

EXCERPT

*Chapter 1*

*I roll into the parking lot of Ice Dreams and swap my in-line skates for mint-colored Chucks. I've got fifty-one minutes before my lesson. If she shows. So far this month Hannah has called out four times. Cramps. A cold. "Bad fish tacos." Sore quad. I don't know how she expects to make it to Nationals, much less the Olympics, when she can't even handle the slightest twinge of discomfort. I medaled in the World Junior Championships with a fractured toe when I was her age.*

WELCOME TO ICE DREAMS! Olympic gold medalists Midori Nakashima and Michael Kennedy—aka Mom and Dad—greet me as I enter our rink. I bring my fingertips to my lips and slap a kiss on Mom and Dad's poster as I pass in front of them.

"Put your hands together for OH-LIV-I-AHHH 'ICE SCREAMS' KENNEDYYYYY!" Mack says in a let's-get-ready-to-rumble voice when I get to the snack bar. She flips her magenta-streaked blond braids over the back of one of the hundred roller derby T-shirts she owns. Today's choice says: EAT. SLEEP. SKATE. REPEAT.

"Ice Screams?" I grab my official Ice Dreams jacket off its designated hook and pull it over my plain T-shirt.

"Ice Dreams. Ice Screams? Eh, I'll keep working on it." Mack squirts some cleaner on the glass box hanging on the wall. My parents—still wearing their baby-blue skate costumes and gold medals—smile back from their Wheaties box inside.

"Is my mom at physical therapy?" I hop up on the counter, even though I know it's a health code violation.

"Yep." Mack hands me a pretzel that has the consistency of a doggie chew toy. "Either you eat it, or we throw it away. I've already had three. It's your turn to take one for the team."

I gnaw on the pretzel, praying I won't chip a tooth in the process. "I need the energy. Hannah's coming in at four. Maybe. If she doesn't have a hangnail or Ebola or some other life-threatening problem today."

"Nah, she quit this morning."

A stab of guilt punctures my gut. Hannah may be my least favorite Olympic wannabe, but I also like to eat. Every day, in fact. We need Hannah's tuition money to keep the lights on. Literally. Open Skates on Sunday afternoons keep the water turned on.

"You missed all the drama," Mack says. "Hannah's mom stormed in here this morning all high and mighty about how her little sparkle pony was no longer getting the quality training they expected from a former Olympian and her staff. That Hannah had been pushed onto a lesser coach, and that you weren't teaching Hannah the skills she needs for Olympic-level competition."

"She's twelve! I'm not going to teach Hannah how to do a triple loop until she can do a double loop consistently. Mrs. Taylor is delusional."

“That’s what Midori said too. Only at a much lower decibel. Eh, goodbye and good riddance.” Mack flicks her hand toward the door. “Especially now that we have a new client.”

“We do? Is she a preschooler, or can she at least lace her own boots?”

“*He* is neither.”

“He?” I’ve never taught a boy before, but I’ve partnered one. How hard could it be? “Well, he couldn’t be any worse than Hannah unless ... Oh no. Am I going to be partnering somebody whose head will be squarely in my boobs?”

“He’s not your charge, princess. His dad wrote a big fat check to buy rink time from three to five p.m. Monday through Thursday, and some Sunday mornings. Midori skipped out the door to physical therapy. Your mom. The boss lady. Her bad back. Skipping. Oh look, here they come now.”

I turn back around to see an Asian guy carrying a pile of tiny orange plastic cones heading for the ice. A middle-aged man, who I’m guessing is his dad, follows a few steps behind him.

“*That’s* our new client?” I say.

“Yep. Short-track speed skater on deck.” Mack smiles so big that her lip ring clinks against her bottom teeth. The guy slides off an oversize sweatshirt to reveal a form-fitting speed-skating top. “Enjoy the view, princess. He’s too young for me, but we may have potential prom date material for you.”

When I reach out to smack Mack upside the head, she grabs my arm and pulls me into a headlock. Meanwhile, the guy steps out onto the freshly Zambonied ice and hands his blade covers to his dad. He skates around the rink, dropping orange cones until an oval path forms. His dad yells to fix them a little here, a little there.

“Wait. What happened to my ice?” I say as another cone splashes into the puddles of water covering the ice.

Mack puts her nose in the air and says in an uppity voice, “When one skates short track, the ice must be wet.” Mack rotates her shoulders. “I got in an extra workout today thanks to all the buckets of water I had to lug out onto the ice. The things I do for you guys.”

“You know you love it.”

“There are worse jobs. Here, this came today.” Mack hands me a UPS box. “You get to put it together. The party is at seven tonight, so this needs to be done ASAP. Midori said to start deodorizing the skates after that.”

I miss Hannah. I take the box over to Table #1, the one closest to the snack bar, and open it. I groan. It’s a Skater Barbie piñata. It’s always Skater Barbie. I am Ice Dreams’ reigning Piñata Queen. I can also make simple balloon animals and do the Hokey Pokey on the ice. I’m a multitasking girl. I’ve barely gotten the mass of papier-mâché out of the box before I notice the guy’s dad standing in front of me.

“Hey, I need to take this.” The man waves his cell phone in my direction. “Can you keep count for me?”

“Excuse me?”

“Can you count laps for my son? He needs to do twenty-five.” The man places a clicker in front of me. After reading my name off the front of my official Ice Dreams jacket, he turns back to the ice and yells, “Jonah! Olivia here has the lap counter. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Eat if you get done before me.”

Jonah nods. His dad plunks down the skate guards, oversize sweatshirt, and a soft-sided cooler in front of my UPS box before walking away. Meanwhile, Jonah takes off in a slow, counterclockwise, oval path around the rink. When he gets back into prime viewing—right in front of Table #1—I click one on the lap counter. Jonah is on lap #12 when Mack comes over.

“Do you want me to bring you a napkin for the drool?” Mack squeezes in across from me, blocking my view of the ice.

“Ha-ha. I can’t keep an accurate count with you here.”

“Why? Because your brain is melting?”

“No, because your big head is in the way.” I push Mack to the side.

She crams candy into Skater Barbie as I watch Jonah sail around the ice in an easy flow. Each stride during the straightaways is smooth, controlled, and completely even. He takes each curve at a perfect seventy-degree angle.

“He looks bored out of his mind.” Mack slides to her feet with a grunt. “You know what he needs? A little GNR.”

“Guns N’ Roses? Isn’t that kinda last century?”

“It’s what the derby girls do drills to. He’ll love it.”

“Sure, if he’s secretly a fortysomething suburban mom.”

“You’ll see.”

I count off lap #14 as Mack enters the sound booth. The PA system crackles to life.

“Hey, new guy,” Mack’s voice booms around the empty rink. “Here’s my lap music. Enjoy.”

A few seconds later, “Welcome to the Jungle” blasts through the PA system. Jonah trips but immediately regains his footing. It takes him a solid lap to get his timing back, though. Mack gives Jonah a thumbs-up as he whizzes by a second time. He nods back. As the song goes on, Jonah’s speed picks up to match it. Even his crossovers are on the downbeat. I watch him fly, the wind pulling his longish black hair straight back. Axl Rose is in his final wail as Jonah completes lap #25.

“Hey, that was twenty-five,” I yell.

Jonah catches my eye, nods, and slows his pace. He arcs around and heads for my table. I busy

myself stuffing Skater Barbie with candy. Jonah leans over the wall. He grabs his water bottle from the cooler and chugs.

I want to say something. Anything. But what? I look at him. He looks at me.

Mack appears at my elbow. “Olivia Kennedy. Jonah Choi. Jonah. Olivia.”

“Hey.” Jonah nods at me.

“Hey.” I nod back.

“Thanks for the inspirational music ... um...” Jonah says.

“Annabelle MacIntosh, but my friends call me Mack.” Mack flips her braids over her shoulders. “And the derby girls call me ‘Mack Truck.’”

“Mack is an aspiring roller derby queen,” I say, and Jonah looks confused because obviously this isn’t a roller skating rink.

“Ice. Roller. In-line. Honey, I can do it all,” Mack says.

“My mom likes to run to that song,” Jonah says.

“See!” I say to Mack.

“Whatever, hatertot.” Mack gives me a playful shove. “You wanna skate with the Surly Gurlz, you skate to a lot of GNR.”

“You do roller derby too?” Jonah raises an eyebrow at me.

“No,” I say as Mack says, “Not yet.”

“Your dad wants you to eat.” I push the cooler toward Jonah. “No eating on the ice, though. My mom is super strict about that.”

“Gotcha.” Jonah grabs his skate guards off the table and heads to the exit near Table #3, or as I like to call it, the bronze exit. Jonah waddles over to Table #1 and slides in across the table from me. There’s something different about him. He’s definitely Asian, but maybe he’s biracial too? But you don’t exactly lead with that.

“Candy?” I say instead, and offer Jonah a Tootsie Roll from the stash.

“Nah. Simple carbs are crap,” he says.

“Well then, I will be cleaning the Slushee machine if anybody needs me.” Mack snatches a handful of candy off the table and crams it into the pocket of her Ice Dreams jacket.

Jonah pulls out a container of hard-boiled eggs and peels one. He holds it out to me. “Want one?”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass.” I unwrap a mint—crap carbs and all—and pop it into my mouth to

counteract the egg smell wafting across the table.

Jonah's on his third hard-boiled egg when his dad gets back.

"You didn't let him cheat, did you?" Mr. Choi smiles and grabs an egg for himself.

"No, sir. He did all twenty-five," I say. "And ate three eggs."

"I like you, Olivia." Mr. Choi gives Jonah a pointed look. "See, this is going to work out fine."

"For now." Jonah slams the lid of the egg box firmly closed with his fist. "Then I'm going back to Arlington. For good."

"One skate at a time, son." Mr. Choi wipes his hands together to get rid of any egg cooties. "Now, give me your pants and go stretch."

"I'm cold. I'll take them off later."

"Jonah." Mr. Choi holds out his hand.

Jonah looks at me and then his dad. "Later."

Mr. Choi finally puts two and two together. "Son, this a professional skating rink. I'm sure boys skate in tights, yoga pants, whatever all the time. Act like a professional, Jonah."

Jonah unzips the sides of his warm-up pants and yanks them over his skates. He shoves the pants into his dad's chest.

"Stretch." Mr. Choi's voice has a warning tone. He hands Jonah a piece of blue fabric. "We do sprints in five."

When his dad is out of earshot, Jonah leans toward me. "They are not *tights*. It's a skinsuit."

"Oh-kay," I say to Jonah's back.

I bet Skater Barbie never has to put up with salty speed skaters. Mack chuckles as she pushes the broom around the snack bar area. When she gets to my table, Mack leans over my shoulder.

"You could crack walnuts with that butt," Mack whispers in my ear, which of course makes me look.

I've watched enough Olympic speed skating on TV to know that your typical skinsuit leaves nothing to the imagination. Though the rest of his body is willowy, this guy has thighs larger than Mack's. And, yes, he could crack walnuts with those glutes.

Mr. Choi returns from the locker room with Jonah's helmet, so I make my eyes scan a little farther north. Jonah ties the folded royal-blue bandana around his forehead. Once his helmet is securely on, Jonah plows over to the starting line, which also happens to be right in front of Table #1. He crouches down into launch position with his left foot out front. He pounds his right foot into the ice at an eighty-degree angle. His left arm bends across his chest. His right elbow cocks back. Silence floods the rink and he waits. And waits. And waits some more. Is he going to skate

or do the Chicken Dance?

I almost fall off my bench seat when an air horn pierces the quiet of the rink. Meanwhile, Jonah bursts off the start line like a runner. It only takes a few steps before he's coming into the turn. Jonah drops into a seventy-degree lean until his left fingers graze the ice. He's flying. Chicken Boy has turned into a phoenix. He pumps around the back stretch, the sound of blades cutting ice echoes around the rink. He loops another couple of times before he stands up tall and stretches his right foot forward over the imaginary finish line—Table #1.

"Too slow," Mr. Choi says as Jonah whizzes past him.

Less than a minute later, the air horn goes off again.

"Too slow," Mr. Choi says again. "You're holding on to it too tightly, son. Find your balance. Feel the ice."

Jonah loops around until he's at the starting line again. He shakes out his tree-trunk thighs and resumes the chicken position. The air horn blares. Jonah explodes off the starting line.

"Whoooooaa," Mack says from behind me. "This kid's got some serious moves."

Yes, he does. An hour sprints by, and I still haven't finished filling the piñata. Jonah's eyebrows furrow in frustration as once again his dad pronounces his time "too slow." It takes more than a minute for him to reset this time. He is gasping for air and his face is flushed. I know that feeling. When the lactic acid builds up so high that your legs feel like they are on fire. When your body screams that you can't go any farther. When all you want to do is go home and sit on your couch with a bag of frozen peas for the rest of the night. And yet, you do it again. Jonah shakes out his legs and takes the position. And this, Hannah, is what a *real* Olympian looks like.

Jonah comes into the first turn in his usual deep lean. It's the second turn that goes sideways on him. Literally. Jonah's inner foot goes from 70 degrees to 180 degrees. A thunk echoes around the rink as Jonah hits the ice and slides out of control. Followed by the crack of him colliding with the painted wooden wall—the boards—in front of my table. I jump to my feet.

"Are you okay?" I peer over the top.

Jonah is curled up, his hands cradled around his helmet. Air hisses through his clenched teeth. Mom is going to kill me if our new client dies on his first day at the rink. I hop over the wall and nearly bite it on the ice myself. I squat down. Jonah's eyes are squeezed tight, his face contorted in pain. Mack arrives seconds after me and plops the first aid kit on the wall. Somehow, I doubt a Hello Kitty Band-Aid and an ice pack are going to help a possible skull fracture.

"He's fine, ladies." Mr. Choi jogs up to us. "Happens all the time."

Mr. Choi puts his hand over the side, but Jonah doesn't take it. I put my hands on Jonah's upper arm to pull him to a stand. He jerks away from me.

"If this were a *real* training facility like in Arlington, they'd have freakin' safety padding on the boards." Jonah grabs the wall and scrapes himself off the ice.

"That's what safety helmets are for." Mr. Choi taps the top of Jonah's helmet. "And watch your language."

Jonah snatches the skate guards off the table and limp-skates away. An unflattering wet mark spreads from his butt up the left side of his skinsuit, thanks to the excess water on the ice.

“Take five, and we’ll go again,” Mr. Choi yells after him. “And use the hairdryer to dry your suit some.”

Five minutes pass, but Jonah doesn’t reappear from the men’s locker room. After fifteen minutes of Mr. Choi over-helping me hang Skater Barbie in the party area, he finally goes to investigate. A minute later, Jonah—now dressed in jeans, royal-blue Chucks, and a NEED FOR SPEED T-shirt—bursts out of the locker room with his dad two steps behind.

“Ladies, I think we are going to call it a day,” Mr. Choi says as Jonah storms out the front door of Ice Dreams without even acknowledging our presence. “See you tomorrow.”

“I hope,” I say when the door closes behind him.

“What a drama king,” Mack says, coming out from behind the now-pristine snack bar. “Derby girls skate without safety padding on the boards. Sheesh. He needs to man up. The girls would kick his walnut-cracking ass.”

“I hope he doesn’t have a concussion. I heard his head hit the boards. He may have scrambled his brains a bit.”

“Speaking of scrambling, the Chois forgot their cooler.”

My phone buzzes as I go back to retrieve the cooler.

Mom: Hurting from PT. Going home until 6:30. Will return for the party so you can leave. Can Mack stay a little longer or does she need to go pick up Fiona?

I relay the message to Mack. Sure thing. Granny MacIntosh has Fiona but Mack needs to leave for derby practice at 6:00 tonight.

I’ll be in at 6:00 then. Stay safe. Love you.

“Since Drama King left his cones on the ice, and we have the afternoon to ourselves…” Mack holds up her pair of hockey skates and nods her head “yes” as I shake mine “no.” “Come on, just for thirty minutes. I need the workout. I’ll even help you deodorize the skates after.”

“Okay, but just for you.”

“Liar. You’re doing it for you.” Mack shrugs. “That works for me. Go put on your *fancy* skates and meet me in five.”

I pass several more vintage posters of my parents as I jog over to the skate counter and pull my skates from their designated spot. Mack ribs me about my skates all the time—they did cost more than her car, after all—but today after losing Hannah’s tuition and maybe the Chois’ business too, they feel so extra at our little rink. But I love them, and it’s not like I will be getting another pair anytime soon.

“C’mon, princess, let’s go,” Mack’s voice booms over the PA system, followed by Guns N’ Roses, yet again.

Mack does a little air guitar as she comes out of the sound booth. She makes a large, easy loop around the rink as she swings her braids around and sings along. She’s made a couple of passes by the time I hit the ice.

“Seriously, we have to get you up to this decade,” I say when I skate up beside her. “This century, at least.”

“Whose workout is this? Mine. Therefore, we skate to my music.”

“When’s the next Surly Gurlz tryout?”

“This training cycle ends in six weeks, then I might be eligible for a spot on a team. Six weeks to work on this.” Mack pats her belly. “Easy to put on in nine months, next to impossible to get it back off again. But the derby girls told me not to give up. I’m almost there. Gotta keep training.”

“Training. Something I’m good at. Well, used to be good at.”

“Ride my ass about this, Olivia. I need this. I know my life went a little sideways after high school, but this will help me get it back together.” Mack looks over at me, her blue eyes teary.

My stomach clenches. Instinct says I should hug Mack, but Mack doesn’t do hugs. So I punch her in the arm instead.

“C’mon, Mack Truck. Catch me if you can.” I’m only at 50 percent, but I’m leaving Mack in the dust. “Move it! Move it! Move it! You call that skating?”

Mack growls at me. I flip around in front of her and skate backward. I yawn for emphasis. It works. Mack picks up speed. I flip back around and fall in behind her. My heart rate goes up, but I could still skate circles around Mack if I wanted to. I slide off my jacket and tie it around my waist like a skirt.

“Tag, you’re it!” I slap at her braids as I pass.

“You’re going to get it now,” Mack wheezes.

Mack’s got brute strength, but her endurance sucks. At least she stopped vaping. I have to thank the Surly Gurl “Barnacle Barb” for that one. I zigzag in front of Mack, humming the cancan song. At the end of my off-key rendition, I flick my jacket-skirt up in the back with a “woo!” Mack smacks me on the butt.

“Ow! Okay, I need a break,” I say more for Mack’s benefit than mine.

“No. Not yet. Not until. I almost. Puke. Only queasy. Keep going.”

I take it back down to 50 percent until Mack can find her breath. I stop at one of the orange cones and assume the Chicken Dance position.

“Let’s race,” I say.



“You’re on.” Mack lines up beside me and squats down. “On three. One ... two...”

And Mack takes off.

“Cheater!” I dig my skates into the ice and explode into motion. Within seconds, I catch up with her. When I go to pass her on the inside, she slides to the left to block me.

“Nope,” Mack says over her shoulder.

Fine. I wait until we are out of the curve to try passing on the right instead.

“Nope.” Mack blocks me again.

I drop back. As we come into the next turn, I see an opening on the inside. I wait until Mack is two strides into the sharp curve and struggling to stay balanced when I duck under her arm and pop through the other side. Except Mack’s blade catches mine. We both stumble forward. Mack’s arms windmill, but my muscle memory kicks in. I pull my arms in and sit back, lowering my center of gravity. Mack crashes into the ice with an audible thunk, but I stay on my feet.

“That’s going to leave a mark,” a voice echoes across the rink.

Jonah stands next to Table #1 with a slip of paper in his hand. Mack scrapes her wet butt off the ice and limp-skates to the boards. With a groan, she climbs up on top of them and swings her legs over. Mack pulls down the waistband of her jeans a few inches on one side to expose the top of her hip bone.

“Yep. One more battle scar.” Mack presses on the red mark and winces. “Such is the life of a derby girl.”

I climb up beside Mack since Mom isn’t here.

“That was kinda impressive,” Jonah says, nodding toward the ice.

“Kinda? What d’ya mean kinda?” Mack says. “That was freaking awesome. Did you see Olivia here trying to sneak by me? Nuh-uh, honey. Not on my watch.”

“I saw how you waited until she was in the turn to make your final move,” Jonah says to me. “Short track is as much a mental game as a physical one.”

“Short track? Pfft,” Mack says. “Honey, this is practicing for derby life. I’m training to be a blocker. My job is to keep the jammers—today played by the lovely Olivia—from slipping by. But you’re right. This is as much a mental game as a physical one. Being the biggest or the fastest doesn’t mean squat if you lose your balance, even for a second.”

Mack pulls at her clothes again. The red welt on her hip is already taking on a blue-black tinge.

“Don’t I know it.” Jonah pulls up his T-shirt. He’s got a matching bruise peeking out the top of his waistband over his left hip too.

“Nice six-pack, kid,” Mack says with an appreciative nod.

“Told you, simple carbs are crap. Eggs, salmon, and seaweed. Fuel of champions.” Jonah pulls his shirt back down. “Gives you long, lean muscles.”

“Speaking of eggs, you forgot your cooler. I’ll go get it out of the fridge for ya.” Mack slaps on her skate guards and waddles toward the snack bar.

“How’s your head?” I say.

He shrugs, but I can see the red mark on his left temple. “So, you work here? Like, every day after school?”

“Olivia practically lives here,” Mack yells over, her butt sticking out of the refrigerator. “You will be seeing a lot of Ice Dreams’ reigning princess. A lot.”

“Cool. I gotta go.” Jonah holds out the slip of paper to me. It’s a check folded in half. “Can you give this to your mom? Dad will email her the specifications for the safety padding tonight.”

“You’re such a wuss, Choi.” Mack playfully shoves Jonah’s cooler into his chest until he takes it. “Derby girls don’t use padding.” Mack snorts. “Well, at least not on the track. Other places? Yep. Some very much so.”

I take the check. “See you tomorrow, then?”

“Junior Championships are in ten weeks. I can’t waste any more time.” Jonah slides the cooler strap over his muscular shoulder and rocks back and forth on his heels. “So, I guess that’s a yes.”

I nod. A new energy crackles around the rink as Jonah makes a less dramatic exit this time. That, plus the amount of zeroes on this check, makes our dying rink spark back to life.

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