



THE FAVOURITES

LAYNE FARGO

To the world, they were a scandal.

To each other, an obsession...

Coming 2023 | Major characters

'Part *Wuthering Heights* and part
Daisy Jones and the Six'
JODI PICOUlt

The Favourites

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The Favourites

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*For Katarina, Tonya, Surya,
and all the other badass women who've shown me
what it means to win on your own terms.*

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Today is the tenth anniversary of the worst day of my life.

As if I could forget, when millions of strangers have been so eager to remind me. I'm sure you've seen the news stories, the magazine covers, the social media posts. Maybe you're planning to snuggle up on your sofa tonight with a bowl of popcorn and binge the documentary series released to commemorate the occasion. Schadenfreude and chill.

Go right ahead. Enjoy the show. But don't fool yourself into thinking you know me. By now, I've heard it all: Katarina Shaw is a bitch, a diva, a sore loser, a manipulative liar. Cold-blooded, a cheater, a criminal. An attention whore, an actual whore. Even a murderer.

Call me what you want. I don't give a damn anymore. My story is mine, and I'll tell it the same way I skated: in my own way, on my own terms.

We'll see who wins in the end.

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NARRATOR: They were an obsession.

American ice dancers Katarina Shaw and Heath Rocha smile and take their bows in front of a crowd of screaming fans at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia.

NARRATOR: Then a scandal.

Shaw and Rocha, surrounded by a crowd again—only this time, it's paparazzi shouting their names, a flurry of shutters and flashbulbs as they leave their Sochi hotel. The couple pushes through the throng with grim expressions, Heath's arm around Katarina's shoulders.

NARRATOR: And ultimately . . . a tragedy.

NBC Sports commentator Kirk Lockwood reports live from the Sochi Olympics. "In all my years covering skating," he says, shaking his head solemnly, "I've never seen anything like this."

NARRATOR: Now, for the first time, those closest to Katarina Shaw and Heath Rocha will share their stories, shedding new light on what led to the unprecedented events of that fateful Olympic final.

Former Olympic ice dancer Ellis Dean speaks to an interviewer in a West Hollywood bar.

ELLIS DEAN: We used to joke they were going to die in each other's arms or kill each other with their bare hands. Nothing in between.

Figure skating coach Nicole Bradford is interviewed in her suburban Illinois kitchen.

NICOLE BRADFORD: They were the most talented skaters I've ever worked with, no question. But looking back . . . yes, I could see the signs of trouble to come.

U.S. Figure Skating judge Jane Currer addresses the camera from an ice rink in Colorado.

JANE CURRER: How could we have known? How could anyone have known?

In quick flashes, a series of images: Katarina and Heath skating together as children. Then older, standing on top of a podium, smiling, gold medals around their necks. Finally, shouting at each other, Katarina's makeup ruined, her hand pulled back to strike.

ELLIS DEAN: I know one thing for sure. There'll never be another team like Kat and Heath.

Slow dissolve to a photo of the ice rink in Sochi. Bright red spatters stain the Olympic rings.

ELLIS DEAN: And you know what? Maybe that's a good thing.

NARRATOR: This is ...

THE FAVOURITES:

The Shaw & Rocha Story

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PART I

The Hopefuls

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CHAPTER 1

Once I was satisfied, I handed him the knife.

Heath stood up on his knees, and I stretched out in the warm spot he'd left on the bed, watching him: the way his black hair shone in the moonlight, the press of his teeth on his lower lip as he concentrated, making his first mark with the tip of the blade. He was more precise than I had been, drawing curved, graceful lines underneath my savage slashes.

Shaw & Rocha, the carving read when he finished. It was the way our names would be written on the scoreboard at our first U.S. Figure Skating Championships in a few days' time. The way they'd be announced in medal ceremonies and reported in newspapers and entered in the record books. We'd cut the letters into the center of my antique rosewood headboard, deep enough that no amount of sanding could remove them.

We were sixteen, and so sure of everything.

Our bags were already packed for the National Championships, costumes and skates in a neat stack next to my bedroom door. As many years as we'd been waiting, working, preparing for this moment, those few final hours felt like torture. I wanted to leave right then.

I wished we never had to come back.

Heath left the knife on my bedside table and settled down beside me to admire our handiwork. "Are you nervous?" he whispered.

I looked past him, at the pictures collaged around the drafty leaded glass window—all images of my favorite figure skater, Sheila Lin. Two-

time Olympic gold medalist in ice dance, living legend. Sheila never seemed nervous, no matter how much pressure she faced.

“No,” I told him.

Heath smiled and slid his hand up the back of the stretched-out Stars on Ice 1996 sweatshirt I always wore to bed. “Liar.”

Nosebleed seats to see that tour were the closest I’d ever come to Sheila Lin in real life. My father sprung for a signed commemorative photo of her too, which was tacked up on my wall with the rest of my shrine. She was the woman, and the athlete, I wanted to be—not when I grew up, but as soon as possible.

When Sheila and her partner, Kirk Lockwood, won their first U.S. title, she was still a teenager. Winning was a long shot for Heath and me, since we’d never been to Nationals before. We had qualified the previous season but didn’t have the means to travel to the competition venue in Salt Lake City. Luckily, the championships were in Cleveland this time, a comparably short and affordable Greyhound bus ride away. I was certain the competition would change everything for us.

I was right. Just not in the way I imagined.

Heath kissed my shoulder. “Well, *I’m* not nervous. I’m skating with Katarina Shaw.” He said my name slow, reverent, savoring the sound. “And there’s nothing she can’t do.”

We stared at each other in the shadows, so close we were sharing breath. Later, we’d become world famous for that: stretching out the moment before a kiss until it was almost unbearable, until every member of the audience felt the quickening of our pulses, the pure want reflected in our eyes.

But that was choreography. This was real.

Heath’s mouth finally met mine—soft, unhurried. We thought we had all night.

By the time we heard the footsteps, it was too late.

Nicole Bradford, a middle-aged blond woman wearing a sparkly cardigan and heavy makeup, sits at the center island in her white-on-white suburban dream kitchen.

NICOLE BRADFORD (Figure Skating Coach): There's always a surge after the Winter Olympics. All these girls who think they're destined to become stars. Though they usually aren't quite as intense about it as Katarina Shaw.

Family photos show Katarina as a little girl in various skating costumes. In one, she's in front of a wall covered in pictures of Sheila Lin, imitating Sheila's pose in the central image.

NICOLE BRADFORD: At her first lesson, Katarina said she was going to be a famous ice dancer like Sheila Lin. The other girls hated her instantly.

Four-year-old Katarina skates alone with a serious expression, her hair in two messy pigtails.

NARRATOR: Though her name eventually became synonymous with ice dance, Katarina Shaw spent her early career as a singles skater, since no boys were available to partner with her.

Ellis Dean perches on a stool at a chic cocktail bar, holding a martini glass. He's in his early forties, with an impish smile and carefully coiffed hair.

ELLIS DEAN (Former Ice Dancer): There are vanishingly few guys who want to do ice dance. At least pairs has jumps, plus hurling pretty girls into the air and catching them by the crotch. If you like that sort of thing.

NARRATOR: Ice dance is perhaps the least understood figure skating discipline.

Archival footage of skaters competing in the ice dance event at the 1976 Winter Games in Innsbruck, Austria—the first year ice dance was contested as an Olympic sport.

NARRATOR: Drawn from ballroom dancing, ice dance focuses on intricate footwork and close partnering between skaters, rather than the acrobatic lifts and athletic jumps seen in other events.

ELLIS DEAN: A lot of female ice dancers start out skating with their brothers, cause those are the only dudes they can manage to guilt into it. That was not an option for Kat Shaw.

CHAPTER 2

The door banged open, and my bedroom filled with the mingled stench of Marlboros, Jim Beam, and body odor.

My older brother, Lee.

Heath and I leapt up. My brother didn't want Heath in the house, let alone in my room. Which only inspired us to find more creative ways to sneak him inside. If Lee was sober—an increasingly rare occurrence—he limited his objections to snide remarks, maybe the occasional inanimate object hurled against the wall.

When he was drunk? He had no limits at all.

"What the hell's he doing here?" Lee staggered across the threshold.
"I told you—"

"*I told you to stay out of my room.*"

I used to lock the door and leave the tarnished brass key in place, so Lee couldn't spy on us through the keyhole either. Until he kicked the door in and busted the lock.

"It's *my* house." Lee jabbed a finger in Heath's direction. "And he's not welcome."

Heath moved in front of me, smooth as a dance step, and smiled in a way we both knew would only incense Lee further. "Katarina wants me here," he said. "And so did—"

Lee surged forward, seizing Heath by the arm and yanking him toward the hallway.

"Stop it!" I shouted.

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Heath gripped the doorframe, fingernails sinking into the cracked

trim. As a competitive athlete, he was in far better shape, but Lee had several inches of height and many pounds of bulk on him. One brutal wrench, and Heath was forced to let go.

“Lee! That’s *enough*.”

Not for the first time, I wished we had neighbors close enough to hear the commotion, to call the police. But our house was in the middle of nowhere, bordered only by old-growth forest and the cold expanse of Lake Michigan.

No one was coming to help us.

I chased after them, snatching at the collar of Lee’s shirt, pulling his greasy hair, anything I could think of to slow him down. He jabbed an elbow into my rib cage, knocking me back.

Heath made a valiant effort to stomp on Lee’s toes, and Lee slammed him into the banister. They were close—treacherously close—to the top of the staircase.

Gruesome images flashed through my mind: Heath, in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the steps, a pool of blood spreading. Bones protruding through skin, shattered so thoroughly he’d never be able to stand, let alone skate.

I scrambled back to my feet. I ran into the bedroom.

I didn’t realize what I was doing until the knife was already aimed at my brother’s face.

“Get your hands off him.” I jabbed the blade toward Lee’s stubbled chin. He regarded it with a lazy grin. He didn’t believe I was capable of hurting him.

Heath knew better.

“Katarina.” The lower Heath’s voice, the raspier it sounded, rustling the edges of every word like a breeze through tree branches. “Please. Put the knife down.”

It was only a little paring knife, taken from a dusty drawer in the kitchen. Sharp enough to carve wood, but not to seriously maim someone, let alone murder them. Still, I did want to hurt Lee, just a little. Just enough to make him afraid of me for once.

I looked at Heath, like we were standing at center ice, our music about to start. *Ready?*

He winced and shook his head. I held his gaze, tightening my grip on

the knife. I could tell he thought this was a terrible idea—and also that he didn't have any better ones.

Heath's chin dipped, almost imperceptibly. *Ready.*

I lunged at Lee, swiping the knife across his bicep. He let out an enraged yelp—and let go of Heath so he could take a swing at me. I managed to duck the blow but dropped my weapon as I shoved past my brother, racing down the steps. Heath hauled open the front door, letting in a blast of cold wind, then stopped on the other side of the threshold to wait for me.

Lee spat out a flurry of curses as he tripped on the last step and stumbled into the foyer. I kept running, eyes locked on Heath. I was almost there.

But Lee got there first. With one hand, he slammed the door and threw the deadbolt.

With the other, he pressed the blade to my neck.

NICOLE BRADFORD: Katarina and Heath met at the rink, but he wasn't a skater.

NARRATOR: Heath Rocha grew up in foster care. By the time he was ten years old, he'd lived with six different families.

NICOLE BRADFORD: I don't know for sure what Heath's home life was like, so I don't want to cast aspersions. I'll just say his foster parents didn't seem very...involved. He first came to the rink through a charity organization that offered free sports programs for local kids.

Slow zoom in on a photograph of young boys in hockey gear, highlighting ten-year-old Heath. He's the only child in the photo who isn't white.

NICOLE BRADFORD: Heath signed up for hockey, and after his lesson, he'd hang around the rink, like he didn't want to go home. When he thought no one was looking, he sat in the stands and watched Kat skate. It was clear he had a crush on her. I thought it was cute.

A photograph of nine-year-old Katarina practicing at the North Shore Ice Rink in Lake Forest, Illinois. Zooming in reveals a blurry figure behind her in the bleachers: Heath.

NICOLE BRADFORD: Eventually they struck up a friendship, and he started going home with her for dinner. Even sleeping over at the Shaw house. She hadn't mentioned her ice dancing aspirations for a few months; I thought maybe she'd finally gotten over it and was ready to go all-in on singles. I should have known she wouldn't give up so easily.

Stock footage of Lake Michigan in the dead of winter, the waves frozen solid.

NARRATOR: Katarina taught Heath to figure skate in secret, on the lake near the Shaw home.

ELLIS DEAN: I took up skating at seven, and that was late. Heath Rocha was almost eleven.

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Jane Currer, a severe-looking woman in her seventies with curly hair dyed bright red and a silk scarf in a clashing hue, sits rinkside at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs.

JANE CURREN (U.S. Figure Skating Official): While ice dancers do tend to peak at an older age, skaters who start any discipline past the average age are at a disadvantage. Basic skating skills lay the foundation for future success.

NICOLE BRADFORD: I'll admit it, I was extremely skeptical. Until I saw them skate together.

CHAPTER 3

I didn't fight anymore, as Lee dragged me back upstairs and threw me into my bedroom. As soon as his shuffling steps faded down the hall, I ran to the window. Heath stood on the lawn below, bare feet in the frost-covered grass. His shoulders dropped with relief when he saw me.

For January, it was reasonably pleasant outside: no snow on the ground, the lake still unfrozen. Heath had been chased out in far worse weather. I used to toss things down to him—clothing, food, clean blankets—but Lee got wise to that and screwed the window casing shut.

Heath waved, then turned and walked toward the woods. Lee might not have been able to lock my door anymore, but I was still as good as trapped until he passed out, which could happen anytime between midnight and the break of dawn. I knew where Heath went to hide on nights like this, and I couldn't risk my brother ruining that too.

I pressed my hand against the pane, like I could touch Heath from a distance, and kept it there until he'd disappeared beyond the twisting branches of the locust trees. When I pulled away, my palm left a streak of red on the glass.

I hoped my brother was still bleeding.

Since our father's death, Lee was in charge—though he was only five years my senior, and barely capable of looking after himself—and he thought Heath was a bad influence. Bold of him to worry about Heath's “influence,” when Lee brought a different girl home every week. I'd

lost count of the nights I spent with a pillow over my ears, trying to drown out the sounds of those poor girls' obviously faked orgasms.

The media likes to make my younger years with Heath out to be some sordid *Flowers in the Attic* shit: the two of us raised together as siblings (we weren't), left unsupervised to explore our undeniable passion for each other (I wish).

The truth, whether you want to believe it or not, is that Heath and I were both still virgins at sixteen. Sure, we kissed, we touched each other, we slid aside clothing so we could press skin against skin. We knew how to make each other gasp and groan and shudder with pleasure. I knew he wanted to go further. So did I.

In some ways, it seemed absurd to wait. After all, we were already intimate in ways even adults in years-long relationships find difficult to comprehend. We went to school together, skated together, spent practically every waking moment together—and our sleeping moments too, when we managed to sneak past my brother.

Despite that, the upcoming trip to Nationals would be the first time the two of us were truly on our own. We still technically had a coach, though we could barely afford to pay Nicole. My father's will divided everything equally between Lee and me, including the property, but I couldn't access my half of the estate until I turned eighteen.

Nicole helped Heath and me out as much as she could—arranging part-time jobs at the rink to subsidize our ice time, assisting with choreography since hiring a professional was out of reach—but asking her to give up days of paid lessons to travel with us for free was out of the question. So we were going it alone, staying several nights in a shabby motel we'd booked because the official event accommodations were too expensive.

Any normal teenage girl would have been eager to take advantage of the lack of chaperoning. But I wasn't a normal teenage girl. I was going to be an Olympic champion, and I wasn't about to do anything stupid to jeopardize that. Like stabbing my brother, no matter how much he might deserve it. Or getting myself knocked up and having to spend our dwindling training funds on an abortion.

Everyone thinks Heath Rocha was my first love. He wasn't.

My first love was figure skating.

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It started in February 1988—the Winter Olympics in Calgary. I was four years old, and up way past my bedtime, watching the last night of the ice dance competition.

Lin and Lockwood were the final couple to take the ice. As they posed in the center of the rink, awaiting the first note of their program music, the camera zoomed in—straight past Kirk, with his skintight costume and slicked-back hair, to focus on Sheila's face alone.

The skaters who'd gone before had looked as if they were swallowing their nerves, hoping and praying to whatever god they believed in that all those years of grueling work would pay off with Olympic glory.

Not Sheila Lin. A smirk played across her lips, which were painted the same ruby hue as the jewels shining in her black hair. Even as a kid with no knowledge of the sport, I was sure she would win. Sheila looked like she'd *already* won—like she had the gold medal around her neck and her blade firmly planted on the still-twitching corpse of her competition.

I didn't become a skater because I harbored some childish fantasy of wearing sequins and spinning around like a pretty little top. I became a skater because I wanted to feel like *that*.

Fierce. Confident. A warrior goddess covered in glitter. So sure of myself, I could make my dreams come true through sheer force of will.

Skating was my first love, but in the intervening years it had become so much more. It was the only thing I was good at—my best hope for survival, for escape from that dark and crumbling house, from my brother and his rages. And if I worked hard enough, if I got good enough . . . one day I might become as invulnerable as Sheila Lin.

Nationals was the first step, the beginning of everything. Soon, I told myself, staring into the shadows beyond my bedroom window, Heath and I would be free of this place.

And no matter what, we would be together.

CHAPTER 4

The sun was rising by the time I managed to sneak out of the house.

Lee lay facedown on the sofa in the parlor. The fireplace hearth was scattered with cigarette butts, and liquor bottles left rings all over the original hardwood floors. My brother's idea of a quiet night in.

Outside, the morning was crisp and calm, silent aside from the gentle lap of the waves and the crunch of my shoes on the gravel driveway. I picked up my pace, jogging past Lee's mud-spattered pickup truck to follow the path I knew Heath had taken in the dark.

My childhood home is in a far-flung Chicago suburb closer to the Wisconsin border than to the city, dubbed The Heights due to its *very* slight elevation over the pancake-flat landscape surrounding it. Most of the area was populated in the late 1800s, following the fires and labor riots that sent all the richest assholes fleeing downtown Chicago for the relative safety of Lake Michigan's northern shore. The Shaws had already been there for decades.

My some-number-of-greats-grandfather bought a big patch of lake-front property back when the area was nothing but dirt and sand and black oaks bent double by the winds that whipped across the water. A generation after him, another Shaw built a house right on the lakefront, leaving plenty of forest to block the view of future prying neighbors.

The house itself is relatively simple: a modest flagstone farmhouse with a few Gothic revival flourishes. It's the land that's valuable. Every decade or so, developers come sniffing around, offering stacks of cash,

and whichever Shaw is currently in residence tells them to fuck off, sometimes with Midwestern passive-aggression, other times with the barrel of a shotgun.

You can see how I came by my winning personality.

As a girl, I hated that house. It had already fallen into cobweb-choked disrepair when my parents inherited it, and my mother passed away before she had a chance to carry out her grand redecoration plans. If I wasn't at school or at the rink, I was usually running wild outdoors—on my own at first, and then with Heath by my side. In warmer months, the lake itself was our favorite spot. We'd wade through the waves, climb on top of the rocks to watch the sailboats and freighters passing by, and build bonfires in the small strip of sand that passed for a private beach.

When the weather turned, we retreated to the stable. Everyone still referred to the building that way, though it hadn't held any horses since decades before my father was born. Made of the same gray stone as the house, it sat near our northern boundary line, right next to the family burial plot. Lee steered clear of that corner of the property; he never came to visit our parents' graves, not even on their birthdays or the anniversaries of their deaths.

So when Lee banned Heath from the house barely an hour after our father's funeral, it seemed like the ideal hiding spot. For weeks, I smuggled things out to him: candles, firewood, an old mattress I dragged up from the cellar, even a battery-operated boom box.

As soon as I entered the stable that morning, I could tell Heath hadn't gotten any more rest than I had. He'd pulled the mattress into the warmest stall, away from the shattered skylight that served as a makeshift chimney, and a Debussy nocturne played on the classical radio station he tuned in to when he had trouble sleeping. Last night's fire had burned down to ash, and though sunshine had begun to melt the frost crystals on the jagged remains of the glass, it was still so cold I could see my breath.

I'd brought him his warmest coat, which I draped over his shoulders before lying down beside him. He opened his eyes, and even in the dim light, I could see how bruised the right one was, a purple bloom unfurling between his lashes and cheekbone.

My fingertips ghosted over the swollen skin. It must have been tender, but Heath exhaled a cloud of steam and leaned into my touch.

“I’m going to kill Lee,” I said.

“It’s not that bad.” Heath’s teeth chattered when he spoke. I slipped off my shoes and rubbed my wool socks against his cold-numbed toes. “You can cover it up for Nationals, right?”

I nodded, though I wasn’t sure the watery drugstore concealer in my makeup kit was up to the task.

“I think freezing my ass off out here might’ve kept the swelling down.” He brushed my hair back, fingers catching in a tangle. “I’m just glad he didn’t hurt you.”

Lee had figured out a long time ago: the best way to hurt me was to hurt Heath.

Heath always stayed stoic, brushing off every insult and injury, no matter how severe. Once Lee shoved him into a wall so hard, he lost consciousness for a few terrifying seconds, and when I shook him back awake, all he did was shrug and tell me it could’ve been worse.

As close as we were, I knew next to nothing about Heath’s life before me. He had a birth certificate showing he was born in Michigan and shared his surname with his mother. The line that should’ve listed his father was blank. The name *Rocha* was Spanish in origin, or maybe Portuguese—the only solid clue he had to his heritage. Most people in the Midwest took one look at Heath’s brown skin and dark hair and assumed he was either Mexican or Middle Eastern (then made other, less charitable assumptions accordingly).

Heath knew nothing more about his real parents and insisted he had no desire to search for them. I’d never set foot inside his foster home, a squat sepia bungalow by the train tracks that didn’t look anywhere near large enough to hold the number of people who lived there at any given time. When Heath moved in with us the summer before eighth grade, my father gave him Lee’s childhood bedroom, which he’d vacated the second he turned eighteen in favor of a filthy shared flat closer to the city. Heath had gaped at the cramped, drafty room like it was a royal palace, and I’d realized it must have been the first time he’d had space all to himself.

He didn’t like to talk about his past, and I didn’t want to pry. All I

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knew was, if life with Lee Shaw was an improvement, whatever he'd endured before must have been truly horrific.

"Murdering your brother seems a *little* extreme." Heath's shivering had slowed, so the words came out steadier. "But I could get behind slashing his tires."

"I've got a better idea," I said. "Check your pockets."

Heath rummaged through the coat until there was a metallic clink. A slow smile spread across his face as he held up the keys to Lee's truck.

I didn't have my driver's license yet. But Heath had gotten his the summer before.

"Now *he's* going to kill *us*," Heath said.

"Not if we're gone before he wakes up."

Still clutching the keys, Heath took my face in his hands and kissed me. Cold metal pressed against my cheek. "What did I tell you, Katarina Shaw?"

I smiled and kissed him back. "There's nothing I can't do."

NICOLE BRADFORD: At first, Heath seemed hopeless. Thanks to his hockey lessons, he could skate fast, but he had no finesse. Ice dance is all about maneuvering on the edges of your blades, carving into the ice with precision and control.

In a home video taken by Ms. Bradford during one of their first practices together, Katarina and Heath attempt some simple forward crossovers, skating hand in hand.

NICOLE BRADFORD: But they had this ... connection.

Heath's skates keep getting tangled up as he tries to match Katarina's rhythm. She squeezes his hand. He stops focusing on his feet, looking at her instead. Soon, they're moving in unison.

NICOLE BRADFORD: It was like they were reading each other's minds. His technique needed a ton of work. But I've never seen anyone work as hard as Heath.

ELLIS DEAN: Imagine being down so bad you'd master a whole Olympic sport to spend time with someone.

NICOLE BRADFORD: By the time they turned thirteen, I was starting to think bigger: Nationals, Worlds, maybe even the Olympic Games. I never made it that far myself.

Katarina and Heath wave from the top podium step at a regional competition.

NICOLE BRADFORD: One afternoon, I found them together on a bench outside the rink. They were embracing, and I thought for a second they might be ... (She clears her throat.) Anyway, it turned out they were crying. They were both so upset, I thought someone must have died.

A series of candid snapshots show young Katarina and Heath at the rink and at the Shaw house: wading in the lake, cartwheeling on the lawn, cuddled in a nest of blankets watching television.

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NICOLE BRADFORD: I finally got Heath calmed down enough to tell me he was being transferred to another foster home, hours away. He had to leave in less than a week.

JANE CURRER: Mr. Rocha's departure most likely would have meant Ms. Shaw had to give up skating, unless she could find another partner. Since switching to ice dance, she'd developed a body type that was ... less than ideal for the jumps required in the ladies singles discipline.

NICOLE BRADFORD: I was sad too. But what could I do? I thought it was over. Then the next day, in they walk, holding hands, big smiles on their faces. And Katarina says Heath isn't going anywhere after all.

A snapshot of preteen Katarina and Heath, standing on either side of Katarina's father outside the Rosemont Horizon arena after the 1996 Stars on Ice tour performance headlined by Lin and Lockwood. Mr. Shaw has his arms around their shoulders, and all three are smiling wide.

NICOLE BRADFORD: She'd convinced her father to become the boy's legal guardian.

CHAPTER 5

The heater in Lee's Chevy pickup didn't work, and frigid wind cut through the cracked window seals. Even so, my memories of that drive with Heath are drenched in warmth.

Our gloved hands entwined over the gearshift, winter sun caressing our faces as we sang along to Savage Garden and Semisonic on the radio. The prickling heat that spread across my chest, then pooled lower, every time Heath turned to smile at me.

After miles of fallow cornfields, dairy farms, and industrial smokestacks, Cleveland finally appeared on the horizon. We were hours earlier than we would have been if we'd had to take the bus—right on time for an open practice session on competition ice.

Walking into the arena, even with my unwashed hair in a haphazard ponytail and the burnt taste of gas station coffee on my tongue, I felt impossibly glamorous—which seems ridiculous to me now. A multipurpose sporting complex in Cleveland, Ohio, is not exactly the height of sophistication. But that day, staring up at the cresting wave of blue stadium seats, I felt like I'd finally arrived.

As we stretched out the tension of our sleepless night and all those hours in Lee's icebox of a truck, I watched—and judged—the other skaters.

Right away, I spotted last year's silver medalists, Paige Reed and Zachary Branwell, both clean-cut Nordic blonds from Minnesota. They showed enviable technique, but despite being a couple off the ice as well as on, there was about as much heat between them as two un-

toasted slices of white bread. Paige favored her left leg too, thanks to a preseason injury.

The other two teams, I didn't recognize. So either it was their first time at Nationals, like us, or they'd been ranked too low last year to make it into the TV broadcast. There was a skinny, flat-chested girl and a freckle-faced guy who weren't a serious threat; they had decent edges, but no flow in their movements, and they held each other at arm's length like they were at a middle-school dance.

The last pair—both sporting ponytails: his dark and tied with ribbon like a nobleman, hers platinum and pulled so tight she looked like a face-lifted divorcée—weren't half bad, but they lacked connection too. They were skating next to each other rather than *with* each other.

Heath and I could beat them, I thought, a giddy buzz growing in my chest.

Just then a big band track trumpeted over the loudspeakers, and a new team took the ice.

Instead of typical warm-up gear, they were in full costume and makeup. The girl's dress was a retro confection that sparkled like an ice blue disco ball. Her partner wore matching suspenders over a black shirt perfectly tailored to emphasize his impeccable posture. And they weren't simply warming up or running through their program. They were performing all-out, finishing off every step with a smile up to the rafters, as if the arena were full of adoring fans.

This was our *real* competition.

I twisted my ring, trying to settle my nerves. Since my very first juvenile competition, I'd worn my mother's Art Deco engagement band as a good luck charm. When I was small, it hung on a gold chain around my neck. By sixteen, the ring fit my middle finger—and I'd started keeping it on my person at all times, because I knew if Lee got his hands on it, he'd pawn the diamond and drink the proceeds.

“Don't worry about them,” Heath said. He could always read my moods like a weather report. “If we do our best, that's all that matters.”

I had no interest in “our best” unless it was *the* best. We'd been the best at our small-town rink for so long, it had ceased to mean anything. If we wanted to keep improving—if we wanted to become Olympic-

caliber athletes—we needed to be pushed, to be challenged. Well, here was the perfect challenge, passing right by us in a blur of blue sequins.

I took Heath's hand, and we stepped onto the ice. As we completed a few circuits, the other team finished their program—then cut a path to the center of the rink. Their music started up again, and they repeated their choreography, step for step, smile for smile. They didn't even look winded.

Heath raised his eyebrows, as if to say, *Shall we?* I grinned and pulled him into a hold, not bothering to correct the way his hand drifted too low, settling into the crease of my waist.

We were off, whirling around the rink, syncing our movements to the song. This was how we stretched out our training time at home—we'd show up early and improvise to whatever music happened to be playing, whether it was the Top 40 pop they blasted during public skate sessions or the perky cartoon themes that accompanied kids' birthday parties.

Our feet followed the bombastic harmony of the horn section first, then sped up to chase the driving string bass line. We spun faster and faster, my ponytail coming undone, wild curls whipping around my face, the competition forgotten. For a few blissful moments, it was only me and him, only the ice and our blades and the beat.

And suddenly I wasn't in Heath's arms anymore.

I was sprawled facedown, my hip wrenched at a strange angle, ice burn all over my palms. Snow sprayed in my eyes as a pair of skates skidded to a stop a few inches from my nose.

“Are you okay?” a voice said from somewhere above me.

The skates were so clean, they looked brand-new—blinding white leather, carefully knotted laces. I polished my boots every night before bed, and they were never that spotless.

“Katarina.” Heath's voice now. His breath at my ear. “Can you stand?”

I blinked melting snow from my eyes. Or maybe I was crying, I couldn't be sure. I kept staring at those skates, studying them. There was something engraved on the blades too. Words, in delicate, flowing text. A name.

Her name. *Isabella Lin.*

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Kirk Lockwood—who we previously saw in news footage from the Sochi Olympics—takes a seat by the bay window in the parlor of his Boston home.

KIRK LOCKWOOD (Former Ice Dancer): Is it time to talk about Sheila?

JANE CURRER: To fully understand Katarina Shaw, first we have to discuss Sheila Lin.

KIRK LOCKWOOD: Sheila started training at my rink in the summer of 1980. She was between partners. I guess she'd gone through a couple different guys already—which isn't uncommon. She was so good, though. I couldn't understand why anyone would let her go. Or why I'd never met her before.

Exterior shot of the Lockwood Performance Center ice rink in the suburbs of Boston.

NARRATOR: While Sheila Lin seemed to come out of nowhere, Kirk Lockwood came from a long skating bloodline. His family founded the Lockwood Performance Center, which is known for turning out champion figure skaters—including Kirk's mother, Carol, who won silver in ladies singles at the Cortina Games.

JANE CURRER: It was quite the scandal, when Kirk left his partner for Sheila. He and Deborah Green had been together almost ten years, and they'd just won gold at Junior Worlds.

KIRK LOCKWOOD: Maybe if I was a nicer person, I'd say I regretted it. But I don't. Teaming with Sheila was the first decision I made on my own, without my parents telling me what to do.

JANE CURRER: Sheila manipulated him. He was the best, and she wanted him for herself.

KIRK LOCKWOOD: She was better than I was, and I knew she'd make me better than I could've ever been with Debbie. You had to skate up to Sheila's level, because she wasn't gonna skate down to yours.

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Old, glitchy camcorder footage shows Sheila and Kirk practicing synchronized side-by-side rotations, also known as twizzles. Kirk loses his balance and falls. Sheila doesn't even slow down.

KIRK LOCKWOOD: And if you couldn't get on her level? Well, too damn bad for you.

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CHAPTER 6

A hand reached down, and I took it.

I didn't realize until I was back on my feet that it belonged to the boy with the blue sequined suspenders.

If the girl was Isabella Lin, he must be her twin brother, Garrett. Their resemblance to their famous mother was unmistakable. They both had Sheila's high cheekbones, her full lips, her shampoo-commercial hair. And they'd clearly inherited her skating talent as well.

Winning two consecutive gold medals was a rare feat, but Sheila Lin had accomplished something even rarer: managing to stay competitive after motherhood. The twins were born following her first Olympics. At her second, they had front row seats.

I knew Isabella and Garrett had followed in their mother's footsteps, but I still thought of them as the little kids I'd seen on Sheila's lap during the Calgary coverage. They were younger than Heath and me, though not by much: fifteen, and already competing at the senior level, skating circles around teams a decade older. Amazing what you can accomplish when you're born with the best coach in the world.

"Are you hurt?" Heath asked, putting his arm around me.

I was still holding on to Garrett Lin's hand. I dropped it, backing up and brushing ice off my leggings. "I'm fine. Just got the wind knocked out of me."

Every skater is used to falling. I knew how to brace myself to absorb

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the impact and prevent injury, but I'd been too caught up in the moment, already down before I realized what was happening.

"I'm so sorry." Garrett looked more upset than I was. "I didn't—"

"Don't apologize to them."

Unlike Garrett, who was pushing six feet and still growing, his sister shared Sheila's petite stature. Isabella barely came up to my chin, yet somehow she seemed to be staring down her nose at me.

"It was their fault," she said.

Heath's fingers tensed, digging in. A dull ache radiated from my shoulder.

"You ran into *us*," he said.

Isabella crossed her arms. "Our music was playing."

"Whoever's program music is playing gets the right of way during a practice session," Garrett explained. His tone was kind, not even a hint of condescension. "But even so, we should have been paying more attention. Are you sure you're okay? If you hit your head, or—"

"She's fine." Heath steered us toward the boards. With every stroke of my skates, the ache in my back spread, rooting deeper in my spine.

I couldn't be injured. We were at the National Championships. We had three straight days of competition ahead. We'd worked so hard.

"What are you doing at *Nationals*," Isabella called after us, "if you don't even know—"

"Bella."

The voice was soft, even-toned. But both twins snapped to attention as if they'd been issued a military command. I followed their gaze, and there she was.

Sheila Lin.

She looked as stunning in person as she did in the photos on my bedroom wall. Her hair was shorter, precision-cut in a bob following the sharp line of her jaw. She wore all white: slim-fitting pants and a leather blazer as spotless as her daughter's skates.

I was only a few feet away from the woman I'd idolized for as long as I could remember. And she'd witnessed me wiping out like a total amateur, almost taking her champion children down with me.

Heath didn't even seem to notice Sheila's presence. He led me off

the ice and helped me sit down on a bench, then knelt to snap my blade guards back in place.

“What do you need?” he asked. “I can get you an ice pack. Or a medic, to check you out, make sure there’s no—”

“I’m fine,” I repeated. My hips felt stiff, a pulsing pain settling into the right socket. Movement should help. “Let me rest for a second, and we can get back out there.”

“I’m going to get the medic.”

He was gone before I could stop him. I knew it would make him feel better to do something, even though I was certain my pride was more bruised than my body.

The twins were at the boards now, heads bowed, consulting with Sheila. Probably talking about the ignorant girl who’d run into them because she didn’t know basic ice-sharing rules. I shut my eyes, determined to hold back the tears that threatened.

“Please tell me you did that on purpose.”

I looked up. It was the ponytailed guy I’d seen earlier. Close-up, he was so skinny he looked less like a nobleman and more like a freakishly tall Victorian urchin.

“What?” I said.

“Trying to take out the Lin Twins.” He plopped down next to me, a smirk twisting his pale face. “Please tell me you did it on purpose.”

“It was an accident. I wasn’t watching where I was going, and—”

“Too bad. You struck me as the type.”

“The ‘type’?” I couldn’t figure out whether he was making fun of me or not.

“The type who’ll do anything to win.” He stuck out his hand. “Ellis Dean.”

I took it. “Katarina Shaw.”

“Nice to meet you, Katarina Shaw.” He leaned closer, dropping his voice to a whisper. “Next time, aim for her toe pick. Then she’ll be the one eating ice.”

As if she’d somehow heard him from the other side of the rink, Isabella shot a glare in our direction. Ellis gave her a smile and a finger-wagging wave. She did not return either.

“Trust me,” he said through his teeth. “She deserves it.”

When Isabella's glare settled on me, I didn't bother with the pretense of a smile. I glared back, holding her gaze without blinking until my eyes started to burn.

Finally, she turned away, taking a sip from her Swarovski-encrusted water bottle.

My first victory over Bella Lin. I vowed it wouldn't be my last.

Garrett Lin, now in his late thirties, lounges on a leather sofa at his home in San Francisco.

GARRETT LIN (Sheila Lin's Son): If you think I'm going to spill a bunch of dirt about my mother, how mean she was to me and my sister or whatever ... forget it, all right? That isn't why I agreed to do this.

A few candid Polaroids showing Sheila during her pregnancy are followed by a formal birth announcement. As infants the twins look identical, with black hair and gold swaddling.

KIRK LOCKWOOD: Sheila was the most driven, focused person I'd ever met. Then she's pregnant, with twins, at twenty-two years old? I was shocked.

ELLIS DEAN: Bella and Garrett were born exactly nine months after the Sarajevo Games. Sheila refused to tell anyone who the father was, but it had to be an Olympic Village hookup.

KIRK LOCKWOOD: All I know is, it wasn't me. I'm proud to be both a gold medalist and a gold-star gay man.

GARRETT LIN: I know my mother didn't plan her pregnancy, but it's almost like she did, right? We were a ready-made ice dance team, and she had us in skates as soon as we could stand.

NARRATOR: After revealing her pregnancy, Sheila Lin retreated from the public eye. Though she hadn't announced her retirement, most assumed she wouldn't return to competition.

In a series of paparazzi photos, Sheila pushes a double stroller down a city street.

KIRK LOCKWOOD: We didn't speak for months. When she finally got back in touch and said she wanted to start training for the '88 Games, I almost told her to fuck off. Excuse my language. But c'mon—she thought I was waiting around for her? Well, I guess I kind of was, but that's not the point.

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Sheila laces up her skates at the Lockwood Performance Center, staring at the ice with fierce determination.

KIRK LOCKWOOD: I figured, quit while you're ahead, right? But she was so sure we could win again. And if Sheila Lin wanted something? Only an idiot would try to stand in her way.

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CHAPTER 7

The next morning, the ache in my hip was worse. I told myself it was from the motel mattress springs stabbing into me as I tried to sleep through the combined noise of the highway traffic and the most definitely *not* faked cries of pleasure coming from the room next door.

I turned the shower as hot as it would go and stretched under the stream, willing my muscles to loosen. The first event started in the late morning and would be over by mid-afternoon, then I'd have the whole rest of the day to take it easy and recover.

In those days, ice dance competitions kicked off with the compulsory dance, where all teams had to perform the same exact steps—by far my least favorite event; unfortunately, the skating Powers That Be didn't do away with it until near the end of my career. The original dance, which allowed teams to put their own spin on each season's required dance style, was better, but I much preferred the final event, the free dance. There, we could choose whatever music and choreography we wanted.

After a scalding shower and lots of warm-up stretches, I made it through our compulsory Quickstep program without too much trouble. I wasn't able to swing my leg as high as usual, but Heath adjusted his turns so we still had matching lines. Not our best performance, but enough to put us in seventh place.

It wasn't until the next day, when I was getting dressed for the original, that I noticed the bruise. We didn't have the funds for fancy cos-

tumes, so Heath wore the same nondescript black shirt and trousers for all three programs, while I had one more elaborate dress I saved for the free. My costume for the compulsory and original dances was plain black velvet with spaghetti straps and a slit up the leg—a slit that perfectly framed the furious purple splotch spreading from my hip down toward my knee.

“That looks bad,” Heath said.

“At least we match now,” I pointed out.

I’d been able to conceal the worst of the damage to Heath’s eye, but all the Cover Girl in the world wasn’t going to make the mark on my leg go away. It was obvious even through my thickest tights. My free dance costume was longer—a structured bodice over a gauzy, shredded skirt; I’d DIY’d it from a thrift store prom dress—so I put that on instead, ignoring the sparks of pain that lit up my thigh every time the skirt swished.

The required style for the original dance was Latin ballroom, and our program was a Rhumba to the old standard “Perhaps Perhaps Perhaps”—a mash-up of the Desi Arnaz version and a cover by the band Cake to provide the changes in musical character and tempo the judges wanted to see from a well-balanced program.

Later in our career, the Latin dances would become something of a specialty for us, since they made such good use of our natural chemistry (and plenty of the officials thought Heath had Latin heritage, an assumption he didn’t bother correcting if it boosted our scores). We weren’t as polished back then, but Latin was still one of our best styles. While the Quickstep relied on sharp, controlled movements, the Rhumba required formal carriage in the upper body and more exaggerated, sensual movements in the lower.

Not an ideal combination in my condition. Seconds into our program, Heath could sense how much pain I was in—and I could sense how desperately he wanted to stop and make sure I was all right.

We couldn’t stop. If we stopped, it was all over. So I let the momentum of the steps carry me, and we made it through. As we skated to the boards, Heath looped his arm around my waist, and he kept it there during the walk to the kiss and cry area to wait for our scores. He knew I wouldn’t want anyone to see me limp. Especially not the Lins, who were about to take the ice as part of the final warm-up group.

By the time we made it back to the motel that night, it was snowing so hard we almost drove right past the flickering neon *Vacancy* sign. And I was in so much agony, I couldn't get out of the car without Heath's help. He had to carry me over the threshold like a bride.

While he trudged through snowdrifts to the drugstore across the street, I lay prone on the bed, listening to the wind rattle the flimsy windowpanes and silently panicking.

The sixth-place team had stumbled during their twizzle sequence, and by the end of the original dance, we found ourselves in fifth—right behind Ellis Dean and his partner, Josephine Hayworth. One more event to go, and we were within striking distance of the podium. We'd only have to advance a single spot, since they awarded a pewter medal for fourth place finishers at Nationals in addition to the usual bronze, silver, and gold.

The worst of the pain was coiled around my hip socket, but even the smallest movement sent it slithering out to attack the rest of me. My mother's ring was typically loose on my finger. Now my hands were so swollen, I couldn't get it past my knuckle.

Heath returned with snow caked on his eyelashes, bearing Tylenol, a jar of Tiger Balm, and a bag of ice. He alternated between the cold of the ice, the heat of his hands, and the balm's strange combination of both. Nothing helped.

I hated being taken care of like that, nursed like a helpless child. I'd only let Heath do it once before.

The day my father died.

He always picked us up from the rink on his way home from the college where he taught history. When he failed to show that evening, I told myself he must have forgotten, gotten distracted and lost track of time. As children, Lee and I would often find him sitting in the same place for hours, staring at the wallpaper like he hoped to see our mother's face in the pattern. It was unspeakably sad, and so we never spoke about it.

Since Heath had come to live with us, though, my father had been better. More present. He even arrived at the rink early sometimes and sat in the stands, watching us skate and chatting with the other parents—