

THE GAMES

Patricia McLinn

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"Patricia McLinn wins gold with this sparkling romance! *The Games* is your ticket behind the cameras and inside the hearts of the Winter Olympics."

– *Carla Neggers, New York Times bestselling author*

"Fast-paced, vivid and true-to-life, Patricia McLinn's *The Games* captures the personal drama and compelling stories of the greatest sports event on earth. It's a gold-medal winner any fan of the Games will love."

– *Christine Brennan, USA Today sports columnist*

"*The Games* accurately portrays the emotional roller coaster an athlete rides ... The pride, excitement, disappointment, relationships, doubt, relief, joy and all of the pressures ... all come to a head at the Olympic Games."

– *Michael Weiss, U.S. Olympic figure skater
and three-time U.S. Men's Champion*

"*The Games* is a wonderful book! All of the characters are so dynamic, so believable. The tension of the various competitions is nerve-racking. The romance going on behind the scenes is explosive. . . . a story you won't be able to put down, and one you'll not soon forget."

– *RomanceJunkies.com*

"If the aim of *The Games* is to give readers a vicarious Olympic experience that is lively, entertaining, and emotionally satisfying, it hit its mark dead center." – *Romance Reviews Today*

"I delighted in the 'real world' look at some Olympic heroes. . . . Ms. McLinn's knowledge added the excitement of the Olympics to her wonderful book." – *CataRomance*

"Written with invigorating, breathtaking passion, I found myself jumping up and cheering for the wins, and sobbing out loud during the defeats. . . . The sensual romance . . . will also have you cheering, sighing, and all choked up throughout this wonderfully compelling read. This is an exceptional read, a winner worthy of the gold, and one I highly recommend!" – *Romance Reviews Today*

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Thank you all. Let *The Games* begin.

OPENING CEREMONIES

“Mesdames et Messieurs, l'equipe Olympic des Etats Unis!”

“Ladies and gentlemen, the United States Olympic team!”

Red, white and blue, they marched through an archway that vibrated with their eagerness, then burst into the open floor of the oval stadium. A roar rose, the sheer volume of it enough to set a sea of hand-held flags fluttering. All for them.

In return, they spilled into the frosting night the essence of themselves. Youth, exuberance, skill, endurance, dedication, determination, hope, anxiety, excitement. Stirring and stirred.

Energy crackled through each movement as voices admonished them to “Keep those lines straight!” with little effect. Lines? Lines sat as static, dull things. This burned with motion and emotion.

A culmination of years distilled into the first of a handful of moments. Moments that would flash past at speed beyond sound, yet would cover a world, and last a lifetime.

Emotions.

Rikki Lodge figured some scientific machine ought to exist to chart the waves of emotion swirling around her. Maybe the gadget that measures electrical flow. Lord knows, she felt the current. The Olympics! At last. If she wasn't the grand old lady of her contingent, she might give into the urge to do a cartwheel just for the joy of it. Come to think of it, that might be the only way the

TV cameras would zero in on a biathlete. Even at the Olympics.

The Olympics.

A shiver skipped up her backbone, and she grinned at herself. You'd think someone who'd competed as long as she had and at as many dots on the world map wouldn't react to one more. But how could anyone ignore all the reminders that this was different, this was special. If the hometown sendoff and the team outfits hadn't reminded her, there'd still be these other athletes from all the other sports and countries. She wasn't even rooming with biathletes, so how could she possibly pretend this was just another meet?

The American team curved around the track's first turn. Behind her, and to the left she caught sight of the men's hockey team. A few faces she'd recognized from newspaper and television coverage when she saw them two days ago while they all got accredited and outfitted. The dark, intense face that stayed well behind the youthful group of players mugging for a TV camera, belonged to Lanny Kaminski.

They'd never met, yet from what she'd read, Rikki Lodge felt an affinity with him. Like her, he was the oldest on a team of youngsters. A man who'd clung to his dream long after most his age –*their* age –embraced more ordinary lives. And now here they were with one, final, shot. *Good luck, Lanny Kaminski*, she thought. We're both going to need it. . . .

Luck.

It came to those who touched the Olympic flag. Even non-believers didn't scoff at the superstition. As the rippling field of white with rings of yellow, blue, green, red and black passed just above the athletes' section, they stood. Stretching arms, straining fingers, climbing on seats, for a touch before the flag rose out of reach.

Kyle Armstrong's arm dropped to her side; her fingertips' contact with the silky material had been so brief she doubted it had happened.

She had always counted on luck as her companion. Now, she felt deserted. Not alone, no never

alone. Not as long as other members of the ski team surrounded her. She didn't even have to think about where she was going, she could just go follow the force of their flow. Kyle had skied with these people, traveled with them, eaten with them, lived with them. Even when she wanted to she couldn't be alone. Never alone with Rob Zemlak watching her.

She looked up. And slammed directly into Rob's stare. His mouth smiled at the exuberance around him, but his eyes scowled. At her. *He knows. Oh, God, he knows!* She sat abruptly, but controlled the fear with will-power honed through years of hurtling down mountains. He couldn't know. No one here did except her. And he didn't watch her any differently than he watched the rest of the skiers he coached.

Keep it in perspective, Kyle. If she could get through the next sixteen days. . . .

Sixteen days.

The flame, brought from Greece by hand in honored stages, would burn over the stadium for sixteen days, as it had over another stadium so long ago. From her spot in the stands, Tess Rutledge watched this Olympic flame flare to life. Memories of another one flowed into the present seamlessly, dangerously.

Remember your reason for being here. No longer Tess Rutledge The Skater, she had come here to coach Amy through her first Olympics and to help the team. She searched the section where the American athletes sat. She recognized the distinctive auburn hair of Rikki Lodge and a momentary shifting of the crowd showed her Kyle Armstrong's straight back. Tess sat taller, looking over heads, and there sat Amy Yost –as bright and vivid and alive as the red, white and blue she wore. She was the reason Tess once more sat in a stadium watching the Opening Ceremonies, listening to the pomp, and forming a minute part of the pageantry. The reason she had come back to all the reminders. Had come back, after years of meticulous avoidance, not to a place, but to a moment in her life.

That's what she had to guard against. She'd

known he'd be here. If they should meet –and they would –she had to have a firm control on all this. To keep the years and the memories clearly separated. Because if she saw him –

Fate could be as cruel as people. She learned that anew in the instant she caught sight of the man staring at her. A man from another world, another time, sitting close enough now that she could see the winter night's breeze ruffling his blond hair, his too-long-remembered blue eyes piercing into her. Andrei Chersakov.

Let the Games begin.

THE DAY BEFORE – FRIDAY

“Isn't this great? When they said we were in a pod I thought gross, but this is just like an apartment.”

At the sound of the youthful voice, Rikki Lodge straightened from folding newly washed clothes into the dresser in her room. Across the hall, the voice was accompanied by thumps of luggage hitting the bed and floor. That had to be Amy Yost.

Three nights ago Rikki had found a namecard “Rochelle Lodge –Biathlon” tacked to a room door and moved in. Alone in the apartment, she'd wandered from door to door and checked namecards.

A large room with a double bed, a desk and an arm chair had a single name on its card, but when Rikki read “Tess Rutledge –Ladies Figure Skating/Asst. Team Leader” the special accommodations didn't surprise her. Tess Rutledge had been a familiar name for close to two decades, first as the darling of figure skating, then as a pro and most recently as an emerging coach.

What was surprising was that she was staying in official housing at all. Rikki would have figured Tess Rutledge for luxury hotels.

The other large room had two beds and two names: “Kyle Armstrong –Women's Alpine Skiing/Nan Monahan –Women's Alpine Skiing.” More familiar names, at least to a winter sports fan – that duo had ranked as among America's best on the international ski circuit for several years now.

Across the hall the final card read “Amy Yost – Ladies Figure Skating.”

Rikki had heard that name, too, but only in the past month as U.S. figure skating's surprising third Olympic qualifier in ladies singles. The media had loved the story of the late-comer to skating bursting onto the scene while remaining what so many referred to as fresh. She supposed that might explain Tess Rutledge's presence in these pedestrian surroundings, since Amy Yost was her protégé, and this was her first Olympics. Give the kid another four years and she'd probably be like most of the top figure skaters, who jetted in before competing, stayed in luxury accommodations, and departed immediately afterward. Their Olympic experience was almost entirely what happened in front of the cameras.

Amy had a mirror image of Rikki's train-compartment room. Rikki didn't mind the size. For the luxury of a private bath she would sleep in a closet. Come to think of it, she'd slept in spaces the size of the closet *without* a private bath.

After reading all the cards, Rikki had whistled to herself and wondered how she'd gotten into such exalted company. Women's biathlon had only reached the Olympics in 1992 at Albertville; the United States didn't rank among the top teams and Rikki Lodge couldn't even claim to be the top U.S. competitor. Just the one with the most longevity.

Now, after two days of wondering, she was about to meet the people behind the names on those cards.

As Rikki reached the hall, Amy Yost disappeared through another door. She reappeared almost

immediately.

“That's a double room.” Amy tossed the news over her shoulder without looking back as she plunged deeper into the apartment. At first she seemed a blur of long blonde hair and even longer limbs, but Rikki saw the teenager couldn't be more than five-three, her slenderness creating the illusion of height. “Oh, and Tess, there's a living room with a big window and a fireplace!”

Rikki looked back toward the hall door, and saw Tess Rutledge emerging from the room marked with her name.

“Amy – Oh. Hello. You must be Rochelle Lodge. I'm Tess Rutledge.”

Even caught in surprise Tess Rutledge's voice flowed as smooth and graceful as the woman did on ice. A clip held dark hair drawn back at her nape, the style's severity a counterpoint to the soft lines of a face that hadn't seemed to age in the fourteen years since it had captured the world as Olympic champion.

“Rikki. Everybody calls me Rikki. It's an honor to meet you.”

“Tess! There's – Oh, hi! I'm Amy. You're one of our pod roommates? Pod! Can you believe they call it a pod? Pod roommate sounds like something from a sci-fi flick, doesn't it? Which one are you? What event are you in? Have you been to the Olympics before?”

“Amy –”

“Rikki Lodge. Biathlon. First Olympics.”

“Biathlon? That's cross-country skiing and, uh. . .”

“Target shooting.” Rikki grinned. “You're ahead of most people. Just the other day someone said, ‘Oh, that must be hard with swimming and running.’”

Having won a laugh from Amy and smile from Tess Rutledge, Rikki went on. “What I don't understand is how we got put together. I thought they assigned housing by sport. And in dorms. Not apartments like this.”

“They usually do, but –”

The entry door swung open with enough force to

hit the wall and bounce back on its way to reclosing.

“Damn!” A U.S. team suitcase was propelled across the threshold to prop the door open. “Where are the bellhops?”

“It's the Olympics, Nan, not the Ritz.”

Rikki identified the second voice as well-bred Eastern boarding school, no doubt well-accustomed to bellhops and other considerations. From what she knew of her two remaining roommates that had to be Kyle Armstrong, of the Delaware Armstrongs, discreetly moneyed and influential for generations. A most unlikely gene pool to produce a world-class skier.

“Here, let me.” Amy flew past Rikki and Tess, tugging the suitcase.

“Thanks! Here.”

Amy took a second bag from the curly-haired woman who'd lamented the lack of bellhops and passed it to Tess. Rikki received another and in seconds suitcases, overnighters, oddly shaped totes, bulging shopping bags, a wrapped tray of cheeses and fruit and five women clogged the narrow hallway.

“I guess you're right, Kyle, I am a pack rat,” said the curly-haired woman, not much taller than Amy, but considerably more compact. She had the high-contrast coloring of Irish ancestry –black hair, fair skin, blue eyes, bright cheeks. She reached across to shake hands. “Hi, I'm Nan Monahan.”

Rikki grinned back, then turned to meet the last of her roommates. Kyle Armstrong brought together subtle variations on a theme, light brown hair tinged with red, honey skin, pale brown eyes flickering to hazel.

Names and introductions came in a flurry. All the while, Rikki watched the faces. Amy was thrilled. Tess was classy. Nan was a dynamo. Kyle was . . . what? Maybe an enigma. The same as the rest, she yet seemed separate, the smile never reaching her eyes.

“I've been *dying* to get here,” pronounced Amy with full dramatic emphasis. “I can't *wait* to meet everybody. C'mon, the living room's great and –”

“Slow down, Amy.”

“But, Tess –”

“We've all just arrived –all except Rikki and it looks as if she's in the middle of something, too. Give us time to get organized, then we'll get to know each other.”

* * * *

“They said we're an experiment within an experiment,” Tess told the rest of them after they'd settled in with mineral water and Nan's cheese and fruit basket.

“They're housing some athletes in these 'pods' that will become apartments after the Games. With us, the idea is to see how it works mixing people from several sports in one pod instead of dividing up by team. Even though that will mean longer trips for practices and events for everyone except Amy.”

She looked at the people who would share these rooms for the next sixteen days. Not only had the organizers mixed sports, they'd mixed ages, looks, backgrounds, circumstances and, unless she missed her guess, personalities.

Lord, please, no problems. She'd been promised her title of assistant team leader was strictly nominal.

For no reason she could name, Tess's gaze went to Kyle Armstrong, silently looking out the window, her face expressionless. Despite experts' cautions that Kyle needed more experience, great things were expected of her at these Olympics. Kyle looked almost too delicate to carry that expectation much less the physical demands of her sport, tall but quite slender and with less color in her face than Tess would have expected from someone outdoors so much.

“In other words, they ran out of room to keep the various teams together and we're the leftovers, so they threw us together.” Rikki Lodge's dry voice held amusement as well as a clear-eyed realism.

Tess liked that. Rikki Lodge impressed her; she felt almost a kinship with the biathlete. Maybe because the information sheets listed Rikki as the one closest to Tess's age, thirty-one to her thirty-six. “Exactly.”

“Then I'm glad to be a leftover, because this is

great,” said Amy. “The whole thing's been like a miracle.”

“That's what the papers called it, too,” said Rikki, interest glinting in her blue-green eyes. Tess had always heard a temper went with red hair, but she suspected curiosity went with Rikki Lodge's auburn. “One writer called you a miracle of enthusiasm on the ice.”

Amy giggled – thank God, she still giggled at compliments. Her impish grin appeared. It was one of the things Tess most loved about Amy – that she was satisfied to remain a girl at fifteen, and only rarely lapse into sophisticated ennui. Having spent most of her youth playing rowdy team sports with her brothers definitely helped. “That's not what Tess called it when she was making the arrangements for all this after Nationals.”

Tess shook her head. “You can laugh. But it was a month of unadulterated craziness. Then, on top of the arrangements to come here and the interview requests for Amy, plus keeping a practice schedule, they pressed me into service to help the team leader.”

She hadn't really minded. There'd been less time to think that way. Less time to remember.

“The first person who'd agreed to help had a car accident last week and broke *both* legs,” said Amy, brutally cheerful. “So they needed somebody fast, somebody already coming. Everybody knows Tess won't play favorites even though she's my coach. And everybody likes her.”

“I've always said it was dangerous to be likable.” Rikki shook her head. “See what happens? They ask you to be a team leader and when you're too likable to say no, they put you in a pod with a bunch of strangers. Why are they calling these things pods instead of apartments, anyway?”

“These aren't the final apartment layouts. After the Games they'll reconfigure them,” Tess said.

“Ah, I'd wondered about four bathrooms per apartment.”

“Well, at least they picked a fun group for our ‘pod,’ right?” Nan Monahan lifted a chunk of cheese in salute.

“Absolutely.” Amy's response reminded Tess how certain a teenager's certainty could be. And how wrong.

“I intend to have all the fun I can,” Amy added. “I don't get to skate until the Olympics are practically over – and there's no way I'm going to spend all that time sitting around worrying when there's all this fun stuff going on.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Nan said. “I've got to wait ten days to ski the GS –giant slalom,” she interpreted for the non-skiers. “Then three more days before the slalom. Kyle gets to start Tuesday, with the combined – that's half downhill, half slalom. So, Tuesday she'll do downhill for the combined, finish up with the slalom run Wednesday, and she'll already have an event under her belt. Probably a medal, too.”

Tess watched for Kyle's reaction, but her gaze out the window didn't waver.

“That's another reason I intend to have all the fun I can this time.” Amy's enthusiasm nearly covered Kyle's lack of response. “If I get to the Olympics again, I'll want a medal. Everybody'll expect a lot. So this time is to have fun. And if there's a next time, that's to be serious.”

Nan shook her head slowly, but her lips curled up. “This kid is frightening. Truly frightening.”

“Sounds wise to me,” said Rikki.

“That's what I mean.”

Kyle had stared out the window so long her voice startled Tess a little. “She must have had a good teacher,” she said to Tess.

Memories of her own painful lessons, learned when she was not all that much older than Amy, telescoped into a blink, and for a moment, Tess couldn't answer.

Nan covered the silence, by design or accident, Tess didn't know. “Yeah, boy, I wish I'd had somebody who'd told me those kinds of things. I sure could have used that kind of wisdom when I was fifteen.”

“You could use that kind of wisdom now,” said Kyle, affection, truth and teasing braided in her voice.

And then she smiled, and Tess understood why

the media had dubbed Kyle Armstrong the sweetheart of skiing.

Before that smile faded, Rikki raised her glass, saying, "Here's to wisdom for all of us, then. That would be my idea of a most successful Olympics."

Tess looked at the faces of the others, the three women she'd just met and the girl she knew so well. Would these Olympics bring them success of that kind or any kind? Would they bring them happiness? Or would they return some day to the Olympics, as she was returning, trying not to be defeated by the memories?

"Right," piped up Amy. "Here's to us. The five peas in the pod."

DAY 1 - SATURDAY

An hour after the Opening Ceremonies ended, the main Olympic Village recreation center was a babble of languages and laughter. Colors splashed it like confetti, adrenaline frothed the air.

Tables and chairs filled the center, retrofitted into an industrial area made over for the Olympics. Through an arch to the left, they could see an open area with couples dancing to international rock and pop songs. Opposite their spot at the entrance another arch opened to a food court. And to the right flashes of light and occasional whoops of triumph promised a video arcade.

Yet, amid all that confusion, Rikki became aware of the prickling sensation of being watched, once removed. One pair of eyes had zeroed in on Tess Rutledge, who sat next to her.

Rikki picked out the watcher easily –blonde, blue-

eyed, probably in his late-30s. By age, he was probably a coach or an official, but as well-built as the athletes. She'd seen him before. But no name came to mind.

She scanned his companions and recognized two as Russians, including the male half of the pairs figure skating team she'd heard called a medal favorite. Nobody else at that table showed interest in the newcomers, but this man's eyes hadn't left Tess. Sure, Tess was recognizable, but this seemed extreme.

Curious, Rikki turned to question Tess. And shut off the words immediately.

Tess's smooth skin had turned a shade paler. Her wide brown eyes tightened in strain. Her graceful body was stiff. She stared sightlessly in the opposite direction from where the man sat.

"Oh, look, there's Vladimir Metroveli. Gorgeous," Amy announced, pointing to the skater Rikki had already recognized, the one sitting next to the man Tess so carefully ignored. Tess was so taut, Rikki thought the older woman might hum any second.

Nan bustled in behind them. "Oh, good, I caught you before you got lost in the crowd."

"Where's Kyle?" Amy asked.

"She decided not to come. She wanted to rest. She's been feeling a little punk the past week or so."

"Maybe I should go check on her —"

"No need, Tess, she said she wants to be alone. She's just fighting a bug of some sort." Nan's tone dismissed anything more serious, but Rikki thought she caught uncertainty in the skier's eyes.

Was she getting imaginative in her old age, or were there really all these undercurrents in this small group?

"Somebody's waving to you, Rikki."

Rikki looked in the direction Amy indicated and saw several members of the biathlon team, who had come into the main Village for the Opening Ceremonies. With the biathlon venue among the farthest away, the rest of the team was headquartered in a smaller Olympic Village near the course. She waved back, but didn't

respond immediately to their gesture to join them.

“They want you to go over there,” Amy pointed out.

“Yes,” she said slowly. “But I thought I might stick with you guys for a while, if you don't mind.”

Odd to feel protective of Tess, a woman who'd been in the spotlight more than half her life, yet Rikki did.

“Please do.” Under Tess's politeness, Rikki thought she heard real relief.

“Sure, stick around, we'll show you a good time,” added Nan. At twenty-five Nan Monahan had a reputation for having a good time. Also a reputation for letting that interfere with her skiing.

“Good. Let's try that direction.” Rikki gave a final wave to her teammates, then started Amy and Nan weaving between tables, in the opposite direction from the unknown watcher. At least unknown to her. She'd bet the ranch – if she'd had one – that he was known to Tess Rutledge, and that it wasn't her imagination that he was staring, that Tess knew it and fully intended to ignore it.

“Baby Amy! Amy Yost!”

Before they could do more than turn in the direction of the bass shout, a burly figure engulfed Amy in a bear hug that nearly eclipsed her slight figure.

“Mikey! Mikey Sweet! How are you?”

“Mikey Sweet?” Nan's astonished murmur echoed Rikki's reaction to the incongruity of that name for a young man with the face and build of a barroom bouncer. And perhaps a not entirely successful one, since his nose looked as if it had done some bouncing.

She met Nan's eyes, looked away to try to avoid laughing, connected with Tess's equally amused look and lost the battle.

Amy excitedly performed the introductions, filling them in that she'd known Mikey Sweet since she really was a baby, and he and her older brother had attended hockey camps together. But the hockey player saw their reaction.

“With a name like Mikey Sweet, I started playing hockey in self-defense,” he said with a shrug and half

smile. "I didn't hear you'd made the Olympic team until I called home last night, Amy. We've been training and playing exhibitions for weeks and I kinda forget there's another world outside. C'mon, sit down, meet the guys," he invited them all, pulling out two empty chairs from a rectangular table, "while I catch up with the half-pint here."

Leaving Amy and Tess to take those seats, Rikki and Nan took the only other empty chairs, which were at the far end of the table and bracketed a pair of men bent over a paper napkin where one diagrammed something. Rikki recognized the diagrammer as Lanny Kaminski.

He barely looked up when she sat next to him. His younger companion showed considerably more interest in Nan's arrival.

If Rikki's ego had been the type to feel that as a slight, it would have quickly been salvaged by the reaction of the player to her right. Flirting for all he was worth, he introduced himself as Dan Christopher and made his admiration obvious. She supposed that could be considered something of a coup since he was attractive and a good eight to ten years younger than her. But she found his attention more sweet than exciting.

I must be getting old.

With a mental sigh, she answered his questions – what's your name, where are you from, what's your event – though a slice of her attention lingered on the oblivious man to her left.

Kaminski kept his head bent, the thick, slightly wavy hair masking his expression. He spoke only to the player next to him, too low amid the din for Rikki to hear anything more than a murmur.

"You want something to drink?" asked Dan, her right-side companion.

"Thanks. A mineral water would be great."

He disappeared on his mission, and with the blank wall of Lanny Kaminski's indifference on her other side she was left to look around.

At the other end of the table, Amy's hands moved in animated accompaniment to her conversation, while

Mikey Sweet grinned indulgently. Tess's lips also curved, but without any meaning behind the smile.

Rikki slued around in her chair and leaned to the side. Just as she thought, the blond, blue-eyed man still focused on Tess. His face expressionless, almost wooden. The very lack of emotion seemed to indicate an intensity that prickled Rikki's backbone.

Now what was that all about?

Straightening, she glanced again at Tess. One look, and she concluded that she wouldn't be getting the answer to this mystery from that source any time soon, so there was no sense fretting about it.

Her gaze skimmed the faces of the other hockey players at the table. How young so many of them seemed.

If that thought brought a twinge, it disappeared as she focused on the vignette down the table. Nan had the full attention of the player to her left. She also had a good portion of the attention of the player to her right, though Lanny Kaminski doggedly hung on to the rest as he continued diagramming.

His blunt-tipped fingers guided a pen tip into emphatic lines and arrows. A broad palm dwarfed the shaft of the pen. Without looking away from the other player, Lanny reached his right hand to grab a napkin off the top of the stack next to his drink. Dark hair sprinkled the back of his hand, then disappeared under the cuff of his Team USA shirt. Veins and knuckles strained against the tough skin. Joints on his middle and little fingers were misshapen, preventing the little finger from straightening completely. The white line of a scar sliced across two knuckles then slipped out of view around the softer web of skin between the thumb and index finger.

Looking away from that evidence of hard use, Rikki saw that the player being tutored had taken advantage of Kaminski's second of interrupted concentration to turn to Nan.

Kaminski reared back slightly, as if taken by surprise, then spoke a single, stern word.

“Tonetti.”

The player named Tonetti frowned, but turned back to Kaminski.

“Here you go.”

Dan placed a glass in front of her and one in front of his spot. Rather than pulling his chair out, he swung one leg over the back and slid down into the seat. He'd almost made it when his solid thigh connected with the underside of the table. The resulting earthquake set off tidal waves in the two full glasses, slopping over the sides.

Instinctively, Rikki snatched from the napkin stack and started mopping.

“What the fuck –!” Lanny Kaminski's outrage from her left drowned out Dan's mingled curses and apologies from her right.

She grabbed more napkins, containing the flood within a circle of soggy paper.

“Hey, I need those napkins.” Kaminski's voice, with a distinctive thread of Boston, came as stern as when he'd called Tonetti to order. Maybe he didn't know any other tone.

She slanted a grin at him, just to annoy him. She tucked away the observation that his eyes were a soft, deep brown.

“My need was greater. And more immediate.” She made a third raid on his dwindling cache despite the frown that drew his dark brows into a straight, uninterrupted line. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tonetti had wasted no time in turning to Nan. Rikki's grin widened. She drew the circle of wet napkins smaller. “You can get more later.”

His frown tightened, but before Kaminski said anything, Dan scraped back his chair. “I'll get more for you, Kam. It was my fault. I'll be right back.”

With Kaminski busy frowning at Rikki, Tonetti and Nan stood up and started away. Happy to be an accomplice, Rikki took the last of the dry napkins and put them to use.

“Want my shirt, too?” Kaminski muttered darkly, moving the already diagrammed napkins out of her

reach.

“You think I need it?”

He ignored that, turning his shoulder on her in preparation for reeling Tonetti back in.

But all that was left of Tonetti was an empty chair and a glimpse of his retreating back as he and Nan headed for the dance floor.

Rikki laughed, and Kaminski spun back to face her. His gaze –with the softness gone –slammed into hers. Her laughter hitched, then mellowed to a chuckle.

“Looks like your captive audience went over the wall.”

“Think that's funny?” The Boston in his voice grew wider. “So will the Czechs when we play them tomorrow. Yeah, they'll get a real kick out of it when they go against Tonetti, because he's nowhere near up to speed on this. They'll think it's a damned good joke all right.”

“Oh, come on. It's not as if Tonetti catching a dance instead of looking at one more napkin diagram is going to decide the fate of the world.”

“How about the fate of a team.”

His dourness rubbed her as raw as criticism. “These are supposed to be games, you know. Olympic *Games*. Or aren't you –”

“Oh, I see you've met Kam.”

Dan's return snapped her strangely testy mood. “Not officially,” she said sweetly, because that seemed most likely to irk Kaminski. She held out her hand. “Hi. I'm Rikki Lodge. Biathlon.”

He looked down at her hand, then into her eyes. “Lanny Kaminski.”

He met her hand, but didn't shake it. Just engulfed it with his big, rough one. Letting her own unpampered, no nonsense hand absorb the sensation of heat and the friction of calluses and scar ridges.

She swallowed, trying to clear the way for words that would be light, funny. Nothing came. She was grateful he didn't look up from where his hand enclosed hers.

“Well now that the introduction's official, you want

to dance with me, Rikki?" asked the voice behind her. She turned to the younger athlete.

"Sounds great." Gratitude to Dan for the unintentional excuse infused extra warmth in her voice.

Lanny Kaminski released her hand and turned back to the fresh pile of napkins Dan had provided, apparently content to dismiss her with a mumbled "See you."

But as she danced with Dan, then with Mikey Sweet, Tonetti and other members of the team, she did notice Kaminski watching her once.

She hadn't counted how many times she'd glanced at him.

DAY 2 - SUNDAY

Even before the descent, the mountain brought Kyle Armstrong peace.

Enclosing herself in the familiar armor against the cold. Contemplating strategy, reviewing what had already been learned that day, anticipating the course's next lesson. Being conveyed sedately up the incline she soon would make her private domain for one final time today. Beneath the babble of voices, listening to the silence of stretching nerves, even now, when it was only a training run.

It was her haven, always.

Even tomorrow when she would forfeit the relative privacy of this workout with her team. When the official training run for Tuesday's downhill half of the combined would bring a U.N. of television cameras to cause

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confusion as they jockeyed for set-up shots they would use to explain Alpine skiing to viewers in Tampa and Taiwan, Boston and Brazil, Albuquerque and Australia.

Kyle Armstrong loved it all.

Each mountain was different, individual. Yet this was the same. She loved her moment in the start shack, totally alone, inside herself, with only herself and the mountain. She loved the jangle of the bell that released her with a heart-jolting burst of adrenaline. She loved the twist and flow of the movement. She loved the calm reason of the notations and reminders her mind issued. She loved the undertow of fear.

And it was almost as if it all loved her back.

“Okay, Kyle. Course is clear.”

Now. Her moment. The second of release. The pushoff. The first, clean swoop down the mountain like a bird diving after prey.

Speed. She felt it. The wind her own body stirred, the spinning away of the snow she slid over.

Fear. She didn't mind this kind of fear. It was the other fear, slow and gnawing that rattled her. What am I going to do?

Ski. That's what she was going to do. Just ski. And not think.

Last year, in a World Cup, she'd skied well on this mountain, on courses set by the same designers, but there would be changes since then. Minor, true. But a hair's-breadth of balance split disaster from victory. So the coaches had set up this training run as close as possible to what they expected the race courses to be, so every nuance could be traced, noted, filed as she sped through the curves, scanning the turns so they would be recorded in her muscles' memories.

And then it was over. In a blink. Less.

Frowning, she started tugging her goggles off even as she curved to a stop.

No huge electronic scoreboard flashed her time at her as it would on the race course, but she didn't need one to tell her. The run had gone by too fast. Way, way too fast. Never a good sign. In some perverse rule of

skiing, when she was really on, really concentrating, really flying, every ridge of snow, every inch of mountainside seemed to linger in crystal clear slow motion.

She flicked loose her skis, automatically propping them against her shoulder with the brand name forward, even with no TV cameras to focus on her. Turning, she came face to face with Rob Zemlak, holding the clipboard he never seemed to be without despite its almost nostalgic old-fashionedness.

“What was that?” His dark brows clashed over the bridge of his straight nose in a frown that turned his gray eyes steely.

She turned so she didn't look directly at him. “Training run. Didn't you read the day's schedule you're always yapping at us about?”

He glared, but said nothing about her tone. Still, he got his digs in.

“Pretty shitty training run.”

“Thanks for the support, Coach.”

His jaw tightened. That seemed to be the only way his jaw operated. Always tighter. Never looser. As tight as she'd seen his jaw get over the past fifteen months, he'd never let loose.

“Your start was barely acceptable, but you could have made it up if you'd had your head on. Instead, it looked like you took a side trip to another planet. I thought you were heading off the side of the mountain. And the end –”

“A training run. I simply used it as a training run. Checking the course, working on sections, honing technique. You know, all those things we're supposed to do on training runs.”

He ignored that too –ignoring her was one of Rob Zemlak's best honed techniques –and finished his sentence. “The end looked mechanical. Like some expensive windup doll.”

That jerked her back to face him.

Standing toe to toe, she stared at him, too angry to fully realize it was probably the first time in more than a

year they'd made direct eye contact. And too angry to wonder about the change in his gray eyes. But he went on, as always.

"That's not going to get you a medal. Nowhere near. And combined's your best shot, much better than GS or slalom. You used to want a medal more than anything, Armstrong. Don't you want it anymore? Have you gotten bored with all this? Tired of working so hard for a bit of precious medal you could have bought with a week's allowance when you were eight years old? Want to leave all this behind and run away to Daddy's Caribbean hideaway and –"

She shoved him in the chest with enough force to make him take a step back and started past him.

"Kyle! Rob! Just who we were looking for." Nan hurried up to them with a man in tow. Her mouth smiled, but her brows knit in warning. "This is Benton Harbor of the Washington Observer. You know, a reporter."

The color-coded tags hanging around the zipped up collar of the man's painfully new parka gave that away.

"How do you do, Mr. Harbor." Automatically Kyle extended her hand and smiled, pushing down the sudden clutch deep in her belly.

"Actually, it's Harrison. No relation to the town in Michigan." He smiled as they shook gloved hands. He wasn't one of the regulars they encountered on the ski circuit.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Harrison. I'm really sorry. I'm always getting names mixed up."

Kyle looked at Nan, who rarely confused names or faces. But even as she continued the introductions, Nan's attention focused somewhere over Harrison's shoulder.

Kyle shifted to see what Nan was looking at. Another man stood about six feet away, his shoulder to them but the wind flipping around tags to match Harrison's. Oil, natural or artificial, darkened his hair. He didn't look at them and his posture was of complete nonchalance. He was trying his damndest to

eavesdrop.

How long had he been there? Had he heard her dispute with Rob?

“And this is Rob Zemlak, our coach. He's the one you should ask those questions about today's training runs.”

“Of course. I just wanted to ask Kyle –”

“Nan's right, you really should ask me,” interrupted Rob, firm but with the anger gone. *That* he saved for her. He took the reporter's arm and turned him toward one of the buildings at the base of the run. “I think I saw Stephen Carlisle, our head coach, just go inside over there, so we can get warm and you can hit both of us at the same time.”

Benton Harrison didn't protest, but he did glance at Kyle again as he let Rob lead him away.

The other man darted a look toward Kyle and Nan. They looked back. He displayed a momentary intense interest in the mountain, then sauntered off behind Rob and Benton Harrison.

Nan watched them go and gnawed on her lower lip. “That's not the last of him. Harrison's going to be back.”

“So?” Abruptly, Kyle felt exhausted. And the grip on her lower belly tightened.

“So? So, he got a good look at you and Rob going at it and he'd have to be blind and stupid not to see you two were pissed at each other, and I don't think he's either. And that other guy – who knows what shit he heard. He was busy sidling closer to you two when we came up.”

Kyle started to shrug, then stopped when it threatened to turn tightness into outright pain.

“Do you want to be asked a lot of questions about why you and Rob Zemlak don't get along?” Nan demanded. “What is with you two anyway? You've never been buddy-buddy, but it looked as if you'd like to put poles through each other's hearts.”

“I don't know what you're –”

“Don't lie to me, Kyle.” Nan's sharpness brought

Kyle's head up in surprise. It was so unlike Nan. By her next words it had disappeared. "You don't want to tell me what's going on with you and Rob, fine, don't tell me shit. That's your business. But don't lie to me, Kyle. Not if you want me to stay your friend."

Kyle looked away, to the top of the mountain, where she'd left her peace.

Nan sighed, but said with her usual cheer. "C'mon. Let's head back for hot showers, massages and some food. And forget about that pile of rock and ice."

* * * *

"Don't worry about the triple lutz, Tess. I'm gonna land it from now on. I can feel it." Amy grinned at her with utter confidence. "Just like at Nationals. Those falls in practice were a fluke. I'm gonna nail it. I can feel it."

"I know you will." Tess smiled, wishing she could bottle that confidence and feed it back to Amy whenever the girl needed it down the road.

Although this wasn't a bad time for a dose of confidence.

They stood in the "Kiss and Cry Area," to one side of the entrance to the ice where, in a few days, Amy would wait for the scores from her first Olympic competition. Although today's skate officially qualified as practice, it was different from sessions at the practice rink. Amy wore full competition warpaint –costume, matching tights, hair styled, makeup –because the scores that flashed on the electronic board and across the world the night she competed would start to be earned in the next few minutes.

One of figure skating's arcane little idiosyncrasies: the judges judged practices. They sat among the spectators for these official practices, and they familiarized themselves with routines and skills, built expectations of what should be done and how. The final scores would be a measurement of how well the skater lived up to those expectations under the spotlight.

In fact the process of stockpiling those expectations began much earlier, certainly as the season progressed through the fall and into the winter,

but also from the skater's past years of competition.

But Amy didn't have past years of competition before these judges.

For Amy, this was a critical debut. She'd jumped from juniors to top-level international competition earlier than anyone had expected, including Tess. And though these judges would have heard of her success, she'd entered a new world. The major leagues.

They would watch her carefully. In the next few minutes her reputation would start to form, her place in the international hierarchy begin to be established.

Tess felt her stomach tighten, a dampening of sweat on her palms and under her arms despite the ice-cooled air.

"There. That finished the music for the last pairs," Amy announced as a classical piece blaring over the loudspeakers ended with a flourish.

No skaters got the ice to themselves. They practiced in pre-assigned groups, shifts of men's singles, ice dancing, pairs and ladies' singles. But every entry's music played during the session for a complete run-through of the routine. With the last session of pairs wrapping up, the first group of ladies, including Amy, prepared to take the ice for their short-program practice.

Tess adjusted a fold on the shoulder of Amy's costume to keep her hands busy as the pairs slowly filed off, pausing to slip on skate guards as they were greeted at the entrance by their coaches.

"Mmm, Vladimir Metroveli."

Tess stiffened just as Amy's murmur reached her, for she, too, had seen Vladimir Metroveli and Radja Rastnikova come off the ice and join their coach. A man with hair as blond now that he was forty as it had been just past twenty. His eyes as blue, and as direct in their survey of her as they had been last night.

Andrei.

She jerked her eyes away. "Ready, Amy?"

"Ready."

"Remember –"

"I know, I know. Remember to have fun. I will!"

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Tess concentrated all her thoughts on the lithe form that went flying across the ice like a bird set free. She followed every move, every breath, refusing to let the past or the sensed departure of the blond man intrude.

She eased a little as Amy's music queued up third. Skating the program was easier for Amy – and her coach – than the waiting.

Tess gave the two minutes fifty seconds of the short program her total attention, evaluating the elements all the skaters had to incorporate into this program while displaying individuality of style. The short program scores would account for one-third of Amy's final result, with the other two-thirds from the long or “free” skate, though it, too, had required elements now.

In the end Tess was satisfied. It wasn't flawless, but close enough for now. She would mention a few points . . . but not until later.

Tess breathed in deep satisfaction. Amy had taken a first step – a solid, respectable first step. Not too flashy to raise false expectations, not too staid to let anyone dismiss her.

And she had nailed the triple lutz.

Relaxing enough to let her focus widen, Tess sensed an air of heightened expectation. She saw Xing Li poised at center ice for the next music to start, and Tess understood.

The young woman from China had burst onto the international scene just a year ago and now ranked as a medal favorite. A remarkable ascension, even more remarkable because China's production of top-level skaters was relatively recent.

The music started, and the other skaters slowed their workouts, unabashedly watching the slender, dark-haired figure. The tapes Tess had seen didn't do justice to Xing Li's flowing movement. She seemed to glide equally over the ice or through the air. But the skater also emanated a tension Tess hadn't sensed in the tapes she'd watched.

The music echoed into stillness and the lone

skater came to a stop in a position that seemed to beg the skies for sympathy. The arena let out its collective breath and the other skaters resumed spins, footwork and jumps with new vigor. The Chinese girl, summoned by a peremptory gesture, skated, head down, to where five unsmiling official-looking types in team parkas stood just outside the wall. Breathing deeply from exertion, she listened wordlessly as each of the five had something to say.

Tess felt a pang of sympathy. Being the favorite could be a terrible burden; Tess knew that from experience. How much worse under Xing Li's conditions?

She watched the slender figure skate back into the maelstrom of activity on the ice, her shoulders drawn up tightly, her mouth a straight, stern line.

Automatically, Tess's eyes went to Amy. In four years, if all went well, Amy Yost could be the favorite.

I won't let it be like that for you, Amy. I swear.

"She has your joy, but not your grace."

Tess swung around to the voice, unable to stop herself. Andrei stood next to her, leaning his forearm on top of the wall. He was close enough for her to see the fine lines at the corner of his eyes. Close enough to watch the cadence of his breathing. Close enough to smell the slight spiciness that cut through the chill air.

But not as close as she'd so often dreamed.

She turned back toward the ice, found Amy, and made her eyes follow the girl.

"You look away from me always. Now you will not talk to me, Tess?"

Even and calm, almost placid, yet the words tore at something in her. Maybe it was only memories, scarred over and buried deep.

Without taking her gaze from the figure on the ice, she started slowly.

"She has great athletic potential. More than I ever hoped to have. Look at that —" Amy landed a double axel with ease and grinned. "The grace will come. She'll grow into it. The athleticism's already there."

She didn't turn away from the ice, so she didn't see Andrei's reaction, but she heard a slow breath escape him.

"They can jump, these children. But there is more to the skating."

"Of course there is." She said it with something like enthusiasm. She'd given so many interviews on the subject she hardly had to think. Exactly the state she desired right now. "And that's where the coaches are so important, making sure the young ones don't jump their knees into J-ello, and teaching them the grace and artistry. Especially with the school figures gone. Mastering those used to slow everyone down enough that the skaters were more mature before they tried competing on this level. It was a less flamboyant, more disciplined sport in the old days, back when –"

She'd almost achieved the laugh she often used to punctuate that point, the laugh meant to emphasize how long she'd been away from competing before anyone else could. But this time the laugh died abruptly.

"When we skated, Tess? When we competed in the Olympics? When we met?"

Silence was her safeguard.

Still soft, his voice was relentless. "So now you will talk to me, but not of me. Not of us."

Silence couldn't stand up to anger.

"There's no *us*. There probably never was. There certainly hasn't been since you – So there is nothing to say. Nothing."

"Tess –"

"They're coming off the ice. I have to go."

She started past, but he caught her, large hands wrapped around her upper arms. Through the layers she wore against the rink's chill she surely couldn't feel his touch. Yet there was warmth there.

He'd made it so she couldn't look away and she wouldn't look down.

She met his eyes, trying to bleed everything out of her own –the memories, the pain, the warmth where his hands touched her.

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“There is nothing to say,” she repeated.

“There is much to say. But you will not listen. Not now. But I will be there when you will listen. I will be there, Tessa.”

He released her and she moved away, pulling a smile from somewhere for Amy as she came off the ice, bubbling and panting.

“Did you see that? Did you see that?”

“I saw. You were great.”

As she hugged Amy, she saw Andrei standing where she'd left him, watching her once more.

* * * *

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