

A VERY CODEX CHRISTMAS

SLOANE

It was Christmas Eve in Philadelphia – and the Codex team was taking Humphrey and Reggie to the ice-skating rink. They were in town for the holidays visiting, in their words, “*their favorite detectives in the whole bloody universe*”. I’d managed to convince all of them to go out drinking *after* we put sharp metal on our feet, but only just barely.

Shivering, I laced up my skates next to Henry, looking especially academic in his dark pea-coat and glasses.

“Is this where you and your family used to come every year?” I asked. Little white clouds formed in the air when we spoke.

He nodded with a smile, pointing up at City Hall, lit in white and blue lights. “We would skate here and get hot chocolate at that little Christmas village.” To our right was a collection of cozy-looking stands, decorated in twinkle lights and wreaths. “There’s an organ performance in the old Wanamaker building right there, and two floors up, something called Dickens’ Village.” His eyes brightened. “You walk through a demonstration of The Christmas Carol story, and as a kid, just the sight of it would have me over-the-moon about Christmas coming.”

When I raised my eyebrows at his admission, he shrugged with a sheepish grin. “I just loved opening up all the books I got under the tree.”

I laughed, immediately finding Abe in the crowd, listening to Humphrey tell him an extremely loud story with a familiar bemused expression.

“This is, well, my first Christmas I guess.” I finished lacing up my skates, avoiding looking at Henry’s too-kind eyes.

“I’m sure it wasn’t a priority for your parents,” he said, gently.

“No, it wasn’t.” I tugged my white hat down over my ears and blew on my fingers. When I stood on my skates, I wobbled. Delilah and Freya appeared by my side immediately, clutching my hands.

“How did you guys know I needed you?” I leaned on them both, testing out the blades.

“Girl code bat signal,” Freya said wisely. “And I need you both helping me to declare *total and righteous victory* over Sam on that rink tonight.”

“Wait, you two are turning it into a competition?” Delilah asked with mock surprise.

“I’m a fucking beast on the ice,” she replied. “And I need my stupid-hot-boyfriend to acknowledge my prowess so we can finally settle one of our many debates. Which is, of course, *who’s the better ice skater.*”

Out on the rink, former Special Agent Samuel Byrne was smoothly, and gracefully, skating backwards across the ice. He gave Freya a sarcastic-looking salute. “It’s me, by the way,” he called out to us. “I’m the better skater.”

“Wow, *cheating already*,” she yelled. She wobbled away from us, blowing two kisses, and then dancing out onto the ice with a surprising amount of skill.

“I’m guessing she’s been paying for private lessons preparing for this moment,” Delilah said.

“Oh definitely.”

Henry appeared to take Freya’s place, and then he and Delilah eased me out onto the ice without making fun of me once. Delilah skated back a foot, hands out to catch me.

“First time, right?”

“I’m guessing I’m a natural?” I said, brow arched.

“Absolutely,” they said in unison.

Delilah tugged me forward, holding my hand. Henry cheered as Sam and Freya flew past us, looking like Olympic ice skaters. Even when competing on the ice they looked like they belonged together.

“When I was growing up,” Delilah said, “we lived deep in the woods, and my dads used to turn our backyard into this winter wonderland for the holidays. String lights on all the fir trees. Snowmen building competitions. They built this little fire-pit so we could drink hot chocolate around a fire at night. And on Christmas Eve, my siblings and I always had a big slumber party in my room.” She spun around, skating backwards, tossing a pretty smile at Henry.

He chuckled with appreciation. “So...hand-to-hand combat skills *and* ice skating?”

She pursed her lips. “I’m a woman of many skills and talents, Dr. Finch.”

A light snow was starting to fall, making Delilah look like an ice angel. Henry certainly stared at her like she was. Two flashes of color roared by – Freya and Sam on their third lap.

“Drop me off at the side here,” I said. “You two go skate together. You look like a couple in a Hallmark movie.”

“Are you sure?” she said, eyes teasing.

“Yes, go, go.” I gave her a playful shove that almost sent me falling backwards. Henry took Delilah’s hand as they skated together – he bent to whisper something that made her blush. When I turned back around, I found myself face-to-face with just the elegantly dressed man I wanted to see. Abe Royal wore a black coat over his tailored suit, and not a salt-and-pepper hair was out of place.

“Ms. Argento,” Abe said, eyebrow arched.

I leaned against the ledge with a sly grin. “Abraham.”

He brushed the hair from my shoulders. “You look exceptionally beautiful with snow in your hair.”

My cheeks heated. I wrapped my hands in the lapels of his jacket and brought him in for a pretty steamy kiss for an ice-skating rink. “Thank you for that,” I whispered against his mouth. “And thank you for the two exquisite orgasms you provided earlier tonight.”

He dragged his nose through my hair, kissed my neck. “Always a pleasure,” he said softly. “Besides, after you bear witness to my distinct lack of skill on that rink, I’m concerned you’ll immediately lose any and all sexual attraction to me.”

“Not possible.”

His lips quirked at the ends. “I can successfully de-escalate a high-profile hostage situation but, alas, skating eludes me.”

Humphrey and Reggie appeared out of nowhere, looking jolly and cheerful in their winter garb. “The enchantress is a graceful swan in skates, naturally!”

“Why thank you,” I said, attempting a curtsy. “You make a handsome pair.”

Humphrey kissed the top of Reggie’s head. “Christmas makes happy fools of us both. It is, quite possibly, the most romantic time of the year.”

“It’s my first one,” I said. Abe cast his eyes at me. Shifting on my skates, I said, “When your parents are con artists, holidays aren’t really celebrated. And before I met Abe, I was,” I paused. “Alone.”

A month ago, I’d confessed to Abe how new this holiday was to me, and he’d carefully planned a dozen events – from light shows, to movies, to decorating our first tree. I hadn’t expected to feel so many conflicting emotions, nostalgic for memories that were never mine to begin with. Abe, of course, was helping me create new ones with him.

Humphrey nodded with a serious expression. “Well then, I’m extra happy your uncles are here for our first holiday together.”

I laughed and pretended there weren’t tears in my eyes. “Me too.”

He clapped a heavy hand on Abe’s shoulder. “We shall return with the instrument you’ll need to be a perfect specimen upon the ice.”

“I am simply over-joyed,” Abe said, casting a dry smile my way. Then he leaned in, kissed my cheek. “Happy first Christmas Eve, my charming, sticky-fingered girlfriend.”

I held up his wallet. “You really should keep this thing more secure, Mr. Royal.”

He snatched it from me but traded it for a hot kiss. The next second, Humphrey returned carrying...a penguin.

“No,” Abe said.

“Wait, what is that?” I asked.

Humphrey slid the door to the rink open and smoothly skated out, penguin in hand. It was about three feet high, made of plastic, and had two small handles on the side. I gazed around the rink – saw Henry and Delilah together, Freya and Sam laughing as they raced, and then...small children, *tiny children*, using those penguins to learn how to skate.

“Yes,” I said emphatically.

Reggie skated behind Humphrey with the biggest shit-eating grin on his face. “It’s the best way to learn, Abe.”

“That cannot possibly be true,” he said.

Humphrey held up the penguin. “Take heart, lad! We must attack the ice the way we must attack life! With vigor! With courage!”

“Take the fucking penguin,” I said, barely suppressing a laugh.

Abe looked at Humphrey, then back at me.

“Do it for me?” I pressed my hands together.

Mirth and affection flared in his eyes. With absolute care, he brushed his gloved hands down his jacket and straightened his buttons. Then he stood in the doorway and stared at the penguin with a look of contempt on his face.

Freya skated by, saw what was happening, and stopped so fast Sam had to dive around her.

“Oh my god, it’s not even my birthday,” she said.

Sam skated up with his best version of a serious look. “Nice choice, sir. The penguin will...serve you well.”

He *almost* made it without laughing.

Abe scowled at them. “If I could go back in time and give you both a failing grade, I would.”

“You wouldn’t though,” Freya said. “You’re a big softie.”

“What makes you think I’ve gone soft?” he said.

She indicated the tableau in front of her. “All of this.”

“Chin up,” Humphrey said. “Do you believe a man cannot learn a new skill? To humble oneself before the greats of this fine sport is a rare privilege, indeed.”

Freya propped her hands on her hips. “Yeah. What Humphrey fucking said.”

I had a hand over my mouth, stomach sore from laughing too hard.

With about as much dignity as a man has ever mustered, Abraham Royal – once a highly trained agent with the FBI – leaned down and gripped the tiny penguin, putting his weight onto it and sliding onto the ice. His feet went briefly wild before he steadied himself.

“Is this,” Abe said, jaw clenched, “what you meant when you said to be –” he wobbled, almost fell, “an unstoppable force of *valiant passion*?”

“Well what else could I have meant?” Humphrey bellowed. “The lights! The music! It’s Christmas Eve and the night is so very young!”

Henry and Delilah skated past. Did a double-take.

“Sir?” Henry asked.

“Go about your business,” Abe replied. He was cursing lightly beneath his breath.

Delilah held up her phone. “Filming this for the next time we spar and you incorrectly claim that you’ve won.”

“I’ve never lost,” he replied.

“Not true, Delilah’s better at fighting than you,” Freya sang as she skated past.

I held up a finger. “I believe *I’m* better at fighting as well.”

“True,” they said in unison.

Henry stood on his skates, laughing so hard he had to hold Delilah’s shoulder to stay upright. “Sir, was this one of the courses you taught at the FBI Training Academy?”

“A man makes himself utterly vulnerable before some of the keenest investigative minds imaginable and they make a mockery of him,” Abe called over his shoulder.

“We wouldn’t have to mock you, sir, if you didn’t lie about going to London on vacation when really you were secretly hunting a criminal mastermind and we had to go rescue you,” Sam called back.

Delilah appeared behind me, pushing me ahead of her. “Go get Abe before he dies of shame,” she said. With a shove, I flew towards Abe, arms flying, and he managed to catch me before we both fell against the side. I was laughing so hard I had tears streaming down my face. He held me against his chest, hand on the back of my head.

“Something amuses you, Sloane?”

“The fucking *penguin*.”

His chest rumbled with laughter, and when I finally looked up, he was smiling as big as the moon above us. “Was I dashing and handsome?”

“You were adorable, and I love you,” I said. He dipped his head down, kissed the tip of my nose.

“Was that a good memory for your first Christmas?” he asked, eyes holding mine.

“It was perfect,” I replied.

With a secret smile, I tugged him back onto the ice, penguin discard. We made a slow, clumsy circle around the rink, holding hands. Almost falling. Laughing the whole time.

Humphrey twirled with a happy Reggie. “No more penguin, Mr. Royal?”

Abe shook his head. “I have...humbled myself enough for one evening. And Sloane has taken great pity on my lack of skill.”

“A lucky lad indeed,” Humphrey boomed, stroking his red beard. “In life, we must search for those who eagerly catch us when we fall.” He looked at me and winked. “That’s what family is all about.”

Henry and Delilah slid past. “Merry first Christmas, Sloane,” they said.

Sam and Freya skated past us, both going backwards, arms wobbling as they held their balance. “Merry...*Byrne watch out*...first Christmas, Sloane!” Freya cheered.

My heart grew three sizes, like that cartoon Abe had shown me just the other night. It was true – on this rink, with my found family spinning around us, surrounded by lights – that all I’d ever wanted in my entire life was this. To find love, to find a family, to make a home.

I turned to the man who made this all possible. Snow was landing in his hair and on his jacket. He cupped my face. “I love you so much,” he said. “Let’s keep making memories.”

“With the penguin, or no?” I asked.

He pressed a kiss to the back of my hand. “For you? Anything.”

What a gift, indeed.

THE END

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