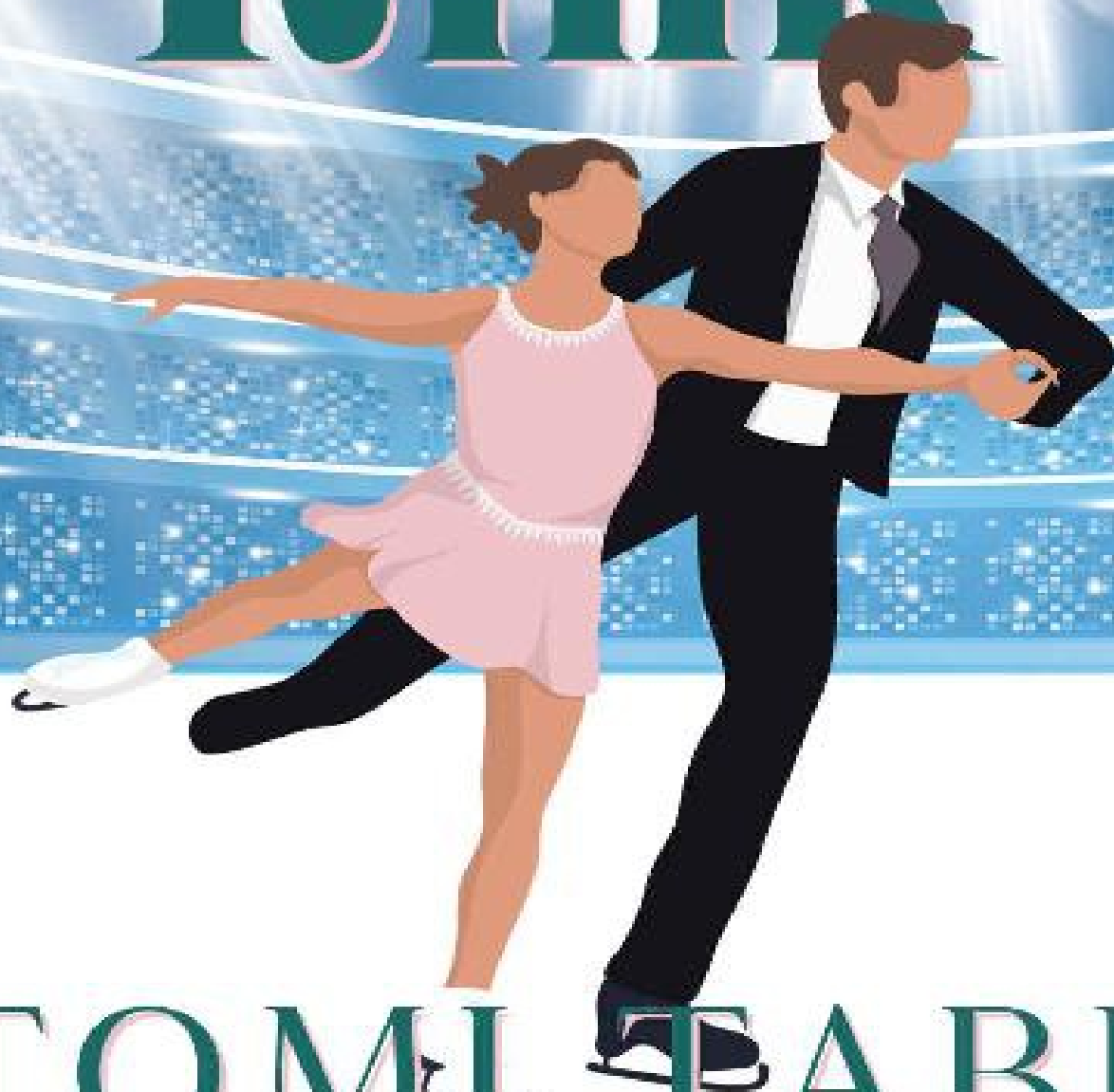


A Sweet Romance

The Rules of the Rink



TOMI FABB

TOMI TABB

The Rules of the Rink

A Sweet Sports Romance

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Work hard, be yourself, and have fun!

—Michelle Kwan

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PROLOGUE



The houselights dimmed, and a hush came over the audience. A prerecorded voice reminded those in attendance that flash photography and video recording were strictly prohibited. Then the voices of the soundtrack faded into the background, replaced with the overture of an upbeat musical melody.

Inside the tunnel leading to center ice, behind a thick set of worn wine-red curtains, Francesca Tomlinson, who had gone by the name Frankie since childhood, counted down in her head from sixty. She touched the brunette wig one final time, ensuring it was secured in place over her naturally copper-colored hair.

One of the red curtains slowly began to rise.

Fifty seconds.

On the audio soundtrack, the narrator said “. . . and always remember, you are never too old to dream.”

A worker dressed in all black, wearing a headset, pointed to the line of ensemble skaters standing ahead of her, and mouthed, “Go.”

The skaters high-fived one another and skated out into the darkened area. The houselights slowly became less dim. Frankie heard the excited laughter of children and audible gasps of delight at the fast footwork and spins being performed by her fellow Dreams on Ice skaters.

Thirty seconds.

Frankie glided closer to the entrance. Her pulse began to increase. She kept her hands occupied by tapping the side of her leg in time to the beats of the overture.

Ten seconds.

The ensemble skaters linked arms and held their pose, catching their breaths. The machinery controlling the set backdrop suddenly hummed to life.

Three. Two. One.

“You’re on,” the backstage tech mouthed to her.

Plastering a big smile onto her face, Frankie skated out of the tunnel. It was pitch-black. Some of the ensemble skaters raced backstage for a quick change while she went out to the center of the ice. A spotlight illuminated her.

She glided around the perimeter of the makeshift French village.

“It’s Beauty!”

Hearing the excitement of the children never grew old. Although it was dark, she could just make out the silhouettes of them waving to her in the front row.

“Hi, Princess,” they shouted.

Frankie tried her best to make eye contact with as many of them as possible before coming to a stop.

“Bonjour. Bonjour . . .” the music played.

She breathed shallowly as she picked up the basket laden with fake books and let her muscle memory take hold. The spotlight gave way to soft blues, greens, and pinks. The remainder of the cast, dressed as villagers, glided around her.

Bending her knees deeply, she picked up speed with some forward

crossovers, and lifted her leg into a high spiral.

I'm going to miss this.

* * *

An hour and a half and two quick changes later, Frankie locked eyes with Fernando, the skater playing her prince. She nodded subtly, and felt him place one hand on her waist and the other on her butt as he pressed her high into the air.

She waved her wrist in a circular motion. *Being a princess never gets old.*

They performed one final lap and joined the rest of the principal character skaters in a neat line to take a bow. She stared out at the tiny audience members waving glow sticks and shouting their favorite characters' names. She wondered just how many of the children would be inspired to take up skating lessons after seeing the show.

Her father had taken her to a show just like this one more than twenty years before. She could still recall being mesmerized by how the performers had jumped and twirled in the air, defying gravity. For weeks, it had been all she could talk about. *"Dad did you see that spin? Dad, can you do that? Dad, can I have a dress just like the one the princesses were wearing?"*

Fernando squeezed her hand and chuckled. "Lost in the past again?" he asked in his thick Spanish accent.

Her cheeks warmed. She glanced out of the corner of her eye to the tunnel. Her best friend Gemma and her partner John were already nearly hidden from view.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Sí," he said.

They waved to the crowd a final time, and with a few strokes, were backstage, where members of the company's technical team were running around reorganizing props for the show later that evening.

They skated over to the rim of the ice and collected their jackets, water bottles, and plastic skate guards from a set of storage cubbies.

"How many shows do you have left now?" Fernando asked.

Frankie did a mental calculation. "Three weeks' worth? My last show will be in Lyon, France."

They stepped off the ice.

"That quick?" He let out a low whistle. "In that case, how would you feel about going out with a bang? We could upgrade our normal side-by-side double toes to triples for the final eighteen shows."

"Triple toes?" She placed a hand on the wall and secured the skate guards in place.

He nodded. "You're one of the few skaters here who can still do triples. You might as well have some fun with them before you retire."

"You're right. We're getting down to the wire. It really is now or never."

"That's the spirit." Fernando grinned. "It should only take us a couple tries to work out the timing. Out of all the female skaters I've partnered, you're always going to stand out as the one that's been the easiest to work with."

She laughed.

"I'm being serious here. You're one of the rare ones. When we first started out skating together, we went from doing crossovers to lifts in three sessions. Every skater comes to the tour having learned different techniques for jumps, spins, and lifts. But your willingness to compromise and make

adjustments has made our partnership a literal dream come true for me. I've gotten so spoiled."

She hugged him. "You're going to make me cry."

"Hey, kids . . ." Gemma called out. Frankie glanced over her shoulder at her Scottish friend. "Are we doing a group thing for dinner? Or should I just bring back something for you two?"

Fernando shook his head. "Thanks, but that's a no for me. I have plans."

What Fernando really meant was that he couldn't miss his afternoon siesta, or he really might transform into a beast.

"I'll catch up with you ladies in a few hours." He excused himself and headed down the hall to his dressing room.

"Too bad. What about you, Frankie?"

She paused thoughtfully. "I'm in. I love Greece, and I haven't been outside the arena or hotel once since we arrived."

Her friend arched an eyebrow and shot her a "who's fault is that" look. "Go change and I'll order a car for us."

* * *

"So, you still haven't given *any* reconsideration to renewing your contract, have you?" Gemma asked as she stowed her phone into her brown designer wristlet.

They sat at a table of an outdoor café tucked off the main street. Pink bougainvillea petals rained down on top of the umbrella in the middle of their table.

Frankie shook her head. "Nope. Three weeks from now, I'll be officially retired." She'd come to terms with it four months ago, but it still felt surreal

saying it aloud.

“Wow. I can’t believe it.” Gemma’s eyes widened. “Out of all the skaters, I thought you’d be the one who stayed involved with show skating as long as humanly possible. You love this life.”

At twenty-seven, Frankie was already one of the oldest skaters on tour. It didn’t seem all that out of the ordinary for someone her age to decide to retire. Last year, just after her thirtieth birthday, Michelle had said farewell to Dreams on Ice. The season before that, it had been Gia, who at twenty-eight had decided it was in the best interest of her long-term health to step back from skating.

Like many skaters, the wear and tear from years of practicing and performing jumps and spins had made itself known in her hips, knees, and ankles. Frankie counted herself lucky that unlike Gia, she had more good days than bad.

“It’s just my time. When you know, you know. I’ve made peace with it.” She reached for her cup and took a long sip of her latte, letting the spicy flavor of the chai settle on her tongue. “It feels scary, but I’m getting to the point in my life where my priorities have changed.”

Should I say something to Gemma about Dad? she wondered. *We’ve always told one another everything. I feel so guilty keeping such a large secret from her.*

Gemma kept a straight face. “Do you promise that you haven’t been holding out on me and are leaving the tour to run off with a guy?”

“A guy?” She furrowed her brow. “Nope. Definitely not. I haven’t been on a date in I don’t even want to know how long.” She shook her head. “If there was a guy involved, you’d be the *first* person I’d tell.”

Dating was too complicated when she lived her life out of a suitcase for

more than half the year.

Gemma reached for the last piece of baklava on her plate. “Point taken. The last guy I dated was Paul. Great skater. Terrible people skills.”

“I think a lot of skaters lack basic people skills. From an early age, we’re trained to focus on ourselves,” Frankie said.

Her friend sighed. “At least as a pairs skater, you were able to work with another person.” Gemma had been a singles skater who learned basic pairs skating skills when she joined the company.

“In theory.” Frankie’s mind turned to her long-time competitive skating partner, Danny. Their relationship had been more one-sided than a shared partnership. He was the type of partner who was always telling her what he thought was best for them. Yes, back then, her jumps were not the most consistent, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. She’d had a growth spurt at the worst possible time.

She’d never forgiven him for ending their partnership right before the start of the Olympic season. It had spelled the end of her competitive career. She’d never had any luck finding someone else to skate with her.

The harsh reality was that there were ten female skaters for every male partner. It was like a Regency-era marriage mart. As soon as a skating mother took note of an eligible partner for her daughter, he was snapped up for a tryout.

They chatted for a few more minutes, then Gemma glanced at her smartwatch. “We should start heading back to the arena to warm up soon. The traffic was heavier than I thought it would be when we left. Now, it’s rush hour.”

Frankie took two final bites of her salad and pushed her plate away. “Good idea. I just wanted to pop into one of those touristy shops and pick up

a magnet for my dad.”

Gemma signaled for the waiter to bring them their check. “Is there even any space left on the family fridge?”

“Last time I was home, there were a couple of gaps left near the freezer.” Frankie reached down and opened her purse, searching for her card holder.

“He’ll be so happy to have you nearby again.” Gemma smiled. “How’s he doing these days?”

A waiter walked over to their table and Frankie said a silent thanks that she was saved from having to answer the question, because at this point in time, even she didn’t have a full answer.

CHAPTER 1



Three Months Later

Frankie's turn indicator clicked as she waited for the oncoming traffic to pass by. She gripped the steering wheel tightly. A few drops of rain made a soft pitter-patter sound against the windshield.

I swore I'd do everything I could to escape Grizzly Springs, and here I am, moving back.

Driving down the town's main route, State Highway Three, she was stuck with a strong sense of déjà vu. Strict building codes had kept the facade of the historical town center largely unchanged. Yet at the same time, many of the small family-owned businesses that had been a fixture during her teenage years had been replaced by big-box retailers.

Frankie turned left, and maneuvered her car into the parking lot of the Lakeside Apartment Complex. She parked in an open spot near apartment number fifteen and turned off the engine. Taking a few deep breaths, she sat for a moment, and closed her eyes. The skies had opened. Sheets of rain pelted down on the windshield steadily.

Would her dad ask how her latest job interview had gone or was there a chance she'd be able to skirt around the issue a little longer? She felt the telltale dull throb of an oncoming tension headache. Searching for a job in the real world had been a wake-up call.

Potential employers might be impressed by her skating experience, but they treated her like a high school kid since she lacked any practical work experience. If she heard another “we’ll be in touch if a position suited to you opens up,” she’d scream.

It would’ve been much easier if the hiring managers of the places she’d applied to would just tell her directly if she was or wasn’t the candidate for them. She could handle the rejection. It was being in limbo that frustrated her to no end.

She rested her forehead on the cool leather of the steering wheel. Was she being too picky? All she wanted was a job that offered her stable hours and insurance benefits. Was that too much to ask?

It was her turn to take care of her dad. He was in his mid-seventies now. He’d always done whatever it took to come up with the funds to pay for her endless ice time, skating lessons, skating tests, costumes, choreography, and competitions. No matter what she needed, her father had found a way to get it for her.

A surge of guilt flooded her body. What if nobody wanted her? What if she never found a job? Her eyes opened. She pounded her fist against the dashboard. No. It wouldn’t happen. It couldn’t. She wouldn’t let it. She was her father’s daughter. Giving up was not an option.

I have options. As much as I don’t want to become a skating coach, beggars can’t be choosers. I have to do what I have to do.

She inhaled deeply through her nose and exhaled through her mouth, then swallowed hard and pushed all her negative feelings aside. Reaching over to the passenger seat, Frankie retrieved a brown paper bag and made a dash from the car to her front door.

She shrugged off her wet coat as she entered the apartment. “Dad, I’m

home. I brought us something nice and hot for dinner tonight.” She shook the slightly soggy bag.

She heard the crinkle of her dad lowering the local newspaper and then saw him sniff the air. “Soft tacos?”

Frankie smiled brightly. “Lucky guess.”

He folded the sports section of the paper and placed it on the side table. “There’s only one place in town we order takeout from on Fridays. It’s our tradition.”

She walked around the ancient coffee table and kissed him on the cheek, feeling the scratch from the neat beard that matched his close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair. “I’ll warm this up. Did you do your physical therapy exercises today?”

Frown lines appeared on his forehead. Picking up the remote control, he clicked on the TV and turned on the news. The sound of the news anchor filled the living room.

Frankie filled a glass of water from the tap and handed it to him “Dad?”

“No. I haven’t,” he murmured.

“Okay.” She breathed deeply. “After we eat, we’ll work on them together. The sooner you build up the muscles around your hip, the sooner you’ll be able to ditch the cane you hate so much.”

She padded into the kitchen and retrieved two plates from the cabinet above the dishwasher. It seemed difficult to believe that only a few months ago, she was in Europe. She wondered what Gemma, Fernando, and her other skating friends would be up to this evening. Their next set of stops would be in Australia and New Zealand. Those were two places she had always wanted to visit.

“How was your interview today?” Dad grunted, changing the subject.

Like salt being rubbed into an invisible wound, but I can't tell you that. I have to stay positive.

“It went fine. Better than the one for Henry’s Hardware.” She popped two tacos into the microwave and set it for one minute. It buzzed to life. “The woman interviewing me said they’d make a decision over the weekend. If I’m shortlisted for a second interview, I’ll hear back by mid-week.” Her voice oozed with false cheer.

“And what position did you interview for today?” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“The evening hostess role at Lou’s Diner,” she said, low enough she hoped he wouldn’t hear her.

He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Frankie.”

“Dad.”

“Frankie.”

“Dad.”

“Honey, don’t do this.” He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Do what?” She bit her lip, knowing full well the words that were about to leave his mouth.

“Frankie, we both know you’d never be happy as a hostess. I love having you home; you’re my only child. My pride and joy—”

Here it comes.

“—but you should be doing what you love, not stuck here taking care of an old man. I promise I can manage. If you call the management team at Dreams on Ice, I bet it’s not too late to ask about getting a new contract.”

The microwave beeped. Frankie pushed the button to open the door and retrieved the tacos. “Dad, we’ve been through this. I *want* to be here with you. I know I’m not stuck. I am *choosing* to be here. Dreams on Ice will

forever be the best job I'll ever have had, but I can't skate on tour forever. As I grow older, my priorities are changing."

When her father fell and broke his hip, nobody found him for over twenty-four hours. She wouldn't ever let that happen again. He was the only family she had. He was her number-one priority. She only had one dad.

"Frankie . . ." His voice trailed off.

"There is no point in arguing with me. I've made up my mind and I won't change it. I'm stubborn, just like you." She placed a steaming taco on his plate and carried it into the living room. "We've both experienced a lot of changes recently. It's going to be an adjustment period for both of us."

He accepted the plate. "I know."

Making up a plate for herself, she plopped down on the love seat across from her dad. They ate in silence for several minutes, listening to the extended weather forecast for the weekend.

"Do you want another? I bought six."

"Yes, please."

She got up and reheated a second taco for each of them.

"Frankie, I know you weren't exactly keen on ever becoming a figure skating coach, but is there any chance you might reconsider? I think it might be the perfect solution for you. I remember you telling me how much you loved interacting with kids during the meet-and-greets before each show."

Her teenage self had found kids annoying. She didn't have any patience for young children who couldn't pay attention or pick up on a skill right away. But as an adult, she found them endearing and a breath of fresh air. She supposed she was technically still a kid herself back then. As usual, her dad was right.

Frankie pushed a stray piece of lettuce around her plate. "I'll add it to my

list. It's too bad the Grizzly Springs Community Rink closed. Off the top of my head, I think the next closest one is in Fresno."

It would be a two-hour drive each way, plus gas. She'd hate to leave her dad alone for so many hours. On the other hand, if she became a coach, it would mean free or discounted ice time.

"Fresno? No, dear, there's a rink that's closer. I thought you would've heard about it. It's been all over the news." He placed his plate on the table and reached for the newspaper, flipping through to the third page, and folding back the bottom half. "Here's the article. The old Sequoia Valley rink was bought by new owners three years ago. It was gutted and completely remodeled. It just celebrated its two-year anniversary."

Frankie wiped her hand on a napkin and took the paper from her dad. Her eyes scanned the article. "Sequoia Valley," she muttered under her breath. "Right in our backyard." She glanced at him. "I can't believe I didn't know about this. Have you heard anything about what offerings they have?"

"That's up to you to find out." He smirked.

Frankie sank into the soft back of the sofa. *I should've known better than to try and escape the skating world. It's a part of my DNA.*

"Thanks for dinner, sweetie." Her father scooted forward and gingerly got to his feet. "I'll take care of loading the dishwasher."

"Dad, I'll do it."

"No. I can do it." He placed a hand on her shoulder as he passed by her. His cane tapped against the linoleum floor. "I may still be feeling like crap, but I'm well enough to load the dishwasher."

She knew the battle was lost. "Yes, sir." She collected the plates and put them on the kitchen counter.

He pecked her on the cheek. "That's a good girl."

While her dad worked in the kitchen, Frankie sat back down. She pulled out her phone from the pocket of her jeans and typed in the web address listed in the article. The website loaded and showed photos of a gym, café, two rinks, and a ballet studio.

“The California foothills’ premier ice sport destination . . .” Well, at least it looked like they catered to more than just the hockey clientele.

Frankie clicked on the staff page. A red stop sign said, “Under construction.” She encountered the same red roadblock on the skating academy, hockey academy, and birthday party pages.

“Find anything interesting?” her dad asked, glancing over her shoulder.

“A little bit. They have waivers and some photos of their facilities, but a lot of the website is still under construction. I’ll have to give them a call tomorrow and see if I can get some info.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He dried his hands on a dish towel. “I’m going to pop into the bath before we start the wash cycle. I’ll let you know when I’m done.”

She opened her mouth.

“I’ll call you if I need help. I promise.”

* * *

Frankie wiped her clammy palms on the slippery fabric of her black fleece pants. The large hand of the clock behind the manager’s desk at the Sequoia Valley Ice Sport Center reached the twelve and let out a soft *click* at the exact moment a heavy-set balding man in his mid-fifties entered the office. He wore a navy-blue and white hockey jersey and jeans. She jumped to her feet.

“Francesca, thanks for coming in on such short notice.” The man extended his hand to her. “I’m Jack. Please, have a seat.”

“Please call me Frankie.” She took his hand and shook it. “Thanks for having me. It just worked out that today happens to be my day off.” She mentally crossed her fingers at the small fib.

Jack sat down. His chair let out an audible squeak. “In that case, I won’t keep you long. I’m sure you have a lot of errands to run today. I had the chance to skim over the resume you submitted. It’s impressive. You have so many accolades on there. A bronze medal in the junior pairs division at US Nationals and a top-ten finish at the Junior Figure World Championships.”

He folded his hands on the desk. “Your former coach, John Franks, was one of the best in the business before he retired. I remember him well. I have no doubt some of his wisdom has rubbed off on you.”

So far so good. Jack was impressed with her qualifications.

“With that being said, unfortunately, I’m afraid the only skating job openings I have right now are for part-time public-session ice patrol or for a part-time skating school coach. Are you interested in either of those?”

She crossed one leg over the other. “I’d love to coach.”

“Great. Right now, since school is in session, most classes are taught after five during the week. On Saturdays, we offer classes from toddler to adult all day long.”

Frankie could see that working to her advantage. It would give her more flexibility if she had to take her dad to a medical appointment in Fresno. Most of his appointments were in the late morning or early afternoon.

Jack ran through a few more details such as the starting hourly pay, which was way less than she had hoped, but it did include health and dental benefits

and free ice time. Ice time was worth its weight in gold to Frankie. The ice complex normally charged the public fifteen dollars per session for it.

“If all of that works with what you had in mind, I’ll have our skating director e-mail you the new-hire paperwork and staff handbook. You’ll just need to read it over and complete the forms by your first day on the job.”

Frankie’s stomach muscles clenched. “That’s awesome. I’m free to start as early as next week.”

“Then I guess that settles it.” He tapped his computer mouse, and the screen glowed to life. He pulled up the calendar and made a note to himself. “Do you have any questions for me?”

“Yes, you mentioned that most of the skating classes are at night. What about the daytime? Are there any morning freestyle sessions available to skate in?”

Jack blinked twice. “The morning ice belongs solely to Charlie Welch and his private lesson students. You’ll have to take it up with him, but otherwise, feel free to use the ice anytime between ten and twelve, before the public session.”

Frankie’s mouth made the shape of an O. “Charlie Welch?”

She gulped. Everyone in the skating community knew that name. Only five years ago, Charlie had been one of the most desirable pairs skaters in the country and a legend for his partnering skills. Charlie made his female partners appear as if they floated across the ice. He was a national champion and a world silver medalist.

Why he retired had always remained a mystery. Frankie had never been one to speculate, but found it odd that just like her, it had been right before the Olympics.

“Yes. He’s the skating director. Sorry, I thought I’d mentioned that.

You'll meet him soon enough."

She managed a small nod. Her pulse raced. *I'm going to meet skating royalty.*

After promising to look out for the paperwork from Charlie, Frankie stepped out of the rink and into the parking lot. She took a deep breath, and the brisk winter air filled her lungs. That had gone about as well as she could've hoped. She'd found a job.

CHAPTER 2



A few days later, Frankie finally received the email she'd been waiting for.

To: FTomlinson@email.com

From: CWelch@email.com

Dear New Hire *blank*,

On behalf of the Sequoia Valley Ice Sport Center staff, we're thrilled to welcome you to the team. It's our valuable staff like you that bring the joy of skating to the community. Attached to this email, you will find the New Hire Handbook.

Please read it in full and return the last page stating you've read and agreed to the rink's rules and regulations on your first day, in addition to any other paperwork attached to this email. You are scheduled to begin on *blank*. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to me. Again, welcome to the team.

Sincerely,

blank

Frankie stared in confusion at the message sitting in her inbox. "There are so many things wrong with this email."

Her dad glanced over the top of his crossword puzzle book. "Like what?"

She crossed one leg over the other. "It looks as if Charlie copied and pasted this email from a template and couldn't be bothered to fill in the details." She shook her head. "I'm supposed to have a handbook, a start date,

and some basic forms, but none of that has been included with the message. It all says ‘blank.’”

Her father’s eyebrows knitted together. “That’s unprofessional. Who’s this Charlie fellow? An assistant?”

“Not by a long shot. He’s supposed to be my new supervisor. He’s the rink’s skating director.”

“Ah.” His attention returned to his puzzle book. “That’s certainly one way to make a first impression. Maybe he just forgot to attach the documents.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.”

Hitting the “reply” button, she began to type.

To: CWelch@email.com

From: FTomlinson@email.com

Dear Charlie,

Thank you for your welcome email. I’m excited to be joining the team. I think there might have been a small mistake when you sent the message, however. I didn’t receive any attachments or a start date from you. If you could please clarify those items for me, I’d appreciate it. You can also reach me at (559) 555-6700.

Thanks!

Frankie

A moment later, her inbox chimed.

“Did he reply already? The man must have lightning reflexes.” Her dad chuckled.

Frankie opened the message.

To: FTomlinson@email.com

From: CWelch@email.com

This is an automatic reply. I am out of the office and unavailable until *blank*. If there are any important issues, please reach out to the rink at *blank*.

Sincerely,

C

“It’s an out-of-office reply.” She placed a palm on her forehead. “More blanks. This is so bad.”

Her dad’s eyes sparkled with mirth. “This Charlie is firing—”

“Dad. No inappropriate jokes right now. Please.” Her cheeks warmed as she took out her phone and dialed the number Jack had called her from three days before.

Her father shrugged.

“Hi, Jack, so sorry to bother you. I just received an email from Charlie, and it looks like it’s missing some important information. I was going to try calling him, but I realized I also didn’t have his phone number.”

“Blanks,” her dad mouthed to her.

She shot him a glare. Jack’s voice came out muffled. “I’m sorry; can you repeat that one more time?”

She heard typing in the background. “According to the notes I have in the system, you’re supposed to start your coaching today. Didn’t Charlie call you about it?”

She gasped. Her blood pressure jumped ten points. “Today? I’m so sorry! I never received a call from him. I promise, I’m not normally like this. I’m usually highly organized. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Don’t worry, Frankie. Miscommunications happen.” Jack’s voice was patient. She sensed he wasn’t all that surprised by Charlie, but would stay professional about the entire situation. “If you’d still like to start today, come

when you're able to. Classes start at five. You'll need your skates and two forms of government ID. Stop by my office, and I'll get you set up with payroll and take care of any other loose ends. After that, I'll have Leslie take care of you. Charlie just left for the day."

"Perfect. I'm on my way."

"Don't rush. Just drive safely."

In record time, Frankie changed clothes, reminded her father where he could find his dinner, and was out the door.

As she inserted her key into the ignition, she muttered, "Charlie Welch, you are not off to a good start with me. How can such a disorganized man like you be the skating director?"

* * *

All the tension Frankie felt on the drive to the rink fled her body the moment she stepped onto the ice and saw the bright-eyed, cheery faces of the group of four- and five-year-old level-one students she and Leslie would be teaching for the evening's first group class.

Each child wore a helmet, gloves, and oversized jacket, and had a lanyard acting as a name tag looped around their neck. They stood in a neat line hugging the closest wall, their eyes wide and hungry to learn.

"And how is everyone doing tonight?" Leslie called out in a cheery tone. She had jade-green eyes, bubblegum-pink hair, and an athletic frame. Frankie guessed she was about five foot nine based on how the other woman towered over her.

"Gooooood," the children chorused.

"Are we excited to skate today?"

“Yes!”

Leslie cupped a hand to her ear. “I don’t think the level fives on the other side of the rink heard you all.”

“YES!” they exclaimed.

“Excellent.” She grinned. “Today, we have a special helper with me. Her name is Miss Frankie. Can you say hello to her?”

“Good . . . evening . . . Miss . . . Frankie,” they chorused.

Frankie’s heart warmed. She lifted a hand and waved. “I’ve heard you’re all superstars. I can’t wait for you to show me what you can do.”

Leslie clapped her hands together. The children returned their attention to her. “Who can tell me what we worked on last week?”

Two hands shot up into the air like rockets. Leslie pointed to a little boy in a red hoodie. “Michael?”

“Swizzles.”

“Very good.” Leslie nodded. Michael puffed out his chest, looking pleased with himself. “Eric, can you show us what swizzles look like?” she asked the other child who had raised his hand.

The little boy in a black jacket wiggled forward, pushing his skates toward each other, then away from one another. His blades left S-shape indentations in the ice. The other children observed and started to mimic Eric’s movements with looks of fierce concentration on their little faces.

Frankie brought a hand to her mouth and bit back a giggle. They reminded her of children dancing the Hokie Pokey, each one wiggling to their own beat.

“You’re all doing an amazing job. Give yourself a pat on the back.” Leslie reached her arm behind her. The kids mirrored her movements. “Now that everyone remembers what swizzles are, let’s practice.”

Leslie wiggled her hands, signaling for the kids to come toward her while she slowly glided backward. One by one, they came away from the wall, skating in the direction of their instructor.

Frankie observed from the side, noting how relaxed the pink-haired coach was. She had a calm, easy manner about her, but also had her eyes glued to the kids, watching them like a mother hawk, in case they fell. Ice, after all, was hard.

In the blink of an eye, two hours passed. Frankie had assisted Leslie with a level-six class learning flip jumps and half-loop jumps, a level-seven class working on two-footed back spins, and an intermediate-level boys' hockey class.

As they cleaned up the orange safety cones dividing the ice into different sections after the last class that evening, Leslie chatted with her. "So how did it feel being on the other side of the boards as a coach, instead of being the skater?"

"It didn't feel as strange as I thought it might. The level ones were so sweet. I was scared the boys in the last class would be little terrors, but they were the best-behaved group of the night!"

Leslie laughed. "They weren't always that way." She deposited a set of cones in one of the two hockey bench areas near the speaker system.

"Really?"

"I've had most of those kids for two years. They know I won't take any crap from them, especially if they want to try out for the rink's junior hockey team. I'm the head coach. Every time they step onto the ice, they know I'm watching them. They have to prove to me that they're able to listen and be respectful."

"Oh, I like that." Frankie placed the cones in her arms next to Leslie's.

“Hockey has a lot of moving pieces to it. I’ll only work with kids who can prove they can be team players.” Eyes sweeping the ice one final time, Leslie looked satisfied that everything had been put in its rightful place. “Speaking of being team players, you were late today. As a rule of thumb, I like all the instructors to be on the ice at least five minutes before class begins.”

Frankie’s shoulders stiffened. “It won’t happen again. I’m usually the type of person who’s never late. There was a . . .” She considered her words carefully, uncertain as to how friendly Leslie was with Charlie. “Misunderstanding. Jack’s aware.”

“Charlie.” Leslie’s eyes narrowed. “What did he do this time?”

Frankie hesitated.

“I swear on my favorite hockey stick that whatever you tell me stays between us. You can trust me.”

Frankie rubbed the back of her neck. “Um . . . there was a problem with the new-hire paperwork and with my start date.” Her cheeks warmed. “I received an email from him, but it was . . . uh . . . missing all the key information.”

Leslie facepalmed and muttered under her breath. “This is exactly why *I* should’ve been named the skating program director and not my brother.”

Had she heard Leslie correctly? Charlie was her brother? Now she really hoped she hadn’t overstepped. *My first day and I’ve already thrown the boss under the bus.*

“Thanks for telling me. In the future, promise me that if you need anything, you’ll come to me, or to Jack.” Leslie shook her head and locked eyes with Frankie. “Charlie will take forever to get back to you, and that’s only *if* he remembers.”

She wondered what the story was between the siblings. It was apparent Leslie was the one who held the real power around anything related to the skating academy. All the other coaches Frankie had met in the pros' room earlier had defaulted to her.

“Understood.”

Leslie relaxed. “Now that that’s been settled, let’s get you a set of keys to the pros’ room, a coaching jacket, a Sharpie to draw on the ice, and a schedule.”

They skated to the rink door and stepped off the ice. Frankie picked up her skate guards and balanced against the plexiglass as she slid them over her blades. Her pulse increased. “I don’t think I’m ready to teach on my own yet.”

“Don’t worry. You won’t be flying solo until I’m satisfied you can handle it.” Leslie winked. “You’ll be shadowing me or another coach for four more weeks, then co-teaching for another four.”

“I’m so relieved to hear you say that.”

Maybe coaching wouldn’t be so terrible, after all.

* * *

Later that week, Frankie arrived at the rink an hour before the ten a.m. open freestyle session to fit in a full warm-up. Inserting a set of wireless earbuds into her ears, she cranked up the music on her phone and started jumping rope.

The lobby area was nearly empty. A few straggling students from the morning session, already late to school, were ushered by frantic parents to cars double parked in front of the building.

Frankie smiled. Her dad was always frustrated she could never learn to tell time. She always wanted to stay on the ice trying one more jump or spin until she was literally kicked off the session by her coach or the Zamboni driver.

With her heart rate up, Frankie moved on to her stretching routine. Her muscles ached after her long break from skating. How long *had* it been since she'd taken the ice? She ran through the last couple of months in her head. The only definitive date she could remember was her last show with Dreams on Ice.

I guess I've been so wrapped up with Dad, finding a job, and settling into life in Grizzly Springs that I really haven't skated in more than ten weeks. Do we have an ice bucket at home? I'm going to be so sore after this session. Will I even be able to make it through two full hours?

Questions running rampant through her head, Frankie laced up her skates and headed to the ice. She placed her guards and a rink-side bag containing her phone, water bottle, and a box of tissues on the boards, and pushed off into a set of forward and backward power pulls.

Cold air greeted her face. Her blades dug into the ice and let out ripping noises every time she moved from an outside edge to inside edge. She focused on her breathing and getting a nice deep knee bend. She was home. There was no other place where she felt so free and at ease. When she was on the ice, it was as if she'd been transported to another world.

Picking up some speed with a set of fast back crossovers, Frankie stepped into a camel spin. As if her old coach were yelling in her ear, she could hear Mr. Franks telling her to point her foot, lift her leg higher, and watch her centering.

Changing positions, she brought her leg around and snapped into a sit

spin. She leaned forward and grabbed her shin in what was known as a cannonball position. She'd always thought it was a strange name. She felt a sharp pull. Her hamstring muscles were tight.

“Hey!” a man’s deep voice suddenly called out.

Caught unaware, her concentration broke, and she leaned too far back on her blade and fell, spinning on her butt like a break dancer. Slightly dizzy, Frankie took a moment to catch her breath. The world slowly shifted back into focus.

“Hey!” the voice shouted again.

Brushing the snow off her legs, she looked up to see a man in a black beanie entering the ice, awkwardly half walking and half sliding in a set of black running shoes. “Get off the ice! The rink is closed!”

Her chest tightened, and her pulse increased. “I . . . I was told it was okay,” she said in a small voice.

The man had reached her. He wore a pair of dark jeans and a black North Face fleece jacket with stains on the front. A wisp of curly tawny-brown hair stuck out from underneath the beanie. Although she was on skates, he was still a few inches taller than her. His cheeks were red, and forehead knitted with tension. His green eyes were like neon lightning bolts shooting out jolts of electricity. Unkempt scruff coated his face, making him appear almost wild.

“Who told you that you could skate right now?” he growled. “Don’t you have any common sense? It’s dangerous to be out on the ice alone. What if you fell and hit your head?”

Frankie swallowed hard. She understood the risks of skating as well as anyone. Didn’t the man see that she knew what she was doing? She’d lost

count of how many waivers she had been asked to sign when she was hired. Wasn't this session only for coaches?

"Well? Who was it?" He crossed his arms, glaring at her.

"Jack," she sputtered.

"Jack?" He looked up and down at her.

"The manager."

"I know who he is," the man snapped.

"When he hired me, he said staff members could skate before the public session."

He looked down his nose at her. "Are you even old enough to work here?"

Her nostrils flared. "Yes!" She placed her hands on her hips. "Look, I'm sorry. Clearly, I was given some wrong information. I'll get off the ice now."

The man removed his beanie and ran a hand through his hair. It stuck out like an untamed lion's mane. Frankie could see some pieces appeared tangled. "See that you do. Don't let me catch you out here alone again. Make arrangements for someone to be here if you're planning to skate. I don't have time to babysit you."

Then, just as quickly as he'd yelled at her, he turned and started walking toward the exit.

There are so many things I want to say to you right now, like call you out for being rude, but I'm not that kind of person.

She clenched her fists together and gave the man a twenty-second head start. She refused to let him ruin her day. She had enough problems to worry about with her father.

CHAPTER 3



Frankie: Oh. Em. Gee. You will never believe what just happened.

Gemma: About time I heard from you. It's been an entire week. Spill the tea! How's the new job going? I'm stuck on a hot bus with a broken AC, and I need something to take my mind off it.

Frankie: Do you remember that grump I mentioned yelling at me on Monday?

Gemma: Did you see him again?

Frankie: Yes. We were already off to a bad start, but things have gone from bad to worse.

Gemma: That's cryptic.

Frankie: *Flaming red face emoji*

She took a deep breath.

Frankie: This morning, I was trying to juggle my coffee, skate bag, and all my stuff for the day. I wasn't exactly looking where I was going; I pulled open the complex door and . . .

Gemma: Did you knock into the grump?

Frankie: Worse. He stepped aside, but when I was shifting my skate bag to my shoulder, I accidentally hit his arm and the venti coffee he was holding.

Gemma: Ouch.

Frankie: Yeah.

Gemma: Where did the coffee spill? All over his shirt? Please tell me it was transparent, and you have photos of it clinging to his chest.

Frankie: Gemma!

Gemma: What do you expect? I'm a reality TV romance junkie.

Frankie: *slapping head emoji*

Frankie: It spilled all over his jeans in the worst imaginable spot.

Gemma: *laughing emoji* That *is* bad.

Frankie: I know.

Gemma: He'll get over it eventually.

Frankie: I hope so. I apologized and offered to run out and buy him another coffee, but all he could do was glare at me and say, "You've done more than enough damage." You should've seen his face. I actually considered running back to my car. I hope I don't see him again anytime soon. I'm so embarrassed.

Gemma: It could only happen to you. Have you found out who he is yet?

Frankie: I know. Just my luck, right? And no. I still have no idea. I'll text you more about it later.

Gemma: You got it. Are we still on to video chat Sunday?

Frankie: One hundred percent. I can't wait to hear more about Australia. I'm starving for gossip.

Frankie stowed her phone into the outside pocket of her black handbag.

"How's Gemma?" her dad asked.

"She's well. They're in Canberra, Australia, for the next couple of days."

A door creaked open. "Robert Tomlinson." A physician's assistant in blue floral scrubs read off her dad's name from the clipboard.

They both stood.

The kindly woman smiled. "If you'll follow me into exam room number

four. We just need a quick blood pressure reading, then I'll let Dr. Kaur know you're here."

Frankie trailed her dad and the PA through a door and down the hall to a small room that smelled of disinfectant. Posters displayed the anatomy of the hip joint. She took a seat on one of the plastic chairs across from the cushioned table as the assistant slipped a black blood-pressure cuff over his left bicep.

The woman made idle chatter. Frankie squeezed her knees together, forcing herself to think positive thoughts. She hoped his latest X-ray was clear and that he was still healing on schedule. She worried that his balance hadn't improved much since the last checkup.

The monitor beeped. "One-forty over eighty-three. A little high, but it could just be because you're in the office today. BPs are always elevated in this type of environment." The woman scribbled down his numbers and unfastened the Velcro. "Any problems with your medication? Any swelling or new pains?"

Her dad shook his head. "Nope. Everything's great."

Frankie's fingers itched. He wasn't being entirely truthful. He'd been a lot more tired and irritable than normal. She bit her lip. Should she say anything?

"Great. I'll let Dr. Kaur know you're here and she'll be in shortly."

They were left alone.

"Dad . . ." she started. "You have been really tired lately. Make sure you mention that if the doctor asks you."

He frowned. "Frankie, it's just me getting older. I sleep more than I used to. I can't stay up past eight any longer."

"Dad. Mention it anyway, please. For me."

Her patience was fleeting. Why was her father so darn proud?

“Frankie. There isn’t any point. Like I said, it’s just me—”

Her eye twitched as the door opened. Her father stopped speaking. A petite woman of Indian descent entered, wearing a white lab coat.

“Hello, Mr. Tomlinson. Miss Tomlinson. It’s nice to see you two again.” They all shook hands. “So tell me, how have you been doing lately? How are you finding your physical therapy?” Dr. Kaur logged on to the computer in the corner of the room as she spoke.

Her dad grinned. “Everything’s wonderful! I’ve been doing my PT every day and have also been working on my crossword books.”

Dr. Kaur typed a few notes. “Excellent. Let me just skim a few things on your file and load your most recent set of X-rays.”

Frankie felt a tension headache coming on. She rubbed her temples and resisted the urge to answer for her dad. The doctor asked a few more questions, and he answered that everything was “perfect” and “normal.”

Dr. Kaur nodded and swiveled the computer screen so it faced them. It contained an image of his hip with its hardware. “You’re about sixteen weeks post-op, and as you can see from this most recent image, the fracture is nearly all the way healed, just as we had hoped.”

Frankie relaxed, and she felt a huge weight being lifted off her shoulders. She placed a hand on his arm.

“That’s reassuring.” He patted his hip. “I thought I’d bounce back after twelve weeks, like when I had my knee replaced.”

“Every patient is an individual and heals on their own timeline. The older we get, the longer it takes. Remember, it’s not a race.”

The doctor changed the screen. “Glancing over the notes from the PT, I can see that we haven’t quite reached the targeted range of motion and

increase of muscle strength we'd aimed for. Is there anything you feel might be contributing to this?"

Frankie's father nodded. His cheeks colored a rosy red. "That, ah . . . may be my folly. I might have missed a day or two of exercises. Everything has felt stiff."

The doctor shot him a look of sympathy. "How would you rate the pain on a scale of one to ten? Ten being the worst discomfort."

He puffed his cheeks out. "A two?"

"When it comes to the exercises, experiencing a little soreness is normal. You're building muscles back up that haven't been in use. The goal is to be consistent. Perhaps you can try doing shorter sets? I can have the physical therapist contact you to discuss some other modifications that could be made to your routine."

Frankie squeezed his hand. "And I'll make sure he keeps doing them on a schedule. Now that I'm home for good, there are no more excuses."

"Do you have any other questions for me?" Dr. Kaur asked.

"No, I think you've covered everything," her dad said.

Dr. Kaur nodded. "Excellent. Mr. Tomlinson, I'll have Becky, my assistant, set your next video appointment and take your BP one more time. I'm just going to borrow your daughter."

"Go right ahead," he said.

Frankie followed the doctor. Out of earshot of the exam room, Dr. Kaur gently touched Frankie's shoulder. "I know how stressful caring for an elderly parent can be. It's just you, isn't it?"

Her stomach muscles clenched. "Yeah. There isn't anyone else. I'm an only child."

She didn't want to disclose more than that. It wasn't really anyone's

business that a single dad had adopted and raised her. She hated the sympathetic looks she received when people found out she'd never had a mother. Why should it matter? She had the world's greatest dad. A man who would do absolutely anything for her.

"We have a support group I can email you information about. There may come a time when you find it helpful to speak to others in the same situation as yourself."

Frankie's throat grew dry. "Thanks." She let out a gravelly sound.

"Did you have any questions that you'd rather ask privately?"

She rubbed her shoulder. "Should I be worried about his balance? Do you think this fall was just a one-off, or is there a chance he has an underlying condition that caused it?"

"Your father is in overall good health for his age. All the tests we've run came back clear. I suspect at the time of the fall, he may have experienced some vertigo from an ear infection. The balance will improve over time, but there is a possibility that he will have to rely on a cane for the rest of his life. It depends on how his physical therapy goes."

They really had to work the glutes, quads, hamstrings, and muscles supporting the hip. Frankie needed to be more vigilant with Dad's at-home exercise program.

"Thanks, Doc."

"You're welcome." She smiled softly. "If you ever have questions for me, please, feel free to call or email."

"Will do."

The doctor excused herself. Frankie stood outside the exam room, taking a few deep breaths. *I can do this. I just need to keep Dad on a routine, and everything will start to fall into place. Our new normal.*

* * *

After dropping her dad at home, Frankie made her way to the rink.

The cashier in the booth at the entry door greeted her as she walked in. “Hiya, Frankie. Public session today?”

“Yeah. I’m running a little late. Is it busy today?”

“So-so. We have about thirty-five kids on a class field trip. Sixth and seventh graders.” Frankie grimaced. Eleven- and twelve-year-olds could be giant daredevils and risk takers always trying to one-up one another. She felt sorry for whoever had ice patrol duty. “Do you need any help fitting the kids with rental skates?”

“Nah. You enjoy your practice. Charlie took care of the skates. Max and Aaron are on ice patrol. They’ll handle any troublemakers.”

Her pulse picked up. “Charlie is here?” In the three weeks she’d been employed at the rink, she still had yet to meet her boss face-to-face.

“He’s up in his office now, up to his ears in paperwork. I told him not to put it off, but you know men. They think they always know better than us. Just like my ex.” The lobby doors opened. A mom and two young kids chatted excitedly, approaching to pay for the session. “If I see Charlie, I’ll let him know you’d like to say hello.”

“Thanks.”

She wondered whether she should say something to him about the grump too, but it could be awkward seeing as she’d never met the man. On second thought, she’d just talk to Leslie the next time she saw her.

Stepping onto the ice a scant ten minutes later, she wondered if it was even worth her time to bother skating. It was covered in deep ruts, making it

bumpy as she glided toward the center. Loud pop music played. Some kids grabbed hold of the wall and used it to pull themselves along. Others had discovered the buckets used for the toddlers and dragged them across the ice, racing one another.

Wearing red jackets, Max and Aaron, two of the youngest staff and members of the community college hockey team, weaved in and out of the kids, keeping a watchful eye on all the action. As Leslie's students, these two teenagers had learned from the best.

Frankie watched Max dart over to the kids with buckets to put an end to the antics. Aaron nodded to her and was already putting out a set of orange traffic cones in the center of the ice where she'd practice. They were like two scent hounds who could tell what was about to happen before it did.

"Thanks, Aaron!" she called out cheerily.

He held up his hand in acknowledgment and raced out of the center to address a set of boys who had started throwing loose shards of ice at one another.

Well, as crazy as it is, I'm here, so let's make the most of my time. It's a good excuse for me to work on some basics.

Her long-time coach Mr. Franks had been adamant that the best way to learn control and edge quality was through learning figures. Just as the name implied, a figure was a set shape a skater would trace with their skates. It was where the sport of figure skating had originally gotten its name from.

With one push, a skater had to know when to rise and fall with the edge and how much pressure to apply to the boot of the skate to make it all the way through the shape. It was much harder than it looked and really taught a skater control and proper body alignment. When figures were removed from competitive skating in 1991, most coaches stopped giving lessons on how to

do them. But not Mr. Franks. He wanted his skaters to have the complete package.

Frankie had thought it was a colossal waste of time, but he promised it would give her the literal edge over her competition, and it did. She just didn't have the right partner. Danny refused to work on figures. His fight with Mr. Franks cost her the best coach she ever had. That was another thing she'd always remain bitter about.

Frankie spent the next hour attempting three turns, brackets, and loops on a small patch of ice.

She remembered that there were eight shapes in total, but what was figure five? A counter? Or was it a rocker? Mr. Franks would have her head if he knew she couldn't remember.

“Hey! What are you doing out here?”

She inwardly cringed. The grump's voice! What did he want from her now? She slowly raised her head and heard the whisper of his blades skating across the ice. He stopped abruptly next to her.

The lines of his forehead were creased, his jaw clenched. He was in the same black clothing she'd seen him in the past two encounters. “I thought we already went over this. Didn't you tell me just a few days ago that you wouldn't practice out here alone?”

Frankie resisted the urge to roll her eyes as she stared into his jade-green ones. “I'm *not* alone. This is the public session.”

He gestured to the empty rink. “Public ended half an hour ago.”

“Huh?” Frankie blinked a few times and glanced up at the hockey scoreboard displaying the time. It was two thirty. Her shoulders hunched. Where had the time gone? “Oh, I didn't realize.”

“Clearly.” The grump pointed to the door. “Now, if you don't mind, I

need you to clear off the ice. Aaron can't wait any longer." Aaron sat atop the Zamboni with an amused expression on his face. "The ice needs a cut so it's ready for the three p.m. freestyle session. I have lessons to teach."

The grump was a coach? Huh. Leslie did mention there were some coaches here who didn't teach any skating academy classes. Made sense. But still, she couldn't see this guy working with kids.

Frankie blew out air. "I'm done. I'm sorry." She started toward the door, the grump hot on her tail.

He shut the door to the ice behind her as she heard the Zamboni turn on and enter. She collected her skate guards from the ledge by the plexiglass.

The grump stood there, arms crossed, leaning against the door, watching her. "That's twice now that I've caught you skating alone. You clearly have no respect for the rules of the rink. I should take you to Jack's office and see what he has to say about it."

Alarm bells went off in Frankie's head. She swallowed hard. Words started to tumble out of her mouth. "You're wrong. I *do* take the rules seriously. Safety will always be one of, if not the most, important thing to me. Both times you found me it was happenstance. Please, believe me." Her legs trembled. "I need this job. I . . . I can get you character references."

The grump held up his hand. "Even if I cared, that wouldn't do anything for me."

Frankie made herself smaller. "I'm sorry," she repeated in a hushed whisper.

The man ran a hand over his beard. Frankie noticed for the first time that the pocket of the jacket had fancy white embroidery that read "Mr. C." Heat seared her cheeks. There was only one person who could have a name that started with the letter C. She gulped.

“Charlie!” Leslie shouted in a shrill voice. Both their heads turned to the left. “What are you doing terrorizing my newest skating school instructor?”

All the signs were there. How could I have been so stupid as to miss it? Was it the hair? I mean I vaguely remember that Charlie used to keep it super short. Come to think of it, he never used to have any scruff either.

Frankie shook her head. There was no denying that only Charlie would walk around the Sequoia Valley Ice Center with a cocky swagger as if they’d owned the place.

CHAPTER 4



“Well?” The spitfire of a woman walked right up to her brother and into his personal space, standing a head shorter than him. “I’m waiting for an answer.”

Charlie’s nostrils flared. “It’s none of your business. This conversation is between me and her—”

“Her name is Frankie, and it *is* my business.” Leslie’s eyes flashed. “I won’t have you acting like a rude, obnoxious bully to the staff. You can treat *me* however you want, but the staff is off-limits. You’re out of line and I’m calling you out on it. After I sort Frankie out, you and I need to have a chat.”

He glared. “I don’t have time—”

One look from Leslie silenced him. Frankie was impressed. She needed to learn how to school her face in the same manner as her supervisor.

“Yes, you do. If you’re running late for your first lesson, maybe you could ask Frankie if she’d be willing to get whoever you have started on warm-ups.” She turned her head. “No pressure, of course. You don’t owe Charlie anything.”

“I’d do it for the kids,” she said in a hushed tone.

“Thank you,” Leslie said.

“But she’s—” he sputtered, throwing up his hands.

“More than qualified.” Leslie crossed her arms. “Frankie just retired from show skating and has more experience than almost every single member of

the teaching staff.”

Frankie’s body warmed.

“Fine. I’m too tired to argue with you.” Charlie closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. “I normally have Richelle first. She’s working on her novice moves in the field. Have her warm up with forward and backward power pulls.”

Leslie stepped to the side. “Good, now that that’s sorted, you can apologize.”

His eyes opened. His forehead was still creased with tension. His eyes darted from Leslie to Frankie. She noticed for the first time that they were red, almost bloodshot. “Frank . . . I . . . uh . . .”

Leslie cleared her throat. “Her name is Frankie.”

He tried a second time. “Frankie, I’m sorry,” he grunted.

She managed a curt nod, slightly annoyed that a grown man had to be told by his sister to apologize.

“That’s not a decent enough apology, but it’s a start.” Leslie took hold of Charlie’s shoulders, spun him around, and gave him a small push. “The clock says it’s two forty. I’ll meet you in your office in five minutes. In the meantime, go shave. You look like a caveman. If you’re going to grow a beard, at least make sure it’s neat. You know what Jack will do if he sees you like *that*.”

Charlie shoved his hands in his pockets and slowly started walking away from the rink, muttering something under his breath. Leslie and Frankie watched his retreating form.

Leslie fanned the air. “He needs a shower too. Good grief. He smells worse than the locker room after a hockey game.” Placing her hands on Frankie’s shoulders, Leslie studied her. “Are you okay? I’m truly sorry for

the way he treated you. I hope you'll believe me when I say no member of the rink's staff should be treated with such disrespect."

"I'm fine. I think I'm still a little shocked." Her muscles slowly started to relax. "I can't believe the two of you are related. He's so . . . uh . . ."

"The words you're searching for are irritable and ill-tempered." Leslie's eyelids fluttered. "Not that I want to make any excuses for him, but you've caught him at a bad time. It didn't hit me until this morning that the anniversary of the accident was coming up this week. Even after five years, his emotions are like a tangled knot. He really shouldn't be at the rink, but unfortunately, I don't have the power to boot him out."

Frankie's eyes widened. Accident? Did that have anything to do with why he had been so angry at her? She sorted through her memories. His words echoed in her mind. *"I thought we had gone through this already. Didn't you tell me just a few days ago that you wouldn't practice out here alone?"* Had he gotten injured himself while he was practicing alone?

"I'll make sure he gives you a proper apology when he's back to himself." Leslie rubbed the back of her neck. "Anyway, I heard most of your conversation with Charlie, but what did he say to you before I got here?"

Frankie returned to the present. As diplomatically as she could, she recounted today's exchange, as well as their first encounter, and the coffee incident.

"Again, I'm sorry for the way he's treated you. There're a couple other people he's crossed the line with too." Leslie's lips thinned. She glanced at the clock on the scoreboard above the rink. "I hate to do this, but I'm going to run out on you in a minute."

Frankie blinked slowly. "I'll take care of Richelle if he's not back." Leslie shot her a grateful smile. "Can you tell me what she looks like?"

“Richelle is about eight years old. She always wears a sparkly pink headband and carries a purple unicorn-shaped tissue-box holder. If you have trouble finding her, let Aaron know. He’s best friends with Richelle’s brother.”

“Got it.”

“I really appreciate this, and I won’t forget it.”

* * *

“Relax, Richelle. You’re so stiff. Is there any way you can make your edges a little deeper for me?”

“What do you mean, Miss Frankie?” The petite skater cocked her head to the side and stared quizzically at her. She reminded Frankie of a baby owl with her large doe-like eyes. “Mr. C told me I was doing a good job.”

Leslie made it look so easy when she was explaining things to the level ones and twos. How could she explain what she wanted to Richelle?

“You *are* doing an amazing job, but let’s see if we can make this footwork sequence even better,” Frankie emphasized. She motioned for the skater to hold on to the wall. “Let’s do the inside three and rocker pattern one more time. But every time you do a new step or turn, I want you to bend your knees as far as they can go.” Frankie tapped the student’s knees. “Your goal is to try and push the tongue of your boot out of your skate.”

“Like this?” Richelle bent her knees like a ballet dancer performing a deep plié.

“Yes! That’s great. Just like that.”

Richelle stuck her tongue out. “It feels weird.”

Frankie grinned. “You’ll get used to it.”

The skater shrugged. “Okay.”

From her position at the center of the ice, Frankie intently watched the eight-year-old repeat the pattern. By reputation, the novice-level Moves in the Field test was the most difficult of the American Skating Union’s tests to pass. Frankie had taken the test herself three times before passing. Each time, the three-person judging panel had marked her down for the smallest things. She’d promised herself if she ever became a coach, she’d make sure that didn’t happen to her students.

“Bend even more,” she shouted.

Richelle took the correction and picked up speed. Frankie looked on as she glided past her, opting to do the full serpentine pattern instead of the half pattern. Her blades made sharp ripping noises, indicating deep edges.

“Keep your chin up and bring your free leg’s boot to your heel,” a male voice suddenly interjected.

Frankie jumped. Her hand flew to her chest. Off to her left was Charlie. She’d been so focused on watching Richelle that she’d missed him entering the ice.

“I didn’t mean to startle you. Sorry,” he said in an even tone, eyes glued on his student. “I didn’t think I’d be this late. Her lesson is almost over. What have you two worked on?”

“We did power pulls for warm-up, then started in on forward and backward twizzles. She said it was the move that gave her the most trouble.”

He nodded. “I’d say she tends to struggle more on the forward loops, but her twizzles do need work.”

Frankie leaned against the boards. “She’s a gifted skater, just a little rough around the edges.”

“Agreed. It’s hard to believe she’s only been skating a year and a half.”

Frankie's jaw dropped. "And she's working on *novice* moves already?"

Charlie didn't respond. At that moment, Richelle spotted her coach and let out an ecstatic, "Mr. C!" The tiny skater raced over to them and wrapped her arms around his legs. "Miss Frankie said you might not make it today. It made me sad because seeing you is one of my favorite things about Mondays." She released him. "Where did all the hair on your face go? I'm glad it's gone. I didn't like it."

Frankie's gaze traveled to Charlie. She hadn't noticed that he'd shaved. He appeared much younger. She could make out a defined jawline and a set of high cheekbones.

"I'm glad you approve." Charlie ran a hand across his jaw. "My big sister made me get rid of it."

"My big sister is bossy too." Richelle wrinkled her nose. "She's always telling me what to do, but Mommy says I don't always have to listen to her. Maybe you can tell your mommy to tell your sister to not be bossy to you."

Frankie hid a smile.

"I'll keep that in mind."

Was this the same grump she'd encountered earlier? He seemed so relaxed and at ease with Richelle. They clearly had a strong student-coach bond.

"Your footwork looked better."

Her large brown eyes danced. "Thank you, Mr. C. Miss Frankie told me to just bend my knees more. It's hard."

Charlie nodded solemnly. "Yes, it is, but Miss Frankie is right. If you bend your knees more, it'll help you make the jump to the junior and senior levels quicker."

His words, however, were lost on Richelle, who tugged on the edge of his

jacket. “Mr. C?”

“Yes?”

She pointed to the fishing-pole harness. “Can we please, please, please try some double loops? McKenzie told me at school that she landed her double loop on Friday. I want to land mine too. I spent all weekend and my recess today practicing off-ice jumps, just like you told me to.”

“We only have five minutes left. I don’t think that’s enough time for the harness, but we have enough time for you to try one or two without it. Do you remember the drills I showed you?”

Richelle nodded and walked through the jump.

A part of Frankie wanted to stay and see how the rest of Richelle’s lesson went, but she also didn’t wish to spend any more time around Charlie than necessary. She weighed the pros and cons in her mind. Should she stay? Or should she go?

“Miss Frankie, did that look right?”

“Uh . . .” She hadn’t been paying attention. Charlie nodded behind Richelle. Frankie flashed Richelle a thumbs-up. “Yes, it was great.”

“Are you leaving?” A look of distress crossed the child’s face. “Mr. C, can you make Miss Frankie stay a few more minutes?”

Charlie blinked slowly. “Richelle, Miss Frankie might have places to be. We can ask her nicely, but we never make anyone stay.”

Frankie knew the girl only had four minutes left. “I’ll stay until your lesson’s over. Why don’t you show me this double loop?”

Richelle clapped her hands together. “Okay!”

Cheerfully, she took off and set up for the jump, taking a set of back crossovers around some skaters working on their spins in the center of the ice.

“Bend your knees more,” both Charlie and Frankie said at the same time. They glanced at one another, then quickly back to Richelle. Twin patches of pink appeared on his cheeks.

Richelle held a long entry edge and attempted the jump, but as she came down to land, it was a quarter turn short of the full rotation. She stepped out of the landing.

“Oh, she’s so close! If she didn’t rush the takeoff, she would’ve landed it,” Frankie said.

“That’s the best her double loop has looked.”

Richelle brushed the stray pieces of white snow from her black skating pants and returned to her two coaches.

“Slow down your takeoff. Your goal is to press deep into the ice enough that you can spring up and off of your toe pick like a bunny.” Charlie walked her through the jump drills again.

“You’ve told me that before, Mr. C, but I don’t get it.”

He puffed his cheeks out.

“Richelle, can you jump up and down for me?” Frankie asked. She nodded and jumped in place. “Did you feel how you had to bend your knees, and push through your skate as if you were going up onto your tippy toes when you jumped? That’s what Mr. C is trying to get you to do.”

Richelle’s eyes were glazed over. Words weren’t helping.

She must be a visual learner. It worked well when she was able to feel what she was supposed to do.

“Watch what my legs do on my double loop.” Frankie took a few steps, set up, and exaggerated her takeoff. Loops had always been the easiest jump for her. Even with so little speed, she could crank out a double without any problems.

Frankie stroked over to Charlie. “Nice one,” he said.

She didn’t think he was capable of giving her a compliment.

Richelle looked at her in awe. “That was so high and floaty. Can you do a triple?”

Frankie nodded.

“Cool! Can I see?”

Charlie cleared his throat. “If you want to try one more double loop, you have one minute left.”

“Times up already?” she huffed. “I wanna do one more. I think I get what you’re supposed to do now.”

“This is your last attempt, Richelle; make it count.” Charlie held out his hand and offered her a fist bump. Frankie watched in amusement. Taking his phone from his pocket, he discreetly started recording her.

“Good speed,” Frankie mused aloud.

Tracking her movements, they watched and waited, collectively holding their breaths. The tiny skater jumped, spun around two times, and landed on a strong edge. Her mouth dropped open.

“Yes!” Charlie shouted and raced over to Richelle. They hugged. “You did it! I am so proud of you, tiny mite.”

“Wait until I tell Mommy and McKenzie!”

Frankie thought maybe she was wrong about him. Did he have a soft side hidden under all the layers of grump?

Charlie released Richelle.

“Miss Frankie, did you see? Did you see?” Richelle clapped her hands together.

“I did; that was so good!”

Richelle skated over and hugged her. “Thank you, Miss Frankie! You are

the second-bestest coach ever!”

An Asian woman in a tan parka coat and plaid Burberry scarf rushed over to the door of the rink and pointed to her watch. “Richelle, we have to go. We’ll be late for your piano lesson.”

“Mommy, guess what?”

“You can tell me about it in the car. Let’s go!”

Richelle’s face fell. “Yes, Mommy.”

“You can take your skates off and change in the car. I’m parked in the usual spot.”

Stepping off the ice, Richelle collected her skate guards and waved goodbye.

“Go, I’m right behind you.” Her mother urged her forward. “Mr. Welch, please make sure you’re on time next time. I pay you for a thirty-minute skating lesson, not thirty-one minutes.”

Charlie’s lip curled. His shoulders stiffened. “Yes, ma’am.”

Richelle’s mother nodded and took her leave.

“Rude much?”

“She’s a tiger mom.” Charlie shrugged. “Thanks again for the help. I’m late for my next lesson.”

“No problem. Always happy to help.”

He didn’t wait for any sign of acknowledgment as he rushed off to a teenage boy who appeared to be about fourteen or fifteen years old.

Maybe Charlie was only good with kids? *Hmm . . . the mystery continues.*

* * *

On Tuesday, Leslie gave Frankie the green light to lead the level-five class. Her work with Richelle had boosted her confidence. She felt more than prepared.

“After you turn, you’re going to kick the leg, just like you’re aiming for a soccer ball. Then, you jump.”

She skated up and down the line of teenage and adult students practicing their Salchows, the first single jump most skaters learned. A warm, fuzzy feeling gripped hold. These students were here because they had chosen skating. Their positive attitudes and encouragement for one another were infectious. Frankie hoped she’d be able to continue working with the adults.

Class ended a few minutes later. Leslie and Frankie skated to the boards for a drink of water and to collect the roster for the last class of the evening.

“You’re really settling into coaching. I’m impressed. You’re both patient and confident with the students. It’s all about finding the right words to explain what to do. People think that it’s easier to work with higher-level skaters, but it’s not. There are so many more components to work on, like dealing with frustration. Take the adult class, for instance—”

Leslie stopped talking as a student approached them, her blade making a loud scraping noise. “Hi, Leah; did you forget something?” Frankie asked.

Leah shook her head. “No. Mr. Charlie was by the door and asked if I could grab you. He said it would be quick.”

Frankie glanced over Leah’s shoulder. She noticed the skating program’s director lurking in the shadows.

“You can tell him I’ll be there in one second.”

“Okay.” She glided back to the exit.

“He couldn’t wait thirty minutes?” Leslie rolled her eyes. “Tell him you only have two minutes. The next class starts in ten.”

Frankie shrugged, wondering what Charlie could need. He didn't normally stay at the rink so late since he was on the ice first thing in the morning. She stepped off the ice and got a good look at Charlie, his hands in his pockets. There were dark purple shadows under his eyes. Messy strands of curly hair poked out at odd angles from under his signature beanie.

He looks exhausted, like he hasn't had a good night's sleep in a while.

He nodded to her. "Frankie."

"Charlie." She swallowed hard. "Leah said you had something to talk to me about?"

His voice came out raspy. "I wanted to know if your offer to help me out still stands?"

"Of course."

He rubbed his eyes. "Are you able to stay after your last class tonight? I understand if you can't."

Frankie was taken aback. "How late is late?"

"I'll try not to keep you more than an hour. I screwed up and I know Leslie can't stay tonight. I thought maybe I might be able to ask you."

"What do you need help with?" She was puzzled.

"Paperwork. I read my calendar wrong. There's a test session scheduled for the Sequoia Valley Figure Skating Club's members this weekend. I thought it was next weekend." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "All the kids have to be registered on the computer by tomorrow morning. I thought since you have a background in competitive skating, you might be more useful to me than one of the teenage coaches."

She winced. She knew he probably didn't mean it as an insult, but that was how it sounded to her. She was tired and hungry, but as much as she wanted to go home, grab dinner, and lounge on the couch, seeing Charlie in

such a pitiful state tugged at her heartstrings. He might be a royal grump, but she couldn't say no to a person in trouble.

"I'll stay."

"Thank you." He inclined his head to her. "I better let you go before the lioness comes to protect her cub."

Frankie tilted her head to the side. "Lioness?"

"Leslie," he grunted.

"Oh."

"I'll be in my office. Come on up when you're done coaching."

Frankie returned to where Leslie stood. Her fellow coach's eyes locked on to her, like a sharp-eyed falcon. "What did he want?"

Frankie shrugged. She had nothing to hide. "Help with paperwork."

"He could've asked me." Leslie grimaced.

Frankie cocked her head to the side. "He said you couldn't stay."

"I wasn't planning on it, but I can. My boyfriend is in town for a short visit. I haven't seen him in a couple weeks. He'll understand if I tell him my bro needs me to stay."

"It's no biggie. I can do it." Frankie brushed her off. "Besides, it might give us a chance to clear the air."

"Are you positive?"

"Yes."

"I promise, in spite of all his flaws, he's a good guy. When we finish this class, go straight to his office. I'll take care of the cleanup."

The ten-minute buffer between classes was over. Children from the final class of the night began to enter the ice.

"If you're sure," Frankie said.

Picking up the clipboard to begin marking their students as present, Leslie

said in a hushed tone, “A word of warning: Charlie is one of the most disorganized guys you’ll ever meet. Be prepared for stacks of random papers and nothing to be where he claims it is. Don’t let him keep you until midnight, and try to be patient with him.”

Frankie couldn’t help but wonder, what was she getting herself into?

Plastering a big smile on her face, Leslie clapped her hands together. Eight sets of curious eyes focused on the two teachers.

“How are we doing tonight?”

“Gooooooooooooood.”

“Are we ready to work on bunny hops tonight?”

“Yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeees!”

CHAPTER 5



Frankie rapped her knuckles on the door of Charlie's office. A muffled voice instructed her to enter. She let out an audible gasp as she slowly pushed the door open. Charlie's office wasn't just messy—it looked as if some wild animals had entered it and decided to throw themselves a party.

From what she could tell, the room was laid out in a manner similar to Jack's office. It contained a desk, computer, printer, bookshelf, and two chairs for visitors. Every available inch of flat surface space was covered by binders, stacks of paper, books, coffee cups, boxes, and other assorted items. Crumpled balls of paper that had missed the recycle bin littered the floor. Framed images that might have otherwise hung on the wall were propped against the bookcase.

At least there aren't any takeout containers on the desk, she thought. Coffee cups are bad enough.

Charlie jumped to his feet, sending the desk chair crashing into the wall behind him. His face was slowly turning a shade of candy-apple red. "Is it eight already?"

Frankie nodded, too transfixed by the state of the room to speak.

He walked around the side of his desk and tossed the jackets piled up on the visitor's chair onto the printer. Thrown off balance, the items on top of it crashed to the ground. Charlie groaned.

She covered her mouth. Her body shook with laughter.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t laugh.” She clutched her stomach and wiped a stray tear from the corner of her eye. “It’s just, this room is so messy.”

Charlie scratched the back of his head. “I know.”

“I know I’m here for the paperwork, but I can help you do a quick tidy-up first if you’d like,” Frankie offered, securing her hair into a casual bun.

“No,” he said a little too quickly. “It’s a pigsty, but it’s the only way I know where everything is.”

I find that hard to believe. A muscle in her forehead spasmed. She let out a deep breath. As much as she despised mess and working in a cluttered area, she had to remember this was Charlie’s space and not hers.

“Okay. In that case, where do you want to start?”

He gestured to the now-empty guest chair. “Have a seat.”

She caught the lingering scent of earth, cedar, and pine, transporting her back to her childhood and the first and only time she and her dad had camped near Lake Wakahanra.

So much had gone wrong during that trip. They’d neglected to bring sleeping mats, but perhaps more importantly, a liner for the tent. During the heavy rainfall during the night, the tent had collapsed upon them.

They ended up sleeping in the car that night. As cold and as miserable as they were, her dad made it up to her the next morning when they roasted marshmallows and made s’mores for breakfast. He tried so hard to do what “normal” families did. She never felt as if she’d missed out on anything.

She blinked a few times. Back in the present, she sat across from Charlie and rested her hands on the desktop. “So, um . . . how many people do you have testing? Are they all kids or do we have any adults?”

He sorted through the pile of papers under the computer monitor. “Twenty-five participants. All kids.”

“Do you mind if I write on this notepad?”

“Knock yourself out.”

She nodded and started scribbling the information down on a blank legal notepad she’d spied sitting under a thick manila folder. “Of those, how many are testing singles? Any ice dance tests?”

“Yes, to both of those. Two kids are doing the preliminary-level solo dances—the Dutch Waltz, Canasta Tango, and Rhythm Blues. Everybody else is doing their singles Moves in the Field or Free Skate tests.”

As Charlie spoke, she felt as if she were experiencing a refresher course on skate tests. There were three tracks in competitive ice skating—singles, pairs, and ice dance. Singles and pairs had two tests a skater needed to pass for each level, a Moves in the Field test and a Free Skate test.

For ice dance tests, each level had three compulsory dance patterns a skater needed to learn to music. All skaters started on the singles track. Once they reached the second level, they could begin taking pairs and ice dance tests.

Frankie added what Charlie told her to her notes. “Perfect.” She glanced up. “If I remember correctly, each participant is going to need a waiver and the corresponding judging form for the level.”

“That’s right.” He nodded. “Lower-level tests only need one judging form and one judge. Anything past the pre-juvenile level needs three forms and three judges.”

She tapped her pen against the desk. “Have your judges been able to change their dates to this week?”

“So far so good. I have two judges confirmed. There’s one I haven’t heard back from yet.” Charlie tapped his mouse to life. “All the forms we need are on the American Skating Union’s website.” He typed slowly with

his pointer fingers, glancing from the keyboard to the screen every few keystrokes. A full minute passed. He groaned and rubbed his eyes.

Frankie chewed on her lips and drummed her fingers on the desktop. What could be taking so long? “Do you need some help?” she asked impatiently.

His face burned red. “My . . . ugh, my computer is running slow.”

“Is it updating? Or is it frozen?”

He sat there for several long moments, squinting at the screen. “Uh . . . I’m not good with computers. I don’t know what it needs. Would you mind taking a look?”

He stood and walked over to the window overlooking the parking lot, his back turned to her. He slid his hands into his pockets.

She plopped herself into the vacant chair. The ASU site was open. A message on the page read: **The number of log-in attempts has been exceeded. Please enter your email to reset your password.**

“What’s your email address tied to the ASU page?” She glanced over the top of the monitor at him.

He spun around. “My email? It’s, uh . . . my name.”

“Which is?”

“Cwelch@email.com.”

Frankie’s eyes narrowed. “You spelled your email wrong in the log-in box.”

“I did?”

“Yes, you did.”

His shoulders hunched, and his entire neck was now red. He rubbed his temples. “How could I make such a stupid mistake?”

Her expression softened. *I’ll cut him some slack. He obviously isn’t*

sleeping well. I know when I haven't slept, I can't think straight. It must be tied to that accident Leslie alluded to yesterday.

"I'll tell you what. I'll take over the computer side of things if you tell me what needs to be done. It'll give your eyes a chance to rest."

He looked her up and down with uncertainty. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." She cleared the log-in box and typed in Charlie's email correctly this time. It populated a saved password. "What do you need from the site?"

"We need to print the forms from the forms library and manually add each test the kids are taking to their member profiles."

Frankie nodded. "Okay, let's sort out how many kids are taking each test and go from there."

* * *

Frankie's stomach growled loudly just as they'd about finished two and a half hours later. "I'm sorry." She placed a hand on her stomach. It growled again. "Do you mind if I run to the pros' room? I have a granola bar in my bag."

Charlie covered a yawn with his hand. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Right before I left for the rink? Two-thirty?"

"That was hours ago. It's eleven." His eyes widened. "You haven't eaten dinner? Why didn't you say anything?"

"I usually eat when I get home."

"Come on." He stood and stretched. "The least I can do is make you something to eat in the café. Are you okay with pizza?" He picked up his keys.

Frankie licked her lips. "I'll eat anything, but pizza sounds amazing."

They walked down the hall. Seeing the ice complex at night was eerie. Through the glass, the two rinks were inky black. The only sound was the electric hum of the vending machines. Charlie led them through the door next to the skate rental room and tapped the switch, leaving his keys on the counter. Fluorescent light flooded the room.

Opening an industrial-sized stainless-steel refrigerator, he poked his head inside and removed a bowl of dough, as well as tomato sauce and cheese. “We can fight over the toppings in a minute.” He preheated the oven, then searched for a pan and rolling pin.

“I’m not picky, but my favorite type of pizza is Hawaiian if you’re asking.”

Charlie grimaced. “Pineapples do NOT belong on pizza.”

She placed a hand on her hip. “Says who?”

“Me.” He rolled his eyes. “Didn’t you hear me?”

They shared a laugh. It was the first time she’d seen Charlie loosen up enough to show he had a sense of humor.

“I prefer supreme pizzas with everything on it,” he said, “but if you want pineapple, we can do a half-Hawaiian and half-supreme.”

“Great.”

Charlie washed his hands and flattened a handful of dough. He gestured his head toward the fridge. “Would you mind pulling out some of the toppings? We should have a decent number of choices.”

He used a ladle to spread the red sauce.

“I see mushrooms, olives, bell peppers, onions, pepperoni, and pineapple. No bacon though.”

He snorted.

Retrieving the plastic containers, she lined them up on the counter and

removed the lids. Charlie had started to sprinkle cheese over the crust. “Any food intolerances or allergies I need to be aware of?”

“Nope. Let’s just make a supreme pizza and I’ll add my pineapples separately. To be honest, I don’t like them hot.” She washed her hands in the sink. “How did you know you’d be able to find all the ingredients in here?”

Charlie opened the pepperoni and randomly placed them on top of the cheese. “Who do you think prepares the pizzas for the weekend birthday parties the rink hosts?”

“Oh.” She passed him the mushrooms and olives. “I thought the rink might have an events director or would have the pizzas delivered.”

“Nah.” He shook his head. “Events directors are expensive. It’s just Jack, myself, and Leslie running the place. Jack takes care of the business side of things for the rink. I’m supposed to do skating side of things . . .” He hesitated. “But most of the time it’s Leslie who takes over.

“We learned early on that making pizzas in-house is more cost-effective than ordering out.” Charlie walked over to the oven and slid the tray inside. He checked the time and temperature. “Twelve minutes should do it. There are some bar stools over here.”

They sat across from one another. She rested her head on her arm, suddenly tired. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you seem to be stretched thinly. Have you thought about hiring an assistant?” Frankie knew she was walking a fine line as a new employee, but exhaustion was clouding her judgment.

Charlie sighed. “We don’t have the budget for it. We had to buy a new Zamboni.”

“Ah.” She changed subjects. “So, how much older is Leslie than you?”

He stared at his hands. “We’re actually twins.”

A twin? She tried to picture the woman with multicolored hair standing next to Charlie. Physically, they had a slightly similar build, but that was where their similarities ended. “I’m having a hard time seeing it.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. We’re the complete opposite of one another in every way imaginable. Leslie’s always been the type of person who hates fitting in, hence the zany-colored hair. But me . . . I’m the twin who’s reserved and never wanted to stick out or cause any trouble. It was hard enough being bullied in school for being a figure skater.”

Frankie’s shoulders drooped. “I’m so sorry. Kids can be so cruel.”

Charlie shrugged. “I won’t lie; it *was* painful, but at least when I was at the rink, none of that mattered. I could just leave the outside world behind.”

She sat up. “Just a guess, but you were tall for your age and one of the very few male skaters at your rink.”

He smirked. “Correct.”

She could picture the hormone-crazed teenage girls taking notice of him and worshiping the ground he walked on.

At her rink, everyone had crushes on the ice dance guys—Jason, Felix, and Phil. They were in their twenties when she and the other girls were around thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. The guys would always take the time to say hello and chat with them for a few minutes even though they saw them as kids. When they were in the gym working out, she and her fellow skaters looked for any excuse to walk by the windows to peek in.

“I’m sure you had quite a few female admirers. I hope you treated them decently.”

“I was arrogant and cocky. Who wouldn’t be when you’re the center of attention?” Charlie ran a hand through his locks. For the first time, she

noticed there was a silvery-white scar running diagonally from his forehead into his hair, normally hidden by his beanie.

“Somehow, I can’t see Leslie letting you get away with that.”

“You’re right. She made sure my ego was cut down to size when it needed to be.”

Frankie crossed her legs. “She doesn’t take crap from anyone, does she?”

“Nope,” he agreed. “It’s one of the reasons why Les is an outstanding hockey player. Our rink back home near Vancouver, Washington, didn’t have any hockey teams for girls, so growing up, she played with the guys. It toughened her up.”

“Uh-huh. So you two both have type-A personalities.” She looked him up and down. It felt like she were assembling the pieces of a puzzle. “I’m just speculating, but did you and Leslie happen to get into some sort of disagreement?”

“You’ve hit the nail on the head. We’re both too stubborn to try and figure things out.”

The timer went off. Charlie excused himself to check on their pizza.

As he walked away, she wondered what type of disagreement the siblings could have had with one another. Had it been over something work related? Or more personal? How long had it been going on?

Charlie returned momentarily with a piping-hot pizza and set it on a cooling rack. She soaked in the sight of the golden-brown crust, and the perfectly curled pepperonis. The cheese had melted, now soft and gooey. Her mouth watered and her mind went blank. All she could focus on was eating their culinary confection.

He sliced the pizza and plated two pieces for each of them. “Don’t forget to add your pineapple.”

She snapped her fingers together. “I almost forgot.” Grabbing the container from the counter, she popped off the lid and sprinkled them over the pizza.

“So good!” she said, biting into it.

“Eat up. There’s plenty more.”

“I haven’t been able to have pizza in a long time.”

“Why?” Charlie chuckled. “You don’t skate competitively anymore. Having a slice or two every now and again won’t hurt you.”

“It’s not that.” She shook her head. “It’s my dad. I try not to have pizza in the house. It’s too tempting. His doctor wants him to try and eat healthier while he recovers. If it were up to Dad, he would live on frozen entrees and takeout.”

Charlie’s face sobered. “I’m sorry to hear he hasn’t been well.”

“Thanks.” She sighed. “He’s doing better now. He fell and broke his hip recently.”

“Is it just you two, then?”

She nodded.

He took a bite of his pizza and chewed slowly. “Thank you again for all your help tonight. You really don’t know how much it means to me. I know I’m not the world’s easiest person to work with.”

“You’re welcome.” She patted her face with a napkin. “Just promise me one thing . . . You’ll try not to be so grumpy the next time we see one another.”

“It’s a deal.”

They ate the remainder of the pizza in thoughtful silence.

CHAPTER 6



Frankie's dad sipped his decaffeinated coffee and sighed over breakfast the next morning. "Not strong enough."

"It tastes identical to your old favorite blend from Norma's Cafe." Frankie popped open the box of cereal and poured her honey flakes into a white ceramic bowl.

"I survived on coffee for fifty years. I can tell a light roast from a dark. A blonde roast from a french roast. It doesn't taste anything like it should." He pushed the cup aside. "Maybe I should just switch to tea."

She rolled her eyes. "Drama king."

He ignored her comment and changed subjects. "You got in late last night. Was it a date? Any young men I need to give 'the talk' to?"

"Daaaaaaaaaaaaaad." She almost dropped the carton of milk in laughter.

"What?" He schooled his face, so his features remained neutral.

"I wasn't on a date, nor do I have any plans to put myself on the dating scene. I had to work late."

He popped a piece of bread into the toaster. "Uh-huh."

"It's true. My boss, Charlie, had some paperwork he needed help with. I offered to stay and help out. That's it." She poured herself some coffee and took a sip. She smacked her lips together. "I can't taste any difference."

"Mr. Blanks?"

She grimaced. "Please don't call him that. You'll scar me for life."

The folds of his mouth twitched.

“Dad . . . quit looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

She rested her head against the cool countertop. “Ugh. This is too much before I’ve had my second cup of coffee.”

The toast popped up in the toaster. He placed it on his plate. “Your cereal is going to get soggy if it sits there much longer.” Opening the butter container, he dipped a knife into the soft topping, and started to spread it over the crunchy top of the bread. “So, Gemma sent me a few links to that dating show you two young ladies are obsessed with, *Cupid’s Fate*?”

“You mean *Cupid’s Arrow*?”

“That’s the one.” His head bobbed up and down. “I watched the first two episodes last night. What I don’t understand is why Selena and Mackenzie opted to send TJ home. It should’ve been Mike. He seems more like the type of young man Yvonne might like. Gemma agrees with me.”

The reality television show her dad mentioned involved two best friends searching for a suitable guy for their third bachelorette friend to date, and hopefully, fall in love with. Every week a different contestant was sent home by the two best friends.

Frankie took a bite of her cereal and chewed slowly. She couldn’t believe that her father had watched a dating show and had spoken to her best friend about it. Her life had changed so much in the last few months. Her two takeaways were that one, she needed to find her dad some new hobbies, and two, today was going to be a very long day.

Choosing not to comment on the TV show, she said, “Dad, I’m going to go grocery shopping, then skate in the public session. I’ll probably be home around two thirty. Is there anything you need while I’m out?”

“Nope.” He sat down across from her. “I’ve got everything I need here.”

“What are your plans for today?” She sipped her coffee.

“I’m going to watch the remaining episodes of *Cupid’s Arrow*. Maybe we can discuss it when you get home.”

Her eyebrows twitched and her facial muscles tightened. A very, very long day. “Great.”

* * *

On the way out to the parking lot, Frankie texted Gemma.

Frankie: You really had to get my dad hooked on our show? Gah. He’s going to be so annoying until he catches up to where we are.

Gemma: You’re welcome. *Smiling emoji* I never thought he’d get into it, but he’s sent me some hilarious texts. I have some screenshots I can send to you.

Frankie: You’re awake! And no thanks. Whatever you and my dad talked about can stay between you two.

Gemma: It’s not anything earth-shattering. Going to bed soon, I promise. And the texts are mostly harmless.

Frankie: Mostly?

Gemma: Let’s just say it makes me wonder how your dad has stayed single all these years.

Frankie: He was married once. It was years before he adopted me.

Gemma: I know you mentioned finding your dad a hobby the other day. .

Frankie: I’m afraid to ask.

Gemma: Senior dating is a thing. Maybe you could see if he's up for testing the waters.

Frankie stared at her phone screen blankly. Her immediate thought was to completely dismiss Gemma's suggestion. However, the longer she had to mull over it, the more intrigued she became. It could be a fantastic means to having her dad leave the house for a few hours, and maybe make some new friends.

Frankie: I'll run it by him later.

Gemma: If it would be easier for you, I personally volunteer to help him set up his dating profile.

She laughed.

Frankie: I feel like senior dating could make an amazing concept for a reality TV show.

Gemma: I'd watch it. *Winking emoji*

Frankie: Leaving for the rink now.

Gemma: Good luck with Mr. Blanks today.

Frankie: *Rolling eye emoji*

Gemma: You know you love me.

Frankie chose not to respond and shoved her phone into her pocket.

* * *

Frankie skated a couple laps around the rink to warm up, weaving her way in and out of a handful of recreational skaters. Making a game plan in her head, she transitioned onto a back outside edge, picked up speed, and set up for an easy double Axel toward the empty center of the ice.

The jump could be tricky for some due to its unique forward takeoff. She remembered how at sixteen, it had been one of the most challenging jumps to learn. All her triples had come before even the double Axel. She'd fallen thousands of times trying to figure out the proper timing and take off. Even with crash pads, her hips, knees, and butt had been bruised and battered for weeks. None of the corrections her coach offered to her clicked.

Then, one day, a visiting Russian coach gave her the one correction that had magically fixed everything. "*Change your entry setup. Your body is falling too far outside of the circle.*" As soon as she and Mr. Franks took the words to heart and shortened her steps and edge into the jump, it became one she could land with pinpoint accuracy overnight.

Bending her left leg, Frankie swung her right leg into a position that resembled a lowercase "h." Wrapping her arms and legs in tightly to achieve the most aerodynamic position, she rotated two and a half times, and landed on a deep backward outside edge.

A few of the recreational skaters clapped. Others stared openly. Frankie gave them a nod of acknowledgment.

She could probably manage a double Axel-double toe and maybe a double Axel-triple toe. If she tried something harder like a triple flip or triple Lutz, she'd end up bailing halfway through the jump. She hadn't properly worked on them in a couple months.

Frankie repeated her entry pattern for a second double Axel attempt. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Charlie in a navy-blue beanie, observing her. She felt the need to show him what she was capable of, not certain why.

New plan. Let's try something completely different.

Putting her touring experience to use, Frankie kicked higher than normal

from a skid and delayed her rotation into the double Axel. It was a trick she had learned from one of the more experienced show skaters. Adding in another layer of difficulty, she landed the first jump with her left leg in front and immediately pushed off her toe pick for a triple loop.

Yet as ambitious as Frankie was, she could sense she lacked the right amount of height for the loop. On its exit, she landed and finished the rotation on the ice, fighting to stay on her feet as she ground her blade into it. She cringed as she heard the scratchy scraping noise.

We'll call that a double Axel-two and a quarter loop. It wasn't even close to being all the way around. But all in all, not bad for a first-ever attempt at that combo. It could've gone a lot worse.

Glancing to the boards, she saw Charlie had moved and stood at the door to the ice. With a frown, he pointed at her, and signaled for her to see him. She deflated and felt like a naughty child being caught doing something wrong.

After last night, she'd thought they'd moved past the point of him being testy with her. She'd changed her ice time so she skated in the public session. There were plenty of people around to "supervise" her. What had she done wrong now?

She let two kids cross in front of her, then exited the ice. "Hi, Charlie," she said in a cheery tone.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Her face fell. "Skating?"

We've had this conversation before.

He planted his hands on his hips. "A public session is *not* for doing big jumps like double Axels. There are too many safety hazards and liabilities out

there. What if a kid darts in front of you when you're taking off for a jump and you don't see them or can't stop in time?"

She tilted her head back and stared at the ceiling for a split second. "What do you want me to do? Skate before public or during? I've tried both options, and apparently neither works for you." She locked eyes with him. "I'm in a catch twenty-two. Help me out. What should I be doing?"

"Skate in the morning freestyle session," he stated matter-of-factly.

Frankie groaned. He made the solution sound so simple. "I thought you didn't want anyone but your students in those sessions."

"I changed my mind." He shrugged. "If you're going to *actually* practice, it's the best time for you to be on the ice. I cap the number of skaters on the morning ice at twelve. Unlike the public session, my students are all experienced and are trained to give the jumping skater or the skater running a program the right of way."

I could skate before Dad wakes up. This could work. It just means no more sleeping in. "What time would I be able to stop by?"

"Between four and eight," he offered.

Frankie nodded slowly. "What's the catch?"

"Why would there be a catch?" He fidgeted. "You did me a favor, and now I'm trying to be nice and do you a good turn. Karma. It's a real thing."

"Okay."

He lifted his chin and gestured to the ice. "I haven't seen a delayed double Axel in a long time. It's nice."

"Thank you." She smiled brightly.

"You were a show skater?" He leaned casually against the door frame.

"With Dreams on Ice."

He appraised her in a new light. "Did you skate as a principal skater or in

the ensemble?”

He should know this. Didn't he read my resume? Heat seared her cheeks. Maybe he didn't read it. After all, Jack is the one who hired me.

“Principal.”

“And have you ever done pairs?”

“Yes, up to the junior level.”

“Interesting.” He stroked his jaw. Before she could ask just what he meant by that, he turned and started to walk away. “See you Friday morning.” He waved.

CHAPTER 7



I shouldn't be nervous. It's just another freestyle session, Frankie thought to herself. She'd arrived at the rink at five on Friday morning. Watching skaters through the glass windows of the lobby, she recognized Charlie and the two coaches from the afternoon session where she'd worked with Richelle. All three coaches were bundled up in multiple layers for warmth. Metal thermoses, likely filled with coffee, were balanced on the edge of the boards between the water bottles and boxes of tissues belonging to the students.

The morning session had eight skaters on the ice. As she joined the group and stroked around the perimeter, she gave a nod of acknowledgment to her fellow coaches. Zipping up her puffer vest all the way to the top, she rubbed her forearms and picked up some speed, willing some warmth to return to her body. She despised not being able to feel her toes.

Appraising the skaters at the session, she noted that many were beginning the journey of learning their triple jumps. She recognized the protective shorts filled with padding to protect their hips and bottoms on the falls they were likely to take along the way.

Mental note to me—find my own padding and bring it with me for the day I manage to work up the courage to try flips and Lutzes.

For this session, Frankie decided to spend the first half on spins and devote the second half to jumps. If her jumps weren't there today, she'd move on to footwork.

Finding a patch of space in the center, she took a deep left outside edge windup entry into a spin combination. It was one of her favorite sequences when she'd performed as Belle. She'd expended a lot of effort to get the turn out of her leg and arch of her back just right on the layback. It wasn't a spin position she came by naturally. She'd never been a singles skater.

About halfway through the skate, as she was taking a drink of water between jumps, she heard Charlie holler at her, "Hey, Coach Frankie, can I borrow you for a moment?"

She screwed the top of her bottle back on and glided in his direction. A young teenage pairs team looked on with wide eyes. The girl had silky strawberry-blond hair and appeared to be about fourteen years old. The boy was much taller, with curly jet-black locks. She judged him to be about seventeen.

"Kaylee, Steve, this is Coach Frankie. Please say hello."

They greeted each other softly.

"We're working on learning some new elements for the upcoming season, but we're having a hard time understanding the split double-twist takeoff and catch. They've mastered it off the ice, but on the ice is another story. We were wondering if you wouldn't mind watching them and seeing if you could offer a few words of advice on the skill."

"Of course." Frankie smiled warmly. "Split twists are super tricky. I remember it being one of the hardest elements to learn. Nothing can really prepare you for it. What entry are you guys using?"

"We're doing a Lutz entry," Kaylee responded.

"Okay, great. Let's see it, then."

"You heard her, you two—go on, show her your best attempt." Charlie's voice was light and encouraging.

The pair nodded and took off from the boards.

“Thanks for doing this.” Charlie’s eyes tracked his charges. “You were great with Richelle. I hoped that if I asked you again, you might be able to give Kaylee and Steve some helpful advice. You’ll see what I mean in a minute.”

“Of course,” she sputtered, slightly stunned by the compliment.

Mr. C the coach was a person she could picture herself getting along with. Why couldn’t he be like this all the time? Off ice, it was like he was a completely different person.

Kaylee and Steve performed their footwork into the skill, and Frankie watched closely as Kaylee turned backward. Steve placed his hands on her hips. Tapping her right skate into the ice, Kaylee pushed off her toe pick just as Steve pushed her into the air. At the top of the element, she crossed her legs in the air and rotated twice. Coming down for the landing, Frankie watched as her body tensed, anticipating the landing. Steve caught her late, nearly dropping her.

“The technique is good. It’s trust issues with the landing.” Frankie winced. Trust between partners was the foundation of pairs skating. Without it, a team would never be able to advance to the highest levels of the sport.

“They’ve heard me tell them a thousand times to relax, but it never seems to sink in.” Charlie sighed and inclined his head. “I’ve tried every training trick I know of—trust exercises, visualization drills, journaling, and the harness. I don’t know what else to do.”

Kaylee and Steve returned to where Charlie and Frankie stood, cheeks rosy, catching their breaths.

“Sorry, Mr. C, that wasn’t our best. We know we can do it better,” Steve apologized in a slightly high-pitched tone.

“I know you two can.”

Frankie puffed out her cheeks. “Kaylee, once you finish your rotation position, what’s freaking you out?”

“I don’t know.” The girl’s shoulders sagged. “Mr. C has told us that if I trust my body, we can do this skill with no problem. I just can’t seem to let go of the memory of the last time I fell. I hurt my shoulder and was off the ice for six weeks.”

Frankie nodded. *Bingo. Fear of falling and overthinking.*

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s not just you, K. I know my timing on the catch isn’t consistent either.”

What Kaylee needed was a distraction. That way, she wouldn’t have time to think about the twist. If she was more relaxed, Steve should be able to cue in to her. At least, that was what worked for Frankie and Danny when she used to overthink things.

“Show me your arm position again when you bring your arms in,” she said. Kaylee crossed her wrists and brought them into her chest as she might for a jump. “What would happen if you tried rotating with your arms over your head?”

“I don’t know?” Kaylee fidgeted. “I’ve always done split twists with my arms pulled in.”

“What do you say we give it a try off-ice, K? We could go to the gym and play around. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you,” her partner said.

“We can also put you in the harness to try a few single twists if you’d like,” Charlie added.

Frankie could see that the girl needed a different tactic. Taking a bold risk, she said, “What if Mr. C and I were to show you how it’s done? Would you try one then?”

“I haven’t done any pairs elements in a few years.” Charlie’s face paled. “I don’t know if I remember how.”

“I think we can manage a simple single split twist. I’ll even do it on the harness with you.”

“Please, Mr. C,” Steve pleaded. “We’ve heard so many stories about how good you are. Every time we ask you to show us something, you always say no.”

Several unreadable emotions passed over his face. Finally, he said, “Only a single. And only once. The harness won’t work for us. Neither of the other coaches here has ever tried using the harness with a pairs element. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think now is the best time for them to try experimenting.”

“No, definitely not,” Frankie agreed.

He removed his jacket. “I need a minute.” He sat down on the bench, rolled up his pant legs, and tightened the laces on his skating boots.

Frankie felt somewhat guilty she’d put him in this position. But if he wanted his students to learn, this was the best way. *This is the ultimate test of trust. If Charlie’s students can see that I can trust him to toss me up and safely catch me, they should see they can do it too.*

Kaylee and Steve clapped their hands together gleefully and started chanting, “Mister C. Mister C. Mister C.”

The other skaters and coaches turned their heads to see what the commotion was. As Charlie stepped onto the ice, he slowly peeled off two more layers of clothing. He was down to a long-sleeved compression shirt. Frankie did the same, taking off her vest and jacket. All action on the rink ceased. Skaters and coaches huddled together, watching the scene unfold with amusement.

Charlie's face was pale. Frankie watched as he took several deep breaths. "I need us to walk through this first," he said.

This was a bad idea. Why was I dumb enough to even suggest it?

"Let's forget it. You don't look like you're in the right frame of mind for it."

"No." He straightened his posture. "I can do this. I have to."

"I prefer a Lutz entry too, if you don't mind," she said carefully.

"Noted."

She turned her back to him. He tentatively placed his hands on her hips, and they slowly glided backward. Feeling his arms and knees bend, she relaxed her body and let him lift her, then place her back down.

They faced one another again. "I've only ever done a split twist with my old partner." Charlie removed his beanie and scratched his head.

"You're in luck. I used to perform a split double twist with Dreams on Ice daily with different partners. As long as you push me up into the air, I can do the rest. I've got the experience to get us through this."

"That's good because we're going to need all that experience." In a serious tone, he said, "We'll take a lap around the ice forward, then change to a slow set of back crossovers for a second lap. When you're comfortable, give me the word. We'll cut across the center and set for a long entry edge into the skill."

Frankie bobbed her head. "Got it."

Letting her take the lead, Charlie matched her speed. They skated side by side. Reaching the corner, his hands locked onto hers. His grip was firm and confident. Despite the reservations he'd voiced a few moments earlier, there was no trace of any uncertainty in his hold.

"Change," she directed.

Their bodies were now gliding backward. She gripped his wrist. The only sound she heard was their blades pushing against the ice. The world blurred as they picked up speed. She extended her left leg.

“Change,” she repeated.

As if they’d been doing this longer than thirty seconds, they both got into position, his hands on her hips.

“My count,” she said. “In three, two, one, go.”

Her knees bent. She tapped her foot into the ice, and Charlie pushed her up and overhead. Holding her arms over her head, she hoped it would help delay her rotation. She had so much more air time than she’d expected.

Squeezing her glutes and keeping her back upright as she came down, she let Charlie catch her and assist her on the landing. She heard a deep sigh of relief and the sound of catcalls and clapping as her blade touched the ice.

So that’s what it’s like to skate with a man who was one of the best in the world at what he does. She found it hard to believe this was the first time he’d done any skating in five years. With that much height, they probably could’ve done a triple.

“Not bad . . . for a retired guy,” Frankie joked.

“That was pretty good. The only bad thing is that my arms are going to pay for it later.” He shook them out. “I’m so much weaker than I was back in the day.”

They stopped in front of Kaylee and Steve.

“That was so graceful. I love the look of the arms overhead,” Kaylee said in awe. “And you really haven’t done that since you stopped skating, Mr. C?”

“No. I wouldn’t lie to you.” Charlie reached for his jacket.

“Can we try a single twist on the harness now?” She rubbed her hands together.

Charlie glanced at Steve. “How does that sound to you?”

The teenager had a glint of determination in his eyes. “Let’s rock it.”

“Coach Frankie, will you stay and watch us a little longer?” Kaylee asked.

“Guys, Frank . . . Coach Frankie is here to skate, not be put to work.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. I’d love to stay and watch.”

“Thank you!” Kaylee said, wrapping her arms around her.

Charlie chuckled. “I’ll go release the harness.”

* * *

Later that morning, Frankie met Leslie in the neighboring town of Lake Wakahanra, located between Sequoia Valley and Grizzly Springs.

She pulled her car into the spot next to Leslie’s sunshine-yellow VW bug just as her pink-haired friend was climbing out of her vehicle. “You made good time. My color artist Alyssa said she could take us early if you’d made a decision,” Leslie said.

“I have.” Frankie clicked the alarm button on her key fob. “I’m not ready to commit to anything too dramatic, but I’m willing to give having the ends of my hair dyed violet and turquoise a go.”

Leslie slapped her on the back. “Once you see how fun it is to have colored hair, you’ll never go back.”

Her friend held the door open as they entered the salon. Immediately, Frankie was struck by the cool vibe of the place. The furniture was all sleek black leather. Each station had a circular mirror and funky light fixture hanging above it. In the middle of the salon was a large planter box with tall succulents that looked to be part of the aloe vera family.

Her gaze continued to sweep the room. Three of the walls were white, but the back wall, made up of exposed brick, contained an illuminated neon sign that read “The Mane Event.” The logo had a male lion in a red boxing robe, with a silky mane and crown. Classic eighties music was piped into the hair salon from a local radio station.

“Frankie, this is Alyssa. Lys, Frankie.” Frankie shook hands with a curvy woman with seafoam-turquoise hair, ruby-red glasses, and oversized gold hoop earrings. There was a tattoo of the salon’s logo on her forearm. “Lys is the best in the business and the only person I’ll ever trust to touch my hair.”

The salon owner laughed and set them up in two chairs adjacent to one another, with sparkling water and chocolate-covered strawberries.

Leslie reached for the fruity dessert greedily. “These are the best! Lys’s husband grows the strawberries himself. I don’t know what he does to them, but they’re the sweetest things ever.”

Alyssa wrapped a smock around Frankie’s neck. “I’ll tell you what he does. He’s obsessive about checking the pH of the soil, the temperature, the humidity levels, and whatever else might affect their growing conditions in his greenhouse. It drives me insane, but that’s what I get for being married to a plant biologist.”

Leslie nodded. “Jason’s a professor at Fresno State.”

“Ah.” Frankie pulled her hands from under the smock and reached for a chocolate-covered strawberry. Taking a bite, she found the chocolate was dark, rich, and creamy, and melted the moment it touched her tongue. The extreme sweetness of the berries balanced out the tartness of the dark chocolate perfectly. She groaned. “I need a basket of these.”

“I’ll pack one up for you before you leave.” Alyssa pivoted Frankie’s chair, so she faced the mirror and adjusted her shoulder-length copper-

colored hair, distributing it evenly on both sides of her shoulders. “What would you like to have done today?”

“I’ve never dyed my hair before. Leslie talked me into dipping my toes into the world of color. So, maybe purple and teal ends?”

Alyssa studied the ends of her hair. “If I were you, I’d start with just one color. We could lighten your lovely hair one shade and have the very ends be a subtle violet. If you like it, in a few weeks we could add some more color to it.”

Frankie exhaled deeply. That was much more in her comfort zone. “I’d love that.”

Alyssa walked over to Leslie and draped a smock over her clothing. “What about you?”

Her friend grinned. “Since spring’s coming up, I’d like you to chop off my hair so it’s Twiggy short. I was thinking a tangerine orange with some daffodil-yellow highlights.”

Alyssa rolled her eyes. “You can’t do subtle, can you?”

“Subtle is boring.” Leslie bit into another strawberry.

As Alyssa set to work washing Frankie’s hair, she chatted to Leslie about the time she’d spent with her brother over the last few days. “I cringed the entire time I was in the office. It stresses me out to the limit to have a sink full of dirty dishes.” She shuddered. “How can a person stand to have takeout containers a few days old just sitting there?”

“Charlie has a one-track mind. Once he starts something, if he gets interrupted, it’s game over. He’ll just move on to something else.”

“He could write things down. Maybe even keep a to-do list.”

“It wouldn’t help. He’s dyslexic.”

“He’s dyslexic?” she sputtered.

Things suddenly made much more sense. *If he's dyslexic, that must be why he kept squinting at the computer and giving himself a headache on Monday night. He could've saved us both a lot of time if he'd just said something about it from the start.*

“My brother is too proud to ask for help most of the time. I have to force his hand to let me help when I know he's in over his head with paperwork.” Leslie frowned. “We've talked about delegating, but it's in one ear and out the other. Uncle Jack says to let him be, but it really makes more work for both of us when I have to review it.”

Frankie's eyes widened.

“Back up. Jack . . . is your uncle?”

“Yup. Our mom's brother and the financial backer of the rink.” Leslie smacked her lips together.

“I would've thought your parents would want to run the rink.”

“It's not their style. Mom and Dad don't like to be settled in one place for too long. They made their fortune in real estate and took an early retirement to travel the world.”

Alyssa massaged Frankie's head. She closed her eyes, processing all the information.

“My brother and I had other ideas. It's always been my dream to run our own rink.”

“Hearing that makes me so happy. Few people are ever lucky enough to have their dreams come true.”

Like me.

“Yes and no. It's not all it's cracked up to be. There's a saying that you should never go into business with your friends and family for a reason.” Leslie's voice was flat and emotionless. “Working with my brother and uncle

as business partners has been stressful, and it's put a strain on our relationship."

"Leslie's uncle is a blockhead," Alyssa grumbled. "He named Charlie as skating director over her because he has an established name in the skating world. Supposedly, putting a recognizable face on the rink's marketing materials helps bring in business."

Frankie opened her eyes and wrinkled her nose. "I remember skating at the Grizzly Springs rink. There was hardly anyone outside of the skating-school students who could identify who the world's top skaters were."

"Exactly. Around here, people don't care about having a big name. It's about having good facilities and skating classes that are affordable to the community. The skating school is what pays the bills. My number-one goal is for us to make hockey and figure skating accessible to people of all ages and stages."

Frankie loved hearing Leslie's passion and was proud to play a small part in helping to fulfill her vision. She thought about the siblings again. Leslie was brilliant with the skating school. "Do your uncle and your brother know how you feel?"

"In a way." Leslie drew small circles on her thigh. "I've tried to bring it up with Jack, but he just brushes me off."

"Leslie is afraid to antagonize him. She needs a bigger budget to expand the hockey program," Alyssa said.

"And Charlie?"

"As much as I complain about his ability to do the job, I'd never want to force him out of it. He's had enough things taken from him."

Alyssa repositioned Frankie's chair and started to gently comb out her locks for a trim. "Les, you almost single-handedly run the rink," the stylist

said. “You do so many things that aren’t officially part of your job description. I wish you’d talk to your brother. He might surprise you.”

“I can’t.” Leslie shook her head vehemently. “At least not now. This weekend marks five years since the accident. I’m on standby to make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid. I know he’s not sleeping well. The last thing he needs is extra stress.”

“Oh no!” Frankie’s eyes fluttered. “The skating tests are this weekend!”

Leslie bolted upright. “What?”

“All that paperwork I helped Charlie sort out were test applications. He misread the calendar. There are twenty-five of his students taking figure skating tests this weekend.”

“Of all the possible weekends for a test, it had to be this one. His stress levels are going to go through the roof between all the crazy parents, judges, and kids.” Leslie face-palmed. “Charlie, Charlie, Charlie. You’re going to be the death of me.” She held her face in her hands for several seconds, then took a deep breath. “Frankie, I feel horrible asking you this, but do you mind if I throw you to the wolves? I don’t have anyone to cover my skating classes.”

“As long as it doesn’t involve breaking any laws, you can count me in.”

Alyssa and Leslie chuckled.

“No law breaking.” She held up her hand. “I promise.”

She should’ve known the day she met Leslie that her life would never be the same again. She was definitely one of the most outgoing and outspoken people Frankie had ever met. Just what did she have in mind?

CHAPTER 8



Leslie and Frankie arrived at the rink an hour and a half before the first skating classes on Saturday morning.

“Oh good, there’s already a table set up here.” Leslie ran a finger over its surface. “It needs a good scrub though. It’s still sticky from the last birthday party.”

“I’ll run and get some cleaning supplies.” Frankie set the box she was carrying on top of it. “Anything else you need?”

“If you could also grab a tablecloth from the back too,” Leslie shouted.

“On it.” Frankie started to walk backward, and collided with a solid wall of muscle. Two arms steadied her as she tilted her head back. His arms felt so natural around her body. “Uh . . . hi,” she said.

Charlie’s eyes met hers. “Hi.” He helped her regain her balance and gently pushed her head into a neutral position. “I know I’m good-looking, but try not to strain your neck.”

She couldn’t help herself and snorted.

“You two are here early,” he said.

“We’re here to set up for the test session.” Leslie shrugged.

“I’ve got it covered.” He released Frankie and looked over her head at his sister. “The forms are in the judging area with pens and clipboards. I’m just waiting for them to arrive.”

Leslie rolled her eyes. “Have you set up their hospitality room with food and snacks? What about the parents’ hospitality room? The table for check-ins?”

Charlie’s brows knit together. “It may have slipped my mind.”

“Ah-ha. Bro, go and collect five of the best-looking clipboards the rink owns, the waivers you and Frankie printed out, pens, and a cup to put them in. I’ll take care of putting out the coffee and breakfast pastries we picked up. It’s ten to seven, and the judges could theoretically start arriving at any time. The first test is scheduled for seven thirty.”

His gaze darted from Leslie to Frankie and back to his sister. Frankie soaked in the crisp white button-up shirt and black dress slacks he wore. She had to admit, he cleaned up pretty nicely.

“Chop-chop.” Leslie clapped her hands together. “We can talk later.”

“Thanks for being here,” he said quietly to Frankie.

* * *

A short while later, Frankie bemoaned ever volunteering to scrub the table. “Ugh . . . why isn’t chewing gum banned from the rink?” She cringed and used a scraper to remove another leftover gift from one of the birthday parties.

“It is banned. But better you find it there than have it stuck to your skate,” Leslie said, passing through the lobby to pick up the extra plates and cups from Norma’s Cafe.

“True that.” She wiped the back of her hand against her forehead. “At least this is the last of it.”

“Do you need me to pull any more chairs?” Charlie inquired.

“No, bro. I think we’re good.” Leslie slid a navy vinyl tablecloth over the table and placed the supplies just as the first sleepy-eyed judge entered the lobby area. “Vera, good morning.” She nodded in response to Leslie’s greeting. “You’ll be in party room number two today. Let me show you the way.”

Right behind her, two nervous kids and their parents approached the table. Charlie perked up and greeted them. “Jake, Emily. Are you excited? It’s your big day. You’re going to do so well.”

Once again, Frankie witnessed how gentle and encouraging the man was with his young charges.

“Answer your coach, Jake,” his mom said.

“Yes, Mr. C.”

“You too, Emily,” the second mom added.

A girl who appeared to be about seven years old squeezed her mom’s hand and nodded.

“I think we have some club jackets for you two as well.” Frankie elbowed Charlie. “Leslie said they’re in her office next to the doorway.”

“Oh, um, right. Be right back.” He jogged to his sister’s office.

“Our club jackets are here?” Emily said.

Frankie smiled widely. “Yes, they are, and it even has your name on it.”

Emily tugged on her mother’s sleeve. “Mommy, can I wear it to school on Monday? I want all my friends to see it.”

“We’ll see. It might be too warm.”

“But Mommy . . .”

A moment later, Charlie returned with the boxes. Setting them down on the ground, he knelt next to it. Discretely, Frankie watched him go cross-eyed

as he stared at the names on the order forms. He pulled out the jackets for Jake and Emily. “Here we are.”

The children’s eyes danced. She held her breath.

“Emily, you have a youth small, and Jake, a youth medium?” The jackets were handed off.

Frankie exhaled. He’d chosen correctly. The parents and children grinned like Cheshire cats.

Emily ripped off her blue school sweater. “Mommy, I have to wear this right now.”

“Me too. If Emily is going to wear hers, I want mine too,” Jake pleaded.

Charlie laughed. The intense lines of concentration faded. To Frankie, he appeared much younger and more handsome when he was at ease, with laugh lines and dimples.

“Let’s step off to the side. We have others waiting to check in.” Jake and Emily were shepherded out of the way of the next set of parents and kids.

Over the next few hours, Leslie popped in and out of the lobby between skating school classes and kept an eagle eye on the hospitality rooms, while Frankie took charge of check-ins and retrieving the feedback forms from the judges. Charlie was given the toughest tasks. He ensured that the students made it onto the ice at the correct times and was also responsible for letting the kids know whether they had passed or failed.

Emotions ran high, and by late afternoon, all three of them were exhausted. Charlie waved goodbye to the last student of the day and leaned against the wall.

Frankie stood and stretched. “That was it. We’re done! All that’s left for us to do now is add the results to the ASU’s testing database.”

“Let’s do it later. I’m drained.” Charlie rubbed his temples. “I still don’t

understand why Kaylee didn't pass her singles senior Moves in the Field test. It was gut-wrenching to have to tell her she missed passing by one point. Maybe I should go speak to the judges and see if they could look the other way."

Having worked with Kaylee the morning before, Frankie had to agree, it was painful to see the teenager so distraught. Even though she was a pairs skater, she would still have to pass her individual Moves in the Field tests in addition to the Pairs Track tests to move up to the junior and senior ranks.

Frankie placed a hand on his elbow. "That won't do any good."

"How do you know?" he snapped.

She backed up a few steps and held her hands up. "Trust me. From experience, the judges won't change their marks. Kaylee *was* super prepared, but sometimes there are other factors, like nerves, at play. Skaters can't be on all the time."

He shook his head. "Vera is friends with Kaylee's grandmother. If I just ask for a favor . . ."

Frankie took a breath. "Don't," she shot back. "You'll just end up hurting her chances more than helping her."

For several heartbeats, he breathed hard. The copy of Kaylee's test crinkled in his hands. "I guess you're right."

The lobby was nearly empty. A few students from the adult class lingered, chatting about their plans for the week. There was no public session scheduled for the day.

He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking everything through."

"It's fine." She focused on folding up the vinyl tablecloth. "All of your students did wonderfully overall. Congrats to you."

His shoulders hunched. “It doesn’t feel right to celebrate unless everyone passed.”

“When is Kaylee’s next lesson with you?”

“Monday morning,” he murmured.

“Why don’t you guys use the time to film and submit a virtual test?”

He leaned against the table, and it scooted a few inches to the side. His cheeks flushed pink as he recovered his balance. “That’s an option?”

“Yeah. I was looking at the ASU website. The only downside is it might take a couple extra days to hear back. What time is her lesson?”

“Six-thirty.”

Frankie nodded. “I’ll make sure I’m here, and I’ll even be the proctor.”

He cocked his head to the side. “You would do that for her?”

“Not just for her, for the both of you. I can see how important this is to you.”

Charlie wrapped his arms around Frankie. He smelled of fresh pine. The scruff of his jaw rubbed against the tender skin of her neck. “Thank you.”

He released her and set off in a quick walk down the hall. “I have to call her parents and let her know.”

Frankie moved a stray piece of hair behind her ear. She wished that hug had lasted a moment longer.

“Did my bro just hug you?” Leslie said in a tone of disbelief.

Frankie turned to see her friend standing there with wide eyes. She nodded.

“Who would’ve thought you’d be the one to crack through the gruff exterior of my baby bro. I haven’t seen him this animated in a long time.” Leslie shook her head. “When he gets back, tell him I volunteered to stay and close up.”

Frankie found her voice. “You could tell him yourself,” she said in a scratchy tone.

“And ruin the good mood he’s in? No. For once, he deserves some happiness.” Leslie’s eyes glazed over for a moment. She cleared her throat. “Actually, I have a favor to ask you. “

“Um . . . sure, what’s on your mind?”

“Would you mind taking Charlie out to dinner? He needs to get out and away from the rink. Millie’s Steakhouse in downtown Sequoia Valley is his favorite place.”

Frankie pivoted slowly. “You want me to go on a date with your brother?”

“Not a date. Think of it more like babysitting or taking care of a puppy. He needs to be socialized.” Leslie sighed. “In all seriousness, I’d like to see him have a night out where he forgets himself. I don’t know how you managed it so quickly, but you’re the first person in a long time he’s opened up to, even if it’s just a little bit.”

Without a second thought, she found herself agreeing.

CHAPTER 9



“What did Leslie bribe you with to get you to have dinner with me?” Charlie pulled into the parking lot of Millie’s Steakhouse. He turned the ignition off and glanced to his right.

Frankie raised an eyebrow. “You really think your sister would sink so low as to resort to bribery?”

“Yes. I know exactly how her mind works.”

She thought he was being sarcastic, but it was hard to tell. He was definitely more relaxed. It felt like something in their relationship had shifted. It was almost like by skating together, they’d gotten rid of a barrier wall between them.

Frankie unbuckled her seat belt and opened the car door. “She didn’t bribe me. I came willingly. As a friend.”

Charlie slid out of his own side of the car. “So she guilted you into it?”

Frankie huffed. “Is it so difficult for you to think that I might have *wanted* to have dinner with you?”

“Yes. I know I’m not exactly the world’s easiest person to get along with.”

She rolled her eyes. “If you must know, Leslie called it babysitting, but that isn’t at all how I see it.”

“How do you see it, then?”

They closed the doors, and he clicked the alarm to his truck. They'd carpooled from the rink to Millie's, a restored historic wooden cabin in the heart of the small town.

"I spend more time at the rink than anywhere else. It's inevitable the people who work there are going to become like a second family to me. So I see tonight as an icebreaker activity between us."

"Okay. That I can get on board with."

They walked from the parking lot up a pathway lined by a string of tea-light lanterns. They shimmered like golden dancing fireflies against the backdrop of the evening. Frankie could see couples dining as they passed some windows. The air was thick with the scent of cooking meat.

Charlie held the door open for her, and they stepped inside. A roaring fire burned in a glass fireplace behind the hostess's podium. Soft piano music played in the background.

"Welcome in. How are y'all doing tonight? Just the two of you?"

"Yeah," Charlie confirmed.

The hostess tapped the screen of a tablet and took his name. "It'll be about fifteen minutes before you're seated. This buzzer will go off when your table is ready. Feel free to wait here, in the lounge, or outside."

They thanked her and said they'd wait in the lounge.

Walking deeper into the building, Frankie counted a total of five rooms. Each one had its own distinct theme and colors.

"This building dates back to the eighteen-sixties. It's one of the original structures in Sequoia Valley," Charlie said. "The owners of Millie's have done a bang-up job with the restoration of the place. Proceeds from the restaurant help support the upkeep."

They sat down across from one another in plush maroon chairs. An art-

deco Tiffany-style lamp was on the side table next to Charlie. To their left was the bar. To their right, a chocolate-colored Great Dane lay stretched out asleep in front of a gray stone fireplace.

“I love that story. The atmosphere really does feel like we’re sitting in a lodge in the middle of a forest.”

Charlie grinned. “That’s one of the reasons this is my favorite restaurant.”

“Who is that cutie over there?”

“That’s Millie. The restaurant’s mascot.”

Frankie crossed one leg over the other as her stomach rumbled. Her face warmed. “The smells are making me hungry.”

“I’ve tried every single item on the menu, and I can say with confidence that every dish is delicious.” Charlie scooted forward in his seat. “I should’ve asked, do you want anything from the bar? I’m driving, but don’t let that stop you from having a drink if you want one.”

“I don’t normally drink, but I wouldn’t mind a Shirley Temple.” She reached for her clutch.

“Got it. Tonight is on Leslie. I’ll have her expense it as a work dinner.” He hopped to his feet. “I’ll be right back.”

Frankie leaned back in her seat. The fire cracked. She watched Millie roll onto her back and look up at her lazily with large brown eyes. Frankie’s own eyes traveled up to Charlie, and she took in how he looked in form-fitting jeans and a navy cable-knit sweater.

His legs and backside were massive compared to his trim waist. She wondered how he managed to find jeans that fit over his bubble butt. She could get away with wearing leggings most of the time, but men had it more difficult, especially as skaters.

He turned and caught her staring. She looked away, only to see that Millie

had repositioned herself at her feet, her tail wagging, and paws in front of her. She whined.

“I don’t have any treats for you; sorry, girl.” She leaned forward to scratch the dog’s ears. Her fur was silky soft. Millie licked her hand.

“Millie, you know better than to beg,” Charlie chuckled. Millie sat up. “Your drink is on the side table.” The dog let out a second high-pitched whine. He crossed his arms. “Nope. If you want a treat, you’ll have to go find your mama.”

The dog huffed and slowly sauntered back toward the fireplace.

“She definitely understands you.”

He shrugged as he sat down. “I speak dog fluently. It’s one of my many gifts.”

She wondered how she should play this. *I should stay away from asking anything too personal. Skating is a safe topic. I’ll try to stick to that.*

“When I was with Leslie yesterday, she said you guys have lived in the area for a couple of years. I never asked, but what drew you to it?” Frankie took a sip of her drink. The lemon and cherry flavors hit her tongue in the perfect blend of sweet and savory.

“Family?” He stroked his chin. “My nan doesn’t live too far from here. I always enjoyed the quaintness and generally slower pace of life when I visited her. When I retired from competitive skating, I knew I wanted out of SoCal. Moving here just seemed like the logical answer.

“The crazy thing is, the day I signed my apartment lease, Leslie discovered there was a dilapidated rink for sale a five-minute drive away. Because of the amount of repair work it needed, it was listed dirt cheap. Leslie managed to talk me and Uncle Jack into pooling our resources together, and a few years later, here we are.”

Frankie sat back in her seat. “That’s one heck of a story.”

“I wouldn’t believe it myself if I hadn’t lived through it.” He leaned an elbow against the arm of the chair. “What about you? Why did you decide to move here?”

“My dad.” She stared at the floating pieces of ice in the glass. “I decided I wanted to be closer to keep an eye on him.”

“You mentioned the other night that it’s just the two of you.”

“Yeah. It is.” She nodded. “Dad has lived in Grizzly Springs most of his civilian adult life. I couldn’t see him ever wanting to move, so here I am, back where it all started.”

“He was in the military?”

She nodded again. “The Navy.”

The buzzer went off. They stood and made their way back to the reception area. It was more crowded than earlier. The sound of many conversations filled the room. The hostess took the device and placed them at a table in the red room.

When the waitress came, Charlie ordered fried artichokes for them to split as an appetizer. Alone again, they continued their conversation. “How have you found the adjustment transitioning from being on the road as a professional tour skater to normal life?”

She considered his question as she drummed her fingers on the table. “At first, I was so busy with Dad and settling in. I didn’t have time to think much about the change of pace. But now that I have more time on my hands, I don’t like it. I’m the type of person who needs to stay busy. I like having places to be and things to do.”

“Are you looking for more hours at the rink to pass the time?” He placed a napkin on his lap. “I know you’re still new to coaching, but if you’re open

to it, I wouldn't mind having you help me with some of my students. You were fantastic with Richelle, Kaylee, and Steve. They all keep asking about you."

Her pulse picked up. He wanted her to coach with him? Was he being serious? Her?

She arched an eyebrow. "I've only been coaching since I moved back. That's less than a month."

"When I started coaching, I had no idea what I was doing either. It's all about trial and error. You learn along the way. I'll never get used to the number of times I find myself repeating what my coaches once told me."

"You have the pedigree of being a world-class and international-level pairs skater. I only made it to the junior level. I wouldn't have much to offer your students."

"That's where you're wrong. You're selling yourself short. As a show skater, you have more performance skills than any other coach on the staff, including myself. And I looked at your resume. You forgot to mention that you were a *national* medalist. One half of one of the three best junior teams in the US. That's a *huge* accomplishment. How many people can lay claim to that? What did surprise me, though, was that I didn't see you list anything about senior pairs."

Charlie had hit upon a sore spot. She rubbed the back of her neck and stared at the place setting on the table. "I never had the opportunity to skate seniors."

His eyes widened. "Really? Why not? What happened?" he asked in a hushed undertone.

"Puberty. It hit me at the worst possible time, and there wasn't anything I could do about it. I lost my jumps, then I lost my partner."

Charlie frowned. “What blockhead were you skating with?”

“Danny McDonald.”

“I vaguely remember him.” Charlie drummed his fingers on the table. “He’s the guy who had a wonky double Axel and always fell on his triple toe.”

“That’s him. The triple toe was the only triple jump he could fully rotate.” She made a face. “Thinking about him still leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. He was already skating with a new partner before he even told me he wanted to end our partnership.”

“What?”

“Yeah. He claimed it would be faster to find a new partner than to wait for me to figure things out.”

“For what it’s worth, from what I’ve seen, you have nice technique on your jumps.”

“Thanks.” Hearing Charlie say that made her feel slightly better.

“Did you ever try and find a new partner after him?”

She nodded. “I had three tryouts, but nothing ever came of them. You know how it is . . . there are way more female skaters out there than male skaters. The guys call the shots on who they get to skate with. I never received a call back from any of them. No partner, no senior pairs.”

“Given the chance, would you go back and skate seniors?”

“Definitely. I had so many goals that were left unfulfilled. The feeling of having unfinished business in the sport has always left me wondering what-if. But none of that matters now.” Her forehead crinkled. “I’m too old and I have other responsibilities to worry about. My window of opportunity has passed.”

The waitress brought their artichokes, giving Frankie a moment to

compose herself. Her hand shook as she took a long drink from her water glass.

“Are you two ready to order?”

Charlie glanced in her direction. “We need a few more minutes.”

“No problem. I’ll circle back around to you two.”

He thanked her and returned his attention to Frankie. “You all right?”

She nodded. Her lips trembled. “Sorry. Just thinking about the past brings back a lot of emotions. I promise, I’m not normally like this.”

“Like what? I don’t see anything wrong.”

“Emotional.”

He clenched his jaw. “Trust me, I understand *exactly* how you feel.”

“So, um . . . your students . . .”

He held up his hands. “We’ll get back to them in a minute. First, I need to know—what feels unfinished?”

“It’s nothing.”

His large green eyes evoked a sense of calmness within her. They sparkled under the dim lighting like a piece of expensive jewelry. “Humor me.”

“I don’t know, there’s a lot of things on my list.”

“Such as?”

“I would’ve liked to have taken my senior test.” Frankie folded her hands and rested them on the table. “Skate as a senior at nationals.”

There was one other item, but sitting here with a former national champion and world medalist, she felt intimidated. What would he think if she told him about what she’d really dreamed about since she was a little girl? Would he make fun of her and think it was foolish?

“I can see it in your eyes. There’s something else.”

She twiddled her thumbs together. “The Olympic Games. I wanted to skate at the Olympics. Doesn’t everyone?”

Several moments of silence passed between them.

“It’s dumb. I’m sure that every skater who makes it to the senior level says the same thing. I was never ever even all that great of a skater. Forget I ever mentioned it. Anyway, how would this co-coaching thing work?”

“It’s your dream,” he said slowly. “It’s not dumb. It was something *I* wanted once upon a time too.” She watched his Adam’s apple bob up and down. “What if I told you that at least one of those items on your list could be accomplished?”

Her cheeks warmed. “I’d be tempted to say, tell me what to do and I’ll do it.’

“What if you could take your senior test?”

“I’d say I’m interested but . . .” Her pulse began to race. “Let’s be realistic. Who’s going to skate with me, knowing full well that the partnership wouldn’t go anywhere? And even if I did find a partner, at this point in my life, I’m not willing to relocate.”

As the words left her mouth, she knew as well-meaning as Charlie was, what he was suggesting wasn’t logical. Why was she even contemplating this? She had her dad to think about. He was her priority. Not skating. She was an adult with responsibilities. Not a teenager who could shove everything to the side and hope things magically worked out.

“I know a guy who lives locally, and I can say with full confidence that he’d skate with you if asked.” He sat up taller. “I can’t promise you’d get a trip to nationals out of it, but you could at the very least earn the distinction of being an American Skating Union gold medalist.”

Goosebumps appeared on her arm. “Who?”

“Someone I know can be trusted to get the job done.”

“Who?” she repeated.

“Me.”

“You?” Frankie sputtered. Her eyes looked him up and down.

“Me,” he confirmed.

“This isn’t a joke to me.” She stood, her legs shaking, and slammed her napkin onto the table. “I can’t believe I was stupid enough to tell you about all those things.” She fumbled with her purse. “Tonight was a mistake. I should’ve just gone home.”

Charlie jumped to his feet. His arm reached for hers, and he stared directly into her eyes. “I *am* being serious. I’d *never* joke about something like this with you. I’m willing to skate with you and help you take your test.”

“Now you’re just rubbing salt into the wound.” She ripped her hands away from him and clenched her fists by her side. “I had to talk you into doing a single split twist. You haven’t skated since you retired.”

“I won’t lie. What you’re saying is true. I *haven’t* skated in years. Until yesterday, I didn’t have a reason to.” He took a step closer to her. “But when we started stroking around the ice together yesterday, it was like you flipped a switch in my body. I felt something that’s been missing for a long time. That spark. That excitement. That energy that used to make me hungry to skate.

“Answer me this. Did you feel it too?” His green eyes glowed like a cat’s, watching something with intense focus in the dark. “When you went up into the air, you can’t tell me you didn’t feel as if we’d been skating together for a lot longer than a couple minutes.”

She buried her head in her hands. Her chest heaved. “I felt it too.”

“You have to know that it was a challenge for me to keep coaching after

that. All I wanted to do was grab your hand and keep skating with you. You were on my mind all day yesterday. Even last night, I couldn't stop thinking stop thinking about us as a team. I dreamed about us skating together."

She swallowed hard and took a deep breath. Her hands slipped down by her sides. She studied Charlie, noticing that today he appeared better rested than she'd ever seen him. He almost looked happy. There was no sign of the grump she'd met a couple weeks ago. Had he really been thinking about them as a pair?

"In your dream, what did we skate to?" she asked.

His lips twisted. "*My Fair Lady.*"

Her legs felt weak. She sank down into her chair again. How could he have known that was the music she'd dreamed about skating to? She'd always loved the music, the story, and the costumes.

For her twenty-first birthday, her dad even had a pink skating dress made up for her inspired by the movie. It was the only costume she still owned.

"You're a busy man. You wouldn't have the time for me," she said weakly.

Charlie sat down too. "For you, I'd make the time. I can figure something out."

Frankie knew she was fighting a losing battle. "What would you get out of all this?"

"My own closure." He tugged at his shirt collar. "Having unfinished business is the worst feeling in the world. I never got to end my career on my terms."

"I can't believe I'm even considering this. It's madness." She stared at the ceiling, then back at Charlie.

"It wouldn't be all that crazy. We'd start small and work up to a full

program, step by step over the next couple of months. I can see the easier elements like the spins, the footwork, and death spirals starting to come together in two or three months. But other elements like the jumps, the lifts, and a split double or triple twist would take a lot more time. Before we could start working on them off ice, I'd need a couple months in the gym to build up my physical strength."

"Who do you envision coaching us?"

"I think we could get away with starting out without a coach. We both have enough experience to at least start in on the basics. When the time comes, if we decide we need one, we can ask our friends or the American Skating Union for recommendations."

What Charlie said was true. She'd gotten used to coaching herself. Touring with Dreams on Ice had trained her to be ready to skate with different people every night. There were times when someone might be ill or injured. The show always went on.

This is all so much to wrap my head around. He makes it sound so easy, but it seems too good to be true.

He reached for a piece of fried artichoke. "What do you say?"

"I'll think about it."

"That's all I ask."

CHAPTER 10



“We can’t spend all of dinner talking about work. Leslie made me promise I’d help you relax. There has to be something besides ice skating we can talk about,” Frankie mused. “What is your favorite TV series?”

The appetizer had been eaten and their steaks had been cleared away. The tea light candles on the table had burned to the end of their wicks. There was only one other couple remaining in the red room. They’d spent the last few hours talking about the current state of pairs skating, exchanging stories about crazy skate parents, and discussing the pros and cons of traditional leather skating boots versus carbon-fiber boots.

“I don’t own a TV.” Charlie leaned against the back of his chair.

“Okay, what about your favorite book?”

“I, erm, don’t have time to read much.” His neck flushed red.

She’d forgotten about his dyslexia. She tried to play off her faux pas. “That’s right. You pretty much live at the rink.”

“I do, but that doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy *listening* to books. On my drive home or when out I’m running errands, I’ll stream an audiobook. My favorites are thrillers, especially if there’s a treasure hunt involved.”

She soaked in the information. You could tell a lot about a person’s personality based on the type of books they enjoyed.

“Treasure hunts, huh? Do you mean like an Indiana Jones type of adventure?”

“Is there any other kind?” Charlie laughed. “I live vicariously through the characters just like Indy. If I weren’t a skating coach, I probably would’ve been a middle school science teacher. I love working with kids.”

Frankie made a face. “Science?”

“Uh-huh. It’s the only subject where you can go outside and do hands-on activities. I hated being inside the classroom as a kid. Are you not a fan?”

She giggled. “Science is oh-kay, but I’m more of an art gal. I love sketching and painting.”

“I’ll be sure to let Les know. She’ll be thrilled to have a new person to drag along to craft shopping. Nobody in the family will go with her anymore. She can spend hours going up and down the aisles, looking at every single item that’s new.”

Frankie laughed. “I can see that.”

“It’s gotten to the point of being embarrassing. All the cashiers at Sequoia Valley Hobby Land know her by name and sight.” Charlie groaned. “She’s their best customer. It’s not like she even needs any of the stuff she buys.”

Frankie tilted her head. “She seems like an organized person. Where does she store all her craft supplies?”

“At the rink. I’ll show you her storage closet the next time we’re at work.”

Frankie pictured a room bursting with decorations and other odds and ends for every holiday. She was willing to bet Halloween was Leslie’s favorite.

The friendly waitress approached the table. “Sorry to interrupt, I just wanted to ask if you two would care to have a look at the dessert menu. The kitchen is getting ready to close.”

Frankie defaulted to Charlie. “I’m game if you are.”

“We’ll split a piece of the pineapple upside-down cake.”

He remembered I like pineapple!

“I’ll be right back with it. Do you want a scoop of ice cream on the side too?”

Frankie nodded. “Vanilla if you have it.”

Charlie shot an amused glance at her. “Vanilla is so plain. I thought you’d go for the chocolate or the strawberry.”

“Chocolate would overpower the pineapples and the cherries.”

“And the strawberry?”

“Same. It would overpower the pineapple.” She winked. “Thanks for ordering the cake, by the way.”

“You’re welcome. The pineapple upside-down cake is my favorite thing on the dessert menu.”

She arched an eyebrow. “I thought you didn’t care for pineapples.”

“As long as they’re not on pizza, they’re fine by me.”

They shared a laugh.

Frankie glanced at her watch. “It’s ten-thirty already. I didn’t realize we’ve been sitting here for four hours! It’s a good thing tomorrow’s Sunday.”

Charlie reached for his water glass and took a sip. “What happens on Sundays?”

“Sunday is my lazy day. It’s the one day a week I allow myself to sleep in past six. The only things I have on my to-do list are to call my best friend Gemma, catch up on the TV show *Cupid’s Arrow*, do laundry, and meal prep a few lunches and dinners for the days I work late.”

“Six sounds like a luxury. I wake up every day at three.”

She winced. “I must be keeping you up way past your bedtime.”

“If I’m in bed by eleven, it’ll be a victory.”

“Are you part vampire? How can you run off four hours of sleep?”

If she did end up agreeing to partner with Charlie, this four-hours-a-night sleep nonsense was the first thing that was going to change. He was going to get a minimum of seven hours. No ifs, ands, or buts. She refused to put her own safety at risk for a guy who was permanently exhausted. Plus, maybe it was another reason he was always kind of grumpy.

“You get used to it.” He shrugged. “Even if I wanted to sleep late, I don’t think I could. I’m on autopilot. My body is used to early mornings.”

“Even on your days off?”

He nodded. “I’m only off on Sundays.”

“And your Sunday routine is . . .?”

“Hiking.” His eyes lit up. “Weather permitting, I try and get out on a different trail every week. There’s nothing more relaxing than being out in nature.”

“Where are you planning to go tomorrow?”

He stroked his chin. “I’ll probably take it easy and do the King’s Summit loop. It’s a nice flat trail, plus I haven’t been up to the waterfall in a while.”

Frankie rested her elbows on the table. “That takes about five or six hours round trip, right?”

“Give or take.”

“In that case, as soon as the server comes back, I’ll ask her to box up the dessert. You really should get home. I can call a cab and have it take me back to the rink.”

“We’re fine on time. I’m enjoying your company.” Charlie clenched his jaw. “And don’t worry about the cab. I’ll drive you back. You’re on my way home. I promise.”

“Are you sure? I thought you lived in Sequoia Valley, not Grizzly

Springs.”

“I’m positive,” he said.

* * *

The next morning, Frankie texted Gemma.

Frankie: I’ve never been more confused in my life.

Gemma: ???

Frankie: I’ve received an offer that I don’t think I can say no to.

Gemma: Call me right now!

Frankie: It’s like two in the morning in Auckland!

Gemma: There’s no show tomorrow and I’m waiting for the season finale of *Cupid’s Arrow* to drop. I only have another hour to wait.

Frankie: Only you. *Shaking head emoji* Do you want to do a video chat, or chat-chat?

Gemma: Either one.

Frankie: Do you have your own hotel room?

Gemma: No, but it doesn’t matter. I’m sharing with Vivian.

Frankie: Even a thundering herd of elephants wouldn’t wake her.

She snickered.

Frankie: Let’s do video.

Gemma: *Thumbs-up emoji*

Frankie sent her bestie a video request. A moment later, she picked up. The background was dark. Gemma held up her finger to her lips, took her phone into her hotel bathroom, and shut the door. Her friend’s curly blond ringlets were secured into a messy low ponytail.

“Hey, pretty lady, how are you getting on?”

She'd missed hearing Gemma's thick Scottish drawl. Lying on the couch, she brought her knees to her chest and rested her phone on them. "Good?"

"What's this about a crazy offer you've received? I'm dying for details. Spill."

"I had dinner with my boss last night," she started.

"Mr. Blanks? The grump? A date? Woah. Reverse the train back into the station. How did *that* happen?"

"It's nothing to read into. It was *not* a date. It was a getting-to-know-you kind of dinner."

"Sure. If that's what you're going to call it," Gemma said dryly. She signaled for Frankie to continue.

"You're never going to believe this, but guess what, Gem? He's offered to become my pairs partner. He wants to help me take my ASU Senior Pairs test!" Saying it aloud still didn't make it feel real. She resisted the urge to pinch the skin on her forearm.

"And what did you say?"

"I said I'd think about it."

"What's there to think about? Isn't this something you've always wanted? Tell the bloke yes and crack on with it."

"It's not that simple."

"Why? What's holding you back?" Gemma brought the screen in closer to her face. "Are you worried about your dad?"

Frankie listened carefully and didn't hear any signs of her dad stirring. "Yeah. There are some things that have been going on that I haven't told anyone about."

Except Charlie, she thought to herself. It was time to come clean with her friend.

“Do you remember the two weeks that I ‘disappeared’ from the show when we were in Spain?”

Gemma nodded. “I figured that something had happened and that when you were ready, you’d talk about it.”

“You’re an amazing friend for respecting my privacy. The thing is something *did* happen.” Her breath hitched. “I had to rush back to the States because Dad had suffered a bad fall and had to have surgery to repair a broken hip.”

“Frankie! Why didn’t you tell me?!”

A stray tear ran down her cheek. “I don’t know. I guess I didn’t want anyone to feel sorry for me. It’s my burden to bear.”

“Is that the real reason why you quit DOI? Because you’re caring for your dad?”

“I don’t have anyone else, Gem. I’m so scared that something might happen to Dad, and I won’t be around.” Her body trembled. “When he fell, it was only by happenstance that somebody found him. He was supposed to have lunch with a friend from the Navy. When Dad never showed up, his friend called me.”

The dam of tears burst as she relived one of the worst days of her life all over again. She’d repressed so many feelings and emotions over the last few months. She’d had to put up a facade that everything was fine, when it wasn’t.

“Dad had been alone for over twenty-four hours before I could get someone to do a wellness check on him. I don’t even want to think about what would’ve happened if—”

“Frankie, don’t say it. Don’t think it. Your dad *was* found. He’s on the road to recovery now. It’s okay to cry. We all need to cry sometimes.”

The tears kept flowing.

Gemma stood and paced the bathroom. “You are one of the strongest people I know. But I want you to remember that when things get tough, you aren’t alone. You have friends like me who are always going to be right by your side. All you ever have to do is say the word, and I can be on the first plane out to California. Your dad is like my second dad.”

“I know you would be.”

It took Frankie the better part of half an hour to get herself into a coherent state of mind. She was so lucky Gemma was a patient listener and instinctually knew the exact words she needed to hear.

“Take one more deep breath for me. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Now exhale. Feel better?” Gemma asked.

“Yeah.” Frankie dried the corners of her eyes with the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

“Good. Now here’s my two pence. If you don’t give this pairs skating thing a shot, you’re always going to regret that you were given a second chance and you said no to it. Everything happens for a reason. Skate with Mr. Blanks for a couple of weeks. If you’re still feeling like you made the wrong choice, *then* you can walk away.”

She nodded.

“I also think that you should have an open conversation with Mr. Blanks about your dad. Let him know what’s going on. I’m sure he’ll understand. Although, I’d wish you’d consider joining that support group for people with senior parents.”

“I should do both things, but I’m such a chicken.” Frankie’s cheeks flushed. “I value my privacy. I don’t feel like I could talk to a room full of strangers about my life.”

Gemma held the camera closer to her face. "Opening up is never easy, but if anyone can do it, you can. If you aren't ready to go to a meeting, don't. Just know you have that resource available to you should you need it."

Frankie wanted to reach out and hug her. "You're the best friend I have."

"That's why I'm irreplaceable." Gemma winked.

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Just so we're on the same page, I asked the blokes about Charlie. Both Fernando and Patrick only had good things to say about him. The skating community is small. If there was something off about him, one of them would've heard the gossip."

Frankie heard a rattling sound. The pipes in the apartment creaked. "Sounds like Dad is getting up."

"You better get going. Tell Mr. T that I said hello and I'll be ready to discuss the finale of *Cupid's Arrow* whenever he's up for it."

"We'll probably watch it together after breakfast. We'll call you later."

Gemma waved goodbye, and they disconnected. Frankie stood and stretched. She picked up the discarded blankets and pillows she had kicked off the couch sometime during the night.

I'm going to do it. Gemma's right. This is the second chance I never thought I'd get. I've got to seize the moment.

When her dad joined her a half hour later, he sniffed the air. "Blueberry pancakes this morning? Somebody must be in a good mood."

Frankie smiled coyly. "I thought we could both use a little change of pace today."

"Did I hear you chatting on the phone earlier too?"

"It was Gemma."

"That's right, the finale of *Cupid's Arrow* comes out today." He snapped

his fingers. "I hope you didn't watch it without me!"

She giggled. "Don't worry, Dad. I told Gem I was planning to watch it with you."

"Phew," he said in a fake sigh of relief. "Who do you think Selena and Mackenzie will declare the winner? My money is on Johnny. He seemed to have won all the ladies over on his last date with Yvonne with the horseback ride through the winery."

"You think so?" She removed the last pancake from the frying pan and turned the stove off. "Of the two finalists, I was thinking maybe it would be Zach. I loved how his grand gesture was to take Yvonne to an animal shelter to spend the day volunteering."

Zach reminds me a little bit of Charlie. He's got a soft side behind the grumpy exterior. I've seen flashes of it.

"We'll just have to wait and see." Bringing the plate of pancakes to the kitchen table, Frankie and her dad sat across from one another. "Would you mind if we streamed it first thing after breakfast?"

Why am I thinking about Charlie like that? We're just co-workers and friends.

She nodded. "Anything for you."

Her father picked up his fork and placed two pancakes on his plate. "I had another favor to ask you, sweetie."

"What's on your mind?"

"Would you help me set up a dating profile on the Golden Years senior dating platform afterward?"

Frankie dropped her fork. "You want me to sign you up for a dating app?"

"I've already signed up. I just don't understand what I should put in my

profile.”

She wondered when he had time to sign up for that. Was this platform legitimate? She hoped it vetted the people who were signing up for it. There were already too many seniors out there who might fall victim to a scam. It would hurt Frankie to see their hearts get broken, especially when they were hoping to find love and companionship.

She swallowed hard. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is. I’ve been hit with Cupid’s arrow. If these young twenty-somethings can find love, maybe I can too. I never tried after my first marriage failed. I’ve always felt so guilty that you never had a mother figure in your life.”

“You know I never cared about that. You’ve loved me enough for two parents. Probably more.” Frankie stood and walked around the table to hug her dad. “I love you so much, Daddy.”

She felt his body expand and contract. “And I you.”

CHAPTER 11



Wednesday morning, Frankie watched and waited as Charlie drove the Zamboni off the ice. She chewed on her lip. Today was the day. She wouldn't let her nerves get the better of her again.

Walking toward the storage area where the machine was kept, she called out, "Hey, Charlie, do you have a second?"

He glanced up, hands resting on the handle of the broom used to sweep the stray chunks of ice left behind by the machine as it exited. "Sure, what's on your mind?"

"I did a lot of thinking this weekend. I made a four-page long list of all the potential pros and cons, but it didn't help because I already knew what my answer was going to be. If the offer still stands, the answer is yes."

He stared at her with glassy eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Yes, I want to skate with you."

He dropped the broom. His eyes crinkled. "You do?"

She nodded.

He rubbed his hands together. "You've just made my day."

He looks a lot younger when he's happy.

"I'm glad." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "No hurry, but sometime this week, I have a few details I wanted to discuss with you about how our partnership is going to work."

"I'm free now if you are?"

“Sure.”

“Great, give me two minutes to finish up here. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

“The kitchen?”

“I know the mess in my office last week stressed you out.” His face and ears flushed red. “Let’s just say you don’t want to see the state it’s in now.”

How could it be any worse than last week? You know what; I’m probably better off not knowing.

“The kitchen it is.”

When Charlie joined her a few minutes later, Frankie was scribbling a few notes into her journal.

He walked over to the sink to wash his hands. “Do you mind if I multitask while we talk?”

“Nope.”

He bent down and retrieved a cutting board, knives, and an apron from the storage shelves on the central island. “I was going to make myself some grilled chicken, broccoli, and baby carrots. Can I interest you in some?”

She blinked a few times. “Only if you have enough ingredients.”

“I bought enough chicken to last three weeks.” He shook with laughter. “If you were to look in my freezer, it’s all meat.”

She blinked slowly. “So what you’re trying to tell me is that you *are* part vampire, after all.”

“Nice try, but no.” He snorted. “Take another guess.”

“Was there a big sale on meat at the grocery store?”

Charlie made a buzzer noise. “You’re getting warmer.”

She shrugged. “I give up. Why?”

“I cleaned out my fridge this weekend. The only things I have now are

fruits, veggies, and lean meats.”

“You’re eating clean,” she said in a surprised tone.

“Ten points to Frankie,” he confirmed. “I had my first gym session yesterday too. When you gave me your answer, which I’d hoped would be a yes, I wanted to be able to physically show you that I’m taking this seriously.” He lifted his left arm and winced. “See? I’m so sore that I can’t even lift my arm above my head.”

“And what if I’d said no? That I wouldn’t skate with you?” She leaned her elbows on the counter.

“It wouldn’t make any difference. I still would’ve started my eating clean and working out this week.” He pulled out a green basket of baby carrots from the fridge. “I’ll never admit this to anyone else, but helping Kaylee with the harness last week made me so sore. I had a hard time getting myself out of bed and moving around for two days. Everything hurt.”

“You looked fine on Saturday.”

“I’m a talented actor.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Don’t believe me? It’s true. Well, at least that’s what the TV commentators used to say,” he joked.

“Suuuuuuuuuuure.”

He chuckled to himself as he washed the carrots in the sink. “Anyways, I decided that no matter what, I needed to build up enough strength so that wouldn’t happen again. Both pairs teams I coach are on the verge of learning riskier and more difficult elements. Sooner or later, that means I’ll have to step in and help them with the harness, spot them on lifts, et cetera, et cetera. When it happens, I want to be ready.”

Her gaze lingered on him a moment longer before returning to her paper.

Her body warmed. Charlie's students were lucky. It was rare to have a coach who wanted to take such an active and hands-on role in teaching them skills. It said a lot about his dedication.

"You've let me go on long enough." He started slicing the carrots into small equal pieces. "What's on your list?"

"Oh." She cleared her throat and stared at the writing in her notebook. "Um . . . I had a couple of things to ask you, but number one was picking out the days and times we could skate together."

"Hmm . . . would mornings work? Right now, the first freestyle session of the day is scheduled from four to five. Hardly anyone ever shows up. If you have a day in mind, I could adjust the schedule so we could have private ice time for an hour, hour and fifteen minutes. My first lesson isn't until five-thirty."

"That would be awesome." She made a note. "I could do any morning Monday through Friday. You pick."

"Those are dangerous words," he said ominously. "How ambitious are you?"

"When it comes to skating, I'm *very* ambitious."

"Then let's skate every day."

"As my bestie Gemma would say, that's brilliant." She grinned. "That brings us to item number two. What does your afternoon schedule look like? I'd like for us to try and get some off-ice training time in somewhere too."

"On a normal day, I coach until ten. Then from ten to one, I try to catch up on paperwork and any other admin duties." His voice grew softer. "I . . . ugh, I usually end up needing all three hours."

She glanced up. "What about asking Leslie to help?"

"I'll talk to her later," he mumbled.

“Great, just make sure you do it sooner rather than later.”

He grunted. Frankie took that to mean yes.

She tapped her pen against the counter. “Let me know if she says she’s too busy. I can jump in and help you out. That way, we could reallocate one of those hours to off-ice prep.”

“Good point. The ice is open from ten to twelve. Why don’t you tentatively pencil us down for ten to eleven?” Charlie wiped his hands against his apron and placed the knife down, turning to face her. “Eleven to two is too chaotic. I usually help cover staff lunch breaks.”

“Yeah!” Frankie turned the page of her notebook. “This is really starting to come together! I’m so excited. Now, next item. . .”

He raised an eyebrow. “Just how many things did you write down?”

She hesitated. “Six?”

“Well, at least you’re organized.” He shook his head, amused. “What’s number three?”

“Action item three is more for me. When I skated pairs, I was definitely more of a technical skater than an artistic one. Touring with Dreams on Ice helped, but I still feel like I would benefit from some type of dance class. Do you guys have a ballet teacher at the rink?”

“We do, but I don’t think you need a ballet class.” Charlie walked over to the stovetop and poured some oil into a frying pan. “Pairs is all about being able to connect with your partner. Something like ballroom dancing would probably be a better fit for us.”

“Us?”

“We’re a team, aren’t we?” A thin smile crossed his lips. “That means we should be working on trying to build up our connection. If you find a class that works for us, I’ll join you.” He placed the first chicken breast in the pan,

and it started to sizzle. “I’m free after eight during the week or after twelve on the weekends.”

Wait. Did he say eight? She did a few mental calculations. Something wasn’t adding up for her. Frankie’s eyes twitched. “Charlie, how many hours a day, on average, are you here?”

He stared into the pan and mumbled something.

“What was that?”

“Fifteen or sixteen hours?” He hunched his shoulders. “I know. It’s bad.” He refused to meet her eyes.

She winced. It was worse than she had thought.

“We’re about to significantly start increasing the amount of physical activity we do with our bodies. That means you need time to rest and recover. Pairs skating is already dangerous. I won’t skate with you if you’re going to only sleep three or four hours a night.”

He stood still for a moment, closing his eyes, and exhaled deeply. “I know. Your safety is important to me too. I would never take a chance on you getting hurt.” His eyes opened and he turned and looked directly at Frankie. “I promise I’ll figure something out before I leave the rink tonight.”

“Thank you.”

She wondered if she should step in and text Leslie too, or if she could trust that Charlie would remember on his own. This was the first big test they were about to face. Whatever she did would set the tone for how this partnership was going to go.

The meat smelled as if it were nearly fully cooked. He returned his attention back to the pan and flipped it over with a spatula.

“I’ve lost count—the last item was number three or four?”

“It was number three. We can skip over items four and five, but number

six is important.” Frankie closed her notebook and rested her hands on top of it.

“Your face is telling me it’s serious too.” After plating the finished meat, he walked over to the island and leaned against it. “You’ve got my full attention. Shoot.”

“Do you remember I mentioned the other night that I live with my dad?”

He nodded.

“My dad is, um . . .” Frankie’s throat constricted.

“Take a deep breath.” Charlie rested his hand on hers. His fingers were long. “Now exhale.”

Her chest tightened. Why was finding the right words so difficult?

“Your dad . . .” he started, nodding encouragingly.

“He, er . . . he isn’t in the best of health.” She dropped her chin to her chest, staring at the sparkly cover of her notebook. “There might be times when I need to cancel a practice with you so I can take him to a doctor’s appointment. Or days when I have to stay home because he isn’t having a good day. I mean, he’s gotten a lot better, but there’s still a lot of unknowns ahead. Is . . . is . . . that going to be a problem?” she sputtered.

“No. If something comes up, take care of your dad. You do you.” She raised her head. Charlie’s eyes were wide with understanding. He cleared his throat. “If there’s ever anything you need, I want you to let me know. Like I said earlier, we’re partners now. That relationship extends beyond just being on the ice together.”

“Only if you promise me the same,” she croaked.

He gave her a curt nod.

Frankie felt as if a weight had been lifted off her chest, and her body relaxed. The scent of meat hit her nostrils. “Thanks for cooking. This smells

as good as the steak we had at Millie's." Her mouth still watered thinking about the tender meat that was so soft, it literally melted in her mouth.

"I'll take the compliment, but there's no matching the food Millie's makes. It's on another level." He made them plates of food and then pulled up the stool across from her.

"So, uh, where did you learn to cook?"

"The internet." Charlie cut his chicken up into small pieces and laughed. "Les and I used to be roommates. We had a great arrangement going. She did the cooking, and I contributed a couple extra bucks to the rent. But when she moved in with her boyfriend, all that ended, and I had to move quickly to figure things out. Eating takeout every night became expensive very quickly."

Frankie could relate. "And the frozen foods weren't filling enough."

"Exactly. I started out learning the basics, like how to make pasta from a box, and worked my way up to meats."

"Impressive."

He shrugged. "Not really. I'd say I was just motivated. I hate wasting food, so it was an incentive for me to make it work."

Frankie took a bite. "So good."

"Thanks." He sampled his own chicken. "It's a little dry."

"I can't tell, but then again, I'm easy to please. You and I might have to swap a couple recipes. Dad and I always eat the same old stuff. It would be nice to have a couple new things to rotate into the menu." She sighed. "Dad's picky about food. He hates fruits and veggies and won't eat about three-quarters of the options on the list his doctor gave him."

"Deal." He walked over to the sink and filled a glass with water. "I'll let you in on a little secret. You can cook the same dish over and over; all you

have to do is find the right sauce or spices to change the flavor.”

Frankie opened her notebook and turned it to a blank page. “Wait, I need to write this down.”

The more time she spent in Charlie’s company, the more she liked him. When he smiled at her, butterflies fluttered their wings in her stomach. There was no denying that physically, her body responded to Charlie in ways that frightened her.

I can’t fall for my boss, and I especially can’t fall for somebody I skate with. I have to keep Charlie at arm’s length. I have to focus on what really matters—Dad. Maybe I can try distancing myself from him a little more. Yeah, that could work. I hope.

CHAPTER 12



Two weeks later, Frankie lay awake on the couch. Her alarm would go off at any moment. As much as she wanted to stay nestled under the warmth of her covers for several more hours, she knew it wasn't going to happen. It felt as if she had only just laid down to go to sleep. How could it already be almost two-thirty in the morning?

A moment later, her phone chimed. Groaning, she swiped to turn it off and sat up, rubbing her eyes. At least today was Thursday. She wouldn't have to worry about coaching until eight tonight. She loved her skating school students, but despised the idea of only getting a couple hours of sleep. She didn't know how Charlie had managed to function on so little sleep for so long. Just doing it once a week was a struggle.

Wrapping her blanket around her like a cape, she shuffled over to the kitchen, poured herself a cup of the coffee she'd brewed last night, and stuck it in the microwave. The machine hummed to life with an electric buzz. Pulling open the refrigerator, she found her bowl of vanilla yogurt topped with strawberries, blueberries, and granola and set it down on the table just as the microwave chirped.

Over the last two weeks, she'd gotten her morning routine down to an exact science of twenty minutes. It took her ten minutes to eat and scroll through the social media apps on her phone, five minutes to get dressed, three minutes to wash her face, throw her hair into a bun, and brush her teeth, and

two minutes to write a note to her dad letting him know what was for breakfast and that she loved him. By three a.m., she would be out the door and on her way to the rink.

As Frankie pulled into a parking spot parallel to Charlie's truck, she took out her phone and sent him a text message.

Frankie: I'm here.

Three dots blinked. He was typing.

Charlie: On my way.

Even though she felt safe walking across the well-lit parking lot, he had made it abundantly clear that she should always wait in her car with the doors locked until he arrived to escort her inside. She'd given up trying to change his mind.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Charlie rapped his knuckles against her window and waved, pointing to a coffee.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," he called out in a chipper voice. "Are we ready to skate this morning?"

She opened the driver's door, and he presented her with the caffeinated beverage. She clutched it to her chest. It was still hot.

"Thank you," she grunted. "Not yet, but I will be." She took a long swig. It was sweet, not like the coffee she'd had at home. This had vanilla creamer in it. She smacked her lips together. "The barista got the ratio perfect this morning."

"Yes! Go me." Charlie pumped his fist. "What are you going to do for warm-up? Jump rope? The elliptical? Stationary bike?"

"I need to wake up, so a jog around the rink? The cold air should do the trick."

Charlie held the door open to their storage room turned private locker

room. "I'll join you."

"Aren't you already warm from your pre-skate gym session?" She raised an eyebrow and slid her coat off her shoulders, hanging it up on one of the metal pegs lining the wall.

"I need the extra cardio."

"Oooooooooook. No complaining later when your energy tanks."

"That won't happen," he said smugly.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

She exchanged her trusty Converse for her running shoes. "Let's go."

* * *

Frankie and Charlie glided forward on the ice. Their bodies were pressed in close to one another. He gripped her waist firmly and applied just the right amount of pressure to be snug, but not uncomfortable. Frankie pushed down into a deep entry edge and lifted her right leg to initiate a throw double Salchow just as Charlie tossed her into the air.

The jump had become easy. With so much height, she didn't need to wrap her legs or arms in tightly and easily completed the two rotations before coming down to land. She estimated that she held the edge for six feet.

Charlie clapped. "You had so much hang time on that. That was the best one we've ever done."

Frankie placed her hands on her knees to catch her breath. "That made me lose my breath a little."

"It won't be long before we're ready to try a throw triple Sal. We'll have to start thinking about what jumps we should put in our program." He skated over to the boards to grab a quick drink of water.

“I used to do loop and Lutz. Right now, I’m thinking Sal and loop.” She shrugged. “I haven’t done any throw Lutzes in a long time. How much time do we have left in the session?”

Charlie glanced at his smartwatch. “Five more minutes.”

Her pulse pounded in her ear. Adrenaline rushed through her veins. “Let’s try a triple Sal.”

“Now? We only started doing throw doubles on the ice this week.” He shook his head. “It’s too soon.”

They’d already done forty minutes of throw double loops, flips, and Salchows. Frankie was tired, but she was also anxious to see if she could still do a throw triple. She and Fernando had talked about doing it on tour, but had faced challenges with getting on the same page on jump technique. As a leftie, Fernando jumped and spun in the opposite direction as her.

With Charlie it was different. His experience as a top-level skater and a coach shined through. She appreciated how much effort he was putting into figuring out how best to meld their two different styles of skating. It was a true partnership in every sense of the word. They were nearing the point where she didn’t need to count out their setups. Charlie intuitively knew when she was ready to rise up into the air.

“You’re giving me more than enough height and power on the jump. Plus, I’ve been doing solo triple Sals without any problems since I started coaching here. I know I can squeeze out another rotation.”

“No.” His hand went to his forehead. Frankie had noticed that Charlie often touched his scar when he was nervous about something. “Remember, we’re running a marathon, not performing sprints. Doubles might be easy, but with triples, there are a lot more things that can go wrong. I don’t want

there to be any doubts about you being able to complete the jump. I want us to be able to do the double on autopilot before we think about a triple.”

We can do that almost every time now. What’s the harm in doing a triple? She glanced at her partner. His lips made a thin line. His face was stoic. There was no way she was going to change his mind. It was like throwing a ball against a wall. The wall won every time.

“Then how do *you* want to fill these last five minutes?”

“How about a compromise? We could try side-by-side single Axels.”

Disappointed, she said, “Make it side-by-side double toe loops.”

He wrinkled his nose. “I haven’t tried any double jumps since we started skating together.”

“Charlie, you’re killing me.” She placed her hands on her hips. “Have you done any single Axels?”

He nodded.

“Then would you be willing to go for a double Sal? It’s basically a three-turn into an Axel.”

Out of all the double jumps, double toe loops and double Salchows were the first ones a young skater normally learned after mastering a single Axel.

He licked his lips. “We’ll set up for them in the corner.”

Taking hold of one another’s hands, Frankie and Charlie flew across the rink into powerful back crossovers. Approaching the opposite corner of the ice, they dropped hands, and positioned themselves about eight feet apart.

“Turn,” Frankie called out. She kept her attention on Charlie’s body, trying to match his timing and keep their spacing as close as possible. “Jump.”

Rising into the air, she kept her body open and only performed a single rotation. Her gaze was focused on Charlie. He had so much speed and attack

going into the jump, but his torso whipped around too quickly. Bailing at two and a half rotations, Charlie fell sideways and went down.

Frankie was at his side immediately. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” He sat on the ice for a moment and was slow to come to a stand. “Gah. That was awful. I was thinking double, but my body was ready to do a triple.”

“Muscle memory is powerful.”

He brushed the dusting of snow from his pants. “I have to try that again. My pride won’t let me leave the ice until I land a clean one.”

An amused grin crossed her face. “Try to relax when you take off. Your body was so tense that it almost looked like your shoulders were trying to hide your ears.”

She skated over to the boards and watched Charlie skate off for his second attempt. He went up into the air and had plenty of time to kick out for the landing.

I shouldn’t be jealous, but I am. All his jumps are so easy. He flies across the ice.

Frankie slow clapped. “You get some extra brownie points for actually going for it.”

He bowed.

Their time was up. Their first set of students would be arriving at the rink in the next half hour. They both wanted time to have a snack and change clothes.

“What jumps did you use to do with your partner?” Charlie asked.

Frankie draped her jacket over her shoulders. “We competed double Axels and double flips. Had we moved up to seniors, we would’ve replaced the flips with triple toes. What about you?”

“We did the standard side-by-side triple Sals and triple toes. I had hoped Camille would be up for trying side-by-side triple loops, but it wasn’t ever consistent.”

“You can do a triple loop?”

“Yes, I can.” He puffed his chest out and struck a pose with his hands on his hips. “Or rather, I used to be able to.” He scratched the back of his head. “I had all my triples through the Lutz. I was hopeless with triple Axels. Forget ever learning a quad. Since my coach knew there was no way I’d be competitive in senior men’s without those jumps, we decided I should switch to pairs. Best decision I ever made.”

“As soon as you get your triple loop back, we’re so making that our signature move.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Charlie was so different than Danny ever was. He used to always blame Frankie when the jumps went wrong.

“You’ll get it back.” She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. One of Charlie’s hallmarks was that he was an excellent technical coach. If anyone could break a jump down and figure out how to fix it, he could.

She wouldn’t admit it to him, but her quad muscles were starting to tighten up. Every step she took, she could feel the fibers pulling in the front and on the side of her leg. She needed to cool down and stretch if she hoped to be able to skate again later that afternoon. Charlie had been right. It was probably a good thing they hadn’t pushed the limits and gone for the throw triple Salchow.

They stopped outside the door to their locker room. “Do you mind if I ask you something?” Frankie said.

“You just did.”

She tapped his arm playfully. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

“Ow,” he said with mock hurt.

She rolled her eyes. “I didn’t hit you that hard.” *But his arm has gotten firmer.*

“I know. Go ahead. Ask me anything.”

“You don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to, but I’m just curious. What made you retire from competitive skating?”

Charlie’s face paled, and his shoulders hunched. A look of weariness passed over his face. He opened and closed his mouth several times. Strained tones escaped.

She didn’t think such a simple question would set him off. *Why did I have to open my big mouth and ask? It must have to do with his unfinished business.*

Frankie stepped in closer to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, it’s okay. Like I said, you don’t have to answer. Forget I ever asked.”

His green orbs locked onto hers. His jaw clenched. “I’ll tell you,” he said slowly, “but not here and not now. It’s a long story, and I’d rather be in the place where we can have a little privacy.”

As if to prove his point, the front doors to the ice center opened. “Hi, Mr. C, hi, Coach Frankie,” Steve yelled out.

“Hi, Steve,” they both responded automatically, attention still on one another.

“We’d better hurry. The kids are here.” Charlie opened the door and entered the locker room.

Frankie lingered in the doorway, wondering just what had happened to cause such a reaction from him.

CHAPTER 13



Sunday morning arrived. Frankie hovered near her dad with a lint roller, going over his black cable-knit sweater one final time as he studied himself in the mirror. She could smell the almond and whiskey scents of his special occasion cologne lingering in the air.

“Dad, you look dapper. You’re going to make your date swoon from how handsome you are.”

A light tinge of pink appeared on his cheeks. “I doubt it, but I appreciate you saying so.” He kissed the top of her head and straightened his glasses once more. “I just hope I’m not making a colossal mistake.”

Frankie set the lint roller down on the hallway side table. “I think once you get to Norma’s Café and meet your date, all the nerves will flee your body. Are you ready to head out? You have your wallet and your cell phone?”

Dad tapped the pockets of his charcoal-gray dress slacks. “Check and check.”

“Great! I just need to grab my purse. I’ll lock up and meet you in the car.”

Dad grabbed the car keys and headed out the front door. The moment the coast was clear, she whipped out her phone and shot off a text to Gemma.

Frankie: We’re about to leave for Dad’s date.

Gemma: Well? How is he? Excited? Anxious?

Frankie: A little of everything? He woke up extra early to make sure his shoes had a visible mirror shine. I think it's his way of relaxing.

Gemma: What outfit did he finally settle on?

Frankie: The white dress shirt, blue and dove-gray striped tie, black cable-knit sweater, and gray dress slacks.

Gemma: *Thumbs-up emoji* Do you have any photos?

Frankie scrolled through the earlier snapshots she'd taken when her dad wasn't looking.

Frankie: Sending it to you now.

Three dots blinked. Gemma was typing.

Gemma: Oh, looking sharp, Mr. T! He looks like one of those distinguished older chaps you would find back home in Glasgow. It's the perfect blend of dressy yet casual.

Frankie: He hogged the bathroom all morning, showering, shaving, and ironing his clothing. Did I mention he took *extremely* detailed notes from the *Dating for Dummies* book you sent him?

Gemma: Oh no. *Laughing emoji*

Frankie: You created a monster. He wasn't happy until he made sure he satisfied every criteria from the Dress for Success chapter.

Gemma: Wish him luck from me. Not that he needs it.

Frankie: Will do. He'll enjoy hearing that you thought he looked distinguished.

Gemma: *Winking emoji*

Frankie clicked her screen off, tucked the device into the back pocket of her handbag, and jogged out to the car.

"Sorry for holding you up." She buckled her seat belt. "I had a message from Gemma."

“Oh?”

“She said to wish you luck.”

“That girl is too good to me. I owe her a box of chocolates. Maybe some flowers too.”

“Her favorites are pink peonies and chocolate mints.” Frankie clicked the blinker and turned out of the parking lot. “She’ll be Stateside in two months. I was thinking we could invite her to visit.”

“By all means. It would be wonderful to see her cheery face in person, instead of over a computer screen.”

From the corner of her eye, Frankie saw her dad fidgeting in his seat. He was nervous. She had to keep the conversation flowing.

“Remind me again . . . what do you know about Suzy?”

His lips curved. “Suzy is a former nurse and widower about my age. She’s lived on the outskirts of Lake Wakahanra for the last two decades with her older son’s family.”

“And what attracted you to her profile?”

“She’s the one who made the first move.” Dad chuckled.

I don’t remember him telling me that.

“We’ve only exchanged e-mails a handful of times, but we both share a fondness for crossword puzzles and watching reality TV shows like *Cupid’s Arrow*.”

“She sounds like a good match for you.”

“I hope so, but the book Gemma sent me said not to set the bar too high. Online profiles can be misleading. Did you know that more than half of people who use dating sites digitally alter their profile photos?”

“I didn’t. You learn something new every day.”

She drove into the parking lot of Norma’s and parked in the disabled

parking spot near the restaurant's entrance.

Turning off the engine, she pivoted toward her father. "Dad, you'll do great, but I'm available if you need me to serve as your wingman or to swoop in and rescue you. Just send me a text message."

His eyes narrowed. "Don't you have plans today?"

Her body warmed. "Charlie and I are going to go for a hike up toward King's Summit, but he knows you always come first."

"You and Mr. Blanks are getting awfully chummy. You're always spending time with him."

Frankie knew Charlie would never be interested in her romantically. She wasn't his type. At least, she didn't think she was his type. He was the type of man who could date a model, not a shorty like her.

"Dad, I promise our relationship is strictly professional. I, um . . . we . . . what I mean to say is that we've been skating together. If everything keeps going well, I'm going to take my Senior Pairs' test in a couple months."

Her father's face was neutral. "Where did this come from?"

She blinked twice. "It just sort of happened."

"How long have you been keeping this a secret?"

"Not long." She felt as if she were a child caught doing something she shouldn't have. Her fingers gripped the steering wheel tightly. "Three weeks?"

"Is he a good partner?"

"Charlie is probably the most talented man I've ever worked with. He brings so much experience to the ice, not just as a skater, but also as a coach too. We've picked up a lot of pairs elements quickly."

"What happens after your senior test? Are you two going to become a competitive team?" Her dad cocked his head to the side.

“I don’t know. It’s a possibility. We haven’t really discussed the future.”

His face lit up. “Your dream was always to make it to the Olympics. Maybe with Mr. Blanks, your dreams could become a reality.”

Not likely. They’d have so many factors working against them, like age. If they made it to nationals, they’d probably be the oldest team in the field. The judges wouldn’t want to take a risk on them. Frankie would just be happy to say she’d made it to the highest level of the sport. She didn’t want to overreach. She’d learned that lesson the hard way.

Her father said something she didn’t catch. “Sorry, I was lost in thought. Can you repeat that?”

“I said not to worry about crashing my date. Enjoy your time with Charlie. I’ll take a taxi home from Norma’s when we’re finished.”

“Do you need my credit card or any cash?”

He shook his head. “No, everything I need is on my phone.”

Hearing her dad say that was surreal. She shot him a skeptical glance. “If you say so.” He climbed out of the car. She watched him stroll inside Norma’s to meet a woman with a stylish scarf and short silver hair.

“Good luck, Daddy,” she said under her breath.

* * *

“I meant to ask when you picked me up, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in this truck before.”

“It’s Jack’s.” Charlie glanced at Frankie. “My battery was dead. We swapped cars for the day. He had some errands to run with my grandma and said he wouldn’t mind dropping it off at the body shop for a couple hours while he waits for her.”

“What’s he going to do while he waits?” Frankie asked.

He shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. I didn’t ask.”

Leaving Sequoia Valley for the King’s Summit trailhead, the road changed from being smooth and well-maintained to a road that was bumpy, uneven, and full of potholes. Frankie’s body jolted up and down in the passenger seat like clothing tumbling inside a washing machine.

Her hands gripped the side of the door. “Please tell me that we’re almost there and that the trail we’re hiking isn’t in as bad of shape as that road.”

“We’ll be there in two seconds and it’s not. I checked some of the hikers’ forums last night. The section that we’re going to explore had a green check mark next to it, meaning the park rangers have already cleared any hazards that were out here.”

Charlie parked the car, jumped out of the driver’s side of the truck, and walked around to the back to retrieve their backpacks.

“That’s a relief.” Frankie exhaled. She could still hear her teeth rattling as she climbed out of the truck.

He chuckled and handed her bag to her.

“Thanks,” she said.

They walked past two other vehicles in the parking lot. Dry pine needles and gravel crunched under Frankie’s feet. She breathed in the fresh chilly air, enjoying the scent of the pine trees and mud. A symphony of birds chirped.

“I’m excited. I haven’t been hiking in years. I just hope I don’t slow you down too much.”

Charlie matched her stride. Today, he wore khaki cargo pants, hiking boots, a hunter-green windbreaker, and a baseball cap. “The beauty about hiking is we can take all the time we need.”

“Who knows, if this ends up becoming a regular thing, maybe I’ll even

work my way up to hiking in a place like Yosemite. I've always wanted to visit."

"You've never been to Yosemite?"

"I know. It's a running joke between Dad and me. We've always talked about going, but neither of us has ever done anything about it."

"Do you want to go next weekend? I have a National Parks pass. If you aren't up for hiking, there are tons of other things we can do there. This time of year, it would only take about an hour and a half to get there."

"Can I get a rain check? I know it's not too far, but I don't want to leave my dad alone that long. At least until his hip is one hundred percent."

"Sure thing. Just tell me the day before you want to go, and I'll make it happen."

They stopped walking. The silence was filled by the sound of a woodpecker tapping into a dying tree trunk. They were surrounded by a thick canopy of tree cover. Few of the sun's rays reached them.

"If you don't want to go out too far, maybe we can do the Sequoia Valley Nature Preserve next week. There's a ten-mile-long stretch of trail that runs parallel to the Merced River. Not too many people take the time to seek it out. It's always empty."

A sudden thought struck Frankie. "Charlie, who do you normally go hiking with?"

"Me, myself, and I?"

"Isn't one of the number-one rules of hiking not to go out by yourself?"

"Well, if you want to be technical about it . . ."

"Says the man who was upset that I was skating alone at a public session when we first met," she fired back.

"That's different." His voice grew defensive.

“How so?”

“It just is.” He removed his hat and scratched his head. “When I’m hiking, I make sure to text the trail I’m taking and share my location with Leslie or Jack.”

He’s scratching that scar again.

She could see him beginning to get worked up. His face was flushed pink, his fists clenched by his sides. She didn’t need to be an expert in reading body language to see her words had upset him.

“Charlie?” She took a deep breath. “What’s bothering you?”

His eyelids fluttered. He didn’t answer her.

“Hey, look at me.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. His eyes traveled from the ground up and locked onto hers.

“I’m sorry for whatever I said that set you off.” She tentatively took hold of his hand and squeezed it tightly. “Let’s keep walking. Clear your mind. Focus on your breathing.”

They started walking again, albeit at a slower pace than when they had started out, still holding hands. After several minutes, Frankie heard his breathing shift.

When he finally spoke, his voice came out slightly hoarse. “If our roles were reversed, I probably would be full of burning curiosity and would be asking you a million questions.”

I am curious, but if you don’t want to talk about it, I get it. There are some subjects that are too painful to give voice to. She chose to stay silent.

He exhaled deeply. “My therapist said the more time that passes and the more people I talk to about the accident, the easier it will be to move on.” He let go of Frankie’s hand and gripped the straps of his backpack. “So here goes

. . . Five years ago, during a practice session, just as I was lifting Camille into a star lift, I tripped and hit my head on the ice. It took less than three seconds for my life to change forever.”

CHAPTER 14



Frankie winced. Falling was a part of skating. She thought about the thousands of spills she'd taken over the years not just on jumps, but also on spins and footwork. When you fell in pairs skating, though, it was a whole other matter.

A fall on a lift was the worst possible thing that could happen. It meant there was a high probability of both skaters getting hurt.

“When we went down, I had the oddest sensation that everything was happening in slow motion. I had just enough time to use my body to shield Camille from hitting the ice. Everything that happened after that is still fuzzy. Camille was shaken, but physically fine. I remember having this searing pain in my head. I couldn't hear or see straight. It was like I was having an out-of-body experience.”

Charlie's voice grew softer. “Leslie had been watching us practice. She knows a lot about head injuries from playing hockey. Our coach kept telling me to shake it off, but it didn't sit right with Les. She knew I needed to be checked out for a concussion. From what I was told, they got into a nasty argument that ended with her firing our coach before she dragged me to the ER. I told myself if I ever became a coach, I'd always make sure something like that never happened to my students.”

Frankie's nails dug into the tender flesh of her palms. Anger bubbled inside her. How could a coach, a person you were supposed to rely on, just

tell somebody to shake it off? Shouldn't Charlie's coach have been watching out for his well-being? Every single person who joined the American Skating Union was supposed to take an annual course on the proper protocol for head injuries and concussions. There was no way Charlie's former coach could have been that clueless.

Charlie's face was grim. "At the ER, the medical staff confirmed that I had a concussion. The treatment protocol was to get lots of rest and avoid any strenuous physical activity for a couple weeks until my symptoms subsided, but that was only the beginning of the nightmare."

The roller coaster of emotions continued. Frankie felt her stomach muscles tying themselves in knots. Her breathing grew shallow.

"After six months, I continued to have problems with my memory. There was no clear timeline of when I'd be cleared to skate again, so Camille decided it would be best if we ended our partnership. Meanwhile, I spent another eighteen months off the ice doing specialized therapy."

"Oh, Charlie, that's horrendous," she said, her voice breaking as her chin quivered.

He hung his head. "Finally, two and a half years after the accident, I decided enough was enough. I had to come to terms with the fact that I was as recovered as I was ever going to be. I had what's called acquired dyslexia. While I was technically cleared to skate again, I didn't see a point. I was damaged goods."

They'd reached one of the vista points on the trail. It afforded hikers the first glimpse of the King's Summit waterfall through the trees. If they really opened their ears, they might be able to hear its far-off sound.

Charlie sat on a nearby wooden bench. "The only thing I had, my skating, had been taken from me. Looking back, I'm grateful I had a twin who refused

to let me wallow in self-pity. She conspired with our nan, and the pair of them convinced me that if I moved here, I could have a fresh start.” He shifted his backpack so it rested on his chest, reached for his water bottle, and took a long drink.

Frankie cautiously sank down next to him. She processed all the information he’d just told her. The pieces of the puzzle were coming together.

Leslie kept referencing the accident’s anniversary when Jack hired her. It must have just passed. Knowing what she knew now, reliving those memories could turn anyone into a grump. Charlie was so much stronger than he looked. He had obviously worked hard to turn himself around and move forward from the past.

She wanted to offer him a hug, but didn’t feel as if their relationship had reached that point. She settled for placing a hand on his knee. “That’s a lot for a person to have to go through both physically and emotionally.”

“It was.” He sat quietly for a moment, playing with the top of his water bottle. “I was bitter and depressed for a long time. I still have days where I struggle, but becoming a skating coach has helped me redirect a lot of that negative energy. I have a sense of purpose again.”

“You’re so good with the kids.”

“It’s hard not to love them. They’re so innocent and always eager to learn. Working with them reminds me of why I originally started skating all those years ago. It was because it was an activity I loved. When I was a kid, it was never about medals or money. It was about racing my sister to the other side of the rink and seeing who could land an Axel first.”

She smiled. “For me, it was about becoming a princess.”

“A princess?”

“Uh-huh. I saw a Dreams on Ice show when I was little. The skaters

fascinated me. I wanted to be just like them.”

“I can see that. You’d make a good princess.” They were quiet for a moment, watching a pair of large birds soar through the expansive blue sky. Finally, Charlie asked, “How did you move past your own heartbreak?”

Her body grew hot. She crossed one leg over the other. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve, er . . . never been in any romantic sort of relationship.”

He frowned. “I meant when your pairs partner ended your skating relationship.”

“Oh! I didn’t have too much time to think about it.” She sat taller. “Right after it happened, my dad gave me an ultimatum. If I wasn’t going to skate, he told me, I’d have to find a job and start paying rent. Dad was in the Navy for over thirty years. When he gives orders, he means business.”

“And you applied for Dreams on Ice, just like that?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I looked for retail jobs, but after about a week, Dad intervened. He told me we were going on a road trip. I fell asleep in the car, and when I woke up, we were in Las Vegas to see a DOI show. To this day, I don’t know how he managed it, but he got me an audition and they hired me on the spot.”

“He sounds like a character.”

“He is. Believe me.” She nodded. “You’ll enjoy meeting him and my best friend Gemma. She’s due to visit in a few weeks. She wants to see us skate.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. “With memory problems, I don’t make many friends anymore. When I meet people, a good amount of the time, I can’t remember their names or details about them. They take that as a sign that I just don’t care, but it’s not that at all. I physically can’t remember.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Just like the disorganization, the mess, it’s all . . .”

Her heart wanted to melt. “Don’t say another word.” She put a finger to her lips. “Don’t apologize. Don’t explain. You have me, we’re friends.”

She heard him breathe heavily for several seconds as he looked out into the distance. His expression was unreadable. “Thanks, Frankie.”

So Charlie’s problems have to do more with his short term memory than his long term term memory. I know he sometimes struggles to tell his left side from his right side, but otherwise his skating skills don’t seem to be that affected. At least not that I’ve noticed. I guess when you’ve been skating since you’re three, it’s as second nature as walking.

She nodded toward the trail. “Come on, we still have a long way to go. What is it, another mile and a half to the waterfalls?”

He cleared his throat. “Give or take.”

As they left the vista point and began ascending one of the steeper points of the trail, Frankie could tell something between them had shifted. She couldn’t point to exactly what it was yet, but there was no denying that their relationship as friends and partners had just reached a new level.

* * *

Soaking their feet into a small tide pool below the falls, Frankie and Charlie enjoyed a light lunch. They munched on sandwiches with turkey bacon and egg that he’d cooked that morning. Droplets of water rained down on them, cooling down their overly-warm bodies. Small fish swam near her feet, tickling her toes. To this point, they’d tried to keep their discussion centered on neutral topics.

Frankie mulled over her next words carefully. “Charlie, I was thinking. Would it be for the best if we reevaluated our long-term skating goals?”

He chewed slowly before he said, “And by that you mean . . .?”

“I still want us to skate together,” she threw out quickly. “Just maybe we should consider pursuing something safer than pairs skating, like ice dance. I don’t need to take my senior test.”

“No.” His shoulders became rigid.

“Hear me out.” She finished her sandwich, brushed her hands against her leggings, and brought her knees to her chest. “I really don’t think it’s worth the risk of taking any chances that you might suffer another concussion.”

His nostrils flared. “I’m tired of having the fear of another concussion rule my life. Ice is slippery. Every time I step out there, I take the risk of suffering another concussion.”

“Charlie, I didn’t mean it—”

He stood and walked away. “Are you worried about my ability to be a competent partner?”

She opened her mouth, but he cut her off again.

“I had a full physical and psychological evaluation from my doctors over the weekend. They gave me a clean bill of health.” His brows knitted together. “If for a single moment I felt I was putting you at risk, I wouldn’t take the ice with you. I’m not that stupid.” His chest heaved up and down.

“Charlie, I trust you.” She slowly pulled her feet out of the water, and approached him with even, steady steps, placing a hand on the crook of his elbow. “I’m only bringing this up because I care. I don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

“I’m sorry if I overreacted.” He swallowed hard. “I’ve had several conversations similar to this one. I don’t like being given any special treatment because of what happened.”

I’ll try my best to remember that for next time.

“Okay.”

Frankie walked over to the tide pool to retrieve her shoes and socks. Charlie did the same. She hoped the space would give him time to collect his thoughts.

* * *

Charlie remained semi-quiet on the ride back to Grizzly Springs. As he pulled up to the parking lot in front of the Miller School of Dance, she'd nearly forgotten that it was still Sunday.

“I’m exhausted from the hike, and I bet you are too. Are you sure you don’t feel like skipping our ballroom class and grabbing a bite to eat instead?” Charlie said.

“We’re doing this. We made a commitment. You’re the one who wanted to pay for the full twelve-class package in advance to get the ten percent discount.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I know. I’m regretting it.”

They climbed out of the truck. Frankie walked ahead of him and pulled the door to the dance studio open. “After you, Mr. C.” She gestured for him to enter just as two couples walked out and thanked her.

He grumbled under his breath and walked inside.

“You don’t see me complaining,” she whispered behind him.

Once in the lobby area, they checked in with the receptionist. Frankie plopped herself onto the ground and exchanged her street shoes for a pair of ballroom dance heels. “You’re lucky that men’s ballroom shoes are comfortable.” She pointed to the two-inch heels. “These things are torture devices.”

“It can’t be all that different from wearing a skate boot, can it?”

She stood and winced. The leather on the front of the shoe was stiff and not yet broken in. It put an uncomfortable amount of pressure on her pinky and big toes. She should’ve listened to her gut instinct and ordered a half-size larger. Oh well, it was too late now.

“You can try my heels on after class, then tell me what you think.”

He zipped his mouth closed. They tucked their belongings and shoes into the storage cubbies and walked out onto the dance floor. The room was similar in size and shape to a ballet studio. Three walls were covered with floor-to-ceiling mirrors. The fourth wall contained the studio’s sound system. The floor was made of polished cherry hardwood.

“Welcome back, everyone.” Madame Miller, the studio’s owner, clapped her hands together. “Let’s get right to work. Last week, we started learning the basic step, the chase step, and the proper posture for ballroom dancing. Has everyone been practicing?”

Madame Miller stood about five-foot-three and had her curly black hair secured in a bun. She was about sixty years old, but a person would never know that based on how she moved and carried herself. Today, she wore a black leotard, red shawl, red chiffon overskirt, black leg warmers, and black ballroom shoes.

There were grumbles from the men and a few half-hearted “no” answers from the women.

“Then I see we are going to need a quick review of the steps. First is the basic step.” She walked out to the front of the room to demonstrate. “Men, remember, you always lead first. You step forward with your left foot. Your weight goes back on the right foot. Bring the left foot up to meet the right. Then the right foot goes back. Take the weight on the left foot. Then right

meets the left. That's one set. Ladies, you will reverse it. Do we all remember now?"

There was a series of blank stares. "I see." She laughed. "Well, let's give it the old college try and see what happens. You all mastered this step at the end of last week. I'm sure your muscle memory will return quickly once you settle in."

She clicked a button on the remote to the sound system, and Spanish guitar music filled the room. "Don't worry about adding any arms. Footwork only. The tempo is quick-quick-slow, quick-quick-slow." She clapped her hands together again. "Ready, go."

Madame Miller increased the music's volume. Charlie and Frankie both stepped toward one another with their left feet. They laughed.

"Have you forgotten already?" he asked.

"My brain is in ice skate mode. When I take a set of intro steps, I normally lead with my left skate."

"Ice would be a lot easier than this. Let's try this again," he said.

"Five, six, seven, eight." She counted off as she did during their practice sessions.

Charlie and Frankie quickly got into a rhythm.

"This reminds me of a cha-cha, except there's one less step," she mused.

"Switch!" Madame Miller called out. "Ladies, this time you try leading. Men, you follow."

They reset and Frankie took the lead.

"Wait, isn't this step in a mambo?" Charlie looked amused. "Think about the ice-dance pattern Richelle was practicing all last week for her solo dance test."

She glanced down to her feet. "You're right."

Madame Miller swept around the room, offering a few helpful corrections. When she reached them, she said, “Try not to look at your feet. Keep your eyes up and chin up. You have a handsome partner who should make the job all the easier.”

As she walked away, Charlie cackled with laughter.

“Not a word,” Frankie said.

He held his hands up.

“Let’s try the pivot step. Men, you’ll turn to . . .”

Frankie pivoted away from Charlie as if she was practicing while Madame Miller explained. Her hands went to her cheeks. *Why did she have to bring up how attractive he is? Gah. It’s not like I haven’t noticed it before.*

She turned back around. Charlie was facing away from her as he practiced. Her gaze traveled to his strong back and firm butt, which had become even more toned over the last few weeks. She’d noticed he started to increasingly favor more fitted clothing.

He was constantly on her mind. She was always wondering what he was up to when they weren’t at the rink together.

Charlie is only a friend and a skating partner. Nothing else. I can’t fall for him. I refuse to.

Her pulse began to race. She thought back to earlier in the day and some of the feelings and emotions her conversation with Charlie had sparked. A sinking feeling began to take hold.

Oh no! I’ve already started to fall for him, haven’t I?

She stumbled. As she tried to catch her balance, Charlie was right there to steady her. As his hands touched her body, butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

“You okay?”

She was certain her face was crimson by now. “Fine. It’s these heels.”

“Amazing how you can glide on a metal blade an eighth of an inch thick, but you can’t manage to walk in a straight line.”

“Yeah, amazing.”

“Excellent job, everyone. You looked great.” Madame Miller paused the music. “I see we already have a couple in here who’s eager to get a start on reviewing how to partner one another. Fantastic.”

All the heads in the room turned in the direction of Frankie and Charlie.

“See how nice and upright they are. This is exactly what I’d like you all to aim for. The only thing that could use improving is for them to be closer. You two should almost be touching. Ballroom dancing is about creating nice long lines and intimate connections.”

Frankie groaned internally. How was she going to make it through the next hour?

CHAPTER 15



Lake Wakahanra’s antique market took place on the second and fourth Sundays of every month in the center of town. White tented booths were packed tightly together, displaying vintage trinkets, antique furniture, delicate porcelain dolls, weathered books, and jewelry. The air was filled with the scent of aged wood and lavender.

“An antique market?” Frankie teased Charlie.

“Blame my nan.” He shrugged. “Antiquing is one of her hobbies. She uses me as the muscle”—Charlie flexed his biceps—“to carry whatever she ends up buying.”

Frankie’s body shook with laughter. She tried to picture what his grandmother might look like. She imagined that she might be a sweet older woman with a short silver bob.

“Uh-huh.” Frankie gestured to the tables. “I bet ninety percent of the things for sale here weigh less than five pounds.”

“Okay, so maybe it’s wishful thinking.”

“Yeah.” She shook her head and laughed. “Is there anything specific we’re looking for today?”

“A birthday gift for Nan.” Charlie ran a hand through his hair. “Les and I wanted to get her something unique. Whenever she’s brought me here, we’ve found some unexpected things. I thought it might be a good place to start.”

If we don’t find anything here, I can ask Dad.

Frankie could have sworn she'd caught him researching antique shops on the internet a few days ago, but when she'd asked him, he'd brushed her off. Her father had been extra secretive lately. His dating life with the woman he'd met online had taken off. Today, he was taking her to a sip-and-paint class.

“What type of things does your grandma enjoy?”

Charlie stroked his jaw. “She has eccentric taste, but the one thing she always tells us is that it's best to come to an antique market with an open mind and a budget. She looks for items that appear as if they have an interesting story to tell.”

Frankie twirled the end of her hair around her finger. “And your budget is . . .?”

“A grand?”

She stumbled. With the refined reflexes of a skater, he steadied her. “Woah, careful. I need you in one piece.”

“Thanks.” Frankie blushed, a mix of embarrassment and gratitude rushing through her. She dry swallowed. It was getting increasingly more difficult to not pay attention to the electric spark that coursed through her body every time their hands touched. Ignoring it on the ice was easy enough—they were there to work—but outside the rink was another story.

Finding her voice, she managed, “A grand is a *lot* of money.”

“It is, but this is my nan. I don't want to cheap out if we see something amazing.”

As they neared the end of the aisle, Frankie spotted a red-and-green jukebox. “Charlie, look!” she exclaimed, flinging her arm out to stop him. She accidentally hit his ribs.

“Ow. That hurt.” His gaze traveled up to the machine. His eyes started to

twinkle. “That’s it!”

“Come on!” Frankie tugged on his shirt and dragged him toward the tent. “I wonder if it’s still in working order.”

“Even if it’s not, I bet we could find someone who could outfit it with new hardware or a turntable. Vinyl records are making a comeback.”

He was right. Her dad had been over the moon when they’d discovered them at the downtown Grizzly Springs bookshop. She remembered him bragging the entire way home about how his collection of vinyl records, and eight tracks was original.

They entered the tent. Up close, the machine had chrome accents and colorful buttons. Frankie and Charlie exchanged excited glances.

“Hi there.” A vendor in a Fresno Flying Squirrels baseball cap, T-shirt, and jeans approached. He appeared to be in his mid-forties. “I see this little baby seems to have caught your eye.”

“Yes, sir. It has,” Charlie said.

The vendor leaned over and turned on the power strip connected to a generator. The jukebox buzzed to life. “This belonged to my gramps. It used to sit up in his office at the Lucky Dog Diner over on Tenth Street. It’s in pristine condition and still has all its original records.”

Charlie rubbed his hands together. “My nan would *love* this. There’s a spot in the living room near her bookcases where it would fit perfectly. I can see her dancing around, enjoying a glass of wine to the Bee Gees or Elvis when no one is home.”

Behind them, Frankie could see a few other people taking note of the jukebox. They had to snag this for his grandmother. Jumping in, she asked, “How much are you asking for it?”

The vendor eyed them, then returned his gaze to the machine. “Why don’t

you tell me how much you're willing to pay for it?"

Frankie watched Charlie reach into the back pocket of his jeans to retrieve his wallet. Opening it, he glanced inside the cash section. "I can do two hundred in cash and eight hundred on my credit card."

The vendor's face fell. "That's a lot lower than I'd hoped to get for it."

Charlie frowned. "You asked us to make you an offer. What figure were you thinking?"

Frankie did some quick mental math. "I can throw in two hundred on my credit card."

Charlie sucked in air sharply. "Frankie, that's a lot."

She placed her hand on his. "It's for a good cause."

Technically speaking, it was a lot more than she could afford, but no one needed to know that. She'd have a month or two to pay her credit card balance down.

A couple listening in to the conversation approached the vendor's left-hand side. They threw out their own offer. "This is probably worth about five grand. We'll give you four grand for it."

Charlie's jaw clenched. "I can do two grand now and three grand next week."

"We'll do fifty-five hundred."

"I'll do—"

"Charlie, remember what you told me when you walked in?" Frankie interrupted him. "Stick to your budget. Don't get sucked into a bidding war."

She watched his shoulders deflate. "You're right. Nan would kill me." He turned to the vendor. "The best I can do is two grand. Otherwise, you can give it to them."

She squeezed his hand.

The man stroked his chin. "Credit cards charge me a three percent transaction fee every time." He faced Charlie. "Cash is still king to me. If you give me your two hundred bucks cash, and eight hundred on your card, it's yours."

"Done."

They shook hands.

Shrugging, the other couple left the tent.

Charlie handed his money to Frankie. "Would you mind double checking this is two hundred and helping with the transaction?" His big eyes pleaded with her. "Numbers . . . er . . . I have trouble reading them. . ."

"I've got your back."

"Thank you," he said softly to her. "Here's my credit card. I'm just going to inspect Nan's new toy."

Frankie organized Charlie's cash as he leaned forward to study the machine.

"Thank you. This means more to him than you know." She handed the cash to the man.

"That's why I'm happy to have you two take it. To anyone else, it's a collector's item, but since it's for his grandmother, it's an item that will hopefully evoke a lot of fond memories." He took hold of Charlie's credit card. "I'll be right back with this."

Frankie slid her hands into her pockets. Suddenly, the rich sound of Elvis's voice played aloud. She closed her eyes and let the music fill her, swaying side to side.

Charlie cleared his voice. "You know, a slow song like this is perfect to practice our ballroom dancing to." Her pulse increased as he extended his hand to her. "Shall we?"

She hesitated. “Oh . . . um . . . sure.”

He pulled her in close to him. He placed one hand on her waist and held her other hand gently in his, their bodies moving in perfect sync, just like when they were on the ice. The world around them seemed to blur as they danced, lost in the moment.

“You’re a natural,” Charlie complimented, his eyes locked with hers. “So talented in everything you do.”

Her cheeks warmed. Feeling playful, she said, “It helps that I have an experienced partner. I wouldn’t trust just anyone.”

“Touché.” He chuckled, and she was treated to a glimpse of his high cheekbones. “Thanks for all your help today. Nan is really going to enjoy this.”

“Who knows, maybe once you give it to her, she’ll insist on having a dance party.”

“You know what, Frankie, she just might.”

Frankie’s heart swelled at seeing Charlie so happy. *I’m so lucky I get to spend so much time with a man like this. Is there a chance that if I open my heart to him, it’ll lead to something more? Is there room for us to be a couple both on and off the ice?*

Many questions lingered in her head.

As the man returned, and Charlie and Frankie broke apart, she knew that it wouldn’t be long before she’d have to tell him how she felt about him. She didn’t know if she’d be able to hide her feelings for him much longer.

* * *

On Monday, Leslie, Frankie, and Charlie met for dinner at Millie’s.

Leslie clapped her hands together. “A jukebox! Are you serious? That’s amazing!”

“It is, isn’t it?” Frankie smiled, her eyes fixed on Charlie. “Your brother fought off another couple to make sure he’d be the one to be able to gift it to your grandma.”

“Let me know how much I owe you and I’ll split it with you.”

Charlie blinked slowly. His gaze turned to Leslie. “You owe me five hundred.”

Her eyes fluttered. “You spent a grand?”

“I was prepared to pay more for it, but Frankie made sure I stayed within budget.”

“I guess in the grand scheme of things, five hundred isn’t too bad.” Leslie picked up her wineglass and swirled the red liquid around. “Thanks, Frankie. If you weren’t there, I can only guess how much Charlie would’ve spent. He probably would’ve gotten into some sort of bidding war over it. He’s stubborn.”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “Hey, I’m *right* here, Les.”

Frankie watched the two siblings banter. She always enjoyed watching the exchanges and wondered what it would have been like if she’d had a sibling.

Charlie’s eyes met hers, an unspoken understanding passing between them. He winked.

“Why do I even bother trying to reason with you? You’re my twin. We’re too much alike.” Leslie pinched the bridge of her nose. “So, Frankie . . . moving on. How did your dad’s most recent date go?”

Charlie frowned. “Date?”

“Until recently, my dad was kind of a hermit. I was hoping he’d join a

club or that I'd be able to find him a hobby, but he insisted on signing up for a dating app." She rubbed her temples. "It's been interesting, to say the least. He never does anything half-heartedly."

Charlie and Leslie's bodies shook with laughter.

"Dad had his first date with a woman a couple weeks ago, and apparently, they hit it off. He's taught himself how to send texts and video chat."

"And what did they do last night?" Charlie leaned an elbow on the table.

"Another wine tasting and painting thing. Dad looked like he'd done some type of finger painting. He's gifted in many things, but when it comes to art, he's artistically challenged."

Charlie and Leslie laughed even harder.

Frankie had missed having friends to hang out with again. She shut herself away when she moved here. Getting out was good for her.

I wonder if Charlie has finally told Leslie about us skating together. He promised me he'd do it soon. I'll ask him about it later.

CHAPTER 16



Six Weeks Later

Frankie and Charlie held their opening pose on the ice. Their backs were facing away from one another, one knee bent, the other out to the side. The fast, opening chords of their long program music played out over the rink's speaker system from the classic Audrey Hepburn film *My Fair Lady*.

“Five, six, seven, eight . . .” Frankie counted, patting her hand against her thigh.

Popping up from their opening stances, they grasped hands and performed a set of back crossovers diagonally across the ice. Setting up for a split twist, Frankie felt Charlie's hands take hold of her waist and thrust her up into the air simultaneously as she tapped her toe pick into the ice.

She held her hands over her head as she rotated two times around. If done correctly, Charlie would catch her and gently assist her into a gliding position. Unfortunately, this was one element where they still hadn't quite figured out their timing. She came down with a thud, and Charlie wrapped his arms around her and steadied her.

At least it wasn't a crash this time. She'd call that a victory.

For their program layout, they'd both agreed the smartest move would be if they stuck to getting the elements that required the largest amount of energy out of the way first. By the one-and-a-half-minute mark, they could also check off their jumps.

Catching their breaths, they marked where the placement of their lasso lift and death spiral would go just as the music slowed and transitioned from the film's overture to "Wouldn't It Be Lovely."

It was Frankie's favorite section of the program so far. They used large gestures and facial expressions to portray Professor Henry Higgins and his love interest Eliza Doolittle. As she'd discovered, Charlie had another hidden talent—he was an excellent choreographer.

They attacked their footwork sequence, throw double Lutz, and side-by-side spins, and the music changed one final time to the music from the song "I Could've Danced All Night." Their program would eventually end with back-to-back press lifts and a final pairs spin.

The audience is going to be on their feet once we work out the lift entrance and exits, Frankie thought as the program came to a close. *I already have chills thinking about it.*

The music ended. They bent over at the waist, breathing hard.

"That twist was a hot mess. You're not getting enough height," Charlie wheezed. "I'm still not pushing you far enough into the air."

"It could also be that I'm picking in for the twist too far back." Frankie shrugged. "Don't blame yourself. It takes two to skate. When Gemma gets in, maybe she can watch it and give us her thoughts?" She patted his shoulder. "I still can't believe how much progress we've made."

"It is pretty amazing, isn't it?" He stood straight. "Now if I could make it through without being so winded."

"You and me both." They exchanged laughs.

Joking aside, they decided to spend the last few minutes performing one more run-through sans the twist.

Skating over to the sound system, Frankie tapped her rink card against the

reader. A beep sounded. “Francesca Tomlinson and Charlie Welch,” a computerized voice said.

She rushed over to join Charlie at the center of the ice.

* * *

“How exhausted are you from the double run-throughs?” Charlie asked her with a calculating look later that morning, after the last of their students had departed. They’d taken off their skates and were stretching and warming up their muscles in the rink’s ballet studio.

She sat with her legs crossed on top of her purple yoga mat. “Not enough to skip out on our afternoon training session, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“No, it’s nothing like that.” Charlie dipped his chin. “I was hoping we could start off-ice lifts today. It wouldn’t be anything too fancy; I just want us to start getting comfortable with the basics.”

Frankie regarded him carefully. She’d been eagerly waiting for this moment. This was two months ahead of where she’d thought they’d be. Up until this point, Charlie had been cautious with their skill progressions. Lifts were the last element they needed to have a full program.

She jumped up and down like a puppy discovering a fresh set of tennis balls to play with. “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

His cheeks flushed a light pink. “You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

They unfolded the foam panel mats normally stored in the corner and spread them out around them. Charlie removed his bulky outerwear and stripped down to just a fitted black T-shirt and skating pants. It was the first time she’d gotten a look at what lay hidden underneath his fleece jacket in

weeks. Even when they were ballroom dancing, he wore a loose long-sleeved shirt.

She gulped. *Who knew that underneath it would be so much lean muscle? He was in decent shape before, but now he really looks like an elite athlete.*

“If you don’t feel safe at any point in time, tell me, and we’ll stop immediately,” he instructed her.

“That goes for you too.”

“Of course.” His jaw tightened, and he rubbed the back of his neck. “I have a small confession to make. This is going to be the first time I’ve done any overhead lifts since the accident.”

She felt a small seed of fear plant itself in her mind, yet it disappeared almost as quickly as it had appeared.

Both of us have to be one hundred percent committed to one another for this to work. I have to trust that Charlie won’t let anything happen to me. She took a deep breath. *I know we can do this.*

“I trust you,” she whispered.

Charlie rolled his neck from side to side and loosened up the muscles in his arms, chest, and shoulders. “We’ll take this nice and easy. I’m going to put my hands on your hips, lift you up, then put you back down. Just to get used to the motion, feel, and timing.”

They’d done this a month and a half ago without any problems when starting off-ice split-twist drills.

His hands went to her hips. “On your count.”

Frankie initiated a countdown. “Three. Two. One. Ready. Go.”

She was up and down in a matter of seconds. Her pulse increased, and adrenaline flooded her body. She’d forgotten how much she loved the feeling of being up in the air. It was the closest she could ever come to flying.

“Easy peasy.” She gave him a high five.

“Easy peasy?” He snorted.

She glanced over her shoulder. “That’s what my level one and two students always say to me.”

“Mine say, ‘Easy peasy, lemon squeezy.’ They have the funkiest expressions.” He chuckled. “Let’s do two more of these before we move on.”

She got back into position. “Counting us down in three. Two. One. Ready. Go.”

Charlie was strong. He never wavered or strained when her feet left the ground.

“How’s the hand placement? The timing? Does it feel okay?”

She gave him a thumbs-up. “It was perfect.”

Charlie has worked so hard to get to this point. I’m so lucky to be skating with a man who cares so much. We’re a real team.

“For this next set, let’s try a hand-to-waist lift. I’ll lift you so your hips are about even with my head. How long should we hold it for?”

“Five seconds? And do you want me to step into the lift, or were you thinking it should be a press?”

Charlie puffed out his cheeks. “Which one is easier for you?”

“I like the step in—it’s a better simulation to being on the ice—but either one works.”

“Okay. We’ll try both. The step in first, then a press.”

They moved into position. Frankie counted down. Charlie took a deep breath and lifted her up.

“Charlie, have you seen Frankie? I have some news to share with you!” Leslie’s voice called out, followed by the sound of glass hitting the ground and breaking. “What the Hades do you think you two are doing?”

Frankie's body fidgeted. Charlie fought to stay calm and didn't let the intruder's sudden appearance affect him. Lines appeared on his face as he carefully placed her back down on the ground before snapping his head in the direction of his twin sister. His eyes flashed dangerously.

"You of all people know better than to raise your voice at me like that when we're in the middle of a lift." His tone was short and clipped. "You can say whatever you want after my partner is safely back on the ground. Got it?"

Frankie felt as if her limbs were lead. She was frozen in place.

"Fine." Leslie's face was deep red. The muscles in her neck bulged. It reminded Frankie of a hockey player itching to start a fight. "I'll ask you two again. What do you think you're doing?"

"What does it look like we're doing?" He crossed his arms. "Frankie and I were right in the middle of starting a lift when you *barged* in on us."

Had neither one of them mentioned to Leslie that they'd started training together? She winced.

Leslie's eyes suddenly narrowed. "Why?"

"Don't be dense. We're planning to skate together."

"Competitively?"

"Maybe? I don't know. We're leaving our options open."

"Do you know how foolish that sounds? Or the enormous risks you're taking? What happens if you fall again?"

"I'm *not* being foolish. Frankie and I have spent months working up to this. I'm sick and tired of being treated like I'm *damaged*. What I decide to do is my decision. Not yours."

"Charlie, why do you have to be so darn selfish?!" Leslie punched the wall. A few tears leaked down her cheeks. "Your decision affects everyone

around you. Have you ever considered the physical and mental toll your accident took on me?”

Charlie stared at her blankly.

“You’re not the only Welch who was broken.” Leslie shook her head, the tears flowing like a melting ice cube. “If you want to roll the dice and skate pairs again, fine. Like you said, it’s *your* life. Just don’t expect me to be there to pick up the pieces. You’re on your own.”

Frankie took a step forward. “Leslie . . .”

As if she’d forgotten Frankie had been present, Leslie snapped her head toward her and glared. “Don’t. Speak. To. Me.” She sprinted out of the room.

“She’s always been the stronger twin. The rock. Why didn’t she ever say anything to me about how affected she was by it all?” Charlie stood rooted in his spot. His eyes were wide, and his shoulders hunched. “What to do? Where do I go from here?”

Frankie fought to find her voice. “Leslie may be strong, but she’s not a robot. She’s human. Maybe she was too afraid to say anything to you.” She placed a hand under his chin and lifted it. “Whatever the reason is, she needs you right now. Go find her.”

“Frankie . . .”

“Go. I’m fine. We can touch base later. Besides, somebody needs to clean up the mess.”

Walking to the doorway, Charlie glanced at Frankie one more time, then disappeared from her sight.

She hoped Charlie and Leslie could work things out between the two of them. She swallowed hard. It was partly her fault Leslie was so upset. Charlie was skating with her to help her pass her test. She was also the one who talked him into demonstrating for his students.

* * *

Frankie: Hey. Sorry I didn't get a chance to touch base with you before I left. It was crazy tonight without Leslie around. Half the skating school teachers didn't know what to do, but we figured it all out eventually.

Charlie: It's fine.

Frankie: And? Were you able to talk to Leslie?

Charlie: Sort of?

Frankie: ???

Charlie: She hopped into her car right after she left us. I spent a couple hours making calls and driving around to figure out where she might've gone. Three dots blinked. Charlie was typing.

Frankie: You're leaving me hanging here.

Charlie: Sorry, I'm using the voice to text. It's slow.

Frankie: *Blushing emoji*

Charlie: Les called Nan about an hour ago. She's at her hair stylist's place. She flat-out refuses to speak to me, but Nan promised to pass on the message that I'm here whenever she changes her mind.

Frankie: Oh, Charlie, I'm so sorry.

Charlie: I think Les just needs a few days to cool down. We're both hardheaded. I just wanted to warn you, she might not be speaking to you either.

Frankie: Noted.

Charlie: Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow. I'm hoping some sleep will make my tension headache disappear.

Frankie: See you then. Good night.

CHAPTER 17



A few days later, Frankie stood inside the men's department of Wardrobe Emporium with Gemma. The soft hum of conversations filled the store. After spending over an hour combing through rack after rack of suits with Gemma, she hoped that the traditional-cut suit they'd found would be to his liking.

The dressing room door opened and closed. Frankie's dad cleared his throat, and she and Gemma immediately paused their conversation and turned their heads toward him.

"Mr. T, wow." Gemma let out a wolf whistle. "Looking sharp."

"That's one approval down. Frankie?" He turned and struck a pose. "What do you think? Will Suzy approve?"

"Navy blue suits you, Dad. It brings out your eyes." Her throat was dry. "I think she'll love it."

Her father always gravitated toward navy blue. She figured it must remind him of his military uniform.

"How's the fit? Do you think it needs any alterations?"

Frankie walked up to her dad and adjusted the position of the collar. She had him spin around slowly for her, and she looked over the alignment of the seams. "I think the fit is pretty good."

He smiled. "Excellent. I'll just change and then we can get in line at the register to check out. This is the first suit I've bought since your middle school graduation, kiddo." He walked back toward the fitting rooms.

Frankie elbowed Gemma. “Do you see what I mean? Dad’s *really* serious about her. Should I be worried?”

Gemma shook her head, and her blond ringlets bounced up and down. “Not yet. When he starts asking you about rings, then you can worry. I think he’s just happy to have a woman close to his age to spend time with.”

“They’ve upped their dates to three times a week. Dad even stops by the market and buys a bouquet of freshly-cut flowers for her on Sundays.”

Gemma’s eyes widened. “Three times a week?”

Frankie nodded. “I have no idea what they do when they’re together. He’s tight-lipped about it. All I know is he gets a lot of enjoyment out of telling me not to wait up for him.”

“You sound like a parent.” Her friend laughed. “You were the one who wanted him to pick up a hobby and get out there and meet people.”

“I did.” She moved her ponytail to her shoulder, combing her fingers through it. “It’s not that I regret doing it either; it’s just a lot for me to get used to.”

“Have you told your father how you feel?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to run interference. I’m a grown adult and so is he. If Suzy makes him happy, I’m all for it.”

“I don’t blame you. If it were my mum or dad, I’d let this dating thing run its own course too.”

Her father rejoined them. The suit blazer and slacks were draped over his arm.

“Dad, I’ll take care of paying for this.”

He hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. It can be one of your Father’s Day gifts.”

He slowly handed the clothing to her and pecked her on the cheek.

“Thank you, sweetie.”

“I meant to ask earlier, what should we bring to Suzy’s place tonight?” She readjusted the strap of her purse as she took hold of the clothing. “Wine? Dessert?”

“I have no idea. Wine? I’ll ask Suzy-kins what she prefers.” He whipped his phone out of his back pocket and started typing expertly. A goofy grin crossed his face, and he laughed to himself. “Sorry, she sent me the funniest joke of the day. What do you call a pile of cats? A meown-tain!”

“Nice one, Mr. T.” Gemma laughed.

“Yesterday, she had another humdinger!” He scrolled. “Here it is. What do you call a well-balanced horse?”

Frankie closed her eyes and shook her head. “I don’t know, what?”

“Stable!” Dad slapped his thigh.

Gemma covered her mouth with her hand. “Mr. T, how about you and I pick up a bottle of champagne just to be safe while Frankie checks out? If Suzy ends up texting you back and tells you not to bring anything, you two can save it for dinner with Mr. Blanks later this week. I can’t wait to finally meet him!”

“That sounds great.” He glanced up from the screen. “Except you’re coming with us tonight, Gem.”

Frankie’s body shook with silent laughter. Her friend’s face was comical. “I am?”

“Of course, you’re part of the extended Tomlinson family.”

Frankie pointed to the register. “I’ll meet you both across the street when I’m done.”

Dad’s phone buzzed. “That’s Suzy. She says she has everything we need for dinner, but if I still insist on bringing a wine, she prefers a pinot grigio.”

* * *

Frankie's and Gemma's mouths dropped open as the cool female voice on the phone's GPS directed them down a long gravel driveway.

"Is this a home or a castle?" Gemma sputtered.

"It looks more like a mansion to me."

Frankie's dad half laughed, and half coughed. "Suzy describes it as a cottage."

"That home is way too upscale and posh to be considered a cottage!" Frankie exclaimed.

Stepping out of the car, she was instantly reminded of one of the medieval homes she might find if she were in Germany. The structure was two stories tall and painted white, with exposed wooden beams. Arched windows let in plenty of natural light. The roof was sloped, with three chimneys. There was even a castle-like turret jutting out to the side.

Walking toward the front door, Frankie noticed an intricately carved figurine of a wooden bear sitting on its haunches, wearing a doctor's stethoscope, and holding a clipboard. "Huh. That's interesting."

Her father's lips twitched. "Suzy is a retired nurse." He knocked three times.

"It's open!" a singsong female voice called out.

Dad opened the door to a lavishly decorated living room. The interior walls were white, mirroring the building's exterior. The floor was carpeted in a dark turquoise color, complementing the cherry tones of the wooden built-in bookcases on both sides of a gray stone fireplace. There was a long olive-

green sofa, three hunter-green wingback chairs, a clear coffee table, and to Frankie's amusement, a knight's full suit of armor.

"It like we're in an upscale boutique hotel," Gemma muttered.

"If you think this room is spectacular, wait until you see the rest of the house. It's done up beautifully. One of the hobbies she picked up after she retired is interior design. It's fascinating going to antique markets and furniture shops with her. She knows so much, like how to tell a real piece of Sevres porcelain from a . . ."

When was this? Is this what you do on your dates with her? Frankie wondered.

"Rich, good timing! I was about to give you a call to see when you might be arriving." A woman with short silver hair greeted her dad with a kiss on each cheek. She was elegantly dressed in a flowing floral top and black trousers cuffed at the ankle. "You look exceedingly dapper in that suit. You didn't have to get all dressed up for me, but I do appreciate it." She adjusted his tie.

Her dad's chest swelled. His cheeks turned a rosy red. "These are for you."

She splayed a hand on her chest. "Stunning." She sniffed the flowers and accepted the gift bag containing the bottle of wine. Her eyelids fluttered. "You spoil me so. Thank you." Placing the items on the coffee table, she glanced behind him. The corners of her mouth folded up. "You must be Frankie; lovely to meet you. Your father has spoken highly about you."

Frankie stepped forward to offer the woman a handshake, but instead, she received a hug.

"I'm a hugger. It comes with the territory of being a mother and a grandmother," she laughed.

“Suzy-kins, this is Gemma.”

“Of course, you’re welcome too! You’re with Dreams on Ice, if I remember correctly, and Frankie’s closest friend?” She glanced at Frankie’s father, who nodded.

“Yes, ma’am, that’s right.” Gemma’s eyes widened as she, too, received a hug.

“Do I detect a hint of a Glaswegian accent?”

“Er . . . yes, you do.”

Suzy’s lips curved up. “My late husband was from Scotland. Fort Williams in the Highlands, to be exact. We lived in Glencoe, Glasgow, and Aberdeen before moving to the States in the seventies.”

“Did you now?”

Frankie and her dad exchanged glances. Gemma’s accent had suddenly become much more pronounced. She appreciated the way her father’s friend—no, girlfriend—went out of her way to make everyone feel at ease. She was a consummate host.

“You have a lovely home, Suzy. Thank you so much for inviting us to dinner tonight,” Frankie said.

Suzy led them to the formal dining room. Floor-to-ceiling windows on three sides of the room looked out over the shimmering blue water of Lake Wakahanra and the surrounding forest of pine trees. A speedboat zipped through the water in the distance.

“I’m thrilled you could all come tonight. I’d hoped our families might be able to meet, but both my sons had to work this evening, and my daughter doesn’t live in the area. So, it’ll just be my eldest grandson and possibly granddaughter dropping in on us today.”

“We don’t mind at all. I’ve been eager to meet your grandchildren.”

Frankie's dad rubbed his hands together.

"Would you like any help in the kitchen, Suzy? Gemma and I would be happy to be put to work," Frankie offered.

"Oh heavens, no. You're my guests this evening, and in any case, we have a housekeeper who runs the kitchen."

Suzy picked up the wine and read the label. "Good choice! I haven't heard of this winery, but the label is stunning. I love the watercolor detailing."

"Mr. Tomlinson mentioned you collect wine labels. We thought this one might be unique. It's a local special reserve. The liquor shop owner also mentioned that all their labels were created by hand," Gemma said.

Her eyes danced. "That makes it all the more special."

They chatted a little more about the home and learned it had been a passion project of her late husband. It had seven suites and a separate annex where her older son resided. Suzy promised that her grandson would give them a full tour of the cottage after dinner.

They sat down at the oak dining table and were served crackers, cheese, meats, tomatoes, carrots, and a few other select appetizers to nibble on as the housekeeper prepared a roast for the main meal. Plates were passed around and everyone began to serve themselves.

"Suzy, I'd love to hear a little bit more about what made you decide to ask Dad out on a date through the Golden Years app," Frankie said.

A smile tugged at the corner of her lips. She glanced at him. "After the holidays were over this past winter, I was hit with a case of seasonal depression. It happens every so often, but time it was worse than normal." She swallowed hard. "One might think that after being widowed for twelve years, a person might become accustomed to the quiet and the solitude, but in

truth, you never do. Normally, I try to keep busy to keep my mind off things, but that wasn't working."

Frankie didn't miss how her father's hand disappeared under the table in Suzy's direction.

"For my birthday in January, my eldest grandchildren bought me a premium membership to the Golden Years app. They thought it might be the best way to get me out of my funk, and they were right. I had a hoot and a holler scrolling through different profiles, but it was Rich's cheeky profile photo that spoke to me. I loved that it was in black and white, and that he was winking while holding a rose between his teeth."

Frankie blanched. "I thought we had removed that one?"

"You did, but I added it back to my account after I saw how many more profile views it generated," her dad said.

Gemma high-fived him.

Frankie pinched the bridge of her nose.

Her dad stroked his chin. "I picked up the idea from the episode of *Cupid's Arrow* where the contestants were asked to participate in a vintage photoshoot."

"Zach won the challenge, didn't he?" Suzy let out a sigh. "I'm so happy he ended up being declared the winner. Johnny was a nice young man, but he didn't have the same spark to his personality as Yvonne."

"You watch reality TV?" Frankie questioned.

Her dad shook with laughter. "Suzy-kins is just like our Gemma. She lives for them. Her DVR is full of not just *Cupid's Arrow*, but also travel shows, survival shows, cooking shows. You name it, and Suzy probably watches it."

Gemma sat forward in her seat. "Have you heard the announcement about

the next season of *Cupid's Arrow*?”

“Have I?!” Suzy exclaimed. “I can’t wait for Johnny to be in the hot seat. From the trailer that dropped this morning, his friends look like they’ll be just as much fun as Selena and McKenzie were for Yvonne.”

The table erupted into a spirited debate over dinner.

An hour and a half later, just as the Dutch apple pie slices were being eaten, the front door opened and closed. A man spoke in a soft, muffled tone to the housekeeper in the kitchen.

“About time one of my wayward grandchildren arrived.” Suzy patted her mouth with a napkin and scooted her chair back. “Excuse me.” She disappeared into the kitchen.

Frankie’s father leaned back in his seat and pushed his plate away. “I can’t eat another bite. Would either of you two ladies care for my piece?”

“If you felt that way Dad, why didn’t you refuse it?” Frankie tilted her head to the side.

“I can’t say no to that woman.” He glanced toward the kitchen with a faraway look in his eye.

Gemma reached for the plate and offered to eat the remnants.

“Dad, you really like her, don’t you?”

“I do.” He ran a hand over his hair. “She makes me feel young and energetic again. I never thought I’d be this happy. I always thought I’d end up being an old bachelor.”

Frankie stared at her plate. “I’ve always wondered . . . your first marriage . . .”

“You want to know why it broke down.” Dad’s shoulders slumped. “The short answer is that my ex-wife and I were both too young and inexperienced at life. When I married Shirley, I was eighteen and she was seventeen. We’d

been neighbors growing up, and I'd always had a crush on her. The evening before I was about to ship out for my first deployment, I'd intended to ask her out on a date, but instead, I asked her to marry me. To my shock, she said yes."

Frankie and Gemma hung on to his words. He'd always been tight-lipped about the past.

"The first two years of our marriage, I was gone more than I was home. We exchanged letters, but I can count on one hand the number of times we saw one another in person. Everything changed the day I received orders to return Stateside. I learned I was to be based in Hawaii. Shirley was over the moon and jumped at the opportunity to live in an island paradise. We moved in together."

"That must have been awwwwwwwwwwwwkard," Frankie said.

Her dad snapped his fingers and pointed to her. "You called it. We realized almost instantaneously that we had nothing in common. Adding to that, Shirley found out the hard way that living on an island thousands of miles from the mainland is isolating. She grew to resent me for it. We fought constantly. She might have loved the idea of being a wife, but she didn't enjoy having a husband. So I did the only sensible thing. I offered her a way out and she took it."

Gemma frowned. "I'm sorry, Mr. T."

"Don't be. It was a valuable learning experience. I enjoyed being a bachelor." He shrugged. "Yet one of the most important lessons I learned was that I didn't have to conform to the norms of society. When I was ready to become a father, I had no qualms about taking the adoption route."

"And I'm all the more grateful for it." Frankie walked over and hugged her dad.

“You were the most perfect baby I’d ever laid eyes on.” He sighed deeply. “I only wish I had been able to take both you and your sister home. I’ve always wondered about the family that adopted her.”

Gemma’s fork clattered on the plate.

Frankie dropped her arms from around her father and took two steps back. “I . . . I . . . I have a sister?” she sputtered.

He paled. “I thought we’d discussed this when you turned eighteen.”

All the air left Frankie’s lungs, and her chest grew tight. The walls were closing in around her. She shook her head. “No. Never.”

Suzy reentered the room. “Here he is. Everyone, meet my grandson, Charlie.”

A familiar brown-haired man waved. “I’m sorry I’m late—Frankie?”

Her eyes went wide and her vision fuzzy. Her heart thudded against her ribs. Her palms grew wet and clammy. She started to shake. It was all too much. She needed air. She needed to get away.

“Excuse me.” Without a clue as to where she was going, Frankie opened the glass door by the kitchen and ran toward the forest.

CHAPTER 18



Tears trickled down from Frankie's eyes as she pumped her arms and legs. Question after question ran rampant through her mind.

Is Dad keeping more information from me? How could he not know he never mentioned a sister? Why didn't he take both of us?

She felt betrayed. She felt angry. She felt lost. All this time, she'd had another biological family member. Had her sister found a good home? Or had she grown up all alone?

Her sides began to cramp. She couldn't run any longer. Slowing her pace, she sank down onto her hands and knees and breathed hard. Sharp, dried, and sticky pine needles stuck to her palms. She felt a pinecone digging into her knee. It was eerily silent except for the soft hooting of an owl somewhere off in the distance. It smelled like a mixture of vanilla and fresh butterscotch.

She glanced up. The thick canopy of trees obscured the sky, matching her mood. Was her sister looking at the same sky? Was she older? Younger? Sitting down, she brought her knees to her chest and rested her forehead on them, rocking back and forth. Her throat constricted as she dry sobbed.

I have a sister. Would we have been friends? Do we look alike or share any common interests?

For years, she'd tried to put on a strong front, not ever dwelling too much on who her birth parents might have been or the circumstances of the adoption. Back then, she'd claimed she didn't care if she ever saw her official

adoption agency records—she never wanted to hurt or offend her dad—but if she was truly honest with herself, she'd always been curious.

I was afraid of what I might or might not find. I didn't want to be left with more questions that couldn't be answered. What's the point of learning the names of people who didn't want me?

She rubbed her hands against her forearms, shivering slightly. She'd been so hot when she was running, and now, she was cold. She replayed her father's confession in her head. His ashen face caused her to shiver.

I need time to figure out what my next move is going to be. I overreacted when I ran out of the house. I ruined dinner. Dad's probably freaking out. I hope he and Suzy aren't furious with me. At least Gemma is there to help defuse the situation.

She stood and winced. Her body was achy. She wasn't certain how much time had passed. She squinted. The small amounts of light visible through the gaps in the dense forest scape had faded. Frankie was having a difficult time seeing what was in front of her. She felt as if she were stuck inside a maze.

Which direction had she come from? Every direction she looked appeared the same. Maybe she could use the location services from her phone to help her. She patted her pockets. They were flat and empty. She'd forgotten she'd tucked her phone away in her purse before they sat down for dinner.

How could I be so dumb as to blindly run into a forest!

She held her head in her hands. Panicking had gotten her into this mess in the first place. If she wanted to find a solution to her problem, the only thing she could do so was to try and muster up whatever composure she had remaining. She took a deep breath, held it for ten seconds, then exhaled.

“Okay, Frankie, you have two options,” she said to herself. “One, you could stay put until help comes to you, or two, you could start moving and

hope that if you walk in a straight line, it'll lead you out of the forest.”

Neither one sounded particularly appealing.

If I stay here, it could be a long cold night. I don't want to find out if there are bears, coyotes, mountain lions, wolves, or who knows what other beastly animals in these woods. So by default, that leaves option two.

Sending a silent prayer that she was doing the right thing, Frankie made an educated guess and started walking. Her feet crunched against the fallen leaves and pine needles. Progress was painfully slow as she kept her head directed toward the ground, watching for exposed tree roots.

Trying to keep her mood positive, she started softly singing “Wouldn't It Be Lovely” to herself.

She crossed her arms toward her body, tucking her hands under her armpits. The chiffon sleeves of her blouse looked beautiful, but they weren't practical for an evening in the mountains.

Suddenly, she heard the familiar voice of her skating partner yelling in the distance. “Fran-kie! Fran-kie! Can you hear me? Where are you?”

Her pulse began to race. She cupped her hands to her mouth. “Over here!”

“Stay where you are! I'm coming for you!” She heard the sound of twigs snapping as Charlie moved through the underbrush.

She spun in a circle. “I can hear you, but I can't see you!”

“I'm coming! Keep talking!” His voice was closer.

“I thought you preferred solitude when you were out in nature,” she joked lamely.

“Not when one of my friends is lost.”

“I was lost, but you've found me.”

A beam of light flashed in her direction, temporarily blinding her. She

averted her eyes. “Bright.”

Charlie jogged toward her. “Frankie!” He breathed heavily. “Thank goodness. You’ve had everyone so worried.”

He tossed the flashlight onto the ground and quickly unzipped his jacket. Draping it over her shoulders, he started running his hands over her arms.

“I’m sorry. I just had to get out of there. I wasn’t thinking. I was acting on instinct.” The tears returned. “Everyone is going to hate me. I ruined the evening.”

“Shh . . . it’s all right.” He hugged her tightly to his body. He was like a human furnace. His scent reminded her of a campfire. “You didn’t ruin anything. I pinkie promise.”

She pulled back. Her lips trembled. “Is my father all right?”

“He was in shock, but he’ll be fine with your friend Gemma and my nan. Try not to worry too much. All I want you to focus on right now is your own well-being.” Charlie wiped the corner of her eyes with his thumbs. “Give me the honest truth—how are you doing?”

“I’m an emotional mess and I’m barely holding it together.” Her voice cracked at the end of her sentence.

“Okay.” He rubbed comforting circles on her back. “Okay,” he repeated. She rested her head on his chest, listening to the rhythmic drum of his heart. “I’ll tell you what . . . How about we get you warmed up in front of a fire and make s’mores? You don’t have to talk about anything. Your only job would be to make sure that your marshmallow gets a nice golden-brown coating on the outside.”

She tensed up. “I don’t know if I can face everyone just yet.”

“You won’t have to. The firepit is away from the house. Making s’mores will buy us a little extra time for you to gather your composure. I’ll tell your

dad that I've found you, so he won't worry." He cupped her cheeks and tilted her chin up. "I'm here to take care of you. If that means acting as your bodyguard, I'll happily do it. I care about you, Frankie."

Butterflies started to flutter in her stomach. As she gazed into Charlie's intense eyes and perfectly lush rosy-red lips, she knew that she'd truly fallen for him.

* * *

"You're staring at me," Charlie said with a hint of amusement as he poked and prodded the embers and kindling in the firepit.

Frankie sat on a raised stone bench, a blanket draped over her shoulders. "I never realized you had so many outdoorsy skills. It took you about two seconds to start a fire. Where did you learn to do that?"

He laughed. "From my grandad. We used to go camping together every weekend. He made sure that Leslie and I learned the survival basics just in case we ever got stranded."

"Besides building a fire, those would be . . .?"

"Knowing how to erect a temporary shelter, sourcing and purifying water, identifying edible plants, and basic first aid."

"He sounds like a smart man."

Charlie grinned. "He was."

Her throat constricted. "Do you think he would approve of your grandma dating my dad?"

"I think so. Nan has been alone for a long time. He was the light of her life, but from how excited Nan is when she talks about Rich—er, your father

—I think he'd give Les and me a good kick in the pants for not signing her up for a dating app sooner.”

“Dad's been the same. I've never seen him happier.” She stared at the intense violet, orange, and yellow hues of the growing flames. “Before all the crap hit the fan earlier, I thought there was a chance he might tell me he was planning to propose to her.”

If Dad did marry Suzy, what would that make me and Charlie? Would his parents and I technically be stepsiblings? So I'd be his step-aunt?

“Just between us, I think your dad and Nan tying the knot is inevitable.”

Frankie rubbed her temples. “When you properly meet my father, please try not to judge him too harshly. He's a big kid at heart and is always cracking jokes.”

The fire crackled. Her body soaked in the warmth.

“That's another trait he shares with Grandad. He was a practical joker. One of my earliest memories is hearing the sound of Nan and Grandad laughing.” Charlie blinked slowly. “I've always had a closer bond with them than with my parents.”

At the mention of Charlie's family, her chest felt heavy. Leslie was still angry with them. That was yet another mess she had to try and figure out how to fix. “Have things improved at all with your sister? It's been so awkward coaching with her. She's still pretending I don't exist.”

Charlie let out a deep sigh. He poked the fire one more time before planting himself next to Frankie. “No change on my end either. A part of me hoped she'd show up here. She knows how important tonight's dinner was to Nan. It's rare for her to ask a favor from us.”

“It makes me feel like I'm this terrible person. I never wanted to have to take sides between the two of you.”

“Frankie, have you been blaming yourself for this the whole time?”

She didn’t answer him.

“Hey.” Charlie scooted closer to her. “You haven’t done *anything* wrong. I made the decision to return to the ice. I’m also the one who asked you to skate with me.” He exhaled deeply. “Per usual, Leslie was right about everything she said. I realize now that I’ve been a self-centered fool. Since the accident, the only person I’ve thought about was myself. I lost sight of how important Leslie, Nan, and the other members of my family were to my recovery.”

Frankie played with a stray piece of thread on the edge of the blanket. “Where do you go from here?”

“Once Les and I get past this latest roadblock, I think it’s high time for me to have a meeting with Jack. There’s no earthly reason I ever should’ve been made skating director. That job has my sister’s name written all over it. I hate admin work. It takes time away from my doing what I love—coaching and skating with you.”

Frankie glanced at him curiously through her lashes. Her heart rate increased. “We do make a pretty amazing team.”

“We do, but it’s more than that.” He stood, and picked up two long metal skewers and a bag of marshmallows.

“Thanks.” She accepted the skewer from his hand. Ripping open the bag of marshmallows, she looked for the largest and fluffiest one in the pack, trying to buy herself some time. Her body was growing as warm as the fire.

“Ask me why,” he said in a husky tone.

She continued to keep her head tipped down, staring at the marshmallows, which were the same uniform size.

“Frankie, ask me why.”

She chewed on her lip and slowly lifted her chin. “Okay, I’ll bite. Why?”
“Because I see you as more than just a friend.”

She laughed nervously. “Haha. Good one. I thought you’d be sick of me by now. We’re together every single day of the week.”

His brow furrowed. “I could never grow sick of you.”

They were moving into dangerous territory. The wings of a thousand-and-one fast-flying hummingbirds fluttered in her stomach. Her throat went dry. “Charlie, once we leave the friend zone, there’s no going back.”

He licked his lips. “That’s a risk I’m willing to take. The question is, are you?”

Alarm bells sounded in her head. She’d spent more time with Charlie these last couple of months than with any other person. She couldn’t fool herself any longer. He was more than just a partner and a friend. He was the man who brought her coffee bright and early in the morning. The man who put a smile on her face after a tough practice. The man who literally searched for her in the forest because he was concerned about her. She was about to break all the rules she’d set for herself.

She swallowed hard. “I am.”

In two strides, Charlie closed the gap between them. He popped the skewers into the firepit. Sitting down on the bench, he pulled Frankie onto his lap, and slid the blanket off her shoulders. Staring directly into her eyes, he removed the small tendrils of brown hair covering her face. “Francesca,” he whispered into her ear. “You have no idea how hard it is for me to resist you every time you’re near me. I’ve wanted to do this for so long.”

He leaned his head toward her, and like a ballet dancer delicately balancing on the tips of his toes, planted a series of soft, supple kisses up on the exposed flesh of her neck.

Frankie smelled the scents of whiskey and cinnamon. She felt the scratchy texture of his facial hair on his cheek. She didn't want him to stop. Her body felt as if she were gathering speed and was about to be propelled into the air to perform a quadruple jump. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest. She could hear its steady thud, thud, thud pulsating against her ribs. As Charlie traced the outline of her lips with his thumb, she shivered.

His eyes locked on to hers. The vibrant green color reminded her of a field of four-leaf clovers. "You're not only the most talented person I've ever skated with, but you are also the most stunningly beautiful woman I've ever met."

It was the first time she'd ever been told by a man that she was beautiful.

Charlie is my human four-leafed clover. Most people could spend an entire lifetime searching and never find one. I'm the luckiest woman alive.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and closed her eyes. Like a delicate butterfly resting on a sun-kissed petal, they shared an intimate, yet gentle kiss.

So this is what love feels like.

CHAPTER 19



“We can stay out here as long as you’d like, but at some point, I’m going to have to get up and stir the fire, or else it’ll be completely extinguished.”

Frankie’s head rested on Charlie’s shoulder. She was still sitting on his lap, his fingers playing with the ends of her hair. Their s’mores had long been demolished.

“When you move, I’ll get up,” she sighed. “I’ve stalled facing Dad long enough. At this point, I just want to get it over with.”

“How are you going to approach the, uh, sister issue?” He released her and she sat up.

“Like an adult.”

A low throaty laugh escaped his throat. “I’m glad your sense of humor is still intact.”

She shot him a tired grin and rubbed her neck. “I’m too drained to have any heavy conversations tonight. All I want is for Dad and me to be on the same page. I’ve been mulling over what he said, and I do genuinely think that he thought he’d told me about her.”

Charlie kissed the top of her head. “I love that you always try hard to see the positive side of things.”

“I’m just thankful that you’re here. Gemma too.”

“I’ll be right by your side every step of the way. The thing about partners is that we’re always here to lift one another up.”

After putting the fire out, Charlie and Frankie walked hand in hand into the house. Gemma, Dad, and Suzy were all seated anxiously around the kitchen table, Gemma and Suzy talking in soft undertones.

Frankie was wracked with guilt when she saw how haggard and old her dad appeared. His forehead was creased with lines of worry. His eyes were bloodshot, staring blankly into space. His posture was hunched.

“Daddy?” She dropped Charlie’s hand and ran to him, kneeling by his side.

“Frankie?” he said, slowly craning his neck to the right.

“I’m sorry,” they both said in unison.

Father and daughter embraced. She’d lost count of just how many tears she’d shed. At this point, she was surprised her body still had any waterworks left to produce.

“Sweetie, I promise I never meant to hurt you,” he whispered into her ear.

“I know everything you’ve ever done for me has been out of love. I just went into shock. My body shut down.” She looked up at him and felt like she was a child again. “I’m so sorry for running away.”

“If I were in your position, there is a very strong probability I might have done the same thing. I’m not good with surprises.” He kissed her. “We’ll have a long chat later.”

She agreed with him.

Frankie stood. Gemma didn’t wait another moment to check on the well-being of her best friend. “Still in one piece?”

“Mostly.”

Suzy, who had made herself scarce, reappeared. “Charlie, thank you for finding Frankie and taking care of her.”

“Of course, Nan.”

She positioned herself between Frankie and her father. “It’s getting late, and I think based on how tonight has gone, if everyone is amenable to it, you should all spend the night.” Her dad opened his mouth to argue. “Rich, it’s not an inconvenience at all. There are more than enough spare suites that are never used in the main house to accommodate everyone, plus the annex.”

His cheeks colored pink. “Suzy-kins, raising a daughter, I learned that the lady of the house is the boss. Whatever she says goes.”

Frankie and Gemma nodded.

“Excellent. Then there’s only one other issue to take care of. We skipped out on the introductions earlier. Rich, this is Charlie. Charlie, meet Rich Tomlinson, his daughter Frankie, whom you already seem to know, and her friend Gemma.”

Charlie and Frankie exchanged nervous glances. “We work and skate together at the rink,” he said, his neck, cheeks, and ears all flushing.

“You’re Mr. Blanks?” Dad coughed.

Gemma threw her head back and roared with laughter.

Frankie covered her face with her hands.

Charlie looked on in confusion, and Suzy shrugged.

“I’ll tell you later,” Frankie murmured.

* * *

Later that evening, Frankie lay in bed next to Gemma. It was past midnight, and despite her exhaustion, she couldn’t quiet her thoughts.

“Frankie”—her half-asleep friend groaned—“you’re shaking the bed.”

“Sorry, I just can’t get comfortable.”

Rolling over, Gemma repositioned her body, so she faced Frankie. “Talk to me. What’s eating at you? Your long-lost sister?”

“Earlier it was, but now it’s my biological parents.” Frankie turned from her back to her right side. “When I was younger, every so often, I’d go through these periods of time where I’d feel like I had been abandoned. I’d try to tell myself that maybe they were just young and dumb and couldn’t care for a child. Or that they’d given me up for my own good.”

She fidgeted. “But now that I know that there were two of us, everything’s changed. What if I take a look at the adoption records and find out that my sister is my twin? What if our parents surrendered us to child services because we were both accidents? What if I have other siblings besides my sister and my biological parents kept them and not us? What if—”

“You’re going to rip yourself to bits if you keep thinking like this, Frankie.” Gemma pulled the covers back. She sat up cross-legged on the bed, giving her best friend her full attention. “You’re not going to start in on the what-if questions. I forbid it.” She cleared her throat. “Repeat after me . . . I am *not* an unfortunate accident.”

“Gemma,” she whined.

Gemma glared. “Frankie. Come on. Humor me. Repeat after me.”

“Fine.” She rolled her eyes, sat up, and came to a sitting position. “I am *not* an unfortunate accident.”

Gemma nodded. “I am exactly where I am supposed to be.”

“I am exactly where I am supposed to be,” she said softly.

“I have a family and friends who love me no matter what. Nothing I learn will change that.”

Frankie repeated her friend’s words.

“Feel any better?”

“Not really.” She pulled her knees to her body.

“Anytime those negative thoughts start to resurface, promise me you’ll start repeating what I just said to you. Full stop.”

“I’ll try,” Frankie said.

Gemma gave her another hard stare.

“Fine. I promise.”

“Better.” Gemma took hold of Frankie’s hands. “Now, here’s what’s going to happen next. I cleared the rest of this week’s schedule. In the morning, after you’ve had a shower and coffee, you and Mr. T will go off and have a private chat while I get to know your boyfriend a little better. When we get back, you can go for a walk with one or both of us and we’ll help you sort out your thoughts.”

Frankie sucked in air. “Charlie’s not my boyfriend. He’s just my partner.”

“You can call it whatever you want. You can’t fool your bestie. The puppy-dog looks you two were giving one another say otherwise.”

“Gemma . . .” she whined again.

“After you ran out of here, do you know what your man did? He filled a glass of water and made sure your dad was taken care of first. He said that as much as he wanted to rush off and find you, you once told him your priority would always be your father. He wanted to make sure that when he found you, he’d be able to look you squarely in the eyes and tell you your dad was in good hands.”

She let the words soak in. Charlie had really said and done that? He’d remembered one of the first conversations they’d had months ago. Her heart swelled.

“If that isn’t some form of love, I don’t know what is. You better not do anything to muck this up, because a bloke like that doesn’t come around

often. *My best friend deserves nothing but the best.*”

“Gem, have I ever told you that you’re one of my favorite humans?”

They hugged.

“Likewise. Now, do you think you’ll be able to get a few hours of rest?”

Frankie hid a yawn with her hand. “Maybe?”

They both lay down. Frankie closed her eyes. Thinking about Charlie helped calm her.

“If you can’t sleep, try listening to an audiobook, like you used to do on tour. Nora Bennet’s new book, *The Scandal of the Season*, is brilliant,” Gemma suggested, but Frankie barely heard her. Her breathing had evened out and she’d fully surrendered to the world of sleep.

* * *

Everyone slept in late the next morning. It was after one when Frankie and her father finally sat down for their much-anticipated talk in the cottage’s sunroom. The glass doors were propped open, and a gentle breeze tickled her face. Mature pine trees provided a barrier of natural shade. A symphony of birds chirped.

“From here, Lake Wakahanra looks like something you’d see on a tourist postcard,” she said.

Her dad agreed.

She felt like a speed skater waiting for the starting gun to fire. It was the first set of words they’d exchanged in the ten minutes since Gemma had brought them a tea service. Charlie had volunteered to take Gemma on a tour of the area, promising he’d drop her off at their apartment in time for dinner.

Frankie reached for the teapot and poured herself a cup with shaking hands. “Would you like one too?” Her father shook his head, stood, and walked outside.

Gemma said drinking tea would help calm my nerves, but all I’ve managed to do is spill half of it. She put the cup on the side table and joined her dad outside.

The outdoor patio was enclosed by a black iron gate. Beyond it, a dirt pathway led down to the cottage’s private boat dock.

Her dad leaned against the railing, staring out at the water. “What do you want to know first?” he asked.

She’d spent all morning thinking about it. “Were you ever told why I was put up for adoption? Why didn’t you take both my sister and me? What do you know about her?”

Dad took a deep breath. “As you know, I left the Navy for civilian life when I was forty-seven years old. I’d always wanted to be a father, yet I knew by that point in my life that I probably would never marry again.” A thin smile tugged at his lips. “Based on my research, I decided I’d look into adoption.”

Frankie knew this part of the story well. Dad had been told that even with his stellar character references, as a single male, it would be challenging for him to prove to the adoption agency that he was a suitable candidate to raise a child. He spent two years as a foster parent to gain experience caring for children before approaching any agencies to strengthen his case.

“I was matched with you by the adoption agency about seven months after I’d first filed my paperwork. At the time, you were just shy of seven months old. I drove from Grizzly Springs to Los Angeles to meet you. It was love at first sight.” Dad locked eyes with her. He smiled widely. “I’d never

seen such an angelic baby. I took you in my arms and I just knew we were meant to be together. I thought it was especially fitting that you'd been born right when I started looking for you."

Frankie took a step closer to him. He kissed her cheek.

"It took about three months to finalize the paperwork before I was able to bring you home. About a week before that big day, I received a call from your case agent. She informed me that you had a full-blooded older sister. The family that had wanted to adopt her had withdrawn their application. She wanted to see if it might be a possibility to try and keep both siblings together."

Her eyes widened. *My sister is older. I have a big sister.*

Her father's voice suddenly grew hoarse. "I agonized over the decision. I wanted more than anything to be able to say yes to the case worker, but at the time, I didn't think I could handle more than one child. That week turned into one of the longest of my life. I didn't sleep. I didn't eat. All I could think about was that if fate decided to keep you and your sister together, I didn't want to be responsible for breaking you two up." He ran a hand through his hair. "When I finally managed to phone the agency back six days later, I was told they'd found another family for her in Seattle. I urged them to let me know if anything changed, but that was the last I heard about her."

Frankie let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. Her pulse was racing. Her dad had only been given a couple of days to figure things out. If she were in the same situation, would she have been ready to take on two children instead of one? *It would've come as a shock, that's for certain. I don't know what I would've done.*

"Dad, what happened next?"

"I brought you home and you became my daughter, Francesca

Tomlinson.” His eyes glistened with moisture.

“And my biological parents?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know much. Your adoption was a closed one. All I can tell you is that you were born in the city of Alisio Viejo in Southern California.”

A closed adoption meant that her biological parents hadn’t wanted any further contact with their children. The records were sealed and information about their identities withheld. She’d never know who they were.

Frankie’s mind spun. Her father had always been open to discussing her adoption, but she’d never had the courage to ask. After all these years, she had her answer. It was as if she’d taken a sucker punch to the gut. There weren’t any answers. Her case was a cold one. There were no more clues to uncover.

Those weren’t my parents. They are merely people I’m biologically related to.

“You can look over your official file anytime. It’s in the fireproof safe,” her father told her in a low tone.

Her throat constricted. “Dad, I’d only be interested in maybe finding my sister. As far as I’m concerned, the only person worthy of the title of parent is you. What I really want right now is for you to just hold me.” She buried her head into the stiff white cotton of his dress shirt and cried softly. “You’re all I need. I love you so much.

CHAPTER 20



Monday, Frankie and Charlie were back at the rink at four in the morning. She needed normalcy to stay sane. The ice was her refuge, the sole place she could escape the outside world and pretend she was living in a little bubble.

“Why do you two insist on keeping such insanely early hours? Charlie’s family owns the rink! Isn’t there a way he can arrange it so it opens late or closes early? It can’t be all that difficult to get private ice time at a more *reasonable* hour,” Gemma murmured.

“Gem, it *isn’t* that easy. We can’t just push aside our students, the skating academy, the curling club, the hockey league, and all the other groups that pay for ice time.”

“I know. I’m just complaining. It’s early and I’m grumpy.” She hid a yawn with her hand. “You know I don’t like to wake up before eight unless I have a good reason to. I kissed any practices before nine in the morning goodbye when I turned pro.” Gemma followed Frankie out of the lobby and onto the ice. “You used to be like me. *Not* a morning person.”

They skated a few laps around the ice. “Spending time around Charlie has changed me.”

“I can see that.”

“I didn’t get a chance to ask you yesterday, but how did the two of you get on?”

“He was nervous around me at first, and kept forgetting my name, but once I got him started on his favorite topic, which is you, the conversation flowed.”

“What did you end up doing?”

“We spent most of the time walking through the Sequoia Valley farmers’ market. I told him all your darkest secrets.”

Frankie’s face paled. “Gemma! I have to skate with the man! What did you tell him?”

“Relax. It wasn’t anything that bad.” Gemma rolled her eyes. “I only mentioned things like how you have a ridiculous magnet collection and how you always have to have your lucky stuffed Peter Rabbit in your skating bag.”

She breathed a little easier. Those were both things Charlie already knew about her. He’d seen the beat-up stuffed toy their first week as partners and wondered why it lived in her bag. She’d explained it was one of her first gifts from her father. It was her way of always carrying a piece of him with her wherever she was.

“Thank you? I think.”

Gemma laughed. “He struck me as a genuinely good bloke. He passed the best friend test with flying colors. He knows if he doesn’t treat you well, he’ll have to answer to me.” She made a show of rolling up her jacket sleeves and flexing her arm muscles.

“Good to know.”

“I always have your back, bestie.”

They skated over to the boards. Frankie did some light stretching and Gemma tied her hair into a low ponytail.

“Have you set the date for when you’re going to take the test? I’ve seen

the videos you've sent me. You look like you'd pass it with flying colors."

"No. We're still aiming to be ready in three or four months. Our plan was to wait and see how the elements came together. We started off-ice lifts last week."

"I hate seeing you stuck having to wait so long. Have you thought about asking Fernando if he could partner with you? You two could rework one of the show programs and knock the test out of the way in a weekend. I'm sure Charlie would understand. It was kind of him to get the ball rolling, but I thought by now he might be a little further along."

Frankie had never considered having her Dreams on Ice partner skate with her. If Gemma had suggested the idea to her several months ago, she would've jumped at the opportunity, but now the status quo had changed. Fernando was a fantastic skater and brilliant partner, but he wasn't Charlie. They were in this together. She was willing to wait as long as it took for him to be ready.

"I appreciate the suggestion, Gem, but it's a hard pass from me. Remember, I never really stopped skating pairs. Charlie, on the other hand, had to start from scratch. I'm so proud of him for how far he's come in such a short time. He's the only person I'm willing to take this journey with."

"Of course, I respect that. I won't bring it up again."

Charlie joined them on the ice. "Good morning, ladies; what's up first on the agenda today?"

"I thought we could do a run-through of the program for Gemma."

He nodded. "Ok let's get to work."

* * *

“You and Charlie didn’t say much to one another today. Are you two normally so focused?” Gemma asked as they entered the Sequoia Valley Hobby Land.

“No. Usually we spend the hour bantering with one another. I think we were just nervous. You’re the first person we’ve ever skated the program in front of.”

“I’m honored.” Gemma grinned.

They walked past the displays of clearance Easter baskets, bunnies, and plastic eggs and headed to the floral department.

Gemma fingered the waxy petals of a yellow banana gladiola. “These are all artificial? They all look so real.” There were flowers of every shape and size in many different colors.

“Yup. A friend . . .” She hesitated. “A friend from the rink introduced me to them.”

She remembered Leslie gushing about the store the very first time she visited. “*A lot of people don’t know it, but Hobby Land does a lot to support local artisans. Take the floral department, for instance. All the silk flowers they sell are handmade. And those paintings hanging behind the register? Those were all done by people who live here.*” It was too bad Leslie was still mad at her. Frankie would have loved to have her shop with them.

“What do you think?” she asked, picking up a bouquet of blue and purple hydrangeas.

Gemma leaned forward and turned it over in her hand. “Do you have a picture of the costume?”

Reaching into her purse, Frankie retrieved her phone, unlocked the screen, and handed the device to her.

She let out a low whistle. “I’d forgotten how stunning that dress is. Who

made it, again?”

“I’m not sure. It was a gift from Dad. You’d have to ask him.”

Gemma stared at the phone a moment longer and passed it back to Frankie. “If you’re going to go through the trouble of making a fascinator to go with the dress, it should match. Or at the very least be black and white.” Gemma’s attention went to the selection of white flowers at the end of the aisle. “These would be perfect for my older sister’s wedding! I have to send her a picture and see if she wants me to pick these up for her.”

The excitement Frankie had felt a few minutes before disappeared, replaced by feelings of sadness. She slowly put the bouquet back in its place. “I wonder if my sister likes hydrangeas.”

Gemma slapped her hand over her mouth. “Frankie, I’m sorry. I didn’t think about what I was saying until just now.”

“It’s fine. Go call your sister.”

“Frankie.”

“Really, Gem. I’m okay. I’ll be outside. I need some air.”

Why was she getting so worked up about her sister? She’d thought she’d pushed those thoughts aside. Without paying attention to where she was going, she found herself walking into the drugstore next to Hobby Land.

Her dad had made a suggestion to her last night. *“I’ve done a little research. If you ever decided to try searching for your sister, your best option would be to use one of those ancestry sites. The testing kits would take a sample of your DNA and run it through their database. It looks like there’s been a decent number of adoptees who’ve had some success. The kits are even sold at the drugstore.”*

“Can I help you?” a worker in a blue vest asked.

She nodded. “Do you have any family ancestry tester kits?”

A few minutes later, Frankie shoved the brown bag with her purchase into her purse as her phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Frankie, where are you? I thought you were just outside.”

“I’m coming right now.”

She heard Gemma sigh. “I have some bad news. I’m going to have to cut my trip short. DOI just called. Vivienne’s been injured and they need me to fly back to Phoenix in the morning.”

“I understand, Gem. There isn’t much you can do when someone gets hurt. I’ll be right there.”

* * *

Gemma enveloped Frankie in a tight hug the next day at the Fresno Yosemite International Airport. “Don’t let another six-plus months slip by without my seeing you.” They released one another, and Gemma picked up her tote and rolling bag. “Charlie, I’m counting on you to take care of my bestie.”

He nodded solemnly. “I will.”

Gemma waved one final farewell and joined the security line.

“Thanks for driving. It gave Gemma and me a little extra time together.”

“Sure.”

They walked side by side at a slow, even pace. She was tempted to take hold of his hand like they did when they skated together. It just seemed so natural.

They exited the airport and waited for the signal to change. A steady stream of cars drove by searching for an empty space by the curb. Car doors

opened and closed as passengers were dropped off and picked up. The wheels of their luggage clattered against the sidewalk.

“You’re awfully quiet,” she finally said.

“Just thinking.”

“About?” Frankie prompted.

“About us.”

The hum of an airplane’s motor roared to life.

“Our skating? Or us off the ice?”

She’d expected him to smile or at least to elicit some type of reaction, but instead, he remained stoic.

“Skating.”

The signal changed from red to green. Frankie started to cross, but Charlie remained rooted in place.

“If you’ve changed your mind about skating with me, I’d be more than happy to take a back seat and become your coach instead.”

She froze in her tracks. The hairs on the back of her neck perked up. “Excuse me?” She stepped back onto the curb.

“I’m holding you back.” He looked at the ground. “I take a slow and cautious approach to skating. Skills don’t come back to me as quickly as they should. Sometimes I have flashbacks and it takes me time to process and push through them.”

She realized at that moment that he must have overheard her conversation with Gemma.

He kicked a stray pebble. The strained sound of his voice broke her. “I want to be fair to you. If you were to skate with your former show partner, you could take and pass your Senior Pairs Free Skate test tomorrow. Or if

you want, I still have some connections. I could find you someone who'd be willing to—”

She grabbed his hand and tilted his chin up with her other one. “The only person I’m willing to skate with is you.”

“You don’t have to pretend with me.”

“I’m not. I meant what I said to Gemma. You are worth waiting for. *You* are my forever partner. You’re stuck with me whether you like it or not.” She rose up onto the tips of her toes and pecked him on the cheek. “If it takes us a little longer to get from point A to point B, so be it. I’ve waited eight years to take this test. A few more months don’t make a difference to me.”

Charlie hesitated. “You’re sure.”

“Positive.”

The signal changed again. His lips tipped up in the corners, and they crossed the road together.

“Do you realize you’re holding my hand in a crossover grip?”

She shrugged. “That’s what you get when you’re dating a figure skater.”

Reaching the car, they climbed inside. Charlie entered Sequoia Valley into the map app on his phone. “The commute hour starts earlier and earlier. It’s going to take us three-and-a-half hours to get back.”

Frankie drummed her fingers against the armrest of the passenger door. Her eyes looked outside at the bumper-to-bumper cars inching along the elevated section of the interstate leading out of Fresno. Her body was stiff from the two-hour journey to the airport. She didn’t fancy sitting another three hours in the car. A flashing billboard caught her attention.

For one night only, come and experience an unforgettable game of exhibition baseball between your hometown Fresno Flying Squirrels and

the Scottsdale Sloths. Whether you're a baseball fan or not, you're guaranteed to laugh and be entertained! Tickets are still available!

She read the date and the time. The game was in an hour. The wheels began to turn in her mind.

“Charlie, how do you feel about baseball?”

He frowned at his phone, still trying to find an alternate route. “When it’s on TV, I don’t mind if it’s on in the background. I’ve never been to a live game before.”

“Says the man who doesn’t even own a TV.”

“Touché.”

Here was the perfect opportunity to start building a foundation of trust and perhaps enjoy their first date together as an official off-ice couple. She opened the internet browser on her phone and typed in the website for the Fresno Flying Squirrels. Tickets were only ten dollars for lower-box seats.

“Do you trust me?”

“That’s a loaded question.”

She huffed and crossed her arms. “I was thinking earlier that trust is one of the areas we need to improve on if we’re going to make this relationship work both on and off the ice.”

His gaze traveled in her direction. He exhaled deeply. “Yes, I trust you.”

“Tonight, we’re going to be doing something a little bit different.”

She swore she heard him gulp.

* * *

A female singer belted out the last line of the national anthem, and the crowd of seven thousand fans cheered wildly before resuming their seats. The air

smelled of salty popcorn, sunscreen, and grass. The sky was still blue, with hints of orange, and the stadium lights had just clicked on.

“And now, please give a warm welcome tonight to our visiting team, the Scottsdale Sloths. Playing left field and battle leadoff, number fifty-six Jose Alcano. Playing . . .”

“Is there a reason the players are walking in slow motion to their starting spots?” Charlie asked, replacing his hat on his head.

“I think they’re imitating sloths.”

He frowned. “Their uniforms are also very . . . green.”

“This is an exhibition team. So what we see tonight isn’t going to be a typical baseball game.”

“And by that you mean?”

She smirked. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

The public address speaker’s voice rose in excitement and volume. “And now for your hometown Flying Squirrels, batting leadoff, second baseman, number five, Matt McClure.

A man standing in the on-deck circle tapped his bat on the ground to slip the donut protector off the handle, walked toward home plate, and stepped into the batter’s box.

Everything, at first, appeared to be business as usual. The umpire crouched down. The catcher set his glove and flashed the pitcher a set of signs. Nodding, the pitcher waited a moment, then suddenly took a knee, and using his glove like a microphone sang out the song “Love Shack.”

The other seven players on the field, the catcher, and even the umpire turned their bodies, and in unison, began performing a line dance. The batter remained focused, knees bent, trying to maintain his composure.

Charlie sat forward in his seat with wide eyes. “What in the world?”

Around the stadium, the crowd burst out with resounding laughter. Finally, twenty seconds later, a pitch was thrown.

“What just happened?” Charlie turned to Frankie.

“The Scottsdale Sloths are an exhibition baseball team. They play by their own rules and perform antics like this throughout the entire game.”

Another pitch was thrown by the pitcher, and the batter swung and hit it foul. Fans sitting in the left field lower box cheered as a little boy about ten years old caught the ball and held up his prize.

“You’re out!” the umpire yelled.

Dejected, the batter walked back toward the dugout.

Once again, Charlie looked at Frankie in confusion. Whipping out her phone, she typed in “Sloths’ baseball rules.”

“It says here that if a fan catches the ball, it counts as an out.” She continued scrolling through the page. “Huh . . . the team that scores the most runs in an inning also gets a point. At the end of an hour and fifty minutes, whichever team has the most points wins.”

“This type of baseball, I can get behind.” Charlie clapped his hands together.

“I’m glad.” Frankie leaned over in her seat and kissed him.

“Can I see those rules?”

She handed over her phone. “While you do that, I’ll be right back. I’m going to pick up some ice cream. I saw some being served inside a hat and it looked like a cute souvenir.”

“As long as it’s not a magnet.” He chuckled.

Frankie got up from her seat, ignoring him.

* * *

The teams managed to play a total of four innings before they reached the time limit. The Flying Squirrels had won ten points to eight.

As they stood and stretched, Charlie asked, “Is there anything else you want before we head out? Another jacket? Pennant? More nacho steak fries?”

She bent over to retrieve two large plastic bags of merchandise and her giant stuffed sloth. “No,” she said matter-of-factly, her face burning. “Here, this one is yours.”

“My inflatable sloth costume. This has to be the best work purchase I’ve ever made.” He grinned. “The kids are going to love this. I have it all planned. For the summer showcase, we’ll skate to ‘I Like to Move It’ and you can—”

“I am *not* wearing that. It’s too bulky.”

Charlie clutched the bag to his chest. “This is *mine*. You can dress like a monkey or a lemur or some other elegant animal.”

She gave a fake sigh of relief and wiped her forehead.

They joined the lines of people shuffling toward the stadium exit. “What was your favorite part of the game?” she asked.

“The Rockettes-style kick line after the home run.” He glanced over his shoulder. “And yours?”

“The relief pitcher’s Michael Jackson ‘Thriller’ dance.”

“Oh, before I forget, I still have your phone.” He reached into the front pocket of his jeans and handed it to her.

“Thanks.” She took the device and frowned at the smudge marks on the screen. As she tried to wipe it clear of fingerprints with her T-shirt, it glowed to life.

Three missed calls. It was probably another spam bot.

“Do you remember where we parked? I should’ve taken a picture,” Charlie asked.

“Um, yeah . . . we were on Kern Street,” she said half paying attention, trying to open the voicemail. “Ugh, the signal is spotty.”

“You’ll have to lead us there,” he said in a resigned tone.

She mentally kicked herself. She should’ve been paying more attention. Charlie was talented at disguising when he had problems with his memory. They’d spent so much time together that sometimes she even forgot he had problems until he asked for help.

“I’m sorry. Of course.” She shoved the device into her pocket. “Do you need me to get us on the freeway too?”

“If I have the GPS voice talking to me, I can manage.”

She laced her fingers through his. His hands were soft. She knew them intimately from spending hours upon hours holding on to them. They were long, slender, and powerful.

“Did you have fun tonight?” she asked.

“I did. It was the perfect escape.”

They reached Charlie’s black SUV. He clicked the fob to unlock the doors. “Do you want your bags in the back seat?”

“No, I’ll just put them by my feet.”

He nodded and opened the back door. “Remind me when we get home that these are back here.”

“I’ll put the reminder in my phone now.”

Opening the passenger door, she slid inside and unlocked the screen. The glowing red number three reminded her about the voicemails. She tapped the button and held it to her ear. A robotic voice said, “You have three unopened

messages. First message. Hi, Frankie; this is Suzy. Please call me as soon as you get this.”

She frowned. Why would Suzy be reaching out to her? As far as she was aware, her dad was supposed to be home tonight watching his James Bond movie marathon.

“Second message. Frankie, I’m sorry to call you again, but your father has called me twice now and left an incoherent message. Have you heard from him at all?”

Frankie’s heart lurched. What was going on with her dad? Why hadn’t he tried to call her? She tapped to the next message. “Frankie, I’ve driven over to your apartment and your father has a high fever. I’m taking him to urgent care.”

She gripped the edge of her seat. Her pulse pounded erratically like a horse galloping full speed ahead.

Charlie climbed into the driver’s seat and closed the door. “Okay. Let’s see. Maps. Sequoia Valley directions.”

She dropped her phone and then scrambled to find it inside the bag with her merchandise. She leaned forward, but the seat belt held her in place.

“Sloth got your phone?” he joked. But the words died on his lips.

She shook her head and started to cry. Racing around the car, Charlie was by her side in an instant. “Frankie? What happened?”

He removed her seat belt and took her into his arms.

“Suzy called. Something’s wrong with Dad.”

CHAPTER 21



Frankie felt as if someone had taken a wire brush to her scalp and rubbed it against her sensitive skin.

The memory of Charlie's words still rattled around in her brain. *"I spoke to Nan. They're at the Grizzly Springs Memorial Hospital. Your father was admitted for observation. They're running tests now."*

Everything else after went in one ear and out the other.

"We'll be there in five minutes."

All she could do was nod and stare out the window. There were few lights on this stretch of roadway. The inky blackness gave her the impression of being in a black hole, a force so strong that even light couldn't escape.

This is the second time I've failed Dad, and he was alone when he needed me most. The main reason I moved here was to be closer to him in case anything ever happened.

The turn indicator clicked on, and Charlie entered the hospital parking lot. After he parked and turned off the engine, they sat for a moment.

"Frankie, I know you may not feel like talking to me right now, but remember, no matter what, your father is receiving the best possible care. You won't be left alone in all this. I'll be right beside you the entire time."

Frankie managed a weak bob of her head.

She leaned heavily on Charlie's arm as he escorted her inside. They spotted Suzy, the only person in the waiting area, looking well put together in

a green floral top and jeans. She flipped through a quilting magazine.

“Nan,” Charlie called out softly.

Suzy glanced up, closed the magazine, and stood. She removed her reading glasses and hugged them. “Charlie, Frankie. You made good time. I’ll let the receptionist know you’re here. Since I’m not family, unfortunately, they weren’t able to disclose any details of Rich’s condition to me.”

Frankie glanced around her. The walls were white. Three televisions were turned on, muted. Black-and-white captions flashed across the screens. A dozen or so brown-and-white chairs with abstract circular patterns were set in a horseshoe pattern.

Magazines were scattered across the empty seats. It smelled sterile. The two arrangements of fresh flowers on the nurses’ station desk offered the only pop of color in the otherwise neutral room.

Charlie kept her hand in his and drew circles over the top of it.

Soon, Suzy rejoined them.

“In your message, you said Dad was ill. How was he when you found him?” she sputtered.

Suzy looked her directly in the eye. “He was feverish and confused. His pupils were dilated, and I could tell he was in a lot of pain. Although I didn’t think it was anything life-threatening, I still thought it prudent to take him to urgent care just to err on the safe side.”

“Nan was a nurse for over thirty years. She’d know right away if it were something like a heart attack,” Charlie said, trying his best to comfort her.

Frankie’s body stiffened.

“Charlie, let’s leave any diagnosing to the medical professionals,” Suzy said carefully. She approached Frankie with slow steps and took hold of her other hand.

The automated doors leading to the exam rooms opened with a whoosh. A doctor in blue scrubs and a ruffled white lab coat exited, carrying a clipboard. He read out her name.

“Here!” she shouted.

“Hi. I’m Dr. Rudd. I’ve overseeing your father’s case since he was admitted.” He eyed Suzy and Charlie. “Would you care to chat somewhere more privately?”

“No, they’re extended family.”

He nodded and reviewed the chicken scratch on the clipboard. “Your father, in layman’s terms, is presenting with a case of shingles.”

Suzy winced.

Dr. Rudd continued. “Shingles is an illness caused by the same virus as chicken pox. It can manifest in anyone, at any age, although it’s more common in adults than children.”

“Shingles . . . is that serious?” Frankie asked. “I know chicken pox in adults can be complicated.”

“Yes, it can be. As a geriatric patient, Mr. Tomlinson is at greater risk of suffering complications from the illness.” Dr. Rudd hesitated. “I admitted him due to his fever and level of pain, but I’m confident it’s been caught early enough that he’ll make a full recovery. In any case, I’ve started him on some anti-viral medication. I’d like to keep him here for a few more days before releasing him to your care. The time for recovery ranges from two to six weeks.”

“I work with a lot of children. Should I be worried about any exposure they might have had? Is it contagious?”

“The virus can be passed around like any other illness, but the chances of it turning into shingles is low. Generally, shingles is triggered by the onset of

a stress-inducing incident or anxiety.”

Frankie’s face paled. Charlie kept her upright.

The adoption. My sister. Dad’s extra stress is my fault.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Suzy said.

“Visiting hours are over for the evening. I’d recommend you go home and get some rest. The nurses will call you with any changes. Just be sure to confirm your contact information before you leave.”

“Thanks,” Frankie managed. Her head began to ache. Her pulse was loud in her ears.

Dr. Rudd nodded and exchanged a few words with the nurses at the front desk.

“Charlie, here’s a five. Get Frankie a sports drink from the vending machine,” Suzy told him. “She’s in shock and could use some electrolytes. We’ll just be sitting here.”

He nodded and disappeared down the hall.

Suzy pushed her into a chair. “Shingles is manageable. Rich will recover. He’s also got a strong support system. As do you.”

The words felt hollow. She understood what both the doctor and Suzy were trying to tell her, but it still did little to ease her guilt. It was like a colony of termites was slowly eating away her protective shell from the inside out. She felt raw and exposed. How could anyone stand to be near her?

“This is all my fault.” She took her head in her hands. “I wish I’d never ever opened Pandora’s box.”

“Frankie, this is *not* your fault. Rich would be the first person to say that you didn’t cause him to become ill.”

She shook her head, clenching her fists. “I wasn’t there when he needed me. Again. It *is* my fault. I should’ve noticed he didn’t feel well before I left.

I should've had my phone on me.”

“None of us is perfect. We're all human. When you left for the day, there is a very good chance your father was in fighting form. You can't have your phone on you twenty-four-seven.” She felt the comforting weight of Suzy's arm on her back. “Rich is an adult. He knew to call me when he couldn't get ahold of you.”

Her head shot up. “But it's my *job* to take care of him. I promised I would after the last time.” Her lips quivered. Her body shook.

“Oh, Frankie, you can't do everything, as much as you may want to. We all need somebody to take care of us. Even you. I'll keep repeating it over and over, but you and Rich aren't alone anymore. You have me and Charlie. We're your extended support system. Even if your father and I decide to no longer date one another, I'll still be there for you two.”

Frankie started to cry. She instinctually knew Suzy meant every word she said. She'd never had a mother or a grandmother before, but in Suzy's arms, she knew she was safe from the world. She knew that everything would be all right.

“It's been an emotional last couple of days for you both. What you need is a good night's sleep.”

Charlie shuffled back to the waiting area. “Nan, I'm sorry I took so long. I couldn't decide what flavor to get so I bought one of everything in the machine.”

Suzy released her. Frankie looked up and noted Charlie's arms were laden with about eight or nine different colored bottles. She wiped her face with her sleeve and fanned herself.

“I'll take the yellow one.” She sniffled.

Charlie untwisted the top and handed it to her. The icy cold bottle felt

refreshing against her hot skin. She took a long drink.

“Charlie, take her home and make sure she goes straight to bed.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Frankie gulped and opened her mouth to protest.

Charlie shook his head. “Never argue with Nan. She’s the head of the family.”

“That’s right. We grandmothers have awesome powers.”

She sighed, too tired to argue with either one.

* * *

“Charlie, I appreciate everything you’ve done today, but I promise, I can make it from here.” She retrieved a set of keys from her purse and stepped out of the car. “I don’t want to keep you any longer. You’re probably as exhausted as me, and I don’t have to drive another half hour to Sequoia Valley.”

“I told Nan that I’d tuck you in. Once you’re in bed, I’ll leave.”

“You are so stubborn.” She rolled her eyes as they walked to the door.

“You can blame my mom’s side of the family.”

With a click, the deadbolt unlatched, and they walked inside. If it had been any other time, she would’ve ensured her apartment had been cleaned from top to bottom before inviting a guest inside. She hated the idea of making a bad first impression on Charlie.

She tapped the light switch, flooding the kitchen and living room with light. She cringed. There were dishes in the sink, a takeout container on the counter, blankets and pillows on the floor.

“Sorry for the mess.”

Charlie entered behind her and closed the door. “You’ve seen my office. Compared to that, this place looks spotless.”

She placed her keys on the kitchen island and started toward the sink, rolling the sleeves of her jacket up to her elbow.

“What are you doing?” He raised an eyebrow.

“The dishes?” She pinched her lips together. “If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s a sink full of dishes. It’s an invitation for creepy crawly things to invade the kitchen.”

Charlie moved beside her and rolled up his own sleeves. “Go change and get ready for bed. Leave the dishes to me.”

“Charlie, no.”

“Look, the sooner you do as I say, the sooner I’ll be out of your hair.” He gently nudged her with his hip. “Let me do this for you. You’re dead on your feet.”

As soon as he said that, her limbs suddenly felt extra heavy. She glanced toward the hallway with the bathroom, then back to the kitchen. He had already added the orange dish soap to the sponge by the sink.

“Go.”

He started to whistle a tune from *My Fair Lady* and dance in place as he scrubbed the plates and silverware. Grabbing a set of pajamas, she slowly made her way to the bathroom.

When she returned to the living room, changed, with her face washed and teeth brushed, Charlie was sitting on the couch flipping through a photo album she and Gemma had been working on putting together.

Hearing her approach, he looked up. He had a sheepish expression on his face. “I hope you don’t mind. This was just sitting here, and I was curious.”

“It’s fine.”

“Are all these from Dreams on Ice?”

She nodded. “Yeah, from my last week.”

She pulled her hair loose and shook it free, massaging her tender scalp.

“Mmm . . . much better.”

Charlie closed the album, placed it on the coffee table, and watched her.

“Your hair looks beautiful when it’s down. I never noticed you had purple streaks in it, or that it was so long. When I see you, it’s always up in a bun.”

“That’s my signature look. If it’s down, it gets in the way.” He patted the couch, and she sat next to him and scooted into his arms, resting her head on his shoulder.

“It smells like strawberries too.” He played with the ends.

For a long while, they sat there, both content. Frankie finally allowed her body to relax. “You’re the perfect pillow. Now all I need is a massage.”

“As the lady wishes.” He chuckled. “Where do you carry most of your stress? In the neck? Shoulders?”

“Neck.”

He repositioned himself and began kneading the tender area between her neck and shoulders.

“That feels so good. You have the magic touch.” She felt like a happy bear who had just scratched a bothersome itch by rubbing its back against a tree and was now ready to have a long hibernation.

“You have so many knots back there. It’s no wonder your back is always bothering you.”

She blinked lazily. “I should have you massage me before every practice. Your hands are so much better than a foam roller.” She yawned. Her eyes were growing heavy, and her breathing was evening out.

“If you ask, I’d be happy to. But for now, bed. Is your room down the

hall? I'll carry you if you can't walk."

But Frankie didn't respond. She was already mostly asleep. Charlie grabbed the nearest blanket, kissed the top of her head, and draped it over her. She didn't stir.

As he turned the light off, she barely heard him whisper, "Sweet dreams, fair princess."

CHAPTER 22



“Hello, Ms. Tomlinson; this is Dr. Rudd. How are you doing?”

Frankie dropped her keys on the kitchen island and held her phone to her ear with her shoulder. “I’m doing well. Thanks for asking. Is everything all right with my father?” It had been two days since he had been admitted to the hospital, and she was eager for another update.

“He’s doing just fine now, but I thought I’d phone you to let you know that during the night, he experienced a slight fever. I’d initially planned to release him tomorrow, but I’d like him to stay in our care a little longer.”

“Oh.” Frankie’s voice dropped. “Okay.”

“There was one other topic I’d like to discuss if you have a moment.”

She walked over to the couch and sat down. “I have time.”

“Great. It involves Mr. Tomlinson’s home care.”

“Oh, sure.”

“Based on my evaluation of him this morning, I’m projecting that he’ll be released to you sometime later this week. Once home, you can expect that he’ll spend the majority of the first few weeks on bed rest and will require extra assistance with everyday tasks such as bathing. Are you with me so far?”

“Yes.”

“Good. For my records, I just needed you to go ahead and confirm with me that you’ll be able to provide the necessary level of care for your father.

Or that you're planning to hire a visiting nurse."

She wouldn't let anything stand in the way of her dad's care. They couldn't afford a nurse, but she could make sure she was there around the clock to do what needed to be done.

"Everything's been taken care of."

"Fantastic, I'll make a note in his chart."

After she got off the phone with the doctor, Frankie sent a text to Charlie.

Frankie: I won't be coming to the rink today.

Charlie: No problem. Take all the time you need.

Frankie: *thumbs-up emoji*

Charlie: Is there any update on your dad?

Frankie: The doctor said he's on the road to recovery.

Charlie: That's good news!

Frankie: Yes, it is.

Charlie: I'm only a text away if you need anything.

* * *

Two Days Later

Charlie: Hey, Frankie, I heard from Nan that you spent all day at the hospital yesterday. I'm sorry to hear about your dad's secondary infection. Is there anything I can do to help?

Frankie: No. It's a waiting game.

Charlie: I'll talk to Jack and let him know you need a couple more days off from the skating academy.

Frankie: Thanks.

Charlie: Do you need me to bring you food? Coffee?

Frankie: No. I'm fine.

Charlie: Okay, if you change your mind, let me know.

Frankie: *Thumbs-up emoji*

* * *

The Next Day

Charlie: Good morning, Frankie.

Frankie: Hi.

Charlie: I know you still have a lot going on, but how about I swing by and take you out for lunch?

Frankie: Thanks, but no.

Charlie: Even a piece of cake from Millie's?

Frankie: Not interested.

Frankie: I'm also sorry to tell you this over a text message, but I've decided to scrap any plans on taking my senior test. I appreciate you putting up with me the last few months, but I'm done with skating.

Charlie: Frankie, you don't mean that. You're not thinking straight. You've been under a lot of stress.

Frankie: You're wrong. It's never been clearer to me that I've had my priorities wrong all along.

Charlie: Can I come over so we can talk about this in person?

Frankie: I'd rather you didn't. I won't change my mind.

Charlie: But Frankie . . .

Frankie: No. I'm done. I just want to be left alone.

* * *

Frankie sat on the couch with her knees to her chest. The TV was on, the only source of light in the darkened room. Her phone chimed, but she'd been ignoring it since she called things off with Charlie earlier that day. She didn't want to speak to anyone. She had no energy left. Her reserves were gone.

I'm a failure. Nothing but a failure. Dad's sick because of me. I won't mess up again.

Suddenly, there was a pounding sound on the door, and she heard Leslie shout, "Francesca, open this door right now! Or else!"

She continued to stare at the screen.

"Leslie, you promised you wouldn't yell." That was Charlie's voice.

"No, I promised I wouldn't give her a hard time. There's a difference." Leslie pounded again. "Fran-ces-ca."

The door creaked open. The lights flickered on. Frankie blinked a few times, feeling like a bat ascending, fleeing a darkened cave.

"How did you do that?" Leslie asked her brother.

"It was unlocked," Charlie grumbled.

Leslie marched in front of the TV, turned it off, and stood with her arms crossed.

"I was watching that," Frankie said in a monotone.

"As the level ones might say, too bad, so sad." Leslie stuck her tongue out. "When did you last eat? Shower?"

Frankie shrugged.

Leslie and Charlie exchanged twin looks of concern. "We're under Nan's orders. You're coming home with us," she said. "You can't be left on your own any longer."

"I'm not going anywhere," Frankie muttered.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way.” Leslie rolled her eyes. “My baby bro is stronger than you and won’t have a problem carrying you to the car like a child.” Her eyes flashed like a bird of prey ready to attack. “Make your choice.”

There was a rustling sound. Charlie sat down on the opposite side of the couch and slowly peeled back the lid from a container of food. The second the scent of the sweet and savory omelet hit her nostrils, Frankie’s stomach grumbled. She licked her lips.

“How about Frankie eats first, then we talk.” He slid the container and some cutlery in her direction. Reaching into the bag once more, he also pulled out a metal thermos and shook it. Ice cubes rattled around inside it. “One iced coffee, just the way you like it.”

Frankie’s eyes darted from Charlie to Leslie, and back down to the food. “Do you two always use a good cop, bad cop routine?”

“Yes,” Charlie said at the same time Leslie said, “No.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. The container was placed in her hands. She opened her eyes to meet Charlie’s large emerald ones. “Eat.”

* * *

“Where’s Charlie?” Frankie asked as she dried the tips of her hair, damp from the shower.

“I sent him to the grocery store so we could talk alone for a couple minutes. Speaking of which, your kitchen is woefully empty. What have you been eating this last week?”

“Hospital food.”

Leslie grimaced. “That’s like eating cardboard. It doesn’t have any flavor.”

Food, coffee, and a shower had been just what she needed to feel a little more like herself. “It was convenient.”

Leslie sighed. “Look, before we go any further, I’m really sorry for acting like a first-class jerk to you. You didn’t deserve it. I was being petty because I was mad at my brother for keeping his skating from me. I should never have lashed out at you. I know Charlie’s a grown man and that he’s more than capable of making his own decisions, but it still upset me.”

Frankie managed a nod. She knew she’d accept Leslie’s apology in the long run, but her emotions at the present were a tangled mess. She didn’t trust herself to speak.

“You’re one hundred percent justified if you don’t want to be friends with me anymore. I just want you to know that no matter what you decide, I’ll still be here to offer you my support.” Leslie walked over and touched Frankie’s forearm. “Nan and Charlie brought me up to speed with what’s been going on with your dad. I’ve been in your shoes before. I know firsthand the physical and emotional toll that being a caregiver can take on a person. Charlie’s accident changed me in ways I never expected.”

Frankie’s eyes widened. She’d forgotten Leslie had been the main person to help him recover.

“For two years, nobody could give us an answer as to why he wasn’t getting better. It was a stream of never-ending tests and experimental treatments. All I could do was sit helplessly on the sidelines. I felt like a failure as I watched his mental health deteriorate.”

“That’s *exactly* how I feel about my dad. Like I’ve failed him.” Her legs quivered. She sank down onto the couch. “How were you able to move past

it?”

“With the help of Nan.” Leslie’s cheeks flushed. “She helped me to understand that I hadn’t failed Charlie. Instead, it was that I had a fear of failing him.”

That can’t be true for me too. Can it?

“As caretakers, we think that there isn’t anyone else out there who can do our job. We push people away because we don’t want to risk having someone from the outside messing things up. What ends up happening is a recipe for self-destruction.” Leslie blinked slowly. “Take it from someone who has been where you are—it’s *okay* to ask for help. You *don’t* have to do things alone. We need somebody to take care of us too.”

“I don’t know if I can. I’m used to being on my own.” Frankie stared at the ground.

“Accepting help is tough. But I promise, if you decide to give it a shot, you’ll find that not only will things get a lot easier, but you’ll be a lot happier too.”

“Thanks for sharing that with me, Leslie.”

“Of course.”

“I’m back!” Charlie called out, entering the apartment, and heading straight to the kitchen.

“We’re in the living room,” Leslie replied.

A moment later, he joined them. “I picked up mostly frozen foods, since they’ll keep longer.” He slid his hands into his pockets. “Frankie, um . . .hi. You look, er . . . wet.”

Leslie facepalmed. “That’s *not* something you say to your girlfriend.”

Frankie cracked a smile for the first time in several days. She’d missed him more than she’d cared to admit.

“Are you ready to go?” Charlie asked.

She arched an eyebrow. “Go where?”

“To Nan’s?” He shot a confused look at Leslie. “I’m guessing you didn’t tell her everything?”

Leslie shook her head. “No. You were supposed to take longer at the store.”

“Tell me what?”

Charlie walked around the couch and sat on its arm. “Your dad is supposed to be released from the hospital tomorrow, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, Nan wanted to see if you might be open to having your dad stay at the cottage while he recovers.”

Frankie sucked in air sharply.

“Nan’s invitation extends to *both* you and him,” Leslie added quickly. “She thought that instead of having us take turns coming over to your place, we could have everyone stay in one location.”

Suzy, Leslie, and Charlie were willing to help care for her dad?

The doctor mentioned it could take several weeks for him to recover. If I’m being honest with myself, I’m already feeling pretty run down, and Dad isn’t even home yet. Frankie puffed out her cheeks. She thought about her conversation with Leslie. *My decision has to be about what’s best for Dad, and that’s having Suzy near him. Her nursing background and the love she has for him are better than any sort of medicine.*

“Dad can stay at the cottage for however long he needs, but not me. I’ll stay a day or two while he settles in, but I need some space.”

Leslie’s eyes narrowed. “Frankie, can you clear something up for me?”

“Sure.”

“This is a one-bedroom apartment, is it not?”

“Yes,” she answered slowly, wondering where Leslie was going with this.

“Where do you sleep?”

“In here.”

Charlie scratched his head. “I don’t get it.”

“The couch.” She picked up a pillow and clutched it to her chest. “It folds out into a bed.”

His jaw clenched. “You’ve been sleeping on the couch since you moved here?”

She nodded. “After Dad broke his hip earlier this year, we had to find a place that had step-free access to everything.”

“Where was he living before?”

“In a split-level place.”

“And you couldn’t get a place with two bedrooms?” Leslie asked.

“We can’t afford it.” Her face burned even more. She decided to be completely open with them. “Dad’s veteran’s insurance took care of most of the medical bills, but it didn’t fully cover everything.”

She shook her head. “While I was finishing my Dreams on Ice contract, he needed access to care. We didn’t have anyone else to help, only one another. A professional facility seemed like the perfect answer at the time. Anyway, after I paid off the bills for that and the remainder of the lease on Dad’s old place, and put down a security deposit for this place, I didn’t have much money left.”

“Doesn’t your father receive a pension of any sort? Social security?”

She rubbed the back of her neck. “Yes, but it still doesn’t go as far as you think. Grizzly Springs is an expensive place to live. With my limited hours at

the rink and the fixed income he receives, we just manage to break even every month.”

“Why didn’t you say anything to us? To Jack? We would’ve found you more hours,” Charlie said.

“My pride wouldn’t allow it.” She smiled sadly. “Jack said when he hired me that he didn’t have any full-time openings. I took the only job that was available. My original plan was to try and find a second job, but then Charlie and I started to train together, and I didn’t think I could physically handle much more.”

Frankie hated seeing the pained looks on the twins’ faces.

Leslie spoke first. “When your dad starts to recover and you’re back at the rink coaching again, come talk to me. If you’re still interested in full-time hours, they’re yours.”

Charlie cleared his throat. “Don’t forget, you also still have an open offer to become my coaching partner. As a private lessons coach, you’d be able to set your own rates and earn more than Leslie would pay you.”

Frankie felt overwhelmed. “Thank you. I don’t know what to say.”

Charlie crossed his arms. “Like my sister said, we can figure everything out later. Right now, we have a more important matter to settle—where you’re going to stay.”

“I’ll sleep in Dad’s bed.”

“No,” both Leslie and Charlie said at the same time.

“Everybody’s worried about you. We don’t want you to be on your own right now. If you still don’t want to stay at the cottage, your options are my place or Charlie’s place.”

Frankie slouched against the back of the couch. “Whose place is closer to the cottage?”

“Mine.” Charlie raised his hand. “You’d get your own room too.”

“How big is Leslie’s place?” Frankie furrowed her brow.

“Two bedrooms. My sister just uses her second bedroom as a craft studio.”

“Ah.”

She exhaled deeply. “I guess it’ll be your place, Mr. C.”

He rubbed his hands together. “You won’t regret it.”

Charlie and Leslie were becoming the family she never had. What would she do without them?

CHAPTER 23



“You live in a cabin? I just assumed it would be an apartment,” Frankie murmured as Charlie drove down a long private-access road leading to a rustic cabin with large glass windows and a wraparound deck. After dinner with Suzy, Charlie and Frankie had made the short fifteen-minute drive to his place.

“You never asked.”

Much like the cottage, Charlie’s cabin was nestled among a thick patch of woods and vegetation. Towering, majestic pine trees surrounded the property on three sides.

“I’d never know we were only a few minutes outside of town based on the location. It looks and feels like we’re back at King’s Summit.”

“That’s one of the main things that made me fall in love with the property. It’s a little bit like Nan’s place, but not as grand.”

She noticed next to the front door, there was a carved wooden statue of a grizzly bear standing upright and holding a pair of figure skates. Charlie must’ve gotten it from the same place Suzy got hers. It looked like it was made by the same company.

“We’re entering through the back door. It’s closer to the carport. I never use the front door.”

She wiped her feet on a mat as Charlie turned his key in the lock, and then he let them into the kitchen. Her eyes made a three-sixty over the room.

Wooden cabinets were painted a forest green. There were high-end stainless-steel appliances and a medium-sized white marble island. A few fake flowering plants on the windowsill added a touch of color to the space.

How is Charlie able to keep his kitchen spotless and his office is a disaster?

Skirting around the island, they stepped into the main living area of the cabin. The wall opposite the kitchen was made from red bricks and held a black wood-burning stove. The top half of the remaining two walls were painted white, and the bottom half contained exposed wood.

The center of the room had an amber-brown couch and matching oversized chair with a red-and-black plaid blanket draped over it. She smiled as she noticed the mahogany coffee table was covered with stacks of mail, books, binders, and other assorted items. Her gaze traveled to the dining table and four chairs, which were also covered in piles of random objects. She could immediately tell it was Charlie's place.

"I know you don't have a TV, but what do you do for entertainment when you're not at the rink?"

"Woodworking." Twin patches of pink colored his cheeks. "My grandad taught me when I was a boy."

She absorbed the information. "Do you make birdhouses? Or are you more advanced and you make things like furniture?"

He let out a raspy laugh. "Neither. I carve figurines."

"Can I see?"

He shoved his hands into his pocket. "I don't know. They aren't very good."

"Anything you made is going to be ten times better than anything I ever could've come up with. I can draw, I can paint, but I have no talent for

anything that's three-dimensional."

"Follow me."

They entered one of the three darkened rooms off the living room. He clicked the light on, illuminating a set of tools hanging from a pegboard attached to the wall. Stacked neatly on top of a workbench were more bear figurines. There was one that was sleeping, and another bear was sticking its paw into a jar of honey.

Picking up the closest carving, a rabbit, she ran her fingers along the ridges of its ears, across its back, and to the tip of its fluffy tail. It was so lifelike. "These are amazing!" Her eyes flickered to Charlie, who leaned against the door frame. "You made *all* of these?"

He nodded.

"And the bear with the ice skates? And at Suzy's?"

He bobbed his head up and down again. "When I was recovering from the accident, woodworking was one of the few activities I could manage. I had a lot of time to perfect my skills. I started with small projects like my kitchen cabinets and worked my way up to things that were more intricate, like figurines."

I bet if I asked him, I'd find out that every wood element in this cabin came from his own two hands. Just as she felt as if she knew who Charlie was, he managed to surprise her.

"Do you do commissions?"

"My work isn't for sale. It's all for fun."

Her face fell. She carefully replaced the rabbit on the worktop. "Oh."

He stepped in closer to her. "But for the woman I'm dating, I just *might* be willing to create something special."

Her pulse picked up. *I know we only just confessed that we have feelings*

for one another, but I love him. I want him to love me back.

“What would you have me carve for you? An elegant swan? A delicate ice skater?” He brushed a few stray pieces of hair from her forehead.

She shivered. His touch set her body afire. All her exhaustion was being replaced by rapid energy. She could bound across a grassy savannah with the speed of the fastest cheetah.

Her arms reached around his neck. “If I could only pick one animal, it would be a sloth.”

“A sloth?” He blinked in confusion.

“That’s our spirit animal. They may be slow, but they’re also friendly and highly intelligent. Our first official date together was the Sloths’ baseball game. They’ll forever hold a special place in my heart.”

“So they’re the animal version of me?” he asked, nuzzling her nose with his.

“Yes?”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

He brushed his lips against hers in a kiss. They were soft and warm, like the smooth chocolate outer layer of her favorite candy, a chocolate peanut butter cup. With each bite she took, she was treated to a new and exciting flavor. Individually, the chocolate and peanut butter were delicious, but together, they were the perfect melding of flavors, just like Charlie’s kisses.

Eventually, when they broke apart, he showed her into his guest bedroom. As soon as she climbed under the covers and her head touched the pillow, she fell into a deep sleep. She dreamed of Charlie and herself skating together with thousands of glittering stars around them, to the theme music of *Beauty and the Beast*.

* * *

“Welcome home, Daddy,” Frankie said two days later, kissing the top of his head and adjusting the blanket on his legs. He was propped up in a recliner chair in one of the ground-floor suites at Suzy’s cottage.

“Frankie, what’s wrong?”

A small tear escaped down her cheek. “Nothing.” She wiped it dry. “I’m just so happy to see you.”

Although her father’s spirits had been high when he was discharged, he’d required Charlie’s help getting into and out of the car. Every movement he took was slow and deliberate. He later confessed that he was still experiencing some bouts of nerve pain. It hit home to see him looking so fragile and vulnerable.

“You saw me at the hospital every day. I haven’t changed. I’m just as handsome as I was before.”

She giggled.

Her dad grinned. “Remember, you can’t keep a Navy man down. We’re built to last.”

“I’m glad.” They hugged. The sharp hairs of his beard tickled her cheek. As they broke apart, she asked, “Are you sure you don’t mind staying at the cottage? It was Suzy’s plan. I can take you home if you’d prefer.”

Dad shook his head. “The cottage is perfect. I can’t think of another place I’d rather be.” “Suzy has it all arranged. She, Charlie, Leslie, and I are going to take turns helping you out whenever you—”

He held up his hand. “About that.”

“Dad?”

“Suzy-kins and I spoke about it at the hospital yesterday. As kind as you kids were to offer, I don’t want, nor do I need, any of you three to play nursemaid to me.”

“But the doctor said—”

“Honey, I know what the doctor said. I was there.” He took hold of her hand and squeezed it. “I’m feeling much, much better than I was last week. I’ll be back in fighting form before you know it. I only need one person to take care of me, and that’s Suzy.”

Her stomach lurched. “Suzy? Not me?”

“Suzy,” he repeated. “I promise, I’m not replacing you with her. Our bond is special. You are my daughter. My baby girl. It’s just that unlike you, my little princess, Suzy is retired. She won’t be interrupting her life to take care of me.”

“But Dad, I’m your daughter. It’s my job to take care of you. You wouldn’t be inconveniencing me at all.”

“Really?” He raised an eyebrow. “Because a little birdy mentioned to me that you’d decided to give up on your Senior Pairs test. *And* that you were taking extended leave from your *actual* job.”

Frankie opened and closed her mouth. He had a point.

“I didn’t raise you to be a woman who quit when things got tough. I raised you to be a young woman who would do anything to chase her dreams. Nothing would make me happier than to see you finish what you started all those years ago.”

She rubbed her forearms and breathed deeply. “You’re really enjoying guiltting me into this.”

“Darn right I am. It’s always worked like a charm with you.”

“Does Suzy make you happy?”

“She does.” His eyes twinkled. “When I’m spending time with her, the years melt away and I’m a young man again.” He covered a yawn with his hand. “The funny thing about life is that nothing stays the same forever. In any case, if Suzy and I decide to marry down the line, remember you won’t be losing me; you’ll be gaining a family.”

I’d never thought about it from that angle before. A family is so much more than just a set of people who happen to be related to one another. A family is a collection of people who love and support one another through the good times and the bad times. Through life’s ups and downs. Through the highs and lows.

Father and daughter spoke a little longer before he fell asleep. Tiptoeing out of his room, Frankie felt lighter and more hopeful for the first time in several days. The large gray clouds of gloom and doom surrounding her had lifted. Now, she could finally put one foot in front of the other, knowing that after every storm came a rainbow. If she followed it, maybe, just maybe, it might guide her toward an elusive pot of gold.

CHAPTER 24



It took Frankie's father four weeks to fully recover. In that time, his relationship with Suzy continued to blossom. It was a surprise to no one when they announced he would be moving to the cottage on a full-time basis.

For Frankie, however, the change was still startling. Their apartment was too quiet and empty. The environment felt sterile. She'd always wondered how it might be to live on her own, but as she was discovering, she hated it. The apartment was just four walls and the place she slept in. It didn't have a heart, like the cottage or Charlie's cabin.

Frankie discussed the situation with Alyssa and Leslie as she sat in a chair at the Mane Event, having her hair colored.

"Charlie keeps hinting that I should seriously consider moving in with him."

"And what reasons is he giving you?" Alyssa asked.

Frankie counted on her hand. "He says that I won't have to pay rent; it's a short commute to the rink, and we could carpool together."

"Those sounds reasonable to me." Alyssa massaged the shampoo into her scalp. "What's stopping you?"

"We've only been officially dating for two months. It feels too soon. What if spending all our time together in the same house is too much for us to handle? We might drive one another crazy."

“I hate to point out the obvious, but you two already spend *all* your time in one another’s company.” Leslie laughed. “You train together. You coach together. You eat every meal together. Even your days off are spent together. If he hasn’t driven you crazy yet, you’ll be just fine.”

“Let me ask you this—when are the two of you apart?” Alyssa added.

Frankie thought long and hard. “When we’re asleep?”

“I rest my case,” Leslie said sarcastically.

“Do you think I’ll be able to cope with Charlie’s messiness? I’m a neat freak.”

“Now you’re nitpicking. I’m sure you two will figure out a middle ground. But if it really bothers you that much, when Charlie and I lived together, our agreement was that the communal areas needed to stay clutter free. All his stuff was kept in his room; that way the mess was contained to a single area.”

Alyssa laughed. “That’s a great idea! I’m going to try that with my husband.”

“When my boyfriend is home, I use the same trick. I hate it when he dumps his hockey gear in the hallway.”

Alyssa repositioned Frankie’s chair so it was upright. She faced Leslie. “How long have you and Ron been together, again?”

“We’re coming up on four years.” Leslie smiled.

Alyssa looked at Frankie. “Has Les ever told you how they met?”

She shook her head. It was rare Leslie ever mentioned much about Ron. She’d put together a few bits and pieces of information about him. She knew that he played hockey professionally, and that he was on the road most of the year. When he was home, Leslie disappeared for days at a time, spending every available moment with him.

“It was romantic. We both played on the second line on the Sequoia Valley adult hockey team. One game, I took a hard body check that really rattled me, and Ron jumped right off the bench and defended my honor.”

That’s not exactly my idea of romance, but to each their own. I wonder what type of person he is. Is he ultra-outgoing like Leslie? Or more closed off?

As if reading her thoughts, Leslie added, “The next time he’s in town, I’ll introduce you to him. You’ll be the first person outside the family and Alyssa to meet him. Ron keeps a low profile. He’s painfully shy, which is ironic given his profession.”

She could see that being the case. As a pro hockey player, he was probably inundated with fans and the spotlight. When he was home, he probably just wanted to be himself.

“What colors were you thinking about adding today? When I texted, you said something about pink?” Alyssa said.

Frankie grinned. “Yes, I’m taking my skating test next week, and I was hoping you could color the end of my hair to match the color of my dress. That way, when I perform, the judges won’t be able to tell my hair isn’t ‘normal’”—she made air quotes—“but when it’s down, it’ll be a fun surprise.”

“That sounds great. Show me the exact shade, I’ll try to re-create it.”

Frankie got up from the chair and walked over to her purse.

“What about you, Les?” Alyssa asked.

Leslie’s face lit up with a wide jack-o-lantern smile. “I’ve been inspired recently by all the Halloween merchandise that’s starting to pop up in the stores. I want a dark purple with white and orange streaks. There isn’t a way

you can dye shapes in my hair, is there? It would be next level if I could have silhouettes of ghosts, pumpkins, and bats in my hair.”

“Sometimes I think you like coming up with the most complicated styling options possible just to test me.” Alyssa sighed. “I can’t make any promises, but we’ll experiment with some stencils.”

Leslie fist-pumped.

* * *

“Well done, everyone. You’ve all officially passed into the intermediate-level adult ballroom class.” Excited chatter broke out around the room. “You’ve learned the mambo and the jitterbug for social dancers. And we’ve also covered the waltz, foxtrot, cha-cha, and a little bit of the quickstep. Today, we have just enough time to start on the rumba. It’s a very sensual dance from eastern Cuba.”

Madame Miller walked out into the center of the floor. She asked the couple closest to her to come out and act as her demonstrators.

“In this Latin dance, one of the most recognizable features is the active hip movements. The difficulty lies in making the motion subtle while keeping your torsos upright.”

“It looks to me like we’re about to get a good ab workout with all the side-to-side movements,” Frankie whispered to Charlie.

“You will also take note of the arms in the rumba. The best way I can describe it is to pretend as if you’re throwing a Frisbee. Picture that Frisbee directly in front of your face. When you initiate a throw, you start with your back, shoulder, upper arm, elbow, lower arm, wrist, and then release the fingers when you finally let go.”

“I was afraid she was going to say pretend you were throwing your partner,” Charlie whispered back.

Frankie snickered. “You would never throw your partner in ballroom.”

Madame Miller clapped her hands together. “Now if you would all line up. We’ll learn the box step, arms, then try putting it to music. It goes like this . . .”

The six couples in the room turned to face the mirror. Walking through the motions, they worked on an individual basis, then were instructed to try it with their partner.

“I like the rumba—it’s a nice slow-and-easy pace.” Charlie offered his arm to her.

The music clicked on. Frankie tried to stay on the balls of her feet as she imitated the movements Madame Miller had asked them to try out a few minutes before.

“Well done, Frankie. Close your ribs a little more. Charles, no slouching. Lift from your back. Extend your chest out. Better,” the ballroom teacher said while perusing the room.

When she was out of earshot, Charlie said, “So, I’ve been wanting to ask you if you’ve given any thought about what’s going to happen after you pass your test?”

“If I pass—”

“It’s not an ‘if’ any longer,” he interjected. “It’s a when. You’re more than ready.”

“Don’t blame me for not wanting to jinx myself, but no, I haven’t thought about anything else.”

“Well, I’m so confident that you’ll pass; I didn’t think it would hurt to look into what it would take for us to qualify for nationals.” Charlie grinned.

Frankie's curiosity overruled her head. "And?"

"It's all pretty straightforward. We'd sign up to compete at regionals. Place in the top three to get to sectionals. Repeat a top-three finish there, and boom, nationals here we come."

Frankie rolled her eyes. "Charlie, that's asking a lot. A top-three finish?"

"Here's the best part." His smile widened. "Last season at regionals, the pairs field consisted of three teams. At sectionals, there were only five teams. All we'd have to do is layer in a little more difficulty and skate a clean program."

It seemed too good to be true. There had to be a catch.

"I'll think about it, but I don't want you to bring it up again until after Wednesday. This week, I want to stay focused on the test."

He kissed her on the cheek. "I can respect that."

The music paused. "Wonderful. Who's feeling adventurous?" Madame Miller asked.

A few meek hands went up.

"The dance floor is open. Take the last few minutes to freestyle. Try out the rumba, cha-cha, mambo, whatever dance captures your fancy. You've all earned it."

"What do you say, Mr. C?" Frankie poked him in the chest. "Shall we try some freestyle?"

"I'd like to keep practicing the rumba." Charlie presented his arm to her as if they were on the ice.

Holding out her long swishy skirt, Frankie swept out onto the floor, took his hand, and was pulled in tightly to his chest as they started to dance.

* * *

“I’m skipping the gym tomorrow,” she laughed, then gripped her stomach.
“Ow. Abs.”

“You’re that sore?” Charlie chuckled as he opened the door to the cabin.

She poked him in the ribs and walked past him inside. “At least I know I was doing the rumba correctly.”

“And I wasn’t?” He closed the door.

“Are you sore?” she asked.

“No.”

“There’s your answer.” She slipped off her shoes and sat on his couch.

“Maybe my abs are just too well-conditioned for me to notice.”

He removed his jacket and pulled up the hem of his shirt to reveal a chiseled set of perfectly square lower muscles that disappeared into the waistband of his sweats. He poked them. The skin around them didn’t move. It was tight and firm.

She licked her lips. She’d always found Charlie attractive, but in peak physical form, he was even more handsome. Here was a man who had spent the last five and a half months working out hard in the gym and eating clean so he could skate with her.

As her eyes traveled up, she could see the veins and sculpted muscles of his forearms, biceps, and triceps. She knew exactly how powerful and strong they were. When he lifted her over his head, it was easy. Suspended in the air, she felt like a bird in flight, able to extend her wings and effortlessly glide through the skies.

He let go of his shirt, oblivious to her staring. She quickly averted her gaze.

He stepped into the kitchen and opened a cabinet, pulling out a glass.

“Water?”

“No, thanks. I’m good.”

“You sure? Your throat sounds like it’s dry.”

“Um, okay. I’ll have some.”

He returned a moment later with the water and sat next to her.

“Thanks.” She drank from her glass and set it on the table, then stretched her legs across his lap. “Did I tell you I mailed my ancestry test kit today?”

“No.” He ran a hand through his hair. “It’s been sitting on the kitchen table for a few weeks. What made you decide to finally pull the trigger?”

“I want some closure. I’m tired of not having any answers. My sister is always lingering in the back of my mind.” Charlie wrapped his arms around her, and she rested her head on his chest, her personal pillow. “If the test comes back with nothing, fine. I’ll know it wasn’t meant to be, but it isn’t for lack of trying. However, if there *is* a match, then I’d like to reach out to her just to let her know if she ever wants to establish contact, I’m here.”

“I’m so proud of you. It couldn’t have been easy to reach that decision.” He kissed her on the cheek.

“It wasn’t, but I’m glad I did it.” Frankie sighed in contentment, and snuggled further into Charlie, thinking about the coming days ahead.

CHAPTER 25



“Do you guys need some more time to warm up?” Leslie called out from her perch behind the boards, near the middle of the ice. She wore a thick parka-style jacket, leg warmers, and hockey skates.

“I think we’re good,” Charlie replied.

The glowing red numbers of the clock on the rink’s scoreboard showed the time as 4:12 in the morning.

“This is just like another run-through,” Charlie said, putting his hands on Frankie’s shoulders. “Remember, there’s no pressure. I cleared our lessons for today. The rink is ours until ten. We can take as long as we need to do this. Got it?”

She nodded and gave him a fist bump with shaky hands. Every muscle in her body hummed with adrenaline. She pounded her legs with her hands, hoping they wouldn’t feel so hollow.

Their off-ice warm-up had gone like normal. But when she’d stepped onto the ice in her costume, everything had suddenly become real. The last six months of preparation had led to this moment.

I haven’t had to skate a long program under pressure in years. I forgot about the nerves that come with it. I wish I had my Peter Rabbit with me instead of in my locker. Should I go get it? Would it make a difference?

She unzipped her jacket. Her dress was cherry-blossom pink, with a square neckline and chiffon skirt. Although the silhouette was simple, it was

adorned with hundreds of shimmering silver Swarovski crystals. She touched the top of her head; the pink fascinator she'd created was still in place. Charlie's costume was a black tailcoat, white shirt, black tie, and black trousers. He appeared every inch the upper-class gentleman Henry Higgins from *My Fair Lady*.

After checking the laces on her skate boots were tied securely one last time, she took Charlie's hand, and they glided out to the center of the ice. Once in position, Frankie gave Leslie a thumbs-up.

Leslie held up her phone to her watch to record the time and date stamps. "This is Francesca Tomlinson from the Sequoia Valley Figure Skating Club testing Senior Pairs Free Skate."

Frankie and Charlie knelt down on the ice. Her pulse was pounding relentlessly against her ribs.

"Don't forget to smile. This is your moment to shine," he whispered.

The opening notes of their music filled the rink. She laced her fingers through Charlie's, and they came to a stand and started across the ice diagonally. Their first test would be the split double twist. It was a skill that had started off tricky, but over the last few weeks, they'd found a rhythm to it.

Facing backward, she placed her toe pick into the ice as Charlie's arms pushed her up. Coming down, she could feel him cleanly catch her and set her down. She stretched her left leg behind her and let out a deep sigh.

That's one down. Let's hope the rest of the skate goes as well as that double twist.

Next came their first set of two side-by-side jumps on the opposite side of the rink. The triple Salchow was the trickiest element for Charlie. He'd only just begun to land it consistently. It had been a toss-up if they'd stick with a

clean double or upgrade to the triple for the test. After the morning warm-up, they'd jointly decided to attempt the triple.

They entered the jump in unison, but coming down to land the jump, she saw Charlie stumble out of the corner of her eye.

"Keep going," she said through her teeth.

Their second side-by-side jump, the double loop, was coming up in rapid succession. She could hear him grunt in acknowledgment.

Maybe we could change the triple Sals to doubles and go for triple loops on the next run-through. He seems to trust himself more on it than the Sal.

Under normal circumstances, she would've wanted to stop and restart, but because she was the one taking the test, Charlie's messy landing wouldn't necessarily affect whether she passed or not. They'd be judged on the unison. Frankie just wanted to get one skate under their belt. Once they had one full run-through recorded, she knew she'd be able to relax. Under the ASU virtual test rules, they could record their program as many times as they wanted and pick the best one to submit.

At the one-minute and forty-five second mark, the music changed. Both Frankie and Charlie used the slow notes to catch their breath. The jumps might be out of the way, but they still had two throws and three lifts to get through.

We're halfway there.

The music changed to "I Could've Danced All Night."

Gliding out of their serpentine footwork step sequence, Frankie and Charlie clasped hands and picked up some speed into a set of powerful back crossovers. The approaching throw triple loop was Frankie's favorite element.

Gliding on a long outside edge, Charlie grasped hold of her waist. Just as

he was about to propel her into the air, his blade caught an edge. He stumbled forward. Frankie, who had already started to leave the ice, found herself completely lost in the air for a frightening moment. The next thing she knew, she was sliding down the ice on her side. Everything on her right side stung. All the oxygen left her lungs.

Of all the stupid things to fall on. The loop should've been our moneymaker move. Gah. Now we'll have to start from the beginning again. She slowly got to her hands and knees. At least it felt like a “normal” fall. She'd be sore and have some fun colorful bruises later. She could just hear Leslie suggesting she dye her hair to match them. The thought made her snort. *I hope Charlie's okay. I guess if something bad was going to happen, at least we could get it out of the way now.*

“Frankie! I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to . . . I never would . . . I mean to say . . . I'm sorry.”

She got her first look at her partner, who was kneeling next to her. His face was ashen, and his eyes continuously scanned her body. His hands hovered near her as if he was afraid that touching her might break her.

Her voice came out hoarse as she said, “I'm fine. I know it was an accident. How are you?”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to,” he repeated.

“Charlie, look at me.” His green eyes were glazed over. He seemed to look right through her. Nevertheless, she tried to get through to him. “I'm okay. I promise. It. Was. A. Fluke. Fall.” Frankie gripped his hand and squeezed it hard. “Charlie, I need you to focus on the present, not relive the past.”

The sound of skates stopping sharply next to them caused both of them to turn their heads.

“Charlie. Frankie. You good?”

She gave Leslie a thumbs-up. Charlie hesitated.

Leslie nodded. “Baby bro, I need an answer from you.”

He didn’t respond.

“Bro.” She clapped her hands together. “Char . . . lie. Snap out of it. Frankie needs you.”

His attention finally settled on his sister. “Frankie?”

“Right here,” she said, waving to him.

Leslie sighed. “Now give me a straight answer. Are you physically okay? From back there, it looked like you hit your knees pretty hard.”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay, then.” Leslie’s eyebrows knitted together. “Do you think you can run and fetch the first-aid kit from the front desk? I see a few scrapes on you two that need cleaning ASAP.”

“First-aid kit?”

“Yeah, the one behind the cashier’s desk. I’m just going to help Frankie over to the boards.”

Charlie finally seemed to understand what Leslie needed. “I’ll be right back.” When he jumped to his feet, Frankie noticed a hole in the right knee of his skating trousers.

Leslie helped her come to a stand. “Now that he’s out of the way, I need a straight answer from you too. Are you really okay? Or were you just saying that ’cause my brother was here?”

“It stung, but the fall didn’t feel any different from ones I’ve taken on jumps before.” Her butt, hip, and the palm of her hand still ached, but the pain had mostly subsided.

“That’s a relief.” Leslie exhaled. “You did a really impressive karate-style

kick out of the loop jump, but when you landed, your feet were still crossed. If I had to guess, I'd say it looked like you got too far back on your blades."

And once that happened there was nothing anyone could do to keep from going down. She shrugged.

"I'm just glad it wasn't something more serious. Every time I watch Charlie skate, it makes me anxious. But when you start layering in pairs elements, it takes me to the edge of having a nervous breakdown." They sat down on the hockey bench at the edge of the rink. "I have no idea how you can agree to willingly be suspended ten feet in the air over the ice by someone. Or be tossed into a jump like a ragdoll."

"I'm an adrenaline junkie?"

They shared a soft laugh.

Her mind returned to Charlie. "Do you think it would be best if we left it here for today and tried filming the test another time?"

"In the past, I would've said yes, but he's changed. It's something you'll have to discuss with him. After I help you clean up some of the scrapes, I'll give you two some privacy. The one on your chin is pretty gnarly."

Frankie's hand went to her chin. Glancing at her finger, she noticed a few dots of crimson-red blood. "How did that happen?"

"Welcome to my world. I ask myself that every time I play hockey."

"I've got it!" Charlie exclaimed, rejoining them a moment later. "Where did you cut yourself? Does it sting? Let me help." He dropped the kit and zealously tried to unzip the rim of the first-aid kit.

"Bro, let me. My hockey kids and the students from the skating academy have given me ninja-like first-aid skills."

Charlie relented. Leslie methodically opened the bag and slipped a pair of latex gloves onto her hands. "Let's look at your knees first, bro."

“But Frankie—”

“You’re worse off than her.”

“But—”

“Please.” Frankie batted her eyelashes at him.

“Only because you asked me so nicely,” he huffed.

“Thank you.” She pecked him on the cheek, then started stretching. “Ugh . . . my muscles are already starting to stiffen. If we decide to skate more today, I’ll need a couple extra minutes to warm up again.”

His eyes widened. “You’re thinking about running the program again?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“I think we should postpone it.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“That’s not a reason.”

Leslie cleared her throat. “I just remembered, I have to make a quick adjustment to tomorrow’s staff schedule.” She snapped the gloves off and handed both of them ice packs. “Ice whatever hurts for ten minutes. I’ll be back.” She quickly made herself scarce.

“She could’ve come up with a better excuse.” Charlie glared at the ice pack. “It’s warm.”

“You have to break up the beads inside to activate the chemical reaction.”

“Oh.” He cracked his ice pack and stuck it on top of his kneecap.

Their chests rose and fell as they sat still. The only sound was the crinkling of the plastic wrapper on the ice pack.

“If it were my choice, I’d want us to get right back out on the ice,” Frankie said. “But my vote doesn’t matter if you don’t agree with it. We’re a

team. Any decision we make, I want us to both agree on. So, I'll ask you again. What are you thinking? Why would you rather postpone the skate?"

"Because I screwed up."

"Charlie, what happened out there was not your fault."

"You're wrong. I was too amped up and lost my footing." He ran a hand through his hair. "I mistimed the release."

"We've both fallen on jumps before. It's a part of figure skating." She cracked another ice pack and placed it on her hip, sitting with her right leg stretched out on the bench. "Neither of us can be perfect every time we skate. Ice is slippery."

"I know that. It's just when I tripped and my grip on you slipped, for a few moments, I thought that you might—"

"Have hit my head?"

He nodded. "Earlier, I had a flashback to when Camille and I went down." He rubbed his scar. "I don't want you to suffer like I have. You're not just my partner; you're my girlfriend. If I had hurt you—"

Her stomach lurched. She scooted closer to him. How could she get through to him that she was fully aware of the risks of skating?

"You went through the worst possible experience a skater can have. Any other person might have turned their back on the sport and let their injury define who they are. But you didn't." She poked him in the chest. "You, Charlie, are the man who sought to defy the odds and come back from it. Answer me this—why do *you* take the risk?"

"At first, it was for purely selfish motives. I saw you as my way back into the sport. I wanted to prove to the world that I wasn't a broken man; I could still skate." His voice suddenly grew hoarse. "But the more time I spent with

you, the more I started to develop feelings for you. I didn't want to skate for myself anymore. I wanted to skate for you."

He grasped her hand. "Not only are you stunningly beautiful, you are driven, passionate, and competitive. But the quality I'm most attracted to is your heart. You have so much more love and kindness to give the world than any person I've ever met."

Frankie held on to Charlie's every word. He was like a flower, and she was a butterfly. She couldn't look away. The sweet scent of pollen sang to her.

"You've cast your magic spell over me. Because of you, I've rediscovered the joy I had for skating." Charlie pressed his leg against hers. His hand brushed against her cheek. She felt as if she'd just sprinted full speed through a field of wildflowers and was breathless. "You asked me why I take the risk to skate pairs. It's because I want to see you achieve your dreams. I want you to have everything you desire because you deserve it and I love you."

He loves me.

"And I love you too."

Leaning toward one another, they kissed. She was reminded of the intensity of an approaching storm. A primordial force that was both powerful and raw. The air would steadily grow humid. Thick, darkened clouds would pass overhead. While at first these clouds might produce a light mist or a steady stream of sprinkles, eventually, it would transform into a heavy downpour of rain. Nothing would be safe from becoming soaked through.

When they broke apart, her lips were swollen. Her pulse was as rapid as a flash of thunder. Her energy as electric as a bolt of lightning.

"When did you first realize you loved me?" she asked.

They nuzzled their noses together.

“The moment you challenged me to do a split twist. You set my heart on fire that day,” he said. “I’ll ask you the same question. When did you realize you loved me?”

Her cheeks colored. “The night I ran into the woods. Without you, I might still be stumbling around through the darkness.”

“You’re resourceful; you would’ve figured out a solution to your problem eventually.”

The ice packs on their bodies had fallen to the ground unnoticed. Frankie rested her head on the bony edge of his shoulder, and her fingers brushed against the rough fabric of his costume. She inhaled deeply. “We can postpone the skate. Your mental health always comes first. Skating will always be there.”

“If you want to skate another program today, we’ll make it happen. Hearing you say the three most beautiful words in the English language, I love you, has given me all the mental strength I need to do it. I’ll skate with you because I love you.”

They kissed a second time.

Frankie rubbed his knee as he pecked her on the cheek. “As weird as it sounds, the fall kind of scared all the nerves out of me. I feel like it was exactly what I needed to clear my head and get out of my funk. I feel so calm and at peace with my skating.”

“That’s all I needed to hear.”

They heard Leslie open and close the door to the rink and watched as she glided out toward them.

“Did you finish the schedule?” Charlie asked.

“Schedule?” She arched an eyebrow. “Oh right, yeah, the schedule. It’s

done.”

He rolled his eyes.

Leslie’s eyes darted from her brother to Frankie. “Is everything cleared up between you two?”

They both nodded.

“We’re going to skate one more time,” Frankie confirmed.

In unison, they both stood and cringed. She felt as if she’d spent the entire session tossing her body around, attempting triple Axels just to see how many tumbles she could take on them.

I bet Charlie’s aches are just as bad as mine. We’re probably only going to get one more shot at this.

He muttered that he needed to change his torn skate pants while Leslie finished patching her up.

“Is it weird that I fell hard enough to open the skin, but my tights didn’t rip?”

Leslie shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. Only figure skaters wear tights.”

When Charlie returned and they took the ice to warm up a second time, she knew that this skate would be different. As she gazed into her partner’s eyes, she saw love. No matter what the future held, she knew Charlie would be the only one who would forever be able to lift her up.

Who needs a prince to skate with when you have your very own Professor Higgins?

CHAPTER 26



A few weeks later, Frankie heard the front door open and close.

“I’m back.” Charlie shrugged off his jacket and hung it on a peg by the door. “Guess what . . . Richelle landed a triple toe today! That kid really has the potential to go places if her mom would let her focus on skating.”

“That’s good.” Her voice came out crackly, sounding like a frog.

“I can’t believe how many of the coaching staff have gone down with the same nasty cold. Funny how I happen to be the only one who seems to have avoided it.” Charlie entered the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. “I finally had to turn my phone off. Les is *still* sending me messages every ten minutes asking me to update her on how the skating academy is running. Sorry if I didn’t respond to any messages you might’ve sent.”

“I didn’t send anything.”

Charlie sat down on the couch and placed the back of his hand on her forehead. “Your temperature’s down. That’s good. You feeling any better?”

“So-so.” Picking up her laptop computer, she opened it and tapped on the mouse. “It came.”

“The test results? Excellent. About time.” He rubbed his hands together. “I bet you passed with honors. How should we celebrate? Do you want to order something for me to run and pick up from Millie’s for dinner?”

“Not the results from the skate test.” Frankie dry swallowed. “The results from the DNA sample I submitted.”

“Oh.”

“I was too afraid to open it on my own.” She bit her lip.

“My Frankie is a world-class figure skater who lets me toss her around the ice doing things that shouldn’t humanly be possible. If you can do that, you *can* open that email.” Charlie wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her body closer to his. He kissed the top of her head. “Just remember that no matter what, you still have a family and a boyfriend that love you for being you.”

“I love you so much.” She rested her head against his chest and listened to the sound of his heart beating. “Will you help me?”

He stroked her arm. “If that’s what you want.”

“I do.”

“We’ll click on it together.”

Frankie repositioned herself so she sat in front of Charlie. With shaky hands, she pulled up the email. Her hand hovered on the mouse pad. Charlie placed his hand on top of hers. It was warm and so much larger than her own. She knew his hands well. They were strong and able to suspend her high into the air. And now, when she was nervous with anticipation, they brought her comfort.

“On the count of three, we’ll click the button,” he said.

Frankie managed a nod. Her pulse increased.

“Ready? One. Two. Three.”

The button clicked. The screen reloaded. Her eyes darted back and forth over the page. She inhaled sharply.

“Well?”

“It says I have a close match. Not a fourth or fifth cousin, but an actual close match!” She sank into the back of the couch and shook her head. She

set her computer to the side, taking it all in. A swirl of emotions flooded her body. Fear. Excitement. Nervousness.

“Congratulations, Frankie.” Charlie hugged her. “You’ve found her. Now what?”

She stiffened. “I don’t know. I guess I have to make a profile, and then try sending her a message?” She fumbled for the device, skimming the page again. “It doesn’t say what to do next.” Her eyes fluttered. “What am I going to say? How much should I tell her?”

I’ve pictured myself finding my sister for so long, and now I don’t know what to do.

“Breathe, Frankie, breathe.” Charlie cupped her cheeks. “Let’s get some food into you while the information sinks in, then you’ll figure out what’s next. I’m guessing you may even want to call your dad. Does that sound okay?”

Frankie nodded.

It was at times like these she counted herself lucky that she had such an amazing man to watch out for her. Although they’d only been dating and living together for a short time, it often felt as if they were more like an old married couple.

We’re a pair team in every sense of the word. On ice and off.

* * *

Dear BalletGirl13,

Well, this is awkward. I’m not even sure what to type. My boyfriend told me to just talk on paper, so here it goes.

Hi. My name is Francesca, but everybody calls me Frankie. I've always known I was adopted, but until a few months ago, I never knew that I had an older sister.

Since then, I've thought about you constantly. I'd really hoped that we'd be able to meet one day, but I wasn't sure if it would ever happen since our adoptions were both closed. To my shock and excitement, I was wrong. I got the email today confirming we are close relatives.

I know that we could be first cousins, but I know in my heart that you're the sister I've always had and am just learning about.

I have so many questions, but for now, I'll try and keep this short and sweet.

A little about me . . . I'm twenty-seven, I live in California with my wonderful boyfriend, I'm a figure skater, and I like Hawaiian pizza.

I hope I haven't scared you off, and I also hope that you'll reply soon.

Best,

Frankie aka TripleLoopLover

** * **

Dear Frankie,

Oh my goodness, oh my goodness. Hello! I'm sorry it's taken me a full week to respond to you, but I was in shock. I needed some time to process the fact that I have a sister! Like you, I knew from a young age that I was adopted, but nobody ever mentioned a sibling!

I joined the DNA site hoping to find out a little more information about my biological parents, but this is so much better than I ever could have imagined.

You said you're twenty-seven? I just turned thirty-one. So that means I'm the older sibling and we must be about three or four years apart depending on when your birthday falls.

I'm sure you're curious, so here is a little about me . . . I've been married for just over four years to a witty and dry-humored Brit. We live in London with a spoiled English springer spaniel. I'm rather jealous that you're a figure skater! I can't skate to save my life, but I did pursue a career that is non-traditional—I'm a ballerina.

Would you be comfortable speaking over the phone or via video chat with me? I'd love to get to know you better, but there are a few things about my life that I'd rather not share over the internet.

Best,

Clara

** * **

Dear Clara,

You're a ballerina and live in London? I've hit the sister jackpot!

Please let me know when it would be convenient to talk. I'm available at any time. My number is (559)-555-2300.

Best,

Frankie

** * **

Dear Frankie,

I think I'm the one who's hit the jackpot. How about tomorrow at three your time? I keep late hours since I dance late.

Best,

Clara

* * *

Frankie heard the sound of Charlie pattering around his workshop. He'd offered to be right by her side when she made the call to her sister, but this was something she needed to do on her own.

With trembling fingers, she dialed Clara's number. The ring seemed to echo the beating of her heart, each tone a reminder of the years they had spent apart.

After what seemed like the longest ten seconds of her life, a gentle melodic voice answered. "Hello?"

"Hi, Clara?" She choked on her words, a mixture of tears and joy. "It's me. Frankie."

Clara inhaled sharply. "I know we planned to have this call and that we've exchanged a few emails, but it's still so surreal to me."

"I know exactly how you feel." A few tears flowed freely down her cheeks. "I've spent so much time wondering if I'd ever find you."

"Well, now you have. And I'm not going anywhere." Clara's voice was filled with raw emotion.

Frankie clung to the phone as if it were an extension of her body. "There are so many things I want to ask you. I don't even know where to begin."

"Likewise. I want to know everything about you, about your life, about the years we've missed."

Frankie took a deep breath. “Um . . . I guess I’ll start off. So I’m twenty-seven. I was adopted when I was a couple months old by a single dad.”

“He sounds like an amazing man to be single and become a father.”

“You have no idea.” Frankie found herself starting to calm down. “Dad was older when he adopted me and had recently retired from the Navy.”

Clara whistled. “He’ll get along with my husband swimmingly. He was in the British Army.”

Frankie and Clara took turns asking questions about one another and sharing memories of their childhoods. She learned that unfortunately, Clara’s adoptive parents had been in an accident when she was a teenager. Her best friend’s parents had taken her in. She also learned that although Clara had grown up in Seattle, she’d spent most of her adult life divided between LA and London.

“Clara, I’m dying to know . . . What’s this big secret you alluded to in your email?”

“Are you sitting down?” her sister asked.

“Yes,” Frankie answered slowly. Her knees were to her chest. The phone was on speaker.

“Promise you won’t freak out or panic on me?”

Her pulse rate increased. “Um . . . okay. I’ll try.”

“Okay. Here it goes.” She heard Clara gulp. “When I married David . . . I became a part of a family that isn’t exactly normal by any stretch of the imagination.”

She frowned. *What could Clara possibly mean by that?* “Okay . . .”

“David has a title.”

Frankie laughed. She splayed a hand on her chest. A title. That wasn’t anything to write home about. So Clara was fancy. “Are you trying to tell me

that your husband is a lord and you're a lady? Because if you are, that's amazing!"

Clara didn't laugh. "Not exactly . . . David's a little higher up on the ladder."

Her eyes widened. "Help me out here. I'm not good with this. What's higher than a lord?"

"David was born a prince, but these days, he's better known as the Duke of Leeds."

"Oh." All the air left Frankie's body. Her brain went into overdrive trying to process all the information. Her sister was married to a prince. Her brother-in-law was a royal. Did that make her a royal by extension? Was Clara a princess? Or was she a duchess? She'd have to ask her to clarify.

"Frankie? Are you still there?"

"Oh . . . um, yeah. I am. It's just . . . wow. That's not what I expected to hear from you."

"I know it's a lot of information to take in. I had a hard time at first, too, when I found out." Clara spoke slowly. "On the surface it may seem amazing. People think about the glitz and the glamor that come with the royal lifestyle—the title, the jewelry, the money, and the palaces. They never realize that everything comes at a hefty price. I've had to pretty much give up on ever having a private life. I can't do anything that I did before I was married. I'm photographed everywhere I go. People analyze my clothing choices, my hair, my jewelry, even my shoes. I have to be on guard twenty-four-seven."

Hearing Clara share a small glimpse into her life helped Frankie to understand just a little bit about the type of life her sister lived. She was a bird in a gilded cage. A goldfish in a fishbowl.

“Wow, Clara. I can’t even imagine.”

She sighed. “There are days I ask myself if it’s worth it all. But then . . . I remember that I didn’t fall in love with a prince or a duke. I fell in love with David. Even if he were a penniless shoemaker, I’d still love him to bits.”

Frankie scratched her forehead. “A shoemaker?”

“Yes. That’s one of David’s hobbies. He makes men’s dress shoes, although, he’s branching out a little more these days.”

“My boyfriend is into woodworking. I have a feeling if he ever stopped by your husband’s workshop, they’d disappear for hours, and we’d have a hard time getting them back.”

Clara laughed. “That, I fully believe.”

Frankie and Clara chatted for three hours before they disconnected the call. The two sisters agreed that for now, they would keep the people who knew Clara’s secret to a minimum.

* * *

“Didn’t I tell you that life always has a funny way of working out?” Charlie bragged a few days later. “You just never know what’s around the corner.”

Frankie rolled her eyes. “Dad, Suzy, Gemma, and Leslie are the only people who we can tell about Clara’s secret. We both agreed that it would be a nightmare publicly if we were ever to acknowledge that we’re siblings at all.”

“I’m only teasing.” Charlie secured his skate lace, pulled his pant leg over it, and stood. “I hate attention. I like our life just the way it is. Quiet.”

Frankie zipped up her jacket. “Clara said the constant media attention is something she’ll never get used to, but she’s happy to pay the price to have a

husband like David.”

“I can’t wrap my head around the fact that we have an open invite to stay in an actual palace.”

“Neither can I.” They walked out of the pros’ room to the rink. “I told her we wouldn’t have a date until sometime after regionals.”

“You mean nationals,” Charlie corrected.

“Char-lie . . . we’ve been through this. Don’t get too far ahead of yourself. We only *just* found out that I passed my senior test.”

Charlie removed his skate guards. “We’ll make it to regionals. Trust me. You had like a perfect score on your test. The judges gave you almost all plus-fives out of a possible five on all your skating skills.”

“That was different. That was a virtual test. I haven’t competed in *years*.”

Charlie puffed out his chest. “With me as a partner, you’ll be fine.”

Frankie resisted the urge to toss a skate guard in his direction, although she did admire his fighting spirit and his cheeky grin.

“Come on. Let’s get to work. Once you have more practice under your belt and our program feels like second nature, you’ll be fine.”

They took a few easy strokes around the rink to warm up.

“So, I was thinking . . . I don’t think we necessarily need a full-time coach, but what would you say about having my friend Fernando from Dreams on Ice step in on a part-time basis? He wouldn’t be able to be here all the time at first, but he’d be able to coach us virtually. He’s hinted that he’s looking to retire at the end of the DOI season,” Frankie said.

Charlie gripped her hand. “He was your partner on tour?”

She nodded.

“If you think he’s a good fit for us, let’s give him a try.”

Frankie pecked him on the cheek. “I love how open you are to new

ideas.”

“I wasn’t always that way, but as you’ve showed me, sometimes, the rules are meant to be broken.”

They shared a laugh. “There’s something I wanted to ask you,” Charlie said.

“Oh?”

“If we’re going to give regionals a go, what do you think about us upping our difficulty in the side-by-side jumps to something like triple loops?”

Frankie shrugged. “Why not? Everything we do is a bonus anyway.”

They looked at one another and smiled widely, knowing that with hard work and a little bit of luck, dreams could come true.

EPILOGUE



Three Years Later

The stadium was packed to capacity. The sound of cheering for the hometown team from Italy, who was sitting in the “Kiss and Cry” area, was deafening.

Charlie gripped Frankie’s hand tightly as they skated a few last-minute warm-up laps around the ice. She found comfort in the feel of his other hand resting on her back.

“I still can’t believe we’re here.” Her gaze traveled to the Olympic rings plastered on the ice and on the banners all around them. “I never would’ve imagined we’d make it this far.”

Grinning widely, Charlie threw back his head and laughed. “I told you that together, we’d accomplish great things.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Our big accomplishment was supposed to be making it to nationals, not winning the bronze in our first season together.”

Charlie and Frankie had won the top prize, the national title, the last two years running. Their experience and commitment to artistry gave them a large advantage over their much younger competitors.

“You’re forgetting our bronze medal from the World Championships too.” Charlie winked. “What can I say? The judges love me.” She cleared her

throat. “Did I say me? What I should’ve said is us.”

“That’s more like it.”

As the children serving as ice sweepers cleared the last of the flowers and stuffed toys, Frankie and Charlie skated over to the boards, received some last-minute encouraging words from their coach—Frankie’s former partner from Dreams on Ice, Fernando—and sipped from their water bottles.

The scores for the Italian team were announced. They had moved into the lead ahead of the teams from China and Russia.

“Our next competitors represent the United States of America. Please welcome to the ice Francesca Tomlinson and Charlie Welch.”

Nodding to one another, they fist-bumped and stroked out to the center of the ice.

“Are you ready to do this one final time?” Charlie asked softly.

“As long as it’s with you.”

She’d be sad when they retired from competitive skating, but neither of their bodies recovered like they used to. Her hip and Charlie’s back were going to be happy to have a respite from all the extra practices after this.

Skating the team competition might have been too much, but they had no regrets. They got to represent their country at the Olympic games—and even won a silver medal. Tonight was the icing on the cake.

They took their opening poses. Frankie felt oddly at ease. The first strains of melody from the overture of *My Fair Lady* played out. They’d decided to revive their three-year-old program after being unable to connect to the classical Rachmaninoff program they’d originally planned for the Olympic season.

She let the music consume her. For Frankie and Charlie, the Olympics weren’t about skating in a competition, but rather celebrating the fulfillment

of a lifelong dream and that they were about to close out their careers on their terms. The ice was their stage.

For the next four minutes, Frankie and Charlie were one.

Triple twist. Check. Lasso lift. Check. Now for something a little different.

Gathering speed, Frankie grinned and nodded to Charlie. Setting up on a long outside edge, they tapped in unison for their side-by-side triple Lutzes, which were rare jumps for pairs skaters. Her arms pulled in tight. From her air position, she knew they were on. Her arms opened. She bent her knees to absorb the landing. Mirroring her every move was her partner.

“Nice one,” he mouthed to her.

As Charlie lifted her into a lasso lift, her gaze went out to the stands. She wondered where Leslie, her husband Ron, and Charlie’s parents might be sitting. She chuckled to herself. She’d heard that Leslie was so nervous watching them skate during the short program, she’d covered her eyes and only looked up after it was over.

A minute later, the crowd jumped to its feet as they exited their last lift. There was still thirty seconds to go. Coming out of the last element, an outside death spiral, they performed the final ten seconds of choreography and hit their closing pose, which involved Frankie arching back into Charlie’s arms. Both of them breathed deeply, relishing the moment. Flowers, stuffed toys, cards, and other items rained down upon them.

“Thank you. That was more than I ever could’ve asked for,” he whispered into her ear, and then kissed her neck. He assisted her upright, then knelt down to kiss the ice.

Frankie’s attention went to the stands; she spotted Charlie’s family near the front row of the upper deck. She made a heart with her hands. Leslie

laughed and pointed to the ice. As Frankie turned around, she noticed that Charlie was still down on his knees.

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach as he pulled out a small black velvet box and mouthed, “Will you marry me?”

She flung herself at Charlie and wrapped her arms around him. They fell back down onto the ice, laughing wildly. She kissed him. The ring box slid out of his hands. If it was possible, the crowd’s volume increased another decibel.

As they broke apart, Charlie looked deeply into her eyes. “I take it that’s a yes?”

She rolled her eyes and playfully batted his chest. “Yes, it’s a yes.”

One of the ice girls slowly approached the newly engaged couple and handed the ring box to Charlie.

“Grazie. Thank you.” He winked.

Taking hold of Frankie’s left hand, he kissed it, and slipped the ring on. It fit perfectly. Holding it up for closer inspection, Frankie noted that it contained both white and rose gold. The center housed a brilliant-cut solitaire diamond inside of a flower. Tiny diamonds adorned the side of the band.

“This is your own enchanted rose. I was a beast to you when we first met. You saved me, and for that I will always be eternally grateful to you. I love you.”

“I know.”

The last team to skate, a duo from Canada entered the ice.

“We had better clear off.”

Standing up, they skated to the door leading off the ice.

Their coach, Fernando, embraced Frankie and shook hands with Charlie as he handed them their Team USA jackets, skate guards, and water bottles.

“Congratulations. You two were flawless.”

“We couldn’t have asked for a better skate.”

Sitting down in the Kiss and Cry, Fernando handed Frankie her phone. She tapped the screen and found her dad’s name in her contacts. A moment later, he and Suzy crowded around his phone.

“Hi, Daddy, Suzy! Look! Charlie asked me to marry him! And I said yes!”

Suzy laughed. “We had a front-row seat to it on the TV, dear.”

Charlie looped his arm over Frankie’s shoulders and waved to everyone back home.

Her dad beamed with pride. “Your young man is a gentleman. He asked my permission right before you left for Milan.”

Charlie’s cheeks flushed. “I wanted to do things right.” He winked.

Her dad chuckled. “Did you know he had that ring custom designed for you? Gemma here recommended the rose as an homage to your time as Belle with Dreams on Ice, and Suzy-kins sketched out the ring’s design.”

Gemma’s face appeared on the phone. Recently retired from Dreams on Ice, her best friend had made the move to Sequoia Valley and was now coaching.

“Gemma! I hope you’re going to be my bridesmaid,” Frankie exclaimed.

“And let me know if you have any thoughts on groomsmen. I’ll be asking Fernando, of course.” Charlie glanced over to their coach.

“Congratulations, you two, but we can chat about it later,” Gemma said. “Look up at the scoreboard . . . You two are in first place with one team left.”

Charlie’s head jerked up.

“We are?” Frankie yelped, dropping the phone. Her pulse raced. Her eyes went to the board. Sure enough, her name and Charlie’s were at the top of the

leaderboard. “We are!” She let out a high-pitched squeal. They were guaranteed another medal.

“Wow!” Charlie shook his head in disbelief.

They waved to the crowd one final time. Frankie retrieved the phone and promised to call later. They exited the Kiss and Cry.

“The night keeps getting better and better, but no matter what, I’ve gotten the best prize of all. *I* get to spend the rest of my life with you!” Charlie picked her up and spun her in a circle. Frankie giggled. A cameraman approached with a reporter, who cleared his throat. Charlie placed Frankie back on the ground.

“Charlie, do you have time for a quick word?” He nodded. The interviewer held a microphone up to him.

“This is for everyone back at the Sequoia Valley Ice Sport Center. Make sure you guys are listening to Coach Gemma and following the rules of the rink. I had better not find any wads of chewing gum in the party room when I get back. Or else.”

Frankie slapped her forehead. “Charlie.”

“What? It took me hours after our send-off party to get the tables clean.”

“Ignore, Mr. C. Thank you for all your support. We can’t wait to see you soon and celebrate with you all.”

“Oh . . . is that what I was supposed to say?”

The cameraman and reporter walked away.

She shook her head. Sometimes Charlie drove her mad. They took a seat, and as they waited for the final couple to finish skating, she thought over their relationship. When they’d first crossed paths, he was a beast, but over the last three years, he’d become the man she couldn’t live without. Her

partner. Her boyfriend. And now, her fiancé. Humming the tune “Tale as Old as Time” to herself, she reflected on just how much she loved him.

“Charlie, don’t ever change.”

He gave her a cocky grin. “Don’t worry, I won’t. You’re stuck with me as long as you’ll have me.”

Her heart fluttered. “I’m the luckiest woman alive.”

They kissed.

Suddenly, the volume of the crowd jumped ten decibels.

As they broke apart, their gazes traveled back up to the scoreboard. They were Olympic Champions, and all was right in the world.

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About the Author

Tomi is a coffee loving writer who has been dreaming up stories since she was a little girl. Her first published novel, *Dancing With a Royal*, made its debut in 2020. She currently writes sweet, feel-good romance novels.

Outside of her day job and attending graduate school, Tomi enjoys figure skating, watching HGTV, and traveling. She is always on the hunt for pumpkin flavored foods and is willing to give almost any item a try.

Tomi is an avid supporter of one following their dreams. She lives by the quote, “everything is possible with the right mindset.”

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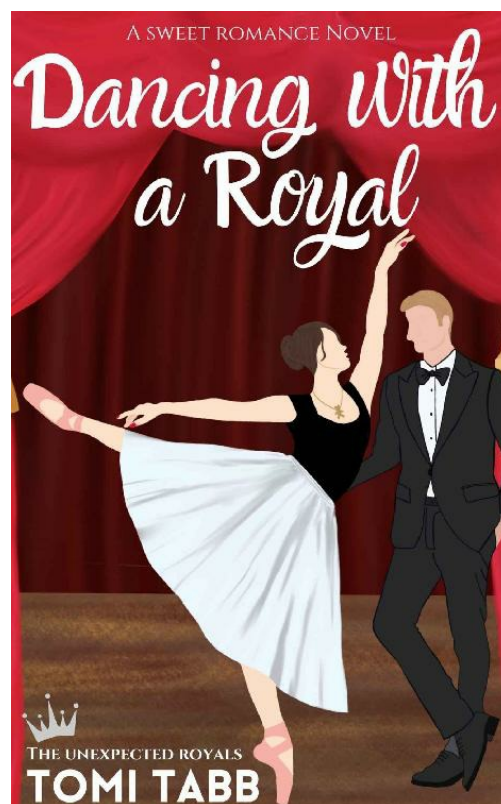
The Royals of Isola Nostrum

-The Great Austen Adventure

-For the Love of Dinosaurs

Regency Novella

-The Mysterious Mr. Marcellus



Dancing With a Royal

Clara is a soloist with the Los Angeles Ballet Theater who knows she has what it takes to become a principal dancer.

When one of the major stars slated to appear in the World Stars of Ballet gala suddenly bows out, Clara is invited as a last-minute fill-in. She's about to dance on the biggest stage of her life. Her dream is one step closer to becoming a reality.

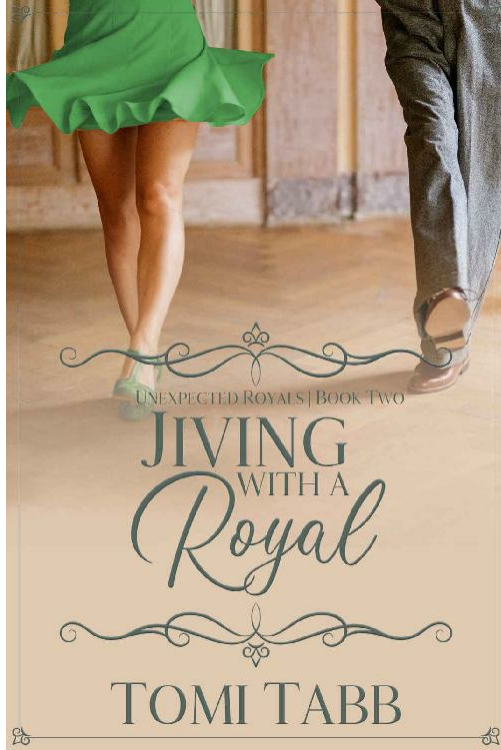
Prince David is a royal who prefers working behind the scenes, away from the glare of the spotlight.

When he is summoned home to London to mend whatever royal mess his cousin has left behind this time, little does he know that this time, his journey will lead him down a path he never expected.

Neither Clara nor David is looking for a relationship, but their hearts have other ideas.

When love takes center stage, can a ballerina and a prince defy the odds and discover their own fairy tale ending?

Link: books2read.com/u/bp6wD6



Jiving With a Royal

Amanda is a flight attendant whose job is to ensure passenger comfort and safety while cruising at 30,000 feet.

Eddie is a prince who is working hard to reform his tarnished reputation and partying image before he joins the army.

Their two lives couldn't be more different.

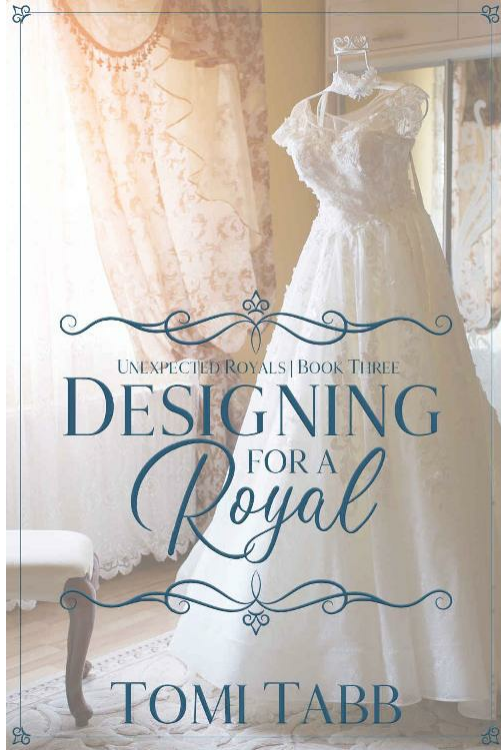
When Amanda's best friend begins dating Eddie's cousin, she never imagined she might actually meet the man she's harbored a crush on since childhood—until a chance encounter changes everything.

As Eddie enters Amanda's life, they become friends. Both learn that there is much more to one another than meets the eye.

Will Eddie dance away with Amanda's heart and into a world of unexpected love?

If you are a fan of all things Disney, "I Love Lucy," and royalty, this sweet, closed-door romance is for you!

Link: books2read.com/u/4N7yLW



UNEXPECTED ROYALS | BOOK THREE

DESIGNING
FOR A
Royal

TOMI TABB

Designing for a Royal

A year ago, Clarissa Lee was an unknown, struggling London based fashion designer. Then, a surprise phone call from the royal palace changed her life. Fast forward to the present where business is booming and she is creating *the* dress for the upcoming royal wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Leeds. Her work life is a fairy-tale.

Her personal life, however, is another story. After the scars of a past relationship, Clarissa closed her heart off to the world, afraid to trust again.

Patrick Nelson, the Earl of Renbrook, understands what it is like to be broken. It has been two years since his last relationship and his father's untimely death. When his mother announces she has remarried, Patrick seeks to escape the family estate. A meeting in London with his childhood friend, the Duke of Leeds, provides the perfect excuse.

When Clarissa and Patrick unexpectedly meet, sparks fly. Together can they learn to conquer the past and that love may be in the cards for them after all?

This sweet-romance is the third book in the Unexpected Royals series, but can be read as a standalone novel.

Link: books2read.com/u/bW8QdM