking like a couple. There’s speculation about how long we’ve been together and why I’m in Vienna instead of at practice with the team leading up to next week’s game against the Stars.

My head snaps up at Anna’s next sentence. “I’m not his girlfriend.”

“Oh, I know that. Everybody should know that because Max Walker doesn’t do girlfriends. Having a girlfriend would mean caring about someone other than himself.”

Jesus, Felix. Harsh. I copy one of the photos, saving it as my new home photo while Felix continues. “Do I need to remind you who Max actually is? What he’s done?”

My chest tightens. I want to walk away—this isn’t a conversation I’m supposed to hear—but my feet don’t move. What is it that Felix thinks I’ve done?”

“People change,” Anna replies, her voice softer now, defensive.

Felix's laugh is sharp and bitter. "Not Max. He doesn't change, Anna. He's selfish, and he doesn't care who gets hurt as long as he's happy."

"Felix—"

"No, let me finish," he snaps. "Do you know what it felt like, Anya? To have my shot—my career-defining shot—ripped out from under me because of him? That trade would've changed everything for me. I would've had a real chance to show what I could do. But no, the team wanted to keep their golden boy happy, and suddenly, I'm the odd man out."

My stomach sinks, cold dread settling over me. What the hell is he talking about?

Anna's voice cuts through the silence. "The manager made that decision, Felix, not Max."

"Now you're defending him?" Felix spits. "He knew exactly what he was doing when he made it clear he wanted to go to that team. They fell over themselves to get him, and I got tossed aside."

I press a hand to the wall, steadying myself as the weight of his words hits me. I know exactly what he's talking about. My first draft, as an elite prospect. I had my pick of teams and I wanted one I know I could build, with a foundation that would create a Cup legacy.

But I didn't know Felix was even on the radar when that trade went through. Sure, I'd made it clear to my agent that I was interested in the deal—it was a good move for my career at the time—but that's as far as it went. I didn't sabotage anyone. At least, I didn't think I had.

But Felix clearly thinks otherwise.

“I can’t believe you’re even entertaining the idea of being with him knowing that he’ll step on anyone to get what he wants,” Felix says, his voice quieter now but no less angry.

Anna sighs, and there’s a long pause before she speaks again. “It’s complicated, Felix. He’s... different than I thought he’d be.”

“Different?” Felix scoffs. “Please. He’s the same guy who broke Kate’s heart without a second thought. Or have you conveniently forgotten about her because Max turned his charm on you this time?”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Anna says sharply, her voice rising. “And it’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like? Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’re about to make the same mistake every other woman in his life has made—thinking you’ll be the exception when you’re just another number.”

“It’s nothing, Felix, okay. He’s leaving tomorrow, and it’s nothing, so just drop it.”

The words hit like a punch to the gut, and I stagger back, stepping onto a patch of ice that cracks loudly under my weight. Anna hears it and spins around, spotting me.

“Felix, I have to go,” she says quickly, her eyes wide.

“Anna—”

“I’ll call you later,” she says firmly, and then jabs her finger to the screen, her eyes never leaving mine. “How much of that did you hear?” she asks, walking towards me.

“Enough,” I say, crossing my arms. “Care to explain?”

Her cheeks flush, and she presses her lips together before sighing. “It’s not what you think.”

“Really?” I raise an eyebrow. “Because it sounds like Felix thinks I ruined his career, and you guys have hated me for something I didn’t do for years. That I’m a total asshole.” I cock an eyebrow. “It sounds like you might agree with him.”

“I didn’t say that,” she snaps, but there’s hesitation in her eyes.

“Then tell me what the hell he was talking about,” I say, my voice harsher than I intend.

She crosses her arms, her fingers gripping her elbows like she’s trying to hold herself together. “It was a long time ago. Felix was set up for a trade that would’ve been huge for his career. It wasn’t really a secret that the team wanted him, but then you—” She stops, biting her lip.

“Then I what?” I press, stepping closer.

“You said you wanted to go there,” she says, her voice quiet now. “And suddenly, everything shifted. They focused on doing everything to get you, building you a team and Felix didn’t fit into that vision. He ended up going to Sweden for two years because of it, and it set him back.”

“But he has an amazing career,” I say. “They paid him a shit-ton of money to leave Sweden and come back to the NHL.”

Anna shrugs. “Yeah, I know, but it might not have worked out that way. He’s still bitter about it.”

I stare at her, the pieces clicking into place. “I didn’t know,” I say, the words

tumbling out before I can stop them. “Anna, I had no idea that happened. I just... I told my agent I was interested. That’s it.”

“Maybe,” she says, her eyes searching mine. “But Felix doesn’t see it that way.” She looks away, biting her lip. “But you’re the great Max Walker. You always get what you want. You always win.”

I run a hand through my hair, frustration boiling under my skin. “Is that what you think? That everything is just some sort of game where I keep score?”

“I did.” The silence stretches between us like a chasm. Then she flashes her whiskey eyes at me. “Until this weekend.”

“What about the other thing?” I ask, my voice tight. “What was Felix talking about with this Kate person?”

Her head snaps back toward me, her expression unreadable. “She’s your ex-girlfriend.”

“I’ve never had a girlfriend, Anna. Max was right about that at least.” Anna flinches and I step closer. “I went out on a few dates with a girl named Kate. I actually thought she was dating your brother first, but she said they were just friends. It wasn’t anything serious.”

“She seemed to think it was. She cried for days when you broke up,” she says, her voice rising. “She was staying with Felix and I at the time, and she was a mess.”

“I believe she was a mess,” I say, the words coming out sharper than I intended. “We never broke up because we weren’t actually dating. She freaked out on me one night when I didn’t call her after a game and threw a huge scene after crashing a team dinner. I never led her on, Anna. If she got the wrong idea, that’s on her, not me. I

don't go around deliberately hurting people."

Her eyes narrow. "No? What about all the other women? The ones you've left in your wake because you couldn't be bothered to stick around for more than a night?"

"That's not fair," I say, anger bubbling in my chest. "I've never pretended to be someone I'm not. I've always been honest about what I wanted and didn't want."

"And what is it you want now?" she asks, her voice low, challenging.

"You," I say without hesitation. The word feels heavier than I expect, but I don't back down. "I want you, Anna. And not just for one weekend."

She blinks, clearly not expecting that.

I blow out a frustrated stream of air, watching it curl into a cloud. "This isn't nothing to me. Yeah, I've been lucky, in life, in my career, but I work for it, too. I've worked for everything I have and I'm not afraid to put in that work. I'm not afraid to take a chance and I'm not going to pretend that this weekend was just a fling." I shake my head. "And don't make assumptions about me," I add, my voice softer now. "I've never felt this way before. Never wanted more than one night, with anyone. Until you."

Her breath catches, and I see her defences start to crumble.

"Anna," I say, taking her hands in mine. "I'm not perfect. Not even close. But I think we could have something pretty close to perfect, if we try it together."

She stares at me, her eyes glassy with unshed tears. "I'm scared, Max," she whispers.

"I know, sweetheart, me too. Your brother is a big son of a bitch."

Anna gives a watery chuckle and I pull her in for a hug, kissing the top of her head. “I do like to win, you know.” I tighten my arms as she pushes against my chest in protest. “I’ll win him over too because I know how much you love him. And your happiness is important to me.”

She cuddles into me and my heart swells. “I do have to leave here tomorrow, but I’m begging you to try this with me. I’m willing to take the risk. Are you?”

She doesn’t answer right away, but then she tips her head back and rises up on the tips of her toes to press her lips to mine and I can taste the promise in her kiss.

12

ANNA

The hum of anticipation thrums through the arena like an electric current, rising to a crescendo as the clock ticks closer to game time. It's the kind of energy you feel in your chest, as the music pulses, a loud backdrop to the air of excitement and camaraderie.

Fans decked out in festive sweaters, blinking Christmas lights, and oversized Santa hats fill the stands, their laughter and chatter a cheerful backdrop to the ice's cool sheen under the arena lights. The scents of popcorn, beer and pizza drift around me, and I'm glad I ate before arriving at the arena.

I'm in the front row, right up against the glass, and the faint chill seeps through to my legs. I tug my coat tighter around me, watching as players skate sharply across the ice, stretching their muscles during the warm-up. The sound of blades carving into the surface and pucks clanging against the boards creates a rhythmic symphony of hockey chaos.

Felix is out there, focused as always, his movements sharp and precise. He passes a puck to a teammate, his stick slicing cleanly through the air, and then glances briefly in my direction. I wave, and he skates over the glass, checking out the row. People are still filing in and some of the seats around me are empty, but the arena is filling up fast. He gives me a short nod before skating back to his teammates. A couple more of the guys give me a wave as they skate past, and I smile.

The seat next to me remains conspicuously empty. It's strange since the game was sold out weeks ago, and I know Felix's team doesn't skimp on their ticket giveaways. He told me these tickets had been set aside for him and I thought one of our cousins would be joining me as we decided to try and get together for the holidays this year. I glance around, half-expecting someone to show up late, but the spot remains vacant through warm-ups and the national anthem. Maybe someone couldn't make it at the last minute.

The hockey horn sounds, signaling the start of the game, and the arena erupts into a frenzy. Fans leap to their feet as the puck drops, the noise a deafening roar that shakes the glass. Felix's team dominates early, their quick passes and aggressive forechecks putting pressure on the opposing defense. The energy is infectious, and I find myself screaming wildly along with the crowd as Felix drives a breakaway past three defensemen to score the first goal.

By the end of the first period, the score is tied, and I take a moment to soak in the atmosphere as the players exit to the dressing rooms. The festive outfits, the booming announcer's voice, the smell of popcorn wafting through the air—it's all so quintessentially hockey, and I definitely missed this. Watching the game online in Vienna, even wrapped in my cozy blanket, can't compete with this.

And then the commotion starts.

It ripples through the crowd like a wave—laughter, cheers, and a few gasps of recognition. People begin pointing toward my section, and I sit up straighter, craning my neck to see what's causing the fuss. The guy behind me moves and suddenly I can see Felix's team mascot—a strange mash-up between a polar bear and a moose, affectionately called Boosey, probably because a bunch of drunk guys named him—bounding down the steps. He's waving his oversized arms dramatically, his moose antlers shaking, playing up the crowd as he approaches. A shadow falls over me. Oh no. What in the world has Felix done now?

Boosey stops right in front of me and gestures with a paw, pointing back up the steps. I turn and blink in disbelief, just as the announcer shouts to the crowd that a special guest has arrived.

Boosey starts jumping up and down, holding out the hem of his jersey and flashing a giant thumbs up.

Max.

My stomach flips. He's sauntering down the steps with that infuriatingly confident grin, wearing—of all things—a Felix J?ger jersey. The team logo stretches across his broad chest, the fabric hugging his shoulders in a way that should be illegal. Fans are stopping him on the stairs, getting their photo taken with him, slapping him on the back and cheering. Max's feud with my brother is the stuff of hockey legend and a few people boo him, until he turns and points his thumbs over his shoulders to show off the number eighteen and 'J?ger' displayed on his back. Boosey runs back up the steps and raises his arm with Max's like he's just won a boxing match, before pulling him down to where I'm seated, my jaw on the floor.

"What are you doing here?" I blurt as he slides into the seat next to me, the empty space suddenly feeling a hundred times smaller with all eyes on us thanks to the jumbotron.

Max stretches out his legs, like he's settling in to watch the game. "Thought I'd take in the local hockey scene," he says.

My heads tilts in disbelief. "Really? I thought I wouldn't see you until after Christmas."

Max straightens and leans in, his voice low, "I couldn't wait that long."

I arch an eyebrow. “And what is this spectacle?” I gesture to his jersey.

His grin is teasing. “You said you wouldn’t wear my jersey until I wore the J?ger name on my back. I’m just making good on the deal.”

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can, Boosey shoves a bright red box into my hands. I look at it, then back at Max, who’s grinning like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Open it,” he says, nudging my arm.

Curiosity wins out, and I lift the lid. Inside, folded neatly, is a black and gold Titanium jersey with Max’s name and number emblazoned on the back. My heart stutters in my chest.

“For when you come to my games,” he says, his tone soft now, almost tentative.

Emotion tightens my throat, and for a moment, I can’t speak. I run my fingers over the fabric, feeling the weight of his gesture—not just the jersey, but everything it represents.

I start to pull it out, but Max stops me, his hand brushing against mine. “Save it for later,” he murmurs, his eyes locking with mine. “I don’t want Felix having a heart attack mid-game. And I’d rather enjoy seeing you in it for the first time... privately.” His eyes darken with his husky words.

Heat blooms in my cheeks, and I quickly shove the jersey back into the box, ignoring the wolf whistle that comes from a nearby fan. Max just smirks, clearly enjoying my flustered state.

“You’re impossible,” I mutter, shaking my head.

“True,” he says, leaning back in his seat like he belongs here, like he hasn’t just upended my entire evening. “But you like it.”

Before I can respond, the arena lights dim slightly, signaling the start of the second period. The players flood back onto the ice, and my focus shifts as Felix skates toward our section.

He stops in front of us, his skates kicking up a spray of ice, and lifts his visor, his gaze zeroing in on Max.

For a moment, the two of them just stare at each other, the tension palpable.

Then Felix nods, knocking his stick on the glass, “Looks good on you, Walker,” he shouts before skating off for the face-off.

I turn to Max, who looks ridiculously smug.

“You knew he’d be okay with this,” I say, realization dawning. “Didn’t you?”

“I might have gotten a heads-up,” he admits, his tone far too casual. “And an invitation to Christmas dinner.”

“Unbelievable,” I mutter, but I can’t hide my smile.

Max leans closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Just a reminder, Luxx has offices in Vegas. Once that promotion of yours comes through, you could transfer. Maybe wear that jersey while I’m on home ice, and around the house if you’re so inclined.”

My heart stutters, caught between the playfulness of his words and the weight of what he’s suggesting. “Your house?”

“If Santa gives me what I asked for, it could be our house.” He winks. “I’ve been a very good boy this year, you know.”

I blush again and he reaches out to take my hand.

“I don’t know, it seems wrong to cheer for another hockey team,” I say, trying to keep my tone light.

“You can root for whatever team you want,” he says, his eyes locking with mine. “As long as the only name you scream is mine.”

Suddenly, it’s too hot, even sitting right next to the ice.

“I love you, Anya. Every decision I’ve ever made in life, I’ve made it quickly, knowing it’s the right one. You’re the right one. Come home with me after Christmas, Anya.”

The chaos of the game fades into the background as his words settle over me, heavy and undeniable. For a moment, I forget the crowd, the noise, the glare of the arena lights. All I can see is him, the man who somehow managed to find his way into my heart despite every wall I’ve tried to build.

And, as we sit here my hand warm in his, I realize he belongs there.

MAX

The scent of pine fills the house, mingling with the sugary warmth of baked treats and the spicy-sweet glühwein Anna has simmering on the stove.

Anna insisted on a real tree this year, and she wasn't about to settle for anything less than the fullest, most majestic tree Las Vegas Valley had to offer. Now, it stands in the corner of the living room, its branches a riot of sparkling lights, delicate glass ornaments, and ribbons she painstakingly tied herself.

I lean against the doorframe, watching her fuss with the topmost strand of tinsel. She's on her tiptoes, brow furrowed in concentration, her sweater slipping off one shoulder, revealing the smooth curve of her skin. She doesn't notice me yet, too busy mumbling to herself about balance and symmetry.

Michael Bublé croons in the background, something about "baby, please come home," and the fire crackles softly in the hearth. The Christmas music has been on a continuous loop all day and Anna even convinced Brian, my chef, to throw the nutrition plan out the window for the holidays.

The kitchen smells like butter and sugar and the counter is piled high with shortbread, fudge, and even an incredible gingerbread house that my teammate Owen had shipped to everyone in the Titanium organization from his family's bakery in Canada.

The whole scene should be relaxing—perfect, even—but Anna's been acting weird all day. Nervous, jumpy, and it can't just be that her brother Felix is arriving to spend the holidays with us tonight. Things aren't perfect between us, but we've come a long

way, and no blood has been shed over the last year, even when our teams face off against each other, so I call that a win. Felix seems to realize I'd do anything to make Anna happy, and other than a warning to break my legs and beat me over the head with them if I ever break her heart, he's accepted that we're together.

She steps back to survey her creation and shakes her head, chewing on a nail.

Something is wrong and I have no idea what it is, but it's starting to get to me.

I slide my hands into my pockets, my thumb brushing the small box hidden there. My plan was to wait until tomorrow morning to give it to her, to make the moment as perfect as she deserves. But watching her now, twisting a piece of ribbon like it holds the answers to the universe, I'm starting to second-guess everything.

What if she's unhappy? What if moving in together was too much, too soon? I thought we were in sync, that this was it for both of us. But what if I'm wrong?

She adds the ribbon to a branch, tilting her head to assess her work. The lights reflect in her eyes, making them shine even brighter.

"I don't know," she mutters, half to herself, half to the room. "Something's missing."

I can't take it anymore. Pushing off the doorframe, I walk toward her, pulling the box from my pocket. "Maybe this will help."

She turns, startled, and I see her eyes flicker to the small package in my hand. Her nervousness deepens, and my heart does a funny twist in my chest.

"What's that?" she asks, her voice soft, reaching out to touch the sprig of holly.

"Just something I thought might finish the tree." I hand it to her, letting my fingers brush her fingers. Her touch steadies me, even as my pulse pounds like a drum.

She unwraps it carefully, her movements slow, deliberate. “It looks like it’s from Vienna.”

“It is,” I say. “Who knew Ernst made a great elf?”

She chuckles. “Only you could get that man to run errands.” Then the paper falls away and she gasps.

It’s a delicate music box ornament, hand-painted and gilded with tiny stars. Anna lifts it reverently, her fingers tracing the intricate details. Then, with a glance at me, she opens it.

The melody of *Silent Night* spills out, soft and sweet, and nestled inside is the ring I bought three months ago—a stunning solitaire set in a simple platinum band.

Her breath stutters out, and she lifts her eyes to mine, her lips parting in surprise.

“Anna,” I begin, my voice hoarse, “I love you. I can’t imagine a life without you. You’ve taken this house and turned it into a home. You’ve made Christmas—hell, every day—feel magical. I never thought I’d want gingerbread and carols and mulled wine, but with you, it’s all I want. Forever.” I swallow hard, this risk the biggest one I’ve ever taken in my life. “Will you marry me?”

Her golden eyes shimmer with tears, and she presses a hand to her mouth, shaking her head.

“Max...” she whispers, her voice breaking.

Then the tears spill over, and I panic.

“Did I—did I mess this up?” I stammer, my heart sinking. “If it’s too soon or?”

“No!” she exclaims, stepping closer and grabbing my face with both hands. “No, you didn’t mess it up. I just—God, Max, I love you so much.” Her voice wobbles, her lips trembling as she adds, “Yes. Of course, yes.”

Relief floods me, and I pull her into my arms, holding her tight as the world rights itself. She laughs against my chest, her tears dampening my shirt, and I don’t care.

“You’ve been acting so strange, and I was worried,” I say. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, it’s just...” She snuggles into me. “I have something for you, too,” she says, her voice muffled.

“Is that what you’re worried about?”

She leans back and bites her lip, looking uncertain. “I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about it.”

“Anna.” I tip her chin up so she’s looking at me. “Whatever it is, I’ll love it. I promise.”

She hesitates, then nods. “Okay. Wait here.”

She runs upstairs, and I use the moment to take a steadying breath. When she returns, she’s holding a neatly wrapped box.

“Here,” she says, handing it to me.

I tear into the paper, curious and a little nervous. When I pull the tissue paper away and the gift finally reveals itself, I freeze.

It’s a Titanium hockey jersey, my number emblazoned on the back. But instead of “Walker,” the name reads “Daddy.”

For a second, I can't breathe. The word blurs as I stare at it, my mind racing to catch up. Then it hits me, full force, and my knees buckle. I drop down, clutching the jersey, and look up at Anna, who's wringing her hands, her eyes wide with fear.

"Are you serious?" I manage, my voice cracking.

She nods, her face pale. "I found out a few weeks ago, and I didn't know how to tell you. I know it's not what we talked about yet, and I just?—"

"Anna." I cut her off, dropping the jersey and pulling her into my arms. "You're kidding me, right? This is—God, this is the best thing you could've given me." I press my forehead to hers, overwhelmed. "We're going to have a baby?"

She nods, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Yeah. We are."

I laugh, a deep, joyful sound that feels like it comes from somewhere I didn't know existed. "You're amazing. Absolutely amazing."

Her lips quirk into a watery smile. "So... you're okay with this?"

"Okay?" I pull back, cupping her face. "Anna, you've already made my life better than I ever thought it could be. Now you're giving me something I didn't even know I wanted this much."

She snuffles, laughing softly. "You're such a sap."

"True," I say, leaning in to kiss her. "But you love me for it."

And as All I Want for Christmas Is You starts playing in the background, I realize it's true. Everything I've ever wanted is right here in my arms.

THE END